

M. Slaying 421

Chapter 421: Gathering of the Swords

Jiang Yuebai hurriedly departed.

After parting ways with Chu Liang, she left the woman in the care of the Tang family and quickly set out to investigate. When she discovered that Chu Liang had been detained by the City Supervisory Division, she wasted no time and returned to Mount Shu without delay.

It only took her a moment of thought to guess Chu Liang's intentions.

Now that she had solid evidence, her only concern was that the city lord might try to use his influence to forcibly quash the matter into nothingness. However, she was confident that as long as an esteemed sect elder intervened, even the city lord, with all his authority and power, would be unable to meddle in matters concerning the immortal sects of the Divine Nine.

Although the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten were merely sects, they held enough power to negotiate with the imperial family—the Xia Family. The idea that government officials could intimidate these immortal sects was nothing more than a fantasy.

In a way, these otherworldly cultivators acted as overseers beyond the law, like a sword hanging over the heads of government officials.

Although the Yu Dynasty had long attempted to control the actions of immortal sect cultivators, the most they could do was encourage them to communicate with the Imperial Supervisory Bureau and let the imperial court handle matters, rather than taking the law into their own hands to punish wrongdoers.

It was impossible to completely stop such actions.

After racing back to Mount Shu, she first went to Silver Sword Peak, only to find that Di Nufeng had yet to return.

There weren't many people at Mount Shu who were close to Di Nufeng. The first was Jiang Yuebai's teacher, who was currently in closed-door cultivation. The second person... was hard to track down, but fortunately, Jiang Yuebai remembered her teacher mentioning someone.

The Discipline Master, Tian Lingxin.

Few among the younger generation at Mount Shu knew that Di Nufeng had been raised by the Discipline Master. In truth, the Discipline Master was of the same generation as Chu Liang's grandmother, and therefore, of the same generation as Xu Hongqiu's great-grandmother. It was best not to dwell on the complexities of generations and titles too deeply.

When Jiang Yuebai arrived at the Hall of Discipline, the Discipline Master was already scolding someone, despite it being just dawn. This was her daily routine.

If a disciple from any peak violated the rules of Mount Shu, the Discipline Master wouldn't reprimand them directly. Instead, she would summon the peak master and give them a stern scolding. If a supervising elder or disciple in the Hall of Discipline wasn't meeting her standards, she'd call them in for a rebuke. She would even summon Venerable Wen Yuan for a scolding if he ever behaved improperly.

When the Discipline Master got angry, even Venerable Wen Yuan wouldn't dare talk back.

She always dressed in black, her hair meticulously tied back, and her eyes sharp as swords. Wherever her gaze fell, all of Mount Shu trembled.

However, Jiang Yuebai wasn't afraid of her. She was the kind of girl adored by elders, having grown up showered with their affection. Of course, it wasn't just the elders who loved her.

"What's the matter?" The Discipline Master, noticing Jiang Yuebai's sudden approach, set aside her current task and immediately focused on her.

"I have urgent news to report," Jiang Yuebai replied.

She then recounted what she and Chu Liang had discovered in Wu'an City, including how Chu Liang was now detained in the City Supervisory Division.

After listening to the story, the Discipline Master nodded calmly and said, "Don't worry."

With that, she stood up and led Jiang Yuebai out of the Hall of Discipline.

Upon arriving at the vast square on the Heaven-Reaching Peak, she raised her hand and sent out a jade talisman. In an instant, a beam of light shaped like a flying sword shot into the sky with a sharp whoosh!

Jiang Yuebai's eyes widened in surprise.

This was the Sword-Gathering Order!

Many Mount Shu disciples, upon reaching a bottleneck in their cultivation, would leave the sect to explore new paths and seek greater growth. On one hand, Mount Shu's resources weren't enough to support so many high-level cultivators; on the other, staying within the comfort of the sect often made it difficult to encounter the life-changing opportunities they sought.

Yet even after leaving, these disciples remained part of Mount Shu. Each one carried a Sword-Gathering Talisman with them, a bond that kept them connected to the sect no matter how far they wandered.

Only the Sect Leader and the Four Guardian Elders had the authority to issue a Sword-Gathering Order.

If the sect needed to gather its disciples, all it took was the activation of a Sword-Gathering Order, and Mount Shu disciples from across the land would swiftly return in response.

However, the Sword-Gathering Order was never issued lightly. The routine tasks were handled by the younger disciples as a means of training and growth, while the more challenging matters were handled by the sect's powerful elders. This order was reserved for times of war, when large numbers of fifth and sixth-realm cultivators were urgently needed.

Jiang Yuebai recognized the order because one had been issued on the day of the Mount Shu Summit. However, the battle that day had started and ended so swiftly that by the time many of the older disciples returned, it was already almost over.

The Sword-Gathering Order had different tiers. The one issued during the Mount Shu battle was of the highest tier, summoning all Mount Shu disciples from across the world to rush to aid.

The one issued now was of the third tier, calling back any available disciples within a thousand li.

But for a young disciple like Chu Liang, such treatment was far beyond what his position warranted!

If he were just an ordinary disciple, he wouldn't receive such treatment. But as the swordmaster of Mount Shu's Violet and Azure Twin Swords, his safety was extremely important.

Thus, the Discipline Master was willing to deploy such a formidable force, likely intending to send a powerful message.

She unleashed a cloud-piercing sword!

In just a few moments, over a dozen swordlights descended upon Heaven-Reaching Peak.

Each of them was a former disciple of the Mount Shu Sect, and they all arrived with eager anticipation, bombarding her with questions.

"Discipline Master?"

"Are you going to war again?"

These former disciples might not match the current younger generation in raw talent, but they had all reached the peak of their abilities. Even the weakest among them were at fifth realm.

In less than one hour, around eighty to ninety people had gathered.

Though there weren't a massive number of people, there were still nearly one hundred fifth-to-sixth-realm cultivators of the conventional path! Each of them were capable of fighting independently.

"We're not waiting any longer," the Discipline Master declared, swiftly rising into the air. Her voice echoed with authority as she announced, "A fellow disciple in Wu'an City needs our help. Follow me to rescue him!"

The gathered disciples responded with a thunderous roar.

The forces gathered were more than enough to rescue someone. In fact, if they wished, they could have easily taken over Wu'an City.

In an instant, nearly a hundred dazzling sword lights shot into the sky, like a grand rainbow cloud surging toward the southeast!

Jiang Yuebai followed closely beside the Discipline Master. Though her face remained calm, concern weighed heavily on her heart as she silently urged, "Chu Liang, you must be careful."

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"Be careful, be careful," the bald giant whispered to his underlings as he leaned against the wall, "Don't wake up that fiend."

Everyone in the prison was resting on straw mats at this hour, and Chu Liang was no exception, lying alone on one. The bald giant, however, dared not sleep. He only allowed himself a bit of relaxation while Chu Liang was asleep.

If Chu Liang so much as turned over, the giant would immediately kneel again.

This bully, who had spent years tormenting others, had ample experience in being bullied, so he knew how to handle himself.

He had been channeling all his qi and blood to heal his injuries, and after most of the night had passed, he finally managed to stop the bleeding from his broken arm. But with his limited cultivation, regenerating the limb quickly was impossible. He could only let time do its work.

Just as he was about to catch his breath and perhaps doze off for a moment, a sudden explosion erupted beside him!

Boom—

The source of the explosion grazed past his eyes—it was an enormous fist, larger than his own head!

The prisoners in the cell were startled awake, and moments later, the clamor of battle echoed from outside. However, the noise quickly faded, suggesting that the prison guards of the City Supervisory Division had been swiftly brought under control.

The punch had shattered the enchanted formations on the wall, and a massive figure burst through. It turned out to be an actual enormous giant that was even taller than the cell itself.

His skin was an ashen gray, as if it were carved from solid rock, with muscles bulging like mountain ridges. His features resembled those of a rough, burly man, but they were far larger than those of an ordinary human.

As he lowered his head and scanned the tiny prisoners on the ground with wide eyes, he called out in a deep, resonant voice, "Advisor?"

The prisoners should have taken the chance to flee, but with the giant's gaze fixed on them, not a single one dared to move. They all trembled in silence.

The frail middle-aged man who had previously spoken to Chu Liang quickly stood up and said, "I'm here."

"Heh," the giant chuckled as he scooped the man up in one hand. "Let's move—reinforcements from the City Supervisory Division will be here any minute."

"Wait..." The middle-aged man, struggling against the giant's grip, managed to stretch out his arm and point at the bald man. "Take off his limbs."

"Huh?" The bald man was suddenly struck with terror.

Who would have thought that this middle-aged man, who had always been so submissive and never fought back when bullied, held such power?

He wanted to beg for mercy, but it was too late. In the presence of the giant, his pride in his physique and strength meant nothing. Without a word, the giant set the middle-aged man down,

grabbed the fleeing bald man with one hand, and with a casual, effortless motion, tore off all his limbs, sending blood splattering everywhere!

The giant did it as easily as a child tormenting insects, his eyes devoid of any emotion.

The frail middle-aged man finally looked satisfied. Just as the giant was about to leave with him, the man pointed at Chu Liang, who had been silently watching the scene unfold. "Bring this brother with us too."

"Huh?" Chu Liang muttered.

Chapter 422: Wrongly Accused

At the darkest hour before dawn, a screaming gust of black wind left Wu'an City. At its center was the terrifyingly massive giant and two cultivators with imposing auras.

As the giant flew through the sky, he held one cultivator in each hand, looking like he was carrying two pets. In the giant's left hand was the thin and weak middle-aged man, and in his right was Chu Liang.

Chu Liang was initially quite stunned when the giant grabbed him, but then he thought that this could be a good opportunity for him to get out. He could avoid getting charged with breaking out of prison since he was technically being abducted.

In any case, it might not be a good idea for Chu Liang to stay behind in the prison. City Lord Su and City Supervisor Ma probably wouldn't dare harm him, but what if they ended up acting irrationally? In that case, it was probably better to just leave earlier.

He would just part ways with this group once they landed on the ground.

Come to think of it, this giant's grip is pretty tight. It would be really difficult to break out of it. In terms of raw strength, this giant might rival an ordinary draconic descendant, perhaps even a young True Dragon.

Truly terrifying.

Chu Liang had never seen giants before, but he had heard of them. This giant man was likely a member of the legendary Kuafu Clan[1], who were known for their superhuman physiques and

insane strength. When they reached the peak of their cultivation, they could move mountains, fill seas, and swallow rivers.

The Kuafu Clan had been active during ancient times and were formidable rivals to the dragons during the era of the Dragon God. However, they gradually seemed to disappear from the world after that.

The reason was likely their difficulty in reproduction. In the struggle among the myriad of races, those with strong reproductive abilities weren't necessarily powerful, but those with weak reproduction abilities were certainly at a disadvantage. After all, their numbers were limited, and so was the land they could conquer.

Presently, the nine provinces were dominated by humans, and the available lands that the other races could live in were continuously being reduced.

Once the black gust of wind was finally out of Wu'an City's vicinity, Chu Liang turned to the middle-aged man and asked, "Elder Brother, where are we headed?"

"Brother Ye, I haven't told you who I am yet," the middle-aged man replied with a smile. "I am the advisor of the Emerald Sky Waters' Flying-Dragon Fortress in Jiangnan. I came to Wu'an City on business and was unexpectedly arrested by the City Supervisory Division over a minor issue. If they had discovered my true identity, I'd be dead for sure, so my brothers rushed to rescue me."

The Emerald Sky Waters, the Flying-Dragon Fortress...

The Emerald Sky Waters was a vast region of interwoven lakes and mountains. It was filled with countless bodies of water and complex terrain, so merchant ships often passed through it. Naturally, that meant the Emerald Sky Waters was also a haven for bandits and pirates.

Chu Liang knew a little about the Emerald Sky Waters, but he had never heard of the Flying-Dragon Fortress. He imagined they were likely a group of bandits. Nevertheless, they certainly seemed like a powerful group.

The City Supervisory Division of Wu'an City probably had no idea of the middle-aged man's true identity. They would not have kept him there otherwise.

Given the limited manpower of a City Supervisory Division, it would be very difficult to prevent powerful cultivators from breaking into the prison. The best preventative measure was to avoid

giving anyone a reason to attempt a prison break, so they would always transfer important prisoners to the capital of Yu.

Although Chu Liang hadn't heard of the Flying-Dragon Fortress before, he put on an expression of admiration when he replied to the middle-aged man. "So, you're the heroes of the Emerald Sky Waters and the Flying-Dragon Fortress! You're so famous that it's like thunder piercing the ear! I hear about you everywhere I go!"

"Heheh..." The middle-aged man chuckled. "We can't really be called heroes; we're just keeping ourselves fed."

"..."

Amid the mighty roaring winds in high up in the sky, the two "pets" in the giant's hands continued their conversation as if nothing was amiss.

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Meanwhile, in Wu'an City, City Supervisor Ma wore a grim expression.

He had been rudely awakened at dawn with news that the City Supervisory Division had been broken into. His first thought was that it was because of Chu Liang.

Could it have been people from the Mount Shu Sect?

However, upon investigating the situation, Ma Ben discovered that it wasn't the work of the Mount Shu Sect but rather a group of powerful individuals with an unknown origin. There had even been a giant from the Kuafu Clan among them.

Finding that out just made Ma Ben's head hurt.

All the prisoners in Chu Liang's cell had been released by the mysterious group, except for one unfortunate soul whose limbs had been brutally ripped off. The rest of the prisoners had scattered in and around Wu'an City, and there was an urgent need to recapture them.

Ma Ben was at his wits' end.

It was right at this moment that Su Shengyan hurried over to him.

"Old pal, did you release Chu Liang like we discussed last night?" Su Shengyan asked with a frown.

"He has indeed left..." Ma Ben replied quietly, "but I wasn't the one who let him go..."

"It's all good as long as he's gone." Su Shengyan sighed in relief. "Keeping him would only have caused more trouble."

"You didn't seem this worried last night. What's changed?" City Supervisor Ma asked puzzledly.

"I had people investigate his background overnight and found out that his teacher is the peak master of the Mount Shu Sect's Silver Sword Peak. She's Di Nufeng—the one who recently used her bare hands to beat to death an Eminent One from the Celestial Charm Sect!" Su Shengyan said, raising his voice. "I looked into Di Nufeng's history. She's not someone you want to mess with!"

Ma Ben was equally shocked. "Di Nufeng?"

As a cultivator, he was well aware of Di Nufeng's reputation. He had known about Chu Liang too, but he had no idea that Chu Liang was Di Nufeng's disciple.

Good heavens, that explains a lot.

No wonder that kid was so unbridled and arrogant.

It turns out he inherited it.

"Anyway, he's gone now, so let's not worry about anything else. Just clean up your family's mess, and make sure there's no evidence left," Ma Ben said, still feeling a little fearful.

If Di Nufeng really comes looking for us, the consequences would be unimaginable.

Before Ma Ben even finished talking, screaming wind ripped through the skies. He looked up in shock to see a massive array of swordlights blotting out the sky! Nearly a hundred beams of swordlight flew overhead, leaving long arcing trails that illuminated the night sky above Wu'an City!

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh—

In an instant, the swordlights descended like rainfall, all headed for the City Supervisory Division!

Boom!

The leading beam of swordlight crashed through the gates of the City Supervisory Division. For the second time in the span of a day, those gates were smashed to pieces.

The rest of the swordlights hovered above the City Supervisory Division, looking mighty and intimidating.

A stern-looking elderly woman dressed in black slowly walked into the City Supervisory Division. She was followed by a young lady whose beauty was like that of a celestial being.

Although fear gripped his heart, Ma Ben forced himself to step forward and shout, "Who dares to storm my City Supervisory Division? Such audacity!"

"I am the Mount Shu Sect's Discipline Master," the elderly woman replied in an icy tone. "I am here today to find a disciple of my sect. Are you the city supervisor here?"

"That's right. I'm Ma Ben, the city supervisor of Wu'an City. Have you come here for Chu Liang?" Ma Ben asked. His heart filled with dread the moment he heard that these people were from the Mount Shu Sect. He could only say meekly, "If you wished to pick him up, you could have contacted the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. It's a violation of the rules to fly over the city on flying swords."

"Rules?" the Discipline Master uttered, her eyes gleaming with cold light.

Whoosh.

A long whip of black-iron thorns shot out of the ground like a giant serpent. It coiled around Ma Ben and lifted him, suspending him in midair.

Ma Ben uttered, "You—"

Despite being a powerful sixth-realm cultivator, he had no way of breaking free. He was extremely tightly bound, and any attempt to resist brought him sharp, intense pain.

All Ma Ben could do was cry out helplessly, "Chu Liang is no longer in the City Supervisory Division! He left!"

"He left?" the Discipline Master asked, "When did he leave? Why hasn't he returned to Mount Shu?"

"Someone broke into the prison last night. He escaped along with them."

The Discipline Master let out a cold laugh, "Hah. The prison break could have happened before or after, but no, it just had to happen right when Chu Liang was detained. How could such a coincidence exist?"

The black-iron whip tightened around Ma Ben, squeezing him so hard that his joints popped and bones cracked. It looked like he was about to be crushed to bits.

Jiang Yuebai's expression darkened.

From Jiang Yuebai and the Discipline Master's perspective, it was clear that the two men before them wanted to harm Chu Liang in secret, so they falsely claimed there had been a prison break as a cover. How else could such a coincidence have occurred?

Ma Ben cried out, "It really is just a coincidence..."

Feelings of anguish and indignation were written all over his face as tears welled in his eyes.

Ma Ben had thought that everything would be fine once Chu Liang left, but who could have predicted that Chu Liang hadn't returned to Mount Shu yet? Now, they wouldn't believe anything he said... Mud might fall into his mouth, but if the people from the Mount Shu Sect said he had shit in his mouth, then that's what it would be...

Su Shengyan stepped forward to mediate. "Esteemed elder, please don't act hastily. I am somewhat aware of the situation, and I assure you that City Supervisor Ma harbors no ill intent toward Young Hero Chu. Why not wait a little longer?"

The Discipline Master turned her gaze to him. "And you are?"

"I am Su Shengyan, the chief official of Wu'an City."

"Perfect. We can deal with you both at once," the Discipline Master said with a wave of her hand.

Whoosh—

Another whip of black-iron thorns burst from the ground, tightly binding Su Shengyan and suspending him in midair.

"The two of you sure have a lot of nerve. Despite being court officials, you shielded a criminal, murdered witnesses to silence them, and plotted against a disciple of the Mount Shu Sect. Today, I will execute both of you here, and I am certain the imperial court will have no objections. If anything happens to Chu Liang, it won't just be the two of you—your entire families will be buried with him!" the Discipline Master declared, exuding an intensely ferocious aura.

With the multitude of swordlights hovering in the sky behind her and a whip of black-iron thorns swaying menacingly, the Discipline Master resembled a fiendish evil god who had come to reap the lives of the two men!

With teary eyes, Ma Ben was filled with regret and resentment as he glared at the man beside him.

He had been doing his job as a city supervisor. Then out of nowhere, his division's gates were kicked in during the dead of night, leading to this unexpected calamity.

Now, looking at Su Shengyan, only one thought crossed Ma Ben's mind: Why did you provoke them?

Su Shengyan was also filled with anguish and indignation. He had falsely condemned many people to suffer wrongful deaths over the years. Now, experiencing injustice himself, he finally understood what it felt like to be wronged.

The two men hung helplessly in the air, too powerless to do anything about their restraints.

The overwhelming sense of injustice that they felt could only be expressed in loud cries.

"We are innocent!!"

Chapter 423: My Esteemed Teacher's Arch-Rival

The Flying-Dragon Fortress in the Emerald Sky Waters.

If someone were to gaze down from a high altitude, they would see a vast stretch of water extending for hundreds of li, interspersed with towering mountains that resembled isolated islands.

With endless green mountains and clear waters, the entire area looked like a piece of jade that the gods had dropped from heaven.

As a gust of black wind descended upon a spot within the lake and mountains, it revealed a huge walled city hidden among the misty hills. It appeared to be a large village situated halfway up the mountain. However, the squads of burly men armed with sharp blades patrolling the area made it clear that this was no ordinary place.

Whoosh—

The black wind settled in the central clearing of the walled city, revealing the figures hidden within. A towering giant stood out among them, surrounded by several fierce-looking, burly men. Yet, the passing villagers showed no fear; instead, their eyes reflected a mix of respect and admiration.

It seemed they greatly envied these powerful fighters who had the privilege of going out to battle.

Long before they landed, Chu Liang had already scanned the surroundings with his divine sense, allowing him to gain a rough understanding of the nature of this place.

Over the years, the bandits and pirates of the Emerald Sky Waters had developed their own way of life. They were bandits when they were on the back of horses, but when they dismounted, they blended in as ordinary folk. When the government sent powerful forces to eliminate them, they presented themselves as simple farmers and fishermen. Yet, when merchant ships sailed by, they could instantly transform into bandits, which was why they had never been completely eradicated.

Otherwise, with the power of the court, any group that dared to openly rebel, no matter how strong, would be swiftly crushed.

Some powerful villages could rival the sects of immortal cultivation and even the most formidable gangs. Among them, the Flying-Dragon Fortress stood out as one of the best.

"Chief, we've brought the advisor back!" the giant shouted as soon as he landed.

"Wu Lei, you could have let us down before calling out to the chief," the frail middle-aged man said, his face twisted in discomfort. It was clear that the rough journey had shaken him so much that he just wanted to throw up.

Chu Liang's cultivation level was much higher, which was why he remained unaffected.

During the trip, Chu Liang learned that the middle-aged man's name was Wu Qingfeng. The Flying-Dragon Fortress was primarily made up of people bearing the Wu surname. Although his cultivation wasn't among the strongest in the fortress, Wu Qingfeng was renowned for his wisdom and strategic mind, earning him the title of advisor, or Mister Qingfeng.

Though Wu Qingfeng appeared somewhat disheveled when he first met Chu Liang, the moment he stepped onto the grounds of Flying-Dragon Fortress, he straightened up and once again displayed his composed, strategic demeanor.

"Oh, Advisor!" A burly, one-armed man clad in a thick gray robe emerged from the main hall.

With a headband tied around his forehead and dark stubble shadowing his rugged face, he exuded a powerful aura of the martial world. As he stepped out, he greeted, "You're finally back."

This man was likely the chief of the Flying-Dragon Fortress, known as the One-Armed Flying Dragon, Wu Yinhai—the very person Wu Qingfeng had mentioned. As a powerful sixth-realm cultivator, his name was renowned throughout the hundred li of the Emerald Sky Waters.

"Heh, I ran into some trouble in Wu'an City and ended up embarrassing the Flying-Dragon Fortress, Wu Qingfeng said with an awkward smile.

"Nonsense," Wu Yinhai said, giving him a hearty pat on the shoulder before turning to Chu Liang. "Huh? This young man isn't from our fortress, is he?"

"This is Ye Wen, a brother I met in prison," Wu Qingfeng said with admiration. "Don't let his youth deceive you; his cultivation is extraordinary. None of our young ones here can match him. That's why I had Wu Lei bring him along."

"Hahaha! This young brother is clearly a gifted talent. Now that you're here, you must stay!" Wu Yinhai laughed heartily.

Chu Liang returned the smile, thinking to himself, Those who know you would see this as a friendly recruitment, but to others, it might seem like we have a grudge.

He clasped his fists and politely declined, "Thank you, Mister Qingfeng and esteemed heroes, for rescuing me from the prison. However, I am already committed to a sect and cannot join another. I must return and report to my elders."

"Sect?" Mister Qingfeng looked at him. "You mean that Yong Chun Sect? I've never heard of it; it doesn't seem like a major sect. Why not join our Flying-Dragon Fortress? We can drink big bowls of wine, eat large chunks of meat together—wouldn't that be enjoyable?"

Great. You want me to drink, eat, and plunder across the nine provinces, huh? Chu Liang grumbled inwardly.

Then he smiled and said, "There were too many people in prison earlier, so I couldn't reveal my true identity. Actually, I'm a disciple of the Mount Shu Sect. I was out on a mission..."

Since they had helped him escape, Chu Liang decided not to hide anything. However, as soon as he mentioned "Mount Shu Sect," Wu Yinhai snapped his head around and looked over at him.

"Mount Shu Sect?" Wu Yinhai's voice rose sharply. "You're telling me you're a disciple of Mount Shu?"

"Hm?" Chu Liang paused, giving him a curious look. "Chief Wu, is there something wrong?"

Wu Qingfeng quickly intervened with a strained smile, "Brother, you might not know this, but our chief's greatest enemy in life happens to be from the Mount Shu Sect... What an unfortunate coincidence."

Chu Liang immediately considered a possibility, pausing before he slowly asked, "Could it be the Silver Sword Peak Master, Di Nufeng, of Mount Shu?"

"Exactly!" Wu Yinhai nodded heavily, his chest swelling with anger at the mere mention of the name. "It's her. Do you know her?"

"Of course, I know her," Chu Liang nodded slightly, aware of the sharp gazes fixed on him. He let out a heavy sigh and continued, "Alas! Speaking of her, she is my teacher's... arch-rival!"

"Hm?" Everyone stared at him in confusion.

"You all might not know this, but the thirty-six peaks of Mount Shu Sect are not exactly united," Chu Liang explained. "I'm a disciple of Jade Sword Peak. My name is Lin Bei, and my teacher is the grand peak master, Wang Xuanling. He and the Silver Sword Peak master have been at odds for many years—everyone on Mount Shu knows this. The disciples of our two peaks are constantly at each other's throats."

"I've heard a bit about Wang Xuanling's rivalry with Di Nufeng," Wu Yinhai said. His expression only softened after hearing this explanation.

Since Wu Yinhai considered Di Nufeng his lifelong enemy, he naturally knew a great deal about her. After all, it was often said that the person who knew you best was your enemy.

"Hahaha, indeed," Wu Qingfeng said, taking Chu Liang's hand with a warm smile. "Not everyone on Mount Shu is bad; Brother Lin Bei is a good man."

Chu Liang then looked up and asked, "Chief, what deep grudge do you have against Di Nufeng? Perhaps you could tell me, and I can spread the word among the peaks when I return, so others may criticize her as well."

"Haaaa..." Wu Yinhai said, "It's not really something worth spreading."

Wu Yinhai then began recounting his story. He had become a sixth-realm martial artist before the age of thirty, with boundless prospects ahead of him as he ventured into the martial world. If he had been part of an immortal sect like the Great Astral Sect, he would have been recognized as someone with the potential to achieve the seventh realm of martial arts.

At the time, he was young and successful, with a tendency to act arrogantly. One day, he learned that a large ship carrying precious cargo from the Fuyao Kingdom of the East Sea was about to pass through the Emerald Sky Waters, and he was tempted to rob it.

Those around him advised against it, pointing out that they lacked both the regional advantage and the manpower outside the Emerald Sky Waters. Additionally, the weather conditions were unfavorable, making the endeavor even more dangerous. But he wouldn't listen.

Wu Yinhai spoke solemnly, "That day, I led my men to intercept the ship. Just as we boarded and began our attack, a fire phoenix flew out from the cabin! Every brother who stepped on board was incinerated! I tried to flee right away, but a spark of that divine fire grazed my left arm, and it nearly consumed my entire body! If I hadn't acted fast and cut off my arm, I would have been reduced to ashes by now.

"With her status as an Eminent One from Mount Shu, she could have simply revealed her identity, and we would have backed down. Why did she resort to killing right away? Our brothers at Flying-Dragon Fortress rob the rich to help the poor, but we've never taken lives! That single burst of fire cost us dozens of brothers, and left my body crippled, scarred by divine fire. Since then, any hope I had of reaching the Heavenly Gate has been lost.

"All of this is thanks to Di Nufeng..."

Upon hearing the story, Chu Liang didn't know what to say. He could only sigh in response. "Haaaa!"

He then added, "What she did does seem excessive. Chief Wu, I won't stay any longer. As the mountain stands firm and the river flows, so may our paths cross again..."

Just as he was about to say goodbye, a group of people suddenly burst into the fortress, shouting and rushing over, with some of them looking injured.

"Chief!" one of them yelled. "A Trifloral Goldgrass showed up in the Green-Fish Pond. Ah Liu and the others tried to pluck it, but they ran into a golden draconic python guarding it and barely made it out alive!"

Chu Liang's eyes lit up. Huh?

...

While the tension eased on one side, the other side was on the brink of conflict.

In Wu'an City, dazzling sword lights lit up the sky, leaving the entire city in shock. Every household quickly shut their doors, fearing they might be implicated in the fierce battle between cultivators.

Meanwhile, hundreds of martial artists from the garrison camp outside the city were mobilized. Clad in silver armor and mounted on exotic beasts, they advanced in a grand formation through the clouds.

Such a massive gathering of cultivators was beyond what the City Supervisory Division could manage. And so, the general of the garrison in Wu'an City immediately led his troops to the scene.

Given the immense strength of these cultivators, he knew his troops stood no chance against them. Yet, he couldn't just stand by. If he did, the military might of the Yu Dynasty would be called into question, and the people would no longer feel safe!

And so, the garrison forces of Wu'an City had no choice but to press on. They surged forward like a wave of silver-scaled clouds, moving relentlessly toward the sword lights of Mount Shu!

"May I ask which immortal sect you belong to, daring to wield such power over Wu'an City? Do you truly believe there's no one here who can oppose you?" General Meng Yuan shouted.

Behind him, a row of exotic beasts stood ready, their swords and halberds raised, presenting an imposing show of force.

These martial artists in the military were carefully trained and nurtured by the imperial court. Most had reached the third realm of cultivation, with some elite members advancing to the fourth or fifth realms. With a sixth-realm general leading the garrison and the support of a ferocious formation, even Eminent Ones would struggle to defeat such a force. This garrison was formidable enough to defend any inland city.

However, this garrison was clearly outmatched as they faced off against the formation of sword-wielding experts.

At that moment, a voice rang out from the opposing formation, "We are disciples of Mount Shu, here under the command of the Discipline Master. If the general has any objections, you may take them up with her."

"Very well!" the general responded loudly. "Then I shall go and see for myself!"

In reality, General Meng Yuan had a different plan in mind. These cultivators were clearly from a righteous sect, so it was unlikely that things would get so bad that both sides would end up burning bridges. A fight seemed improbable. Matters between cultivators were usually handled by the City Supervisory Division, and he was there mainly to show support. By stepping forward now, he might even earn some praise afterward.

However, when he arrived at the City Supervisory Division and saw the situation, he immediately changed his mind and wanted to leave.

Unfortunately, it was too late.

As soon as he landed, General Meng Yuan was struck by a chilling sight. The Discipline Master of the Mount Shu Sect exuded an aura of deadly intent. The chief official of the city and the city supervisor dangled helplessly in mid-air, bound by two menacing black spiky horns. Of the three highest-ranking officials in Wu'an City, two were now suspended in this unsettling display.

Seeing this, Meng Yuan realized that these cultivators were ready to burn bridges. In fact, things had escalated so far that it felt like they were already lighting the flames to do so! Clearly, he had walked straight into a trap.

Just as he was about to leave, the Discipline Master shouted, "You're just in time! I was about to execute them, but I worried there wouldn't be any witnesses."

Meng Yuan's scalp prickled with fear, but he turned back and kept his composure. "Discipline Master, isn't this a bit too hasty? Even if you are from the immortal sect of the Divine Nine, you should still respect the laws of the Yu Dynasty."

"Law?" The Discipline Master sneered. "What should we do when the officials of the imperial court are the ones breaking the law?"

"This..." Meng Yuan hesitated for a moment, then said, "We can hold a court trial and execute them only after they have been proven to be guilty."

"Okay!" The Discipline Master said, "Let's arrange for a trial and judge them accordingly!"

Chapter 424: This Lowly Official Has Come to Beg For Your Forgiveness

In the main hall of the City Supervisory Division...

At this moment, the master of the place, City Supervisor Ma Ben, and City Lord Su Shengyan, were both bound and kneeling with their heads lowered.

Seated at the head of the hall was the Discipline Master from the Mount Shu Sect, with General Meng Yuan of the garrison at her side.

At this moment, Meng Yuan felt as though a fishbone was lodged in his throat, a thorn was in his side, and he was sitting on pins and needles...

The Discipline Master raised her hand and commanded, "Bring him forward!"

Two disciples of the Mount Shu Sect brought forward a young man who appeared weak and frail—it was none other than Su Wei, the City Lord's son!

As soon as Su Shengyan saw his son, distress immediately showed on his face.

Immediately, the Discipline Master asked, "Are you Su Wei?"

"Yes..." Su Wei had likely been dragged here while he was sleeping. He looked around in panic, fear evident in his eyes as he stammered, "Who are you people? My father is the Lord of Wu'an City! If you dare touch a hair on my head, he won't let you off..."

"Son, son..." Su Shengyan lifted his head and whispered from the side, "I'm here."

"Ah!" Su Wei then noticed his father kneeling right in front of him, and his face instantly paled in shock.

"Let me ask you. Was it you who tortured and killed innocent women in the City Lord's Residence, causing their souls to linger in unrest?" As the Discipline Master spoke, her face was as cold as steel.

"What?" Su Wei shook his head. "I don't know..."

The Discipline Master raised her hand, and suddenly, the sky darkened. The sunlight was completely obscured by a thick layer of dark clouds.

With a flip of her hand, she summoned the clouds!

At the same time, Jiang Yuebai, standing beside her, unfurled a scroll painting, and a group of figures floated out from it. The moment they saw Su Wei, deep-seated hatred filled their eyes.

"Ahhhhh!!!" Su Wei screamed.

Upon seeing these women, Su Wei was so terrified that he immediately tried to flee, leaping to his feet and running like a trapped beast!

With his martial arts cultivation and strong yang energy, he naturally had no reason to fear these weak ghosts.

What he feared was that the truth would be exposed, leaving him with no way to deny it!

"You still claim you didn't kill anyone?" The Discipline Master scoffed coldly, raising her hand. "Execute him."

Swoosh—

A sword light descended from the sky, piercing straight through Su Wei! Blood sprayed across the ground with a sharp splatter.

"No!" Su Shengyan wailed from the side, unable to stop it. His eyes were bloodshot as he glared at the Discipline Master and muttered, "You dare kill my son..."

"There's no need to rush. You're next," the Discipline Master said.

Then she ordered him to be brought forward and began another round of questioning.

"As the official of Wu'an City, did you use your power to cover up for your son?"

"Have you oppressed the people, exploited the villagers?"

"Have you deceived your superiors and caused the ruin of innocent families?"

"Hmph." Su Shengyan, seeing his son's death, took a resolute stand. "No need for further questioning. If you have evidence, just kill me. But remember, I hold the position of chief official under imperial decree. You should weigh the consequences yourself!"

"Heh." The Discipline Master sneered coldly. With her long-standing authority over Mount Shu, she had her own ways of getting people to speak.

Her eyes gleamed with a cold, piercing light, and suddenly, two beams of dark energy shot directly into Su Shengyan's eyes.

Su Shengyan had no defense against the Discipline Master's power. His entire body shook uncontrollably before collapsing to the ground.

"I'll ask you one more time. Did you use your power to cover up your son's crimes over the years?" the Discipline Master demanded.

"Yes..." Su Shengyan answered faintly.

The general of the garrison closed his eyes helplessly.

"Have you oppressed the people and exploited the villagers?" the Discipline Master asked again.

"Yes..." Su Shengyan nodded again.

"Have you ever embezzled, abused the law, and caused the deaths of innocent people?" the Discipline Master asked one last time.

"Yes..." Su Shengyan nodded without hesitation.

The Discipline Master raised her hand. "Execute him!"

Meng Yuan's eyelids twitched as he watched the scene unfold.

Does she really have the audacity to kill an imperial court official?

The sword cultivator beside her was about to strike when suddenly, a voice rang out from the distance: "The chancellor has ordered: Spare him!"

It seemed someone had rushed over to stop them, and for a moment, a glimmer of hope flickered in Meng Yuan's eyes.

But then the Discipline Master roared, "Get lost!"

Her voice boomed like thunder, sending the person flying back several li!

The figure stood there dazed for a moment before turning and heading back north the way they came.

Swoosh—

With a flash of sword light, a sword pierced through Su Shengyan's chest, the Lord of Wu'an City, and he died instantly.

Thud.

As he collapsed on the ground, City Supervisor Ma Ben felt a chill run down his spine.

These people from the Mount Shu Sect are lunatics... They really dared to kill! They actually killed an official of the imperial court!

They are maniacs!

There was no time to think. It was his turn now. He was dragged to the front of the hall and forced to kneel as the Discipline Master demanded, "I ask you, have you ever plotted against a disciple of Mount Shu?"

Upon hearing this, Ma Ben immediately burst into tears.

"If you ask me anything else, fine, but if you ask me this, I really haven't..."

...

In the capital city of Yu, within the Chancellor's Residence.

In a quiet chamber, wisps of smoke curled through the air, casting flower-shaped shadows on the window lattice. A man dressed in casual attire sat silently in the hall, his breath calm, forming two streams that spiraled like dragons at his nose.

His brows and eyes were gentle, his skin fair, with features so delicate they seemed almost feminine, making it hard to believe he was nearing fifty. Despite his delicate appearance, an undeniable aura of authority surrounded him.

His name was Su Qian.

He was the current chancellor of the Yu Dynasty, second only to the emperor, and above all others.

It had been less than twenty years since Su Qian joined the imperial court as an official. Initially, he ranked among the top three in the imperial examination. From there, he rapidly rose to the position of chancellor, advancing steadily at every crucial point in his career. His superiors always made mistakes, his enemies never prevailed, and his allies consistently supported him. Those who knew of his journey could only marvel, perhaps this was what it meant to have great fortune on one's side.

But even with such good fortune, one must possess the strength to match that luck.

Obviously, Su Qian's abilities were exceptional.

In the bureaucracy of the Yu Dynasty, a few officials with formidable cultivation had spent decades or even centuries establishing their influence, ensuring that their positions remained unshakable by those who came after them. For instance, the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch in the Imperial City, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, the current Grand General of the nation, and the King of the Northern Prison...

Several chancellors had been overthrown by them.

Although Su Qian had only held the position of chancellor for a few years, he had already risen to become a formidable force in the imperial court, capable of contending with these seasoned and entrenched officials. His rise was clearly not due to the emperor's favor alone.

Now, the factions aligned with him had grown immensely powerful, collectively known as The Chancellor's Sixteen-Factions Alliance, renowned throughout the capital of Yu. Just moments ago, he dispatched Zhang Kuahai, the eldest disciple of the Mystic Path Sect, to rush to Wu'an City to save someone.

It turned out that the moment the massive sword lights from Mount Shu descended, Su Shengyan sensed something was amiss. With a swift glance, his trusted aide received the signal and promptly fled back to the City Lord's Residence to deliver a message to Yu's capital.

They had always used the communication channels set up by the imperial court, misusing them for private purposes. But it was precisely this misuse that allowed the message to quickly reach the Chancellor's Residence and land in Su Qian's hands.

There was no actual bond between Su Qian and his adopted son, who was older by several years. He had simply agreed to take him under his wing because the man was shrewd and capable of governing a city.

Although Su Qian was unwilling to clean up Su Shengyan's messes, he now had no choice.

Everyone in the world knew that Su Shengyan was his adopted son. If he didn't intervene and allowed this man to be trampled by the Mount Shu Sect, his subordinates would see him as powerless. Over time, he would lose their respect as Chancellor.

And so, he sent Zhang Kuahai, instructing him to use the Divine Movement technique to rush to Wu'an City.

The disciples of the Divine Movement Sect dedicated their lives to studying the Great Dao of Distancelessness, and their movement technique was as swift as the Golden Path performed by Daoist Huang Long. In no time, Zhang Kuahai arrived at Wu'an City, just in time to stop the Discipline Master from killing Su Shengyan.

But with just one shout from the Discipline Master, he was sent flying several li away.

Zhang Kuahai quickly assessed the situation. Upon realizing that the man was already killed, he decided it wasn't worth risking further trouble, which was why he then turned back.

By the time he arrived back in the capital of Yu, Su Qian hadn't even completed the execution of a full Qi-Circulation cycle.

"Chancellor," he said with a bow, "I announced your name, but it was the Discipline Master of Mount Shu Sect who was there... She sent me flying several li away and insisted on killing Su Shengyan. I could not stop her."

Su Qian's brow slowly furrowed.

"The people of the Mount Shu Sect refused to show me any respect," he said in a grim tone.

When he became the chancellor, he had sent generous gifts to all the great sects of the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten. Though there hadn't been many opportunities to interact since, he had never missed an occasion to send lavish gifts during festivals, ensuring they knew he respected them.

But now, Mount Shu showed him no respect at all, which naturally angered him.

"It's not just a lack of respect; it's as if they're stomping on your face," Zhang Kuahai said indignantly.

Su Qian suddenly stood up and shouted, "Prepare my horse! I'm going to the palace!"

...

The Chancellor's jujube-red horse made its way through the streets, accompanied by strong martial artists as guards. Wherever they passed, pedestrians quickly stepped aside. In the Yu capital, where officials and nobility were common, the chancellor's power and influence were unmatched, and no one dared to stand in the way.

Su Qian swiftly made his way to the imperial city, moving smoothly through it and passing through the palace city until he arrived at Night Dragon Hall.

Passing through numerous checkpoints so swiftly required more than mere rank and power; it required the emperor's unwavering trust. Few in the world received this level of treatment.

The blatant disregard for imperial law by the immortal sects had been a major concern for the emperor for a long time, and in this severe case, Su Qian didn't need to exaggerate to incite the emperor's fury towards Mount Shu.

As for how they should be punished was entirely up to the emperor.

When Su Qian stopped outside Night Dragon Hall, he saw Lao Santai standing outside with an awkward expression.

From within the hall, the noise of a commotion could be heard, accompanied by a woman's voice shouting curses in a rather vulgar manner.

How strange. Su Qian thought. Who would dare act so brazenly in the emperor's hall?

He couldn't help but move closer and ask quietly, "Warrior Lao, who is in there? They seem incredibly bold..."

"It's an imperial family gathering," Warrior Lao squinted, glancing away as he whispered, "Chancellor, please keep this to yourself. Those being scolded are all royal relatives, and the one doing the scolding is His Majesty's Second Aunt."

"I've never heard of His Majesty having a second aunt," Su Qian asked, puzzled.

"She's always existed, but due to certain reasons, she was raised elsewhere. This isn't something to discuss in detail," Lao Santai said cautiously.

The affairs of the imperial family were fraught with many taboos.

Su Qian was already accustomed to the reticence of these palace attendants, so he stood aside and waited patiently for a moment.

Finally, there was a loud bang!

The palace door was forcefully pushed open, and a tall figure clad in fiery red suddenly emerged, emanating an overwhelming aura that made Su Qian instinctively lower his head.

"Miss Feng," Lao Santai immediately bowed and escorted the woman a good distance away.

As for the imperial relatives who followed, one after another, they were the ones Su Qian recognized. With their heads dropping, they all looked as wilted as frostbitten eggplants.

He couldn't ask any questions. However, when those people left and Lao Santai came back, he then asked, "That Second Aunt of the emperor seems quite powerful? Her aura is truly overwhelming."

"You've probably heard her name before," Lao Santai whispered. "She's Di Nufeng of the Mount Shu Sect. She is an actual seventh-realm Eminent One! If not for... Haaaa... Well, just keep in mind that you should never provoke her."

Hearing this, Su Qian's brows started twitching.

When he turned back, he heard the palace attendant behind him call out, "Chancellor, you may enter to see His Majesty now."

"Oh..." Su Qian murmured, deep in thought, as he walked into the hall.

He found the place in disarray, with shattered objects scattered on the ground and numerous palace attendants busy with the cleanup.

It seemed that more than just scolding had occurred...

The old man in the yellow robe, seated behind a desk adorned with dragon carvings, looked visibly frustrated. It was unknown what he had experienced. When he saw Su Qian stepping forward, he asked, "What's the matter?"

Su Qian hesitated for a moment before kneeling with a thud. "Your Majesty, this lowly official has come to beg for your forgiveness!"

"Hmm?" The emperor looked slightly taken aback. "What crime have you committed?"

"It's about Su Shengyan, the City Lord of Wu'an, who once called me his adoptive father. I've learned today that he's been misusing my name to oppress the people of Wu'an City for years!" Su Qian lamented. "Fortunately, some cultivators from the Mount Shu Sect discovered his evil doings and informed me. I've authorized them to arrest him swiftly. If he resists, they have permission to execute him immediately!"

"I beg Your Majesty to punish me for failing to recognize his true nature!"

Chapter 425: The Sigh of the Poor

The Green-Fish Pond was a body of water located more than a hundred li away from Flying-Dragon Fortress. It wasn't particularly large, but it was very deep. The pond was home to a green-scaled fish

with tender and delicious meat, making it one of the most popular species of fish in Emerald Sky Waters.

The people of the Flying-Dragon Fortress had gone down to the pond to fish for these green-scaled fish, and that was when they noticed that the number of green-scaled fish in the pond had decreased sharply. One of their skilled and courageous members went into the pond to investigate what was going on, and he discovered a blooming Trifloral Goldgrass.

Unfortunately, just as that person was about to pick it, a golden draconic python emerged to protect its treasure. Obviously, this python was the culprit behind the disappearance of the green-scaled fish in the pond.

The golden draconic python injured several of the men from the Flying-Dragon Fortress and nearly swallowed two of them. The men fled in a sorry state, returning to the Flying-Dragon Fortress to report to their chief. It just so happened to be when Chu Liang was there, and he overheard the report.

"Chief..." Chu Liang said "I am in need of a treasure of nature for my cultivation, and this Trifloral Goldgrass is perfect for that. How about selling this spirit plant to me?"

Wu Yin Hai was preparing to lead his men to eliminate the golden draconic python and avenge his brothers.

However, when he heard what Chu Liang said, he looked at Chu Liang in bewilderment. "Sell it to you?"

Wu Qingfeng laughed and said, "Brother Lin Bei, it's not that we look down on you... but you're a disciple of a sect in the Divine Nine. A spirit plant like this would sell for a drastically higher price than if you were to buy it from your sect..."

The Flying-Dragon Fortress was mostly composed of martial artists who needed treasures of nature that could boost their qi, blood, and physique for cultivation. The Trifloral Goldgrass was not one of them, so for the Flying-Dragon Fortress, it was merely something to be sold for money.

However, the asking price for that spirit plant was not a price an ordinary junior disciple could afford. That's why they looked at Chu Liang strangely, thinking he probably had no idea how much this spirit plant was worth outside his sect.

"I know, and I won't pay you less than it's worth," Chu Liang replied with a smile. "I'm willing to pay eight thousand Vermillion-Bird coins for it. But I don't have that much on me right now, so I'll give you four thousand as a deposit first."

"I'll go to the pond myself and take only one shot at retrieving the Trifloral Goldgrass. If I succeed, I'll come back later and pay the remaining four thousand. If I fail, you can keep the deposit, and you can try to take the spirit plant for yourselves afterward."

Everyone around him fell silent.

The men of Flying-Dragon Fortress looked at each other and finally realized that it wasn't that Chu Liang didn't know how much this spirit plant was worth. Rather, it was they who didn't know how much money Chu Liang had.

A mere junior disciple of the Mount Shu Sect has that much in savings?

Eight thousand?

How could he say it so casually? Did he not value that money at all?

Contrary to what the members of the Flying-Dragon Fortress thought, Chu Liang had been quite reserved with that offer; he could easily afford eight thousand Vermillion-Bird coins. Nevertheless, he feared that offering a higher price would reveal his wealth and cause these "heroes" to set their greedy eyes on him.

So, he mentioned that he only had four thousand on him and would pay the rest if he succeeded in obtaining the spirit plant. That would greatly reduce the chance that they would harbor bad intentions toward him.

Nonetheless, even if they had bad intentions, Chu Liang wasn't particularly worried. After all, he still had Venerable Wen Yuan's jade talisman in his possession. It would allow him to escape instantly if his life was in danger.

Chu Liang wasn't being very vigilant, but even that low level of vigilance was unnecessarily excessive. Wu Yin Hai dared to consider Di Nufeng his enemy, but it was likely only in his thoughts. He probably wouldn't dare make a move even if Di Nufeng were standing right in front of him.

It didn't matter if they were confident they were capable of stopping Chu Liang from leaving. Even if they were, how could they, dare to casually kill a disciple of the Mount Shu Sect when they had families to care for and a business to run?

The imperial court could not use excessive force to control them because it would be unlawful, but that was of no concern to immortal sects. Years ago, a disciple of the Valley of the Three Absolutes had been killed in a village within Emerald Sky Waters. The next day, the entire village was slaughtered, regardless of whether they were innocent. As long as they knew the perpetrator had been hiding among them, they were treated as accomplices who harbored the perpetrator and were killed together with the perpetrator.

Since then, no village in the Emerald Sky Waters dared to touch anyone from the Divine Nine or the Terrestrial Ten.

The Valley of the Three Absolutes had both righteous and diabolical aspects, but the Mount Shu Sect was an traditional righteous sect, so it might not act in the same way. Nevertheless, that was something no one knew for certain since the Mount Shu Sect had produced someone like Di Nufeng... If someone were to say that everyone in that sect was a good person, even a child wouldn't believe that to be true.

After a brief consideration, Wu Yinhai looked at Mister Qingfeng and asked, "Advisor, is eight thousand... okay?"

Wu Yinhai wasn't very knowledgeable about the prices of spirit plants, but he felt that this amount was probably on the higher end.

Wu Qingfeng, on the other hand, was very familiar with the prices of spirit plants. Spirit plants were sold at high prices in legitimate markets, but the members of the Flying-Dragon Fortress operated in the gray market^[1], so the legitimate stores that bought from them always made very low offers. If a store sold a spirit plant for eight thousand Vermillion-Bird coins, the Flying-Dragon Fortress would get at most three thousand for it.

Of course, the Flying-Dragon Fortress could list the spirit plant for sale themselves and only pay a commission for the listing. However, in that case, they'd have to wait for a buyer, so it would take a really long time before they could get the money. After all, there weren't many buyers who could easily afford eight thousand Vermillion-Bird coins.

Eight thousand Vermillion-Bird coins were just a number to Chu Liang. However, for these sectless cultivators, it might even take them ten years to save up that much—or even twenty years if they're unlucky.

Wu Qingfeng's long train of thought condensed into one word.

"Okay!" Wu Qingfeng answered, nodding firmly.

"Hahaha, great!" Wu Yinhai said. "The enemy of Di Nufeng is my friend, so I'll tell you the location of the Trifloral Goldgrass. As for what you said about only taking one shot at picking the spirit plant, let's just take that as a joke. Brother Lin Bei, take as many tries as you want. If you can't get it, you can come to us for help. We, the Flying-Dragon Fortress, have our doors wide open just for you!"

"In that case, I thank you, Chief Wu," Chu Liang replied, cupping his hands in gratitude.

After that, he asked for the location of Green-Fish Pond. Then he gave them a jade talisman and even wrote them a promissory note.

While seeing Chu Liang off, Wu Qingfeng whispered to him, "Brother, our chief is concerned about his reputation and finds it hard to say some things frankly. The grudge he has against Di Nufeng—don't spread it around when you go back. We've never thought about seeking revenge in this lifetime. We'll be doomed if she hears about it and decides to come and kill us all."

"Mr. Qingfeng, rest assured," Chu Liang said sincerely. "I won't tell anyone, and even if Di Nufeng knows, she won't take action... There are at least eight thousand people in the world who consider her an enemy. Can she chase them all?"

Hearing that, Wu Qingfeng finally felt at ease and smiled. "That's true."

Before Chu Liang left, Wu Yinhai had maintained his demeanor as an elder brother. He had not even glanced at the jade talisman and instead let his subordinates inspect it.

Yet, as soon as Chu Liang left, Wu Yinhai's mouth twisted into a crooked grin.

He shouted at his underlings, "Quick, let me see! Let me see! Well, damn. There really are four thousand Vermillion-Bird coins in here."

These pirates were on the fringes between the world of immortality cultivators and the martial community. They usually only plundered gold and silver treasures from ships. After all, items from the world of immortality cultivators rarely needed to be transported by ship, so the members of the Flying-Dragon Fortress wouldn't find them on the ships they robbed.

Consequently, they were quite wealthy in terms of gold and silver. However, the gold and silver of the secular mortal realm couldn't be exchanged for Vermillion-Bird coins, let alone legendary weapons or the Great Pill of Qi and Blood.

In the world of immortality cultivators, the Flying-Dragon Fortress could be described as nothing more than a den of poor men.

One of Wu Yinhai's underlings asked, "Chief, what if he successfully takes the Trifloral Goldgrass and doesn't come back to pay the other half?"

"Hah, don't worry about it." Wu Yinhai waved his hand relaxedly. "He doesn't look like he's short on money. Throwing out such a huge number like it's nothing—he's most likely a foolish second-generation of a wealthy cultivator family."

"Yeah. Four thousand Vermillion-Bird coins is already a big profit. We couldn't get that price even if we sold it to a store in Taotie City." Wu Qingfeng nodded in agreement and waved around the promissory note. "Besides, didn't he leave us this promissory note? He's got the Mount Shu Sect as his guarantor, and he even wrote these five big words 'Jade Sword Peak, Lin Bei' and stamped it.

"Just check the pond tomorrow. If he takes the Trifloral Goldgrass and leaves without paying, we'll just go to Mount Shu and demand they pay us! They're a sect ranked in the Divine Nine. Surely they wouldn't cheat us out of this little bit of money."

"Yeah, he's really rich," the giant Wu Lei said gloomily.

The group exchanged glances and suddenly fell silent.

After a while, Wu Yinhai let out a heavy sigh, "Haaa!"

The others did the same.

The men of the Flying-Dragon Fortress gazed in the direction that Chu Liang had left, and they all let out a collective sigh of the poor.

Chapter 426: Trifloral Goldgrass

Beyond the verdant valley, a broad and deep pond that was as clear as jade lay undisturbed. Its surface was smooth, unbroken by even the slightest ripple.

With a flash of sword light, Chu Liang's figure materialized.

At present, his cultivation level had reached a bottleneck at the peak of the fourth realm, and breaking through would require more time. While resources were crucial during the Earthly Gate's cultivation stages, a profound understanding of cultivation was necessary to continue advancing.

Chu Liang was in no rush.

He could force a breakthrough by nurturing his cultivation with an abundance of resources. However, even if he succeeded, his cultivation would be unstable—like a building without a foundation, preventing any further advancement in his cultivation.

Therefore, he chose to temporarily slow the pace of his cultivation.

In less than a year, he had progressed from the third realm to the threshold of the fifth, surpassing two major realms. For disciples of other immortal sects, such progress might take three, five, or even ten years. Some might never cross this hurdle in their entire lives.

Chu Liang's aptitude for cultivation was only slightly above average; he couldn't be considered a prodigy. In fact, throughout his cultivation journey, he had often not been the one doing the cultivating.

Cultivation power gained too easily inevitably carried underlying risks.

Having spent only a short time in the fourth realm, he had not yet mastered the fundamental aspects of the Divine Nine's Profound Mental Cultivation Technique: The Book of Golden Core.

The way to comprehend The Book of Golden Core was very straightforward. All he had to do was perform the Qi-Circulation Technique repeatedly to understand the Great Dao of the Heavens and Earth embedded within the Qi-Circulation Technique.

As the Large-Headed Doll performed the Qi-Circulation Technique, the energy generated was used to expand his Sea of Qi, temper his meridians, and increase his foundational qi. However, no matter how flawlessly the Large-Headed Doll executed the technique, it was impossible for him to absorb the insights gained during its practice.

Therefore, it was wiser for him to remain at the fourth realm to consolidate his current cultivation power.

However, just because his progress slowed, it did not mean that he would not be able to increase his strength.

If it were his own body, he had to be cautious. But with the Large-Headed Doll, he could afford to be more daring in his actions. The Green Jade Bodhi Branch he had acquired earlier would soon be fully absorbed. When that time came, he would need to obtain a water-attribute spirit plant for the Colorful Doll to help unlock the third level of the Secret Reservoir of Five Elements.

At that point, he would possess three types of fifth-realm foundational qi: Geng Metal, Jia Wood, and Ren Water. In contrast, Xu Ziyang, who had just broken through to the second level of the Realm of the Five Elements, had only two.

The endless flow of Ren Water foundational qi was the type that could most easily replenish itself and sustain long-term use. For Chu Liang, with his astonishing capacity to store a vast Sea of Qi, gaining the Ren-Water foundational qi would be like adding fuel to the fire. Since then, his endurance had reached an astonishingly terrifying level.

If someone else had obtained the Large-Headed Doll, they might not have been able to unlock the levels of the Secret Reservoir of the Five Elements so quickly, as the pressure of obtaining the treasures of nature was immense.

Despite not being extremely wealthy, Chu Liang was now rich enough to buy as much spirit plants as he wanted.

Getting one for both himself and the Colorful Doll was of no issue to him. Back then, when he was being an undercover agent in the Dark King Sect, the Fiend he met went through painstaking effort to get a Nethersea Golden Lotus. Still, he never achieved that breakthrough throughout his

lifetime..It was hard not to feel sad for the Fiend. And now, Chu Liang from the Mount Shu Sect had the right to say that he had no interest in money[1].

... When he landed on the ground, he first scanned the surrounding area with his divine sense. But for some reason, he sensed that everything was normal in the waters. If there was anything weird, it was that there was not a trace of fish or shrimp in such a large lake.

Clearly, the golden draconic python was hiding its presence.

Chu Liang didn't give it a second thought. He quickly located the area where the people from Flying-Dragon Fortress had indicated the Trifloral Goldgrass could be found. With a swift leap, he transformed into a stream of light and plunged deep into the water.

The Green-Fish Pond was deep. It took him a while to get to the bottom of the pond. As he scanned the surroundings with his divine sense, he discovered a cluster of dazzling golden light in the darkest region of the water.

A spirit plant stood there, radiating a soft brilliance. Its slender, elongated golden leaf was adorned with delicate, curved patterns that faintly resembled scales. Surrounding it were three shimmering flowers, their light flickering in harmony with the gentle ripples of the water.

The Trifloral Goldgrass was a unique treasure of nature. Unlike ordinary plants, where flowers were considered the most valued part, its leaf contained the true essence, while the flowers played a secondary role. Regardless of how big it grew, the plant would only ever produce a single leaf. The quality of the Trifloral Goldgrass was determined by the number of flowers surrounding it.

The so-called Trifloral Goldgrass with only one flower would be classified as a low-grade spirit plant. If it had two flowers, it would be considered medium-grade. However, if it bore three flowers, it would be recognized as a high-grade spirit plant. Chu Liang glanced around before he dived deeper to the left of the Trifloral Goldgrass. When he was just about to pluck the leaf, he heard a deep, muffled hiss of a python.

"Hiss...." The water surged, and a massive golden python emerged from the murkiest depths. Its waist was so thick that it would take three men to encircle it with their arms. The scales, a deep golden hue, gleamed with an aura of invincibility. Its vertical pupils, filled with fury, burned with fire-type spiritual energy, adding to its fearsome presence. Seeing the ferocity with which the python approached, Chu Liang acted without hesitation. He swiftly swam upward and began executing the Secret Dragon Blood Technique. Even underwater, the flames generated by his qi blazed fiercely, creating an impressive display of power and intensity.

But just as he unleashed his full aura and prepared for battle, the golden python suddenly froze in the water. As Chu Liang's image reflected in its eyes, a look of fear emerged within them. After a moment, a look of pain flashed in its eyes and it turned back and left, giving the Trifloral Goldgrass to Chu Liang. The python did not dare to fight with Chu Liang for the treasure of nature. "Hmm?" Chu Liang blinked but wasn't too surprised.

He now emanated the powerful auras of the White Dragon, the Blue Dragon, and the Inferno Dragon. These auras, possessing a high degree of purity, greatly intimidated the draconic demonic beasts.

Based on the demonic aura of the golden python, it seemed to be at the beginning stage of the fifth realm. While Chu Liang was not afraid of fighting it, it was good that it left on its own accord.

He then drew his sword and carefully sliced the Trifloral Goldgrass at its base, ensuring not to damage the precious plant. With delicate precision, he placed it into a jade box.

...

When he emerged from the waters, he didn't rush back to the Flying-Dragon Fortress to give them the remaining amount. He decided that he would first return to Wu'an City to check on the situation. If he handed over the money immediately, his claim of only having four thousand would be exposed. He had no intention of deceiving the people from the Flying-Dragon Fortress or evading the final payment; after all, if he did, he would be ruining Lin Bei's reputation.

But when he arrived in Wu'an City, he was startled.

He saw sword lights gathering like clouds over Wu'an City, with countless flying swords hovering in the sky, each one belonging to a formidable cultivator. Opposing them, a vast legion of imperial martial artists and demonic beasts stood poised for battle, their murderous auras hanging thick in the air.

By the tense standoff between both sides, it was clear that they had been locked in this silent confrontation for some time.

He didn't dare to fly in the sky and instead entered the city on foot. As he approached the City Supervisory Division, he found a large crowd of onlookers gathered at the gate. When he pushed his way through, he was met with the sound of agonized screams from within.

"Brother, what's happening in there?" he asked someone nearby.

The man replied, "Word is that City Lord Su Shengyan was corrupt and defied the law, so the chancellor sent men to execute him. Even the City Supervisory Officer is being tried alongside him."

"Imperial officials?" Chu Liang was momentarily puzzled.

"What are you even saying?" another person interjected, "Last night, someone broke into the City Supervisory Division's prison, and many prisoners escaped. Esteemed cultivators from Mount Shu Sect have come to help round them up across the city. They've captured most of them already, and now they're interrogating the remaining prisoners to uncover the others' hiding places. They won't rest until they have caught everyone."

"People from Mount Shu?"

At that moment, someone ahead in the crowd spoke up, "Yes, there's only one wanted criminal left. He's the only one they are searching for right now. I think the name was... Chu Liang? The Elder from Mount Shu said that if the City Supervisory Division doesn't find him, they'll execute all the remaining prisoners."

Chapter 427: So It Was Me?

In the City Supervisory Division, a group of escaped prisoners knelt on the ground, tightly bound and trembling with fear, their faces streaked with tears. These were the same prisoners who had shared a cell with Chu Liang.

When the people from the Flying-Dragon Fortress raided the prison, these prisoners seized the opportunity amidst the chaos and fled. They believed that with the City Supervisory Division being short-staffed, they could make their escape if they got out of the city quickly enough.

Who would have thought that a large number of Mount Shu cultivators would descend from the sky?

For reasons unknown, the Mount Shu Sect had deployed such a powerful force to assist with the capture, and by mid-morning, all the escapees had been rounded up. Aside from Wu Qingfeng and Chu Liang, who had gone to the Flying-Dragon Fortress, everyone else was present. If the Discipline Master continued the investigation, it wouldn't take long to trace the remaining two to the Flying-Dragon Fortress. The Discipline Master resembled the judge of the dead, her expression as cold as steel. She spoke with a casual tone that sent chills down the spine. "As escapees, your crimes are undeniably severe. If you cannot provide us with any useful information, I might as well help you start a new life through reincarnation."

The prisoners below were once fierce bandits and local bullies. However, people only turned evil because they had never encountered someone even more terrifying than them. In the presence of the Discipline Master, they now wept like children who had lost their parents.

No one believed the Discipline Master's words were mere bluffs; after all, even the City Lord had been executed at her command. What chance did these escapees have?

But aside from mentioning that Chu Liang had been taken by a giant, none of them could offer any useful information.

Fortunately, at that moment, Chu Liang emerged from the crowd, shouting, "Discipline Master! I am here!"

"Hmm?" The Discipline Master finally raised her eyes.

Jiang Yuebai, standing behind the Discipline Master, had her eyes light up.

"I left the prison earlier. Something happened, and I got delayed. I only just managed to make it back now. My apologies for worrying you!" said Chu Liang.

He truly hadn't expected such a large-scale operation.

The imperial court was particularly wary of immortal sects rallying their disciples to storm a city. The repercussions of this incident would not be easily resolved. Wait. Isn't that City Supervisor Ma kneeling over there? His eyes then drifted to the two bodies casually tossed in the corner. Wait a minute... They look just like Su Shengyan and his son Su Wei!

He looked up at the Discipline Master in surprise. "This..."

The Discipline Master's expression softened slightly, "It's good that you're back. Everything here has been taken care of. You don't need to worry."

Chu Liang looked at the prisoners crying tears of joy and the bloodstained scene, momentarily at a loss for words.

You call this taken care of? Isn't this just killing those who needed to be killed and tying up those who needed to be tied up, leaving all the trouble for later? I couldn't tell that, at your age, you handle things just like my esteemed teacher. Ohhhhhh!

At that moment, Chu Liang suddenly realized from whom his esteemed teacher had adopted that way of doing things.

She had grown up under the Discipline Master's guidance, who had clearly influenced her in every way. This was a perfect example of how crucial a parent's influence was on a child's upbringing.

Of course, these weren't matters he needed to concern himself with. The Discipline Master, appearing untroubled, ordered the release of City Supervisor Ma and the remaining escapees once Chu Liang had returned.

She was ready to return to Mount Shu.

City Supervisor Ma surveyed the mess on the ground and the crowd of onlookers, feeling utterly helpless. These fierce gods from Mount Shu had come and gone as they pleased, causing such a commotion, but now that it was over, what was he supposed to do?

Just as he was pondering, he heard the whistling of the wind, and a majestic, luxurious White-Feathered Golden Luan descended from the clouds, landing gracefully outside the City Supervisory Division, drawing gasps of amazement from the crowd.

Immediately after, a young palace attendant dressed in fine robes entered with an air of elegance.

City Supervisor Ma's face immediately lit up when he saw this. After all this commotion, someone from the palace had finally arrived! It must be that the chancellor had already reported this to the emperor; the matter had surely caught the emperor's attention, and now, someone was here to back me up!

He glared at the Discipline Master, thinking, No matter how fierce you are, you wouldn't dare be fierce in front of an imperial envoy, right?

The palace attendant led a team of imperial guards into the scene, expressionless, and announced in a sharp voice, "The Emperor has a decree——"

"Read it!" the Discipline Master shouted coldly, cutting off his long announcement.

The palace attendant immediately fell silent.

How could she even dare to do that... City Supervisor Ma muttered inwardly as he quickly lowered his head. Be reckless! When the emperor's wrath descends on you, we'll see how long you can last. Just you wait!

The palace attendant then unfolded a yellow decree and read aloud, "Su Shengyan, the chief official of Wu'an City, was found to be corrupt, lawless, and guilty of heinous crimes. Although he is dead, his family assets will be confiscated, and his accomplices will be questioned. City Supervisor Ma Ben of Wu'an City was found to have colluded with him, causing harm to the local area. He is to be brought back to the Imperial Supervisory Bureau for trial. This case is of high priority and must be executed with no room for error. The disciples of Mount Shu who assisted the chancellor in eliminating the traitors will be greatly rewarded. This is His Majesty the Emperor's decree!"

With each sentence the palace attendant read, City Supervisor Ma's smile grew stiffer until it completely vanished.

Ah...

So, it's me who's meeting my end?

...

The group of former disciples who came to help quickly scattered, leaving only the Discipline Master and the two juniors to head back to Mount Shu. Chu Liang couldn't hold back his curiosity any longer.

"Elder, what's really happening here? How could killing an imperial official result in this instead..." he asked. "I don't know the details either," the Discipline Master shook her head. "But I'm certain it has something to do with your esteemed teacher. Since she's in the imperial city right now, it makes even more sense."

"My esteemed teacher?"

"Indeed," the Discipline Master said, "The relationship between Mount Shu and the imperial court has never been great, but we haven't had to worry about it for decades, all because of her."

Shouldn't having a rogue outlaw around make us more concerned?

Chu Liang was even more puzzled. "Does my esteemed teacher really have that much influence?"

The Discipline Master thought for a moment before saying, "It's alright to tell you this, but it's a secret that has to do with the imperial family. You mustn't spread it around."

Seeing her serious expression, Chu Liang also became serious.

"In fact, your esteemed teacher's parents were Crown Prince Mingde and Princess Luoyu of the Yu Dynasty eighty years ago," the Discipline Master said slowly.

Eighty years felt like a long time to Chu Liang, but for her, it wasn't as significant, so she spoke of it rather casually.

Although Chu Liang hadn't heard these names before, he felt that something was off... A prince and a princess?

Could it be that my esteemed teacher was born from a close-relative marriage?

No wonder her intelligence... um, no wonder she's of such a powerful bloodline.

The Discipline Master explained, "Back then, the demonic followers of the Celestial Charm Sect caused chaos in the Yu Dynasty's court. They targeted the Crown Prince and Princess, who had long

harbored feelings for each other, and forced the union of the half-siblings. They then used this incident to blackmail Crown Prince Mingde, forcing him to assassinate the emperor at the time..."

Good grief, a family drama.

Chu Liang's ears perked up.

The Discipline Master continued, "No one knows exactly what happened that night. However, Crown Prince Mingde failed to assassinate the emperor, and all the evil members of the Celestial Charm Sect in the imperial court and palace were exterminated. As for Princess Luoyu, she was sent off to the Western Regions as a diplomatic bride.

"But after Princess Luoyu was sent to the Western Region, she realized that she was pregnant. She didn't dare to tell people about it as she was worried that someone might harm the child. She only told the leader of the wedding escort team at the time, which was her tutor Sun Shouyu."

Chu Liang had indeed heard of this name. It was the full name of Scholar Sun, one of the Wanderers of the North and South.

During the Mount Shu Summit, these two old men had also appeared, and he had met them a few times with his esteemed teacher.

"If this news had reached the imperial court back then, the emperor would have ordered for the baby to be killed. If the wedding escort team had reached the Western Regions, it would be too difficult to hide the baby," the Discipline Master said.

She paused, showing a disgusted expression before continuing, "And Sun Shouyu then sought help from his scoundrel friend, someone with the surname Huang..."

Chu Liang struggled to keep a straight face.

It went without saying that this person with the surname Huang was, of course, Old Huang.

The Discipline Master continued, "Old Huang went to that small kingdom in the Western Regions to perform divination and predict the kingdom's fortune. Everything he said was spot on. He then told the king that his fate clashed with that of Princess Luoyu and suggested building a separate

palace at the kingdom's border so they would never have to meet. This way, they managed to keep Princess Luoyu out of the Palace of the Western Regions and watched over her until Ah Feng was born... This could be considered one of the few decent things they did together."

"But what followed was far from decent..." the Discipline Master's tone shifted. "Princess Luoyu couldn't keep the child with her, and those two old men, not knowing how to raise a child, ended up coming to me. If they didn't know, how could they expect me to know?"

Chu Liang nodded in response.

I believe it when you said you didn't know how to raise a child. With the way that my teacher turned out, it seems it would be hard to raise her any worse.

The Discipline Master said, "I reluctantly helped them when they said they were worried that the imperial family might become suspicious of the baby's identity. I took her in and raised her. From a young age, she was mischievous and stubborn. I can't even begin to count how much effort it cost me..."

"Twenty years later, Ah Feng, along with Jiang Tiankuo, Daoist Yan, and their cohort, defeated many at the Assembly of Immortal Sects.[1] They impressed the capital of Yu and became famous. The imperial family naturally took notice of her pure Divine Fire Spirit. They asked me where she came from, and I simply said she was a kid that I picked up somewhere."

Hearing this, Chu Liang smiled and thought, That answer is truly your style...

"Then, someone came to Mount Shu..." The Discipline Master gradually lowered her voice. "It was Crown Prince Mingde."

Chapter 428: Backstory

"What?" Chu Liang uttered in astonishment.

The crown prince attempted to assassinate his father and usurp the throne, but he failed. Yet, he's still alive?

The Disciple Master began, "At the time, I was very surprised as well. Later on, I found out..."

At this time, they were nearing Mount Shu, so the Discipline Master slowed their flight. It seemed she intended to finish the story before they arrived at Mount Shu.

She continued, "It turned out that he had been the most talented prince of his generation. That was why he'd been made the crown prince. After the fateful night of the failed assassination, the emperor did not kill the crown prince. Instead, he temporarily imprisoned the crown prince and purged the followers of the Celestial Charm Sect.

"Unexpectedly, while Mingde was in despair, he had a breakthrough in his cultivation. He gained a deeper understanding of the Great Dao of Incinerating Heaven, bringing him to the threshold of the eighth realm...

"At that time, the vitality of the imperial family's guardian was declining. Mingde was the only member of his generation who had cultivated to the pinnacle of the Great Dao of Incinerating Heaven, so only he could take over. To prevent the Great Dao of Incinerating Heaven from being lost to someone outside the Xia Family, they ultimately made Mingde the Dao Master of Incinerating Heaven... and the new guardian of the imperial family."

This information was a lot for Chu Liang to take in.

To become the emperor of the Yu Dynasty, it was necessary to have a Divine Fire Spirit and be at least a seventh-realm Eminent One. However, he usually was not the Dao Master of Incinerating Heaven.

That was because a cultivator needed many things to reach the eighth realm—talent, resources, perception... and most importantly the right opportunities. If this were the standard for choosing an emperor, it would be too difficult to choose one.

On the other hand, the most important requirement for a guardian was that they had to be powerful. That meant they had to put all of their focus on cultivating, which was definitely not what a good emperor should do.

Therefore, the imperial family would always have a guardian who controlled the Great Dao of Incinerating Heaven. An eighth-realm guardian could oversee the imperial family for hundreds of years, during which several emperors would come and go.

The guardian did not get involved in the struggle for imperial authority or politics. During peaceful times, the guardian might stay unknown and perhaps not need to take any action for a hundred years.

Nevertheless, there still had to be a guardian. If the imperial family did not have an eighth-realm Eminent One to hold the fort, the imperial court, the nine provinces, and the entire human faction built around the imperial family as its pillar would be unstable.

The legacy of a Great Dao was much easier to handle than most people might think. The eighth-realm Dao Master had an inherent advantage; it was nearly impossible for someone to succeed in challenging them. However, once the Dao Master's chosen successor reached the threshold of the eighth realm, the position of Dao Master could be naturally passed over to the successor.

Nonetheless, if the guardian were to die without a chosen successor reaching the threshold of the eighth realm, that would place the imperial family in a very awkward position. Any other seventh-realm Eminent One who had cultivated to the pinnacle of the Great Dao of Incinerating Heaven could then easily become the next Dao Master.

If the imperial family were to lose the Great Dao of Incinerating Heaven, the whole world would know that the imperial family had lost its power.

The imperial court would certainly have other eighth-realm Eminent Ones, but no matter how loyal they were, they were ultimately "outsiders." The Xia Family had to have their own eighth-realm Eminent One. This was a matter of utmost importance, so much so that it didn't matter if he was an unfilial son who had just tried to assassinate his father, the emperor.

The imperial family had likely put Mingde through a series of tests and trials during this time, but such information was not disclosed to outsiders.

The Discipline Master explained, "Mingde remained in the imperial city all those years. He cultivated in closed-door cultivation and guarded the imperial family in silence as if to atone for his crime. He never contacted Princess Luoyu and had no idea he had a child. That continued until that day when he saw Di Nufeng at the Assembly of Immortal Sects...

"He sensed it immediately—that Di Nufeng was his daughter..."

Chu Liang thought, Did he even need to sense it? Wasn't it obvious just from the name you gave her...?

It's like the answer was in the question all along.

He didn't even need to see her in person. Just seeing the registration form would have made him suspicious.

The Discipline Master continued, "Ah Feng's Divine Fire Spirit is exceptionally pure, even within the imperial family. So, he wanted her to return to the imperial family, hoping she could take over his Great Dao in the future.

"However, he failed to convince her. Ah Feng chose to stay at Mount Shu. But because of her connection with the imperial family's guardian, the imperial court's attitude toward Mount Shu became more favorable."

"I see..." Chu Liang sighed. "What a twist."

He finally had the answers to the things he had been curious about for so long.

Chu Liang had always wondered why his teacher could be so unbridled at Mount Shu, with almost no one able to restrain her. She was a powerful seventh-realm Eminent One, but couldn't those at the eighth realm suppress her?

He had previously thought it was because his teacher had the Discipline Master backing her up, but now he realized there was a much grander reason than that. It turned out that it was all thanks to Di Nufeng's connection to the imperial family that the Mount Shu Sect was able to maintain a good relationship with the imperial court.

After the Mount Shu Sect lost the Demon-Suppressing Pagoda, they kept a good relationship with the Heavenly Star Divine Cult faction, but their relationship with the imperial court took a bad turn. The imperial court suppressed the Mount Shu Sect so much that it jeopardized the Mount Shu Sect's position among the Divine Nine.

However, the situation had eased in recent years, and it turned out that had been all thanks to Di Nufeng. The imperial court's support was crucial for the Mount Shu Sect in its current state, so it didn't matter much to them that Di Nufeng caused a bit of trouble here and there.

As for Di Nufeng's Divine Fire Spirit being purer than the other members of the imperial family, that wasn't surprising at all. She had been born from half-siblings, so it was only natural that the Xia Family bloodline in Di Nufeng hadn't gotten diluted and had instead become more concentrated.

In fact, in ancient times, the members of many old immortality cultivation families, including the three major aristocratic families, would marry within the family to maintain the purity of their bloodline.

This practice carried a very high risk of producing babies with birth defects, but among many such babies, there would occasionally be a healthy baby carrying the pure mystical bloodline. The babies with birth defects were considered an acceptable price to ensure the continuation of that pure bloodline.

The descendants of a pure mystical bloodline did not have birth defects, but they often had other innate problems, such as being irascible, being battle-crazy and bloodthirsty, or lacking intelligence...

Of course, my esteemed teacher absolutely doesn't have any of these flaws.

Mmhm.

Many of the old immortality cultivation families gradually fell into decline, and that was when they finally opened up to marrying outsiders, gradually evolving into their current state.

Chu Liang silently calculated in his mind.

After Crown Prince Mingde was deposed, there wasn't another prince of his caliber in that generation, so the old emperor selected the most talented among his grandsons and made him the crown prince.

In terms of generations, the chosen grandson was a generation younger than Crown Prince Mingde, but they were actually around the same age. Ten years later, the old emperor passed away, and his grandson ascended the throne. Forty years later, the old emperor's grandson passed away too. The old emperor's great-grandson then ascended to the throne. Thirty years have passed since then, and he's still the emperor now.

So, that means the current emperor has to call my teacher "Aunt."

In that case, that means I could call him "Brother."

Wow.

They reached Mount Shu soon after, and they could see beams of light flitting to and fro above the sea of clouds, all headed toward Red Cotton Peak and Silver Sword Peak. Mount Shu was now bustling with life thanks to the two businesses Chu Liang had established there.

Yet, the Discipline Master frowned when she saw this. "It's bound to get chaotic with so many outsiders coming and going."

After all, the Mount Shu Sect was a traditional immortal sect. Aside from when they held the Mount Shu Summit, it was rare for there to be so many outsiders going in and out of the sect. In terms of security, it was indeed not an ideal situation.

Chu Liang promptly suggested, "Why don't we move Red Cotton Peak and Silver Sword Peak to the outermost edge of Mount Shu? That way, we can prevent chaos from breaking out between the other peaks."

The Discipline Master pondered for a moment and then nodded. "That's indeed a good idea."

Moving mountains was not a particularly difficult task for the Mount Shu Sect.

...

Meanwhile, in the depths of nearby waters, Xuan Yinzi was shrouded in darkness and had long since lost track of night and day. He only knew that a second Spirit-Slaying Jar had finally returned to him.

A tearful expression appeared on his dirty face.

"You've finally returned..." His voice was weary and aged. "I thought you'd never come back..."

The wait had been very painful for him.

If he hadn't sent out the Spirit-Slaying Jars, he would have wasted away here for decades or centuries, dying from qi and blood depletion all the same. However, the wait for the return of his jars was pure agony.

He was like a gambler who had lost everything, save for a few silver pieces. Yet, all he could do was continue betting in the hopes of winning back his money. Unfortunately, it seemed like there was a shameless dealer on the other side who kept swallowing up his meager assets, only to give him a small win just when he was about to give up.

Having made so many Spirit-Slaying Jars already, Xuan Yinzi had no option but to continue placing his hopes on the Spirit-Slaying Jars. Yet, the odds of the Jars returning were too low...

Days had passed, and only two had returned. After the first one came back, he thought the rest would follow quickly, but they remained out of reach.

Just when he was about to give up for the second time, another jar finally returned.

"Ah..."

He drained the yin qi contained in the jar, replenishing just a minute fraction of his strength. This was a mere drop in the ocean compared to the strength he'd had at his peak. Nevertheless, in his current state, even that little bit of yin qi was enough to invigorate him.

"Come back quickly. I'm begging you!"

Chapter 429: That Would Not Be Necessary

"I finally made it back."

Chu Liang raised his hand, unleashing a torrent of sword qi that effortlessly shattered the wine-jar monsters in the river. Upon doing so, a wave of satisfaction washed over him. Although he was now the wealthiest person on Mount Shu, he still very much enjoyed the struggling progress of grinding for rewards. From the first lantern monsters to the venomous bees, thorny black spheres, and wine-jar monsters... This process of gradually collecting items was addictive.

He hadn't seen the thorny black spheres for quite some time, ever since the wine-jar monsters appeared. Nevertheless, Chu Liang didn't mind.

By now, the fruit garden had become self-sufficient. Its slow and steady growth was fine as long as he had no plans for expansion.

The Fragrance of Enlightenment had become the top priority.

At present, the fields of Intoxicating Spirit Flowers were still limited in scale, allowing for only a few leaves to be harvested each day. Although the production of Fragrance of Enlightenment was gradually increasing, the current rate was still insufficient to meet even the demands of the people on Mount Shu. After all, this item truly helped with cultivation—something the berries couldn't match. While the Fragrance of Enlightenment was far more expensive than the berries, it remained one of the more affordable natural treasures that could help with Dao Comprehension. As soon as a batch of Fragrance of Enlightenment hit the market, it sparked a frenzy among the disciples of the Mount Shu Sect. Disciples from other sects, having heard of its effects and eager to purchase some, would arrive only to discover that it was impossible to obtain any.

The precious resource was obviously first offered to the disciples of the Mount Shu Sect.

Wen Yulong himself could not keep up with the production on his own. And so, he followed Chu Liang's footsteps, in which he hired two senior brothers from the Hall of Weapons at a high price to get them to help with refining the Fragrance of Enlightenment.

When Chu Liang learned of Wen Yulong's actions, he was quite pleased. To Chu Liang, Wen Yulong's approach indicated that he was ready to take on the role of a business owner.

The Mount Shu Sect was not developed well enough, which was why its disciples had to take on such production tasks. But Chu Liang believed that these menial jobs could eventually be outsourced to smaller sects, allowing the disciples of Mount Shu to focus solely on their cultivation.

Even if they chose not to cultivate, they could simply relax and do nothing, comfortably living off the generous benefits provided by Mount Shu.

And all of this would be thanks to the foundational work laid by Chu Liang's generation.

"Huh?"

Chu Liang made his way up the river, shattering one wine-jar monster after another.

But then, he noticed that one jar was missing again!

Why is it that every time I go a few days without hunting, a wine-jar monster goes missing? Chu Liang thought, furrowing his brow in growing frustration.

This wretched wine-jar thief has already stolen two whole wine-jar monsters... The losses it's caused me are enormous. This is too much! But why does it only steal one at a time? Besides, without the White Pagoda to exchange for rewards, stealing these things is useless, right? Chu Liang pondered, perplexed by the thief's strange behavior.

He couldn't help but begin pondering another possibility.

The wine-jar monsters seem capable of accumulating yin qi. Could it be that, once they gather enough of it, they undergo some kind of transformation? Maybe they leave this place, or even gain intelligence? Chu Liang speculated, his mind racing with the possibilities.

After considering his options, Chu Liang decided to leave this last wine-jar monster alone, carefully placing a tracking talisman on it. This way, he could always sense its location.

Let's see where it ends up, he thought,

...

The next day, a message arrived from the Boundless Palace, summoning Chu Liang. Obviously, it was Venerable Wen Yuan who wanted to see him.

Chu Liang had no idea what the summons was about, but he quickly set aside his tasks and made his way over. Upon entering the quiet room of Boundless Palace, he found the Four Guardian Elders of Mount Shu already present, smiling as they looked at him.

"Venerable Sect Leader, esteemed elders," Chu Liang greeted each of them with a respectful bow.

Venerable Wen Yuan began with a note of praise, "The development at Red Cotton Peak has been progressing well lately. When we entrusted you with the peak, there were some concerns, but it seems those were unfounded. You've managed everything with a steady hand."

"It's all thanks to the Sect Leader's wise leadership and the elders' strong support," Chu Liang replied humbly with a smile. "I merely played the role of executing the tasks."

Venerable Wen Yuan smiled and shook his head. "Credit should go where it's due. Mount Shu does not encourage flattering your superiors."

Although you say that, you're still smiling happily... Chu Liang thought to himself.

"I heard that a few days ago, you let Taotie City invest ten percent? You gave them a share of the business?" the Weapons Master asked bluntly. "That won't cause any issues, right?" So this is what they wanted to ask about, Chu Liang muttered inwardly before replying with a smile. "It's not an issue. The agreement with Taotie City is only for ten years, which aligns with the time Red Cotton Peak is under my management. Once the ten years are up and Red Cotton Peak is no longer under my control, the collaboration with Taotie City will also come to an end."

"But I also heard you agreed to some sort of... wagering agreement?" the Alchemy Master inquired, his tone laced with concern. "If the business at Red Cotton Peak doesn't make that amount of money by then, you'll have to pay them six hundred thousand Vermillion-Bird coins..."

The Alchemy Master paused, seemingly too embarrassed to continue, and it was the Discipline Master who stepped in. "If you can't repay that amount, they might come to the Mount Shu Sect for it. Isn't this approach a bit reckless?"

"Your concerns are understandable," Chu Liang replied calmly. "I was planning to explain everything once things settled down. Rest assured, we won't face any issues with this wagering agreement."

"Oh?" The elders all showed expressions indicating they were eager to hear more.

Chu Liang continued, "I won't be relying solely on Taotie City's investment. There could be three or four more investors, possibly even more if the contributions are smaller. As long as I hold the majority of shares, we'll be fine. If the subsequent investments cover the debt of six hundred thousand Vermillion-Bird coins, we're guaranteed to profit. Once Red Cotton Peak flourishes, the later investors will bring in even more funds, and the terms of the agreements will be less stringent. We won't be signing any more wagering agreements with those investors."

Chu Liang explained everything in detail.

"So you're essentially taking down the east side of the wall to repair the west side of the wall," the Conservation Master was the first to grasp Chu Liang's strategy. He quickly added, "This means you'd be in perpetual debt. As long as you keep securing more investments to cover previous losses, it won't matter if the businesses are losing money... It wouldn't matter as long as we continue to claim that we're making a profit."

Whoa. Conservation Master! Very smart! As expected of the guy who studied the most in the Mount Shu Sect, Chu Liang thought, acknowledging the Conservation Master's sharp insight. Within such a short time, he figured out that this was a strategy that could land someone a seven-year prison sentence.

"You mustn't do that," Venerable Wen Yuan said, shaking his head thoughtfully. "You're not focusing on true development. Resorting to such schemes is not the right path. This will eventually lead to a dead end, and when that time comes, the Mount Shu Sect could find itself at odds with the entire world."

"Conservation Master, your wisdom is indeed remarkable, and Venerable Sect Leader, I respect your vision," Chu Liang flattered them both, then continued, "The most important thing is that Red Cotton Peak can develop. Now that we've taken the first step, I'm confident in its success."

"The elders and I all have high hopes for you," Venerable Wen Yuan nodded slightly and added, "If you're short on funds, the sect can also provide support."

Hearing this, Chu Liang immediately grasped the real reason behind his summons today.

The so-called "providing support" was simply a way for the high-ranking members of Mount Shu to get in on the investment action after seeing that Taotie City was able to make a return on their investment. They just didn't want to say it outright.

They saw that Red Cotton Peak was thriving and that Taotie City's investment was yielding returns. Now, the higher-ups of the Mount Shu Sect wanted to get a piece of the action too.

After all, Red Cotton Peak still belonged to Mount Shu, and Chu Liang had been leveraging the sect's credibility. It wouldn't sit well if all the profits were taken by outsiders.

Chu Liang blinked upon hearing this, his smile unwavering, and quickly responded with a wave of his hand, "That will not be necessary."

The elders, who had been prepared to show an expression of approval, suddenly paused.

"Hmm? Huh?"

Chapter 430: This Moment

It was through Chu Liang's efforts that Red Cotton Peak became so bustling with activity. Given that Red Cotton Peak was a territory of the sect, it was impossible for the higher-ups of the Mount Shu Sect not to take notice. Ever since they entrusted the peak to Chu Liang, the elders had been keeping a close watch on him, both openly and covertly.

It wasn't until Chu Liang sold shares to Taotie City that they began to feel uneasy.

On one hand, they were concerned that if he couldn't repay the money in the future, the debt would fall on Mount Shu; on the other hand, if he was confident he could make a profit... Why let outsiders benefit from it?

The Mount Shu Sect could invest as well.

The sect was currently short on funds, but this was precisely why they needed to invest and generate income. With this in mind, they summoned Chu Liang to ask about it. From their perspective, they weren't taking advantage of Chu Liang—they would be investing just like Taotie City and receiving the same amount of shares. What could be wrong with that?

The elders never expected Chu Liang to reject their offer.

But before they could react, Chu Liang quickly explained, "I'm relying on the sect's fame and prestigious reputation to conduct this business. How can I ask for more investment? I've already set aside a ten percent share for the sect, and quarterly dividends will certainly provide the sect with its due share."

Upon hearing this, the elders finally broke into satisfied smiles.

You should have said that earlier. Why were you playing hard to get? they thought.

Yesterday, these elders had discussed among each other for a while as they felt somewhat embarrassed to bring up this to Chu Liang. But now it turned out that Chu Liang had already prepared the dividend for them.

"But..." Chu Liang pondered as he spoke, "If the sect is willing to invest the same amount, I could give an additional ten percent. This way, the sect would hold a twenty percent stake in Red Cotton Peak's business profits."

"Twenty percent..." The elders exchanged glances, clearly intrigued.

They didn't need to know the exact figures; they only knew it was double what Taotie City would receive.

"We'll go with your suggestion," Venerable Wen Yuan promptly agreed.

"In that case, I have a small proposal," Chu Liang added.

"Please say what is on your mind," Venerable Wen Yuan encouraged as he nodded with a smile.

"Since we're discussing business operations, we should do this more formally," Chu Liang continued. "Proper accounting is necessary. I'd like to propose that Senior Brother Yuan from the Hall of Conservation manage the accounts for Red Cotton Peak."

As Red Cotton Peak's business ventures grow, accounting will become a laborious and vital responsibility. If outsiders were to manage it, Chu Liang wouldn't feel at ease. However, if a Mount Shu disciple were assigned to handle it, two concerns would arise: first, whether they could perform the task efficiently, and second, that they wouldn't have time to focus on their cultivation. Unlike physical labor, this was not a task that could be done by rotating shifts.

At this point, Chu Liang thought of someone.

Senior Brother Yuan Zhuo from the Hall of Conservation, the one with the square face.

He seemed to possess an uncanny ability, almost like photographic memory. Once he laid eyes on something, it was etched in his mind forever. He could flawlessly recall the precise location of even

the most obscure ancient book—down to the exact shelf, the corner it was tucked away in within the Hall of Conservation, and even the specific page and line where the text appeared.

This was no ordinary skill, and it made him perfectly suited for the meticulous task of managing the accounts.

"Oh?" The Conservation Master smiled, clearly pleased. "You certainly have a knack for placing the right people in the right roles. Little Square—ah, I mean Yuan Zhuo—has a photographic memory and a keen mind, and his integrity makes him the ideal candidate for managing accounts. From now on, he'll be responsible for Red Cotton Peak's finances. I'll have him meet with you later."

"Thank you for your support," Chu Liang responded promptly, expressing his gratitude with a respectful bow.

Today, the Conservation Master appeared as a young man in a yellow robe, a stark contrast to his usual form. Yet, as Chu Liang studied him, there wasn't a shred of doubt—this was unquestionably the Conservation Master. Everything about him felt just as it should.

But as Chu Liang's cultivation level increased, a subtle thought began to creep into his mind: The Conservation Master seems... different from before.

He had asked about this previously and found out that the Conservation Master was a practitioner of the Great Dao of Reincarnation. This Dao was notoriously difficult and profound, which explained why so few cultivators chose this path.

As of now, the Conservation Master was at the phase of The Myriad Forms of Reincarnation, which was why he had to be in a different form every day.

The complexities of this process were beyond Chu Liang's comprehension.

...

When Chu Liang returned to Silver Sword Peak and noticed that Di Nufeng had also come back, he made sure to greet her first.

"Esteemed teacher, you're back?" he called out as he entered.

"Oh?" Di Nufeng smiled warmly as she saw him approach. "I just went looking for you and found you weren't around. Seems like perfect timing."

"You were looking for me?" Chu Liang asked, curious. "What's it about?"

"I took a stroll around the imperial city these past few days and ended up in quite a few arguments... mostly me scolding people one-sidedly," Di Nufeng said with a chuckle. "Then, I made a bet with someone over there..."

"Hmm?"

Hearing this, Chu Liang immediately furrowed his brow.

Why does this feel so familiar?

He hesitated, then asked, "Could it be... another bet involving me?"

"Heh heh," Di Nufeng chuckled. "Last time, I made a bet with Wang Xuanling because he couldn't win me in a fight no matter what, so fighting was pointless. This time, I made a bet with someone because I couldn't win him in a fight no matter what, so fighting was pointless too. In situations like this, who else can I count on but my good disciple?"

Chu Liang scratched his head, a wry smile tugging at his lips. "Who is it this time?"

"My father," Di Nufeng replied casually.

Chu Liang raised his eyebrows once more. The guardian of the Yu Dynasty's imperial family...

This was a rank well above that of Wang Xuanling.

Before he could dwell on it further, Di Nufeng continued, "My father... he's just a pretty formidable old man. He's currently the guardian of the imperial family, the Xia Family. He's been the Dao Master of Incinerating Heaven for decades. I never cared much for cultivation or had any interest in competing with him for the control of this Great Dao—I figured I'd just wait for him to die."

That's a truly touching display of filial piety... Chu Liang thought to himself, biting back a response.

"But lately, Mount Shu has been in turmoil, and with the world finding out that the Baize celestial beast is now on the brink of ascension, those with ill intentions will surely target the Mount Shu Sect..." Di Nufeng trailed off, then added, "At least, that's what Yan Zi said."

That definitely sounds more like something she'd worry about than you... Chu Liang nodded inwardly, keeping his thoughts to himself.

"Yan Zi is the most promising person on Mount Shu to reach the eighth realm. She's planning to force a breakthrough and compete for control of the Dao with the Sword Emperor of the West Sea," Di Nufeng continued. "I don't want to slack off anymore either. Since my father stubbornly refuses to die... I'll have to forcibly break through as well. That explosion you heard last time? That was me hitting the threshold of the eighth realm."

"Esteemed teacher, you're truly impressive," Chu Liang said sincerely.

This wasn't just empty flattery.

The threshold of the eighth realm could be reached without even fighting for control of the Great Dao but it was still a stage that countless cultivators could only dream of achieving in their lifetimes. Yet, for Di Nufeng, it seemed as effortless as drinking a bowl of soup.

Whenever she decided to break through, she simply did it.

Comparing oneself to her could only lead to a jealousy so intense it might drive one to an early grave.

"Naturally, this made the Xia Family anxious," Di Nufeng said. "My father isn't worried about me taking control of the Great Dao from him... in fact, he'd love for me to take over the Great Dao of Incinerating Heaven. But what he really wants is for me to return to the Xia Family and become the guardian of the imperial family in his place."

"But those old men in the imperial family don't see it that way. They don't trust me to be the guardian... not that I even want the job," Di Nufeng added, curling her lip in disdain. "I never liked the idea anyway."

Can't really blame them, Chu Liang thought, a subtle smile tugging at the corners of his lips. Who wouldn't be worried in their position?

"I argued with them a few times, but we couldn't reach a decision, so I suggested we settle it with a bet," Di Nufeng said. "If the Mount Shu Sect can take first place in this Assembly of Immortal Sects, I'll break through and compete for control of the Great Dao with him. He won't have to hold back, and we'll let fate decide who becomes the Dao Master of the Incinerating Heavens."

"But if the Mount Shu Sect doesn't win, I'll never mention it again."

Hearing this, Chu Liang couldn't help but give a wry smile. It reminded him of a sunny afternoon nearly a year ago.

One moment, he was enjoying hotpot, singing songs, and leisurely hunting lantern monsters. The next, his esteemed teacher was telling him he had to compete against some burly guys from Jade Sword Peak.

This moment felt eerily similar.

The level of difficulty in winning at the Assembly of Immortal Sects was no less daunting than when Silver Sword Peak defeated Jade Sword Peak back then.

Currently, Mount Shu's core disciples were all quite powerful. The gap between them now wasn't as vast as the one that had existed between Chu Liang and Xu Ziyang.

However, back then, the Jade Sword Peak had been the Silver Sword Peak's only opponent.

The Assembly of Immortal Sects, on the other hand, was a grand event where all the immortal sects from the Divine Nine, the Terrestrial Ten, and even those from the human realm participated—a fierce competition among the most outstanding prodigies of the generation!

The victor's name would be sung at the Dragon Terrace, honored at the Qinghong Banquet, and celebrated with unparalleled glory under the gaze of all.

Who could resist the desire to compete for such an honor?

To win, one had to overpower all their peers of the generation.

How could that be child's play?

"You mustn't think of this as too difficult," Di Nufeng said with a smile. "All that talk about the Dragon Terrace and Qinghong Banquet is exaggerated. In the end, it's just about fighting. Just beat all your opponents, and that's it."

Chu Liang wanted to protest, but when he considered her past achievements, he knew she had every right to say that.

There was no way he could win an argument with her.