

## M. Slaying 541

### Chapter 541: On One Additional Condition

"Great, great, great! After wandering all day, I finally ran into some familiar faces. You have no idea—my fellow senior and junior brothers said this scout task requires intelligence, courage, bravery, and wit, and they unanimously nominated me for the job. I've been roaming this wilderness all day. Aside from getting into one fight, I didn't do anything else. I was bored to death, but now that I've seen you all, I feel so much better..."

Chu Liang had no intention of attacking Monk Pushan. While they wanted soul crystals, they weren't desperate enough to go after just this one. Monk Pushan, unguarded and carefree, sat down with the team from the Mount Shu Sect and immediately began delivering a long-winded speech.

Listening to him pour out his grievances after a whole day of boredom, Chu Liang and his companions exchanged glances. They couldn't help but think, Maybe we should just finish him off, not for the soul crystal, but for some peace and quiet.

Chu Liang seriously suspected that Monk Pushan's teammates from the Buddhist Cloud Monastery had sent him out as the scout simply to free themselves from the torture of keeping him around.

Noticing that Pushan showed no signs of stopping, Chu Liang quickly interrupted, "Have you been in this area all day?"

"No, we came from the eastern coast and didn't encounter many people along the way," Monk Pushan replied gloomily. "When we passed Misty Waters City, we saw people fleeing, but they didn't escape before being slaughtered by Penglai. It was a brutal scene. By the time we arrived in this area, the fight was over, and we ran into the team from the Earthfire Sect..."

"Earthfire Sect?" Chu Liang recalled the dark horse from the Great Selection of the Four Seas, "Did you beat them?"

"No, we just fought a little, but when we saw that they had more people, we retreated," Pushan said as he shook his head.

After listening to Pushan, Chu Liang realized that the Earthfire Sect and the Five Poisons Sect were at odds with each other, despite both being part of the Chancellor's Sixteen-Faction Alliance. Each had formed its own alliance within the illusory realm.

The Five Poisons Sect was cunning and elusive, making them difficult to defend against. They had formed alliances with the Divine Movement Sect and the Mountain-Shifting Sect.

The Earthfire Sect specialized in fire techniques and had allied with the Puppetry Sect and the Kuimu Sect to hunt for soul crystals across the plain.

The alliance of these three forces was quite formidable.

In truth, the Five Poisons Sect was not weak; they were simply unfortunate to encounter someone like Chu Liang—an existence impervious to poison. It was like an animal meeting its primary predator. As long as the poison wasn't something particularly unique that the Poison-Expulsion Whip couldn't cure, it would be nothing more than harmless probiotics to the Young Hero with the Divine Whip. What could they possibly do about that?

If it had been anyone else from the Divine Nine or the Terrestrial Ten, the Five Poisons Sect likely wouldn't have been so easily defeated. But fate had other plans.

The legacy of the Earthfire Sect was not particularly powerful. The only reason this team was strong was that there was a pair of twin brothers in this generation of disciples, both of whom possessed the rare Fire Spirit Meridian constitution.

The Fire Spirit Meridian enabled one to cultivate fire techniques with half the effort and double the results. While it ranked below the Divine Fire Spirit, it was not bound by any specific bloodline, making it one of the strongest innate talents in the world.

Because the two brothers had each won a match on the arena stage, their team was able to win the one from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. If these brothers worked together, their powers would complement each other, unleashing an even more extraordinary force.

"Three sects..." Chu Liang pondered. "Do you know their exact location?"

"I only know the general area, but I'm not sure if they've moved," Monk Pushan replied, looking at him. "You plan to take them on? It won't be easy."

"Why don't we form an alliance and take down these three sects together?" Chu Liang suggested.

"Oh?" Pushan raised an eyebrow. "You have a plan?"

"They may be strong, but we can outsmart them," Chu Liang explained. "I'll act like I'm scouting and let them spot me, then I'll lure them into a valley. You can wait there and ambush them. Just launch a sudden attack to catch them off guard."

"Great idea," Pushan nodded. "It's got to be you. How do you come up with so many plans off the top of your head?"

"Maybe it's because I've been through a lot..." Chu Liang chuckled.

"I'll head back to find my fellow brothers Pucheng, Puyou, and Pujing to ask for their opinions," Pushan said. "I'm sure they'll agree with a little persuasion."

"Of course," Chu Liang responded.

With your "little" persuasion, who wouldn't agree?

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Compared to the commotion at the coast and mountain peaks, Misty Waters City was eerily quiet under the night sky.

The truth was that the Penglai Supreme Sect team's overwhelming presence had scared everyone away. Many teams had dared to fight for the city during the day, but they soon realized that they couldn't even escape.

Since then, no one had dared to come near Misty Waters City.

This huge city was now empty.

Under the bright moon, Yang Yuhu guided a richly dressed young man to the tallest pavilion in Misty Waters City.

"Big Brother, City Lord Junior Huyan wants to see you," Yang Yuhu announced, leading him to the spot.

The young man was none other than Huyan Bin, the City Lord Junior of Taotie City.

While everyone else avoided Misty Waters City, the team from Taotie City went the opposite direction. If not for Huyan Bin's connection with Yang Yuhu, he and his other three team members would have surely been torn apart by Qi Lin'er.

"City Lord Junior?" Yang Shenlong, who had been meditating in his room, slowly opened his eyes and stepped out.

"Young Hero Yang! I've heard a lot about you, but we've never actually met. It's great to finally meet you today," Huyan Bin said with a smile.

"City Lord Junior, you're too courteous," Yang Shenlong said with a slight nod, inviting him inside.

Since the visitor had come to negotiate, Yang Shenlong wasn't in a hurry to turn him into a soul crystal. With a moment's thought, he quickly deduced the reason behind the team from Taotie City's visit.

"Taotie City would like to form an alliance with the Penglai Supreme Sect," Huyan Bin said with a smile. "What do you think, Young Hero Yang?"

In response, Yang Shenlong asked, "What's the price?"

This wasn't the first time Taotie City had taken such an approach. Whenever their own disciples lacked sufficient cultivation power, they sought alliances with stronger forces, effectively purchasing soul crystals with their wealth.

This kind of behavior warranted scrutiny. While it didn't violate the fundamental rule of forming alliances in this illusory realm, it did involve certain external factors.

After extensive discussions among the sects in the Divine Nine and the Terrestrial Ten, they concluded that money was indeed a form of strength. As long as the alliance was established for

legitimate reasons to secure victory, the specific methods of forming that alliance shouldn't be overly scrutinized.

The people who set the rules still wanted to give the disciples within the illusory realm with as much freedom as possible.

After all, Taotie City wasn't asking other sects to give up their chances to advance to the next round. Instead, they wanted to team up with stronger groups and have those groups share their extra soul crystals. Plus, buying soul crystals usually costs a lot, making it hard for others to do the same.

"The usual price of two thousand Vermillion-Bird coins per soul crystal," Huyan Bin said directly.

"Five thousand," Yang Shenlong replied flatly.

"This..." Huyan Bin's expression tightened.

To secure a spot in the top ten, he would need at least thirty to forty soul crystals. At two thousand Vermillion-Bird coins per crystal, it was already expensive. If it were five thousand per crystal, the cost would be at least a hundred thousand coins.

But thinking about the importance of his mission, Huyan Bin gritted his teeth and said, "Fine, five thousand per crystal, but I want to add one condition... You have to eliminate Mount Shu Sect in this round!"

Chapter 542: Thunderbolt Stronghold

The sharp cry of a bird pierced through the air. "Keeew!"

A shadowy creature loomed over a hillside, descending toward it at the very next second.

Four disciples of the Thunderbolt Stronghold were sitting on that hillside, deep in a discussion.

Their team leader was, of course, the Thunderbolt Stronghold's eldest disciple of the current generation, Du Wuhen. He was dark-skinned, tall, and slim with limbs as long and agile as an ape's, giving him a rather unusual appearance.

At this moment, Du Wuhen stood up, his hands almost reaching his knees. He raised his arm, and the shadowy creature shrank in midair, landing on his arm.

"Misty Waters City is filled with people from the Penglai Supreme Sect. There's no way the Mount Shu Sect team is there," Du Wuhen said quietly.

Right then, the shadowy creature's true appearance was finally revealed. It was a spirit bird with feathers that were colored a deep shade of azure and covered in intricate patterns. The beautiful spirit bird had a pair of lively and animated eyes like those of a human. Despite being the average size of an ordinary bird, the spirit bird exuded the arrogant air of the mighty.

This was Du Wuhen's tamed beast, the Azure Mysterious Wind Bird.

In the Assembly of Immortal Sects, restrictions were applied to members of beast-taming sects like the Thunderbolt Stronghold, greatly reducing their combat power. The assembly rules only allowed tamed beasts that were bound by a soul contract to participate in the competition.

A soul contract was a method that beast tamers used to control their beasts, similar to how a Soul Subjugator controlled the souls under their command. Limitations were imposed on the target to ensure their obedience.

There was one key difference between the beast tamers' soul contract and the Soul Subjugators' soul control—the parties in a soul contract shared the benefits and drawbacks. The death of the beast tamer would result in the death of the soul-bound tamed beast. On the other hand, the death of the soul-bound tamed beast would result in damage to the beast tamer's soul.

Additionally, their cultivation journeys were mutually complementary. If one party made a breakthrough in cultivation, the other would benefit from it too.

Initially, there were no issues with this rule. Without it, everyone would just take their sect's guardian celestial beast into the events.

The problem was that many of the spirit beasts of the Thunderbolt Stronghold's beast tamers were not controlled through soul contracts. This was because a person's soul could only accommodate a limited number of soul contracts—typically three and at most five or six as they raised their cultivation level. The beast tamer would be unable to bear any more soul contracts than that.

Moreover, soul contracts could not be easily removed. They could only free up a spot when one of their soul-bound tamed beasts died. However, the death of a soul-bound tamed beast would permanently damage the beast tamer's soul.

Therefore, beast tamers were extremely cautious when imprinting their souls with soul contracts. They only formed soul contracts with spirit beasts that met their high standards of talent and combat ability.

There were limitations for soul contracts. Usually, a tamed beast could not exceed its master's cultivation level by more than half a realm, at most a full realm. Otherwise, the soul contract could not be formed.

Therefore, the disciples of the Thunderbolt Stronghold relied more on emotional bonding to tie their tamed beasts to them. They helped their tamed beasts cultivate by giving them sufficient resources. In turn, the tamed beasts would aid their tamers in combat. The beast tamers treated their tamed beasts the same way they would a friend or family member, rather than depending on the traditional method of soul contracts.

For spirit beasts with long lives, they did not mind spending decades accompanying a genius cultivator in exchange for resources they might not find even after searching for several hundred years.

This was one of the reasons why the Thunderbolt Stronghold was stronger than any other beast-taming sect in history.

For example, Huang Ling'er once commanded a Mammothdragon to stomp the young master of the Inferno Devil Valley to death. However, that Mammothdragon was actually her father's tamed beast and had followed Huang Ling'er around as her pet. Under the rules of the Assembly of Immortal Sects, she wouldn't be allowed to bring it in.

Fortunately, the Thunderbolt Stronghold also placed great focus on the cultivation of the beast tamers. Even if the core disciples could not take their tamed beasts into the events, they would still have high combat power, and that had allowed the sect to perform well in the past Assemblies of Immortal Sects.

Consequently, the Thunderbolt Stronghold had high hopes for this year's Assembly of Immortal Sects as well. The three core disciples representing their sect this year were all exceptionally talented and had great reputations among the younger disciples of the immortal sects. Their tamed

beasts had been training with them since they were young children, allowing them to have outstanding combat power and perfect synergy.

Du Wuhen's Azure Mysterious Wind Bird, Wei Tiandi's Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle, and Deng Yixiao's Five-Fire Divine Ape—all of them were spirit beasts of extremely powerful bloodlines.

Those spirit beasts were all sitting beside their masters, painting quite a lively scene.

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"We searched all the way from the northern coast to here. There is an area of plains to the west of Misty Waters City that is a forbidden area in Penglai. If the Mount Shu Sect hasn't been eliminated yet, that is probably where they are," Du Wuhen surmised.

Deng Yixiao replied, "The Mount Shu Sect's team isn't weak. Jiang Yuebai, Chu Liang, and Xu Ziyang are among the top in strength. It's very unlikely they would die right after landing."

Wei Tiandi frowned. "I think so too, but those hilly plains are huge. It will be difficult to search for them."

"Let's be patient for a little longer. We still have six days anyway. We'll find them eventually," Du Wuhen said calmly.

"Why do we have to find the Mount Shu Sect's team? Can't we just advance without doing that?" Huang Ling'er asked, sounding quite bored.

She had run away from home and been gone for quite a while. Huang Hanshan, the Lord of the Thunderbolt Stronghold, had expended great efforts to find and take her home. He had to coax her with kind words and promise to let her participate in the Assembly of Immortal Sects. That was the only reason she obediently stayed home to cultivate for a period.

Anyway, the Thunderbolt Stronghold knew that their representative team for this Assembly of Immortal Sects was a three-plus-one deal. Aside from the three core disciples, no other disciple in the current generation had a higher cultivation level than Huang Ling'er, so they might as well let their sect leader's beloved daughter gain some experience.

Huang Ling'er was rebellious, but she was indeed quite powerful. She had been diligent in her daily cultivation, after all. Huang Ling'er had always wanted to roam the martial world. How could she do that if she was weak? Moreover, her tamed beast was quite strong too.

Huang Ling'er was currently hugging and playing with her tamed beast Hua Hua, a large black dog. It was the only tamed beast she had formed a soul contract with.

Hua Hua was a legendary Snow Mountain Divine Hound. It was capable of tracking over great distances, understanding the balance of yin and yang, and had mystical abilities.

Guo Zhanfeng of the Night Saber Sect had a white dog named Baixue from the same lineage of Snow Mountain Divine Hounds. However, Baixue was just his pet. He did not have a soul contract with it, so he couldn't bring it with him to the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

Du Wuhen explained, "Our most important task is to eliminate the Mount Shu Sect team in this round. As long as the Mount Shu Sect fails to make the top ten again, they'll lose their place among the Divine Nine. That spot will naturally be filled by one of the Terrestrial Ten sects. Ascending Dragon Academy isn't interested, so the contenders are our sect and Taotie City. Our sect has always performed better than Taotie City."

With a serious expression, Deng Yixiao added, "In other words, if the Mount Shu Sect team is eliminated, our sect has a great chance of ascending into the Divine Nine."

The three core disciples knew how critical this mission was—so much so that it could determine the future of the Thunderbolt Stronghold. The pressure was immense.

However, Huang Ling'er, their sect leader's daughter, wasn't as aware of these stakes.

Huang Hanshan had always doted on his daughter and never forced her to get involved in sect affairs. Their relationship had been very strained recently, and he knew that pushing her would only backfire. That's why he had instructed these three senior brothers to explain things to his daughter once they were in the illusory realm.

After hearing their explanation, Huang Ling'er's expression became serious, and she stopped joking around.

Huang Ling'er was quite stubborn and rebellious, but she understood what was at stake now. Having dealt with Chu Liang before, she didn't really want to target the Mount Shu Sect team, but now that she understood the situation, she no longer objected to it. Friendship was one thing, but her sect's interests were another.

To be fair, Huang Hanshan and Xu Bashan of the Whale Gang were sworn brothers. Xu Bashan had also sworn brotherhood with Chu Liang, so that made Huang Hanshan and Chu Liang two practically brothers as well. Nevertheless, in the face of the Thunderbolt Sect's future, all these personal ties had to be set aside.

Huang Ling'er stood up and said seriously, "All right, I'll do my best with you all!"

Before she finished speaking, Hua Hua suddenly jumped to its feet and urgently barked twice. "Woof! Woof!"

Right after that, the tamed beasts of the other three disciples swiftly got up.

Huang Ling'er could tell from Hua Hua's barks that something was wrong. She tried to jump aside, but it was too late.

A hand suddenly shot up from the ground and grabbed Huang Ling'er by the ankle. The hand was small, but it was very strong.

A short figure with a sinister grin burst out of the ground and punched Huang Ling'er, causing her to explode!

Boom!

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"Little Junior Sister!"

Huang Ling'er's three senior brothers flew into a rage.

Someone had killed their little junior sister right in front of them. How could they tolerate such terrible humiliation?

Du Wuhen struck first. His Azure Mysterious Wind Bird spun in the air and instantly transformed into a massive black scythe that was almost as tall as him. With it in hand, he looked like the Grim Reaper.

"I'm going to take your life!" Du Wuhen roared.

He swung the scythe, swiftly stirring up gusts of black wind!

The short figure laughed loudly. "Haha!"

The person that killed Huang Ling'er turned out to be a child who looked barely over ten years old and wore a wild and sinister grin.

Despite facing Du Wuhen's scythe, the child just lifted his leg and used it to block the blade of the scythe!

Clang.

The sound of colliding metal rang out.

The child leaped back several times to create some distance between him and Du Wuhen, before lastly doing a somersault and landing on the ground.

The only child in this Competition of the Hundred Sects was, of course, the Penglai Supreme Sect's Qi Lin'er.

After landing, he twisted his left leg slightly, revealing a shallow bleeding wound on his calf.

Both Qi Lin'er and Du Wuhen were surprised by the clash.

Du Wuhen was astonished that his scythe, which had an extremely sharp blade, hadn't severed Qi Lin'er's leg.

Qi Lin'er, on the other hand, was surprised because he had rarely been injured to the point of bleeding. He was quite astonished that Du Wuhen's weapon could break through his defense.

Nevertheless, before Qi Lin'er could think much about that, the attacks of the other two members of the Thunderbolt Stronghold team were already upon him.

Wei Tiandi's Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle moved extremely quickly, appearing as a streak of lightning as it rammed into Qi Lin'er.

He could not react in time to block the attack. Blinded by the flash of light, he had quickly raised his left arm to block, but what followed were stabs of sharp pain. The Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle's fangs sank several inches into Qi Lin'er's forearm.

Meanwhile, the Five-Fire Divine Ape arrived with a whoosh, shrouded in raging demonic flames.

Seeing that, Qi Lin'er let out a strange laugh, "Hah! You've got more people. I won't fight you. I'll just take one of your soul crystals as a toll!"

Then he drilled into the ground and fiercely struck the Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle's head with his right palm. He pried it off his left arm, causing a stream of blood to spurt out. Shockingly, the blood wasn't red but gold!

"You think you can leave?" Du Wuhen said, turning his hand over and folding his fingers into a hook-like form as if beckoning something.

Whoosh.

A fierce gust of wind flipped over the surface of the ground, and countless wind blades danced wildly on the ground, revealing Qi Lin'er.

Even though they found Qi Lin'er quickly, he escaped underground just as swiftly. The three members of the Thunderbolt Stronghold chased after him.

In the blink of an eye, they arrived at the outskirts of Misty Waters City, where they could see the towering city walls in the distance.

"If you dare, come and chase me!" Qi Lin'er shouted.

"Stop! Don't chase him," Du Wuhen yelled, waving his hand to call off his two junior brothers.

"Why?" Wei Tiandi asked urgently, "I was just about to catch that brat!"

"He's from the Penglai Supreme Sect," Du Wuhen said quietly.

"So what if he's from Penglai?" Wei Tiandi replied angrily. "He killed our junior sister. Aren't we going to avenge her?"

"Our priority is to take down the Mount Shu Sect team. Let's not complicate things."

"But..." Wei Tiandi uttered frustratedly.

He glanced at Misty Waters City, unwilling to let Qi Lin'er off.

Deng Yixiao tried to persuade Wei Tiandi as well. "Second Senior Brother... the Penglai Supreme Sect is powerful. If we clash with them, it might not end well for us. We could end up ruining the plan for our sect. How about we deal with the Mount Shu Sect team first? We can just come back later to avenge Little Junior Sister later."

Wei Tiandi glared at the city walls. "Hmph. Fine, we'll settle this later. We'll come back for what they owe us in a couple of days."

#### Chapter 543: Sincerity Is the Ultimate Strategy

When the spectators outside the illusory realm saw that scene, they marveled at the Penglai Supreme Sect's strength. A mere child had killed someone in front of the three senior brothers of the Thunderbolt Stronghold and even escaped from them. Furthermore, it seemed like those three senior brothers didn't dare to pursue the child into Misty Waters City.

In fact, they weren't Qi Lin'er's first victims. After clearing out Misty Waters City, the Penglai Supreme Sect's team already had enough soul crystals to enter the top ten, but they didn't stop hunting. Instead, they expanded their hunting grounds.

Xi Miaoxian, Yang Yuhu, and Qi Lin'er roamed outside the city. Whenever they saw a team passing by, they would strike. Each of them had the power to take down entire teams alone, and several more teams perished.

The fact that the Thunderbolt Stronghold team had only lost one person to a shameless ambush actually showed that they were strong.

Scholar Sun, who was sitting amid the spectators, muttered, "This child... has some mystical abilities."

"I heard Daoist Cangsheng carried him out from the Divine Ruins. He certainly has an impressive background," Elder Huang remarked. "There's even a rumor in the martial world that this child is Daoist Cangsheng's illegitimate son, but it doesn't seem like it."

The offspring of cultivators inherited some of their parents' spiritual qi, and that spiritual qi manifested as the offspring's exceptional talent. However, even if Qi Lin'er had been born from two eighth-realm cultivators, the amount of talent that he had was rather excessive.

"If he's from the Divine Ruins, he might even be a descendant of some ancient Hallowed One," Scholar Sun speculated.

Elder Huang sighed. "Haaa... Extremely gifted but hot-tempered, wild, hard to tame, and has no manners... Are all kids that are found outside and brought into sects like that?"

Scholar Sun glanced behind him. Then he suddenly sat upright and shouted, "Who are you referring to? Stop talking nonsense!"

"Who else but Ah Feng?"

Scholar Sun shook his head. "I think Ah Feng is a pretty good kid, quite courteous and amiable."

"Hah, she didn't even come today. What are you afraid of?" Elder Huang laughed. "What, is she going to suddenly pop out and punch me?"

Boom.

There was a sudden explosion in the spectator stands, drawing the attention of the various immortal sects.

Through the smoke and dust, they saw glimpses of a woman in a fire-red dress roughly lifting an old man off the ground and beating him repeatedly.

It was a very bloody scene. Yet, no one dared to intervene.

Those seated there were all senior cultivators of the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten, so they obviously recognized Di Nufeng.

What kind of person was she? She had spent her whole life eating well and going broke from drinking alcohol, and she had a great fondness for beating up old men. No one would dare to provoke her without good reason.

After a moment, the dust finally settled.

"Ah Feng, when did you get here? Why didn't you come say hello..." Elder Huang said, his eyes now bruised black and blue.

He straightened out his robes and sat upright.

"I just got here." Di Nufeng flexed her wrist. "I just ate and felt quite full, so I wanted to move around a bit."

Scholar Sun chuckled. "Well, that's some great timing."

Elder Huang stared at him furiously. "You saw her and didn't tell me. Instead, you even fanned the flames."

"Utter nonsense," Scholar Sun replied with a righteous expression, waving his sleeve dismissively.

Uninterested in their bickering, Di Nufeng sat down and asked, "How's the situation now? Is my sect doing all right?"

"It's a pretty good start," Scholar Sun told her. "Your little disciple is quite similar to you from back in the day."

"Then it's settled," Di Nufeng said with a grin. "As long as he has at least thirty percent of my power from back then, it won't be a problem for my sect to win the Assembly of Immortal Sects this time."

Elder Huang smiled as well. "Of course."

Nearby in the seating area for the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals, Immortal Jiuyi sat with his arms folded in his sleeves. He seemed to sense that something was off and turned his gaze to the side.

Immortal Jiuyi was a bit worried.

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"Keep watch around us."

On the totally secluded shore of a coast, there were four black-clad men gathered in the middle of some piles of rocks.

They were members of the Sea Dragon Gang from the Western Regions. Their sect was a new presence in the Assembly of Immortal Sects; they had no history of ever participating in it.

Their journey in the Assembly of Immortal Sects so far had been full of twists and turns. During the elimination tournament of the first round, they had fought all three duels in each match for three days in a row, narrowly qualifying for the Competition of the Hundred Sects. Despite achieving such a difficult feat, the Sea Dragon Gang did not attract much attention. That meant that their team would likely go fairly unnoticed in the second round.

Their actions seemed to strive for precisely that, as they had chosen to land on this desolate coastline that no one else would choose to land. It looked like they planned to hide until the competition was over. They were gambling on the likelihood that there would be fewer than ten sects at the end and that they would be lucky enough to advance.

Many small sects had the same idea in the past assemblies, but most of them never survived past the fifth day, as hunters would eventually find and kill them.

One of the men, a young man with an ordinary face, ordered his teammates with a serious expression, "Notify me immediately if anything happens."

After his companions spread out to keep watch, he sat cross-legged on the ground and began performing some strange cultivation technique.

Before long, his hands were covered with pitch-black dragon scales. Then in the blink of an eye, the scales spread to his arms and legs... Eventually, he was completely covered in black dragon scales, even his eyes.

Boom.

There was a sudden change in the transformation process, and he shook violently, falling backward onto the ground.

Quite a while later, the dragon scales covering his eyes fell off, and he opened his eyes. His expression was drastically different from before. It was cold and sinister... like he had become a totally different person.

The scales on his face slowly fell off next, followed by the scales on his hands, feet, and then the rest of his body. With his face visible once more, it was now clear that he had truly become someone else.

He looked completely different from before; he had taken on someone else's appearance!

From an ordinary-looking young man, he had transformed into a middle-aged man with a cold expression and sinister eyes, dressed in loose robes with wide sleeves.

The middle-aged man, who had taken the place of the ordinary young man, looked around with a strange smile and muttered, "The Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams..."

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It was quite a while before Chu Liang appeared on the Divine Mirror's projection screen again.

That wasn't Immortal Jiuyi's fault for not giving him screen time though. The Mount Shu Sect's team just hadn't done much during that time. After allying with the Buddhist Cloud Monastery team, they had stayed hidden in a valley.

Meanwhile, Chu Liang went out alone, wandering in the direction that Pushan had mentioned where the Earthfire Sect team might appear.

The vast plains were totally empty.

After flying for a while, Chu Liang finally spotted someone. It was a young man in a coarse hemp robe, carrying a huge wooden box on his back. The box was larger than him and seemed to be very heavy.

Upon noticing Chu Liang, the young man was immediately on guard.

Without any hesitation, the two of them charged at each other!

Bang!

Brimming with intense murderous intent, Chu Liang threw a punch at the young man. Yet, he only used twenty percent of his strength.

Eight holes opened up in the young man's box, and a long wooden whip shot out from each one. Every section of the whips was engraved with intricate enchanted formations that made the whips incredibly flexible and agile, like the tentacles of a living creature.

Some of the wooden tentacles layered over each other to form a shield and protect the young man. Meanwhile, two more swung toward Chu Liang.

Thud, thud.

Two dull sounds sounded when Chu Liang's fist struck the defensive tentacles and the two remaining two tentacles struck Chu Liang.

Right then, two screams rang out in unison. "Aaah!"

One of the screams was Chu Liang's. He pretended to be overpowered by his opponent and turned to flee, hoping to lure the opponent into his trap.

Chu Liang quickly retreated several dozen zhang, only to realize belatedly that his opponent had screamed as well earlier. Instead of chasing Chu Liang, his opponent had fled in the opposite direction.

Chu Liang stopped in his tracks and looked at the hemp-robed young man in the distance.

Meanwhile, the young man in the hemp robe was retreating, seemingly because he was injured. However, realizing that Chu Liang was not reacting as expected, the young man turned back to face him.

Both of them felt a bit embarrassed.

Chu Liang was mentally stronger, so he broke the silence with a laugh. "Haha. Brother, you... were trying to lure me too?"

"Yeah." The young man in the hemp robe awkwardly scratched his nose. "What a coincidence, huh?"

This was quite the situation. They had used the same trick.

It was Chu Liang's first time using this trick, so he had not expected this to happen. He obviously wouldn't be able to lure his opponent into his trap now.

After thinking about it for a moment, Chu Liang ultimately just asked, "So... are you coming with me, or should I go with you? Let's not waste this trip for both of us."

"Huh?" The young man in the hemp robe was stunned for a moment. He clearly had not expected such an offer and did not know if it was genuine. Nevertheless, he decided to just give it a try and ask, "How about you come with me? I've been out here all day. If I don't lure anyone back soon, my senior brothers will scold me."

"Sure." Chu Liang nodded. "I don't have as much pressure as you to perform well, so I'll go with you first. Just fly ahead like normal, and I'll follow as if I'm chasing you."

"Uh..." the young man in the hemp robe uttered, dumbfounded by Chu Liang's words. After a long pause, he said, "Thank you."

"Hey, there's no need to be so polite."

Chu Liang waved his hand, motioning for the young man to get going.

In actuality, Chu Liang had no other choice. It was impossible for him to lure his opponent into his trap anymore. To begin with, they were all in the same line of work; who would have fallen for such a trick?

Nonetheless, Chu Liang's goal was to collect soul crystals. So, if he could find a place with a large number of soul crystals, what difference did it make whether he lured the enemy or if they lured him? As long as his team could win, there was no difference.

The hemp-robed young man flying ahead probably hadn't considered that at all. In fact, he was in disbelief when he saw Chu Liang sincerely follow him at a distance of several dozen zhang, without the slightest intention of shamelessly pulling a sneak attack on him.

Who said the Assembly of Immortal Sects was all about life-and-death struggles? It turns out there are still people who were willing to talk things out nicely.

Sincerity truly is the best strategy.

Chapter 544: Let's Have a Meal Together Next Time

The next day, the emperor did not show up at the spectator stand reserved for him on the Emperor's Mound.

After all, the claim that he was occupied with a million national affairs each day was no exaggeration. If he were to sit idly here like a common street loafer for seven days straight, the entire court might come to a standstill.

This was also why Mingde said Di Nufeng was not suited to be an emperor. A serious emperor was always busy. If she had to attend the morning court session daily and deal with national affairs afterward, she would likely give up within a short time.

Of course, if she didn't quit, things might become even worse.

Even though the emperor was busy, the court officials still attended after the morning session. Some were there out of genuine interest, while others likely placed bets using their own belongings.

With the emperor gone, everyone on the viewing platform appeared more relaxed. They gathered in small groups, chatting loudly, much like the commoners below the Emperor's Mound.

There were two large groups present. The first consisted of military officers from the court. Although their leader, the Grand General of the Nation, was absent, the soldiers still gathered, creating a noisy scene.

The second group was led by Chancellor Su Qian, the head of all officials. Most of the civil officers gathered around him, engaging in lively conversation and laughter.

Many of the individuals present were of such low rank that they wouldn't have been able to clearly see whether the chancellor was even wearing clothes during the usual court sessions. However, in this relaxed setting, they had the rare opportunity to exchange a few words with the chancellor, and naturally, they went out of their way to flatter him.

Their compliments mainly revolved around praising the chancellor's talent for recognizing capable individuals.

Before Su Qian became a court official, he was just a commoner with no connections. The sects and clans in the Sixteen-Faction Alliance that he helped promote were mostly unknown before he gave them a chance. They were people who had nothing prior to joining his alliance.

But under Su Qian's leadership for over a decade, twelve of these factions managed to participate in the Great Selection of the Four Seas, with six making it to the Competition of the Hundred Sects.

Considering that half of these factions managed to make it to the second round, it showcased the value of the newer generation within the Sixteen-Faction Alliance.

As the officials around the chancellor talked about the Sixteen-Faction Alliance, they were obviously praising the chancellor for having a keen eye to recognize talent.

To be honest, this was not mere flattery.

It was truly remarkable that Su Qian, a man with no background, was able to build such a large faction on his own, even with the position and resources of a Chancellor. After all, many past chancellors ended up in pathetic circumstances, regardless of their status.

Even with such achievements, there was no trace of joy on Su Qian's face; instead, he faintly furrowed his brows.

"This Chu Liang from Mount Shu..." he murmured softly.

Chu Liang had single-handedly taken down over ten opponents yesterday, eliminating the alliance of three sects led by the Five Poisons Sect. Now, it appeared he was set to target the alliance of three sects led by the Earthfire Sect. Naturally, this caught Su Qian's full attention.

Hearing the chancellor's tone, someone nearby immediately whispered, "This Chu Liang is truly too much. He's always targeting the sects under the Chancellor's command. It's obvious he's doing it on purpose."

"Yesterday, the Five Poisons Sect was limited by their techniques. The Earthfire Sect will definitely send him back in defeat!"

"He always wears a fake smile. I've found his face repulsive for a long time."

"..."

"Although Chu Liang held the title of Imperial Younger Brother, most people only recognized him for his achievements in the capital of Yu. He had no real official rank or power, and ultimately, he was just another figure from the martial world. To curry favor with the chancellor, they naturally didn't hold back their criticisms.

Unexpectedly, Su Qian changed his tone and said, "This Chu Liang is indeed extraordinarily gifted—a true dragon among men. Losing to him wouldn't be shameful."

"Haha, yes indeed!" The people around him nodded enthusiastically. "He truly is a dragon among men, deserving of the title of Imperial Younger Brother bestowed by His Majesty."

"He and the members of the Chancellor's Earthfire Sect are well-matched opponents"

"I've long thought he has striking features, quite pleasing to the eye"

"..."

The ways of officials, with their constant flip-flopping, might seem ridiculous to outsiders, but within this circle, it was nothing out of the ordinary.

But soon, their focus shifted once again.

"What are the people from the Thunderbolt Stronghold doing?!"

...

Du Wuhen, Wei Tiandi, and Deng Yixiao had just lost their junior sister, and they were filled with frustration and dissatisfaction.

However, even if they wanted to charge into Misty Waters City, they were still intimidated by the powerful Yang Shenlong.

After all, their junior sister hadn't truly been killed—she had simply been eliminated. Though they were angry, they had no choice but to endure for now.

They still carried a heavy burden on their shoulders.

They searched further away from Misty Waters City. The Azure Mysterious Wind Bird soared through the sky like a divine breeze, whistling past before quickly returning.

It then landed back on Du Wuhen's shoulder.

"My bird has located Chu Liang of Mount Shu. He's about a few dozen li to the northwest, and the others shouldn't be far from him," Du Wuhen said. "Let's go!"

The three brothers quickly accelerated, skimming low as they rushed in the direction the Azure Mysterious Wind Bird had indicated. Before long, they spotted a concealed valley.

The Azure Mysterious Wind Bird returned once more, bringing more news.

"Chu Liang is heading this way. Let's hide in this valley and ambush him. We can catch him off guard and take down one of his men first," Du Wuhen suggested.

His two brothers followed his lead without question, and the three of them stealthily entered the valley.

The valley was thick with trees and foliage, abundant in spiritual qi, and with a bit of stealth, it was hard to be noticed. It was the perfect place to hide. However, as soon as the three brothers landed, they sensed that something was off.

Unfortunately, Hua Hua, the Snow Mountain Divine Hound, had been eliminated along with Huang Ling'er. Otherwise, it would have sniffed out the chaotic qi inside the valley before they even approached.

As soon as they landed, Deng Yixiao's Five-Fire Divine Ape was the first to react, letting out a sudden roar, "Raaar!"

The ape's body expanded to several times its original size, transforming into a massive fire ape nearly ten zhang tall. It roared ferociously in one direction.

"It sensed the presence of another kind of flame," Deng Yixiao said.

At the same time, several figures gradually emerged from the depths of the valley, and cultivators appeared on both sides.

More than ten people surrounded the three disciples of the Thunderbolt Stronghold.

The group was led by two boys who looked very similar. They seemed to be twins. The one on the left was a bit taller, with long, fine hair and a sharp look, while the one on the right was shorter and stockier, wearing a wicked grin.

The three brothers from the Thunderbolt Stronghold recognized them as well. These were the Ling family brothers, the dark horses from the Earthfire Sect who had made a big impression during the Great Selection of the Four Seas just a few days earlier.

The one on the left was the older brother, Ling Xiao, while the one on the right was the younger brother, Ling Yan. The flames of the powerful Primordial Earth Core Fire flickered in their hands.

Alongside them were two fellow disciples, who also appeared to be from the Earthfire Sect.

To the left was a group of three cultivators, each carrying a large wooden box on their backs. They were likely from the Puppetry Sect of the Chancellor's Sixteen-Faction Alliance.

They believed that puppets refined and sacrificed held a semblance of life, so it was a strict rule in their sect never to store these life-bound puppets in enchanted tool storage.

The group on the right looked even more peculiar. Each of them had only their upper bodies exposed, while their lower halves were fused with trees and vines. Their qi harmonized perfectly with the forest, making them undetectable unless they chose to reveal themselves.

These were undoubtedly members of the Kuimu Sect from the Chancellor's Sixteen-Faction Alliance that had specially cultivated the wood-based art of the Five Elements. The sect itself had their own unique mystical arts and techniques.

Although the three brothers had no fear of these individuals, their main target was still the members from the Mount Shu Sect, and they wanted to avoid any unnecessary complications.

Since Chu Liang was nearby, they didn't want to make a rash move that might alert him.

Thus, Du Wuhen clasped his hands and said, "We apologize for the intrusion. We mean no hostility. Since you've claimed this spot first, we'll take our leave."

"Heh." Ling Xiao from the Earthfire Sect chuckled. "I know you guys, the brothers from Thunderbolt Stronghold—quite the reputation you have. Do you really think we're hiding here for no reason? We're waiting for someone, of course."

Du Wuhen's expression darkened, and his gaze turned as sharp as a saber. He shot a glance at Ling Xiao, making him instinctively step back half a pace.

"You won't be able to take us down. We're not after you either, so it's best for both of us to take a step back," Deng Yixiao chimed in.

However, the hot-tempered Wei Tiandi was already itching for a fight. He stroked the head of his Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle, looking ready to strike at any moment.

"Whether we can or can't, we'll only find out once we try. If no one dares to make a move, why are we even here?" Ling Yan shouted as he stepped forward. "Attack!"

At his command, a deafening roar echoed through the valley.

Boom!

...

Meanwhile, Chu Liang was a dozen li away from the valley, leisurely following the disciple of the Puppetry Sect who had been sent to lure enemies but was, in reality, acting as a guide for him.

As the outline of the valley came into view ahead, a sudden series of loud booms echoed from within, indicating that a fierce battle had started.

"Huh?" The disciple stopped mid-air, muttering to himself in confusion. "I haven't even returned yet. Who are they fighting?"

"This is the valley, right? It seems quite lively," Chu Liang remarked as he caught up, walking alongside him.

"This place is so far from everything else. How could anyone come here?" The disciple remained confused but added, "Since someone is here, we might gain something today. You should really leave. You seem like a decent guy, and if you follow me into the valley, you'll be killed."

"I haven't gained anything yet, so how could I leave?" Chu Liang laughed. "You seem like a good guy too. How about we grab a meal together next time?"

"Sure," the disciple said with a chuckle.

Just then, Chu Liang caught hold of a tentacle that attempted a sneak attack.

"Why are you attacking while we're still talking?" he asked with a smile.

The disciple awkwardly rubbed his nose. "Well, it's a competition after all."

"No worries, I understand," Chu Liang said with a nod. "We're on the same page."

Unbeknownst to the disciple from the Puppetry Sect, Chu Liang's clone had appeared behind him. At that moment, the clone swung his fist at the disciple.

Boom—

The wooden box on the disciple's back suddenly burst open, revealing a disc-shaped object with ten tentacles extending from it, resembling a giant octopus.

Chu Liang's sneak attack was intercepted by the puppet, and his punch struck the disc with a thunderous sound, leaving only faint cracks behind.

The octopus then coiled around Chu Liang with its ten tentacles, as if it was trying to restrain him.

But in the next instant, Divine Dragon Fire ignited in Chu Liang's palm.

Boom—

The crimson-gold flames immediately engulfed the wooden puppet and the disciple. Amidst a painful scream, the entire figure vanished into thin air, leaving only a soul crystal falling to the ground.

Chu Liang caught the soul crystal tightly in his grip before continuing heading toward the valley.

Chapter 545: I Will Give You the Time of One Incense Stick

Rumble—

In that instant, the valley lay in ruins, its once-dense terrain shattered as flames erupted violently from the earth. In the blink of an eye, the three brothers of Thunderbolt Stronghold were swallowed whole by the raging Primordial Earth Core Fire.

The members of the Earthfire Sect had been lying in wait for a long time, meticulously preparing their ambush. Hundreds of fiery channels had been set beneath the ground, ready to ignite and engulf any unfortunate prey that stepped into their trap.

Ordinary cultivators might have been reduced to ashes in an instant, but the three from Thunderbolt Stronghold were far from ordinary.

Du Wuhen gripped the massive scythe, transformed from the Azure Mysterious Wind Bird, and swung it with immense force. In an instant, the air was filled with the howl of wind as tens of thousands of wind blades tore through the sea of flames, shredding everything in their path and engulfing more than a dozen disciples from the surrounding sects.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The three members of the Puppet Sect moved in perfect synchronization, almost as if they shared a single mind. In one fluid motion, they summoned their puppets from the wooden boxes strapped to their backs.

The three puppets were a fearsome sight: a towering giant with the head of an ox and the head of a horse, a three-eyed deity forged from solid steel, and a massive bird with wings that spanned wide.

After deflecting countless wind blades, the puppets wasted no time and charged forward with relentless speed, launching a fierce counterattack.

On the other side, the disciples of the Kuimu Sect avoided direct confrontation, opting instead to cast spells. From the dense forest, countless vines and branches surged forth, twisting and weaving together to ensnare and trap the three brothers from Thunderbolt Stronghold.

Of course, the vines alone couldn't hold the brothers for long. But the Earthfire Sect was quick to follow up, unleashing their divine techniques. Raging flames surged along the vines with the intensity amplified tenfold!

It turned out that they were coordinating. The spirit wood of the Kuimu Sect was specially designed to fuel the flames, making the sea of fire's encirclement even fiercer and more solid.

Seeing themselves trapped in the fire once again, Wei Tiandi roared, "Charge with me!"

Before his words could fully escape his lips, the Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle became a blinding streak of lightning, cutting through the sea of fire with a sharp, sizzling sound. Regardless of how dense or solid the blockade was, it stood no chance against the Divine Turtle's relentless charge.

As the Divine Turtle successfully cleared a path through the flames, a two-headed giant descended from above, slamming down with immense force. The ground shook under the impact as the giant attempted to drive them back into the inferno, its massive fists ready to push them once again into the raging sea of fire.

Sizzle—

At that moment, Du Wuhen made his move once more, his saber gleaming with a sharp, lethal light as it cut cleanly through the puppet, slicing it in half at the waist!

The three of them worked together in perfect coordination.

As Du Wuhen's strike landed, the Five-Fire Divine Ape surged ahead, barreling toward the disciples of the Puppetry Sect. Deng Yixiao moved in perfect sync with his beast, their actions flowing seamlessly as if they were a single entity, ready to overwhelm their opponents with their combined strength.

Meanwhile, the Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle darted toward the Kuimu Sect disciples, who vanished into the dense forest in a flash of light.

But the Divine Turtle wouldn't give up! It crashed through the trees with reckless force, shattering everything in its path as it relentlessly pursued the fleeing disciples.

The battlefield split into three distinct sections. In one, Du Wuhen stood firm, saber in hand, facing the strongest fighters of the Earthfire Sect. His gaze was steady, showing not a trace of fear.

Meanwhile, the Ling brothers, Ling Xiao and Ling Yan, pressed their hands to the ground in perfect synchronization. With a thunderous boom, the earth trembled, and a towering pillar of fire erupted into the sky, taking shape as a massive Earthfire Giant.

Behind Du Wuhen, a dark and fearsome manifestation took shape. It was the Form of the Heavens and the Earth!

The small valley erupted into chaos, barely able to contain the fierce clashes, reminiscent of a battle between dragon and tiger.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Among the Thunderbolt Stronghold brothers, Deng Yixiao was the first to finish his fight.

Deng Yixiao, alongside his Five-Fire Divine Ape, battled fiercely against the three members of the Puppetry Sect and their puppets. Though it seemed like a fight of two against six, the disparity in power was unmistakable. The gap between each member of the Puppetry Sect and Deng Yixiao—or his mighty Five-Fire Divine Ape—was far too great.

The three-eyed puppet unleashed beams of divine light from its eyes, but the Five-Fire Divine Ape responded with a powerful blast of flame. In the next moment, the puppet was engulfed in a fiery explosion.

Seizing the opportunity, the two-headed giant charged forward, slamming into the Five-Fire Divine Ape with immense force, knocking the ape to the ground. Yet, in the blink of an eye, the ape sprang back up, grabbed the giant and, with one mighty pull, ripped its ox and horse heads apart

The flying bird puppet swiftly coiled around its master, merging with him to give the appearance of enormous wings. With these wings, the puppet master soared into the air at incredible speed, launching into combat with Deng Yixiao.

But Deng Yixiao was no ordinary opponent. Having once fought Feng Chaoyang head-on, his physical cultivation had reached the fifth realm. Cloaked in a radiant golden light, Deng Yixiao showed no sign of losing ground as he fought against the Puppeteer Master.

In an instant, the Five-Fire Divine Ape obliterated the remaining enemies and turned back to help its master deal with the Puppeteer Master.

Seeing the overwhelming strength of the Five-Fire Divine Ape, the last remaining disciple of the Puppet Sect panicked and attempted to flee. But before he could escape, the ape leaped into the air and snatched the fleeing disciple back down from the sky.

Thud—

The Puppetry Sect disciple was slammed violently into the ground. A massive foot then came crashing down upon him. With a resounding crash, his body was obliterated, leaving nothing behind but a gleaming soul crystal amidst the dust and debris.

Meanwhile, on Wei Tiandi's side of the battle, it was pure domination. The Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle charged after the fleeing Kuimu Sect disciples, crashing into them with unstoppable force. They had no way to fight back.

The Kuimu Sect was never skilled at direct combat, and it was already fortunate for them to have made it this far in the Competition of the Hundred Sects. They relied heavily on the Earthfire Sect's offensive strength to carry them through battles. But now, with the Earthfire Sect fully engaged elsewhere, the Kuimu Sect disciples were utterly overwhelmed.

The disciples of the Kuimu Sect did try to fight back. Some of them targeted Wei Tiandi with their divine technique and tied him up with countless wooden vines.

But they quickly realized that Wei Tiandi was even fiercer than his tamed beast. With a thunderous roar, he shattered the vines in an explosion of raw power, sending splinters flying in all directions.

Without hesitation, he followed the trail of divine energy back to the spellcaster. In an instant, Wei Tiandi closed the distance and unleashed a devastating punch.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

After a series of deafening explosions, the Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle's fight had ended.

Only on Du Wuhen's side did the fight still rage on. The Earthfire Sect, as the ace among the Sixteen-Faction Alliance, was indeed a force with fierce combat power. The Earthfire Giant towered over him, forcing Du Wuhen's manifested form to continuously retreat and dodge.

However, the Ling brothers were growing impatient. Despite having the apparent upper hand, the prolonged battle was taking its toll. They knew that being stalled here meant their allies were being picked off one by one. As Du Wuhen continued to skillfully deflect their attacks and avoid fighting directly, they grew increasingly frustrated and desperate for the fight to end as quickly as possible.

It was clear that Du Wuhen had the strength to fight back, yet he was deliberately holding back, stalling for time to aid his fellow disciples. Rather than launching a full assault, he chose to focus on evasive maneuvers, skillfully avoiding the Earthfire Sect's overwhelming attacks while keeping the fight drawn out.

Finally, as Du Wuhen continued to buy precious moments, Deng Yixiao and Wei Tiandi, having finished their own fights, rushed to his side. With their combined strength, they joined the fight against the Earthfire Sect.

The Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle and the Five-Fire Divine Ape swelled to enormous sizes, their forms towering like mountains. They charged forward with Du Wuhen, and the Earthfire Giant was forced to retreat repeatedly, unable to hold its ground.

Ling Xiao let out a furious roar, "Then we'll die together!"

In response, the Earthfire Giant's color began to shift, darkening and becoming more solid, as if it were gathering an immense, destructive energy within.

Seeing the Earthfire Giant's transformation, Du Wuhen's expression shifted to one of alarm. He immediately shouted, "Retreat! It's going to self-destruct!"

"No, I'll block it!" Wei Tiandi bellowed, as the Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle shot forward with incredible speed. The enormous creature lunged at the Earthfire Giant, its massive shell closing tightly around the giant.

Boom—

The explosion rocked the entire battlefield, reverberating like a violent earthquake. The world went dark, and only a black sun rose from the ground. In an instant, the world was plunged into darkness with only a massive black sun rising from the ground.

...

The Ling brothers, seeing their defeat looming, made a desperate final move. They activated the Earthfire Giant's self-destruction, intending to die with their enemies.

The giant, filled with boundless earthfire, detonated with immense power, flattening the entire valley and the surrounding area, leaving only a scorched crater..

At the critical moment, thanks to Wei Tiandi and Deng Yixiao using their tamed beasts to suppress the Earthfire Giant, they managed to reduce the explosion's force to some extent and saved themselves from the full destructive force of the detonation.

with the soul-wrenching pain of losing their tamed beasts, left them in a dire state. They were battered, and their internal injuries were quite serious.

The three struggled to get up, with only Du Wuhen doing slightly better. However, his fight with the Earthfire Giant had drained much of his foundational qi, leaving his Sea of Qi severely depleted.

"Let's collect the soul crystals quickly and find a place to heal," Du Wuhen urged. "Such a commotion could easily attract others."

"Right, Chu Liang is nearby. I wonder if he'll come," Deng Yixiao added, glancing around.

Just then, a leisurely voice called out. "Did I hear my name?"

Chu Liang hadn't just arrived—he had been there for quite some time. He had been watching since the three disciples of the Thunderbolt Stronghold started fighting.

As Chu Liang observed the fierce battle, he couldn't help but marvel at the sheer power of the Earthfire Sect. They were far stronger than the Five Poisons Sect he had faced before. If he had to face the Earthfire Sect alone, he knew he wouldn't stand much of a chance.

However, despite the overwhelming power of the Earthfire Sect, Thunderbolt Stronghold's strength was undeniable. Even against a greater number of opponents, they had managed to emerge victorious.

When the Earthfire Giant self-destructed, the resulting blast was so powerful that it reached far beyond the valley's borders, forcing Chu Liang to retreat a great distance to avoid being caught in the explosion. He only flew back when the explosion subsided.

Upon his return, he saw the severely injured three brothers and the scattered soul crystals.

"You..." Du Wuhen raised his saber once more as he said, "In the end, you still came."

Beside him, Wei Tiandi and Deng Yixiao struggled as they forced themselves to stand up. They were prepared to face Chu Liang in another fight, even if it meant battling to their deaths.

"Hold on," Chu Liang said seriously. "Miss Huang saved my life once, and I have some connection with your Lord as well, so I consider you members of the Thunderbolt Stronghold my friends. Although the Competition of the Hundred Sects is ultimately a competition, I have no desire to take advantage of your current weakness. I'll give you the time of one incense stick[1]. Sit down and heal now. When you're better, we can start our fight."

Hearing Chu Liang's righteous words, the three disciples of Thunderbolt Stronghold exchanged glances before they nodded in unison.

"Thank you," they said before they immediately sat back down and started circulating their qi, seizing the precious moments to recover their strength.

As they meditated, the thought crept into each of their minds: if not for their rivalry with the Mount Shu Sect, they wouldn't want to make an enemy of someone like Chu Liang. In these times, it was rare to find someone so honorable.

Soon, the time of one incense stick had passed.

The three brothers, having recovered slightly, slowly stood up and cast their gaze toward the "honorable" Chu Liang.... only to notice the large group of people who had just rushed over and were now standing behind him.

Aside from the members of the Mount Shu Sect, there were also four young monks from the Buddhist Cloud Monastery.

"..."

So he figured it wasn't safe to handle three injured enemies alone and decided to wait for his teammates to arrive? Seriously... In times like this, there are no honorable people, the disciples of the Thunderbolt Stronghold thought.

Chapter 546: Old Injuries Acting Up

"Shameless scoundrel!"

The cry of outrage came from the audience at the Emperor's Mound, who had an omniscient view of the entire scene as it unfolded. Unlike the three brothers of Thunderbolt Stronghold, who were caught in the heat of battle, the spectators had a front-row seat to the tragedy.

It all began with Chu Liang encountering a disciple from the Puppetry Sect who had been sent as bait. At first, there was nothing remarkable about the encounter. But when the Thunderbolt Stronghold brothers unknowingly walked into the Earthfire Sect's ambush in the valley, things started to get interesting.

While the fierce battle raged on, Chu Liang stood on the sidelines, quietly observing for a long time. In many ways, he was no different from the spectators watching from the spectator stands.

Meanwhile, his teammates followed at a measured pace, maintaining a safe distance behind him. This allowed them to avoid drawing attention while ensuring that they could arrive quickly when needed.

The more intense the head-on clash between the Earthfire Sect and Thunderbolt Stronghold grew, the more cunning Chu Liang's scheme appeared.

As Chu Liang allowed the three heavily injured brothers from Thunderbolt Stronghold to sit and heal, his teammates, who had been trailing at a distance, suddenly began to accelerate. At this point, even a fool could see what he was planning.

Clearly, Chu Liang was using the excuse of letting them heal to buy time for his reinforcements to arrive.

"Taking advantage of someone's weakness is one thing, but bringing in so many people? That's just too much!" one indignant spectator exclaimed, his voice echoing across the spectator stands.

"Chu Liang, Chu Liang, heartless and cruel!" shouted another spectator. It was likely that this spectator had attended the Mount Shu Summit in the past and remembered that familiar chant.

"It's no surprise he would do something like this. His teacher is none other than Di Nufeng!" added a more knowledgeable spectator, pinpointing the source of Chu Liang's cunning behavior.

"Truly a shameless scoundrel!"

"..."

The crowd's rising anger wasn't just fueled by the stark contrast between the honorable, head-on battle earlier and Chu Liang's scheming tactics.

Most of them were furious because they had placed their bets on the Thunderbolt Stronghold advancing to the next round—the Battle at the Imperial City. After all, the disciples of the Thunderbolt Stronghold that joined this assembly were very powerful and fierce.

This unexpected disaster took everyone by surprise.

In the Assembly of Immortal Sects, such upsets were not uncommon, but the fallout was often dire. Whenever a major upset occurred, many corpses would be fished out of the rivers surrounding the capital of Yu the following day, as there were many who gambled everything in hopes of striking it rich overnight.

Compared to the anger and disdain of the majority, a small group of individuals seemed out of place, quietly reveling in their happiness.

These were either locals from Mount Shu or the few who placed bets on the Mount Shu Sect, hoping for something unexpected to happen. Even though they were happy, they only dared to smile subtly, careful not to reveal their joy amidst the crowd.

After all, the Assembly of Immortal Sects was also notorious for being a time when fights and brawls erupted most frequently in the capital of Yu.

However, among them was an eighty-something-year-old woman who looked remarkably young and beautiful, standing out with her especially brazen demeanor.

She clapped her hands and laughed heartily as she said, "As expected of my disciple! He hasn't learned much over the years, but he has inherited two-tenths of my wisdom. Hee-hee-hee!"

Old Sun and Old Huang, standing beside her, exchanged knowing glances, thinking to themselves, If you had two-tenths of his wisdom, there'd be no place for us in this world.

But, of course, they didn't dare voice their thoughts aloud.

Instead, Old Sun simply mused, "The combined strength of those Earthfire Sect brothers was truly terrifying. And for the three young men of Thunderbolt Stronghold to survive such a self-destruction shows their incredible resilience. If Chu Liang had acted recklessly on his own, they might have escaped. By delaying slightly, he managed to trap them completely. That was truly a clever plan."

"Indeed," Old Huang nodded in agreement. "You make a good point. As expected of Ah Feng's disciple. He has a great chance of winning the championship this time."

Old Sun glanced at Old Huang, who had become notably more obedient after being reprimanded, and smiled. "Weren't you the one who didn't think highly of Mount Shu?"

"What are you talking about?" Old Huang quickly retorted, "I've always been a loyal fan of the Mount Shu Sect! Every time I see Jiangjiang and Chu Liang together, I feel happy. Jiangjiang! Jiangjiang! A national beauty! And Chuchu! Chuchu! With a big brain and muscles..."

"Disgusting," Old Sun grumbled, unable to bear the sight of him cheering like that.

...

While storms raged outside the illusory realm, Chu Liang and the others inside the illusory realm remained blissfully unaware.

As soon as Monk Pushan landed, he immediately noticed the ground littered with soul crystals and the three severely injured brothers of Thunderbolt Stronghold. Pushan had grown used to such scenes. His fellow monks, however, were taken aback by the sight before their eyes.

Whenever he would go on a mission with Chu Liang, he knew he wouldn't just be getting easy spoils. More often than not, the spoils would just fall into his laps—opportunities he couldn't even avoid!

Their formidable opponents, the members of the Earthfire Sect, had been decisively wiped out, and now the even stronger Thunderbolt Stronghold brothers lay severely injured, waiting to be finished off. The team from the Mount Shu Sect was, of course, delighted. The monks from Buddhist Cloud Monastery, who hadn't done much, were also happy to see the bounty lying all around.

The only ones who weren't happy were likely the three "lambs" waiting to be slaughtered.

"I don't care how many of you are here, I'll take you all on today!" Wei Tiandi roared. "Big Bro, Third Bro, you two go quickly!"

"The Five-Fire Divine Ape is dead. I am of no use staying here.," Deng Yixiao shouted, struggling. "I'll hold them off. Second Brother, Big Bro, you two go!"

"Don't let them look down on Thunderbolt Stronghold!" Du Wuhen shouted boldly, his voice filled with determination. "Second Brother, Third Brother, take care!"

As Wei Tiandi and Deng Yixiao charged toward the enemies, Du Wuhen turned and fled.

He was the only one going against the tide of battle.

It wasn't that Du Wuhen feared for his life—after all, what was death in the illusory realm, anyway? The truth was far more significant: the future of Thunderbolt Stronghold rested squarely on his shoulders. If they all died and the Mount Shu Sect managed to secure a place in the top ten, it would take the Thunderbolt Stronghold another sixty years to fight for a position in the Divine Nine again.

The reason the three brothers didn't flee together was due to the deep understanding built from years of fighting side by side.

The Purple-Lightning Divine Turtle and Five-Fire Divine Ape had both died in the earlier explosion, leaving Wei Tiandi and Deng Yixiao significantly weakened. In their current state, it was far more strategic for them to use up their remaining strength to help their senior brother escape. They knew that if they all tried to escape together, none of them would make it out alive.

Naturally, no one wanted to let Du Wuhen escape, and the enemies closed in quickly. But as soon as Deng Yixiao charged forward, he activated his Form of the Heavens and the Earth, which resulted in his body suddenly enlarging. With a powerful punch and a fierce kick, he forced back the two who tried to go after Du Wuhen.

At the same time, Wei Tiandi charged forward recklessly without a care of any injuries or perhaps death.

Both of them were on the verge of death, having given up all defenses. All they cared about was attack. Fueled by the determination to die with their opponents, they poured every ounce of strength into their punches, kicks, and divine techniques.

When one fought without regard for their life, they would become an unstoppable force; not even the strength of ten could stop them. In that moment of reckless bravery, Wei Tiandi and Deng Yixiao managed to hold off everyone around them for a brief but crucial moment.

It was only for a moment.

As lights flashed and a myriad of swords hovered in the air, the two massive figures were slain by the group, transforming into soul crystals that fell to the ground.

However, that brief moment created a gap that allowed Du Wuhen to escape, flying away on the Azure Mysterious Wind Bird. He soared through the air with such incredible speed that he was soon out of sight.

"What a shame," Chu Liang said, gazing at the distant sky. "One of them still got away."

"It's still a great harvest," Jiang Yuebai replied, his eyes scanning the soul crystals scattered across the ground. There were over ten from the Earthfire Sect alone, plus the ones they had collected earlier. Even after giving half to the Buddhist Cloud Monastery, the Mount Shu Sect would still have over twenty crystals.

That brought them very close to their goal.

The past two days had gone exceptionally well for the Mount Shu Sect. Each encounter had resulted in significant victories.

On the other hand, the monks from the Buddhist Cloud Monastery felt a bit embarrassed. Monk Pushan scratched his head and smiled, "How could we accept this? We didn't do anything, and we're getting half of your soul crystals. Why don't you take the bigger share and just give us a few?"

"Ah," Chu Liang said with a smile, "there is no need to calculate everything so clearly in a collaboration. It's about us helping each other. I may have put in more effort this time, but you can pitch in more next time."

"Alright," Monk Pucheng of Buddhist Cloud Monastery said, "Then Young Hero Chu, you can rest for a while, and we'll let my junior brother Pushan be the scout."

"That would not be..." Chu Liang was about to refuse.

Jiang Yuebai suddenly tugged at his sleeve and whispered, "Let him go."

Chu Liang looked at Jiang Yuebai and saw a hint of pleading in her eyes.

"Alright then," he said with a smile. "We'll let Pushan be the scout."

"Huh?" Monk Pushan looked around at everyone, feeling a bit aggrieved. "Then Chu Liang, come with me, so I'll at least have some company."

"Um..." Chu Liang suddenly clutched his chest, feigning discomfort. "I think I am slightly injured, so I'm afraid I can't accompany you."

"In that case, Little Junior Brother, you can come with me..." Pushan turned to his fellow monk, Pujing.

"Uh..." Pujing clutched his chest as well. "I think I'm also..."

"You didn't even do anything earlier!" Monk Pushan shouted in exasperation.

"It's an old injury acting up!" Pujing declared seriously.

#### Chapter 547: Fierce Flames

On the first day, Misty Waters City was filled with wails, but by the second day, it had become peaceful and serene.

After the first day, when the reckless individuals who dared to enter the city were thoroughly eliminated, no one dared to challenge the Penglai Supreme Sect's might again.

Yang Shenlong remained in the city, while his three fellow disciples spread out to hunt. Although their gains couldn't match those of the previous day, they were still quite substantial.

On the evening of the second day, a new figure stepped into Misty Waters City.

This man was tall and thin, with dark skin marked by traces of blood and charred wounds—it was none other than Du Wuhen of the Thunderbolt Stronghold. His breathing was slightly uneven, suggesting he had recently suffered serious injuries and was still in the process of recovering. His cultivation power had not yet been fully restored.

He walked along the empty main street of the city until he reached the center, where someone finally appeared to block his path.

This individual was dressed in black, with a saber strapped to his back and half of his face concealed. He was a young man from the Royal Wave Bureau of the Fuyao Kingdom, who had allied with the Penglai Supreme Sect at some point.

However, the Penglai Supreme Sect had always been the power behind the Fuyao Kingdom, so their collaboration was of no surprise.

"You're the first one bold enough to enter Misty Waters City today," the disciple from the Fuyao Kingdom said coldly.

"I'm not here to fight. I have something I want to discuss with Yang Shenlong," Du Wuhen replied. The disciple from the Fuyao Kingdom stared at him for a moment before stepping aside, gesturing for him to pass. He wasn't the least bit concerned about Du Wuhen having ulterior motives—after all, he was heading toward the strongest person here.

Du Wuhen slowly ascended to the highest tower in the city, and as soon as he entered, he saw a familiar short figure in the main hall.

"Haha! You really dared to come for revenge!" Qi Lin'er cackled as he leaped up, clearly surprised that Du Wuhen had the nerve to actually come.

"I'm not here for you. I need to speak with Yang Shenlong," Du Wuhen repeated.

"You want to see him? Then you'll have to get through me first!" Qi Lin'er wasn't going to let him off so easily. He lunged forward, swinging a kick at Du Wuhen.

The brothers from Thunderbolt Stronghold had injured him before, and he was still holding a grudge.

Clang—

A metallic clang rang out as Du Wuhen's scythe blocked the kick once again. Fortunately for Qi Lin'er, he quickly adjusted his direction, kicking the side of the blade. If not, he would have been injured.

Using the momentum, Qi Lin'er flipped in midair, his palms descending with the force of collapsing mountains.

Boom—

Du Wuhen met him with one palm, his feet sinking one chi into the ground before he stopped.

Qi Lin'er was also thrown back, landing on the ground again.

"Back off!" A command suddenly came from upstairs.

Hearing that voice, Qi Lin'er was still disgruntled but dared not act recklessly anymore. He had no choice but to let Du Wuhen pass.

Du Wuhen ascended to the top floor and saw a figure standing on the open balcony, facing away from him.

Even among the prodigies, there were differences in ability.

If Du Wuhen was considered one of the top prodigies of his generation, then Yang Shenlong was unparalleled. Among the young disciples of the sects in the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten, Yang Shenlong was the only one Du Wuhen had no confidence in defeating.

That was why he came to seek out Yang Shenlong.

"The eldest disciple of Thunderbolt Stronghold, what brings you here?" Yang Shenlong didn't turn around but asked calmly.

"I'd like to ask for your help," Du Wuhen said. "I need your help to eliminate Mount Shu's team. Once it's done, I'll give you all twelve soul crystals I've collected so far."

"Do you think I need your soul crystals?" Yang Shenlong asked.

"I will also form an alliance with you on behalf of the Thunderbolt Stronghold. Although I'm the only one left, in this illusory realm, I will obey your every command," Du Wuhen continued.

Yang Shenlong finally turned around. With calm, deep, and unfathomable eyes, he said, "It seems Qi Lin'er killed one of your teammates earlier. So, we are enemies, aren't we?"

Du Wuhen remained silent.

It was true.

But the fact that they were enemies was less important compared to the urgent task of eliminating the team from the Mount Shu Sect. Teaming up with the enemy was no longer a big deal.

This was the hardest path for him.

From what he had observed, the rise of the Mount Shu Sect seemed inevitable. Aside from this move, he couldn't think of any way to change the situation.

"Heh." Yang Shenlong smiled slightly. "I accept the alliance, but I don't need your soul crystals. Just your presence here is sufficient. I've already promised someone else that I'd handle the Mount Shu Sect, so I don't need any extra payment."

Du Wuhen hesitated for a moment before saying, "Thank you."

As he turned to leave, Qi Lin'er stood at the stairway and stared at him with a taunting gaze.

"You came too late. Taotie City and Fuyao Kingdom have already arrived long ago. Your Thunderbolt Stronghold will only be ranked fourth in this city.

"Even before you came here, we were already planning on obliterating the team from the Mount Shu Sect."

...

Meanwhile, within the illusory realm, there was another area where the fighting was just as fierce as in Misty Waters City.

It was the Black Whale Mountain.

Unlike the one-sided slaughter by the Penglai Supreme Sect in Misty Waters City, there were numerous teams on the Black Whale Mountain near the coast. There was not a huge difference in strength between these teams, which was why the battle continued even after two days and one night.

There were only five or six teams remaining, all hiding in the corners of Black Whale Mountain, taking a break to recover.

It appeared they were prepared for a prolonged standoff. No one intended to leave until they had established dominance over the area.

At this moment, a strange-looking team arrived on the scene.

The leader was a cold-looking middle-aged man with an eerie glint in his eyes. Without hesitation, he led his teammates up Black Whale Mountain.

One of the resting teams thought that their territory was being invaded. Instantly, all four members jumped up, prepared to fight. The middle-aged man merely glanced at them and raised his hand lightly.

Whoosh—

Suddenly, black light erupted from the chests of the four young men. In an instant, they swelled up and then exploded with a thunderous bang!

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The series of explosions caused the Black Whale Mountain to tremble, sending the teams that had just begun to catch their breath into a panic as they hurriedly gathered to prepare for battle.

Whenever the middle-aged man spotted someone within his line of sight, he raised his hand and effortlessly exploded them.

As for the soul crystals that fell to the ground, he didn't even glance at them.

He soon reached the peak of the Black Whale Mountain.

There was also a team here, led by a red-haired youth. Although his team came from a small, unknown sect, the youth himself was extraordinarily powerful. After two days and one night of fighting, his presence caught the attention of the surrounding teams. All of them were aware that his body was as indestructible as a living vajra, impervious to divine techniques and weapons alike.

When they saw the middle-aged man's figure, the red-haired youth and his three lackeys reacted very differently. Instead of leaping into battle, they immediately grew tense and bowed deeply, saying, "Greetings, Sect Leader Yuan!"

The middle-aged man gave them a second glance. Instead of attacking, he asked, "From the West Sea?"

"I'm the Copper Demon Ridge's Third Leader. Five years ago at the Evil Dragon Mountain Assembly, I had the honor of meeting you," the red-haired youth said, all his usual arrogance replaced by respect. "You even praised my exceptional talent. Today, I've come in response to your call, Sect Leader Yuan. We are ready to join this grand event!"

The middle-aged man nodded and said, "Good, you've come at the right time."

"Sect Leader Yuan, our second leader was killed on the way here!" the red-haired youth continued, his voice pleading. "Please, help us avenge him!"

"Hmm." The middle-aged man nodded again, though he didn't seem overly concerned. He stepped on the mountain beneath his feet and murmured, "I can only enter this illusory realm with the body of a seventh-realm cultivator, which I thought would be troublesome... but I didn't expect the battle to be centered on Black Whale Mountain. This saves me a lot of trouble."

As he spoke, he crouched down and pressed his palm to the ground.

Whoosh—

Endless black light surged forth, like a geyser erupting from the earth. In an instant, the black light spread across the majority of the mountain like dark ink, gradually seeping downward.

As the black light expanded, the massive mountain began to rumble loudly, shaking violently.

At that moment, everyone within the illusory realm could feel it...

A fierce flame from the ancient primordial wilderness swept across the heavens and the earth!

#### Chapter 548: Something Strange

A delicate lady, dressed in ice-blue robes, gently strummed a guqin<sup>[1]</sup> as swallows frolicked in the black bamboo grove.

The heavenly sound of the guqin flowed from her fingertips, filling the black bamboo grove with music. The melody was so beautiful that it calmed the mind and pleased the spirit of whoever listened in, transporting their minds to the realm of immortals.

Four men dressed in black stood nearby, watching the blue-robed lady in silence.

They had been passing by the bamboo grove when they heard the enchanting music. Unable to resist, they entered the bamboo grove to find out who was playing the guqin, and what they saw was that mesmerizing scene.

The blue-robed lady looked like a celestial being as she sat on the ground, playing her guqin in the breeze. Her music and visuals combined to make such a captivating and harmonious scene that it made the men feel as if they had stepped into a paradise in the immortal realm. So, they stood there for a long time, unwilling to disrupt her.

When the blue-robed young lady's song was about to end, she finally raised her gaze and looked at the four men.

Suddenly, another person emerged from the dense forest beside them—a towering, muscular woman. She was so burly that she looked like two strong men put together.

With a wide nose and face, fierce eyebrows, and large eyes, this shockingly mighty and domineering woman charged toward the four men.

The four men were startled, and the tranquility of the scene was shattered. It reminded them of where they were—the battlefield of the Competition of the Hundred Sects!

The burly woman carried a huge drum in her left hand. She even brought a stand to hold it up.[2] Yet, the drum looked like a mere toy in her hand.

She set it up on the ground with a bang.

In response, the four men made hand seals and tried to activate them, but the moment they circulated their foundational qi a little, they felt weak all over. Their Sea of Qi was blocked, and they couldn't muster any strength to fight.

The burly woman pulled out a thick purple-gold mallet with her right hand and struck the drum fiercely.

Boom.

The sound of the drum was like a clap of thunder, and in that moment, it was like an earthquake had struck. The burly woman smashed the purple-gold mallet down onto the Kui Ox Drum[3] with earth-shattering force.

The four men were sent flying dozens of zhang. With battered muscles and broken bones, blood poured from their orifices.

Before they could even think of fleeing, the notes of a flute rang out swiftly and fiercely, sending countless razor-like sonic blades flying with the wind. The sonic blades instantly sliced the four men to shreds, turning them into soul crystals.

"Heheheh!" The burly woman laughed loudly as she strode forward and collected the soul crystals. "With the addition of these four, we've gathered twenty soul crystals in just three days. The effect of Lingxue's 'Drunken Immortal Melody of Spring' was amazing!"

The blue-robed lady put away her guqin and walked over slowly. "It's all thanks to your Kui Ox Drum. I was merely supporting from the side."

Two more women emerged from the bamboo grove.

These four women were the South Melody Conservatory's core disciples: Xue Lingxue, Shen Qingyan, Yu Xiang'er, and Tie Chui[4], who had been specially trained to become a combat musician.

During the three days that these four women had spent in the illusory realm, they had been using the illusion effects of the "Drunken Immortal Melody of Spring" to lure people into the black bamboo grove and then swiftly kill them.

The South Melody Conservatory team had seamless teamwork, and their tactic was simple and straightforward. If Tie Chui's attack and Shen Qingyan's follow-up attack didn't finish off their opponents, Yu Xiang'er would wait for the right timing to launch a surprise attack on them from the dense forest.

The common perception was that musicians weren't skilled in combat, but truly gifted musicians were terrifying existences. Regardless of whether they cultivated combat-type or support-type divine skills, most of those divine skills were meant to be used in groups. The more people there were involved in the battle, the more powerful the effects would be.

"Okay, Lingxue, no need to be so modest," Shen Qingyan said with a smile. "You'll always be our best support member that we can never do without."

"Especially when you're going for a matchmaking session, right?" Xue Lingxue replied with a grin.

"Oh, come on." Shen Qingyan blushed. "I didn't have a choice."

Xue Lingxue teased, "So you had to make me the bad guy and get me to offend the future crown prince."

The four young women walked back into the bamboo grove, chatting and laughing.

As it turned out, Shen Qingyan and Xue Lingxue were the closest among the four core disciples of the South Melody Conservatory. When their sect arranged for Shen Qingyan to attend the banquet

at the Celestial Observatory Pavilion to meet the Second Prince, Shen Qingyan had been unable to refuse, so she brought Xue Lingxue along.

She had specifically asked Xue Lingxue to help stop the Second Prince from getting too close to her. If Xue Lingxue could not do it, then Shen Qingyan would need an excuse to leave without disrespecting the imperial family or placing herself in a difficult position.

...

After the South Melody Conservatory's team concluded their battle, the scene that was being shown on the projection shifted to another location.

The spectators at the foot of the mountain shouted with dissatisfaction.

"We want to see Shen Qingyan!"

"Just stay focused on the South Melody Conservatory! Who wants to watch those big men fight?"

"It would be nice even if we're just listening to Xue Lingxue play the guqin!"

The screen time for the South Melody Conservatory team had been pitifully short. Their fans made up a large proportion of the crowd, and many of them had been waiting for days just to catch a glimpse of their beloved young ladies. It was no surprise that they were disheartened when the focus shifted.

However, the South Melody Conservatory was not the main attraction in the Assembly of Immortal Sects, so Immortal Jiuyi paid no attention to those complaints. After all, there were plenty of chances to see beautiful women. Right now, he had more pressing matters to attend to.

No one had noticed that Immortal Jiuyi's expression grew increasingly tense as the Assembly of Immortal Sects progressed into its third day.

At this moment, the team from the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals was still drifting out at sea, casually playing mahjong.

Li Guanlong, their eldest senior brother, had covered his face with white strips of paper. He was sitting there, dozing off with mahjong tiles in his hands.

His junior brothers exchanged glances and sneakily craned their necks to peek at his tiles.

Suddenly, Li Guanlong opened his eyes and yelled, "I knew you'd try to peek while I was asleep! Caught you red-handed!"

His junior brothers panicked, scrambling their minds to defend themselves.

Right then, a thunderous voice rang in their ears. "Enough!"

"Sect Leader?"

As soon as they heard the voice, the disciples of Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals fell quiet, becoming more well behaved.

The voice in their ears belonged to their sect leader, Immortal Jiuyi.

However, sect elders were strictly forbidden from getting involved in the second round of the Assembly of Immortal Sects. As the master of the Divine Mirror, Immortal Jiuyi was supposed to be a mere observer. Just speaking to his disciples was a violation of the rules.

"According to the rules, I shouldn't be speaking to you, but there's an urgent matter I need you to handle," Immortal Jiuyi said. "I suspect someone has infiltrated the illusory realm. They are capable of evading my detection, so I can't see what they're doing. Go search for any strange occurrences. Notify me immediately if you find anything."

Immortal Jiuyi had sensed something was amiss from the start, but now that feeling was growing stronger. He used his senses to scan all of the illusory realm in an instant, yet he still couldn't detect anything unusual.

If there were indeed strange occurrences, it could only mean one thing: the person causing them was capable of blocking his senses. That meant they were at least as powerful as he was.

Immortal Jiuyi did not want to prematurely interrupt the Assembly of Immortal Sects, so he decided to send his sect's disciples to investigate. This way, he could confirm if something strange was happening without avoiding alarming the intruder.

If the intruder truly was a powerful cultivator of Immortal Jiuyi's level, that would explain why they could evade Immortal Jiuyi's detection. However, since the intruder was inside the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, their cultivation level was probably suppressed by a realm due to the maximum cultivation level that was allowed inside the illusory realm. So, even though Immortal Jiuyi couldn't see the intruder from outside the illusory realm, his disciples who were inside the illusory realm might be able to.

If some evil force intended to cause trouble on the Emperor's Mound during this time, it would be sheer suicide. Powerful cultivators of the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten had gathered there for the Assembly of Immortal Sects. This union of righteous forces was powerful enough to make any force of evil tremble in fear.

Nonetheless, since this illusory realm was constructed inside the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, the intruder could be interfering with the event from a remote location. If Immortal Jiuyi hastily and aggressively intervened, the intruder could easily escape by swiftly leaving the illusory realm.

Upon hearing Immortal Jiuyi's instructions, the disciples of the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals stopped playing around and became serious. Once their sect leader was done talking, they all stood up.

They had been playing mahjong on the sea for days, but they weren't weaklings who had retreated to the sea out of fear. If they needed to act, they would do it without much hesitation.

Li Guanlong said, "Sect Leader has given us an order. We mustn't slack off. Let's check the entire illusory realm quickly."

"Eldest Senior Brother, I don't think we need to go to all that trouble," Zhuge Guanxing replied, raising his hand and pointing toward a shore in the distance. "We should start by checking there."

A massive black monster was rising on that distant shore.

#### Chapter 549: The Diabolical Forces' Scheme

"I just knew it would be best if it's the two of us. My senior and junior brothers are either injured or ill. But us—we have gone through life-and-death experiences together. We're true friends! If you

ask me what true friends are... Well, it's just like what people say. The gain or loss of power and influence will reveal whether your friendship is genuine, and your loyalty will be tested in the face of death...[1]"

Chu Liang and Pushan skimmed low over the plains, flying side by side. Throughout the journey, Pushan kept up his usual chatter, causing Chu Liang's brain to quiver incessantly.

Chu Liang had agreed to accompany him because no one in the Buddhist Cloud Monastery was willing to join Pushan as a scout. Having already been coldly ignored for a day, Pushan just looked so pitiful.

Seeing that, Chu Liang felt sorry for Pushan. Furthermore, seeing as he couldn't rest easy if someone else did the scouting anyway, Chu Liang reluctantly agreed to accompany Pushan. However, he regretted it soon after.

He couldn't help but wish Luo Yao were there. She had a way of shutting down Pushan's chatter at just the right moments. Thinking about that now, Chu Liang realized that was a skill in itself.

He couldn't help but hope for enemies to appear—anything to interrupt Pushan's relentless chatter.

At the next moment, someone appeared in the distance, entering the range of his divine sense. It was as if the heavens had heard Chu Liang's prayer.

Chu Liang quickly said, "Someone's coming,"

Chu Liang and Pushan sped forward, swiftly entering the range of the other party's divine sense.

Unexpectedly, the other party didn't intend to fight.

Instead, they turned and fled, shouting, "It's Chu Liang from Mount Shu!"

They bolted away into the distance.

"Heeey!" Chu Liang called out.

He and Pushan hurriedly gave chase.

When Chu Liang was flying on his sword, it was difficult for anyone within his line of sight to escape. Yet, he only managed to catch that person and secure his soul crystal. As for that person's teammates, they had long since scattered without a trace.

"Why did they run off...?" Chu Liang wondered. "Since they sent someone to scout ahead, they must've been looking to hunt for soul crystals. But the moment the scout saw me, he bolted. I guess he must've recognized me."

"Indeed." Pushan nodded. "You've made quite a name for yourself; you're as well known as the top prodigies of the immortal sects. The members of ordinary small sects would definitely be cautious if they recognized you."

This was based on his reputation from before the second round of the assembly started. If word were to get out that Chu Liang had single-handedly defeated three teams, even more people would fear him.

If the opposing teams kept fleeing at the sight of Chu Liang, that meant he would only be able to catch and kill the scouts, not wipe out entire teams. That was, of course, the whole reason they sent scouts in the first place.

"Hmm..." Chu Liang murmured, thinking for a moment. Then he said, "I guess we should disguise ourselves."

He put on a black robe with a habitual swiftness. Seeing that, Pushan put on his own black robe.

Their black robes, specially made of Aura-Concealing Muslin, instantly made them look like members of a diabolical sect. The righteous aura of the young heroes was replaced by something far more sinister. They were true professionals.

Chu Liang explained, "This way, they won't recognize us from afar. Once a large group surrounds us, the soul crystals will be ours."

Pushan chuckled. "Haven't worn this robe in a while. Feels kind of nostalgic."

They continued scouting the area in their black robes, flying for a long time before finally encountering another person. This time, it was a woman. Her slim and graceful figure was visible even from a distance. Chu Liang thought that the woman looked rather familiar, but he couldn't remember who she was.

Nevertheless, Chu Liang didn't dwell on it. After all, he had many acquaintances in the various immortal sects. It was possible they had met at the Mount Shu Summit or another event. Regardless, now that they were in the Competition of the Hundred Sects, anyone who wasn't an ally was an enemy.

Chu Liang and Pushan went straight over to the woman. She did not flee; instead, she moved toward them.

Chu Liang was just about to make a move and pretend to be overpowered.

Unexpectedly, when the woman saw him, she called out, "Esteemed senior!"

"Hm?"

"Chu Liang uttered, taken aback by the woman's form of address for him. He stared blankly at her for a moment before hesitantly yelling back, "It's you?"

...

Actually, Chu Liang had no idea who the woman was.

Nonetheless, when they moved closer to talk, Chu Liang finally recognized her face. It was Enchantress Yi from the Scarlet-Robe Hall.

Yi Qiushui's physique hadn't changed, but she had put on some makeup, and her skin was a different shade. She looked significantly different from the last time he saw her; it was like she was a different person. Yi Qiushui wasn't using an illusion technique though. She had simply used makeup to change her appearance, and she had become nearly unrecognizable.

Participants in the Assembly of Immortal Sects had to undergo strict inspections, so the imperial court officials and sect elders overseeing the events would have detected any use of illusion techniques early on. However, the method Yi Qiushui used made it easy for her to deceive them.

The simplest infiltration tasks only needed the most basic disguise.

Yi Qiushui she had only recently emerged into the martial world and hadn't made many public appearances yet. There were only a few righteous cultivators knew who she was, so it was easy for her to slip in unnoticed.

Chu Liang was curious about her purpose for being there.

"Esteemed senior, why haven't you gone to see my teacher?" Yi Qiushui complained. "You promised to visit her. She has waited for you for so long."

Pushan blinked. "Something like that happened?"

Pushan had seen Yi Qiushui before and knew she was the disciple of the Scarlet-Robe Hall's master, but this was a total surprise...

Chu Liang felt rather awkward. I did agree to meet her, but she's expecting someone else. How am I supposed to explain that to you?

So, all he could say was, "I've been busy lately."

"Hmph..." Yi Qiushui scoffed, angry on her teacher's behalf. She wasn't going to let him off so easily.

Chu Liang quickly changed the subject. "What are you doing here?"

"My teacher sent me here. We received word that the West Sea Diabolical Forces are plotting to seize the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams! She sent me to check things out."

Pushan gasped. "Eh?"

Chu Liang was just as surprised, but he didn't show it.

Instead, he calmly asked, "You know about this too?"

"Esteemed senior, you know about this too?" Yi Qiushui asked right back. Without waiting for an answer, she continued, "Of course, it makes sense. With your remarkable divine abilities, it's only natural you'd know."

Chu Liang shot Pushan a glance.

Then Pushan said, "This is a serious matter. Enchantress Yi, what information do you have? Perhaps you could confirm the intel with... our esteemed senior."

The three undercover agents—Chu Liang, Pushan, and Luo Yao—had worked together for so long that they could understand each other with just one glance.

Yi Qiushui shared the information with them. "The West Sea Diabolical Forces are making a big move this time. Immortal Yuan Lu contacted many sects, urging them to participate in the Assembly of Immortal Sects to infiltrate the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams. He plans to invade the illusory realm and seize control of the Divine Mirror from within it."

That sounded far-fetched, so Chu Liang exchanged another glance with Pushan.

Pushan asked, "The Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams is no ordinary treasure. Can it really be taken like that?"

Yi Qiushui explained, "That involves one of the Diabolical Forces' secrets."

She then shared more details, and Chu Liang and Pushan finally understood how Immortal Yuan Lu was going to take control of the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams.

The "Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures" had only mentioned that the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams was a treasure that had fallen from the immortal realm. However, it didn't explain that when the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals discovered it, it was just a damaged Eight Trigram Compass that could connect the real and illusory worlds. Although the compass was mysterious and profound enough to be considered a legendary artifact, it didn't possess the immense power that made it worthy of being ranked third in the catalog.

At that time that the Eight Trigram Compass was discovered, Evil Dragon Mountain was at the height of its power within the Diabolical Forces. A second Diabolical Emperor emerged from that sect, wielding the Diabolical Divine Mirror—an absurdly powerful artifact capable of reflecting everything in the world.

After the second Demon Emperor perished, the new sect leader of Evil Dragon Mountain used the Diabolical Divine Mirror to fight against the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals and their Eight Trigram Compass. Ultimately, the wielders of the two artifacts both perished in the battle, and the two artifacts fused together before falling into the illusory realm.

The Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals later recovered this fused artifact, known now as the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams. With the artifact upgraded to legendary status, the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals flourished.

Evil Dragon Mountain, on the other hand, fell from glory and failed to rise back up again. The biggest reason was losing their most powerful legendary artifact.

Since then, whenever eighth-realm righteous cultivators carried legendary artifacts to the West Sea, the West Sea Diabolical Forces would run like the wind, as they had been unable to regain their former strength.

The Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals didn't want their legendary artifact to be associated with the Diabolical Forces, so they kept it a secret. Once enough time had passed, there wouldn't be anyone left who knew about it.

By the time the Celestial Pivot Pavilion established the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures, the battle between the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals and the Evil Dragon Mountain had become ancient history, and no records had been made of it.

The Evil Dragon Mountain never publicly revealed that they had lost their legendary artifact, but they had always harbored the desire to reclaim their Divine Mirror. Now, they wanted to seize the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams by infiltrating the illusory realm inside it. That meant that they had likely found some way to reclaim control of the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams.

However, if Evil Dragon Mountain were to regain possession of the Divine Mirror, the Dark King Sect's already unstable position as the most dominant sect in the Diabolical Forces would be in jeopardy. That was why the Dark King Sect sent someone to investigate the situation.

Chu Liang frowned.

Why is this happening during this Assembly of Immortal Sects?

This plan to infiltrate the illusory realm inside the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams and seize control of the mirror... sounded far-fetched, but it didn't seem impossible.

The Great Dao of Reality and Illusion was profoundly mysterious. This situation sounded like a hacker planting a virus in a computer to take it over. The difference was that a hacker couldn't physically steal the computer. However, if someone had control over the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, it would be an easy feat for them to instantly summon the mirror from thousands of li away.

While the three people were talking, a deep rumble reverberated through the ground from afar, and an ancient and malevolent aura surged into the sky.

Chu Liang looked up and saw a massive black shadowy form rise from the distant shore!

It was a mountain.

Yet, as the mountain rose higher, the rocks, earth, and trees on it quickly fell off. The mountain was shaking... No, it wasn't simply shaking—it was shaking off the earth and rocks clinging to it.

Boom! Rumble, rumble...

As the rocks and earth rained down, a part of the mountain's core was revealed. It was pitch-black as if it had been forged from iron.

Rumble, rumble, rumble...

More and more of the mountain's massive core was unearthed until most of it was visible. It looked like an enormous whale rising into the sky. The whale was covered in countless wounds. The deepest one was an injury that ran through its head.

Is that Black Whale Mountain?

Chu Liang suddenly recalled a legend he had heard a long time ago. It said that Black Whale Mountain had been formed from the corpse of the Black Devil Whale.

Could the legend really be true?

That very mountain had returned to life inside this illusory realm!

The enormous Black Devil Whale hovered overhead, stretching across the sky. Finally seeing daylight again after so long, the Black Devil Whale unleashed the fury that had been silently accumulating within it for thousands of years.

"RAAAAAAR!!!"

Chapter 550: How Noisy

When Li Guanlong and his teammates arrived at the coastline, the massive black whale had already risen into the sky, leaving behind a colossal crater in the ground, casting a terrifying shadow.

Beneath the giant whale, about a dozen figures had gathered. They were the factions of the West Sea Diabolical Forces who had been summoned to infiltrate the illusory realm.

Immortal Yuan Lu descended from the sky and was saying something to them.

This scene, however, could not be seen by those outside the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams. If Immortal Jiuyi were to observe Black Whale Mountain right now, he would see it as barren and unchanged.

Fortunately, Immortal Jiuyi was vigilant enough.

At this moment, he was looking at the scene through Li Guanlong's perspective. Immediately, he recognized the instigator of this upheaval. "Immortal Yuan Lu?"

Immortal Jiuyi said in a calm and deep voice, "He lacks true understanding of the Great Dao of Reality and Illusion. The fact that he managed to infiltrate the illusory realm showed that someone more powerful must have helped him. Clearly, he infiltrated the illusory realm to awaken the spirit of the Diabolical Divine Mirror that has long been suppressed and reclaim control of the Divine

Mirror. I will find ways to crack his defense so that my power can manifest within the mirror. Until then, you must do all you can to stop him..."

"Understood!" Song Guanchao shouted as he leaped into the air.

Whoosh—

He transformed into a streak of swordlight, flying toward the enemy as he yelled, "Die, devil!"

Immortal Yuan Lu glanced up nonchalantly at the approaching swordlight and, with a calm gesture, raised his hand.

Boom—

Song Guanchao erupted in mid-air like a falling meteor, his body obliterated in an instant, leaving only a small soul crystal that slowly drifted to the ground.

"I wasn't finished..." Immortal Jiuyi continued. "Immortal Yuan Lu wields the power of a seventh-realm cultivator within this illusory realm, so facing him head-on would be a death sentence. However, while he's awakening the spirit of the mirror, he must focus and circulate qi within his body, rendering him unable to move. That is your moment to strike from the side. His diabolical followers will likely be guarding him during this process. Your mission is to eliminate them when he starts circulating qi in his body."

"As long as you can disturb him and slow down the awakening process, giving me enough time to channel my power into the illusory realm, we can destroy him. But if he manages to awaken the spirit of the Diabolical Divine Mirror before then, there is a risk of us losing the Divine Mirror..."

When the legendary artifact, the Eight Trigram Compass, and the Diabolical Divine Mirror merged, their spirits were equally matched in strength.

However, since the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals retrieved the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams first, they suppressed the spirit of the Diabolical Divine Mirror, transforming the combined artifact into a righteous legendary treasure.

If Immortal Yuan Lu were to successfully awaken the suppressed spirit, there would indeed be a chance that the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams could transform into a diabolical artifact.

This had been a closely guarded secret within Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals.

It was precisely because of this risk that they kept the true origin of the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams a secret.

For Immortal Yuan Lu to achieve this, it was likely that an Eminent One skilled in the Great Dao of Reality and Illusion had assisted him. There must have also been someone with deep knowledge of the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals, providing him with inside information.

Immortal Jiuyi didn't expect his disciples to truly stop Immortal Yuan Lu; even though Immortal Yuan Lu's power was suppressed to the seventh realm, he was still an existence that they could not challenge.

The main fight was between Immortal Jiuyi and the Eminent One who had kept reality hidden with an illusion.

At this moment, even those who had attained the Heavenly Origin had no means to help as there was simply no way for them to take part in the battle happening inside the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams.

Only those disciples of the immortal sects within the illusory realm could help. If all the disciples joined forces and launched a coordinated attack, it would be far more effective than relying solely on the members of the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals. Though it would cause significant disruption to the Assembly of Immortal Sects, the risk of losing the sect's legendary artifact was a far more pressing concern.

At that moment, Situ Guanhai suddenly shouted, "Isn't that cheating?"

It turned out that Immortal Yuan Lu had leaped into the air and vanished into the gaping mouth of the Black Devil Whale!

In response, a streak of swordlight shot up from the ground, streaking into the distance with blinding speed.

When the enormous Black Devil Whale was alive, it had been a ferocious creature of the eighth realm. Even though it had been dead for over ten thousand years and was now revived within this illusory realm, it still retained near-seventh realm strength, and its physical durability remained unmatched.

It seemed that Immortal Yuan Lu would soon begin awakening the spirit of the Diabolical Divine Mirror.

It would have been manageable if they only had to deal with the diabolical cultivators protecting Immortal Yuan Lu.

But how could they even disturb him if he had hid himself inside the belly of the Black Devil Whale?

Damn it, why did we choose this place for the competition... Immortal Jiuyi cursed inwardly.

At the same time, he swiftly started sending a message to all the immortal sect disciples within the illusory realm.

Previously, Immortal Jiuyi had only summoned the disciples of Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals, as they were the ones facing the imminent risk of losing the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams. For the other righteous sects, this loss might not have been seen as a terrible outcome.

If Immortal Jiuyi spread word of the situation, there was no guarantee that some wouldn't seize the opportunity to implement their own schemes. But with the situation so dire, he had no choice now but to call upon every available force, despite the risks.

"To all disciples participating in the Competition of the Hundred Sects..."

...

Moments earlier, Chu Liang, Pushan, and Enchantress Yi had arrived at Black Whale Mountain, just in time to witness the massive beast soaring into the sky.

Enchantress Yi's eyes widened as she gazed at the figure descending from the Black Devil Whale. "It really is Immortal Yuan Lu!" she exclaimed.

Chu Liang fixed his gaze on the indifferent-looking middle-aged man. So, that's the sect leader of the Evil Dragon Mountain from the West Sea?

"What is he trying to do?" asked Monk Pushan.

Seeing that Immortal Yuan Lu was speaking to the surrounding diabolical cultivators, Chu Liang leaped forward, saying, "We'll know once we ask."

"Huh?" Enchantress Yi was startled. Although both were from diabolical sects, the Dark King Sect and the West Sea Diabolical Forces had never gotten along, and she didn't dare to approach.

How could he dare?

Out of a blind sense of trust, Enchantress Yi and Pushan followed him.

Had it been a righteous cultivator approaching, Immortal Yuan Lu would have obliterated them with a mere glance. But as Chu Liang drew closer, he made no move to stop him.

When righteous cultivators spot anomalies, they usually rush over with stern faces, shouting, frowning, and acting in haste.

But these individuals approached with shrouded faces, eerie auras, and a calm, unhurried pace.

Their demeanor clearly marked them as fellow members of the diabolical path.

Sure enough, as Chu Liang drew near, he cupped his hands and said, "Greetings to Sect Leader Yuan. I am a Fiend under the Violet Gold Marquess, sent here as an envoy to assist you."

Yuan Lu finally smiled. "It's good that the Violet Gold Marquess is willing to help."

Behind him, Enchantress Yi's pupils dilated in shock. So, Immortal Yuan Lu had managed to recruit the Violet Gold Marquess as well?

That would be a major move, causing internal strife within the sect and fracturing the power of the Dark King Sect from within.

Even though she was from the Dark King Sect, she hadn't known about this, yet her esteemed senior was already aware. How could anyone casually pose as a member of the Dark King Sect in front of the West Sea Diabolical Forces unless they had prepared thoroughly?

No wonder he was the man her teacher loved.

Clearly, his capabilities knew no limits.

What she didn't know was that Chu Liang had simply searched through his database of identities and chosen one that fit the situation perfectly.

It seemed so natural because... it was nothing but familiarity and practice at work.

Just when they thought they had successfully infiltrated, a voice suddenly called out: "Sect Leader Yuan! Don't trust him! He's definitely a lackey of the righteous path!"

All three of them felt their hearts skip a beat.

A red-haired youth leaped out from the side, shouting, "I remember him! He's the one who killed our Second Leader! I'd recognize him even if he turned to ashes!"

"Hmm?" Immortal Yuan Lu's gaze shifted sharply back to Chu Liang.

Chu Liang looked at the red-haired youth, feeling a bit confused.

When did I kill your Second Leader... Wait a minute... Could it be...

He suddenly recalled the unlucky fellow he had hacked to death with a cooking knife a few nights ago. That man had seemed like a diabolical cultivator from Bronze Demon Ridge in the West Sea.

What a mess... There was a witness?

If he hadn't been wearing this robe, the red-haired youth might not have recognized him. But dressed like this, he looked exactly as he had that night, making it easy for him to be identified.

After a brief pause, Chu Liang said with a sneer, "Hmph, I've killed too many people to remember. Who are you even talking about?"

"That night, I saw him and a woman kill our Second Leader and take a letter written by you, Sect Leader Yuan," the red-haired youth pressed on. "He must have gotten the information from that!"

"A fake one?" Yuan Lu's gaze sharpened as he looked at Chu Liang again.

Am I about to be exposed?

Hearing Chu Liang being questioned, both Pushan and Enchantress Yi exchanged nervous glances behind him, already contemplating whether to launch an attack.

At that moment, a sudden shout rang out from the distance: "Devil, meet your death!"

It was Song Guanchao, charging straight toward them.

Song Guanchao shot toward them fiercely on his glowing sword. Immortal Yuan Lu glanced at him casually, and with a mere flick of his hand, he effortlessly exploded him into nothingness.

This completely shattered any thought Chu Liang and his companions had of making a move right away.

Chu Liang paused for a moment, then suddenly let out a laugh.

"If you hold a grudge against me, there's no need to make a scene here. I will settle it with you once we are out of the illusory realm. We should not delay Sect Leader Yuan from more important matters.

"Sect Leader Yuan, if I had learned of this matter elsewhere, how could I have known about the letter you wrote to our marquess? Even if one could fake an identity, could this be faked?"

As he spoke, he raised a token. It was none other than the golden token of the Violet Gold Marquess.

Immortal Yuan Lu recognized the token instantly, and Chu Liang's explanation made sense. He nodded in agreement and said, "That's true. The Violet Gold Marquess has clearly put thought into this."

With that, Immortal Yuan Lu turned away, preparing to awaken the spirit of the Diabolical Divine Mirror.

But the red-haired youth refused to give up, shouting, "Sect Leader Yuan! He's definitely from the righteous sects. Our Second Leader died responding to your call, and you can't—"

Bang—

Before he could finish his sentence, his entire body suddenly erupted into a flash of black light, instantly obliterated.

"How noisy," Immortal Yuan Lu muttered, lightly furrowing his brow.

In truth, the red-haired youth was just another diabolical cultivator meant to guard him, someone of little importance. These people existed solely to buy him more time.

However, with the Black Devil Whale present, they were no longer important.

On the contrary, the envoy of the Violet Gold Marquess held great value, representing a significant force within the Dark King Sect.

When countering a formidable enemy like the Dark King Sect, internal attacks were a far more effective way to cripple the sect than external assaults.

Immortal Yuan Lu then said to the remaining people, "I need absolute peace to awaken the spirit of the Diabolical Divine Mirror. Once successful, I will have control of the Divine Mirror of the Eight

Trigrams. Your task is to kill any enemies that approach and guard this place. Do not let anyone disturb this area."

With that, he leapt into the mouth of the Black Devil Whale.

The remaining diabolical cultivators, seeing him disappear, quickly scattered and vanished. After all, they were no fools. What good would it do for them to stay and guard Immortal Yuan Lu? Even if he successfully reclaimed control of the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, his true form was far away at the ends of the earth, while they were right here, exposed at the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

If they had openly supported Immortal Yuan Lu, they would still be eliminated once everything was over.

So, they could only continue pretending to be righteous disciples participating in the Competition of the Hundred Sects, pretending to hunt for nearby soul crystals while secretly carrying out the task of guarding.

Pushan turned to Chu Liang and asked, "What should we do?"

"We have to stop him..." Chu Liang murmured.

Monk Pushan glanced up at the colossal Black Devil Whale looming in the sky, its body seemingly forged from meteoric iron, and couldn't help but say, "You're not joking, right?"