

TRANSMIGRATED INTO A GRANDPA, EMBRACING THE LAID-BACK LIFE

Chapter 311: Extra Income

If it had been any other time, with a strike like that, Zhao Tiji's arm would definitely have been left slightly numb from the impact.

But this time, Zhao Tiji didn't budge an inch.

The moment the back of the blade made contact with the shield's surface, that layer of deep blue water-light suddenly rippled outwards, just like a stone thrown into a lake. That fierce, violent impact force followed the ripples, rapidly spreading to the very edges of the shield before finally dissipating into nothingness.

"Holy shit!"

Zhao Tiji cursed, looking at his own arm with an expression of utter disbelief. "No feeling? It really doesn't shake my hand at all!"

Old Liu was also stunned, touching his own blade. "This talisman... is godly."

"The defensive power hasn't decreased, but this kind of vibration sensation has been reduced by at least thirty percent." Zhao Tiji couldn't stop fondling the shield, his gaze more affectionate than when looking at the girls of Cuihong Tower. "Brother Su, how the hell did you come up with this? With this one paste, this dead hunk of iron instantly came to life!"

"The main thing is saving effort." Su Ming smiled. "On the battlefield, saving a bit of effort means you can get in one more slash."

"Right! Exactly right!" Zhao Tiji slapped his thigh hard, his face flushed red with excitement all the way to his neck. "Brother Su, do you have more of these talismans? Make me a few more! From now on in Bing Battalion, if anyone dares to bully you, I'll wring their head off and kick it like a ball!"

The commotion here quickly attracted the attention of the others in the barracks tent.

When those few old soldiers personally tried out that "enhanced" shield, the look in their eyes when they turned to Su Ming instantly changed.

It was the look of a starving wolf spotting fresh meat, a bachelor seeing a potential wife.

"Little Master Su! Make one for me too! My heart protector mirror grinds painfully against my chest every time it gets hit!"

"Brother Su, my boots are too heavy, can you also paste one of those force-dispersing talismans on them? I could run faster when retreating too!"

"Scram, scram, what's the point with boots! Master Su, look at my blade first, the handle shakes my hand too much, the Tiger's Gate cracks after too much chopping!"

The originally quiet corner was instantly surrounded by a crowd of burly, rough men, packed so tightly not a drop of water could leak through.

Su Ming, squeezed in the middle, not only showed not the slightest impatience, but smiled like a shopkeeper.

"Everyone, don't rush, come one at a time."

Su Ming pulled out a stack of blank talisman paper from his storage pouch.

"Materials are limited, and drawing these talismans also consumes quite a bit of divine sense..."

"We get it! We all get it!"

Chen Chuan squeezed in from behind the crowd, directly slapping his own identity token in front of Su Ming. "Fifty points of Military Merit, exchange for one pasted on my sword hilt. That reforged sword of yours is good, but I've been killing too fiercely these past few days, my wrist can't quite take it."

With Chen Chuan taking the lead, the others quickly caught on.

"I'll transfer too! I have thirty points!"

"I'll give fifty! Do mine first!"

"Master Su, I have a piece of cold iron essence I captured last time, can that offset Military Merit?"

Su Ming refused no one.

He didn't make outrageous demands, charging only thirty to fifty points of Military Merit per talisman, or equivalent materials. This price was practically a steal for these old soldiers who licked blood off their blades.

After all, this was good stuff that could save lives, save effort, and make battles last longer.

For a whole afternoon, Su Ming never stopped writing.

Lin Yu helped him calculate the optimal spiritual energy ratio in his Consciousness Sea, while Su Ming was responsible for turning this theory into tangible talismans.

By the time the dinner horn sounded, Su Ming rubbed his sore, swollen wrist and glanced at the number on his identity token.

Six hundred and thirty points.

And that didn't even include the piles of cold iron, beast hides, and spirit ore heaped at his feet.

"Tsk tsk, earning money this way is faster than robbery." Lin Yu sighed.

"Disciple, do you understand now? In the cultivation world, the primary productive force is always technology. Rather than going outside to risk your life fighting demon beasts, it's better to sit in a room and earn money from those who are risking theirs."

Su Ming pasted the last talisman onto Old Liu's leg guard, watching the other man run off joyfully to try it out, a faint smile curling at the corner of his mouth.

"Master, this isn't called earning money."

Su Ming put away his token, his gaze sweeping over the old soldiers in the barracks tent who looked at him with gratitude and awe.

"This is called making plenty of friends."

Here at Iron Wall Pass, Military Merit was certainly important, but these old soldiers, each owing him a favor and using his equipment, were his real protective talismans.

"Brother Su! Time to eat!" Zhao Tiji walked over carrying two huge bowls, piled high with steaming stewed meat. "The mess hall has spirit-horned mutton today, I specifically fought for a leg for you! Nourish your brain!"

Su Ming took the bowl, smelling the rich aroma of meat, feeling the exhaustion of the entire day dissipate quite a bit.

"Thanks, Brother Zhao."

He took a bite of the mutton, his mouth full of savory juices.

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The night was as dark as ink. Inside Stone Hut Number Seven of Bing Battalion, only a bean-sized spirit fire flickered.

Su Ming sat cross-legged on the stone bed, playing with that bronze fragment in his hand. Deep blue water spiritual energy coiled and extended from his fingertips like spider silk, attempting to probe into the obscure, ancient patterns within the fragment's interior.

"Master, I think I'm starting to get a rough idea of what Elder Mo meant by 'momentum'."

Su Ming's fingers trembled slightly, the spiritual energy threads tracing a distorted arc in the air. "Before, when I set up formations, I always thought about how to use spiritual energy to 'collide' or 'block'. But after seeing these 'Star Attraction Lines', I understand now. True control is 'guiding'."

"Starting to get it." Lin Yu's voice sounded in the Consciousness Sea, carrying a hint of laziness. "It's like... ahem, like Tai Chi push hands in the mortal world. Brute force flying bricks is the work of a brute, using four ounces to deflect a thousand pounds is skilled work. The core of these 'Star Attraction Lines' isn't creating a black hole to suck people in, but altering the local gravitational field. Even a tiny adjustment can be a fatal deviation for a high-speed moving object."

Su Ming nodded thoughtfully.

He poured out a pile of junk from his storage pouch.

There were over a dozen low-grade "warning disks" scavenged from the scrap heap, and a stack of standard-issue "sinkhole talismans".

These were the cheapest consumables from the military supply depot. The warning disks had low sensitivity, going off at the slightest rustle of grass; the sinkhole talismans had weak power, at best tripping up a demon beast.

But in Su Ming's eyes, this trash was the best building blocks.

"Using the vibration sensing of the warning disks as 'eyes and ears', the sticky force field of the sinkhole talismans as 'hands and feet', and then using simplified 'Star Attraction Lines' as meridians to connect them all together..."

Su Ming muttered to himself, but his hands moved extremely fast.

He didn't use expensive spiritual ink, but instead used water spiritual energy as a guide directly. He disassembled those warning disks, extracted the core sensing spirit stones, and peeled off the talisman cores from the sinkhole talismans.

Deep blue spiritual energy threads intertwined in the air. Su Ming carefully injected an extremely faint trace of the "star attraction" concept into the connection points.

This was difficult.

The Star Attraction Lines were too domineering. Even a simplified version was more than ordinary spirit materials could bear. Su Ming tried over a dozen times, ruining seven or eight warning disks, before barely finding that balance point.

It was a structure similar to a "spider web".

It didn't pursue sturdiness, but pursued extreme sensitivity and conduction.

One hour later.

A strange-looking "web", appearing tattered and patched together, connected by over a dozen extremely fine spirit threads, lay on the stone table. It didn't emit any astonishing Spiritual Pressure, even its spiritual light was dim and obscure. Thrown on the ground, probably no one would give it a second glance.

"It's done." Su Ming wiped the sweat from his brow. "Let's call it the 'Spirit Response Spider Web'."

"Pretty lame name, but practical." Lin Yu evaluated. "Spread this thing out, and as long as the ground within a hundred-zhang radius trembles, even if it's just a mouse passing by, the feedback from the gravitational fluctuations will let you know whether it's male or female the first moment."

Chapter 312: Why Did the Wolf's Legs Go Soft?

The next morning, at the forward edge of Bing Battalion's defense zone.

Zhao Tiji carried his giant hammer on his shoulder, watching Su Ming squat in the snow, burying that pile of things that looked like tangled mess into the ground.

"Brother Su, what new trick is this?" Zhao Tiji breathed out a puff of white air, "Doesn't look like a formation plate, more like a trap."

"It's pretty much a trap."

Su Ming patted the dirt off his hands and stood up, "Brother Zhao, when patrolling later, tell the brothers not to walk between these few rocks, it's easy to slip."

Zhao Tiji chuckled, "Alright, we'll listen to you, everyone will go around it."

He didn't take it too seriously.

In his view, although Su Ming the formation master had good skills, it was all about repairs and patches. To really kill the enemy, you still had to rely on the weapons in your hands.

However, the chance to test it came faster than expected.

In the afternoon, the wind and snow suddenly intensified.

A piercing whistle suddenly tore through the howling of the blizzard.

"Enemy attack! Northeast direction! Small wolf pack!"

The sentry on the watchtower roared and waved a flag.

A dozen large-sized snowfield wolf demons, using the cover of the wind and snow, crept up from the flank like white ghosts.

They were clearly scouts sent to probe, their movements light and swift, the pads under their claws making no sound upon landing.

"Prepare for battle!"

Zhao Tiji roared, his entire body's muscles tensing, the giant hammer raised high. Chen Chuan's long sword was also unsheathed, its tip flickering with a cold gleam.

The wolf pack was extremely fast, rushing into the hundred-zhang range in the blink of an eye.

Based on past experience, these beasts would use their speed advantage to circle the perimeter of the defense line, avoiding the frontal heavy firepower, specifically looking for weak gaps in the defense.

But today, the situation seemed a bit off.

The moment those dozen-plus wolf demons charged into the area covered by the "Spirit Response Spider Web" Su Ming had laid down.

Su Ming's left hand hidden in his sleeve, his index finger gave a slight hook.

Hum.

The invisible large net buried underground trembled lightly.

The wolf demon charging at the very front, originally preparing to leap and bite a new recruit's throat.

Its hind leg muscles had already exerted force, its body leaping into the air.

Right at that moment, the ground beneath it didn't collapse, nor were there any vines entangling it.

But that wolf demon felt as if its hind legs had been viciously yanked by an invisible giant hand.

It was a sudden disruption of gravity.

The pounce that should have leapt three zhang high was forcibly shortened by half.

Thud!

The wolf demon's body lost balance in mid-air, like a ragged sack thrown by someone, crashing heavily onto the ground, right at the new recruit's feet, startling the recruit.

"Good chance!"

Though flustered, the new recruit's instincts were still there, his spear instinctively thrusting downwards.

Thwack.

The spear tip pierced the wolf demon's soft abdomen without any resistance. That fierce wolf demon died without ever understanding why its proud leap had failed.

It wasn't just this one.

The dozen-plus wolf demons that charged into the area were like they had suddenly gotten drunk.

Some, while running, had their front legs sink as if into a quagmire, stumbling violently, their chins hitting the frozen ground, knocking out two fangs.

Some wanted to change direction to dodge arrows, but their bodies disobediently drifted in the opposite direction, actively delivering their heads to the blade's edge.

The originally swift and deadly wolf pack charge instantly turned into a comical wrestling show.

"Did these beasts' legs go soft?"

Although Old Liu was one-eyed, his vision was sharp. Seizing the moment a wolf demon lost its balance, he cleaved off its head with one slash, "Weird today, why are these wolves like they haven't eaten their fill?"

"Don't overthink it! Kill!"

Zhao Tiji laughed heartily, his giant hammer swinging with a fierce whooshing sound.

Facing a group of enemies who couldn't even stand steady, this battle was practically a one-sided slaughter.

In less than half the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, all dozen-plus wolf demons had become corpses. The snowfield was splattered with red wolf blood, while everyone in Squad C-Seven, except for that startled new recruit whose pants were a bit wet, were completely unharmed.

"Exhilarating!"

Zhao Tiji kicked away a wolf corpse by his feet, wiped the snow spray off his face, then turned to look at Su Ming standing calmly in the rear.

"Brother Su, that trap of yours... is godly!"

Zhao Tiji strode over, his eyes shining, "I saw it clearly just now, that wolf could clearly dodge Old Liu's blade, but then its body tilted, and it crashed into it on its own! What kind of formation is this? Did you slip the wolf demons a knockout drug?"

"Just a little trick."

Su Ming squatted down, pretending to check the formation's depletion, casually retrieving a few already cracked Warning Disks, "Just slightly altered the flow of spiritual energy on the ground, making it so they couldn't borrow force."

He didn't explain "gravity" and "viscous force fields," those terms were too profound for these rough men.

"Useful! Damn useful!"

Old Liu came over, looking at the inconspicuous spirit threads on the ground, clicking his tongue in wonder, "This thing has no movement, perfect for

ambushing people. Master Su, can this formation be expanded a bit more? If we could lay a circle around the entire defense zone, we could sleep with one eye open at night."

Su Ming's fingers gently brushed over those broken spirit threads, sensing the residual fluctuations within.

Although the effect of the previous battle was outstanding, the depletion was also shocking.

The simplified Star Attraction Lines placed too much load on the carrier; these low-grade materials were basically disposable.

"It can be done, but it costs materials."

Su Ming stood up, clapping his hands, "And this thing is okay for dealing with low-grade demon beasts. If we encounter a Foundation Establishment demon general, their demonic energy would shatter this net with one shake."

"That's enough!" Zhao Tiji waved his big hand, "Materials are nothing! The materials from these dozen-plus wolf demons just now, they all go to you! Brothers, any objections?"

"No objections!"

"Master Su taking the lion's share is only right!"

The surrounding soldiers clamored in agreement. On the battlefield, something that can make people bleed less is their lifeline.

Su Ming smiled, not declining.

He collected those wolf corpses, but his gaze went over the cheers of the crowd, landing on the distant gray horizon.

"Master, although this 'Spirit Response Spider Web' is useful, it's still too fragile."

Su Ming reviewed in his heart, "If it's a large-scale beast tide, this kind of disposable obstruction won't be enough to look at. I need a tougher carrier, or... a more ingenious structure."

"Don't rush, you can't become fat in one bite."

Lin Yu's voice was still lazy.

Chapter 313: Zheng Tieshou's Wine Invitation and Secret Tale

The back workshop of the Vessel Hall was a furnace of rolling heatwaves.

It was completely different from the clamor of the front hall. The air was thick with the unique metallic, fishy scent of burnt coke and cooling metal. Giant bellows resembled the lungs of slumbering behemoths, each rise and fall accompanied by a dull, rumbling roar.

Zheng Tieshou led Su Ming through a long corridor piled high with discarded molds and pushed open a heavy, iron-clad wooden door.

Inside was a world of its own.

It was a stone chamber only about twenty feet square. The walls were hung with all manner of strange tools, some hook-like or claw-shaped, others seemingly carved from whole animal bones, gleaming with a cold luster. In the center of the room, a red copper beast-head furnace burned fiercely, its flames licking at a dark blue-green earthenware jar suspended above it. A rich aroma of liquor, carried by the hot air, rampaged through the confined space.

"Sit."

Zheng Tieshou casually kicked two rush cushions, sewn from some unknown beast hide, over beside the furnace and sat down himself with a wide-legged, imposing posture. He grabbed two rough earthenware bowls.

"This place is a bit messy, I'll admit, but it's quiet." Zheng Tieshou lifted the earthenware jar. A thick, viscous thread of dark red wine poured out, looking particularly enticing at that moment. "This is my private stash of 'Fire Pear

Brew'. It's fierce stuff. Those delicate-skinned alchemists would feel their throats on fire after one sip. But for us ironworkers, this is the drink."

Su Ming sat down as instructed, accepting the bowl with both hands.

The liquor hit his throat, indeed feeling like a line of fire shooting straight down to his gut. Immediately, a wave of warmth spread to his limbs and bones, even making the spiritual energy circulating in his meridians feel a bit more lively.

"Good wine." Su Ming set down the bowl and exhaled a puff of white mist tinged with the scent of alcohol.

"You know your stuff!"

Zheng Tieshou laughed heartily, threw back his head, and drained the bowl in one gulp. He casually wiped the wine stains from his beard. "Back there earlier, those little bastards must have given you quite a show. All of them have high ambitions but low skills, thinking forging artifacts is just about swinging a hammer. They don't realize the 'finesse' involved is finer than a woman's embroidery."

He leaned forward, his eyes, reflecting the furnace fire, glowing red as they fixed on Su Ming. "Brother Su, I truly admire that 'water grinding effort' technique of yours. No fire refinement, no hammer forging, just using water spiritual energy to permeate and replace, and you smoothed out the hidden damage in that Yin-Yang Mother-Child Formation Plate. That kind of skill... you can't develop it without a good eight to ten years of immersion."

Su Ming gave a slight bow of his head and picked up the jar to refill Zheng Tieshou's bowl. "Steward Zheng flatters me. This disciple's spiritual roots are impure, and my fire techniques are not refined. I can only spend more time pondering these clumsy methods. Like water dripping through stone. The stone is hard, but it still fears the long-term, soft, persistent grind."

"Well said! The soft, persistent grind!"

Zheng Tieshou slapped his thigh, making the shelves behind him buzz. "Young people nowadays all think about using overwhelming force to overcome all techniques, about how to push the fire temperature to the extreme, to refine materials harder than diamond. But they don't understand—what is too rigid breaks easily."

He picked up his wine bowl, his gaze suddenly becoming somewhat distant, as if looking through the dancing furnace flames at scenes from long ago.

"Thirty years ago, the Earth Patrol Division placed a huge order."

Zheng Tieshou's voice lowered, his fingers unconsciously rubbing the rough rim of the earthenware bowl. "Back then, I was still an elite inner sect disciple, full of pride. The Earth Patrol Division wanted a batch of 'Mystic Iron Drill Cones' for exploring mineral veins over three thousand *zhang* underground. There was only one requirement: hard, harder than all rock."

Su Ming's fingers holding the wine bowl paused slightly.

Three thousand *zhang* underground.

Within his Consciousness Sea, Lin Yu, who had been lying lazily, suddenly sat up. "Disciple, this plot feels off. There's gossip to be had. Listen to what this old blacksmith has to say."

"Back then, we demanded the finest Mystic Iron essence, mixed in diamond dust, and even requested a Golden Core elder to personally inscribe 'Rock-Shattering Patterns'." Zheng Tieshou let out a wine-scented belch, a self-

mocking smile appearing on his face. "When that batch of drill cones was finished, they could pierce straight through the skull of a fourth-rank demon beast. We all thought nothing in this world could stop them."

Su Ming didn't interrupt, just watched Zheng Tieshou quietly.

"And then?"

Zheng Tieshou splashed half the wine from his bowl into the furnace. The flames surged up half a man's height, making his face flicker between light and shadow.

"Half a month. It only took half a month."

Zheng Tieshou held up two thick, short fingers. "The Earth Patrol Division sent that batch of drill cones back. Thirty-six in total. Twenty were broken. The remaining sixteen..."

Zheng Tieshou poured himself another bowl of wine. "At the time, the three of us artificers refused to believe it was that strange. We wanted to melt them down and remake them. But the moment we threw them into the earth fire furnace..."

He paused, a flicker of fear in his eyes.

"The furnace exploded?" Su Ming asked softly.

"If only it had exploded." Zheng Tieshou gave a bitter laugh. "The dark golden fragments on them... the moment they touched the earth fire, it was like they came alive. They didn't melt. Instead, they started devouring the earth fire! The spiritual energy in that furnace was sucked dry in the blink of an eye. Two junior brothers who were controlling the fire stood too close. They didn't even have time to scream before all their vital energy, blood, and spiritual energy were sucked dry by that thing. They turned into two desiccated corpses!"

Su Ming's heart skipped a beat.

"What happened after that?" Su Ming's expression remained unchanged, only his voice lowered a bit. "Didn't the sect investigate?"

"Investigate my ass."

Zheng Tieshou cursed. "An elder came from above, took one look, and had the things sealed away. Said it was some kind of special magnetic field anomaly underground, told us to keep our mouths shut. The remaining drill cones were all confiscated."

He didn't continue, just pointed upwards. "Some things... us workers, we just need to understand in our hearts."

After three rounds of wine, the atmosphere warmed up again.

Zheng Tieshou, having finally vomited out that secret he'd held for years, clearly felt much more at ease.

He thumped his chest and pointed at the rows of shelves outside.

"Brother Su, I'm happy today. That stunt of yours fixing the formation plate earlier helped me vent some pent-up frustration. From now on, in this Vessel Hall, aside from those core materials that require an elder's written order, everything else, you pick whatever you want! I'll write you the chits!"

Su Ming set down his wine bowl, the apparent drunkenness on his face seeming to fade a bit.

"Since Steward Zheng says so, then this disciple won't stand on ceremony."

Su Ming pulled out a list he had prepared long ago from his robes, but didn't hand it over directly. Instead, he probed, "I wonder if the storeroom might have any 'Void Stone'?"

Chapter 314: Ghost Market

"Void Stone?"

Zheng Tieshou was momentarily stunned, then shook his head with a bitter smile. "Brother Su, your appetite is truly not small. That thing is the core

material for forging storage magical treasures and spatial formations, classified as a strategic resource of the sect. Forget about me, even if Elder Mo wanted to mobilize it, he'd have to go through dual verification by both the Internal Affairs Hall and the Enforcement Hall."

A flicker of disappointment flashed in Su Ming's eyes, but he quickly concealed it.

It was expected.

Lin Yu's soul body's recovery required Void Stone Powder. It seemed the official channels were impassable.

"However..."

Zheng Tieshou lowered his voice, tilting his chin towards the north. "We don't have it here, but that doesn't mean other places don't. Although Iron Wall Pass is strictly managed, there are always some things that can't see the light of day. On the first and fifteenth of every month, at the 'Ghost Market' behind the Supply Camp, you might get lucky."

"Ghost Market?" Su Ming raised an eyebrow.

"Calling it a Ghost Market, it's actually just a place where various wandering cultivators and us sect disciples privately exchange goods," Zheng Tieshou chuckled. "Some spoils of war, the higher-ups either can't officially accept or offer too low a price, so everyone unloads them there. As long as no trouble breaks out, the Enforcement Team turns a blind eye."

As he spoke, Zheng Tieshou fished out a black iron token from his waist and tossed it to Su Ming.

"Take this. Go to the Ghost Market and find someone called 'Old Blind Man.' Tell him I sent you. He has some connections there."

Su Ming caught the token. It felt icy cold to the touch, engraved with a faint hammerhead mark.

This was the biggest gain of the night.

"Thank you, Brother Zheng." Su Ming changed his form of address.

"Thank my ass, drink!" Zheng Tieshou waved his hand. "Besides the Void Stone, take whatever else you want."

Su Ming didn't stand on ceremony either. He got up and walked out the door.

He didn't touch the shiny, glamorous refined gold and secret silver displayed openly. Instead, he went straight to the scrap area in the corner.

There, piles of various artifact forging failures, slag, or fragments of damaged magical implements recovered from the front lines were stacked.

In the eyes of others, this was all garbage. But in Su Ming's eyes, equipped with the "observation micro state" vision and Lin Yu as a knowledge repository, this place was practically a treasure mountain.

"That black jar on the left, take it," Lin Yu directed from within the Consciousness Sea. "That's waste liquid from 'Thunder Fire Sand' refinement. The 'Thunder Mercury' settled inside is a high-explosive material. With a bit of

processing, its power is three times stronger than your Bumper Harvest No. 2."

Su Ming complied, collecting that unattended jar of black sludge.

"And that one, that piece that looks like a rusted copper plate." Lin Yu's voice carried a hint of excitement. "Don't judge it by its ugliness. That's the oxidized crust of 'Star Pattern Steel.' Just wash off the oxidation layer with strong acid, and what's left is the best spiritual energy conducting material, perfect for making formation plates."

Su Ming picked through the scrap pile like a scavenger.

Before long, a small pile of grayish, grimy-looking "junk" had accumulated at his feet.

Zheng Tieshou, who had followed him out, clicked his tongue in amazement.

"Brother Su, you're... done picking?" Zheng Tieshou was somewhat puzzled. "There's top-quality Crimson Refined Copper on that shelf over there. Don't you want some?"

"It's enough."

Su Ming patted the dust off his hands, pointing at the pile on the ground. "Brother Zheng, in others' hands, these things are scrap. But for me, they're just right for repairing those low-grade formation plates. Crimson Refined Copper is good, but too conspicuous. I'm a timid person, afraid of attracting unwanted attention."

Zheng Tieshou was stunned for a moment, then gave a thumbs-up. "Perceptive! Brother Su, your temperament is steady!"

With a flourish of his pen, he signed an inventory release form. "This junk isn't worth much. Count it all as loss. Take it, take it!"

Su Ming packed the items away but didn't leave in a hurry. Instead, he took out a huge bundle from his own storage pouch.

When the bundle was opened, a strong, heavy smell of blood wafted out.

It was dozens of complete Crimson-Eyed Wolf Demon pelts, along with a pile of processed wolf fangs and claws.

"Brother Zheng, these are the gains from today's daytime battle," Su Ming pointed at the items on the ground. "The brothers gave all these to me. I know the Vessel Hall also collects materials. Rather than going to the Administration Hall and getting lowballed, it's better to give them directly to you, Brother Zheng. You decide on a price, whatever's fair."

Zheng Tieshou crouched down, examining the quality of the pelts.

"Good craftsmanship."

Zheng Tieshou praised. "The pelts are skinned completely, no extra cuts. These wolf fangs also retained the spiritual marrow at the roots. Those bloodsuckers at the Administration Hall would give you thirty contribution points per pelt at most for this quality."

He stood up, pondering for a moment. "Alright, I'll take them at fifty points per pelt. Wolf fangs and claws calculated separately. I'll convert it all to two thousand contribution points for you. Or if you want spirit stones, fifteen hundred spirit stones."

This price was at least twenty percent above market rate.

Su Ming was secretly delighted, but his expression remained unchanged. "Then I thank Brother Zheng for your consideration. I'll take the spirit stones."

Contribution points were good, but in a place like the Ghost Market, hard currency like spirit stones was more useful.

The transaction completed, both host and guest were satisfied.

When Su Ming walked out of the Vessel Hall, the wind and snow outside had stopped.

The cold air drawn into his lungs instantly cleared his head, which had been somewhat heated by the alcohol.

He glanced back at the massive hall belching flames into the night behind him, his fingers gently rubbing the black iron token inside his sleeve.

"Master." Su Ming called out in his mind.

"Hmm?"

"If the marks on that drill bit were really left by those insects..." Su Ming looked up at the pitch-black night sky. "Then their bite must be even better now than thirty years ago."

Thirty years ago, they could already gnaw through Mystic Iron essence.

"So we need to hurry."

Su Ming nodded, tightened his robe, and quickly strode into the darkness.

...

Three days later.

The waning moon offered no light. The night was like a tightly sealed black pot, completely covering the continuous camp layout of Iron Wall Pass.

Behind the Supply Camp, mountains of dried fodder grass emitted a stale, musty smell.

This was the most inconspicuous corner of the entire Iron Wall Pass, usually only passed by menials responsible for feeding the scaled horses.

A dark shadow slid out from the shadows like a civet cat, its toes lightly tapping on the soft haystacks without making a sound.

Su Ming was wrapped in a wide black robe, a plain bronze mask covering his face.

This mask was pressed from scrap leftover from discarded formation plates. Inside, a simple "breath-concealing array" was engraved, capable of blurring facial contours. Even if scanned by divine sense, one would only see a hazy mist.

"Master, this place is chosen to be quite remote," Su Ming murmured in his mind, his gaze warily sweeping the surroundings.

"Remote is right," Lin Yu's voice sounded in the Consciousness Sea, carrying the certainty of an expert. "That's where the good stuff is."

Su Ming lowered his posture. Following the location given by Zheng Tieshou, he circled around two massive hay mountains and stopped before a wind-sheltered cliff face.

The cliff face appeared smooth, but in Su Ming's "observation micro state" vision, there was an extremely faint layer of spiritual energy fluctuation there, gently rippling like water waves.

Two guards in gray clothes, their auras cold and gloomy, were integrated into the shadows like rocks. If not for Su Ming's keen divine sense, he might have overlooked their presence.

"Halt."

The guard on the left didn't draw his blade, merely lifting his eyelids. His pupils glinted with a cold light in the darkness, eerily reminiscent of some cold-blooded reptile.

Su Ming didn't speak. With a flip of his wrist, the black iron token engraved with the hammerhead mark appeared in his palm. He presented the token forward, his movements steady, without any unnecessary probing.

The guard glanced at the token, and his previously tense muscles relaxed slightly.

He extended a thin, withered finger and tapped three times on the cliff face behind him in an extremely subtle pattern.

Two long, one short.

Screech—screech—screech—

A grating, teeth-grinding friction sound rang out. The originally seamless cliff face actually recessed inward, revealing a deep, narrow opening only wide enough for one person to pass through sideways. A turbid airflow, mixed with the smell of blood, decay, and some strange incense, instantly rushed out.

"Enter." The guard coldly spat out a single word before receding back into the darkness.

Su Ming put away the token, took a deep breath, adjusted the circulation route of his "Like Water Art" within his body, suppressing his own aura to the extreme. Only then did he step into that light-devouring "beast's maw."

Chapter 315: Stardust

The space inside the cave was larger than imagined.

It seemed to be a naturally formed limestone cave, crudely excavated by human hands. Hive-like depressions had been dug into the rock walls on both sides.

There were no bright lanterns, only sporadically embedded glowstones on the walls emitting a sickly green phosphorescence, stretching the shadows of passing figures into twisted, monstrous shapes.

This was the "Ghost Market."

Su Ming slowed his pace, his gaze sweeping over the crude stalls.

There were no hawking cries here. Everyone was wrapped in black robes or wore masks. Conversations during transactions were deliberately hushed, merging into a buzzing drone like the fluttering of insect wings.

The goods on the stalls were even more varied, exuding an unsettling, "wild" flavor.

On a stall to the left, several broken flying swords were displayed. The blood on the blades had long since dried and blackened, the edges curled, clearly having seen brutal combat. The stall owner was a one-armed man, wiping a notched war blade with a greasy cloth strip, his eyes fierce as they tracked every passerby.

"That's 'corpse loot'," Lin Yu clicked his tongue. "Look at the patterns on those sword hilts; they're probably standard-issue flying swords from some small sect up north. That stall owner is likely a 'vulture' who specializes in scavenging on the edges of battlefields."

Moving further ahead, a few people were gathered around a stall that exuded a medicinal fragrance. The owner had several sealed clay jars placed before him; it was unclear what was inside, but occasional dull thumping sounds could be heard.

"Gallbladders of the third-tier demon beast 'Iron Thread Snake', with venom sacs attached. Exchange for two bottles of Reviving Spring Pills." The stall owner's voice was hoarse, as if he had swallowed charcoal.

Su Ming did not linger.

He was like a drop of water merging into the ocean, moving inconspicuously through the crowd. In this place, curiosity was the cheapest and most dangerous thing.

The deeper he went, the damper the air became, and that musty smell grew stronger.

Finally, at the very depths of the cave, a corner hung with tattered banners appeared in Su Ming's line of sight.

The spot was so remote it seemed forgotten. There were no other stalls within several yards, only a few jagged, bizarre rocks standing abruptly.

Beneath the banners sat an emaciated, withered old man.

He wore a faded gray cloth robe, his eye sockets sunken, a black cloth strip covering where his eyes should be.

On a piece of tattered animal hide in front of him lay a sparse scattering of dull-colored ores, looking like worthless stones one might find anywhere by the roadside.

"Old Blind Man."

Su Ming silently recited the name given by Zheng Tieshou, paused his step slightly, then walked over.

The old man seemed asleep, his head bowed. Only when Su Ming's shadow fell upon his stall did he slightly twitch his ears.

"Looking at stones?"

The old man's voice was dry and grating, like two bones rubbing together.

Su Ming crouched down, his gaze sweeping over the few ores on the stall.

To ordinary eyes, these stones held no spiritual energy fluctuations; they weren't even as good as the poorest quality iron ore.

But with Lin Yu's guidance, Su Ming entered the "observation micro state."

In that instant, the world changed.

Beneath the seemingly worthless surfaces of those few stones, faint, extremely weak silver threads, like starlight, could be seen faintly moving. This fluctuation was incredibly restrained. Without Su Ming's deep insight into the "Star Attraction Lines," it would have been impossible to detect.

Su Ming reached out, his fingertip lightly tracing over a fist-sized, pitted grayish-white stone.

"Zheng Tieshou recommended I come."

Su Ming's voice was very low, only echoing between the two of them.

"Looking for some 'heavy-weighting' stones."

Hearing the three words "Zheng Tieshou," the Old Blind Man's face, covered by the black cloth, lifted slightly. His dry, thin lips twisted into a faint, ambiguous smile.

"Recommended by Zheng the Big Hammer?"

The Old Blind Man extended a finger like a withered branch, accurately pressing down on the grayish-white stone where Su Ming's fingertip had lingered. "This stone is indeed heavy-weighting. However, the weight is heavy, and the price isn't light either."

"What's the price?" Su Ming asked.

The Old Blind Man raised a single finger, shaking it in the air.

"One liang of 'Stardust' in exchange."

Su Ming's pupils contracted slightly.

"Stardust" was Ghost Market slang, referring to high-grade spirit stones.

One high-grade spirit stone!

One had to know that on the open market, one high-grade spirit stone could officially exchange for one hundred mid-grade spirit stones, or ten thousand low-grade spirit stones. And that was the official, often unavailable, exchange rate. In resource-scarce Iron Wall Pass, strategic reserves like high-grade spirit stones commanded an even higher premium.

Ten thousand low-grade spirit stones for such a piece of impure, low-quality Void Stone raw ore?

This was practically robbery.

"Master, this old man is fleecing us," Su Ming gritted his teeth inwardly.

"It's expensive, yes, but this is something you can't buy even if you have the money," Lin Yu sighed. "Void Stone is a space-attributed spiritual material. Even low-quality raw ore can be refined. It's crucial for stabilizing my soul body. Moreover, although this stone has a lot of spatial impurities, its advantage is its quantity. After refining, it'll be enough for me to use for half a year."

Su Ming took a deep breath.

Money could be earned again. But if his master was gone, his greatest reliance in this cultivation world would be lost.

"Deal."

Su Ming did not haggle. In the Ghost Market, decisiveness often earned more respect and was safer than penny-pinching.

He pulled out a prepared brocade pouch from his robe.

Inside was his entire accumulated savings from these past few days: profits from reselling "Bumper Harvest No. 2," repairing magical implements, and liquidating spoils of war.

Su Ming pushed the pouch toward the Old Blind Man.

The Old Blind Man did not open it. He merely hefted its weight in his hand, brought it to his nose to sniff, and a satisfied expression appeared on his face.

"You're a decisive one."

The Old Blind Man kicked the grayish-white stone toward Su Ming, casually tucking the pouch into his robe.

Su Ming grabbed the stone. It was heavy in his hand, far heavier than ordinary iron of the same volume.

That unique sense of spatial dislocation made his palm tingle slightly.

Goods and payment exchanged.

Su Ming stood up, stored the stone in his storage pouch, and was about to turn and leave.

"Youngster."

The Old Blind Man's voice suddenly sounded behind him, even lower than before, carrying a trace of barely perceptible eeriness.

Su Ming's steps halted. He didn't turn around, but the muscles in his back tensed slightly. His left hand, hidden in his sleeve, gripped a "Bumper Harvest No. 2."

The Old Blind Man's empty eye sockets seemed to bore into Su Ming's back through the black cloth, his voice like the whisper of a night owl. "The place where this thing was dug up... many people died. The 'smell of earth' on it hasn't fully dissipated yet. Remember to soak it in rootless water for three days when you get back. Don't bring the 'thing' indoors."

Su Ming's heart gave a violent jolt.

People died at the place where this was dug up?

Could this Void Stone raw ore have been excavated from near that "underground dark river"?

"Thank you for the advice, Senior."

Su Ming cupped his hands slightly in a gesture of respect, then without further delay, his figure flickered and swiftly disappeared into the dim flow of people.

Watching Su Ming's departing back, the Old Blind Man lowered his head again. His withered fingers lightly tapped on the tattered animal hide before him, a strange smile curling at the corner of his mouth.

"That reckless brute Zheng the Big Hammer has found himself a cautious kid..."