

M. Slaying 601

Chapter 601: The Friendship That One So Desired (I)

Chu Liang thought sarcastically, Help me take back the Dragon Orb from the forbidden ground in the imperial palace and regain my strength, and you will gain my friendship... Yeah, not even a village fool would fall for that!

"Ehhhhhhhhhhh????? Hey, hey, hey!" The Little Golden Dragon watched Chu Liang roll up his sleeves and began to panic. He then pouted and scolded loudly, "Foolish human, do you even understand what it means to earn the friendship of a True Dragon?"

"What does it mean?" Chu Liang asked, casting him a sidelong glance.

"It means," the Little Golden Dragon began, "you will earn the honor of speaking with me as an equal, the chance to dine at the same table with me, and the privilege of addressing me without honorifics..."

He listed them one by one.

Chu Liang couldn't be bothered to listen any longer. He glanced around the hall and decided that he'd better summon Tuntun to solve the issue.

But then he remembered—if this was a hidden realm, Tuntun wouldn't be able to leave either.

"Along with my great friendship," the Little Golden Dragon said loudly once again, "I will also provide a few trivial gifts to assist you in retrieving the Dragon Orb."

So the great reward was sharing a meal? Chu Liang couldn't help but scoff, having already given up on this poor kid. He lazily raised his eyelids and replied, "What is it?"

"I'll teach you the method us dragons use to refine Dragon Orbs, so you can harness the full power of the Blue Dragon's Orb," the Little Golden Dragon explained. "It's just a small technique, but it might be of use to you. I can sense an unrefined Blue Dragon's Orb in you..."

The Little Golden Dragon paused, muttering to himself, clearly struggling to think of anything else to offer.

"Hmm?" Chu Liang frowned, his gaze sharpening as he scrutinized the Little Golden Dragon with renewed interest.

"I..." The Little Golden Dragon froze, blinking rapidly as he stammered, "I really don't have anything else. As soon as I was born, that evil Yao Dengxian stole my teachings of Dao, and he suppressed my dragon orb... I—"

"The method you mentioned for refining Dragon Orbs is indeed trivial," Chu Liang said thoughtfully, slowly sitting back down. His expression grew more serious as he added, "But upon further consideration, the friendship of a Golden Dragon is truly something desirable."

"Right?" The Little Golden Dragon grinned widely. "In ancient times, it might take a thousand years for even one person to earn this honor, and this honor would be celebrated by their kin and remembered for generations."

"So, this method for refining the Dragon Orb—what exactly is it?" Chu Liang asked.

Though Chu Liang had been accepted by the Blue Dragon's Orb as its master, true control remained out of his grasp because he hadn't refined it. Each time he sought to use the orb, he had to pour an immense amount of foundational qi into it. Yet, he could never tap into the inherent spiritual energy within the Blue Dragon's Orb.

If he could refine the orb, there was a chance he could then unlock its spiritual energy and powers linked to this authority. If this could be done, he would then be no different from a True Dragon.

The method to refine a Dragon Orb was something that the Little Golden Dragon had inherited directly from the memories left by its mother. This was the dragons' standard way of passing on cultivation legacy. Chu Liang, however, didn't have a dragon mom to teach him such critical knowledge.

The Little Golden Dragon wasn't dumb. Seeing the friendly smile on Chu Liang's face, he hesitated for a moment before saying, "You have to promise to help me first. Otherwise, I won't teach you."

In truth, Chu Liang had been contemplating whether he could help the Little Golden Dragon or not.

He had to first consider the current situation.

Yao Dengxian had taken away the teachings of Dao that belonged to the Golden Dragon, and the imperial family had turned a blind eye to it. Now, the Little Golden Dragon had escaped. None of these matters directly concerned him, nor could he do anything to change them.

He didn't have the ability to drag the Little Golden Dragon back to suppress the Yu Dynasty's fate. Instead, he was the one trapped here by this little dragon.

It would be even more difficult for him to force Yao Dengxian to relinquish the Great Dao of Cloud Dominion he had already claimed. If he had that kind of power, it would be far easier to simply capture the Little Golden Dragon and return it.

The current situation was that the Golden Dragon had fled, and the Yu Dynasty had lost the celestial beast that suppressed the fate of the nation.

This was an undeniable fact.

The task before him was to help the Little Golden Dragon retrieve the old Golden Dragon's Dragon Orb. For the imperial family and Yao Dengxian, the orb was of little use, and taking it wouldn't have much impact.

If he could get the method for refining a Dragon Orb by accepting this task, it would be a worthwhile deal.

The only question was...

"Can I even do it?" Chu Liang asked doubtfully. "Yao Dengxian has been the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch for over a hundred years and is a powerful monster at the eighth realm. You're asking me to steal something from his doorstep?"

"The Dragon Orb isn't in the Dragon-Keeping Pool," the Little Golden Dragon said indignantly, seemingly outraged by the shameless act. "It's suppressed beneath the imperial palace's Spring of Virtue so that people can drink water infused with dragon aura."

"I see." Chu Liang nodded slightly.

He had heard a little about the Spring of Virtue, reputed as a famous landmark within the palace.

Coincidentally, he would be feasting at the Qinghong Banquet in the palace tomorrow. He could find the chance halfway during the feast to steal a dragon orb. This didn't seem like a very difficult task, as long as no one was watching him closely.

Given his current status and his relationship with the imperial family, even if he were caught, it probably wouldn't cost him his life.

As the saying went, "Good fortune favors the bold..."

"Let me be clear upfront: I'll do my best," Chu Liang said. "But if I fail and get caught, they'll interrogate me about you. I won't let them have the chance to torture me—"

"You'd rather commit suicide?" the Little Golden Dragon asked, a bit surprised.

"I'll spill everything about you to negotiate a lighter sentence," Chu Liang replied ruthlessly. "So, before that happens, you'd better hide somewhere even I don't know. It might keep you a little safer."

The Little Golden Dragon pouted, unsure of whether this human could be trusted or not.

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Meanwhile, a storm was brewing deep within the imperial palace.

An elderly man, draped in a heavy white sable cloak, his hair like that of a crane yet with youthful features, strode leisurely into the Night Dragon Hall.

"Your servant greets Your Majesty," he said, bowing deeply.

"Rise quickly, Warrior Yao," the emperor said at once.

The man before him was none other than Yao Dengxian, the chief eunuch and the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch.

Back when Yao Dengxian had seized the Great Dao of Cloud Dominion, he displayed no arrogance and continued to regard himself as a servant, maintaining absolute loyalty to successive emperors of the Yu Dynasty. This might be why the Dragon-Keeping Eunuchs held such an unshakeable position.

"Something chaotic happened in the Dragon-Keeping Pool, and the Golden Dragon escaped. The fault is mine," Yao Dengxian said as he rose. "I beg Your Majesty to punish me."

"That Golden Dragon has barely over a hundred years of cultivation. How did it manage to escape?" the emperor asked in a deep voice, not in a rush to accuse Yao Dengxian of anything.

"Because of this," Yao Dengxian replied, raising his hand to reveal a jade pendant.

The pendant was intricately carved in the shape of a fish, with a small "Luo" character engraved on its back.

It was the given name of the Thirteenth Prince.

Aside from the exquisite craftsmanship, the pendant appeared unremarkable. However, the emperor, being a seventh-realm cultivator, activated his foundational qi and focused his gaze. His eyes glowed with divine fire, and he immediately noticed something unusual.

Deep within the pendant, hidden beneath its surface, was a vast and intricately concealed spiritual energy inscription.

"This is..." the emperor muttered, his voice tinged with slight astonishment.

"I remember this one night eighty years ago, I was fighting with a member of the Celestial Charm Sect. His cultivation was higher than mine, and his methods were bizarre and unpredictable. The injuries I got that night have kept me healing in seclusion ever since," Yao Dengxian said slowly. "I recognize the spiritual energy in this pendant very well. It's that man's handiwork."

Yao Dengxian continued, "Members of the Celestial Charm Sect call him the Celestial Master."

"The Celestial Master of the Celestial Charm Sect?"

The emperor fell silent.

Chapter 602: The Friendship That One So Desired (II)

In recent years, the Celestial Charm Sect had become increasingly active, with frequent reports from various regions, including the chaos during the Grand Capture Ceremony in the capital of Yu. As the reigning emperor, he was deeply aware of this grave threat.

The Celestial Charm Sect thrived on chaos, as it fueled their power. Their leader was the Dao Master of the Great Dao of Chaotic Separation. Whenever the world descended into disorder and murderous energy filled the air, his strength would peak. However, during times of peace, the Celestial Charm Sect would fade into obscurity, the power of the Chaotic Separation Great Dao would diminish, and his source of power would vanish.

This Celestial Master was extremely mysterious. No one knew how long he had led the Celestial Charm Sect, nor did anyone know his true origins. What was certain, however, was that even the most ruthless, evil, and powerful individuals within the sect followed his commands without question.

He seemed to be a master manipulator, often achieving his goals through cunning and deception rather than brute force. At its height, the Celestial Charm Sect had gained the trust of the emperor and his officials, and the court paid a heavy price for it.

And yet, he had not shown himself in the past eighty years.

"So, this is his handiwork?" After a moment of contemplation, the emperor asked, "This is the Thirteenth Prince's jade pendant?"

"Indeed," Yao Dengxian replied. "When the Thirteenth Prince brought this pendant into the Dragon-Keeping Pool, the formations within the jade pendant activated, disrupting the pool's restrictions and allowing the Golden Dragon to escape. This is likely part of the Celestial Charm Sect's scheme, aimed at releasing the Golden Dragon, which stabilizes the fate of the empire."

"Once again, they've meddled within the imperial city. How bold of them!" the emperor remarked, his expression calm, though his heart grew heavy with concern.

From ancient times onward, the greatest fears of rulers were the dangers closest to their thrones.

After all, the last time the Celestial Charm Sect caused chaos, it nearly led to regicide.

Yao Dengxian continued gravely. "Releasing the Golden Dragon is likely just the beginning. They won't stop here."

The Golden Dragon, as the celestial beast that suppressed the dynasty's fate, shared a symbiotic relationship with the imperial family's fortune. The rise and fall of both were intricately linked.

The fate of the dynasty was not solely shaped by the Golden Dragon, but its departure could lead to a decline or halt the upward momentum of the nation's fortune.

While the Golden Dragon played a crucial role, the nation's karmic fate was also shaped by many other factors.

Moreover, the consequences of losing the Golden Dragon would not be immediately apparent but would likely unfold over hundreds or even thousands of years.

The biggest danger of the Golden Dragon escaping was that the people might lose faith in the current imperial family. If the people found out, it could lead to widespread unrest, and ultimately, the dynasty's fortune could begin to decline, just as was predicted.

If the goal was to destroy a nation by releasing the celestial beast that suppressed the nation's fate, it would be like trying to harm someone by making them an alcoholic.

Theoretically, it might work, but the impact would be unpredictable.

"The members of the Celestial Charm Sect are always meticulous in their planning," the emperor said. "There is likely more to their scheme. We must stay vigilant while we search for the Golden Dragon."

"Your Majesty!"

At that moment, the voice of a palace attendant echoed from outside.

A guard from the Dragon-Keeping Pool entered, bowing deeply. "Your Majesty, the Thirteenth Prince has awoken."

"Have him come here immediately!" the emperor ordered.

While the Thirteenth Prince may not have directly caused this incident, it had been set in motion by his actions, and the emperor couldn't help but feel a hint of resentment.

Moments later, the Thirteenth Prince, appearing pale and visibly weak, stepped forward and bowed deeply. "This humble son pays my respects to you, my father. Greetings to Warrior Yao..."

With that, he fell to his knees. "It was because of me that we lost the nation's celestial beast. Father, please punish me!"

"Enough!" the emperor said irritably. "Get up and explain where this jade pendant came from!"

"This jade pendant..." The Thirteenth Prince hesitated, seemingly unwilling to explain.

"What are you hiding?" the emperor frowned. "Could it be that you're colluding with the Celestial Charm Sect, trying to protect their allies?"

"I would never dare!" the Thirteenth Prince replied hastily. "It's just that..."

After a pause, he explained, "This jade pendant was a protective talisman that my mother gave me before the Assembly of Immortal Sects happened. How could my mother collude with the Celestial Charm Sect? There must be more to this..."

The mother he spoke of was, of course, Empress Wu. Though all the princes referred to her as mother, her only biological child was the Second Prince.

Upon hearing this name, the emperor's suspicion deepened. "The empress?"

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After Chu Liang discussed and finalized the plan with the Little Golden Dragon, he asked to be released. The Little Golden Dragon flicked his finger, and Chu Liang's eyes opened.

"You're awake?"

The first thing Chu Liang saw when he opened his eyes was Jiang Yuebai's concerned gaze.

A wave of relief washed over him.

"I'm just glad you're still here," he said, pulling her into a hug. "What happened just now?"

"A golden light suddenly shot toward you and struck you. After that, you lost consciousness," Jiang Yuebai explained. Her shoulders tensed slightly in his embrace, but she didn't pull away.

"I'm fine. Just passed out for a moment," Chu Liang reassured her.

"A moment?" Jiang Yuebai asked. "You've been unconscious the whole night."

"What?" Chu Liang exclaimed in surprise.

I was just having a quick conversation with that Little Golden Dragon and a whole night had passed?

Looking around, he saw that it was indeed broad daylight.

He didn't just see the bright sky; he also saw Wang Xuanling, Xu Ziyang, Ling Ao, Lin Bei, Shang Ziliang, and Lackey A. In fact, everyone in the temporary imperial residence that could breathe was there.

"Ah..." Chu Liang snapped out of it, awkwardly releasing Jiang Yuebai. "Everyone's here."

"No worries," Lin Bei waved dismissively. "Carry on. Pretend we are not here."

Chu Liang glanced out the window and sighed. What is there to carry on? It was almost time to enter the imperial palace.

It seemed the Golden Scale Hall had some power to alter the flow of time—what felt like less than half an hour inside had actually been an entire night outside.

That Little Golden Dragon is really a troublemaker.

Sure enough, Wang Xuanling cleared his throat and said, "I checked your pulse earlier and found nothing wrong—you were just asleep. So, we let you rest while Yuebai stayed by your side all night..."

Chu Liang glanced at Jiang Yuebai beside him, feeling a warmth in his heart.

"However..." Wang Xuanling added slowly, "It's almost time to enter the imperial palace. We mustn't be late for the Qinghong Banquet. Whatever you have to say, perhaps you could save it for later?"

"Haha." Chu Liang chuckled lightly. I'd like to say no, but can I?

The imperial palace sent a convoy, led by the Celestial Golden-Winged Horse at the forefront, to fetch them. The long procession stretched from the palace to the base of the Emperor's Mound, a grand spectacle befitting the champion of the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

As they rode toward the imperial city in their carriages, Wang Xuanling suddenly raised his eyebrows.

"The imperial city feels... unusual today," he remarked.

Chapter 603: A Rainfall

"The fates of all living beings are predetermined. Look at how they are walking on the street with barely visible threads on their shoulders, pulling them toward an unknown path."

"When you see that thread, you will understand the meaning of the Celestial Charm. We do not alter their fates; we merely guide them toward their destined ends."

"The vast heavens and earth remain constant over time, but chaos and separation arise from the hearts of humans."

On a long embankment adorned with peach blossoms and willow trees, with bustling streets on either side, an elderly man sat leisurely by the riverside.

Dressed in simple, coarse cloth, with hair as white as snow, he exuded the gentle kindness that comes with old age.

With a fishing rod in hand, he muttered softly to himself as he waited patiently for a catch.

Rather than talking to himself, it seemed he was conversing with the fish in his basket.

The bamboo basket held a single fish—a plump, five-colored koi of exceptional quality. Not long ago, a wealthy passerby had offered hundreds of taels for it, but the old fisherman had turned down the offer.

"The Celestial Master's cultivation is supreme, nearly reaching the Hallowed One. We look up to you," the chubby koi gurgled, poking its head out of the water and speaking in clear human words.

If one of the palace consorts' maids had seen this, they might have recognized it. This was the same fish that had once swum in the imperial palace pond.

"Hallowed?" The old fisherman sighed and shook his head. "Far from it."

He continued speaking slowly, "Every Great Dao has its limits. The Heavenly Origin for the Great Dao of Chaos and Separation is stronger than all the other Heavenly Origins of Great Daos. However, the price is that it is almost impossible to ascend to the Profound Realm."

This principle was widely known.

Ascending to the Profound Realm through Great Daos with lower entry barriers was much more difficult, while those with easier ascension often came with weaker combat power. Ultimately, the balance of the Great Daos in this world was maintained.

"The Hallowed One appears only once every several thousand years. That no other eighth-realm cultivator can surpass the Celestial Master is already impressive enough," the chubby koi added quickly, its words dripping with flattery.

As they spoke, a thin layer of clouds began to gather in the sky.

"Looks like rain is coming," the old fisherman remarked, gazing upward. "There's something familiar about the scent in these clouds."

"Probably Yao Dengxian's doing," suggested the chubby koi.

The most famous power of the Great Dao of Cloud Dominion was its ability to command wind and rain. When the Golden Dragon held mastery over this Dao, the emperor could offer incense to summon it during times of drought, floods, or unfavorable weather, asking it to change the weather conditions in that area.

However, the Golden Dragon, as a noble and exalted being, could not be summoned lightly. It only intervened in major disasters, leaving minor weather disturbances unresolved, which meant the people still struggled to live comfortably.

Over the past hundred years, with Yao Dengxian in control of the Great Dao of Cloud Dominion, he had secretly intervened whenever weather conditions were unfavorable across the Nine Provinces or at the court's command. His efforts brought about unprecedented harmony in the Yu Dynasty's weather.

However, the court could not publicize his achievements, fearing that people across the land would begin building temples to worship and pray to him.

As a light drizzle began to fall, ripples danced across the water in the bamboo basket.

"It's definitely him," the chubby koi declared confidently. "He must be casting spells to search for the Golden Dragon after its escape. Everything is happening just as we planned. Your calculations are flawless. We will surely succeed tonight!"

"The members of the Heavenly Observers lineage are the ones that can do flawless calculations. We merely observe people," the old fisherman said. "But oftentimes, the hearts of people are even

harder to predict than the will of the heavens. We can only do our best and leave the rest to fate. Since Yao Dengxian is monitoring so extensively, you should return for now."

With that, he slowly rose to his feet, lifted the fish basket, and tipped it over, releasing the koi into the river with a soft splash.

The people chatting at a nearby teahouse couldn't help but be astonished. That old man had refused to sell the koi for a hundred taels of silver, yet he just let it go back into the river?

Watching the chubby koi vanish beneath the water's surface, the old man muttered to himself, "We failed eighty years ago. Let's hope that it will be different this time. We don't have anymore time left to set the stage for another attempt."

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"We have plenty of time. You can rest for now. Later, the palace attendants will come to help us get acquainted with the banquet arrangements," Wang Xuanling assured.

The convoy, led by the Celestial Golden-Winged Horse, entered the imperial city, escorting the Mount Shu Sect team to the palace. They were dropped off at a grand hall, where Warrior Lao and a group of palace attendants awaited their arrival. With warm greetings, they guided the group inside.

The Qinghong Banquet was scheduled for the evening, but they arrived in the morning to familiarize themselves with the venue, prepare their attire, and rehearse the process—all tasks that demanded considerable effort.

The Qinghong Banquet was a grand occasion. While only a select few would be able to taste the meat of the Qinghong bird, the banquet still hosted imperial family members and countless civil and military officials. As a once-every-twelve-years event, it was taken very seriously.

The winning disciples of the Assembly of Immortal Sects were the stars of the Qinghong Banquet. As such, their preparation was of utmost importance.

As Chu Liang watched the palace attendants bustling about in precise formation, he couldn't help but wonder, "It's just a meal. Does it really take an entire day to prepare?"

"Haaaaaa," a palace maid sighed. She then explained softly, "I heard from my seniors that the rules weren't always this complicated. Sixty years ago, one of the victors of the Assembly of Immortal Sects behaved in such an uncouth manner and caused a huge scene at the Qinghong Banquet. Ever since then, disciples are required to arrive much earlier to..."

"Stop talking nonsense," Warrior Lao's voice came from behind. He glared at the maid and said, "What sixty years ago? Don't spread lies. That banquet went perfectly well. There were no ill-mannered people. You must have remembered it wrong."

"Ah..." The maid seemed to suddenly realize something and quickly nodded. "Yes, I must have remembered the wrong time."

"Haha." Chu Liang gave a polite smile.

The maid definitely did not remember wrongly.

Among the last ten Assemblies of Immortal Sects, and likely the next ten to come, no one came close to surpassing that person in being called "uncouth."

Speaking of which, Chu Liang couldn't help but feel a little concerned.

His esteemed teacher had mentioned attending the banquet at the palace, but she hadn't returned yet. Could it be that she had already started fighting for the control of the Great Dao of Incinerating Heavens?

Although her opponent was her own father, duels over the control of Great Dao were inherently dangerous. Could she truly be safe?

But no matter how worried Chu Liang was, it wasn't something he could help with.

While he was lost in thought, he was escorted to their temporary resting room. Each room in the palace was lavishly adorned with gold and jade. Each bedroom was huge, nearly half the size of a palace. Even the screen frames were gilded, making the entire place dazzling.

Chu Liang entered the room, opened the window, and saw that a soft rain had begun to drizzle outside.

The rain was infused with dense spiritual qi, and Chu Liang quickly deduced it was Yao Dengxian's doing. He was not actually familiar with Yao Dengxian's techniques. He only knew because the Little Golden Dragon had warned him about this.

As the Dao Master of the Great Dao of Cloud Dominion, Yao Dengxian excelled in manipulating clouds and rain. The Little Golden Dragon had planned to leave five golden scales outside the capital of Yu. Once Yao Dengxian sensed its aura, he would undoubtedly venture out personally to capture it.

This would allow Chu Liang to use the opportunity to sneak into the Spring of Virtue and steal the Golden Dragon's Orb. Even if there were guards, they would likely be the subordinates of the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch, whose cultivation wouldn't surpass the peak of the sixth realm.

With the power of the Blue Dragon's Orb at his disposal, Chu Liang stood a strong chance of success.

After hearing the plan, Chu Liang was quite surprised. For a dragon as small as the Little Golden Dragon, it had come up with a plan that was surprisingly reasonable.

Chu Liang asked two questions. The first one was whether the Little Golden Dragon could escape Yao Dengxian's pursuit and delay him long enough?

The second one was whether Chu Liang is really able to steal the power of the dragon orb after refining the Blue Dragon's Orb.

The Little Golden Dragon's answer to the first question was that he just needed to keep luring Yao Dengxian with his aura. With how big the world is outside, even if he is an Eminent One at the eighth realm. The Little Golden Dragon's answer was that as long as it kept emitting its aura to draw Yao Dengxian's attention, the vast open world would make it difficult for even an eighth-realm powerhouse to catch a True Dragon that could traverse the cosmos.

As for Chu Liang, he would know for himself upon refining the Blue Dragon's Orb and feeling the power of a True Dragon.

If Yao Dengxian detected the Golden Dragon's aura, he would undoubtedly cast spells to search for it, causing rain to fall. That would be when the Little Golden Dragon would start to lure the Yao Dengxian away, and Chu Liang would make his move.

Seeing the rain outside, Chu Liang immediately strode out of his room and, in front of all the palace attendants, walked straight into Jiang Yuebai's room.

"What's wrong?" Jiang Yuebai, who had just sat down, asked as Chu Liang entered.

"I need to take care of something," Chu Liang said. "If anyone asks later, you need to say I've been here the whole time."

Jiang Yuebai immediately understood—he was asking her to provide him with an alibi.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

This was the inner palace, fraught with danger for those who wandered carelessly. She couldn't help but feel worried.

"I'll explain when I'm back," Chu Liang said, not wanting to waste time. Draping a black robe over himself, his figure flickered and transformed into a wisp of wind, disappearing through the window.

This was one of the powers of the Blue Dragon's Orb.

The Blue Dragon, as an ancient True Dragon, had attained the Heavenly Origin, and it had the control of the wind. For Chu Liang, who had now fully refined the Blue Dragon's Orb, he could easily transform into the wind.

"Then you'd better come back soon. If you stay here too long and people think that you are here with me for a long time..." Jiang Yuebai's words trailed off as Chu Liang vanished, leaving her to murmur to herself, "What would they think?"

Chapter 604: What Business?

Chu Liang had heard of the Spring of Virtue, but he didn't know its location. Fortunately, the Little Golden Dragon had used the dragons' method for imparting their cultivation legacies to imprint a map of the imperial city in Chu Liang's mind.

The high walls surrounding the Inner Imperial Garden were tall and imposing. Furthermore, the imperial city was heavily patrolled by guards, so Chu Liang had to tread carefully. He was moving through the city in the form of a cool breeze, but someone with a keen divine sense might still detect traces of his qi.

Chu Liang climbed over the wall and roamed through the garden like he was taking a stroll in his own backyard. He soon arrived at a huge landscape garden where the famous Spring of Virtue was located. This was just one corner of the immensely vast Imperial Garden.

There was a massive artificial rock formation that resembled a small mountain. Crystal-clear spring water flowed into the landscape garden from the mouth of the spring, winding around the little mountain in a narrow stream before ending up in a pond.

It was drizzling at that moment, and the raindrops created ripples in the stream. However, not a single raindrop fell into the pond.

The water flowing into the pool had already been infused with dragon breath, and it was protected by an enchanted formation. The enchanted formation prevented ordinary water from contaminating it.

The process of infusing dragon breath into the water occurred in the golden eddy^[1] between the stream and the pond.

Chu Liang walked around the landscape garden briefly before entering the pond, only stirring up small ripples.

Whoosh.

Once he was underwater, he could no longer maintain his disguise as a cool breeze. His true form became visible as he activated the Water-Repelling Seal and dove downward. The seemingly shallow eddy was actually incomprehensibly deep, and it took Chu Liang quite a while to reach the bottom.

Thud.

When he finally landed on the bottom, there was a dull thud, and weak currents swirled around him.

The pressure at the bottom of the pool was immense. Even with his powerful corporeal body, every movement he made felt strenuous. An ordinary person would have been crushed into paste in an instant.

The source of the pressure was the three-chi-tall[2] pedestal in the center of the underwater space, and on top of it sat a golden orb the size of a fist. A square enchanted formation about one zhang wide surrounded the base of the pedestal.

This golden orb was the object Chu Liang had come for!

Everything had gone smoothly so far, but he did not dare to let his guard down.

Despite only being just outside the reach of the enchanted formation, he was already subjected to such immense pressure that he had a very difficult time moving. However, the Golden Dragon's Orb was being suppressed within the enchanted formation. It would not be easy for Chu Liang to take the orb out.

Now, it would all depend on Chu Liang's abilities.

He circulated his qi and gathered the strength of the Blue Dragon's Orb. Bracing himself against the overwhelming pressure of the enchanted formation, he took a step inside its range.

Thud.

The tremendous pressure weighed down on him, causing him to hunch over and press his hands onto the ground for support.

"Ugh..." Chu Liang groaned in pain, clenching his jaw as he tried to keep going.

He knew that without the immense power of the Blue Dragon's Orb, this one step would have snapped his spine. Refining the Blue Dragon's Orb had brought him benefits beyond his imagination. It was, after all, the most important thing that the Blue Dragon, an eighth-realm True Dragon, had left behind—well, aside from its Great Dao.

If Chu Liang were to repeat his fight against Yang Shenlong right at this moment, he would be able to crush Yang Shenlong effortlessly with the power of the Blue Dragon's Orb and emerge totally unscathed.

Yet, even with all that strength, Chu Liang was having a hard time withstanding this overwhelming water pressure. He managed to keep moving toward the pedestal, but when he got within three steps of it, he could go no further.

Chu Liang quickly activated a technique, and blood flames ignited all over him. A boom reverberated through the water as he was filled with immense power once again.

If he had the choice, he would have avoided using such a conspicuous divine technique. It would leave traces of his qi, and others could use that against him.

Nevertheless, Chu Liang had no other choice at this point.

The power he got from using the Divine Dragons' Great Blood-Burning Technique allowed him to take two more steps, leaving him just one step away from the Golden Dragon's Orb.

"Ah..."

The overwhelming water pressure threatened to crush him to bits. Chu Liang could even hear his bones crack as his chest rose and fell.

Clenching his jaw, he partly transformed into a dragon and swiftly extended a tri-colored dragon claw.

Boom.

The moment the dragon claw was right above the Golden Dragon's Orb, the pressure of the water surrounding Chu Liang intensified dramatically. He couldn't withstand it and spat out a mouthful of blood, staining the water red.

Damn it.

With a swift motion of his left hand, he collected the blood-stained water to prevent leaving any evidence behind. Leaving any traces of blood would make things far too obvious that someone had been there.

The injury ignited Chu Liang's ferocity and determination. He gripped onto the Dragon Orb with his dragon claw, but he couldn't pull it out. It seemed like it was embedded in the pedestal.

Chu Liang spat out another mouthful of blood and steeled himself. He tightened his grip on the Dragon Orb and unleashed the tremendous power of a True Dragon.

"Hah!" he roared, yanking the Golden Dragon's Orb free!

Boom.

The pressure in the water suddenly dissipated, and the pool water, which had been held down by the immense pressure this whole time, erupted in towering waves.

Chu Liang swam up swiftly, aiming to escape before the commotion drew people over.

Splash.

Yet, the moment he emerged from the water, a large golden net was cast over the top of his head!

"Warrior Yao was right. There really is a thief here to steal the Dragon Orb!"

Eight guards in uniform surrounded the pond, each with a Dragon-Keeping Pool token hanging at their waist. These were Yao Dengxian's trusted men.

They had been lying in wait there for a while. Chu Liang's entry into the pool had initially gone unnoticed, but the activation of the underwater enchanted formation alerted them, prompting them to set up their own enchanted formation outside the pool.

The golden net crackled with spiritual qi. The moment Chu Liang touched it, he felt an electric shock and immediately plunged back into the water!

...

Earlier...

After Chu Liang left, Jiang Yuebai muttered to herself for a while. Then she hurriedly set up enchanted formations in the four corners of the room to ensure that no qi would be leaked out.

Just as she finished, there was a knock at the door.

"Senior Sister Jiang," Ling Ao called out.

"What is it?" Jiang Yuebai asked.

"Senior Uncle Wang asked us to gather in the hall once we're done setting up our rooms. He said he has something to tell us."

"Please let Senior Uncle Wang know that I've got some business to attend to and will go down later."

"Some business to attend to?" Ling Ao wondered.

They had just arrived at the imperial palace. What business could she possibly have to attend to?

"In any case, I'll go over a while later. Just inform him for me, thanks."

"All right," Ling Ao replied. "I'll go fetch Chu Liang then."

Jiang Yuebai frowned. She quickly twirled two of her fingers and tapped her neck.

"I'm here too," she said in an altered voice.

"Huh?" Ling Ao uttered.

He was surprised to hear Chu Liang's voice. So, Chu Liang's here too?

Fortunately, Jiang Yuebai had trained in numerous divine arts and skills, so she could use this trivial divine skill.

Ling Ao blinked. He took a breath and then suddenly displayed an expression of realization.

Oh...

And here I was wondering what business she was talking about.

This... this... this...

Doing this in the imperial palace? This is just too... Ah...

"Well... um... you two should hurry up with... whatever you're doing. I'll... I'll inform Senior Uncle Wang a bit later," Ling Ao stammered before dashing off with a trail of smoke.

Jiang Yuebai let out a breath of relief. "Phew..."

I managed to brush him off, but the way that played out felt a bit weird...

It's all Chu Liang's fault. He just had to make me cover for him. Why couldn't he just share whatever he's doing with everyone?

In truth, Chu Liang couldn't be blamed for wanting to keep it a secret. The fewer people who knew about this matter, the better it would be. After all, Chu Liang was conducting a theft in the imperial palace.

If Wang Xuanling had found out, that serious and respectable old fellow might not have allowed him to proceed. And if Xu Ziyang had found out, it would have been very difficult to convince him to keep it from his teacher. Thus, Chu Liang had no choice but to rely on Jiang Yuebai for help.

Fortunately, the others didn't have time to consider what Chu Liang might be up to.

However, just as Jiang Yuebai let out a sigh of relief, there was another knock at her door.

"Junior Sister Jiang?"

"Senior Brother Xu?" Jiang Yuebai frowned again. "What's the matter?"

"Esteemed Teacher has asked us to gather in the main hall. Since you and the others haven't arrived, I was sent to check on you."

"I... I thought I already told Ling Ao that I had something business to attend to and would go down later?"

"Ling Ao? He left earlier to call everyone but never returned. That's why Esteemed Teacher sent me to find you all too."

Jiang Yuebai told Xu Ziyang the same thing she had told Ling Ao. "In that case, I'll go down later. Please inform Uncle Wang for me, Senior Brother."

"All right." Xu Ziyang nodded. "I'll go find Chu Liang then."

Oh, no...

Jiang Yuebai sighed helplessly and cast the voice-altering divine skill again.

"Senior Brother Xu, I'm here."

"Junior Brother Chu?" Xu Ziyang asked puzzledly. "Are the two of you working on something together?"

"..." Jiang Yuebai gritted her teeth. "Let's just say it's inconvenient to leave right now..."

"How strange," Xu Ziyang muttered in confusion.

Nevertheless, he eventually turned to inform his teacher.

Jiang Yuebai clenched her fist.

Her eyes filled with rage as she slammed her fist onto the table. Wham!

Chu Liang!

Chapter 605: Stealing a Fowl

Boom.

At the Spring of Virtue, Chu Liang sank back down into the pool without even the slightest splash. The only trace of his presence was a ripple on the surface of the water.

The eight guards stepped forward in unison. Instead of retracting the golden net, they extended their divine senses into the water to track Chu Liang's movements.

The golden net hadn't injured Chu Liang. However, he'd realized he wouldn't be able to break through it in one attempt, so he did a flip and swam back down to the bottom of the pool.

Before arriving at the Spring of Virtue, he had already expected the Golden Dragon Orb's location to be guarded and had a contingency plan in mind.

So, Chu Liang acted without any hesitation. Knowing that the Spring of Virtue wasn't connected to other bodies of water, he immediately used the divine spell Underground Escape Route to escape through the dirt wall of the pool.

The guards' divine senses quickly locked onto him and detected that he was using the divine spell Underground Escape Route. One of them swiftly flipped his hand and retracted the golden net back into his storage tool.

The guards then each summoned a golden pestle and leaped backward into the air. They formed a circle with a diameter of dozens of zhang in midair.

Bam, bam, bam.

As they landed on the ground, they drove their eight golden pestles into it, sealing off the earth within that circle. The earth surrounding Chu Liang, who was moving underground, suddenly became hard like metal and stone, preventing him from advancing even half a cun[1] further.

Not one to stubbornly persist, Chu Liang immediately changed direction. Redirecting his qi upward, he used the immortal art Dimension Compression.

Whoosh!

Chu Liang disappeared from several zhang underground and instantly reappeared in midair. The eight guards shouted in unison, swinging their golden pestles at him simultaneously.

Chu Liang didn't engage them in battle. Instead, he charged forward and used his back to receive two of the golden pestles' strikes.

Wham! Wham!

The strikes left Chu Liang shaking, but they also propelled him forward another dozen zhang[2], bringing him to one of the walls of the Imperial Garden. Without pausing for even a second, he used Dimension Compression

again—this time to pass through the wall and make his escape.

Seeing that, the eight guards shouted, "Catch the flying thief!"

They pursued him closely, leaping over the high wall of the Imperial Garden. However, Chu Liang had already vanished without a trace in just the blink of an eye.

The guards scanned their surroundings and followed the faint trail of residual qi in the air. No matter how amazing Chu Liang's transformation into wind might be, all usage of divine abilities would leave behind traces of qi. The Dragon-Keeping Eunuch's eight guards chased after Chu Liang's trail of qi, alerting the patrolling imperial guards along the way.

The group of guards chased the trail all the way to an exquisite flower garden, coming to an abrupt halt there. They looked through the archway before them and saw a small lake in the courtyard. There was a woman sitting by the lake, dressed in palace robes. She was gazing at the water, seemingly lost in thought.

The earlier drizzle had ceased, leaving the water crystal-clear. It showed a reflection of her stunningly delicate and beautiful face.

The guards bowed deeply in unison as they greeted her. "Your Highness!"

"What is the matter?" the imperial consort asked, raising her gaze.

One of the guards sounded a bit confused as he explained, "There was a thief in the imperial palace just now. We tracked the trail of qi all the way here..."

The trail of foundational qi had abruptly vanished upon reaching this courtyard, without even the slightest trace of where the thief might have gone.

Could the thief have vanished into thin air?

The guard paused for a moment, then he continued, "For Your Highness's safety, we must search the garden."

"I see." The imperial consort glanced around. "Go ahead, but be careful not to damage anything in my chambers. Otherwise, I'll report you to His Majesty."

"We wouldn't dare," the guards replied.

They hastily spread out to search the area thoroughly. Yet, the trail of qi truly ended there. They couldn't find any signs of where the thief might have gone.

Upon finding nothing, the lead guard turned his gaze toward the imperial consort who was still sitting by the lake.

He asked, "Your Highness, did you notice any disturbance in the water earlier?"

Though the thief's stealth technique was exceptional, it couldn't entirely erase their presence. If they had gone into hiding underwater, it would explain why the trail of qi had cut off there. Nevertheless, the thief would have certainly made a sound when they entered the water.

"I've been staring at this lake water the entire time. If there had been any movement, I would have noticed. But there was nothing at all," the imperial consort answered bewilderedly. "Could you have made a mistake?"

"This..." the guards uttered. They exchanged glances and then apologized, "Our apologies for disturbing you, Your Highness."

They were fortunate to be under the command of Yao Dengxian, whose high status had given them the confidence to act as they had done. If it had been the ordinary imperial guards, the fruitless search would likely have resulted in punishment.

After the guards left, the imperial consort gazed at the water and muttered like she was talking to herself. "What a daring little fish indeed."

...

The Imperial City was vast, and on the other side of the Imperial Garden was the Beast Taming Park. It housed countless exotic beasts from across the nine provinces, with the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch's office located on the edge of the park.

To the east of the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch's office, past several large landscape gardens, was the Qinghong Aviary. It was home to the last remaining flock of Qinghong, divine birds known to be the most delicious in the world.

Aside from when the Assembly of Immortal Sects was being held, no one was permitted to disturb the Qinghong birds' mating and nesting, as the goal was to grow their population. Normally, only the palace attendants tasked with maintaining the aviary dared set foot inside.

However, today, two heads peeked out from behind a rock garden in the aviary.

The head on the left belonged to a handsome middle-aged man in flowery robes. He carried an air of nobility and stood with his hands held behind his back.

The middle-aged man repeatedly shook his head and sighed. "This is a sin..."

The head on the right belonged to a tall, elegant woman in red robes. She was a gorgeous woman of unparalleled beauty, but her eyes gleamed like those of a sparrow in a granary or a weasel in a chicken coop.

Inside the Qinghong Aviary, brightly colored wings fluttered as sharp cries rang out incessantly. Occasionally, a large green bird would fly across the large aviary. Most of the Qinghong birds were perched languidly in the woods.

The woman's eyes darted back and forth. "That fat one—let's just go with that one. Oh, no, that one's even fatter. But it's a female... Better leave it... Oh, there are eggs! Can we eat the eggs? No? Ah..."

The middle-aged man sighed again. "I spent the first half of my life as Crown Prince and the second half as the Dao Master of Incinerating Heaven. I've lived my life in an upright manner—or at least, in an open and honest manner. To think that I would end up sneaking around and stealing a fowl..."

"Oh, please. If you're a good man, how did you end up having me? You've got some nerve saying that," the woman retorted, giving him a shove. "I want that one."

She pointed decisively at the Qinghong bird with the most beautiful feathers.

These two people were, of course, Di Nufeng, the peak master of the Mount Shu Sect's Silver Sword Peak, and Mingde, the guardian of the imperial family.

Taking advantage of the Assembly of Immortal Sects, Mingde had hoped to spend some quality time with his daughter and rekindle their bond as parent and child. Yet, Di Nufeng's mind was filled with dreadful schemes.

She would frequently share her outrageous ideas with him at the drop of a hat—like how she wanted to become emperor, or how she wanted to seize the Great Dao from him, or how she wanted to make hot pot... with Qinghong birds. In short, all of the things she wanted to do were capital offenses.

Left with no other choice, Mingde could only let her do the least harmful thing. He brought her to the aviary to catch one Qinghong bird in the hope that having a good meal might placate her for a while.

Mingde was the guardian of the imperial family, but he couldn't openly flout ancestral rules. Thus, he opted to secretly catch one of the birds and then quietly inform the emperor later. After all, stealing a bird wasn't an honorable deed, so it wasn't something he wanted to publicize.

Yet, just as he moved toward the colorful and radiant Qinghong bird, he noticed a heavy aura of death emanating from behind a nearby rock.

Mingde immediately sensed something was amiss. He extended his divine sense behind the rock and found a corpse!

It was the body of a woman with snow-white skin, dressed in palace robes. She seemed to have been dead for some time, but her face was still intact and in good condition as if she were still alive.

Mingde recognized that face.

Though the palace was filled with beauties, few could compare to this woman.

Her name was Gong Yu'er.

Chapter 606: I'll Be Damned

"What a disgrace..."

"A blow to decency..."

"In broad... Ugh, in broad daylight..."

In the empty palace hall, Wang Xuanling frowned deeply, muttering to himself.

After Xu Ziyang returned and briefly explained the situation, Old Wang's face darkened, the fine wrinkles on his forehead furrowing with confusion.

What is wrong with young people these days? This is the imperial palace! Even if they don't respect the solemnity of the palace, they should at least understand that this is someone else's home... and it's still broad daylight!

Out of concern for the dignity of the two outstanding young talents from Mount Shu Sect, he was not in a rush to interrupt their business. He decided to wait until they emerged to give them a stern lecture.

Yet, they still hadn't come out of the room...?

After waiting for a long time, Wang Xuanling finally lost patience. With a flick of his sleeve, he stood abruptly and declared, "I'll fetch them myself."

Xu Ziyang followed behind him, but after only a few steps, Wang Xuanling stopped him. "You stay back."

When Wang Xuanling reached Jiang Yuebai's door, he took a few steps back and let out a heavy cough. "Ahem!"

But he didn't hear any sound coming from inside.

Wang Xuanling thought it was weird. Immediately, he called out, "Chu Liang? Jiang Yuebai?"

"I'm here!"

"Me too!"

Two voices answered in quick succession from within.

They indeed belonged to Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai.

"I called for a meeting in the hall. Why have you still not come over?" Wang Xuanling asked with a stern voice.

Jiang Yuebai replied, "Senior Uncle, we had pressing matters to attend to, which caused the delay. Please forgive us."

"What could be so urgent?" Wang Xuanling's tone grew louder. "Let me see for myself!"

"Ah..." Jiang Yuebai hesitated for a moment before saying, "Senior Uncle, please wait a moment."

"I'm coming in!" Wang Xuanling declared, his voice firm. "I'll give you the time of three breaths. Then I'm breaking down the door."

Three, two, one...

Assuming that he had given them enough time to get dressed, Wang Xuanling strode forward and flung the door wide open.

"Senior Uncle Wang!"

Wang Xuanling immediately saw Chu Liang sitting at the table. His face was pale, and his breathing seemed weak.

Jiang Yuebai stood to the side, appearing perfectly normal.

The old man glanced at Chu Liang and shook his head. "Young people... I understand, but you mustn't overdo it. You need to exercise some self-control..."

"Cough, cough," Chu Liang coughed twice before saying, "The injuries I sustained yesterday have flared up again, so I asked Senior Sister Jiang to help treat me. What exactly is Senior Uncle Wang referring to?"

"Hmm?"

The old man examined Chu Liang closely, placing a hand on his shoulder. It didn't take long for him to realize that Chu Liang's qi circulation was indeed blocked due to his injuries.

Everyone had seen the extent of Chu Liang's injuries yesterday, so there was no reason to doubt their severity.

However, after seeing him appear to be in normal condition after a night's rest, they had assumed he had fully recovered.

But it seemed that wasn't the case.

"Haaaaa," Chu Liang sighed and said, "Senior Uncle, though you usually keep your emotions hidden, I can see clearly that winning first place for the Mount Shu Sect this time brought you more joy than anyone else. Your love for our sect runs deeper than all of ours combined! You've lived a life of frugality and hard work, dedicating yourself to our sect for decades without ever asking for anything in return. Seeing you experience such rare moments of happiness, we can't help but share in your joy!"

"My injuries flaring up is nothing major," Chu Liang continued, gently taking Wang Xuanling's hand. "If I had mentioned it, it would have only worried you. As long as I can endure it, how could I bear to disturb your rare moment of happiness?"

"You... this child..." Wang Xuanling's aged face twitched slightly.

Such a thoughtful child, and yet I actually thought they were doing something improper behind closed doors... Oh, I'll be damned.

Old Wang felt deeply moved but said no more. He silently circulated his foundational qi, helping Chu Liang smooth out the blockage in his circulation of qi.

Wang Xuanling then said, "Next time, just come to me directly. As your elder, any shortcomings in taking care of you are my responsibility!"

...

In reality, the injuries Chu Liang suffered were from the guards of the Dragon-Keeping Pool in the Imperial Garden. As for his wounds from the previous day, those had mostly healed after a night's rest.

With a physique as formidable as a True Dragon, he endured two powerful strikes before fleeing. He eventually made his way to the consort's courtyard, diving into the water right in front of her.

Beneath the lake lay an underground waterway. He swiftly swam through it and emerged at a different location.

He had carefully planned out this escape route in advance.

What he hadn't expected was the presence of a consort by the lake. She had likely seen him dive in. Even if she were an ordinary person, she would have noticed something unusual.

The Dragon-Keeping Guards should have caught up with him soon after.

Yet, after diving into the water and fleeing, he detected no pursuers.

Could it be that the consort hadn't reported seeing me dive into the water? Chu Liang wondered.

Strange as it was, it worked out for the best—the mission was a success. Now, he only had to enjoy the Qinghong Banquet and wait for Little Golden Dragon to seek him out afterward.

Once the Little Golden Dragon recovered and fully refined the final legacy left by his mother, he might still fall short of reclaiming the Great Dao of Cloud Dominion, but his strength would be greatly amplified.

Upon reaching adulthood, he was destined to become one of the strongest seventh-realm entities.

At the very least, he would be much more powerful than the White Dragon of the Mount Shu Sect.

The Golden Dragon lineage ensured that his accomplishments in adulthood would far outshine those of ordinary True Dragons.

Although helping the Little Golden Dragon with this was risky, it allowed Chu Liang to learn how to refine the Blue Dragon's Orb, granting him a substantial power boost in a short period. It was a fair trade.

When Chu Liang rushed back, he narrowly avoided being caught by Wang Xuanling, who pushed the door open just as he stepped inside. Quickly, he sat at the table, making sure to hide any signs of what had just happened.

Old Wang then brought Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai to the main hall, where Xu Ziyang and Ling Ao were already waiting. Finally, the five of them were gathered.

"I summoned you here because, upon entering the imperial city today, I noticed something strange," Wang Xuanling said seriously. "There is a powerful flow of qi in the city, and it feels like it's just waiting to attack.."

Since Wang Xuanling had devoted most of his cultivation in the art of sword, he could be considered an experienced sword cultivator. Being highly attuned to the flow of qi, he immediately sensed the anomaly upon entering the city.

It felt like the calm before the storm.

"It feels like a great battle could break out at any moment," he said slowly. "I must warn you. Don't wander around today. I don't know what happened in the palace, but it has nothing to do with us. Let's attend the Qinghong Banquet, fulfill our obligations, and leave right after. Don't interfere in other matters."

As he spoke, Jiang Yuebai glanced at Chu Liang.

Chu Liang gave a faint smile and said, "Understood."

Based on his deduction, the unusual flow of qi was most likely caused by the Golden Dragon's escape. With the loss of the fate-suppressing celestial beast, the imperial city was bound to take action. This came as no surprise to him.

As they spoke, the sound of marching troops suddenly echoed from outside. Several units of the imperial guards had surrounded the entire palace compound!

"What's happening?" Wang Xuanling asked sharply as he stood and hurried outside.

A flicker of doubt crossed Chu Liang's eyes. Could they have discovered what I did? If so, they got here much faster than expected.

As Chu Liang pondered the situation, a leader of the imperial guards stepped forward, cupping his hands in a respectful salute. "Grand Peak Master Wang," he said, "my apologies for the interruption. By the emperor's command, all palace halls are now under lockdown, and major routes have been sealed. We appreciate your cooperation."

Wang Xuanling asked, "What major event has occurred?"

After a brief hesitation, the guard captain lowered his voice and said, "I suppose I can tell you... The imperial consort has been assassinated!"

"Who could be so daring?" Wang Xuanling exclaimed in disbelief.

"We don't know who the killer is," the guard captain replied frankly. "Her body was left in the Qinghong Aviary for hours. If someone hadn't happened to pass by, it wouldn't have been discovered until moments before the banquet."

These people from the Mount Shu Sect had only just entered the palace, so they were naturally not suspects in the murder. Thus, he saw no need to conceal the details of the case.

A wave of murmurs swept through the hall, filled with disbelief and curiosity.

The others were astonished that the beloved imperial consort had been murdered in the palace.

But Chu Liang was shocked for a different reason. He had clearly seen that imperial consort with his own eyes earlier!

During the opening ceremony of the Immortal Sect Assembly at Emperor's Mound, he had seen the consort's face. There was no way he would mistake her for another person. The woman by the lake in the consort's courtyard had definitely been her.

Yet the body found in the palace could not possibly be someone else either.

Then who exactly had he encountered by the lake?

Chapter 607: In the Night Dragon Hall

In the great hall, the air was thick with speculation as voices rose and fell. The events of the day had ignited a storm of questions, and naturally, the discussion drifted toward the mystery of the Qinghong Aviary.

Chu Liang sat among the crowd as he analyzed and shared his thoughts. "No matter who the victim was, in a place like Qinghong Aviary, the prime suspect is always the person who discovers the body. Even if they aren't the killer, there's usually some connection. After all, there are countless ways for cultivators to dispose of a body, yet someone deliberately left it there. Why?"

He let the question linger for a moment. "The only logical reason is that they wanted the body to be found. "

"And then there's this supposed coincidence," Chu Liang added, his tone tinged with sarcasm. "Trespassing into Qinghong Aviary is a capital crime, yet someone just happened to be there, at that exact moment? What were they doing—stealing a fowl? Ha. That is a bit too absurd."

"Uh..." The head of the imperial guards in the hall was also listening to their conversation and he couldn't help but interject. "Your Highness, based on our findings, the individual who discovered the body really was there to steal Qinghong birds."

"Even a three-year-old wouldn't believe that excuse," Ling Ao remarked dryly, shaking his head in disdain. "In centuries past, how many people have dared to set foot in the Qinghong Aviary to hunt? Let alone risking their life for a fowl? Are they really hungry? And why today, of all days? Why just happen to stumble upon a corpse? The entire situation reeks of improbability."

"We're not entirely clear on that either." The guard's minor rank meant he only knew the general details and little about the fowl thief's identity.

In fact, apart from the emperor and a select few high-ranking officials like the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner, no one else in the imperial city knew the identities of those involved. None of them were punished for it.

As they conversed, a sudden commotion broke out outside the hall. Looking up, they saw a fiery figure striding in.

"Yo, old man, still alive, huh?" The fiery figure greeted Wang Xuanling before brazenly seating herself in the main chair of the hall.

Who else could it be but Di Nufeng?

"Esteemed Teacher? What brings you here?" Chu Liang asked, surprised by her sudden appearance.

"Don't get me started! Let me tell you, I just achieved something big," Di Nufeng said, pouring herself a cup of tea. She downed it in one gulp and continued, "You've heard about the consort's murder, right? That body dumped in the Qinghong Aviary? Who knows how long it would've gone unnoticed. Haha, I found it!"

She proudly gave a thumbs-up, pointing at herself.

"Ohhh." Everyone let out a sound of understanding.

With that explanation, everything suddenly made sense.

"I happened to pass by that area. At a glance, I noticed the garden shrouded in a deathly aura, as if something ominous was at hand," Di Nufeng said, gesturing dramatically. "I immediately pointed toward it and said, 'I want this one—' Ah, no, 'I want to go take a look.' After going forward to investigate, I indeed found the body."

"Esteemed Teacher, your instincts are as sharp as ever," Chu Liang nodded in agreement.

After the corpse was discovered, Mingde reported the matter to the emperor, while Di Nufeng came directly to see the team from the Mount Shu Sect.

"It's just strange..." she mused, appearing puzzled. "If I were the one who killed someone in the palace, I'd burn everything to ash without leaving a trace. How could anyone discover it? Leaving such a large corpse out here is just sloppy..."

Her nonchalant tone sent an involuntary chill through the imperial guard leader. The way she spoke, it sounded less like a hypothetical and more like she actually had done something like that before.

"What time do people normally go to the Qinghong Aviary?" Chu Liang asked.

"On regular days, someone enters once a day to deliver food. For today's Qinghong Banquet, someone was supposed to enter two hours before the banquet to catch a Qinghong bird and deliver it to the imperial kitchen," the guard leader replied. This was a question that he could answer.

"So, if Esteemed Teacher hadn't uncovered this crime..." Chu Liang said as he pondered, "the corpse would have only been discovered two hours before the banquet? At that time—"

Jiang Yuebai interjected thoughtfully, "According to the Qinghong Banquet schedule, an hour before the banquet, all members of the imperial family and court officials would already be in the palace, preparing to attend."

"If the corpse were discovered then, the palace would undoubtedly go into lockdown for a full investigation," Chu Liang continued, his expression sharpening. "The banquet would be forced to end temporarily. Could the culprit have discarded the corpse there to disrupt the banquet?"

Before the words had fully settled, a palace attendant entered to announce, "Your Highness, the emperor requests your presence."

...

When Chu Liang arrived at the Night Dragon Hall, the atmosphere was heavy and oppressive.

The emperor sat behind his desk, his expression as dark and unreadable as still waters, exuding an undeniable sense of authority. Normally, Chu Liang regarded him as a kind and gentle elder, but in this moment, the emperor's sudden sternness reminded him of the unyielding majesty of the throne.

Two elders were seated on either side of him.

On the left was an elder in a long robe, his demeanor elegant and approachable. Chu Liang recognized him immediately—it was the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner, someone he was quite familiar with.

On the right sat an elderly palace attendant clad in ornate robes. Chu Liang didn't know him by face, but the man's imposing presence far surpassed that of even Warrior Lao. It didn't take much deduction to realize this was Yao Dengxian, the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch and leader of the Four Great Warriors.

Yao Dengxian's gaze was sharp and penetrating, carrying a weight that seemed to see through to one's very core. With just a glance, Chu Liang instinctively turned his head slightly to avoid meeting his eyes.

"Your Majesty summoned me?" he asked, stepping forward cautiously.

"The matter of the Golden Dragon's Orb... that was your doing, wasn't it?" the emperor asked bluntly.

"Uh..." Chu Liang's shoulders stiffened, and his mind raced, desperately searching for where his plan might have gone awry.

Before he could formulate a response, Yao Dengxian stepped forward and raised his hand. Resting in his palm was a radiant golden halo of light, within which a small dragon appeared to be struggling.

The World In One's Palm was a move that Yang Shenlong was good at so Chu Liang obviously knew.

But when Yao Dengxian used it, its power was exponentially greater. Trapped in his palm was a young dragon with the cultivation level of the seventh realm.

FUCK.

No matter how many scenarios he had considered or how carefully he had crafted the plan, there was one crucial detail Chu Liang had overlooked: the Little Golden Dragon's overconfidence in its ability to hide from Yao Dengxian. He had been caught far too easily.

WHAT ABOUT THE PROMISE OF BEING ABLE TO KEEP YAO DENGXIAN OCCUPIED FOR A WHOLE DAY WITH THOSE FIVE SCALES? Chu Liang screamed inwardly.

"Chu Liang!" the Little Golden Dragon, trapped in Yao Dengxian's palm, shouted desperately. "I didn't rat you out!"

"He didn't reveal your name, but he did mention locating a Mount Shu Sect disciple who inherited the cultivation legacy of the dragons," the emperor said calmly.

You might as well have just said my name—it would've been simpler... Chu Liang thought, feeling a little speechless.

"Hehe." After a brief pause, he chuckled. "It told me that the Dragon Orb wasn't of much use in the palace and asked me to help take it out..."

Seeing his mischievous grin, the emperor couldn't help but shake his head. "Indeed, the dragon orb wasn't of much use. Warrior Yao only kept the Golden Dragon's Orb here to lure out the Golden Dragon."

"Warrior Yao is quite the strategist," Chu Liang remarked as he stepped forward, placing the Golden Dragon Orb on the desk and giving the elder eunuch a thumbs-up.

Yao Dengxian remained silent.

The emperor glanced at Yao Dengxian and, in a tone that seemed to carry a deeper meaning, said, "I don't think it's unreasonable to release this dragon. With the Yu Dynasty's flourishing destiny, divine phoenixes and qilins will fight to safeguard our fate, even if we no longer have the Golden Dragon to suppress the fate of our dynasty. Since the Golden Dragon is still young, there is no need to force it to remain here."

"Your Majesty is wise. I will release it once I return," Yao Dengxian replied, turning his palm to put the Golden Dragon away.

The emperor added, "Just have the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner set it free later on."

Chu Liang glanced between the two of them, sensing an undercurrent of tension.

The emperor's words were true. Suppressing the fate of a dynasty was not a burdensome task; on the contrary, it was a coveted opportunity for a celestial beast.

In ancient times, the old Golden Dragon had claimed this role among many celestial beasts through sheer strength. Since then, as dynasties rose and fell, it had continued to suppress the fate of the dynasty, reaping immense benefits for its cultivation and growing ever stronger.

That was why, even after its fall, it wanted to pass this opportunity on to its offspring.

However, after Yao Dengxian seized the Great Dao from it, the Golden Dragon could no longer leave, even if it wished to.

But with enmity already established, whether the Little Golden Dragon stayed to suppress the dynasty's fate or was directly killed, either outcome would be preferable to letting it go.

With how long the dragons live, there was no guarantee as to whether it might take revenge in the future.

If the court and Yao Dengxian remained united, there was no chance the dragon would be set free—unless some hidden conflict lay between the emperor and Yao Dengxian...

Chu Liang looked at the elder eunuch's humble demeanor and understood. Warrior Yao might not be as submissive behind the scenes as he appeared on the surface.

The matter of seizing the Great Dao of Cloud Dominion and imprisoning the Golden Dragon was bound to spread sooner or later. By then, not only the Golden Dragon but the entire dragon race would harbor hatred toward the Yu Dynasty. Although the dragon race had remained hidden for years, once they gathered, they would still be a formidable force.

It could be said that Yao Dengxian's act of seizing the Great Dao back then had also been an act of creating enemies for the Yu Dynasty. Yet, with his ascension to the eighth realm, his skyrocketing strength, and his steadfast loyalty to the court, the Yu Dynasty had chosen to overlook it.

Now, with Yao Dengxian capturing the Golden Dragon and the emperor ordering its release, all the resulting enmity would fall squarely on Yao Dengxian alone.

If Warrior Yao's loyalty remained unwavering, then making a few enemies would be a small price to pay for a dragon capable of passing down a Great Dao. However, if he harbored ulterior motives, the court could easily sever ties with him if the dragons retaliated in the future.

This move could be considered a subtle warning.

However, Chu Liang was unaware of the deeper intricacies of the situation. The matters of the imperial city were as opaque as deep waters. Whatever conflicts existed between the emperor and Yao Dengxian would undoubtedly remain hidden, fought behind closed doors and never openly revealed. It certainly wasn't his place to intervene, so he simply feigned ignorance.

The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner, much like Chu Liang, remained composed and detached, keeping his thoughts and expressions carefully guarded, refraining from getting himself involved.

The emperor continued, "Do you know how it escaped?"

"I don't know," Chu Liang replied, shaking his head.

"Someone infiltrated the Dragon-Keeping Pool in the palace, instructed it on how to escape, and told it how to retrieve the Dragon Orb afterward," the emperor said. "The chaos at the Dragon Pool was no coincidence. Someone had planned for it to happen."

"I see."

No wonder. With the Little Golden Dragon's limited intellect, it could never have come up with such a thorough plan on its own. Too bad that even with the plan handed to it, it still failed to execute it properly.

"Do you know who that person is?" the emperor asked suddenly.

Chu Liang blinked and replied, "Her Highness the Imperial Consort?"

Chapter 608: The Imperial Decree

"Huh?"

Chu Liang's response left the emperor, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner, and Yao Dengxian visibly stunned.

The emperor had asked the question casually but hadn't expected him to actually know the answer.

"How do you know this?" the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner asked.

"Just a little guesswork," Chu Liang said with an awkward smile.

The truth was more complex. During his daring escape through the imperial consort's garden, the guards stopped pursuing him. It wasn't a coincidence; someone had intervened. And given the circumstances, it seemed likely that the consort herself had helped him.

At that time, he hadn't revealed his dashing and elegant appearance, appearing only as a stranger in a black robe. To the imperial consort, he should have been just a faceless fugitive. Why, then, would she help him?

Unless, of course, she somehow knew about it—or worse, had orchestrated the entire event herself.

This train of thought led Chu Liang to suspect her, and judging by their reactions, he was probably right.

The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner's lips curved into a faint smile. "Your Majesty, didn't I say he's exceptionally clever? He's undoubtedly the best candidate for this."

"What the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner said is absolutely true," the emperor remarked, nodding with quiet approval.

Hmm?

Chu Liang furrowed his brow, a flicker of doubt crossing his mind. Something felt off. Their words seemed to imply more than they let on.

Best candidate... for what?

"First, there was this mess at the Dragon-Keeping Pool. Then, the imperial consort died. One incident after another—each pointing to traitors stirring unrest within the palace. And it's clear their schemes do not end there," the emperor said, leaning forward. His sharp and penetrating gaze locked onto Chu Liang. "I need someone to investigate the imperial consort's case."

Under the weight of the emperor's gaze, Chu Liang couldn't help but feel a slight unease. He hesitated for a moment before replying, "Warrior Yao possesses unparalleled cultivation and exceptional intellect. Surely, he is the stabilizing force of the imperial palace."

"It is inconvenient for the members of the palace to investigate matters that happened in the palace," Yao Dengxian replied immediately.

"This falls squarely under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau," Chu Liang said, trying once more to deflect responsibility.

"It is unsuitable for outsiders to meddle in the affairs of the palace," the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner replied.

Chu Liang was at a loss. If palace insiders couldn't investigate, and outsiders weren't allowed to intervene, then who could handle it? Did the consort need to die on the imperial city walls before anyone would take action?

"When the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner first mentioned you, he described you as exceptionally clever and capable of handling great responsibilities. I was hesitant," the emperor said. "But now, I see he was right. As my Imperial Younger Brother, and someone unconnected to any factions within the palace, you are the perfect person to take on this case."

"But..." Chu Liang began, trying to think of another excuse to refuse.

The emperor raised a hand, cutting him off. "You needn't concern yourself with anything else. Others will handle the rest. Your sole responsibility is to investigate the imperial consort's case. There are six hours until the Qinghong Banquet begins. If you can uncover the real murderer within that time, I will pardon your theft of the Golden Dragon Orb—and allow you to take it with you. But if you fail..."

Chu Liang raised his eyes, meeting the emperor's gaze.

The emperor felt a little troubled.

Even if Chu Liang couldn't solve the case, what could I really do to him? The thought lingered in the emperor's mind. After all, my Second Aunt is still in the palace. If even a single hair on her disciple were harmed, she would undoubtedly cause havoc and turn the palace upside down. It's hard to come up with anything that could truly threaten him.

After a brief pause, the emperor finally spoke. "Then I will strip you of your title as Imperial Younger Brother, sever all cooperation between the imperial family and Red Cotton Peak, and forbid you from doing business in the Immortals' Square."

"What?" Chu Liang's face twisted in shock. "Please! Noooooooooo!"

"Then do me this favor," the emperor said, picking up a brush. At his gesture, Warrior Lao immediately unrolled a silk scroll. "I will grant you an imperial decree. For the next six hours, anyone inside or outside the imperial city must treat this decree as if I am present in person."

"I'll have Chengfeng accompany you," the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner added. "If anything arises, you can rely on him for assistance."

"I'll also assign you a young eunuch," Yao Dengxian chimed in. "If you encounter any issues with palace matters, he'll provide guidance."

Chu Liang's face darkened.

I was just a thief. How did I suddenly become an imperial envoy?

...

Chu Liang was familiar with Li Chengfeng. The jade-faced celestial official carried himself with the same elegance and upright demeanor as always. His expression was serious, fully aware of the challenges this mission entailed.

Yao Guang, in contrast, was an inconspicuous young eunuch. His plain features were unremarkable, and years of bowing in palace service had left him slightly hunched, making his already short stature appear even smaller.

"Gentlemen, we're short on time and face a difficult mission. Let's work together," Chu Liang said earnestly as he greeted the two.

"Don't worry. If there's anything you need, you can count on me," Chengfeng Li assured.

"I will also fully cooperate with Your Highness the Imperial Younger Brother," Yao Guang replied respectfully.

Looking at these two, both willing to assist yet unwilling to come up with ideas, Chu Liang sighed softly.

In truth, he understood all too well why this case had been thrust upon him.

The imperial consort was dead. And who was the most obvious suspect?

Naturally, it was Empress Wu.

Yao Dengxian and the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner were both figures deeply rooted in court politics. Even with their status, they had to consider the Empress Wu and the powerful Wu family backing her and would have no choice but to handle such matters with utmost caution.

This was exactly why an outsider was needed—someone who could act without being entangled in the web of palace power struggles.

But that person also needed to be capable enough. It wasn't surprising that the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner had thought of him. Chu Liang suspected that even without the matter of the stolen Golden Dragon Orb, they would have sought him out anyway.

"Since this is a murder case, the first step is to examine the body," Chu Liang said decisively. "Is the corpse still at Qinghong Aviary?"

"It's already been moved," Yao Guang replied immediately. "I'll take you both there."

The three of them set out without guards. With Li Chengfeng's cultivation level, there was no danger in the palace. Armed with the imperial decree, they moved unimpeded through the palace and soon arrived at the place where the consort's body was kept.

The corpse lay peacefully, its face as lifelike as it had been in life, with almost no visible changes. It still wore the same elegant palace gown, identical to the figure Chu Liang had seen by the lake.

The palace staff had determined the time of death based on the lingering traces of her aura, a method unlikely to be mistaken. This meant that the person Chu Liang had seen earlier by the lake was someone else.

He suddenly recalled the story he had heard just days ago—how Chen Xuanlu had discovered a corpse identical to Empress Wu at the bottom of a lake.

Could there be a connection? What's with the trend of doppelgangers in the imperial palace? Chu Liang wondered.

After mulling it over for a moment, he asked, "Has the body been identified?"

"The emperor himself saw it and confirmed it was the imperial consort," Yao Guang replied.

"What was the cause of death?" Chu Liang pressed further.

"There are no visible injuries on the surface," Li Chengfeng replied. "A thorough autopsy might be necessary to uncover the cause."

"Well..." Chu Liang hesitated. An autopsy would require a far more invasive examination. "I don't think it's appropriate for me to perform it."

"I have a wife, so it's even more inappropriate for me," Li Chengfeng immediately added.

Yao Guang glanced between the two of them, sighed heavily, and said, "Alright, I'll do it."

But as he approached the body, his movements were hesitant.

To channel the flow of qi throughout the corpse, one would have to remove the clothing, and dissect the body. These steps were inevitable for a proper examination. If it were an ordinary corpse, it might not matter, but this was the body of a consort. Naturally, there were concerns.

"We really should have brought a woman along. This was an oversight," Li Chengfeng remarked.

"Agreed," Chu Liang added with a sigh. "Being a man is hard."

Li Chengfeng added with a deep sigh, "Being a man with a family and responsibilities is even harder."

"Ahem." Yao Guang couldn't help but clear his throat. "Gentlemen, let's not say such things in front of me... This humble eunuch feels that not being able to be a man is the hardest of all."

Chapter 609: Elimination Method

Slash.

Yao Guang carefully sliced open the consort's chest and abdomen with his blade. No blood flowed out. Instead, a faint, delicate fragrance escaped into the air.

At first, the scent seemed harmless. But in an instant, Chu Liang felt suffocated! The fragrance was poisonous, preventing him from breathing.

Chu Liang's physical resilience was on par with that of a True Dragon at the same cultivation realm. For any poison to affect him, it would usually require a quantity as vast as a mountain. Yet, just one inhale of this faint, lingering fragrance nearly suffocated him. The sheer potency was truly terrifying.

It felt as though an invisible membrane had sealed his nasal passages, cutting off his ability to draw air. Fortunately, the scent wasn't too strong and dissipated after a few moments. Chu Liang quickly channeled his foundational qi, breaking through this blockage in an instant with a surge of energy.

Even Li Chengfeng, a celestial official at the seventh realm, was affected by the fragrance. A fleeting discomfort crossed his face. However, as his cultivation level was much higher than Chu Liang, he recovered instantly without the need of doing anything.

Yao Guang had it the worst. Being the closest to the body and having the lowest cultivation, he struggled to breathe. His blade slipped from his trembling hand, clattering to the ground as he staggered backward, clutching his chest in pain.

Li Chengfeng stepped forward and swiftly pressed his palm and finger onto two acupoints on Yao Guang's chest, unblocking the eunuch's constricted meridians. Immediately, a surge of qi flowed through and Yao Guang exhaled a big breath of air.

"What kind of poison is this?" Chu Liang asked, still shaken. "It's terrifying."

"It's the Dreamweave Breath-Sealing Fragrance," Li Chengfeng replied.

"You recognize it, Celestial Official Li?" Chu Liang and Yao Guang immediately turned to him.

The Imperial Supervisory Bureau handled all kinds of strange cases across the land, so Li Chengfeng's knowledge of such matters was undoubtedly broader than theirs.

"This poison is highly lethal," Li Chengfeng explained. "Inhaling it causes immediate suffocation, but as long as one moves away in time, it's typically not fatal. That's why it's often paired with a sophisticated illusory technique. The illusion traps the victim, preventing them from realizing they're suffocating until it's too late. Those who succumb to this poison often die with serene expressions, making it nearly impossible to identify the cause of death."

He paused briefly before continuing, "The person most skilled in using this poison is Xiao Wuyan, an assassin from the Celestial Charm Sect. The Imperial Supervisory Bureau only came to understand this poison after investigating several bizarre cases linked to her."

"I see," Chu Liang said. It was the first time he had heard of such a poison. "But wasn't Xiao Wuyan already captured?"

"Correct," Li Chengfeng replied. "She is currently imprisoned in the Celestial Northern Prison, so this couldn't have been her doing. As for who else might possess this poison, that remains unknown. The only thing we can be certain of is that the culprit is likely an expert in illusory techniques."

"Let's finish examining the body first," Chu Liang said with a nod, motioning for Yao Guang to continue.

The faint lingering fragrance earlier had been nothing more than residual traces of the poison within the consort's body—yet even that had been so potent. It was no surprise this poison had been the cause of her death.

This made Chu Liang feel a trace of awe. The world was full of strange poisons, and the Poison-Expulsion Whip was not a cure-all. Without sufficient caution, he might not even have the chance to wield the whip before falling victim to such a poison in the future.

Yao Guang carefully resumed his examination of the corpse and eventually confirmed that the cause of death was indeed the inhalation of the Dreamweave Breath-Sealing Fragrance.

Chu Liang fell silent for a moment, his brows furrowed in thought. Then, without warning, he said, "Let's head back to Qinghong Aviary."

Time was of the essence, and he couldn't bother with the formalities of the imperial city. He shot forward like an arrow, soaring ahead. Li Chengfeng and Yao Guang exchanged a glance before quickly following, their movements equally swift. The trio moved in unison, reaching Qinghong Aviary in no time.

Neither Li Chengfeng nor Yao Guang knew exactly what Chu Liang was looking for, but revisiting the place where the body had been found was a logical step.

With practiced ease, Chu Liang leapt over high walls and scaled the garden's intricate artificial hills. He headed straight to the location where the consort's body had been discovered—the spot where his teacher claimed to have "coincidentally" come across the corpse.

Chu Liang crouched down, closing his eyes as he took a deep breath and let his senses expand. After a moment, his gaze fell on a patch of withered plants and flowers nearby. Their decay stood out starkly against the lush surroundings.

"This is where it happened," he said decisively. "The imperial consort must have come here willingly, only to be poisoned under the influence of an illusory technique."

"What was the consort doing at Qinghong Aviary?" Yao Guang asked, clearly puzzled.

"That...is something only she can answer" Chu Liang paused, glancing at the scene once more before taking off without further explanation.

"Hey, hey, hey! Wait for me!" Yao Guang called out, scrambling to keep up. Turning to Li Chengfeng, he huffed, "Celestial Official Li, do you have any idea what Imperial Younger Brother is up to?"

Li Chengfeng gave him a sidelong glance, his expression one of faint condescension. "You don't know?"

"That's why I'm asking," Yao Guang replied, spreading his hands as if stating the obvious.

"He's going to..." Li Chengfeng dragged out the words, then added firmly, "Investigate the case!"

"Oh." Yao Guang nodded slowly. Then, with a deadpan expression, he thought to himself, You say that like it explains everything. But it's all words and no substance. Just air.

...

Moments later, the three of them arrived at the imperial consort's courtyard.

Chu Liang had been here just recently. The consort, who should have already been dead, had been sitting calmly by the lake. He was not the only one who had seen her; the Dragon-Keeping Guards could testify to that as well.

That false consort must have imitated the real one using some sort of illusory technique. Chu Liang's thoughts turned to the Spirit Fox Illusory Transformation, one of the strongest transformation immortal arts. With this line of reasoning, there was a ninety-nine percent chance that the imposter was the murderer.

But why? Why would the murderer go to the trouble of disguising themselves as the consort after killing her?

Simply to sit by the lake and look at the water? That seemed highly unlikely.

If the goal was to create the illusion that the consort was still alive, it didn't seem necessary. After all, her body wouldn't be discovered in Qinghong Aviary for some time, and no one had been aware of her whereabouts.

Chu Liang stood by the lake, staring at the water as he asked Yao Guang, "Have the consort's maids been questioned?"

Yao Guang acted swiftly, and before long, the two maids of the imperial consort were brought to the courtyard.

Given the consort's status, it was unusual for her to be attended by only two maids. However, she had always valued peace and quiet and had requested special permission from the emperor to limit her attendants to just two.

Both maids were sobbing pitifully.

"Her Highness..." The older maid spoke through sobs, her voice trembling. "She wasn't particularly warm to us and often didn't let us accompany her. When she wanted to be alone, she wouldn't allow anyone near her... We... we truly didn't know much about her personal affairs."

The younger maid, tears streaking her face, added with a choked voice, "Her Highness was always so kind to us. She was nothing like the other consorts who treated their servants poorly. How could someone as good as her be killed..."

Listening to their laments, Chu Liang suddenly asked, "Did Her Highness have any unusual habits?"

The two maids thought for a moment before the younger one spoke. "If there was anything strange, it was that she often liked to sit by the lake alone and talk to herself... almost as if she were speaking to the fish."

Chu Liang nodded and looked at the water again.

"This waterway leads outside the imperial city..." Li Chengfeng mused aloud. "Could the consort have been in contact with someone beyond the city walls?"

"She helped release the Golden Dragon and went to Qinghong Aviary alone on the eve of the banquet. Something is definitely off," Chu Liang replied. "Before we can identify the murderer, I think we need to search this consort more thoroughly."

There was no need for a physical search, as the consort had already laid everything bare for them.

But Chu Liang thought the consort's palace needed a more thorough search.

"Where does the consort sleep?" he asked.

"This way," the two maids quickly pointed. "Her Highness was a light sleeper and never allowed us near her bedroom."

"Then there's even more reason for us to check her bedroom," Chu Liang replied, his expression unreadable as his mind raced.

Bang.

He pushed open the door to reveal a modest bedroom. There wasn't much furniture: a screen, a bed, a table, some chairs, and a bronze mirror...

"If I were the imperial consort, where would I hide something I couldn't let anyone see or carry with me?" Chu Liang muttered to himself.

The consort didn't have any enchanted storage tools on her. As a member of the imperial harem, possessing such items would raise suspicions, so most consorts refrained from having them.

"With a room this size, searching it thoroughly could take quite a while," Yao Guang said.

"Search?" Chu Liang repeated.

"Huh?" Yao Guang exchanged a puzzled look with him.

Then, Chu Liang placed his hand on the floor, and Divine Dragon Fire spread rapidly from his palm!

He was setting the room on fire!

"What are you doing?" Even Li Chengfeng widened his eyes in disbelief this time.

"A thorough search of this room would take too much effort. We will just use the method of elimination," Chu Liang explained. "The place the consort used to hide something secret would definitely be immune to fire."

Boom—

Li Chengfeng stared at Chu Liang in astonishment. It only then hit him... He really is Di Nufeng's disciple!

Chapter 610: How Far Has It Gone?

In the Night Dragon Hall, the emperor unrolled a small scroll, his brow furrowed as he read its contents.

"What is the Celestial Charm Sect trying to achieve? Disrupting the Qinghong Banquet, forcing a lockdown in the palace..." he murmured. "Could they be planning to attack the imperial city?"

Behind him, Warrior Lao chuckled lightly and said, "You're overthinking it, Your Majesty. Unless a Hallowed One emerges, no one could possibly stir trouble in the capital of Yu."

This wasn't blind confidence; the capital of Yu was a fortress of power.

Within the imperial city, there were two cultivators who had attained the Heavenly Origin: the Guardian and Yao Dengxian.

Alongside them were the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner and the Left Deputy Commissioner of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau.

Beyond the city walls stood the Guardian Ruler of the Celestial Northern Prison, as well as Gongyang Qi and Shentu Yang, the headmaster and vice-headmaster of the Ascending Dragon Academy. Additionally, there was the National Master of the Nation Guard Monastery.

Everyone knew that there were eight powerful cultivators at the Heavenly Origin. Together, these eight powerful cultivators, aligned with the imperial court, formed a force unrivaled by even the Supreme Sect of Penglai or any other top-tier immortal sect.

Minor disruptions would barely register with experts of this caliber, but if real chaos were to erupt, their response would be swift and devastating.

Who could possibly stir up major chaos?

The emperor, of course, knew that this was highly unlikely. No matter how much trouble the Celestial Charm Sect stirred up, it could only be in secret.

However, their actions were truly peculiar.

The discovery of the imperial consort's body earlier than expected was definitely not part of their plan. Normally, the body would have been found just two hours before the Qinghong Banquet, triggering a lockdown in the palace.

This would have left the civil and military officials attending the banquet trapped within the city, unable to leave for a period of time.

Anyone drawing these conclusions might naturally assume that the plan was to kill the Yu Dynasty's imperial family, along with the entire court.

However, that was simply impossible.

The emperor shook his head and said, "Or perhaps the one who killed the consort wasn't from the Celestial Charm Sect, but someone who uncovered their scheme and decided to stop them. And the consort... was actually a member of the Celestial Charm Sect..."

With how he was emotionally connected with the imperial consort, he didn't want to believe this possibility.

Although the imperial consort had previously infiltrated the Dragon-Keeping Pool to teach the Little Golden Dragon the escape plan, if the perpetrator could mimic her appearance, it was possible that it had been the murderer in disguise all along.

This consort had been by his side for years, and the emperor was reluctant to think ill of her.

But everything would ultimately depend on the final investigation results.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then asked, "How far has Chu Liang gotten in his investigation?"

"He's already at..." Warrior Lao squinted into the distance, as if he were observing something far away, and then answered, "The step where he's setting Yuhua Palace on fire."

The emperor's eyebrows twitched inexplicably.

Is setting things on fire really part of a normal investigation process?

...

"What are you doing?" Yao Guang asked anxiously. "Imperial Younger Brother, Celestial Official Li, you can leave once you're done investigating, but I still have to live and work in the palace! If you set this fire, I'll be punished!"

"If we find something, who would dare hold you accountable?" Chu Liang replied.

"But what if you don't find anything?" Yao Guang countered.

"Then I'll explain to His Majesty. What are you afraid of? Relax..." Chu Liang reassured him, patting his shoulder. "We're all in this together."

The Divine Dragon Fire roared in front of them, unstoppable and spreading quickly. Within moments, the entire bedroom was reduced to ashes, not even leaving behind a ruin.

Amid the charred remains, something emerged.

It was a jade-green ring, likely hidden in a secret compartment within the wall. Now, with the wall and compartment destroyed, only the ring remained, lying on the ground.

Chu Liang stepped closer for a better look. Sure enough, it was an enchanted storage tool, but without the correct hand seals, it couldn't be opened.

He tried burning it with Divine Dragon Fire, but it remained intact.

It seemed his destructive techniques were still lacking compared to his teacher's.

That fire had clearly been unleashed in his teacher's style. Though reckless at times, Chu Liang had to admit, it was effective.

"Let me handle this," Li Chengfeng sighed, drawing his sword.

Slash—

A sharp sound split the air as the ring shattered.

The items stored inside the ring spilled out onto the ground.

"What's this?" Yao Guang exclaimed.

They picked up the items one by one, carefully inspecting them.

The largest item was a silk scroll. When they unrolled it, they found a detailed map of the imperial city. Marked on it were the visible buildings, but more intriguingly, secret layouts were included—hidden areas, forbidden grounds, and hidden realms that contained a whole other world.

"Ah!" Yao Guang yelped, quickly covering his eyes and refusing to look any further.

Seeing Chu Liang still staring at it, he warned, "Imperial Younger Brother, possessing or even looking at the map of the imperial city privately is a capital crime."

"Oh, then I won't look anymore," Chu Liang replied, sneaking one last glance before rolling the scroll up.

You've memorized it, haven't you?! Yao Guang trembled in silence, too afraid to speak.

The next item was a tightly sealed red porcelain bottle, its lid secured with engraved enchanted formation seals. Chu Liang carefully removed the seals and opened the lid.

Inside was a thick red liquid that resembled molten lava.

"Fireflow Poison!" Li Chengfeng exclaimed, his expression changing immediately.

Another strange poison? Chu Liang looked at him in confusion.

Li Chengfeng quickly sealed the bottle again and said in a low voice, "Keep this poison bottle in your hand. May all three of us be witness to the fact that none of us are storing it away."

"What kind of poison is this that you are acting with such caution?" Chu Liang asked.

"This is Fireflow Poison, a deadly toxin that spreads with fire. It can fuse with divine fire. Anyone touched by the toxic flames will suffer corroded bones and a pierced heart, dying instantly," Li Chengfeng explained.

He paused briefly before continuing, "If ordinary people consume this poison, there's a chance that nothing will happen, since it only activates upon contact with fire. However, anyone with the qi of divine fire will die immediately upon ingesting it."

"The Divine Fire Spirit," Chu Liang added.

"Indeed," Li Chengfeng replied. "That's why this poison is absolutely forbidden in this dynasty. Both crafting and possessing it are capital crimes."

So this poison was clearly meant to target the imperial family. No wonder Li Chengfeng reacted with such fear upon seeing it.

It was truly terrifying that an imperial consort managed to get her hands on such a poison.

Next, they picked up a golden hairpin, its body engraved with intricate enchanted formations. Li Chengfeng immediately recognized it. "The patterns... this is the Spell Disruption Formation. This is the Spell-Disrupting Golden Hairpin, capable of disrupting divine ability defenses. It's ranked over two hundred on the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures."

Looking at the items, Chu Liang quickly connected the dots in his mind.

The Fireflow Poison... the Spell-Disrupting Golden Hairpin. This was clearly a plot designed to kill a strong cultivator with the constitution of Divine Fire Spirit. The answer seemed obvious.

The emperor, being a cultivator at the seventh realm, wouldn't die just from ingesting Fireflow Poison—he would likely suffer severe injuries. But if the Spell-Disrupting Golden Hairpin was then used to assassinate him, the consequences would be dire.

This was a highly targeted scheme.

As they examined the next item, Yao Guang's face suddenly turned ashen.

It was a gold token, engraved with the insignia of the Dragon-Keeping Pool.

"This is the command token of the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch..." Li Chengfeng said slowly, recognizing the token. "It belongs solely to Warrior Yao."