

## M. Slaying 411

Chapter 411: That Is Definitely Not a Rumor

Huyan Bin had thought about paying his way out of trouble, but he never expected Chu Liang to ask for such a huge amount right from the start—far more than he had imagined.

How can you be so bold? Huyan Bin thought.

Even Lin Bei, who was standing nearby, was stunned.

He had heard stories of how Chu Liang had extorted money from Shang Ziliang, which already sounded like highway robbery. But this? This was on a whole new level—this was like wishing upon a shooting star!

Despite his reputation for being calm and composed, honed from years of managing his family's business, Huyan Bin felt his patience wearing thin. The urge to curse was rising fast.

But before he could unleash his frustration, Chu Liang added, "If you're willing to pay that amount, I'll consider it an investment. In return, I'll offer you ten percent of Red Cotton Peak's profits every year for the next ten years."

"You..." Huyan Bin choked on the curse that was about to slip out and quickly countered, "Are you saying Red Cotton Peak's business will now be part of Taotie City's operations?"

"Exactly," Chu Liang replied with a sly grin. "This way, any success Red Cotton Peak achieves won't be a threat to you—instead, you'll profit from it."

Huyan Bin furrowed his brow, lost in thought. "This..."

"Furthermore, I can sign a wagering agreement with you. If this profit share doesn't double your principal—meaning it doesn't reach six hundred thousand Vermillion-Bird coins in ten years—I'll cover the difference. So, your investment is guaranteed to double in ten years."

Huyan Bin's eyes flickered with surprise. "You really dare to make such a bold guarantee?"

"It all depends on whether you trust me," Chu Liang replied with a calm smile. "But let's be clear: you're not the only one interested in investing in Red Cotton Peak. I'm offering this opportunity because I'd rather avoid competition with you, not because I need your money. If you wait a couple of years to join, the price won't be as favorable."

Huyan Bin fell into deep thought.

He had just praised Chu Liang for his clever ideas, and now Chu had presented something even more innovative. He hadn't realized business could be done this way. Partnerships weren't unusual, but breaking it down into small shares to sell—this was a new concept to him.

But there was no reason for him to reject signing this contract.

If he invested three hundred thousand now, it would be guaranteed to double in ten years...

And with the backing of the Mount Shu Sect, there was no worry about Chu Liang disappearing—his credibility was rock solid.

After a brief contemplation, Huyan Bin responded, "I think this is feasible, but I don't have the authority to make such a decision on my own. Young Hero Chu, let me discuss it with my father first before giving you a final answer."

"Alright," Chu Liang replied, "I will be waiting."

"Then we'll leave it at that for now," Huyan Bin added. "Brother Chu's ideas are always impressive. I can't help but be impressed."

"Brother Huyan's courage is truly top-notch," Chu Liang reciprocated with a smile.

Lin Bei, who had been listening on the side, was dumbfounded. How did it suddenly become Brother Chu and Brother Huyan?

Just as Huyan Bin was about to rise and take his leave, he hesitated and then sat back down. "By the way," he began, "there's something I would like to consult you about."

"Hm?" Chu Liang responded. "Brother Huyan, feel free to say what's on your mind."

"Well, I've admired Fairy Jiang of Mount Shu for a long time and have always wanted to meet her, but I haven't had the chance," Huyan Bin admitted with an embarrassed smile. "The other day, I heard that you and Fairy Jiang seem to have some sort of relationship. Is that true? If it is, I wouldn't dare harbor any further thoughts. But if it's just a rumor, could you perhaps introduce me?"

As Chu Liang listened, his smile slowly faded.

"Regarding the matter between Senior Sister Jiang and me..." Chu Liang said slowly, "let me clarify: that is definitely not a rumor."

...

"It's all just rumors; don't listen to that nonsense," Di Nufeng said with a chuckle. "All that talk about closed-door cultivation to break through to the eighth realm—how could it be that simple? Yan Zi is simply studying some divine techniques."

Sitting across from her was an elderly man of imposing stature, dressed in a purple-red brocade robe adorned with flying serpents, and wearing a black crown threaded with gold. Though his skin was wrinkled, with gray hair and white brows, his sharp eyes and the vitality, qi, and spirit radiating from his entire presence were far beyond those of ordinary men.

"Miss Feng, no need to be nervous; I'm just making a routine inquiry," the old man said with a smile. "For the sword cultivators of the world, there are three Great Daos, each with its own master. His Majesty's intention is not to see Peak Master Yan Zi's extraordinary talent wasted on the Great Dao of Tai'a, so he asked me to remind you."

"What? Is he saying that Yan Zi is no match for the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner?" Di Nufeng retorted as she glared at that old man.

"No, no..." the old man said as he quickly waved his hand. "But even with cultivation power that can ascend the heavens, we should all work together against our actual enemies. The Divine Nine, Terrestrial Ten, and the Imperial Supervisory Bureau are all on the same side. There's no need for us to fight among each other.."

"Alright, alright," Di Nufeng said, curling her lips into a faint smile. "I know what you mean. You're just worried that Yan Zi might compete with the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner for the control of the Tai'a Great Dao. Rest assured, Yan Zi has no such intention."

"That's good," the old man said as nodded with a smile.

Yet, despite his outward calm, he couldn't help but sigh inwardly.

Though he had witnessed countless storms throughout his life and served by the emperor's side for many years, the brief glare from Di Nufeng had stirred a flicker of instinctive fear within him.

Is this the pressure of the Divine Phoenix?

Or have I just gotten old... and become more timid?

At that moment, Chu Liang's figure appeared at the door, calling out in confusion, "Esteemed teacher?"

It turned out that after returning from Red Cotton Peak, Chu Liang had noticed the fluttering banners on Silver Sword Peak, with two rows of black-clad guards in brocade uniforms lined up in front of Di Nufeng's pavilion.

Chu Liang's heart skipped a beat.

Could it be that his esteemed teacher had committed some major crime and the officials have come here to arrest her? Although he didn't know what the crime might be, he could easily think about the things she could have done. She must have done something.

Given how his teacher looked, who would believe she hadn't broken any laws or committed any crimes? At the very least, she must have beaten up an old man in the street.

So Chu Liang hurried over to check, but instead of seeing Di Nufeng resisting arrest, he saw her sitting and chatting with someone. The person across from her seemed to be... a eunuch?

Yes, an elderly eunuch dressed in the attire of a palace attendant, seemingly of high rank, was sitting across from his esteemed teacher, smiling deferentially.

"Ah, you're just in time. I was about to look for you." Di Nufeng waved him over as soon as she saw him. "This is Eunuch Lao from the imperial city."

"This younger one greets the Eunuch Lao," Chu Liang immediately bowed in respect.

So you are Eunuch Lao, Chu Liang thought.

He had indeed heard of this man. There were countless experts in the imperial city. Aside from the masters of the imperial family and the Night Dragon Hall guards, the most renowned were the Four Great Warriors[1].

These were four great eunuchs who had attained mastery in both martial arts and divine techniques.

The eunuchs of the Yu Dynasty traditionally practiced a powerful cultivation manual known as the Yin-Slaying Sutra, an art that could only be cultivated by those who had undergone castration. At its peak, this formidable art granted the ability to move mountains and command the seas.

Some of the eunuchs who mastered this cultivation art were honored as Emperor's Warriors.

The man before them, Lao Santai, held the position of Terrace-Supervising Eunuch and was recognized as the second-ranked among the Four Great Warriors, surpassed only by Yao Dengxian, the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch.

Eunuch Lao was also the Pen-Bearing Eunuch to the current emperor. Having served alongside two generations of rulers, he had become a central figure in the power hierarchy of the Yu Dynasty.

"This must be Young Hero Chu, the one who killed Taowu with his sword," Lao Santai said and chuckled when he saw Chu Liang. "Not only is your talent extraordinary, but you are also very handsome."

Chu Liang couldn't help but smile inwardly.

As expected from someone who had long served beside the emperor, his words were indeed flattering. Lately, everyone who met Chu Liang praised him as a "young hero," but Eunuch Lao was different. He was the only one who commented on his appearance.

The remark was fair, accurate, and objective.

"So, how about it? Will he pass the selection process for eunuchs?" Di Nufeng suddenly asked.

The Yu Dynasty's selection for eunuchs was notoriously strict, requiring candidates to meet high standards of elegance and attractiveness. That was why Di Nufeng asked.

"Definitely top-tier," Lao Santai replied, having given Chu Liang a thorough top-down scrutinization once more.

Chu Liang's smile froze on his face.

Wait, so you're not here to take away my esteemed teacher—you're here to take me?

Fortunately, Lao Santai quickly stood up and said, "Since Miss Feng has agreed to enter the palace, let's set off right away. We can still reach the capital before sunset."

"Alright," Di Nufeng said, rising with casual ease.

"Esteemed teacher, you're entering the palace?" Chu Liang asked.

"The Emperor wishes to see me," Di Nufeng replied.

"Mainly to inquire about the matters concerning the Whale Gang from that day," Lao Santai added.

Having observed through her facial expression that it was not a serious matter, Chu Liang nodded.

As for the inquiry about the Whale Gang, Chu Liang didn't believe it. The Imperial Supervisory Bureau had already investigated everything from that day, and if there were further questions, they would likely have summoned him as well.

He didn't press further about their exact plans.

Lao Santai's visit to Mount Shu was not only to summon Di Nufeng but also to gather information on Daoist Yan's situation. The higher-ups were concerned that Daoist Yan might take a path conflicting with the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner, which could lead to unnecessary complications.

In fact, a written decree would have been enough to summon anyone else. However, they were worried that if they had only sent a letter, Di Nufeng would refuse to show up. And so, they sent a high-ranking eunuch to extend a personal invitation.

As Di Nufeng walked out the door, she was still grumbling.

"You guys handle things in such an unreliable manner. You said you came to fetch me because Mount Shu is far. Why didn't you seek me out when I was still at the Giant Whale Mountain Manor? Instead, you waited until I returned here, only to make me travel all the way back again."

"Yes, yes, that was indeed inconsiderate of us," Lao Santai said repeatedly. "The main issue was that by the time this matter was reported to His Majesty, it was already too late. Even if we had sent the summons then, it wouldn't have reached you in time. By the next day, when we checked, you had already returned to the mountain."

"What? Are you blaming me for leaving too early?" Di Nufeng shot him a sharp glance.

"No, no, it was just unfortunate timing, and I apologize for the trouble," Lao Santai said with a fawning smile.

As Chu Liang escorted them outside, he watched from the side and mused to himself, Serving alongside the emperor might be easier than dealing with Di Nufeng.

As they stepped out, a loud screech echoed through the air, and a magnificent White-Feathered Golden Luan descended from the sky. Its back was adorned with a seat and a brocade canopy.

Everyone took their seats, and the eunuch at the front gave the signal to take flight. However, the White-Feathered Golden Luan remained on the ground, trembling and shaking in place.

"What's going on?" Lao Santai frowned, causing the guards and eunuchs ahead to stiffen with fear. Their reaction made it clear that this Warrior Lao was far less easygoing than Di Nufeng.[2]

Chu Liang whispered as he reminded Di Nufeng from below, "Esteemed teacher, could you please control your aura a bit?"

"Oh, I forgot," Di Nufeng said before she intentionally restrained her imposing aura. Only then did the White-Feathered Golden Luan stand straight and soar into the sky.

With her Divine Phoenix aura, she was the queen of all feathered creatures. If she didn't keep her aura in check, even birds with celestial beast bloodlines would cower and tremble before her.

The giant bird glided slowly across the distant sky.

Chapter 412: Stop Messing Around [End of Book 4]

Jiang Yuebai sat quietly on the branch of the ancient tree on Azure Falling Peak, frowning as her gaze lost in the distance where birds danced across the sky. A faint mist clouded her eyes.

She had been feeling a bit annoyed recently.

At first, it was the gnawing worry over Chu Liang's sudden disappearance that unsettled her. But after he was found, a new emotion took hold—one she hadn't expected. Watching him walk too close to Xu Hongqiu sparked a sudden, inexplicable anger within her.

These were emotions she had never felt in her lifetime before.

Ever since that day when she first laid eyes on Chu Liang, soaring toward her on the back of the Baize youngling, she couldn't shake the feeling that this person possessed an unusual charm.

Back then, he was just an unknown junior disciple, seemingly ordinary in every way. Yet, despite his unassuming appearance, he had a way of stirring her emotions. As events unfolded, it became clear that her instincts hadn't been wrong—this person was indeed extraordinary.

He rose to fame with astonishing speed, quickly becoming a celebrated prodigy among the immortal sects across the nine provinces. Yet to Jiang Yuebai, he remained unchanged—no different from the person she had always known.

What she cared about was never that. As for what it truly was, she couldn't quite put it into words.

Her esteemed teacher had taught her all the immortal arts of Mount Shu, but had never taught her what this feeling was.

"Jiangjiang!" A voice called from behind.

Jiang Yuebai didn't need to turn around to know it was her junior sister, Mu Yueting.

She had never been naturally gifted at socializing. Though she always appeared aloof and distant, it was more out of uncertainty in how to interact with others than a true desire to be solitary. Because of this, few dared to approach her, and even those who tried often found their courage faltering before they could utter a word, leading to awkward encounters.

Perhaps this was what set Chu Liang apart in her eyes—his effortless ease with people. He had a way of connecting with others naturally, instinctively earning their trust without even trying.

Because of her reserved nature, Jiang Yuebai had never had many close friends. The only one bold enough to call her Jiangjiang to her face was this junior sister.

"Mumu." Jiang Yuebai snapped out of her thoughts and said as she took her junior sister's hand. "What's up?"

"Have you heard? That Red Cotton Peak project Chu Liang's been working on—they've started building a lot of shops there recently. The disciples on the peak have all gone to check it out; let's go take a look too!" Mu Yueting said excitedly.

"Red Cotton Peak?"

Jiang Yuebai thought for a moment; she was, of course, aware of it. Before Chu Liang began any new project, he would always share his ideas with her, and she could grasp his vision immediately. Over time, the two had developed a quiet but deep understanding of each other.

She was naturally curious about the bustling activity on Red Cotton Peak. However, whenever she ventured out, she inevitably attracted a crowd. In busy places like this, it was even worse. While she wasn't afraid, the attention often became a nuisance.

After a brief pause, she shook her head and said, "Forget it, I won't go."

"It's okay," Mu Yueting insisted, tugging at her hand. "You need to go out more often; that way, people won't find it so unusual."

As Jiang Yuebai looked into her junior sister's eager eyes, she had no choice but to nod and say, "Alright then. Let's go have a look."

So, the two of them set off together for Red Cotton Market.

Upon arrival, they were met with a scene of transformation.

What had once been just two rows of modest stalls was now a thriving marketplace, with broad roads lined by towering pavilions. Although many of the shops were still preparing to open, some were already bustling with activity, drawing in a steady stream of people.

The original stalls remained, but with the addition of these new shops, more Mount Shu disciples had been inspired to set up their own stalls, contributing to the lively atmosphere.

In the center of the marketplace, a middle-aged man had claimed an open plot of land, proudly displaying a sign that read "Red Cotton Peak's First Shop." He had even drawn a circle around it to keep others at bay.

As soon as Jiang Yuebai arrived, she naturally drew the attention of many onlookers, but she moved through the crowd with a serene composure, as if the stares didn't exist.

As they continued walking, they suddenly came upon another area where a crowd had gathered, piquing their interest.

As Jiang Yuebai approached, murmurs spread quickly through the crowd, with voices calling out, "Fairy Jiang is here!" The crowd immediately parted, but only to surge towards her, leaving an open space at the center.

In that newly formed opening, Jiang Yuebai quickly spotted the center of attention: a beautiful woman in a scarlet robe, directing several burly men as they worked on constructing a building.

She naturally recognized her—this was Miss Xu Hongqiu, the Young Lady of the Whale Gang.

Miss Xu was overseeing the construction of the Whale Gang's new foothold on Red Cotton Peak, where they intended to establish a branch in the future.

With the crowd shifting around them, Xu Hongqiu turned, and her gaze met Jiang Yuebai's.

Jiang Yuebai, moving with the grace of someone strolling casually through the street, yet with an air as though she were descending from the heavens. Her garments billowed like clouds around her, exuding a brilliance that was both captivating and otherworldly.

The two women exchanged a glance. Although they recognized each other, they did not know each other well. After a brief pause, they both nodded in acknowledgment.

Just as Jiang Yuebai was about to continue walking down the street, a voice called out from behind, "Miss Jiang!"

She turned to see Xu Hongqiu quickly making her way toward her.

"Miss Xu?" Jiang Yuebai asked, puzzled, "What's the matter?"

"I... I have some questions to ask you," Xu Hongqiu began hesitantly. "It might be a bit presumptuous, but... I've heard some things about you and Young Hero Chu, and... I want to know if they're true? Because I..."

Despite being known for her boldness and straightforward nature—even daring to seek revenge for her father by attempting to assassinate a seventh-realm enemy on her own—Xu Hongqiu found herself hesitating as she asked this question.

But before she could finish, Jiang Yuebai gave a small, decisive nod and simply said, "Yes."

"I wanted to..." Xu Hongqiu was still searching for the right words when Jiang Yuebai's unexpected response interrupted her thoughts. She blinked in surprise, momentarily stunned. After a brief pause, she could only manage a confused, "Huh?"

Jiang Yuebai nodded again as she said, "Yes."

...

The imperial palace in the capital city of Yu.

The heavily fortified imperial city stood at the heart of the majestic and vast Panyang City. Within the innermost part of the imperial city lay the golden-bricked, jade-tiled palace city. The layers of palace walls seemed to carve the sky into perfect squares.

Although the weather had turned cold, the willows, flowers, and grass within the palace walls never withered, blooming as if it were still spring.

Lao Santai, accompanied by a group of palace attendants, led Di Nufeng into the grand hall, where an elder with clear, sharp features and clad in plain robes was already seated, awaiting their arrival.

"You two, please wait here while I inform His majesty," Lao Santai said with a slight bow before excusing himself.

"Well, well." Di Nufeng smiled upon seeing the elder and greeted him warmly, "Old Qi, it's been a long time."

This man was none other than Qi Yingxuan, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner of the Yu Dynasty.

The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner smiled as he replied, "Indeed, it has been a long time. Miss Feng, I see you have made progress in your cultivation. You are not far off from achieving the Heavenly Origin Realm."

"Hmph," Di Nufeng scoffed, "I knew it—this is exactly why they've summoned me here. The moment I spend a few days cultivating seriously, these old folks start getting restless."

Qi Yingxuan smiled but said nothing.

"And what are you smiling about? Yan Zi goes into closed-door cultivation for a few days, and suddenly you can't sit still either, can you?" Di Nufeng shot him a pointed glare.

Qi Yingxuan immediately stopped smiling and took on a more serious expression as he said, "I'm not afraid, but I don't want to see her efforts go to waste while causing a conflict among us who are on the same side."

"Why are you being so fierce?" Di Nufeng glared at him once more.

Qi Yingxuan blinked, his lips curling into an expression that resembled a smile, though it was clearly not one.

"Hahaha..." At that moment, a hearty laugh echoed from the rear of the hall as a tall elder in a dragon-embroidered robe strode in, flanked by palace attendants.

He looked old, with white hair and high, arched eyebrows. His wide eyes still radiated a strong energy, like a blazing flame. Even though he was not angry, he still exuded an aura of authority that demanded respect. With a quick flick of his sleeve, he took the foremost seat.

In the vast lands of the nine provinces of the Yu Dynasty, only one person dared to occupy this seat.

He was the current emperor with the surname Xia.

Di Nufeng remained standing while the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner rose to greet him, and that was all. Cultivators from the sects in the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten would not have to bow when entering the imperial hall, especially the Eminent Ones—this was a tradition established when the Yu Dynasty was founded.

"Stop messing around..." the emperor said with a smile as he settled into his seat. "Second Aunt."

Chapter 413: Puppet Show [Start of Book 5]

"Elder Brother!"

"Luoyu..."

On a simple but spacious wooden stage, two rather stiff human figures embraced each other. One was a man dressed in a robe made from yellow cloth, in the role of the crown prince. The other was a woman dressed in a robe made from white linen, in the role of his younger sister. Their faces looked no different from those of ordinary people, but their movements lacked a certain vitality.

As they embraced, a murmur of voices rose from the audience below.

"What are they performing?" a woman asked with a frown, feeling slightly displeased.

Dressed in a green dress, the woman had skin that was as fair as jade and a countenance that held a misty allure. She was clearly a beautiful young woman. However, there was a depth to her eyes like that of a deep lake. It gave her the air of someone much older who had experienced the vicissitudes of life.

There were around a hundred audience members behind her. About eighty percent of them were lively young women with diverse appearances. They were chatting noisily, complaining about the story being performed on stage.

As their discontent grew, the two figures on stage froze. Then a young noble with the air of someone extraordinary stepped out from backstage.

He was all smiles as he asked, "Your grace, do you not like this tale?"

"We want to see The Legend of the White Snake or Meng Jiangnu. What is this you're performing?" a woman in the back asked.

"Those tales are all fake; what's so interesting about watching them?" the young man replied with a smile.

"And this tale of yours is real?" the woman in green suddenly asked.

The young man answered, "It is, of course, a true story."

"All right." The woman in green nodded. "Then continue with the performance. I'm curious to see what stories the human imperial family has."

The young man forced a smile. "Great."

Instead of returning backstage, he sat down in the audience. He formed a seal with his hands, and the puppets on stage began to move again.

This man was none other than Young Noble Xunyang, who had wandered to the Far West out of desperation.

In the past, Young Noble Xunyang sheltered the defeated Lu Chengchou, and that caused the imperial court to pursue him. With the imperial court on his tail, Young Noble Xunyang was recommended to flee to this demon territory, and that was exactly what he did. Fortunately, the queen of Qingqiu, one of the Seven Great Demon Kings, was exceptionally friendly to humans. Additionally, Young Noble Xunyang's cultivation level wasn't low, so he was able to use that to find a decent place to settle down.

As for why he was using his brilliant puppet divine skill to put on a puppet show, that was because he had been commanded to do so by the Demon King of Qingqiu.

A few days ago, copies of the bi-monthly publication of The Seven Stars Gazette

had found their way to the Far West. The demons of Qingqiu were captivated by the incomplete tales published in the gazette, and they wanted Young Noble Xunyang to turn the tales into puppet shows for them.

The reason they enjoyed the tales so much might have something to do with the culture in Qingqiu. Humans viewed all animals that cultivated and turned into supernatural beings as demons, but the demons were not a monolithic race. From the perspective of the various clans of demonic creatures, humans were fundamentally no different from another clan of demonic creatures.

When tigers cultivated, they would become tiger demons. When wolves cultivated, they would become wolf demons. And when humans cultivated, they would become human demons... In essence, they were all the same.

However, human demons were extraordinarily gifted. There were as many powerful figures among them as there were clouds. Consequently, they ended up dominating the nine provinces. That forced

the other demonic creatures to unite as the demon race, while human demons separated themselves from this label and gave themselves a unique name—cultivators.

So, the conflict between the demon race and the human race was essentially a conflict between animal demons and human demons. Additionally, that "Demon God" from several thousands of years ago was actually just a title that the human race had given to a certain demon, but the demon race regarded that demon as their one true god.

In the Far West, the demon race was free from human oppression, and the Far West had long since become an independent state ruled by the Seven Great Demon Kings. The Seven Great Demon Kings were from different demon clans, and they each ruled a territory of their own. They only gathered when they were summoned by the Demon God Temple.

The Qingqiu Tribe was led by fox demons. Fox demons were extremely beautiful, and they were experts in transforming their appearance and bewitching others. Most fox demons were female, so they had a particular fondness for tales of love.

However, Young Noble Xunyang had never read tales like that. Despite being from the nine provinces, he had never paid attention to such things. He had only heard of the tragic love stories that were wildly popular among the common folk.

Nevertheless, with the Demon King of Qingqiu's command, Young Noble Xunyang had no choice but to have his puppets act out a love story from his own memories.

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The puppets on the stage were moving again.

They played out scenes of the Crown Prince and Princess Luoyu growing up together. Due to an accident, subtle feelings of affection blossomed between them. They became deeply attached but were eventually forced to part. There were strict rules within the palace walls that made it impossible for them to be together.

"Why can't they be together?" a young voice sked from the back.

It likely belonged to a young fox demon who had only recently taken on human form.

This time, it was the Demon King of Qingqiu, who was sitting at the front, that answered.

"Because they are half-siblings," she said calmly. "Humans have their own morals and rules, especially within the imperial family. Such relationships are not permitted."

The young fox demon sighed, "Ah..."

The Qingqiu demons took on human forms, wore human clothes, and spoke the language of humans. Nonetheless, without having experienced life in the nine provinces, they would not be able to fully understand human behavior.

After becoming supernatural beings and gaining divine intelligence, demons avoided having romantic relationships with close family relations too. However, that was mainly because they had learned that close inbreeding could result in deformed offspring. Unlike humans, demons did not have the same morals deeply ingrained in them.

The puppet show continued.

The Crown Prince and Princess Luoyu lived within the small confines of the palace walls for many years. That was until one day, rumors spread that Princess Luoyu had reached the marriageable age, and the Emperor was choosing a consort for her.

This news brought sorrow to the Crown Prince and Princess Luoyu.

At this point, another character appeared—a palace attendant dressed in black with a small cap[1]. He seemed to cast some kind of dark magic on the Crown Prince and Princess Luoyu. Caught under a spell, they had a true union on a rainy night.

"Wow."

Upon seeing this, the fox demons in the audience clapped and cheered for the man in black.

Perhaps, in their view, two people who loved each other should be together, so the man in black had done a good deed. But it was soon revealed that he was not as benevolent as he seemed.

The man in black used this incident to blackmail the Crown Prince into doing his bidding. He wanted the Crown Prince to assassinate the Emperor!

The Emperor puppet on stage was dressed in just a simple yellow cloth, but he still exuded immense power. The moment he appeared, he exuded tremendous pressure.

At first, the Crown Prince refused to comply with the demands of the man in black. Nevertheless, when news arrived that the Emperor had chosen a consort for the Princess, the Crown Prince gave in. If he could assassinate the Emperor, he would become the new ruler of the nine provinces, and no one would ever control his choices again.

What followed was the thrilling night of the Dragon<sup>[2]</sup> Assassination.

Under the moonlight, the Crown Prince nearly succeeded in assassinating the Emperor with the help of the man in black. Unfortunately, he failed in the end.

The man in black's plot was exposed, and he was killed, along with all his followers. The Crown Prince took his own life. The Princess was married off to a small state in the Western Regions, never to return to her homeland.

That was the end of the puppet show.

As the story concluded, curses and shouts erupted from below the stage.

In the eyes of these fox demons, the human emperor was undoubtedly the greatest evil. The man in black, on the other hand, was seen as a righteous figure. The Crown Prince and the Princess were tragic lovers, ultimately separated by life and death. The tragic tale evoked deep pity from the fox demons.

The Demon King of Qingqiu remained silent for a moment, then she asked, "You said this was a true story. So, which dynasty is it set in? And which crown prince is featured in the tale? I have read through many volumes of human historical records, so why haven't I heard of this?"

"Historical records are written under the orders of emperors. How could they possibly record the scandals involving their own families?" Young Noble Xunyang replied with a smile. "As for which dynasty... it's the current Yu Dynasty, and this happened less than a hundred years ago."

"Humans seem to always find beauty in tragic love stories," the Demon King of Qingqiu murmured.

Her eyes, like a deep autumn lake, gazed into the clear distant sky. She seemed to be thinking of someone, the question was who.

Young Noble Xunyang smiled and said, "Your grace, it seems you have a story of your own."

Chapter 414: The Person in the Painting

"Hurry, tell us your story!"

In a pavilion at Red Cotton Market, Jiang Yuebai sat with Mu Yueting and Xu Hongqiu, who were both leaning in eagerly, their eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Fairy Jiang and Chu Liang...

Rumors about the two had been swirling for ages, but neither had ever confirmed anything. Yet, just moments ago, Jiang Yuebai's subtle nod had left Xu Hongqiu and Mu Yueting utterly shocked.

Mu Yueting couldn't wait and immediately begged Jiang Yuebai to share the details. Despite feeling a little disappointed, Xu Hongqiu's curiosity got the best of her, and she timidly asked if she could listen too.

Jiang Yuebai, helpless under the burning gazes filled with the thirst for gossip, finally sighed, "Alright, I'll tell you."

With that, Xu Hongqiu quickly found a quiet pavilion where the three could sit down and talk in private.

"It's not as exaggerated as the rumors say..." Jiang Yuebai began slowly after they settled in.

She recounted her first encounter with Chu Liang.

She emphasized how Chu Liang charged in while riding the Baize youngling, but she quietly skimmed over the part where she had been slurping noodles at the time.

She went on to describe how she taught Chu Liang divine techniques and skills, and how he would give her curious little things in return... Over time, these simple interactions fostered an unspoken connection between them.

Whether this connection was what people called "catching feelings," she was uncertain.

She spoke quickly about these events, so much so that Mu Yueting was still a bit stunned after listening.

Mu Yueting mulled it over before asking, "So you're not really sure if Chu Liang actually has feelings for you..."

"Of course he likes her," Xu Hongqiu interjected firmly. "How could any man not like Fairy Jiang?"

"Huh?" Jiang Yuebai and Mu Yueting both looked at her strangely.

They seemed a bit surprised by her change of stance.

Xu Hongqiu blinked, then hurriedly added, "I just mean, if I were a man, I'd definitely feel the same way..."

Mu Yueting listened and nodded as she agreed, "That's true."

"And from the way you describe it, even though Young Hero Chu hasn't said anything outright, the way he acts around you is completely different from how he is with others," Xu Hongqiu said thoughtfully.

As she spoke, she recalled how Chu Liang behaved around her—always warm and friendly, yet never with the same quiet attentiveness he reserved for Jiang Yuebai.

With just a bit of observation, it was clear whom he favored.

However, Xu Hongqiu didn't feel too heartbroken. She wanted to confirm things first, which was why she asked. Seeing that the two seemed to share mutual affection, she decided she wouldn't interfere. As the Young Lady of the Whale Gang, she knew how to gracefully accept defeat... and there was no shame in losing to Fairy Jiang.

"Is that so?" Jiang Yuebai mused quietly as she whispered. "I feel like there are quite a few women close to him..."

"Chu Liang is a young prodigy with a heroic spirit. It's no surprise that many want to be close to him," Xu Hongqiu replied. "But if you truly like him, Miss Jiang, you should act fast."

"Me?" Jiang Yuebai was taken aback.

"Who is Jiangjiang? Being liked by her is already a great fortune. Why should she have to make the first move?" Mu Yueting asked, genuinely puzzled.

"When it comes to matters of the heart, you have to seize the moment," Xu Hongqiu remarked wisely. "Who knows what tomorrow might bring?"

"But if a girl takes the initiative, won't she be less cherished?" Mu Yueting asked.

"That's nonsense. Men aren't fools." Xu Hongqiu dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand. "Only people who lack confidence worry about things like that. As you said, Miss Jiang is already so remarkable that if she shows interest, it's a blessing for him! If she's a bit more proactive, he'll be worshiping her like a goddess!"

Mu Yueting nodded slightly. "That... makes sense."

Jiang Yuebai, still looking a bit bewildered, softly asked, "So, what should I do?"

"On a night when the moon hangs high, the wind whispers, and the darkness is deep... Uh..." Xu Hongqiu started dramatically, then paused, realizing she might be overdoing it. She quickly pivoted, "I mean, find a romantic spot under a blooming tree, with the mood just right, then take his hand—or better yet, pull him into your arms—and ask him if he wants to spend the rest of his life with you," she declared boldly.

The other two girls stared at her, wide-eyed. Mu Yueting weakly asked, "Isn't that a bit too forceful?"

"My dad said that's how he wooed my mom back in the day," Xu Hongqiu replied.

"Is it possible that, um..." Mu Yueting said hesitantly, "Your dad is a man... and your mom is a woman. Even if we should learn from them, shouldn't we learn how your mom did it, right?"

"Oh, right!" Xu Hongqiu slapped her thigh and immediately corrected herself. "Then just find a romantic spot under the moon and stars, and when the mood is right, get him to hold your hand and then fall into his arms."

Mu Yueting nodded in agreement. "That sounds better."

Jiang Yuebai furrowed her brow, feeling unsure. "Will that work...?"

Before she could think further, the other two girls, more excited than ever, started chiming in with their advice.

"It will definitely work!"

"Just ask him to go on a mission together, pick a place with beautiful scenery, and then... do this and that..."

"And that and this..."

"And you'll succeed!"

"Yay!"

Jiang Yuebai silently watched the two, an inexplicable feeling stirring within her that she couldn't quite place.

After a while, the two finally calmed down from their excitement.

Jiang Yuebai then hesitated before asking, "Miss Xu, didn't you ask me this question today because you also..."

"Of course not," Xu Hongqiu interrupted before she could finish, shaking her head decisively. "He's my uncle!"

...

It was a dark and windy night.

A slender young man, gripping a flickering candle, cautiously stepped into the pitch-black room.

"What was that noise..." he murmured, pushing open the door.

Before entering, he carefully shielded the candle flame with a lamp cover. The room was filled with his father's collection of famous paintings—one stray spark could lead to disastrous consequences.

The candlelight illuminated the room, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

"Maybe it was just a rat," the young man muttered, preparing to turn back.

Suddenly, he noticed that something was off.

Hanging on the wall directly in front of him was a painting his father had recently acquired, titled Ladies of the Eastern Suburbs. It depicted a scene of noblewomen from the previous dynasty, elegantly enjoying a serene spring outing.

The centerpiece of the painting was a breathtaking woman in palace attire, standing gracefully by the riverbank, her beauty so vivid it seemed to leap off the canvas.

But now, as he stared at it, he noticed something unsettling—the riverbank was empty.

Where did the woman go?

What's going on? Did my father get swindled with a fake?

A wave of panic surged through him, and he spun around to notify his father of this. But as he turned, his blood ran cold.

Her slender waist, snow-white skin, and full bosom, along with a face as delicate as a peach blossom, exuded an indescribable charm.

The young man's gaze locked onto her, his eyes glazing over as if in a trance. He slowly asked, "Miss, where did you come from?"

"I come from my home. Would this young master care to visit me?" the woman in the red dress whispered.

The young man nodded numbly, "I... I'm willing."

With a sudden clatter, the candle slipped from his hand, the flame snuffing out as it hit the floor.

The room was plunged into darkness.

Chapter 415: All The Best To You

When Chu Liang found Lin Bei and Shang Ziliang, they were sitting together and drinking away.

In a quiet pavilion on Cloud Horizon Peak, the two sat side by side with a jug of wine between them. On the table were a few scattered peanuts and dried fruits as snacks. They sighed heavily as they drank, each taking turns with the jug.

"What are you two doing here, drowning your sorrows in wine?" Chu Liang asked as he landed.

He had searched all over Mount Shu for them, sending flying-crane messages that went unanswered—only to discover them hiding away here.

"Haaaaa!" Lin Bei let out a deep, melodramatic sigh.

"What is love in this world..." Shang Ziliang lamented, staring wistfully at the sky.

"Since ancient times, love has been a tale of endless regret..." Lin Bei said with a sigh as he placed his arm around Shang Ziliang's shoulder

"What on earth happened?" Chu Liang asked, appearing very speechless.

Shang Ziliang heaved a deep sigh. "I invited Junior Sister Xu Ziqing on a trip, but she said she only sees me as a brother and asked me to stop bothering her."

Chu Liang had nearly forgotten about this. The initial tension between them had stemmed from Shang Ziliang's interest in Xu Ziqing... though, to be fair, it had always been a one-sided grudge. He hadn't expected Shang Ziliang to still harbor those feelings.

In fact, Shang Ziliang had given up at one point. But after spending time with Chu Liang, getting his life back on track, and seeing his wealth and cultivation level soar, he felt like he had become a different person.

Since he was no longer the same person as before, he decided to try his luck with Xu Ziqing once more.

Unfortunately, he was met with the same, unflinching rejection.

Chu Liang struggled to find words of comfort, and after a moment of thought, he finally said, "Well, if you think about it, being seen as a brother by her might actually be a compliment, considering who her actual brother is..."

Shang Ziliang looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

Chu Liang then shifted his attention to Lin Bei. "And what about you? Why are you joining him in this?"

Lin Bei, his face etched with sorrow, replied, "I went to South Melody Conservatory to find Sister Suqiu, and she told me I'm a good person..."

Chu Liang's brow furrowed in confusion until he finally remembered who Sister Suqiu was.

During the Mount Shu Summit, the South Melody Conservatory sent a young girl named He Suqiu as the envoy. When the disciples of the immortal sects got into a fight, she was playing the "Morale-Boosting Melody: The Rise of the Azure Waves" to boost morale... If not for her, the brawl would not have been so disastrous.

Back then, Lin Bei had used his status as a disciple of the Foreign Affairs Hall to get close to her, and it turns out they had kept in touch all this time.

But it was honestly naive of him to even attempt to woo a disciple of the South Melody Conservatory...

He Suqiu was aiming to become famous across the world one day.

After a pause, Chu Liang offered some consolation, saying, "At least it's a form of acknowledgment."

Lin Bei and Shang Ziliang each took another gulp of wine and sighed in unison. "Haaaaaa!"

Chu Liang patiently comforted them for a while longer until they started to feel a bit better. Shang Ziliang then looked up and asked, "Big Bro, did you need something from us?"

"There is something," Chu Liang replied. "I have to leave again, but the construction at Red Cotton Peak is critical right now. I need someone to keep an eye on things for me. You two are the ones I trust, so you'll need to pull yourselves together."

Besides these two, the only others in the group were Lackey A and Lackey B. Unfortunately, Lackey A was away on a mission and hadn't been on Mount Shu recently.

As for Lackey B...

Wherever he was supposed to be watching, he would end up at a place to eat, so he wasn't really trustworthy.

"What are you going to do?" Lin Bei asked curiously.

"Oh," Chu Liang said casually, "Senior Sister Jiang invited me to go on a mission with her."

"Senior Sister Jiang invited you?"

"Just the two of you?"

"This..."

Although the rumors had spread everywhere, those close to Chu Liang knew that he and Senior Sister Jiang hadn't really established any substantial relationship. When they heard that Senior Sister Jiang had taken the initiative to invite Chu Liang on a mission alone, both of their expressions stiffened.

Shang Ziliang and Lin Bei's jaws visibly tightened, and one could almost see their molars grinding under the pressure.

"That's great... All the best to you..." they said through gritted teeth, their eyes filled with tears.

Their own failures were hard enough to bear, but seeing a good brother succeed was even more painful.

As they spoke, the two began wailing in each other's arms again.

"Brother Ziliang, I want to cry!"

"Brother Lin, me too!"

"Waaah—"

"..." Chu Liang looked at the two and realized they were beyond help, so he began brainstorming for other reliable allies.

If these guys outside Silver Sword Peak were no good, then perhaps someone from the Silver Sword Peak... But he couldn't ask his esteemed teacher or Xiaoyu'er, as supervising the construction required someone with a bit more brain power.

Maybe I should send the Golden-Furred Hou? Chu Liang wondered.

...

Jiangnan, Wu'an City.

The cities of the Eastern Regions were generally prosperous, and Wu'an City was no exception. The streets bustled with activity, and the crowds were vibrant and lively.

Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai walked side by side through the city, drawing many glances from passersby due to their striking appearance.

However, compared to their previous trip to Shaonan Town, both of them seemed a bit reserved. This was their first time going out alone together, and they realized that having a few quiet companions along could actually be quite helpful—it kept the atmosphere from becoming too awkward.

Jiang Yuebai appeared preoccupied and lost in thought throughout their walk. Chu Liang didn't want to push for a lively conversation, so they ended up reaching their destination in near silence.

In Wu'an City, there was a painter named Tang Song. He wasn't very famous but was quite wealthy. He had tried to practice cultivation but only reached the second realm before hitting a dead end, which made him give up. His teacher had been a disciple of Mount Shu, so he always felt a connection to the Mount Shu Sect.

When something bad happened at home, his first thought was to reach out to the Mount Shu Sect.

"Oh my, are you Jiang Yuebai and Chu Liang, the two prodigies?" Tang Song greeted them personally with his family. Though in his forties, he appeared younger, with a lean, scholarly look. He was very enthusiastic. "To think that my humble home could host Mount Shu Sect's head disciple and Young Hero Chu, who slayed the Taowu. This is truly an indescribable honor."

Chu Liang simply smiled in response. With the head disciple present, it wasn't his place to speak first. To be honest, he hadn't expected this.

Normally, cases involving evil spirits in a large city like this wouldn't be too serious and would typically be handled by disciples at the Spiritual Awareness Realm. If a disciple at the Golden Core Realm was dispatched, it would show that the Mount Shu Sect was taking the situation very seriously.

As a result, Chu Liang was surprised by Senior Sister Jiang's sudden invitation to Wu'an City.

He wondered what she had in mind.

"Official Tang, you've always shown great care toward our sect. Given the recent events at your home, we should definitely give it our full attention," Jiang Yuebai replied with a respectful tone.

Families with close ties to Mount Shu often made regular donations.

Of course, this wasn't the usual standard for when immortal sects took action. Even if a family was poor, if they were plagued by evil spirits and sought help from Mount Shu, the sect would certainly intervene.

"I consider myself half a disciple of Mount Shu, so it's only right that I care for the sect," Tang Song said earnestly.

As they walked to the main hall, he began to explain the unusual case at his home. In short, his son had disappeared.

Official Tang continued explaining, "My son, Tang Yu'an, has always been kind-hearted and has never made enemies. When he disappeared, I found the door to my painting room wide open and an oil lamp overturned on the floor. But what happened next was even stranger..."

He summoned a servant to bring out a securely locked box, sealed with multiple talismans. It seemed that he only dared to open the box in the presence of Jiang Yuebai and Chu Liang.

With a soft click, he unlocked the box, carefully extracted a scroll, and began to unroll it slowly.

The scroll displayed a traditional ink painting of ladies on an outing. The brushwork was exquisite, the figures appeared almost alive, and a subtle spiritual energy emanated from the scroll. It was clear that the painter was a highly skilled cultivator with great mastery in the cultivation of the Dao.

"This is a painting from the previous dynasty titled Ladies of the Eastern Suburbs that I recently acquired, but..." His eyes shifted as he pointed to a spot on the scroll. "This figure wasn't in the original painting. It appeared only after my son went missing..."

The spot he pointed to was beneath a willow tree by the riverbank, where a slender young man was depicted. The figure bore a striking resemblance to Tang Song.

Strangely, while everyone else in the painting wore clothes from the previous dynasty, this young man was dressed in clothes from the current era. Given that the previous dynasty was a few hundred years ago, the contrast was quite striking.

Unlike the other figures who were gazing at the scenery, he was the only one looking directly out of the painting. The detailed brushstrokes revealed that his expression was one of sheer terror.

Tang Song immediately exclaimed, "This is my son, Tang Yu'an!"

Chapter 416: Huh?

Neither the front nor back gates of the Tang Residence had been open on the night in question. Furthermore, there were no signs of the courtyard walls having been climbed over. However, Tang Yu'an's lamp was smashed inside the collection room, and there was that person who had appeared in the painting.

Every clue seemed to point to... a living person being pulled into the painting...?

This matter was indeed strange.

If it were just Tang Yu'an's soul that had been drawn into the painting, it wouldn't be that strange. If there were ghosts in the painting, pulling a person's soul into the painting was certainly something they could do. Yet, Tang Yu'an's corporeal body had been pulled in as well, so that meant there had to be a physical space inside the painting.

The painting could not be a storage enchanted tool, as storage enchanted tools could not hold living beings... The most likely scenario was that the painting contained a small world similar to a hidden realm.

"Official Tang, could you tell us more about the origin of this painting?" Jiang Yuebai asked.

"Sure," Tang Song replied. "This is a famous piece by Lin Bingzhu, a renowned court painter of the previous dynasty. Titled Ladies of the Eastern Suburbs, the painting depicts a scene of ladies on an outing. It is an ancient piece that's fairly well known. I bought it from Honorable Su, the chief official of Wu'an City, and paid a hefty price for it. Who knew it would lead to such a strange incident?"

"Since it's a famous painting, it must have passed through many hands before getting to you," Chu Liang remarked as he pondered about the matter. "Have you ever heard of such an incident occurring in the past?"

Tang Song shook his head. "Never."

"If there's nothing wrong with the painting itself, then something must have happened after the purchase that caused things to go awry," Jiang Yuebai mused, lowering her gaze as she analyzed the situation.

Chu Liang said, "If something attached itself to the painting and pulled a soul in, it would certainly be the work of a ghost. But this matter is quite unusual, as the corporeal body has disappeared as well. Further investigation is probably needed to figure out what happened."

"The scroll painting must not be damaged. Otherwise, Young Master Tang may be harmed. Skills from the Great Dao of the World should be used to access it, or... it will need to be reattempted."

"I'll attempt it tonight."

"Huh?" Tang Song uttered in confusion.

After these two young prodigies fell into deep thought, it was as if they suddenly entered another realm. They each seemed to be talking to themselves... How did that end up being a conversation between them?

And... attempt what?

If those who had attended Jiang Yuebai's lecture at Mount Shu were here, they would likely feel a sense of *deja vu*.

Chu Liang turned to Tang Song. "Official Tang, seeing as the sky's already dark now, let's not rush things. In a while, hang the scroll back in its original spot. I'll stay there tonight to observe. If there are indeed ghosts harming people, they won't just appear once. If nothing happens tonight, we'll take the scroll back to Mount Shu tomorrow and ask an esteemed senior who is an Eminent One to try to access it."

"All right..." Tang Song finally understood the two prodigies' plan and nodded repeatedly. "I'll do as you say."

Jiang Yuebai brought her gaze back up and looked at Chu Liang. "Why are you going? I'm the head disciple. I should be the one investigating."

"What if it's a ghost that targets men?" Chu Liang joked with a grin.

Jiang Yuebai curled her lips in annoyance and muttered, "Look at how eager you are."

...

That night, Chu Liang arrived at the Tang Residence's collection room. He held a candle and quietly did a walkthrough of the room, looking at Tang Song's valuable collectibles.

The painting of the Ladies of the Eastern Suburbs was hung in the center of a wall, but there were no signs of movement from it. Nevertheless, Chu Liang didn't feel anxious; he just waited patiently.

Meanwhile, Jiang Yuebai was outside the room, in the courtyard. She had her divine sense locked on the room. She planned to rush in the moment she sensed any unusual activity.

With Chu Liang's and Jiang Yuebai's current abilities, they were more than capable of handling things on their own. Naturally, it would be super easy for them to deal with a couple of ghosts.

The sky darkened as night fell.

Suddenly, a cold wind swept toward Chu Liang, and his keen senses picked up the presence of yin qi. He swiftly turned his gaze to the painting on the wall, but it seemed unchanged.

Seeing that, he quickly looked behind him.

Just as he expected, there was a flash of vivid red clothing by the doorway behind him. A woman in scarlet robes was leaning against the door frame, flaunting her elegant and captivating figure.

With a soft and sweet voice, she said, "It's late, young noble. Would you like a place to rest?"

Chu Liang had guessed correctly; it was indeed a flirtatious ghost.

Chu Liang looked at the alluring ghost and smiled. "Of course, that would be wonderful. Where do you live, Miss?"

The scarlet-robed ghost slowly approached him. "I'll take you to my place..."

Chu Liang used his divine sense to probe the ghost's aura and found out that her cultivation level was low. He didn't dare to use the Demon-Revealing Brick for fear of smashing her to death with a single strike.

After thinking about it for a moment, Chu Liang decided it wouldn't hurt to follow her.

He nodded and replied, "Then I'll have to trouble you, Miss."

While Chu Liang was speaking, the scarlet-robed woman had gotten close enough to grab his hand, but Chu Liang quickly pulled it out of her grasp.

"Miss, just lead the way. There's no need for this..." Chu Liang said shyly.

The scarlet-robed ghost giggled. "Look at you, all shy. There's no one watching. What are you afraid of?"

"Who said no one's watching..." Chu Liang muttered, pointing at the painting on the wall. "Aren't they watching?"

"Then I'll take you to meet them."

With a wave of her long sleeve, The scarlet-robed ghost swung her long sleeve over the painting, and everything inside it suddenly seemed to come alive—the flowing river, the shady trees, the women by the riverside...

Then the scarlet-robed ghost grabbed Chu Liang. With a whoosh, they transformed into a beam of light and entered the painting.

Chu Liang felt dizzy for a moment. He had arrived in another world.

So, this really is a hidden realm?

The world he saw had a clear blue sky with light and fluffy clouds and beautiful green willow trees. Astonishingly, it was the scene of a warm spring day.

A group of women were playing by the riverside. When they saw the scarlet-robed ghost leading Chu Liang in, they burst into laughter.

"Another handsome young noble has come in."

"Another?" Chu Liang asked. "Has someone else come here before me?"

The scarlet-robed woman suddenly pushed her way into his arms. She clung to him and said, "Why? Are you here to find that person?"

Chu Liang quickly stepped back. "That's right. Miss, do you know where he is?"

"He's probably enjoying himself somewhere." The scarlet-robed ghost scanned the area around them. Then she raised her hand and pointed in a certain direction. "Ah. There he is."

Chu Liang looked in that direction too and saw a slender young man walking out of a pavilion with a woman in teal robes. The young man's steps were unsteady, but he was beaming with joy.

This young man was Tang Yu'an.

Chu Liang immediately went over and cupped his hands together in greeting. "Brother, are you Tang Yu'an?"

"I am. And who might you be, brother?" Tang Yu'an asked, still smiling as he looked at Chu Liang.

"Your father sent me to find you and bring you back."

"My father?" Tang Yu'an was stunned. "I just came in for a moment, and he already noticed?"

"Brother Tang, you disappeared last night. A whole day has already passed."

"This..." Tang Yu'an was shocked. "How did that happen?"

"Young noble, time flows differently here," the woman in teal reminded him. "One day in the painting is the same as one year outside."

"Huh?"

Tang Yu'an was astonished. Chu Liang was quite surprised too.

Could this really be a hidden realm where time flows differently?

That would be a true treasure.

Tang Yu'an shook his head. "I must have been enjoying myself too much here. I forgot to leave. What a big mistake."

Chu Liang said puzzledly, "But from outside, you looked absolutely terrified, Brother Tang."

Tang Yu'an shook his head and smiled. "I was scared when I first came in, but Xiao Cui and the others quickly eased my fears."

Looking at the bright smile on Tang Yu'an's face, Chu Liang thought that it indeed appeared that Tang Yu'an's fears had been thoroughly dispelled.

Hang on...

If Tang Yu'an's initial terrified expression was frozen in the painting for so long, could it be...

As a feeling of unease sprouted in Chu Liang's mind, the women gathered around them.

"Young noble, since you came to rescue him, you must be a cultivator, right?"

So, they knew?

Seeing that these women were different from ordinary ghosts, Chu Liang answered truthfully, "I am Chu Liang, a disciple of the Mount Shu Sect."

Upon hearing that, they all knelt down. "Please, young noble, seek justice for us!"

...

Outside the painting...

Jiang Yuebai entered the collection room.

She had sensed the presence of the female ghost earlier, but since the ghost's cultivation level was low, she hadn't taken action.

Knowing that Jiang Yuebai had his back, Chu Liang had followed the ghost into the hidden realm within the painting without hesitation. Naturally, Jiang Yuebai understood why he'd done that.

At this moment, her gaze fell on the painting. She noticed that changes had occurred within the depicted scene.

Tang Song's expression was no longer one of terror. Instead, he was smiling and holding hands with one of the ladies in the painting, enjoying a stroll with her.

Meanwhile, Chu Liang appeared on another part of the riverbank. There was a scarlet-robed woman pressed against his chest...

Jiang Yuebai slowly furrowed her brows. "Huh?"

Chapter 417: The Gruesome Case

"Our homes are all on the outskirts of Wu'an City..."

By the riverside with verdant grasses lining the banks, several women gathered around Chu Liang. They knelt before him, begging him to seek justice for them.

Chu Liang quickly helped them to their feet and urged them to tell him what had happened. The woman dressed in scarlet robes stepped forward and started explaining.

Back when they were alive, they had been locals of Wu'an City. Most of them were daughters of ordinary families, with only two among them being courtesans. They had led separate lives, unconnected in any way, until they encountered the same devil.

The scarlet-robed woman continued, "That man is Su Wei, the son of Su Shengyan, who is the lord of Wu'an City..."

As the city's highest official, the City Lord held almost absolute power, with only the military out of his control. He was often addressed simply as "City Lord," and his son, Su Wei, was the most privileged of his generation.

Su Wei would abduct any woman he fancied, and after satisfying his desires, he would cruelly murder her. Over the past few years, more than ten women had fallen victim to his wickedness.

Some of the victims' resentful souls lingered within the City Lord's residence, drifting aimlessly, their hatred and sorrow keeping them bound to the mortal realm. On the brink of fading into nothingness, they stumbled upon a hidden realm within a mysterious painting. This realm became their sanctuary, allowing their souls to anchor themselves. The spiritual qi within this hidden world nourished them, even granting them a touch of cultivation power.

However, time within this hidden realm flowed differently than in the outside world. While only a few days had passed inside, years had slipped by outside. The women dared not stray far from the painting, for fear that the cultivators within the City Lord's residence would discover their presence and destroy the last remnants of their existence.

It wasn't until the other day when Tang Song attended a banquet at the City Lord's residence. While there, he noticed the painting and became fond of it. Su Shengyan, seeing Tang Song's admiration for the artwork Ladies of the Eastern Suburbs, decided to sell it to him at a low price as a favor.

This unexpected turn of events gave the ladies a chance to appear before Tang Yu'an, drawing him into the painting with hopes that he might help them seek justice. However, they didn't anticipate that just expressing their gratitude would cause a whole day to pass in the outside world.

This led Tang Song to request the assistance of Mount Shu cultivators.

After briefly recounting their tragic fates, a few of the women began to sob.

"I see..." Chu Liang murmured.

It all made sense now—why the young master of the Tang family had vanished for a day without anything happening to him. The women had only emerged to seek help.

Looking at the blissful yet frail<sup>[1]</sup> Tang Yu'an, Chu Liang couldn't help but think that such deep gratitude from the lingering spirits was more than enough; there was no need for them to go to such lengths.

Tang Yu'an then sincerely pleaded, "Young Hero Chu, since you are a disciple of Mount Shu with outstanding cultivation, you must help them! We can't let that villain go unpunished! Justice must prevail in this world!"

Seeing Tang Yu'an's anxious expression and earnest tone, Chu Liang couldn't help but feel that Tang Yu'an seemed more distressed than the victims themselves.

Chu Liang nodded thoughtfully. While the lingering spirits' gratitude was perhaps unnecessary, it was certainly a powerful motivator.

"If what you say is true, I will make sure justice is served and these evil deeds are not buried," Chu Liang declared with conviction. He then turned to Tang Yu'an, "Young Master Tang, come with me first so your parents won't worry."

"Alright." Tang Yu'an turned back to the woman in the green dress and held her hand as he said, "Xiao Cui, wait for me a moment; I'll be back soon."

Chu Liang couldn't help but inwardly wonder, They've only just met, is there really a need to be so reluctant to part?

With a respectful bow to the women, he said, "Please wait here."

The woman in scarlet robes waved her hand, and a portal to the hidden realm opened before them. Chu Liang then led Tang Yu'an through the portal and left.

They had been able to sense and enter this hidden realm because their souls, being incorporeal, could navigate more easily between different worlds. Over time, the lingering spirits had mastered the pathways within it.

For those with living, corporeal bodies, however, this perception was much weaker.

When it came to the understanding of the Great Dao of Reality and Illusion, those in the living world could never match the innate knowledge of ghosts. It was said that when Eminent Ones meditate on certain aspects of Dao, they would use techniques of out-of-body experiences to search for that sense of the unreal existing in the world.

Whoosh—

In a flash of light, Chu Liang returned to the painting collection room with Tang Yu'an.

Immediately, his eyes fell on Jiang Yuebai's beautiful face, which was as calm and dark as still waters.

...

"Let me explain..." Chu Liang began, already suspecting that his sudden appearance in the painting earlier might have looked rather improper.

"There's no need to say more, as long as the person is rescued," Jiang Yuebai responded, her expression stern. "Were the ghosts inside dealt with?"

"It's not like that, this matter needs to be explained in detail," Chu Liang quickly clarified. "What you saw in the painting was just the first scene after I entered—it was an accident! Everything that happened afterward was not what you think. If you don't believe me, ask Young Master Tang."

"Yes," Tang Yu'an chimed in, a nostalgic smile spreading across his face, "The joy that followed is beyond your imagination."

"..." Chu Liang was speechless.

If you keep talking like that, no one will come to save you next time, you know? he screamed inwardly.

Before he could say anything further, the Tang family members, alerted by the commotion, rushed into the room. As soon as Tang Song saw his son, he hurried over, fussing over him anxiously.

The room was suddenly filled with noise and confusion.

"Father, there's still important business to attend to!" Tang Yu'an insisted, breaking free from his father's grip. "We need to help those girls get justice."

"Leave this matter to us," Chu Liang finally managed to interject, taking the opportunity to recount what he had just witnessed.

"A hidden realm within a painting..." Jiang Yuebai mused after hearing the full story. "That court painter from the previous dynasty must have been a seventh-realm Eminent One, and also well-versed in both the Dao of Time and Space, to have created such a space within a painting."

"Yes..." Chu Liang nodded in agreement.

Currently, the known Great Daos related to time include the Great Dao of Years and the Dao of Infinity, while those related to space encompass the Great Dao of the World and the Great Dao of Distancelessness—each with its own unique focus. To craft such an exquisite hidden realm, one would need to master both the Great Dao of Years and the Great Dao of the World and seamlessly integrate them—a feat of immense difficulty.

Upon hearing about the atrocities committed at the City Lord's residence, Jiang Yuebai's expression darkened, her brows knitting together in anger.

"These poor girls..." Jiang Yuebai said solemnly. "We must help them."

"Owh..." Tang Song hesitated, his face showing clear discomfort at the idea. "The City Lord's son? That's going to be difficult." "It doesn't matter who he is; now that we know about this, we can't just let it go," Chu Liang declared. "Even if he were the son of a marquess, I've dealt with that before."

"I've read about Young Hero Chu's heroic deeds in South Gate City on The Seven Stars Gazette," Tang Song admitted, "but... the chief official of Wu'an City, Su Shengyan, is not someone a marquess can compare to. He's being backed by...the current chancellor!"

"Hmm?"

Tang Song then began to explain about Su Shengyan.

Su Shengyan was a man who had climbed the ranks through flattery and cunning manipulation. He started as a poor scholar, failing the imperial exams repeatedly, and his family name was originally Lu. Desperate to change his fortunes, he married into a wealthy local family and took on the surname Yang. With his father-in-law's influence, he secured a minor position in the local government, and within ten years, he had maneuvered his way up to become the chief official in the city, responsible for legal judgments—a key role in the government office.

He was essentially the third most powerful person in Wu'an City.

But that was only the beginning. During a reporting trip to the capital of Yu, he managed to ingratiate himself with Su Qian, who had just become the new chancellor. Despite being a few years older, Su Shengyan brazenly knelt in front of Su Qian and asked Su Qian to adopt him as a son. After that, he changed his surname to Su and adopted the name Shengyan, riding high on his newfound connections.

With this powerful support, Su Shengyan returned to Wu'an City and quickly ousted the previous city lord, seizing the position for himself. He divorced his wife, remarried, and ruthlessly orchestrated the downfall of his former wife's entire family—people who had once treated him with kindness.

Today, in Wu'an City, his word had become law and no one dared to oppose him.

"Good grief," Chu Liang muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. "He really has drifted through life..."

"So, if you want to bring him down in Wu'an City, it will be as hard as climbing to the heavens," Tang Song sighed deeply. "I'm not trying to dissuade you, but you need to be aware of the stakes. You must find concrete evidence and not act recklessly. Although the Mount Shu Sect is one of the Divine Nine, if he catches you on a technicality within imperial law, it will still be difficult to handle."

"Thank you for the reminder, Official Tang. We will be careful," Jiang Yuebai replied as she nodded.

Even without Tang Song's warning, Jiang Yuebai wouldn't have rushed to label Su Wei a criminal outright. No matter how convincing the wrongfully treated spirits might be, they were still presenting only one side of the story. Without solid evidence, it would be reckless to jump to conclusions.

She exchanged a glance with Chu Liang, and they both understood each other's thoughts without a word.

But then, as if remembering something, a flash of annoyance crossed Jiang Yuebai's eyes before she quickly looked away, her expression tightening.

Chu Liang's eyelids drooped slightly, letting out a quiet sigh. "Haaaaaa..."

Chapter 418: Eavesdropping By The Wall

Wu'an City, the City Lord's Residence.

The more twisted a person's heart, the heavier their guilt, and it seemed the City Lord of Wu'an carried a considerable burden. His residence was even more heavily guarded than the ordinary city official's residence.

Rows of towering walls loomed, layered with intricate enchanted formations. Martial artists and cultivators, both visible and hidden, patrolled the grounds with unyielding vigilance. One wrong move here, and you'd find yourself trapped like a rat.

Yet, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai decided that they would still investigate first and check on Su Wei's situation. They had to see for themselves before deciding their next move. The City Lord's Residence was dangerous, but with their cultivation level, this was a risk that they could take.

"Over here," Chu Liang murmured in the narrow alley behind the residence. He had slipped on a robe made of Aura-Concealing Muslin and handed another one to Jiang Yuebai.

Ever since he discovered how effective this robe was at concealing one's presence, he had bought several more and stored them in his enchanted tool for future use. It was a must-have for slipping through enemy lines, scaling walls unnoticed, and ensuring that those who saw too much would never speak again.

That was not the end of it. He had even managed to find a few Essence-Concealing Pills, which were rare pills because their alchemical recipes had been lost to time.

As he handed one to Jiang Yuebai, he said, "If we have no choice but to act, make sure to take one of these."

These two items were indeed useful; the only downside was their high cost...Regardless, it did not matter to Chu Liang.

Jiang Yuebai gave him a weird look as if she was saying, "Why are you so experienced at this?"

Chu Liang met her gaze with a knowing look that seemed to say, "Practice makes perfect."

With that unspoken exchange, the two wasted no more time and swiftly darted forward.

The area was densely layered with enchanted formations, rendering simple techniques like Wall-Phasing or Underground Escape Route ineffective. Leaping over the walls would only draw immediate attention.

Fortunately, both of them had mastered Dimension Compression. With two swift movements, they slipped through the defenses like a pair of shadows.

Tang Song had previously visited the City Lord's Residence. Since he was a painter, he sketched a rough layout of the residence for them. Thus, they were able to head straight for Su Wei's quarters in the rear courtyard without any detours.

As they moved stealthily, Jiang Yuebai took the lead. Her Transcendent Spirit was highly sensitive to spiritual qi, allowing her to detect formations and enchanted tools long before they were within range.

Chu Liang followed closely, paying attention to their surroundings. Though it was their first time scaling walls together, they moved with remarkable coordination, as if they had been partners for years.

If the top two prodigies of Mount Shu truly lowered themselves to engage in breaking and entering, no one would be able to stop them.

In a matter of moments, they reached the outer wall of a courtyard and pressed themselves against it. Inside was Su Wei's bedroom.

Jiang Yuebai glanced at Chu Liang, who gave a slight nod.

According to their plan, they would wait until Su Wei was alone in the room before they would slip inside together. Jiang Yuebai would then use the illusory technique Shadow of Radiance to coax him into confessing his past crimes.

As long as they confirmed he was the murderer, everything would fall into place.

But before they could act, bursts of laughter erupted from the room.

It wasn't just Su Wei in there. The two exchanged glances again, then crouched lower by the wall and continued waiting.

The sounds of laughter and chatter grew clearer.

"So, Young Master Su has a taste for this sort of thing? I would've never guessed," a woman's voice purred seductively.

"Why? You don't like it?" a deep, masculine voice resonated.

"I do, I like it very much," the woman replied with a playful laugh. "But don't tie it too tight; it'll hurt."

"I want you to feel the pain," the man said as he chuckled wickedly.

Suddenly, a muffled groan filled the room, quickly followed by a series of moans.

Jiang Yuebai: "?"

Chu Liang: "!"

Jiang Yuebai's brows gradually furrowed as she realized the situation was more complicated than they initially thought.

Chu Liang's eyes darted around nervously, thinking they had truly stumbled upon an awkward moment.

This was way too awkward.

It was starting to feel like the top two prodigies of Mount Shu had sneaked out in the middle of the night just to eavesdrop on something entirely inappropriate.

Both of them blushed slightly.

Jiang Yuebai looked at Chu Liang, her eyes flustered, and communicated through Voice Transmission, "Maybe we should just charge in?"

Chu Liang signaled her to stay calm with his eyes and replied, "Wait a moment, we might catch him red-handed."

Jiang Yuebai shot Chu Liang an impatient glare and asked through Voice Transmission, "How much longer do we have to wait?"

Chu Liang, now regaining his composure, replied, "Judging by the sounds, not much longer."

Sure enough, the awkward tension only lasted a moment.

They soon heard the man let out a long sigh, followed by silence.

Moments later, there was a faint rustling, and the woman's voice rang out again, "Huh? Young Master Su, what... what are you doing? Owh!"

"He's about to murder her!"

The two immediately realized the situation, and in a flash, they both entered the room!

...

Inside the room, a gruesome scene unfolded.

A woman lay bound on the table, her eyes wide with terror as a man hovered over her and was about to slash her stomach open with the glinting blade in his hand.

"Stop!" Chu Liang shouted in a low voice. Without hesitation, he threw the Demon-Binding Rope toward the man.

The figure was none other than Su Wei, the City Lord's son. His eyes widened in shock as he narrowly evaded the rope, scrambling toward the door in a desperate bid for escape!

This scoundrel had some skill in martial arts!

But Chu Liang was faster. He surged forward, swinging the golden brick with unerring precision. The impact resonated with a solid thud against the back of Su Wei's head.

Su Wei let out a sharp cry of pain as he crumpled to the ground, knocked out by the brick.

It would have hurt him, but it would not be painful enough.

Chu Liang wasted no time, swiftly wrapping the Demon-Binding Rope around Su Wei, securing him tightly.

Behind him, Jiang Yuebai had already freed the woman. She draped a cloak over the woman as she whispered soothing words.

The two moved in perfect sync, resolving the situation in a heartbeat.

However, as Su Wei collapsed, he let out a scream that echoed through the courtyard, alerting the patrolling cultivators to the unfolding chaos in this room.

Su Wei's perverted behavior was something of an open secret among the cultivators at the City Lord's Residence, so strange noises from his quarters were often ignored. But his scream—one of genuine fear—was an entirely different matter.

Instantly, a divine sense swept across the courtyard to investigate the situation in the room.

The sight it revealed was indeed unusual. Su Wei, usually the one binding others, now lay helplessly bound. It was as if the wheel of karma had turned, and the heavens had decreed that he reap what he had sown.

And who were those young man and woman standing there?

"Intruders!"

With a loud shout, several figures immediately rushed over.

Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai each seized a person. Without wasting a moment, they leaped onto their swords and shot into the sky, transforming into two streaks of brilliant swordlights as they made their escape.

Since Chu Liang was carrying Su Wei, an especially large number of cultivators were chasing after him, including a sixth-realm martial artist whose speed was nothing short of extraordinary!

"You take the woman back first," Chu Liang shouted to Jiang Yuebai, then abruptly veered off in a sharp turn, skillfully shaking off many of the cultivators hot on his trail.

But after parting ways with Jiang Yuebai, the number of pursuers tailing him only grew. It was extremely difficult to escape carrying someone. Even if he managed to flee the city, he might still be caught.

It would be much easier to kill Su Wei and then flee. But if it were exposed that a Mount Shu Sect's disciple had taken the law into his own hands, it would tarnish Mount Shu's reputation and invite severe repercussions from the imperial court.

So, Chu Liang swiftly altered his course, making a beeline for the Wu'an City Supervisory Division.

Bang!

He didn't go to the government office because the officials there were surely under the City Lord's control. In addition, seeking help from the government office would be futile as there were not many cultivators there.

He kicked open the doors of the City Supervisory Division, his voice booming as he shouted, "Where is the city supervisor? This man has abducted and brutally murdered women repeatedly! I caught him in the act and have brought him here to face justice!"

Chapter 419: Detained

Inside the City Supervisory Division, several night-duty cultivators rushed out in shock. They watched Chu Liang stride in, carrying the unconscious Su Wei with one hand.

The group of cultivators working for the City Lord's Residence were on Chu Liang's heels, but they hesitated for a moment before swarming in after him. They knew that they wouldn't be able to do anything to Chu Liang once they were inside the City Supervisory Division.

Seeing the group of people suddenly burst in, the several cultivators belonging to the City Supervisory Division were quite alarmed.

The person leading them, a flag-bearing official[1], shouted at Chu Liang, "Who dares to barge into the City Supervisory Division?!"

"Why are you shouting at me?" Chu Liang replied. "I'm here to report a crime."

"Oh..." the flag-bearing official uttered. Then he shifted his attention to the group behind Chu Liang and shouted, "Do not behave impertinently inside the City Supervisory Division!"

"Why are you shouting at me? We're from the City Lord's Residence!" the leader of the group shouted back.

The flag-bearing official was taken aback.

If I can't shout at either of them, who do I shout at?

After thinking for a moment, he suddenly turned around and shouted at his subordinates, "What are you standing there for? Go fetch Seal-Holding Official[2] Ma!"

His subordinates quickly responded, "Yes, sir..."

However, they were thinking, You can't shout at outsiders, so you shout at us, huh?

It wasn't surprising that the flag-bearing official didn't dare continue raising his voice at the outsiders. Be it Chu Liang or the group of cultivators who followed him in after, they all exuded a formidable presence. The flag-bearing official could tell at a glance that they were all at much higher cultivation levels than him.

Naturally, he was intimidated by those he couldn't defeat. This was the City Supervisory Division's domain, but without a commanding officer present, the flag-bearing official needed to maintain caution.

Chu Liang, unbothered by the situation, grabbed a chair and sat down in the main hall. He tossed the unconscious Su Wei onto the ground and pinned the guy down with his foot.

Seeing that, several of the City Lord's cultivators wanted to charge over. "You—"

"Who dares to move?" Chu Liang said coldly. "He's committed serious crimes. Trying to save him means you're shielding a criminal. If any of you step forward, I will stomp him to death!"

Those words left the group of cultivators quite bewildered. They couldn't tell for sure if this young man even cared about adhering to the law.

Nevertheless, seeing their young master under the young man's foot, they understood the situation well enough.

They could only shout with feigned bravado, "If you harm even a single hair on the young master, you'll never leave this place alive!"

"Heh?" Chu Liang uttered.

He immediately stomped down on Su Wei's chest with a thud.

Su Wei was a cultivator of martial arts, yet Chu Liang's stomp was powerful enough to make Su Wei cough up blood. Despite having been knocked out before the stomp, Su Wei was now grimacing in so much pain that it looked like he was about to wake up.

Chu Liang had no sympathy for this deranged murderer.

If the aggrieved souls of the women in the painting hadn't told me about Su Wei, there would have been another tragedy tonight.

With Su Wei at Chu Liang's mercy, the opposing group of cultivators did not dare to provoke him any further.

Yet, someone shouted from the rear of their group, "If you have the guts, stomp on him again!"

"Hmm?" Chu Liang murmured.

As Di Nufeng's disciple, how could Chu Liang let such a provocation slide?

He stomped on Su Wei's chest again!

Crack!

The distinct sound of Su Wei's bones cracking rang out. Just as Su Wei was about to regain consciousness, he passed out again from the pain.

The same person from before shouted once more, "You dared to stomp again? I don't believe you have the guts to do it a third time!"

Just as Chu Liang was about to deliver another stomp, the leader of the opposing group frantically waved his hands. "Hang on, hang on..."

He first gestured for Chu Liang to stop, then he turned to the person at the back of the group who had been shouting at Chu Liang.

The leader asked that person, "Why are you doing that?"

The man answered, "I'm the janitor here at the City Supervisory Division. I was just curious if he'd dare to stomp again... and he actually did, heh..."

"Get out of here! Scram!"

The cultivators from the City Lord's Residence angrily drove the janitor away.

...

The standoff lasted only a moment before a thunderous voice rang out. "Who dares to cause such a ruckus at the City Supervisory Division in the dead of night? I want to see who exactly is so bold!"

A middle-aged man with piercing eyes, dressed in the white robes of the City Supervisory Division, strode in with large steps. His fiery gaze swept over the hall.

The man had a majestic and imposing aura and a high cultivation level, likely the sixth realm. He was Ma Ben, the head of the City Supervisory Division in Wu'an City.

The chief official, the city supervisor, and the general of the garrison were the three most powerful figures in the city.

"City Supervisor Ma," the leader of the group from the City Lord's Residence called out.

He cupped his hands in greeting, and his group followed suit.

The group leader said, "You're finally here."

"Honored Ally Xue," Ma Ben replied, cupping his hands in return.

Seeing that the two knew each other, Chu Liang refused to be outdone. He cupped his hands in greeting too and greeted Ma Ben. "City Supervisor Ma."

"Hmm...?" Ma Ben murmured, turning his head and giving Chu Liang an intense stare. He asked, "And you are?"

Chu Liang answered, "I am Chu Liang, a disciple of the Mount Shu Sect. City Supervisor Ma, I've come here today to ask you to punish evil and uphold justice."

"Chu Liang?" Ma Ben furrowed his brows. "You're that Young Hero Chu who slayed Taowu?"

Chu Liang smiled humbly.

Before arriving at the hall, Ma Ben had already inquired about the situation and decided on a plan of action. He just needed to take down anyone who dared to oppose the City Lord's people. However, upon finding out Chu Liang's identity, Ma Ben was hesitant to go ahead with his plan.

Ma Ben sat down in the seat of honor[3] and slowly asked, "What exactly happened here?"

Honored Ally Xue accused Chu Liang of breaking into the City Lord's Residence in the middle of the night and kidnapping Young Master Su. It was a blatant disregard for the law and morals.

Chu Liang, on the other hand, claimed that Su Wei was guilty of murder and a slew of other crimes. He didn't mention anything about the female ghosts in the painting though.

After hearing that, Ma Ben said unhurriedly, "The City Supervisory Division has no authority to judge cases. You should be taking this matter to the Wu'an City government office[4]. Why have you come barging into my division?"

"You'll have to ask this madman for that," Honored Ally Xue replied, glaring at Chu Liang.

"Naturally, it was to prevent them from silencing witnesses. There are no powerful cultivators in the government office; how could they stop these people?" Chu Liang asked. "I'm young and weak. Wouldn't my sect elders worry if I were to get harmed?"

Glancing at Ma Ben, Chu Liang added, "By the way, my fellow disciple has already left. She should be back at Mount Shu and reporting this matter to our sect elders as we speak."

Hearing that, Honored Ally Xue hurriedly said, "City Supervisor Ma, our young master is Chancellor Su's adopted grandson. The chancellor is very fond of our young master..."

Ma Ben's eyebrows knitted together so tightly that they looked like a baton[5] furrowed tightly. His expression turned grim like dark waters, showing no inkling as to what he was thinking.

After a long pause, Ma Ben finally spoke. "The specifics of the case still need to be verified. Nevertheless, you will not escape punishment for causing a disturbance at the City Supervisory Division. Men, detain all of them! If any of them resist, pin them down! As for Young Master Su, take him to get treated. We'll investigate his alleged crimes afterward."

Upon receiving Ma Ben's orders, the members of the City Supervisory Division stepped forward and detained Chu Liang and the group of cultivators.

Ma Ben handled the situation flawlessly. In this situation where the facts were unclear, he restrained both parties first, leaving the investigation for afterward.

Despite getting detained, Chu Liang wasn't worried. After all, he held a life-saving jade talisman, so there was nowhere he didn't dare to go. As long as he wasn't in a vast hidden realm like the Python Belly City, no one could stop him if he wanted to leave.

As for how everything would be resolved after that—well, that wasn't his concern.

City Supervisor Ma's attitude made it quite ambiguous as to where he stood, but it didn't matter, as Chu Liang believed that Jiang Yuebai would make the right decision.

Before leaving the hall, Chu Liang gazed at City Supervisor Ma for a moment.

That one look lit the flames of anger in Ma Ben's heart.

This kid looks pretty young. How is he exerting such strong pressure?

I wonder who he learned that from.

...

After Chu Liang and the group from the City Lord's Residence were taken away, Ma Ben returned to the rear hall.

Waiting there for him was a handsome and refined middle-aged man dressed in the crimson robes of a court official. This man was Su Shengyan, the chief official of Wu'an City.

Seeing Ma Ben return, Su Shengyan stood up with a smile and cupped his hands together in greeting. "I've caused you trouble, City Supervisor Ma."

It made sense that Su Shengyan, someone who had used marriage to advance his career, would be an attractive man. Just his smile made others feel like they were being bathed in a warm spring breeze.

Over the years, Su Shengyan had bribed people at every level of the Wu'an City bureaucracy, including the City Supervisory Division.

"Old Su, you've always been very meticulous in everything you do. How could you be so lax in disciplining your son?" Ma Ben sighed. "Today's incident doesn't seem fake. Now that it has caught the attention of disciples of the Mount Shu Sect, it won't be easy to resolve this."

Su Shengyan sighed as well. "Every family has its own troubles."

His son hadn't always been like this.

When Su Shengyan married into his wife's family, his father-in-law's family had scorned and humiliated him. Coupled with his wife's unattractive appearance, Su Shengyan had been deeply discontent. He went on to use his wife's status to raise his own and attach himself to the chancellor.

After that, he turned on his wife and her family. He didn't just divorce his wife and marry another woman. He destroyed the Su Family and left them destitute and homeless. Only after doing all that was he finally satisfied.

However, not long after that, something terrible happened in the City Lord's Residence. The beautiful woman Su Shengyan had just married to be his concubine—his son, Su Wei, had cut her open with a blade, killing her!

It was then that Su Shengyan thought of the indelible impact this incident would have on his son, and the damage was not something he could mend. Over the years, Su Wei continued to commit crimes, time and time again.

Su Shengyan had been secretly cleaning up his son's messes this whole time. Nonetheless, the truth had finally come to light now.

"It would have still been doable if you had kept all of the disciples here, but you let one escape," Ma Ben complained. "Once the Mount Shu Sect hears of this, it will be much harder to cover up."

"I've already thought of an explanation," Su Shengyan replied softly. "My son was merely having some fun with a courtesan. Perhaps they were playing a bit too roughly, causing her to scream. This alarmed the heroes from the Mount Shu Sect who were passing by. That then led to a misunderstanding."

"That explanation might work for me, but will it pass with Mount Shu?" Ma Ben asked.

"That kid from Mount Shu..." Su Shengyan's gaze darkened, revealing a ruthless expression. "At this point, we might as well go all the way..."

Ma Ben was shocked. "You're going to end him?"

Su Shengyan looked at Ma Ben with a baffled expression. "Obviously I meant we should let him go! He's a prodigy of an immortal sect who is renowned across the nine provinces. If he were to die here, it doesn't matter how well you clean up your tracks. You wouldn't be able to bear the consequences."

Ma Ben fell silent for a moment as he thought, Then why did you show such a ruthless expression?

Su Shengyan said quietly, "In any case, my son has already been rescued. As long as they can't find any evidence, it won't matter that they're a sect in the Divine Nine. It's not like they can falsely accuse someone without proof, right?"

Chapter 420: Chaos at the Prison

With the towering walls, thick barriers, and complicated enchanted formation patterns, the prison at the City Supervisory Division was specially designed to make escape extremely difficult for cultivators.

But such defenses...

For Chu Liang in his current state, there wasn't a barrier he couldn't breach—so long as it was truly just a wall.

Ma Ben might have realized this too; if a prodigy from Mount Shu like Chu Liang wanted to escape, it would be very difficult to trap him in a place like this.

Typically, cultivators who had reached the fourth realm or higher would have their golden cores sealed, acupuncture point punctured, and be bound with talismanic chains before being confined in solitary cells. However, Chu Liang wasn't a criminal—he was merely temporarily detained for talking back to the City Supervisor, so he clearly wouldn't be subjected to such harsh treatment.

The City Supervisory Division simply placed him in a cell with dozens of other prisoners, most of whom were minor offenders with cultivation levels at the first three realms. In fact, most were martial artists of the first two realms; anyone at the Spiritual Awareness Realm was already considered exceptional among them.

Although the supervision was lax, the environment was extremely filthy. Clearly, Ma Ben had deliberately placed Chu Liang in this wretched cell to disgust him.

"Heh..."

As soon as Chu Liang stepped into the crowded cell, he heard a sinister laugh.

In the depths of the cell sat a huge, bald man covered in dragon and tiger tattoos, his height towering like an iron fortress. A few underlings hovered around him, massaging his shoulders and back.

All of them were laughing weirdly as they cast eerie and mocking glances at Chu Liang.

There were no chairs in the cell; instead, the burly man sat on a bench made of four prisoners kneeling side by side. His massive body made even four people struggle to hold him steady, their bodies trembling under the weight. They had no choice but to grit their teeth and endure, as any slight movement from them would provoke harsh reprimands.

It seemed that this bald giant was the boss of this prison cell here.

At first, Chu Liang ignored them, keeping to himself quietly by the side. But then the giant raised his chin at him and sneered, "Kid, you look pretty handsome."

"Thanks," Chu Liang replied with a smirk, "You're not bad yourself—quite human-looking."

"What do you mean?" The bald giant was taken aback.

A thin, monkey-like underling beside him quickly chimed in, "Boss, he's saying you look like a person."

The giant's eyes narrowed in anger, and with a casual swing of his massive fist, he sent the underling flying into the wall, where he flattened like a painting. "What do you mean, 'like a person'? Are you saying I'm not human?" he growled, his voice filled with menace.

"It wasn't me, boss... it was him..." the underling gasped, slowly sliding down the wall, his voice barely a whisper as he struggled to speak.

"You dare insult me, kid?" The giant snarled, his eyes locking onto Chu Liang with a cold glare. "You probably don't know the rules around here. Newcomers are expected to choose a grand gift."

"Haaaa..." Chu Liang frowned as he sized up the giant. After a moment of contemplation, he sighed helplessly. "Alright, what's the procedure? Go ahead and tell me," he said.

He had intended to stay quiet and avoid trouble.

"You either lie down and serve as a bench for three days, or take three punches from our boss. Your choice," one of the underlings said as a wicked grin spread across his face.

It was clear they had all endured this so-called "grand gift" when they first arrived, and now they were eager to pass on the torment to someone else.

Upon hearing this, Chu Liang's eyes lifted slightly, and a smile played on his lips. "Do I even have a choice here?"

"Looks like you're a quick thinker," the underling chuckled, kicking away the straw on the ground to clear a spot for Chu Liang to kneel.

Instead, Chu Liang stepped forward and said, "Go ahead, hit me."

"Hmm?" The other prisoners exchanged surprised glances, clearly taken aback by his unexpected response.

"Haha, looks like you've never been hit before," the giant laughed, his voice rumbling like thunder as he stood up. "It's been a while since I stretched these muscles."

As the giant rose, the four prisoners who had served as his bench sighed in relief. The weakest-looking one at the end managed to lift his head just enough to warn, "Young fella, he's no ordinary martial artist. This guy was born with extraordinary strength. One punch from him can kill a demonic beast stronger than himself. Don't push your luck..."

Judging by his earnest tone, it seemed he had experienced those punches himself.

Chu Liang's smile widened upon hearing this, "Is that so? Then I'd like to see it for myself."

"You're really asking for it," the giant snarled, seemingly provoked by the smirk on Chu Liang's face. He took two heavy steps forward and swung a punch with a roaring wind!

This was him holding back, using only a tenth of his strength. He was scared that he might actually kill Chu Liang with this punch.

Boom—

As the punch landed, the underlings eagerly anticipated a scene of blood and gore.

But then, their faces froze.

They weren't the only ones. It was as though the two in the center had stopped moving.

The giant's fist had slammed into Chu Liang's chest, yet Chu Liang remained unscathed, not even budging an inch. The faint smile on his lips lingered, as if the attack had never happened.

As for the giant...

"Owhhh..." The giant suddenly gasped, staggering back two steps as he clutched his arm, which now trembled uncontrollably.

The moment his fist struck, a tremendous force jolted up his arm, sending shockwaves of pain through his muscles. For a brief instant, he could not lift his arm at all.

This kid is something else... the giant thought.

Before he could process it, Chu Liang grinned and said, "Brother, you may look fierce, but you're holding back. You barely tapped me."

The other prisoners, sensing something was off, began shouting as well.

"Boss, don't hold back! Hit him like you hit us—make sure he can't get up for days!"

"Use your full strength and kill him!"

"..."

Hearing the jeers from the other prisoners behind, the bald giant gritted his teeth. The strength he used in his first punch against Chu Liang was the same he had used on countless others—enough to nearly kill anyone else—yet it seemed to have no effect on Chu Liang.

It seemed he could no longer hold back. If he did, he would lose all respect and authority in this prison.

With this in mind, a fierce determination flashed in his eyes.

Even if I kill you, it's your own fault for provoking me...

"Kid, life and death are just part of being in this world," he said gloomily, twisting his arm with menace. "Don't blame me when you find yourself on the other side."

With that, he took a stance, stepped forward with force, twisted his waist, and unleashed a powerful punch!

Boom—

The force of this punch was truly extraordinary, accompanied by the sound of wind and thunder!

Thud—

Amidst the heavy thud, the unmistakable sound of bones cracking echoed through the room.

Yet, just like before, neither of the two moved.

But someone from the crowd shouted, "Yeah! I heard it—he broke that kid's bones!"

"Hmph, let's see if he dares act arrogant now."

"..."

But after a few cheers, the group quickly sensed something was wrong.

Why was Chu Liang still standing there with a smile, while their boss's back was starting to tremble?

"Uh..." The bald giant staggered back, his right arm hanging limply as he cried out in agony, "Ah... my arm..."

In that punch, he had put everything he had into it, yet it had no effect on Chu Liang. Instead, the recoil had shattered his own right arm—not just broken, but completely splintered!

Thud!

He collapsed heavily to the ground, howling in pain, "Ahhhhhh—"

Chu Liang stepped forward and looked down at him as he asked, "Can you handle it?"

"I was blind and offended you, young hero..." The bald giant actually started begging for mercy, "Please forgive me, young hero."

"Don't say that. You still owe me one punch. Let's finish this," Chu Liang shook his head. "You'd better use your full strength."

"No more, no more! I wouldn't dare offend you again," the bald giant cried out. While he was drenched in cold sweat from the pain, he suddenly became much more polite.

The underlings behind him finally saw the truth.

Clearly, this youth's cultivation was extraordinary. Even when the giant was the one attacking, the recoil alone was enough to reduce him to this pathetic state.

After a brief silence, someone quickly stepped forward, a flattering smile spreading across their face as they said, "I knew from the start that this young hero possessed an extraordinary aura. His skill is truly unmatched."

"Yes, yes, he must be from some immortal sect. Otherwise, how could he have such remarkable cultivation?"

"..."

Ignoring the flattery around him, Chu Liang turned to the giant and said, "You still owe me one punch. So, according to your own rules, lie there and be a bench for a day."

"Yes, yes..." The giant, still writhing in pain, dared not defy Chu Liang's command. He turned towards the wall and knelt down on all fours, not daring to move a muscle as he pressed against the floor.

Indeed, even the wicked would meet their match.

"You can get up now," Chu Liang said, gesturing to the four men who had been forced to serve as a bench. "From now on, except for him, none of you have to do this anymore."

"Thank you, young hero..."

Amidst the voices of thanks, the frail middle-aged man who had earlier warned Chu Liang stood up. Dressed in silk robes, with a lean face and a slight mustache, he had an air of refinement that set him apart from the others in the prison, suggesting he was a recent arrival.

"Thank you for your help, young hero," the man said as he approached, offering a respectful bow with a smile. "If I may ask, what is your esteemed name, and where is your teacher from?"

Chu Liang glanced at him. With so many people around, he didn't want to reveal his true identity.

Ever since he had encountered enemies after mentioning his teacher's name, Chu Liang had grown cautious during his travels. He now avoided revealing his true identity unless absolutely necessary.

After a quick contemplation, he replied slowly, enunciating every word clearly, "Ye Wen, Yong Chun."