

M. Slaying 481

Chapter 481: The Potion Jar Boy

The moon hung high in the dark sky, and a cold wind howled through the Black Pine Ridge. On this eerie night, a deathly silence filled the base of the Black Pine Ridge.

Ever since this place became a gathering ground for poison specialists, no wild animals had survived here. Now, with the poison specialists themselves gone, an eerie silence had settled over the land. Only the rustling of branches in the night wind broke the stillness, a sound that could send chills down anyone's spine.

Earlier in the day, officials from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau arrived to inspect the area. Although the poison specialists were dead, traces of their poison still lingered, hidden in every corner. There was no telling which patch of land might turn deadly with a single step.

After all, the poison specialists on the ridge weren't all unified. Each had set up their own protective measures in front of their homes. Preliminary inspections revealed that the lingering poison would take centuries to dissipate. It might be best to use a large-scale method to reshape the entire mountain into a new peak.

However, this grand plan had yet to be carried out. Instead, numerous notices were posted at the mountain's entrance, warning that the Myriad Poison Mountain was on the verge of collapse and advising people to stay away.

In truth, these notices were rather redundant, as no living creature had dared to venture near this area for years.

Swoosh—

After a long silence, a shadowy figure suddenly darted by, gliding through the area stained with blood from the previous night before coming to a halt on a tree branch.

The figure resembled a beast, crouching on all fours, its entire body shrouded in a dark, greenish-black hue. Its eyes gleamed as they cautiously scanned the surroundings.

Yet, upon closer inspection, its features were unmistakably human! The dark greenish-black hue that covered its body was actually a strange pattern, sprawling across its skin.

"Heh—" A deep, ragged breath escaped his mouth, indistinguishable from the sound of a wild beast.

In the next instant, he pushed off with all four limbs and sprang forward.

Swoosh—

His figure instantly appeared in the dilapidated courtyard, darting through the darkness with such speed that his movements were nearly impossible to follow—swift as lightning.

But the moment he landed in the courtyard, a burst of white light suddenly flared beneath his feet. Whoosh—

As the light swirled, a cage instantly enclosed him.

The beast-like figure sprang up, attempting to break through the white light. However, as his body soared, he discovered the light did not obstruct him; he passed through it effortlessly.

Yet, after crossing the barrier, he found himself landing back in the same courtyard.

It was an illusion.

"Heh—ah—" A deep growl rumbled from his throat as he spun around, attempting to escape in another direction, only to be forced back by a flash of sword light slashing toward him!

Swish—

A figure in white robes descended gracefully, like an immortal from the heavens, forcing the shadowy figure back with a single stroke of her sword.

It was Jiang Yuebai.

With her left hand forming a seal, the sword light twisted and instantly transformed into a pool of lightning, crackling with golden dragons and silver thunderbolts!

The shadowy figure could no longer dodge and was struck by a golden dragon, his body instantly stiffening before collapsing to the ground.

Jiang Yuebai flicked her hand once more, and countless bolts of lightning twisted into several ropes, crackling as they coiled around the shadowy figure, binding him tightly.

"Ahhhhhhhhh—" The shadowy figure howled, but the more he struggled, the stronger the backlash from the lightning ropes grew, paralyzing his entire body until he could no longer move.

Only then did Jiang Yuebai approach, using the light from the lightning to see the figure's face clearly.

He appeared young, likely even younger than her, around fifteen or sixteen years old. Dark green patterns covered his body, resembling living creatures that swelled with each of his breaths, as if every pulse inflicted immense pain.

His eyes were bloodshot, full of chaos and rage.

After a moment's thought, she raised her hand and cast a Mind-Pacifying Incantation. A soft white light flickered, spreading across the youth's body and seeping into his skin, gradually easing the tension in his expression.

The Mind-Pacifying Incantation was a technique used to clear the mind and bring a calming effect. It was proving quite effective at this moment.

Jiang Yuebai immediately questioned, "Who are you?"

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Yesterday, when Jiang Yuebai first spotted the shadowy figure, she lost track of him. However, she later took some time to reflect on the encounter.

Why would he come to such a dangerous place?

The massacre caused by Qiongqi likely left no survivors, and no one else would dare approach Black Pine Ridge. So, did he come here seeking something? Could it be that there was something here that he wanted?

The Myriad Poison Mountain was vast, making it unrealistic to track down that person. However, since he had visited Black Pine Ridge once, there was a chance he might come back.

Having investigated the case this far, this seemed to be the last clue. So, in hopes of testing her luck, she set up large enchanted formations, ready to wait for lightning to strike twice.

If this shadowy figure returned, Jiang Yuebai was determined not to let him escape again.

And tonight, he did.

It could be said that her luck was quite good.

Hearing Jiang Yuebai's question, the boy, his emotions gradually stabilizing, finally replied in a clumsy accent, "I... I am a Potion Jar."

"Potion Jar?" Jiang Yuebai was puzzled.

The boy then slowly began to share his story with Jiang Yuebai.

It turned out that among the poison specialists of Black Pine Ridge, there was one who stood out as the strongest and most sinister, a man surnamed Song. The others referred to him as Master Song.

Master Song never used wild beasts to test his poisons; he used only humans. Beneath his courtyard, he had hollowed out a basement where he imprisoned countless children, forcing them to serve as his "potion jars" for his poison experiments.

These children grew up in this cruel environment. Even if they survived, they would gradually transform into beast-like beings, possessing extraordinary physiques but stripped of their humanity.

As they grew older, like this boy, Master Song would send them to the Myriad Poison Mountain to gather medicinal herbs and capture venomous and poisonous creatures. Each of them had a strange poison planted in their bodies, forcing them to take an antidote daily. Missing even a single dose would cause them to go berserk and die a violent death. Thus, none dared to run away; they were compelled to return within the allotted time, handing over the spirit plants and poisonous creatures in exchange for that day's antidote.

If they returned empty-handed, they would be beaten. If they failed for several consecutive days, Master Song would withhold the antidote as a brutal warning, forcing them to go berserk and die in front of everyone.

The boy Jiang Yuebai had captured was one of those Potion Jar Kids. That day, he had spent too long in the Myriad Poison Mountain without harvesting anything. And so, he didn't dare to return.

Just as he was on the brink of death from the poison within the mountain, he stumbled upon a strange herb that could alleviate the agony of the poison's onset. After consuming the herb, he managed to hold on a while longer, giving him enough strength to survive and return to Black Pine Ridge by nightfall.

But upon his return, he was met with the sight of the ridge drenched in rivers of blood. It was at that moment that Jiang Yuebai had found him the previous night.

He thought Jiang Yuebai was the one responsible for what had happened, which was why he fled in madness. After entering the Myriad Poison Mountain, he found more of that strange herb, which allowed him to survive until now.

But without the antidote, he could never truly escape his fate. So, he returned to see if Master Song was dead and whether he could find the antidote.

"I see..."

If everything he said was true, then he was indeed a pitiable soul.

However, Jiang Yuebai did not loosen his restraints. Instead, she instructed him to get up and search for the antidote. The boy stood up, kicked open the courtyard door, and pressed a hidden mechanism, revealing an underground chamber.

The chamber was empty, with only patches of dried blood staining the floor. No one could say how many innocent lives had been lost here.

"No..." The boy let out a sigh of relief. "They all left... They didn't die. It must be Master Song; he took them all away!"

"Didn't die?" Jiang Yuebai's mind raced as she processed his words.

Traces of the massacre at Black Pine Ridge were everywhere. It was entirely possible that a few poison specialists were not among the dead. However, if the children from the underground chamber were among the bodies, they would be easy to identify.

So, he could confirm that these Potion Jar Kids were not dead.

But where had they gone?

As Jiang Yuebai breathed in the air of the chamber, a scent struck her with familiarity.

This scent... Where have I smelled it before? She wondered.

Chapter 482: The Walking Jiangshi

It was rather quiet at the Imperial Supervisory Bureau today.

Whenever a major event took place, a group of experts would be called upon to oversee every detail. The guards of the capital of Yu maintained order on the surface, while the Imperial Supervisory Bureau operated in the shadows, ensuring stability behind the scenes.

The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner had already entered the palace, making preparations for the grand court assembly following the presentation of the captives.

Conquering the Roupu Kingdom was merely a tactic to restore public morale. The officials in the court chamber, however, would not view this as a significant victory. Their thoughts had already turned to the next challenge—dealing with the Fuyao Kingdom. On its own, the Fuyao Kingdom posed little threat to the Yu Dynasty. But with Penglai supporting it, the situation became far more complicated.

Penglai had always maintained a highly ambiguous stance. While it sided with the Yu Dynasty on matters concerning the interests of the human race, it also seemed to wish for the Fuyao Kingdom to grow as powerful as possible.

After all, if the Yu Dynasty grew too powerful, its imperial authority could eventually overshadow the influence of the immortal sects. On the other hand, no matter how strong the Fuyao Kingdom became, it would always remain loyal to Penglai.

At the break of dawn, commotion stirred outside. Along both sides of the main street stretching from the eastern gate to the imperial city, vendors scrambled for the best spots while city patrol guards worked to maintain order. Before long, curious citizens would line the street, eager to witness the day's events.

Rumor had it that this time, the presentation of captives would be unlike any before.

As the Heavenly Dynasty ruling over the nine provinces, the Yu Dynasty had not encountered an foreign enemy in decades. The last presentation of captives after a war dated back nearly a hundred years, marked by grand sacrifices at the Grand Ancestral Temple and a parade of prisoners in wooden carts.

However, this time, the people of the Roupu Kingdom were rather submissive. As a result, His Majesty allowed the East Sea General to forgo harsh treatment and transport nearly a hundred members of the Roupu royal family to the imperial city in carriages. A few hostages would be held, while the rest would likely be returned in due course.

Of course, for the royal family of the Roupu Kingdom, the chance to stay in the capital of Yu as hostages was quite precious, so there would probably be some competition for it.

"Brother Chu, this is the Fiery Celestial Grass you requested."

An official from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau handed Chu Liang a spirit plant sealed inside an ice box. Through the semi-transparent lid, he glimpsed what appeared to be a half-burned blade of grass—nothing about it seemed particularly remarkable.

However, Chu Liang accepted it with repeated thanks, "Thank you, Brother Chen."

He accepted the treasure of nature with one hand and handed over a jade talisman with the other.

Seal-Holding Official Chen received the talisman, scanned it with his divine sense, and started laughing. He then said, "Didn't I say yesterday, it's just nine thousand Vermillion-Bird coins, Brother Chu, you..."

"Of course, I can't let you run this errand for nothing," Chu Liang replied with a smile.

The jade talisman contained ten thousand Vermillion-Bird coins, with the extra amount serving as payment for the errand.

"Brother Chu, you..." The official's smile immediately turned warm and sincere. His gaze toward Chu Liang shifted from that of a friend to a true brother. After a long pause, he could only say, "Very generous of you."

In fact, the cost of acquiring this spirit plant was eight thousand and eight hundred, and he had rounded up the price when reporting to Chu Liang. He hadn't expected that Chu Liang would be even more generous than he thought.

A few days earlier, Chu Liang had noticed that the Colorful Doll had fully absorbed the water-attribute treasure of nature, which meant that he would be able to unlock the fourth level of the Secret Reservoir of the Five Elements. However, as he was now a prisoner in the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, it was rather inconvenient to obtain treasures of nature.

Once he became familiar with the officials in the residence, he inquired and found that the capital of Yu indeed had large shops and markets for the cultivation world. He then asked someone to purchase this spirit plant for him.

In Yu's capital, everything cost a fortune. Nine thousand Vermillion-Bird coins for a single spirit plant? It was steep, a bit more than the usual price. But if it made him stronger, it was worth every coin. It wasn't like he couldn't afford to part with nine thousand. Besides, paying a little extra for the errand wasn't just about kindness—it was an investment in favors, a promise that someone would lend a hand when he needed it again.

Last time, he had bought a spirit plant at Flying-Dragon Fortress using Lin Bei's name. Even after returning to Mount Shu, he wasted no time and settled the remaining payment right away.

There was no point in skimping on these small sums.

The initial construction of Red Cotton Peak had been funded by an investment from Taotie City. Now, it was thriving, and all the income flowed straight into Chu Liang's pocket. Although he had to share a portion of the profits, the costs were minimal, and he was still raking in a fortune.

He now held a large stash of spirit-stone coins that couldn't be eaten or earn interest. The smartest move was to trade them for natural treasures to boost his strength.

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Once things quieted down, he sank his divine sense into the White Pagoda.

Tuntun was curled up, wrapped in her wings, sound asleep. Nearby, several Large-Headed Dolls worked frantically, their overlapping phenomena making the inside of the White Pagoda appear ethereal.

Chu Liang opened the ice box and took out the half-charred blade of grass.

Whoosh—

The moment the leaf left the ice box, a bluish-golden flame erupted! Light flowed within the flame, radiating spiritual energy, and in an instant, the missing part of the leaf was restored.

So this was the marvelous nature of the Fiery Celestial Grass.

The surge of spiritual qi was intense. Tuntun, off to the side, caught a whiff of it. Jolted awake, she sprang up, muttering, "Ah ba... Ah ba..." She flapped her large wings and wobbled over, mumbling incoherently, "Hungry..."

It seemed that objects filled with spiritual energy still held the greatest appeal for her.

"This isn't for you," Chu Liang said with a smile, pressing down on her small head. Then, he pulled out a bag of steaming barbecue and fried skewers from his chest, each piece coated in sauce and wafting a delicious aroma. "This is for you."

Tuntun's nose twitched, instantly lured by the scent.

"This isn't for little ones," Chu Liang teased. "Be good, and we'll have a small barbecue every day to keep you full."

After pacifying Tuntun, Chu Liang approached the Colorful Doll in the White Pagoda with the Fiery Celestial Grass in hand and embedded the spirit plant into it.

Boom—

In an instant, the tri-colored doll shimmered and gained a new hue. Once the Reservoir of the Five Elements was unlocked, the fourth level—the Bing Fire Foundational Qi—would be activated.

The Bing Fire Foundational Qi was fierce and explosive. Infusing it into divine abilities or sword qi would amplify their destructive power tremendously, significantly enhancing one's combat strength.

Initially, Chu Liang had been concerned that Tuntun might gnaw on other items in the White Pagoda. If she ended up devouring the Large-Headed Dolls, it would be a devastating loss. However, over the past few days, he noticed that Tuntun showed little interest in the objects within the pagoda, even those brimming with spiritual energy.

This allowed him to relax, at least a little.

Still, he kept a close eye on the little one, ready to intervene should she make any irreparable mistakes.

As he came out from the White Pagoda, preparing to begin his work, he suddenly felt a faint warmth spread across his chest.

At the moment, he was carrying several objects that could trigger motion or sensation, so he couldn't immediately tell which one it was. Without hesitation, he reached into his robes and pulled out a jade ornament. Just as he had guessed, the warmth was coming from the United Hearts Jade he shared with Senior Sister Jiang.

As his divine sense entered the United Hearts Jade, the green waves within the jade stirred. A moment later, Senior Sister Jiang's message surfaced, appearing amidst the swirling jade light.

[Jiang Yuebai]: "I found something."

[Chu Liang]: "Hmm?"

Soon, Jiang Yuebai informed Chu Liang of the situation she had uncovered last night.

After capturing the Potion Jar Boy, she had followed him to Master Song's hidden underground chamber, where she caught a familiar scent in the air.

She then questioned the boy, asking if he knew anything about the Red River Sect. As it turned out, he did know a bit.

He revealed that he had once overheard someone seeking Master Song's help to concoct a certain poison. Master Song had agreed, but on one condition—they had to kill members of the Red River Sect.

When Jiang Yuebai pressed him further about the visitors, he could only provide a single detail—they seemed to be a married couple.

After that, the effect of the poison on the boy suddenly triggered, pushing him to the brink of madness. Left with no other choice, Jiang Yuebai took him deep into the mountains in search of a rare herb known as the Asura Leaf. Only after finding it did the boy finally calm down, though just barely. However, if they couldn't find Master Song and obtain the antidote, he would be forced to endure this agony for the rest of his life.

Watching his skin turn a sickly dark green and his features contort into something beast-like, Jiang Yuebai suddenly remembered what that familiar scent was.

It was the same scent she had detected on the city patrol guard at the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. He had been bitten by a strange person during his patrol and was poisoned shortly after. It was only thanks to Chu Liang and his Poison-Expulsion Whip that the poison had been cleansed from his body.

As the toxic mist dispersed into the air, it carried that same eerie, pungent odor.

Jiang Yuebai immediately questioned the boy again. He revealed that this strange poison was one of Master Song's secret techniques, known as the Walking Jiangshi[1].

Once a person was afflicted with this poison, they would gain immense strength. However, if the antidote was not taken for even a single day, the person would instantly go berserk, descending into madness. Eventually, they would die a violent death and transform into a full-fledged Jiangshi. The longer the poison lingered, the stronger their body would become, but the harder it would be to cure. Most terrifying of all, anyone bitten or scratched by the berserk would also fall victim to the poison.

It was extremely bizarre and sinister.

The Potion Jar Kids had been consuming this Walking Jiangshi Poison since a young age. It was the reason they possessed such formidable physiques despite never undergoing proper cultivation. However, the poison had already taken deep root within their bodies, its onset as fierce as a mountain torrent. So far, the boy had only discovered that the Asura Leaf could temporarily alleviate its effects.

Jiang Yuebai immediately shared all her discoveries with Chu Liang. As he read through it, a wave of turmoil surged in his heart.

The East Sea, the Red River Sect, Black Pine Ridge... countless pieces of information began to connect in his mind, but there was no time to ponder it further.

It would have been fine if the poison had stayed within the mountains and territories of Black Pine Ridge. But now, it had reached the capital of Yu—a major city with millions of citizens!

Chapter 483: The Grand Ceremony

The rhythmic beat of drums and the clash of gongs filled the air at the eastern gate of Yu's capital. Firecrackers exploded with a deafening roar, red flags flapped in the wind, and the streets were packed with an ocean of people.

With each thunderous stomp, a terrifying giant beast emerged, its mane like a lion's and scales resembling a dragon's, as it stepped into the city. Even though it consciously attempted to adopt a posture to make itself appear smaller, it still towered over a zhang tall.

This was the legendary spirit beast, Suanni—the mount of the great General Wu Anmin.

Seated atop the beast, Wu Anmin wore a suit of bright red armor. His brows were sharp as swords, and his eyes keen as an eagle's, exuding a dignified aura. Despite the thunderous cheers of the capital's citizens, his expression remained calm, showing no trace of joy.

It was understandable. For a general of the Yu Dynasty, leading an army of thirty thousand elite soldiers to conquer a small island with a population of just over twenty thousand hardly qualified as a true military achievement.

Wu Anmin yearned to achieve real military accomplishments. Now in his forties, he had already climbed to the ranks of the top three generals in the Yu Dynasty. Yet, not once had he tasted the thrill of a true battlefield.

Generals in times of peace often felt somewhat helpless.

Moreover, Wu Anmin held a special status—the eldest son of the Wu Family, a prestigious noble clan from the Western Continent.

For generations, the Wu Family had defended the Western Regions' border on behalf of the Yu Dynasty and was held in high regard. His elder sister sat on the throne as Empress Wu, while his father had once held the esteemed position of chancellor. However, after His Majesty appointed Wu Anmin as the great general, his father retired and returned back to his hometown.

There were many rumors among the people, claiming that Wu Anmin had climbed to his position solely on the backing of his family, father, and elder sister, without possessing any true skill or capability of his own.

It was likely that His Majesty had appointed him to lead the expedition against the Roupu Kingdom to help him build some real military merit. Yet, he felt no interest in this sort of achievement—one that anyone could have easily obtained if they had been sent in his place. Still, he understood that this was a victory the Yu Dynasty needed.

As of now, all Wu Anmin wished for was to end this charade as quickly as possible. Behind him marched over a thousand sturdy soldiers, some mounted on fierce spirit beasts, guarding hundreds of carriages.

Each carriage carried a member of the Roupu Kingdom's royal family, with standards that were nothing short of extravagant. People who had no idea that an expedition had happened would have thought that this was a welcoming ceremony for the dignitaries in the carriage.

A grand procession passed through the capital, drawing enthusiastic cheers from the citizens. The crowd, having waited since morning, tossed ribbons and garlands to the soldiers, offering fruit baskets and fresh clothes as a gesture of appreciation for their achievements.

It left the soldiers feeling dazed, as if they had genuinely risked their lives in battle for the nation.

The procession to present the captives had to maintain a slower pace.

First, they had to complete the ancestral rites performed ten li outside the city before entering the gates and reaching the imperial city. The entire procession took two hours, providing the citizens with a chance to witness the might of the Yu Dynasty's military.

In the center of Heavenly Street, the owner of a silk shop waved his arms, signaling his staff members to present several rolls of brand-new brocade to the marching soldiers. The staff member handed the rolls directly to the soldiers, prompting a wave of cheers from the surrounding crowd.

However, once the procession had passed, the owner descended from the building, wincing quietly in pain. To gain a good reputation, he had truly made a significant sacrifice.

He pushed aside the hanging cloth in the courtyard, intending to return to his house, when he suddenly noticed a pitch-black humanoid figure huddled in the corner behind the fabric.

"Who's there?" The owner was startled.

At first, he thought a petty thief had snuck in to steal something amidst the presentation, and he intended to drive them away.

But the shadowy figure crouched in the corner trembled uncontrollably, as if suffering from unbearable pain. It muttered, "Help me..."

"Hmm?" The owner's hesitation lingered. "What's wrong with you?"

He cautiously took slow steps forward, moving closer to the shadow in the corner to see what was wrong with the person.

In an instant, the small shadow's eyes gleamed with a fierce blood-red light.

"Hissssss—"

At last, the owner could see the shadowy figure in detail. It appeared to be around ten years old, with a dark greenish-black body, veins protruding ominously, and covered in grotesque patterns.

As the owner drew near, the shadow suddenly sprang up and lunged at him!

"Ahhhhhhhh—" The owner stumbled back, losing his balance and falling to the ground. The shadow lunged forward like a wild beast, sinking its teeth into the owner's calf with a vicious bite!

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Helppppppppp!" The sharp pain and overwhelming fear sent the owner into a frantic scream.

Several staff members hurried over at the sound of his cries. Upon seeing their owner being mauled, they quickly grabbed sticks, ready to come to his aid.

However, even as the staff members struck the shadowy figure several times, it didn't budge at all. It continued to gnaw on the owner's leg.

One brave staff member shouted in anger, reaching out with both hands to pull the shadowy figure away. Yet the figure's body felt as hard as iron, its strength overwhelming. No matter how hard he tried, the shadowy figure wouldn't budge an inch.

Suddenly, the shadowy figure did a flip, knocking the staff member to the ground in an instant.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh—" the staff member screamed as the shadowy figure moved to bite his neck. He felt the impending doom closing in around him!

Swish—

In that critical moment, a flash of lightning illuminated the scene, and a powerful figure suddenly appeared, grasping the child by the head. A golden dragon flickered into view, paralyzing the child's entire body in an instant.

Behind this powerful man stood several cultivators clad in the uniform of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau.

"It's just as Chu Liang had predicted. Thank goodness for his timely warning. Someone is truly trying to stir trouble during the presentation of captives..." The powerful man was none other than Ji Zidian, the celestial official of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau.

Upon receiving news that the Walking Jiangshi Poison had spread to the capital of Yu, Chu Liang immediately deduced that someone would take advantage of the presentation of captives to create chaos.

At that moment, the citizens of the entire city lined both sides of Heavenly Street. If this Walking Jiangshi Poison were to spread on this street, countless individuals would instantly become Walking Jiangshi, leading to unimaginable consequences.

So, he quickly alerted those at the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, including the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner, who had already arrived at the palace. Upon receiving the message, they swiftly returned to the scene.

The Imperial Supervisory Bureau and the city patrol guards dispatched all their forces, staying alert for any possible emergence of Walking Jiangshi.

But as the presentation of captives reached the end, screams erupted from both sides of Heavenly Street. Amid the cheering crowds, these cries were swiftly drowned out.

Ji Zidian's expression darkened. "Don't follow me. Split into pairs and use your divine sense to patrol the streets. If you encounter any more evil entities, detain them immediately! Detain anyone who is poisoned or has been bitten, and send them back to the Imperial Supervisory Bureau! Chu Liang can help clear the toxins in them."

"Yes!" his subordinates behind him replied, accepting the order before swiftly setting off on their task.

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The disturbance in the rear went unnoticed by the procession that had already passed.

Wu Anmin, riding the Suanni, made his way to the forefront of the imperial city. With a flip, he dismounted and guided his mount to the side. Following his lead, all the soldiers dismounted and began their march into the imperial city to receive their rewards.

The members of the Roupu Kingdom, who had been in the carriages, got off and followed the soldiers, moving forward slowly.

At the front was the King of the Roupu Kingdom, an elderly man in his fifties or sixties, wearing traditional white hemp garments. His dark, cracked skin looked like that of an old fisherman weathered by years at sea.

As he took in the scene before him, he was amazed by the power of the Yu Dynasty. Though he was a ruler himself, there was a vast difference between him and the Emperor of the Yu Dynasty. In comparison, even calling himself a landlord felt like an exaggeration.

The procession soon moved through the numerous palace walls of the imperial city and reached the expansive square in front of the palace. The Emperor of the Yu Dynasty stood on the dragon steps outside the main hall, ready to review the victorious soldiers.

Behind him stood the current civil and military officials of the Yu Dynasty. Aside from those like the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner, who had temporarily departed, everyone who could be there was present.

A bright yellow figure stood high above. Wu Anmin was the first to kneel, declaring loudly, "This humble general greets Your Majesty! I have completed the Eastern expedition as commanded!"

Following his lead, those behind him knelt down in unison.

"Hahaha!" The Emperor of the Yu Dynasty laughed heartily from his elevated platform. He waved his hand and declared, "All soldiers, rise! People of the Roupu Kingdom, rise!"

As they rose, the people of Roupu Kingdom, led by their king, reached into the folds of their garments to retrieve grayish-white bone teeth. Those who witnessed this did not stop them as they knew it was their highest form of respect.

Whenever the people of the Roupu Kingdom wished to sincerely pledge allegiance to someone and express their willingness to serve as slaves, they would use a fish tooth to cut their cheeks, symbolizing their loyalty.

At this moment, it was clear that they were about to perform this ritual.

The King of the Roupu Kingdom raised the bone tooth and slowly cut his right cheek, allowing blood to trickle down.

Most of the royal family members behind him had unmarked faces, but some bore scars, likely indicating their previous pledges of loyalty to another king.

Now, a new scar would be added to their faces.

The Yu Dynasty's civil and military officials in front and the soldiers around them all watched with due respect as they completed this ceremony.

However, as the blood trickled down their cheeks, a faint and strange scent began to permeate the air.

Chapter 484: The Married Couple

"It's quite a shock, huh? They moved faster than we expected.," the man remarked.

The soft trickling of water accompanied his words as wisps of steam curled up from the teacup, filling the room with a delicate fragrance. With a slight adjustment of his sleeve, he pushed the teacup forward, offering it to the person seated across from him.

The man's face was sallow, his frame nothing but skin and bones. He looked ill, exuding an aura that made it seem as though he was on the very brink of death.

Across from him sat a middle-aged man clad in black. Although it was warm in this room, he remained wrapped in a thick, dark robe. His weathered face showed no expression, yet his brows conveyed a trace of gloom and sorrow.

"Our Potion Jars did not get the chance to feast..." The man in black took the teacup first, seemingly unbothered by its scalding heat as he downed it in one swift gulp. Setting the cup down, he continued, "The destruction was far from enough."

"Master Song, this is not your fault. No one could have foreseen the Imperial Supervisory Bureau mobilizing its entire force before the chaos broke out," the emaciated man said slowly. "It's just a shame that your Walking Jiangshi Poison could only be used once. I am afraid an antidote for this poison would soon be created."

"Rest assured, Mister Yang," Master Song, the man in black, sneered coldly. "As long as you pay me enough, I can develop a new deadly poison very quickly."

"Master Song, you truly live up to your reputation as the finest poison specialist in Black Pine Ridge," Mister Yang remarked casually, offering a light compliment.

Cries and wails echoed outside. The area around their pavilion had become the most chaotic part of the capital of Yu. Dark figures darted about, sinking their teeth into the fleeing citizens. Those who were bitten struggled for a moment before going crazy.

Amid the dense crowd of the presentation ceremony, many within the inner circle had already been bitten. Those on the outer edges remained clueless about the chaos unfolding and had no time to flee.

Fortunately, the powerful members of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau reacted swiftly. Whenever a citizen went berserk, cultivators would descend from the sky, subduing them in an instant. The citizens newly exposed to the toxins had yet to gain any significant combat strength, making their capture a simple task.

Soon, it wasn't just the Imperial Supervisory Bureau; the city patrol guards and various armored forces of the capital joined the battle, assisting in evacuating the crowd and keeping those exposed to the Walking Jiangshi Poison under control.

Yet, amid the chaos, separated by just a wall, tranquility prevailed here.

"Most of my Potion Jars have been captured. It seems this won't last long," Master Song muttered, shaking his head with clear dissatisfaction.

"That's already more than enough," Mister Yang replied with a confident smile. "Our main battlefield lies elsewhere."

"After this, I probably won't be able to establish myself in the land of the nine provinces anymore," Master Song said suddenly. "Your Celestial Charm Sect... Do you think I can join?"

"That's not a decision we can make," Mister Yang replied calmly, seemingly unsurprised by the request. "I can consult the higher-ups. If they're willing to accept you, we would certainly be pleased."

"Even with your high cultivation levels, you and your wife can't decide?" Master Song asked, a hint of surprise flickering across his face.

"Cough, cough..." Mister Yang cleared his throat a few times before replying, "My wife's status is slightly higher than mine. If it weren't for her, I might not even be qualified to join."

Master Song was genuinely shocked. In their interactions over the past few days, he had sensed the immense and unfathomable power of the man before him. If even he had barely managed to join, just how powerful was this faction?

No wonder this faction dared to plot against the entire world.

"Your wife is indeed formidable," Master Song could only remark.

"Indeed," Mister Yang replied with a nod. "Aside from being a bit ugly, my wife is first-rate in every other aspect..."

"Yang Bujue[1]!" A stern voice rang out from beyond the door, which was flung open with a bang. A fragrant breeze swept in as the figure entered. "Talking bad about me again, are you?"

A tall, graceful woman stepped inside, her skin smooth and delicate, her features soft and gentle. An irresistible charm lingered in her gaze, exuding a beauty so striking that it felt unparalleled in the world.

However, her mannerisms and behavior left much to be desired.

She wore a purple gauze dress, sleeves rolled up, and without hesitation, grabbed Mister Yang by the ear, yanking it sharply.

"Wifey..." Yang Bujue cried out in pain.

Master Song's eyebrows twitched as he watched the woman thrash the frail-looking Yang Bujue for quite some time. She didn't stop until he struggled to sit up. With that, a satisfied glint appeared in her eyes and she sat down and took a sip of tea.

"Madam Xiao, did everything go smoothly?" Master Song asked.

His expression grew uneasy. This woman, Xiao Wuyan[2], was Yang Bujue's wife—and she was evidently far more terrifying than her husband.

"Fairly smooth," Xiao Wuyan said with a nod. "Everything is within the plan."

Beside her, Yang Bujue awkwardly climbed back to the table and asked in a fearful tone, "Wifey, whose face are you using this time?"

"It's a concubine's face," she replied, shooting a cold glare at Yang Bujue. "I found it pretty, so I decided to use it for a while."

Her voice took on a biting edge as she added, "You like beauties, don't you? How about I keep this look forever?"

"I still prefer your original appearance," Yang Bujue replied firmly.

"Heh." Xiao Wuyan sneered. "Such bullshit."

...

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—"

The Imperial Supervisory Bureau echoed with cries of agony. Inside, the courtyard was packed with citizens poisoned with the Walking Jiangshi. With no antidote yet available, they could only be whipped by Chu Liang's Poison-Expulsion Whip.

Snap, snap...

Chu Liang swung the whip, each strike landing on the body of a man whose skin had turned a shade of black. Around him, others were tightly bound, their faces contorted in pain as dark qi seeped out, growing thicker by the moment.

"If they remain in this berserk state for too long, they'll die violently and transform into true Walking Jiangshi," Chu Liang warned, turning to the personnel of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. "Once that happens, there's no saving them. We need to prioritize detoxifying those most affected."

"It seems like we won't make it in time..." Xue Muyu muttered, her brows knitting together in a deep frown.

She extended her hands, channeling her divine abilities to soothe the poisoned individuals. Still, it had little effect. As the Walking Jiangshi entered their berserk state, the only option left was to subdue them by force.

The timing of the Walking Jiangshi outbreak was truly insidious; it struck during the presentation ceremony when the capital was packed with people. Dozens of those Potion Jars hid among the crowd, and the poison spread to over a thousand people within moments.

As more people were poisoned, the number of transmitters rapidly multiplied. Had the Supervisory Bureau not acted promptly after Chu Liang's warning, the poison could have spread to tens of thousands, leading to unimaginable consequences.

Yet, even with timely intervention, thousands were already poisoned, and more continued to be brought in.

Chu Liang couldn't work fast enough on his own; during the wait, many would die as the poison attacked their hearts.

While everyone was feeling very anxious, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner appeared.

Qi Yingxuan wasted no words; he simply raised his hand and made a sharp gesture.

Suddenly, the movements of all the poisoned people in the courtyard slowed to a crawl. Their actions, expressions, and even their breathing became several times slower than before.

Chu Liang's eyes widened. It was the first time he had ever seen something like this. Could this be the power of the Great Dao of Infinity?

Among the various Great Daos, those related to time were undoubtedly the most mysterious. Although the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner was the Dao Master of the Tai'a Great Dao, he also possessed some mastery over the Great Dao of Infinity, which pertained to time.

With a single gesture, he slowed the flow of time for all the poisoned individuals. As the poison's attack on their hearts slowed, Chu Liang gained more time to save them.

Snap, snap!

He swung the Poison-Expulsion Whip in rapid circles, as swift as leaves caught in a whirlwind, doing his utmost to cleanse the deep poison from the victims' bodies. Beside him, Xue Muyu acted swiftly, dispersing the poisonous mist expelled to prevent it from accumulating and poisoning others.

While they were urgently working to save people, a shrill shout suddenly pierced the air from outside.

"Make waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!"

Chapter 485: You Dare?!

After the captives were presented, a grand celebration banquet was held in the imperial palace's main hall.

The emperor was sitting in the seat of honor. His face looked old, but his complexion was glowing with vitality, looking ever more dignified and imposing by the day.

His ministers were scattered along both sides of the hall. The first row was filled with the high-ranking military officers who had participated in the expedition. General Wu Anmin was naturally sitting at the very front, closest to the emperor.

The members of the Roupu Kingdom's royal family were also seated at the front. They had been given a place at the Yu Dynasty's banquet to celebrate their own defeat.

This time, the Yu Dynasty was adamant about holding a grand celebration, so both civil and military officials as well as members of the imperial family were in attendance.

There was a table in front of each person, and palace attendants were walking to and fro placing dishes onto the tables.

During the banquet, the Emperor of the Yu Dynasty was conversing with the King of the Roupu Kingdom, attempting to appease him. That's when the King of the Roupu Kingdom cautiously asked if his people could all stay in the capital of Yu. Naturally, the Emperor of the Yu Dynasty stated that the capital of Yu welcomed friends from all states and said nothing else afterward.

From that, the King of the Roupu Kingdom understood that his people were not welcome to stay in the capital of Yu permanently. As a king, he could afford to buy a residence in the capital of Yu, but considering the housing prices there, the other royal family members would not be able to do the same. It was utterly impossible for him to support the expenses of over a hundred people living in the capital; that was simply a fantasy.

The Emperor of the Yu Dynasty's silence on assisting with their relocation made it clear they were unwelcome. They would still have to return to that island and continue fishing for a living amid battering winds and under the scorching sun.

Midway through the banquet, there was non-stop music and dance, putting on a grand display to reflect the Yu Dynasty's dominant status. The King of the Roupu Kingdom even took to the stage to perform a dance from his region. His movements were slightly comical, eliciting laughter throughout the hall.

The king had created that atmosphere intentionally, to present the Roupu Kingdom as a harmless and submissive existence. He knew that doing this would likely resolve any imminent threats from the Yu Dynasty. After all, the Yu Dynasty had already achieved their goal of showing off their might, so it was unlikely the Yu Dynasty would continue making things difficult for the Roupu Kingdom.

However, once the King of the Roupu Kingdom returned home, he would have to think about how to deal with the people of the Fuyao Kingdom. Those island neighbors were not as easy to negotiate with as the Yu Dynasty.

Just as the King of Roupu Kingdom relaxed, a sudden thud echoed in the hall. He turned to see his young son collapsed on the ground, convulsing and appearing to be in great pain.

Then a second member of his family collapsed, followed by a third... Numerous other members of the Roupu Kingdom's royal family collapsed in succession.

The King of the Roupu Kingdom panicked.

His first thought was, Could the Yu Dynasty have poisoned the food and wine? Do they want to wipe us out?

However, on further thought, he realized, If that's the case, there's no reason at all for them to do this. If they wanted to kill us, they could have done so long ago. Why bother to go through all this trouble and waste so much food and wine?

Upon noticing the situation, the emperor and ministers of the Yu Dynasty hesitated for a moment.

Then the emperor called out, "What's wrong with the people of the Roupu Kingdom? Quickly summon the court physician!"

Just as the palace attendants hurried to summon the physician, an unexpected change occurred.

"Huff, huff..."

The child who had collapsed first seemed unable to withstand the poison any longer. After a few muffled gasps, he suddenly sprang up! His pupils turned crimson, and black mist surrounded him as he lunged toward the nearest person!

A shrill yell rang out, "Protect the emperor!!!"

The poisoning of guests at a state banquet was already a serious matter, but now that someone had violently attacked another person, the severity of the situation quickly escalated.

A large number of palace guards rushed in, and the hall descended into chaos.

Yet, the Emperor of the Yu Dynasty's voice rang out like thunder, cutting through the chaos. "Don't panic! First, subdue all the people from the Roupu Kingdom. Just capture them; do not kill them!"

The hall instantly regained a sense of calm.

The reason the emperor was able to remain so composed was that the hall was filled with powerful figures. There were many formidable cultivators among the civil and military officials alone. Just a few of them would be enough to subdue the hundred or so people from the Roupu Kingdom.

Furthermore, if the civil and military officials were not enough, there was still the man standing in front of the emperor—Lao Santai. Even if Lao Santai were not present, the emperor himself could step up, as he was a seventh-realm Eminent One who had reached the Dao Attainment Realm... So, the emperor found it utterly unbelievable that this group of fishermen would attempt to assassinate him.

Regardless of the cause behind this chaos, the situation was getting out of control. Only a small number of the royal family of the Roupu Kingdom had some cultivation power. The rest were ordinary people, so they should have been subdued quickly. Yet, for some unknown reason, those who had no cultivation power suddenly exhibited incredible strength.

The worst part was there were so many of them, and they were in close proximity to the nobles. It meant that when the chaos erupted, they bit some members of the Yu Dynasty's imperial family.

Most of the men in the imperial family possessed some cultivation power, so only a small number of them were injured. However, the women of the imperial family had been seated close to the women of the Roupu Kingdom. Consequently, many of them were scratched and bitten.

Screams rang out over and over as the palace guards made a series of captures. Eventually, they managed to subdue everyone from the Roupu Kingdom.

The people of the Roupu Kingdom had all transformed into frenzied figures with crimson eyes, including the king.

Meanwhile, court physicians promptly attended to the injured members of the imperial family.

"What is going on?" The Emperor of the Yu Dynasty frowned at the appearance of the Roupu King's royal family. "Have they been struck by some kind of dark magic?"

"Your Majesty!" a voice called out from below the stairs leading to the emperor's seat of honor.

It was Li Chengfeng of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. Before the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner left the hall, he had instructed Li Chengfeng to stay behind in his stead, so Li Chengfeng had witnessed the whole incident.

He stepped forward and said, "The people of the Roupu Kingdom have been poisoned! Someone afflicted with the same poison was brought to the Imperial Supervisory Bureau last night."

"Huh?"

Li Cheng Feng's words caused an uproar.

Someone poisoned the food and wine at the palace banquet...?

This shocked everyone, especially since everyone attending the banquet had consumed the same meal. If the members of the Roupu royal family had indeed been poisoned, then surely all the other attendees could have been poisoned too.

Li Chengfeng continued, "This poison is quite problematic. Anyone who was injured by the poisoned Roupu family is at risk of going berserk as well. Fortunately, there is someone in the Imperial Supervisory Bureau who can neutralize the poison. Please hurry over there for treatment."

The emperor nodded slightly. "There are indeed many capable individuals in the Imperial Supervisory Bureau."

"That person is not a member of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. He is a disciple of the Mount Shu Sect..." Li Chengfeng said, raising his gaze. "Your Majesty may not know him, but you surely know his teacher."

...

In the Imperial Supervisory Bureau...

A young eunuch in brocade robes—a palace attendant—pushed through the crowd and asked loudly, "Which of you is Young Hero Chu Liang from Mount Shu?"

"It's me!" Chu Liang replied without even putting his whipping on pause. "What's the matter?"

For a moment, the young eunuch watched Chu Liang swing the whip, each lashing accompanied by a loud crack.

He wondered, Is this really the method for treating those who got poisoned? It's so violent...

The young eunuch then raised his voice and announced, "His Majesty the Emperor has passed down a decree. A disturbance has occurred in the palace, and many have been poisoned. His Majesty heard that Young Hero Chu Liang from Mount Shu can neutralize this poison, so His Majesty has requested that you come to the palace immediately to provide treatment!"

"You can see the situation here. I can't leave," Chu Liang replied. "There are thousands waiting for me to cleanse them of the poison. If I leave now, over a hundred people might be dead by the time I get back..."

"Young Hero Chu, the people in the palace are more important!" The young eunuch seemed quite surprised by Chu Liang's response. "This is an imperial command."

Chu Liang gave him a strange look.

The Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten did indeed show respect to imperial authority... but it was only respect.

He asked, "You don't think I'm the same as you, do you?"

The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner spoke up. "Forget it. It's a critical situation here. He cannot leave. I'll go with you to the palace and bring the injured back here for treatment."

Then he grabbed the young eunuch by the back of his collar. Taken by surprise, the young eunuch was quickly overpowered by the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner and dragged away. In an instant, the two people vanished from Chu Liang's line of sight.

The palace attendants who had accompanied the young eunuch looked at each other, unsure of what to do.

After a moment, a large number of carriages and horses emerged from the palace.

Given the distance from the palace to the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, the carriages arrived in no time. The first few carriages contained the injured members of the imperial family and officials, while the rest were all from the royal family of the Roupu Kingdom. The people from the Roupu Kingdom were certainly more deeply poisoned, yet they were all placed at the rear of the line.

Before the poisoned individuals could get out of the carriages, a tall, burly, and slightly older eunuch with graying hair rushed over.

He stared Chu Liang down with a fierce gaze. "Are you the young hero from Mount Shu? The injured have been sent here. Please treat them quickly!"

"Please have them lined up according to the severity of their poisoning, and I will prioritize treating those who have been poisoned the most deeply," Chu Liang said, furrowing his brows.

If someone else were to cause a disturbance, the people from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau would surely intervene. However, they couldn't stop these palace officials, as it would only interrupt him further.

"I am Cheng Hu, head of the Fengyi Bureau[1] in the imperial palace. All of these injured people are members of the imperial family," Cheng Hu, the eunuch, stated in a deep voice. "There's no need to prioritize them based on the severity of the poisoning. Just treat these nobles first; they are more important."

Chu Liang glanced at Chen Hu indifferently and replied, "Sir, I have to ask that you please follow the rules."

He had heard of the name Cheng Hu before. Cheng Hu was the third of the Four Great Warriors, ranking after the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch Yao Dengxian and the Terrace-Supervising Eunuch Lao Santai. He was responsible for matters in the inner palace and was under the personal command of Empress Wu, so he held a high position with great power.

Nevertheless, as the saying goes... What does this have to do with me, a disciple of the Mount Shu Sect?

Chu Liang didn't concern himself much with these dynastic powers. Lives were at stake; he needed to prioritize based on severity to maximize the number of lives that could be saved. If everyone insisted on being placed at the front, those in critical condition would undoubtedly lose precious time for treatment and could end up losing their lives.

Seeing that Chu Liang had no intention of complying, Cheng Hu's expression darkened. "Follow your rules? If something were to happen to these nobles, the consequence will be something no one can bear..."

In his view, it was inconsequential if commoners died, but any harm to the imperial family would surely land him in trouble, and that undoubtedly made him anxious.

Chu Liang couldn't be bothered to respond.

Seeing this, Cheng Hu became furious. "So, it's this treasure that can neutralize the poison, right? Then you need not trouble yourself; just lend me this item!"

He could tell at a glance that Chu Liang had no divine abilities that could neutralize the poison; it was just the Poison-Expulsion Whip that was extraordinary. Since Chu Liang wouldn't comply, Cheng Hu would just seize the enchanted tool!

Chu Liang's gaze sharpened. "You dare?!"

Chapter 486: Don't Think I Won't Hit You Just Because You're a Eunuch

Cheng Hu left obediently.

...

Di Nufeng had been quite busy during the last few days.

Ever since Chu Liang got imprisoned, she had been proactively planning his jailbreak. Taking into consideration how much manpower the Mount Shu Sect possessed, Di Nufeng worked on crafting a huge and incredibly detailed plan to rescue Chu Liang.

Ultimately, it wasn't just one plan but three, divided into three levels based on feasibility: high, mid, and low.

The high-level plan was to leverage the power of the Mount Shu Sect and coerce the Red River Sect into giving up on the cases. They just needed to follow the standard method of using force and heavy threats, and they'd be done with the matter.

This plan was the simplest to put into action, but the downside was that many others had done the same. It lacked creativity... Moreover, It could also draw condemnation from the immortal sects and scrutiny from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, tarnishing the Mount Shu Sect's reputation.

The mid-level plan involved Di Nufeng taking advantage of her right to visit Chu Liang. She would secretly take Chu Liang back with her and then have him escape to the islands of the South Sea, where he would live incognito for years before returning.

However, that plan had some risks and many variables that might interfere with its execution.

The low-level plan was for the Mount Shu Sect to rise together. Venerable Wen Yuan would lead them in a nighttime surprise attack on the capital of Yu. Di Nufeng, a mole in the imperial family, would bring them into the imperial palace and then behead the emperor. She would take the throne herself, exonerate Chu Liang from his charges, and release him.

This plan posed the least long-term risk, but it would be quite challenging to execute it.

When Di Nufeng presented the plans to Venerable Wen Yuan, he was taken aback.

"Did you write these yourself?"

He looked at the lengthy plans, quite surprised that Di Nufeng could produce something like this.

"I only spent two hours writing them, so there will definitely be some oversights," Di Nufeng replied calmly. "We can ask Uncle Sikong and Tantai Jing to finalize the plans. After that, we can run some simulations on a sand table to choose the path with the highest chance of succeeding."

Speechless, Venerable Wen Yuan scanned through the plans with an expressionless face. Then he asked, "Which of these plans do you think is best?"

"I'm leaning toward the third one. It's got the lowest feasibility of the three, but it's a permanent solution," Di Nufeng said with great passion.

She continued, "That emperor—that old guy's surname is Xia, and so is mine. If he can sit in that position, why can't I? When we take the capital, we can get rid of the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner and have you take his place. I'll grant titles of general and chancellor to the Four Guardian Elders. We'll feast and drink in the golden palace hall. Wouldn't that be wonderful...?"

As Di Nufeng fantasized about the future, Venerable Wen Yuan furrowed his brows even more deeply, and dark creases gathered in between them.

Goodness. If the Mount Shu Sect were left in your hands, would it even be able to survive for three years?

There was a time when I thought the Discipline Master had led this girl astray, indulging in her wild behavior. But now it seems that perhaps it was her teachings that saved the girl.

If she had been raised elsewhere, wouldn't she have easily become the leader of a major rebellion?

The problem is that her plans may sound wild and outrageous, but on paper, they are bold, meticulous, and clearly feasible.

And that's what makes her even more terrifying.

She truly is part of the Xia Family...

"Um... Feng'er," Venerable Wen Yuan began. He hesitated and then said, "Have you considered the possibility that... Chu Liang really is innocent? He didn't kill anyone, and once Jiang Yuebai and the Imperial Supervisory Bureau figure out the truth, he'll be fine."

"Mm." Di Nufeng nodded. "That's also a good idea. We can fabricate evidence to prove it was someone else or find a scapegoat."

Venerable Wen Yuan rubbed his forehead in exasperation. "Forget it. You don't need to worry about such things. Just don't be hasty. I assure you that Chu Liang will be fine, so don't worry."

"What do you mean?" Di Nufeng looked a bit disappointed. She nudged her plans over to him. "Won't you consider using one of these plans?"

"I will think it over," Venerable Wen Yuan said irritably, waving his hand to dismiss her. "Just go back and wait for my message."

...

Di Nufeng waited on Mount Shu for two days without contact from Venerable Wen Yuan. Eventually, she realized that the phrase "wait for my message" was likely the biggest lie in the world, so she could only give up resentfully.

During this time, she also went to find Old Man Sikong to see if hexagram divination could be used to prove Chu Liang's innocence. However, that wasn't necessary, as the people from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau had already done precisely that.

Old Man Sikong performed the divination, but from the moment he started looking into the cases, all he saw was a blur. It was clear that there was something obscuring the secrets of the heavens.

Then when he tried to find out whether Chu Liang had killed anyone, he was met with the same blur. It seemed that Chu Liang also possessed something that obscured the secrets of the heavens.

Di Nufeng had no choice but to give up on this method too.

After those two days, she remembered that she should go check on Chu Liang. She wanted to confirm that he was safe and sound. Furthermore, if she needed to break him out of jail later, she needed to scout the place first.

So, Di Nufeng rushed to the capital of Yu as streak of fire. On her way to the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, she saw large crowds and chaos everywhere.

Di Nufeng put her hands together and sighed in disappointment. If we wanted to attack the city, now would be the perfect opportunity.

When Di Nufeng arrived at the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, she saw Chu Liang swinging a whip wildly. There was a huge line of people in front of him waiting to be whipped.

"You little rascal. Here I was worried you'd be tortured here, but it turns out you're dishing out punishment to others," Di Nufeng said as she approached. Then she asked. "Have you joined their gang?"

Chu Liang saw that his teacher had arrived, but he couldn't pause his whipping.

He just stayed silent as he remarked inwardly... For a government institution like the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, even if I were to become one of its members, it would be called "entering the ranks." What's that about "joining their gang"??

Chu Liang explained, "It's a mess in the city. All these people have been poisoned, and I just happen to be able to help detoxify them."

Di Nufeng was about to ask something else, but she spotted a beautiful woman in the distance.

Her eyes lit up as she called out, "Little Yu!"

Xue Muyu^[1] was in the midst of helping stabilize the situation. Nevertheless, she smiled when she saw Di Nufeng.

"Ah Feng," Xue Muyu replied.

Without another word, Di Nufeng ditched Chu Liang and ran over to Xue Muyu.

Given the critical situation, Xue Muyu couldn't leave to spend time with Di Nufeng, but it was clear that the two had a close relationship.

The courtyard of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau was quite large. Chu Liang was saving people at the front of the line, while Xue Muyu was at the end of the line. They were quite far apart. The members of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau who were moving to and fro between them were too preoccupied to notice Di Nufeng.

This was when that palace attendant, the young eunuch, requested for Chu Liang to enter the palace, but he refused.

Afterward, the young eunuch returned to the palace hall to report Chu Liang's response to the emperor. Then Li Chengfeng suggested sending the poisoned members of the imperial family and the people from the Roupu Kingdom to the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. They could get there with adequate time to spare for Chu Liang to save them.

Empress Wu was worried about the safety of the imperial relatives, so she ordered Cheng Hu to accompany them. However, when Cheng Hu arrived at the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, he found that Chu Liang was unwilling to comply. Used to being domineering, Cheng Hu decided straight away to simply snatch the Poison-Expulsion Whip from Chu Liang.

Unfortunately for Cheng Hu, he didn't know that Chu Liang was an expert in the ways of the world. Even if he was unwilling to comply with Cheng Hu demands, he would usually, at the very least, tactfully negotiate for a compromise. The reason he was being so stubborn now was that Silver Sword Peak's esteemed heroes were all present!

Di Nufeng had been busy clinging to Xue Muyu, so she hadn't paid much attention to the old eunuch when he entered. However, she did notice when Cheng Hu made a move against Chu Liang.

Di Nufeng sprang into action.

Boom!

Cheng Hu was an Eminent One who had reached the Dao Attainment Realm. With the Yin-Slaying Sutra, his cultivation power surged like the towering waves of tempestuous seas. In an instant, he unleashed an intense murderous aura.

It was obvious that he released that overwhelming pressure to force Chu Liang into submission. Yet, Chu Liang didn't even blink.

In the next moment, a burst of violet-gold flames swooped down with a whoosh!

"Huh?" Cheng Hu uttered in alarm, pushing his palms out to block the flames.

The violet-gold flames exploded loudly against his palms. Just how much force did the Samadhi True Fire possess?

The collision left Cheng Hu in a very sorry state. His sleeves had been incinerated in a mere instant.

Before he could circulate his foundational qi again, a ferocious figure charged out from the flames and pressed a hand onto Warrior Cheng Hu's face.

Boom!

The two figures moved so quickly that they left brightly colored afterimages. Then when finally stopped, it was because Di Nufeng had slammed Cheng Hu's head onto a wall.

The buildings of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau were fortified with special enchanted formations, making them extremely sturdy. That was why they hadn't collapsed with a loud crash from the force of Di Nufeng's attack.

Instead, Cheng Hu's head ended up getting embedded into the wall!

"You old fool..." Di Nufeng, still surrounded by residual flames, narrowed her eyes. "Don't think I won't hit you just because you're a eunuch."

Chapter 487: I Don't Know Them Well

Swish—

A gust of wind swept through, causing the flames of the Samadhi True Fire to flicker and dance, shocking everyone present.

Even those who had been poisoned and were in a frenzied state calmed down somewhat.

Chu Liang was the only one who remained the same as before, still exceptionally calm as he continued to cleanse the poison from every person in front of him.

It was as though he had predicted that this would happen.

Indeed. He felt damn safe.

Cheng Hu, trapped against the wall, struggled as he turned his gaze to the side. He then muttered, "Miss Feng?"

Di Nufeng held no official title within the royal family, and few were aware of her existence.

However, after she single-handedly insulted several prominent members of the imperial family, she became famous overnight, sparking much speculation about her identity within the palace.

As one of the Four Great Warriors, Cheng Hu was well aware of the truth. He knew that she was the daughter of the Guardian of the imperial family and the current emperor's second aunt.

"You know me?" Di Nufeng withdrew her hand and said, "If you know me, how dare you bare your teeth at my disciple?"

"Esteemed teacher, he was trying to take my whip," Chu Liang said softly from behind.

"Hmph," Di Nufeng scoffed. "Don't you have one of your own? Why do you need someone else's?"

"Esteemed teacher," Chu Liang added glumly, "it seems he truly doesn't have one."

"Just because he doesn't have one doesn't mean he should snatch it from someone else," Di Nufeng muttered.

Cheng Hu continued to struggle, trying to pull his head from the wall. With a loud pop, he finally succeeded.

He quickly moved in front of Di Nufeng and Chu Liang, bowing deeply. "So you are Miss Feng's disciple. I failed to recognize greatness despite having eyes. Yet, the imperial relatives and people of the Roupu Kingdom are poisoned and desperately need treatment..."

He leaned close and whispered, "Miss Feng, especially the imperial relatives—they are your family..."

Di Nufeng immediately waved her hand dismissively. "I don't know them well."

It was obvious from her face that she wanted those people to stay the hell away from her.

Just then, Chu Liang chimed in from behind, "If you want to save them quickly, you need to follow the proper procedures. If anything goes wrong because of the time you've wasted, you'll have to take responsibility."

Cheng Hu cast a glance at Di Nufeng and then at Chu Liang before he finally realized that he had no choice in this situation. Immediately, he turned around and ordered the others to help carry the poisoned individuals down from the carriage.

Only then did the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner stroll out casually. With a smile on his face, he said to Di Nufeng, "Let's not resort to violence next time. Peace is always the better option."

He had not shown up earlier because Di Nufeng had appeared. Otherwise, he would have stepped in to help Chu Liang while Cheng Hu was pressuring Chu Liang.

With Chu Liang's esteemed teacher present, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner was more than willing to stay in the background.

Di Nufeng shot a glance at the crafty old man, who chose to appear only after everything was settled, and rolled her eyes.

As she turned away, she grumbled, "Next time, I'll hit you too."

With more than a hundred imperial relatives and citizens from Roupu Kingdom set to arrive, the already large crowd would soon become unmanageable.

While Chu Liang worked quickly to detoxify and save those affected, newly poisoned individuals kept appearing, and the crowd showed no signs of reducing.

Ultimately, regardless of how fast he was, he could only rescue one individual at a time, while the Walking Jiangshi Poison affected many at once.

With the support of the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner's powerful skills, it still seemed unlikely that Chu Liang could save everyone in time.

Even though those most severely poisoned were at the front, with more arriving continuously, some had already started to bleed profusely and transform into Jiangshi.

Chu Liang's expression grew increasingly grave. The reason for his concern was because many individuals had been poisoned at once, so when one began to die, numerous others would also be on the brink of death.

At that moment, a golden bird shot through the sky with incredible speed, emitting a sharp cry before landing in a gust of wind.

The moment Chu Liang saw the bird, he was overwhelmed with joy.

Two figures jumped down from the back of the great bird. It was Jiang Yuebai and a boy whose entire body was green and black.

"Did you bring it with you?" Chu Liang inquired urgently.

"Yes!" Jiang Yuebai replied with a nod.

When she saw the thousands of poisoned individuals, she was shocked. She hurriedly opened a small white porcelain vial and, with a wave of her hand, scattered a shimmering blue-green powder that sparkled like stars.

With a flick of her wrist, Jiang Yuebai summoned a gentle breeze that evenly dispersed the powder among all the poisoned individuals.

The frenzy and agitation displayed by the poisoned individuals began to visibly subside.

"That really works!" Xue Muyu exclaimed in surprise. "What kind of medicine is this?"

"This is Asura Leaf Powder," Jiang Yuebai explained.

Previously, Jiang Yuebai had told Chu Liang the poison smelled like what she had detected the night before and that there was a strong chance it was already present in the capital of Yu. Hearing about that, Chu Liang had already suspected this was a scheme with widespread implications.

Without hesitation, he had instructed Jiang Yuebai to gather as many Asura Leaves as she could from Myriad Poison Mountain. Then, he arranged for the Imperial Supervisory Bureau to send their fastest spirit beast to bring her back.

During this time, they stayed in contact through the United Hearts Jade until the situation became too intense. After Jiang Yuebai had gathered plenty of Asura Leaves, she was asked to come back as soon as possible.

As she made her way back quickly, Jiang Yuebai crushed the Asura Leaves into powder so that the symptoms brought on by the poison could be alleviated more rapidly, giving Chu Liang extra time to detoxify them.

The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner smiled at Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai. "Thanks to the two of you, this crisis caused by the Walking Jiangshi Poison can be averted."

"It is my duty as a disciple from Mount Shu Sect," Jiang Yuebai replied, turning back to gesture at the Potion Jar behind her. "I was able to locate the Asura Leaves thanks to his guidance. Furthermore... he knows who is responsible for this incident with the poison!"

...

Within the loft by the street, the couple and Master Song were monitoring the situation taking place outside.

"All the Potion Jars have been captured, and the poisoned individuals have been subdued. It looks like this is about to wrap up," Master Song commented.

His face reflected a hint of regret. If the Imperial Supervisory Bureau had been even a moment slower, the Walking Jiangshi Poison might have spread among the captives and the crowds, potentially affecting tens of thousands. What a chaotic scene that would have led to...

As the creator of the Walking Jiangshi Poison, he yearned to see a sea of blood. This would guarantee his name was forever recorded as the most terrifying poison specialist in the world.

"That should do it, cough cough..." Yang Bujue coughed lightly and continued, "We've achieved our goal."

"It seems you've got something else planned?" Master Song inquired as he stared at Mister Yang.

With a mysterious grin, Yang Bujue said, "That's something I wouldn't dare to share with you. After all, you are not one of us yet."

Xiao Wuyan remained at the side, still wearing the face of that charming palace consort.

She said with a smile, "But I believe Master Song has outstanding potential to join our Celestial Charm Sect."

As the three chatted leisurely, Yang Bujue's expression suddenly changed. Out of nowhere, he shouted, "Run!"

Master Song remained in the same spot in confusion, still unaware of what was happening. Although Xiao Wuyan was equally clueless, a tacit understanding existed between her and Yang Bujue—a connection typically developed between a husband and wife.

In the blink of an eye, the couple became streaks of light, darting off in separate ways.

Yet, it seemed as though time had slowed dramatically. With their speed, it would have taken them a split second to make it out of the city. But now, they had only just managed to get past one street.

Suddenly, a tremendous force, resembling a massive sword, descended from the sky. It was the legendary Tai'a sword.

A sword emanating heavenly might descended, causing all three of them to freeze in place.

This was the fearsome power of the eighth realm. All three were skilled cultivators; in fact, the couple were both at the seventh realm.

However, beneath the imposing presence of this sword that was far away, they felt powerless, with no means left to fight back.

"Darling! Don't worry about me, you escape on your own!" Xiao Wuyan suddenly shouted.

Gritting his teeth, Yang Bujue raised his hand and pricked his finger. The golden blood that spilled forth ignited into flames, turning into a fierce blaze.

His body was swallowed by the fire, disappearing in a split second.

He had a way to escape while the other two did not.

As the power of Tai'a Sword descended, they were all forced to the ground, unable to move.

Qi Yingxuan's figure then descended.

These individuals executed their plan meticulously. Prior to the release of those Potion Jars Kids, they had drugged these kids into mindless fools, ensuring that none of them remembered anything.

Even if these Potion Jars Kids fell into the hands of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, extracting any useful information from their memories would be impossible.

Yet, unexpectedly, at the Black Pine Ridge, Master Song had left behind a Potion Jar Boy that still remembered everything.

After Jiang Yuebai brought him back, Xue Muyu swiftly used the Shadow of Radiance, which she had mastered to perfection, to create an image of Master Song from his memories.

Since they knew what Master Song looked like, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner could easily identify his location with a single thought, as long as he was still in the capital of Yu.

It was exactly when Yang Bujue sensed that something was off.

Unfortunately, with the Imperial Commissioner present, no amount of caution would allow them to escape.

Qi Yingxuan descended, glanced at Xiao Wuyan, and said gravely, "It's the married couple again... So it turns out this mess was indeed your doing once again."

Chapter 488: The Young Hero with the Divine Whip

"You must be exhausted by now, right?"

"Not too bad, just a bit sore in the arm."

"How's that whip?"

"It's fine, still quite sturdy."

"We were lucky to have you this time. Otherwise, who knows what would have happened to all these people."

"It was my duty."

"..."

As twilight fell, the once-bustling Imperial Supervisory Bureau grew quiet. Chu Liang sat on the steps in the courtyard, finally letting out a sigh of relief.

One after another, members of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau approached him with questions. Chu Liang had single-handedly saved the entire city from the Walking Jiangshi Poison—a truly heroic feat.

Had it not been for his timely warning, the spread of the Walking Jiangshi Poison could have been dozens, if not hundreds, of times worse. Moreover, without his tireless efforts to cleanse the poison from the victims, few would have survived.

Even so, dozens of people lost their lives in this incident.

Another hero of the day was Jiang Yuebai from Mount Shu. The Asura Leaf Powder she brought back played a crucial role in saving lives, including that of the Potion Jar boy from the Black Pine Ridge. Without this sole surviving Potion Jar Boy, they wouldn't have uncovered the mastermind behind the plot so quickly.

After capturing Master Song, the Imperial Supervisory Bureau swiftly extracted the antidote for the Walking Jiangshi Poison, which, as expected, contained Asura Leaf. Jiang Yuebai, along with the Potion Jar Boy and the Bureau's agents, went to Myriad Poison Mountain to gather additional herbs before returning.

Meanwhile, Di Nufeng went off to play with Xue Muyu again. It seemed the allure of a beautiful married woman was far stronger than that of her own disciple.

And there she went, deserting Chu Liang by himself.

Not long after, Ji Zidian approached to brief Chu Liang on the case.

"Aside from the poison specialist, the main culprits are a couple," Ji Zidian explained. "Yang Bujue and Xiao Wuyan."

"What a fitting pair of names," Chu Liang remarked upon hearing their names.

Ji Zidian then gave a brief introduction of their background.

Yang Bujue was once a disciple of Penglai, and even regarded by Daoist Cangsheng, the leader of the Penglai Supreme Sect, as his last disciple and successor.

Nearly a century ago, a particularly notorious incident shook the world of immortal cultivation. The leader of the Sea King Sect was ambushed by several powerful demons while exploring a hidden realm in the North Sea and barely escaped with his life.

After his narrow escape, he launched a thorough investigation into how news of his visit to the hidden realm had been leaked. He discovered that the Penglai Supreme Sect was the first to know of his whereabouts, and the information was later spread through the East Sea. The one responsible was none other than the Penglai disciple, Yang Bujue.

His collusion with evil entities to harm a righteous sect leader sparked an uproar, inciting the wrath of both the imperial court and the sects in the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten. Few believed that a mere disciple could have orchestrated this alone, so suspicion quickly fell on Yang Bujue's teacher, Daoist Cangsheng.

The Penglai Supreme Sect quickly apprehended Yang Bujue, claiming he had been led astray by outsiders and said that they would be willing to execute him.

Of course, this was seen at the time as a sacrificial move to protect the higher-ups.

However, what happened next made people waver in their judgment. On the eve of Yang Bujue's execution, a group of Celestial Charm Sect bandits launched a nighttime attack on Penglai and rescued him.

In the decades that followed, Yang Bujue married Xiao Wuyan, another notorious member of the Celestial Charm Sect. Together, they committed numerous heinous crimes, gradually leading people to believe that he might have indeed been lured by the Celestial Charm Sect into betraying the Sea King Sect's leader. After all, the Celestial Charm Sect had long been known for secretly and openly stirring up conflicts among various factions.

Yang Bujue was skilled in stealth traversal techniques, while Xiao Wuyan excelled in illusory techniques. Together, their abilities made them nearly impossible to detect or defend against.

If not for the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner tracking down Master Song, the poison specialist, and subsequently uncovering their whereabouts, neither the imperial court nor the sects in the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten would have known what Xiao Wuyan truly looked like.

With this discovery, the details of the cases that Chu Liang had been framed for became known.

Shortly after the decision to launch the expedition against the Roupu Kingdom, the Celestial Charm Sect caught wind of the plan and learned about the captive presentation ceremony that would happen after the army's triumphant return. They reached out to Master Song, a poison specialist at Black Pine Ridge, to prepare a deadly poison.

Since Master Song harbored a grudge against the Red River Sect, he demanded that they first kill a few members of the Red River Sect. When Xiao Wuyan was carrying out the killings, she happened to notice Chu Liang. Perhaps due to Chu Liang's past conflict with the Celestial Charm Sect, she decided to frame him for the murders.

She didn't attack Chu Liang because she needed a scapegoat to divert the Imperial Supervisory Bureau's attention and absolve herself of suspicion. Since Chu Liang had been near the crime scenes twice, he became the perfect target.

This aligned with the Celestial Charm Sect's usual methods—they preferred to sow discord between Mount Shu and the Imperial Supervisory Bureau rather than killing a young disciple.

If the plot succeeded, the Imperial Supervisory Bureau would be pressured to take action against Chu Liang, while the Mount Shu Sect would be compelled to protect him. Regardless of the case's outcome, conflict between the two factions would be inevitable.

In their plan, if things escalated, the Mount Shu Sect might even attempt to break into the Imperial Supervisory Bureau to rescue Chu Liang. As for Di Nufeng's plan to raid the capital of Yu at night, even the Celestial Charm Sect hadn't dared to envision such a spectacle.

While the Imperial Supervisory Bureau had their attention on the Myriad Poison Mountain, they secretly transferred all the Potion Jar Kids to the capital of Yu, planning to strike a devastating blow on the day of the captive presentation ceremony.

They even tampered with the bone teeth used in the Roupu Kingdom's ceremonial offerings. Typically, captives entering the imperial city would undergo thorough inspections. If they showed any signs of poisoning, they would not be allowed to even step into the main hall.

However, the couple from the Celestial Charm Sect and Master Song coated the bone teeth with the Walking Jiangshi Poison, ensuring that the captives were only poisoned during the ceremony, with the effects appearing later at the banquet. This allowed them to carry out their scheme undetected, plunging the palace into chaos.

The plan was meticulously crafted, but unfortunately for them, the person that Xiao Wuyan saw happened to be Chu Liang. Sending him to the Imperial Supervisory Bureau might be the decision that Xiao Wuyan would regret making the most.

With Jiang Yuebai at the Myriad Poison Mountain and Chu Liang in the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, it could be said that the Celestial Charm Sect's evil plan was completely foiled, thanks to the two of them.

...

After reviewing the entire plot, Ji Zidian couldn't help but feel a sense of dread as he remarked, "Fortunately, you were the one who was framed and it was you who came here. Had it been someone else, the capital of Yu would likely have plunged into chaos."

"I believe that even without my help, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner would have found a way to quell the unrest," Chu Liang replied with a smile.

He didn't believe the success was solely his; at the very least, the Imperial Supervisory Bureau had mobilized immediately at his warning, demonstrating their strict vigilance during large-scale celebrations.

"But he wouldn't have been able to treat the Walking Jiangshi Poison. At the very least, those thousands of citizens would have surely died," Ji Zidian said with a smile. "Oh, by the way, many people have already written thank-you letters to you, and some have even sent banners."

Some of those saved early had recovered quickly after detoxification and had already prepared their thanks for Chu Liang, sending them to the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. However, Chu Liang had been busy, and the bureau hadn't yet passed them along.

At Ji Zidian's call, the staff of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau promptly brought over a stack of thank-you letters and several banners.

Chu Liang smiled as he unfurled them, revealing golden characters embroidered on the red banners.

"Skillful Hands and Benevolent Whip..."

"The Divine Whip that Clears All Meridians and the Sacred Hands Moving with the Spring Breeze..."

"Thanks to the Divine Whip of the Young Hero from Mount Shu, My Wife Has Found Her Smile Again..."

Chu Liang's smile gradually faded as he found the words somewhat odd.

Wouldn't it have been better if they had just given some money instead? Real silver or gold, regardless of the amount, would have made much more sense, he thought.

"You can hang these on your wall at home to let people know of the heroic deeds of the Young Hero With the Divine Whip," Ji Zidian said as he laughed heartily.

The smile didn't disappear; it simply shifted from Chu Liang's face to Ji Zidian's, who now beamed with amusement.

"Heh." Chu Liang forced a smile. No, thanks. I fear I'll never be able to hold my head up for the rest of my life...

As they packed away the banners and letters, Ji Zidian remarked, "It seems you and your teacher are the true nemesis of the Celestial Charm Sect. The imperial court has hunted them for years with little success; in the past sixty years, they've only managed to slay a few. Last time, your teacher struck one down, and now, thanks to you, we've captured another. You need to be cautious. There's no telling if they will come after you."

"I'll be careful," Chu Liang responded with a nod.

The imperial court's current failure to hunt down the members of the Celestial Charm Sect was largely due to the brutal chaos that occurred eighty years ago. Many members of the sect were killed during that turmoil, forcing the Celestial Charm Sect to maintain a low profile for decades, which made it difficult for the imperial court to capture them.

Recently, however, their activities had resurfaced with alarming frequency. Whether they had regained enough strength or were simply exploiting the turmoil across the land of the nine provinces remained unclear.

With Xiao Wuyan now imprisoned in the Celestial Northern Prison, there was hope that her interrogation might yield some valuable information.

In the capital of Yu, prisons lay in all four directions, but the most renowned was the Celestial Northern Prison, known for holding the Eminent Ones.

In a world where individuals held great power, the importance of secure prisons could not be overstated. Without proper fortifications, they could easily be breached, much like the jail in the City Supervisory Division where Chu Liang had once been held.

Compared to the prisons across the land of the nine provinces and four seas, the Celestial Northern Prison was the most fortified. It was guarded by the Guardian Ruler of the Celestial Northern Prison and a Master of the Heavenly Origin from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau.

Both were eighth-realm cultivators, capable of ensuring absolute security.

As the two were chatting, someone suddenly approached and called out, "Young Hero Chu, an imperial decree has arrived... you and your teacher are being summoned to the imperial palace."

Chapter 489: Imperial Younger Brother

Outside the gates of the imperial city stood a towering platform, its grand pillars intricately carved with eight stone dragons. An ancient formation for sound amplification had been etched into its surface, allowing any sound made there to instantly ripple through the capital of Yu, reaching every ear like a distant thunderclap.

During major announcements from the imperial palace, citizens would flock to the platform to hear the announcements made by the palace attendants. On grand occasions such as the Shangyuan Festival or the Mid-Autumn Festival, the emperor himself would sometimes ascend the platform to deliver a speech.

Thus, this platform was also known as the Dragon Terrace.

For the disciples of the immortal sect, the highest honor they yearned for in their youth was to have their names sung upon the Dragon Terrace and to be celebrated at the Qinghong Banquet.

Those whose names were sung on the Dragon Terrace were the victors of the Assembly of Immortal Sects. They would ascend the terrace and have their names be heard by all the citizens of the capital of Yu, soon spreading across the four seas and nine provinces, becoming known to all.

The Qinghong Banquet was the grand feast that followed, held within the halls of the imperial palace.

A rare spirit bird known as the Qinghong was raised in the rear garden of the imperial palace. From ancient times to the present, the Qinghong's numbers had dwindled, nearing extinction at one point—primarily because its meat was unbelievably delicious.

Legend had it that the spirit bird was once a creature of the heavens, kept by the deities, until one accidentally fell to the human world, giving rise to the Qinghong birds of today. By then, the imperial palace had become the only place where this rare species was kept. Still, they were few in number, which was why even the emperor was forbidden from eating them on ordinary days.

At the end of the Assembly of Immortal Sects, the victorious disciples were granted entry into the palace. A Qinghong would be killed for a grand feast shared by the emperor and the disciples.

"Such were the boundless honors bestowed upon the victors of the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

Regarding this, Di Nufeng, who had been one of those victors, remarked sharply from within the carriage, "The Dragon Terrace Announcements are so boring; it's just a crowd staring at you like you're part of some monkey show. But that bird does taste amazing. When you get to eat it, be sure to pack one for me to take back."

Seeing his teacher speak so casually with her arms crossed, Chu Liang couldn't help but ask, "I thought the emperor would be eating one with an entire group of people. Packing it up before the feast seems a bit inappropriate, doesn't it?"

Just imagine it. The emperor waited twelve long years for another taste of Qinghong meat. The prodigies from the other immortal sects would also be eagerly waiting on the side. Then, just as the Qinghong is served, I walk up, open a bag, and pack up the entire bird, saying, "My teacher back home is craving this..."

If I do that, I'll certainly get a harsh beating.

"True," Di Nufeng said, smacking her lips. "Then I'll find a way to get one out someday. Last time, the preparation was way too complicated, but I bet just roasting the meat would be delicious too."

Chu Liang shivered, sensing something was off.

Even the emperor isn't allowed to eat it on ordinary days. How are you planning to get your hands on one? Surely, it wouldn't be through proper or legal means, right? Chu Liang grumbled inwardly.

"Esteemed Teacher, please mind your words and actions," Chu Liang cautioned.

Goodness. If you were to sneak into the imperial palace to steal a bird and get caught... what if that criminal record affects the next generation[1]? It's definitely not worth it.

The teacher-disciple duo continued their conversation as the carriage rolled into the imperial city. On the way into the imperial city, a guard lifted the curtain to inspect them, but upon recognizing their status, he quickly bowed and stepped aside, allowing them to pass.

The gates of the imperial city opened one by one as the carriage slowly made its way into the palace grounds, finally coming to a stop before a side hall.

"We've arrived at the Night Dragon Hall. Please step out of the carriage," a familiar voice called from outside.

Chu Liang stepped out of the carriage and saw that it was indeed the familiar eunuch, Lao Santai.

"Warrior Lao," he greeted.

Lao Santai responded with a smile.

As Di Nufeng stepped off the carriage, Lao Santai led them into the hall, speaking quietly, "I heard there was some conflict between you and Cheng Hu at the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. He's an old hand in the palace and was merely concerned about the safety of the imperial family. I hope Miss Feng and Young Hero Chu won't take it to heart."

"I don't mind," Di Nufeng said indifferently. "After all, I wasn't the one getting beaten up. Just remind him not to hold a grudge."

Her tone carried a hint of warning.

"Of course not," Lao Santai replied hastily. "Cheng Hu actually asked me to apologize on his behalf. He wouldn't dare harbor any resentment."

Chu Liang had nothing to add and merely glanced at Lao Santai. He hadn't expected the two chief eunuchs, Lao Santai and Cheng Hu, to be on such good terms.

What Chu Liang didn't realize was that, due to the overwhelming power of Yao Dengxian, the leader of the Four Great Warriors and the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch, the other three chief eunuchs had to band together to maintain their status in the inner court. If they showed any sign of disunity, they would likely end up becoming the lackeys of Yao Dengxian.

As they spoke, they soon arrived at the Night Dragon Hall, where the emperor conducted state affairs after court sessions.

The hall exuded an air of antiquity, its worn walls and neglected repairs revealing the character of the emperor.

Throughout his decades-long reign, the current emperor had always imposed light taxes and kept the government simple. Though he made a few bold moves, he also seldom caused turmoil. For a ruler focused on stability, it wasn't a poor approach. At least until the news of the Demon God's return, the livelihood in the Yu Dynasty had been fairly prosperous.

As they reached the entrance of the hall, Lao Santai stopped and said, "Your Majesty."

Although the door was open and the golden screen visible inside, he didn't dare to enter.

Instead, he stood at the threshold and announced, "Miss Feng and Young Hero Chu have arrived."

A voice promptly called from within, "Please, come in."

...

This was Chu Liang's first time seeing the Emperor of the Yu Dynasty. At a glance, he appeared to be an elderly man clad in a bright yellow dragon robe, his sharp eyebrows and piercing eyes exuding a commanding presence.

Yet, Chu Liang felt no fear. In this world, imperial authority was not overwhelmingly imposing. The leaders of the Divine Nine Immortal Sects could interact with the emperor as equals. Disciples of these sects were granted the privilege to enter the imperial hall without bowing, and in their presence, the emperor would not refer to himself as "we[2]"...

In any case, they enjoyed many special privileges.

Chu Liang was someone who had always been able to chat and joke freely with Venerable Wen Yuan, so he naturally did not treat the emperor with reverence either.

In contrast, the emperor's expression grew slightly uneasy when he saw Di Nufeng. Forcing a smile, he said, "Second Aunt, you're here."

"Yes." Di Nufeng nodded. "What did you call us here for?"

"The recent turmoil caused by the Walking Jiangshi Poison in the capital was no small matter. Even the palace was greatly affected. Thanks to Young Hero Chu, who turned the tide and saved many lives in the city, " The emperor said as he glanced at Chu Liang with an approving look. "Since he is your disciple, Second Aunt, it is only fitting to meet him and grant a reward."

"There's a reward?" Di Nufeng's eyes lit up as she immediately cupped her hands. "Your Majesty is wise."

Esteemed Teacher, this belated courtesy seems rather unnecessary...

Chu Liang thought to himself.

The emperor turned his gaze to Chu Liang. With a warm expression and a smile, he said to Di Nufeng, "Despite being at such a young age, Chu Liang is very remarkably gifted. He is handsome as well. I have heard about how he slayed Taowu. With such outstanding temperament and character, and as a disciple of the prestigious Mount Shu..."

Hmm? Hearing the emperor's tone, Chu Liang suddenly realized things were far more complicated than he had expected.

Sure enough, the emperor went on, "I have a daughter who has reached the age of marriage. Born with the constitution of the Divine Fire Spirit, she is a rare talent in the imperial family. Why not let the two of you marry? It would bring our families even closer. What do you think?"

"Your Majesty." Chu Liang quickly cupped his hands. "this would not be appropriate."

"No need to be so quick to refuse," the emperor continued. "My daughter is quite beautiful. I'm sure you'll like her once you meet her."

"I am still young, and now is the time for me to strive for the Mount Shu Sect. I currently have no intention of—" Chu Liang began, intending to mimic Xu Ziyang's tone to excuse himself.

"Forget it." Di Nufeng waved her hand dismissively. "My disciple already has someone he likes."

Chu Liang's words came to an abrupt stop, his face turning red.

"Haha," the emperor chuckled at Di Nufeng's words. "I see. That's rather unfortunate. I truly believed it would have been a good match."

"Besides, I am your Second Aunt," Di Nufeng pointed out. "By generational hierarchy, he is on the same level as you. If you let him marry your daughter, wouldn't that mess up the family order?"

"..." Chu Liang and the emperor both fell silent for a moment, not knowing how to respond to that.

After a brief pause, the emperor said, "Since this marriage is not meant to be, I find myself at a loss for how we should reward you. Is there anything you want?"

Hearing this, Chu Liang perked up.

He stepped forward and said solemnly, "Recently, the Mount Shu Sect has been managing business operations at a place called Red Cotton Peak. I wonder if Your Majesty has heard of it? If you wish to reward me, there's no need for anything personal. I simply hope that the imperial court's shops might be allowed to open a few branches on Red Cotton Peak to help expand its scale. Would that be possible?"

"Oh?" The emperor raised his eyebrows slightly. This was an unexpected request.

In the capital, there were many shops catering to cultivators, some indeed operated by the court. However, due to the overt and covert rivalry between the imperial court and Taotie City, there were no court-affiliated shops in Taotie City... at least not openly.

If they could open a few branches on Red Cotton Peak, it would symbolize the imperial court's recognition of the peak. The size of the shops was irrelevant; the gesture held far more significance.

In terms of just a few branches, it was not an excessive request. However, if this precedent were set, who knew what future developments might follow?

Thus, the emperor hesitated slightly.

"Is that it?" Di Nufeng suddenly interjected. "Compared to a princess, opening a few shops seems like too small a reward."

"Esteemed Teacher, it would already be generous of the emperor to grant such a request. How much more would be considered excessive?" Chu Liang replied with a smile.

"Doesn't that make His Majesty seem a bit stingy?" Di Nufeng retorted. "You saved countless lives in the capital, and all you get is permission to open a few shops? Shops that might even turn a profit for the imperial court. What kind of reward is that?"

"It would be great if the emperor could grant my request," Chu Liang added.

"Really?" Di Nufeng said with mock suspicion. "There's a chance he might refuse this request?"

"Hahaha..." The emperor on the dragon throne couldn't help but let out a bitter laugh. Watching the teacher-disciple duo's performance, he smiled and said, "Alright, alright, how could I possibly refuse? I'll have the Ministry of Internal Affairs handle it. From now on, all the shops that the imperial court opens on Red Cotton Peak will be managed by Chu Liang."

After a brief pause, he added, "Since marriage is off the table and we are of the same generation, why not grant Chu Liang the title of Imperial Younger Brother? How does that sound?"

Chapter 490: Where Did These Poor Relatives Come From?

Huh?

Upon hearing the title Younger Imperial Brother, vivid images of a queen, a bald man, a talking pig, and a monkey instantly flashed through Chu Liang's mind.[1]

However, the people in this world were surely unaware of this story.

What the emperor said was not entirely wrong; after all, they belonged to the same rank within the generational hierarchy. Thus, granting him the title of Imperial Younger Brother would bring no shame to anyone.

But the problem was that the whole world had no idea of Di Nufeng's background, and the imperial family could not publicly disclose her affairs.

No one would know that Chu Liang had received this title due to his esteemed teacher. They would merely assume that the emperor had whimsically decided to recognize a young talent as his younger brother.

What was the difference between this and suddenly pledging brotherhood with Xu Bashan?

In truth, there was no difference at all.

The only distinction lay in the fact that the emperor could not actually swear brotherhood with Chu Liang due to his status, which was why he bestowed upon Chu Liang the title of Imperial Younger Brother. However, the underlying meaning was largely the same.

Chu Liang couldn't help but wonder if these influential figures derived pleasure from such formalities.

However, upon further reflection, he began to piece together the underlying connections.

The explanation was rather complex.

Since the rise and rapid expansion of Taotie City, the imperial court have had the intention to acquire the entire city. After all, this city was making so much money. It was practically a money-eating behemoth in the Northern Regions.

Strictly speaking, Taotie City was built by the imperial court during the rise of the Demon God era as a stronghold for human society against the Demon God. Given its location on the border of the nine provinces, it should rightfully belong to the human dynasty.

Yet, Taotie City refused to comply.

While they acknowledged their origin as a city developed by the imperial court, they insisted that this imperial authority belonged to a bygone era—three thousand years ago.

Over these years, the land of the nine provinces had undergone tremendous changes. In the days when Taotie City struggled to survive in poverty, no one came to their aid. Only after they had prospered did anyone remember them and seek to bring them back under human rule.

They had no intention of complying—not a chance.

After the chaos brought by the Demon God, the human lands lay in disarray. Many of the city gates erected during the war had long since fallen into disrepair. It was normal that Taotie City was left to die on its own.

It was indeed rather unreasonable for the imperial court to still seek to claim Taotie City as its own after all that had happened. Even the immortal cultivation sects would oppose such a decision.

Since then, Taotie City severed all ties with the imperial dynasty of human society.

However, with such a treasure trove lying within their borders, it was difficult for others to resist the temptation to scheme and covet what was not theirs.

Even though Taotie City had consistently offered generous tributes to the imperial court, it still occasionally fell victim to underhanded schemes.

Fortunately, the immortal sects also refused to let the imperial dynasty take ownership of Taotie City. Together, they united to ensure that Taotie City remained independent.

Then the Yu Dynasty was established, facing the same issue that plagued every great dynasty at the beginning of its reign: a lack of funds.

The common people lacked food and jewels, while cultivators sought treasures of nature; it was all just different forms of poverty.

Despite this, the Yu Dynasty retained some sense of pride.

While they didn't target Taotie City directly, they began to devise a plan inspired by Taotie City.

If Taotie City could thrive in the desolate northern wilderness—an area where nothing grows—then surely a similar establishment in the capital of Yu, the prime location in the land of the nine provinces, would attract cultivators to its shops.

Wouldn't the imperial court profit handsomely from such ventures?

With such a grand vision in mind, the Yu Dynasty designated an area in the expanding capital known as the Immortals' Square, specifically for cultivators to engage in activities and transactions.

However, they were met with a harsh blow from reality.

Just because the imperial court had money and resources didn't guarantee success in business operations.

The entire Taotie City was united in their pursuit of wealth. But did such like-minded individuals exist in the capital of Yu?

When Chu Liang managed Red Cotton Peak, his first challenge was recruiting merchants; the Yu Dynasty faced a different dilemma altogether.

Their issue was that there were too many people eager to open shops.

Since the construction of the Immortals' Square started, various factions had attempted to get involved.

The imperial family, high officials, aristocrats, scholars, and military generals—all sought to stake their claims. Each wanted their share, openly and secretly competing against one another.

It was like marking lines on a cow and fighting over which piece of meat would belong to the calf, even before the cow had been impregnated.

After the Immortals' Square was constructed, the Yu Dynasty quickly encountered its first problem.

If Taotie City already offered a more comprehensive variety of options, why would people choose to shop in Immortals' Square or set up their businesses there?

Chu Liang's strategy for Red Cotton Peak was to waive rent for shops, offer discounts to customers, and heavily promote Berry Wonderland. Although this approach required significant initial investment, it ultimately set the Red Cotton Peak on the right path.

However, the interest groups made up of nobles and high officials at that time lacked such foresight; they were eager for immediate profits and unwilling to invest in attracting customers.

The Immortals' Square lacked unity, which made it impossible to implement many initiatives.

There were smart officials in the imperial court who recognized this issue. The emperor couldn't directly confront these interest groups, so he resorted to subsidizing prices in Immortals' Square from the national treasury, essentially having the court cover the mounting expenses.

However, once the various interest groups noticed this, they realized they didn't even need to sell anything to turn a profit; the money was simply flowing in.

Whether it came from customers or was allocated from the treasury, did it really matter?

They pocketed the subsidies and paid even less attention to proper management. The worse they managed, the more continuous support the court provided.

If customer numbers increased, the imperial court would no longer need to allocate funds. They felt that putting in the effort to handle business operations would be too tiring.

Without price discounts, scattered customers showed no interest whatsoever.

During the opening period of the new shops, everyone arrived eagerly to browse but ultimately found that Taotie City was still more affordable.

They initially tripled the original prices and then claimed that all customers would receive a fifty percent discount to celebrate the grand opening. It was nothing more than a trick to deceive the gullible.

Large immortal sects, such as those in the Divine Nine and the Terrestrial Ten, were vying for influence against imperial authority at that time. They had no interest in seeing the Immortal Square thrive and succeed, let alone conducting business there.

With obstacles on both sides, it would be weird if the Immortals' Square even managed to develop and expand at all.

After hundreds of years of effort from several generations of emperors, a small-scale commercial street has finally emerged, gradually displaying some signs of prosperity. However, it remained a far cry from the original vision of Immortal Square.

For competitive reasons, the Yu Dynasty could not openly engage in setting up businesses in Taotie City.

It was indeed true that the development of the Immortals' Square was struggling. Consequently, the imperial court secretly set up shops in Taotie City under various identities.

However, any factions associated with the imperial court maintained a firm stance against collaborating with Taotie City, avoiding it altogether out of respect for the imperial authority.

This illustrated the complex relationship between the imperial court and Taotie City.

Red Cotton Peak, managed by Chu Liang, was quite similar to Taotie City.

Not long ago, the emperor lamented over the investigation into Red Cotton Peak, wondering how it had reached such a level of development in just a few months while the imperial court had struggled for hundreds of years to achieve even a fraction of that success.

If he granted Chu Liang's request to set up shops in the name of the imperial court at Red Cotton Peak, it would effectively acknowledge the legitimacy of Red Cotton Peak. Consequently, major factions associated with the court would feel less pressure to establish their businesses there.

This move could bring about significant repercussions.

The first to arrive would undoubtedly be internal pressure; those with a stake in Immortals' Square or who had avoided the troubles caused by Taotie City over the years would surely voice their grievances.

This was why the emperor hesitated.

But in an instant, he thought of an optimal solution: to grant Chu Liang the title of Imperial Younger Brother and appoint him to manage all the shops.

In this way, the shops wouldn't be regarded as businesses of the imperial court in Red Cotton Peak but rather as gifts from the emperor to his younger brother.

The nature of this arrangement would be completely different.

With this, it would effectively silence the gossipers and complainers.

...

Although this is all just Chu Liang's speculation, it was likely quite close to the truth.

After some conversation, Lao Santai came in again to report that General Wu Anmin had arrived.

The emperor's expression suddenly darkened. After providing a few more instructions regarding subsequent matters, he allowed Di Nufeng and Chu Liang to leave.

As the teacher-disciple duo stepped out, they spotted two individuals waiting outside the Night Dragon Hall.

One was a middle-aged man dressed in purple robes, appearing rather unwell. The other was a handsome young man in bright yellow robes, with sharp brows and bright skin, appearing rather energetic.

As the two stood together, they shared some resemblance.

Lao Santai led them out and addressed the middle-aged man, saying, "Great General, you may enter now."

The middle-aged man nodded, took a deep breath, and then stepped into the hall.

He must be the Great General Wu Anmin; during this expedition to the Roupu Kingdom, he not only failed to secure what should have been easy military achievements, but the captives he brought back from the Roupu Kingdom nearly caused a mess in the palace.

Although the trouble was caused by the Celestial Charm Sect, as the person in charge, he would undoubtedly face blame for negligence and would certainly be punished.

The young man in yellow robes smiled and asked Lao Santai, "Who are these two?"

Lao Santai introduced them, saying, "This is Di Nufeng, a peak master of the Mount Shu Sect, and this is Chu Liang, a young hero of the Mount Shu Sect."

He then turned to introduce the other, saying, "And this is His Highness the Second Prince."

The emperor of the Yu Dynasty had many children, but only three were born with the Divine Fire Spirit: the Second Prince, the Sixth Princess, and the Thirteenth Prince.

The Second Prince, the legitimate son of Empress Wu, held the highest rank among the three and was always regarded as the crown prince.

From a young age, he was diligent and studious, earning a good reputation both within and outside the imperial court; he was widely considered to be the next emperor.

As a result, both Di Nufeng and Chu Liang knew about him.

"Ohhh." Di Nufeng nodded enthusiastically and said, "Little Second Prince, you can call me grandauntie[2]."

"Eh?" The Second Prince was about to greet her when he was momentarily stunned by her words.

His reaction clearly conveyed his thought, Why the sudden insult?

Lao Santai quickly whispered, "Your Highness, she really is your grandauntie."

"..." The Second Prince finally understood. He had certainly heard about a certain grandauntie who had raged at the royal relatives in the palace last time, but he hadn't expected his father's second aunt to look so young.

After gathering his thoughts, he smiled again and said, "I've known the name Di Nufeng, one of the Mount Shu Sect's peak masters, since I was young; I didn't realize we had this connection. What a pleasant surprise!"

Not wanting to dwell on the matter of seniority, he quickly turned his attention to Chu Liang.

"Young Hero Chu, you previously slayed the Taowu, and I've also heard that you were the one who did the detoxification for the recent incident, saving countless lives. I have long been aware of your great reputation. Among the talented individuals in today's immortal sects, you are undoubtedly one of the best."

"Oh, no, no, I wouldn't say that," Chu Liang quickly replied with a friendly smile. "Your Highness doesn't need to be so formal; we'll soon be family."

"Hmm?" The Second Prince glanced back at Lao Santai.

Lao Santai quietly explained, "His Majesty just granted Young Hero Chu the title of Imperial Younger Brother, so he will be Your Highness'..."

Uncle? The Second Prince looked at his uncle's youthful smile and then at his grandaunt's bright and beautiful face. He suddenly felt that he should have never greeted them in the first place.

"It's our first time meeting someone of the younger generation. We should give him some greeting gifts," Di Nufeng said as she nudged Chu Liang with her elbow.

"I have some," Chu Liang replied, raising his hand to pull out two cards. "It's just a small gift."

"Oh, there's no need for such formalities," the Second Prince said with a quick smile as he accepted the cards. With this, he could no longer deny their relationship and awkwardly added, "From now on, you two... elders, please visit the palace often so we can get to know each other better."

"Of course, of course," Chu Liang responded with a radiant smile.

After chatting a bit more, the teacher-disciple duo finally left together.

As the Second Prince watched them walk away, he glanced down at the gifts in his hand. They were two specially made cards that read, Red Cotton Peak Discount Coupon: Spend 10,000 spirit-stone coins to receive a discount of 5.

The Second Prince felt so speechless. It truly was a "small" gift.

Where did these poor relatives come from? he couldn't help but wonder as he observed the two figures moving farther and farther away.