

M. Slaying 641

Chapter 641: We Hold Our Ground

Upon hearing that Du Wuhen had arrived at the Lei Family, Chu Liang immediately hid himself. If an old acquaintance recognized him, his plan to infiltrate the Lei Family would be ruined.

Unfortunately, it was Steward Wang who paid the price. When the Fierce Draconic Colt kicked him and sent him flying, everyone outside the enclosure fell silent for a moment.

Du Wuhen remained quiet, but Lei Ren's expression turned grim. "My subordinates were too eager to claim credit and ended up making a fool of themselves before you. Young Hero Du, let's move on to the next demonic beast."

Then he turned to a servant and instructed, "Take him to the city to see a physician. Let him return only after he's fully recovered... I don't want to see him any sooner."

Meanwhile, Fifth Young Master Lei Hou's expression betrayed a hint of delight.

He had been concerned about losing his horse, but who would have thought a single kick from the Fierce Draconic Colt would resolve the issue so neatly?

As the group moved on to inspect more demonic beasts, Chu Liang quietly returned to the courtyard at the back of the house. Just as he was about to settle in, he heard a faint sound coming from the mother horn.

"Huh?"

Out of curiosity, Chu Liang leaned in closer to listen.

The moment he did, a woman's startled cry rang out, "Ah!"

"..."

This familiar voice left Chu Liang momentarily speechless. Why is it her again? But isn't Mr. Fang inspecting the demonic beasts with Lei Ren right now?

"Why do you guys always like to do this in the master's study?" The woman's voice, as familiar as yesterday, carried the same casual tone.

"Us?" The man's voice, now rough and rugged, responded with a trace of confusion. "Who else?"

"Ah... What do you mean by who else? All you men are the same," the woman huffed. "Let go of me... Let's talk tonight. Master Lei will surely go out tonight; I'll come find you then."

"Don't worry. Master Lei is busy entertaining the guests from Thunderbolt Stronghold right now," the man said casually. "Tonight, I'll be accompanying him on some matters, so I won't be able to meet you."

"Hm?" The woman suddenly lowered her voice. "He's taking you along?"

"Yes. All the honored allies of the family that are at the fifth and sixth realm are going," the man replied. "Do you know what this is about?"

"Yesterday, I found a letter in his study," the woman whispered, leaning closer. "I sneaked a peek. It mentioned meeting someone at the Three Pines Crossroad on the cliff to trade for a valuable item. Since Master Lei has summoned you all, I think he is planning to..."

"He's planning to take the money without giving up the treasure?" the man interjected, catching on immediately.

"The person meeting him is after a treasure map. That map... I helped seal it with a secret technique back then." She paused, gritting her teeth before continuing, "And the price they've offered is astronomical—equivalent to the Lei Family's earnings from selling demonic beasts for years."

"You've done so much for him over the years," the man said. "And yet, Master Lei still treats you like this..."

"Hmph." The woman snorted coldly. "Back then, as a disciple of the Greater-Yin Cult, I agreed to marry him as a concubine, all because I believed his sweet lies. Who would have thought that over the years, he'd take in so many more concubines and only remember me when he needs something."

Hearing this, Chu Liang finally confirmed the woman's identity.

The Second Madam of the Lei Family was rumored to have once been a disciple of the Greater-Yin Cult. She was likely a less favored member; otherwise, they wouldn't have let her leave. After she left the Greater-Yin Sect, she fell in love with Lei Ren and, in a way, married beneath her status. Over the years, the Lei Family's growth had undoubtedly been bolstered by her connections and influence.

Even if seeking help from the Greater-Yin Cult was unlikely, her association with them was enough to make anyone plotting against the Lei Family think twice.

"Alright," the man said softly, trying to console her. "You still have me, don't you?"

"Honored Ally Chen..."

"You were calling me Daddy earlier, and now it's just Honored Ally Chen?" he teased.

"You're so annoying."

"..."

Chu Liang promptly shifted the mother horn aside, deciding he didn't need to hear the rest of their little performance.

At this point, it became clear to him that Lei Ren had no intention of conducting an honest trade. In that case, tonight's meeting was absolutely out of the question.

Anyway, It didn't matter. As long as the scroll was confirmed to be in the Lei Family's possession, everything was still under control.

He immediately sent a message to Jiang Yuebai, asking her to fetch the Whale-Riding Immortal.

Now that he was certain that the scroll was on Lei Guan, he was confident that the Whale-Riding Immortal would know exactly what to do once he got here.

And since the Lei Family had already prepared their trap for tonight, he decided to let them spring it on nothing but thin air.

I originally intended to use the ability of the wealthiest man on Mount Shu to strike a fair deal with you, he thought. But instead, you've responded with ambushes and schemes. Very well. I'll call on the powerful eighth-realm cultivator supporting me and reveal the truth to you in full.

...

The night was dark, and the wind howled ominously through the void.

On a towering cliff, three pine trees stood clustered together, their stark silhouettes forming an unusual and striking sight.

Amid the stillness of the night, a lone figure appeared, stepping into the shadowy clearing.

The figure was tall and slender, with a scythe strapped to his back—it was none other than Du Wuhen, a disciple of Thunderbolt Stronghold.

Earlier that day, Du Wuhen had visited the Lei Family estate, selecting fewer than ten young spirit beasts with potential. He was still short by two or three. Lei Ren had assured him that the remaining beasts could be sourced nearby.

Though there were other merchants dealing in demonic beasts outside the Abyss of Barbarian Wilderness, none could rival the scale and reputation of the Lei Family's business.

Unwilling to search for the remaining beasts himself, Du Wuhen had entrusted the task entirely to Lei Ren.

He planned to remain at the Lei Family's estate for two days, giving them time to gather the required number of demonic beasts before he departed.

But after tonight's banquet, he unexpectedly received a secret letter.

The letter claimed to be from another family selling demonic beasts in Cliffhold Bastion. It accused Lei Ren of skimming off a hefty cut as the middleman and proposed a direct trade with Du Wuhen, suggesting a meeting on the cliffs outside the Residence of the Lei Family.

Du Wuhen arrived as agreed.

But when he got there, the area was eerily empty.

Du Wuhen felt puzzled and decided to wait for a while.

What he failed to notice was the group of sharp-eyed figures hidden among the rugged boulders in the distance.

"Senior Brother Feng, the target has arrived," one of them whispered.

Feng Chaoyang, leading the Celestial King Sect team, remained hidden in the shadows.

Knowing that Du Wuhen would surely notice if they had been too close, they positioned themselves at a safe distance and projected a view of the scene from afar using a head-sized enchanted orb.

Under the pale moonlight, Du Wuhen's dark silhouette almost disappeared into the night, like a scythe cloaked in shadow, swaying gently in the breeze.

"The bastard took the bait," Feng Chaoyang muttered, clenching his fist.

After obtaining information on Du Wuhen's movements through secret channels, the Celestial King Sect team had set their trap near the residence of the Lei Family well in advance. As expected, Du Wuhen appeared, falling right into their carefully planned scheme.

Feng Chaoyang was just about to give the order to close in when the light from the enchanted orb flickered. It revealed several figures descending from the sky and landing quietly behind Du Wuhen, quickly concealing themselves among the shadows.

"Senior Brother Feng, it looks like there's an ambush," someone immediately warned.

"Indeed..." Feng Chaoyang's eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the unexpected arrivals. They had not been part of his calculations. Unlike his younger, brash self, he now refrained from acting on impulse. "It seems he didn't come unprepared after all."

"What should we do?" a junior brother behind him asked.

Feng Chaoyang studied the orb's projection. The people who arrived radiated powerful auras—likely cultivators at the seventh realm.

After a moment of tense silence, Feng Chaoyang raised his hand, signaling for calm. "We hold our ground."

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Meanwhile, the head of the Lei Family, Lei Ren, crouched behind a cluster of jagged rocks with three or four trusted allies, each possessing considerable cultivation. Their expressions were tense as they observed the unfolding scene with utmost caution.

"Master Lei, it's someone from Thunderbolt Stronghold!" Chen Huang, the family's chief honored ally, whispered urgently.

With his rugged face and towering frame, Chen Huang was the Lei Family's second strongest, surpassed only by Lei Ren himself. In battle, Lei Ren relied on him more than anyone else. Naturally, for an operation of such importance, his presence was a given.

"This isn't surprising," said Fang Zizai, another honored ally, a faint smile playing on his lips. "As soon as we learned Thunderbolt Stronghold was on the move, Master Lei received that letter. The timing is no coincidence. Their purpose here is clearly not what it seems."

Fang Zizai, with his refined demeanor and cultivation at the fifth realm, was renowned for his sharp intellect and strategic mind.

Together, these two—one a master of intellect, the other a paragon of strength—were Lei Ren's most trusted confidants.

"No matter how skilled Du Wuhen is, he's only at the peak of the sixth realm. If we all attack together, he won't stand a chance," Chen Huang said confidently.

"Brother Chen, don't be so impulsive," Fang Zizai warned. "We might succeed in capturing him, but can we handle the full retaliation of the Thunderbolt Stronghold? They already know that what they're after is with the Lei Family. At this point, we're left with only two options."

"What options?" Chen Huang asked.

Fang Zizai smiled and said, "At this point, we either fight or negotiate. If we fight, the entire family will have to abandon everything and flee. If we negotiate, we take their money and retreat."

Lei Ren listened in silence. With a flick of his sleeve, he said, "This place isn't safe. Let's return to the residence and discuss further."

"Not making a move anymore?" Chen Huang asked hurriedly.

If we aren't going to act, what was the point of coming all this way? Chen Huang thought. The more he dwelled on it, the more his impatience grew.

Lei Ren shot him a sharp glare and said firmly, "We hold our ground."

Chapter 642: Zhuo Yuxiang

"Wifey."

Lei Ren soon pushed open the door to his second wife Zhuo Yuxiang's chamber.

A beautiful woman in a purple gauze dress emerged from behind the screen. Upon seeing Lei Ren, she rolled her eyes slightly, let out a soft huff, and turned away.

It seemed like she didn't want to see Lei Ren at all.

"Wifey..." Lei Ren forced a smile as he approached her. "Why the cold shoulder? It's been so long since I've seen you."

"So you do know it's been a long time?" Zhuo Yuxiang retorted sharply. "Do you even remember how many days it's been since you last came here?"

"Haven't I just been busy lately?" Lei Ren replied. "Come now, wifey, there's no need to act so distant. I know what you've been doing in the study every day."

"Huh?" Zhuo Yuxiang's eyebrows arched sharply. "Know what?"

"The servants have told me," Lei Ren said with a knowing smile. "Whenever they go to clean the study, they see you arranging my desk, straightening the chairs, wiping down the pillars, and even dusting the windowsills..." He paused, his tone softening. "It's obvious you've been thinking of me."

With every spot he mentioned, Zhuo Yuxiang's expression flickered. Only when he finished speaking did her gaze finally soften.

After a brief silence, she extended a finger and poked his chest. "You heartless man! How often have you visited me over the past few years? When I miss you, where else can I go but the study?"

"These past few years, I've been so focused on strengthening the Lei Family's foundation that I've truly neglected you," Lei Ren admitted with a sigh. "That's entirely my fault."

"Strengthening the foundation?" Zhuo Yuxiang shot back. Her expression turned pointedly emotional as she added, "In these past few years, you've taken thirteen concubines for the sake of the Lei Family. You must be absolutely exhausted."

"..." Lei Ren fell silent for a moment.

When Zhuo Yuxiang, a disciple of the Greater-Yin Cult, had agreed to marry him—a noble son from a border family in the Western Regions. Lei Ren had been deeply moved by that. In their early years together, she had indeed been a great help to him.

However, as time went on, Zhuo Yuxiang grew increasingly arrogant from his favor. She showed no respect to the First Madam and often disregarded him as well, frequently losing her temper regardless of the situation. This strained their relationship, and Lei Ren began to avoid her whenever possible.

While Zhuo Yuxiang felt wronged, Lei Ren harbored his grievances as well.

Even if you're a disciple of the Greater-Yin Cult, what's so special about that? he thought. When you came of age, you were expected to leave the sect and experience the world—there was no place for you to stay there forever. As for the Lei Family, though we are not an ancient clan, we're still a powerful household, and I was the heir. By any measure, we were more than a good match. Why do you act like you're above it all? Who would want to tolerate that attitude?

Of course, he couldn't say that aloud. Instead, he cautiously softened his tone and coaxed her, "Wifey, don't say such things. No matter how many women are in this household, you will always be the one I hold dearest in my heart."

"Alright, alright," Zhuo Yuxiang said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Just get to the point—what do you want this time?"

"Years ago, you used the secret arts of the Greater-Yin Cult to help my father imprint a map onto Guan'er's back, protecting it from prying eyes," Lei Ren began, speaking slowly and deliberately. "Now, the time has come to retrieve that map."

"Oh?" Zhuo Yuxiang raised an eyebrow, though she already knew what he was referring to. Feigning surprise, she asked, "And why now?"

"Someone is offering an astronomical price for it," Lei Ren explained. "And they aren't just wealthy—they're powerful. After much deliberation, I've realized that since they've approached us, they must already have reliable information. If we refuse to sell, we'd have no choice but to move the entire family to a place where they can't find us, and that would be no easy feat."

He paused, then added, "Besides, the map is only a fragment. It's been useless to us all these years. Why not sell it and secure a fortune for the family?"

"That is indeed a good idea," Zhuo Yuxiang nodded in agreement. "We haven't been able to find the other parts of the map. What's the point of keeping it?"

"It's just a pity," Lei Ren sighed. "The map is said to lead to the Immortals' Storehouse, which holds secrets to transcendence. Its value cannot be measured in spirit stones."

"Such things aren't meant for us to hold onto," Zhuo Yuxiang said with a faint smile.

"Exactly," Lei Ren agreed with a nod.

Even a powerful sect like the Thunderbolt Stronghold wouldn't dare speak of the Immortals' Storehouse openly, conducting negotiations only in the utmost secrecy.

Not even the powerful sects of the Terrestrial Ten could endure the calamity that the mere mention of the legendary Immortals' Storehouse would bring—let alone a small family like the Lei Family.

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"Father, Second Mother..."

Lei Guan looked at the two people who had suddenly come to her room in the middle of the night. She was a bit puzzled, not knowing what had happened.

"Don't worry, Guan'er. We're here to remove the thing on your back," Lei Ren said gently.

Lei Guan's eyes lit up. Since childhood, she had known there was something unusual on her back, though she never fully understood its significance. Hearing that it could finally be removed, she felt an immediate sense of relief.

Lei Ren gently pressed his hand on her shoulder, and Lei Guan immediately lost consciousness.

"Master, please step back," Zhuo Yuxiang said.¹¹

Stepping forward, Zhuo Yuxiang carefully pulled back Lei Guan's clothing, revealing her fair, smooth back. A distinct red line, resembling a scar, ran down the center.

Swish—

Zhuo Yuxiang formed several hand seals, her fingers shifting in intricate movements. Finally, she pressed two fingers onto the red line with a soft hiss.

The red line split open, revealing a radiant glow. From within, a white light emerged, unfolding like a scroll to expose a piece of the golden map. Then, Zhuo Yuxiang pinched the golden scroll between her fingers.

Whoosh—

In an instant, the glow faded, and the red line disappeared entirely, leaving Lei Guan's back smooth and unblemished as though nothing had ever been there.

Zhuo Yuxiang carefully covered Lei Guan with a blanket before turning to face Lei Ren. She handed him the fragment of the map and said softly, "When I helped your father seal this map, we had only just married. And now, more than ten years have passed in the blink of an eye."

"These years must have been hard on you, my dear," Lei Ren said, taking her hand in his.

That night, he naturally stayed in Second Madam's room and left at dawn. After he left, Zhuo Yuxiang quickly got dressed and went straight to Fang Zizai.

"Second Madam?" Fang Zizai greeted her with a mix of surprise and caution, hastily closing the door after glancing around to ensure no one was nearby.

"I just want to ask you one question," Zhuo Yuxiang said. "If I asked you to elope with me, would you say yes?"

"Ah..." Fang Zizai was taken aback. "Elope? Leave the Lei Family?" He hesitated, then added, "If it meant being with you, of course, I would. But we—"

"That's all I needed to know," Zhuo Yuxiang said immediately. "Do you know who came to trade last night?"

"Yes," Fang Zizai said with a nod. "It was Du Wuhen from Thunderbolt Stronghold."

"So it's him... no wonder this happened as soon as he arrived," Zhuo Yuxiang murmured thoughtfully. She lifted her gaze to Fang Zizai and continued, "I've already prepared a fake map and given it to Lei Ren. The real map is still with me. If Lei Ren asks you to arrange the time for

tonight's transaction, suggest it be during the third night watch period[1]. Meanwhile, I'll meet with Du Wuhen during the second night watch period[2] to close the deal."

She then added, "Once I get the money, we'll leave this place behind and start fresh. Who knows? We might even build another Lei Family from scratch—one that's truly ours."

"The real map to the Immortals' Storehouse is with you?"

Fang Zizai was shocked by her words. However, as he mulled over her words, he realized it was doable.

For years, he had served the Lei Family, driven only by the promise of money and resources. If this was his chance to become the master of his own family, why wouldn't he take it?

After a brief moment of thought, he said, "Okay! I'll go with you!"

"Then, during the second night watch period, wait for me at the start of the road leading up the Western-Facing Mountain," Zhuo Yuxiang instructed. "Once the transaction is done, I'll come to you immediately."

After finalizing the plan with Fang Zizai, Zhuo Yuxiang didn't return to her room. Instead, she made her way to another honored ally's courtyard.

"Yuxiang, why are you here?" Chen Huang was surprised to see her.

She wouldn't normally come so openly.

Zhuo Yuxiang, wasting no time, asked directly, "I just want to know—are you willing to run away with me?"

"Ah?" Chen Huang froze in place, his reaction almost mirroring Fang Zizai's earlier.

"I already have the real map to the Immortals' Storehouse. Tonight, I'll make the trade with the representative from Thunderbolt Stronghold before Lei Ren," Zhuo Yuxiang said bluntly. "After I get the money, would you be willing to leave with me?"

"This... this..." Chen Huang stammered, nervously rubbing his hands. "Of course, I'd be willing!"

"Good," Zhuo Yuxiang said with a nod. "During the second night watch period tonight, release all the demonic beasts in the garden to create chaos in the residence. Then wait for me at the entrance of the East Mountain. After the transaction is completed, I'll meet you there, and we'll leave together."

"Okay!" Chen Huang agreed eagerly.

After meeting with these two, Zhuo Yuxiang made her way to the guest room where Du Wuhen was staying.

At this moment, Du Wuhen was still touring the Residence of the Lei Family with Lei Ren and the other family members, so she couldn't meet him directly. Instead, she left a letter in his room.

The thing you want is with me. Tonight, during the second night watch period, meet me at the same place as last night. Bring the money, and we'll make the trade. Everyone else is deceiving you, except for me.

Chapter 643: Go All the Way or Not At All

In the evening, Whale-Riding Immortal finally arrived at Cliffhold Bastion.

"The last piece of the Divine Ruins' scroll has been confirmed to be in Lei Ren's hands," Chu Liang reported as he greeted the Whale-Riding Immortal and Jiang Yuebai outside the Lei Family Residence.

"Good," Whale-Riding Immortal said, giving him an approving glance.

Although tracking down the Lei Family was the result of years of investigation, things always seemed to go more smoothly when Chu Liang was involved.

It couldn't all be a coincidence.

"What should we do now?" Chu Liang asked.

With the Whale-Riding Immortal present, it wasn't his place to make the final call.

"We'll go directly, but let's keep it discreet," the Whale-Riding Immortal replied with a smile.

As long as the scroll's location was confirmed, with his cultivation and abilities, there were countless ways he could retrieve it.

"Then I'll go fetch my friend," Chu Liang said with a grin, parting ways with the father and daughter for the time being.

He had promised to take the Fierce Draconic Colt with him when he left, and now it was time to fulfill that promise.

Chu Liang made his way to the beast enclosure, expecting it to be a simple task to free the colt. However, as he approached, he noticed an unexpected visitor lingering nearby.

Chen Huang, an honored ally of the Lei Family, stood before the enclosure, his intentions uncertain. But the moment he noticed Chu Liang approaching, his eyes narrowed sharply, and he barked, "Get lost!"

To him, a lowly enclosure servant wasn't even worth the trouble.

As long as he released all the demonic beasts, he could leave.

Chu Liang hesitated. Chen Huang's cultivation level wasn't low. Even if Chu Liang could win in a fight, the inevitable noise would draw unwanted attention—directly contradicting the Whale-Riding Immortal's instructions to keep things quiet.

It might be best to wait and see what Chen Huang was up to.

Before Chu Liang could leave, he saw Chen Huang raise his hand and cast a flash of light, deactivating the restriction formation in front of Fierce Draconic Colt.

Huh? Chu Liang was stunned. Turns out he's on my side?

Chen Huang didn't stop there. As soon as the Fierce Draconic Colt was freed, he leaped forward, making his way toward the next beast enclosure, releasing them one by one.

"Neeigh~"

The Fierce Draconic Colt trotted out of the enclosure, its body ablaze like a ball of fire. It galloped toward Chu Liang and nuzzled him affectionately.

Chu Liang chuckled, running his hand through its fiery mane. "I told you I'd come for you. Wait for me at the entrance to the mountain outside. I'll be there soon."

Chu Liang had only intended to free Fierce Draconic Colt, but Chen Huang ended up releasing all the beasts. He was even more ruthless than Chu Liang.

Roars echoed through the estate as the beasts scattered. The Fierce Draconic Colt, heeding Chu Liang's command, ignited in flames and galloped out of the Lei Family Residence.

Chu Liang made his way to the familiar study to check on Whale-Riding Immortal's progress.

A restriction had been placed outside the study, sealing off light and sound. Inside the study, the atmosphere felt oddly calm.

"Esteemed senior, then it's settled," Lei Ren said with a flattering smile.

"Good," Whale-Riding Immortal replied with a smile. "Hand over the Divine Ruins scroll, and I will protect your family three times. It's a bargain you won't regret."

Lei Ren nodded repeatedly. "Of course."

Moments earlier, the sudden arrival of this unfamiliar eighth-realm cultivator in his study had left Lei Ren paralyzed with fear.

The man had wasted no time, declaring his intent to claim the scroll. Lei Ren, of course, denied possessing it, but Whale-Riding Immortal had simply pointed out that the scroll was on Lei Ren's person.

When Lei Ren saw that the man had come prepared, he realized that any attempt to resist or fight back was pointless.

Fortunately, this eighth-realm expert was reasonable and willing to negotiate terms.

The agreement was simple—Whale-Riding Immortal would protect the Lei Family three times. As long as he lived, no harm would befall them.

Lei Ren didn't even stop to consider the possibility of deception.

If this man wanted to exterminate his family, it could happen in the blink of an eye. What did a little deceit matter in the grand scheme of things? Lei Ren thought.

Whale-Riding Immortal took out three jade slips, holding them delicately between his fingers. "These are my tracking talismans. Should calamity befall your family, crush one, and I will come."

"Thank you, esteemed senior!" Lei Ren hurriedly expressed his gratitude and reached to take them.

Whale-Riding Immortal pulled the jade slips back. "The scroll?"

"Here, here."

Lei Ren fumbled inside his robes and retrieved an ornate box, carefully opening it.

Inside lay a fragment of the scroll, just as Whale-Riding Immortal had expected.

Whale-Riding Immortal's gaze darkened as he stared at Lei Ren. "Is this scroll real?"

"It's absolutely real!" Lei Ren insisted loudly.

"Then..." Whale-Riding Immortal's nose twitched. "Why does it smell... gamey?"

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Du Wuhen stared at the two letters in his hand and couldn't help but fall into deep thought.

Last night, he had naively believed a trade would take place, only to return empty-handed. It was even worse today. He got two letters.

One letter scheduled for the second night watch period, while the other set it for the third. The times were deliberately staggered.

Despite being the eldest disciple of Thunderbolt Stronghold and holding a position in its upper ranks, Du Wuhen had never attracted this much attention as his plain appearance rarely turned heads.

Seeing that it was nearing the start of the second night watch period, he decided to check it out.

When Du Wuhen arrived once more at Three Pines Crossroad, he spotted someone waiting in the distance – a slender woman.

Du Wuhen quickened his pace slightly.

Under the tree stood a beautiful woman, and Du Wuhen's eyes narrowed in surprise. "You?"

He recognized her from the banquet—Lei Ren's second wife. So, the Lei Family was getting betrayed by one of their own.

"It is indeed me," Zhuo Yuxiang replied with a faint smile. "Young Hero Du, did you bring the agreed amount?"

"And where is what you promised?" Du Wuhen asked.

He glanced around, but there were no signs of any beasts or monsters. Then again, for a trade this secretive, it was unlikely she'd bring the demonic beast along.

"It's right here," Zhuo Yuxiang said, extending an ornate box toward him.

Du Wuhen stared at the box, momentarily stunned. "In here?"

This size... Forget holding a demonic beast—this box can't even fit its ashes.

Just then, the wind howled sharply, echoing around them.

"I never thought you'd walk into the trap yourself, haha!" Feng Chaoyang's voice rang out from above. "Prepare to die!"

The disciples of Celestial King Sect had been lying in ambush. Since Du Wuhen had been prepared last night, they didn't think he would fall for the trap again tonight. They were already considering a different approach.

Who would have thought Du Wuhen would return—totally unprepared at that?

After confirming that he had come alone and there were no ambushes nearby, the disciples of Celestial King Sect surged forward.

"A trap?" Du Wuhen muttered. His eyes narrowed, his gaze turning sharp as he shifted his attention to the woman before him.

His movements should have been secret. Yet, somehow, the members of the Celestial King Sect had found out, and the person who lured him out was the Lei Family's Second Madam.

In an instant, the truth clicked into place—the Lei Family had colluded with Celestial King Sect to bring about his downfall.

Without hesitation, his scythe flashed in the moonlight.

The one in front of him would be the first to fall.

Zhuo Yuxiang's eyes widened in shock. Though she had been a member of the Greater-Yin Cult, her cultivation had been stuck at the peak of the fifth realm for years, and she had not been able to achieve a breakthrough and step into the sixth realm.

How could she possibly withstand an attack from Du Wuhen, a cultivator at the peak of the sixth realm?

In her haste, Zhuo Yuxiang shaped her fingers into a halberd stance, conjuring several ice walls in front of her. However, Du Wuhen's scythe tore through them like paper, shattering the barriers and striking her down in a single blow.

"Aaaaaahhhhhh!!!" Zhuo Yuxiang's scream pierced the night as blood soaked half her body.

She twisted away, stumbling as she fled.

Du Wuhen had no time to pursue her as Feng Chaoyang's divine light struck. The battle between the two prodigies raged on, leaving no one to care about Zhuo Yuxiang's escape.

Zhuo Yuxiang, gravely injured, fled along the mountain path, hoping to return to the Lei Family Residence for help. But she was halfway there when she had lost too much blood and collapsed to the ground.

"Hah..." She gasped, her breath ragged as blood pooled beneath her.

From behind, footsteps echoed along the path. A figure approached slowly, his voice breaking the silence.

"Second Madam!"

Through her fading vision, Zhuo Yuxiang glimpsed the face of the Lei Family's steward, Wang Fugui. He was the last person she saw before she lost consciousness.

It turned out that several beasts had escaped from the Lei Family's enclosures, wreaking havoc across the grounds. The ones in charge of the enclosures all scrambled to track them down.

Instead of locating the demonic beasts, Steward Wang stumbled upon their Second Madam, gravely injured and on the brink of death.

Zhuo Yuxiang clutched the ornate box to her chest, her voice faint and trembling. "Find... help... save me..."

Steward Wang stared at her. He was about to head back to the manor to find someone to save her, but as soon as he took a step forward, he froze.

The demonic beast enclosures had fallen into chaos for reasons unknown, and many beasts had escaped, resulting in immeasurable losses. As one of the stewards, Wang Fugui knew severe punishment awaited him.

A pay cut would be the least of his worries. He could very well be beaten within an inch of his life. The Lei Family was notoriously strict when it came to managing their demonic beasts. Just the other day, Ah Wei lost the Rampaging Devil Bull and nearly died before being thrown out of the estate.

Having suffered multiple injuries recently, Wang Fugui's patience had worn thin. The Lei Family had shown him little kindness, and resentment festered beneath his calm exterior.

His eyes lingered on the ornate box gripped tightly in Zhuo Yuxiang's bloodstained hand. The fact that she gripped it tightly even while she was on the brink of death showed that this was definitely some kind of valuable treasure.

I might as well... Go all the way or not at all! he thought.

Without hesitation, Wang Fugui lunged forward, yanking at the box. But Zhuo Yuxiang's fingers refused to let go.

He stomped down hard on her wrist and with a final tug, the box was his!

There was no going back to the Lei Family now. If he sold this treasure, he could leave this miserable life behind. A wealthy landowner in the countryside—far better than suffering as a mere servant.

As these thoughts danced in his mind, Wang Fugui's steps grew lighter. By the time he reached the foot of the mountain, far from the Lei Family Residence, he finally stopped. He wanted to open the box and see what kind of treasure lies within.

Just as he was about to lift the lid, he froze.

A shadow loomed over him.

Hot, heavy breath blew onto his face.

Looking up, Wang Fugui found himself face-to-face with a rugged horse's snout. One golden eye, flickering with flames, stared at him—his reflection trembling within it.

Ah, this old horse.

"Heh... heh." Wang Fugui forced a shaky smile. "You're out too? I... I'm not the Lei Family's steward anymore, so... you don't need to—"

Boom!

A deafening explosion thundered behind the mountain wall, and Wang Fugui rocketed into the sky, flailing helplessly as he turned into a distant speck of light.

Only a single sound lingered in the night sky.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

Chapter 644: Easier Said Than Done

"The grudges of the past have already been settled. Why do you persist in this relentless pursuit..." Du Wuhen said as he stood at the center of the encirclement, his long scythe resting against his shoulder.

Shadows clung to him like a second skin, and black winds coiled around his figure, howling softly in the still air.

"Settled?" Feng Chaoyang retorted sharply. "This ends when a blood debt is paid for with blood."

Without hesitation, he ruthlessly summoned three General's Constellation Orbs. The radiant spheres drifted into the air, circling him slowly. Misty qi spiraled off them, forming a nebula-like haze that shimmered faintly with light.

The disciples of the Celestial King Sect encircled Du Wuhen, standing several feet apart. Wisps of mist trailed behind each one, like ribbons that stretched and merged into the swirling starry mist around Feng Chaoyang.

Du Wuhen knew well the formidable nature of Celestial King Sect's Star Nebula Formation, so he had no intention of engaging in a prolonged standoff.

His eyes locked onto Feng Chaoyang, appearing ready for a direct confrontation. However, the moment he raised his scythe, his body twisted sharply, slashing towards a Celestial King Sect disciple behind him.

He was trying to escape!

His action set the entire formation in motion, causing the members of the Celestial King Sect to rise into the air. As the wind from Du Wuhen's scythe roared toward one of them, the mist encircling the disciple twisted sharply. In the blink of an eye, the disciple vanished and was replaced by someone else.

Boom!

The disciple vanished in an instant, and Feng Chaoyang appeared in his place.

Feng Chaoyang had previously been at the center of the formation!

The three orbs orbiting Feng Chaoyang flared and accelerated, merging into a solid ring of radiant light.

Du Wuhen's scythe tore through the air, colliding against it with a thunderous crash.

In that moment, the starry river seemed to fracture—the swirling mist of light scattered violently. His strike carried immense force, but it still wasn't enough to shatter the defense.

Feng Chaoyang stepped forward and pushed one of the glowing orbs from his chest. The orb shifted from defense to attack, shooting out as a beam of light that smashed into the shaft of Du Wuhen's scythe.

Du Wuhen quickly raised his scythe to block, but the impact exploded with a deafening roar, and blinding light engulfed him.

A sharp cry of a bird echoed through the air moments later.

A gust of azure wind burst forth, lifting Du Wuhen high into the sky. The Azure Wind Onyx Bird had revealed its true form! Riding the force of the explosion and the bird's incredible speed, they soared upward like a flash of lightning.

"Sky Net!" Feng Chaoyang shouted, leaping into the air as soon as he saw that Du Wuhen was attempting to escape. A dozen Celestial King Sect disciples followed, rising like pillars of light. In perfect unison, they wove a massive net across the sky.

Du Wuhen unleashed a barrage of ferocious wind blades, but they were all repelled by the light net, halting his ascent instantly.

He lowered the Azure Wind Onyx Bird again, skimming the ground like a storm, swiftly reaching the entrance of the mountain.

A refined-looking man stood at the mountain entrance, waiting in silence. The distant explosion caught his ear, and he turned just in time to see Du Wuhen charging toward him atop the divine bird, moving at blistering speed. There was no time to react.

Du Wuhen recognized him instantly. The man was an honored ally of the Lei Family who had accompanied Lei Ren earlier. His presence confirmed Du Wuhen's suspicion. They had foreseen his escape route.

Fury ignited within Du Wuhen, his killing intent rising like a storm. The Azure Wind Onyx Bird showed no sign of slowing.

With a sharp stomp of his foot, Du Wuhen commanded the bird to lower its right wing by three chi.

Meanwhile, Fang Zizai lingered at the entrance, waiting for Zhuo Yuxiang. As time stretched on, the growing commotion from the Lei Family Residence made his heart race.

Unease crept over him, and he considered going back for now.

Unexpectedly, he found himself in this situation.

By the time he thought to dodge, it was already too late. Without exceptional cultivation, he stood no chance against Du Wuhen's killing intent and full-force attack.

Shhh—

A cold glint flashed. In a breath, the onyx bird's wing sliced through cleanly, severing Fang Zizai's head from his body.

Fang Zizai's headless body remained standing, as if he was still awaiting someone's arrival.

Du Wuhen shot past the mountains in an instant, but the Celestial King Sect disciples pursued him relentlessly.

The Azure Wind Onyx Bird's speed was unmatched. Even as Feng Chaoyang transformed into divine light, the distance between them only grew.

"Assist me!" Feng Chaoyang's voice rang out.

The disciples responded immediately, forming hand seals and thrusting their right hands forward. Over ten beams of mist solidified, striking Feng Chaoyang's back and propelling him forward like a shooting star.

Whoosh.

With the surge of power, Feng Chaoyang streaked through the sky, appearing above Du Wuhen in a flash.

"Die!" he roared, thrusting both hands forward.

Three spinning General's Constellation Orbs shot from his palms, blazing as they expanded into glowing rings that tightened around Du Wuhen like shackles.

Realizing the danger, Du Wuhen transformed into a whirlwind, attempting to disperse the three orbs.

But it was too late.

Gritting his teeth, Feng Chaoyang's voice echoed across the sky.

"Explode!"

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The sky erupted with light. Though the General's Constellation Orbs were rare and invaluable, Feng Chaoyang sacrificed them without hesitation to destroy Celestial King Sect's greatest enemy.

The three General's Constellation Orbs exploded simultaneously, igniting the night with brilliance. For a fleeting moment, it was as if three suns had risen together, their radiance spreading across the land for hundreds of miles.

Those who glanced at the night sky were blinded by the sudden brilliance, shielding their eyes as they cried out in pain.

When the light faded, silence hung heavily in the air.

At the heart of the blast, nothing remained. There was no sign of Du Wuhen and no trace of the Azure Wind Onyx Bird.

The Celestial King Sect disciples descended one by one, gathering around Feng Chaoyang, their eyes fixed on him in quiet anticipation.

Feng Chaoyang turned and said to his fellow disciples, "The Azure Wind Onyx Bird might have escaped the power of three exploding General's Constellation Orbs, but Du Wuhen is dead. There's no surviving that."

...

The Whale-Riding Immortal, Jiang Yuebai, and Chu Liang walked out of the Lei Family residence, the air thick with an unsettling silence.

Unable to bear the quiet any longer, Chu Liang spoke up. "The Lei Family went through so much trouble hiding it for years, and it turns out the piece of scroll in their possession was a fake."

The Divine Ruins' scroll was said to be crafted from hide imbued with potent spiritual energy. It was an item that felt otherworldly. However, the piece in the Lei Family's possession was made from ordinary sheepskin. It was nothing more than a counterfeit. Though this fake map was expertly crafted, it took only a glance for the Whale-Riding Immortal to recognize the forgery.

The Whale-Riding Immortal spent considerable time interrogating Lei Ren through various methods. After confirming Lei Ren didn't know anything else, the Whale-Riding Immortal finally gave up and left.

"Turns out the lead to the Blossom Barbarian Kingdom was false as well," Jiang Yuebai said. "Their reports claimed the Lei Family had a part of the scroll, but if this one is a forgery, then the piece that caused a stir in Muzhi City was likely fake too. The real, final piece of the map is still missing."

"I got those three clues from your mother back then," the Whale-Riding Immortal said. "I'm not sure how Divine Ruins Monastery uncovered the locations of the four parts, but I doubt they were wrong."

"The clue about the part being in Muzhi City..." Jiang Yuebai's brow furrowed slightly. "It's brought us to a dead end."

The Whale-Riding Immortal turned to Chu Liang and said, "You should head back to Mount Shu first. I'm sure they've been searching for you all these years. Go ease their worries; let them know you're safe. Yuebai and I will continue searching for the last part of the Divine Ruins' scroll."

Chu Liang's gaze lingered on Jiang Yuebai, reluctant to part from her.

Jiang Yuebai met Chu Liang's gaze, her eyes soft with warmth. After years apart, reuniting only to part once more inevitably left a quiet sadness lingering between them.

As the two exchanged lingering glances, a sudden neigh rang out. A blaze of fire galloped toward them, crashing into Chu Liang's arms.

"Ah." Chu Liang stroked the Fierce Draconic Colt's head and gently led it aside. "Saves me the trouble of finding you. Let's head back... huh?"

The Fierce Draconic Colt raised its head with a flattering tilt, eyes gleaming expectantly. Chu Liang's gaze dropped, noticing the colt delicately holding a brocade box in its mouth, presenting it like a treasured gift.

"Where did this come from?"

He hesitated for a moment before gently taking the brocade box from the colt's mouth. Its fine craftsmanship hinted at something valuable inside, and Chu Liang couldn't help but laugh.

"An unexpected bonus."

Upon opening the box, Chu Liang's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

Nearby, the Whale-Riding Immortal let out a long sigh. "You should return to Mount Shu. Let me wander this path alone."

Jiang Yuebai shook her head firmly. "Father, I told you six years ago, this isn't just your burden to bear."

"Haaaaaaa,

" the Whale-Riding Immortal sighed. "The world is vast, and the land of the nine provinces and four seas stretch endlessly. That single fragment is simply too small. If you follow me, it will be like searching for a needle in the sea. I can't let you waste your youth chasing shadows."

Jiang Yuebai replied, "I believe we'll find it soon."

"Hah." The Whale-Riding Immortal gave a wry smile. "Easier said than done."

Chu Liang stepped forward, extending the brocade box. "Here."

The lid creaked open, and inside lay a fragment of the scroll. Its unmistakable aura and craftsmanship left no doubt it was real.

"I... Uh..."

The Whale-Riding Immortal had only just begun to settle into the melancholy that had been brewing within him when it was abruptly cut short. His smile of sadness hung awkwardly on his face, and a twitch tugged at his brow as his composure wavered.

After a long, awkward pause, he finally spoke. "Where... exactly did you get this fragment of the map?"

WHERE DID YOU GET THIS PIECE...

Chu Liang pointed at the Fierce Draconic Colt beside him. "I got it from this colt."

The Whale-Riding Immortal felt lightheaded. I spent years traversing the nine provinces, chasing shadows and dead ends. Yet, you casually found three of them. Doesn't this make me look dumb?

Though it was hard to accept, the sudden realization that he finally had all four pieces of the Divine Ruins' scroll left the Whale-Riding Immortal teetering between confusion and excitement.

For a moment, he didn't know what expression to make.

"So..." The Whale-Riding Immortal held the final piece in his hand, glancing between Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai. "That's it?"

Jiang Yuebai nodded. "Yes."

A long silence followed. Then, Whale-Riding Immortal exhaled deeply, the weight of years of searching easing from his shoulders.

"There's only one step left, but it will take time. For now, we part ways," he said. Then he turned to Chu Liang and sincerely expressed his gratitude. "Chu Liang... thank you."

Without this kid, who knew when they would have found those three parts of the map.

After their farewells, the Whale-Riding Immortal left with Jiang Yuebai.

Chu Liang wasn't sure what the final step involved, but it was clear it wouldn't be simple.

As he watched them disappear into the distance, Chu Liang let out a long, quiet sigh.

Parting is always the sorrow of the sentimental... he mused.

He then mounted the Fierce Draconic Colt, preparing to leave Cliffhold Bastion.

The Fierce Draconic Colt seemed to sense his mood, pacing gently and lifting into the air. As they glided low over the mountain entrance, a faint prickle ran down Chu Liang's spine. Someone was watching him.

Below, Chen Huang stood near the entrance, his eyes fixed on the sky.

After freeing the Lei Family's beasts as promised, he went there and had been waiting for Zhuo Yuxiang. However, even though he waited for a long time, she never appeared.

A flicker of irritation crossed his face.

When Chen Huang finally heard movement and thought his beloved had arrived, he turned eagerly... only to see a servant riding the Fierce Draconic Colt, drifting through the sky.

His expression darkened, annoyance flickering in his eyes.

What kind of lowly servant dares to ride a spirit beast?

Chu Liang, already in a sour mood, noticed Chen Huang glaring at him. He shot back a glare of his own.

One man was missing his beloved woman while the other one had just parted from his beloved woman. The two lonely men clashed with their eyes.

Irritated, Chen Huang wasn't about to offer kindness to a mere servant and barked, "What are you staring at?!"

...

Moments later, a blaze of fire streaked across the sky as Chu Liang, feeling refreshed and revitalized, rode the Fierce Draconic Colt straight toward Mount Shu.

Meanwhile, back on the ground, Chen Huang lay in a crumpled heap—bruised, battered, and sprawled across the dirt.

Tears welled in his eyes as he whimpered softly.

"You could've just stared... Did you really have to hit me that hard? Uwaaaaah..."

Chapter 645: When I Was Eighteen

At the shores of the East Sea, the sea waves billowed.

Accompanying the rolling waves of azure seawater was pure white sea spray, leaving trails of sea foam on the sand. There seemed to be blue robes draped over the dark rocks by the shore. However, if someone were to approach it, they would be able to discern that under the fabric lay a person.

Du Wuhen opened his eyes and opened his mouth, wanting to speak. Instead, he spat out a mouthful of bloody sea foam.

"Hah..."

A man in black Daoist robes descended onto the shore. He wore an indifferent expression as he observed Du Wuhen lying on the rocks.

"How did you end up like this?" he asked.

"Daoist Xuan Lu..." Du Wuhen raised his hand weakly. "Save me."

The man in black Daoist robes was none other than Daoist Xuan Lu, who had recently risen through the ranks of the Penglai Supreme Sect. He had little life experience compared to the other high-ranking members, but his strategizing ability had earned him the favor of Daoist Cangsheng.

"I already saved you," Daoist Xuan Lu replied, gazing down at him. "If not for the life-saving enchanted tool I gave you, you wouldn't have even been able to flee all the way here. You'd already be dead."

"My... my cultivation foundation is damaged. My injuries need to be treated," Du Wuhen said anxiously in a weak voice. "If I don't get treated in time, my cultivation journey will end here..."

"Shouldn't you return to the Thunderbolt Stronghold then?" Daoist Xuan Lu asked puzzledly.

"You're the eldest disciple of the Thunderbolt Stronghold. Why have you come to the East Sea?"

"I can't go back..." Du Wuhen grasped Daoist Xuan Lu's ankle as he gasped for air. "I... I just realized. It couldn't have been the Lei Family that betrayed me and leaked my location. It... it must have been Huang Hanshan. He must have found out about our dealings and handed me over to the Celestial King Sect to appease their wrath. He already wanted to do that four years ago. He's unwilling to bear the bad name of someone who kills his own disciples, so he... he exposed my whereabouts. It has to be him..."

"You know as well as I do that it was a one-time deal," Daoist Xuan Lu replied coldly. "We gave you what you wanted, and you did what we required of you. That's all there is to it. Now, repairing your foundation would require far more resources than what we gave you before. What do you have left to give us in exchange for treating you?"

"If not for you..." Du Wuhen became enraged and coughed up more blood. "If not for you, why would I have crossed Celestial King Sect..."

...

After the Assembly of Immortal Sects six years ago, Wei Tiandi's cultivation level advanced rapidly. He beat Du Wuhen by a step and advanced to the sixth realm first.

Meanwhile, Du Wuhen's performance during the assembly had been heavily criticized, causing his standing within the sect to plummet.

As the strongest among his generation of Thunderbolt Stronghold disciples, Du Wuhen had initially been set to inherit the position of the Thunderbolt Stronghold's lord without question. Now, that position might very well slip from his grasp.

There were even rumors that Huang Hanshan intended to arrange a marriage between Huang Ling'er and Wei Tiandi. If that happened, Wei Tiandi would undoubtedly be the one to take over Thunderbolt Stronghold.

Du Wuhen couldn't help but grow anxious. It was at this time that people from the Penglai Supreme Sect approached him.

Seeking to expand their influence across the nine provinces, the Penglai Supreme Sect set their sights on the Thunderbolt Stronghold in the Southern Regions. However, while the Thunderbolt Stronghold maintained friendly ties with the Penglai Supreme Sect, they were far from being the Penglai Supreme Sect's hawks and hounds at their beck and call. The Thunderbolt Stronghold would never risk offending the imperial court on their behalf.

Thus, the Penglai Supreme Sect sought to exploit the conflict between the Thunderbolt Stronghold and Celestial King Sect. They planned to escalate the conflict until the Thunderbolt Stronghold had no choice but to fully align with them.

At the time, Daoist Xuan Lu told Du Wuhen that their goal was to suppress the Celestial King Sect through this scheme. The Penglai Supreme Sect promised to cover up the murder, framing it as an accidental killing to ensure Du Wuhen's safety. In exchange, they provided him with resources and treasures to aid his cultivation, allowing him to advance to the peak of the sixth realm in a short time.

Du Wuhen went through with the plan, but the consequences were far graver than he had anticipated. The Thunderbolt Stronghold was forced to become fully subservient to Penglai, reliant on their favor to survive.

...

Now, Du Wuhen was finally reaping the bitter fruits of his actions.

Daoist Xuan Lu shook his head. "Young Hero Du, we aren't the cause of your descent into such a plight. As you just said, it was likely your teacher who betrayed you."

"Save me..." Du Wuhen pleaded submissively, abandoning his pride. "I can join the Penglai Supreme Sect. I will serve you faithfully, like a dog or horse..."

Daoist Xuan Lu let out a soft laugh, "Haha. Have you forgotten? We were already the top immortal sect before you came along."

Du Wuhen was at a loss for words. "I..."

Seeing Du Wuhen's pitiful state, Daoist Xuan Lu bent down and placed his hand on Du Wuhen's chest. "I can help you once. I'll send you to a place where you'll have only two paths ahead of you.

"You will either be reborn from the ashes or perish without even a grave.

"Would you like to go?"

...

"Let me! Let me!"

"I... I... I..."

"Make way! Make way!"

Chu Liang rode the Fierce Draconic Colt and returned to Mount Shu. As he hovered overhead, he almost didn't recognize it.

Red Cotton Peak had been moved even further away, creating a considerable distance between it and the other peaks of Mount Shu. It was something that just had to be done. Red Cotton Peak had gotten too popular and busy with activities and events that it inevitably affected the surrounding mountains.

Red Cotton Peak was now covered with towering pavilions stacked dozens of stories high, piercing the clouds. Spirit birds and exotic beasts danced in the breeze, airships weaved to and fro through the sky, and beams of swordlight rose and fell like raindrops.

The plans of a future that Chu Liang had envisioned for Red Cotton Peak had been realized almost perfectly.

As Chu Liang and the Fierce Draconic Colt approached Red Cotton Peak, they encountered cultivators descending toward the peak from all directions, either riding on swords or beasts. There were so many of them that he got swept along with them to a public square.

Chu Liang hadn't decided where he would go first anyway, so he simply went with them to see what was happening.

Upon landing, he realized the Four Extremities Hall, Red Cotton Peak's logistics department, was holding a recruitment event. The crowd of cultivators had traveled there from all over the mortal world to apply for a job.

Initially, Red Cotton Peak's logistics department consisted of Mount Shu Sect disciples managing higher-level operations[1] and the Four Seas Whale Gang managing lower-level operations[2], covering their bases across four seas and the nine provinces.

However, Red Cotton Peak's business operations continued to expand, and they didn't have enough manpower within the Mount Shu Sect to meet the growing needs of their business. That led to the formation of the Four Extremities Hall and the recruitment of capable and reliable cultivators from outside the sect to work as their logistics and transport staff.

Given the great salary that Red Cotton Peak offered, the response was unsurprisingly overwhelming.

That was how Chu Liang came to witness the bustling scene before him.

At the end of the square stood a pill shop with a sign saying "Red Cotton Peak's First Store." There was a raised platform set up in front of it.

Just as the crowd filled practically the entire square, a delicate and pretty female cultivator stepped onto the platform and said loudly, "Fellow Daoists, please quiet down! Let us welcome Red Cotton Peak's Hall Master Lin!"

A deafening wave of cheers erupted from the crowd. "Wooohooo!"

Amid the crowd's anticipation, a young man dressed in beautifully embroidered swordsman robes[3] stepped onto the platform. He had thick eyebrows, large eyes, and a face full of yang qi. Under the watchful gaze of the crowd, he really did carry the imposing air of someone who held a high-ranking position.

Who else could that be but Lin Bei?

Lin Bei cleared his throat and raised a hand to silence the crowd. "Everyone, quiet down."

Not bad. Pretty imposing, Chu Liang remarked inwardly.

He watched Lin Bei with a pleased smile.

He's already got them feeling envious and in awe. Next up, he'll probably paint a picture to make them believe they could be like him.

"I know why you're all here—to make money, right?" Lin Bei said slowly. "Let me make something clear. Joining the Four Extremities Hall is not the end point of your career. My current position here is not the end point of my career either..."

Mm. Chu Liang nodded. The opening was very smooth; it seems he's had a lot of practice in painting this vision. Next, he should recall his humble past so that the crowd can relate to him.

Lin Bei continued, "Six years ago, I was still a nobody. At the last Immortal Sects Assembly, I was eighteen, and I just stood around as a mere underling. I swore through my tears that one day, you would all see me rising..."

Nice. It even rhymes. Chu Liang nodded again. In the next step, he should be revealing the main objective.

"Everything I've achieved today is thanks to one person. He founded Red Cotton Peak and led us down this path... That person is my best bro forever—Chu Liang!" Lin Bei exclaimed.

With a wave of his hand, a black-and-white picture scroll unfurled behind him, revealing a portrait of Chu Liang.

Right then, clusters of white and yellow flowers appeared around the square.

Lin Bei said loudly, "I'm sure many of you have heard how that brother of mine became the champion of the last Assembly of Immortal Sects and that he went missing soon after. As potential members of the Four Extremities Hall, your first task is to report back to us immediately if you see him—no matter the time or place!

"Regardless of whether you end up joining the Four Extremities Hall, if you can provide clues as to his whereabouts, you will be rewarded with 10,000 sword coins! And if you can find him and bring him here, the reward will be 100,000 sword coins! You'll also be made a hall master!"

As soon as those words were spoken, the eyes of everyone in the crowd turned red with excitement.

The several people standing beside Chu Liang all turned their gazes toward him. They looked at the portrait and then back at him. Then they looked at the portrait once more.

They thought he looked the same as the person in the portrait, but they couldn't quite believe it to be true.

It couldn't possibly be that easy to find him, right?

Wasn't this like finding the answer to a riddle in the riddle itself?

They hesitated for a moment because the reward seemed too easy to claim.

Seeing that someone was about to raise their hand, Chu Liang panicked. He was touched that Lin Bei would go to such lengths to find him...

But I'm back now. If you don't stop this now, you'll just be squandering away the family fortune!

Chu Liang quickly yelled, "Nobody move!"

He quickly leaped into the air. "I'm right here! Don't—"

"It's him!" someone shouted, interrupting Chu Liang.

The crowd of cultivators immediately shot into the air, surrounding and piling onto Chu Liang.

The scene instantly descended into chaos with Chu Liang at the center of it all.

"I—

"Be a little more civilized—pui!

"Whose foot is on my face?!"

Chapter 646: Golden Jade Temple

Seeing the commotion, Lin Bei hurriedly asked, "What's going on?"

Someone reported to him, "I heard them say... they found Chu Liang!"

"What?" Lin Bei uttered in shock.

He immediately rose into the air and hovered above the crowd.

Lin Bei shouted, "Make way, make way!"

The crowd of people had piled up like a small mountain. They all tried to squeeze inside as if their life depended on it. There was no way they would clear the way for Lin Bei at that moment.

While Lin Bei was growing impatient, someone patted his shoulder from behind.

"I'm right here."

Lin Bei turned around and saw Chu Liang standing there!

It turned out Chu Liang had quietly slipped out from beneath the crowd at some point.

Overjoyed, Lin Bei shouted, "Chu—"

However, Chu Liang quickly covered Lin Bei's mouth. "It's too dangerous here. Let's head to Silver Sword Peak and talk there."

Taking advantage of the moment when the crowd was distracted, Chu Liang pulled Lin Bei out of there. The two of them rode the Fierce Draconic Colt and flew away from Red Cotton Peak.

On the way to Silver Sword Peak, Lin Bei couldn't help but chatter away.

"Where have you been all these years? You look fine, so why didn't you ever contact us? Do you know how much everyone at Mount Shu missed you? We've been exhausted handling things these past years. Your teacher even put up a tablet with your name on it and burned incense for you during festivities..."[1]

It had been so long since Chu Liang last saw Lin Bei that he actually found this storm of chatter quite endearing. He didn't stop Lin Bei and simply continued flying toward Silver Sword Peak.

When they got to Silver Sword Peak, they found that no one was there.

"Huh? Where is everyone?" Chu Liang asked.

"Your teacher went out to collect debts," Lin Bei answered. "After Silver Sword Peak started offering credit services, some people couldn't pay back. So, Little Yi put your teacher in charge of debt collection. Senior Aunt Feng loves doing it. She waits eagerly for someone to miss a repayment so she can go after them."

Well, that's... something. She turned her hobby into a job, I guess.

Chu Liang chuckled and asked, "So, the one managing Red Cotton Peak is Little Yi?"

He had already guessed it. If Silver Sword Peak had to pick the most intelligent being among its members and residents, then six-year-old Chu Yi was the obvious choice. The Golden-Furred Hou would be the second choice.

"That's right." Lin Bei nodded. "Not long after you left, Shang Ziliang and I continued bringing the account books to Silver Sword Peak as usual. When we ran into problems, your teacher had no idea how to handle them. That's when Little Yi stepped up to offer advice.

"There were a lot of the things that you'd already explained to us, but we couldn't remember what you'd said. However, Little Yi figured all of them out. So, over time, we just listened to him. After all, he's a member of Silver Sword Peak too."

"I can tell you're all working well with him. You've even become the Four Overlords of Mount Shu," Chu Liang said with a chuckle.

"Heheh," Lin Bei laughed embarrassedly. "The Four Overlords? That's just our friends in the martial world showing us their affection."

"Where is Little Yi now?" Chu Liang asked. "Does he need to be at the Four Extremities Hall for the recruitment?"

"No, he usually works behind the scenes. On the surface, Red Cotton Peak is still being managed by the four of us and your teacher," Lin Bei replied. "But no matter how busy he is, he never misses his lessons with Senior Brother Yuan. That is the one thing that's fixed in his schedule and cannot be changed even if he's struck by lightning. He said it's something you mentioned before—regardless of what major events were happening, he still had to keep learning and studying."

If only my esteemed teacher were as mature as Chu Yi... Silver Sword Peak would surely thrive without any worries, Chu Liang thought with a sigh.

He then glanced around and asked, "What about Xiaoyu'er and her sister?"

"They're the mascots of Red Cotton Peak now. According to the plan you had for the fruit garden, we got them a carriage decorated with flowers. They parade around Red Cotton Peak twice a day. They've got a lot of fans."

"It seems that everyone has been really busy. What about the Golden-Furred Hou?"

Everyone has something to do, but Big Head can't possibly be busy, right?

Lin Bei gave Chu Liang a strange look. "Who do you think is pulling the carriage?"

Oh, wow.

I guess it's because it would cost money to hire a spirit beast for that. Silver Sword Peak sure makes good use of its resources, leaving no one idle... humans and beasts alike.

Lin Bei said, "Oh, right. You know that little golden dragon you met at the imperial palace? We brought it back with us. It's hanging out with the White Dragon at the Dragon-Fishing Pool now."

Seeing that Silver Sword Peak was so empty, Chu Liang did not feel like going around and disturbing anyone.

He told Lin Bei, "Go let everyone know I'm back. I'm going to head out to take care of something. I'll be back at night."

Suddenly nervous, Lin Bei quickly asked, "Where are you going? Should I get one or two hundred subordinates to go with you?"

Chu Liang had only just returned. Lin Bei was afraid that once Chu Liang left Mount Shu, he would run into danger and disappear for several years again.

Woah, Chu Liang thought in surprise. Things sure are very different now. The way Lin Bei casually made that suggestion just shows how much wealth and influence he now possesses.

Chu Liang laughed. "It's nothing dangerous. I'm just going to find an esteemed senior from Mount Shu."

...

The Whale-Riding Immortal had previously told Chu Liang about Jin Mucuo, an Eminent One from the Southern Regions. Jin Mucuo had been a disciple of the Mount Shu Sect, and he had maintained a close relationship with the Mount Shu Sect even after becoming an Eminent One.

Years ago, the Whale-Riding Immortal sought Jin Mucuo out to inquire about the Divine Ruins scroll, hoping to negotiate a trade. Jin Mucuo agreed to it, but before the trade could take place, Xuan Yinzi, a formidable diabolical cultivator, found him first. All Jin Mucuo managed to leave behind before he died was a letter for the Whale-Riding Immortal.[2]

When the Whale-Riding Immortal and Chu Liang were done sharing what they knew about the Divine Ruins scroll, they concluded the corpse that Chu Liang had found and taken a part of the scroll from was highly likely to be Jin Mucuo's remains. After some discussion, the Whale-Riding Immortal and Chu Liang decided that Jin Mucuo's family should be informed about the location of his corpse.

Jin Mucuo had a younger sister who served as the overseer of the Golden Jade Temple. It was situated by the South River, which was not far from Mount Shu.

Chu Liang mounted the Fierce Draconic Colt and took off. The ball of fire that was the Fierce Draconic Colt flew through the sky for a while. Before long, they arrived at the banks of the surging South River, where a beautiful and secluded Daoist temple stood amid the quiet.

The temple courtyard wasn't large. From above, Chu Liang could see a peach blossom tree in full bloom, adorned with jade-green leaves on its branches.

Chu Liang dismounted and instructed the Fierce Draconic Colt to wait outside. Then he walked over to the door and knocked.

Knock, knock, knock.

He knocked three times, but no one answered.

Huh?

Before going to the temple, Chu Liang had done a bit of research on the Golden Jade Temple. It was not a major force in the martial world, but it was well-known locally and had many visitors going there to pray and burn joss sticks.

Why would a temple like that be closed for no reason? And why is there not even one person around?

Knock, knock, knock.

Chu Liang knocked again, but there was still no response.

He thought about it for a moment. Then he applied a bit of force and pushed the door open, letting himself in. Inside the temple, there were silver jade shrubs[3] with blooming flowers. The bricks that formed the temple floor were so spotless they were gleaming, suggesting the fallen leaves had been swept away recently. It didn't seem like the temple had been deserted.

Just as he was about to walk further inside, a command rang out clearly. "Come here."

With a whoosh, a horsetail whisk[4] wrapped around Chu Liang's waist and pulled him to the side. Chu Liang didn't resist and allowed himself to be pulled behind a tree trunk. His vision momentarily darkened, then it brightened again just as abruptly.

It turned out there was a hidden realm in the temple.

The hidden realm wasn't large, taking up an area of land that an average hill occupied. At the center of the hidden realm stood a tree with blossoms in full bloom, identical to the one outside. It likely served as the gateway between the real world and the hidden realm.

Unlike in the real world, the hidden realm wasn't absent of people; there was a middle-aged Daoist nun clad in plain white robes. She was the one who had pulled Chu Liang in with the horsetail whisk.

"What do you want? Speak quickly," the Daoist nun urged, looking like she was facing a great enemy.

The sight of the nun's skittish appearance gave Chu Liang a fright.

Chu Liang stammered, "I... Uh... Are you this temple's overseer, Jin Yuzhi? I came to inform you of some news regarding Esteemed Senior Jin Mucuo."

"That dead fool?" Jin Yuzhi frowned. "Did you find his corpse?"

"Yes." Chu Liang nodded, feeling puzzled. "How did you know he's dead?"

"This is the Life Blossom Tree..." Jin Yuzhi pointed at the tree. "There used to be two of them. His tree withered and died more than ten years ago. Naturally, that meant he was gone."

"His remains are in a cave a few dozen li outside Mount Shu. If you're free, I can take you to retrieve his bones."

"Mount Shu?"

At the mention of Mount Shu, Jin Yuzhi stiffened and trembled in fear.

She replied, "I'm definitely not free. You can just tell me the rough location. I'll go get him when I have time."

"Uh... sure," Chu Liang said, just going along with what Jin Yuzhi wanted in the end.

He couldn't exactly drag her to the cave after all.

Just as he was about to draw a map to leave behind, he suddenly heard a sound come through from the tree outside the hidden realm.

It was the creepy laughter of a savage woman.

"Little beauty! Today's your last day to make your repayment! If you don't give us the money, don't blame me... Hee-hee-hee!"

Chapter 647: The Last One

When Chu Liang heard the laughter outside, he thought, Why does that sound so familiar?

"Esteemed senior—"

"Shut up," Jin Yuzhi scolded quietly. "That person is incredibly powerful, ruthless, and violent. If you speak loudly in the hidden realm, she might hear you. And if she breaks in, she won't care if you're from this temple or not!"

Incredibly powerful, ruthless, and violent...

Hearing that description, Chu Liang was certain it was her.

So, he said, "Esteemed senior, the person outside—"

"Hee-hee-hee!" That person's creepy laughter came through from the outside again. "I suggest you come out on your own. If I catch you instead, you'll suffer greatly!"

Jin Yuzhi's face turned pale as she gritted her teeth. "Don't make a sound. No matter what, we can't let her find us."

"No, I can—"

Chu Liang wanted to say something, but Jin Yuzhi glared at him very fiercely. So, Chu Liang reluctantly shut his mouth.

"Okay, fine. Guess you're really not here." The person outside let out another creepy laugh. "Then don't blame me for setting this Daoist temple on fire. After that, I'll write in blood on your outer wall—'Debts owed left unpaid!'"

Jin Yuzhi furrowed her brows, and her hand that held the horsetail whisk trembled slightly.

"Don't worry, esteemed senior. She's definitely just bluffing to scare you," Chu Liang comforted her. "After she sets the temple on fire, there won't even be an outer wall left to write on."

Jin Yuzhi glared at him again.

"Esteemed senior, do you owe Red Cotton Peak some money?" Chu Liang asked.

"That's right," Jin Yuzhi replied.

"I can help you resolve your debt. I... have some connections at Red Cotton Peak," Chu Liang said with a smile.

"I have connections at Mount Shu too. It's useless. They only care about money!"

"Then, I can just help you pay off your debt. I have some money."

"You don't know how much I owe..." Jin Yuzhi shook her head. "It's not an amount you can pay off so easily."

Chu Liang thought, How much money could this small temple possibly owe?

Besides, Chu Liang roughly knew how Red Cotton Peak's credit system worked. Jin Yuzhi wasn't part of the Divine Nine or the Terrestrial Ten, and she was only running a small Daoist temple. Red Cotton Peak wouldn't have allowed her to borrow much.

"If you don't believe me, let me go out and talk to her. I guarantee I can resolve the issue," Chu Liang said.

Jin Yuzhi immediately replied, "Don't even think about it! You're just afraid of getting caught up in this horrible situation and want to expose my location to save yourself, don't you?"

"Haaa..." Chu Liang sighed.

Why is there so little trust between people? Is it just because the person outside is that woman?

Chu Liang suddenly stood up and shouted, "Over here!"

His shout carried the power of a dragon chant. It sent waves of sound rippling out, passing through the Life Blossom Tree and reaching outside the hidden realm.

"You!" Jin Yuzhi uttered furiously.

She hurriedly swung her horsetail whisk at Chu Liang to stop him.

However, Jin Yuzhi was only at the sixth realm, so Chu Liang wasn't intimidated by her at all. He caught her horsetail whisk with one hand, and the two of them briefly locked in that position.

In that brief moment, a loud crack rang out from the Life Blossom Tree, and a face appeared in the hidden realm!

The face was extremely beautiful, but the expression it wore was incredibly domineering and ferocious.

The woman's lips split into a sinister grin. "Found you!"

"Esteemed teacher!" Chu Liang called out.

"Eh?"

The owner of the face was, of course, Di Nufeng.

She twisted her neck so that she could face Chu Liang.

Di Nufeng exclaimed, "My disciple!"

Upon seeing this, Jin Yuzhi cried out in shock, "So the two of you were in on this together!"

...

A while later, Jin Yuzhi sat silently on the prayer mat in front of the Golden Jade Temple's main hall.

Di Nufeng dragged over a chair and sat down nonchalantly, flipping open a ledger. "Jin Yuzhi, three months ago, you bought three treasures of nature from Red Cotton Peak on credit, totaling eighteen thousand sword coins. We never charge interest, and you know that. But you can't just avoid making repayments on the principal amount!"

Jin Yuzhi whispered, "The heavy snow sealed the mountains for dozens of days. I had no firewood or rice at home. I couldn't even put food on the table..."

Di Nufeng stared at her with a dumbfounded expression. "Try again."

"Fine, fine." Jin Yuzhi waved her hand in resignation. "I didn't buy those treasures of nature for myself. I was planning to trade them for valuables."

"Trade them for valuables?"

"That's right. I was planning to trade with the Golden Toad. You've probably heard of it, right?"

Chu Liang hadn't heard of it, but Di Nufeng had. She gave him a brief explanation.

It turned out that in the South Sea, there was an ancient spirit beast called the Golden Toad of Many Treasures. It appeared sporadically. Anyone who fed it treasures of nature would receive a valuable item of equivalent value in return.

According to legend, the Golden Toad's treasures were retrieved from the Immortals' Storehouse of the South Sea—the Ruins of Return. Many of those treasures were said to be legendary artifacts that ranked among the top hundred in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures. So, it would always be profitable to trade with the Golden Toad.

That was why cultivators would rush to the Golden Toad like a badling of ducks whenever it appeared. However, the Golden Toad's location was always a mystery, and it might only surface once every century. As for whether a person could encounter it, that was all dependent on fate.

"I received information that the Golden Toad was about to surface, so I prepared a few treasures of nature to trade with it. I thought I'd strike it rich immediately," Jin Yuzhi said. "But the Golden Toad I encountered... was a fraud."

The teacher and disciple were both surprised. "A fraud?"

"Mm." Jin Yuzhi turned her hand over and revealed a few worn-out golden items. "The enchanted tools it spat out look fancy but are useless; they're not even worth a few dozen sword coins. By the time I realized the Golden Toad was a fake, it had already fled. I lost everything, so of course, I can't repay the debt."

"I see." Chu Liang nodded. "However, Red Cotton Peak's rules can't be broken. Esteemed teacher, how about I cover Esteemed Senior Jin's debt myself?"

"Huh?" Jin Yuzhi uttered, stunned.

She hadn't expected this young man to actually do it. She had thought the teacher and disciple were colluding to gain access to the hidden realm where she had been hiding.

Chu Liang felt guilty. He had unknowingly used the remains of Jin Yuzhi's brother to grow spirit plants. Previously, Chu Liang hadn't known who Jin Mucuo's family was, but now that he knew Jin Yuzhi was his senior from the Mount Shu Sect, helping clear her debt was the least he could do to repay the favor.

"Of course, that's not a problem." Di Nufeng chuckled. "As long as you're back, anything can be arranged."

"I'll take Temple Overseer Jin to retrieve her brother's remains first. After that, I'll return to Mount Shu."

Di Nufeng quickly replied, "Okay, I'll go with you."

Her disciple had finally returned. She was afraid he might go missing again.

...

At the bottom of the Bombax River, a weak voice drifted through the air.

"Just one more... One is enough..."

Xuan Yinzi's voice sounded like the voice of a lingering spirit; it didn't sound like a voice that a living person could produce.

At the beginning, he frantically released Spirit-Slaying Jars. As long as thirty percent of them returned, he could gather enough power to break free. However, the jars creatures, which he had made by sacrificing his qi and blood, did not return.

Then right when he was on the verge of despair, a jar suddenly returned. Someone seemed to be stringing him along time and time again, tormenting him endlessly.

Eventually, he had almost fully depleted his qi and blood. He was barely hanging on by a thread, and he was ready to give up. That was when the jars from the previous day all returned.

This drove him to the brink of madness.

It felt as though a master of psychological torment was toying with him—stringing him along, torturing and mocking him.

After pondering over it for several days and nights, Xuan Yinzi decided to slow the rate at which he made the Spirit-Slaying Jars. He would not allow himself to be tricked any longer. Once there was some profit, he would stop making the Spirit-Slaying Jars.

He cautiously tested the waters for a long time and finally began to feel at ease. The fiend that devoured his Spirit-Slaying Jars seemed to have vanished.

Seeing that, Xuan Yinzi wanted to increase his efforts in making the Spirit-Slaying Jars, but he no longer had the strength to do so. Although he had recovered a significant amount of his spiritual energy, he had lost too much qi and blood. If he wanted to continue exchanging his qi and blood for spiritual energy, he had to do it extremely cautiously. He couldn't survive on spiritual energy alone after all. Ultimately, the problem was that he had used up too much qi and blood in the beginning.

Xuan Yinzi lingered at the edge of death, using his qi and blood little by little. He had no idea how many days he spent doing this. He lacked even the strength to carve marks into the wall now.

Finally...

He gazed at the pitch-black hole in the cavern.

"I just need one more..."

With just one more Spirit-Slaying Jar, he would have enough spiritual energy to break the seal on the cavern. Once the seal was shattered, he would devour every living creature in the river.

On the day I return to the world, every fish will perish!

It will be an effortless task for me to replenish my qi and blood!

Dark King Sect, your true king has returned!

I just need one last Spirit-Slaying Jar!

Without those earthen wine jars, how could I escape? When I get back to the sect, I must celebrate with fine wine!

Inwardly, Xuan Yinzi let out a long-suppressed laugh that he didn't even have the strength to produce audibly.

Kekekekeke...

Chapter 648: Sizzle

Chu Liang led Jin Yuzhi to a hidden cave in the valley by the Bombax River. That was where they found Jin Mucuo's remains.

"So, he's here?" Jin Yuzhi asked.

She scattered three petals from the Life Blossom Tree into the air. The petals drifted down and landed on a patch of soil where several young plants, brimming with spiritual qi, were extending their branches and leaves.

From this, she confirmed the bones belonged to her brother, Jin Mucuo.

"It's him all right."

Chu Liang said solemnly, "Even after his death, Esteemed Senior Jin nourished spirit plants with his body, dedicating himself to helping his juniors. It's truly moving."

"It's nothing," Jin Yuzhi replied with a smile. "It's a family tradition. When a member of the family passes away, they are buried beneath the Life Blossom Tree of a younger member of the family. This strengthens the descendant's fate and karmic luck, allowing them to be full of vitality and thrive."

She dug up the golden skeleton and placed it in a coffin.

Chu Liang carefully uprooted the young plants with the soil still clinging to their roots. He hadn't had the chance to accelerate their growth with spirit herbs, so they had grown slowly. After six years, they had only sprouted into young plants.

Fortunately, Mount Shu still had half of Violet Gold Marquess' remains. If Chu Liang moved the young plants there, they would be nourished with spiritual qi just the same.

Just as Jin Yuzhi was about to shut the coffin, she paused, letting out a surprised murmur. "Hmm?"

"What's wrong?" Di Nufeng asked.

Jin Yuzhi pressed her fingers onto the vein-like patterns running across the golden skeleton's ribcage. "Before my older brother died... he cast the Life-Ending Profound Seal."

"Huh?" Chu Liang and Di Nufeng gasped in astonishment. They exchanged glances before asking, "What's that?"

Jin Yuzhi was rather dumbfounded. "Why are you two so astonished if you don't even know what it is..."

Di Nufeng chuckled. "Just from the name alone, it seems like it would be very powerful."

Jin Yuzhi explained, "It's a secret spell that's passed down in our family. The caster cuts their life short and transforms into the Life-Ending Profound Gateway[1], sealing away their enemy. This is a last resort that's only used when there's an enormous gap in cultivation level between the caster and their opponent. Once the spell is cast, the caster dies within moments, while the sealed enemy remains trapped for centuries on end until they perish within the seal."

"Within moments..." Chu Liang muttered, fixated on that timeframe.

"That's right," Jin Yuzhi replied. "My older brother most likely sealed Xuan Yinzi, the monster who was hunting him. Only a prominent diabolical cultivator like Xuan Yinzi, who had a much higher cultivation level than my older brother, could have forced him into using his life to create a seal instead of escaping."

"That means the sealed location can't be far from here," Chu Liang said quickly. "Assuming that Esteemed Senior Jin had been gravely injured, he couldn't have gone far before his death. It's likely he wasn't confident his seal could kill such a powerful enemy, so he hid in this cave..."

...And swallowed the part of the Divine Ruins scroll in his possession.

Chu Liang left that part unsaid.

If Jin Mucuo had more time before his death, it was likely he would have returned to Mount Shu instead of resorting to such a desperate method to hide the scroll part.

After a moment's thought, Chu Liang asked, "Is there a way to track down the location of the seal? Maybe we can find the monster and avenge Esteemed Senior Jin."

"I can try... But the sealed space is different from the outside world. There is no qi, blood, and spiritual qi necessary for sustaining life. Unless it's a celestial beast in its corporeal body or an eighth-realm Eminent One, it's pretty much impossible for anyone to have survived for so many years in there, draining off their qi, blood, and spiritual qi. If that monster hasn't escaped by now, it's probably dead."

Jin Yuzhi pulled out a twig and tapped the golden skeleton. She closed her eyes in deep thought and then raised the twig skyward.

"This way."

Jin Yuzhi took the lead, following the pull of the Life Blossom Tree.

The Jin Family's Life Blossom Tree was quite amazing, but its abilities had a limited range of effect. Otherwise, Jin Yuzhi would have found Jin Mucuo a long time ago. She could only get a general sense of the direction that would lead them to the seal. She needed to get closer before she could determine the exact location.

The three of them sped along, passing through a crevice in the valley until they reached the roaring downstream of the Bombax River.

"It's below," Jin Yuzhi said.

With a sweep of her twig, the river parted and revealed the wet riverbed.

Chu Liang and Di Nufeng followed closely behind Jin Yuzhi. The three of them treaded lightly until they reached the deepest part of the river, where a dark underwater cave lay.

Jin Yuzhi suddenly exclaimed, "He partially opened the seal! Be careful! That monster may still be inside!"

...

"It's here! It's here!"

Xuan Yinzi lay motionless, no different from a corpse. Yet, his spirit surged with excitement. He could feel it. The final Spirit-Slaying Jar he needed was approaching; it was almost within his reach. Freedom was only a breath away.

It's coming in!

Xuan Yinzi watched the dark, glossy jar enter the cavern through the small hole. Very soon, it would return to his side and replenish a bit more of his spiritual qi. With this last bit, he could finally break the seal!

Come on!

Just as he was filled with joy from the bottom of his heart, the jar suddenly slowed. Then it slid back out of the cavern with a whoosh.

Huh?

Xuan Yinzi stared blankly at the hole.

...

Moments ago...

Jin Yuzhi led Chu Liang and Di Nufeng to the deepest part of the underwater cave. The sealed space had initially been blocked off completely by a solid pitch-black wall, but that wall now had a hole, leading into the deep, dark unknown.

"This wall separates us from the sealed space. I can't break through it," Jin Yuzhi said. "It's quite possible that monster is right behind this wall. From the looks of it... if he's still alive, it won't be long till he makes an escape."

"Let's return to the mountain and notify the elders. We should prepare an enchanted formation before attempting to break the seal," Chu Liang suggested, erring on the side of caution.

If they hastily attempted to break the seal without making the necessary preparations, they might end up letting that monster escape. However, they couldn't just continue leaving him there either, as he might find a way to escape on his own.

While the three people were discussing what to do, a jar carrying an eerie aura drifted into the underwater cave. Guided by some unseen force, it drifted steadily toward the deepest part of the cave.

Chu Liang gazed at the black jar, feeling an odd sense of familiarity.

So, this is where it came from.

In that instant, he understood the jars' purpose. The monster inside the cave couldn't escape on his own, nor could he replenish his spiritual qi. So, he had been using these jars to gather spiritual qi for him to regain his strength.

As the jar drifted into the depths of the underwater cave, Di Nufeng casually pulled it out. "What is this thing?"

"It seems to be a method for collecting spiritual qi," Jin Yuzhi answered. "He's using it to accumulate sufficient spiritual qi for him to have the power to escape!"

"In that case, we can't let him have it."

Di Nufeng raised her hand, burning the Spirit-Slaying Jar into nothingness.

As she turned around, another jar floated toward them.

"Huh?" Di Nufeng uttered, grabbing the jar.

She held the jar and pushed it into the dark hole. Then she pulled it back out almost immediately.

Di Nufeng laughed. "Look at this. My hand can't pass through the dark hole, but if I'm holding the jar, I can put my hand through."

She seemed to be having fun.

"Let me try," Chu Liang said. He took the jar, pushed it into the hole, and then pulled it back out. He grinned and remarked, "There's a pulling force inside, like something is trying to drag the jar further in."

Jin Yuzhi was next. "Let me have a look."

She took the jar, inserted it halfway into the hole, and then pulled it back out.

She concluded, "Indeed. That monster is still alive, but he's extremely weak. He's probably trying to absorb the spiritual qi inside this jar."

"I have an idea," Di Nufeng said.

She grabbed the Spirit-Slaying Jar and enveloped it in spiritual qi, igniting the spiritual qi with Samadhi True Fire.

In a flash, the jar became scorching hot. With the power of the Samadhi True Fire, the jar was now hot enough to melt gold and iron.

Di Nufeng then pushed the scorching hot jar into the hole.

...

"Arghhh!"

Inside the cave, Xuan Yinzi was about to explode with rage.

At the very moment when all he needed was one last Spirit-Slaying Jar to regain his freedom, that strange sensation returned. That unseen hand that messed with him before was back.

The Spirit-Slaying Jar had been about to return to the cavern, only to swiftly slide back out.

What is going on?

Xuan Yinzi froze in disbelief. Then, he saw another Spirit-Slaying Jar peek in, only to withdraw immediately. Moreover, that happened twice.

What is this? Just what the hell is this?!

Is this some kind of foreplay? What the hell??

Or are they trying to play with a dog? To lure it out?

Xuan Yinzi sensed something was off. Obviously, the Spirit-Slaying Jars wouldn't be able to mess with him like that. There had to be someone on the other side of the hole controlling the Spirit-Slaying Jars.

"Haah..."

Summoning his last bit of strength, Xuan Yinzi dragged himself to the hole. He raised his hand in agony, waiting to grab the Spirit-Slaying Jar that next it came in.

As long as the Spirit-Slaying Jar came in through the hole one more time, he could muster his remaining strength to grab the jar. If there really was someone on the other side of the hole who dared to toy with him, then he would drain their flesh and blood dry in an instant!

"Since you dare to offend this mighty being, you will pay in blo—AAAAHHH!"

Xuan Yinzi's deep voice changed into a shrill scream.

The moment he raised his hand earlier, a Spirit-Slaying Jar happened to pass through the hole, so he grabbed it. But as soon as his hand touched the Spirit-Slaying Jar, there was the sizzling sound of burning skin.

Xuan Yinzi had once ascended to the eighth realm. So, logically speaking, that meant his corporeal body was far superior to that of the average cultivator, even though he had not focused on physical cultivation in the past. Even after he died, few metals would be able to pierce his skin.

However, the heat radiating from this Spirit-Slaying Jar was far from ordinary. Even the divine fires of the world rarely reached such high temperatures.

The long-silent cave erupted with the loudest sound it had heard in decades.

"OOOOOOOOWWWWW!!!"

Chapter 649: The Mount Shu Sect Is a Righteous Sect

Xuan Yinzi left this world peacefully.

...

Earlier...

Though no sound came from the other side, Di Nufeng felt the tremors ripple through the air and couldn't help but chuckle wickedly.

But just as quickly, a surge of powerful spiritual energy erupted from the black hole.

Di Nufeng exclaimed, "That guy is coming out!"

On the other side, Xuan Yinzi's expression twisted with fury.

So, someone dared to play tricks on me? Xuan Yinzi growled inwardly, his flesh charred and bones barely holding together. You did not expect that this... would be the final Spirit-Slaying Jar I need, did you?

Despite his battered body, Xuan Yinzi pressed forward, mouth gaping to devour the spiritual energy in the jar.

The power that coursed through him was but a sliver of what he once commanded at his peak. Nevertheless, it was enough to break the last seal. Long ago, he had poured every ounce of his cultivation into breaking the cavern's defenses. This jar was the missing piece.

And this Spirit-Slaying Jar was the last thing he needed to break out of the cavern.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

Xuan Yinzi let out a roar filled with pain, anger, and exhilaration, howling toward the sky as his foundational qi erupted. Though his withered form resembled a corpse, the power he unleashed carried a world-destroying force!

How strong was the seal forged by the self-sacrifice of an Eminent One at the seventh realm?

It was so strong that only an expert of Xuan Yinzi's caliber could break free!

Rumble.

The cavern collapsed and shattered as river waves surged violently. Diabolical qi billowed like a black fog, gushing from depths of the river!

"Tremble! Fear! Wail!" Xuan Yinzi bellowed.

Holding onto the last bit of life he had left, he pushed out all his remaining energy in one final burst, enjoying the brief thrill it brought.

All he needed was to escape. He could soon recover the rest afterward.

As the barrier shattered and the seal fractured, the merging of two spaces unfolded before his eyes. And there, standing amidst the swirling darkness was a figure—a woman.

She wore a fiery red robe, the high slit along her side revealing slender legs as pale as moonlight. Her black hair danced in the lingering shockwaves, yet her gaze remained cold and distant.

Xuan Yinzi and the woman both held the Spirit-Slaying Jar. She gripped it firmly, while his charred hand was glued to it.

Is it her? The one who has been toying with me all this time?

Two people who seemed to be cultivators stood behind her.

Good. Their flesh and blood were of excellent quality.

Let them be the first ones I consume upon my return. Their sacrifice will mark the beginning of my rise to power once more. Surely, they should feel honored.

Xuan Yinzi had never put much faith in fate, but now, he wondered if perhaps it had a hand in his return.

Once he escaped, he was certain of how his path would unfold. He would ascend once more to the eighth realm, reclaim the Dark King Sect, and surpass the heights he once stood upon.

Adversity would surely give way to prosperity, he thought.

Xuan Yinzi's early years were marked by relentless battles. Through bloodshed and struggle, he clawed his way to the top, rising from mountains of corpses and seas of blood to claim the title of sect leader of the eighth-realm Dark King Sect.

Yet, just as he was at the height of his glory, he was betrayed by a disciple and fell to the seventh and a half realm.

After years of decline, Xuan Yinzi believed his chance for resurgence was finally within reach. However, during a fierce battle for a map leading to the Immortals' Storehouse, fate twisted against him once more. He was sealed away, teetering on the brink of death.

Most would have perished under such misfortune, but Xuan Yinzi endured.

His survival was proof enough. From this moment on, his path could only lead to greatness!

A cruel glint flickered in Xuan Yinzi's eyes as he gazed at the figures standing before him.

It's unfortunate that you encountered me today! If you kneel and beg for mercy, you might suffer less. When you reach the netherworld, tell the king of the netherworld to grant you a better reincarnation in your next life!

The power to decide life and death filled him with satisfaction. The thought alone made him burst into laughter.

"Hee-hee-hee..."

Yet, as the sinister chuckle echoed through the cave, another laugh joined in—identical to his own.

His gaze locked with the woman in red, and to his disbelief, she wore the same wicked grin.

Both paused at the same time. "Hmm?"

Xuan Yinzi was puzzled. I came out, so I laughed. Why is she laughing? I clearly look like a monster. Isn't she afraid of me?

Di Nufeng frowned. "Who the heck are you to be laughing the same way as me?"

"Me?" Xuan Yinzi froze in anger at her words. Unbelievable! After all these years, the younger generation no longer recognizes my authority?

"It's unfortunate that you encountered me today..." Di Nufeng said in a heavy tone.

Huh? Xuan Yinzi was even more puzzled. Wait, isn't that exactly what I just thought of saying earlier...?

Di Nufeng continued, "If you kneel and beg for mercy, you might suffer less..."

No, no, this isn't right. Xuan Yinzi grew furious. She's saying everything I was going to say!

Di Nufeng concluded, "When you reach the netherworld, tell the king of the netherworld to grant you a better reincarnation in your next life!"

Xuan Yinzi's eyes widened in rage.

She's stealing all my lines!

"Waahhh!" he roared in fury.

Billowing diabolical qi coiled around him, thick and suffocating, condensing into a murderous force that loomed over the three figures ahead.

His strength had faded to a mere shadow of its former glory, barely one percent of his cultivation at his peak.

Nevertheless, dealing with a few insignificant bystanders should still be—

Bam!

"Ugh..."

Xuan Yinzi's lofty confidence crumbled the moment Di Nufeng's fist connected squarely with his face, sending the once-feared leader of the Dark King Sect spiraling into momentary darkness.

His qi and blood were already hanging by a thread, and that single heavy blow nearly finished him on the spot.

Wait... This isn't right. Isn't adversity supposed to lead to prosperity?

Bam!

I've been suffering for most of my life. Where's my prosperity?

Bam!

Ahhhh! I won't accept this. I still need to reclaim my spot at the peak!

Bam! Bam! Baaaaaaam!

Di Nufeng's Violet-Golden Samadhi True Fire erupted, flames swirling and scattering in all directions. The intense heat lifted her hair, making it dance like crimson threads in the wind. Her expression remained cold and indifferent.

I hate this... Xuan Yinzi thought.

"I HIIIT!!!" Di Nufeng roared at last.

Bam!

As Di Nufeng withdrew her fist, Xuan Yinzi's body crumpled backward. Everything below his neck remained intact, but his face had completely caved in.

His ruptured, protruding eyes still held a lingering glimmer—a longing for the new world he had envisioned as well as the heavy weight of shattered hope and boundless resentment.

Hatred clung to his corpse, his hands frozen mid-reach toward the sky. It was unclear whether he sought vengeance or mercy, but in the end, it made no difference. All of it faded into dust.

"This damn monster sure had a tough head," Di Nufeng remarked, cracking her knuckles with a look of disdain.

Chu Liang nodded in agreement. "Indeed quite strong."

It was the first time Chu Liang had seen someone simply die under his esteemed teacher's fists instead of being reduced to nothingness.

No seventh-realm cultivator—regardless of how arrogant they were—had ever left behind anything resembling a body after enduring one of Di Nufeng's fiery punches.

"He should be Xuan Yinzi, right?" Chu Liang asked Jin Yuzhi.

Jin Yuzhi stood in stunned silence, her mouth slightly agape. She was frozen like a statue.

The rumors of Di Nufeng's ferocity had always seemed exaggerated—until now. Seeing it firsthand made her realize those tales had barely scratched the surface.

That was terrifying. Oh heavens... Thank goodness the disciple had arrived at Golden Jade Temple first. If the debt-collecting esteemed teacher had arrived first...

The mere thought sent a chill crawling down Jin Yuzhi's spine.

After a long pause, Jin Yuzhi finally said, "Uh. I don't know him. Even if I did... I doubt I can identify him now."

At this moment, Xuan Yinzi's face was a crumpled wreck of hatred and despair. His emaciated body resembled dried wood, and his tattered robes barely clung to his skeletal frame. His qi and blood had been depleted to such extremes that even after Di Nufeng's relentless assault, not a single drop of blood flowed.

Strangely, his death seemed... peaceful.

In his desperate struggle to survive, he had already drained every ounce of life from himself.

After enduring countless hardships and finally seizing the last Spirit-Slaying Jar, he believed his return to power was inevitable.

But beyond the hell he had crawled through, another layer awaited.

Beyond the eighteenth layer... was the nineteenth.

Life, it seemed, was nothing more than an endless series of falls.

Where was the rise he had been promised?

Naturally, that realization only struck him after his death.

...

"I'll burn this place down to make sure no trace is left."

"Teacher, there's no need for that this time. He's a bad guy."

"..."

Watching the teacher-disciple duo clean up the scene felt less like witnessing justice at work and more like observing two veteran serial killers dispose of evidence. Within moments, it was as if nothing had happened.

What do you mean by there's no need for that this time'?

When was destroying evidence ever necessary before?

Judging by their skill, this was clearly not the first—or even the second—time they'd cleaned up like this.

As these thoughts raced in Jin Yuzhi's mind, she grew even more frightened.

The unsettling thought crept into her mind. If they were to get too carried away, would they deal with me just as effortlessly?

Chu Liang turned back and noticed Jin Yuzhi's silence. Detecting the change in her emotions, he flashed a harmless smile. "Temple Overseer Jin, don't worry. The Mount Shu Sect is a righteous sect."

"His fingers won't budge, and I can't pry the enchanted tool off. Bring me the Dustless Sword to chop his fingers off," Di Nufeng called from the side.

"Alright," Chu Liang replied, turning back toward the corpse. "I'll gut him while I'm at it, just in case he hid something in his chest or stomach. Remember that guy—oh, what's his name—who hid treasures in his belly... hehe."

Di Nufeng glanced over and frowned as she corrected, "Aiya, you're doing it all wrong. You have to cut here. Haven't you ever dissected someone before?"

"You truly are experienced, Esteemed Teacher," Chu Liang humbly replied. "I'll make sure to remember this for next time."

"Haha..." Jin Yuzhi forced out a weak laugh, her face pale as a sheet.

Mount Shu Sect is definitely a righteous sect... she thought nervously. But perhaps demons walk among them too.

Chapter 650: Being an Attendant in the Sect (I)

The Boundless Palace on Heaven-Reaching Peak.

Even though six years had passed, Venerable Wen Yuan still looked the same. He remained calm and unshaken, like a still pond. However, the moment Chu Liang stepped inside, a rare flicker of excitement flashed across Venerable Wen Yuan's face.

"You're back," Venerable Wen Yuan said.

He rose to his feet, stepping forward to greet Chu Liang with a warm pat on the shoulder.

The leader of the Mount Shu Sect rarely welcomed others like this, something that likely happened to only a few people in the last century.

Chu Liang responded humbly, "I apologize for worrying the elders."

"Ah..." Venerable Wen Yuan gently pulled him down to sit. "We know what happened before you disappeared. You played a crucial role in helping the court root out the Celestial Charm Sect spies. The imperial court sent the Golden Dragon to Mount Shu, and they have been supporting us over the years. It is all undoubtedly a gesture of gratitude for what you have done for them."

"It was all thanks to the elders' guidance. I wouldn't dare take credit for it," Chu Liang said with a modest smile.

Venerable Wen Yuan chuckled. "If you don't take credit for Mount Shu's rise, who else should? Even Red Cotton Peak's current prosperity comes from the plans you left behind."

"That only happened because the elders trusted me enough to let me try different experiments at the Red Cotton Peak," Chu Liang replied.

"If we must fault you for something," Venerable Wen Yuan said, "it's that you returned to the sect and left again without visiting the elders. I only found out that you came back through the disciples' reports."

"There were pressing matters to attend to," Chu Liang replied with a calm smile.

"And what could be so important?" Venerable Wen Yuan asked.

"My esteemed teacher and I killed someone who used to be a powerful former eighth-realm diabolical cultivator," Chu Liang said casually.

"..." Venerable Wen Yuan straightened his posture, suddenly feeling uneasy.

After Chu Liang briefly recounted the events, Venerable Wen Yuan finally exhaled and settled back into his seat.

It wasn't Chu Liang that Venerable Wen Yuan was worried about. If Chu Liang truly returned after six years with the strength to slay an eighth-realm cultivator, Wen Yuan wouldn't hesitate to hand over the sect leader's position.

If someone was that much of a prodigy, it would be unreasonable for them not to become the Hallowed One of this era.

Clearly, it was Di Nufeng he was wary of.

If she gained the strength to single-handedly defeat an eighth-realm opponent, it might not necessarily be a blessing for the Mount Shu Sect...

With her rebellious nature, her first step would likely be storming the imperial city to challenge her own father. As for the second, she might challenge him for the position of sect leader. Then for the third... she might just start challenging the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten altogether.

After the false alarm, Venerable Wen Yuan let out a heavy sigh. "Xuan Yinzi was of my generation, the leader of a diabolical sect that once held unrivaled power. It is truly lamentable that his life ended this way."

Chu Liang nodded in agreement. "It's just the cycle of karma. Retribution always finds its way."

By all rights, such an achievement from a disciple should have earned high praise from the sect leader.

Yet somehow, when it came to Chu Liang, Venerable Wen Yuan felt numb to the news.

Chu Liang was like a merit-making machine for the Mount Shu Sect, racking up countless achievements. For him to return and immediately accomplish another great feat—well, it fitted his character.

"Not bad." Venerable Wen Yuan nodded. "Since you're back, it's time to take on some responsibilities. Red Cotton Peak is flourishing, so you don't need to devote all your attention there. Why don't you serve as an attendant at a hall?"

"Hmm..." Chu Liang hesitated.

After the Assembly of Immortal Sects, younger disciples were considered to have reached the graduation phase. The Sword Exchange Pavilion no longer provided tasks suited to them, making it harder for them to acquire resources. Some would leave to seek opportunities, while others would choose to venture in the outside world for more training. Those who remained had to assume the roles of attendants across the halls of the sect.

Of course, with Red Cotton Peak thriving, many disciples of the Mount Shu Sect had another option. The critical matters of the peak had to be handled by the members of the sect. For those not interested in becoming attendants, working at Red Cotton Peak was a viable path—one that often yielded greater rewards than sect positions.

Still, serving as an attendant within the sect was a steady, comfortable role—like holding a golden ticket to lifetime job security. It also paved the way to higher leadership.

Given Chu Liang's status, he would naturally gain more prestige if he continued overseeing Red Cotton Peak. However, if he took on an attendant role, he would have to start from the bottom.

Venerable Wen Yuan insisted for one reason alone.

To reach the upper ranks—whether as a supervising elder, one of the Four Guardians, or sect leader—Chu Liang had to walk the same path as those before him. No one rose without first learning the inner workings of the halls, and the role of attendant was an inevitable milestone along the way.

It was clear Venerable Wen Yuan had high hopes for him.

Sensing Chu Liang's hesitation, Venerable Wen Yuan softened his tone. "No rush. You've just returned—take a few days to rest. When you're ready, you can decide which hall to serve in."

...

Chu Liang understood Venerable Wen Yuan's intentions and did not object.

The choice of which hall to join wasn't a decision he should take lightly. It would set the course for his development in the years to come.

The top choices were obviously Sword Exchange Pavilion and the Four Great Halls.

For those lacking unique talents but possessing raw power and strong cultivation, the Sword Exchange Pavilion was the obvious choice.

The Sword Exchange Pavilion kept a team of enforcers, tasked with handling difficult missions. Its members were battle-hardened fighters. It was said that Xu Ziyang, the eldest senior brother of Jade Sword Peak, had assumed the role of attendant there.

In six years, he had ascended to the rank of Twin Flower Red Rod—a title coined by Di Nufeng herself.

The Hall of Weapons required no introduction. As its name suggested, the Hall of Weapons specialized in tool-making and weapon forging.

At the Hall of Conservation, the preservation of ancient texts and scholarly pursuits took center stage. Disciples spent their days studying scriptures alongside diligent scholars like the square-faced Senior Brother Yuan.

The Hall of Alchemy had been where Chu Liang spent the most time. His remarkable growth in the art of alchemy had once positioned him as the clear successor to the Alchemy Master.

However, over time, his path took a different turn. Instead of striving for the pinnacle of alchemy, he became fixated on making a fortune by trading pills—buying pills at low cost and selling them for profit as prices soared. This left the Alchemy Master quietly disheartened.

The Hall of Discipline was traditionally the hardest to enter, but it likely wouldn't be much of a challenge for Chu Liang.

Unlike the errand-running junior disciples, joining meant becoming one of the Mount Shu Sect's law enforcers. Proper attendants of the Hall of Discipline wielded real authority, with the power to punish fellow disciples both within the sect and beyond its walls.

Under the leadership of the Discipline Master, the Hall of Discipline was feared by all disciples.

Beyond the Sword Exchange Pavilion and the Four Great Halls, the Mount Shu Sect had various other administrative halls handling miscellaneous affairs.

Halls like the Hall of Construction, the Hall of Meals, the Foreign Affairs Hall, the Hall of Astronomy, the Hall of Healing, and the Hall of Agriculture didn't hold much power. They mainly handled sect affairs and general maintenance. Most disciples who served as attendants there lacked lofty ambitions. Rarely did anyone from these halls rise to high-ranking positions within the sect.

Chu Liang pondered this as he made his way back to the Silver Sword Peak.

...

While Chu Liang was making his way back to the Silver Sword Peak, Chu Yi had just returned from his studies at the Hall of Conservation.

When Chu Yi saw Chu Liang landing on the ground, he excitedly ran to greet him.

"Senior Brother!" Chi Yi called out with a bright smile.

As a child, he used to call Chu Liang "Big Bro." But now that he had started cultivating, he would address Chu Liang as senior brother.

Chu Yi was at the age of eleven or twelve, appearing tall and slender for his age. With his current height, it seemed likely that he would grow to be quite tall in the future. His skin was fair, and his delicate features made him look refined and gentle when he smiled. Dressed in white robes, he carried himself with an air of elegance.

He bore a striking resemblance to Chu Liang, with at least seventy percent similarity in their features.

Chu Liang observed Chu Yi's cultivation level. At just twelve years old, Chu Yi had already advanced to the third realm. With a soft sigh, Chu Liang thought, This is what a real prodigy is like.

With the exception of prodigies like Qi Lin'er, whose abilities defied common sense, the young elites of immortal sects typically advanced rapidly, attaining the realms in the Mortal Gate.

On the other hand, Chu Liang had only advanced to the third realm at the age of seventeen, which was rather mediocre.

Ironically, it was this slow start that made Chu Liang's rapid ascent all the more extraordinary.

As for Chu Yi's cultivation, Di Nufeng never taught him anything. His actual mentor was likely Senior Brother Yuan Zhuo.

"I hear you're managing Red Cotton Peak now. That is very impressive," Chu Liang said with a smile.

"I'm just following the methods you left behind. I haven't done much on my own," Chu Yi replied with a modest smile.

The two then continued walking to the pavilion where Di Nufeng resided.