

## M. Slaying 441

### Chapter 441: The Talisman of Life Destruction

"This should be the final choice..." Chu Liang murmured, his eyes tracing the apocalyptic mural before him. "I believe the Celestial Talisman Master's intention is for us to follow our instincts—whatever resonates with us. That should guide our decision."

Ye Yongxing nodded thoughtfully, seeming to agree with Chu Liang's reasoning.

With that, he stepped forward and leapt into the door underneath the Talismanic Script of Yin.

Whoosh—

Light flashed around him, and when it cleared, a new scene unfolded.

Before him lay a meditation chamber of modest size, where an elderly man in simple robes sat cross-legged. His hair and beard were white, his attire pristine, and his expression serene.

He gave off an otherworldly aura.

Only when Ye Yongxing stepped inside did the elder slowly open his eyes. "You've arrived?" he asked.

As Ye Yongxing stared at the old man in front of him, he didn't display the usual unease he felt when facing others. He could tell that this old man was neither truly alive nor marked by the signs of death.

"Esteemed Senior, my apologies for disturbing you," Ye Yongxing said politely, bowing respectfully despite the peculiarities of the elder.

"No need for courtesy. I am but a fragment of the Celestial Talisman Master's spirit, left here as a vessel of memory and talismanic script," the elder said calmly. "Whether you can comprehend the talisman or not depends entirely on your own fortune."

"Understood," Ye Yongxing replied, still maintaining a respectful tone.

The elder then asked, "Why did you choose this door?"

"Because..." Ye Yongxing paused before continuing, "I sensed an aura of despair and emptiness. This is why I thought the answer might be tied to the power of Yin."

When he gazed at the mural, all he saw was despair and desolation—heavens shattering, the world collapsing, lightning, fire, and floods... all life wiped from the earth. Only destruction remained.

"Hmm..." The elder's voice sounded deep as he gently waved his hand. "Come with me."

As the voice faded, Ye Yongxing's vision shifted rapidly, and in an instant, it felt as though he was swept into the river of time, moving backward.

It was a desolate, dark era of chaos. He saw a young boy, no more than seven or eight, knocked to the ground in a muddy pool of rain, as several burly officials held him down with clubs.

There was another young girl at the age of around four to five being dragged out of the house nearby by another official. Both children were crying loudly, their voices lost in the pouring rain, heard only by themselves.

"It was the twilight of an ancient dynasty, when soldiers were like bandits, and officials like thugs..."

The elder's voice echoed from beyond the scene, drawing Ye Yongxing deeper into the memory. "That year, my parents were imprisoned for minor offenses and soon died in prison. The officials came to seize our belongings, and my sister and I were separated, lost to one another."

Ye Yongxing found himself immersed in the scene, feeling the boy's crushing despair and helplessness. The boy stood in the storm, his sobs turning to cries of rage, consumed by a hatred that seemed endless.

The young boy wanted to kill all these officials!

But he was young, weak, and powerless. Just surviving to the next day was challenging enough, not to mention executing a revenge.

Yet he swore to take revenge, to kill every last one of them.

He had heard tales of immortals beyond the East Sea, so he begged his way to the shore, built a small raft, and set sail. But not long after, a storm capsized his raft, casting him into the sea.

He was fortunate that the heavens took pity on him. When he awoke, he found that not only was he alive, but he had drifted to an island where an immortal sect was located.

However, his talent for cultivation was mediocre.

"None of the immortal masters on the island were willing to take him as a disciple. After enduring countless cold stares, he eventually apprenticed himself to an elderly talisman-maker.

This was the first teacher of his life.

At that time, the Dao of Talisman-Making was an obscure and underdeveloped path within the vast world of cultivation. There were very few talismanic scripts created, and the execution of these talismanic scripts was crude.

But soon, the elder discovered that the boy possessed a rare talent for talisman-making. Not only was he quick-minded and intuitive, but he also had a natural gift for creating new applications for talismans.

In less than ten years, the boy had grown into the strongest of the island's younger generation...

He could no longer be called a boy.

He was a young teenage prodigy.

Yet many still looked down on him because he practiced the Dao of Talisman-Making, a path in which advancement was rather restricted. His future seemed predictable—no matter how far he progressed, he would only become a talisman specialist, supporting others in their cultivation.

But the young man didn't care.

For years, he had cultivated tirelessly, always holding onto the hope of returning home to find his sister once his cultivation was strong enough. When that day finally came, he set out on the road back home.

Ten years had passed, but his homeland remained unchanged.

The good and kind were still treated like beasts, while wolves sat in high positions. He found the enemies from back then and began to track down his sister's whereabouts. Along the way, he searched, questioned, and killed, until he finally found where his sister had been.

It turned out his young sister had been captured and was meant to be sold with other girls. But she had tried to escape multiple times, and not long after, she was beaten to death during one of her attempts.

The sister he had longed to reunite with had been dead for ten years.

The young man's heart broke into pieces.

He had killed all his enemies from the past, but it still wasn't enough. He wanted to obliterate this entire world, a world steeped in evil. One word echoed in his mind, over and over: Kill, kill, kill...

It was a chaotic and maddening Dao essence, similar to the one depicted in the apocalyptic mural. Intense rage and killing intent surged within Ye Yongxing, but he fought to keep his mind clear, ultimately preventing himself from being consumed by the emotion.

When he opened his eyes again, he was still in the small meditation chamber.

"This is..." His eyes flickered as he looked at the elder, "The story of the Celestial Talisman Master?"

"These are the earliest days of his life. It is where it all started," the elder replied. "The wounds from that period, however, never mended, even as he lived on.."

Ye Yongxing fell into deep thought. After a moment, he raised his hand and gently traced a complex script in the air.

Where his fingers passed, light gathered, and in an instant, it transformed into a sharp, black talismanic script!

The aura of killing intent soared toward the heavens!

This was the culmination of everything he had witnessed in those scenes—the talismanic script he had finally comprehended.

This was the talismanic script that the Celestial Talisman Master created when he was consumed by the overwhelming killing intent.

The Great Talisman of Life Destruction!

...

When Ye Yongxing stepped through the door under the Talismanic Script of Yin, the others in the group were surprised. They hadn't expected him, someone who was usually so quiet, to display such determination.

But Chu Liang understood.

"For this trial, the most important thing is to stay true to yourself," Chu Liang said. Then, without any hesitation, he stepped through the door underneath the Talismanic Script of Yang.

With a flash of light, his eyes opened to the sight of an old man in plain robes with sharp and well-defined features.

When he arrived, the old man asked the same question.

"Why did you choose this door?"

"Because..." Chu Liang pondered before answering, "I saw life in that painting."

"Life?" The elder smiled. "That is a mural of doomsday."

"Indeed." Chu Liang nodded. "But after the storm, the land is replenished with water. After the fire, the soil becomes fertile. And when plants die, they turn into spiritual qi for the future... What seems like the end of the world is also the beginning of rebirth."

This was exactly why he and Ye Yongxing had made different choices.

While some saw destruction in the mural of doomsday, others saw the rebirth hidden within that destruction.

The elder continued to smile, neither confirming nor denying his words. With a gentle wave of his sleeve, he said softly, "Come with me."

In the next moment, Chu Liang felt the light and shadows around him shift, as if time itself were rewinding.

When everything settled, he found himself in a peaceful, serene world. Before him stood a mountain, its summit crowned with golden and jade palaces and pavilions. This was the site of the towering Celestial Talisman Sect.

#### Chapter 442: None Could Keep Up

At this moment, the Celestial Talisman Sect was hosting a grand apprentice acceptance ceremony.

At the very top of the high platform stood a man whose youthful appearance contrasted with the depth of experience in his eyes—he was the legendary Celestial Talisman Master.

With his own strength, he revitalized the Dao of Talisman-Making in the mortal realm, single-handedly established the Great Dao of Talismanic Script, and attained the Heavenly Origin. He was one of the three most powerful figures in the world.

In terms of founding a new school and opening up new paths, his contributions to the nine provinces made him arguably the most influential figure in the world of immortality cultivators.

The Dao of Talisman-Making today had changed drastically from a hundred years ago, and the Celestial Talisman Sect had become the place where youths of the nine provinces aspired to join.

Unfortunately, not everyone was suited for the Dao of Talisman-Making; even the most talented prodigies might fail to grasp its fundamentals and would not be accepted by the sect.

Just moments ago, a young lady in a flowing green dress had amazed everyone present.

Her dress billowed gracefully as she demonstrated a talismanic technique she had created on her own.

This caught the attention of the Celestial Talisman Master.

The Celestial Talisman Master personally descended and accepted her as his successor.

"What is your name?" the Celestial Talisman Master asked.

"Cui Yu'er," she replied with a smile.

From that day onward, the lively and energetic Cui Yu'er became a part of the Celestial Talisman Master's life, adding a touch of brightness to his otherwise solemn existence.

After ten years, the Celestial Talisman Master began to sense that something was wrong.

He realized that over the years, Cui Yu'er's feelings for him had changed, and they were no longer just those of a disciple toward her master.

What frightened him most was discovering that he, too, had unknowingly changed.

The Celestial Talisman Master had never taken a partner, and many hoped he would one day find someone to cherish and spend the rest of his life with, but that person could never be his disciple.

So, he sent Cui Yu'er down the mountain for training, unwilling to see her again. He hoped that time would dissolve the unnatural bond that had formed between them.

Yet, time didn't heal everything; instead, it deepened his suffering. Cui Yu'er returned to the mountain repeatedly, hoping to see him, but each time, he refused.

Each rejection caused unbearable pain.

Just as he began to question whether he should defy everything and give in to his feelings, terrible news arrived from the foot of the mountain—Cui Yu'er, in her eagerness to break through the seventh realm, had succumbed to qi deviation and died.

She left the world like the last whiff of fragrance and a shattered jade.

When the Celestial Talisman Master rushed to the site, all that greeted him was her cold, lifeless body, still dressed in the usual green dress.

He felt as though the heavens had collapsed.

In his life, he had endured two soul-crushing losses. The first had driven him to the brink of destroying everything; the second made him want to save everything.

For the first time in his long life dedicated to the Dao of Talisman-Making, an impossible thought crossed his mind.

The Celestial Talisman Master wanted to create a talismanic script capable of bringing people back to life.

It was then he realized how easy it was to take life, yet how difficult it was to restore it.

In the days that followed, he threw himself into researching this Talismanic Script of Life, even though deep down, he knew it was an absurd pursuit.

How could it be possible?

On a certain day a hundred years later, he suddenly noticed that the yellow leaves were falling, the mountains and the rivers appeared distant, and the world was enveloped in the fading light of dusk.



He knew then that his lifespan was nearing its end.

And in that final moment, as death approached, he finally understood the true meaning of life...

The autumn wind brought death, and soon the snow fell and melted. Only when lightning strikes in winter and snow falls in spring can one sing freely with the wind[1]. The meaning of life would remain hidden in the smallest moments. Though he could never bring his love back, as his fingers gently brushed against the leaf...

The yellow leaf sprang to life.

"This is..."

As the flow of light and energy shifted, Chu Liang slowly opened his eyes, feeling the divine insight he had just gained. He moved his fingers lightly through the air.

Moments later, a golden talismanic script shimmered into existence.

The elder's voice echoed softly, "That is called the Talisman of Life Restoration."

...

After Ye Yongxing and Chu Liang made their choices, the remaining three took a moment to reflect before selecting their own paths.

Situ Guanhai studied the mural on the wall, pondering deeply before saying, "It seems I must follow my heart and it's telling me to choose the Door of Yin."

After a brief hesitation, Xi Miaoxian made the same choice as him.

They both sensed the stillness of death within the mural.

But Monk Pushan made a different choice.

"I'll trust Chu Liang," he said, after much deliberation, deciding on the door beneath the Talisman of Yang.

Upon entering their respective doors, none of them encountered those who had gone before. Each was led into their own meditation chamber, where they met an elder in simple robes.

The elder, smiling warmly as always, took them on a journey back through the river of time, guiding them against its current. As they traveled, each one gained a profound insight.

In the end, both Situ Guanhai and Xi Miaoxian comprehended the black Talisman of Life Destruction.

But Monk Pushan was left somewhat stunned.

"This..." He muttered to himself as he reflected on the Dao essence he had just experienced, "Is way too hard..."

Although following Chu Liang's path rarely led him astray, it wasn't always the correct choice. Compared to the black Talisman of Life Destruction, the golden Talisman of Life Restoration demanded a far deeper understanding.

Individuals who did not perceive the hidden meaning of life within the mural would not be able to understand the final talisman even if they managed to pass through the right door and enter the final stage.

While he did experience personal growth this time, he was unable to master the final talismanic script.

...

"Hmmm..." Feng Chaoyang muttered as he stared at the nine doorways in front of him and fell deep in thought.

When everyone else successfully comprehended the Talismanic Script of the Eight Trigrams, he did not. He had not been with them when they defeated Xiangliu and then entered the grand hall.

He had been by himself, silently reflecting on his own.

As the head disciple of Celestial King Sect, Feng Chaoyang was certainly no fool. In fact, he had contended with the prodigies of other immortal sects at a younger age than most, and in terms of pure talent, he surpassed many of them.

However, in this hidden realm of talismanic script, his abilities were of little use, which made him appear somewhat out of place.

Once outside, he was confident that in terms of combat power, he would not lose to anyone.

Once he understood what was required in this realm, he quickly comprehended the Talismanic Scripts of the Eight Trigrams by observing the celestial phenomena and finally made his way here.

But upon reaching the palace, the first checkpoint stopped him.

With Xiangliu already dead, he could no longer see the serpent.

Still, faced with the nine doorways, he began to ponder using what little wisdom he had.

"A serpent is drawn above..." Feng Chaoyang muttered. "When you attack a snake, you should strike it seven cun below its head, so I'll choose the seventh door."

This was the decision he made after careful consideration. With confidence, he strode through the seventh doorway.

Whoosh—

With a flash of light, he found himself standing in a crumbling, dilapidated hall.

The place was in ruins, yet oddly familiar—it was clearly the very old site of the Celestial Talisman Sect where they had been when they first arrived to enter the hidden realm.

Did I already exit the hidden realm? I must have chosen the wrong doorway...

"You're out already?" The voice of an elder from the Celestial Pivot Pavilion sounded behind him.

Feng Chaoyang turned around to see the gray-bearded elder who had been waiting there. Given the close ties between Celestial King Sect and Celestial Pivot Pavilion, they naturally knew each other. In fact, they had traveled here together.

"Yeah..." Feng Chaoyang paused, then waved his hand with a wide grin. "Fast, right? None of them can keep up with me!"

The gray-bearded elder from the Celestial Pivot Pavilion looked at him, utterly perplexed.

Is being the first to exit really something to be proud of?

Chapter 443: There's a Thief

As Chu Liang felt the golden talismanic script in his palm, he found it strange and peculiar.

It didn't seem to contain much spiritual energy at first glance, but that was likely due to his low cultivation level. The talisman itself, however, held unimaginable mystical abilities.

Simply put, it had the power to grant life.

"This Talisman of Life Restoration was the final insight gained by the Celestial Talisman Master in the last moments of his life. It contained the complete essence of the Great Dao of the talismanic script for time. Today, it has finally found a successor," the elder said with a smile. "I hope you will make good use of it, and perhaps... even complete it."

"Complete it?" Chu Liang asked, surprised. "It's still incomplete?"

"The Celestial Talisman Master wished to create a celestial talisman that transcended life and death, one capable of reviving his loved one. But, alas, he lacked the strength..." the old man explained.

"The Celestial Talisman Master of every generation since then has shared this same grand aspiration, but none have been able to break free from the constraints of the heavens and the earth."

Transcending life and death... When Chu Liang heard this, he chuckled. If this was something that even the previous generations of Celestial Talisman Masters couldn't accomplish, how could he possibly dare to think that he could do it?

Moreover, the Great Dao of Talismanic Scripts originated from the forces of heaven and earth, a method of channeling these powers into oneself. How could one possibly break free from the constraints of the heavens and earth?

He raised the Talisman of Life Restoration again and asked, "Esteemed senior, since this talisman can grant life to anything, could it bring you to life?"

He wasn't asking to revive the Celestial Talisman Master, but rather, he wanted to grant the fragment of divine intent a chance to live a life of its own.

"Oh?" The elder chuckled softly. "You're the first to think of that, but I am merely a wisp of divine intent, without a body of my own. I was never alive, so how could I be brought to life?"

"I see..." Chu Liang murmured. He wasn't trying to do a good deed, but having acquired the Talisman of Life Restoration, he simply wanted to test its power.

But there wasn't anything convenient at hand.

First, it would be ineffective if used on objects with too much spiritual energy. The higher the spiritual nature of the item, the greater the power required, and at his current level, it would easily exceed his limits.

Secondly, he didn't dare experiment with important items, such as the enchanted tools and flying swords he often used. If something went wrong, the loss would be significant.

Especially with something like the Large-Headed Doll. If it gained divine intelligence and developed a consciousness, how could it ever be content to work peacefully again?

After some thought, he decided to take out a berry.

He slowly executed the Talisman of Life Restoration with his right hand, gradually merging it with the berry. A faint golden glow immediately enveloped it.

Whoosh—

Moments later, a surge of life energy burst forth from the berry.

Plants were always beings with life energy. If not, there wouldn't be so many plants that managed to cultivate and attain the status of demons. The "Life Restoration" part in the name of the talisman referred not just to the restoration of life but, more importantly, to the awakening of or the development of the target's consciousness.

As Chu Liang stared at the berry in his palm, a sudden message popped into his mind.

—What the fuck are you looking at?

The berry wasn't speaking, of course. But since it had developed a consciousness through Chu Liang, he could easily sense the messages it was sending. If it had been anyone else, they would have probably just noticed the fruit twitching slightly.

This little thing is quite fierce... Chu Liang was just about to smile when the berry spoke to him again.

—Wipe that wicked grin off your face! I'm warning you, don't even think about eating me! I'm poisonous!

It even sensed my bad intentions? Wait, how did it figure that out?

Chu Liang asked, "Don't you know I gave you life?"

The berry gave a blunt response.

—Well, thank you. So you won't eat me now, right?

"..."

Logically speaking, since I gave it life, I should be like its dad, right? But why isn't this fruit showing a bit of respect or gratitude? An unfilial fruit?

...

Mount Shu, Cloud Horizon Peak.

The intricately carved bronze stove hissed with steam as red-hot coals radiated warmth into the crisp air. Shang Ziliang, with a gleam in his eye, sliced a perfect square from the large slab of meat beside him and carefully laid it over the fire to grill.

"The weather's getting colder; it's the perfect time to enjoy something hearty," he said, his face lighting up with satisfaction. "This is premium flying-deer meat from the Western Regions, a gift from one of my father's associates."

"Exactly!" Lackey A, seated on his left, chimed in with enthusiasm. "Deer meat is known to boost yang qi. We're so lucky to be following you, Boss. We get to enjoy this feast!"

As the deer meat was about to be cooked, Lackey B promptly held up a plate for Shang Ziliang to serve the meat on.

"These past few days have been draining. I really need to recharge," Shang Ziliang sighed, cutting a fresh piece. "Big Bro is always on the move, Lin Bei's busy with his breakthrough, and I'm stuck managing the business, running between the fruit garden and Red Cotton Peak..."

"Tell me about it!" Lackey A nodded vigorously. "Managing the fruit garden alone is exhausting. With our business expanding, we should ask Big Bro to hire more help."

Meanwhile, Lackey B quietly transferred a chunk of grilled meat onto his sauce plate.

"Hiring isn't that easy," Shang Ziliang replied. "I talked to Big Bro about it. We have to hire disciples from Mount Shu as it's hard to trust outsiders. But at the same time, we can't expect Mount Shu disciples to work all day either. Finding reliable people is tough."

He glanced over and noticed that the plate was empty, so he cut another piece of meat and carefully placed it on the grill.

"True!" Lackey A agreed. "Before, it was manageable with just our core group, but now the workload is too much. Just in the fruit garden, without a dozen hands, it's impossible to keep up. Every day, berries are either stolen or eaten. We're lucky the losses aren't too bad yet—otherwise, the business would be dying."

Lackey B once again held up the plate for Shang Ziliang to fill with freshly grilled meat.

"Haaaaa!" Shang Ziliang sighed again. "I've been neglecting my cultivation lately. Everyone at Mount Shu envies our wealth, but no one understands the pressure I'm under."

"Couldn't agree more!" Lackey A chimed in. "The members in our core group keeps leaving. If we don't get more people, we won't be able to keep everything running. This is becoming urgent!"

Lackey B, looking just as eager, dipped his freshly grilled meat into the sauce, cut it into bite-sized pieces, and quietly savored each one.

"Exactly!" Shang Ziliang said with newfound resolve. "We have to convince Big Bro to hire more people, or we'll never be able to keep Red Cotton Peak and Silver Sword Peak running. I'll talk to him as soon as he's back from the hidden realm!"

He glanced at the plate and noticed it was empty again. He then cut a large piece of meat and placed it on the grill.

"You're right!" Lackey A agreed eagerly. "There are plenty of senior brothers at Mount Shu who would jump at the chance to help. Some have even asked me in private. Big Bro really doesn't need to worry so much."

The "worries" Lackey A referred to were Chu Liang's concerns that involving too many Mount Shu disciples might interfere with their cultivation.

Lackey B again handed over the plate for Shang Ziliang to serve the grilled meat.



"That settles it!" Shang Ziliang said, smiling confidently. "But first, let's enjoy this meal... huh?"

When he reached to cut another slice of meat, he realized there was nothing left but a bare pile of bones.

He turned to the plate, but it was empty, with not even a scrap of meat left.

"Where's the meat?" he asked, his eyes narrowing at the two lackeys.

"I don't know!" Lackey A stammered as his eyes grew wide.

Lackey B, wiping grease from his mouth, looked equally shocked and gasped, "There's a thief?"

#### Chapter 444: No Idlers on Silver Sword Peak

As the group stepped out of the hidden realm of talismanic scripts, they saw the gray-bearded elder of the Celestial Pivot Pavilion standing there, waiting for them.

"Young Master Feng had some urgent matters at home," the gray-bearded elder announced brightly. "So he left ahead of you."

Chu Liang gave a nod in acknowledgment, understanding all too well. If he had been in Feng Chaoyang's shoes, he would not have wanted to linger a moment longer after such a disheartening defeat in the hidden realm of talismanic scripts.

"So, how did it go?" the gray-bearded elder asked, eyes gleaming with curiosity. "Did you gain anything valuable?"

Ye Yongxing remained silent. Without a word, he raised his hand, summoning the ominous black Talisman of Life Destruction and demonstrated its power in front of the elder. It drifted forward, and as it did, everything it touched withered—grass shriveled to dust, trees lost their leaves in a blink, and even the stone walls cracked and decayed, aging centuries in mere seconds. If this were unleashed on a human, the outcome would be painfully obvious.

Such lethal power... Chu Liang silently compared it with his Talisman of Life Restoration. Although the effects of the Talisman of Life Restoration were more extraordinary, it didn't seem to offer much practical benefit—aside from making a berry curse at him.

On the other hand, the Talisman of Life Destruction was a clear and immediate boost to combat power.

"We gained the same knowledge as Young Hero Ye," answered Xi Miao-xian and Situ Guan-hai as they displayed the power of their Talismans of Life Destruction.

A peculiar expression showed up on Monk Pushan's face as he said, "My temperament and understanding have both greatly improved."

"So you got nothing?" the gray-bearded elder remarked.

Monk Pushan immediately felt a wave of frustration and disappointment, but he couldn't really complain. Chu Liang hadn't asked him to copy his answers. However, he hadn't expected that he would end up with nothing, while everyone else who made different choices walked away with something.

He could only blame himself for not being sharp enough to figure it out.

At that moment, Chu Liang summoned a golden talismanic script, instantly drawing everyone's attention.

"This is the legendary golden talisman, isn't it?" Xi Miao-xian exclaimed in surprise. "Young Hero Chu, you actually got it!"

"I was just lucky," Chu Liang replied with a smile. "As for its effects, it's hard to demonstrate since this talisman consumes a significant amount of cultivation energy."

Hearing this, everyone assumed he was hiding something, so they didn't ask any more questions. After expressing their amazement, they each went their separate ways.

In reality, Chu Liang wasn't intentionally hiding anything from them. The secret of the talisman was secondary. The truth was that activating it truly consumed a tremendous amount of cultivation energy. Even though the berry only contained a trace of spiritual energy, restoring life to it had drained nearly half of his Sea of Qi.

If he even tried to activate something with higher spiritual energy, it could easily drain all of his cultivation energy. Such heaven-defying feats naturally required an immense amount of power.

Although the trial in the hidden realm didn't last long, it had taken a great mental toll on Chu Liang, leaving him feeling quite exhausted. He quickly returned to Mount Shu, intending to rest for a while.

Unexpectedly, Shang Ziliang showed up soon after Chu Liang returned.

"What's the matter?" Chu Liang asked.

"There's something important I need to discuss with you. The moment I heard you were back, I came straight over," Shang Ziliang said, his expression troubled. "With you and Lin Bei both away lately, it's been just a few of us trying to manage Silver Sword Peak and Red Cotton Peak, and to be honest, we're barely holding it together..."

He went on to explain to Chu Liang the challenges they were facing, all stemming from a serious lack of manpower.

In fact, Shang Ziliang had already suggested to Chu Liang that they recruit more fellow Mount Shu disciples. With more help, they could not only keep everything running smoothly but also expand their operations significantly.

However, Chu Liang still believed that cultivators should prioritize their cultivation. He worried that involving or allowing too many Mount Shu disciples to join might eventually affect the sect's overall strength.

After all, not everyone, like him, had the advantage of a few Large-Headed Dolls working tirelessly day and night, giving them plenty of extra free time.

"It really has been tough on all of you these past few days," Chu Liang said. "I'll figure something out."

Those three from Cloud Horizon Peak had indeed been running around tirelessly lately, and the business couldn't continue relying solely on them.

...

A few days later.

In the fruit garden of Silver Sword Peak, Chu Liang stood before a field of Golden Vein Flowers, trees, and rocks, clearing his throat. "Alright, let's have a meeting," he announced.

There wasn't a single person in sight, making his words seem rather odd.

But in the next second, a chorus of voices echoed back.

"Another meeting? Why are we meeting every day?"

"So noisy, so noisy!"

"A meeting? Did you even fucking water me before calling for one?"

All these responses came from the flowers, grass, and trees in front of him!

It turned out that after Chu Liang had considered the issue of being short-handed, he had an epiphany... overseeing the fruit garden and guarding the streets didn't necessarily require cultivators. Shang Ziliang's preference for using fellow disciples was simply because they needed "trustworthy" individuals.

But this meant that as long as they were trustworthy, it didn't matter if they weren't human, right?

And as luck would have it, he possessed the Talisman of Life Restoration, which could grant life.

However, merely giving life as he had done with that berry wouldn't be enough. The berry's spiritual nature was too weak, making it incapable of proper communication.

So, he set his sights on something greater—the Golden Vein Flower. Unlike individual fruits, the mother plant of the flower held far more spiritual energy.

He decided to try giving life to a Golden Vein Flower.

What followed was an unexpected half-hour of the flower venting its pent-up frustrations... mostly complaints about how Chu Liang had been harvesting its fruits for years to sell, trampling the flower beds with visitors every day... Now that it could finally speak, it didn't hesitate to air its grievances.

Chu Liang listened, frowning the entire time.

What's with the bad temper of everything grown on Silver Sword Peak? Could it be they're taking after the Peak Master? he mused.

Still, Chu Liang saw the potential. As long as their spiritual nature is strong enough for normal speech, they could serve as his eyes and ears. By spreading them throughout the entire fruit garden, it would save a lot of manpower.

Over the past few days, he had worked tirelessly, giving life to dozens of spirit plants in the garden.

Soon, they would become the eyes and ears that Chu Liang would position throughout the entire Wonderland.

"Quiet down, quiet down!" Chu Liang waved his hand. "The main point of today's meeting is to tell you: don't make noise for no reason! If nothing unlawful is happening, just stay quiet like other plants and don't ruin the visitors' experience. If someone commits an illegal act, then speak up and do your duty.

"When the Wonderland expands and becomes bigger, you will be the first internal staff. By then, I will give you arts manuals for cultivation. I will get spirit potions and herbs to increase your cultivation levels. It's only a matter of time before you all turn into real demons!"

Chu Liang's statement struck these plants where it hurt the most.

Although they had been granted life by Chu Liang, Chu Liang did not give them much spiritual energy, making them incomparable to those demonic beasts who had come into existence by cultivating on their own. Only by becoming real demons could they truly achieve success in cultivation.

Chu Liang remained at the center of it all, as everything still depended on him.

The creatures he had brought to life had no choice but to accept the tasks he assigned. Watching his group of swaying "employees," a sense of satisfaction filled Chu Liang.

Thanks to the Celestial Talisman Master's gift, he thought. I've finally found diligent, tireless workers who never need vacations and survive on nothing but photosynthesis. As long as they were originally plants, it's easy to make this happen.

He already had bigger plans for the future. I'll awaken all the plants, rocks, and trees on Silver Sword Peak to act as my spies. Soon, every tree, bush, and stone on this mountain will follow my command. There won't be a single idle thing on Silver Sword Peak—not even the objects.

Even the trees by the entrance would have tasks, and the stones on the mountain would have to pay rent!

But this is still small-scale, Chu Liang mused. When my cultivation grows stronger, I'll grant life to each of my enchanted tools.

He understood that the key difference between legendary artifacts and ordinary ones, aside from their power, was the presence of a spirit.

Although simply adding a spirit wouldn't immediately enhance the quality of an enchanted tool, he could try giving the spirit cultivation manuals to train on its own. As the spirit grew stronger over time, the tool would naturally become more powerful as well.

When that day comes, he might not need to replace his tools with stronger ones, as they would be able to cultivate and grow stronger on their own. That would be truly magnificent.

Chapter 445: The Great High Priest

"Kaw~"

Hearing a bird's cry outside, Chu Liang went out to take a look and discovered that this month's issue of The Seven Stars Gazette had arrived.

Many major events had occurred in the world of immortality cultivators during the past month, and Chu Liang had experienced the biggest one firsthand.

He flipped past the section on the "Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures," and it was just as he'd expected. The first article he saw in the "Chronicles of the Nine Provinces" was about the great battle at the headquarters of the Four Seas Whale Gang, as well as the cause of it and what happened after.

The article started with the Celestial Charm Sect's plot to harm Xu Bashan. Then it continued with the Mount Shu Sect's search for their disciple Chu Liang and how Di Nufeng had beaten up Chi Menshen with her fists. Even Jiang Shenting's conspiracy was revealed. The entire sequence of events was truly full of twists and turns.

What surprised Chu Liang, however, was that The Seven Stars Gazette did not criticize his teacher this time. In fact, the author of the article spared no praise when describing Di Nufeng.

She was portrayed as an Eminent One who cared deeply for her disciple and was filled with righteousness. This was very different from how she was usually depicted in the gazette.

Chu Liang guessed that when his esteemed teacher asked the Celestial Pivot Pavilion to help find him, she had probably had a little "talk" with them... Or perhaps that had been the main purpose, and finding him had been secondary.

At the end of the article, the Celestial Pivot Pavilion warned all the immortal sects in the nine provinces about the Celestial Charm Sect's resurgence. They reminded everyone to be vigilant against this powerful group of madmen who wished for the world to descend into chaos.

The second article was about how there had been another horde of beasts attacking the Western Regions.

Several thousand years had passed since the scattered survivors of the demon race had fled to the Far West, yet the human race still hadn't forgotten those terrifying beings. Moreover, with the recent uproar caused by the Demon God's return, the humans became much more vigilant toward the Far West.

The Western Regions was a buffer zone between the lands under the rule of the Yu Dynasty and the demon race, so the slightest sign of trouble in the Western Regions would send a wave of terror through the Yu Dynasty.

Beast hordes only attacked the Western Regions when major events occurred in the Far West. This time, the Celestial Pivot Pavilion used various methods to investigate, but they could not figure out what had been the triggering event. Perhaps the imperial court had intelligence reports with the answers, but those would never be made public.

Over the course of the past several thousand years, some prosperous cities had emerged along the border of the Yu Dynasty's western province. They specialized in trading with the states of the Western Regions and had developed a thriving trade network.

However, since the news of the Demon God's return started to spread six months ago, large numbers of people left the western province and moved closer to the capital of Yu. That caused business in the borderlands to plummet.

"The Demon God..."

Chu Liang looked at the words and felt there was something very odd about what was reported in the article.

Previously, the Far West had sent out divine envoys to announce the Demon God's return to all the demons in the world. They had caused such huge waves of trouble that made everyone believe the Demon God's return was a certainty. Yet, after all this time, there had been no further news. It seemed like a thunderstorm that rained only a little despite the loud rumbling.

That made the demons' previous actions appear quite strange. If there was no confirmed news about the Demon God, they should have quietly searched for it. Why had they made such a huge commotion about it first?

It was truly perplexing.

Chu Liang then turned to the section on the "Uncommon Tales of the Martial World."

The biggest news was that the final selection for the South Melody Conservatory's next head disciple was approaching!

After the recent competition rounds of concert tours, Shen Qingyan's popularity was the highest, with Yu Xiang'er slightly behind but not far off, and Xue Lingxue close in third. With such a tight



competition going into the final selection, it was impossible to predict who would become the next head disciple.

The competition would be intense. Fans from all over would rush to the South Melody Conservatory to support their favorites. It wouldn't be surprising if an someone with fewer supporters but immense talent and skill managed to turn the tide. It was sure to be a very exciting final round.

Chu Liang wasn't interested in these things, but he could imagine that it would certainly be a magnificent event. Quite a few disciples from Mount Shu would surely be rushing over to attend it... for example, a certain disciple from Jade Sword Peak with the surname Lin.

...

The Mountain Range of the Seven Kings, the Far West.

At the peak of a steep mountain range that seemed forged from black iron stood a modest temple. It appeared rather plain and small, with only the word "Temple" inscribed simply on the horizontal signboard hanging above its doors.

Yet, this small temple was the center of power for the entire demon race in the Far West. The temple's commands had to be followed, even by the Seven Great Demon Kings.

At this moment, two people were waiting outside the temple.

One of them was a woman dressed in colorful robes. She was fair-skinned and so immaculately beautiful that there was an otherworldly aura about her. It seemed as though she belonged not to the Land of Demons but to the Land of Immortals.

The other person was a young man. He had long, flowing hair, bronze skin, and the face of a stalwart person. There were three purple stripes on his left cheek.

"Caiyi?" the long-haired man said, pleasantly surprised. "You're here too?"

The woman, Caiyi, replied indifferently, "The Great High Priest summoned me."

"The Great High Priest didn't summon the others, just the two of us. Does that mean we're destined for each other?" the long-haired man asked cheerfully.

Caiyi frowned in annoyance. She couldn't be bothered talking to him.

The long-haired man was Changfeng, the current Demon King of Daze[1] and the leader of the Serpent Clan.

Changfeng had nearly two hundred concubines from various clans, yet he constantly sought Caiyi's hand in marriage, much to her exasperation. She always avoided speaking to him at whenever the demon kings met up, but the temple had unexpectedly summoned only the two of them this time.

As the atmosphere grew awkward, a divine envoy wearing a bronze mask emerged from the temple and announced loudly, "The Great High Priest invites the Demon King of Qingqiu and the Demon King of the Daze into the temple!"

Without the Great High Priest's command, even the demon kings, the pinnacle of the demon race's power, would not dare enter the temple. That was how much authority the Great High Priest held.

The two demon kings entered the temple and came face to face with the Demon God's statue on the altar in front of them.

It was the only statue of the Demon God in the mortal realm. The face on the statue was indistinct. The body seemed humanoid, with six outstretched wings on the back. Despite being just a statue, it exuded an overwhelming aura that forced even the demon kings to avert their gazes.

Below the statue stood a very tall figure, nearly one zhang tall[2], wearing a golden mask. In his right hand, he held a scepter woven from the manes and feathers of a myriad of beasts. It symbolized the unity of all demonic creatures and his authority over them.

Caiyi and Changfeng both greeted him with a bow. "Great High Priest."

"Demon King of Qingqiu, Demon King of the Daze..." The Great High Priest's voice was deep and distant as if he were speaking to them from another realm. "I have summoned you to entrust you with an important task."

"We will obey God's will," the two demon kings replied in unison.

"The last time God's aura appeared, I dispatched the divine envoys to announce it to the world, but God has yet to arrive. The other demon kings are confused," the Great High Priest said slowly, "and I believe you are too."

The two demon kings did not reply. Though they dared not question their god, they couldn't help but have doubts about the Great High Priest.

As the demons in the Far West increased in number over the past several thousands of years, the prestige of their god gradually faded within the demon race. The temple was still revered by the demon race, but the demon kings no longer obeyed as they once had. Eventually, some internal power struggles emerged.

As the demons lost faith in their god, the status of the temple and the divine envoys naturally declined. Nevertheless, when news of the Demon God's return was spread, the temple, which shared the Demon God's fate, suddenly rose in power once more, regaining its unquestionable authority.

After that, time continued to pass without further news, and their god still had yet to descend to save the people of the Far West. The demons' fervent belief in the Demon God gradually died down once. Some demons even suspected that the Great High Priest might have fabricated the story to elevate his own authority. Of course, these doubts could never be spoken aloud.

Nonetheless, in the lands of the nine provinces beyond the reach of the Demon God's temple, such rumors had long run rampant. Many humans mocked the demons, claiming that their god was a mere fabrication. It turned out that the humans had been pointlessly apprehensive all this time.

"The truth is, it has indeed appeared," the Great High Priest continued. "However, our Supreme God remains deeply asleep and oblivious inside a chaotic mass. I can sense its presence, but I cannot communicate with it through the statue. That's why I sent the divine envoys to announce the news to all the demons in the world, hoping that the collective prayers of our Supreme God's countless subjects may break through that chaotic mass."

"This method has indeed been effective. I can feel God's sleep gradually getting lighter..."

The Great High Priest's words moved the two demon kings.

So, that was the reason?

The fact that their god needed to be rescued by the demon race obviously could not be made public. It was no wonder the temple had remained tight-lipped, offering no explanation regarding their god's continued absence.

"Now, I need an advance force to infiltrate the humans living in the nine provinces and make preparations for the war that will occur once God returns," the Great High Priest said. He paused and then added, "And I wish for you to be the ones to go."

That was when the two demon kings finally understood the Great High Priest's intentions.

It was no surprise that the Great High Priest had chosen them. Among the Seven Great Demon Clans, these two young demon kings were the only ones who were part of the new generation of demon kings, so they did not have much power in the Mountain Range of the Seven Kings.

The remaining five demon kings had all existed since the era of the Demon God, so the Great High Priest couldn't order them around as he wished. In fact, they might even outright refuse to obey him.

"Sure!" Changfeng immediately agreed. "It'd be best if the two of us acted together. I may not be familiar with the humans of the nine provinces, but Caiyi knows a lot about them! After all, that great achievement she made back then was because of—"

His words came to an abrupt halt. That was because Caiyi had shot daggers at him with her eyes.

In that instant, Changfeng even felt as if she truly wanted to kill him!

His pupils dilated in fear, and he quickly changed his words. "Forget it. Let's act separately after all."

...

Silver Sword Peak, Mount Shu.

At the hilltop of Berry Wonderland, a thin and short young cultivator was crouched amid an inconspicuous patch of flowers. He was staring at the berries in his basket with a conflicted expression.

If he took these berries out of Berry Wonderland, he would have to pay for them. However, if he ate them now, he wouldn't have to.

After thinking it over, he decided to eat a few of the berries right now.

Just as he was about to do it, a sharp voice suddenly spoke from above him. "What are you doing?"

"Huh?" the cultivator uttered, stumbling backward in alarm.

Looking up, he found himself face to face with a Golden Vein Flower. It swayed back and forth, shimmering splendidly. This flower was clearly the one that had spoken to him!

"I wasn't intending to speak to you, but what you're doing is pretty shameless. It's like your face left home with its mother. I guess you don't want your face anymore.[3] If you don't want to pay, just pick fewer berries. Why did you pick so many? If you want to eat more, just pay a bit more money. Who doesn't have a few coins to spare?"

"Since you hesitated earlier, I'll assume you still have a sliver of conscience left, so I won't shout for someone to come over this time. I see you came with a lady friend, right? You don't want her to think you're some morally flawed guy, do you? Now hurry up and go pay. Let's not make this a habit. Hey, what are you still standing there for? Get going."

"Ah, ah... oh."

The young man was utterly bewildered by the flower's barrage of words.

There's no demonic qi, so how's this flower able to talk?

And even scold me?

Huh?

## Chapter 446: Our Great Astral Sect

Red Cotton Peak, Mount Shu.

After a period of development and construction, Red Cotton Peak rapidly became one of the most prosperous places in the world of immortality cultivators, second only to Taotie City. Thanks to the various promotional discounts for the opening period, many cultivators from all corners of the nine provinces visited daily.

Actually, the main reason was something else. Compared to the enormous number of immortality cultivators, there were far too few shopping districts available to them. There was only Taotie City, which was in the Northern Regions. That wasn't enough to cater to such a large customer base.

Chu Liang and his fellow disciples had faced the same problem in the past. Whenever they wanted to buy something, they had to fly for an entire day to Taotie City. It was really inconvenient.

However, the sudden rise of Red Cotton Peak greatly alleviated this problem. From now on, all cultivators closer to the Southern Regions could make Red Cotton Peak their first choice for shopping.

The scale of Red Cotton Peak was still nowhere near that of Taotie City, but at its current rate of development, it was only a matter of time before it caught up.

Nevertheless, this wouldn't cause much of a problem to Taotie City, as they had always been overwhelmed with excess demand. Additionally, a portion of the profits from Red Cotton Peak would go to them, so they were more than happy with the arrangement.

After the cooperation between the two parties was established, Huyan Bin organized the expansion of around half of the larger stores in Taotie City. They opened branches on Red Cotton Peak, and business was booming.

Red Cotton Peak was no longer just a simple Red Cotton Road on a mountain. It had several long intersecting streets, resembling a small town in scale.

On this particular day, there was an especially large number of people on the mountain. It was the day of the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Four Seas Whale Gang's shops.

The Whale Gang's first batch of shops had long been completed and operational, but the formal ribbon-cutting ceremony had been delayed. Now that the Whale Gang had completed the

construction of a street on Red Cotton Peak, they held a formal ribbon-cutting ceremony for the grand opening of their branch shops.

The chief of the Whale Gang, Xu Bashan, personally attended the event, significantly raising the status of the ceremony. Many famous figures from the world of immortality cultivators had also been invited, making it a huge event.

Since the Whale Gang's chief was present, the higher-ups of the Mount Shu Sect could not ignore the event, so the grand peak master, Wang Xuanling, made an appearance.

"Hahaha, Elder Brother Wang! Welcome, welcome! Since Mount Shu is the host, you should make the first cut," Xu Bashan said warmly.

As he handed a pair of scissors to Wang Xuanling, he gestured for Wang Xuanling to stand on his left.

Xu Bashan called out, "Come, Younger Brother Chu! All these shops are here on Red Cotton Peak thanks to you."

As he handed a pair of scissors to Chu Liang, he gestured for Chu Liang to stand on his right.

Wang Xuanling: "..."

He felt extremely awkward, but he could only smile.

The people from the Celestial Pivot Pavilion were watching, and any misstep in his expression would surely result in a scathing article later.

Wang Xuanling had done his homework. Seeing how the relationship between Di Nufeng and the Celestial Pivot Pavilion had improved, it was possible that the Celestial Pivot Pavilion might target him next. Therefore, he had to behave with extra caution.

As for why Chu Liang had the right to stand at the center of attention with Xu Bashan and Wang Xuanling, it wasn't just because he was sworn brothers with Xu Bashan. It was also because he was the one overseeing everything on Red Cotton Peak.

The fact that he was renting the mountain from his sect hadn't been leaked, but it was widely known that he had spearheaded the planning and construction. Considering his heavy involvement, it was impossible to keep that a secret. Thus, Chu Liang's position on Red Cotton Peak was far more significant than that of a mere young disciple.

From the side, Xu Hongqiu yelled, "Three, two, one! Cut!"

As Wang Xuanling, Xu Bashan, and Chu Liang cut the red ribbon together, celebratory fireworks shot into the sky.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

A round of enthusiastic applause erupted from the guests of the ceremony.

Many of Chu Liang's close friends were present.

Wen Yulong, who was sitting among the many guests, suddenly recalled a few months ago when he had gone to Taotie City with Chu Liang and remarked that Mount Shu could never have such a place like Taotie City.

At the time, Wen Yulong truly had no idea... that Chu Liang could establish such a grand Red Cotton Peak in such a short amount of time.

The only word to describe it was "miraculous."

After the ribbon-cutting ceremony ended, Chu Liang hurried back to the second floor of the building, arriving at a table in the loft.

Jiang Yuebai was sitting there, smiling at him. "Peak Master Chu, you're quite impressive."

"Hehe, it's just a small event." Chu Liang humbly waved off the compliment. "Why are you here? I thought you didn't like these kinds of events, so I didn't invite you."



"I'm the one who invited Jiangjiang," Xu Hongqiu chimed in, walking over to sit next to Jiang Yuebai.

"You two..." Chu Liang uttered, stunned at how they seemed so close with each other.

As far as he remembered, the two of them didn't even know each other.

"Jiangjiang and I hit it off right away, and now we're besties," Xu Hongqiu said with a grin.

"Then..."

Chu Liang trailed off as he glanced at Jiang Yuebai and suddenly smiled.

"I know what you're about to say. Shut up." Jiang Yuebai shot him an annoyed look. "Keep it to yourself."

Chu Liang grinned without saying anything.

"Hmph," Xu Hongqiu scoffed. Her tone shifted as she suddenly said, "Jiangjiang, you'd better keep a close eye on him. He's richer than you can imagine now. Even if he doesn't go looking for girls, they'll come looking for him."

Jiang Yuebai's face immediately turned red. She snapped, "What are you talking about..."

"Yeah, what are you talking about?" Chu Liang chimed in. "I would never—"

Before he could finish speaking, a sweet voice called out from the staircase, "Young Hero Chu! We've finally found you!"

Chu Liang turned to look and saw two cute and lovely young ladies running toward him.

...

Sitting upright, Chu Liang said, "Miss Ji, Miss Tang, please explain. Why have you come looking for me in broad daylight?"

The two lovely young ladies were now sitting across from him. They were none other than Ji Lingyu and Tang Shi.

Meanwhile, Jiang Yuebai and Xu Hongqiu sat on the side, watching the conversation with amused expressions.

Ji Lingyu, clearly unaware of the situation's complexity, looked around with a bright smile. "It's really lively here today."

Chu Liang pointed at Xu Hongqiu. "Today's the ribbon-cutting for the Whale Gang's shops, so it's a bit more lively than usual."

Then he added, "Is there something important you need to discuss?"

He emphasized the word "important." Normally, he wouldn't mind chatting with them for a while since they were friends, but given today's occasion, it wasn't the time for idle talk.

"It's like this," Ji Lingyu responded seriously. "Our Great Astral Sect recently..."

"Hmm?"

Chu Liang thought there was something odd about what Ji Lingyu said.

It's already become 'our' Great Astral Sect...?

"Miss Ji, are you really not planning to return home?" he asked curiously.

"Hah," Ji Lingyu let out a cold laugh. "Did you know my eighth brother has joined the Imperial Supervisory Bureau?"

"Huh?"

Chu Liang honestly didn't know.

The last time he met Ji Lingfeng, the eighth young master of the Ji Family, had been in Python Belly City. Ji Lingfeng had stayed behind, but he and the other people in Python Belly City were later rescued by the Imperial Supervisory Bureau.

He actually stayed with them afterward?

With his family background, talent, and cultivation level, it wouldn't have been difficult for him to join the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. The bureau often recruited talents from various immortal sects, and having Ji Lingfeng among their ranks would be valuable for building future relations with the Ji Family.

But...

"Is your bet still on?" Chu Liang asked.

"He won't go home, so how can I admit defeat?" Ji Lingyu replied. "Now I'm already an outer disciple of the Great Astral Sect. In time, I'll achieve success in martial arts. Joining the inner sect won't be a problem."

Well, well.

Just because of this bet, one sibling has become a government official, and the other is pursuing martial arts.

I guess the Ji Family's desire to win must be made of iron. At this rate, will the two of you refuse to return to your family's ancestral tomb even in death?

Thinking this, Chu Liang glanced at Jiang Yuebai and then thought of his teacher...

Could it be that all descendants from noble immortality cultivator families are like this? Is "I can never lose" ingrained in their blood?

After some small talk, Ji Lingyu explained, "Yesterday, a disciple from the Great Astral Sect was killed in Kaoshan City, on the outskirts of the Southern Bastion Mountain in the Southern Regions. That person was Tang Shi's senior brother. Tang Shi's esteemed teacher took a group of us to investigate the matter, but we couldn't find any clues. Then Yun Chaoxian suggested that you have some connections in Kaoshan City. Furthermore, you're very resourceful, so we came to ask for your help."

"I see," Chu Liang replied with a nod. He then gazed at Jiang Yuebai and reiterated what Ji Lingyu said. "So, you came to ask for my help regarding the murder of a disciple of the Great Astral Sect."

"If they're asking for your help, then help them properly. What are you looking at me for?" Jiang Yuebai said, shifting her gaze away.

#### Chapter 447: Blood Moon

In large immortal sects, relationships between disciples often varied. Within the Great Astral Sect, Yun Chaoxian and Tang Shi were not disciples of the same teacher. Though they belonged to the same sect, they were from different branches of disciples.

The person who died this time was Tang Shi's senior brother from the same branch, a fellow disciple who shared the same teacher as her.

Though he had left the Great Astral Sect over a decade ago, the sect remained fiercely protective of its members. No matter how much time had passed, they would always take care of their own.

While many immortal sects maintained a sense of responsibility toward their disciples, the Great Astral Sect was especially strong in this regard. Whether this was due to all the disciples using one brain together remained unclear.

When they were unable to uncover any clues, Yun Chaoxian suggested they turn to Chu Liang for help.

Initially, Tang Shi's teacher was skeptical. "Is that disciple from Mount Shu truly capable?"

"He's reliable," Yun Chaoxian responded confidently. "And if he's not, I'll step in myself."

"Very well," the teacher nodded. "I'll invite him and see."

Thus, Ji Lingyu and Tang Shi made their way to Mount Shu to seek Chu Liang's assistance.

When it came to the Great Astral Sect, Chu Liang was more than willing to lend a hand. If one were to rank the sects by trustworthiness, the brothers of the Great Astral Sect would undoubtedly be at the top.

They were fiercely loyal.

Chu Liang quickly made arrangements for matters on Red Cotton Peak and immediately set off with them to Southern Bastion Mountain in the Southern Regions. Thanks to the Talisman of Life Restoration, they had managed to secure many basic workers, so there was no longer an urgent need for additional manpower.

The journey to Kaoshan City was not far. By evening, the three of them had already arrived.

By then, Tang Shi's teacher was already waiting at the inn.

"Junior Chu Liang, greets the esteemed senior."

Though he had been invited to assist, Chu Liang, mindful of etiquette, made sure to greet first.

"Oh, Young Hero Chu, we requested your help. There's no need to be so formal."

Tang Shi's teacher was Yan Qihu. At first glance, he seemed like a rugged, muscular man in his prime, with sharp features and long arms. But in truth, he was already over a hundred years old.

He personally came down to greet them.

Just by standing there with his arms at his sides, Yan Qihu<sup>[1]</sup> exuded the presence of a lurking vicious beast.

A century ago, there was the Yan Family in the Great Astral Sect. The Yan Family had eight sons, all martial arts prodigies, collectively known as the Eight Tigers of the Yan Family. Yan Qihu was the seventh youngest among his brothers.

Unfortunately, since then, none of the current generation of the Yan Family came out to be outstanding disciples. Yet, the Eight Tigers from the previous generation still remained the backbone of the Great Astral Sect.

Yan Qihu, standing before them, was a seventh-realm martial arts Eminent One.

Compared to other forms of cultivation, advancing through the first six realms was much easier. This allowed Martial Arts cultivators to progress quickly and showcase impressive combat abilities during the first six realms. However, upon reaching the three realms of the Heavenly Gate, they would face greater challenges and be at a disadvantage. This was why far fewer Martial Arts cultivators successfully reached the seventh realm.

Yet, every Martial Arts cultivator who managed to reach the seventh realm became a formidable figure.

"No need for formalities. I'm close friends with several disciples of the Great Astral Sect. Whenever you need me, I'll be there," Chu Liang said with a smile.

"That's great," Yan Qihu responded, giving Chu Liang a firm slap on the shoulder. "We martial artists don't bother with empty words. When the day comes and someone in your family passes away, just watch what we will do."

"..." Chu Liang first felt momentarily speechless, torn between wanting to laugh and feeling exasperated.

You could either go easy with your words or with your grip, either way works, he remarked inwardly.

Everyone then entered the room and took their seats. Ji Lingyu, one of the few clear-headed people in the group, began explaining the case to Chu Liang.

"The person that died is named Wei Feng, and he was the disciple of Esteemed Senior Yan. He has left the Great Astral Sect several years ago," Ji Lingyu explained. "In recent years, he had been serving as an honored ally outside Southern Bastion Mountain."

Many who sought to enter Southern Bastion Mountain to gather spirit plants or explore hidden realms lacked the strength to do so alone. Without a teacher or elder from their sect to accompany them, they would need to hire someone to act as a guardian for the duration of their venture.

However, this guardian couldn't be just anyone. Once inside Southern Bastion Mountain, there would be no recourse if they chose to rob or kill you. Ideally, the guardian should come from a large, reputable immortal sect with a trustworthy reputation.

Wei Feng was exactly the kind of honored ally who came from a major immortal sect and had a trustworthy reputation.

Members of the Great Astral Sect, in particular, were renowned for their trustworthiness and were less likely to harbor ill intentions.

"Yesterday, an anomaly was reported in Kaoshan City," Ji Lingyu said, pausing before continuing. "Witnesses claimed that the moon turned blood-red."

"A blood moon?"

"Yes," Ji Lingyu confirmed with a nod. "Soon after the blood moon appeared, three murders took place in the city. Three of the city's experts transformed into demonic beasts and started attacking everyone around them."

Transformed into demonic beasts...

As Chu Liang listened, the situation grew more puzzling.

"Wei Feng was one of the three," Ji Lingyu continued. "There was an expert at the pinnacle of the fifth realm and two sixth-realm experts among them. They went on a rampage through the city, and no one could stop them. Then, just moments after the blood moon faded, they all collapsed and died on the spot."

The blood moon happened and they transformed into demonic beasts, and then died instantly. These were fifth- and sixth-realm experts—how could they have perished so easily? Chu Liang furrowed his brow in deep thought.

"Rumors are spreading like wildfire in the city," Yan Qihu said. "People are claiming that these three must have had half-demon blood, leading to their transformation and the subsequent killings. I can't vouch for the other two, but I know Wei Feng's parents, and I raised him myself. He definitely didn't have any demon blood. There's something else at play here."

After listening to them explain, Chu Liang nodded and said, "I understand the situation. Let's go see the bodies first."

The three bodies were stored at the City Supervisory Division in Kaoshan City, and Yan Qihu, with his standing in the Great Astral Sect, had unrestricted access. Even though it was late, he led the group there promptly.

The City Supervisory Division, overwhelmed by the case, was really hoping that they could figure out the answer to this peculiar mystery. Naturally, they welcomed the group with open arms.

Chu Liang then saw the three corpses lying side by side.

"Wei Feng was a sixth-realm martial artist... This one is Liu Ming, a cultivator at the pinnacle of the fifth realm... And this is Fang Chongshan, a sixth-realm cultivator," introduced one of the City Supervisory Division officers.

Chu Liang didn't know much about autopsies, but he could sense the faint demonic qi lingering on the corpses.

Clearly, the claims of them transforming into demons weren't exactly lies, he thought.

"Have you found out why they turned into demonic beasts?" Chu Liang asked. "Any signs of poisoning?"

"No," the officer said, shaking his head. "The doctors from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau have already examined them and found no signs of poisoning."

Chu Liang lifted the white cloth and glanced at the corpses. Each body had large wounds, with their skin torn open and flesh spilling out. The injuries appeared to come from within, as if something had expanded inside them, causing their bodies to burst.



The deaths of the two martial artists might be somewhat explainable, but not Wei Feng's. As a sixth-realm martial artist, his body should have been capable of withstanding the pressure of even a mountain.

What kind of force could have torn his body apart?

After a moment of thought, Chu Liang shifted his line of questioning. "Who did these three interact with or contact before they died? Were there any common factors or events in the time leading up to their deaths?"

"We're still investigating that, but we don't have any answers yet," the officer replied, shaking his head. "Wei Feng and Liu Ming were long-term honored allies here in Kaoshan City, while Fang Chongshan was the head of a small sect in the Southern Regions. Individuals like them tend to keep their activities and movements secret, making it challenging for us to track their interactions."

Chu Liang nodded in understanding.

Those hired to gather spirit plants or explore hidden realms naturally kept their missions confidential for their employers.

However, because the mission was kept confidential, the investigation became much more difficult.

If answers couldn't be found through official channels, Chu Liang thought about visiting Second Madam Gu's tavern. Her information network in Kaoshan City was likely more extensive than that of the City Supervisory Division.

As Chu Liang was lost in thought, a sudden shout came from outside.

"It's red... It's red again!"

"Huh?" Chu Liang looked up to see the moon in the deepening night sky gradually turning a vibrant, blood-red hue.

"Roar—"

A fierce roar followed immediately after.

"Oh no!" exclaimed one of the City Supervisory Division officers. "I am afraid someone is turning into a demonic beast!"

"Let me see what's going on," Yan Qihu said with a frown, and in a flash, his figure shot into the sky.

When it came to problems that could be solved with force, the Great Astral Sect was always reliable.

In the moonlit sky, a monstrous figure with half-scaled skin lunged upward with a roar. It was a half-transformed human! His eyes blazed with a blood-red fury, his face contorted in pain as he howled and ascended into the night.

"Roar..."

His gaze soon turned entirely bloody red, and he seemed to be on the hunt for his prey.

But in the very next moment, a sharp crack echoed through the air.

In an instant, Yan Qihu appeared behind him, grabbing the back of his neck with one hand.

"Awooo!" The man's roars intensified, but Yan Qihu's grip remained firm.

As Chu Liang and the others rushed over, they saw Yan Qihu holding the half-human, half-demon beast with one hand. The man had fully transformed into a lizard-like monster, its body covered in scales and stretching over one zhang in length.

The man was likely a fifth-realm cultivator, and his transformation into a demon had only amplified his strength. As he struggled, his qi and blood surged with a thunderous roar. Yet, his efforts to break free were futile.

"What on earth is going on..." Yan Qihu muttered. Even as he could easily lock this person in his grip, he couldn't make sense of the situation.

It was Ji Lingyu, with her Xuan Yuan Eyes gleaming with divine light, who seemed to notice something. She suddenly exclaimed, "A Nightmare Specter?!"

Chapter 448: While In the Night's Rain on the Lake, A Lamp Has Burned For Years.

Nightmare Specters typically referred to evil entities that would appear in dreams.

Among them were ghosts capable of invading a person's dream, feeding on their yang qi.

There was also a kind of demonic monster[1] that fed on dreams. Upon reaching a certain level in cultivation and gaining physical form, they could wreak havoc in the dream world of their victims.

A unique clan of these entities existed in the Far West. They were known as the Nightmare Demon Clan.

"There's a Nightmare Specter on this person?"

Yan Qihu stared at the man in his grip with a strange expression.

The man didn't seem like someone caught in a dream. Instead, he looked as though he was transforming into a demon before his eyes.

Ji Lingyu's eyes shimmered with a divine radiance. She could distinctly see a swirling cloud of lurid red demonic qi festering within the man's head—a clear sign of possession by a Nightmare Demon!

Suddenly, the crimson glow flared, intensifying with a menacing brightness!

"Watch out!" Ji Lingyu cried out in warning.

The man was nearly fully transformed into a demon and his entire body glowing with an eerie red light.

Suddenly, a deafening explosion echoed through the air as demonic qi erupted in all directions.

Fortunately, Yan Qihu was the closest to him. His quick reflexes kicked in, and with a swift movement of his palm, this Martial Artist at the seventh realm suppressed the shockwave.

The man's demonic form vanished, leaving behind only a lifeless corpse that had exploded from the inside out... identical to the ones placed at the City Supervisory Division.

"This..."

Everyone stood frozen, their eyes wide with shock at the bizarre scene before them.

Although the immortality cultivators were used to such strange events, witnessing something of this magnitude for the first time left them feeling speechless.

The blood-red moon in the sky slowly dimmed, as though its only purpose had been to stir the evil spirit slumbering within the man.

"It's Chunyu Tu!" someone cried out in shock.

The City Supervisory Division officers rushed over, surrounding the corpse. In no time, they recognized the cultivator who had died.

Moments later, they confirmed the deceased's identity. He was Chunyu Tu, a renowned guide in the region near Southern Bastion Mountain, frequently hired at a high price by those looking to venture deep into its treacherous terrain.

"Nightmare Demons do have the ability to influence reality through dreams," Chu Liang said thoughtfully, his gaze fixed on the body. "But these cultivators were all at the fifth and sixth realms. It would take immense cultivation power for a demon to control them through their dreams, forcing them to transform and lose their minds..."

"At the very least, it would need to be a seventh-realm greater demon..." Ji Lingyu added, her voice filled with concern. "Legend has it that during the chaotic age of the Demon God, there was a Nightmare Demon King under his command, an eighth-realm greater demon who could drive the people in an entire nation to slaughter one another. What we've witnessed here bears a striking resemblance to that legend."

"The Nightmare Demon King was killed during the War against the Demon God," Yan Qihu interjected. "After that, the clan of Nightmare Demonic Monsters vanished, and there hasn't been a

sign of them since. Could it be that another greater demon has emerged, causing havoc in Southern Bastion Mountain?"

"But why would it kill these people?" Chu Liang continued to ponder.

Regardless of how evil a demon or spirit might be, there was always a motive behind its actions. The idea that a greater demon would enter human territory just to kill at random seemed far-fetched.

"It doesn't matter who they are or what kind of evil entity they might be..." Yan Qihu growled, clenching his fist tightly. "If they dare commit murder in the territory of humans, if they dare kill a disciple of the Great Astral Sect, they will pay the price!"

His voice rumbled like thunder, each word reverberating with power, before he fixed his intense gaze squarely on Chu Liang.

Chu Liang looked up, realizing that Yan Qihu had been staring at him intensely the entire time.

Oh. So you are talking to me? Alright, alright. I got it. I will try my best.

...

The next day, Chu Liang donned his black robe once again and made his way to Second Madam Gu's tavern.

Previously, he had been able to track down a demon divine envoy thanks to the valuable information provided by Second Madam Gu. In the underground world of Kaoshan City, she acted as a crucial node in the network of information, often being the one who knew many secrets that the commoners and officials would never know.

After following the same steps as before and waiting for a long time, he found himself once again in the dim chamber beneath the tavern.

Second Madam Gu sat behind the flickering lamplight, as alluring as ever, her light blue eyes glowing faintly.

Chu Liang stared at her eyes, lost in thought.

Previously, he had not seen someone with Xuan Yuan Eyes before, so he had merely thought that Second Madam Gu's eyes were of unusual color. But after seeing Ji Lingfeng's eyes, he noticed a striking resemblance between them.

He couldn't help but connect the dots...

"Have you been here before?" Second Madam Gu asked.

"I have," Chu Liang said with a nod. "I know the rules."

"Good. What's your question?" Second Madam Gu asked bluntly.

"Do you know anything about the blood moon killings in Kaoshan City?" Chu Liang inquired.

"I don't," Second Madam Gu answered very quickly, shaking her head without hesitation.

Still, Chu Liang wasn't discouraged by this. After a brief pause, he changed his question and asked, "Do you know if the people who died had any connection? Why were they the ones killed?"

"You're investigating this case, aren't you..." Second Madam Gu pondered for a moment before replying, "I can tell you what I know. I'll share half the information, and then we'll discuss the terms of exchange."

"Agreed," Chu Liang nodded.

"Wei Feng, Liu Ming, Fang Chongshan—these were all top experts in Kaoshan City. Chunyu Tu was the city's best guide," Second Madam Gu began slowly. "All I know is that a woman from the Far West gathered these men three days ago to explore a hidden realm in Southern Bastion Mountain. After they returned, they died one by one."

"A woman from the Far West?"

"I don't know who she is or which hidden realm they explored, but I do know that there's one survivor who hasn't died yet," Second Madam Gu added.

Chu Liang's eyes flickered with interest.

"Alright, now we can talk about the price," Second Madam Gu leaned back. "What do you think this information is worth?"

"This information is, of course, very important. But before we discuss the price, I have another question..." Chu Liang cautiously asked, "Do you have any connection to the Ji Family?"

"None whatsoever," Second Madam Gu answered coldly.

"I see..." Chu Liang scratched his head and continued, "When I was in a hidden realm in the Southern Bastion Mountain, I found a man trapped there. He entrusted me with a letter for the thirteenth young lady of the Ji Family. But when I went to the Ji Family, I found out she had left long ago and has been missing ever since—"

Before he could finish, Second Madam Gu suddenly stood up as she slammed her palms onto the table. "What did you say? Who was the person that gave you the letter?"

Seeing her intense reaction, Chu Liang knew that he had guessed correctly.

After seeing Second Madam Gu again and noticing her eyes seemed to resemble the Xuan Yuan Eyes, Chu Liang had a hunch. Ji Lianhua had left her family for love, presumably to search for Gu Qingyuan. And since she hadn't returned for so many years, could she have settled at the foot of Southern Bastion Mountain?

And it seemed Second Madam Gu was indeed that person.

"He said his name is Gu Qingyuan," Chu Liang replied.

Bang.

The table beneath Second Madam Gu's hands creaked as she left two deep handprints, a clear sign of her agitation.

"I am... Ji Lianhua," Second Madam Gu said softly.

She had finally admitted her identity.

Chu Liang stood up and respectfully bowed. "Esteemed Senior Gu once assisted me in the hidden realm, and I accepted his request. I don't doubt your identity, but to fulfill my duty properly, I ask that you share some of your story, so I can fully confirm it."

As for the matter of the survivor, he wasn't in a rush. Once this issue was settled, he was confident Second Madam Gu would provide the information.

Second Madam Gu then started sharing parts of her story with Gu Qingyuan, which matched what Chu Liang had heard from the Ji Family. What she added was that after leaving the Ji Family, she stayed near the outskirts of Southern Bastion Mountain, using her information-gathering business to try to find out about what happened to Gu Qingyuan.

After all the complications, she had spent decades watching and waiting.

Even after so many years, as she spoke of it now, there was still a distant glow in her eyes.

The flames on the table flickered, casting shadows that danced endlessly.

While in the night's rain on the lake, a lamp has burned for years.[2]

#### Chapter 449: Another Visit to the Deep Pool of Dreams

After leaving her family, Second Madam Gu spent decades searching for Gu Qingyan. Now that she had finally received news about him... Chu Liang could not even imagine how she felt at this moment.

He handed over the letter and obtained the name he wanted, then he quietly took his leave.

Chu Liang and Second Madam Gu had made an agreement. Once the case that Chu Liang was investigating was resolved, he would take her into the mountains to search for Gu Qingyuan. Chu



Liang only vaguely remembered the location of the Deep Pool of Dreams, but he was confident they could find it with some careful searching.

Upon returning to the inn, Chu Liang told Yan Qihu, "I've learned that there is one survivor who entered the hidden realm with them, a man named Xue Ziyang. We need to find him quickly, or he might meet the same fate as the others once night falls."

Hearing that, Yan Qihu wasted no time in leading the group straight to the location that Second Madam Gu had provided—Xue Ziyang's residence.

Xue Ziyang was a well-known scholar in Kaoshan City. He ran a free private school, where he taught children from impoverished families. It had earned him the nickname Master Ziyang among the townspeople.

Xue Ziyang wasn't in the business of escorting people into the mountains, so it was unclear why he had participated this time.

When Chu Liang's group arrived at Xue Ziyang's school, they found the gates locked and the place deserted.

Just then, a neighbor happened to walk by, and Chu Liang stepped toward him to inquire about the situation. "Brother, do you know where Mr. Xue might have gone?"

"Oh, you mean Master Ziyang?" the neighbor responded warmly with a big smile. "I have no idea."

Chu Liang remarked inwardly, Why are you so happy if you don't know...?

"But my child goes to his school, and from what I've heard..." the neighbor continued, "Master Ziyang seems to have run into some major trouble. He rarely cancels classes, and whenever he does leave, he always gives a return date. But this time, he said he doesn't know when he'll be back..."

Chu Liang asked, "Did he leave in the past couple of days?"

"Yes, just yesterday," the neighbor answered. "He took a day off, then he came back and taught for one day before leaving indefinitely. Haaa, Master Ziyang is such a good person; I hope nothing bad happens to him."

"Thank you."

He then turned back to discuss with the group from the Great Astral Sect.

Chu Liang speculated, "The first time he left was likely to join the expedition into the hidden realm. The second time must have been because he panicked after hearing about the deaths of the other three. At this point, he's probably seeking refuge somewhere."

Ji Lingyu chimed in, "Before we arrived, I asked the City Supervisory Division about him. Xue Ziyang studied under Wei Lang, a renowned scholar from the Noblemen's Hall in Jiangnan."

"Then it's highly likely he's returned to the Noblemen's Hall," Chu Liang guessed.

Yan Qihu said decisively, "Let's head over and look for him there."

...

The Noblemen's Hall was located in the Misty Rain Pavilion in Jiangnan, and it was not far from the Southern Regions. This was why when trouble occurred at the South Mountain Academy, Song Qingyi[1] had gone over to resolve it.

Chu Liang's group traveled swiftly and soon arrived at the Misty Rain Pavilion.

It had been a long time since the Noblemen's Hall expanded. They were no longer contained in just one ancient building; instead, they occupied numerous pavilions and towers scattered across the mountainside. The Misty Rain Pavilion was relegated to being a place of symbolic significance, only used for the ceremony to formally acknowledge their disciples as new distinguished scholars—Confucian masters—and inscribe their names in the pavilion.

Unlike large immortal sects with many disciples, the Noblemen's Hall housed only a few resident Confucian masters and their remaining disciples.

The Noblemen's Hall was quite empty most of the time, but when trouble arose, the Confucian masters whose names had been inscribed in the Noblemen's Hall and even Confucian masters belonging to other Confucian halls across the land would all lend a helping hand. Their influence should never be underestimated.

Yan Qihu held a high status in the Great Astral Sect, so the moment he introduced himself at the Noblemen's Hall, a disciple emerged and respectfully led them inside. A short while later, a Confucian master came out to greet them.

The Confucian master wore a loose robe with wide sleeves. Though his hair was white and his face aged, he was broad-shouldered and he had a glowing complexion with a healthy amount of red in his cheeks. It was clear at a glance that he was brimming with vital energy.

The Confucian master cupped his hands in greeting. "I am Wei Lang. I hear you've come looking for my disciple?"

"Mr. Wei," Yan Qihu replied politely and quickly explained why he and his group were there. "We wish to find out which hidden realm your disciple and his companions ventured into and what they encountered there."

"Haaa..." Wei Lang sighed. "My disciple hasn't been in a good condition since his return. I'll take you to see him."

He led the group to a room in the rear courtyard. Upon opening the room's door, they saw a middle-aged scholar lying on a bed with his upper body bare. He appeared haggard and weak. There were talismans all over his body and dozens of steel needles embedded in his head.

"He returned yesterday, saying he had encountered danger and hoped to avoid disaster by staying here," Wei Lang explained. "But at nightfall, he became violent and went berserk. There was even demonic qi seeping from within his body. I had no choice but to suppress him and put him into a deep sleep."

"Mr. Wei, did a blood moon appear over the Noblemen's Hall last night?" Chu Liang asked.

Wei Lang shook his head. "No, we didn't see anything like that."

Chu Liang nodded slightly.

It seemed the blood moon's influence was limited to the area around Kaoshan City, most likely because the source was in the Southern Bastion Mountain. The further away the target was, the less they were affected... though only to a certain extent.

Judging from Xue Ziyang's current state, it was likely he would have met a tragic end last night if Wei Liang had not intervened.

"To save him, we need to find out exactly what they encountered. Could you wake Mr. Xue?" Chu Liang asked.

Wei Lang hesitated for a moment but eventually nodded. "Very well."

With a gentle wave of his hand, a faint blue light seeped from the talismans and steel needles, instantly releasing the seals on Xue Ziyang.

"Aaaaahhhh!!!" Xue Ziyang screamed, jerking upright!

He gasped for breath for quite a while. With Wei Lang's help, Xue Ziyang finally calmed down. He still looked quite dazed, but he gradually returned to his normal self.

That was when Chu Liang and the others thought it was safe to begin questioning him.

"Esteemed Senior Xue, who exactly did you enter the Southern Bastion Mountain with that day? Which hidden realm did you explore, and what did you encounter?"

Xue Ziyang sighed deeply and said, "Haaa, it's a long story..."

"I usually just teach in Kaoshan City and would never rashly venture into the Southern Bastion Mountain. But a few days ago, Chunyu Tu came to me. He told me that the precious herb I need to reach the pinnacle of the sixth realm seems to be in a hidden realm.

"It just so happened that there was a very wealthy woman from the Western Regions who was forming a group to venture into the Southern Bastion Mountain, so Chunyu Tu asked if I would like to join them."

So, it was about treasures of nature, after all, Chu Liang thought. Money might not buy happiness, but it sure helps you avoid a lot of trouble.

Xue Ziyang continued, "The others were all prominent cultivators from Kaoshan City, so I thought it wouldn't be a very challenging expedition and ended up agreeing to go with them.

"At first, the journey went smoothly. We passed through the Valley of Bewildering Fog, where many lingering spirits and Sickly Ghosts wandered, but they posed no real threat to us. Later, our path was even blocked by ghosts from the previous dynasty..."

"Hmm?" Chu Liang was a bit surprised. "Esteemed Senior, the place you went to... Is it the Deep Pool of Dreams that's at the end of the Valley of Bewildering Fog?"

"That's right," Xue Ziyang confirmed. "Do you know of it?"

"I've been there as well..." Chu Liang said puzzledly, as he hadn't encountered the same situation as Xue Ziyang. "Beyond the Deep Pool of Dreams, isn't there a hidden realm that is filled with dense spiritual energy and has a palace on a mountain peak?"

"No..." Xue Ziyang shook his head. "After we passed through the Deep Pool of Dreams, we entered a gloomy ghost domain. It was a battlefield littered with piles of white bones and battered corpses."

Huh?

This description struck Chu Liang as rather strange.

He recalled the time he, Pushan, and Luo Yao had followed a diabolical cultivator through the Deep Pool of Dreams. The hidden realm they'd entered had been completely different from Xue Ziyang's account.

That hidden realm is probably the place where Gu Qingyan is trapped, which means it should be a place of lush mountains and serene waters, with palace halls and towers.

Xue Ziyang continued, "As soon as we entered, we knew something was wrong. We kept hearing a voice calling out, but we couldn't find the source... The further we went, the clearer it became, until finally, we heard the voice calling out the name of that woman!"

"Her name is Caiyi."

Chapter 450: Even Dogs Won't Go Back

"Caiyi?"

When Chu Liang heard this name, he thought it sounded very familiar.

During the Mount Shu Summit, he and Jiang Yuebai had fallen into the sea of clouds and found a small cabin beneath Mount Shu. It was at that place that they found a diary that belonged to the ancestor of the Yan family. The name, Caiyi, was mentioned in the diary.

It was a woman named Caiyi who had revealed to that ancestor of the Yan Family the method to break the Demon-Suppressing Pagoda.

But five hundred years had passed since then. This Caiyi might not be that same person... And so, although Chu Liang was inwardly surprised, he kept this thought to himself.

Xue Ziyang continued, "The murmuring sounded like a demonic melody, and the weakest among us, Chunyu Tu, began hallucinating and nearly lost his mind. I had to use a secret Confucian technique to restore his sanity, but even I myself was barely managing to hold on. We could feel that something was gravely wrong. The demonic qi around us thickened, and most of it seemed to be coming from that Lady from the Western Regions.

"I was the first to suggest turning back. The hidden realm was far too strange. This was not a place that people of our cultivation level could explore. While the others were still hesitating, the woman told us that now that we had reached this point, she no longer needed us... and allowed us to leave.

"By then, we understood that her cultivation was likely far superior to ours. She had only needed some people who were familiar with the Southern Bastion Mountain to guide her way in here. So, one by one, we left the hidden realm."

"But even after returning to Kaoshan City, I felt incredibly sick, as if... something was affecting my soul," Xue Ziyang said as he pointed to his head. "Sure enough, on the first night after our return,

when the blood moon rose over Kaoshan City, I felt countless voices calling out to me. I felt like my head was being split apart and I nearly lost my mind.

"Although I barely survived the first night, I could feel the calling getting stronger and stronger. That's why I rushed to my teacher for help."

"It seems that the moment you entered that hidden realm, your souls were implanted with Nightmare Specters," Wei Lang explained.

Nightmare Specters, mysterious and eerie entities, remained incomprehensible and known only as something indescribable.

Ji Lingyu asked, "Can a Nightmare Specter be implanted in a person, like a curse insect?"

Wei Lang, being a renowned Confucian master of the current age and highly knowledgeable in matters of the soul, explained, "A Nightmare Specter exists somewhere between reality and illusion. The real world and the illusory world are entirely separate dimensions. Though in the real world it may seem a million li away from Ziyang, in the illusory world, it could be right next to him.

"In ancient times, humans developed the Dream Techniques, a cultivation legacy tied to the Great Dao of Reality and Illusion. They explored it extensively, but with the disappearance of its creator, the Great Noble Dream Immortal, the Technique of Dreams was lost. Later generations could only gather a limited understanding from the fragmented records that remained."

The Great Dao of Reality and Illusion was a profound concept, and Chu Liang had only a limited understanding of it.

He understood that the illusory world existed independently from the real world, yet could still exert influence over it. For example, the Dark King Sect's Soul Subjugator Token could send messages through this illusory realm.

Something that seemed distant in the real world could be right at hand in the illusory world.

That was all he knew and anything beyond that was a knowledge gap.

Wei Lang continued, "To lift the curse, we must find its caster. To end the threat of the blood moon, we'll need to return to the hidden realm and destroy its source. To save your life, I have no choice but to go."

Yan Qihu nodded. "I'm going too."

Chu Liang observed the two of them. With Wei Lang's scholarly wisdom and Yan Qihu's martial prowess, there was a high chance that they could resolve this issue if they ventured into the mountains together. It was also the perfect opportunity for Chu Liang to fulfill Second Madam Gu's request.

So, he spoke up, "If you two esteemed seniors are going to explore the hidden realm, I know someone exceptionally knowledgeable about Southern Bastion Mountain. She could join us."

...

Yan Qihu was naturally reluctant to bring his juniors along, but with Xue Ziyang in his current condition, there was no way he could return to Southern Bastion Mountain. Their previous guide had died, leaving Chu Liang as the only one capable of leading them to the Deep Pool of Dreams.

If it were only for the Great Astral Sect, Chu Liang wouldn't be willing to risk his life like this. But he owed Gu Qingyuan a favor, and he had to bring Second Madam Gu to find him, no matter what.

With two powerful experts accompanying them, this was his best opportunity to join the expedition.

After carefully questioning Xue Ziyang, Chu Liang confirmed that the place they had followed the Lady from the Western Regions to was indeed the Deep Pool of Dreams—the same one he had visited with the Southern-Route Guider. However, why the hidden realm beyond the abyss looked so different remained a mystery, one that could only be solved upon arrival.

When Ji Lingyu heard that Chu Liang had found her thirteenth aunt, she immediately demanded to come along. Seeing her join, Tang Shi naturally didn't want to be left behind either.

In the end, Yan Qihu had no choice but to bring along all these juniors.

Fortunately, they were all among the top of the younger generation, so they might not be a burden.



"When we enter that treacherous realm full of demons and monsters, stay close and don't charge ahead," Yan Qihu reminded them cautiously, worried that the younger ones might fall prey to the Nightmare Demon and meet the same fate as those who had perished before.

Nevertheless, with Wei Lang joining them, Yan Qihu was brimming with confidence.

A Confucian master from the Noblemen's Hall was bound to be intelligent, and with this, the only shortcoming in the Great Astral Sect's plan was now resolved.

The great confucian scholar was well-prepared, even bringing a Soul-Pacifying Scroll from the Noblemen's Hall, specifically designed to counter strange and malevolent spirits that target the soul.

Upon returning to Kaoshan City, Chu Liang immediately went to see Second Madam Gu.

And he brought Ji Lingyu along with him.

"Done with your business already?" Second Madam Gu asked upon seeing Chu Liang.

Previously, Chu Liang had told her that he needed to handle matters with the Great Astral Sect first, so she had expected to wait a few more days.

But when she noticed Ji Lingyu's Xuan Yuan Eyes, her expression turned a bit wary.

Upon seeing her wary expression, Chu Liang realized she might have assumed he had informed the Ji family and that Ji Lingyu had come to confront her. He very quickly clarified, "There has been a change of plans. It turns out the members of the Great Astral Sect are heading to the same place, so I figured you could join us. With two powerful figures from the Great Astral Sect and the Noblemen's Hall, it's quite safe. And as for this young lady, Ji Lingyu... well, she ran away from home."

Upon hearing this, Second Madam Gu's expression softened slightly.

Ji Lingyu timidly approached and said, "Thirteenth Aunt, I've heard your story..."

Chu Liang was certain the two would get along—after all, in a way, Second Madam Gu was the reigning champion of the Ji family's "runaway contest" from the previous generation.

After some conversation, the aunt and niece quickly hit it off. Ji Lingyu was captivated by her aunt's story, while Second Madam Gu grew fond of Ji Lingyu's sharp wit and cleverness.

After a while, Second Madam Gu turned back to Chu Liang, "Since we already have two powerful figures joining us, I won't bother gathering more people. We'll head into the mountains tomorrow."

"That sounds good," Chu Liang agreed.

Since it was already late, venturing into the mountains was out of the question, so they chose to stay in Kaoshan City for the night. Whether Xue Ziyang would make it through the night at the Noblemen's Hall remained uncertain, but with so many Confucian masters watching over him, Chu Liang felt a flicker of hope.

Ji Lingyu stayed with Second Madam Gu, and the two seemed to share a few drinks, their conversation stretching late into the night. The cool night breeze drifted through the city, carrying their voices in soft echoes. The phrase that lingered the most was...

"Even dogs won't go back to the House of the Ji Family."