

M. Slaying 731

Chapter 731: The Business World (II)

On Mirage Mountain, in Daoist Cangsheng's cave dwelling.

The sect leader of the Penglai Supreme Sect had a palace of his own, yet he still kept the cave dwelling he used to live in—a place that would never be removed from Mirage Mountain. Daoist Cangsheng spent most of his time cultivating in his cave dwelling instead of the grand palace hall for the sect leader.

His cave dwelling was at the finest location on Mirage Mountain, perched atop a towering cliff by the sea. Shrouded by divine trees, it was bathed in the vast winds of the heavens that swept across the residence.

At this moment, Yang Shenlong stood at the edge of the cliff, letting the wind whip his robes and tousle his hair as he stood in silence for a long time.

Rumble!

The grand doors of the cave dwelling swung open. Daoist Xuan Lu stepped out from within and said flatly, "You may enter."

Yang Shenlong cast a glance at Daoist Xuan Lu but said nothing, stepping forward into the cave dwelling.

Qi Lin'er's death had been largely caused by Daoist Xuan Lu. Yang Shenlong had assumed that no matter how highly Daoist Cangsheng valued Daoist Xuan Lu, he would still be punished. Yet, it seemed that Daoist Cangsheng had merely sent him on a trip to the Far West, without any further reprimand.

Perhaps he had been forgiven because he had no knowledge of Qi Lin'er's true origins.

The resurrection of Hallowed Yang was an utmost secret, one that could never be openly revealed. If it were to fail for any reason, it could always be blamed on fate.

But Yang Shenlong refused to submit to fate, and this was why he had come to see Daoist Cangsheng today.

The cave dwelling was huge. After entering the front courtyard, one had to walk along a long corridor, passing by waterside pavilions on either side, before finally reaching the place where Daoist Cangsheng typically engaged in closed-door cultivation.

The furnishings were simple—just a single divine statue and a few meditation cushions. Wisps of incense smoke curled gently within the private chamber.

Upon seeing the seated figure in meditation on the cushion, Yang Shenlong nodded and bowed in greeting. "Sect Leader."

"You rarely come to see me," Daoist Cangsheng said, slowly opening his eyes and speaking in a gentle voice. "I assume it must be something important."

Rumors often circulated in the outside world that Daoist Cangsheng had struck down the Yang Family of Penglai. However, only those on Mirage Mountain knew the truth. With the sect leader's authority and position, if he had truly intended to eliminate a family, it would have been eradicated long ago—no matter how deeply rooted they were in Penglai. There was no way he would have allowed Yang Shenlong to grow into a peerless prodigy known throughout the world.

The reality was that while Yang Shenlong had little direct contact with the sect leader during his growth, every resource he required had been of the highest quality.

Yang Shenlong pondered for a moment before speaking. "Qi Lin'er is dead. Do you have anything to say about this?"

"I had Xuan Lu take a trip to the Far West and uncovered a few things," Daoist Cangsheng replied. "That Chu Liang seems to be hiding something. Even the East Sea Chrono Wheel couldn't save the person he killed... Moreover, it seems he possesses something the demons want."

"Chu Liang?" Yang Shenlong seemed surprised that Daoist Cangsheng would bring him up. He thought to himself, Qi Lin'er is dead. Is it even important as to how he died?

"Indeed." Daoist Cangsheng seemed to take this matter quite seriously. "Those two demons risked their lives to save Chu Liang, claiming he carries something sacred that belongs to the demons... What could it be?"

As Yang Shenlong listened, his mind raced. Suddenly, he said, "I once heard Yuhu mention that when he first met Chu Liang, he was shocked. Chu Liang destroyed a solid enchanted tool in mere moments..."

Then something seemed to click in his mind.

"Could the sacred item the demons are so desperate to obtain be related to the resurrection of the Demon God...?"

Hearing this, Daoist Cangsheng connected the dots. "The true form of the Demon God? It could only be the Heaven-Devouring Bug!"

With a composed expression, Yang Shenlong's gaze revealed that he had come to the same conclusion.

Earlier, when Daoist Xuan Lu reported to Daoist Cangsheng, the two had speculated about what it might be but had no idea. Now, with the crucial information provided by Yang Shenlong, they were able to immediately piece together the answer.

If Caiyi had revealed this information outright, they might have suspected she had ulterior motives. But since they had deduced it themselves, there was no reason to question its validity.

"No wonder he hasn't left Mount Shu since returning from the Far West. It seems he's not just guarding against our retaliation," Daoist Cangsheng said, gazing in the direction of Mount Shu. "He's clearly afraid of the demons."

Yang Shenlong asked doubtfully, "But even if he possessed the Heaven-Devouring Bug, surely he should have been killed by now?"

"Not necessarily," Daoist Cangsheng said, his gaze growing darker. "Perhaps the Mount Shu Sect has some deeper scheme in motion."

Hearing this, Yang Shenlong shook his head slightly. From what he knew of Chu Liang, the man might be skilled in strategy, but he was not someone with an evil, cunning mind. He would never use the safety of the human world as a bargaining chip in a scheme.

For Daoist Cangsheng to say such things—he was judging Chu Liang by the standards of a sect leader.

Daoist Cangsheng continued, "But even though he hasn't left Mount Shu recently, he's been quite active. Young men like him tend to draw attention no matter where they go. Perhaps we can test him a little."

Yang Shenlong had no intention of defending Chu Liang, as he had come to talk to Daoist Cangsheng for a different purpose altogether.

"Sect Leader, now that Qi Lin'er is dead, about our ancestor, Hallowed Yang..."

"It will naturally be put on hold for now," Daoist Cangsheng said firmly. "You are not to mention it to anyone. We will revisit it once we find a suitable vessel."

"Actually, I..." Yang Shenlong hesitated before saying, "I can—"

"You can what?!" Daoist Cangsheng's voice suddenly turned sharp.

"I can also transition to learn the Great Dao of Physical Cultivation. And since I share a bloodline with Hallowed Yang, the fusion will be twice as compatible—far more than with anyone else..." Yang Shenlong said softly.

"Don't you dare mention this again," Daoist Cangsheng scolded sharply, flicking his sleeve heavily.

But still, Yang Shenlong seemed unwilling to give up. "Sect Leader..."

"I am willing to sacrifice myself because only when one reaches the peak does one understand the limits of their own aptitude," Daoist Cangsheng said sternly. "You are still at the beginning of your cultivation journey. How can you be so eager for such ambitions?"

"..." Yang Shenlong remained silent.

"I once swore to your forefathers that I would ensure the safety of you and your family members. I absolutely will not allow what you just said to happen," Daoist Cangsheng vowed firmly. "I shall ban you from leaving your residence for a year. Go back and reflect on your actions."

Yang Shenlong seemed like he wanted to say something, but in the end, he held his words back. Lowering his head, he simply replied, "Yes."

...

Chu Liang, who had been the subject of countless discussions, now found himself in an awkward situation.

Inside Red Moon Pavilion, a lavish banquet had been set, with all sorts of exquisite dishes spread across the table. The red oil hotpot bubbled and boiled, sending up bursts of steam.

However, the people sitting before him showed him no respect. They simply focused on eating and drinking, not even sparing him a glance.

Lin Bei frowned in displeasure. It seemed he wanted to say something about it. "You all..."

However, Chu Liang gestured lightly in the air, signaling him to stay calm. Then he smiled and said, "Young Master Hong, now that we've almost finished eating, shall we discuss our business?"

"What's there to discuss? Heh, our stance remains the same..." The burly young man across from him finally looked up and wiped his mouth. "No extra money, no deal."

Chapter 732: I, Chu Liang, Invest In This Project (I)

"Heh," Chu Liang chuckled as he showed a faint smile.

The man before him was Hong Jufeng, the young master of Starhold Island in the East Sea.

Hong Jufeng was a massive man, his bulky frame resembling a small mountain of flesh as he sat there. His demeanor was domineering and unyielding.

For someone to act this brazenly on Mount Shu without getting beaten to a pulp, he had to have some serious backing.

“We should at least discuss how much more we’re expected to give and how it should be handled,” Lin Bei interjected, trying to suppress his anger. He spread his hands and continued, “You can’t just keep silent about it. That puts us in a difficult position.”

“If it is difficult, then don’t do it.”

Suddenly, Hong Jufeng stood up. He didn’t even spare Lin Bei a glance as he fixed his gaze solely on Chu Liang. “We came here today out of respect for you. Our demands were clear—you know exactly how much more we want. You can’t agree to the price increase, yet you still expect the job to be done. Tell me, where in the world would you find such a good deal?”

Hearing this, Chu Liang smiled and shook his head.

Starhold Island wasn’t just a single island. It was the heart of a powerful sect that controlled nearly a hundred islands in the East Sea, making them a huge and powerful force.

They were originally a branch of the Heavenly Star Divine Cult, known as the Starhold lineage. However, after the Heavenly Star Divine Cult split up—or perhaps even before that—the Starhold lineage aligned itself with the Penglai Supreme Sect.

When the Heavenly Star Divine Cult collapsed and split apart, the Starhold lineage swiftly relocated to the East Sea, seizing a resource-rich island as their stronghold. It was hard to believe this hadn’t been orchestrated by the Penglai Supreme Sect from the start. Being a classic case of defecting to the winning side, the Penglai Supreme Sect provided Starhold Island with unwavering support.

Over the centuries, Starhold Island’s influence grew to its current scale, and in the East Sea, they could even be considered a dominant force.

However, by openly siding with the Penglai Supreme Sect and acknowledging it as Starhold Island’s new master, Starhold Island naturally incurred the wrath of its old one.

The Celestial King Sect, Celestial Pivot Pavilion, and Sea King Sect—once all top-tier immortal factions part of the Heavenly Star Divine Cult—relentlessly sought to suppress Starhold Island. However, as long as the Starhold Lineage remained within the East Sea, the Penglai Supreme Sect’s protection ensured their survival.

This led to a peculiar situation. Within the East Sea, Starhold Island's influence was nearly as fearsome as the Divine Nine and the Terrestrial Ten, and few dared to provoke them. But beyond the East Sea, they were practically unheard of.

They continued to dominate within the East Sea, and at first, they kept to their own business and had no interactions with Mount Shu Sect.

However, Starhold Island controlled the Turbid Mountain Archipelago, which produced a spiritual ore known as Mountain-Suppressing Rock. This ore had long been an essential material for immortal sects in constructing buildings infused with spiritual energy. The majority of the Starhold lineage's income came from selling this resource.

Previously, the sects of immortality cultivation didn't have a high demand for spirit-infused buildings, so the price of Mountain-Suppressing Rock stayed stable. But that changed when the Feng-grade houses on Red Cotton Peak became popular and sparked this renovation craze.

The Mount Shu Sect's Hall of Construction found itself with orders scheduled years in advance. Seeing that the Mount Shu Sect's Hall of Construction was raking in so much profit, Starhold Island could no longer sit still.

Just as the Hall of Construction was about to go all out, Starhold Island suddenly announced that the price of Mountain-Suppressing Rock had to be raised, except that the raise was ridiculous. It was nearly ten times the original price!

This was nothing short of daylight robbery.

Chu Liang had invited him to Red Cotton Peak for negotiations, but he hadn't expected the young master of Starhold Island to arrive with such hostility.

"Young Master Hong, there's no need to be upset. With the price of Mountain-Suppressing Rock skyrocketing, you must understand that it's difficult for us to accept it right away," Chu Liang said slowly.

The Red Cotton Peak was already in a tight financial spot. Even if they had more than enough funds, they couldn't tolerate such blatant price gouging. Otherwise, every supplier would try to exploit them in the future, making business impossible.

Chu Liang's tone remained gentle as he continued, "If you're determined to profit from the Hall of Construction's operations, we can explore other ways to collaborate."

He paused before adding, "For example, investment dividends."

"Oh? And what exactly do you mean by that?" Hong Jufeng sneered, his double chin jiggling. "Are you saying that we should pay you for our spirit stone mine? Chu Liang, let me tell you—I know exactly how you became rich, and I know what happened to Huyan Bin, the last person who worked with you. If the Mount Shu Sect wants Mountain-Suppressing Rock, you'll pay the price. Otherwise, we're done talking!"

With that, he lifted his leg and strode toward the door. The disciples of the Starhold Island behind him all rose and followed behind him.

"Actually, we could sit down and go over the numbers properly," Chu Liang said with a helpless smile, still unwilling to give up.

"I have nothing to discuss with you people from Mount Shu!" Hong Jufeng snorted coldly and shoved the door open. "What a waste of time!"

Bang.

As the door swung open, a strikingly cold and beautiful face was suddenly revealed outside.

Hong Jufeng froze for a moment. Before he could get a clear look at the person, a powerful kick struck him square in the chest.

Bam!

Like a rolling boulder, the mountain of flesh hurtled backward through the banquet hall, crashed through a window, soared across three streets, and finally slammed into the upper-floor wall of a shop.

The shop, having taken the brunt of the impact, remained unshaken. But Hong Jufeng, who had borne the full force, hit the ground with a thud and lost consciousness.

Such was the beauty of the Feng-grade building.

The once-arrogant Starhold Island disciples who had followed Hong Jufeng now stood frozen. The woman's terrifying presence sent chills down their spines, and one dreadful name surfaced in their minds. Not one of them dared to step forward.

In the end, they bolted for the window, scrambling out as they shouted:

"Young Master!"

"Young Master!!"

"Young Master!!!"

...

The woman watched the group leave, then frowned and stepped inside, muttering curses under her breath.

"Ugh, who is that eyesore..."

Indeed, the woman had no idea what had just happened. She simply found the man an eyesore. She was none other than Di Nufeng, the peak master of Silver Sword Peak.

Whoever the sect leader didn't dare to beat up on Mount Shu, she would. Whoever Chu Liang wouldn't dare to touch, she would.

Chu Liang gave an awkward smile as he answered, "A... business partner."

He had long found that fat man unpleasant, and since his esteemed teacher had already struck, he saw no reason to smooth things over. Instead, he gave Lin Bei a look, and Lin Bei quickly led a group to check the situation.

Chu Liang quickly stood up and greeted her with a smile. "Esteemed Teacher, are you in a bad mood?"

It wasn't just him—anyone, even a blind man, could see that Di Nufeng had stormed in seething with anger. She was clearly in a foul mood. The moment Lin Bei left, nearly everyone else hurried after him, afraid they might be next to face her wrath.

"Hmph!" Di Nufeng sat down and slammed the table with a loud smack. Letting out a frustrated cry, she snapped, "Don't even mention it! I'm absolutely furious!"

"What happened?" Chu Liang asked hurriedly.

"I was just out collecting debts for the Red Cotton Peak and ran into a troublesome bastard," Di Nufeng said, furrowing her brows. "I came back to have you gather more men to head over there with me and settle this with blood!"

With finances running tight, Chu Liang had his esteemed teacher initiate another round of debt collection. After all, since they still had debts to pay, it was only natural to collect what was owed to them first.

Di Nufeng was an expert in this field. With just a few moves, the immortal sects indebted to Red Cotton Peak had wailed like ghosts. None of them dared to refuse payment.

However, she had just experienced the first failure of her debt-collecting career.

This time, the debtor was the Talismanic Sect of Mount Nao. Their sect leader, Huan Leisheng, was a newly ascended Eminent One who had reached the Dao Attainment Realm through the Dao of Talismans.

Despite Huan Leisheng being a beginner at the seventh realm, Di Nufeng had surprisingly failed to catch him right away. This was due to the ever-shifting nature of the Dao of Talismans and the treacherous terrain of Mount Nao.

In her frustration, she set fire to the entire Mount Nao. Yet, despite her efforts, Huan Leisheng managed to escape, which was why she became so furious.

When she returned to get reinforcements from Chu Liang, she happened to see Hong Jufeng walking out the door with his ugly face. Overcome with anger, she couldn't hold back and sent him flying with a single kick.

"The Talismanic Sect of Mount Nao?"

Chu Liang couldn't recall much about the sect, but given that Red Cotton Peak had lent them money, it was likely that Chu Yi had been the one to approve the loan. This meant that they were a legitimate immortal sect with an established cultivation legacy.

If they were people of proper morals and upright character, then there would be nothing to fear.

"The fact that he escaped from you must mean he's skilled!" Chu Liang said, slamming his hand on the table. "I'll gather some men from Red Cotton Peak right away. We'll follow you back!"

"Yes!" Di Nufeng gritted her teeth. "I'll bring Yan Zi along too. Let's see if that bastard can still escape!"

"Um..." Chu Liang quickly tried to dissuade her. "Bringing in a powerful cultivator at the eighth realm might be a bit much. How about we try again first?"

"Fine!" Di Nufeng snapped. "Then go and call for reinforcements. Numbers don't matter... just bring a few more spirit dogs. I refuse to believe he can escape beyond the land of the nine provinces!"

Moments later, Di Nufeng, Chu Liang, and the Golden-Furred Hou charged out of Mount Shu once more.

Previously, for the sake of safety, Venerable Wen Yuan had advised Chu Liang to stay on Mount Shu for the time being. But there's no such thing as guarding against thieves for a thousand days—he couldn't remain on the mountain forever.

When Chu Yi left a while ago, the way he left reminded Chu Liang that while his actual body couldn't leave the mountain, he could leave as a clone created through External Manifestation.

Thus, the one accompanying his esteemed teacher today was his clone, which he had created using External Manifestation.

In fact, many Eminent Ones, upon reaching a certain level of cultivation, chose to travel as clones instead of in their true form. They would only appear in their actual selves when absolutely necessary. A clone created using External Manifestation possessed the same cultivation level and divine abilities as the real person. The only difference was that it would be inconvenient for him to bring certain enchanted tools.

The reason Chu Liang had to go with Di Nufeng to the Talismanic Sect was that he had some knowledge of talismanic script. With his current cultivation, he might actually be able to help.

Moreover, he was worried that if he wasn't there to keep an eye on things, his teacher might lose her temper and flatten the mountain range that spanned a hundred li, causing a disaster far too great.

Mount Nao lay in the heart of the Southern Regions. Surrounding the great mountain were several villages and towns, home to a considerable population. However, the deep valleys and towering peaks were seldom traversed, and legend had it that this place had many immortals.

Everyone in the world of immortality cultivation knew that Mount Nao was the home to the Talismanic Sect.

Yet, when Chu Liang arrived, what lay before him was no longer the lush, green mountain.

Instead, it was now a vast, charred wasteland.

"I knew it..."

As Chu Liang gazed at the devastation before him, his heart trembled with fear. He couldn't help but think, If my teacher went to collect debts and left the debtor's ground barren with no grass left to grow... that's already an act of mercy.

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Chapter 733: I, Chu Liang, Invest In This Project (II)

Chu Liang and his teacher descended from the clouds and arrived at the entrance of the Talismanic Sect.

However, the entrance gates no longer existed. Faint traces suggested that a pavilion had once stood here, but now, only a desolate cliffside remained. The building had likely been built against the mountain wall, but now, a massive, pitch-black cavity marred the surface of the mountain.

"This is the place. Huan Leisheng escaped using a talismanic script and merged into the mountain," Di Nufeng said. "I even blasted through the rock, but I still couldn't track his trail."

"Go sniff it out," Chu Liang said, releasing the Golden-Furred Hou.

Big Head let out a howl, leaping into the middle of the scorched mountain wall, where he sniffed around amidst the lingering scent of burnt rock.

The Golden-Furred Hou was now a powerful sixth-realm spirit beast. As it sniffed, it quickly picked up a faint trail and dove into a hole in the mountain's surface. It traversed the path inside, leading Chu Liang and his teacher to the other side, where a waterfall crashed down from the cliffs.

The thunderous roar of the waterfall echoed endlessly.

Di Nufeng glanced at it and asked, "Did that bastard hide in the water when I was chasing him?"

"No..." Chu Liang examined it for a moment before shaking his head. "The waterfall is not real."

With that, he waved his hands, and the waterfall before them unraveled under his glowing fingertips, dissolving into countless talismanic inscriptions.

"An illusory technique?" Di Nufeng frowned.

"No, this is a terrain created with talismanic scripts," Chu Liang explained. "If it were purely an illusion, how could it deceive you, esteemed teacher? His mastery of the Dao of Talisman-Making must be incredibly high for him to be able to escape this way."

So it turned out that Huan Leisheng had been able to reshape the terrain using talismanic scripts, continuously creating a cover for his escape. No wonder his teacher had failed to catch him even with her immense cultivation power.

"This entire Mount Nao is one massive talismanic formation," Chu Liang concluded after surveying their surroundings. "It's like his own personal hidden realm. Within it, he wields the ability almost on par with creation-level abilities. Even a powerful cultivator at the eighth realm wouldn't be able to track him down so easily."

"Then what should we do?" Di Nufeng asked.

"Creating a formation like this is no easy feat. He's invested too much effort into it to simply abandon it," Chu Liang said. "If we only damage the outer terrain, he won't care at all, as he can restore it with talismanic script in no time. But if we strike at the formation's core, he won't be able to sit still and do nothing."

As he spoke, Chu Liang closed his eyes slightly. His divine sense flowed along the talismanic script's spiritual veins, unraveling the formation layer by layer.

Although he had not committed himself to studying the Dao of Talisman-Making since he had acquired the Talisman of Life Restoration from the Celestial Talisman Master's Hidden Realm, he had nonetheless gained considerable insight into its profound mysteries. As a result, tackling and deciphering this formation was no difficult task.

Before long, Chu Liang and his teacher followed the spiritual vein running through the mountain and arrived at a gently flowing stream.

"The true core of the talismanic formation lies beneath this stream," Chu Liang said. "Esteemed Teacher, if you cut off the water flow, you can dismantle his entire formation."

This talismanic formation was exceptionally sturdy, and destroying its foundation of spiritual veins would be no easy task. However, with his esteemed teacher present, such brute-force matters were hardly a concern.

"Heh..." Di Nufeng let out a sinister chuckle as she rolled up her sleeves, preparing to take action.

Just then, a voice called out, pleading, "Wait! You two, please show some mercy!"

With a swoosh, a flash of light streaked through the air.

A middle-aged man in wide robes and flowing sleeves emerged from the stream. He wore a black gauze cap, and his refined features exuded the elegance of a scholar. As he looked at Chu Liang and his teacher, who were on the verge of destroying everything, his eyes brimmed with helplessness.

He had thought Di Nufeng was domineering enough on her own and had barely managed to shake her off. Who could have expected that she would return to Mount Shu and then come back here with someone that has a brain?

He screamed inwardly, Isn't this just cheating?

...

Moments later, the middle-aged man sat on the ground, his face filled with dejection.

"I am Huan Leisheng, sect leader of the Talismanic Sect," he muttered. "Knowing that Di Nufeng of Mount Shu would come to collect debts, I sent all my disciples away to hide. But I couldn't bring myself to abandon the foundation we built here on Mount Nao, so I stayed here by myself."

Chu Liang praised, "This grand talismanic formation on Mount Nao is truly exquisite. Sect Leader Huan Leisheng, you are truly a genius in this field."

"I didn't expect to run into Young Hero Chu. As expected of someone who obtained a legacy from the Celestial Talisman Master's Hidden Realm!" Huan Leisheng said, unable to conceal his envy.

It turned out that when the ruins of the Celestial Talisman Sect revealed a hidden realm, the Talismanic Sect had also sought a share of the treasure.

Strictly speaking, the founding fathers of the Talismanic Sect were merely a minor offshoot of the ancient Celestial Talisman Sect. However, with the main sect's legacy nearly lost, they now held the most complete cultivation techniques rooted in the Dao of Talisman-Making.

Yet, as a small and humble sect, the Talismanic Sect had no say in such matters.

In the end, the Celestial Talisman Master's Hidden Realm was seized by several sects in the Divine Nine and the Terrestrial Ten, who turned it into a training ground for their young disciples. It was there that Chu Liang inherited the cultivation legacy of the Celestial Talisman Sect—the Talisman of Life Restoration.

Huan Leisheng had heard about this before.

Chu Liang said with a modest wave of his hand, "It was just a stroke of luck."

"You don't have to be so humble, Young Hero Chu. We all know your talent is unparalleled," Huan Leisheng replied with a flattering smile.

Di Nufeng, watching from the side, snapped impatiently, "I dare you to smile again!"

Huan Leisheng instantly stiffened, not daring to show even the slightest hint of a smile.

"Do you think we came here for small talk?" Di Nufeng barked. "After all the effort we spent, we should charge you an interest of thirty percent of your debt!"

The moment Huan Leisheng heard this, his expression darkened with sorrow. He pleaded, "Peak Master Feng, Young Hero Chu, forget about the interest—we don't even have a single grain of savings left in the Talisman Sect

..."

"Mister Huan, your debt isn't a small amount," Chu Liang said, feigning helplessness. "If it were just pocket change, we wouldn't care whether we got it back or not. But you've owed this massive sum for three months past the deadline, and now you're telling us you're broke? This behavior is a little outrageous."

Huan Leisheng replied, "But Young Hero Chu, it's the truth. Honestly, there is a reason why I am buried in debt."

"Rubbish!" Di Nufeng shot him a sharp look. "Every debtor has a sob story. I don't want to hear it!"

"Esteemed teacher, at least hear him out," Chu Liang advised from the side. "Let's not get angry. Mister Huan doesn't seem unreasonable. Even if he can't pay in spirit-stones, surely he has something else he can offer as collateral."

"With how poor he looks, what could he possibly have?" Di Nufeng shouted. "Don't stop me! I'll wipe out his entire family!"

Chu Liang called out, "Esteemed Teacher! We're here to ask for money, not to take lives!"

Huan Leisheng felt speechless as he watched Chu Liang and his teacher exchange words in perfect harmony, each one following the other's lead as if it were a well-rehearsed performance.

"Haaaaa!" He let out a deep sigh before finally saying, "Please follow me."

With a wave of his hand, Huan Leisheng parted the stream before them, revealing a deep cavern. He led them inside and they descended further into the cave, until they reached the lowest level, where a place of dazzling light awaited.

In the center stood a jade stone table, shaped like a wheel and engraved with intricate talismanic script.

"Young Hero Chu, this is the legendary artifact I spent twenty years creating—the Celestial Talismanic Wheel!" Huan Leisheng said, pointing to the wheel-like table with pride. "If not for this project, I would never have burned through so many resources and fallen into such massive debt!"

Seeing how strange the item appeared, Chu Liang asked, "What exactly is this?"

"The talismans we use now are all manually drawn and infused with spiritual energy, a process that is slow and inefficient," Huan Leisheng explained, lifting his hand. "But once my Celestial Talismanic Wheel is fully functional..."

As he spoke, he pulled out a blank yellow talisman paper and flicked it onto the wheel.

Swoosh!

The wheel spun, engraving talismanic script onto the paper in an instant. A fresh, glowing red talisman was created in the blink of an eye.

"In mere moments, a talisman is formed! And by adjusting the script combinations, different effects can be achieved. With just one person overseeing the Celestial Talismanic Wheel, it can create talismans at a speed that rivals a thousand talisman specialists! Young Hero Chu, can you imagine what that would be like?"

"So you plan to use this piece of junk to pay off your debt?" Di Nufeng asked, eyeing the Celestial Talismanic Wheel.

"This artifact is not for sale!" Huan Leisheng protested. "It's my life's work! But... if you lend me a bit more money, I can share a portion of its future profits with you."

"You still dare to bargain?!" Di Nufeng, already irritated by the old man, couldn't hold back any longer upon hearing his nonsense.

She was about to erupt, and Huan Leisheng swore he could already see his late grandmother standing by the yellow springs[1] and waving him over.

However, Chu Liang, who had been contemplating for a long time while gazing at the glow of the Celestial Talismanic Wheel, suddenly declared with absolute certainty, "This project of yours... I will invest in it!"

Chapter 734: Passion! (I)

"Money is not an issue. Resources are not an issue either," Chu Liang said. "Esteemed Teacher, do you know what is most important in this era? It is talent. Mister Huan, you are the talent that we need."

Inside the hidden cavern of the Talismanic Sect, Chu Liang had invited Huan Leisheng to sit in the main seat. His attitude toward Huan Leisheng had completely changed, and the way he spoke of him when persuading Di Nufeng earlier was filled with high praise and recommendations.

If he, someone who had inherited the cultivation legacy of the Celestial Talisman Master, could not recognize the profound beauty of the Celestial Talismanic Wheel, then he might as well pack up and hang himself.

Just as Huan Leisheng had pointed out, the talismans on the market today were all hand-drawn. Even for a skilled talisman master, crafting a few dozen Five Elements Talismans a day was already the limit. Not to mention more complex composite talismans, which required deep concentration and qi control, all while carrying a high risk of failure.

The remarkable aspect of this Celestial Talismanic Wheel lay in its ability to break apart commonly used talismanic scripts and recombine them into other kinds of talismanic scripts. It actually managed to automate the process of talisman-making.

This meant that by simply selecting different script combinations, one could rapidly produce new talismans. While it couldn't craft the more complex ones, it could mass-produce ordinary talismans at speeds thousands—if not tens of thousands—of times faster.

This was practically the printer of the talisman-making industry.

One had to admit that Huan Leisheng was a genius.

If several Celestial Talismanic Wheels were built and continuously operated, they could mass-produce talismans indefinitely. At that rate, anyone who owned the Celestial Talismanic Wheel would be able to dominate the entire talisman market of the immortal realm.

Who would still bother with traditional talismans then? The entire world would have no choice but to use our talismans!

These thoughts ran through Chu Liang's mind.

"As expected of Young Hero Chu, who is well-versed in the craft of talisman-making..." Huan Leisheng grinned as he spoke. "Since you can see the great potential of my Celestial Talismanic Wheel, I assume you are willing to invest even more money in this."

"I'm certainly willing, but we need to clarify the conditions first," Chu Liang said with a smile. "Mister Huan, the biggest issue with your Celestial Talismanic Wheel right now... is stability, isn't it?"

Hearing this, Huan Leisheng's expression stiffened slightly.

Chu Liang had hit the nail on the head.

As demonstrated earlier, the Celestial Talismanic Wheel could produce talismans at an astonishing speed without issue. However, the reason it hadn't been introduced to the world yet was simple—under heavy workloads, it would collapse.

It could handle crafting a few talismans, but if tasked with producing hundreds, its flaws would quickly be exposed.

Huan Leisheng hadn't expected Chu Liang to be this sharp-minded, able to catch the biggest flaw at a glance.

"It will be very difficult to find the kind of material that can provide stability to this revolutionary enchanted tool. You'll need to experiment countless times," Chu Liang said casually as he stroked his chin. "While I believe you'll eventually succeed, I'm sure you don't have the confidence to tell me how many resources and spirit-stone coins you will need to burn through during this experiment, do you?"

"Well..."

Huan Leisheng suddenly felt a pang of guilt. If he had that kind of confidence, he wouldn't have been hiding in the first place.

Chu Liang offered enticingly, "But I can provide you with unlimited resources. I can also find the best artificers in Mount Shu—or even across the entire world—to help you source materials and create a Celestial Talismanic Wheel truly ready for the world. What do you say?"

"Unlimited?" Huan Leisheng's pupils contracted slightly. Though he was ecstatic, he still retained some rationality. "Then... how much of the Celestial Talismanic Wheel's future profits do you want?"

Chu Liang wasn't running a charity. Every investment was made for a return—the more he put in, the more he would expect in return. Huan Leisheng understood this principle well.

With such an investment, if Chu Liang had demanded a 90-10 split in his favor, Huan Leisheng wouldn't have been surprised in the slightest.

But to his surprise, Chu Liang shook his head. "I don't want the Celestial Talismanic Wheel."

"Huh?" Huan Leisheng was momentarily stunned.

Before he could ask, Chu Liang continued, "I want the Talismanic Sect."

...

"Taotie City's downfall is already set in stone. I've heard that the sects of immortality cultivation are preparing to reselect the Terrestrial Ten," Chu Yi said leisurely, gazing at the towering snow-capped mountains in the distance. "Even if you go back, it's likely already too late."

"As long as Taotie City retains even a tenth of its former size, enough to let my Huyan Family scrape by, that's all we need," Huyan Dong replied indifferently.

A sect of immortality cultivation might rise again, but a market ravaged by the rebels of Mount Mang could never return to its former glory. Huyan Dong understood this clearly. Even if they returned now to rebuild Taotie City, the shops and customers wouldn't gather there as before.

"If City Lord Huyan can see it this way, that's not bad," Chu Yi said with a smile. "However, I have a proposal—we can work together."

Huyan Dong's wore a complicated expression. "Work with you?"

Had it not been for Chu Yi orchestrating the attack by the Mount Mang rebels, they wouldn't have fallen to this state. Yet, now, this kid had the audacity to invite him to collaborate.

Does this kid think I don't hold any grudges? Huyan Dong thought.

"With the current situation, even if you and your son managed to go home, it will be extremely hard for you to rebuild Taotie City to its former glory. However, by working with me, I will give you the way to rise again," Chu Yi said confidently. "Just as there aren't many willing to help me, I am sure there aren't many who are willing to help you."

Huyan Dong thought for a moment and easily understood why this kid had sought him out.

It was nothing more than what Lu Jiangtong had done—finding a representative to operate in certain circles. After all, he had spent years navigating the higher ranks of the immortal world, building connections and mastering the rules. Meanwhile, this boy was still an unfamiliar face. Even if he was capable enough, there were things he simply couldn't accomplish alone.

However, with Chu Yi's support, restoring Taotie City to its former glory might actually be easier.

This kid's reasoning was simple. Huyan Dong should forget who wronged him and focus on who could help him now.

Huyan Dong found this logic utterly baffling. Where had this boy learned to think in such a cold, profit-driven manner at such a young age?

Even a small kid that grew up in Mount Shu possesses such intelligence... Huyan Dong thought.

Huyan Dong thought of his own son and realized that Taotie City's defeat was well deserved.

Still, he chuckled lightly. "Don't be too naive. Not everything will go as you plan. If you can secure the protection of the Noble Dharma today, then perhaps this will all be negotiable. But if not, you and the Mount Mang rebels will be wiped out soon enough. What will you have left to offer us then?"

"Then it's settled," Chu Yi suddenly said. "If I can get the Noble Dharma to join my side, you will work with me. How about that?"

Huyan Dong gazed at this kid's confident expression and felt momentarily dazed. For a moment, he found himself unable to outright refuse.

After a brief pause, he replied, "Let's talk when you return from the Holy Mountain. Not just anyone gets to see the Noble Dharma."

"Haha." Chu Yi chuckled. "If the Noble Dharma is as extraordinary as the legends say, then he will see me."

The groups of two or three individuals headed up the snow mountain, gradually approaching the peak. From a bird's-eye view, they appeared like black dots on the pure white snow. Eventually, they stopped before the temple at the mountain's peak.

A middle-aged monk in a coarse robe emerged. His attire differed from the monks of the Buddhist Cloud Monastery, with one shoulder exposed and a few wisps of greenish-gray hair atop his slightly balding head.

This was Dhyana Master Wu'e, a disciple of the Noble Dharma.

It was his arrival that had once sent the leader of the Dark King Sect fleeing in terror.

Seeing the three visitors to the Holy Mountain, Dhyana Master Wu'e nodded slightly toward Huyan Dong and greeted, "City Lord Huyan, it has been a long time. I trust you have been well."

Then his gaze fell upon Chu Yi, and he looked intrigued. But when he looked at Lu Jiangtong, his expression shifted to one of distaste—perhaps sensing the bloodstained aura of slaughter upon Lu Jiangtong.

Huyan Dong let out a bitter laugh. "I'm sure Master Wu'e has heard about what happened to Taotie City. How could I be well? I simply survived by luck."

"Now that you have reached the Holy Mountain, you are well," Wu'e Dhyana Master replied. Then, turning to Chu Yi, he said, "The Noble Dharma invites the Young Emperor to ascend the summit."

Hmm?

The title sent a shock through everyone present. Huyan Dong had always known that Chu Yi's identity was shrouded in mystery, but he hadn't expected this.

Immediately, his gaze deepened.

Even Lu Jiangtong, who had followed Chu Yi closely, now looked at Chu Yi with a contemplative expression.

This identity had always been the deepest secret Chu Yi had kept. Aside from Chu Liang, no one else knew. Even he himself had discovered this after piecing together the clues he found over the past few years. He hadn't expected that his secret would be revealed by the Noble Dharma even before the meeting.

Still, Chu Yi showed no displeasure. Instead, he offered a slight smile, bowed respectfully to Wu's Dhyana Master, and proceeded to head up the mountain alone.

The distancing back of the child made the snow mountain seem all the more vast and solemn. However, Chu Yi continued walking with unwavering steps.

Chapter 735: Passion!

On the way back to Mount Shu, Di Nufeng voiced her doubts to Chu Liang.

"I already burned down their entire gate. Why did you still spend so much money acquiring the Talismanic Sect?" she asked, her face full of confusion.

Just moments ago, when Chu Liang declared his intent to take over the Talismanic Sect, both Di Nufeng and Huan Leisheng were stunned.

Huan Leisheng was shocked. I just want to borrow some money, but you want my everything?

Di Nufeng, on the other hand, was baffled. She simply couldn't understand what use a ruined sect could have.

Almost the entire Mount Nao had been reduced to ashes! Even if it was restored, the place was so remote that it wasn't even suitable for a graveyard.

However, what Chu Liang said next moved Huan Leisheng.

Chu Liang explained that if he merely asked for a share of the Celestial Talismanic Wheel's profits, no matter how much he took, it would be for personal gain. However, as someone who had inherited the Celestial Talisman Master's legacy within the hidden realm, it was his duty to contribute to the advancement of the Dao of Talismans in this world.

Therefore, no matter how many resources it required, he was determined to see the Celestial Talismanic Wheel completed—even if it meant losing all his wealth.

This was passion!

This unwavering determination struck a chord with Huan Leisheng. Now that the discussion had reached the level of the Dao of Talismans, continuing to haggle over money would seem petty.

However, passion was one thing—debts were another. No matter how devoted Chu Liang was to the Dao of Talismans, it didn't change the fact that Huan Leisheng still owed a substantial debt to Red Cotton Peak. And with the vast resources needed for the future, Chu Liang decided that the most secure approach was to take full control of the Talismanic Sect.

"Of course, I won't interfere with the sect's teachings or internal affairs," he assured. "In fact, Mister Huan, you will remain the sect leader."

"I'm still the sect leader?" Huan Leisheng was dumbfounded. "Then how are you in charge of the Talismanic Sect?"

"You'll remain the sect leader, but I will be the Chief Executive Overseer," Chu Liang replied with a serious expression. "I won't involve myself in daily matters, but when it comes to major decisions, I will have veto power. I will only commit to fully investing in the Talismanic Sect if you agree to this condition."

After Chu Liang patiently explained everything, Huan Leisheng finally understood the meaning of a Chief Executive Overseer.

Chu Liang wouldn't meddle in the sect's daily operations. In fact, even if he wanted to, he simply didn't have the time—managing Red Cotton Peak was already a massive responsibility.

As long as the funds were used appropriately, the Talismanic Sect could request resources from the Chief Executive Overseer whenever necessary.

In return, if the Talismanic Sect generated any profit in the future, Chu Liang would have full authority over its allocation. And when necessary, the entire sect would be obligated to follow his orders.

Simply put, the Talismanic Sect had just secured itself a wealthy backer.

All of its outstanding debt to Red Cotton Peak would now be considered part of the acquisition cost and effectively erased. Not only was Talismanic Sect no longer burdened by debt, but they could now openly receive funding from Red Cotton Peak.

Huan Leisheng hesitated for a moment. After some deliberation, he eventually accepted this Chief Executive Overseer who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

He did not have any other choice. Where else in the world could he find someone who was as passionate about the Celestial Talismanic Wheel and even had the power and resources to support its development?

The Talismanic Sect had already reached the end of its rope. If he still wanted to complete the Celestial Talismanic Wheel, he had no choice but to rely on Chu Liang.

As for the control over the sect... Huan Leisheng wasn't the least bit concerned about it.

If Chu Liang wanted it, he could have it. That authority was the least valuable part of the deal.

This was the leader of Red Cotton Peak—a man who might one day take over the Mount Shu Sect itself. Why would someone like him need to scheme against a mere Talismanic Sect?

Huan Leisheng saw no reason to worry. In fact, if the Mount Shu Sect were to completely absorb the Talismanic Sect into their own ranks, Huan Leisheng would exclaim out loud and celebrate it as a double blessing.

He wouldn't even bother with asking for investments. A simple greeting would settle everything.

If his ragtag group of disciples had the chance to join one of the Divine Nine, why would they choose to stay in the struggling Talismanic Sect?

Having figured it all out, Huan Leisheng immediately put on an eager, bootlicking expression and assured Chief Executive Overseer Chu that he would complete the Celestial Talismanic Wheel as soon as possible.

"No need for such a mouthful. Just call me CEO Chu from now on," Chu Liang said with a wave of his hand, smiling warmly.

After leaving the Talismanic Sect, Chu Liang could only chuckle in response to his teacher's lingering confusion.

"Think about a hen on the verge of starvation," he explained. "Even if we kill it now, there's barely any meat to gain. But if we save it, feed it, and let it grow, it will start laying eggs. Those eggs will hatch into more chickens, giving us even more meat. In the end, we'll have an endless supply of eggs and meat."

Hearing this, Di Nufeng nodded thoughtfully.

She remained silent for a long time, deep in thought, all the way until they returned to Silver Sword Peak.

Then, out of nowhere, she turned to Chu Liang and exclaimed, "Oh! You mean the Talismanic Sect is the hen?!"

"..." Chu Liang fell silent for a moment before looking at her with admiration. "As expected of my teacher! I can't hide anything from you!"

"Hehe." Di Nufeng grinned mischievously. "I figured it out instantly."

Gazing at the bustling prosperity of Red Cotton Peak in the distance, she couldn't help but sigh from the bottom of her heart. "You people really know how to make money."

...

"OOOOOOOOW!!!"

Inside a lavish palace on Starhold Island in the East Sea, Hong Jufeng lay groaning in pain, surrounded by attendants.

"Who dares to harm my son!" An enraged voice roared through the hall. "I will flay his skin, tear out his tendons, and grind his bones to dust!"

A hulking figure strode in, his heavy footsteps rumbling like thunder. Compared to him, Hong Jufeng was merely a mound of flesh.

The man's features bore a striking resemblance to Hong Jufeng's, but his presence was far more oppressive—like a gathering storm looming over the hall.

This was Hong Zhenyuan, the Lord of Starhold Island.

"Father!" The moment Hong Jufeng saw him, he wailed even louder. "It was that Di Nufeng from Mount Shu! Father, you must avenge me—"

"Hmm..."

The rage in Hong Zhenyuan's eyes visibly froze—like snow melting under the first warmth of spring.

After sobbing for a while and receiving no response, Hong Jufeng called out hesitantly, "Father?"

"Why did you have to provoke her..." Hong Zhenyuan said, his deep voice carrying a hint of helplessness.

"It was the people of Penglai who told me to be tough with the Mount Shu Sect! Otherwise, why would we, out of nowhere, pick a fight with one of the Divine Nine?" Hong Jufeng replied indignantly.

"Those people from Penglai..." Hong Zhenyuan paused, sweeping his gaze across the room. "Penglai had a conflict with Mount Shu a while back. Now, they want to use us to make things difficult for them. We've been caught in the middle, and it's a tricky position to be in."

"Hmph!" Hong Jufeng snorted angrily. "Then let's just ignore them both and let them fight it out themselves!"

"That won't work either..." Hong Zhenyuan sighed again. "The Terrestrial Ten's Selection is coming up. If we want to secure a spot, we might still have to rely on the Penglai Supreme Sect and Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals. They're the two dominant immortal sects in the East Sea."

Hearing this, Hong Jufeng instantly perked up and asked, "It's happening soon?"

He usually oversaw the operations of a few spirit stone mines, lording over the East Sea as he pleased, but he was already growing bored of it. If Starhold Island could be a sect in the Terrestrial Ten, then his status and future as the junior sect leader would be completely different.

"It won't be that easy," Hong Zhenyuan said, "but Daoist Xuan Lu mentioned that the Penglai Supreme Sect will be pushing us forward this time. They don't have many other pieces to play."

Hong Jufeng laughed heartily. "Hehe, then surely no sect can match our strength!"

With Taotie City's downfall, a vacant spot had opened in the Terrestrial Ten, drawing the attention of countless ambitious sects.

If this were the selection of a sect in the Divine Nine, there wouldn't be as many contenders. After all, to be in the Divine Nine, one had to at least have the strength to be considered one of the Terrestrial Ten. As for the vacant spot in the Terrestrial Ten, far too many sects had a shot at claiming it.

For now, wolves and tigers lurked on all sides.

To be ranked among the Terrestrial Ten meant a massive leap in status, resources, influence, and decision-making power. Even the slightest opportunity would push sects into fierce competition, and none would hesitate to fight for it.

"It won't be that simple." Hong Zhenyuan shook his head. "From what I've heard..."

"The Endless Sword Sect and Greater-Yin Cult of the Northern Regions are supporting the Ice Soul Sword Sect.

"The Celestial King Sect and Celestial Pivot Pavilion are backing the Great Lunar Dao Sect.

"The Ascending Dragon Academy and Noblemen's Hall are championing the Yushan Academy.

"The Buddhist Cloud Monastery and Monastery Tower are advocating for the Xuantian Monastery of the Buddhist Order..."

"That many?" Hong Jufeng exclaimed. "They're all competing against us?"

The factions Hong Zhenyuan listed were all major forces—just a step below the Terrestrial Ten. Many of them had remained neutral for years, seemingly detached from worldly struggles. Yet, they were all stepping forward to vie for the coveted spot now.

"It's an unparalleled opportunity to expand their influence. Who would let that slip away?" Hong Zhenyuan muttered. "Even the Great Astral Sect, which seemed like a house of fools, is pushing for the War Tomb Mountain to compete for the Terrestrial Ten ranking..."

Hong Zhenyuan furrowed his brows as he counted the contenders. "These are all formidable contenders. This isn't just a fight between us and them—the greater forces behind all of us will clash as well. Even Penglai can't guarantee our success. This battle for a place in the Terrestrial Ten will be like a struggle between dragons and tigers!"

Chapter 736: What's So Great About Falling in Love?

"How is it?"

In a private chamber within the Hall of Weapons, Chu Liang looked at Wen Yulong and Huan Leisheng, his expression carrying a trace of anticipation.

Huan Leisheng was not a professional artificer. No matter how deep his understanding of the Dao of Talismans ran, his knowledge of tool-making materials was still lacking compared to the Hall of Weapons at Mount Shu Sect. Seeking a breakthrough, Chu Liang introduced him to Wen Yulong, who was dubbed the Peculiar Tool-Making Genius of Mount Shu, hoping he could help identify more suitable materials.

Wen Yulong had his shortcomings, but when it came to tool-making materials, he was practically a walking encyclopedia. He dared to use materials others wouldn't, experimenting with combinations that others wouldn't even consider. Naturally, his knowledge far exceeded that of his peers.

It was knowledge born of sheer audacity.

After spending three days together here, Wen Yulong and Huan Leisheng finally gave Chu Liang an answer.

Wen Yulong explained, “The Celestial Talismanic Wheel requires dozens of basic talismanic scripts, each corresponding to a different Dao essence. That means the materials used must also vary according to the type of Dao essence.

“The materials needed to construct the Celestial Talismanic Wheel are extremely diverse, and some are particularly tricky to find. Esteemed Senior Huan Leisheng is very close to success, but two crucial materials are missing—the ones corresponding to the Talismanic Script of Water and the Talismanic Script of Thunder.”

Chu Liang, well-versed in the Great Dao of Talismanic Script, grasped the concept immediately.

The Celestial Talismanic Wheel was massive, and while the material of its main body was not the primary concern, the durability of the engraved talismanic scripts was crucial. For the wheel to function over an extended period, each inscription had to withstand countless infusions of spiritual energy without deteriorating.

For instance, the material used to engrave the Talismanic Script of Fire had to possess exceptional fire resistance. Even the sturdiest metal would eventually melt if exposed to an endless flow of fire-based spiritual qi.

Through his own efforts, Huan Leisheng had already found suitable materials for most of the talismanic scripts. Some of the more basic ones could be omitted if absolutely necessary. However, the remaining materials—those for the Talismanic Script of Water and the Talismanic Script of Thunder—were still missing. Until those were secured, the Celestial Talismanic Wheel remained incomplete.

Wen Yulong continued, “Water spiritual qi may seem soft and formless, but as the saying goes—Dripping water wears through stone. Over long-term erosion, it actually causes the most severe Dao essence damage. So far, we haven’t found any material that can withstand this kind of assault.

“Thunder spiritual qi, on the other hand, is too explosive. The materials that can withstand it tend to be relatively soft, relying on flexibility to absorb its force. But a certain level of hardness is required to inscribe talismanic scripts, and so far, we haven’t found anything suitable.”

Wen Yulong furrowed his brows unconsciously before continuing, “I consulted my esteemed teacher about this matter. He mentioned that deep within the Ruins of Return, there is a land of tribulation where divine lightning strikes without end. A rare stone known as the Thundercloud Seed is produced there and it might just meet the requirements.”

With the Weapon Master's wealth of experience, his advice was undoubtedly reliable.

"I've decided to set off for the Ruins of Return soon," Huan Leisheng declared resolutely. "Even if it costs me my life, I will complete the Celestial Talismanic Wheel."

Chu Liang's passion might have been somewhat fake, but Huan Leisheng's was unquestionably real.

He was wholly committed to forging this enchanted tool—one that had the potential to revolutionize the Great Dao of Talismans.

"Mister Huan, you don't need to worry about that," Chu Liang said casually, waving his hand. "I have some connections in the Ruins of Return. If this material exists, I'll make sure to get it for you."

Huan Leisheng's eyes lit up. "Hm?"

The Ruins of Return were no ordinary hidden realm. It was a place riddled with peril, where even powerful cultivators treaded cautiously. For someone like him—who was not among the top combatants of the seventh-realm cultivators—entering it meant gambling with his life. Yet, with a single offhand remark, Chu Liang made it sound like all Huan Leisheng had to do was wait in peace.

In the past, whenever he needed rare materials, he had to risk his life scouring dangerous places for them. This was the first time he had ever felt such an overwhelming sense of security.

So this is what it feels like to have a reliable backer? Huan Leisheng thought.

Seeing the look in Huan Leisheng's eyes, Chu Liang couldn't help but chuckle to himself. No wonder Lin Bei always talks like this. It really is quite satisfying.

Of course, his connections in the Ruins of Return—or rather, his fish connections—were no joke. With the merfolk princess on his side, he had far better options than blindly exploring a hidden realm.

After a moment of thought, he retrieved a Sea Soul Stone and handed it to Wen Yulong. “This seems to have a water-suppressing effect. See if it can be used for the Talismanic Script of Water.”

“This...” Wen Yulong’s pupils contracted as he examined the stone. “The experiment to test whether this can withstand endless erosion from water spiritual qi will take a long time. However, a material with such a potent water-suppressing effect is exceedingly rare. That said, this amount alone isn’t enough to craft the Celestial Talismanic Wheel.”

If only a small quantity was needed, refining key components at a high cost might have been an option. However, talismanic inscriptions required a substantial amount of material—not too little and not too much. Compared to many rare resources, they had to be gathered in relatively large quantities, which was precisely why finding a suitable material had proven so difficult.

“That’s not a problem. Just check if it’s suitable. As long as it works...” Chu Liang’s lips curled into a faint smile before adding two more words, “There’s plenty.”

When he first obtained the Sea Soul Stones, he had unboxed an entire pile of them while refining the essence. At that time, he had even complained that he had no idea what to do with them. However, upon hearing Wen Yulong mention the need for materials resistant to spiritual qi erosion, he suddenly recalled these divine stones—ones that held the power to suppress the seas.

If he didn’t use them now, then when?

Hearing the sheer confidence in Chu Liang’s voice, Huan Leisheng’s eyes grew misty. Thousands of emotions condensed into just three words.

My new daddy!

...

The next day, Chu Liang and Lin Bei once again arrived in the sky above the South Sea.

After learning about the Thundercloud Seed, Chu Liang wanted to contact Princess Liange of the Ruins of Return. Since this was official business for the Mount Shu Sect, he planned to ask Xu Ziyang to relay the message. It would also serve as an opportunity for Senior Brother Xu to interact with the merfolk princess—though it was unsure whether that interaction would be of any use.

However, when he went to Jade Sword Peak to ask Lin Bei, he found out that Xu Ziyang was no longer on the mountain. It turned out he was already in the South Sea.

Oh? Chu Liang marveled. Did Senior Brother Xu find an opportunity on his own?

After inquiring further, he learned that during her last visit to Mount Shu, Princess Liange had mentioned the lack of books in the Ruins of Return. In response, the Mount Shu Sect had partnered with other sects in the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten to organize a book donation event. Various sects contributed ancient texts, hoping to strengthen ties with the sea creatures of the Ruins of Return.

It wasn't a large event and could have been handled solely by the Foreign Affairs Hall. Nevertheless, with Wang Xuanling, the Grand Peak Master of Mount Shu, personally overseeing it, there was more than enough manpower for the event. After the event, Xu Ziyang was assigned to deliver the books to the South Sea and organize a small ceremony among the sea creatures. The ceremony had ended yesterday, and Xu Ziyang was still in the South Sea.

Chu Liang figured that Wang Xuanling was only thirty percent concerned with official business, while the other seventy percent was purely personal interest. It was obvious he was deliberately creating an opportunity for his disciple.

Senior Brother Xu's lifelong happiness had truly become a concern for all of Mount Shu.

Yet, despite having been taken to the Hall of Conservation to read books last time, Princess Liange was still willing to spend time with Senior Brother Xu. That meant there was still hope.

...

At the South Sea, the waves parted, and Xu Ziyang and Princess Liange emerged from the water to greet Chu Liang and Lin Bei.

Chu Liang smiled at them and asked, "Princess Liange, Senior Brother Xu... did everything go smoothly?"

Baozhu Liange glanced at Xu Ziyang, her expression slightly shy. She nodded gently and murmured, "Mm."

Xu Ziyang, on the other hand, maintained a serious demeanor. "The book donation ceremony was held yesterday. Many sea clan leaders attended, and everyone took it very seriously, so everything went smoothly."

It was clear that they were answering two different questions.

Standing beside them, Lin Bei cut straight to the point. "Eldest Senior Brother, Chu Liang is mainly here for the Thundercloud Seed. Have you heard anything about it?"

This time, Princess Liange responded, "I asked around... There is a land of tribulation within the Ruins of Return—a dangerous place called Misty Island. The owner of that island is Madam Hongyu, who happens to be on good terms with my mother. I can take you all there to ask for the Thundercloud Seed later."

Chu Liang said cheerfully, "Princess Liange, thank you."

Misty Island in the Ruins of Return was a hidden and treacherous place. If someone were to venture there without a guide, they could easily come close to losing their life. It was at this moment that the true value of Chu Liang's fish connections became apparent.

Without delay, Princess Liange took the lead with Xu Ziyang beside her. They descended into the sea while Chu Liang and Lin Bei followed closely behind.

Ever the social butterfly, Lin Bei made several attempts to start a conversation.

"Eldest Senior Brother, when you were in the South Sea..."

"Princess Liange, are we..."

"Heheheh..."

Yet, an odd atmosphere lingered between the man and the fish swimming ahead of Lin Bei. He had tried multiple times to join their conversation, only to be ignored again and again. Despite his persistent efforts, he remained nothing more than a diligent yet invisible bystander.

After several failed attempts, he sulkily retreated to Chu Liang's side.

"What's so great about falling in love anyway? Hmph, if they don't want to talk to me, then fine," Lin Bei muttered under his breath. "Let's walk together as brothers and talk about the heavens and the earth. This is just as fun... Eh? What are you doing?"

He suddenly realized that Chu Liang wasn't even listening.

Chu Liang was completely ignoring him, preoccupied with fiddling with the United Hearts Jade.

Finally, Chu Liang looked up with a smile. "Oh, since we're about to enter a hidden realm, I won't be able to send messages. I was just informing Senior Sister Jiang. Huh? Why are you crying?"

Chapter 737: Lower Half

In the pavilion of the Ruins of Return Cult, the Sea Master sat with a grim expression, listening to the report from the sea demon before him.

After the deaths of his shrimp soldier and crab general in his own home, the Sea Master had clearly reinforced the defense of his pavilion. It was now surrounded by armored sea demon warriors. Of course, as long as he remained present, these guards were nothing more than mere decorations.

Standing before him was a hunched old sea demon, its back burdened by a heavy, spiked shell that shimmered with a dull, dark luster. This was an old sea turtle.

"The last battle only strengthened the ties between the sea clans and human cultivators..." The old turtle demon spoke slowly. "Now, the sea demons led by the merfolk frequently interact with the sects of the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten. Just yesterday, they even accepted a large shipment of human texts. It's as if they're preparing to open our sea territories to those humans."

The Sea Master's gaze remained inscrutable as he said "The merfolk queen... With Wuchao backing her, she has opposed me time and again. If they weren't needed as vessels to resurrect the Hallowed Mother, I would have slaughtered her entire clan."

"Now that the Azure Wave Lamp has been lost, reviving the Hallowed Mother is..." The old turtle paused to think, carefully selecting his words. "...as difficult as ascending to the heavens."

The Sea Master said sinisterly, "The resurrection of the Hallowed Mother was never easy. But she is not our only option. The reason we sought her resurrection is so she could lead us to conquer this world. If another Hallowed One among the demons can do the same for us, then why not consider resurrecting the other one..."

The old sea turtle's eyes widened. "Are you thinking about... working with the demons from the Far West? Last time..."

"What happened last time may not have been their doing. They are much closer to resurrecting the Demon God than we are to resurrecting the Hallowed Mother. If aiding them means securing future protection for ourselves, then why not?" the Sea Master said in a deep voice. "But we are no fools. If they want the support of the Ruins of Return's Sacred Cult this time, they must first offer us something in return."

"You mean to borrow their strength first?" the old sea turtle asked. "But Lord Wuchao has already spoken on this matter. We—"

The Sea Master interrupted, his tone decisive, "That is exactly what we wish to resolve. Wuchao is too old. He no longer has the nerve and vigor he once had when he dominated the South Sea. If the sea demons continue to follow his orders, we will cowardly remain here forever."

The demons of the South Sea might seem diverse and great in number, but their leaders shared the same view. Whether it was the merfolk queen trying to unite the sea clans or the radical Ruins of Return Cult, all had to obey the commands of the ancient sea demon, Wuchao.

Wuchao had been the most powerful demon king in the South Sea, ruling it thousands of years ago. Even now, at the peak of his own power, the Sea Master was merely an outstanding junior in comparison to Wuchao. Wuchao had defeated and subdued no fewer than eight or ten eighth-realm sea demons that were as powerful as the Sea Master.

No one knew exactly how strong that old monster was. All they knew was that as long as Wuchao remained, the South Sea could never be overturned.

Last time, when the Sea Master tried to bypass Wuchao and directly incite the sea clans into a great war, he was immediately summoned by Wuchao for punishment. If he had pressed on with it, he would likely have been suppressed and killed on the spot.

"Lord Wuchao..." the old sea turtle muttered, his face exposing his fear. He was clearly scared of the consequences of the Sea Master's decision.

He dares challenge the most fearsome authority deep within the Ruins of Return? the old sea turtle thought, his mind racing.

"Don't worry. The demons of the Far West will be helping us. Besides, I have no intention of acting myself. Even if it fails, the Ruins of Return Cult will not be implicated," the Sea Master said in a low voice, enunciating each word carefully. "I've already sent someone to seek out Wuchao's greatest enemy."

"Ah? You mean..." The old sea turtle gasped in shock, quickly lowering his voice as if afraid of being overheard. "The Bloodmist Manor?"

...

Rumble! Crackle!

A series of dark golden lightning bolts descended from the sky, striking the dense mist in the distance. As the lightning shattered the fog, it illuminated half the mountainside, making it shimmer as though forged from divine light.

Chu Liang and his group watched from afar, marveling at the awe-inspiring power of heaven and earth.

This divine lightning struck at random and was essentially a divine punishment. If a seventh-realm cultivator were struck, their life would be at risk. Survival depended entirely on luck.

No one knew why this land of tribulation, relentlessly bombarded by divine lightning day and night, would exist in the sea. All that was known was that Misty Island was perpetually shrouded in dense fog and would only reveal its true form temporarily when the lightning struck.

On Misty Island, within the Ruins of Return, there stood an estate known as the Bloodmist Manor. Its master, Madam Hongyu, ruled the island. Without her permission, no one could set foot on the island to harvest Thundercloud Seeds.

Anyone who ventured to Misty Island not only had to withstand the wrath of the heavens but also risked being hunted down by Madam Hongyu herself. As an ancient and powerful sea demon, she was formidable, ruthless in battle, and not someone to be taken lightly.

Fortunately, this time, they had Princess Liange to lead the way.

Princess Liange called out sweetly, "Aunty Hongyu."

In the distance, the manor, shrouded in gray mist, was briefly illuminated by the divine lightning flashing across the sky, revealing its somber, ancient silhouette. The structure was enormous, seemingly carved from and hollowed out of an entire mountainside. Countless chains entwined around it, resembling some form of seal.

Two figures stood in front of the manor, one large and one small.

The larger figure was a towering sea demon, with the head of a fish and the body of a human. He had a shark head and sword-like fangs. Dressed in dull gray armor, the shark demon stood over thirty zhang tall, exuding a ferocious aura.

The smaller figure was a gracefully built woman. Her auburn hair curled slightly at the ends, her pale skin nearly translucent, and her gaze carried a cold, striking allure.

Standing before the massive shark demon, she glanced at Princess Liange and offered a faint smile. "I just received a message from your mother. You certainly arrived very quickly."

"Well, it's an urgent matter," Princess Liange replied. She stepped closer affectionately, though it was clear she held some reverence for this woman.

In truth, Madam Hongyu's name carried immense weight across the South Sea and the Ruins of Return. Any being—human or sea demon—who dared approach Misty Island was killed without exception.

Indeed, she had a fearsome reputation!

If not for the Merfolk Queen, they wouldn't have been able to approach so smoothly.

Xu Ziyang, Chu Liang, and Lin Bei followed behind Princess Liange, bowing respectfully to Madam Hongyu.

Madam Hongyu sized them up briefly, her expression more indifferent than before.

She then spoke, "There are two ways to harvest the Thundercloud Seeds."

"Please enlighten us, Madam," Chu Liang said.

"The first option is to bring more people. You need more than three. At least a few dozen cultivators of your level would be required," Madam Hongyu said. "Then, all of you can rush to the island together, carve out a Thundercloud Seed from the mountain, and flee for your lives. If luck is on your side, perhaps one of you might make it back with a seed."

Chu Liang glanced toward the heart of the island, where the divine lightning rained down relentlessly, and grimaced, and thought, There's no way we can survive by relying on the probability of success.

The sheer intensity of the divine lightning bolts was terrifying. With so many strikes hitting every part of the area, even a fly would struggle to pass through and come back unscathed.

Moreover, divine lightning nullified all techniques. Any divine abilities would likely fail within its range. It would be impossible to use any cloning techniques. Currently, as a clone created with External Manifestation, he would likely disintegrate if he got close to any of the lightning strikes.

It would be impossible to create a horde of clones and force their way up the mountain.

As Lin Bei stared at the lightning, he instinctively pulled his head back. He immediately asked, "What's the second option?"

Madam Hongyu replied, "The second option is to wait until nightfall. Every night, for a brief quarter of an hour, the island's mist turns blood-red. During that time, the divine lightning ceases, allowing safe passage."

"That sounds much better," Lin Bei said as he clapped his hands. "Fifteen minutes is more than enough for us."

"Indeed," Madam Hongyu agreed with a nod. Then she added casually, "However, a terrifying entity tends to emerge during that time. If my estimates are correct, at least two and a half of you will likely die before retrieving a Thundercloud Seed."

"Uh..." Lin Bei's smile froze. Awkwardly, he said, "Madam, surely you're joking. People don't exactly come in halves."

Madam Hongyu responded indifferently, "Depends on whether you'd prefer to keep your upper half or your lower half."

Lin Bei's eyes flickered rapidly, his mind racing through a brief but resolute moment of contemplation before he blurted out, "Lower half!"

Chapter 738: Falling Into the Pit

"Is that what's important?" Chu Liang said, feeling speechless as he pulled Lin Bei away.

He looked at Madam Hongyu and asked, "Madam, may I ask what other dangers exist on Misty Island when the divine lightning stops?"

Madam Hongyu replied solemnly, "It is a terrifying entity that once roamed the Ruins of Return during ancient times."

Only after her explanation did they finally grasp the full story.

Thousands of years ago, a powerful ancient sea demon wreaked havoc across the South Sea and the Ruins of Return. Eventually, the legendary Lord Wuchao intervened to suppress it. Yet, even Wuchao himself could not completely destroy this monstrous being. Instead, he sealed it on Misty Island, where an endless barrage of divine lightning continuously weakened its life essence, slowly wearing it down over time until it could one day be disintegrated completely.

That terrifying entity had been sealed here for nearly two thousand years.

The reason the divine lightning stopped each day was that the sealed entity released its power to absorb spiritual qi from Misty Island, momentarily stopping the strikes.

Though this was temporary, the fact that this ancient sea demon could use its demonic power to stop the divine punishment was proof of how powerful it was.

Compared to land demons, sea demons at the peak of their cultivation could attain even longer lifespans. It was hard to fathom the immense power of these old beings that had existed since the ancient era.

"So basically, the divine lightning stops because there's something even more terrifying than divine lightning?" Lin Bei said as he clicked his tongue. "Wouldn't it be better to just endure the lightning instead?"

As they learned more about the Ruins of Return, they also came to understand the existence of the mysterious Lord Wuchao—an ancient demon who had ruled over the South Sea for thousands of years. Like Baize, he had once stood on the brink of ascension. If this enemy was so powerful that even Lord Wuchao couldn't kill it, then its vitality must truly defy the laws of the heavens.

This reminded Chu Liang of the Demon God and how he had been suppressed beneath the Demon-Suppressing Pagoda for three thousand years, yet he still retained half of his life essence. It seemed that once a being reached a certain level of strength, even dying became difficult.

Perhaps this was why cultivators only became truly fearsome upon attaining the Heavenly Origin Realm. Possessing a legendary artifact was the decisive factor that set some Heavenly Origin masters apart, elevating them to an entirely different level from those without one.

"Aunty Hongyu, my mother said you have a way to deal with this," Princess Liange pleaded, her tone almost childlike. "Stop scaring them already. These young heroes from Mount Shu saved my life."

"Haha." Madam Hongyu finally smiled. She turned back to Chu Liang and the others and said, "When the Blood Fog rises, I will hold back that terrifying entity. You must seize the moment to gather the Thundercloud Seed. You must remember to be quick about it."

Since Misty Island was the place where the great demon was sealed away, Madam Hongyu's rule over Bloodmist Manor here was no coincidence. In truth, she was the one tasked with watching over the terrifying entity. Ensuring their safety while they harvested the Thundercloud Seed would be a simple task for her.

The three from Mount Shu expressed their gratitude in unison. "Many thanks!"

Had they charged blindly into Misty Island without Princess Liange, they might not have even known what killed them.

Sometimes, this was simply how the world worked—what could be easily accomplished with the right connections and knowledge could just as easily lead to certain death without them. A mere gap in information could make all the difference.

Without delay, Madam Hongyu took Princess Liange by the arm and led her into Bloodmist Manor. She then ordered the giant shark demon to escort Chu Liang and his companions inside, arranging for them to rest until nightfall.

Although Bloodmist Manor was vast, only a small portion was accessible. The rest was shrouded in mist and bound by heavy chains, concealing whatever lay beyond.

The giant shark, noticing that the three were glancing toward the darkened shadows, turned his head and warned in a deep voice, "Do not wander carelessly. You will die."

...

The manor's architecture was rugged and unrefined, clearly not designed for human habitation. The room assigned to them was a vast stone chamber, its open space supported by only a few towering pillars beneath the high dome.

Chu Liang, Xu Ziyang, and Lin Bei rested there briefly. As night fell, the giant shark returned, his heavy footsteps echoing against the stone floor.

He spoke again in his deep, rumbling voice, "Come with me."

At the entrance of Bloodmist Manor, Madam Hongyu stood gracefully, nodding slightly to the three young men before leading the way.

Princess Liange stood beside them, gazing at Xu Ziyang with concern as she said softly, "Be careful, alright?"

"I will," Xu Ziyang replied as he nodded solemnly.

Princess Liange finally turned toward Lin Bei and Chu Liang and said, "You two as well..."

"Of course. We'll make sure Eldest Senior Brother stays safe," Lin Bei teased with a grin.

Princess Liange blushed at his words.

Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!

As they left the manor and approached the edge of Misty Island, the relentless thunder of divine lightning boomed. The noise sounded deafening and almost as though it would never stop. Golden-purple streaks of divine light struck the ground hundreds of zhang away, and each explosion sent shockwaves that made them tremble in fear. A single bolt would undoubtedly reduce them to ashes in an instant.

Chu Liang could wield divine lightning using the Dragon God's Mark, yet in the presence of this supreme divine punishment, his abilities felt insignificant. As he immersed himself in the overwhelming power within the lightning, he gained a faint sense of enlightenment. As he observed the divine lightning, he came to understand its divine power.

"When the blood mist rises, hold your breath and maintain absolute focus. Do not inhale even the slightest bit," Madam Hongyu instructed as she fixed her gaze ahead.

After a brief moment of waiting, the sky suddenly darkened.

The divine lightning, which had been striking the ground at random intervals, ceased without warning. At the same time, a thin layer of blood-red mist began to rise from the center of Misty Island.

Using their divine sense to scan the area, they vaguely saw a massive cavity in the ground. At the same time, the blood mist drifted upward from the pit, slowly rising into the sky.

"Go!" Madam Hongyu commanded sharply.

Chu Liang's figure blurred into the wind as he shot forward, landing instantly on Misty Island's darkened terrain. Though the island was vast, without the divine lightning obstructing him, he could traverse it in the blink of an eye.

However, the Thundercloud Seed was not something that could simply be picked up from the ground. It had to be unearthed. This task was too difficult for one person alone, which was why all three of them had to work together. If not, Chu Liang could have handled everything in a single flash of movement.

Xu Ziyang and Lin Bei, both possessing considerable cultivation power, darted off in different directions.

Xu Ziyang was the first to land. Lin Bei, on the other hand, was slightly slower and had just started descending when Madam Hongyu had already reached the sky above the pit in the center.

Madam Hongyu hovered in midair, her right sleeve sweeping outward. In an instant, a misty red light streaked across the sky. With a sharp whooshing sound, glistening red coral pillars erupted from the ground, blocking the pit in the blink of an eye.

It seemed that Madam Hongyu's true form was that of a coral demon. As she summoned the red coral to seal the pit, the entity below erupted in fury. The blood mist churned like boiling liquid, rushing violently against the corals blocking the pit's opening.

However, having already exhausted much of its power to suppress the divine lightning, the entity couldn't strike the coral with its full strength. Despite its repeated attempts, it failed to completely shatter the layers of coral blocking the pit.

Each time a coral pillar was shattered, Madam Hongyu immediately summoned a new one to fill the gap.

Meanwhile, Chu Liang and Xu Ziyang had already begun digging for the Thundercloud Seeds. Their flying swords slashed through the earth, carving deep fractures into the ground. While the Thundercloud Seeds were nearly indestructible, this method allowed them to break apart the surrounding stone, separating the material that they needed from the debris.

Lin Bei had just landed and was about to start digging, but before he could even swing his sword, the blackened ground beneath his feet suddenly erupted.

Boom!

Along with the explosion of earth, a surge of black mist shot out, carrying a dense demonic aura. Seeing this, Lin Bei immediately formed a seal with his fingers and raised his sword.

Swish!

Hundreds of streaks of swordlight formed a protective barrier in front of him, enclosing Lin Bei in a wall of sword qi. His quick reflexes saved him just in time. But then, a hand suddenly emerged from the black mist and slammed into his barrier of sword qi.

Boom!

The palm strike carried immense force and immediately shattered the barrier that Lin Bei had formed with his full strength. The impact sent him hurtling hundreds of zhang away.

Meanwhile, the coral pillars blocking the abyss had also been shattered completely by the blood mist, and Lin Bei plummeted into the deep pit like a falling star!

Although Madam Hongyu hovered above, she was too preoccupied to rescue him. A black-robed figure had suddenly appeared and attacked her.

At the same time, the black-robed figure who had attacked Lin Bei before now turned against Madam Hongyu, joining the other attacker in a coordinated assault from both sides.

Madam Hongyu's eyes turned razor-sharp as she glared at the powerful enemies charging toward her. In a commanding voice, she declared, "By the command of Lord Wuchao, I guard the Grand Ancestor Fuyou! Who dares cause trouble here?!"

...

Lin Bei was sent tumbling into the deep pit, his mind spinning in disarray. His attacker was undoubtedly a seventh-realm cultivator. Considering his own cultivation level, the fact that he had managed to resist even slightly without dying was already impressive. By the time he regained his senses, he had already reached the ground.

He struggled as he tried to prop himself up. When he opened his eyes, he was met with complete darkness. He also felt as though he was leaning against an icy, rigid wall.

Without thinking much, Lin Bei conjured a small starlight at his fingertip to illuminate his surroundings. However, the moment the light flickered to life, countless gleaming dots appeared in the darkness before him.

"Whoa!" Lin Bei gasped aloud.

He was surrounded by countless eyes!

Chapter 739: Come on out, Grand Ancestor

The sudden turn of events caught both Chu Liang and Xu Ziyang off guard.

Before that, Chu Liang had been diligently using his Demon-Slaying Sword to excavate Thundercloud Seeds. Within moments, he had already excavated a stone roughly the size of a fist. Since he had no way of knowing how much of the refined material it would yield or the exact amount they needed to forge the Celestial Talismanic Wheel, he continued mining.

Even though this was merely a clone created through External Manifestation, he had still brought his Demon-Slaying Sword with him.

His actual form remained on Mount Shu. While he was on Mount Shu, he could wield the Violet and Azure Twin Swords. No matter what, the twin swords were far superior to the Demon-Slaying Sword, so the Demon-Slaying Sword was only useful when he was outside the sect.

If he never brought Demon-Slaying Sword along for fear of losing it, then it might as well have been an expensive but useless decoration.

While Chu Liang was focused on mining, Lin Bei was suddenly attacked. Almost immediately after, Madam Hongyu's sharp cry rang out, drawing both Chu Liang and Xu Ziyang's attention.

Two mysterious black-robed figures with formidable cultivation power appeared in the sky. Their identities were unknown, but the powerful demonic qi emanating from each attack made it clear that they were sea demons.

However, Madam Hongyu's cultivation was much more powerful. With a swift motion of both hands, she unleashed two powerful attacks. Countless blood-colored corals burst from the ground, their intertwining branches forming a massive nest-like structure that spread across the sky, trapping the two black-robed figures within.

One of the black-robed figures struck with ruthless efficiency. With a mere wave of their hand, a surge of black mist erupted, corroding and shattering countless coral branches. Meanwhile, the other figure moved like a specter, vanishing into a blur before reappearing behind Madam Hongyu.

Whoosh!

A knifehand strike cut through the air like a raging gale!

It was clear these two sought to conceal their identities, as they wielded no enchanted weapons, nor did they use any innate divine abilities. Instead, they relied purely on their physical strength to attack.

Madam Hongyu's gaze sharpened. In an instant, she took on a crystalline, jade-like sheen. The knifehand strike landed squarely on her, but instead of cutting through, it resounded with a metallic clang!

However, the black mist was already closing in. With both enemies attacking from different angles, even with her formidable cultivation, she was about to be forced into a disadvantageous position.

At that moment, a streak of swordlight surged forth with unstoppable force!

It was Chu Liang, rushing in to assist. Though he didn't fully grasp the situation, he knew that he had to help Madam Hongyu, who had been aiding them. More importantly, one of the black-robed figures had just sent Lin Bei plummeting into the pit.

As soon as the sides were clearly defined, Chu Liang unleashed his most powerful strike—the Sword Strike of Severing the Void! He needed to head down the pit to rescue Lin Bei, but he had to take control of the situation above first.

Swish!

The sheer power of this strike was far beyond what the black-robed figures had expected. In fact, even Madam Hongyu was momentarily taken aback.

She had assumed that, despite attaining the seventh realm at his age, Chu Liang's combat strength would still be limited. Moreover, it was clear to any keen observer that he was now a clone created with External Manifestation.

Madam Hongyu didn't think Chu Liang would be a great help in this fight, but as soon as his sword strike landed, she found herself silently apologizing for underestimating him. She even began reflecting on whether she had been too rude to these young cultivators from Mount Shu.

This strike was incredibly powerful!

The Sword Strike of Severing the Void that Chu Liang had unleashed contained great power, but the true key lay in the performance of the Demon-Slaying Sword. Against these two sea demons, the sword's full potential erupted, elevating the strike's destructive force to its peak!

Boom!

A deafening explosion of sword qi resounded. The black-robed figure who had attempted to ambush Madam Hongyu from behind was instantly engulfed by the attack. Half of his body ruptured, and his unnaturally colored blood splattered into the air.

"Aaaaaah!!!" he screamed in agony. Then he quickly shouted, "Into the pit!"

It seemed that not only had Chu Liang and his group been caught off guard by today's events, but even these two black-robed figures had not expected their presence here.

Hearing the call, the other black-robed figure who was standing inside a dark cloud immediately spread his hands open and released a surge of black mist that enveloped his injured teammate. Without hesitation, the two dashed toward the pit at the center.

At that moment, Madam Hongyu had fully transformed into coral, unleashing the full extent of her cultivation power. A wide beam of red light shot down from the sky, enveloping the entire black cloud. In the span of a single breath, the light solidified, forming a massive coral pillar.

Like insects trapped in amber, the two black-robed figures in the black cloud were both trapped in the coral.

The black cloud roiled violently from within, showing clear signs that it wouldn't remain restrained for long. But outside, Chu Liang had already raised his sword once more.

In a cooperation between powerful cultivators, words were unnecessary. The exact moment Madam Hongyu trapped the enemy, Chu Liang was already poised to strike.

Swish!

He struck once more with Sword Strike of Severing the Void.

This time, the sword qi was even more overwhelming. The Demon-Slaying Sword unleashed its full offensive potential!

Boom!

Just as the black cloud burst out from the red coral pillar, Chu Liang's strike landed. A spray of blood erupted skyward, and a severed limb was sent flying.

These two sea demons possessed incredible physical resilience. If they had been weaker seventh-realm cultivators, they would have died. Even so, the two assassins were severely wounded. Chu Liang had single-handedly crippled them with just two strikes.

This time, they abandoned all thoughts of descending into the pit. In unison, they shouted, "Retreat!"

But it wasn't so simple for them to escape.

Madam Hongyu raised her hand, and a massive stalk of blood-colored corals, shaped like a giant palm, reached out to grasp the fleeing black cloud.

Rumble!

A series of explosions erupted from within the black cloud, shattering the coral restraints one after another.

If Chu Liang had pursued with full force, he might have been able to capture one of them. But right now, he had no time to care about them. He turned and leaped into the pit below.

"Come back!" Madam Hongyu yelled. "The divine lightning is about to strike again!"

Between their brief period of mining and the fierce fight that followed, fifteen minutes had already passed. The relentless divine lightning was about to descend once more.

No matter how powerful the attackers earlier were, they were still threats that could be resisted. But what was about to fall from the sky now was an unstoppable calamity!

Yet, Chu Liang's gaze remained firm, and he descended into the pit without looking back.

It was precisely because he knew time was running out that he had abandoned the chase and dived into the pit instead. His current form was merely a clone created through External Manifestation, but Lin Bei, who had fallen into the pit, was very much real.

Lin Bei had come along this time to help him. If Lin Bei were to suffer misfortune because of that, how could Chu Liang ever be at peace?

At the critical moment, Chu Liang transformed into a gust of wind and surged into the pit without hesitation!

Meanwhile, Xu Ziyang, who had not revealed himself during the fight, had already descended ahead of Chu Liang. He had placed his trust in Chu Liang to handle the situation above and had gone down first to rescue Lin Bei.

Madam Hongyu stared at the empty entrance of the pit, momentarily stunned.

Do all these disciples of immortal sects have no fear of death? she thought.

She had no idea that Mount Shu Sect disciples never abandoned their own. They would never give up on a fellow sect member!

Madam Hongyu looked up at the rolling thunderclouds above.

The moment the divine lightning struck, Chu Liang and the others would not be able to evade it, even if they were hidden deep within the pit. It was clear that all three of them were doomed to be obliterated.

Clenching her teeth, Madam Hongyu turned and left decisively. If she hesitated any longer, even her own life would be at risk.

...

The pit was incredibly deep. Moving like the wind, Chu Liang descended swiftly. Despite entering later, he quickly caught up with Xu Ziyang.

"Senior Brother Xu," Chu Liang whispered. "Be careful. This place is dangerous."

Xu Ziyang nodded. "I know."

The two advanced side by side, one on the left and the other on the right, moving in perfect coordination.

Not long after, Chu Liang sensed an unusually dense concentration of life energy. In the depths of Misty Island, where divine lightning raged constantly, how could so many living creatures exist?

He was startled. As he looked ahead, he saw a single flickering point of light and then another. Within mere breaths, a vast cluster of tiny lights illuminated the darkness, countless glowing dots resembling watchful eyes peering at them from the void!

"What is this...?" Chu Liang muttered.

He instinctively raised his Demon-Slaying Sword, ready to strike at a moment's notice. When facing a horde of unknown demonic creatures, it was always better to act first rather than hesitate.

Just then, a voice echoed from deep within the cave.

"Hold your strike! We're on the same side!"

"Huh?"

Recognizing the familiar voice, Chu Liang and Xu Ziyang hesitated, pausing their attacks.

Sure enough, Lin Bei emerged from the sea of glowing dots, waving his hands. As he moved, the source of the lights became clear.

They were firefly-like insects, hovering motionlessly in the air. Their eerie glow had made them seem like countless watchful eyes lurking in the darkness. The cavern was teeming with these creatures, yet how they had managed to survive in such a place remained a mystery.

"It's great to see you both unharmed," Lin Bei said, jogging over with evident relief.

"What's going on?" Chu Liang asked.

Lin Bei chuckled and replied, "It's hard for me to explain clearly. Why don't you guys ask him? We're all brothers here—we can talk it out."

Under Chu Liang and Xu Ziyang's astonished gazes, Lin Bei casually raised a hand and gestured toward the depths of the cavern.

"Come on out, Grand Ancestor."

Chapter 740: The Great Dao of Politeness (I)

At Lin Bei's casual beckoning, a man emerged from the depths of the cavern, where countless star-like lights flickered. There was a faint glow around him, making him appear almost like a spectral apparition.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, a pleasure indeed."

The man wore long robes colored green and white. He had a gaunt face, with facial features that made him look like a good-natured man. Judging by his appearance, he seemed to be in his sixties or seventies.

The old man stepped out of the darkness with a serene and welcoming smile, giving a bow each to Chu Liang and Xu Ziyang. He bowed so low that it was no longer just a greeting but rather a show of flattery.

Chu Liang eyed the old man with some confusion. "And you are...?"

Logically, the only living being in this cavern should have been the "terrifying existence" that had been sealed away for nearly two thousand years—the ancient devil whom Madam Hongyu had referred to as Grand Ancestor Fuyou.

Yet, the old man before them didn't seem terrifying at all... In fact, every wrinkle on his face radiated nothing but politeness. How could he be that supposedly terrifying existence?

Recalling Madam Hongyu's warning, Xu Ziyang cautiously asked, "Are you Grand Ancestor Fuyou?"

"Oh, no, no, no! Please, don't call me that," the old man said. He chuckled embarrassedly, waving his hands in rejection of the term of address. With utmost humility, he explained, "Those were just youthful follies, reckless times... I ended up with a rather bad reputation. You can call me Little Fu, Little You[1], or even just Little Ancestor—it's all fine!"

"Uh..." Chu Liang uttered, finding himself at a loss for words.

He couldn't quite figure out what the old man was playing at. Did he want to ask them for a favor?

Before he could dwell on it further, a deafening thunderclap boomed outside, followed by a streak of violet-gold lightning striking down! The three young men turned pale. Divine lightning spared no one, and they wouldn't be able to avoid it even though they were in an underground cavern.

At that moment, Grand Ancestor Fuyou huffed, lung out his wide sleeves, and swung his arms forward in a beckoning gesture.

Whoosh!

The countless tiny glowing lights behind him converged into a dense cluster, merging with the red mist rising from the depths of the earth. In an instant, they sealed off the entrance to the underground cavern.

"Hohoh." Grand Ancestor Fuyou smiled ingratiatingly. "I'm not strong enough to halt the divine lightning for a long time, but I can at least protect this part of the underground cavern. My young friends, you may rest easy here."

Chu Liang gave a slight nod. "Many thanks..."

With this, it was finally confirmed that this old man truly was the legendary Grand Ancestor Fuyou. Anything else could be faked, but power could not.

Chu Liang turned his gaze to Lin Bei, his eyes carrying a silent question. Lin Bei had only arrived moments before Chu Liang and Xu Ziyang, yet he seemed to have already settled into this strange place.

"Heheheh!" Lin Bei laughed heartily. "No need to be so reserved. Oldie Brodie here is a good guy; he's easy to get along with."

"Yes, yes!" Grand Ancestor Fuyou nodded eagerly. "Young friends, you are guests here. If you have any requests, please do not hesitate to ask. If it is within my power, I will do my best to fulfill them."

Our requests?

Chu Liang studied him carefully. The old man did not seem to be asking for anything in return.

Chu Liang smiled politely and said, "Grand Ancestor, you are our esteemed senior after all. There's no need for you to be so polite with us."

"Oh, I dare not have anyone call me Grand Ancestor." Grand Ancestor Fuyou shook his head and smiled. "As the two of you likely know, I am but a pitiful wretch who has been sealed alone in this place for two thousand years."

He slowly explained, "When I was first sealed here, my heart was filled with rage. I swore that if anyone ever entered this place, I would torment them, devour them! But... no living being ever came.

"After a thousand years of loneliness and despair, I began to seek redemption. All I had left was the hope and desire for companionship. If anyone came, be it human or demon, as long as they had sentience and rationality, as long as they could speak... I would swear brotherhood with them and help them fulfill any wish. But still... no one came."

"Now, after two thousand years, my mindset has changed once again," Grand Ancestor Fuyou said. He paused for a moment before solemnly declaring, "At this point, I don't care what kind of creature it is. Whoever enters this place... is my newfound father."

Well, then. So, he would treat whoever enters as his father.

This is hospitality taken to an extreme.

Could this old man's Great Dao actually be the Great Dao of Civility and Politeness?

"There's no need to go that far, Oldie Brodie." Lin Bei waved his hand casually. "We can just be brothers. No need for all this 'father' talk. You're being way too polite."

"But I must, I must." Grand Ancestor Fuyou laughed again. "If that won't do, we can each address each other however we see fit."

...

It wouldn't be the slightest bit exaggerated to say that Grand Ancestor Fuyou was the most polite great devil that Chu Liang had ever encountered. All the other seventh and eighth-realm Eminent Ones he had met tended to be bomb-like existences, to be treated with great respect and hospitality. Yet, Grand Ancestor Fuyou was the opposite; he had a service attitude that could probably only be matched by the attendants at Red Moon Pavilion.

The old man perched himself neatly on the edge of a rock, adopting a perfectly proper sitting posture as he began telling them the story of his life.

"My true form is that of a little mayfly from the distant past."

Chu Liang was indeed quite curious about the origins of Grand Ancestor Fuyou's cultivation power.

The mayfly was a flying insect with a fairly short lifespan. Even if it descended to the sea, it would just be a mindless aquatic creature, often serving as mere shrimp fodder.

A creature like that, with a lifespan that barely exceeded a day, had almost no chance of developing a spiritual nature, let alone comprehending the Dao. For Grand Ancestor Fuyou to have cultivated all the way to the Heavenly Origin Realm, his journey could only have been an extraordinary one.

"A mayfly's fate is to be born at dawn and perish by dusk. It should not have even the faintest trace of divine intelligence," Grand Ancestor Fuyou said slowly. "But by sheer luck, I encountered the South Sea's Hallowed Mother, who had once cultivated in the Ruins of Return. I clung to her divine presence, soaking in the Hallowed One's spiritual qi all day and night. Miraculously, I did not die. A long time later, I even awakened my spiritual nature."

Good heavens, Chu Liang thought. No wonder this old man was called an ancient devil. He has been alive since the era of the South Sea's Hallowed Mother. That's some serious longevity.

Grand Ancestor Fuyou continued, "After the Hallowed Mother perished, I drifted across the world, continuing my cultivation journey sporadically for thousands of years. You can surely imagine how difficult it was for a mere mayfly to cultivate. It took me millennia before I finally attained the Heavenly Origin.

"Perhaps it's because my true form was so short-lived, fated to be born and then die the next day, that I came to treat each new dawn as the start of a new life, each day as a cycle of reincarnation. Over time, through these endless cycles of life and death, I gained insight into the Great Dao of

Reincarnation. Ultimately, I was able to smoothly gain control of it. Given my meager spiritual qi, it was nothing short of divine mercy."

This was, indeed, a fate decreed by the heavens.

Though Grand Ancestor Fuyou spoke lightly of it, Chu Liang knew the difficulty of such a path. The Mount Shu Sect's Conservation Master was also devoted to the Great Dao of Reincarnation. He underwent a cycle of rebirth each day, awakening as a different person each time. Even then, his cultivation progress was painstakingly slow.

For Grand Ancestor Fuyou, his origin had been a shackle, yet it had also granted him a unique advantage. Born fragile and fleeting, wouldn't each new day be considered a new life for a mayfly?

Truly, there was no shame in having a humble origin.

Grand Ancestor Fuyou continued his tale. "After I attained the Heavenly Origin, that became my greatest pride. I had once lived cautiously, believing every extra day I survived was a blessing. But after achieving attaining this Great Dao, my ambitions began to grow.

"Using the myriad mayflies under my control, I tried to become the South Sea's ruler. Had I succeeded, the various demon tribes of the Ruins of Return and even the South Sea would have become my puppets—forced to obey my commands and to work as slaves under my subordinates."

It was incredibly jarring to hear such a humble old man recount his past as a great devil.

Chu Liang was hesitant to praise Grand Ancestor Fuyou about what an inspiration he was, afraid the old man would take it too seriously and immediately fall to his knees in gratitude.

"Fortunately, that old—uh... Elder Brother Wuchao..." Grand Ancestor Fuyou nearly blurted out "that old thief," but at the last moment, he switched to a respectful title instead. "He fought me in a great battle. I was defeated and sealed here. For two thousand years, I have done only one thing."

He solemnly squeezed out one one word: "Self-reflection."