

Transmigrated into a Grandpa, Embracing the Laid-Back Life

c 101

[2,240 words]

The capital's first snow fell silently and without fanfare.

Overnight, the grey-tiled roof and the quiet courtyard of the Penglai Inn were blanketed in a layer of soft, lonely white.

Outside the window lattice, the world had grown quiet, leaving only the occasional soft rustle of accumulated snow falling from tree branches.

Inside the room, the weak warmth emanating from the charcoal brazier barely held back the chill seeping through the cracks in the doors and windows.

Xu Qing placed an oil paper package on the table containing two still-warm wheat cakes, then sat down himself, spreading open the notebook he never parted with. His brow was knit with the weariness and focus that came after a day spent gathering information outside.

"Brother Su, eat something first to tide you over." He rubbed his hands, reddened from the cold, his voice dropping very low. "Today's harvest was substantial."

He sat down, opened that ever-present notebook, and began reporting the day's results.

"I went to several large bookshops and also mingled at a few teahouses in the southern part of the city, listening to the idle chatter of old, failed Xiucai."

Xu Qing's voice was kept very low, but his speech was rapid, as if reciting a long-memorized essay.

"The chief examiner for this year's Metropolitan Examination is, in all likelihood, Wang Deyou, the Minister of Personnel. This man is of the mature and prudent faction. Having served as an official for decades, he believes 'avoiding mistakes is an achievement in itself' and most detests students whose writing is dangerously eccentric or whose arguments are extreme."

He turned a page, pointing to a few names on it.

"Of the capital's three major literary societies, the 'Bamboo Grove Society' belongs to the upright official faction. The 'Western Garden Gathering' mostly consists of scions of meritorious nobles, with the shadow of the Yongchang Marquis Manor behind them. The literary style they champion is one of resplendent diction and majestic momentum, yet the core must align with practicality."

Su Ming listened quietly, occasionally nodding once.

Xu Qing took a sip of cold tea and continued, "I sought out and read their exemplary essays from the past two years. To sum it up, if you want to catch Lord Wang's eye, your essay must be well-balanced and steady. If you want to be appreciated by the other grading officials, your literary talent cannot be mediocre."

He looked at Su Ming, a trace of anticipation in his eyes.

"Brother Su, with your talent and learning, if you just slightly temper the sharp edge of that flood control policy discussion and polish its literary flair a bit more, competing for a top-three position in the First Class is not out of the question!"

Su Ming picked up a wheat cake and slowly chewed it.

"No."

He uttered a single word.

The anticipation on Xu Qing's face instantly froze, turning into bewilderment. "Why? Brother Su, ten years of arduous study are all for that single moment of achieving a place on the golden list and bringing glory to one's family. Hiding your abilities like this, isn't that... tying your own hands?"

"It is Teacher's warning." Su Ming raised the banner of Zhou Wenhai, his tone steady. "Teacher said the waters in the capital run deep, not comparable to Qingshi Town. As newcomers, we should not seek merit, but only seek to avoid mistakes. First, secure our footing, discern the direction of the wind, then plan for other things later."

Hearing it was Zhou Wenhai's instruction, Xu Qing stopped arguing. The confusion on his face slowly dissipated.

Lin Yu was feeling quite content within the ring.

Once the strategy was set, the two began preparing for the long winter ahead.

The prices in the capital made every purchase Xu Qing made feel like a precise calculation.

Following Lin Yu's suggestion, Su Ming spent the majority of their budget on old books.

He didn't buy those popular contemporary essay collections. Instead, he specifically sought out historical records from previous dynasties, discarded legal case studies, and a geographical miscellany titled *Records of Extraordinary Mountains and Rivers*.

In Xu Qing's view, this was to broaden knowledge and strengthen the foundation of scholarship.

He didn't know that Su Ming's true purpose was to search for traces of another world within these piles of old paper.

With heavy snow sealing the doors, Su Ming entered a period of complete dormancy.

He stayed in the small inn room every day, studying behind closed doors.

He no longer practiced his own sharp, forceful calligraphy style, instead imitating the currently most popular 'Guan'ge' style.

Stroke by stroke, it was neat, rigid, utterly devoid of personality, like a standard mask.

And when no one was around, he would sit cross-legged in meditation, circulating the *Aura Concealment Art* over and over.

The capital's Dragon Qi was like a massive whetstone, suppressing his outwardly projected spiritual sense, yet it also forced him to withdraw all his mental focus inward.

His control over his own aura, heartbeat, and even every subtle expression reached a whole new level.

Now, with just a thought, he could become the most inconspicuous lodger in the inn.

One afternoon, the door was gently knocked.

"Tap, tap, tap."

Su Ming opened his eyes. All the aura about him instantly became peaceful and ordinary, like a common scholar who had just woken from a nap.

"Who is it?"

"It is I, Liu Ji, a student from Jingzhou. I have long heard of Brother Su's great reputation and have come specially to pay a visit." The voice outside the door was very enthusiastic.

Su Ming opened the door. A fair-skinned, amicably smiling young man stood in the doorway.

The two sat down as guest and host. This Liu Ji, acting like an old acquaintance, chatted about the scholarly atmosphere in Jingzhou, the prices in the capital, his words witty.

After chatting for the time it takes to drink half a cup of tea, he shifted the topic, asking as if by chance, "Brother Su studied under Teacher Zhou of Qingshi Town. I too have heard of Teacher Zhou's great name. It is said that back in his days at the Hanlin Academy, he was a top-tier iron-boned remonstrating official. I wonder why he retired and returned to his hometown?"

Here it comes.

Su Ming's mind was crystal clear, but his face showed just the right amount of appropriate bewilderment and respect.

"Brother Liu, you flatter me. Regarding my teacher's affairs, we juniors truly dare not recklessly discuss them."

A flicker of disappointment passed through Liu Ji's eyes, but he smiled again. "It was presumptuous of me. It's just that I heard Teacher Zhou's memorial, the *Memorial on Rectifying Canal Transport Malpractices*, offended the Yongchang Marquis Manor, and that's why..."

Su Ming immediately interrupted him, a trace of alarm on his face.

"Brother Liu, such major court matters, how would a mere commoner like me know of them? My teacher has also never spoken to me of these things."

He picked up his teacup, making a gesture of seeing a guest out.

"It's getting late. I still need to review my lessons, so I won't keep Brother Liu any longer."

The smile on Liu Ji's face stiffened for a moment before returning to normal.

He stood up to take his leave, flawless and watertight, as if it had truly been just an ordinary visit.

Xu Qing pushed the door open right after he left, his expression unpleasant.

"Brother Su, that man just now, I've seen him before."

Xu Qing lowered his voice. "The day before yesterday, outside the teahouse frequented by that Western Garden Gathering crowd, I saw him getting down from a carriage belonging to a retainer of the Yongchang Marquis Manor. His demeanor was extremely respectful."

Su Ming nodded, not surprised.

Lin Yu snorted from within the ring.

Trying to play mind games with my disciple? You're still too green. Our 'Three Questions, Three Don't Knows' divine technique is the core secret art of the Way of Survival.

Late at night, in the quiet, Su Ming opened the yellowed pages of *Records of Extraordinary Mountains and Rivers*.

The book's pages were filled with annotations left by previous readers, the handwriting scribbled and messy.

When he turned to the chapter describing a place in the northern frontier called "Black Wind Abyss," Lin Yu's voice suddenly rang in his mind.

"Stop! This page!"

Su Ming focused his gaze. Next to that passage of text, there was a line of extremely small annotations written in vermilion ink.

"Strange light beneath the abyss, thunderclaps unceasing, suspected of a demonic creature being executed by Heaven."

"Heh, interesting." Lin Yu's voice carried a thread of excitement. "Demonic creature being executed by Heaven'—that phrasing sounds just like a cultivator failing a tribulation. Disciple, note down this place name. This is definitely not a baseless rumor. After the exams, we might go take a look."

Without changing his expression, Su Ming used his fingernail to scratch an extremely shallow mark next to the three characters "Black Wind Abyss."

The New Year approached.

The capital's streets and alleys were decorated with lanterns and streamers, filled with a festive atmosphere.

But this bustle had nothing to do with the scholars staying at the Penglai Inn.

With the Metropolitan Examination drawing near, an intangible pressure weighed on everyone's hearts, making even the air in the inn's main hall feel particularly oppressive.

A few other scholars also from the south, feeling they got along well with Su Ming and Xu Qing, pooled some money to set up a table at the inn, treating it as an early New Year's celebration.

During the meal, a scholar named Zhang Rui, having drunk a few cups of wine, his face flushed red, began criticizing current politics.

"Now, with the war situation in the northern frontier unclear, the court is still arguing over those stale, moldy matters of ritual and law. It's truly harming the state!"

Another looked worried.

"I've heard that the number of successful candidates for this year's special examination seems to be fewer than in previous sessions. Ah, our futures are so uncertain."

Su Ming just listened quietly. Occasionally, when someone asked him something, he would only discuss questions of classical meaning, absolutely never touching on any specific person or event.

The meal was eaten with everyone's minds in different places.

Just a few days before the New Year, a minor incident stirred up quite a ripple within the capital's scholarly circles.

An old compiler from the Hanlin Academy, while overseeing the compilation of a historical record from a previous dynasty, was caught by a rival in a minor error.

It wasn't any major, principled mistake, merely changing one character in the name of a former dynasty imperial clansman to avoid taboo related to some insignificant noble of the current court.

This matter could be made big or small.

But under the instigation of interested parties, it ultimately resulted in the old compiler being fined half a year's salary on the grounds of "imprecise scholarship, deceiving the imperial hearing," and he was also demoted to serve as an assistant instructor at the Imperial Academy.

When the news spread, the entire upright official scholarly community was on edge, everyone fearing for themselves.

The day after this incident happened, Su Ming went to the courtyard to collect his laundry.

He discovered that on the sleeve of his old, washed-out robe, there was a new, half-inch-long slit.

The cut was very fine, as if accidentally snagged by a withered tree branch in the courtyard.

But when he reached out to touch it, the cut was clean and even, clearly made by a sharp blade.

Su Ming stood in the cold wind, holding the damaged robe, saying nothing.

This was a silent warning.

Lin Yu's voice also turned cold. *"They're telling you they're watching you, that they can cut you anytime. Today on your clothes, tomorrow, it could be on your future, or even... your neck."*

That night, in Su Ming and Xu Qing's room, the oil lamp burned late into the night.

"...If there's an emergency, I'll place half a roof tile on the windowsill. If you see it, don't ask anything, immediately go to the Fushun Teahouse in the Mule and Horse Market and find that Manager Zhang."

Su Ming told Xu Qing about the escape route Professor Liu had given him.

Xu Qing nodded heavily, committing every detail to heart.

Spring arrived.

The Ministry of Rites officially promulgated the regulations for the Metropolitan Examination. The main gate of the Examination Hall was plastered with densely packed notices for examinees.

The atmosphere in all the inns across the capital suddenly grew tense to the extreme.

Su Ming and Xu Qing went to familiarize themselves with the area outside the Examination Hall one last time.

They discovered that the number of patrolling soldiers around the Examination Hall had doubled compared to half a month ago.

Moreover, among those ordinary soldiers were mixed some plainclothes individuals with sharp eyes and vigorous, fierce auras.

Their positions seemed casual, yet they subtly blocked all the key intersections.

"They're from the Capital Garrison, and also... Imperial Guards." Lin Yu's voice sounded in Su Ming's mind. *"This deployment doesn't look like it's to prevent cheating among examinees, more like it's to guard against assassins."*

Xu Qing also sensed something was off. He tugged at Su Ming's sleeve.

"Brother Su, look over there."

Following the direction of his finger, they saw that outside the gate of the most imposing villa next to the Examination Hall, carriages and horses bustled, servants swarmed like clouds.

An extremely luxurious carriage was parked at the entrance. On its side, that eye-catching "Wei" family crest shone painfully bright in the sunlight.

"It's the Young Duke of the Wei Duke's house. I heard he's also taking the exam this session," Xu Qing whispered.

Su Ming withdrew his gaze, his expression calm.

The final night before the exam.

The capital did not sleep.

Countless scholars were making their final preparations, some burning incense in prayer, others studying through the night.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 102: Leaping Over the Dragon Gate

[1,906 words]

The sky at the mao hour (5-7 am) was not yet fully bright.

The morning in the capital carried a biting, damp chill.

In front of the Examination Hall, a crowd had already gathered long ago.

But unlike the usual clamor, today this place was silent as a graveyard.

Hundreds of armored soldiers clad in cold iron armor, holding long halberds, stood in two rows, forming a stern, killing-intent-filled passage leading to the "Dragon Gate." The expressions on their faces were even colder and harder than the iron armor they wore.

The scholars lined up in a long queue, each with a pale face and a nervous expression.

"Undo your hair buns!"

"Outer robe, inner garment, take them all off!"

"Open your mouth, stick out your tongue!"

The voices of the soldiers conducting the search were hoarse, their movements rough and merciless. Like inspecting livestock, they felt up each scholar from head to toe, even pinching apart hair buns to confirm no slips of paper were hidden inside.

A scholar from a poor family, wearing a patched inner garment close to his skin, was roughly pulled out by a searching soldier.

"What's hidden in these patches? Rip it open!"

"Sir, this was sewn by this humble student's mother, there's really nothing inside..."

Rip! With a harsh sound, the patch was violently torn open, revealing the grayish-white cotton wadding inside.

Finding nothing, the soldier relentlessly slapped the scholar.

"Pathetic wretch! Get inside!"

The scholar covered his face, eyes reddening, but dared not utter a word. Clutching his torn clothes, he scrambled awkwardly into the Examination Hall.

The atmosphere in the line grew increasingly oppressive.

Su Ming stood in the middle of the queue, his expression calm, only slowing his breathing further.

He saw ahead, a luxurious carriage drove directly to the entrance, completely ignoring the long line.

Several attendants escorted a young man dressed in a moon-white brocade robe out of the carriage.

It was that young master from the Wei Duke's house.

He didn't even walk; two sturdy servants practically half-carried him to the search checkpoint, one on each side.

The soldier in charge of the search immediately put on a fawning smile, merely symbolically brushing his sleeve, then bowed to let him pass.

"Young Master, please!"

From start to finish, the young master Wei didn't even lift his eyelids.

Their gazes met briefly in the air.

The other's eyes still held that aloof indifference, as if looking at an ant by the roadside.

Su Ming withdrew his gaze, his heart as still as water.

Lin Yu whistled in his mind. Wow, what a spectacle, what privilege. The dregs of feudal society were truly on full display.

"Disciple, see that? That's the kind of creature we need to keep a low profile and avoid in the future."

When it was Su Ming's turn, the searching soldier, seeing his plain clothing, showed a trace of impatience.

"Hurry up! What are you dawdling for!"

Su Ming said nothing, cooperatively taking off his outer robe and undoing his hair bun.

The soldier's hands patted him roughly. When they touched the cold, old bronze token in his embrace, the movement paused.

"What's this?"

"A family heirloom bronze token, used for calming the mind," Su Ming replied flatly.

The soldier took the token and examined it. The blurred cloud patterns on it were already worn, looking worthless.

He snorted with contempt and tossed it back to Su Ming.

"Playing mystical tricks."

After the search, Su Ming walked through that vermilion "Dragon Gate." The clamor and cold wind behind him seemed to be shut out.

The passageway was deep and dark, flanked by densely packed examination cells resembling honeycombs.

The air was thick with a stale, moldy smell, mixed with the odors of ink and urine.

Su Ming found his examination cell.

"Xuan Character, Number Seventy-Three."

The space was stiflingly narrow, only ten feet long and three feet wide. Two wooden boards served as desk and chair during the day, and when put together at night, became a bed.

Closing the door, the entire world shrank to this tiny space.

Su Ming did not immediately take out his writing implements.

The external oppression, tension, the muffled coughs from neighboring cells, the monotonous footsteps of patrolling armored soldiers... all of it gradually faded away.

His heartbeat became slow and powerful, his entire being entering a state of absolute calm.

It was as if he hadn't come to take the fate-deciding imperial examination, but had merely changed locations for his daily cultivation practice.

"Good, that mindset, steady as a rock," Lin Yu commented approvingly.

An unknown amount of time later, the bell signaling the start of the examination rang.

Dull, prolonged.

The exam papers were passed in through a small opening under the cell door.

Su Ming unrolled the paper.

The first session tested knowledge of classics and their meanings, examining memorization of canonical texts.

For Su Ming, whose soul far exceeded that of ordinary people, this was as easy as turning his hand.

He lifted his brush, set it to paper, his handwriting the meticulously practiced official script.

Neat, rigid, utterly lacking in sharpness, but also guaranteed not to lose points due to calligraphy issues.

The second day, the policy discussion.

The topic was handed down. Su Ming's gaze swept over it, and his heart stirred slightly.

"Discussing the Northern Border Troubles: Should we suppress or pacify? Also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of methods like military farming and the 'Kai Zhong' system, to secure the people's livelihood."

Border troubles and people's livelihood.

What a grand topic.

Almost the instant he saw the topic, several world-shaking, unconventional approaches to tackling the theme flashed through Su Ming's mind.

He could combine "suppression" and "pacification," waging a national war that sustained itself through combat.

He could also take an alternative route, starting from economics, discussing how the Kai Zhong system was controlled by the powerful, ultimately leading to inadequate provisions for border troops, layers of exploitation, and soldiers lacking the will to fight.

Any of these ideas, if written out, would be enough to shock the entire examination hall, making the graders slap the table in admiration.

But that would also instantly make him the focus of all attention.

Make him a thorn in the side of the Yongchang Marquis Manor, a pawn the upright officials faction would want to recruit, a target of jealousy and scheming by countless others.

That was not what he wanted.

Su Ming slowly exhaled a breath of turbid air, pressing down, one by one, all those ideas dazzling enough to astonish the world.

Harmonize with the light, blend with the dust. Unfurl and furl with the times.

His teacher's instruction still echoed in his ears.

Our goal is to be unwanted.

Lin Yu's voice sounded timely.

Su Ming's eyes regained the calm, still-as-an-ancient-well composure.

He re-examined the topic, choosing the safest, most "correct," and also most mediocre line of argument.

Quoting classics and citing authorities, all were words of the sages, not stepping out of any established pattern.

First, he bitterly described the severity of the border troubles, quoting words from the "Book of Documents" to discuss the ruler's duty to defend the land, establishing the righteous principle of "suppression."

Then shifting to pacification, quoting Mencius to discuss how the people are more important than the ruler, stating that border people are also subjects of the Great Xing and should not be lightly abandoned, establishing the benevolent heart of "pacification."

As for methods like military farming and the Kai Zhong system, he completely followed the mainstream discourse of the court in recent years, praising their merits, briefly stating their flaws, and proposing suggestions that were all bland, empty talk like "strengthen supervision" and "strictly punish corruption."

He lifted his brush, dipped it in ink.

The brush tip flowed across the paper, with ornate rhetoric, quoting classics, perfectly parallel in structure.

The entire essay's structure was as rigorous as a perfectly constructed pavilion, every beam and pillar in its proper place, not a single flaw to be found.

The literary talent was brilliant, enough to display his solid foundation.

But its core argument was balanced, steady, balanced and peaceful, like a cup of lukewarm plain water.

Excellent, but absolutely not dazzling.

Safe, absolutely safe.

...

Nine days were a long, drawn-out ordeal.

The examination cells were narrow, with extreme temperature differences between day and night. During the day, it was as stuffy as a steamer; at night, cold seeped in from all sides.

The food was uniformly distributed hard, dry flatbreads, and drinking water was also rationed.

By the third day, muffled sobbing came from the neighboring cell, followed by violent banging on the door.

"I'm going mad! I want out! I don't want to take this exam anymore!"

Soon, two armored soldiers expressionlessly opened the door and dragged out the mentally collapsed candidate like dragging a dead dog.

The oppressive atmosphere grew even heavier.

Relying on spiritual perception far surpassing ordinary people, Su Ming could "hear" some unusual movements.

In the rows of cells deep within the Examination Hall, the footsteps of officials were much more frequent than elsewhere.

They occasionally paused before a certain cell for a moment, seemingly conversing in low voices, with even the faintest sound of paper rubbing.

Su Ming knew that was certain children of the powerful enjoying "special treatment."

But he turned a blind eye, turned a deaf ear, focusing only on his own answers.

Lin Yu snorted contemptuously at this.

"Standard procedure, standard procedure. Where there are people, there is the jianghu (underworld/martial world); where there are exams, there is cheating. Normal, normal."

On the fifth night, Su Ming was resting with his eyes closed.

Lin Yu's voice suddenly sounded in his mind, carrying a trace of alertness.

"Disciple, don't move, something is sweeping over."

Su Ming maintained his cross-legged sitting posture, motionless.

He felt an extremely faint but exceptionally pure spiritual energy fluctuation sweep past, like a searchlight, from the deepest part of the Examination Hall.

That power was suppressed extremely harshly by the Dragon Qi, yet still carried an indisputable authority.

It paused for a moment over each examination cell, seemingly probing something.

When that fluctuation swept over Su Ming's cell, Lin Yu immediately withdrew his soul body fluctuations to the extreme, as if turning into a genuine speck of dust.

Su Ming also fully operated the Aura Concealment Art, his entire presence vanishing, like a stone.

The spiritual energy fluctuation seemed to linger on Su Ming for half a breath longer than elsewhere.

Then, it swept towards the next cell without any abnormality.

"Whew..." Lin Yu breathed a sigh of relief. "Wow, it really is a cultivator. Judging by the purity of that spiritual energy, probably at the Foundation Establishment stage. Sent here to invigilate... looks like the Great Xing Dynasty really does have ties with the cultivation world. Coming to the capital was indeed the right move."

"Did he discover us?" Su Ming asked in his mind.

"Probably not. He was likely just conducting a routine scan. Plus, with the Dragon Qi all over the city as cover, he couldn't detect us."

This minor episode made Su Ming even more cautious.

The final session ended, and the bell signaling the submission of papers rang.

Su Ming was in no hurry to hand in his papers.

He carefully reviewed all his answer sheets from beginning to end.

Every character, every sentence, ensured there was no possible "sharp edge" that could invite speculation.

After confirming there were no issues, he calmly organized his answer sheets and waited for the official to collect them.

The nine-day ordeal was over.

The gates of the Examination Hall opened once more, and the scholars poured out like a tide.

Many were sallow and emaciated, their steps unsteady, as if drained of their vital spirit.

Some laughed heartily at the sky, others hugged their heads and wept.

Su Ming blended into the flow of people, utterly inconspicuous.

He walked out of that enormous "Dragon Gate." The afternoon sun made his eyes squint slightly.

He turned back, glancing at that stern, beast-like structure.

In his heart, there was neither sorrow nor joy.

Only a calm sense of "mission accomplished."

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,953 words]

The day the results were released, the entire capital city was in an uproar.

Before dawn had even broken, the wide street in front of the Examination Hall was already jam-packed and impassable.

A sea of people, the clamor shaking the heavens.

"Brother Su, look quickly! There are too many people, we can't possibly squeeze through!"

Xu Qing was so anxious that sweat was pouring down his face. He was not tall, and was being jostled and shoved all over the place in the crowd. He tried several times to charge forward, only to be pushed back by stronger men.

Su Ming stood on the periphery of the crowd, his expression still calm.

He patted Xu Qing's shoulder. "No rush. The list is right there, it's not going anywhere."

"How can I not be in a rush!" Xu Qing's face flushed red. "This is the moment that decides the fate of our remaining years!"

Su Ming smiled but said nothing more.

He knew Xu Qing was right.

For the vast majority of scholars under heaven, this golden list was their life.

"Boom—Boom—Boom—"

At high noon, the Ministry of Rites' gong officer struck the bronze gong.

The noisy crowd instantly fell silent for a moment.

Several government runners were seen carrying a huge imperial proclamation, escorted by armored soldiers, slowly walking out of the Examination Hall and posting it on the high results wall.

"It's out!"

The crowd, like a powder keg ignited, instantly exploded.

Countless people surged toward the proclamation wall like a tide, cries, screams, and cheers all mixing together.

"I made it! I made it! Third Class, seventy-second place! Father! Mother! I made it!"

"No me... how could there be no me... ten years... ten years..."

Xu Qing had long since disappeared from sight. Relying on his slight build, he had somehow squeezed his way to the very front.

Su Ming was jostled by the crowd. He didn't try to push through, just waited quietly.

A long time later, when the first, most frantic wave of the crowd had receded somewhat, he unhurriedly walked over.

He spotted a familiar figure at a glance.

Xu Qing was standing dumbly beneath the proclamation, head tilted back, staring at the imperial list, motionless.

Su Ming walked over, about to speak, when he saw two clear trails of tears slide from the corners of Xu Qing's eyes.

Su Ming's heart sank.

Failed?

He followed Xu Qing's gaze.

On that golden list densely packed with names, in the Second Class section, a line of characters stood out clearly.

"Second Class, thirty-fifth place, Xu Qing, native of Qingshi County, Southern Metropolitan Region."

Su Ming let out a sigh of relief.

Top of the Second Class, bestowed the status of Presented Scholar.

For Xu Qing, from a poor family, this was a result already sufficient to change the fate of his entire clan.

"Brother Xu, congr..."

Before the word "ratulations" could leave his mouth, Xu Qing suddenly let out a loud "wah" and squatted on the ground, wailing like a child.

He cried, pounding his chest with his fist, muttering indistinctly through his tears.

"Father... Mother... I did it... I did it..."

The people around them seemed used to this sight, even casting glances of envy.

At the moment of having one's name inscribed on the golden list, how many could truly maintain their composure?

Su Ming stood quietly by his side, shielding a small space for him, not disturbing this long-overdue release.

Only when Xu Qing's emotions had calmed somewhat did Su Ming speak.
"Congratulations."

Xu Qing wiped away his tears and stood up, an unprecedented brilliant smile on his face. He clapped Su Ming's shoulder vigorously.

"Brother Su! Same to you! Same to you! Hurry, find your name!"

Su Ming shook his head, his gaze sweeping over the end of the list, the Third Class section.

He estimated his ranking should be somewhere in the middle-to-lower part of the Third Class, an inconspicuous position.

However, he searched meticulously from the back to the front.

Nothing.

Su Ming's brow furrowed almost imperceptibly.

Could it be, he didn't even make the Third Class?

Impossible. Given the quality of his examination paper, even if it was mediocre, it shouldn't have resulted in his name being absent from the list.

"How can it not be there?" Xu Qing also grew anxious. "Brother Su, look more carefully! Did you miss it?"

Su Ming took a deep breath, suppressing the ripple of unease in his heart, and slowly moved his gaze upward.

Second Class...

End of the Second Class... not there.

Middle of the Second Class... not there.

His gaze, inch by inch, scanned over those neat names written in the official script.

Then, his pupils suddenly contracted.

It was as if a basin of ice water had been poured over his head, sending a chill through every limb and bone.

In a highly conspicuous position on the imperial proclamation, at the very forefront of the Second Class section, a name clearly entered his field of vision.

"Second Class, tenth place, Su Ming, native of Qingshi County, Southern Metropolitan Region."

Xu Qing saw it too.

He froze for a moment, then erupted with cheers even louder than when he saw his own name.

"I knew it! I knew it! Brother Su! Second Class, tenth place! Heavens! You were just a hair's breadth away from the First Class!"

He excitedly grabbed Su Ming's arm, shaking it forcefully, his words tumbling out incoherently.

"Too wonderful! This is truly too wonderful! When Teacher Zhou finds out, he will surely be proud of you!"

The surrounding crowd also cast looks mingled with envy, jealousy, and astonishment.

Second Class, tenth place. This was already a result worthy of entering the Hanlin Academy, becoming a candidate for future chief ministers, a prestigious and pure choice!

Su Ming's body stiffened where he stood, letting Xu Qing shake him.

Not a trace of joy showed on his face.

His heart, like a calm lake surface, had a massive boulder thrown into it, stirring up monstrous waves.

It's over.

This was the only thought in his mind.

"Something's wrong!"

Lin Yu's voice exploded in his mind, carrying unprecedented vigilance and gravity.

"Extraordinary events must have extraordinary causes! Disciple, our plan has run into a major problem!"

Su Ming forcibly suppressed the massive shock in his heart, forcing a smile onto his face that was uglier than crying, and said to Xu Qing, "Brother Xu, I... I feel a bit dizzy. Let's go back first."

"Right, right, right! We should go back! We must celebrate properly!" Xu Qing, still immersed in immense joy, didn't notice Su Ming's abnormality.

As the two turned to leave, Su Ming felt a familiar gaze land on his back.

He glanced subtly out of the corner of his eye.

On the periphery of the crowd, under a large locust tree, a middle-aged man dressed in the servant attire of the Yongchang Marquis Manor was quietly watching him.

That person's eyes no longer held the previous scrutiny and hostility.

In its place was a complex, somewhat calculating amusement.

As if appreciating a tool that was thought to be scrap iron but unexpectedly discovered to be good steel.

That gaze caused a layer of cold sweat to instantly break out on Su Ming's back.

.....

Returning to the Penglai Inn.

Xu Qing excitedly made plans to book a feast at the best restaurant, but Su Ming stopped him, citing physical discomfort.

Closing the door, cutting off all outside noise.

Su Ming sat by the table, poured a cup of tea that had long gone cold, and drank it in one gulp.

"Master, what on earth is going on?" His voice carried a tremor he himself hadn't noticed.

This ranking had completely disrupted all his plans.

He was like someone who only wanted to move quietly underwater, but was suddenly and inexplicably thrust to the surface by a mysterious force, exposed to everyone's sight.

"Don't panic. Let your teacher sort this out."

Lin Yu's voice was also unusually serious.

In Su Ming's mind, he quickly pieced together and deduced all the information fragments.

Zhou Wenhai's past, the Yongchang Marquis Manor's domineering ways, the existence of the upright officials faction, the personality of the chief examiner, Minister Wang...

After a moment, Lin Yu let out a long sigh.

"Disciple, we... have been used as pawns."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it, who had the greatest power in grading the papers this time?"

"The chief examiner, Minister of Personnel Wang Deyou."

"Right. What kind of essays does this man, who believes 'avoiding mistakes is achievement,' like best?"

"Perfectly balanced, flawless." Su Ming instantly understood something.

"Exactly! Your examination paper perfectly catered to his aesthetic! Elegant prose, solid foundation, arguments so steady they were unassailable! So, during the initial selection, your ranking absolutely could not have been low!" Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of regret. "We both overlooked that 'hiding one's talent' is not the same as 'writing poorly.' What you submitted was a perfect 'exemplary model essay,' not an ordinary 'passing paper.'"

"But that still shouldn't have pushed me up to Second Class, tenth place." Su Ming remained puzzled.

"The key lies in the subsequent maneuvering!" Lin Yu's voice grew heavy. "The final rankings of the palace examination, especially the top twenty, have never been just about the essays. They are the result of struggles between various factions!"

"Think about it. In this imperial examination, the aristocratic faction represented by the Yongchang Marquis Manor and those upright civil officials all wanted to place their own people in the First Class and the top of the Second Class. But the chief examiner, Minister Wang, is an old fox who wants to smooth things over, offending no one."

"When they fought fiercely over the three First Class spots and the top few Second Class spots, with neither side willing to yield, what happens?"

Su Ming's eyes sharpened. "Compromise."

"Bingo!" Lin Yu snapped his fingers. "To break the deadlock and show so-called 'fairness,' they would each take a step back, ceding a few of the most contentious spots to some 'clean background,' 'truly excellent essay' third-party candidates. That way, everyone saves face."

"And you, Su Ming," Lin Yu's tone became extremely complex, "are that most perfect 'compromise product!'"

"First, your essay, even Minister Wang couldn't find fault with it. No one could say a single 'no.'"

"Second, your identity is too perfect. 'Zhou Wenhai's student!' In the eyes of the upright officials faction, Zhou Wenhai was one of their own who was persecuted by the aristocrats back then. You naturally carry a sense of closeness. And in the eyes of the Yongchang Marquis Manor, Zhou Wenhai has been retired for over a decade, posing no threat. Promoting his student both gives the upright officials faction face and doesn't create an enemy for themselves."

"The most important point is, you have no foundation! A poor kid from a remote little county. Even if you enter the Hanlin Academy, you won't be able to stir up any waves. You can only be manipulated by them!"

Lin Yu's analysis was like a bolt of lightning, cleaving through all the fog.

Su Ming's face turned deathly pale.

He finally understood. He hadn't reached this position by talent.

He was a commodity placed on a shelf, selected by two powerful factions in tacit agreement to fill a shelf they couldn't agree on and couldn't leave empty, because he was of "good quality" and "harmless."

He wasn't chosen.

He was sacrificed.

"Then... what should we do?" Su Ming's voice was somewhat hoarse.

Becoming Second Class, tenth place meant he would almost certainly enter the Hanlin Academy.

Enter that most prestigious, yet also most perilous, power center of the Great Xing Dynasty.

"What else can we do?" Lin Yu's voice carried a fierce, reckless determination, like smashing a pot already broken.

"Since we're here, we might as well make the best of it. So what if we're pawns? Who's afraid of whom!"

"If they want to manipulate you, they'll need the capability! From today onward, our 'Way of Survival' needs an upgrade."

"Before it was 'the hidden dragon does not act.' Now, we must learn 'the dragon appears in the field!'"

Su Ming raised his head, looking out the window at the sky dyed red by the setting sun.

He knew that from this moment on, that smooth official road leading to the capital had come to an end.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 104: The Grand Feast of Qionglin

[2,997 words]

Three days later, the horseback parade through the streets commenced.

In the faint light of dawn, officials from the Ministry of Rites delivered the bright red official robes and golden flowers.

The red was so glaring it felt somewhat unreal.

Su Ming and Xu Qing, along with all the new jinshi, gathered before the palace gates.

The Top Scorer, the Second Place Scorer, and that handsome yet slightly somber-looking Third Place Scorer, Wei Zi'ang, stood at the very front of the procession. They wore black gauze caps and red robes, the golden flowers on their chests gleaming brilliantly in the morning light like stars in the sky, attracting countless envious gazes.

Su Ming's position was at the forefront of the Second Class group.

He could clearly see the backs of the three men ahead and could also feel the countless gazes of jealousy or curiosity from behind, pricking his back like needles.

Xu Qing stood not far behind him, excitedly adjusting his own robes, his cheeks flushed red with excitement.

"The auspicious hour has arrived! Begin—!"

With the ceremonial officer's loud cry, bells and drums sounded in unison, and grand music swelled.

Instantly, the solemn ceremonial music filled the sky.

The prepared horses, already adorned with red silk and colorful decorations, pawed the ground restlessly.

The Top Scorer took a deep breath and was the first to mount his horse, followed closely by the Second Place and Third Place Scorers, with the Second Class jinshi following in order.

The horses' hooves first trod upon the specially laid red felt carpet on the official road, then landed on the hard bluestone slabs of Chang'an Street, producing crisp, rhythmic clapping sounds.

These sounds were instantly drowned out by the roaring cheers and discussions from the crowds lining both sides of the street.

Both sides of the street were already packed with people; commoners had poured in from everywhere, vying for a glimpse of the new Son of Heaven's disciples.

"Look! That's the Top Scorer! So imposing and dignified!"

"The Third Place Scorer is so handsome!"

The crowd surged like boiling water, people jostling and squeezing, craning their necks. Children rode on their fathers' shoulders, young girls covered their mouths with their hands, their eyes following those red figures.

Scented pouches, handkerchiefs, even fresh flower petals rained down like colorful drops from the windows of taverns and the balconies of teahouses on both sides, landing on the jinshi's shoulders and before the horses, diffusing a rich, heavy fragrance.

Xu Qing finally loosened up a bit, clumsily yet sincerely imitating those ahead by cupping his hands in salute to the crowd, a pure and dazzling smile on his face.

At this moment, the loneliness of his ten years of diligent study, his family's poverty, all his efforts seemed to be compensated.

Su Ming sat upright on his horse, wearing a perfectly appropriate smile tinged with a bit of restraint and joy.

After the parade ended, the procession headed directly to the royal garden—Qionglin Garden.

The Qionglin Banquet, a feast bestowed by the Son of Heaven, was the supreme honor for the new jinshi.

The royal garden was filled with pavilions, towers, carved beams, painted rafters, and exotic flowers and rare plants vying in splendor. The very air was permeated with an aura of luxury and majesty.

The new jinshi were guided by ceremonial officers to their seats according to their rankings.

The top three of the First Class were arranged in the area closest to the imperial throne, sharing space with imperial relatives, nobles, and important ministers of the Grand Secretariat.

Su Ming's seat was in the front row of the Second Class area.

This position was delicate. He could clearly see the casual conversation and laughter of the great figures ahead and also see their appreciative glances toward the top three.

As for Xu Qing, he was placed in a more rearward area of the Second Class, separated by over a dozen tables, a distant view.

An invisible chasm had already formed.

"His Majesty arrives—!"

Following the palace eunuch's long, drawn-out announcement, everyone rose and knelt in obeisance.

The Great Xing Emperor, surrounded by a host of eunuchs and palace maids, slowly walked toward the imperial throne.

Su Ming, kneeling on the ground, caught a glimpse of a bright yellow dragon robe passing before his eyes from the corner of his vision.

"Long live Your Majesty! Long live, long live, long live!"

After the mountain-shaking cries of "long live," the Emperor took his seat, his voice majestic and even.

"All ministers may rise and be seated."

Everyone's gaze was fixed upon the imperial throne.

The Emperor's voice was majestic and resonant. After offering a few words of praise and encouragement, the ceremony of bestowing wine and rewards began.

The Top Scorer, the Second Place Scorer, and the Third Place Scorer, Wei Zi'ang, stepped forward and knelt before the Emperor.

The Emperor personally bestowed imperial wine upon the three of them. He specially granted the Top Scorer golden flowers, a black gauze cap, and court robes, and bestowed silver flowers and treasure notes upon the Second and Third Place Scorers.

Such extraordinary honor caused countless jinshi below to reveal looks of envy in their eyes.

Su Ming noticed that the Third Place Scorer, Wei Zi'ang, wore a faint, barely perceptible, restrained smile at the corner of his mouth the entire time he received the reward and gave thanks. His eyes were calm yet carried a trace of unconcealable arrogance, as if all this was only natural and expected.

The banquet began.

The sound of string and wind instruments rose, and palace maids, like butterflies flitting through flowers, served one exquisite, peerless dish after another in a flowing stream.

Jade plates bearing rare delicacies, fine wines of the finest quality—each was a top-tier enjoyment from the mortal world.

At Su Ming's table, including himself, sat four fellow graduates of the same year.

They exchanged names and hometowns; all were among the top ranks of the Second Class and were likely to serve as officials in the same yamen in the future.

The atmosphere was superficially harmonious but inwardly carried a hint of cautious probing and comparison.

The few were quite restrained, sampling the delicacies before them—unseen delicacies in their entire lives—with refined manners.

After three rounds of wine, the atmosphere gradually warmed, entering the segment where the new jinshi toasted the princes and important ministers.

Led by the Top Scorer, accompanied by the Second and Third Place Scorers, they began toasting the princes, important ministers, and fellow graduates present.

This was customary, and also the first opportunity for the new jinshi to make contact with the big shots of the court.

When the Top Scorer led the two to Grand Secretary Zhang, the elderly man with white hair and beard merely nodded faintly and casually took a sip of wine.

But when they reached Yongchang Marquis, that burly, resolute-looking middle-aged noble laughed heartily, personally stood up, and patted Third Place Scorer Wei Zi'ang on the shoulder.

"Excellent! Zi'ang, you haven't brought shame to your father! Tonight's wine is truly enjoyable!"

A trace of genuine respect finally appeared on Wei Zi'ang's restrained smile.

"Thank you for your praise, Marquis. Zi'ang is unworthy."

This scene caused countless people around them to change their expressions.

Soon, those three dazzling figures reached the Second Class area.

They toasted table by table, speaking standard, polite words.

Finally, it was Su Ming's table's turn.

The Top Scorer was a steady-looking man in his forties, whose words were flawless.

The Top Scorer raised his wine cup and said clearly to the few at the table, "Fellow graduates, today we have ascended the Dragon Gate together. I hope we will unite our efforts in the future to repay the Emperor's grace."

After speaking, he drank it all in one go.

Su Ming and his tablemates hurriedly stood up to return the toast.

When it was Wei Zi'ang's turn, his gaze lingered on Su Ming's face for a brief moment. That look wasn't curiosity, nor scrutiny, but a kind of aloof, slightly probing indifference.

As if examining a piece of furniture that, for some reason, had been placed here and was slightly in the way.

He raised his wine cup, a formulaic, distant smile on his face, and addressed Su Ming, as well as the others at the table, with a standard polite phrase.

"Congratulations to you all. In the future, serving in the same court, I ask for your guidance."

After saying this, he followed the Top Scorer to the next table.

From beginning to end, he didn't spare Su Ming another glance.

In his eyes, Su Ming was perhaps just a name, a symbol, a poor student from a humble background who had gotten lucky.

"Good, very good." Lin Yu breathed a sigh of relief. "Being ignored is our first protective talisman. The more arrogant this Third Place Scorer is, the safer we are."

Su Ming sat down, picked up his wine cup, and drank the slightly cool imperial wine in one gulp.

The wine was mellow, but carried a hint of spiciness as it went down his throat.

After the toasting segment by the top three ended, the banquet atmosphere became more lively.

"This Third Place Scorer Wei is indeed the grandnephew of Duke Wei. His bearing truly has the innate nobility of aristocracy," a fellow graduate named Qian Bin at the neighboring table remarked sourly.

Su Ming remembered him: eleventh place in the Second Class, just behind himself.

This person seemed to have some criticism toward Su Ming, this "dark horse," and had been subtly observing him since they sat down.

"Brother Su," Qian Bin suddenly turned his focus toward Su Ming, saying with a smile that didn't reach his eyes, "you really hit the jackpot this time. I heard Chief Examiner Minister Wang particularly favors balanced and peaceful essays. Your policy discussion essay must have perfectly hit the mark."

These words sounded like praise but actually implied that Su Ming had achieved his high ranking by taking advantage of an opportunity and catering to the examiner's preferences.

The other two fellow graduates at the table immediately stopped their chopsticks and looked over with keen interest.

Lin Yu sneered in Su Ming's mind.

Here it comes, the classic sour grapes segment. Disciple, ignore him. Let him perform a solo act.

Su Ming, however, just smiled faintly.

"Brother Qian flatters me. This student's essay merely rehashed old ideas. I was merely fortunate enough to catch the eye of a few esteemed officials. I truly dare not call it 'luck.'"

His reply was modest and proper, leaving no room for fault.

Su Ming's identity as this "dark horse" had clearly piqued the interest of many mid-to-low-ranking officials.

Officials wearing sixth or seventh-rank official robes continuously approached, holding wine cups.

"This gentleman must be Su Ming, the fellow graduate from Qingshi County! I've long heard of you!"

"Fellow Graduate Su, so young yet already placed in the top ten of the Second Class! Truly a talented youth! May I ask which great Confucian scholar you studied under?"

"Fellow Graduate Su, the Southern Metropolitan Region produces outstanding people. My hometown is also in the Southern Metropolitan Region. Come, come, let's have a drink!"

Su Ming immediately slipped into the role of the "lucky one."

He stood up, acting flattered and wearing a somewhat simple, awkward expression, returning the courtesies one by one.

"I dare not accept such praise, I dare not. This student was merely fortunate."

"My teacher is a rural tutor. His name is not worth mentioning and is not worthy of note."

"So we are fellow townsmen! My apologies for not recognizing you sooner. This student toasts you, sir."

His replies were watertight yet utterly mediocre.

His speech was steady, his demeanor measured, but in his words, one couldn't hear any astonishing insights or see any sharp edge.

After several rounds, the eyes of those officials who had initially held strong interest in him gradually changed.

From initial curiosity to a hint of disappointment.

"This young man seems... a bit too steady."

"Steady? I think he's dull. Asked about his views on policy discussions, he couldn't articulate anything substantial, only saying 'all relying on the Sage's teachings.' Such a person achieving a high rank truly got lucky."

"Hmm, lacks sharpness. Probably won't achieve great things. A pity, a pity."

These whispered discussions reached Su Ming's ears word for word.

His heart was as still as an ancient well, even stirring with a trace of the desired indifference.

In the innermost circle of seats at the banquet, the few true giants—including Yongchang Marquis—from beginning to end, never cast a single glance of attention toward Su Ming's direction.

Their lively conversation and laughter, their exchange of interests, had nothing to do with this poor student from a humble background who had suddenly leaped to a high position.

In their eyes, a Second Class tenth-place graduate with no roots or foundation, whether "lucky" or not, had not yet entered the chessboard they needed to bother paying attention to.

His heart was completely calm.

This was precisely the effect he desired.

.....

The clamor and superficial glamour of the Qionglin Banquet rapidly receded from the capital's life like a retreating tide.

What remained was the anxious waiting of the new jinshi and the undercurrents of power allocation.

These past few days, the atmosphere at the Penglai Inn became particularly delicate.

Xu Qing was visibly growing restless. He went out early and returned late every day, rushing about among various fellow graduates, trying to pick up any rumors regarding the Ministry of Personnel's official appointments.

"Brother Su, have you heard? The Ministry of Personnel has already started drafting the list!" As soon as he returned to the inn, he rushed into Su Ming's room, lowered his voice, his expression both excited and nervous.

"The Ministry of Revenue has an opening this year! I heard it's a lucrative post!"

"The Ministry of Justice is too perilous, better not go there."

"The Ministry of Works has plenty of lucrative opportunities, but no future..."

He analyzed the news he had gathered one by one, as if solving the most complex arithmetic problem, his face filled with longing and unease for the future.

Su Ming just quietly poured him a cup of hot tea and listened.

"Master, is the Hanlin Academy... really that perilous?" Late at night, in the stillness, Su Ming asked in his heart.

"Dangerous? Disciple, that word is too gentle." Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, carrying a hint of serious schadenfreude. "That place shouldn't be called the Hanlin Academy; it should be called the 'Reserve Grand Secretariat' or the 'Prime Minister Preparatory Class.' Do you think a class full of future imperial confidants and Grand Secretariat Grand Secretaries could be a benign place?"

Lin Yu's soul body phantom paced within the ring space.

"Every single person inside likely stands with a powerful family, a giant of the court behind them. Inside, you're not competing with fellow graduates in scholarship; you're fighting against the accumulation of several generations and a complex web of connections. What do you, a poor kid from the countryside, have to fight with?"

Su Ming was silent.

"So, our best destination is being an assistant instructor at the Imperial College, or managing rituals at the Ministry of Rites. At worst, going to the Imperial Observatory to watch the stars is fine too. In short, the less attention, the more leisurely, the better!" Lin Yu concluded decisively.

On the afternoon of the fifth day, a carriage bearing the insignia of the Ministry of Personnel stopped at the entrance of the Penglai Inn.

The entire inn instantly fell silent.

All the scholars staying at the inn craned their necks, their gazes burning as they stared at that carriage.

A stern-faced Ministry of Personnel official in seventh-rank official robes, holding two scrolls of yellow-shafted documents, walked directly up to the second floor under a host of envious and jealous gazes.

He first knocked on Xu Qing's door.

"By order of the Ministry of Personnel, announcing to new jinshi Xu Qing: appointed as an observation jinshi of the Ministry of Revenue. Report to the yamen immediately for registration, commence duty in three days."

Xu Qing stood dumbfounded at the doorway, as if struck by a bolt from the blue.

He froze for a full three breaths. Then, immense ecstasy overwhelmed him. He was at a loss, bowed deeply to the Ministry of Personnel official, his voice trembling violently with excitement.

"This student... receives the order! Thank... thank the court for its heavenly grace!"

The official just nodded faintly, his expression unchanged, then turned and walked toward Su Ming's room next door.

This slightly cooled Xu Qing's joy. He watched Su Ming's door nervously, his palms sweaty.

"Knock, knock, knock."

Su Ming opened the door.

The Ministry of Personnel official examined him with a scrutinizing look—this "lucky one" who had been discussed by many after the Qionglin Banquet.

He cleared his throat and, in a tone clearer and more formulaic than before, announced loudly:

"By order of the Ministry of Personnel, announcing to new Second Class tenth-place jinshi Su Ming: appointed as Compiler of the Hanlin Academy, rank 7b. Proceed immediately to the Hanlin Academy to receive official robes and tally. Commence duty in three days."

As his words fell.

The entire hallway fell into dead silence.

Hanlin Academy!

Compiler!

This was the prestigious position all literati dreamed of, the golden staircase leading to the center of power!

"Brother... Brother Su..." Xu Qing's lips trembled, too excited to utter a complete sentence. "Hanlin Academy... you entered the Hanlin Academy!"

Su Ming's mind buzzed.

It's over.

Lin Yu's wail almost burst out of the ring: "Damn it! What we feared has come! Those old foxes are really pushing us into the fire! This official robe is made of iron, and it's electrified! Whoever wants to wear it can wear it!"

Yet, Su Ming's face had to conjure up the perfect blend of pleasant surprise and trepidation.

He bowed deeply to the Ministry of Personnel official, imitating Xu Qing's manner, his voice carrying a slight tremor of a young man achieving success. "This student... receives the order. Thank you for the heavenly grace, thank you, sir."

The official, observing his reaction, a flicker of imperceptible amusement flashed in his eyes.

He handed the document to Su Ming and added in a flat tone, "The Hanlin Academy is a prestigious and noble place, and also the place with the strictest rules. Compiler Su is young. You should watch more, listen more, speak less, make fewer mistakes. In the past, Lord Zhou Wenhai also started as a compiler."

He deliberately mentioned Zhou Wenhai.

This sentence was like a needle, gently pricking Su Ming's heart.

It was a reminder, and also a warning.

"Yes, this student will remember your instruction." Su Ming bowed again.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[2,176 words]

The Ministry of Personnel official nodded and turned to leave.

Only after the carriage had disappeared down the alley did Xu Qing suddenly lunge forward and grab Su Ming's shoulders hard.

"Brother Su! Did you hear that? Hanlin Academy! Seventh-rank Compiler!"

He babbled incoherently, his eyes red, happier than if he had won the Ministry of Revenue post himself.

Su Ming could only force a rigid smile and let him shake him, while inside he felt ice-cold.

This official robe—truly hot to the touch.

Three days later, Su Ming stepped into that grand complex in the southeast corner of the imperial city for the first time as an official.

The Hanlin Academy.

Unlike the austere Ministry of Personnel office, there were no rows of soldiers and no hurried clerks here.

The academy gate was simple; even the gold paint on the signboard had flaked away in places.

The moment he entered, the clamor of the outside world was completely cut off.

Towering ancient locust trees and sturdy cypress sliced the sky into small shards of blue. Sunlight filtered through the dense leaves, casting mottled shadows on the bluestone pathways that swayed gently with the breeze.

The air carried a unique scent: the age of old book paper, the deep fragrance of precious wood, the bitter clarity of ink cakes, all mixed to form a heavy atmosphere called "history."

It was too quiet.

Quiet enough to hear his own heartbeat, quiet enough to catch, faintly, the sound of pages being turned in a distant study.

This kind of silence was not peaceful; it pressed down like an invisible weight that made one afraid to breathe loudly.

Following directions, Su Ming crossed a stone bridge and arrived at a three-story pavilion named the Wenyuan Pavilion, where the compilers did their daily work.

He climbed the steps; the wooden stair creaked "squeak" from frequent use.

The second floor opened into a large, airy hall.

Dozens of black-lacquered writing desks stood in neat rows, and behind each desk sat a figure.

Some buried their heads in towering stacks of scrolls, some held brushes and wrote in concentration, and some sat with eyes closed, thoughts drifting elsewhere.

This was the "brain center" of the Great Xing Dynasty.

Su Ming's arrival was like a pebble dropped into a still pond.

Almost the instant he stepped into the hall, a dozen gazes from all directions aimed at him, impassive but piercing.

Those looks were intensely complicated.

A few elderly men in the front rows, hair white, glanced at him briefly and then withdrew their eyes. Their looks were like watching a falling leaf, full of worldly detachment and utterly calm.

But the younger colleagues, roughly Su Ming's age, were more interesting.

Curiosity, scrutiny, unhidden jealousy, and a trace of contempt showed in their eyes.

Su Ming knew his identity was no longer a secret.

Second division, tenth place; Zhou Wenhai's disciple; a penniless scion with no backing.

Those labels stuck together made him destined to be an outlier.

He belonged neither to the circles of established families with patrons behind them, nor could he blend with the veteran Hanlin who had clawed their way up by seniority.

"You're Su Ming?"

A slightly sharp voice sounded.

Su Ming turned toward it and saw a young man wearing the same official robe, arrogance written on his face, leaning against a desk with arms folded and casting a sidelong glance at him.

It was Qian Bin from the Qionglin Banquet.

He had been assigned to the Hanlin Academy as well.

A thought flashed through Su Ming's mind and he immediately put on a respectful expression, stepped forward, and cupped his hands in salute. "Greetings, Brother Qian."

Qian Bin let out a derisive laugh, small but loud enough for several nearby desks to hear.

"Alright, Qian Bin, enough. Newcomer arrived, don't scare him."

A more moderate voice came from nearby.

The speaker was a young man copying something at a desk beside Qian Bin; without looking up he offered a faint remark.

But his words, framed as advice, actually fixed Su Ming as the frightened, weak newcomer.

Inside the ring, Lin Yu hummed and grumbled: Here we go, Lesson One of workplace bullying. Disciple, steady yourself, don't get dragged along. Remember your newbie role: naive, harmless, slow to react.

Su Ming seemed not to notice the scorn behind Qian Bin's words; his face retained that awkward, rustic earnestness of a countryside youth entering a grand scene for the first time.

"Brother Qian jokes. I am shallow in learning and rely on luck. In the future at the academy, I will need the guidance and support of seniors and colleagues."

He spoke with immense sincerity and humbled posture, as if he truly believed he had stumbled in by luck.

Qian Bin's ready store of ridicule met only cotton and found no purchase.

Seeing Su Ming's "sincere" face, he choked on his words, snorted coldly, turned his head, and ignored him.

At that moment, a middle-aged man wearing the sixth-rank Reader-in-Attendance robe stepped out from an inner office.

Lean-faced, sporting a goatee, his eyes sharp as he scanned the room, his gaze finally fixed on Su Ming.

"You're the new compiler, Su Ming?"

"Junior official Su Ming, greetings, Reader Guo." Su Ming hurriedly stepped forward and bowed.

This Reader Guo was the immediate supervisor responsible for managing the new compilers.

Guo gave a nasal "hmm," a bureaucratic sound laced with restraint and indifference.

He sized Su Ming up and down; the look wasn't that of evaluating a colleague but of appraising an object.

"I have read your exam papers," Guo said slowly. "Your handwriting is fairly tidy. As for your essays, they are skilled but lack spirit. Young man, don't always try to cite the classics and repeat others' words. The Hanlin Academy needs genuine talent who can ease the emperor's burdens, not bookish nerds who only write well."

Those words immediately undermined the "stability" Su Ming had been proud of in the imperial exam.

Around them, Qian Bin's mouth curled into a gleeful, schadenfreude smile.

"Yes, junior official is dull-witted. Thanks for your instruction, Lord Guo." Su Ming bowed his head even lower, displaying a humble, teachable attitude.

"Hmph, good that you know you're dull," Guo seemed satisfied with his attitude, and from a stack of books beside him he pulled out the thickest volume and tossed it onto the empty desk before Su Ming.

That desk was the outermost one in the hall, closest to the door; freezing in winter, scorching in summer, with people passing by constantly—the worst position.

"This is your desk," Guo pointed to it. "Since you're new, start from the basics. Read through this Da Xing Compendium, then hand-copy it three times. Use Hanlin-standard characters, stroke by stroke, with no mistakes. When you've finished copying, come find me."

Copy books?

Three times?

This brick-thick Da Xing Compendium contained at least a hundred thousand characters; copying it three times meant nearly half a million characters!

This was no longer a test of character; it was pure harassment, a show of authority to knock him down.

Qian Bin and the others' faces showed an eager anticipation of a spectacle.

"Damn! That old man is brutal! He's treating us like copy machines!" Lin Yu in the ring cursed loudly.

Su Ming's heart sank.

But when he raised his head, his face showed gratitude and delight.

"Thank you for your cultivation, Lord Guo!" He bowed deeply to Reader Guo, his tone sincere. "My foundation is shallow and needs such tempering. I will copy earnestly and not disappoint you!"

His unexpectedly wholehearted reaction stunned everyone.

Guo's prepared litany of scolding was blocked midstream. He stared at Su Ming's tearful, grateful-looking face, his expression turning odd.

Is this kid actually foolish, or merely pretending?

He watched Su Ming for a long moment, then waved his sleeve, snorted, and returned to the inner office.

"Ungrateful."

Su Ming cradled the heavy Da Xing Compendium like a treasure and returned to his corner desk.

He could feel those complicated gazes resting on his back for a long time before gradually dispersing.

He sat and spread the paper, ground his ink, and picked up his brush.

Stroke by stroke, meticulous and focused, with no distractions.

Those rigid, neat Hanlin-standard characters appeared on the white xuan paper one by one from his brush.

The sun slanted west; golden late light poured through the wide window lattices, bathing the tranquil Wenyuan Pavilion in a warm glow.

People gradually stopped writing, packed up, and prepared to leave their posts.

When Qian Bin walked past Su Ming's desk, he deliberately paused to glance at what Su Ming had copied.

The handwriting was tidy, faultless.

A flicker of contempt crossed his eyes—this kid really was just a bookish hard worker.

He shook his head, chatted with a few peers he knew, and walked away.

When the last person left, the second floor of Wenyuan Pavilion held only Su Ming.

He was still copying.

Only after the final thread of sunset vanished did he stop, gently working his stiffened wrist.

His spirit-sense spread out like a silent tide.

He "heard."

On the first floor, in the archives, an old Hanlin coughed softly.

On the third floor, in the stacks, faint footsteps—an on-duty clerk making his rounds.

He even "heard" that Reader Guo had not left his private room.

There was another person inside.

"...That's how it is," Guo's lowered voice carried a flattering tone. "I followed your instructions and knocked some sense into that boy. Punish him with copying, leave him to the margins for a few months, wear down his sharpness."

"Hmm." A stranger's voice, slightly effeminate, replied. "Well done, but keep it measured. Don't ruin him. The higher-ups have plans for him."

"I understand, junior official does. It's just... Su Ming seems dull; he doesn't look capable of major responsibility. Today I gave him a hard time and he expressed gratitude—perhaps he's an idiot."

The effeminate voice laughed softly.

"An idiot? Reader Guo, no true fool can stand out in the imperial exams. He's either deeply scheming, or... an uncut jade that needs careful carving."

"Watch him. Report his every move, who he meets each day, what he says."

"Yes, junior official will obey."

Su Ming's spirit-sense receded like a tide.

He slowly opened his eyes; ink-black depths filled them.

So Reader Guo's harassment was not his personal whim but ordered from above.

And the person behind it clearly held higher rank.

From the moment this pawn was placed on the board, countless eyes from all directions had been fixed tightly on him.

He packed his things, blew out the candle, and left the Wenyuan Pavilion.

Night had deepened; the cold moon hung like a hook.

In the Hanlin Academy, ancient trees cast long, monstrous shadows on the ground.

Walking the silent bluestone path, Su Ming felt the weight of the seventh-rank robe on his body grow heavier.

Not far from the Hanlin gate, a familiar figure came up to meet him.

It was Xu Qing.

He had clearly been waiting a while, chilled by the night air.

"Brother Su! You finally came out! How was your first watch? Are the great scholars in the academy very learned?" Xu Qing's face shone with curiosity and excitement.

He enthusiastically recounted his experiences at the Ministry of Personnel.

"Today I followed Director Li and sorted through ten years of old accounts—my head's spinning! But I learned so much. I had no idea the court's taxation had so many intricacies!"

His eyes glittered; he had found a place to apply himself.

Su Ming looked at him with some envy.

"Pretty good." Su Ming smiled simply and concisely. "The academy is quiet; colleagues concentrate on study. I received a task: copying books."

"Copying books?" Xu Qing blinked. "Well, that's good! The books in the Hanlin are unique treasures. To read and copy more is a blessing!"

He clearly didn't catch the deeper meaning behind "copying books."

Seeing Xu Qing's sincere face, Su Ming swallowed the words he had nearly spoken.

He couldn't tell him he was being sidelined, sent to the corner.

They walked side by side, one full of boundless hope for the future, the other hiding worries deep inside.

Xu Qing patted Su Ming's shoulder vigorously. "Brother Su, on our next day off let's go have a proper drink to celebrate our bright futures!"

"Okay." Su Ming replied.

"Brother Su, Director Li at the Ministry of Personnel has taken a liking to me and assigned me many tasks. Traveling daily to the south of the city is a bother. I... plan to move into the ministry's official lodgings in a couple of days. It will be simple, but convenient, and I'll have more time at night to sort documents." Xu Qing's face showed excitement and a touch of awkwardness.

He paused, looking apologetic. "But that means I won't be able to room with you."

Su Ming understood—this was Xu Qing's style: practical, seizing opportunities.

He patted Xu Qing's shoulder sincerely. "That's good. Official duties come first. Living at the office will save travel and help you quickly get familiar with departmental work. We're both in the capital, we'll see each other plenty."

Relaxed at Su Ming's understanding, Xu Qing exhaled and smiled more easily. "Exactly! Brother Su, then you..."

"I am already looking for a place to live," Su Ming picked up the thread calmly. "The Hanlin is peaceful but inconvenient for comings and goings. I plan to find a small courtyard nearby to stay, for quiet and convenient... studying." He deliberately paused slightly on "studying," as if a true Hanlin scholar absorbed in learning.

Xu Qing nodded without suspicion. "Appropriate, appropriate! Now that Brother Su is a Hanlin official, you should have a decent place. If you need help, just say the word."

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 106: Paying Homage to Liu Siye

[2,452 words]

The Penglai Inn was ultimately just a temporary stop, a place of mixed company, not a long-term solution.

Su Ming took the first salary issued by the Ministry of Personnel and, instead of buying any new outfits, poured all of it into rent.

He found a small single-courtyard house. The alley was quiet, the bluestone path worn smooth by time, flanked by gray, dusty courtyard walls. The courtyard wasn't large, but its advantage was being self-contained. Once the gate was closed, it became his own private world.

Xu Qing had specifically taken leave to help. The moment he entered the courtyard, his eyes lit up.

"Brother Su, you... you're really willing to spend!" He touched the half-withered old locust tree in the yard, his tone full of envy.

"For the sake of peace and quiet." Su Ming carried an old wooden chest into the main room, his reply brief and to the point.

This courtyard had cost him most of his salary. The remaining money had to be stretched thin.

But Su Ming felt it was worth it.

He needed an absolutely safe space, a place where he could shed all disguises.

"True." Xu Qing nodded, then became excited again. "The Hanlin Academy is prestigious and refined; it's only right to live a bit more respectably. Not like our Ministry of Revenue, dealing with money, grain, and account books every day, reeking of copper all over!"

He complained with his words, but his eyes and brows were brimming with energy.

Su Ming poured him a cup of cool tea, quietly listening to Xu Qing's grumbles.

Xu Qing's world was concrete numbers, complex entries, and tangible, touchable official connections.

But his own world was a mist-shrouded swamp that needed to be explored with extreme caution.

The two ate a simple meal in the courtyard before Xu Qing hurriedly bid farewell and rushed back to the Ministry of Revenue.

The spacious small courtyard instantly fell silent.

Su Ming closed the courtyard gate and locked it.

He stood in the yard, taking a deep breath.

The air carried the smell of earth, the scent of the old locust tree's wood, and a faint, elusive sense of home-like peace.

"Master, now we can finally relax a bit."

"Indeed." Lin Yu smacked his lips. "It's still better than that Hanlin Academy. The Dragon Qi there is as dense and solid as an iron plate; I didn't even dare poke my head out inside."

Every day at the Hanlin Academy was like a cup of tepid, plain water.

Su Ming entered the Wenyuan Pavilion punctually every day and sat at the desk by the window in the corner.

His job was to copy books.

Stroke by stroke, as neat as if carved by a printing block.

Reader Guo would occasionally stroll past behind him, hands clasped behind his back, his gaze lingering on Su Ming's paper for a moment before letting out an inscrutable snort and walking away.

Qian Bin and his few followers, however, made "caring about" Su Ming's copying progress a daily pastime.

"Well, well, Compiler Su, which volume have you copied up to today?" Qian Bin's voice always carried a hint of sarcasm.

"Your handwriting is truly improving. In a couple more years, you might be able to write couplets for people at the street corner."

Suppressed snickers came from the surroundings.

Su Ming would always look up at such times, wearing an honest and earnest expression.

"Thank you for your guidance, Brother Qian. My brushwork is still shallow and requires diligent practice."

His response was always this line.

Neither subservient nor arrogant, yet carrying a touch of "dense" dullness that left Qian Bin's prepared bellyful of sarcasm with nowhere to go.

After several attempts, Qian Bin also found it boring.

A bookworm who only buried his head in copying, a dull stone that made no sound when struck, simply held no value for teasing.

In this way, Su Ming made himself a blurry background figure.

But his silence didn't mean he wasn't observing.

His eyes recorded everything within the Wenyuan Pavilion.

Several elderly Hanlin scholars with white hair and beards held ancient texts daily, turning a deaf ear to the wind and rain outside the window, forming their own faction.

The rest were a few young men, like Su Ming, with no solid backing, marginalized.

They were either resentful or overly cautious, trying to find a patron.

Su Ming relied on no one.

He relied only on the never-ending *Da Xing Compendium* on his desk.

The days of copying were tedious, but they also gave Su Ming a perfect excuse.

"Lord Guo, while copying the 'Ritual System' volume, this student discovered some discrepancies between the ceremonial records from the previous dynasty and those of our current dynasty. I wish to go to the underground archives to consult some original materials for verification and correction."

Su Ming stood respectfully in Reader Guo's study, his posture extremely humble.

Reader Guo was savoring a cup of fresh tea, not even lifting his eyelids.

"Noted. Go yourself. Don't mess with things."

He waved his hand as if shooing away a fly.

The key to the underground archives hung on the wall by the gatekeeper's room, available for anyone to take.

This place was clearly somewhere no one wanted to come.

Su Ming pushed open the heavy wooden door. A turbid air, mixed with the smell of mold and dust, rushed to meet him.

The light was dim, with only a few shafts of daylight filtering in from the high ventilation windows, illuminating countless dancing dust motes in the air.

Rows of floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves were piled high with dust-covered archives and wooden boxes. Many were already rotting, emitting a smell of aged, decaying wood.

The management was extremely chaotic.

The materials Su Ming needed to find were haphazardly stuffed into a broken box in a corner.

He crouched down, patiently searching through it.

Besides yellowed archives, the box contained many miscellaneous items. Broken brush handles, dried-up inkstones, even a broken bowl from who-knows-what era.

Just as he moved aside a stack of discarded records of "auspicious signs" from the previous dynasty, his fingertip touched something cold and hard.

It was a small black seal being used as a paperweight.

The seal was only thumb-sized, topped with an endearingly naive turtle-shaped knob. The material was neither metal nor jade, warm to the touch yet carrying a metallic heaviness.

Su Ming turned it over. The seal face was carved with several strange seal script characters he didn't recognize at all, their strokes complex, like ghostly scribbles.

"Master, look at this," he called out in his mind.

Inside the ring, Lin Yu's Soul Body opened his eyes. His spiritual sense cautiously extended from the ring. The moment it touched that small black seal—

"Hum..."

A faint, almost inaudible hum resonated directly in the depths of his soul body.

Lin Yu's "gaze" instantly froze.

That small seal was no longer a simple, unadorned black stone in his "eyes."

Inside it, an extremely faint yet incredibly pure stream of dark golden light actually seemed to flow! That light was tightly confined within the seal's body by some powerful force.

"Don't show anything! Put it away!" His voice carried a trace of barely suppressed excitement.

Su Ming complied, discreetly slipping the seal into his sleeve, then continued searching through the useless discarded archives.

"What is this?"

Lin Yu's voice trembled. "There's an aura of 'sealing' on this! It's very faint, but the technique is extremely ancient! This thing... its grade might not be high, but it's definitely a good item!"

"Heh heh, disciple, our hard labor wasn't in vain!" Lin Yu was overjoyed. "What do they call this? This is called 'Heaven rewards the diligent'! Those people who exiled you to this godforsaken place have no idea that the greatest treasures are often hidden in the trash heap!"

Su Ming's fingers gently tightened around the small seal in his sleeve. Its cool touch slightly cooled his boiling blood. A heaven-sent bargain? In this abandoned archive room of the Hanlin Academy?

...

In the blink of an eye, Su Ming had been copying books at the Hanlin Academy for over two months.

The four words "diligent, earnest, dull, and silent" were firmly stamped upon him.

Direct provocations from Qian Bin and others gradually decreased, probably because they found it truly boring to pick on a stone.

Su Ming paid it no mind.

His daily life was clearly divided into two halves by a distinct line.

During the day, he was Compiler Su in the corner of the Wenyuan Pavilion, who only buried his head in copying, slow to react, speaking little, like a dull gourd fresh from the countryside.

At night, with the small courtyard gate closed, he was the true Su Ming.

He would sit cross-legged under the half-withered old locust tree in the yard, circulate the *Greenwood Longevity Art*, and use the sparse yet still pure spiritual energy of the capital to slowly nourish his Qihai.

Su Ming: "Master, that turtle-knob seal still shows no reaction."

He would nurture the small black seal in his sleeve with spiritual energy every night, but it was like an iron lump, utterly unresponsive. Lin Yu had studied it for a long time and only concluded: The "sealing" power contained within this thing is very ancient, but without a specific incantation or formation, it's just an ornament.

"Don't rush. Treasures have their own temper." Lin Yu was completely unconcerned. "Just treat it like polishing walnuts. Polish it long enough, and maybe one day it'll work?"

Su Ming withdrew his spiritual energy, opened his eyes, and looked up at the patch of night sky framed by the courtyard walls.

The moonlight was cold, the stars sparse.

He knew he couldn't wait like this any longer.

The Hanlin Academy was like an airtight iron box. He was locked in the lowest level, cut off from information, completely in the dark. Who was behind Reader Guo? What exactly was the Yongchang Marquis Manor's attitude towards him?

These questions couldn't be answered by copying books alone.

He had to break this deadlock.

The letter left by his teacher Zhou Wenhai, that wax seal impression, and the name Liu Wenyuan were the only lifelines he could currently grasp.

"Master, I plan to pay a visit to Director Liu."

"Mm, it's time." Lin Yu's tone was uncharacteristically serious. "Your 'wooden man' image is now firmly established. Suddenly visiting an elder to seek scholarly guidance is perfectly reasonable."

"I understand."

Su Ming had long prepared the Gift of Respect.

An old-pit She inkstone from Huizhou, its ink color warm and moist, not particularly valuable but elegant. Two volumes of rare ancient texts he had personally copied by

hand: one was *Zhong Ding Kao* on the study of ancient bronzes and stone inscriptions from the previous dynasty, the other was *He Luo Gu Yun*, recording the evolution of ancient music theory.

These gifts were not ostentatious, carried no taint of money, and exuded the refined elegance between scholars—the safest choice.

On his day off, just as dawn was breaking.

Su Ming changed into a slightly worn blue Confucian robe, wrapped the gifts in a clean piece of blue cloth, carried them in hand, and left the small courtyard.

The morning capital was not yet fully awake.

He didn't hire a cart but walked step by step through the crisscrossing streets and alleys towards the western part of the city.

Director Liu's residence was completely different from the high-ranking official mansion he had imagined.

It was located in a quiet alley, far from those vermilion gates and high walls symbolizing power. The courtyard walls were gray, the plaster peeling, revealing the color of the rammed earth beneath.

There were no stone lions in front of the gate, no mounting blocks, only two faded black lacquered wooden doors. One of them was slightly ajar, and a thin layer of dust had accumulated on the door knocker.

Compared to the bustling, crowded scene at the Yongchang Marquis Manor, this place could only be described as desolate.

"This... seems a bit down on his luck." Lin Yu clicked his tongue inside the ring. "Zhou Wenhai praised him like a blooming flower. How come he lives like a down-and-out family? Disciple, are you sure you haven't come to the wrong place?"

"Should be correct."

Su Ming stepped forward and gently knocked on the door knocker.

"Knock, knock, knock. Knock, knock, knock."

After a long while, slow, dragging footsteps came from inside, accompanied by an old, raspy cough.

"Creak—"

The door opened a crack. A wrinkled head poked out from behind it. It was an old servant with sparse, graying hair, wearing a faded gray cloth garment. His eyes were cloudy, and he had to squint for a long time to focus on someone.

"Who are you looking for?" The old servant's voice was hoarse, as if rubbed by sandpaper.

"This student, Su Ming, by order of my teacher Zhou Wenhai, has come specifically to pay respects to Director Liu." Su Ming bowed in greeting, presenting his name card with both hands.

The old servant's cloudy eyes swept over Su Ming, then looked down at the name card bearing the characters "Su Ming," as if trying to recognize them.

"Wait."

He didn't take the name card, just coldly tossed out two words before slamming the door shut with a "bang."

Su Ming got a door shut in his face but wasn't angered. He simply stood quietly outside the gate.

He waited for the time it takes an incense stick to burn.

In the alley, occasionally, early-rising commoners would pass by, looking at him curiously with eyes holding a bit of sympathy and understanding.

"Another one coming to ask Director Liu for help."

"Ah, this Director Liu himself is almost in dire straits; how can he care about others?"

Whispered comments drifted into Su Ming's ears.

Lin Yu found it amusing: "Disciple, see that? The masses have sharp eyes. This Director Liu is probably being sidelined too."

Just as Su Ming thought he had made a wasted trip today, that black lacquered wooden door creaked open again.

It was still the old servant.

He expressionlessly moved aside. "Come in. The master is waiting for you in the study."

Su Ming followed the old servant into the Liu residence.

The courtyard wasn't large. Moss grew in the cracks of the bluestone paving. The red lacquer on the pillars under the eaves had peeled off, revealing the wood's original color.

The entire courtyard exuded a sense of chilly, forgotten loneliness.

The old servant didn't lead him directly to the study but to a side hall.

"Wait here."

With that, the old servant turned and left, not even offering a cup of tea.

Su Ming looked around. The furnishings in the side hall were extremely simple: a few tables and chairs, their lacquer surfaces badly worn. The air carried a faint smell of mold.

Su Ming didn't sit down. He just stood quietly in the center of the hall, eyes lowered, observing his nose, nose observing his heart, patiently waiting.

Time ticked by.

The daylight filtering through the window lattice gradually changed from bluish-gray to bright white.

Nearly half an hour later, the old servant's footsteps sounded again.

"Follow me."

Passing through a dimly lit corridor, Su Ming was brought before a study.

The old servant pushed the door open, made a "please" gesture, then turned and left.

Su Ming took a deep breath, straightened his clothes, and stepped inside.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 107: Who is the prey is still uncertain.

[2,680 words]

Director Liu's study had a strong smell of ink, mixed with a scent of medicinal herbs, and a hint of the musty odor emitted by damp paper.

This study was smaller than Teacher Zhou's, but the sense of oppression it gave off was ten times stronger.

There were no calligraphy scrolls, no potted plants.

All four walls were bookshelves, crammed full of books. Those books weren't haphazardly placed; they were neatly arranged and categorized according to the classics, histories, philosophers, and literary collections.

Behind the desk sat a man.

The man appeared to be around fifty, with a lean figure, wearing a somewhat old dark blue robe. His face resembled mountain rock that had been hacked by axes and knives—the lines were rigid, and his nasolabial folds were deep.

The most striking feature was his eyes. They were like the eyes of a hawk, deeply set, yet the pupils shone with a startling brightness.

He was the Vice Director of the Imperial College, Liu Wenyuan.

Su Ming dared not be negligent. He stepped forward three paces, took out the wax-sealed secret letter from Zhou Wenhai from his bosom, and respectfully presented it with both hands.

"Student Su Ming, following the orders of my teacher Zhou Wenhai, has come specially to pay respects to Lord Liu. This is a personal letter from my teacher."

Director Liu's gaze fell upon the letter, especially on the dark red, intricately patterned wax seal. His eyes seemed to freeze for an instant.

Then, he reached out and took the letter.

He did not tell Su Ming to rise, nor did he offer any pleasantries.

He simply sat there quietly, using a small paper knife to carefully pry open the wax seal.

He unfolded the letter paper, his eyes sweeping over the handwriting on it.

Throughout the entire process, the only sound in the study was the faint rustling of the letter paper being unfolded.

Su Ming maintained his bowing posture, motionless, his breathing steady.

Director Liu read the letter at a measured pace, his face devoid of any expression.

Finally, he finished reading the last word. Slowly, he refolded the letter paper along its original creases, but instead of putting it back into the envelope, he simply placed it by his hand.

Only then did he lift his eyes and direct his gaze back at Su Ming, who was still standing bowed.

Su Ming dared not be negligent, stepped forward three paces, and bowed.

"Student Su Ming, paying respects to Lord Liu."

Director Liu grunted in acknowledgment, but did not tell him to rise, nor did he offer any pleasantries.

He simply sat there quietly, using those sharp eyes of his to scrutinize Su Ming inch by inch.

The air seemed to solidify.

Su Ming maintained his bowing posture, motionless, his breathing steady.

He could feel that gaze dissecting everything about him.

His attire, his demeanor, the rhythm of his breathing, every subtle twitch of his muscles.

"Rise." Director Liu's voice, like the man himself, was dry, cold, and devoid of any emotion.

"Thank you, Lord." Su Ming straightened up, still keeping his eyes lowered, not daring to meet his gaze.

Director Liu pointed to a wooden stool in front of the desk. "Sit."

Su Ming complied, sitting only on the edge of the stool, his back ramrod straight.

"I've read Wenhai's letter." Director Liu got straight to the point, his voice betraying neither joy nor anger. "In his letter, he holds very high expectations for you."

He paused, and those hawk-like eyes fell upon Su Ming once more.

"Now that you've entered the Hanlin Academy, how does it feel?"

Su Ming quickly organized his thoughts in his mind, while his face showed just the right amount of a young man's apprehension and restraint upon first entering the officialdom.

"Replying to Lord Liu, this student... this student is doing well in all respects."

He didn't directly answer "how does it feel," but first set a tone.

"The Hanlin Academy is a place of pure prestige. The seniors within the academy are all great scholars. This student feels only the shallowness of his own knowledge while being there daily, and dares not slack off, adhering only to the words 'diligence and earnestness'."

"Reader Guo, taking pity on this student's unstable foundation, specifically ordered this student to copy the 'Da Xing Compendium' as a form of tempering. This student copies books every day; though it is tedious, it is also greatly beneficial."

He paused, as if somewhat reluctant to speak.

"However... most of my colleagues in the academy come from prominent families. This student, from a humble background... cannot converse with them. But this student keeps in mind the teachings of my teacher and Lord Liu: observe more, listen more, speak less, and act cautiously. So far, no one has given me a hard time."

This speech contained a huge amount of information.

He mentioned being punished to copy books, mentioned being isolated, but his tone was calm, without a trace of complaint or bitterness—he was merely stating a fact.

Finally, he cleverly drew Director Liu into it as well, pointing out that he had been "keeping in mind the teachings."

This response both revealed his own situation and demonstrated a level of forbearance and steadiness beyond his years.

"Hmph."

A cold snort came from Director Liu's nose, filled with undisguised contempt.

"Copying books? Guo Huan is left with only these petty, unsightly methods."

His opening words made Su Ming's heart jolt.

Guo Huan—Reader Guo's name.

Director Liu addressed him by his name directly, clearly not placing him in his eyes at all.

"They are leaving you out in the cold not to destroy you." Director Liu picked up a cup of tea on the table that had long gone cold and took a sip. The tea must have been

extremely bitter, yet his expression didn't change. "They want to see if you are 'usable' and 'controllable'."

He put down the teacup, his gaze becoming even sharper.

"As for Guo Huan," the corner of Director Liu's mouth curled into a mocking arc, "the person behind him is the Transmission Commissioner, Li Wen. Li Wen isn't particularly capable, but he is best at guessing the emperor's intentions."

Transmission Commissioner, Li Wen!

This name was like a bolt of lightning, cutting through the fog before Su Ming's eyes.

He instantly understood that the harassment he faced from the Hanlin Academy Reader was not a personal grudge, but came from instructions at a higher level.

"This student... is obtuse." Su Ming lowered his head even further.

"You're not obtuse; you're just in the middle of the game and can't see clearly." Director Liu stood up and walked to the window.

With his back to Su Ming, he looked at the parasol tree in the courtyard, his voice becoming somewhat distant.

"Do you know how your Second Class, tenth-place ranking came about?"

Su Ming's heart constricted violently.

"This student does not know, I only thought it was by chance."

"By chance?" Director Liu slowly turned around. A bone-chilling coldness flashed in those hawk-like eyes. "In this world, there aren't that many chances. That wasn't solely the intention of Minister Wang. It was someone adding another subtle stroke to your teacher's old case from years ago!"

The old case!

The framing case triggered years ago by Teacher Zhou Wenhai's "Memorial on Rectifying Canal Transport Malpractices"!

"They lifted you high and placed you in the Hanlin Academy, a position everyone is watching, precisely to see everyone's reaction," Director Liu walked step by step back to the desk, each step seeming to land on the beat of Su Ming's heart.

"To see if those who received favors from your teacher in the past, or those who shared his ideals, would make any unusual moves because of your appearance."

"To see how the Yongchang Marquis Manor would deal with you, the 'disciple of their enemy'."

He leaned forward, placing both hands on the desk, his eyes blazing like torches, staring fixedly at Su Ming.

"They want to see even more whether Zhou Wenhai's disciple will become a second Zhou Wenhai trying to shake the great tree, or..."

"A knife that, after being honed, becomes sharper and more obedient!"

The study fell into dead silence.

Su Ming only felt it difficult to breathe. The bitter taste of the medicinal herbs seemed to have drilled into his lungs, making his internal organs feel chilled.

The waters of the capital were deeper and murkier than what his teacher had said!

He wasn't a chess piece.

He was bait!

Used to see just how many unwilling fish were still hiding beneath this stagnant pond!

"Thank you... Lord Liu for your guidance." Su Ming's voice was terribly dry.

Director Liu sat back in his chair, his expression returning to its previous cold hardness, as if the earth-shattering words he had just spoken were merely about some trivial matter.

He picked up the teacup and blew on the nonexistent tea leaves on the surface.

"In the Hanlin Academy, scholarship is the surface; stance is the core. Before you have the ability to overturn the chessboard, be a good chess piece and stay put."

"What you hide is not only your edge, but also your 'teacher's legacy'."

"Remember, the three words 'Zhou Wenhai'—in the capital, sometimes they are a protective talisman, but more often, they are a death warrant."

These words were both a warning and a final piece of advice.

Su Ming stood up and bowed deeply to Director Liu once more.

"This student has been enlightened."

This time, his bow came from genuine awe and gratitude.

Director Liu said nothing more, merely waving his hand to indicate that Su Ming could leave.

Su Ming knew that today's meeting had come to an end.

He took out the gift wrapped in blue cloth from his bosom and respectfully placed it on a corner of the desk.

"This student is new here and has prepared a humble gift. It is nothing much, but I hope you will accept it."

Director Liu's gaze swept casually over the cloth-wrapped package, and he nodded.

Su Ming performed a bow and turned to leave.

Walking out of the black-lacquered wooden door of the Liu residence, Su Ming felt a layer of sticky cold sweat on his back.

The wind in the capital in October already carried a chill. Blowing against his face, it felt like being scraped by a soft knife.

He didn't leave immediately. He just stood at the mouth of the alley, looking back at the mansion that appeared even more desolate in the morning light.

Bait.

These two words were like two red-hot iron nails, brutally hammered into his mind.

He had originally thought he was a chess piece, passively awaiting the fate of being placed on the board. Now he understood that he didn't even have the qualification to be on the chessboard. He was merely bait thrown into murky waters, his purpose to stir up the winds and clouds, to lure the snakes out of their holes.

"Master, I..." Su Ming spoke in his heart, his voice somewhat tight.

Lin Yu, unusually, did not immediately mock him. He remained silent for a moment.

"Disciple, don't panic." His voice was very calm. "Fear solves nothing. What you need to do now is to figure out how to be this bait."

Lin Yu's soul body paced within the ring space.

What kind of mess is this! These political players, their hearts are all dirty! One careless move, and my precious disciple won't even have bone fragments left!

"They see you as bait because you appear weak, tempting, and without any poisonous sting." Lin Yu's analysis was as calm as solving a math problem. "Then we'll just go along with their wishes."

"We'll be the perfect bait. Bait that appears completely non-threatening, even a bit foolish and clumsy, that everyone wants to take a bite of."

Su Ming's footsteps started moving again, merging into the flow of people on the street.

Lin Yu continued, "From today on, in the Hanlin Academy, you are that Su the Dullard who only knows how to copy books and is slow-witted."

"Bait can also devour its master." A hint of a chilling coldness entered Lin Yu's voice. "But that's for later. Right now, your task is only one—survive, and see clearly just how many big fish are under the water."

Su Ming returned to his small courtyard and closed the door.

He didn't light a lamp, just sat quietly in the darkness for a long time.

Only when the light from outside the window was completely swallowed by the night did he let out a long sigh. The trace of panic and shock in his eyes was replaced by a deeper calm.

Who is the prey is not yet certain.

...

Days passed one after another. Su Ming's life seemed to have been pressed onto a repeat playback button by an invisible hand.

Copy books, finish duty, return to the courtyard.

Three points, one line, as monotonous as a cup of overnight plain water.

The copies of the "Da Xing Compendium" he had made were already piled half a person high. That neat, rigid Hanlin-style handwriting became his only calling card in the Wenyuan Pavilion.

Qian Bin and the others had long since grown tired of bothering him.

Su Ming enjoyed the peace. Like an inconspicuous patch of moss, he silently absorbed nutrients in the outermost corner of the Hanlin Academy's massive machinery.

Until the first snow of early winter fell, and the atmosphere in the capital suddenly grew tense.

An urgent military report delivered by express courier was like a massive rock thrown into the deep waters of the court.

In the northern border garrison, the Heirong tribe had invaded the border. Three military forts were besieged, the defending generals had died in battle, and the border army had suffered a minor setback!

The news spread throughout the capital's streets and alleys overnight as if it had grown wings.

The serene scent of ink in the Wenyuan Pavilion was also diluted by an anxious, impending-storm atmosphere.

Even those old Hanlin scholars who usually only buried their heads in ancient texts began to gather in twos and threes, discussing in low voices.

"These Heirong barbarians are going too far!"

"I heard the one leading the troops this time is the Heirong's newly ascended 'Wolf Lord,' exceptionally fierce and brave."

"Hmph, fierce and brave? They're just taking advantage of our northern border's troop rotation and lax military preparedness! The Yongchang Marquis has already submitted a memorial, requesting to lead troops on an expedition. He's determined to beat these barbarians back to their homeland!"

Qian Bin's voice sounded particularly loud in the hall. He spoke passionately, as if he himself were the general about to head to the front lines.

"Our Great Xing soldiers are ready and waiting. How can we allow these northern barbarians to run wild at the border! This battle must be fought, and fought decisively!"

His words drew agreement from a few young compilers.

Su Ming still sat in the corner, the tip of his pen moving at a steady pace on the paper, emitting a faint rustling sound, as if everything outside had nothing to do with him.

Qian Bin's gaze swept over him, a flash of disdain in his eyes.

He strode over to Su Ming's desk and knocked on the tabletop with his knuckles.

"Compiler Su."

Su Ming looked up, his face wearing that trademark slightly bewildered expression. "Brother Qian, what guidance do you have?"

"Guidance is not for me to give." Qian Bin smiled a thin, insincere smile. "I just wanted to ask, with the northern border war situation like this, do you feel even a ripple in your heart while copying these old papers all day?"

Su Ming put down his pen, his expression turning serious.

He stood up and actually bowed with clasped hands to Qian Bin.

"Brother Qian's admonishment is correct." His voice wasn't loud, but it carried a tone of "earnestness." "This student is insignificant and knows nothing about military and state affairs. I only hope to finish copying the compendium soon to contribute my meager strength to the court. I dare not recklessly discuss border war matters, lest I engage in empty talk and become a laughingstock."

The bellyful of sarcasm Qian Bin had prepared was once again deflected by this soft punch.

Looking at Su Ming's "sincere" face, he felt like he was arguing with a fool. It was utterly pointless.

"Hmph, rotten wood!"

He spat out these two words, flicked his sleeve, and left.

The surrounding gazes also shifted away from Su Ming.

A bookworm who only knew how to copy books really wasn't worth wasting words on.

Su Ming sat back down and continued copying.

However, no one saw that within his lowered eyes, there was a demeanor as still as an ancient well.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 108: Pull Me into the Fire Pit? In Your Dreams

[2,285 words]

The next day, Reader Guo summoned several newly appointed officials, including Su Ming, to his private office. Su Ming stood quietly among them, wearing the teal heron-embroidered robe that signified a regular seventh-rank compiler.

Reader Guo's gaze scanned the group, finally resting on Qian Bin.

Qian Bin had a roundabout connection to the Yongchang Marquis Manor and had always been more active within the academy.

Reader Guo tossed a rusted bronze key to Qian Bin.

"The Ministry of War is pressing. With the northern border conflict, we need to review all previous dynastic files related to the Heirong," Reader Guo said, his tone brooking no argument.

"Qian Bin, you will lead this. The rest of you—assist Compiler Qian. Within five days, pull every piece of information from the underground archives related to the Heirong: geography, armaments, battle records, customs, and tribal origins. Categorize everything and compile it into volumes. The Ministry of War will come to collect."

The assignment was heavy and tedious, and the conditions were harsh.

But the words "you will lead" made a flash of pride cross Qian Bin's face. He bowed immediately, "I accept the order, I will not fail your trust, my lord!"

Su Ming and the others bowed in unison, their faces betraying no emotion.

They pushed open the wooden door to the underground archives and a fetid, dust-laden air hit them.

The others immediately frowned.

Qian Bin cleared his throat and took on the airs of the leader: "Gentlemen, this is urgent military business. A few days of hard work is as it should be. Li bro, Wang bro, you take the two rows on the east; Zhang bro, Zhao bro, the rows on the west are yours."

Only then did he look at Su Ming and casually point, "Compiler Su, you'll have the harder lot. Take the innermost rows and those scattered boxes in the corners. I'll handle the final compilation."

He handed Su Ming the messiest, dustiest section and claimed for himself the comparatively pleasant task of compiling the final report—the task that would let him appear before the Ministry of War.

Su Ming showed no displeasure. Instead he offered a gentle, almost timid smile and cupped his hands, "As Brother Qian arranges, I will obey."

His submissive demeanor pleased Qian Bin even more. He nodded with satisfaction and found himself a relatively clean spot to begin his “supervision.”

Su Ming silently walked toward the corner of the shelves.

This place was the Hanlin Academy’s graveyard, where all forgotten knowledge was piled up.

But for Su Ming, it was a treasury.

He did not start rummaging right away. He first circled the towering bookshelves.

His spirit-sense quietly spread out.

Every scroll’s position, material, age—each formed a three-dimensional image in his mind.

“Disciple, show them a trick! Let them see what a mover of knowledge looks like... no, the master of knowledge!” Lin Yu rubbed his hands excitedly.

Though Su Ming appeared to clumsily search and move dust-covered records, the instant he touched a volume its contents flooded into his mind like running water.

Qian Bin put on performances of command in other sections while the others loafed and complained.

Su Ming, however, absorbed the sealed knowledge.

He accurately pulled useful scrolls from the mountain of waste paper.

General Li Muyun’s Northern Expedition Notes contained detailed records of the Heirong tribes’ distribution and troop strengths.

An anonymous clerk’s Northern Ironworks Survey documented the Heirong tribes’ weapon-smelting techniques and mine locations.

A moth-eaten sheepskin map, partially ruined, bore ancient script marking secret desert trade routes and water sources.

There were also unofficial chronicles about the century-old enmity between the three major clans within the Heirong—the Golden Wolves, the Silver Wolves, and the Blue Wolves...

These fragmented, messy, even contradictory tidbits were rapidly filtered, integrated, and restructured in Su Ming’s mind.

A startlingly clear strategic atlas of the northern Heirong unfurled in his head.

Its detail and precision surpassed any Minister of War of the current court, even the Yongchang Marquis himself.

While sifting through those military archives, Su Ming did not forget his private concern.

Lantai Secret Garden.

He treated that name as a keyword and hunted for it among the piles of old papers.

Finally, tucked in the margins of a miscellany recording strange court events from the previous dynasty, he found a few lines.

They contained blurry characters: "...the Secret Garden is hidden north of the imperial city; none may enter without the Son of Heaven's edict. Within are collected courtly oddities, secret techniques, forbidden prescriptions, guarded by the Department of Ghosts and Spirits; mortals who pry therein bring misfortune..."

"Guarded by the Department of Ghosts and Spirits?" Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind with a hint of amusement, "Heh, the imperial library's security is pretty high. Disciple, note it down. Now is not the time to touch it."

Su Ming silently took note and calmly slid the book back into its place.

Five days later, the Ministry of War's official arrived.

Qian Bin immediately plastered a smile on his face and pointed at the neatly gathered piles labeled "geography," "armaments," and "tribes," eager for praise: "My lord, I have not dishonored your trust! I have supervised day and night and at last organized the required scrolls. Please examine them."

The Ministry official skimmed a few pages and nodded, "Thank you, Compiler Qian." The clerks he brought began to inventory and move the materials.

Throughout the process, Su Ming stood quietly in the most inconspicuous corner behind everyone else, like an irrelevant background figure. The Ministry official did not even notice him.

...

Night in the small courtyard.

A pot of warm wine, two plates of snacks.

Xu Qing arrived, looking exhausted, dark purple bruises beneath his eyes.

He took a long swig of wine the moment he entered and exhaled deeply.

“Brother Su, I... I don’t know how to be an official anymore!” His voice was hoarse, full of frustration.

“The old lords at the Ministry of Revenue are still quarrelling endlessly over northern border military funds.”

“The Yongchang Marquis Manor folk come by eight times a day, hinting and outright saying that if we don’t allocate sufficient grain and supplies for the spring campaign, they’ll submit a memorial to impeach our whole Ministry!”

“But where is the treasury money? The account books are all holes! I crunched the numbers— even if we transfer every tax from several big southern provinces next year, it won’t plug this hole!”

Xu Qing’s eyes were bloodshot as he slammed his fist on the table.

“A bunch of upright officials keep yelling ‘store wealth among the people.’ The moment you mention levying merchant taxes, they act like it’s the end of the world. But when a war erupts, the ones who die are the border soldiers and the ones who starve are the northern commoners! Where is this so-called ‘rest for the people’?”

Su Ming listened quietly and refilled his cup.

He understood that Xu Qing didn’t want advice; he simply needed a sympathetic ear.

“Brother Su,” Xu Qing had drunk too much and his gaze grew unfocused, “tell me, why is the world such a mess?”

Su Ming patted his shoulder without answering.

After sending Xu Qing off, Su Ming stood alone at the alley entrance.

Night wind blew, stirring a few fallen leaves across the ground.

His eyes scanned the dark roofs and corners on both sides of the alley.

He returned to the courtyard, shut the door, and turned the key.

...

In the following days, Su Ming’s life outwardly showed no change.

At the Hanlin Academy, he started paying attention to a few other compilers who, like him, had been sidelined.

Their leader was a young man named Zhang Yiming.

He had talent—his essays were excellent—but bitterness and resentment always shadowed his features. Two or three followers often gathered around him, whispering in corners, railing against the government and lamenting their talent being unrecognized.

Su Ming kept his distance with caution.

One afternoon, while washing his hands, Su Ming was stopped at a corridor corner by Zhang Yiming.

“Compiler Su.” Zhang Yiming called softly to halt him.

“Brother Zhang.” Su Ming cupped his hands in greeting.

“Aren’t you suffocated by copying books every day?” Zhang Yiming got straight to the point.

A chill ran through Su Ming’s heart, but his face remained wooden and calm: “I would not speak ill. Lord Guo cultivates me; I dare not complain.”

“Cultivates?” Zhang Yiming sneered, his voice hushed, “Brother Su, you and I both come from humble families. Can’t you see this world? The likes of the Yongchang Marquis are nothing but state parasites living off ancestral privilege! For their mere glory they would drive millions to the northern fields to die for no reason! They drain the treasury, and the suffering falls back on the people!”

His words were incendiary.

“Brother Su, you are a disciple of Teacher Zhou Wenhai. We admire Teacher Zhou’s integrity in standing up for the people. Now corruption rules; we scholars cannot remain bystanders.”

He stepped closer, fixing Su Ming with an intense stare.

“A few of us compilers plan to jointly submit a petition, to clearly denounce the harm of rash war and ask His Majesty to think twice. Brother Su, will you join us and raise your voice for the common people?”

Su Ming’s heart sank.

This was an attempt to recruit him, to push him to choose sides.

He looked at Zhang Yiming’s face, flushed with passion, and slowly shook his head.

A troubled, fearful expression crossed his features.

“Brother Zhang, your righteousness is admirable. I... I respect it immensely.”

“It’s just that... I am inexperienced and my words carry little weight. I am newly entering official life and ignorant of military and state affairs. Lord Guo commands me to copy books because my roots are shallow and I must be tempered.”

He took a deep breath and his voice trembled a little.

“Speaking rashly about state matters is not our role, and I fear I would betray my teacher’s counsel to ‘speak cautiously.’ I... I truly cannot. I hope Brother Zhang will understand.”

He held up his claimed “stupidity” and his teacher’s “caution” as the firmest shield.

Zhang Yiming’s expression shifted from expectation to disappointment and finally to contempt.

He stared at Su Ming for a long time, then through gritted teeth spat out a few words.

“Rotten wood cannot be carved!”

He flung his sleeve and strode away, his retreating back full of finality.

Su Ming stood alone under the corridor as the winter wind lifted his wide sleeves.

“Tsk tsk tsk.”

Lin Yu’s voice sounded in his mind, enjoying the spectacle.

“See that, disciple? Classic workplace greenhorn. All heart and idealism, but hasn’t figured out who the players are and who the pawns are. If he submits that memorial, it’s like throwing meat to a dog.”

Su Ming answered nothing and returned to Wenyuan Pavilion.

Zhang Yiming and his followers watched him with complicated looks of scorn mixed with a hint of relief, as if saying: look, that’s the coward.

Su Ming kept his eyes forward and went back to his corner, picking up his brush again.

The ink was half-dry; he dipped the tip lightly in water and roughed it on the inkstone until the nib regained moisture.

“Master, was he wrong?” Su Ming asked softly in his heart.

“In principle, he’s not wrong. An empty treasury and a rash war are indeed full of danger.” Lin Yu’s tone grew unusually serious. “But his mistake is treating the court like a debating hall. This place is not about right and wrong; it’s about interests and positions.”

“He shouted and felt catharsis, but he offended every person who wants, needs, or profits from war. The Yongchang Marquis wants military glory, the Ministry of War wants power, the emperor wants prestige. He’s striking his own future against their iron rice bowls.”

Su Ming’s brush tip touched paper and a neat character for “military” leapt onto the page.

He understood.

Zhang Yiming did not lose because his reasoning was poor; he lost because he had not learned the rules.

And Su Ming was clumsily learning those rules himself.

Copying books was the turtle shell he put on to protect himself.

...

Ministry of Revenue, Accounting Department.

The air smelled of old ledgers and the crisp clack of counters being shifted filled the room.

This place was the heart of the Great Xing Dynasty—and the most headache-inducing.

Xu Qing’s eyes were bloodshot; piles of scrolls in front of him seemed ready to swallow him whole.

He hadn’t slept well in three days.

Dispatches from the northern border came like a blizzard; each one meant astronomical expenses.

Provisions, weaponry, pensions, horse fodder... behind every line was a long row of zeros.

But the treasury’s ledgers only showed glaring red deficits.

“Clerk Xu, Clerk Xu!” A sharp voice called out.

The speaker was an old clerk in the same office, named Qian, who delighted in shirking responsibility.

“The Yongchang Marquis Manor’s chief clerk is back outside, waiting. He specifically asked to see you, to ask when the first batch of spring grain funds will be disbursed.” Old Clerk Qian’s face displayed schadenfreude. “You see...”

Xu Qing rubbed his temples in irritation.

The Yongchang Marquis again.

These veterans were the loudest when demanding funds, yet they were also the most adept at appropriating fields and evading taxes.

“Tell him I’m auditing the necessary items and to wait,” Xu Qing said without looking up.

“Oh, my Lord Xu, that’s the Marquis’s chief clerk. We can’t offend him.” Old Clerk Qian’s tone dripped with sarcasm. “Maybe you should go see him?”

Xu Qing snapped his head up, his red eyes fixing on Old Clerk Qian so fiercely that the old man involuntarily took a half step back.

“Do my words fall on deaf ears?”

Old Clerk Qian’s neck shrank and he awkwardly retreated.

The entire accounting office fell silent except for the occasional sound of counters being placed.

Xu Qing closed his eyes and leaned against his chair, feeling the world tilt.

The hole can’t be plugged—no matter what, it can’t be plugged.

He could already picture the spring: the border short of grain, soldiers’ morale collapsing, the Heirong sweeping in.

When that happened, officials from the Ministry of Revenue would be the first to be dragged out and made scapegoats.

“Open new revenue streams... open new revenue streams... where can we possibly open new revenue streams?”

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 109: Drinking Poison to Quench Thirst

[2,297 words]

He murmured to himself, his fingers unconsciously flipping through a stack of old files about local products from various regions.

"Coal from the Western Mountains is plentiful, but extraction and transportation costs are prohibitive, distant supplies can't solve an immediate need..."

"Silk from the Southern Lake tops the world in quality, but sericulture cycles are long, making it hard to meet urgent demand..."

He read each one in turn, his heart growing heavier. These regional products either couldn't solve an immediate shortage from afar, or involved too wide a supply chain to be converted quickly into hard silver to fund a war.

Suddenly, he remembered Su Ming mentioning their village's paper-making workshop, which used an improved new method—very low cost, yet produced abundant, high-quality paper.

One thought, like wildfire across a dry plain, exploded in his mind!

Paper!

Official paper for the government!

The imperial offices of the Great Xing Dynasty consumed staggering amounts of paper every day. This paper was centrally purchased by the Imperial Household Office, then distributed to the ministries. And the largest supplier was several big paper workshops under the Yongchang Marquis Manor!

They used the poorest raw materials to produce barely acceptable paper, and sold it at sky-high prices.

This was a tacitly accepted, shadowy channel for transferring profits.

If... if the court could set up government-supervised, privately operated paper workshops in the northern regions where bamboo, wood, and hemp were abundant, and employ the new method used in Qingshi Town...

How much could paper costs be driven down?

How many soldiers could the saved silver equip?

Xu Qing's breathing suddenly grew rapid.

He sprang up, clutching the files so tightly his knuckles whitened.

He had found a way to break convention and strike at the existing pattern of vested interests!

This was a staggering plan that could change the empire's fiscal structure!

He had to tell Su Ming immediately!

.....

In Su Ming's small courtyard, the last few leaves of the old locust tree had been stripped off by the winter wind.

He had just finished practicing a set of Lin Yu's improved fist techniques designed to invigorate qi and blood, his whole body emitting a faint warmth.

A knock sounded at the courtyard gate.

"Knock knock knock! Brother Su! Brother Su, are you there?"

It was Xu Qing's voice, tinged with pent-up excitement.

Su Ming opened the door to find Xu Qing standing outside, his cheeks flushed from excitement and brisk walking.

"Brother Xu, what's the rush?"

Xu Qing grabbed Su Ming's arm, pulled him into the yard, and slammed the gate shut behind them.

"Brother Su! I've thought of it! I've thought of an infallible plan to increase revenue and cut expenses for the treasury!"

He paced back and forth in the yard, speaking as he walked.

"Paper! The problem is paper!"

"I checked the Ministry of Revenue's purchase ledgers over the past decade, and the government's expenditure on paper is alarming every year! Most of that silver flows straight into the Yongchang Marquis Manor's pockets!"

"Brother Su, I recall you saying your village's papermaking method is extremely low-cost, right?"

He stopped and stared at Su Ming with burning eyes.

Su Ming's heart skipped and sank.

He looked at Xu Qing's face, glowing with idealism, his throat dry.

"I plan to submit a memorial, petitioning the court to implement, in northern raw material producing areas, the Qingshi Town model of 'official supervision with private operation' and to set up modern paper workshops using the new method to stabilize paper prices! The profits would not go into the imperial treasury but be directly allocated to the Ministry of War, earmarked for frontier military supplies!"

Xu Qing grew more excited the more he spoke, as if he could already see well-funded military campaigns and victorious armies returning.

"In this way, we won't need to raise taxes on the people, yet can alleviate the urgent military funding shortage! This is a great benefit for the nation and its people! Brother Su, what do you think?"

He finished, eyes bright with expectation, waiting for Su Ming's approval and applause.

But Su Ming only watched him in silence, his gaze heavy as iron.

The courtyard was very quiet, only the winter wind moaning through dead branches.

"Master..." Su Ming called in his mind.

"This is deadly, truly deadly!" Lin Yu's soul body spun anxiously inside the ring.

"Disciple, steady him! Under no circumstances let him drag us into this! This is no longer about people's livelihoods, it's about digging up their ancestral graves!"

Su Ming inhaled deeply and spoke slowly, his voice hoarse.

"Brother Xu, your idea... is well thought-out."

He affirmed that first, giving Xu Qing a moment to breathe.

"But have you considered why the Yongchang Marquis Manor's business has lasted so many years and grown so large?"

Xu Qing blinked in surprise. "Of course... because their family is powerful."

"Not merely powerful." Su Ming shook his head and spoke each word deliberately, "It's because those who need them to be powerful silently permit it. This business is a

reward the emperor granted to the martial merit faction, a bone to placate them. If you pull that bone out now, what do you think those starving wolves will do?"

The flush drained from Xu Qing's face visibly, leaving a pallor.

"I..."

"You are not touching the little trade of a single paper workshop." Su Ming rose and stood before him, looking straight into his eyes. "You are striking at a tangled web of interests throughout the capital. You are declaring war on the entire martial merit faction!"

"They will not reason with you or debate whether your plan benefits the state and people. They will use the simplest, most direct method to make you and your memorial vanish from this world."

Su Ming's words were like a bucket of ice water poured over Xu Qing from head to toe.

The light in his eyes dimmed bit by bit, his body trembling.

"Are we to do nothing because they are powerful? Watch soldiers at the border starve and freeze to death?" Xu Qing's voice carried bitter resentment.

"I do not mean that." Su Ming's tone softened, with a touch of pity. "Brother Xu, your heart is good. But action cannot rely on mere passion."

He paused, then spoke with grave seriousness: "You may submit the memorial. But you must promise me two things."

"First, all details about the new papermaking method must be completely blurred in the memorial. Say only that it synthesizes good methods from various places, and never let anyone trace it to any specific technical origin."

"Second," Su Ming's eyes became unusually stern, "and this is the most important point: From today on, forget Qingshi Town, forget Su Family Village, and forget that you came to see me today. Your memorial must not contain those names— not a single one!"

Xu Qing stared at him dumbly, lips moving but no sound coming out.

Su Ming was not stopping him to obstruct; he was protecting him in his own way, and protecting himself.

After a long silence, Xu Qing slumped and nodded hoarsely, his voice raw: "I... understand."

He left, spirit broken, his silhouette bleak like a defeated soldier.

Su Ming watched his back for a long time without moving.

"You tried your best, disciple." Lin Yu sighed. "This friend is a good man, but he's a liability. I hope he listens."

Su Ming closed the courtyard gate and returned indoors.

He knew the fuse of a storm had been lit.

Xu Qing locked himself in the official lodgings of the Ministry of Revenue for an entire night.

At dawn the next day, he emerged.

His eyes were still red, but his gaze had regained clarity and resolve.

He placed a freshly rewritten memorial carefully into an envelope.

The memorial was titled: Petition to Stabilize Paper Prices and Increase Revenue to Replenish Military Supplies.

He submitted it in his personal capacity as a seventh-rank official of the Ministry of Revenue, Xu Qing.

As Su Ming predicted, once the memorial surfaced, it immediately stirred a not-small commotion within the ministry.

After reading it, the Minister and several vice ministers reacted strangely: they kept it on file without issuing it, and chose to wait and see.

They were all seasoned bureaucrats who could instantly sense the danger behind the memorial.

But the plan was indeed ingenious, striking right at the crux, so they couldn't bring themselves to toss it into the wastebasket.

Thus the memorial quietly circulated among the desks of a few senior officials in the Ministry of Revenue.

.....

Yongchang Marquis Manor, study.

Candles burned bright as a middle-aged man in brocade robes, stern and authoritative, listened to his aides' report.

He was the Yongchang Marquis.

"...There is a junior official in the Ministry of Revenue named Xu Qing who submitted a petition to stabilize paper prices. Proposals like 'official supervision with private operation' and 'profits directed back to military supplies' are rather novel." The aide with a goatee, a thin scholar, spoke in a measured tone.

"Oh? A junior clerk with such insight?" The Marquis set down the military book in his hand, his tone neutral, unreadable.

"The oddness lies here." The goateed aide's eyes flashed. "This man is from a humble background, his record is spotless—not the sort to possess such practical talent. I checked his contacts and found he is closely associated with one person—a newly titled jinshi, a Hanlin Academy compiler named Su Ming."

"Su Ming?" The Marquis pronounced the unfamiliar name.

"He placed tenth in the second tier of this imperial exam, comes from Qingshi Town, a disciple of Zhou Wenhai. We previously considered him insignificant, so we did not report him to Your Lordship." The aide emphasized "Zhou Wenhai" deliberately.

Qingshi Town!

The Marquis's eyes sharpened. He remembered a few years prior when the steward in charge of the paper business had reported that a place in the south called Qingshi Town produced a new kind of paper that was high-quality and cheap, affecting the manor's local business—then it had been dismissed. Now that name resurfaced, linked to a disciple of Zhou Wenhai and a memorial aimed at the paper trade...

"What has this Su Ming been doing since arriving in the capital?" the Marquis asked, his voice deepening.

"He lives quietly, only copying texts at the Hanlin Academy, keeping to himself and interacting little with colleagues. Nothing unusual was observed," the aide answered. "There is also no direct evidence linking Xu Qing's petition to Su Ming."

"No evidence does not mean no connection." The Marquis tapped the zitan wood desk softly, the sound heavy. "Zhou Wenhai's disciple is unlikely to be a genuine dullard. Either he is deeply scheming, or someone is guiding him from behind."

He pondered for a moment and ordered: "Increase surveillance. Keep a close eye on this Su Ming. And watch that Xu Qing as well. Do not alarm them. I want to know who they see and what they say each day."

"Yes, my lord."

"Remember," the Marquis's eyes flashed coldly, "our manor has survived not only because of imperial favor, but because of caution. Any possible stir must be investigated thoroughly. If these two indeed harbor ill intent, plot against us..." He left the threat unsaid, but the air in the study turned murderous.

The Hanlin Academy remained a dead pool of calm.

Su Ming was still copying books.

But Zhang Yiming had utterly changed.

The memorial he had co-signed sank without a trace, not even a ripple.

On top of that, he received a rebuke from the Ministry of Personnel, accused of "not understanding governance and presumptuously discussing military affairs," and was docked three months' salary.

That final blow shattered his remaining pride.

He no longer spouted lofty speeches; he became sullen and mute.

He sat at his post every day, reading nothing, writing nothing, casting resentful glances at everyone around him.

Especially at Su Ming.

To him, Su Ming's brand of "preserving one's life through caution" was more contemptible than the greedy officials.

One day several people chatted in the tea room and someone mentioned the frontier war again.

"Have you heard? Lord Zhang's memorial was rejected."

"Alas, it's a pity for Brother Zhang. He has talent, but lacks flexibility."

Zhang Yiming, carrying a teacup, overheard and his face turned ashen.

He hurled the cup to the ground.

Crash!

The sharp sound startled everyone.

"Flexibility? How to be flexible?" Zhang Yiming's eyes were rimmed red; he roared like an enraged beast. "Do you mean to praise every day and gloss over reality like you? Or bury your head in old books as if the world is fine?"

His gaze cut like a blade toward Su Ming, who had just come in from outside.

Su Ming paused.

Looking at Zhang Yiming's crazed state, he said nothing, simply stepped over the broken porcelain.

To Zhang Yiming, that silence was the ultimate contempt.

"Su Ming!" Zhang Yiming howled, "Do you dare say you have no opinion about this war? Have you fed your teacher Zhou Wenhai's integrity to the dogs?"

It was no longer mockery but naked humiliation.

The tea room went silent.

All eyes fixed on Su Ming.

He stopped, turned, and looked at Zhang Yiming calmly.

There was no anger or embarrassment on his face—only tranquility.

"Brother Zhang," he said softly but clearly, so everyone could hear, "you have spoken out of turn."

With that he ignored Zhang Yiming and walked out of the tea room.

"You... stand still!" Zhang Yiming trembled with rage and tried to chase him, but others held him back.

"Coward! Hypocrite!"

Zhang Yiming's shout echoed down the empty corridor.

Su Ming's steps did not falter.

When he returned to his seat, however, his pen-holding hand had paler knuckles.

Night deepened.

Su Ming's small courtyard was silent.

He sat cross-legged in the center, palms facing upward, breathing slowly.

Suddenly his eyelids flickered.

He "heard" it.

On the roof of the house across the alley, two people sat like night owls, motionless.

Their breathing was long and steady; they were clearly trained practitioners.

Their gaze was fixed on his courtyard.

Su Ming's breath did not change at all, as if he sensed nothing.

"Master."

"Yes, I see them too." Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of gravity. "The Marquis Manor's scouts indeed came. It seems Xu Qing's petition has alerted them. They are verifying whether you are connected to this matter."

Su Ming slowly concluded his practice, stood, and—as always—went inside, extinguished the lamp, and lay down to sleep.

Only in the darkness his eyes were bright as frost.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[2,386 words]

The two auras on the rooftop across the alley vanished.

"They're gone," Su Ming said in his heart.

"Mm, gone," Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of gravity. "Disciple, your counter-surveillance skills are really becoming more and more beyond this teacher's expectations."

Su Ming did not respond.

He could feel that although those two probing gazes had disappeared, a deeper, intangible sense of being locked onto remained. That feeling was like prey being watched by a pack of wolves; even if the wolves temporarily retreated, that chilling, murderous intent had already seeped into the marrow.

"What did they confirm?" Su Ming asked.

"They confirmed you are a 'law-abiding' bookworm," Lin Yu analyzed. "Every day, you either copy books or go home to sleep, not even visiting a brothel. You're practically the moral paragon of the Great Xing Dynasty. Since they can't find any direct connection between you and Xu Qing, they won't move against you for now."

Su Ming slowly let out a long breath. He broke the silence. "Master, this can't go on."

"Hmm?" Lin Yu inquired.

"Passively waiting means forever being the bait," Su Ming's eyes shone startlingly bright in the darkness. "I want to know what fish they're trying to lure out using me. I want to know even more how many vicious crocodiles and giant sharks are lurking in this pond."

Lin Yu fell silent.

He knew that his disciple's "cautiousness" wasn't genuine cowardice. It was a form of building momentum, preparing to deliver the most fatal blow at the most critical moment.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"Go to the Liu residence again," Su Ming's voice was very calm. "Last time was testing the waters. This time, I want to go and beg for a real key."

"Beg that old fox?" Lin Yu's soul body trembled. "He almost saw through our underwear last time. Going again is too risky."

"The greater the risk, the more genuine it appears," Su Ming stood up, patting the dust off his clothes. "A panicked young man, having discovered a secret he can't afford to mess with, loses all composure and goes to seek advice from the only elder he can trust. That's very reasonable."

Lin Yu smacked his lips.

Alright then, the Oscar-winning actor's script has been updated again.

"And the excuse this time?"

"The Lantai Secret Garden."

The next day was still a Day Off.

Su Ming once again picked up the Gift of Respect he had prepared long ago and walked alone to the quiet alley in the western part of the city. Just like last time, it was

the same mottled black lacquered wooden door, the same old servant with muddled eyes.

When the old servant saw Su Ming, that wrinkled face showed a trace of human emotion for the first time—clear impatience.

"Why is it you again?"

"This student Su Ming has an urgent matter and seeks an audience with Lord Liu," Su Ming bowed and presented his Name Card.

The old servant couldn't even be bothered to take the Name Card, turning to close the door. "His Lordship is not receiving guests."

"This student, while organizing archives from the previous dynasty at the Hanlin Academy, inadvertently came across records mentioning the 'Lantai Secret Garden.' It filled me with dread, fearing it might involve forbidden matters, and I couldn't sleep at night. This matter may concern court secrets. This student dares not act on his own. After much thought, I could only seek guidance from Lord Liu. I beg you, Old Uncle, to make an exception!"

Su Ming said all this in one breath. His voice wasn't loud, but each word was clear, his tone filled with just the right amount of panic and anxiety.

The four words "Lantai Secret Garden" acted like a key, inserted into the old servant's rusty mind.

His door-closing motion stopped.

His murky eyes stared fixedly at Su Ming for a long time before he coldly spat out two words.

"Wait."

The door closed again.

This time, Su Ming stood outside the door for the time it takes two incense sticks to burn.

When the door opened again, the old servant's expression was even more unpleasant than before.

He offered no extra words, only saying, "Come in."

It was the same side hall smelling of mildew, still without a cup of tea.

Su Ming stood quietly, waiting.

This time, he didn't have to wait long.

Director Liu's gaunt figure appeared at the doorway.

He wasn't wearing his official robes, just an ordinary gray gown, but his eyes were even sharper than last time, like two freshly sharpened awls.

He didn't enter, just stood under the doorframe. "Speak, what's going on?" He didn't invite Su Ming to the study, staying right in this side hall, getting straight to the point.

Su Ming immediately bowed and repeated the prepared story, his tone even more panicked and uneasy.

"...This student is dull-witted, I don't know about this 'Lantai Secret...'"

Before Su Ming could finish, "Who told you to investigate this!"

Director Liu's roar exploded like a thunderclap in the small side hall.

He took a sudden step forward, those hawk-like eyes boring into Su Ming as if he wanted to devour him whole.

"Is it Guo Huan? Or Li Wen? What tricks are they playing now? Sending you to probe this old man?"

A powerful aura, mixed with the authority of long-standing high position, washed over Su Ming.

Su Ming, startled by this sudden thunderous rage, paled and retreated two steps in succession, his back hitting the cold wall directly. That chill instantly sobered him a little.

"N-no... it's not... this student... this student really just saw it by chance..." he stammered, looking on the verge of tears from fright.

"By chance?" Director Liu sneered, advancing until he was almost face-to-face with Su Ming, his voice like shards of ice. "The Hanlin Academy's archives are as vast as the sea. Would you so 'accidentally' flip to these four words?"

Su Ming's body trembled slightly against the wall.

"This student... this student was consulting... consulting records of previous dynasty palace rituals... in a corner of a miscellaneous notebook... saw... saw a line saying 'The Secret Garden is hidden north of the palace city, governed by ghosts and gods'... This student thought it was supernatural folklore and didn't pay it mind. But... but yesterday,

while organizing battle records from the Black Rong campaign, I saw the two words 'Lantai' on a damaged scroll... Putting the two together, this student became afraid, and so... so I dared to come and seek Your Excellency's guidance."

His words were somewhat jumbled, yet he perfectly connected the two clues. It fit his job of organizing archives and explained the accidental nature of the discovery.

Director Liu's gaze remained locked on him.

The side hall fell into suffocating silence.

A long time passed.

Only then did Director Liu slowly straighten up, creating distance.

The thunderous rage in his eyes gradually receded, turning back into a bottomless pool of ice.

"Too much curiosity is the path to death."

He clasped his hands behind his back, turned, and paced to the window, looking at the withered locust tree in the courtyard. His tone was icy and resolute. "The Lantai Secret Garden is not something you should know about." His voice held not a shred of warmth. "Forget it, act as if you never saw it. Otherwise, not even a deity could save you."

Su Ming leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, his face still wearing an expression of lingering fear.

"Yes... yes, this student... this student understands. Thank you, Your Excellency... thank you for your guidance."

He bowed, preparing to take his leave.

Just as he turned and his hand was about to touch the door curtain, Director Liu's drifting voice came from behind him. The voice wasn't loud, but each word was like a nail.

"Matters of the Hanlin Academy, this old man does not interfere."

"The key to Lantai is in the hands of the Head of the Academy."

"However, the Head of the Academy has been ill for three years. Apart from Imperial Physician Li, the Vice Director of the Imperial Medical Bureau who diagnoses his pulse, he sees no one."

"He is now nothing but a living ghost."

Su Ming's footsteps paused for a moment.

He did not turn around, only said softly, "This student takes his leave," then quickly lifted the door curtain and left as if fleeing.

Once outside the Liu residence, the cold wind hit him, and Su Ming realized his back was already soaked with cold sweat. It wasn't an act; he was genuinely shaken.

"Holy..." Lin Yu's voice was trembling. "Scared me to death, scared me to death! That old fellow, is he a firecracker? Explodes at the slightest touch! That roar just now, I felt my soul body was about to be blasted apart by him."

Su Ming ignored Lin Yu's grumbling. His mind was spinning rapidly.

Head of the Academy.

Ill for three years.

Imperial Medical Bureau, Vice Director Li.

Living ghost.

These few words connected to form a brand new clue.

The only possible clue leading to the "Lantai Secret Garden."

One month later, Yongchang Marquis Manor.

Inside the study, the heating stove was blazing, creating a world apart from the severe cold outside.

The Yongchang Marquis, wearing a black sable cloak, was leisurely polishing a curved blade captured from the northern frontier.

The blade was like an autumn pool, reflecting his resolute and stern profile.

His advisor, Wence, stood respectfully to the side, holding an urgent secret report just delivered from Qingshi Town.

"Marquis, the matter from Qingshi Town has been clarified."

"Speak," the Yongchang Marquis didn't even look up, just using a piece of deerskin to repeatedly polish the cold gleam of the blade.

"The paper-making workshop in Su Family Village indeed uses a previously unseen new method. The emergence and initial application of this technology occurred long before Zhou Wenhai took Su Ming as his disciple."

The Yongchang Marquis's polishing motion paused. The deerskin stopped at a point one-third along the blade.

"Oh?"

"According to statements from village elders we bribed, this method seems more like... more like Su Ming himself, a few years ago, figured it out on his own through self-study and independent experimentation," Wence's voice held a trace of disbelief.

"Even more interesting," he continued, "the workshop's 'officially supervised, privately operated' model, as well as its subsequent rapid expansion, all precisely occurred after Su Ming became Zhou Wenhai's disciple and entered the County School. The timing is seamless."

Wence took a deep breath and voiced his judgment.

"This official believes that Zhou Wenhai, in this matter, was more like a tiger skin borrowed for prestige. The true planner, from beginning to end, was that youth, Su Ming, who was not even fifteen at the time."

The study fell silent.

Only the charcoal in the stove occasionally emitted a soft cracking sound.

The Yongchang Marquis's fingers lightly tapped the desk. "A fifteen-year-old youth, with such cunning?" The Yongchang Marquis finally put down the curved blade, raised his eyes, his gaze carrying a hint of amusement.

"This official also found it hard to believe. Therefore, I managed to obtain copies of the essay he wrote when he placed first as a Child Scholar, as well as some practice writings from his time at the County School."

Wence took several transcribed papers from his sleeve and presented them.

"Marquis, please look. These are his early essays. The writing is somewhat immature, but between the lines, his edge is sharp. The novelty of his arguments and the rigor of his logic far surpass his peers."

"Now look at this one. This official had someone copy it from the Hanlin Academy; it's a damaged page of the *Da Xing Compendium* he transcribed for Reader Guo. The handwriting is neat, steady and balanced, but it's like a stagnant pond, utterly lifeless."

The Yongchang Marquis took the papers, his gaze slowly sweeping over them.

The transition from that unrestrained, flamboyant sharpness to this rigid, wooden craftsmanship was too deliberate, too drastic.

"The report also mentions," Wence added, "that before the Provincial Examination, both Zhou Wenhai and the entire Qingshi County School believed he had the talent to take first place. Yet the result was he only ranked seventy-third. That ranking seemed deliberately suppressed."

The Yongchang Marquis listened in silence.

He gently placed the papers on the desk.

He was not a bloodthirsty person, but from his high position, he deeply understood the importance of "nipping problems in the bud."

A talented youth from a humble background with no roots or backing could be controlled or suppressed.

But a potential enemy who was "skilled at biding his time, highly capable, and might harbor old grievances" must not be left for the future.

"Heh..." The Yongchang Marquis suddenly chuckled softly.

The laughter was light, but it sent an inexplicable chill down Wence's spine.

"Zhou Wenhai... certainly took on a good disciple."

"A little fox who knows how to keep his tail tucked."

"This boy has a deep, scheming mind and aims high. Since he cannot be used by us, he must not be allowed to become a future problem."

"Wence."

"This official is here."

"Find a way to eliminate him."

Wence replied, "Yes, Marquis."

When Su Ming returned to his small courtyard, it was almost dark.

He closed the courtyard gate, didn't light a lamp, just quietly digested everything he had gained today in the darkness.

Head of the Academy, Vice Director Li, a living ghost ill for three years.

Yongchang Marquis, Qingshi Town, those unseen eyes.

Two strands of clues intertwined and tangled in his mind, forming a complex and dangerous web.

And he was right in the center of this web.

"Master, I think... I've made things even more complicated."

"The Yongchang Marquis..." Lin Yu's tone grew heavy. "Since he's already become suspicious, he won't let it go. We must get more cards in our hand before he makes a move."

Su Ming nodded.

Cards.

His biggest card right now was himself.

A seemingly harmless, utterly ordinary Hanlin Academy Compiler.

And the other card he needed was hidden within that royal forbidden ground called the "Lantai Secret Garden."

If the "Lantai Secret Garden" contained the information he wanted, the location of a cultivation sect, he wouldn't need to tiptoe around with them at all.

He opened his eyes, walked into the courtyard, and began practicing his fist forms.

The sound of fists cutting through the air broke the courtyard's tranquility.

He didn't practice quickly. Each move and stance was steady and powerful. His blood and qi surged through his meridians, gradually dispelling the cold and fear accumulated during the day. The spiritual energy within his body flowed through his meridians like a rushing river.

The hunter was no longer satisfied with just observing.

They were starting to set traps. Then he, the prey, couldn't just think about how to hide.

He stopped his movements, his gaze turning in the direction of the Yongchang Marquis Manor, his eyes profound.

Everything had only just begun.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 111: The Storm Is Brewing

[2,573 words]

The charcoal fire burned vigorously in the study of the Yongchang Marquis Manor, yet it brought not a shred of warmth.

Wen Ce stood at the Marquis's side, stepped forward, and presented the strategy he had long contemplated.

"Currently, the war in the Northern Frontier is on the verge of erupting, and military supplies are at their most critical. Although Xu Qing's memorandum from the Ministry of Revenue was suppressed, it successfully drew Xu Qing's attention towards the malpractices in military funding."

"We can exploit this tense situation in the Northern Frontier to make an issue out of the military supplies. The Marquis Manor has people in both the Ministry of War and the Armaments Bureau."

Wen Ce's voice dropped even lower, laced with a venomous cunning. "We will forge evidence that Su Ming 'sought political achievements and misled court officials,' then link him to a batch of 'faulty leather armor' that has been tampered with in advance. As long as a single casualty occurs at the front, it will be ironclad proof."

"The leather armor splits, causing dozens of soldiers to be killed or injured. The charge will be 'colluding with unscrupulous merchants and jeopardizing military operations.' This crime is sufficient to warrant the extermination of his entire clan. By then, even if Zhou Wenhai's old faction wants to rescue him, they will have no way to intervene."

After listening, the Yongchang Marquis offered no comment, merely giving a slight nod to indicate his silent approval.

"This matter must be swift, covert, strike with one blow, and ensure he can never recover," Wen Ce emphasized. "Simultaneously, it must appear as an internal conflict among the upright officials or his personal corruption, minimizing any trace of the Marquis Manor's direct involvement. Over at the Censorate, I will arrange for our people. We only need to wait for news from the front to launch the attack immediately."

"Go and handle it." The Yongchang Marquis waved his hand, picked up the curved blade again, and resumed polishing it.

Wen Ce bowed and retreated, his mind already beginning to mobilize the Marquis Manor's forces within the military supply system and the Censorate.

A net targeting Su Ming was being meticulously woven on the vast chessboard of the capital, awaiting only a suitable moment to completely engulf him.

.....

One week later, Xu Qing arrived.

He looked even more haggard than last time, the bloodshot veins in his eyes almost seeming to bleed.

As soon as he entered the courtyard, he nervously looked left and right, confirmed the alley was empty, then hurriedly closed the gate.

"Brother Su, have you heard?" Xu Qing lowered his voice, his tone laden with deep guilt. "Over at the Ministry of Revenue, people are spreading rumors... rumors that my memorial was... was instigated by someone, intended to undermine military morale."

He walked up to Su Ming, his lips trembling.

"Brother Su, I... I truly am sorry. I never imagined that simply trying to increase revenue and reduce expenditure for the national treasury could potentially bring a calamitous disaster upon you!"

Xu Qing finally realized that in the capital, any attempt at idealism could become a deadly trigger.

Su Ming turned and patted his shoulder, his gaze firm and composed, without a trace of blame or panic.

"Brother Xu, this matter has nothing to do with you," Su Ming's voice was soft, yet carried a reassuring power. "The fact that I achieved Second Class, tenth rank, already placed me at the center of the storm. What the Yongchang Marquis Manor wants to move against is not your memorial, but Zhou Wenhai's disciple, this 'disobedient' pawn that is me."

"Your memorandum is merely the kindling they used to start the fire. Even without it, they would have found another excuse."

Su Ming led Xu Qing to sit at the stone table, poured him a cup of hot tea. The curling steam from the tea slightly dispelled the chill in the courtyard.

"Brother Xu, listen to me," Su Ming's tone turned serious. "You must protect yourself now. Your memorial has already been suppressed by the Minister. In the short term, no one will use it to make an issue."

"But from today onward, you and I must no longer meet privately."

Xu Qing looked up sharply. "Brother Su, what do you mean by that?"

"You and I only need to greet each other in public settings like the Hanlin Academy and the Ministry of Revenue, as ordinary colleagues would," Su Ming looked directly into his eyes, his tone leaving no room for doubt. "No matter what happens, you must insist that you and I are merely fellow graduates from the same imperial examination year, acquainted through our writings, with no deep personal connection in private."

"If anyone asks about your memorial, you say it was the result of your own independent contemplation, unrelated to anyone else."

Looking at Su Ming's calm face, Xu Qing felt a surge of immense sorrow and gratitude. He knew Su Ming was using his own safety to carve out a path of survival for him, taking all the danger upon himself.

"Brother Su..." Xu Qing's voice choked. "If I truly protect myself, wouldn't that confirm your..."

"Let it be confirmed then," Su Ming interrupted him, his voice carrying a touch of detachment. "I am, after all, a son of a humble family, without roots or backing. If they need a scapegoat, I am more suitable than you. You have entered the Ministry of Revenue, holding real power, with a promising future ahead."

Xu Qing abruptly stood up and bowed deeply to Su Ming.

"Brother Su's great kindness, Xu Qing will remember it in my heart. If misfortune befalls, I will definitely..."

"No need to say such things," Su Ming stopped him.

Xu Qing knew Su Ming's mind was made up; further persuasion was useless. He gave Su Ming a deep look, transforming that guilt and gratitude into a heavy weight, pressing it down into the depths of his heart.

"Brother Su, take care."

Xu Qing turned and left the small courtyard with heavy steps.

.....

One month later.

Su Ming received a secret letter from Liu Wenyuan. It stated: The Yongchang Marquis wants to eliminate you! And it detailed the other party's method of framing him.

Lin Yu's voice exploded in his mind, carrying an unprecedented gravity.

"Disciple, the net is tightening! It's tightening far too quickly!"

"Master, I sense the two presences at the mouth of the alley have disappeared."

"Those were the overt spies," Lin Yu's voice carried a slight tremor. His soul body's fluctuations were more intense now than ever before. "Your master senses a more sinister, deeper malice, like a huge fishing net closing in from all directions. This isn't ordinary surveillance. This is... this is meant to take your life!"

Lin Yu paced anxiously within the ring space, his soul body's phantom image somewhat blurred.

"They're mad! How dare they directly use such a killing move? This is no longer political maneuvering. This is breaking the rules, intending to directly wield the state apparatus to commit murder!" Lin Yu's analysis carried the keen judgment of a transmigrator regarding power operations.

"They are no longer planning to play by the rules with me," Su Ming's voice was very calm, but his hand had already reached the bundle by the bedside. Inside the bundle was the small Turtle-Knob Seal he had been nurturing with his spiritual energy for a long time.

"Disciple, listen to your master. Now is not the time to play the hero. We must prepare for the worst," Lin Yu quickly planned. "You must immediately pack all important items, especially that incomplete copy of the 'Greenwood Longevity Art,' and your master's ring. They absolutely must not fall into others' hands!"

"Contact points! When you went to the Liu residence last time, did you notice any noteworthy back doors or secret passages? Plan three escape routes! One by waterway, one out the north gate, one through the Western Hills!"

Su Ming said nothing more and immediately stood up. He placed the thick 'Da Xing Compendium' on the table, then neatly folded his official robe and placed it beside it.

"Master, I will not leave."

Lin Yu was stunned. "What? Are you insane? If you don't leave now, when they come to your door, you won't have wings to fly away!"

"If I flee now, I will confirm the charge of 'fleeing from guilt.' The Yongchang Marquis Manor's goal is to kill the chicken to scare the monkey, to purge their ranks," Su Ming's tone carried a calmness and resolve beyond his years.

"If I flee, they will immediately redirect their fury towards Brother Xu, even implicating Teacher Zhou's old faction."

"Most importantly," Su Ming walked to the window, looking out at the deep night sky beyond the courtyard, "if I flee, I will completely lose this lead in the capital. The Lantai Secret Garden, the Chief Administrator, Chief Judge Li... these leads, I cannot abandon them."

Lin Yu fell silent. He knew Su Ming's temperament; once decided, he would not change his mind.

"Alright, my disciple of the Way of Survival, you truly are a madman," Lin Yu sighed, his tone carrying a hint of helpless pride. "Not fleeing is fine, but we must push the 'art of survival' to its extreme. From now on, your every move must fit the persona of a 'son of a humble family scared out of his wits.'"

"I want you to act as innocent and terrified as possible. They want to kill you, right? Then let's make them kill you 'justifiably,' kill you with a 'clear conscience!'"

"I understand," Su Ming nodded, tucking the Turtle-Knob Seal into the clothing against his skin.

.....

Deep night, Qianqing Palace, Western Warmth Chamber.

The warmth chamber was brightly lit, the air permeated with a faint scent of ambergris.

The Great Xing Emperor, wearing a casual robe embroidered with coiled dragon patterns, was bent over, reviewing the mountain of accumulated memorials. His face, illuminated by the candlelight, flickered between light and shadow, revealing no true emotion.

The Seal-holding Eunuch of the Directorate of Ceremonial, Eunuch Wang, knelt respectfully in the corner, quietly presenting a freshly compiled secret report directly before the Emperor.

The content of the secret report was precisely about the Yongchang Marquis Manor's actions against Su Ming, and the origins of Xu Qing's memorandum from the Ministry of Revenue.

The Emperor took the secret report but did not open it immediately. Instead, he slowly set down the memorial in his hand.

"It seems the Yongchang Marquis is determined to eliminate that little disciple of Zhou Wenhai," the Emperor's voice was flat, like a calm lake surface, betraying no ripples.

Eunuch Wang kept his head lowered, his voice thin and respectful. "Reporting to Your Majesty, the Yongchang Marquis has always acted with ruthless decisiveness. This time, the evidence is crafted to be seventy percent true, thirty percent false. The key is that batch of leather armor; it has indeed been tampered with, showing traces of someone from 'over there' having a hand in it."

"Over there?" The Emperor's tone slightly emphasized, his fingers gently tapping the table.

Eunuch Wang immediately understood. "Yes, Your Majesty. Within the Armaments Bureau, there are several officials who have had ties to the Marquis Manor for many years. They mixed a batch of old leather armor into the new military supplies and tampered with it, waiting only for the frontline war to erupt to immediately expose the problem."

"What is Liu Wenyuan's reaction?" The Emperor slowly set down the memorial, his face showing neither joy nor anger.

"Minister Liu has united with several censors and is strenuously refuting, saying this is factional strife and framing," Eunuch Wang replied.

"Framing?" The Emperor chuckled lightly, the laughter carrying a hint of mockery. "Of course it's framing. I have an impression of this Su Ming. Second Class, tenth rank, his essays were steady and balanced. He has been inconspicuous in the Hanlin Academy for a year. For the Yongchang Marquis to make such a great stir actually makes me somewhat curious."

The Emperor stood up and walked to the giant map of the Northern Frontier. That enormous map laid bare the entire border of the Great Xing Dynasty.

"The Northern Frontier needs the Yongchang Marquis's military talent to stabilize morale, but his influence in the court also needs some checks and balances," the Emperor's gaze fell on the several war zones marked in red along the border. "The upright official faction has also been somewhat disappointing lately. This Su Ming is a good piece on the board."

Eunuch Wang immediately understood that this piece was not one the Emperor intended to easily abandon, but neither would he directly step forward to protect it.

The Emperor turned, his tone flat yet brooking no doubt. "Issue the decree. Hanlin Academy Compiler Su Ming, negligent in his duties, implicated in military supply malpractice, is hereby stripped of his scholarly honor and official position, exiled three thousand li, to serve in the 'Blackwater Camp' in the Northern Frontier to atone for his crime through labor."

Eunuch Wang's heart tightened. He immediately grasped the Emperor's deeper meaning. Exile, not execution, gave the Yongchang Marquis an explanation while also leaving hope for the upright official faction.

"Your Majesty is sagacious," Eunuch Wang said respectfully. "The journey into exile is perilous. Should we..."

"No need," the Emperor waved his hand, his voice carrying a trace of cold decisiveness. "If he cannot even survive this journey, then I have misjudged him. If he can reach it... Liu Wenyuan and Zhou Wenhai will know what to do."

"Withdraw."

Eunuch Wang bowed and retreated, tightly clutching that secret decree in his hand, sighing inwardly: The art of rulership is indeed unfathomable. This young man Su Ming, his life, death, glory, and disgrace were themselves a counterweight for fine-tuning the two factions. If he succeeded, he was a hidden piece; if he failed, he was insignificant.

The snow from the Northern Frontier finally fell upon the capital.

The first snow of early winter, carrying a knife-like cold wind, swept through the entire Hanlin Academy.

Inside the Wenyuan Pavilion, the atmosphere was even colder than the wind and snow outside.

"Have you heard? Something happened in the Northern Frontier!"

"The Black Rong launched a night raid! Three military forts were lost! Dozens of brothers died!"

The news spread through the Wenyuan Pavilion like a plague.

Qian Bin immediately jumped up. He slammed the table, his voice filled with indignation. "Utterly disgraceful! How could our Great Xing border army be so utterly defeated!"

He walked over to Su Ming's desk. Looking at Su Ming, who was still copying the compendium, that neat handwriting seemed to mock the clamor of the world.

"Compiler Su, you certainly remain composed!" Qian Bin sneered. "Northern Frontier soldiers are shedding blood at the border, yet you sit here copying the rituals of a bygone dynasty? Is your heart made of stone?"

Su Ming set down his brush and looked up, his face wearing a perfectly measured expression of panic and bewilderment.

"Brother Qian, what... what are you talking about? The border..."

"Still pretending!" Qian Bin roared, his voice drawing the attention of Reader Guo.

Reader Guo emerged from the inner room, his face as dark as if it were about to drip water.

"What is all this noise! Utterly disgraceful!"

At that moment, a man wearing the official robe of a Censorate censor, accompanied by several yamen runners, strode purposefully into the Wenyuan Pavilion.

The censor's face was stern. His gaze swept over the room, finally fixing on Su Ming.

"Who is Hanlin Academy Compiler Su Ming?"

Su Ming's heart clenched violently.

"They're here," Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, carrying a determined calmness of one burning their boats. "Disciple, don't panic. Play your part well."

Su Ming stood up, his voice carrying a slight tremor. "This... this official is Su Ming."

"Seize him!" the censor bellowed.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[2,670 words]

The two yamen runners immediately stepped forward, pulling out cold iron chains to shackle Su Ming.

Reader Guo's face darkened, and he instantly blocked Su Ming's path. "Censor, what is the meaning of this? Su Ming is a Hanlin Compiler. Even if he has erred, he should be dealt with by the Hanlin Academy or the Ministry of Personnel. For the Censorate to act in this manner, does it not overstep its authority?"

Although he had given Su Ming a hard time, Su Ming was, after all, one of his own men. Having someone taken from his own office was a blow to his face.

"Reader Guo, this matter involves a grave crime concerning the military and the state. Do not interfere!" The censor swept him a cold glance, pulling out an official document stamped with the Censorate's great seal from his robe.

"By order of the Censorate, Hanlin Academy Compiler Su Ming, disregarding military affairs, colluding with unscrupulous merchants, substituting inferior goods for quality ones, delaying military plans, causing heavy casualties among the Northern Frontier soldiers. He is to be apprehended immediately and await judgment!"

"Colluding with merchants? Delaying military plans?" Reader Guo was so frightened by these sudden accusations that his face turned deathly pale.

"The evidence is irrefutable!" The censor snorted coldly, looking at Su Ming. "Su Ming! Do you admit your guilt!"

Su Ming's body trembled slightly. He did not resist, allowing the cold iron chains to lock around his wrists.

He raised his head, his face etched with innocence and fear.

"My lord, I... I am wronged! I do nothing but copy books in the academy every day, I have never left the capital. How could I possibly commit the crime of delaying military plans?"

"Hmph, on the brink of death, and you still dare to quibble!" The censor harshly reprimanded him, taking an object wrapped in oilcloth from a yamen runner.

He tore open the oilcloth with a jerk, revealing a piece of broken leather armor inside.

The chest area of the leather armor was torn open by a hard object, exposing the rotten inner lining, the edges still stained with shocking traces of blood.

"Look at this!" The censor threw the leather armor onto the desk in front of Su Ming. "Northern Frontier soldiers, because they wore the leather armor you colluded with unscrupulous merchants to supply to the Armaments Bureau, substituting inferior goods, the armor cracked and they were hacked to death by the Black Rong's curved blades! Dozens of lives, all dead because of you!"

Su Ming looked at the piece of armor, his face displaying a perfectly measured shock and terror.

"My lord! This... what does this have to do with me? I have never been involved in military equipment procurement!"

"Still pretending!" The censor sneered. "Your fellow jinshi from the same examination year, Ministry of Revenue junior clerk Xu Qing, submitted a memorial titled 'Memorial on Stabilizing Paper Prices, Opening New Revenue Sources and Reducing Expenditures to Augment Military Funds,' intending to shake up the existing structure of military procurement. Do you dare say you knew nothing of this?"

"Brother... Brother Xu..." Su Ming's lips trembled slightly, as if struck in a vulnerable spot.

"His petition directly pointed out the flaws in military supply. And you! You have been consulting a vast number of Northern Frontier battle archives in the Hanlin Academy! You, in pursuit of political achievement, disregarded military affairs, intending to replace the existing military supply system with your immature 'new methods'! You are deluding court officials, plotting sedition!"

The censor's accusations, like a mountain collapsing and a tidal wave surging, pinned Su Ming firmly under the dual shackles of morality and law.

Su Ming's body swayed unsteadily, as if he might collapse at any moment.

"I... I was only..." He opened his mouth, but couldn't utter a complete sentence. That appearance of being utterly terrified and heartbroken by the sudden heavy accusations made everyone in the Wenyuan Pavilion believe the censor's charges.

Qian Bin watched Su Ming's wretched state, a flash of satisfaction and schadenfreude passing through his eyes.

"Take him away!" The censor said no more, waving his hand sharply.

The yamen runners roughly shoved Su Ming, leading him out of the Wenyuan Pavilion.

However, in a corner of the crowd, a figure suddenly clenched his fist tightly.

It was Zhang Yiming.

He watched as Su Ming was shackled with iron chains. The contempt in his heart, that feeling of 'rotten wood cannot be carved,' was replaced by a more complex emotion.

He had once despised Su Ming's cowardice. But when this cowardly colleague truly faced catastrophic disaster, he realized that in this game of power, they, these sons of humble origins, didn't even have the right to be cowards.

The cold iron chains dragged across the bluestone floor, emitting a grating, scraping sound.

As Su Ming was being taken away, he deliberately stumbled and fell on the ground, his panic and helplessness performed to perfection.

The Imperial Prison, located deep underground in the capital, was a place specifically for interrogating serious criminals.

The moment one stepped inside, the smells of damp cold, darkness, blood, and rot hit like a solid block of lead, almost suffocating.

Su Ming was roughly pushed into a narrow cell. Stone walls, stone floor, stone bed. Water dripped from all sides, the chill biting.

The yamen runners removed the chains from his body, only to replace them with heavier, thicker leg irons.

"Stay put! In the Imperial Prison, no one cares about Hanlin Academy rules!" The yamen runner sneered, slamming the heavy iron door shut with a bang.

"Clang—"

The sound of the iron door locking was like a giant hammer smashing into Su Ming's heart.

He slumped onto the cold stone bed, his body trembling slightly from the cold and fear.

"Disciple, stop acting. There's no audience here." Lin Yu's voice sounded, carrying a hint of schadenfreude-laced humor.

Su Ming took a deep breath, circulated the Greenwood Longevity Art. The spiritual energy within his body slowly flowed, dispelling the surrounding yin cold.

"Master, the yin energy in this place... is so heavy."

"That's the backlash from the suppressed earth vein energy, combined with the accumulated resentment and blood energy over many years. An ordinary person staying here long would either die or go mad." Lin Yu's tone was grave. "You might as well take the opportunity to absorb some yin-attribute spiritual energy, balance the wood attribute in your body. Consider it not a wasted trip."

"Someone! Bring out the serious criminal Su Ming for interrogation!"

The iron door opened again. Su Ming was taken to the interrogation room.

The interrogation room was even colder than the cell. Expressionless yamen runners stood on both sides. In the middle sat two interrogation officials wearing Censorate robes.

The chief interrogator was a clean-shaven middle-aged man with a pale face, narrow eyes that exuded a chilling coldness.

"Su Ming, do you admit your guilt?" The chief interrogator's voice was like ice scraping, carrying a bone-chilling cold.

Su Ming immediately knelt on the ground, prostrating himself extremely low. "My lord! This student is wronged! Since entering the capital, this student has only known copying books daily, never involved in military or state affairs. What crime have I committed!"

"Copying books?" The chief interrogator sneered, picking up a stack of documents from the desk and slamming them heavily on the floor in front of Su Ming.

"Look! What is this!"

Su Ming's hands trembling, he picked up those few sheets of paper.

The first was a letter imitating his handwriting. The wording in the letter was obscure, hinting that he had successfully persuaded Ministry of Revenue officials to be "flexible" in military procurement. The signature at the end was clearly the character "Ming."

The second was a document regarding "leather armor procurement," with his "suggestion" to adopt a certain batch of cheap, abundant leather armor annotated on it.

The third was a Censorate verification report. It stated: On the Northern Frontier front, due to the inferior quality of military leather armor, dozens of soldiers were killed or wounded during a Black Rong night raid. The leather armor was precisely the batch Su Ming had "suggested" procuring.

The evidence was irrefutable!

Su Ming's face instantly turned deathly pale. He looked at the report, his eyes wide open as if seeing the image of himself being beheaded.

"My lord! This... these are all forged! This student never wrote these letters, nor had the authority to suggest procurement! This student is only a seventh-rank compiler, I even need Reader Guo's approval to leave the academy!" Su Ming suddenly kowtowed, his voice choked with sobs. His forehead struck the cold ground, emitting "thud, thud" sounds.

"Outrageous!" The chief interrogator slammed the table hard, making the teacup on it jump.

"At this point, you still dare to quibble! I ask you, what dealings do you have with the merchant Li Fugui from Qingshi Town? Is your new paper-making method related to your collusion with unscrupulous merchants for huge profits?"

"Li Fugui? This student does not know him!" Su Ming shouted. "The paper-making method is a local method from my hometown, what does it have to do with military supply? My lord, this student is wronged! I beg you to investigate clearly!"

He channeled all his fear and innocence into the most primal wails and pleas for mercy. He cried until snot and tears streamed down his face, his body shaking with convulsions, completely the image of a frail scholar pushed to the brink.

A flash of contempt passed through the chief interrogator's eyes.

"Hmph, you won't admit it until you see the coffin! Men, bring out the torture instruments!"

"Yes, sir!" Two yamen runners immediately stepped forward, holding whips soaked in saltwater.

At that moment, the deputy interrogator who had been silent beside the chief interrogator suddenly spoke, his voice icy. "Su Ming, do you know what a grave crime delaying military plans is according to the Great Xing Code? Light punishment is immediate execution by beheading. Heavy punishment is extermination of three clans! If you truthfully confess the mastermind behind you, perhaps your punishment can be lightened, changed to exile three thousand li!"

Su Ming instantly understood their intention—they didn't want to execute him directly, but to force him to implicate more people. Exile three thousand li, this was the outcome they had prepared for him.

"My lord, spare my life! This student confesses! I confess!" Su Ming's performance reached its climax. He cried out in terror, "This student truly doesn't know! This student only... only heard Reader Guo and Lord Li's attendants mention a few words while I was organizing the archives! This student didn't understand a single word!"

Su Ming's "confession" pointed the finger at Reader Guo and Li Wen. This was precisely what the Yongchang Marquis Manor hoped to see. Turning the conflict into a dog-eat-dog fight within the upright officials' faction, clearing the Marquis Manor of suspicion.

The chief interrogator watched Su Ming's "breakdown" coldly, his tone softening slightly.

"You only need to speak the truth. Who instructed you, who conspired with you. I will naturally see justice done for you."

"No one instructed me! No one conspired with me!" Su Ming wailed, shaking his head like a rattle drum. "This student is just a book copier! It was them! They saw this student was easy to bully, they... they shoved these things into this student's hands!"

He pointed at the documents on the floor, his eyes filled with extreme fear of power struggles.

The interrogation lasted a full hour.

Su Ming did not relent. He insisted he was innocent, that he had been framed. But the fear and helplessness he displayed made the interrogators believe he had completely broken down, utterly vulnerable.

"Take him away! Continue holding him! Await judgment!"

The chief interrogator waved his hand, a flash of impatience in his eyes. He had already gotten what he wanted—Su Ming's "evidence of guilt" and his "confessing" attitude.

Su Ming was thrown back into his cell. He was soaked through, shivering from the cold.

"Disciple, impressive. For this performance, teacher gives you ninety-nine points. Deducting one point so you don't get arrogant." Lin Yu's voice carried appreciation.

Su Ming didn't speak. He leaned against the cold wall, adjusting his breathing, while simultaneously replaying in his mind the material evidence he had come into contact with during the interrogation.

"Master, those pieces of evidence... have problems."

"Of course they have problems, otherwise how could it be called framing?" Lin Yu laughed. "But the problems are bigger than you imagine. Let's start with that letter."

Su Ming closed his eyes, recalling the letter that imitated his handwriting.

"The handwriting imitation is very similar. But on the signature character 'Ming,' I sensed a hint of stiffness. My brushstroke, when finishing, habitually has a restrained force. The finishing stroke of that letter seemed somewhat hollow and floating." Su Ming analyzed solemnly.

"Correct, that's the first point." Lin Yu praised. "Although your spiritual energy is weak, long-term cultivation of the Greenwood Longevity Art has given you control over your body and brushstrokes far surpassing ordinary people. Ordinary people can't see it, but the imitator ultimately isn't you."

"Second, is the annotation on the leather armor document." Su Ming continued. "My handwriting, when copying the 'Collected Statutes,' is the standard academy style, extremely rigid. But the handwriting on that annotation carried a hint of... a hint of casual elegance. Although very faint, it slightly deviates from my usual 'dull' persona."

"Excellent!" Lin Yu's voice carried excitement. "This proves that the person framing you probably only obtained your earlier, or private correspondence handwriting, and didn't get your 'Su the Dullard' handwriting from after you entered the Hanlin Academy. This is an intelligence discrepancy."

"The most crucial, is that batch of leather armor." Su Ming's voice sank.

At that time in the interrogation room, although he appeared panicked, his spiritual sense, like the most precise sensor, had quietly touched that piece of leather armor fragment presented as evidence.

"That leather armor fragment carried an unnatural smell of decay. That smell was extremely similar to the scent of withered wood eroded by an array that I discovered on the back mountain of Qingshi Town."

Lin Yu's soul body instantly froze.

"What?!" Lin Yu's voice carried genuine shock for the first time.

"Are you sure it's not ordinary insect damage or chemical corrosion?"

"I'm sure." Su Ming's tone was firm. "That aura was extremely faint, but carried a unique yin coldness and sense of decay, completely different from mundane rot. It left subtle array traces on the leather armor. Although mostly worn away, the residual aura couldn't hide from my spiritual sense."

Lin Yu fell silent. This silence was more alarming than any noise.

"The Yongchang Marquis Manor... has a cultivator behind it!" Lin Yu's voice became unprecedentedly grave.

Su Ming's heart gave a violent jump, a chill sweeping through his entire body.

"A low-level cultivator." Lin Yu quickly analyzed. "They didn't attack you directly. Instead, they used mundane means, tampering with mundane evidence to achieve the framing. This shows they have reservations, not daring to openly use cultivation power."

"This is both good and bad."

"Good, because they don't dare to blatantly kill you within the capital. Bad, because they have already employed methods from the cultivation world. This means you will face pressure from two worlds!"

Lin Yu's soul body inside the ring was like an overloaded machine, operating at high speed.

"Why would they use an array to corrode the leather armor? Using poison directly would be faster and more concealed, wouldn't it?" Su Ming asked.

"No, array corrosion is harder for mundane coroners to detect than poison." Lin Yu explained. "Moreover, if this is the method of some low-level sect or family, they would deliberately leave this 'array corrosion' trace as a kind of hidden warning or mark."

"Warning whom?"

"Warning all cultivators who want to interfere in this matter, and also warning all upright officials who want to clear Zhou Wenhai's name. Telling them that this matter has already been 'sealed' by 'immortal families,' mortals stay away!" Lin Yu's voice carried anger. "These old foxes really play power games to the extreme!"

Su Ming closed his eyes, suppressing this anger.

"Master, since they don't dare to act within the capital, then my life is temporarily safe."

"Correct, the capital is the center of mundane power, Dragon Qi is vast and mighty, not a place where they can act recklessly." Lin Yu said. "But exile three thousand li, once you leave the capital, that's a different story."

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[2,352 words]

Days passed, one after another, in the damp darkness of the Imperial Prison's depths.

Su Ming was held on the lowest level. Aside from being brought up for interrogation once a day to be asked trivial questions, all that remained was endless waiting.

Outside, Xu Qing was engaged in the most desperate running-around of his life.

First he went to the Ministry of Revenue and sought out his direct superior, Director Li.

He knelt before Director Li and placed all his salary and savings on the table.

"Director! Please! Su Ming is absolutely innocent! He... he wouldn't dare kill even a single chicken! How could he collude with corrupt merchants and endanger military supplies!" Xu Qing's voice was hoarse, his eyes bloodshot.

Director Li looked at the messy pile of silver and copper coins on the table, sighed, and pushed the money back.

“Xu Qing, you’re a promising young man, but you’re too young.” Director Li lowered his voice, a trace of helplessness on his face. “Do you think this is an investigation? This is a purge. What the Yongchang Marquis Manor wants is not the truth, but an explanation.”

“That military report was handed in by the Marquis himself. The Censorate’s censor was personally named by the Marquis’s men. If you try to save him now, you’ll make enemies of the entire military merit faction!”

“If you want to live, distance yourself from him. Begging now will only drag you down with him!”

Xu Qing was driven out by Director Li and walked numbly down the Ministry’s corridor.

He did not give up.

He went to the Hanlin Academy. He tried to see Reader Guo but was turned away.

He tried to petition those upright censors, but each response was the same—avoid and refuse to meet.

“Who wants to touch a scapegoat that the military merit faction has its eye on? Whoever does will get unlucky!”

Xu Qing finally understood that Su Ming had been made the sacrificial pawn in this political struggle.

He returned to his official lodging, stared at the lone lamp, and was filled with powerlessness and despair.

He remembered Su Ming’s words in the courtyard: “You and I should not meet privately anymore.”

Su Ming had foreseen everything long ago.

The last thing he could do was follow Su Ming’s instructions, pull himself out, and not become another leverage against Su Ming.

Meanwhile, Liu Wenyuan’s residence remained as silent as a tomb.

He did not even go to the Censorate to defend Su Ming.

He was simply waiting.

.....

Ten days later.

A charcoal worker responsible for delivering fuel to the Imperial Prison stealthily approached Su Ming's cell.

The charcoal worker looked gaunt. He stuffed a charred lump of coal under Su Ming's stone bed.

"Compiler Su, this... this was ordered by Lord Liu for you. He told me to bring it so you can keep your fire burning, don't freeze," the worker said, then turned and hurried away as if pursued by ghosts.

Su Ming casually reached beneath the bed and his fingertips touched the chunk of coal.

Two tiny lines of characters were carved on its surface.

"Endure, preserve for useful days."

"Northern Frontier, Blackwater Camp."

Su Ming's heart leapt.

Liu Wenyuan, indeed, had not abandoned him.

"Northern Frontier, Blackwater Camp," Su Ming mouthed silently.

Liu Wenyuan was telling him that he had negotiated to the best of his ability and arranged for exile rather than execution, and had specified the exile destination—the Blackwater Camp in the Northern Frontier.

Blackwater Camp was the Great Xing Dynasty's coldest, most dangerous forward duty posting.

Yet it was also the place where frontier warfare was most intense and where it was easiest to win military merits.

"This is giving you a chance to turn things around, disciple." Lin Yu.

"Blackwater Camp should be the farthest exile they would accept, and it's the most punitive place," Su Ming analyzed.

"Exactly, Blackwater Camp is near the desert, where all kinds of people gather and martial arts flourish," Lin Yu said. "Compared to the imperial capital—the mortal power center—it's better for our Way of Survival development, though that means it'll be harder to get news from cultivation sects."

“A loss may turn out to be a gain,” Su Ming said.

He crushed the coal in his hand; the powder drifted away and left no trace.

Three days later.

Public opinion in the capital, fanned by the Yongchang Marquis Manor, erupted completely.

“Hanlin Academy compiler Su Ming colluded with corrupt merchants and embezzled military supplies!”

“Zhou Wenhai’s disciple is a parasite on the state!”

“Dozens of frontier soldiers bled to death because of inferior leather armor!”

Rumors and tavern storytellers vividly embellished Su Ming’s supposed “crimes.”

Su Ming, once an obscure child from a humble household, overnight became the city’s object of scorn.

In Wenyuan Pavilion, Qian Bin and the others discussed Su Ming’s fate each day with schadenfreude.

“I heard the Censorate has transferred the case to the Court of Judicial Review. At minimum he’ll be exiled three thousand li and sent as forced labor!”

“Hmph, people like him should be executed and displayed for public warning!”

Only Zhang Yiming, sitting in a corner and gazing at the snow-covered world outside, wore a complicated expression.

His petition with signatures was still held up at the Ministry of Personnel, while that “coward” he despised had secured a chance of exile for himself.

He did not know how Su Ming had done it, but he knew Su Ming’s “weakness” had protected him.

In the afternoon.

The gates of the Imperial Prison were opened again.

This time it was not for interrogation, but to announce a decree.

A palace eunuch in the fourth-rank official uniform, holding the golden imperial edict, entered the prison flanked by two guards.

The chief examiner and the officials from the Censorate immediately knelt, solemnly awaiting.

Su Ming was brought out of his cell and forced to kneel on the cold stone floor, head bowed, seeing only the hem of the fourth-rank officer's robe.

The eunuch unfolded the edict and his thin voice rang out in the empty prison.

"By command of Heaven and the Emperor: Hanlin Academy compiler Su Ming, lax in study and careless in conduct, involved in the military supplies corruption case, allowing inferior leather armor to enter the army, an unforgivable crime!"

The eunuch's voice rose sharply, carrying imperial authority.

"Strip Su Ming of his honor and office, exile him three thousand li, to the bitterly cold Northern Frontier 'Blackwater Camp' to perform military duty and atone for his crimes!"

"Let it be so!"

The Censorate officials kowtowed in unison.

Su Ming knelt, his body trembling slightly.

Exile! Blackwater Camp!

This was exactly the outcome Liu Wenyuan had hinted at in his note.

The edict gave the Yongchang Marquis Manor an explanation—removal and exile enough to intimidate petty schemers.

It also left the upright faction a sliver of hope—his life was spared, leaving a "useful body."

Lin Yu snorted and summarized, "The Emperor plays this balancing act very cleverly. Frankly, in his eyes you're expendable material, something to balance two rival factions. So, disciple, don't fool yourself with talk of boundless imperial benevolence. The only ones to rely on are yourself and your teacher."

Su Ming bowed deeply, his voice choked as he offered a ritualistic "thanks for the grace," concealing every emotion beneath the gesture.

The eunuch tucked away the edict and glanced over Su Ming with an almost imperceptible complex expression.

"Su Ming, do you know that you surviving is a tremendous favor?"

“Student knows his crime, thanks His Majesty for his great grace, student will atone by meritorious service to repay this imperial benevolence,” Su Ming replied with utmost submissiveness.

“Hmph.” The eunuch said no more and turned to leave.

The prison officials exhaled with relief.

The case was closed; no one wanted to touch that hot potato anymore.

Su Ming was returned to his cell; his leg irons were still heavy.

“Seven days from now you will be escorted and depart. Prepare yourself well,” the chief examiner said coldly, then left with his men.

The cell fell back into darkness and silence.

Su Ming leaned against the wall and breathed out a long, ragged breath.

.....

Over the next seven days, two special visitors came to Su Ming’s cell.

The first was Liu Wenyuan.

He did not appear openly; instead, under the pretext of “Censorate interrogation,” Su Ming was taken to a quiet interrogation room.

Liu Wenyuan wore a plain robe and sat across the table. He looked at Su Ming with a faint, hard-to-notice approval in his eyes.

“You did well,” he said, his voice still cold but carrying a senior’s recognition.

“Student thanks Lord Liu for saving me,” Su Ming immediately rose and bowed deeply.

“No need to thank me,” Liu Wenyuan waved his hand. “This was the path your teacher laid for you long ago, and something you earned yourself.”

“You should understand the imperial will now,” Liu Wenyuan looked straight into Su Ming’s eyes. “You are both an abandoned pawn and a hidden pawn now. The Yongchang Marquis Manor will not let you go; they will do everything to make you die on the road to exile or on the battlefield at Blackwater Camp.”

“Your chance lies at Blackwater Camp.”

“It’s the frontier army—the military merit faction’s sphere of influence—but there the Marquis’s reach is weaker.”

“There will be people there who can help you.” Liu Wenyuan did not elaborate; he simply tapped the table three times with his finger.

“The only way you can save yourself is by military merits. Use battlefield achievements to wash away the stain on you so the Yongchang Marquis Manor dares not openly touch you.”

Liu Wenyuan rose, stepped over to Su Ming, and produced a palm-sized wooden box from his sleeve.

“What’s inside will be useful to you.”

Su Ming accepted the box with both hands; it felt warm, with a faint sandalwood scent.

“I will remember your instruction, Lord,” he said.

“Go,” Liu Wenyuan patted Su Ming’s shoulder, his eyes flashing with complexity. “Survive.”

Su Ming bowed again and left the interrogation room.

The second visitor was Xu Qing. Using a connection with an old jailer, he sneaked to the bars outside Su Ming’s cell. Fatigue and shame were written deeply on Xu Qing’s face.

“Brother Su!” he called softly through the iron bars.

“Brother Xu.” Su Ming looked at him and offered a smile.

“I... I’m sorry!” Xu Qing’s eyes reddened.

“Brother Xu, do not say that. I am going to the Northern Frontier; I don’t know when I will return. My parents and siblings at home will worry. I ask you to deliver two letters to my family,” Su Ming interrupted, his tone calm but solemn.

Xu Qing immediately nodded. “Brother Su, rest assured, I’ll take care of it! I will hand them over personally!”

Su Ming took from his breast two preprepared letters. The paper was coarse—the most unnoticeable scraps he could find in prison—and the handwriting was deliberately hurried and rough to simulate panic.

The first letter was to his parents and siblings.

It read: "Respected parents: Your unfilial son has offended the court and brought shame upon the family. I am deeply ashamed. I have been ordered to serve at the Northern Frontier with no foreseeable return. The capital is a place of controversy, do not stay. After receiving this letter, quickly sell off the family's expendable goods and move the whole family to Qingshi Town, placing yourselves under Teacher Zhou's care. Teacher Zhou is benevolent and will protect you. Do not cling to land and property; leave Su Family Village, change your name, and live in peace. When I win merit in the North and clear my name, I will return to reunite and serve you. Please take care and do not worry about me. Your unfilial son Su Ming, with tear-soaked obeisances."

This letter, though seeming to arrange their future, secretly warned: "leave Su Family Village quickly," "change your name," signaling the danger and the need to stay away from the source of any investigation.

Entrusting his family to Zhou Wenhai was both a plea for shelter and a placing of gratitude and future hope upon Zhou's shoulders.

The second letter was a secret missive to his teacher, Zhou Wenhai.

Its wording was more oblique, using many references and coded phrases understood only between master and disciple.

"Student Ming kowtows and prostrates before Master: Your foolish student failed to repay your kindness and fell into captivity, dragging disgrace upon the sect, a crime deserving death. I am now bound for Blackwater Camp; I go to certain peril, yet I shall not forget Master's teaching to 'harmonize with the light, blend with the dust, unfurl and furl with the times.' The northern land's hardships are also a chance for tempering. If heaven shows mercy, in three years or five I will seek recompense. I beg Master to watch over the old and weak at home. Even if I die, I shall feel deep gratitude beyond the grave. Taken by sorrow in haste, I do not know what more to say. Your student Ming bows again."

Xu Qing carefully pocketed the two letters, face grave. "Brother Su, the letters are safe with me! I will take care of Uncle and Aunt and Teacher Zhou!" Then he pushed a heavy cloth pouch through the bars.

"This is all the silver I could gather. You'll need money on the road to make arrangements. I also greased the palm of a deputy officer in the escort. He agreed to look after you a bit on the way, but... it may not help much. The escort is a frontier military transport; they are fierce—be careful," Xu Qing's voice trembled.

Su Ming took the pouch and felt the weight of the coins inside; he knew that sum could not have come from his official pay alone, and his chest warmed.

“Brother Xu, thank you. You did well,” Su Ming said. “Since you weren’t implicated, you may be more helpful to me in the future. Listen: after I leave, you must secure your footing at the Ministry of Revenue. Your talent will have the greatest effect there.”

“I will! I will for sure!” Xu Qing nodded emphatically.

“Don’t worry—I’m tough.”

Xu Qing said no more. He bowed deeply to Su Ming and left.

Su Ming watched his silhouette disappear into the darkness and stowed the pouch away.

He opened the wooden box Liu Wenyuan had given him. Inside lay two items: a piece of silk covered in tiny handwriting, and a small bottle of dark green ointment that smelled of fresh herbs.

“What’s written on the silk?” Lin Yu asked.

“This is disguise ointment,” Su Ming examined it carefully. “It can temporarily change one’s appearance and scent—excellent for escape!”

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 114: Departure from the Capital and the Beginning of the Assassination

[2,343 words]

Seven days later.

Deep within the Imperial Prison, the heavy iron door ground against its frame with a teeth-grinding squeal, and a cold wind threaded with snowflakes and the must of age slithered into the abyss like a poisonous snake.

Su Ming was hauled roughly upright from the cold stone slab by two yamen runners.

His shackles were removed and replaced with a longer, heavier five-person linked iron chain.

The iron links radiated bone-deep cold; at the other end were chained four gaunt prisoners.

The first had hollowed eye sockets and bloodshot eyes; the second had a face full of coarse flesh and a wolfish glare, and even restrained could not hide the murderous viciousness of a river-pirate; the remaining two had vacant eyes and numb expressions, already reduced to walking corpses.

Su Ming was the only one among the five wearing slightly decent prison clothes. Thin and slight, he stood out starkly among these desperate men, like a lamb lost in a wolf pack.

“Listen up, all of you!” A thunderous bark rang beside the prison cart.

The speaker was the lead escort officer on this convoy — Wei He, captain of a hundred men from the Northern Border Army.

He was hulking as a bear, a jagged scar running from the corner of his eyebrow down to the corner of his mouth, and when he spoke that scar seemed to writhe on his face like a living centipede.

Wei He’s eyes swept across the prisoners, his tone icy: “From today on, you’re not men, you’re beasts! I tell you to move, you move; tell you to stop, you stop! Anyone trying any tricks, the blade in my hand recognizes no person, only military law!” His gaze finally landed on Su Ming and lingered for a moment, the undisguised contempt like looking at a heap of rotting trash.

By the prison cart, forty Northern Border soldiers in heavy leather armor, long knives at their waists, were already lined up in formation.

Their expressions were indifferent, their presence suffused with a ruthless aura honed only in mountains of corpses and rivers of blood, utterly unlike the hollow pomp of the capital’s Imperial Guard. This was a true, battle-tested force.

The prison cart slowly rolled forward, its heavy wooden wheels crunching through the morning’s thin snow in the capital, leaving two deep ruts.

Lin Yu’s voice carried a hint of gravity, “Disciple, forty Northern Border elite troops escorting a single exile? That level of force... could this be arranged by that Liu Wenyuan?”

Su Ming gave a slight shake of his head, his gaze tracking the turning wheels as he gathered every scrap of surrounding information.

By a steaming breakfast stall at a street corner, a familiar figure flashed past — Xu Qing.

He was dressed in coarse cloth, wearing a tattered felt hat, disguised as a porter headed for the early market.

Their eyes met like two silent threads crossing the air for a brief instant — no words, only the muted transmission of unspoken instructions and promises.

Xu Qing's figure quickly vanished into the crowd.

The prison cart reached the city gate without stopping. After the gate guards inspected Wei He's military order, they promptly saluted and waved them through.

When the cart finally rumbled past the gate and out beyond the tall, thick walls of the capital, Su Ming looked back.

The massive city, towering like a beast in the morning light, was receding rapidly. Everything he had planned here was being left behind by those walls, his past cast away with them.

"Disciple, pull your gaze back," Lin Yu's voice was unusually steady. "The capital is the past, the Northern Border is our rebirth. This isn't exile, it's a strategic redeployment! As long as the green hills remain, there'll be firewood to burn. Remember, living is the greatest bargaining chip."

Su Ming withdrew his gaze and felt a profound calm settle over him.

...

A secret chamber in the Yongchang Marquis Manor. It was colder than the Imperial Prison; the blue stone walls were frozen and airtight. Only an ever-burning lamp, its flame no larger than a bean, cast the two figures' shadows thin and long along the wall.

The Yongchang Marquis still wore a black sable cloak. Facing him stood a man in a green Daoist robe.

The Daoist's face was ordinary and would not draw attention in a crowd, but his temperament was aloof and noble, like a stubborn stone washed by a stream for a thousand years — unremarkable at a glance, yet emanating a detached transcendence from the mundane world.

He was Zhao Qianshan, a name that existed in the capital's circles of power only as legend.

"Master Zhao, I trouble you again." The Marquis's tone carried genuine respect and caution.

Zhao Qianshan's eyelids drooped slightly, his voice calm as water: "Marquis, speak plainly. I am leaving the capital to seek a quiet place and to settle worldly causes."

"Master speaks modestly." The Marquis did not dare to be casual; he handed over a map prepared beforehand, vermilion ink clearly marking a route to the Northern Border.

"This youth is scheming and is a remnant of Zhou Wenhai. Though now exiled, he remains a hidden trouble." The Marquis pressed his finger hard on a place on the map labeled "Black Wind Pass."

"I have arranged it. The escort will pass through this spot in five days."

Only then did Zhao Qianshan slowly lift his eyes, scanning the map, then looking at the Marquis with an expression still devoid of emotion.

"You mean for me to strike, to silence this escort and those forty-plus elite soldiers completely?"

"Exactly." The Marquis's voice was ruthless, his killing intent frigid. "Devoted death operatives are not easy to cultivate. This must be foolproof; nothing may be left that ties back to the Marquis Manor. Therefore, I can only ask Master to act, and afterward we will disguise it as a bandit ambush."

Zhao Qianshan was silent for a moment; his tone carried a trace of displeasure: "Marquis, you should know the favor my ancestor once did for you. Twenty years ago, when your family faced a calamity, I repaid that debt in full. Our karmic accounts were settled long ago."

The Marquis's face stiffened briefly, but his respect remained: "Master's words are indeed true. However... this matter is but a small thing for Master. I hope, by the face of my family's ancestor, you will grant your aid..."

"Enough." Zhao Qianshan waved to halt him, his voice carrying a worldly detachment. "I am leaving the capital anyway, and this falls upon my path, so consider it an incidental favor." He paused, then added, "It will also serve as a small interest on your ancestor's debt."

At those words, wild joy washed over the Marquis's face. He bowed deeply, his voice trembling: "Thank you, Master! Thank you for fulfilling this!"

Zhao Qianshan gave no further response. He shifted and vanished from the chamber like a wisp of blue smoke, leaving one cold, ethereal sentence lingering in the air: "In five days, at Black Wind Pass, I will send them on their way."

The Marquis straightened, staring at the empty room, his respectful smile gone, his expression blank as he stared at the wall.

...

Three days after leaving the capital, the escort had already penetrated deep into the Yanshan Mountain range.

The official road was rugged and difficult; on both sides rose endless steep peaks.

The winter mountain forest was bleak, bare branches swaying in the cold like the dead claws of ghosts.

During these three days Su Ming truly felt what it meant to be a prisoner under escort.

Their daily rations were two black wheat buns as hard as stones and a bowl of thin congee that could be seen through to the bottom.

At night, they were locked in the freezing prison cart, the biting cold blowing in from all sides until it reached the bone.

A gambler among the prisoners froze through the second cold night and developed a high fever, babbling incoherently, soon near death.

At dawn the next day, Wei He, annoyed at the trouble he caused, kicked him down from the cart without mercy and left him to perish in the wilderness.

The three remaining prisoners, including Su Ming, grew quieter, fear spreading through them like frost.

The coarse-faced bandit seemed to notice something unusual beneath Su Ming's frail appearance, and over the past two days had not picked a fight; instead he kept a measured distance.

"Disciple, how's the free deep-experience tour? Exciting, isn't it?" Lin Yu teased.

Su Ming was nibbling at his hard black bun; the food hurt his teeth and was hard to swallow. "Master, I'm just thinking, this Wei He doesn't seem in a hurry to get anywhere." Su Ming swallowed the last crumbs and wetted his throat with the icy stream water.

"Oh? What makes you say that?" Lin Yu asked.

"By military escort rules, speed comes first. Yet in these three days we've traveled less than sixty li each day, and they camp as soon as dusk falls."

Lin Yu's soul form paced within the ring, his tone laced with alertness: "You're right. This unit's formation and vigilance far exceed those of ordinary escort teams."

Su Ming's heart tightened almost imperceptibly.

Liu Wenyuan's warning, the Yongchang Manor's ever-watchful eyes — it all made sense now. They wanted him dead on the road, and the deliberately slow pace was buying time for that assassination to be set up.

Just then, Lin Yu's voice detonated in Su Ming's mind without warning!

"Su Ming! Center your spirit and stay still!"

Su Ming's chewing froze instantly.

"Master, what's happening?" He kept his face impassive.

"There is a spirit-scan sweeping over us!" Lin Yu's soul paced within the Xuantian Ring.

"Is it a cultivator?" Su Ming forced calm into his voice.

Lin Yu responded: "This... should be a Foundation Establishment cultivator! And not an ordinary one — at least late Foundation Establishment! Possibly... Foundation Grand Perfection! The aura is solid; not comparable to a common Foundation! Hopefully they're just passing through and not looking for trouble with us!"

Foundation Grand Perfection! Those four words struck Su Ming's heart like a physical weight, hammering down on him.

He was only at Qi Refinement second layer. In front of such a powerful being he was not even dust; one thought from that person could obliterate his soul completely.

"How far is he? What does he intend?" Su Ming's voice remained eerily calm.

"He's about five li behind us, trailing at a distance not too close, not too far. His spiritual pressure is heavy as a mountain; he's not hiding it! He's clearly bullying the weak, assuming control over us! For the Yongchang Manor to use such power!" Lin Yu's voice carried barely suppressed fury and vigilance.

Su Ming's mind reached razor-sharp clarity in that instant. The pursuer's brazen tracking and unhidden aura meant absolute confidence — he assumed complete dominance over this mortal escort. That he hasn't struck yet suggested he was waiting for the optimal moment to act, or rather... the perfect place to kill.

Su Ming's gaze swept the terrain without showing it. They were deep in the Yanshan interior, cliffs towered on both sides, the official road narrow and constrained. He immediately sent a thought: "Master, check the map. Are there any named spots within three to five li ahead?"

Lin Yu quickly sank his spirit into the map copy Su Ming carried. "Yes! Four li ahead, there's a marked place called 'Black Wind Pass'! It's the narrowest defile between two mountains; winds are dangerous there year-round. It's a military taboo and a perfect spot for bandit ambushes!"

Black Wind Pass! Su Ming's heart fell as if struck by a great stone, sinking into an endless abyss.

He understood completely.

The pursuer would strike at Black Wind Pass, using the Foundation Grand Perfection's power to instantly erase the entire escort, then pin the blame on "bandits robbing the road."

A Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator against forty trained mortal soldiers was pure domination.

Once action was taken, there would be no witnesses left, and the Marquis's manor could wipe away all traces.

"Master, I need your help." Su Ming's voice was as cold as ice.

"Right now, we must win by guile. What's your plan?" Lin Yu snatched back his panic and asked in a low voice. "There's no time to flee! We must create a perfect false scene before they strike!"

"I'll use that jar of disguise ointment." Su Ming said.

"I'll disguise myself as the gambler who was kicked from the cart." Su Ming explained.

Lin Yu's soul shuddered with sudden comprehension.

It was an insanely daring plan: at the exact moment the Foundation cultivator slaughtered everyone, Su Ming would pose as a discarded, unnoticed "corpse," lying amid the blood, relying on the attacker's assumption that "Su Ming is dead" to survive the lethal spirit-scan!

"Good! Disciple, you are ruthless enough!" Lin Yu's tone shifted from horror to excitement.

Half an hour later, the convoy reached a mountain stream.

Wei He ordered a rest, and the soldiers began refilling water.

Su Ming and two other prisoners were permitted to drink under the guard of the soldiers.

The moment had arrived!

Su Ming knelt by the stream, cupped the icy water in his hands and drank, then buried his face in the water as if rinsing it.

The instant his cheek touched the surface, his hand hidden in his sleeve moved like lightning and smeared the dark-green disguise ointment across his face.

The ointment felt icy at first, but once it contacted the skin it turned into a warm current that quickly seeped in.

Su Ming felt the muscles and bones of his face undergoing minute, numb writhing and reshaping.

He did not hesitate; he smeared a few hasty strokes, then rose and returned to the prison cart. The whole process flowed like water and took only a few breaths, attracting no attention from the soldiers.

He sat down again, head bowed, letting the shadow fully conceal his altered features.

“Master, is it done?”

“Perfect!” Lin Yu’s voice brimmed with contained excitement. “I compared your new visage with the last image of that gambler left behind, and the similarity is ninety-nine percent! Now, you are that unlucky bastard tossed aside in the wasteland — an unimportant corpse that should have died!”

Su Ming exhaled slowly, tamping down the turmoil in his chest.

The first step was complete.

Now, they had to wait — wait for the death sentence to come from that Foundation cultivator.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,274 words]

The prison cart continued forward, its wheels grinding against the gravel, producing a monotonous and grating creak.

The mountain path grew increasingly rugged, with sheer cliffs on both sides like the fangs of a giant beast, slicing the sky into narrow strips.

The wind began to change.

"With acting skills like this disciple's, back in my day, it would have been a waste of talent if he only won a Golden Rooster Award for Best Supporting Actor." Lin Yu's internal monologue carried a touch of lightheartedness, finding joy amidst hardship.

"Look at your current appearance: sallow and emaciated complexion, unfocused eyes, and a faint trace of drool hanging at the corner of your mouth. Perfect! You're practically the twin brother of that gambler!"

Su Ming did not respond. He merely huddled himself tighter, as if trying to wedge himself into the corner of the prison cart.

His senses, however, operating under the circulation of the Greenwood Longevity Art, were heightened to their limit.

The sound of the wind, the sound of water, the low roars of unknown beasts in the distance, even the heavy breathing of the great bandit beside him—all clearly reached his ears.

"Something's wrong ahead." Wei He's voice, thunderous like an explosion, suddenly rang out.

He reined in his horse. The magnificent Northern Border warhorse pawed the ground uneasily.

Almost simultaneously, the forty Northern Border Army soldiers gripped the hilts of the swords at their waists, their gazes sweeping the surroundings like hawks.

Their movements were uniform, without a single superfluous sound, only the faint rustle of clinking armor plates.

This was the instinct honed by elite veterans of a hundred battles.

"Boss, fog is rising." The vice officer's voice was tinged with vigilance.

Ahead, in the valley, a dense white fog could be seen rolling and surging forward at a visible speed.

The fog came too fast, too bizarre, completely defying the laws of nature.

"This is no ordinary fog!" Wei He's scarred face contorted. From this fog, he smelled the scent of death.

"Ambush! Form a circle formation! Protect the prison cart!" Wei He's roar echoed through the valley.

But it was already too late.

The thick fog, like a burst dam, instantly swallowed the entire convoy.

One couldn't see their own hand in front of their face.

Comrades who were clearly visible one moment vanished into the thick white fog the next.

Sounds also became muffled and indistinct, as if wrapped in a thick layer of cotton.

Panic began to spread among the soldiers' hearts.

"Master, it's an array!" Su Ming shouted inwardly.

"A Mist Array! A low-tier auxiliary array, but for ordinary mortals, it's an inescapable net!" Lin Yu's voice was extremely urgent. "He's making his move! Disciple, proceed as planned! Life and death hinge on this one move!"

At that very moment!

"Swish—"

A faint, almost imperceptible sound of something cutting through the air flashed through the fog.

Immediately after, came the dull thud of a body hitting the ground.

"Ah!" A soldier let out a short, sharp scream that was abruptly cut off, as if an invisible hand had seized his throat.

"Old Third!"

"What was that?!"

"Hold steady! Don't panic!" Wei He's roar carried a trace of suppressed shock and fury.

Green sword light, like will-o'-the-wisps reaching out from hell, flickered erratically within the dense fog.

Each flicker was accompanied by a muffled grunt and the extinguishing of a life.

This was not a fight; it was a slaughter.

These elite soldiers who had never taken a step back even when clashing head-on with the Black Rong iron cavalry on the Northern Frontier battlefields now resembled lambs for the slaughter, unable to even catch a glimpse of the enemy's shadow.

Wei He's eyes were bloodshot. He frantically swung his long saber, the blade wind howling, but it only sliced through clumps of empty, illusory fog.

"Bastard! Show yourself!" he roared like a wild beast.

The response to him was a flash of green light, impossibly fast.

Wei He's roar was cut short. He lowered his head, looking at the bowl-sized bloody hole in his chest, his eyes filled with unwillingness and confusion.

His burly body collapsed with a heavy thud.

With the commander dead, the soldiers' psychological defenses completely crumbled.

Within the thick fog, only desperate screams and futile struggles remained.

"Now!" There was not a trace of fear in Su Ming's eyes, only the calm of a wild beast.

He strained suddenly. Under the covert operation of his spiritual energy, the seemingly sturdy interlocking iron shackles emitted a soft "click" at the lock mechanism and snapped open.

Without the slightest hesitation, he rolled, taking cover behind a half-man-high boulder beside the prison cart.

This was a blind spot in the field of view that Wei He had previously surveyed.

He quickly circulated the Aura Concealment Art, lowering his own aura to the minimum, almost merging with the surrounding boulders.

But this was not enough!

Su Ming's gaze fell on the corpse of a soldier that had just fallen not far away.

Warm blood was still gurgling from the soldier's chest.

A flicker of struggle passed through Su Ming's eyes, but it was instantly replaced by resolve.

He crawled over, reached out his hand, and without hesitation, plunged it into the sticky, warm blood.

Then, he smeared his blood-covered hand haphazardly over his own face, neck, and prison uniform.

A heavy scent of blood instantly enveloped him.

He also picked up the broken half of a saber that had fallen beside the soldier, clutched it tightly to his chest, curled his body into a ball, lay on his side on the ground, and remained motionless.

He closed his eyes, adjusted his breathing, and slowed his heartbeat.

At this moment, from his appearance, aura, even his posture, he was indistinguishable from a prisoner who had just been tragically caught and killed in the chaotic fight.

He had become a perfect "background prop."

Just then, a shrill, piercing shriek tore through the deathly silence of the thick fog!

"Whoosh—Bang!"

A brilliant red firework exploded at the top of the dense fog, like a desperate blood lotus.

A signal flare!

That vice officer whom Xu Qing had bribed, with his last ounce of strength before death, had fired a distress signal!

"Seeking death!"

A cold, disdainful voice rang out in the valley.

Immediately after, the rolling thick fog, as if stirred by an invisible giant hand, rapidly thinned and finally dissipated completely.

Sunlight shone down once more, illuminating a scene of hell on earth.

Over forty corpses lay scattered haphazardly on the official road, a river of blood flowing.

The manner of death for each person was identical: either a pierced throat or a pulverized heart.

A single strike, fatal.

In the center of the valley, a middle-aged man in a cyan Daoist robe stood suspended in mid-air.

He had an ordinary face and an indifferent demeanor. In his hand, he held a three-inch-long emerald green flying sword, its blade untainted by a single drop of blood.

Zhao Qianshan.

His brow furrowed slightly as he glanced at the red smoke that had not yet completely dispersed in the sky, a flash of displeasure in his eyes.

"At least they have some backbone."

The appearance of the signal flare disrupted his composed plan.

He had to clean up all traces and confirm the target's death before nearby forces arrived.

His divine sense, like an invisible giant net, instantly enveloped the entire valley.

"Hmm? Five prisoners... three dead..."

His divine sense swept over the great bandit with the fierce, scowling face; the man stared unblinkingly at the sky, dead with unseeing eyes.

It swept over another numb-looking prisoner; the man's body was already ice-cold.

Then, it was the gambler whom Wei He had kicked off the cart... no, it was the corpse impersonated by Su Ming.

Zhao Qianshan's divine sense paused on Su Ming for a moment.

Aura extinguished, heartbeat stopped (forcibly suppressed by Su Ming using spiritual energy), body cold, covered in blood and grime.

"Dead."

Zhao Qianshan's divine sense swept past, finding nothing unusual.

He was just about to leave.

Suddenly, his indifferent eyes flickered slightly.

Something's wrong.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 116: I Have a Secret

[1,127 words]

His divine sense, like the most precise instrument, swept over the heap of corpses once more, and for the last time.

This time, he slowed his pace, raising the precision of his divine sense to the utmost.

When his divine sense passed over Su Ming's "corpse" again, he finally detected an extremely faint, almost negligible anomaly.

Although the "corpse"'s heartbeat had stopped, his muscles retained a kind of... a very subtle elasticity only a living person would have.

Dead bodies' muscles are rigid, or slack.

But a living person, even when pretending to be dead, still keeps a subconscious, ready-to-strike tension deep in the muscles.

Ordinary mortals could not perceive such a difference, and even common Qi Refining cultivators could not tell.

But to Zhao Qianshan at Foundation Grand Perfection, it was like a speck of dust in the night—tiny, but undeniably there.

"Interesting."

A trace of amused curvature appeared at the corner of Zhao Qianshan's mouth.

He did not immediately expose it.

He slowly lowered his body and walked casually to Su Ming's "corpse."

He extended his foot and pressed Su Ming's finger with the tip of his boot.

"How long do you plan to keep playing dead, little bug?" His voice was soft, laced with mockery.

At that moment, Su Ming's heart felt as if gripped by an icy hand, nearly stopping.

Exposed!

He didn't know where his flaw had shown, but he knew his greatest reliance—playing dead—had failed!

Run!

That was the only thought in Su Ming's mind!

The instant Zhao Qianshan finished speaking, Su Ming's tensed body, like a compressed spring, suddenly exploded!

He did not spring up. Instead, he rolled on the spot, using all his strength to thrust the half-broken blade in his hand like lightning toward Zhao Qianshan's ankle!

When surrounded, strike another to save your ally! Attack to relieve!

For ordinary warriors facing an unbeatable enemy, this was the only way to survive!

“Oh?”

A flicker of surprise passed through Zhao Qianshan's eyes; he had not expected this “little bug” to attack instead of wetting himself in fear.

He did not even move.

A faint cyan shield of spiritual energy flashed at his ankle.

Clang!

The broken blade struck the shield as if hitting ten-thousand-year black iron, producing a crisp sound. The massive countershock shattered Su Ming's Tiger's Gate, blood gushing.

Using that recoil, Su Ming's body was flung backward. He kicked hard against the ground; like an arrow loosed from a bow, he shot toward the dense forest on the valley side without turning his head!

“Trying to run?”

Zhao Qianshan laughed, the derision in it like a cat playing with a mouse.

He did not pursue.

He only snapped his finger.

Whoosh!

The jade-green flying sword transformed into a streak of light and instantly caught up with Su Ming. It did not pierce his vitals; instead, it struck the ground ahead of him with a thunderous crash, carving a trench several feet deep!

Gravel flew, dust billowed.

The massive shock threw Su Ming to the ground. He rolled several times before stopping, every bone in his body feeling disjointed.

“Did I tell you to run?”

Zhao Qianshan’s voice sounded like a specter behind him.

Su Ming whipped his head back and saw that Zhao Qianshan, when had he gotten there, was three steps behind, looking down at him. His gaze was like watching a moth flail on a spiderweb.

Su Ming’s heart dropped to the bottom of a ravine.

Speed, power, reaction—complete, all-around domination!

This was Foundation Grand Perfection!

“Disciple! Don’t give up! Use the short sword in the ring later!” Lin Yu’s voice roared frantically in Su Ming’s head. “He’s playing with you right now! This is our only chance!”

A flash of the lethal weapon Lin Yu had shown him streaked across Su Ming’s mind.

He didn’t draw it immediately, because he knew once he revealed it, he would lose his last trump card.

He struggled to his feet, face stained with blood and dust, eyes fixed on Zhao Qianshan.

“Who are you? Why do you seek our deaths?” Su Ming’s voice was hoarse; he was stalling, his brain racing to find the smallest sliver of hope.

“You don’t need to know.” Zhao Qianshan shook his head, as if conversing with a dying insect bored him.

“Merely carrying out orders, loyal service to a client.”

“The Yongchang Marquis?” Su Ming blurted out.

For the first time, Zhao Qianshan’s brow twitched.

“You’re clever.” He nodded, acknowledging it. “Unfortunately, clever people die faster.”

“Because you know far too much.”

He raised his hand. The jade-green flying sword emitted a faint hum, floating at his fingertip, the tip pointing toward Su Ming’s brow from afar.

A palpable killing intent, like an actual ice spike, prickled Su Ming’s skin.

“Any last words before you die?” Zhao Qianshan asked, tone almost charitable.

Staring at the flying sword and feeling the martial force capable of instant death, Su Ming knew this chance would come only once.

Slowly, very slowly, he raised both hands and adopted a surrendering posture.

“I... I have a secret.” Su Ming’s voice trembled, equal parts fear and the baiting of something huge.

“A secret... about the Lantai Secret Garden.”

“The Lantai Secret Garden?”

Zhao Qianshan’s expression finally shifted.

It mixed surprise, contempt, and a thread of greed even he had not expected to find in himself.

“With you? A mortal who can’t even be counted as Qi Refining?” he scoffed, but the flying sword at his fingertip paused infinitesimally.

“I... I accidentally found a clue to the key that opens the Secret Garden among old paperwork in the Hanlin Academy.” Su Ming’s performance reached its peak.

His eyes darted, full of fear toward the supposed secret, and the desperate yearning to trade it for his life.

“Oh? Do tell.” Zhao Qianshan’s interest was piqued. He retracted the flying sword and folded his hands behind his back, offering Su Ming an opportunity to “confess leniently.”

Su Ming swallowed saliva, stepped forward two paces, and leaned in, lowering his voice as if about to divulge a cosmic secret.

“The clue is right...”

His voice dropped, his body leaning slightly forward.

Zhao Qianshan instinctively leaned in too, trying to catch every word.

At that instant!

Unprecedented brilliance exploded in Su Ming's eyes!

He suddenly flung a clump of black-red filth from his hand!

It was the handful of muck Su Ming had secretly gripped while pretending to be dead—mud, decayed leaves, and corpse blood, all mixed into a disgusting mass!

The move was too sudden, and too vile!

Zhao Qianshan, as a Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator, had never seen such a low, dirty trick!

He instinctively leaned back, and with a sleeve-swipe, a gust of wind blocked the muck.

Although none of it struck him, the stench that hit his face made him dry-heave.

When masters spar, they fight for a sliver of time!

In that 0.1-second gap when Zhao Qianshan leaned back to block!

Su Ming moved!

He didn't retreat. He lunged forward and crashed into Zhao Qianshan's chest!

By some unknown moment, a broken sword had appeared in his hand, only half a blade and an archaic hilt, covered in rust!

It was the relic Lin Yu's previous landlord had left in the ring.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 117: Disciple! Stab the Bastard!

[1,088 words]

Zhao Qianshan's body leaned back, the gust from his sleeve sweeping the filth and foam against the mountain walls to either side.

He dodged that disgusting clump, but he could not dodge the wave of stench that hit him.

He, a Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator who looked down on others like an immortal, had actually been smeared all over the face by a mortal ant with a handful of rotten mud mixed with corpse blood.

"Merely a mortal, how dare—"

But Su Ming was faster than him!

The broken sword in Su Ming's hand was driven, with every ounce of his strength, straight into Zhao Qianshan's heart!

The broken sword was plain and unadorned; Lin Yu had wrapped the original baleful aura with soul force, and the blade itself was covered in dark red rust.

"Overestimating yourself."

Zhao Qianshan snorted coldly in his mind. The spiritual shield thickened by several layers again, becoming as solid as blue-green glaze.

He could already foresee that in the next moment this scrap of metal would shatter against his shield, and the youth holding the sword would turn into a spray of blood mist.

But at that instant!

Every hair on Zhao Qianshan's body stood on end without warning!

Danger!

Lethal danger!

His spiritual senses screamed wildly, like facing an unparalleled ferocious beast awoken from the prehistoric wilds!

That pang of dread—he had only felt a trace of it once in his youth, when facing the Foundation-stage elder in his sect!

How could this be?!

This broken sword!

Zhao Qianshan had no time to think; the instinct to survive overwhelmed everything.

The blue-green shield before him instantly layered over a dozen more times, heavy and nearly substantial!

"Disciple! Now! Stab him, damn it!"

Su Ming's figure and that dark broken sword had already struck his shield.

There was no earth-shattering roar.

There was no explosion of colliding spiritual energy.

"Pfshhh..."

A sound so slight it was like a hot knife slicing into butter cut through the air.

Zhao Qianshan's prideful, supposedly impenetrable dozen-layer spiritual shield—capable of withstanding a full-force artifact strike—was fragile as tissue paper before that dark broken sword.

It was pierced easily, without hindrance.

Time seemed to slow to countless times its normal pace in that moment.

Zhao Qianshan could clearly see the sword tip of the broken blade drawing ever closer to his chest.

He could feel the annihilating aura on the tip that made his soul tremble.

He tried desperately to turn and dodge.

But the baleful energy had already locked onto his qi, and his body felt pressed by a colossal weight, moving as slowly as a crawling tortoise.

"No—!"

He cried a despairing roar.

In the next instant, a cold sensation transferred from his heart.

The broken sword sank into his chest.

That rust-stained broken blade, in an instant, became even darker.

The rust on the blade writhed like something alive, forming countless fine, indescribable black veins.

"An evil weapon!"

Zhao Qianshan screamed in horror, his voice changing pitch.

He finally recognized the origin of that thing!

This was not an artifact; it was a taboo created by tempering the resentments and baleful energy of living beings!

"Uaaaah!"

An indescribable agony, accompanied by an icy, violent black-red baleful energy, surged from the wound into Zhao Qianshan's body. Like a breached dam, it rampaged madly through the meridians he had always boasted about!

The moment his spiritual power met that baleful energy, it was like ice meeting a hot iron—instantly corroded, assimilated, shattered!

His Dantian Qihai roiled like a storm!

Zhao Qianshan felt his body being torn and devoured from within by a frenzied beast!

"Get away!"

Under the twin shocks of terror and torment, he unleashed his last reserves, caring nothing for dignity, lifting his only movable left palm and slamming it with all his might into Su Ming's chest!

"Bang!"

A dull crack of bone sounded.

Su Ming's body flew backward like a broken sack. Midair, he coughed up a large mouthful of blood mixed with entrail fragments.

"Disciple!"

Lin Yu used soul force to form a buffer in front of Su Ming.

Even so, Su Ming was hurled more than a dozen zhang away, collapsing heavily onto the ground. His chest caved at a grotesque angle, ribs broken in countless places, and he immediately lost consciousness.

On the other side, Zhao Qianshan's condition was even more miserable.

He tore the sword from his chest and threw it to the ground as if it were a poisonous object.

A fist-sized blood hole gaped in his chest, the edges scorched black, and wave after wave of black-red baleful energy crawled like bone-eating maggots, burrowing crazily into his body.

His complexion shifted constantly between green, white, and black. The transcendent, immortal aura he once possessed was gone, replaced by a grotesque, contorted ferocity.

"Pf!"

He spat a mouthful of black blood, and his breath visibly withered away.

The Foundation Grand Perfection cultivation he had relied on crashed down like an avalanche under the overwhelming baleful energy!

Late Foundation... mid Foundation... early Foundation...

In the end, he barely stabilized at a level not much stronger than Qi Refining Grand Perfection!

His combat strength was reduced to a tenth at best!

"You little bastard... I'll make you... unable to live, unable to die!"

Zhao Qianshan clutched his chest, staring hard at the unconscious Su Ming in the distance, his eyes erupting with endless malice and killing intent.

He no longer cared about the Yongchang Marquis' assignment.

He only wanted to seize the youth who had ruined his path and torment him cruelly for seven days and nights!

More importantly, that baleful weapon!

Though broken, its power was enough to drive any cultivator insane!

If he could obtain it and find a way to refine it, he could not only recover his injuries but perhaps—perhaps even glimpse the way to Golden Core!

Greed instantly outweighed the pain.

He struggled to his feet and staggered, step by step, toward Su Ming.

At that moment, a whisper so faint it was almost imperceptible sounded in the depths of Su Ming's mind.

"Wake... wake up... disciple... run..."

It was Lin Yu's voice.

His soul body had already grown transparent, as if it could dissipate at any moment; his voice barely breathed.

"Run... into the woods... use... use the Greenwood Longevity Art... to hang on to your life..."

The near-death agony and his master's anxious summons dragged Su Ming from the boundless darkness.

He opened his eyes to see Zhao Qianshan advancing like a demon.

The instinct to survive drove him to force the last trace of spiritual power.

The Greenwood Longevity Art!

A faint, life-filled warm current painfully flowed through his shattered meridians, protecting his cardiac channel and keeping him from instantly dying.

He used every ounce of strength, hands and feet both, to crawl backward, then rolled and, reckless, plunged into the dense forest beside him.

"Still trying to run?!"

Seeing this, Zhao Qianshan roared. He no longer bothered to restrain his wounds, forcing a breath and giving chase.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,053 words]

Three days.

A full three days.

Su Ming did not know how he had survived.

On the first day, following Lin Yu's intermittent guidance, he ran frantically through the dense forest.

The stabbing pain in his chest made every breath feel like a blade.

Broken ribs had even pierced into his lungs.

He could only rely on the faint life force of the Greenwood Longevity Art to barely keep a breath, mechanically forcing his legs to move.

"Left...that patch of thorns...crawl in...they'll mask your scent..."

Lin Yu's voice was broken and intermittent, as if it might cut off at any moment.

Without hesitation, Su Ming plunged into the bristling thicket.

Sharp barbs tore his skin, shredded his clothes, left streaks of blood, yet he did not feel pain.

The agony in his chest had already drowned out everything.

That night he hid in a tree hollow excavated by a wild boar, chilled to the bone and shivering.

The Greenwood Longevity Art's life force could only barely keep him from dying, it could not heal such grievous injuries.

He felt his life slipping away bit by bit.

"Master...Master, are you still there?" he called with a faint thread of consciousness.

"...I'm...here..."

Lin Yu's voice was no louder than a mosquito.

"Don't...give up...the old bastard...he's hurt worse than you...killing intent entered his body...he won't last long...we're competing...to see who can endure longer..."

On the second day, the pursuit continued.

Zhao Qianshan was like a mad dog that had scented blood, hanging doggedly on his trail.

His condition was terrible, the killing intent repeatedly erupting inside him, forcing him to stop often to circulate his energy and suppress it.

That gave Su Ming chances to catch his breath.

Several times Su Ming heard, not far behind, Zhao Qianshan's suppressed, painful heavy breathing.

He hid in a pit filled with rotting leaves, held his breath, and watched with wide eyes as Zhao Qianshan's mud-stained boots passed a few feet above his head.

In that moment, his heart stopped beating.

Zhao Qianshan began leaving more traces, even carving marks into the cliff face with his flying sword.

"He's showing off! He's trying to intimidate you!" Lin Yu's voice carried a thread of warning.

"At the same time he's guiding you toward a trap he set!"

Su Ming stopped beside a mountain stream, warily scanning his surroundings.

He noticed Zhao Qianshan's marks converging in one direction — toward an open marshland.

"Master, the marsh favors him more," Su Ming assessed.

"Exactly, the marsh makes concealment impossible. Once you get stuck, he can lock onto you easily, use spiritual energy to pull you out, then...crush you," Lin Yu said. "We go the other way! Follow the stream upstream against the current!"

"Go...into the water...the brook can...wash away your scent..."

Lin Yu gave another directive.

Su Ming forced himself up and leaped into an ice-cold mountain creek, forging upstream.

The freezing water restored a sliver of feeling to his nearly numb body and cleared his head a little.

He could not die.

If he died, what would happen to his master?

If he died, what would happen to his family thousands of miles away?

A fierce will to survive overrode his body's collapse.

By the third day, Su Ming had reached his limit.

He had eaten not a grain and was hanging on by a single breath.

His mind blurred, his vision went black in waves, and several times he collapsed to the ground.

Zhao Qianshan behind him had also reached his end.

The repeated torment of killing intent had further destabilized his already plummeting cultivation.

His speed slowed more and more, and his tracking became duller as his spiritual energy weakened.

At dusk.

Su Ming was tripped by a protruding tree root and fell hard on a slope, unable to get up again.

He exhausted his last reserves.

He turned his head and stared at the blood-red setting sun, a hint of despair in his eyes.

Was this the end?

“Disciple...don’t move...”

Lin Yu’s voice suddenly became a little clearer.

“He...he’s almost done too...this is the last chance...”

Following Lin Yu’s guidance, Su Ming painfully lifted his head.

He saw that the slope where he’d fallen was steep and littered with loose stones.

Above the slope, a millstone-sized boulder was barely held by several thick tree roots, teetering.

A desperate idea formed in Su Ming’s mind.

Using his last strength, he felt around the ground, picked up a sharp stone, and began to strike the roots holding the giant boulder, again and again.

His movements were slow and weak.

But his eyes had reignited.

“You little bastard...where do you think you’re running now...”

A hoarse, venomous voice sounded from below the slope.

Zhao Qianshan, leaning on a tree, had finally caught up.

He was in tatters, his face as black as a pot bottom, the wound on his chest still oozing dark blood, yet when he saw the immobilized Su Ming on the slope his face twisted into a feral grin.

“Your life...and every secret on you...will be mine!”

He climbed upward step by step.

Su Ming did not look at him; he used every ounce of strength to smash the sharp stone against the last and thickest root.

“Crack—”

A crisp snapping rang out.

The millstone boulder lost its last restraint and began to slowly...slide downward.

The boulder thundered with enormous force, rolling toward the spot where Zhao Qianshan had just stood!

“Nice reflexes!”

Zhao Qianshan’s voice came from above, laced with cruel amusement.

He had clearly discovered Su Ming’s escape route and, using his advantage as a Foundation Establishment cultivator, circled to Su Ming’s front!

Su Ming looked up to see Zhao Qianshan standing on the cliff edge, looking down.

Zhao Qianshan’s face was ghastly pale, the blood on his chest crusted dry, but his eyes burned with lunatic killing intent.

“Run, then.”

His voice was as harsh as two stones grinding, his mouth pulled into a smile uglier than a cry.

“You were so good at running, weren’t you? Why stop now?”

Su Ming's heart sank to the bottom of a ravine.

He was utterly drained, each rise and fall of his chest strained broken bones and tore agony through him.

He saw the perilous cultivator before him, dangerously unstable yet still lethal, and knew he had fallen into a true death trap.

Su Ming's brain, deprived of oxygen and wracked by pain, began to move at an unprecedented speed.

Fight — no.

He could not win.

Run — no.

He could not escape.

Plead — laughable.

The hatred in the other's eyes said it all.

"You little insect, your tricks are done."

Zhao Qianshan stopped wasting words. He raised a trembling hand, and the dim green flying sword, its spiritual radiance faded, wobbled and hovered before him.

Clearly, the killing intent's corrosion had heavily damaged even that magical weapon.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,030 words]

"Disciple, don't panic."

Lin Yu's voice, fragile as a thread of breath, echoed in Su Ming's mind, carrying a strange calm.

"He's forcing himself. That murderous energy is fiercer than a bone-shredding steel blade. Every time he uses even a sliver of spiritual energy, he's bleeding himself out."

"Provoke him, make him lose focus, drive him mad!"

"Only a madman will show a flaw!"

Su Ming's gaze slowly moved away from the wavering flying sword, finally landing on Zhao Qianshan's twisted face.

He made no attempt to get up and run.

He did not beg for mercy.

Instead, he turned toward the tip of that lethal sword and grinned.

His mouth was torn, blood mingling with dirt, making his smile look hideously feral and utterly insane.

"Heh..."

"Hehehe..."

He laughed, his voice hoarse, like an old bellows being pumped, wrenching at the wound in his chest and forcing him into violent coughing.

"Ka...cough..."

Each cough brought up a streak of blood.

Zhao Qianshan's brow tightened; he did not like this feeling.

This little insect had not displayed the fear and despair he had expected.

It made him uneasy.

"What are you laughing at?" Zhao Qianshan's voice was cold.

Su Ming lifted his head and stared at him with eyes veined in blood.

"I'm laughing at you... pitiful."

Su Ming spoke each word slowly. His voice was soft, but it felt like steel needles stabbing at Zhao Qianshan's already taut nerves.

"Foundation Grand Perfection... heh, such swagger."

"Hunting me—a third-stage Qi Refiner—for three days and nights, and you've turned yourself into this wreck."

"How do you feel now?"

Su Ming's eyes glanced pointedly at the wound on Zhao Qianshan's chest, where black blood kept seeping.

"The taste of that murderous energy... quite nice, isn't it?"

Zhao Qianshan's facial muscles twitched violently.

"Suicide!"

He roared, and the flying sword at his fingertip became a faint streak of light, thrusting straight at Su Ming's face!

At that last critical moment, Lin Yu used the last of his soul power to block most of the lethal strike aimed at Su Ming!

"Sss!"

The flying sword's edge stalled against the soul-energy barrier, its force and speed dropping sharply. It only carved a shallow scratch across Su Ming's face before its spiritual light dimmed and it was deflected.

Su Ming seemed unable to feel pain.

The smile on his face grew brighter, more deranged.

"Come on!"

He shouted with all the strength he had left!

"Kill me!"

"Make your move!"

Instead of retreating, he propped himself up on his elbows and painfully inched forward one inch, actively moving toward the flying sword that had just been deflected!

"Look at your current state!"

"The moment your sword kills me, the spiritual energy inside your body will be triggered and explode!"

"At that point, that murderous energy will eat you from the inside out, inch by inch... until nothing is left!"

"We... die together!"

"You, a Foundation Grand Perfection, will be buried with a third-stage Qi Refiner!"

"This deal is mine!"

Those words were like heavy hammers, striking Zhao Qianshan's heart.

He understood perfectly!

More than anyone, he knew how dire his internal condition was.

The murderous energy inside him was like a ferocious beast temporarily imprisoned, violently battering the dam of spiritual energy he had built with his remaining power.

If he used spiritual energy to kill Su Ming, that murderous energy very likely would break through the spiritual dam.

The boy was not wrong.

Killing him might not guarantee his own survival!

It could even lead to a far more agonizing death!

"You... you're talking nonsense!"

Zhao Qianshan's voice trembled for the first time.

He was afraid.

After a hundred years of cultivation and countless life-and-death trials, he had never felt such terror.

Not fear of death, but fear of being consumed alive by murderous energy, of a soul devoured without end!

"Nonsense?"

Su Ming laughed harder, even tears of mirth spilling out.

"Then why won't you strike?"

"Why are you trembling?"

"Your flying sword... you can hardly hold it steady!"

"You—"

At that moment, Zhao Qianshan's mental defenses were utterly shattered by Su Ming's words that pierced his heart.

Reason, calculation, weighing consequences—all were consumed by the limitless terror and rage!

"Brat! I want you dead! I'll kill you right now!"

He let out an inhuman roar; his eyes were red as blood, like a maddened demon!

He no longer thought of consequences or the backlash of murderous energy!

His sole thought was to make this youth—who had shamed his face and ruined his path—vanish from the world!

"Go!"

He pointed abruptly!

The turquoise flying sword uttered a mournful cry, turning into a final streak of light that shot toward Su Ming's brow!

It was over!

Lin Yu's soul body almost solidified at that instant.

But!

At the moment the sword moved!

Su Ming moved!

He did not step back or dodge!

He emptied every scrap of spiritual energy within him and hurled himself forward!

His target was not the flying sword!

It was Zhao Qianshan, whose body had trembled and whose defenses had been opened by launching the sword!

"No!"

Zhao Qianshan's pupils constricted. He never expected that the boy would dare to counterattack at the brink of death!

He tried to retreat, but his body—drained of spiritual energy—would not obey!

In the blink of an eye!

Su Ming slammed into him with all his force!

"Phut!"

The flying sword grazed past Su Ming's shoulder blade, spraying a stream of blood, before with a clang embedding itself deeply into the cliff face behind them.

Su Ming felt no pain!

His hands clamped onto Zhao Qianshan's cold, rigid legs like iron pincers!

"What are you doing! Let go!"

Zhao Qianshan screamed in absolute horror, pounding Su Ming's back with frantic fists.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

The dull thuds, mixed with the brittle snaps of breaking bones, kept coming.

Su Ming bit his teeth and remained silent, refusing to let go!

The mad smile was still plastered on his face.

"I told you..."

He raised his head, his face covered in blood, almost pressed against Zhao Qianshan's knees.

"We... die together!"

After he finished speaking, he used the last of his strength to hug Zhao Qianshan and, with a violent roll, sent them both toward the cliff's edge!

Holding Zhao Qianshan's legs caused the other man to lose his footing; like a weighted top, he was dragged along, tottering.

"No! No—!"

He let out a desperate howl, his hands clawing frantically at the ground, trying to grab anything to steady himself.

But at the cliff's edge there were only smooth rock and loose soil.

His fingernails left white scrapes across the stone, and finally, pulled along by Su Ming's suicidal embrace, the two of them tumbled and fell together over the ten-thousand-foot cliff!

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 120: The Humiliation of the Cultivation World

[1,328 words]

A sensation of weightlessness instantly enveloped Su Ming's whole body.

The howling gale tore wildly at his ears.

Sky and earth spun rapidly in his vision.

"Let go! You lunatic!"

Zhao Qianshan struggled frantically in midair, trying to fly, trying to steady himself.

But the moment he gathered spiritual energy, that black-red murderous aura in his chest, like a shark sensing blood, immediately lashed back, causing agonizing pain in his meridians and making his spiritual power collapse at once!

"Disciple! Well done!"

Lin Yu's voice exploded in Su Ming's mind!

"Now! Leave it to me!"

In the next instant, Lin Yu's soul body, which had become utterly transparent, suddenly shot out of the Xuantian ring!

He condensed all the remaining soul force he had into an invisible, razor-sharp cone!

"Old dog! Taste the soul force attack of Grandpa Lin!"

Lin Yu let out a soundless roar, and that cone of soul force stabbed mercilessly into Zhao Qianshan's Consciousness Sea, which was already in chaos from the invading murderous aura!

“Ah—!”

Zhao Qianshan clutched his head and emitted a dreadful, agonized scream!

His Consciousness Sea felt as if a red-hot iron spike was being twisted violently inside; under such pain his eyes went black and he completely lost control of his body.

Su Ming only sensed that the legs he was holding stopped struggling in an instant.

He could no longer hold on; his vision dimmed and he lost consciousness completely.

Two figures traced a parabolic arc like two stones through the air, finally smashing down into the raging river below the cliff!

“Splash!”

A huge spray burst up, then fell back down.

The cold was bone-piercing, and that instant of frigidness cut through Su Ming’s body, snapping his nearly fainted mind clear for a moment.

The rushing water tore at Su Ming and Zhao Qianshan’s bodies.

He couldn’t let go!

Relying on his last instincts, just before hitting the water, Su Ming flipped his body and used every ounce of strength left to force Zhao Qianshan’s head deeply under the water!

“Gurgle...”

A string of bubbles burst from Zhao Qianshan’s mouth.

He tried to rise to the surface.

But his limbs felt as though filled with lead and refused to obey.

Icy river water poured frantically into his nose and mouth.

The choking, mixed with the excruciating pain from the murderous aura eating his body, made his suffering unbearable.

He widened his eyes and watched the light above grow more distant and blurred.

Fragments of his hundred years of cultivation flashed through his mind.

From an ignorant youth stepping onto the immortal path, enduring hardships, finally reaching Foundation Establishment.

He should have had a brighter future, perhaps even a chance to glimpse that legendary Golden Core path.

But now...

He, a Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator, was about to, like a mortal who could not swim, be alive and truly... drowned here?

How absurd!

How laughable!

Endless regret and unwillingness drowned his last consciousness.

He opened his mouth, intending a final curse, but only a string of murky bubbles slipped out.

This Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator, once a notable figure within Great Xing's borders, ultimately stopped breathing in extreme pain and bitter resentment.

Su Ming could feel the convulsions of the body in his arms gradually subside.

Darkness began to press in before his eyes.

Master... I think... I'm dying...

Su Ming's consciousness slowly sank into boundless blackness and cold.

He could no longer hold on; his arms relaxed.

The torrent swept him and the now motionless corpse downstream into the unknown.

.....

Dawn on the riverbank was deathly silent.

Su Ming lay on his back on cold pebbles, his whole body paled from being soaked, the wound on his chest grotesquely gaping. His breathing was extremely faint, almost imperceptible.

Only the Greenwood Longevity Art, acting on instinct, drew in faint life from the riverweed and clung desperately to his collapsing soul.

Not far away, Zhao Qianshan's corpse lay twisted on the shore, eyes wide, his face frozen in unwillingness.

He died with his eyes open, as if he could not accept that a Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator would drown in such an ignominious way.

Just then, the space beside the riverbank rippled.

Light and shadow warped, and a boy and a girl holding hands popped out with a "pff" sound, stumbling on their feet. They looked about eleven or twelve, wearing fine cyan Daoist robes and carrying small sword cases.

The girl failed to steady herself and sat down on the wet pebbles with a thump. "Ouch!"

The boy hurriedly pulled her up, patted his chest, and with a little-adult air said, "Junior Sister Mingyue, don't be afraid. The Little Shift Talisman does wobble when it lands."

Mingyue rubbed her bottom and stood up, worried. "Senior Brother Qingfeng, are we really okay sneaking out using Master's talisman?"

Qingfeng stuck out his little chin. "Relax! Master is in seclusion. By the time he comes out we'll be back. We'll just say we went out to gather morning dew for alchemy."

He inhaled deeply. "Look, the river water here is so clear! The air smells like fresh earth, much nicer than the mountain!"

Mingyue rushed to the river and dipped her small hand into the icy stream. She shivered but then giggled.

"Ah! Senior Brother, there are people there!" Mingyue pointed at the riverbank, a trace of nervousness in her voice.

Qingfeng looked and saw the two motionless figures as well. He took Mingyue by the hand and led her over. "Don't be scared, stay behind me."

He approached Zhao Qianshan's corpse and probed his neck and chest. "Huh?" Qingfeng frowned.

"What's wrong, Senior Brother? Is he dead?" Mingyue asked softly.

"Dead, stone dead." Qingfeng stood up, his little face full of puzzlement. "Weird. Really weird."

He walked around the body, muttering to himself, "This man is Foundation Grand Perfection; his foundation is solid. There's residual murderous aura in his body. Maybe he died from a magic treasure's backlash..." He crouched and pried open Zhao

Qianshan's mouth. "But his lungs are full of water and sand... A Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator drowned?"

Qingfeng found it unbelievable; this manner of death was absurd.

"What a disgrace! A humiliation for the cultivation world!" he shook his head and pronounced his conclusion.

Mingyue's gaze shifted to Su Ming. She ran to his side and crouched, looking at his pale, delicate face, and reached out as if to check for breath.

When her hand neared Su Ming's chest, a faint but pure warm current flowed out.

"Ah!" Mingyue cried with delight. "Senior Brother! Come quick! This young man is still alive!"

"Alive?" Qingfeng walked over with a trace of scorn. "A Qi Refining that sustained such injuries—how could he be alive? He's probably just barely breathing."

He still crouched and placed his finger on Su Ming's wrist.

Refined spiritual power probed into Su Ming's body.

The next moment, Qingfeng's eyes flew wide. "How is this possible?!"

Seven or eight-tenths of Su Ming's meridians were severed, and his internal organs were shattered. Any Qi Refining cultivator should be dead.

Yet, stubbornly protecting his heart channel was an extremely pure vegetation life force, like tenacious vines.

This life force was weak but of an extraordinarily high grade, even surpassing the sect elder's wood-based cultivation method. "Such tenacious vitality!" Qingfeng showed genuine curiosity for the first time.

"Senior Brother, he's so pitiful."

Mingyue pleaded, "Let's save him, please?"

"Save him?" Qingfeng shook his head and returned to his little-adult act. "Don't be foolish. We snuck out secretly and have only two Ninefold Rebirth Pills on us. Those are for saving our own lives! What if we give them to him?"

"But we can't just watch someone die." Mingyue's eyes reddened. "Master taught us that those who practice medicine have compassion."

Qingfeng was stumped and argued, "Saving someone could get us into trouble! Let's go and pretend we didn't see anything!" He tried to drag Mingyue away.

"I'm not leaving!" Mingyue squatted beside Su Ming and refused to budge. "You can leave if you want! If he dies, I'll have a heart demon!"

Qingfeng was furious and anxious but helpless with his junior sister. His gaze swept to the Xuantian ring on Su Ming's finger. The ring was pitch-black and unremarkable, yet Qingfeng's spiritual sense detected a faint, extremely subtle spatial fluctuation.

A storage magic tool? Or a high-grade item that could conceal its aura?

How could a poor Qi Refining kid possess such a treasure?

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 121: The Elixir Dissolved on the Tongue

[1,299 words]

Qingfeng's gaze fixed on Su Ming's plain, unremarkable finger.

The ring was jet black all over, without any markings; if tossed by the roadside it would be mistaken for an ordinary lump of iron.

But just now, when his spiritual awareness had skimmed over it, he had sensed an extremely subtle fluctuation.

"This is definitely not an ordinary storage ring!"

A wandering cultivator at the Qi Refining stage, wearing a high-tier storage magic artifact on his finger?

"Senior Brother! Senior Brother! What are you spacing out for?" Mingyue's anxious voice snapped him out of his shock.

She squatted beside Su Ming, her small hand hovering above his nose, feeling that faint, nearly interrupted breath; her eyes were rimmed with red from worry.

"His qi is getting weaker and weaker. If we don't save him now, he'll die!"

“Save him?” Qingfeng came back to his senses, brow knotting into a frown, his gaze leaving the ring and falling on Su Ming’s pale face.

“Mingyue, wake up! We sneaked out! The life-saving elixirs Master gave us are only a few pills. If you give one to him, what if we encounter danger?”

He pointed at Zhao Qianshan’s corpse and lowered his voice, “Dying alongside a Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator—this kid is trouble itself! Get involved with him and nothing good will come of it!”

“But... but Master said if you see someone dying and don’t save them, your Dao heart won’t be at peace.” Mingyue’s voice wavered with tears as she stared stubbornly at Qingfeng.

“Ugh, you...” Qingfeng was rendered speechless.

He dreaded this look from his junior sister; whenever she put on that tearful expression, his own principles felt like they were crumbling inch by inch.

“No way! Absolutely not!” Qingfeng steeled himself, grabbed Mingyue’s wrist and tried to drag her away.

“Saving a troublemaker is just endangering ourselves! Let’s go and pretend we were never here!”

“I won’t go!” Mingyue yanked her wrist free with a snap.

She crouched back down beside Su Ming like a little beast protecting its cub.

“If you want to leave, go! If he dies, I will be haunted by a heart demon forever and my cultivation will never advance!”

Seeing Qingfeng still unmoved, Mingyue’s eyes darted and she pulled out her trump card.

She puffed up her small chest, cleared her throat, and in a voice that was neither too loud nor too soft said, “Senior Brother Qingfeng, if you let him die, when I go back I’ll have to talk with Master about why one of the ‘Little Shift Talismans’ he made is missing.”

Qingfeng’s face fell instantly.

Like a cat whose tail had been stepped on, his fur bristled all over, and he hurriedly lunged to cover Mingyue’s mouth.

“Sister! Keep your voice down!” He glanced around guiltily, fearing a senior from the sect might suddenly appear on the mountain.

“You’re ruthless!” Qingfeng released her with gritted teeth, his face full of pain and helplessness.

“Fine! I’ll save him, is that enough?”

He glared fiercely at the unconscious Su Ming, as if the elixir inside his pocket were being torn from his own flesh.

“But I’m putting my conditions up front!” Qingfeng held up a finger and proposed them with a stern face, “We can save him, but once he wakes, he must answer for the origin of that ring and exactly who he is. I will interrogate him to get it all out of him!”

“Okay!” Mingyue instantly wiped her tears into a smile and nodded eagerly.

Seeing her brilliant smile, Qingfeng’s last bit of resistance evaporated; only resigned sighs remained.

He carefully took a small white jade bottle from his bosom.

The instant the stopper came off, an invigorating aroma of herbs, full of life, spread across the riverbank.

Qingfeng’s expression read like the words “my heart is bleeding.”

He poured out a pill that was entirely jade-green, radiating medicinal luster—the Cloud Hidden Sect’s secret healing elixir: the Hundred-Herb Revival Pill.

Though not the sect’s top-tier elixir, it was concocted from hundreds of rare spirit herbs and for cultivators below the Foundation Establishment stage, as long as there was still one breath left, it could pull a person back from Death’s Gate.

Mingyue blinked her big eyes and asked puzzled, “Senior Brother, didn’t you say earlier we only had two Nine-Turn Soul-Returning Pills?”

A flash of embarrassment crossed Qingfeng’s face; he forced calm and hummed, “Silly junior sister, when you’re out and about, who doesn’t hide a few prized things? This Hundred-Herb Revival Pill was something I barely won from Pill Refiner Senior Brother Wang! I originally intended to... to trade it for that flying sword I liked!”

As he spoke he winced, looking at the unconscious Su Ming and muttering under his breath, “This is a huge loss...”

“You got off easy!” Qingfeng grumbled, pried open Su Ming’s mouth, and shoved the priceless pill in.

The elixir dissolved the moment it hit his tongue, transforming into a surging, warm, nourishing current that flooded Su Ming’s limbs and bones.

Like long-awaited rain after drought, the current flowed through his body, rapidly replenishing and repairing the meridians that had been withering from grievous injury.

The gruesome wound on his chest stopped bleeding at a visibly noticeable pace, and the paper-white face slowly regained a trace of color.

What had been a nearly extinguished breath settled into a steady, prolonged rhythm.

“All right, life is saved.” Qingfeng checked Su Ming’s pulse and relaxed, then winced in sympathy.

“One of these pills is worth a top-quality flying sword...”

Mingyue looked at Su Ming’s steadier breathing and laughed happily, sincerely praising, “Senior Brother, you’re so kind!”

Qingfeng snorted and turned his head, his cheeks faintly red.

He stood and turned his gaze toward the other “trophy” — Zhao Qianshan’s body.

At once, the boyish helplessness and softness on his face vanished, replaced by a practiced coldness.

He walked over to Zhao Qianshan’s corpse with familiarity, not shying away as he searched the body and quickly found a gray storage pouch.

He weighed the pouch in his hand, nodded with satisfaction, and casually stuffed it into his own bosom.

Having finished, he straightened and quickly formed several strange hand seals.

“Transform!”

He shouted and pointed at Zhao Qianshan’s corpse.

A pale green light like rippling water enveloped the corpse.

“Sizzle...”

A teeth-gnawing corrosive sound rang out.

The corpse of the Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator melted and decomposed in the green light like snow under fierce sun, quickly dissolving until it became a pool of crystal-clear water that seeped into the crevices between the river pebbles, leaving no trace.

The whole process was smooth, efficient, and utterly clean.

That practiced, ruthless way of handling the aftermath contrasted sharply with his still-not-fully-mature face.

Mingyue seemed used to it already; she turned her head away, unable to watch the corpse dissolve.

“All done, everything’s cleaned up.” Qingfeng clapped his hands as if it had been nothing.

He returned to Su Ming’s side, examined the still-unconscious youth, stroked his chin and began to analyze.

“Sister, this man carries too many mysteries; his origins are unclear. If we leave him here, his injuries mend and his enemies find him, it’s a death trap.”

“Then what do we do?” Mingyue asked anxiously.

A glint flashed in Qingfeng’s eyes as his little mental abacus started clicking.

“So we can’t leave him. We’ll take him back to the sect!”

“Huh? Take him back?” Mingyue was surprised.

“Yes!” Qingfeng slapped his hands and the idea seemed more and more brilliant to him.

“Think about it: we hand him over to the Hall of Meritorious Deeds and say we rescued a wandering cultivator from being chased by evil cultivators during practice below the mountain. That way, we save his life and we score merit!”

He leaned close to Mingyue’s ear and whispered, “Maybe this merit will offset the punishment for using the Little Shift Talisman to sneak out!”

Mingyue’s eyes lit up instantly.

“That’s right! Then Master won’t punish us!” She clapped happily. “Senior Brother, you’re so clever!”

“Of course!” Qingfeng smugly lifted his chin.

With agreement reached, Qingfeng stepped forward and effortlessly slung the unconscious Su Ming onto his back, heading toward the treeline by the river.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,097 words]

After an unknown length of time passed,

Su Ming's consciousness slowly rose from boundless darkness and icy cold.

The first sense to return was smell.

A fresh, damp-earth-laced bamboo scent pierced his nostrils.

Next came touch.

Beneath him lay a soft bed, a warm quilt covered his body, no longer the bone-chilling river water.

He slowly opened his eyes.

What met his gaze was a pale-green bamboo roof, sunlight filtering through the lattice and scattering mottled light across the floor.

The air was saturated with an extraordinarily rich, pure spiritual energy, and merely breathing it made his battered body feel a wave of comfort.

"Where is... this?"

Su Ming struggled to sit up, but an explosive, tearing pain in his chest forced a muffled groan from him, and he fell back down.

He looked inward at his body and found his condition still abysmal.

His meridians were severed in many places, his five viscera and six organs badly damaged; that palm strike, powerful enough to split stone, had almost shattered all his vitality.

If not for that miraculous pill keeping him alive, and the stubborn repairs of the Greenwood Longevity Art, he would already be a corpse.

Even so, to fully heal from these injuries would take at least a year or more, impossible to finish quickly.

“Master!”

He immediately called out anxiously in his heart.

“Master, how are you?”

Silence filled his Consciousness Sea; there was no reply.

Su Ming’s heart tightened. He hurriedly sent a faint thread of divine sense into the Xuantian ring.

Inside the ring’s space, Lin Yu’s Soul Body floated quietly at the center of the Spirit Gathering Array.

His soul had grown dim and translucent.

A faint glow emanated from the formation core, like a warm cocoon wrapping Lin Yu’s Soul Body.

Su Ming could sense his master’s soul essence had not dissipated; it had merely been overconsumed and entered the deepest level of self-repair.

Only then did he exhale in relief, but guilt and lingering fear followed immediately.

If his master had not spent his essence at the last moment, using his soul power to shock Zhao Qianshan and then using his remaining strength to shield him from the flying sword, he could never have survived.

“Master...”

Tears prickled Su Ming’s eyes. He clenched his fist and swore in his heart.

“Rest assured, your disciple will find heavenly materials and earthly treasures to restore your Soul Body to its former state!”

At that moment, the bamboo hut’s door creaked open.

Qingfeng and Mingyue entered, one after the other.

“You’re awake?”

Qingfeng’s voice carried a hint of scrutiny as his gaze swept over Su Ming.

Mingyue carried a steaming bowl of medicinal porridge, her face alight with a joyful smile.

“How do you feel? I made some spirit-rice porridge for you; it’ll help your recovery.”

Su Ming struggled to sit up and thank them, but Mingyue pressed him back down.

“Don’t move, you’re badly injured.”

Looking at these two, carved like delicate jade, childlike yet unworldly, Su Ming felt both gratitude and wariness.

“Thank you both for saving my life.” His voice was hoarse from weakness.

“Where is this...?”

“This is the Cloud Hidden Sect.” Qingfeng answered directly, his tone carrying a few airs of precocious maturity.

“We were training at the foot of the mountain when we happened to find and save you. Now it’s your turn to answer my questions.”

He pulled over a bamboo chair and sat, eyes burning as he looked at Su Ming.

“What’s your name? Who was the Foundation Establishment cultivator who died with you? How did he die?”

At that question, the air inside the bamboo hut immediately grew heavy.

Su Ming’s heart leapt.

He knew this moment would decide his fate.

The secrets about his master and that baleful broken sword must never be exposed.

His mind raced, running through the prepared account he had already rehearsed.

He lifted his head, letting a measured sorrow and fear show on his face.

“My name is Su Ming. I am originally from the mundane Great Xing state, passed the jinshi examination in the nineteenth year of the Jinghe era, and served as a Compiler at the Hanlin Academy.”

Qingfeng and Mingyue both paused at this opening line; worldly honors were distant and novel to them.

Su Ming continued, his tone low and clear: “That Foundation Establishment cultivator had no personal hatred toward me. He was commissioned by the Yongchang Marquis Manor to kill me and silence me.”

“Yongchang Marquis Manor?” Qingfeng caught the unfamiliar secular power name.

“Yes.” Su Ming nodded. “I offended the Yongchang Marquis in court, was framed, stripped of my honors, and exiled to the northern border. Zhao Qianshan was sent by the manor to wipe me out along the exile route, along with the entire escort.”

He recounted his experiences in the court, being framed for the alleged offense of jeopardizing state affairs, and the ambush during his exile—concise, clear, and to the point.

He even mentioned his friend Xu Qing and his teacher Zhou Wenhai, making plain that this was essentially a court faction struggle and that he had been discarded as a pawn.

“I don’t know what specific ties that Foundation Establishment cultivator had with the Yongchang Marquis. Before he died, his words hinted at repaying some old favor. Our fight wasn’t personal; it was for survival.”

He omitted every detail about Lin Yu guiding him in that desperate moment and the final soul-force strike, and he kept silent about the eerie baleful broken sword. He only described the final counter as a stroke of luck in a desperate situation: “He gravely wounded me, and at death’s door I clung to him and we both fell down the cliff into the river. Perhaps fate intervened—his wounds were worse and he drowned, while I was miraculously saved by you two.”

This account almost fully exposed his true background and plight—ninety percent truth, ten percent concealment (hiding Lin Yu and the baleful weapon). The logic was coherent, details believable, sketching a vivid portrait of a scholar caught in power struggles, struggling desperately to survive.

Qingfeng listened, brow slightly furrowed, tapping the arm of his bamboo chair as if digesting the treachery of the secular court and weighing the truth in Su Ming’s words. For someone raised in a sect, Su Ming’s worldly tale felt both alien and starkly real.

Mingyue, however, believed him completely, her eyes full of sympathy and indignation. “That Yongchang Marquis is wicked! And that Foundation Establishment cultivator, helping such evil! You... you’re so pitiful...”

Su Ming bowed his head, letting timely sorrow and fear show on his face. He said nothing more, simply took the bowl of spirit-rice porridge and sipped it slowly.

What he needed to do now was play the part of a persecuted scholar, unfortunate and cast out by power—this candidness was intended to lower the guard of these two mysterious sect disciples and win their sympathy.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,233 words]

Qingfeng's expression was intensely complicated, as if he were listening to an impossible fairy tale.

Mingyue's clear eyes were full of sympathy, her small hand clenched tightly, indignant over Su Ming's tragic fate.

"So, you, a third-level Qi practitioner, grabbed a Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator and jumped off a cliff with him, and you... actually drowned him alive?"

Qingfeng finished his summation, his tone dripping with disbelief to the point it seemed irreconcilable.

That cause of death sounded even more absurd and bizarre than his original judgment on the corpse.

Su Ming's face was pale as paper, his lips trembling.

He did not rush to answer. Instead he weakly coughed twice.

The cough hit his heavily wounded chest; under the stabbing pain, a fine cold sweat instantly dotted his temples.

In his eyes there was just the right amount of post-disaster fear and bleakness from having narrowly escaped death.

"In front of the sect elders, Su Ming dares not utter a single falsehood."

"At that time, his palm force had already shattered my internal organs, and I knew I would certainly die."

"My only thought was that I could not let him have it easy; I had to take him with me to the grave."

His voice was hoarse, yet threaded with the stubbornness and resoluteness of a scholarly soul.

"Perhaps Zhao Qianshan had done countless evil deeds, and heaven would not tolerate it. He was wounded by my... my family's short defensive sword, his qi was already in chaos. After falling into the water, he couldn't even draw a breath and was choked to death."

He attributed all the impossibilities to "heaven's will" and "a sliver of luck in desperate straits."

As for the broken sword that exuded murderous aura, he dismissed it as an ordinary "family short sword," after all he had already taken it back into the Xuantian ring, leaving no living witness.

Qingfeng was about to press further when Mingyue could not bear it any longer. "Senior brother!" she shot Qingfeng an irritated look, her tone clearly displeased, "Can't you see how badly he's hurt? Why keep interrogating him! The man barely escaped certain death, can't you let him rest?"

Saying that, she pushed the warm bowl of spirit-rice porridge a little closer to Su Ming.

"Hurry and drink, it'll help your body recover faster."

"Thank you, fairy." Su Ming nodded gratefully, bowed his head and sipped the porridge in small mouthfuls, speaking no more.

He knew well that too many words lead to mistakes.

Speak nine parts, leave one part unsaid, and you minimize openings for contradiction.

Qingfeng, caught off guard by Mingyue's rebuke, sniffed and rubbed his nose a little sullenly.

He looked at Su Ming's extremely weak state and ultimately did not probe further.

"Fine, rest here first." Qingfeng stood and recovered his small-adult demeanor, "However, this matter is serious and must be reported to the sect. When you feel better, you will come with me to the Hall of Meritorious Deeds and explain everything exactly as it happened."

"Hall of Meritorious Deeds?" Su Ming paused slightly and looked up.

"Yes, it's the place in the sect that handles merits, demerits, rewards, and punishments." Qingfeng explained. "Don't worry. Our Cloud Hidden Sect is a righteous and reputable sect. We won't wrong an innocent person. If you truly were the victim, the sect will uphold justice for you."

He spoke righteously, but in his heart his mental abacus was clicking busily.

Saving a life, plus killing an 'evil cultivator'—that was a considerable merit. It might even offset the fault of secretly using a Little Shift Talisman.

Su Ming replied respectfully, "All is as the elder arranges."

The bamboo hut lay silent, only the rustling of wind through the green bamboo outside could be heard.

Half a month passed, felt to Su Ming both long and short.

Long, because day and night he endured bone-shattering pain.

Short, because every waking moment was consumed by circulating the Greenwood Longevity Art.

The pure elixir power had long since been exhausted. Now his technique drew on the abundant vegetal spiritual energy of this place like a most diligent ant, carrying lifeforce bit by bit to mend his ruined body.

Every morning and evening the girl named Mingyue would come on time with medicinal broth and spirit-rice porridge.

She always wore a bright smile and chirped about sect gossip like a care-free lark.

The boy named Qingfeng seldom showed up; when he did, he would merely stand at the doorway, scrutinize Su Ming a few times with a critical gaze, then turn away.

Su Ming did not mind.

He kept his posture low, playing the role of a gentle, grateful, taciturn scholar in distress.

He did not speak much, but his thanks were always sincere.

He knew that his survival depended entirely on these two.

He kept their kindness in his heart.

But he also understood that his current situation was like a leaf drifting in a storm; any small disturbance could send him past all redemption.

"Ahem..."

Su Ming coughed violently, the old wound in his chest tugging painfully until cold sweat beaded on his forehead.

He looked inward. The severed meridians had been reconnected by spiritual energy to thirty or forty percent. Though still fragile, he was no longer on the brink of death.

"It's still too slow."

He clenched his fist.

His master's Soul Body was still trapped in slumber; he had to recover his strength quickly and find a way to restore his master's soul.

This Cloud Hidden Sect, with its plentiful spiritual energy, was unquestionably his only hope for now.

He had to stay!

By any means necessary!

Just as his thoughts churned, clear footsteps sounded outside the bamboo hut.

Not Mingyue's light steps, but two steady, powerful strides approaching the hut.

Su Ming's heart tightened. He immediately reined in his mind, resumed his weak and harmless guise, leaned against the head of the bed, and waited quietly.

Creak—

The bamboo door was pushed open by an invisible force.

Two young cultivators in dark practical garb entered.

The man in front seemed about twenty-five or twenty-six years old, his features sharp, eyes keen as an eagle. A blackwood token engraved with the two characters "Meritorious Deed" hung at his waist.

The youth behind him looked a bit younger, his face carrying an unhidden arrogance. His gaze swept over the simple bamboo hut, then rested on Su Ming with a flicker of disdain.

"You're the one Qingfeng and Mingyue brought back?"

The younger man behind spoke first, his tone carrying a condescending interrogatory edge.

Su Ming stirred inwardly.

Shi-shu?

Those two who looked only eleven or twelve actually had such high rank in relation?

He kept his expression composed and struggled to rise to bow. Weakly he managed to say, "I am Su Ming, greetings to the two elders."

"Enough, stay lying down."

The cold-faced leader waved his hand to stop his movement.

He pulled over a bamboo chair and sat down as if it were his right, his voice plain but carrying unquestionable authority.

"I am Meritorious Deeds officer Liu Jing. Today I come to verify your identity and the matters concerning the death of that evil cultivator."

"You had better tell everything truthfully, down to the last detail."

"If there is so much as a single lie..."

Liu Jing did not finish the sentence, but his icy stare said it all.

A powerful spiritual pressure, like an invisible tide, instantly filled the bamboo hut.

Su Ming felt his breath hitch, as if a thousand-pound stone pressed on his chest, his soul suffering sharp stabs of pain.

That a single officer could possess such presence.

He forced down the discomfort and prepared to repeat the script he had practiced so many times.

"Disciple Liu's nephew, what is all this commotion, disturbing my junior sister's peace?"

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 124: I'm Going to Rely on You Now

[1,332 words]

Qingfeng walked in with his hands clasped behind his back, taking measured, square steps. Mingyue trailed behind him, peeking around with curiosity.

The arrogant young man's contempt froze the moment he saw them, replaced instantly by a flurry of panic and respect.

He hurriedly bowed, his voice stammering, "Di... disciple Fang Ping pays respects to Senior Uncle Qingfeng, Senior Sister Mingyue!"

Liu Jing also rose from his chair. The sharpness in his eyes softened slightly as he gave the two children a slight nod, an acknowledgement of greeting.

"Senior Uncle Qingfeng, Senior Sister Mingyue."

His tone stayed calm, but the form of address revealed the gap in seniority between them.

Qingfeng glanced at him, nodding with an air of officiousness like a little adult. "Is there any problem with the person my junior sister and I brought back?"

"Just part of our duty, a routine inquiry." Liu Jing was curt and to the point.

"Oh?" Qingfeng drew out the tone and walked over to Su Ming's bedside, glancing at his pale face before turning back to Liu Jing.

"We were the ones who rescued him. The circumstances at the time have been recorded in the Hall of Meritorious Deeds' jade slip."

"A mortal pursued by an evil cultivator until he was on the brink of death. Steward Liu, do you really think he can pull off any tricks now?"

The words sounded casual but carried a sharp edge, tinged with accusation.

The implication: you, Hall of Meritorious Deeds, don't trust my judgment?

Liu Jing's expression did not change. "Senior Uncle Qingfeng's testimony will be accepted by the Hall. But this person's origins are unclear, and the matter involves the death of a Foundation Establishment cultivator, so procedure cannot be ignored."

As he spoke, his gaze shifted back to Su Ming, like a drawn sword pointing at him.

"Su Ming, I ask you, you claim to be a compiler of the Hanlin Academy of Great Xing. Do you have any proof?"

Here it comes.

Su Ming felt it in his chest.

He met Liu Jing's eyes calmly and shook his head slowly. "With your clear sight, Immortal Lord, when I was exiled my official seal and documents were confiscated. I have nothing on me to prove my identity."

"Oh? So there's no evidence at all?" Fang Ping, standing behind Liu Jing, immediately interrupted.

Su Ming ignored him and continued looking at Liu Jing. "Although I have no proof, what I have learned is all in my head. If you doubt me, you may test my knowledge on the classics and policy essays."

He paused, his voice turning grave.

"You may also send someone to the capital of Great Xing, or to Qingshi County, to ask Vice Director of the Imperial College Liu Wenyuan or County School head Zhou Wenhai of Qingshi County. One inquiry will show the truth."

"I, Su Ming, have studied hard all my life, living righteously and conducting myself properly, yet I was framed by powerful ministers and narrowly escaped death. If not for the assistance of these two young immortals, I would already be bones in the wilderness. Before you today, I speak no falsehoods."

His tone was neither servile nor arrogant, his eyes bright and honest. The picture of a wronged, principled scholar sprang vividly to life.

Liu Jing's gaze flickered for the briefest moment.

He would not actually dispatch people into the mundane world to verify this, but Su Ming's willingness to name specific people and places made his words more believable.

"Very well, even if your identity is true." Liu Jing shifted his angle, his questions becoming sharper. "Then Zhao Qianshan, a peak Foundation Establishment cultivator—how did you both perish together, falling from the cliff?"

"That's a good question."

Before Su Ming could answer, Qingfeng suddenly spoke.

With a flip of his small hand, a grayish storage pouch appeared in his palm, which he casually tossed to Liu Jing.

"Steward Liu, this pouch was taken from Zhao Qianshan's body. See what's inside."

Liu Jing accepted the pouch and probed it with his divine sense.

The next moment, the expression that had been as still as an ancient well showed the faintest hint of surprise for the first time.

There weren't many spirit stones or elixirs in the pouch, and the only magic tool was a damaged flying sword. But beyond those, a few items made his brow tighten.

A black porcelain bottle contained more than a dozen living souls that had been refined by secret methods, their resentment soaring.

There were also several pieces of human bone ground into spell materials.

None of these items pointed to anything but one identity—evil cultivator!

“Moreover,” Qingfeng’s voice sounded again, carrying an unquestionable certainty, “I inspected Zhao Qianshan’s corpse. There remains within him an overwhelmingly domineering, vicious murderous aura, a force no righteous cultivator should possess. I suspect he cultivated forbidden arts and deviated into madness, or his own magic tool backfired, leaving him gravely wounded, causing him to stumble off the cliff and drown.”

He looked at Su Ming, but his words were addressed to Liu Jing. “As for Su Ming, to me he’s just an unlucky mortal chased down by that evil cultivator. His survival was pure luck.”

That statement struck like a judge’s hammer!

Qingfeng cleverly reframed the most illogical point—how Su Ming could have killed someone stronger—into the sect’s internal issue of why the evil cultivator Zhao Qianshan died.

How could a third-stage Qi refiner kill a Foundation Establishment cultivator? That’s very hard to explain.

But a Foundation Establishment cultivator who practiced forbidden arts dying from a backfired technique or internal strife is perfectly plausible.

This maneuver instantly redirected the sect’s attention away from the “little shrimp” Su Ming.

Liu Jing fell silent.

Holding the storage pouch, he stole another glance at the weak, powerless “scholar” on the bed and had already made up his mind.

Qingfeng was right.

Compared to the bizarre story of a mundane scholar, an evil cultivator sneaking into Cloud Hidden Sect's territory was what the Hall of Meritorious Deeds should focus on.

The items in the pouch were ironclad evidence.

"I see."

Liu Jing slowly nodded and put the pouch away.

"The Hall will continue to investigate this matter."

He stood, giving Su Ming one last look. The sharp scrutiny had faded, replaced by an official, detached indifference.

"Your suspicion is cleared for now. As for how you reached third-stage Qi refinement, that's your private matter. We have no need to waste time inquiring."

The huge stone of anxiety in Su Ming's heart slowly slid down.

He knew his gamble had paid off.

However, Liu Jing's next words sent that newly settled relief crashing back down.

"However, Cloud Hidden Sect is not an ordinary hall."

Liu Jing's voice grew cold and clear.

"Your mortal roots have already been damaged; your internal organs are ruined. Even if your injuries heal, you will merely be a cripple. Your affinity with immortality is shallow, and you are not destined for the Immortal Path."

"The sect has already done its utmost in saving your life."

"When your wounds are healed enough for you to walk out on your own, you will leave the mountain by yourself."

Those words were nothing short of an exile decree.

Su Ming's nails dug into his palms beneath the blanket.

An overwhelming thirst and unwillingness burned through him like wildfire.

Leave?

If he left and returned to the spirit-thin mundane world, he would never make another inch of progress in his life. His master's soul injury would have no hope of recovery!

Impossible! Absolutely impossible!

Yet not a trace of resentment showed on his face.

On that pale, blood-drained face was instead an expression of heartfelt, impeccable gratitude and obedience.

He struggled to sit up and, facing Liu Jing's direction, bowed deeply—so low his forehead nearly touched the edge of the bed.

“Su Ming... thanks the Immortal Lord, thanks Cloud Hidden Sect for saving my life.”

His voice was hoarse but sincere.

“I understand sect rules. When my wounds are somewhat better, I will not disturb the sect's tranquility and will descend the mountain to live out the remainder of my life.”

This posture, this sense of propriety and acceptance, left no fault for anyone present to find.

Even the normally stern Liu Jing showed the slightest softening in his gaze.

He nodded, said nothing further, and turned to leave the bamboo hut with Fang Ping.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[995 words]

The Ministry of Revenue, Accounting Office.

The air was thick with the musty smell of aged paper and the fresh fragrance of new ink. Abacus beads clattered incessantly, like an unending torrential downpour.

Xu Qing sat behind piles of archives, his expression focused. The tip of his brush danced swiftly over the grain transport ledgers, each number inscribed with clear, forceful strokes.

A junior clerk entered with quick, short steps, holding the newly arrived government gazette. His voice was neither too loud nor too soft, just enough for everyone in the room who was already listening intently.

"Have you heard? An urgent dispatch has come back from the Northern Frontier."

"That Su Ming, the former Hanlin Academy compiler exiled a few days ago."

"He was waylaid by mountain bandits en route. Not a single soul survived, neither him nor the escorting officers. Not even their bones could be found."

Tap.

A soft sound.

The brush in Xu Qing's hand slipped from his grasp and fell onto the open ledger.

A dense, dark blot of ink rapidly spread, like a blooming, ominous black flower, utterly defiling the page filled with neat, elegant calligraphy.

The surrounding clamor, the clatter of abacuses, the chatter of his colleagues—all of it faded away in that instant.

Xu Qing's world was left with nothing but deathly silence.

He froze in place, the color visibly draining from his face until it was as pale as paper.

Li Wei, the colleague at the neighboring desk who had always been at odds with him, glanced sideways at his lapse. A gloating smirk curled at the corner of his mouth.

"Oh dear, Clerk Xu, my condolences."

Li Wei's voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"Some people just aren't destined for an official's fortune. The capital isn't a place for just anyone to stay. Going back to the countryside to feed pigs is still better than being fed to wolves halfway there."

Xu Qing didn't move. He didn't look at him.

He just slowly, inch by inch, turned his head. Those eyes, usually clear and bright, were now terrifyingly hollow.

Li Wei felt a shiver down his spine under that gaze. He gave a dry chuckle, hunched his shoulders, and turned back to continue joking with others.

Xu Qing stood up.

He paid no heed to the soiled ledger, nor to the various gazes directed his way.

He turned, took a step, and walked out of the accounting office.

His stride was steady, his back ramrod straight, like a spear that would never bend.

He traversed the bustling ministry compound and returned to his own cramped, dimly lit room in the corner of the official lodgings.

The door closed and was locked.

The last sliver of light was shut out.

Xu Qing leaned against the cold door panel, his body slowly sliding down until he slumped to the floor.

That taut string had finally snapped.

He buried his face deep into his knees, his shoulders beginning to tremble violently, uncontrollably.

There was no wailing, no roaring, only a choked, stifled sob forced from the depths of his throat.

"Brother Su..."

"It was me... I killed you..."

"If not for my memorial... If not for me..."

A tidal wave of immense grief and self-blame, enough to drown a man, instantly engulfed him.

This young man, always optimistic, resilient, and believing in "Heaven rewards the diligent," broke down and wept uncontrollably for the first time on this cold afternoon.

...

Yongchang Marquis Manor, Warm Pavilion.

High-quality silver-bone charcoal burned brightly in the beast-headed bronze brazier, without a wisp of smoke.

The musician's fingertips drew forth a decadent melody. Dancers with enchanting figures twirled their water sleeves.

Yongchang Marquis Zhao Siyuan reclined lazily on the soft couch, resting with his eyes closed. His fingers tapped lightly on the shoulder of the beauty beside him, keeping time with the music.

A steward entered silently, bent down, and whispered a few words in his ear.

Zhao Siyuan's eyelids didn't even twitch.

His fingers maintained that same unhurried, rhythmic tapping.

"Understood."

He waved a hand as if shooing away a fly.

The steward bowed and retreated.

Only then did Zhao Siyuan slowly open his eyes, pick up the warm wine from the table, and drain it in one gulp.

"This Zhao Qianshan fellow handled things quite efficiently."

He smiled at the beauty beside him, his tone flat, as if discussing a trivial matter.

"That ignorant ant who didn't know his place has finally been crushed."

"Change the tune. Something more cheerful."

...

Imperial College, Director's Residence.

The study was piled high with ancient texts exuding an aura of antiquity.

Liu Wenyuan sat behind the desk, holding in his hand the government gazette that had just arrived.

His gaze lingered on that brief line of text for a long time.

"Exiled convict Su Ming, en route to the Northern Frontier, was waylaid and killed by mountain bandits. Remains lost."

A long, drawn-out sigh, as if it had exhausted all his strength, echoed in the quiet study.

His withered fingers pressed lightly on a hidden compartment at the side of the desk.

He retrieved a locked rosewood box.

The key turned. The lid opened.

Inside lay a file, resting quietly.

Three characters were clearly visible on the cover—Su Ming File.

Liu Wenyuan took out the file, caressing the slightly yellowed paper. Before his eyes, the image of that youth, taciturn at the Qionglin Banquet yet clear-eyed and upright in his presence, seemed to reappear.

"This capital..."

"In the end, it cannot tolerate a living Su Ming."

He murmured to himself, slowly feeding the file into the bronze basin beside him.

Inside the basin, the charcoal fire burned bright red.

The paper met the flames. Its edges instantly curled and blackened. A flame "whooshed" upward, greedily devouring everything recorded upon it.

The former top scorer, the former second-class *jinshi*, that once vibrant youth, along with the final traces he left in this capital, all turned to ashes.

Black ashes rose with the heat waves, then slowly settled.

The flickering firelight reflected in Liu Wenyuan's clouded eyes, now devoid of any ripple of emotion.

The news in the gazette was like a pebble tossed into the deep waters of the capital, stirring a few insignificant ripples before quickly sinking into silence.

But these ripples traveled southward along the official roads, through the relay stations, finally arriving at a small town called Greenstone.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,548 words]

Zhou Wenhai's residence.

Su Shan and Chen Xiulian were streaming tears, nearly collapsing to the ground.

Su Yang and Su Feng, the two brothers, had red-rimmed eyes, fists clenched so tight their knuckles whitened, saying nothing.

From acquaintances at the county yamen, they had heard a piece of news that could make the sky fall.

"Teacher Zhou... my Ming'er... my Ming'er he..." Chen Xiulian sobbed, unable to finish the sentence.

Zhou Wenhai led them into the inner hall. Seeing the family's utter devastation, his chest felt like it was being crushed by a great stone.

He went back to his study alone, pacing, his hand stroking his beard trembling slightly.

He knew that official documents were nine times out of ten truthful.

That student he prized most, that quick-witted, unusually mature boy, might really have...

But looking at the two elderly parents who were on the verge of collapse, could he speak the word "dead" aloud?

He could not.

That single word would utterly break this family.

After a long time, he stopped pacing, a glint of resolve flashing in his eyes.

He left the study, returned to the Su family, and spoke in a steady, determined voice.

"Both of you, do not grieve yet. Hear an old man out."

All eyes turned to him.

"The journey to the northern borders is long, bandits are rampant, and official dispatches often exaggerate to shirk responsibility."

Zhou Wenhai looked the couple in the eyes and spoke distinctly, word by word.

"In my view, this 'mountain bandit massacre' was most likely a golden cicada sheds its shell trick used by Ming'er!"

"Golden cicada sheds its shell?" Su Yang looked up in confusion.

"Exactly!" Zhou Wenhai nodded heavily. "How clever is Ming'er? He already expected that the Yongchang Marquis Manor would not give up easily and would act on the road. Rather than wait to be killed, he would seize this chance to fabricate a 'death' and thus escape imperial surveillance, then find a new life elsewhere!"

Those words were like a beam of light cutting into the Su family's despair.

Su Shan and his wife stopped crying, staring at Zhou Wenhai in a daze as a faint thread of hope rekindled in their eyes.

"Teacher... you mean... Ming'er is still alive?"

"More than likely!" Zhou Wenhai's tone brooked no doubt. "Only, since he is 'dead,' he won't be able to contact you for a while, otherwise the ruse would be ruined. What you must do is not mourn, but guard this secret for him and live steadily until he returns!"

"Wait until he has the means to settle his affairs and he will come back to find you!"

This compassionate lie acted like a tonic, injecting strength into the couple's hearts.

They would rather believe this hopeful explanation than accept the cold, brutal truth.

"Yes... yes! My Ming'er is so clever, he must be alive..." Chen Xiulian wiped her tears and murmured.

Zhou Wenhai then made arrangements.

He had already bought a small courtyard in a quiet alley in Qingshi Town, near the County School.

"Do not return to Su Family Village for now. Stay in Qingshi Town and tell outsiders you are distant relatives of mine."

"Su Feng, Su Yang, you are hardworking. I have found employment for you at a grain shop in town that I am familiar with, enough to support the family."

He arranged everything meticulously, sheltering this battered family under a temporary eave.

...

Su Family Village.

In Village Chief Zhao Dequan's yard, the old locust tree had lost all its leaves.

He stood in the courtyard a long while, holding a slip of paper that had come from the county seat.

The contents matched what Zhou Wenhai had heard.

Su Ming, dead.

No emotion showed on Zhao Dequan's face.

At first, he felt a wave of relief.

That boy who had always weighed on his mind and made him feel out of control had finally disappeared.

Next came an inexplicable hollow and panic.

Without Su Ming, would the core improvement technique for the paper mill die with him?

In the end, both feelings turned into a profound sense of powerlessness.

He opened the paper mill's ledger and stared at the entries listing payments to the County School's public account, feeling agitated.

Zhou Wenhai's shadow lay over him like a mountain, making it hard to breathe.

Though the Su family had moved to Qingshi Town under Zhou Wenhai's protection, he couldn't even arrange for someone to keep watch.

On paper, the paper mill still belonged to the village, but in reality, most of the profits and lifeblood were firmly in the County School's hands.

He, Zhao Dequan, had been reduced from a local emperor to a senior steward.

"Dead is fine."

He murmured to himself.

"Dead, and no one will split my attention anymore."

He turned and closed the door to his house.

.....

Meanwhile, a thousand miles away in the capital.

Inside the official residence assigned to the junior clerk by the Ministry of Revenue.

Xu Qing sat at a writing desk, his expression frighteningly calm, the lone lamp elongating his silhouette on the wall.

He spread a sheet of paper once more, lifted his brush, dipped it in ink.

The brush tip, soaked with ink, hovered over the paper for a long time before falling.

His eyes were no longer the hollow vacancy seen during the day; they had become two bottomless pools of cold water, beneath the surface raged dark currents and bone-deep frost.

At last, the brush touched down and he wrote a name.

Then he began to categorize and list items beneath that name.

On the page, name after name, official post after post, related incidents—he wrote them in tiny, meticulous characters.

"Grain transport:" control over the grain guild, annual embezzlement shares, implicated ships and docks, the network of interests with riverside prefectural officials (fragments gleaned from memory and hearsay, marked cautiously "to be verified").

"Military supplies:" the leather armor scandal's whole story, the craftsmen and middlemen involved (bold hypotheses based on scattered information Xu Qing accessed at the Ministry), abnormal flows in Northern Border Army fund allocations (this was the area he could currently reach and most likely find a breakthrough).

"Courtiers and allies:" a list of known officials who maintained close ties with the Yongchang Marquis Manor (pieced together from daily observation and colleagues' gossip), possible scandals to exploit (corruption, perversion of justice, nepotism).

He knew much of this information might be ill-founded or downright wrong.

He did not care. This was the starting point of his path of vengeance; he would spend years, decades if needed, verifying, filling, and perfecting the list.

He would hollow out the seemingly impregnable mountain that was the Yongchang Marquis Manor inch by inch until it collapsed with a roar.

"Brother Su," he murmured to the void, his voice hoarse yet resolute, "watch closely. From today, I, Xu Qing, will no longer be the scholar who only knows the Sage's Books."

"I understand the 'hide one's talent' you wanted. I understand the 'blend with the common' you suggested."

"I will be better at hiding than they are, more adept at mastering the rules than they are, and... crueller than they are."

He stared at the page, engraving its contents into his mind.

Then, by the lamp on the desk, he reduced the list to ash.

Afterward, he spread another official document from the Ministry of Revenue, picked up another brush, and all his emotions vanished, replaced by a nearly numb concentration.

He began handling the piled-up official duties; the abacus clicked again, precise and efficient, devoid of any personal feeling.

He no longer wasted words on Li Wei and his ilk; for others' probes and mockery, he either remained silent or returned a flawless, formulaic smile.

He became a silent, diligent shadow in the Ministry's office, increasingly deemed "dependable" by superiors and "practical" by colleagues.

Beneath that façade, however, he was like the most patient hunter, quietly weaving his net.

Using the opportunity to audit accounts, he memorized several merchant names that had indirect dealings with the Yongchang Marquis Manor.

When handing documents to other departments, he "happened" to meet discontented low-level officials and, in casual conversation, collected fragments of court information.

He even began studying the penal and household law sections of the Great Xing Code, not for exams, but to seek loopholes and legal weapons.

Several days later, an unsigned letter with deliberately altered handwriting, accompanied by fifty taels of silver, was delivered to Zhou Wenhai's desk in Qingshi Town. The letter read only that it was sent at the request of Su Ming's old classmate to support the family, hoping the teacher would oblige.

Zhou Wenhai looked at the unfamiliar script and the heavy silver, understanding immediately. After a long sigh, he accepted it in silence.

He realized that this was Xu Qing fulfilling a promise to a deceased friend in his own way.

This hidden thread thus connected, silently and without fanfare.

.....

One month later, the Ministry of Personnel's evaluation.

Xu Qing's appraisal added the phrase "diligent and pragmatic, capable of heavy responsibility."

His immediate superior, Director Li, who had once advised him to keep a low profile, patted his shoulder and said earnestly, "Xu Qing, you've figured it out, good. In this capital, staying alive is more important than anything."

Xu Qing bowed with humble bearing: "Thank you for your instruction, sir. I understand."

When he straightened, his gaze crossed the high threshold of the Ministry of Revenue's office and fell upon the gray sky outside, stained by power and desire.

This capital could not contain a living Su Ming.

But it could contain a living... Xu Qing.

A Xu Qing who would bury hatred deep in his heart and wait for the right moment to act... Xu Qing.

End of the Capital arc.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 127: No Place Left to Stand

[1,199 words]

Liu Jing and Fang Ping's figures vanished beyond the bamboo gate, and the oppressive spiritual pressure dissipated with them.

Inside the bamboo hut, for a moment nothing remained but the soft rustle of wind through bamboo leaves outside the window.

Su Ming's chest heaved violently as he drew a long, deep breath, like a fish thrown ashore finally returned to the water.

He did not speak at once.

Instead, he struggled and rolled off the bed.

The motion tugged at every wound across his body; waves of searing pain surged through him, blurring his vision. Cold sweat soaked his thin undergarment in an instant.

He clenched his teeth, his legs trembling, yet stubbornly steadied himself.

Then, facing Qingfeng and Mingyue, he smoothed his robe and performed a solemn, deep bow.

It was the proper courtesy a scholar pays to those who have saved his life.

“Su Ming offers thanks to the two immortal elders for saving his life.”

His voice was hoarse, but each word was clear and struck like a hammer.

“This favor is heavier than Mount Tai.”

Mingyue was startled by his sudden formal salute and hurried forward to help him.

“Get up quickly! You’re so badly injured, you can’t leave the bed!”

Qingfeng, however, did not move. He folded his arms, tilted his head, and studied Su Ming with curious interest.

He was used to the flattery of cultivators both inside and outside the sect, and he was used to how ordinary people looked at them with a mixture of reverence and fear.

Someone like Su Ming, neither servile nor arrogant, thanking them with plain mortal manners—this was a first.

“All right, don’t tear the wound open. That Hundred-Herb Revival Pill I gave you wasn’t cheap.” Qingfeng sniffed, his tone still carrying a touch of bratty pride.

Su Ming straightened and offered a bitter smile, then sat back on the edge of the bed.

“The immortal elders’ kindness with medicine, the grace of giving life again, Su Ming will not dare forget in this lifetime.”

He looked at the two children before him, fully aware that Liu Jing’s departure did not mean the matter was over.

On the contrary, it marked the true beginning of his fight to survive.

“However,” his voice shifted, showing the right measure of gloom and loneliness, “from what Steward Liu said just now, once I recover, I will be expelled from the mountain.”

Mingyue’s face filled with worry at his words.

“Yes, the sect has rules. Outsiders cannot remain in the sect for long.”

Su Ming let out a soft sigh, a sorrowful sound full of the bleak dignity of a scholar at the end of his road.

“Downstairs is the Yongchang Marquis Manor’s iron net. For a cripple like me to return there is no different from walking to my death.”

He did not state it bluntly at first, but he laid his desperate situation bare for them to see.

Mingyue’s heart tightened. She looked to Qingfeng as if asking for help.

“Senior brother...”

Qingfeng frowned slightly, his fingers tapping unconsciously against his arm.

Of course he understood what Su Ming was thinking.

But this was not easy.

An outsider hoping to stay in the Cloud Hidden Sect? It was pure fantasy.

Su Ming saw Qingfeng’s hesitation and his mind raced.

He knew that straightforward self-pity would not move this sharp, somewhat precocious boy.

He had to make the boy see his value.

Even if that value was negligible.

He suddenly smiled, the smile lightening the sadness on his face and adding a scholar’s casual grace.

“Never mind. Life and death are decreed, fortune is in heaven. To live another day in this blessed immortal place is already Su Ming’s greatest fortune.”

He turned to Mingyue and spoke sincerely, “These past fifteen days, I’m grateful for the medicinal porridge you brought each day. The rice’s fragrance is heavenly, and it melts into warmth on the tongue. Could it be the fabled spiritual rice?”

Mingyue relaxed when he dropped talk of being expelled and chirped brightly, “Yes, it’s cooked with spring water from Guiding Peak and Qinggu rice. It helps your healing.”

“I see.” Su Ming adopted the curious expression of a scholar probing a subject. “Back in the mortal world I read the Classic of Herbs, yet I never knew how immortal herbs differ from ordinary medicinal plants.”

He deftly steered the conversation from his life-and-death plight to an area the two were familiar with and interested in.

The tactic felt natural and left no trace of begging.

Sure enough, Mingyue's interest was piqued at once.

"The difference is huge!" She brightened, taking on the air of a little teacher as she counted on her fingers to explain.

"Mortal herbs absorb the essence of sun and moon. Our so-called spiritual herbs can actively draw in the world's spiritual energy. The older the herb, the purer the refined spiritual energy it contains, and the stronger its medicinal effect."

"Take that Hundred-Herb Revival Pill that healed you. It used thirty-six kinds of herbs over a hundred years old!"

Qingfeng, who had been listening with some impatience, couldn't help but chime in as he listened.

"Not only the spiritual herbs. The alchemist's techniques, the timing of the fire, the Alchemy Formulas—if you stray by a hair, you come out a thousand miles off. The mortal methods of grinding herbs into paste are just a waste of treasures."

Su Ming nodded repeatedly, eyes shining with the light of curiosity as if a door to a new world had swung open.

"To think cultivation and seeking the Dao hold such profound learning."

He posed a few simple but aptly timed questions, like "How do spiritual herbs absorb spiritual energy?" and "Do different spiritual herbs follow a sovereign-minister-assistant-servant pairing in prescriptions?" These questions showed his intelligence without probing sect secrets.

Mingyue grew animated answering, and Qingfeng would occasionally correct and add deeper principles.

Before they knew it, the atmosphere in the bamboo hut had become relaxed and harmonious.

Sensing the right moment, Su Ming shifted tone and smiled, "Listening to your words is worth ten years of study. It's a pity I have no fate with the immortal path, or I would study these teachings diligently. By the way, when I was mortal I heard some strange tales. Would the two immortal elders be interested?"

"Strange tales?" Mingyue's eyes sparkled.

Qingfeng raised an eyebrow. Life in the sect was peaceful but monotonous; mortal stories could be entertaining.

Su Ming cleared his throat and did not speak of deities or ghosts.

He told of a headless case he had seen among the old documents at the Hanlin Academy.

A tangled scandal involving grain transport, illegal salt, and officials framing each other.

He recounted the web of relationships and step-by-step conspiracies in the tone of a storyteller.

There were no sky-leaping miracles in the story, only human treachery and guile.

The thrill rivaled any cultivator's duel.

Mingyue listened with parted lips, nervously clutching at her robe.

Qingfeng's brow drew tight; he nodded and shook his head in turns, completely absorbed, even beginning to analyze the case's flaws and key points.

By the time the story ended, the sun was already leaning west.

Qingfeng, reluctant to stop, couldn't help asking, "And then? Where did they hide that illegal salt? Was that magistrate surnamed Li really innocent?"

Su Ming smiled slightly and took a sip of water to moisten his throat.

"This matter is long. If the two immortal elders have time tomorrow, Su Ming will explain it to you in detail."

He was creating an opportunity for further contact tomorrow.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 128: First Impressions of Cloud Retreat

[1,211 words]

Qingfeng finally realized he had been somewhat inappropriate, clearing his throat lightly and resuming his little-adult demeanor.

"Worldly mortal affairs, just this much is interesting."

Though he said this, the curiosity in his eyes simply couldn't be hidden.

Su Ming saw that the timing was ripe and finally revealed his true intentions.

He let out another long sigh, his face once again showing that desolation and unwillingness.

"Ah, it's just a pity that after tomorrow, I don't know if there will be another tomorrow."

"Su Ming's worthless life is not worth regretting if lost. It's just that all this learning, and those unfinished interesting stories, will turn to dust along with this broken body."

He looked at Qingfeng and Mingyue, his gaze utterly sincere.

"Su Ming dares not hope to join an immortal sect. I only seek to find some menial job like chopping wood or carrying water on this immortal mountain, to barely cling to life."

"I don't want elixirs, I don't want cultivation methods, I just want a place to survive."

"I've studied, I can keep accounts, and I still have some strength left. As long as the sect can give me a bite to eat, Su Ming is willing to work like an ox or a horse to repay this great kindness!"

After speaking, he moved to get out of bed and bow again.

This time, Qingfeng didn't let him bow.

For the first time, the little boy's face showed genuine conflict and worry befitting his age.

Mingyue was beside him, tugging hard on his sleeve, pleading softly, "Senior brother, please help him, look how pitiful he is. And... and I still want to hear the rest of the story."

Qingfeng glared at her.

"What do you think Cloud Hidden Sect is? A shelter?"

Though his words were harsh, his heart had already softened.

This Su Ming, though a mortal, was clever, spoke well, and the stories he told were truly interesting.

Most crucially, he understood boundaries and knew when to advance or retreat.

Someone like this, staying at Guiding Peak to entertain himself and his junior sister... seemed... not entirely unacceptable?

"Fine, fine!" Qingfeng waved his hand impatiently. "I'm really afraid of you!"

He looked at Su Ming and snorted.

"Let me be clear first, I can only take you to the External Affairs Hall to ask. Whether they accept you or not is not up to me!"

Upon hearing this, Su Ming's face instantly lit up with the radiance of having survived a disaster, his eyes filled with gratitude.

"Thank you, Immortal! This great kindness and virtue, Su Ming will never forget it for the rest of my life!"

...

Three days later.

Su Ming's injuries, nourished by the spiritual rice porridge, had finally improved somewhat, allowing him to barely walk.

As promised, Qingfeng took him and Mingyue to the External Affairs Hall of Guiding Peak.

Su Ming pushed open the wooden door that emitted a faint bamboo fragrance.

The cool morning air, rich with spiritual energy, rushed into his lungs, refreshing his spirit.

However, moments later, his entire body froze in place.

His pupils involuntarily dilated, as if even his breathing had stopped.

He thought he had walked out of the bamboo hut, but it was as if he had stepped out of the mortal world, falling into mythology in a single step.

Before him was no longer a mortal scene.

The "Guiding Peak" he was on itself floated above an endless sea of clouds.

Looking out, countless immortal mountains, floating islands, and jade pavilions were scattered like stars.

They were like a handful of emerald pearls casually scattered by a deity, quietly suspended amidst the churning, golden-dawn-flowing cloud waves.

Some peaks were completely inverted, waterfalls cascading from their tips, transforming into thousand-foot silver rivers.

Yet these silver rivers didn't fall into the abyss; they dispersed into seven-colored spiritual mist mid-air, nourishing the circling immortal cranes.

Some mountains were transparent like glass, with jade marrow-like spiritual veins flowing slowly inside, emitting a gentle, eternal halo, becoming the natural light source of this realm.

Connecting the peaks and islands were not lifeless mortal bridges.

They were "rainbow bridges" constructed from solidified rosy light and runes.

They flowed slowly as if alive, with elegantly shaped, powerfully aura-ed humans or beasts occasionally walking upon the light.

Or cultivators flying on swords or boats, transforming into streams of light streaking across the sky, creating subtle ripples of spiritual energy.

This was completely different from the carefree, leisurely immortal realm he had imagined; this place was more like a precise and magnificent colossal creation.

His gaze was involuntarily drawn to the extreme heights of the sky.

There, under the sunlight, a layer of translucent watery ripples faintly appeared.

The ripples were composed of countless minute runes and veins, slowly circulating as if breathing, enveloping the entire heaven and earth.

It was silent, yet emanated a pressure that made his soul tremble slightly.

"What is this?"

He was inwardly horrified.

"This is the sect's grand protective formation."

Qingfeng's slightly proud, childish voice sounded beside him.

Su Ming snapped back to reality, seeing Qingfeng standing beside him at some point, hands clasped behind his back, trying hard to mimic his master's mature posture.

"This place... where is this?"

Su Ming's voice carried an unconscious dryness.

The imperial palaces and prestigious Hanlin academies he once thought grand now seemed as insignificant as dust—no, even less than dust—before this sea of clouds and mist and the mighty power of the heavenly way.

Qingfeng was quite satisfied with his reaction, lifting his little chin even higher.

"This is our Cloud Hidden Sect's 'Guiding Peak,' considered the sect's outer gateway."

"What you see is just the ordinary scenery of the sect."

He casually pointed toward several of the most majestic, awe-inspiring peaks in the distance, listing them off familiarly.

"Look, that one with sword aura soaring into the sky is 'Heavenly Sword Peak.' The senior brothers and sisters there have bad tempers; better not provoke them."

"Next to it, with pill clouds swirling and fragrance wafting, is 'Pill Cauldron Peak.' They're the richest."

"And over there, the one that looks the most plain, even a bit messy, is 'Formation Peak.' A bunch of senior brothers and sisters obsessed with studying formations, though our sect's grand protective formation is the work of their founding ancestor..."

Finally, his tone casual, he dropped a bombshell heavy enough to shatter all of Su Ming's past perceptions.

"As for where you came from, the three mortal dynasties—Great Xing, Northern Barbarian, Western Flame—are just three zones the sect casually delineated for easier management of the mortal world."

"Every so often, we routinely pick a few promising seedlings from there to bring in."

"Casually delineated... three zones..."

These light words sounded more deafening to Su Ming than thunder from the highest heavens.

The scholarly honor he had fought for, the factional struggles he had been deeply entangled in, the Yongchang Marquis Manor he had viewed as a colossal entity...

The entire stage for all the joys, sorrows, honors, and humiliations of his past eighteen years was actually just a piece of land this vast immortal sect had "casually" marked out?

An unprecedented sense of insignificance, and... a thrill of having broken free from the bottom of a well to glimpse the vast truth of the world, surged and churned simultaneously within him.

He instinctively touched his chest.

There, his heart meridian had nearly been shattered by a Foundation Establishment cultivator's palm.

Though now healed, a hidden ache remained.

He looked at the unimaginable immortal spectacle before him, at the celestial grand formation enveloping the sky.

The shock in his eyes gradually faded, replaced by a settled clarity and an unprecedented firmness.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

- Chapter 129: Where did you get this unorthodox approach?

Chapter 129: Where did you get this unorthodox approach?

[1,304 words]

After the shock, Su Ming slowly exhaled a turbid breath.

He forcibly suppressed the turbulent emotions surging within him, burying that sense of inferiority stemming from the mortal world deep in his heart.

The past was already past.

From the moment he jumped off the cliff, Su Ming, the Hanlin Academy compiler, was already dead.

What lived now was Su Ming, who only sought a path to survival in this immortal world.

"Stop standing there foolishly, the External Affairs Hall won't wait for anyone."

Qingfeng's voice interrupted his thoughts, carrying a hint of impatient urging.

"If you miss the appointed time and the elder responsible for reception goes into meditation, you'll have to wait another three days."

"Coming."

Su Ming responded and followed in the footsteps of Qingfeng and Mingyue.

The three of them stepped onto the nearest Rainbow Bridge.

It wasn't solid underfoot but formed by condensed, flowing, radiant rosy light. Yet stepping on it gave a steady feeling, as if treading on warm, smooth jade.

The Rainbow Bridge was like a living, flowing river of stars, carrying the three of them steadily flying across towards a distant peak shrouded in mist and clouds.

Standing on the bridge, watching the slowly flowing sea of clouds beneath his feet and the immortal cranes and spiritual birds faintly visible within the cloud layers, the last shred of mortal constraint in Su Ming's heart also dissipated like smoke.

He turned his head to look at Qingfeng beside him, who had his small hands clasped behind his back and wore an arrogant expression, and humbly sought guidance.

"Immortal Master, this humble one has a matter he does not understand and hopes the Immortal Master can enlighten him."

"Ask." Qingfeng was concise, thoroughly enjoying the feeling of being consulted.

"Does cultivating immortality and seeking the Dao have clear distinctions of realms?"

Lin Yu had mentioned this to him once before, but to conceal Lin Yu's existence, Su Ming had no choice but to pretend he didn't know.

"You don't even know this?" Qingfeng glanced at him as if looking at a country bumpkin who knew nothing.

He cleared his throat and began explaining like a little adult: "Listen carefully. The first step in cultivating immortality is drawing energy into the body, which is Qi Refining."

"After Qi Refining, opening the Dantian's Purple Mansion, transforming spiritual energy into liquid, that is Foundation Establishment."

"Above Foundation Establishment, the liquid condenses into a pill. 'A single Golden Core swallowed into the belly, my fate is up to me, not up to Heaven.' That is the Golden Core True Person."

He counted on his little fingers, looking quite proper.

"As for the Nascent Soul and Spirit Transformation realms after Golden Core, they are too far from you. Even if I told you, you wouldn't understand."

Su Ming firmly memorized these realms in his heart and asked again: "Then... what exactly is the Spiritual Root the Immortal Master mentioned?"

"Spiritual Root?"

This time, Qingfeng's expression became somewhat more serious.

"Spiritual Root is the bridge between us and Heaven and Earth, it's the bowl you eat from."

He gave a very vivid analogy.

"Without a bowl, even if dragon liver and phoenix marrow rain from the sky, you can't eat a single bite. The better the Spiritual Root, the bigger the bowl, the more food it can hold, and naturally, the faster the cultivation speed."

"So that's how it is."

Su Ming had a sudden realization, but his heart sank.

He didn't know if he had a Spiritual Root, and if he did, what grade it was.

"Then..."

He was about to ask more, but Qingfeng, walking at the very front, stopped abruptly without any warning.

The Rainbow Bridge continued to flow slowly forward, the radiant, colorful light illuminating Qingfeng's childish yet exceptionally serious face.

He turned around. Those eyes that should have been clear and innocent were now sharp as an eagle's, staring fixedly at Su Ming.

The surrounding air seemed to solidify in that instant.

Even Mingyue beside them sensed the change in atmosphere, her smile fading as she looked somewhat uneasily at her senior brother.

"Su Ming, I ask you."

Qingfeng's voice was no longer the clear, crisp tone of a child but carried an interrogative and oppressive quality that was extremely incongruous with his age.

"Where did that meager trace of spiritual energy of yours come from?"

"You, who is your master?"

Each word was like a heavy hammer, pounding fiercely on Su Ming's heart.

Su Ming's heartbeat skipped a beat.

He knew the real test had arrived.

This question was far more deadly than the earlier inquiry at the Hall of Meritorious Deeds.

The Hall of Meritorious Deeds only cared if he was an evil cultivator, if he was harmful to the sect.

But what Qingfeng asked was his origins, his background, the most core secret of a cultivator.

If he didn't answer this question well, all his previous efforts would vanish like bubbles.

Master Lin Yu's warning echoed clearly in his mind—never reveal the secret of the ring, always have a flawless story ready.

Not a trace of panic appeared on Su Ming's face.

Meeting Qingfeng's sharp gaze, a flicker of bewilderment first crossed his face, then transformed into a touch of bitterness and embarrassment.

This change of expression was utterly natural.

"In reply to the Immortal Master."

He bowed slightly towards Qingfeng, his posture extremely humble.

"This humble one has no master."

"Oh?" Qingfeng raised an eyebrow, clearly not believing it.

An expression of slight embarrassment appeared on Su Ming's face, as if he was revealing the scar he least wanted others to know about.

"To be frank, this meager trace of spiritual energy of mine was not obtained through proper cultivation."

"It came from a damaged, ancient text I stumbled upon in my youth when I was frail, which contained an incomplete health-preserving cultivation method."

He slowly recounted the story he had already prepared.

"That method only talked about how to breathe and regulate energy, to strengthen the body and improve health. This humble one is dull-witted. After practicing it haphazardly for a few years, I only felt somewhat healthier, with sharper hearing and vision, and within my body... this faint sense of qi appeared."

"With no one to guide me, progress was extremely slow. Compared to a true immortal method like the one you possess, Immortal Master, it is truly... not worth mentioning."

His words were half-truth, half-lie.

The "Greenwood Longevity Art" was indeed something he cultivated himself, and progress was indeed slow.

He had simply replaced the existence of Master Lin Yu with an "incomplete health-preserving cultivation method."

This story explained the source of his spiritual energy while, due to its "meagerness" and "unorthodox nature," seemed perfectly reasonable, greatly lowering others' guard.

What threat could a wild fox Zen practitioner who hadn't even touched the threshold of cultivation pose?

After listening, the seriousness and sharpness on Qingfeng's face slowly faded.

Replacing it was an understanding expression of "just as I thought."

His tense little face relaxed, and he even let out a disdainful snort.

"I knew it."

He folded his arms and walked a circle around Su Ming as if inspecting a piece of goods.

"I guessed long ago you came from an unorthodox background."

"Think about it. If you truly had a master, with a senior from a sect backing you, after suffering such severe injuries, wouldn't you have cried for your daddy and mommy,

running back to find your master for revenge? Would you have been reduced to fighting a Foundation Establishment cultivator to the death and jumping off a cliff?"

"You'd probably have called for reinforcements long ago, grinding that Zhao Qianshan to dust and scattering his ashes."

This reasoning was clear and logical, perfectly reasonable.

Unintentionally, it provided the most powerful corroboration for Su Ming's story.

The massive boulder hanging in Su Ming's heart finally slowly lowered.

He knew he had passed this hurdle.

Following Qingfeng's words, an even more bitter smile appeared on his face.

"The Immortal Master sees clearly. If I had a sect to rely on, how could this humble one have ended up in such a state?"

The crisis was temporarily resolved, but Su Ming did not completely relax.

He seized the opportunity and asked about another doubt in his heart.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,012 words]

"Immortal elder, I have something unclear, may I boldly ask?"

"Speak." Qingfeng was in a good mood, waving his big hand.

"Why... why did Steward Liu of the Hall of Meritorious Deeds call both of you 'Shishu' a few days ago?"

The moment this question came out, the smug look on Qingfeng's face froze instantly.

His eyes darted about, and he began to stammer.

"Uh... well..."

He let out a nervous laugh, his small face turning slightly red.

"My master... yes, my master is of a high senior generation! So naturally our generation rose accordingly!"

After saying that, afraid Su Ming would press further, he immediately changed the subject.

"Okay, okay! Stop asking useless questions!"

He waved his hand, urging, "The External Affairs Hall is just ahead, hurry up! The elders don't have time to listen to you digging for details here!"

With that, he grabbed Mingyue and quickened his pace, looking somewhat like he was fleeing in panic.

Su Ming watched their backs, thoughtful. He didn't ask more and silently followed.

At the end of the Rainbow Bridges stood a magnificent hall.

The hall was built entirely from green jade, with upturned eaves and ornate roof beams, shrouded in immortal mist.

In front of the hall lay a huge white jade plaza. At the plaza's center stood a stele a hundred zhang tall, its surface carved with three bold characters — External Affairs Hall.

As they drew closer, Qingfeng's steps slowed.

The relaxed, childlike air on his face faded, replaced by the previous seriousness.

"Su Ming, I'll warn you a few last times, listen carefully."

His voice dropped very low.

"Our Cloud Hidden Sect has strict rules; there are two things we forbid above all."

"First, spies with unknown origins."

"Second, those who steal cultivation methods from other factions."

"Your story may fool people for now, but the elders of the External Affairs Hall are all seasoned and sharp-eyed."

He pointed at the grand hall with a hint of awe in his tone.

"When you go in, speak little and look little. Answer whatever the elder asks."

"He can tell truth from lie in a single glance."

"If he discovers you lied, or thinks your heart is corrupt, consequences... hmph, I can't save you then."

"Watch out for yourself."

.....

Inside the External Affairs Hall, the atmosphere was so solemn you could hear dust settling.

The lighting inside was somewhat dim. The tall bronze beams were carved with intricate cloud patterns, and an imposing aura swept through the hall.

Several disciples wearing the hall's uniform—blue-gray Dao robes—were bent over jade slips on the desks, handling official paperwork.

When Qingfeng, hands behind his back, led Mingyue and Su Ming through the entrance, everyone's movements froze for a moment.

"Disciples pay respects to Shishu Qingfeng and Shishu Mingyue!"

A young disciple nearest the door reacted first, rising quickly and bowing respectfully.

The others also stood, humility on their faces, and saluted in unison.

"Spare me."

Qingfeng's small face turned stern, and he waved his hand with a bit of elder-like authority.

"What business?"

A middle-aged steward who seemed to hold a slightly higher position stepped forward. He first bowed to Qingfeng and Mingyue again, then turned his gaze to Su Ming, his brows knitting barely perceptibly.

Qingfeng pointed at Su Ming, speaking plainly.

"This person was rescued by my junior sister and me at the foot of the mountain. We want to find him a menial post in the External Affairs Hall."

When he said that, the disciples in the hall exchanged peculiarly strange looks.

Menial post?

Although the lowest-status disciples of Cloud Hidden Sect did the toughest, most exhausting work, they still needed to show some spiritual root, or at least be of clean background with recommendations from sect disciples.

This unknown, half-dead-looking fellow — why should he qualify?

Just because two little shishu picked him up?

The middle-aged steward's expression grew troubled. "Shishu, this... isn't according to regulations. Recruitment for menial disciples in the External Affairs Hall has rules. We must inspect bone structure, verify origin..."

"Regulations?"

Qingfeng glared, puffing up like a little adult.

"I brought him here, that's his origin! I vouch for him. If there's any problem with him, I'll take full responsibility!"

He spoke with overwhelming arrogance, utterly unreasonable.

The middle-aged steward was left speechless, his face flushed, yet he dared not refute.

These two little ancestors' master was someone even the sect leader treated with courtesy.

Don't mention arranging a menial post; if they wanted to tear the External Affairs Hall's roof off, others would only dare to watch.

"Yes, yes, disciple understands." The steward nodded repeatedly, wiping cold sweat from his brow.

"However... this matter is important. We must request Elder Ma's verdict."

The Ma elder he mentioned was one of the three steward-elders of the External Affairs Hall, a foundation-establishment stage cultivator, in charge of recruiting and assigning menial disciples.

"Elder Ma?" Qingfeng nodded. "Fine, saves you the trouble. Lead the way."

They passed through the main hall and entered a quiet chamber.

An old man with white hair and beard, his face gaunt, sat cross-legged on a meditation cushion with eyes closed.

He wore a gray Dao robe faded from washing, his aura restrained, looking no different from an ordinary old scholar.

But Su Ming knew the seemingly ordinary body concealed a power that could crush him a hundred times over.

This was a foundation-establishment stage cultivator.

"Elder, Shishu Qingfeng and Shishu Mingyue request an audience," the middle-aged steward respectfully reported outside the door.

"Come in."

The old man's voice was hoarse and plain, devoid of emotion.

Qingfeng led the two in.

Elder Ma slowly opened his eyes. Those eyes were murky yet profound, as if capable of seeing through the heart.

He scanned Qingfeng and Mingyue with a nod of acknowledgement.

Then that deep gaze fell like two invisible blades upon Su Ming.

Su Ming felt his whole body tighten, as if every part of him was being examined and exposed.

The faint spiritual energy within him was utterly revealed under that gaze.

"Backwater trick."

Elder Ma slowly uttered three words, as a judgment.

Qingfeng stepped forward and succinctly recounted Su Ming's origins and his and Steward Liu Jing's assessment.

"...That's the situation. Elder Ma, this boy, though a mortal, has some wit. Giving him a menial post is a charitable act for our Cloud Hidden Sect."

Elder Ma listened without giving an opinion.

He did not look at Qingfeng; his eyes remained fixed on Su Ming.

"Your name is Su Ming?"

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[905 words]

"Yes, junior disciple Su Ming." Su Ming bowed and answered, neither servile nor arrogant.

"You claim that with a third-stage Qi Refining cultivation, you perished together with a Foundation Grand Perfection cultivator?" Elder Ma's voice remained calm, yet carried an undeniable pressure.

That question had come again.

Su Ming had already prepared for it, and he repeated that statement again, measured and unhurried.

He emphasized Zhao Qianshan's practice of forbidden arts, the backlash of murderous aura, and his own desperate, lucky survival.

Every detail matched exactly what he had told Qingfeng and Liu Jing before.

Elder Ma listened quietly, his cloudy eyes betraying no emotion.

When Su Ming finished, Elder Ma was silent for a moment before speaking again.

"Show me your so-called health-preserving technique, run a full cycle for me to see."

Su Ming's heart tightened.

Here it comes!

He was going to test his foundation!

Without hesitation, he sat cross-legged, slowly closed his eyes, and began circulating the Greenwood Longevity Art that Lin Yu had modified.

A faint, herb-scented spiritual energy started to flow through his damaged meridians at an extremely slow, even sluggish pace.

The process was painful and arduous.

But Su Ming's face remained focused.

Elder Ma's divine sense, like an invisible net, enveloped Su Ming.

He could clearly sense every tremor and every current of spiritual energy within Su Ming.

The technique's pathway was crude and makeshift, with several key meridians circumvented in the clumsiest ways.

It was plainly a patchwork method with no proper lineage, something cobbled together by someone experimenting.

Moreover, the technique's grade was extremely low; its efficiency at absorbing spiritual energy was outrageously slow.

Compared to the sect's most basic introductory mind-methods, it was worlds apart.

"Hmm."

After a while, Elder Ma withdrew his divine sense and made a faint sound of acknowledgment.

Though garbage, the method was peaceful and orthodox in its essence; indeed a health-preserving technique, with no hint of demonic cultivation.

Su Ming's story was once again corroborated.

"I have no interest in your mundane experiences."

Elder Ma's tone remained cold.

"Cloud Hidden Sect does not keep idlers, nor does it keep useless people."

He looked at Su Ming and said slowly, "Your body and meridians are damaged; your foundation is ruined. There is no inch of progress left on the path to immortality."

This verdict matched Liu Jing's earlier judgment.

Su Ming's heart sank.

He knew the moment that would decide his fate had arrived.

He was about to plead his prepared case again, begging to be allowed to serve as a menial.

But Elder Ma shifted course.

"However, Qingfeng says you were a scholar?"

Su Ming blinked, then nodded. "Yes, junior served as a Compiler at the Hanlin Academy."

"Hanlin Academy Compiler?"

For the first time, a trace of interest flickered across Elder Ma's ancient-well-still face.

His cloudy eyeballs rolled slightly, as if a thought had occurred to him.

"Very well."

He rose and shouted toward the door, "Bring me the inbound inventory ledgers from the pharmacy that have been piled up for three months."

The middle-aged steward outside paled as if he had heard something dreadful.

"Elder... those ledgers..."

"Bring them here." Elder Ma's tone brooked no argument.

"Yes."

Soon, two outer disciples struggled in carrying seven or eight heavy wooden boxes into the quiet chamber.

When the lids were opened, a mixed stench of old ink and medicinal herbs rushed out.

The boxes were crammed with towering stacks of bamboo slips and account books, in chaotic order, some already mildewed.

"These are the inbound inventory ledgers for a batch of medicinal materials delivered by the sect's medicinal garden three months ago," Elder Ma said, pointing at the mess and looking at Su Ming with a flat voice.

"The disciple responsible was suddenly transferred and no one took over. It's been in complete disorder."

"You said you were educated and could handle accounts?"

"Now I give you one hour."

"Sort these ledgers out for me."

"If you sort them correctly, I will allow you to do menial work."

"If you cannot sort them..."

He did not finish the sentence, but the meaning was clear.

Be thrown off the mountain.

Qingfeng and Mingyue were stunned.

They knew these ledgers were notorious trouble from the External Affairs Hall.

Supposedly the entries were numerous and complex, with several mismatched bad accounts. The two disciples who had been responsible for the paperwork had spent half a month trying to reconcile them and ended up feigning illness and taking leave.

Now they wanted Su Ming, a mortal, to reconcile them in one hour?

Wasn't that impossible?

It was blatant harassment!

"Elder Ma, this..." Qingfeng couldn't help but speak up for Su Ming.

"What?" Elder Ma glanced at him, "Do you object?"

Qingfeng swallowed his words immediately.

Su Ming's face, however, showed no trace of fear.

He looked at the boxes and his expression brightened.

For him, this was not harassment but an opportunity!

The only chance to prove his value!

When he had worked at the Hanlin Academy, he had organized stacks of old paperwork far more complicated than this.

This was nothing.

"Junior disciple, I will obey." Su Ming bowed deeply to Elder Ma.

Outside the chamber, the disciples standing by the door wore openly mocking or pitying expressions.

This mess of ledgers had been a festering tumor between the pharmacy and the External Affairs Hall for three months.

Whoever touched it was jinxed.

Asking a mortal scholar to sort it within an hour?

This wasn't just harsh.

Qingfeng's face tightened; he felt Elder Ma had gone too far.

Mingyue was so anxious she stamped her foot, clutching her senior's sleeve with worry.

"Su Ming, you—" Qingfeng started.

Su Ming gave him a slight smile and shook his head.

His gaze was calm and confident, as if the pile in front of him was not a mess at all.

He walked straight up to the heap of ledgers.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,411 words]

Su Ming didn't hesitate in the slightest. He directly upended one of the boxes onto the floor.

With a crash, countless bamboo scrolls, account books, and scattered slips of paper, mixed with dust and the smell of mildew, spread across the ground.

A suppressed snicker came from the disciples outside.

Amateur!

A real accountant would examine the ledgers scroll by scroll. Who would treat account books so roughly?

Su Ming paid no attention to the surrounding gazes.

He crouched down, his hands moving like phantoms, rapidly sorting through the pile of old papers.

"What is he doing?" Mingyue whispered.

Qingfeng couldn't understand either, frowning and staring intently.

Su Ming's hands never stopped moving, and he was even muttering under his breath, his voice so low that others couldn't make out the words.

"Year of Jiazi, seventh month, Green Dew Grass, three hundred and twelve catties, entered Warehouse Bing-7..."

"Year of Jiazi, eighth month, Fire Sun Flower, ninety-seven plants, entered Warehouse Jia-3..."

"Year of Yichou, first month, Red-Tailed Rooster Inner Cores, three missing, recorded as bad debt..."

He wasn't using counting rods. He wasn't using paper or brush.

All the accounts were being calculated, categorized, and consolidated at lightning speed within his mind.

He divided the account books on the floor into several distinct piles.

On his left side were the monthly total entry ledgers.

On his right side were the detailed accounts sorted by medicinal herb type.

Directly in front were those slips and notes with messy handwriting and unclear figures.

The entire process flowed smoothly, without the slightest hesitation.

At first, the disciples outside the quiet room watched with a mentality of waiting for a joke.

But gradually, their smiles froze.

That young man's speed was too fast!

Fast beyond reason!

They couldn't even clearly see the youth's fingers flipping through the bamboo scrolls, only catching a blur of afterimages.

The mountain-like pile of accounts visibly decreased at a rapid pace.

Meanwhile, the several piles of sorted ledgers on the ground grew taller and neater.

Half an hour passed.

Su Ming placed down the last bamboo scroll.

He stood up, patted the dust off his hands, and bowed deeply towards Elder Ma, who was still sitting cross-legged.

"Elder, the mission has been accomplished without dishonor."

The quiet room fell into absolute silence.

Everyone looked at the floor.

The originally chaotic and disorderly scene had become perfectly organized.

The seven large boxes of account books had been sorted and organized by him into thirty-six scrolls of varying thickness.

On the cover of each scroll, clear labels were written in charcoal.

"Total Entry Ledger, Year of Jiazi, Seventh Month."

"Category Ledger for Spirit Herb 'Green Dew Grass'."

"Record of Questionable Bad Debts."

...

The handwriting was elegant, the organization clear and easy to understand at a glance.

The middle-aged steward's mouth hung open wide enough to fit an egg.

He rubbed his eyes, unable to believe what he was seeing.

This... how was this possible?

Two disciples couldn't make sense of this mess of accounts in half a month, yet this kid managed it in less than an hour?

Elder Ma slowly opened his eyes. A genuine glint of light flashed for the first time in his murky pupils.

He didn't speak, merely lifting his chin towards the middle-aged steward.

"Go. Check."

"Yes... yes!"

The middle-aged steward snapped out of his daze. He hurriedly called two disciples and, flustered, picked up the organized scrolls one by one to begin verification.

Fine beads of sweat appeared on their foreheads.

At first, they intended to find fault, to pick out errors or omissions.

But the more they checked, the more shocked they became.

Not a single discrepancy!

Every entry, every expenditure, matched perfectly!

Those fractional amounts that were originally mixed together and impossible to calculate clearly had all been accounted for by Su Ming using a method they didn't understand, but which yielded exceptionally accurate results!

"Elder..."

After the time it takes an incense stick to burn, the middle-aged steward's voice carried a slight tremor, his face filled with disbelief.

"The... the accounts, they all match!"

These words caused a wave of astonishment throughout the room!

Qingfeng and Mingyue exchanged a glance, both seeing shock in the other's eyes.

"You, are quite good."

Elder Ma slowly nodded, delivering the final verdict.

"From today onward, you are a menial disciple of my Cloud Hidden Sect."

Hearing this, the massive boulder in Su Ming's heart finally settled completely.

He bowed deeply again, his voice steady.

"Thank you, Elder."

He knew that from this moment on, he finally had a place to set foot in this immortal world.

Even if it was only the lowest, most insignificant menial post.

For him, it was already enough.

...

Half an hour later.

Su Ming followed a disciple from the External Affairs Hall to complete the sect entry procedures.

He signed a special contract.

It wasn't made of paper, but a thin scroll crafted from some kind of beast hide, densely covered in terms written in cinnabar.

When he bit his fingertip and pressed a drop of blood onto the end of the contract, the drop was instantly absorbed by the hide, transforming into a mysterious rune that flashed and vanished.

An intangible feeling of restraint, originating from the rules of heaven and earth, settled upon his soul.

"This is the 'Menial Contract,' witnessed by the sect's grand formation. No one can violate it."

The one guiding him was precisely the young disciple who had seemed somewhat arrogant inside the hall earlier.

"You must remember the rules on this contract clearly."

"First, menial disciples are forbidden from privately teaching or cultivating sect cultivation methods. If discovered, cultivation will be abolished, and you will be expelled from the sect."

"Second, you must not spy on the secret areas of the various peaks, nor trespass into important places like the Transmission Pavilion or Pill Refining Room."

"Third, you must complete the tasks assigned daily by the External Affairs Hall and cannot be absent without reason."

"Fourth, and this is the most important one." The young disciple lowered his voice. "Menial disciples must labor within the sect for a full five years before they are eligible to take the assessment for outer sect disciples. If they fail the assessment, they must wait another five years."

For ordinary cultivators, five years was but the snap of a finger.

But for a menial laborer of mortal origin, hoping to exchange hard labor for an opportunity, five years was enough to grind away all sharpness and hope.

The young disciple expected Su Ming to show disappointment or resentment.

However, Su Ming's face held only calmness.

Five years?

Excellent.

An ignored menial laborer, hiding at the very bottom of the sect, cultivating safely and steadily for five years.

Could there be a start more perfectly aligned with the essence of the Way of Survival?

"Thank you for the guidance, Senior Brother. I will remember it." Su Ming gave him a gentle smile.

"You're welcome, you're welcome." The young disciple hurriedly waved his hands.

He handed Su Ming a palm-sized gray wooden token and two sets of coarse gray Daoist robes.

"Junior Brother Su, this is your identity token and menial attire. With this token, you can move through most areas of Guiding Peak. Each month, you can also collect three cattles of spiritual rice and some fasting pills from the kitchen."

Su Ming took the heavy wooden token.

The token felt warm and smooth to the touch. The front was carved with the characters "Cloud Hidden." The back had the character "Mennial," along with a string of unique numbers.

He neatly folded the two sets of gray cloth clothes and held them in his arms.

From this moment on, he was no longer the Hanlin Compiler of the Great Xing Dynasty, nor a fugitive being hunted.

He was Su Ming, the most ordinary, most insignificant menial disciple of the Cloud Hidden Sect.

"Junior Brother Su, I'll take you to your residence."

"Your residence is arranged in Courtyard D-7. It's relatively quiet there."

Su Ming followed the young disciple, heading downward.

The further down they went, the thinner the spiritual energy in the air became.

By the time they reached the foot of Guiding Peak, the concentration of spiritual energy was less than one-tenth of what it was at the bamboo hut halfway up the mountain where he had recovered.

But even so, it was still far more abundant than the mortal world.

Ahead, a cluster of orderly arranged courtyards appeared.

These courtyards were mostly built from green stone and wood, simple in style. Compared to the immortal halls and palaces atop the mountain, they were practically slums.

This was the settlement area for the tens of thousands of menial disciples of the Cloud Hidden Sect.

The young disciple led Su Ming to a relatively secluded courtyard.

A wooden plaque reading "D-7" hung on the gate.

"Junior Brother Su, this is it." He pushed open the courtyard gate. "This courtyard houses four people, one room each. You've come at a good time; there's just one empty east wing room left."

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 133: A Sense of Security

[1,182 words]

Su Ming hugged the two drab sets of menial clothes and followed the junior disciple who led the way into Courtyard "Ding-Qi".

The courtyard was small, paved with greenstone, with an ancient well covered in moss in the corner. A few clumps of cold-resistant spirit moss grew crookedly beside it, the only green in the yard. The three side rooms had their doors and windows tightly shut, only the eastern room was empty, its lintel coated in dust.

"This is it, Junior Brother Su." The junior disciple pointed to the east side room, "There are some old brooms and rags in the storage room, sort them out yourself. Every day at the first quarter of mao hour, the External Affairs Hall will have a steward strike the bell to assign that day's tasks, don't be late."

“Thank you, Senior Brother.” Su Ming bowed and thanked him politely.

Seeing his tact, the junior disciple’s tone softened a little. “My name’s Sun Miao, I also serve in the External Affairs Hall, in the Bing courtyard up ahead. If anything comes up, you can come find me.” With that he turned and left.

No sooner had Sun Miao left than the wooden door of the west side room creaked open.

A burly, dark-skinned man poked his head out. He looked about twenty-seven or twenty-eight, wearing the same gray short jacket as Su Ming. His muscles were knotted and steam rose from him, as if he had just finished heavy labor.

He sized Su Ming up from head to toe, his gaze lingering briefly on the pale, thin face, then he gruffly asked, “New here?”

Su Ming immediately cupped his hands and offered a gentle, harmless smile. “I am Su Ming. I just joined today and was assigned to this Ding-Qi courtyard. I ask for your guidance, Senior Brother.”

Seeing Su Ming’s proper manners, the man’s expression softened and he stepped out.

He was tall, a full head above Su Ming, standing in the yard like an iron tower.

“My name’s Zhang Meng.” His voice was loud as he patted his solid chest, “I work in Spirit Beast Valley, taking care of the Cloud-Steppers. You look scrawny, where were you assigned?”

“Temporarily serving in the External Affairs Hall’s Accounting Office.” Su Ming replied.

“Accounting Office?” Zhang Meng’s eyes lit up, his big hand clapped like a fan, “Hey! That’s a good place! No wind, no rain, much better than me dealing with beasts every day and smelling like sweat!”

He was loud and straightforward. He walked a few steps up to Su Ming, very friendly. “With you here, this courtyard finally has four people. There’s also Li Kai, who does odd jobs at Formation Peak, a gloomy type who keeps to himself for days. And that other one...”

Before he could finish, the main room to the north opened.

A slightly portly young man, dressed more neatly in a gray robe starched into crisp folds, emerged frowning.

He held a white cloth and was carefully wiping his fingertips as if removing nonexistent dust, his eyes carrying scrutiny and displeasure as they fell on Zhang Meng and Su Ming.

“Zhang the Rough, at this hour, what are you making noise about? Disturbing the peace.”

His voice was low but carried a clear air of superiority.

Zhang Meng seemed slightly cowed, his voice unconsciously dropping a few registers as he mumbled, “Manager Zhao, we’ve got a newcomer in the yard, I was just saying hello...”

The portly young man called Manager Zhao turned his gaze to Su Ming and scanned him from head to toe, lingering particularly on the new menial clothes in Su Ming’s arms and the wooden tag at his waist.

“A new menial?” His tone was indifferent. “How did he come?”

Su Ming understood in his heart that this man was likely the “figurehead” among the menials, possibly with some backing.

He maintained his humble posture and answered, “Reporting to Manager Zhao, I am Su Ming. I was recommended into the sect by Senior Brothers Qingfeng and Mingyue.”

He had chosen the title “Senior Brother” carefully.

“Qingfeng? Mingyue?” Manager Zhao paused, then seemed to remember something. The little arrogance on his face instantly smoothed away and was replaced by a hint of uncertain surprise.

He looked at Su Ming again, as if trying to see something in that plain face, then simply nodded and his tone became much more accommodating. “If those two recommended you, you must have some ability. The Accounting Office is a respectable place, work hard.”

With that he said no more, turned and went back into his room, closing the door.

Zhang Meng spat a little toward the closed door, then lowered his voice to Su Ming: “Don’t mind him. Fat Zhao’s like that! He’s cocky because his uncle is a steward in the External Affairs Hall and handles our meager monthly rations. Not a terrible person, just full of himself.”

Su Ming smiled but didn’t reply. Newly arrived, it was best not to get tangled in any disputes.

“Oh right,” Zhang Meng suddenly remembered, pointing to the south room that had been shut tight, “that’s Li Kai’s room. He works at Formation Peak. A bit odd, but his skills are solid. When my roof leaked, he fixed it for me.”

As he spoke, the south side room’s door slid open a crack.

A thin, somewhat pale young man stood in the doorway. He looked only slightly older than Su Ming and his gaze was evasive. He held half a carved wooden stick etched with twisted patterns.

He quickly glanced at Su Ming, his eyes lingering for a moment at Su Ming’s pallid, frail face, a fleeting look of sympathy crossing his features before he dropped his eyes and softly said, “I... I’m Li Kai.”

Having spoken, he didn’t wait for a response and slammed the door shut.

Zhang Meng laughed as if this were nothing: “See? I wasn’t wrong—what a closed-off fellow!”

But something stirred in Su Ming’s heart.

Odd jobs at Formation Peak?

A flash of the fragments Lin Yu had mentioned earlier streaked through his mind.

“Senior Brother Zhang, what exactly does Senior Brother Li do at Formation Peak?” Su Ming asked casually.

“What could he do? He helps move formation materials, clears discarded formation plates and flags—rough work.” Zhang Meng waved it off, “But I heard he likes tinkering with small things privately. Last time he fixed a broken time bell for Fat Zhao, saved him several spirit stones.”

Su Ming nodded, mentally noting the names and snippets: “Li Kai,” “Formation Peak,” “likes tinkering.”

He held the clothes and pushed open the east side room’s door.

A musty scent of old dust rushed out. The room contained nothing but a hard plank bed and a shabby wooden table.

Still, a genuine, relaxed smile—the first since arriving—spread across Su Ming’s face.

The place was simple, but at least it was entirely his own, a corner where he could temporarily put down roots.

He moved to the bed and carefully arranged the menial clothes, his fingers unconsciously stroking the warm Xuantian ring in his arms.

His consciousness sank into it and he could sense the Spirit Gathering Array operating imperceptibly, nourishing his master's soul body, which was still dim but no longer a candle flickering in the wind.

"Master," he whispered in his heart, "for now... we're safe."

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,405 words]

The bell tolled at mao hour, its sound heavy and prolonged.

Su Ming opened his eyes.

The room was still dark, only a sliver of fish-belly white light seeping through the window paper.

From the next room came the loud sound of Zhang Meng turning over, while from Manager Zhao's room in the north wing, the faint sound of water could be heard, presumably as he had already gotten up to wash.

Su Ming did not get out of bed immediately.

He felt the wisp of spiritual energy within him, finer than a strand of hair, struggling to worm its way through his damaged meridians.

A whole night of breathing exercises had yielded minimal results.

The damage to his Dao Foundation was like a leaky wooden bucket; eight or nine out of every ten parts of the spiritual energy drawn in silently dissipated.

He sat up and put on that brand-new set of gray menial clothes.

The coarse cloth material was a bit rough against his skin, but he felt a long-lost sense of solidity on his body.

He pushed open the door. The slightly cool air at the foot of the mountain in the early morning rushed into his lungs, carrying the freshness of earth and vegetation.

Zhang Meng also walked out yawning, his burly upper body bare, the lines of his muscles distinct in the morning light.

"Brother Su, morning!" he greeted in a muffled, booming voice, picking up a bucket from the corner of the courtyard. He drew a bucket of water from the old well and poured it over his head.

The icy well water made him shudder, instantly waking him up completely.

"Let's go, time to get our assignments!"

The huge square in front of the External Affairs Hall was already packed with a sea of dark heads.

Over a thousand menial disciples were divided into ten squares according to the areas they were responsible for, silent as crows.

Standing among the crowd, Su Ming activated the Aura Concealment Art, minimizing his own presence to the lowest.

A steward from the External Affairs Hall stood on a high platform, holding a jade slip, reading out today's personnel transfers and task assignments with an expressionless face.

The vast majority were repetitive, hard labor jobs.

"... Courtyard Ding-Qi, Zhang Meng, Spirit Beast Valley, cleaning the Cloud-Steppers stables."

"... Courtyard Ding-Qi, Li Kai, Formation Peak, transporting discarded formation materials."

"... Courtyard Ding-Qi, Zhao Ping, Pill Cauldron Peak, weeding the herb fields."

Su Ming listened. Zhao Ping was likely the name of that Manager Zhao.

"Courtyard Ding-Qi, Su Ming."

"... Transferred to the Accounting Office of the External Affairs Hall. Report there immediately."

As soon as these words were spoken, countless gazes filled with envy, jealousy, and doubt swiveled towards Su Ming in unison.

The Accounting Office!

That was heaven in the eyes of menial disciples!

No exposure to wind and sun, no physical labor, just sitting indoors every day fiddling with counting rods and organizing ledgers.

This was an incredibly cushy job!

Su Ming merely smiled slightly and walked out of the square under everyone's gaze.

The Accounting Office was located in a side hall halfway up Guiding Peak.

Far from the bustle at the mountain's foot, the surroundings were planted with emerald bamboo, creating a quiet and secluded environment.

Su Ming pushed the door open. The stale scent of ink and the unique fresh smell of bamboo slips assailed his senses.

The room was large. Shelves reaching to the roof beams lined the walls, crammed full with various account books and archives.

Several disciples also wearing gray menial clothes were buried among mountains of paperwork, the crisp sounds of abacus beads clicking rising and falling intermittently.

This place was even busier than Su Ming had imagined.

"Newcomer?"

A thin, gaunt old man poked his head out from behind a pile of account books, his murky eyes sizing up Su Ming.

His hair was graying, his face covered in wrinkles, and an old, polished abacus hung at his waist.

"This junior is Su Ming, ordered to report to the Accounting Office." Su Ming bowed in greeting.

"I'm Liu Tong." The old man grunted and pointed to a small, empty desk in the corner. "You'll sit there from now on."

"From now on, you'll call me Manager Liu."

His tone carried a natural sense of exclusion that an old-timer held towards a newcomer.

Su Ming didn't mind. He followed the instruction and went to sit in the corner.

"Kid, don't think entering the Accounting Office means you're here to enjoy yourself."

Liu Tong slowly walked over and heavily thumped a thick stack of bamboo slips, their edges already frayed, onto Su Ming's desk.

"These are the material in-and-out warehouse receipts from the Vessel Hall for last quarter. A complete mess, nobody wants to deal with them."

"Aren't you a scholar? Today, sort these out for me."

"If you can't sort them out, don't bother eating."

After saying this, he clasped his hands behind his back, strolled back to his own seat, picked up his teacup, and closed his eyes to rest.

The few menial disciples nearby secretly glanced at Su Ming, their eyes holding a trace of sympathy.

They had all seen that pile of messy accounts.

Those blacksmiths from the Vessel Hall had tempers as foul and hard as their hammers. Their receipts were even more scribbled and chaotic. Shortages and discrepancies were common, nothing ever matched up.

This was Manager Liu putting a newbie in his place.

Su Ming picked up the topmost bamboo slip and slowly unrolled it.

Pungent ink stains, sloppy handwriting, chaotic numbers.

It was indeed a mess.

Yet, the corner of Su Ming's mouth lifted slightly in a faint arc.

What he feared was not trouble.

What he feared was having no opportunity.

He did not touch the abacus on the desk.

His fingers lightly traced over the bamboo slip, his eyes rapidly scanning the content.

His brain was the most precise abacus.

"Mystic Iron, incoming inventory three hundred twenty-one jin, loss three jin, actual incoming three hundred eighteen jin..."

"Red Copper, outgoing inventory one hundred seven jin, used to forge thirty-six 'Fire Crow Swords'..."

"Low-grade Spirit Jade, outgoing inventory one thousand two hundred pieces, used to inscribe 'Spirit Gathering Array Disks'..."

"Formation Flags..."

When he saw these two words, Su Ming's mind stirred slightly.

He remembered that quiet, reticent roommate of his, Li Kai.

He continued reading.

One after another chaotic account entry was automatically broken down, categorized, and reorganized in his mind.

Time passed bit by bit.

At some point, the sound of abacuses in the room stopped.

Those few menial disciples were all looking at Su Ming in the corner with eyes as if looking at a monster.

Too fast!

That kid's speed was simply inhuman!

In the time it took them to look at one bamboo slip, he had already finished three!

Moreover, from start to finish, he hadn't used an abacus once, hadn't touched a writing brush once!

Liu Tong had also opened his eyes long ago.

His murky old eyes were full of doubt and uncertainty.

Was this kid putting on an act, or did he really have the skill?

One shichen later.

Su Ming put down the last bamboo slip.

That mountain-like pile of messy accounts had been completely sorted and neatly arranged by category by him.

He pulled a worn-out brush from the brush holder, took a blank bamboo slip, and dipped it in ink.

He did not start writing immediately.

Instead, he closed his eyes.

In his mind, countless streams of data flowed, converging into an invisible, massive table.

Incoming inventory, outgoing inventory, losses, balance...

Each item was crystal clear.

Suddenly, his brow furrowed slightly.

The Logistics Department of Heavenly Sword Peak received a batch of low-grade Spirit Jade and standard Formation Flags from the Vessel Hall every month, under the heading 'Daily Training Losses.'

The quantity of these supplies was astonishingly similar every single month.

Even stranger, their loss rate was also remarkably consistent, neither more nor less, exactly thirty percent.

Once or twice might be coincidence, but for it to be so for several consecutive months, this regularity was far too deliberate.

Su Ming had seen too many similar accounting tricks back in the Hanlin Academy. Behind such seemingly neat numbers often hid things that couldn't bear the light of day.

There was definitely something fishy going on here.

A bold idea surfaced in his mind—this was an opportunity, a chance to demonstrate his value, yet one that could also backfire spectacularly.

His thoughts raced, swiftly weighing the pros and cons.

Expose it directly? That would be like an egg striking a rock; how could a mere menial disciple like him provoke Heavenly Sword Peak? Pretend he didn't know? Then he would be no different from any ordinary menial, lost in the crowd.

He had to find another way. He needed to let those above see his ability, yet he couldn't point it out directly, making himself a target.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,151 words]

Su Ming opened his eyes.

He picked up his brush and began writing swiftly on the blank bamboo slip.

His calligraphy was elegant yet forceful, a pleasure to behold.

He was not writing a dry, boring inventory list.

What he was writing was an "Analysis of Vessel Hall's Last Quarter Material Inflow/Outflow and Optimization Suggestions."

He used the method Lin Yu had once taught him to categorize all the ledger entries into several major groups.

Then, using a cinnabar brush, he drew a simple chart.

The chart clearly displayed the material consumption comparisons of the major peaks.

Among them, the line representing the Logistics Department of Heavenly Sword Peak was unnaturally straight.

At the end of the report, he did not use any words like "corruption" or "problematic."

He merely wrote in a tone of discussion:

"...The material loss rate of Heavenly Sword Peak shows a regular pattern. Perhaps inventory optimization could be implemented to reduce unnecessary resource occupation..."

After writing the final character, he blew on the ink to dry it and rolled up the bamboo slip.

Just at that moment, a slightly portly middle-aged man wearing steward's attire walked out from the inner hall.

"Steward Wang."

Everyone in the room hurriedly stood up and bowed in greeting.

This person was precisely the supervisor of the Accounting Office.

"All sorted out?" Steward Wang glanced at the neat pile of bamboo slips on Su Ming's desk, then looked at Liu Tong's displeased face, and already understood the situation.

"Reporting to the steward, everything has been organized." Su Ming respectfully presented the bamboo slip in his hands with both hands.

Steward Wang took it, somewhat surprised.

He unrolled the slip, and after just one glance, his eyes lit up.

Beautiful handwriting! Clear organization!

Looking further down, when he saw that cinnabar chart, the fat on his face couldn't help but tremble.

Good heavens!

He had managed the Accounting Office for ten years, and this was the first time he had seen someone do accounting in this way!

So intuitive!

When he read the final "optimization suggestions" section, his breathing even became somewhat hurried.

He abruptly looked up, staring intently at Su Ming, his gaze as if looking at a piece of flawless, peerless jade.

"This... you did this?"

"Yes."

"Good! Good! Good!"

Steward Wang said the word "good" three times in a row, excitedly slapping his thigh.

"Damn it! Finally, someone who actually knows how to work has arrived!"

Holding the bamboo slip, he turned and strode into the inner hall.

A moment later, his excited roar echoed from within the inner hall.

"Elder Ma! Come quickly and look! I've got a genius here!"

The door to the quiet chamber in the inner hall was slammed open with a loud "bang."

Wang, the fat man, was beaming, his face flushed. He rushed in, panting heavily, holding a bamboo slip high in his hand.

His ample flesh trembled violently from his excitement.

"Elder Ma! Elder Ma! Look at this quickly!"

On the meditation cushion, Elder Ma, who had been resting with his eyes closed, furrowed his brows into a tight knot.

He slowly opened his eyes. Two icy, cold glints shot from his murky pupils, as if intending to freeze Wang the fat man right where he stood.

"Wang Defa, is that fat of yours something you want me to refine into lamp oil for you?"

Elder Ma's voice was hoarse and low, carrying a suppressed anger.

"Have you swallowed all the rules of the External Affairs Hall?"

Wang the fat man was glared at by this look, causing his whole body to shudder. The excitement on his face instantly froze. He quickly hunched his body, his face plastered with an obsequious smile.

"Elder, please calm your anger! Please calm your anger! It was Defa who was rash and impulsive. Defa deserves to die!"

While verbally apologizing, his steps didn't stop. He shuffled a few steps closer to Elder Ma and presented the bamboo slip in his hand as if it were a treasure.

"Elder, look at this quickly! This... this is simply divine workmanship! I've managed the Accounting Office for ten years and have never seen such beautiful accounting!"

Elder Ma snorted coldly but ultimately took the bamboo slip.

He initially thought it was just Wang the fat man making a mountain out of a molehill again, a hint of impatience in his eyes.

But when he unrolled the slip and his gaze fell upon it, those eyes, usually as still as an ancient well, contracted slightly.

The first thing that caught his eye was that elegant, handsome, and naturally graceful calligraphy.

Just this handwriting alone was enough to make ninety-nine percent of the disciples within the sect feel ashamed.

Looking further down, the content made his heart jolt even more.

No lengthy, tedious itemized records. No chaotic piling up of numbers.

In its place was a meticulously drawn chart using a cinnabar brush.

Horizontal axis for time, vertical axis for materials.

The consumption curves of the major peaks were clear at a glance.

Which peak's usage exceeded standards, which material's loss rate was abnormal—all were as clear as looking at the lines on one's own palm.

This... what incredibly clear thinking!

Elder Ma's gaze finally settled on that unnaturally straight curve.

Heavenly Sword Peak.

His finger gently stroked that line. A meaningful glint flashed in his murky eyes.

Seeing this final suggestion, Elder Ma's breathing halted for an instant.

This kid not only figured out the accounts clearly.

He also pointed out the problem behind the accounts in the safest, most fireproof way possible.

This was a smart person.

"Who did this?" Elder Ma's voice now betrayed no emotion, neither joy nor anger.

Seeing an opportunity, Wang the fat man immediately straightened his back, speaking as if claiming credit, "Reporting to the Elder, it's that menial post disciple you specially approved for sect entry a few days ago, Su Ming!"

He leaned in closer, lowering his voice, his tone full of the excitement of having found a treasure.

"Elder, you didn't see it. That pile of messed-up accounts from the Vessel Hall that had been rotting for three months, two disciples couldn't sort them out in half a month. This kid, half a day! Just half a day, he made everything crystal clear!"

"This isn't a menial post disciple! This is clearly talent tailor-made for our Accounting Office!"

Elder Ma slowly rolled up the bamboo slip and placed it to the side.

He glanced at the enthusiastically spittle-flying Wang the fat man and said indifferently, "Since he's talent for your Accounting Office, he'll be under your management from now on."

"Do not disturb my quiet cultivation again over such trivial matters."

"If there's a next time, you can go to the Spirit Beast Valley and sweep the stables."

Upon hearing this, Wang the fat man was immediately overjoyed.

This was approval!

The Elder was completely assigning Su Ming, this treasure, to him!

"Yes, yes, yes! Defa obeys! Defa wouldn't dare do it again!"

He bowed and scraped as he retreated, the fat on his face smiling like a fully bloomed chrysanthemum.

Quiet returned to the chamber once more.

Elder Ma picked up that bamboo slip and looked at it again.

"Su Ming..."

He softly uttered this name, a trace of pity flashing in his murky eyes.

"What a fine Hanlin Academy compiler. A pity, what a pity..."

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,357 words]

A month passed in the blink of an eye.

Su Ming's life had settled into an unprecedented state of tranquility and routine.

Every day at the mao hour, he would go to the Accounting Office on time.

Manager Liu Tong had long since stopped his initial harassment and would even proactively hand over some of the cleaner, simpler ledgers to him.

The other few menial disciples were also quite polite to him, always respectfully addressing him as "Mister Su" in their conversations.

Within this small Accounting Office, Su Ming had earned himself a rare measure of respect through his professional competence.

He would efficiently complete his daily tasks within half a day.

The remaining time, he would spend in the Accounting Office's library, flipping through the sect's old archives that were covered in layers of dust.

They recorded the Cloud Hidden Sect's various expenditures, resource allocations, and personnel changes over thousands of years.

To outsiders, this was just a pile of dry, boring numbers.

But in Su Ming's eyes, it was a magnificent scroll depicting the entire operational veins of the sect.

He was like a dried-out sponge, frantically absorbing everything about this immortal world.

He even began consciously recording the regular resource consumption of different peaks and different affairs, silently constructing his own "sect operation model" in his mind.

Which areas had stable expenditures, which projects had abnormal fluctuations, which links might have redundancies or loopholes—he noted them all down one by one.

Every ten days, he would submit a compiled account analysis to Wang the fat man.

Each report would bring Wang the fat man a new surprise.

And these reports would ultimately be delivered to that secluded, tranquil room deep within the External Affairs Hall.

On this particular day, in the afternoon.

Elder Ma was sitting cross-legged in meditation when a steward from the External Affairs Hall hurried in with an anxious look.

"Elder, Disciple Chen from Formation Peak requests an audience, saying he has important matters to report."

"Let him in."

A moment later, a young man wearing Formation Peak disciple robes rushed in, his face full of agitation.

"Elder Ma!"

As soon as he entered, he began pouring out his grievances.

"You must do something about this! Those menial disciples the External Affairs Hall sent to our Formation Peak to maintain the Spirit Gathering Arrays are simply a bunch of idiots!"

He stamped his foot in anger.

"Tell them to clean the dust off the formation plates, and they'll wipe off the core spiritual energy nodes! Tell them to replenish the low-grade spirit stones, and they can't tell the yin-yang fish eyes apart, nearly causing spiritual energy backflow several times!"

"Just yesterday, the Spirit Gathering Array for Medicine Plot Ding was paralyzed by them again! Over a hundred newly sprouted Green Dew Grass plants had their spiritual energy cut off overnight, all of them wilted!"

"Our Formation Peak's core disciples are too busy studying profound formations every day, how can we have time to follow behind them cleaning up these messes every single day?"

The young man grew more agitated as he spoke.

"Elder Ma, if you keep sending these utterly clueless good-for-nothings over, our Formation Peak will really just throw in the towel!"

Elder Ma listened, his brow tightly furrowed.

He had already heard about this matter.

The sect had numerous low-level formations, and the maintenance workload was enormous, indeed requiring a large number of hands.

But the Dao of formations was subtle and profound; even the simplest Spirit Gathering Array involved dozens of runic nodes.

Having a group of completely untrained menial disciples do it—it would be strange if mistakes **didn't** happen.

But having Formation Peak's formal disciples do these menial tasks would indeed be a waste of talent.

It had become a difficult deadlock.

Just as he was deep in thought, the door to the tranquil room was gently knocked.

"Elder, Su Ming from the Accounting Office requests an audience."

It was Wang the fat man's voice.

"Enter."

Wang the fat man pushed the door open but did not enter himself. He merely stepped aside, making way for Su Ming behind him.

Su Ming walked in slowly, holding a bamboo scroll in his hands.

He first bowed respectfully to Elder Ma and then to the Formation Peak disciple, before presenting the bamboo scroll.

"Elder, this is the detailed ledger of spirit stone consumption for each peak of the sect last month, along with a comparative analysis against the same period last year."

His voice was clear and calm, like a cool spring in this agitated, tranquil room.

The Formation Peak disciple was still fuming over the loss in the medicine plot, muttering under his breath, "...they don't even understand the most basic 'Three Powers Positioning,' it's simply..."

Elder Ma's gaze, however, slowly shifted away from that angry face.

It landed on the bamboo scroll Su Ming had presented.

The densely packed numbers on the bamboo scroll were categorized in perfect order.

The destination of every spirit stone expenditure was clearly marked.

Loss rates, growth ratios, all data precise to two decimal places.

Chaos.

Order.

On one side, stupidity that couldn't even grasp "Three Powers Positioning."

On the other, meticulousness that could discern clear patterns from tens of thousands of dry numbers.

Elder Ma looked at Su Ming's steady posture as he offered the scroll, at the clarity and focus in his eyes that didn't belong to a menial disciple, and then thought of the well-organized, even subtly insightful account analysis reports Wang the fat man had delivered over the past month.

A vague idea gradually became clear.

He looked at Su Ming. This kid's mind, wasn't it just like the most precise formation plate?

Every number was a rune.

Every ledger entry was a formation line.

He could combine these things without the slightest error, making them operate smoothly.

This... wasn't this precisely excellent material for learning the Dao of formations?

His immortal path was severed, making him "useless."

But if this "useless" person could be trained into a special menial disciple proficient in low-level formation maintenance...

Wouldn't that be "making the best of a bad situation"?

This move would both solve Formation Peak's urgent problem and provide this kid with a skill to secure his livelihood.

Killing two birds with one stone!

Thinking of this, Elder Ma's mind suddenly cleared.

He waved his hand at the Formation Peak disciple.

"This matter, I am aware. But it cannot be resolved immediately. You may return first. I will give Formation Peak a reply."

Although the Formation Peak disciple was unwilling, seeing the elder had spoken, he could only bow and take his leave.

Only Elder Ma and Su Ming remained in the tranquil room.

Su Ming, having finished his report and seeing the elder had no other instructions, prepared to take his leave.

"Wait."

Elder Ma stopped him.

Su Ming halted his steps and bowed. "Does the elder have further instructions?"

Elder Ma did not speak.

He stood up, walked to a dusty wooden chest in the corner, and rummaged inside for a moment.

Finally, he took out a jade slip that looked old, its color faded, even its edges somewhat worn.

He walked back and casually tossed the jade slip to Su Ming.

The action was like throwing away a useless stone.

"Your immortal path is hopeless, but your mind is still passable."

Elder Ma's tone was so indifferent it betrayed not a single ripple of emotion.

"This is the 'Basic Overview of Formations.' Take it and look at it."

"If you can learn a little bit while doing your accounting work, you might be able to take charge of inspecting the illumination and dust-repelling formations on various peaks in the future. That would be a stable path for you."

Su Ming instinctively caught the jade slip.

The jade slip felt cool to the touch, carrying an aura of weathered time.

He stood frozen in place, looking at this old man before him whose emotions never showed on his face, while a tidal wave of thoughts surged in his heart.

Formations?

The path he had previously contemplated was now placed before him so abruptly, so lightly.

He had originally thought about seeing if he could obtain knowledge of formations from Li Kai, but Li Kai's nature was too introverted. Su Ming hadn't managed to have more than a few words with him this past month and had planned to proceed gradually. He never expected a new path to appear just as one seemed blocked.

Su Ming tightened his grip on the jade slip in his hand. The cool sensation seemed to penetrate his palm.

He bowed deeply to Elder Ma.

"Thank you... Elder Ma."

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 137: This thing is much harder than the imperial examination.

[1,245 words]

Su Ming walked out of the meditation room, the glaring sunlight making him squint slightly.

Wang the fat man was standing outside the door, and the moment he saw Su Ming emerge, he immediately stepped forward with a face full of smiles.

His small eyes were sparkling with nothing but appreciation and warmth.

"Su Ming, what did Elder Ma tell you? Did he have some important task to entrust to you again?"

Su Ming shook his head, tucking the jade slip further into his sleeve.

"Nothing much. The elder just offered a few words of encouragement."

He didn't want to reveal this matter too early.

"Oh, oh, but that is still an immense honor!" Wang the fat man rubbed his hands together, wearing an expression that said 'I understand'. "Su Ming, from now on, the Accounting Office will rely entirely on you! If you need anything, just say the word!"

Su Ming exchanged a few polite words with him, then bid farewell and left.

He walked out of the main hall of the External Affairs Hall, the glaring sunlight making him squint slightly once more.

He did not linger outside the hall. Instead, as usual, he walked with his gaze fixed straight ahead, following the fixed route directly towards the direction of the menial disciples' courtyard at the foot of the mountain.

The hand in his sleeve held the jade slip steadily, but his mind was already operating the Aura Concealment Art, firmly locking away the anticipation and curiosity that might otherwise show on his face.

With a treasure in hand, one must be even more cautious.

Investigating it in this place bustling with people would be no different from a naive child carrying gold through a crowded market.

He understood deeply that any trace of untimely eagerness could attract unnecessary attention.

Just as he was about to turn onto the stone steps leading down the mountain, a somewhat teasing, youthful voice sounded beside him.

"Looks like Elder Ma didn't do anything to you. What's that in your hand?"

Qingfeng was standing with his hands clasped behind his back, impatiently kicking pebbles on the ground with the tip of his foot.

Mingyue was squatting on the ground, curiously watching a line of ants moving house.

"What are you two doing here?" Su Ming was somewhat surprised.

"Just passing by."

"We were waiting for you! We went to the Accounting Office, and the manager there said you came here." Mingyue stood up, her eyes curving into crescents as she smiled. "Senior Brother said he wanted to see if Elder Ma would chase you down the mountain."

Hearing this, Qingfeng's little face flushed red, and he glared at Mingyue.

"Nonsense! I... I was just passing by!"

He cleared his throat, walked up to Su Ming, and looked him up and down like a little adult.

His gaze fell on the slightly bulging cuff of Su Ming's sleeve.

Su Ming knew he couldn't hide it from him, so he took out that old jade slip.

"A jade slip bestowed by Elder Ma. He said... it's for me to learn something, so I can have a stable future path."

Qingfeng took the jade slip, glanced at it only once, then curled his lip in disdain and tossed it back.

"Basic Overview of Formations? The most common, worthless stuff. It's piled up like mountains in the sect's library, and no one even looks at it."

He snorted, his tone carrying a hint of contempt.

"However, Elder Ma being willing to give you this does set a precedent. You, kid, really have some luck."

Mingyue leaned over to take a look and asked curiously, "Formations? That's really hard to learn! I heard from a senior brother at Formation Peak that just memorizing those runes can make your head explode!"

"Su Ming, you... can you understand it?"

Su Ming shook his head with a bitter smile.

"Haven't looked at it yet. But I have to try."

"Having that kind of spirit is acceptable." Qingfeng snorted noncommittally.

"But don't say I didn't warn you. Without guidance, relying solely on this broken jade slip, you won't even find the door. Let's go, Mingyue."

Having said that, he didn't speak further. Pulling along a still somewhat worried Mingyue, he turned and left along the small path, their figures quickly disappearing amidst the verdant bamboo.

Su Ming watched the direction they disappeared in, knowing that although Qingfeng's words were unpleasant, they were the truth.

Su Ming stood where he was, watching them leave, then lowered his head to look at the jade slip in his palm.

He clenched the jade slip tightly, turned around, and walked towards the cluster of courtyards where the menials lived at the foot of the mountain.

His footsteps were steady and resolute.

...

Late at night.

Courtyard Ding-Qi was completely silent.

Thunderous snores came from the west room where Zhang Meng was. In the north room belonging to Manager Zhao, the lamplight had long been extinguished.

In the south room, Li Kai was, as always, utterly silent.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on his bed, carefully pressing that jade slip against the center of his forehead.

Imitating the way sect disciples did it, he tried to slowly channel that faint wisp of spiritual energy from within his body into it.

The spiritual energy, like a tiny stream, touched the jade slip.

"Hummm—"

In Su Ming's mind, vast, complex, and profound information, like a bursting flood, surged madly into his Consciousness Sea!

Research on the Origins of Formations...

Detailed Explanation of Basic Runes - Three Thousand Six Hundred Forms...

Preliminary Discussion on Constructing Spiritual Energy Circuits...

Analysis of the Interplay of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements and Their Compatibility with Formation Attributes...

Every single character felt like a mountain, pressing down heavily upon his soul.

Those twisted, complex runes, like living creatures, swirled and danced in his mind, making him dizzy.

After just a short moment, Su Ming felt a splitting headache, his mental energy completely exhausted.

He grunted, abruptly moving the jade slip away from his forehead, gasping for breath in large gulps.

Cold sweat had already soaked through his back.

It's too difficult!

This was a hundred times harder than memorizing the entire Da Xing Compendium!

No guidance, relying entirely on self-exploration.

This feeling was like an illiterate child being thrown into a massive library containing tens of thousands of scripture scrolls, not even knowing which book to start opening.

Forcing himself to endure the mental fatigue, he once again pressed the jade slip against his forehead.

This time, he didn't dare to be greedy for more.

He concentrated all his mental focus, looking only at the first section of the Detailed Explanation of Basic Runes.

One of the simplest runes, representing the meaning of "gather".

That rune was composed of three strokes. Every turn, every pause in each stroke contained a unique rhythm.

He stared fixedly at that rune, copying it over and over again in his mind.

He would write it and forget it, forget it and write it again.

One hour passed.

He finally managed to barely imprint the shape of this single rune deep into his memory.

And his spirit had already reached its limit of exhaustion, his eyelids feeling as heavy as a thousand pounds.

"No good... this is way too slow."

Su Ming leaned against the wall, his heart filled with a sense of powerlessness.

Three thousand six hundred basic runes. Even memorizing one a day would take ten years to finish.

And that was just the most basic memorization, not to mention comprehension and application.

He took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down.

Can't rush.

The more it's like this, the more one must not lose composure.

He closed his eyes and began to operate the Aura Concealment Art, entering a state of meditation.

The fatigue in his Consciousness Sea slowly recovered during meditation.

He suddenly remembered his work in the Accounting Office, remembered those tedious ledgers...

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,289 words]

The next day, in the Accounting Office.

Manager Liu Tong noticed Su Ming looked a bit pale and, assuming he was overworked, didn't assign him any heavy tasks.

Su Ming was happy to have the leisure.

He didn't go look at the regular ledgers.

Instead, he went straight into the deepest archive room of the Accounting Office.

What was piled up here were all old, outdated files that no one cared about.

He carefully searched through the dust-covered shelves.

Finally, he found what he was looking for.

—"List of Low-Level Formation Maintenance and Material Replacements for Each Peak."

This was precisely the "messy accounts" of Formation Peak that he had previously organized.

He carefully unrolled a scroll detailing the maintenance list for the "Dust-Repelling Formation of Medicine Plot Ding."

The list recorded in detail:

"Third day of the seventh month, Jiazi Year, Medicine Plot Ding, 'Three Powers Dust-Repelling Formation,' the spiritual energy of the formation flag at the southwest 'Kun' position has attenuated, replaced with one low-grade earth-attribute spirit stone."

"Fifteenth day of the seventh month, Jiazi Year, Medicine Plot Ding, 'Three Powers Dust-Repelling Formation,' the core rune of the formation core is worn, re-engraved with the 'Gathering' character rune by Formation Peak disciple Li Changqing."

Su Ming compared these records one by one with the content he saw in the jade slip last night.

The "Basic Overview of Formations" mentioned that the "Three Powers Dust-Repelling Formation" uses the positioning of the Three Powers of Heaven, Earth, and Man, and requires drawing upon the earth's qi as its foundation. Therefore, the "Kun" position requires an earth-attribute spirit stone.

This perfectly matched the record on the list!

So that's how it is!

A light of excitement burst forth in Su Ming's eyes.

This was no longer dry theory.

This was the combination of theory and practice!

In the following days, during the daytime, Su Ming treated each formation maintenance list in the Accounting Office as a textbook to study.

He compared them with the principles in the "Overview," reverse-engineering every detail in those lists.

Why does the illumination formation need yang-attribute spirit stones?

Why must the formation flags of the dust-repelling formation be made from rootless wood?

Why must the energy core of patrol puppets be activated using wood struck by lightning?

One by one, the "common knowledge" that puzzled ordinary menial disciples became formation principles that could be disassembled and understood in his eyes.

His brain, like a precise machine, operated frantically.

And at night, he would put what he learned during the day into practice.

.....

Su Ming sat cross-legged on his hard plank bed, without lighting a lamp.

Moonlight filtered through the window paper, casting a patch of cold silver frost on the floor.

His fingertip unconsciously rubbed the Xuantian ring.

The ring was cool to the touch, yet smooth and warm.

But no matter how he urged his divine sense, he could only feel Lin Yu's soul body, as faint as a candle flame in the wind, quietly suspended in the center of the Spirit Gathering Array, showing no signs of awakening.

A sense of loneliness surged over him like a tide.

Over this past month, he seemed to have adapted to sect life, moving with ease in the Accounting Office.

But he knew clearly in his heart that every step he took was like walking on thin ice.

The stability of the Accounting Office was Elder Ma's favor, and also something he had exchanged with his far-above-average mathematical ability.

But this stability was too fragile.

It was built on the foundation of his "usefulness."

Once he lost this value, or if the Accounting Office no longer needed him, he could be discarded like a worn-out shoe at any moment.

He must possess power that truly belonged to him.

"Master..."

Su Ming murmured softly in his heart.

"If you were here, you would surely be able to resolve my doubts."

"Where should one even begin with the path of formations?"

He gathered his focus and once again pressed that old jade slip to his forehead.

This time, he didn't try to be greedy for more. Instead, he concentrated all his spirit on the simplest formation recorded in the jade slip.

—"Dust-Repelling Formation."

As the name implied, this formation had only one function.

Clearing away dust.

This was an entry-level formation used by formation apprentices to practice their touch and perceive the flow of spiritual energy.

Su Ming took a deep breath.

He fished out from under his bed a few smooth pebbles he had picked from the back mountain during the day, and a small pinch of dry wood shavings.

Following the pattern in the jade slip, he arranged three pebbles on the floorboards in front of him in the shape of a triangle.

Next, he extended his index finger, mobilized the wisp of spiritual energy within his body that was finer than a strand of hair, and gathered it at his fingertip.

Holding his breath, he imitated the strokes of the rune in the jade slip, slowly inscribing it on the cold stone floor.

First stroke, starting the momentum.

Spiritual energy seeped from his fingertip, leaving a barely perceptible, faintly glowing blue trace on the ground.

Success!

Joy surged in Su Ming's heart.

However, just as he was about to draw the second turning stroke, the spiritual energy at his fingertip suddenly trembled and instantly dissipated.

The blue light on the ground vanished along with it, as if it had never appeared.

Failure.

Su Ming was not discouraged.

He mobilized his spiritual energy again and started over.

Starting momentum, turning...

"Snap."

A soft sound.

The spiritual energy lost control again, breaking at the turning point.

Again!

"Snap."

Broke again.

Fine beads of sweat appeared on Su Ming's forehead.

He discovered a problem he had never considered before.

Copying a rune in his mind and drawing it out with spiritual energy by hand were two completely different things!

His hand seemed to have a mind of its own.

Every turn, every pause, had a subtle yet fatal deviation from the standard pattern in the jade slip.

What he drew was not a rune at all, just a glowing scribble.

"Calm the heart, focus the spirit."

Su Ming forced himself to calm down.

He closed his eyes and visualized the form of that "Gathering" character rune in his mind hundreds of times.

After confirming every detail was memorized thoroughly, he opened his eyes again.

This time, he drew extremely slowly, extremely steadily.

The spiritual energy at his fingertip, like a docile little snake, slowly slithered across the ground.

One stroke, two strokes, three strokes...

Success!

A complete, albeit somewhat crooked, "Gathering" character rune finally appeared in the center of the three pebbles!

Although the glow was dim, as if it could extinguish at any moment, it had ultimately taken form!

Su Ming was ecstatic.

He hurriedly followed the final step in the jade slip, gently sprinkling that small pinch of wood shavings onto the center of the rune.

Then, he waited nervously.

One breath.

Two breaths.

Ten breaths passed.

Nothing happened.

The wood shavings were still just those wood shavings.

The dust in the corner of the room still rested quietly in place, paying no heed to the "masterpiece" he had drawn.

After flickering a few times, the glow of that rune finally exhausted its last trace of spiritual energy and completely extinguished.

Failed again.

Su Ming stood frozen in place, the joy on his face slowly solidifying.

Where was the problem?

Su Ming replayed the entire process in his mind over and over again.

Three Powers Positioning, correct.

Rune inscription, although ugly, was complete overall.

The guiding material was also placed.

But why was there no change in the spiritual energy flow?

The theory seemed to correspond, but actual hands-on practice left him completely clueless.

For the first time, Su Ming felt that his proud "comprehension" was so pale and powerless before the path of formations.

The jade slip only recorded "what it is" and "how to do it."

But it did not record the most crucial "why."

Why must this rune be drawn this way?

Why must the spiritual energy pause at that node?

Why must the three stones be arranged at that angle?

These required a master's verbal instruction, required guidance through soul perception.

And these were precisely what the jade slip could not give him.

Self-study had reached a deadlock.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 139: Formation

[1,162 words]

An unprecedented sense of anxiety, like a creeping vine, coiled around Su Ming's heart, making his breathing somewhat difficult.

Su Ming refused to believe it was impossible. For the next several nights, he poured almost all his time into this tiny "Dust-Repelling Formation."

To avoid disturbing his roommates, he even moved his practice spot to the corner of the courtyard, next to an abandoned old well.

The runes were carved inaccurately.

The timing of spiritual energy injection was off.

The node connections were wrong.

Countless failures.

The bluestone slabs around the well platform were covered with his crooked, meandering green scratches, which would then fade and disappear with each failure.

Scattered nearby were piles of broken stones and rotten wood he had used as makeshift formation bases, only to be discarded in frustration.

The entire well platform was a mess he had created.

And the formation itself remained completely unresponsive.

One night, Zhang Meng got up to relieve himself and saw Su Ming squatting by the well, staring blankly at a pile of junk. Unable to hold back, he asked through a yawn.

"Brother Su, not sleeping in the middle of the night? What's the big deal with this pile of broken stones?"

Su Ming shook his head with a bitter smile.

"It's nothing. Couldn't sleep, just doodling."

"Doodling?" Zhang Meng leaned over for a look, scratching his head. "What you're drawing... is it ghostly scribbles?"

Su Ming had no retort.

Even Manager Zhao from the north room, stepping out one morning and seeing the mess at the well platform, couldn't help but frown and say, "Su Ming, this courtyard is where menials live, not a place for you to pile up garbage. Remember to clean it up."

Li Kai from the south room remained silent as ever.

But when he went out to fetch water, his gaze would linger on those broken stones and scratches for an extra moment.

Su Ming took in everyone's reactions, and the anxiety and pressure in his heart grew with each passing day.

He felt like a prisoner trapped in a maze, holding a blueprint of the exit but unable to find a single path leading out.

That night, he failed once again.

His spiritual energy dissipated at the final node; the stone slab before him didn't even flicker with the faintest glimmer.

Frustrated, Su Ming fiercely slammed the stone in his hand onto the ground.

With a sharp *crack*, the stone shattered into several pieces.

He slumped dejectedly against the cold edge of the well, looking up at the clear, cold moon in the night sky, his heart filled with defeat.

Could it be that I truly have no talent in this area?

Could it be that without a master's guidance, I can't even grasp the simplest entry-level formation?

He stared blankly at his own hands.

These hands could handle the most complex ledgers, could write analytical reports that even Elder Ma praised.

So why couldn't they even draw the simplest rune correctly?

Just as he was losing heart, a thought flashed through his mind.

The Accounting Office... the ledgers...

Heavenly Sword Peak!

He abruptly sat up straight!

He remembered that ledger detailing the material consumption of the Logistics Department of Heavenly Sword Peak!

It clearly recorded that the wear rate of the formation flags consumed by Heavenly Sword Peak disciples while practicing a certain sword formation was astonishingly consistent every single month!

No more, no less, exactly thirty percent!

Back then, he had simply thought it was a clumsy method of falsifying accounts, leaving behind an overly obvious pattern.

But now, he suddenly understood!

That perhaps... wasn't falsification at all!

What kind of precise control was that!

To be able to control the output of spiritual energy at the exact same level every single time, causing precisely thirty percent wear and tear on the formation flags—no more, no less!

This stood in stark contrast to his current situation, where his spiritual energy was sometimes strong, sometimes weak, completely uncontrollable!

Su Ming finally understood!

Setting up a formation wasn't about rote memorization of those runes and steps!

Its true core was that precise, down-to-the-millimeter control over one's own spiritual energy!

It was the soul's meticulous, nuanced perception of the flow of spiritual energy!

His current problem wasn't a lack of theoretical understanding; it was that his hands couldn't keep up with his brain!

That wisp of weak spiritual energy was like an untamed wild horse, completely ignoring his commands.

Tell it to go east, and it insisted on going west.

Tell it to stop, and it charged recklessly ahead.

Using such uncontrollable spiritual energy to set up a precise formation was no different from asking a drunkard to thread a needle!

"So... that's how it is."

Su Ming let out a long, slow breath, the anxiety and confusion in his heart swept clean away.

He looked at the mess surrounding the well platform and gave a self-mocking smile.

He had been on the wrong path from the very beginning.

He stood up, meticulously cleaning up the broken stones and wood chips, restoring the well platform to its original state.

Then, he walked back to his room.

This time, he didn't take out that jade slip, nor did he touch those stones again.

He sat cross-legged on his bed and slowly closed his eyes.

For now, he set aside those complex formations.

There was only one thing he needed to do now.

Tame the disobedient "wild horse" within his own body.

He calmed his mind and began to concentrate fully on circulating the "Greenwood Longevity Art."

He no longer pursued the speed of the cultivation method's circulation, nor did he obsess over the amount of spiritual energy absorbed.

He focused all his will on mastering control over that wisp of weak spiritual energy.

He tried to make that wisp of energy flow back and forth within one of his meridians.

At first, the energy still stumbled along, sometimes fast, sometimes slow.

He patiently repeated the process. Once, ten times, a hundred times.

Until that wisp of energy could, at a mere thought, flow smoothly from one end of the meridian to the other.

Then, he began to increase the difficulty.

He tried to make the spiritual energy stop at a specific node within the meridian.

Hold for one breath.

The energy trembled, uncontrollably surging forward.

Failure.

Try again.

Hold for half a breath.

The energy lost control again.

Failure.

...

This was an even more tedious and grinding process than setting up the "Dust-Repelling Formation."

But Su Ming's heart was unprecedentedly calm.

He knew he had finally found the right direction this time.

This was the true "foundation."

This was the one correct, solid step leading to the path of formations.

While Su Ming was immersed in this tedious cultivation, he didn't notice.

The tightly shut door of the south room silently cracked open a sliver.

Li Kai's somewhat evasive eyes were peering through the crack, quietly watching the well platform in the courtyard that had been cleaned up so neatly.

His gaze lingered for a long time on an inconspicuous bluestone on the well's edge.

There, a failed, incomplete rune mark left behind by Su Ming.

Though fragmented, one could vaguely make out that it was the character for "Gathering."

A complex expression flashed in Li Kai's eyes.

Surprise, confusion, and a hint of... understanding born from shared hardship.

He watched silently for a while, then soundlessly... closed the door again.

The room once more sank into darkness and dead silence.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,427 words]

The days flowed slowly by in a monotonous, regular rhythm.

Su Ming used his own thin wisp of spiritual energy to wash over the Xuantian ring, over and over again, every single day.

He didn't know if this was useful, but he had to do it.

The vitality brought by the Greenwood Longevity Art, mixed with the residual medicinal power of that Hundred-Herb Revival Pill, continuously nourished the ring, and also nourished the master slumbering within it.

A month's time passed quietly.

One afternoon, as Su Ming had just returned from the Accounting Office, he saw two familiar small figures standing at the courtyard gate.

Qingfeng stood with his hands clasped behind his back, impatiently kicking pebbles on the ground with the tip of his foot.

Mingyue was squatting on the ground, curiously teasing a passing grasshopper.

"Su Ming! You're back!" Mingyue, sharp-eyed, was the first to spot him, waving happily.

Su Ming walked over, a faint smile appearing on his face.

Over this past month, these two little ancestors had become regular visitors to Courtyard Ding-Qi.

They would always find some pretext, either "passing by" or "conducting an inspection," but in reality, they came to listen to Su Ming tell those stories of political intrigue from the mortal imperial court, or the strange tales and bizarre accounts from the Records of Southern Border Wonders.

"Senior Apprentice Brother Qingfeng, Senior Apprentice Sister Mingyue." Su Ming cupped his hands in salute.

"Enough, enough." Qingfeng waved his hand impatiently, but his eyes were sparkling, "Are you telling the 'Nine Princes' Fight for the Throne' story today? Last time you stopped right when the Fourth Prince and the Eighth Prince joined forces to set a trap for the Crown Prince, what happened next?"

Before Su Ming could open his mouth, the door to the North Room creaked open.

Manager Zhao walked out, his face wreathed in smiles, holding a plate of freshly washed spirit fruits.

"Oh my! Junior Uncle Qingfeng, Junior Aunt Mingyue! Why didn't you two inform me you were coming? I could have prepared some fine tea and snacks!"

The speed of his attitude change over this month had left even Zhang Meng utterly astonished.

Ever since learning that Su Ming was under the protection of these two "little junior uncles," Manager Zhao had completely dropped his airs. He now inquired daily about Su Ming's well-being, being extremely attentive and solicitous.

"Zhao Ping, your presence is not required here." Qingfeng's little face immediately adopted a stern expression, clearly enjoying the feeling of being flattered.

"Yes, yes, yes, this disciple will not disturb the esteemed junior uncles' pleasant conversation." Manager Zhao nodded and bowed, stuffing the fruit plate into Su Ming's hands, then lowering his voice to say, "Brother Su, the courtyard is out of water, I'll go fetch some. If there's any work, just give the order."

After saying this, he tactfully picked up the water buckets and left.

Su Ming watched his retreating back, secretly shaking his head in his heart.

In this world of cultivation, the ways of human relations and worldly affairs were no different from those of the mortal imperial court.

"Su Ming, ignore him." Qingfeng tugged at Su Ming's sleeve, urging him, "Hurry up and tell the story, hurry up!"

Su Ming smiled, placed the fruit plate on the stone table in the courtyard, and said, "The story can wait. Actually, I happen to have a matter I'd like to ask you two about."

He concisely explained his predicament of studying formations but being unable to grasp the fundamentals.

"...I can barely manage to draw the runes now, but for some reason, I always fail to stir the spiritual energy."

"Formations?" Qingfeng's eyes immediately lit up upon hearing this. He lifted his little chin, putting on the airs of an expert.

"I understand this!"

He cleared his throat, imitating the way the sect elders lectured, and began his "profound discourse."

"The Dao of Formations is vast and profound! Its core lies in the three true words: 'Draw,' 'Gather,' and 'Transform!'"

"The so-called 'Draw' means drawing upon the spiritual energy of heaven and earth for your own use! If you can't draw it, it means your affinity with the heaven and earth's spiritual energy is insufficient! That requires talent, understand? Talent!"

"The so-called 'Gather' means gathering the drawn spiritual energy at the formation core! Why can't your drawn runes gather energy? It means your spiritual energy isn't pure enough! Go back and practice your cultivation method another hundred times!"

"As for 'Transform,' that's even more profound! Transforming spiritual energy into myriad phenomena, either for slaughter or for protection! Right now, you haven't even touched the threshold, so don't even think about it!"

His speech was full of cogent arguments, delivered with great confidence.

Mingyue, listening beside him, nodded repeatedly, her eyes full of admiration.

After listening, however, Su Ming frowned deeply.

These words sounded very reasonable, but... they were all correct yet useless platitudes.

The Basic Overview of Formations explained these theories in a hundred times more detail than he did.

What Su Ming wanted wasn't theory; it was a method to solve the problem.

Looking at Qingfeng's smug expression, Su Ming had a thought and changed his approach.

"Senior Apprentice Brother's words are extremely insightful, they have truly opened my mind."

He first offered a compliment, then asked, "Then... could Senior Apprentice Brother demonstrate for me how to precisely control spiritual energy, allowing it to steadily infuse into the rune at the final node, rather than instantly dissipating?"

This question precisely hit Qingfeng's weak spot.

His little face instantly flushed red.

"Uh... well... that..." His eyes began to dart around, and he hemmed and hawed, "Spiritual energy control is a matter of slow, meticulous work! It can only be comprehended, not explained! Yes, only comprehended!"

"I... my spiritual energy circulation isn't smooth today, not suitable for a demonstration! Another day, we'll talk about it another day!"

After saying this, he grabbed Mingyue's hand and ran off without looking back.

"We'll hear the story next time!"

Watching their fleeing figures, Su Ming could only smile helplessly.

It seemed the Dao of Formations ultimately still depended on himself.

Just as he was about to return to his room to continue that tedious practice of spiritual energy control, a familiar, loud voice rang out outside the courtyard.

"Brother Su! Brother Su! Come out quickly to collect your monthly allowance!"

Wang Defa's portly figure squeezed through the courtyard gate, panting heavily.

His face was flushed with excitement. As soon as he saw Su Ming, he enthusiastically waved him over.

"Brother Su, come quick, come quick! This month's allowance, plus last month's, I'm giving them to you together!"

Wang Defa fished out a small cloth pouch from his bulging storage pouch and thrust it into Su Ming's hands.

The pouch felt heavy in his grasp.

Su Ming opened it to see six pieces of stone, quietly lying inside, emitting a warm, lustrous glow.

Low-grade spirit stones!

"Six pieces?" Su Ming was somewhat surprised.

According to the rules, menial disciples could only receive ten catties of spiritual rice and three fasting pills per month. Spirit stones were a privilege reserved for outer sect disciples.

Although he had done well in the Accounting Office this past month, it shouldn't warrant such preferential treatment.

"Heheh!" Wang Defa proudly slapped his chest, lowered his voice, and spoke mysteriously.

"Brother Su, you don't understand."

"What a great merit you've earned for our Accounting Office, no, for our entire External Affairs Hall? Just based on those ledger analyses of yours, how many spirit stones have you saved for the sect? I, Old Wang, saw it all with my own eyes!"

He leaned in even closer, his spittle practically spraying onto Su Ming's face.

"Last month, I applied to Elder Ma to improve your treatment! Elder Ma didn't say anything at the time, so I thought it fell through. But when it was time to distribute the monthly allowances, Elder Ma specifically instructed me to give you an extra spirit stone per month, according to the outer sect disciple standard!"

"But back then, the official approval document from above hadn't come down yet. I, Old Wang, thought about it, this matter had to be handled cleanly! I couldn't let you take the money without a clear reason, only to have people gossip about it later."

"So, I simply held back your allowance from last month! I said you had just entered the sect, the procedures weren't finished, and we'd make it up together next month!"

He heavily patted Su Ming's shoulder, wearing an expression that said, "Brother, I've worried myself sick for you."

"See, this month the official approval came down! You are now a 'Specially Appointed Menial' of our External Affairs Hall's Accounting Office! Your monthly allowance is three spirit stones! I've given you last month's and this month's, a total of six, all at once!"

"So? Did your brother here handle this matter properly or not?"

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[884 words]

Su Ming held the weighty cloth pouch, his heart filled with a whirlwind of emotions.

He knew this wasn't just six spirit stones.

This was the first time within this immortal sect that he had truly earned, through his own ability, resources recognized by the rules.

He bowed deeply towards Wang Defa.

"Thank you, Steward Wang. I will remember this kindness."

"Ah! You're too kind! Too kind!" Wang Defa's smile was so wide his eyes became mere slits. "The Accounting Office will still need to rely on you in the future, Brother Su!"

After seeing Wang Defa off, Su Ming returned to his simple, crude eastern side room.

He closed the door and carefully poured the six spirit stones onto his bed.

The gentle glow of spiritual light instantly illuminated the dim little room.

Pure spiritual energy washed over him, making every pore in his body feel a wave of comfort.

This was spirit stones!

He picked up one piece, feeling the spiritual energy contained within it, a hundred times denser than the surrounding air, his heart surging with emotion.

With these, Master's Soul Body might recover a little faster.

His own cultivation might also...

Su Ming didn't dare think further.

He took a deep breath, carefully putting away three of the spirit stones, leaving only this month's three.

In all matters, leave a line of retreat.

This was a principle his master had taught him.

.....

Night deepened.

Courtyard Ding-Qi was completely silent.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on his bed, not rushing to absorb the spirit stones for cultivation.

As usual, he first mobilized the strand of spiritual energy within his body, which had become much more docile, and channeled it into the Xuantian ring to nourish his master's Soul Body.

This had become his unshakable daily habit.

Only after completing this did he prepare to begin tonight's cultivation session.

However, just as he began circulating the Greenwood Longevity Art, preparing to inhale and exhale the heaven and earth's spiritual energy, a sudden change occurred!

The Xuantian ring on his finger grew slightly warm without any warning!

Immediately after, that warmth instantly turned scalding hot!

A powerful suction force erupted violently from the ring!

Su Ming's expression changed drastically. He could clearly feel the thin spiritual energy in the surrounding air, like a hundred rivers returning to the sea, madly surging towards the Xuantian ring!

Inside the ring, the Spirit Gathering Array that had always operated slowly now resembled a primordial beast awakening, its rotation speed suddenly increasing by more than tenfold!

Hmm——

A low humming sound resonated within Su Ming's mind.

The air in the room became somewhat distorted due to the violent flow of spiritual energy.

The flame of the oil lamp on the table flickered wildly before finally extinguishing with a "pfft" sound.

Darkness enveloped the entire room.

Only that Xuantian ring emitted an eerie, dark red glow, casting Su Ming's face in shifting light and shadow.

"What's happening?"

Su Ming was horrified. He wanted to stop the circulation of his cultivation method, but he discovered the spiritual energy within his body was completely out of control, forcibly drained away by that terrifying suction force and poured into the ring!

His body was visibly withering away.

In just a few breaths, he felt dizzy, his vision blurry, his limbs weak.

If this continued, he would be sucked dry into a mummy!

Just as Su Ming thought he was going to die here, an extremely faint thought transmitted into his mind.

"Water... spirit... energy..."

The voice was weak to the extreme, yet incredibly familiar!

It was Master!

Su Ming's breath hitched violently, his heart feeling as if gripped by an invisible hand, then ruthlessly thrown into the sky!

Wild joy!

Indescribable, overwhelming joy instantly washed away all his fear and terror!

Master was awake!

Master needed spiritual energy!

Needed denser, purer spiritual energy!

Without the slightest hesitation, using the last shred of his strength, Su Ming tremblingly grabbed the three low-grade spirit stones on the bed with his hand and pressed them firmly against the Xuantian ring!

The three hard spirit stones, the moment they touched the Xuantian ring, melted away at a visible speed like ice and snow thrown onto red-hot iron!

Vast and pure spiritual energy transformed into three streams of white energy visible to the naked eye, "swallowed" whole by the Xuantian ring!

"Hic..."

A soft sound, like a satisfied hiccup after a meal, echoed in Su Ming's mind.

The scalding temperature on the ring's surface receded like a tide.

The madly spinning Spirit Gathering Array gradually slowed down.

That terrifying suction force that had almost drained him dry also vanished.

The surrounding air returned to calm once more.

Everything seemed as if it had never happened.

Su Ming collapsed limply on the bed, gasping for breath in great heaves, his entire body soaked in cold sweat.

He stared nervously at the ring on his finger, his heart in his throat.

One breath.

Two breaths.

Ten breaths passed.

The ring showed no reaction.

Su Ming's heart sank little by little.

Could it be... that was just an illusion?

Just as a trace of despair rose in his heart, that familiar voice finally sounded again.

This time, it was no longer a fragmented thought.

Though still weak, it was clearly audible.

"Good disciple..."

"Where... are we now?"

"Why is the spiritual energy... so abundant..."

Su Ming lay collapsed on the bed, sweat soaking through his clothes, every limb and joint trembling uncontrollably from the weakness of having his spiritual energy drained.

But he didn't care at all.

All his focus was concentrated on that weak yet incredibly clear call.

"Master..."

Su Ming's voice was hoarse, carrying a hint of a sob he himself hadn't even noticed.

"Your disciple is here!"

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 142: Good heavens, my apprentice has infiltrated the government!

[1,586 words]

"Hmm..."

Inside the ring, Lin Yu's voice was still as faint as a dying breath, as if it could cut off again at any moment.

"Don't speak yet, it consumes your spirit. Use your thoughts to tell me everything."

Su Ming closed his eyes, forcibly suppressing the surging ecstasy and excitement in his heart, and sank his divine sense into the Xuantian ring.

Falling off the cliff.

The raging torrent.

The near-death counterattack.

Qingfeng and Mingyue's rescue.

The interrogation at the Hall of Meritorious Deeds.

The awe towards the Cloud Hidden Sect.

The assessment at the External Affairs Hall.

Finding a foothold in the Accounting Office.

The predicament with the formation jade slip.

The origin of the six spirit stones.

...

Scene after scene, memory after memory, like a surging flood, carrying all of Su Ming's unease and caution from the past two months, poured unreservedly towards that faint soul body that had just awakened.

At the moment the information was transmitted, Su Ming felt as if he had relived that nine-deaths-one-life ordeal, his mind in turmoil.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu, who had received all this, fell into a long silence.

Su Ming didn't dare disturb him, only waiting nervously.

A long time passed, so long that Su Ming began to wonder if his master had fainted again.

A thought filled with amazement, and a hint of secret delight, sounded in Su Ming's mind.

"Holy smokes!"

"I just took a nap, and my disciple... has already gotten himself into the official system?!"

"The Cloud Hidden Sect! The External Affairs Hall! Specially Appointed Menial!"

"With a salary (spirit stones) too! Three pieces a month!"

"This cliff jump was a bloody jackpot!"

Su Ming: "..."

He was stunned speechless for a long moment by his master's sudden outburst.

This style... seemed a bit different from the awakening of a great master he had imagined.

Before he could ponder it further, Lin Yu's tone, still somewhat weak but having regained its usual steadiness, slowly sounded.

"Hmm, disciple, you have done very well."

The voice wasn't loud, but it carried a power that settled the heart.

"Finding a sliver of life in a desperate situation; securing a place for yourself in a den of wolves. Your temperament, intellect, and forbearance are all of the highest order."

"The cliff fall was my carelessness, nearly plunging both master and disciple into a state beyond all redemption."

These words were an affirmation of Su Ming's efforts during this time.

Su Ming's eyes grew hot, all the grievances and unease in his heart instantly vanishing without a trace.

"Master, if not for your final intervention..."

"No need to say more," Lin Yu interrupted him. "Master and disciple are as one."

"Since we have arrived at this Cloud Hidden Sect, we must first establish our fundamental strategy here."

"Fundamental strategy?"

"Correct." Lin Yu's voice took on a serious tone. "Namely, the eight characters: 'Conceal the sharp edge within the blunt, nurture obscurity within silence.' Previously in the mountain village, what I taught you was 'conceal clumsiness to avoid disaster.' Now that we are in an immortal sect, a place of mixed fish and dragons, we must deepen this path, integrating it into daily cultivation."

Su Ming's mind jolted into alertness, listening intently.

"You are now within the Cloud Hidden Sect. It seems safe, but in reality, dangers lurk everywhere." Lin Yu analyzed. "Your foundation is destroyed, your path to immortality severed. Once you display talent beyond expectations, you may attract the attention of other cultivators."

"You have no background, like duckweed without roots. Qingfeng and Mingyue can protect you for a while, but not forever. They are, after all, inner sect disciples, their circumstances vastly different from ours."

"Therefore, our strategy is divided into two lines: the overt and the covert."

"Overtly, you, Su Ming, are still that menial with astonishing talent in calculation, the ace menial of the Accounting Office with no hope in the immortal path. You must perform better, more outstandingly than before, making everyone believe your value lies solely in accounting. Use your unparalleled 'excellence' to cover up the 'genius' you may reveal in the future."

"You must use your position to read all the classics, ledgers, and lists you can access. For us, those are not dull numbers, but the operating veins of the sect, the distribution of resources, the network of relationships... they are our living map and protective talisman!"

Su Ming's mind was shaken. He had never considered that the ledgers he dealt with daily held such profound strategic significance.

"And covertly?"

"Covertly," Lin Yu's tone gained a sharp edge, "I will personally guide you to systematically study the path of formations."

"We won't learn flashy but impractical attack arrays, nor will we touch attention-grabbing grand illusion arrays. We will only master three types: survival, concealment, and escape!"

"First, blocking prying eyes. Soundproofing arrays, breath-concealing arrays, shielding arrays. To ensure all our activities within this tiny space remain unknown to outsiders."

"Second, early warning and surveillance. Warning arrays, spying arrays, confusing trail arrays. To ensure we are fully aware of any ill-intentioned individuals long before they approach."

"Third, and fundamental, prepare an escape route. Short-distance teleportation arrays, simple earth-escape arrays, flexible contingency arrays! To ensure that if things go south, we can flee thousands of miles away in the first moment and seek a new chance at life!"

"Our goal is not to become a revered grandmaster of formations, but to become a seeker of the Dao who cannot be detected, cannot be trapped, cannot be pursued, and can peacefully pursue the great path of longevity."

Su Ming listened, his heart surging with excitement.

This theory was unheard of, completely overturning his understanding of cultivation.

But for some reason, he felt... his master made so much sense!

"This disciple understands!" Su Ming nodded emphatically.

"Very good." Lin Yu seemed quite satisfied with Su Ming's comprehension.

"With the plan set, let's talk about startup capital."

"Take out the three spirit stones you have left. Let me see them."

Su Ming complied, pouring all three low-grade spirit stones from the cloth pouch, lining them up on the bed.

In the dark room, the gentle glow emitted by the spirit stones illuminated his young, earnest face.

"Hmm, the quality is acceptable." Lin Yu's thoughts swept over the stones.

My soul body repair SPA package!

"These three spirit stones need to be allocated for use."

"Two of them will be placed into the Spirit Gathering Array inside the Xuantian ring immediately to nourish my soul body. The faster I recover, the more guidance you receive, and the safer you become. This is called investment, understand?"

"Understood."

"The last one," Lin Yu paused briefly, "is for you."

"During your daily cultivation, you can draw a wisp of spiritual energy from this stone, integrating it into the circulation cycle of the Greenwood Longevity Art. Remember, just a wisp, no more!"

"Although your Dao foundation is destroyed, the Greenwood Longevity Art is ever-renewing. Combined with the residual medicinal power of the Hundred-Herb Revival Pill, it is enough to subtly, slowly repair your meridians. This process must be slow, so slow you can barely perceive it yourself, and no one else must notice any sign."

"What we want is not meteoric progress achieved in a day, but the silent, gradual nourishment of water dripping through stone."

After this speech, clear and meticulous, every point accounted for.

Su Ming's admiration for his master reached a new level.

Strategizing from within a tent, calculating without a single oversight.

This was the true demeanor of a master!

He immediately followed Lin Yu's instructions, pressing two spirit stones against the Xuantian ring.

The ring flashed faintly, and the two stones disappeared, sucked into the ring's interior.

Su Ming could clearly feel the Spirit Gathering Array inside the ring suddenly speeding up its operation. A stream of pure spiritual energy began continuously nourishing Lin Yu's weakened soul body.

Lin Yu let out a comfortable "hmph."

Bliss! Absolute bliss! A five-star energy SPA! I'll have to get my disciple to snag more spirit stones later!

"Alright, the plan is set, resources are in place. Now, let's begin our first lesson."

Lin Yu's voice sounded again.

"Your previous understanding of spiritual energy control was correct in direction, but wrong in method."

"Where was it wrong?" Su Ming humbly sought guidance.

"It was wrong because you only knew how to block, not how to guide."

"Forcing spiritual energy to stop or change direction within your meridians is like trying to rein in a galloping horse. Naturally, it's extremely difficult and prone to losing control."

"True control is about guidance."

"Now, close your eyes, mobilize that wisp of spiritual energy within your body. Don't try to control it, just 'watch' it, feel its flow trajectory, speed, rhythm within your meridians..."

Su Ming did as instructed.

He calmed his mind, looking inward.

That wisp of green spiritual energy, like a mischievous little fish, was swimming aimlessly through his meridians.

"Feel it?"

"I feel it."

"Good. Now, don't command it. Instead, imagine that ahead of it, a channel it would prefer, more comfortable, appears. Use your will to 'pave a path' for it."

Su Ming was taken aback upon hearing this.

Pave a path?

He tried focusing his will on a section of meridian ahead of the spiritual energy, imagining that area becoming incredibly smooth and comfortable.

A strange thing happened.

That originally erratic wisp of spiritual energy actually seemed attracted by something, actively and smoothly flowing towards the section of meridian where his will was concentrated!

The entire process was seamless, without the slightest obstruction or force!

Su Ming's heart gave a powerful thump!

"This..."

"This, is 'momentum'." Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of laughter.

"Act according to the momentum, not force against it. This is not only the method of controlling spiritual energy but also the foundation of the path of formations."

"Contemplate this carefully. Tonight, practice this. When you can make this wisp of spiritual energy flow freely through all your meridians, guided by your will paving the path, I will teach you the next step."

"Yes, Master!"

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 143: The Array Cultivator Beginner's Tutorial

[1,120 words]

Su Ming suppressed his excitement and threw himself wholeheartedly into this novel form of cultivation.

Time passed unnoticed.

The room fell silent once more.

While Su Ming was immersed in his cultivation, Lin Yu inside the ring was not completely idle.

He had recovered a sliver of soul power, and his spiritual perception was now much sharper than before.

He could sense that within the courtyard, Zhang Meng in the West Room was snoring like thunder, and Manager Zhao in the North Room had a long, steady breathing rhythm; both had fallen into deep sleep.

Except for...

Lin Yu's soul sense silently extended toward the South Room.

The South Room was pitch black and utterly silent.

Yet, Lin Yu could clearly "see" that the menial named Li Kai was sitting cross-legged on his bed, neither sleeping nor cultivating.

His breathing was extremely faint and carried a unique, barely perceptible rhythm.

It was a breathing technique that could only be formed through long-term suppression of one's own aura.

Lin Yu's soul sense swept over Li Kai's body in a flash, not daring to linger.

Interesting.

This Courtyard Ding-Qi truly had hidden dragons and crouching tigers.

A mathematical genius from the Hanlin Academy, and a silent youth harboring unknown secrets.

Lin Yu's thoughts returned to Su Ming's room.

He "looked" at Su Ming's profile, flushed with excitement from his initial success, and began to scheme internally.

It seems the 'Way of Survival Array Cultivator' plan needs to be moved up.

Soundproofing arrays and breath-concealing arrays must be put on the agenda as soon as possible.

.....

Inside Su Ming's room, it was quiet and still.

He sat cross-legged on the bed, eyes closed, his entire mind immersed in guiding that wisp of cyan spiritual energy within his body.

Following his master's instructions, he no longer forced commands but used his intent to "pave a path" for the spiritual energy.

It was a bit clumsy at first, but with repeated attempts, that wisp of spiritual energy became increasingly docile.

It was like a cheerful little stream, flowing smoothly and happily along the "channel" opened by Su Ming's intent, coursing through his parched meridians.

An unprecedented sense of control spontaneously arose.

Just as Su Ming was immersed in cultivation, Lin Yu's soul body within the Xuantian ring quietly began to move.

Digesting those two spirit stones had solidified his weak soul body a little.

Although he was still a translucent shadow, he could at least move freely now, and his spiritual perception had recovered somewhat.

He drifted aimlessly around the ring's space for a bit.

Then, his soul sense landed on the jade slip titled *Basic Overview of Formations* that Su Ming had placed by the bedside.

Lin Yu's soul sense, like an invisible tentacle, gently extended and touched the jade slip.

Hum.

A massive stream of information instantly flooded into his soul.

Three thousand six hundred basic runes.

Seventy-two types of spiritual energy circuits.

Nine fundamental array models.

The obscure ancient texts, the mysterious and profound explanations, the content that gave Su Ming a splitting headache, presented a completely different picture within Lin Yu's soul.

"Hmm?"

Lin Yu's soul body trembled slightly.

"This 'Gathering' character rune... isn't this just an energy funnel model? The three main strokes construct a gravitational field, the node in the middle is responsible for compression, and that final hook sets the output direction?"

Within his soul, that complex rune was instantly deconstructed into lines and symbols he was extremely familiar with.

"And this 'Defense' character rune... holy crap, isn't this a simplified version of a Faraday cage? Guiding external impact forces to dissipate along the surface by constructing a closed energy circuit?"

"This 'Sharp' character rune focuses energy onto a single point, increasing pressure... isn't this middle school physics!"

The logical thinking, geometry, physics, and even a bit of programming foundation from the modern world transformed at this moment into an indestructible key.

Instantly, it unlocked the seemingly mysterious and heavy door of array studies!

In Lin Yu's eyes, what was so profound about these arrays?

This was clearly... applied spiritual energy physics!

Runes were the most basic circuit components!

Spiritual energy circuits were printed circuit boards!

And the entire array was just the simplest automated program with predefined inputs and outputs!

"So that's how it is..."

Lin Yu's soul body floated in the air, falling into a prolonged silence.

A profound sense of absurdity filled his soul.

The problem that had troubled Su Ming for over a month, making him scratch his head in frustration and unable to find the way in, seemed to him...

Like asking a PhD student to solve an elementary school word problem.

No, even simpler than that.

Because he could not only understand it, but also spot the errors and redundancies at a glance!

"The author of this *Overview* is absolutely a hack!"

Lin Yu's soul sense swept over the jade slip's contents again, his soul of outbursts burning fiercely.

"Why does this 'Three Powers Dust-Repelling Formation' use three spirit stones of the same attribute as array foundations? The energy fields will interfere with each other! Isn't that just like pointing three speakers at each other and getting a muddy mess of sound?"

"Just replace one of them with a mutually-generating attribute, and you can form a micro energy cycle, increasing efficiency by at least thirty percent! It even reduces energy loss! What were these ancient people thinking?"

"And these runes here, they're completely superfluous! Passed down for thousands of years, and no one noticed these strokes are completely redundant? What is this, some ancient code spaghetti?"

As Lin Yu read, he rapidly performed optimizations and deductions in his mind.

In the short time it takes an incense stick to burn, this *Basic Overview of Formations* had been restructured in his brain into *Basic Overview of Formations - Lin Yu's Modified Edition V1.0*.

It pointed out at least seventeen design flaws and provided thirty-two optimization solutions.

"However..."

Lin Yu's soul sense sank deep into the Xuantian ring again, comparing it with the incredibly complex Spirit Gathering Array that had been constantly nurturing his soul body.

"Although the Cloud Hidden Sect's entry-level arrays are crude and primitive, compared to the one in the ring, it's like the difference between an abacus and a supercomputer..."

"But precisely because they are primitive, every part of them is based on the most fundamental, basic principles."

"There's nothing more suitable than this for laying the foundation."

Lin Yu understood clearly in his heart.

Asking someone who doesn't even know how to lay bricks to directly build a skyscraper isn't training, it's murder.

What Su Ming needs right now is to start from mixing mortar and laying bricks.

A clear, complete teaching plan instantly took shape in Lin Yu's mind.

He even came up with the course name.

Zero to Hero: The Beginner's Guide to the Way of Survival Array Cultivation - Theory and Practice

Chapter 2: Runes - No Rote Memorization! Understanding the "Circuit Diagrams" of the Array World.

...

Chapter 10: The Ultimate Chapter - An Introduction to Escape Studies: Simplification and Application of Short-Distance Teleportation Arrays.

"Perfect."

Lin Yu nodded with satisfaction at his own teaching syllabus.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 144: Formations: So Easy to Learn

[1,082 words]

At this moment, Su Ming slowly opened his eyes from his cultivation state.

His face carried a trace of irrepressible joy.

"Master!"

He called out with his spiritual sense.

"I... I think I've done it! I can now make that wisp of spiritual energy travel back and forth three times within the meridians of my arm without losing control!"

"Hmm, acceptable."

Lin Yu immediately suppressed his inner outburst and adopted that demeanor as still as an ancient well, the tone of a master.

"Controlling spiritual energy is like herding horses; this is the first step. But, do you know why we herd horses?"

Su Ming was taken aback.

"Why... to make it obedient?"

"Superficial." Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of perfectly measured guidance.

"Herding horses is to make them pull a cart. Spiritual energy is your horse. Formations are the cart you want to build."

"Your previous failure in setting up a formation was because you tried to build a complex cart before you had even tamed the horse. Putting the cart before the horse, how could you not fail?"

This analogy, simple and easy to understand, instantly enlightened Su Ming.

A look of sudden realization appeared on his face.

"This disciple understands! This disciple was too impatient for success before!"

"To know one's mistake and be able to correct it shows promise in a young man." Lin Yu said calmly.

"Now, look at that 'dust-repelling formation' again. Don't act yet, just look at its 'principle'."

"Master, what is 'principle'?"

"Look, why does that formation use three stones as its foundation?" Lin Yu guided patiently.

Su Ming answered without thinking. "The jade slip says it's for 'Three Powers Positioning', drawing on the meaning of Heaven, Earth, and Man."

"That is its 'name', not its 'principle'."

Lin Yu's voice held a hint of guidance.

"Your teacher asks you, when you were in the mortal world, you saw craftsmen making objects. Why does a table need at least three legs? Why does a tripod have three feet?"

Su Ming frowned in thought.

He remembered Old Man Wang, the village carpenter, whose three-legged stools were always more stable than four-legged ones, never wobbling.

A thought flashed through his mind.

"Because... three points provide the greatest stability!"

"Exactly!"

Lin Yu praised.

"So-called 'Three Powers' is merely a pleasant-sounding name given by the ancients. Its true 'principle' is the two words: 'stability'! Formations are constructs of energy. If the foundation is unstable, everything is a castle in the air. This is the first layer of 'principle' in the path of formations—the principle of form."

Su Ming's heart was struck hard.

So... that's how it is?

Not some mysterious, abstruse explanation, but the most plain, simplest truth?

"Now look at the core 'Gathering' character rune." Lin Yu continued to guide.

"Before, when you inscribed it, you only knew its shape, not its meaning. Now, look at it again with your mind, break it apart. Each stroke, each line, what do you think they are respectively doing?"

Su Ming immediately closed his eyes, visualizing that rune in his mind.

This time, he no longer treated it as a complete picture.

He followed his master's guidance and deconstructed it.

The first stroke, like a primer, 'hooks' the external energy in.

Those few complex, interweaving strokes in the middle were like a sieve, or a whirlpool, causing the hooked-in energy to spiral and compress within.

The final downward stroke was like an outlet, guiding the compressed energy out.

The more Su Ming thought, the brighter his eyes became.

"Master! I... I think I understand!"

"Good."

Lin Yu's voice finally carried a trace of genuine smile.

"This is the second layer of 'principle' in the path of formations—the principle of energy."

"The way of formations, despite myriad changes, never strays from its core. It's nothing more than 'stable form' and 'energy flow'. Only by comprehending these two points have you truly stepped through the gate of formations."

Su Ming's mind was suddenly enlightened.

All the fog that had shrouded his heart before was completely swept away at this moment by his master's few words!

He looked at that jade slip again, his gaze now completely different.

Those originally obscure runes were no longer incomprehensible scribbles in his eyes.

But rather, exquisite and interesting little...

spiritual energy toys, constructed from the most fundamental principles.

He eagerly extended his finger.

"Master, this disciple wants to try again!"

"Go ahead."

Lin Yu's voice carried a note of encouragement.

"Remember, this time, feel it with your heart. Feel how the spiritual energy at your fingertip resonates with the 'principle' of this world."

Su Ming took a deep breath and extended his index finger.

This time, his fingertip did not tremble in the slightest.

That docile wisp of cyan spiritual energy gathered at his will, as easy to command as his own arm.

He looked again at the three ordinary pebbles before him, his gaze now completely different.

Those were not stones.

They were vessels for the principle of "stability", the most solid foundation of the entire formation.

His finger slowly traced across the ground in the center of the three pebbles.

No longer constrained by the rigid stroke order from the jade slip.

In his mind appeared the "energy funnel model" his master had described.

The first stroke was "luring".

With a slight movement of his will, the spiritual energy at his fingertip gave a gentle flick, as if casting an invisible bait into the void.

The sparse spiritual energy in the surrounding air was actually 'hooked' by this action, a wisp of it drawn in and converging into the trace he was inscribing.

The second stroke was "compressing".

The spiritual energy at his fingertip swirled, constructing a small vortex that firmly locked that wisp of drawn-in heaven and earth spiritual energy within, continuously spiraling and squeezing it.

The third stroke was "guiding".

The final downward stroke was like opening a sluice gate, precisely directing that compressed-to-the-limit spiritual energy towards the formation's core node!

Hum—

A faint hum, almost imperceptible.

In the center of the three pebbles, that 'Gathering' character rune he had inscribed—still somewhat crooked—suddenly lit up!

The light was no longer as dim as before, but a stable, soft cyan glow!

Success!

Su Ming's heart gave a powerful thump!

Suppressing his excitement, he followed the procedure and gently sprinkled a small pinch of wood shavings onto the rune.

The moment the wood shavings touched the rune's light, a sudden change occurred!

An invisible, gentle force rippled out from the center of the rune.

The force spread outward like a circle of transparent ripples, extending about three feet.

Wherever the ripples passed, the dust accumulated on the ground seemed to be gently brushed away by an invisible hand, instantly disappearing without a trace.

Even the fine dust particles floating in the air seemed to encounter their nemesis, scattering and avoiding the area.

A perfectly clean circular area with a three-foot radius clearly appeared before Su Ming!

The effect was stable.

The glow persisted.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,430 words]

Su Ming stared nervously at the ring of light, counting silently in his heart.

One breath, two breaths... ten breaths...

Half an incense stick of time.

A full half an incense stick of time passed before the glow of the rune gradually dimmed and finally vanished completely.

Success.

A success on the first try!

And the effect lasted for half an incense stick!

Su Ming stared blankly at the clean circle on the ground, then looked at his own finger. A massive, surreal feeling completely overwhelmed him.

The problem that had troubled him for so long was solved so easily with just a few pointers from his teacher?

"Teacher..."

His spiritual sense carried a slight tremor.

"Your disciple... has done it."

"Hmm, acceptable."

Inside the ring, Lin Yu's voice was as still as an ancient well, as if this were merely an insignificant trifle.

"This is the beginning of the path of formations, a journey of ten thousand miles. You have only taken the first step. You absolutely must not become arrogant or complacent."

Holy crap! My disciple is awesome! I just flapped my lips a bit, and he actually pulled it off! This comprehension talent is simply incredible! It's a lock, a total lock!

Hearing this, the wild joy in Su Ming's heart was instantly replaced by a surge of reverence.

Yes, for a master like his teacher, this might truly be just an insignificant entry-level skill.

What did his own little achievement amount to?

He took a deep breath, firmly suppressing that excitement and joy deep in his heart.

"This disciple humbly follows the teacher's instruction."

"Very good." Lin Yu was quite satisfied with Su Ming's attitude.

He immediately pivoted, steering the conversation toward the area he was most concerned about.

"Disciple, your success in setting up this formation is certainly praiseworthy. However, it also brings a new problem."

"Problem?" Su Ming was taken aback.

"When you set up the formation, although the commotion was slight, it ultimately caused spiritual energy fluctuations." Lin Yu's voice turned serious. "This Courtyard Ding-Qi is a place of mixed fish and dragons. There's no guarantee there aren't individuals with keen perception here."

"Especially that Li Kai in the South Room. His breathing and energy circulation method is quite peculiar, his aura is restrained to the extreme. People like that either possess unusual treasures or have cultivated a high-level cultivation method. Either way, it indicates this person is not simple."

"The communication between us master and disciple, and your future cultivation, must all be conducted in an absolutely secretive environment. Otherwise, once exposed, both of us will die without a burial place!"

Lin Yu's words were like a basin of ice water, instantly dousing the small flame of warmth that had just risen in Su Ming's heart.

A cold sweat seeped from his back.

Only now did he realize that his recent success also came with enormous risk.

"Then... Teacher, what should we do?"

"The most urgent task is to establish a 'safe room' within your eastern side room."

"Safe room?"

"Correct." Lin Yu's thoughts carried a hint of the certainty of one strategizing from within a tent. "We will use formations to completely 'isolate' part of the space of this room from the perception of the entire Courtyard Ding-Qi, no, from the perception of the entire Cloud Hidden Sect!"

"Extend an additional space, making it an absolute domain that people outside cannot see, cannot hear, and cannot sense!"

Su Ming felt his mind swaying upon hearing this. Such a method was simply unheard of!

"This... can your disciple accomplish it?"

"With your teacher here, naturally you can."

Lin Yu's soul sense once again probed into the "Basic Overview of Formations" jade slip within Su Ming's memory.

He browsed through it rapidly, all the while internally continuing his outburst.

Soundproofing arrays? This is it? The energy conduction path takes such a huge, meandering detour, like a maze, and the final effect is still terrible. A typical academic design, flashy but without substance!

Breath-concealing arrays? My heavens, this practically has 'come find me' written all over it! Forcibly compressing spiritual energy fluctuations into a ball? Isn't that as conspicuous as a firefly in the night? Stupid! So stupid!

"Disciple."

Having finished his screening, Lin Yu slowly spoke in his profound and unfathomable tone.

"Your teacher has selected the two most suitable entry-level formations for you."

"First, the Micro Soundproofing Array. Second, the Simple Breath-Concealing Array."

"These two arrays are of the lowest grade, require the least consumption, and when activated, cause the most minimal spiritual energy fluctuations. They are most suitable for our current situation."

Su Ming hurriedly focused his mind to listen carefully.

"However..." Lin Yu pivoted again, "...the array-setting methods recorded in the jade slip are too crude, riddled with flaws. Your teacher will make some... minor adjustments to them."

"Minor adjustments?"

"Correct."

Lin Yu's soul sense directly materialized the array diagram of the "Micro Soundproofing Array" within Su Ming's mind.

It was a composite array constructed from nine basic runes.

"Disciple, look at this 'Quiet' character rune here."

Lin Yu's consciousness pointed to the lower left corner of the array diagram.

"The jade slip says this rune requires seven strokes to draw, seeking structural stability. In reality, that's painting legs on a snake."

"You only need to change three of its strokes into a single arc. This will allow the spiritual energy to circulate on its own, forming a stable 'quiet field.' The effect will improve by at least fifty percent, yet the consumption can be reduced by thirty percent."

In his mind, Su Ming modified that rune according to his teacher's instruction.

He immediately felt the energy flow of the entire array diagram become much smoother!

"And here, these two 'Guide' character runes are completely redundant! Remove them! They only cause spiritual energy fluctuations to leak out!"

"And the formation core here, don't use the 'Suppress' character rune. It's too rigid, prone to causing rebound. Replace it with the 'Absorb' character rune, allowing the sound waves to be absorbed and dissipated, like gentle rain moistening things silently. That is the superior way of soundproofing!"

Lin Yu's voice was like that of the most skilled craftsman meticulously carving a piece of uncut jade.

Every modification he made struck at the core, simplifying complexity, yet causing the entire array's effect to undergo a world-shaking change!

The more Su Ming listened, the more appalled he felt in his heart.

Was this a minor adjustment?

This was practically taking a broken-down ox cart and drastically refashioning it into a carriage that sped like the wind!

Moreover, the theories his teacher mentioned—things like "energy circulation," "wave rebound," "absorption and dissipation"—he had never heard of them before, yet he felt... they made so much sense!

"Do you understand?"

"This disciple... understands!" Su Ming nodded heavily, his eyes flashing with a fanatical light.

"Good, then let's begin." Lin Yu's tone naturally followed his previous train of thought, ready to begin his masterclass on the "safe room."

However, the excited expression on Su Ming's face instantly froze stiff, then transformed into a trace of embarrassment.

He had no choice but to brace himself and interrupt his teacher's grand blueprint.

"Um... Teacher..." Su Ming's voice carried obvious awkwardness. "Your disciple... your disciple currently, actually... only knows how to draw this one 'Gathering' character rune."

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's torrential soul sense came to an abrupt halt.

An eerie silence spread through the mental connection between master and disciple.

Lin Yu's soul body seemed to have been put on pause.

He had just mentally hacked the "Basic Overview of Formations" to pieces, even nearly finished the 3D modeling for the "safe room" in his head, and then... the construction crew told him they currently only knew how to lay one type of brick?

An emotion named "Holy crap" almost broke through the demeanor of a master he was struggling to maintain.

Lin Yu took a deep breath... no, he didn't need to breathe.

He forcibly steadied the fluctuations of his soul power.

"...It's fine." His voice betrayed not a ripple of emotion, as if the previous silence was merely him pondering who he was.

"Skyscrapers rise from level ground. Mastering one path far surpasses having a superficial knowledge of a hundred. Since you have already grasped the 'Gathering' character and can draw inferences about other cases from one instance, learning other runes should not be difficult."

Phew, phew. Good thing this disciple's comprehension is high. The literacy class probably won't take too long.

Hearing this, the embarrassment in Su Ming's heart lessened slightly, and he felt even more ashamed of his teacher's tolerance. "It is this disciple's dullness, causing the teacher trouble."

"The path of formations is as vast as a sea of mist. Proceeding step by step is the correct principle." Lin Yu rapidly adjusted his mindset and teaching plan.

Lin Yu rapidly adjusted his mindset and teaching plan.

"Since that's the case, we shall start learning from the most basic runes. Today, you will devote yourself to studying this 'Control' character rune."

"Yes, Teacher!"

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 146: Don't Mention My Name

[1,442 words]

Su Ming's spirits lifted, and he immediately focused his divine sense into the jade slip, firmly imprinting the rune for "Control" in his mind—a structure several times more complex than the rune for "Gather".

Following his previous successful experience, he first deconstructed it in his mind.

This character "Defend" had a square, upright form with a closed structure, resembling a shield.

He extended his finger, channeled that strand of docile spiritual energy, and confidently began tracing it on the ground.

This rune for "Control" had a square, upright form with a closed structure, resembling a shield.

The second stroke turned smoothly.

However, when he reached the third stroke, which required guiding the spiritual energy outward to construct a closed framework, a problem arose.

That strand of spiritual energy, accustomed to the introverted, spiraling nature of the character "Gather," was completely unaccustomed to this outward-expanding method of guidance.

It suddenly stalled.

"Pop."

A soft sound. The spiritual energy snapped at the turning point, and the two strokes that had just taken shape instantly dissipated.

Su Ming was stunned.

Refusing to believe it, he tried again.

"Pop."

He attempted to slow down, guiding it with extreme care.

The spiritual energy passed through, but the entire runic framework became soft and limp, utterly lacking any sense of "defense." Its glow flickered and died.

It simply couldn't take shape.

After over a dozen consecutive failures, fine beads of sweat appeared on Su Ming's forehead.

He realized he was wrong.

Terribly wrong.

The experience gained from mastering the character "Gather" was almost entirely useless when faced with the character "Defend."

"Master..." he began, somewhat dejected.

"How does it feel?" Lin Yu's voice held no emotion.

"Disciple... feels this 'Defend' character rune is completely different from the 'Gather' character. The way the spiritual energy moves is entirely opposite."

"Oh? How is it opposite?"

"The character 'Gather' attracts and compresses external spiritual energy inward. But this character 'Defend'... seems... seems to require using one's own spiritual energy to construct a barrier outward. It emphasizes a sense of 'propping up.'"

"Correct. Continue."

"No matter how I guide it, disciple cannot form a stable 'surface' with the spiritual energy. It always disperses."

"Superficial."

Lin Yu's evaluation was blunt.

"You only see the surface. This teacher asks you, what is the core of the character 'Gather'?"

"It's... the vortex?" Su Ming ventured a guess.

"It's 'gravitational force,'" Lin Yu corrected. "It uses your own spiritual energy as a core to create a tiny gravitational field, attracting external energy. Therefore, its strokes are inwardly spiraling, centripetal."

"What about the character 'Defend' then?" Su Ming pressed.

"Think again. What is the purpose of a shield?" Lin Yu didn't give the answer directly.

"To block external force."

"How does it block?"

"By... dispersing the impact force?" Su Ming recalled the shield formations of mortal armies.

"Exactly!" Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of approval. "The core of the character 'Defend' is 'repulsive force' and 'conduction.' It requires you to use your spiritual energy to construct a uniform and stable repulsive field, and to evenly conduct and dissipate any impact received along the closed structure of the rune."

"Therefore, its strokes must be outwardly expanding and closed! Using the mental method for drawing the character 'Gather' to draw this one is like climbing a tree to catch fish—completely futile!"

It was as if a thunderclap exploded in Su Ming's mind, instantly clearing the fog.

The experience gained from mastering the "Gather" rune was almost entirely useless when faced with the "Control" rune.

Inward spiral and outward expansion.

Absorption and conduction.

This was the most fundamental "principle" behind different runes!

He no longer rushed to act. Instead, he closed his eyes and placed the two runes side by side in his mind, comparing them repeatedly.

One was like a clenched fist, the other like an open palm.

"Disciple... feels this 'Control' rune is completely different from the 'Gather' rune. The way the spiritual energy moves is entirely opposite."

So, learning a new rune wasn't simple copying and pasting.

One must first understand its "intent," then imitate its "form."

"Thank you for your guidance, Master! Disciple understands!"

...

Early the next morning, Su Ming tidied up, left Courtyard Ding-Qi, and prepared to head to the Accounting Office.

The moment he stepped out of the courtyard gate, Lin Yu's soul sense, tinged with curiosity, extended from the Xuantian ring.

"Disciple, hold still. Let this teacher take a look."

This was the first time Lin Yu, since his awakening, was truly "seeing" this world.

In the next moment, the magnificent and spectacular scenery of the Cloud Hidden Sect unfolded completely within the perception of his soul sense.

Immortal mountains floating in a sea of clouds, rainbow bridges spanning the sky, cultivators flying on swords...

Lin Yu's soul body fell silent.

Su Ming could feel a trace of... disturbance in his master's soul force fluctuation.

"You only see the surface. This teacher asks you, what is the core of the 'Gather' rune?"

Su Ming thought to himself, that's how he felt the first time he saw it too.

However, the next second, a barrage of mental outbursts exploded in Su Ming's mind.

"Holy crap! These floating mountains defy basic physics! Such massive mass, and there's not even an anti-gravity rune array underneath? Just propped up by a few energy pillars? If the energy supply becomes unstable, wouldn't they all go bungee jumping?"

"And that guy on the flying sword! Speeding, buddy! Don't you see that crane rider ahead? Don't you need a traffic department to manage this? A rear-end collision is inevitable sooner or later!"

"Pill Cauldron Peak? Good grief, that pill cloud billowing from the chimney—back in my day, the PM2.5 would be at least a thousand! Where's the environmental protection department?"

"What about the 'Control' rune then?" Su Ming pressed.

He felt he might have some misunderstanding about the word "awestruck."

Just then, Lin Yu's soul sense abruptly retracted.

Waves of powerful, obscure auras emanated from the higher peaks in the distance, pressing down on him like invisible mountains, almost suffocating him.

Golden Core... Nascent Soul... and even more terrifying existences!

Lin Yu's outburst-prone soul was instantly extinguished, replaced by deeply ingrained vigilance.

An urgent thought rang in Su Ming's mind.

"Disciple, listen carefully!" Lin Yu's voice was unprecedentedly serious.

"From now on, except within your own room, do not call out to me anywhere!"

"Don't even think about me too much!"

This place was filled with powerful beings, their divine senses reaching the heavens. Any slight abnormality could invite catastrophic disaster.

He responded respectfully in his mind.

Only then did Lin Yu relax slightly.

"This place... the waters run too deep, and there are too many powerful figures. We... need to keep our tails tucked in even tighter."

...

Life returned to its usual calm.

But Su Ming's daily routine underwent a dramatic transformation.

He no longer went to the corner of the courtyard to fiddle with those broken stones.

During the day at the Accounting Office, he remained that remarkably efficient accountant.

But during breaks between checking ledgers, he would often stare blankly into the air or at a blank sheet of grass paper, lost in thought.

Sometimes, his finger would hover in mid-air, unconsciously and slowly tracing, as if copying something invisible.

This was him visualizing the structure of runes, deducing the flow of spiritual energy.

When night fell, the eastern side room became his most secretive cultivation ground.

He no longer pursued quantity.

Instead, following Lin Yu's guidance, he thoroughly digested and understood each rune.

Mastering the second rune, "Defend," took him a full five days.

Mastering the third rune, "Fortify," took him four days.

The fourth rune, "Channel," cost him another five days.

The progress was agonizingly slow, but each step was taken with incredible solidity.

He was no longer rote memorizing. He was truly beginning to understand the common, eternal "principle" behind these ever-changing lines.

His spiritual energy remained feeble.

But his control over that strand of spiritual energy, through day after day of meticulous tracing, had reached an astonishing level.

All of this was observed by certain people within Courtyard Ding-Qi.

Zhang Meng simply thought Su Ming had become even more silent and eccentric lately.

Manager Zhao believed Su Ming was distressed over his inability to cultivate, often sighing and sending over some spirit fruits as consolation.

Only Li Kai from the South Room.

He remained as quiet and withdrawn as ever, leaving early and returning late each day.

But when he went out to fetch water, he would always, inadvertently, glance at the tightly closed door of the eastern side room.

His gaze was more complex than before.

As another "self-taught" practitioner exploring alone, he understood better than anyone what Su Ming's current state signified.

That wasn't confusion.

That was focus.

It was the most painful, yet most crucial, entry phase for someone who had just stepped through the gate into a difficult field.

Li Kai withdrew his gaze, picked up his water bucket, and silently walked back to his room.

He closed the door and leaned against the cold wooden panel.

In the darkness, he slowly extended his own hand.

A strand of spiritual energy, several times more refined than Su Ming's, silently formed a small, stable...

"Defend" character rune at his fingertip.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 147: A Great Path Lies in the Scrap Heap

[1,078 words]

Su Ming had hit a bottleneck.

He was stuck on the fifth basic rune.

"Concealment."

For seven whole days, aside from his mandatory attendance at the Accounting Office, he had devoted every moment to this rune.

Yet it was like an unreasonable, stubborn stone, utterly unresponsive no matter how Su Ming tried to grind it down.

Crack.

On the ground, a newly outlined trace of cyan light shattered precisely at its final turn.

Spiritual energy dispersed, the glow extinguished.

Another failure.

Su Ming's brow furrowed tightly, his fingertips trembling slightly from excessive mental concentration.

He couldn't understand where the problem lay.

After over a month of arduous practice, his control over that wisp of spiritual energy within him was already a world apart from before.

He could make the spiritual energy as pliant as silk thread, or as rigid as a steel needle.

Carving the first four runes was now something he could do with ease, with an extremely high success rate.

But this "Concealment" character alone felt like a creation from another world.

He could perfectly replicate every stroke of its form, precisely control the output of spiritual energy at every node.

Yet, the result was something that possessed only the outer shape.

It was merely a glowing doodle, lying there quietly until it exhausted its energy and faded away.

It lacked "intent."

"Master."

"This 'Concealment' character rune, your disciple... cannot comprehend it."

Hearing his disciple's plea for help, Lin Yu lazily stirred his thoughts.

"Oh? What is it you don't understand?"

"Your disciple can already accurately depict its form and perfectly control the flow of spiritual energy, but it... simply won't work."

Su Ming described his predicament in detail.

"It isn't introverted like the 'Gathering' character, nor outwardly expansive like the 'Control' character. Your disciple cannot sense where its 'principle' lies."

Listening to this, Lin Yu's mind was as clear as a mirror.

Seriously, the first four runes were basic physics, dealing with the conduction and shaping of energy.

This "Concealment" character was already brushing against the edge of quantum mechanics, dealing with "existence" and "observation."

Could they possibly be the same?

Tell him directly?

No.

It's better to teach a man to fish than to give him a fish.

The core of nurturing an outstanding disciple lies in guiding him to think for himself.

"Disciple." Lin Yu's voice was as still as an ancient well. "This teacher asks you, what is 'concealment'?"

Su Ming was taken aback and answered without thinking. "To hide, to not be seen."

"Superficial." Lin Yu was unsparing. "A rock, hidden behind a tree, does that count as concealment?"

"It does."

"Then a fierce tiger, hidden behind a tree, waiting to choose a person to devour, does that count as concealment?"

"That also counts."

"Then this teacher asks you again, the wind that blows past your cheek, the dust that falls upon your shoulder, did you see them?"

Su Ming was stunned once more.

The wind has no form, dust is visible, but... he had never paid them any mind.

"Your disciple... did not pay attention."

"This, is the true meaning of 'concealment'."

Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of leisurely guidance.

"True concealment is not making you disappear from others' sight. It is making you disappear from others' minds."

"It is making you become like the wind, like dust, like a pebble by the roadside. Others see it, yet it's as if they didn't. It exists, yet carries no sense of presence."

Su Ming's mind was struck hard by these words.

To exist, yet carry no sense of presence...

Wasn't this precisely the essence of the *Aura Concealment Art* his master had imparted?

"You need not practice for the next few days." Lin Yu's voice sounded at just the right moment.

"What you lack is not skill, but comprehension."

"Go do your tasks, go calculate your accounts, use your eyes to see, use your heart to feel."

"Do not try to draw 'Concealment', but go and seek 'Concealment'."

Having said this, Lin Yu severed the soul-thought connection, leaving Su Ming alone, sitting dazedly in place, repeatedly chewing over his master's words.

...

The next day, in the Accounting Office.

Su Ming sat at his familiar desk, holding an account book, but his gaze was somewhat unfocused.

"To exist, yet carry no sense of presence..."

He looked at the leaves falling outside the window, at the streaks of light flashing across the distant Rainbow Bridges, at the menial disciples coming and going within the Accounting Office.

Who was the wind? Who was the dust?

"Brother Su! Brother Su! What are you daydreaming about!"

Wang Defa's booming, loud voice jolted Su Ming out of his contemplation.

Wang the fat man was carrying a large stack of old, dust-covered archives, which he placed heavily on the table before Su Ming, causing the ink, brushes, paper, and inkstones to jump about.

"Come on, come on, stop gazing at fairies out the window, time to work!"

Su Ming snapped back to reality and looked at the "small mountain" before him, somewhat puzzled.

"Steward Wang, what is this?"

"Sent over by those bookworms from Formation Peak." Wang Defa said with a look of disdain, patting the dust off his hands. "They said they need to destroy a batch of scrapped formation flags and formation plates, and want me to verify the numbers and go through the procedure."

He pointed at the pile of archives.

"These are the records of that batch of scrap: storage, issuance, and loss. Messier than a chicken coop. Do me a favor and sort them out, make a general ledger."

Wang Defa chuckled and lowered his voice.

"This job is easy, no one's rushing it. Take your time with it, good chance to rest your brain."

After saying this, he hummed a little tune and waddled his portly frame into the inner room for tea.

Su Ming shook his head helplessly.

He picked up the topmost scroll and unrolled it.

A musty, decaying scent, mixed with the unique odor of dissipated spiritual energy, wafted over him.

The archive recorded the loss situation of a batch of formation flags named "Misty Trace Illusion Dust Flags."

While cross-checking, Su Ming retrieved the corresponding physical items from a large wooden crate beside him.

Most of those formation flags were already tattered and worn.

Some had broken flagpoles, others had large burnt holes in the flag cloth.

The complex runes once inscribed on them had long since lost their spiritual light, leaving only faint, nearly illegible traces.

Su Ming's work was monotonous and mechanical.

His mind remained immersed in his master's words.

His fingertip unconsciously brushed across a relatively intact formation flag.

The flag cloth was woven from an unknown type of cyan silk, cool to the touch.

Just as his fingertip touched a damaged rune on the flag cloth, his movement suddenly halted.

An extremely faint, almost completely dissipated remnant of spiritual energy transmitted itself into his perception through his fingertip.

This aura...

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[1,228 words]

Lin Yu's heart stirred.

He immediately closed his eyes, immersing his entire mind and spirit into that faint, elusive sensation.

It wasn't a "force."

It didn't flow, didn't surge, didn't gather, and didn't defend.

It was simply... dissipating.

Like a wisp of blue smoke, it gently, softly, drifted out from the runic veins on the flag's surface.

Then, it didn't vanish.

Instead, it merged into the surrounding air, into the thin, ever-present spiritual energy that filled the Accounting Office.

It lost its own "form," lost its own "substance."

It became part of the background.

Su Ming held his breath. He could "see" how that lingering trace of spiritual energy, following the specific trajectory of that incomplete rune, gradually "dissolved" itself away.

This process wasn't a collapse, wasn't a breakdown.

It was a kind of... orderly, active, return.

A bolt of lightning seemed to flash across Su Ming's mind!

His master's words exploded in his ears like thunder!

"Make yourself like the wind, like dust..."

"Existing, yet utterly devoid of presence!"

He abruptly opened his eyes, staring fixedly at the incomplete rune on the flag's surface.

The structure of that rune was extremely complex.

But the path of a small part of its core circuits bore a slight resemblance to the "Concealment" character rune he had painstakingly practiced for seven days!

So that was it!

Su Ming's heart pounded fiercely!

The true meaning of "Concealment" wasn't construction, wasn't defense, wasn't attack!

It was "integration"!

It was using a specific structure to guide one's own spiritual energy to actively, orderly, perfectly merge with the surrounding environment, thereby erasing one's own sense of presence!

All his previous efforts had been like using brute force to try and pry open a precise combination lock!

His direction had been wrong from the very beginning!

Theory must be combined with practice!

And these discarded items, treated as worthless trash by Formation Peak disciples, were for him the most precious, most intuitive textbooks!

At this moment, Su Ming looked at the mountain of "garbage" before him, his eyes shining brightly.

What trash?

That was clearly an undiscovered treasure trove!

...

That night.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on his bed, his expression unprecedentedly focused and serene.

He didn't take out any stones, nor did he draw on the ground.

He simply slowly extended his index finger and began to trace in the air before him.

Spiritual energy flowed at his fingertip.

His mind was no longer focused on "constructing" a rune.

Instead, it was simulating, mimicking the trajectory and rhythm of the spiritual energy's dissipation from that tattered formation flag.

His intent was no longer a command, but a guide, a letting go.

One stroke, two strokes...

When the final stroke was completed.

He didn't forcefully maintain the spiritual energy output as he usually did.

Instead, with a thought, he actively severed his connection with that rune.

Hum.

In the air, the "Concealment" character rune composed of cyan spiritual energy trembled lightly.

It didn't glow, nor did it collapse.

Instead, it was like a drop of ink falling into clear water.

It rapidly faded, grew blurry, as if the surrounding air had produced a slight, subtle distortion.

After a few breaths, that rune completely disappeared.

Su Ming slowly opened his eyes.

He reached out his hand, probing towards the seemingly empty air before him.

A strange sensation came.

His hand felt as if it had passed through a thin, cool curtain of water.

He could clearly feel that his divine sense, when sweeping over that area, was naturally... ignored.

That place seemed to have become a "blind spot" of perception.

Not a void, not a barrier, just a patch of... "normal" air with nothing in it.

Success!

Suppressing the wild joy in his heart, Su Ming let out a long, slow breath.

The bottleneck that had plagued him for days vanished like smoke at this moment.

He finally understood.

His master's guidance was the "Dao."

The theory in the jade slip was the "method."

And these dust-covered old papers, these discarded scraps, were the unique bridge connecting the "Dao" and the "method"!

"Master, this disciple... understands."

He said respectfully in his heart.

"Hmm."

Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of satisfied laughter.

"The boy can be taught."

Excellent! This kid has already learned to dig up information from the garbage heap himself! My retirement plan is as solid as a mountain!

External Affairs Hall, meditation room.

Su Ming respectfully placed the last volume of the account book he had finished organizing on the desk in front of Elder Ma.

"Elder, this is the summary of last month's resource consumption for each peak, along with an optimization proposal."

His voice was calm, betraying no emotion.

In the meditation room, sandalwood incense curled upwards.

Elder Ma didn't immediately look at the account book. His turbid eyes just quietly observed the young man before him.

Over this past month, Su Ming had submitted four similar reports.

Each one accurately pointed out some inconspicuous "problematic node" in the sect's resource circulation process.

He never directly said who had a problem, nor did he draw any conclusions.

He merely listed data, drew charts, and then, in the most objective tone, proposed a suggestion that "might save more money."

"Explain," Elder Ma said, picking up his teacup and blowing on the steam.

"Yes."

Su Ming bowed slightly. "This disciple discovered that the frequency and quantity of 'Clearheart Grass' requisitioned by Pill Cauldron Peak has shown a steady upward trend over the past three months, but the output quantity of 'Clearheart Pills' has not seen a corresponding increase."

"In this disciple's humble opinion, perhaps a slight deviation in the heat control or purification technique during the alchemy process has led to an increase in the loss rate."

Elder Ma took a sip of tea, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

"What else?"

"The 'Sharp Gold Stone' replenished by the Vessel Hall for Heavenly Sword Peak has a fixed monthly consumption of three hundred catties, not a fraction off. This disciple believes this does not conform to the random loss patterns that should occur during actual combat training."

"Furthermore, regarding the 'Hundred Beast Pills' from Beast Taming Valley, if the 'Three-leaf Worm' in its formula is replaced with the more common 'Iron Thread Worm' from the back mountains, the medicinal efficacy would only decrease by half a tenth, but the cost could be reduced by nearly forty percent."

Su Ming listed them one by one, item by item, speaking calmly and methodically.

Everything he talked about was accounts.

But behind every account entry lay a pointer towards human nature.

Lin Yu's soul thought within the Xuantian ring was nodding in approval.

Not bad, not bad. This move of playing Tai Chi is quite skillful.

It demonstrates value while kicking all the difficult issues back.

Letting the superiors deal with the headaches themselves—that's the self-cultivation of an excellent subordinate.

After listening, Elder Ma put down his teacup.

He still didn't look at those account books.

"You have been in the sect for three months now."

He suddenly spoke, asking a completely unrelated question.

Su Ming's heart tightened, but his expression remained unchanged.

"Reporting to the Elder, this disciple has been in the sect for ninety-seven days."

"Hmm." Elder Ma nodded, asking as if casually, "How is your progress with that 'Basic Overview of Formations' jade slip?"

Here it comes.

Su Ming's heartbeat skipped a beat.

Within the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's thought instantly sounded.

"Say it as we rehearsed! Remember, you are dull-witted, you are struggling in despair, you are a fool who has just barely touched the threshold!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, his face appropriately showing a trace of shame and embarrassment.

"Reporting to the Elder, this disciple is dull-witted."

"In over a month, despite day and night study, this disciple has only preliminarily grasped the 'Gathering' character rune."

"Currently, I can barely set up a most basic dust-repelling formation."

After speaking, he deeply lowered his head, as if utterly mortified by his own "slowness."

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

[944 words]

Su Ming's words were nine parts truth, one part falsehood.

He had indeed spent a great deal of time on the basic runes.

But he omitted his master's guidance, and he concealed his own comprehension ability that far surpassed the ordinary.

He had compressed his actual progress by at least tenfold.

"Oh?"

Elder Ma's tone gave no indication of joy or anger.

"Set one up, let me see."

"Yes."

Su Ming replied respectfully.

He did not go looking for spirit stones or jade.

He simply walked to a corner of the meditation room, and from a potted plant used for decoration, picked up three of the most inconspicuous, fingernail-sized pebbles.

Then, he crouched down, right there on the polished, mirror-like bluestone floor, and prepared to begin.

Lin Yu's soul thought, at this moment, transformed into the most demanding director.

"Your hand, tremble a little! Yes, just like that, as if your spiritual energy is unstable!"

"Your expression must be pained! Frown! Make others think that mobilizing every wisp of spiritual energy is like being constipated for you!"

"The rune inscription must be slow! Hesitant! Pause at the turning points, make it look like you're pondering the meaning of life!"

Su Ming's performance was practically flawless.

He extended his index finger, mobilizing that faint wisp of spiritual energy within his body.

His fingertip slowly traced across the floor, leaving behind a crooked, dimly glowing cyan trace.

The entire process was halting and stumbling.

He would pause from time to time, as if recalling the strokes.

At times, sweat beaded on his forehead, as if his spiritual energy was insufficient.

It took a full stick of incense's time before a structurally simple, even somewhat ugly "Gathering" character rune finally took shape.

Hum.

At the center of the three pebbles, a faint halo of light ignited.

That halo flickered like a candle in the wind, brightening and dimming unsteadily.

An invisible, extremely weak force field rippled outwards from the rune as its center.

The range of the force field was no more than three feet.

Where it passed, a few specks of dust on the floor were gently pushed aside.

One breath.

Two breaths.

...

Exactly ten breaths.

The halo flickered twice, then completely extinguished.

Everything returned to stillness.

Su Ming let out a long, heavy sigh, his face wearing a trace of joy after success, but more than that, the pallor of depleted spiritual energy.

He stood up and bowed deeply once more towards Elder Ma.

"Elder, this disciple has made a fool of himself."

The meditation room was utterly silent.

Elder Ma's turbid eyes stared quietly at the three ordinary stones on the floor.

No one knew that, in the very moment Su Ming was setting up the array just now,

His seemingly ancient-well-still divine sense had already clearly observed every single detail of the entire process.

The spiritual energy was weak. That was true.

The technique was clumsy. That was true.

The array's effect was poor. That was also true.

But!

Beneath that surface appearance of clumsiness and weakness, what was hidden was a level of control that was almost terrifying!

The output of every single wisp of spiritual energy was neither too much nor too little, just enough to maintain the rune's formation.

Every pause, seemingly hesitant, was actually to allow the subsequent spiritual energy to connect more smoothly.

From beginning to end, not a single iota of spiritual energy was wasted in the entire array!

More importantly, this kid had actually completed the array setup using only ordinary stones!

Elder Ma's hand, holding the teacup, under the concealment of his sleeve, paused for a moment, almost imperceptibly.

Back then, when he exceptionally approved three spirit stones for him monthly, it was to see, once he had spirit stones as the array's energy source, what fraction of power he could unleash from this most basic array. He never expected... the kid had actually reached this stage.

A glimmer of extremely difficult-to-detect sharp light flashed in his turbid eyes.

Interesting.

A truly interesting little fellow.

He did not expose it, nor did he offer praise or criticism.

He merely placed the teacup gently back on the table.

"Progress is acceptable," he spoke indifferently, his voice as calm as ever.

"With your foundation damaged to this extent, to still possess such temperament and comprehension is truly not easy."

Su Ming kept his head bowed, but his mind was rapidly calculating.

"Acceptable" meant "not bad."

"Truly not easy" meant "very good."

It seemed this performance had passed.

"Dismissed." Elder Ma waved his hand.

"Yes."

Su Ming respectfully performed a bow and turned to leave.

Just as his hand was about to touch the meditation room door, Elder Ma's voice came from behind him once more.

"If you encounter difficulties, you may..."

Elder Ma's voice paused, as if carefully choosing his words.

"...come ask me again."

Su Ming's body stiffened abruptly.

He slowly turned around, looking at the old man, his face filled with a perfectly appropriate, incredulous delight.

He opened his mouth, seeming to want to say something, but in the end, it only transformed into an even deeper, heartfelt long bow.

"Thank you... Elder!"

This final sentence was a signal.

An immensely important signal.

It meant that Su Ming was no longer merely a "useful" menial post from the Accounting Office.

He had been truly, by Elder Ma, brought within the scope of those who could be "guided."

This door leading to higher levels, Elder Ma had personally pushed it open a crack for him.

Su Ming withdrew from the meditation room and gently closed the door behind him.

Outside, the soft sunlight fell upon him, making him feel somewhat unreal.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu let out a long sigh of relief.

"Whew, we finally managed to fool him."

"From today on, you have a real backer in this External Affairs Hall!"

Su Ming's heart settled, and his footsteps also became much steadier.

He did not return to Courtyard Ding-Qi, but instead walked straight towards the scrap repository deep within the Accounting Office.

Elder Ma's "olive branch" was an opportunity, but also a death warrant.

He had to become faster, stronger.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 150: Formation Complete

[1,423 words]

Having thoroughly comprehended the true meaning of "Concealment," Su Ming felt as if he had pierced through a layer of window paper.

Previously, when he looked at those basic runes, it was like reading a celestial script; he could only memorize them by rote.

Now, looking at them again, each rune transformed into the most fundamental "principle" in his eyes.

"Repel," its principle was "exclusion," constructing an outward-facing, stable force field.

"Flow," its principle was "guidance," allowing energy to travel smoothly along a specific trajectory.

"Resonate," its principle was "sympathetic vibration," using one's own spiritual energy as a guide to vibrate in sync with the fluctuations of the external spiritual energy.

These problems that had troubled him for so long were now resolved with ease.

He was no longer constrained by form, but went straight to the core.

He spent only a short eight days to fully master the remaining few basic runes.

Thus, he had completely grasped all nine basic runes of the "Micro Soundproofing Formation" and the "Simple Breath-Concealing Formation."

"Not bad." Lin Yu's soul thought carried a trace of satisfaction. "The foundation is laid; now we can build the house."

"Disciple, today, your teacher will teach you the technique of formation superimposition."

Su Ming's spirits lifted, and he focused intently, listening carefully.

"So-called superimposition is not a simple piecing together. It is using one formation as the skeleton, incorporating another formation for its function, making them complement each other and become an integrated whole."

Lin Yu's soul thought materialized two formation diagrams in Su Ming's mind.

They were precisely his modified "Micro Soundproofing Formation" and the "Simple Breath-Concealing Formation."

"Look, the core of this soundproofing formation lies in the 'Absorb' technique, dissolving vibrations. The core of the breath-concealing formation lies in the 'Concealment' technique, blending into the environment."

"What you must do is find a balance point. Make the breath-concealing formation also 'conceal' the spiritual energy fluctuations generated when the soundproofing formation activates."

Su Ming immediately sat down cross-legged on the cleanest patch of greenstone floor in the center of the room and began his first attempt.

He first used the "Breath-Concealing Formation" as the base.

Spiritual energy flowed from his fingertips, and a rudimentary formation framework composed of the three runes "Concealment," "Flow," and "Solidify" slowly took shape.

Then, he took a deep breath and began embedding the runes of the "Soundproofing Formation" into it.

This was the most critical step.

Two different "principles," two different modes of energy operation, began to intersect and collide at his fingertips.

Fine beads of sweat instantly broke out on Su Ming's forehead.

He could clearly feel two forces repelling each other, like two stubborn bulls refusing to yield.

"Steady your mind!" Lin Yu's voice sounded in time. "Don't force the fusion! Guide it! Let the 'water' of the breath-concealing formation envelop the 'stone' of the soundproofing formation!"

Su Ming's mind stirred, and he immediately changed his strategy.

He no longer tried to twist the two forces into a single rope.

Instead, he divided part of his focus, controlling the power of the breath-concealing formation like a gentle stream of water, softly, bit by bit, enveloping that restless soundproofing formation.

Something marvelous happened.

The originally violent spiritual energy fluctuations, after being enveloped by the "water stream," truly began to gradually calm down.

It's working!

A flash of sharp light gleamed in Su Ming's eyes, and the spiritual energy at his fingertips suddenly accelerated!

The final rune was placed!

However, at the very moment the formation was about to be completed—

"Pfft!"

A faint sound, like a bubble bursting.

The composite spiritual light that had just lit up on the ground flickered violently a few times, then, like a punctured balloon, all the spiritual energy instantly dissipated, vanishing without a trace.

Only a few rapidly dimming etchings remained on the ground.

Su Ming panted, his face somewhat pale, not just from spiritual energy consumption but also from the exhaustion after such intense mental concentration.

"Expected." Lin Yu's voice was calm and unruffled. "The requirements for spiritual energy stability and total amount for superimposing formations are far beyond those of a single formation. The little spiritual energy you possess yourself is like a trickling stream, insufficient to support the simultaneous stable operation of two formations, let alone maintaining their delicate balance."

Su Ming was not discouraged. He closed his eyes to regulate his breathing for a moment. Once his mind and spiritual energy had recovered slightly, he began his second attempt.

This time, he was even more careful, his control over spiritual energy output refined to the extreme.

Guided by him, the runes of the two formations began their slow and arduous fusion once more.

Everything seemed to go smoother than the last time. That invisible barrier was vaguely taking shape, and even the surrounding air began to grow sluggish and quiet.

But just as success seemed within reach, another anomaly occurred!

"Hum... Zzz..."

An unstable, piercing tremor, like a lute string about to snap, emanated from the center of the formation. The originally stabilizing spiritual light twisted violently, as if being fiercely grasped and kneaded by an invisible hand!

"Not good! Local overload in the spiritual energy circuit, backlash is coming! Disperse it quickly!" Lin Yu urgently shouted.

Su Ming acted decisively, forcibly severing his connection with the formation. The faint burst of spiritual energy pushed him backward, and his chest felt tight.

On the ground, even a small patch of the greenstone floor showed fine, web-like charred cracks.

Su Ming looked at the traces of failure, his brow furrowed tightly.

Lin Yu clearly realized the problem wasn't with technique or understanding, but with "energy" itself. Su Ming's own spiritual energy couldn't support two formations.

"It seems we can't do without using some 'external force'." Lin Yu sighed. "Take out those two remaining low-grade spirit stones of yours."

Hearing this, Su Ming immediately and carefully retrieved the two warm, smooth stones containing pure spiritual energy from his personal storage space.

"In the path of formations, borrowing the power of heaven and earth for one's own use is the norm. Spirit stones are crystallized spiritual energy, the most stable and purest source of external force." Lin Yu instructed. "Place these two spirit stones at the 'Heaven' and 'Earth' positions you used when setting up the 'Three Powers Dust-Repelling Formation' before. Use them as the formation foundation to construct the energy core of this entire composite formation. Your spiritual energy will then focus on guiding and regulating, not serving as the main force."

Su Ming followed the instructions, carefully placing the two low-grade spirit stones in the specified positions.

The moment his fingertips left the spirit stones, he could clearly feel two stable, gentle, yet powerful sources of spiritual energy being activated, like drilling two deep wells into a dry riverbed.

He extended his fingers for the third time.

This time, the feeling was completely different.

When he inscribed the runes and guided the formation fusion, he was no longer solely relying on his own weak thread of spiritual energy to struggle along. It was more like holding reins, driving two docile yet powerful steeds.

The previous feeling of struggling inadequately, the critical point of collapse, disappeared. It was replaced by a sense of smoothness and stability.

The runes were outlined, the formations superimposed, everything proceeded as naturally as water flowing downhill.

When the final rune was placed, perfectly connecting with the energy core formed by the two spirit stones—

Hum—

A faint hum, almost inaudible.

On the floor in the center of the room, a composite formation with an intricate structure, composed of nine basic runes, suddenly lit up!

There was no dazzling light, no violent fluctuation.

The halo spread out silently towards the surrounding walls like ripples on water.

The moment the halo touched the walls, Su Ming's ears were abruptly struck by silence.

The world seemed to have had its mute button pressed.

The shouts of Zhang Meng practicing his fist and footwork outside the window, disappeared.

The *thump-thump* sounds of Manager Zhao chopping firewood in the courtyard, disappeared.

Even the *whoosh* of the wind blowing past the eaves, completely disappeared.

An absolute, pure silence enveloped his entire being.

Immediately after, he felt his own aura, his own sense of presence, being infinitely diluted within this space.

He felt as if he had turned into a stone, a speck of dust.

Success!

An indescribable surge of wild joy and a sense of security welled up in Su Ming's heart.

He finally possessed a corner that was truly his own, absolutely private!

However, just as he was about to share this joy with Lin Yu.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Violent, door-splitting pounding suddenly erupted without warning!

Su Ming's heart gave a violent lurch!

"Su Ming! Open up quickly! My junior sister and I are here to listen to your stories!"

Outside the door came Qingfeng's loud, robust shout, delivered at full volume.

Su Ming's face instantly turned deathly pale!

"Dispel the formation! Now!"

Lin Yu's urgent soul thought rang out in Su Ming's mind!

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

