

M. Slaying 611

Chapter 611: I Didn't Do It!

"There must be some misunderstanding!" Yao Guang exclaimed hurriedly. "This token couldn't possibly..."

"Of course, it's a misunderstanding," Chu Liang said calmly, patting Yao Guang's shoulder. "The fact that this token is here likely has nothing to do with Warrior Yao."

"And how can you be so sure?" Li Chengfeng asked.

"First, we can't yet confirm whether these items were left behind by the real consort or planted here by the imposter to frame someone," Chu Liang explained. "Second, even if these do belong to the real consort, consider this: if Warrior Yao were conspiring with her, she would have had free access to the Dragon-Keeping Pool without the need for a token. The fact that she possessed this token actually proves she wasn't connected to Warrior Yao and needed it to gain access on her own."

"That makes sense," Li Chengfeng agreed.

Yao Guang let out a visible sigh of relief. "Thank goodness for Your Highness' sharp insight."

If someone less perceptive were handling this, the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch might have been implicated. While a full investigation would likely never touch Yao Dengxian, every minor wrongdoings of his underlings could certainly come to light.

Chu Liang's attention shifted to a porcelain bottle nearby. Unlike the tightly sealed poison vial, this one was closed with a simple wooden stopper, suggesting it was less dangerous.

He carefully removed the stopper, revealing a crimson liquid with faint golden undertones, radiating a subtle spiritual energy. The liquid swirled like living blood, infused with a strange vibrancy.

He handed it to Li Chengfeng, who examined it closely and said, "This appears to be Spirit Fox Blood."

"Spirit Fox Blood?" Chu Liang repeated. He had heard of it before.

The fox clan was renowned for their mastery of transformation techniques. Upon attaining Dao, a fox demon could assume human form so flawlessly that it left no trace of demonic aura unless deliberately revealed. Their transformation abilities far surpassed ordinary camouflage, making them true masters of deception.

The immortal art Spirit Fox Illusory Transformation was a mimicry of the fox clan's divine technique, capable of achieving a flawless disguise that could deceive even the keenest senses.

As the saying goes, "The antidote would always be seven steps away[1]," the most effective way to counter such transformations came from the fox clan itself.

If one could acquire the blood essence from the heart of a fox demon that had attained Dao and refine it through sacrificial rituals, it would produce Spirit Fox Blood.

Even a single drop of the Spirit Fox Blood was enough to unravel any disguise or transformation.

However, Spirit Fox Blood was an exceedingly rare item. Fox demons who had attained Dao and reached a cultivation level of the seventh realm or higher were few in numbers anyway.

Most of these powerful beings resided in the Far West and over the past few millennia, only a handful of such fox demons had been seen within these lands.

To harvest the blood essence from the heart of a seventh-realm fox demon, one would first need to slay it. Yet with fox demons being legendary masters of transformation and divine abilities, how much more daunting would this already difficult task become?

Even after successfully refining a Greater Fox Demon at the seventh realm, one would only be able to extract this small bottle of blood essence.

Calling the Spirit Fox Blood rare would be an understatement. In truth, this item had likely not surfaced for thousands of years. Li Chengfeng had only been able to identify it due to the unmistakable scent unique to fox blood.

"Now we can conclude that these items do indeed belong to the consort," Chu Liang said decisively. "It couldn't have been items that belonged to the imposter as the imposter would never have left something that could counter their own divine abilities."

"True," the other two agreed in unison.

The three of them simultaneously turned their gaze to the final item on the ground, falling silent for a moment.

It was a red silk garment, adorned with gold embroidery and intricate patterns in vibrant colors. There were two delicate ties at the top and sides.

The clothing looked very delicately made.

This item was commonly known as a dudou.

Chu Liang stared at it, his expression blank. For a moment, he wondered why he kept encountering such items.

"This is the consort's personal belonging," Yao Guang whispered. "Even if her reputation is now in question, she's still a noble consort. We shouldn't touch it."

Chu Liang raised an eyebrow. "Eunuch Yao, would you carefully hide a dudou inside a storage artifact?"

"Huh?" Yao Guang jolted as if struck by lightning. Jumping back a step, he raised his hands defensively and exclaimed, "What are you saying? I didn't! I didn't! I didn't!"

Chu Liang couldn't help but exchange a glance with Li Chengfeng, a flicker of surprise crossing their faces.

Well, well... This was an unexpected discovery...

Yao Guang, after composing himself, straightened his back and forced a nervous smile. "Gentlemen... why are you looking at me like that? Is something wrong?"

Chu Liang turned to Li Chengfeng and asked casually, "Celestial Official Li, would you hide a dudou in your storage artifact?"

"Of course not," Li Chengfeng replied, spreading his hands in mock disbelief. "Why would I even have such a thing?"

Chu Liang mimicked the gesture and turned his gaze back to Yao Guang. "Don't you think that's the normal reaction to my question?"

"Ah..." Yao Guang froze, his expression stiff.

Didn't expect you to be a dudou thief in the imperial palace. Truly, appearances can be deceiving.

"Don't worry," Chu Liang said calmly. "Such matters in the palace have nothing to do with us. Our priority is solving the consort's case. Anything she kept in the storage artifact must hold some special significance, right?"

With that, he unfolded the dudou to examine it.

On the front of the dudou was a delicate illustration of autumn waters blending into endless skies, with a pair of mandarin ducks nestled closely together. Beside the image were two finely embroidered lines of poetry:

"Water and sky, emotions untold,

"Each to their longing, distant and cold."

Li Chengfeng read the lines aloud, his gaze lingering on the garment before shaking his head. "It doesn't seem like there's anything special about this dudou."

"It does seem that way," Chu Liang agreed, a faint smile tugging at his lips as he carefully put it away.

By now, all of the consort's scattered belongings had been thoroughly examined. While they revealed many of her hidden secrets, none seemed to provide a direct clue to the murderer.

Yao Guang hesitated before turning to Chu Liang. "What should we investigate next?"

Chu Liang fell silent, thinking for a moment before replying, "It seems the only clue we can use is that token."

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Chu Liang, Li Chengfeng, and Yao Guang once again entered the Night Dragon Hall, stepping before the emperor.

The emperor gazed at the items laid out on the table, lost in thought.

The imperial city map, the bottle with the poison, the Spell-Disrupting Golden Hairpin, the token, the dudou...

Earlier, Chu Liang had presented the consort's belongings, exposing her hidden intent to assassinate the emperor.

His most beloved consort had harbored malicious intent all along, scheming to take his life. While the emperor had long suspected that her identity was not as simple as it seemed, he hadn't expected her plans to have advanced this far.

After a long silence, the emperor sighed and said, "Enough. She has died; there's no point dwelling on it. Issue an order to investigate how the consort was selected and who she was closely associated with. These people must have been plotting for a long time to extend their reach into the palace. Even if we cannot uproot them entirely, we must sever this hand that has now reached into the palace."

"Your Majesty," Chu Liang interjected, "those connected to the consort may not all be within the palace. Some could be operating from outside."

"Oh?" The emperor raised his eyes, his gaze sharp. "Are you suggesting there is a path linking the imperial palace to the outside world?"

"The small lake in the consort's garden has an underground waterway that leads directly outside the imperial city," Chu Liang explained. "The consort often sat by the lake. It's possible she was using it to communicate with her allies."

"I see." The emperor nodded thoughtfully before turning to Warrior Lao. "Go. Inspect the area around the lake. If you find no activity after waiting for a while, seal it off completely."

Hearing this, Chu Liang's eyes flickered as a realization struck him. He seemed to understand what the fake consort had been doing by the lakeside after committing murder.

However, since the matter wasn't fully resolved, voicing his guess wouldn't help just yet.

"Your Majesty summoned me?" At that moment, Yao Dengxian strode into the hall and knelt before the emperor.

"Warrior Yao, rise quickly," the emperor said calmly. "I summoned you to clarify something. The token of the Dragon-Keeping Pool is supposed to be carried by you personally. How did it end up in the consort's hands? She must have used it to enter the Dragon-Keeping Pool and conspire with the Golden Dragon to plan its escape."

Yao Dengxian's brow furrowed deeply as he stared at the token. "This token..."

"Did she ask you for it?" the emperor asked again.

"Someone did request the token from me," Yao Dengxian said, "but it was not the imperial consort."

He paused briefly before finally revealing, "It was the Second Prince."

Chapter 612: A Test

"The Second Prince?"

If anyone else had taken the token from Yao Dengxian, it might not have raised suspicion. But the Second Prince? That was truly unexpected.

Everyone in the palace knew that Empress Wu viewed the consort as a thorn in her side.

The Second Prince was Empress Wu's actual son.

How did his token end up with the consort?

Without hesitation, the emperor ordered the Second Prince to be summoned. It wasn't long before he arrived, stepping into the hall with urgency.

"Father," he greeted, pausing as he felt the oppressive atmosphere in the room. His apprehension grew immediately.

"Was it you who took the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch's token?" the emperor asked bluntly.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the Second Prince replied without hesitation. "I borrowed it from Warrior Yao the other day. I went to the Dragon-Keeping Pool seeking for a cultivation legacy but had no success. I thought I'd try again a few times and didn't want to trouble Warrior Yao repeatedly, so he lent me the token, saying I could return it after a few days. When my attempts proved fruitless, I instructed a palace attendant to return it."

"But the token was not returned to the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch," the emperor said gravely.

"Instead, it ended up in the consort's hands. And because of that, the Golden Dragon escaped yesterday."

"What?" The Second Prince was startled and immediately knelt. "I had no knowledge of this matter. I will summon the palace attendant at once for questioning."

The emperor exchanged a glance with Warrior Lao, who immediately understood. He promptly ordered someone to bring in the palace attendant who had acted on the Second Prince's behalf.

An important item like the token wouldn't have been entrusted to a mere underling. The person in question was the head eunuch of the Second Prince's house, a figure of considerable standing.

Chu Liang stood quietly to the side, quietly thinking that this inquiry was unlikely to yield any meaningful answers.

For powerful cultivators, it was easy to act without leaving any trace. This was precisely why solving the consort's case had been so difficult.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before the news returned.

"Your Majesty, the palace attendant who returned the token for the Second Prince has gone missing," Warrior Lao reported quietly.

"When did this happen?" The emperor's expression darkened.

"It seems it happened last night. We've just looked for him and found that he hasn't been seen all day," Warrior Lao replied.

"These people have so much power in the palace, killing whomever they wish!" the emperor muttered grimly. "Whose subordinate is he? Summon his superior immediately!"

"He's Cheng Hu's godson," Warrior Lao replied.

Cheng Hu, one of the Four Great Warriors, was a trusted confidant of Empress Wu. He had previously had a minor clash with Chu Liang, which ended up with him being beaten up by Di Nufeng.

The emperor waved his sleeve and ordered them all to be summoned.

But this time, it wasn't only Cheng Hu who appeared; he came with a full entourage. Leading the group was none other than the empress herself, draped in an elegant palace gown and exuding this dignified aura.

"Mei'er, why have you come?" The emperor's tense expression softened slightly upon seeing her.

From her days as the crown princess to her current position as empress, she and the emperor had shared a deep, unshakable bond for decades. No number of favored consorts could ever threaten her position.

"With such a major incident happening in the palace, how could I not come to witness it myself?" Empress Wu said.

As soon as she arrived, a palace attendant swiftly placed a chair beside the emperor's. The emperor and empress sat together, side by side, facing the gathered officials and guests.

"Cheng Hu, the head eunuch of the Second Prince's household is your godson. Do you know where he is?" Empress Wu was the first to ask the question.

"Your Majesties," Cheng Hu replied, his usual arrogance replaced with utmost deference in the presence of the emperor and empress. "Although Cheng Lu is my godson, since he became head of the household, I've had little contact with him and am unaware of his daily activities."

Looking at Cheng Hu's expression and behavior, the emperor knew that there was no way that no matter how many questions they asked, they wouldn't get any useful answers from him.

He turned to Chu Liang and asked, "There's still over two hours left. Where do you plan to investigate next?"

With all the leads exhausted, where else could I go? Chu Liang thought to himself.

His mind raced. Though there was still time, every clue had led to a dead end, leaving him feeling uncertain.

He clenched his teeth and resolved, If it comes to that, I'll have to take a gamble!

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In response to the emperor's inquiry, Chu Liang pulled out the imperial decree and asked, "Your Majesty, you said that anyone, inside or outside the imperial city, who sees this decree must respond to me as if they were responding to you. Is that still valid?"

"Of course it is," the emperor replied, puzzled as to why this question was asked.

"So, apart from you, Your Majesty, everyone present here must obey my orders, correct?" Chu Liang pressed further.

"Yes," the emperor affirmed once more.

Chu Liang nodded, then turned his gaze toward the empress and suddenly said, "Then I must ask Her Majesty the Empress to stand up!"

"Huh?" Everyone present was taken aback.

Even the emperor himself wouldn't have spoken to the empress in such a commanding tone.

The empress was taken aback.

Even the emperor jolted back in shock and quickly added, "The decree grants you authority equal to mine, but only for matters concerning the investigation. Anything unrelated is not permitted."

Especially not right in front of me, the emperor mused.

"Rest assured, Your Majesty, the questioning that is about to happen is directly relevant to the case. However, since the Empress is seated beside you, I cannot proceed without the utmost respect. Therefore, I request that she step down from the dais," Chu Liang said.

"Hah." Empress Wu smiled faintly, rising with grace. As she walked slowly toward Chu Liang, she asked, "Imperial Younger Brother, do you suspect me?"

Do I suspect? You don't say? Ever since this case surfaced, the entire palace knows that you are the prime suspect.

But after uncovering the consort's cause of death and true identity, the case had become even more confusing. Still, Chu Liang had a bold theory of his own.

"May I ask, Your Majesty, where were you at dawn today?" Chu Liang asked, his voice steady.

"Of course, I was resting in the palace. The attendants here can testify," Empress Wu replied.

"Them?" Chu Liang gestured toward the attendants behind her.

"Hm?" Empress Wu turned to look over her shoulder.

Suddenly, Chu Liang raised his hand, and three streaks of starlight shot toward the empress from point-blank range.

With a flash of movement, the empress evaded the attack with a speed that seemed almost like teleportation, narrowly dodging the streaks of starlight.

Sizzle.

The three streaks of starlight struck the wall with a sharp hiss, the impact releasing a faint, eerie sound. While no visible damage was done, they left behind a strange, blood-like residue.

"How dare you!" Cheng Hu roared, fury flashing across his face. As he spoke, he launched a palm strike toward Chu Liang.

Warrior Lao stepped forward, shielding the emperor, while Yao Dengxian also prepared to intervene. Chu Liang's sudden attack on the empress had caught everyone off guard.

Seeing that he was about to be subdued, Chu Liang spoke quickly, his voice ringing out across the hall, "As we all know, Her Majesty the Empress is not particularly gifted and has a low cultivation level. So how does she possess such agile reflexes?!"

His loud question jolted everyone present. The way Empress Wu had narrowly dodged the streaks of blood-like starlight at such close range had been quite impressive.

Yao Dengxian sneered coldly but made no move to act. However, Cheng Hu, who had just attacked Chu Liang, suddenly staggered back, his face contorted in pain as his blood surged chaotically within him. He took three unsteady steps backward, clearly unable to advance any further.

With an eighth-realm cultivator present, it was clear that the situation would not escalate into complete chaos.

"What is the meaning of this?" the emperor demanded, his voice rising with authority. "Burning down Yuhua Palace was already a serious transgression, but I allowed it in the name of the investigation. Now you act so recklessly here in the Night Dragon Hall—what justification do you have for this?"

"There is one item I didn't present earlier because I was waiting for the right moment to use it," Chu Liang explained. "Among the consort's belongings was a vial of Spirit Fox Blood, capable of unraveling the secret art of the Spirit Fox Illusory Transformation. It seems Her Majesty was particularly fearful of it just now?"

The empress's gaze darkened.

"Your sudden actions startled me, as they would anyone," she said coldly. "Do you suspect that I am an imposter?"

"That's impossible," the emperor insisted, shaking his head with firm conviction. "The empress and I have supported each other for decades. I would recognize her in an instant. No disguise, no matter how perfect, could fool me."

"Your Majesty..." Chu Liang began. He paused for a moment before continuing, "What if the disguise began before you even met her? What if the one who supported you all these years was never real from the start?"

"This..." The emperor was suddenly at a loss for words.

He remembered his early days as one of the many princes, not particularly favored. Back then, the daughter of the Wu Family had married him. When he was named crown prince, she had become the crown princess; and when he ascended the throne, she had become the empress.

If that were the case, he would never have been able to tell. However, the possibility of such a meticulous plot, spanning decades, seemed too elaborate and too intricate. More troubling still, the empress had shown no signs of inconsistency in her role all these years.

Under normal circumstances, Chu Liang would never have considered such an extreme possibility. But recent events—rumors about the empress, the method of killing with Dreamweave Breath-Sealing Fragrance, and the connection to the Spirit Fox Blood—pulled at his thoughts.

Threads of suspicion wove together in his mind, forming an intricate web, all leading back to one figure at the center.

The clock was ticking. If he didn't act quickly and resort to extreme measures to confirm his theory, he would have little chance of uncovering the truth.

Seeing how the emperor reacted, Empress Wu started laughing instead of showing anger. "Your Majesty, are you doubting me as well?" Empress Wu asked. "Fine, let him use this so-called Spirit Fox Blood and see if I am real or not!"

None of the onlookers had foreseen the situation escalating to this point. Yet without conducting the test, there would be no way to conclude today's events.

The emperor glanced at Warrior Lao, who immediately understood and stepped forward. Taking the vial of Spirit Fox Blood from Chu Liang's hand, Warrior Lao turned toward the empress with a respectful bow.

"Your Majesty, I apologize in advance," he said.

With a fluid motion, Warrior Lao extended his finger, allowing a drop of the Spirit Fox Blood to gather at its tip. He then carefully reached toward the empress's forehead.

Swish.

The droplet landed softly on her forehead, like a drop of red vermilion. But as it touched her skin, nothing remarkable happened. The empress's appearance remained unchanged.

"Phew..." The emperor sighed, clearly relieved. "It goes to show—how could the empress possibly be an imposter?"

Chu Liang was the only one who looked slightly disappointed.

"Hmph," Empress Wu snorted coldly. "Since I am no longer a suspect, I wish to leave and not remain here to be humiliated any further. May I have Your Majesty's permission?"

Though phrased as a question, her tone was unmistakably sharp with anger. Without waiting for a response, she turned and began striding toward the hall's exit.

As she passed by Yao Dengxian, the old eunuch suddenly spoke up, "Your Majesty, please wait."

"Hm?" Empress Wu turned to him. "What is it, Warrior Yao?"

"This servant dares not offend Your Majesty," Yao Dengxian replied, his aged eyes burning with intensity. "However, I must trouble Your Majesty to remove the concentration of foundational qi from your forehead so that we can test it again."

The empress's tricks might have fooled the emperor and Warrior Lao, whose cultivation levels were similar. But to Yao Dengxian, whose cultivation level was much higher, such feeble deceptions were laughable.

The drop of Spirit Fox Blood had never truly touched her forehead! It had been blocked by the concentration of foundational qi she had gathered, which she had integrated with a subtle spell to conceal any discrepancies.

Upon hearing his words, Empress Wu first chuckled, then, in an instant, her body blurred as she leapt into the air, moving with the speed of a gust of wind, almost as though she had teleported. In the blink of an eye, she was in midair!

Swish—

But Yao Dengxian extended his hand with precision, grasping at the air. Immediately, the sound of thunder cracked through the hall, and the sky seemed to warp as her fleeing figure was yanked back into the great hall by his powerful palm!

Thud.

The empress fell heavily to the ground, back in the great hall. As Yao Dengxian's thunder technique coursed through her, her divine ability lost its effect, and the drop of Spirit Fox Blood finally made contact with her skin.

In that instant, an entirely unfamiliar face appeared in the great hall!

Chapter 613: This is Goodbye

As the flowers faded the late evening, their brilliance drifted away.

In a decaying world, fate had become unbearable.

A woman in a palace dress sat quietly in the desolate hall. The once lively and luxurious empress's chambers were now devoid of maids, with not even a single candle lit. As the sky darkened, shadows shrouded the room.

The emperor stepped in slowly, each step heavy with burden. Though he had been at the seventh realm for years and even though he no longer had the time to focus on cultivation right now, he remained far stronger than that of an ordinary person. Yet, it was the first time he felt such physical exhaustion.

Within a day, he realized that the two women he loved the most each had ulterior motives. While his affection for the imperial consort was merely physical, he had genuinely considered the empress as his lifelong companion.

To think even she was an imposter.

At this moment, as he stood before her, he couldn't even recognize the person before him.

The empress had always been graceful and slightly plump, yet the woman before him bore sharp, thin features and her face devoid of warmth. Politely speaking, she was not very attractive.

Even as the emperor could not recognize the person before him, his thoughts churned.

He gazed at her white attire, which was what she would always wear, and her expression, which appeared icy and distant.

After a long silence, he finally spoke, "You have been with me since I was still a prince, back when I held no power. How did you know I would become the crown prince and ascend the throne? If I didn't, wouldn't you have sided with the wrong person?"

"The Celestial Master can see everyone's destiny." This most familiar stranger before him finally spoke, "You were destined to become emperor. I knew it even before you did."

Before the emperor's arrival, she had refused to utter even a single word.

"So, it turns out in the end that you are really a member of the Celestial Charm Sect." The emperor took a deep breath and held it for a long time.

When Li Chengfeng had mentioned it earlier, he had been unwilling to believe it.

This face was unfamiliar to him, but the senior officials of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau recognized it. The last time Xiao Wuyan had been personally apprehended by the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner, she had reverted to her original appearance after being captured—and it was identical to this one.

Earlier, Li Chengfeng had personally gone to the Celestial Northern Prison to check, confirming that Xiao Wuyan was still detained there. Even if the woman before him was not Xiao Wuyan, she was undoubtedly closely connected to her.

Yet, even so, the emperor held onto a sliver of hope.

Until she spoke the words herself.

If her origins were from elsewhere, he might still have hope of sparing her. But if she was a member of the Celestial Charm Sect, there would be no chance for redemption.

"Your Majesty, you need not hold onto any kindness toward me. You may claim that a member of the Celestial Charm Sect assassinated the empress, disguised herself as the empress, but was exposed and executed by you," she said, shaking her head. "Only Hai'er is innocent. Over the years, I have never revealed the truth to him. I hope you can treat him as usual. Even if you don't let him ascend the throne, please don't let my actions affect him..."

"Rest assured," the emperor interrupted her. "Regardless of who his mother is, he will always be my child."

The Hai'er she referred to was naturally the Second Prince.

After a pause, the woman finally said, "Thank you."

The emperor then asked, "What is your real name?"

"Xiao Wuyin[1]," the woman replied. "The Xiao Wuyan who was captured earlier is my twin sister."

"You two certainly have mastered transformation arts," the emperor sneered, then leaned on a nearby chair as if tired from standing, and gently sat down. "Tell me about yourself."

"I..." Xiao Wuyin hesitated before continuing. "I was born a daughter of the Xiao family and prepared from childhood to cultivate the ancestral Spirit Fox Illusory Transformation technique. But when I was twelve, the Xiao family was annihilated... The Celestial Master saved my sister and me."

She recounted slowly, from her childhood to joining the Celestial Charm Sect, event by event. Many had no connection to the imperial court, yet the emperor listened quietly, showing no impatience.

"That year, the Celestial Master suddenly announced an important task that one of us sisters had to undertake, which could mean losing our freedom for many years," Xiao Wuyin continued. "As the elder sister, I naturally volunteered."

"I never imagined that the task would involve replacing the daughter of the Wu family and marrying a prince of the reigning dynasty."

"Since the court upheaval eighty years ago, the imperial court has strictly scrutinized those entering the palace. At the time, you had already established a residence outside, which was much easier to infiltrate than the palace itself."

"The Celestial Master said it was to set up a long-term plan."

"Heh." The emperor chuckled again. "Truly a scheme carefully crafted with meticulous effort."

"I spent several months secretly observing the Wu family's daughter before replacing her on the day before she was to marry you, thus becoming your wife. The Celestial Master merely instructed me to live in peace, rarely assigning me any tasks. Years would pass before they contacted me, and only my sister kept in touch with me."

"My life suddenly became tranquil. For decades, I almost forgot my true identity. Many times, I would wake up thinking I was truly the empress of the dynasty."

At this point, she gave a bitter smile.

"Three years ago, when the Celestial Master ordered me to arrange for someone to enter the palace, I finally realized that my identity would never see the light of day. I almost refused at the time, but my sister and my identity... all of it was in their hands. I didn't dare. Having controlled the imperial palace for years, it was naturally easy for me to bring a woman in."

"Gong Yu'er?" the emperor asked.

"Yes, you indeed took a liking to her at first glance," Xiao Wuyin raised her eyes. "The Celestial Master instructed us to create the illusion of palace strife, making everyone think we were at odds. But in truth, the fights were merely the schemes of the Celestial Charm Sect."

The emperor held his hand to his forehead, appearing somewhat unable to accept it.

"Afterward, they repeatedly targeted the Wu Family, intending to mislead the court into thinking that the Celestial Charm Sect sought to weaken the Wu family and my factions. This, in turn, strengthened my position."

"It was very effective," the emperor said. "If not for this recent blunder, you would have succeeded."

"Blunder?" Xiao Wuyin chuckled upon hearing this. "The Celestial Master doesn't make blunders. What happened today is because I no longer share the same goal as them."

"Oh?" The emperor turned his gaze back to her.

"Ever since my sister was captured, I have been struggling," Xiao Wuyin said, her eyes drifting to the palace ceiling as she spoke in a daze. "I have lived in the palace far longer than I ever did in the Celestial Charm Sect. I am only attached to my sister, but now she is in the Celestial Northern Prison. Why should I continue helping them?"

She looked the emperor in the eye again. "And the relationship we've shared as husband and wife all these years... it wasn't fake."

The emperor silently shifted his gaze elsewhere.

Xiao Wuyin continued saying, "The Celestial Master had been plotting for years, and when it was finally time to act, he began contacting me more frequently, replacing my messenger with the palace consort. However, I have many spies in the palace, so it was easy to discover how the Celestial Charm Sect was passing messages to her.

"I once considered killing the palace consort to become a true empress and sever all ties with the Celestial Charm Sect," Xiao Wuyin continued. "But on that very day, I received a letter from the Celestial Master, instructing me to prepare to destroy something.

"Then, the real Wu Family daughter's corpse was dug up from the bottom of the lake. They had preserved her body all these years, which sent chills down my spine. The Celestial Master was demonstrating his power, showing me that he could still destroy me with ease if he wished.

"In recent days, I've helped them place many people in the palace. Although they didn't inform me, I learned from the palace consort that a major plan was to be launched during the Qinghong Banquet, and it included an assassination attempt on you."

"So, you killed her and dumped her body at Qinghong Aviary to stop the banquet?" the emperor asked.

At this point, the situation had become clear.

"Yes," Xiao Wuyin admitted. "I didn't dare explain it to you, so I used this method to stop the Qinghong Banquet and trigger a thorough investigation of the palace, giving me the chance to eliminate all the people the Celestial Charm Sect had planted."

"You were still trying to protect me?" The emperor's tone carried a hint of mockery.

"I can't tell anymore whether I wanted to protect you or myself," Xiao Wuyin sighed. "But such is life—when one does something, the reasons are not always clear."

"If your plan had succeeded, with the palace consort discovered before the Qinghong Banquet, the banquet was put to a pause, and the palace would be thoroughly investigated..." The emperor mused, "It wouldn't have been a bad outcome."

"Unfortunately..." Xiao Wuyin said, "there were still things I couldn't foresee."

She could never have predicted that the imperial guardian would bring his daughter to Qinghong Aviary that day to steal the Qinghong birds and stumble upon the corpse of the imperial consort... nor could she have foreseen that the Di Nufeng's disciple would piece the clues together and trace them back to her in just over two hours.

"If not for Chu Liang, this might have all passed unnoticed," the emperor said.

"He was another miscalculation in the Celestial Master's plan," Xiao Wuyin said. "In his predictions, the ones entering the palace at this time were supposed to be people from the Penglai Supreme Sect, and the person the Golden Dragon sought should have been Yang Shenlong."

"Isn't he supposed to see everyone's destiny?" The emperor sneered.

"Perhaps... not everyone and not at all times," Xiao Wuyin said with a self-deprecating laugh. "Take me, for instance—he didn't predict me correctly, did he?"

"If everything went as he predicted, the world would already be his, and they wouldn't have failed eighty years ago," the emperor said coldly.

"Perhaps," Xiao Wuyin said. "He prides himself on being able to predict the hearts of humans, but he could never truly understand the feelings experienced by humans."

What followed was a long silence.

The two sat silently—one on the chair, the other on the ground—until the sound of drums and music echoed from afar.

"The Qinghong Banquet is about to begin," the emperor said as he stood up. "Mei... heh, how should I address you?"

"Call me Xiao Wuyin," the woman said with a sorrowful smile. "We, the daughters of the Xiao Family, were voiceless and faceless from the moment we were born.[2]... We were destined to have nothing of our own, living under someone else's identity...

"Now that it's come to this, I wish to be myself."

"Very well," the emperor replied, nodding in agreement. Then he said, "Xiao Wuyin, I will have your words verified. If you are not lying, I will give you a chance to see your sister."

Xiao Wuyin stood up as well, stepped forward, and, as if it were a normal day, adjusted the emperor's dragon robe collar and sleeves.

In a soft voice, she said, "I am at the end of my road and can no longer accompany you. The future is fraught with storms; I only wish for Your Majesty's safety."

Chapter 614: The Start of the Banquet

On the way back to the palace where the team of the Mount Shu Sect dwelled, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner said leisurely to Chu Liang, "We owe it to you for what happened this time. Who could have expected that the empress would actually be a member of the Celestial Charm Sect? However, this must remain confidential."

"I understand," Chu Liang replied.

"The Golden Dragon and its Dragon Orb are now yours," the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner said, raising his hand to reveal the golden orb and the Little Golden Dragon swimming within his palm. "You saved it this time, so it will surely remember you for this."

"You're asking me to set it free?" Chu Liang asked.

"Once you leave the palace, you may handle it as you see fit," said the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner as he turned his hand and took out a jade bowl, sealing the Little Golden Dragon inside. "When the time comes, break the jade bowl to release it."

"Thank you, Imperial Supervisory Commissioner," Chu Liang said with a smile.

With this, he could bring the Little Golden Dragon back to Mount Shu and ask if it was willing to stay. If it agreed, it would certainly be a great boon to Mount Shu.

After all, the fate of a sect could not compare to the fate of a dynasty, and it wasn't easy to attract a celestial beast.

"The Golden Dragon has safeguarded the dynasty's fate for years, contributing to the land and its people," said the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner. "When Yao Dengxian seized the Golden Dragon's teachings of Dao, I found it hard to accept. However, he has risen to power and remains loyal to His Majesty, working tirelessly over the years. Stripping him of his Great Dao now would seem unreasonable. Properly settling this little dragon would be a way to give it closure."

From his tone, Chu Liang gathered that it wouldn't be particularly difficult to strip Yao Dengxian of his control of the Great Dao of Cloud Dominion.

After all, instead of something like "I am not capable," he said it would seem unreasonable.

So he curiously asked, "Are there differences in strength between the various Great Daos?"

"Of course there are. This is something I should explain to you," the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner replied patiently, as he had always done with Chu Liang. "Generally, Great Daos with even higher difficulty in ascension would have greater combat power. For instance, the three Great Daos of Swords require practitioners to fight their way through countless sword experts and possess unparalleled perception. As a result, their slaying techniques are always top-notch... and this is not me bragging."

In truth, he didn't need to add that statement—Chu Liang already knew the old man had no need to boast. The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner of the Yu Dynasty could be regarded as the actual Eminent One who held sway over the nation.

If one were to name the strongest experts of the current era, he would certainly be on the list. How could someone like that be ordinary or mediocre?

"Some Great Daos focus more on profound abilities and are not particularly suited for combat. Although no one at the eighth realm could be considered weak, a duel between equals would immediately reveal their shortcomings. The Great Dao of Cloud Dominion is an example of this. It excels in changing the weather conditions to make people's lives better and my Great Dao of Tai'a cannot compare in that regard."

The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner didn't say the rest, but Chu Liang could infer it himself.

In terms of combat, the Great Dao of Tai'a was undoubtedly much stronger.

"The depth of understanding and cultivation level in a Great Dao also influences combat strength at the eighth realm. Take Venerable Wen Yuan of your sect, for instance. His Great Dao of Primordial Chaos is not one known for its combat prowess, yet his profound cultivation and mastery allow him to rival top-tier experts. This is why he could face the True Form of Ksitigarbha barehanded when the Mount Shu Sect was under attack by the Dark King Sect. This itself speaks volumes."

When mentioning Venerable Wen Yuan, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner's tone carried great admiration.

This wasn't the first time Chu Liang had seen such reverence. Many powerful figures admired Venerable Wen Yuan, believing that supporting the Mount Shu Sect was an immense burden that far exceeded the capabilities of his Great Dao.

"Of course, the greatest influence on combat power comes from legendary artifacts. If someone wields one of the top ten artifacts and attains the Heavenly Origin, the gaps in cultivation and comprehension can then be easily bridged. This is one reason the sects ranked in the Terrestrial Ten changed often, while the immortal sects in the Divine Nine remained the same as always."

Chu Liang had heard rumors about this before.

"The court establishes the Terrestrial Ten, and the Divine Nine establish the court." This saying had long circulated in the immortal realm.

Through the passage of time, the immortal sects in the Divine Nine remained strong because of their legendary artifacts. However, a sect with just one eighth-realm cultivator could still dominate the land of the nine provinces.

"With your talent, ascending to the seventh realm shouldn't be an issue," the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner continued. "But you must be especially careful when choosing your Great Dao for the seventh realm. Although the Dao Attainment Realm allows for the study of other Great Daos, eighty percent of The cultivators who have attained the Heaven Origin experts became the Dao Master of the Great Dao that they comprehended upon when they entered the seventh realm."

"If you wish to become the strongest, you can't take the easy route. Choosing a simple Great Dao to comprehend now may mean no hope of advancing to the eighth realm later. As for the Great Dao of Severing the Void that you have comprehended, it is a powerful Great Dao. But ascending with this Great Dao would mean that you would have to fight the members of the Endless Sword Sect for control to ascend to the eighth realm. That would be extremely difficult.

"When you reach the sixth realm, you should start considering these things. That way, when you reach the pinnacle of the sixth realm, you won't end up wasting any time."

His advice to Chu Liang was thorough and all-encompassing. The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner was really treating Chu Liang as if he were his own junior.

Chu Liang was deeply moved and said, "Thank you, Imperial Supervisory Commissioner, for your guidance. I have truly learned much. You have helped me so much, and I have no way to repay you. I heard you have no kids. How about I care for you in your old age? We can become sworn brothers —"

The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner's response was short.

"Get lost."

...

Joking around with the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner was all in good fun. Since Chu Liang had already sworn brotherhood with the emperor, it wouldn't be appropriate to recognize anyone as his godfather.

However, asking the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner to become sworn brothers with him would be wrong in terms of the generational hierarchy.

However, since he really had nothing else to offer the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner in gratitude, Chu Liang merely joked and laughed it off before returning to the palace resided by the team from the Mount Shu Sect.

As soon as he entered, he saw Di Nufeng sitting with her arms crossed, a sulky expression on her face.

Meanwhile, Wang Xuanling sat on the other side, his face dark with anger.

It was obvious—they were at it again.

Chu Liang had seen such scenes countless times growing up and was no longer surprised.

Not daring to approach them directly, he first tugged on Jiang Yuebai's sleeve and asked softly, "What happened?"

Jiang Yuebai replied, "Your esteemed teacher wants to attend the Qinghong Banquet and suggested replacing Senior Uncle Wang as Mount Shu Sect's representative to lead the team to the imperial hall."

"How is that even possible?" Chu Liang said.

There'd be a miracle if Old Wang agreed to that.

Unlike Di Nufeng, who had already attended the Qinghong Banquet once, Old Wang hadn't tasted it yet. Although he had participated in the Assembly of Immortal Sects in his youth, he never had the chance to win the honor and dine there.

Now that he finally had the chance to attend as the leader of the team, there was no way he would give it up.

"Senior Uncle Wang naturally refused, so your esteemed teacher suggested having two leaders," Jiang Yuebai continued.

Heh, that must have been her true intention, right?

First, propose something completely unacceptable, so that people could compromise on something more reasonable.

"Looks like Senior Uncle Wang didn't agree either?" Chu Liang asked.

"Exactly," Jiang Yuebai nodded. "So now your esteemed teacher plans to drag you along, form a separate team, and head to the imperial hall on your own. She's planning to establish another Mount Shu Sect!"

...

At the same time, outside the imperial city.

The overcast sky cleared by evening, and many fish surfaced to breathe. Among them was a particularly chubby koi.

The riverside was sparsely populated, with only an old man sitting there, gazing at the sky with a calm expression.

"Xiao Wuyin has indeed betrayed us. She killed Gong Yu'er, and the people we planted in the palace are being purged," the chubby koi said in a human voice. "Fortunately, you prepared two escape routes for me to get away."

"People are bound to one another by ties. After Wuyan was captured, our ties to her were severed. I don't blame her for turning against us. Even now, her contributions are undeniable," the old man said softly.

"Celestial Master, your schemes are beyond her comprehension," the chubby koi flattered. "She thought she had disrupted his plan, not realizing she was merely a part of yours."

"That is their fate, one I am compelled to follow," the old man said, shaking his head. "If it were possible, I would wish for none of the Celestial Charm Sect's followers to die or leave. Together, we could enter the era of chaos and separation. But alas, unforeseen changes always occur."

"Speaking of unforeseen elements, that boy from Mount Shu Sect is one," the chubby koi said. "If not for him, Xiao Wuyin might not have been exposed so soon. Had the Golden Dragon chosen Yang Shenlong, the Penglai Supreme Sect would certainly have kept it, raising it alongside their Azure Dragon to one day challenge the court, perhaps even helping it reclaim Yao Dengxian's Great Dao. But instead, the Golden Dragon chose Chu Liang. While he also won the Assembly of Immortal Sects, by some twist of fate perfectly replacing Yang Shenlong, the results still fell a bit short."

"There aren't many whose fates I cannot see, but that boy from the Mount Shu Sect is one of them," the old man said, a faint smile crossing his face. "If he survives, he may become a force against the era of chaos and separation. His fate intrigues me."

"Perhaps it's because he's about to die and his fate has already been severed?" the chubby koi said in a chilling tone.

"You should return now. By my estimation..." The old man turned to gaze toward the imperial city. "The Qinghong Banquet should be starting."

Chapter 615: Then Stay Behind Me

The Qinghong Banquet was held in the main hall of the imperial palace. Two hours before the feast began, civil and military officials had already arrived to prepare for entry into the imperial city. This grand event, held once every twelve years, carried greater significance and grandeur than even the New Year's palace banquets for both the imperial family and officials.

However, this time, the atmosphere in the palace felt grim, with an unmistakable sense of unease. The more cautious officials avoided looking around and walked silently, while the bolder ones whispered inquiries, though the answers they received were vague.

Within the palace, a purge was underway. Xiao Wuyin had revealed the complete list of spies that the Celestial Charm Sect had planted. The Night Dragon Hall guards were fully mobilized, executing any resistance on the spot. Cleanup crews followed closely behind, restoring the surroundings to their pristine state in the blink of an eye.

In just two hours, the entire operation ended.

By the time the officials entered the grand hall, all they saw was a scene of opulent splendor.

The main hall of the imperial city was vast, divided into two tiers of steps. The first broad step beneath the dragon throne was reserved for the winning immortal sects to dine. Below that was the hall where nobles and officials, while not partaking in the meat of the Qinghong bird, enjoyed their fine wine and delicacies.

The imperial family and officials took their seats first, followed by the team from the Mount Shu Sect, which was next to enter the imperial hall.

Due to recent events, Chu Liang had been temporarily reassigned and was unfamiliar with the Qinghong Banquet's ceremonial procedures. The palace attendants responsible for this had anticipated some difficulties but never expected the source of the problem to be someone else entirely.

"Esteemed cultivators of the Mount Shu Sect, please follow me," Warrior Lao personally arrived to escort the group into the hall.

Then two groups stood up in the hall.

On the left was Di Nufeng, leading Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai.

On the right was Wang Xuanling, accompanied by Xu Ziyang and Ling Ao.

"Um..." Warrior Lao hesitated to point out that there was an extra Di Nufeng and could only say, "Is there an extra person in your group?"

"There's no extra," Di Nufeng declared, waving her hand. "The Mount Shu Sect is splitting into two teams this time."

"We are Mount Shu Team One," Wang Xuanling interjected.

Di Nufeng turned and glared at him. "THEN WE ARE MOUNT SHU TEAM ZERO!"

"Hmph!" Old Wang huffed, flicking his sleeves angrily.

"Hmph!" Di Nufeng retorted, spinning around indignantly.

The two had been arguing over this issue long before Warrior Lao arrived. If they weren't in the palace, they would have started fighting already. Meanwhile, the four juniors behind them stood nervously, too frightened to utter a word.

"Uh..." Warrior Lao wiped the sweat from his forehead and forced a smile. "This is the first time I've heard of a Team Zero and a Team One... Please wait here while I report this to His Majesty."

With that, the old eunuch scurried back to the main hall to inform the emperor of the situation.

By right, as the second-ranked member of the Four Great Warriors and the emperor's personal steward, Warrior Lao's authority in palace affairs surpassed even that of Yao Dengxian. There was no need to bother the emperor about such a matter—especially when the emperor had just endured the betrayal of not one but two wives. The emperor's mood was undoubtedly sour.

Under normal circumstances, Warrior Lao would have simply waved it off, denying the request. After all, the immortal sects had already submitted the number of attendees for the banquet long ago. Since when was it reasonable to add extra people just because they had won the Assembly of Immortal Sects?

But the person trying to join the feast was someone he dared not offend, so he hurried back to report the matter.

"Hah..." The emperor furrowed his brows upon hearing the situation. "This Second Aunt of mine... Forget it, let her be."

"Your Majesty, that would break the tradition that the ancestors has set," Lao Santai reminded him.

"She's closer to our ancestors than I am—go ask her about it!" the emperor said irritably. "I already have enough headaches. Don't trouble me further with this. Oh, and since there's one more person, let's slaughter an extra Qinghong bird for this year's banquet."

"Your Majesty, it takes five people to finish one Qinghong. Do we really need to kill another just for one more person?" Lao Santai asked in shock.

"Five people? Maybe that's enough elsewhere," the emperor chuckled. "Sixty years ago, when I was still young, I clearly remember that no one ate a full meal during that Qinghong Banquet..."

He shook his head. "Enough. This Second Aunt of mine has done great service today. If not for her early discovery of the corpse, the Qinghong Banquet wouldn't have happened at all. Her disciple has also worked hard. One more Qinghong bird is no big deal."

"But this..." Lao Santai hesitated. "If we make an exception and kill an extra Qinghong bird this year, the next Assembly of Immortal Sects..."

"Who would know if you don't tell them?" the Emperor frowned. "The Qinghong bird is only presented briefly before it is divided and served later. Just tell them that this year's Qinghong bird was well-fed so it's nothing weird if it has a bit more meat."

"Understood, Your Majesty," Lao Santai said. "This year's Qinghong bird has been well-raised. A couple of extra legs or wings won't hurt."

As he was about to leave, the emperor suddenly raised his hand and added, "Oh, and for this year's Qinghong Banquet, change the wine to something with less alcohol."

...

Moments later, a long procession of drum music echoed through the square outside the main hall. At the center of the grand parade were two teams, striding forward with pride and vigor.

It was the two teams of the Mount Shu Sect.

The six of them reached the main entrance of the hall, only to be stopped.

Di Nufeng asked, "Hasn't the banquet started? Why won't you let us in?"

"Before the Qinghong Banquet, you must slay the Four Evils," Jiang Yuebai whispered.

"Slay the Four Evils?" Chu Liang asked, puzzled. "What's that?"

"You weren't present when the palace attendants explained earlier. It's part of the Qinghong Banquet ceremony," Ling Ao said. "The four members from the team that won the assembly must slay four types of evil spirits—demon, devil, ghost, and monster—before entering the banquet to showcase the martial virtues of humanity."

Wang Xuanling looked at Di Nufeng. "Your disciple wasn't there during the explanation, but weren't you there?"

Di Nufeng puffed up her chest and raised her head high. "I forgot!"

Chu Liang thought to himself, You don't have to be so proud of that.

Then he leaned over to Jiang Yuebai to quietly inquire further, gradually piecing it all together.

It turned out that this ritual originated from the coming-of-age ceremony of the imperial Xia family, back when they were one of the Three Aristocratic Families and brimming with martial virtue.

During the ceremony, the family would arrange a battle for their disciples, typically against local evil entities or spirits. If the young participant succeeded in slaying the evil, they would return triumphant to a grand victory feast.

Of course, those who failed were granted the honor of burial in the ancestral tomb.

After the Xia family's rise to power and the establishment of the Yu Dynasty, this ritual was incorporated into the Qinghong Banquet's proceedings.

The symbolism was clear: the young heroes who won the Assembly of Immortal Sects were not only victors among their peers but also defenders of humanity that would slay evil spirits to protect their kin.

Naturally, the chosen evil spirits for this ceremony weren't powerful demons requiring life-and-death battles. They were typically recently captured troublemakers of moderate strength, selected and delivered here by the Imperial Supervisory Bureau.

It was a mere formality: slay the evil, enter the hall, and bask in the cheers of civil and military officials lining the grand hall, draped in glory.

As they spoke, the prison carts holding the four evil entities were wheeled in.

In the first cart was a boar demon with one broken tusk, clad in armor. Its crimson eyes glowed fiercely, and it reeked of bloodlust.

"The boar demon ravaged villages and slaughtered innocents on the Western Regions' borders. By its crimes, it deserves execution."

A young eunuch beside the cart read aloud from a scroll.

The second cart held a pitch-black devil ape. It looked seventy percent human but had lost all divine intelligence. Even within the cart, it furiously tore at the surrounding seals.

"The devil ape was created by a diabolical sect cultivator, existing solely to kill. This creature was released into Changling City in the Northern Regions to massacre the people, and disaster was averted only thanks to the timely intervention of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau's cultivators."

The third cart contained a nearly transparent ghostly creature resembling a child in size and stature, with bulging, terrifying eyes and sharp fangs.

"The Human-Faced Xiao is a rare and cunning ghostly entity with a vicious temperament. It caused numerous deaths in the Western Regions and evaded capture for over seventy days before being apprehended by the Imperial Supervisory Bureau."

The fourth cart held a demonic monster that was jet-black in color. It resembled a leopard, but it had four wings and three tails and exuded an imposing presence.

"The Three-Tailed Winged Leopard originally lived in the sea. After coming ashore in the Eastern Regions, it wreaked havoc across more than ten cities before being captured."

After reciting the details of the Four Evils, the young eunuch loudly announced, "Will the four disciples of the winning sect please step forward and slay the Four Evils in turn!"

The first cart was slowly pushed forward. Sensing its impending death, the boar demon began violently ramming the cart, causing loud thuds.

Jiang Yuebai glanced at Chu Liang with her bright eyes. Naturally, the first person to slay an evil and enter the hall should be the champion of the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

To her surprise, Chu Liang gently took her hand and said, "You should go first."

"Hmm?" Jiang Yuebai looked puzzled.

Chu Liang smiled and said, "You are the head disciple of Mount Shu, representing the face of our sect. That so-called champion of the Assembly of Immortal Sects was something you gave to me. I've already enjoyed more than enough glory thanks to you. Without your leadership, winning the immortal sects competition would have been impossible. No matter what, the honor of slaying the first evil and entering the hall first today belongs to you."

Jiang Yuebai smiled faintly. "Alright."

With that, she stepped forward as the seals on the prison cart were released. The boar demon lunged out, roaring and displaying such ferocity.

"Raa—"

But its roar was cut short as a brilliant sword light split it cleanly in two.

Jiang Yuebai, untainted by a speck of dust, floated gracefully into the hall.

The imperial family members and civil and military officials in the hall cheered and applauded her.

However, some were curious as it was unusual for the champion of the assembly not to be the first to enter the hall.

Judging by the earlier scene, not only was Chu Liang a prodigy, but he also displayed remarkable humility, which was such a rare characteristic.

Jiang Yuebai walked the length of the grand hall, ascended the steps, and took her seat, signaling that it was time for the second person to act.

Before that could happen, Chu Liang turned to Xu Ziyang. "Senior Brother Xu, you should be the second to enter."

"How could I possibly?" Xu Ziyang responded immediately. "It's understandable for the head disciple to go first, but among the rest of us, you've contributed the most. Without you, our sect would not have won..."

"Senior Brother Xu!" Chu Liang grasped Xu Ziyang's arm and said earnestly, "You are older than me and have guided me countless times. I do not have a senior brother at my Silver Sword Peak so I've always considered you my own. You are someone I respect the most! If not for you, our sect would not have won at the Assembly of Immortal Sects. Each one of us played a crucial role! No matter what, you must go ahead of me!"

Seeing him so passionate and sincere, Xu Ziyang was deeply moved. He patted Chu Liang's arm and then strode forward confidently.

As the devil ape was released from its prison cart, Xu Ziyang dispatched it cleanly with a single strike—shing!

This time, his entry into the hall caused even more surprise.

Chu Liang not only yielded to Jiang Yuebai but also to Xu Ziyang? This was no mere humility.

Chu Liang had demonstrated true nobility.

When Chu Liang turned back, Ling Ao opened his mouth to speak. "I—"

Before he could finish, Chu Liang nodded slightly and said, "Then stay behind me."

Chapter 616: The Guardian Ruler of the Celestial Northern Prison

The Human-Faced Xiao wasn't a very powerful ghostly entity, but it was very elusive. It could only form when a series of rare coincidences occurred. This creature was notoriously cunning, making it extremely difficult for people to capture it even if they encountered one.

Chu Liang had put up high bounties for the creature in places like Taotie City and Red Cotton Peak, but the bounties were never fulfilled. After all, whether a Human-Faced Xiao could be caught was entirely dependent on luck. Some people had the luck to encounter one, and some simply didn't. It wasn't worth the effort to actively hunt for them.

To Chu Liang's surprise, he had found one in the imperial palace. It was truly like searching high and low for something, only to stumble upon it effortlessly.

For Chu Liang, slaying a Human-Faced Xiao was far more profitable than any major evil spirit. The enchanted tools that the White Pagoda gave him had their limits, but he could get limitless returns

from a Large-Headed Doll. As long as Chu Liang supplied the Large-Headed Dolls with enough pills, they could operate indefinitely.

Chu Liang slayed the Human-Faced Xiao and entered the hall. He received even louder cheers and applause than the previous two members of his team.

Just as everyone thought the Qinghong Banquet was about to officially begin, Ling Ao entered the hall too.

That was when the officials present remembered that there had been one more person left on the team. They had just assumed the Four Evils Ceremony was over when Chu Liang entered. Consequently, they gave Ling Ao some perfunctory applause, marking the successful conclusion of the Four Evils Ceremony.

Once all four members of the Mount Shu Sect team were seated, the banquet began with some appetizers, accompanied by a performance of song and dance. This time, the musician was Xue Lingxue from the South Melody Conservatory. Originally, it was supposed to be Shen Qingyan, but she had been attacked and injured, forcing the musician to be replaced at the last minute.

Chu Liang, of course, had no interest in watching the performance. Even in that crowded hall, he saw no reason to delay rewarding himself.

He had already sunk his divine sense into the White Pagoda space to greet his most beloved Human-Faced Xiao. Its imprint hovered inside an iron cell, and Chu Liang eagerly pressed "Refine."

Boom!

There was a flash of red light, and a familiar glow floated out. Chu Liang carefully caught it in his hands.

[Transcendent Form Puppet: This puppet is used to refine the host's transcendent form and aid in their cultivation. It consumes one Primordial Spirit Pill during the day and two at night, enabling continuous cultivation throughout the day. All developments made toward forming a transcendent form will be transferred to the host. Please be aware that this puppet is to be used strictly as a cultivation aid, and there is a risk of damage if used inappropriately.]

It's this familiar description and this familiar feeling again.

After receiving the information contained in the cluster of light, Chu Liang felt extremely fond of his puppets. The reason was that the innate talents of his corporeal body were only slightly above average. Without the fortuitous encounters he had experienced, he would likely only be on par with Lin Bei, no matter how hard he worked on his cultivation.

Chu Liang's efforts could probably only account for at most 7% of the hard work needed to achieve his current cultivation level. The efforts of the Large-Headed Dolls accounted for the remaining 93%. Without them aiding his cultivation, he wouldn't have had the energy or time to travel extensively. Additionally, his assets would likely be significantly reduced.

Looking at the Large-Headed Dolls circulating qi until clouds of smoke swirled around them, Chu Liang was filled with gratitude.

Keep working hard and circulating qi for me. Every ten years, I'll give you one day off! And you can even schedule it for whenever you want. If you go seventy years without a break, you'll get a seven-day vacation!

Chu Liang placed the new Transcendent Form Puppet on the ground and then pulled out a book he had prepared in advance—The Divine Nine's Profound Mental Cultivation Technique: The Book of the Transcendent Form.

He circulated his qi according to the qi circulation route detailed in the book, imparting the cultivation method for a Transcendent Form to the new doll. Chu Liang was already well-versed in this process.

Even before reaching the fifth realm, he had already obtained fifth-realm foundational qi through his Colorful Doll. His cultivation puppets were always one step ahead of him.

After a while, the new Large-Headed Doll lit up with a brilliant radiance. It circulated its qi using the Divine Nine's Profound Mental Cultivation Technique, cultivating at a pace comparable to Chu Liang's. This meant it would take only a few months for the Transcendent Form Puppet to cultivate a complete transcendent form.

Normally, a fifth-realm cultivator with only above-average talent would take around a year to cultivate a transcendent form, assuming they had sufficient resources and smooth progress. However, the Transcendent Form Puppet could work tirelessly day and night, all year long without ever taking a break. This made the process significantly faster.

Once the puppet's Transcendent Form was complete, Chu Liang would be able to enjoy the benefits of a sixth-realm transcendent form earlier, greatly enhancing all his physical attributes. Then when he advanced to the sixth realm, he would be able to enjoy the benefits of having two transcendent forms.

Chu Liang pondered this for a moment.

I could try figuring out a way to teach the Transcendent Form Puppet a different cultivation technique. I can only cultivate the Divine Nine's Profound Transcendent Form, but the Transcendent Form Puppet doesn't have the same limitation. I may be able to get even better effects if I have two different transcendent forms.

By then, with two ultimate-tier Golden Cores and two different transcendent forms... Well, I don't even dare dreaming that I might be able to defeat opponents of a higher realm than me, but at the very least, I would be unbeatable among those below the seventh realm.

...

While Chu Liang's divine sense was immersed in the White Pagoda's space, a commotion broke out around him, snapping him to attention.

A palace attendant announced in a shrill voice, "The Guardian Ruler has arrived!"

A towering man stepped in through the doorway. He was tall and well-built, with long, dexterous arms like those of an ape and a muscular lower back like that of a wolf. His wide face was highlighted by a high forehead and long sword-like eyebrows, bearing a striking resemblance to the reigning emperor. These were facial features that commonly ran in the Xia Family.

The man's eyes glowed like sparks of fire. As he looked around the hall, the civil and military officials averted their eyes. None of them dared to meet his gaze.

This was the Guardian Ruler of the Celestial Northern Prison!

His title was extremely well known across the lands, so Chu Liang had, of course, heard of him too. It was said that the Guardian Ruler had been born into the imperial family, but he did not have the

Divine Fire Spirit. In the hierarchical structure of the Xia Family, having the Divine Fire Spirit made a world of difference.

For instance, the Second Prince, Sixth Princess, and Thirteenth Prince were well-known to all. However, few knew of the other imperial princes and princesses who did not have the Divine Fire Spirit. Nevertheless, the Guardian Ruler was naturally proud and independent, and he was determined to be superior to everyone else in everything.

In his youth, he had been known as the strongest among the imperial descendents of the same generation, even crushing his brothers who possessed the Divine Fire Spirit. Despite this, people had said that he would lack power when he was older and that his future achievements would inevitably fall short compared to those with the Divine Fire Spirit.

The Xia Family's ancestral rules forbade anyone without the Divine Fire Spirit to succeed the throne. Consequently, the Guardian Ruler had not been included in the selection process for the position of the crown prince.

In anger, the Guardian Ruler had left the imperial family and roamed the martial world for decades. It wasn't until he advanced to the seventh realm that he returned to the imperial court. Nevertheless, his relationship with the imperial family remained distant.

Afterward, he ventured deep into the Divine Ruins and narrowly escaped death many times. During that time, he observed an ancient Golden Crow and gained enlightenment for the Great Dao of the Ultimate Yang, allowing him to attain the Heavenly Origin.

Most of the various Great Dao originated from the Divine Ruins. For instance, that was where the founder of the Greater-Yin Cult had observed an ancient Kun[1] and gained enlightenment for the Great Dao of the Ultimate Yin, leading to the creation of the Divine Nine. The Great Dao of the Ultimate Yang and the Great Dao of the Ultimate Yin were incomparably powerful.

So, the fact that the Guardian Ruler had attained the Heavenly Origin for the Great Dao of the Ultimate Yang was a huge slap in the face for those who had looked down on him. From then on, no one dared to speak ill of the Guardian Ruler.

His status within the imperial family became equivalent to that of the Imperial Guardian[2], but he still remained unwilling to come into close contact with the imperial family. He voluntarily took on the responsibility of guarding the Celestial Northern Prison, holding the position for the past century.

The Guardian Ruler had never attended any imperial banquets or imperial court assemblies. Nevertheless, his presence at the Celestial Northern Prison was enough to suppress countless powerful figures, striking fear into the hearts of dissenters across the mortal realm.

Why, then, had he suddenly appeared at the Qinghong Banquet today?

"Guardian Ruler." The emperor immediately rose to greet him, showing him the utmost respect. "Why didn't you tell us in advance that you were intending to attend the banquet?"

The Guardian Ruler rarely associated with the imperial family, but it was undeniable that he was unmatched in power and status. Furthermore, in terms of seniority within the Xia Family, he greatly outranked the reigning emperor. He was also a few generations older than Imperial Guardian Mingde. Naturally, no one dared show him the slightest disrespect.

The Guardian Ruler halted at the steps leading to the throne and bowed in greeting. Then he raised his head and said, "Your Majesty, forgive my last-minute decision to attend the banquet, disrupting it."

The emperor quickly waved his hand dismissively. "Your presence here is a great cause for joy. How could it possibly be a disruption?"

The Guardian Ruler turned around to face the civil and military officials behind him. His icy gaze was so intimidating that they all lowered their heads.

The Guardian Ruler explained, "I heard news that some malicious evildoers want to wreak havoc within the palace. I came to see for myself. I don't know who it is that's so ridiculously bold... but you'd better not let me catch you."

Chapter 617: Let's Eat the Qinghong Together

The moon had just risen, and its light shone through the window lattice, casting a grid of light and shadow across the spacious and vacant floor.

A man dressed in the long robes of a scholar sat calmly on the floor.

There was a teapot and cups on the table in front of him. Someone picked up the teapot and poured the tea out in a steady stream, filling the cups slowly. A delicate aroma rose from the tea with the steam.

The man in scholarly robes gazed out the window and remarked casually, "The Qinghong Banquet should have started by now."

"You suddenly said that you're sick and can't attend the banquet. Won't that arouse His Majesty's suspicion?" asked the man sitting on the other side of the table.

He appeared to be of a similar age to the man in scholarly robes. He was a slim middle-aged man dressed in black, almost blending into the darkness.

The man in scholarly robes replied slowly, "At first, I thought something major would happen. Unexpectedly, the imperial palace resolved the matter so swiftly. Now, Her Majesty has been captured, and the imperial consort is dead. That should put an end to the rising disturbances. What can His Majesty suspect me of when there's nothing happening?"

The man in scholarly robes was none other than Su Qian, the chancellor of the imperial court.

The person sitting across from him was Gu Shanfeng, the best fighter among Su Qian's subordinates. He was also the head of the Mystic Wind Sect, one of the sects in The Chancellor's Sixteen-Faction Alliance.

Compared to the other sects and factions in the alliance, the Mystic Wind Sect wasn't particularly prominent, as they didn't have any outstanding disciples. However, Gu Shanfeng was the most powerful among the leaders in the alliance. He was a genuine seventh-realm Eminent One.

In the past, Gu Shanfeng committed a grave mistake, resulting in the Greater-Yin Cult hunting him down. Su Qian mediated between the two parties and saved Gu Shanfeng's life.

Gu Shanfeng had been accompanying Su Qian loyally ever since.

"Miss Shen suffered a palm strike from me for nothing," Gu Shanfeng said with a chuckle. "A truly unfortunate event for her."

"It may end up being a good thing. Initially, I wanted her to enter the palace because it seemed like His Majesty had decided on the Second Prince for the position of crown prince. But in recent days, it seems His Majesty is wavering on that."

Gu Shanfeng added, "Especially now that Empress Wu has been exposed, the Second Prince's chances of becoming the crown prince seem even slimmer."

Su Qian shook his head. "His Majesty won't take such things into consideration in selecting his successor. He will focus more on the abilities of the two princes. The Second Prince has a mild disposition and is decently talented, so it initially seemed like had the demeanor of a ruler who would carry on the good work of his predecessors. Thus, His Majesty didn't even bother considering anyone else.

"However, in recent years, evildoers have been running rampant, and omens of disaster have appeared repeatedly. It's clear that even greater storms lie ahead. At such a time, the Yu Dynasty needs an intelligent and capable ruler that can open up new horizons for the dynasty. In comparison to the Second Prince, the Thirteenth Prince is young, but he is far more ambitious and skilled.

"That is the root of the emperor's hesitation. A ruler doesn't only think about the imperial palace; he takes all of the nine provinces into consideration."

Su Qian deduced the emperor's thoughts as if he were experiencing them firsthand.

"Your foresight is simply incredible, Chancellor. I am but a pale shadow in comparison to you," Gu Shanfeng said, praising him at just the right time.

A black swallow landed on the windowsill outside and tapped the window lattice with its beak. The window opened, and the swallow flew in. There was a flash of light, and the swallow transformed into a letter—black ink on white paper.

After reading the letter, Su Qian raised his head to speak.

"Elder Brother Gu, it's only because you're not in my position. For everyone in a position like mine, it is essential that we're able to deduce His Majesty's intent. The Guardian Ruler has made a move as well. It seems he, too, caught wind of tonight's developments."

"Wow," Gu Shanfeng uttered in surprise. "If that legendary figure is stepping in, there's no chance of anyone making unexpected movements at tonight's Qinghong Banquet."

Su Qian made another conjecture. "The Guardian Ruler hasn't entered the imperial palace for a very long time, so many have speculated that he's at odds with the imperial family. This move is likely to prove to everyone that he still stands with the Xia Family."

"In that case, should we be supporting the Thirteenth Prince instead once the situation stabilizes?" Gu Shanfeng asked.

Su Qian shook his head again. "The Thirteenth Prince is still too young and immature; his morals and conduct are lacking. He may be able to bear the heavy burden of a ruler, but his youth means it will be easy for the power to get to his head. He may not be a viable choice for the long term."

"Then does that mean we're sticking with the Second Prince?"

"The Second Prince..."

Gu Shanfeng's question made Su Qian hesitate, his gaze darkening slightly.

...

The legendary Guardian Ruler took a seat at a table near the emperor's throne, serving as proof of his high status.

Since the Guardian Ruler was sitting on the upper level, that meant that he would need to be served the Qinghong bird as well. The emperor felt relieved that he had ordered an extra Qinghong bird to be prepared in advance, as it was much too late to prepare another one now.

It was said that even the emperor could not kill a Qinghong bird just to indulge his cravings. From the ladies of the harem to the civil and military officials, everyone would oppose it as a breach of tradition. However, if the Guardian Ruler expressed the desire to eat a Qinghong bird, few would dare to object.

This prince, who had been made an outcast in his youth, had outlasted all his peers and elders who had scorned him. The current members of the imperial family were juniors who had grown up hearing tales of his prowess, so none of them dared show him disrespect.

Of course, the Guardian Ruler wasn't the type to covet a bite of the spirit bird. In fact, he paid no mind as to whether he would get to eat it.

After sitting down, the Guardian Ruler said, "When I entered the imperial palace, I heard that something's already happened. Is that right?"

The emperor let out a sigh, "Haaa..."

Then he recounted the events of the day.

The Guardian Ruler furrowed his brows. "Those evil people from the Celestial Charm Sect are indeed cunning. To think that they actually had someone infiltrate the imperial palace so many years in advance! They should truly be killed!"

The emperor and the Guardian Ruler had been conversing quietly thus far. However, after hearing about the events of the day, the Guardian Ruler flew into a rage, his voice ringing loud and clear like a flood bell. He yelled that last sentence with such ferocity that even those outside the hall heard him.

The banquet had only just begun, but the sound of his fury made everyone put down their chopsticks.

The Guardian Ruler turned and told them, "Keep eating!"

Everyone immediately lowered their heads to their bowls and plates, swiping at them with chopsticks even if they were empty.

"Fortunately, they've been exposed. The imperial city will increase its vigilance in the future to ensure there are no more infiltrators," the emperor said.

The Guardian Ruler grumbled, "I already said back then that Mingde was unfit to be the Imperial Guardian. The imperial palace is in such chaos. Just what exactly has he been protecting? He's utterly useless."

The emperor smiled but said nothing.

Both men were his elders, and both of them were at the eighth realm. What could he possibly say?

Nevertheless, there was someone who dared to speak.

A shout rang out, "You're full of shit!"

The rebuke stunned both the emperor and the Guardian Ruler.

This was the Golden Throne Hall. How long had it been since anyone dared to curse at someone here?

The Guardian Ruler, in particular, was very surprised. It had been at least a century since someone had dared to scold him to his face.

He shifted his gaze to the speaker and saw a stunning and imperious woman standing with her hands on her hips, glaring at him with a fierce expression. The Guardian Ruler could tell that the woman possessed the Divine Fire Spirit, indicating she was part of the imperial family.

Instead of getting angry, the Guardian Ruler laughed. "Hah. Were you cursing at me?"

"That's right," Di Nufeng admitted without the slightest hesitation.

"Second Aunt... Guardian Ruler..." The emperor raised his hands, trying to calm the situation as he spoke in a controlled tone. "We're all family. Let's not ruin the harmony here."

Both Di Nufeng and the Guardian Ruler replied in unison, "Who's family with you?"

That was when they realized they were both renegades of the imperial family.

The Guardian Ruler asked, "Are you related to Mingde?"

Di Nufeng held her head high and answered, "He's my father."

"Hah," the Guardian Ruler sneered. "Even he wouldn't dare speak to me like this here."

"But I'm the one here!" Di Nufeng retorted, showing no sign of backing down. "I can criticize him, but you can't!"

"I've already done it. What are you going to do about it?" the Guardian Ruler fired back, totally unconcerned with his image.

"You'd better sleep with your eyes open. I might just burn your house to the ground one day!"

Di Nufeng was fully riled up now. She rolled up her sleeves, getting ready to fight.

Stuck between the two, one of the emperor's eyebrows twitched uncontrollably.

What a disaster...

Just what kind of cursed day is today? I lost my two wives that I loved the most, and now at the Qinghong Banquet, there are two people acting like a pair of fools shouting insults at each other in the street.

Maybe I should just retire.

Right then, the sound of gongs rang out, and a box was carried into the hall. It contained the huge Qinghong birds, freshly cooked and piping hot.

"Your Majesty, the Qinghong birds are ready to eat!"

"Wonderful!" the emperor exclaimed. He then tried to mediate between Di Nufeng and the Guardian Ruler. "Second Aunt, Guardian Ruler, this is a rare day that we get to have a family reunion, so let's stop the fighting. Let's eat! The! Qing! Hong!"

Bang!

What the emperor got in response was the Guardian Ruler slamming his hand onto the table.

He told Di Nufeng, "Considering you're my junior, I'd lose my prestige if I fight with you. So don't push your luck!"

"Hah," Di Nufeng sneered. "Then let's compete in something else. Do you dare?"

"What do you want to compete in? Not daring to do so would make me my grandson!"

"Even your grandson is more senior than her..." the emperor muttered quietly on the side.

"Bring the wine!" Di Nufeng yelled, placing one foot on the chair. "If you can outdrink me today, I'll respectfully call you Elder Brother. But if you lose, you'll recognize me as your grandauntie!"

The emperor turned to Di Nufeng. "What kind of logic is that?"

"Lose?" The Guardian Ruler burst into laughter. "I haven't gotten drunk in the past two hundred years, and it's been a long time since anyone dared to challenge me."

The emperor looked at him in shock. "You're agreeing to this?!"

"Today, I'll teach you what happens when you insult someone's father!" Di Nufeng exclaimed.

She grabbed a jar of wine and drank straight from it.

"But don't you insult others all the time?" the emperor muttered, with dark creases running across his forehead.

The Guardian Ruler replied, "Win first before you say that!"

He raised a jar of wine to his lips as well and poured in a steady stream of wine into his mouth.

"Even if you win, we don't gain anything!" the emperor cried out, about to give up all hope of stopping them.

Warrior Lao whispered to him, "Your Majesty, what should we do?"

"Do I look like I know?"

Exasperation was written all over the emperor's face.

The two monsters had already started their contest, and the officials on the lower level watched them with great interest.

The emperor let out a deep sigh. "Forget it. Let's just treat this as entertainment. Keep the music playing! Keep the food coming!"

...

Chu Liang was used to this. Di Nufeng treated everyone the same way; she bullied those weaker than herself and was just as domineering toward those who were stronger than her. Apart from the Discipline Master, Chu Liang had never seen Di Nufeng back down from anyone, inside or outside the Mount Shu Sect.

The cowardly draw their blades against the weak, while the brave draw their blades against the strong... But my teacher doesn't belong to either of those groups. She swings her blade at anyone she sees.

Di Nufeng had a knack for dragging others down to match her intelligence and character. Then she would use her copious amounts of battle experience to defeat them. This certainly wasn't her first time doing that.

After the cooked Qinghong birds were presented to the emperor, the birds were taken back to the kitchen and cut up for serving. The maids brought out plates of Qinghong meat to some of the tables.

The Qinghong meat gave off a deliciously enticing and fragrant aroma that stirred the soul, proving that Qinghong meat truly deserved its reputation as one of the world's finest delicacies.

Just as Chu Liang picked up his chopsticks to try some of that delicacy, a tiny voice suddenly said, "Give me a bite too!"

Chapter 618: My Best Friend

Chu Liang placed the jade bowl on the table and saw the small golden dragon inside frantically circling along the edge of the bowl. It seemed it, too, had caught a whiff of the Qinghong meat's aroma.

"You want some too?" Chu Liang asked with a smile.

"Yes, yes, yes!" The Little Golden Dragon cried out anxiously.

"We're good friends. If I get a bite of meat, of course, you'll get one too," Chu Liang teased, testing the waters. "Right?"

"Of course, of course," the Little Golden Dragon immediately replied.

Although it was currently suppressed, it was fully aware of what had happened in the outside world—from the emperor ordering Yao Dengxian to release it to the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner handing it over to Chu Liang.

Chu Liang carried the strongest dragon aura... though it was slightly mixed, its concentration was on par with that of a True Dragon. This made the little dragon feel very secure in Chu Liang's presence.

Only now did it have the luxury of craving some meat.

Having been in the palace for years, it had, of course, heard of the legendary Qinghong meat.

"We're best friends, so I should set you free soon, right?" Chu Liang asked.

"Of course!" The Little Golden Dragon nodded repeatedly. "We're the best of friends."

"Where do you plan to go once you're free?" Chu Liang inquired.

"Uh..." This question stumped the Little Golden Dragon.

Although it was a member of the dragon race, ever since the Dragon Lair was shattered, dragons had scattered across the lands, and all had become loosely connected with one another.

Even the larger dragon clans were now hidden deep within the Abyss of the Hidden Dragons, a place it had no way of locating.

Moreover, the older Golden Dragon had spent years suppressing the fate of the dynasty, leaving it with no friends, connections, or "dragon connections" to rely on.

Its initial plan had been to regain its freedom and steal the Golden Dragon's Orb—something the imperial consort had encouraged. Beyond that, it had no idea where to go next.

Seeing its troubled expression, Chu Liang chuckled. "I figured you hadn't thought it through..."

"We're good friends. If you have nowhere to go, isn't it only right that I offer you a place to stay?" Chu Liang continued to coax.

"Yes, yes!" The Little Golden Dragon nodded again.

"Our Mount Shu is beautiful, with abundant spiritual energy. Countless spirit beasts and divine birds compete to cultivate there, and eventually, a White Dragon seized the opportunity and is now helping us suppress our sect's fate. If you're willing, you can live with us from now on. There are others of your kind on the mountain, so you won't be lonely," Chu Liang said.

"That would be amazing!" the Little Golden Dragon said excitedly.

"Then tell me..." Chu Liang chuckled slyly, "If you have a friend who treats you this well, is it right to not return the favor at all?"

"Uh?" The Little Golden Dragon froze, its expression turning blank as it feigned ignorance.

"Don't you think you should give me something in return?" Chu Liang said directly.

"You could have... my friendship," the Little Golden Dragon offered.

"What do you mean? I already gained your friendship last time when I helped you steal the Golden Dragon's Orb. Is your friendship something that can be handed out in installments?" Chu Liang's face darkened.

"You could gain... a deeper level of friendship," the Little Golden Dragon said.

Alright then. Do you have a friendship meter or something? Do I have to max it out to unlock new storylines?

Chu Liang dropped the pretense and said outright, "Don't you dragons have something called Dragon Soul Protection? Can you give me one?"

He already had the scales of the White Dragon and Inferno Dragon and the Blue Dragon's Orb. The only thing he lacked was a cultivation legacy of the dragon soul. Last time, when he saw Qi Lin'er using it, he noticed how extraordinary the power was, so he wanted to try it out for himself.

As for the cultivation legacy of the dragon blood, which was of a lower tier, that was not worth mentioning.

"Well..." The Little Golden Dragon circled twice, hesitating. "All dragons would only be able to bestow three Dragon Soul Protections. As for the legacy of the Dragon Scale, it can be given to seven. While a spot opens up if a host dies, the total number remains limited..."

"So, I am not even worthy of being one of the three?" Chu Liang nodded knowingly. "And you still want to eat Qinghong meat? Maybe later, I'll make you a sashimi with the large intestine of the Qinghong bird instead."

As he spoke, he began to tuck the jade bowl back into his robes.

"EHHHHHHHHHHH!" The Little Golden Dragon cried out urgently. "Fine, I'll give it to you, okay?"

"Hehe." Chu Liang grinned with satisfaction. "That's why you're my best friend."

"I can give it to you now. Just find a quiet place," the Little Golden Dragon said.

Chu Liang quickly wolfed down a couple of bites of meat, fed two pieces to the Little Golden Dragon, and finished the plate. Then, he stood up, left his seat, and exited the Golden Throne Hall through a side door.

At the start of the banquet, proceedings were a bit formal, with the emperor offering toasts alongside his officials. But as the evening progressed, the atmosphere became more relaxed, and people were free to move about.

But today's Qinghong Banquet was unlike the others. With the presence of the Guardian Ruler and Di Nufeng, chaos had erupted from the start. The emperor had no mood to celebrate with his officials, so the banquet took on a casual tone.

The Golden Throne Hall was bustling with activity, and no one paid attention to his departure.

Chu Liang walked a considerable distance along the palace's main road until he reached a secluded garden.

Only then did he take out the Little Golden Dragon and ask, "Will this place do?"

"As long as no one disturbs us, it's fine," the Little Golden Dragon replied.

Then, its body flashed with golden light, and its fiery golden vertical pupils reflected Chu Liang's figure.

Boom—

In an instant, a surge of immense mental power flooded Chu Liang's mind.

Although the Little Golden Dragon didn't seem particularly bright, it was still a celestial beast that had attained the seventh realm at birth, and even a fraction of its soul power was not something ordinary people could endure.

If Chu Liang's cultivation level were any lower, he might have fainted on the spot.

It took him a good while to shake off the dizziness. When he opened his eyes again, he realized his vision had changed.

His pupils were now ablaze with golden flames!

Feeling the surging power of the Dragon Soul coursing through him, he tried to suppress it and gradually retracted the golden irises.

The power of the Dragon Soul Protection was indeed far stronger than the cultivation legacy of the Dragon Scale. Only the Dragon Orb was more powerful.

"How is it?" the Little Golden Dragon asked eagerly.

This was its first time granting the cultivation legacy of the Dragon Soul, so it wasn't sure what to expect.

"We will be best friends forever," Chu Liang responded enthusiastically.

As Chu Liang sensed the power of the Dragon Soul surging within him, he felt exhilarated. He felt a sense of regret that he couldn't test it immediately.

With the Qinghong Banquet still ongoing, Chu Liang headed back toward the Golden Throne Hall.

As he passed by a pond, he noticed a figure standing there.

It was a handsome young man gazing at the water. For some reason, his demeanor struck Chu Liang as oddly familiar.

As Chu Liang approached, the young man turned and asked, "You're back?"

"Thirteenth Prince?" Chu Liang greeted him with a smile. "What a coincidence."

"Not a coincidence," the Thirteenth Prince said, shaking his head. "I was planning to invite you for a chat, but since you came out on your own, I waited here for you."

"Waiting for me?" Chu Liang's expression turned cautious. "What's the matter?"

The Thirteenth Prince smiled. "I just have a few questions for you."

"About the imperial consort?" Chu Liang asked abruptly.

"Oh?" The Thirteenth Prince raised his eyes to meet Chu Liang's. "You've figured it out."

"Just a guess," Chu Liang replied with a smile.

"You're too clever," the Thirteenth Prince said, nodding. "So clever, it's frightening."

"I know what you're afraid of, but I won't say a word about it," Chu Liang said. "These matters have nothing to do with me, and the imperial consort is already dead. No one cares about this anymore."

"Really?" The Thirteenth Prince's gaze turned sharp and sinister.

Earlier, Chu Liang had found a dudou at the imperial consort's residence.

It was embroidered with two poetic lines:

Water and sky, emotions untold, Each to their longing, distant and cold.

At first glance, it seemed like a simple love poem, but on closer inspection, the first word of each poetic line came together to resemble the meaning of the character "Luo." [1]

And the Thirteenth Prince's given name was Luo.

Chu Liang hadn't dwelled on it and handed the dudou along with other items to the emperor, who didn't examine them closely and instead entrusted everything to Lao Santai for careful disposal.

That should have been the end of it.

"I'm telling the truth. Coming to me now isn't the smartest move," Chu Liang said with a grin.

"Actually..." The Thirteenth Prince paused briefly before continuing, "It wasn't me who wanted to see you."

"Oh?" Chu Liang caught a dangerous undertone in the prince's expression.

"It's me!"

With a loud splash, a fiery, menacing figure leapt from the pond. Though humanoid in form, it was covered in multicolored scales, resembling a terrifying fish demon!

This was beyond Chu Liang's expectations. He hadn't imagined that after the recent palace upheaval, someone would dare make such a brazen move. And judging by the fish demon's aura, it was no ordinary opponent.

Where had the Thirteenth Prince found such a powerful entity?

In an instant, Chu Liang's mind raced, piecing everything together. The Thirteenth Prince's relationship with the imperial consort wasn't as simple as gifting a dudou—he had used her as a bridge to make connections.

The origins of this fish demon were now clear.

It was the Celestial Charm Sect!

Chapter 619: Killed

Danger incoming!

The fact that this fish demon even dared to launch an attack in the imperial palace was truly beyond Chu Liang's expectations.

Even if it had the cultivation level of the seventh realm, with the palace's defenses being far tighter than usual and with the surrounding area sealed, could it even escape after revealing its aura?

The fish demon lunged, unleashing a multicolored spiritual energy that condensed into a formation resembling fish scales, instantly engulfing Chu Liang.

Even though Chu Liang had just gotten the gift of the Dragon Soul Protection, he was still a cultivator at the realm in the Heavenly Gate. When facing a cultivator at the realm above the Heavenly Gate, there was no chance he could win.

In this life-or-death moment, Chu Liang wasted no time. He flipped his hand, pulling out the jade bowl. "Come out, my best friend!"

Crack.

When facing an opponent of levels higher and much more powerful, any attempt to fight back would be futile. The best course of action was to call for reinforcements—only someone of equal strength could even the odds.

Fortunately, Chu Liang happened to have just such an ally on hand.

Whoosh—

The jade bowl shattered, releasing a burst of radiant light. A magnificent golden-scaled dragon soared into the sky! Its dazzling brilliance illuminated the night as a thunderous dragon roar shook the air.

"RAWRRRR!!!"

Had the fish demon not preemptively set up a restrictive barrier to block sound and aura from going out, this dragon roar alone would have shaken the imperial city to its core.

The fish demon unleashed a divine light of five colors, striking the massive Golden Dragon. With a resounding clash, the light was deflected by the dragon's sturdy golden scales. Though the force pushed the dragon back, it remained unharmed.

The golden-scaled dragon's greatest strength was its defense. Even though the fish demon was of a higher cultivation level, there was no way it could win with one attack.

"Take this!" Chu Liang tossed the Golden Dragon's Orb, and the Little Golden Dragon caught it in one swift gulp.

He had intended to release the dragon and return the orb after leaving the palace. But in this moment of crisis, there was no time for such considerations.

"My barrier can't hold back the Golden Dragon. Let's strike together and finish this quickly! If we don't kill him, you'll never become the emperor!" the fish demon shouted, turning to the Thirteenth Prince.

The Thirteenth Prince clenched his teeth, seething with frustration.

The Thirteenth Prince's affair with the imperial consort was real. He couldn't explain why he had been so captivated by her, but with just a little seduction, he had fallen completely under her spell, unable to break free.

Not long ago, the imperial consort introduced him to the fish demon, claiming it could help enhance his cultivation.

He was well aware of their dubious origins, suspecting they were connected to the infamous Celestial Charm Sect. Yet the improvements to his cultivation were undeniable, and their promise to aid him in seizing the throne was too tempting to refuse.

If he refused to cooperate, his affair with the imperial consort might be exposed.

With the Second Prince, the eldest son, backed by Empress Wu, the Thirteenth Prince had no choice but to align himself with these dubious allies if he wanted a chance at the throne.

His visit to the Dragon-Keeping Eunuch was no coincidence. After receiving a signal from the imperial consort, he went there and released the Golden Dragon.

What he hadn't expected, however, was that the Golden Dragon would wander about and end up in Chu Liang's hands!

The Thirteenth Prince was among the first to hear of Empress Wu's true identity being exposed. Though he felt some sorrow over the imperial consort's death, the event brought him far more relief than grief.

With the imperial consort gone, he no longer had to worry about their affair being exposed. Furthermore, Empress Wu turned out to be a spy of the Celestial Charm Sect. This meant that the Second Prince's status, as her son, was bound to plummet.

With only two candidates for the throne and the Second Prince losing his chance at becoming the crown prince, the Thirteenth Prince was confident that he was the only choice left.

But his excitement didn't last long. The fish demon returned, demanding that he use the Qinghong Banquet as a chance to lure Chu Liang out so it could kill him.

Why would the Thirteenth Prince agree to help at this point? As long as he behaved himself, he would surely become the crown prince.

Unexpectedly, the fish demon revealed that the imperial consort had left evidence of their affair—a dudou. If this were brought to the emperor's attention, the Thirteenth Prince's near-certain claim to the throne could crumble in an instant.

Thus, the Thirteenth Prince reluctantly agreed.

All he had to do was lure Chu Liang out. As a seventh-realm existence, the fish demon could kill Chu Liang in an instant and flee. No one would suspect him.

But to his utter surprise, Chu Liang had brought along the little Golden Dragon!

With the fish demon entangled by the Golden Dragon, the effect of the restriction that the fish demon had set up began to falter, and the demon's aura would leak within moments. If that happened, the powerful cultivators in the palace would arrive, and all would be lost.

These thoughts raced through the Thirteenth Prince's mind, culminating in a shouted command: "Hand over your life!"

...

Seeing the Little Golden Dragon block the fish demon, the Thirteenth Prince lunged at him, but Chu Liang remained calm.

He had seen the Thirteenth Prince make a move in the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams before. Although he was among the best of the younger generation, he was still far from being a top-tier prodigy. Moreover, with the fortification of the Blue Dragon's Orb, Chu Liang—though not yet at the sixth realm—already possessed combat strength that was considered exceptional even within that level.

But as soon as they exchanged blows, he noticed something was wrong.

Boom!

A thunderous roar erupted as the Thirteenth Prince unleashed a sweeping wave of purple-gold flames.

It was the Samadhi True Fire!

The most outstanding among the younger generation of the imperial family was the Sixth Princess. Even then, she could only control sparks of the Samadhi True Fire, which she had to use carefully to achieve results.

During that time, the Thirteenth Prince had been weaker than his elder sister. But he had made such incredible progress since then!

Obviously, it had to be the work of the evil people from the Celestial Charm Sect.

Faced with the overwhelming divine fire, Chu Liang's expression turned grave. As a disciple of Di Nufeng, he had a deep understanding of the power of Samadhi True Fire.

His esteemed teacher often used this fire to dominate; those who came into contact with it died, and those who touched it perished. There was no escape!

Facing such a fierce attack, Chu Liang could only risk everything. He gathered all his foundational qi, transforming it into a Severing the Void slash and struck with all his might!

At the same time, the Blue Dragon's Orb operated at full power. A roaring hurricane descended, sweeping the Samadhi True Fire away to prevent it from touching him. However, faced with such a massive amount of divine fire, the fierce winds dissolved on contact, barely delaying its approach.

Meanwhile, the Sword Strike of Severing the Void had already reached the Thirteenth Prince.

If this strike could bring him down, the threat of the divine fire would be resolved. If not, Chu Liang, enveloped by the Samadhi True Fire, would be in grave danger.

At the critical moment, the sword qi descended first.

The Thirteenth Prince clearly hadn't expected that, while the cultivation of the divine fire had greatly increased with the Celestial Charm Sect's help, Chu Liang's power had also grown so much stronger in just one day compared to the Assembly of Immortal Sects!

This makes no sense...Even if he has the gift of the Dragon Soul Protection, how can he be this powerful?

The Little Golden Dragon's gift to Chu Liang had been within the expectations of the Celestial Charm Sect and the Thirteenth Prince. However, the Blue Dragon's Orb was something they had no knowledge of.

Swish—

The Sword Strike of Severing the Void finally landed on the Thirteenth Prince!

The infused sword qi instantly extinguished the divine light.

Although his divine fire cultivation had been significantly boosted, he remained at the same cultivation realm, which meant that the improvement was lacking. Against the Sword Strike of Severing the Void, he was nearly powerless.

"Ugh..."

As the Thirteenth Prince fell, his eyes were filled with unwillingness.

I am just one step away from the position of crown prince, only a hair's breadth from the throne—how could it all end here?

I paid such a hefty price to obtain the power of Samadhi True Fire, yet why am I still no match for Chu Liang?

Isn't this... unfair?

...

As the sword strike landed, Chu Liang was still feeling tense.

It wasn't that he intended to kill the Thirteenth Prince, but the prince had struck with the intent to kill him in a single blow, unleashing his full cultivation power without holding back. This was, in fact, a highly unrefined technique, revealing that the Thirteenth Prince was inexperienced in life-and-death combat.

At that moment, Chu Liang had only one choice—clash head-on with the prince.

Either he would die in an instant, or the Thirteenth Prince would.

In such a situation, no matter how much he considered the prince's imperial status, Chu Liang had no way to hold back.

Thud.

As he watched the Thirteenth Prince fall lifelessly to the ground, Chu Liang felt a heavy weight in his heart. Looking up, he realized that the fish demon had already vanished.

It turned out that after being blocked by the Little Golden Dragon's attack, the fish demon had called for the Thirteenth Prince to strike before turning and escaping into the pool!

The Little Golden Dragon had given chase, but it too had disappeared without a trace.

The Celestial Charm Sect clearly had more than one waterway within the palace!

In fact, ever since they discovered the waterways in the imperial consorts' courtyards, everyone had speculated that there might be others within the palace. However, due to the tight schedule, there was no time to inspect all of them thoroughly. The investigation had primarily focused on the areas extending outward from the imperial consort's and Empress Wu's palaces. No one had expected a waterway to exist so close to the Golden Throne Hall.

The Celestial Charm Sect's demons had spent decades laying their plans, and their infiltration of the imperial palace was far deeper than anyone had imagined.

Suddenly, Chu Liang was the only one left in the area. Before he could make any move, the sound of rushing wind heralded someone's arrival. After the fish demon fled, the effect of the restrictions on this location had dissipated, allowing the aura to leak out. It was no surprise that experts from the palace had arrived.

The first person to land was dressed in brocade robes, his expression fierce. Chu Liang turned his head and frowned.

It was Cheng Hu.

He had always been Empress Wu's close confidant, but he knew nothing about the Celestial Charm Sect's schemes and had not done anything to aid in rebellion over the years. As such, he was released after a brief interrogation.

This leniency was also due to Empress Wu's repentance, as she had voluntarily exposed all the Celestial Charm Sect spies she had planted. Consequently, others associated with her were not heavily implicated.

However, with his support gone, Cheng Hu's status was certainly not what it once was, and at this moment, he was filled with resentment.

Seeing Chu Liang and the scene before him, Cheng Hu acted without thinking and shouted, "Audacious traitor! You dare assassinate a prince in the depths of the palace!"

As he spoke, he launched a fierce palm strike without hesitation!

Chapter 620: I Want to Eat Fish

"The Thirteenth Prince has colluded with the Celestial Charm Sect..." Chu Liang wanted to explain, but before he could finish, Cheng Hu's full-force palm strike had already come down!

Chu Liang immediately understood that Cheng Hu might not be ignorant of the truth; rather, he was simply using this as an excuse to kill!

Chu Liang had made significant contributions to Empress Wu's downfall. So, that might have left Cheng Hu, a member of her faction, filled with resentment toward him.

Or perhaps Cheng Hu himself had ties to the Celestial Charm Sect!

Otherwise, why was he the first to arrive? There were plenty of other powerful cultivators in the Golden Throne Hall, including eighth realm cultivators.

In any case, tonight had been full of twists and turns, and the real life-or-death crisis was only beginning now!

He only needed to hold on for a moment; he trusted that other experts would arrive in an instant, giving him a chance to reveal the truth.

However, Cheng Hu was, after all, a renowned seventh-realm cultivator, had gained the position of the Four Great Warriors not solely because of his allegiance to Empress Wu but also because of his overwhelming strength that made him her trusted aide.

As this palm strike descended, it carried a majestic force like a storm of wind and thunder!

It was clear that his mastery of the Yin-Slaying Sutra had reached its peak. At this moment, he was attacking with all his might, trying not to give Chu Liang any chance to explain.

After all, killing a prince within the deep palace would always give him a valid justification for action.

There was no avoiding or escaping. As Chu Liang felt himself being targeted by the flow of qi unleashed by a seventh-realm cultivator, he immediately realized that his belief of himself as powerful was an utter mistake. In this very moment, he couldn't even use Dimension Compression because, as long as he couldn't break free from that flow of qi, this palm strike would land on him no matter where he fled.

All he could do was summon all his cultivation energy, activating every defensive divine technique he possessed in an attempt to withstand the attack.

Bang—

But the moment Cheng Hu's palm wind made contact with Chu Liang, the layers of foundational qi surrounding his body shattered entirely, leaving only his heavily fortified physical body to take the blow.

As the shockwaves of wind and thunder swept over, Chu Liang's bones emitted loud cracking noises.

"Ah—!" he roared in agony.

The power of the Blue Dragon's Orb was fully unleashed, spinning and glowing within the Sea of Qi. Yet, Chu Liang lamented that his transcendent form had not yet been achieved. Without the enhancement of the Divine Nine's Profound Transcendent Form, he couldn't wield the Blue Dragon's Orb to its fullest potential.

Whoosh—

As the palm strike landed on him, Chu Liang felt as though he was in the very heart of a storm. Overwhelming forces surged from every direction, threatening to crush every bone and muscle in his body.

Spat. Chu Liang could no longer suppress it and spat out a mouthful of blood. By the time Cheng Hu's palm truly struck his chest, he had no foundational qi left to resist.

All that remained was his body.

At the critical moment, the Golden Dragon's Dragon Soul Protection shone brightly. Large patches of golden scales spread across his chest, radiating dazzling light!

Thud.

Chu Liang finally collapsed to the ground.

It all happened in an instant. From the moment Cheng Hu launched his ferocious attack to the moment Chu Liang's defenses shattered and he fell, it had taken no more than a blink of an eye. He had already lost all ability to resist.

At this moment, Chu Liang had lost consciousness. Blood drenched his body, and the golden scales on his chest were shattered. This injury was different from the wounds he had suffered in his battle with Yang Shenlong. Injuries from opponents of equal strength could heal naturally, but the crushing force of a seventh-realm cultivator left behind a black qi flowing through his wounds, intensifying the damage and preventing his body from healing.

This was the power of the Dao Attainment Realm. With just one full-force strike, Chu Liang, having lost ninety-nine percent of his qi, was nearly dead.

He could survive only because of the Dragon Soul Protection. If not for the layer of golden scales that had provided some defense, Chu Liang would have been dead twice.

"Ha—"

Cheng Hu, however, had no intention of letting Chu Liang go. He raised his hand for another palm strike!

Boom!

"Stop!" Just as his palm was about to strike, a thunderous shout rang out from the side.

Yet, the ferocity in Cheng Hu's eyes intensified. He had no intention of stopping and slammed his palm to the ground!

Light erupted, and wind and thunder roared!

...

In the Golden Throne Hall, the Guardian Ruler and Di Nufeng were originally having a drinking contest, and the imperial hall was filled with noise and merriment.

When the flow of qi leaked from a nearby location, a sharp glint flashed in the Guardian Ruler's eyes. "There is indeed some disturbance."

"Is it someone from the Celestial Charm Sect?" Di Nufeng asked with rising interest.

She immediately leapt into the air, transforming into a streak of fire as she sped away. Meanwhile, the Guardian Ruler took a single step and, though slower to act, arrived first at the poolside.

Though he had rushed there as quickly as possible, Cheng Hu was even faster, striking at Chu Liang the moment the restriction disappeared.

Thus, when the Guardian Ruler arrived, he saw Cheng Hu preparing to deliver a finishing blow to the unconscious Chu Liang and shouted, "Stop!"

But Cheng Hu, consumed by his bloodlust, ignored the Guardian Ruler's warning and struck down with his palm!

A red glint flashed in the Guardian Ruler's eyes, and the moment Cheng Hu completed his second strike, he was overwhelmed by an invisible force and fell to the ground.

He shouted, "Chu Liang assassinated the prince. I only took action to kill the perpetrator!"

The Guardian Ruler naturally noticed the Thirteenth Prince's corpse nearby. He furrowed his brows deeply.

He was about to question Cheng Hu further, but suddenly, a burst of fire crashed down beside him.

"What did you say?" A fiery figure with wings spread wide and blazing flames descended beside him. "Where is Chu Liang?"

As the woman questioned, she swung her fist and slammed it down heavily!

The punch was wreathed in raging purple-gold flames!

Bang—

"Ah..." Cheng Hu's chest caved in under the punch, his internal organs nearly destroyed. Blood gushed from his mouth as he murmured, "I don't know..."

"Don't know?" Di Nufeng's fiery fist burned brightly. "You're the only one here, and you say you don't know?"

Bang—

The second punch.

Cheng Hu's head was smashed flat, with only half remaining intact while the other half was charred and deformed.

"I really don't know..." Cheng Hu whispered weakly. "I missed..."

Whoosh—

The sound of wind roared as Di Nufeng's third punch was about to land.

"Stop!" the Guardian Ruler commanded again, using an invisible force to control Di Nufeng entirely. "The prince is dead, and the culprit is still unknown. Let's wait until the matter is investigated thoroughly."

Di Nufeng turned to glare at him. "If something happens to my disciple, not even the lives of a few princes would be enough to compensate."

At the same time, another force swept in from the side, relieving Di Nufeng of the Guardian Ruler's suppression.

"Since this just happened, we might be able to recreate the scene with the Shadow of Radiance," Mingde said as he stepped forward. "Feng'er, Guardian Ruler, please both remain calm."

He had been in the Divine Fire Hall, which was farther away, so he arrived later than the others.

These three standing together represented the strongest combat power of the Xia Family. Of course, they were also the most rebellious members of the family.

As Mingde countered the Guardian Ruler, Di Nufeng's fist, which had been hanging over Cheng Hu's face, was freed.

She asked one final question, "Who ordered you to kill him?"

"No one..." Cheng Hu managed to utter with difficulty. "Chu Liang assassinate the prince, and I—"

Boom—

The third punch.

Cheng Hu's head was completely smashed, leaving only a charred and mangled half of his body.

A powerful cultivator who had seemed like a deity or demon to Chu Liang was defeated by Di Nufeng in just three punches.

This was when a large number of palace guards finally appeared at the scene. The emperor arrived as well, flanked by palace attendants. When he saw the corpse of the Thirteenth Prince, he trembled as if he was struck by lightning.

The Guardian Ruler glared at Mingde. "You knew she would kill Cheng Hu."

"Cheng Hu's attack on Chu Liang was witnessed by you personally. If she hadn't been allowed to vent her anger, the entire imperial city would have suffered," Mingde replied calmly. "I will now use the Shadow of Radiance."

With that, he formed a seal with his hands, conjuring a halo resembling a full moon.

The halo cast down a cascade of white light, illuminating the entire area. Since the events had only just occurred, everything was replayed.

The Thirteenth Prince had been waiting here for Chu Liang when a fish demon suddenly appeared. Chu Liang released the Little Golden Dragon to block it. The Thirteenth Prince then fought desperately, only to be killed by Chu Liang.

Finally, Cheng Hu arrived and, without a word, delivered a palm strike that nearly killed Chu Liang. His last strike landed, and Chu Liang disappeared.

"Yu Tuoluo." The Guardian Ruler recognized the fish demon immediately. "On the list of Celestial Charm Sect members we obtained, he is ranked highly. He is a trusted aide of the Celestial Master of the Celestial Charm Sect. He was once a cultivator of the immortal sects but carried traces of demon blood. Later, that demon blood resurfaced, transforming him into a half-demon, for which he was expelled from his sect. In a fit of rage, he slaughtered his sect and joined the Celestial Charm Sect."

"So, the Thirteenth Prince was colluding with the Celestial Charm Sect to plot against Chu Liang," Mingde said gravely. "The palace has been infiltrated to this extent."

"So that fish escaped from here, right?" Di Nufeng glanced at the pool before tilting her head to look at Mingde. "I want to eat fish now."

