

# Transmigrated into a Grandpa, Embracing the Laid-Back Life

## Chapter 261: That's Not How Business Is Done

[ 1,352 words ]

The night of the black market always feels heavier and colder than the outside world.

Here, there are no sect rules to bind, only naked exchanges of profit. The air is thick with the smell of rotting spirit herbs, cheap rouge, and that musty odor of gutter rats that can never be washed away.

Wang Defa sat at a greasy square table in the furthest corner of the "Drunken Immortal Inn," holding a bowl of watered-down, low-quality spirit wine, his gaze somewhat vacant.

This was his third day in the black market.

Following Su Ming's instructions, he hadn't recklessly set up a stall hawking "Bumper Harvest No. 1" like a greenhorn. Instead, he had spent three days, like a diligent spider, weaving an invisible web in every corner of the black market.

"Have you heard? A batch of special farming tools has recently surfaced."

"What farming tools? Hoes?"

"Hey, these aren't your ordinary hoes. I hear they're specifically for splitting mountains and cracking rocks. Just a tiny pellet, 'BOOM,' and even bluestone can be blasted to dust. Even the protective spiritual light of a late-stage Qi Refining cultivator would shudder three times if hit."

"Really? Where's the stuff from?"

"Shh... better not ask that. Anyway, it's not that fancy-looking junk from the Vessel Hall."

These words, spread through a few carefully chosen, big-mouthed middlemen by Wang Defa, had taken flight among the lower-level cultivators of the black market. He was extremely cautious, his wording deliberately vague, only talking about "land reclamation," not "killing"; only mentioning "farming tools," not "thunder fire."

He was waiting.

Waiting for the first fish to bite.

As soon as someone showed interest, he could follow the vine to find the melon, screening for suitable buyers.

\*Tap, tap.\*

Two light knocking sounds echoed on the tabletop.

Wang Defa jolted, nearly dropping the wine bowl in his hand. He looked up to see a figure shrouded entirely in a gray robe standing beside the table, having appeared out of nowhere.

The person didn't speak, just pulled out the long bench opposite and sat down, took a black iron token from their sleeve, flashed it quickly on the table, and immediately withdrew it.

Though it was only for an instant, Wang Defa's pupils instantly contracted to pinpoints.

That token was engraved with a ferocious \*Bì'àn\* beast head—that was the symbol of the Outer Sect Enforcement Hall!

Cold sweat instantly soaked through Wang Defa's back. He felt as if his throat was being choked, his breathing becoming difficult.

It's over.

Is this entrapment? Or has the matter been exposed?

Countless thoughts flashed through his mind in an instant. He was even already calculating how to bite down and never reveal Su Ming if he was dragged into the Enforcement Hall's prison.

"Don't be nervous."

The voice of the gray-robed person was low, carrying the cold, hard edge of someone accustomed to giving orders, but there was no killing intent. "I'm here to discuss business."

Wang Defa swallowed hard, forcibly suppressing the urge to flee, and let out a dry laugh. "Y-you jest, sir. I'm just a small-time dealer in second-hand junk. What kind of business could possibly catch your discerning eye?"

"Cut the nonsense."

The gray-robed person slightly lowered their hood, revealing a pair of sinister eyes. "I hear you have a batch of particularly 'potent' farming tools?"

Wang Defa's fingers dug tightly into the edge of the table, his knuckles turning white. He neither admitted nor denied, just stared fixedly at the other person.

The gray-robed person seemed quite satisfied with his reaction, the corner of their mouth twitching. "I don't care where this stuff comes from, or whether it follows the rules. I just need to solve one problem."

They dipped a finger into the wine and wrote a few characters on the table, then immediately wiped them away.

"There are some 'structures' built in violation of regulations. Their location is rather... obstructive. They need to be demolished. But..." The gray-robed person stared at Wang Defa. "The commotion can't be too big. It's best if they... collapse silently and without a trace. Can it be done?"

Wang Defa was stunned.

Illegal structures? Demolition?

Having mixed in the outer sect for so many years, he understood this underworld jargon all too well.

So-called "illegal structures" likely referred to the cave dwelling of some wandering cultivator unwilling to pay protection money, or a secret stronghold of some hostile faction. And "demolition," naturally meant...

"Sir, you mean..." Wang Defa probed cautiously, "As long as it falls down?"

"Correct. As long as it falls, and no trace of human intervention can be found." The gray-robed person pulled a heavy cloth pouch from their sleeve and tossed it onto the table, producing a crisp clinking sound. "This is the deposit. There will be a substantial reward upon completion."

With that, the gray-robed person stood up and vanished into the crowd like a ghost.

Wang Defa looked at the spirit stone pouch on the table, feeling it wasn't money, but a red-hot branding iron.

Someone from the Enforcement Hall, coming to the black market to buy "demolition tools"?

These waters run too deep.

...

Clear Stream Valley, the night was deep.

The atmosphere inside the cave dwelling was somewhat tense.

After listening to Wang Defa's report, Su Ming tapped his fingers rhythmically on the stone table, his brow slightly furrowed.

"Hall Master, we can't take this job!"

Wang Defa was still shaken, his face pale. "That's someone from the Enforcement Hall! If our stuff leaves any trace and gets discovered, that would be colluding with dark forces, violating sect rules—a beheading offense!"

Su Ming didn't speak, just turned to look at the ring floating beside him.

"Master, what do you think?"

"This is hiding in plain sight."

Lin Yu's voice sounded in the Consciousness Sea, carrying a hint of amusement. "Even Enforcement Hall people have dirty work to do, and they often need to cover their tracks more than ordinary cultivators. For us, this is both a crisis and an opportunity."

Su Ming nodded, his gaze returning to Wang Defa, his tone calm. "Old Wang, you did very well. You didn't refuse on the spot, nor did you directly agree to sell 'Bumper Harvest No. 1,' leaving room for maneuver."

"But Hall Master, it's the Enforcement Hall..."

"Precisely because it's the Enforcement Hall, we must do this business."

Su Ming stood up and paced a couple of steps in the stone chamber. "If we sell him 'Bumper Harvest No. 1,' that would indeed be seeking death. The explosion would ring out, the whole sect would know someone was using explosives to blow something up. They'd investigate the residue, follow the clues, and trace it back to the Repair Hall."

"Then..."

"Therefore, we cannot sell finished products."

Su Ming stopped walking, a flash of insight in his eyes. "Starting today, our strategy changes. We don't sell 'general-purpose farming tools.' We switch to 'customized services.'"

"Customized services?" Wang Defa looked utterly confused.

"Correct." Su Ming pointed at the spirit stones on the table. "The client presents a specific problem—such as how much power is needed, what attributes, what effect. We provide a one-time solution based on the requirements. Used once, then destroyed, leaving no trace."

"This way, what we're selling isn't 'contraband,' but 'technical consultation.'"

Lin Yu whistled from the side. "Listen to that, that's vision. Turning the arms trade into a consulting firm—the profit margin instantly skyrockets."

Su Ming looked at Wang Defa. "Did that Enforcement Hall person leave contact information?"

"They left a communication talisman."

"Contact them." Su Ming said coolly. "Tell them, 'Farming tools' are not available, but we have experts specializing in 'handling illegal structures.' Ask for specifics: what exactly they want to demolish, the material, the thickness, whether there are any formation enhancements."

...

Late the next night, the specific requirements came back.

The target of that gray-robed steward was not some cave dwelling, but a door.

A door located deep within a remote, abandoned mine shaft, made of Mystic Iron, three inches thick.

The requirement was simple: break it open, get inside, and do so without triggering the alarm formation linked to the door, and without making a loud noise that would alert any guards.

"Three inches of Mystic Iron, with an alarm attached."

Su Ming looked at the intelligence in his hand, a cold smirk curling at the corner of his mouth. "This isn't some illegal structure. This is clearly wanting to engage in a black-on-black heist, trying to steal someone's private treasury."

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## Chapter 262: Three Things You Shouldn't Accept

[ 1,149 words ]

"Who cares who he stole it from." Lin Yu floated in mid-air, looking at the pile of bottles and jars arranged in front of Su Ming. "As long as the money is enough, we're professional lockpickers. However, this Mystic Iron is extremely hard. If we try to smash it, the commotion definitely won't be small."

"So we can't use brute force."

Su Ming took out a ceramic jar from his storage pouch. Inside was a dark green, viscous liquid.

This was the essence he had refined using the "Water Refining Method" from a poisonous plant called "Bone-Erosion Grass." It possessed extremely strong corrosive properties.

"Mystic Iron belongs to the metal element, hard but brittle. If we can destroy its internal crystal structure..."

Su Ming muttered to himself as he added a few drops of fire poison liquid separated from the "Thunder Fire Sand" into the ceramic jar.

"Sizzle..."

A pungent white smoke rose from the jar. The dark green liquid began to boil, its color gradually shifting to a strange, deep brown.

"Not enough yet."

Lin Yu instructed from the side, "Pure strong acid corrosion is too slow, and the smell is too strong. You need to add a 'catalyst.' Modify the structure of the 'Burst' character rune. Don't let it release energy instantly. Instead, make it act like a woodworm, slowly and continuously releasing shockwaves inside the metal."

Su Ming's eyes lit up.

Physical vibration plus chemical corrosion!

He immediately picked up an engraving knife and began carving a mutated, miniature rune onto a jade piece the size of a fingernail.

This rune was extremely twisted, its lines broken and intermittent, as if it might disintegrate at any moment.

"This is called the 'Metal-Devouring Pattern'," Su Ming said solemnly. "Spiritual energy is locked inside it. Once it contacts metal, it will generate high-frequency vibrations at the microscopic level. Combined with the corrosive liquid, it can make Mystic Iron as soft and crumbly as shortbread."

Half an hour later.

A tube of gel-like substance, sealed inside a specially made jade cylinder, was born.

It appeared semi-transparent and amber-colored, looking completely harmless, even somewhat like a certain kind of healing ointment.

"Let's call this 'Iron-Corroding Glue'."

Su Ming handed the jade cylinder to Wang Defa, who had been waiting for a long time. "Tell the client the usage is simple: apply this glue to the door lock or hinge, then wait for the time it takes an incense stick to burn. Do not touch it during this period. After the incense stick burns down, give a gentle push, and that piece of Mystic Iron will crumble into sand on its own."

"Remember, the fee is two hundred spirit stones. No bargaining."

Wang Defa held the tube of jade, his hands trembling slightly. "T-two... two hundred? How much is our cost?"

Bone-Erosion Grass is worthless, the fire poison liquid is refined from waste material, and the jade piece is just a few broken spirit stones. The total cost doesn't exceed ten spirit stones.

This is practically robbery!

"This is the value of technology." Su Ming patted his shoulder. "Go on. Tell him this is a proprietary formula, the only one of its kind in the entire sect."

...

Three days later, the black market.

Still that same dark corner.

The gray-robed steward appeared again. This time, his hood was pulled even lower, but Wang Defa could sense that the chilling murderous aura around the other man had dissipated considerably, replaced by a barely concealed... awe.

"The item works very well."

The gray-robed man didn't waste words. He directly threw a heavy cloth pouch onto the table. "That's two hundred spirit stones. Also..."

He took out another, slightly smaller bag and pushed it towards Wang Defa. "This is twenty spirit stones, consider it tea money for the Master. In the future, if there are similar troubles..."

"We are always at your service."

Wang Defa collected the spirit stones, standing up straight with his back ramrod. He had never felt as important as he did today.

Even a steward from the Enforcement Hall had to be polite to him. This feeling was damn good!

"However, the Master has a few rules that need to be made clear to you."

Wang Defa cleared his throat and extended three fingers.

This was the "Three Iron Laws of the Black Market" that Su Ming had specifically instructed him to convey before coming.

"First, we do not interact with end clients. For any future jobs, you can only contact me. You must not inquire about the Master's identity, and you absolutely must not attempt to trace the source of the goods. Otherwise, the transaction is terminated immediately."

The gray-robed man nodded. "Reasonable."

Anyone in this line of work doesn't want their identity exposed. The more mysterious the other party, the more it puts him at ease.

"Second, we do not deal in standard products."

Wang Defa continued, "We don't sell finished goods, we only accept commissions. You present the problem, we provide the solution. Each item is custom-made, destroyed after use, no returns or exchanges."

"Third..."

Wang Defa paused, his gaze sharpening a bit. "We do not accept urgent orders of unknown origin. All commissions must be scheduled at least three days in advance, and we will assess the risks. If a job involves the sect's core forbidden areas, or could potentially cause major chaos, we won't take it no matter how much money is offered."

The gray-robed man was silent for a moment, then let out a low chuckle.

"Fine 'Three No-Accepts.' Cautious, with rules."

He stood up and gave Wang Defa a deep look. "It seems the Master behind you is not only highly skilled, but also a smart person who understands the way of survival. This business, we can do it long-term."

...

Clear Stream Valley.

Su Ming looked at the pile of glittering spirit stones on the table and let out a long sigh.

Two hundred and thirty spirit stones.

After deducting Wang Defa's commission, his net profit was one hundred and sixty.

This was far more profitable than toiling away watering the Spiritual Plant Garden for two months, and the efficiency was extremely high.

"Although the risk is a bit higher, this profit margin is truly tempting."

Su Ming put the spirit stones into his storage pouch, feeling that he had taken another small step closer to that "three hundred thousand" goal.

"That's right."

Lin Yu floated around nearby, like a military advisor pointing out strategies. "The essence of the black market is monetizing 'risk.' What we're doing now is building a single-plank bridge over the cliff edge of that risk, a bridge that only we can walk."

"However, we still need to keep an eye on Old Wang's side."

Su Ming calmed down. "This time we were lucky, meeting someone who understands the rules. In the future, if we encounter someone who doesn't understand the rules and tries to rob us..."

"Then we have to let them know that we not only know how to fix doors, but also how to 'close them' for good." Lin Yu chuckled darkly. "It's also about time to test the power of Bumper Harvest No. 1 on some fools with no sense of self-preservation."

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## Chapter 263: That's what you call professional.

[ 1,536 words ]

The morning mist had yet to completely disperse in Clear Stream Valley, and a few fallen leaves clung to the damp stone steps.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on a meditation cushion deep within his cave dwelling. Before him lay three cyan jade pill bottles, their stoppers still sealed, yet a faint, crisp medicinal fragrance was already seeping through.

These were top-grade Qi Gathering Pills he had obtained through an "internal channel" at Pill Cauldron Peak, using the two hundred spirit stones he had just acquired plus the savings he had accumulated over the past few months.

To charge into the seventh layer of Qi Refining, he had truly invested heavily this time.

"A cracked Dao foundation is like a leaking bucket. To fill it with water, you have to pour it in relentlessly," Su Ming thought, looking at the pill bottles, his fingers gently stroking the cool, textured patterns on their surfaces. "If these three bottles of pills still can't break through that membrane..."

"Then you'll try again next time," Lin Yu's voice drifted lazily within his Consciousness Sea. "Cultivation is a matter of patient, grinding work. Now that you're somewhat wealthy, your mindset has actually become impatient. That's not good, you need to change it."

Su Ming gave a bitter smile and was about to speak when a series of urgent fluctuations suddenly rippled through the protective formation outside his cave dwelling.

Immediately after, that signature booming voice pierced through the multiple layers of formations, causing dust to sift down from the ceiling of the stone chamber.

"Brother Su! Brother Su! Your big brother is here to deliver a money-making opportunity to you!"

Su Ming's eye twitched. He helplessly put away the pill bottles.

That voice—there wasn't a second person besides that brute Lei Hu from Spirit Beast Peak who could produce it.

He deactivated the formation and opened the stone door. Lei Hu's iron-tower-like frame almost completely blocked the entire doorway.

Today, he wasn't wearing the sect's standard long robe. Instead, he had changed into a form-fitting, short-sleeved martial attire that revealed his two arms, knotted like tree roots. He also carried a heavy sword as wide as a door plank on his back.

"Senior Brother Lei, what money-making opportunity is there so early in the morning?" Su Ming stepped aside to let him into the cave dwelling and casually poured a cup of cool tea.

Lei Hu didn't stand on ceremony either. He grabbed the teacup and gulped it down like an ox, wiped the water from the corner of his mouth, his eyes gleaming. "A big deal! The sect discovered a small accompanying spirit stone vein in Crimson Glow Ridge. Turns out the place is occupied by a swarm of 'Earth Fire Scorpions'. Those beasts are only first-tier demonic beasts, but their shells are tough, their poisonous fire is troublesome, and they move in swarms. The mining team can't even get their shovels in the ground."

"So?" Su Ming's expression remained calm.

"So the sect's Administration Hall is in a panic! They've issued a 'Suppression Order!'" Lei Hu slapped the stone table with a bang. "Clear out an area, reward of two hundred spirit stones! Plus, the bodies of the Earth Fire Scorpions you hunt belong to you. Those scorpion shells are excellent material for crafting fire-attribute armor. The poison sacs in their tails are hot commodities that Pill Cauldron Peak buys all year round."

Two hundred spirit stones.

Su Ming's finger twitched slightly within his sleeve.

That amount of money—if it were before, he would have accepted without a second thought.

But he had just made a quick buck and was planning to go into seclusion...

"Brother Su, I know what you're thinking," Lei Hu said, seeing Su Ming hadn't responded. He chuckled and leaned in closer. "If we go at this job head-on, it's definitely not worth it. But those Earth Fire Scorpions are afraid of water, afraid of cold. You're the Hall Master of the Repair Hall, an expert at playing with formations, and you cultivate a water-attribute method. We don't need to clash head-on with those bugs. You just set up a trap, your big brother here will provide the muscle, and the spirit stones will be like picking them up for free!"

Su Ming's mind stirred.

Earth Fire Scorpions, fire attribute, aggressive temperament, prefer to live in groups, low intelligence.

The \*Like Water Art\* might not have formidable offensive power, but it excelled at "using softness to overcome hardness." If combined with a specific environment...

"Master?" Su Ming asked in his mind.

"Go," Lin Yu yawned. "The poison sacs of Earth Fire Scorpions contain a kind of 'Fire Poison Crystal'. If extracted, it's perfect for upgrading your 'Bumper Harvest No. 1'. Relying on that worthless, useless waste soil is only good for blasting rocks. To really blast people, you need to add some stronger stuff."

Su Ming's gaze sharpened, then a gentle smile appeared on his face. "Since Senior Brother Lei has put it that way, if this junior brother declines again, it would be ungrateful. But the team..."

"Don't worry! I've already found them!" Lei Hu thumped his chest so hard it echoed. "Besides the two of us, I've also called a junior sister from Pill Cauldron Peak, specializing in detoxification and healing. Plus, two outer sect sword experts, famous for their fast swords. The five of us, a complete setup!"

...

One hour later, at the foot of the sect mountain.

Su Ming met the "teammates" Lei Hu had mentioned.

That junior sister from Pill Cauldron Peak was named Liu Qing. She had a delicate, pretty appearance and carried a medicine basket on her back larger than herself. She would blush before speaking to anyone, seeming somewhat timid. But her skilled herb-separating technique revealed an extremely solid foundation.

The other two were a pair of twin brothers, Chen Feng and Chen Yun. Their faces were cold and stern, each holding a long sword in their arms. Standing there, they were like two wooden stakes, radiating an aura of sharpness that kept strangers at bay.

"Junior Brother Su, I've heard much about you," Chen Feng glanced at the storage pouch at Su Ming's waist, gave a slight nod, his tone indifferent. "I heard from Brother Lei that you are proficient in formations? Let's be blunt upfront. When Earth Fire Scorpions attack in swarms, they are extremely fast. If the formation is set up too slowly, the swords in our brothers' hands won't wait for anyone."

This was questioning Su Ming's practical combat ability.

After all, while the Repair Hall had a big reputation, in the eyes of many combat-oriented cultivators, it was just a logistics department that repaired broken stuff.

Su Ming wasn't angry either. He just gave a gentle smile, took out two palm-sized round plates from his sleeve, and lightly tossed them in his hand. "Senior Brothers, just focus on using your swords. Leave the rest to me."

...

Crimson Glow Ridge, mine entrance.

A wave of heat mixed with the smell of sulfur rushed at them. The rocks on the ground were so hot they were slightly red.

This was a tributary of the earth fire vein. The air was so dry it felt like it could ignite hair.

"This damn place, water spiritual energy is suppressed by at least thirty percent," Su Ming frowned, sensing the thin water vapor around him.

"But fortunately, I came prepared."

Su Ming took out several light blue formation plates from his storage pouch and distributed them to everyone. "This is an improved version of the 'Cooling Formation'. Stick it on your chest, and it will protect you from fire poison for half an hour."

The Chen brothers took the formation plates, a flicker of surprise in their eyes.

The plates felt cool to the touch. Once attached, the irritating, dry heat around them instantly subsided by more than half, and even the circulation of spiritual energy within their bodies became noticeably smoother.

"Let's go in!"

Lei Hu took the lead, heavy sword in hand, striding into the deep mine tunnel.

As they went deeper, faint rustling sounds began to appear around them. It was the sound of countless arthropods crawling on the rock walls, making one's scalp tingle.

"They're coming!" Chen Feng shouted in a low voice, his long sword half-drawn from its scabbard.

From the corner ahead, a tide of reddish-brown suddenly surged out.

It was hundreds of Earth Fire Scorpions, each as large as a washbasin! They waved their dark red pincers, the poisonous hooks on their tails gleaming with a blue sheen, their mouthparts emitting a teeth-grating hiss. Like a red torrent, they swept toward the group.

"So many!" Liu Qing's face paled with fright, and she instinctively shrank back.

Lei Hu roared, his muscles bulging all over his body, about to charge forward and clash head-on.

"Senior Brother Lei, retreat!"

Su Ming's voice suddenly rang out, so calm it felt out of place. "Retreat to the narrow spot! Don't fight in the open area!"

Although Lei Hu was reckless, he forcibly halted his charging momentum upon hearing this, protecting Liu Qing and Su Ming as they retreated to a narrow pass only about ten feet wide behind them.

"Senior Brothers Chen, guard the two flanks," Su Ming spoke rapidly, his hands weaving through a series of hand seals like butterflies fluttering through flowers.

Just as the scorpion swarm was about to charge into the narrow pass, Su Ming suddenly slapped the two formation plates in his hands onto the ground.

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[ 1,349 words ]

"Rise!"

Hummm——

A vast expanse of white mist exploded out of thin air, instantly filling the entire passageway.

This mist was no ordinary water vapor; it was Su Ming's specially concocted "Heavy Water Mist."

Every droplet of mist contained viscous spiritual energy. The moment the Earth Fire Scorpions charged in, their originally swift movements visibly slowed down, as if they had sunk into a quagmire.

Immediately after, a piercing "sizzling" sound erupted.

That was the reaction produced by the clash of water and fire. The fire-tainted energy on the Earth Fire Scorpions' bodies was suppressed by the water mist. The red glow on

their carapaces rapidly dimmed, and their originally iron-hard defensive power was greatly diminished.

"Ice Condense!"

Su Ming changed his hand seals once more.

Countless fine, fragmented ice crystals abruptly formed within the mist, adhering to the joints of the Earth Fire Scorpions.

This violent alternation between extreme cold and heat caused the dozens of scorpions at the forefront to emit pained shrieks. Some even had their carapaces directly crack and split open.

"Now! Kill!"

Without needing Su Ming's reminder, Lei Hu and the Chen brothers, who had long been poised for action, moved.

The heavy sword in Lei Hu's hand swept out, carrying a fierce wind. Under the formation's suppression, those scorpion shells, originally difficult to penetrate, were now as brittle as thin wafers. The sound of "crack-crack" was incessant, with severed limbs and broken carapaces flying everywhere.

The Chen brothers were even more in their element. Their sword techniques followed an agile and nimble path. With the Earth Fire Scorpions' movements now sluggish, they were practically living targets. Two streaks of sword light weaved through the mist like swimming dragons. Each thrust precisely pierced the cracks in the scorpions' splitting carapaces, aiming straight for vital points.

Su Ming stood at the very rear of the team, his hands clasped behind his back, but his ten fingers were constantly making minute adjustments to the formation plate's spiritual energy output within his sleeves.

He was like a precise puppeteer. Where the scorpion swarm was denser, the mist there grew thicker. Where someone's defense was struggling, the ice crystals there became more substantial.

Liu Qing stood beside Su Ming, holding the medicine basket. The detoxification pills she had prepared remained unused, not a single one.

She watched the almost one-sided slaughter ahead, then glanced at Senior Brother Su beside her, whose robes weren't even rumpled. Her small mouth hung slightly open, her eyes dazed.

This was... the combat style of a formation master?

This was just too... too comfortable!

"Be careful!"

Just as everyone was killing with rising fervor, a sharp shriek suddenly came from deep within the mist.

An elite Earth Fire Scorpion, its body as large as a millstone and colored a deep red bordering on black, violently crashed through the mist.

It was clearly more resistant than ordinary scorpions. The fiery light on its body actually forcefully repelled the surrounding ice crystals. Its thick, child's-arm-sized venomous stinger, carrying a foul wind, shot straight towards Lei Hu's face.

Lei Hu had just swung his sword, his old force spent, new force not yet generated. It seemed he was about to be hit.

The Chen brothers wanted to turn back to assist, but they were entangled by several ordinary scorpions.

At this critical moment.

Su Ming's expression remained unchanged. He merely gently hooked his right index finger.

"Bind."

The accumulated water beneath that elite scorpion suddenly came to life.

Several dark blue water ropes shot up without warning, tightly entangling its six legs and the base of its tail.

Although these water ropes lasted only for the space of one breath before being torn apart by the scorpion's terrifying brute force, that one-breath pause was enough for an experienced veteran like Lei Hu.

"Die for me!"

Lei Hu roared. Seizing this brief opening, he lowered his stance, evading the venomous stinger. His heavy sword swept upward from below, carrying earth-splitting, rock-cracking force, viciously striking the scorpion's softest underbelly.

Squelch!

Dark green fluid splattered out.

That arrogant elite Earth Fire Scorpion didn't even have time to shriek before being gutted by this sword, collapsing to the ground with a heavy thud.

The battle ended even faster than imagined.

When the last Earth Fire Scorpion fell, the narrow mine tunnel was piled high with corpses.

Lei Hu, panting heavily, kicked aside a scorpion corpse in front of him, wiped a smear of blood from his face (it was the scorpion's), turned to look at Su Ming, and gave a thumbs-up.

"Brother Su, exhilarating! Damn exhilarating!"

Lei Hu grinned from ear to ear, his teeth showing. "When teaming up with others to kill these things before, every time we'd end up covered in grime from the fire poison fumes, and we'd have to watch out for the venomous stingers. Today's fight was like chopping melons and slicing vegetables!"

The Chen brothers sheathed their swords, exchanged a glance. The previous trace of disdain in their eyes had long since vanished.

Chen Feng walked up to Su Ming, cupped his hands in a salute, his tone solemn. "Junior Brother Su, that control earlier, impressive. Without your formation suppression and that final water-binding technique, Brother Lei would likely have been injured."

"Senior Brother overpraises me."

Only now did Su Ming "appropriately" reveal a trace of weariness, wiping sweat from his forehead that wasn't actually there. "My cultivation is low and weak; I can only handle some auxiliary tasks. For truly slaying the enemy, we still rely on the valor of you senior brothers."

"Tsk tsk, acting again," Lin Yu commented within the Consciousness Sea. "But I give this performance full marks. It showcased your value without stealing the main attackers' thunder. This is workplace survival wisdom."

The subsequent cleanup of the battlefield became exceptionally easy.

The sect reward of one hundred spirit stones was fixed, but these scorpion corpses were also a windfall.

According to the prior agreement, although Su Ming didn't directly kill any monsters, his control was the greatest merit, so he received thirty percent of the spoils.

He didn't want those bulky scorpion shells, specifically choosing to take all the venom sacs and that elite scorpion's tail stinger.

"Junior Brother Su, you only want these?" Liu Qing felt somewhat embarrassed. After all, she had just shouted a few "keep it up" from the back the whole time. When dividing the spoils, her face truly felt a bit hot.

"My Repair Hall happens to lack some auxiliary materials for refining special substances." Su Ming smiled, storing the venom sacs into a specially made jade box. "Each takes what they need, that's all."

When the group walked out of the mine tunnel, the sky outside was nearing dusk.

This mission took only about two hours. Each person received forty spirit stones in profit, with no one injured and minimal consumption.

When handing over the mission at the Hall of Stewards, the steward responsible for inspection looked at the completely unharmed five people, then at the mountain-like pile of scorpion shells, his eyes filled with surprise.

"Good! Very good!" The steward stamped an "Excellent" character seal on the mission archives. "Among outer sect disciples, it's rare to see team coordination executed to this level. Su Ming, right? The formation use was excellent. You have a clever mind."

Walking out of the Hall of Stewards, Lei Hu threw an arm around Su Ming's shoulder, lowering his voice. "Brother Su, if there are more good missions like this in the future, I'm coming to you first! You, this is what's called professional! Teaming up with you, that's truly worry-free!"

Su Ming smiled and agreed, watching the others depart.

Returning to Clear Stream Valley, Su Ming closed the cave dwelling door, the smile on his face gradually fading.

He placed that elite Earth Fire Scorpion's tail stinger on the stone table. Under the lamplight's illumination, the tip of the stinger shimmered with a heart-palpitating dark blue luster.

"Master, the materials are complete."

Su Ming said softly. "With the fire poison crystal in this thing, plus the previous 'Thunder Fire Sand,' 'Bumper Harvest No. 1' should be able to be upgraded to 'Bumper Harvest No. 2.'"

"Hmm, not bad." Lin Yu drifted out, circling the venomous stinger. "But before that, use up those three bottles of Qi Gathering Pills first."

Su Ming took a deep breath and sat cross-legged back on the meditation cushion.

This time, no one came to disturb him.

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## Chapter 265: Master of Array Formations

[ 1,285 words ]

The mist in Clear Stream Valley was stirred by an invisible force, slowly rotating to form a miniature vortex, eventually transforming into a fine drizzle that pattered down onto the stone steps before the cave dwelling.

Inside the cave dwelling, Su Ming slowly opened his eyes. A trace of deep blue water light swirled within the depths of his pupils before vanishing.

Qi Refining, seventh layer.

He felt the clearly expanded lake of spiritual energy within his Dantian and the more resilient, smoothly circulating meridians, then gently exhaled a mouthful of turbid air.

The breath condensed in the air without dispersing, carrying the unique, gentle moisture of the Like Water Art.

The process had been more difficult than he anticipated.

The three cracks at his Dao foundation had felt like tearing agony during the spiritual energy's assault on the bottleneck, akin to termite holes at the weakest point of a dam.

If not for Lin Yu stabilizing the most dangerous spread of the cracks with soul power at the critical moment, coupled with the unique flexibility and permeability of the Like Water Art's spiritual energy allowing him to "circumvent" the most solid obstacles and "infiltrate" through from the sides, this breakthrough attempt would likely have ended in failure.

"Finally succeeded." Lin Yu's voice sounded in the Consciousness Sea, carrying a trace of fatigue. "This damage to the Dao foundation is becoming more and more like a sword hanging over your head. We must find a solution."

Su Ming nodded. Just as he was about to turn his senses inward to consolidate his gains, the restrictions outside his cave dwelling transmitted a familiar fluctuation.

Withdrawing the restrictions, Luo Feng's handsome face, bearing a hint of urgency, appeared at the entrance.

"Brother Su! You've finally emerged from seclusion!" Luo Feng stepped inside in one stride. His gaze swept over Su Ming, and a flash of surprise appeared in his eyes. "Huh? Your aura is rounded, condensed, and full of water essence... You've broken through to the late Qi Refining stage? Congratulations!"

"Just a stroke of luck." Su Ming invited Luo Feng to sit and poured tea. "Brother Luo, your visit today, is there urgent business?"

"Urgent, of course it's urgent!" Luo Feng took the teacup, not even bothering to drink. "During these days of your seclusion, Elder Qingquan's side finally has definite news. He has permitted me to bring you to see him. The time is set for three days from now, at the Listening to Waves Pavilion on Formation Peak!"

Su Ming's heart stirred.

Elder Qingquan, finally meeting him.

"I've troubled Brother Luo to go to such efforts on my behalf." Su Ming cupped his hands in thanks.

"Between you and me, why stand on ceremony." Luo Feng waved his hand, a sincere smile appearing on his face. "But honestly, Brother Su, Elder Qingquan is a rigorous person, especially regarding the path of formations. His standards are extremely high. For him to proactively propose meeting you indicates that your previous 'unorthodox' methods at the Repair Hall have actually piqued his interest. What he values may not be how many profound formations you've mastered, but rather your unique way of thinking—'simplifying complexity' and 'directly targeting utility'."

Su Ming pondered and said, "Elder Qingquan is a publicly recognized grandmaster of formations within the sect. To receive his guidance is naturally an opportunity. I just wonder, with the elder's abilities, what realm has he currently reached in the path of formations?"

Hearing this, Luo Feng's expression turned serious. He set down his teacup. "Since Brother Su asks, I'll tell you. In the cultivation world, especially within our Cloud Hidden Sect, the hierarchy of formation masters isn't entirely equivalent to cultivation level. It depends more on comprehension and attainment in the path of formations."

He paused, as if organizing his words. "Simply divided into five tiers. The lowest is 'Formation Apprentice'. One only needs to master basic runes and be able to set up and

maintain ordinary formations according to diagrams. Most disciples within and outside the sect who dabble in formations may remain at this level their entire lives."

Su Ming nodded. This probably corresponded to Qi Refining stage and most Foundation Establishment stage formation cultivators.

"Above that is 'Formation Master'." Luo Feng continued, a trace of yearning in his tone. "One must be proficient in a large number of runes, understand the principles of formation operation, be able to independently design and improve conventional formations, and even possess a certain degree of innovation ability. Reaching this realm means one has truly entered the hall of the path of formations." He pointed at himself, slightly embarrassed yet somewhat proud. "I, with my limited talent, have studied the path of formations for over ten years. Only last year did I earn my Master's recognition, barely considered to have stepped across the threshold of 'Formation Master'."

"Congratulations, Brother Luo." Su Ming offered sincere congratulations, then asked curiously, "What lies above 'Formation Master'?"

"Above 'Formation Master' is 'Grandmaster of Formations'." Luo Feng's expression became solemn and respectful. "This realm is extraordinary. One must achieve mastery through comprehensive understanding, forming one's own system of formation principles, capable of creating entirely new formations, repairing and modifying those obscure and difficult-to-understand high-level ancient formations. At this level, cultivation level becomes secondary; it relies entirely on peerless comprehension and profound accumulation in the path of formations." A light of reverence shone in his eyes. "Elder Qingquan is a publicly recognized 'Grandmaster of Formations'. Although his cultivation is only at the late Golden Core stage, even some Nascent Soul stage uncles and masters often need to seek Elder Qingquan's advice when encountering profound formation problems."

Su Ming was inwardly awed. So Elder Qingquan's status was so revered, no wonder Luo Feng always spoke of him with such respect.

This wasn't just about seniority; it was reverence for the "Dao".

"Above 'Grandmaster of Formations', could there be an even higher realm?" Su Ming pressed.

"There is." Luo Feng nodded, his tone becoming distant, as if narrating a legend. "'Formation Ancestor', establishing one's own school and lineage, whose formation concepts can become a lineage of inheritance with far-reaching influence. The founding patriarch of our Cloud Hidden Sect, Cloud Hidden Master, was such a figure. As for the higher 'Sage of the Formation Path'... that only exists in ancient, ethereal legends. Entering the Dao through formations, a single formation capable of altering heaven and earth, beyond our ability to fathom."

After hearing this account, Su Ming gained a clear understanding of the formation system within the Cloud Hidden Sect and even the broader cultivation world. Right now, he probably didn't even qualify as a "Formation Apprentice". He merely had some clever ideas and the special "Water Refining Method", making him somewhat unique in the low-level maintenance field.

"The path of formations is indeed vast as the sea." Su Ming sighed with emotion. "Runes are the foundation. Since Brother Luo has already reached the level of 'Formation Master', I wonder how many basic runes you have mastered now?"

Luo Feng smiled and said, "I sensed spiritual energy at age six, began touching formation lines at eight, and it's been nearly twenty years now. The total number of basic runes is three thousand six hundred. According to Elder Qingquan, if one can completely master one thousand two hundred of the core runes and flexibly combine and vary them, it counts as laying a solid foundation within the 'Formation Master' realm. I currently... have mastered approximately over one thousand five hundred."

One thousand five hundred!

Su Ming was inwardly astonished.

Relying on the Xuantian ring's "observation micro state" ability, Lin Yu's guidance, and relentless day-and-night study, over two years, the number of runes he had completely mastered and understood in more than three variations had barely broken one hundred and fifty.

This speed, compared to a genius like Luo Feng, was as slow as a turtle's crawl.

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## Chapter 266: Listening to the Waves Cottage

[ 1,589 words ]

"One thousand five hundred..." Su Ming gave a bitter smile. "Senior Brother possesses heaven-endowed talent, I am far from reaching your level. I entered the path late, it's only been a little over two years so far. Even going all out, I've only mastered around a hundred basic runes."

"Around a hundred?" Hearing this, Luo Feng did not look down on him; instead, he glanced at Su Ming with surprise. "Brother Su, do you know that learning these basic

runes is not a constant speed? The first hundred, especially the first three hundred, are the most difficult. Because the structure, spirit attraction, and attributes of each rune are completely different, requiring rote memorization, repeated practice, and understanding their most fundamental 'meaning'. Many people get stuck at this entry stage, unable to make any progress for years."

He recalled, "I remember, it took me a full six years to master the first eight hundred basic runes. From eight hundred to one thousand two hundred, it took three years. And from one thousand two hundred to the current one thousand five hundred, it took nearly four more years. The further you go, many rune structures have similarities or originate from the same 'parent pattern'. Once you comprehend by analogy, sometimes a single day of enlightenment can allow you to master a dozen related runes. But at the very beginning, you might not be able to crack a single new rune in a month."

Su Ming silently calculated. For him, one hundred fifty in two years, at this speed, he could learn about four hundred fifty in six years. Although it couldn't compare to Luo Feng's eight hundred, considering his damaged Dao foundation, lack of resources, and the need to divide his attention to manage the Repair Hall, this speed seemed... not too slow?

"Disciple, your learning efficiency, even among sect geniuses with complete legacies and ample resources, is considered above average," Lin Yu said leisurely within the Consciousness Sea. "Don't forget, you also have this teacher as your 'cheat'. But what this kid says is right, being slow at the start is normal, it's about laying the foundation. Those one hundred fifty runes of yours, each one has been thoroughly figured out by you using the 'Water Refining Method' and practical application. Your foundation is much more solid than those who rely on rote memorization."

Receiving his teacher's affirmation, Su Ming felt slightly more at ease. He said to Luo Feng, "Thank you, Senior Brother, for clearing up my confusion. So it seems, for us cultivators, on the path of formations, learning truly has no end."

"Exactly that principle," Luo Feng said seriously. "So Brother Su, you must not belittle yourself. With your Qi Refining stage cultivation, being able to forge a new path in practical work is already rare and commendable. What Elder Qingquan values might be precisely this 'inspiration' of yours that isn't bound by convention."

He reminded again, "In three days, at the Listening to Waves Pavilion, don't be late. The elder dislikes excessive formalities, but you must prepare yourself fully. He might test you. However, there's no need to be overly nervous either, just face it with your usual mindset."

After conversing a bit more, Luo Feng stood up to take his leave. He still needed to return to prepare for the final work on the Nine Palaces Soul-Locking Formation.

After seeing Luo Feng off, Su Ming returned to the stone chamber, stroking the storage pouch at his waist.

One hundred fifty runes, not even a Formation Apprentice, yet he was going to meet a Grandmaster of Formations.

The pressure was like a mountain, but the opportunity was also right before his eyes.

"Teacher, what will Elder Qingquan test me on?" Su Ming asked in his heart.

"Nothing more than looking at your quality, whether you're rotten wood or material that can be carved," Lin Yu said. "Formation basics, adaptability of thought, even temperament, could all be involved. However, since he actively wants to see you, it's highly likely he doesn't want to stump you, but rather wants to see exactly what makes you 'special'. Prepare the thinking logic behind your set of 'datafication' and 'standardization', and also sort out our approach to solving the Cold Pool and optimizing the Drizzle Formation. A Grandmaster of Formations looks at the 'Dao', not the 'technique'."

Su Ming took a deep breath, his gaze becoming resolute.

"I understand."

For the next three days, he did not rush to tackle those profound formation texts. Instead, he calmed his mind, reviewing and organizing every successful or failed case since he first came into contact with formations, trying to extract his own, most fundamental "view of formations" from them.

Whether he could catch Elder Qingquan's eye depended entirely on this.

.....

Three days passed in the blink of an eye.

The Listening to Waves Pavilion was not at the highest point of Formation Peak, but was hidden behind a patch of emerald bamboo halfway up the mountain.

A winding bluestone path, full of moss traces, clearly saw few visitors on ordinary days.

Su Ming adjusted his lapels, ensuring the Repair Hall waist token was properly positioned, then stepped onto the stone steps.

The spiritual energy here was not violent; instead, it carried a sense of gentle, silent peace, completely different from the stern, oppressive feeling elsewhere on Formation Peak where formation lines interwove and spiritual pressure pressed down.

At the pavilion entrance, Luo Feng had already been waiting for some time.

This usually composed and confident Formation Peak genius actually seemed a bit restrained at the moment.

Seeing Su Ming approach, Luo Feng quickly stepped forward to meet him, lowering his voice, "Brother Su, you've finally arrived. The elder is brewing tea. Remember, listen more, speak less. Answer what you're asked."

Su Ming gave a slight nod, his expression calm. "Thank you for the advice, Senior Brother."

In the Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu's voice sounded lazily, "This kid is more nervous than you. It seems this Elder Qingquan usually commands quite a bit of awe."

Su Ming did not respond, following Luo Feng across the undefended bamboo fence gate.

The courtyard was not large: a stone table, several stone stools, with a stream of mountain spring water channeled to the side, dripping down a bamboo pipe with a tinkling sound, gathering into a clear, small pond.

An old man in a gray cloth robe sat by the pond.

His hair and beard were completely white, not tied up with a crown, just casually held with a wooden hairpin. He held a cattail leaf fan, gently fanning a small red clay stove.

In the clay pot on the stove, the sound of water gradually grew louder, just like the rustling of pine waves.

If not for Luo Feng's respectful bow, Su Ming would have almost thought this was just an old man from the mortal countryside.

"Disciple Luo Feng, bringing outer sect disciple Su Ming, pays respects to Elder Qingquan." Luo Feng bowed deeply.

Su Ming followed closely behind, performing a standard disciple salute. His movements were neither subservient nor arrogant, without a single fault to be found.

The old man did not stop fanning with his cattail leaf fan. His gaze fixed on the white steam rising from the pot's spout, his voice gentle yet carrying a penetrating force. "Here? Sit."

Luo Feng did not dare to sit, retreating to stand by the side in attendance.

Su Ming hesitated slightly, then followed the instruction and sat on the lower seat of the stone stool, only half-sitting, his back straight.

Only then did Elder Qingquan turn his head. What kind of eyes were those?

The whites were clear as a child's, but the pupils were deep as an abyss, like two ancient wells, without ripples, yet capable of reflecting one's heart.

Under this gaze, Su Ming felt as if he had become that formation plate awaiting repair, his inner and outer structures seen through at a glance.

"Repair Hall, Su Ming."

Elder Qingquan put down the cattail leaf fan. He did not release any pressure, but when his gaze focused, Su Ming felt the surrounding air seem to solidify for an instant.

It wasn't killing intent, but a difference in "quality" originating from the soul level, tempered by the passage of time.

Like a stream facing a deep pond; though the surface is calm, it knows the pond's depths are unfathomable.

Su Ming noticed that the furnishings within the pavilion were extremely simple, but each one subtly conformed to a certain rhythm.

The fire for brewing tea was not ordinary fire, but a strand of tamed earth vein flame breath, burning docilely in a specially made stove. As the tea leaves unfurled and curled in the cup, faint, subtle spiritual energy runes flickered briefly.

Every plant, every object here seemed to have become a natural extension of his formation cultivation.

Elder Qingquan put down the cattail leaf fan, lifted the clay pot, and poured boiling water into two coarse porcelain tea cups. "This name has been quite prominent on Formation Peak recently. Even these old bones of mine have heard it so much my ears are getting calloused."

Su Ming stood up, accepting the tea cup with both hands, but did not rush to drink. He just kept his eyes lowered and said, "This disciple is apprehensive. I merely do some trivial repair work, disturbing the elder's peace."

"Trivial work?"

Elder Qingquan chuckled lightly, taking a sip from his own tea cup. "Being able to turn trivial work into rules, to turn patches into an essay, that's not something the word 'apprehensive' can cover up."

He put down the tea cup, his gaze suddenly becoming sharp, piercing straight into Su Ming's eyes.

"This old man asks you, what is your original intention in cultivating the path of formations?"

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## Chapter 267: The Remnant Eight Gates Mystery Formation

[ 1,258 words ]

This question came abruptly, yet it was perfectly reasonable.

If he answered "to serve the sect loyally" or "to pursue the Great Dao," it would be too vague and hypocritical; if he answered "to earn money," it would seem worldly and vulgar.

The fingers Su Ming held the teacup with tightened slightly.

Within his Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu, for once, did not crack jokes and remained silent.

This was Su Ming's own path; he had to answer it himself.

Su Ming raised his head, meeting Elder Qingquan's gaze with clear and frank eyes.

"Reporting to Elder, this disciple cultivates formations, initially for just two words—to live."

Luo Feng's eyelid twitched slightly beside him.

Many scenes flashed before Su Ming's eyes: the suffocating pressure of Zhao Qianshan's Foundation Establishment aura on the riverbank, the cold touch of the chains in the Imperial Prison, the scrutinizing gaze he felt walking on thin ice when he first entered the sect.

His voice was calm: "This disciple comes from the mortal world. I have witnessed the oppression of power and experienced life being as cheap as grass. Cultivating formations was the only tangible 'power' I could find and grasp at that time. This

disciple's aptitude is mediocre, with no family background to rely on. Cultivating formations is to have a skill to rely on, to be able to control my own destiny in this world of cultivation, and not drift aimlessly like duckweed."

Elder Qingquan's face remained expressionless, only his fingers lightly tapping the stone table: "And after that?"

"After that..."

Su Ming glanced at the koi swimming in the pond, his voice softening, "Once this disciple can establish myself and secure a stable life, I wish to use the eye of formations to glimpse the wonders of this world. To see why the wind rises, why the water flows, to see if the principles governing the operation of all things in this world truly have discernible patterns, just like formation lines."

The courtyard fell into brief silence.

Only the "ding-dong" sound of water pouring from the bamboo tube knocked against their hearts, one drop at a time.

After a long while, the sharpness in Elder Qingquan's eyes gradually receded, and the corner of his mouth lifted into an extremely faint curve.

"To live, to glimpse principles. That is indeed practical."

He picked up the cattail leaf fan again, gently fanning himself, "It sounds more pleasing to the ear than those youngsters who constantly spout 'slaying demons and vanquishing monsters' or 'acting on behalf of Heaven.'"

Luo Feng secretly breathed a sigh of relief.

The first hurdle was passed.

Elder Qingquan abruptly changed the subject, pointing at the Repair Hall token at Su Ming's waist: "That 'standardization' system you implemented in the Repair Hall, I have seen it. Dismantling formation lines so that even menial disciples who don't understand formation principles can repair formation plates like assembling a puzzle."

"Some say you are destroying the very foundation of the path of formations, stripping formations of their spirit and turning them into dead objects. How do you respond to that?"

This was the real topic.

A debate over technical approaches.

Su Ming set down the teacup, his expression turning solemn.

"Elder, this disciple believes the path of formations is like building a tower."

Su Ming stretched out his hand, gesturing on the stone table, "Those exquisitely ingenious ancient formations, grand formations, are the glazed tiles on the roof, the flying eaves and bracket sets. They require masters to meticulously carve and imbue with spirit."

"But what constitutes the main body of this tall tower are thousands upon thousands of the most ordinary bricks."

Su Ming's voice was steady and forceful, "This disciple's 'standardization' is about firing these bricks. If every single brick had to be shaped by a master's own hands, then this tower would probably never be built, not even by the year of the monkey."

"Moreover..."

Su Ming paused, glancing at Luo Feng beside him, "If a genius like Senior Brother Luo were to be trapped all day in the repetitive labor of firing bricks and laying walls, that would be a waste of talent. Entrusting the foundation to 'standards' and leaving the spirit to 'geniuses'—that is the way for the path of formations to flourish."

"That is also the distinction you once taught Senior Brother Luo, the difference between 'laying the foundation' and 'capping the roof.'"

Upon hearing this, a thoughtful light flashed in Luo Feng's eyes.

The cattail leaf fan in Elder Qingquan's hand stopped.

He stared at Su Ming for a long time, the gaze containing less scrutiny and a bit more appreciation.

"What a fine analogy of firing bricks and capping the roof."

Elder Qingquan nodded slightly, sighing, "How many old-timers within the sect, cultivating for a lifetime, have a vision less clear than a little Qi Refining youngster like you. They only stare at those few glazed tiles, forgetting that if the foundation beneath their feet collapses, even the finest tiles will be nothing but shattered debris on the ground."

At this point, Elder Qingquan took out a jade slip from his sleeve and gently placed it on the stone table.

The jade slip was entirely bluish-gray, its surface covered with the mottled marks of time, looking rather unremarkable.

But the moment Su Ming's divine sense touched it, he felt an extremely obscure, complex fluctuation of logic, as if a labyrinth was locked inside.

"Since your reasoning is sound, then let this old man see your craftsmanship."

Elder Qingquan pointed at the jade slip, "This is the formation diagram for the 'Eight Gates Lost Trace Incomplete Formation.' This formation was obtained by this old man from an ancient cultivator's cave dwelling in my early years. Although it's only a fragment, it contains one logical deadlock."

"It's not about the formation's power being immense, but its operational logic is like a tangled mess, head connected to tail, impossible to untie, impossible to sort out."

Elder Qingquan looked at Su Ming, a hint of examination in his eyes, "I don't require you to repair it, and there is no time limit. If you can untie this deadlock and sort out a feasible approach for guiding spiritual energy, even if only in theory..."

He paused, his tone serious: "This old man will accept you as a nominal disciple, permit you to come to this Listening to Waves Pavilion at any time to consult my personal notes, and provide you with targeted guidance in your cultivation of the path of formations."

Nominal disciple!

The weight of these four words was as heavy as a thousand jun.

Although not a direct disciple, to be able to receive guidance at any time from a Golden Core late-stage Grandmaster of Formations, and to have his private notes opened to him—for Su Ming, who had no master-disciple background, this was akin to ascending to heaven in a single step.

This was a true "powerful backer."

"Master Lin, this task..." Su Ming asked in his mind.

"Take it!" Lin Yu's voice was resolute, "Logical deadlock? That's exactly what we're best at finding. Moreover, this old man's study must have plenty of good stuff. We must get this access pass."

Su Ming took a deep breath, stood up, and solemnly cupped the jade slip with both hands.

The jade slip was slightly cool, yet it made his palms feel warm.

"This disciple is willing to give it a try."

Elder Qingquan nodded with satisfaction and waved his hand: "Go on. This matter is not urgent. The wonder of the path of formations lies in principle, not power; in comprehension, not memorization. Go back and ponder it slowly. Come back when you have figured it out."

"Yes."

Su Ming stored the jade slip in his storage pouch, bowed once more, then withdrew from the Listening to Waves Pavilion together with Luo Feng.

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## Chapter 268: The Fragment of the Map Enters My Arms

[ 1,633 words ]

Stepping out of the bamboo grove, the mountain breeze brushed his face, and Su Ming realized his back was slightly damp with sweat.

"Brother Su, impressive!"

Luo Feng patted Su Ming's shoulder, his face first showing admiration, then revealing a trace of a bitter smile.

He hesitated for a moment, lowered his voice, and said, "To be honest with you, Brother Su, I also spent over half a year studying this 'Eight Gates Lost Trace Incomplete Formation'."

Hearing this, Su Ming's footsteps paused slightly, and he turned his ear to listen attentively.

"The difficulty of this formation lies in its self-binding causality," Luo Feng said with a serious expression. "It's not like ordinary formations where the flow of spiritual energy has a clear beginning and end. Within this incomplete formation, there are at least three key nodes that are mutually causal yet contradictory. I tried seventeen different deduction paths. Each time I felt I was about to sort it out, I would always discover, in some unexpected place, that a premise from my earlier deduction had already been overturned by myself... It was like spinning in circles in a maze with no exit."

He glanced at the jade slip in Su Ming's hand, a flicker of lingering fear in his eyes. "The solution I ultimately submitted was to forcibly construct a larger energy field externally using the 'Seven Stars Suppressing the Mountain' pattern, to 'wrap' and 'suppress' this entire tangled mess, thereby forcing a relatively stable spiritual energy channel to emerge from the chaos. Elder Qingquan looked at it and said my solution was 'using brute force to break finesse, losing the ever-changing, unpredictable essence of a lost trace formation, but it is still a path.'"

Luo Feng patted Su Ming's shoulder again, his tone sincere yet carrying a hint of helplessness. "So, Brother Su, I can't help you this time. Since Elder Qingquan has taken out this formation again as a test and explicitly stated there's no time limit, he wants to see your unique method of breaking it. My path has already been walked. If I tell you about it now, it would only limit your thinking. This hurdle, you must cross it yourself."

Su Ming understood in his heart and was quite grateful for Luo Feng's frankness and goodwill.

"Senior Brother Luo's willingness to be so candid is already a great favor. The path of formations, while all methods return to the same origin, varies from person to person. Since it's a test question, there must be a solution," Su Ming said with a smile. Although he had no real confidence in his heart, his expression remained calm and unruffled. "No matter how difficult, it just means spending a bit more time."

"Your mindset, I truly admire it," Luo Feng shook his head. "I still need to go into seclusion to finalize the Nine Palaces Formation Plate, so I won't see you off. When you solve it, we'll have a proper drink. Also, take this token. It's Elder Qingquan's token. In case you solve it ahead of time, you can come directly to the Listening to Waves Pavilion to pay your respects to Elder Qingquan."

After bidding farewell to Luo Feng, Su Ming walked alone down the mountain path.

He reached out and touched the jade slip and token in his robe, his steps becoming a little lighter.

.....

Su Ming sat cross-legged before the stone table, which was covered with densely packed draft papers. Discarded paper balls filled the bamboo basket at his feet.

The bluish-grey jade slip lay quietly under the lamplight. The mottled patterns on its surface seemed like the breathing of some ancient creature, exuding an indescribable sense of eeriness.

Since returning from the Listening to Waves Pavilion, Su Ming had been sitting rigidly before the table for a full three hours.

"Wrong, still wrong."

The rune brush in Su Ming's hand hovered in mid-air. A drop of ink finally gathered at its tip, unable to bear the weight any longer, and fell with a soft \*plop\* onto the paper, spreading into a dark blotch of ink.

This was already the one hundred and seventh failed deduction.

According to the logic of the "True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction," any formation, no matter how complex, is ultimately a logical closed loop constructed from basic runes.

Just like building a house, as long as you find the load-bearing walls and beams, you can deduce the entire structure.

But this "Eight Gates Lost Trace Incomplete Formation" was a complete exception.

Su Ming put down the brush, rubbed his throbbing temples, and pointed at the tangled mess of a structural diagram on the draft paper, saying in a low voice, "Master, look here. According to the rules of spiritual energy flow, the 'Qian position' governs life. Spiritual energy should flow smoothly to the 'Kan position' and transform into water-element power. But every time I try to deduce this step, the spiritual pressure at the 'Kan position' inexplicably reverses flow, counter-charging the 'Qian position,' turning the original life gate into a death gate."

What was even more absurd was that this reverse flow wasn't fixed.

In one deduction it was a reverse flow, in the next it might become a split flow, and in yet another it might even vanish into thin air, as if that node was a black hole devouring spiritual energy.

"It's like a snake biting its own tail," Su Ming murmured to himself. "Head and tail entangled, mutually causal. If I untangle the head, the tail gets knotted; if I straighten the tail, the head gets messed up."

Within the Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu didn't respond immediately.

The semi-transparent figure floated above the jade slip, arms crossed, brows furrowed tightly, as if examining an extremely thorny and difficult problem.

"Disciple, don't you think this formation is a bit... 'disgusting'?" Lin Yu suddenly spoke, his tone carrying a hint of distaste.

"Disgusting?" Su Ming was taken aback. Formations emphasized precision and rigor. Even if they had a murderous aura, they shouldn't be described as "disgusting."

"Not visually disgusting, but logically."

Lin Yu floated down, his finger pointing virtually at those key incomplete nodes on the jade slip. "You've been using a 'disassembly' approach to deal with it, but the problem is..."

Lin Yu paused, his voice becoming somewhat profound. "What if this formation... is still moving?"

A chill shot up Su Ming's back. He instinctively looked at the seemingly dead, silent jade slip. "Master, are you saying this formation is alive?"

"To be precise, it's a living formation."

Lin Yu snapped his fingers. A faint pulse of soul power stirred at his fingertip, sketching a distorted formation model within Su Ming's Consciousness Sea. "The original framework of this formation is indeed the 'Eight Gates Lost Trace Formation,' that's correct. But it suffered extremely violent destruction. This destruction wasn't a simple break. It was some external force that forcibly twisted its core logic, causing a mutation in its internal spiritual energy cycle."

"Look at these nodes." Lin Yu pointed at those places Su Ming couldn't make sense of no matter how he calculated. "When spiritual energy flows through here, there's a very unnatural 'sense of stagnation.' It's like... a tumor growing in a blood vessel. Blood flowing past is forced to change course, forming a new, deformed collateral circulation."

Staring at that model, a spark of inspiration flashed in Su Ming's mind. He blurted out, "Formation Corpse!"

In some obscure miscellaneous records on the path of formations, this kind of formation was mentioned.

When some high-level formations are damaged, if they happen to be located on a spiritual vein node, after being washed over by spiritual energy for long ages, the surviving formation lines will instinctively undergo "self-repair" to maintain operation.

This repair has no intelligence, only a survival instinct. It often results in all sorts of bizarre, dangerous, and utterly illogical structures.

"This isn't a 'Lost Trace Formation' anymore." Su Ming took a deep breath. The confusion in his eyes gradually faded, replaced by a solemn understanding after seeing through the essence. "This is a formation corpse, protecting its core from collapse."

The conventional approach to solving a formation is to find the "life gate."

But this thing has no gates at all.

Its entire body is covered in wounds. Every wound is bleeding and healing at the same time, forming a dynamic, chaotic balance.

"No wonder Elder Qingquan said there's no time limit." Su Ming let out a bitter laugh and threw the rune brush in his hand back into the brush holder. "To solve this, relying on deduction from the 'True Meaning of Basic Rune Deconstruction' is useless. It's like trying to cure a sick patient. You first need to figure out the cause of its illness, and even... learn to think like a madman."

Lin Yu nodded approvingly, his figure swaying slightly in the air. "That's right. This requires a large number of samples and a very deep understanding of the microscopic changes of spiritual energy."

Lin Yu glanced out the window at the sky already showing the first light of dawn and yawned. "Can't be rushed. That old man has given you a long-term research topic. He probably doesn't expect you to solve it now either. This is more like... a form of tempering."

Su Ming silently put away the jade slip, placed it into a specially made spirit-sealing box, and pasted two restriction talismans on it.

Su Ming stood up, stretching his stiff joints, which emitted a series of crisp cracking sounds. "I'm only at the seventh layer of Qi Refining now, and my Dao foundation is still damaged. Although this 'formation corpse' is tough to deal with, it's not going anywhere. There's no need for me to disrupt my own cultivation rhythm for the sake of a nominal disciple's test."

Only by staying alive do you have the qualification to solve problems.

"Master, it's dawn." Su Ming pushed open the stone door. The crisp morning wind, carrying the dampness of soil, rushed to meet him. "Time to go water the 'money tree'."

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[ 1,436 words ]

The mornings in Clear Stream Valley always carried a unique blend of tranquility and busyness.

Su Ming didn't rush to the Repair Hall. Instead, he first went to the medicinal herb field behind his cave dwelling, which was tightly protected by a formation.

What was planted here weren't any rare spiritual herbs, but vast stretches of the most common Heart-Clearing Orchids.

However, in the very center of the herb field, a small area was cordoned off separately. There, over a dozen orchid plants grew that were different from the rest. Their leaves were covered in fine, scattered silver spots, as if a layer of starlight had been sprinkled upon them.

Silver-Spotted Heart-Clearing Orchids.

This was the new variant Su Ming had induced by utilizing the remnant vein of Sinking Star Iron. Although its grade only reached the Upper Yellow Rank, it possessed an extremely special effect—rapid recovery of divine sense.

For Su Ming, who now frequently used the "observation micro state" while also juggling formation deductions, this thing was even more precious than spirit stones.

Su Ming deftly formed hand seals, activating the "Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation."

The moisture in the air rapidly condensed, transforming into a continuous, fine drizzle.

Every single raindrop was infused with a trace of the uniquely gentle and moist spiritual energy from the "Like Water Art."

Under the nourishing rain and dew, those Silver-Spotted Heart-Clearing Orchids unfurled their leaves, their silver spots shimmering, releasing a cool, serene fragrance.

Su Ming took a deep breath, feeling the fatigue from sitting in meditation all night within his Consciousness Sea dissipate noticeably.

"Tsk, this mutated variety is growing quite well." Lin Yu floated above the herb field, resembling a landlord inspecting his work. "At this rate, we can harvest the first batch in another half month. By then, we can try refining a special 'Mind-Awakening Incense' targeting divine sense fatigue. Selling it to those unlucky souls who stay up all night practicing alchemy or drawing talismans would be absolutely, outrageously profitable."

"Master, you're obsessed with money." Su Ming chuckled, shaking his head, his hands never stopping as he meticulously cleared the weeds from the herb field.

"Nonsense! Without money, how will you cultivate your Dao foundation? Without money, how will you buy Void Stone Powder to replenish your teacher's health?" Lin Yu retorted righteously. "What we're doing is called 'supporting the Dao through commerce,' scientific cultivation."

Just as master and disciple were engaged in their usual banter, the restriction at the valley entrance transmitted a series of urgent fluctuations.

Su Ming straightened his back, patted the dirt off his hands, a flicker of confusion in his eyes.

Who would come this early?

He waved a hand, sending out a hand seal. The mist and clouds at the valley entrance parted, opening a passage.

He saw Wang Defa rushing in, sweat pouring down his face. His usually slicked-back, shiny hair bun was now somewhat disheveled. The face that always wore a shrewd smile was now etched with anxiety.

"Hall Master!"

"Did something happen at the Repair Hall again?"

Su Ming looked at the panting Wang Defa, casually sending a stream of spiritual energy to help him catch his breath, all while still holding the Silver-Spotted Heart-Clearing Orchid he had just finished weeding.

Wang Defa didn't even bother wiping his sweat, grabbing Su Ming's sleeve instead. "Hall Master, the Administration Hall has erected a new stone stele! What's written on it... you'd better go see for yourself!"

Su Ming's fingers paused slightly. "A new stele?"

"Yes! It's different from the usual mission boards. It's a Blood Jade Stele!" Wang Defa swallowed hard. "It's about the war at the Northern Border's 'Iron Wall Pass'... and the Earth Vein Spirit Milk you need!"

"Let's go take a look."

...

The square in front of the Administration Hall was now a boiling cauldron of noise and activity.

Many disciples were gathered around a blood-red jade stele the height of two men, pointing and discussing animatedly. Unlike the usual quiet around mission boards, disciples from various peaks had gathered before this stele, their expressions varied—some excited, some grave, some hesitant.

Su Ming activated the "observation micro state." His gaze pierced through the crowd, landing on the stele's inscription.

The inscription was divided into upper and lower parts.

The upper part was concise and to the point:

[The Northern Border's Iron Wall Pass is in critical condition. A coalition of three demon tribes is assaulting the defensive line. The sect hereby summons disciples at Qi Refining fifth layer and above to serve rotational duty at the Northern Border for a period of one year. This is not a mandatory conscription; it is a voluntary mission. Participating disciples will receive triple the usual sect contribution points, with additional access to the 'Military Merit Exchange System.']

"Voluntary mission..." Su Ming's heart stirred.

His gaze moved down, falling on the lower part's "Military Merit Exchange List."

The list was dazzling, ranging from magical implements, elixirs, and cultivation methods to rare natural treasures. Many were treasures from the sect's vault that were usually not open to disciples.

Su Ming's eyes swept rapidly over the list, suddenly freezing on a line of small text near the top.

[Earth Vein Spirit Milk: Extracted from the core of the earth vein spirit lines beneath the Northern Border. One drop is equivalent to ten years of arduous cultivation. It can also reshape meridians and repair damage to the Dao foundation. Exchange requirement: 50,000 points of military merit.]

Thump.

Su Ming clearly heard the heavy beat of his own heart.

Earth Vein Spirit Milk!

"Fifty thousand points of military merit..." Su Ming narrowed his eyes, quickly looking at the accompanying explanation for earning military merit.

[Slaying a first-rank late-stage demon beast awards ten points of military merit; second-rank initial stage, one hundred points; second-rank mid-stage, three hundred points...]

[Completing designated logistical tasks, formation maintenance, elixir refinement, etc., awards between fifty and one thousand points of military merit based on difficulty.]

[Special contributions receive additional commendations.]

It wasn't purely a kill count.

This meant that even those not skilled in combat had opportunities to accumulate military merit.

"Master." Su Ming spoke silently in his heart.

"I see it." Lin Yu's voice carried a trace of gravity. "Earth Vein Spirit Milk... the sect is really bringing out the treasures they've kept at the bottom of their chests this time."

"But this is an opportunity." Su Ming stared at that line of text, his gaze gradually firming. "Staying in the sect, I don't know how many years I'd have to wait to save up enough spirit stones to buy Earth Vein Spirit Milk. But going to the Northern Border, as long as I earn fifty thousand military merit—"

"Fifty thousand military merit, easier said than done." Lin Yu interrupted him. "Do you know what that means? By the kill count, you'd have to slay five hundred Foundation Establishment level demon beasts! By tasks, you'd have to complete dozens of high-risk logistical missions! You'd be gambling with your life."

Su Ming fell silent for a moment, but his gaze didn't waver.

Risk and reward were always directly proportional.

If he didn't go, perhaps in ten or twenty years he could afford it, but by then, the cracks in his Dao foundation would likely have worsened.

Going to the Northern Border, while dangerous, at least offered a clear target—fifty thousand military merit in exchange for a drop of spirit milk, in exchange for the path to the Great Dao.

"This risk must be taken." Su Ming's voice was hoarse yet resolute. "But we can't do it recklessly."

He continued reading down. In the most inconspicuous corner of the stele, he found a line of notes:

[Those proficient in the four arts of Alchemy, Artifact Crafting, Formations, and Talismans may register for the special assessment for the 'Technical Support Battalion.' Those who pass will be assigned to logistical sequences, primarily engaged in non-frontline tasks such as position maintenance and resource processing. Military merit acquisition will be based on task completion.]

Technical support roles.

Su Ming's pupils contracted slightly.

This was practically tailor-made for him.

"I'm not good at killing enemies, but I'm good at fixing things." Su Ming took a deep breath. "And the logistical sequence... while the spoils might be less, the safety factor is higher."

"Don't celebrate too soon." Lin Yu poured cold water on his enthusiasm. "Many people will definitely be eyeing such a good position. Alchemists, Artificers, Formation Masters—who wouldn't want to hide in the rear? You, an outer sect Repair Hall Master, what makes you think you can compete with them?"

Su Ming touched the storage pouch at his chest.

Inside lay a bluish-gray jade slip—the "Eight Gates Lost Trace Incomplete Formation" given by Elder Qingquan, as well as that token from Elder Qingquan.

"Because I have the skills in hand, and I have backing."

Without hesitation, he turned and walked towards the side hall of the Administration Hall—that was the special talent registration office.

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## Chapter 280: Preparations Before Departure

[ 1,018 words ]

Several long lines stretched across the side hall, filled with disciples from various peaks who were skilled in specific crafts.

These normally arrogant technical specialists were now craning their necks, peering towards the registration window, clutching their identity jade tokens tightly, afraid the quotas would be filled.

Su Ming stood in the "Formations/Talismans" queue, silently observing.

The person in charge of registration was a middle-aged steward with a pale, beardless face, who was impatiently waving away a Pill Cauldron Peak disciple trying to slip him spirit stones:

"I said no means no! What do you think the frontline is? A place for slackers? Get lost!"

The disciple slunk away dejectedly.

Soon, it was Su Ming's turn.

"Name, cultivation level, specialty." The steward didn't even look up.

"Su Ming, Qi Refining seventh layer, proficient in formation maintenance and repair." Su Ming handed over his identity token.

The pen in the steward's hand paused. He looked up, scrutinizing Su Ming. "Qi Refining seventh layer? Your cultivation is sufficient. But formation maintenance is delicate work. The frontline grand formations concern the lives of tens of thousands. What are your qualifications? Which Formation Master is your teacher?"

Scrutinizing gazes fell upon him from the surroundings.

Su Ming's expression remained unchanged. He retrieved a thick stack of archives from his storage pouch and placed them on the desk.

"These are records of the one thousand three hundred and twenty-seven formation plates I handled and repaired during my tenure as Hall Master of the Repair Hall. Included are detailed accounts of the 'Drizzle Formation' modification case for the Spiritual Plant Garden and the 'Cold Pool Incubation Formation' flow guidance case for the Spirit Beast Peak."

The steward raised an eyebrow and casually flipped open the archives.

His initially dismissive gaze gradually grew serious.

These archives weren't just dry data; they were detailed "medical records": symptom descriptions, fault analysis, repair plans, and follow-up on effectiveness. The level of professionalism far exceeded that of an ordinary disciple.

"Your fundamentals are very solid." The steward closed the archives, his tone softening. "But this time, the maintenance involves a secondary node of the 'Big Dipper Seven Stars Demon Locking Grand Formation'. That formation is extremely complex. Solid fundamentals alone aren't enough. You also need to understand adaptability and withstand pressure."

He stared at Su Ming. "Are you certain you can handle it?"

Su Ming knew that relying on the archives alone wasn't enough.

He smiled faintly, reached into his robe with his right hand, took out the Listening to Waves Token, subtly flashed it before the steward's eyes, and then placed it on top of the archives.

"To be honest with you, steward, apart from responding to the sect's summons, this disciple has a personal reason for going to the Northern Border." Su Ming lowered his voice. "Elder Qingquan is currently researching the topic of 'Formation Spiritual Energy Aberration in Extreme Environments'. This disciple is honored by the Elder's regard and is tasked with going to the frontline to collect data and verify several conjectures regarding 'formation self-repair'."

The steward's pupils contracted sharply.

The Listening to Waves Token! Elder Qingquan's token!

He originally thought Su Ming was just an outer sect manager with some skill, never expecting such a powerful figure—a late-stage Golden Core expert—to be backing him!

"Researching a topic for the Elder"—this reason was flawless. It demonstrated capability while also presenting a powerful backer.

The impatience on the steward's face vanished instantly, replaced by a cordial smile. He quickly picked up a cinnabar brush and drew a thick circle next to Su Ming's name.

"So you are the esteemed disciple of Elder Qingquan. My apologies for the earlier disrespect." The steward handed over a dark red waist token. "Since it's for the Elder's research project, naturally you must be assigned to a key position."

"Approved for camp entry. Assigned to the Iron Wall Pass 'Formation Maintenance Camp', Third Squad. Position: Technical Assistant Repair Specialist. Primary responsibilities: formation inspection patrols, data recording, and auxiliary maintenance."

"Many thanks, steward." Su Ming cupped his hands in thanks, collected the waist token, and left.

Envious murmurs followed behind him.

"The Formation Maintenance Camp? That's a cushy post!"

"Technical Assistant Repair Specialist... what connections does this kid have?"

Su Ming paid no heed, striding quickly out of the Administration Hall.

The sunlight was glaring. He tightened his grip on the waist token.

Step one, secured.

.....

Returning to Clear Stream Valley, Su Ming immediately switched to combat preparation mode.

"Old Wang, after I leave, you will temporarily manage the Repair Hall." Su Ming handed several jade slips to Wang Defa. "These contain the key points of the assembly line repair method and troubleshooting manuals for several common formation plates. Remember, the 'standard' must not be lost."

Wang Defa accepted them solemnly. "Rest assured, Hall Master! The hall stands as long as I stand!"

After settling hall affairs, Su Ming ducked into the deepest artifact forging room within the Repair Hall, sealing all doors and windows.

"Master, there are still three days." Su Ming looked at the room full of materials. "We need to convert all our assets into capital for survival."

"Three days is enough." Lin Yu floated in the air. "Take out that elite Earth Fire Scorpion tail stinger. And the Spirit-Eroding Sand, Thunder Fire Sand... Since we're going to a battlefield, the 'Bumper Harvest Series' should also be upgraded."

For the following time, Su Ming worked without rest or sleep. Supported by the \*Like Water Art\* and Lin Yu's soul power, his hands were as steady as a rock.

The Water Refining Method operated at its peak.

The Earth Fire Scorpion tail stinger was refined into hundreds of red needles as fine as an ox's hair. Each needle was inscribed with miniature "Armor-Piercing" and "Flow Poison" runes—specifically designed to pierce the thick hides of demon beasts.

The Thunder Fire Sand was highly compressed and sealed inside specially crafted Mystic Iron casings, forming fist-sized "Bumper Harvest No. 2" explosives. Equipped with dual delayed and contact fuses, their destructive power was tripled.

Most crucially, Su Ming used "Moisture Stones" and the remaining Void Stone powder to craft a set of miniature "portable formation plate kits".

The formation plates were only palm-sized, usually clipped onto a belt. When activated, they could form a "Minor Zhou Heaven Water Rhythm - Defense Formation" with a three-zhang diameter within three breaths.

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