

Transmigrated into a Grandpa, Embracing the Laid-Back Life

Chapter 151: We need to install a doorbell.

[1,173 words]

Su Ming almost instinctively mobilized all the spiritual energy within his body and slammed it hard toward the formation core on the ground!

"Smack!"

A crisp sound rang out, and the just-formed formation instantly collapsed and dissipated.

That intangible barrier that isolated everything vanished in an instant.

The noisy sounds from outside rushed back into his ears like a tidal wave.

Su Ming staggered, nearly falling to the ground.

He forced himself to steady his footing, took a deep breath, quickly walked to the door, and pulled it open.

Outside, Qingfeng was holding up his small fist, ready to knock for the fourth time.

Mingyue stood behind him, holding a package of pastries wrapped in oil paper.

"What took you so long?" Qingfeng grumbled discontentedly.

He stepped inside the door, looking around suspiciously.

He didn't even glance at Su Ming. His small nose sniffed hard, and his clear eyes instantly turned sharp. It was no longer a child's curiosity but carried the scrutiny of a cultivator as they swept toward the two not-yet-collected, low-grade spirit stones in the center of the room, their spiritual energy already dim.

"Were you just using a formation?" Qingfeng's voice held certainty as he pointed at the two spirit stones. "No! This formation feels very strange... it's not an ordinary dust-

repelling formation or soundproofing array! The spiritual energy fluctuations are so subtle they're almost non-existent, yet it's... self-contained. Where did you learn this?"

Su Ming's heart felt as if gripped by an invisible hand, cold sweat on his back nearly soaking through his clothes.

He hadn't expected Qingfeng's spiritual perception to be so sharp, not only detecting the formation but even sensing its peculiarity!

I'm done!

As this thought just arose, Lin Yu's voice sounded: "Calm down! Don't panic! He's just probing, he's not sure what it is exactly! Quick, give him a 'reasonable' explanation, half-truth, half-lie!"

In that split second, the color drained from Su Ming's face. The pallor caused by the backlash now served as perfect cover.

His eyes appropriately revealed a trace of panic at having his secret discovered, along with a struggle to maintain composure. His lips trembled slightly as if it was difficult to speak. Finally, as if having made a decision, he took a deep breath and bowed respectfully to Qingfeng.

"Senior Brother Qingfeng sees everything with clarity... This disciple, this disciple dares not hide anything." His voice carried a slight tremor. "This disciple did not intentionally delve into the profound mysteries of formations. It's just... while organizing the ledgers in the Accounting Office, I saw a formation flag. The patterns on it looked somewhat similar to a basic formation rune I'm currently learning. I was just drawing the basic rune and wanted to copy it crudely to see what the difference was between this rune and the patterns on that flag. I carelessly channeled spiritual energy into the spirit stones, never expecting it would actually trigger some slight anomaly, disturbing you, Senior Brother. I beg for your forgiveness!"

His words were seventy percent true, thirty percent false. The true part was that he indeed dealt with ledgers all day. The false part was that he packaged Lin Yu's peerless inheritance as a "self-taught wild method" he "comprehended" from the boring account books. He cleverly transformed an act of "privately studying formations" that might involve sect taboos into an "academic inquiry conducted to do a better job."

Qingfeng was stunned. He had anticipated many possibilities, even suspecting Su Ming might have obtained some secret inheritance, but he never expected such a... reason full of "Accounting Office characteristics."

He looked at the two ordinary low-grade spirit stones on the ground, then at Su Ming's face, pale from "spiritual energy backlash" and "shame," and that explanation that

sounded reasonable, even a bit "bookworm-ish." His brows furrowed tightly as if judging the truth of these words.

Beside him, Mingyue blinked her big eyes, looking at Su Ming's "pale and weak" appearance as he struggled to explain. She gently tugged Qingfeng's sleeve. "Senior Brother, Su Ming was only trying to do the tasks assigned by the sect well..."

Pulled by Mingyue, Qingfeng stared at Su Ming for a few more moments, ultimately failing to find anything more suspicious about him.

He pursed his lips, that sharp aura retracting as he reverted to that proud, aloof little shishu. He snorted. "Hmph, you've gone stupid from all that calculating! The Dao of formations is something you can just randomly ponder? Forget it this time. If you mess around like this again, be careful of spiritual energy backlash destroying what's left of your already ruined foundation!"

The crisis was temporarily averted.

The massive boulder in Su Ming's heart slowly lowered. He hurriedly bowed again. "Thank you for your instruction, Senior Brother. This disciple will remember it."

"Thank you for your concern, Senior Sister."

As he spoke, he subtly turned sideways, steering the conversation away.

"Please, both of you, come in. Today, would you like to hear 'Eight Princes Vying for the Throne' or 'The Golden Throne Hall Stained with Blood'?"

This unexpected "inspection" acted like an alarm bell, ringing harshly in the hearts of Su Ming and Lin Yu.

Formations were not omnipotent.

For high-level cultivators with sharp spiritual perception, any trace of abnormal spiritual energy fluctuation could expose them.

...

After seeing Qingfeng and Mingyue off, Su Ming immediately closed the door.

"Master, this..."

"Our 'Way of Survival' still has gaps." Lin Yu's voice was unprecedentedly grave.

"I forgot. That kid's master has an extremely high seniority. He must have protective treasures on him, and his spiritual perception far exceeds others of his level. If you hadn't withdrawn quickly just now, he might have already seen through it."

Lin Yu's soul thought carried a trace of lingering fear.

"It seems having a 'safe room' isn't enough. We still need a 'doorbell.'"

"Doorbell?"

"An early warning network." Lin Yu explained. "We must know in advance, before anyone gets close."

Su Ming immediately understood Lin Yu's meaning.

For the next two days, he did not attempt to overlay formations again.

Instead, he devoted all his energy to constructing the early warning network.

He took the three runes "Resonate," "Repel," and "Flow" as the core.

He disassembled and simplified them, carving them into miniature runes only the size of rice grains.

Then, with extreme care, he placed these nearly imperceptible warning nodes under the outer windowsills of the eastern side room, in the door cracks, and at the roots of the walls.

Each node was like an invisible eye.

They silently brought the entire eastern side room into the surveillance range.

When the last warning node was silently activated by Su Ming,

the entire eastern side room instantly felt different in his perception.

His divine sense seemed to connect with those tiny rune nodes.

Ten zhang outside the door, an ant crawled by.

Five zhang outside the window, a leaf fell.

On the roof, a sparrow preened its feathers.

Everything was clearly presented in his mind.

The entire eastern side room seemed to transform into an independent space with its own "domain."

He was the master of this domain.

Success!

"Master!"

Su Ming called out excitedly in his heart.

"Mmm." Lin Yu's voice also carried a trace of satisfaction. "From today onward, the spiritual thought communication between us, master and disciple, will have no more reservations."

Su Ming finally possessed an absolutely private cultivation environment.

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Chapter 152: Taking a Part-Time Job at Zhenfeng

[1,278 words]

The next day, Qingfeng and Mingyue came again.

They pulled Su Ming into the room, saying, "Quick, continue the story of 'The Kitten Swapped for the Crown Prince!'"

Once inside, Mingyue secretly tugged on the corner of Su Ming's sleeve.

She pulled a small paper packet from her sleeve and swiftly stuffed it into Su Ming's hand.

"For you," she whispered, leaning in with a hint of mystery on her little face.

Su Ming opened it to find several curled-up tea leaves emitting a delicate, elegant fragrance.

"What is this?"

"Clarity Heart Tea leaves!" Mingyue whispered. "I got them from a senior brother at Pill Cauldron Peak! It helps calm the mind. When you're tired from studying formations at night, you can brew a cup."

She blinked, a touch of pride in her eyes.

"Senior Brother and I are quite familiar with the senior brothers and sisters at Pill Cauldron Peak!"

Su Ming held the packet of still-warm tea leaves, feeling a wave of warmth in his heart.

As they were leaving, Qingfeng's little face wore a rare seriousness.

"Hey, Su Ming, I heard Formation Peak is seriously short-handed lately."

"Several menial post disciples responsible for repairing basic formation lines have been doing a terrible job. It really pissed off the patrolling Senior Brother Chen, who went to complain to the External Affairs Hall again."

Qingfeng tilted his head, looking at Su Ming with a probing gaze.

"How's your practice with that dust-repelling formation going?"

"If Elder Ma sends you there, would you go?"

These words struck Su Ming's mind like a thunderclap!

He instantly understood that Elder Ma's arrangement was likely imminent!

His heartbeat skipped a beat.

On the surface, however, he managed to display just the right amount of apprehension and yearning.

"This disciple's skills are insignificant, how could I dare to hope for such a thing?"

He bowed deeply, his posture humble to the extreme.

"But... but if the sect commands it, this disciple will naturally do his utmost!"

This answer both expressed his lack of presumption and hinted at his willingness to follow orders.

Qingfeng curled his lip, seemingly finding this flawless response a bit boring.

"Alright, I was just asking casually."

He said no more, got up, and pulled Mingyue along to say their goodbyes.

Su Ming saw them off at the courtyard gate. The humble smile on his face vanished instantly, replaced by a grave expression.

He immediately returned to his room and closed the door.

"Master!"

"I heard," Lin Yu's voice was equally serious.

"It seems the piece you represent is about to move on Elder Ma's chessboard," Lin Yu's soul sense rapidly calculated within Su Ming's mind.

"This is both good and bad."

"The good part is, we finally have a chance to legitimately come into contact with one of the sect's core arts. Even if it's just the periphery of Formation Peak, its resources and knowledge are far beyond what the Accounting Office can offer."

Su Ming nodded, understanding.

"And the bad part?"

"The bad part is, your identity changes," Lin Yu's voice grew heavier.

"In the Accounting Office, you're just someone who does accounts. No one cares about the cultivation level of a bookkeeper. Your 'severed path to immortality' is the best camouflage."

"But once you go to Formation Peak, you'll be seen as a 'formation cultivator.' Even if you're just a menial post disciple, you'll be scrutinized by the standards of a formation cultivator."

"Every bit of progress you make, every mistake, will be watched by countless eyes."

Su Ming fell silent.

He could imagine such a scene.

He would be like a sheep that had wandered into a pack of wolves, needing to tread carefully with every step.

"Then... how should this disciple respond?"

"You need to show a certain level of talent, but absolutely not genius-level. You need to be able to complete tasks, but you must stumble through them. You need to make everyone think you're just an ordinary person with a bit of cleverness, but limited by your bone structure, your ceiling is just about that high."

"You need to become, in their eyes, that person who is 'not worth keeping, but not worth discarding either.'"

"This disciple understands."

...

The wait did not last long.

Three days later, early in the morning before dawn.

Su Ming was sitting cross-legged on his bed, practicing his control over the "Concealment" rune.

Suddenly.

A tiny, early-warning node he had placed at the courtyard gate transmitted a faint, unfamiliar ripple of spiritual energy.

The ripple was steady, carrying a hint of the unique cultivation method aura of the External Affairs Hall.

They're here!

Su Ming's eyes snapped open, and he immediately withdrew all his spiritual energy.

He rolled off the bed, quickly mussed up the bedding, and deliberately left an account book open on the table, creating the appearance of someone who had been up late doing accounts and had just gone to sleep.

He had just finished this.

Thump, thump, thump.

The courtyard gate was knocked on with moderate force.

Immediately after, a voice sounded.

"Su Ming of Courtyard Ding-Qi, are you there?"

Su Ming did not respond immediately.

He waited about ten breaths, then pretended to be bleary-eyed, rubbing his eyes as he opened the door.

"Who is it... so early in the morning..."

Outside stood a young man wearing the steward uniform of the External Affairs Hall.

The youth appeared to be in his early twenties, at the early Foundation Establishment stage. His chin was slightly raised, and his eyes held a trace of condescending scrutiny.

Seeing Su Ming's lazy appearance, his brow furrowed.

"You are Su Ming?"

"This disciple is he," Su Ming hurriedly bowed in greeting, his face showing the perfect amount of apprehension. "I did not know Senior Brother Steward was coming, I failed to welcome you properly. Please forgive this offense."

Seeing his respectful attitude, the steward's expression softened slightly.

He cleared his throat and spoke in an official, business-like tone. "I am Liu Feng, steward of the External Affairs Hall. I am here on the verbal order of Elder Ma to deliver a message."

Su Ming immediately lowered his head further.

"This disciple respectfully awaits the elder's instruction."

Liu Feng was quite satisfied with Su Ming's posture, and his voice softened a bit more.

"Elder Ma's verbal order: Due to a shortage of personnel for basic formation maintenance at Formation Peak, and the uneven quality of the menial post disciples, the 'menial post disciple Su Ming, who has a foundation in calculation and a meticulous mind,' is hereby temporarily transferred from our External Affairs Hall."

"Effective immediately, you will spend half your day at the Accounting Office and half your day at Formation Peak, assisting with the verification and repair of basic formation lines."

"Do not fail in this."

The verbal order delivered.

Liu Feng looked at the bowed Su Ming before him, waiting for his reaction.

Su Ming's body first gave a slight tremble, as if shocked by the sudden news.

He slowly raised his head, his face first showing confusion, then transforming into a trace of incredulous apprehension.

"For... Formation Peak?"

His voice carried a hint of a stammer.

"But... but this disciple is dull-witted, I... I only know one dust-repelling formation! How... how can I shoulder such a responsibility?"

Su Ming's reaction fell completely within the normal range for an ordinary menial post disciple.

A flicker of disdain passed through Liu Feng's eyes.

"This is Elder Ma's decision. You need only obey," his tone carried an unquestionable authority.

"As for whether you are competent, the senior brothers at Formation Peak will judge. If you prove useless, naturally you will be sent back."

After saying this, he added another sentence.

"However, since you are a member of our External Affairs Hall, if you embarrass yourself at Formation Peak, it will be Elder Ma's face and the face of our External Affairs Hall that you disgrace. But if you can manage to stay at Formation Peak, starting this month, your monthly allowance will be doubled. There's also a chance to formally join Formation Peak in the future. Take care."

These words carried both a warning and a veiled reminder.

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Chapter 153: Can you take on five people by yourself?

[1,263 words]

Fear and anxiety grew heavier on Su Ming's face.

But beneath this fear, a sliver of... uncontrollable excitement and longing quietly rose.

"Yes! This disciple... this disciple understands!"

He bowed deeply, his voice trembling slightly with agitation.

"This disciple... will definitely not fail the elder's high expectations!"

Seeing his appearance of being both scared and excited, the last trace of doubt in Liu Feng's heart dissipated.

This kid was just a commoner who got lucky.

"Pack your things and follow me."

Liu Feng waved his hand impatiently, turned around, and walked out of the courtyard.

Su Ming hurriedly acknowledged the order, rushed back into the room, and carefully returned the account book on the table to its original place.

Only after finishing all this did he quickly follow.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu watched Su Ming's series of performances and nodded with satisfaction.

...

Formation Peak was located at the edge of the Cloud Hidden Sect's thirty-six main peaks.

The entire mountain peak was enveloped by a visible light screen composed of countless runes, radiating a powerful and profound aura.

Liu Feng led Su Ming but did not enter the main peak area.

Instead, he stopped before a huge square at the foot of the mountain.

At the edge of the square stood rows of massive, warehouse-like stone halls.

This was the "Basic Formation Lines Maintenance Department."

Even before getting close, a chaotic and mixed aura of spiritual energy rushed towards them.

The air was filled with the smell of spirit stone powder, the scorched odor of metal smelting, and the peculiar scents of various formation materials.

This place was even more chaotic and busier than Su Ming had imagined.

Countless disciples wearing menial clothes hurriedly shuttled between the various stone halls.

Some carried huge formation plates taller than a person, others held bundles of damaged formation flags, and some pushed carts filled with scrapped spirit stones.

The clamor of voices, curses, and the clanging of metal rose and fell incessantly.

"This is it," Liu Feng pointed to one of the largest stone halls, a flicker of disgust flashing in his eyes.

"Go in by yourself and report to Senior Brother Chen Ping, who's in charge here. Just say you were sent by Elder Ma from the External Affairs Hall."

After saying this, he flew away on his sword without looking back, as if avoiding the plague.

Su Ming took a deep breath, suppressed the turmoil in his heart, and stepped into that stone hall.

The interior of the stone hall was extremely spacious.

Like a giant scrap recycling station.

Piles of various low-grade formation plates, formation flags, and the wreckage of patrol puppets that needed repair were scattered everywhere, in heaps to the east and stacks to the west.

Over a dozen menial disciples were gathered around a massive workbench, frantically carrying out repair work.

"The energy circuit of this 'Sharp' character rune burned out again! Who did this!"

"The wear and tear on this batch of formation plates is too high! Did those brutes from Heavenly Sword Peak use them as shields?"

"Stop complaining! Hurry up! Senior Brother Chen said we must repair these thirty 'Shield Formations' before sunset today, or there'll be no dinner!"

Amidst the chaos, an impatient voice rang out like thunder.

"What's all the noise! Have you all finished the work in your hands?"

Su Ming looked in the direction of the voice.

At the far end of the stone hall, on a high-backed chair, sat a young man wearing the core disciple robes of Formation Peak.

The young man had handsome features, but between his brows was an inescapable air of irritability and arrogance.

His cultivation level was actually at the early Golden Core stage!

This person should be Chen Ping.

Chen Ping's gaze soon fell upon Su Ming at the entrance.

He frowned, his voice icy.

"Newcomer? Which hall are you from?"

Su Ming hurried forward and bowed in greeting.

"Disciple Su Ming, greets Senior Brother Chen."

"Elder Ma from the External Affairs Hall sent this disciple here to assist with the verification and repair of basic formation lines."

"External Affairs Hall?"

When Chen Ping heard the words "External Affairs Hall," the irritation between his brows intensified.

When the name "Elder Ma" came from Su Ming's mouth, the impatience on his face instantly transformed into a suppressed fury.

"Elder Ma?"

Chen Ping repeated it once, his voice not loud, yet it instantly silenced the entire noisy stone hall.

All the menial disciples who had been working hard with their heads down froze as if under a paralysis spell, stopping their work and even lightening their breaths.

An invisible pressure began to permeate the air.

Su Ming clearly felt a gaze as sharp as a blade land on him.

That gaze carried scrutiny, contempt, and a trace of undisguised anger.

"I requested that he dispatch at least five menial disciples who understand basic formation lines."

Chen Ping slowly rose from the high-backed chair.

With his movement, a pressure far a hundred times more powerful than that of a Foundation Establishment cultivator descended with a crash!

The pressure of a Golden Core cultivator!

Su Ming's body suddenly sank, his bones emitting a creaking sound of strain.

The air seemed to turn into viscous mud, pressing down on his every breath.

His face instantly turned pale.

"And he sent only you?"

Chen Ping stepped forward from the depths of the stone hall, each step seeming to tread on Su Ming's heart.

He walked up to Su Ming, looked down at him from above, and laughed in extreme anger.

"What a fine Elder Ma!"

"Does he think my Formation Peak has no one, or is he just making a fool of me?!"

He suddenly waved his hand, pointing at the mountain-like pile of damaged formation plates in the center of the hall.

"Look at all this!"

"Thirty 'Bedrock Shield Formations' need to be repaired before sunset! Can you alone replace five people?!"

His voice echoed like a great bell within the spacious stone hall, painfully vibrating eardrums.

The surrounding menial disciples buried their heads even lower, afraid this fury would burn them.

A few menial disciples in the corners secretly glanced up, their gazes towards Su Ming filled with sympathy and schadenfreude.

"Another unlucky fellow."

"Look at his build, like a scholar. He might be crushed directly by Senior Brother Chen's pressure."

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul body instantly bristled.

"How outrageous!"

"Disciple, let's go! We won't suffer this humiliation! If this place doesn't want us, there are other places that will! At worst, we'll go back to keeping accounts!"

However, Su Ming's reaction was beyond everyone's expectations.

Under the mountain-like pressure, although his face was pale and his legs trembled slightly.

His back remained ramrod straight.

He bowed deeply to Chen Ping once more, his tone neither servile nor overbearing.

"Senior Brother Chen, please calm your anger."

"This disciple does not know the specific agreement between Elder Ma and Senior Brother."

"This disciple came under orders, knowing only to exhaust all efforts to complete the work within my duty."

"Whether I can replace five people, this disciple dares not presume."

Su Ming raised his head, meeting Chen Ping's icy gaze, and said calmly.

"But please give this disciple a chance, Senior Brother. You'll know once we try."

His voice was not loud, but it clearly reached the ears of everyone in the stone hall.

The entire stone hall fell into a deathly silence.

All the menial disciples looked at Su Ming as if he were a madman.

Even Chen Ping's anger paused slightly, replaced by a flicker of astonishment.

He hadn't expected a third-stage Qi Refining menial disciple to dare say such words under his pressure.

"Master, calm down."

Su Ming soothed the furious Lin Yu in his heart.

"This is Elder Ma's test, and also our opportunity."

"If we cannot even establish a foothold here, how can we talk about the future?"

Lin Yu's soul consciousness fell silent for a moment, then transformed into a sigh.

"Ah! You child, you're just too honest! Fine, fine, since you want to stay, your teacher will help you!"

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Chapter 154: Try It and You'll Know

[1,051 words]

Chen Ping looked into Su Ming's calm, unreadable eyes, and the anger in his heart inexplicably subsided a few degrees.

He snorted coldly, withdrawing the crushing pressure that had almost ground everyone into dust.

"Fine!"

"What a fine 'try it and you'll know'!"

He turned and casually pointed to the far corner of the hall, at a pile of discarded, most severely damaged formation plate fragments.

That pile of stuff was less like fragments and more like trash.

The formation plates had been violently blasted into pieces, their core runes completely obliterated, with even the formation bases showing irreparable cracks.

They were piled separately there, clearly the "scrap" that even the other menial post disciples had given up on.

"You fix those!"

"If you can repair... five of them by sunset."

He held up five fingers, then seemed to think of something and shook his head disdainfully.

"No, as long as you can get three of them to operate stably."

"Then I'll believe Elder Ma didn't misjudge you!"

"If you can't..."

A flash of cold light gleamed in Chen Ping's eyes.

"Go back where you came from! I will personally explain this to Elder Ma!"

The gazes of the surrounding menial post disciples looking at Su Ming had already turned into complete pity.

"He's done for, it's the stuff from that 'graveyard' pile."

"Never mind three, if he can even assemble one complete one, he's impressive."

Su Ming did not say another word.

He merely bowed once more to Chen Ping.

Then, under everyone's watchful eyes, he silently walked toward that pile of "scrap."

He did not rush to start like the other menial post disciples, picking up tools and beginning to piece things together.

He simply squatted down, reached out his hand, and slowly brushed it over the pile of cold, dust-covered fragments.

His gaze quickly scanned every piece of debris.

Size.

Shape.

Material.

Pattern of the break.

Remaining traces of rune pathways.

Countless pieces of information flooded his mind.

"The third piece on the left, the Kun position formation corner, can perfectly match that diamond-shaped fragment under your foot."

"That charred black piece in front to the right is the core remnant, but the internal 'Solidify' character rune base still exists, it can be utilized."

"Don't touch that largest piece! It was shattered by reverse spiritual energy, its internal structure is completely ruined!"

Su Ming's eyes remained as still as an ancient well.

His brain, with Lin Yu's assistance, instantly completed the classification, modeling, and deduction of the optimal repair plan for all the fragments.

Three complete, feasible repair processes clearly appeared in his mind.

He stood up.

From the workbench nearby, he picked up a set of the most basic repair tools.

A spiritual energy engraving knife, a bottle of spiritual energy adhesive, and a small piece of blank spirit stone used to supplement the energy circuits.

He squatted down again and picked up the first fragment.

He mobilized the wisp of weak spiritual energy within his body and channeled it into the engraving knife.

To outsiders, his movements seemed somewhat clumsy, even awkward.

His grip on the knife was completely different from that of the skilled menial post disciples.

The spiritual energy he channeled was so faint it seemed like it could sputter out at any moment.

"Sss..."

The tip of the engraving knife slid across the edge of the fragment, producing a slight, not-so-smooth scraping sound.

From a corner, a menial post disciple let out a suppressed snicker.

"Look, he can't even hold the engraving knife steady."

"I thought he had some great skill, turns out he's just a smooth talker."

Chen Ping crossed his arms, watching coldly, the disdain in his eyes growing thicker.

However, no one noticed.

That seemingly clumsy stroke of Su Ming's knife—its landing point, its depth, its angle—were all precise to a shocking degree!

It perfectly shaved off that tiny bit of burr on the fragment's edge caused by the break, making the entire fracture surface as smooth as a mirror.

Immediately after, he picked up another fragment.

Another seemingly clumsy stroke.

Two originally completely unrelated fragments, after being processed by him, were gently fitted together.

"Click."

A nearly imperceptible soft sound.

The two fragments actually fit together perfectly, seamless, as if they had originally been one piece!

"Huh?"

The nearest menial post disciple let out a sound of surprise.

Su Ming paid no attention.

His movements were still not fast.

But every time he picked something up, every time he engraved, every time he joined pieces, carried a strange, flowing, natural rhythm.

Not a single superfluous movement.

Not a single waste of spiritual energy.

He was like the most precise machine, silently, efficiently, executing the perfect repair plan in his mind.

Gradually, the murmurs within the stone hall quieted down.

Everyone's gaze was involuntarily drawn to that corner, to that silent figure.

One piece.

Two pieces.

Ten pieces.

...

The time it takes an incense stick to burn passed.

In Su Ming's hands, a "Bedrock Shield Formation" formation plate that had been nearly seventy percent damaged was miraculously reassembled into a complete outline!

Though it was covered with joining seams, like a warrior covered in scars.

Its "form" had returned!

Everyone held their breath.

Chen Ping's crossed arms had, at some unknown time, slowly lowered.

For the first time, a look of seriousness appeared in his eyes.

Su Ming took a deep breath and entered the most critical step.

—Reconstructing the core runes.

He carefully embedded that blank spirit stone into the groove at the center of the formation plate.

Then, he extended his index finger, using it in place of the engraving knife.

A wisp of pure cyan spiritual energy gathered at his fingertip, condensing into a point of faint light.

He closed his eyes.

In his mind, Lin Yu's voice, like the most precise metronome, slowly sounded.

"Start the stroke, draw three parts spiritual energy, follow the 'Qian' position."

"Turn, halve the spiritual energy, connect the 'Li' position circuit."

"Pause the stroke, gather all your focus, ignite the 'Suppress' character core!"

Su Ming's finger moved.

His fingertip slowly traced across the surface of the blank spirit stone.

Brand new, soft cyan-glowing runes began to appear, bit by bit, on that small stone surface!

.....

Time flowed slowly amidst the spiritual light at his fingertips.

While the other menial post disciples were still scratching their heads over the blocked energy circuit of their first shield formation, a fully repaired formation plate already lay quietly by Su Ming's side.

That formation plate looked unremarkable.

The joining seams were clearly visible, the newly engraved runes had strokes utterly lacking in aesthetic appeal, compared to the original's smooth, ornate patterns, they looked like a child's scribbles.

But Su Ming didn't spare it another glance.

He merely placed it gently to the side, then picked up new fragments from that pile of scrap.

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[961 words]

"Disciple, don't think of them as unique, one-of-a-kind formation plates."

Lin Yu's voice echoed within Su Ming's mind.

"They are products, standardized industrial products. Understand?"

"Standardized?" Su Ming silently repeated this unfamiliar term in his heart.

"Right! Look, this kind with edge damage, we uniformly call it 'Type A damage'. That kind with core rune wear, call it 'Type B damage'."

"All Type A damage, use the first set of repair procedures. All Type B damage, use the second set. Don't think, don't innovate, just execute! This is called assembly line operation!"

Su Ming's eyes suddenly lit up.

His brain, tempered by Lin Yu with all sorts of inexplicable terms, instantly grasped Lin Yu's meaning.

Categorize, model, apply!

Wasn't this the same method he used to handle the ledgers?!

He immediately sorted the pile of scrap beside him according to Lin Yu's "damage classification method," quickly dividing them into three piles.

Then, he picked up the fragments of the second shield formation.

This time, his speed was noticeably several times faster than the first!

He no longer needed to analyze each fragment one by one.

He just glanced at the damage type, and the corresponding repair procedure automatically surfaced in his mind.

Cutting, grinding, piecing, bonding...

His movements were still not fast, even somewhat rigid.

But that smooth, flowing sense of fluency made all the menial disciples stealing glances feel an inexplicable palpitation.

"He... he seems to have gotten faster again?"

"How is that possible? Repairing formation plates relies on inspiration and feel. There's no logic to getting faster and faster."

On the surface, Chen Ping was reviewing a material requisition list.

But his powerful divine sense, like an invisible net, enveloped Su Ming's every move.

"Something's off!"

Chen Ping's divine sense could clearly "see."

Every cut Su Ming made precisely accounted for the thickness of the spiritual energy adhesive.

Every time he pieced fragments together, he perfectly utilized the structural stress of the fragments themselves.

He even, while reshaping the core runes, directly erased an extremely subtle, almost negligible energy circuit redundancy in the original design!

That redundancy was a habitual drafting error by the designer of the "Bedrock Shield Formation," passed down for over a hundred years. Even many stewards at Formation Peak had never noticed it!

How did this menial disciple spot it?!

For the first time, Chen Ping felt doubt about his own judgment.

Elder Ma... could it be he wasn't just toying with me?

Did he actually... send me a... talent?

...

There was still one hour until sunset.

Inside the stone hall, the busy scene of clanging and hammering continued.

Most menial disciples were still struggling with their second shield formation.

In the corner, Su Ming slowly put down his carving knife.

On the empty ground before him, seven repaired "Bedrock Shield Formations" were neatly arranged.

Far exceeding Chen Ping's requirement of three.

He didn't announce it, nor did he look at anyone.

He just quietly sat down cross-legged, slowly closed his eyes, and began circulating the "Greenwood Longevity Art" to recover his depleted mental energy and spiritual energy.

As if he had done a trivial, insignificant thing.

"Disciple, that's the way." Lin Yu's voice was full of approval.

"Matters settled, brush off your robes, hide your merit and fame. You've grasped the demeanor of a master."

The entire stone hall had, at some point, fallen completely silent.

All the menial disciples had stopped their work, staring dumbfounded at that corner.

Looking at the seven neatly arranged formation plates, then at the youth meditating with closed eyes.

Their faces were filled with bewilderment and absurdity.

This thing... he repaired seven of them?

Alone?

One afternoon?

Using that pile of junk?

...

At sunset, the last rays of twilight fell from the stone hall's dome.

Chen Ping put down the jade slip in his hand and stood up.

He didn't look at the flustered menial disciples, but walked straight to Su Ming.

Su Ming happened to open his eyes at that moment.

"Senior Brother Chen." He stood up and calmly bowed in greeting.

Chen Ping didn't speak.

He just crouched down and picked up the first repaired formation plate.

His expression was stern and cold.

Divine sense probed in, spiritual energy injected.

Hum—

A steady hum.

Above the formation plate, a thick, earthen-yellow light screen instantly expanded!

The light screen was uniform, solid, without the slightest fluctuation or flaw!

Chen Ping's pupils contracted slightly.

He put down the first one and picked up the second.

Activate!

Light screen expanded, perfect operation!

Third one!

Fourth one!

...

When the seventh formation plate also bloomed with a stable, thick light in his hand, the sternness on Chen Ping's face had completely vanished.

Replaced by unconcealable shock.

He suddenly looked up, staring intently at Su Ming, his divine sense frantically sweeping through the internal circuits of the seventh formation plate.

Then, he found it.

That erased, insignificant redundancy.

He clearly calculated that just this tiny modification alone reduced this shield formation's spiritual energy consumption by... half a percent compared to a brand-new standard formation plate!

Chen Ping's breath hitched.

He slowly stood up.

Looking at this calm-faced, weak-aured menial disciple before him, he remained silent for a long time.

The entire stone hall was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

All eyes were focused on these two.

After a long while, Chen Ping gave Su Ming a deep look.

That gaze was completely different from when they first met.

He said nothing.

He just turned and walked towards the exit of the stone hall.

His voice came from the doorway, carrying a trace of complex, hard-to-define emotion.

"The rest of you, continue."

"Su Ming, follow me."

Su Ming stood up, brushed off non-existent dust from his robe.

He didn't look at the stunned, dumbfounded menial disciples around him, just calmly followed Chen Ping's steps.

One in front, one behind, they passed through the bustling square and entered a quiet side hall.

Inside the side hall, it was empty, only the faint scent of sandalwood lingered.

The stone door slowly closed behind them, isolating all external noise.

Chen Ping didn't turn around, just stood with his back to Su Ming in silence.

Su Ming also didn't speak, waiting quietly.

He knew the real test was only beginning now.

After a long time, Chen Ping finally slowly turned around.

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[1,462 words]

The arrogance and irritation on Chen Ping's face had vanished, replaced by a hint of... awkwardness.

"You..."

He opened his mouth, seemingly wanting to ask something, but didn't know where to start.

Finally, he let out a long sigh, a sigh that seemed to shed all his pride.

"I apologize for my loss of composure today."

Chen Ping's voice was somewhat hoarse, but every word was crystal clear.

Su Ming's heart stirred slightly, but his expression remained unchanged as he simply bowed respectfully.

"Senior Brother Chen, you are too serious."

"As a newcomer, I am already extremely fortunate to receive your guidance."

His words were delivered with an extremely humble posture, without the slightest hint of taking credit or arrogance.

Chen Ping looked at him, his gaze growing even more complex.

"You don't need to be like this."

He smiled a self-deprecating smile.

"Today's matter was me judging a gentleman's heart with my own petty measure."

Chen Ping walked over and sat down on a stone stool, gesturing for Su Ming to sit as well.

"Let me be honest with you."

"A few days ago, I requested reinforcements from Elder Ma of the External Affairs Hall."

"I hoped he could assign me a few experienced outer sect disciples who had worked for many years at Formation Peak."

"As a result, he only sent you, a newcomer from the Accounting Office of the External Affairs Hall."

Chen Ping's tone carried a trace of helplessness.

"I truly felt at the time that he was looking down on me, looking down on our entire Maintenance Department."

Su Ming listened quietly without interrupting.

"But now, I understand."

Chen Ping raised his head, his gaze burning as he looked at Su Ming.

"That energy circuit redundancy you erased when repairing the seventh Shield Formation..."

"That design was a habitual drafting error by a Formation Peak elder a hundred years ago, passed down to this day. Even many stewards have never noticed it."

"How did you spot it?"

This question was the key.

Su Ming's heartbeat skipped a beat.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul sense instantly went on high alert.

"Here it comes! The pressure interview!"

"Don't panic! Just say you've looked at too many ledgers, are particularly sensitive to numbers and lines, and felt that part was 'incongruous'!"

A perfectly appropriate look of confusion and contemplation appeared on Su Ming's face.

"Reporting to Senior Brother, this disciple... actually didn't recognize that as any redundancy."

"This disciple merely saw over a hundred damage records for the 'Bedrock Shield Formation' while organizing the scrap inventory."

"This disciple noticed that the spiritual energy attenuation of almost all formation plates started from that exact spot."

"So... this disciple boldly erased it."

"It was just... a fortunate success."

This explanation was seamless.

It perfectly attributed Su Ming's formation talent to his equally recognized talent for calculations.

Fortunate.

Fortunate again.

After listening, Chen Ping fell silent for a long time.

Looking at Su Ming's sincere face, he could only end up with a long sigh.

"So that's how it is."

"It seems Elder Ma's judgment is indeed sharper than mine."

He stood up, his tone now completely restored to calm, even carrying a hint of solemnity.

"Su Ming."

"From today onwards, you are officially a member of my Basic Formation Lines Maintenance Department."

"I will no longer assign you any fixed tasks."

"You may freely choose from all the formation vessels awaiting repair here."

"You may freely take any basic repair materials from the storeroom."

"Furthermore, if you have any suggestions for optimizing the existing repair procedures, you may propose them directly to me."

These words were tantamount to granting Su Ming immense freedom and authority.

Su Ming immediately stood up and bowed once more.

"Thank you, Senior Brother Chen!"

"This disciple will definitely spare no effort and live up to the expectations of Senior Brother and Elder Ma!"

...

By the time he returned to Courtyard Ding-Qi, the moon was high in the middle of the night sky.

Su Ming closed the door and immediately activated the room's composite formation.

"Master!"

His spiritual sense carried a trace of barely suppressed excitement.

"Disciple, you did brilliantly!"

Inside the ring, Lin Yu's soul sense was already overjoyed.

"Freedom to choose tasks! Materials for free use! Isn't this just opening an all-you-can-eat buffet with unlimited refills for us!"

"Our 'safe house' plan can be upgraded! Soundproofing, aura concealment, early warning, plus we need to add defense and short-range teleportation! Let's get it all set up!"

Listening to his master's outlandish plans, Su Ming didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Master, this matter is probably not that simple."

He analyzed calmly.

"Senior Brother Chen Ping's change in attitude today is certainly a good thing."

"But it also means that from now on, this disciple is completely exposed within the sight of Formation Peak."

"The slightest misstep could attract unnecessary attention."

Lin Yu's soul sense immediately calmed down.

"Hmm, what you say is very true, disciple."

He immediately switched to his master's lofty tone.

"Your master was just now testing your character. Good, not arrogant or impatient, you truly grasp the essence of my 'Way of Survival'."

"This matter is indeed a double-edged sword. It is both an excellent opportunity to integrate into Formation Peak and obtain resources, and also the eye of the storm where the slightest mistake could lead to disaster."

"Therefore, our next strategy must also be adjusted."

"On the surface, you must still maintain the persona of a 'calculation genius, formation rookie'. Every repair you make must be reasonable and justifiable, explainable from the perspective of 'data analysis'."

"In secret, you must use this convenience to voraciously absorb formation knowledge, but only learn, never create. All high-level, attention-grabbing formations exist only in our minds, never revealed in the slightest."

"What we must become is the most excellent 'repairman', not the most talented 'designer'."

Su Ming nodded heavily.

"This disciple understands."

...

At the same time.

Chen Ping flew on his sword, passing through layers of cloud seas, and finally landed outside the familiar meditation room of the External Affairs Hall.

He straightened his robes, his expression solemn, and respectfully knocked on the stone door.

"Disciple Chen Ping requests an audience with Elder Ma."

"Enter."

Inside the meditation room, Elder Ma's voice was as calm as ever.

Chen Ping pushed the door open and gave a deep bow to the slender back.

"Disciple... apologizes to the Elder for today's events."

Without the slightest hesitation, he directly admitted his mistake.

"This disciple was blind, nearly missed a talented individual, and moreover misunderstood the Elder's profound intentions. I ask the Elder to punish me."

Elder Ma slowly turned around, his cloudy eyes quietly looking at him.

"Oh?"

"It seems that boy did not disappoint you."

A bitter smile appeared on Chen Ping's face.

"Far from disappointing."

He reported everything that happened today in detail, including how Su Ming repaired the seven Shield Formations, how he discovered and erased that century-old design redundancy, leaving nothing out.

His tone was extremely complex.

There was shock, admiration, and a trace of... lingering fear.

"That boy's talent and character regarding basic formation lines are truly rare."

"This disciple... is far inferior."

After listening, Elder Ma showed no surprise whatsoever.

He merely picked up his teacup, gently stroked his beard, and smiled faintly.

That smile was profound and inscrutable.

"That boy's path to immortality is severed, yet the meticulousness of his thoughts and the excellence of his comprehension are the best I have seen in my entire life."

Chen Ping's heart tightened. He knew Elder Ma was about to get to the main point.

"I sent him there not expecting him to do the work of five men."

Elder Ma put down his teacup, his voice unhurried.

"But for him to see, to learn, to understand what our Formation Peak truly needs, and what it lacks."

Chen Ping's breathing unconsciously grew lighter.

He listened as Elder Ma slowly said.

"I intend to establish a 'Formation Lines Repair Hall' under the External Affairs Hall."

"It will be dedicated to the maintenance, optimization, and establishment of standardized procedures for all low-level formations within the sect."

"He will lead it, and we will train a group of specialists like him from among the menial disciples."

"Do you think he is capable of taking on this responsibility?"

Formation Lines Repair Hall!

Led by a menial disciple!

This...

This was no longer a promotion; this was building a whole new stove for him!

Elder Ma's plan was actually this far-reaching!

A tidal wave surged in Chen Ping's heart.

He finally understood the gap between himself and this Elder.

What he saw was the mess before his eyes, a troublesome problem.

What Elder Ma saw was the flaws in the entire sect's operational system, and an opportunity capable of changing the future!

He opened his mouth, his throat dry. It took a long moment for him to find his voice again from the immense shock.

"Elder... this move... is unprecedented."

"This disciple... does not know how to judge it."

Looking into Elder Ma's eyes that seemed capable of seeing through everything, he ultimately spoke his most genuine thoughts.

"But in terms of meticulous thinking, understanding and optimization of basic formation lines..."

"This disciple believes that within the sect, among the Qi Refining and Foundation Establishment realms... probably no one can surpass him. Of course, excluding those few monstrous talents among the inner sect disciples; the sect wouldn't let those few do this kind of work anyway."

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Chapter 157: This Genius Title is a Bit Hot to Handle

[1,207 words]

On the afternoon of the second day, Su Ming arrived at the Basic Formation Lines Maintenance Department from the Accounting Office.

The moment he stepped through the stone hall's entrance, the originally noisy and chaotic atmosphere instantly fell dead silent.

Over a dozen gazes, like searchlights, snapped to focus on him in unison.

"He's here."

"That's him? The one who repaired seven shield formations in half a day yesterday?"

"He doesn't look like he has three heads and six arms..."

Su Ming walked straight ahead without looking sideways, heading directly for the corner he used yesterday, ready to start work.

"J-Junior Brother Su."

A voice, somewhat stammering, came from beside him.

Su Ming turned his head. It was the menial disciple from yesterday who was closest to him, the first one to discover he had spliced the formation plate back together.

That menial disciple wore a smile that was both ingratiating and somewhat fearful, holding a damaged formation plate in his hands.

"Junior Brother, the core circuit of this 'Shield Formation' plate of mine... it just won't connect properly. C-could you... take a look?"

As soon as he finished speaking, several people immediately gathered around from the surroundings, all looking at Su Ming with hopeful eyes.

Before Su Ming could speak.

"Ahem!"

A heavy cough came from deep within the stone hall.

Chen Ping was sitting on that high-backed chair, his expression stern.

"What's this crowd doing? Have you all finished the work in your hands?"

The menial disciples immediately scattered like birds and beasts.

Chen Ping's gaze fell on Su Ming, his voice softening considerably.

"Su Ming, come here."

Su Ming complied and stepped forward.

Chen Ping pointed to a clean and tidy stone table beside him.

On it were not damaged formation plates, but several thick stacks of jade slips and animal skin diagrams.

"Starting today, you will use this table."

"You no longer need to touch those basic repair tasks."

Chen Ping tossed over a blank jade token, engraved with the character "Chen".

"This is my token. With this token, you can freely enter and exit all the archive rooms within the maintenance department."

"What I need you to do is to read through all the original formation diagrams of low-level formations in our repository, the repair notes from past generations, and the wear-and-tear reports from the last three years."

"Then, give me an... optimization plan."

The entire stone hall once again fell into deathly silence.

All the menial disciples stopped the work in their hands, staring at the jade slips and diagrams on that stone table.

An optimization plan?

Have a menial disciple who just arrived yesterday optimize the repair procedures that Formation Peak has passed down for over a hundred years?

Has Senior Brother Chen gone mad?!

Su Ming's heart also sank heavily.

This wasn't just putting him on a fire to roast anymore, this was directly tossing him into an alchemy furnace.

"Master, this..."

"Take it!" Lin Yu's soul thought was resolute and decisive.

"What are you afraid of! Isn't this exactly what you're best at? He wants you to optimize formations, so you give him data analysis! He wants results, so we'll give him a perfect result in a way he can't understand!"

Su Ming steadied his mind and bowed once more to Chen Ping.

"This disciple... will do his utmost."

...

In the days that followed, Su Ming completely transformed from a "repairman" into a "researcher".

Every morning, he handled the ledgers of the External Affairs Hall at the Accounting Office, and every afternoon, he plunged headfirst into the archives room of the Formation Peak maintenance department.

The archives room was piled high with dust-covered archives.

The air was filled with the ancient, dry scent of animal hide mixed with spiritual ink.

Su Ming, holding the jade token, passed through without hindrance.

He wasn't in a hurry to look at those profound formation theories.

Instead, he pulled out all the materials related to the "Bedrock Shield Formation".

From the first draft of the design sketch a hundred years ago, to the detailed records of every revision, to the material ratios of every batch, and thousands of wear-and-tear reports.

A massive amount of information flooded into his mind.

To outsiders, he was merely boringly flipping through old papers.

But inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul thought was already dancing with excitement.

"Beautiful! Too beautiful!"

"Disciple, look at this energy circuit design, doesn't it look like the most basic series circuit?"

"That redundant part you erased, I found it! The designer added a 'voltage-stabilizing' rune here, which actually caused extra spiritual energy loss! A classic case of gilding the lily!"

Using terms Su Ming completely couldn't understand, Lin Yu broke down the complex formations into the most basic physical models and logic modules.

And Su Ming, relying on his terrifying memory and inductive ability, matched these models and modules one by one with the actual wear-and-tear data.

Seven days later.

Su Ming walked out of the archives room carrying a thick stack of animal skin paper and placed it on Chen Ping's desk.

"Senior Brother Chen, these are this disciple's humble opinions regarding the 'Bedrock Shield Formation'."

Chen Ping put down the work in his hands and picked up the first sheet with suspicion.

There wasn't a single formation rune on the paper.

Instead, it was a chart composed of horizontal and vertical lines and various strange symbols that he had never seen before.

The chart was titled: "Pie Chart of Attribution Analysis for Common Damage Types of 'Bedrock Shield Formation' in the Past Three Years".

Chen Ping's brows furrowed into a deep crease.

"What is this?"

"Reporting to Senior Brother, this chart classifies and analyzes the proportion of all damages that appeared in three thousand wear-and-tear reports."

Su Ming pointed to the largest area on the chart.

"Look, 'Core Rune Energy Attenuation' accounts for a high forty percent. The main cause of this attenuation is not external impact, but the 'fatigue' of the material itself during the process of spiritual energy activation."

He then flipped to the second sheet of paper.

On it was another, even more complex chart filled with curves.

"Graph of Different Batches of Mystic Iron Ore Ratios vs. Formation Plate 'Spiritual Energy Fatigue' Curve."

"This disciple compared the material formulas of fifty different batches and found that when the 'Red Copper' content in the Mystic Iron ore exceeds three parts per thousand, the 'fatigue' threshold of the formation plate plummets off a cliff."

"And the Mystic Iron ore drawn from our repository in the past half year generally has a 'Red Copper' content around five parts per thousand."

Chen Ping's breathing gradually became rapid.

He couldn't understand those charts.

But he could understand Su Ming's words!

Su Ming wasn't discussing elusive formation theory, he was talking about materials, data, cost!

Things that every maintenance department manager could understand!

Su Ming opened the last page.

It was a clear, well-organized proposal.

"Five Suggestions Regarding Optimizing the 'Bedrock Shield Formation' Repair Process and Upstream Material Quality Control."

First, it is suggested to communicate with the Vessel Hall to strictly control the 'Red Copper' content in Mystic Iron ore.

Second, standardize the repair process: use Plan One for Type A damage, Plan Two for Type B damage.

Third, improve the spiritual energy adhesive formula by adding a small amount of 'Gel Grass' powder, which can increase structural strength by over thirty percent.

Fourth...

Looking at each clear, specific, and actionable suggestion, Chen Ping's hands began to tremble slightly.

He abruptly raised his head and looked at Su Ming, his gaze as if looking at a monster.

What kind of formation genius was this?!

This was clearly a management prodigy!

Elder Ma...

Where on earth did you dig up such a treasure?!

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Chapter 158: Li Kai's Kindness

[1,048 words]

Su Ming's reputation as a "prodigy" began to ferment in a strange way among the lower ranks of Formation Peak.

No one claimed he had exceptional talent in formations.

All the circulating versions turned into:

“Did you hear? That Su Ming from External Affairs looked at the accounts and found every flaw in the Shield Formation in one glance!”

“That’s nothing! He drew a diagram and the Vessel Hall obediently raised their material standards!”

“Now when we repair formation plates, we don’t need to think anymore. We just follow his ‘manual’—efficiency’s more than doubled!”

Su — Accounting Mister — Ming, in Formation Peak, had unexpectedly planted his first foothold in a way nobody anticipated.

Month’s end.

Su Ming was in the materials room, receiving the spiritual ink for next month’s practice.

The steward in charge of distribution treated him extra politely, his face full of smiles. “Junior Brother Su, this is your monthly allotment. I picked out the best for you.” As he spoke, he pushed several ink ingots whose quality was clearly superior to the usual pieces in front of him.

At that moment, a silent figure came to the counter beside him.

It was Li Kai.

He was still the taciturn type, head bowed, accepting his own share—the most ordinary materials as a menial laborer.

The two exchanged almost no words, like strangers.

But as Li Kai received his materials and turned to leave, his step seemed to pause imperceptibly. His gaze, faint but deliberate, swept over the pile of high-quality ink in front of Su Ming.

His sight lingered for less than half a breath on one particular ingot, its color unusually dark and its texture appearing remarkably even and fine.

Then, as if nothing had happened, he walked away without a backward glance.

The whole process was so quick it felt like an illusion.

Yet Su Ming’s heart leapt. He was sure this was no coincidence.

He casually reached out, took the ingot that Li Kai's gaze had "marked," and slipped it into his storage pouch. His face remained calm, but he was alert inwardly. "Master, what did Li Kai mean by that? What's special about this ink?"

"Not sure." Lin Yu's soul thought carried curiosity. "The spiritual light contained in that ingot seems purer than the others. But that kid wouldn't act without cause. He's probably signaling that this is something good. Keep it for now; we'll test it later and find out."

...

Another month-end assessment day.

A Formation Peak steward responsible for inspecting repair outcomes frowned as he flipped through the jade slip of records in his hand.

"Strange," he murmured, "why is this month's repair submission failure rate over thirty percent lower than last month's?"

He walked over to Chen Ping and handed him the jade slip, his tone full of disbelief. "Junior Brother Chen, take a look. This month, all the repair plates submitted by the new menials show a major drop in failure rates. Especially... this one named Su Ming."

The steward's finger tapped the data after Su Ming's name.

"He submitted thirty-seven repaired pieces, covering basic formations of Lighting, Rock Stabilization, and Sharp Metal."

"Assessment result... zero failures!"

"And according to the patrol disciples' feedback, the average spiritual energy loss during subsequent use of his repaired plates was five percent below the standard value—the lowest of anyone!"

The steward looked at Chen Ping, astonishment written all over his face. "This kid seems plain, even a little clumsy. But how did the things he repaired become... so solid and durable?"

Chen Ping took the jade slip. Seeing the glaring 'zero failures' and the efficiency improvement numbers, a complex, already-knowing smile appeared on his face. He patted the steward's shoulder with a tone of matter-of-fact clarity.

"Senior Brother Wang, you'll get used to it. This is someone Elder Ma favors."

...

At dusk, Su Ming walked back toward Courtyard Ding-Qi.

He detoured to the Hall of Meritorious Deeds in External Affairs first.

As soon as Zhao Ping, who handled monthly stipends, saw him, he approached with a beaming face and an even warmer, almost respectful tone than usual. "Senior Brother Su! You're here!"

He respectfully handed Su Ming a heavy cloth pouch.

"This is your monthly stipend. Elder Ma specially approved one from External Affairs and one from Formation Peak, that's six low-grade spirit stones total."

The other menials collecting stipends shot envious, even reverent looks his way. Six spirit stones! That was almost the monthly allowance of some outer disciples! And this was only a menial's income!

Su Ming accepted the pouch calmly, thanked him, and turned to leave, as if oblivious to the whispers behind him.

He kept the spirit stone pouch close, feeling the warm, pure spiritual energy through the cloth. There was no ripple on his face, as if this were ordinary.

But for the first time, Su Ming felt a deep sense of security. In this perilous cultivation world, tangible resources like these were the foundation of his foothold and steady progress.

Back in Courtyard Ding-Qi, Su Ming did not go straight into his room.

Instead he glanced up at the southern room still emitting a faint light.

Who exactly was Li Kai? What was his intention in signaling like that? What hidden quality did that ink ingot hold?

Su Ming withdrew his gaze and pushed open his door.

No matter what, strengthening himself was never wrong.

After closing the door, Su Ming efficiently activated the compound formation in his room.

Absolute silence and secrecy enveloped him once more.

He took out the dark-hued ink ingot.

"Master, this object..."

“Hold on. I need to use soul power to probe carefully, confirm there’s no poison, no tracking marks, no spiritual traps.”

“Preliminary probe shows the ink ingot itself doesn’t contain malicious curses, tracking sigils, or explosive arrays—common traps are absent. The spiritual energy contained seems a bit better than what you used before.”

“Let’s first find a discarded, unimportant formation plate to test it on, see what effect this ink has.”

Su Ming immediately pulled out an almost-falling-apart old formation plate from the corner.

“Now, grind just a tiny bit of ink, only enough to inscribe one most-basic rune. While you carve, I’ll fully monitor your divine sense, spiritual energy, and any minute changes in the ink. If anything goes wrong, drop the brush immediately!”

Su Ming inhaled deeply, steadying his mind and calming his spirit.

Following Lin Yu’s instructions, he took only a pea-sized amount of the ingot, ground it carefully, then dipped a spare rune brush until it was saturated.

The brush tip descended, and spiritual energy began to slowly flow in.

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Chapter 159: Incident

[1,231 words]

The rune flowed beneath the brush tip. Su Ming was completely focused, keenly aware of his own state. Lin Yu's soul power acted like the most precise sensor, enveloping Su Ming's wrist, the brush shaft, and the slowly forming rune.

A quarter of an hour later, the simplest "Spirit Gathering" rune was completed. A faint glimmer flashed, and it began operating stably.

"How do you feel?" Lin Yu asked immediately.

Su Ming carefully savored the sensation, a flicker of surprise passing through his eyes. "Master, while carving it, I felt... the consumption of my divine sense seemed slightly

less than usual. My brushstrokes were steadier, and my mind felt more tranquil and concentrated."

"As expected..." No joy could be heard in Lin Yu's soul voice, only deeper caution. "This ink stick indeed possesses the miraculous effect of nourishing the divine sense and improving carving stability. Just this effect alone makes this item extremely valuable, far beyond what those few low-grade spirit stones of yours could compare to."

"What about Li Kai..."

"The debt of gratitude is even greater now, but it's also more suspicious!" Lin Yu cut him off. "Where did a mere menial disciple like him obtain such a precious item? And why would he give it to you so easily? This matter is absolutely not simple!"

He looked at that ink stick as if it were a hot potato.

"This item is to be sealed away for now. Until we completely understand Li Kai's background and motives, it absolutely cannot be used for maintaining core formations like the 'safe house'! Even for daily practice, use it with extreme caution, and constantly observe for any subsequent effects."

When Su Ming held his breath, focused his spirit, and his brush tip was about to touch the old formation plate, Lin Yu's warning sounded again:

"Remember, disciple, pies don't fall from the sky! In this perilous world of cultivation, apart from your master, you must maintain a twelvefold wariness towards everyone! Any seemingly good fortune or gift likely has a price tag attached that you cannot afford!"

Su Ming understood clearly in his heart. Li Kai's "silent gift" held value far beyond his imagination.

He noted this debt of gratitude. Simultaneously, he became even more convinced that within this sect, only by quietly, unobtrusively improving himself could he weather the unknown storms ahead.

.....

Several days later, at the Basic Formation Lines Maintenance Department.

Su Ming was guiding two newly arrived menial disciples in repairing a "Bedrock Shield Formation," following the "standardized procedure" he had organized. His explanations were clear and insightful, completely based on data analysis and structural mechanics. The two menial disciples listened, nodding repeatedly, their eyes filled with admiration.

"Junior Brother Su, your method is truly effective! Before, looking at runes made my head spin. Now, following your 'three-step inspection method,' I immediately know where the problem lies!"

Su Ming gave a gentle smile. "It's just a matter of practice making perfect. If you two senior brothers practice more, you'll definitely do even better."

His attitude of not hoarding knowledge, his willingness to share, coupled with methods that genuinely improved efficiency, had earned him an excellent reputation among the lower-level menial disciples in the maintenance department.

However, not everyone was pleased to see this.

Not far away, Steward Sun watched the harmonious scene, his expression somewhat gloomy.

He had seniority but had never been able to break through to the Golden Core realm. Seeing Chen Ping increasingly rely on Su Ming, even hinting at letting him share some management responsibilities, a mix of jealousy and a sense of crisis inevitably rose within him.

"A good-for-nothing with a ruined foundation, relying on some crooked methods, dares to give orders here?" he cursed inwardly, pondering how to find an opportunity to make this kid recognize his place and not get too carried away with his success.

.....

Deep within the sea of clouds above Formation Peak.

A cave dwelling floated outside a cliff face. There was no plaque at its entrance, only drifting clouds gathering and dispersing, with an occasional crane alighting.

Inside the cave dwelling, an unfinished game of Go and two cups of clear tea.

A middle-aged man in blue robes sat opposite Elder Ma, a black Go stone held between his fingers, yet to be placed.

His face was ordinary, the kind that would be lost in a crowd. His aura was restrained to the extreme, deep as an abyss, vast as the sea. If not seen with one's own eyes, a sweep of divine sense might mistake him for a mere rock on the mountain.

Only his eyes, when they opened and closed, seemed to contain the flow of galaxies, capable of making one's heart and spirit tremble.

Between the two men, a water screen hovered.

Light and shadow flowed upon the water screen, clearly reflecting a corner of the Basic Formation Lines Maintenance Department. The focus was precisely on that youth working silently in the corner, Su Ming.

The blue-robed middle-aged man looked at Su Ming in the water screen, his gaze calm and unrippled. Finally, the black stone in his hand descended.

"Tap."

The stone settled, sealing the last path of life for the white stones.

"This youth has a tranquil disposition, sees the essence in the minutiae. His foundation is laid exceptionally solid."

The blue-robed middle-aged man picked up his teacup, his tone flat, revealing neither joy nor anger.

"A pity. The damage to his Dao foundation is like an unbridgeable chasm, ultimately limiting his future. Junior Brother Ma, you seem to be investing too much effort in him."

His evaluation was objective and sharp, striking right at the core.

Elder Ma showed no dejection over losing the Go game. His turbid eyes looked at Su Ming in the water screen, revealing a rare, genuine smile.

"You are astute, Senior Brother."

"However, a sect is like a great ship. It does not rely solely on the power of its sails and masts."

Elder Ma's "defense" of Su Ming did not emphasize his talent, but rather his "systemic value."

"This youth may not become the sharp sword charging at the forefront, but if he can become a reliable rivet maintaining the operation of the great ship, his value may not be inferior to that of a true disciple."

The blue-robed middle-aged man neither agreed nor disagreed.

His slender fingers lightly brushed across the Go board. The stones returned to their containers, and a fresh game layout appeared.

Simultaneously, a wisp of clear breeze escaped from his fingertips, penetrated the water screen, and silently merged into the vast information flow of the Cloud Hidden Sect.

"Let us see how he handles the upcoming disturbance."

"If he can see through it, it proves he has the qualifications to become the 'rivet' you speak of. If he cannot... then such is his fate, not worth you expending further effort."

.....

Basic Formation Lines Maintenance Department.

The stone hall was still a scene of bustling activity.

Steward Sun was berating several menial disciples.

"Incompetents! All of you, incompetents! You can even repair the energy nodes of such a simple 'Quiet Heart Formation' incorrectly!"

Suddenly, the communication jade slip at his waist emitted a faint glow.

Steward Sun probed it with his divine sense. The angry expression on his face instantly froze, then transformed into a trace of barely noticeable obsequiousness and excitement.

His eyes rolled, scanning the entire area, finally landing on Su Ming, who occupied a stone table alone, buried in a pile of old documents.

Steward Sun's brow furrowed slightly, a cold laugh echoing in his heart.

Perfect. A little reprimand to make him understand just how deep the waters of Formation Peak truly run.

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

Chapter 160: The Hidden Killing Intent

[1,382 words]

Not long after, Steward Sun returned from outside. He cleared his throat, forced a seemingly warm smile onto his face, and walked towards Su Ming.

"Su Ming, put down the work in your hands for a moment."

Su Ming looked up, his face showing confusion. "What instructions do you have, Senior Brother Sun?"

"We just received an urgent task issued by the Formation Hub Pavilion." Steward Sun placed a formation diagram drawn on special beast hide and a formation plate on Su Ming's desk, his tone brooking no argument. "The sect will be launching the 'Minor Heavenly Cycle Martial Arts Demonstration' next month and requires a large number of 'Flowing Wind Evasion Formations' for support. This is an ancient formation plate left behind from a certain inheritance site. Parts of its original formation diagram have become blurred due to the passage of time, and the Formation Hub Pavilion has provided a deduced restoration version."

He pointed at the diagram, deliberately emphasizing his words. "This formation plate will serve as the verification prototype for this batch replication. It concerns the preparation for the martial arts demonstration and is highly valued within the peak. You are limited to three days to complete the restoration of the formation plate prototype according to this restoration diagram for verification. This is a task specifically assigned to you from above. Do not disappoint this 'favor'."

The task was urgent, the blueprint complex, and refusal was not an option.

The menial disciples around them all cast gloating glances.

"The Flowing Wind Evasion Formation? That's one of the most complex third-tier formations!"

"And it's a restoration and deduction diagram for an ancient formation plate? That difficulty is like dancing on the tip of a needle!"

"Making a menial disciple repair a third-tier formation? Has Steward Sun gone mad?"

Su Ming felt a chill in his heart. He could sense an unusual meaning behind this command.

But he showed nothing on his face, merely extending his hand, preparing to take that formation diagram.

However, just as his fingertips were about to touch the formation plate.

"DON'T TOUCH IT!!!"

Lin Yu's soul voice, sharpened to a distorted pitch, exploded like thunder in his mind!

"Disciple! Get back! This thing isn't right!"

Su Ming's hand jerked to a halt in mid-air.

He looked up, his face showing just the right amount of confusion as he looked at Steward Sun.

"Senior Brother, this formation plate... seems somewhat..."

Before he could finish.

"Wrong! This formation diagram has a major problem!" Lin Yu's soul voice carried unprecedented terror. "There's an extremely obscure spiritual energy conflict node between the core 'Wind Walk' circuit and the flanking 'Solidify Form' runes! This conflict is not part of the original design, but was artificially created by subtly adjusting the width and depth of three energy circuits! The margin of error is terrifyingly precise!"

"If spiritual energy is injected according to the diagram, the moment the formation operates to the third breath, that conflict node will detonate! The entire formation plate will undergo a chain collapse! The force of the explosion is enough to blast any cultivator below the Foundation Establishment realm within a ten-zhang radius into dust!"

Su Ming's heart instantly sank to the depths.

"Master, is it a mistake, or..."

"Mistake my ass!" Lin Yu cursed loudly, no longer caring about the demeanor of a master. "The method of the tamperer is so masterful it's terrifying! He exploited several minor, easily overlooked flaws that originally existed in the ancient formation diagram, performed precise 'amplification' and 'induction,' causing the entire energy flow to go out of control at a specific point! This kind of alteration, forget you, even that Golden Core brat Chen Ping might not be able to detect it without examining it under a magnifying glass for three days and nights!"

"This is no longer jealousy, this is premeditated murder! They've calculated that you cannot access the original ancient formation diagram and can only work according to this 'restoration diagram!'"

In an instant, Su Ming's back was completely soaked through with cold sweat.

He understood.

From Elder Ma's special attention, to Chen Ping's exceptional promotion, to his current reputation as a "prodigy," it had finally attracted a fatal killing intent!

His mind raced with thoughts, but on his face, he merely frowned, as if struggling to comprehend the complex formation diagram.

Steward Sun saw him hesitating to take it, his expression darkening.

"What? Scared?"

"Or are you saying that little skill of yours is only good for looking at account books and doing armchair theorizing?"

His voice did not conceal his contempt.

The surrounding menial disciples let out a suppressed burst of mocking laughter.

Su Ming took a deep breath, suppressing all the raging waves in his heart.

He looked up, meeting Steward Sun's icy gaze, and slowly extended his hand to take that fatal formation diagram.

He bowed respectfully to Steward Sun.

"This disciple accepts the command."

"This verification prototype is of great importance. This disciple will definitely consult all relevant classics, verify carefully, and strive to perfectly reproduce the blueprint, not daring to be negligent in the slightest."

Steward Sun gave a grunt of acknowledgment, then turned and left with a flick of his sleeve.

Su Ming held that scalding piece of beast hide, saying nothing.

He did not start work immediately, nor did he go to collect materials.

He just carefully rolled up the formation diagram, then turned and bowed respectfully to Chen Ping, who was watching the spectacle.

"Senior Brother Chen."

"This formation plate is the foundation for the martial arts demonstration verification. This disciple dares not be the slightest bit careless. This disciple's knowledge is shallow, and my understanding of ancient formation restoration and the essence of the 'Flowing Wind Evasion Formation' is still lacking. I fear I may betray the trust of Senior Brother and the sect."

"To ensure absolute success, this disciple humbly requests to first go to the archives room to consult relevant ancient texts and senior notes, in order to gain a thorough understanding before proceeding."

This reason was reasonable and flawless.

Chen Ping pondered for a moment, then finally nodded.

"Go ahead."

"Thank you, Senior Brother."

Su Ming bowed again, then turned and, under countless gazes filled with sympathy, mockery, and schadenfreude, walked silently towards the archives room.

That was the only place where he could find a way to break this deadlock.

...

The stone door of the archives room slowly closed.

Cutting off all sound from the outside world.

Su Ming almost immediately rushed to the deepest corner, violently spreading that formation diagram out on the table!

"Master! What do we do?!"

His voice, for the first time, carried a trace of uncontrollable trembling.

This wasn't an act.

This was the first time he had felt so clearly the cold, deadly malice coming from within the sect itself.

"Calm down! Disciple, the more critical the moment, the more you must stay calm!"

Lin Yu's soul voice forcefully suppressed its own panic and began to operate at high speed.

"This is a dead end!"

"Restore according to the diagram, and you will surely die!"

"Point out the error directly, and we will be exposed! A menial disciple who can spot a trap that even a Golden Core cultivator can't see? Do you think they'll treat you as a genius, or as a spy sent by another faction to be captured and dissected for study?"

Su Ming's face was deathly pale.

He looked at that exquisite, artwork-like formation diagram, feeling as if every line on it was silently mocking him.

"Why... would they do this?"

"Why else?" Lin Yu sneered. "When a tree grows too tall in the forest, the wind will surely break it! You've been making too big a splash recently! You're blocking someone's path, offending someone's eyes!"

"This is no longer a simple test, this is a killing trap!"

"The other party has calculated that a menial disciple like you, with no background and ruined foundations, even if blown to pieces, won't cause the slightest ripple! At most, it will be classified as an 'accident'!"

Su Ming fell silent.

He slowly closed his eyes, his mind frantically recalling every archive, every piece of data he had ever read.

He had to find a way to break the deadlock!

A method that could both preserve himself and completely thwart the other party's conspiracy!

He began to search frantically through the archives room.

He didn't look at the direct materials about the "Flowing Wind Evasion Formation," because he knew the answer to the trap would definitely not be there.

What he searched for were the most inconspicuous ones, covered in dust, from decades or even over a hundred years ago... maintenance logs and decommissioning lists!

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

- Chapter 161: Turning the Tables

[1,305 words]

"Disciple, what are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for... 'accidents'." Su Ming's voice was terrifyingly calm.

"Since they want me to die in an 'accident', then I'll search through all the 'accidents' in the sect's history, find their methods, find their flaws!"

His fingers swiftly swept across rows of jade slips.

"Report on the Explosion Accident of Spirit Gathering Array No. 3 in the Pill Cauldron Peak Medicinal Garden, Year 37 of Jingyou"... Rejected, energy overload.

"Record of the Furnace Formation Rampage Accident in the Vessel Hall, Year 2 of Chengping, and the Severe Injuries of Three Disciples"... Rejected, material degradation.

"Investigation Archives on the Failure of the Heavenly Sword Peak Trial Sword Platform's Defense Formation, Jiazi Year of Yuanfeng"...

Su Ming's hand suddenly stopped!

His gaze locked onto this yellowed, century-old archive!

He slowly pulled out the jade slip and probed it with his divine sense.

A line of ancient script entered his mind.

"...Upon investigation, the defense formation's failure was not due to combat damage. The root cause was that the 'Hyacinth Crystal' used in the formation plate's core and the 'Solidification Green Jade' in the auxiliary formation, under specific high-intensity spiritual energy impact, produced a 'Reverse Spiritual Energy Resonance', causing the formation to instantly collapse..."

Wind!

Solidify!

Reverse Spiritual Energy Resonance!

These words, like lightning, instantly illuminated Su Ming's mind!

He whipped his head around to look at the "Flowing Wind Escape Formation" blueprint on the table!

The core "Wind Flow" circuit!

The flanking "Solidification" rune!

Lin Yu's soul sense also reacted instantly!

"I understand!"

"I understand, disciple!"

Lin Yu's soul sense carried a trace of ecstatic joy and lingering fear at having seen through the scheme!

"This trap has two layers!"

"The first layer is the trap on the blueprint! That tiny, fatal conflict node!"

"And the second layer, the most vicious one, is the materials!"

"According to standard sect procedure, the formation base for the 'Flowing Wind Escape Formation' should use gentle 'Moonlight Stone'. But what if, the materials they provide you are that extremely rare, yet still technically meeting third-tier formation standards, 'Hyacinth Crystal'?"

"The blueprint trap, plus the material trap, a double insurance!"

"Even if you are exceptionally talented and discover the problem on the blueprint and correct it. As long as you use the 'Hyacinth Crystal' they provided, the formation plate will still explode!"

"So poisonous! What a ruthless, interlocking scheme!"

Su Ming's breathing almost stopped.

Slowly, he placed that century-old archive back in its original spot.

The color drained from his face.

Su Ming felt a wave of icy, lingering fear, but even more so, a sense of provoked anger. He had been living carefully within the sect, yet he still couldn't escape schemes.

"Master! What do we do!"

"Calm down! Disciple, the more critical the moment, the calmer you must be!"

Lin Yu's soul sense forcibly suppressed his own panic and began operating at high speed.

Damn! There are so many old schemers in the cultivation world! Luckily, my disciple is clever! We must handle this wave steadily, we need to scheme back, and also keep ourselves clean!

He rapidly calculated in his heart, but his voice spoke with a steady tone, "Disciple, this matter has significant implications. If we directly report it to the sect, we might protect ourselves."

Su Ming took a deep breath, his divine sense sweeping over the formation diagram concealing murderous intent, quickly responding in his mind.

"Master, we cannot."

His voice had already regained its composure.

"If we directly expose it, we have no proof. The other party, since they could tamper with the blueprint issued by the Formation Bureau, must hold a fairly high position and definitely have foundations within the sect. If we rashly speak out, not only will we fail to harm them in the slightest, we will instead thoroughly alert them, letting them know we have seen through the trap."

Su Ming's brain operated at lightning speed, the massive amounts of data he had seen in the Accounting Office flowing like a river of stars.

His gaze once again fell upon that century-old archive.

A flash of sharp light appeared in his eyes.

"Master, I remember the *'Accident Archive from the Jiazi Year of Yuanfeng'* recorded the 'Reverse Spiritual Energy Resonance' triggered by 'Hyacinth Crystal' and a specific structure."

"Since the other party has set this double-layered killing trap, they must have calculated that I would use the 'special materials' they provided."

"Why don't we... turn the tables?"

"Make the 'explosion' they prepared become a 'reasonable, verifiable' early failure?"

Lin Yu grew excited.

"Yes! Let's do just that! We'll add some 'superfluous detail' on a few unimportant auxiliary circuits, then fiddle a bit with that damn stone, make it 'fatigue and retire' before reaching the critical point!"

"When the formation fizzles out, we'll then 'accidentally' 'drop' that century-old archive at the scene... hehehe."

Lin Yu was thrilled.

This disciple truly has inherited my teachings! Steady, yet with a touch of slick operation!

...

Over the next two days, Su Ming's daily routine didn't change at all.

He still went to the Accounting Office every morning to organize ledgers, and in the afternoon, he buried himself in the archives, publicly claiming to be researching the ancient mysteries of the "Flowing Wind Escape Formation".

His face wore just the right amount of distress and exhaustion, as if crushed by the weight of this daunting task.

During this time, he visited the materials warehouse.

The one responsible for distributing the materials was precisely a trusted subordinate of Steward Sun.

That disciple handed him a sealed jade box with a fake smile.

"Junior Brother Su, Steward Sun said this task is of great importance, so he specially applied for this batch of high-grade materials transferred from the inner treasury for you. You mustn't mess it up."

Su Ming opened the jade box. Inside lay several crystal-clear crystals emitting a faint breeze-like aura.

They were precisely Hyacinth Crystals.

Su Ming sneered inwardly, but on the surface, he showed a flattered and grateful expression.

"Thank you, Senior Brother. Please convey my thanks to Steward Sun."

No one knew that that night, within the formation-shrouded room of Courtyard Ding-Qi.

Under Lin Yu's guidance, Su Ming used a wisp of spiritual energy so faint it was almost imperceptible, like an invisible embroidery needle, to leave an undetectable hidden flaw inside that most critical Hyacinth Crystal.

This hidden flaw had no effect under low spiritual energy operation.

But once the spiritual energy reached a certain critical value, it would instantly disintegrate, causing the entire crystal's energy structure to completely collapse.

Three days later, the main hall of the Maintenance Department.

The atmosphere today was completely different from usual.

The hall was crowded, almost all the menial post disciples had stopped their work and gathered around, ready to watch a good show.

Chen Ping sat high at the head seat, his expression calm, revealing neither joy nor anger.

Steward Sun stood to the side, a barely noticeable cold smile playing on his lips. Deep in his eyes was undisguised anticipation and malice.

He was anticipating that loud explosion.

Anticipating that eyesore of a menial disciple turning into a pile of flesh and blood under everyone's watch.

At high noon, Su Ming, holding the repaired formation plate, slowly walked into the main hall.

His face was pale, his eyes sunken, his steps even seemed somewhat unsteady, as if these three days had exhausted all his mental energy.

He respectfully placed the formation plate on the verification platform in the center of the hall.

"Senior Brother Chen, Senior Brother Sun."

"This disciple has not failed in his mission. The repair is complete according to the blueprint."

Steward Sun glanced at the formation plate, then looked at Su Ming's seemingly on-the-verge-of-collapse appearance. The smile on his lips grew wider.

"Not bad, you've worked hard."

"Begin then. Let everyone also open their eyes and see how our Maintenance Department's 'prodigy' repairs an ancient third-tier formation."

His words were filled with the meaning of setting someone up with excessive praise.

Su Ming didn't speak. He just silently walked to the verification platform, took a deep breath, and according to procedure, placed his hand on the formation plate's activation rune.

He slowly began injecting spiritual energy.

Hum—

On the formation plate, a cyan radiance suddenly lit up, rippling outwards like water.

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[981 words]

Everyone held their breath.

Steward Sun's fist, hidden beneath his sleeve, unconsciously clenched!

Now!

Almost there!

One breath!

Light flowed smoothly, the formation stable.

Two breaths!

The wind-attributed spiritual energy began to grow more lively, the hum from the formation plate rising higher and higher!

Three breaths!

Just as everyone anticipated the formation's full power activating, that sharp, swift aura of the escape technique about to burst forth—

A sudden, drastic change!

The flowing spiritual light on the formation plate gave a violent shudder!

The sensation was like a person sprinting at full speed, only to have all their strength instantly drained away.

The originally brilliant radiance, like a punctured balloon, rapidly dimmed.

The high-pitched hum transformed into a resentful whimper, then abruptly ceased.

The entire formation plate, like a chicken with its neck wrung, went completely dark, utterly still and silent.

Silence.

A deathly stillness.

No explosion.

No shockwave.

Not even a single wisp of spiritual energy leakage.

It just... gently, peacefully, fizzled out.

This unexpected outcome left everyone stunned.

The vicious sneer on Steward Sun's face froze at the corner of his mouth.

His mind went blank. The prepared, sorrowful eulogy he had ready was stuck in his throat, impossible to utter.

This gentle failure snapped the nerve he had strained to its absolute limit, and the words burst out!

"Impossible! It should have clearly been—"

He abruptly cut himself off, his expression changing drastically!

It's over!

He had slipped up!

But it was already too late.

The moment he misspoke, Su Ming moved.

He seemed frightened silly by this sudden failure, his face showing the perfect amount of "panic" and "confusion."

He staggered forward a step, then bowed deeply toward Chen Ping at the head of the hall!

"Senior Brother Chen! This disciple is foolish and incompetent! Please punish me!"

His voice carried a sob, filled with grievance and bewilderment.

"While repairing it, this disciple felt the flow of the spiritual conduits here was quite similar to a case recorded in the 'Miscellaneous Records of the Yuanfeng Jiazi Year' that I happened upon in the reference room! I harbored doubts all along!"

"This disciple was so bold as to attempt minor adjustments to several auxiliary circuits, trying to avoid the risk, but... but I never imagined it would still fail in the end!"

Having said this, as if to prove his words, he frantically pulled out a scroll of his own repair notes from his storage pouch, along with a... yellowed, fragile, ancient-looking book.

He raised both items high above his head.

"These are this disciple's repair notes and that miscellaneous record! Please, Senior Brother, examine them!"

Instantly, everyone's gaze converged on that ancient book.

'Miscellaneous Records of the Yuanfeng Jiazi Year'!

Hyacinth Crystal!

Reverse Spiritual Energy Resonance!

These key words slammed into Steward Sun's heart like invisible sledgehammers!

His face drained of all color, turning deathly pale.

Above, Chen Ping's gaze had long since sharpened like a blade.

He didn't look at Su Ming, nor at the failed formation plate.

He simply rose slowly, step by step, descending from the dais.

He took the notes and the yellowed ancient book from Su Ming's hands.

A sweep of his divine sense.

The notes clearly recorded Su Ming's "doubts" and "tentative modifications."

The ancient book contained that shocking record about "Reverse Spiritual Energy Resonance"!

The formation fizzling out.

Steward Sun's slip of the tongue.

Su Ming's "defense."

And this ironclad, century-old material evidence!

The chain of evidence was perfectly closed!

Chen Ping slowly closed the ancient book and looked up.

His face instantly turned livid!

A bone-chilling, murderous intent belonging to a Golden Core cultivator erupted violently!

The air in the entire stone hall seemed to be sucked out in an instant, solidifying into glass.

This pressure was no longer the previous probing aimed solely at Su Ming.

It was an indiscriminate, all-encompassing storm!

All the menial disciples turned pale under the wrath of this Golden Core cultivator, their legs trembling, even breathing becoming a luxury.

Some with weaker cultivation had already collapsed to the floor.

In the center of the hall, Steward Sun looked as if struck by lightning.

Ninety-nine percent of that killing intent was locked onto him.

He felt his very soul freeze.

"Se... Senior Brother Chen..."

His teeth chattered, each word squeezed out from between them.

"A misunderstanding... this is all a misunderstanding..."

Chen Ping did not look at him.

He simply slowly closed the ancient book in his hands, his movements gentle, as if polishing a rare treasure.

Then, he lifted his head, his gaze passing over everyone to land on Steward Sun's face.

That look held no anger, no fury.

Only a dead, unfathomably deep chill.

"Misunderstanding?"

Chen Ping's voice was soft, yet it stabbed into Steward Sun's ears like a red-hot iron rod.

"You're saying this tampered-with formation diagram issued by the Formation Bureau is a misunderstanding?"

He waved the repair notes in his hand.

"Or are you saying Su Ming's recorded concerns about 'Reverse Spiritual Energy Resonance' in these notes are also a misunderstanding?"

Finally, he gently placed the yellowed ancient book on the verification platform.

"Or perhaps this 'Miscellaneous Records of the Yuanfeng Jiazi Year' from a century ago, which records the fatal flaw of the 'Hyacinth Crystal,' is also a misunderstanding?"

With each sentence, Chen Ping took a step forward.

Each step felt like it was stomping on Steward Sun's heart.

Steward Sun's complexion went from deathly pale to ashen gray.

He was finished.

All his arrangements, all his backup plans, had been strung together by these three items into a perfect chain of evidence pointing directly at himself.

He couldn't understand it!

A menial! A crippled good-for-nothing!

How could he possibly know about a century-old case!

How could he possibly see through such an exquisite trap!

"I... I don't know! I don't know anything!"

Steward Sun let out a hysterical roar, making a final desperate struggle.

"It's Su Ming! He's the one with poor skills, failing the repair, trying to find an excuse to escape blame! He's slandering me!"

"Oh?"

Chen Ping finally stood before him, looking down at him from above, a cruel curve lifting the corner of his mouth.

"Then how do you explain that 'Impossible' you blurted out just now when the formation failed?"

"What were you expecting?"

This question was the final straw that broke the camel's back.

Steward Sun completely broke down.

He collapsed to the floor, his face ashen, merely muttering repeatedly.

"No... it wasn't me..."

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

[1,230 words]

Deep within the sea of clouds, in a suspended cave abode.

A game of Go had already concluded.

The blue-robed middle-aged man, holding the black stones, had slaughtered the white's large dragon, wiping it out completely.

The water mirror technique was currently reflecting the tense, drawn-swords-and-strung-bows scene in the Maintenance Department.

Seeing the formation plate go silent, Steward Sun lose composure, and Su Ming presenting the ancient text to turn the tables, the blue-robed middle-aged man casually placed a stone on the board. His tone was flat, as if discussing a trivial matter that had nothing to do with him.

"This lad is indeed cautious, knows how to use an opponent's strength against them."

"Pity, his bone structure is a fatal flaw. He will ultimately find it difficult to achieve greatness."

Opposite him, Elder Ma, with white hair and beard, had a calm and steady aura.

He picked up a white stone, pondered for a moment, and placed it in a corner of the board, attempting to revive a dead group. His movements were neither hurried nor slow.

"Senior Brother, I must disagree with that statement."

Elder Ma's voice carried the hoarseness unique to the elderly, yet each word was clear.

"This lad can perceive the essence in the minutiae. His temperament is calm, his thinking unconventional and ingenious."

"He can dig out a century-old case from dusty old records to extricate himself. This resourcefulness and solid foundation is no worse than simply charging ahead with brute force."

He raised his eyes, a glimmer of imperceptible wisdom flashing in his cloudy gaze.

"In my opinion, he could become one of the sect's managers."

As these words fell, the air within the cave abode seemed to still for a moment.

Manager.

These three words carried immense weight.

They represented not just power, but responsibility, a position significant enough to influence the operational structure of the entire sect.

Elder Ma fell silent for a moment, looking at the youth in the water mirror who remained bowed, posture humble, and finally let out a sigh.

"It's just... isn't this tempering a bit too harsh?"

The blue-robed middle-aged man's gaze returned to the water mirror, watching the entire process of Su Ming presenting the ancient text and turning the tables.

The corner of his mouth seemed to lift in a barely perceptible curve, but it vanished just as quickly.

"Harsh?"

He picked up his teacup, blowing on the floating tea leaves.

"Real storms are a hundred times more perilous than this."

"However..."

He changed the subject.

"Since I intervened, I naturally have my measure. Giving Steward Sun an opportunity to vent his malice is also giving Su Ming a chance to see the undercurrents within the sect."

"That Steward Sun is of unsound mind, making this a good opportunity to clean house. The 'rivet' you chose won't be broken by this."

The blue-robed middle-aged man neither confirmed nor denied, simply shifting his gaze away from the water mirror.

He gave a slight flick of his wide sleeve.

A wisp of gentle breeze emanated from his fingertips, pierced through the cave abode, and silently merged into the Cloud Hidden Sect's vast mountain-protecting formation, disappearing.

After this action, he changed the topic, as if everything just discussed was merely idle chatter between moves.

"Your lifespan is nearing its end. Are you confident about your next attempt to break through?"

He looked at Elder Ma, a trace of concern appearing in his eyes.

"I can still get you a 'Realm-Breaking Pill'."

Elder Ma laughed freely and easily, tossing the white stone he had been unable to revive into the nearby Go stone container.

The crisp sound of the stone landing echoed in the silent cave abode.

"Thank you for your kind intention, Senior Brother."

"No need."

"Formation, abiding, decay, emptiness—all follow their destined course. Being able to select one more capable talent for the sect before my path dissipates brings me great comfort."

He looked at the youth in the water mirror, his gaze gentle.

"This lad may be the last bit of effort I can contribute to the sect."

His tone was transcendent, detached from worldly concerns, carrying the release of one who has seen through life and death.

The blue-robed middle-aged man's gaze swept over the calm figure of the youth in the water mirror once more.

This time, there was less casual appraisal in his eyes, replaced by a hint of ineffable depth.

He did not speak again.

...

Basic Formation Lines Maintenance Department.

Chen Ping looked at Steward Sun, who lay collapsed like mud at his feet, not a single ripple of emotion remaining in his eyes.

As if suddenly remembering something, he retrieved a crimson jade slip from his robe.

He slowly raised the jade slip.

"Fellow disciples harming each other, the evidence is conclusive."

"Such a matter is no longer something I can handle."

He looked at Steward Sun, enunciating each word clearly.

"Sun Quan, do you admit your guilt?"

With that, his five fingers suddenly exerted force!

"Crack!"

The jade slip shattered in response!

A red light shot into the sky, instantly piercing through the stone hall's dome, exploding into a bloody cloud pattern high above Formation Peak!

That was... the Law Enforcement Hall's summoning token!

Everyone was stunned.

No one had expected Chen Ping to be so resolute!

He didn't choose to handle it privately, nor did he even report it to the Formation Peak elders.

He directly escalated it to the sect's enforcement arm—the Law Enforcement Hall!

"No! Don't!"

Steward Sun let out a despairing wail.

He struggled to get up, trying to cling to Chen Ping's legs.

"Senior Brother Chen! I was wrong! I lost my mind for a moment! Spare me! Spare me this once!"

Chen Ping kicked him away with one foot.

"Too late."

Almost the instant his words fell.

"Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!"

Three figures clad in black tight-fitting garments, with icy auras, appeared at the great hall's entrance like ghosts.

They wore standardized black soft armor, engraved with ancient punishment runes.

Each face was half-covered by a bronze mask, revealing only a pair of emotionless eyes.

The leader's aura had already reached the mid-Golden Core stage.

He merely swept a glance over the situation inside the hall before locking his gaze onto Steward Sun, who lay collapsed on the ground.

He didn't ask any questions.

He simply retrieved a black scroll of orders from his robe and slowly unfurled it.

"By order of the Law Enforcement Elder!"

"Formation Peak Steward Sun Quan is suspected of using a formation trap to murder a fellow disciple. Preliminary evidence is conclusive."

"Take him into custody immediately and bring him to the dungeons of Punishment Peak to await interrogation!"

The icy voice held not a trace of emotion.

Two Foundation Establishment stage law enforcement disciples stepped forward. Two black chains crackling with electric light appeared in their hands out of thin air.

"Clank!"

The chains, like venomous snakes, instantly coiled around Steward Sun's limbs and Dantian, completely sealing off all his spiritual energy.

"No—!"

Steward Sun let out one final despairing roar.

Then, like a dead dog, he was dragged out of the great hall by the two law enforcement disciples.

From the appearance of the Law Enforcement Hall disciples to the removal of Sun Quan.

The entire process took no more than ten breaths.

Clean, decisive, efficient.

Deathly silence filled the great hall.

All the menial disciples hung their heads, not even daring to breathe heavily.

The looks they cast at Su Ming had completely changed.

From earlier schadenfreude, to shock, and now to... reverence and fear.

This seemingly gentle, harmless Accounting Office menial disciple.

Without any visible fuss, he had toppled a Foundation Grand Perfection steward!

And in such a resolute, such a devastating manner!

Chen Ping slowly turned and walked over to Su Ming.

He looked at Su Ming's face, which still wore an expression of "alarm" and "lingering fear," his own expression complex.

"You, come with me."

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

[1,264 words]

It was still that secluded side hall.

The stone door closed, cutting off everything from the outside world.

"Sit."

Chen Ping's voice carried a trace of weariness.

Su Ming sat down as instructed, his posture still respectful.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu let out a long, deep sigh.

"My god! You scared your master half to death!"

"Disciple, with your acting skills, not winning an Oscar in your previous life would have been a waste of talent!"

"But... this time, we've really gone too far. The Enforcement Hall is involved. People fear fame just as pigs fear getting fat. It'll be hard for us to keep a low profile and grow quietly on Formation Peak now!"

Su Ming felt a bitter laugh in his heart, but dared not show the slightest hint of it on his face.

Chen Ping remained silent for a long time, seemingly organizing his thoughts.

Finally, he retrieved a palm-sized, pitch-black token from his storage pouch and slid it across the table towards Su Ming.

On the token, only one flamboyantly written character "Chen" was engraved.

"This is my personal disciple token."

"With this token, on Formation Peak, seeing it is like seeing me in person."

"From now on, if you have any matters, come directly to the main peak to find me. No need to go through anyone else."

These words were no longer a promise, but protection.

The most direct protection from a Golden Core True Disciple.

Su Ming hurriedly stood up and bowed deeply.

"Many thanks for Senior Brother's great favor! This disciple..."

"No need to thank me." Chen Ping cut him off, smiling a self-deprecating smile.

"Regarding today's matter, if not for your meticulous mind and discovering the clues in advance, I'm afraid... my Maintenance Department would have become a huge laughingstock."

He looked at Su Ming, a hint of inquiry in his eyes.

"I'm just curious, did you really... just happen to come across that miscellany by luck?"

Su Ming's heart tightened, knowing the real test had arrived.

He raised his head, revealing a bitter smile uglier than crying, tinged with a hint of bookishness.

"Reporting to Senior Brother, this disciple... it truly was luck."

"This disciple is dull-witted and cannot comprehend profound formations, so I could only use the most foolish method to check all related materials."

"That miscellany was something I accidentally discovered while searching for materials related to the character 'wind'... I just felt the records in it were somewhat... illogical, so I took a few extra glances."

"This disciple never imagined, I would actually... actually encounter such a thing."

This explanation remained flawless.

Attributing everything to his "mathematical talent" and the diligence of a "slow bird flying early."

Chen Ping stared at him for a long time, ultimately choosing to believe him.

Or rather, he couldn't find any reason not to believe.

He waved his hand, signaling Su Ming to take the token.

"Dismissed."

...

The attempted murder plot in the Maintenance Department was like a massive rock thrown into a lake.

The ripples spread, lingering for a long time.

Courtyard Ding-Qi seemed to become the calm eye of the storm.

Moonlight like water spilled onto the tranquil small courtyard, the flagstones glowing with a cold light.

Su Ming returned to Courtyard Ding-Qi, pushed open the door, activated the formation.

He threw himself heavily onto the bed, letting out a long, deep sigh of turbid air.

This day was more exhausting than his life-and-death struggle with Zhao Qianshan.

"Master."

"Don't speak, let your master recover a bit."

Lin Yu's soul sense also sounded somewhat drained.

"Disciple, this 'prodigy' reputation of yours is more effective than a death warrant! We need to find a way to lower this fame!"

Lin Yu was still shaken.

"Starting tomorrow, you make more mistakes for me! Lower your success rate in repairing formation plates to ninety percent! No! Eighty percent!"

Su-the-accountant-Ming, looked at the moonlight outside the window, feeling the cold, hard token in his embrace.

Su Ming knew, from today onwards, his days in the Cloud Hidden Sect could never return to how they were before.

Su Ming spoke softly, a trace of helplessness in his voice.

"Master, I'm afraid... it's already too late."

Su Ming's fingertips rubbed the pitch-black "Chen" token. It felt cold to the touch, but its weight was incredibly heavy.

This was protection, but also a shackle.

Even more, it was proof that had completely dragged him from the shadows into the spotlight.

"Disciple, stop overthinking it."

Lin Yu's soul sense sounded somewhat lazy.

"When soldiers come, we use generals to block them; when water comes, we use earth to dam it. If the sky falls, your master... will help you plan an escape route."

Su Ming felt a bitter laugh in his heart.

He slowly exhaled a breath of turbid air, stored the token in his embrace, and closed his eyes.

...

The next day, mao hour.

Su Ming arrived at the Accounting Office of the External Affairs Hall as usual.

The moment he stepped through the main gate, that originally bustling, lively sound of abacuses belonging to the early morning abruptly halted.

Dozens of pairs of eyes swiveled to look at him in unison.

The gazes were extremely complex.

There was fear, curiosity, aloofness, and even a hint of... ingratiating.

Immediately after, everyone, like startled rabbits, quickly lowered their heads again, their hands moving the abacus beads faster and louder, as if trying to use the clattering sounds to cover up their previous lapse.

The entire accounting office fell into an eerie, conspicuous silence.

Su Ming's expression remained normal as he walked to his usual corner seat, picked up the ledger, and began the day's work.

The seat beside him was now empty.

The disciple who originally sat there had found an excuse and moved to the corner farthest from him.

"Junior Brother Su!"

A greasy voice rang out.

Steward Wang Defa rubbed his plump hands together, his face blooming with a chrysanthemum-like smile. He personally brought over a pot of freshly brewed spirit tea and placed it on Su Ming's desk.

The tea aroma wafted everywhere; it was top-grade "Cloud Mist Tip."

"Ah, yesterday really scared me! I heard something big happened over at Formation Peak?"

Wang Defa lowered his voice, leaning forward, his face full of concern.

"Everything's alright now, right? Such an unjust calamity, Junior Brother, you've suffered wrongfully."

However, his eyes, like two mung beans, were fixed intently on Su Ming's face, not missing any change in expression.

Su Ming put down the writing brush in his hand and looked up.

Su Ming did not touch that cup of tea, merely looked calmly at Wang Defa.

"Thank you for your concern, Steward Wang."

His voice was neither loud nor soft, just enough for the colleagues nearby who were all ears to hear clearly.

"It was merely handling matters according to the rules, fortunately not leading to a major mistake. As for Steward Sun... the sect has its own laws and regulations. We subordinates dare not make presumptuous comments."

A speech, watertight.

Attributing the credit to "rules," completely extricating himself from the affair.

The smile on Wang Defa's face stiffened, but the shrewd glint in his eyes grew even brighter.

Good kid, slipperier than a loach!

His eyes rolled, and he changed the topic again: "I heard... the Enforcement Hall was alerted? Ah, that's..."

"Steward Wang."

Su Ming directly interrupted him, pointing at the mountain-like pile of ledgers on the desk.

"The material accounts for the Vessel Hall this quarter need to be summarized and reported before noon today. If there are any omissions, neither you nor I... can bear the responsibility."

The fat on Wang Defa's face twitched.

Looking into Su Ming's eyes, as still as an ancient well, he suddenly felt a chill run down his back.

"Ahem, right, right, right! Official business is important, official business is important!"

Wang Defa gave a dry laugh twice and retreated resentfully.

Inside the accounting office, the clattering of abacus beads resumed once more.

Only this time, no one dared to use the corner of their eye to peek at that silent figure in the corner.

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

[1,179 words]

Evening found Su Ming walking along the stone path back to Courtyard Ding-Qi.

He could clearly sense the change in the gazes of the outer sect disciples he passed.

Those looks no longer held the indifference reserved for an ordinary menial.

Instead, they carried scrutiny, inquiry, and a faint, elusive trace of apprehension.

The news of him "bringing down" a steward had already spread.

Pushing open the courtyard gate, Su Ming was somewhat surprised.

Two people were actually sitting by the stone table in the yard.

One was the burly, iron-tower-like Zhang Meng.

The other was the long-unseen Manager Zhao, who oversaw the monthly allowance distribution.

It seemed the two had come specifically to wait for him.

"Su Ming! Kid, you're finally back!"

Zhang Meng was the first to jump up, covering the distance in a few quick strides to stand before him. A hand as large as a cattail-leaf fan landed heavily on his shoulder.

"I heard all about it! Damn it! Some blind fool dared to bully you? Tell me! I'll go to Spirit Beast Valley and lead a 'Cloud-Stepper' over to trample the bastard flat!"

His voice was booming, his expression agitated, his concern genuine from the heart.

A warmth spread in Su Ming's chest. He patted Zhang Meng's arm.

"Thank you, Senior Brother Zhang. I'm fine."

Manager Zhao also stood up from the side, a complicated smile on his face.

"Junior Brother Su, you this time... you truly opened our eyes."

He looked Su Ming up and down, his gaze carrying lingering fear as well as a deliberate attempt at closeness.

"That Sun Quan always threw his weight around relying on his seniority. This time, he kicked an iron plate. However..."

His tone shifted, becoming earnest and serious.

"Junior Brother, in your future actions, you need to be even more careful. The waters of Formation Peak run deep. The situation behind Sun Quan might not be clean either."

Su Ming cupped his hands in a polite salute, his attitude gentle yet maintaining a distance.

"Thank you both, Senior Brothers, for your concern. This junior understands. I'm rather tired today and will retire to my room to rest first."

With that, he nodded to the two and walked straight towards his eastern side room.

He did not engage in deep conversation, maintaining a perfectly appropriate distance.

Watching the door to Su Ming's room close firmly, Zhang Meng scratched his head, somewhat puzzled.

"This kid, why does he feel a bit distant from us?"

Manager Zhao looked at the door, a gleam flashing in his eyes as he murmured softly.

"It's not distance."

"It's... he's different now."

...

Inside the eastern side room, the composite formation silently activated.

All noise from the outside world was completely cut off.

Su Ming let out a long sigh, throwing himself onto the bed.

"Huff—"

Lin Yu's soul thought popped out immediately, carrying a tone of gleeful schadenfreude.

"Disciple, see that? That's human nature!"

His illusory figure, one leg crossed over the other, pontificated from within the ring.

"They fear you, yet they want to get close! They want to bask in your reflected glory, or probe your depths."

"That Zhang Meng is a straightforward fellow, genuinely worried for you. That Manager Zhao is a classic risk investor, thinking you have potential and wanting to place a bet early."

"And that Wang the fat man from the Accounting Office is purely an information broker, trying to figure out which way the wind blows so he can decide whether to curry favor with you or distance himself."

Listening to his master's commentary, Su Ming's mind was perfectly clear.

That was exactly it.

"We need to be even more low-key from now on. This 'Way of Survival' truly cannot be relaxed for a single moment!"

Lin Yu's tone became serious.

"Before, others only saw you as a math genius with ruined foundations, no threat. It's different now. Everyone knows you're not only clever, but also... have a tough wrist and a ruthless heart."

"Now, you're a conspicuous nail. Those who want to pull you out will only increase, and their methods will only become more hidden!"

Su Ming was silent.

Feeling the cold token in his bosom, he felt it wasn't a protective talisman, but a scorching hot brand.

"Master, your disciple understands."

"Good that you understand." Lin Yu nodded with satisfaction. "Starting tomorrow, make a few more mistakes when repairing formation plates. When writing optimization proposals, deliberately leave a few inconsequential flaws. We need to tamp down this 'prodigy' reputation, preferably make them think your last success was pure dumb luck."

Master and disciple were urgently discussing their subsequent "hiding one's abilities" strategy.

Suddenly.

A faint, subtle fluctuation of spiritual energy came from the early-warning node Su Ming had set up at the courtyard gate.

The fluctuation was steady, carrying a hint of the unique cultivation method aura of the External Affairs Hall.

But the person arriving was not anyone familiar to him.

Su Ming's heart grew slightly tense.

He and Lin Yu exchanged a glance, instantly falling silent.

He swiftly deactivated the formation in the room, messed up the account books on the table, putting on the appearance of someone deep in research.

He had just finished all this.

"Knock, knock, knock."

A measured, not-too-heavy knocking sound sounded right on time.

A strange, businesslike voice came from outside the door.

"Is Su Ming of Courtyard Ding-Qi present?"

Su Ming straightened his robes, walked over, and pulled open the door.

Outside stood a young man wearing the steward uniform of the External Affairs Hall.

The young man had an ordinary face and sharp eyes. Seeing Su Ming, he merely swept a glance over him before pulling a token from his robes.

"External Affairs Hall steward, Zhou Ning."

He identified himself, his tone devoid of any fluctuation.

"Su Ming."

"Elder Ma summons you."

"Come with me."

...

External Affairs Hall, meditation room.

Sandalwood incense curled upward, wisps of blue smoke swirling and dispersing in the air, leaving a room filled with tranquility.

Elder Ma sat cross-legged on a prayer mat. His figure appeared even more hunched than during their last meeting, his aura increasingly somber and fading, like an ancient piece of wood on the verge of weathering away.

Only those turbid eyes still held the wisdom to see through worldly affairs.

Zhou Ning led Su Ming to the door, then bowed and retreated, soundlessly.

Su Ming stepped into the meditation room, respectfully saluting the figure with its back to him.

"Disciple Su Ming pays his respects to Elder Ma."

Elder Ma did not turn around. His voice was hoarse, like two pieces of rotten wood rubbing together.

"Sit."

Su Ming complied, sitting on the prayer mat opposite, his back ramrod straight.

In the meditation room, only the faint, almost inaudible crackling sound of the burning sandalwood incense remained.

A long while passed.

Elder Ma slowly spoke, each word carrying an undeniable weight.

"The recent matter at Formation Peak, this old man is already aware."

"You were wronged."

No questioning, no probing, not even mentioning any details.

He directly, definitively characterized the event.

Su Ming's heart trembled. The shadow and killing intent brought by Sun Quan seemed to be gently wiped away by these words. He lowered his head, his voice steady.

"This disciple dares not presume."

"There's nothing about daring or not." Elder Ma finally turned around. Those deep-set eyes gazed quietly at Su Ming. "The tree desires stillness, but the wind will not cease."

"To avoid further trouble, from today onward, you need not go to Formation Peak anymore."

Upon hearing this, Su Ming's heart tightened.

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[1,323 words]

Hearing Elder Ma's words, Lin Yu almost couldn't hold back and nearly cheered out loud!

"Brilliant! This is exactly what I wanted! That old man is a real lifesaver!"

"That Formation Peak place is crawling with Golden Core and Nascent Soul cultivators, it's like a minefield! If we go there to clock in and work every day, sooner or later some old monster will see through our act! It's perfect that we're not going! Let's go back to the External Affairs Hall and continue lying low!"

Lin Yu's soul consciousness was dancing with joy inside the ring, but the thoughts he transmitted to Su Ming were steady and composed.

"Indeed, Elder Ma's consideration is thorough. Laying low and avoiding the limelight for now is indeed the best strategy."

Su Ming suppressed the turmoil in his heart, his face showing just the right amount of obedience and apprehension.

"This disciple... obeys."

Seeing him like this, a trace of imperceptible approval flashed in Elder Ma's turbid eyes.

Unmoved by favor or disgrace, knowing when to advance and when to retreat.

He was a promising seedling.

"However, the sect's operation cannot be separated from the maintenance of formation vessels."

Elder Ma's words took a turn, making Su Ming, who had just let out a sigh of relief, tense up again.

"Those geniuses at Formation Peak have their eyes set too high; they disdain handling those low-level chores. Ordinary menial post holders are mostly dull-witted and incompetent. Over time, the wear and tear and scrapping of the sect's low-level formation vessels have become a chronic problem."

He looked at Su Ming, his gaze burning.

"This old man wishes to establish a 'Formation Lines Repair Hall' under the External Affairs Hall."

"It will be dedicated to the maintenance, optimization, and archiving of low-level formation vessels across all peaks of the sect."

"You, are you willing to take the lead?"

Silence.

So silent he could hear his own heartbeat.

Su Ming's mind raced at lightning speed.

Take the lead?

This was no longer a simple task; this was... authorization!

"This disciple... this disciple's foundation is completely ruined, my cultivation is low and weak, I fear I am unworthy of such a great responsibility." Su Ming immediately bowed, lowering his posture to the extreme.

"This old man doesn't want your cultivation."

Elder Ma's voice carried a trace of indisputable authority.

"What this old man wants is your meticulousness that can dig out a life-saving straw from a pile of old papers!"

"Your methodical approach that can organize a mess of bad accounts into perfect order!"

"And most importantly, your solid skill that can achieve 'zero failures' in repairs!"

Seeing Su Ming still lost in thought, seemingly weighing the pros and cons, a flicker of amusement passed through Elder Ma's turbid eyes. He threw out a bait that no menial post holder could refuse.

"If you can get this hall running, establish its regulations, and train a few capable hands."

"And reduce the repair report rate for the sect's low-level formation vessels by thirty percent."

"This old man will make an exception..."

He paused, each word landing on the lake of Su Ming's heart like a massive boulder.

"And recommend you to become an outer sect disciple!"

Boom!

Su Ming's mind went completely blank.

Outer sect disciple!

These four words represented the identity he had dreamed of since entering the Cloud Hidden Sect!

It wasn't just a change in status; it was a leap from being an "object" to becoming a "person"!

He abruptly raised his head, his eyes for the first time revealing an uncontrollable desire.

Seeing him like this, Elder Ma nodded with satisfaction.

Having desires made him easier to drive.

"You have three days to consider this matter."

"In three days, give this old man your answer."

After saying this, he closed his eyes and spoke no more, as if once again transforming into a withered statue.

Su Ming took a deep breath, suppressing all the raging waves in his heart.

He bowed deeply to Elder Ma, then turned and exited the meditation room.

...

Walking on the road back to Courtyard Ding-Qi, Su Ming's footsteps felt somewhat unsteady.

The moonlight stretched his shadow very long.

"Master, Elder Ma's move is both an opportunity and an even greater test."

His heart had completely calmed down.

"This 'Formation Lines Repair Hall,' while seemingly independent from Formation Peak and under the jurisdiction of the External Affairs Hall, is actually like a probe meant to extend into the logistical systems of each peak."

"Maintaining formation vessels will inevitably involve contact with each peak's material lists, loss data, and personnel assignments. The interests involved in this are probably a hundred times more complex than a single Steward Sun."

Lin Yu's soul consciousness also shed its previous frivolity, becoming serious.

"Correct. That old man is building a stage for you, but he's also putting you on the grill."

"He wants to use your mathematical abilities to clean up the chronic problems and accumulated abuses at the sect's lower levels. If you handle this well, you'll become a sharp blade in his hand, and your name will be on the merit list."

"But if you mess it up, or offend the wrong people in the process, you'll be the first scapegoat thrown out."

Su Ming nodded, his eyes flickering with thoughtful light.

"But the identity of 'outer sect disciple,' we must obtain it."

"Exactly!" Lin Yu said resolutely, "Only by becoming an outer sect disciple will you truly have a 'protective talisman.' Your teacher also needs more stable resources to restore his soul power. This opportunity must be seized!"

"But how do we break the deadlock?" Su Ming frowned, "With my strength alone, how can I move these deeply entrenched and intertwined interests?"

"Who said you have to do it alone?"

Lin Yu chuckled, his tone once again carrying that familiar, modern office worker's cunning.

"Disciple, have you forgotten our 'old trade'?"

Su Ming was stunned, "Old trade?"

"Yes! Management! Processes! Standardization!"

Lin Yu's soul consciousness excitedly waved its arms.

"We're not playing their game of formation talent! We're not talking about their mysterious, inscrutable bullshit insights! We're playing science with them!"

"Treat formation maintenance as... hmm, treat it as an assembly line operation!"

"What we need to do isn't cultivate a few formation geniuses—that's Formation Peak's job. What we need to do is build a reliable 'maintenance team'!"

Lin Yu grew more and more excited as he spoke, terms popping out of his mouth one after another.

"Step one, formulate the 'Standard Operating Procedures'! Break down the repair of every type of low-level formation into a dozen, or even dozens of steps! What to check in step one, what tools to use in step two, what materials to replace in step three, write it all down clearly! Let a complete newbie idiot follow it and still complete seventy or eighty percent of the job!"

"Step two, compile the 'Common Fault Atlas'! Take pictures, draw diagrams, make an illustrated manual of all the faults that have ever appeared! Annotate them with the cause of the fault, the solution, and the required materials! In the future, anyone encountering a similar problem can just flip through the atlas and follow the map!"

"Ahem, step three, issue the 'Material Compatibility Taboo Manual'! List what materials fail when combined, which runes conflict with which formation bases, list it all! Avoid another 'Hyacinth Crystal' type of disaster!"

Su Ming listened, dumbfounded.

These unheard-of terms, these unimaginable ideas, struck him like a bolt of lightning, shattering his inherent understanding.

So... formations, they could be "repaired" like this?

"Master, this method... is it feasible?"

"Feasible? It's extremely feasible!" Lin Yu said smugly, "We're not cultivating masters; we're cultivating skilled workers! We don't want creativity; we want execution! Use the simplest methods to solve the most practical problems! That's the essence of management!"

"This 'Formation Lines Repair Hall' is our experimental field! Do it well, and you'll become the Cloud Hidden Sect's 'Process Management Master,' your position as solid as Mount Tai!"

An unprecedented light ignited in Su Ming's eyes.

He seemed to see a brand new, completely different path from traditional cultivation slowly unfolding before him.

Just as he was immersed in this grand blueprint.

"Su Ming! Su Ming!"

Two voices, crisp as orioles, came from afar, breaking the night's tranquility.

Su Ming looked up and saw two small figures, carrying lanterns, rushing energetically toward Courtyard Ding-Qi.

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

Chapter 167: The Benefits of Outer Disciples

[1,620 words]

The voice arrived before the person did.

"We heard you were bullied by bad people!"

Qingfeng and Mingyue rushed to his front, one on the left, one on the right, and stopped.

Mingyue's little face was puffed up with anger, like an enraged hamster.

"Who was the blind fool? Tell us! We'll go back and tell Master, and he'll get justice for you!"

Qingfeng, on the other hand, wore a stern expression on his little face, trying his best to look like "I'm very angry, and the consequences will be severe."

"Tell us quickly! Was it that guy surnamed Sun from Formation Peak? I'll go to the Enforcement Hall right now and have them increase his punishment!"

Watching the two little ones' righteous indignation, Su Ming felt a warmth in his heart.

In this cold sect, such pure concern was especially precious.

He smiled gently and invited them into the courtyard.

"Thank you, Senior Sister, Senior Brother, for your concern. The matter has already been resolved. The sect's enforcement is strict and fair; it won't wrong a good person, nor will it let a bad one go."

He skillfully changed the subject, poured them some water, and casually asked,

"I've heard that after becoming an outer sect disciple, one can enter the Transmission Pavilion to select cultivation methods? I wonder, are there any other benefits?"

This question successfully piqued Qingfeng's "eagerness to teach" interest.

He cleared his throat, put his hands behind his back like a little adult, and began pacing in the courtyard.

"Benefits? There are loads of benefits!"

He glanced at Su Ming, as if weighing something.

"Why are you asking this? Could it be... Elder Ma promised you an outer sect disciple spot?"

Su Ming's heart stirred, but his expression remained unchanged as he gave a bitter smile. "This disciple wouldn't dare to hope for such a thing. It's just that being in the sect, one needs something to aspire to, something to motivate oneself."

This answer satisfied Qingfeng greatly.

He nodded and finally began listing the benefits like counting treasures.

"Alright then, let me open your eyes a bit."

"Becoming an outer sect disciple comes with so many advantages!"

Qingfeng extended one finger.

"First, monthly stipend! A menial disciple gets at most three to five spirit stones a month. An outer sect disciple starts with ten low-grade spirit stones! Plus a fixed quota of 'Foundation Consolidation Pills' to stabilize cultivation!"

He extended a second finger.

"Second, cultivation methods! Free access to the first floor of the Transmission Pavilion! It holds over a hundred Qi Refining stage cultivation methods, along with various basic technique jade slips. Sword techniques, escape arts, defensive spells... everything is there, all exchangeable with contribution points!"

"Third, lectures! The qualification to regularly listen to Golden Core elders' lectures! Any difficult problems encountered during daily cultivation can be raised during these lecture sessions. The elders will resolve your doubts and explain things! This is an opportunity that's hard to buy even with a thousand pieces of gold!"

"Fourth, missions! You can go to the Hall of Meritorious Deeds and take on sect missions with richer rewards! Hunting demon beasts, gathering spirit herbs... not only can you earn a lot of spirit stones and contribution points, you can also go out to gain experience and broaden your horizons!"

Qingfeng finished in one breath, looked at Su Ming's stunned expression, and smugly lifted his chin.

He paused, his tone becoming unprecedentedly serious.

"But the most important thing... is status!"

"An outer sect disciple truly steps across the threshold of the Cloud Hidden Sect! Your name will be recorded in the sect's jade register, receiving the highest protection under the sect's laws!"

"Unless you commit a heinous crime like betraying the sect or murdering fellow disciples, even an inner sect steward cannot casually kill you!"

"Do you understand? This is the most fundamental difference between an outer sect disciple and a menial!"

After finishing, Qingfeng puffed out his little chest, very satisfied with his own "knowledge sharing."

Su Ming stood rooted to the spot, as if struck by a thunderbolt.

He had known before that outer sect disciples had many benefits, but he had never understood so clearly, so profoundly, that behind this status lay a fundamental leap in

life security! It was a qualitative change from being "consumable goods" to "protected property"!

Ten spirit stones, Foundation Consolidation Pills, the Transmission Pavilion, elder lectures... these were certainly tempting, but none could compare to the storm the six words "cannot casually kill" stirred in his heart. This meant that as long as he didn't actively seek death, he could truly practice his master's "Way of Survival" more stably within the Cloud Hidden Sect!

Looking at the two little ones standing up for him, warmth surged in his heart, mixed with a hint of indescribable bitterness. He took a deep breath, suppressed the churning emotions, and towards Qingfeng, performed a solemn, deep bow.

"Senior Brother Qingfeng, Senior Sister Mingyue, for the kindness of resolving my doubts today, Su Ming... will remember it in my heart!"

His sudden solemnity actually made Qingfeng a bit embarrassed. His little face flushed slightly as he waved his hand. "Ah, it was nothing! You... you don't need to be so polite!"

Mingyue also nodded vigorously. "Yeah, yeah, Su Ming, don't be afraid. If there are bad guys in the future, we'll still help you!"

After chatting a bit more and seeing that the night was deep, Su Ming finally saw the two reluctant little ones to the courtyard gate.

Watching the two small figures carrying lanterns disappear into the stone path shrouded in night, the gentle smile on Su Ming's face gradually faded away.

After seeing off Qingfeng and Mingyue, Su Ming closed the courtyard gate.

"Creak—"

The sound of the wooden door closing was exceptionally clear in the silent night.

Leaning against the cold door panel, he didn't immediately return to his room.

The night breeze was slightly cool, dispersing the liveliness the two little ones had brought.

But Su Ming's heart could no longer be calm.

Outer sect disciple!

That wasn't just a status; it was a door, and behind it lay the true path of immortality.

He quickly walked back to the eastern side room. The moment the door closed, Lin Yu's soul thought, which had long been unable to hold back, jumped out.

"Disciple, do it! We must do this!"

Lin Yu's phantom image excitedly rubbed his hands together inside the Xuantian ring, like a startup founder who just got angel round funding.

"Outer sect disciple! Stable monthly salary plus options! Plus internal training and team building! This is an iron rice bowl!"

Su Ming lit the oil lamp. The bean-sized flame illuminated his face, which held an unprecedented seriousness.

"The key is..." Lin Yu changed tack, a sly light flashing in his eyes, "how do we turn this 'hard job' into our 'power base'?"

Su Ming paced under the lamplight, his mind racing.

From ledger data, to formation principles, to the intricate relationships between the various peaks of the sect.

A moment later, he suddenly stopped, a brilliant light bursting in his eyes.

"Master, I understand."

"We're not fighting for temporary gains or petty advantages."

"What we're fighting for is the 'right to set the standards'!"

"Once the maintenance of the sect's low-level formations must follow our procedures, then..."

"Even if Elder Ma is no longer here in the future, as long as this system is still running, any successor who wants to move against us would have to consider first whether the entire sect's logistics would collapse because of it!"

Su Ming's heart settled completely.

The road ahead was still perilous, but he had found that one viable, narrow path to victory.

"Time waits for no one!"

Su Ming, the accountant, felt the drive he had when pulling all-nighters to analyze reports in the Hanlin Academy completely ignited.

He immediately spread out paper and brush, dipped the brush fully in ink.

"Master, we must produce a detailed outline within three days that Elder Ma cannot refuse and cannot find any flaws in!"

Inside the eastern side room of Courtyard Ding-Qi, formation light swirled, completely isolating all external prying.

On the table, the drafts Su Ming drew up through the night quickly covered the surface.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul power even materialized a huge virtual white light board. On it, drawn with strange symbols Su Ming couldn't understand, were complex mind maps, frantically simulating and deducing.

Master and disciple, one responsible for refining the details based on the Cloud Hidden Sect's actual situation, the other responsible for providing top-level design ideas beyond this era.

A sleepless night.

When the sky lightened at dawn, the rudimentary form of an outline titled "Outline for the Establishment of the Formation Lines Repair Hall" had already taken shape.

The outline was clearly divided into three parts.

Part One: "Draft Organizational Structure and Personnel Management."

Clearly established positions such as Hall Master, Deputy Hall Master, Repair Team, Quality Inspection Team, Storage Team, etc., each with its own duties and clear responsibilities, fundamentally eliminating the possibility of overstaffing and buck-passing.

Part Two: "Standard Operating Procedures Framework."

The repair processes for the ten most common, highest repair-rate low-level formation devices in the sect, such as the Bedrock Shield Formation, Spirit Gathering Array, Illumination Formation, etc., were all broken down into foolproof steps, accompanied by illustrative diagrams.

Part Three: "Contribution Point Incentive and Assessment Methods."

Directly linked each repair disciple's work efficiency, repair quality, and material consumption to the contribution points they could earn. More work, more reward; survival of the fittest. Using the most direct benefits to stimulate everyone's motivation.

Su Ming put down his brush, looked at the three thick drafts on the table, a flame burning in his eyes like never before.

He clenched his fist.

"Master, if this hall can be established, it will be the first deep root we plant in the Cloud Hidden Sect."

"We want the status of outer sect disciple!"

"And we want this 'right to set the standards' even more!"

His gaze pierced through the window lattice, looking towards the few silent rooms in the courtyard.

"Within these three days, I must find the most suitable 'cornerstones'."

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

[1,233 words]

The next day.

Inside the Accounting Office, the clattering of abacuses continued as usual.

Su Ming kept his head down, his fingers swiftly gliding over the ledger, appearing no different from his colleagues around him.

Yet, his powerful divine sense had already transformed into an invisible net, enveloping the entire Accounting Office.

Everyone's breathing, the force of each pen stroke, every casual snippet of conversation, all passed through the most precise sieve, forming a dynamic map of interpersonal relationships in his mind.

His gaze focused particularly on an elderly man with half-gray hair and beard sitting in the corner.

Old Wang, a veteran of the Accounting Office, was not fond of talking and spent his days solely in the company of ledgers.

A thought stirred in Su Ming's mind. While auditing a list of spirit stone expenditures for the Vessel Hall, he deliberately misaligned a decimal point by one place.

This error was extremely subtle, hidden among hundreds of data entries, enough for ninety-nine percent of people to overlook it.

A young disciple at the neighboring desk glanced over, a gloating smile curling at the corner of his mouth, before he lowered his head, pretending not to have seen anything.

The others were completely immersed in their own work, indifferent.

The time it takes an incense stick to burn later, Old Wang got up to fetch water, passing by Su Ming's desk.

His footsteps paused almost imperceptibly, his gaze lingering on Su Ming's ledger for less than half a breath.

He said nothing, simply walked back with his cup of water.

A while later, Old Wang stood up again, as if to stretch his stiff back. He "inadvertently" walked behind Su Ming, bent down, and mumbled a reminder in a voice only the two of them could hear.

"For that batch of Fire Washing Stones from the Vessel Hall, the loss rate is three *li*, not three *qian*."

After saying this, he straightened up, rubbed his back, and slowly walked back to his seat as if nothing had happened.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul consciousness materialized into a faint figure sitting with legs crossed, nodding in satisfaction.

"Hey, this Old Wang is pretty good!"

"Tight-lipped, meticulous, and understands human relations. He didn't directly point out your mistake to embarrass you, but reminded you this way. He's an old hand and a sensible person. Disciple, I think this 'screw' will do!"

Su Ming lightly tapped his brush tip on the ledger.

On his list, a circle was drawn next to Old Wang's name.

In the afternoon, Su Ming left the Accounting Office under the pretext of "verifying inter-departmental accounts."

He didn't go to the accounting offices of other departments but headed directly for the Basic Formation Lines Maintenance Department at the foot of Formation Peak.

This was the very place where Sun Quan had once thrown his weight around.

Now that Sun Quan had been taken away by the Enforcement Hall, the entire Maintenance Department felt somewhat desolate.

An older, honest-looking man was bent over, meticulously polishing a scrapped formation plate. His movements were diligent, but his expression held a trace of numbness.

This was Old Li, the old menial disciple who had always been suppressed by Sun Quan and assigned the hardest, most exhausting tasks.

"Senior Brother Li," Su Ming greeted respectfully with a cupped fist salute.

Old Li looked up. Seeing it was Su Ming, a flicker of unease passed through his muddled eyes, and he quickly stood up.

"Brother... Brother Su, what brings you here?"

"I'm here to verify the maintenance material inventory for the 'Bedrock Shield Formation' from last quarter," Su Ming said, handing over a file. "There are a few entries for 'Azure Aura Sand' usage that don't match the Vessel Hall's outgoing records. I wanted to consult with you, Senior Brother."

Old Li took the file. After just one glance, he pointed at a specific entry and said honestly,

"Brother Su, this batch of shield formations was phased out from Heavenly Sword Peak and was severely worn. Using Azure Aura Sand according to procedure, even after repair, they wouldn't last long. Steward Sun... oh no, Sun Quan, he told us to use cheap 'Black Mountain Rock Powder' as a substitute. The accounts were still reported as Azure Aura Sand."

He spoke frankly and openly, without the slightest attempt to conceal anything.

Su Ming—the accountant—nodded calmly.

"Thank you for clarifying, Senior Brother."

Lin Yu's soul consciousness sounded again, carrying a hint of appreciation.

"This Old Li is also good. Honest, has practical experience, and has been suppressed. Give someone like this a chance, and he'll give his all for you. Write it down, write it down!"

Leaving the Maintenance Department, Su Ming took a detour to the Spiritual Plant Garden.

The person he was looking for was a young menial disciple named Zhang Asheng.

When Su Ming arrived, he saw Zhang Asheng squatting in front of a patch of withered, yellowish "Dew-Gathering Grass," his expression focused.

He wasn't using spiritual energy to force growth. Instead, he was using a thin bamboo stick to gently loosen the hardened spiritual soil bit by bit, then carefully dripping diluted spiritual liquid, drop by drop, near the roots of the grass.

That level of patience made it seem like he wasn't tending to spiritual plants, but carving a peerless work of art.

Su Ming—the accountant—only watched for a moment before turning and leaving.

"Master, what do you think of this person?"

"Need you ask?" Lin Yu's voice held a note of admiration. "Just watching him handle those nearly-dead spiritual plants tells you this kid has the patience for meticulous work! What we need most for repairing formation lines is precisely this kind of 'craftsman spirit'—someone who can sit still and focus! We want this kind of 'screw,' not those 'ambitious climbers' who dream of reaching the top in one step!"

In the evening, Qingfeng and Mingyue sneaked into Courtyard Ding-Qi.

"We found out! We found out!"

Mingyue proudly shoved a piece of paper with messy, crooked handwriting into Su Ming's hands.

"That Zhao Tiezhu you mentioned, his family raises spirit pigs for the sect! Five generations, their background is as clean as water! He's honest too, just a bit slow. He's failed the outer sect disciple exam several times!"

Qingfeng stood with his hands behind his back, trying hard to maintain the dignity of a "senior brother."

"That Qian Xiaofan, his parents are mortals. He has a bit of spiritual root and was brought up the mountain by a steward from the Mortal World Experience Hall. He's clever, but too poor, always getting bullied. We asked several people, and they all said he's clean-handed, never cuts corners or slacks off."

The two youngsters, entrusted with an "important mission" by Su Ming, had excitedly used their own connections to thoroughly investigate the backgrounds of several impoverished disciples on Su Ming's list.

Looking at the information on the paper, a sincere smile appeared on Su Ming's face.

"Thank you both."

After seeing the two youngsters off, Su Ming returned to his room and activated the formation.

He took a deep breath, reorganizing and integrating all the information in his mind.

Finally, a core list of five individuals was firmly decided upon.

Accounting Office's Old Wang: Proficient with data, meticulous, could serve as the head of quality control.

Maintenance Department's Old Li: Experienced, steady, could serve as the backbone of repairs.

Spiritual Plant Garden's Zhang Asheng: Patient, detail-oriented, single-minded, could serve as a talent for precision work.

And the impoverished disciples vouched for by Qingfeng and Mingyue, Zhao Tiezhu and Qian Xiaofan: Clean backgrounds, eager for opportunity, could serve as the foundation for apprentices.

These five individuals were the first cornerstone of his "Formation Lines Repair Hall."

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Chapter 169: The Fox Borrows the Tiger's Power

[1,373 words]

The third day, early morning.

In the meditation room of the External Affairs Hall, the sandalwood incense seemed even more serene.

Elder Ma sat upright on a meditation cushion, eyes slightly closed as if in deep meditation.

Su Ming stood below with hands respectfully at his sides, holding something that seemed completely mismatched with his menial disciple status.

It was a booklet with a cover made of fine beast hide, neatly bound, its thickness far exceeding anyone's expectations.

"Elder, these are the thoughts and considerations of this disciple after three days of contemplation."

Su Ming did not make empty promises but respectfully presented the plan that had condensed the countless efforts of both master and disciple.

"A hastily prepared work, it must contain many oversights. I humbly request the Elder's correction and guidance."

Elder Ma slowly opened his eyes and took the booklet.

Proposal for the Establishment of the Formation Lines Repair Hall.

He opened to the first page, glanced at it only once, and for the first time, an expression of barely concealed astonishment appeared on his face, which was usually as still as an ancient well.

His turbid eyes grew brighter and brighter the more he read.

Even his withered fingers began to unconsciously tap lightly on the edge of the booklet, producing a rhythmic, faint sound.

"Look, look! The fish has taken the bait!" Lin Yu's soul consciousness jumped up and down in Su Ming's mind. "What do you call a dimensional strike? This is it!"

Su Ming held his breath and focused his spirit, seemingly oblivious to his master's lively thoughts, quietly awaiting the final judgment.

Elder Ma had completely not expected that what Su Ming presented wasn't just an idea or a notion.

It was a complete, meticulous, even revolutionary management system!

His gaze lingered for a long time on the sections titled "Standard Operating Procedures" and "Contribution Point Incentives and Assessment."

Every word and sentence was like a sharp scalpel, precisely dissecting the core pain points of the sect's current low-level management inefficiency!

After a long while, Elder Ma slowly raised his head, his deep eyes filled with complex emotions.

He pondered for a moment, then lightly tapped a spot on the booklet with his fingertip, pointing out the most central concern.

"This method... seems overly rigid."

"In the long run, wouldn't it stifle the disciples' spiritual nature, making them too craftsman-like?"

Lin Yu's soul consciousness instantly grew tense. "Here it comes! The pressure interview is here! Disciple, don't panic, say what we rehearsed!"

Su Ming was already prepared with an answer. Upon hearing this, he bowed neither humbly nor arrogantly and responded.

"Reporting to the Elder, the original purpose of this hall is not to cultivate grandmasters of formations who can establish their own schools."

His voice was calm and clear, echoing within the meditation room.

"It is to ensure the 'foolproof' stable operation of the sect's thousands of low-level formation vessels."

"Spiritual nature is for innovation and breaking new ground—that is the business of the geniuses on Formation Peak. For daily maintenance, what is needed is not spiritual nature, but 'absolute reliability.'"

"The output of this hall must be qualified products every single time, not dependent on some disciple's sudden 'masterpiece' from a spark of inspiration."

These words were like a clear spring, instantly washing away the last trace of doubt in Elder Ma's heart.

Right!

Reliability!

What the sect needed was precisely this kind of absolute reliability!

"What excellent phrases—'qualified products' and 'absolute reliability'!" A flash of sharp light passed through Elder Ma's eyes.

Seeing this, Su Ming smoothly took out another prepared list from his robe and presented it again.

"Elder, this is a list of five candidates this disciple has boldly screened. I humbly request the Elder to review it."

He explained the reasons for choosing each of the five individuals one by one.

"Steward Wang from the Accounting Office is meticulous in thought and steady in character. He can serve as the head of quality inspection."

"Senior Brother Li from the Maintenance Department is experienced and down-to-earth. He can serve as the backbone of repairs."

"Zhang Asheng from the Spiritual Plant Garden is patient, meticulous, and single-minded. He can be a talent for precision work."

"In addition, there are Zhao Tiezhu and Qian Xiaofan. Their family backgrounds are clean, and they yearn for opportunity. They can serve as the foundation for apprentices."

Every person he selected was precisely the kind of ordinary character who would disappear into a crowd—no background, no innate talent. Their only common points were steadiness, attentiveness, and reliability.

"Additionally, this disciple requests that the Repair Hall be established in a secluded courtyard in the back mountains."

"Firstly, it can avoid interference from the comings and goings of the various peaks, allowing focus on the work."

"Secondly, it can also... avoid prying eyes and reduce unnecessary disputes."

This last sentence was spoken extremely cleverly.

It considered the needs of the Repair Hall while also responding to the previous incident with Sun Quan, indicating his desire to work steadily and avoid further trouble.

Elder Ma closed the thick proposal. His turbid eyes fixed on Su Ming for a long time.

That gaze contained scrutiny, appreciation, and finally transformed into a hint of decisive resolve.

"Good!"

"Your requests are approved!"

He took out a simple, ancient Mystic Iron token from his robe. On the token was only a single, imposing character: "Ma."

He handed the token to Su Ming.

"With this token, within three days, you may requisition the people you need, the location you need, and all basic materials and supplies."

The token felt cool to the touch, yet its weight was as heavy as a mountain.

"Su Ming."

Elder Ma's voice carried an unprecedented gravity.

"Do not disappoint this old man's expectations."

"This disciple will certainly not fail the trust placed in me!" Su Ming bowed deeply, tightly gripping the token in his palm. Its cool sensation slightly calmed his boiling blood, yet made his resolve even more firm.

Exiting the meditation room, the afternoon sunlight was somewhat glaring. Su Ming did not delay for a moment. Clutching that token, which seemed to still carry Elder Ma's residual warmth, as if holding a freshly unsheathed Imperial Sword, he walked directly toward the stewards' office of the External Affairs Hall.

He did not seek out any familiar stewards. Instead, he directly presented the token and found the steward on duty responsible for personnel assignments and material distribution.

Seeing the token, the steward's pupils contracted slightly. The arrogance on his face instantly transformed into respect, even carrying a trace of barely detectable fear.

"Su Ming... no, Senior Brother Su, what are your instructions?"

"Transfer five people." Su Ming handed over the list, his tone calm yet leaving no room for doubt. "Wang Ming from the Accounting Office, Li Hou from the Formation Peak Maintenance Department, Zhang Asheng from the Spiritual Plant Garden, Zhao Tiezhu and Qian Xiaofan from the menial disciples' courtyard. Effective immediately, they are reassigned to the newly established 'Formation Lines Repair Hall.'"

"Also, approve Back Mountain Courtyard Bing-Seven for use by the Repair Hall. According to this list, allocate the first batch of basic tools and materials. Everything must be in place before sunset."

The steward took the list and the materials list, glanced at them, and nodded repeatedly. "Yes, yes, yes, Senior Brother, rest assured, I will handle it immediately!"

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu watched the steward's shift from arrogance to deference with amazement. *See that, disciple? This is called power! Even if it's only temporary, using it feels really good! Can we consider this starting a business with imperial sanction?*

"Master, this is just the beginning." Su Ming responded in his heart, his gaze sweeping over the bustling crowd in the External Affairs Hall. "What comes next is the real key."

Half an hour later.

Inside the Accounting Office, Old Wang was frowning bitterly over a stubbornly unbalanced entry in his ledger when a rough hand pressed down on his account book.

He looked up and saw Su Ming's calm face.

"Senior Brother Wang," Su Ming's voice was not loud but clearly reached his ears. "By order of the External Affairs Hall, effective immediately, you are transferred to the newly established 'Formation Lines Repair Hall.' Pack your things and come with me."

Old Wang was stunned. He looked at Su Ming, then at the shocked and doubtful glances from his colleagues around him. His lips moved slightly as if he wanted to say something.

Su Ming did not give him a chance to ask. He simply added one sentence. "It's an order personally given by Elder Ma."

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Chapter 170: Opening Ceremony

[1,391 words]

Old Wang's cloudy eyes instantly flashed with a light of disbelief. He asked nothing, merely nodded, quickly and silently gathered his few personal belongings, and followed behind Su Ming.

When Su Ming found Old Li with the token, this honest man who had long suffered suppression was holding a pile of scrapped formation plate debris, preparing to go to the waste area. Upon hearing the transfer order, his hands holding that pile of "junk" trembled, and his eyes instantly reddened.

Meanwhile, in the Spiritual Plant Garden, Zhang Asheng was carefully watering a spiritual plant. Hearing Su Ming's words, he set down the ladle, silently bowed to Su Ming with a gaze that was clear and resolute.

Finally, the menial disciples' quarters.

When Zhao Tiezhu and Qian Xiaofan, two youths who had always lived at the very bottom of the sect with almost no hope, heard their names spoken by Su Ming and were told they would enter a newly established "department" specially approved by Elder Ma, the expressions on their faces shifted from confusion, to shock, then to ecstatic joy, almost to the point of tears.

At dusk.

Outside Back Mountain Courtyard Bing-Seven, Old Wang, Old Li, Zhang Asheng, Zhao Tiezhu, and Qian Xiaofan stood silently in a row.

They came from different places, their ages and experiences varied, but at this moment, their faces all bore a similar glow—a mix of excitement, nervousness, and a glimmer of rebirth.

They looked at the young figure who had gathered them here, at the token representing supreme authority in his hand. Their hearts were filled with the unknown, yet also burned with unprecedented hope.

Su Ming's gaze slowly swept over these five faces. He knew this was the foundation of his future in the Cloud Hidden Sect.

"The place is humble, the work is complex," he began, his voice exceptionally clear in the twilight. "But from today onward, all of you will be here with me, Su Ming."

He said no more, pushing open the courtyard gate.

"Come in."

"Tomorrow at mao hour, we officially begin work."

...

The fourth day, the morning sun rose.

A long-deserted, secluded courtyard in the back mountains was now completely renewed.

The ground in the courtyard had been swept clean, revealing the original color of the bluestone slabs. Though the side rooms appeared simple, their window lattices had been wiped bright. A set of basic repair tools and the first batch of "illumination formation plates" awaiting repair were neatly arranged on newly built wooden shelves, sorted by category.

Old Wang, Old Li, Zhang Asheng, and the two slightly nervous youths, Zhao Tiezhu and Qian Xiaofan, stood straight in the courtyard.

They had changed into matching blue cloth garments. Their expressions held both the excitement of being entrusted with important tasks and the apprehension of facing the unknown, very much like new recruits awaiting inspection.

Su Ming walked out from the main room. He held no tea, offered no pleasantries.

He directly distributed several booklets recorded on thin wooden boards to the five of them.

"This place values not cultivation level, nor background, only procedures and records."

His voice was calm, yet carried an undeniable certainty that clearly reached everyone's ears.

"Safety first! Violators will be expelled immediately!"

The five men's hearts tightened. They hurriedly lowered their heads to look at the booklets in their hands.

On the cover, a line of clearly carved characters came into view: "Safety Regulations" and "Standard Repair Procedures for 'Illumination Formation Plates' (First Edition)."

No empty words, no motivational speeches, only rules.

Su Ming walked to the nearby wooden shelf and casually picked up a dim, lifeless illumination formation plate.

"Today, I will only demonstrate once."

He placed the formation plate on the stone table, picked up the procedure manual, and turned to the first page.

"Step one: Visual inspection."

As he spoke, he picked up a clean, soft cloth and carefully wiped the dust from the formation plate's surface, his gaze sweeping over every corner.

"Record: Plate body has no cracks, runes show no obvious breaks, spirit stone slot is intact."

He picked up a charcoal pen and swiftly jotted down a few symbols on a nearby bamboo slip.

"Step two: Faint Light Technique to probe for residual energy."

He pointed his fingers like a sword. A wisp of spiritual energy so faint it was almost invisible seeped from his fingertips, like quicksilver pouring onto the ground, slowly permeating the formation plate's interior.

"Record: Core 'Gathering' character rune energy node is blocked. Three auxiliary circuits show slight spiritual energy dissipation."

His movements weren't fast, but they flowed smoothly. Each step strictly followed the diagrams in the manual, each record was clear and unambiguous.

From inspection and testing, to disassembly and replacement of damaged micro-rune nodes, to final assembly and spiritual energy verification.

Throughout the entire process, Su Ming did not display any profound formation techniques. He was like a mortal craftsman, following a blueprint step-by-step, meticulously and conscientiously.

The five men watched, dumbfounded.

So... repairing formations could be like this?

This wasn't some profound, mysterious immortal art at all. This was clearly... following the clues step by step!

"All understood?" Su Ming completed the final verification step. With a soft "hum," the formation plate emitted a gentle, steady light.

The five men snapped out of their daze and hurriedly nodded.

"Good." Su Ming, the accounting office clerk, revealed his most adept expression. "Now, preliminary division of labor."

He looked at the meticulous Old Wang.

"Old Wang, you have ample experience and a careful mind. You will be responsible for process optimization suggestions and final quality inspection record verification."

He then looked at the experienced Old Li.

"Old Li, you will lead Zhao Tiezhu and Qian Xiaofan, responsible for the main repair operations. Remember, strictly follow the procedures. Better to be slow than to make a mistake."

Finally, he turned his gaze to the patient and meticulous Zhang Asheng.

"Asheng, your hands are the steadiest. You will be responsible for material pre-processing and repairing those delicate parts."

The five men bowed in unison, loudly responding, "Yes!"

At that moment, two crisp voices approached from afar.

"Su Ming! Su Ming! We've come to congratulate you!"

They had expected to see chaos, but the orderly scene before their eyes and the several huge flowcharts hanging on the wall, filled with various strange arrows and boxes, shocked them, making their eyes widen.

"Wow! Su Ming, what are you doing? Is that a treasure map on the wall?" Mingyue asked curiously, pointing at the "Illumination Formation Plate Repair Flowchart."

Su Ming smiled inwardly and naturally stepped forward to greet them.

"Senior Brother Qingfeng, Senior Sister Mingyue, this is the newly established 'Formation Lines Repair Hall.' We are currently in need of two esteemed advisors for guidance."

He clasped his hands and bowed seriously to the two youngsters.

"This disciple ventures to ask if the two of you would be willing to serve as 'Honorary Advisors' for this hall. Would that be acceptable?"

"Honorary Advisors?" Qingfeng and Mingyue looked at each other, their eyes full of novelty.

"What do they do?"

"Usually, no effort is required." Su Ming's smile was very much like an old fox luring a little white rabbit. "Only occasionally, if we need to communicate some minor matters with other departments, we would need to rely on your esteemed names to make things go smoothly."

Borrowing their status to reduce initial external resistance.

This was Su Ming's calculation.

Qingfeng immediately puffed out his little chest, feeling this "official position" suited his status perfectly, and immediately made the decision.

"Approved! From now on, if there's anything, just use our names!"

In the courtyard, Old Wang and the others watched this scene, and their admiration for Su Ming rose another level.

To arrange these two little ancestors so clearly and properly, this Senior Brother Su was truly unfathomable!

With the "Honorary Advisors" kindly lending their presence, the Repair Hall's first day of work officially began.

The sun set in the west, the evening glow dyeing the horizon red.

On the stone table in the courtyard, fifteen illumination formation plates emitting a soft light were neatly arranged.

The five men were exhausted, their backs and waists aching, but their faces radiated an unprecedented sense of satisfaction and pride.

The speed was slow, but the quality... perfect!

Old Wang held the quality inspection record, his hand trembling slightly.

"Senior Brother Su... fifteen items, all qualified! Not a single error!"

Su Ming nodded, picked up the charcoal pen, and solemnly wrote the final entry in today's work log.

[First day: Repaired fifteen illumination formation plates. Time taken: six shichen. Qualification rate: one hundred percent. No safety incidents.]

This was the Repair Hall's first performance data.

It was also the first cornerstone Su Ming personally laid in this Cloud Hidden Sect.

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

[1,137 words]

Ten days later, External Affairs Hall, meditation room.

The air was still filled with that familiar, reassuring scent of sandalwood.

Different from ten days ago, this time, what Su Ming held in his hands was no longer a thick proposal, but a thin bamboo scroll recording data.

He stood quietly in the center of the meditation room, head bowed, silently waiting.

Elder Ma sat cross-legged on the meditation cushion, his figure appearing even more gaunt, as if a gust of wind could blow him over. He slowly extended his withered hand and took the bamboo scroll.

The scroll unfurled, revealing no flowery rhetoric, only rows of clear numbers recorded with charcoal pencil.

Formation Lines Repair Hall, First Ten-Day Operation Summary:

Received formation plates for repair: eighty-three items. Categories: Illumination Formation, Bedrock Shield Formation, Quiet Heart Formation.

Completed repairs: one hundred and eighty-three items.

Pass rate: one hundred percent.

Elder Ma's turbid eyes scanned it word by word. His finger unconsciously rubbed over the line "pass rate one hundred percent" for a long time.

In the quiet room, there was only the faint "rustling" sound of his fingertip rubbing against the bamboo scroll.

A long, long time passed.

Elder Ma slowly closed the scroll and gently placed it aside.

He did not look up, nor did he say much. He just exhaled a single word towards the curling blue smoke.

"Good."

Su Ming bowed, performed a salute, and then quietly withdrew.

...

Bing Character Seven Courtyard, Formation Lines Repair Hall.

It was no longer the desolate place it was when first established.

In the courtyard, five stone tables were arranged in an orderly manner, forming an efficient assembly line.

Old Li, with Qian Xiaofan, was responsible for the preliminary disassembly and rough repair of the formation plates; Zhang Asheng focused on the meticulous carving and

replacement of those fine runes; while Zhao Tiezhu, under Old Wang's strict gaze, carried out the final assembly and verification.

Everyone was focused. Their movements, though still somewhat clumsy, strictly followed the "Standard Operating Procedures Flowchart" hanging on the wall, adhering meticulously, not daring to deviate in the slightest.

The air was filled with the unique fragrance of spiritual ink, interwoven with the rhythmic "rustling" sounds of tools grinding against formation plates, composing a unique symphony belonging to craftsmen.

"Crack!"

A crisp, discordant shattering sound suddenly pierced through this tranquility.

Everyone's movements halted, their eyes swiveling in unison towards the source of the sound.

Zhao Tiezhu stood pale-faced before a stone table, holding half of a shattered formation plate in his hands. The other half had fallen to the ground, broken into several pieces. From the fracture of the formation plate, a few wisps of blue smoke rose, carrying the charred smell of burnt spiritual energy.

"I... I..." Zhao Tiezhu's lips trembled, his eyes instantly filling with terror. "Senior... Senior Brother Su, I... I didn't mean to! When I was verifying the spiritual energy, my hand shook, and I injected it... too fast..."

He fell to his knees with a "thump," his voice choked with sobs.

Damaging sect property, even if it was just the lowest-grade formation plate, was a serious crime for a menial disciple, enough to warrant expulsion from the sect.

The atmosphere in the courtyard instantly froze.

Old Li and Zhang Asheng both showed looks of concern on their faces. Even the usually strict Old Wang frowned.

Su Ming put down the record book in his hand and slowly walked over.

He did not look at Zhao Tiezhu kneeling on the ground. He merely bent down, carefully picked up the fragments from the floor, placed them on the table, and pieced them together with the other half.

He carefully examined the fracture, then picked up the verification tool Zhao Tiezhu had just used, sensing the residual spiritual energy fluctuations on it.

Everyone held their breath, awaiting his judgment.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul thought manifested into a phantom figure with hands on hips, pointing at a virtual light panel.

"Typical 'surge current' breakdown! The warning about 'slow injection' in the operation manual isn't highlighted prominently enough! Disciple, this is a great opportunity for process optimization! Don't just focus on punishing the person, solve the problem at the system level!"

Su Ming understood in his heart. He looked up, his gaze calm as he looked at Zhao Tiezhu, who was on the verge of tears.

"Get up." His voice was not loud, but it clearly reached everyone's ears.

Zhao Tiezhu was stunned, momentarily not daring to move.

"I told you to get up." Su Ming repeated.

Only then did Zhao Tiezhu shakily stand up, head lowered, like a condemned prisoner awaiting sentencing.

Su Ming did not scold him. Instead, he handed him a blank bamboo scroll and a charcoal pencil.

"Don't just focus on being afraid."

"From the moment you received this formation plate until the moment it shattered, write down everything you were thinking in your mind, everything you did with your hands, every single detail, exactly as it happened."

"When did you feel nervous? Why were you nervous? When your hand shook, how did the spiritual energy go out of control? The more detailed, the better."

Zhao Tiezhu was completely dumbfounded.

Not just him. Everyone in the courtyard was dumbfounded.

This... what kind of handling method was this?

"Can't write it?" Su Ming looked at him.

"No... no... I'll write! I'll write it right now!" Zhao Tiezhu felt as if granted a pardon. He hurriedly took the bamboo scroll, ran to a corner, and began recording with a trembling hand as he recalled the events.

Su Ming turned around and addressed everyone. "Everyone, stop for a moment. Come here."

He pointed at the shattered formation plate on the table.

"Take a look, all of you. Zhao Tiezhu's mistake serves as a reminder for all of us."

"This matter is not his fault alone. It shows that our process still has loopholes."

"Old Wang," he looked at Old Wang, "starting today, add a 'Common Error Warning Record.' Record this incident as the first case."

"Old Li, Zhang Asheng, you two have the most experience. Discuss how to add a 'mistake-proofing' step to the verification process. For example, could we add a miniature rune to the verification tool that limits the spiritual energy output rate?"

These words struck everyone present like a thunderbolt.

They looked at Su Ming, their eyes filled with disbelief.

No punishment, no scolding, even... attributing the responsibility to an imperfect process.

In the corner, Zhao Tiezhu, who was writing furiously, was already in tears. He looked up at that not-so-tall figure, wiped his face roughly with his sleeve, and his writing speed increased even more.

Half an hour later, a detailed accident report and an improvement plan for "secondary current-limiting verification" drafted jointly by Old Li and Zhang Asheng were placed on Su Ming's desk.

A new step was added to the "Standard Operating Procedures Flowchart" on the wall.

And the first entry was made in the brand-new "Common Error Warning Record."

After this incident, the atmosphere in the entire Repair Hall quietly changed. The sense of alienation originally born from rules was completely replaced by something called "belonging" and "trust."

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

Chapter 172: The Master of Gentle Breeze and Bright Moon

[1,297 words]

The night was as dark as ink, in Courtyard Ding-Qi.

Su Ming did not return to his own eastern side room. Instead, he walked to the door of the South Room and knocked gently.

The door creaked open, revealing Li Kai's silent face.

His room was still piled high with various discarded formation plate components. The air carried a peculiar smell, a mix of metal and spirit stone powder.

"Senior Brother Li," Su Ming got straight to the point.

Li Kai didn't speak, merely looking at him, a hint of inquiry in his eyes.

Su Ming met his gaze frankly, his tone sincere.

"Senior Brother Li, to be honest with you, with the Repair Hall newly established, I originally intended to invite you to join."

"However... as you've seen, the hall has too many rules and regulations, and the work is all trivial mending and patching. I've thought it over and feel such an environment is truly too small, likely to restrict your movements and hinder your future prospects."

"After the Repair Hall is properly established and we need to delve into more advanced formations in the future, I will come to formally invite you then. What do you think?"

These words were half-truth, half-falsehood.

Both an excuse and a probe.

Both Lin Yu and Su Ming judged that this Li Kai was like a hidden dragon in the abyss, his temperament unpredictable. The small Repair Hall truly couldn't contain him. Forcibly recruiting him would be unpredictable in terms of fortune or misfortune. It was better to treat him with courtesy and watch how things developed.

Li Kai looked at Su Ming in silence, his deep eyes seemingly able to see through a person's heart.

The oil lamp inside the room cast a dim, yellowish light, making the shallow scar on his face flicker between light and shadow.

After a long while, he twitched the corner of his mouth, as if trying to smile, but it ultimately transformed into a slight nod.

"I understand."

He only spoke these three words, his voice somewhat hoarse.

"Thank you."

After saying this, he took a step back and slowly closed the door.

Su Ming stood outside the door, listening to the renewed "rustling" sound of polishing components coming from inside, lost in thought.

"Master, he seems... to truly understand."

"Understand my foot!" Lin Yu's soul thought erupted in an outburst from within the ring. "What he understands is that you know he's not simple! Your words were telling him, 'I know you're a big shot, our small temple can't hold you, let's not interfere with each other, each to his own peace.' His 'thank you' was thanking you for being 'sensible'."

Su Ming gave a bitter smile and turned to walk towards his own room.

Regardless, a potential trouble had been temporarily stabilized.

...

The operation of the Repair Hall was even smoother than anticipated.

Driven by the powerful force of "process," five people from different backgrounds were twisted into a single rope.

Su Ming finally had large stretches of free time.

In the deep quiet of the night, the composite formation completely isolated the eastern side room from the outside world.

Su Ming sat cross-legged, eight basic runes of varying light floating before him.

Besides the nine runes he initially mastered, over the past month, under Lin Yu's guidance, he had thoroughly digested six new basic runes.

He didn't greedily seek more, but followed Lin Yu's teaching of "laying a solid foundation," beginning the most tedious yet most crucial practice—pairwise combination.

He activated his divine sense, slowly bringing the rune representing "Flow" closer to the rune representing "Solidify."

The two completely different spiritual energy attributes clashed violently the moment they made contact, their light flickering unsteadily as if on the verge of collapse at any moment.

"Idiot! Don't just force them together!" Lin Yu's soul thought rang out promptly. "'Flow' is movement, 'Solidify' is stillness. To combine movement and stillness, you need a 'converter'! Use the principle of the 'Absorb' character rune to guide them! Make 'Solidify' become the channel for 'Flow,' not its dam!"

Su Ming's heart stirred. He immediately separated a strand of his consciousness to visualize the true meaning of the "Absorb" character rune—"compatibility and inclusion."

Sure enough, the two originally mutually repelling runes gradually stabilized under his guidance, finally merging into a brand new, structurally complex composite rune, emanating a peculiar charm of "resilient flow."

Lin Yu's teaching method never made him memorize by rote. For every rune, he started from explaining its most fundamental "principle," then extended it to various phenomena in reality, letting Su Ming comprehend and draw parallels on his own.

This method might not be the fastest in terms of efficiency, but it laid a foundation for him that was far more solid and terrifying than that of ordinary people, even surpassing those geniuses of the Formation Peak.

A few more days passed, and the two little ones, Qingfeng and Mingyue, arrived at the Repair Hall again carrying food boxes.

Only this time, their faces lacked the usual high spirits. Instead, they both pouted, looking thoroughly unhappy.

"Su Ming, Su Ming!" Mingyue couldn't help but complain as soon as she saw him. "My Master hasn't come back for a long time!"

Qingfeng also wore a stern face, chiming in, "Yeah! Who knows what he's busy with, appearing and disappearing mysteriously! We sent him messages, and he just replies with 'Do not disturb!'"

Mingyue opened the food box. The pastries inside were still exquisite, but she couldn't muster any interest in them.

Listening to the two little ones' complaints, Su Ming's heart stirred. He asked casually, as if unintentionally, "Is your esteemed Master so busy because of... the upcoming 'Minor Heavenly Cycle Martial Display'?"

Qingfeng's little face stiffened, and he snorted. "The martial display is for those brutes from the Heavenly Sword Peak to worry about. Master can't be bothered. He's deducing a more important major matter. What exactly it is, we don't know either."

Before his words faded, a series of hurried and arrogant footsteps sounded from outside the courtyard, accompanied by a sharp voice.

"Is that newly established 'Repair Hall' from the External Affairs Hall here? Dragging your feet, made me search forever!"

As the words fell, a young cultivator wearing the attire of a Vessel Hall steward, chin held high and eyes filled with arrogance, strode into Bing Character Seven Courtyard. The silver thread embroidery on his robe depicted intricate patterns of gears and hammers. He exuded an aura of metal and sparks. His gaze swept over the simple furnishings in the courtyard and the craftsmen who originated from menial posts, not concealing the disdain within.

"You're Su Ming? Elder Ma said this place can repair formation plates." He pointed his chin at Su Ming, flicking out a jade slip engraved with formation lines. "Urgent requisition from the Vessel Hall. Twenty 'Sharp Metal Formation Plates' were excessively damaged during trials last night. They're needed for tomorrow's martial display! You are limited to repair all of them before the hour of Hai tonight!"

Seeing Qingfeng and Mingyue present, his attitude softened slightly, but that sense of superiority remained undiminished. "The Vessel Hall gives Elder Ma face. But don't be ungrateful. A bunch of accountants and farmers, don't ruin our Vessel Hall's treasures!"

Old Li and Zhang Asheng's faces instantly flushed red. They were about to retort but were stopped by a calm glance from Su Ming.

Within the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul thought had already materialized into a phantom, pointing and gesturing at the steward. "Well, well, look at this attitude. Disciple, don't stoop to his level. Use your skills to shut him up, and incidentally, slap his face swollen."

Su Ming, neither humble nor pushy, stepped forward, took the jade slip, and scanned it with his divine sense, taking in the damage conditions of all twenty formation plates. He bowed slightly, his tone as steady as if reading an account entry. "Please rest assured, Steward. The Repair Hall only recognizes process, nothing else. They will be delivered before the hour of Hai."

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

Chapter 173: Information Warfare

[1,191 words]

The steward snorted coldly, clearly not believing him. "It better be!" After saying that, he found a stone stool and sat down, adopting a supervisor's posture.

Su Ming said nothing more. He turned around to face the team he had built from the ground up, his voice calm yet powerful.

"Begin work."

At his command, the small courtyard instantly transformed into a precise machine.

Twenty formation plates, shimmering with sharp golden light yet dim in spiritual radiance, were laid out one by one. Old Li, with Zhao Tiezhu, carefully removed the casings according to the *Sharp Metal Formation Plate Standard Dismantling Procedure*, sorting the internal components into categories. A faint, burnt smell of metal scorched by spiritual energy began to permeate the air.

Zhang Asheng, wearing a pair of specially-made deerskin gloves, used a soft cloth soaked in "Dust-Clearing Liquid" to polish every disassembled part until they shone, then used the Faint Light Technique to check for hidden damage.

Meanwhile, Old Wang sat behind a desk in the corner, his charcoal pen scratching softly against paper.

[Third hour of the Shen period (approx. 3:45 PM), received twenty 'Sharp Metal Formation Plates' from the Vessel Hall.]

[Fourth hour of the Shen period (approx. 4:45 PM), dismantling commenced. Recorder: Wang Ming. First formation plate: three impact dents on casing, energy node of the core 'Armor-Piercing' rune burned out...]

His records were exhaustive, detailing every scratch and the result of every spiritual energy probe.

Su Ming took command at the center, responsible for the most critical rune repairs. Before him lay only three rune brushes and a dish of spiritual ink. His movements were not fast, but each stroke he made was incredibly precise, the output of his spiritual energy as stable and unwavering as a straight line.

Initially, the Vessel Hall steward stood with his arms crossed, watching coldly, waiting to see how this "ragtag bunch" would make fools of themselves. But after an hour passed, the mockery on his face gradually morphed into astonishment.

There was no frantic scrambling, no arguments or discussions.

Only silent, highly efficient coordination and a process that seemed pre-programmed. Every person was like a perfectly meshed gear, operating with precision within the machine named the "Repair Hall."

Night fell as the last rays of sunset vanished from the sky.

Su Ming set down his rune brush.

Twenty "Sharp Metal Formation Plates" were neatly arranged on the stone table, each one emitting a full, sharp golden spiritual light.

"Steward, the mission is accomplished," Su Ming said, handing over a list. "All twenty have been repaired. Please inspect them."

The steward stepped forward, picked up one plate with suspicion, and channeled spiritual energy into it.

Hum—

A concentrated beam of golden light shot from the formation plate, cutting a fierce arc through the air. The very air seemed to be sliced apart, emitting a faint hiss. He tested five or six more in succession, each performing identically. The flow of spiritual energy was so smooth it was even better than some newly manufactured plates!

His face turned pale, then flushed, his inner shock beyond words.

"This... how is this possible?"

Su Ming did not answer his question.

The steward gave Su Ming a deep look, said nothing, turned, and left with a flick of his sleeve.

...

Deep within the Artifact Forging Hall of the Vessel Hall.

The crimson glow of the earth fire cast the stone walls in a dark red hue. The air was thick with the smells of sulfur and refined metal.

A red-faced elder with bristling beard and hair, burly in stature, stared intently with wide eyes at a furnace where a magical treasure was nearing completion. This was one of the three chief elders of the Vessel Hall, the Golden Light True Person, renowned for his fiery temper and obsession with artifact forging.

The steward stood respectfully to the side, not daring to breathe too loudly.

"Elder, the 'Sharp Metal Formation Plates' have been retrieved."

"Hmm." The Golden Light True Person grunted from his nose without turning his head.

...

The efficiency and "peculiarity" of the Repair Hall soon stirred up ripples, small but not insignificant, within the External Affairs Hall.

At first, it was curiosity.

"Did you hear? That urgent task from the Vessel Hall, that group finished it in one night!"

"More than that! I heard the Vessel Hall even added an extra reward of contribution points!"

When the Vessel Hall elder's praise spread through certain "unintentional" channels (like Qingfeng and Mingyue's loud chatter in the dining hall), curiosity quickly fermented into jealousy.

In a tea room somewhere in the External Affairs Hall, several managers had gathered.

"Hmph, a cripple with a ruined foundation, relying on some unorthodox tricks, and he actually manages to make a name for himself?" A sharp-faced, weaselly Manager Liu took a sip of tea, his tone sour. He was originally responsible for part of the material procurement. Since the Repair Hall's establishment, several lucrative operations had been transferred over, and he was already deeply dissatisfied.

"Exactly!" another person chimed in. "I heard they use only the best materials to fix things! That spiritual ink is almost up to the standard for inner sect disciples! What a waste! Pile good materials on anything, even a pig could fix a few items!"

"Elder Ma must be getting senile to trust a mere brat!"

Thus, rumors began to spread.

"The Repair Hall is wildly extravagant, wasting sect materials to chase empty fame."

Soon, Su Ming began to feel the pressure.

One day, when Old Wang went to the material warehouse to collect this month's allocated supplies, the warehouse steward delayed him for a full two hours on the pretext of "incomplete procedures." The spiritual ink he brought back was also noticeably inferior in quality.

"Senior Brother Su, they... they did it on purpose!" Old Wang fumed, his face flushed red.

Looking at the pieces of subpar spiritual ink, a flicker of coldness passed through Su Ming's eyes, but his expression remained calm.

He walked to the courtyard wall and said to Old Wang, "Uncle Wang, go get a large wooden board."

Half an hour later, a huge wooden board, painted black, appeared on the outer wall of Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

On the board, written in the most eye-catching white lime, were several lines of large characters.

[Formation Lines Repair Hall Daily Bulletin]

[September 17th]

[Materials Received: Three ingots of third-grade spiritual ink, one bottle of Dust-Clearing Liquid, two taels of Red Copper sand...]

[Repairs Undertaken: Twelve Quiet Heart Formation Plates.]

[Completed: Twelve pieces.]

[Success Rate: One hundred percent.]

[Material Loss: Half an ingot of spiritual ink, one qian of Red Copper sand (Standard loss: one qian, three li)...]

The data was simple, clear, and irrefutable.

Su Ming looked at this "data wall," the corner of his mouth lifting in a barely perceptible curve.

He turned his head just in time to see Qingfeng and Mingyue running over again with food boxes, their faces puffed up with anger.

"Su Ming! We heard people badmouthing you again!"

Su Ming's face immediately shifted to a perfectly measured expression of grievance and helpless bitterness.

"Ah, let them be. We merely wish to do our part for the sect. It's a pity that gossip is so fearsome..."

He sighed softly. His demeanor instantly ignited righteous indignation in the two youngsters.

Outside the courtyard, the sharp-faced Manager Liu happened to be passing by. Seeing the glaring data on the wall, the smile on his face froze instantly, turning extremely grim.

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

Chapter 174: The Taste of Process

[1,517 words]

After seeing Qingfeng and Mingyue off, Su Ming did not immediately immerse himself in contemplating how to deal with the Vessel Hall steward. Instead, he returned to his own meditation room. No matter how turbulent the outside storm, it could not shake the most fundamental plan in his heart—improving himself.

He carefully retrieved from his storage pouch the jade slip that recorded the "Detailed Explanation of Basic Runes."

The composite formation silently activated, completely isolating this tiny space from the outside world.

"Master, today's incident at the Vessel Hall, though temporarily handled, also exposed that our Repair Hall is like duckweed without roots, extremely easy for others to control and manipulate," Su Ming's divine sense sank into the Xuantian ring, his voice carrying a trace of gravity.

"Correct." Lin Yu's phantom sat cross-legged inside the ring, his expression uncharacteristically serious. "Therefore, we must seize every moment to solidify our own foundation even more! External process management is the 'technique'; your own formation cultivation is the 'Way'! Only by unifying the Way and the technique can one truly stand undefeated."

Su Ming deeply agreed. He expelled distracting thoughts and immersed his divine sense into the jade slip. This time, his goal was no longer to learn new runes, but to conduct a deeper-level organization and induction of the fifteen basic runes he had already mastered.

He did not try to memorize those complex variations. Instead, he learned the method Lin Yu taught him, seeking the "principle" behind each rune.

"Gathering" is gravitational force, "Control" is repulsive force, "Solidify" is structural stability, "Flow" is energy conduction...

In his Consciousness Sea, it was as if a massive mind map had appeared. The fifteen basic runes were no longer isolated points, but were connected through various logical relationships into a complex yet orderly network.

One hour later, Su Ming slowly opened his eyes and let out a long, turbid breath. He felt his divine sense was more condensed than before, and his understanding of formations had stepped onto an entirely new level.

...

The next day.

The appearance of the "Data Wall" was like a public slap in the face to those whispering rumors.

Many passing External Affairs Hall disciples stopped in their tracks, pointing and commenting at the data on the wall, their faces full of astonishment.

"Goodness, the loss ratio is even lower than the standard value? How was that achieved?"

"It seems the rumors are untrue. Their ledgers are crystal clear."

Su Ming looked at this "Data Wall," the corner of his mouth curling into a barely perceptible arc.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul thought materialized into a phantom wearing gold-rimmed glasses, currently pointing and gesturing at a virtual whiteboard.

"See that, disciple! This is called 'Transparent Open Management and Public Opinion Guidance'! Let all doubts crumble before absolutely real data! Not only must we do the work beautifully, we must also keep up with the publicity work!"

Just then, a steward wearing Vessel Hall attire strode briskly into the courtyard. This person had a square face and a serious demeanor, exactly the one who had been responsible for receiving the "Sharp Metal Formation Plate" last time.

He was not here to cause trouble, but to deliver a new batch of formation vessels awaiting repair.

After the handover was complete, he did not leave immediately. Instead, he walked up to that "Data Wall" and examined it carefully for a long while.

He suddenly turned around and, facing the busy crowd within the courtyard, said in a clear, loud voice, "Everyone, I am Zhou Tong, steward of the Vessel Hall. That batch of Sharp Metal Formation Plates from last time, after being personally inspected by the elder, were found to have superior repair quality, smooth spiritual energy operation, and extremely precise material usage with not a single bit of waste! The elder specifically ordered me to deliver another batch of tasks and to convey his thanks to everyone at the Repair Hall on his behalf!"

His voice was resonant and full of vigor, clearly reaching the ears of everyone inside and outside the courtyard.

These words were like a resounding slap, fiercely striking the faces of those rumor-mongers!

Outside the courtyard, the sharp-faced, monkey-cheeked Manager Liu happened to be passing by. Looking at the glaring data on the wall and hearing the Vessel Hall steward's undisguised praise, the smile on his face instantly froze, becoming extremely gloomy.

He flicked his sleeve and left, his eyes flashing with venomous light.

"Fine! What a Su Ming! Since I can't beat you with open schemes, then don't blame me... for using underhanded tricks!"

...

The next day, the Repair Hall received a "special task" personally issued and signed by Manager Liu.

When a massive flatbed cart pulled by four "Iron-Armored Savage Oxen" rumbled to a stop at the gate of Bing Character Seven Courtyard, everyone was stunned.

On the cart was piled a small mountain.

A "garbage mountain" haphazardly stacked with various discarded parts, damaged magical artifacts, burnt formation flags, and wreckage mixed with mud and medicinal dregs!

The pungent smell of metal corrosion, dissipated spiritual energy, and rotting vegetation mixed together was enough to make people gag.

Manager Liu stood beside the cart, unfolding a task archive with a false smile.

"Junior Brother Su, hard work. This is the 'mixed waste material' cleared out from various places within the sect, backlogged for a long time. The Hall of Meritorious Deeds is pressing hard, and Elder Ma values your Repair Hall's 'sorting' ability, so he entrusted this important task to you."

He pointed at the small mountain, his eyes full of schadenfreude.

"The requirement isn't high. Within three days, just sort and categorize all materials within it that still have recycling value, and register them in a ledger. If you miss the Hall of Meritorious Deeds' deadline, Elder Ma's face... won't look too good."

Old Li and Zhang Asheng's faces instantly turned pale.

What kind of task was this? This was clearly deliberate obstruction!

Such a massive, such a mixed pile of waste material—forget three days, even thirty days might not be enough to sort through it!

This was simply an impossible task!

Yet, not a trace of panic could be seen on Su Ming's face.

He just calmly looked at that "garbage mountain." Far from despair, his eyes instead shone with an almost fervent light.

He stepped forward slowly, reached into the pile of waste material, pinched a small pinch of scorched black earth mixed with metal shavings, and brought it lightly to his nose to sniff.

"Master," he whispered in his heart, "I smell it... the scent of process."

Lin Yu's soul thought inside the Xuantian ring laughed so hard he nearly tumbled over.

"Good disciple! You have promise! Crisis, crisis—within danger lies opportunity! Isn't this the perfect opportunity for us to perfect the 'waste material recycling and reuse' process? A teaching case delivered right to our doorstep!"

Su Ming straightened up, facing the livid Manager Liu with a slight, gentle, and harmless smile.

"Please rest assured, Manager Liu."

"The Repair Hall guarantees completion of the task."

Manager Liu looked at his composed and unruffled appearance, feeling an inexplicable twinge of unease in his heart. He snorted coldly, flicked his sleeve, and left.

After he left, the atmosphere within the courtyard became extremely tense.

"Senior Brother Su, this... what do we do?" Qian Xiaofan asked.

Su Ming turned around, his gaze sweeping over the anxious faces of everyone, his voice steady and forceful.

"Why panic?"

"It's just a pile of unsorted materials."

He walked to the courtyard wall, picked up a new wooden board, and began writing with vigorous, flowing strokes.

"Today, we establish a new process—Waste Material Preprocessing and Classification!"

He gathered everyone together, pointed at the small mountain, his eyes flashing with intelligent light.

"Old Li, you have the most experience. You are responsible for preliminary identification, sorting out the four major categories: metal, jade, wood, and fabric."

"Zhang Asheng, your hands are the steadiest. You are responsible for fine cleaning, removing impurities from the sorted materials."

"Old Wang, your mind is the most meticulous. You are responsible for recording and cross-referencing, compiling the 'Waste Material Classification Atlas,' recording the form, properties, and residual value of every single type of material for me!"

"Zhao Tiezhu, Qian Xiaofan, you two are strong. You are responsible for moving and rough washing!"

He paused, looking at everyone, enunciating each word clearly.

"Remember, we are not picking through garbage."

"We are establishing an unprecedented standard for the sect!"

These words were like a shot of adrenaline, instantly dispelling the fear in everyone's hearts.

That's right! We are not picking through garbage!

Under Senior Brother Su's leadership, they had created one miracle after another. This time, they definitely could too!

The team's sense of belonging and combat effectiveness, faced with this unprecedented obstruction, was thoroughly ignited and unprecedentedly united!

A race against time thus began.

Relying on efficient assembly line operation and increasingly seamless cooperation, this seemingly impossible "garbage mountain" was rapidly decomposed and categorized at a visible speed.

Two and a half days later.

When Manager Liu arrived right on schedule, ready to watch the Repair Hall become a laughingstock, what he saw in Bing Character Seven Courtyard were hundreds of neatly stacked, meticulously categorized material boxes, and a thick, illustrated "Waste Material Classification Atlas."

The Repair Hall had not only completed this thorny task on time, but even half a day early.

When the news spread, the entire External Affairs Hall was in an uproar.

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

Chapter 175: The Impossible Task

[1,388 words]

The Repair Hall perfectly resolved the "Trash Mountain" provocation half a day early. This resounding slap not only struck Manager Liu's face but also stirred up monstrous waves in the not-so-small pond that was the External Affairs Hall.

For a time, Bing Character Seven Courtyard became bustling with visitors.

Disciples from various peaks coming to collect repaired formation plates were no longer giving cold stares; their words carried a hint more respect. Even those stewards who usually looked down on everyone would cast a few extra glances toward the courtyard when passing by, their expressions complex.

That massive "data wall" became a unique sight within the External Affairs Hall.

The daily updated material consumption data turned all rumors about "wanton waste" into a complete joke.

However, Su Ming felt not the slightest bit of relaxation in his heart.

He knew deeply: a tree that stands out from the forest will be destroyed by the wind. The Repair Hall, this newly sprouted sapling, might appear glorious on the surface, but its roots were not yet firm. Any minor disturbance could uproot it entirely.

"Master, after Manager Liu, I'm afraid even bigger troubles await." In the dead of night, Su Ming communicated with Lin Yu in the meditation room.

"What's there to fear?" Lin Yu's soul thought materialized into a leisurely phantom, reclining on a beach chair and basking in non-existent sunlight. "If soldiers come, we'll deploy generals to block them; if water comes, we'll use earth to dam it. Right now, we are Elder Ma's 'pilot project.' As long as our 'data' is impressive enough and the 'value' we create is substantial, he will be our strongest backer. What you need to do now is make the 'standardization' signboard even more prominent, dazzling everyone's eyes!"

Su Ming nodded. Just as he was about to continue studying rune combinations, a vast, ancient aura suddenly emanated from the direction of the Cloud Hidden Sect's main peak. It spread out like ripples, sweeping across the thirty-six main peaks and seventy-two secondary peaks, ultimately covering the entire sect.

The aura was majestic yet carried no killing intent, as if an ancient slumbering deity had slowly opened its eyes.

"The Minor Heavenly Cycle Martial Display is about to begin." Lin Yu's phantom sat up straight, his expression turning somewhat more serious. "This sect-wide competition held once every ten years is a grand event to test the strength of the younger generation. It's also an important stage for each peak to flex their muscles and compete for resource allocation over the next decade."

Su Ming, the accountant, felt a stir in his heart, immediately grasping the implications.

"The Martial Display... will require massive formation support."

"Exactly!" Lin Yu snapped his fingers. "Especially Formation Peak. They are responsible for the main formation of the core martial arena and have to provide auxiliary formations for over a hundred sub-arenas. During this period, they'll be so busy they won't even touch the ground, and that's when... things are most likely to go wrong."

Before his words faded, a series of hurried footsteps sounded outside Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

A young man dressed in the attire of a Formation Peak core disciple, surrounded by a group of External Affairs Hall stewards, strode in with large steps. His face was cold and stern, his aura deep and steady—he was unmistakably a late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivator.

His gaze was sharp as lightning, directly locking onto Su Ming in the courtyard. His voice was cold and rigid, devoid of any emotion.

"You are Su Ming?"

Su Ming took a step forward, neither subservient nor arrogant, and cupped his hands in greeting. "Disciple Su Ming greets Senior Brother."

The young cultivator waved a hand from his storage pouch. In an instant, a small mountain piled high with formation plates materialized on the empty ground in the courtyard—over five hundred pieces! The various formation plates had dim spiritual light, their surfaces covered in cracks and scorch marks, emitting the burnt smell of spiritual energy overload and the cold metallic scent.

He lifted his chin slightly and tossed a jade slip to Su Ming.

"The sect's Minor Heavenly Cycle Martial Display is imminent. All of Formation Peak is busy with the core grand formation. We have no time to repair these five hundred backup martial display formation plates."

He paused, a barely noticeable cold smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. His gaze swept over Manager Liu, who had rushed over upon hearing the news, his face full of schadenfreude.

"Formation Peak Elder Luo has heard that the newly established Repair Hall in the External Affairs Hall has exceptional efficiency. He specifically assigns this task to you."

"Deadline: five days. Five hundred pieces. They must all be completely repaired and delivered to the Martial Display Hall. If there is any delay, or if flaws appear in the formations during the martial display after repair, you will be held solely responsible!"

As these words fell, the entire courtyard fell into deathly silence.

Old Wang's abacus clattered to the ground. His eyes, accustomed to dealing with numbers, were filled with despair for the first time.

Five days, five hundred pieces!

That averaged one hundred repairs per day! Moreover, these formation plates were of various complex types, their damage far exceeding that of the previous illumination formations or Quiet Heart Formations. Among them were structurally complex combat formations like "Sharp Metal Formations" and "Thick Earth Formations"!

This was no longer a provocation. This was a blatant, inescapable death sentence!

"This... Senior Brother, this... this is impossible!" Old Li's lips trembled as he mustered the courage to speak.

The young cultivator snorted coldly. The pressure of his late-stage Foundation Establishment cultivation spread out like a tidal wave, pressing down on Old Li and the others, making their faces turn pale and their breathing hitch.

"Nothing is impossible! This is Elder Luo's command!"

Manager Liu chose this moment to step forward, a hypocritical smile on his face. He patted Su Ming's shoulder, but his tone was brimming with glee.

"Junior Brother Su, this is a tremendous opportunity! What a figure Elder Luo is—one of the presiding elders of Formation Peak! For him to take notice of your Repair Hall is your great fortune! Work hard, don't disappoint the good intentions of Elder Luo and Elder Ma!"

While his mouth spoke words of encouragement, his eyes looked at Su Ming as if he were a prisoner already sentenced to death.

The atmosphere in the courtyard froze to an icy point. The two youths, Zhao Tiezhu and Qian Xiaofan, were so frightened their faces were devoid of color, their bodies swaying unsteadily.

Yet Su Ming, at the center of the storm, remained exceptionally calm.

His gaze did not fall on the arrogant young cultivator, nor did it acknowledge the gloating Manager Liu. He simply looked quietly at the small mountain of formation plates before him, as if it were not a death warrant but a treasure mountain waiting to be mined.

Within his Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu's soul thought was already excitedly bouncing up and down, almost materializing into a physical form.

"Disciple, accept it! You must accept it! Let these locals witness the terror of 'industrialization'!"

"Five hundred pieces think they can crush us? He's delivering 'achievements' and 'prestige' to us on a silver platter! If we win this battle, your Repair Hall will be firmly established within the Cloud Hidden Sect!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, suppressing the turbulent thoughts in his heart.

He raised his head, meeting the gazes of everyone present—filled with shock, pity, or schadenfreude. To the young cultivator, he slowly and clearly said:

"The Repair Hall accepts this task."

As these words left his mouth, the entire assembly was stunned.

A flicker of surprise passed through the young cultivator's eyes, quickly replaced by deeper disdain. The smile on Manager Liu's face grew even brighter.

"Good! You have guts!" The young cultivator sneered. "I'll be waiting in five days to collect the goods, or... to collect you!"

With that, he flicked his sleeve and left.

Manager Liu offered a few more hypocritical words of encouragement, then left thoroughly satisfied, bringing along the crowd of stewards who had come to watch the spectacle. They were going back to brew a pot of good tea and slowly, leisurely watch how the Repair Hall would be crushed under this impossible task, eventually becoming the laughingstock of the entire External Affairs Hall.

As the crowd dispersed, Bing Character Seven Courtyard was left with only a deathly silence.

"It's over... it's all over now..." Old Wang slumped to the ground, utterly despondent.

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Chapter 176: Operating at the Limit

[1,103 words]

Su Ming did not speak. He walked over to the pile of formation plates, casually picked one up, and examined it carefully.

Then, he turned around to face his five subordinates who had already fallen into despair. His voice was not loud, but it struck each person's heart like a heavy hammer.

"Everyone, stand up!"

The five of them shuddered, instinctively straightening their backs.

"They think this is impossible because, in their eyes, repairing formation plates relies on a single formation master's momentary spark of inspiration."

Su Ming's gaze swept over each of their faces in turn.

"But we are different."

"We have processes! We have standards! We have every single one of you!"

He walked to the courtyard wall, picked up the largest wooden board, and began writing swiftly on it with a piece of charcoal.

There were no impassioned slogans, only cold, rational task assignments.

"Old Wang! Your task is not repair! It's 'sorting'! Within two hours, I want you to sort these five hundred formation plates into at least twenty batches based on model and degree of damage! Each batch must have a clear label!"

"Old Li, Zhao Tiezhu! You two are responsible for 'disassembly'! Don't worry about repair. Just use the fastest speed to disassemble all the formation plates into their most basic components according to the standard procedure, and sort them into the parts bins!"

"Zhang Asheng, Qian Xiaofan! You two are responsible for 'cleaning and preliminary inspection'! All disassembled components must be thoroughly cleaned, and core parts must be marked for preliminary damage assessment!"

"And I," Su Ming put down the charcoal, his eyes shining with an unprecedented light, "am responsible for repairing all the core runes!"

"Remember! We are not fighting alone. We are a machine! A precision machine born specifically for repair!"

These words exploded in the minds of the five like a thunderclap.

They looked at Su Ming, then at the brand new, logically clear "wartime workflow chart" on the wall. The despair and fear in their hearts were unexpectedly replaced by a strange, burning fighting spirit.

Yes! They were not alone! They were a single unit!

"Let's begin!"

With Su Ming's command, this small courtyard instantly transformed from an abyss of despair into a high-speed battlefield!

The crisp sounds of metal tapping, the friction of parts, and the faint hum of spiritual energy probing intertwined into a tense and stirring symphony.

Time flew by at their fingertips.

The sun set, the moon rose. The moon set, the sun rose.

For a full day and night, no one closed their eyes except for taking turns to meditate and recover for half an hour.

When the dawn of the second day illuminated the tired yet shining faces in the courtyard, an astonishing miracle had occurred.

One hundred and three repaired formation plates, brimming with spiritual light, were neatly stacked in the delivery area.

In the pending repair area, all the formation plates had already been disassembled, cleaned, and sorted, like troops awaiting inspection, silently waiting for the order for the "final assault."

However, just as Su Ming picked up the core module of the one hundred and fourth formation plate, ready to repair it, his brow furrowed slightly.

His divine sense probed inward. While repairing a "Ning" character rune, he keenly detected an extremely subtle, fleeting sense of spiritual energy stagnation. The sensation vanished in an instant; if he weren't intimately familiar with the spiritual energy he controlled, he would never have noticed it.

He did not make a sound, calmly picking up another core module of the same model.

The same location, the same sense of stagnation.

"Master," he whispered in his heart, "this batch of 'Kun Yuan Shield Formation' plates has a problem."

Lin Yu's soul sense instantly became alert, carefully perceiving the spiritual energy feedback Su Ming transmitted.

"It's not a trap... more like... a flaw that existed from the factory."

"Disciple, this is interesting. What Elder Luo threw at us isn't just a hot potato; it seems... there's another secret hidden inside."

From outside the courtyard came the sly, mocking voice of Manager Liu.

"Well, well, Junior Brother Su, esteemed colleagues, you've worked hard! How are the results on the first day? Let me have a look..."

When he walked into the courtyard and saw the neatly stacked pile of over a hundred finished formation plates, the smile on his face instantly froze.

The smile on Manager Liu's face cracked like cheap pottery struck by a winter wind, piece by piece, until it completely solidified.

The schadenfreude in his eyes was replaced by an emotion called "absurdity." He stared fixedly at the one hundred and three formation plates stacked as neatly as an honor guard, each one emitting a full and stable spiritual light that stung his eyes.

How was this possible?

This was absolutely impossible!

Those weren't some simple illumination formations; dozens of them were structurally complex "Sharp Metal Formations" and "Thick Earth Formations"! Even a Foundation Establishment stage formation master, working without sleep or rest for a day and night, could never possibly repair more than twenty!

Inside the courtyard, the air was filled with a faint, fresh scent of spiritual ink and the smell of cooled metal. Although Old Wang and the others were utterly exhausted, their spirits were unusually high, their chests puffed out. Watching Manager Liu's face turn from green to white, then from white to purple, an unprecedented sense of satisfaction surged in their hearts.

Manager Liu's Adam's apple bobbed. He wanted to say a few perfunctory words, but found his throat felt stuffed with dry hay; not a single word could come out. In the end, he just turned and left in a flustered, almost panicked manner, his sleeves flung back. His retreating back looked as if a demon were chasing him.

"Master, he's gone," Su Ming said calmly in his heart.

"Mhm, ran off with his tail between his legs," Lin Yu's soul sense crossed his legs inside the Xuantian ring. "But disciple, don't celebrate too soon. At our current speed, one hundred pieces a day, five days exactly makes five hundred pieces. That's just 'barely completing' the task, still far from a 'stunning debut.' Moreover, even if you're made of iron, you can't sustain repairing core runes at high intensity for five consecutive days."

Lin Yu had pinpointed the core issue.

The biggest bottleneck in the entire process was Su Ming himself.

Su Ming looked at the mountain of formation plates awaiting repair piled in the courtyard, his brow slightly furrowed. He knew his master was right; his divine sense and spiritual energy were already showing signs of depletion.

"So," Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of amusement, like a mentor about to reveal a magic trick, "it's time for you to witness what true 'process management' is. Disciple, forget that you're a 'craftsman.' From now on, you are a 'chief engineer!'"

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[1,162 words]

Lin Yu instantly understood what Lin Yu meant.

Without the slightest hesitation, he immediately gathered the five core members together.

"Everyone, our speed is still not fast enough."

As these words fell, the faint pride that had just ignited in Old Wang and the others' hearts tightened once more.

Chief Engineer Su Ming ignored their astonishment. Instead, he walked over to the mountain-like pile of formation plates and began his earth-shattering "modular decomposition."

"All formation plates are to be divided into three major categories based on function!" His voice was steady and clear, carrying a power that seemed to calm the mind.

"Sharp Metal Formations, Rock-Splitting Formations, and the like, are categorized as the 'Attack Module,' to be handled by you, Old Li!"

"Kun Yuan Shield Formations, Unmoving Rock Formations, and the like, are categorized as the 'Defense Module.' Zhang Asheng, this is yours!"

"Quiet Heart Formations, Swift Travel Formations, and the like, are categorized as the 'Support Module.' Zhao Tiezhu, Qian Xiaofan, you two will collaborate on this!"

"Old Wang!" Su Ming's gaze finally settled on Old Wang. "You are no longer just quality inspection. You are the 'Chief Dispatcher' and 'Quality Control Director'! You are responsible for the precise allocation of all materials and the flow records of all semi-finished products!"

He forcibly dismantled the five hundred formation plates into three massive "project groups." But this was merely the beginning.

"Just the five of us is not enough." Su Ming turned and once again took out the Mystic Iron token representing Elder Ma's authority from his robes. "I need more manpower."

Half an hour later, twenty menial disciples from the External Affairs Hall—the most honest, most hardworking, yet perennially marginalized due to poor aptitude—stood anxiously at the gate of Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

They stared in horror at the small mountain of formation plates inside the courtyard, thinking they had been called to be scapegoats.

However, Su Ming's next words were something they would remember for the rest of their lives.

"From now on, each of you only needs to learn one single action."

Su Ming picked up a disassembled component and walked up to one of the menial disciples.

"Your task is to take this soft cloth soaked in Dust-Clearing Liquid and wipe this component three times, from left to right. Remember, it must be exactly three times, and only from left to right."

He then walked to another person and handed him the thickest rune brush.

"Your task is to retrace this most basic auxiliary line of the 'Guide' character rune with a fresh layer of spiritual ink. You don't need to infuse spiritual energy, just trace it evenly."

...

Twenty people, twenty of the simplest, most mechanical, even downright monotonous steps.

This was the "assembly line" that Lin Yu had spoken of, powerful enough to overturn this world's mode of production!

But a new problem arose immediately. Tracing runes, even just the simplest auxiliary lines, required a certain foundational skill. A single tremor of the hand could render it scrap.

"Master, their hands are unsteady." Su Ming immediately identified the problem.

"Heh, I anticipated that long ago," Lin Yu laughed. "Disciple, do you remember the ink line and mortise-and-tenon joints used by mortal carpenters? Come, let this teacher teach you how to design a few 'universal fixtures'."

Under Lin Yu's guidance, Chief Engineer Su Ming soon designed several adjustable rune-engraving bases using a few pieces of extremely hard ironwood.

These bases were unremarkable in appearance, yet incorporated various slots, limit gauges, and auxiliary guide rails based on the simplest physical principles. An inexperienced menial disciple only needed to firmly fit the component into the base and then slide the rune brush along the guide rail to trace a standard rune with minimal error.

These crude "universal fixtures," like a stroke of genius, instantly bridged the widest skill gap between operators!

Night fell once more.

Yet, Bing Character Seven Courtyard was as bright as day.

Dozens of repaired illumination formation plates were hung high, illuminating the entire courtyard in stark detail.

A scene that would make any formation master's scalp tingle with shock was unfolding here.

Twenty-five people worked silently and intently at their respective stations.

The courtyard was bustling with people, yet busy without chaos, eerily quiet. Not a single word of conversation, not a single clamor, only the rhythmic "clicks" of tools meeting components, the "swishing" sound of rune brushes gliding over formation plates, and the sound of Old Wang, as the "Quality Control Director," writing furiously in the record book.

The air was filled with the grassy fragrance of Dust-Clearing Liquid, the mellow scent of spiritual ink, and the faintly heated smell of metal components being polished, creating a unique atmosphere belonging solely to "creation."

Each person was like a precise gear, pushed by an invisible hand, meshing into this terrifying machine named "efficiency," operating at high speed.

Beside the "Data Wall" on the wall, a new wooden board was hung, displaying today's Work Log.

The numbers on it were no longer increasing slowly, but were leaping frantically at an alarming rate.

[Chen Hour (7-9 AM), 120th item repair completed.]

[Si Hour (9-11 AM), 175th item repair completed.]

[Wu Hour (11 AM-1 PM), 250th item repair completed!]

...

Old Wang held a verification checklist in one hand and a charcoal pencil in the other, his wrist moving so fast it almost left an afterimage. Behind him, in a wooden box, the white pebbles representing qualified products had already piled up high.

The qualification rate remained that heart-stopping—one hundred percent!

Su Ming stood in the center of the courtyard like a general strategizing from his tent. He no longer repaired items himself, but constantly patrolled between the three "production lines," solving various minor problems that arose in the process.

When his gaze swept over the "Defense Module" production line, that familiar, extremely subtle feeling of spiritual energy stagnation once again emanated from a batch of semi-finished "Kun Yuan Shield Formations."

He picked up one of the core modules without changing his expression and probed it carefully with his divine sense.

This time, he finally pinpointed the source of that anomaly.

Deep within a node where the "Kun" character rune and the "Solidify" character rune intersected, there existed an incredibly tiny distortion in a spiritual energy circuit finer than a hundredth of a hair's breadth.

"Master, I found it," Su Ming's heart sank.

"Well done!" Lin Yu's tone also turned grave. "This flaw is usually invisible. But under intense spiritual energy activation, this distortion point will become a bottleneck. At best, it will cause the formation to fail. At worst... it will trigger a chain reaction of spiritual energy collapse!"

A layer of cold sweat instantly broke out on Su Ming's back.

On the field of the Minor Heavenly Cycle Martial Display, if a defensive formation plate suddenly collapsed...

He dared not think further.

This was a scheme more insidious and more malicious than Sun Quan's trap!

Because this blame would ultimately land perfectly on the head of their "Formation Lines Repair Hall"!

At that very moment, a cold voice, devoid of any warning, rang out from outside the courtyard gate, like a frigid winter wind instantly scattering all the fiery enthusiasm within the courtyard.

"It seems your progress is... much faster than I imagined."

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Chapter 178: Pillar of the Sect

[1,288 words]

Everyone turned back in shock, only to see that Foundation Establishment late-stage cultivator from Formation Peak — who had appeared at the gate without anyone noticing. He stood with his hands behind his back, his gaze deep as he looked at the courtyard's already sizable "finished pile," and his face betrayed no hint of pleasure or anger.

The Formation Peak disciple stood like a cold statue with his hands clasped behind him, his deep eyes inspecting the courtyard's bustling scene and that now sizable "finished pile." His expression gave away nothing, but the invisible pressure in the air made the whole courtyard seem several degrees colder.

Old Wang and the others subconsciously stopped their work, nervously watching the unexpected guest.

Su Ming's thoughts raced, but his expression remained calm. He stepped forward and bowed slightly, "Senior Brother, coming at this hour, may I ask what guidance you bring?"

“Guidance is too grand a word.” The disciple’s voice was cold and hard. “I’m just here to see if you’re wasting your time.”

His gaze swept over the mountain of finished formation plates. A flash of disbelief passed through his eyes before being replaced by a deeper scrutiny. He said nothing further; he turned and melted into the night as if he had never been there.

“Master, what is he...?”

“Knocking the mountain to frighten the tiger, also testing for substance.” Lin Yu’s soul-echo hummed inside the Xuantian ring. “Behind him is Elder Luo. He probably can’t sit still. Disciple, ignore him, follow our plan. Now, immediately, contact your big backer!”

Su Ming inhaled deeply and nodded.

He knew the design defect within that batch of Kun Yuan Shield Formations was no longer a mere technical issue. It was a political trap capable of dragging the entire Repair Hall into a ruin beyond all redemption. This level of power play was far beyond what a single menial disciple could handle.

He walked to a corner of the courtyard and took out the Mystic Iron token Elder Ma had bestowed on him.

The token, besides representing authority, also functioned as a simple communication talisman.

He sank a thread of divine sense into it, adding no embellishment and making no subjective assumptions — he simply condensed the discovered design flaw of the Kun Yuan Shield Formation and the possible chain collapse that could be triggered under high-intensity spiritual energy, into the most objective, precise wording, then transmitted the information.

After finishing, he returned to his workstation as if nothing had happened and continued optimizing and coordinating the process.

About the time an incense stick burned, the token trembled slightly. An aged yet calm consciousness echoed directly into his consciousness sea, brief but weighty as a mountain.

“Proceed with the repairs. I will handle the aftermath,” it said.

A great stone fell from Su Ming’s heart. He bowed silently toward the main peak.

“See that, disciple,” Lin Yu’s soul-echo manifested as a little apparition wearing a safety helmet and waving a small flag. “That’s professionalism! Shift the blame professionally!”

Kick the ball to those who can fix it, and we just do our job perfectly so there's nothing to complain about!"

With Elder Ma's reassurance, Su Ming had no more hesitation.

He immediately added a special "structural reinforcement" step to the Kun Yuan Shield Formation repair process. He did not alter the original core circuitry — that would be tantamount to scrapping and rebuilding, time did not allow it and it would leave them vulnerable.

Instead, under Lin Yu's guidance, he cleverly added a miniature "spiritual energy diversion" rune cluster beside the distorted node.

This rune cluster functioned like a floodgate: normally inconspicuous, but if the formation plate encountered an overload of spiritual energy, it would instantly activate and channel the surplus energy to the plate's peripheral reinforcing ribs to dissipate.

This stroke of genius not only perfectly avoided the original design flaw, it even slightly increased the plate's maximum load capacity!

Over the next three days, Bing Character Seven Courtyard was transformed into a war machine born for efficiency.

The air mixed with the scent of spiritual ink, the singed metallic smell, the herbal aroma of Dust-Clearing Liquid, and the sweat of dozens of people, producing an almost manic atmosphere. Everyone's eyes were bloodshot, yet their movements grew increasingly mechanical and precise. Fatigue had long been replaced by something called conviction.

They wanted to prove to those who looked down on them that even menial disciples could create miracles!

On the fifth day, at dusk.

As the last sliver of sunset sank behind the western hills and reddened the clouds, all the noise in Bing Character Seven Courtyard fell silent.

In the open courtyard, five hundred formation plates were sorted and arranged into ten neat square formations. Each plate had undergone final cleaning and calibration; their bodies reflected a warm, full spiritual light in the sunset glow. They stood there quietly like an army awaiting inspection, silently testifying to five days and nights of madness and miracles.

Not a single one missing, not a single flaw.

Outside the gate, disciples and stewards from various peaks had already gathered, among them Manager Liu's sullen face.

"The time has come, deliver them."

A cold voice rose. The Formation Peak disciple from the previous day stepped into the courtyard again, flanked by a group of cultivators in the same attire. This time walking ahead of him was a gaunt-faced, middle-aged cultivator in a dark formation robe, his eyes fierce.

When he appeared the surrounding air tightened. The barely perceptible Golden Core realm pressure made every onlooker take an involuntary half-step back.

He was one of the Formation Peak's steward elders, Elder Luo.

Elder Luo did not look at Su Ming, nor at the five hundred finished plates. His eyes, hawk-like, were fixed on the courtyard wall's huge "data wall." When he saw the daily-updated, shockingly large repair numbers, his knife-like lips pressed into an extremely dangerous line.

"Inspect." He forced the single word out through his teeth.

The Formation Peak disciples behind him immediately stepped forward and produced their precise instruments. Some devices could emit bright light to probe the internal structure of the plates; others could simulate spiritual energy shocks of varying intensity to test stability.

"Clink..."

The crisp sounds of instruments and the hum of spiritual energy flow became the courtyard's only noises.

Everyone's hearts rose into their throats.

One — passed.

Ten — passed.

Fifty — still flawless!

The inspecting Formation Peak disciples began to sweat fine beads on their foreheads. The more detailed their checks, the greater their astonishment. The repair craftsmanship of these plates did not seem human! Every rune was stamped as if printed, and the spiritual circuits flowed with unbelievable smoothness!

Seconds ticked by and Elder Luo's face turned steadily darker. He clenched the fist hidden in his sleeve until his knuckles turned slightly white.

"Senior Brother Luo, why make such a fuss?"

Just as the atmosphere tightened to a breaking point, an aged, peaceful voice drifted from the back of the crowd.

Everyone turned to see Elder Ma, who had somehow arrived silently. He still wore that faded gray Daoist robe, his figure thin and his breath restrained, appearing like a neighborly old man come to watch.

He walked slowly to the mountain of plates and, without even using divine sense, casually picked up the top one and rubbed the warm spiritual light on its surface with his fingertip. A hint of satisfaction showed in his cloudy eyes.

Elder Luo stared at him and said coldly, "Senior Brother Ma, martial affairs concern the sect's reputation, and cannot tolerate the tiniest mistake!"

"Of course." Elder Ma nodded and gently placed the plate back.

He turned and did not look at Elder Luo's iron-faced expression. Instead, he directed his gaze to the silent Su Ming standing to the side, and to the exhausted yet resolute Repair Hall members behind him.

He spoke slowly, his voice small but clear enough to reach everyone present.

"This hall can be called the pillar of the sect."

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Chapter 179: Quasi-Outer Sect Disciple

[1,398 words]

The entire Bing Character Seven Courtyard, and even all the disciples watching outside the courtyard, instantly fell into a deathly silence so profound you could hear a pin drop.

Elder Luo's body jolted violently, his livid face instantly flushing to the color of liver. He wanted to refute, but found any words seemed utterly feeble and pale in the face of those four characters.

"Sect Pillar" — such an evaluation had never before been used on a hall comprised of menial disciples!

Elder Ma was using his own prestige to vouch for the Repair Hall, for Su Ming!

However, that wasn't the end.

Elder Ma's gaze once again fell upon Su Ming, his tone flat, yet dropping another thunderbolt.

"Su Ming, your application for promotion to outer sect disciple, this old man has already submitted it to the sect."

The crowd completely erupted!

"What? Outer sect disciple? But his Dao foundation is damaged..."

"Personally recommended by Elder Ma! This... this Su Ming is practically ascending to heaven in a single step!"

Manager Liu stood within the crowd, feeling darkness cloud his vision, nearly collapsing on the spot.

He had schemed with all his might, only to end up becoming the stepping stone for someone else's meteoric rise! This mouthful of reversed blood choked in his chest, making him almost faint.

Su Ming's heart was also roiling with towering waves, but he forcibly suppressed it, offering Elder Ma a deep bow from the waist.

"This disciple... thanks the elder for his nurturing!"

"Don't thank me." Elder Ma waved his hand, his gaze sweeping over Elder Luo whose face was now ashen with extreme displeasure, his words carrying a pointed meaning. "This is something your Repair Hall earned, brick by brick and tile by tile, through your own capability."

With that, he turned, hands clasped behind his back, and leisurely walked away, leaving behind a retreating figure and a ground littered with shattered astonishment.

...

Half an hour later, External Affairs Hall, meditation room.

The scent of sandalwood was more mellow than usual, seemingly capable of soothing the restlessness in one's heart.

Elder Ma personally poured a cup of tea for Su Ming. The steaming tea mist blurred the wrinkles on his face, yet made those turbid eyes appear even more profound. The teacup was made of coarse pottery, warm to the touch, carrying a sense of rustic simplicity.

"Today's matter, you handled it very well." Elder Ma took a sip of tea, speaking slowly.

"All thanks to the elder's protection." Su Ming replied respectfully.

"Protection?" Elder Ma shook his head, a trace of self-mockery appearing at the corner of his mouth. "This old man's meager cultivation, how can it be called protection? It was merely leveraging influence, shielding you from some of the open attacks."

He set down the teacup, his fingertips lightly rubbing the warm rim, as if organizing his words.

"Your application for promotion to outer sect disciple, I have already submitted it. However, don't celebrate too soon."

Su Ming's heart tightened, listening attentively.

"The sect has its rules. Your 'damaged Dao foundation' assessment is recorded in the registers; this is an ironclad fact. This matter requires re-examination by the Stewards Hall and the Transmission Pavilion; it's definitely not a task that can be completed in a day. Especially for a special case like yours, they will investigate more meticulously, drag it out longer." Elder Ma's voice was calm, yet revealed a cruel reality. "Short, half a year. Long... a year, is also possible."

Su Ming's heart sank, yet he didn't show the slightest disappointment.

Elder Ma observed his expression, a flash of approval appearing in his turbid eyes. Not arrogant in success, not disheartened by failure, this child's temperament far surpassed his peers.

"However, since you have already rendered such meritorious service to the sect, this old man cannot let your heart grow cold." Elder Ma retrieved a new identity token from his robes and handed it over.

The token was entirely made of green jade, cool to the touch. Besides the characters "Su Ming", there was also a small imprint of the character for "outer".

"From today onward, you are a 'Quasi-Outer Sect Disciple'." Elder Ma explained. "Although your status is not yet formally entered into the sect's jade register, the monthly stipend an outer sect disciple should receive, the permissions in the Hall of Meritorious Deeds, you can all enjoy in advance. Consider it a bit of personal compensation and motivation from this old man."

"This disciple... kowtows in thanks to the elder!" Su Ming received the token with both hands, performing another grand bow.

He weighed its significance clearly. This wasn't merely an improvement in treatment; it was a clear political stance — Su Ming was someone Elder Ma was protecting!

"Go on." Elder Ma waved his hand, closing his eyes once more. "The Repair Hall's path has only just begun. Remember, walking steadily is the only way to walk far."

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu laughed heartily. "Hahaha! Good! Excellent! Disciple, your master knew it! That Elder Ma of yours is a man who understands!"

Su Ming was taken aback by this sudden reaction. "Master, the slow approval process, isn't that a bad thing?"

"A bad thing? This is a heaven-sent opportunity!" Lin Yu's phantom image excitedly rubbed his hands together, pacing back and forth within the ring. "Disciple, you're still too young! What is official status? Status is a shackle, a spotlight! Once you become a formal outer sect disciple, you'll have to accept the sect's mandatory missions, get involved in the overt and covert struggles between the peaks, be watched by countless eyes! How could we then quietly amass wealth?"

Lin Yu's voice suddenly became earnest, filled with the flavor of "ancient wisdom".

"Disciple, you must remember, true strength is never written on an identity token. Slow approval is good! This threshold is both a test and, more importantly, our protective umbrella! This is a once-in-a-millennium development period!"

The "five-year plan" he had charted for Su Ming officially commenced at this moment.

"We must use this perfect window period to forge the Repair Hall into an iron fortress, impervious to needles and water! Not only must we monopolize the repair of the sect's low-grade formation vessels, we must thoroughly master every single link in the upstream and downstream chains!"

Hearing this, Su Ming felt his vision suddenly broaden.

Yes, Master was right. He had only seen the glory brought by official status before, overlooking the constraints and risks behind it.

"This disciple understands." Su Ming's gaze once again became clear and resolute.

...

Returning to Bing Character Seven Courtyard, it was already late at night.

The courtyard was brightly lit. Old Wang, Old Li, and the others had not dispersed, but were gathered together excitedly, discussing the triumphant vindication of the day.

Seeing Su Ming return, they immediately surrounded him, their eyes filled with fervent admiration.

Su Ming placated everyone with a few words, announced a day off tomorrow, and advanced a portion of contribution points as a reward, only then dispersing the excited crowd.

Returning to the eastern side room, activating the compound formation, he finally let out a long sigh of relief.

...

The next morning, when the first rays of dawn pierced through the thin mist of the back mountain, spilling onto the bluestone slabs of Bing Character Seven Courtyard, the usual busyness was absent, replaced by a tranquility more reassuring than spiritual energy.

Su Ming had not slept all night.

He hadn't cultivated, nor rehashed the heart-stopping events of yesterday. He simply sat quietly on the stone stool in the courtyard, listening to the wind whistling past the eaves, feeling the slight coolness transmitted from the "Quasi-Outer Sect Disciple" token against his chest.

"Quasi-Outer Sect Disciple" — a single character's difference, a world apart.

He knew this wasn't merely a symbol of status; it was Elder Ma's resounding declaration, an invisible barrier temporarily isolating him from the open and covert attacks of the past.

"Disciple, what are you thinking about? Reliving the feeling of being the center of attention yesterday?" Within the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul consciousness materialized a phantom image, leisurely reclining on a beach chair, his tone full of teasing.

"Stop thinking about it. The highlight moment experience card has expired. From today onward, you need to be even more 'low-key' than before. A tree that stands out in the forest will be toppled by the wind. We are now that little sapling just sprouting, watched by all the gardeners and pests alike. We need to quickly sink our roots deeper."

Su Ming's heart stirred, deeply agreeing.

He was about to respond when the sound of familiar, cheerful footsteps approached from afar.

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Chapter 180: Celebration

[1,277 words]

Steward Wang Defa of the Accounting Office in the External Affairs Hall, his plump face beaming like a full-blown chrysanthemum, hurried into the courtyard carrying a delicate wooden box. Two menial disciples followed behind him, carrying a brand-new stone table and stools.

Instantly, the rich, elegant fragrance of top-grade "Cloud Mist Spirit Tea" wafted through the air.

"Su Ming, look at this place of yours. You're always so busy with affairs, you don't even have a proper spot to receive guests. Please, you must accept this small token of my respect!" Wang Defa instructed the menial disciples to set up the stone table while personally opening the wooden box, revealing a set of high-quality purple clay tea ware and a sealed jar of spirit tea preserved with a jade talisman.

"Steward Wang is too kind," Su Ming stood up, his expression calm, neither overly familiar nor distant.

"Ah, still calling me Steward Wang? You're putting me to shame!" Wang Defa hurriedly waved his hands, the wrinkles on his face deepening further, "From now on, if you have any instructions for the Accounting Office, just say the word! Junior Brother, you're a man destined for great things. We'd be more than satisfied just to cheer you on from the sidelines!"

His posture was extremely humble, but Su Ming knew he hadn't come just to offer congratulations.

Sure enough, after dismissing the menial disciples, Wang Defa personally poured a cup of tea for Su Ming. The tea liquor was a clear jade green, misted with spiritual energy. Lowering his voice, he leaned close to Su Ming and spoke mysteriously, "Senior Brother Su, everyone in the Accounting Office is overjoyed about your promotion. However... there's something I'm not sure if I should mention."

Su Ming picked up the teacup, feeling its warm smoothness. He gently blew away the floating leaves, his movements unhurried, "Senior Brother Wang, please speak freely."

Seeing his steady attitude, Wang Defa felt even more awe. Gritting his teeth, he said, "Your application, Elder Ma personally submitted it. But according to the rules, it must go through a joint review by the Stewards' Hall and the Transmission Pavilion. Over at the Stewards' Hall, with Elder Ma's influence, there shouldn't be much of a problem. But the Transmission Pavilion side... you know, the elders of the Transmission Pavilion value bone structure and lineage the most, and their ways are the most rigid. Your evaluation of 'damaged Dao foundation'... I'm afraid it might... get held up by Elder Luo."

As he spoke, his eyes were fixed on Su Ming's reaction, his fingers unconsciously twisting the hem of his robe.

Elder Luo?

Su Ming's mind stirred, but his expression remained unchanged. The one from Formation Peak is also surnamed Luo. Coincidence, or...

"Which Elder Luo?"

"One of the three presiding elders of the Transmission Pavilion, Luo Tianzheng, Elder Luo," Wang Defa's voice dropped even lower, "This Elder Luo is famously at odds with Elder Luo from Formation Peak, but the two are surprisingly aligned when it comes to 'upholding the sect's orthodoxy.' He is most averse to the phrase 'making an exception.'"

This information was worth its weight in gold.

It clearly pointed out the first foreseeable stumbling block on Su Ming's meteoric rise.

"Thank you for the heads-up, Senior Brother Wang," Su Ming put down the teacup, his tone a touch more sincere.

"Not at all, not at all!" Seeing his objective achieved, the smile on Wang Defa's face grew even more genuine, "If you ever need any information in the future, Senior Brother, just give the order! These eyes of mine aren't good for much else, but I do have a bit of insight when it comes to reading people and situations."

Satisfied, he chatted for a few more moments about trivial matters before rising to take his leave. As he turned to go, a discarded talisman paper used to wrap tea leaves "accidentally" slipped from his sleeve, though he himself seemed completely unaware.

Su Ming bent down to pick it up, about to throw it away, when he noticed two characters written in very faint strokes on the inside of the paper—"Luo Tianzheng."

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul consciousness stroked his non-existent chin, marveling, "Well, well, this fatty's got skills! Gift-giving, currying favor, presenting a letter of allegiance—a seamless combo move. This connection is worth keeping. Might hook a big fish later."

After seeing Wang Defa off, tranquility returned to the courtyard.

The looks Old Wang, Old Li, and the others gave Su Ming were no longer just of admiration, but now held an added firmness about the future.

If even someone like Steward Wang came to actively show goodwill, what worries could there be about the future prosperity of the Repair Hall?

However, this peace did not last long.

"Su Ming! Su Ming! We're here to congratulate you!"

Two crisp, lively voices drew nearer. Qingfeng and Mingyue, the two little ones, were actually staggering in together, carrying a wine jar half a person tall between them. The jar was even pasted with several restriction talismans, clearly indicating its extraordinary origin.

With a *thud*, the wine jar was heavily placed in the courtyard, causing the ground to tremble slightly.

"This is a hundred-year-old 'Bamboo Green Brew' we 'borrowed' from our Master's wine cellar!" Qingfeng puffed out his little chest, looking immensely proud, as if he'd accomplished a monumental feat, "To celebrate your promotion!"

As soon as the seal on the jar was opened, a clear, mellow, and sweet aroma, rich with bamboo fragrance and spiritual energy, instantly filled the entire courtyard. Just one whiff made one feel refreshed and invigorated, with every limb and joint feeling wonderfully comfortable.

Old Li and the others couldn't help but take deep breaths, feeling the fatigue of the past few days dissipate considerably.

Mingyue, meanwhile, curiously looked around the orderly workshop. The flowcharts on the walls she couldn't understand, and the neatly stacked parts on the shelves, all seemed novel to her.

She ran to Su Ming's side, tilting her delicate, jade-like little face up, and asked curiously, "Su Ming, Su Ming, now that you're an outer sect disciple, you don't have to stay here fixing these broken plates anymore, right?"

As soon as these words were spoken, the previously cheerful atmosphere in the courtyard subtly froze.

The smiles on the faces of Old Wang, Old Li, Zhang Asheng, and the others involuntarily faded a little. Deep in their eyes, a trace of hard-to-conceal worry and anxiety surfaced.

Yes, Senior Brother Su was now a quasi-outer sect disciple, one of the 'elite' who received a monthly stipend from the sect. Could this small Repair Hall, this group of menial disciples with bleak futures, still keep him?

Su Ming did not answer immediately.

He smiled gently. Instead of touching the priceless spirit wine, he turned and fetched a pot of spirit fruit juice from inside, pouring a full cup for Mingyue and handing it to her.

He crouched down, bringing his gaze level with Mingyue's, his voice soft yet firm.

"Senior Sister, rest assured, this place is my foundation."

His gaze slowly swept over every tense and expectant face in the courtyard.

"I will not leave. In the future, this place will be even bigger. There will be more people, repairing more things."

"Together."

These words, like a warm current, instantly flowed into the hearts of Old Wang, Old Li, Zhang Asheng, and the twenty newly joined menial disciples.

The anxiety and unease in their eyes were instantly replaced by a searing emotion called 'belonging.' Unconsciously, their eyes grew a little moist.

"Approved!" Qingfeng, standing to the side, broke the warm scene with a deliberately mature wave of his hand, "Su Ming is right! From now on, this is our turf! If anyone dares to cause trouble, just drop my name... and my Master's name!"

Finally, a burst of genuine, relaxed laughter erupted in the courtyard.

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[1,252 words]

The next day.

Su Ming gathered Old Wang, Old Li, and Zhang Asheng together for a closed-door, short meeting.

"Starting today, your tasks are changing," Su Ming got straight to the point.

He handed each of them a new, more detailed procedure manual.

"Old Wang, your 'Quality Control Manual' needs an upgrade. It's not just about recording errors anymore; you must analyze the root causes of those errors and propose at least three improvement solutions. I need you to become the 'brain' of the Repair Hall."

"Old Li, your 'Repair Manual' is also changing. I don't just need you to repair things well; I need you to summarize the most beginner-friendly repair techniques and compile a set of 'Quick-Start Training Materials for Newcomers.' I need you to become the 'instructor' of the Repair Hall."

"Asheng, your 'Material Processing Manual' is the same. I want you to quantify everything: the properties of each material, the pros and cons of substitutes, the differences after processing with different methods, and create charts and diagrams. I need you to become the 'database' of the Repair Hall."

He looked at the three men who were too shocked to speak, his voice steady and powerful.

"What I need are not three skilled craftsmen. I need three 'teachers' capable of training hundreds, even thousands, of qualified craftsmen!"

"The future of our Repair Hall does not rest on me alone. It depends on whether we can replicate and pass down this set of standards!"

These words completely ignited the fire within the three men. Looking at the manuals in their hands, they no longer saw just a job, but a weighty, groundbreaking undertaking!

Just as Su Ming was about to elaborate further on his expansion plans, a clear, slightly arrogant voice came from outside the courtyard gate.

"Excuse me, is this place the Formation Lines Repair Hall, reputed to be the 'Cornerstone of the Sect'?"

Su Ming looked up and saw a young man dressed in the attire of a personal disciple of Heavenly Sword Peak standing at the entrance, a simple, ancient-looking longsword strapped to his back. He was tall and straight, with sharp eyebrows and bright eyes, exuding an aura as sharp as an unsheathed blade.

In his hand, he held a damaged scabbard. Carved onto the scabbard were some strange runes Su Ming had never seen before, emitting a faint, bloody glow.

Su Ming's gaze lingered on the scabbard for a moment, especially on those peculiar runes glowing with faint bloody light. It was a structure he had never encountered in the

"Basic Overview of Formations," filled with a primitive and violent aura, breathing as if it were alive.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul sense instantly went on high alert: "Disciple, don't touch it! This thing isn't right. It looks like some kind of evil, blood-sacrifice-refined rune. It's not in our knowledge base. Getting involved with this would be major trouble!"

Su Ming understood internally, but his expression remained the same, calm and businesslike.

He cupped his hands towards the sharp-browed, bright-eyed young man, neither subservient nor arrogant.

"Senior Brother, my sincere apologies," his voice was gentle yet distant. "This hall is newly established, with limited manpower and skills. Currently, we only undertake the repair and maintenance of basic formation lines within the sect. The runes on your scabbard are exquisitely structured, far beyond our current capabilities. To avoid delaying your important matters, I must ask you to seek more skilled assistance elsewhere."

His words were flawless, clearly stating his position while giving the other party ample face.

The young man clearly hadn't expected such a straightforward refusal. He frowned, his sharp aura intensifying. "You really can't repair it?"

"Really cannot repair it," Su Ming's reply held no hesitation. His gaze was clear, meeting the other's scrutiny with utter frankness.

The young man looked at him deeply, as if searching for any trace of pretense on his face, but found only complete sincerity. He was decisive, putting the scabbard away, turning, and leaving.

"Farewell."

Su Ming bowed slightly once more towards the young man's retreating back.

Chief Engineer Su Ming turned around and said calmly, "Clean up the workstations. Prepare to record yesterday's data."

A small disturbance was thus lightly and effortlessly quelled by him.

The wind of "standardization" had finally blown out of the small valley of the External Affairs Hall.

Three days later, an unexpected visitor knocked on the gate of Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

The visitor was a manager from the Spiritual Plant Garden, surnamed Sun. He was a middle-aged cultivator with a kindly face and skin darkened from years of tending medicinal herbs.

The moment he entered the courtyard, he was stunned by the massive "data wall" and the orderly assembly line operation within.

"I have long heard of the Repair Hall's great reputation. Seeing it today, it truly lives up to its name!" Manager Sun's attitude was extremely polite.

After exchanging pleasantries, he stated his purpose.

The Spiritual Plant Garden was responsible for cultivating over forty percent of the sect's spiritual herbs used for alchemy. The two most important foundational formations there—the "Spirit Gathering Array" that maintained spiritual energy concentration and the "Cloud-Rain Array" that regulated temperature and humidity—operated year-round and suffered significant wear and tear.

"...The senior brothers from Formation Peak are either busy researching profound formations or look down on such small tasks. Getting them to take action once not only costs a high price but also requires waiting in line for several months," Manager Sun said with a pained expression. "I heard that the Repair Hall is not only remarkably efficient but also exceptionally skilled at optimizing processes. So, I boldly came to ask if Master Su... oh, I mean, Senior Brother Su, could lead a team to our place to take a look and see if you could help optimize things a bit."

This was like a pillow arriving just as one was feeling sleepy.

Su Ming immediately agreed. Early the next morning, he brought Old Wang and Zhang Asheng, following Manager Sun to the Spiritual Plant Garden on the mountainside of Pill Cauldron Peak.

The moment they stepped inside, an almost tangible, rich aura of vegetation and spiritual energy washed over them, mixed with the moist scent of earth and the unique fragrances of various medicinal herbs, refreshing to the heart and mind. Looking around, orderly plots of medicinal fields stretched out like a green chessboard, faintly visible amidst the swirling mist and clouds.

However, the moment Su Ming stepped into the medicinal fields, his brow furrowed tightly.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul sense was completely exploding.

"My heavens! Disciple! Look at what those people are doing!"

Following his master's guidance, Su Ming looked and saw a herb farmer operating the "Cloud-Rain Array." The man closed his eyes, stretched out a hand, as if sensing the faint, elusive moisture in the air. A moment later, he suddenly opened his eyes and channeled a stream of spiritual energy into the formation plate. Instantly, a shower of spiritual rain poured down with a "splash," drenching several sun-loving "Blazing Sunflowers," causing them to droop their heads immediately.

On another side, a disciple was carefully adjusting the position of spirit stones at the formation core of a "Spirit Gathering Array." His basis for adjustment was actually the "physical sensation" of the changes in surrounding spiritual energy concentration felt by his Dantian's Qihai!

Countless "unscientific," primitive operations made Lin Yu's eye twitch.

"Spiritual energy irrigation based on *feel*? Temperature and humidity relying entirely on experience? This... this efficiency is simply too touching! This isn't farming; it's artistic creation! Disciple, I cannot stand this! Today, we must give these old farmers of the cultivation world a good lesson on what 'scientific farming' really means!"

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Chapter 182: This isn't an array.

[1,199 words]

Su Ming took out a blank bamboo scroll and began the work he was most skilled at—data recording.

He didn't comment on the other party's operations; he simply followed behind Manager Sun, silently taking notes.

"Manager Sun, may I ask how many times per day this Dew-Gathering Grass medicinal field is irrigated? And what is the volume of water each time?"

"Uh... this... it's all based on Junior Brother Wang's feel. He's the best herbal farmer in our garden."

"What about the spiritual energy concentration? Is there a standard?"

"This... Junior Nephew Li is the most sensitive to spiritual energy. If he says it's enough, then it's enough."

...

After an hour of investigation, the bamboo scroll in Su Ming's hand was filled with various primitive records like "based on feel," "go by experience," and "close enough is fine."

He closed the scroll and offered a polite yet confident smile to Manager Sun, who was looking at him with anticipation.

"Manager Sun, it's not a big problem. In three days, I'll provide you with a completely new solution."

...

Back at the Repair Hall, Su Ming immediately gathered all core members and held a "Spiritual Plant Garden Project Kickoff Meeting."

Under the remote guidance of Lin Yu, the "Chief Engineer," a set of revolutionary "fool-proof" operational procedures and matching simple formation plates were quickly designed.

However, while conceptualizing the core circuit of this new formation plate, Lin Yu's soul consciousness fell into a rare silence.

His divine sense involuntarily "looked" once again toward the ancient, incomplete, and finely cracked Spirit Gathering Array on the inner wall of the Xuantian ring.

Usually, he only felt this array was complex and obscure, far beyond his comprehension. He could only barely maintain its minimal operation to nourish himself.

Today, he discovered that the most basic energy guidance circuit, the underlying structure, of the crude and shoddy "Spirit Gathering Array" in the Spiritual Plant Garden actually bore a faint resemblance to this ancient array inside the Xuantian ring!

This... how could this be?! The array inside the Xuantian ring is far more exquisite and complex than I can comprehend.

How could something as common as the Spiritual Plant Garden's... This discovery was too shocking. Lin Yu immediately suppressed this thought firmly and did not reveal a word of it to Su Ming.

...

The new formation plate Su Ming made eliminated all complex fine-tuning functions.

In their place were several clearly marked dials.

One dial controlled lighting, with three settings engraved: "Shady," "Sunny," and "Intense."

One dial controlled humidity, divided into five levels from "Dry" to "Wet."

One dial controlled spiritual energy concentration, also corresponding to five levels of spiritual energy output.

What the herbal farmers needed to do was no longer to operate based on feel, but to consult a thick manual provided by Su Ming titled "Standardized Cultivation Handbook for Common Spiritual Herbs." They could look up the corresponding spiritual herb like using a dictionary, then simply set the pointers of the three formation plate dials to the scale required in the manual.

Simple, crude, but effective!

When Su Ming handed over this "Su Standard" set and three sample formation plates to Manager Sun, the other's expression was one of bewilderment.

However, under Su Ming's promise of "no extra charge, refund if ineffective," the Spiritual Plant Garden, half-believing and half-doubting, allocated an experimental plot.

...

One month later.

The news spread as if it had wings, traveling from Pill Cauldron Peak throughout the entire outer sect of the Cloud Hidden Sect.

In the experimental plot at the Spiritual Plant Garden that adopted the "Su Standard," the yield and quality of the spiritual herbs, compared to the adjacent control plot meticulously tended by senior herbal farmers, had increased steadily and precisely by thirty percent!

This figure completely shook the entire Spiritual Plant Garden and also startled Formation Peak.

Formation Peak, as the core of the sect's array research, had always taken pride in designing complex, exquisite, and powerful arrays. They could not tolerate that a menial hall under the External Affairs Hall had achieved such astonishing results in their area of expertise using an almost "insultingly" simple method.

A talented inner disciple from Formation Peak was ordered to come and investigate.

This person was named Luo Feng. At only twenty years old, he had already reached the mid-stage Core Formation cultivation and possessed extraordinary talent in the path of formations. He had always been arrogant and looked down on others.

When he arrived at the Spiritual Plant Garden and saw the formation plates that the herbal farmers were praising endlessly, he almost laughed in anger.

He picked up a formation plate. The feel in his hand was rough and simple. Probing with his divine sense, the internal rune structure was simple to a "shocking" degree, devoid of any technical elegance.

The energy circuits were straight and direct, like the simplest shack built by mortal craftsmen, lacking even a trace of the spiritual insight and ingenuity expected of a formation master.

"This... what is this thing? It's practically a disgrace to the world of formations!" Luo Feng's voice was filled with contempt.

Manager Sun, standing nearby, hurriedly put on a flattering smile. "Senior Brother Luo, this item... its effectiveness is indeed good."

"Effectiveness?" Luo Feng sneered coldly. He walked to the edge of the experimental plot and looked at the Dew-Gathering Grass that was clearly more robust and glowing with stronger spiritual light than elsewhere. The mockery on his face gradually solidified.

Impossible...

This doesn't make sense!

How could this crudely made "toy" achieve such precise control effects?

His formation mastery, his pride, the heritage he took such pride in—at this moment, they seemed to face an unprecedented challenge. Luo Feng stood on the ridge, looking at those simple formation plates and the thriving spiritual grass. For the first time, a look of confusion and bewilderment appeared on his handsome face.

...

In Bing Character Seven Courtyard, the afternoon sun was just right, casting a warm golden hue over everything in the yard.

The air didn't have the expected spiritual energy fluctuations. Instead, there was only a faint fragrance of spiritual ink mixed with the slightly heated smell of metal parts being polished.

The yard was bustling with people. Over twenty menial disciples performed their duties quietly and efficiently. Only the rhythmic "clack" sounds of tools and parts colliding echoed in the courtyard.

On the wall, next to the huge "Data Wall," a new wooden board had been added—"Spiritual Plant Garden Spirit Gathering Array Optimization Project Progress."

This place didn't resemble any cave dwelling on Formation Peak. There was no heaven-and-earth-swallowing spiritual energy, no mysterious and profound array diagrams, and certainly no formation masters lost in crazed contemplation.

This place was like... an accounting office.

Luo Feng's frown, which had formed the moment he stepped into the courtyard gate, never relaxed.

His inner disciple attire stood out starkly against the simple, bustling atmosphere here.

His eyes immediately found Su Ming in the center of the courtyard.

Su Ming wasn't inscribing runes or deducing arrays. He was holding a bamboo scroll, discussing something in a low voice with Old Wang. That focused expression was exactly like a shopkeeper checking accounts in the mortal world.

This scene completely ignited the fire in Luo Feng's heart.

He strode forward. The sharp aura belonging to a talented formation master made the surrounding menial disciples' breaths catch, and they all stopped their work.

"Are you Su Ming?" Luo Feng's voice was clear and bright, yet carried undisguised arrogance.

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Chapter 183: The Inquiry Stone

[1,294 words]

Su Ming raised his head, looking calmly at this uninvited guest and cupped his hands in greeting. "Disciple Su Ming greets Senior Brother."

"I observe your formations—they are rigid and mechanical, utterly devoid of the soul of the Path of Formations!" Luo Feng got straight to the point, pointing without any courtesy at a newly repaired formation plate on the shelf, his eyes filled with disdain. "They are nothing but cold, pieced-together objects! Do you dare compete with me in a contest of true formation techniques?"

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul consciousness instantly sat bolt upright. "Well, well, a challenger has come to our door! Disciple, steady yourself, follow the script we rehearsed! Remember, we are civil servants, not jianghu wanderers!"

Hearing this, Su Ming's face revealed a perfectly measured expression of difficulty and apology. "Senior Brother Luo jests. The Repair Hall's official duties are heavy. Every day, formation vessels sent from various peaks urgently await repair. I truly have no time for contests. Moreover, the responsibility of this hall lies in 'repair,' not 'creation.' It is fundamentally different from the Path of Formations that Senior Brother meticulously studies."

His words both elevated the other party and clearly drew a boundary, causing Luo Feng's punch to land on cotton.

Luo Feng clearly hadn't anticipated this kind of response. He was stunned for a moment, then snorted coldly. "Clever words and an ingratiating manner! If you don't dare, you simply don't dare!"

Su Ming merely smiled faintly, said nothing more, turned around, and continued checking data with Old Wang, effectively leaving Luo Feng standing to the side.

This silent dismissal was more aggravating to Luo Feng than any rebuttal could have been. A wave of stifled anger rose in his chest. He clenched his fists, his knuckles turning slightly white from the force, but in the end, he could only flick his sleeve and leave.

However, the next day, he came again.

The third day, the fourth day... He was like a stubborn child, appearing punctually in Bing Character Seven Courtyard every afternoon. He didn't speak, just stood there with his arms crossed, watching everything on the assembly line with a scrutinizing gaze.

Finally, on the fifth day, he couldn't hold back any longer.

That day, he brought a formation plate he had personally refined.

The formation plate was crafted entirely from "Star Pattern Secret Silver." Runes flowed across its surface, and spiritual light was contained within. It was like a perfect work of art, exuding a lively charm with every breath.

"Su Ming!" He slammed the formation plate heavily onto the stone table with a dull *thud*. "You spend your days here, surrounded by this scrap metal and broken iron. Do you know what 'formation sense' is? What 'spiritual nature' is?"

Pointing at his own formation plate, his eyes shone with a fanatical light. "Formations are bridges to communicate with heaven and earth! Every rune should have its own life! Look at my 'Flowing Cloud Formation.' Its core 'Wind' character rune was something I attained through sudden enlightenment after observing the sea of clouds for three months! Its momentum is lively and graceful, ever-changing! *This* is the Path of Formations!"

Everyone in the courtyard was drawn to that exquisite formation plate. Even Old Wang couldn't help but let out a gasp of admiration.

Chief Engineer Su Ming, however, didn't even lift an eyelid. Under Lin Yu's "remote guidance," he took a completely ordinary "Illumination Formation Plate" produced by the Repair Hall from a shelf and placed it next to Luo Feng's artwork.

Then, he took out a new bamboo scroll.

"Senior Brother Luo," his voice was as calm as if he were reading a dull report. "Your 'Flowing Cloud Formation' is beautiful, indeed. But this disciple ventures to ask, I would like to discuss a few questions with Senior Brother."

Pointing at Luo Feng's formation plate, he posed the first question. "This formation plate requires half a standard spirit stone to activate once. Its core function is 'acceleration.' However, observing the flow of its spiritual light, at least thirty percent of its spiritual energy is dissipated on useless light and shadow changes and cloud mist special effects. May I ask, what is this formation's 'spiritual energy utilization efficiency'?"

The smug expression on Luo Feng's face instantly froze.

Spiritual energy... utilization efficiency? What was this thing?

Su Ming didn't wait for his answer. Pointing at the expensive "Star Pattern Secret Silver" material, he posed the second question. "What is the value of this material? If the formation plate's core is damaged, what level of cultivation would a formation master need to repair it? How many days would it take? What is the material cost? Calculated comprehensively, what is this formation plate's 'full lifecycle maintenance cost'?"

Full lifecycle... maintenance cost? Luo Feng's mind was already starting to buzz.

Finally, Su Ming picked up the ugly "Illumination Formation Plate" in his hand, his tone still flat. "My formation plate has a simple structure and no aesthetic beauty whatsoever. But its spiritual energy utilization efficiency is ninety-nine percent. Its repair can be completed within the time it takes an incense stick to burn by any menial post disciple

who has thoroughly read the *Repair Manual*. The cost? Repairing five of them costs about one spirit stone."

He paused, then delivered the final sentence, which landed like a heavy hammer squarely on Luo Feng's pride.

"Most importantly, my Repair Hall can repair one hundred of these formation plates in a single day. May I ask, Senior Brother Luo, how many pieces of your artwork can you produce in a month? In a large-scale sect war requiring mass equipment, which do you think is more important—the replicability brought by standardization?"

"You..."

Luo Feng was struck dizzy by this series of "principles" he had never heard before, yet couldn't refute. His face flushed red, then turned pale, then turned green.

He looked at Su Ming, then looked at his own "artwork" that he was so proud of. Suddenly, he felt the flowing spiritual light was somewhat glaring.

He felt that the faith in the Path of Formations he had held for over a decade had been torn open by a brutal, cold logic at this moment.

After a long time, he suddenly slammed the table, grabbed his formation plate, his handsome face flushed with angry embarrassment.

"Heretical nonsense!"

"This is not formation technique!"

He almost roared these words, then turned around in disarray and fled from Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

.....

For several days after that, Luo Feng became a regular visitor to the Repair Hall.

He just no longer issued challenges. Instead, every day, he would find an unobtrusive corner, cross his arms, keep a cold face, and watch for most of the day.

He didn't say it out loud, but those eyes, brighter than stars, were secretly imprinting every single process of the Repair Hall into his mind.

This strange peace was broken on yet another afternoon.

"Su Ming! Su Ming! We're here again!"

Accompanied by two crisp, lively voices, Qingfeng and Mingyue scampered into the courtyard.

Today, they were carrying a food box containing freshly baked "Hundred Flower Cakes" from Pill Cauldron Peak, said to clear the mind and brighten the eyes.

The moment they entered the courtyard, their gazes simultaneously landed on Luo Feng in the corner.

"Eh? Senior Brother Luo Feng, you really are here again!" Mingyue blinked her big eyes, her tone familiar and carrying a touch of innocent charm. "Qingfeng and I made a bet, saying you'd definitely come to 'debate the Dao' with Su Ming again. Looks like I won!"

Qingfeng, meanwhile, crossed his arms and nodded like a little adult, saying to Su Ming, "Su Ming, Senior Brother Luo Feng is the person with the highest talent in the Path of Formations among the younger generation of our Cloud Hidden Sect! When he entered the sect back then, he made the 'Dao Inquiry Stone' at the mountain gate light up nine times in a row!"

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Chapter 184: Senior Brother, Do You Know the Standard?

[1,436 words]

Seeing the flicker of confusion in Su Ming's eyes, Qingfeng immediately added with a smug expression, "You didn't know, did you? That 'Dao Inquiry Stone' is a rare treasure for testing formation talent! An ordinary disciple who can make it light up three times is qualified to enter Formation Peak's inner sect. Five times, and they're a genius. Senior Brother Luo Feng's 'nine times' is unique in nearly a hundred years! Even Uncle Xuanheng was shocked!"

As soon as these words were spoken, the hands of Old Wang, Old Li, and the others in the courtyard, who had been diligently working with their heads down, all paused for a moment.

When they looked again at that solitary, proud figure in the corner, the awe in their eyes had already transformed into reverence.

Unique in a hundred years!

These words struck everyone's hearts like a heavy hammer.

Only now did they truly understand the terrifyingly prestigious status of this Senior Brother Luo who came daily to "find fault."

A Peak Master's personal disciple! The weight of these four words was enough to suffocate any outer sect disciple.

Su Ming understood in his heart. No wonder Luo Feng pursued perfection in formations with an almost obsessive perfectionism.

What he carried on his shoulders was not just his own pride, but the face of the entire Formation Peak.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul thought materialized into a phantom image, currently pointing at Luo Feng and commenting, "Good heavens, so he's a Crown Prince's faction member! Disciple, let me tell you, this kind of person is the hardest to deal with, but also the easiest. What they lack isn't resources, nor cultivation methods, but a unique skill that allows them to 'forge a new path and stand out' within their sect! Our set of 'dimensional reduction strikes' is practically tailor-made for him!"

Having his background exposed by Qingfeng and Mingyue, Luo Feng's face flashed with a barely perceptible trace of awkwardness, but he still maintained that cold, proud demeanor, merely letting out a soft "Hmm" from his nose as a response.

Su Ming deeply agreed with his master's analysis. He was currently focused on a "Quiet Heart Formation" formation plate in his hand.

The core of this formation plate required the composite superposition of the "Quiet" character rune and the "Tranquility" character rune. He had attempted it over a dozen times, but the spiritual energy at the convergence point always produced a slight, disharmonious disturbance, causing the formation's effectiveness to be greatly diminished.

His brows furrowed tightly, his divine sense sinking into it, repeatedly deducing the flow direction of the spiritual energy circuit, trying to find that one-in-ten-thousand error.

This subtle bottleneck, landing in the eyes of Luo Feng in the corner who had been observing him out of the corner of his eye, was as glaring as a bonfire in the night.

That kind of mistake, in his view, was appallingly crude.

He finally couldn't hold back.

Luo Feng's figure flickered, appearing instantly before Su Ming's desk like a wisp of breeze.

His slender finger pointed without ceremony at the formation plate in Su Ming's hand, his tone carrying a kind of precise and arrogant certainty that came from a great height.

"Here, at the 'Li' position's circuit, the spiritual energy should arc like a bird circling back, tracing a seven-part arc, not going straight back and forth. This is a fundamental principle stated in the third chapter of 'The Cloud Reef Formation Treatise.' You actually don't know this?"

What he casually cited was a secret transmission from the Formation Peak Master's lineage, something Su Ming had absolutely no access to.

The courtyard instantly fell silent, everyone's gaze focused on this scene.

Su Ming raised his head, his eyes showing no shame or annoyance at being corrected. Instead, a flash of keen insight shone within them.

Following Luo Feng's guidance, he channeled a wisp of spiritual energy into the spot. Sure enough, that sense of stagnation suddenly cleared, and the entire formation emitted a *hum*, radiating a flawless, harmonious, soft glow.

"Thank you for your guidance, Senior Brother," Su Ming thanked sincerely, then immediately shifted the topic, posing the question he truly cared about. "But this disciple is dull-witted. May I ask, Senior Brother, when you mentioned 'tracing a seven-part arc,' how is this 'seven parts' quantified? Is there a standard? Is it the ratio of the arc's curvature to its chord length, or the path length the spiritual energy travels per unit of time?"

"..."

Luo Feng was speechless for the first time.

His handsome face, always bearing an air of solitary pride and confidence, in this moment, displayed an extremely rare blankness mixed with bewilderment and displeasure.

He had been immersed in the path of formations since childhood, proficient in all the "answers" taught by his master. Yet he had never contemplated the "principles" behind these "answers." If the master said trace a seven-part arc, then it was seven parts. This was as natural and unquestionable as eating or drinking. What need was there for principles? What need was there for standards?

This feeling of being stumped was unfamiliar, making him extremely uncomfortable. Yet deep in his heart, a faint thread of curiosity was stirred, a sense of having touched upon a blind spot in his knowledge.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu was already rolling on the floor with laughter.

"It's happening! It's happening! Disciple, do you see? He is a walking mountain of gold, piled high with ten thousand years of Cloud Hidden Sect's formation inheritance! What we need to learn isn't the 'answer' he points out, but the vast 'knowledge system' that enables him to point out that answer! The first step is to make friends with him!"

Luo Feng ultimately just snorted coldly, offered no reply, and once again flicked his sleeves and left.

For the next several days, he still came daily to "clock in," but his attitude completely shifted from the previous provocation and scrutiny to silent observation.

He no longer fixated on Su Ming, but began observing the entire assembly line layout of the Repair Hall. He even secretly took out a recording stone at times, covertly recording the mechanical yet efficient movements of the menial disciples and those flowcharts on the walls that he couldn't comprehend.

Su Ming's divine sense was exceptionally sharp; he had long taken in all of this.

Far from stopping it, he instead gave a meaningful glance to Old Wang, who was checking the materials inventory list in the corner.

Old Wang understood perfectly. Carrying a stack of thick bamboo scrolls, he "accidentally" stumbled as he passed by the stone stool where Luo Feng often sat.

"Ouch!"

A stack of bamboo scrolls scattered across the ground. Among them, a not-very-thick booklet bound with wooden boards just happened to "fall out" under the stone stool. On the booklet's cover, written clearly, was: *"Illumination Formation Plate" Standard Operating Procedures (Third Edition)*.

Old Wang scrambled to pick up the other bamboo scrolls, repeatedly apologized, and hurried away, as if he hadn't noticed he'd dropped something at all.

Luo Feng's gaze was locked onto that booklet under the stone stool, his breathing even hitching slightly. He glanced around, seeing no one paying attention to him. His face struggled for a few breaths, but in the end, he couldn't resist that fatal temptation.

Pretending to adjust his robes, he silently slipped the booklet into his storage pouch.

For three consecutive days, Luo Feng did not return.

When he appeared again on the fourth day, dark circles under his eyes, his gaze filled with bloodshot threads as if he hadn't slept for days, he walked straight up to Su Ming, who was instructing a newcomer, and slapped the booklet onto the table with a *thwack*.

Pointing to a diagram in the booklet about "parallel optimization of spiritual energy circuits to improve energy efficiency," he asked in a tone as cold as possible, yet unable to completely hide a thread of urgency, "This part... how is it explained?"

Su Ming raised his head, looking at that appearance of someone dying of curiosity yet forcing themselves to remain aloof, and chuckled inwardly.

Calmly picking up the booklet, he patiently explained the series and parallel principles of the several basic runes involved, using the simplest, most straightforward numbers and logic.

Su Ming didn't debate "the Dao" with him, only spoke of "numbers" and "principles."

In these simple Q& A sessions, concepts like standardization, efficiency, reproducibility, cost control, yield rate... these cold, rational notions, like spring rain, silently eroded Luo Feng's inherent, "spiritual" and "aesthetic" concepts of formations.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu watched this scene, crossing his legs with satisfaction.

"Heh heh, that's the power of knowledge, moistening things silently like rain. By the time this kid realizes he's already starting to think with our logic, he won't be able to escape!"

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

Chapter 185: Another Path

[1,330 words]

On an afternoon in Bing Character Seven Courtyard, sunlight filtered through thin clouds and dappled the bluestone slabs.

Today Luo Feng did not stand in the corner; for once he sat on the stone bench opposite Su Ming.

He toyed with a formation rune that shimmered with flowing light, brow furrowed. Beneath his proud expression there was, for the first time, a faintly noticeable weariness and irritation.

"I spent a full half-year improving the fire-earth junction of this Five Elements Rotation Array," Luo Feng said, lightly tapping the rune with his fingertip. His tone still carried that ingrained reserve, yet it sounded like he was talking to himself. "I failed one hundred and thirty-seven times, detonated three test platforms, and only yesterday managed to raise the spiritual energy transfer efficiency by a mere sliver."

He stretched out a long finger and indicated an almost invisible distance, his eyes showing an almost obsessive fervor. "Although it's just that tiny fraction, it is a necessary step toward perfection. The beauty of array-craft lies in mastering the minutest precision."

Su Ming put down the ledger in his hands, glanced at the exquisitely crafted formation rune in Luo Feng's palm, then looked at the bluish-black shadow in the other's eyes.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul-mind gave an exaggerated sigh. The phantom he projected helplessly held his forehead. "Half a year? Improved by point-something percent? If this were in the Engineering Department back then, that project manager would already have been sacrificed to the heavens! Disciple, this is classic late-stage obsessive-compulsive—needs curing."

Su Ming kept a calm face and did not echo praise for that "craftsmanship." Instead, he picked up several broken spirit stone fragments from the nearby scrap pile and laid out a crude Five Elements orientation on the stone table.

"Senior Brother pursues the extreme, and I admire that," Su Ming said gently, yet with a cool, rational tone. "But from my point of view, if perfect fire-earth coupling is impossible, why insist on fighting over that sliver of precision?"

Luo Feng raised a brow and snorted coldly. "Five Elements interact; if they're not tightly matched, spiritual energy will surge and be wasted. That's common sense."

"Then why not bypass it?" Su Ming picked up a water-filled teacup and placed it between the fragments representing Fire and Earth. "Rather than chasing perfect point-to-point transfer, why not build a Five Elements balance pool here? Guide the fire-aligned spiritual energy into the pool first, use the redundant energy as a buffer to forcibly maintain dynamic balance, then let it flow steadily into the Earth position."

Luo Feng froze.

He looked at that incongruous teacup as if it were a beggar who had barged into the palace.

"Absurd!" Luo Feng shot to his feet. His sleeve knocked over the teacup and water splashed across the stone table. "This is a cheat! Opportunistic profiteering! Adding redundancy to an array only destroys the purity and aesthetics of the diagram! It's a rogue shortcut that betrays orthodox array-craft!"

His chest heaved violently; he was clearly angered by Su Ming's "vulgar" idea.

To him, arrays should be precise clocks, and Su Ming proposed stuffing cotton into the gears to muffle the noise.

"It's sacrilege against array-craft!"

Leaving that verdict behind, Luo Feng snatched up his rune and stomped away in fury.

Back at his aura-dense grotto on Formation Peak, however, Luo Feng could not calm his mind.

He sat cross-legged on a meditation mat, trying to continue deducing that perfect fire-earth junction, but the image of the water-filled teacup had taken root in his head and would not be shaken off.

"Balance pool... redundant energy... forced balance..."

These heretical phrases circled in his thoughts.

He tried to use his deep theoretical knowledge of arrays to refute the idea and prove it wrong. But after running the simulations again and again, he found with mounting alarm that this crude, blunt "brute-force" scheme—though ugly, bulky, and devoid of elegance—actually held up logically.

Worse, if done this way, the stability problem that had plagued him for half a year might be solved in three days.

"Impossible... absolutely impossible..." Luo Feng muttered, the spiritual light at his fingertips flickering with his agitation.

Three days later.

When Luo Feng, guided by some impulse, returned to Bing Character Seven Courtyard, the scene before him froze him solid.

In the center of the courtyard, Su Ming, Old Li, and Zhang Asheng were bustling around a huge, complex "composite array." This was a malfunctioning formation plate sent from the Outer Gate training grounds. Because its spiritual energy circuits were overly complex and it had suffered long neglect, its internal Five Elements were chaotic; Formation Peak had judged it "not worth repairing."

Luo Feng had expected Su Ming to give up, or to, like him, spend a huge amount of time sorting the tangled spiritual energy threads.

What he saw was entirely different.

Su Ming did not attempt to untie that deadlock.

He directed Old Li to forcefully embed three slots for low-grade spirit stones at three key nodes of the formation plate that looked redundant.

"Install buffer valves, sever the original direct circuits, switch to overflow-style power supply," Su Ming commanded clearly and decisively.

As the last spirit stone slid into place, the once-quivering, near-collapsing formation plate miraculously settled. The spiritual energy flow no longer moved like the original's smooth currents and was somewhat sluggish, but it... stabilized.

And it ran with surprising robustness.

Luo Feng stood in the shadow of the wall, staring dumbfounded at the "Data Wall" mounted there.

[Training Ground Composite Spirit Gathering Array Repair, Time Used: Two shichen.]

[Status: Stable operation.]

[Cost: Three low-grade spirit stones.]

If it had been him, a perfect repair of this plate would have taken at least three days, with uncountable expenditure of spirit and materials.

Two shichen... versus three days.

More than an order of magnitude difference in efficiency.

Luo Feng felt the edifice of perfectionism he had defended for years get smashed by that ugly "buffer valve." For the first time he wavered over whether "perfection" truly outweighed "efficiency."

"Senior Brother?" Su Ming noticed Luo Feng in the corner and looked surprised. "You arrived a bit late today."

Luo Feng inhaled deeply and stepped out from the shadows. His face still bore pride, but his eyes held an unprecedented complexity.

He approached the repaired formation plate and pointed at one rune. Instead of the usual scolding for "crudeness," he was silent for a moment, then said:

"Here you used the 'cut' technique to forcefully sever the line. It does halt the damage, but the returning spiritual surge will harm the array foundation."

He paused, turned his head away as if awkward with this mode of speech, and his voice sounded slightly stiff. "If you add a guiding 'lead' rune here to channel the returning force toward that... that ugly balance pool of yours, the effect will be better."

Su Ming's eyes brightened and he immediately took out a charcoal pencil to jot notes on a bamboo slip. "You mean to use the returning surge for a secondary cycle?"

"...Something like that." Luo Feng watched Su Ming's eager, questioning face and felt some of the internal resistance ease. He condensed a wisp of spiritual light at his fingertip and drew a graceful arc in the air. "This is called 'Returning Wind Dancing Willow.' It is a technique of using force to leverage force. Your so-called 'balance pool' is an inert object; to make it act, you must understand 'momentum.'"

He began to explain.

No longer speaking from a high pedestal of "this is how it must be," he patiently explained "why" the approach worked. He instinctively translated his abstruse, opaque "ways" into reasons Su Ming's pragmatic method could comprehend.

"Think of it like... carving a spillway from your pool to let off excess," Luo Feng found a metaphor he could tolerate.

Su Ming nodded repeatedly, the charcoal flying across the bamboo slip.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu watched this scene and let a meaning-laden smile tug at his lips.

"Tsk tsk, stubborn pride ruins a life. Disciple, see that? When an idealist begins to compromise with reality and then tries to use his theory to optimize reality, that's when he's most dangerous. This free senior technical consultant is completely hooked."

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

Chapter 186: The Tip of the Iceberg of Core Inheritance

[1,526 words]

Su Ming sat at his isolated workstation in the corner, his brow deeply furrowed.

The wolf hair brush in his hand hovered over a scrap of discarded parchment, its tip trembling slightly, unable to descend for a long time.

Drawn on the paper was a strange semi-circular structure, its lines twisted, resembling an unclosed vortex.

This was an ancient, incomplete formation—a variant of a "breath-concealing array"—that Su Ming had excavated from some damaged formation diagrams over the past few days.

Lin Yu had modified it somewhat by incorporating some node pathways from within the Xuantian ring.

To avoid drawing attention, Su Ming had deconstructed it into countless seemingly unrelated geometric shapes, conducting his deductions under the pretense of "researching anti-interference coatings for formation plates."

But he was stuck.

No matter how Lin Yu used topology from his previous life to explain it, the spiritual energy would always inexplicably dissipate along the circuit of this structure, like water flowing into a bucket with a leaky bottom.

"Wrong, completely wrong," Lin Yu's soul thought paced restlessly within Su Ming's mind. "In theory, the energy here should form a closed loop, but this damn spiritual energy fluid dynamics doesn't follow basic laws! There's a missing key 'valve' here, a structure that allows spiritual energy to 'want to leave but be unable to.'"

Su Ming expressionlessly set down the brush, his peripheral glance shifting to the other end of the courtyard.

Luo Feng stood with his back to him before the "Data Wall," holding a newly repaired "Spirit Gathering Plate," seemingly studying its spiritual energy diversion channels.

This Formation Peak genius had now essentially become an unofficial quality inspector for the Repair Hall.

A flicker passed through Su Ming's eyes as his fingers lightly rubbed the parchment.

"Master, mind if I borrow a bit of fire?"

"Borrow! You must borrow it! This walking encyclopedia delivered to our doorstep, not using it would be a waste!"

Su Ming stood up, picked up the spiritual tea beside him, and walked unhurriedly to stand behind Luo Feng.

"Senior Brother Luo," Su Ming's voice was gentle, carrying just the right amount of inquisitiveness, "Regarding the diversion channels of this 'Spirit Gathering Plate,' if deepened by three-tenths as you mentioned yesterday, the rate of spiritual energy gathering indeed increases, but the stability seems to have decreased slightly."

Luo Feng didn't even turn his head, snorting coldly. "That's because the engraving knives you use are of inferior material, unable to withstand the spiritual pressure. Switch to Red Copper knives, and this won't be an issue."

"I am enlightened," Su Ming nodded respectfully, then, as if suddenly remembering something, casually handed over the parchment with the incomplete vortex drawn on it. "By the way, while researching how to reduce the erosion of formation plates by external impurities, I happened to see this runic structure in a tattered ancient text. I am dull-witted and truly cannot discern its spiritual energy flow. I wonder if Senior Brother has seen it before?"

Luo Feng initially just gave it a careless glance, preparing to dismiss it with "such wild, unorthodox methods aren't even worth a look."

However, when his gaze fell upon that twisted semi-circle, his pupils abruptly constricted.

His body, originally lazily leaning against the wall, instantly straightened. He snatched the parchment, his fingertips even turning slightly white from excitement, his eyes erupting with a hunter's gleam upon spotting a rare, peerless bird.

"This... this is the 'Formless Pattern'?"

Luo Feng's voice was somewhat hoarse. He jerked his head up to stare at Su Ming, his tone urgent. "In which ancient text did you see this?"

"A 'Miscellaneous Records' used to prop up a wobbly table leg, long since moldy and illegible," Su Ming lied without changing his expression, his gaze clear and sincere. "Only this page with the incomplete diagram remains."

"A waste of a treasure! What an absolute waste!" Luo Feng cursed with heartfelt pain a couple of times, then his gaze glued itself to the parchment again. His fingers traced imaginary lines in the air as he muttered to himself, "No wonder... no wonder it looked familiar. This structure is clearly a variant of the ancient 'Concealment' character rune!"

He looked at Su Ming, the arrogance in his eyes replaced by a sense of superiority from sharing a secret.

As he spoke, a point of faint blue spiritual light suddenly ignited at Luo Feng's fingertip.

"Watch closely! The essence of this structure lies not in 'blocking,' but in 'devouring'!"

He swiftly sketched in the air. The spiritual light flowed like silk, not following the semi-circle Su Ming had drawn to close it, but instead folding inward abruptly at the gap, forming an extremely complex, three-dimensional loop akin to a Möbius strip.

As the final stroke was completed, that cluster of spiritual light did not erupt; instead, it collapsed inward bizarrely, instantly vanishing into the air—not dissipating, but remaining there, yet even divine sense could not perceive its existence!

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu instantly exploded.

"Holy shit! Holy shit! Quick! Disciple! Memorize it all! This is 3D modeling! The curvature of this loop, the folding angle of these spiritual energy nodes... This is the real stuff, beyond basic textbooks! It's a glimpse of the tip of the iceberg of Formation Peak's core heritage!"

Su Ming held his breath, his eyes fixed dead on that spot in the air, his Consciousness Sea frantically recording every movement Luo Feng had just made, every fluctuation frequency of the spiritual energy.

"Did you understand?" Luo Feng waved his hand, dispersing the spiritual energy, his chin slightly raised, reverting to that lofty demeanor. "This is 'Formlessness.' Your so-called 'data' and 'standards' are utterly incapable of describing even a ten-thousandth of such a structure that points directly to the origin of the Great Dao."

He paused, seeming to feel he had said too much, and added a corrective remark, "Of course, this is still just superficial knowledge, not touching upon the fundamentals of Formation Peak. Even if I teach it to you, you wouldn't be able to use it. Consider it just broadening your horizons."

Suppressing the wild joy in his heart, Su Ming's face revealed an expression of half-understanding, half-awe. He bowed deeply. "Senior Brother's learning probes the heavens and man. That single stroke of 'inward folding' was truly a stroke of divine inspiration! Although this disciple cannot grasp its profound meaning, I am greatly shaken."

Luo Feng accepted this bit of flattery, the corner of his mouth hooking up imperceptibly, his mood greatly improved.

"Alright, enough pondering these overly ambitious things. First, get the yield rate of that batch of 'Spirit Gathering Plates' up for me!"

Although he said this, over the next half hour, when Su Ming "unintentionally" raised a few more questions about the stability of spiritual energy nodes, Luo Feng's answers were noticeably more in-depth than usual, even beginning to proactively cite theories from high-level formations to support his points.

A subtle, unspoken understanding quietly grew between the two.

For Luo Feng, Su Ming's place was an excellent "Experimental Plot."

Those unorthodox ideas he dared not easily try at Formation Peak could be tested without reservation here through Su Ming's "data stream." Su Ming's strange yet precise logic was more like a series of "battering rams," capable of shattering the rigid walls in his thinking from time to time.

And for Su Ming, Luo Feng was a walking, talking, self-correcting "Comprehensive Guide to High-Level Formations."

"Hehe, Senior Brother, look, Senior Brother Luo Feng is giving Su Ming 'private tutoring' again!"

At the courtyard gate, Mingyue, holding two food boxes, peeked in at the scene, her eyes curved into happy crescents.

Qingfeng stood beside her holding a sword case, curling his lip, but the usual hostility in his eyes had diminished somewhat. "Hmph, Senior Brother Luo Feng just appreciates talent. But this Su Ming kid is indeed strange. Clearly a menial post, yet his brain works better than many inner sect senior brothers."

Su Ming took the food boxes, thanking the two, and casually crumpled that parchment into a ball, tossing it into the wastepaper basket as if it were nothing.

Late at night, Bing Character Seven Courtyard was utterly silent, all sounds hushed.

Inside the eastern side room, Su Ming sat cross-legged, his breathing nearly imperceptible.

"Master, have you reconstructed it?"

"Absolutely! With Luo Feng's 'Möbius strip' as a reference, plus my topological corrections, this 'breath-concealing array' is complete!"

Lin Yu's voice carried unprecedented excitement.

Su Ming took out the Xuantian ring he always kept close to his body. Under Lin Yu's guidance, he concentrated an extremely fine thread of spiritual energy at his fingertip and, following the trajectory from his memory of Luo Feng's demonstration—yet adjusted through thousands of micro-modifications—slowly infused it into a broken formation line deep within the ring.

"Hum—"

There was no light, no sound.

The Xuantian ring merely trembled slightly. Then, that ancient, weathered aura that constantly lingered on the ring's surface began to "disappear" bit by bit, like melting snow and ice.

It became utterly ordinary, like an iron ring commonly seen in any mundane market.

Even when Su Ming swept it with his divine sense, he would subconsciously overlook its existence.

"It's done! This is the true divine artifact of the Way of Survival!" Lin Yu laughed wildly. "Now, unless a Spirit Transformation stage old monster presses their face against it and scans it with divine sense, no one will be able to detect anything unusual about this ring!"

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

[1,486 words]

The night was as thick as ink, dense and impenetrable.

In the rear hall of the External Affairs Hall on Guiding Peak, a place usually bustling with people and the noisy clamor of task handovers, it was now eerily quiet.

Only a solitary lamp flickered at the end of the corridor, stretching Su Ming's shadow into a long, thin, and twisted shape.

Su Ming stood before that heavy purple sandalwood door, took a deep breath, and tried to calm the slightly rapid heartbeat in his chest. Just half an hour ago, an emergency message talisman had directly breached the defensive formation of Bing Character Seven Courtyard and landed in his hand.

There was no official format, no bureaucratic prose, only Elder Ma's familiar, somewhat weary voice: "Come quickly."

"Disciple, this atmosphere doesn't seem right," Lin Yu's soul thought within the Xuantian ring, unusually dropping his usual playful demeanor, his tone carrying a hint of gravity. "In the dead of night, a lone young man and an old man, in this kind of meditation room... based on my extensive experience, this usually only means two things: either entrusting an orphan or a soul seizure attempt."

The corner of Su Ming's eye twitched slightly as he responded in his mind, "Master, can you wish me something good?"

"Ahem, your teacher is just conducting the worst-case risk assessment," Lin Yu said.

Su Ming's heart tightened. Death aura?

Su Ming hesitated for a moment, straightened his robes, and gently knocked on the door.

"Enter."

Su Ming pushed the door open and entered.

No lamps were lit inside the room. Only the cold moonlight from outside the window poured in like quicksilver, outlining the gaunt silhouette by the window.

Elder Ma stood with his back to the door, hands clasped behind him, gazing at the churning sea of clouds outside the window.

The incense in the burner had long since burned out. The air was filled with a desolation that came after a task was accomplished and the dust had settled, along with a faint, almost imperceptible... sense of finality.

Su Ming did not speak, merely bowed respectfully and then stood to the side with his hands hanging down.

After a long while, Elder Ma slowly turned around.

By the moonlight, Su Ming saw his face clearly and couldn't help but feel his heart skip a beat.

Old.

Too old.

If Elder Ma before had looked like a vigorous old scholar, now he resembled a piece of withered wood about to burn out completely. The wrinkles on his face were as deep as ravines, his eye sockets were sunken, and only those eyes shone startlingly bright in the darkness, like the final flare of a dying flame.

"Sit," Elder Ma pointed to the meditation cushion opposite.

Su Ming complied and sat down, his back ramrod straight.

"In three days, this old man will enter secluded cultivation for a life-or-death breakthrough."

Elder Ma's first sentence was like a massive rock hurled into the deathly still air.

Su Ming's head snapped up. Even though he had some premonition, the news still came too suddenly.

"Success means shattering the core to form an infant, extending my lifespan by another five hundred years; failure means the Dao dissipates, the body perishes, and the soul returns to heaven and earth," Elder Ma's tone was as calm as if discussing some trivial matter unrelated to himself. "This is fate, a hurdle this old man must cross in this lifetime. You need not worry, and certainly don't adopt that childish, sentimental attitude."

Su Ming opened his mouth, but a thousand words ultimately condensed into a single dry phrase: "Elder... a fortunate man under a lucky star is sure to..."

"Spare me such platitudes," Elder Ma waved his hand, a faint trace of mockery tugging at the corner of his mouth. "What 'fortunate man under a lucky star' exists in the cultivation world? It's merely fighting fate. This old man has been stuck at Golden Core Perfection for over one hundred and sixty years. My great limit approaches. If I don't take this gamble, I'd just be prolonging my feeble existence for a few more years, ultimately turning into a handful of yellow earth."

His gaze was like a deep, ancient well, quietly fixed on Su Ming. "Before entering seclusion, there is one matter I must settle to establish your foundation. This is my final responsibility as your guide."

Su Ming's heart shook. He sat up even straighter. "Please instruct me, Elder."

Elder Ma did not speak immediately. Instead, he withdrew an ancient bronze mirror from his sleeve.

The mirror was no larger than a palm, its back carved with intricate cloud patterns. The mirror surface, however, was not smooth bronze but a chaotic, grey vortex, as if capable of devouring all light.

Su Ming's heart tightened, but his expression remained unchanged.

"Extend your hand, press it against the mirror," Elder Ma's voice brooked no argument. "This old man will personally test your spiritual roots again."

Su Ming hesitated for an instant.

What if something abnormal is detected...

"Afraid of what?" Lin Yu's voice chimed in at the perfect moment, carrying a hint of disdain. "We cultivate the orthodox Great Dao, not demonic arts. Besides, with the concealment of the 'Formless Pattern,' unless a Spirit Transformation old monster arrives in person, he won't detect anything odd about the ring. As for your body... heh, that's a good thing. Let him see it!"

With his master's assurance, Su Ming hesitated no longer. He extended his right hand and slowly pressed it against the cold mirror surface.

"Hummm—"

A faint humming sound resonated within the quiet room.

The grey vortex on the mirror surface began to spin wildly. A faint yet pure suction force emanated from the palm of his hand.

Immediately after, a vast, brilliant light erupted violently from the mirror!

It was an azure blue.

Pure, profound, boundless, like an endless emerald sea, instantly illuminating the entire dim meditation room, even overpowering the moonlight outside the window.

Water Spiritual Root!

And an exceptionally pure, superior Water Spiritual Root at that!

The originally turbid light in Elder Ma's eyes instantly erupted into two beams of intense brilliance, fixed unwaveringly on that sea of blue light.

However, a sudden change occurred.

Just as the vast expanse of water light was stabilizing, a ripple stirred from deep within the emerald sea.

A wisp of green spiritual essence, brimming with vibrant vitality, like tenacious seaweed on the ocean floor, slowly sprouted and swayed. It was not powerful, yet it was extraordinarily resilient. It stretched its leaves within the vast water light, merging with the water radiance yet not being devoured. Instead, it drew upon the water's momentum, becoming increasingly verdant and lush.

Water gives birth to Wood!

"Indeed! Just as I thought!"

Elder Ma abruptly stood up, his movement so forceful he even knocked over the incense burner behind him. He seemed completely unaware, his gaze fixed solely on that swaying green spiritual essence within the mirror, an expression of sudden, profound understanding dawning on his face.

"A Water-Generates-Wood phase spiritual root! No wonder... no wonder!"

He turned his head, looking at Su Ming, his eyes blazing as if gazing upon an uncut jade.

"Su Ming, your previous success in cultivating that crude wood-element cultivation method was no mere fluke, nor was it some lucky accident! It's because your spiritual root's inherent nature contains this latent Wood phase! It usually lies dormant and unseen, nurtured and born by the Water Spiritual Root. Once guided by a wood-element cultivation method, it's like withered wood meeting spring!"

Elder Ma let out a long sigh, as if a great weight had been lifted from his heart.

"You told me before that your cultivation method was an incomplete longevity art. This old man always harbored doubts. How could there be so many coincidences in this world? Now it seems it was because your special physique spontaneously compensated for the shortcomings of the method!"

Pausing here, his tone became serious. "Your Dao path lies in 'the highest good is like water.' Use water as the root, wood as the support. Water and Wood mutually generating each other—that is the correct path. Previously, you only cultivated the wood element. While it caused no major harm, it was a deviation, a waste of this innate talent of yours!"

Su Ming was stunned.

He instinctively asked in his mind, "Master, is this... true?"

Within the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's soul thought also fell silent for a moment before erupting into a burst of awkward coughs.

"Ahem... that, disciple, this old man's eyes are truly sharp! But well, he's right! Ours was, after all, 'theory first,' and in practice, we slightly... hmm... took a bit of a detour. I was only focused on having you practice the 'Greenwood Longevity Art' for survival, overlooking your body's original attributes."

A bitter laugh rose in Su Ming's heart, but on the surface, he put on an expression of sudden enlightenment mixed with sincere trepidation. He bowed deeply towards Elder Ma.

"This disciple is dull-witted. If not for Elder's illumination today, clearing the clouds to reveal the sun, this disciple would likely still be groping in the dark on the wrong path. Thank you, Elder, for pointing out the right direction!"

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Chapter 188: Setting the Foundation for the Path Ahead

[1,454 words]

Elder Ma waved his hand, put away the Mirror of Heaven Appraisal, and sat back down on the meditation cushion, a touch more gratification now evident in his expression.

"Pointing this out was not to blame you. It was to illuminate the path you must walk from now on."

He looked at Su Ming, his tone becoming unprecedentedly grave, even carrying a trace of a sense of entrustment.

"Su Ming, do you know, this old man's entire life, his aptitude has been mediocre, and reaching the Golden Core realm was his limit. Yet within this Cloud Hidden Sect, even those lofty Peak Masters, when they see this old man, must respectfully address me as 'Junior Brother Ma.' Do you know why?"

Su Ming shook his head. "This disciple does not know."

"Because this old man's greatest contribution in his life is not his own cultivation, but these eyes." Elder Ma pointed at his own eyes. "This old man is good at recognizing people, and even better at employing them."

He stood up, walked to the window, and pointed at the faintly discernible main peaks in the sea of clouds in the distance.

"One hundred and seventy years ago, I brought back from a noisy mortal market a ragged, stubborn child who was obsessed with watching the trails of ants moving on the ground. Everyone else thought he was an idiot, but this old man saw he possessed a natural heart for formations. His Daoist title is Xuanheng, and he is the current Peak Master of Formation Peak."

Su Ming's heart shook violently. The Peak Master of Formation Peak? Luo Feng's master?

"Ninety years ago, during the sect's grand selection. A youth whose parents were both mortals, with a patchwork, chaotic spirit root, was rejected at the gate. He knelt before the mountain gate for three days and three nights. This old man overrode all objections and sponsored him to go train in the bitter, freezing lands of the far north. His Daoist title is Lingyun. He is now the Chief Seat of the Discipline Hall, at the early Spirit Transformation stage, overseeing the sect's laws and punishments, impartial and incorruptible."

Elder Ma's voice was not loud, but it struck like metal hitting stone, each word hammering against Su Ming's heart.

He turned around and looked at Su Ming, his eyes blazing as if gazing upon a rare treasure.

"They have both become the towering pillars of the sect. And today, I see you."

Su Ming instinctively wanted to utter some modest words, but Elder Ma raised a hand to stop him.

"Do not belittle yourself. Your Dao foundation is damaged, that is the will of heaven, beyond mortal power to change. But everything you have done these past few months in the Repair Hall, this old man has seen it all."

"Your understanding of the sect's 'system,' your ability to unravel complex matters, to simplify the intricate, your 'capability' to establish order from the minute details, to transform decay into wonder..."

Elder Ma spoke each word deliberately, his voice like a great bell: "Its value is absolutely no less than that of a Spirit Transformation cultivator!"

"A Spirit Transformation cultivator can suppress the fortune of an entire sect single-handedly. But this 'framework' of yours, if it can be implemented across the entire sect, can make the Cloud Hidden Sect's foundation three parts thicker! Can double the utilization rate of the sect's resources!"

"This is the path of longevity! This is the true 'pillar of the sect!'"

Su Ming felt a surge of hot blood rush straight to his head, his breathing even becoming rapid.

"Master, is this Elder Ma... giving me empty promises?" Su Ming murmured in his heart.

"No." Lin Yu's voice was unusually serious. "Disciple, this old man is a man of insight. He understands the value of 'productive forces.' In this cultivation world where individual might is paramount, he is the first person I've seen who recognizes the value of 'organizational structure' and 'efficiency.' This old man, he's got something."

Elder Ma seemed tired from speaking, breathing lightly a few times, his previously straight spine slightly hunched.

He took out a jade slip and a token that was neither metal nor wood from his robes and solemnly placed them before Su Ming.

"This old man has used the last of his authority to fight for a 'special approval' for you."

He pointed at the token. "This is a special permit for the Transmission Pavilion. It allows you early entry to select a Foundation Establishment stage cultivation method. The reason given is that you need a new method to stabilize your cultivation, in order to better manage the Repair Hall, which concerns the sect's practical affairs. Those old sticklers had quite a few objections, but considering this old man's face and the Repair Hall's achievements, they tacitly consented."

Su Ming's hands trembled slightly.

A Foundation Establishment stage cultivation method!

This was something countless outer sect disciples dreamed of! Typically, one could only obtain it after performing great meritorious service, or reaching the peak of Qi Refining and passing layer upon layer of assessments.

"For this trip, focus on water-attribute methods, with formations as your application. Remember, don't bite off more than you can chew." Elder Ma instructed. "After entering the pavilion, go straight to the third floor and find a method called the 'Like Water Art.' While this method is not the foremost in offense, its strengths lie in its enduring, mellow nature and exceptional compatibility. It is most suitable for your water and wood mutually generating constitution, and best matches your 'moistening things silently and imperceptibly' temperament."

"As for the rest, it depends on your fortune. But remember, do not aim too high and chase after what is beyond your reach."

Su Ming received the token and jade slip with both hands, feeling their weight, heavier than ten thousand pieces of gold.

"This disciple... will certainly live up to the Elder's high hopes!"

Elder Ma looked at him, a complex emotion flashing in his eyes. There was gratification, worry, and also a trace of reluctance.

"Go."

He waved his hand, as if having exhausted all his mental energy, and turned back around to face the lonely cold moon outside the window.

"This Repair Hall, you built it with your own hands. From now on, no matter the storms, you must protect it well. As long as it exists, you will have roots within the sect."

"During this old man's seclusion, the External Affairs Hall will be temporarily managed by Steward Liu. If you encounter an unresolvable crisis..."

Elder Ma's voice lowered, as if hesitating.

A moment later, he sighed softly. "If you encounter an unresolvable crisis, take this token and go to Formation Peak to seek out Xuanheng. Just say... it's that old man who took him to watch the ants moving, asking him to repay a favor."

Su Ming abruptly looked up at that hunched back, his eyes growing warm.

This was a true life-saving talisman!

This was the final escape route Elder Ma had paved for him, using a favor from one hundred and seventy years ago!

"This disciple... will remember!"

Su Ming knelt on the ground and solemnly kowtowed three times.

The heavy stone door slowly closed behind him with a dull thud, isolating two worlds.

Inside the door, a seclusion ground of uncertain life and death.

Outside the door, the unpredictable and treacherous world of cultivation.

Su Ming stood beneath the corridor. The night wind, carrying a chill, blew against his face, dispersing the warmth on his body, but it could not disperse the warmth transmitted from the token in his embrace.

For the first time, he felt so clearly that a weighty legacy, far surpassing individual life and death, had already fallen upon his shoulders.

"Master." Su Ming called out softly in his heart.

"Hmm." Lin Yu's voice was lazy, yet it carried a reassuring steadiness.

"Does it mean we... can't just think about hiding like we did before?"

"Hiding is still necessary, that's the basic policy." Lin Yu yawned, his phantom figure turning over inside the ring. "But, since someone has set up the stage and aimed the spotlight at us, if we keep shrinking backstage, it would be a bit of a waste of this old man's effort."

"Then we..."

"We'll do as the old man said!" Lin Yu chuckled. "First, go to the Transmission Pavilion and get our hands on that 'Like Water Art'! Water benefits all things without contending—this is the highest realm of the Way of Survival! With this method, plus your formations, we can sink roots deeper than anyone else in this Cloud Hidden Sect!"

"As for that Steward Liu..." Lin Yu sneered. "An administrator, thinking he can mess with us technical types? If he dares reach out, we'll let him know what 'dimensional reduction strike' means!"

Su Ming took a deep breath and tightened his grip on the token in his hand.

He looked up at the bright moon overhead, his gaze gradually becoming clear and resolute.

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Chapter 189: You call this a library?

[1,158 words]

The night wind was biting cold, whipping Su Ming's robes into a fierce flutter.

He stood before the sheer cliff at the back of the Teachings Peak, tightly clutching the Special Permit that still carried the warmth of Elder Ma's body heat.

What lay before him was not an ordinary pavilion with upturned eaves, but a colossal tower-like structure floating atop a churning sea of clouds.

The body of this pagoda was constructed entirely from massive, unknown bluish-grey stone blocks, each one astonishingly large, as if sliced from mountains casually moved by gods.

Most unnerving was that the pagoda's surface was not static; countless flowing, faint blue halos meandered between the stone seams, like the breathing of a living creature.

A vast, majestic, and unfathomable aura, ebbing and flowing with the clouds and mist, washed over Su Ming in wave after wave, like a tide.

"Holy crap..."

Lin Yu's voice echoed in Su Ming's mind, carrying unconcealed shock, "What kind of library is this? This is clearly a floating server room! Damn, the scale of this heat dissipation is way too outrageous!"

The corner of Su Ming's mouth twitched slightly. His master's peculiar analogies always managed to instantly shatter the atmosphere, pulling him slightly away from that awe of the unknown and restoring a sliver of rational calm.

"Master, can you see what's special about it?" Su Ming asked in his mind.

"Special? It's full of special things," Lin Yu's phantom pushed up his non-existent glasses within the Xuantian ring, his expression serious. "Disciple, don't be fooled by those flashy runes. This entire pagoda itself is a massive, living formation! Those flowing lights aren't decorations; they're monitoring all spiritual energy fluctuations within ten miles in real-time."

Su Ming's heart tightened. He instinctively restrained all his aura, tucking the Xuantian ring, disguised with the "Formless Pattern," deeper into his sleeve.

He took a deep breath, lightly tapped his toes, and his figure, like a grey crane, skimmed over the cliff, landing steadily on the floating bluestone platform.

The moment his feet touched down, an invisible pressure enveloped his entire body.

The great doors were tightly shut. There was no handle, only a recessed palm print.

Su Ming stepped forward and pressed his Special Permit into that palm print.

"Hummm—"

A deep, muffled groan sounded, as if a slumbering giant beast had been disturbed from its rest. The thick stone doors did not swing open to the sides. Instead, they crumbled into countless fine stone dust, collapsing inward to reveal a swirling grey vortex.

"Spatial folding technology," Lin Yu whistled. "The founding ancestor of the Cloud Hidden Sect had some skills. This is way more advanced than those lame designs that still require pushing doors. Go on in, disciple. Don't keep your new cheat waiting."

Su Ming adjusted his breathing and stepped into the vortex.

That single step sent the world spinning.

There was no expected dizziness, only the fleeting sensation of weightlessness. When his vision refocused, Su Ming couldn't help but gasp sharply.

The pagoda, which seemed only nine stories tall from the outside, was as vast as the starry sky within!

Above was a deep, boundless void. Countless luminous orbs, glowing with various colored halos, drifted slowly along mysterious trajectories in this void, like stars scattered across the heavens. Some orbs were crimson like fire, trailing long tails of flame across the sky; others were cold and clear like ice, silently suspended in corners; still others were violent like thunder, crackling with tiny arcs of electricity in the void.

Each "star" was a jade slip.

This was a universe of knowledge.

"If I could stay here for a hundred years..." Su Ming murmured to himself, his eyes filled with awe and longing. For a former Hanlin Academy compiler, this tangible manifestation of knowledge held a fatal attraction.

"Don't daydream," Lin Yu ruthlessly poured cold water on his hopes. "Every 'star' here carries high voltage; touching them randomly will get you killed. And... I sense something... watching us."

Every muscle in Su Ming's body instantly tensed.

At that moment, a grey figure silently materialized from the previously empty void.

It was an old man dressed in grey cloth robes, his features indistinct, as if veiled by an impenetrable layer of mist. He didn't walk over; he seemed to "seep" out from the surrounding space, as if he were an integral part of this void itself.

The Library Guardian.

Su Ming dared not be negligent. He hurriedly bowed respectfully, holding the Special Permit aloft with both hands. "Disciple Su Ming of the External Affairs Hall, following Elder Ma's orders, presents this permit to enter the library and requests a Foundation Establishment cultivation method."

The grey-robed old man did not speak. Those eyes hidden behind the mist seemed to sweep over Su Ming's body.

In that instant, Su Ming felt as if he had been stripped naked and thrown onto snow. Whether it was the faint vortex of spiritual energy in his Dantian or the hidden soul injury lurking in his meridians, everything seemed laid bare under that single glance.

Lin Yu's tone, however, was extremely tense. "Disciple! Steady yourself! That old man isn't human! Or rather... he's not entirely human! He carries the exact same aura as this pagoda! This is... a projection of the Pagoda Spirit!"

Cold sweat instantly broke out on Su Ming's back, but he forcibly controlled the rhythm of his heartbeat, maintaining his respectful posture, motionless.

It was an instinct honed through countless life-and-death crises—since resistance was impossible, he would calmly accept the scrutiny. As long as he wasn't guilty, the one feeling guilty would be the other party.

After a long while, the grey-robed old man seemed to confirm the authenticity of the token and Su Ming's "innocence."

He gave a slight nod and waved a withered finger.

The Special Permit flew from Su Ming's hand, transforming into a streak of light that vanished into the void. Immediately after, a bridge formed of pure, condensed light extended from beneath Su Ming's feet, stretching deep into that starry expanse.

"Second floor, Water Phase Domain. Half an hour."

The old man's voice was hoarse and mechanical, like two sheets of sandpaper rubbing together. After uttering these eight words, his form dissipated like smoke once more, as if he had never appeared.

"Huuu..." Su Ming let out a long breath, only then realizing his palms were drenched in sweat.

"That was close," Lin Yu's voice also sounded somewhat weak. "Just then, I was ready to play dead. The Cloud Hidden Sect's foundation runs deeper than I imagined!"

Su Ming wiped the sweat from his palms and stepped onto the light bridge.

The sensation of solid ground did not greet him; instead, it felt like stepping onto clouds.

"The Heart-Seeking Bridge," the phrase Elder Ma had casually mentioned earlier surfaced in Su Ming's mind.

This bridge would not be easy to cross.

The moment he took his first step, Su Ming felt the surrounding starry sky suddenly begin to spin. An intangible force, not acting on his physical body, directly penetrated his Consciousness Sea, stirring the spiritual energy within him into a frenzied tumult.

"For what purpose do you seek the Dao?"

A grand voice exploded within his mind.

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[1,303 words]

Su Ming's footsteps halted.

Why?

For longevity? For power? Or to roam heaven and earth freely like Qingfeng and Mingyue?

No.

Su Ming's mind flashed with the despair of that moment he fell off the cliff, with Zhao Qianshan's ferocious face, with the humiliation of being trampled upon at will by the powerful when he was just a mortal.

He raised his head, his eyes clear, silently answering in his heart.

"To live."

"To live with dignity, without being manipulated by anyone... to live."

Boom!

The roaring sound in his mind dissipated, and the surrounding pressure suddenly eased.

Su Ming felt as if his divine sense had undergone a baptism, becoming more condensed.

"Not bad, disciple!" Lin Yu praised, "That answer, plain, unadorned, and even a bit dull, but it hits the essence! Much better than all that empty talk about 'for all living beings' or 'for justice.' This Pagoda Spirit probably is a pragmatist too, letting you pass."

Su Ming smiled faintly and quickened his steps.

Passing through the bridge of light, the scene before him changed once more.

The previously chaotic starry sky vanished, replaced by a deep blue expanse.

Hundreds of blue light spheres floated here, each one enveloping a crystal-clear jade slip. Mist swirled, light shimmered on ripples, as if he were in a deep-sea dragon palace.

"We've arrived, the water-attribute cultivation method zone."

Su Ming took a deep breath. The dense water spiritual energy made all the pores on his body relax and open. The spiritual energy within his Dantian cheered and leaped for joy, as if returning to a mother's embrace.

"Is this the joy of a single-attribute spiritual root?" Lin Yu sounded somewhat envious, "Back in my day, to pass that damn exam, I memorized books until my hair fell out, but I never had this feeling of being like a fish in water. Disciple, don't get dazzled by the choices, find it according to what Old Ma said."

Su Ming nodded, closed his eyes, and released his divine sense.

He didn't look at the brightness of the light spheres, nor did he pay attention to the pressure they emitted. Instead, he completely immersed his mind and spirit in the artistic conception of "water."

What is water?

Is it the raging, turbulent sea? The trickling stream? Or...

He recalled Lin Yu's teaching—"The Way of Survival isn't about being cowardly. It's about being like water, adapting to the container, seeping into every crevice. It appears soft and weak, yet it can drip through stone."

This concept resonated strangely with his current state of mind.

In this deep blue starry space, one originally dim and lightless light sphere, hiding in a corner, seemed to sense this resonance.

Unlike the other light spheres that eagerly radiated light to attract Su Ming's attention, it merely trembled slightly, emanating a gentle, peaceful, and inclusive aura.

Just like... a drop of the most ordinary water.

Su Ming abruptly opened his eyes. His gaze pierced through countless dazzling light spheres, precisely locking onto that inconspicuous "star" in the corner.

"Found it."

He moved, drifting over gracefully, and reached out to gently touch that light sphere.

No rejection, no backlash.

His finger passed through the halo. The touch was warm and smooth like jade, as if holding a drop of warm current.

The next instant, the light sphere exploded, transforming into countless blue points of light that drilled into the center of Su Ming's brow.

Boom!

Su Ming only felt darkness before his eyes, as if he had instantly plunged into an endless azure sea.

But this sea had no violent winds or giant waves.

The sea surface was smooth as a mirror, reflecting the star-filled sky. The ebb and flow of the tide carried a rhythm that seemed eternal.

Lines of ancient, grand characters, rising and falling with the tide, imprinted directly into his mind. Each character contained the supreme principles of the Great Dao, shaking his very soul.

"The highest good is like water. Water benefits all things without contention. It stays in places that people dislike, therefore it is close to the Dao."

"Dwell in good places. Keep your mind deep. Deal with others kindly. Speak with sincerity. Govern with order. Handle affairs with competence. Act with good timing."

"Because it does not contend, it is without blame."

As the scripture flowed, that gentle spiritual energy began to circulate on its own within his body.

It wasn't bursting with vitality like the Greenwood Longevity Art, nor was it sharp and aggressive like metal-attribute methods.

It was like a clear spring, slowly flowing through Su Ming's meridians, which had become somewhat parched and twisted from forcibly practicing the wood-attribute method.

Wherever it passed, the tiny cracks were smoothed over, and the accumulated impurities were washed away.

Su Ming's originally somewhat unstable foundation began to grow steady and solid under the nourishment of this power.

Even more wondrous was that when this water spiritual energy flowed past the tiny sprout of his wood spiritual root deep within his Dantian, it didn't cause conflict. Instead,

like spring rain nurturing growth, it made that originally somewhat wilted tender sprout instantly stretch out its branches and leaves, becoming even more vibrant and emerald green.

Water nourishes wood, ever-renewing!

"Perfect."

Lin Yu's voice sounded in Su Ming's mind, carrying unprecedented satisfaction, "It's practically tailor-made for you! This Like Water Art, while its offensive power seems utterly battle-useless, this recovery speed, this mana regeneration rate, this compatibility... it's basically a walking fountain! Disciple, this is solid! With this method, plus the formations I taught you, in the future we'll be the unkillable cockroach, the tireless ox!"

Su Ming awoke from that mysterious state. A deep blue light flashed in his eyes, then quickly faded, returning to their usual clarity and calmness.

He could feel that this cultivation method was his fundamental method.

It didn't demand explosive power in the short term, but focused on long-term accumulation. Just like the path he wanted to walk, not contending for momentary pride, only seeking ultimate longevity.

"The jade slip can't be taken away." Su Ming looked somewhat regretfully at the gradually fading light sphere in his hand.

"Nonsense, these are the core legacies of their sect, you think they'd let you just take them?" Lin Yu urged, "Hurry up! While it's still active, memorize as much as you can! Don't forget to memorize the annotations too, they're the experiences of predecessors, very important!"

Su Ming said no more. He sat down cross-legged, opened his divine sense fully, and began to inscribe this Like Water Art with all his might.

Time passed minute by minute.

Deep within this blue space, a pair of blurred eyes were quietly watching this scene from across the void.

It was precisely that Library Guardian elder.

On his face, which seemed eternally expressionless, a trace of extremely faint surprise actually flickered for a moment.

"Found a life-bound, perfectly compatible method in half the time it takes to drink a cup of tea..."

The elder murmured to himself, his voice so low it was almost inaudible, like a mere disturbance of air.

"And his nature is clear and pure, like water containing emptiness, neither arrogant nor impatient. Facing the interrogation of the Heart-Seeking Bridge, he actually saw through it in the span of a single breath..."

"Junior Brother Ma has sent quite a promising seedling this time. A pity though..."

The elder slightly raised his hand, pointing a fingertip.

The water spiritual energy around Su Ming suddenly doubled in density. The originally somewhat obscure and difficult-to-understand scripture, in this moment, became clear and fluent, as if someone were whispering a recitation in his ear, explaining it word by word.

Su Ming, who was struggling to memorize, shuddered. Wild joy surged in his heart, but he didn't dare let his focus waver. He could only absorb this unexpected gift even more greedily.

Lin Yu, keenly sensing the change in the environment, rolled his eyes inside the ring, though the corner of his mouth curled up in a smile.

"This old man, talks about handling things strictly by the book, but his actions are quite honest. Seems 'looking honest' really is a plus. Full marks for this under-the-table favoritism."

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Chapter 191: The True Understanding of Nourishing the Spirit

[1,243 words]

Half an hour later.

Su Ming slowly opened his eyes. In that instant, his aura seemed to undergo a subtle change.

If the previous him was like a hard stone, resilient yet prone to shattering.

Then the current him was more like a deep pool of water. Its surface calm and unrippled, throwing a stone into it would only create ripples before everything was swallowed and dissolved.

That "water-like" essence had been carved into his very bones.

"Thank you, Senior, for your generosity."

Su Ming stood up and bowed deeply towards the empty space.

He knew that the last moment's spiritual energy infusion was definitely not a coincidence.

There was no response from the void.

"How do you feel?" Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, carrying a hint of lazy amusement. "Feel like you were driving an ox before, but now you're finally galloping on a fast horse?"

"Master's metaphors are always so... vivid." Su Ming smiled helplessly in his heart before turning serious. "This disciple feels unprecedentedly good. The Like Water Art is balanced and peaceful, embracing all things. Not only did it repair the previous hidden injuries, but even that budding Wood Spirit Root has grown a bit stronger under the nourishment of the water spiritual energy."

"That's right. Water benefits all things without contention. That is the highest principle of the Way of Survival." Lin Yu paused, his tone carrying a hint of urgency. "Alright, now that you have the foundational method, it's not wise to linger here. That old man's Special Permit has a time limit. Don't waste it on sentimental reflections."

Su Ming nodded and was about to turn and leave when his footsteps suddenly halted.

He lowered his head, his gaze falling on the Xuantian ring, which had long since become ordinary.

The ring was cool, pressed tightly against the base of his finger, feeling like a part of his body.

Looking back on this journey, from surviving the cliff fall to infiltrating the Cloud Hidden Sect, from a mortal living day-to-day to the current Quasi-Outer Sect Disciple, every step bore the shadow of his master.

His master was still a remnant soul, confined within this tiny space, constantly expending soul power to conceal his destiny and deduce formations for him.

An intense desire to repay something, like wild grass, grew wildly in Su Ming's heart.

He did not step forward. Instead, he asked solemnly in his heart, "Master, this disciple has obtained the foundational method. You... do you need to find a cultivation method that can nourish the soul and aid in your recovery?"

A brief silence fell within the Consciousness Sea.

Inside the Xuantian ring, Lin Yu's illusory form was lounging on a "beach chair" with his legs crossed, holding a non-existent "sugary soda" in his hand. Hearing these words, his movements froze stiffly, nearly spilling the "soda" all over himself.

He was used to planning everything for this disciple, used to playing the role of the all-knowing, calculating-without-a-single-oversight "old grandpa." In his eyes, Su Ming was still that child who needed to be taught hand-in-hand how to "survive" in the cultivation world.

This was the first time this "tool-like" disciple had shown such direct and solemn concern for him.

An unfamiliar, somewhat sour yet warm feeling surged in his heart.

Lin Yu opened his mouth, wanting to maintain the demeanor of a master, but found his throat somewhat choked.

"You brat..."

After a long moment, Lin Yu laughed and scolded, his voice hiding a barely perceptible tremor. "So you do have a conscience! I didn't waste this non-existent heart worrying about you for nothing! Fine, since we're already here... let's go see if there are any cultivation methods suitable for a soul body!"

"Since we're here anyway, we might as well take full advantage of the opportunity!" He returned to that playful, joking tone, as if the previous moment of stunned silence was just an illusion. "Go up! The soul path area is usually in some obscure corner. After all, this stuff is borderline 'high-risk contraband' in righteous sects."

A warmth spread in Su Ming's heart, and the corners of his mouth lifted slightly. "Yes, Master."

Without further hesitation, his figure moved, following the winding bridge of light, darting towards the darker regions higher up in the pagoda.

If the second-floor Water Phase Domain was a tranquil deep sea, then the higher he went, the more bizarre and fantastical the surrounding scenery became.

Passing through the third floor where thunder and fire intertwined, crossing the fourth floor filled with the aura of metal and warfare, Su Ming arrived at the extreme heights of the Transmission Pavilion—a fringe area almost swallowed by darkness.

There were no sky-full-of-stars-like light orbs here, only scattered, sporadic points of faint light, like will-o'-the-wisps in a graveyard, drifting uncertainly in the void.

"Be careful." Lin Yu's voice suddenly turned grave. "Every cultivation method here reeks of something sinister. The soul path is the easiest to deviate from the proper path and go berserk. See that red light orb on the left? Stay away from it. The fluctuations it emits are full of violence and a desire to devour. It's probably some evil technique that levels up by consuming human souls."

Su Ming followed the advice and avoided it, carefully extending his divine sense, weaving between the sparse light orbs.

Su Ming stopped before a light orb emitting a pale white glow. As soon as he approached, countless mournful, piercing shrieks of vengeful spirits echoed in his mind, shaking his spiritual platform.

"Ten Thousand Ghosts Devour the Heart Art..." Su Ming's face paled, and he quickly retreated. "Master, there doesn't seem to be anything suitable for you here."

"What a bunch of garbage!" Lin Yu couldn't help but have an outburst. "Isn't there anything 'green and eco-friendly'? Like getting stronger by basking in the sun, or leveling up by sleeping? The Cloud Hidden Sect's collection tastes are too extreme!"

"Keep looking." Although Lin Yu complained verbally, his tone couldn't hide his disappointment. "If there really isn't any, forget it. I'm actually fine like this anyway. No rent to pay, no food to eat, just a bit boring..."

Su Ming did not give up.

He closed his eyes and activated the Like Water Art. The water spiritual energy within his body slowly circulated, transforming into a gentle, moist film that isolated the chaotic, violent, and seductive spiritual sense fluctuations from the outside world.

His mental state became clear as a mirror again, reflecting this dark void.

Just as his search yielded no results and he was about to reach the end of this area, a faint, almost imperceptible, gentle white light spontaneously flickered from a corner.

The light was extremely faint. If Su Ming's mind wasn't highly focused at this moment, he would have almost missed it.

It was like a compass, guiding Su Ming, pointing towards a corner, towards a gray light orb that almost merged with the darkness.

That light orb was too inconspicuous.

Its surface was even covered with fine cracks, its glow as dim as a lamp about to burn out. It floated quietly under the shadow of a massive pagoda stone, like discarded trash.

"Hmm?" Lin Yu let out a soft sound of surprise. "This little thing... is interesting. It's 'breathing.'"

Su Ming carefully approached.

This time, there were no mournful ghostly wails, no seductive whispers, only a faint sense of coolness and tranquility, like moonlight falling on a dry well.

Su Ming extended a finger and gently touched the cracked light orb.

Hum.

A gentle stream of information flowed along his fingertip into his Consciousness Sea. Unlike other techniques that forcefully and domineeringly poured in, it was like a trickling stream, silently moistening everything.

Spirit Nourishing True Explanation.

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Chapter 192: The Myriad Methods of Formations, All Roads Lead to the Same Destination

[1,350 words]

"The spirit is the master of man. The soul is the dwelling of the spirit. Nourishing the soul is like an oyster containing a pearl, like earth concealing gold. Do not contend over momentary strength or weakness, only seek the perfection of the origin. Guard stillness and sincerity, reach the ultimate of emptiness, use the qi of heaven and earth to nourish my vast and righteous soul..."

Su Ming's heart shook.

This cultivation method did not teach how to attack, nor how to seize bodies. Its entire text discussed how to "nourish."

How to stabilize the soul body, how to repair cracks, how to maintain one's own clarity and integrity through the long passage of time. It emphasized stability, refinement, and slow growth, not the impatient and greedy path of devouring and plundering.

"Like an oyster containing a pearl..." Lin Yu murmured to himself, his voice carrying a slight tremor. "Isn't this tailor-made for a 'holdout' like me? It doesn't seek to kill and plunder, it only seeks to prevent oneself from being worn away in the vast river of time."

"This is the one!" Lin Yu laughed heartily. "Disciple, quick! Memorize it! This is truly good stuff, authentic Daoist orthodoxy, ten thousand times better than those flashy, worthless things!"

Su Ming hesitated no longer. He opened his divine sense fully and began to inscribe this "Spirit Nourishing True Explanation."

However, the moment his divine sense probed into the core of the light sphere, a sudden change occurred!

That originally gentle light sphere, as if some kind of restriction had been triggered, suddenly erupted with a massive suction force from within!

Su Ming felt his divine sense instantly pulled into a huge gray vortex. Countless chaotic images, delirious murmurs, even sighs from some ancient existence, surged toward him like a tidal wave.

"What is spirit? What is soul? Do you also seek immortality? Abandon the flesh..."

A will filled with temptation tried to lure Su Ming into abandoning his resistance and sinking into this gray tranquility.

"Not good! It's a legacy trial!" Lin Yu exclaimed in alarm. "This thing looks gentle, but its threshold is actually extremely high! It's testing the resilience of your soul! Disciple, guard your spiritual platform! Don't listen to that nonsense!"

Su Ming's face turned deathly pale, and beads of sweat the size of beans instantly seeped from his forehead.

That pulling force was immense, as if trying to rip his soul out of his body by brute force.

"Like Water..."

At the critical moment, Su Ming gritted his teeth and silently recited the scripture of the "Like Water Art" in his heart.

"The highest good is like water... dwelling in good places... the heart is good at being profound..."

The water spiritual energy within his Dantian madly circulated, transforming into a cool, rushing torrent that charged straight into his Consciousness Sea.

That coolness acted like a dam, stubbornly blocking the erosion of the gray vortex.

Though his eyes showed pain, Su Ming always maintained the last shred of clarity.

He was like a reef amidst raging waves, letting the waves crash against him, yet remaining unshakable.

Boom!

As if sensing this unyielding will, or perhaps the all-encompassing nature of the "Like Water Art" took effect, the gray vortex suddenly paused, then rapidly collapsed and contracted, finally transforming into passages of golden text that obediently imprinted themselves deep within Su Ming's memory.

Haa...

Su Ming's legs went weak, and he almost knelt on the spot.

He gasped for breath in big gulps, his clothes completely soaked through with cold sweat, as if he had just been fished out of water.

"You scared the hell out of me..." Lin Yu's voice also sounded a bit weak. "Disciple, you just had a major 'kingly aura' leak there! Are you alright? Is your brain still working? Do you still recognize me? I'm your creditor."

Su Ming wiped the sweat from his face and gave a weak smile. "Master... I have not failed the mission."

"Alright, alright, I'll add a chicken drumstick for you when we get back!" Lin Yu's tone was light, but Su Ming could hear the poorly concealed concern and gratitude within it. "With the 'Spirit Nourishing True Explanation' obtained, my resurrection grand plan has taken the first step of a ten-thousand-mile journey. Next... we still have a little time, don't waste it, go take a look at the formation area."

"Yes."

Su Ming swallowed a Qi Recovery Pill, rested briefly to regulate his breathing, then forced his exhausted body onward, walking toward the other end of the starry sky—the formation area.

The formation area was the most vast starfield within the Transmission Pavilion.

The light spheres here were as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River, densely packed and arranged in the air. Countless lines threaded and connected between the spheres, evolving earth, water, fire, and wind, resembling a precise universe constantly deducing itself.

The moment Su Ming stepped in, he was dazzled and dizzy from the eye-dazzling array diagrams.

"Nine Palaces Eight Trigrams Formation," "Heavenly Net Earth Web Grand Formation," "Purple Firmament Divine Thunder Formation"...

Each light sphere emanated a heart-palpitating, powerful fluctuation, as if learning just one would allow one to dominate the world.

Su Ming instinctively looked toward those legacies with the brightest light and the highest positions.

"Don't look up there." Lin Yu's voice sounded timely. "Those ready-made, profound formations are just useless burdens for us right now."

"What we need to find is something that allows us to 'build the road' ourselves."

Lin Yu's voice became serious, carrying the obsession of a former science student from his past life. "Disciple, you must remember. A true formation master isn't one who has memorized countless blueprints, but one who understands 'why' every single rune is the way it is."

"Look and see if there are any texts discussing the 'structural principles' or 'energy logic' of the most basic runes. Even if they look very simple, very boring."

Su Ming nodded, half-understanding, but he chose to unconditionally trust his master's judgment.

He withdrew his gaze, no longer looking at those divine-level grand formations high above, and instead lowered his head to look at the "bottom" of this formation starry sky.

That was the foundation of countless light spheres.

Beneath those radiant legacies, at the deepest part of the water mirror, Su Ming discovered an extremely inconspicuous, even somewhat crude, earthy-yellow light sphere.

It wasn't suspended in the air but was half-buried in the foundation of nothingness, like a stepping stone supporting countless magnificent formations above, yet no one paid it any attention.

Su Ming walked over and probed it with his divine sense.

"True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction."

No domineering name, no earth-shattering descriptions of power.

The content of this text did not discuss a single complete formation. Instead, it deconstructed thousands of basic runes, dissecting them like a corpse, exploring the energy structure of every stroke, the symbolic origin of every turn, and the combinatorial logic between different runes.

It discussed: Why is the "fire" character rune drawn this way? Why would adding one stroke cause an explosion, and removing one stroke cause it to extinguish? Why does combining the "Gathering" character and the "Scatter" character produce a repelling force?

This was practically a "Xinhua Dictionary" and "Grammar Compendium" for the formation world.

"This is it!"

Lin Yu's voice was so excited it almost cracked. "This is what I was looking for! This is the real treasure! Disciple, think about it. If you master these foundational logics, you'll be able to create, modify, and optimize any formation as you wish, like building with blocks!"

"This is practically tailor-made for us! With this, we can fundamentally launch a Dimensional Reduction Strike against those natives who only know how to memorize blueprints!"

Looking at this earthy-yellow light sphere, a flash of understanding also appeared in Su Ming's eyes.

What he needed was never to learn ten thousand types of formations.

What he needed was to master the method of creating formations.

"This is... the foundation for establishing one's own path."

Without the slightest hesitation, Su Ming reached out and grasped this seemingly most basic, yet directly core-focused, light sphere.

The moment he made his choice, the noisy formation starry sky above his head seemed to instantly fade away.

A tranquility of returning to the source enveloped him.

He seemed to see countless threads intertwining in his hands, weaving the warp and weft of the entire world.

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- Chapter 193: Disperse Cultivation and Start Anew

Chapter 193: Disperse Cultivation and Start Anew

[1,238 words]

At the entrance to the first floor of the Transmission Pavilion.

The swirling grey vortex slowly stopped, solidifying once more into a heavy greenstone gate.

Su Ming's figure stepped out from the doorway.

Although only a short hour had passed, the aura he exuded felt as if he had undergone a complete transformation.

His divine sense was extremely fatigued from consecutively imprinting three cultivation methods, his temples even throbbing, yet his eyes had become increasingly restrained and profound.

The **Like Water Art** was the root, nourishing body and mind, like water benefiting all things.

The **Spirit Nourishing True Explanation** was the repayment, nourishing his mentor's kindness, guarding the soul from perishing.

The **True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction** was the technique, the foundation for establishing his path, deconstructing the myriad methods of the world.

With these three methods integrated into his being, Su Ming felt the path ahead had never been so clear.

"Young man."

A hoarse voice sounded behind him.

Su Ming turned to see that mysterious Library Guardian had materialized once more, at some unknown time.

His face remained indistinct, only those eyes, peering through the mist, gave Su Ming a deep look.

"The path you've chosen... is quite special."

The Library Guardian raised a withered hand. A plain token, neither metal nor wood and devoid of any patterns, drifted lightly to float before Su Ming.

"Hold this token. It exempts you from contribution points, allowing you to borrow the starlight power of the Transmission Pagoda for one hour each month within the sensing area outside the pagoda, to aid in comprehending the *Like Water Art*."

Su Ming was shocked. This was an immense opportunity! The starlight power of the Transmission Pagoda was said to contain the Dao resonance accumulated by the Cloud Hidden Sect over ten thousand years, providing an unimaginable boost to comprehending cultivation methods.

"Senior, this..."

"This is recognition of your choice of the 'foundation' path." The Library Guardian's figure began to fade. "In this world, there are too many clever people, and too few willing to put in the hard, 'dumb' work. Go now."

Just as he was about to vanish completely, he left behind one last phrase, ethereal as smoke:

"The path of the soul is mysterious and arduous. Be cautious, value it. Do not... lose yourself."

Su Ming's heart tightened, knowing this senior had discerned something about the *Spirit Nourishing True Explanation* and was offering guidance.

He solemnly stored the token and bowed deeply towards that empty space. "This disciple will remember your teachings."

.....

Returning to the "safe room."

Su Ming sat cross-legged in the center of the simple Spirit Gathering Array. The jade slip recording the *Like Water Art* held between his fingertips emitted a faint blue light, casting shifting shadows on his face.

"Made up your mind?"

Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, lacking its usual banter, carrying a rare seriousness. "This is no joke. Even though your original *Greenwood Longevity Art* was practiced half-heartedly, at least it let you run and jump, allowing you to survive in this Cloud Hidden Sect that devours people without spitting out the bones until now."

Su Ming didn't speak, just gently rubbed the cool surface of the jade slip.

Third-stage Qi Refining.

This was the cultivation level he had painstakingly scraped together after falling off the cliff, in that icy river water, relying on survival instinct and that meager wood-attribute spiritual energy.

Every strand of spiritual energy contained his fear of death and his desire to live.

Now, he had to personally destroy it.

"Master," Su Ming suddenly spoke, his voice somewhat dry, "If dispersing my cultivation fails..."

"No 'if'," Lin Yu cut him off, his tone turning rigid.

"With me here, you won't die. At worst, we start over from scratch. You're young anyway, your life has just begun. Besides, your wood-attribute spiritual energy is like putting gasoline in a diesel engine; it might run for a while, but it'll blow the cylinder sooner or later. Old Man Ma might look like a pyramid scheme leader, but that *Mirror of Heaven Appraisal* doesn't lie. Your body is naturally a vessel meant for 'water'."

Su Ming took a deep breath. The hesitation in his eyes gradually gave way to a kind of resolve.

Better a sharp pain than a lingering one.

Rather than clinging to a leaky old boat that might sink at any moment, it's better to swap it for a submarine that can withstand storms while still in the harbor.

"This disciple... understands."

Su Ming closed his eyes, his hands forming a strange seal—the "Dispersion Guidance" recorded at the beginning of the *Like Water Art*.

"Begin," Lin Yu's voice held a trace of nervous teasing. "The process might be a bit... stimulating. Endure it, don't cry out. That silent guy surnamed Li next door has sharp ears."

The corner of Su Ming's mouth twitched into a strained curve. Then, he focused his mind and fiercely activated the technique.

Boom!

The wood-attribute spiritual energy that had been flowing gently through his meridians suddenly became like an enraged venomous snake, madly thrashing and charging around inside his body. The sensation wasn't like spiritual energy dissipating; it was more like someone was taking a blunt knife and slowly scraping his bones from within his meridians.

"Ugh..."

Su Ming grunted, his entire body suddenly curling into a shrimp-like ball.

Cold sweat instantly soaked through his grey menial disciple robe. The veins on his forehead bulged like earthworms, throbbing violently.

Pain.

Pain that penetrated to the marrow.

It was a feeling of despair, watching his own power drain away, his body gradually becoming empty and weak.

Mid third-stage Qi Refining...

Early third-stage Qi Refining...

As spiritual energy flooded out from his pores like a breached dam, Su Ming's aura visibly plummeted.

That vibrant wood-attribute power was forcibly stripped away. His meridians transmitted a dry, tearing sensation, like a long-dried riverbed cracking under the scorching sun.

"Steady your mind!" Lin Yu shouted sharply. "Don't cling to that power! Out with the old, in with the new! Empty your meridians! Imagine yourself as an empty bottle!"

Su Ming clenched his jaw tightly, the taste of rust-like blood filling his mouth. He forced himself not to resist that feeling of weakness, but to follow the force of the dissipation, expelling the last trace of wood-attribute spiritual energy from his body.

He didn't know how long it lasted. Perhaps an instant, perhaps an eternity.

When the last green speck of light dissipated into the air, Su Ming collapsed limply to the ground, looking as if he had just been fished out of water.

Second-stage Qi Refining.

No, right now, his meridians were completely empty. Aside from his body, which had been tempered by spiritual energy and was still somewhat sturdy, his internal spiritual energy reserves were even less than those of a newly initiated child.

That sense of falling from the clouds into the mud was enough to make anyone with an unstable mind break down on the spot.

"Now!"

Lin Yu's voice suddenly rose sharply. "Guide the spiritual energy to circulate according to the *Like Water Art* meridians! Quickly!"

Su Ming's previously unfocused pupils suddenly sharpened.

Struggling, he sat up straight. Ignoring the phantom pains still echoing in his meridians, his hands rapidly changed seals, assuming the cultivation posture of the *Like Water Art*.

"The highest good is like water, water benefits all things without contention..."

He silently recited the scripture flowing through his heart.

Whoosh—

As if sensing a summons, the ambient water-attribute spiritual energy around Courtyard D-7 suddenly surged towards him like wandering children finding their home.

Unlike the vibrant, even somewhat wild and restless growth of wood-attribute spiritual energy.

The moment the water-attribute spiritual energy entered his body, Su Ming couldn't help but shiver.

Cold.

Bone-chilling cold.

Immediately after, came an indescribable sense of moistening nourishment.

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Chapter 194: The Soul's 'Divine Water'

[1,207 words]

That stream of deep blue spiritual energy flowed through his parched and cracked meridians, like a rain-starved rice field welcoming its first spring shower.

The tiny wounds torn open by his forced cultivation dissipation were gently enveloped, nourished, and smoothed over the instant the water-like energy washed over them.

The pain receded like a tide, replaced by an unprecedented feeling of comfort and clarity.

"This..."

Su Ming was inwardly astonished.

If cultivating before was like pushing a wheelbarrow on a rugged mountain path, stumbling with every step.

Then now, he felt like a fish that had returned to the ocean.

The spiritual energy didn't need him to deliberately guide it at all. With just a thought, it would eagerly surge into his Dantian, automatically beginning the Grand Circulation cycle along the pathways of the Like Water Art.

Qi Refining First Layer...

Qi Refining First Layer Mid-stage...

Qi Refining First Layer Peak!

In the short time it takes an incense stick to burn, Su Ming's internal spiritual energy had refilled. Although the total amount was only half of what it was before, this deep blue water spiritual energy was pure without a single trace of impurity, and its condensation level was several times higher than the previous mixed wood spiritual energy!

"It's actually... this fast?" Su Ming opened his eyes, looking at the flickering strand of deep blue water light on his fingertip, his eyes filled with disbelief.

"Nonsense, you think Old Man Ma's eyes are just for show?" Lin Yu's voice came from the ring, his tone smug as he crossed his legs (figuratively, of course), "Superior Water Spiritual Root, plus you already had a foundation, this is called 'bringing capital into the group,' how could leveling up not be fast?"

Suddenly, Lin Yu's voice paused, as if he had discovered something new, his tone turning peculiar.

"Huh? Interesting... Disciple, look inward, deep into your Dantian."

Su Ming complied and looked inward.

He saw that deep within that ocean-like expanse of blue spiritual sea, the wood-attributed spiritual root seedling that had nearly withered due to his cultivation dissipation was not submerged by the water spiritual energy at all.

On the contrary, as the pure water spiritual energy flowed past it, not only was there no rejection, it was greedily sucked up by the seedling like the sweetest milk.

The originally yellowed leaves, nourished by the water spiritual energy, actually regained a hint of tender green, even appearing more vibrant than before!

Water Nourishes Wood!

"I knew it!" Lin Yu slapped his thigh (though he didn't have one), "The Five Elements' mutual generation! This Like Water Art not only matches your attribute perfectly, it can actually nourish that bit of hidden wood spiritual root of yours! This isn't a single system, this is clearly dual-core drive!"

"Disciple, you've hit the jackpot this time! The water element focuses on defense, endurance, and concealment; the wood element focuses on healing, vitality, and entanglement. As long as you can survive, this will be a 'perpetual motion machine' combo in the future!"

Although Su Ming didn't quite understand terms like "dual-core drive," he could clearly feel the changes in his body.

This feeling... was very stable.

When cultivating the Greenwood Longevity Art before, he always felt like there was a ball of fire inside him, restless and uneasy. Now, he felt like he had become a deep, bottomless lake.

Quiet, profound, yet containing a certain kind of unending power.

Su Ming raised his hand, and with a thought, he performed the most basic "Spirit Gathering" technique.

Unlike before, it didn't cause violent fluctuations in the surrounding air currents. Instead, the moisture in the air slightly condensed, and a palm-sized transparent water vortex silently formed in his palm.

Although the suction wasn't strong, the vortex's rotation frequency was terrifyingly stable, as if it could spin like this until the end of time.

"Gentle, tolerant, enduring..." Su Ming murmured to himself, "This is the path that suits me."

He withdrew the technique, feeling the warm current slowly flowing through his meridians.

The hidden injuries left from his life-and-death struggle with Zhao Qianshan, and even the thin, weak meridians caused by long-term malnutrition, were all being slowly repaired under the nourishment of this water spiritual energy.

This was truly nourishing things silently.

"Alright, enough basking in the feeling." Lin Yu yawned, though he couldn't hide the fatigue in his voice, "Since your system upgrade was successful, isn't it time to install that 'antivirus software' for me?"

Su Ming was startled, then realized his master was talking about the Spirit Nourishing True Explanation.

He quickly straightened his posture, his expression solemn, "Master, your disciple will transmit the method now."

This time, it was no longer a one-way taking.

A faint light glowed at Su Ming's brow. He carefully, bit by bit, transmitted the golden scripture of the Spirit Nourishing True Explanation from the depths of his memory, sending it into the Xuantian ring through his divine sense.

Lin Yu didn't speak. The entire ring fell into a deathly silence.

Su Ming could feel that the usually cold and ancient ring was now slightly warm to the touch.

An almost imperceptible, gentle white light slowly seeped out from inside the ring.

The light wasn't dazzling, but carried a warmth that soothed the mind, like a soft silkworm cocoon, wrapping Lin Yu's illusory Soul Body layer by layer.

"Good stuff... truly good stuff..."

After a long while, Lin Yu's voice, carrying a slight tremor of admiration, finally drifted out.

"This isn't just a cultivation method, this is practically 'miracle water' for a Soul Body! I feel like those soul fragments of mine that were about to crack apart are being glued back together, bit by bit..."

Su Ming keenly noticed that as Lin Yu cultivated, the nearly invisible fine cracks on the inner wall of the Xuantian ring were also, under the nourishment of the white light, healing at an extremely slow pace.

Although this repair process consumed a tremendous amount of soul power—Lin Yu's aura was even weaker than before—the connection between him and the ring had become unprecedentedly close.

If Lin Yu was just a tenant living in the ring before, now he was gradually becoming the ring's true "vessel spirit."

"Master, how do you feel?" Su Ming asked with concern.

"Feel?" Lin Yu chuckled, his voice weak but carrying an unprecedented sense of ease, "It feels like I've finally been transferred from the ICU to a regular ward. I still need an IV drip, but at least I don't have to worry about being dragged away by the Black and White Impermanence at any moment. Although the specific effects of this method aren't fully clear yet, it's more than sufficient for now."

"Disciple, this gift, your master accepts it."

The rare serious tone made Su Ming's eyes feel slightly warm.

He lowered his head, hiding the emotion in his eyes, and said softly, "Master, you speak too gravely. Without you, Su Ming would have long been a pile of bones at the river bottom."

"Alright, alright, enough of this sentimental stuff, I'm getting goosebumps." Lin Yu immediately reverted to his usual irreverent tone, "We're a community of shared interests. Me staying alive means I can protect you; you getting stronger means you can support me in my old age. This is called... what was it... a win-win!"

"Now that both our 'software' has been upgraded, next, we should research the development of the 'application layer.'"

Lin Yu shifted the topic, steering it toward the field that also stirred Su Ming's heart—formations.

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[1,324 words]

"Master, I wish to go into seclusion."

Su Ming's voice was calm, yet it carried an undeniable decisiveness. "That 'True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction' is as vast as the sea. If I cannot settle my mind to delve into it deeply, I fear even a year or two will yield no progress. Moreover, the 'Like Water Art' has just taken initial form. I need time to adapt to this new power."

"Granted." Lin Yu agreed crisply and cleanly. "Sharpening the axe won't delay the woodcutting. However, what about all your affairs? The Repair Hall is a hot commodity now. If you, the 'Hall Master,' suddenly disappear, someone is bound to stir up trouble."

Su Ming straightened his somewhat oversized menial disciple's robe and re-hung the Mystic Iron token representing authority at his waist, a slight chill flashing in his eyes.

"Therefore, before entering seclusion, I must first secure my home."

He pushed open the door, strode out into the crisp, biting mountain wind of early morning, and walked away with large steps.

"The Repair Hall must be my stable and secure rear base."

...

Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

Though the sky was just beginning to brighten, the courtyard was already a scene of bustling activity.

There was none of the usual chaotic, disorderly noise. Instead, it was replaced by a pleasing sense of rhythm.

"Station One, Spirit Gathering Array Disk cleaning complete! Wear rate three percent! Transferring to Station Two for verification!"

"Received! Station Two ready to receive!"

"Warehouse Three! Three hundred catties of Hyacinth Crystal received today! Old Zhang, take some men to check the quality! Execute according to Article Three of the 'Su Standard'! Any with cracks are to be returned without exception!"

Su Ming stood at the courtyard gate, watching the scene before him that meshed and operated like precise gears, a slight curve lifting the corner of his mouth.

This was his masterpiece.

This was not merely a repair workshop. In this world of cultivation, this was the first nascent "assembly line."

"Hall Master!"

A cry of pleasant surprise broke Su Ming's observation.

He saw a man with half-gray hair, wearing a thick leather apron around his waist, quickly running over. His hands were still stained with spiritual ink, yet his face wore a relieved smile.

It was precisely Old Wang from the Accounting Office, whom Su Ming had promoted to be the Repair Hall's "chief steward."

"You finally show yourself!" Old Wang ran up close, not even bothering to wipe his sweat, and quickly reported. "These three days you were gone, we followed the 'Emergency Response Plan' Chapter Three you left behind. Everything was stable. The Vessel Hall sent another hundred formation plates yesterday, wanting to jump the queue. Old Li used your schedule chart to push them back. Although that steward's face looked sour, he didn't say anything."

Su Ming nodded, his gaze sweeping over the menial disciples in the courtyard who had stopped their work and were looking over.

Five core members, twenty auxiliary menial disciples.

In their eyes, there was awe, dependence, and also a bit of scrutiny.

Su Ming keenly caught several concealed gazes currently resting upon him.

The aura of the peak of the second stage of Qi Refining was simply too weak within the Cloud Hidden Sect, a place teeming with cultivators.

It was even weaker than most of the menial disciples doing heavy labor here.

If it were three days ago, he was at the third stage of Qi Refining. Though not high, at least among the menial disciples, he was considered quite capable.

But now, this cliff-like drop could not be hidden at all.

"Old Wang, gather everyone. I have something to say," Su Ming instructed plainly.

"Yes, sir!" Old Wang didn't hesitate in the slightest. He turned and bellowed, "Everyone, stop work! The Hall Master addresses us! Assemble!"

In less than ten breaths.

The twenty-five people were already standing neatly in the center of the courtyard. This level of discipline was something Su Ming had hammered into them through countless deductions of contribution points and rewards of spirit stones.

Su Ming walked up the steps, his gaze calmly sweeping over the entire group. He did not release any aura pressure—currently, he couldn't release much anyway. He simply stood there casually, hands tucked into his sleeves, like a mortal world schoolteacher.

"I know some of you are wondering why my cultivation has dropped."

Su Ming's first sentence caused a slight stir among the originally quiet crowd.

Old Wang and Old Li exchanged a glance, a trace of worry flashing in their eyes.

Su Ming smiled, admitting frankly, "There's nothing to guess about. A few days ago, I was fortunate to receive guidance from a senior of the sect. Only then did I realize the cultivation path I was following before was wrong. For the long term, I abolished my own cultivation, switched to a water-attribute cultivation method, and reforged my Dao foundation."

A low chorus of sharp inhales came from the crowd.

Abolishing one's own cultivation!

For these low-level menial disciples who viewed cultivation as their very life, this was an almost unimaginable act of ruthless determination. To just disperse the spiritual energy they had worked so hard to cultivate?

"What a ruthless person..."

"No wonder he can be the Hall Master. To be able to deal such a ruthless hand even to himself..."

The previously dismissive thoughts born from Su Ming's cultivation drop miraculously transformed at this moment into an even deeper awe.

A person who could be so ruthless to himself would only be more ruthless to others.

"For the next month, I will enter seclusion to stabilize my realm and also delve into some new formation techniques."

Su Ming took out a jade slip he had prepared long ago from his sleeve and handed it to Old Wang.

"During this period, all major and minor affairs of the hall will be jointly decided by Wang Ming and Li Hou. This jade slip contains the 'Phase Two Process Optimization Outline' and the 'Performance Assessment Supplementary Terms' I drafted. Follow them."

Old Wang received the jade slip with both hands, his back ramrod straight. "Hall Master, rest assured! Before you emerge from seclusion, if even a single formation flag in this courtyard is out of place, I, Old Wang, will offer my head!"

"It's not that serious." Su Ming patted Old Wang's shoulder, his tone softening a bit. "The Repair Hall is the rice bowl for all of us. If the bowl isn't held level, the rice spills. Guarding the rules is guarding our very lives."

He then looked towards Zhang Asheng, standing silently in the corner, and the sharp-eyed Zhao Tiezhu, among others.

"When I'm not here, if you encounter technical problems you cannot solve, first seal and store them, record them in the log, and wait for me to handle them upon my return. Remember, don't force repairs on things you don't understand. The reputation of our Repair Hall is 'stability,' not 'speed.'"

"Yes, sir!" everyone responded in unison, the sound wave causing the ivy on the courtyard wall to tremble.

Su Ming nodded with satisfaction.

He didn't say anything more, nor did he deliberately try to intimidate those whose thoughts were wavering.

Some authority isn't maintained by words, but by a long-established, machine-like, precise operating order.

Having given all instructions, Su Ming didn't linger any longer. He turned and left Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

Watching his slightly thin back disappear into the morning mist, a few newly arrived auxiliary menial disciples couldn't help but gather close to Old Wang.

"Steward Wang, the Hall Master is only at the second stage of Qi Refining now... are we...?"

"Are we what?" Old Wang abruptly turned around. His usually amiable round face was now full of murderous aura, his narrowed eyes gleaming with shrewd light. "Tired of living? Do you think the Hall Master's lower cultivation means he can't wield a blade anymore? Or do you think Elder Ma's Mystic Iron token is scrap metal?"

He raised the jade slip in his hand and sneered, "All of you, stay on your toes! The Hall Master is lying low! When he emerges from seclusion... hmph, the low-level formation circles of the Cloud Hidden Sect are probably going to see another upheaval."

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Chapter 196: Consolidating the Foundation of Formations

[1,379 words]

Courtyard D-7.

Su Ming closed the door behind him and hung the "Closed for Cultivation - Do Not Disturb" wooden placard on the door handle.

Then, he expertly pulled several low-grade spirit stones from under his bed and placed them at the four corners of the room according to a specific arrangement.

"Three Talents Concealing Spirit Formation, activate."

With a low chant, an invisible, transparent ripple gently spread out, isolating the entire room from the outside world. To the outside, this place still appeared utterly lifeless, but the concentration of spiritual energy inside the room was slowly rising.

After completing this, Su Ming finally let out a long sigh and sat cross-legged on the meditation cushion.

"Master, let's begin."

"Alright!"

The Xuantian ring vibrated slightly, and that earthy-yellow sphere of light—the "True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction"—once again materialized within Su Ming's Consciousness Sea.

This time, Su Ming didn't rush to copy those ready-made formation diagrams as he had done before.

He concentrated his divine sense into a sharp blade and fiercely stabbed it into the deepest part of the light sphere.

"Deconstruct!"

Boom!

Countless intricate runes exploded within his Consciousness Sea.

If looking at formation diagrams before was like looking at a "painting," then now, Su Ming was looking at the "bones."

He casually grabbed one of the most basic "Light" character runes.

This was the core of the "illumination formation" and also the most common, run-of-the-mill rune in the cultivation world. Any Qi Refining stage apprentice could create a glowing orb by simply drawing a circle with a spirit brush and filling it in with a few strokes.

But no one had ever thought, why draw it this way?

"The starting stroke is at the Qian position, channeling Yang Energy; the brushstroke passes through the Li position, igniting the fire attribute; the closing stroke returns to the Kun position, solidifying the form..."

In Su Ming's mind, Lin Yu's voice sounded like a narrator's commentary, filled with the desire for an outburst.

"Which idiot designed this? The dwell time at the Li position is way too long! This isn't illumination, this is boiling water! No wonder all the illumination formation plates in the sect feel hot to the touch. Half the energy is wasted as heat!"

Su Ming looked at the "Light" character rune magnified countless times within his Consciousness Sea.

Under Lin Yu's guidance, he could clearly see that when spiritual energy flowed through the turning points of the rune, due to uneven line thickness and harsh angles, it created violent turbulence and friction.

This friction was the source of the heat and the culprit behind the energy loss.

"Master, if it were you, how would you modify it?" Su Ming humbly sought guidance.

"Simple." Lin Yu's voice carried a sense of superiority from an industrial civilization.
"Change the right angles to rounded corners, reduce fluid resistance."

Su Ming extended a finger and gently traced through the air.

The water-attribute spiritual energy within his body surged out like silk threads, condensing but not dispersing at his fingertip.

This time, he didn't copy the ten-thousand-year-old drawing method.

The starting stroke was as round and smooth as a pearl.

The brushstroke flowed like floating clouds and flowing water. As it passed through the Li position, his wrist trembled three times with an extremely minute motion, using the oscillation of spiritual energy to construct a tiny folded loop.

"Pfft!"

A soft sound.

The rune at his fingertip had just taken shape when, due to the instability of the spiritual energy structure, it directly collapsed into a puff of spiritual energy mist.

"Failed." Su Ming frowned.

"Normal." Lin Yu said calmly. "Your current precision in spiritual energy control isn't sufficient yet. The radius of that loop is too small; spiritual energy gets congested inside it. You need to see it more clearly."

"How do I see it?"

"Use this."

Before the words faded, Su Ming suddenly felt the Xuantian ring on his finger grow warm.

An extremely faint, yet pure and heart-palpating power extended from the ring.

That was... soul power.

It was the first time Lin Yu had truly extended his power to the outside world after cultivating the "Spirit Nourishing True Explanation."

This soul power had no color or shape, but when it covered Su Ming's eyes, the world changed.

The previously empty air now appeared to Su Ming as countless floating dust particles and flowing lines of spiritual energy.

He looked down at his fingertip.

There, the mist of spiritual energy that had just collapsed hadn't fully dissipated yet.

Under the enhancement of Lin Yu's soul power, he could clearly see how those spiritual energy particles collided, entangled, and how they caused a "traffic accident" at that failed node.

"This is..." Su Ming's pupils contracted sharply, and a storm of shock surged in his heart.

This wasn't just assistance; this was practically activating a "microscope" cheat!

"Don't space out. My soul power can only last for the time it takes an incense stick to burn, and the range is only three feet." Lin Yu's voice sounded somewhat weak; clearly, this was a significant burden for him too. "Hurry up, strike while the iron is hot, correct it!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, suppressing the shock in his heart.

He raised his hand again.

This time, his movements were much slower, but terrifyingly steady.

In his field of vision, the spiritual energy at his fingertip was no longer a vague stream of air, but a river composed of countless blue points of light.

He carefully guided this river, navigating around those invisible reefs, correcting those tiny turbulent flows.

At that critical loop, he held his breath, controlling the spiritual energy particles to pass through in an incredibly profound spiral trajectory.

"Round and smooth... clear and unobstructed... closed loop."

The moment the final stroke was completed.

Hum—

A rune only the size of a thumbnail quietly floated in mid-air.

It didn't emit the dazzling white incandescent light like traditional illumination runes, nor did it radiate that dry, fiery heat.

It emitted a soft, cold white glow akin to moonlight.

Although this glow wasn't harsh, its penetrating power was extremely strong, instantly illuminating the dim meditation room, making every corner visible down to the finest detail, yet not leaving a single shadow.

What shocked Su Ming the most was that this rune's consumption of spiritual energy was shockingly low.

He had only input a tiny, extremely weak strand of spiritual energy, yet it shone brightly for a full ten breaths before its brightness began to slowly fade.

"Success!"

Looking at this small rune, as exquisite as a work of art, Su Ming's eyes shone with the light of wild joy.

"Energy consumption reduced by at least forty percent... no, close to fifty percent!" Su Ming quickly calculated the data in his mind. "And the light is stable, no flicker, no heat. If used in places requiring long-term illumination like archive halls or mine tunnels..."

"This is the beauty of 'industrial design'." Lin Yu withdrew his soul power, his voice full of fatigue yet tinged with pride. "Remember this, disciple. In this world, other people's formations are for 'blowing things up.' Our formations are for 'using.' That is our core competitive advantage."

Su Ming carefully dispersed that rune with a wave of his hand, not letting it continue to shine.

He knew how much profit this tiny rune could bring to the Repair Hall if it spread, and also how much trouble.

"This thing cannot see the light of day for now." Su Ming said calmly. "At least not until my strength recovers to the mid-stage of Qi Refining."

"Oh, very aware." Lin Yu teased. "I thought you'd be so excited you'd go show off to that kid surnamed Luo."

"Luo Feng?" Su Ming shook his head, a cold smile curling at the corner of his mouth. "He's a genius who looks down on these 'clever tricks and wicked crafts.' In his eyes, only those killing formations that can channel the power of heaven and earth are the true path. And this... is merely a craftsman's trick."

"But he doesn't understand." Su Ming looked at his palm, slowly clenching it into a fist. "Often, it's these insignificant 'tricks' that can take a person's life at a critical moment."

What if the principle of this "Cold Light" rune was used in reverse?

What if, when an enemy thought it was an illumination formation, that "loop" was suddenly reversed, creating spiritual energy turbulence...

That would be an instant flashbang!

Su Ming's thoughts began to diverge. Under the collision between the "True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction" and Lin Yu's "scientific cultivation" philosophy, a door to a new world was slowly opening.

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

Chapter 197: Water Refining Equipment

[1,285 words]

The air in the meditation room seemed to solidify, with only the faint hum of the concealment formation plate in the corner breaking the silence.

Su Ming sat cross-legged, a pile of messy materials laid out before him: Red Copper, Star Pattern Steel, and several pieces of unrefined crude mica stone. His gaze was fixed on the fingernail-sized piece of Red Copper in his hand, his brow deeply furrowed as if trying to solve an unsolvable math problem.

"Master, something's not right."

Su Ming put down the Red Copper and let out a long sigh. "According to the theory in the 'True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction,' as long as my control over spiritual energy is precise enough, I should be able to construct perfect circuits inside the material. But... there are just too many impurities inside this Red Copper. My spiritual energy barely probes in before being blocked by those tiny grains of sand and air bubbles. It's like trying to drive a car on a wasteland full of rubble; you simply can't get up to speed."

Just now, he had tried to verify the reverse application of that "Cold Light" rune—the "flashbang" concept. But before he could even complete the reversal cycle, the Red Copper, unable to withstand the heat generated by the turbulent flow of spiritual energy, cracked in half with a sharp *snap*.

"Expected," Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind, carrying a trace of worldly-wearied laziness. "Even the cleverest housewife can't cook a meal without rice. The most exquisite formation diagram is futile if inscribed on common iron. How do the artifact forgers in the sect handle this?"

"With fire," Su Ming recalled the scenes he had secretly observed in the Vessel Hall before. "They use earth fire or their own pill fire to repeatedly smelt and burn, turning impurities into ash or smoke."

"A clumsy method, yet direct," Lin Yu commented. "However, smelting with fierce fire is overly aggressive and leaves hidden consequences. While impurities are removed, the material's own spiritual nature is also damaged. It's like setting yourself on fire to ward off the cold—the gain does not outweigh the loss."

"Then..." Su Ming looked thoughtfully at the ruined piece of Red Copper in his hand. "Since I'm currently cultivating a water-attribute technique... can I use water?"

"Water?" Lin Yu was momentarily stunned, then his phantom within the ring abruptly sat up straight. "You mean... high-pressure water jets? Or chemical leaching?"

Su Ming didn't answer. Instead, he directly began to act.

He took a jade bowl, filled it with clean water, then cupped his hands in a void embrace and activated the 'Like Water Art.'

Dark blue water spiritual energy flowed out from his fingertips, slowly infusing into the jade bowl. The originally calm water seemed to be given life, beginning to rotate slowly and rhythmically.

"Go."

Su Ming flicked his finger, and a thumb-sized piece of crude mica stone fell into the water.

This time, he didn't just simply flush the surface like when performing a 'Cleaning Technique.' With the assistance of Lin Yu's soul power providing a supplementary perspective, he controlled those strands of water spiritual energy, fine as gossamer, like a swarm of micro-sharks that had caught the scent of blood. They followed the tiny fissures on the mica stone's surface and fiercely drilled in!

"The characteristics of water are 'moistening' and 'penetrating,'" Su Ming said with his eyes slightly closed, concentrating fully on perceiving the water flow's feedback. "It permeates everywhere. As long as there's a crack, it can get in. Once it gets in... it can squeeze out the things hidden deep inside!"

Hum!

The water flow in the jade bowl suddenly accelerated, emitting a dense, vibrating sound.

In Su Ming's perception, that hard piece of mica stone was undergoing a microscopic-level "baptism." Gentle yet tenacious water spiritual energy seeped between every crystal grain, tenderly but firmly enveloping the sand, iron filings, and other substances that didn't belong to the mica structure. Then, using the water flow's tension, it began to slowly "pull" them out, bit by bit.

This wasn't like violent excavation. It was more like a precise vascular clearance surgery.

A moment later.

Threads of black filaments drifted out from within the mica stone, muddying the bowl of clear water.

When Su Ming withdrew his spiritual energy and fished out that piece of mica stone, even the well-traveled Lin Yu couldn't help but whistle in admiration.

The originally dull, gray mica stone with mottled spots had now become crystal clear, emitting a warm, lustrous glow in the dim meditation room.

Although its volume had shrunk a little, that level of purity made it seem like a completely different stone.

"Incredible!" Lin Yu exclaimed in amazement. "This isn't artifact forging; this is clearly 'ultrasonic cleaning' plus 'solvent extraction'! Disciple, your mind works fast! You've actually grasped the essence of fluid mechanics without a teacher!"

Su Ming looked at the nearly perfect piece of mica stone in his hand, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Fire refining removes its form; water refining extracts its essence," Su Ming murmured to himself, gently rubbing the stone's surface with his fingers. The smooth, delicate texture made him reluctant to let it go. "Fire nature is violent and inevitably damages the foundation; water nature is enduring and can eliminate the dross while preserving the essence. Master, I think... this is the path for my future artifact forging."

"Not just a path, this is practically a cheat!" Lin Yu chuckled. "Think about it. In the future, others will have to guard their furnaces, getting smoked and exhausted like a dead dog. You'll just need to brew a cup of tea, get a basin of water, and elegantly get the job done. Moreover, materials processed by this 'Water Refining Method' have a more complete internal structure, and their affinity with spiritual energy is increased by at least thirty percent!"

Su Ming nodded and immediately placed this processed mica stone on the workbench.

"Then let's try using this 'Water-Refined Mica' to bear that modified 'Spirit Gathering' rune."

This time, Su Ming wielded his brush as if divinely inspired.

The water-refined mica stone was transparent and unobstructed inside. Su Ming's spiritual energy brushstrokes moved within it as smoothly as a hot knife through butter, incredibly fluid.

He didn't draw that explosive "flashbang" again. Instead, he incorporated the "voltage stabilization" concept Lin Yu had mentioned earlier.

At the core of the traditional Spirit Gathering rune, he added a "buffer loop" resembling water ripples. The function of this loop wasn't to block spiritual energy, but to use the "viscosity" of water spiritual energy to "stretch" the originally violently rushing spiritual energy, turning it into a gentle, continuous flow.

A quarter of an hour later.

A formation plate emitting a faint blue light took shape.

It didn't whip up a whirlwind of spiritual energy upon activation like the Spirit Gathering plates on the market, sending sand and stones flying everywhere.

It was as quiet as a piece of jade resting at the bottom of a pond.

But Su Ming could clearly feel that the surrounding spiritual energy was gathering towards this formation plate at an extremely gentle, stable, and continuous rate.

Like spring rain moistening things silently, the spiritual energy concentration in the entire meditation room had already increased by twenty percent without anyone noticing.

"Perfect," Lin Yu gave his evaluation. "Cultivating in this kind of environment makes it less likely to deviate from the proper path and go berserk. It's especially suitable for seclusion. Disciple, if you take this out to sell, those old monsters afraid of death will wear out your doorstep."

Su Ming smiled faintly, carefully placed the formation plate beside him, then formed hand seals and slowly closed his eyes.

"We'll talk about making money later. Now that we have this 'voltage-stabilized' environment, it's time... to attend to the real business."

Formations and artifact forging are, in the end, merely techniques.

Cultivation base is the true path.

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

Chapter 198: Let Your Master Show You a Grand Scene

[1,264 words]

Time lost all meaning within the mountains.

The meditation room in Courtyard D-7 seemed to have transformed into an isolated island, cut off from the rest of the world.

Su Ming was completely immersed in cultivating the Like Water Art.

Thanks to the assistance of that "Water Refinement Spirit Gathering Plate," coupled with the wondrous mutual generation cycle of Water and Wood within his body, his cultivation progress advanced by leaps and bounds each day.

Unlike the forced, "pulling up seedlings to help them grow" feeling he experienced when cultivating wood-element techniques in the past, this breakthrough came naturally and effortlessly.

He felt as if he had become an inexhaustible water-absorbing sponge.

The gentle, moist water spiritual energy around him continuously seeped into his body through his pores and breath. It was neither rushed nor impatient, neither striving nor competing, simply filling Su Ming's meridians, Dantian, and every inch of his flesh and blood bit by bit.

Second-stage Qi Refining, perfected...

Third-stage Qi Refining...

Third-stage Qi Refining, peak...

If it were anyone else, when impacting the small bottleneck of the fourth stage of Qi Refining—the transition from early to mid-stage—they would often need to accumulate power to make a fierce charge, to break through the shackles of their meridians.

But Su Ming did not "charge."

He simply "waited."

He waited for the water spiritual energy within his body to accumulate to its limit, for that feeling of overflowing to flow naturally.

When a vessel is full, it overflows. This is the way of heaven.

Late at night on the seventh day.

Just as a dewdrop outside the window slid down a bamboo leaf and fell onto a stone step with a soft *plink*.

A nearly imperceptible *pop* also sounded from within Su Ming's body.

It was like the final drop of water entering an already brimming cup.

There was no violent tremor, nor any painful tearing.

That originally resilient bottleneck, faced with the vast and mighty water spiritual energy, dissolved silently and without a trace, like a piece of paper soaked through.

Boom!

The Qihai within his Dantian suddenly expanded twofold.

The spiritual energy that was once like a meandering stream instantly transformed into a surging river.

An unprecedented sense of fullness and control instantly spread throughout his entire body.

Fourth-stage Qi Refining!

Su Ming slowly opened his eyes.

For an instant, a deep, tranquil pool seemed to flash within the depths of his pupils.

He raised his hand and looked at his fingertips. Without deliberately circulating his cultivation method, the moisture in the surrounding air automatically gathered at his fingertips, condensing into a crystal-clear water droplet that changed shape according to his will—sometimes transforming into a sharp ice needle, sometimes into a flexible water shield, and sometimes into a harmless puff of mist.

Moistening, permeating, enduring.

This was the true essence of water spiritual energy.

"Congratulations, disciple. Your Dao foundation has taken its initial form, and your realm is stable." Lin Yu's voice sounded at the perfect moment, carrying a note of gratification. "This breakthrough was smooth and flawless, with a solid foundation. Your future prospects are promising."

A slight smile touched the corner of Su Ming's mouth. He clenched his fist, feeling the surging power within his body.

"So this is the mid-stage of Qi Refining..."

Even though it was only an increase of one stage, he felt that his current self could defeat ten of his former selves.

That power was no longer something borrowed, a violent force that could go berserk at any moment. It was now completely his own, an extension of his will as natural as moving his own arm.

"Master, how are things on your end?" Su Ming did not forget to inquire about the one inside the ring.

These past few days, his cultivation had progressed smoothly, but he could occasionally sense extremely obscure fluctuations emanating from the Xuantian ring. Clearly, Lin Yu hadn't been idle either.

"Me?"

Lin Yu sighed, his tone carrying a hint of trouble. "It's hard to explain in a few words. Your teacher here has encountered some difficulties regarding the compatibility of a cultivation method."

Inside the Xuantian ring.

Although Lin Yu's ethereal form was now much more solid than before—even the helpless expression on his face was clearly visible—he was scratching his head in frustration before a suspended piece of golden scripture.

It was precisely that Spirit Nourishing True Explanation.

"Disciple, isn't this strange?" Lin Yu pointed at the scripture. "The effects of this cultivation method are outstanding. After cultivating it for these past few days, my soul body has become more solid, and my mind feels clear and refreshed. But upon carefully contemplating its crucial points, I find them all exceedingly bizarre."

"Bizarre?" Su Ming was puzzled.

"Exactly! Many of its descriptions defy common sense!" Lin Yu spoke as if facing an incomprehensible text. "Look at this line—'Draw upon the spiritual energy of heaven and earth, transform it into intangible touch, use the soul as skin, and thought as bone.' What does this mean? How can a soul body serve as skin? How can thought act as bone?"

"And this line—'Scatter to become qi, gather to become form, without fixed momentum, without constant shape, moving according to the heart.' This is simply impossible for a human body's structure to achieve! Humans have physical bodies; the soul is locked within the flesh. If one truly practiced according to its instructions, 'scattering' the soul into qi, wouldn't that turn one into a wandering ghost?"

Lin Yu grew more agitated as he spoke. "I am increasingly convinced that this method was not designed for the human race at all! Its presumed cultivation foundation is a type of being without a substantial physical form, one composed purely of spiritual mechanisms!"

Su Ming's heart stirred.

Without a physical body... a pure energy form...

"Master, are you saying..."

"Correct." Lin Yu's voice grew solemn. "I suspect this Spirit Nourishing True Explanation was prepared for those naturally born 'spirit races,' or perhaps some kind of energy-based life form!"

Su Ming fell silent.

No wonder the old man guarding the pavilion had said those words back then.

The path of the soul was mysterious and profoundly difficult. If Lin Yu weren't already in a soul body state, he would have likely deviated from the proper path and gone berserk long ago.

"However..." Lin Yu suddenly changed the subject, his tone becoming somewhat strange. "Even though it's illogical, I just tried forcibly operating the 'Spirit Communication' chapter within it, and as a result... something strange happened."

"What strange thing?" Su Ming immediately became alert.

"I felt... emotions."

Lin Yu's voice became somewhat distant, as if recalling an indescribable experience. "Not my emotions, nor yours. But... this ring's."

Su Ming instinctively lowered his head to look at the Xuantian ring on his hand.

This ancient, simple ring had been on his finger for so long. Apart from storing items and housing his master, it had always seemed like an inanimate object.

"The ring... also has emotions?"

"It didn't before, or perhaps they were sealed. But as my soul power strengthened, especially just now when I tried to touch it using that 'non-human' logic..."

Lin Yu took a deep breath. "Disciple, prepare yourself. I'm going to take you... to witness a grand spectacle."

Before his words faded.

Su Ming felt a sudden, intense heat at the base of his finger.

This time, it wasn't the gentle, auxiliary perspective from before. Instead, it was an overwhelmingly domineering suction force that directly yanked his divine sense and violently slammed it toward the depths of the ring!

"Master!" Su Ming cried out in alarm.

"Don't resist! Follow my guidance! Use the 'permeation' concept of the Like Water Art, imagine yourself as a drop of water!" Lin Yu's shout exploded within his Consciousness Sea.

Su Ming immediately abandoned all resistance. Instinctively, he activated his cultivation method, transforming his divine sense into a gentle stream of water, and followed that suction force, drilling inward.

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Chapter 199: The Realm of Perceiving the Minutest Detail!

[1,443 words]

Bzzzt—

The world changed.

It was no longer the familiar storage space cluttered with miscellaneous items.

Su Ming felt as if he had passed through a thick membrane, entering a gray, boundless expanse.

There was no light here, no sound, only a suffocating, heavy sense of oppression.

It was like standing amidst the ruins of a primordial era that had been annihilated for endless eons, facing the long river of time, feeling nothing but insignificance and solitude.

"This is..." Su Ming was so shocked he couldn't speak.

"This is the Xuantian ring's place of origin," Lin Yu's figure materialized beside him, his expression equally grave. "Or rather, the location of its dormant 'spirituality.'"

He stretched out his hand, pointing towards the gray void ahead.

"Can you feel it? That emotion."

Su Ming closed his eyes, quietly perceiving.

Sorrow.

Endless sorrow.

And also... a near-desperate waiting.

It was as if a voice, within the long river of time, was calling out a certain name over and over again, yet never receiving a response. That voice, from its initial anticipation, turned to disappointment, and finally transformed into this dead, silent grayness.

"It is waiting," Su Ming blurted out.

"Indeed," Lin Yu nodded, a flash of wisdom in his eyes. "And the one it awaits is definitely not human. The cadence of this emotional fluctuation is completely different from human soul resonance. If I hadn't cultivated this 'Spirit Nourishing True Explanation,' making my soul body's characteristics approach those of the spirit races, I would have been utterly unable to use this 'Spirit Communication' state to temporarily guide your divine sense here."

"Master, you mean..." The speculation in Su Ming's heart grew clearer. "The creator of this ring, or rather, the ring's original owner, was from the spirit races?"

"Almost certainly," Lin Yu's tone was firm. "No wonder the formations within are so profoundly mysterious, even I find it difficult to fully comprehend their intricacies."

As they spoke, Lin Yu's expression suddenly shifted.

"This is a once-in-a-millennium opportunity! Disciple, don't just stand there wallowing in sentiment! This place is the ring spirit's origin space. In this 'Spirit Communication' state, your perception will be amplified to the extreme, allowing you to glimpse a microscopic realm unreachable by ordinary means. This is 'perceiving the minutest detail'! Quickly, take advantage of this excellent opportunity, look inward!"

"Perceiving the minutest detail?" This was the first time Su Ming had heard of this state.

"Correct! Ordinary introspection is merely a vague sensing of the flow of blood, qi, and spiritual energy, like viewing something through a veil. But 'perceiving the minutest detail' is an extremely profound method of soul power application. One can only enter this state for a brief moment, either by relying on a secret treasure or encountering a rare opportunity. In this state, you can observe your own meridians and acupoints as clearly as the lines on your palm, perceive the finest details, leaving no hidden flaws concealed! Quickly, turn your awareness back upon yourself!"

Turn awareness back upon himself?

Su Ming instinctively directed his divine sense towards his own body.

Boom!

Instantly, Su Ming's soul was stirred, he could hardly contain himself.

What did he see?

It was no longer a flesh-and-blood body.

In his "eyes," his own self had transformed into a vast and intricate three-dimensional star chart!

Meridians became surging blue rivers of stars, meandering through the endless dark void.

Acupoints resembled brilliant stars, rotating and breathing according to mysterious trajectories.

Even the flow of blood, the fibers of muscles, the texture of bones—everything was revealed in minute detail, clear to the extreme!

"This is... the realm of perceiving the minutest detail?" Su Ming was speechless with shock.

"Exactly! This is high-definition, uncensored introspection!" Lin Yu excitedly pointed out. "Don't just stand there dazed, quickly look at the foundation of your Dantian's Qihai! That is the location of your Dao foundation!"

Su Ming immediately cast his "gaze" towards his Dantian.

He saw that at the center of the Qihai, the spiritual energy vortex that he had previously perceived as merely a chaotic mass of qi now clearly manifested as a massive, slowly rotating blue spiral structure.

Countless tiny blue light points were arranged according to a golden ratio spiral trajectory, layer upon layer, as precise as a functioning galaxy.

And at the center of this galaxy, that tender green wood-element seedling gently swayed.

Su Ming could even see the fine hairs on its roots, greedily absorbing nutrients from the surrounding water spiritual energy, then transforming them into threads of vibrant green light points, feeding them back to the entire galaxy.

However, this supposedly flawless spiral structure was covered with dozens of subtle, hairline cracks resembling crazing on porcelain. Especially at the core foundation of the spiral, a distinct break and distortion was glaringly obvious, as if the center of the galaxy had been damaged, causing the entire spiritual energy vortex's operation to carry a sense of laboriousness, its light uneven and dim.

"See that? These are the Dao foundation injuries left by that Foundation Establishment cultivator's shockwave attack!" Lin Yu's voice carried a chill. "They hinder the condensation and circulation of your spiritual energy at all times, making your cultivation efforts yield half the result for twice the work, and they are fatal hidden dangers when you attempt to break through to higher realms in the future! Ordinary elixirs are utterly incapable of repairing this kind of fundamental, root-level damage."

Su Ming's heart turned cold. So he had been carrying such a heavy burden all along.

"And there! Three inches below the left rib, that small tributary meridian!" Lin Yu pointed to another location.

Su Ming focused his gaze.

He saw that within the originally smooth blue river of stars, at a location of a small tributary meridian below his left rib, there was an extremely inconspicuous patch of gray shadow.

The flow of spiritual energy there was noticeably sluggish, like a hidden reef blocking a river, causing a slight turbulence in the surrounding current.

"This is..." Su Ming's heart tightened.

"That's the hidden injury left from your fall off the cliff," Lin Yu said gravely. "Although the 'Hundred-Herb Revival Pill' healed the major damage, this clot of stagnant blood has remained stuck in the fine meridian. Normally you wouldn't feel it, but at a critical moment, this little thing could cause your meridians to reverse and your efforts to be wasted!"

Su Ming broke out in a cold sweat.

If not for this "high-definition introspection," this hidden danger would likely have remained buried, eventually becoming a fatal bomb.

"Now! Flush it open with water spiritual energy!" Lin Yu shouted sharply. "Use the 'permeation' power you just comprehended! Don't force it, grind it away slowly!"

Su Ming dared not delay.

In this microscopic perspective, manipulating spiritual energy became exceptionally simple and intuitive.

With a thought, a slender stream of water energy split off, accurately rushing towards that patch of gray shadow.

He controlled the force and angle of the water stream, slowly chipping away at that "hidden reef."

Threads of black impurities were carried away by the water flow, dissipating into the void.

A moment later.

As the last trace of shadow vanished, that tributary meridian suddenly became clear and unobstructed.

Hum!

Su Ming felt his body lighten, as if he had shed a heavy burden. The speed and smoothness of his internal spiritual energy circulation instantly increased by more than five percent!

"Excellent! First step complete!" Lin Yu's voice also carried a hint of weary excitement. "Dao foundation damage cannot be restored in a day, but now that you've seen it, you can gradually work on it in the future. This experience of 'perceiving the minutest detail' will be of immense benefit to your future cultivation! Remember this feeling of controlling your own body!"

Just as master and disciple were immersed in this joy, the surrounding gray space suddenly began to tremble violently.

A repulsive force abruptly arose.

"Not good! Time's up! My soul power can't hold on anymore!" Lin Yu yelled. "Retreat! Retreat now!"

Su Ming felt his vision blur. That high-definition view instantly shattered, and his divine sense was violently flung back into his body by a tremendous force.

Whoosh—

Meditation room.

Su Ming's eyes snapped open. He gasped for breath, his entire body already drenched in sweat.

But the light in his eyes was brighter than ever before.

"Master..."

"Don't speak, let me recover..."

From within the ring, Lin Yu's voice was as weak as a mosquito's hum. Clearly, the operation just now had nearly drained all the soul power he had painstakingly accumulated. "Using 'cheats' also comes with a price... but it was worth it."

Su Ming looked at the ring in his hand, his expression complex.

This night, he had not only broken through to the fourth layer of Qi Refining, not only eliminated a hidden danger, but more importantly, he and his master had glimpsed a deeper layer of truth about this world.

Spirit races, ancient formations, microscopic perspective...

This path of cultivation seemed even more exciting, and even more... dangerous, than he had imagined.

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

Chapter 200: Inspecting the Accounts?

[1,236 words]

Su Ming had just completed a cycle of circulating the Like Water Art. The water spiritual energy within his body surged like a great river, finally converging into the deep, dark blue pool of his Dantian.

He slowly exhaled a mouthful of turbid air. The white vapor shot out like an arrow, condensing in the air without dispersing, only gradually fading away after traveling three feet.

"The fourth layer of Qi Refining is now completely stable."

Feeling the smooth, unimpeded sense of power within his body, Su Ming's mind settled slightly.

Just then, a series of urgent yet suppressed knocks shattered the night's tranquility.

Three long, two short, extremely light—if not for Su Ming's keen divine sense, he would have barely heard them.

"Hmm?" Inside the ring, Lin Yu's phantom image yawned. "Who has such poor manners in the middle of the night? That knocking sounds like a thief."

Su Ming frowned slightly, swept his divine sense outward, then stood up. With a light flick of his finger, he deactivated the door restriction.

A round, plump figure rolled in like a ball, turned around with surprising agility to close the door, then leaned against the door panel, panting heavily. His forehead was covered in a fine sheen of oily sweat.

"Steward Wang?" Su Ming was somewhat surprised.

The visitor was none other than Wang Defa, the supervisor of the Accounting Office in the External Affairs Hall.

The usually smiling, Buddha-like Wang the fat man now had not a trace of a smile on his face. His small eyes, narrowed to slits by fat, were filled with anxiety and panic.

"My little ancestor! You still have the mind to cultivate!" Wang Defa didn't bother wiping his sweat, lowering his voice in a rushed tone. "Something huge has happened! The sky is falling!"

Su Ming's expression remained unchanged. He turned and poured a cup of cold tea, handing it over. "If the sky falls, the tall ones will hold it up. Steward Wang, sit and speak."

Wang Defa took the teacup and gulped it down. The cool tea calmed him slightly.

He glanced at Su Ming's unnervingly calm face, and miraculously, the anxiety in his heart subsided a few degrees.

"Steward Liu has made his move."

Wang Defa took a deep breath and dropped a bombshell. "Steward Liu has teamed up with those people from the Vessel Hall, armed with a 'Resource Verification Order,' claiming they want to thoroughly investigate all the ledgers and material consumption of the Repair Hall over the past three months. This happened the moment Elder Ma left for closed-door cultivation."

"The pretext is 'preventing sect resource loss, eradicating corruption.' But in reality..." Wang Defa sneered, a flash of ruthlessness in his eyes. "They're coming for us! And they're coming for your 'Quasi-Outer Sect Disciple' status!"

"The Vessel Hall has long been eyeing the Repair Hall's efficiency and that staggering flow of contribution points with envy. Now that Elder Ma has entered a life-and-death seclusion, that bastard Liu wants to take advantage and swallow this fat piece of meat... or... ruin your reputation and kick you out of the game!"

After speaking, Wang Defa stared intently at Su Ming, hoping to see panic or anger on this young Hall Master's face.

But he was disappointed.

Su Ming merely gently rubbed the teacup in his hand. A faint layer of water mist swirled around his fingertips, as if he hadn't heard this news concerning his very life and livelihood.

"Is that all?" Su Ming looked up.

Wang Defa was stunned. "Huh?"

"I thought demonic cultivators were attacking the mountain, or the Sect Grand Protective Formation had cracked." A faint curve appeared at the corner of Su Ming's mouth. That smile carried a hint of something Wang Defa couldn't quite grasp... contempt?

"Checking the accounts?" Inside the ring, Lin Yu let out a derisive snort.

Su Ming put down the teacup, stood up, walked to the window, and looked out at the dark night in the distance.

"Steward Wang, who handled the Repair Hall's accounts?"

"It was... Old Wang from our Accounting Office, Wang Ming." Wang Defa answered instinctively. "And Li Hou and the others cross-checked each other."

"And the procedures?"

"They all followed the 'Su Standard' you established. Every spirit stone, every tael of material has inbound and outbound records, signatures from the handlers, even categorized and weighed records for waste materials."

"Then what are you afraid of?" Su Ming turned around. His gaze was like water, yet weighed a thousand pounds.

Wang Defa opened his mouth, suddenly feeling his throat go dry.

Yes, what am I afraid of?

In the past, he feared audits because the accounts always had ambiguous areas, always had loopholes from personal favors. But the current Repair Hall was like a precision machine. Every component operated under the sunlight, clean to a terrifying degree.

"But... those people from the Vessel Hall are experts. If they make a fuss about the material loss rate, insisting we're wasteful..." Wang Defa was still somewhat worried. "If they want to condemn, they will never lack a pretext."

"Then let them come."

Su Ming's voice turned cold. "Help me relay a message to Old Wang: proceed as usual. Work as they should, eat as they should. If they want to investigate, open the doors wide and let them investigate. Place all the original documents, repair records, waste material charts, everything on the table."

"Additionally," Su Ming paused, a glint of sharp light flashing in his eyes, "tell Old Wang to prepare that ledger. Since guests have come, we must have a return gift."

Seeing Su Ming's confident demeanor, Wang Defa's hanging heart finally settled back into place.

"Got it!" The fat on Wang the fat man's face trembled, regaining its usual shrewdness. "With your word, I know what to do now. Damn it, that bastard Liu thinks he can squeeze me like a soft persimmon. This time, I'll make sure he loses a few teeth!"

After Wang Defa left, the room returned to silence.

"Disciple, that was a decent act." Lin Yu applauded inside the ring. "Unmoved even if Mount Tai collapses before you, you have the bearing of your teacher in his youth. But, what's that 'ledger'? How come I don't know about it?"

Su Ming sat back down cross-legged, closed his eyes, and said calmly, "Master, don't you often say the best defense is a good offense? They want to investigate our losses. Then we'll help them investigate the true quality of those 'raw materials' delivered by the Vessel Hall."

Lin Yu was taken aback for a moment, then burst into a burst of laughter like clanging bells.

"Hahahaha! Holy shit, you're going to expose the Vessel Hall's dirty secrets!"

...

The moon reached its zenith.

Tonight was a full moon. The silver disc hung high, pouring down cold, silvery moonlight like a waterfall, dyeing the Cloud Hidden Sect's sea of clouds a silvery white.

Su Ming did not continue cultivating inside his room. Instead, he quietly arrived at a sheer cliff in the back mountain.

This place faced the direction of Teachings Peak, with an open view and the most abundant moonlight.

He took out from his chest the non-metallic, non-wooden token given by the old library keeper. The token's surface had no patterns, only a simple, ancient, weathered texture. It felt slightly cool in his hand.

"This is the VIP admission ticket." Lin Yu sighed. "Disciple, give it a try. That old man said it could stir the starlight of the Transmission Pagoda. I want to see just how powerful this otherworldly 'star link' is."

Su Ming nodded, took a deep breath, and slowly channeled the water spiritual energy from his body into the token.

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