

Transmigrated into a Grandpa, Embracing the Laid-Back Life

Chapter 281: Entrustment

[1,397 words]

The mist in Clear Stream Valley was thinner than usual, dew sliding down the leaves of the Silver-Spotted Heart-Clearing Orchids and dripping into the soil.

Su Ming squatted by the medicinal field, holding a specially crafted jade scissors in his hand, carefully cutting a few orchid plants that showed the best growth.

These mutated spiritual plants had thick, fleshy leaves with shimmering silver spots, emitting an exceptionally pure and refreshing fragrance. Just one whiff was enough to clear one's divine sense.

"These are the 'first harvest,' their medicinal potency is the strongest."

Su Ming placed the orchid plants into a jade box, then took out several pre-made calming incense cakes, packing them together. "This trip to the Northern Frontier, the return date is uncertain. Although Senior Brother Qingfeng and Senior Sister Mingyue might still be in seclusion, the proper courtesies cannot be neglected."

In his Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu's voice drifted over lazily: "If your Repair Hall didn't have those two big Buddhas keeping watch, the moment you leave, those people from the Vessel Hall would probably dismantle it for firewood."

Su Ming nodded, sealed the jade box, and affixed a Restriction Talisman.

He originally intended to go directly to their cave dwellings to leave a note, but then reconsidered. There were still a few essential supplies for the Northern Frontier he hadn't exchanged for at the Internal Affairs Hall.

"Go to the Internal Affairs Hall first, then pay a visit."

Having made up his mind, Su Ming stood up, patted the dust off his robe, checked the storage pouch at his waist and the "Bumper Harvest No. 2" hidden in his sleeve, then turned and walked out of Clear Stream Valley.

...

The Internal Affairs Hall was exceptionally crowded today.

With the outbreak of war in the Northern Frontier, previously unpopular items like Cold-Resistance Talismans, Antidote Pills, and Fasting Pills had become hot commodities.

The area in front of the counter was packed with disciples about to head to the front lines, with clamoring voices and haggling sounds rising and falling.

Su Ming, using his "Technical Assistant Repair Specialist" waist token, took the special side passage.

He had just received two stacks of specially made "Warm Sun Talismans" and a bottle of "Hundred Herb Evil-Cleansing Pills" from the steward and was about to turn and leave when his gaze inadvertently swept over a corner and then froze.

He saw two small figures sitting side by side on an inconspicuous stone stool beside the counter.

Qingfeng was wearing an obviously ill-fitting cyan short jacket, his hair hastily tied up with a wooden hairpin, a few stray strands hanging over his forehead. His small face was smudged with a bit of dirt and dust as he hugged his knees, staring longingly at the exchange list. Mingyue wore a matching lotus-root-colored short shirt, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows. She was squatting on the ground without any regard for decorum, idly scratching the ground with a small twig, with half a dry pancake stuffed in her mouth.

Although the two looked somewhat disheveled, the faint, almost imperceptible Spiritual Pressure they emitted was several times more substantial than before.

Su Ming's pupils contracted slightly, then he cupped his hands in salute, lowering his voice: "Greetings, Senior Brother Qingfeng, Senior Sister Mingyue."

The two were also taken aback. After recognizing Su Ming, the previously somewhat dazed look in their eyes instantly brightened.

Both little heads turned simultaneously. Qingfeng's eyes showed a moment of confusion, then lit up as he jumped down from the stone stool: "Junior Brother Su!" Mingyue also tossed the twig away, stuffed the pancake into her mouth in a few bites, and mumbled with puffed cheeks: "Su Su Su Ming! You're here to exchange stuff too?"

"Wait... you're going to the Northern Frontier?"

Su Ming nodded: "I accepted a posting with the Formation Maintenance Camp, to go earn some Military Merit."

"Good courage!" Qingfeng praised, though his voice sounded a bit lacking in vigor. He gave a bitter smile and pointed at himself and Mingyue. "We just came out of the 'Withering and Flourishing Secret Realm.' Master said our foundations were unstable and tossed us in there to fight a bunch of wood demons for half a year."

"Fight? That's putting it mildly!"

Mingyue wore an expression of grievous indignation, lowering her voice for an outburst. "Master said we needed to 'cut off, discard, and detach,' and confiscated all the spirit stones, talismans, and elixirs on us, saying 'external objects disturb the mind.' For half a year, we ate tree bark when hungry and drank dew when thirsty. We finally got out, and our pockets are cleaner than our faces!"

Hearing this, Su Ming understood.

No wonder these two, as disciples of a sect heavyweight, appeared in the Internal Affairs Hall in such a state. They were probably here to "fence goods" in exchange for spirit stones to eat.

Lin Yu was beside himself with glee in the Consciousness Sea: "Tsk tsk, this is the rich kids' 'Metamorphosis' show. Seems their master is quite a character too."

Su Ming's expression remained unchanged. He smoothly took out the list of supplies he had just exchanged for, along with the description about the "Earth Vein Spirit Milk," from his storage pouch.

"This junior brother is going to the Northern Frontier for this." Su Ming pointed at the small print about the spirit milk, speaking frankly. "The damage to my Dao foundation cannot be delayed. It seems only this substance can repair it. There are risks, but it's worth a try."

Qingfeng took the list and glanced over it. The original look of weariness on his face receded slightly, and his gaze towards Su Ming gained a touch of solemnity.

"Earth Vein Spirit Milk... fifty thousand Military Merit." Qingfeng sighed softly. "Even for us, gathering that amount wouldn't be easy. For Junior Brother Su to dare to go to the Northern Frontier at the Qi Refining stage, this temperament, Qingfeng admires it."

Su Ming gave a slight bow, seizing the opportunity to voice his request.

"This junior brother's departure date is uncertain. The Repair Hall is this junior brother's hard work, and also the place where a few old brothers have settled and established themselves. Steward Wang Defa is diligent, but after all, his cultivation is low and his vision limited."

Su Ming looked at the two, his tone sincere. "This junior brother presumes greatly, but I earnestly request that if you two senior siblings have spare time, please help keep an eye on it. There's no need for deliberate favoritism, just ensure the hall doesn't descend into chaos and isn't deliberately targeted or harassed."

Qingfeng and Mingyue exchanged a glance.

"Junior Brother Su, rest assured." Qingfeng said seriously. "The Repair Hall being what it is today also has a share of our 'favor from past kindness.' As long as we are here, the Repair Hall will not fall into chaos."

After speaking, Qingfeng pondered for a moment, then reached into his robe and pulled out a token that was neither metal nor jade.

The token was pale cyan, carved with cloud patterns and a cliff, faintly exuding a sharp, sword-like intent.

"This is the 'Cloud Cliff Token.'" Qingfeng handed the token to Su Ming. "Although it cannot directly mobilize sect resources, seeing this token is like seeing a Nominal Disciple of our master. Leave this item at the Repair Hall, or give it to Steward Wang to hang in the main hall. Common troublemakers will know their place upon seeing this token."

Su Ming received it with both hands. It felt warm and smooth to the touch, but his heart trembled.

This wasn't just a token; it was a form of silent deterrence.

With it, the Repair Hall would truly be considered under the banner of that heavyweight.

"And this!"

Mingyue rummaged in her deflated storage pouch for a long time, finally pulling out a bulging beast-skin bag and unceremoniously shoving it into Su Ming's hands.

"We have no spirit stones, we're broke, penniless." Mingyue scratched her head somewhat sheepishly. "These are core fragments that dropped from those 'Crystallized Wood Demons' we fought in the secret realm. That stuff is incredibly hard, too brittle for artifact forging, and toxic for alchemy. But..."

Mingyue lowered her voice, speaking mysteriously: "We discovered this stuff is extremely sensitive to Wood and Earth attribute spiritual energy fluctuations. Even from dozens of yards away, as long as something is burrowing underground, these fragments will heat up and vibrate. Take them to the Northern Frontier, bury them around the camp perimeter. They might help guard against sneak attacks from burrowing demon beasts."

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Chapter 282: A Hundred Boats Race Across the Sea of Clouds

[1,323 words]

Su Ming took the leather pouch; it felt heavy in his hand.

Su Ming was ecstatic inside, but on his face, he maintained an expression of gratitude as he solemnly put it away.

"Many thanks for Senior Brother and Senior Sister's generous gift."

Su Ming then took out the two jade boxes he had prepared long ago from his own pack and handed them over.

"This junior brother has little of value, only these 'Heart-Clearing Incense Cakes' I personally prepared these past few days. They are made from those mutated Silver-Spotted Heart-Clearing Orchids in Clear Stream Valley. They have a slight effect on calming the mind, settling the will, and alleviating divine sense fatigue."

Looking at the dark circles under their eyes, Su Ming smiled and said, "Both Senior Brother and Senior Sister have just emerged from the secret realm, your divine senses have been strained for too long. This item might help you both get a good night's sleep."

Qingfeng took the jade box and gently opened it a crack.

An ethereal, cold, and tranquil fragrance instantly wafted out. Just a whiff of it noticeably eased the needle-like throbbing pain at the center of his brow.

"This..." A flicker of surprise passed through Qingfeng's eyes. "Such pure medicinal potency. Junior Brother Su, you are very thoughtful."

Mingyue took a deep breath, her previously somewhat irritable expression visibly relaxing. "I feel alive again... This scent is truly wonderful. Junior Brother Su, this gift is much better than spirit stones!"

They exchanged a knowing smile.

There was no excessive small talk, nor any grand declarations.

In this bustling corner of the Internal Affairs Hall, an exchange concerning future plans was completed amidst seemingly casual conversation.

"Take care." Qingfeng patted Su Ming's shoulder.

"The Northern Frontier is bitterly cold. Come back alive." Mingyue waved her hand.

Su Ming clasped his hands in farewell, turned, and walked towards the main gate.

Sunlight streamed in from outside the door, casting his shadow long on the floor.

"Master," Su Ming touched the Cloud Cliff Token inside his robe, then pressed on the leather pouch filled with Wood Demon cores. "The home front is secured, and the tools in hand are ready."

"Mhm." Lin Yu's voice was uncharacteristically serious. "Then prepare to depart."

.....

The Cloud Hidden Sect's mountain gate plaza was now shrouded by a massive shadow.

A colossal flying vessel, three hundred zhang in length, hovered in mid-air. Its hull, with a keel of thousand-year ironwood as the main structure, was covered in layers of bluish-black Mystic Iron armor. Dense, intricate runes shimmered with a faint golden light, pulsating like breathing. This was the sect's strategic-level transport magical treasure—the "Cloud-Piercing Shuttle."

The plaza was teeming with people, disciples from each peak assembled according to orders.

Sword cultivators stood solemnly with their swords on their backs, alchemy cultivators carried huge medicine baskets, beast taming cultivators led restless spirit beasts. The clamor was suppressed to a very low hum by the immense spiritual pressure.

Su Ming blended into the "Formation Maintenance Battalion" ranks, wearing the gray short tunic symbolizing a Technical Assistant Repair Specialist, utterly inconspicuous. He looked up at the behemoth, his fingers subconsciously rubbing against his sleeve cuff.

"Master, this thing looks pretty sturdy," Su Ming said in his mind.

"Sturdiness is a relative concept," Lin Yu's voice echoed in the Consciousness Sea, carrying a touch of professional nitpicking. "Look at the rune brightness at the keel joints, it's thirty percent dimmer than the surrounding areas, indicating a blockage in spiritual energy conduction. And look at the tail fin's counterweight, clearly sacrificing

maneuverability for greater cargo capacity. This is a flying iron coffin. Fortunately, we're in the middle section."

Lin Yu paused, his tone becoming earnest. "Remember this, disciple. On these large-scale transports, the front cabin is for the big shots to put on airs, the rear cabin is for cannon fodder to cushion the blow. Only the middle section, near the core power furnace, has the most stable structure, the thickest defenses, and is the most convenient for making a quick escape."

Su Ming gave a slight nod. His footwork subtly shifted as he imperceptibly adjusted his position within the ranks, ensuring he could secure a corner spot towards the inner part of the middle cabin upon boarding.

"Board the vessel!"

Following the command, thousands of disciples, like ants returning to their nest, filed in along the lowered Mystic Iron ladders.

The interior space was more crowded than expected. The Technical Battalion was assigned to the third deck, surrounded by thick soundproofing barriers. The air was filled with the smell of aged spirit stone dust and a faint scent of machine oil.

Su Ming found a corner spot near the window but not right against it and sat down. He skillfully pulled out a safety belt—a rope he had braided himself from discarded beast sinew—and securely fastened himself to a handrail on the cabin wall.

Several disciples from Pill Cauldron Peak nearby cast strange glances, whispering among themselves, "Why is this Formation Peak junior brother tying himself up? Afraid of falling?"

Su Ming ignored them, closing his eyes to rest.

"Boom—"

The deck beneath their feet jolted violently, a massive pushing force pressing against their backs. The Cloud-Piercing Shuttle had launched.

The scenery outside the window instantly blurred into streaks of light. The flying vessel pierced through the cloud layers, the surrounding air currents crashing against the protective shield, emitting muffled thunderous roars.

Although formation arrays dampened the vibrations, that high-frequency tremor still traveled through their bones, resonating throughout their entire bodies.

"Don't just sit idle," Lin Yu reminded. "This kind of bumpy environment isn't something you encounter often in Clear Stream Valley. Try setting up a formation."

Su Ming opened his eyes. His right index finger slightly curled, a wisp of dark blue water spiritual energy coalescing at his fingertip.

He didn't dare attempt anything large-scale, only trying to set up a miniature "Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm - Control" formation on the small, palm-sized window in front of him.

The moment his fingertip touched the window frame, the flying vessel lurched sharply to one side.

"Pfft."

The barely-formed rune instantly dissipated. The spiritual energy backlash sent a numbing shock through Su Ming's fingertip.

"Your hand is too rigid," Lin Yu critiqued. "In this environment, the window is moving, the air is moving, even the spiritual energy is turbulent. If you try to 'nail' the rune onto it, it's like hitting water with a hammer—you'll just splash yourself. You have to go with its flow."

Su Ming pondered this. He withdrew his finger, not rushing to inscribe again. Instead, he placed his palm against the vibrating cabin wall, closed his eyes, and focused on sensing that utterly chaotic rhythm.

Vibration, frequency, wave peaks, wave troughs.

Half a cup of tea later, Su Ming's finger moved again.

This time, his fingertip was no longer forceful and rigid, but swayed like seaweed with the vibrations. Each stroke of inscription precisely landed in the gaps between vibrations or slid along the direction of the motion.

A pale blue rune, crooked yet exceptionally tenacious, adhered to the window frame. It deformed slightly with the flying vessel's tremors but never disintegrated.

"Interesting," Lin Yu praised. "This is called dynamic equilibrium. Threading a needle in a shaking carriage doesn't rely on eyesight, but on the rhythm of unified waist and horse stance."

However, at the other end of the cabin, an elderly man dressed in a deep purple formation robe stood with his hands clasped behind his back, steady as a mountain.

He was the leader of this Technical Battalion, a Golden Core realm Grandmaster of Formations, known as "Elder Mo."

Elder Mo's gaze pierced through the flustered crowd, landing precisely on Su Ming.

"Solid foundation, meticulous mind."

The wrinkles on Elder Mo's perpetually stern face relaxed almost imperceptibly as he gave a barely noticeable nod.

"A promising seedling."

Su Ming remained with his eyes closed, his fingers lightly tapping against his knee.

"That's right," Lin Yu's voice carried a note of satisfaction. "Never be content with a single success. Also, that old man was watching you earlier. Be more careful when working from now on, don't stand out too much."

Su Ming's finger tapping his knee paused slightly.

"Understood, Master."

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Chapter 283: The pass is as solid as iron, and the blood is as cold as frost.

[1,291 words]

A few days later.

The Cloud-Piercing Shuttle's colossal hull descended with a grating screech of metal, slowly settling into a docking berth behind Iron Wall Pass.

When the hatch opened and the first gust of cold wind rushed in, it wasn't the biting chill one might expect. Instead, it was a dry, oppressive heat, thick with the mingled smells of char, rust, and intense spiritual energy fluctuations.

Su Ming followed the line out of the hatch. The moment his feet touched the ground, he felt a faint tremor through the soles.

This wasn't an earthquake. It was a resonance caused by some unimaginably vast energy surging deep beneath the earth.

He looked up, his pupils involuntarily contracting slightly.

Before him stretched a black mountain range.

No, that wasn't a mountain range.

It was a section of mountain peak that had been forcibly sheared off by human effort, then built upon with countless massive blocks of Mystic Iron rock to form a city wall.

The wall soared a thousand *zhang* high, extending left and right to the limits of vision, like a black iron gate cleaving heaven and earth in two.

But that wasn't the most awe-inspiring sight.

The most awe-inspiring was the curtain of light enveloping the wall outside.

Seven pillars of starlight, thick as celestial columns, descended from the firmament, plunging deep into the earth. Using these as anchor points, they supported a translucent, pale golden curtain of light. What flowed across this curtain weren't ordinary runes, but torrents of spiritual energy surging like mighty rivers.

Each surge of the spiritual energy tide produced a deep, thunderous rumble.

"This is... the Big Dipper Seven Stars Demon Locking Grand Formation."

Su Ming murmured to himself. Even hovering at the edge of the "observation micro state," he felt dizzy and disoriented. The complexity of this formation was billions of times greater than any formation diagram he had ever seen.

"Don't stare at it for too long. Your divine sense will get sucked in and shredded."

Lin Yu's voice sounded in his Consciousness Sea, carrying a rare note of seriousness. "This isn't so much a formation as it is a furnace burning spirit stones. Just maintaining the normal operation of that light curtain consumes an amount of spiritual energy every second that would be enough to make you explode a hundred times over."

Su Ming quickly averted his gaze, rubbing his throbbing temples. "Master, the spiritual energy flow of this formation... it seems a bit sluggish?"

"Naturally," Lin Yu replied. "It's like an old machine that's been running at full capacity for thousands of years. Parts are worn, pipes are aged. The fact that it's still turning is a miracle. Your job is to tighten the screws on this machine, to keep it from falling apart at a critical moment."

A shout came from the front of the line.

"New recruits for the Formation Maintenance Battalion, assemble over here!"

Su Ming collected his thoughts and hurried to catch up.

The person responsible for receiving them was a middle-aged cultivator wearing a dark red formation robe. His left sleeve was empty, fluttering in the wind. He held a jade slip in his hand, his gaze sweeping coldly over this group of "fledglings" from the sect.

"Those whose names are called, go collect your identity tags and tools."

"Zhang San, First Squad."

"Li Si, Second Squad."

...

"Su Ming, Third Squad."

Su Ming stepped forward and took the heavy black iron tag. It felt cool to the touch. On the front was carved the character for "Assistant," while the back bore a string of complex numbers.

"Third Squad is over there." The one-armed cultivator pointed toward a stone hut in a corner of the camp. "Go find Captain Zhao Tiji. Don't wander off. Take one wrong step here, trigger a killing formation, and no one will be around to collect your corpse."

Su Ming offered his thanks and turned toward the stone hut.

The atmosphere in this camp was completely different from the ethereal, immortal air of the sect. The ground was paved with rough stone slabs, the cracks between them packed with black sealant to prevent spiritual energy leakage. The cultivators coming and going mostly wore hurried expressions, their robes stained with grease and scorch marks. The air was thick with a tense, orderly sense of grim purpose.

A tall, burly man stood in front of the Third Squad's stone hut.

He had his back to Su Ming, holding a massive formation plate in his hands. He was using a tool resembling a chisel to carve something onto it with forceful strokes. Each strike sent sparks flying.

"Reporting. Newly appointed Technical Assistant Repair Specialist, Su Ming, reporting for duty as ordered."

Su Ming stood three paces away and performed a standard sect salute.

The man didn't stop his work. Only after carving the final stroke did he slowly turn around.

He had a face as hard and cold as rock.

A dark red scar ran from the corner of his right eye all the way down to his jaw, lending his face a somewhat ferocious aspect. His cultivation was at the early Foundation Establishment stage, but the aura he exuded was far more condensed and sharp than any other early Foundation Establishment cultivator Su Ming had ever met.

Zhao Tiji.

He looked Su Ming up and down, his gaze lingering for a moment on Su Ming's long, pale, clean hands. The corner of his mouth twisted into an unfriendly smirk.

"Qi Refining seventh layer? The sect is being generous this time, sending someone with decent cultivation."

Zhao Tiji's voice sounded like two pieces of raw iron grinding together. "But judging by your delicate, tender looks, you're used to sitting comfortably in a back-office, aren't you?"

Su Ming's expression remained unchanged, his tone calm. "Reporting to Captain, this disciple was indeed responsible for the Repair Hall in the sect and has little experience fighting on the front lines. If I am lacking, I ask for the Captain's guidance."

He was neither subservient nor arrogant, showing neither anger at the other's disdain nor deliberate fear.

Zhao Tiji casually tossed the formation plate, which weighed over a hundred *jin*, toward Su Ming.

Su Ming instinctively channeled spiritual energy to catch it. It was slightly heavy in his hands, but he held it steady.

"That's the backup node formation plate for the 'Celestial Mysterious' position on the city wall."

Zhao Tiji pointed to a tiny crack on the formation plate. "A crack like this, back in the sect, you'd probably dismantle it for re-forging, or spend three days slowly repairing it. But here, you have half the time it takes to drink a cup of tea."

He walked up to Su Ming, the oppressive aura mixed with the scent of blood washing over him.

"Kid, remember the first rule here."

Zhao Tiji extended a rough finger and tapped the tag on Su Ming's chest. "In the sect, if you draw a rune wrong, all you waste is a piece of material, and you get a scolding. But

at Iron Wall Pass, if the node you're responsible for fails, and a single demon beast slips through, the ones who die could be the brothers behind you, or even an entire battalion."

"The formation lines here, every single one is dyed with blood."

Su Ming looked at Zhao Tiji's hand, calloused and scarred, his gaze sharpening slightly.

"This disciple understands," Su Ming said solemnly. "The formation stands while I stand. I will not disgrace my duty."

"Save the pretty words for the dead."

Zhao Tiji snorted coldly, turned, and took a dusty cloth pouch from a shelf behind him, tossing it to Su Ming. "This is your gear. Inside are a standard formation brush, spiritual ink, inspection diagrams, and a distress flare. Your quarters are in Stone Hut Number Seven, Bing Zone. Today, familiarize yourself with the environment and the diagrams. Tomorrow at mao hour, be on time to follow the squad up the wall."

"Yes, sir."

Su Ming took the pouch, saluted again, and turned to leave.

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Chapter 284: First Step into the Iron Wall Pass

[1,249 words]

"This man is a wily old veteran."

After walking some distance, Lin Yu commented within the Consciousness Sea, "Although his words are harsh, this kind of person is often more reliable than those hypocrites who spout benevolence and righteousness. Following him, at least you won't be inexplicably sold out."

"He was testing my method of receiving the formation plate just now," Su Ming said in a low voice. "He used a clever force, not brute strength. He noticed."

"Good that he noticed," Lin Yu said. "Here, showing your value is more important than hiding your clumsiness. Only when they think you're useful will someone give you a hand when danger strikes."

Stone House Number Seven in the Bing District was located at the very edge of the camp, right next to a section of abandoned city wall.

Pushing open the heavy stone door, the furnishings inside were simple to the extreme. A stone bed, a stone table, and a few meditation cushions piled in the corner. Simple soundproofing and temperature-gathering runes were carved on the walls, but they were already peeling and worn.

No one was inside, clearly a single room, or perhaps the roommate was still on duty.

Su Ming closed the door and checked the interior restrictions.

"Too crude."

Su Ming shook his head. "The defensive restrictions here are full of holes. If someone was eavesdropping outside, it'd be no different from standing right in front of me."

He pulled out several Formation Flags from his storage pouch and skillfully laid down a simplified version of the "Minor Heavenly Cycle Water Rhythm Formation."

As faint water ripples spread across the walls, the noise inside the room instantly vanished, becoming deathly quiet.

"Master, is it safe here?"

"Temporarily, no high-level divine sense prying has been detected," Lin Yu said. "The spiritual energy fluctuations here are too chaotic, which actually provides natural cover. Hurry up and plant that thing."

Su Ming nodded and walked to the darkest corner of the stone house.

He took out his commonly used Mystic Iron small shovel. Without using spiritual energy, he acted like an ordinary mortal, carefully prying open the floor slab and digging down about three feet.

The soil showed an eerie dark red color, hard as iron.

Su Ming took out the beast-skin pouch Mingyue had given him from his chest and poured out a fist-sized fragment shaped like dead wood.

This was the "Wood Demon Core Fragment."

The moment it was taken out, the fragment trembled slightly, as if sensing some rhythm deep within the earth.

"This thing is a good treasure," Lin Yu praised. "The Wood Demon race is most sensitive to vibrations. That girl Mingyue might seem careless, but this gift is truly thoughtful."

Su Ming placed the fragment at the bottom of the hole, then took out a sensing talisman and stuck it on top. He then refilled the soil, covered it with the slab, and finally used a "Mud Transformation Technique" to seal the seams flawlessly.

After finishing all this, Su Ming sat cross-legged on the stone bed, closed his eyes, and lightly pressed his fingers against the ground.

A faint, almost imperceptible connection transmitted through that sensing talisman to his fingertips.

Thump... thump...

That was the heartbeat of the earth, also the faint tremors caused by countless demonic beasts moving underground miles away.

"This is my 'Earth Hearing.'"

A faint curve appeared at the corner of Su Ming's mouth. "With this, any movement within five miles underground won't escape my ears."

"Alright, enough showing off," Lin Yu yawned. "Hurry up and memorize that inspection map Zhao Tiji gave you. The structural diagram of the Big Dipper Seven Stars Demon Locking Grand Formation, even if it's just the tip of the iceberg, is enough for you to chew on all night."

Su Ming gathered his focus, took out the jade slip from the cloth pouch, and pressed it against his forehead.

A massive amount of information instantly flooded his mind.

Countless spiritual energy pipelines crisscrossed inside the city walls, like the meridians of a human body.

As Su Ming looked, his brows gradually furrowed.

"Master, look here."

Su Ming's consciousness lingered on a certain node within the jade slip. "This is the inspection area of the third squad Zhao Tiji is responsible for, located on the flank of the

'Celestial Pivot' position. Logically, this should be a buffer zone for spiritual energy backflow, with the lowest pressure. But..."

"But the data for these backflow pipelines is wrong," Lin Yu's voice also turned serious. "The flow rate is thirty percent lower than the theoretical value. Either the pipes are clogged, or... someone is intercepting the flow downstream."

"Or the formation's foundation is damaged, and spiritual energy is leaking underground," Su Ming added.

Master and disciple exchanged a look (though within the Consciousness Sea).

"Finding a problem as soon as we arrive, what luck," Lin Yu clicked his tongue. "Don't say anything for now. That wily old veteran Zhao Tiji is there tapping and beating every day, he can't possibly not know. If he didn't mention it, either he can't fix it, or... he mustn't fix it."

Su Ming nodded, burying this suspicion deep in his heart.

He continued immersing himself in the complex formation diagrams, like a dry sponge greedily absorbing every bit of formation theory from this monumental grand formation.

Night deepened, the wind outside Iron Wall Pass howled like ghosts and wolves.

And under the dim lamplight in Stone House Number Seven of the Bing District, a young Formation Master held that black iron nameplate, his gaze profound.

"No matter how many rules there are here, no matter how much blood is stained on the formation lines."

Su Ming muttered to himself, "I just want to survive and get those fifty thousand Military Merits."

"Even if I have to pry open the floor tiles of Iron Wall Pass one by one."

...

Morning light had not yet broken through. A layer of bluish-gray mist shrouded the top of Iron Wall Pass's walls.

The Mystic Iron rock beneath their feet transmitted a dull, deep pulse from the earth veins, mixed with the low hum of the light barrier's operation, making their feet go numb.

Outside the wall, the fierce astral winds howled, whipping up black dust—whether ash or sand—that pattered against their protective spiritual light.

Looking out, the distant horizon was shrouded in a turbid haze.

No beast roars, no flames, only a suffocating gloom, as if even light was devoured there.

Zhao Tiji walked at the front, his steps heavy yet rhythmic, each footfall landing precisely in the gaps between the nodes of the formation's spiritual energy flow.

"Forget all those formation diagrams you memorized in your heads."

Zhao Tiji didn't turn around, his voice somewhat fragmented in the wind yet exceptionally clear. "Diagrams are dead, formations are alive. Especially here at Iron Wall Pass, the spiritual pressure changes every moment."

He stopped by a beacon tower, pointing at the flowing spiritual light below. "Watch it. Don't look with your eyes, use your divine sense to touch it, to listen to its flow rate."

Su Ming stood at the side rear of the team, following the instruction and extending his divine sense.

At the edge of the "observation micro state," the originally continuous light barrier decomposed into countless surging rivers in his vision.

"Fast flow rate means there's a blockage downstream; slow flow means insufficient power supply upstream; flickering brightness means the node is gasping, about to give out."

Zhao Tiji turned around, his single eye sweeping over everyone. "What we need to do is clear those clogged blood vessels before this giant beast dies of exhaustion."

This was the "Wartime Spiritual Eye Vein Observation Method" Zhao Tiji taught.

Crude, direct, yet more suited for the battlefield than the complex calculations taught in the sect.

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Chapter 285: The True Strength Lies in the Minor Flaws

[1,278 words]

"Master, this method may seem crude, but it secretly aligns with the principles of 'observation, listening, inquiry, and diagnosis'," Su Ming murmured in his heart.

"Naturally," Lin Yu's voice drawled lazily. "This is experiential science paid for with countless lives. Learn it well; it's more useful than any book."

The inspection continued.

The team advanced along the winding city wall. Zhao Tiji moved extremely fast, often judging the state of a node with just a glance.

When they reached the seventh node at the "Celestial Pivot Position," Zhao Tiji paused for a moment, reached out, and patted the formation hub shell, which was as large as a millstone.

The shell was cast from a single piece of Star Pattern Steel, its surface smooth and glossy as if brand new. The spiritual pressure reading was also exceptionally stable.

"Nothing wrong here. Move to the next one," Zhao Tiji waved his hand.

But Su Ming didn't move.

He stared at that seemingly perfect formation hub, his brow slightly furrowed.

The spiritual energy of the *Like Water Art* within his body circulated on its own, as if sensing some extremely discordant, minute tremor. Water benefits all things by permeating them, and water-attribute spiritual energy possesses a natural sensitivity towards such subtle structural changes.

"Wait," Su Ming spoke up.

Zhao Tiji stopped and turned to look at him, a trace of impatience in his single eye. "What?"

"There's a problem here," Su Ming stepped forward, his finger hovering three inches above the formation hub. "The spiritual circuits inside show signs of crystal fracturing."

Zhao Tiji snorted with disdain, strode back, and slapped the formation hub heavily with his hand.

Hum—

The formation hub emitted a clear, crisp ringing sound. The flow of spiritual light was smooth, without the slightest obstruction.

Zhao Tiji pointed at the hub. "Kid, that sound is crisp, and the spiritual pressure is stable. Even if there are some minor flaws, with the strength of Star Pattern Steel, it can hold for another three to five months without issue. There are still dozens of nodes ahead to check. Don't waste time."

The other veteran team members also cast dismissive glances.

In their view, this "Technical Assistant Repair Specialist" from the sect was just too fussy, making a big deal out of every tiny burr.

Su Ming didn't argue. He calmly retrieved a slender silver needle from his storage pouch.

The needle was hollow, its entire body polished from transparent crystal, with a strand of highly compressed, deep blue water vapor sealed inside.

This was a tool he had made himself back in Clear Stream Valley for detecting the internal structure of formation plates—his "Spirit-Detecting Needles."

"Captain, if it were merely a minor flaw, this disciple wouldn't dare to hold us up."

Su Ming gently pressed the Spirit-Detecting Needle against a seam on the formation hub. "But what if it's a precursor to an 'internal explosion'?"

Before his words faded, his finger moved slightly, activating the water vapor inside the needle.

That strand of deep blue water vapor instantly seeped into the seam, traveling along the internal grain of the Star Pattern Steel.

Su Ming formed a hand seal with his left hand and uttered a low command, "Reveal!"

In the next moment, the crystal at the tip of the Spirit-Detecting Needle suddenly lit up.

A phantom light projection appeared in mid-air.

It was a diagram of the spiritual circuit structure inside the formation hub.

The spiritual circuits, which should have been smooth as silk, were actually covered in dense, minute cracks at the core, like an ice sheet on the verge of shattering, barely maintaining its shape only under the pressure of the outer shell.

And under the simulated spiritual pressure impact Su Ming had applied, those cracks were visibly spreading wildly outward at a rapid pace.

"This..."

Zhao Tiji's pupils constricted to pinpoints.

Although he didn't understand this projection method, he could read the direction of those cracks.

That was unmistakably a sign the formation hub was about to disintegrate.

If this location exploded under high-load operation, the entire "Celestial Pivot Position's" defense would have a momentary gap.

And under the onslaught of a demon tide, that single moment would be enough to kill dozens.

The contempt on Zhao Tiji's face vanished instantly, replaced by an ashen pallor.

The scar running across his face seemed to flush red as if engorged with blood.

"Grab your things. Come with me."

Zhao Tiji grabbed Su Ming's arm with a frighteningly strong grip. "We're going to see Commander Duan!"

...

Inside the wall command post, the atmosphere was so tense it felt like water could drip from it.

Commander Duan was a Golden Core initial stage cultivator, clad in heavy armor, frowning deeply at the sand table.

When Su Ming activated the Spirit-Detecting Needle again, projecting that phantom image riddled with cracks into the air, Commander Duan's finger, which had been tapping the table, abruptly stopped.

"That was close."

Commander Duan stared at the projection, his voice low. "A glossy exterior, but rotten to the core inside. If not discovered in time, once battle commenced, this spot would inevitably become the ant hole that collapses the dike."

He suddenly looked up at Zhao Tiji. "Old Zhao, this is the team you're leading?"

Zhao Tiji dropped to one knee, bowing his head with fists clasped. "This subordinate failed in his inspection. I request punishment, Commander!"

"Now is not the time for punishment," Commander Duan waved a hand. "It would take at least two hours for the Vessel Hall to allocate a new formation hub. There's no time. Can it be repaired?"

This last question was directed at Su Ming.

Su Ming put away the Spirit-Detecting Needle and pondered briefly.

"Replacing it with a new one truly is too late, and wasteful."

Su Ming walked to the formation hub and placed both hands on the cold Star Pattern Steel. "Although the cracks are numerous, they haven't damaged the fundamental structure. We just need to use 'water' to glue it back together."

"Glue?" Commander Duan was taken aback.

Su Ming didn't explain.

He took a deep breath, fully operating the Qi Refining seventh layer *Like Water Art*.

Deep blue spiritual energy surged from his palms, no longer its usual gentle warmth, but becoming viscous like glue.

"Master, lend me some strength."

"Got it. Use it sparingly. This is pure spiritual energy converted from soul power," Lin Yu grumbled within the Consciousness Sea.

A cool stream of power flooded into his meridians. A faint glow instantly veiled Su Ming's eyes.

Observation Micro State, activate.

In his vision, those minute cracks were magnified infinitely.

Su Ming's hands danced like butterflies threading through flowers. Two talismans he had prepared earlier—one emitting an earthy yellow glow, the "*Solidify*" character, and one swirling with a cyan halo, the "*Flow*" character—were simultaneously slapped onto the formation hub.

"Water moistens all things, merge!"

The deep blue spiritual energy, carrying the power of the talismans, seeped into the cracks along with it.

This wasn't simple filling. It was using the tension of water-attribute spiritual energy to pull and re-bond the crystal structures that were about to separate.

It was like injecting the strongest adhesive into the cracks of shattered porcelain.

In the time it takes an incense stick to burn.

Su Ming withdrew his hands, a layer of fine sweat beading on his forehead.

The grating sound of crystal fracturing that had been present inside the formation hub vanished, replaced by a sense of seamless unity.

"Done."

Su Ming let out a long breath, pulling out a low-grade spirit stone from his robe to hold in his hand and restore his spiritual energy. "This repair method achieves ninety percent of the original's strength, more than sufficient to last through this duty rotation. Moreover, the material cost is less than one-tenth of a replacement."

The command post fell silent.

Commander Duan stepped forward, personally inspecting it. A flash of something unusual crossed his eyes.

"Impressive skill."

He turned, grabbed a token from the desk, and tossed it to Su Ming. "Reward. One thousand Military Merit. Recorded in your file."

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Chapter 286: Earth Vein Anomaly and Remnant Array

[1,424 words]

Su Ming took the token, its touch warm and smooth.

One thousand military merit points.

In the rear, one would have to complete ten tedious formation plate repair tasks to earn this much.

Walking out of the command post, the wind outside seemed even stronger.

Zhao Tiji walked ahead, remaining silent the entire way.

Only when they returned to the third squad's defense sector did he stop, turn around, and look at Su Ming.

His rock-like, cold, and hard face held a somewhat complex expression.

"Just now in front of the Commandant, you didn't shirk responsibility, nor did you claim credit for being the one who discovered it," Zhao Tiji said in a muffled voice.

Su Ming smiled, straightening his wind-ruffled robe hem. "I'm a soldier brought up by the squad leader. The squad leader's oversight is my dereliction of duty. Fixing it was just our squad's good luck."

This was the wisdom of the "Way of Survival."

In the workplace, especially on a battlefield where death could come at any moment, stepping on your superior to climb higher was the dumbest move.

Giving face to your superior while pocketing the actual benefits (military merit) for yourself was the strategy for long-term survival.

Zhao Tiji stared at Su Ming for a long moment, then suddenly grinned, the scar on his face twisting with the motion, making him look somewhat ferocious, yet also adding a touch of sincerity.

He extended his large, palm-fan-like hand and gave Su Ming's shoulder a heavy pat.

"You, kid, you're alright."

Zhao Tiji's voice no longer carried the explosive edge it had before. "Don't call me 'squad leader' anymore. In private, call me Brother Zhao. On this stretch of wall, as long as Brother Zhao still has a breath in him, no one will be able to lay a finger on you, Brother Su."

Su Ming swayed from the pat, grimacing as he rubbed his shoulder.

"Then, many thanks, Brother Zhao."

In his Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu clicked his tongue in admiration. "Not bad, disciple. That move of 'returning good for evil' was played smoothly. Now you've firmly established your footing within this small group."

Su Ming watched Zhao Tiji's retreating back, his gaze clear.

"This isn't about playing tricks," Su Ming said inwardly. "In a place like this, having one more comrade willing to take a blade for you is more useful than having one more magical implement."

He tightened his grip on the military merit token in his hand.

Still forty-nine thousand points short of fifty thousand.

The road ahead is long and arduous.

"Brother Su! What are you spacing out for? Chow time!" Zhao Tiji's booming voice came from afar. "There's second-tier savage beef today! If you're late, you won't even get the broth!"

"Coming!"

Su Ming responded and quickly followed.

.....

The walls of Stone House Number Seven in the Bing District were black, a hue born from years of erosion by the earth vein's murderous aura.

The night was deep. Outside, the wind's wail had turned into a piercing shriek, like countless blunt knives scraping against that precarious, shimmering curtain. Inside the stone house, a heavy chill permeated the air. Even with warmth-preservation seals deployed, that bone-piercing coldness remained stubbornly present.

On the low table, a flickering oil lamp cast a dim, bean-sized light.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on a meditation cushion, eyes closed, his right index finger lightly resting on the edge of a slightly loose stone slab on the ground.

Beneath his fingertip, a pale yellow sensing talisman transmitted extremely faint tremors in rhythm with the earth's pulse.

"Thump... thump-thump... thump..."

This sound wasn't heard through the ears; it traveled directly through his finger bones, striking against his Consciousness Sea.

"One hundred and thirty-seventh time."

Su Ming counted silently in his mind, his brow furrowing almost imperceptibly. "The frequency has changed. Earlier in the night, it was three long, one short. Now it's two

short, one rapid, and the epicenter's location has shifted about thirty zhang towards the 'Celestial Pivot Position'."

In his Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu's figure hovered mid-air, holding a non-existent, illusory notebook, scribbling and sketching on it.

"This doesn't seem like the earth vein's natural expansion and contraction," Lin Yu's voice carried a note of certainty. "When an earth vein shifts, it's a grand, sweeping movement, like a person turning over in sleep—heavy and slow. But this disturbance is sneaky, fragmented yet dense, more like..."

"Like a bunch of rats gnawing at the foundation," Su Ming finished the thought.

"To be precise, like ancient subterranean demonic creatures," Lin Yu corrected. "According to a marginal note in that 'Northern Border Strange Tales Record' from the Scripture Depository, there's a type of low-tier demon beast called the 'Earth-Devouring Hog' that loves to eat rock layers associated with spirit ore deposits. The foundation of Iron Wall Pass is made of ten-thousand-year Mystic Iron rock. To them, it's probably like braised pork with crunchy cartilage."

Su Ming slowly withdrew his finger, rubbing his slightly stiff fingertip.

"If it really is Earth-Devouring Hogs, the number is probably not small," Su Ming opened his eyes, looking at the flickering oil lamp. "Individually, these creatures aren't scary. What's terrifying is them swarming together to hollow out the foundation underground. If a beast tide arrives one day, and fighting erupts above while the ground suddenly collapses below..."

The mental image was too grim. Su Ming didn't dare continue the thought.

He took out a blank jade slip from his robe and meticulously inscribed the vibration frequency, location, and intensity he had just sensed into it with extremely detailed data.

"This is evidence."

Su Ming murmured, "But if I present it now, no one will believe it. They won't mobilize manpower to excavate the foundation based solely on a newcomer's intuition."

After doing this, he turned his gaze to the cyan jade slip resting on his lap.

That was the "Eight Gates Lost Trace Incomplete Formation" gifted by Elder Qingquan.

The jade slip's surface was warm and smooth, emitting a faint glow. In this frigid stone house, it was like the only source of warmth.

"One hundred and eighth time."

Su Ming took a deep breath, adjusted his sitting posture, straightening his back until it was ramrod straight.

These past few days, whenever he had a spare moment, he would immerse his divine sense into it.

Yet, every single time, the result was a retreat in defeat.

"Let's begin."

Su Ming focused his mind. His divine sense poured forth like quicksilver, instantly penetrating the jade slip.

The world before his eyes instantly transformed.

Thousands of spiritual energy nodes danced chaotically in the void like runaway stars.

If it were an ordinary incomplete formation, even with broken nodes, their trajectories would remain. One could follow the clues and eventually find the logic for repair.

But this "Eight Gates Lost Trace Incomplete Formation" was different.

The moment Su Ming tried to capture a node that seemed like the "Life Gate," it disintegrated upon contact, transforming into a counter-current that crashed into the nearby "Death Gate," triggering a chain reaction of explosions.

What should have been a logically rigorous formation now resembled a prison of logical paradoxes filled with contradictions.

Every deduction contradicted itself; every attempt at repair accelerated the collapse.

"Hiss—"

Su Ming grunted, his face instantly turning deathly pale. Beads of sweat the size of beans rolled down his temples.

His divine sense was painfully twisted by that chaotic spiritual current, as if someone were stirring his brain with steel needles.

He abruptly severed the divine sense connection, leaning back with a gasp, breathing heavily.

"Failed again."

Su Ming rubbed his throbbing temples, a flash of frustration in his eyes. "All the principles of the Five Elements' mutual generation and restraint are completely ineffective here. Water generating fire, metal restraining earth... it's utterly absurd."

"Absurd?"

Lin Yu pointed outside the window.

Through the stone house's narrow vent window, one could see Iron Wall Pass's massive light curtain connecting heaven and earth.

In the deep night's cold wind, the light curtain trembled slightly. Some areas were bright as day, while others were dim as candle flames. The flow of spiritual energy wasn't smooth; it was, in fact, stumbling and halting.

"Look at that grand formation."

Lin Yu's voice became distant. "It has operated for ten thousand years. In those ten thousand years, it has been rammed by demon beasts, blasted by Demonic Cultivators, had its foundation collapse, its Formation Hubs replaced. Every generation of Formation Masters has patched it up. Zhang San fixed one piece, Li Si modified another spot. By now, it's long since ceased to be the original blueprint."

Su Ming's gaze fixed intently on that light curtain.

At the edge of his "observation micro state" vision, he saw those torrents of spiritual energy.

They weren't flowing along straight pipelines. They were like winding snakes, bypassing damaged nodes, forming eddies before congested passes, then overflowing, seeking new paths, finally converging into a barely usable force.

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

Chapter 287: Trivial Matters in the Camp

[1,135 words]

The lamp flame in the stone hut was as small as a bean, stretching Su Ming's shadow into a long, thin, and flickering shape.

The green jade slip in his hand remained warm and smooth, but the impatience in Su Ming's eyes had already faded, replaced by a kind of almost cruel calmness.

"Master, you are right."

Su Ming slowly withdrew his divine sense, no longer trying to correct those chaotic nodes, nor forcibly sorting out those spiritual flows that defied the Five Elements, "This formation is like an old man struggling on his deathbed, with all his meridians spasming. If I try to set his bones straight according to the meridian chart in a medical book right now, I'm afraid he'll stop breathing the moment I lay a hand on him."

Within his Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu floated cross-legged, holding that illusory notebook in his hands, a 'teachable' curve lifting the corner of his mouth: "Finally getting it. Faced with such a mess, the first step is never to repair, but to—establish records and observe."

Su Ming fished out a blank recording stone from his storage pouch.

He condensed a wisp of water spiritual energy as fine as a hair at his fingertip. Instead of directly inscribing a rune, he acted like threading a needle, gently connecting the recording stone's core crystal to the edge of the jade slip.

"Water Mirror technique, transfer."

Su Ming uttered a low command.

The surface of the recording stone rippled like water, and immediately after, the image of the wildly dancing spiritual energy nodes from within the jade slip was projected onto the recording stone and faithfully engraved.

This time, Su Ming was no longer a participant, but an observer.

He watched as those light points representing spiritual energy collided, annihilated, and regenerated in the void.

"Three changes per breath, the collapse of the Qian Position triggers a surge in the Li Position, seemingly chaotic..." Su Ming stared at the image, his fingers unconsciously tapping on his knee, "But if you stretch the timeline to half an hour, this kind of surge has occurred exactly twelve times."

"That's the pattern." Lin Yu said lazily, "As long as it's still operating, even if it's operating incorrectly, it must follow some underlying logic."

Su Ming didn't speak, silently sealing the first record and carving a number on the recording stone: "Sample One."

He decided not to rush to solve Elder Qingquan's puzzle anymore.

...

Half a month later.

Life at Iron Wall Pass was as dull as chewing a piece of jerky dried for three years.

There was no birdsong and fragrance of flowers like within the sect, only the never-ending black wind and the smell in the air mixed with rust and char.

The backyard of the Formation Maintenance Battalion was a narrow, long open space enclosed by high walls. It was piled high with discarded formation plates replaced from the city walls, broken spiritual energy conduits, and various metal wreckage of unknown names.

The ground was perpetually slippery because the underground spiritual energy conduits were old and poorly maintained, always leaking some spiritual liquid.

At this moment, the air was filled with a sickeningly sweet smell—the unique odor of highly concentrated spiritual liquid after volatilization.

"Bullshit! I saw this Crimson Gold pipe first!"

A roar shattered the backyard's dullness.

Two old soldiers wearing greasy formation robes were confronting each other like fighting cocks.

The one on the left had a pockmarked face and was tightly clutching a dark red metal pipe about half a person's length; the one on the right was missing half an ear and was brandishing a wrench, spittle flying everywhere.

"Pockmarked Zhao, have some shame! Last time, you swiped the Star Pattern Steel replaced from the 'Heavenly Pivot Position.' This time, it's our Second Squad's turn!" the half-eared old soldier cursed, "Even though this Crimson Gold pipe is cracked, if you cut it up, you can still get about two taels of refined gold. That's enough for two jugs of good wine on the black market! Don't even think about hogging it all!"

"Whoever grabs it gets it! The rule in this camp has always been 'the quick get, the slow get none!'" Pockmarked Zhao didn't yield an inch, the spiritual pressure around him faintly fluctuating—he was actually an old hand at the eighth layer of Qi Refining.

A circle of formation cultivators had gathered around to watch the commotion. Some were egging them on, while others watched with cold eyes. Clearly, this kind of scrap-grabbing drama was commonplace here.

Su Ming had just finished reporting his work from Zhao Tiji's stone hut and was passing by. He frowned slightly.

He didn't want to meddle.

At Iron Wall Pass, "meddling" often meant trouble, and trouble often meant danger.

But just as he was about to detour, his gaze was involuntarily drawn to the Crimson Gold pipe that had caused the dispute.

A subtle yet familiar crack pattern on the pipe's body stirred something in his heart—it was almost identical to the "Type C, Third Pattern Brittle Fracture" he had categorized while recording the characteristics of various discarded materials in the backyard over the past few days.

The depth and direction of this crack meant the amount of refined gold that could be extracted from this pipe wouldn't exceed one and a half taels, far from enough for the two to split evenly. However, if cut into specific shapes, it would be perfect for repairing a common "Earth Hearing" talisman base...

A vague idea took shape in Su Ming's mind.

Over the past half month, he had been silently recording backyard scraps and observing personnel disputes, originally intending to sort out the chaotic situation for his own convenience. Wasn't the conflict before him the perfect opportunity to introduce that long-considered "scrap management rule"? It could solve the immediate trouble and clear obstacles for the more important "observation" to follow.

Thinking this, Su Ming stopped.

But just as he was about to mediate, the half-eared old soldier's wrench slammed hard onto a nearby discarded pipe.

"Clang—"

A crisp sound rang out, accompanied by sparks flying everywhere.

Immediately after, that seemingly discarded pipe actually spewed a jet of scalding steam straight at Pockmarked Zhao's face.

"Watch out!"

Su Ming's figure swayed. His footwork seemed casual, but he instantly inserted himself between the two men.

He didn't block it head-on. Instead, with a flick of his right sleeve, a flexible water membrane instantly unfurled, like a catching net, enveloping the jet of steam. Then, with a flick of his wrist, he used a clever force to redirect it towards the open ground to the side.

"Hiss—"

The steam hit the slippery ground, billowing up a cloud of white mist.

Both old soldiers were startled by the sudden turn of events. After seeing it was Su Ming, their previously tense expressions relaxed slightly, but the wariness in their eyes didn't disappear.

"It's Assistant Repairer Su." Pockmarked Zhao gave a stiff, insincere smile and cupped his hands, "What, Assistant Repairer Su also has his eye on this scrap?"

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Chapter 288: The soil is indeed loose.

[1,395 words]

Lin Yu is now somewhat well-known in the camp.

That unique skill of "Water Method Adhesion" has helped many squads solve urgent problems. Coupled with Zhao Tiji's care, no one is willing to easily offend this "technical expert."

Su Ming brushed the moisture from his sleeve, his gaze sweeping over the two men before finally settling on the Crimson Gold pipe on the ground that had caused the dispute.

"Brothers, if you keep fighting over this pipe, I'm afraid it'll just be confiscated by the enforcement team."

Su Ming's tone was flat as he pointed at a squad of black-armored guards patrolling not far away. "Private brawling over resources, according to regulations, results in confiscation of the gains and three days in confinement. These days, with the demon beasts causing so much trouble, if you miss your duty shift because of confinement, it could cost you your heads."

The two old soldiers' expressions changed.

They weren't afraid of a fight, but they were afraid of missing their duty shift. At Iron Wall Pass, missing a shift meant desertion, a capital offense.

"Then... Assistant Repairer Su, what do you suggest we do?" The old soldier missing an ear thrust his wrench behind his waist, somewhat unwilling to give up. "We can't just let this Pockmarked Zhao have it."

Su Ming didn't answer directly. Instead, he pulled out a thick notebook from his robe that seemed completely out of place here.

It was a set of "makeshift methods" he had been developing over the past half-month, combining his experience from the Repair Hall.

"If you two trust me, why not follow this."

Su Ming opened the notebook, which was densely filled with neatly written tables. "This is a 'Waste Material Duty Roster' I drafted. The waste materials in the camp are divided into three grades: A, B, and C. Our three squads take turns having priority selection rights. For example, this Crimson Gold pipe counts as Grade B. Today's date is an odd number. According to the roster, priority belongs to the Second Squad."

The earless old soldier's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Really." Su Ming nodded, then looked at Pockmarked Zhao. "But this isn't a free pass. If you take a Grade B waste material, you have to record it in the roster. Next time something good of the same grade appears, you have to yield to the person next in line. Also, if anyone takes something but doesn't do their job, or intentionally damages public property, it will be announced to the entire camp, and they can forget about entering this backyard gate ever again."

Pockmarked Zhao's expression shifted slightly as he calculated in his mind.

Although this method made him lose out today, it was better in the long run. In the past, everyone fought tooth and nail over scraps, sometimes damaging the good stuff in the struggle, so no one ended up benefiting.

"Assistant Repairer Su is a scholar; your brain is just better than ours." Pockmarked Zhao released his grip on the pipe, grinning, though his smile was uglier than a frown. "Alright, since Assistant Repairer Su vouches for it, I'll give you face today. Mark it down, this pipe belongs to Old Liu."

A potential conflict dissolved into nothingness before Su Ming's few words and a notebook.

The surrounding formation cultivators looked at Su Ming with changed expressions.

If his earlier technical demonstrations had earned their respect, this "establishing rules" now gave them a strange sense of trust.

In this chaotic, disordered meat grinder, order was sometimes more reassuring than spirit stones.

Su Ming put away the roster and was about to leave when he heard Pockmarked Zhao and the earless Old Liu squatting by the wall, starting to smoke their pipe tobacco.

"Hey, Old Liu, that wrench swing of yours earlier was pretty fierce. You even made the ground tremble." Pockmarked Zhao blew out a puff of blue smoke.

"Bullshit!" Old Liu spat. "My hand slipped. But seriously, hasn't the ground in this backyard felt a bit loose lately? When I stomped down earlier, it felt hollow underneath, like stepping on cotton."

Su Ming's departing footsteps abruptly halted.

But he didn't turn around. He just slowed his pace, his ears twitching slightly as he entered a shallow state of Earth Hearing.

"You felt it too?" Pockmarked Zhao lowered his voice. "I thought it was just my imagination. Last night during my night watch, I was dozing against the wall and kept feeling movement under my butt, a buzzing sound, like someone grinding their teeth underground."

"Don't talk nonsense, that's creepy." Old Liu hunched his shoulders. "But this feeling reminds me of three years ago..."

"Shh!" Pockmarked Zhao abruptly cut him off, looking around before lowering his voice even further. "Are you talking about that incident in Sector D?"

"Yeah." Old Liu's voice trembled slightly. "That time was the same. First, the ground felt loose, then the well water turned muddy, and then... boom, half the barracks were gone. The higher-ups said it was a formation backlash, but who among us didn't know privately? It was..."

The voice stopped abruptly.

Because Zhao Tiji's burly figure appeared at the courtyard gate.

The two old soldiers immediately extinguished their tobacco and scattered like frightened birds.

Su Ming stood where he was, his fingers slightly curling inside his sleeves.

Three years ago. Sector D. Loose ground.

These words were like a key, instantly fitting into the scattered clues he had been collecting over the past half-month.

"Master." Su Ming called out in his mind, his voice frighteningly calm.

"I heard." Lin Yu's voice also lacked its usual teasing tone. "This description matches the data you measured with the Wood Demon core."

"I want to check the archives from three years ago."

"Go ahead." Lin Yu said. "But don't make a big show of it. Use your 'organizing the waste material roster' as a pretext to go through old accounts in the archives. No one should suspect a 'bookworm' who wants to establish order."

Su Ming took a deep breath and turned towards the stone building in the most remote corner of the camp.

That was the archives, also the most forgotten place in all of Iron Wall Pass.

Pushing open the heavy wooden door, a musty smell of old paper assaulted him.

The guard was an old cultivator missing an eye, dozing with his head on the table. Hearing movement, he just lifted an eyelid. Seeing it was Su Ming, who had recently created the "duty roster," he waved his hand, indicating Su Ming could help himself.

Su Ming lit a smokeless lamp he had brought and went straight to the shelf labeled "Sector D."

His fingers traced over the jade slips covered in dust.

Year Bingshen... Year Yiwei...

Found it.

Su Ming pulled out the dull-colored jade slip and extended his divine sense into it.

"Winter of Xuanhe Year 35. Abnormal movement in the earth veins of Sector D. Spiritual pressure reversed flow, causing ground collapse of a hundred zhang. Barracks damaged. Thirty-seven casualties. Conclusion: Formation hub aging triggered spiritual explosion."

Only these few sentences.

Official records were always this clean, concise, covering all the bloodshed and doubts with the two words "aging."

But Su Ming didn't give up. He continued flipping through that year's material consumption records.

This was a habit he had developed in the Repair Hall—account books were often more honest than people.

"Third day of the eleventh month, Xuanhe Year 35. Sector D requisitioned three hundred 'Earth Sealing Talismans,' five hundred jin of 'Stone Transforming Powder.'"

"Fifth day of the eleventh month. Requisitioned fifty 'Refined Gold Reinforcement Piles.'"

"Eighth day of the eleventh month. Incident occurred."

Su Ming closed the jade slip. The light in his eyes seemed particularly profound under the dim lamplight.

"Earth Sealing Talismans are used to reinforce soil quality. Stone Transforming Powder is used to fill cavities." Su Ming sneered inwardly. "Five days before the incident, they were already frantically filling holes. This wasn't some sudden spiritual explosion at all. The foundation had already been hollowed out long before."

"And," Lin Yu added, "the scale of those reinforcement materials indicates the underground cavities had already formed at least a network. And now, in Sector C, where you live, the underground vibration frequency is... strikingly similar to the records from that year."

Su Ming returned the jade slip to its place, habitually wiping away his fingerprints.

He walked out of the archives. Outside, the sky had completely darkened.

The cold wind of Iron Wall Pass remained biting, stinging people's cheeks.

Su Ming looked up at the distant city wall. That light curtain was still flickering, like a giant net trapping everyone.

"Pockmarked Zhao was right. The ground really is loose."

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

Chapter 289: Night Raid

[1,260 words]

At the third quarter of the Zi hour, a piercing, mournful horn blast tore through the Iron Wall Pass's night sky without any warning.

The sound didn't seem to come from an ox horn or conch shell, but rather like the simultaneous shrieks of countless wronged souls, carrying a soul-shaking, penetrating force. It instantly pierced through the thick stone walls of the hut, stabbing straight into the eardrums.

Su Ming was just holding the jade slip containing the "Eight Gates Lost Trace Incomplete Formation." His fingers trembled violently, nearly dropping the slip.

Almost at the same instant, the "Earth Hearing" talisman he had buried under the stone slab began to vibrate frantically. What it transmitted back was no longer a rhythmic pulsation, but a chaotic, disorderly roar, like a boiling pot of porridge.

"They're here."

Within his Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu's voice was unusually devoid of its usual laziness, instead carrying a cold, metallic hardness. "Don't just stand there. Put on your armor, grab your pack, get out. Move fast, look cool doing it—and most importantly, don't take the main roads."

Su Ming didn't hesitate in the slightest.

He stowed the jade slip into his storage pouch, reached back to grab the standard-issue leather armor hanging on the wall and pulled it on, then tied the cloth pouch filled with repair tools and "Bumper Harvest No. 1" around his waist. The entire process was smooth and fluid, clearly rehearsed countless times in his mind.

Pushing open the heavy stone door of the hut, a gale of wind mixed with the smells of sulfur, scorched material, and blood assaulted his face.

The originally pitch-black camp was now illuminated as bright as day by countless torches and illumination spells. Shadows of figures flickered everywhere. Shouts, the clashing of weapons and armor merged into a cacophony, yet it didn't seem panicked. Instead, it exuded a suffocating sense of order.

"Formation Maintenance Battalion, Third Squad! Celestial Pivot Position flank, Node A-Three! Move! Move! Move!"

Zhao Tiji's booming voice exploded through the wind, even drowning out the distant thunder.

Su Ming blended into the ranks, keeping his head down and hurrying along. He didn't look around like the new recruits, but instead kept his eyes fixed on the path underfoot, avoiding the spiritual energy transmission pipes that were glowing as they charged up.

Stepping on one of those now could result in anything from having a leg broken by the spiritual pressure to being flung away as an obstacle disrupting the spiritual energy flow.

"BOOM—"

A thunderous roar echoed from overhead.

Su Ming instinctively looked up, his pupils contracting sharply.

He saw that the originally semi-transparent, pale golden light curtain of the Big Dipper Seven Stars Demon Locking Grand Formation now looked as if it were being pressed inward by an invisible giant hand, forming a shocking concave arc.

Beyond the light curtain was boundless darkness.

And within that darkness, countless pairs of crimson eyes lit up like will-o'-the-wisps, densely packed, blotting out the sky.

Bolts of lightning thick as water vats, fireballs, and streams of venomous liquid rained down on the light curtain like a downpour, stirring up blinding ripples.

"Stop gawking! Want to go blind?"

A rough, large hand slammed down on the back of Su Ming's head, forcing it down. It was Zhao Tiji.

The face of this old veteran was taut with tension, his scar engorged and purple-red. He held a giant formation clamp half a man's height, roaring, "That's concentrated fire from third-order demon beasts, 'Thunder Roarers'! Stare at it too long and your divine sense will shatter! All of you, get to your positions now!"

Su Ming felt a buzzing in his mind. If Lin Yu hadn't immediately used his soul power to protect Su Ming's Consciousness Sea, that single glance might have damaged his divine sense.

"Thanks, Brother Zhao."

Su Ming gasped, put force into his feet, and charged up onto the second-level platform of the city wall.

This was the location of the "Celestial Pivot Position" formation base, and the battlefield for Technical Assistant Repair Specialists like them.

The scene before his eyes was even more shocking than the view from below.

The massive formation base rotated slowly like a millstone, gears meshing with a teeth-grating friction sound. Countless spiritual energy pipes converged here, transforming the immense spiritual energy drawn from the earth veins into energy for the defensive shield.

But now, this colossal machine was groaning.

"Node C-Six overloaded! Cool it down!"

"Spiritual pressure at D-Nine unstable! Reinforce with talismans, now!"

"Damn it, where are the backup spirit stones? Fill them in, fast!"

Shouts rose one after another.

Su Ming was assigned next to the auxiliary formation plate at Node A-Three. His task was simple, and deadly—to ensure this node didn't blow up under extreme operation.

"VRRMM—"

The formation plate before him suddenly shook violently. The originally deep blue runes instantly turned crimson red, and a wave of scorching hot air blasted towards his face.

"Spiritual pressure exceeding limit by thirty percent!" Lin Yu reported rapidly within the Consciousness Sea. "It took a heavy blow head-on. The returning spiritual energy can't be channeled away in time, it's blocked here. If we don't cool it down, the plate will melt."

Su Ming's gaze sharpened, his hands instantly forming a hand seal.

But he didn't use the conventional "Freezing Spell" or simply splash cold water. Using cold directly on a metal formation plate this hot would only cause the embrittled Star Pattern Steel to shatter instantly.

"Like Water Art, Guide!"

Su Ming shouted low, and ten threads of water spiritual energy, fine as gossamer, surged from his fingertips.

This spiritual energy wasn't icy cold, but carried a strange suppleness and warmth. They moved like living tendrils, winding and seeping along the crimson rune patterns on the formation plate.

Water vapor enveloped the scalding formation lines, not resisting them, but rapidly carrying away the heat, transforming it into billowing white mist.

"Sizzle—"

The white mist billowed up, instantly swallowing Su Ming's figure.

The heat traveled back along the spiritual energy threads. Su Ming felt as if his fingers had been plunged into boiling oil.

"Endure it." Lin Yu's voice was calm, almost coldly so. "Every bit of heat right now is runaway energy. What you need to do is act as a 'heat sink' and channel it out."

Su Ming clenched his teeth, veins bulging on his forehead. Sweat barely seeped out before being vaporized.

He watched as the skin on the back of his hands visibly reddened, blistered, and even emitted a faint, cooked-meat aroma.

But he didn't let go.

Because he clearly saw that at the core of the formation plate, the numerical value representing the defensive strength was slowly rising again. The crimson runes were reverting to a stable deep blue.

Right at that moment, a crisp, tearing sound, like ripping cloth, came from the light curtain overhead.

"Watch out! Breach!"

Someone shouted.

Su Ming instinctively looked up. Through the billowing steam, he saw an Iron-Feathered Eagle with a wingspan of at least two zhang had actually forced its way through a gap in the light curtain. Covered in crackling arcs of electricity and blood, it shrieked as it dove towards the second-level platform.

Its target was precisely Node A-Three, where the spiritual energy fluctuations were most intense—exactly where Su Ming was.

The golden eyes of the eagle were filled with cruelty and bloodlust. Its sharp iron feathers sliced through the air like throwing knives, emitting a piercing, sharp screech.

Su Ming's fingers were still on the formation plate. He couldn't dodge.

If he let go, the formation plate would go out of control and explode, killing him for sure. If he didn't let go, the Iron-Feathered Eagle's talons would shatter his skull in the next instant.

"Duck!"

A furious roar exploded by his ear.

A flash of snowy-bright sword light swept across like a bolt of silk.

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Chapter 290: Blood and Fire First Stain the Garrison Wall at Night

[1,631 words]

That was a sword cultivator responsible for protecting the formation cultivator. He wore a tattered gray robe, his face young yet weathered.

He didn't hesitate in the slightest. His entire body lunged forward, the longsword in his hand carrying an utterly resolute determination as it met the diving Iron-Feathered Eagle.

"Thud—"

The sound of sharp claws piercing flesh was so dull it made one's heart palpitate.

One of the Iron-Feathered Eagle's claws directly pierced through the sword cultivator's left shoulder, pinning his entire body in mid-air.

But the sword cultivator let out a fierce grin amidst the excruciating pain. His right hand swept the longsword upward in a reverse slash, accurately stabbing into the Iron-Feathered Eagle's softest abdomen, before his spiritual energy erupted wildly.

"Get the hell away from me!"

Sword energy exploded inside the eagle's belly.

The Iron-Feathered Eagle let out a shrill, mournful cry, its massive body plummeting out of control and crashing heavily onto the ground less than three feet away from Su Ming.

The rank, hot eagle blood mixed with the blood from the sword cultivator's shoulder poured down like rain.

"Plop."

A few drops of scalding hot blood splashed onto the formation plate before Su Ming, slowly flowing along the dark blue formation lines before instantly being vaporized by the high temperature into a wisp of red blood mist.

A few drops of blood also landed on Su Ming's cheek.

He didn't wipe them away. He didn't even blink.

His hands remained firmly pressed against the formation plate, maintaining the flow of spiritual energy.

Because he knew, the time that sword cultivator had bought him with his life wasn't for him to stand there in a daze.

"Formation plate stabilized, spiritual pressure receding."

Ten breaths later, Su Ming rasped out a shout.

Only then did he feel his legs go a little weak, that post-crisis feeling of exhaustion washing over him like a tide.

Support disciples immediately rushed over from the side, carrying away the severely wounded and unconscious sword cultivator.

Su Ming looked at the sword cultivator's pale face and the half of his body soaked in blood. That spot was only half an inch away from his heart.

"Stop looking."

Zhao Tiji had walked over at some point, holding that giant pincer in his hand, his own body bearing wounds as well. Dark red blood dripped down his armor.

He glanced at Su Ming's hands, which were still trembling slightly, and at the few drops of dried blood on the formation plate.

"This is Iron Wall Pass."

Zhao Tiji's voice was very soft, drowned out by the chaotic shouts and killing sounds around them, yet it clearly pierced Su Ming's ears.

Su Ming nodded silently in response.

He lowered his head and continued cleaning the impurities from the gaps in the formation plate, his movements mechanical yet precise, as if that life-and-death moment from just moments ago had never happened.

...

Half an hour later.

As a sliver of fish-belly white appeared on the eastern horizon, the tide-like demon beasts finally retreated.

The roaring sounds outside the light curtain gradually subsided, leaving only the occasional sporadic beast roar, tinged with unwillingness and exhaustion.

"They've retreated! The demon bastards have retreated!"

Scattered cheers rose, but more people simply collapsed onto the ground, gasping for breath, lacking even the strength to move a finger.

Su Ming leaned against the cold stone wall, looking at the scene below the ramparts.

It had become a slaughterhouse.

Countless demon beast corpses were piled up like mountains, some still burning, others already turned to dust.

Black-red blood converged into rivers, reflecting a sinister luster under the morning light.

And amidst that mountain of corpses and sea of blood, one could still see fragments of shattered human magical implements, and... incomplete limbs.

A group of support disciples wearing gray hemp clothes moved silently through it all.

They had no expression, their movements practiced and numb.

Some were responsible for retrieving usable arrows and magical implements, some for harvesting valuable materials from the demon beasts, but most were carefully gathering the remains of their fallen comrades into black body bags.

There were no sobs, no wails.

Only suffocating silence.

Su Ming watched all this, feeling as if a large stone was lodged in his chest.

"If you want to vomit, then vomit. It's not shameful," Lin Yu's voice rang out in the Consciousness Sea, carrying a hint of a sigh. "For your first time seeing a scene like this, your mental fortitude is already considered quite strong."

Su Ming shook his head.

He pulled out a water skin from his robes, took a gulp of the cold, clear water, forcibly suppressing the churning in his stomach.

"Master, what was the name of that sword cultivator who saved me?" Su Ming suddenly asked.

"Didn't see his identification tag clearly," Lin Yu said. "But judging by his clothes, he was probably a wandering cultivator from Bing Battalion. There are the most of those kinds of people at Iron Wall Pass, and they die the fastest too."

Su Ming pressed his lips together and said nothing more.

He lowered his head to look at his own hands.

The backs of his hands were covered in blisters, red and swollen. Those were burns left from forcibly channeling overloaded formation plates with water spiritual energy earlier.

This kind of injury wasn't severe, but with his spiritual energy depleted, the pain was excruciating.

"Let's head back."

Zhao Tiji walked over and patted Su Ming's shoulder. This time, he didn't use much force, his movements even carrying a hint of care.

"Did well. Node A-3 didn't collapse. You get the main credit for that, kid."

Zhao Tiji pulled out a small porcelain vial from his robes and tossed it to Su Ming. "Burn ointment. Not as good as the sect's Jade Muscle Powder, but it works well for pain relief."

Su Ming caught the vial. It felt slightly warm to the touch.

"Thanks, Brother Zhao."

...

By the time he returned to Stone House Number Seven, Bing District, the sky was already bright.

Su Ming closed the stone door and re-established the protective restriction.

Only at this moment did that tightly strung nerve finally relax completely.

He plopped down onto the meditation cushion, lacking even the strength to remove his armor.

"Master."

Su Ming raised his red, swollen hand, looking at the inferior ointment smeared on it. "I always used to think that the so-called 'formation lines stained with blood' was just an exaggerated figure of speech in books."

"Now you know?" Lin Yu's figure materialized, looking at Su Ming's hand with a complex expression.

"Now I know."

Su Ming nodded.

He closed his eyes, the scene replaying constantly in his mind: the sword cultivator's resolute lunge toward the Iron-Feathered Eagle, the warmth of the blood splashing onto the formation plate.

An unprecedented emotion stirred in his heart.

It wasn't fear, nor was it simple shock.

It was a deeper understanding of the two words "power" and "survival."

At the sect's Repair Hall, what he repaired were "objects," focusing on efficiency, cost, standardization.

But at Iron Wall Pass, what he repaired were "lives."

Every rune here, every spiritual circuit, connected not just spirit stones and formation bases, but countless living human lives.

"The Way of Survival..."

Su Ming murmured softly, his voice somewhat hoarse. "Master, the Way of Survival you taught me before was about hiding one's abilities, staying low-key, about keeping one's head down and not getting involved."

"But in a place like this, if one truly just hides their abilities all the time, acting like a slacker..."

Su Ming opened his eyes, his gaze falling on the corner where the "Wood Demon Core Fragment" was buried. "...you might not even know how you died. That sword cultivator saved me, not because I looked pleasant, but because I was repairing the formation plate, I was protecting everyone's lives."

Lin Yu was silent for a moment, then suddenly laughed.

That laugh held less mockery and more gratification.

"Disciple, you've grown up."

Lin Yu floated in front of Su Ming, his illusory finger tapping Su Ming's chest. "The true Way of Survival was never about being a turtle hiding in its shell. It's about making yourself indispensable, making yourself extremely important, so important that everyone is willing to risk their lives to protect you."

"This is what's called—a value shield."

Su Ming nodded thoughtfully.

Enduring the intense pain in his hand, he retrieved the jade slip of the "Eight Gates Lost Trace Incomplete Formation" from his storage pouch, along with the "Earth Hearing" data chart he recorded last night.

"Master, I want to solve this incomplete formation."

Su Ming's gaze gradually grew resolute. "No, not just solve it. I want to use the thinking behind solving this incomplete formation to re-examine this entire Big Dipper Seven Stars Demon Locking Grand Formation."

"Oh?" Lin Yu raised an eyebrow. "Not tired anymore? Not bothered by the trouble anymore?"

"I am."

Su Ming grinned, showing his white teeth. "But I don't want to die even more. Those rats underground are still gnawing at the foundations. The fact that that Iron-Feathered Eagle could break through last night means the light curtain's vulnerabilities are even bigger than we imagined."

"If we don't patch up these holes, the next blood splashed on the formation plate might be my own."

Lin Yu looked at the youth before him, whose face was full of exhaustion and hands were red and swollen, but whose eyes burned with a flame called "the will to survive."

That youth who used to be timid and submissive in Qingshi Town, who only wanted to hide behind his master and muddle through life, had finally been tempered by this night of blood and fire, revealing a trace of true edge.

"Good."

Lin Yu waved his large sleeve, his heroic spirit surging forth. "Since you want to do it, then let's, master and disciple, pull off something big. It's just a broken formation, right? We'll take it apart, crush it, and then put it back together!"

Su Ming took a deep breath, pulled out a spirit stone from his robes, held it in his hand, and began recovering his depleted spiritual energy.

Outside the window, the morning wind remained bitingly cold.

But inside the stone house, the youth's state of mind was already different.

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