

Transmigrated into a Grandpa, Embracing the Laid-Back Life

Chapter 201: Borrowing the Starlight Power of the Transmission Tower

[1,370 words]

Those usually obscure and difficult-to-understand barriers, those abstract descriptions about "the softness of water" and "the resilience of water," were now like being stripped of their outer garments, revealing their most fundamental textures.

"Water is not formless, but possesses ten thousand forms."

Su Ming subconsciously raised his hand, his fingertips tracing patterns in the empty air.

The surrounding water vapor, guided by his will, no longer simply coalesced into a sphere but transformed into a thin, cicada-wing-like water film.

This water film shimmered with a rainbow halo under the moonlight, appearing incredibly fragile. Yet when Su Ming tried to strike it with a burst of spiritual energy, the film simply dented, swirled, dispersed the force, and then bounced back completely intact.

"Using softness to overcome hardness, borrowing force to counter force."

A flash of enlightenment dawned in Su Ming's eyes.

This was the true defensive method of the Like Water Art.

It wasn't about stubbornly resisting like an earthen wall, but rather, like the surface of water, it embraced, dissolved, and reflected force back.

Just as Su Ming was immersed in the euphoria of this sudden insight, a vast and powerful divine sense, without any warning, swept through his Consciousness Sea.

The feeling was like being glanced upon by a higher-dimensional being.

There was no privacy to speak of.

"Who?!" Lin Yu inside the ring instantly bristled, his Soul Body shrinking into a tight ball. "Holy crap, this divine sense..."

However, that divine sense did not linger, nor did it attack.

It merely confirmed Su Ming's identity and the aura of that token, then withdrew.

And it left Su Ming with a message:

"The soul cultivation method you practice belongs to the defensive path of the spirit races. However, the method is incomplete. Proceed cautiously along this path, do not become fixated or stubborn."

Su Ming's entire body stiffened, cold sweat instantly soaking through his back. He relayed this message to Lin Yu.

"Master, the key point is that sentence," Su Ming said with a grave expression. "The defensive path of the spirit races. The method is incomplete."

Inside the ring, Lin Yu's expression became unprecedentedly serious.

He closed his eyes, carefully savoring the lingering resonance left by that divine sense.

After a long while, Lin Yu suddenly opened his eyes, a brilliant light bursting forth from them.

"I understand!"

"I finally understand why those nonsensical logics in the Spirit Nourishing True Explanation existed!"

"Spirit races... defensive path... method incomplete..."

Lin Yu's voice rang in Su Ming's mind, filled with the wild joy of clouds parting to reveal the sun, and a deeply hidden trace of lingering fear. "This teacher always felt this cultivation method operated with abnormal sluggishness, soul power was like a wild horse difficult to tame, and many crucial points defied common sense! So it wasn't that the method was flawed, but that we... were walking the wrong path!"

His ethereal form floated excitedly within the ring's space, his soul light flickering unsteadily.

"Disciple, you must understand. For human cultivation, whether it's the Dao, Demonic, Buddhist, or Demonic Beast paths, they all use the physical body as the foundational cauldron, the meridians and acupoints as the pathways, emphasizing condensation, purification, and control. But this Spirit Nourishing True Explanation, its fundamental

essence lies in 'dispersion rather than gathering,' 'fusion rather than solidification,' 'defense rather than offense!' This is more like a method tailor-made for those spirit races born of heaven and earth, formless and immaterial, resonating with the world!"

"I was previously using a human soul to forcibly harness a spirit race method. It was like making a land beast practice the swimming techniques of deep-sea fish. How could it not be constrained at every turn, fraught with dangers?"

Su Ming asked with concern, "Then Master, your current condition..."

"Haha, it's fine! Now that we know the root of the problem, there is a solution!"

Lin Yu let out a hearty laugh, the fluctuations of his Soul Body exuding a confident, enlightened aura. "What the Pagoda Spirit said about the 'defensive path' is the key! It clarified that the core of this method is not about advancing and conquering, but about strengthening the foundation and cultivating the source, about constructing an indestructible soul barrier!"

As he spoke, the originally somewhat restless, outward-pulsing soul power fluctuations within the Xuantian ring suddenly changed. They rapidly converged and retracted like a receding tide.

Lin Yu no longer forcibly compressed and condensed his soul power. Instead, he followed the guidance of those obscure scriptures within the Spirit Nourishing True Explanation, letting his soul power naturally "disperse," transforming into a gentle yet resilient mist of light that slowly fused with the internal spatial structure of the ring.

Hum—

The ring no longer felt hot. Instead, it began to emit an aura as smooth and round as warm jade, as deep and serene as a deep pool.

Lin Yu's Soul Body did not weaken because of this "dispersion." On the contrary, it seemed to have found its rightful place, establishing an unprecedented, intimate connection with this mysterious ancient ring.

"Marvelous!"

Lin Yu let out a sigh of contentment. "The soul returns to its position, the spirit bonds with its vessel! Disciple, this teacher now feels that my relationship with this ring is no longer one of mere residence, but... a soul-deep connection, as if I am its spirit!"

"Not only that," Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of exploration, "the compatibility between my soul and this ring has greatly increased. I seem... able to perceive some secrets that were previously beyond my reach."

Su Ming's heart stirred. "Master, are you referring to that core ancient formation?"

"Precisely. In the past, observing that formation was like reading a celestial script, a chaotic blur. Now, although it remains profoundly difficult to decipher, I can already discern some of its general structure and flow." Lin Yu's soul power pointed towards a previously dim and unlit rune node in a corner of the ring's space. "See there? That seems to be an 'Eye of the Spiritual Pivot,' one of the key nodes for this ring to intake and release external spiritual energy. Previously, we could only passively absorb some scattered spiritual energy, which was inefficient. If we could activate this pivot..."

Before he finished speaking, Lin Yu, manipulating the soul power now in harmony with the new method, transformed it into an invisible trickle and carefully probed towards that node.

It was like a key sliding into a lock. A nearly inaudible, faint chime sounded.

In the next instant, Su Ming clearly felt that the spiritual energy within the meditation room, and even in the surrounding courtyard, began to actively and continuously converge towards the Xuantian ring like countless rivers flowing into the sea!

The absorption speed was many times faster than before!

Moreover, after being transformed by that "Eye of the Spiritual Pivot," this spiritual energy became exceptionally pure and gentle, directly nourishing Lin Yu's Soul Body. A trace even flowed back, moistening the finger on which Su Ming wore the ring.

"The Spiritual Pivot is open! From now on, the efficiency of spiritual energy absorption will be greatly increased!" Lin Yu's tone held satisfaction. "At this rate, this teacher's soul power recovery will far exceed previous levels. When necessary, I may even be able to help you purify your spiritual energy faster and assist your cultivation."

Su Ming looked at the ring on his finger, which now seemed alive, unable to hide the shock in his eyes. Not only had Master resolved the hidden danger of his own cultivation method, but he had also managed to elevate the ring's functionality by another level!

"However, disciple, don't celebrate too soon," Lin Yu's tone shifted again, returning to gravity. "The Pagoda Spirit said 'the method is incomplete.' This means the inheritance this teacher received might only be a fragment, especially lacking offensive variations and higher-level evolution techniques. In other words..."

"The road ahead still requires caution. Keeping a low profile and biding our time remains fundamental," Su Ming immediately grasped the implication.

"Exactly!" Lin Yu praised. "The defensive path prioritizes a solid foundation, immovable as a mountain. From now on, you must continue to maintain your social connections,

accumulate resources, and develop discreetly on the outside. This teacher will focus all efforts on consolidating my soul foundation internally, turning this Xuantian ring into our ultimate stronghold. Survival is always the first priority."

Su Ming nodded solemnly.

This was the principle Master repeatedly emphasized, and he had it engraved in his heart.

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Chapter 202: The Daily Grind at the Repair Hall

[1,223 words]

Bing Character Seven Courtyard, the Repair Hall.

The atmosphere today was tense, like drawn bows and unsheathed swords.

The usually orderly courtyard was now completely blocked by a group of cultivators wearing crimson Daoist robes.

The leader, with high cheekbones and upturned eyes, was a senior steward from the Vessel Hall, surnamed Zhang.

Standing beside him was a middle-aged man with a sinister look on his face, a trusted subordinate of the acting manager of the External Affairs Hall, Steward Liu.

"Wang Ming!" Steward Zhang held a thick ledger in his hand and slammed it fiercely onto the table, causing teacups to rattle. "How dare you people at the Repair Hall! The amount of 'Star Pattern Steel' and 'Red Essence Copper' you've requisitioned over the last three months exceeds what the entire External Affairs Hall used in a whole year! And where are the repaired artifacts? The accounts may balance on paper, but I suspect you've been lining your own pockets, swapping precious spiritual materials for scrap to fill the quota!"

"And this wastage rate!" Steward Zhang pointed at the ledger, spittle flying. "Three percent? You're trying to fool a ghost! Even the master forgers of the Vessel Hall wouldn't dare guarantee a three percent wastage rate, so how can a bunch of menial post holders achieve it? This is clearly fabricated accounting!"

The menial post disciples in the courtyard glared back angrily, their hands tightly gripping half-repaired formation plates. If it weren't for Old Wang holding them back firmly, they would have likely charged forward to fight already.

Old Wang, Wang Ming, this once timid, submissive, and bookkeeping-obsessed nice guy from the Accounting Office of the External Affairs Hall, now stood like a nail driven solidly into the center of the courtyard.

He wasn't angry. He even wore that same professional, somewhat fake smile on his face.

But the cold glint in his eyes felt unfamiliar to those who knew him.

"Steward Zhang, one can eat recklessly, but one should not speak recklessly," Old Wang said slowly, straightening his slightly wrinkled sleeve. "You accuse us of fabricating accounts. Do you have evidence?"

"Evidence? This ledger in my hand is the evidence!" Steward Zhang sneered. "There's no explanation for such a low wastage rate other than fraud!"

"Is that so?"

Old Wang suddenly smiled. He turned and waved a hand behind him.

"Li Hou, bring out 'that thing'."

"Right away!"

Li Hou, along with two burly menial post disciples, huffed and puffed as they carried three massive boxes out from the storeroom and dropped them with a heavy *thud* right in front of Steward Zhang.

"What is this?" Steward Zhang frowned, instinctively taking half a step back.

"This is the explanation you wanted."

Old Wang stepped forward and yanked open the lid of the first box.

Clatter!

It was filled with blackish metallic scrap, emitting a pungent smell of sulfur.

"This is the impurities and waste material we extracted from the thousand cattles of 'Red Essence Copper' allocated to us by the Vessel Hall last month," Old Wang's voice suddenly rose in pitch. He had somehow produced a chart in his hand and thrust it right under Steward Zhang's nose.

"According to Vessel Hall standards, the purity of Red Essence Copper should be ninety percent. But our testing showed the batch you sent us was only seventy percent pure! The remaining twenty percent was all this sulfur slag and iron filings!"

"To ensure the quality of our repairs, we had to expend triple the manpower to perform 'water washing' and 'purification'. We weighed, sealed, and kept samples of every single ounce of this waste! If Steward Zhang doesn't believe it, you can inspect it right now! See if this garbage wasn't forged by your Vessel Hall!"

Steward Zhang's face instantly changed color.

He knew very well this batch of copper had issues. It was ore procured by a relative of a Vessel Hall elder, who had bought a lot of inferior ore to pocket kickbacks. They thought they could fool these ignorant menial post holders in the External Affairs Hall and get away with it. Who would have thought these people actually kept all the waste?!

Before he could speak, Old Wang opened the second box.

It was filled with broken Formation Flag poles.

"'Century-old Wood Struck by Lightning'?" Old Wang picked up a broken piece of wood, sneered, and snapped it with force. *Crack!* It was the sound of rotten wood breaking. "Steward Zhang, you call this Wood Struck by Lightning? This is clearly insect-eaten rotten wood painted with a 'lightning-struck' lacquer! If this kind of thing were used in a formation, the formation would explode upon activation! Who would die then? The menial post disciples of our Repair Hall, or the senior brothers and sisters practicing in the training grounds ahead?"

"You... you..." Steward Zhang pointed a trembling finger at Old Wang, unable to utter a complete sentence.

"Third box!"

Old Wang gave him no chance to catch his breath, yanking open the final box.

Inside were stacks upon stacks of neatly arranged jade slips and blueprints.

"These are the maintenance records for every single artifact our Repair Hall has handled over the past three months," Old Wang's voice rang out strong and clear, carrying throughout the entire courtyard. "Which artifact used what materials, who repaired it, how much time was spent—everything is recorded. We've even annotated and corrected the inherent design flaws on the formation plates you sent us!"

"Steward Zhang, you just said our wastage rate is fabricated?"

Old Wang took a step forward. The aura of confidence born from years immersed in a sea of data actually forced the Foundation Establishment realm Steward Zhang to retreat several steps.

"Our low wastage rate is because we re-refined and reused the materials you threw away as scrap! It's because we optimized all those error-prone designs of yours that were prone to causing furnace explosions!"

"We are saving the sect money! We are cleaning up the mess for your Vessel Hall!"

"Now, do you still want to investigate?"

Dead silence.

A deathly stillness.

The surrounding External Affairs Hall disciples who had come to watch the spectacle stood with their mouths agape, as if witnessing a miracle.

Was this still that timid, submissive Old Wang from the Accounting Office? Was this still that easily bullied menial post department?

This was clearly a bunch of technical masters disguised in menial post skins!

Steward Zhang's face turned the color of pig liver. Looking at the irrefutable waste materials and the excruciatingly detailed data records, he knew he had kicked an iron plate this time.

Not just an iron plate—this was a goddamn spiked steel plate!

If these matters were brought before the Sect Master or the Enforcement Hall, the ones in trouble would definitely not be the Repair Hall, but the Vessel Hall for cutting corners and using substandard materials!

"Fine... very well..."

Steward Zhang gritted his teeth, squeezing out the words from between them. "The Repair Hall... truly lives up to its reputation. Today... this steward acted rashly."

With that, he gave a sharp flick of his sleeve, not even daring to glance at the waste in the boxes, and turned to leave in a fluster.

Seeing this, Steward Liu's trusted subordinate also hunched his shoulders and scurried away, crestfallen.

"We won!"

"Old Wang is mighty!"

"Hall Master is mighty!"

After a brief moment of silence, earth-shaking cheers erupted from Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

Old Wang stood in place, watching Steward Zhang's retreating back. Only now did the hands he had clasped behind his back begin to tremble slightly. It was a tremor of excitement, but also of lingering fear.

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Chapter 203: Emerging from Seclusion

[1,699 words]

For the next half month, Su Ming, relying on the enhanced spiritual energy absorption effect of the Xuantian ring, devoted himself wholeheartedly to cultivating the Like Water Art.

Thanks to the supply of pure and abundant spiritual energy, as well as the high compatibility between the cultivation method and his own Water-Wood dual spiritual roots, Su Ming's cultivation progress could truly be described as advancing a thousand miles a day.

Early stage of the fourth layer of Qi Refining...

Mid stage of the fourth layer of Qi Refining...

All the way to the peak of the fourth layer of Qi Refining!

If news of such speed were to spread, it would be enough to leave many outer sect disciples utterly dumbfounded.

For ordinary individuals with three spiritual roots, each small step forward during the middle stages of Qi Refining required years of painstaking grinding.

However, just as Su Ming's momentum was soaring like a rainbow and he was preparing to muster his spiritual energy in one go to assault the barrier of the fifth layer of Qi Refining, a sudden, unexpected change occurred!

Late at night, inside the meditation room.

Su Ming sat cross-legged, but his body trembled slightly. Fine beads of cold sweat seeped from his forehead, and his face was flushed.

Within him, the spiritual energy driven by the Like Water Art had accumulated to the limit that his current meridians could contain. Surging and turbulent, like a bursting flood, it crashed against that invisible barrier of realm, time and time again.

"Break!"

With a hardened heart, Su Ming concentrated all his divine sense, imitating the method of his previous breakthrough, attempting to forcibly compress that vast spiritual energy into an indestructible sharp spear to pierce through the barrier.

However, this time, the spiritual energy went out of control!

That water-attribute spiritual energy, which should have been pliable and enduring, after being compressed to an extreme degree, actually gave birth to a violent backlash force! Moreover, a deep-seated stagnation and hidden pain originating from the depths of his Dao foundation suddenly amplified, as if an old injury had been triggered, causing the flow of spiritual energy to instantly congeal and distort.

"Ugh!"

Su Ming groaned, a sweet taste rising in his throat. A trickle of blood overflowed from the corner of his mouth.

His face instantly turned pale. A stabbing, burning pain, like needles and fire, came from his internal meridians. The previously orderly cycle of energy circulation was on the verge of collapse. Spiritual energy ran rampant inside him like a wild horse that had broken free of its reins.

"Quickly, disperse the energy! Do not force it!"

Lin Yu's stern shout exploded in Su Ming's Consciousness Sea like a thunderclap. "Foolish child! How could you be so reckless! Is this how you cultivate the Like Water Art?!"

"Master... I..." Su Ming's breath was chaotic, even his spiritual sense communication becoming intermittent.

"Immediately guide the spiritual energy to disperse into your limbs and bones, return to calm! Quickly!"

Lin Yu, not caring about the consumption of his soul power, separated a wisp of pure soul power and forcibly intervened in Su Ming's spiritual energy circulation, guiding those violent strands of spiritual energy to gradually calm down and disperse.

A full half hour passed before the stormy, churning commotion within Su Ming's body gradually subsided.

He slumped limply on the meditation cushion, breathing heavily, his eyes still holding lingering shock and deep confusion.

"Master, why did this happen? The spiritual energy was clearly sufficiently abundant..."

"Because you are water, not metal, nor fire! And more importantly, because the old injury to your Dao foundation has not healed. Forcibly assaulting the barrier is like stirring up a flood peak in a river channel full of cracks, how could it not be dangerous?"

Lin Yu's tone was heavy and solemn, carrying reproach, but even more so, a sense of lingering fear. "The essence of the Like Water Art lies in 'silent, gradual nourishment,' in 'water dripping through stone!' It emphasizes acting according to the momentum, letting things take their natural course! You used it like a giant mountain-splitting axe, ramming with brute force, it would be strange if problems didn't arise!"

"You, your heart is too impatient."

Lin Yu sighed. "This half month of rapid cultivation progress has made you develop a sense of arrogance and impatience. Little did you know, the path of cultivation requires a balance of tension and relaxation. Sometimes, taking a step back allows you to advance three steps forward. Especially with the damage to your Dao foundation, you need to tread as if on thin ice. How could you act so rashly?"

"The fifth layer of Qi Refining is a crucial step marking the transition from the middle to the late stage of the Qi Refining period. It tests not only the quantity of spiritual energy, but even more so the comprehension of the essence of spiritual energy and the precise grasp of one's own Dao body condition. Your meridians are now like a cup filled to the brim. Coupled with the constraints of old injuries, instead of thinking about nourishing, repairing, and broadening your meridians, you forcibly used brute strength. This is no different from destroying your own Great Wall."

Listening to his master's admonishment, the impetuosity that had sprouted in Su Ming's heart due to the rapid improvement completely cooled down, replaced by an icy chill of lingering fear.

Yes, he had been too eager for quick results. After learning the secrets of the ring and the cultivation method, subconsciously, he had become somewhat carried away, forgetting that his own foundation was still not solid.

This mouthful of vomited blood and the hidden pain from his Dao foundation were like alarm bells, thoroughly waking him up.

"The true meaning of the Way of Survival lies first in self-awareness." Su Ming wiped the bloodstain from the corner of his mouth, his eyes once again becoming calm and resolute.

"Master, this disciple knows his mistake."

"Knowing your mistake is good, nothing is greater than this." Lin Yu's tone softened. "Since this path is temporarily blocked, there's no need to force it. End your seclusion."

"Studying behind closed doors is ultimately not a good strategy. You need to enter the world, walk among the mundane dust, temper your heart and nature, and comprehend the true meaning of 'flowing water does not compete to be first.' When your state of mind becomes harmonious and unified with the true intent of the cultivation method, the bottleneck will naturally break."

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The first light of dawn appeared, a strand of purple qi passed through the sea of clouds, shining on the tightly closed window lattice of Courtyard D-7.

Beside the ancient well in the courtyard, a few unknown wild grasses hung with crystal dewdrops, gently swaying in the breeze. Suddenly, the wooden door of the meditation room emitted a light "creak" and was slowly pushed open.

A moist air, mixed with the scent of dew and spiritual herbs, rushed to meet him. The faint spiritual energy misting from the ancient well in the courtyard seemed to sense something, becoming a bit more lively than usual, even faintly gathering towards the doorway.

Su Ming stepped over the threshold, standing in the morning light, and took a deep breath.

With this inhalation, it was as if a giant whale was sucking in water. The moisture within several zhang around him was instantly swept away, transforming into a nearly invisible white thread that vanished into his nostrils.

A moment later, he slowly exhaled. His breath was long and drawn out, actually condensing into a straight arrow of qi in the cold morning air, shooting out three chi before dispersing.

Su Ming clenched his fist, feeling the water spiritual energy within his body. A faint curve lifted the corner of his mouth.

Although he hadn't directly broken through to the fifth layer during this seclusion, after digesting the insights from "Perceiving the Minutest Detail," his control over his own spiritual energy was no longer on the same level as before.

That feeling was like going from a blacksmith wielding a great hammer to a sculptor holding a carving knife.

"Don't get cocky," Lin Yu's lazy voice sounded in his mind, carrying a hint of a sleepy nasal tone. "You've just barely learned how not to spill the water. Remember, right now, you're like a water balloon filled to the brim. Looks big, but pops with one poke. Keep a low profile, understand?"

"Master's lesson is correct." Su Ming was in a good mood and didn't argue. He lifted his foot and walked towards Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

...

Stepping into Bing Character Seven Courtyard, the scene that met his eyes made Su Ming pause slightly.

The usual hustle, bustle, and noise were gone, replaced by an extremely comfortable "production rhythm."

In the center of the courtyard, the once mountain-like pile of formation plates awaiting repair was now sorted and placed on three long wooden tables.

Over a dozen menial disciples stood in a single row. Each had specific tools and materials arranged before them. Their movements were uniform and synchronized, like gears on a precision instrument.

There was no idle chatter, no complaints, only the rustling sound of carving knives scraping metal and the crisp clicks of spirit stones being fitted into grooves.

"Li Er! The concentration of the spiritual ink in the third process is two points too high! Are you trying to burn the formation plate? Do it again!"

Not far away, Old Wang stood with his hands behind his back, holding a homemade "vernier caliper" made by Su Ming. He was sternly reprimanding a young menial disciple.

That demeanor, that tone, was the spitting image of how Su Ming used to scold people, even down to the subtle expression of exasperation at someone failing to live up to expectations.

"And you, Zhang Tiezhu! That's the 'Spirit Gathering pattern,' not for you to draw ghostly scribbles! The lines must be steady, your breathing even! If you tremble one more time, forget about dinner tonight!"

Li Hou was responsible for the final quality inspection on the side. He held a standard sample plate in his hand. Every repaired formation plate had to undergo extremely stringent comparison. If there was the slightest flaw, it was directly thrown back into the rework area.

On the wall, that huge "Data Publicity Board" shimmered faintly in the morning light. The top line of vermilion characters was particularly eye-catching—

"This Ten-Day Period's Pass Rate: Ninety-nine point eight percent."

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Chapter 204: Luo Feng's Plea for Help

[1,101 words]

"Tsk tsk tsk," Lin Yu exclaimed in amazement from within the ring. "Disciple, you've truly imparted that whole capitalist 'exploitation' aesthetic to them. Look at Old Wang's demeanor, he's more like a ruthless foreman than you are now."

Su Ming smiled, a flash of satisfaction in his eyes. "This is called standardized management, Master. Only this way can I free up my hands to focus on more important matters."

Old Wang turned his head and suddenly saw Su Ming standing at the entrance. His stern face instantly blossomed into a chrysanthemum-like smile as he trotted over to greet him.

"Hall Master! You've emerged from seclusion!"

At this shout, the disciples in the courtyard performing menial tasks all stopped their work, standing up in unison, their eyes filled with reverence and admiration. "Greetings, Hall Master!"

Su Ming waved his hand, signaling everyone to continue. "Old Wang, well done. It seems you haven't been slacking off these past two weeks."

"How could we!" Old Wang rubbed his hands together, his face showing unconcealable pride. "Following that... that 'manual' you left behind, we optimized the repair process for two small formation plates. We merged the 'cleaning' and 'polishing' steps, increasing efficiency by over ten percent! Now our Repair Hall truly achieves 'daily tasks, daily closure!'"

Watching Old Wang's straightened back and confident gaze, Su Ming nodded inwardly in approval.

The former good-natured man from the Accounting Office, who used to be meek and only knew how to bury his head in calculations, had now genuinely grown into a technical supervisor capable of holding his own.

This was the power of a system, and also the foundation upon which Su Ming stood firm in this world.

Just then, hurried footsteps sounded from outside the courtyard gate.

"Brother Su! Brother Su!"

The voice arrived before the person. That distinctive, raspy voice could only belong to Wang Defa.

Wang the fat man rushed into the courtyard, sweating profusely. The moment he saw Su Ming, his small eyes, nearly squeezed shut by fat, instantly lit up, like a drowning man grasping a life-saving straw.

"Good heavens, you've finally emerged from seclusion!"

Wang Defa grabbed Su Ming's sleeve, looked left and right, and lowered his voice. "Let's talk in private. Big catch!"

The two men went to a side hall and sat down. Without wasting words, Wang Defa directly pulled out a jade slip he had kept hidden close to his body and slapped it solemnly on the table before Su Ming.

"What's this?" Su Ming raised an eyebrow.

"A letter of allegiance."

Wang Defa wiped the oily sweat from his forehead, his eyes turning fierce. "Last time, those bastards from the Vessel Hall wanted to audit our accounts, right? Over these past two weeks, using my authority as the Accounting Office supervisor, I conducted a cross-comparison between the Vessel Hall's material procurement lists from the last ten years and their actual outbound records."

Su Ming's heart stirred. He reached out, picked up the jade slip, and probed it with his divine sense.

The next moment, his pupils contracted slightly.

This was no longer just an account book; this was a meticulously detailed "list of crimes," thorough to a frightening degree.

Inside the jade slip, dense data was organized into Su Ming's favorite chart format.

Which year, which month, how much Star Pattern Steel the Vessel Hall procured, how much was actually warehoused, and how much was recorded as loss.

Which elder's relative was in charge of the procurement, and how much higher the price was compared to the market rate.

There were even notes on where those so-called "failed" high-grade magical artifacts ultimately ended up—in which underground black market.

"Good heavens," Lin Yu whistled. "This fatty is a talent! He's practically stripped the Vessel Hall bare. If this thing gets thrown out, half the people in the Vessel Hall would lose their heads."

Su Ming put down the jade slip and looked deeply at Wang Defa.

He understood that Wang Defa was gambling.

Betting that Su Ming would win, betting that the Repair Hall would become a true behemoth within the sect.

So he was no longer that fence-sitter trying to please both sides, but had instead staked his entire life and fortune on Su Ming's ship.

"Steward Wang, this gift is... weighty." Su Ming lightly tapped the table with his fingers.

"It's not heavy enough!" Wang Defa gritted his teeth. "Brother Su, I've figured it out. In this sect, to live well, just knowing how to do accounts isn't enough. You need backing, you need a blade! You are that blade, and I, Old Wang, am willing to hand you the knife!"

Su Ming smiled, storing the jade slip in his sleeve.

"Good. Since Steward Wang trusts me, then from now on, we are our own people."

The simple phrase "our own people" made all the fat on Wang Defa's body tremble with excitement.

He knew his gamble had paid off!

After seeing Wang Defa off, just as Su Ming was about to return to his meditation room to consolidate his cultivation, another "rare guest" arrived at the courtyard gate.

Dressed in snow-white robes, a long sword strapped to his back, with handsome features yet carrying deep exhaustion and... a trace of unspeakable awkwardness.

It was precisely the talented disciple from Formation Peak, Luo Feng.

"Senior Brother Luo?" Su Ming was somewhat surprised. "What brings you to my humble abode today? Have you come to discuss the aesthetics of the path of formations again?"

An unnatural expression flashed across Luo Feng's face. He cleared his throat dryly. Unlike his usual haughty demeanor, he seemed somewhat flustered, rubbing his hands together.

"That... Junior Brother Su, ahem, I'm not here for a philosophical discussion this time."

Luo Feng glanced at the busy disciples performing menial tasks around them and lowered his voice. "I heard you emerged from seclusion today. I came to... ask for help."

Luo Feng got straight to the point. With a flick of his wrist, an extremely complex, crimson jade slip emitting a scorching aura appeared in his hand. "I accepted a sect mission to reinforce the core fire-control formation array for the 'Molten Heart Furnace' in the Earth Fire Cavern. This formation needs to withstand the dual assault of Earth Lung Poison Fire and violent fire spiritual energy over the long term."

Su Ming's expression turned serious. The Molten Heart Furnace in the Earth Fire Cavern was an important site for the sect's alchemy and artifact forging; its core formation was no trivial matter. The fact that Luo Feng received this mission itself proved his abilities were highly recognized.

"Senior Brother Luo's formation attainments are profound. This mission must be easily within your grasp," Su Ming said politely.

Upon hearing this, however, a trace of helpless bitterness appeared on Luo Feng's face—the kind of distress a genius feels when encountering a cognitive bottleneck.

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Chapter 205: Overcoming Skill with Simplicity, First Glimpse of Talent

[1,235 words]

"The main structure of the formation, I completed long ago." Luo Feng's tone carried confidence, but also a hint of defeat. "I used the 'Nine Revolutions Solar Yang Formation' as the foundation, supplemented by the 'Seven Stars Stabilizing Element Chapter,' which is sufficient to guide and refine over ninety percent of the violent fire spirit. In terms of the intricacy and power of the formation itself, I am confident it does not lose to any formation of the same tier."

"The problem lies in... the carrier for the 'formation core.'" Luo Feng pointed to the node in the jade slip where the energy flow was most violent. "The spiritual energy here is too explosive. I tried seven different third-tier spiritual materials, and even used a small piece of 'Millennium Fire Marrow Jade' as the core. But they either shattered prematurely due to conflicting spiritual energy attributes, or because the natural spiritual patterns within them created imperceptibly minute 'spiritual pattern interference' with my formation. Under sustained operation, this would form extremely subtle 'spiritual vibrations,' causing the foundation of the formation to become unstable. At most, within half a month, cracks would inevitably appear in the formation core."

Luo Feng looked at Su Ming, his expression complex. "I consulted the ancient texts. The conclusion was, either find a fourth-tier or higher spiritual material with perfectly compatible attributes and absolutely uniform internal structure, but the cost is too high; or, I would need a grandmaster artifact forger who could completely disperse and reshape the internal spiritual patterns of the material, turning it into a pure 'blank carrier.'"

He paused, his tone carrying a tentative curiosity. "I observed Junior Brother Su handling those low-tier formation plates, especially in material purification and basic rune inscription. You seem to have some... unconventional methods. I wonder, for this requirement of making a material 'absolutely obedient,' or even 'absolutely blank,' do you have any ideas?"

Su Ming instantly understood the crux of the problem.

"Spiritual pattern interference," "spiritual vibrations," "blank carrier"... These issues, which seemed mysterious and profound to traditional cultivators, were, from his and Lin Yu's "scientific perspective," actually problems of uneven internal stress within the material, energy resonance, and microstructural defects.

"Senior Brother Luo's problem, I might have some ideas about." Su Ming didn't speak in absolutes. "I dare not claim to solve it, but I can try to make a 'carrier' sample for Senior Brother to verify."

"Oh?" A gleam flashed in Luo Feng's eyes. "What kind of spiritual material do you need? I'll go prepare it immediately."

"No need." Su Ming shook his head and walked towards his workbench. "Just use the most ordinary 'Mystic Iron Essence.'"

"Mystic Iron Essence?" Luo Feng was stunned. That was a basic material rarely used even for first-tier magical tools. "Junior Brother Su, the spiritual energy impact at the core formation eye of the Earth Fire Cavern is comparable to a strike from a Golden Core cultivator. Mystic Iron Essence would probably vaporize instantly..."

"No harm in trying." Su Ming smiled, offering no further explanation.

He took out a piece of Mystic Iron Essence. He didn't use any fancy tools, just that same engraving knife marked with a standard ruler and his pure water spiritual energy.

Under Luo Feng's skeptical and scrutinizing gaze, Su Ming began.

He didn't inscribe any complex formations, nor did he channel much spiritual energy.

His water spiritual energy acted like the finest probe and scalpel, penetrating deep into the interior of the Mystic Iron Essence.

His goal wasn't enchantment, nor inscription. It was—"combing" and "reconstruction."

Using water spiritual energy, gentle yet tenacious, he forcibly combed the chaotic, disordered microstructure within the Mystic Iron Essence into order. He washed away and squeezed out all the impurities, air bubbles, and internal stress nodes.

Simultaneously, utilizing the penetrating and accommodating properties of water spirit, he performed "annealing" and "quenching" at the molecular level, making its structure denser and more uniform.

This process resembled "material refinement" and "structural optimization" in modern industry more than traditional artifact forging.

One hour later, a piece of Mystic Iron, its surface smooth as a mirror, its color deep and dark, without a trace of impurity, lay on the workbench.

It still didn't emit any spiritual light, but the material itself had become incredibly pure and uniform.

"Senior Brother Luo, you can try inscribing your formation core's key runes onto this object." Su Ming handed over this "super Mystic Iron."

Luo Feng took it with a mixture of doubt and belief. It felt slightly heavy and cool to the touch.

He took a deep breath, mobilized his divine sense and spiritual energy, and began carefully inscribing the complex and powerful core fire-control rune he had designed into the interior of this Mystic Iron.

The next moment, his eyes widened in shock!

Smooth!

Unbelievably smooth!

This seemingly ordinary Mystic Iron had an incredibly high degree of receptivity to his spiritual energy and divine sense! Its interior was like an absolutely calm, absolutely uniform "sea of nothingness," perfectly "reflecting" and "solidifying" every single stroke of the rune he outlined without the slightest distortion!

No spiritual pattern interference, no attribute conflict, because it was itself almost "attribute-less"! It was merely a carrier, perfect to the extreme!

When the final rune was set, the entire piece of Mystic Iron glowed faintly before returning to its plain appearance. But

Luo Feng could clearly sense that a stable miniature spell formation had perfectly taken shape within it, merging with the Mystic Iron itself into a seamless whole!

"This... how is this possible?!" Luo Feng stared at the still unremarkable "lump of iron" in his hand, feeling the powerful, stably operating formation within. The shock in his heart was beyond words.

Su Ming hadn't defeated him in formation mastery. Instead, using a method he completely couldn't comprehend, Su Ming had forged an unprecedented, long-dreamed-of perfect "foundation" for his exquisite formation!

"Junior Brother Su... this isn't the path of formations. This is practically... the creative work of 'turning stone into gold!'" Luo Feng looked at Su Ming, his gaze completely changed. It held respect for an unknown field and intense curiosity.

He had originally come just to try his luck, never expecting the other party to give him an answer that overturned his understanding.

"Senior Brother praises me too highly. It's just some clever material processing tricks, hardly worthy of the elegant hall." Su Ming smiled modestly.

Luo Feng took a deep breath, solemnly stored away this "formation core," and cupped his hands respectfully. "Junior Brother Su, great kindness needs no verbal thanks. After I report the completion of the task, I will surely repay you generously! This... 'material processing' knowledge of yours, I am very interested. I will definitely come again in the future to seek your guidance!"

Watching Luo Feng's hurriedly departing back, filled with a desire for exploration, Su Ming knew he had planted a seed named "science" in the heart of this formation genius.

"Master, it seems our 'basic science' is still somewhat useful."

"Nonsense!" Lin Yu said smugly inside the ring. "He's responsible for designing the CPU, we're responsible for making the motherboard and heat sink! Clear division of labor, a powerful alliance! Now, let's see who dares to call us amateurs!"

After seeing Luo Feng off, Su Ming stood in the courtyard, looking at the towering Cloud Concealment Main Peak in the distance.

"Master, it seems our 'Way of Survival' business is about to expand into new territory."

"Hehe, mechanisms?" Lin Yu laughed in the ring like an old fox. "Disciple, think about it. If we carve formations onto a Gatling... oh no, a repeating crossbow... that image... tsk tsk tsk."

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Chapter 206: Elder Qingquan's Invitation

[1,428 words]

The tranquility of Bing Character Seven Courtyard was shattered by a flurry of hurried footsteps the next morning.

Luo Feng had arrived.

This Formation Peak genius, who usually looked down his nose at everything except formation lines, now had an unmistakable glint of intense curiosity in his eyes. He strode

in with such vigor that he didn't even notice the morning dew dampening the hem of his signature white robe.

A faint, lingering scent of earth fire and sulfur still clung to him, clearly indicating he had come straight from the Earth Fire Cavern.

The menial disciples in the courtyard all stopped their work, looking at this inner sect senior brother with awe.

Su Ming was inspecting a batch of newly repaired "Spirit Gathering Plates." Seeing the visitor, he set down his engraving knife and stepped forward to greet him. "Senior Brother Luo, judging by your expression, your trip to the Earth Fire Cavern must have concluded successfully?"

"More than just successful!"

Luo Feng strode forward and grabbed Su Ming's arm with such force it actually hurt.

His gaze burned as he stared at Su Ming. Though his voice remained calm, his words came noticeably faster than usual. "Junior Brother Su, tell me the truth. That 'Mystic Iron formation core'... besides its pure material quality, did it also contain some kind of... structure for channeling spiritual pressure?"

Su Ming's heart stirred slightly, but his face showed confusion. "What makes you say that, Senior Brother?"

"The spiritual pressure the Molten Heart Furnace's formation core had to bear far exceeded estimates!" Luo Feng's tone carried a mix of lingering fear and excitement. "The earth fire had a sudden anomaly, causing the spiritual pressure to spike by thirty percent in an instant! Based on my original design, even a fourth-tier spiritual material would have definitely cracked. But that Mystic Iron of yours... at the critical moment, it spontaneously made micro-adjustments internally! It channeled the overloaded spiritual pressure into the earth veins through some strange 'turbulent flow' structure! This was no coincidence!"

Hearing this, Su Ming understood. This was likely some microscopic structure conducive to energy conduction that had inadvertently formed while he was organizing the material's structure.

"That wasn't a formation. It should be an effect of the material structure being so uniform that it naturally formed a channeling effect," Su Ming explained. "All things follow their principles; it was simply following its inherent nature."

"This is not an overstatement!" Luo Feng's expression turned serious. "When the task was delivered, Elder Qingquan personally inspected the formation. The old man stared

at that formation core for a full half-cup-of-tea's time. In the end, he only said eight words."

Su Ming's heart stirred again. "What eight words?"

"Great skill appears clumsy; the foundation is profoundly solid."

A trace of envy flickered in Luo Feng's eyes. "Elder Qingquan is a cultivator at the late Golden Core stage. He entered the Dao through water techniques and also cultivates the path of formations. His insight is razor-sharp. With one glance, he saw the extraordinary aspect of this formation core didn't lie in flashy patterns, but in the 'purity' of the material itself."

At this point, Luo Feng glanced left and right, lowered his voice even further, and leaned close to Su Ming's ear. "The Elder immediately asked me whose handiwork the formation core was. I didn't dare hide it and told the truth, saying it was a junior brother from the Repair Hall under the External Affairs Hall who assisted with the handling."

Su Ming lowered his eyelids slightly, rapidly calculating the pros and cons in his mind.

"The Elder was silent for a moment, didn't say much more, and only left one sentence before departing." Luo Feng imitated the Elder's steady tone. "This disciple possesses extraordinary insight into the fundamentals of the Dao. After the outer sect assessment, if he is willing, he may come to Emerald Wave Pond for a meeting."

Emerald Wave Pond!

Su Ming's heart gave a violent leap.

Within the Cloud Hidden Sect, Emerald Wave Pond was Elder Qingquan's personal cultivation ground.

And Elder Qingquan, though nominally attached to Formation Peak, because he primarily cultivates water techniques, had formed his own faction and wasn't fully entangled in the internal power struggles of Formation Peak.

A late Golden Core stage major water-element cultivator, and a backer not at the center of the power vortex.

This was practically a tailor-made "protective umbrella" for Su Ming, who cultivated the "Like Water Art."

"Congratulations, disciple," Lin Yu's lazy voice sounded in his mind. "This counts as getting a direct pass to the 'big company' interview. And this interviewer is a technical expert who looks at results, not background. This wave is steady."

Su Ming's face, however, still maintained a humble expression. He cupped his hands towards Luo Feng. "Thank you for your kind words, Senior Brother Luo. If not for Senior Brother's trust, I would have had no opportunity to display these insignificant skills."

"Ah, no need for such formalities between us." Luo Feng waved his hand, pulled out a hefty storage pouch from his robe, and stuffed it into Su Ming's hands. "This is the reward for this task. I'm splitting it with you, half and half. Don't refuse. If not for that formation core, I wouldn't have completed this task and would have had to compensate a huge sum for materials. This is what you deserve."

After seeing Luo Feng off, Su Ming hefted the storage pouch in his hand. It contained a full fifty low-grade spirit stones.

"This is the dividend from technology shares," Lin Yu sighed with feeling. "In this world, core technology truly is the primary productive force."

Su Ming stored the spirit stones properly, his gaze turning towards the distant main peak of Cloud Hidden Sect, his eyes profound.

Elder Qingquan's olive branch was undoubtedly tempting, but that was something for "after the outer sect assessment." Right now, the tree that was the Repair Hall had grown, but it had also attracted quite a few bugs.

"Master, it seems before we can 'lay low' and enter Emerald Wave Pond, we still have to clear a few hurdles first."

...

The tree may desire stillness, but the wind will not cease.

The Repair Hall's efficiency and "affordability," while winning the praise of low-level disciples, had also genuinely taken a bite out of certain people's profits.

Early the next morning, before the gates of Bing Character Seven Courtyard were even opened, a clamor of noisy commotion erupted right outside the entrance.

"By order of the Hall Master! The Repair Hall under the jurisdiction of the External Affairs Hall, heed this command!"

Su Ming pushed the door open and stepped out. He saw the entrance crowded with menial disciple onlookers. In the center of the crowd stood a middle-aged man wearing the attire of a Vessel Hall steward, looking down his nose arrogantly, with two inner sect disciples behind him who also had their noses in the air.

The steward didn't enter the courtyard. Instead, he stood on the steps, holding a dark red command token, his voice booming as if he wanted half the mountain to hear.

"Effective immediately! Due to the sect's various high-grade spiritual materials needing priority allocation to guarantee the cultivation and tasks of inner sect and true disciple disciples! Upon approval by the Vessel Hall, the material quotas for all subordinate institutions under the External Affairs Hall are to be cut by half!"

His gaze swept coldly over the pile of awaiting-repair magical tools in the courtyard, finally landing on Su Ming who had just stepped out, a mocking curl appearing at the corner of his mouth.

"Especially the Repair Hall! The requested strategic materials such as 'Star Pattern Steel,' 'Flowing Cloud Iron,' and 'Purple Gold Sand' are to be temporarily suspended from supply! Existing inventory must be sealed immediately, awaiting reallocation!"

Boom!

As soon as these words were spoken, the courtyard instantly erupted into chaos.

The account book in Old Wang's hands fell to the ground with a clatter, his face turning deathly pale. Li Hou jumped up in agitation. "Temporarily suspended? Then what about these half-repaired formation plates in our hands? These are all urgently needed by senior brothers from various peaks!"

"That is your problem."

The steward sneered, flicking at non-existent dust on his sleeve. "Even the cleverest housewife can't cook without rice. If you don't have the skill to repair them, then don't take on such delicate work. Or perhaps..."

He looked at Su Ming with a meaningful glint in his eye. "...you could use some lower-grade materials. After all, those shoddy things from the outer sect just need to be usable. Why waste good resources?"

With that, he waved his hand grandly and strode off with his entourage, leaving behind a mess of feathers and a courtyard full of panicked menial disciples.

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Chapter 207: A Silent Victory

[1,312 words]

"This... what are we supposed to do now?" Old Wang trembled as he picked up the ledger, his lips quivering. "Without the Star Pattern Steel, the core of that batch of 'Golden Light Shields' simply cannot be repaired; without the Flowing Cloud Iron, the formation lines for the 'Wind Flow Boots' would crack even if we managed to draw them on. This is trying to kill us!"

The atmosphere in the courtyard instantly plummeted to freezing point.

The assembly line that had just been running at high speed seemed to have its throat choked, emitting a dry, grating sound. Everyone's gaze converged on Su Ming.

Su Ming stood on the steps, watching the steward's departing back. His face showed none of the anger or panic everyone had anticipated.

He just calmly glanced at the group and said plainly, "Understood."

Then, he turned and walked back into the courtyard, his tone as steady as if commenting on the nice weather. "Old Wang, have everyone stop what they're doing. Since there's no material, we'll rest."

"R... rest?" Old Wang was stunned. "Hall Master, if we delay the schedule, those senior brothers will blame us..."

"If the sky falls, the tall ones will hold it up. It was the Vessel Hall that cut off the materials; they can't blame us."

Su Ming walked into the main hall, sat down, and poured himself a cup of tea. His movements were fluid and effortless, showing not a trace of agitation.

"Old Wang, come inside."

Old Wang followed him into the room with trepidation, closing the door behind him.

"Hall Master, do you have some kind of plan?" Looking at Su Ming's composed demeanor, Old Wang felt a glimmer of hope inexplicably kindle in his heart.

Su Ming blew on the tea foam, took a small sip, and then slowly spoke. "Old Wang, do you remember that 'Analysis Report on Quality Issues of Certain Materials from the Vessel Hall' we compiled earlier?"

Old Wang was taken aback for a moment, then nodded. "I remember! That ledger recording the scrap and defective goods they gave us, along with those... those micro-structure diagrams you drew."

"Good."

Su Ming put down his teacup and gently tapped the table with his fingers, producing a rhythmic *tock-tock* sound.

"Go and make two copies of it. Make them exquisite. Use high-quality recording stones to imprint images of that scrap material inside."

Su Ming raised his head, a flicker of cunning light flashing in his eyes. "Then, find a few clever brothers to go for a stroll around the places frequented by disciples from Pill Cauldron Peak and the Spiritual Plant Garden."

"A stroll?" Old Wang couldn't quite follow the train of thought.

"Yes, a stroll." A slight smile touched the corner of Su Ming's mouth. "Then, 'accidentally' leave this report there. Remember, it must be 'accidental,' preferably dropped on the paths that alchemists who are in a bad mood due to furnace explosions, or herb farmers whose spiritual plants withered due to formation failures, are bound to pass."

"Also," Su Ming added, "at the very end of that report, add a line: 'Due to the Vessel Hall's material supply cut-off, the Repair Hall has no rice to cook. Although we are aware that material defects will cause the failure rate of magical instruments to skyrocket, we are powerless to change it. We hope for the understanding of all senior brothers.'"

As Old Wang listened, his eyes grew wider and wider, until he finally couldn't help but suck in a sharp breath.

"Hiss— Hall Master, you intend to..."

In his mind, Lin Yu was laughing uproariously. "Or you could call it 'information warfare.' Disciple, you're playing this 'borrowing a knife to kill someone' move quite slickly. Those alchemists at Pill Cauldron Peak are the richest and also the most afraid of dying. If they find out furnace explosions are due to problematic materials supplied by the Vessel Hall... tsk tsk tsk, those bastards in the Vessel Hall are in for it."

Su Ming looked at Old Wang and smiled gently. "Go on, do it discreetly. Remember, we only 'accidentally' lost something. We are also victims."

Looking at Su Ming's harmless smile, Old Wang felt a chill run down his spine, but the stifling resentment in his heart instantly dissipated by more than half.

"Understood!" Old Wang straightened his back, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "I'll go take care of it right now! I guarantee it will be dropped 'naturally,' dropped 'perfectly!'"

...

Over the next two days, the Cloud Hidden Sect seemed calm on the surface, but undercurrents were swirling.

The doors of the Repair Hall remained tightly shut, with a sign hanging outside that read, "Material Shortage, Orders Temporarily Suspended."

Meanwhile, those few "accidentally" lost reports were like sparks falling into a haystack piled high with dry tinder.

Pill Cauldron Peak.

An inner sect alchemist, who had just suffered a furnace explosion while refining third-grade pills and was covered in soot, was walking down a mountain path, filled with rage.

Suddenly, his foot kicked against an exquisite jade slip.

Puzzled, he picked it up and scanned it with his divine sense.

"Huh? 'Analysis Report on Quality Issues of Certain Materials from the Vessel Hall'? What is this?"

As he read further, the alchemist's expression shifted from confusion to shock, and finally to furious anger.

"Excellent! No wonder my 'Li Fire Furnace' has been having temperature control issues lately! So it's because this 'Red Essence Copper' is mixed with so many impurities! And these micro-cracks in the 'Star Pattern Steel'... This isn't forging material, this is outright murder!"

Similar scenes played out in the Spiritual Plant Garden, in Beast Taming Valley.

The detailed data, the clear comparison charts, and that helpless phrase "powerless to change it" instantly ignited the fury of these "clients."

The Repair Hall just fixes things; if the materials are bad, there's nothing they can do.

But these materials came from the Vessel Hall!

And now the Vessel Hall wants to cut off the supply? Do they want us to keep using those shoddy things that could blow up at any moment?

Early morning on the third day.

While the Vessel Hall Master was still dreaming of crushing the Repair Hall and reclaiming the repair rights for low-grade magical instruments, a messenger crane from the Enforcement Hall flew into his cave dwelling.

Immediately afterward, two influential elders from Pill Cauldron Peak and the Spiritual Plant Garden jointly visited the Hall of Stewards, slamming several recording stones and that analysis report heavily onto the table.

The accusations pointed squarely at the Vessel Hall: passing off inferior goods as quality ones, dereliction of duty, and lining their own pockets!

It was said that morning, the Vessel Hall's main hall echoed with the Hall Master's furious roars and the miserable cries of several stewards being berated until they were thoroughly humiliated.

That very afternoon.

The previously arrogant Vessel Hall steward, looking utterly disheveled, arrived at the entrance of the Repair Hall with several large carts of materials.

This time, he did not make a loud commotion, nor did he act haughtily.

With his head bowed, he directed disciples to carry boxes of "Star Pattern Steel" and "Flowing Cloud Iron" into the courtyard. He didn't even dare to look Su Ming in the eye, dropping off the handover list before scurrying away in a hurry.

Old Wang opened a box and was delighted.

"Hall Master! You're a genius! Not only has this batch of materials made up the shortfall, but the quality is also a whole grade higher than before! This Star Pattern Steel, it practically gleams!"

The menial workers in the courtyard erupted into thunderous cheers.

Su Ming stood by the window, watching this scene, his expression still calm.

"Old Wang, start work. Don't keep the senior brothers waiting."

"Right away!"

The machines started up again, the assembly line restarted.

But this time, the way everyone looked at Su Ming had changed. It was no longer just reverence, but a genuine sense of trust and admiration from the heart.

This young Hall Master had, without making a sound, beaten the lofty Vessel Hall into submission, leaving them unable to fight back.

This was true skill!

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Chapter 208: A Natural Success, Fifth Level of Qi Refining!

[1,440 words]

A few days after the storm had settled, Su Ming's life returned to its regular rhythm.

During the day, he handled affairs at the Repair Hall, and at night, he would return to his meditation room to cultivate.

After experiencing this covert contest with the Vessel Hall, Su Ming's state of mind seemed to have undergone some subtle changes. He gained a deeper level of insight into the phrase from the Like Water Art: "It benefits all things without contention, thus it is almost like the Dao."

Not contending does not mean not acting.

It means not contending with others over temporary advantages or superiority, not competing for superficial sharpness.

Like water, it avoids the high and flows to the low, appearing soft and yielding, yet in reality, it permeates all things, seeping into every crevice. Once the time is ripe, it can gather momentum and wash away all obstacles.

The night was like water, and the small courtyard was silent.

Beside the ancient well, dew quietly condensed on the grass blades. Su Ming sat cross-legged by the well, his breathing long and steady. A tiny vortex of mist slowly rotated before his mouth and nose with each exhalation and inhalation, faintly resonating with the misty water vapor rising from the well.

He was not deliberately trying to break through the bottleneck to the fifth layer of Qi Refining.

At this moment, he was in his Consciousness Sea, working with Lin Yu to deduce a modified version of a complex water-attribute defensive rune—the "Flowing Light Shield."

"Master, if we slightly elongate the structure of the 'Control' character, forming a loop, would it be better at dispersing force?"

"Interesting, it's like the principle of Tai Chi. Try adding a bit of a centrifugal force structure with rotation."

Master and disciple were immersed in their academic discussion, completely forgetting about cultivation itself.

Right at the moment Su Ming's mind stirred and he perfectly constructed that modified rune within his Consciousness Sea...

Inspiration struck.

The originally full spiritual energy within his body seemed to receive some kind of summons, naturally beginning to circulate along the pathways of the Like Water Art.

He did not deliberately assault the bottleneck; he simply allowed his mind to sink completely into the circulation of the Like Water Art. His consciousness seemed to transform into a drop of water, merging into the great cycle of spiritual energy flowing around him.

Not striving to be first, not clinging, just following its inherent laws, flowing slowly.

He didn't know how much time had passed when that barrier that had troubled him for so long actually melted away silently under the gentle, persistent permeation of his spiritual energy.

There was no thunderous roar, no severe pain, only a sense of fulfillment, as natural as water flowing into a channel.

It was like a frozen stream quietly thawing under the warm spring sun, merging into a great river.

A faint, gurgling sound came from within his body. All the pores on his body dilated and then contracted, expelling some turbid qi and absorbing more of heaven and earth's essence.

The water in the ancient well in the courtyard rippled with fine, delicate waves without any wind, as if cheering for Su Ming.

Su Ming slowly opened his eyes. A flash of deep blue, water-like light seemed to flicker in their depths.

The fifth layer of Qi Refining—achieved!

He raised his hand, his mind stirring slightly.

Hum!

Three layers of "water membranes," thin as cicada wings and shimmering with flowing light, instantly materialized before him. They were no longer static shields but flowed and rotated slowly like living water.

Su Ming casually picked up a stone and threw it.

Pat.

The stone touched the first water membrane, its speed instantly slowing as if it had sunk into a quagmire. Upon touching the second layer, it was deflected by the rotating water flow. By the time it reached the third layer, its force was spent, and it was gently bounced off, falling to the ground.

"What excellent 'force dispersion!'" Lin Yu praised. "This is the charm of physical defense combined with fluid mechanics. Disciple, this move is much more sophisticated than just taking a hit head-on."

Feeling the surging power within his body, a faint smile appeared at the corner of Su Ming's mouth.

This was what it meant for water to flow naturally into its channel.

...

Early the next morning.

The morning sun rose, casting myriad rays of rosy light.

Two auspicious clouds drifted leisurely from the horizon, landing precisely at the entrance of Courtyard D-7, drawing sidelong glances and looks of envy from passing menial disciples.

Those were flight artifacts only high-ranking inner sect disciples possessed.

Two exquisitely beautiful childlike figures stepped down from the clouds.

"Senior Brother Su Ming! Congratulations on exiting seclusion and achieving great progress in your cultivation!"

Clear, crisp voices rang out. It was Qingfeng and Mingyue, whom he hadn't seen for a long time.

The two still looked like children. One pretended to be mature, hands clasped behind his back; the other was lively and spirited, her big eyes darting around.

Mingyue bounced cheerfully up to Su Ming. Like presenting a treasure, she pulled out a jade box. "Senior Brother Su Ming! We heard you cultivate water techniques! This is... um, a 'Water Cloud Fruit' we picked... on the way... from Pill Cauldron Peak! It's really good for water-attribute cultivation! We give it to you!"

She stuck out her tongue. Clearly, the truth was closer to "stole" than "picked."

Qingfeng, on the other hand, saluted steadily with clasped hands, though his eyes held genuine delight and a trace of surprise. "I sense Senior Brother's aura is vigorous and his spiritual energy is harmonious and full, surpassing the past. It seems the Like Water Art truly suits you. Our Master emerged from seclusion a few days ago and specifically asked about you."

Su Ming's heart tightened.

Qingfeng and Mingyue's Master was a true giant of the Cloud Hidden Sect, a figure even Elder Ma regarded with awe.

"Oh? May I ask what guidance the Senior has?" Su Ming asked respectfully.

Mingyue, straightforward and quick to speak, rushed to answer. "Yes, yes! Master heard about that 'standardization' thing you did in the Repair Hall and laughed so hard his beard twitched! He said something like 'Great formations arise from the minutiae, the great Dao walks in daily life,' and told us to learn more from you! He said this is what you call... um, what was it again?"

Qingfeng gave his junior sister a helpless look and added, "Master said, Senior Brother's actions constitute 'tempering the heart within worldly affairs,' finding clarity amidst complexity, which holds the true essence of the path of formations."

Hearing this, Su Ming felt both moved and wary.

That great figure was indeed keeping an eye on him. Fortunately, the current evaluation was positive.

"The Senior praises me too highly. I am unworthy," Su Ming said with a smile.

He accepted Mingyue's gift and invited the two into the courtyard.

Qingfeng looked at the orderly assembly line in the courtyard, at those busy yet highly motivated menial disciples, a thoughtful glint flashing in his eyes.

"Senior Brother, your Repair Hall is quite famous now," Qingfeng remarked with a sigh. "Even many inner sect senior brothers are talking about it, saying the External Affairs Hall has produced an extraordinary figure."

"It's just empty fame," Su Ming said, pouring tea for the two. "I'm the one who caused trouble for you both, with that 'lost' report earlier..."

"Hey, that was fun!" Mingyue's eyes sparkled. "I 'found' one too! Those bad guys from the Vessel Hall always used to shortchange us on furnace materials. Seeing them get their comeuppance this time was so satisfying!"

Qingfeng also smiled. "Senior Brother's plan was brilliant. It solved the problem without leaving any handles. Master also said this is called... a 'Yang Scheme'."

The three chatted for a while longer in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere.

Before leaving, Qingfeng suddenly turned serious. "Senior Brother Su Ming, the outer sect assessment is approaching. This assessment is no ordinary matter. I've heard the difficulty will increase because of the 'Minor Heavenly Cycle Martial Display'. Although you have Elder Ma's recommendation, solid strength is still key. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you for the reminder, Junior Brother," Su Ming said solemnly.

After seeing Qingfeng and Mingyue off, Su Ming looked at the Water Cloud Fruit in his hand. Its surface was wreathed in a faint mist of water vapor; it was clearly no ordinary item.

"Master, it seems our 'unorthodox path' has caught the eye of a truly great figure," Su Ming thought to himself.

Lin Yu chuckled in his mind. "Hey, what the great figure values isn't your cultivation level, but your mind. Remember, disciple, in this world of cultivation, there are many who can fight. But those who can straighten out complex situations and invigorate interests are the rare resources."

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[1,234 words]

The night in Courtyard D-7 was as still as a stagnant pond.

After seeing off those two "little ancestors," Qingfeng and Mingyue, Su Ming wasn't in a hurry to return to the meditation room to cultivate. Instead, he sat alone by the stone table in the courtyard, his fingers tapping idly on the tabletop.

Moonlight flowed like water, spilling over his somewhat gaunt face, casting flickering shadows.

"Master, don't you think someone in our courtyard is even more 'low-key' than I am?" Su Ming suddenly spoke, his voice very low, almost scattered by the night breeze.

Inside the ring, Lin Yu lazily rolled over, his Soul Body tracing a relaxed arc within the space of the Xuantian ring. "Are you talking about that silent gourd, Li Kai, who only knows how to haul scrap material all day and doesn't even let out a peep?"

"Yes." Su Ming's gaze swept towards the tightly closed door of the South Room. "When Junior Brother Qingfeng came today, I noticed that window was cracked open. Just for a moment, but I sensed... fear."

"Fear?" Lin Yu became interested. "That kid is afraid of Qingfeng? That shouldn't be. Qingfeng may be a bit arrogant, but he's just an immature kid. Unless..."

"Unless he has something on him that makes him terrified." Su Ming picked up the thread, a glint of sharpness flashing deep in his eyes. "Also, the spiritual energy fluctuations in his room have been a bit off lately. Even though he's using a very sophisticated technique to conceal his aura, to the perception of my Like Water Art, it's like hiding a restless fish beneath a calm water surface."

Before his words faded.

Creak—

The door of the South Room opened.

A figure walked out silently.

No footsteps, not even the sound of breathing, which was deliberately suppressed to the absolute minimum.

It was Li Kai.

The menial disciple who usually kept his head down, whose presence was lower than the moss in the corner, now stood with his back straight.

He quickly walked to the stone table and, without any preamble, directly pulled out an object wrapped in layers of black cloth from his robes, slapping it heavily in front of Su Ming.

"Junior Brother Su."

Li Kai's voice was hoarse, like two pieces of coarse sandpaper rubbing together, clearly unused to speaking full sentences for a long time. "Help me."

Su Ming didn't touch the bundle, just looked up at Li Kai.

By the moonlight, he saw his roommate's eyes clearly for the first time. They were eyes filled with red veins, brimming with anxiety, despair, yet holding a trace of desperate madness.

"Senior Brother Li, what is the meaning of this?" Su Ming's tone was flat, even pausing to pour himself a cup of tea.

"I know you're hiding your true abilities." Li Kai stared fixedly at Su Ming, speaking rapidly. "I also know that behind the so-called 'standardized procedures' of the Repair Hall is your terrifyingly formidable ability to analyze formation structures. You can turn scrap into treasure, you can make those menials who only know how to copy others repair third-grade formation plates... you... are no ordinary person."

Su Ming's hand holding the teacup paused slightly, then he smiled. "Senior Brother Li, you jest. I'm just someone who can do accounts..."

"Stop pretending!"

Li Kai growled, his voice carrying a tremor. "I'm out of time! I have no other choice! In the entire Outer Sect, even the entire Cloud Hidden Sect, aside from those lofty elders, only you... only someone like you who doesn't play by the rules could possibly unravel this!"

As he spoke, he tore away the black cloth.

Hum—

An ancient, weathered, yet somehow violent fluctuation instantly rippled through the small courtyard.

Su Ming's pupils contracted sharply.

It was a damaged formation plate.

Unlike the common jade or Mystic Iron formation plates used in the sect, this object was entirely a strange dark gold color, its surface covered with raised dark red patterns like blood vessels. Just a single glance made Su Ming feel a chilling sense of dread shooting straight to the top of his head.

In the center of the formation plate was a distinct charred black hole, as if instantly melted through by some terrifying high heat. The broken rune lines were exposed like shattered blood vessels, looking ferocious.

"This is..." Su Ming set down his teacup, his expression turning grave.

"This is a heirloom of my Li family." Li Kai gritted his teeth, as if squeezing out every word from between them. "Half a month ago, I tried to activate it. The result... you can see. The core circuit burned out. I suffered a backlash."

He abruptly rolled up his sleeve.

Su Ming's gaze sharpened.

On Li Kai's right arm, there were clearly crawling, strange bluish-black patterns. They moved slowly beneath the skin like some living creature, emitting a nauseating aura of decay.

"Is this... 'Formation Murderous Aura Backlash'?!" Lin Yu exclaimed from inside the ring. "Good grief, this kid has a death wish? Daring to forcibly activate such an ancient formation overflowing with murderous aura? If the spiritual energy sealed inside this formation plate fully exploded, it'd be enough to give a Golden Core cultivator a nasty shock!"

Li Kai stared at Su Ming, his eyes full of pleading. "This murderous aura is devouring my vitality. At most three days, and I'll be finished. Junior Brother Su, this formation plate contains an ancient secret formation—'Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation.' As long as you can help me repair the core and expel the murderous aura, this secret formation... I'll hand it over to you!"

"Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation?"

Before Su Ming could react, the Lin Yu in his mind seemed like a cat whose tail had been stepped on, instantly exploding.

"Agree! Quick! Su Ming! You must agree!"

Lin Yu's voice was so excited it almost changed pitch. "Forget the secret formation for now, but this formation plate... this material is 'Stellar Core Meteorite Iron'! And these etching patterns, this is the technique of 'Void Imprinting'! This is the work of a grandmaster of ancient formations! The formations the Cloud Hidden Sect uses now are like children's toys compared to this! Get it, and I, your teacher, can deduce the lost true meaning of formations from it!"

Su Ming's heart jumped, but his expression remained unchanged.

He looked at Li Kai, his fingers lightly tapping the tabletop, remaining silent for a long while.

This silence was pure torture for Li Kai.

Just as the light in Li Kai's eyes was about to fade, Su Ming finally spoke.

"Three days."

Su Ming held up three fingers, his tone as calm as if discussing the most ordinary transaction. "I need three days. Also, write down everything you know about this formation plate—its origins, clues, even legends—and give it to me. Not a single word can be missing."

Li Kai swayed, almost collapsing to the ground. It was the weakness after his tightly wound nerves suddenly relaxed.

"Okay... okay!" Trembling, he pulled out a jade slip he had prepared long ago from his robes and placed it on the table. "It's all here... Junior Brother Su, I'm counting on you."

Finished, as if he had used up all his strength, he staggered back to his room.

Su Ming watched his retreating back, then looked at the ominous dark gold formation plate on the table, slowly letting out a deep breath.

"Master, this time... have we taken on a hot potato?"

"Hot potato?" Lin Yu chuckled, his tone carrying a hint of fervor. "This is called seeking opportunity amidst danger. Disciple, get ready. We're about to pull off a big one."

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

This question in Chapter 210: is beyond the syllabus.

[1,369 words]

This question in Chapter 210 is beyond the syllabus.

Inside the meditation room, the dark golden formation plate was placed on a specially made workbench, surrounded by various sizes of carving knives, spiritual ink, and the "spirit-detecting needles" Su Ming had made himself.

Su Ming sat cross-legged, his eyes slightly closed, his divine sense spreading out like quicksilver, carefully enveloping the formation plate.

"Do not rush recklessly. First, 'observe its momentum, inspect its damage.'"

Lin Yu directed with calm authority. "Use your water spiritual energy, transform it into the softest spiritual mist, and seep in to investigate. Remember, observe only, do not touch. This thing right now is like a volcano about to erupt. The slightest misstep, and our master and disciple will be reduced to ashes."

Su Ming nodded, took a deep breath, and began operating the Like Water Art.

Deep blue water spiritual energy flowed from his fingertips, transforming into a hazy mist that slowly seeped into the charred break on the formation plate.

As his divine sense delved deeper, Su Ming was inwardly horrified.

Since he began studying formations, relying on the True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction and his own unique "Investigation of Things" method, he had mastered over eighty basic runes to perfection. In the Repair Hall, he could already easily dismantle and optimize most first-order formation plates. But the internal structure of this formation plate before him, that three-dimensional rune network that seemed to form its own world, was at least a hundred times more complex! His meager foundation was like dust before this vast star chart.

"Found it."

After the time it takes half an incense stick to burn, Su Ming suddenly opened his eyes, his forehead covered in cold sweat.

"The core damage is here." He pointed a finger at the charred hole in the center of the formation plate. "This place should originally have been a three-dimensional 'void node,' acting as the spiritual energy hub for the entire formation. But due to spiritual energy overload, the node collapsed, causing the 'spiritual conduits' to melt and sever."

"The node collapse triggered a spiritual energy backflow, incinerating the three auxiliary conduits surrounding it." Lin Yu's voice sounded in Su Ming's mind, his tone serious. "This is like tempering a flying sword, blindly pursuing sharpness while forgetting resilience. The sword intent becomes too strong and backlashes against the sword embryo, causing the scabbard to shatter along with it."

"What should we do then?" Su Ming asked. "Recarve this node? But I don't even know what its original 'dao pattern' was."

"Repairing it exactly as it was is impossible." Lin Yu stated decisively. "The fundamental framework of this formation has a 'dao injury.' It's like using a reed stalk to channel

water from the Heavenly River. Even if you temporarily connect it, the moment the water arrives, it will collapse."

"Then..."

"This is where we use our 'Investigation of Things to Extend Knowledge' method." Lin Yu's voice became gently instructive. "The road is broken, why must we replicate the original path? We can 'forge a new path.'"

"Forging a new path?" Su Ming was taken aback.

"Exactly. Since the original 'rigid connection' couldn't withstand such violent spiritual energy, then let's change our thinking." Lin Yu said. "You cultivate the water method, so you should know the characteristics of water. Water benefits all things without contention, conforms to the square and the round, and can contain a hundred rivers."

"We won't repair that damaged node. Instead, we will use your water spiritual energy to construct a temporary, flexible 'spiritual energy diversion bridge' at this location!"

Lin Yu grew more excited as he spoke. "It's like setting up a 'flow-diversion weir' in a turbulent spiritual vein, or rather... constructing a 'spiritual pool' to slow its momentum! Use the 'inclusiveness' and 'permeability' of water spiritual energy to envelop and soften the violent spiritual energy, then guide it to the next part of the network. As long as the spiritual conduits are reconnected, the formation can be briefly activated!"

Su Ming's eyes gradually lit up.

This line of thinking... was bold, but also perfectly aligned with the true meaning of the Like Water Art!

"But, water spiritual energy is formless and intangible. How can such a delicate structure be maintained for a long time?" Su Ming raised the key question.

"Who said anything about maintaining it for a long time?" Lin Yu snorted with laughter. "Our goal is to activate it, retrieve the secret technique sealed within, and incidentally draw out the murderous aura from Li Kai's body. As long as it can be maintained for ten breaths, that's enough! This is a 'makeshift measure,' understand?"

"Understood!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, a flash of determination in his eyes.

Since it was a "makeshift bridge," then he would go all out!

...

For the next two hours, a breathtaking microscopic "spiritual energy guidance" battle unfolded within the meditation room of Courtyard D-7.

"Steady! The spiritual energy flow is too fast! That's three strands of spiritual energy, not thirty! Do you want this formation plate to explode completely?"

"Swirl! Swirl! That conduit node has a spiritual clog. Gently guide it with water spiritual energy! Be like the spring breeze brushing the willow, not like a torrential stream scouring sand!"

"Left side! The auxiliary rune on the left is trembling! Cover it with a protective membrane of water spiritual energy! Stabilize its spiritual resonance frequency!"

Lin Yu constantly gave pointers in Su Ming's mind, directing every minute manipulation.

And Su Ming, at this moment, had completely entered a state of forgetting both self and surroundings.

His face was as pale as paper, sweat soaked his clothes, dripping onto the floor to form a puddle. But the hands controlling the spiritual energy were as steady as a rock.

In his perception, he felt as if he had transformed into a drop of water within this complex formation.

Carefully navigating through the spiritual energy ruins, searching for every possible foothold.

Failure.

Still failure.

The water spiritual energy was too soft, unable to bear the spiritual pressure; the water spiritual energy was too rigid, unable to fuse; the structure had flaws, collapsing instantly...

Attempt after attempt, failure after failure.

With each failure, a sharp pain shot through Su Ming's meridians. But he didn't even frown, his mind unwavering.

He was adjusting, comprehending, transforming.

Finally, on the ninety-ninth attempt.

Su Ming suddenly felt an inspired insight.

He no longer forcibly tried to shape the water with his divine sense. Instead, he let the water spiritual energy flow naturally along the residual traces of dao resonance within those broken runes, gradually forming—vortices.

Water benefits all things, does not contend with them, therefore it can dissolve impact.

Countless tiny water spiritual energy vortices formed at the charred break.

They interconnected, meshed together, like an exquisitely intricate "water-diversion and energy-guiding" formation, smoothly and gently connecting the violent spiritual energies from both ends.

Hum—

A clear, melodious hum suddenly reverberated through the meditation room.

The dark golden formation plate trembled slightly. Those originally dim, dark red patterns, as if injected with vitality, suddenly lit up!

Flowing light circulated, rising and falling like breathing.

At the charred hole, a deep blue water-light vortex slowly rotated, pulsing like a beating heart, perfectly harmonizing the previously conflicting spiritual energies.

"It's done!" Su Ming exclaimed in a low, hoarse voice.

The next instant, brilliant light erupted from the center of the formation plate. A pitch-black, ink-like light pillar shot upward (fortunately blocked by the breath-concealing array Lin Yu had pre-arranged).

Within the light pillar, a jade slip, completely black and emitting a cold aura, slowly materialized.

"Quick! Imprint it with your divine sense!" Lin Yu urgently shouted.

Su Ming dared not delay, immediately separating a strand of his divine sense and probing towards the jade slip.

However, the moment his divine sense touched the core of the formation plate.

Boom!

Su Ming felt a roar in his mind, as if a door to an endless abyss had been violently thrown open.

He "saw."

Beneath the layers of brilliant light, the true core that was hidden.

It was no longer the flat, interconnected rune patterns he was familiar with.

But a vast, despair-inducing, three-dimensional, ever-renewing rune network!

Thousands upon thousands of densely packed runes flowed and danced within three-dimensional void space, interlocking with each other, like the stars of the heavens moving along profound trajectories. Each one was changing, each one was intertwining with billions of other runes in a myriad of dao resonances.

These were not the fixed diagrams from the Basic Overview of Formations.

This was... living dao.

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

Chapter 211: Gaining a Glimpse into the Dao of Arrays

[1,518 words]

It was like an illiterate child suddenly being thrown into a scripture hall containing supreme Dao treasures, facing walls full of heavenly texts.

Dizziness.

Intense dizziness instantly overwhelmed Su Ming.

It was the helplessness of having one's cognition completely crushed, the insignificance and fear perceived by a mayfly gazing up at the vast sky.

"Pfft!"

Su Ming spat out a mouthful of blood, his body swaying, nearly toppling over.

That divine sense connection snapped with a sound. The hovering black jade slip clattered onto the table, and the formation plate's radiance also dimmed.

"Disciple! Guard your heart, concentrate your spirit!"

Lin Yu's stern shout, like the evening drum and morning bell, forcibly pulled Su Ming back from that endless dizziness.

Su Ming gasped for breath, his hands gripping the table edge so tightly his knuckles turned white. His eyes were filled with shock and bewilderment.

"Master... what was that? Was that... the true Path of Formations?"

His voice trembled uncontrollably. "It's... too vast. Compared to it, everything I've learned before... is like child's play."

A profound sense of defeat spread in Su Ming's heart. He had once thought that, relying on the "Investigation of Things" method and mathematical deduction, he had already entered the hall of formation arts, even occasionally feeling smug.

But that brief glimpse just now made him fully understand that he had merely touched the threshold of that colossal gate, not even having pushed open the crack.

"Scared already?"

Lin Yu's voice sounded in the Consciousness Sea, lacking its usual teasing tone, carrying a rare seriousness and... a trace of vicissitude.

"Disciple, what you just saw was merely a wisp of the surface of the 'Cycles of the Celestial Stars', a manifestation of the 'Dao' within formations."

"Dizzy? Seeing stars? Feeling powerless?"

Su Ming nodded subconsciously.

"That's right." Lin Yu sighed softly, as if watching a fledgling eagle attempt its first flight. "If it weren't so, that would be strange."

"You need to understand, this path of immortal cultivation is inherently cruel."

Lin Yu's tone shifted, turning slightly cold. "Spiritual root aptitude, opportunities, destiny, and fortune are mostly predetermined by heaven. Your dual water-wood spiritual roots are considered above average. In a minor sect, you might be treasured. But in the Cloud Hidden Sect, before those true prodigies, you are merely ordinary."

"Moreover, your Dao foundation is damaged, and you lack any heaven-defying, fate-altering bloodline inheritance. The road ahead... is arduous."

"Your teacher is being frank with you. Without a great opportunity, the Golden Core realm might very well be the first insurmountable chasm of your life."

Su Ming's body shuddered, his face turning deathly pale.

The Golden Core... was that the end?

In this cultivation world where Nascent Soul cultivators could be revered and Spirit Transformation cultivators could be called ancestors, while Golden Core cultivators were considered local experts, they were still far, far from true "longevity and enduring vision," from "roaming freely between heaven and earth."

Could it be that in this life, he was ultimately destined to be just a slightly stronger ant?

"Unwilling to accept it?" Lin Yu asked.

"Unwilling!" Su Ming gritted his teeth, his fists clenched so tightly the joints cracked.

"Good! That's exactly the unwillingness I want!"

Lin Yu suddenly laughed, his laughter carrying an air of looking down upon the world. "Heaven never seals off all paths! Since our innate bone structure cannot compare to others, then we shall carve out a path to heaven through acquired 'skill!'"

"Precisely because of this, you must never view the Path of Formations merely as an auxiliary means to earn spirit stones and manage mundane affairs."

"You must treat it as your 'second life'! Your 'foundation for establishing yourself!'"

Lin Yu's words fell like hammers, striking Su Ming's heart.

"Imagine, if you stop at the Golden Core realm, with a lifespan of five hundred years. An ordinary Golden Core cultivator is merely mid-tier within the sect, bowing upon meeting a Nascent Soul cultivator, yielding the way upon encountering a true disciple."

"But!"

"What if you are a grandmaster of formations capable of setting up, improving, and even innovating new formations? What if you could increase the sect's protective mountain formation's power by thirty percent, boost the Spirit Gathering Array's efficiency by fifty percent, and casually set up a trapping formation that even a Spirit Transformation cultivator would need time to break?"

"What would your status be then?"

The scene Lin Yu painted was like a beam of light, piercing through the gloom in Su Ming's heart.

"At that time, even a Nascent Soul ancestor would need to show you deference! Because you hold the secrets of the sect's foundation! Your words would be the law; the rules you establish would be the standard!"

"This is the glorious, righteous path of 'approaching the Dao through skill,' of 'grasping destiny as a mortal!'"

"Therefore, from today onward, put away that shallow smugness, and don't let that single glance just now frighten you out of your wits."

"Cultivation is to strive for more time and a higher starting point, to delve into deeper formations; and achievements in formations will, in turn, nourish you, becoming your sturdiest armor, your sharpest blade, your loudest voice!"

"Do you understand now? My disciple."

Within the meditation room, silence reigned.

Su Ming sat there in a daze, his gaze shifting from bewilderment, to shock, and finally settling into deep concentration.

After a long time, he slowly let out a turbid breath. The shock in his eyes completely dissipated, replaced by an unprecedented calmness and pragmatism.

It was the sedimentation after weathering storms, the enlightenment after recognizing the road ahead.

"Master, this disciple understands."

Su Ming stood up and gave a solemn bow to the empty air. "This disciple does not seek to view all the flowers of Chang'an in a single day, but only seeks to tread firmly upon every brick and stone beneath his feet, building them into a ladder to heaven."

Since he couldn't comprehend that vast star chart, then he wouldn't look at it for now.

Since he couldn't fathom those infinite changes, then he wouldn't try to fathom them for now.

He would look at only one point.

Only at the "damaged" place.

Su Ming sat down again, once more channeling his divine sense to probe into the formation plate.

This time, he no longer attempted to glimpse the whole picture. Instead, relying on the ability of "Perceiving the Minutest Detail," he concentrated all his mental energy on that broken node.

Screening out distracting thoughts, unraveling the cocoon to extract the silk.

Avoiding the complex interweaving of Dao rhythms, he went straight to the material foundation bearing the runes—that core piece of jade marrow.

Under the microscopic view, the originally chaotic structure gradually became clear.

"Found it."

Su Ming's heart lake was perfectly clear.

At the point where the spiritual energies of the three-dimensional rune converged, he discovered a slight "crystal lattice misalignment" and a clump of "spiritual impurity" clogged like a blood clot.

It was this thing that was choking the throat of the entire grand formation.

"Since you are a 'Spiritual Clog,' then I shall employ the method of 'guiding and channeling.'"

The corner of Su Ming's mouth lifted slightly.

He once again mobilized his water spiritual energy. This time, the spiritual energy did not form a torrent, but transformed into billions of "spiritual needles" a hundred times finer than a hair strand.

With extreme caution, as if approaching a deep abyss.

The first wisp of spiritual needle probed in, gently nudging the misaligned crystal lattice.

The second wisp of spiritual needle followed, gently enveloping that clump of clogged spiritual substance.

Moistening things silently.

The "moistening" principle of water spiritual energy was brought to its extreme by Su Ming. He was like the most patient craftsman, smoothing out cracks bit by bit, guiding the spiritual substance back into the flow strand by strand.

This process was tedious, mentally draining, to the extreme.

Sweat had long since soaked through his heavy robes, pooling into a puddle on the floor. Su Ming's face grew paler, but the light in his eyes grew brighter.

One hour... two hours...

Until the first rooster crow came from outside the window.

As the last bit of spiritual clog was dissolved, a faint, harmonious, clear chime sounded from within the jade marrow.

Hum—

Like a long-sick person finally able to breathe smoothly.

The radiance at the formation plate's core no longer flickered, turning stable and gentle. That profound rune that had once made him feel despair, though still complex and difficult to comprehend, was now fully lit up, flowing with an intoxicating Dao rhythm.

Su Ming let out a long sigh of relief, his entire body as if fished out of water, slumping into the chair.

But as he gazed at the lit-up rune, he smiled expansively.

Though he still didn't understand its principles, he had repaired it.

This sense of accomplishment made his heart surge more than a realm breakthrough.

"Good."

Lin Yu's voice sounded timely, carrying undisguised approval. "The quality of repairing 'vessels,' observing the 'wounds' of formations—this is your foundation for establishing yourself at present. Remember this experience. As for the principles of the void contained within that 'Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation'..." Lin Yu chuckled. "That will be your starting point for peering into the 'Dao' of formations in the future."

Su Ming reached out and picked up the black jade slip on the table. It felt cool to the touch, yet gave him an immense sense of solidity.

"Senior Brother Li... your life is saved. My path... has also widened."

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

Chapter 212: "Minor Void Spirit Summoning Array"

[1,454 words]

At the same time, in the South Room.

Li Kai, who had been sitting motionless behind the door, suddenly raised his head.

He felt it.

That formation murderous aura that gnawed at his very marrow, in that instant, ceased its restless agitation. Immediately after, a gentle pulling force emanated from the room next door, guiding the murderous aura within his body, slowly flowing toward the now-repaired formation plate.

Two clear streams of tears silently slid down the cheeks of this usually taciturn young man.

He knew his gamble had paid off.

That seemingly gentle yet profoundly unfathomable Junior Brother Su had truly accomplished something even a Formation Peak elder might not be able to achieve.

"Su Ming..."

Li Kai murmured, engraving this name deep within his heart.

Meanwhile, on the distant Cloud Hidden Sect's main peak.

A secluded supreme elder suddenly opened his eyes, looking with confusion toward the direction of the External Affairs Hall at the mountain gate.

"Just now... there seemed to be a ripple of 'Void'? Was it an illusion..."

The old man shook his head and closed his eyes again.

The churning sea of clouds concealed all secrets.

.....

The door of the South Room in Courtyard D-7 was tightly shut, yet it couldn't contain the heavy, labored breathing inside, suppressed to its absolute limit.

When Su Ming pushed the door open, Li Kai's right arm, covered in sinister black murderous aura lines, was currently resting on the edge of the formation plate.

With the circulation of spiritual energy, those ferocious lines, writhing like living worms, were visibly fading at a rapid pace, revealing pale but healthy skin once more.

Hearing the sound of the door opening, Li Kai abruptly looked up.

The despair in his bloodshot eyes had dissipated, replaced by a near-exhausted ecstasy and a profound reverence for the youth before him.

"The mission is accomplished without disgrace."

Su Ming's voice broke the silence. He didn't look further at the arm currently being "purified."

He took out a smooth, warm green jade slip from his sleeve and gently placed it in the center of the table.

Inside the jade slip was recorded the "flexible spiritual energy guidance flow" concept he had spent several hours deducing, along with the specific method for constructing that "water spiritual energy bridge."

"The complete repair plan for the core node is all inside. With your foundation in the path of formations, following the template to maintain the formation plate's operation for half a quarter-hour and expel the murderous aura shouldn't be difficult."

Li Kai's hand, covered in calluses and scars, suddenly clamped onto the jade slip.

His knuckles turned white from excessive force, and the few ferocious black murderous aura lines on the back of his hand seemed to sense their impending end, writhing uneasily.

He didn't immediately check the contents but instead took a deep breath, as if trying to expel all the despair that had accumulated in his chest for half a month.

His divine sense probed inside. Moments later, Li Kai sharply raised his head.

Those eyes, always lifeless, were now bloodshot but burning with a flame called "rebirth."

He didn't utter any superfluous words of gratitude. He simply stood up, took a step back, straightened his robes that hadn't become disheveled even in his suffering, and bowed deeply to Su Ming, bending at the waist until his upper body was parallel to the ground.

Then, solemnly, he took out that ancient, simple jade slip and presented it to Su Ming with both hands.

"It is yours now."

Su Ming took the jade slip. It felt cold to the touch, as if holding a piece of profound ice that hadn't melted for ten thousand years.

The transaction was complete, cause and effect settled.

This young man, usually silent as a stone, now seemed somewhat hesitant.

He glanced back at the closed door, lowered his voice further, his hoarse tone echoing in the quiet meditation room, carrying a barely perceptible tension.

"Junior Brother Su, the outer sect assessment is imminent. After much thought, there are some things I must tell you."

Li Kai stared into Su Ming's eyes, speaking rapidly, "Although you have Elder Ma's recommendation, for the 'Hundred Arts Path to Heaven' stage, the examiner in charge of formations is the brother-in-law of Steward Zhang from the Vessel Hall. This person... has very close past ties with Elder Luo's faction from Formation Peak. Previously, when the Repair Hall cut off the Vessel Hall's source of income, Elder Luo's side also suffered losses. They can't openly move against Elder Ma's people, but if they give you a hard time within the assessment rules, no one could utter a single word of complaint."

Su Ming's pupils contracted slightly.

Steward Zhang's brother-in-law? Elder Luo's faction?

This was indeed an expected kind of trouble.

The cake of the Repair Hall was too tempting. Moving someone else's cheese naturally invites backlash.

He just didn't expect the retribution to come this quickly, and to target such a critical juncture as the assessment.

"Thank you for the warning, Senior Brother." Su Ming nodded slightly, his expression unchanged. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Seeing Su Ming so composed, a flicker of surprise passed through Li Kai's eyes, followed by deeper admiration. He hesitated for a moment, then pointed at the pitch-black jade slip in Su Ming's hand, lowering his voice even further, as if afraid of disturbing some presence.

"One more thing, consider it my meddling."

"Junior Brother, do you know the true origin of the 'Zhou Tian Celestial Star Grand Formation,' the foundation upon which our Cloud Hidden Sect was established, the one said to withstand attacks from peak Spirit Transformation experts?"

Su Ming's heart stirred. "Isn't it said to have been created by our founding patriarch, Senior Cloud Hidden Master, through observing the stars and comprehending the Dao?"

"That's the story told to outsiders."

A mocking curve appeared at the corner of Li Kai's mouth. "The Patriarch was indeed a genius of unparalleled brilliance, but back then... he actually found a fragmentary scroll from 'beyond the heavens.' He pieced together this grand formation based on mere fragments from that scroll, combined with the topography of the thirty-six peaks here."

A fragmentary scroll from beyond the heavens?

Su Ming felt the Xuantian ring on his right index finger tremble slightly.

"And this 'Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation'..." Li Kai pointed at the pitch-black jade slip, a trace of awe flashing in his eyes, "...shares the same origin as that fragmentary scroll. One could even say it is one of the very few relatively intact 'portable' components preserved from that vast inheritance system."

"So, Junior Brother Su."

Li Kai's expression became exceptionally serious. "Although this formation is named 'Spirit Attraction,' in my view, its greatest use is not for cultivation. Using it for cultivation is what fools do."

"Why?" Su Ming didn't understand.

"Cost." Li Kai uttered two words. "Activating this formation requires 'Void Stone' as a medium, something extremely difficult to find in this world. Moreover, while the spiritual energy it attracts is of ultimate purity, it carries a trace of the 'Void's' cold attribute. If a cultivator directly absorbs it, they need to expend a great deal of effort to 'warm' it. The gain isn't worth the loss."

"Its true value lies in two things: First, if you suffer from injuries inflicted by difficult-to-expel foreign spiritual energy, or are poisoned by elixir toxins or murderous aura that has penetrated to the marrow, you can use the pure Void spiritual energy attracted by this formation to slowly cleanse it, like washing ink with clear water. Its effectiveness is unparalleled under heaven. Second, if you obtain some delicate spiritual seeds, or need

to refine high-grade elixirs that have zero tolerance for impurities, the 'absolutely pure' environment provided by this formation is the finest in the world."

Lin Yu listened, his eyes growing brighter and brighter.

For Su Ming, whose Dao foundation was damaged and urgently needed gentle nourishment and repair, and for the future high-end pill refining and talisman-making fields he might enter, this was practically a divine skill tailor-made for him.

"I understand." Su Ming expressed his gratitude solemnly. "This is precisely the kind of formation I urgently need."

Seeing that Su Ming had taken his words to heart, Li Kai breathed a sigh of relief.

He fished out two small bottles from his storage pouch and placed them on the table.

"Inside is the little bit of 'Void Stone Powder' and 'Soul Stabilizing Sand' I have left. I'll give you half."

Li Kai gave a bitter smile. "Don't think it's too little. This stuff is outrageously expensive. When activating the formation, remember to use the 'Soul Stabilizing Sand' to guard your spiritual platform. At the edges of the Void rift, there are occasionally disturbing whispers. Though not fatal, hearing them too much can easily lead to mental agitation, and even... give rise to inner demons."

Having heard all this from Li Kai, Su Ming didn't linger any longer. He turned and pushed the door open to leave.

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Chapter 213: Information on the Outer Disciple Assessment

[1,190 words]

The night wind rushed in, dispersing the stuffiness in the room.

Su Ming toyed with the pitch-black jade slip in his hand, yet his heart was roiling with turbulent waves.

"Master?" he called out in his mind.

However, Lin Yu, who was usually as talkative as a chatterbox, was now eerily quiet.

A full three breaths passed before Lin Yu's somewhat ethereal voice finally came from the ring.

"Beyond the Heavens... a fragmentary scroll..."

"Disciple, when your master probed this jade slip with divine sense just now, aside from the recorded formation, I also sensed a trace of... an extremely ancient, nearly 'law'-level lingering resonance."

"What kind of resonance?" Su Ming pressed.

"It's different from any known formation school in this world."

Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of barely suppressed excitement, "If what Li Kai said is true, then that Cloud Hidden Sect's mountain-protecting grand formation might very well be a 'base shield' that's been demonically modified."

Just as Su Ming was about to inquire further, a series of urgent, drumbeat-like knocks suddenly sounded from outside the courtyard gate.

"Brother Su! Brother Su! Open the door quickly! Something major has happened!"

It was Wang Defa.

Su Ming frowned slightly, stowed the jade slip and materials into his storage pouch with a backhand motion, straightened his robes, and waved his hand to deactivate the door restriction.

Wang the fat man rolled in like a meatball, waving a pale golden proclamation in his hand. The fat on his face trembled violently from excitement, sweat dripping down his chin in a steady patter.

"Brother Su! It's set! It's finally set!"

Wang Defa didn't even bother to drink water, plopping down on a stone stool and slapping the proclamation onto the table with a *smack*. "The sect just released the official announcement! The outer sect assessment will be held in ten days at the 'Hundred Refinements Peak!'"

Su Ming's gaze swept over the proclamation.

The golden characters shimmered brilliantly in the night, exuding an air of unquestionable authority.

By this decree of the Cloud Hidden Sect's outer sect disciples:

All menial disciples who have been in the sect for five full years, or those holding a special approval token from an elder, are eligible to participate.

The assessment is divided into three stages. Only those who pass all stages may be listed among the outer sect ranks.

"Three stages?" Su Ming's eyes moved downward.

"Yes! This assessment has gotten insane!" Wang Defa panted heavily, extending three fingers as thick as carrots. "The first stage, 'The Touchstone of the Dao Foundation.' This is a hard benchmark; all examinees must take it. It tests spiritual energy purity, divine sense strength, and the stability of one's Dao heart. Before, you could pass as long as your cultivation reached the third-stage Qi Refining. This time, I heard the standard has been raised. Those with flimsy spiritual energy, those who relied on elixirs to boost their cultivation—they'll all be weeded out!"

Su Ming nodded slightly. This stage wasn't a big problem for him. The spiritual energy cultivated through the *Like Water Art* was of extremely high purity, and his divine sense had undergone the baptism of *Perceiving the Minutest Detail*, far surpassing his peers.

"The second stage, 'The Hundred Arts Path to Heaven.'"

At this point, Wang Defa's expression turned somewhat odd, and he stole a glance at Su Ming. "Examinees can choose one or multiple items from fields like alchemy, artifact forging, formations, beast taming, spiritual plant cultivation, etc., to demonstrate their skills. The sect says it's to discover 'versatile talents,' but in reality, it's just a show where each peak vies to snatch people."

"Brother Su, you'll definitely choose formations. But this time, the formation examiner is that guy surnamed Zhang... you know the one. He'll definitely give you a hard problem, like asking you to repair a third-grade formation plate using a pile of scrap materials."

Su Ming smiled slightly, picked up his teacup, and took a sip. "Repairing a formation plate with scrap? Isn't that my old trade?"

"Oh, my dear ancestor, it's not the same!" Wang Defa slapped his thigh anxiously. "This is an exam! There are time limits, material restrictions, and people watching your every move, looking for faults! The slightest mistake, and it's 'lack of skill,' immediate elimination!"

"No matter." Su Ming set down his teacup, his gaze calm. "What about the third stage?"

"The third stage is the most mysterious."

Wang Defa lowered his voice, a trace of fear appearing on his face. "The Illusory Realm Heart-Questioning Grove.' I heard the sect has invested heavily this time, activating a large-scale illusion formation that's been sealed away for a long time. All examinees who pass the first two stages will be thrown in. It's not one-on-one combat; it's a group entering together! It tests both adaptability and the decisiveness of one's character."

"It's said... it simulates 'actual combat.' There will be bleeding, pain, even the experience of 'death.'"

Su Ming's fingers gently rubbed the rim of his cup.

Actual combat simulation?

That was somewhat interesting. For him, who had always adhered to the *Way of Survival* and lacked life-and-death combat experience, it was both a risk and a rare training opportunity.

"Brother Su, quite a few people have their eyes on you for this assessment." Wang Defa sighed. "The Repair Hall has been too prominent these past six months. Some want to see you ascend to the heavens, but more want to see you fall into the mud. Especially that Elder Luo's faction. I heard they've contacted several ruthless characters in the inner sect who have suppressed their cultivation and not advanced, telling them to 'show you some color' inside the 'Illusory Realm Heart-Questioning Grove.'"

"Thank you for informing me, Steward Wang."

"Steward Wang, could I trouble you to inquire about one more thing for me?" Su Ming turned, his voice steady. "What was Zhao Wuji's most proud formation work during his lifetime, and what were its characteristics?"

Wang Defa was taken aback. "Brother Su, you're..."

"Know yourself and know your enemy." A faint arc curled at the corner of Su Ming's mouth.

After seeing Wang Defa off, Su Ming closed the courtyard gate.

The meditation room returned to silence, but the air was now filled with a tense, impending-storm feeling.

Su Ming stood up, walked to the window, and looked at the mist-shrouded Hundred Refinements Peak in the distance.

That peak stood in the night like an inverted sharp sword, pointing straight at the firmament.

"Ten days, huh..."

He murmured to himself, his fingers unconsciously stroking the storage pouch where two newly acquired items lay quietly: the pitch-black jade slip recording the *Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation*, and Li Kai's shocking words about the "Beyond the Heavens formation diagram."

"Master, it seems our 'unorthodox methods' will soon be put on the stage for others to judge." Su Ming spoke in his mind.

"Scared?" Lin Yu's voice regained some of its usual playful tone, but deep within, there was now a trace of gravity and anticipation.

"A little." Su Ming admitted frankly. "But more than that... I'm curious."

Lin Yu chuckled softly. "On the path of immortal cultivation, without curiosity, what difference is there from being a salted fish? Ten days is enough for us to make some preparations. First, thoroughly understand that *Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation*. Perhaps... during the assessment, we can give that examiner surnamed Zhang a 'surprise.'"

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

[1,416 words]

In the meditation room, the candle flame flickered.

Su Ming held the small jade bottle containing the "Void Stone Powder" in his hand, his wrist suspended in mid-air, not daring to pour it down for a long time.

"What are you shaking for? Got Parkinson's?" Lin Yu's voice drifted up in his mind. "This is Li Kai's life savings. This one bottle is probably worth several years of savings for an ordinary outer sect disciple. If you tremble and spill it wrong, we'll be drinking the northwest wind tonight."

"I understand, Master." Su Ming took a deep breath, forcibly steadying his mind, and lightly flicked his fingertip.

The "Like Water Art" quietly circulated. Dark blue spiritual energy seeped from his fingertip, warm and gentle, first stroking the patterns on the newly carved formation plate to establish a connection.

Only after sensing a faint, barely perceptible responsive tremor from the formation plate did he lightly tap the bottle with his fingertip.

An extremely fine wisp of silver-gray powder accurately fell into the repaired "flexible node" at the center of the dark gold formation plate.

This was the seventh attempt tonight.

The previous six times, either the spiritual energy output frequency was wrong, or the Soul Stabilizing Sand was sprinkled too early. In short, the delicate "Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation" gave no face at all, aside from emitting a couple of puffs of black smoke.

"Don't be stingy. Think bigger." Lin Yu directed. "Try a different approach this time. Don't use brute force to 'push' the spiritual energy. Use the 'lead' principle of the 'Like Water Art'. Imagine you're giving this formation plate a massage. Be gentle, got it? Just like when you repair those broken formation plates."

Su Ming ignored this nonsensical analogy, holding his breath and concentrating.

The dark blue water spiritual energy within his body slowly extended out. This time, it didn't directly pour in. Instead, it followed the complex, vein-like patterns on the formation plate, seeping in and enveloping them bit by bit.

Hum—

The formation plate emitted an extremely faint trembling sound.

The originally dead, dark red patterns seemed to be injected with blood, beginning to pulsate rhythmically.

"This might work!" Su Ming's eyes lit up. The hand seals in his hands changed, and he finally threw the Soul Stabilizing Sand fiercely towards the area around the formation plate.

Whoosh!

The air in the meditation room suddenly grew heavy.

There was no earth-shattering pillar of light, nor a tidal wave of spiritual energy.

Only at the void node in the center of the formation plate, the space seemed to collapse inwards. Then, wisps of dull, gray, utterly unremarkable mist seeped out slowly, as if alive.

In that instant, the temperature in the meditation room plummeted.

The tea on the table visibly formed a thin layer of ice. The candle flame was instantly compressed to the size of a bean, turning into a dismal blue-green color.

Su Ming shivered, a layer of white frost forming on his eyebrows.

"This is... Void spiritual energy?"

He tentatively circulated his cultivation method, drawing a wisp of that gray mist into his body.

Hiss—

A chill that pierced to the bone shot up along his meridians straight to the crown of his head. The feeling was like jumping naked into an ice cave in the dead of winter.

What was worse, this spiritual energy was extremely "inert." Once inside his body, it was like a rock. No matter how Su Ming tried to circulate and refine it, it remained motionless. It even continuously consumed his own spiritual energy to counteract that chill.

"Pfft!" Su Ming's face paled slightly. He quickly forced this strand of foreign spiritual energy out of his body. His internal spiritual energy had already been depleted by a small portion. "Master, this energy... is indeed as Li Kai said, extremely pure, with almost no impurities. However, its nature is 'silent, cold, inert, and stagnant.' The mental and spiritual energy required to refine it far exceeds its benefits. The cost outweighs the gain. It is truly not a good choice for cultivation. It might be useful for purging foreign spiritual energies or creating specific environments, but directly absorbing it is truly not worth the loss."

"Hmm, it seems Li Kai wasn't lying. This energy is indeed useless." Lin Yu's voice also carried a trace of disappointment. "Unless one cultivates an extremely cold-attribute cultivation method, or refines certain top-tier elixirs or magical tools that require absolute calm and the rejection of impurities, its value is limited. Forget it. Stop for now. What a waste of so much Void Stone Powder."

Su Ming nodded, also feeling it was a pity. He reached out, intending to cut off the spiritual energy supply and dismantle the formation.

Just as his fingertip was about to touch the runes at the edge of the formation plate, at the moment his spiritual energy was about to be cut off but hadn't been yet—

"Wait!"

Lin Yu suddenly roared, startling Su Ming so much his hand shook, nearly flipping the formation plate over.

"What is it, Master? Is the formation going to explode?" Su Ming immediately assumed a crouching, head-covering defensive posture.

"No... Don't move! Absolutely do not move!"

Lin Yu's voice became extremely strange, carrying an unprecedented urgency, and even a hint of... the sound of swallowing saliva?

"Disciple, do you smell something?"

"Smell something?" Su Ming sniffed. Besides the cold air, there was nothing. "No, there's only a chill."

"No... It's fragrant." Lin Yu murmured to himself. "This formation... seems to have smuggled in something extra? This feeling... why is it so like someone who's been starving for three days suddenly smelling braised pork?"

Su Ming was utterly bewildered. "Master, you're a soul body. How do you have a sense of smell? And braised pork?"

"Less nonsense! This is an instinct! An instinct from the depths of the soul!" Lin Yu grew anxious. "Quick! Bring the ring closer! Right in the center of that gray mist, there's something a little different!"

Seeing Lin Yu so flustered, Su Ming didn't dare delay. He hurriedly extended his left hand wearing the ring towards the center of the formation plate where the rolling gray mist was.

For safety's sake, he wrapped three layers of water spiritual energy shields around his hand.

Closer.

"There! Grab it!" Lin Yu shouted.

Su Ming focused all his divine sense, carefully searching within that gray, hazy mist.

Finally, in the microscopic view of his divine sense, he captured an utterly shocking scene.

Hidden within the gaps of the vast, dead, cold gray "waste gas," there were actually a few wisps of gray-brown "filaments" a hundred times finer than the thinnest spider silk, nearly impossible to detect with the naked eye.

They were mixed in with the Void spiritual energy, utterly inconspicuous, not even emitting spiritual energy fluctuations, like dust.

But this was exactly what Lin Yu wanted!

Slurp—

An extremely faint sucking sound rang out.

Those few wisps of gray-brown airflow were precisely peeled away by the Xuantian ring and swallowed in one gulp. As for the remaining bone-chillingly cold Void spiritual energy, it was disdainfully "spat" aside.

The next second.

A long, utterly ecstatic groan from Lin Yu sounded in Su Ming's mind.

"Ah— That feels amazing!"

The sheer bliss in that voice gave Su Ming goosebumps.

"Master... are you alright? Don't tell me you've been poisoned?"

"Poisoned, my foot! This is a tonic! A peerless, supreme tonic!"

Lin Yu's voice trembled. The soul body phantom manifested in the Consciousness Sea was actually a tiny bit clearer than before. His originally somewhat illusory and indistinct facial contours could now make out the bridge of his nose!

"Disciple! This thing can nourish the soul!"

Lin Yu was so excited he was incoherent. "Not the kind of 'nourishment' that relies on spiritual energy, but... it reaches the very source! Like a long-dry spring suddenly receiving a downpour of sweet rain! Although the amount just now was very small, its essence is extremely high! It's ten thousand times better than any Soul Nourishing Wood or Soul Stabilizing Pill!"

Hearing this, Su Ming's heart was also greatly shaken.

Soul nourishment!

What this meant for Lin Yu, who only had a remnant soul left, was self-evident.

"Master, what exactly is this 'filament'? Li Kai never mentioned the formation would produce such a thing!"

"I don't know. This is beyond my knowledge base." Lin Yu calmed down a bit and began to analyze. "But this thing seeped out from a void rift. It definitely doesn't belong to this world. The 'Beyond the Heavens' fragmentary scroll Li Kai's family obtained is

incomplete. Perhaps they also didn't know that this 'Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation,' aside from attracting that silent, cold spiritual energy from the void, also attracts this kind of 'source substance' that can nourish the very source of the soul!"

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

Chapter 215: Soul Power Refueling Station

[1,381 words]

"Source Substance..." Su Ming chewed on the word, his gaze burning as he stared at the formation plate that was still swallowing and spewing gray mist.

What kind of useless formation was this?

This was clearly a "self-service cafeteria" exclusively for his master!

"Continue! Disciple, don't stop! This master feels he can still eat two more bowls!" Lin Yu urged.

"Aye aye!"

Su Ming immediately perked up, no longer stingy with his spiritual energy, and maintained the formation's operation at full power.

That night, the temperature inside the meditation room was frighteningly low, but the hearts of the master and disciple were burning with passion.

Su Ming was like a diligent boiler worker, constantly adjusting his spiritual energy output to maintain the formation's stability; while Lin Yu was like a picky gourmet, manipulating the Xuantian ring to precisely pick out those precious, thread-thin strands of "grayish-brown source substance" from the large masses of gray "waste material."

It wasn't until the first light of dawn appeared at the horizon and the Void Stone Powder was completely exhausted that the formation plate reluctantly ceased operation.

Su Ming collapsed on the floor, exhausted, his fingers frozen stiff.

But in his mind, Lin Yu's condition was unprecedentedly good.

"Disciple, look."

In the Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu extended his hand.

His originally semi-transparent, even somewhat blurry palm, though still illusory, now had sharp, clear edges and lines, and even the patterns of his fingerprints could be seen clearly.

"Though the total amount gained this night is meager, its quality is extremely high. The nourishment to the soul's origin far surpasses ordinary nurturing! If we can obtain it long-term, not only is there hope for repairing soul injuries, perhaps... even reforming a more stable soul body foundation is not an extravagant hope!" Lin Yu exclaimed with emotion, his tone filled with hope.

Su Ming rubbed his numb, frozen hands, grinning as he said, "Since we know this formation is of great use to Master, even if it costs more, it's worth it. It's a pity the 'Source Substance' output seems extremely unstable, and the Void Stone Powder consumption is huge..."

"No matter! Since we've already found the path, what remains is to explore the patterns and accumulate resources." Lin Yu's heroic spirit surged forth, "This formation will be our top priority from now on! Once this master's soul body stabilizes a bit more, perhaps I can uncover more wondrous uses of the Xuantian ring. By then, the foundation for us, master and disciple, will be even stronger!"

.....

Although they had discovered the treasure of "grayish-brown source substance," in the following days, the master and disciple duo fell into a new frustration.

The yield was too low.

Adhering to his usual meticulousness, Su Ming took out a blank jade slip and, using his divine sense as a brush, meticulously recorded the various data of each formation deployment.

"Day Wuchen, third quarter of the Zi hour, deployed formation in the meditation room, consumed half a *qian* of Void Stone Powder, lasted half a shichen, obtained three strands of 'grayish-brown source substance,' as fine as floating silk, almost imperceptible."

"Day Wuchen, beginning of the Chou hour, tried again, lasted one shichen, consumed one *qian* of powder, obtained five strands of source substance, slightly thicker than before, yet extraction was difficult, with eight or nine out of ten dispersing into the ambient spiritual energy of the void."

"Day Jisi, exact Wu hour, tried in the courtyard under sunlight, formation operation was sluggish, almost no source substance precipitated, instead it slightly disturbed the surrounding spiritual energy, fearing it might attract attention, quickly dismantled."

Su Ming looked at the record book in his hand, his brow tightly furrowed, "Master, this efficiency is no good!"

"And this Void Stone Powder is almost gone too." Lin Yu also wore a worried expression.

"There must be some pattern we haven't discovered."

"Pattern..." Su Ming lightly tapped the table with his knuckles, his gaze shifting to the gradually darkening sky outside the window, "Master, you once said that a formation's 'spirit attraction' emphasizes the right time, the right place, and the harmony of the formation. For the right time, we've tried different hours; the transition between Zi and Chou seems to have some benefit. For the harmony of the formation, it relies on the gentle guidance of the Like Water Art and the Xuantian ring's special absorption. Only this 'right place'..."

He paused, then continued, "When this disciple usually practices the Like Water Art by the ancient well in the courtyard, I feel the water spiritual energy is particularly active and abundant. That ancient well is very old; perhaps there is a subtle water vein beneath it. Could that be considered a special kind of 'earth energy node'? The void is ethereal; does it attract its power?"

"Not only that," Lin Yu said, "I've observed recently that the location of that ancient well seems to be exactly on a tiny node of the Cloud Hidden Sect's earth veins. Although it's not some major spiritual vein, it excels in being unobstructed. Since this formation is called 'Spirit Attraction,' why don't we try changing locations?"

"Tonight happens to be the full moon night." Su Ming looked up out the window, "The moonlight is at its strongest, the tidal gravitational pull is greatest; perhaps we can lure the 'big fish' out of the void."

They decided to act immediately.

Deep into the night, the moon was high in the sky.

Courtyard D-7 was deathly silent, with only the occasional chirping of insects.

Su Ming quietly approached the ancient well and placed the dark gold formation plate on the well's edge.

The cold, clear moonlight spilled onto the well's water surface, sparkling and shimmering, the reflected light perfectly illuminating the bottom of the formation plate.

"The last bit of Void Stone Powder, all in."

Without hesitation, Su Ming poured the last bit of powder from the bottle's bottom into the formation.

Hummm—

This time, the formation plate's reaction was completely different from before.

It didn't emit that low, dull hum, but produced a strange resonance.

The calm water surface in the well rippled without any wind, spreading out circles of fine, uniform ripples. The moonlight shattered within them, dancing and shimmering.

As Su Ming infused his spiritual energy, the ancient dark red patterns on the formation plate now faintly took on a layer of silvery radiance, reflecting with the moon in the sky and the moon's reflection in the well, creating a mysterious and wonderful scene.

Su Ming felt that the water spiritual energy he was outputting circulated more smoothly than in any previous attempt, as if the formation had achieved some kind of harmonious resonance with the surrounding environment and the moon in the sky.

"Now! Maintain it!" Lin Yu commanded in a low voice, his tone filled with anticipation.

In the center of the formation plate, the void node appeared once more.

"Here it comes!" Lin Yu exclaimed softly.

This time, there were no large masses of gray exhaust.

From the void node at the center of the formation plate, a familiar gray thread first seeped out.

Immediately following, was a thread... of silver!

That silver thread was extremely fine, yet dazzlingly bright, writhing like a living creature under the moonlight.

"Silver?!" Su Ming was startled.

"Don't mind the color! Get closer quickly! This thing is potent! The quality of this substance far surpasses the grayish-brown!" Lin Yu's voice even changed pitch.

The Xuantian ring shone with intense light, its suction force more violent than any previous time.

Ssss...

The silver thread vanished into the ring.

In that instant, Su Ming felt a refreshing, tingling numbness spread from where the Xuantian ring was worn on his left hand, quickly spreading through half his body. Not only was there no discomfort, it instead cleared his mind, and his divine sense seemed to become a bit sharper.

Inside the ring, the illusory form of Lin Yu's soul body shone with silver light, its degree of solidity visibly increased by a notch, and his facial features became even clearer.

"Good! This substance is highly nourishing!" Lin Yu was both shocked and overjoyed.

But this wasn't the end.

Just after the silver thread was absorbed, it was as if the void node's meridians had been unblocked.

Gurgle.

A soft sound, as if something had bubbled up from deep water.

A substance, only the size of a grain of rice yet emitting a faint golden halo, slowly drifted out.

The moment this thing appeared, the surrounding air was no longer just cold, but became exceptionally viscous, as if time itself had slowed down in that moment.

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[1,360 words]

"Holy shit!"

Lin Yu blurted out a curse, "A golden legend?! Disciple! Full power! Don't let it get away!"

Su Ming felt his scalp go numb and didn't dare slack off in the slightest.

The "Like Water Art" operated at its absolute limit. His deep blue spiritual energy, like the most pliable net, wrapped around that point of golden halo in layer upon layer. He had to prevent it from dissipating, yet couldn't risk disturbing it with brute force. The

spiritual energy within his body surged out like it was free, desperately locking onto that wisp of pale golden source substance.

The Xuantian ring emitted a hum of extreme longing and gave a fierce suction.

Whoosh!

The golden source substance vanished into the ring.

The next second.

Boom!

Deep within Su Ming's Consciousness Sea, it was as if a thunderclap had exploded, yet also like celestial music was lingering!

Lin Yu's Soul Body was completely enveloped by a warm and vast golden radiance.

That radiance wasn't shining from the outside; it was emanating from the very depths of his soul body's origin!

Bathing in this golden light, Lin Yu's originally illusory soul body solidified and reshaped at a speed visible to the naked eye!

It was like a faded, blurry ancient painting being re-outlined and colored, bursting forth with astonishing vitality and detail.

His beard, hair, eyebrows, eyes, even the texture of his robes and the light in his gaze, all became vivid and lifelike, solid as substance.

Although the area below his waist remained slightly illusory, his upper body was now indistinguishable from a living person!

The golden light lasted for about three breaths before gradually receding inward.

Lin Yu slowly opened his "eyes," a divine light shining brightly within them.

He raised his now solid, jade-like palm, examining it carefully. His five fingers slowly clenched, and a wave of soul power far more powerful than before faintly emanated.

"My soul body's origin... has received a fundamental supplement and repair!" Lin Yu's voice carried a slight tremor, born of extreme joy and shock, "It's not just an increase in quantity, but a qualitative transformation! This single strand of golden source substance is a hundred times more effective than the silver threads, a thousand times more than the grayish-brown! Now, the range of my divine sense perception has more than doubled, and my control over soul power has become much more refined and agile!"

He even attempted a slight thought, and a wisp of invisible soul power extended from the Xuantian ring, gently brushing over a fallen leaf on the stone table beside him.

That leaf trembled slightly.

Interfering with the physical world! Though extremely weak, this meant Lin Yu's soul body had grown powerful enough to produce a tangible effect on the external world!

"Haa..."

Lin Yu let out a long sigh, that breath actually forming a real vortex within the Consciousness Sea.

He raised his hand, looked at the solid palm lines, and clenched his fist.

"Power..."

Lin Yu turned his head, looking at Su Ming, his eyes filled with wild joy, "Disciple, this one mouthful is worth a hundred of the past ones!"

Su Ming slumped on the green stone by the well, his face pale from the intense consumption of spiritual energy, sweat beading at his temples. Yet, the light in his eyes was brilliant, full of delight.

"Master, it seems we've found our 'honey hole'."

After this night of frenzied experimentation, the master and disciple had finally deduced a set of patterns.

Returning to the meditation room, Su Ming took out his small notebook and began summarizing.

"Master, it seems we've found the right place. Moonlight essence, the ancient well, the earth energy node... only when the right time and favorable location align can such high-quality 'source substance' be attracted."

"Correct!" Lin Yu's soul body returned to its place, his joy overflowing, "This harvest far exceeded expectations! It fully proves our conjecture was accurate!"

Back in the meditation room, ignoring his exhaustion, Su Ming immediately took out that recording jade slip and continued writing with his divine sense.

"Day Jisi, from the end of the Hai hour to the beginning of the Zi hour, night of the full moon, moonlight essence at its peak. Set up the formation along the rim of the ancient well in the courtyard (suspected to be a subtle water vein/earth energy node). Consumed the final one qian of Void Stone Powder."

"Results: Obtained seven strands of 'grayish-brown source substance' (quality slightly better than before); one strand of 'silver radiance source substance'; one grain (about the size of a rice grain) of 'pale golden source substance'."

"Deduction: The production of source substance is graded. Grayish-brown is common, silver radiance is superior, pale gold is rare. The quantity and quality of the output are jointly influenced by the right timing (moon phase, hour), favorable location (attributes and strength of the earth energy node), and formation harmony (compatibility of spiritual energy). The full moon, the Zi hour, and locations abundant in water spiritual energy seem to be the key to attracting high-grade source substance."

After writing, Su Ming put down the jade slip.

"Master, regarding this 'Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation,' we must reconsider its significance for us," Su Ming said gravely.

"Indeed," Lin Yu nodded, his expression solemn, "This formation is absolutely not the 'useless' thing Li Kai knew it to be. It is a heaven-defying formation capable of drawing the mysterious 'source substance' from the Void, directly supplementing and strengthening the origin of the soul!"

"Therefore, this formation must be classified as top secret, absolutely cannot be known by outsiders," Su Ming's thinking was clear, "To the outside world, it is merely the 'special auxiliary formation' Li Kai mentioned, used for healing, detoxification, and creating a pure environment. Internally..."

His gaze burned intensely, "It is Master's 'origin spirit medicine,' one of our greatest future assets and trump cards! We must continuously optimize the conditions for setting up the formation, explore better 'favorable locations,' and find ways to obtain more formation materials like Void Stone Powder. Until..."

"Until I have the ability to let you swagger sideways through the cultivation world," Lin Yu picked up the thread, the corner of his mouth curling into a confident arc.

"Once this teacher's soul body stabilizes a bit more, I might be able to help you construct formations or discover more wonderful uses. For now, the primary task is to ensure this formation can operate continuously, supplying me with source substance."

As he spoke, Lin Yu attempted to extend a finger, pointing at the teacup on the table.

The teacup wobbled slightly! The movement was small, but it definitely moved!

Su Ming's pupils contracted.

A soul body interfering with reality—this was a huge leap! It meant that at critical moments, Master was no longer just a "fountain commander" who could only talk, but had the ability to protect himself and even launch sneak attacks!

"However, the material problem is pressing," Su Ming pointed at the empty bottle, "The Void Stone Powder is exhausted. This item is rare and expensive, difficult to obtain through ordinary channels. Moreover, purchasing large quantities would inevitably arouse suspicion."

Lin Yu chuckled. With his soul body solidified, his demeanor grew even more composed and confident, "Don't worry. In ten days, it will be the outer sect assessment's 'Hundred Arts Path to Heaven.' That is precisely the time for us, master and disciple, to make a name for ourselves and demonstrate our value! Then, why worry about lacking spirit stones and resources? Perhaps the sect will even award such 'unconventional' spiritual materials as rewards."

"Internally," Su Ming looked at the Xuantian ring, "This is our 'special operations laboratory.' We need to use the high-grade source substance it produces to nourish your soul body until it's plump and healthy, until..."

"However, there's a very practical problem right now."

Su Ming pointed at the utterly empty jade bottle, "The Void Stone Powder is gone. If we want this gas station to open for business, we need to make money, a lot of money."

Lin Yu grinned, "What's there to fear? There are still ten days until the outer sect assessment. When the time comes, on the 'Hundred Arts Path to Heaven,' we'll show off a couple of our unique skills. Are we still afraid we won't earn spirit stones?"

"That's true."

Su Ming put away the formation plate, his gaze turning towards the gradually brightening sky outside the window.

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

Chapter 217: (Final Question)

[1,252 words]

The long table in the meditation room was piled with half a foot of yellowed paper. These weren't cultivation method manuals or secret texts, but rather the Repair Hall's accumulated "Formation Accident Reports" and various rubbings of discarded formation plates.

Three days ago, that Formation Peak genius, Luo Feng, had personally come to the Repair Hall under the pretext of "verifying a batch of training formation plates."

After the handover was complete and the crowd had dispersed, he seemingly casually strolled to Su Ming's side. His fingertip quickly traced a few obscure structural nodes on the tablet with spiritual energy, his voice dropping extremely low:

"Hundred Refinements Peak, Examiner is Shishu Zhang. This person has a fiery temper, despises trickery the most, and uniquely loves this formation's uprightness and its method of overwhelming with momentum. Throughout all previous exam questions, despite myriad changes, they never stray from this core. Do well for yourself."

With that, Luo Feng flicked his sleeve as if nothing had happened and drifted away.

Combined with the fragmented information Wang Defa had pried from the old clerks at the External Affairs Hall about Zhang Lie's preferences, this became the starting point for the deduction diagram in Su Ming's hands. This information was probably only known to him and Luo Feng at the moment.

Su Ming pinched a specially made, extremely fine charcoal pencil in his hand and drew a heavy red circle on a sketch depicting complex formation lines.

"Master, according to the information from Luo Feng, plus the hints Steward Wang managed to dig up, this Examiner Zhang has a 'fiery temper'." Su Ming lightly tapped the red circle with his fingertip. "What he's most skilled at, and what he most enjoys setting up in assessments, are variant questions based on the 'Nine-Curve Solar Yang Formation'."

"Nine-Curve Solar Yang Formation..."

Lin Yu's voice echoed in the Consciousness Sea, carrying a hint of nonchalance. "Sounds intimidating by name. Its characteristics are fast initiation, high burst damage, and this formation has nine energy loops, one nested within another. If you mess up just one part slightly, the entire formation will collapse like dominoes, incidentally blasting the problem-solver into a dusty mess."

Su Ming gave a slight nod, his charcoal pencil quickly sketching nine intertwined curves on the paper, representing the trajectories of spiritual energy flow.

"Steward Wang says this Steward Zhang has a stubborn, self-willed personality and hates people cutting corners the most. In past assessments, anyone who used 'tricky'

methods to break formations, even if they succeeded, didn't get high scores. He likes to see that kind of... head-on, brute-force solution."

"Head-on brute force?" Lin Yu snorted with a laugh. "Using your head to smash against a rock, that's recklessness. Disciple, we are technicians, not a demolition crew."

The corner of Su Ming's mouth lifted slightly. He didn't argue, just took another sheet of paper from the side, densely covered with the ninety basic runes he currently mastered.

"I'm not planning to go head-on with him either. I only have these ninety basic runes in hand right now, and most of them are defensive, guiding, or stabilizing types. Trying to directly clash with an offensive grand formation designed by a Foundation Establishment formation master would be suicide."

Su Ming spread that rune chart flat next to the formation diagram, his gaze becoming deep and sharp. "What I need to do is 'follow the momentum'."

"That's more like it." Lin Yu perked up. "He likes 'Solar Yang', right? When a fire's momentum is great, what does it fear most? Not water, but 'chaos'. If a fire's momentum loses its guidance, it can burn itself out. Your 'Like Water Art' is most adept at infiltration and guidance."

Su Ming lifted his pen and lightly drew a tangent line at the third loop node of the "Nine-Curve Solar Yang Formation".

"Here, this is the essential path for spiritual energy acceleration." Su Ming murmured to himself, as if entering some kind of deduction state. "If I implant three 'Slow' character runes here, combined with a 'Flow Split' structure..."

"Three isn't enough." Lin Yu immediately pointed out. "The spiritual pressure of the Nine-Curve Solar Yang is very high; three 'Slow' characters would be instantly overwhelmed. You should use a 'Vortex' structure, turning the directly rushing spiritual energy into a whirlpool. Just like how we guided spiritual energy in the ancient well, let it spin on its own, consuming its own kinetic energy."

Su Ming's eyes lit up. The charcoal pencil in his hand swiftly danced, transforming the originally sharp, direct lines into gentle spirals.

"With this, although the fiery energy is vigorous, it remains pent up and doesn't release. Once it accumulates to the critical point, I just give a light nudge at the 'pressure release port' at the end of the formation..."

"Boom!" Lin Yu provided a sound effect. "That Examiner Zhang's face will probably be darker than a pot bottom."

Su Ming put down the charcoal pencil and rubbed his slightly throbbing temples.

This was only the first step.

Tactical deduction was certainly important, but more crucial were the "cards" in his hand.

He turned to look at the antique shelf behind him. There, displayed were the fruits of his "standardized operations" during his time at the Repair Hall—a pile of seemingly unremarkable, yet actually meticulously fine-tuned formation modules.

"Master Lin assists with calculations, the 'Like Water Art' provides fine control, plus these..." Su Ming casually picked up a "Universal Voltage Stabilizer Plate" only the size of a palm. "This is my trump card."

This voltage stabilizer plate was his improvement, combining Lin Yu's concept of an "electrical circuit voltage stabilizer" with the cultivation world's "Spirit Solidification Formation". It had no offensive power, and its defensive capability wasn't strong either. Its only characteristic was—extreme stability, and compatibility with the spiritual energy interfaces of the vast majority of first-order formations.

"Ordinary people breaking formations think about how to dismantle the opponent's moves. My line of thinking is to turn the opponent's formation into my formation." Su Ming rubbed his thumb over the cold metal texture, his eyes revealing a confidence named "control".

"What do you call this move?" Lin Yu asked with a laugh.

"The cuckoo occupying the magpie's nest." Su Ming said calmly.

For the next few days, Courtyard D-7 was completely sealed off.

He no longer practiced new runes. Instead, he took those ninety long-mastered basic runes, broke them apart, kneaded them into pieces, and recombined them.

The "Gathering" character didn't necessarily have to be used for gathering spiritual energy; carving it in reverse produced the "Disperse" character that generated repulsive force.

If the "Flow" character was combined with high-frequency vibration, it could serve to cut spiritual energy flows.

If the "Solidify" character was used at the opponent's key spiritual energy circulation nodes, it became the most annoying "lag".

Discarded drafts piled up like snowflakes throughout the room, only to be incinerated into ash by Su Ming using spiritual fire.

Until late at night on the ninth day.

Su Ming stopped all movement.

On the long table before him, only a single blank sheet of paper remained.

The paper was empty, without a single word.

He closed his eyes. In his Consciousness Sea, countless complex lines, runes, and nodes converged like a hundred rivers returning to the sea, ultimately transforming into a calm, waveless expanse of deep blue water.

Beneath the water's surface, undercurrents surged, yet remained orderly and systematic.

"How do you feel?" Lin Yu asked.

"I have a clear grasp in my heart." Su Ming opened his eyes, his gaze clear, showing no trace of fatigue. "No matter what question he sets, as long as it doesn't exceed the scope of basic formations, despite myriad changes, they never stray from the core."

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Chapter 218: The Outer Sect Assessment Begins

[1,227 words]

The tenth day, early morning.

Hundred Refinements Peak, the place with the strongest fire energy and most abundant earth fire among all the peaks of the Cloud Hidden Sect, was usually the training ground for disciples from the Artifact Forging Hall and the Formation Hall.

Today, it was even more bustling and noisy.

The huge white jade plaza had long been filled with figures of all kinds.

Thousands of menial disciples wearing gray robes gathered here like an ant colony. Some looked nervous, muttering under their breath; some gathered in small groups of three or five, encouraging each other; others simply sat cross-legged on the ground, trying to sharpen their not-so-sharp spears at the last moment.

Su Ming wore a washed-out, faded standard gray robe of the Repair Hall, with no extra accessories, blending into the crowd, completely inconspicuous.

But he wanted to keep a low profile, yet someone wouldn't allow it.

"Brother Su! Over here! Over here!"

A voice as loud and grating as a broken gong forcefully overpowered the surrounding noise.

In the southeast corner of the plaza, Wang Defa's massive frame was struggling to push through the crowd, holding up an old, slightly tattered banner with four crookedly written characters—"Repair Hall Glory."

Behind him, Old Wang, Li Hou, Zhang Asheng, and that group of core Repair Hall members trained by Su Ming stood neatly in a row.

Each of them held a formation plate in their hands, their proud works repaired using the "Su Standard," now held across their chests like weapons in an honor guard.

"..." Su Ming's footsteps paused for a moment, and he really wanted to turn around and leave.

"Master, can I pretend I don't know them?" Su Ming groaned inwardly.

"Too late," Lin Yu laughed uncontrollably inside the ring. "This is called showing off! Look at the people's gazes around you, so 'admiring.'"

Indeed, they were "admiring."

The surrounding menial disciples all looked sideways, their eyes filled with... indescribably complex emotions.

"That's Su Ming from the Repair Hall? I heard that 'standardization' thing was his idea?"

"He doesn't look like much, so skinny, how much spiritual energy could he have?"

"Shh! Keep your voice down! He has Elder Ma backing him! And I heard he can even get in touch with Senior Brother Luo Feng from Formation Peak."

The whispers buzzed like flies. Among them were many tinged with jealousy and malicious speculation.

Su Ming took a deep breath, adjusted his facial expression, put on a gentle and humble smile, and walked towards Wang Defa.

"Steward Wang, brothers, you're too kind," Su Ming said, cupping his hands in salute.

"Of course!" Wang Defa's face glowed red as he patted Su Ming's shoulder. "Brother Su, today you're the face of our Repair Hall! Those grandsons from the Vessel Hall are watching over there. You have to fight hard for me!"

Following Wang Defa's pointing finger, Su Ming saw the other side of the plaza.

A group of Vessel Hall disciples wearing fiery red short jackets were gathered there. The leading middle-aged steward stared coldly in their direction. Seeing Su Ming look over, the steward snorted coldly and made a throat-slitting gesture.

Su Ming's expression remained unchanged. He just nodded slightly in acknowledgment, as if he hadn't understood the provocation.

"Childish," Lin Yu commented.

Right then, the noisy plaza suddenly quieted for a moment.

In the sky, two streams of light pierced through the clouds, landing directly on the main seats of the viewing platform.

As the light dispersed, the figures of a boy and a girl were revealed.

The boy carried a sword case on his back, his demeanor steady and composed; the girl was as delicate as carved jade, lively and adorable.

It was Qingfeng and Mingyue.

They didn't go to the high and mighty main viewing platform but landed directly in the area where Su Ming was.

"Senior Brother Su Ming!"

Mingyue's clear voice sounded exceptionally loud in the silent crowd. She skipped over, completely ignoring the countless gazes of admiration or awe around her, and directly stuffed a small porcelain bottle into Su Ming's hand.

"This is 'Mind-Clearing Spirit-Calming Pill.' It's only second-tier, but it's very useful for easing nervousness! Go for it, Senior Brother!"

Qingfeng was as cool as ever. He gave Su Ming a slight nod. Although he didn't speak, his deliberate arrival to show support said everything.

Boom!

The crowd instantly erupted.

"Are those... the two Junior Masters, Qingfeng and Mingyue?!"

"Heavens, they actually came personally to cheer for a menial disciple?"

"What background does this Su Ming have? I thought he had no connections?"

Countless gazes focused on Su Ming once more. If the previous looks were merely curiosity and scrutiny, now these gazes carried substantial weight—jealousy, wariness, and a forced seriousness that couldn't be ignored.

Holding the porcelain bottle that still carried a trace of body warmth, Su Ming gave a bitter smile.

Great, now he was completely the target of everyone's attention.

"A tree that stands out in the forest will be blown down by the wind," Su Ming sighed softly.

"What's there to fear?" Lin Yu's voice carried a touch of pride. "Since you're destined to be the tallest tree, then plant your roots deep and thicken your bark. If anyone dares to try and blow you down, let them break their axe on you."

Dang—!

A long, deep, and heavy bell toll spread from the top of Hundred Refinements Peak, suppressing all the noise in the plaza.

Everyone's heart shook. They instinctively held their breath and looked up at the high platform directly ahead.

There, in the previously empty void, a cluster of crimson red flames suddenly ignited.

The flames twisted and rose, transforming in an instant into a middle-aged man wearing crimson red Daoist robes, with a square face and imposing aura.

He stood with his hands behind his back. Not a trace of spiritual energy leaked from his body, but merely standing there gave people the terrifying oppressive feeling of facing an erupting volcano.

The chief examiner of the outer sect assessment, Formation Peak steward, Zhang Lie.

Also the "Zhang Yama" rumored to have a fiery temper and close ties to Elder Luo's faction.

Zhang Lie's gaze swept slowly over the thousands of examinees in the plaza like two torches.

When his line of sight swept past the corner where the Repair Hall was, it paused on Su Ming for an extremely brief moment.

In that instant, Su Ming felt as if the surrounding air was burning, a stinging pain spreading across his skin.

But he didn't avert his gaze. He just calmly lowered his eyelids, assuming a fully respectful posture.

"Hmph."

A cold snort sounded clearly in everyone's ears.

Zhang Lie waved his large sleeve, his voice booming like rolling thunder:

"The path of cultivation is like rowing a boat against the current—if you don't advance, you retreat! Today's assessment only accepts the top one hundred! The rest, leave!"

"First stage, Touchstone of the Dao Foundation!"

As his words fell, the plaza ground rumbled.

Hundreds of black stone pillars covered in runes slowly rose from underground, covering the entire plaza like a forest.

"Within ten breaths, inject spiritual energy into the stone pillar. Those who light up three sections or more, pass! Otherwise, get lost!"

Simple, brutal.

No unnecessary words.

The atmosphere on-site instantly became tense to the extreme.

Su Ming looked at the cold black stone pillar before him and softly let out a sigh.

"Master, time to get to work."

"Mhm, go on. Remember, hold back a little. Don't blow up the pillar. That thing looks pretty expensive; you'd have to pay for it."

The corner of Su Ming's mouth twitched. He extended his right hand and placed it on the cold surface of the stone pillar.

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Chapter 219: Your spiritual power is a bit heavy.

[1,649 words]

The moment Su Ming's palm made contact with the surface of the black stone pillar, he didn't rush to channel his spiritual energy.

He lowered his gaze slightly, his peripheral vision sweeping over his surroundings.

The other examinees nearby had long been unable to hold back, their faces flushed and necks thick with strain as they poured spiritual energy into the pillars like a breached dam's floodwaters.

In an instant, bursts of multicolored light erupted one after another across the square.

There were fiery red flames, azure wind blades, and also thick, earthy yellow halos.

"It lit up! Three sections! I passed... huh? Why did it go out again?"

Not far to his side, a burly menial disciple who had just excitedly shouted halfway through his sentence watched as the three glowing rings of light that had appeared on the stone pillar suddenly flickered twice, like a faulty lightbulb, before fizzling out with a sizzle, leaving only a foul smell of burnt residue.

"Spiritual energy is insubstantial, impure, and mixed. Failed!"

The inner sect disciple in charge of recording waved his brush expressionlessly, drawing a glaring cross on the roster. "Next."

The burly disciple's face turned ashen. He opened his mouth, wanting to plead, but was dragged out by two Enforcement Hall disciples as if he were a dead dog.

"Tsk, that's what they call 'false fire'," Lin Yu's voice drawled lazily from within the ring, carrying a hint of the casual ease one might have while commenting on a variety show. "That guy probably overdid it with pills. His spiritual energy is like foam—looks like a big lump, but pops with one poke. Disciple, show them what 'solid' really looks like."

The corner of Su Ming's mouth lifted almost imperceptibly.

With a slight movement of his mind, the deep, serene blue pool of spiritual liquid within his Dantian's Qihai began to slowly rotate.

A wisp of dark blue light silently seeped from his palm into the black stone surface.

It was like a drop of water soaking into a sponge.

At first, the stone pillar showed no reaction.

At the edge of the square, Sun Tong, the Vessel Hall steward who had been staring fixedly in this direction, let out a derisive snort through his nostrils. He turned his head to speak to his subordinate beside him. "See that? That's what they mean by 'mud that won't stick to a wall'. Can't even squeeze out a fart after half a day. Probably has blocked meridi—"

The word "blocked" got stuck in his throat before it could fully leave his mouth.

Hum—

An extremely low, deep, and resonant thrum abruptly emanated from within the stone pillar.

The sound didn't seem to be produced by air vibration, but rather resembled the heavy groan of ten thousand tons of seawater compressing rock deep beneath the ocean.

Immediately after, the very first section at the bottom of the stone pillar lit up.

The light didn't even radiate outward. Instead, it clung tightly to the surface of the pillar like some viscous fluid, slowly creeping and climbing upward.

"What kind of technique is this?"

On the viewing platform, several inner sect disciples who had been initially indifferent sat up straight, a flicker of surprise in their eyes.

Then, that dark blue fluid continued to spread upward.

Second section.

Third section.

There was no pause, no flickering whatsoever.

The light advanced upward at a constant, steady, and resolute pace.

When the light passed the third graduation mark representing "passing," Su Ming felt a surge of resistance from within the stone pillar.

It was the testing formation applying reverse spiritual pressure, attempting to "squeeze" out the injected spiritual energy to test its degree of condensation.

"Is that all?"

Su Ming's heart remained calm.

In his cultivation of the *Like Water Art*, he had long grown accustomed to the "grinding work" of repeatedly compressing and purifying his spiritual energy.

This level of spiritual pressure felt to him like a gentle breeze brushing his face.

"Master, should I speed it up a bit?" Su Ming asked in his mind.

"Don't rush, stay steady," Lin Yu said leisurely. "We're here to take an exam, not to smash the venue. Maintain this speed, let it rise slowly. This kind of 'frog-boiled-in-warm-water' oppressive feeling is what makes people most uncomfortable."

Su Ming complied, not increasing his output, merely maintaining the original flow.

But in the eyes of outsiders, this became somewhat terrifying.

Because the pillar's resistance kept increasing. By the fourth and fifth sections, the spiritual energy of an ordinary examinee would have already begun to tremble violently and flicker unsteadily.

Yet Su Ming's dark blue column of light didn't even show a single ripple!

It was still the same speed, the same brightness, that same suffocating stability.

As if what flowed beneath that black stone skin wasn't spiritual energy, but an unstoppable underground river.

The fourth section lit up like a full moon.

The fifth section shone with a profound, dark blue light.

The sixth section...

By the time the light climbed to the sixth section, the entire southeastern corner of the square had fallen silent.

Those who had originally been waiting to see the Repair Hall make a fool of themselves now looked as if someone had grabbed them by the throat.

The face of Vessel Hall steward Sun Tong turned as black as the bottom of a pot. His fingers dug into the armrests of his seat until his knuckles turned white.

He could sense that the gazes around him, which had previously been fawning, were now becoming subtle.

"Six sections..."

In the crowd, Wang Defa trembled with excitement, his plump flesh shaking all over as he grabbed Old Wang's arm beside him and shook it violently. "Old Wang! Did you see that! Six sections! That's the standard for mid-stage Qi Refining! And it's stable as hell!"

Qingfeng stood at the very front of the crowd. Looking at that dark blue column of light, the appreciation in his eyes grew stronger.

"Water benefits all things, profound virtue carries all," Qingfeng said softly. "Su Ming's spiritual energy has already grasped the true essence of 'heavy water'. It doesn't contend for momentary speed, yet carries the weight of a thousand jun. Rare."

Mingyue, however, didn't care about all that. She excitedly waved her small fist. "Go Su Ming!"

By now, the dark blue column of light had already climbed halfway up the seventh section.

Su Ming felt the rebounding force from within the stone pillar suddenly double.

This seemed to be a watershed. Beyond this, lay the boundary between prodigy and mediocrity.

Here, the speed of the light column's ascent finally slowed down noticeably to the naked eye.

The invisible pressure emanating from the stone pillar increased sharply, as if interrogating the very core source and strength of the spiritual energy.

Bit by bit, the light column moved upward with difficulty yet persistence, slowly illuminating the lower half of the seventh section.

Near the main seat of the viewing platform, several elders responsible for different examination areas, who had originally just been going through the motions, also had their attention drawn over.

"Seven and a half sections," said a green-robed elder with graying hair and a thin, refined face, stroking his beard, a look of surprise in his eyes. "The purity and depth of this disciple's spiritual energy ranks among the best of the menial disciples taking this exam. Judging by its attribute, it's deep, serene, and enduring. It should be water-attribute, and of no low grade."

An elder with a ruddy complexion and a slightly plump build next to him chimed in, "Indeed. What's even more rare is that the radiance is as stable as a mountain, without the slightest hint of wavering, clearly indicating a calm temperament and an extremely solid foundation. Hmm? Something seems... off?"

They saw that after illuminating most of the seventh section, the dark blue column of light seemed to touch an invisible bottleneck. No matter how hard it tried, it could no longer climb even half a step further.

The light column itself remained stable, yet it was stuck there, separated from the area above representing higher potential and strength by what seemed like an insurmountable barrier.

The green-robed elder's divine sense stirred slightly as he carefully sensed it. His brow furrowed slightly as he shook his head with a soft sigh. "A pity. This disciple's spiritual energy foundation is indeed superior. However... deep within his Dantian's Qihai, there seems to be an old injury affecting his foundation. The flow of his spiritual source becomes sluggish and weak when it reaches the core. This is a sign of 'damaged Dao foundation'. Without a heaven-defying opportunity to repair it, I fear the moment he attempts Foundation Establishment will be when danger sharply increases. The path to the Golden Core realm becomes even more hopeless. Otherwise, with this spiritual energy foundation and temperament, he could have hoped for the Nascent Soul realm."

Hearing this, the slightly plump elder also sighed with regret. "Damage to the Dao foundation is the most troublesome. No wonder the radiance stopped at seven and a half sections. It's not that his potential is exhausted, but that the injury drags him down, making him powerless to reach higher. A pity, truly a pity."

Although their conversation was soft, they didn't deliberately conceal it. Some of the more perceptive inner sect disciples and stewards nearby overheard. Their gazes toward Su Ming instantly became complex, the previous pure astonishment now heavily mixed with profound regret.

At the center of the main viewing platform, Zhang Lie, the Formation Peak steward who had been meditating with his eyes closed, seemingly indifferent to the assessment below, slowly opened his eyes.

His gaze was like lightning as it swept over the stone pillar where Su Ming stood, pausing for a moment on the dark blue column of light frozen at seven and a half sections, before half-closing his eyes again, as if it had nothing to do with him.

Finally, the dark blue column of light steadily stopped between the seventh and eighth sections, changing no further.

"Su Ming!"

The inner sect steward in charge of that area loudly announced the name, his voice especially clear in the quiet corner. "Spiritual energy potential, evaluation: Upper Middle Grade A. Pass!"

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Chapter 220: The Path to Heaven Through a Hundred Arts: Identifying Talents

[1,373 words]

Upper Middle Grade A!

A low ripple of murmurs spread through the crowd.

An Upper Middle Grade A evaluation was already considered extremely high for this stage, sufficient to prove one's potential.

But combined with the whispers that had just been circulating about "damage to the Dao foundation," this evaluation seemed draped in a layer of gloomy gauze.

Su Ming calmly withdrew his hand, his palm slightly cool. Regarding the halted light column and the faintly audible discussions, he seemed completely oblivious. He merely bowed slightly toward the stewards as etiquette required, then turned and walked back to the Repair Hall team with steady steps.

"Brother Su!" Wang Defa came forward to meet him, excitement and worry mingling on his face. "Upper Middle Grade A! Excellent! It's just..." He hesitated, leaving the words unspoken.

"It's fine," Su Ming replied with a faint smile. "Passing is good enough."

Qingfeng approached, his clear gaze resting on Su Ming as he said softly, "Su Ming, your foundation is solid, and your temperament is even better. The path of cultivation is long. A temporary obstacle does not necessarily determine one's entire destiny." His words carried encouragement.

Su Ming nodded in thanks, saying nothing more.

"The first stage, 'Touchstone of the Dao Foundation,' is complete!"

As another presiding elder's resonant voice spread across the square, the light from all the stone pillars faded.

"Those who passed: one hundred and sixty-three. The rest, leave the field!"

In just half an hour, the ranks of several thousand had been reduced to less than two hundred.

This was the harsh reality of the cultivation world, and the threshold for selection into the Cloud Hidden Sect.

The eliminated disciples, some wailing loudly, others despondent, were ruthlessly driven from the field by Enforcement Hall disciples.

Watching this scene, Su Ming's heart remained utterly calm.

The successful ones were secretly elated, the eliminated ones left dejectedly. The square quickly regained its solemn atmosphere, though the sense of competition lingering in the air grew even more intense.

Standing among the crowd, Su Ming's deep eyes looked toward the front of the square, where new arrangements were already quietly being made.

On the square, the black stone pillar representing the "Upper Middle Grade A" evaluation slowly sank into the ground. Before the aftershocks had even settled, the bell for the second stage rang out.

"Second stage, Hundred Arts Path to Heaven!"

As Zhang Lie's voice, which seemed to carry sparks, fell, the ground at the center of the square changed once more.

Hundreds of green stone platforms rose with a rumbling sound, dividing the area into five major sections: Alchemy, Vessel, Formation, Talisman, and Beast. Each platform was covered by a faint isolation barrier, preventing both spying and cheating.

"Formation path examinees, line up in the Qian position!"

Su Ming followed the flow of people into the formation assessment area located at the southeast corner of the square.

As soon as he took his place, he keenly sensed several malicious gazes sticking to him.

Looking up, he saw that the one supervising this area was none other than the Vessel Hall steward Sun Tong, who had suffered a setback at the Repair Hall earlier, along with a young steward with a sinister face and prominent cheekbones.

"That's Zhang Lie's brother-in-law, Zhao Yin," Lin Yu's spiritual sense transmitted from within the Xuantian ring, carrying a trace of coldness. "Judging by their posture, they come with ill intent. Disciple, guard your mind and spirit, and proceed according to plan."

Su Ming's expression remained unchanged. He cupped his hands in salute as required, then walked toward his assigned platform, number thirty-six.

"First question: Material Identification."

Zhao Yin swept his cold gaze across the entire area, his voice sharp and thin. "In the path of formations, a tiny error leads to a mistake of a thousand miles. If you can't even distinguish the authenticity and quality of the materials in your hands, the array you lay down becomes a knife that kills—you yourself! On the platform are ten types of formation materials. Time limit: half an incense stick. Write down their name, properties, place of origin, and grade. Begin!"

Su Ming lowered his head to look at the platform.

Ten brocade boxes sealed with Spirit-Sealing Talismans were lined up in a row.

He casually opened the first one.

Inside was a piece of ore, crimson throughout, emitting a scorching aura.

"Vermilion Flame Copper Essence, second-tier lower grade, produced in the shallow layers of the Earth Fire Cavern. Properties: dry and fierce. Suitable for refining fire-attribute formation flags." Su Ming had the answer instantly in his mind and raised his brush to write.

"Wait," Lin Yu suddenly spoke. "Don't be in a hurry to write. Look at the rest. That Sun Tong's smirk is practically reaching his ears. This question definitely isn't that simple."

Su Ming's heart tightened. He put down his brush without changing his expression and continued opening the remaining boxes.

The first nine were all standard, common materials. Although a few might be considered rare in the eyes of the menial disciples taking this assessment, to Su Ming, the "Chief of the Repair Hall" who dealt with scrap and dross year-round, they were merely entry-level goods.

Until he opened the tenth brocade box.

Hum—

An incredibly pure wave of fire spiritual energy instantly washed over his face. Inside the box lay a crystal, only the size of a thumb, translucent, with what seemed like a ball of golden flame flowing within.

The sound of sharp inhalations immediately rose around him.

"Fusion Fire Gold Crystal?!"

"Heavens, this is a top-tier spiritual material, third-tier upper grade! It only forms in the core depths of the Earth Fire at Hundred Refinements Peak. A piece the size of a fist is priceless!"

"This question... isn't it too difficult? We don't even have the right to see such treasures normally!"

The examinees buzzed with discussion. On Zhao Yin's face, however, a smug, cold smile appeared.

Su Ming looked at that "Fusion Fire Gold Crystal," his brow slightly furrowing.

"Something's wrong."

He murmured in his heart. "Master, this spiritual energy fluctuation... it's too perfect. Perfect to the point of being deliberate. Moreover, it faintly matches the description of a certain failed counterfeit mentioned in an 'abnormal loss record' I sorted through at the Repair Hall before."

"Examine it closely with 'Observation of the Minute,'" Lin Yu said. "If it's truly a counterfeit, there must be a flaw."

Su Ming complied. Using his body as cover, he lightly placed his right index finger on the edge of the platform. The *Like Water Art* quietly circulated. A wisp of dark blue spiritual energy gathered at his fingertip, forming an extremely thin water-mirror film that could amplify perception dozens of times.

Through this watery membrane, Su Ming's perception instantly probed into the interior of the crystal.

The originally radiant, seamless appearance immediately revealed anomalies under microscopic perception. The crystal's structure was not harmoniously dense like a natural growth. Instead, there was an obvious, rough, artificially filled seam at its core. The mesmerizing golden flowing light on the outer layer also carried a trace of stiffness in its rhythm—a stiffness characteristic of being stimulated by a restriction, not nourished by heaven and earth.

"Outer layer is high-purity 'Flowing Fire Jade' melted and recast. Embedded inside is a low-quality 'Vermilion Flame Stone,' then sealed with a sophisticated fire restriction to lock in the spiritual energy, simulating the introverted image of earth fire essence," Lin Yu rapidly judged within the Consciousness Sea. "This method is identical to the forgery technique mentioned in that record from three years ago regarding a batch of 'problematic Fire Spirit Jade' recalled by the Vessel Hall! If this item is mistakenly used as a primary material for refining, once the fire reaches the right intensity, the inner core will disintegrate, inevitably leading to array destruction and personal injury. What a vicious scheme!"

Su Ming withdrew his perception, a flash of cold intent passing through his eyes.

The time of half an incense stick passed in the blink of an eye.

Zhao Yin, with his hands clasped behind his back, strolled over to Su Ming's platform, looking down at the line of writing on his scroll with a condescending gaze.

"What? The tenth question is left blank?" Zhao Yin scoffed, his voice loud enough for those nearby to hear. "The famously great Hall Master Su doesn't even recognize 'Fusion Fire Gold Crystal'? Or is it that the Repair Hall usually only deals with scrap metal and broken iron, resulting in shallow knowledge?"

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

Chapter 221: The Path to Heaven Through a Hundred Arts: Restoration

[1,205 words]

A few low chuckles came from the surroundings.

Zhang Lie sat high on the main viewing platform, his gaze coldly sweeping over this area without a word.

Su Ming put down his brush. "Reporting to the steward, this disciple is not ignorant, but rather dares not confirm." He pointed at the brocade box. "This item's appearance and spiritual pressure are indeed identical to the 'Fusion Fire Gold Crystal' recorded in the classics."

Zhao Yin's face grew even more smug. "Then that means..."

"However," Su Ming interrupted him, his voice clear, "when this disciple was organizing the yearly archives in the Repair Hall, I once saw a record. Three years ago, the Vessel Hall recalled a batch of 'Fire Spirit Jade' due to issues. Its appraisal summary mentioned an extremely sophisticated counterfeiting technique: using Flowing Fire Jade as the skin and Vermilion Flame Stone as the core, supplemented with specific fire seals, can mimic a high-grade fire spirit object. However, if 'Samadhi Gentle Fire' is used to scorch a single point, the skin chars, the core is exposed, and the spiritual energy disperses."

His fingertip, at some unknown moment, was already pinching a lowest-grade "Fire Gathering Talisman." With a slight release of spiritual energy, the talisman ignited without wind, transforming into a small, pale yellow flame with constant temperature but extremely concentrated heat.

"What are you doing?!" Zhao Yin's face changed, and he reached out to stop him.

Su Ming's movements were faster. That small flame was already suspended just over an inch above the "Fusion Fire Gold Crystal," meticulously scorching a specific point with gentle fire.

"A genuine Fusion Fire Gold Crystal has an extremely Yang nature and stable quality. When encountering this gentle fire, it should contain its radiance internally, with golden light naturally arising." Su Ming's tone was steady. "But if it is the fabricated object recorded in that account..."

Before his words finished.

"Sizzle..."

A faint sound, like hot oil dripping into water, was heard.

That crystal-clear, translucent crystal, at the point continuously scorched by the flame, actually emitted a wisp of nearly invisible black smoke. Its originally perfect surface rapidly charred and cracked!

Immediately after, the cracks spread. The outer layer, that radiant, colorful "skin shell," peeled off in pieces, revealing a dull-colored, rough-textured, weakly spiritual dark red stone core inside—precisely the cheapest Vermilion Flame Stone!

Silence.

Deadly silence.

The muscles on Sun Tong's face twitched. Zhao Yin's smug sneer completely froze, transforming into disbelief, shock, and a trace of panic.

The surrounding examinees who were waiting to see a joke were all dumbfounded.

"Fake... it's fake?!"

"My heavens, the material used for the assessment is actually fake?!"

"How dare Su Ming... how did he recognize it?!"

Su Ming gently blew out the flame and cupped his hands toward Zhao Yin and Sun Tong, whose faces had suddenly turned pale. "Stewards, it seems this object is not a 'Fusion Fire Gold Crystal,' but rather resembles that type of 'fire jade skin, vermilion flame core' fabricated object recorded in the archives. I wonder if the test question has a deeper meaning, or..." He paused and did not continue.

But the unspoken words had already plunged Zhao Yin into an icy abyss.

On the main viewing platform, the corner of Zhang Lie's eye twitched violently.

His gaze was like a knife. First, it swept over the pile of charred, peeling waste, then coldly fixed on Zhao Yin, and finally landed on the calm-faced Su Ming. Shock flashed in his eyes, along with a trace of anger forcibly suppressed.

"Second stage, first question. Su Ming. Top Grade A." Zhang Lie's voice was dry and icy, resounding throughout the area.

Immediately, his gaze turned toward the ashen-faced Zhao Yin, enunciating each word. "Zhao Yin, negligence in question selection. Ten days confinement. Six months salary penalty. This question is void. Replace it!"

The material identification incident was like a resounding slap, fiercely striking certain people's faces.

The crowd who originally looked down on Su Ming now looked at him with changed eyes. It was no longer the gaze looking at a lucky kid, but at an unfathomable freak.

"This kid is a bit bizarre."

Zhao Yin stood at the edge of the field, his gaze venomous. "Brother-in-law, in the next stage, 'Repair,' we absolutely cannot let him steal the spotlight again. That 'Nine-Curve Solar Yang Formation'..."

"Shut up." Zhang Lie coldly cut him off. "Is the disgrace not enough yet? The formation is already set. Whether he passes depends on his fortune. If you meddle again and get caught, even I cannot protect you."

Zhao Yin shrank his neck, but a flash of unwilling, ruthless fierceness appeared in his eyes.

...

"Second question. Repair."

As the new instruction was issued, the examinees' desks sank down again. In their place appeared miniature formation plates, each only the size of a millstone, with dim light.

Su Ming looked at the formation plate before him, the corner of his mouth curling into an almost imperceptible arc.

It was indeed it.

The Nine-Curve Solar Yang Formation.

This formation plate had clearly been meticulously sabotaged.

Seven of the nine main spiritual energy circuits were severed. The core "Solar Yang Fusion Point" was even more of a mess, churned up by a violent, foreign spiritual energy.

According to the conventional solution, the repairer needed extremely high-level fire control skill to meticulously remove the foreign spiritual energy bit by bit, then re-engage the "Solar Yang Lines" to repair the circuits. This was not only time and energy-consuming but also extremely prone to triggering formation backlash. The slightest misstep could cause an explosion.

Su Ming did not attempt to forcibly reconnect those severed, violent "Solar Yang Lines."

His fingertip, with its dark blue spiritual energy like threads, probed into several abandoned auxiliary nodes at the edge of the formation plate, swiftly sketching a complex set of "Vortex Spirit Lines" imbued with the concept of moist, cyclical flow.

"He actually wants to use water to aid fire?" Sun Tong stared wide-eyed.

They saw Su Ming fit his self-made "Suppress Origin Plate" into one node.

Instantly, the wildly rampaging, violent fire power within the formation plate was guided by a resilient, dark blue spiritual light, diverted to the edges.

Right at the critical moment before the water and fire spiritual energies were about to collide, those "Vortex Spirit Lines" suddenly lit up!

The violent fire spiritual energy rushed into them, not to be annihilated, but to be carried and tamed by that rotating water spiritual force, transforming rigidity into softness, forming swirling currents of spiritual energy interwoven with purple and red, stably occupying the outer perimeter of the formation plate. The pressure at the formation's core drastically reduced. The originally dim core formation lines actually self-repaired somewhat, emitting a harmonious aura of water and fire blending, Yin and Yang mutually supporting each other.

"This is... using water as a guide, transforming fire balefulness into a cycle? He can actually repair and even improve the 'Nine-Curve Solar Yang Formation' to this extent?" Luo Feng had approached at some unknown time, his eyes shining with unusual brilliance as he murmured in awe.

"Merge."

With the final stroke completed, the formation plate emitted a clear chime, its radiance perfect and complete.

The entire area fell silent.

Zhang Lie took a deep breath, his gaze complex as he looked at Su Ming for a long time before slowly announcing:

"Second stage, second question. Su Ming... Top Grade A. His method may be recorded in the 'Path of Formations Unconventional Solutions Compendium' for reference."

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Chapter 222: The Path to Heaven Through a Hundred Arts: Formation

[1,612 words]

Two consecutive "A+" grades.

Su Ming's name was no longer just circulating among the menial disciples; even the inner sect stewards and even elders on the viewing platform were now frequently glancing his way.

"If this lad could enter our Vessel Hall and be properly guided, he would definitely become a top talent," a Vessel Hall elder stroked his beard and sighed, completely

forgetting that his own steward had just been trying to make things difficult for him moments ago.

"Nonsense, this is clearly a promising seedling for our Formation Peak!" a Formation Peak elder beside him immediately flared up, his beard bristling with indignation. "That concept of harmonizing water and fire, without exceptional talent in the path of formations, it would be absolutely impossible to conceive!"

Meanwhile, Su Ming, at the center of this storm, was currently following the group to the examination site for the third question.

"The third question: Deploy a formation."

"Location: The back mountain of Hundred Refinements Peak, the Bone Erosion Cave."

Upon hearing these words, the faces of all the examinees turned pale.

The Bone Erosion Cave was a land of ill omen on Hundred Refinements Peak. A strange wind called the "Yin Evil Wind" perpetually howled within the cave. It could not only corrode the physical body but also freeze spiritual energy. Without the protective spiritual light of the Foundation Establishment realm, entering meant certain death.

"Task: Deploy a formation at the mouth of the Bone Erosion Cave and hold out for the time it takes an incense stick to burn."

Zhao Yin stood at the cave entrance, smiling with a sinister air. "The rules are simple: No restrictions on methods, no restrictions on formation plates, but... each person can only carry spirit stones equivalent to the total spiritual energy of a Qi Refinement third layer cultivator. In other words, thinking of relying on burning through piles of spirit stones to brute force your way? No chance."

This was a strategy designed to cut off all avenues of escape.

The intensity of the Yin Evil Wind in the Bone Erosion Cave meant that the spiritual energy of a Qi Refinement third layer cultivator could at most sustain a defense for half a quarter-hour. To last through the burning of an incense stick, unless one was a formation master capable of using the environment to deploy a high-level defensive formation, it was nothing but wishful thinking.

"Junior Brother Su, this stage... won't be easy to pass."

Behind Su Ming, a menial disciple who had also passed the first two stages had a deathly pale face, his teeth chattering. "This Yin Wind is too sinister. Our meager spiritual energy simply isn't enough to handle it."

Su Ming glanced at the pitch-black, monstrous maw-like cave entrance, feeling the bone-chilling cold that assaulted his face. A faint glimmer flickered in his eyes.

"It won't be easy," Su Ming said softly. "If one tries to resist it head-on."

"Master, please help me observe the surrounding environment."

"Yin Evil Wind," Lin Yu replied. "But this wind has a characteristic: there are extremely brief pauses in the middle."

"Flowing energy..." The corner of Su Ming's mouth lifted slightly. "Then it's manageable."

He didn't start frantically calculating how to allocate his spiritual energy to maintain a defensive barrier the moment he received the spirit stones, unlike the others.

He pulled out from his storage pouch a handful of... oddly shaped little flags.

These flags were crudely made, using the cheapest leftover materials. They looked like toys a child might have casually put together.

"What is that? Has he given up?" someone wondered, confused.

Su Ming paid no attention to the gazes of those around him.

The assessment began.

Everyone immediately activated their strongest defensive formation plates, huddling and trembling inside their light barriers.

Only Su Ming was different.

He didn't deploy a defensive formation.

Holding that handful of small flags, he braved the Yin Wind and, like a madman, ran a circle around the cave entrance.

Every few steps, he planted one of the small flags.

The placement of these flags was extremely tricky. Some were wedged into rock crevices, some were planted right in the wind's path. It seemed utterly chaotic.

But if a high-level formation master were present, they would be astonished to discover that these flags actually formed a... diversion channel?

"Rise."

After planting the last flag, Su Ming retreated to an inconspicuous corner, holding between his fingers a "miniaturized Void rune" no larger than a fingernail.

This was a scrap rune—"Disturbance"—that he had extracted while studying the "Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation." It had no offensive power; its sole function was to create a tiny ripple in space.

He gently flicked this rune into the wind's path.

Hum—

The moment the rune made contact with the Yin Wind, it vibrated faintly.

This vibration was like a pebble dropped into a calm lake.

The originally howling Yin Evil Wind, as it passed the rune, was slightly disturbed by that tiny spatial ripple, causing an extremely minute shift in its direction.

It was this minute shift that caused the wind, which originally charged straight for the cave entrance, to collide with the first flag Su Ming had planted.

The rune carved on that flag wasn't a defensive one, but rather... a smooth "Force-Dispersing Pattern."

Whoosh—

The wind was deflected, crashing into the second flag, then sliding toward the third...

For a time, the terrifying Yin Evil Wind that should have poured into the cave entrance was actually being kicked around like a ball by this seemingly crude set of little flags, until finally... it curved around and swept over Su Ming's head!

And Su Ming, he just sat there openly in that sole "eye of the wind"—the dead zone.

He even pulled out half of an uneaten Water Cloud Fruit from his robe, taking a crisp bite.

All around, the other examinees, struggling bitterly within their defensive barriers as their spirit stones rapidly depleted, watched this scene, their eyes practically popping out of their heads.

"This... this works?!"

"He's cheating! He must have used some wind-avoiding treasure!" Zhao Yin jumped up and down, shouting angrily.

In a corner of the viewing platform, a gray-robed elder who had been meditating with closed eyes opened them at some point, his gaze falling on the small flags Su Ming had planted.

A flicker of understanding passed through his cloudy eyes as his fingers unconsciously twirled his beard.

"Not a treasure," the gray-robed elder said, his voice not loud but clearly reaching the ears of another blue-robed elder beside him. "Look at the positions where he placed those flags. They subtly align with the flow of the Xun position and the support of the Kun position. They appear chaotic, but in reality, each one is positioned at a 'joint' in the flow of the Yin Wind's spiritual energy."

Hearing this, the blue-robed elder concentrated and observed carefully. After a moment, he let out a soft sound of surprise. "He's actually using 'deflection' instead of 'blocking,' borrowing the wind's own force to divert it... What ingenious thinking! This requires a thorough understanding of the Yin Evil Wind's flow characteristics and extremely fast on-the-spot calculations. Where did he get the time?"

The gray-robed elder shook his head slightly. "I'm afraid it wasn't calculated on the spot. From the very beginning, this lad never intended to resist head-on; he was observing the patterns of the wind's momentum. That rune thrown into the wind's path is the key—it's not a powerful interference, just a perfectly timed 'trigger,' like throwing a stone to test the water, creating a tiny exploitable gap in the originally stable wind flow, allowing the subsequent flag formation to take effect." He paused, looking toward Zhang Lie on the main viewing platform, whose expression kept shifting. "This lad's comprehension and application of the 'momentum' principle in formation theory is no longer confined to the grade of runes or the amount of spiritual energy. When Junior Brother Ma insisted on keeping him back then, perhaps he truly saw this unique, ingenious talent."

Another elder nodded, his gaze sweeping over Zhao Yin and Sun Tong, whose expressions were as dark as water, then glancing at Zhang Lie on the main platform, whose face shifted through complex emotions before finally settling into a complicated calm. He said meaningfully, "After these three stages, this lad's name has probably reached the ears of certain people. It's just that damage to his Dao foundation... what a pity."

Zhang Lie had now stood up. He no longer looked at Zhao Yin. His gaze swept across the entire venue, pausing especially on Su Ming. His voice betrayed little emotion, yet held noticeably less coldness than before.

"Third stage, Formation Deployment. Su Ming, A+."

"Overall evaluation for the three stages," he paused briefly, as if weighing his words, "...A+. Ranked first in the formation path assessment of this 'Hundred Arts Path to Heaven.'"

After another pause, he added a sentence, his voice carrying across the entire venue: "The path of formations values principles, but values adaptability even more. All of you, in the future, should diligently contemplate and practice earnestly, and avoid becoming complacent and stagnant."

As soon as these words were spoken, the entire venue was shocked. This was almost public recognition and encouragement!

Su Ming cupped his hands in a salute, neither overjoyed by favor nor disturbed by disgrace.

When he returned to the Repair Hall group, Wang Defa and the others were already overwhelmed with excitement. Qingfeng and Mingyue also came over. Mingyue chattered non-stop about the thrilling scene moments before, while Qingfeng gazed thoughtfully toward the cloud-and-mist-shrouded main peaks deep within Hundred Refinements Peak.

No one noticed an almost imperceptibly fine thread of spiritual sense, originating from a certain floating mountain peak in the extremely distant sea of clouds high above, lightly swept across the plaza. It circled around Su Ming, pausing for an imperceptible moment especially on the seemingly unremarkable ring on his left hand, before silently withdrawing.

As if it had never appeared.

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Chapter 223: The Illusory Forest of Inquiry: Rules

[1,500 words]

The wind at the back of Hundred Refinements Peak had stopped.

Su Ming bent down, unhurriedly pulling out the eighteen Formation Flags one by one from the rock crevices and dead corners of the wind passage.

His movements were gentle, like an old farmer tending to his crops and putting away his tools.

Although the flags were made of inferior materials, after the baptism of the Yin Evil Wind just now, a faint, cold, flowing light had appeared on their surfaces, a sign that the murderous aura had seeped into them.

"Keep them safe. Use the 'Water Refining Method' to wash out the murderous aura when you get back, they can still be used a few more times," Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind. "If you could seal this trace of murderous aura inside the flagpoles, next time you could set up a 'Minor Yin Wind Formation'—perfect for ambushing people. Our family fortune is thin; even a needle must be made to perform like a club."

Su Ming's fingers brushed over the cold flagpoles as he stored them in his storage pouch, giving a slight nod.

The surrounding gazes still clung to him. There was shock, there was jealousy, but more than anything, there was a wary caution born of incomprehension. Zhao Yin stood at the edge of the crowd, his face ashen. Originally hoping to see Su Ming make a fool of himself, he had instead become a stepping stone for the other's rise to fame. Now, he hung his head low, his nails almost digging holes into his palms.

Zhang Lie did not give the crowd much time to dwell on it.

"The first two stages are passed. One hundred and thirteen remain."

This Formation Peak steward waved his large sleeve, a crimson spiritual light sweeping up the crowd. "Follow me."

Everyone felt their feet lighten as the scenery rapidly receded behind them.

The dryness, heat, and clamor of Hundred Refinements Peak were swiftly left behind, replaced by an increasingly heavy sense of dampness and chill.

After roughly the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, the crimson spiritual light dissipated.

Su Ming landed steadily and looked up.

Before him was an ancient mountain forest shrouded in thick fog.

Unlike the barren Hundred Refinements Peak, here ancient trees reached for the sky, each requiring several people to encircle its trunk. Their bark was dry and cracked like dragon scales, their dense branches and leaves blotting out the sky. However, what was most eye-catching wasn't these ancient trees, but the layer of white mist permeating the forest.

The mist wasn't static; it writhed slowly like a living thing, sometimes gathering into beastly shapes, sometimes dispersing like sheer gauze. The slightest touch of divine

sense upon it would sink like a clay ox into the sea, vanishing instantly in the blink of an eye.

Before the forest stood a moss-covered stone stele inscribed with three ancient seal characters: "Questioning Heart Forest."

Beside the stele, an old man in a gray robe sat cross-legged on a bluestone. His hair and beard were white, his face thin and refined, his eyes slightly closed. A horsetail whisk lay horizontally across his knees. If not for seeing him with one's own eyes, sensing that spot would make it seem as if nothing was there, like a rock or a withered tree.

After landing, Zhang Lie reined in his violent fiery aura and bowed respectfully to the gray-robed elder. "Questioning Heart Shishu, the outer sect assessment disciples have been brought."

The gray-robed elder's eyelids trembled slightly as he slowly opened them.

In that instant, Su Ming felt as if he had been seen through completely, from his skin and flesh to his bones, even the flow of spiritual energy within his Dantian laid bare. He instinctively tensed his muscles, his fingers imperceptibly moving towards a talisman hidden in his sleeve.

"Hmm."

The elder's voice was hoarse, like wind rustling through dry leaves. "A few more than last time."

His gaze swept over the crowd, then turned to the misty forest.

"The third stage, Illusory Realm Heart Questioning."

The elder raised his hand, pointing at the forest behind him. "There are only three rules."

"First, after entering the forest, you fight your own battles. This mist is called 'Mirage Smoke'; it can isolate the five senses and divine sense. Even if two people hold hands and enter, the moment they step in, they will be worlds apart."

"Second, thirty-six 'Questioning Heart Tokens' are hidden within the forest. Within three days, those who find one and walk out of the mist will be considered to have passed. Three days outside may be a lifetime, or merely a moment, inside."

"Third..."

The elder paused, his turbid gaze suddenly turning sharp, like a sword unsheathing. "Illusions arise from the heart, both false and true. Everything you see inside is what you most desire, or most fear, in your heart. Believe it, and it becomes real; disbelieve it, and it remains false. If your Dao heart is unstable and you become lost within, not even a deity could save you."

He looked around at the crowd, his tone softening slightly. "What you will experience this time is the 'basic mode' of the Questioning Heart Forest. The three trials set are merely common principles of worldly attachments, trust and suspicion in human relations, and decisions on the path of cultivation. However, the reality of the illusion far exceeds what you might imagine. Take care."

"Remember, guard your original heart."

Having said that, the elder closed his eyes again and spoke no more.

A deathly silence fell over the area.

Many of the disciples who had been high-spirited and triumphant at Hundred Refinements Peak moments ago now looked at the churning mist, their Adam's apples bobbing, revealing traces of fear.

For cultivators, cultivating the body is easy; cultivating the heart is hard.

The pain of the flesh can still be endured, but facing the deepest fears and desires within one's heart is the most perilous tribulation.

"Go," Zhang Lie said solemnly. "The auspicious time has arrived."

A burly menial disciple gritted his teeth and strode out first. "What's there to fear! This body of mine was built through hard training! Can a mere illusion eat me?"

He stepped into the mist.

No sound, no ripple.

The moment that robust figure touched the white mist, it was as if erased by an eraser, vanishing into thin air.

Then the second, the third...

Disciples walked into the forest one after another, each disappearing instantly, as if the forest were a giant maw that devoured everything.

In a dimension invisible to the crowd, not far behind the gray-robed elder, inside a seemingly ordinary mountain rock, spiritual light flickered faintly.

That place was connected to the formation's core. Zhang Lie and the two other presiding elders had sunk their divine sense into it.

What they could "see" was not the specific scenery of the illusion, but a hazy "sea of thoughts"—over a hundred points of light representing the disciples who had entered the formation. The brightness, color, and fluctuation frequency of these light points reflected their emotional state, the stability of their Dao heart, and whether they were approaching the edge of danger.

This was sect iron law: the overall situation may be monitored, but privacy must not be spied upon. They could only judge the merits and flaws based on these light points and the unique aura imbued in the "Questioning Heart Tokens" carried by those who ultimately walked out.

Su Ming was in no hurry to move.

He stood in place, seemingly observing, but actually communicating with Lin Yu.

"Master, this mist has some tricks to it," Su Ming thought. "I just tried probing with the perception of the 'Like Water Art' and found the water spiritual energy gets assimilated as soon as it goes in."

"This is a high-level illusion formation, and one that targets the soul," Lin Yu's voice was uncharacteristically serious. "This formation is simple; it adjusts according to the soul fluctuations of the entrant. Disciple, after you go in, no matter what you see, slap yourself first to confirm if you're dreaming."

The corner of Su Ming's mouth twitched. "Master, that move is too crude."

"Effective is what matters," Lin Yu said. "Also, this formation might block external objects. Although the ring's space is independent, if it involves soul-level isolation, I might not be able to contact you at any time."

Su Ming's heart tightened.

Lin Yu had always been his greatest trump card and support. Whether analyzing formations or dealing with crises, his master's presence gave him confidence far beyond his peers. If the connection was cut off...

"Don't panic," Lin Yu seemed to sense his emotions. "You're not the greenhorn fresh out of the village anymore. You're at the fifth layer of Qi Refining, you've mastered ninety basic runes. Even without me, this little Questioning Heart Forest can't trap you. Remember our motto—"

"Lay low, don't show off," Su Ming finished.

"Wrong! It's 'see the essence through the phenomenon'!" Lin Yu corrected. "No matter how real the illusion is, it's constructed from energy. As long as it's energy, it has nodes, flow, and flaws. Use your eyes to dismantle it."

Su Ming took a deep breath and nodded.

He straightened his robes and stepped forward.

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Chapter 224: The Illusory Forest of Inquiry: Entering the Forest

[1,149 words]

Qingfeng and Mingyue stood on a tree branch not far away. Mingyue watched Su Ming's receding back with some concern, "Senior Brother, Su Ming's Dao foundation is damaged. Could there be a flaw in his state of mind?"

Qingfeng held the sword case, his expression calm, "A damaged Dao foundation pertains to the body; the state of mind pertains to the soul. The path he has walked, the experiences he has undergone, are far more numerous than others'. If he cannot even pass this trial, then he isn't worthy of Elder Ma's regard."

Su Ming's toes touched the edge of the mist.

In that instant, the Xuantian ring on his left index finger suddenly transmitted a piercing, bone-chilling cold.

Hum—

An invisible, immense power instantly descended, like a thick curtain of lead, brutally severing the connection between his soul and the ring.

"Not good... this formation... its core rule is... absolute isolation..."

Lin Yu's voice became fragmented, intermittent, "It's... stripping... me..."

Su Ming's heart jolted violently. Instinctively, he tried to mobilize his divine sense to grasp that tenuous connection.

But that power was too vast, carrying an indisputable force of rules, thoroughly suppressing and sealing the ring's aura.

"Disciple... listen..."

Lin Yu's voice grew faint to the extreme, as if separated by countless mountains and rivers, "The illusion will... dig out your deepest fears... firmly guard... your true..."

Snap.

The last trace of connection was completely severed.

The warm, lustrous glow on the Xuantian ring instantly dimmed, turning into an ordinary, dead-silent iron band.

Su Ming's pupils contracted sharply.

This was the first time, since obtaining the ring, that he had so utterly lost contact with Lin Yu.

The feeling was like someone walking along a cliff edge suddenly losing their walking stick; or like someone accustomed to a lamp in the darkness suddenly having the light extinguished.

A massive sense of loneliness and crisis surged over him like a tidal wave.

But he did not stop his steps.

Momentum carried his body completely into the rolling Mirage Smoke.

...

There was no expected dizzying disorientation, no demons lunging at his face.

Even the sensation of the damp mist vanished.

Su Ming only felt his vision blur slightly, as if he had dozed off on a drowsy afternoon and suddenly jolted awake.

The crisp chirping of birds reached his ears.

"Chirp chirp—"

Immediately after, a clear, resonant chorus of reading voices accompanied by a gentle breeze drifted into his ears.

"The way of great learning lies in illuminating bright virtue, in loving the people, in abiding in the highest good..."

The voices were youthful, uniform, carrying a unique rhythm.

Su Ming opened his eyes somewhat dazedly.

The sunlight was a bit glaring, filtering through mottled leaves and casting golden dapples on the ground.

The air no longer carried the damp smell of earth. Instead, there was a faint scent of ink and the dry odor of aged wood.

He looked down.

The faded gray robe of the Repair Hall was gone. In its place was a patched-up blue cloth garment. The cuffs were badly worn, revealing the yellowed inner lining.

There was no storage pouch in his hand, no Formation Flags, only a rolled-up, dog-eared copy of *The Collected Commentaries on the Four Books*.

Su Ming sharply raised his head.

Before him stood a slightly dilapidated courtyard house.

Blue bricks, gray tiles. An old locust tree in the corner of the courtyard was blooming with delicate white flowers.

Several sparrows hopped about under the eaves, squabbling over something.

The door to the main hall was open. Inside sat over twenty youths of varying ages, swaying their heads as they recited the classics.

This place was...

Su Ming's heart felt as if gripped by an invisible giant hand, pounding violently.

The green stone-paved ground, the clutter piled in the corner, and that wooden plaque hanging under the corridor, carved with the two characters "Ming De" (Bright Virtue).

This was the Qingshi Town County School.

The place where he had once studied day and night, trying to change his fate through the imperial examinations, only to end up with nothing.

"This is... too real."

Su Ming murmured to himself.

He reached out and touched the nearby corridor pillar.

The rough texture of the wood, even that scratch carved by some mischievous child, were all incredibly clear.

The tactile sensation transmitted through his fingertips was so real it was horrifying.

He tried to circulate the spiritual energy within his body.

Empty. Void.

The Dantian Qihai was gone. That mutually-generating Water and Wood seedling had vanished. What flowed through his meridians was no longer surging spiritual energy, but the faint qi and blood unique to mortals.

The Like Water Art could not be activated.

Even the Xuantian ring on his finger had disappeared without a trace.

He had become a complete and utter mortal.

A seventeen-year-old poor scholar with a destitute home, bearing the hopes of his entire village, suffering cold stares and exclusion within the County School.

"Is this... illusion born from the heart?"

Su Ming stood under the corridor. The sunlight felt warm on his body, yet he felt a chill permeating his entire being.

If not for the memory of that instant severance of connection with Lin Yu still lingering, he might even suspect that the months of cultivation experience were just a grand dream he had while dozing off in class.

This sense of realism was the most terrifying weapon.

It didn't argue with you. It directly pulled you from the clouds back into the mud, making you unable to distinguish whether Zhuang Zhou dreamed of the butterfly, or the butterfly dreamed of Zhuang Zhou.

Just then, the sound of footsteps came from the other end of the corridor.

Cloth shoes made a soft scraping sound on the green stone slabs.

Su Ming stiffly turned his neck.

A middle-aged man wearing a Confucian robe and a square scarf, holding a scroll of books, walked slowly over.

He had a thin face, sported three wisps of long beard, and his eyes held a sternness mixed with a kind of frustrated expectation, the hope that iron could become steel.

That was the person Su Ming had once most revered, and also felt most grateful towards.

Teacher Zhou.

Teacher Zhou walked up to Su Ming and stopped.

He looked at this outstanding disciple of his standing dazed under the corridor, his brow slightly furrowed, then relaxed, revealing a gentle yet pressure-filled smile.

That smile contained expectations for a scholar from a poor family, but also the heavy weight of being beyond all redemption if one did not succeed.

"Su Ming."

Teacher Zhou gently tapped the book scroll in his hand, his voice mellow, "Tomorrow is the day the county exam results are posted. Your policy discussion was well done, but how is your memorization of the 'Hong Fan' chapter from the *Book of Documents*?"

"If you don't pass this time, how will your elderly father at home, and the villagers who pin their hopes on you to rise above, face their situation?"

Su Ming gazed at this familiar yet distant face, listening to these words that had jolted him awake countless times in the depths of midnight.

He took a deep breath, his lungs filling with the taste of mundane dust.

The first layer of trial had already descended.

Share to your friends

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

- Chapter 225: The Illusory Forest of the Heart: Springtime in the Imperial Academy

Chapter 225: The Illusory Forest of the Heart: Springtime in the Imperial Academy

[1,508 words]

Time within the illusion began to blur and accelerate at a dizzying pace.

The walls of the examination cell crumbled and reformed, the scenes shifting like a revolving lantern.

The results were posted.

Red paper with characters of gold, Su Ming, top scorer.

Amidst the clamor of gongs and drums, he was jostled onto a tall horse, a large red flower pinned to his chest.

On both sides of the street, the common folk of Qingshi Town lined the road, cheering.

In the crowd, he saw Zhao Rui, who was currently staring at him with a face full of envy, trying to push forward only to be blocked by yamen runners.

The scene shifted again.

Yunshuo Prefectural City, the Provincial Examination.

This time, he no longer hid his talent.

That policy discussion essay was written with flowery brilliance, each word a pearl.

He passed, second top scorer.

At the Deer Cry Banquet, cups were raised and exchanged.

Those scions of noble families who had once looked down on him with cold eyes now, one by one, held their wine cups with beaming smiles, addressing him as "Brother Su."

The wine slid down his throat, spicy with a lingering sweetness, warming his stomach.

Su Ming tried to stay clear-headed.

During a lull in the feast, under the pretense of freshening up, he walked to a corner of the corridor and pinched the inside of his thigh hard.

Intense pain.

The pain of twisted flesh shot straight to his brain along his nerves, making him suck in a sharp breath.

"The pain is real too..." Su Ming leaned against the vermilion-red pillar, looking towards the brilliantly lit banquet in the distance, his gaze somewhat dazed. "Even this level of detail is simulated to perfection?"

He raised his hand, looked at the wine stain lingering on his fingertips, and brought it to his nose to smell.

The rich aroma of aged vintage.

"Master?" he called out again in his heart.

Still, only an empty echo.

That sense of loneliness was more piercing than the cold winds of Hundred Refinements Peak.

In this world, there was no cultivation, no formations, no old man always shouting about the "Way of Survival."

There was only him, Su Ming, a genius charging ahead at breakneck speed on the path of the imperial examinations.

The scenes continued to accelerate.

The capital, the Metropolitan Examination.

The examination cells in the Examination Hall were slightly more spacious than those in the County School, but also colder.

Su Ming, wrapped in a thick cotton robe, wrote with flying brushstrokes.

Tenth in the Second Class, granted the status of jinshi.

The Palace Examination.

In the Hall of Golden Chimes, the floor tiles were polished to a mirror-like shine.

He knelt on the hard ground, listening to that lofty voice reading out his name.

"Appointed, compiler of the Hanlin Academy."

The scene froze.

The capital of the Great Xing Dynasty, the Hanlin Academy.

Outside the window, heavy snow swirled; inside the room, charcoal fire burned brightly.

Su Ming, dressed in a set of dark blue official robes with a jade belt at his waist, sat behind a large rosewood desk.

The desk was piled high with memorials and ancient texts, next to which sat a steaming cup of premium Longjing tea picked before the rains.

"Lord Su."

A sycophantic voice came from the doorway.

Su Ming looked up and saw Qian Bin.

That colleague who had once mocked him in the Hanlin Academy and sent him to sort through piles of waste paper and archives.

Now, Qian Bin held a stack of archives in his hands, his back bent like a boiled shrimp, a fawning smile plastered on his face. "These are the records of past malpractices in the grain transport system you requested. This humble official has compiled them all. Please review them, my lord."

Su Ming took the archives, his fingers lightly stroking the surface of the paper.

Rough, aged paper carrying a faint musty smell.

"Leave them," Su Ming said indifferently.

"Yes, yes, of course." Qian Bin, as if granted amnesty, carefully placed the archives down, then eagerly picked up the teapot on the table. "My lord, your tea has gone cold. This humble official will fetch you a fresh, hot cup."

Watching Qian Bin's servile actions, a strange feeling welled up in Su Ming's heart.

Was this the taste of power?

No fighting or killing, no life-and-death crises. One only needed to sit here, move a writing brush, and those who had once humiliated him would grovel and obey.

"Brother Su!"

A hearty laugh shattered the quiet of the room.

Xu Qing pushed the door open and entered.

He wore a set of crimson official robes, the attire for officials of the fifth rank and above.

After several years apart, Xu Qing had grown a short beard, appearing more steady and capable, but the ambition and vigor at the corners of his eyes and brows were impossible to conceal.

"I heard you were working overtime here at the Hanlin Academy right after court adjourned," Xu Qing strode over, unceremoniously picking up Su Ming's teacup and taking a sip. "So? His Majesty praised your 'River Management Policy' to the skies. I heard he intends to promote you to serve in the Southern Study?"

Su Ming looked at Xu Qing.

This person before him was flesh and blood, his breath visible as white mist, even a speck of unmelted snowflake from the morning court session still clinging to his collar.

"Brother Xu," Su Ming spoke, his voice somewhat hoarse. "You... are you well?"

"Well? Of course I'm well!" Xu Qing laughed heartily, patting Su Ming's shoulder. "Now that we brothers serve in the same court, one civil, one military, it's the perfect time to realize our grand ambitions. By the way, I'm hosting a banquet tonight at 'Taibai Tower.' You must come. Guess who's here?"

Su Ming's heart stirred. "Who?"

"You'll know when you get there." Xu Qing winked, keeping the secret.

...

Taibai Tower.

The capital's most renowned restaurant, brilliantly lit, with pleasant music from stringed and bamboo instruments.

Inside the private room, warmth enveloped the space.

The moment Su Ming pushed the door open, his entire body froze in place.

Several figures sat around the round table.

At the head sat Su Shan, dressed in brocade robes, looking much more prosperous, and next to him, his mother, her face full of kindness, holding Zhao Chunlan's hand as they chatted.

"Third Brother!"

A robust shout.

Second Brother Su Yang stood up. He was burly, wearing purple silk only eligible for imperial merchants, with two large jadeite rings on his fingers.

He strode over with large steps, embracing Su Ming in a hug so tight it made Su Ming's bones ache.

This wasn't the first time seeing his family.

His parents and second brother visited him in the capital periodically, sometimes staying for ten days or half a month.

Mother would nag him about not wearing enough clothes, Father would watch his back as he walked in the Hanlin Academy with his hands clasped behind him, Second Brother would boast about his business achievements and also secretly stuff wads of banknotes into his hand for socializing with colleagues.

It was all too real.

So real that he began to wonder if the Cloud Hidden Sect, cultivation, formations... those memories were merely a bizarre, fantastical dream?

"Second Brother..." Surrounded by that familiar scent, Su Ming's eyes grew slightly warm.

"Good lad! You've truly brought honor to our old Su family!" Su Yang slapped Su Ming's back forcefully, his voice booming. "You have no idea how big our 'Su Family Paper Business' has grown! Even the palace procurement specifically requests our paper! When I walk the streets of the capital now, who doesn't show me some respect?"

"Third Son, come here quickly, let Mother look at you." His mother's voice trembled slightly.

Su Ming was pushed by Su Yang to stand before his mother.

He looked at his mother's wrinkled yet smiling face, at his father Su Shan's straight-backed posture...

It was all too perfect.

Perfect, like the most beautiful dream he had ever dreamt on countless cold nights, curled up under the quilt.

Su Ming sat down.

Food and wine flowed onto the table like a stream.

Braised lion's head meatballs, steamed perch, and wild vegetable dumplings hand-wrapped by his mother.

Su Ming picked up a dumpling with his chopsticks and put it in his mouth.

The fresh fragrance of shepherd's purse mixed with the savory flavor of pork exploded on his tongue. It was the taste of home, the warmest imprint deep in his memory.

"Is it good?" his mother asked, looking at him expectantly.

"It's good." Su Ming lowered his head, chewing heartily.

If this was false, then what was real?

That cold, cruel cultivation world where killing and treasure-seizing were commonplace? Or that Hundred Refinements Peak where one had to risk their life for a few spirit stones?

Here, his parents were alive and well, brothers were harmonious and respectful, close friends were by his side, and he had achieved fame and success.

Here, he didn't need to worry about having his head cut off by an evil cultivator in the middle of the night, didn't need to tread on thin ice to conceal his cultivation, didn't need to talk to the air.

Su Ming raised his wine cup and drained it in one gulp.

The spicy liquor slid down his throat, gradually relaxing nerves that had been taut for far too long.

Perhaps... staying here wouldn't be so bad?

Once this thought sprouted, it grew like wildfire.

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

Chapter 226: The Forest of Illusions: The First Awakening from a Great Dream

[1,320 words]

Days passed one after another.

Su Ming began to truly study the court's political situation, research water conservancy and grain transport, and study how to use a single memorial to delight the emperor.

Su Ming discovered he actually had quite a talent in this area. For many complex and intricate government affairs, he could always see the crucial points at a glance and propose insights that hit the nail on the head.

Su Ming recalled those obscure runes and those complicated spiritual energy circuits less and less.

Only occasionally late at night, in the deep quiet, when weary from reviewing official documents, he would subconsciously use his fingertip to trace a few simple, meaningless patterns on the desktop—the opening strokes of the "Gathering" and "Solidify" character runes he had practiced countless times.

Then he would freeze, shake his head with a self-deprecating smile, feeling he was probably just tired and confused.

The Yongchang Marquis Manor held a birthday banquet.

The Yongchang Marquis, who had once been high above, wanting to crush him like an ant, personally sent an invitation.

At the banquet, the Yongchang Marquis, holding a wine cup, walked up to Su Ming, a warm smile on his face: "Lord Su, there were some misunderstandings in the past. In the future at court, I will need to rely heavily on you, Lord Su, to put in a good word for me before His Majesty."

Su Ming looked at that face which had once filled him with fear, now brimming with attempts to win him over.

He smiled slightly, raising his cup in return: "You flatter me, Marquis."

At that moment, Su Ming felt an unprecedented sense of satisfaction.

This was the feeling of controlling fate.

Not by hiding, not by scheming, but by standing upright at the pinnacle of power, making all former enemies bow their heads.

This feeling was too intoxicating.

Su Ming began to grow accustomed to this life.

He grew accustomed to the smooth, silky touch of the official robe on his body, accustomed to the subtle fragrance of top-grade Huizhou ink wafting in his study, accustomed to returning to his manor after court and receiving his parents' concerned inquiries.

Memories of cultivating immortality began to blur, like an absurd, nonsensical dream.

Until that day.

The heavy snow had just cleared.

Su Ming was summoned to the palace.

Inside the Imperial Study, the underfloor heating burned fiercely, making it as warm as spring.

The elderly emperor put down the vermilion brush in his hand, raised his head, and looked with gentle eyes at Su Ming standing below.

"My beloved minister Su." The emperor's voice was aged and kindly.

"Your servant is here." Su Ming bowed in salute.

"You have been diligent and dedicated these years since entering court. I have seen it all." The emperor picked up a memorial from the desk. "Especially the strategy for managing grain transport you proposed earlier. After its implementation, the national treasury has been enriched, and the people live in peace. You are the chief contributor."

"This is due to Your Majesty's great fortune. Your servant dare not claim credit." Su Ming lowered his head in response, his reply fitting and proper.

"No need for such modesty." The emperor smiled, stood up, personally walked to Su Ming, and handed him the memorial in his hand. "I have another major matter here, concerning the state and the livelihood of the people. After much thought, I feel only by entrusting it to you can I be at ease."

Su Ming received the memorial with both hands.

The memorial was weighty, its cover embroidered with dragon patterns in gold thread.

"This is a proposal regarding promoting new paper to enrich the national treasury." The emperor said gently. "I heard this new paper method originates from your hometown?"

Su Ming's heart stirred slightly. He lowered his head and opened the memorial.

The handwriting on the memorial was neat and forceful, clearly and systematically listing the various wonders of the new paper and the methods for its promotion, even detailing the key points of several core improvement techniques.

Su Ming's gaze followed the text downward.

He read very carefully, as if reviewing a crucial official document.

His gaze finally settled on those few lines describing the core formula of the "Su Family Special Bamboo Paper."

Ingredient ratios, steaming and boiling time, pounding frequency, paper-forming technique...

Not a single detail was off.

It was precisely the optimal ratio he and Second Brother had determined after repeated trials.

But...

Something was missing.

Not an ingredient, not a step in the process.

But a mark.

A "security mark" that only he and Second Brother knew about, utterly useless in practice, purely a joke between brothers.

That winter, under the dim light of an oil lamp, he had taught his barely literate Second Brother how to draw a simple stick-figure smiling face in the corner of the paper recording the formula.

Second Brother had practiced for a long time, drawing it crooked and wobbly, but he was very happy.

"From now on, all the paper our family produces will have this smiling face." Second Brother grinned. "No one can copy it."

Although this "security" method was laughably childish, it was a secret belonging to the two of them.

And in this terrifyingly detailed royal memorial, there was the optimal formula, the most reasonable promotion strategy, the tax revenue numbers most likely to impress the emperor...

Only that crooked, wobbly "smiling face" was absent.

In its place was a cold, standardized, vermilion official seal symbolizing imperial authority.

Su Ming slowly closed the memorial.

His movements were very slow, slow enough to clearly feel his heart beating in his chest, thump, thump, steady and firm.

The Imperial Study was as warm as spring, the charcoal fire crackling.

The emperor's breathing was steady and long.

The snowy light outside the window filtered through the transparent roof tiles, casting mottled shadows on the floor tiles.

Everything felt very "real."

But Su Ming felt an extremely subtle, almost imperceptible chill creeping up from the base of his spine.

Not because this world was "fake."

But because this "realness," this perfection so stifling, this consideration so all-encompassing, precisely exposed its essence—it had only constructed "facts," but overlooked "people."

It overlooked those "emotions" and "memories" hidden in the cracks between facts, illogical yet immensely important.

It could replicate the optimal formula, but it couldn't replicate that childish smiling face beside the formula.

Could it simulate a mother's loving kindness, but could it simulate that complex expression unique to a mother, mixed with heartache and pride?

Could it construct a father's stern dignity, but could it construct that almost inaudible sigh he let out while watching his back with hands clasped behind him?

Could it...

Su Ming raised his head, meeting the emperor's eyes filled with expectation and trust.

In those eyes were appreciation, reliance, the dependence of an emperor on a capable minister.

Only that indescribable thing, carrying flaws and warmth, that exists when one "person" looks at another "person," was absent.

"My beloved minister Su?" Seeing him silent for so long, the emperor called out in confusion. "Is there some difficulty? If so, speak freely."

Su Ming took a deep breath.

The warm, fragrant air of the Imperial Study filled his lungs.

He bowed slightly, returning the memorial with both hands, his voice steady, betraying no hint of abnormality:

"Your Majesty's great favor fills me with boundless gratitude. This strategy is excellent. If implemented properly, it will indeed greatly benefit the state and the people. I have some superficial knowledge of the paper-making affairs from my village days. I am willing to elaborate on its pros and cons for Your Majesty, for your wise judgment."

He did not question the authenticity of the memorial.

Instead, he actively took up the topic, embedding himself even deeper into the logic of this world.

Like a stone falling into water, after stirring faint ripples, it chose to continue sinking, rather than float to the surface.

The emperor smiled with satisfaction, signaling him to elaborate.

Su Ming began to explain, his voice clear, his points well-organized.

But in the deepest recesses of his consciousness, an extremely faint, almost forgotten sense of "wrongness," like an undercurrent beneath ice, began to stir quietly.

Like a spectator standing before a stage, suddenly becoming aware of the existence of the curtain.

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

Chapter 227: The Forest of Illusions: Cracks Appear

[1,317 words]

When Su Ming walked out of the palace gates, the snow had already stopped.

Thick snow blanketed the vermilion palace walls and the golden glazed tiles, the entire capital shrouded in a dazzling, pristine white.

The air was fresh and biting cold, carrying a hint of sweetness with each breath drawn into the lungs.

Everything was perfect, flawless beyond reproach.

"Lord Su, the sedan chair is ready."

A sedan bearer dressed in dark blue clothes hurried forward, bowing in greeting, his face wearing a precisely appropriate smile of respect.

The curve of that smile, the angle of his bow, even the reverence visible in his eyes—it all seemed as meticulously standard as if dictated by the strictest master of ceremonies.

Su Ming stopped walking, his gaze lingering on the sedan bearer's face for a moment.

"No sedan today," Su Ming said, his voice turning into a puff of white mist in the cold air. "I'd like to walk."

The sedan bearer showed no hesitation, offered no superfluous attempts to dissuade him, and immediately straightened up, stepping aside. "Understood. This humble one will have the sedan chair taken back at once. Please be careful of the slippery path, my lord."

Su Ming stepped onto the snowy ground. His official boots made of cowhide crunched against the snow with a "crunch, crunch" sound.

Ever since discovering that missing "smiling face" mark on the memorial in the imperial study, a seed named "doubt" had taken root and begun to sprout in the depths of his heart.

But he always felt that he seemed to have forgotten something even more important.

What was it?

He tried hard to recall, but his mind only held the clear trajectory of this "perfect life": Qingshi Town, the County School, the imperial examinations, the Hanlin Academy... Further back, there was only a hazy, misty fog, as if the source of his memories was obscured by something.

He had tried to concentrate, to "think," to "dig," but every time his thoughts touched that mist, he would feel a gentle weariness, and then his attention would be diverted back to the tangible reality before him—the official robe, the documents, and the fragrance of tea.

He wasn't in a hurry to expose anything. Instead, like a patient hunter, he began to scrutinize this jungle called "perfect life."

Returning to the Hanlin Academy, Su Ming sat behind his wide rosewood desk.

"Someone."

Qian Bin pushed the door open almost instantly, holding a cup of tea at just the right temperature. "My lord, your instructions."

Su Ming took the teacup but didn't drink from it. Instead, he casually placed it on top of a stack of archives. The tea sloshed out, soaking the topmost document—an urgent report concerning "river engineering repairs."

This was a major taboo in official circles.

Damaging official documents could result in anything from a salary deduction to criminal charges.

There was no trace of panic on Qian Bin's face, nor the slightest hint of reproach for Su Ming's carelessness.

He didn't even show a flicker of change in his eyes. He simply, very naturally, took out a handkerchief, deftly wiped up the moisture, and said, "My lord must be weary. This humble official will handle such a trivial matter. Fortunately, the ink hasn't bled through. I'll simply recopy it."

Su Ming watched him.

"Assistant Prefect Qian," Su Ming said, lightly tapping the desk with his fingers. "Regarding the calculation of the river engineering funds, I recalculated them last night. It seems the amount approved earlier is about thirty percent higher than it should be."

This was an obvious trap.

Approving thirty percent extra funds was enough to cause an uproar throughout both the Ministry of Works and the Ministry of Revenue. As the person who handled it, Qian Bin's first reaction should have been fear, or at least a frantic attempt to explain himself.

Yet, Qian Bin merely paused briefly, then immediately nodded. "Since my lord's calculation indicates an error, then this humble official's previous calculation must have been mistaken. I will go and recheck it at once, ensuring that the thirty percent excess is corrected. I will absolutely not cause any trouble for you, my lord."

No questioning. No explanation. Not even fear.

He was like a puppet programmed for a single purpose: to cooperate with Su Ming's every instruction, to ensure Su Ming's official career path remained smooth and unobstructed.

A sliver of coldness stirred deep within Su Ming's eyes.

In this world, he, Su Ming, was the absolute center. All the rules, all human hearts, revolved around his will.

It was too smooth.

So smooth it was nauseating.

As evening approached, Su Ming arranged to meet Xu Qing.

The location was, as usual, Taibai Tower, their customary private room.

After several rounds of wine and many dishes had been sampled.

Xu Qing was slightly tipsy, his cheeks flushed, enthusiastically recounting a recent amusing incident from the Ministry of Revenue.

Su Ming held his wine cup, watching this close friend through the flickering candlelight.

"Brother Xu," Su Ming suddenly interrupted him. "Do you remember back in Qingshi Town? That time in front of the bookstall, you argued until you were red-faced with that stall owner over that copy of *Records of Southern Border Wonders*."

Xu Qing was taken aback for a moment, then laughed. "I remember, of course I remember! We were so poor back then, willing to forgo dignity just to save a few copper coins."

"It wasn't to save money," Su Ming said, staring into his eyes. "It was because the stall owner said the 'gu sorcery' in the book was fake, and you were so indignant you insisted on arguing the point. You said that seeking truth and being pragmatic were the

fundamental duties of a scholar, and that even strange tales shouldn't be casually dismissed."

Xu Qing's smile stiffened for an instant.

This was something Su Ming had made up. It was Su Ming who had bought the book back then.

"Is... is that so?" A flicker of confusion passed through Xu Qing's eyes, but it was quickly replaced by that rational clarity. "I must have mixed up the memory. But Brother Su is right. Seeking truth and being pragmatic are indeed our fundamental duties."

He seamlessly followed Su Ming's lead, flawlessly, yet utterly soulless.

Su Ming set down his wine cup, leaning forward slightly, his voice lowering. "Brother Xu, lately I've been feeling uneasy at court. The more His Majesty relies on me, the more I feel like I'm treading on thin ice. You know how it is—it's lonely at the top. Those great aristocratic families, though polite on the surface, behind the scenes..."

He deliberately let a hint of weakness and anxiety show—a side of himself he rarely revealed in front of others.

If this were the real Xu Qing, his brow would have furrowed tightly by now. He might even have slammed the table, cursing the hypocrisy of those aristocratic scions, then grabbed Su Ming's hand, drunkenly saying things like "we can always resign and go back home."

The "Xu Qing" before him set down his chopsticks, his expression turning solemn and thorough.

"Brother Su is worrying too much," Xu Qing analyzed. "His Majesty is wise and sagacious now, precisely in need of capable ministers like you. Although the aristocratic families are powerful, as long as Brother Su closely follows His Majesty's lead and acts according to the law, they won't be able to find any fault. Moreover, Brother Su's political achievements are now illustrious; you are a pillar of the court. A little turbulence is nothing to fear."

Rational. Objective. Perfect.

But these words were like a standard answer copied from a textbook—every single character was beyond reproach, yet they lacked one thing alone—warmth.

The eyes looking at Su Ming held no concern, no shared indignation, only the placid stillness of two pools of stagnant water.

Su Ming leaned back in his chair. The hollow chill in his heart was deeper than the snow outside the window.

"Brother Su, what's wrong?" Xu Qing asked with concern, seeing his silence.

"Nothing," Su Ming said, picking up his wine cup and draining it in one gulp. "It's just that... this wine seems a bit bland."

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

Chapter 228: The Illusory Forest of the Heart: Breaking Free from the Cage

[1,170 words]

Late at night.

Su Mansion study.

The snow outside the window made the room somewhat bright.

Su Ming had dismissed all the servants and sat alone at the desk.

A sheet of fine xuan paper was spread before him, held down by a smooth, warm Hetian jade paperweight.

He lifted the brush, dipping it fully into thick ink.

He did not intend to write characters.

A deeper impulse, originating from his soul, was driving his arm.

The brush tip descended, ink lines meandering.

The starting stroke was decisive, the running stroke smooth, the transitions sharp.

Not characters.

Lines.

Runes.

"Gathering," "Control," "Flow," "Balance"...

Those patterns he didn't know why he could produce, yet felt intimately familiar, flowed naturally from his brush tip.

Those basic runes once etched into his heart were not currently channeling any heaven and earth spiritual energy; they were merely ink seeping into paper.

But Su Ming's hand trembled slightly.

A long-lost tremor, originating from the depths of his soul, traveled through the brush handle and spread throughout his body.

It was the imprint carved by thousands upon thousands of monotonous practice sessions during those days and nights at Hundred Refinements Peak, under dim oil lamps, amidst piles of cold scrap material.

This body lacked spiritual power and had not been tempered by spiritual energy, yet this imprint had long transcended the flesh, engraved into his consciousness.

The brush tip moved faster and faster.

The rudimentary form of a complex formation diagram slowly emerged on the paper.

Nine-Curve Solar Yang Formation - Variant.

This was the flash of inspiration he had in that instant during the second stage of the outer sect assessment. Using water to guide fire, transforming rigidity into softness.

He didn't remember when he had seen this pattern, but it had appeared just like that, carrying an undeniable sense of "reality."

Looking at the imperfect, smudged, shaky lines on the paper, his eyes grew warm.

These "imperfections" felt more intimate and solid to him than that perfect world outside.

"My path..."

Su Ming put down the brush, gazing at the ink-drenched xuan paper, murmuring softly to himself.

"...does not lie within this perfect cage."

The moment these words fell.

The air in the study seemed to freeze.

The candle flame, which had been burning with extreme stability, suddenly flickered violently, its flame elongating, turning into an eerie bluish-gray color.

Su Ming stood up, calmly surveying his surroundings.

"Dissipate."

He said flatly.

There was no earth-shattering explosion, nor heart-rending screams.

It was like a scroll being scorched by fire.

The rosewood grain at the edge of the desk began to twist, fade, transforming into countless tiny gray ashes, silently disintegrating.

That smooth, warm Hetian jade paperweight rapidly lost its luster, turning into rough, crude stone, then immediately into dust.

The famous calligraphy and paintings hanging on the wall, the Persian rug on the floor, even the perfect snowscape outside the window...

At this moment, all began collapsing silently from the edges toward the center.

That "Xu Qing" wearing the crimson official robe, that kind mother, that imposing father... Their figures flashed one last time in Su Ming's mind, then shattered like bubbles.

Su Ming stood amidst the flying ashes. The official robe on his body also began to dissipate, revealing the familiar, patched gray menial disciple robe underneath.

Cold.

A bone-piercing cold enveloped his body once more.

That was a real sensation.

Darkness surged in like a tide, swallowing that brightly lit Hanlin Academy, swallowing that warm capital.

Su Ming closed his eyes, a relieved smile curling at the corner of his mouth.

...

Outside the Questioning Heart Forest.

Inside that seemingly ordinary mountain rock, the atmosphere suddenly grew tense.

On the originally calm, water-like spiritual energy light screen, violent ripples were now churning.

The light point representing Su Ming, which had previously been emitting a soft, stable milky-white glow, slowly meandered at the edge of the light screen, as if slumbering in warm water.

But just a moment ago, the brightness of the light point suddenly surged.

Immediately after, its originally slow fluctuation frequency changed drastically, shifting from a deep, gentle rhythm to an intense, high-frequency tremor.

The milky-white glow rapidly faded, replaced by a deep, ancient, metallic bronze color.

"This fluctuation..."

The Questioning Heart Elder, who had been sitting cross-legged with his eyes closed, suddenly opened his eyes wide, staring fixedly at that violently trembling light point.

"Severe mental shock, yet not collapse, but rather... awakening?"

Beside him, Zhang Lie's perpetually cold, iron-hard face also revealed unconcealed astonishment.

"Shishu, this is..." Zhang Lie pointed at that bronze hue, his voice somewhat hoarse. "This isn't the feedback a 'Basic Mode' illusion should have! When breaking a Basic Mode illusion, it should be a clear light soaring skyward, the inner demon dispersing. This bronze tremor... it's more like..."

"True Mode."

The Questioning Heart Elder slowly uttered these two words, a trace of incredulity in his tone. "He directly triggered 'True Mode' resonance."

"True Mode?!"

Zhang Lie gasped sharply. "Isn't that the formation mode only activated during assessments for inner sect core disciples, or even true disciples? This kid... he's just a menial disciple. How could his thoughts be so complex that they could stir the deep formation lines of the Questioning Heart Forest?"

The Questioning Heart Forest formation adapts to the strong and the complex.

Ordinary menial disciples have simple thoughts, their desires limited to attaining immortality and longevity; their illusions remain at the shallow level of worldly wealth and status.

Only those whose hearts align with the path of formations or possess special soul bodies would cause the formation to judge the "Basic Mode" insufficient, thus automatically upgrading.

"The last time someone triggered True Mode before entering the inner sect..." The Questioning Heart Elder lightly tapped his knee with his finger, his gaze profound. "...was three thousand years ago, that former patriarch of Formation Peak, Xuan Yunzi."

Zhang Lie's expression turned solemn.

Xuan Yunzi, a monumental figure in the history of the Cloud Hidden Sect's path of formations.

Legend says he was born with a "Seven-Aperture Exquisite Heart," breaking formations upon entry, comprehending all methods naturally.

"This disciple..." Zhang Lie looked at that still violently trembling, increasingly deep-colored light point, his throat feeling dry. "Could he be a special soul body? Or is it that he, too, has a natural affinity with the path of formations?"

The Questioning Heart Elder did not answer.

He raised his hand, sending a spell seal into the light screen.

"Since it has been triggered, it is his fortune, and also his tribulation."

The elder's voice regained its calmness, but the slightly trembling tip of his horsetail whisk betrayed his inner turmoil.

"Under True Mode, great terror approaches. I hope he does not breed inner demons because of this."

...

Inside the illusion.

The perfect world had completely collapsed into a void of ashes.

Su Ming stood in a dead silent darkness.

There was no light, no sound, not even a sense of time's passage.

The joy of just having regained his true self was being rapidly devoured by a deeper, colder presence.

If the previous "Hanlin Academy" was a gentle tomb, then now, the malice pressing in from all sides was a naked blade.

Su Ming did not move.

He simply stood quietly, adjusting his breathing.

Having chosen to shatter that false perfection, he was prepared to face whatever came.

"Whatever it is..."

Su Ming silently recited in his heart, his fingers curling as if the brush was still in his hand.

"...it is better than the fake."

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

Chapter 229: The Illusory Forest of Inquiry - The End

[1,254 words]

That flawless capital officialdom, after the phrase "not within this perfect cage" settled in Su Ming's heart, completely disintegrated into a void of ashes.

Cold and darkness poured down like quicksilver, sweeping in from all directions, giving him not even a moment to catch his breath.

Just as Su Ming's consciousness was stripped from the "successful" illusion, feeling that loneliness so real it made his heart palpitate, the darkness suddenly tore apart. A searing cluster of firelight, reeking of a pungent burnt smell, smashed squarely into his face.

The scene abruptly flipped.

He was still standing in the same spot, but the surrounding darkness was instantly replaced by a bloody firelight.

The air was thick with desperate wails and cries for help.

His official robe was instantly scorched and stained with blood and filth.

A figure, burned beyond recognition but with a vaguely discernible outline, was being pinned to the ground by several soldiers in official armor. Illuminated by the firelight, the hand the figure stretched out seemed to be trying to grab him, but only waved futilely in the air.

"Third brother! Run... run away!"

"No! Father! Mother!"

Sharp screams, mixed with the thunderous crash of collapsing beams and pillars, exploded in his ears.

Every muscle in Su Ming's body tensed like iron, his chest cavity felt as if gripped by an invisible giant hand, every inhalation carrying the phantom pain of flames scorching his windpipe.

The qi and blood within his body surged uncontrollably in a wild counterflow, his temples throbbed violently, his vision repeatedly darkened—this was not real physical harm, but the intense resonance and tremor produced when his soul directly faced the deepest fears within his heart.

This was the fear buried deepest in Su Ming's heart, the one he was most unwilling to confront—he had embarked on the path of cultivation to protect. But if, due to his personal recklessness or failure, this layer of protection was torn open, exposing his mortal family to the cruelty of the cultivation world, then everything he had done would be utterly meaningless.

As Su Ming watched helplessly as the flames devoured everything, the phantom of Xu Qing, wearing the County School Confucian robe, appeared in the distance, arguing vehemently with a team of indifferent Government Soldiers, only to be kicked to the ground and driven away in disarray.

Immediately after, Zhou Wenhai, who had once placed great hopes in Su Ming, appeared pale-faced within a patch of shadow. He coughed up a mouthful of blood, his eyes filled with disappointment and lamentation towards Su Ming, then collapsed dead on the ground.

Extreme pain and helplessness seeped like cold venom through his meridians, reaching directly to his soul.

At that moment, all the bloody hues and scorching heat receded like a tide.

The scene flipped for the third time. The warm study, the soft candlelight, Qian Bin's face wearing that standard, fawning smile once again enveloped him.

"Lord Su, you've worked hard reviewing official documents. Have a cup of ginseng tea to steady your nerves."

Su Ming violently pushed away the offered teacup, the tea splashing onto Qian Bin's distorted face.

Qian Bin's fawning face was instantly covered by flames and black smoke. He stretched out a hand, his fingers bony, cold, and powerful, tightly grasping Su Ming's sleeve.

"Choose! Indulge in power, and you will forever lose the chance for transcendence! Chase strength, and the withered bones of your loved ones will be your path marker!"

Two diametrically opposed extreme illusions—"ultimate perfection" and "ultimate shattering"—began to flash, interweave, and superimpose around him at a frequency difficult for the naked eye to follow.

Study and fire scene, fine wine and blood, flattery and wails... light, shadow, and sound waves transformed into countless invisible yet sharp files, taking turns at an extremely high frequency to cut and grind away at his consciousness and mental defenses.

"What has your choice brought?!"

"What is your Dao?!"

Each flash was an interrogation of the very core of his Dao heart.

Su Ming's body began to tremble violently.

His nostrils were filled with the alternating smells of burnt matter and ink, his eyes stung unbearably from the stimulation of blood-red hues and golden light.

At the brink of collapse, he instead became utterly calm.

His breathing became slow and deep. This was not the breath of a mortal, but the gentle cycle automatically initiated by the "Like Water Art" nurtured by the sprout deep within his Dantian.

"My Dao..." Su Ming silently recited in his heart.

Su Ming discarded all the distracting, fleeting illusions before his eyes, sinking his mind inward, tracing back to the original source—not to exchange for the power and empty fame envied by the mundane world, that was too passive, like flowers in a mirror or the moon in water.

Su Ming had embarked on this path to break free from invisible shackles, to see with his own eyes the vastness of heaven and earth, and ultimately, to firmly grasp the reins of fate in his own hands, to possess the power sufficient to construct a "place of peace of mind," to protect those lights he was unwilling to lose.

The so-called superficial glory and suffering before him were all external appearances, meant to shake his true heart.

"Enough."

Su Ming suddenly raised his hand. Though his eyes were reddened from the stimulation of light and shadow, his gaze was unprecedentedly clear.

Addressing the flashing illusion of the golden official robe before him, his tone was calm, yet carried an undeniable finality.

"This is not my Dao. It merely wastes spirit and mind."

As the words fell, the golden light, as if plunged into a piece of cold jade, instantly contracted and dimmed.

Immediately after, the bloody firelight and the illusion of iron chains assaulted him again. The cold chains seemed to shackle his wrists once more, the scorching flames licked his cheeks.

Su Ming closed his eyes, his entire body relaxed.

This time, Su Ming did not try to evade or resist.

He even took a slight half-step forward, actively meeting the body-burning flames and bone-chilling cold.

He closed his eyes, completely opening his physical and mental defenses, using all of his divine sense to "feel" this pain, to "experience" this fear.

"Such tribulation, even if it is what my heart fears, has already been reflected. Fear it, then avoid it; if avoidance is impossible, then break through it. My heart is set on the Dao, unyielding through a hundred setbacks. This resolve... is even firmer!"

To the illusion of "failure," he declared that his Dao heart had already traversed the shadow of that layer of fear.

The bloody flames, the wailing figures, the icy chains began to disintegrate within Su Ming's consciousness.

Not in an instant explosion, but with a slow, sound like shattering glass.

"Crack, crack, crack..."

The sound was faint, yet continuous.

All illusions, whether the perfect life or the tragic failure, transformed into countless tiny, faintly shimmering fragments, slowly drifting away.

As Su Ming's consciousness completely returned, the clear darkness before his eyes was rapidly replaced by a stable, faint white light.

This white light was not dazzling, more like a spatial transition.

Immediately after, a cold, weighty object fell into Su Ming's palm.

Su Ming looked down.

It was a palm-sized white token, neither metal nor jade, its material resembling both stone and bone, cool to the touch, with an even texture.

On the front, a single character "Heart" was engraved in an ancient, simple style, the strokes upright and proper, without any spark of spiritual light flowing through it. On the back was the most common emblem of the Cloud Hidden Sect—simple cloud patterns encircling a solitary peak, equally unremarkable.

Su Ming clenched it tightly. The cool sensation made his mind, slightly dazed from the long passage of time in the illusion, even more clear.

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Chapter 230: Review

[1,304 words]

Dusk gathered from all directions, the setting sun like blood, dyeing the white mist outside the Questioning Heart Forest a murky orange-red.

Three days had already passed since the start of the assessment.

Most of the crowd in the plaza had dispersed. Those remaining were mostly the stewards from various peaks who had come to select people, and those menial disciples who were still anxiously waiting for their companions. The previously noisy

discussions had long been worn away by the long wait. The air was filled with a weary calm, with only the occasional chirping of insects making the place feel even more desolate.

Suddenly, the perpetually churning Mirage Smoke parted on both sides without any warning.

There was no soaring spiritual light, nor any spectacular phenomena. A gaunt figure simply walked out from the depths of the mist, plain and unremarkable.

Su Ming's face was as pale as paper, as if he had just recovered from a serious illness. His gray robe, soaked through with sweat and then dried by his body heat, showed several creases. But his steps were exceptionally steady, each footfall landing with a precision as if measured by a ruler.

He raised his head, his deep, dark eyes sweeping across the plaza. It was a gaze that seemed to have surfaced from the deepest abyss of the sea, carrying a profound pressure and a silence utterly out of place with the surrounding hubbub.

The plaza froze for a moment.

Over at the Repair Hall area, Wang Defa had been leaning against a tree trunk dozing off. He was jolted awake by Zhang Asheng pushing him from the side. Lifting his head and seeing Su Ming, he was stunned for a moment, then his eyes immediately reddened. His lips trembled as he was about to rush forward, but was stopped by Qingfeng reaching out a hand beside him.

"Don't rush, look at the elder," Qingfeng said in a low voice.

In the distance, Zhao Yin, who had originally thought victory was assured, felt the cold smirk on his face freeze at the corner of his mouth. He stared fixedly at the dull, lusterless white token in Su Ming's hand, his fingernails unconsciously digging into the flesh of his palm. His gaze was so sinister it seemed about to drip with malice.

"He came out? He actually came out alive?"

In the southern corner, Li Kai, who had been sitting cross-legged in quiet meditation, leaned forward almost imperceptibly the moment Su Ming appeared.

His bloodshot eyes locked onto Su Ming like hooks.

As a formation master, he perceived more keenly than ordinary people that the aura around Su Ming, which had originally been somewhat sharp and exposed, was now completely withdrawn, becoming harmonious, obscure, like a stubborn stone sunk to the bottom of a deep pool.

On the viewing platform.

The Questioning Heart Elder, who had been resting with his eyes closed, slowly opened them.

Those eyes did not linger overly long on Su Ming's body, but instead looked directly into Su Ming's eyes.

Old and young, their gazes met in the air.

Su Ming only felt his soul tremble slightly, as if all his secrets had been seen through by that gaze, but he did not avert his eyes, continuing to look back calmly.

"Very good."

The Questioning Heart Elder gave a slight nod, uttering only these two words before closing his eyes again.

These two words were light, yet they struck the hearts of all the stewards present like a heavy hammer.

The Questioning Heart Elder had presided over the Heart Demon Grand Formation for sixty years and rarely spoke to comment on disciples. The weight of these two words was immense, as heavy as a thousand pounds.

Zhang Lie stood up and strode over to Su Ming.

He looked at this menial disciple he had once regarded as a "cheater" with a complex gaze and extended his hand. "The token."

Su Ming respectfully handed over the ordinary-looking white Questioning Heart Token with both hands.

Zhang Lie took it, his divine sense habitually sweeping over the token, then naturally sweeping over Su Ming's body.

In the next instant, Zhang Lie's brow twitched almost imperceptibly.

He sensed an extremely tenacious soul fluctuation. Though faint, it was astonishingly pure, like refined iron tempered a thousand times. This level of soul strength was absolutely not something a menial disciple at the fifth layer of Qi Refining could possess.

Zhang Lie gave Su Ming a deep look, returned the token, turned to face the plaza, and spoke in a steady, powerful voice:

"Su Ming, Heart Questioning within the illusion, duration three days, evaluation — Top Grade A."

There were no lengthy praises, no flowery rhetoric.

But everyone present felt a chill in their hearts.

Top Grade A.

This was the highest evaluation an outer sect disciple could receive in the Questioning Heart Forest assessment.

It meant this person's will was resilient, his Dao heart firm. As long as he didn't die prematurely, he would undoubtedly achieve great things in the future.

A wave of barely suppressed commotion erupted from the crowd. Wang Defa and the others were so excited their faces flushed red.

Su Ming bowed respectfully in the direction of Zhang Lie and the Questioning Heart Elder, then turned and walked towards the Repair Hall group.

"Hall Master!"

"Junior Brother Su!"

Everyone crowded around, offering greetings all at once. A gentle yet somewhat weary smile hung on Su Ming's face as he responded to them one by one.

"I'm a bit tired. Let me rest for a while."

Su Ming said softly. Under the concerned gazes of everyone, he found a relatively secluded spot under a tree's shade and sat down.

Leaning against the tree trunk, he appeared to be resting with his eyes closed, but in reality, hidden by his sleeve, his fingers gently rubbed the surface of the Xuantian ring.

The moment his fingertip touched it, that long-missed, warm feeling of a blood connection surged back into his heart.

"Master," Su Ming called out softly in his mind, a barely detectable tremor in his voice.

"Brat, you still remember to come back."

Lin Yu's voice rang out in his mind. Though it still carried that playful, irreverent tone, Su Ming could hear the poorly concealed relief within it. "If you hadn't come out soon, I was

considering whether I should overdraw my soul power to forcibly break open this damned formation and fish you out."

The corner of Su Ming's mouth lifted slightly. The heavy stone in his heart finally settled.

"Master, this Questioning Heart Forest is a bit troublesome."

Su Ming quickly adjusted his mental state, compressing his previous experiences into the most concise stream of information and transmitting it to Lin Yu. "It constructed a perfect illusion. From Qingshi Town to the capital, every detail was flawless. It replicated my memories, even simulated my emotional logic."

"Perfect?" Lin Yu scoffed. "There's no such thing as a perfect program in this world, unless it's a dead loop. How did you break it?"

"A paper-making formula."

Su Ming recalled the scene in the Imperial Study. "The data on that formula in the memorial was precise to the extreme, but it was missing a doodled smiley face that I had agreed upon with Second Brother. That smiley face had no practical meaning, didn't even conform to official document standards, but in my memory, it was more important than the formula itself."

"When I realized that, the illusion began to attack my logic," Su Ming continued. "Xu Qing's reaction became extremely rational, trying to persuade me to stay using logic. Finally..."

Su Ming paused, the image of that sea of fire flashing through his mind. "It activated a fear illusion. People from the Yongchang Marquis Manor arrived at the village, and I saw everything being destroyed."

"Wait a moment," Lin Yu suddenly interrupted him. "In that fear illusion, did the people from the Yongchang Marquis Manor use mundane swords and weapons, or immortal flying swords and spells?"

Su Ming was taken aback, carefully recalling. "They were mundane soldiers and armor. The fire was ordinary fire, not spiritual fire."

"That's good."

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Chapter 231: The Way of Survival 2.0

[1,334 words]

Lin Yu's voice carried the excitement of someone seeing through the opponent's final card. "This shows the formation's 'fear' towards you is still stuck at the mundane stage. It dug up your fear of 'losing family,' but hasn't yet fully linked that fear to 'the cruelty of the cultivation world.' Deep in your subconscious, the greatest threat still comes from secular power and wealth, not high-level cultivators. This is good news, meaning it couldn't dig out the deepest secret about me in your soul."

Su Ming's heart tightened, and he fell into thoughtful silence.

"So how did you finally get out?" Lin Yu asked. "Who did you think of? Your father and mother? Or..."

"No specific person," Su Ming replied bluntly. "At that moment, I just felt that sense of 'being arranged' was utterly disgusting. I wanted to control my own fate, not be a puppet on strings. Whether it's perfect wealth and honor, or brutal destruction, as long as it's fake, I'll smash it to pieces."

Silence reigned in the Consciousness Sea for a moment.

After a long while, Lin Yu finally let out a long sigh, his tone carrying a mix of relief and complexity. "The Dao heart is initially formed, self-awareness awakened. Disciple, you passed this trial with more backbone than I imagined."

"However..."

Lin Yu's tone shifted instantly, becoming serious and full of calculation. "Our previous 'Way of Survival' needs an upgrade."

"An upgrade?" Su Ming was puzzled.

"Yes. Before, we were 'rats in the gutter,' focusing on staying invisible to everyone. But now, you've earned an 'A+,' and you were singled out by that Questioning Heart Elder. Trying to pretend to be invisible anymore is impossible."

Lin Yu conjured up the gesture of pushing up imaginary glasses within the Consciousness Sea. "This Questioning Heart Forest is essentially a super-large 'user profile generator.'

The first stage uses the perfect illusion to make you relax—that's 'data collection.'

The second stage, when you discover the flaws, it patches them with logic—that's 'dynamic game theory testing.'

The third stage, when fear descends, that's 'stress threshold testing.' It's not trying to kill you, but to see your rebound coefficient in a desperate situation."

"You not only withstood it but also gave a high-scoring answer of 'my path is not a cage.' Now, in the eyes of the sect's higher-ups, you've transformed from 'ordinary expendable material' into a 'rare specimen.' Especially that Questioning Heart Elder. The way he looked at you was like an old lecher seeing a peerless beauty... ahem, I mean, like a research fanatic seeing a rare specimen."

Su Ming felt a chill run down his spine. "Then what should we..."

"Panic about what? This is a crisis, but also a heaven-sent opportunity!"

Lin Yu chuckled, the previous gravity completely gone. "Our Way of Survival is officially upgrading to Version 2.0—'The Visible Way of Survival.'"

"What is the Visible Way of Survival?"

"Simply put, it's 'hiding in plain sight, sinking deep roots and securing the foundation, leaning against a big tree.'"

Lin Yu began rapidly laying out the strategy. "First, regarding what happened in the illusion, only speak seventy percent of the truth. Say you saw through the vanity of the mortal world and strengthened your resolve for the Dao. As for that smiling face, that rebellion against the desire for control, keep it buried deep inside. That's your core privacy, and the final wall of defense against prying eyes from the higher-ups."

"Second, firmly establish your persona! What are you? You are the 'Repair Hall Hall Master,' the 'standardization fanatic,' the 'formation path otaku!' From now on, you need to display a fanatical pursuit for the order and efficiency of formations. This 'tech nerd' persona is the safest because, in the eyes of leadership, tech nerds might be weird, but they're useful and have no political ambition."

"Third, and this is the most important point."

Lin Yu lowered his voice. "We need to start 'weaving the web.' Relying on Elder Ma alone isn't enough; he's going into seclusion after all. You need to use the Repair Hall to tie the interests of the Alchemy Hall, the Vessel Hall, and even the Spiritual Plant Garden—even if just a little bit—to your chariot. Make everyone feel that although this kid Su Ming is just an outer sect disciple, without him, many things just don't run as smoothly."

"This is called—making others unable to do without you is the greatest safety."

Listening to his master's analysis, Su Ming's originally somewhat tense heartstrings gradually relaxed, and his train of thought became clearer.

"Lean against the high mountain, build deep roots, forge wide connections of goodwill, and slowly plan for the future." Su Ming silently recited these sixteen words in his heart.

"Exactly!" Lin Yu snapped his fingers. "Alright, stop pretending to sleep. That Zhang Lie over there is looking this way, and that Zhao Yin's eyes are about to pop out. Go, give them a reaction fitting your 'tech nerd' persona."

Su Ming opened his eyes.

Dusk had deepened, and formation-powered lamps lit up around the plaza.

He stood up, patted the dust off his clothes, ignored the various gazes cast his way, and walked directly towards Zhang Lie.

"Elder Zhang."

Su Ming clasped his hands in salute, his tone sincere and calm, without a hint of arrogance from newly receiving an "A+." Instead, it carried the focused attention of an apprentice seeking guidance. "When this disciple exited the forest earlier, in a daze, I perceived that the rhythm of the mist's flow outside the forest had a subtle lag compared to the external celestial timing and earthly qi. Dare I ask, Elder, for maintaining the stability of this Questioning Heart Forest illusion formation, was a principle similar to the 'midnight-noon ebb and flow' introduced to harmonize the spiritual energy tidal differences between different earth vein nodes?"

Zhang Lie's hand, which was gathering the formation flags, suddenly stilled.

He turned around, his gaze sharp as a torch, scrutinizing Su Ming up and down as if examining a formation plate that had suddenly started talking.

Several nearby disciples who hadn't yet left stared dumbfounded. Having just escaped such a mind-grinding illusion, ordinary people would either be spiritually exhausted or filled with endless emotion. But this one? The moment he opens his mouth, it's about profound formation principles?

Zhang Lie stared at Su Ming for several breaths. The muscles on his usually stern and rigid face seemed to twitch with extreme difficulty.

"That's a variant application of the 'Minor Universe Earth Vein Suppression Art,'" Zhang Lie's voice was still hard as iron, but he unusually added half an explanation. "If you're curious, go to the Scripture Depository and look up the seventh chapter of 'Essentials of the Cloud-Concealed Formation Pivot.' It has a detailed explanation."

With that, he said no more, rolled up the formation flags, turned, and strode away. Compared to usual, his retreating back seemed less sharp-edged and carried a hint of an indescribable... smoothness?

In the distance, Zhao Yin watched this scene, his teeth grinding audibly.

"Putting on an act, playing mysterious..." Zhao Yin cursed under his breath.

Su Ming watched Zhang Lie leave, then turned and returned to his group.

"Let's go, back to the Repair Hall."

He smiled at Wang Defa and the others. The smile held less of a youth's naivety and more of an unflustered confidence.

"Tonight, I'll still need to trouble everyone to organize the data from that batch of formation plates returned by the Spiritual Plant Garden last month. Wasting three days in the illusion, I seem to have some new, clumsy ideas regarding data processing."

Hearing this, Wang Defa and the others exchanged glances, then erupted in a chorus of good-natured, laughing complaints.

"Hall Master, you just got out..."

"Less chatter. Contribution points will be calculated."

"The Hall Master is wise! We will definitely exert our utmost effort!"

The group chatted and laughed, their figures gradually blending into the deepening night, leaving behind that lively, mundane chatter outside the silent Questioning Heart Forest.

Su Ming knew that from the moment he stepped out of this mist, his Dao path had truly begun to part the floating clouds, revealing the rugged road ahead.

The wind rises from the tips of the duckweed, the waves form between tiny ripples.

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Chapter 232: We are people of status now

[1,648 words]

The plaza in front of the External Affairs Hall was paved with bluestone slabs that felt somewhat hot under the midday sun.

The originally noisy crowd was now deathly silent, with hundreds of gazes fixed in unison on the high platform.

There, Zhang Lie stood with his hands clasped behind his back. Several trays shimmering with flowing light hovered beside him, and behind him stood several stewards from different peaks, each with a different expression.

"Menial disciple Su Ming, achieved top grade in all three stages of the formation path assessment, top grade in the Questioning Heart Forest, ranking first overall."

Zhang Lie's voice was not loud, but it carried thick spiritual energy, drilling clearly into the eardrums of everyone present, making their ears tingle. "Upon sect approval, effective immediately, he is promoted to outer sect disciple."

The crowd below stirred slightly. Although they had already known the result, hearing the official announcement still carried a different kind of impact.

Wang Defa tugged at his collar, straightened his back, the two lumps of fat on his face trembling slightly with excitement, as if the one standing on the platform was his long-lost biological son.

Su Ming walked slowly up to the high platform, his expression calm. The cuffs of his grey menial robe were washed white, but it couldn't conceal his bearing at this moment.

"Outer sect disciple Su Ming is granted one cave dwelling, to be chosen by him within the Cloud Mist Mountain Range. Additional rewards: one hundred low-grade spirit stones, one thousand sect contribution points; one bottle of 'Condensed Jade Elixir' to aid your breakthrough; three bottles of 'Revitalizing Spring Elixir' for healing purposes."

Zhang Lie looked at the youth who had walked before him, flipped his palm, and three items flew towards Su Ming: a token glowing with a jade-green luster, a provisional steward token forged from Mystic Iron, and a storage pouch embroidered with cloud patterns.

"This is your identity jade token." Zhang Lie paused, his gaze sweeping over the inner sect disciples below with their complex expressions. He spoke again, his tone rising a few degrees. "Furthermore, in recognition of Su Ming's outstanding talent in the formation path and the actual achievements of the 'Repair Hall,' Formation Peak grants special approval, conferring upon him the position of 'Formation Peak Provisional Steward.'"

As soon as these words were spoken, the plaza instantly erupted.

"Provisional Steward? He just entered the outer sect!"

"This comes with real authority! I heard the monthly stipend alone is fifty contribution points, and he can mobilize some Formation Peak resources!"

"This is a meteoric rise to the heavens..."

Su Ming received the heavy iron token with both hands.

The token was entirely jet black, cold to the touch. The front was engraved with the characters "Formation Peak," while the back bore an intricate formation compass pattern.

"Thank you for the elder's guidance and support." Su Ming bowed in salute, his tone neither subservient nor arrogant.

"This is what you deserve." Zhang Lie replied, his gaze lingering on Su Ming's face for a moment. "Although the provisional steward is not a substantive position, it still carries a title. In future conduct, you should be even more cautious with your words and actions, and not bring shame to the reputation of Formation Peak."

Su Ming's fingers rubbed the patterns on the edge of the iron token, a flash of understanding in his eyes. "This disciple understands. To be in a position is to fulfill its duties. I will certainly devote all my efforts and also strictly adhere to my proper place."

Zhang Lie said no more, waving his hand to signal the distribution of rewards.

An exquisitely crafted storage pouch landed in Su Ming's hand.

Su Ming extended his divine sense into it. Even though he was mentally prepared, his heartbeat still skipped a beat.

In a corner, one hundred low-grade spirit stones were neatly stacked, emitting a soft yet rich wave of spiritual energy. Besides these, there were three elixir bottles. The unique, cool medicinal fragrance of the "Condensed Jade Elixir" in one of the bottles was faintly discernible even through the stopper. This was a precious item that assisted in breaking through bottlenecks during the mid-stage of Qi Refining.

"We've struck it rich." Lin Yu's voice sounded in the Consciousness Sea, carrying the joy of an old farmer seeing a bountiful harvest.

The ceremony ended, and the crowd gradually dispersed.

Wang Defa led the core members of the Repair Hall to gather around, their faces all glowing with delight.

"Hall Master! Majestic!" Zhang Asheng was so excited he was at a loss, only able to repeat these two words.

Wang Defa, meanwhile, rubbed his hands together, his eyes narrowed into slits from smiling. "Hall Master, Manager Liu's face just now was as black as the bottom of a pot. With you wearing this 'Provisional Steward' hat now, let's see who dares to give us the cold shoulder when our Repair Hall goes to collect supplies in the future!"

"Keep a low profile." Su Ming waved his hand and tossed the bottle of "Revitalizing Spring Elixir" to Wang Defa. "Take this bottle of elixirs and distribute them among the brothers. Everyone has worked hard these past days."

Wang Defa fumbled to catch it. Seeing it was Revitalizing Spring Elixir, he immediately gasped. "Hall Master, this is too valuable..."

"Take it." Su Ming's tone brooked no argument. "The Repair Hall is our foundation. Only when everyone is physically strong can the work be done well. Remember, although we now have a title, we must do our work even more meticulously and steadily. Don't give anyone a reason to pick fault."

"Yes!" Everyone responded in unison, the force of their voices making passing disciples nearby turn their heads.

Su Ming did not return directly to the Repair Hall. Instead, he turned and went to the Outer Sect General Affairs Hall.

It was already evening, and the General Affairs Hall was sparsely populated.

The person in charge of cave dwelling allocation was a steward surnamed Zhao. He looked kind and amiable and was wiping a jade ornament on the counter with a piece of silk.

Seeing Su Ming enter, Steward Zhao immediately put down his work, a professional smile spreading across his face. "Oh, if it isn't Steward Su! Congratulations, congratulations! Here to select a cave dwelling, I presume?"

"Steward Zhao, you're too kind." Su Ming handed over his identity token. "Indeed."

Steward Zhao took the token, swiped it over a formation plate on the counter, and a huge light screen immediately unfolded in the air.

The screen displayed a three-dimensional topographic map of a mountain range, precisely the "Cloud Mist Mountain Range" where outer sect disciples resided. Many

glowing dots were scattered across the mountain range, with green representing vacant ones and red representing occupied ones.

"Steward Su, according to the rules, you may choose freely among the medium-grade cave dwellings." Steward Zhao enthusiastically pointed to several areas on the map where the spiritual energy was most concentrated. "Look here, the mountainside of 'Purple Bamboo Peak.' The spiritual energy concentration is three times that of the outside world, the view is open, and it's close to the Transmission Pavilion. It's one of the best locations in our outer sect."

He pointed to another spot. "And here, 'Listening to Waves Cliff,' right next to a waterfall. It's rich in water spiritual energy, most suitable for cultivating water-element cultivation methods. Plus, the scenery is superb. Quite a few female disciples live in that area..."

Steward Zhao winked suggestively.

Su Ming's gaze swept over those glowing dots.

Purple Bamboo Peak: conspicuous location, lots of coming and going. Once something happens, the entire peak would know.

Listening to Waves Cliff: the scenery is indeed nice, but if someone were to poison or set up a formation upstream of the waterfall, there would be no way to defend against it downstream.

"Master, what do you think?" Su Ming asked in his heart.

"Purple Bamboo Peak is too noisy." Lin Yu started his outburst mode. "Listening to Waves Cliff, the terrain there is too much of a dead end. Once trapped on the cliff, there's no way out except jumping into the water."

"Look towards the west." Lin Yu directed. "That remote corner, the place called 'Green Stream Valley.'"

Su Ming shifted his gaze to the edge of the map.

There was a long, narrow valley there, in a remote location. The color indicating spiritual energy concentration on the light screen wasn't very deep, belonging to the medium-to-lower range. However, the valley backed against a sheer cliff, with a winding small stream flowing in front. The valley entrance was narrow, easy to defend and hard to attack.

"Steward Zhao, is anyone living here?" Su Ming pointed to a light dot deep within Green Stream Valley.

Steward Zhao followed his finger, momentarily stunned. "Green Stream Valley? Steward Su, that place is extremely remote, and the spiritual energy is mediocre. Usually, there isn't even a ghostly shadow..."

"This is the place." Su Ming interrupted him. "I prefer quiet and don't want to be disturbed."

Steward Zhao wore an expression that clearly said "you must be sick," but he quickly adjusted. "Since Steward Su prefers tranquility, then this place is indeed suitable. Although remote, it has the advantage of being spacious and comes with a small courtyard."

Steward Zhao opened his mouth as if to persuade further, but seeing Su Ming's calm yet unyielding gaze, he ultimately processed the procedures efficiently. He handed Su Ming a jade token for controlling the cave dwelling's basic restrictions and a route map indicating the specific location.

"Steward Su, this is the restriction jade token. A drop of blood will allow preliminary ownership binding. The cave dwelling hasn't been inhabited for a long time and might need some tidying up. If you need to hire menials for cleaning or constructing simple facilities, you can use your steward token to requisition them from the 'External Affairs Hall.' The cost will be deducted from your monthly allowance." Steward Zhao added, his attitude attentive.

"Thank you for your trouble, Steward Zhao." Su Ming put away the items, cupped his hands in thanks, and left.

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[1,352 words]

Cloud Mist Mountain Range, Clear Stream Valley.

By the time Su Ming stood before the somewhat desolate cave dwelling, the sky had completely darkened.

Moonlight spilled onto the weed-choked courtyard, while the stream in the distance gurgled and flowed, producing a pleasant sound.

All around was quiet and still. Apart from the chirping of insects, not a single trace of human noise could be heard.

This place truly was secluded. The small path leading into the valley was mostly obscured by dense vines. His new cave dwelling was located at the very end of the valley, backed against a near-vertical, dark gray cliff face. In front was a rather barren but decently sized flat area, with crumbling courtyard walls and wild grass growing rampant.

"Not a bad location."

Lin Yu's ethereal figure drifted out from the ring, hovering in mid-air as he looked around with satisfaction. "Backed by a mountain, facing water, Azure Dragon to the left, White Tiger to the right... *cough*... Mainly, it's the terrain. There's a natural fissure in that cliff face behind us. With a little modification, it becomes a perfect escape route. And this stream in front leads directly to an underground river. If someone ever sets the mountain on fire, we can still escape via water."

Pushing open the heavy stone door, a wave of dust-laden air, the smell of a long-unoccupied space, rushed to meet him.

The interior of the cave dwelling was more spacious than expected, divided into a front hall, a cultivation meditation room, a pill-forging/artifact-forging room (which also served as a study), and a small storage room. The runes of a basic Spirit Gathering Array were faintly visible on the ground in a corner. Though covered in dust, just as Manager Zhao had said, that basic Spirit Gathering Array was still operating. The spiritual energy in the air here was at least ten times stronger than in the menial disciples' courtyard.

The cave dwelling's interior was quite large, divided into a main chamber, a meditation room, and an artifact-forging room.

Su Ming took out the one hundred spirit stones from his storage pouch, then placed the bottle of "Condensed Jade Pills" and his identity token on the stone table.

A faint, ethereal spiritual light illuminated the dim stone chamber, also lighting up Su Ming's face, which looked somewhat weary yet brimming with hope.

He picked up that iron token representing "Formation Peak Candidate Steward," his thumb stroking its cold, engraved patterns.

From a menial disciple living hand-to-mouth, to now being an outer sect steward with his own independent cave dwelling and holding a huge sum of money. This step he had taken was thrilling, yet also incredibly solid.

"Master," Su Ming spoke softly.

"Hmm?" Lin Yu floated over to the stone table, looking at that pile of resources. A rare trace of emotion also surfaced in his eyes.

"Do we... count as having gained a firm foothold in this Cloud Hidden Sect now?"

Lin Yu chuckled, extending a semi-transparent finger to point vaguely at that pile of spirit stones.

"What's this 'firm foothold'? This is just the first step of our 'Visible Way of Survival' plan—acquiring property and settling down."

Lin Yu turned around, his gaze passing through the cave dwelling's stone door to look out at the dark, profound night sky outside. His voice carried a hint of strategizing-from-within-a-tent confidence.

"The startup capital is in place. Disciple, next, we're going to turn this Clear Stream Valley into an impregnable 'safe house.' Then, using your 'standardization' methods, we're going to ruthlessly harvest the leeks of this outer sect... ahem, I mean, earn resources."

Su Ming tightened his grip on the token in his hand, the corners of his mouth lifting slightly.

"I'll listen to whatever Master says."

Dusk arrived earlier in Clear Stream Valley than elsewhere.

The setting sun was mostly blocked by the sheer cliff to the west, leaving only a few strands of orange-red twilight that barely managed to spill onto the winding stream at the valley entrance, making the water shimmer with rippling light.

Within the valley, the desolate silence that had reigned for many years was broken by a clamor of human voices.

"Gently! All of you, gently!"

Wang Defa's round, plump body spun around the courtyard like a top, a sweat towel waving in his hand as he directed several menial disciples carrying boxes and trunks. "These boxes contain the core account books of our Repair Hall from over the years! If you chip a corner, I'll dock you three days' worth of contribution points!"

"Old Wang, stop hollering."

Zhang Asheng walked by, carrying two bundles of spirit wood saplings he'd somehow procured, his voice muffled and low. "The Hall Master prefers quiet. Your voice is louder than the sound of hammering from Artifact Forging Peak."

Wang Defa's neck shrunk back. He subconsciously glanced towards the depths of the cave dwelling, then immediately lowered his voice, putting on an apologetic smile. "I'm

just excited. Our Hall Master is now a person of status and reputation. If moving house doesn't have a bit of grandeur, wouldn't people look down on him?"

Inside the cave dwelling's main chamber.

Su Ming paid no attention to the commotion outside. He stood in the center of the empty stone hall, a wisp of dark blue water spiritual energy swirling around his fingertip.

This place really had been abandoned for too long.

Dark green moss crawled over the stone walls. A thick layer of dust had accumulated on the floor. The air was permeated with a musty, decaying smell. The lines of the basic Spirit Gathering Array in the corner were long blurred and indistinct. Several glowstones originally used for illumination had also lost their luster, embedded in the wall like dead fish eyes.

"Master, this is no small project," Su Ming said softly.

"Filth, disorder, and poor quality are the mortal enemies of a sense of security."

Lin Yu's voice rang out in the Consciousness Sea, carrying a tone of disdain. "Such an environment not only easily breeds inner demons, but also easily harbors filth and grime."

Su Ming nodded, his eyes closing slightly.

Within the Qihai of his Dantian, that tender green seedling gently swayed. A stream of extremely pure water spiritual energy flowed along his meridians towards his fingertip.

"Go."

Su Ming uttered a soft command.

The wisp of dark blue spiritual energy at his fingertip instantly exploded, transforming into countless fine, dense mist particles that rapidly spread to every corner of the stone chamber.

This wasn't an ordinary Cleaning Technique, but the "Silent, Gradual Nourishment" recorded in the *Like Water Art*.

These mist particles seemed to possess life, seeping into the texture of the stone walls, enveloping and stripping away all the accumulated grime, mold, and even lingering foreign energies that had built up over decades.

Su Ming turned his wrist, his five fingers making a grasping motion in the air.

"Gather."

The mist that had filled the entire room instantly recoiled and condensed, forming a pitch-black water sphere in mid-air that contained all the filth.

Su Ming casually waved his hand. The water sphere flew out of the cave dwelling and fell into a distant deep ravine.

The originally dark, damp stone chamber, though still undecorated, now revealed its original bluish-gray texture. The air had also become fresh and moist.

"Not bad, that 'high-pressure cleaning' trick," Lin Yu commented. "Next is the main event. Since we're going to survive cautiously, this den of ours has to be an iron barrel. The basic protective formations outside are too lousy, keeping out gentlemen but not villains. They need to be changed."

Su Ming walked to the center of the cave dwelling and took out a set of Formation Flags he had prepared long ago from his storage pouch.

This set of flags wasn't standard sect-issue goods, but something he had crafted himself using scrap materials from the Repair Hall.

The flagpoles were made of extremely resilient Water Cloud Bamboo. The flag surfaces were woven from Heavenly Silkworm silk mixed with secret silver thread. The runes drawn on them weren't the common, fierce and aggressive type, but rather rounded and interlocking, exuding a sense of endless continuity.

"Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation."

Su Ming murmured the formation's name.

This was the result of half a month of deliberation between him and Lin Yu.

It didn't seek to kill or trap enemies. It sought only one character—"Fluid."

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Chapter 234: This Place Is Our Safe Haven

[1,231 words]

Su Ming stepped with Yu Steps, his figure darting through the stone chamber like a swimming fish. With each step he took, a formation flag silently sank into the ground.

"The Qian position governs the intake of energy. Set up a 'filtration valve' to block poisonous miasma and probing divine senses."

"The Kun position governs the earth veins. Set up a 'pressure stabilization pool' to harmonize fluctuations in the earth's energy."

"The Kan position governs the water source. Draw upon the stream before the door to form a circulating flow of living water."

As the final formation flag settled, Su Ming clasped his hands to form a seal and pressed them firmly onto the core point on the ground.

"Activate!"

Hum—

An extremely faint tremor sounded.

It wasn't the brilliant flash of spiritual light typical of a formation activating, but a gentle, undulating fluctuation akin to ripples on water.

The air inside the cave dwelling began to flow slowly.

A faint, visible mist rose from the ground, flowing along the floor before dissipating into the air. The temperature in the originally somewhat stuffy stone chamber quickly dropped, stabilizing at an extremely comfortable level.

More crucially, it was the perception of divine sense.

Su Ming tried to extend his divine sense outward and discovered that the edges of the cave dwelling seemed to be covered by an invisible yet pliable "water membrane."

This water membrane didn't block forcefully, but it made the transmission of divine sense from inside to outside become blurred and sluggish.

Looking out from the inside, one could vaguely perceive the outlines of the outside world. But peering in from the outside, one would only sense a hazy, soft, and constantly undulating "water vapor" spiritual light, making it difficult to discern the specific situation and figures within.

"Integrating defense, spirit gathering, early warning, and climate regulation into one." Lin Yu grunted with satisfaction twice. "Even if a Foundation Establishment cultivator's

divine sense sweeps over, they'll only sense a blur of water vapor. Unless they force their way in, they won't be able to see the true situation inside."

Su Ming wiped the fine sweat from his forehead, feeling the warm and gentle spiritual energy environment surrounding him. A weight lifted from his heart, replaced by a solid sense of security.

With this tailor-made "Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation," this cave dwelling deep within Clear Stream Valley could truly be considered his own territory.

At that moment, Wang Defa's voice came from outside the cave dwelling.

"Hall Master, the boxes and miscellaneous items in the outer area have been mostly put away. Old Li is taking inventory of the materials we brought. Ah Sheng is asking what to do with that abandoned spiritual field?"

Su Ming straightened his robes and walked out of the cave dwelling.

The sky had already darkened. Several night pearls hung by Wang Defa on an old tree in the courtyard cast a soft, hazy light.

The courtyard had been cleaned up, weeds removed, and the ground paved with neat bluestone slabs. The brothers from the Repair Hall stood in the courtyard, all sweating profusely from exhaustion, yet smiles hung on their faces.

"Let's go take a look at the field."

Su Ming led everyone to the eastern side of the courtyard.

There was originally a spiritual field of about half a *mu*. Having been abandoned for too long, it had severely depleted its spiritual energy and looked no different from ordinary wasteland.

Zhang Asheng was squatting on the field ridge, a clump of soil in his hand, his brow furrowed tightly.

"Hall Master." Seeing Su Ming approach, Zhang Asheng quickly stood up and patted the dirt from his hands. "This land... is a bit poor. If we try to grow high-grade spiritual herbs, they probably won't survive. If we force them to mature using a Spirit Gathering Array, it would waste too many spirit stones."

"Who said anything about planting high-grade spiritual herbs?"

Su Ming squatted down, pulled out several rough small cloth pouches from his storage pouch, opened them one by one, and showed them to Zhang Asheng.

Zhang Asheng looked under the moonlight and was stunned. "Hemostatic Grass? Heart-Clearing Orchid? And... this is the most common Insect-Repelling Grass? Hall Master, you can grab handfuls of these things in the wild outside the mountain gates. You can buy a whole basket for ten contribution points. Why would we grow them ourselves? It's not even worth the effort."

These were the cheapest, most worthless things in the cultivation world, found all over the mountains and fields. Any cultivator with a bit of wealth would disdain growing them.

"Ah Sheng, remember this."

Su Ming grabbed a handful of soil and gently crumbled it. "We're not farming to sell for money. This field is in a conspicuous location. If we plant treasures like Purple Ganoderma or Vermilion Fruit, it's like writing 'I'm very rich' on our foreheads."

"Then..." Zhang Asheng seemed to understand but not quite.

"Just plant these." Su Ming patted the soil off his hands and stood up. "Just plant these low-level spiritual plants that are found everywhere in the mountains and fields, the most inconspicuous, cheapest ones. Don't plant them too neatly, no need to arrange them in rows. Mimic their wild appearance—a cluster here, a patch there, growing sparsely, half-dead is best. From a distance, this will look like a barren corner of land where a lazy owner barely planted something to fool the sect's inspections."

Su Ming stood up and clapped his hands. "On the other hand, while these low-grade spiritual herbs aren't valuable, they are essential for refining basic elixirs. In the future, if our Repair Hall wants to try refining our own 'dissolving gel' and 'solidifying liquid' for repairing formation plates, the consumption of these herbs will be massive. Being self-sufficient means we won't have to rely on others."

Zhang Asheng listened and nodded repeatedly, a trace of admiration appearing in his eyes. "I understand! The Hall Master is thinking far ahead. I'll get right on it. I'll make sure they grow as naturally as the weeds on a mass grave!"

After arranging the miscellaneous tasks, Su Ming called Wang Defa, Old Li, and Zhang Asheng to the stone table in the courtyard.

Su Ming took out several jars of wine from his storage pouch.

"Tonight, we don't discuss official business. We just drink." Su Ming broke the clay seal and filled bowls for the three men.

The aroma of wine wafted through the air.

Wang Defa picked up his bowl, his eyes slightly red. "Hall Master, to be honest, when you first took over the Repair Hall, I truly never imagined we'd have a day like today.

Back then, we were just a bunch of good-for-nothings waiting to die. Who would have thought that now when we go out, even outer sect disciples have to be polite to us."

Old Li took a big gulp of wine and wiped his mouth. "Hall Master, from now on, wherever you point, we'll fight. Selling our lives for you is worth it!"

Su Ming raised his wine bowl and clinked it with the three of them, his gaze clear and bright. "We're not selling our lives. We want to live well. The Repair Hall is our foundation and our protective talisman. In the future, whether I'm in the hall or not, the rules cannot be broken, and the quality cannot drop."

That night, the lights in Clear Stream Valley stayed lit for a long time.

It wasn't until the moon reached the middle of the sky that the slightly tipsy trio, supporting each other, finally departed.

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

Chapter 235: Inventorying the Property

[1,486 words]

After seeing everyone off, Su Ming closed the courtyard gate and activated all the restrictions of the "Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation."

The sounds from the outside world were instantly cut off, as if the entire world now consisted only of him and this new cave dwelling.

Su Ming returned to the meditation room and sat cross-legged on the prayer mat.

He didn't immediately begin cultivating. Instead, he calmed his mind and spirit, extending his consciousness into the newly acquired storage pouch at his waist and the Xuantian ring on the index finger of his left hand, which had already re-established its connection.

With a wave of his hand, Su Ming took out the one hundred low-grade spirit stones, the elixirs, and some other miscellaneous belongings he had accumulated before, placing them all in front of him.

Low-grade spirit stones: A neat little pile of exactly one hundred and twenty pieces, stacked squarely. This was the most tangible wealth, their spiritual energy gentle and abundant, the hard currency for cultivation, setting up formations, and transactions.

Condensed Jade Pills: One of the core rewards for being the top scorer in this assessment, a precious item specifically used to assist Qi Refining mid-stage cultivators in breaking through minor bottlenecks and stabilizing their cultivation. Their value far exceeded that of ordinary spirit stones.

Reviving Spring Pills: Standard healing elixirs issued by the sect, effective for both internal and external injuries, essential items for venturing out on missions.

Azure Edge Sword (First Tier, Middle Grade): The standard-issue sword for outer sect disciples, sharp and agile, inscribed with simple "Sharpness" and "Lightness" runes. It was a common item, but sufficient for daily use.

Blank formation plates, formation flags (several): "Specialties" and self-made products from the Repair Hall. The materials were ordinary but the specifications standard, serving as the foundation for his practice and formation setting.

Various types of spiritual ink, talisman paper, low-grade spiritual materials: Routine consumables for repairs and talisman making. The quantity was considerable, but the grades were not high.

Special materials: The "Void Stone Powder" was already exhausted, leaving only an empty bottle. A small amount of Soul Stabilizing Sand remained. These two were key for setting up the "Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation" and needed to be replenished as soon as possible.

Miscellaneous items: Two brand-new sets of the outer sect disciple's standard green robe; the iron token for "Formation Peak Candidate Steward"; a route map indicating the location of Clear Stream Valley; a jade plaque for controlling the cave dwelling's basic restrictions; and that ancient, purpose-unknown Turtle-Knob Seal obtained in the mundane capital.

After taking stock of the storage pouch, Su Ming cautiously turned his attention to the index finger of his left hand.

However, Su Ming did not rashly take out all the items inside, especially not within this new sect cave dwelling that he hadn't fully figured out yet.

He merely "inspected" the space inside the ring with his consciousness and communicated with Lin Yu.

A broken sword, rust-covered, murderous aura contained within.

Three jade slips. One of them was completely impenetrable by divine sense, layered with restrictions. One recorded the "Greenwood Longevity Art," its contents complete. The last one was merely inscribed with the two characters "Alchemy Formulas," its contents also sealed by restrictions.

"Master, it's best not to disturb the things in the ring for now," Su Ming said in his mind.

He was referring to those two jade slips sealed by restrictions (especially the one that was completely impenetrable), and that rust-covered, murderous aura-contained broken sword.

The origins of these items were unclear, their auras peculiar. If taken out, they might trigger the sect's grand formation or the perception of a master, with unpredictable consequences.

"Mmm, keep them hidden. They are trump cards, but also trouble," Lin Yu's voice sounded. "At this stage, our visible resources are what's in the storage pouch, plus the knowledge in your head and the foundation of the Repair Hall."

Lin Yu's phantom figure drifted out, circling the pile of spirit stones twice, clicking his tongue appreciatively. "One hundred spirit stones, for a Qi Refining stage cultivator, counts as a huge sum. But if you want to fill that pit of 'Dao foundation damage,' it wouldn't even make a splash."

Su Ming's eyes dimmed for an instant before returning to calm. "The Dao foundation damage is indeed a serious hidden danger."

Although he performed excellently in the Questioning Heart Forest, that was only a matter of temperament.

The physical injury, however, was solid and real.

If not resolved, his cultivation might very well stop at the Golden Core stage.

"Don't lose heart," Lin Yu floated in front of him, gesturing with his translucent fingers. "The current strategy is: open sources and reduce expenditure, target specific breakthroughs."

"How so?"

"These fifty spirit stones," Lin Yu pointed to half of the pile, "no matter what happens, this money cannot be touched. It's for buying life-saving talismans, one-time teleportation charms."

"Of the remaining seventy, thirty will be invested into the operation of the Repair Hall. Purchase higher quality repair materials, attempt to take on more complex

commissions. You could even allocate a small amount as rewards for Old Wang, Ah Sheng, and the others if they make cultivation breakthroughs. Deep roots make for lush foliage. This enterprise is the most stable path for you to establish yourself in the sect and earn contribution points and favors."

"Twenty spirit stones are for your daily cultivation expenses. The 'Like Water Art' is balanced and peaceful, its consumption isn't extravagant, but you also shouldn't be strapped for cash. Accumulating spiritual energy during the Qi Refining stage remains fundamental."

"Finally, ten spirit stones..." Lin Yu's gaze returned to the Xuantian ring. "We need to find a way, through a secure channel, to exchange for 'Void Stone Powder' and 'Boundary Origin Sand' as soon as possible. For every bit more of my soul power that recovers, your safety net and formation deduction ability will strengthen. The 'Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation' is currently our most promising 'unexpected weapon.' We cannot slack off."

Su Ming nodded. With a thought, he divided the spirit stones in front of him according to this plan.

"As for repairing the Dao foundation..." Lin Yu pondered, his phantom figure appearing solemn. "This cannot be solved with spirit stones. Since the sect has already taken notice of you, perhaps we can gradually work towards it, using the sect's power to search for clues. For now, the primary task is still to consolidate your foundation, increase your visible value and indispensability. The more important you are, the more willing the sect will be to invest in you, and the greater the hope of repairing your Dao foundation."

Su Ming took a deep breath and put away the items on the table.

"Understood. Regarding the Repair Hall, I'll have Old Wang keep an eye out for special materials. As for contribution points... it seems I'll need to take on a few big jobs."

By now, it was deep night outside the window.

Moonlight, filtered through the formation, spilled coldly onto the floor of the meditation room.

Su Ming stood up, pushed open the door of the meditation room, and walked into the courtyard.

The night breeze was gentle, carrying the unique fragrance of grass and trees from the valley.

He raised his head, his gaze piercing through the layers of night, looking towards that towering, cloud-piercing peak in the distance: Formation Peak.

There, lights blazed brightly, like a fire dragon coiling in the night sky. That was the power center of the Cloud Hidden Sect's path of formations, and also his nominal "superior unit."

"Master," Su Ming gazed at the dazzling lights and said softly, "Back when I looked out from the menial post courtyard, that peak seemed insurmountably high, a palace in the heavens."

"And now?" Lin Yu floated beside him, also looking in that direction.

"Now I feel..." A hint of sharpness unique to youth appeared at the corner of Su Ming's mouth, only to be quickly submerged in the deep pool of his eyes. "No matter how high the mountain, there is always a path to follow. No matter how large the formation, there is always a pivot to grasp. It's merely a larger, more complex game of chess."

Lin Yu turned his head, looking at his disciple.

Lin Yu glanced sideways, looking at his disciple's profile in the moonlight.

The youth's figure still appeared somewhat slender, but his back was ramrod straight, like a new bamboo shoot, pliant yet firmly rooted in this newly acquired land, growing silently.

"Having this mindset is good," Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of imperceptible satisfaction before returning to its usual lazy tone. "Alright, it's late, the dew is heavy. Don't stand here sighing at the moon. There's a pile of work tomorrow. Our 'Su Family Spiritual Plant Garden' is waiting for you, its 'Technical Director,' to plan the irrigation formations. Go back inside, sleep!"

Su Ming chuckled softly, shook his head, and turned to walk back into the cave dwelling that belonged to him.

The stone door slowly closed, shutting the courtyard full of moonlight outside.

Clear Stream Valley returned to silence.

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

Chapter 236: Bloodfire of the Four Clans

[1,494 words]

Early morning, the mist over the Cloud Mist Mountain Range had yet to disperse, and glistening dew drops condensed on the light membrane of the formation around Clear Stream Valley.

Su Ming, clad in the cyan outer sect disciple's robe, the Formation Peak iron token hanging at his waist, walked out of his cave dwelling with a solemn expression.

Today was his first lesson after being promoted to the outer sect. According to the sect's ironclad rule, all newly promoted disciples, regardless of talent or background, must go to "Teachings Peak" to listen to the "Cloud Hidden Ten Thousand Years Chronicle."

"Master, what do you think this first lesson will be about?" Su Ming asked in his consciousness sea as he changed into the robe and fastened the token. His Cloud Treading Boots stepped on the ground without a sound; he had already integrated the Aura Concealment Art into his daily walking, sitting, and resting.

"About what?" Lin Yu's phantom image sat cross-legged inside the ring, his voice tinged with a world-weary cynicism. "It certainly won't be teaching you classical literature or benevolence and morality. If everyone in this Cloud Hidden Sect truly believed in that set, they would have been devoured long ago, not even scraps remaining. In my view, this first lesson is to make you recognize—what a grinder of flesh and blood this world is; what a situation of the weak being prey to the strong you are in."

Su Ming's steps paused slightly, then immediately returned to normal. His figure, like a wisp of cyan smoke, shot out of the cave dwelling, merging into the morning mountain mist as he swiftly headed towards Teachings Peak.

The main hall of Teachings Peak was as majestic as a divine palace.

Hundreds of dark jade pillars, thick enough to require several people to encircle, rose from the ground, supporting the lofty dome. The dome was no ordinary thing; it was paved with "Zhou Tian Star Jade." At this moment, it slowly rotated, simulating the real trajectory of the starry sky outside, casting down a cold, clear radiance.

Inside the hall, several hundred newly promoted disciples stood solemnly. No one spoke; there were only faint sounds of breathing and the rustle of clothing. An intangible pressure permeated the air, as if a giant beast lurked in the shadows, gazing at every fledgling who had just entered these gates.

Suddenly, the star map on the dome blazed with light!

Not a gentle light, but a searing white bolt of lightning that tore through the hall's tranquility and slammed down onto the central high platform!

Boom—

The thunderous roar rolled, making eardrums ache and blood and qi churn. Many disciples turned pale, staggering backward.

As the lightning faded, a figure had appeared on the high platform.

Purple robes fluttered, hair white as snow. His face was gaunt like an ancient pine, showing no trace of old age, only a pair of eyes that shone terrifyingly bright. Wherever his gaze swept, it felt as if a substantial sword edge scraped across the skin, the sting reaching straight to the soul.

"I am Gu He, in charge of outer sect transmission of techniques, concurrently holding one-third authority over discipline and punishment."

His voice was not loud, yet it rang like the clashing of metal, each word hammering into the hearts of the crowd. "Today's first lesson will not discuss breathing techniques, nor transmit arts and spells. I only ask you one question—"

He paused, his gaze sharp as lightning, piercing every face below—some frightened, some confused, some forcing composure.

"Do you know what land lies beneath your feet? What things you will face?"

Before his words faded, Elder Gu He suddenly waved his sleeve!

The star map on the dome instantly dimmed, replaced by a massive light screen that blotted out the sky. It was not a static painting, but flowing, vivid imagery filled with bloodshed and slaughter!

First scene: The human borderlands, Sky Wind Plain.

In the image, the land was scorched red for a thousand miles, smoke of battle yet to disperse. Countless human cultivators wearing various sect robes and dynasty armor were locked in a desperate struggle with a tide of demon beasts.

Sword energy crisscrossed, cleaving hills; magical treasures roared, blasting out deep craters. But more common were claws tearing through protective spiritual light, fangs biting through necks. Scorching demon blood and human hot blood splashed together, dyeing the earth a bizarre dark red.

A hundred-zhang tall Red-Eyed Rampage Ape beat its chest and roared at the sky, its sonic waves collapsing half a city wall. It casually grabbed a rune-inscribed war chariot and hurled it into the human formation like throwing a stone, sending flesh and blood flying everywhere.

"This is the actual recorded scene of the 'Sky Wind Plain Campaign' from eighty years ago." Gu He's voice was icy, devoid of any emotion. "The opponent was the 'Red Rock

Tribe' of the Ten Thousand Demon Ancestral Court. In this battle, the allied forces of our human race's three sects and seven schools lost seventeen Golden Core cultivators, over three hundred Foundation Establishment cultivators, and countless Qi Refining disciples. Only then did we defend those three medium-sized spirit stone veins."

Dead silence below, so quiet one could hear a pin drop. Many disciples began to tremble, their teeth chattering.

Second scene: The dark abyss, Ghost Wailing Ridge.

The scene changed abruptly to howling Yin winds and flickering ghost fires.

Within dense, impenetrable gray-black Yin energy, shadowy, distorted figures were everywhere.

Some were skeletal, clad in broken armor; others were just blurry black shadows emitting soul-piercing demonic sounds.

Human cultivators formed battle formations. Buddhist light, thunder techniques, and pure Yang true fire illuminated a corner as they fought against endless ghosts and Yin soldiers. One cultivator was pierced through the chest by an invisible ghost hand, instantly turning ashen, his essence blood and soul sucked dry, collapsing into a withered corpse. On another side, a ghost general wielding a rusty giant axe cleaved through a golden light protective shield. Yin energy eroded, and several cultivators screamed as they dissolved into pus and blood.

"This place is a Yin energy node at the border of the 'Northern Mang Ghost Domain' under our Cloud Hidden Sect's jurisdiction. The ghost race forces from the Netherworld Realm constantly attempt to erode the Yang world, plundering living souls and blood energy to strengthen themselves. Guarding this place requires rotating a batch of disciples every ten years. The casualty rate... thirty percent."

Some female disciples couldn't help but cover their mouths, emitting suppressed sobs.

"The ghost race. Rulers of the Netherworld Realm. Their numbers... are the greatest." Elder Gu He looked deeply at the disciples below. "When mortals die, when cultivators perish, if their obsessions do not disperse and by chance, they may enter the ghost path. Their energy is Yin and sinister, with many taboos against the world of the living. Remember, do not easily provoke cultivators who practice the ghost path, and do not casually step into Yin evil forbidden lands."

Third scene: Dazzling and colorful, yet fraught with peril.

The image switched to a breathtakingly beautiful secret realm. Spirit mushrooms glowed with radiant light, ancient trees exuded auspicious energy, and spiritual springs gurgled. However, a team of human cultivators attempting to collect "Earth Heart Fire Lotuses"

had just approached the magma lake when the flames in the lake spontaneously coalesced into a humanoid fire figure. With a wave of its hand, earth fire surged skyward, instantly vaporizing two Foundation Establishment cultivators. In the distance, a seemingly harmless thousand-year-old ancient vine suddenly lashed out, its vines like coiling dragons, tightly wrapping around a Golden Core cultivator and sucking him dry into a withered corpse.

"The spirit races, descendants of the Ten Thousand Spirits Ancestral Land. Transformed from the essence of heaven and earth, they appear auspicious but are actually xenophobic. Their bodies, their essence sources, are supreme materials for alchemy and artifact forging, thus often coveted. However, hunting spirit races means enduring their innate law backlash and their relentless, endless pursuit."

Elder Gu He waved his hand. On the light screen, four horrific scenes froze simultaneously and were displayed side by side.

"See clearly!"

His voice boomed like a great bell, making the hall tremble.

"This is the world you will inhabit! Not some carefree immortal paradise from storybooks, but a slaughterhouse where four races stand side by side, blood and fire intertwined!"

"Human race, demon race, ghost race, spirit race! The struggle for territory, the contention for resources, the debate over doctrines—it has never ceased! The reason you can listen here safely today is not because heaven pities you, but because generations of predecessors, using their flesh and blood as walls, their souls as torches, carved out this tiny foothold for our human race in this jungle!"

His gaze burned like torches as it swept over the crowd below. "Why cultivate immortality? Why seek longevity? If you cannot even protect the land beneath your feet and the race beside you, even if you live for thousands of years, you are nothing but a lingering, barely-alive walking corpse, destined to become food and resources for other races sooner or later!"

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

Chapter 237: The Daoist Canon Passed Down Through Generations

[1,420 words]

Su Ming stood among the crowd, his expression calm. Only the fingers hidden within his sleeves curled slightly.

The bloody scenes before his eyes and Elder Gu He's piercing words did not frighten him into losing composure. Instead, they acted like a bucket of ice-cold water, dousing and waking the last trace of subtle relaxation that might have arisen in the depths of his heart due to his identities as an "outer sect disciple" and "provisional steward."

"Master," he murmured inwardly, his thoughts racing at high speed. "The four-race structure, beneath the balance lies perpetual consumption and conflict. The demon race relies on physical bodies and bloodlines, the ghost race dominates the domain of yin souls, the spirit races are born of heaven and earth with innate affinity for laws, while we humans... appear to have the most comprehensive system, yet our internal consumption is also the greatest. Sects, noble families, dynasties, entangled in endless strife. The power of an individual seems especially insignificant, and especially easy to be devoured, within such grand and chaotic confrontation."

"Insignificant?" Lin Yu's voice rang out, carrying a hint of amusement. "Disciple, your perspective on problems is always so interesting. Consider another angle: precisely because the internal structure of humanity is the most complex, requiring the most precise 'organization' and 'inheritance' to maintain power, the system itself becomes the greatest source of strength, and also the greatest point of vulnerability."

A flash of sharp light gleamed in Su Ming's eyes.

"You mean... while personal valor is certainly important, those who can understand, optimize, or even construct 'systems' might be the truly scarce and powerful force for humanity in these chaotic times?"

"Teachability shows promise!" Lin Yu praised. "Your 'Repair Hall,' your 'standardization,' what you've inadvertently touched upon is precisely this core. You are not simply repairing formation plates; you are building a more efficient, more reliable 'production and maintenance system.' During peaceful times, this is icing on the cake. In this era of continuous conflict and chaos, it is timely aid, the 'infrastructure' that enhances overall survival capability! That old fellow Xuanheng values you, probably not just for your formation talent, but more because he sees this potential value of 'constructing order' within you."

Su Ming's mind suddenly opened up. Many previously vague understandings instantly became clear. The significance of the "scientific cultivation" he pursued was sublimated to an unprecedented level at this moment—this was not only a path for personal ascension, but could also become a tiny variable influencing the survival model of an entire race.

At this moment, Elder Gu He's voice once again pulled his thoughts back.

The gruesome battle scenes on the light screen gradually faded, replaced by an incredibly profound, three-dimensional formation diagram phantom that seemed directly constructed from starlight and Dao Patterns. A mere fleeting glimpse was enough to dazzle the eyes and stir the soul.

"Ten thousand years ago, the world of cultivation was even more chaotic than today. Demons and ghosts ran rampant, the spirit races secluded themselves from the world, and our human race was weak, its flame nearly extinguished."

Elder Gu He's voice, for the first time, carried a solemnity bordering on reverence.

"At this critical juncture of survival, a former sage, the Cloud Hidden Master, fortuitously obtained the 'Legacy Dao Treasury.'"

The moment the words "Dao Treasury" were uttered, the spiritual energy within the great hall seemed to stagnate for an instant.

"The Patriarch comprehended the Dao Treasury for thirty years, integrating his lifelong learnings. Here in the Cloud Hidden Mountain Range, he laid the foundation of the 'Nine Heavens Cloud Canopy Grand Formation.' After three generations of refinement, it became the 'Zhou Tian Celestial Star Grand Formation' that protects us today! Relying on this formation, we were able to establish our sect gates in this perilous land, gather scattered humans, impart the Dao, and weather ten thousand years of storms, finally achieving our present stature!"

His gaze swept over the disciples below the platform, finally resting meaningfully for a moment on a few who appeared exceptionally composed, among them Su Ming.

"The 'Legacy Dao Treasury' is the founding root of our Cloud Hidden Sect, and also the sect's highest secret. Throughout the generations, only those who have made supreme contributions to the sect and whose character and aptitude have passed numerous rigorous tests are qualified to apply. After deliberation by the Council of Grand Elders, they may be granted a glimpse of its wonders."

Elder Gu He's tone shifted to one of extreme gravity, even carrying a warning:

"What it contains may hold great Dao truths pointing directly to ascension, or perhaps secrets concerning the origin of this world's heaven and earth, even the rise and fall of the four races. Those without great fortune, great perseverance, and great merit must not lightly touch it, nor lightly inquire about it. You need only remember that the foundation of everything you have today originates from this. Protecting the sect is also protecting this flame of inheritance from being extinguished."

Having said this, he did not wait for the disciples to digest this shocking information, and waved his sleeve once more.

Clear diagrams of the human meridian system and realm divisions appeared on the light screen.

"The secrets of cultivation realms, many of you know. Qi Refining and Foundation Establishment are merely about shedding mortality and extending lifespan. Only upon forming a Golden Core can one be called a 'True Person,' with a lifespan of five hundred years, initial manifestation of supernatural abilities—my fate is in my own hands!"

He emphatically pointed at the "Golden Core" position.

"As for Spirit Transformation..." Elder Gu He looked up at the star chart on the dome, his eyes revealing deep reverence and yearning. "That is already the realm of terrestrial immortals who can preliminarily mobilize the laws of heaven and earth, with a single thought turning seas into mulberry fields! That our Cloud Hidden Sect can have its present status relies entirely on successive generations of Spirit Transformation Patriarchs propping up the heavens and stabilizing destiny! Should any of you be fortunate enough to reach this realm, only then will you truly be qualified to hold up a corner of heaven and earth for our human race!"

Finally, his expression turned cold and hard as iron once more.

"Do not think that entering the sect means you can rest easy! Resources are limited, powerful enemies surround us! The sect supports you, and you must bear the sect's burden! Resist demons and ghosts externally, compete for advancement internally! Cultivation methods, elixirs, magic treasures, cave dwellings... everything you need, you must rely on your own ability to strive for, to seize, to kill for!"

"Remember! In this world of cultivation, mercy and weakness are both original sins! Only power and value are the foundation upon which you can secure your place and establish your life!"

"Today's lesson ends here. Dismissed!"

The word "Dismissed!" exploded like thunder, startling the disciples immersed in the massive impact of information.

Everyone looked dazed. Some were pale-faced, some had fanatical glints in their eyes, some were silently contemplative. They gradually departed, dragging heavy steps.

Su Ming walked among the crowd, his steps still steady.

Within his Consciousness Sea, however, he was engaged in high-speed communication with Lin Yu.

"Legacy Dao Treasury... Zhou Tian Celestial Star Grand Formation..." Su Ming pondered. "Master, the description of the 'Dao Treasury's' aura, and that fleeting glimpse of the formation diagram... do they have any connection to the Xuantian ring..."

"Most likely." Lin Yu's tone was certain. "The ring's ancient patterns, that transcendent understanding of formations, and also Elder Ma's and Xuanheng's inexplicable attention towards you... I'm afraid what we hold, even if not the 'Dao Treasury' itself, is a key 'key' or 'fragment' originating from the same source. This is getting interesting. We've unknowingly sat ourselves right on top of a volcano."

"It's a crisis, but also an opportunity." Su Ming's gaze was profound. "At least the direction is clear now. Improve strength, accumulate contributions, climb to a sufficiently high position within the sect's system. Only then will we have the qualification to touch the core secrets, and the ability to deal with the risks that follow."

"The damage to your Dao foundation might also find clues within it." Lin Yu added. "According to Gu He, that Dao Treasury encompasses everything, involving origins. A fundamental cultivation problem like repairing a Dao foundation is most likely to find an answer there."

Su Ming gave a slight nod. Facing the brilliant yet slightly harsh sunlight outside Teachings Peak, he took a deep breath.

The air seemed permeated with the heavy, bloody taste of conflict and competition brought by Elder Gu He's words.

The first lesson had ended.

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

Chapter 238: What People Call "Killing and Slaughter" Is Nothing But the Ultimate Catharsis

[1,170 words]

Since that first lesson on Teachings Peak—named "Enlightenment" but really just a "beating"—the mist in Clear Stream Valley seemed several degrees heavier than before.

For an entire month, aside from his rock-solid routine of checking in and reconciling ledgers at the Repair Hall, Su Ming behaved like a hibernating old tortoise, curled up in his cave dwelling and rarely opening even the heavy stone door.

Inside the cave's meditation room, a single glowstone was set into the domed ceiling, casting a cold, sparse light.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on his meditation cushion. A jade slip recording "Introduction to Basic Offensive Runes" hovered before him. His brow was furrowed, and his fingertips tapped his knees unconsciously.

"Master, these last few days I've felt restless in my mind."

Su Ming finally spoke, breaking the room's stillness, "Those scenes Elder Gu He showed, especially the rune war chariot on Sky Wind Plain that the rampaging ape smashed to pieces, keep flashing through my head."

"A sense of danger is good. It means your brain hasn't rotted yet."

Lin Yu's phantom drifted out from the Xuantian ring, still looking lazy as ever, though his eyes carried a streak of seriousness. "But mere anxiety is useless. Can anxiety kill the enemy? No. We need to turn that fear-of-dying energy into productive power."

He conjured a lightboard in midair and began lecturing like a proper teacher.

"Come on, let's review your current setup."

"On defense, you have the Like Water Art as a foundation. Your spiritual energy is long-lasting and resilient. With our improvised Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation and the Silence technique, among peers you're basically impossible to pin down if you want to run."

"On support, you have the Repair Hall. Old Wang and the others gather intelligence and handle chores for you, and you have the Water Refining Method—a purification technique that's basically cheating."

Lin Yu's finger paused, pointing to a final blank spot, his tone turning teasing.

"But on offense? Disciple, besides binding people with water or dazzling them with water mirrors, what methods do you have to end a fight in a single strike? If you actually run into that rampaging ape, do you plan to smash it with a spirit stone or choke it with a ledger?"

Su Ming forced a wry smile and spread his hands, "That's precisely my problem. The Like Water Art benefits all things yet lacks a streak of ruthlessness. I've been poring over this 'Introduction to Offensive Runes.' The runes labeled 'burst,' 'burn,' 'shatter'

mostly require violent fire or metal spiritual energy to drive them. Trying to simulate them with water spirit energy ends up as a failed imitation."

"That's because you haven't thought outside the box."

Lin Yu floated before Su Ming and tapped his brow lightly with a translucent finger. "Who told you water can't kill? Who said 'destruction' has to explode like fire or be sharp like metal?"

Su Ming blinked. "Please enlighten me, Master."

"Remember this: attack, destruction—they boil down to two things: extreme compression of energy, and an instantaneous, violent release."

Lin Yu drew a circle in the air, then suddenly compressed it into a pinpoint. "You think water is soft because you're not applying enough pressure. When you compress the volume of a great river into a needle, that thing can cut through steel like tofu. What's that called? A high-pressure water jet... cough, call it 'turning utmost softness into utter hardness.'"

A glimmer of thought passed through Su Ming's eyes.

"Concentration and release of energy?"

"Exactly. Don't keep trying to imitate metal's sharpness. Find water's own kind of sharpness." Lin Yu waved his hand. "Stop theorizing—practice is where truth lies. Go to the Repair Hall. Give your underlings something to do, and while you're at it bring us some 'negative examples.'"

...

Repair Hall, Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

Although Su Ming was already an external steward, he hadn't moved the Repair Hall; this place remained his base.

It was midday. The courtyard echoed with the steady clang of tools.

Wang Defa stood under the corridor, cradling a purple clay teapot and squinting as he supervised. Seeing Su Ming stride in, he quickly set down the teapot and hurried over.

"Hall Master, why are you visiting in person today? I've reconciled the ledgers these last few days and was about to—"

"Put the ledgers aside for now."

Su Ming waved his hand, scanning the busy laborers in the yard before heading straight to the storeroom piled with items awaiting repair. "Old Wang, give an order. From today on, for all incoming formation plates and magical implements, anything damaged in 'offensive' runes or blown apart due to spirit energy detonation, separate those out."

Wang Defa froze, his fleshy face bunching with confusion. "Hall Master, those are the hardest to repair. Their spiritual energy circuits are scrambled into a mess; if you're careless they can detonate again. We used to avoid taking these jobs."

"The past is the past. This is now."

Su Ming picked up a charred heart-guard mirror, running his finger along the jagged crack and feeling the residue of violent fire spiritual energy.

"We need to record how they failed. Which rune first failed? Which node's spirit energy first lost control? Did the explosion collapse inward or erupt outward?"

He turned to Wang Defa, speaking calmly but without room for argument, "Old Wang, if our Repair Hall wants to level up, we can't just be patchworkers. We have to deduce methods of killing from these formation plates."

Wang Defa nodded, half understanding, but he had one outstanding virtue—his obedience.

"Hall Master says so, we do it! Ah Sheng! Tie Zhu! Stop what you're doing and follow the Hall Master's orders. Dig out all those blown-to-pieces junk items!"

As everyone busied themselves sorting and cataloging, Su Ming stood in a corner and asked Lin Yu to help him enter an "observation micro" state.

With Lin Yu's soul power boosting him, the scrap metal looked different to Su Ming.

No longer just charred metal, it became countless broken, twisted, and collapsing strands of energy. He watched a "burst" rune instantaneously draw in all surrounding spirit energy, tearing the carrier apart. He saw a "sharp" rune pierce a shield like an awl, leaving a hairline hole that led to total defensive failure.

In Su Ming's eyes, those damaged runes reflected back, and the "Introduction to Basic Offensive Runes" in his Consciousness Sea began to map onto the real-world artifacts. What had been abstruse theory, validated by these "negative examples," started to become three-dimensional and vivid.

...

Night fell, Clear Stream Valley, cave dwelling.

Su Ming stood barefoot in the meditation room's center. The greenstone floor under his feet was damp with a thin layer of water.

He had not used a formation to clear it. Instead, he stared intently at a fist-sized water orb hovering before him.

"Sharp."

He whispered the rune name, and his divine sense sliced like a blade, plunging into the orb to coax the water spirit energy into the pattern of the "sharp" rune.

The water orb trembled violently. Spikes bulged on its surface as it tried to emulate metal's edge, but after only a breath it ruptured with a muffled pop and collapsed into a puddle of dead water on the floor.

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

Chapter 239: The Power of Dripping Water

[1,541 words]

The thirty-seventh failure.

Su Ming gasped heavily, his forehead covered in sweat, his face somewhat pale.

Using water to simulate the characteristics of metal was far more difficult than he had imagined. Water's nature is inherently soft; forcibly making it rigid was like trying to carve steel needles out of tofu—apply a little too much force and it would shatter.

"Wrong, the approach is still too narrow."

Lin Yu sighed, his phantom figure floating to Su Ming's side, looking at the puddle of water on the ground. "You've been trying to change the 'shape' of the water, wanting to turn it into a blade, into a sword. But is a blade or sword sharp because of its shape? No, it's because of the material's density and hardness."

"Your spiritual energy is too 'loose'."

Lin Yu pointed at Su Ming's Dantian. "The Like Water Art gives your spiritual energy endurance, but it also makes you accustomed to 'flowing'. Now, forget about flowing."

Imagine your spiritual energy is a bowstring stretched to its limit, or a spring compressed to the bottom."

"At the moment this 'Sharp' character rune is inscribed, what you need to do is not 'draw', but 'compress'."

"Compress?" Su Ming murmured to himself.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and once again mobilized a ball of water spiritual energy.

This time, he didn't rush to outline the rune's lines.

He controlled that ball of water spiritual energy and began to collapse it inward.

One inch, then another.

The originally fist-sized water sphere was compressed to the size of an egg, its color changing from transparent to a deep, dark blue.

Su Ming felt resistance; intense repulsive force began to generate within the water spiritual energy, as if trying to bounce his divine sense away.

"Not enough! Compress more!" Lin Yu shouted from the side. "That little pressure isn't even enough to water a spirit herb! Want to kill someone? Compress until you can barely control it!"

Su Ming gritted his teeth, veins bulging on his neck.

Shrink... for me!

The egg-sized water sphere shrank again, becoming the size of a longan fruit. This single drop of water now was a deep blue, almost black, heavy as a lead pellet, emitting a heart-palpitating fluctuation.

Now!

Su Ming abruptly opened his eyes, his finger rapidly tracing through the air—no longer that flowing, cloud-like drawing method, but with a resolute, almost vicious intensity as if trying to tear through the void.

"Sharp!"

As the final stroke fell, that water droplet compressed to its extreme seemed to find a vent.

Whoosh—!

There was no earth-shattering explosion, only an extremely faint yet piercingly sharp whistle that seemed to stab through the eardrums.

A dark blue thread flashed through the air and vanished.

Thud.

In the corner of the meditation room, a three-inch-thick blue granite slate used for testing spell power silently gained a small hole.

The hole was clear through front to back, its edges smooth as a mirror, without the slightest crack or any flying stone fragments.

Su Ming stared blankly at that hole, his finger still maintaining the posture of inscribing the rune, trembling slightly.

In that instant just now, he felt one-tenth of the spiritual energy within his body had been drained, but the destructive power caused by this energy was more terrifying than the combined force of ten of his previous "Water Bullet" spells.

"This is... the 'sharpness' of water?" Su Ming murmured.

"That's more like it."

Lin Yu floated over, examined the small hole, and nodded in satisfaction. "Although the accuracy is a bit off and the compression efficiency is just passable, this is the threshold of 'offensive combat'. Remember this feeling, disciple. True killing moves are never flashy light and shadow effects, but this kind—soundless, traceless, piercing through with a single strike."

Su Ming let out a long breath and plopped down onto the meditation cushion. Although his body was exhausted to the point of death, his eyes burned with unprecedented excitement.

He knew he had finally driven the first nail into that plank called "attack weakness".

"Master, this move doesn't have a name yet." Su Ming looked at the hole, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Since it relies on high pressure to penetrate and is silent..." Lin Yu stroked his chin. "Call it 'Spirit-Startling Thrust'. A bit corny, but sounds decent for scaring people."

"No." Su Ming shook his head, his fingers gently rubbing the water stain on the floor. "It originates from water and is extremely restrained. Let's call it 'Dripping Water Force'."

"Dripping water wears through stone, not achieved in a single day; but if this drop of water weighs a thousand jun, piercing stone is but an instant."

Su Ming stood up, once again mobilizing the remaining spiritual energy within his body.

"Again!"

...

In the side hall of the Administration Hall, the afternoon sunlight was filtered of its heat by the thick window paper, leaving only a layer of dim yellow light illuminating the dust motes floating in the air.

Su Ming sat behind a long desk piled with archives, dipped his fingertip in a bit of clear water, and turned a page of the yellowed ledger.

This was his thirteenth day as the Formation Peak Candidate Steward.

There was no expected wielding of power, nor was he immediately entrusted with any important task like repairing some ancient grand formation.

Laid out before him were the brief reports on material consumption for the past half-year from the three external halls under the Formation Peak's jurisdiction: "Refining", "Forging", and "Rune Drawing".

"Steward Su, this tea has gone cold. Shall this humble one fetch you a fresh cup?"

The speaker was an old clerk from the Administration Hall, surnamed Chen, with a round face. When he smiled, his eyes narrowed into slits, and his hands were always habitually tucked into his sleeves.

Su Ming didn't even look up, his gaze still locked on the line of densely packed numbers. "No need. Elder Chen, why is the 'Fire Essence Stone' consumption for the 'C-Type' refining room in March thirty percent higher than in February?"

The flesh on Old Clerk Chen's face twitched, then he offered an ingratiating smile. "Ah, Steward Su, you might not know. In March, there was a late spring chill, the earth fire vein was unstable, controlling the heat when refining ores was difficult, so the scrap rate naturally increased a bit. This is all standard practice, standard practice."

"Late spring chill?"

Su Ming lightly tapped the desk twice with his finger, producing crisp *tock-tock* sounds. "But looking at the records for the 'D-Type' room during the same period, consumption actually dropped by ten percent. Does the earth fire vein recognize people, only freezing the C-Type room but not the D-Type?"

A fine layer of oily sweat beaded on Old Clerk Chen's forehead. He hadn't expected this newly appointed young steward, ignoring the leisurely tea, to insist on wrestling with these tedious numbers. Usually, which of those candidate stewards didn't come here just to pad their resumes? Who would actually verify them entry by entry?

"This... perhaps the D-Type room got a batch of new, good furnaces..." Old Clerk Chen hemmed and hawed, his eyes beginning to dart around.

Su Ming finally looked up and glanced at him.

That gaze wasn't sharp, as placid as a pool of stagnant water, yet it made the lies on the tip of Old Clerk Chen's tongue get forcibly swallowed back.

"Note it down." Su Ming pointed to the blank jade slip beside him. "March C-Type room consumption is questionable; requires cross-referencing the on-duty disciples' operation logs and scrap weighing records for secondary verification."

Old Clerk Chen forced a dry laugh twice, dawdling as he picked up the brush. "Steward Su, this... isn't this being too nitpicky? We're all fellow sect brothers, water too clear has no fish, you know..."

"I am the steward; auditing the accounts is my duty." Su Ming's tone was steady as he lowered his head again and turned a page. "I don't care if the water is clear or not, but this ledger of mine must balance."

In his Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu whistled. "Tsk, this old slickster, trying to fool our 'data maniac' with such low-level excuses? Disciple, look at that line for 'Red Copper Powder' reimbursement, five hundred jin? Is this stuff used for artifact forging or for mixing into rice to eat?"

Su Ming mentally replied, "Red Copper Powder is used as a combustion aid. The normal ratio shouldn't exceed five percent of the main material. Here, they reported fifteen percent. The extra portion was either embezzled and resold, or their process flow is rotten to the core."

"Obviously the former." Lin Yu lay lazily in the ring's space. "This isn't a ledger; it's clearly a 'Map of Sect Rats Distribution'. But aren't you afraid of offending people by investigating like this?"

"Finding out is one thing; reporting it upwards is another." Su Ming inscribed a line of symbols only he could understand onto the jade slip. "Having leverage in hand makes it easier to talk later."

Only when the sun set in the west did Su Ming close the last ledger.

He rubbed his slightly throbbing temples and stored the compiled summary of suspicious points into his storage pouch. Old Clerk Chen had long since found an excuse to slip away. The entire side hall held only him.

The day's work was tedious, monotonous, full of the smell of dust and scheming.

But this was exactly what Su Ming wanted—to understand how the blood vessels of this massive sect pulsed.

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

[1,221 words]

For a cultivator, a month's time was nothing more than the span of a short nap.

In Clear Stream Valley, the vines had climbed three feet higher up the cliff face. The stream at the valley entrance had swelled and receded twice with the rainy season.

Within the cave dwelling, the "Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation" operated with increasing smoothness, shrouding this remote valley in a perennial, faint mist. To outsiders, this place seemed cold, damp, and utterly lifeless. In truth, the interior was warm and moist with spiritual energy, a hidden world of its own.

Inside the meditation room, the air was unnaturally dry and hot.

Su Ming was bare-chested, sweat trickling down his spine. Before the droplets could hit the ground, they were vaporized into white steam by the residual high temperature lingering in the air.

A water sphere the size of a fist hovered before him.

Su Ming's eyes were bloodshot, his divine sense honed like a carving knife as he attempted to forcibly inscribe a fiery red "Burst" character rune onto the surface of the extremely unstable water ball.

Fire and water being incompatible was a fundamental law of heaven and earth.

The moment the rune, representing the ultimate ferocity of the fire attribute, touched the gentle water spiritual energy, the violent repulsion reaction occurred exactly as expected.

"Zzzzt—"

A sharp, piercing screech rang out.

The water sphere didn't shatter into lethally sharp fragments as anticipated. Instead, like a deflating balloon, it trembled violently before transforming into a shower of scalding hot water that drenched Su Ming from head to toe.

"Three hundred and twenty-four."

Lin Yu's phantom sat cross-legged in mid-air, having even conjured a handful of sunflower seeds in his hand. Though he couldn't actually crack them, his posture was the epitome of someone enjoying a show. "Disciple, admit it. What you're doing is like trying to make a fish wear iron armor to go for a run. You're torturing both the fish and the armor."

Su Ming wiped the hot water from his face and slumped back onto the meditation cushion, somewhat dejected.

If this hot water had poured onto an ordinary person, their skin would have blistered and peeled instantly. But for a cultivator at the fifth level of Qi Refining, it was merely like taking a bath.

"The power is too dispersed."

Su Ming stared at the mess on the floor, his brow deeply furrowed. "The explosion of fire lies in the instantaneous release of light and heat, propelling shockwaves to injure. Even if I manage to force it into shape using water spiritual energy, the end result is just a pushing shockwave at best. It might knock someone over, but it wouldn't even scrape their skin."

"That's because the 'wall' in your mind hasn't been torn down yet."

Lin Yu drifted down and extended a finger, swiping it through the puddle of hot water. "You've been imitating 'fire.' Why imitate it? Can't water explode?"

Su Ming was taken aback. "The nature of water is supreme softness..."

"Softness my foot."

Lin Yu rolled his eyes, his tone turning serious. "Disciple, let this teacher test you. If you put a pot of water into a completely sealed iron canister, then fiercely burn a fire underneath it, what will ultimately happen?"

Su Ming thought for a moment before answering, "The iron canister will explode."

"Why will it explode?"

"The water turns to steam, its volume expands, and the canister cannot contain it..." Su Ming's voice cut off halfway through his sentence.

His pupils contracted sharply, as if he had just grasped a flash of lightning streaking across his mind.

"Volume... expansion?"

Lin Yu snapped his fingers, a pleased, teacherly smile appearing on his face. "The essence of a fire explosion is the rapid expansion of gas produced by combustion. But water doesn't need to combust. When water turns to steam, its volume can increase a thousandfold! If that kind of force is confined within a tiny space, the instantaneous thrust it generates is purer, more domineering than gunpowder!"

"You don't need 'Burn.' What you need is 'Expand' and 'Shatter!'"

Su Ming sprang to his feet, not bothering to wipe the water from his body, and began pacing back and forth in the meditation room.

He muttered under his breath.

"Gathering spiritual energy into water, that's 'Gathering.'"

"Transforming water into a prison, that's 'Solidify.'"

"Agitating water into steam, that's... 'Heat?'"

Su Ming stopped in his tracks, a sharp light flashing in his eyes. "I don't need the fire attribute's 'Burn.' I just need pure spiritual energy friction, or extremely high-frequency vibrations, to make the water boil and vaporize in an instant!"

"As long as the outer shell is hard enough, the internal pressure is great enough..."

...

Early the next morning, at the Repair Hall.

Su Ming, sporting dark circles under his eyes, appeared punctually at the Bing Character Seven Courtyard.

Though his mind was completely occupied with ideas for rune combinations, as the Hall Master, he couldn't neglect his daily administrative duties.

This was the foundation of his standing within the sect, and also the best cover for concealing his cultivation.

"Hall Master, this is the inventory list of damaged and retired magical implements returned from the front lines last month."

Wang Defa carefully placed a thick ledger on Su Ming's desk.

After two months apart, Old Wang seemed to have lost some weight, his frame a bit tighter, likely due to being run ragged by Su Ming's set of "standardized procedures."

Nowadays, everyone in the Repair Hall moved with purpose and efficiency.

Su Ming took the ledger and flipped through it casually.

His gaze paused on one particular entry.

"Flexwood Shields,' damaged quantity: one hundred and twenty. Cause of damage: Internal fiber fracture?"

Su Ming looked up at Wang Defa. "Old Wang, flexwood is famously sturdy among low-grade magical implements. Chopping at it with an axe would at most leave a white mark. How could so many have 'internal fractures'?"

Wang Defa was momentarily stunned, not expecting the Hall Master to focus on such a detail. He hurriedly explained, "Hall Master, you might not be aware. This batch of shields was issued to disciples assigned to missions in the 'Black Swamp.' That place has heavy humidity and lots of poisonous miasma. These shields look fine on the surface, but the dampness seeped in through the gaps in the runes. If they encountered an ambush and the enemy used ice or fire-based spells..."

Old Wang gestured with his hands. "Even with just a cycle of extreme cold and heat, the moisture that seeped in would either freeze and expand or instantly turn to steam. No matter how hard the flexwood is, it can't withstand that kind of turmoil happening inside it. When we took them apart for inspection, the insides were all crumbled to bits, like rotten wood."

"Moisture seepage... extreme cold and heat... internal disintegration..."

Su Ming's fingers tapped lightly on the desk, his gaze gradually growing profound.

Old Wang's words were like a puzzle piece, fitting perfectly into the framework of his conception from last night.

The strongest fortresses are often breached from within.

If last night's theory was about manufacturing a bomb, then Old Wang's account had just shown him the delivery method for that bomb—infiltration.

"Set aside two shields from this batch. Don't repair them. Send them to my cave dwelling."

Su Ming closed the ledger, his tone calm. "I want to study them for improvements."

Wang Defa quickly assented, though inwardly he was filled with admiration. *The Hall Master is truly dedicated. He even personally delves into these peripheral issues. No wonder he gets top marks.*

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

[1,218 words]

Late at night in Clear Stream Valley.

In the meditation room, two broken Flexwood Shields brought back from the Repair Hall lay quietly on the ground.

Su Ming sat cross-legged, his expression solemn as if performing some kind of ritual.

"Gather."

With his low shout, the water spiritual energy in the air rapidly converged, condensing at his fingertip into a water sphere the size of a longan fruit.

This was no ordinary water sphere.

Under Lin Yu's guidance of "microscopic perspective," Su Ming had constructed an extremely complex rune structure inside this water sphere.

The outermost layer consisted of three superimposed "Solidify" runes. They were like layers of transparent eggshells, tightly locking the water spiritual energy inside.

At the core was a "Vibration" rune that Su Ming had modified beyond recognition. Originally used to assist earth-attribute spells in creating tremors, it was now being used by Su Ming as a "detonator."

"First step, infiltration."

Su Ming lightly flicked his finger.

The water sphere did not directly strike the flexwood piece on the ground, but instead transformed into a stream of light, silently attaching itself to the surface of the wood piece.

Immediately after, the outermost "Solidify" rune cracked open a tiny gap.

Guided by Su Ming's divine sense, the high-pressure water flow, like the sharpest needle, silently drilled into the wood along the natural grain of the flexwood.

This was the signature skill of the Like Water Art—silent, gradual nourishment.

In just two breaths, the water sphere disappeared completely, as if entirely absorbed by the wood piece.

From the outside, this iron-hard flexwood merely appeared slightly damp on the surface.

"Second step, sealing."

Su Ming changed his hand seal.

The water spiritual energy that had infiltrated the interior of the wood piece reconverged at the core.

This time, they were no longer a flowing liquid, but instantly propped up an extremely tiny, sealed spherical space deep within the wood's fibers.

The "Solidify" rune activated again, forming an indestructible inner membrane within this narrow space.

At this moment, the flexwood piece was like a patient with a tumor growing in its belly.

"Third step..."

Su Ming took a deep breath, fine beads of sweat appearing on his forehead.

This step was the hardest.

He had to detonate the internal energy without damaging the external structure.

"Detonate."

His divine sense, like a needle, fiercely pierced into that tiny sealed space, activating the core "Vibration" rune.

There was no flame from spiritual energy friction, only extreme frequency vibration.

The water inside the sealed space was violently churned by this vibration force within a thousandth of a breath, its temperature sharply rising.

Liquid transformed into gas.

Volume expanded a thousandfold!

"Crack."

An extremely faint crisp sound rang out in the silent stone room.

The sound was not loud, not even as loud as breaking a dry twig.

The flexwood piece on the ground merely trembled slightly; it did not explode or burn.

Su Ming held his breath and slowly walked forward.

He extended a finger and gently poked the flexwood piece that appeared completely intact.

"Pfft."

With the touch of his fingertip, that flexwood piece, famous for its hardness and difficult to damage even with a low-grade magical sword, instantly collapsed like a crispy biscuit.

Su Ming pressed down with his finger.

The originally dense wood fibers had now turned into a pile of damp, soft wood pulp.

Completely disintegrated from the inside.

"Hiss—"

Su Ming stood up, feeling his internal spiritual energy nearly depleted, his divine sense utterly exhausted, yet his spirit was unprecedentedly exhilarated.

"However..."

Lin Yu's voice timely poured a bucket of cold water, "The long preparation time is a fatal flaw. Three hundred breaths of casting time is enough for someone to kill you ten times over. In the coming days, your task is to compress those three hundred breaths down to three breaths, or even an instant."

"Naturally."

Su Ming turned and walked back into the room, closing the stone door, "Since the path is open, what remains is nothing more than water dripping through stone."

...

The autumn chill deepened, Clear Stream Valley's morning shrouded in a veil-like mist.

Su Ming stood by the newly cultivated "formation field" east of his cave dwelling. At his feet, eighteen basic formation line nodes had been completely inscribed.

These interconnected nodes formed a small-scale Spirit Gathering and Purification composite formation, the result of his efforts over the past half month.

He did not use formation flags to position and channel spiritual energy like ordinary disciples.

What Su Ming held in his hand was a "Sinking Star Wood" branch cut from a companion tree on the remnant mountain range behind the valley. The branch was straight, its tip sharpened to a point.

The branch served as his brush, spiritual energy as his ink.

He seemed to merge with the earth beneath his feet, his movements as slow as an old tree sprouting new branches. A circle of deep blue water light shimmered around the branch tip—the spiritual energy of the Like Water Art, gentle and enduring.

He did not directly carve spiritual energy into the soil. Instead, using the branch as a guide, he sketched in the air, guiding the water vapor permeating the air and the faint spiritual pulse deep within the earth veins.

This was a bold conjecture from the True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction: runes were not limited to being passively "inscribed"; they could also be actively "guided into formation."

The deep blue water light traced mysterious trajectories in the air. Each time it descended, it was accompanied by an almost imperceptible ripple of spiritual energy, silently seeping into the soil.

He was attempting to use the natural flow of the earth vein's water vapor, with his own spiritual energy as the catalyst, to let the formation "grow naturally" within this environment.

"Sss..."

A strand of spiritual energy flow lost control. The fragile balance just established instantly shattered, and the spiritual energy connection painstakingly maintained between the formation nodes abruptly severed.

Another failure.

This was already the seventeenth time.

"Wrong." Su Ming opened his eyes, his gaze clear, "My perception of the earth veins and water vapor is still not fine enough."

He raised the Sinking Star Wood branch again.

This time, his movements were even slower. His divine sense completely immersed itself, as if he had transformed into a morning breeze in the valley, a drop of dew.

He could "hear" the breathing of the earth's energy deep beneath the soil at his feet; he could "see" the subtle flow of water vapor in the air caused by the sunrise.

His branch was no longer a forceful guide, but instead conformed to this flow, gently nudging it, like skillfully placing a pebble in a rushing stream to alter the direction of a small current.

Time passed bit by bit.

When the eighteenth node was connected in this "act according to the momentum" manner, something marvelous happened.

Between the eighteen formation line nodes, the spiritual energy no longer flowed stiffly. Instead, it surged happily and smoothly, like a combed stream, forming a tiny yet complete cycle.

Yesterday, this formation would collapse after at most ten breaths.

But now, one breath, two breaths, ten breaths... thirteen breaths!

The formation's light flickered once, then finally dimmed slowly. However, those extra three breaths of sustained time caused a faint smile to tug at the corner of Su Ming's mouth.

His formation practice was progressing from "inscription" towards a deeper level of "guidance."

He looked down at the Sinking Star Wood branch in his hand. This seemingly ordinary piece of wood actually had a slight amplification and stabilizing effect when guiding

spiritual energy. He silently noted this discovery, then turned and walked back to his cave dwelling.

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

Chapter 242: Water Overflows When It's Full

[1,358 words]

In the afternoon, in the backyard of the Repair Hall.

The sunlight was just right, and a few sparrows were chirping noisily on the old locust tree in the courtyard.

Su Ming did not hold a general assembly as usual. Instead, he, Wang Defa, and Old Li gathered around a stone slab that had been wiped clean. There were no complex runes on the slab, only a few crudely drawn squares and arrows sketched with charcoal.

It was a simple diagram of contribution point flow.

"This is our Repair Hall's accounts from last month," Su Ming said, pointing at the diagram. "Income is stable, even showing slight growth. But look at the expenditures. Besides the regular material purchases, the largest portion is actually the training losses for new apprentices."

On the diagram, an arrow pointed from the "Material Storage" to a square marked with an 'X'. Below the square was the label "Newcomer Losses," and next to it was a particularly eye-catching funnel-shaped graphic.

Wang Defa leaned in for a look and clicked his tongue. "Hall Master, there's no helping it. When newcomers are learning the ropes, who doesn't break a few things? Back when I was learning accounting, I even miscalculated several large transactions myself."

Su Ming shook his head and pointed at the funnel. "Our current method is master teaching apprentice, passing knowledge orally and by example. The efficiency is far too low. Out of ten new menial disciples, after three months of training, less than three can independently handle faults in a low-grade Yellow-tier formation plate. This isn't because they aren't trying hard. It's because our knowledge transfer is too slow, too disorganized."

Old Li, squatting to the side smoking his pipe tobacco, nodded upon hearing this and blew out a smoke ring. "That's the truth of it. A craft like this relies entirely on innate understanding. Some people grasp it with just a hint, while others, even if you break it down step by step for them, just can't learn."

"So, we need to change our method."

Su Ming picked up the charcoal pencil and drew a few small squares next to the diagram. "We'll take the twenty most common faults, like 'spiritual energy conduction blockage,' 'loose rune node connections,' 'energy core overheating,' and create 'standard damaged components.'"

"Standard damaged components?" Wang Defa and Old Li asked in unison, their faces full of confusion.

"Exactly," Su Ming explained. "We intentionally damage good formation plates, precisely creating those twenty most common fault conditions. Then, the new apprentices won't do anything else. They'll just repeatedly disassemble, diagnose, and reassemble these twenty standard components. They'll develop muscle memory and conditioned reflexes. When they see a certain symptom, their minds won't need to think; their hands will automatically know which component to check."

Upon hearing this, the fat on Wang Defa's face trembled, and his voice changed pitch. "Hall Master! This... this would waste so many good items! A single formation plate costs dozens of contribution points at the very least!"

"Sharpening the axe doesn't delay the chopping."

Old Li, who had been silent, suddenly spoke up, knocking his pipe against the sole of his shoe. "It's a clumsy method, but it might be the fastest proper path. Rather than having them ruin even more valuable formation plates on actual commissions, it's better to pay the tuition fees upfront on these 'standard components.'"

Zhang Asheng was practicing carving runes not far away and had long since pricked up his ears at the argument. Now, he threw down his carving knife and ran over excitedly. "Hall Master, that's a great idea! I volunteer to be that 'instructor,' specifically in charge of damaging formation plates!"

"You just want to cause destruction!" Wang Defa glared at him with annoyance.

Amidst the daily arguments, a concept powerful enough to change the future of the Repair Hall was quietly taking root.

.....

The last autumn rain before winter arrived in the Cloud Mist Mountain Range drizzled for three days.

The humidity within Clear Stream Valley was so heavy it felt like you could wring water from the air. The moss on the cliff face, saturated with moisture, displayed a deep, almost ink-green hue.

The "Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation" enveloping the cave dwelling operated with even more vigor within the curtain of rain. The originally invisible barrier now faintly glowed with an extremely pale, dark blue halo, silently devouring and transforming the endless rain, converting it into pure water spiritual energy that nourished the valley floor.

Inside the meditation room of the cave dwelling, a single lamp burned like a bean.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on a meditation cushion, his eyes slightly closed, his breathing long and subtle, almost merging with the continuous sound of rain outside.

Nearly two months had passed since the day the rule of "destructive teaching" was established.

During these two months, he spent his days at the Repair Hall supervising those apprentices as they disassembled formation plates, and his nights back in the valley diligently cultivating the "Like Water Art" and formation runes.

He hadn't taken any aggressive elixirs, nor had he deliberately tried to break through bottlenecks. He was simply like a patient old farmer, day after day, drawing in energy, circulating it, and accumulating it.

The Dantian and Qihai within his body were now on the verge of overflowing.

The originally viscous spiritual liquid, circulating through the meridians and Dantian walls with each cycle of the "Like Water Art," brought a faint sense of expansion with every tide-like surge.

At the center of the Qihai, that tender green seedling floated quietly.

It seemed to sense the fullness of its surroundings. Its two stretched-out leaves gently swayed. At the base of the petiole, the phantom of a third leaf had solidified to its limit, its veins clearly visible, as if ready to break free at any moment.

"Full."

A flash of understanding passed through Su Ming's mind.

This feeling wasn't the painful swelling of being overstuffed, but a sense of "completion."

Like a large vat filled with water, the water surface bulged slightly, rising above the rim, yet held back from spilling by surface tension, maintaining a delicate and fragile balance.

The opportunity had arrived.

Su Ming felt not a trace of panic, nor did his heartbeat rate change in the slightest.

He did not, like those described in passionate adventure tales, grit his teeth, turn red in the face, and "charge the barrier."

He simply followed that feeling of "overflowing" and gave a slight nudge with his spiritual sense.

"Flow."

He silently recited the character in his heart.

The spiritual energy that had been flowing gently through his meridians suddenly accelerated.

It wasn't a violent surge, but more like a mountain stream merging into a great river, becoming broader and deeper.

The spiritual energy, following the circulation path of the sixth layer of the "Like Water Art," washed over several minor meridians that had originally felt somewhat sluggish.

Those were the barriers leading to the sixth layer of Qi Refining.

There was no imagined violent collision, nor that tearing kind of pain.

The pure water spiritual energy accumulated over two months, upon touching that intangible barrier, was like spring water gently overflowing a dam.

"Pop."

Su Ming's ears seemed to hear an extremely faint, crisp sound.

Like a bubble bursting on the water's surface.

That barrier that had blocked him for two months silently dissolved under the continuous soaking and scouring of the thick spiritual energy.

The originally somewhat crowded Dantian and Qihai expanded outward in that instant.

The sensation was incredibly wondrous, as if a space within his body had been forcibly stretched open. Yet, it didn't feel uncomfortable. On the contrary, there was a sense of sudden openness and clarity.

The Qihai expanded by roughly thirty percent.

The originally overflowing spiritual liquid level dropped, but its rotation speed abruptly increased. The seedling at the center of the Qihai gave a violent tremble, and the third tender leaf fully unfurled, its entire body emerald green, radiating vibrant vitality.

As the vortex's rotation speed quickened, the spiritual energy within the cave dwelling seemed to be pulled by some powerful force.

"Whoosh—"

A light breeze sprang up out of thin air in the meditation room.

A large amount of free-floating water spiritual energy was drawn into Su Ming's body. After being purified through his meridians, it transformed into newly born spiritual liquid, joyfully pouring into the expanded Qihai.

The sixth layer of Qi Refining, achieved.

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

Chapter 243: Hidden Reefs and Deep Abyss

[1,392 words]

Lin Yu slowly opened his eyes.

In that instant, the light within the meditation room seemed to brighten a few degrees.

Deep within his pupils, a faint azure-blue light flashed briefly before vanishing, returning to their usual gentle depth. Yet, deep within those irises, there seemed to be an added hint of an elusive, flowing quality.

Lin Yu raised his hand, his five fingers making a grasping motion in the air.

The moisture permeating the air instantly responded, condensing into a crystal-clear water droplet at his fingertips.

"Divine sense range... twenty zhang."

Lin Yu's spiritual sense extended outward, piercing through the heavy stone door and the curtain of rain.

He could clearly "see" a cold cicada hiding in a rock crevice twelve zhang away, sheltering from the rain. He could even make out the minute patterns on its wings and the slight trembling of its abdomen with each breath.

This level of clarity was more than double what it had been at the fifth layer of Qi Refining.

What was more important was that sense of control.

Before, when he manipulated water spiritual energy, it felt like wielding a heavy whip. Now, he felt as if he had become part of the water flow itself. That sense of awkwardness, that feeling of "using it like one's own arm and fingers," had completely vanished.

"Silent, gradual nourishment..."

Lin Yu murmured softly to himself.

He discovered that the operational loss of spiritual energy within his body had decreased significantly.

Condensing that water droplet just now would have required consuming at least a wisp of spiritual energy before. Now, the loss was almost negligible.

This meant his endurance, his ability to sustain prolonged effort, had taken another significant leap forward on its original foundation.

Master Lin Yu's phantom slowly drifted out, hovering in mid-air. He had even conjured a cup of hot tea in his hand and was pretending to blow on it.

"Not bad. The water has reached the channel naturally, smooth and without a ripple."

Master Lin Yu took a sip of the non-existent tea, a look of approval in his eyes. "A breakthrough achieved without relying on elixirs to brute-force it has the most solid foundation. Although the purity of your spiritual energy is only at the sixth layer of Qi Refining, if we're talking about endurance, I'm afraid even an ordinary seventh-layer Qi Refining cultivator wouldn't be able to outlast you."

Lin Yu stood up, stretching his somewhat stiff joints. A series of faint popping sounds came from within his body.

"Thank you, Master, for protecting me during my cultivation." Lin Yu bowed respectfully.

"Cut the formalities. I was almost falling asleep just now."

Master Lin Yu waved his hand dismissively, then put away his playful expression. He drifted in front of Lin Yu and pointed towards his lower abdomen.

"However, apprentice, don't celebrate too soon."

The joy on Lin Yu's face faded slightly. Subconsciously, he touched the area of his dantian.

Although the breakthrough had been smooth, at the moment when the spiritual energy vortex accelerated its rotation, he had still keenly sensed a subtle, hidden feeling of obstruction coming from the location of those few fine cracks deep within his dantian.

It was like a few flaws, invisible to the naked eye, on a piece of perfect jade. They weren't noticeable under normal circumstances, but when subjected to immense pressure, they became the weakest points.

"You felt it, didn't you?"

Master Lin Yu sighed, looking at his expression. "That pause when the spiritual energy flow passed through the crack area during the breakthrough just now. With the current low spiritual pressure, this pause is harmless. But if you attempt to break through to the later stages of Qi Refining, where the spiritual pressure doubles, this pause could cause turbulent flow of spiritual energy. At best, it would lead to a failed breakthrough."

The atmosphere in the meditation room grew somewhat heavy for a moment.

Lin Yu remained silent for a while, then lifted his head, his gaze calm. "Since it's a hidden reef, then we'll navigate around it, or... fill it in. At least for now, the ship hasn't capsized."

Master Lin Yu was taken aback for a second, then grinned. "Good mindset. That's right. As long as you're not dead, there's always a way. Continue to gently nourish it during this period. Don't be in a hurry to advance recklessly. We have money and leisure now. We can take our time grinding it down."

...

The next morning, the rain had stopped and the sky had cleared.

Inside the Bing Character Seven Courtyard of the Repair Hall, the atmosphere was bustling with activity.

"Gently! That's the core lens of the 'Flowing Light Mirror,' not your flatbread!"

Zhang Asheng's loud voice echoed through the courtyard.

This burly man was no longer the silent type who only knew how to bury his head in work. A wooden plaque labeled "Instructor" now hung from his waist. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, inspecting a row of workbenches.

In front of him, seven or eight newly arrived menial disciples were sweating profusely, struggling with a pile of "Standard Damaged Components."

This was the scene that greeted Lin Yu as he entered the courtyard.

No one noticed his arrival. Everyone was completely immersed in the work at hand.

This was exactly the effect he wanted.

"Hall Master."

Wang Defa, who was squatting in a corner checking supplies, had sharp eyes and was the first to spot Lin Yu. He was about to stand up and bow, but Lin Yu stopped him with a look.

Lin Yu walked over to a workbench.

A young man, roughly fourteen or fifteen years old, was holding a fine engraving knife, staring at a formation plate with a troubled expression.

It was a low-grade Yellow-tier "Fire Gathering Plate." The fault was "spiritual energy circuit blockage."

The young man had clearly been inspecting it for a long time. Beads of sweat were about to drip from his forehead into his eyes, yet he still didn't dare to make the cut.

"What are you hesitating about?"

Lin Yu's gentle voice sounded beside the young man's ear.

The young man jumped in fright, nearly dropping the engraving knife in his hand. Looking up and seeing Lin Yu's blue outer sect disciple robe made him even more nervous, causing him to stammer, "H-Hall... Hall Master! Disciple... disciple can't find the blockage point. I've probed it three times with spiritual energy. It feels like it's clear everywhere, but the fire spiritual energy just won't circulate."

Lin Yu didn't scold him. Instead, he extended a finger and gently tapped the edge of the formation plate.

The divine sense of the sixth layer of Qi Refining, combined with the delicate perception of the "Like Water Art," instantly seeped into the interior of the formation plate like quicksilver.

In his perception, this seemingly inanimate formation plate transformed into a three-dimensional network of pipes and nodes.

"Here."

Lin Yu's finger slid to an inconspicuous rune node at the lower left corner of the plate. "At the connection point of this 'Guide' character rune, there's a speck of dust impurity. It causes turbulent flow when spiritual energy circulates at high speed, forming an air barrier. It's not completely blocked; it's that the flow velocity is incorrect."

The young man's eyes widened in disbelief. He skeptically brought a magnifying glass closer to look.

Sure enough, lodged within the hair-thin groove of the rune, was a metallic speck smaller than a grain of sand.

"Pick it out," Lin Yu instructed.

The young man hurriedly used the finest needle tip to carefully extract that metallic speck.

"Hum—"

As the impurity was removed, the formation plate emitted a soft hum. Its previously dull surface instantly glowed with a layer of red light, and the surrounding fire spiritual energy began to happily gather.

"It's clear! It's really clear!"

The young man was so excited he nearly jumped up. The look he gave Lin Yu was filled with admiration. "Hall Master, you're amazing! I checked for half an hour and couldn't find it, but you knew just by touching it!"

The surrounding apprentices also cast looks of awe and respect his way.

Lin Yu patted the young man's shoulder. "It's not magic; it's experience. In the future, when you encounter this kind of 'apparently clear but actually blocked' situation, pay more attention to the nodes at the turns."

He stood up and walked over to Wang Defa.

Wang Defa gave a thumbs-up, lowering his voice. "Hall Master, that move of yours was brilliant. These kids have been getting a bit too cocky lately. They really needed you to show your skills and put them in their place."

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Chapter 244: Daily Life of the Immortal Sect

[1,225 words]

"How has the hall been doing lately?" Su Ming asked.

Wang Defa's smile faded a bit as he pulled an account book from his sleeve, his expression turning somewhat serious.

"Hall Master, our 'standardized parts' training method is indeed effective; new recruits are getting up to speed twice as fast. However..."

He flipped to a page in the book, pointing at a line of red text. "Material prices on the market have been rising sharply recently. Especially 'Mercury Sand' and 'Red Essence Copper'; their prices have gone up thirty percent compared to last month. I've heard it's because the front lines are tense, and the sect has diverted large quantities of resources there. Although our Repair Hall's income has increased, costs have risen along with it, so our profits have actually become thinner."

Su Ming frowned slightly.

Mercury Sand was the most commonly used spiritual energy conducting material for repairing formation circuits, and Red Essence Copper was an essential for forging formation bases. A price increase in these two items directly impacted the Repair Hall.

"Can we find substitutes?" Su Ming inquired.

"Difficult," Wang Defa shook his large head. "Among low-grade materials, these two offer the best cost-performance ratio. Others are either too expensive or have poor spiritual conductivity. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless we can find a way to utilize that pile of accumulated waste slag in the storage yard." Wang Defa pointed towards a small mountain of blackish rocks piled in a corner

of the backyard. "That's waste material dumped here by the Artifact Forging Hall in the past. They said the copper content was too low, and the extraction cost was higher than buying new material, so it's just been sitting there gathering dust."

Su Ming followed his pointing finger.

It was a pile of uneven slag, its surface mottled and patchy, indeed looking rather worthless.

But at this moment, under Su Ming's "microscopic perspective" at the sixth layer of Qi Refining, what he saw was not merely rocks.

He saw that within the slag, dark red metal particles were scattered like stars, sparse but not insignificant in total quantity.

"Old Wang, go fetch a piece of that waste slag, and prepare a bucket of 'Metal-Eroding Water' for me." A glint flashed in Su Ming's eyes.

Although Wang Defa didn't understand why, his execution was extremely strong; he immediately scurried off with enthusiasm.

A short while later, Su Ming stood before the pile of waste slag.

He held a black rock the size of a fist in one hand, his other hand hovering above it.

"Gather."

Moisture in the air rapidly converged, mixing with a small amount of the "Metal-Eroding Water," transforming into a faint green mist of water vapor in Su Ming's palm.

Under the control of Su Ming's divine sense, this water mist didn't splash directly onto the rock. Instead, it seemed alive, silently seeping into the fine cracks on the slag's surface.

The powerful divine sense of the sixth layer of Qi Refining allowed Su Ming to precisely control the path of every wisp of mist.

They avoided the hard rock structures, specifically seeking out the loose junctions where metal was present.

"Dissolve."

Su Ming mentally commanded.

The water vapor that had penetrated inside began to take effect, enveloping and separating those tiny Red Essence Copper particles.

After roughly ten breaths.

Su Ming flipped his palm and softly uttered, "Out!"

Suddenly, countless fine red droplets seeped out from the surface of the black rock. These droplets rapidly converged, eventually forming a thumb-sized globule of extremely pure crimson-red liquid, floating in mid-air.

Meanwhile, that black rock instantly became porous and brittle. With a gentle squeeze from Su Ming, it crumbled into a pile of dust.

"This..."

Wang Defa's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

Having dealt with materials for decades, he was an old hand and naturally recognized quality.

That small globule of red liquid was clearly Red Essence Copper liquid with a purity reaching ninety percent! Even inner sect artifact forgers using true fire would need considerable effort to refine to this purity.

Yet the Hall Master did it in just ten breaths? And using cold water?

"This... what kind of spell is this?" Wang Defa stammered.

Su Ming collected the copper liquid into a jade vial, a satisfied smile appearing on his face.

The divine sense control at the sixth layer of Qi Refining was indeed extraordinary. This move just now—if it were in the past, he absolutely couldn't have achieved such precise separation; at best, he could only shatter the rock.

"This is called 'Water Extraction Method.'"

Su Ming casually made up a name and tossed the jade vial to Wang Defa. "Old Wang, what's the market price for Red Essence Copper of this purity?"

Wang Defa fumbled to catch the vial, his face flushed with excitement. "This... this is at least three times the price of ordinary Red Essence Copper! And it's practically unavailable at any price! If used to repair high-grade formation plates, the spiritual conductivity would be absolutely perfect!"

"That's good."

Su Ming brushed the stone dust from his hands, his tone calm. "Starting today, select a few apprentices with meticulous divine sense. I'll teach them this skill. From now on, our Repair Hall won't need to buy Red Essence Copper; we'll feed on this pile of waste."

Watching Su Ming's retreating back, the awe in Wang Defa's eyes deepened even more.

This young Hall Master seemed to have an endless stream of methods, always able to turn dead situations around and transform waste into treasure.

...

Evening, Su Ming returned to Clear Stream Valley.

He wasn't in a hurry to cultivate. Instead, he sat on a stone stool in the courtyard, looking at the formation field under the setting sun.

Those eighteen nodes arranged using the "guiding method" were still operating stably, nourishing that patch of messy-looking low-grade spirit herbs.

"How does it feel?" Lin Yu's voice sounded in his mind.

"Very grounded."

Su Ming looked at his own palm. "I used to think cultivation level was just a number. Now I understand that each realm advancement brings not just power, but a new way of seeing the world."

He could see the fine dust within formation plates, the copper particles within slag.

This ability of penetrating insight made him even more steadfast on the path of "scientific cultivation."

"Not bad, your foundation is very solid."

Lin Yu's phantom drifted out, sitting opposite him, speaking with rare seriousness. "That move of 'Water Extraction Method' you showed today was quite inventive. Using water's permeability instead of fire's violence—this aligns very well with our 'Way of Survival' aesthetics: silently reaping benefits without a sound."

Su Ming smiled, about to speak, but saw Lin Yu's expression suddenly turn serious.

"But, disciple, don't forget what I told you this morning."

Lin Yu pointed at Su Ming's lower abdomen. "Although the sixth layer of Qi Refining gives you stronger micro-manipulation ability, it also means your Dantian is bearing a

greater load. You used the 'microscopic perspective' three times today. Each time, your spiritual energy vortex accelerated. I observed that at the crack in your Dao foundation, extremely weak spiritual energy has already begun to leak."

Su Ming's heart tightened, the smile gradually fading from his face.

"This is like a pot with a crack." Lin Yu made an exploding gesture with his hands. "The greater the pressure, the higher the risk of leaking. Before you find a method to repair your Dao foundation, such high-precision operations must not exceed three times per day."

Su Ming remained silent for a long time, then took a deep breath and nodded solemnly at Lin Yu.

"This disciple understands. I will control it."

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

Chapter 245: Seeding Formations

[1,372 words]

The chill of late autumn had deepened. Outside the valley, most plants and trees had withered to yellow, but within this Clear Stream Valley, thanks to the regulation of the "Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation," a moist and constant coolness was still maintained.

Su Ming stood at the eastern side of the valley floor.

This area was originally a stretch of rocky, uneven ground, but now it had been leveled by him, roughly half an acre in size.

Not a single spiritual herb was planted in this plot of land. Instead, it was densely planted with various types of Formation Flags, and the ground was crisscrossed with trenches, carved full of unclosed spiritual energy circuits.

This was Su Ming's newly designated "Formation Field."

Planting crops was to harvest grain; planting formations was to harvest experience.

"The water energy in the Kan position is too strong, causing the fire-attribute warning runes in the Li position to remain unstable."

Su Ming squatted before a small earthen pit, his fingers dipping into a bit of soil and gently rubbing it. A fiery-red formation plate was buried at the bottom of the pit, currently flickering intermittently, emitting a series of grating, sizzling sounds.

"Water and fire failing to aid each other naturally makes it difficult to succeed."

Lin Yu's phantom figure floated to the side, idly teasing the water mist in the air with a withered stalk of grass as he spoke nonchalantly, "Disciple, your thinking is still too 'rigid'. Trying to embed a fire-attribute warning system within the overarching environment of the Water Rhythm Formation is like trying to light a lamp in water. If you force it, it will definitely go out. You need to give it a cover."

"A cover?" Su Ming pondered thoughtfully.

"An isolation layer." Lin Yu pointed at that formation plate. "Use 'wood'-attribute runes as an intermediary. Water generates wood, wood generates fire. Add a 'Generation' character rune in the outer circle to transform the oppressive water spiritual energy pressing in from the surroundings into gentle wood spiritual energy, then feed it to the core fire formation. This is called... ahem, this is called the 'transformer' principle."

Su Ming's eyes lit up.

He immediately took out his carving knife. Instead of directly working on that formation plate on the verge of collapse, he casually picked up a scrap piece of Sinking Star Wood and began carving with flying fingers.

Deep blue water spiritual energy condensed at his fingertips, transforming into extremely fine threads.

The 'Generation' character rune started with a rounded stroke and ended with a concealed edge.

A moment later, Su Ming gently embedded this carved wooden rune into the edge of the earthen pit.

Hum—

The originally wildly flickering fiery-red formation plate, the moment the wooden rune was embedded, seemed to be soothed by a gentle hand, its agitation calming down.

The surrounding water spiritual energy was no longer its enemy. After being filtered through the wooden rune, it transformed into wisps of green vitality, slowly infusing into the formation plate.

The red light stabilized, no longer glaring, but instead emitting a kind of reserved warmth.

"It's done."

Su Ming let out a long sigh of relief, then excitedly recorded in the jade slip in his hand:

"Compound Formation Experiment Record, Seventeenth Attempt: The mutual generation and restraint of the five elements is not absolute opposition; intermediate attributes can be used for 'circulation'. Using wood as a bridge, water and fire can coexist. This method can significantly reduce the rejection reaction of foreign formations in a dominant environment."

After writing this line, Su Ming raised his head and surveyed this half-acre "Formation Field."

No fewer than ten types of small compound formations had already been deployed here.

Some were responsible for creating mist, some for simulating swamps, and others were simply spiritual energy traps.

"But this still isn't enough."

Su Ming put away the jade slip, his gaze shifting to the babbling stream at the valley entrance. "Right now, Clear Stream Valley is a hard turtle shell. But hiding inside the shell, I cannot hear the movements outside. If I only become aware when someone has already reached my doorstep, that would be far too passive."

"So, you want to install surveillance?" Lin Yu raised an eyebrow.

"Surveillance?" Su Ming was no longer surprised by this term, automatically converting it in his mind to cultivation terminology. "Correct. This disciple intends to upgrade the 'Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation' to add the abilities of 'listening to the wind' and 'observing shadows'."

...

Since he was going to modify it, he had to change it from the foundation.

Su Ming did not choose those expensive "recording stones" or "sensing plates" available on the market.

Those things had too strong spiritual energy fluctuations. Hanging them at the valley entrance would be like hanging a lantern, telling others "there's a trap here."

He chose to return to the most primitive runes.

The "True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction" contained extremely obscure annotations on the 'Resonate' character rune and the 'Shadow' character rune.

'Resonate' was not perception through divine sense, but contact through energy aura.

'Shadow' was not an image of light, but a trace of spiritual wave fluctuations.

Su Ming walked barefoot into the icy stream water.

This stream originated from the back mountain, ran through the entire Clear Stream Valley, and finally flowed into the outer sect area. It was a natural spiritual energy conduit.

"Right here."

Su Ming selected a pebble bed at the bottom of the stream. He took out a mica flake only the size of a fingernail, his expression reaching an extreme level of focus.

The divine sense of the sixth-stage Qi Refining realm allowed him to perform micro-carving on such a tiny carrier.

The 'Resonate' character rune was deconstructed by him into its simplest three strokes, corresponding to vibration, temperature, and spiritual pressure respectively.

The 'Shadow' character rune was simplified by him into a spiral pattern, used to record the frequency of spiritual energy fluctuations.

"Go."

Su Ming flicked his finger, and this miniature rune stone flake silently slid into a crevice between two pebbles.

Immediately after, his hands formed a seal, and a thread of spiritual energy from the "Like Water Art" extended out, connecting this rune to the underground water veins.

One spot, two spots, ten spots...

For three full days.

Su Ming, like a tireless farmer, buried a total of one hundred and eight miniature nodes along the stream and the edges of the valley.

These one hundred and eight nodes, through the underground water vein network, converged onto a water mirror inside the cave dwelling.

Now, inside the meditation room of the cave dwelling.

Su Ming looked at the water mirror floating before him.

The mirror's surface was calm and waveless, but as a flying bird skimmed over the stream at the valley entrance, an extremely fine ripple immediately rippled across the mirror's surface.

The center of the ripple clearly displayed the location where the bird passed and its approximate size.

"Extremely weak spiritual energy fluctuation, mundane beast." Su Ming judged.

Immediately after, Lin Yu controlled a wisp of soul power, simulating the spiritual pressure of a third-stage Qi Refining cultivator, and quietly touched a certain node on the western side of the valley.

Hum.

A red ripple instantly appeared on the water mirror. Although blurry, the outline of a humanoid figure was clearly discernible.

"Reaction speed is acceptable, but the imaging is too blurry." Lin Yu commented.
"Moreover, this system of yours has a fatal flaw."

"What?"

"It's too clean." Lin Yu pointed at the locations where those nodes were buried. "If a cultivator proficient in detection techniques simply activates spiritual sight, your nodes buried in the stream water and soil will stand out like fireflies in the night. Although you've used methods from the 'Aura Concealment Art' to conceal them, if you encounter an expert, it's still giving it away for free."

Su Ming's brow furrowed tightly.

This was indeed a problem.

To ensure the sensitivity of spiritual energy transmission, the nodes had to maintain a certain level of activity, and activity meant there were fluctuations.

Wanting the horse to run fast but also wanting it not to eat grass—difficult.

"Unless..." Su Ming's gaze suddenly fell on the area beneath the sheer cliff on the northern side of the valley.

That was the place where, while opening the cave dwelling earlier, the remnant vein of "Sinking Star Iron" had been discovered.

Sinking Star Iron: cold in nature, heavy in quality, possessing a natural ability to block divine sense.

"Since it can't be hidden, then let it become 'chaotic'."

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

Chapter 246: The Spiritual Land Closed-Loop Nurturing Cycle - First Edition

[1,303 words]

A gleam of brilliance flashed in Su Ming's eyes.

He quickly walked to the base of the cliff and pressed his hand against the exposed gray-black rock.

Cold, lifeless.

As his divine sense probed into it, he immediately felt a sluggish sensation, as if trudging through a swamp. Even his perception of direction became slightly distorted.

"This is it!"

Su Ming turned to look at Lin Yu, a trace of excitement in his tone. "Master, the magnetic field... I mean the star-force field, emitted by this Sinking Star Iron remnant vein has a natural interference effect on all detection spells. It's like adding a layer of 'blur filter' to this area."

"I want to move several key master control nodes onto this remnant vein."

Lin Yu was momentarily stunned, then clapped his hands and laughed heartily. "Brilliant! Hiding in plain sight! Normally, when people set up formations, they avoid such troublesome places that interfere with spiritual energy transmission. You're doing the opposite, using its interference to mask the fluctuations of the nodes themselves. As long as your node signals are strong enough to penetrate this interference and transmit back, then to outsiders, this place will just look like a messy magnetic blind spot. Who would ever think there are 'cameras' hidden inside?!"

Action followed words.

Su Ming immediately got to work.

This was no easy task. Sinking Star Iron was extremely hard and repelled spiritual energy.

Su Ming had no choice but to employ the concept of the "Water Extraction Method," using high-pressure water jets to slowly "grind" holes into the rock. Then, he embedded specially-made nodes with increased spiritual energy output power into them.

When the final node was embedded into the remnant vein and successfully integrated into the "Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation"...

Su Ming clearly felt a subtle change occur in the entire valley's spiritual energy field.

The previously hidden, yet still traceable, formation fluctuations now became completely chaotic and disorderly.

If Clear Stream Valley was a clean white cloth under divine sense scanning before, now it had become a gray cloth full of static noise.

Even if outsiders scanned with their divine sense, they would only think the local energy veins here were chaotic and the spiritual energy impure. They would never imagine that beneath this layer of chaos hid a precise surveillance network.

"A natural source of interference, perfect camouflage."

Su Ming wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked at the images on the Water Mirror. Although they were somewhat shaky due to the interference, they were still recognizable. He nodded in satisfaction.

"Now, I can sleep with at least one eye closed."

...

The formation modification was complete for now, but Su Ming didn't idle.

Because he discovered an unexpected boon.

After moving some of the formation nodes into the Sinking Star Iron remnant vein, due to the continuous activation of the formation's spiritual energy, this dormant vein, which had been silent for who knows how many years, actually began to emit an extremely faint, nearly invisible silver stardust.

This stardust seemed harmless to humans but had a strange effect on plants.

Su Ming squatted at the entrance of his cave dwelling.

Here, he had planted several "Heart-Clearing Orchids" he had brought back from the Repair Hall.

These orchids were originally entirely emerald green, barely qualifying as low-grade Yellow-rank spiritual herbs. Their only medicinal effect was a slight mental refreshment.

But now, the edges of these Heart-Clearing Orchid leaves had developed a ring of fine silver spots.

Moreover, the fragrance they emitted was no longer that faint grassy scent, but a subtle, chilly fragrance carrying a sharp coldness.

After just one whiff, Su Ming felt his Spiritual Platform become exceptionally clear. The fatigue in his divine sense from days of setting up the formation actually diminished noticeably.

"Mutated?"

Su Ming carefully plucked a single leaf.

"Water Refining Method, extract."

A mist of water enveloped the leaf. Moments later, a drop of pale silver spiritual liquid hovered in Su Ming's palm.

Without the slightest hesitation, Su Ming lightly touched the drop with his tongue and swallowed it.

Boom.

A surge of coolness shot straight to his head.

It was like drinking a mouthful of chilled sour plum soup on the hottest summer day. The refreshing sensation made Su Ming shiver involuntarily.

Immediately after, he felt the faint throbbing pain in his brow from overusing his divine sense instantly smoothed away.

The recovery speed of his soul power within his Consciousness Sea was actually thirty percent faster than during seated meditation!

"Good stuff!"

Lin Yu's illusory figure drifted closer, sniffing (even though he couldn't smell). "Sinking Star Iron contains star force, which governs the soul; Heart-Clearing Orchids govern the spirit. After this remnant vein was activated by the formation, star force leaked out and was absorbed by these orchids. The medicinal efficacy of these mutated Heart-Clearing Orchids is probably close to high-grade Yellow-rank now, specifically treating divine sense depletion."

Su Ming looked at those few silver-spotted orchids swaying in the wind, his eyes full of pleasant surprise.

As a practitioner of the "Way of Survival" who aspired to become a formation master, divine sense was his ammunition, his mana bar.

Previously, his biggest headache was how slowly his divine sense recovered. Often, after inscribing a few complex runes, he'd need to rest for half a day.

Now, with these "Silver-Spotted Heart-Clearing Orchids," his endurance would be greatly enhanced!

"Is this... an ecosystem?"

The word suddenly popped into Su Ming's mind.

He stood up and looked at Clear Stream Valley before him.

The spiritual herbs didn't grow in isolation; they absorbed the star force from the remnant vein and the water vapor gathered by the formation.

The formation wasn't a dead object either; it operated relying on the spiritual vein, simultaneously activating the remnant vein and nourishing the spiritual herbs in return.

And he, Su Ming, as the manager of this ecosystem, used the spiritual herbs to recover his divine sense, then used that divine sense to optimize the formation and maintain the spiritual vein.

A closed loop.

A miniature, positive, self-reinforcing cycle.

Su Ming quickly walked into his cave dwelling, took out that thick notebook, and solemnly wrote a title on a fresh page:

"Clear Stream Valley Spiritual Land Closed-Loop Nurturing Cycle · Prototype One"

"1. Formations are no longer mere defensive structures, but 'organs' for regulating the environment."

"2. Utilize abandoned remnant veins (Sinking Star Iron) as natural interference sources and special nutrient sources."

"3. Spiritual plants (Silver-Spotted Heart-Clearing Orchids) act as divine sense supply stations, supporting high-intensity formation operation."

"4. Conclusion: This place is no longer a dead land, but a slowly growing 'organism'."

After writing this, Su Ming put down his pen and walked outside the cave dwelling.

Night had fallen.

Moonlight essence cascaded like water, pouring into the valley.

Under the effect of the "Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation," the entire Clear Stream Valley was enveloped in a faint, nearly invisible blue mist of water vapor, interwoven with the moonlight, creating a dreamlike, illusory scene.

Those few silver-spotted plants gently swayed in the breeze, emitting a subtle, cold fragrance.

The stream babbled, carrying silent messages; the remnant vein underground pulsed faintly, weaving an invisible protective net.

Su Ming took a deep breath, feeling this small world that belonged completely to him.

This was no longer just a cold shelter, no longer a temporary base ready for escape at any moment.

It had roots.

"Master."

Su Ming called out softly.

"Hmm?" Lin Yu's voice sounded lazily, yet it carried a sense of peace.

"I think... we can stay here a bit longer."

"Nonsense," Lin Yu scoffed. "Such a good nest, even if you tried to kick me out, I wouldn't leave. Alright, enough with the sentimentality. Hurry up and propagate those orchids. Three or five plants, who can that possibly satisfy? If you want to get rich, have more kids and plant more trees, understand?"

Su Ming chuckled wryly, the bit of poetic sentiment that had welled up in his heart instantly vanishing without a trace.

"Yes, planting right away."

The young man rolled up his sleeves. The moonlight stretched his shadow long.

The sound of the hoe striking the earth seemed particularly solid and reassuring in the tranquil valley.

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Chapter 247: Poverty is the primary driving force for seeking the Tao

[1,628 words]

The mist in Clear Stream Valley was thinned by the morning light, and dewdrops slid slowly down the barrier light screen in front of the cave dwelling, soaking into the soil and leaving a small patch of dampness.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on the stone bed, the storage pouch exclusive to outer sect disciples laid out before him. His slender fingers were gently extracting the items from the pouch one by one, his movements as light and careful as if he were caressing fragile porcelain.

Thirty low-grade spirit stones, stacked neatly, emitted a faint, hazy cyan glow. Five bottles of Foundation Consolidation Pills, the porcelain bottles smooth and warm, exuding a pleasant medicinal fragrance.

This was the standard allocation issued by the sect after his promotion to outer sect disciple. For the vast majority of newcomers who had just climbed out of the menial post pile, this was undoubtedly a windfall, enough to make them laugh out loud even in their dreams.

But there was no smile on Su Ming's face, only a solemnity born of careful calculation.

"Thirty pieces."

Su Ming picked up a spirit stone, feeling the gentle spiritual energy within it, and sighed, "It looks like a lot, but if converted into 'Void Stone Powder,' it's only enough for one and a half portions. If converted into the high-grade material 'Flowing Silver' needed to repair formation plates, it's only enough for three qian."

"Be content, disciple."

The Xuantian ring trembled slightly, and Lin Yu's phantom slowly drifted out.

After being nourished by the "Source Substance" during this period, his form had solidified slightly compared to before, no longer flickering like a candle in the wind, and even the folds on his clothes could be seen more clearly.

Lin Yu drifted above the pile of spirit stones, taking a deep breath of the spiritual energy like a miser guarding his treasure. Although he couldn't actually absorb it, that didn't stop him from enjoying the illusion.

"The 'Spirit Nourishing True Explanation' cultivation method is truly marvelous. Your teacher now feels his soul body is stable, no longer having that floating, ethereal sense of being on the verge of dissipating at any moment." Lin Yu smacked his lips, then changed the subject, "But this thing is a bottomless pit. It focuses on 'defense,' emphasizing slow accumulation and a sudden outburst, which means it requires a massive amount of resources to pile up in the early stages. Relying solely on your meager allocation, if we wait for me to recover to the point where I can help you ward off disasters, we'd probably have to wait until your grandson reaches Foundation Establishment."

Su Ming gave a bitter smile and put the spirit stones back into the storage pouch.

"Also, that 'Minor Void Spirit Attraction Formation'..." Lin Yu pointed at the ring, "Just to activate it once, the 'Void Stone Powder' used as a medium alone consumes twenty spirit stones worth. And that's just the basic material. If you want to attract high-quality 'Source Substance,' you need to add 'Boundary Origin Sand.' That stuff costs thirty spirit stones for just one liang."

"It's a gold-devouring beast." Su Ming summarized.

"Correction, it's a 'god-tier gold-devouring assistant'," Lin Yu corrected, "And then there's your Dao foundation."

Mentioning his Dao foundation, Su Ming instinctively pressed a hand against his lower abdomen.

Even though he wasn't cultivating at this moment, the few fine cracks deep within his Dantian still felt like thorns embedded in his flesh, causing a dull ache.

Earlier, he had attempted to run the 'Like Water Art' for a grand circulation cycle. When his spiritual energy flowed through the core of his Qihai, that distinct feeling of obstruction was clearer than ever before.

It was like a grain of sand stuck inside a precision machine.

The faster it spun, the worse the wear and tear.

"I've estimated it," Su Ming said in a low voice, "With the resources available to an outer sect disciple, cultivating step by step, it would take at least a year to break through from Qi Refining sixth layer to the later seventh layer. Moreover, as my cultivation deepens and my spiritual pressure increases, this damage to my Dao foundation will become more and more of a hindrance. It might even... collapse at the critical moment of a breakthrough."

The air in the meditation room grew heavy for a moment.

Money. Or rather, resources.

This was the most realistic, coldest threshold placed before all immortal cultivators. Without resources, no matter how peerless your talent, you could only waste away into a handful of yellow earth over the years.

Su Ming took out a piece of yellowed grass paper from his robe and spread it on his lap. He dipped his brush in ink, his brushstrokes extremely steady, and wrote two words on the paper:

Make Money.

"Simple and brutal, I like it." Lin Yu commented from the side.

Ignoring his master's teasing, Su Ming listed two lines of smaller text below.

Short-term goal: Earn over a hundred spirit stones per month. Method: Utilize my formation expertise to find tasks with high technical barriers and low competition. Use: Purchase Void Stone Powder to maintain Master's soul body recovery, and gather information on spiritual medicines to repair my Dao foundation.

Mid-term goal: Completely resolve the hidden danger of my Dao foundation.

After writing, Su Ming stared at the words on the paper for a moment, then gently rubbed his fingers together, turning the paper into dust.

He stood up, straightened his cyan outer sect robe, and fastened the waist token representing his status.

Su Ming pushed open the heavy stone door. The morning sunlight was a bit dazzling, and he narrowed his eyes slightly, "Master, I'm going to the Administration Hall. The steady, long-term business of the Repair Hall is stable, but it only earns sect contribution points. We need to take on some 'private work'."

...

Cloud Hidden Sect, Administration Hall.

This was the most bustling, most worldly place in the entire outer sect.

The massive hall was packed with people, hundreds of outer sect disciples shuttling back and forth.

The air was filled with the smell of sweat, the sulfurous odor of low-grade elixirs, and the clinking sounds of various magical implements colliding.

A huge task board hovered in the center of the hall, densely scrolling with all kinds of task information, each character glowing with an enticing spiritual light.

"Purchasing second-rank demon beast 'Ironback Bear' gallbladder, fifty spirit stones each! Forming a team now, need a body cultivator to tank!"

"Seeking to purchase ten stalks of 'Clear Spirit Grass,' price negotiable, urgent!"

The clamor surged like a tidal wave.

Su Ming activated the 'Aura Concealment Art,' suppressing his own aura to around Qi Refining fifth layer. Like a drop of water merging into the ocean, he inconspicuously squeezed into the crowd.

He didn't look at those popular hunting tasks.

Although hunting demon beasts offered high rewards, the risks were immense, time-consuming, and labor-intensive. If injured, the cost of healing elixirs alone would be a significant expense. For Su Ming now, that was an extremely low 'cost-performance' trade.

His gaze skipped over the red-colored 'Combat-type' tasks and went directly to the far right side of the board, to that sparsely attended 'Skill-type' area.

Most of the tasks here were tedious, cumbersome, and required specific skills to complete.

Such as refining ore, drawing low-grade talismans, tending spiritual fields, and so on.

The rewards were stable, but they often took an extremely long time and were incredibly patience-consuming.

"Isn't there anything with higher technical content and higher pay?" Lin Yu complained within the consciousness sea, "These tasks are practically exploiting cheap labor."

Su Ming's eyes swept quickly across the board. Suddenly, his gaze stopped on a task in a corner of the list.

[Urgent Bounty: Formation out of control in the Spirit Beast Peak's 'Cold Pool Incubation Chamber'.]

Description: The third-rank spirit beast 'Jade Water Python' on Spirit Beast Peak has laid three eggs, requiring the cold pool's earth energy for incubation. However, recent fluctuations in the earth fire vein have caused the cold pool's temperature to alternate between hot and cold, becoming unbalanced, leading to the incubation formation becoming disordered and the spirit eggs' vitality being damaged. Requires a formation master proficient in the art of harmonizing water and fire to go and stabilize it.

Reward: One hundred low-grade spirit stones, plus one bottle of 'Beast Spirit Milk.'

Failure Penalty: If the spirit eggs are destroyed, must compensate three hundred spirit stones.

The font of this task was a glaring blood-red color, clearly indicating it had been posted for some days and was in an extremely urgent state.

"One hundred spirit stones..." Su Ming's Adam's apple bobbed slightly.

That amount of money equaled two months of his allocation, enough to buy five portions of Void Stone Powder.

And that 'Beast Spirit Milk' was excellent stuff for strengthening the body and warming the meridians; it might even have some alleviating effect on his damaged Dao foundation.

"But the penalty is harsh enough too." Lin Yu whistled, "Three hundred spirit stones, you couldn't pay that even if you sold yourself. No wonder no one dares to take it. This is clearly a mess. Earth fire vein fluctuations are a natural disaster. For a formation master to go and fight against a natural disaster, that's not just a technical job, it's a physical one too."

"No, it's not about fighting."

Su Ming stared at the task description, a flash of deduction in his eyes, "Cold pool, earth fire, formation. The previous formation master probably failed because they tried to use a 'blocking' method, forcibly suppressing the earth fire or forcibly boosting the cold energy."

"What do you plan to do?"

"Guide it." A slight smile curled at the corner of Su Ming's mouth, "Just establish a dynamic balancing loop, transforming the excess heat into the driving force to circulate the cold energy. Just like my 'Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation'."

"The risk is huge." Lin Yu reminded.

"Wealth is found in danger." Su Ming turned and walked straight towards the counter responsible for accepting tasks.

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Chapter 248, First Mission

[1,232 words]

Behind the counter, a steward in gray robes was yawning out of sheer boredom. Seeing Su Ming approach, he didn't even lift his eyelids. "What are you taking? Show your waist token first."

"I'm taking task seventy-three, Spirit Beast Peak formation maintenance." Su Ming handed over his waist token.

The steward, who had been picking his teeth, suddenly froze, nearly jabbing his gum.

He looked up, giving Su Ming a once-over, his gaze as if looking at a madman.

"You?" The steward pointed at Su Ming's brand-new outer sect magic robe. "Never seen you before. Newly promoted? Do you know how many days that task has been posted? Two Qi Refining late-stage formation masters went before, one had his eyebrows singed by an out-of-control earth fire, the other almost got turned into an ice pop. Both slunk away after paying compensation. You, a... hmm, Qi Refining fifth layer? Going to send yourself to death or to send money?"

Several disciples nearby who were picking tasks also cast surprised glances, and whispers started to rise.

"Who is this kid? So ignorant of his own limits?"

"He looks unfamiliar, probably just entered and wants to show off."

"Hey, if those Jade Water Python eggs shatter, he'll probably be scrubbing chamber pots on Spirit Beast Peak for the rest of his life to pay off the debt."

Su Ming's expression didn't change, his tone steady. "Since this disciple dares to take it, I naturally have some confidence. If something truly goes wrong, this disciple is willing to compensate according to the rules."

The steward sneered, about to dissuade (or rather, mock) him, when a thunderously rough voice suddenly boomed from the main hall entrance.

"Who still dares to take it?! My eggs are about to be cooked! Those trash from Formation Peak usually brag to the heavens, but at the critical moment, they all turn into turtles pulling their heads in!"

The crowd scattered with a rustle.

They saw a burly, bear-like man wearing a sleeveless leather vest stride in with large steps.

His face was full of thick, fierce-looking flesh, his crimson hair stood on end, and his entire body exuded a heart-palpitating aura of violence, the bloody scent from years of battling demonic beasts.

Spirit Beast Peak outer sect disciple, Lei Hu.

Qi Refining ninth layer peak.

Lei Hu charged to the counter, slapping a palm on the table, making the pen holder jump. "Steward Liu! Still no one taking it? If something happens to those three Jade Water Python eggs, I'll dismantle this counter of yours!"

Steward Liu shuddered in fright, hurriedly forcing a smile. "Senior Brother Lei, calm your anger, calm your anger! This task's difficulty is too high, there's compensation and..."

"Cut the crap!" Lei Hu's eyes were bloodshot. "Isn't there a single man with balls who dares to try?"

"This senior brother."

A clear, resonant yet neither subservient nor arrogant voice sounded beside Lei Hu.

Lei Hu turned his head sharply, seeing a thin, azure-robed youth standing quietly there, holding the jade slip representing the task in his hand.

"I'll take it." Su Ming looked directly into Lei Hu's oppressively intense eyes without the slightest retreat.

Lei Hu narrowed his eyes, his violent spiritual pressure pressing down on Su Ming like a mountain. "You? A kid whose hair hasn't even fully grown? Which elder's personal disciple are you?"

Su Ming felt his breath catch, but the "Like Water Art" within his body automatically circulated. That soft, tenacious water spiritual energy instantly dissolved most of the pressure.

"Neither." Su Ming said calmly. "Outer sect disciple, Su Ming. Repair Hall Hall Master."

"Repair Hall?" Lei Hu was stunned for a moment, seeming to have some impression of the name but couldn't recall it. "That place that fixes broken junk?"

A few chuckles came from the surroundings.

Su Ming wasn't angered, just calmly raised the jade slip in his hand. "Senior Brother, if you want to continue discussing my background here, those three spirit eggs will probably truly be cooked. It's true I fix broken junk, but sometimes, those who fix broken things understand better how to solve trouble than those who make them."

Lei Hu stared at Su Ming for three breaths.

He saw not the slightest trace of fear or vanity in this youth's eyes, only a kind of nearly cold rationality and confidence. He had seen this kind of look in the eyes of truly skilled experts.

"Fine!"

Lei Hu suddenly waved a hand. "Treating a dead horse as a live one to doctor! Kid, if you can save my spirit eggs, I owe you a favor! If you ruin them because your skills are lacking..."

He leaned close to Su Ming, baring his pale white teeth. "I'll throw you into the python nest to incubate eggs!"

Su Ming expressionlessly tucked the jade slip into his robe. "Lead the way."

...

Spirit Beast Peak, rear mountain cold pool.

Before even getting close, an extremely strange aura assaulted their senses.

The left half of the body felt as if falling into an ice cellar, the cold piercing to the bone; the right half felt unbearably hot and dry, as if standing in a furnace.

They saw a deep, emerald green pool above which white mist steamed.

Intricate formation flags were arranged around the cold pool, but at this moment, these flags were scattered and askew, some covered in frost, others already charred and smoking.

In the center of the cold pool, on a stone platform, lay three green snake eggs the size of human heads. At this moment, the luster on the surface of these three snake eggs was extremely dim, even faintly emitting a grayish, decaying aura.

"See it?" Lei Hu stood by the pool's edge, anxiously rubbing his hands. "This earth fire vein has gone crazy for some reason, surging up once every half hour. The cold pool's original 'Profound Yin Formation' can't suppress it. I had someone add a 'Blazing Fire Formation' to try to neutralize it, but the two sides started fighting!"

Su Ming didn't speak. He activated the "observation micro state."

With the support of Lin Yu's soul power, the scene before him instantly transformed into countless red and blue intertwined lines.

Red was the earth fire murderous aura, violent, disorderly, like a herd of mad bulls charging up from underground.

Blue was the cold pool's yin energy, icy cold, stagnant, pressing down firmly from above.

The two collided violently at the location of the snake eggs, forming terrifying spiritual energy turbulent flows.

Those three fragile snake eggs were like beans between millstones, about to be crushed at any moment.

"Typical 'block the leak' thinking." Lin Yu evaluated within the Consciousness Sea. "The previous formation master tried to use cold energy to suppress the earth fire, resulting in accumulated pressure that erupts even more violently."

Su Ming nodded, taking out eighteen blank formation flags from his storage pouch.

He didn't immediately set up the formation. Instead, he walked a circle around the cold pool, stopping every few steps to gently tap the ground with his toe, as if measuring something.

"Hey! What are you doing? Performing a shaman dance?" Lei Hu was growing impatient.

"Shut up."

Su Ming didn't even turn his head, coldly spitting out two words.

Lei Hu choked, about to explode, but then saw Su Ming suddenly move.

This time, he didn't use any complex hand seals. Instead, he directly inserted the formation flags in his hand at an extremely tricky angle into seemingly completely unrelated spots of soil at the cold pool's edge.

The first flag, inserted at the Li position, three inches left of center.

The second flag, inserted at the Kan position, five inches right of center.

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[1,328 words]

As the eighteen formation flags fell, a miraculous scene unfolded.

The red and blue spiritual energies that had been violently colliding in the center of the cold pool did not vanish. Instead, like a dredged river channel, they began to flow along the path guided by the formation flags.

The heat from the earth fire was led to bypass the snake eggs, flowing out along the left side; the yin energy from the cold pool circulated along the right side.

The two formed a Tai Chi-like ring around the periphery of the snake eggs.

The heat warmed the surrounding air, preventing the excessive cold from freezing the eggs; the cold energy cooled the core's intense heat, preventing the eggs from being cooked.

The once chaotic battlefield instantly transformed into a precisely temperature-controlled incubation chamber.

"This..." Lei Hu's eyes, wide as copper bells, stared as the luster on the surface of the three snake eggs visibly regained its moist sheen. "It's... fixed already?"

He hadn't witnessed any earth-shattering spell clashes or dazzlingly radiant formation effects.

That kid just stuck a few flags in, like casually untangling a messy ball of yarn, and everything just... fell into place.

Su Ming brushed the dirt off his hands, his complexion slightly pale.

The previous deductions and formation deployment had consumed a massive amount of his divine sense.

He turned around, looking at the dumbfounded Lei Hu, and extended his hand. "Payment due: one hundred spirit stones, plus the Beast Spirit Milk. Also, consider these formation flags a gift; they'll last three days. If the earth fire vein is still unstable after three days, it'll cost extra."

Lei Hu looked at this kid a full head shorter than himself, his Adam's apple bobbing. The ferocious glint in his eyes vanished completely, replaced by a look one might give a monster.

"You kid... you've got some skills."

Lei Hu readily pulled out a heavy pouch and slapped it into Su Ming's hand, then fished out a jade bottle and passed it over. The tough muscles on his face contorted into a smile uglier than a grimace. "Su Ming, right? From now on, my formations are yours to fix! Anyone who dares to snatch this business, I'll have words with them!"

Su Ming hefted the spirit stone pouch in his hand, feeling its substantial weight. A genuine smile finally touched the corner of his mouth.

First bucket of gold, acquired.

And, it seemed he had inadvertently opened up a new business line as well.

"Easy enough," Su Ming said, stashing the spirit stones away, his tone reverting to its usual humility. "As long as the spirit stones are in place, there's nothing that can't be fixed."

...

By the time he left Spirit Beast Peak, the sun had already passed its zenith.

Carrying the heavy one hundred spirit stones and that bottle of Beast Spirit Milk, Su Ming didn't head directly back to Clear Stream Valley. Instead, he changed course and returned to the Administration Hall.

The clamor within the great hall remained, the glowing characters on the mission board flowing endlessly.

Having tasted the sweetness of "monetizing his skills," Su Ming's gaze upon that board had completely changed. Before, looking at these tasks meant seeing trouble; now, he saw uncut spirit stones waiting to be polished.

"Master, wading into these muddy waters to fish has actually revealed some methods," Su Ming stood in a corner of the board, his eyes scanning over the "skill-based" tasks most disciples ignored, speaking quietly in his mind to Lin Yu.

"What muddy waters? This is 'technology diffusion,' it's a 'Dimensional Reduction Strike.'"

Lin Yu's voice sounded in the Consciousness Sea, carrying a hint of just-woken-up laziness. "A roughneck like Lei Hu, aside from fighting and killing, knows nothing about formations. You're earning money from the Information Gap and a technology premium. However, such easy marks aren't easy to find. Next, we need to find some steady, long-term work."

Su Ming gave a slight nod, his gaze finally settling on two tasks.

First: Issued by the Spiritual Plant Garden. "Assist in optimizing the irrigation minor formation for three acres of 'Jade Marrow Mushrooms.' Requires proficiency in water-attribute spiritual energy regulation." Reward: thirty spirit stones.

Second: Private commission. "Long-term purchase of 'refined Red Copper ore,' purity requirement above ninety-five percent." Price negotiable.

"Refining Red Copper ore is grueling labor. Even with your 'Water Refining Method,' a purity requirement above ninety-five percent is extremely high. It's time-consuming, effort-intensive, and easily draws attention," Lin Yu analyzed. "But that Spiritual Plant Garden task fits your current approach quite well."

"The 'Like Water Art' specializes in controlling water; Jade Marrow Mushrooms thrive in shade and moisture," Su Ming calculated internally. "And while thirty spirit stones isn't a lot, the advantages are safety and discretion. A place like the Spiritual Plant Garden has ample resources. If I can establish a connection there..."

"Then I'll take this one," Su Ming decided, reaching out and plucking the pale green jade slip.

...

The Spiritual Plant Garden was located in the southeastern corner of the sect, in low-lying terrain with abundant moisture.

Even before stepping through the garden gate, a rich, complex aroma of vegetation assailed his senses.

Within this fragrance was the clear bitterness of spirit herbs, the earthy scent of humus soil, and the strange odor of various spirit fertilizers in fermentation.

Su Ming stood at the entrance, surveying the scene before him.

The spiritual energy was indeed vibrant, but the chaos was equally real.

As far as the eye could see, plots of spiritual fields interlocked like dog's teeth. The glowing lights of defensive formations flashed red and green in a jumbled mess, utterly lacking order.

Several menial disciples in drab, short work clothes were sprinting along the field ridges with spirit hoes on their shoulders, being chased by a few irritable guardian spirit beasts in a scene of utter pandemonium.

"Quite a 'lively' place," Lin Yu scoffed.

Su Ming straightened his robes and stepped inside.

The steward responsible for receiving him was surnamed Wu.

This man appeared to be around forty, with Qi Refining ninth layer cultivation. He was lean and wiry, with a pair of downturned mustaches that gave him a somewhat troubled look.

He was squatting on a field ridge, sighing heavily over a few wilted, drooping spirit herbs. He held a smoking pipe in his hand, puffing away fiercely.

"Steward Wu," Su Ming stepped forward, cupping his hands in greeting and presenting the task jade slip. "Outer sect disciple Su Ming, here regarding the task to optimize your irrigation formation."

Steward Wu lifted his eyelids. His murky gaze swept over Su Ming's overly youthful face. He didn't reach for the jade slip, merely exhaling two streams of blue smoke from his nostrils.

"Another outer sect one?" Steward Wu's brows furrowed into a deep frown, his tone dripping with impatience. "One came just a couple days ago, Qi Refining eighth layer, claimed to be proficient in water techniques. Went up there and messed around with the formation, ended up watering my Jade Marrow Mushroom seedlings so much their roots rotted. Kid, are you even old enough? If you're here just to pad your experience, go somewhere else. My place can't take any more disturbances."

Clearly, he'd been burned before.

Su Ming wasn't angered. He withdrew the jade slip, his tone calm. "Since you posted the bounty, Steward, it must be that those Jade Marrow Mushrooms have truly reached a point where they must be treated. Root rot is caused by water flow that's too rapid, with accumulated water unable to drain. If I'm not mistaken, the edges of those

seedlings' leaves are yellowing, and there are black spots near the root stems. These are signs of 'water toxicity' accumulation."

Steward Wu's hand, about to knock out his pipe, paused. He finally gave Su Ming a proper look.

"Got a bit of an eye," he said, standing up and brushing the dirt off his backside. "Fine, since you're here, go take a look. Let's be clear upfront: if you can't fix it, even if you're an outer sect disciple, I'll go to the Administration Hall and file a complaint against you, deducting your contribution points!"

Su Ming offered a faint smile. "Please lead the way."

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Chapter 250: Unexpected Harvest

[1,446 words]

The three acres of Jade Marrow Mushroom fields were located on a shady slope deep within the Spiritual Plant Garden.

Jade Marrow Mushroom was a mid-grade Yellow-tier spirit medicine, extremely delicate and finicky. It liked moisture but feared waterlogging, preferred shade but dreaded cold, and had extremely stringent requirements for the spiritual energy environment.

At this moment, a thin layer of spiritual rain was enveloping the field above, a sign of the "Drizzle Formation" in operation.

But Su Ming spotted the problem at a glance.

Although the spiritual rain was falling, its landing points were extremely uneven. The eastern section of the field had already accumulated a puddle of water, while the western part remained dry. The few most precious mother plants in the center were being washed by an intermittent flow of spiritual energy water, their leaves drooping, looking as if they were about to breathe their last.

"See that?" Steward Wu pointed at those mother plants, his heart aching so much he kept sucking his teeth, "This 'Drizzle Formation' was set up three years ago by a senior brother from Formation Peak. It was fine originally. But these past few months,

something went wrong. The rain falls like a drunkard pissing—sporadic and splashing everywhere!"

"Pfft..." In the Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu couldn't help but laugh out loud, "That analogy is absolutely perfect."

Su Ming's expression remained unchanged. He didn't rush to touch the formation plate. Instead, he took out a set of simple tools from his storage pouch.

Several transparent glass tubes engraved with measurement marks, a compass, and a few sheets of blank grass paper.

He rolled up his trouser legs and stepped directly into the muddy field.

"Hey? What are you doing?" Steward Wu was taken aback, "The formation plate is over by the ridge. Aren't you going to fix the plate? What are you doing down in the field?"

"The formation is dead, but the land is alive."

Su Ming didn't even turn his head, inserting a glass tube into the area with the deepest water accumulation and carefully observing the markings on it, "If I don't figure out how the water flows and how the soil absorbs it, messing with the formation plate would be pointless."

For the next half hour, Steward Wu watched as this young disciple walked through the field like an old farmer, taking deep, uneven steps in the mud.

Every few *zhang*, he would stop to take measurements, then scribble and sketch on the grass paper.

The sun gradually shifted westward. By the time Steward Wu had smoked two pipes of tobacco and was nearly out of patience, Su Ming finally climbed back onto the ridge.

He wasn't covered in mud and looking disheveled. Instead, he had used a Dust-Cleaning Technique to clean his robes spotlessly.

"Steward Wu, please take a look."

Su Ming handed over the sketch filled with lines and data.

On the diagram, the terrain undulations, spiritual energy concentration distribution, and water flow directions of these three acres were clearly marked. Especially the nodes marked with red circles were particularly alarming.

"The problem isn't with the main formation plate."

Su Ming pointed at the three curves on the diagram, his tone certain, "The main formation is operating normally. The issue lies in the mismatch between the spiritual energy output nodes of these three auxiliary formations and the slope gradient of this field."

"You see, although this field looks flat, it's actually 'higher in the west, lower in the east,' with a slope of about three *fen*. The original formation setting was for uniform rainfall. Water flows downhill, naturally causing waterlogging and root rot in the east, and dryness and thirst in the west."

Steward Wu looked at the diagram. Although he didn't understand some of the symbols, he grasped what Su Ming was saying.

"Then... in your opinion, how should it be fixed?" Steward Wu's tone softened a bit. This kid didn't seem like someone who only knew theory.

"No need for major changes."

Su Ming took out three blank Formation Flags from his sleeve, toying with them in his hand, "We won't touch the core, only adjust the endpoints. We just need to adjust the output power of these three nodes: increase the west by thirty percent, decrease the east by twenty percent. And add a miniature 'Flow Split' rune in the low-lying area to divert the excess water into the underground drainage channel."

"The cost?" Steward Wu was most concerned about this.

"Five spirit stones for materials." Su Ming held up a hand with all fingers extended, "Plus the thirty spirit stones you'll pay me as reward."

Steward Wu's eyes rolled thoughtfully. The previous formation master had immediately demanded to replace the main formation plate, asking for one hundred spirit stones. This kid in front of him only wanted five?

"You have two days." Steward Wu made a prompt decision, fishing out five spirit stones from his robe and tossing them to Su Ming, "Materials are your responsibility. Succeed, and you get paid. Fail, and don't come back."

"Half a day is sufficient."

Su Ming caught the spirit stones, turned, and left, "I'll go to the Repair Hall to fetch some things. I'll be right back."

...

Half an hour later, Su Ming returned to the Spiritual Plant Garden carrying several inscribed rune stakes and a bundle of materials.

He didn't let Steward Wu intervene, instead walking into the formation alone.

It was dusk, and the light within the Spiritual Plant Garden had softened.

Su Ming stood beside those nearly withered Jade Marrow Mushrooms, took a deep breath, and quietly circulated the *Like Water Art* within his body.

In his perception, his surroundings were no longer just soil and plants, but a world filled with the flow of moisture.

The underground currents, the mist in the air, the sap flowing within plant roots and stems—everything was revealed in minute detail.

"Kan position, channel the flow."

With a flick of his wrist, Su Ming precisely drove a wooden stake carved with the "Lead" character rune into the soil at the lowest point of the terrain.

The stake entered the earth silently, yet it seemed to open an invisible valve.

The stagnant water that had accumulated there, as if summoned, began to slowly seep underground, flowing away along the runic patterns on the stake.

"Li position, increase pressure."

He then moved to the higher ground on the western side, embedding a formation plate fragment into a formation node.

As he injected a point of faint blue spiritual energy from his fingertip, the previously sparse drizzle instantly became denser.

Su Ming moved through the field, his actions flowing smoothly and naturally, without any unnecessary flourishes.

Every move he made precisely targeted the nodes of spiritual energy flow.

"This kid... actually knows his stuff."

Squatting on the ridge smoking, the suspicion in Steward Wu's eyes gradually turned to surprise.

He was an expert. Although he didn't understand formation setting, he understood farming.

He could clearly feel that as Su Ming made adjustments, the "qi" in this field smoothed out. That previously congested, stagnant feeling disappeared, replaced by a vibrant, lively vitality.

Just as Su Ming was adjusting the final node, an unexpected event occurred.

This was an old, worn-out node located at the edge of the field ridge, buried extremely deep.

Su Ming was just about to implant a fine-tuning rune into the ground when he felt the soil beneath his feet loosen.

"Crack."

A crisp sound, as if something had shattered.

Su Ming frowned slightly, crouched down, and carefully brushed away the soil.

Deep in the soil, a corner of a broken clay pot was revealed. The pot, buried for who knows how many years, was already severely decayed and had half-collapsed under Su Ming's foot.

Amid the fragments of the clay pot was a pile of old, long-inactive formation plate debris.

"So it's just garbage from an old, discarded formation foundation." Su Ming felt somewhat disappointed and was about to fill in the soil to bury it.

"Wait!"

In the Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu suddenly spoke up, "Don't bury it! Pick up that blackish stone!"

Su Ming paused his movement, his gaze falling on an utterly inconspicuous black pebble in the debris pile.

The stone was only the size of a thumb, covered in mud, looking no different from an ordinary pebble.

But he trusted his Master's judgment.

Su Ming reached out without changing his expression, pretending to clear the debris, and casually scooped up the black stone. He wiped it with his sleeve and stored it in his storage pouch.

"What is it?" Lin Yu asked in his mind.

"Moisture Stone." Su Ming's voice carried a trace of pleasant surprise, "A low-grade water-attribute material. Although not particularly precious, its advantage is being natural. This thing has been buried underground for some years, saturated with earth qi. It's perfect as supplementary material for the formation core of the 'Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation.'"

Su Ming was secretly delighted internally, but showed absolutely nothing on his face.

This counted as an unexpected harvest.

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