

M. Slaying 521

Chapter 521: Famous Chef of the World

"Hmm?" Chen Xuanlu and Liu Yunzheng looked in the direction of the voice and saw Chu Liang smiling as he held out a jade box.

"Now that the Assembly of Immortal Sects is taking place, it's not easy to find precious medicine. Luckily, I set some aside, so you can have mine," Chu Liang explained. "Junior Brother Liu, with the competition happening tomorrow, we can't risk any delays."

The Mount Shu Sect and Profound Mind Sect were on friendly terms, which was why they addressed each other as senior and junior brothers.

The jade box emanated a powerful spiritual energy, suggesting that whatever was inside was far from ordinary.

"This..." Chen Xuanlu quickly rejected, "I can't accept this! It's not some ordinary thing; it's a precious medicine..."

Even though Liu Yunzheng wanted it badly, he clenched his jaw and refused to accept.

"Don't worry about it; I have more than enough set aside," Chu Liang said casually.

The nonchalant way he spoke left the members from the Profound Mind Sect in disbelief. Even if he had some saved up, it couldn't be much. Rare medicines weren't as plentiful as cabbages that could be stored away for winter.

They didn't know Chu Liang well enough. They only knew he was a top talent among the younger generation of the Mount Shu Sect, but they had no idea that he was the actual owner of the Red Cotton Peak.

Previously, Chu Liang had to pay extra for treasures of nature and rare medicines from different stores. However, the imperial shops had been set up and one of those shops managed by Chu Liang was a spirit medicine shop.

With his own supply chain in place for obtaining treasures of nature, he didn't need to buy spirit medicine from other places. He could source them directly from his shop at cost price, which made the process a lot easier.

As part of his many preparations for the Assembly of Immortal Sects, Chu Liang had made sure to gather plenty of spirit medicine.

Whatever they could think of, Chu Liang had certainly accumulated a far greater amount than the duo from the Profound Mind Sect could ever imagine.

Wang Xuanling remarked, "Our two sects have always supported each other, so it's only natural to help in times of need. There's really no reason to say no."

Hearing this, Chen Xuanlu finally took the jade box and said to his disciple, "Hurry up and thank your Senior Brother Chu."

"Thank you, Senior Brother Chu!" Liu Yunzheng exclaimed, visibly touched. He took the jade box and added, "I'll treat this medicine as a loan, and I promise to pay you back in the future."

Chu Liang smiled and nodded, choosing not to say anything further.

It was clear that Liu Yunzheng had a proud and noble heart, refusing to accept any favor without planning to give back.

In that moment, Chu Liang's stature soared in the eyes of the Profound Mind Sect members. Liu Yunzheng and the two male disciples, as well as the female disciple, looked at him with their eyes sparkling with admiration.

There was perhaps nothing more charming and carefree than the act of giving freely.

"Alright, you'd better take him back to get the medicine," Wang Xuanling advised. "We don't want his injury to get worse."

"Very well, we'll take our leave," Chen Xuanlu responded as he stood up.

Once the Profound Mind Sect members had left, Wang Xuanling turned to Chu Liang and said quietly, "Since the Profound Mind Sect is close to us, being generous is fine. However, it's better to be more frugal when dealing with outsiders."

The old man's face showed a hint of pain for Chu Liang, even if he wasn't the one spending the money.

Chu Liang was aware that Wang Xuanling, the grand peak master with the highest number of disciples in the Mount Shu Sect, had long been used to being frugal. He was always thinking of ways to ask the sect for more money to distribute to his disciples. He was someone who knew how to plan his finances.

So Chu Liang just smiled and said with a nod, "I understand."

In all honesty, Chu Liang was well aware of this. He didn't need the reminder from Wang Xuanling. Even though he had an ample supply of spirit stones now, he wasn't the type to waste them. Doing so would make him look like a fool, throwing his money away.

However, since the Profound Mind Sect was one of Mount Shu's few close allies near the capital, it felt right to extend them a helping hand.

After bidding farewell to the members of the Profound Mind Sect, Chu Liang looked around and suggested, "Shouldn't we find something to eat? It's not every day we're in the capital of Yu, so we ought to treat ourselves."

As he stood, Wang Xuanling said, "You young ones go ahead and explore. I'm going to rest."

It was clear the old man knew the younger members would feel uneasy with him present, especially Xu Ziyang, who was always so stiff and serious in front of his master.

Once Wang Xuanling left, the group could finally feel relaxed.

"So, what should we eat?" Ling Ao asked.

Jiang Yuebai blinked, ready to answer, but her words caught in her throat as she saw Chu Liang's eyes fixed on her...

"How about checking out Famous Chef of the World? We could also go to Imperial City Restaurant... or perhaps Yueya Gathering?" Chu Liang casually suggested.

Upon hearing the names, a hint of surprise crossed Jiang Yuebai's face as she furrowed her brows. "How did you know..."

How did he know to name all the places I have been wanting to visit?

"Hehe," Chu Liang chuckled. "Earlier, on the carriage, I noticed you jotting something down in your notebook..."

It turned out that during their journey to the capital, Jiang Yuebai had been diligently writing the names of the restaurants she wanted to try. She had plans to sample all the renowned spots in the capital of Yu.

Very few people on Mount Shu were aware of Fairy Jiang's love for food. In fact, whenever she traveled for a mission, she always did her homework in advance, ensuring she visited the most famous eateries in the area.

Chu Liang knew this because during their first meeting, he had witnessed her heroic way of slurping noodles.

"Aiya," Jiang Yuebai said, a rare hint of shyness creeping into her voice. "I... I was just doing some research for the Red Moon Pavilion."

"I understand," Chu Liang replied, nodding seriously.

"You don't understand anything!" Jiang Yuebai shot back, playfully punching him.

"Owh..." Chu Liang exclaimed dramatically as he fell to the ground.

Xu Ziyang and Ling Ao exchanged glances, then quietly slipped out of the hall and into the courtyard. Together, they looked up at the sky.

At that moment, the red sun was setting, still large on the horizon, while the moon had already risen on the other side.

In the vast sky, two radiant celestial bodies hung in perfect balance.

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Famous Chef of the World was a renowned restaurant located in the southern part of the capital of Yu, officially known as Xue Yipin. The restaurant was owned and run by a master chef named Xue Yipin.

More than a decade ago, the emperor dined at Yipin Restaurant and was so impressed by the culinary skills that he bestowed a plaque, inscribed with his own handwriting. The words he wrote were "Famous Chef of the World."

Xue Yipin then placed this plaque alongside his own name, transforming the restaurant's title to "Famous Chef of the World Xue Yipin."

Not only was Xue Yipin a renowned chef, but he also possessed impressive cultivation skills. His cleaver, known as The Famous Yipin Knife, came with its own fascinating backstory.

Baili Tong, a renowned swordsmith from the imperial city, was a close friend of Xue Yipin. One day, feeling that his cleaver was no longer sharp, Xue Yipin turned to Baili Tong and requested a new one to be forged.

Baili Tong had recently obtained a piece of high-quality Profound Aetherflame Essence Iron, intending to use it to create a sword that could rank within the top hundred of the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures. However, despite his best efforts, he only succeeded in forging a sword that ranked 142nd, which he named the Profound Aetherflame Iron Sword.

After forging the sword, Baili Tong had a small leftover piece of Profound Aetherflame Essence Iron, which he decided to use to craft a cleaver for Xue Yipin.

To everyone's surprise, this cleaver turned out to be of extraordinary quality, unbreakable and sharper than the Profound Aetherflame Iron Sword. It ultimately ranked 102nd in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures, earning the name "The Famous Yipin Knife."

The best work of a master swordsmith ended up being a casually crafted cleaver. It was truly a case of planting flowers with care but seeing none bloom, while an unintentional willow flourishes. This story was indeed a remarkable anecdote.

With the precious knife in hand, Xue Yipin's culinary skills soared to new heights. He gained fame for his Gourmet Banquet Platter, which featured rare and exotic ingredients. Even Eminent Ones and members of the imperial family marveled at the extraordinary flavors, declaring it the finest food they had ever tasted.

The restaurant Famous Chef of the World had thrived for many years, with reservations from nobles and officials extending far into the future. While most of the day-to-day operations were handled by Xue Yipin's disciples, he still reserved a few tables each day for ordinary citizens, randomly cooking for a few lucky diners. This practice made him beloved not only by the elite but also by the common folk of the capital of Yu.

Among the restaurants Jiang Yuebai most looked forward to, Famous Chef of the World was at the top of the list.

Thus, the four of them arrived at the restaurant just in time for dinner.

After navigating through the bustling streets, they finally stood before the grand establishment adorned with a golden plaque, only to find the doors firmly shut.

"What's going on?" Chu Liang asked, frowning. "Why would they close during dinner time?"

"Ah..." Jiang Yuebai sighed softly, her disappointment evident. "I guess we'll have to come another time."

Seeing her expression, Chu Liang quickly added, "Let me ask."

With that, he stepped forward and knocked on the restaurant door.

Knock, knock, knock.

Before long, a waiter appeared, his demeanor apologetic. "I'm sorry, young master, but we're closed for today."

"But we've traveled a long way just to taste Master Chef Xue's renowned cooking. What happened today?" Chu Liang asked softly.

"Our master chef is currently dealing with something urgent and is unavailable. I'm truly sorry, young master; please come back another day," the waiter replied, preparing to close the door.

Just then, a voice called out from behind them, "Young Hero Chu?"

Chu Liang turned to see a group of officials from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, and the one leading them was someone he recognized.

"Seal-Holding Official Chen," he called out.

This man was none other than the seal-holding official that Chu Liang had paid generously to help him acquire a rare treasure of nature.

When Seal-Holding Official Chen spotted Chu Liang, his face lit up with a warm smile.

"Thank goodness the officials from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau have arrived!" the waiter exclaimed as he quickly greeted them.

"Hmm?" Chu Liang turned to Seal-Holding Official Chen, asking, "Is something wrong here?"

Given the involvement of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, he couldn't shake off the feeling that something peculiar had occurred. He hoped nothing unfortunate had happened to Master Chef Xue.

Seal-Holding Official Chen glanced around before replying, "Since you're not really an outsider, why don't you come inside with us?"

Guided by the waiter, the group stepped into the restaurant and headed up to the second floor.

As they made their way through the bustling restaurant, Chen revealed that while Master Chef Xue was safe, his treasured knife had gone missing.

The Famous Yipin Knife, which held the 102nd spot in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures, had been stolen from the restaurant the night before.

Upon reaching the second floor, Chu Liang finally laid eyes on the famous chef.

Xue Yipin was a big, sturdy man who looked very kind. However, the weight of worry hung heavily on his face at this moment.

Behind him stood seven or eight men, some middle-aged and others younger, who appeared to be his disciples.

On the table in front of them lay an open box.

"Seal-Holding Official Chen! You're finally here!" Xue Yipin exclaimed as he stood up to greet the members of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau.

"Master Xue, what happened?" Seal-Holding Official Chen asked urgently.

With a sigh, Xue Yipin explained, "My knife is too sharp to be stored in an enchanted tool. Every night, I keep it in this box, and my disciples take turns guarding it.

"But last night, somehow, the knife vanished without a trace!"

Seal-Holding Official Chen glanced at the knife box, and Chu Liang moved in closer as well. "Hmm?"

Chu Liang's nose twitched as he caught a faint but familiar scent.

Chapter 522: Never

After taking a moment to survey the scene, Chu Liang decided it was best to leave. Jiang Yuebai and the others were still waiting outside, and it was clear that the knife wouldn't be found anytime soon. With dinner at the restaurant no longer an option, he saw no reason to stay and complicate matters further.

Before Chu Liang could leave, Seal-Holding Official Chen pulled him aside, saying, "Master Chef Xue is feeling a bit anxious and hopes that the news of the missing Famous Yipin Knife won't spread."

Seal-Holding Official Chen leaned in closer and lowered his voice. "Master Chef Xue is quite anxious about the situation. He fears that if the Famous Yipin Knife isn't recovered soon, it could ruin his restaurant's reputation and drive away customers."

Even without the Famous Yipin Knife, the restaurant would still be making dishes.

However, the knife was more than just a tool; it was a signature item of the restaurant. Most customers wouldn't notice a difference in the dishes unless they were informed about the changed knife. Yet, if word spread that the knife was missing, customers might start to think that the food had changed.

Master Chef Xue hoped the Imperial Supervisory Bureau would exert every effort to recover the knife, but if it remained lost, he preferred the issue to be quietly set aside.

Chu Liang nodded in understanding and made his way out.

As Chu Liang descended the stairs, the others from Mount Shu, waiting at the bottom, naturally asked about the situation.

Chu Liang sighed and shook his head. "A strange case has come up. Looks like we'll have to find somewhere else to eat tonight."

Though Jiang Yuebai felt a twinge of disappointment, she had a backup list of restaurants ready to go. The group made their way toward the inner city and soon found themselves at the base of the imperial city walls.

There stood a modest two-story building with a small entrance and a simple sign. However, the words on the sign were impressive: "Imperial City Restaurant."

This restaurant was run by imperial chefs looking to earn a little extra on the side. Typically, there were over a dozen imperial chefs on duty, ready to whip up meals at any time.

Thanks to the chefs' good reputation, business at the Imperial City Restaurant had always been booming. They became so popular that they had to keep raising their prices to manage the crowd.

Chu Liang and the others arrived right at dinner time, so they had to wait for a while before a private room became available.

The private room was simple and elegant, appearing quite modest. But when they opened the menu, it was anything but modest.

Ling Ao stayed silent, while Xu Ziyang furrowed his brows.

Even Jiang Yuebai couldn't help but whisper, "So expensive."

"We don't come here often, so just order whatever you like," Chu Liang said with a smile.

He scanned the fine dishes listed on the menu and casually selected seven or eight that caught his eye. There was no such luxury on Mount Shu, so he figured it was okay to indulge a little, especially since they rarely had the opportunity.

Ling Ao let out a sigh. "The price of this meal is outrageous..."

"Don't worry, it's on me," Chu Liang replied with a grin.

"You're getting more and more generous," Ling Ao joked. "Soon, I won't even dare to be friends with you."

Chu Liang laughed and replied, "I've never cared about whether the people I befriend have money..."

The luxurious dinner was, of course, thoroughly enjoyable. The four of them savored each of the renowned imperial dishes, and the flavors were truly exceptional.

During the meal, Xu Ziyang suddenly said, "I should have asked my teacher to come along. He's always so frugal, saving all his resources for the disciples. He's probably never tasted anything like this."

Seeing how Xu Ziyang acted as such a thoughtful disciple, always keeping his teacher in mind, Chu Liang couldn't help but think of his own teacher Di Nufeng.

Thankfully, he would never have to worry about her.

His own teacher was extravagant, likely having already indulged in luxuries like these, probably spending the entire peak's resources in a single lifetime on feasting and revelry.

He waved his hand, calling over a servant. "Please pack up another set of these dishes." Turning to the others, he added, "We'll take them back for Senior Uncle Wang."

"Uh..." Xu Ziyang seemed about to say something.

Chu Liang gave him a reassuring look.

With his current wealth, no amount of food or drink could make him go broke. As long as he didn't make reckless investments, there was no risk of wasting his fortune.

After their meal, the four of them, fully satisfied, prepared to leave the city and return to their residence at Emperor's Mound.

Chu Liang looked back and said, "You guys head back first. I need to find Junior Brother Liu, whom we met earlier. There's something I need to ask him."

"What for?" Jiang Yuebai asked curiously.

"I'll tell you later," Chu Liang replied with a mysterious smile.

The other three were a bit puzzled, but seeing that Chu Liang didn't want to explain, they went ahead and left without him.

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Earlier, in the knife box at Famous Chef of the World, Chu Liang caught a whiff of a familiar fragrance. After a moment of thought, he realized it was the same scent he had smelled on Liu Yunzheng earlier that day.

The fragrance was rather unique, not something commonly encountered.

During the day, Liu Yunzheng had mentioned that his father was a general in the city patrol, and their house wasn't far from the imperial city. With just a bit of inquiry, Chu Liang easily found the house and went to visit, announcing his name at the entrance.

Soon, Liu Yunzheng hurried out to greet him.

"Senior Brother Chu!" Liu Yunzheng called out, quickly approaching and personally escorting Chu Liang inside. He then turned to the gatekeeper and instructed, "The next time Senior Brother Chu visits, let him enter without needing to be announced."

"Junior Brother Liu, very courteous of you," Chu Liang replied with a warm smile.

Liu Yunzheng looked much better now. Thanks to the precious medicine, his damaged meridians had fully healed, and it wouldn't really affect his performance in the competition tomorrow. He was filled with gratitude toward Chu Liang.

"I've come to ask you about something, Junior Brother Liu," Chu Liang said. "Earlier today, I noticed a rather unique fragrance on you. I'm curious. Could it have come from the Hundred Flowers Pavilion?"

"Fragrance?" Liu Yunzheng paused.

He was now freshly bathed and no longer smelled of that same fragrance. He thought for a moment before replying, "It's probably Yunshang's special perfume powder. I didn't pay much attention to it earlier, but now that you mention it, her fragrance is indeed quite unique..."

"It's unique to Miss Yunshang?" Chu Liang asked further.

"As far as I know, I haven't smelled it anywhere else," Liu Yunzheng replied, a hint of puzzlement crossing his face as he wondered why Chu Liang, being a man, would take such an interest in perfume powder.

"Besides you, could anyone else have picked up the scent?" Chu Liang asked again.

Liu Yunzheng's expression grew slightly serious. "Senior Brother Chu, although Yunshang is a courtesan, she has always been virtuous and has only ever been with me."

"I see," Chu Liang said with a nod.

"This was not a life she wanted to live," Liu Yunzheng continued with a sigh. "Her father was executed when she was young, her mother is gravely ill, and she still needs to pay for her brother's tuition..."

"Truly touching," Chu Liang agreed, though his tone suggested he was somewhat absentminded.

"So, Senior Brother Chu, if you're thinking about pursuing Yunshang, you can forget about it. We've pledged our love for each other, and she would never be with anyone else," Liu Yunzheng said.

"Rest assured, I definitely won't," Chu Liang responded as he quickly shook his head.

After a few more polite exchanges, Chu Liang stood up to take his leave. "I won't keep you any longer. Rest well and make sure you're in top condition for tomorrow's competition."

"Thank you for your kind words, Senior Brother Chu," Liu Yunzheng replied, walking him all the way to the residence gates before stopping to see him off.

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After leaving Liu Yunzheng's house, Chu Liang made his way to the Hundred Flowers Pavilion. The capital city of Yu sparkled in the night, its streets glowing like a flowing river of stars, and in the midst of it all stood the lavishly decorated Hundred Flowers Pavilion.

It was the Hundred Flowers Pavilion, one of the most famous brothels in the city.

Across from the building stood a shop that sold cosmetics and perfumes, where a line of eager patrons waited outside. Clearly, a shop like this, positioned opposite a brothel, was in the perfect location.

Upon entering, Chu Liang was greeted by the vibrant atmosphere of dancers and music that filled the hall. Immediately, a brothel manager approached him. "Welcome! A new face! Is this your first visit? What kind of girl do you fancy? I can introduce you to some of our lovely ladies."

"I'm here to see Miss Yunshang," Chu Liang stated straightforwardly.

"Yunshang?" The brothel keeper chuckled softly. "She's one of our most popular girls. It's not easy to arrange a meeting with her..."

With a flick of his wrist, Chu Liang tossed a pouch to her as a tip.

The brothel manager snatched it from the air, opened it, and found it filled with spirit stones, far exceeding the worth of gold or silver and easily exchangeable in the capital of Yu.

Her smile shone like a wild chrysanthemum in bloom. "Miss Yunshang is free right now. I'll take you to her."

After escorting Chu Liang to a room on the third floor, she stepped inside for a quick conversation and soon emerged with a radiant smile. "Miss Yunshang is waiting for you inside. Please, go in."

Chu Liang stepped into the room and was greeted by the sight of a delicate, gentle woman seated by a table in front of a screen. She looked both pitiful and endearing.

"I heard it's your first time here. How do you know my name?" Yunshang asked softly.

"A recommendation from a friend," Chu Liang answered in a straightforward manner as he took his seat. He was eager to get to the heart of the matter.

This response left Yunshang looking slightly puzzled.

"The fragrance you wear is quite unique," he continued. "Where did you get that perfume powder?"

"You have a keen sense of smell, young master," Yunshang said with a smile. "This perfume was specially made for me by a perfume powder crafter across the street at Elegance Haven. I'm the only one who wears this scent."

"I see..." Chu Liang glanced in the direction of the street and casually asked, "It must have been quite expensive."

"We do these things to please our guests; naturally, we put effort into our appearance," Yunshang replied softly.

"So, Miss Yunshang, how many lovers do you have these days?" Chu Liang asked out of the blue.

"Hm?" Yunshang paused for a moment, then smiled again. "Young master, surely you're joking. Our dealings with guests are just friendly banter. How could there be any lovers...?"

Chu Liang placed a heavy pouch on the table with a solid thump.

As Yunshang opened it, her expression changed, much like the brothel manager's earlier. Immediately, her gaze toward Chu Liang became friendlier.

"I've only had three," Yunshang replied. "During the first relationship, I was naive and easily fooled. I didn't know much about love. My second relationship was one of passion, but unfortunately, we ultimately realized that our personalities weren't compatible. The third... is you, young master, and I hope..."

Well then. Memorized a standard response, huh?

Chu Liang didn't say much more and handed her another pouch. "Please be honest."

Yunshang glanced at the pouch, remained silent for a moment, then quickly said, "Seventeen."

"And who came to see you last night?" Chu Liang handed over another pouch.

With three heavy pouches of spirit stones now on the table, Yunshang considered Chu Liang a true friend.

She answered immediately, "Only Zhao Tietou from the Sword Forging Sect came to see me last night."

Chapter 523: Sword Forging Sect

As Jiang Yuebai and the others prepared to leave the city, a carriage approached from the opposite side. The person inside suddenly lifted the curtain and exclaimed, "Jiangjiang!"

When they looked over, they saw that the person in the carriage was Xu Hongqiu.

"Hongqiu," Jiang Yuebai smiled as she greeted her.

"Ah, it's been months since we last met! I missed you so much," Xu Hongqiu exclaimed, jumping down from the carriage and taking Jiang Yuebai's hand. "As soon as I arrived at Emperor's Mound, I went looking for you guys, but I couldn't find anyone at the residence."

She had spent a long time hanging around Red Cotton Peak, becoming very close friends with Jiang Yuebai. She had only returned to the Whale Gang because she wanted to prepare for the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

They hadn't expected to run into each other here in the capital of Yu.

"We just stepped out for a meal. What brings you to the city at such a late hour?" Jiang Yuebai asked.

"I just arrived and was about to buy some perfume powder," Xu Hongqiu laughed. "There's an excellent shop in the capital of Yu that customizes different scents for each customer. Their craftsmanship is exceptional! I've been using their products for quite some time, but I haven't had a chance to restock in the last two months. I'm running low, so I figured I'd drop by right after arriving in the capital."

"Go ahead then, we can chat later," Jiang Yuebai said. "If you wait any longer, they might close."

"They won't, they stay open late," Xu Hongqiu pulled her along. "Why don't you come with me? Have the master make one for you too. You naturally smell nice, but maybe a little perfume powder will make it even better!"

"Me?" Jiang Yuebai hesitated.

"Come on!" Xu Hongqiu exclaimed, dragging her into the carriage. "It's no fun going by myself. The Whale Gang is full of boring men; they don't talk for three days straight. It's so boring!"

Xu Ziyang and Ling Ao, standing behind Jiang Yuebai, exchanged looks, unsure whether to chime in at this moment...

"I'll head back later. Just let Senior Uncle Wang know," Jiang Yuebai said. She simply couldn't reject Xu Hongqiu and could only allow Xu Hongqiu to drag her onto the carriage.

"Okay," Xu Ziyang replied with a nod.

The carriage took them along a brightly lit long street, where they parked, with Elegance Haven on the left and Hundred Flowers Pavilion on the right.

"This street is lined with brothels, so there are plenty of shops selling perfume powder and tailoring clothes nearby," Xu Hongqiu explained. "Whenever my dad brought me to the capital of Yu for business, he would always leave me at home and sneak over here. He thought I was too young to understand, but I knew exactly what he was up to."

Jiang Yuebai didn't respond, merely glancing outside.

"If you think about it, Chu Liang is really a great guy. Despite being so wealthy now, I never see him in any ambiguous relationships with other girls, and he never seems to mess around. He's totally devoted to you," Xu Hongqiu added.

Jiang Yuebai paused for a moment and replied, "He is indeed a good guy."

"We've arrived," Xu Hongqiu said.

As they exited the carriage, they saw Chu Liang, who they considered "good," walking out of the Hundred Flowers Pavilion across the street with a slight grin, looking quite satisfied.

As the three pairs of eyes met, the expressions on the three faces froze.

In that moment, the bustling street seemed to swirl around them, but the three stood like rocks in a stream, utterly frozen in place.

Chu Liang was the first to react. He hurried across the street and greeted them with a smile. "Miss Xu, what brings you here? With Senior Sister Jiang?!"

"Oh, really?" Xu Hongqiu glared. "You have the nerve to say that? We didn't expect to find you here either!"

"I'm here to look into a case," Chu Liang clarified. "The Imperial Supervisory Bureau is involved, and I happened to come across some clues, so I came to ask around."

"What kind of case requires you to investigate inside a brothel?" Xu Hongqiu demanded.

"It's difficult to explain. The Imperial Supervisory Bureau has instructed me not to disclose anything for now," Chu Liang said. "I only parted ways with Senior Sister Jiang and the others a short while ago, and I even visited Junior Brother Liu's home. If I had really come here to mess around, why would I leave so quickly?"

"Who knows?" Xu Hongqiu replied, her gaze still suspicious. "What if you are just really really fast?"

"No freaking way!" Chu Liang immediately denied it. "Please don't say such nonsense in front of Senior Sister Jiang."

Jiang Yuebai replied calmly, "What does this have to do with me?"

With that, she turned away, not wanting to pay him anymore attention.

"Heeey!" Chu Liang took her hand and said, "I've uncovered some clues. Why not come with me? Once you see it, you'll get it."

Jiang Yuebai glanced back at him but didn't refuse.

"Alright!" Xu Hongqiu exclaimed, "I'll be Jiangjiang's eyes and ears and see if you are lying."

"It's quite late. Aren't you feeling tired?" Chu Liang suddenly asked.

"Huh?" Xu Hongqiu was taken aback by the question.

"If you're tired, you should head home and rest. I'll explain everything later," Chu Liang said.

"Ah..." Xu Hongqiu looked to Jiang Yuebai. "Should I be tired?"

Jiang Yuebai pondered for a moment and then nodded gently.

"Then I guess I am tired," Xu Hongqiu conceded.

With no other option, Xu Hongqiu stayed behind, watching Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai walk away together.

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As they made their way out of the city, Chu Liang explained to Jiang Yuebai what had happened earlier.

While it wasn't the best idea to share the news about the Famous Chef of the World losing his knife, telling Senior Sister Jiang in private shouldn't be seen as spreading it. After all, she wasn't an outsider.

More importantly, if he didn't explain soon, she might end up feeling like one.

He recounted the entire story of how he ended up at the Hundred Flowers Pavilion. As they approached the city gates, he finally finished his story and asked, "So you understand now, right?"

Jiang Yuebai replied calmly, "Are you done talking?"

"Yeah, I'm done..." Chu Liang responded weakly.

"Now that you're done talking, can you let go of my hand?" Jiang Yuebai asked.

"Ah..." Chu Liang quickly released her hand.

He had been so eager to explain that he hadn't even noticed he was holding her hand the whole way.

"I'll go with you to the Sword Forging Sect. If we really manage to find the Famous Yipin Knife, then I'll believe you," Jiang Yuebai said, her expression softening, indicating that she likely believed Chu Liang.

The Sword Forging Sect.

Twenty years ago, this sect didn't exist, but it had become well-known throughout the capital of Yu and beyond.

The sect leader of the Sword Forging Sect, Zhang Bailian, started as an unknown swordsmith in the capital of Yu. Despite his exceptional skills in sword crafting, he struggled to achieve fame and lacked the resources to acquire high-quality materials for making renowned swords. He could only hear the world sing the praises of the three greatest swordsmiths while feeling incapable of catching up.

Then, when Chancellor Su Qian came to power and began recruiting talents, Zhang Bailian decided to try his luck by seeking his patronage. To his surprise, Su Qian recognized and appreciated his skills.

Su Qian supplied him with materials and support, and Zhang Bailian exceeded expectations. He crafted several renowned swords, rising to become the second most famous swordsmith in the capital of Yu, just behind Baili Tong. Su Qian then assisted him in establishing the Sword Forging Sect, which allowed him to train apprentices and establish a school.

Today, the Sword Forging Sect has risen to become one of the sects in the Chancellor's Sixteen-Faction Alliance

As one of Zhang Bailian's top disciples, Zhao Tietou held the highest cultivation level among his peers. Few knew that he had also mastered two divine abilities.

In addition to being an apprentice at the Sword Forging Sect, his remarkable talent caught the eye of other sects. He even spent some time training at the Shadow Sect, one of the eight sects under the chancellor's command.

The Shadow Sect excelled in stealth, moving silently and leaving no traces wherever they journeyed.

Chu Liang knew all these details because he had paid Miss Yunshang a generous sum. With the money in hand, she was eager to divulge everything, nearly including Zhao Tietou's entire family history.

For Chu Liang, this was an unexpected turn of events. Initially, all he wanted was for Senior Sister Jiang to taste the Gourmet Banquet Platter she had longed for. However, it was because of that desire that he stumbled upon some clues, which led him to decide to investigate further.

Now that the clues led him to the Sword Forging Sect, it also led back to the Chancellor.

He had been unsure about getting involved, especially with the Assembly of Immortal Sects happening soon. He really didn't need to be personally involved in this matter. All he had to do was hand the clues over to the Imperial Supervisory Bureau and let them handle it. By doing so, he would have demonstrated sufficient kindness and fulfilled his responsibilities.

However, at this point, to prove his innocence to Senior Sister Jiang, he had no choice but to track down the Famous Yipin Knife.

First and foremost, a large-scale search was simply not feasible.

While the Famous Yipin Knife couldn't be kept in an enchanted storage tool, searching the entire capital of Yu for a kitchen knife would feel like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Secondly, since the Sword Forging Sect had the backing of the Chancellor's residence, it would be tough to bring them to justice without solid proof.

However, with a bit of thought, it wasn't hard to guess how the knife would be handled.

Whoever stole the knife likely didn't take it home to cook. It was meant to be used as a weapon, but since it was stolen, it couldn't be openly displayed. To use it, its appearance would have to be altered.

The Famous Yipin Knife was a legendary weapon forged by Baili Tong and only a handful of swordsmiths in the world would have the skill to reforge or modify it.

Without a doubt, the knife would end up in the hands of Sect Leader Zhang Bailian, who would be the one to reforge it.

A swordsmith of his caliber would create quite a spectacle when forging a weapon, and unusual phenomena would usually happen. Unless, like Baili Tong, they had royal backing and access to a hidden realm within the imperial city, they would have to set up their sword hut outside the city.

The Sword Forging Sect was located fifty li outside the capital of Yu on a flat mountain peak. The sword hut had now taken up the entire space of the flat mountain peak. There were large and small furnaces that were still blazing brightly even at night.

So even though Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai had never been there before, they were able to find the location fairly quickly by following the general direction.

The sword hut was a critical location, filled with valuable weapons and materials, so it was naturally well-guarded with restrictions and enchanted formations.

While the members of the Shadow Sect were skilled in stealth, both Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai were equally adept at remaining unseen.

Chu Liang, familiar with the process, slipped into his black robe and instantly radiated the eerie and sinister aura characteristic of those from diabolical sects.

Jiang Yuebai, skilled in stealth techniques, possessed a divine ability so refined that even Chu Liang would struggle to find her quickly.

The two moved in sync, like a wisp of night wind, quietly infiltrating the Sword Forging Sect.

It wasn't difficult to figure out which sword hut belonged to Zhang Bailian; it was clearly the largest one, with the brightest blaze flickering from its hearth.

The two moved swiftly through the area, slipping behind the sword hut and pausing for a moment to assess their surroundings.

The night breeze carried the hushed conversation between two disciples standing guard at the sword hut to their ears.

One guard asked, "What mood has our esteemed teacher fallen into, forging weapons all through the night?"

"It's definitely a task from the chancellor," the other replied. "We need to craft a legendary weapon for the Thirteenth Prince before the Assembly of Immortal Sects starts."

"The Thirteenth Prince?" the first guard asked, clearly puzzled. "Isn't the Chancellor usually close to the Second Prince?"

The other chuckled softly, "Heh, the waters here run deep—those who understand should know..."

As the wind carried away fragments of their conversation, the words became more obscure—phrases like "don't ask if you don't understand," "this runs deep," and "you can't handle it" drifted through the air.

Hearing nothing more of use, Jiang Yuebai said to Chu Liang with the use of Voice Transmission, "We can't extend our divine sense into the sword hut. We'll need to sneak in and investigate ourselves."

"Right," Chu Liang agreed.

Two figures emerged silently behind the disciples guarding the sword hut. With two quick, muffled thuds, the disciples were swiftly knocked out and dragged into the nearby bushes, hidden from view.

Then, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai swaggered in confidently as they sneaked into the hut.

Chapter 524: Where Did Second Leader Go?

It was called a sword hut, but the area that it occupied was quite expansive. At the peak of the mountain, there was a lake, and beside the lake was a wide clearing. Standing in the center of that clearing was a massive bronze furnace, and next to it was a small hut.

Dark gold flames were blazing inside the bronze furnace, and suspended above the flames was a cleaver gleaming with golden light! A young disciple stood before the furnace and steadily fed pieces of spirit charcoal into the fire, intensifying the flames.

This was the scene that Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai saw when they stealthily approached the sword hut. They crouched low and hid to the side, making no rash movements for the time being.

"That must be the Famous Yipin Knife," Jiang Yuebai said through Voice Transmission.

Stolen goods couldn't be used openly due to the possibility of them being recognized, so they needed to be reforged.

"It looks like the knife won't be smelted anytime soon. Let's see if we can snatch it away. Otherwise, we'll notify the Imperial Supervisory Bureau," Chu Liang replied, also through Voice Transmission.

Once they had the physical evidence, it would be much easier for the Imperial Supervisory Bureau to take action.

A middle-aged man who looked mighty and fierce emerged from the hut. His eyebrows were sharp like swords, and his eyes were the color of bronze bells. He was brimming with abundant vitality.

That man was likely Zhang Bailian, the sect leader of the Sword Forging Sect.

The young disciple immediately stood up and said, "Esteemed Teacher, I've added the spirit charcoal as you instructed, but... isn't it too much? We've never used such intense flames before. Could the furnace explode?"

"No," Zhang Bailian replied. "When Baili Tong smelted the Profound Aetherflame Essence Iron, he used the imperial family's Samadhi True Fire. We don't have such a powerful fire, so we have to use the Earthfire Sect's Primordial Core Fire. This fire is gentle but lacks force, so if the fire isn't intense, we won't be able to reforge this knife even after leaving it in the furnace for three days and nights."

He sounded like he was quite angry about that.

In Zhang Bailian's mind, the only things that separated him from the top three swordsmiths of the era were external factors like his cultivation level and access to special kinds of fire. In terms of true sword-forging skills, he believed he was second to none.

Unfortunately, he had hit the limit of his cultivation potential. It seemed impossible for him to break through to the Heavenly Gate. Now, he only had a sliver of hope left that he would be able to reach the seventh realm.

Nevertheless, even with the chancellor supporting him, his access to resources was still restricted to a limited selection. He couldn't access the world's divine fires at will.

"I see," the young disciple responded with a look of enlightenment.

"Tietou, you did very well this time," Zhang Bailian praised his disciple. "If the chancellor rewards us, the rewards will all go to you."

Zhao Tietou, the young disciple, was overjoyed. "Thank you, Esteemed Teacher!"

The chancellor had always been liberal with his money. Once they were done forging this legendary weapon, the chancellor would surely reward them generously.

Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai silently observed the disciple and teacher from the side, unable to find a good opportunity to grab the knife.

Zhang Bailian's cultivation level was not on par with the three great swordsmiths. Still, seeing as he had managed to become the leader of his sect, he had to be at least at the pinnacle of the sixth realm.

The Heavenly Gate was like an insurmountable chasm, blocking countless people from the next realm. While many saw that as the end of their cultivation path, it didn't mean their combat power couldn't improve.

That was why the cultivators at the pinnacle of the sixth realm had levels of power that varied greatly. For example, Zhang Juque from the Great Astral Sect was known as the strongest sixth-realm cultivator and had the power to challenge the Dao Attainment Realm. Zhang Bailian had been famous for years, but it was hard to gauge his exact strength.

This was the heart of the Sword Forging Sect. If Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai were to make a move and get discovered, it wouldn't take long for the members of the Sword Forging Sect to surround them. It would be difficult for them to escape then.

Chu Liang watched the blazing furnace as Zhao Tietou continued to feed spirit charcoal into it. Then a thought sparked in his mind.

He quietly told Jiang Yuebai through Voice Transmission, "I have an idea."

...

"That Baili Tong obtained a large piece of Profound Aetherflame Essence Iron but failed to grasp its true essence. What a waste," Zhang Bailian said, staring into the furnace. "He did not realize that the material contained sulfur, indicating that the iron was compromised. This meant that to forge an exceptional sword, he needed to add other top-grade materials to filter out the sulfur. [1]"

"So, he ended up forging the Profound Aetherflame Iron Sword, made purely with the Profound Aetherflame Essence Iron. That sword made it onto the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures, but it was practically a failure.

"As for this cleaver that he just casually made—it surpasses the sword in quality simply because there wasn't enough Profound Aetherflame Essence Iron left after making the sword, so he added in some other materials. It was purely by chance that he ended up with a great result."

"Baili Tong's skills are far inferior to yours, Esteemed Teacher," Zhao Tietou chimed in. "As for those so-called swordsmiths of the imperial city, they're just frauds—fooling the world and robbing renown from those who deserve it."

Every swordsmith had their preferred materials and techniques. Zhang Bailian's knowledge of this particular iron did not necessarily make him better than Baili Tong; it just meant he was more familiar with this material. Zhao Tietou probably understood this, but he also knew that just belittling the competition would be enough to make his teacher feel better.

As expected, Zhang Bailian vowed, "One day, I will forge a legendary sword that makes it into the top one hundred of the catalog. I'll let those who say I'm inferior see what a true swordsmith is!"

"That's right! We'll smack their faces swollen with the facts!" Zhao Tietou echoed.

While Zhao Tietou was busy praising his master, he suddenly noticed Zhang Bailian's flow of qi fluctuate.

At the next moment, a black-robed figure leaped out from the side and formed a hand seal in midair.

"Raaaaar!"

Accompanying the roar of a beast, a winged tiger with multicolored stripes and a soaring flood dragon appeared overhead. The two creatures descended from the sky, pouncing toward the master and disciple!

"Who dares to cause trouble in my Sword Hut?!" Zhang Bailian bellowed.

He raised his hand, and...

Boom!

Zhang Bailian did not use any fancy divine skills. With just one palm strike, he smashed the tiger and flood dragon to pieces, their bodies dissolving into light and shadow.

"It's an illusion," Zhang Bailian realized. He turned back, and his gaze hardened. "What are you doing?!"

It turned out that while the master and disciple had been distracted by the illusion, a second black-robed figure had emerged and tossed a shower of golden sparks into the furnace!

"Retreat!" Chu Liang shouted.

The things he had thrown into the furnace were Phoenix-Spirit Fire Seeds.

...

The Phoenix-Spirit Fire Seed, which had been refined in the Phoenix Sheep Hidden Realm, was the spark of the Phoenix-Spirit Fire—the fire second only to the Samadhi True Fire. It had once been Chu Liang's primary choice of fire for alchemy.

Later, he obtained the cultivation legacy of the Inferno Dragon and could summon the Divine Dragon Fire, which was no less powerful than the Phoenix-Spirit Fire. It was much more convenient for him to use the Divine Dragon Fire, so he seldom used those consumable Phoenix-Spirit Fire Seeds.

When he was watching the fire in the furnace earlier, he recalled the Phoenix-Spirit Fire Seeds. Since it was pointless for him to keep them, he decided to just throw them all into the furnace. Then he fiercely injected a wave of foundational qi into the fire.

The amount of foundational qi he injected wasn't necessarily enough to ignite all the Phoenix-Spirit Fire Seeds. Nonetheless, there was plenty of spirit charcoal and the other fire burning fiercely in the furnace.

As soon as the many Phoenix-Spirit Fire Seeds were thrown in, they ignited.

Each Phoenix-Spirit Fire Seed could turn into a huge Phoenix-Spirit Divine Fire. Consequently, with so many of them piled up in the furnace and igniting simultaneously, the result was... a massive explosion.

BOOOOOOM!!!

Sensing something was wrong, Zhang Bailian quickly grabbed his disciple, intending to flee. However, they could not outrun the explosion.

The crimson-gold sea of fire from the explosion blasted the master and disciple away, sending them crashing into a lake. Half of the lake evaporated instantly with a loud sizzle.

The thunderous boom of the explosion was so loud that even the people in the distant capital of Yu could hear it clearly. Anyone looking in the direction of the explosion saw what seemed like the rise of another sun! It illuminated the sky for a brief moment before fading away.

Having been prepared for the explosion, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai had already moved quite a distance away, so the explosion did not hit them hard.

Just like they had planned, Jiang Yuebai locked her divine sense onto the Famous Yipin Knife in the furnace. As chaos ensued, Jiang Yuebai and Chu Liang took the opportunity to seize the knife.

Chu Liang had given Jiang Yuebai a rough idea about how intense the explosion would be, but it still exceeded her expectations. The massive explosion sent the Famous Yipin Knife flying into the sky like an arc of light, streaking through the air like a shooting star!

"Let's go," Chu Liang said.

By the time the members of the Sword Forging Sect rushed over in confusion to see what had happened, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai had already left calmly, going after the Famous Yipin Knife.

...

Meanwhile, there was a group of people somewhere nearby, heading toward the capital of Yu.

A middle-aged man was leading the group. He had a malicious gaze and a dark yellow-bronze complexion, with a glossy sheen to his skin.

The man flew in silence.

There were four youths behind him. One of them had striking red hair and similarly glossy skin, as if cast from bronze.

"When we arrive at the capital of Yu, you must all be cautious," the middle-aged man warned. "Don't let those mountain habits show. This place is different. If our identities are discovered, we will all die."

"Got it, Second Brother," the red-haired youth replied with a laugh. "If the sky falls, the people of Evil Dragon Mountain will hold it up. We'll just treat it as we truly did come here to compete with those righteous immortal sects."

The three underlings beside him chimed in.

"Heh, with Second Leader leading us and Third Leader participating in the battle, we at Bronze Demon Ridge will surely crush the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten!"

"Right! With Second Leader leading us, we will stomp on the Penglai Supreme Sect, beat up the Endless Sword Sect, and head straight to the palace for the Qinghong Banquet!"

"By then, our names will spread across the world. When people hear we're from Bronze Demon Ridge, won't everyone flock to the West Sea to learn from us?"

"Hahaha!"

Their lively chatter continued as they approached the capital of Yu.

The middle-aged man gave another warning. "It's good to have high morale, but you must be cautious. Old Third, your transcendent form is incomplete, so be careful when fighting those prodigies of the righteous path. You're not like me. I've already advanced to the sixth realm and possess the Invincible Bronze Demon Body. Even legendary weapons can't wound me—"

Boom!

At that moment, there was a massive explosion in the distance, drawing all of their gazes to it. They saw a crimson sun rise from the mountaintop nearby.

However, they didn't notice an arc of light flash overhead like a streak of lightning. It was so fast that it was barely visible to the naked eye.

"What just happened? Those are such powerful flames!" the red-haired youth exclaimed in shock.

"Yeah, they're terrifyingly mighty..." one of the underlings echoed.

"That looks like the Phoenix-Spirit Divine Fire. I accidentally entered the outskirts of Divine Phoenix Island in the West Sea once and saw this divine fire..." another underling said. He gasped. "Could it be that a divine phoenix has descended upon the capital of Yu?"

The third underling patted his chest in relief. "Good thing we're far enough from the explosion."

"Forget about it. It's got nothing to do with us. But the capital of Yu is indeed a place with hidden dangers. Second Brother, you're right—" The red-haired youth turned his head, wanting to say something to the middle-aged man. But he froze mid-sentence. "Where's Second Brother?"

"Yeah, where's Second Leader?"

The underlings turned and froze in surprise as well.

He was leading the way just a moment ago. How did Second Leader, a fully grown man, suddenly vanish from our midst?

Huh?

Chapter 525: Provocation

"Crap."

Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai followed the trajectory of the Famous Yipin Knife, chasing after it hastily. However, when they finally caught up with it in a remote forest, they couldn't feel happy about it.

The good news was that they had found the knife.

The bad news was that there was a face under the knife...

A middle-aged man with bronze skin lay stiffly on the ground, with the Famous Yipin Knife embedded in his face. Most of the blade had sunk into his head. He was probably dead.

It was the middle of the night, in the desolate wilderness of a mountain. How on earth did they end up killing someone? It was truly unfortunate.

"Let's search his belongings and see if we can figure out where he's from. Let's send him home first," Chu Liang said.

There was no one around, so they could have just left the body there and taken the knife with no one ever knowing. Nevertheless, that was clearly not something Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai would do.

The two of them searched the corpse, only to find that the corpse was strangely hard... It wasn't the stiffness that came after death. Rather, it was the hardness of metal. There was even a metallic clang when they tapped the corpse.

It seemed the man had been a cultivator, and he likely had a high cultivation level. A corporeal body of this level would normally be very difficult to pierce.

However, when the Phoenix-Spirit Divine Fire erupted, the explosion had sent the Famous Yipin Knife flying with immense force. Furthermore, the knife was an incredibly sharp and almost indestructible legendary weapon... It meant the strike that killed the man had been terrifyingly powerful.

There was no vicious beast that could withstand the cutting power of the Famous Yipin Knife; it could cut through all kinds of scales and shells. Now, it seemed that humans were no different from the vicious beasts.

Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai quickly found a storage ring on one of the man's fingers. They sent their divine sense into it, searching for anything that might identify him.

Nonetheless, all Chu Liang saw were jars filled with body parts, along with other eerie objects emanating diabolical qi. They all looked rather sinister. It appeared that this middle-aged man wasn't a righteous cultivator.

Chu Liang found something familiar among the eerie items—an envelope.

"This letter..."

He took out the envelope from the storage ring. The envelope looked the same as the one he had found in the Violet Gold Marquess' storage enchanted tool.

Chu Liang opened it to take a look.

First Leader of Bronze Demon Ridge, your divine abilities are extraordinary. You are far too great to remain confined to one place. We at Evil Dragon Mountain sincerely invite all our comrades from the West Sea to gather in the capital of Yu during the Assembly of Immortal Sects. Together, we will unleash thunderous force, overturn the heavens and the earth, and cooperate in this grand event!

Like the other letter, this one was also signed off with "Immortal Yuan Lu" at the bottom.

"So, he was a member of a diabolical sect," Chu Liang commented.

The guilt weighing on his heart suddenly lifted.

What a grand event, indeed.

Before even getting to the capital of Yu, one has been killed intentionally, and another unintentionally.

Kind of feels like Immortal Yuan Lu's letters might be... cursed?

After flying through such a vast night sky, a cleaver somehow managed to strike the middle-aged man right in the face with such precision. If someone were to say it wasn't retribution for being a diabolical cultivator, it would be very hard to believe that to be true.

Since the middle-aged man was a diabolical cultivator, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai could handle his corpse casually.

After looting the middle-aged man's enchanted storage tool, they searched his body but found nothing of value. Then they left the corpse by the roadside. They were going to wait until someone discovered it before deciding what to do next.

Since the matter of the stolen cleaver involved the chancellor, the fewer people who knew, the better it would be. Chu Liang didn't even plan to go through the Imperial Supervisory Bureau; he decided he would return the cleaver straight to Xue Yipin in private.

Done with the corpse, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai flew off, heading back to the capital of Yu.

However, they hadn't noticed the several pairs of eyes watching them silently from a distance. They were the four young members of the Bronze Demon Ridge.

After looking around in midair for a while earlier, they had ultimately confirmed that something had happened to Second Leader. They landed and found him very quickly.

Unfortunately, they got there one step too late and found Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai searching Second Leader's corpse.

Third Leader, the red-haired youth, immediately wanted to rush over and fight Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai, but the three underlings held him back with all their strength.

"Third Leader! Don't be impulsive!" one of the underlings urged seriously. "If they killed Second Leader so easily, how could we possibly be their match?"

"Exactly!" another underling added. "Second Leader had already cultivated the Invincible Bronze Demon Body, yet he was killed in an instant. I can't even imagine what methods they used to kill him!"

"They could probably kill the four of us in an instant as well," the third underling chimed in.

Third Leader suppressed the fury surging in his chest.

After a moment, he finally gritted his teeth and said, "Remember those two. We must seek revenge for Second Leader!"

"Revenge!" the three underlings shouted in unison.

"Let's go!" Third Leader ordered.

"Yes!"

The three underlings immediately turned and ran after him.

The four of them left together without looking back.

...

Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai returned to the palace at the top of Emperor's Mound and checked the contents of the storage ring together. They decided to deal with the matter at hand first.

After all, there was no rush to return the knife, so they could do it the next day. It would be fine if they just dropped by the Famous Chef of the World when they had some free time.

Meanwhile, the other members of their team went over to them and asked what was going on. There was no need to hide anything from them, so Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai briefly explained what had happened.

The dead diabolical cultivator seemed to have a high level of cultivation, but he did not have many valuable items in his enchanted storage tool. It was likely because the West Sea was quite remote compared to the nine provinces.

Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai pulled the jars of body parts from the storage ring and placed them out for the others to see. The organs seemed to belong to some exotic beasts.

Ling Ao said, "This diabolical cultivator was probably from the Bronze Demon Ridge in the West Sea. These are materials used for cultivating their transcendent forms."

"Huh?" Chu Liang uttered, looking at him in surprise.

The letter had indeed mentioned Bronze Demon Ridge.

Chu Liang asked, "You know about them?"

"When I decided to take the path of physical cultivation, I studied the physical cultivation legacies of the four seas and the nine provinces," Ling Ao explained. "The Bronze Demon Ridge's Invincible Bronze Demon Body is quite formidable as a divine technique. But it's not well known because it requires resources that are difficult to obtain. That's why this sect hasn't been able to expand its influence."

Ling Ao picked up one of the jars. It contained a huge purple-black eyeball.

He continued, "The Invincible Bronze Demon Body requires each part of the body to be specially fortified. This is probably the eye of a Kui [1], which is a rare exotic beast. Its eyes are used to fortify the cultivator's eyes.

"This is the tendon of a Flying Dragon, used to fortify the cultivator's muscles and bones.

"This is the hoof of an Ancient Thunder Mountain Bull, used to fortify the cultivator's feet.

"This is the penis of a Mountain-Splitting Tiger, used to—"

Ling Ao suddenly paused there.

"Let's just save these for hotpot," Chu Liang said, quietly putting the jars away.

Aside from the jars, the storage ring had some jade slips containing cultivation arts manuals. They browsed through them briefly and confirmed it was pretty much just as Ling Ao had described.

The cultivation arts of the Bronze Demon Ridge had never really been a big secret. The necessary cultivation materials were so difficult to obtain that even if outsiders knew the techniques, they wouldn't bother trying to cultivate with them.

There were also some diabolical weapons in the storage ring, but being righteous cultivators, none of the team from the Mount Shu Sect cared much for them.

After sorting through everything, the most valuable items ended up being the exotic beasts' organs.

"All right. it's time to rest," Wang Xuanling told the team. "The Assembly of Immortal Sects begins tomorrow, so let's get there early and have a look."

Then he shifted his gaze to Chu Liang and smiled. "The two of you did very well today, but be more careful next time. If the person you accidentally killed had been a good person, you would have to bear the consequences."

"I understand, Senior Uncle. I was too reckless," Chu Liang replied.

"No worries. Just be more careful next time."

Still smiling, Wang Xuanling waved his sleeve and left.

"Why is Senior Uncle Wang being so weird?" Jiang Yuebai whispered.

"Indeed." Chu Liang nodded. "He seems unusually gentle. He'd normally scold us in situations like this. But even if he doesn't, he would at least give us a stern warning."

Xu Ziyang guessed, "It's probably because of the food you brought back from our meal. It seems like my teacher really enjoyed it."

Hearing that, Chu Liang realized what the reason was.

So, it's because he ate the food that he's not saying much now.

[2]

Chu Liang could already picture the scene. The old fellow must have been grumbling about why I wasted money on such expensive food. But he probably ate it with a huge, satisfied grin.

...

The Assembly of Immortal Sects began the next day, kicking off with the first round—the Great Selection of the Four Seas.

Over six hundred sects of various sizes were participating this time. The imperial court had set up over a dozen arenas outside the capital of Yu. The plan was to have three consecutive days of elimination matches, resulting in eighty-one teams selected for the next round.

The rules were simple. Each representative team would send three members to participate in a match of three duels. For a team to win the match, two of their three members had to win their duels. The losing team would be eliminated, and the winning team would have another match the next day. Any team that won three days in a row would advance to the second round.

The process was straightforward but brutal. Life-and-death battles were daily occurrences for every sect, so everyone was bound to give it their all. The more powerful sects could crush their opponents without even sending their main fighters.

In any case, the duels were sure to be intense.

The people of the capital flocked in droves to watch the matches. Each team only had one match per day, but with over three hundred matches on the first day alone, each arena had dozens of matches lined up. That ensured it would be a full day of exciting matches.

When Wang Xuanling and the Mount Shu Sect's team arrived, they caused quite a stir. After all, the Mount Shu Sect was considered a heavyweight in this year's Assembly of Immortal Sects.

The crowd erupted with screams and yells. Most of the people screamed "Jiangjiang" or "Fairy Jiang," but there was a small group of people that yelled "The Young Hero with the Divine Whip." There were even some people who called out "Xu Ziyang."

Only a few voices scattered among the crowd shouting Ling Ao's name. However, they were mostly saying things like... "Little Baldy, move to the side a little! Don't block our view of Jiangjiang!"

After a bit of searching, the group from the Mount Shu Sect finally spotted the Profound Mind Sect team sitting by the side of an arena. They quickly went over there.

"This place was hard to find, so we're a bit late," Wang Xuanling said. Then he realized that the whole team from the Profound Mind Sect were sitting there. "Weren't you supposed to be in the first match? Has it not started yet?"

Chen Xuanlu looked up and replied, "Senior Brother Wang, it's already over."

Wang Xuanling looked at the Profound Mind Sect disciples and their ashen faces.

"Eh?"

He was a little surprised.

The Profound Mind Sect's team wasn't particularly strong, but their members had at least reached the fourth realm—a decent level for their age group. Liu Yunzheng, in particular, was considered one of the more outstanding young cultivators in the capital's circle.

Based on the standard from the previous assemblies, the team from the Profound Mind Sect had a fair chance of making it into the Competition of a Hundred Sects.

So, how did this happen?

It had only taken them a short while to get there, yet the match was already over. That could only mean it had been a complete defeat.

"We faced the team from Fuyao Kingdom," Chen Xuanlu explained, sounding stunned and dejected. He raised his gaze and directed it to the opposite side of the arena. "They were too strong."

This wasn't Chen Xuanlu's first time participating in the Assembly of Immortal Sects. In fact, he had participated in it many times as a disciple and a sect leader, so losing was nothing new to him. That made it quite strange that Chen Xuanlu seemed so shocked by the result.

Chu Liang followed Chen Xuanlu's gaze and saw a youth in black combat attire with a knife on his back.

The youth wore a sinister smile as he looked at Chu Liang. He had clearly recognized Chu Liang.

As their eyes met, the youth raised his hand and made a throat-slitting gesture.

Whoa, Chu Liang thought. How arrogant.

Chapter 526: Grudges

"Strange," Chu Liang muttered. "Is there a grudge between us?"

Why is he provoking me for no reason?

At that moment, Wang Xuanling beside him spoke with a meaningful tone, "You don't have a grudge with him, and the Mount Shu Sect has no grudge with the Fuyao Kingdom either."

"Now I get it," Chu Liang immediately understood. Say no more. It must be another grudge caused by my esteemed teacher back in the day.

Wang Xuanling pointed to the opposite side of the arena, where the leader of the Fuyao Kingdom team stood. She was a tall, middle-aged woman with a stern expression and snow-white skin, dressed in a fitted black outfit. Her hair fell just past her ears, partially covering one of her eyes.

"That's Han Lingshuang from the Fuyao Kingdom's Royal Wave Bureau," Wang Xuanling explained. "She has been managing the bureau's internal affairs in recent years and wields significant power. Back in the day, she and your esteemed teacher participated in the same Assembly of Immortal Sects, where your teacher beat her up so badly that she burst into tears on the arena stage."

The Fuyao Kingdom's Royal Wave Bureau operated much like the Yu Dynasty's Imperial Supervisory Bureau, both serving as cultivator institutions under the authority of their respective courts. However, the Royal Wave Bureau had a closer connection to the royal family, being nearly entirely controlled by them. For a woman to attain such a high-ranking position there, she must have remarkable skills and abilities.

Chu Liang observed the woman, who exuded an air of aloofness and coldness. It was hard to picture her in tears, breaking down in public.

It's just losing a fight on the arena stage. What's there to cry about? Chu Liang thought.

But then he realized something—his teacher was Di Nufeng. He couldn't help but imagine that she had likely taunted Han Lingshuang during the fight, hurling insults and teasing the poor girl while mixing physical attacks with psychological torment. Otherwise, how could he, a disciple of the next generation, be caught up in this grudge?

"Be mentally prepared," Wang Xuanling warned. "Your teacher made quite a few enemies back then, and many of them are now core figures in various immortal sects. If they see you, they might take a special interest in you."

Chu Liang slapped his forehead in realization. No wonder he had felt so many hostile stares the moment he stepped into the arena.

At first, he thought it was due to his close relationship with Senior Sister Jiang. But now, it seemed that his teacher was the main reason.

He couldn't help but sigh and say, "How could she possibly make so many enemies just by participating in one Assembly of Immortal Sects..."

"The Di Nufeng you see today is much more mature," Wang Xuanling explained. "When she was younger, she was probably a hundred times worse."

"..." Chu Liang fell silent for a moment.

Was she even human back then? Did she slap every old man she passed on the street? Did people from three streets away flee in fear when they heard her coming? Were even the dogs within ten miles terrified of her?

With a sigh that seemed to carry a thousand thoughts, Chu Liang finally said, "Senior Uncle Wang, you must have had a difficult time all these years."

The old man had been fighting the dark forces within the Mount Shu Sect alone for years, and it had been tough for him.

"Haaaaaa!" Wang Xuanling responded with a sigh as well.

During this time, Chen Xuanlu provided a brief overview of their upcoming match against the team from the Fuyao Kingdom.

Fuyao Kingdom was a powerful enemy that would surely secure a spot in the competition of the hundred sects, which meant that their team would most likely face off against the Mount Shu Sect. Therefore, it was crucial for the Mount Shu Sect to gather as much information as possible.

Unfortunately, Chen Xuanlu didn't have much information to provide.

He only knew that the young cultivators from the Fuyao Kingdom practiced some unusual divine techniques. As the most skilled cultivator in the Profound Mind Sect, Liu Yunzheng was naturally chosen to fight first, aiming to secure the first victory for their team.

However, he faced a towering cultivator from the Fuyao Kingdom, whose body resembled solid metal—immune to sabers, spears, and divine techniques. The man charged forward and threw a powerful punch.

Liu Yunzheng, quick on his feet, swiftly dodged behind the opponent. However, to his shock, two more arms suddenly emerged from the man's back, grabbing him and kicking him off the stage in a single fluid motion.

The remaining two contestants from the Fuyao Kingdom were both women. One was petite and skilled in stealth techniques, making her movements unpredictable even on the open stage. The other was tall and could transform into a crane and send her feathers flying like sharp arrows.

Each of the three fighters far outmatched the disciples of the Profound Mind Sect, all of whom were defeated within three moves.

As for the youth with the saber on his back who had taunted Chu Liang, he hadn't even entered the match. Judging by his demeanor on the sidelines, he was likely the strongest member of their team.

The first day's matches proceeded at a fast pace. The winners advanced, while the losers left, and the second round of matches immediately followed.

The members of the Profound Mind Sect lost interest in watching and decided to leave. Meanwhile, the Mount Shu Sect team was searching for their next target when they heard a commotion coming from the other side.

They all turned their attention in that direction.

...

Not far away, a crowd had gathered around an arena, people standing layer upon layer, all staring at the person on stage. However, their gazes were not filled with admiration, but rather with a hint of curiosity, as if they were watching for entertainment.

On the stage was a woman holding a longsword, engaged in battle.

She wore crimson-gold armor over a neatly fitted white dress, her hair pulled back into a high ponytail that accentuated her sharp, determined aura. With high-arched brows and almond-shaped eyes, her skin was as smooth as white jade, radiating a vibrant glow.

The longsword in her hand was equally striking, measuring four and a half chi in length, with red inscriptions etched along its blade. When she channeled her foundational qi into it, the sword erupted into roaring flames.

Whoosh—

The woman swung her sword, and the longsword slashed through the wind with a scorching blaze!

Her opponent was a young cultivator in a Daoist monk robe. Seeing the fierce strike coming his way, he quickly formed a seal, and a shield wall of chaotic wind and thunder gathered in front of him, blocking the woman's path.

But the woman remained undeterred. With determination in her eyes, she raised her sword high and brought it down with force onto the shield wall!

Boom—

With a thunderous crash that reverberated throughout the arena, the wall of wind and thunder shattered! The Daoist monk behind it quickly altered his stance, thrusting forward with a palm strike that roared with the power of dragons and tigers.

The woman's sword strike had just landed, and her qi was momentarily depleted, making it impossible for her to raise her sword again. Yet she did not back down; instead, she charged forward, seemingly ready to meet the palm strike head-on!

But just as the wind from the palm strike approached, the woman's eyes suddenly lit up, and her armor burst into blazing purple-gold flames!

"Samadhi True Fire!" the Daoist monk exclaimed in shock, quickly pulling back his palm.

The foundational qi in the wind generated by his palm instantly dissipated the moment it came into contact with the purple flames. As the woman advanced, the Daoist monk found himself forced to retreat, completely unable to fight back.

Fortunately, the purple-gold flames around the woman quickly faded, disappearing within a breath.

At this point, the Daoist monk had backed away to the edge of the arena. With the longsword in her right hand filled with qi, the woman closed in and slashed downward once more!

Boom—

The sword qi sliced through the air with a thunderous roar!

The Daoist monk could only twist his palms together, raising them in defense.

In his rush, he barely had time to form a complex seal, managing only to create a basic green barrier to shield himself from the fiery sword qi.

Bang—

This was clearly wishful thinking, as the woman's sword qi shattered the barrier effortlessly. With no room left to retreat, the Daoist monk had no choice but to leap off the stage to escape the strike.

The winner of the match was instantly decided.

The woman spun gracefully, holding her longsword in reverse, and strode back to the center of the stage with an air of authority.

With her flaming sword, she appeared heroic and carefree.

"Bravo!" Cheers erupted from the surrounding crowd.

This Daoist monk was a top disciple from Cold Cloud Temple, known for his strength among local cultivators. Yet, against the woman's divine fire and sword qi, the fight had been swift and one-sided.

Even those who had initially come just for entertainment were now captivated by the woman's heroic presence.

She swept her eyes across the crowd and caught sight of the Mount Shu Sect team. In a flash, her gaze sharpened, targeting Chu Liang like an arrow.

Chu Liang quickly lowered his head to evade her piercing gaze.

This was actually the first time he had seen this woman, but considering her identity, he wasn't shocked by the intensity of her glare.

Among the three children of the imperial family currently possessing the Divine Fire Spirit, the Second Prince was the eldest and had already participated in the previous Assembly of Immortal Sects. Consequently, the Sixth Princess and the Thirteenth Prince from the Xia imperial family participated in this year's assembly.

The one who had just ascended the stage, wielding the Profound Aetherflame Iron Sword, was none other than the Sixth Princess, Xia Shu.

Until now, she had seldom appeared before the citizens of the capital. The most well-known tale about her was how she had been rejected twice when the Emperor attempted to arrange marriages for her, turning her into a subject of gossip and jokes across the nation. However, her participation in the Assembly of Immortal Sects drew many curious spectators eager to see her in action.

Her remarkable strength was unexpected and the crowd responded with genuine cheers.

Chu Liang lowered his head, thinking to himself, The competition of the hundred sects hasn't even started, and I'm already making enemies left and right. Is my name simply unlucky? Can I change my name to Chu Pengyou[1]? Or is it too late?

Chapter 527: Returning the Knife

In fact, the strongest aspect of the Sixth Princess was not her treasured sword, but the fact that she had already mastered the control of Samadhi True Fire.

While she couldn't control it as effortlessly as Di Nufeng, even a short burst of her divine fire against equally matched opponents could serve as a formidable weapon of annihilation.

The next contestant was the Thirteenth Prince. At merely sixteen years of age, he had a youthful appearance. His smooth, fair skin and warm, kind smile made a favorable impression on everyone present.

His weapon was a gold-edged folding fan, and his entire demeanor was refined and cultured.

Because of this, the second Daoist monk from Cold Cloud Temple underestimated him. He figured that even with their strongest senior brother already defeated, a win in the next two matches would still mean victory for them. To him, the Thirteenth Prince's presence felt significantly less imposing than that of his sister.

With the confidence that he would win this fight, the Daoist monk didn't hold back as his senior brother had and launched into an aggressive attack right from the start! As he leaped into action, an apparition of a mighty tiger sprang forth from behind him!

The Thirteenth Prince's eyes suddenly narrowed, and with a swift snap of his fingers, a burst of purple-gold flames ignited in the air before him.

He had also mastered Samadhi True Fire!

Although he possessed the Divine Fire Spirit, to have mastered Samadhi True Fire at such a young age was considered an extraordinary talent even among the imperial family.

While this single spark couldn't do much, he unfolded his fan and gently waved it.

Boom—

The tiny spark instantly transformed into a raging flame!

As the flames roared to life, the fierce tiger apparition charged ahead, only to be caught off guard and engulfed by the fiery blast in the blink of an eye!

"Ah—" the Daoist monk immediately let out a scream.

Before the guardians around the arena could intervene, the Thirteenth Prince quickly stepped forward, flipped his fan, and extinguished the divine fire.

Fortunately, the flames flickered out quickly. The Daoist monk's robes were scorched and his skin burned, yet the Samadhi True Fire hadn't reached his inner body. The Thirteenth Prince quickly snuffed out the fire and channeled qi into him to alleviate his injuries.

"I apologize for not holding back during the match," he said gently, placing a small jar on the table. "This is a rare healing medicine for treating burns. I hope you'll accept it as my way of making amends."

"You're too kind, Thirteenth Prince. Injuries are a normal part of the fight; there's no need to blame yourself," a member from Cold Cloud Temple that went onto the stage to help the Daoist monk down the stage responded courteously.

It was just as the members of the Cold Cloud Temple had said. Even if there weren't a thousand people injured today, there would be at least a hundred. And given how polite the Thirteenth Prince was, they naturally held no resentment.

"In that case, I wish this Daoist master a speedy recovery," the Thirteenth Prince said, offering a slight bow before stepping off the stage.

With two wins out of three, the imperial family team had already secured their victory.

However, the opportunity to participate in the Assembly of Immortal Sects was very rare as the assembly was held only once every twelve years. The defeated side had the option to either accept or decline a third match, and many sects took the chance to allow their disciples to compete for the

experience. Just like the Profound Mind Sect had earlier, they continued to fight in the third round to learn more about their competitors, despite the outcome already being clear.

But this time, the Cold Cloud Temple team chose not to fight again, likely because they recognized the power of Samadhi True Fire and wanted to prevent any further injuries to their members.

"It's impressive how even a flicker of Samadhi True Fire holds such power. No wonder Senior Aunt Di Nufeng is considered unbeatable by anyone else at the seventh realm," Ling Ao said to himself after witnessing the fight.

As a practitioner of physical cultivation at the Mount Shu Sect, Ling Ao naturally took an interest in Di Nufeng.

But through his research, he discovered that Di Nufeng's Fiery Divine Phoenix constitution was something only she could cultivate. Only those with a truly exceptional Divine Fire Spirit could command an endless flow of Samadhi True Fire.

Ultimately, her entire cultivation strength could be summed up in just two words: sheer talent.

Her power was pure talent, completely unattainable through hard work or imitation. No one could learn from her. Upon realizing this, Ling Ao gave up the idea of following her path and set out to find his own practice methods.

Even so, he had a point. Without Samadhi True Fire, Di Nufeng's seventh realm cultivation wouldn't have ranked among the best. It was the immense power of her divine fire that granted her unmatched dominance at the seventh realm.

Hearing this, Chu Liang couldn't help but glance at Wang Xuanling.

The more matches he watched, the more he realized how tough the old man's life had been.

Wang Xuanling once again let out a sigh, "Haaaaa!"

...

The first day's matches came to an end, but many spectators were left wanting more. As usual, the opening day of the Assembly of Immortal Sects had the busiest schedule of arena matches, making it the most exhilarating day for spectators.

Throughout the day, many dark horses emerged, and quite a number of fights had surprising endings.

In a stunning turn of events, a renowned team from the capital of Yu was defeated by a little-known sect from a remote region. Such unexpected outcomes were not uncommon during every Assembly of Immortal Sects and would remain a hot topic for the next twelve years.

Having spent the day as a spectator, Chu Liang quickly made his way back.

There was still work to be done today.

The massive explosion outside the capital of Yu from the previous night had sparked much discussion. After their investigation, the Imperial Supervisory Bureau found that a duo of thieves, one male and one female, were responsible for the chaos at the Sword Forging Sect.

It turned out that the thieves had thrown an enchanted tool into the Sword Forging Sect's furnace, causing a powerful explosion. The sect leader, Zhang Bailian, was slightly injured, while the disciple, Zhao Tietou, was severely wounded. During the chaos, the thieves managed to steal numerous valuable materials and weapons, resorting to particularly unscrupulous methods to carry out their theft.

However, no one at Sword Forging Sect had seen the thieves' faces, which made it impossible to put out a wanted notice. Even when the Imperial Supervisory Bureau used the Shadow of Radiance technique to recreate part of the scene, they only saw two shadowy figures in black robes moving suspiciously.

The only conclusion they could draw was that these two were experienced criminals.

Of course, the Assembly of Immortal Sects was always the time when thieves were most rampant, and the citizens of the capital were used to it. Especially since this time the target was a sect and not the people, the news of the explosion was swiftly overshadowed by the buzz of the second day of the assembly.

No one cared.

In an unnoticed corner, Chu Liang quietly slipped into the Famous Chef of the World.

He avoided the front door, not wanting anyone to tie him to the recent chaos. Sneaking in seemed like a good idea; after all, with the restaurant having lost its most precious cleaver, there was little chance they'd have increased their security, right?

When he reached the second floor, Chu Liang decided to stop hiding and approached one of Xue Yipin's disciples, requesting to see the master.

The disciple, having seen Chu Liang with the Imperial Supervisory Bureau earlier, didn't hesitate and immediately went to inform Xue Yipin.

The renowned chef of Yu soon appeared, his steps heavy with sorrow. Upon seeing Chu Liang holding the knife he had lost, he nearly fell to his knees in gratitude.

Concerned that the floorboards might break under the weight, Chu Liang quickly stopped Xue Yipin from kneeling.

"No need for such formalities, Chef Xue! I only happened to discover a couple of clues and tried to recover the knife—it's hardly anything," Chu Liang said quickly.

"Young Hero Chu, your effort in retrieving my beloved knife is truly a generous act. I honestly don't know how I can ever repay you," Xue Yipin admitted, visibly moved.

"There's no need for grand gestures of repayment. I have a fellow disciple who adores good food and has long been eager to try your famous Gourmet Banquet Platter. If you could prepare a meal for us, that would be more than enough," Chu Liang replied.

"Absolutely, that's no problem whatsoever," Xue Yipin said with a grand wave of his hand. "I'll arrange it right away. From now on, every time Young Hero Chu visits my restaurant, all dishes will be on the house—free for life! And for all Mount Shu Sect disciples, everything will be half-off!"

"You don't have to go to such lengths," Chu Liang quickly added. "I just hope that you don't publicly mention that I was the one who found the Famous Yipin Knife. After all..."

Since Chu Liang had already explained how he retrieved the knife, Xue Yipin quickly grasped the reason behind his request.

It was clear that Chu Liang wanted to avoid any additional trouble. And so, he nodded and assured, "Will do."

With a grin, he added, "I'll have my disciples get the ingredients ready for an exquisite Gourmet Banquet Platter, just for you, Young Hero Chu!"

Chapter 528: If I Called You Elder Brother, Would You Dare Answer?

A familiar voice echoed from the street corner. "Speaking of this notorious pair of thieves—one male and one female, they seem to appear out of nowhere—ruthless and merciless, killing without hesitation! But even the boldest bandits wouldn't dare commit such crimes right outside the capital of Yu. Do you know what they stole from the Sword Forging Sect? It was none other than the legendary Yin-Yang Union Cord of the Universe!

"This cord is a true treasure for dual cultivation. If a man and woman each tie one end around their waists during intimate union, they can exchange and circulate each other's foundational qi, delving into the profound mysteries of the Eight Extraordinary Meridians[1] to seek the Great Dao of Heavenly Intimacy."

At some point, the old storyteller had slipped into the city, and now, he stood before a gathered crowd, weaving his tales once more.

Since the people in the capital of Yu had already witnessed the Assembly of Immortal Sects with their own eyes earlier that day, the old storyteller decided to captivate the crowd with a different tale—one about the mysterious explosion that shook the night before.

In his tale, the notorious pair of thieves—one male and one female—had terrorized the southwest regions for years. Their journey to the capital of Yu, he claimed, was driven by just one purpose: to obtain the elusive dual cultivation treasure. It was this very pursuit that had sparked last night's daring raid on the Sword Forging Sect.

Even the members of the Sword Forging Sect had no idea of the full truth behind last night's events, yet this old storyteller "somehow" knew. Without a hint of shame, he spun outrageous details, weaving scandalous and exaggerated twists into the tale. He fed his audience perverted, wild fantasies, all with the sole aim of holding their attention—completely devoid of any sense of decency.

As Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai passed by, the snippets they overheard made them both frown deeply.

The exaggerated tale was enough to stir frustration, but there was little they could do. After all, the story was about a notorious pair of thieves—it had nothing to do with the Mount Shu Sect's esteemed head disciple and the champion of the Flying-Sword Race.

But at that moment, Chu Liang suddenly realized something: sometimes, when an old man gets beaten, the blame doesn't always rest with the one doing the beating.

With that thought, he and Jiang Yuebai continued down the street until they arrived at the Famous Chef of the World restaurant.

Earlier, Chu Liang had returned the renowned knife to Xue Yipin and, as a reward, requested the restaurant's famous Gourmet Banquet Platter. To his surprise, Xue Yipin had immediately agreed and arranged for the feast to take place that very night.

Chu Liang had returned to the palace to wait for a while, and now, with Jiang Yuebai by his side, he arrived at the restaurant.

They hadn't invited the others to join this meal. After all, it was a special treat from Chef Xue. Bringing along the elder and juniors wouldn't leave the best impression as it might give the wrong idea, making it seem as though the disciples of the Mount Shu Sect were always on the lookout for free meals. And so, Chu Liang and Senior Sister Jiang decided to try the banquet themselves first.

Indeed, the Famous Chef of the World restaurant had been closed for some time, and tonight it was completely empty, with only one table specially prepared for them. As soon as they stepped inside, they were ushered upstairs to a private dining area, where they were warmly welcomed. The atmosphere was quiet and intimate, making it feel as though the entire restaurant had been reserved just for them.

Jiang Yuebai sat there with sparkling eyes, and although she didn't say anything, her anticipation was clear.

Soon, the kitchen staff brought out the first dish. When the lid was lifted, it revealed a fragrant, perfectly cooked long fish.

"The Pikefish is nearly boneless, with its hard, armor-like scales acting as its skeleton. Only my teacher can skillfully remove every scale without damaging the tender flesh, creating this signature Braised Pikefish," Xue Yipin's disciple explained with enthusiasm as he presented the dish.

He then introduced the main course, Eight Treasures Dragon Tendons. "Though this dish doesn't contain the meat of a true Flood Dragon, the tendons are from draconic demonic beasts. Few chefs today can handle such ingredients as creatures of dragon descent are rare and fierce, and their scales and bones are notoriously difficult to process. But my teacher has mastered this technique over many years. Calling this heavenly dragon meat is no exaggeration. Please, enjoy."

"..."

The Famous Chef of the World restaurant truly lived up to its name—each dish was a masterpiece. The flavors were so exquisite that with every bite, it felt as though a warm glow spread through your body, filling you with an energy that made you feel as if you could soar into the sky.

As they savored the meal, the soft creak of the door opening caught their attention. They glanced up, and a group of people entered the dining hall.

The people who walked in were dressed in fine clothes with black hats, clearly palace attendants. Leading them was an older eunuch, and as he approached, one of Xue Yipin's disciples immediately went to greet him.

"Eunuch Tao, you're here?" the disciple greeted with a polite smile. "We haven't opened for business today."

Eunuch Tao sniffed the air, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"This is clearly food prepared by Chef Xue himself," he said, his tone carrying a hint of suspicion. "Yesterday, I came on behalf of the Second Prince to request a banquet, and I was informed that Chef Xue was unwell and unable to cook. The Second Prince was concerned, even sending me with a few imperial physicians to check on him. But from the looks of things tonight, the chef seems perfectly fine. Were we, perhaps, given an excuse to brush us off?"

It turned out that Eunuch Tao was the head eunuch in the Second Prince's residence, entrusted with managing all of his affairs.

The Second Prince had planned to host a grand banquet and had specifically sent Eunuch Tao to arrange it with Chef Xue. However, Chef Xue had declined the request, claiming that he was feeling unwell. And so, Eunuch Tao was asked to visit with imperial physicians to check on Chef Xue's condition.

Yet, upon their arrival, they discovered that a banquet was, in fact, taking place in the restaurant. The sight of the feast, after being told that Chef Xue was unwell, left them feeling understandably upset.

Xue Yipin's disciple quickly stepped forward with an apologetic smile. "We wouldn't dare! My teacher wasn't seriously ill. He just needed a day of rest. After feeling better today, he agreed to host a small banquet."

"Since he's recovered, why were we not informed?" Eunuch Tao asked coldly, his brow furrowed in displeasure. "Who, exactly, is so important that they take priority over our Second Prince?"

Xue Yipin's Gourmet Banquet Platter was usually booked far in advance. However, for someone of the Second Prince's stature, if there was an urgent request, it would usually take precedence without question.

As Eunuch Tao mulled over the fact that someone had taken precedence over the Second Prince's request, his displeasure only grew.

Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai, enjoying their feast upstairs, couldn't help but hear the commotion below.

Immediately, Chu Liang signaled for Jiang Yuebai to remain calm and walked downstairs to see what was going on.

"Are you from the Second Prince's residence?" Chu Liang asked with a smile as he stepped forward.

Seeing how young Chu Liang was, Eunuch Tao raised an eyebrow and asked, "Which sect do you come from that Chef Xue would consider you of higher status than our Second Prince?"

"You don't have to make things difficult for Chef Xue. I've met the Second Prince before," Chu Liang said with a smile. "I am Chu Liang, a disciple of the Mount Shu Sect."

"Mount—" Eunuch Tao seemed ready to rebuke him, but after uttering just one word, he suddenly stopped, his words catching in his throat.

After a brief pause, his expression shifted to one of fear and caution. "Are you the Imperial Younger Brother?"

Among the younger generation of disciples from the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten sects, none had such an elevated status. Even the head disciple of Penglai, with all his prestige, couldn't compare with the Second Prince in terms of rank within the capital of Yu.

But there was one exception—the Imperial Younger Brother, a title recently bestowed by the Emperor himself.

Regardless of how much weight the title carried, it was officially recognized by the court. Technically, this made Chu Liang the Second Prince's honorary uncle.

In the imperial family, where the respect of ranking was of high significance, this distinction was critical. Any sign of disrespect from the Second Prince toward such an honorary elder could lead to serious consequences.

"It's just a title granted by the Emperor," Chu Liang said with a grin. "In truth, the Second Prince is much older than I am. Next time we meet, I should call him Elder Brother."

"You mustn't say that!" Eunuch Tao immediately dropped to his knees, saying, "So, you are His Majesty's imperial younger brother here. This lowly servant was disrespectful earlier. It is my fault for disturbing your meal. Please forgive me, Your Highness."

"Hey, what are you doing?" Chu Liang quickly reached out to help him up. "We martial folk don't stand on such ceremonies. Elder Brother Tao, please get up."

Oh shit. This was the only thought racing through Eunuch Tao's mind.

He didn't dare to stand. All he wanted to do was to lie flat on the ground.

While the martial world might overlook such matters, anyone in the palace who dared to respond to Chu Liang's greeting of "Elder Brother" would likely find themselves scrubbing the dusty corners of the forsaken palace, where the abandoned concubines lingered.

"I, this lowly servant, deserves to die a thousand times for disturbing Your Highness. I shall take my leave at once. Please forgive me."

As he kept apologizing, he crawled backward with surprising speed, quickly retreating through the door of the Famous Chef of the World.

Chu Liang stood there in disbelief. Wow, who knew this guy had put in so much practice?

Chu Liang had done this on purpose, of course. Those who relied on wealth would shrink back when confronted by someone richer, while those dependent on status would grow timid in the presence of someone of higher rank. People tend to respect what they depend on.

So, when dealing with those from the palace, he didn't need to argue. All he had to do was ask if they would have the courage to answer when he addressed them as "Elder Brother."

After Eunuch Tao left, one of Xue Yipin's disciples turned to Chu Liang in astonishment and remarked, "Young Hero Chu, I had no idea you had such a distinguished status."

Though the court had officially declared Chu Liang as the Imperial Younger Brother, this news hadn't spread far and wide, so it was no surprise that many remained unaware.

"It's just a title," Chu Liang replied.

"Let's get back to the meal, then. If the food cools down, it'll affect the taste," the disciple surnamed Li said. "I'll continue serving the dishes."

"Alright," Chu Liang said with a smile. "Thanks for the trouble, Elder Brother Li."

"Oh—just call me Little Li," the disciple quickly raised his hand, flustered.

...

Aside from a minor hiccup, the entire Gourmet Banquet Platter was a delight. With just the two of them, they chose not to burden Chef Xue with too many requests. After savoring several, they said their goodbyes.

On the way back, Jiang Yuebai was clearly in a much better mood.

Seeing this, Chu Liang smiled and said, "It's rare to see you this happy. Let's visit more places in the future and try some foods we haven't tasted before."

Jiang Yuebai paused for a moment, then responded, "Alright."

When they returned to the palace, they found someone waiting for them—a messenger from the palace delivering a letter.

Chu Liang noticed the golden seal, a sign of its formal importance. As he opened it, he discovered it was from the Second Prince.

The letter announced that the Second Prince would be hosting a banquet at Heavenly Street's Celestial Observatory Pavilion the following evening, inviting talented individuals from various immortal sects, and Chu Liang was cordially invited.

Chapter 529: Unnecessary?

It was not unusual for princes to invite prodigies from the immortal sects to banquets during the Assembly of Immortal Sects. After all, these princes might one day ascend to the throne, and the prodigies would become the pillars of their respective sects.

By making these connections early on, future collaboration could be facilitated.

Moreover, unlike court officials who had to navigate the complexities of factional politics, disciples of the immortal sects were much more carefree about such matters.

Typically, princes would begin by inviting people they already knew and gradually expand their social circle through introductions. However, Chu Liang and the Second Prince were not exactly acquaintances.

The prince had likely heard about tonight's incident at the Famous Chef of the World. Out of fear that Chu Liang might hold a grudge due to Eunuch Tao, he extended the invitation as a way to smooth over any possible tensions.

Chu Liang took up a brush and penned a reply to the Second Prince, confirming his attendance at the banquet the next evening. Given the prince's effort to build goodwill, there was no reason for Chu Liang to act aloof.

The next morning, the preliminary battles of the Assembly of Immortal Sects resumed with great fervor.

Compared to the back-to-back matches of the previous day, the number of matches today was reduced by fifty percent, but each fight showcased a much higher level of skill and intensity.

The ones fighting today were the victors from the matches yesterday, which meant that there were fewer one-sided fights, and several competitors were forced to reveal the divine abilities they had been holding back.

When Chu Liang arrived at the venue, he unexpectedly ran into some old acquaintances.

"Elder Yin?" he asked, slightly surprised as he looked at the team in front of him.

Waiting by the arena were none other than the people from the Sun and Moon Pavilion whom Chu Liang had met in Python Belly City. Elder Yin still sat in his small carriage, but it seemed he had since received medicine that replenished his blood and qi, as he no longer appeared deathly pale.

In front of Elder Yin, ready to take the stage, were his four adopted sons, whose names represented the broad vast sky.

"Young Hero Chu?" Elder Yin smiled faintly upon seeing him.

Despite their previous conflicts with Chu Liang in Python Belly City, they had escaped thanks to his help, so they held no grudges against him. The four brothers greeted him with smiles when they saw him.

After some friendly conversation, Chu Liang learned why they were participating in the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

After leaving Python Belly City, the Imperial Supervisory Bureau had questioned them about several matters before allowing everyone to go their separate ways. More than half of the members of the Sun and Moon Pavilion left. These adopted sons, having grown up in Python Belly City, had never ventured outside and found themselves without a place to go.

Elder Yin brought them along with plans to establish the Sun and Moon Pavilion outside of the Python Belly City. With their collective strength, they had the potential to become a mid-sized sect in the world of immortality cultivation.

However, to establish a new sect, the first step was to make a name for themselves, as this would attract both cultivators and resources.

The Assembly of Immortal Sects was a golden opportunity for this.

Small sects that could make it to the second round of the competition of the hundred sects would be qualified to have their names in the top hundred sects in the land of the nine provinces. And so, participation in the Assembly of Immortal Sects was a great way to build a reputation.

Thus, Elder Yin brought his adopted sons to participate in the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

Chu Liang looked at them with some confusion. The Assembly of Immortal Sects had strict age limits, allowing participants to be around twenty years old, with anyone over twenty-eight deemed ineligible.

The other three young men seemed young enough, but could someone like Yin Guang, who looked like a middle-aged man, really participate?

Noticing Chu Liang's gaze, Yin Guang, perhaps accustomed to such skepticism, immediately responded, "I'm twenty-five."

"Ah?" Chu Liang blurted out in surprise. Realizing that his reaction was rather impolite, he quickly added, "Elder Brother Yin is indeed... mature for his age."

"My big brother just looks a little older," Yin Laosi chimed in with a laugh. "He has looked this way since he was eight."

Whoa.

Chu Liang was surprised but quickly shifted his gaze to the opposite side. He had joined his team to observe this match primarily because of the opponents that the Sun and Moon Pavilion would be facing today.

Their opponents were the team from the Sword-Hanging Kingdom of the West Sea.

Historically, the Mount Shu Sect and the Sword-Hanging Kingdom had kept to themselves, with little interaction. However, Daoist Yan had recently gone into closed-door cultivation, likely preparing for a breakthrough to the eighth realm. If successful, she would fight with the Emperor of the West Sea for the control of the Great Dao.

While the people of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom had confidence in their Sword Emperor, it was only natural for them to feel some resentment toward Daoist Yan, and this hostility had inevitably spilled over to the disciples of the Mount Shu Sect.

As a result, clashes between the two teams were bound to happen during the competition of the hundred sects. This was why Wang Xuanling had brought his disciples to watch the Sword-Hanging Kingdom team in action ahead of time.

Yesterday, the Sword-Hanging Kingdom faced off against the team from the Yunan Sect. The fight ended with just a few sword strikes and barely any divine techniques used, revealing little information about the ability of the team from the Sword-Hanging Kingdom.

Thus, the Mount Shu Sect team hoped that today, the Sun and Moon Pavilion could force the team from the Sword-Hanging Kingdom to reveal more of their abilities, allowing them to analyze their strengths.

...

Boom—

With the use of the Heaven-Raising Sword, Yin Kuo was sent flying out of the arena. Elder Yin's expression darkened slightly. He let out a resigned sigh, "This is as far as we go. After all, we are the weaker ones."

Yin Guang, who went up first, and Yin Kuo, who followed, both suffered swift defeats.

Despite their cultivation levels not being weak and even being slightly stronger than their opponents, the outcome was still unfavorable.

However, the two disciples from the Sword-Hanging Kingdom displayed overwhelming mastery of swordsmanship. The sheer force of their sword qi effectively closed the gap in cultivation levels.

Chu Liang could sense the familiar Dao essence of Cloud of Determination emanating from their swords. These disciples had actually grasped that elusive Dao essence. They were indeed powerful opponents.

As the Sword-Hanging Kingdom disciples left, they all glanced toward the team from the Mount Shu Sect, their gazes unmistakably filled with hostility.

The disciples of the Mount Shu Sect, especially Chu Liang, were used to this.

After enduring countless glares the previous day, Chu Liang had grown unfazed by the attention.

The Sun and Moon Pavilion team left feeling dejected. It was such a pity. Considering the past Assemblies of Immortal Sects, with their skills, they would have been able to participate in the competition of the hundred sects. It was simply bad luck that they faced such powerful opponents early on.

Before leaving, Elder Yin cast a meaningful glance at Chu Liang and said with a smile, "Young Hero Chu, until we meet again."

Chu Liang had always thought Elder Yin was rather odd. It was as though Elder Yin was hiding some secrets. Still, he kept this feeling to himself. After all, he couldn't ask about it.

Immediately, he responded, "Until we meet again."

By evening, it was time for the Second Prince's banquet.

The Celestial Observatory Pavilion on Heavenly Street was a well-known restaurant in the capital of Yu, though it didn't quite match the prestige of the Famous Chef of the World. Since it was on Jiang Yuebai's list of places to visit, Chu Liang decided to ask her if she wanted to join him.

Jiang Yuebai shook her head, saying, "They didn't invite me, so why should I go?"

"You could come as my companion," Chu Liang teased with a smile.

Jiang Yuebai responded with an elegant yet dismissive roll of her eyes.

It was nighttime now, and Heavenly Street buzzed with life. The Second Prince had reserved the finest private room on the top floor of the Celestial Observatory Pavilion. As one looked out through the windows, they would find a stunning view of the capital, glowing brightly under the night sky.

When Chu Liang arrived, he found only a few attendants and the Second Prince himself—none of the other guests had shown up yet.

Dressed in fine yet casual robes, the Second Prince still looked as elegant and handsome as ever. He personally descended to the first floor to greet Chu Liang, saying, "Young Hero Chu, it's been a while since we last met in the palace."

"Haha, Your Highness is looking even better," Chu Liang replied with a smile.

It was worth noting that both princes Chu Liang had met so far demonstrated a remarkable ability to engage with others—clearly well-versed in the art of emotional intelligence.

As they ascended the stairs, they exchanged pleasantries, both intentionally trying to foster a closer relationship. The Second Prince mentioned that tonight's guest list was small, consisting only of a few acquaintances.

Among the guests were Zhang Chen from Ascending Dragon Academy, Feng Lei from Monastery Tower, and Shen Qingyan from South Melody Conservatory.

Chu Liang quickly pieced together the situation.

Both Ascending Dragon Academy and Monastery Tower were local sects in the capital of Yu, meaning the Second Prince would have been familiar with their disciples. He certainly wouldn't need to go through the trouble of arranging a special banquet just to invite them.

This guy set up this entire banquet just to invite Shen Qingyan from South Melody Conservatory!

As for the disciples from Ascending Dragon Academy and Monastery Tower, they were clearly invited as company to avoid any awkwardness. No wonder the Second Prince was so eager to reserve the Famous Chef of the World's Gourmet Banquet Platter.

He wanted to impress the lady with the Gourmet Banquet Platter!

Hehe. Just like me I guess.

Thinking this, Chu Liang couldn't help but feel a sense of camaraderie with the Second Prince.

As for this restaurant, it was clearly the Second Prince's second choice after failing to book the Gourmet Banquet Platter. It appeared that the invitation to Chu Liang was a last-minute addition, serving as a convenient way of apologizing.

Having sorted out the situation, Chu Liang relaxed. Tonight, he wouldn't be the center of attention. Instead, he would sit back and enjoy watching the Second Prince work his charm.

He settled into an inconspicuous corner seat by the table.

"Young Hero Chu," the Second Prince quickly said, "You're still my elder—how can you sit there? Please, take the main seat."

Chu Liang waved his hand and said with a smile, "You're the host today; I can't outshine you. Since it's just disciples from the immortal sects, let's not bother with court formalities."

The Second Prince laughed in agreement and sat down.

Right then, an attendant announced, "The two young ladies from South Melody Conservatory have arrived."

"They're here? Young Hero Chu, sit tight for a moment—I'll go greet them." The Second Prince sprang from his seat and dashed downstairs, moving ten times faster than when he had greeted Chu Liang.

Chu Liang found it amusing. As he sat alone in the banquet hall, he suddenly felt a warmth in his chest and an inexplicable sense of unease.

Huh?

He rummaged through his belongings and discovered it wasn't a messaging enchanted tool but the half-piece jade pendant engraved with the character "Shen" that he had kept for a long time. It was glowing faintly and heating up unexpectedly.

He had found this pendant in the abandoned Shen Family Residence, unsure of its purpose. He had kept it on him out of a reluctance to waste anything, but now, it was reacting for some reason.

As he was pondering this, he heard the Second Prince's voice drift in from downstairs.

"Only Young Hero Chu from Mount Shu has arrived so far. Do you two know him?"

"Chu Liang? I know him," came a clear and gentle voice.

Looking up, Chu Liang saw two young ladies enter through the door.

The one on the left wore a light blue dress, her skin as white as snow, tall and graceful. It was none other than the Xue Lingxue whom Chu Liang had met before.

The one on the right wore a pale red gauze dress. Her face looked as fair as jade, with delicate features that seemed painted. Her gaze was misty and ethereal, exuding an air of mystery.

She looked like a living painting.

Xue Lingxue was already a stunning beauty, but standing next to this young lady, she was surprisingly easy to overlook at first glance.

The strangest thing was that the moment Chu Liang saw this young lady, the agitation from the jade pendant in his possession grew even stronger.

The young lady seemed to feel it too. She glanced over, locking eyes with Chu Liang. Then, her eyes lit up as she started walking toward Chu Liang with Xue Lingxue.

"Oh, it's rare for the two of you to accept the invitation," the Second Prince said as he entered. "Since Miss Xue is an old friend of Young Hero Chu, why don't you sit next to him, and Miss Shen can sit beside me—ehh?"

The Second Prince had everything arranged in his mind, aiming to seat Xue Lingxue away so he could sit closer to Shen Qingyan. But before he could finish, the two young women had already taken their seats.

Xue Lingxue, understanding the Second Prince's intent, sat beside Chu Liang. However, Shen Qingyan, for reasons unknown, casually took the seat on Chu Liang's other side. As she sat down, her gaze was fixed on him, keenly observing every detail.

With the three of them huddled together in the corner, the space around the Second Prince's main seat felt remarkably empty.

In fact, the main seat seemed... somewhat unnecessary.

Chapter 530: I Was Meant to Be the Star of the Show Today!

Xue Lingxue was also a bit surprised.

The idea of a marriage between the Second Prince and Shen Qingyan started when the chancellor suggested it. When the imperial family talked to the South Melody Conservatory about the union, both sides seemed to agree.

However, the South Melody Conservatory never had the tradition of bestowing marriages. And so, they arranged for Shen Qingyan to meet up with the Second Prince during the Assembly of Immortal Sects in the capital. If there was mutual interest, things could move forward from there.

This meeting was essentially a formal matchmaking event.

To avoid awkwardness for both himself and Shen Qingyan, the Second Prince used a banquet for the prodigies from other immortality cultivation sects as an excuse. He invited several cultivators from the capital he had befriended, hoping that the lively atmosphere would make his first meeting with Shen Qingyan more comfortable.

The arrangement was reasonable overall.

He only made one mistake, which was to extend an invitation to Chu Liang to smooth things over out of fear that his attendant could have offended Chu Liang. After all, this would only add another person to the banquet and make things even merrier.

Since Xue Lingxue knew Chu Liang and wanted to avoid sitting near the main seat, she chose to sit next to him. This arrangement allowed Shen Qingyan to sit next to the Second Prince, giving them a chance to converse privately. It all made sense.

But unexpectedly, Shen Qingyan chose to sit on Chu Liang's other side, as if she wanted to discuss something with him. This was certainly unusual.

The three of them huddled together, creating a small group that ultimately isolated the Second Prince, the host of the banquet.

Xue Lingxue smiled and asked, "Qingyan, do you know Young Hero Chu?"

Shen Qingyan gently shook her head and paused for a moment. She felt something very peculiar.

That throbbing feeling that Chu Liang felt—Shen Qingyan felt it too.

She had been raised by her teacher and possessed only half of a pendant engraved with the character "Shen" to prove her identity. After all these years, it was the first time the jade pendant had reacted. She couldn't help but wonder if Chu Liang had the other half.

Driven by intense curiosity, she sat next to Chu Liang. Sure enough, as they drew closer, the jade pendant in her possession became increasingly restless, as if it were ready to leap out on its own.

Feeling the same abnormality from his own jade pendant, Chu Liang began pondering as well.

When Chu Liang had visited the abandoned Shen Family Residence, he learned about the tragic events that had befallen the Shen family and found out that the sole survivor, a baby, was taken away by the Master of the South Melody Conservatory. Could that baby be Shen Qingyan?

But if that were the case, why hadn't she returned to the Shen Family Residence all these years? Even though it was haunted, the South Melody Conservatory should have easily been able to handle an abandoned residence.

Unless the Master of South Melody Conservatory had never told her about her true identity.

Why would that be?

Although he felt puzzled, he knew that this would be far more important to Shen Qingyan than to him, which was why he could remain very calm.

The main character of tonight's gathering was supposed to be the Second Prince, and the atmosphere was starting to feel awkward. If the Second Prince had a bad temper, he might get angry at Chu Liang for this situation. On the other hand, if he was a good person, then Chu Liang certainly shouldn't steal the spotlight.

Chu Liang knew he needed to find an excuse to slip away.

As for the half-pendant, if Shen Qingyan was truly the rightful owner, he would simply return it to her.

He just hadn't figured out whether he should say anything at all—if even the Master of the South Melody Conservatory hadn't told her about her origins and background, should he?

As Chu Liang was deep in thought, he suddenly heard a loud voice at the door: "Is Big Sis Shen Qingyan here? Let me see just how beautiful South Melody Conservatory's number one beauty really is!"

A lively girl jumped into the room, looking to be around sixteen or seventeen years old, dressed in a scholar's robe lined with red gauze. She had large, bright eyes, fair and delicate features, and an air of playful cleverness about her.

A refined scholar in white robes stepped firmly behind her—it was none other than Zhang Chen from Ascending Dragon Academy.

As he entered, he softly chided, "Fangling, behave yourself."

As soon as the girl entered the room, she greeted the Second Prince, "Greetings to Your Highness, the Second Prince."

Then her gaze immediately locked onto Shen Qingyan. "This must be Big Sis Shen, right? You truly look like a fairy descended from heaven."

Shen Qingyan was undoubtedly as beautiful as Jiang Yuebai and Xi Miaoxian. Wherever she went, she was always the first person you noticed.

Previously, when the Mount Shu Sect team attended the arena matches, they often faced hostile stares. This was partly because Jiang Yuebai was so striking that she was the first person people noticed.

But no one dared to stare directly at Jiang Yuebai—only at the people around her.

The girl quickly moved to Shen Qingyan's side, sitting right next to her in an effort to cozy up to the beautiful older sister.

Zhang Chen, who had followed her in, surveyed the scene and silently noted how strange the entire seating arrangement seemed.

The Second Prince sat alone at the main seat, while the three young women and Chu Liang were gathered together on the other side, forming a semi-circle around him. If Zhang Chen joined his junior sister, they would completely isolate the Second Prince.

So, Zhang Chen chose to sit next to the Second Prince, joining him in observing the group of women across the table.

"Young Hero Chu, this is my little junior sister from Ascending Dragon Academy, Xu Fangling." Since they had met before, Zhang Chen took the initiative to introduce her. "The headmaster dotes on her quite a bit, so she's a little spoiled. I hope you'll be patient with her."

"Haha, it's no problem at all," Chu Liang replied with a smile.

After the two from the Ascending Dragon Academy arrived, another guest soon came in.

The person who arrived was a burly man. Although he wore a loose monk's robe, his muscular physique was still very much visible. He was bald, with thick eyebrows and fierce eyes, exuding a powerful and domineering demeanor.

His name was Feng Lei, a warrior monk from Monastery Tower.

Unlike the monks of the Southern Buddhist Sects represented by the Buddhist Cloud Monastery, the monks of the Northern Buddhist Sects led by the Monastery Tower were known for being tough and taciturn. Feng Lei, being particularly silent, simply nodded to the Second Prince before quietly sitting beside him.

By now, the room had been divided into two groups: three men on one side and Chu Liang with three women on the other.

Chu Liang was feeling increasingly awkward.

Feng Lei seemed puzzled as well. He glanced at Shen Qingyan and then at the Second Prince, not quite understanding the situation.

It wasn't just Feng Lei who looked confused as he glanced at the Second Prince. The guests who arrived later on all appeared confused as they glanced over at the Second Prince.

The Second Prince was equally baffled, inwardly lamenting, I'm just as confused!

They've been talking about matchmaking us for months, and now this happens on our first meeting?

He had so many things to say, but all those words were summed up into one sentence. The Second Prince could only wave his hand helplessly and say, "Let's order food first."

...

The atmosphere at the table wasn't exactly quiet, thanks to the chatty Xu Fangling. It was clear that she came with a mission. While she was getting to know Shen Qingyan, she kept praising the Second Prince.

"Big Sis Shen, you should visit the capital more often. The Immortals' Square is really bustling these days," she said with a smile. "It's all thanks to the Second Prince. When he was twenty, he was tasked with revitalizing it, and he truly turned the place around. Now, besides Taotie City and the rising Red Cotton Peak, our Immortals' Square is the liveliest of all."

She was obviously referring to large marketplaces that were exclusively for cultivators.

Aside from Taotie City and Red Cotton Peak, the Immortals' Square was the only other major marketplace of its kind.

Chu Liang quickly added, "The Second Prince's talents are well-known, both within the court and beyond. Many merchants have praised him."

"Right!" Xu Fangling turned to him. "The Red Cotton Peak on Mount Shu is really lively. Does Young Hero Chu have a shop there?"

"I have a little something," Chu Liang replied modestly with a smile.

"How much is a little something?" Xu Fangling asked curiously.

Chu Liang was unsure how to respond when Xue Lingxue chuckled and said, "The whole peak."

Most outsiders didn't know that Chu Liang had leased Red Cotton Peak, but those from the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten like Xue Lingxue were aware of it. After all, many immortal sects had opened shops there and had dealt directly with Chu Liang.

"Wow..." Xu Fangling's eyes widened. "You own the whole Red Cotton Peak?"

"Not really, not really," Chu Liang quickly laughed. "I'm just in charge for a while, handling some tasks for the sect. My fellow disciples focus on cultivation, so these mundane matters fall to me."

Come on, just keep praising the Second Prince! Don't shift the focus to me, he thought to himself.

"As cultivators, we should focus on training first. After all, we have limited energy," Zhang Chen added, steering the conversation back. "Even though the Second Prince is often burdened with state affairs, his cultivation level is no less than that of the immortal sect prodigies. I heard he nearly broke into the top ranks in the last Assembly of Immortal Sects, and a few years ago, during his northern patrol, he even slew a descendant of Hundun.[1]."

"Yes! I heard that too!" Xu Fangling chimed in. "That descendant of Hundun could have become a true vicious beast after a few more hundred years of cultivation, one of the Four Great Vicious Beasts! The Second Prince killed it before it could reach that level. This kind of achievement definitely makes him a prodigy among the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten. After all, at his age... huh..."

As she spoke, she suddenly turned to Chu Liang. "They say you became famous for slaying the Taowu with your sword. Is it really true? I'm curious—can it really be done?"

Chu Liang thought to himself, How did this come back to me?

He quickly responded, "It was just luck, aided by our sect's legendary swords. Any of my fellow disciples could have done it."

Xue Lingxue said with a smile, "I heard that the Violet and Azure Twin Swords are extremely selective in choosing their master, but both swords chose you. That's not something just anyone can achieve, is it?"

"Heh, I'm not sure why either," Chu Liang replied casually, then quickly added, "There are plenty of people in the Mount Shu Sect with far superior cultivation and virtue."

"Speaking of which, virtue is the most important quality for both ordinary people and cultivators like us," Zhang Chen continued. "Our headmaster often praises the Second Prince's virtue. He made a deep impression on all his teachers during his years at the academy."

"Yes, yes! Our headmaster shared stories about the Second Prince," Xu Fangling added. "He often helped his less fortunate classmates and once saved a girl from being assaulted by criminals. Those are all good deeds that build merit and virtue."

"Oh, right." On this topic, Xue Lingxue turned to Chu Liang and said, "Back when you saved those hundreds of innocent women in South Gate City, some of them had nowhere to go, so South Melody Conservatory took a few of them in. They wrote some thank-you letters and asked me to give them to you. I almost forgot to mention it."

As she spoke, she took out a stack of letters and handed them to Chu Liang.

Back then, some of the women sold from the Southern Regions were taken in by South Melody Conservatory, since most of their staff, from servants to performers, were primarily women.

"How thoughtful of them..." Chu Liang could only force a smile as he accepted the letters.

The atmosphere was becoming increasingly weird. I'm supposed to be the side character today—can't I just stay out of this?

At this moment, Chu Liang realized that he could not stay here any longer.

As he sat there, he felt as if a light was shining on his back.

Without bothering to come up with a proper excuse, he immediately stood up and said, "The Grand Peakmaster has instructed me to return early tonight for some important matters. I'll take my leave now. Thank you, Second Prince, for your hospitality. Goodbye, everyone."

He finished his string of farewells and swiftly exited the room.

Just as the Second Prince noticed that Chu Liang had finally left, he sighed in relief and was about to smile and resume the pleasant conversation.

At that moment, Shen Qingyan, who had remained silent the entire time, suddenly stood up and said, "Apologies, I'm not feeling well, so I'll be leaving as well."

The Second Prince's smile froze as he stared blankly at Shen Qingyan's departing figure, his once-upturned lips quickly drooping down.

What is happening? Did they arrange to leave together? This is nothing like what I imagined... I was meant to be the star of the show today! the Second Prince shouted inwardly.