

M. Slaying 571

Chapter 571: Three Alliances in a Standoff

In the later stages of the Competition of a Hundred Sects, forming alliances was quite common. Once an alliance was formed, other teams would need to find allies to counter it.

This was essentially a display of competitiveness.

For example, on another hillside, the remaining members of the team from the imperial family—the Sixth Princess and the Thirteenth Prince—were standing with Guo Zhanfeng and Guo Zhanlei from the Night Saber Sect.

In addition to them, there were four warrior monks who looked especially formidable.

Although the imperial family and the Night Saber Sect didn't have a close relationship, they had just been pursued by the Great Astral Sect together, which created a sense of camaraderie.

Furthermore, they soon encountered the forces from Monastery Tower.

As the Nation Guard Monastery Tower, it had always maintained a close relationship with the court, making its ties to the imperial family undeniable. The Night Saber Sect inherited martial traditions from the Holy Mountain in the Northern Regions, while the Monastery Tower inherited the Buddhist teachings from the Holy Mountain in the Northern Regions. The two factions shared a common origin.

With Monastery Tower acting as the mediator, the three factions quickly formed a close connection and promptly decided to create an alliance.

The leader of the team from the Monastery Tower, whose Dharma name was Feng Yan, had a resolute expression and bronzed skin. He seemed like someone with a body forged from iron.

He looked at the Sixth Princess and said, "We recently encountered the team from Ascending Dragon Academy. If we can get them to join us, we will become even stronger."

Since the Ascending Dragon Academy was another sect in the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten that sided with the imperial court, they likely would not say no to joining the alliance.

The only concern was that Zhang Chen had previously rejected the Emperor's offer of marriage to the Sixth Princess, leaving it uncertain whether she held any grudge against him.

"That sounds excellent," the Sixth Princess agreed without hesitation.

She bore no resentment toward Zhang Chen. When he had refused the marriage proposal, it was the emperor who had made the announcement publicly at Ascending Dragon Academy, and Zhang Chen had refused with honesty. It was entirely reasonable, and he hadn't spread word of it.

This matter hadn't affected the Sixth Princess at all.

The reason she felt resentment toward Chu Liang was that the emperor had privately raised the proposal in the Night Dragon Hall, without any outsiders present. Yet, someone from the Mount Shu Sect spread the news far and wide, even publishing it in the Seven Stars Gazette. Since this was the second time the princess had been rejected in marriage, the Sixth Princess became the subject of much ridicule.

Who wouldn't be furious about that?

The person who angered her the most was her father. If he hadn't been bestowing marriage proposals to anyone he met without consulting her, she wouldn't have had to endure such humiliation.

As a result, she had recently appeared grumpy whenever she faced the emperor.

For this Assembly of Immortal Sects, the emperor had given her several valuable treasures from the imperial family, clearly intending to appease his daughter.

The entire group retraced their steps to search, and when they found the Ascending Dragon Academy team, they saw how disheveled the members of the Ascending Dragon Academy looked. They seemed to have just survived a fight. As of now, there were only three left in their team.

When they saw the team from Monastery Tower, Zhang Chen, along with his junior sister Xu Fangling and his junior brother, stopped walking.

"Which group did you encounter?" Feng Yan asked.

The Ascending Dragon Academy was not weak, so it was surprising to see them lose a member and retreat so miserably. It was unclear what powerful enemy they had faced.

"We just encountered the alliance led by the Celestial King Sect," Zhang Chen replied calmly after giving a polite bow. "The Celestial King Sect, Sea King Sect, and Celestial Pivot Pavilion have joined forces. The alliance they formed is quite powerful."

"I see," everyone understood at last.

"With the current situation, teams have no choice but to form alliances. Brother Zhang, why don't you come with us?" Guo Zhanfeng suggested. "Let's hunt for soul crystals and advance to the next round together."

Zhang Chen nodded lightly in agreement.

...

Not far from here, another group had just stopped in their tracks.

"Stop the chase; they've regrouped with the Monastery Tower," spoke a slender youth in white with his eyes closed.

This was none other than Ye Yongxing, the disciple of Enlightened Wulou from the Celestial Pivot Pavilion.

He was a peerless prodigy from the Heaven Observer lineage. After obtaining the Killing Talisman in the Celestial Talisman Master's hidden realm, his power skyrocketed, making him the undisputed leader of his generation at the Celestial Pivot Pavilion.

Beside him stood Feng Chaoyang from the Celestial King Sect, along with four disciples from the Sea King Sect, a faction in the Terrestrial Ten.

The Wenren Mo that Chu Liang had met was not here. Instead, the leader of the Sea King Sect team was his younger brother, Wenren Yan.

Wenren Yan was a handsome young man in green robes. He had a jade-like complexion and captivating peach-blossom eyes, with a smile that was always present on his face.

These three groups were all factions that had split off from the Heavenly Star Divine Cult in the past. Since their sects branched out from the same source, these teams immediately allied upon encountering one another. They were one of the earliest alliances formed in the competition, which was why all their members were still alive.

In this fierce Competition of a Hundred Sects, keeping a full team at this stage was rare, achievable only with a combination of strength and luck.

Even if they had the luck to encounter one of those weaker teams, it would be useless if they still were not strong enough to win. On the other hand, if they had only strength, they could end like the powerful Penglai Supreme Sect, which was unfortunately reduced to just two remaining members.

"What a pity," Wenren Yan said with reluctance. "Zhang Chen is incredibly powerful; he managed to escape while protecting two members. If we don't eliminate Ascending Dragon Academy now, it will only be harder to take them down once they team up with the others."

"Isn't that a good thing? The more people there are, the more soul crystals we can collect," Feng Chaoyang said eagerly.

"At this point, we should focus on finding scattered teams to gather enough soul crystals to advance to the next round," Wenren Yan said. "We should avoid strong teams whenever possible."

"We're aiming for the championship anyway, so isn't it better to eliminate the powerful opponents early?" Feng Chaoyang responded.

Feng Chaoyang was always eager to challenge tough teams, while Wenren Yan preferred to play it safe. This was the only conflict within their alliance.

Thus, Ye Yongxing would always end up being the one to make the final decision.

With his eyes closed and his hands tracing patterns in the air, Ye Yongxing appeared to be performing divination. After a moment, he pointed in a direction and said, "There's a team over there. We're only a few soul crystals short, so let's focus on securing our advancement first."

Although Feng Chaoyang was eager for a challenge, he trusted Ye Yongxing's judgment and reluctantly followed the others.

In this alliance of teams, Celestial King Sect had the best fighters, with Feng Chaoyang as their top combatant. As the strongest fighter in the alliance, he was irreplaceable.

As they walked, Wenren Yan smiled and asked, "I'm really curious about the South Melody Conservatory team. I've admired those renowned beauties for a very long time."

Ye Yongxing replied, "The South Melody Conservatory recently allied with the Mount Shu Sect. They're currently traveling with Chu Liang."

"Oh?" Feng Chaoyang's eyes lit up. "I heard Chu Liang defeated Yang Shenlong—I'd love the chance to encounter him."

"I'm sure the opportunity will come," Ye Yongxing replied calmly. "They've allied with many teams, so they'll need a large number of soul crystals to advance to the next round. They'll have to go out hunting."

...

Ye Yongxing wasn't the only one keeping an eye on the broader situation within the illusory realm. On a boat at sea, Li Guanlong awoke from his dream.

The team from Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals had lost a member due to an earlier accident. However, Immortal Jiuyi hadn't used his privilege to resurrect Song Guanchao, so the team from the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals was now hiding in the sea with one less member.

"Eldest Senior Brother, what's the current situation?" Situ Guanhai asked eagerly.

"Right now, it's three alliances in a standoff," Li Guanlong replied with a smile. "Things are getting interesting."

Chapter 572: Chen Kaitai

"I heard that Chu Liang from the Mount Shu Sect had conquered the Misty Waters City and eliminated a few allies of the Penglai Supreme Sect in succession. He even killed Yang Shenlong," said a youth in a conical hat and white robes with a sword strapped to his back.

"That was why there was a wave of foundational qi surging from the direction of the Misty Waters City that night?" another person remarked in surprise.

This was a hidden cave, where several youths dressed similarly as sword cultivators hid. They were the team from the Sword-Hanging Kingdom of the West Sea.

News traveled slowly within the illusory realm. It was already the sixth day, and they had only just heard about Misty Waters City's fall. They had yet to learn that Chu Liang was now paralyzed.

"It seems it will be tough to eliminate the Mount Shu Sect in this Assembly of Immortal Sects," another person said with a sigh.

"How can you speak of defeat when you haven't even started fighting? What kind of attitude is this?" a rebuke sounded in the deepest areas of the cave.

A tall young man strode out from within, revealing that his entire left arm was missing.

There was only one arm.

"Crown Prince!"

"Crown Prince, is your injury alright?"

"..."

This youth looked plain and honest. He looked like a reliable and trustworthy person. As soon as he emerged, the others seemed to relax, as if they had regained their backbones.

"The divine technique of the Greater-Yin Cult is sinister. It was constantly eating up my tendons and muscles so I had to peel away the cold poison with my sword qi. And now, I am completely fine," the young sword cultivator who was referred to as the Crown Prince said calmly.

His words left his teammates momentarily stunned.

The cold poison clung to his bones and flesh, and removing it with his sword qi felt like scraping it from his very bones. Within the depths of this illusory world, the pain was just as intense as it would be in reality.

Did he really do this alone in the deepest area of the cave during this time? Without even making a single grunt?

"But in doing this, won't your left arm..." someone couldn't help but ask.

"I naturally lost my left arm. But if I want to recover quickly, this is the only way," the young sword cultivator shook his head. "Once we leave the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, everything will return to normal, so it's no big deal."

His casual attitude only made his teammates admire him more, marveling at what a true warrior he was.

This young man was none other than the only son of the West Sea's Sword Emperor Chen Erniu[1], and the current Crown Prince of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom. When he was born, the Sword Emperor had intended to name him Chen Sanyang[2], but the ministers collectively objected, as the name made him sound like the emperor's younger brother.

The Sword Emperor was quite disgruntled, thinking, That's just how we name people in our family. My father was even named Chen Dagou[3], and no one ever said we sounded like brothers!

Fortunately, he wasn't a tyrant who refused to listen to advice, so after some discussion, he changed his son's name to Chen Kaitai.

Perhaps it was because his son was born after he had reached the eighth realm that Chen Kaitai nearly perfectly inherited his father's talent in the Dao of the Sword, achieving a cultivation far beyond others his age.

Though he was unrivaled among the youths of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom, upon entering the stage of the Assembly of Immortal Sects, he still encountered formidable opponents.

Recently, they had encountered the Greater-Yin Cult's team. Although they managed to kill two of its members, the disciple who looked more beautiful than most women severely wounded Chen Kaitai. As he was the backbone of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom team, his teammates had to abandon gathering soul crystals to retreat with him in a hurry.

"Time is indeed running out, so it's no wonder the Crown Prince is so anxious," a sword cultivator said. "With only two days left, there aren't many teams left in the illusory realm, and we still need quite a number of soul crystals. We must hurry."

Someone else then added, "Though few teams remain, each one likely possesses a large number of soul crystals. We might only need to defeat one team to gather enough to advance to the next round."

"Indeed." Chen Kaitai nodded. "Let's go out and hunt for soul crystals."

He took the lead, stepping out of the cave and transforming into a streak of sword light that shot through the air with a sharp whistle. Three more beams of sword light followed closely, not daring to fall behind.

By transforming into sword light, they could move with incredible speed. However, this method of travel was highly conspicuous. If time had not been so pressing, they would have avoided scouting the surroundings in such an conspicuous manner.

But before they had flown far, Chen Kaitai sensed a commotion ahead. He quickly descended to the ground, raised his hand, and said, "Stop."

The three beams of sword light behind him landed in quick succession.

All four of them extended their keen divine senses and detected a powerful surge of foundational qi surging ahead. It was a clear sign of an intense battle taking place.

"It's just like the saying goes: you wear out iron shoes searching, only for what you seek to come effortlessly," Chen Kaitai said with a slight smile. "This is an opportunity blessed upon us by the heavens."

...

At the center of the battlefield ahead, two fierce-looking martial arts cultivators were pursuing three delicate-looking women. The women, adept in the art of music, were far from weak as they worked together. However, without a strong and muscular fighter to protect them, they would be in grave danger if the two martial arts cultivators managed to get close.

One of the martial arts cultivators wielded a long saber, while the other brandished a massive halberd. Both had cultivation on par with the prodigies who stood at the pinnacle.

In that moment, they unleashed an overwhelming momentum, exuding a truly imposing presence.

As they fought and moved, they gradually drew closer to where the Sword-Hanging Kingdom had set up an ambush.

"We'll take down those two men first, then deal with the three women," Chen Kaitai quickly decided.

As the fight drew nearer, Chen Kaitai suddenly leapt forward, forming a sword seal with one hand. He directed his longsword to surge ahead, unleashing a torrent of sword qi that poured forth like rivers and oceans.

His teammates joined in, wielding their swords simultaneously. In an instant, a torrent of sword qi was unleashed, covering the sky.

Yet, the two martial arts cultivators under attack showed no signs of panic. As if they had anticipated the ambush, they swiftly turned their weapons and together deflected the incoming torrent of sword qi.

Similarly, the women did not seize the opportunity to strike the martial arts cultivators. Instead, they turned and launched their attacks toward the hiding spot of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom.

Chen Kaitai instantly sensed something was wrong.

In that moment, swarms of black curse insects rose around them, encircling the members of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom, as several figures descended from above.

So we were the real targets? Chen Kaitai thought.

By the time he realized it was a trap, it was already too late. Several disciples from the Great Astral Sect lunged at his group like ravenous wolves, killing his three teammates in an instant.

Though Chen Kaitai managed to hold them off briefly on his own, he knew he couldn't endure for long. In his final moments, he caught sight of a monk pushing a small cart through the crowd, seated atop it was a disciple from the Mount Shu Sect, who looked gentle, delicate, and elegant.

"It's you!" Chen Kaitai shouted.

If the Sword-Hanging Kingdom had any sworn enemy in this Assembly of Immortal Sects, it was the Mount Shu Sect. They didn't expect to still fall for a trap set up by a member of the Mount Shu Sect. This was truly a bitter pill for the Crown Prince of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom to swallow.

With a final surge of power, he wielded his longsword single-handedly, sword qi swirling around him like a dragon, making it nearly impossible for anyone to approach.

Chu Liang responded with a smile.

You think you are good at fighting? So what if you are good at fighting? In this world, it's about who your allies are!

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom—

After a series of deafening explosions, Chen Kaitai still collapsed after being attacked by the members of the Great Astral Sect. His body shattered, leaving scattered soul crystals on the ground.

After collecting the crystals, they counted only a dozen or so. It appeared that Chen Kaitai's group had taken a cautious approach, gathering a few crystals with the intention of hunting more aggressively in the final days.

Now that there were a total of five sects in Chu Liang's alliance, they needed at least two hundred soul crystals to make it to the next round. Although all members here were quite strong, they still had a significant gap to close.

"It seems that it will be too slow if we continue taking down these scattered teams. By then, we really need to take down tougher opponents," he mused.

Just then, Monk Pushan, who had been using his Heavenly Eye to scan the surroundings, suddenly reported, "Two groups are approaching, and both have large numbers! One is the Imperial Family with the Night Saber Sect, while the other is the Celestial King Sect accompanied by the Celestial Pivot Pavilion!"

Chapter 573: I Sat on the Tower, Gazing at the Mountain Scenery

The alliance of teams from the imperial family, Ascending Dragon Academy, Monastery Tower, and Night Saber Sect was currently led by the Sixth Princess.

Since Zhang Chen had joined, his opinion carried equal weight. However, due to his modest and gentle personality and his reluctance to be in the spotlight, he rarely spoke.

Some time before, someone delivered them a letter.

"It's Ye Yongxing from the Celestial Pivot Pavilion," the Sixth Princess said to the group after reading it. "He invites us to join forces in an attack against the alliance led by the Mount Shu Sect."

"Celestial Pivot Pavilion?" Guo Zhanfeng responded. "They're likely allied with the Celestial King Sect and the Sea King Sect, both of which are powerful teams. If we can join forces with them, we should have no trouble taking down the alliance of the Mount Shu Sect, Great Astral Sect, and their allies."

"Chu Liang secured a large number of soul crystals from the Penglai Supreme Sect. If we divide his loot between our sects, it should be more than enough to guarantee our advancement to the next round," added Feng Yan from Monastery Tower.

"But..." Zhang Chen hesitated slightly. "The Celestial King Sect has always maintained friendly ties with the Mount Shu Sect. At such a crucial moment, would they really be willing to trample on the Mount Shu Sect?"

"Feng Chaoyang is all brawn and no brains. He probably won't even consider such matters," Guo Zhanfeng said. "Feng Chaoyang has always seen himself as a rival to Yang Shenlong. With Chu Liang having killed Yang Shenlong, he'll naturally want to test his own strength against him."

"While Yang Shenlong was alive, no one dared to compare; now that he's dead, all these so-called 'equals' are crawling out of the woodwork," Guo Zhanlei scoffed.

The Sixth Princess passed the letter around before saying, "It's precisely because Chu Liang had the power to eliminate Yang Shenlong that they fear him now. The letter from Ye Yongxing mentions that he has divination abilities and he foresaw that the Mount Shu Sect would win the championship in this Assembly of Immortal Sects. This is our only opportunity to kill Chu Liang. If we let him advance to the round of the Battle of the Imperial City, it will be even more difficult to eliminate him."

For those participating in the Assembly of Immortal Sects, everyone's ultimate goal was victory. Even if two sects had good relations in ordinary times, it was normal to disregard that at such a moment.

The Thirteenth Prince said, "Opportunities like this are rare, and missing it might mean it won't come again. We should act. If we're concerned about any ambush or deception, we can take precautions and make preparations."

"..."

After a brief discussion, the group gathered their forces, raised their sabers, and began advancing.

As they charged toward the location provided by Ye Yongxing, they spotted a young monk in white robes, standing on a hillside and patiently pushing a small wooden cart.

In the cart sat a delicate-looking young man with a serene smile on his face, softly humming, "I sat on the tower, gazing at the mountain scenery[1]..."

Everyone instantly recognized him. "Chu Liang!"

"Brother Zhang, long time no see," Chu Liang greeted Zhang Chen with a smile before calling out loudly to the group below the hill. "Forgive me, I'm injured and unable to rise to greet you, so please, come up on the hill and let's all have a chat."

His calm demeanor, however, made everyone pause in their tracks.

It was only recently that people began to learn of Chu Liang's existence. He had quickly risen to fame across the lands of the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten, gaining a reputation for his exceptional cunning.

At this moment, as he faced the huge group of fierce people, he didn't hide or flee but instead invited them up on the hill. Could this be some kind of trap?

"Hmph, he's just bluffing," Guo Zhanfeng scoffed, readying himself to strike.

At that moment, Pushan, standing beside Chu Liang, suddenly lifted his robe, causing Guo Zhanfeng to pause.

Then, they watched as Monk Pushan pulled out a feather fan and began fanning himself casually, a sly, wicked smile spreading across his face, as if he was saying, "Come on up."

"..." This provocative attitude instantly enraged the crowd.

Not only did Guo Zhanfeng move forward, but the warrior monks of Monastery Tower also strode ahead, ready to attack.

Just then, Monk Pushan lifted his robe once more and abruptly turned around, as if reaching for something.

The crowd halted once more.

When Pushan turned back, they saw he was holding an orange, which he began peeling calmly before taking a bite.

"..." The group was speechless.

If you are just taking out an orange, why are you being so dramatic?

At this moment, the Thirteenth Prince shouted, "Clearly, their main force is occupied fighting the Celestial Pivot Pavilion; they're just putting on an act to stall us. Move up quickly and finish them off!"

No one disagreed with his statement. Without hesitation, they surged forward, each one leaping up the hillside.

...

As the alliance led by the team from the imperial family flew up the hillside, a deep rumbling filled the air. The skies darkened abruptly, and a force as ancient as the primordial wilderness descended, pressing down with an overwhelming intent to crush everything in its path.

Suddenly, a large number of men leapt out from both sides.

So, it really is an ambush after all? This thought flashed through the minds of everyone in the imperial family's alliance.

They were surrounded by members of the Great Astral Sect, South Melody Conservatory, and the Valley of the Three Absolutes...

In addition to the teams in the alliance led by Chu Liang of the Mount Shu Sect, there were also teams from the Celestial Pivot Pavilion, the Celestial King Sect, and the Sea King Sect.

These teams, who should have been allied with the imperial family, now stood alongside Chu Liang's alliance.

The powerful formation that now trapped the imperial family and its allies was, in fact, crafted by Ye Yongxing.

The genius from the Celestial Pivot Pavilion was also well-versed in the art of formations.

If the forces of the Celestial Pivot Pavilion, the Celestial King Sect, and the Sea King Sect had suddenly attacked, the members of the imperial family's alliance might still have had a chance to escape. But now, they were trapped within this formation. Their movements were restricted, and it was too late to flee.

The men from the Great Astral Sect and the Celestial King Sect charged into the imperial family and its allies like unleashed wild dogs, crashing through with ferocious intensity.

The forces of South Melody Conservatory and Celestial Pivot Pavilion provided support that worked like magic. On the other hand, the Sea King Sect and the Valley of the Three Absolutes played similar roles, flanking and launching ambushes with precision.

Ye Yongxing stood beside Chu Liang, smiling as he said, "If you hadn't devised this clever strategy to lure them into our trap, capturing all of them in one sweep wouldn't have been so easy."

"It's all thanks to Brother Ye's divination calculations. Your foresight in predicting the enemy's moves in advance was far more crucial," Chu Liang replied, returning the compliment.

"It's all thanks to your cleverness," Ye Yongxing said.

"Brother Ye played an important role," Chu Liang replied with a grin.

Monk Pushan watched the two of them exchange smiles and compliments, and the phrase "partners in crime" immediately popped into his mind.

He chuckled and said, "Both of you played a crucial role in the success of this operation; there's no need to be modest."

Unexpectedly, Ye Yongxing, who had been chatting freely with Chu Liang, glanced over at Pushan and suddenly wore an expression of discomfort, as if he couldn't bear to look at Pushan's face. Without saying a word, he quickly turned his face away.

"..." Pushan had grown used to it.

Ye Yongxing usually only spoke normally with Chu Liang. When he spoke with other Celestial Pivot Pavilion members, he tended to retreat into silence, so Pushan knew that Ye Yongxing was not targeting him.

The battle on the other side was quickly nearing its end, with most of the teams in the alliance led by the imperial family wiped out, leaving only the Thirteenth Prince standing.

He simply dropped his weapon, sat on the ground, and smiled.

"Huh?" Chu Liang looked at him curiously. "Why is Your Highness smiling?"

"I laugh because you are still not wise enough," the Thirteenth Prince said as he shook his head. "We expected that this might be a trick, so we entrusted all the soul crystals to someone else. Even if you kill us here, you won't gain much."

Chu Liang had noticed this from the start.

Of the men sent to attack the alliance led by the Mount Shu Sect, only Zhang Chen from the Ascending Dragon Academy and Guo Zhanfeng from the Night Saber Sect were present. Additionally, one warrior monk from the Monastery Tower was absent.

It was normal for some members to be absent. Clearly, they were worried that the main forces might face danger, so they assigned one member from each team to hold onto most of the soul crystals. This ensured that their sects had a chance to advance to the next round.

The imperial family likely didn't care about advancing, which explained why both the Sixth Princess and the Thirteenth Prince were here.

"Then let's wish them luck," Chu Liang replied with a smile.

...

On a rocky shore by the coast, Xu Fangling, Guo Zhanlei, and a warrior monk from Monastery Tower were gathered together, each feeling somewhat disheartened.

Fearing that this mission might be a trap, they had entrusted most of the soul crystals to these three, instructing them not to participate in the battle and to survive at all costs.

Although the three were the weaker fighters in their respective groups, they still wanted to participate, so naturally, they felt disgruntled.

"What's that?" Xu Fangling suddenly noticed a glimmer over the distant waves and gazed at it with curiosity.

Then she saw clearly—a cultivator appeared to be walking across the waves, his entire form glowing with a radiant light.

"An enemy?" The three immediately stood up, their senses on high alert.

In the blink of an eye, the radiant figure landed before them. It was a tall young man with a slightly lazy demeanor, as though he had just woken up.

"Ah..." he yawned, then looked at the three of them and said, "Apologies, everyone, but your soul crystals will be mine."

"Who are you?" Guo Zhanlei roared. "You certainly have a lot of nerve."

The young man responded leisurely, "I am Li Guanlong from the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals."

Chapter 574: Are You Done Changing Your Mind

The alliance led by the Mount Shu Sect and the alliance led by the Celestial Pivot Pavilion had just finished cleaning up the battlefield, and indeed, they found only a few soul crystals from the fallen.

However, no one was disappointed, as with Ye Yongxing present, locating those hiding wasn't an issue.

Ye Yongxing closed his eyes in meditation, forming a seal with his left hand, his fingertips trembling slightly, as if pulling invisible strings. After a moment, he furrowed his brows slightly.

"They're at the coast, but someone got to them first," he said slowly.

In this illusory realm, the power of Heavenly Law was not that strong. While Heavenly Law reigned supreme in the outside world, Immortal Jiuyi stood as the ultimate authority in this illusory realm.

With the Heavenly Law that restricted divination weakened here, divination casters were several times better at performing divination than they could in the real world—a lesson learned over many Assemblies of Immortal Sects.

However, no matter how quick divination could be performed, it still required a certain amount of time. In contrast, Li Guanlong's dream-watching ability allowed him to traverse this world in an instant, making it a much faster technique.

Thus, when Ye Yongxing pinpointed the group's location, all he saw was a blurred, chaotic scene.

A battle was already happening there.

Guo Zhanlei, Xu Fangling, and the Monastery Tower warrior monk Feng Chen were not weak. They had simply been selected by their teams as the individuals keeping the soul crystals safe.

Li Guanlong, however, had arrived alone, seemingly disregarding the three of them completely.

Xu Fangling struck first, raising her hand and invoking the Immortal Art: The Spoken Divine Law. She chanted, "Every move will be as heavy as a thousand jun!"

But as Xu Fangling spoke, Li Guanlong remained unaffected. Instead, Xu Fangling's body trembled, and blood seeped from her nose and mouth, as if she had suffered a serious injury.

This was a clear sign of a vast power disparity. The Spoken Divine Law that she invoked had no effect on Li Guanlong, and she was instead inflicted with severe backlash.

As her technique failed, Guo Zhanlei and Feng Chen both rushed forward, charging at Li Guanlong.

Feng Chen went for a head-on attack, driving a powerful punch toward Li Guanlong's chest, while Guo Zhanlei circled around to his back, drawing a long saber in a swift motion.

Sssh—

Yet both of their attacks struck only empty air.

Li Guanlong felt like air. Their punches and attacks passed right through him, leaving no sense of impact, as if they hadn't struck anything at all.

An illusion?

Just as this thought surfaced, another figure had silently appeared behind Xu Fangling.

With a calm expression, Li Guanlong placed his palm on her head.

Bang!

In an instant, her body shattered, scattering into a pile of soul crystals.

"It's an illusion." Feng Chen instantly recognized the technique. He bit down on his tongue, spitting out blood, and shouted, "Break!"

Immediately, the hazy shadows shattered, and the real scene reappeared before them. Moments earlier, it was as if they had all been pulled into a grand dream.

As Li Guanlong faced the two, he formed a seal with his left hand and raised it forward.

With a thunderous rumble, a massive wave rose from the sea, shaping itself into a colossal hand that came crashing down upon them.

Feng Chen showed no fear as he leaped upward, his muscular physique slicing through the waves as he lunged forward with another powerful punch aimed at Li Guanlong.

Li Guanlong was about to dodge, but Feng Chen summoned an even greater force, accelerating his strike and landing a direct hit on Li Guanlong.

Bang—

The punch felt solid, yet in the next instant, Li Guanlong's body exploded, dispersing into a spray of seawater.

It was yet another clone!

Back where he stood, Guo Zhanlei swung his saber, slicing through the massive wave in the form of a hand. But just then, Li Guanlong's figure appeared behind him, delivering a powerful strike with his palm.

Thud.

But this time, it wasn't so easy; the Guo Zhanlei beneath Li Guanlong's hand was also a clone.

In that instant, the clone transformed into a black talisman and shattered. Simultaneously, the real Guo Zhanlei burst through the waves, driving his blade toward Li Guanlong's waist.

Li Guanlong frowned, his hand flipping out to catch Guo Zhanlei's saber in a firm grasp!

Swish—

Though his grip stopped the blade in its tracks, blood spurted from his palm.

Yet, even so, Guo Zhanlei failed to gain the upper hand, as Li Guanlong's blood splattered and instantly ignited into blazing flames, latching onto Guo Zhanlei's body.

Whoosh—

Guo Zhanlei was engulfed in flames. He hurled his saber backward and leaped away.

Still, Li Guanlong would not stop pursuing. With a twist of his hand, the saber caught in his palm rotated and unleashed, deflecting the Shadow Gnat flying saber that Guo Zhanlei had released in his hurried retreat, ringing out with a sharp clang.

Li Guanlong's entire body began to take on a metallic sheen as he activated the fifth-realm Metallic Body. He had assumed this form specifically to withstand the punch coming toward him from behind.

Indeed, Feng Chen had already leaped back, landing another punch.

Bam—

The heavy punch struck his back, and despite having activated his Metallic Body, Li Guanlong's entire body trembled, blood spilling from his mouth.

As he absorbed the force of the punch, Li Guanlong had already closed in on Guo Zhanlei. Violet lightning crackled around his right hand as he launched another strike.

Lightning and fire intertwined, resulting in an instant explosion. Boom!

The Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals had a deep legacy with numerous cultivation techniques, and its disciples practiced various arts. Zhuge Guanxing specialized in star-gazing divination, Situ Guanhai focused on talisman arts, while Li Guanlong trained in innate dream techniques and various stealth traversal methods.

Having killed two of them at the cost of only minor injuries, Li Guanlong now turned his attention to the warrior monk Feng Chen, who felt an overwhelming pressure.

But having landed a successful strike, Feng Chen knew that he had to seize this opportunity and continue his attack without retreating even half a step.

And so, he stepped forward again and delivered another forceful punch.

Lightning continued to radiate from Li Guanlong, expanding to envelop a one-zhang radius around him, creating this pool of lightning!

Li Guanlong was now using the immortal art—the Five-Lightning Heart of the Sky!

This divine technique had been used by Jiang Yuebai against Chu Liang at the Mount Shu Summit. If one hadn't dodged in time, one would be impaled by the surging pool of lightning.

But as a warrior monk, Feng Chen had finally closed the distance. If he backed off now, he would surely lose his advantage and might never get the opportunity to close in again.

So, he made the same choice Chu Liang had back then—he advanced instead of retreating!

Using his powerful physique, Feng Chen surged forward, crashing heavily into Li Guanlong!

Sizzle!

As Feng Chen struck Li Guanlong's chest with a resounding bang, he felt his body being pierced by the Five-Lightning Heart of the Sky!

Rumble!

Amidst the explosive noise, Feng Chen's body was reduced to ashes by countless bolts of divine lightning. The power of Li Guanlong's Five-Lightning Heart of the Sky far surpassed the one unleashed by Jiang Yuebai at the Mount Shu Summit.

Even with Feng Chen's formidable physique, it was unbearable.

"Phew—" Li Guanlong exhaled deeply, feeling the energy and blood in his chest surging, nearly ready to spurt out. Those two punches had done quite a bit of damage.

Just as he was rushing to leave this place, he heard a light footstep behind him.

Tap.

...

Shit. I was too focused on the fight that I forgot to watch out for movements in the surrounding area with my divine sense. Regardless, someone that is able to approach without making sound must be a powerful enemy, Li Guanlong thought.

When he turned around, he saw a slightly disheveled young swordsman standing behind him.

The young swordsman wore a simple linen robe, his unkempt hair tied high, with a sword wrapped in hemp rope slung across his back. His features were plain, and his eyes squinted lazily. His relaxed demeanor even bore a striking resemblance to Li Guanlong himself.

With just a single step, the pressure from his qi was stronger than the combined force of the three opponents Li Guanlong had faced earlier.

Li Guanlong couldn't help but become serious. "Who might you be?"

Given his current injuries, he was in no condition to fight anyone, especially not someone as powerful as this individual. Yet, how was it that he didn't recognize such a formidable cultivator?

"Sword Sect, Xu Bao," the youth replied simply, his gaze drifting to the soul crystals scattered across the ground.

The Sword Sect he referred to was, of course, the Endless Sword Sect. And now, it all made sense to Li Guanlong.

The Endless Sword Sect was known for its peculiar yet exceptionally strong individuals, with disciples who dedicated themselves entirely to the Dao of the sword. It was likely that many of them trained on the mountain for decades without ever descending, which explained why they were not widely recognized by others.

"You want the soul crystals?" Noticing the expression in Xu Bao's eyes, Li Guanlong let out a sigh of relief. With a wave of his hand, he gathered all the soul crystals from the ground and continued, "There are over ninety soul crystals here. Let's split them fifty-fifty so we don't have to fight. How does that sound?"

Originally, these were all the soul crystals that the alliance of four teams led by the imperial family had saved up. The siblings of the imperial family had decided to forgo saving any for themselves, dividing all the soul crystals into three portions and entrusting each of the other teams with one.

The amount would be enough for each team to advance to the next round.

If the two split them now, it would be more than enough; there was no need to fight.

But after hearing this, Xu Bao frowned without saying a word, as if he was calculating something.

Seems very greedy... Li Guanlong thought.

Seeing how silent Xu Bao was, Li Guanlong thought that he was one of those ruthless and taciturn characters.

Li Guanlong's expression grew slightly grim as he spoke slowly, "You and I are at similar cultivation levels. Even though I'm a bit injured, there's no telling who would win in a fight. I'm simply unwilling to take unnecessary risks... I can take a step back and let you have sixty percent while I settle for forty."

Even with just forty percent of the soul crystals, it should be enough for advancement. Since the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals had no allies, Li Guanlong was fine with giving out the extras.

Upon hearing this, Xu Bao's frown deepened.

He still remained silent.

Is that not enough? Li Guanlong thought.

At this point, Li Guanlong felt quite displeased with how greedy Xu Bao was.

The moment of readjusting his breathing had settled his qi and blood somewhat, and he no longer feared a fight. While his injuries would still affect him, there were other factors that would come into play during a fight between the powerful ones. Oftentimes, such injuries were not the decisive factor.

He straightened up and issued a final ultimatum, "Seventy percent for you, and I'll take thirty. This is my last concession. If you keep pushing, you won't get a single one!"

Just because the team from Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals had been drifting at sea for days didn't mean they had no soul crystals. With thirty percent from this haul, they would have enough to advance to the next round.

Li Guanlong was ready to fight if he couldn't secure even thirty percent of the soul crystals.

It wouldn't be easy to find so many soul crystals elsewhere at this point. After all, it had taken him a significant amount of time spent in dream-watching to finally come across such a prime opportunity.

Unexpectedly, Xu Bao, who had been frowning, erupted in fury upon hearing that Li Guanlong was willing to compromise again.

"Are you done changing your mind?" Xu Bao shouted, his eyes blazing with anger. "Every time I finish calculating, you switch things up... What's seventy percent of ninety? Just give me the damn number!"

Chapter 575: The Final Day

While Li Guanlong was squaring off with the "mathematical genius," the team from the Greater-Yin Cult was facing a crisis in a distant location.

Aside from the Mount Shu Sect, the only other sect in the Divine Nine that had historically performed poorly in the Assembly of Immortal Sects was the Greater-Yin Cult.

The performance of the teams during the assembly generally reflected the actual strength level of the sect. While some teams might achieve surprising results in a few assemblies, it was the long-term performance of the teams sent by the sect that ultimately determined their actual strength.

Given the long-term performance of the teams from all participating sects, these two sects were currently considered the weakest.

However, the Greater-Yin Cult was not at risk of being expelled from the Divine Nine, so the disciples of this generation were not under too much pressure.

Upon entering the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, the Greater-Yin Cult's team had been moving cautiously and steadily, collecting soul crystals bit by bit. Every move they made was very steady.

However, as the competition progressed to its later stages, the stronger teams started to make their moves, and the competition became more intense. Just yesterday, they faced a team from the Sword-Hanging Kingdom and lost two members.

Now, only Luo Xiaoyong and a female disciple remained.

Both were dressed in black, and Luo Xiaoyong had a particularly refined appearance, which made the female disciple seem less striking by comparison.

"We still need quite a few soul crystals to advance to the next round, and at this point, the other teams have started forming alliances. It's going to be tough to secure more," Luo Xiaoyong said thoughtfully. "However, the fierce competition in this Hundred Sect Competition means there's a chance that only ten teams will remain."

"Right, we should just try to protect the soul crystals we already have," the female disciple agreed.

Just as their conversation ended, a figure descended from the sky, locking onto their hiding spot among the trees with a surge of qi.

Looks like we can't hide anymore, Luo Xiaoyong thought. When he realized that they had been detected, he stepped out from the woods, deciding not to hide anymore.

The person who appeared was a young man in a coarse linen robe, carrying a sword on his back. He had plain features and a slightly disheveled appearance.

"Sword Sect?" Luo Xiaoyong asked, instantly sensing the aura of the Dao of the Sword from the young man.

The aura radiating from the young man felt even purer than that of the disciples from the Sword-Hanging Kingdom, which was why Luo Xiaoyong knew that he had to be a disciple of the Endless Sword Sect.

"Sword Sect, Xu Hu," the man replied coldly.

"The Endless Sword Sect must have gathered quite a few soul crystals by now, right?" Luo Xiaoyong asked tentatively.

"..."

Unexpectedly, Xu Hu fell silent for a moment before answering truthfully, "Not a single one."

Luo Xiaoyong blinked, then quickly turned and shouted, "Run!"

This guy looked absurdly strong and it wouldn't benefit them if they tried to fight him. Only a fool would choose to fight. At his command, the two members of the Greater-Yin Cult quickly turned and ran.

But with a flick of his fingers, Xu Hu's sword shot from its sheath, and in an instant, he was already behind them, riding the sword light at a speed that would make even Chu Liang marvel...

Now that was skill.

The moment Luo Xiaoyong turned back, he felt the crushing pressure of the sword qi behind him and quickly realized that it was impossible for him to escape. He shouted, "You go first!"

In most teams, soul crystals weren't carried by the strongest member due to the high risk they faced. Instead, they were usually entrusted to an ordinary disciple, who would hide and escape when danger arose.

The Greater-Yin Cult used this strategy as well.

However, they had clearly underestimated Xu Hu.

With a single gesture in mid-air, he came to a halt while his sword surged forward, multiplying into ten, then a hundred, a thousand, and finally ten thousand...

With a thunderous roar, ten thousand swords filled the sky!

He casually unleashed the Ten Thousand Swords Seal, and each wave of sword qi crashed together like a turbulent storm!

Luo Xiaoyong changed his hand seals, and in an instant, an icy aura enveloped him, freezing and blocking the Ten Thousand Swords Seal.

But Xu Hu fixed his gaze on the fleeing female disciple's back, then suddenly opened his mouth and spat out a sharp glint!

Whoosh—

It was a small, icy sword light, unleashed at such speed that Luo Xiaoyong's divine sense could barely catch it. Instantly, the icy sword light pierced a female disciple's back.

With a soft tearing sound, a shower of soul crystals scattered through the air.

Luo Xiaoyong was enraged, forming a hand seal and unleashing the Lunar Deity's Finger forward!

Poof—

Xu Hu was suddenly forced to emit a cloud of crimson-gold qi, his face turning deathly pale as his body temperature plummeted to freezing levels.

What Luo Xiaoyong had just done was expel all yang energy from him, leaving only the yin energy behind.

With all his yang energy expelled, Xu Hu couldn't activate his cultivation energy, regardless of how powerful he was. Yet he displayed no panic; instead, his eyes flashed with divine light, and that small life-bound sword shot toward Luo Xiaoyong once more.

Luo Xiaoyong didn't turn around. In an instant, he encased himself in a block of Mysterious Ice.

Sizzle.

In the blink of an eye, the small sword had pierced his back, but due to the thickness of the Mysterious Ice, the three-cun-long blade couldn't penetrate any further. As it became embedded in the ice, the true form of the blade was revealed.

It looked like a tiny silver toy sword, suspended within the ice, appearing crystal clear.

With his body severely weakened and his weapons under control, Xu Hu appeared to be on the verge of defeat. But then, he quickly formed his fingers into a blade, slashed his left arm, and shouted, "Open!"

The moment Xu Hu slashed his arm, the small sword grew stronger. It began to glow with a red hue and, with a swift motion, shot through the Mysterious Ice, piercing Luo Xiaoyong along with it.

Boom.

Xu Hu crashed heavily to the ground, and the small sword returned to him. Instead of swallowing it back, he took out a gourd filled with liquid and placed the sword inside to nurture it.

After readjusting his breathing for a while to recover, he finally walked over and picked up the soul crystals scattered on the ground.

...

After that battle, Chu Liang and his group parted ways with the alliance led by the Celestial Pivot Pavilion.

Just because they had worked together didn't mean they would be allies.

At this point, both alliances still needed soul crystals. If they became allies, they would only become burdens to one another. Once the final day arrived, there was no guarantee that they wouldn't turn on each other.

The Competition of a Hundred Sects was approaching its final day. Teams with enough soul crystals would go into hiding, while those without would embark on a frantic hunt across the realm, making the situation even more unpredictable.

As evening approached, Monk Pushan unexpectedly detected someone with his Heavenly Eye.

It was a girl who was by herself.

As the entire group hurried over, Chu Liang realized that it was someone he knew.

The girl was wearing a white sword dress. She looked cute and pale, appearing frightened by the group of burly men around her, trembling as she clutched her sword tightly.

She looked as if she would burst into tears if something else popped out and frightened her.

It was Li Shiyi from the Endless Sword Sect.

"Miss Li?" Chu Liang said, looking at her in surprise. "Why are you wandering here alone?"

"I..." As soon as Li Shiyi saw Chu Liang, her lips quivered, and she couldn't hold back her tears any longer. "I got separated from my senior brothers!"

Chu Liang kindly comforted her before asking what had happened.

It turned out that, in addition to Li Shiyi, the Endless Sword Sect had also sent the three brothers of the Xu Family: Xu Long, Xu Hu, and Xu Bao.

Since they were young, these three brothers had been learning the art of the sword at the back of the mountain. Like Li Shiyi, they rarely descended from the mountain, which was why not many people knew of them. Nonetheless, all three were exceptionally talented.

However, there was one drawback. Though the three were triplets, they did not share a close bond. In fact, they consider each other as enemies or rivals.

As the heir of the Li family, Li Shiyi was expected to lead the team. However, since she was not strong enough, she struggled to hold her ground. Although the three brothers had promised her before entering the illusory realm that they would not fight, the moment they entered the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, they began arguing over the camp location and travel direction.

In the end, all three of them decided to settle their dispute with a sword fight to determine who would be the eldest brother.

In the first few days within the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, they spent their time in constant internal strife and sparring. Finally, by yesterday, Li Shiyi could no longer tolerate it and told the three to stop fighting and go their separate ways. If they continued wasting time like this, the Competition of a Hundred Sects would come to an end.

The three brothers quickly agreed, each forming their own separate team to see who could collect the most soul crystals. Whoever gathered the most would be the eldest brother.

But while the three rushed off to compete, poor Li Shiyi was left behind.

After days of watching them fight with each other, they finally stopped. But just as soon as they did, they all ran off, leaving her suddenly all alone.

She was alone and afraid. As nightfall approached, a sense of dread settled over her.

Fortunately, it was near the end of the Competition of a Hundred Sects. With fewer teams remaining, Li Shiyi had managed to wander this far, trembling in fear, without encountering any enemies.

"I told them I didn't want to come, but they made me... and now they won't even stay with me," she sobbed, hugging her knees.

"How pitiful..." Chu Liang remarked, feeling amused and sympathetic at the same time.

Li Shiyi rarely descended the mountain, and when she did, it was never a pleasant experience.

Chu Liang offered, "If you're scared, you can join us. No one would dare target you then. But just so you know, we're also short on soul crystals, so we don't have any extras to share."

"Can I? Oh, thank you so much!" She broke into a smile through her tears. "I don't need any soul crystals; I just want to stay with you all!"

Since she was just a lone, fragile girl without any extra soul crystals, the group decided to take her in.

Although it was nighttime and they normally wouldn't venture out, they were short on soul crystals and couldn't afford to be picky. They searched along the coast but couldn't find any of the remaining members from the alliance led by the imperial family. It seemed, as Ye Yongxing had said, that someone else had beaten them to it.

Before long, it was the next day, with the arrival of dawn.

Suddenly, the voice of Immortal Jiuyi echoed throughout the illusory realm.

"Fellow disciples of the immortal sects, today is the final day of the Competition of a Hundred Sects. Currently, there are... eleven teams left in the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams."

Chapter 576: The Final Effort

"The remaining eleven immortal sects consist of the ones in your alliance—the Mount Shu Sect, the Buddhist Cloud Monastery, the Valley of the Three Absolutes, the Great Astral Sect, and the South Melody Conservatory..." Ye Yongxing continued, "and the ones in my alliance—the Celestial Pivot Pavilion, the Celestial King Sect, the Sea King Sect. Then there's the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals, the Penglai Supreme Sect, and the Endless Sword Sect."

Chu Liang nodded. That was pretty much what he knew as well.

Now that the Competition of a Hundred Sects had reached this point, the strength of the Divine Nine and the Terrestrial Ten was clear. All of the remaining teams were part of the Divine Nine and the Terrestrial Ten, with eight of the eleven teams representing sects in the Divine Nine.

Some teams' survival was certainly due to alliances, but the alliances between the sects in the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten formed only later on. Shortly after entering the illusory realm, many smaller sects had formed alliances, yet none of those had lasted until now.

Overall, this year's competition had a high level of strength and intense rivalry.

Many dark horses that emerged when the illusory realm opened had been eliminated, including Yang Shenlong, who was once regarded as the strongest of the younger generation. By the seventh day, the end of the competition was drawing near.

"One more team to eliminate, and this Competition of a Hundred Sects will be over," Chu Liang said.

He had come to find Ye Yongxing precisely for this reason.

"Brother Chu, are you suggesting..." Ye Yongxing looked at him.

"The remaining scattered sects should already have enough soul crystals and have started hiding to wait out the seventh day," Chu Liang explained. "However, the two alliances we've formed don't have enough crystals to guarantee that all the sects in both alliances can advance to the next round. If things continue like this, we'll have to eliminate one of the sects in either alliance, and that would be a very difficult decision."

Chu Liang was discussing a very realistic problem. Although all the teams in the alliances worked well together, there would eventually be an issue of distribution. How could they decide who to take more and who to take less if there just was not enough soul crystals? Even if someone volunteered to give up their share, they wouldn't be happy about it.

The scheming wouldn't just occur within the alliances themselves. The two alliances led by the Celestial Pivot Pavilion and the Mount Shu Sect would also be plotting against each other, trying to get the other alliance to eliminate a sect in their own alliance.

The original purpose of forming alliances was to compete against external forces, but with limited resources, they could quickly fall into a vicious cycle of internal competition.

The Celestial Pivot Pavilion was all too familiar with this kind of infighting. It was due to such internal conflict that the once-powerful Heavenly Star Divine Cult fell apart and split up into different factions.

"If we don't want things to end up like that, the best solution is for us to work together to eliminate another faction," Chu Liang continued. "That's why I came to you, Brother Ye."

"Alright." Ye Yongxing nodded in agreement. "Then let's join forces and search again."

Those who had collected enough soul crystals were undoubtedly hiding by now. The ones that weren't hiding would be the brothers of the Endless Sword Sect, who had scattered to different places and were difficult to handle.

Eliminating a team at this point would be much harder than before.

However, if the alliance led by Chu Liang and the alliance led by Ye Yongxing were to work together, their combined strength would be overwhelmingly powerful. At this stage, the competition had essentially turned into a game of hide-and-seek, and they were the seekers.

After Chu Liang and Ye Yongxing reached an agreement, both teams immediately split up. Since everyone else was hiding as best they could, even Ye Yongxing's divination couldn't pinpoint exact locations—only a few general directions. As a result, the teams divided to explore each of those directions.

They scoured the mountains and searched the seas.

For the alliance led by Chu Liang, they were fortunate that all the teams were friends willing to risk getting eliminated so that they could all succeed. If they were more selfish, they could simply just kill the one paralyzed person in the alliance, instead of going out to fight more people. With Chu Liang gone, there would be more than enough soul crystals for all the remaining teams in the alliance.

...

While the others scattered to search throughout the illusory realm, Monk Pushan stayed back on the mountaintop with Chu Liang, pushing his small cart and keeping watch. No one felt comfortable leaving Chu Liang alone, and they didn't feel safe with Pushan going along with them. So, they decided to have the two of them stay behind to keep watch.

"It's definitely worrisome," Monk Pushan mused. "Ye Yongxing's divination is strong, but the teams that remain aren't pushovers either. The Penglai Supreme Sect and Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals are skilled in stealth, and the Endless Sword Sect... well, they're monsters. Even if we find them, there's no guarantee we'll win. In the end, it'll come down to luck.

"If we can't make it in the end, I will just give up on taking my portion of the soul crystals. After all, the Buddhist Cloud Monastery made it into the top ten the last two rounds. If our abbot hears me saying this, he'll definitely scold me, saying, 'Does that make any sense? Does that make any sense? Does that make any sense...'"

Chu Liang took a deep breath and said, "I hope it will end well."

Monk Pushan was about to respond when they noticed a cloud of qi descending from the distant sky. As the cloud landed and dispersed, it revealed members of the Sea King Sect.

The person leading them was Wenren Yan.

Even though Chu Liang didn't know him, he knew Wenren Yan's elder brother.

Wenren Yan was the youngest among his family of four brothers, but he was the most capable one, with both cultivation and intelligence far surpassing his siblings.

"Brother Wenren, what brings you back?" Chu Liang greeted him.

"We searched in the direction Brother Ye suggested, but we found nothing, so we returned to protect you, Brother Chu," Wenren Yan replied with a smile.

"Protect?" Chu Liang repeated, eyeing him with a hint of amusement.

Wenren Yan's expression changed, and he said with a sigh, "Brother Chu, I'll be honest with you. Our alliance doesn't have enough soul crystals for all teams, and in terms of distribution, our Sea King Sect is unlikely to stand up against the other two sects in the Divine Nine. We're at the greatest risk of elimination... so I want to take a chance."

"Understandable," Chu Liang replied.

"If we could find enemies, of course, we would prefer fighting them," Wenren Yan continued. "But this illusory realm, while not vast, isn't small either. When three or four people are completely hidden, how are we supposed to find them? We searched for over half a day and found nothing."

"So, Brother Wenren, are you here to deal with me? To wrap things up a bit early?" Chu Liang asked.

"If Brother Ye and Feng Chaoyang return, they definitely won't let me kill you," Wenren Yan said as he gritted his teeth. "But at this point, I can't worry about friendship. In the worst case, I'll just apologize to you afterward."

"No need for formalities, Brother Wenren. The Assembly of Immortal Sects is just a test of our abilities," Chu Liang said with a slight chuckle. "Whether we win or lose, it won't affect our friendship outside."

Monk Pushan stepped forward, positioning himself between them.

"Pushan, you are the only surviving member of the Buddhist Cloud Monastery team. Are you really going to risk your life to protect him?" Wenren Yan warned with a frown. "If you just step aside, this will all be over."

"Amitabha..." Monk Pushan pressed his hands together and replied, "Benefactor Wenren, as the saying goes—"

"Alright, alright, stop talking."

Having dealt with Monk Pushan before, Wenren Yan was aware of how he would start rambling once he opened his mouth. If he kept going, others might return before they could kill Chu Liang.

Wenren Yan quickly waved his hand and commanded, "Attack!"

From his point of view, Chu Liang was essentially useless. Pushan was all alone, while he had his full team at his disposal. With only Pushan fighting, there was no way he could win against him and his three teammates, no matter how hard he tried.

The four members of the Sea King Sect closed in on Chu Liang and Pushan, unleashing their techniques with powerful motions that created a thunderous roar similar to crashing waves.

Pushan, who was all alone, looked like a small boat caught in the chaos of a turbulent sea.

Suddenly, a soft, crisp sound pierced through the deafening roar.

Snap.

Chapter 577: Truly Wonderful

There were many kinds of Heavenly Star Unusual Arts. The kind that the Sea King Sect cultivated focused on the immeasurable expanse of the ocean and its unending torrential waves. Once they launched their offensive, they would release an unrelenting wave of attacks.

The four members of the Sea King Sect team activated their qi circulation together, generating vast and mighty waves of qi that were about to engulf Monk Pushan and Chu Liang.

Then a crisp crack rang out, and the raging torrent of foundational qi suddenly dissipated.

Meanwhile, the radiance of seven-colored light enveloped Monk Pushan. He was using an immortal art—the Transcendent Dharma Mirror.

When Monk Pushan met Luo Yao and Chu Liang for the first time, Monk Pushan had the appearance of a mysterious powerful cultivator going undercover in a diabolical sect. Luo Yao fought him and discovered that her shamanic spell Forbidden Ground had no effect on his Transcendent Dharma Mirror.

Since then, the undercover trio had used this combination to their advantage, as Pushan was the only one who could still use his divine abilities when Forbidden Ground was active.

At this moment, it was indeed Forbidden Ground that restricted the Sea King Sect team.

There was a crushed jade talisman in Chu Liang's hand.

Wenren Yan quickly realized that Chu Liang had activated a jade talisman containing Forbidden Ground, working in tandem with Monk Pushan's Transcendent Dharma Mirror. This was clearly a tactic they had prepared well in advance.

Nevertheless, that didn't stop Wenren Yan.

He circulated his foundational qi even more fiercely and shouted, "Circulate your qi at full power! I'll hold him off. You three kill Chu Liang!"

Even though Forbidden Ground was powerful, there were still limits to its effects. The more people it restricted and the stronger their cultivation, the shorter its duration would be.

Thus, despite his restricted abilities, Wenren Yan didn't retreat and instead advanced. He turned over his hand, pulled out a large banner from his storage tool, and charged toward Monk Pushan with it.

The banner unfurled and flapped about, producing loud gusts of wind. Wenren Yan was unexpectedly strong, and his attack was extremely fierce.

Monk Pushan maintained his Transcendent Dharma Mirror form and made a hand seal, completing it with a flip of his hands. A three-zhang-tall apparition made of golden light rose behind him and struck down with a palm strike.

Wham!

Wenren Yan blocked the strike with his banner, but he sank halfway into the ground, clearly taking significant damage.

The other members of his team charged toward Chu Liang, but they were also repelled by Monk Pushan's golden apparition.

Nevertheless, the Sea King Sect team were circulating their qi at full power, and the Forbidden Ground was already on the verge of breaking. It seemed that the power stored in one talisman could only hold them off for a short time. Once they regained all of their cultivation power, Monk Pushan would no longer be able to hold them off alone.

Just as they were about to recover the use of their divine abilities, another crisp sound rang out.

Crack.

Chu Liang had pulled out another jade talisman and crushed it.

The Forbidden Ground descended once more.

Again??

Wenren Yan leaped up and yelled, "Charge!"

At his command, his team members unleashed raging flames of qi, burning their qi and blood to gain immense physical power!

This wasn't quite the same as the Divine Dragons' Great Blood-Burning Technique. They were using a self-sacrificial technique that inflicted severe damage to the cultivator while immensely boosting their physical strength. Nonetheless, they didn't care much about that at this critical moment.

They just needed to break past Monk Pushan to Chu Liang, who was no threat to them.

Crack, crack, crack...

Right then, they saw Chu Liang pull out a whole bunch of jade talismans. He crushed them nonstop like he was addicted to crushing them.

Those jade talismans, which contained the spell Forbidden Ground, were a crucial part of his reserve of battle supplies.

Fuck.

Wenren Yan was enraged.

How many did you prepare?

Did you not have to pay money for those things?

Seeing that the effects of Forbidden Ground were not going to end anytime soon, the other three members of the Sea King Sect team went all out and made a desperate charge toward Chu Liang. However, Monk Pushan's golden apparition blocked their attacks coming from the left and right, fending them off with relative ease.

Meanwhile, Wenren Yan stepped back, jumping out of the Forbidden Ground's range.

He let out a long shout, "Haaaaah!"

Whoosh.

In an instant, the surrounding spiritual qi rushed madly into him, causing him to swell like an inflated balloon until he became a giant over three zhang tall.

After using a divine skill to enhance his physique, he charged back into the Forbidden Ground and threw a punch at Pushan's golden apparition.

Boom!

The two giants collided thunderously.

Monk Pushan's golden apparition unleashed another palm strike, but Wenren Yan didn't dodge it. Instead, he met it head-on with his chest!

It was all just to buy time.

He finally managed to stall Monk Pushan for a moment—just enough for his team members to burn their qi and blood to charge over to Chu Liang!

As they looked at Chu Liang seated in his small cart, their eyes went red with determination.

Since the founding of the Sea King Sect, there had been very few opportunities for them to make it into the top ten of the Assembly of Immortal Sects. Now, a historic moment was right before them. In fact, this would be a once-in-a-lifetime chance for every disciple participating in the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

The three members of the Sea King Sect let out intense battle cries, determined to kill Chu Liang.

Right then, Chu Liang, who had seemed too weak to protect himself, suddenly... stood up.

He'd been in a state where he couldn't even lift his arm. It was very surprising that he'd even managed to crush the talismans earlier, but now he could stand up as well...?

Of course, that didn't make much of a difference.

However, Chu Liang then turned his hand over and took out a golden brick from his storage tool. He smashed the golden brick down on the Sea King Sect disciple nearest to him.

Wham.

Although the Sea King Sect disciples had burned their qi and blood to enhance their corporeal bodies, they were still no match for Chu Liang physically.

He moved slightly and brought the brick smashing down again on another Sea King Sect disciple.

Wham!

While the third Sea King Sect disciple was stunned, Chu Liang slammed the brick onto him too.

Wham!

In the blink of an eye, the three Sea King Sect disciples, who had finally managed to break past Monk Pushan to Chu Liang after such great difficulty, were defeated with three hits of a brick.

Meanwhile, Wenren Yan had been holding off Monk Pushan with all his might despite his injuries, but he had reached his limit too. Monk Pushan's golden apparition struck Wenren Yan with another palm strike, sending him flying dozens of zhang away.

After spitting out a large mouthful of blood, Wenren Yan got back onto his feet and looked at Chu Liang in shock. "You... you've recovered?"

"Not quite. Only my corporeal body has recovered." Chu Liang shrugged. "I still can't use my Sea of Qi."

He spoke the truth.

Chu Liang had been inflicted with severe damage from overloading his Sea of Qi for fifteen minutes. It left his Sea of Qi pretty much useless and his muscles and bones battered and shattered. However, his corporeal body was as strong as a True Dragon's, so it was incredibly powerful.

Having a powerful physique meant that in addition to possessing physical attributes like great strength and speed, he had one very important thing—a great healing ability.

It was difficult for his Sea of Qi and meridians to heal, but three days had been enough for him to recover from his physical injuries. So, although Chu Liang couldn't use any divine abilities, he had recovered all of his physical strength, and that was all he needed to take out ordinary disciples of immortal sects.

Moreover, in the domain of Forbidden Ground, these Sea King Sect disciples couldn't use their divine abilities either, so that basically made it Chu Liang's domain.

"You..." Wenren Yan uttered as he shrank to his original size. There was blood seeping through the lapel of his robe, and his face was as pale as paper. "Have you been faking this helpless act the whole time these past few days?"

"It's just a bit of deception. If I didn't show that I was weak, how could I lure anyone into taking the bait?" Chu Liang replied with a small smile.

However, in Wenren Yan's eyes, that smile looked utterly evil.

He seemed to see a dark figure with vertical horns on its head rising behind Chu Liang.

It let out an eerie and menacing laugh. "Kekekekekekeke!"

...

With Wenren Yan's death, the Competition of a Hundred Sects finally came to an end. The hundreds of young cultivators at the event venue on the Emperor's Mound opened their eyes.

The venue quickly erupted with noise. There were expressions of joy, anger, excitement, and amazement...

When the cultivators died in the illusory realm, their souls had not been able to return to their corporeal bodies right away. Instead, they fell into a dream-like state, watching everything that happened within the illusory realm as a spectator. They continued like that until Immortal Jiuyi opened the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, allowing all of their souls to return to their corporeal bodies.

The moment Chu Liang opened his eyes, he was met with his fellow disciples of the Mount Shu Sect, whom he hadn't seen for quite a few days.

"You actually got us to advance!" Ling Ao exclaimed excitedly.

He pulled Chu Liang into a hug and gave him a couple of hearty punches.

Then came Xu Ziyang, who also wore an excited expression for once. He fiercely wrapped his arms around Chu Liang and Ling Ao, sandwiching Chu Liang in the middle.

The other Mount Shu Sect disciples who had arrived early on to watch over him all rushed in. Lin Bei, Shang Ziliang, and Lackey A—all of Chu Liang's friends jumped on him, burying him under the pile.

"Woohoo!!!"

They all cheered loudly, with bursts of "Heheheh!" in the mix.

It was like the scene of a group of people making a grand return to their ancestral lands.

When Yang Shenlong eliminated Jiang Yuebai, Xu Ziyang, and Ling Ao, he had seemed so overwhelmingly powerful that the members of the Mount Shu Sect fell into despair and thought that there was no hope left for their sect.

Yet, Chu Liang unexpectedly pulled through once more against all odds! He overcame so many challenges and brought Mount Shu back from the brink. It was nothing short of a miracle.

The outpour of emotions went on for quite a while before Chu Liang's friends finally released him. And when Chu Liang could see what was in front of him again, he found Jiang Yuebai standing there.

Her eyes were filled with joy as a smile lit up her face.

"Hehe," Chu Liang chuckled.

He walked over with a grin, intending to say something.

However, he was thrown off by Jiang Yuebai's fragrance as she stepped forward and hugged him gently. His mind went blank, and he couldn't remember what he had wanted to say.

"Thank you." Jiang Yuebai's voice carried the tremor of a sob, showing she wasn't as calm as she appeared. "This is truly wonderful."

Chapter 578: We Can't Keep Everyone Waiting, Right?

While the disciples from the Mount Shu Sect celebrated joyfully, the members of the many other sects were shrouded in gloom.

Du Wuhen, Wei Tiandi, and Deng Yixiao returned to the Thunderbolt Stronghold camp, feeling quite guilty as they looked at the stern-faced Huang Hanshan.

Despite being the representative team of the Thunder Stronghold's most promising generation of disciples, they had gotten eliminated in the second round. They had failed their mission of taking the Thunderbolt Stronghold into the ranks of the Divine Nine. The four of them felt an indescribable sense of guilt.

Yet, despite his usual stern demeanor, Huang Hanshan surprisingly did not utter a word in reproach of their failure.

Instead, he just said softly, "You worked hard."

Du Wuhen wanted to say something. "Esteemed Teacher—"

Huang Hanshan shook his head and interrupted Du Wuhen. "Victory and defeat are common in life, and you will face them again. I hope you'll learn from this failure and know how to handle defeat in the future."

The three disciples' gazes gradually became firm with determination, and they nodded seriously. "Yes, Esteemed Teacher! We understand!"

After the three young men left, Huang Hanshan turned to his daughter, Huang Ling'er, with a fawning smile. "Ling'er..."

"I leave home all the time, and I'll definitely do it again," Huang Ling'er stated with a displeased expression. "Next time, I hope you won't make such a big deal out of such a small matter. Everyone knows about it. It's really embarrassing."

"All right, all right. I understand." Huang Hanshan chuckled. "Let's just stay at home and be happy. You won't run off anymore, right?"

"That'll depend on what you do," Huang Ling'er replied with a scoff. Then she turned and added, "After the Assembly of Immortal Sects, I'll enter closed-door cultivation for a while. I probably won't be going anywhere for some time."

She glanced at the Penglai Supreme Sect's camp.

The young lady had always prided herself on her outstanding talent, believing she could still be a pretty powerful cultivator without putting much effort into cultivation. However, once she stepped onto the stage of the Assembly of Immortal Sects, she realized her pride was entirely unfounded.

She didn't say it aloud, but deep down, Huang Ling'er had a great desire to excel, especially since she was Huang Hanshan's daughter. This defeat hit her even harder than it did the three core disciples.

The Taotie City camp, on the other hand, had a much more stifling atmosphere. It was perhaps because one sect leader had a daughter, and the other had a son.

Huyan Bin stood before his father, Huyan Dong, with his head bowed, remaining silent for a long time.

Huyan Dong wore a somber expression and did not say a word.

After a long silence, he finally spoke. "Do you know where you fell short compared to Chu Liang?"

Huyan Bin's mind raced. He thought about it, but he didn't know what to say.

There are too many things...

Huyan Dong continued, "You have access to the best resources, but in the end, the most important thing for a cultivator is their cultivation power. I can give you the resources he has, but the strength he possesses can't be acquired out of thin air."

"I'll definitely cultivate more intensely when I return home," Huyan Bin replied.

The Thunderbolt Stronghold and Taotie City bore no personal grudge against the Mount Shu Sect. They only opposed the Mount Shu Sect because they wanted to seize a spot in the Divine Nine.

The Fuyao Kingdom's team, however, harbored a longstanding grudge against the Mount Shu Sect, making their loss even harder to bear.

Hu Sanlang and the other members of the team knelt before Han Lingshuang and said gravely, "Esteemed Teacher! We have failed you!"

"Get up! Quickly!" Han Lingshuang hurriedly helped her disciples up. "You did your best. This is not your fault."

"Damn it. In the end, we still lost to those wicked people from the Mount Shu Sect," Hu Sanlang raged through gritted teeth.

His desire for revenge and his helplessness to achieve it were written all over his face.

"Perhaps this is our fate."

Han Lingshuang thought of all the effort she had put in over the years and felt just as defeated as her students.

She looked behind her, glancing in Di Nufeng's direction again.

The notorious she-devil was walking toward her disciples and passed by Han Lingshuang.

Right then, Di Nufeng looked her way, and their eyes met.

"Hey!" Di Nufeng locked eyes with Han Lingshuang, stepping toward her with an icy expression. "Woman, I noticed you snuck quite a few glances at me. Are you..."

Seeing that familiar face, Han Lingshuang's heart jumped to her throat as a long-forgotten fear washed over her. If this old rival realizes I've harbored a grudge against her all these years, will she want to get rid of me?

Di Nufeng laughed and said, "Are you secretly in love with me or something? We could get to know each other. You look about my age. Maybe we've met before. What's your name? Where do you live?"

...

Yang Shenlong was lost in thought as he gazed in the direction of the Mount Shu Sect disciples.

After quite a long while, he turned back to find Xi Miao-xian and Yang Yuhu waiting for him. However, Qi Lin'er had disappeared.

Xi Miao-xian commented, "He's not as strong as you. He probably used some special method in that fight..."

Yang Shenlong shook his head, not wanting to talk about that. "I owe you both."

Yang Yuhu and Xi Miao-xian looked a bit abashed.

When Chu Liang fought Yang Shenlong, Yang Yuhu and Xi Miaoxian had been so intimidated by Chu Liang's astoundingly courageous and bold display that they hadn't dared to make a move. Later, they realized something was off and heard from other teams that Chu Liang had nearly lost all mobility after his battle with Yang Shenlong.

If they had taken action instead of leaving, they might have been able to take Chu Liang down right there and then. Yet, who would have dared take the risk at that moment?

So, Yang Yuhu and Xi Miaoxian let out a sigh of relief upon hearing Yang Shenlong acknowledge their efforts, instead of reproaching them.

Xi Miaoxian, in particular, felt very relieved. Hailing from Yingzhou, one of the three Penglai Islands, she wasn't on the same progression pathway as the other two, who were from Penglai, the main island. The Penglai Supreme Sect was full of talented disciples, and Yingzhou didn't always get the chance to send representatives to the Assembly of Immortal Sects. That meant that if Xi Miaoxian performed poorly in this assembly, it could very well prevent Yingzhou's disciples from getting selected to represent the sect in the future.

"Young Master!"

Yang Shenlong's Slaves of the Five Sacred Mountains[1] crowded around him.

The Slave of Mount Hua, who looked like an elderly man, stroked his beard thoughtfully. "It seemed like that Mount Shu Sect disciple used some powerful pill that exhausts the cultivator's cultivation power, qi, and blood in excess. A pill like that should be counted as a violation of the rules, yet Immortal Jiuyi said nothing. It's possible he has ties to the Mount Shu Sect..."

"However, using such a pill would sever a cultivator's meridians. That Mount Shu Sect disciple dared to use it in the illusory realm, but he won't dare use it in the real world. So, there's no need to worry about him in the Battle at the Imperial City."

"A loss is a loss," Yang Shenlong said nonchalantly.

He turned and left with his team members and the Slaves of the Five Sacred Mountains trailing behind him. Yang Shenlong maintained a calm and collected expression, giving no indication of what he was thinking.

The Slave of Mount Hua was right. Chu Liang certainly wouldn't use the Great Pill of the Endlessly Devouring Whale outside the illusory realm. Regardless of whether it was worth consuming a pill that would destroy his meridians just for this Assembly of Immortal Sects, Chu Liang didn't have one now anyway.

The golden imprints he had obtained within the illusory realm and the rewards they brought only existed within that realm.

After Chu Liang returned to the real world, all the consumables he'd used in the illusory realm remained except for the Great Pill of the Endlessly Devouring Whale.

He had spent a lot to acquire these supplies, but as long as the Mount Shu Sect made it to the top ten in the assembly this time, he would win enough from the bet to cover all of his expenses and gain some profit too.

Furthermore, he could put the supplies up for sale on Red Cotton Peak after the assembly. This was the advantage of having a shop of his own. If he had bought the supplies from unscrupulous shops and tried to sell the items back to them after the assembly, they would certainly offer to buy the items back at significantly lower prices than what they had sold for.

Chu Liang had bet half of his available funds on the Mount Shu Sect's advancement to the third round of the assembly. The odds of that happening had been considered as a minor upset, and that upset had indeed occurred. That meant Chu Liang had just won a huge sum of money.

Now, besides major forces like Taotie City and the Divine Nine sects, few could rival his wealth. On the individual level, it would be hard to find anyone wealthier than him apart from the emperor of the Yu Dynasty and Huyan Dong.

Of course, in the world of immortality cultivators, wealth was not the most important thing; cultivation power was always of paramount importance. If Chu Liang didn't have the Mount Shu Sect supporting him, his wealth could easily belong to someone else the next day.

Chu Liang had achieved an overwhelming victory in the battle against the Penglai Supreme Sect in the illusory realm, but back in the real world, Yang Shenlong remained an unbeatable foe. How Chu Liang would handle him in the upcoming Battle at the Imperial City—well, that was indeed a great conundrum.

Nevertheless, Chu Liang didn't want to think about any of that for now.

In Jiang Yuebai's embrace, Chu Liang tossed all those worries to the back of his mind. After so many days of battle, he deserved to relax and indulge a little.

Just as he was about to open his arms and return the hug, someone coughed loudly beside him.

"Ahem!"

Wang Xuanling's aged face appeared in Chu Liang's line of sight. "I didn't want to interrupt, but they're calling all the teams advancing to the Battle at the Imperial City to head over there..."

"We can't keep everyone waiting, right?"

Chapter 579: The Corridor City

So what if they wait a little longer? Even if they say time is money, it's not like I can't pay them...

As Chu Liang followed his team up to the high platform, he felt a twinge of resentment. The other nine immortal sects that had advanced to the next round, the Battle at the Imperial City, were already gathered there. The emperor of the Yu Dynasty, members of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, and leaders from the sects of the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten were all seated.

Young disciples from the immortal sects stood on the platform, facing a crowd of hundreds of thousands who erupted in waves of celebration, their cheers reaching toward the heavens.

The sects advancing to the next round included the Penglai Supreme Sect, the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals, the Endless Sword Sect, the Great Astral Sect, the Mount Shu Sect, the Celestial King Sect, the Celestial Pivot Pavilion, the Buddhist Cloud Monastery, the South Melody Conservatory, and the Valley of the Three Absolutes.

This year, all ten of the top sects were from the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten, with the Divine Nine sects claiming eight of the spots.

This rarely happened. It could be said that, in this era of flourishing techniques, these long-standing sects with strong foundations displayed explosive power.

Among them, the South Melody Conservatory and the Valley of the Three Absolutes from the Terrestrial Ten rarely made it to the top ten. The Valley of the Three Absolutes were stronger, but the South Melody Conservatory seldom reached the Battle at the Imperial City, as combat strength was not their strong suit.

They were able to advance to this round all because of one person.

"Chu Liaaaaang!!!"

The loudest cheers were reserved for a disciple from the Mount Shu Sect, who had shone brightly in this year's Competition of a Hundred Sects. His heroic act of saving his sect from danger had earned the admiration of nearly every spectator.

The South Melody Conservatory had a greater number of supporters, but all of them had to thank Chu Liang for the fact that the South Melody Conservatory made it to the next round. So, the fans were more than happy to cheer for him too.

The rest of the spectators cared little for the finer details, as they were there for the exciting events. All they knew was that before the competition, everyone believed Yang Shenlong was leagues ahead of his peers in strength. Yet, Chu Liang had managed to defeat him.

The audience was now convinced that the Mount Shu Sect would take home the championship in this year's Assembly of Immortal Sects.

At the center of it all, Chu Liang stood, basking in boundless glory.

From the elevated platform, officials from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau announced the rules for the Battle at the Imperial City. While the disciples of the immortal sects were well aware of the rules, the announcement was made for the new spectators.

Nestled within the imperial city was the Corridor City, constructed specifically for the Assembly of Immortal Sects. With its vast and imposing walls reaching three zhang high, it enclosed an entire world. Though it seemed like a mere corner of the imperial city, once inside, one would find it nearly as expansive as the entire imperial city.

There were forty entrances in the Corridor City, and each disciple would be randomly assigned to one. Each pair of doors led to the same corridor, leaving them uncertain about who they will meet upon entry.

The two disciples who entered the same corridor would have to fight until only one was left standing. Only then would the door at the end of the corridor open, permitting the winner to advance to the next corridor.

This series of fights would continue until only two remained, who would then fight for the ultimate victory.

In the Corridor City, time was the most crucial element. Fighting until the end could require participants to go through four or five grueling battles with no breaks in between.

One had to end the fight before the next opponent stepped in, enabling them to use the waiting time to regain strength and heal any wounds. Those who were even a bit slower would find themselves going up against a well-rested opponent.

The rounds were held in succession, going from forty to twenty, then twenty to ten, and finally ten to five, with no breaks allowed.

After the round from ten to five, the first victor was offered the opportunity to advance to the next round without a fight, while the other four had to compete to determine the final two.

In the round from four to two, the fastest victor was granted the opportunity to advance to the next round, while the slower victor had to face the first victor from the previous round of ten to five.

This meant that if a participant did not win fast enough, they would need to go through an additional fight to reach the end.

For these top-tier talents, an extra fight would demand an immense amount of energy.

Overall, while the format of the Battle at the Imperial City seemed like a typical one-on-one tournament, the tight schedule made the competition even more intense and unpredictable. But one thing remained unchanged: the strong would always prevail.

Following a round of celebrations, the teams scattered, with the Battle at the Imperial City set to commence in seven days.

They had remained in the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams for seven days. Even though they were in an illusory realm, they still felt a significant mental strain. All the disciples from the various sects needed to rest and rejuvenate.

There was no need for the members from the sects in the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten to leave the Emperor's Mound, as their accommodations were already set up there.

The Mount Shu Sect team had just returned to their quarters when a guest arrived.

Upon seeing the guest, Wang Xuanling bowed in greeting, saying, "Sect Leader Jiuyi."

Standing outside in a wide, flowing white robe with an air of grandeur was none other than Immortal Jiuyi, the sect leader of the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals.

It was unexpected that he would visit the palace where the Mount Shu Sect team resided.

"I wish to meet Chu Liang from your sect," Immortal Jiuyi said. "Would that be convenient?"

Wang Xuanling was astonished. "You want to see him? May I ask why?"

"He was of great help to me, and I'd like to thank him personally," Immortal Jiuyi replied with a smile.

Wang Xuanling was even more astonished. "Huh?"

Since no one outside had seen the events related to Immortal Yuan Lu in the illusory realm, they were completely unaware of what had happened.

At first, Wang Xuanling thought that Immortal Jiuyi had helped Chu Liang in hiding his potential use of a rule-breaking medicine, but it became clear that Chu Liang had, in fact, helped Immortal Jiuyi.

He felt shocked and quickly responded, "Of course, it's convenient."

He called for Chu Liang, guiding him to meet Immortal Jiuyi in the grand hall.

Chu Liang was just as surprised to see Immortal Jiuyi in person, not expecting someone of such high status to come in person.

"Greetings, Esteemed Senior Jiuyi," he said with a respectful bow.

"No need for formalities. Please, have a seat," Immortal Jiuyi said, gesturing with a raised hand.

Chu Liang then took the seat across from him.

"I am truly grateful for your help in the illusory realm. We conducted a search for the diabolical cultivators who infiltrated, but it's likely that we didn't catch all of them. The ones we did capture were merely small fry. Immortal Yuan Lu is really somewhere far away, so dealing with him will take some time," Immortal Jiuyi said slowly. "You must be wary of their retaliation."

"Esteemed Senior, I understand," Chu Liang replied. "Thank you for the warning."

"If not for you, the situation would have been very difficult. Everyone at the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals owes you their gratitude," Immortal Jiuyi said. "However, it's best not to disclose this matter publicly, though we will remember what you did for us."

"Esteemed senior, you speak too highly of my actions," Chu Liang said with a smile. "Your sect provided access to the Divine Mirror of the Trigrams, an excellent battleground for the Competition of a Hundred Sects, which benefits all immortal sects. The wicked members of the diabolical sect intended to seize this opportunity to create chaos. It was obviously our responsibility to help with all our might; otherwise, all righteous forces would also suffer."

Hearing his words, Immortal Jiuyi smiled with satisfaction.

You are young, but you are good at seeing the big picture.

"Still, a token of gratitude is still needed," Immortal Jiuyi said. "Though I may not be able to assist you directly during the Battle at the Imperial City, I will do everything in my power to strengthen your skills. You only have seven days, but spending those seven days in the hidden realm of the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams should give you significantly more time."

Upon hearing this, Chu Liang's eyes lit up.

Some top immortal sects possessed hidden realms created through the integration of the Great Dao of Time, allowing them to alter the flow of time.

It was similar to the painting they saw in Wu'an City, where a year outside equated to just a day within. Of course, that only slowed time, and reversing it would be far more difficult—perhaps even impossible to that degree.

According to Immortal Jiuyi, within the hidden realm of the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, time could flow up to ten times slower. This meant that seven days outside the hidden realm would equal seventy days inside.

The Master of the Great Dao of Infinity within time, Daoist Cangsheng of the Penglai Supreme Sect, definitely possessed such a hidden realm. He could surely alter the flow of time within his hidden realm to an even greater degree.

It would have been impossible for Yang Shenlong to achieve his sixth realm of cultivation in a world where time flowed normally.

It would only be possible if it was in a time-altered hidden realm.

Of course, even if he were training in a hidden realm with the flow of time altered, the change would not be too drastic. This was because he would still be growing according to the time spent within the hidden realm, not the time outside of it. If he exceeded the age limit, he would be disqualified from participating in the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

This was one of the lasting consequences of Mount Shu Sect losing its legendary artifact. Without its support, the current generation's strength would inevitably fall short—unless, like Di Nufeng's generation, they possessed overwhelming talent. As for other immortal sects that still held legendary artifacts, they certainly wouldn't use them to nurture potential rivals.

This was why Immortal Jiuyi's assistance became especially invaluable at this moment.

Immediately, Chu Liang stood up and said, "Thank you, esteemed senior!"

"Of course, there's something else that might be a bit inappropriate to say now, but I will just bring it up since I am here," Immortal Jiuyi continued after settling the matter. "Your talent is remarkable, but I believe your intelligence and cleverness surpass even that. No matter which immortal sect you belong to, your future is boundless."

"However, the Mount Shu Sect, as it stands today, may no longer hold an absolute competitive edge and could limit your potential." He paused before continuing, "After the Assembly of Immortal Sects, would you consider joining the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals? I can promise... to cultivate you as my future successor."

"Your favor is overwhelming, esteemed senior, and I am deeply humbled," Chu Liang replied with a quick smile. "But I owe everything I am today to the training from my esteemed teacher and sect; how could I ever abandon them? No matter the circumstances, I would never dare entertain such a thought."

"That's understandable. If you were a disciple of anyone else, I wouldn't have asked, but since you are part of the Silver Sword Peak of the Mount Shu Sect, I thought I'd try." Immortal Jiuyi said with a nod, seemingly unsurprised by Chu Liang's refusal.

He then remarked casually, "After all, your esteemed teacher is none other than Di Nufeng."

Chapter 580: Top-Tier Connections

Immortal Jiuyi's intention to recruit Chu Liang was not particularly surprising, especially since after the Assembly of Immortal Sects, young disciples trained by the various immortal sects generally entered another phase in their lives.

A small portion of them, favored by their sects, received more resources for intensive training and were entrusted with significant responsibilities. However, the majority, who were not as highly regarded, needed to seek out their own cultivation resources and venture into the world for experience.

They had all essentially arrived at a phase that resembled graduation.

It was not unusual for young cultivators to join another sect at this stage. However, at this point, it felt more like being hired by the sect to work as mercenaries, which was different from being one of the core disciples that the sect had nurtured since young.

For instance, someone like Shang Shuwen of the Mount Shu Sect[1] would have attained the apex of his efforts upon rising to the rank of peak master.

If they had not been nurtured in the sect from a young age, it was unlikely they would attain high positions such as sect leader or guardian elder.

However, for a distinguished member like Chu Liang, nurtured thoroughly by his sect and destined for significant responsibilities, it was rare for him to switch allegiance.

Thus, Immortal Jiuyi's invitation to train him as a successor challenged the norms both inside and outside the sect. It was quite a significant offer.

If every disciple from previous generations had remained within the sect, the sect's power would grow to become immensely powerful, but this would result in two very practical problems.

The first problem was having many capable individuals with nowhere to apply their skills.

This was not a time of warfare between gods and demons; there were only occasional disturbances from evil spirits. With a large number of fifth and sixth-realm experts present in the sect, there simply wouldn't be enough tasks to put them to use.

The Sword Exchange Pavilion of the Mount Shu Sect offered so many missions, but most of these missions could be easily handled by individuals at the third or fourth realm.

Since Chu Liang had reached the fifth realm, he no longer accepted tasks from there.

The second issue had to do with affordability.

The resources needed for cultivation at the fifth and sixth realms were enormous. If these disciples stayed on the mountain, the sect would need to bear these costs, but in reality, no sect could fully support the cultivation needs of all its disciples.

Therefore, it became common practice among immortal sects for disciples who reached this stage to venture out and forge their own paths.

In times when the sect truly needed them, they could be summoned back with the Sword-Gathering Order.

As independent individuals at that point, those disciples could return to offer their strength, repaying the sect for the training they had received in their earlier years.

As a carefree individual, Immortal Jiuyi didn't mind the refusal and smiled lightly before rising to leave. Before departing, he reminded Chu Liang to prepare with his fellow disciples by tomorrow, as he would come back to guide them into the hidden realm.

After he left, Chu Liang went to the back of the main hall to find his fellow disciples. There, he spotted Wang Xuanling conversing with Chu Liang's team members.

"While the Competition of a Hundred Sects is brutal, it ultimately assesses the overall strength of the team, whereas the Battle at the Imperial City assesses individual capabilities. In this regard, the Penglai Supreme Sect is still the strongest.

"With just seven days left, a rapid breakthrough in cultivation level is nearly impossible. Therefore, we will concentrate on refining each of your combat experiences as thoroughly as we can. I'll be here to guide you through these final days.

"Honestly, by reaching this level, you've secured the Mount Shu Sect's rank within the Divine Nine. For at least the next sixty years, our position there will no longer be at risk. As for seizing the championship, there's no need to feel pressured, as long as—"

"Senior Uncle Wang," Chu Liang called out.

"Hm?" Wang Xuanling glanced over and said, "Since you're here, you might as well listen. I was just about to explain the special training plan I've prepared for everyone."

"Senior Uncle Wang, before you go over the plan with us, I have a small suggestion," Chu Liang said.

"Go ahead," Wang Xuanling replied.

If this had happened on his own Jade Sword Peak, a disciple interrupting his teacher like this would have surely faced a severe scolding.

But this was Di Nufeng's disciple, and it was Chu Liang... No matter what, Wang Xuanling couldn't lose his temper.

Di Nufeng was known to be widely disliked, and he carried a personal grudge against her. Losing his temper with her disciple would undoubtedly be interpreted as personal bias. Furthermore, Chu Liang was well-liked, mature, and responsible; he was unlikely to act unreasonably.

"Sect Leader Jiuyi just mentioned that he could lend us the hidden realm within the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams for cultivation," Chu Liang said. "Seven days outside would be equivalent to seventy days inside."

"The Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams?" Wang Xuanling asked, astonished and struggling to believe it. "The Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals is also participating in the Battle at the Imperial City; how could they possibly open the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams for us at this time..."

Chu Liang smiled slightly. "Perhaps Sect Leader Jiuyi is just kind."

...

Chu Liang didn't explain in detail what happened within the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams to his fellow disciples; he only briefly mentioned that there was trouble caused by the diabolical sect and that he helped handle it.

After hearing his words, the others were left amazed by Chu Liang's impressive capabilities.

The fact that he could get Immortal Jiuyi to help and give them access to a hidden realm was unbelievable. This was a different caliber of connections. Even if Venerable Wen Yuan had made the request, it might not have been granted.

After all, the Mount Shu Sect and the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals were competitors in every sense.

If Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals weren't participating in the Battle at the Imperial City, it would be different. But since they were, lending the hidden realm was like training a rival.

In terms of legendary artifacts, the Mount Shu Sect had suffered a major disadvantage.

Although their strength did improve rapidly during the two months of special training in Venerable Wen Yuan's Primordial Chaos Hidden Realm, it was still incomparable to hidden realms found within legendary artifacts, which had been meticulously crafted and refined over a millennium.

The Competition of a Hundred Sects clearly showed that the disciples from various immortal sects, whom they were once familiar with, had made substantial progress. By comparison, the progress of the Mount Shu Sect's disciples appeared relatively modest.

At this moment, they had only seven days remaining. With the hidden realm provided by Immortal Jiuyi, they would be able to close the gap slightly.

Wang Xuanling was somewhat excited as he said, "If we can cultivate for two months within the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams, we can adjust our strategy to focus specifically on improving your cultivation levels. Your cultivation has already been solidified; with enough time and resources, I believe each of you could easily break through to the next level."

"For the upcoming two-plus months of cultivation, I have a small idea," Chu Liang mentioned.

While speaking with Immortal Jiuyi, he had already thought of ways to make the best use of this extra time.

"Go on," Wang Xuanling said.

"If we can achieve Perfect Qi Circulation during these two months and keep that pace in our cultivation, we might progress faster than we expect," Chu Liang suggested.

"Two months of continuous Perfect Qi Circulation?" Wang Xuanling was stunned. "Is that possible?"

Two months of continuous, sleepless cultivation would not be impossible for cultivators at the fifth realm. This wouldn't be an issue, as cultivation essentially involved absorbing spiritual qi. They

wouldn't feel hunger or thirst; at most, they would need to prepare some pills and occasionally take one to replenish their vitality if needed.

But the issue was with Perfect Qi Circulation...

It was outside of Wang Xuanling's expertise.

"Once Perfect Qi Circulation is initiated, it's possible to maintain it without interruption," Jiang Yuebai nodded. "But initiating Perfect Qi Circulation isn't easy—it requires a unique opportunity."

"It's not that difficult," Chu Liang replied. "Three of us have activated Perfect Qi Circulation before and understand it well. With a bit of support to help us, entering that state again shouldn't be too hard."

"Support?" Jiang Yuebai looked at him. "You mean...?"

"Exactly." Chu Liang said as he exchanged a knowing glance with her and smiled. "The first time I achieved Perfect Qi Circulation was with the help of Miss Xue from South Melody Conservatory. If we have musicians from South Melody assisting, entering that state shouldn't be too difficult."

"But the South Melody Conservatory is also participating in the Battle at the Imperial City," Wang Xuanling said with a deep frown. "Would they even be willing to help us with our cultivation?"

"I can try asking," Chu Liang replied with a smile. "The musicians from South Melody Conservatory are good people too."