

M. Slaying 651

Chapter 651: Being an Attendant in the Sect (II)

Once inside the familiar pavilion, Chu Liang raised the matter of selecting a hall for his attendant role, and Di Nufeng had some important thoughts to share on the matter.

"If you ask me, choosing a hall is serious business. We need to plan for the long term." She rested her chin on her hand, analyzing carefully. "I actually think the Hall of Weapons or the Hall of Alchemy would be good for you. Those two hold a lot of power, especially since they oversee the procurement of Mount Shu Sect's materials and spirit plants. If you join one of those, you'll enjoy immense benefits.

"Of course, don't handle the money yourself. You take the attendant role, and Little Yi runs the business. One of you holds the power, the other holds the wealth. One attacks from the outside, the other provides support from the inside. You'd make the perfect team! Anyone who wants to work with you will have to go through him. The money he makes will help you climb the ranks. With this back-and-forth setup, Silver Sword Peak will practically run the Mount Shu Sect!"

"..." Chu Liang fell silent for a moment.

Di Nufeng continued, "The Hall of Conservation isn't a bad choice either. You'd be studying ancient texts—prestigious with a solid reputation. One of you deals with things outside, the other focuses on things inside. You become the face of Silver Sword Peak, and he works behind the scenes to keep things running. He brings in the money, and you bring the respect. It's a perfect setup—no way it could go wrong."

"..." Chu Liang's silence deepened.

"And of course, I still think the Hall of Discipline is the best choice. In our line of work, having friends in the Hall of Discipline is a must. One in the shadows, one in the light—you cover for him, he backs you up. He enjoys more perks than the others, and you rack up merit. The two of you can climb the ladder together and profit together."

"..." Chu Liang let out a quiet sigh.

When it came to organized crime, his teacher was at least two thousand years ahead of her time.

After a pause, Chu Liang changed the topic. "With all this... expertise, which hall did you join back then, Esteemed Teacher?"

Given Di Nufeng's talent for scheming, she should have either risen to greatness or ended up behind bars. How had he and his teacher both ended up scraping the bottom of the barrel back then?

"..."

This time, it was Di Nufeng's turn to fall silent.

After a long pause, she huffed, "If any hall had been willing to take me, do you think I'd be like this? I had to seize my peak master position by force!"

Chu Liang couldn't help but offer his deepest respect to the elders who had withstood the pressure and refused to accept Di Nufeng.

Having them as elders was truly Mount Shu Sect's greatest fortune.

...

After wrapping up that risky conversation with Di Nufeng, Chu Liang made his way back to his long-abandoned cabin.

Everything inside was just as he had left it—untouched but perfectly clean. It was clear someone had been taking care of the place. After thinking about it, Chu Liang figured the only person on the peak who would bother was Chu Yi.

Instead of catching up with old friends right away, Chu Liang sat down cross-legged and started circulating his qi. He pulled out a spirit plant from his storage.

Even though he hadn't cultivated in six years, the path of cultivation remained smooth and unobstructed for him.

Although he remained at the third level of the fifth realm, he currently had two transcendent forms and he had comprehended a Great Dao. In addition, he had more than enough resources.

In other words, as long as the Large-Headed Dolls spun fast enough, he could break through to the next realm once he had circulated enough of his qi. Once he had advanced through all the levels in the fifth realm, he could naturally advance to the next realm with his two transcendent forms.

With the Mystical Winged Divine Dragon Transcendent Form and the Divine Nine's Profound Transcendent Form, which he had possessed for quite some time, the accumulated power could potentially propel him directly to the mid or even late stages of the sixth realm.

But first, he needed to make up for the levels he had yet to reach in the fifth realm.

Feeling too lazy to refine the plant into pills, Chu Liang simply swallowed the spirit plant whole, refining it internally with Divine Dragon Fire. The effect was almost the same as consuming the spirit plant in pill form.

A surge of spiritual energy flooded his body. As his qi circulation accelerated, a muffled boom resounded from within him moments later.

"Hah..."

Chu Liang exhaled softly.

Fourth level of the fifth realm completed.

For someone like him, breaking through the stages in a realm was as effortless as farting.

Now, all he needed to do was make the Large-Headed Dolls work non-stop.

As he glanced outside, he saw that it was still early. With time to spare, Chu Liang decided to head toward Heaven-Reaching Peak.

Inside the Hall of Weapons, he saw that a new generation of young disciples was on duty. The moment they saw Chu Liang, their eyes lit up with a mixture of awe and admiration—like they were standing before a living legend.

As the Champion of the Assembly of Immortal Sects and the founder of Red Cotton Peak, Chu Liang had earned a place of reverence among Mount Shu Sect's younger disciples. His sudden disappearance only deepened the sense of mystery and admiration surrounding him.

It was a long-standing truth—the dead were often revered more than the living. The absence of the person in question left room for endless imagination.

Even though Chu Liang had merely won the title of champion at the Assembly of Immortal Sects, rumors in Mount Shu painted a far grander picture. According to some, had he not vanished, he might have already broken through to the ninth realm and claimed the title of Hallowed One.

As for kicking the members of the Penglai Supreme Sect and punching the members of the Fog-Hidden Mountain of Immortals—well, word had it he'd done that three years ago.

When Chu Liang asked for Wen Yulong, the young disciple stammered for a long moment before finally explaining that Wen Yulong was no longer stationed there.

After learning where Wen Yulong currently resided, Chu Liang set off without delay. It wasn't far. Wen Yulong now lived in a pavilion atop an abandoned mountain peak.

Most of Mount Shu Sect's attendant disciples lived close to one another, except for those from the Hall of Weapons and the Hall of Alchemy

Due to frequent accidents and confidentiality concerns, their residences were more isolated.

Especially in Wen Yulong's case—whenever he tried to live closer to others, they would promptly vacate the area.

He had rightfully earned the infamous title of "Mount Shu's Walking Calamity."

Back then, when Chu Liang became the champion of the assembly, Wen Yulong's reputation soared, as he was Chu Liang's exclusive artificer.

However, the more people sought out Wen Yulong for his tool-making, the more they ended up suffering because of it.

Over time, everyone inside and outside Mount Shu came to know that he was a weird genius at tool-making, so naturally, no one sought him out anymore.

After all, not every cultivator had Chu Liang's level of adaptability.

As Chu Liang thought of this, he couldn't help but laugh.

The only reason he had adapted to Wen Yulong's creations in the first place was simple...

He had been broke.

"Junior Brother Wen!"

Chu Liang arrived at Wen Yulong's loft and called out, but silence greeted him.

He was puzzled. Wen Yulong wasn't at the Hall of Weapons, hadn't left Mount Shu, and clearly wasn't home crafting tools. What could he possibly be up to?

As Chu Liang pondered, he pushed open the door to the first floor.

As soon as he entered, he witnessed a bizarre scene.

Crouching low beneath the table, Wen Yulong suppressed his qi, holding his breath as if he was afraid that something might sense him.

"Junior Brother Wen?" Chu Liang called out in confusion.

Wen Yulong glanced up, relief flickering across his face—only for it to vanish just as quickly. His eyes widened in panic, and he frantically waved his hand, pressing a finger to his lips.

It seemed he was signaling Chu Liang to stay silent.

"Hmm?" Chu Liang, already halfway into the room, let out a puzzled hum.

In that instant, a deafening dragon's cry echoed through the loft.

A flash of black swordlight, swift as lightning, tore through the air and shot directly at Chu Liang! Its power was overwhelming!

Bam!

Chu Liang's right hand instantly morphed into a dragon claw. With lightning speed, he reached out and just barely caught the black swordlight before it could pierce him. Two strands of his hair drifted to the floor, neatly severed.

As the swordlight faded, a black sword trembled in his palm, still vibrating violently as if trying to break free.

Staring at the quivering sword tip, Chu Liang felt lingering fear. Thankfully, his reflexes were fast enough and his dragon claw tough enough...

If it had been someone with weaker cultivation, that strike would have pierced their heart without question.

"Are you trying to kill me?" Chu Liang asked Wen Yulong.

"Don't mention it..." Wen Yulong groaned, crawling out from under the table. "It's a new enchanted tool I just made. I call it the Sound-Slaying Sword. It unsheathes and strikes whenever it hears a sound—perfect for confined spaces."

"The sword qi is impressive," Chu Liang commented. "Your craftsmanship has definitely improved."

Wen Yulong let out a bitter laugh. "It's too impressive. Ever since I finished making it, I haven't dared to move for three days straight!"

Chapter 652: Xuan Yinzi's Hidden Realm

Shing.

Chu Liang sheathed the Sound-Slaying Sword, and Wen Yulong quickly applied three yellow talismans to seal it before sitting down in relief.

"Senior Brother Chu, it's been years, and you remain as impressive as ever," Wen Yulong said with a smile. "Where have you been all these years...?"

Chu Liang smiled helplessly and briefly recounted his experiences once again.

Since his return, he had found himself telling the same story to everyone he met. It was exhausting, but these were close friends and family—he couldn't simply refuse.

If only there were some way to share daily updates here as well. He could post what had happened, and his close friends would see it immediately, sparing him from the endless retelling.

"Huh?"

As he thought about this, a sudden idea struck him.

"Junior Brother Wen, do you know anything about the Soul Subjugator Token from the Dark King Sect? Do you know the secret to crafting an interdimensional domain for housing souls?" Chu Liang asked.

Tools that enabled long-distance communication were rare in the immortal realm.

The United Hearts Jade he shared with Jiang Yuebai could only be used between two people, and its rarity made it impractical for widespread use. In fact, most divine tools in the immortal realm capable of long-distance communication were limited to connecting only two high-level cultivators.

The Dark King Sect was the leader in this technology. The Soul Subjugator Token allowed multiple users to communicate in real-time. When Chu Liang had held it before, he hadn't given it much thought, but now, reflecting on it, he realized the craftsmanship was extraordinary.

"Soul Subjugator Token?" Wen Yulong furrowed his brows, thinking for a moment before answering. "I don't know much about it. All I know is that it's crafted by extracting a wisp of soul flame. If you have a divine technique to extract soul flames, forging the token itself shouldn't be too difficult. If you have a finished one for me to examine, I can give you an answer right away."

"Here," Chu Liang said, handing over a Soul Subjugator Token.

However, the soul flame within the token had already been extinguished, which meant that this soul had been kicked out of the Interdimensional soul domain.

Wen Yulong examined the token for a while before looking up and saying, "I can craft this. The difficulty lies in the Dark King Sect's divine technique for extracting soul flames. Are you planning to create a Soul Subjugator Token for our sect?"

"Not just for the Mount Shu Sect..." Chu Liang replied. "If there were a tool that connected the Divine Nine, the Terrestrial Ten, and even the entire immortal realm, you could send a message, and everyone within the interdimensional soul domain would see it..."

"Of course, you could also choose to contact someone privately, as long as you both enter your own soul domains."

"This..." Wen Yulong, with his sharp mind, instantly grasped Chu Liang's idea. His imagination ran wild, and he envisioned countless scenarios. "That's truly impressive..."

But after some thought, Wen Yulong shook his head and said, "This is too difficult. I haven't encountered that kind of technique yet, but storing soul flames must require highly complex formations. Even the Violet Gold Marquess only had seventy-two Soul Subjugators under his command. To house that many cultivators' soul flames, the spiritual energy needed for the formation would be thousands of times greater..."

"We will connect as many souls as you can. If we can only connect a few, we'll find ways to make it work with a limited number in the domain. If we can have many, all the better. Anyway, just start researching," Chu Liang said. "I've already handed over the Violet Gold Marquess' cultivation legacy to the Hall of Conservation. I'll go retrieve it later."

"Alright," Wen Yulong said, rubbing his hands eagerly.

Now that Chu Liang was back, it meant that his funds had returned.

Now that Chu Liang was back, it also meant that the one who recognized his talent had returned.

Only Chu Liang could fully embrace his wild ideas, provide support, and even inspire him creatively.

"Oh. I got distracted and strayed too far from the main reason I came," Chu Liang said, taking out the enchanted storage ring from Xuan Yinzi. "The reason I came to find you this time is for this."

...

"This formation inscription isn't too difficult to unlock, but it connects to a hidden realm," Wen Yulong said in surprise. "Could this be an enchanted tool belonging to an eighth realm Eminent One?"

"Something like that," Chu Liang replied with a smile. "He likely has his own hidden realm."

Chu Liang then explained what happened with Xuan Yinzi, and while Wen Yulong was astonished, he also felt a strange sense of familiarity.

That's right. The overwhelming feeling he always got when seeing Chu Liang return.

Even though he had seen so much more nowadays, he realized that Chu Liang could always reveal something new to him.

With that feeling, Wen Yulong unlocked the ring. Storage tools belonging to very powerful cultivators were often much easier to unlock. These cultivators never expected anyone to be able to take anything from them, so they rarely paid attention to security.

As the formation inscription broke, the ring emitted a dark glow, shooting into the air and expanding until it grew to the size of a doorway. The opening was deep and shadowy, leading to an unknown destination.

"I'll send a clone to check it out," Chu Liang said.

He took out a Puppet Pill and used the Army of Beans technique. Then, he controlled a clone to charge into the opening.

With a rumble, the clone entered the hidden realm.

Through the clone's eyes, he saw nothing but a vast, three-zhang-wide black space, filled with emptiness. Three items floated within, and scattered across the ground were clusters of dark impurities.

"This is the first time I've seen such a poor eighth-realm cultivator," Chu Liang said, curling his lips. "This hidden realm is smaller than a regular storage tool."

"Based on your story about him, I think it's likely he used up everything in the hidden realm," Wen Yulong replied with a laugh.

Powerful cultivators typically infused their hidden realms with spiritual energy, which could serve as a power source in critical moments. This was similar to how the Blue Dragon's Hidden Realm sacrificed most of its living beings to summon the power needed to restore the Dragon God's throne.

When Xuan Yinzi had no access to the spiritual energy in the world to replenish himself, he had likely absorbed every bit of spiritual energy in his hidden realm. That was how he managed to accumulate almost enough spiritual energy to break Jin Mucuo's seal.

With that in mind, the lack of items within the hidden realm made sense.

Judging by his pitiful state, it seemed anything with even a trace of spiritual energy—conscious souls, spirit plants, or materials—had been devoured. If iron had spiritual energy, he probably would've eaten that too.

In the end, everything became spiritual energy once digested.

This suggested that the remaining items were extraordinary—beyond even what an eighth-realm cultivator could digest.

With nothing left to inspect, Chu Liang controlled the clone to bring out all three items.

With a clattering sound, three items fell to the ground—a token, a scroll, and a jade slip.

Chu Liang picked up the jade slip and examined it. "This is the complete cultivation legacy of the Dark King Sect. It has the lowest level to the highest level. Even the Violet Gold Marquess didn't have a full set like this. Now, this saves me the trouble of searching for materials for you to study. You can study this."

Wen Yulong glanced at it and said, "The traditional arts of the Dark King Sect actually fall under the Heavenly Star Secret Arts. It is not actually very diabolical. The Dark King Sect simply focused on glorifying the strange soul-refining techniques and discarded the actual traditional cultivation path outlined in the technique."

"Once these diabolical cultivators have tried taking shortcuts, they naturally won't walk the righteous path again," Chu Liang remarked.

It was unavoidable. Those lacking talent couldn't outpace others even on the righteous path. If they refused to accept it, their only option was to dabble in forbidden techniques.

Of course, there were exceptions—like himself.

Although Chu Liang's talent was lacking, he neither took shortcuts nor followed the righteous path... he simply stayed put, making his Large-Headed Dolls work hard and advance forward on his behalf.

Wen Yulong picked up the token and examined it. "This looks like the token of the Dark King Sect's leader..."

The front of the token bore the words "Dark King," while the back featured a terrifying carving of the Ksitigarbha's face.

"The Dark King Sect's command token?" Chu Liang inspected it. "It seems authentic. Does that mean the token of the current Dark King Sect's leader is a fake?"

It made sense. After all, Xuan Yinzi had been overthrown—there was no way he would have willingly handed over the token.

Still, possessing the Dark King Sect's command token held little value on its own.

The real treasure was the legendary artifact.

As long as the current sect leader possessed the True Form of Ksitigarbha, his token would be treated as the real one, even if it wasn't.

The one who ended up losing would be the one with the fake token. Even if it was the real one, it wouldn't matter—it would still be deemed as false.

Chu Liang tucked the token away, then untied the string binding the scroll and slowly unfurled it.

Whoosh.

The scroll unfurled, revealing a painting of a serene woman with a soft, gentle smile. Her age was difficult to determine, but her expression exuded such warmth, stirring a quiet sense of reverence. Yet, beneath that facade of kindness, Chu Liang couldn't shake the faint chill that lingered in her smile.

But it was impossible to look away.

She was wreathed in divine light, lotus flowers blooming at her feet—like the goddess of some sort of religion.

The longer Chu Liang stared, the heavier his head felt, as if the painting itself was pulling him in.

Suddenly, Wen Yulong collapsed beside him.

Thud!

Chapter 653: The South Sea's Hallowed Mother

"This is an image of the South Sea Hallowed Mother."

Yuan Zhuo, with his square, resolute face, carefully examined the painting for a long time before speaking seriously.

Moments earlier, Chu Liang and Wen Yulong had been happily exploring Xuan Yinzi's hidden realm, only to find there was barely any treasure—just scraps. It wasn't until they unrolled the scroll that something unusual happened. Chu Liang felt light-headed, while Wen Yulong fainted.

Chu Liang quickly rolled the scroll shut and woke up Wen Yulong.

Thankfully, no harm was done. When Wen Yulong sat up, he spoke of a strange dream—one where he saw his mother.

However, he didn't recognize the woman in the painting, so the two of them went to the Hall of Conservation to consult Yuan Zhuo.

When it came to knowledge, no one on Mount Shu surpassed Yuan Zhuo. After all, he had read countless books and traveled across the nine provinces. His square head was filled with the wisdom of the world.

Yuan Zhuo recognized the woman at first glance, but he scrutinized the painting for so long because it was no ordinary painting.

"Where did you obtain this painting?" he asked. "It contains extraordinary spiritual energy. There's a chance that this painting might have originated from the Ruins of Return Cult."

Chu Liang briefly explained Xuan Yinzi's background, then he asked in confusion, "I know about the Ruins of Return[1], but what is the Ruins of Return Cult?"

Legend had it that the Divine Ruins was the Immortals' Storehouse, hidden high in the heavens. In contrast, the Ruins of Return lay deep beneath the sea, an underwater kingdom of treasures.

Both were places immortal cultivators yearned to find, but danger lurked within them. Many powerful cultivators had ventured into the Ruins of Return, drawn by promises of wealth and power, yet few ever returned. Most ended up dying in the boundless waters of the South Sea.

"Well..." Yuan Zhuo hesitated for a moment before continuing. "I'll have to start by explaining the South Sea's Hallowed Mother."

Chu Liang and Wen Yulong had never heard of this figure before. Quietly, they sat down, ready to listen. Stacks of heavy, dust-laden books surrounded them as Senior Brother Yuan began recounting stories from ages long past.

"The South Sea's Hallowed Mother was said to be a powerful ninth-realm cultivator at the Profound Realm that existed during ancient times. Some believe she was human, while others claim she was the descendant of sea demons. There are even whispers that she was a Hallowed One who descended from the heavens. The era is so distant that no one can say for certain. Whether she ever truly existed remains a mystery.

"Ancient texts speak of a time when the mortal realm faced a great calamity—earthquakes split the land, mountains crumbled into the sea, floods swept away kingdoms, and fire rained from the skies...

"The South Sea's Hallowed Mother used her power to let the sea rise and swallow the sky itself. She submerged the entire world beneath the ocean's surface, protecting all living beings from the catastrophe.

"In this submerged world, the surviving land-dwellers built a new home—a place we now know as the Ruins of Return."

As Yuan Zhuo spoke, Chu Liang and Wen Yulong listened attentively, though they didn't entirely believe it.

Ancient legends were always shrouded in mystery, especially those that had something to do with religion. It was inevitable that they would be exaggerated, and the line between truth and myth blurred over time.

Yuan Zhuo continued, "What happened afterward remains unknown. But if she truly existed, the South Sea's Hallowed Mother predates even the Dragon God. The dragons left behind their own stories, claiming that humans—once weak and fragile—emerged from the sea. This aligned with the history and legends of humans. It is likely that when the humans were living in the Ruins of Return at the bottom of the sea, the dragons became the rulers of the world above the ocean.

"But since the Dragon God and the other Hallowed Ones emerged long after, it implies that if the South Sea's Hallowed Mother was real, she must have fallen."

Yuan Zhuo paused briefly before saying, "However, not everyone believes this.

"There are those who call themselves followers of the Ruins of Return Cult—the self-proclaimed children of the South Sea's Hallowed Mother. They believe, without doubt, that she will return one day. Until then, they vow to guard the treasures in the Ruins of Return in her name."

"These followers mercilessly slaughter any cultivators who dare to explore the Ruins of Return," Yuan Zhuo said grimly. "There are even accounts of them wiping out an entire island nation for offending the South Sea's Hallowed Mother."

"Their ruthless methods angered the immortal sects, prompting multiple attempts to eliminate the cult. However, each attempt only forced them deeper into hiding, making it impossible to eradicate them completely."

"Successive dynasties have labeled the Ruins of Return Cult as heretical, banning their teachings across the nine provinces."

"Ancient texts occasionally mention that the South Sea's Hallowed Mother was a staunch advocate of blood sacrifices. The Ruins of Return Cult inherited this practice, often performing brutal rituals. This was the key reason why they had been suppressed."

"If the South Sea's Hallowed Mother truly existed, then perhaps the actions of the Ruins of Return Cult would be justified—that those who seek the treasures of the Ruins of Return should be seen as the greedy ones. Therefore, for the sake of those treasures, the sects of immortality cultivation must deny the existence of the South Sea Hallowed Mother. And so, with each passing year, fewer people remember her name," Yuan Zhuo said thoughtfully at the end.

Chu Liang listened quietly, his thoughts lingering on Yuan Zhuo's words.

He couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to the story—surely those were not the only reasons.

The more he learned, the clearer it became. It felt as if some unseen force in the world was deliberately erasing all traces of the legacies left by the ninth-realm cultivators, unwilling to let their influence linger.

Aside from Hallowed Li and Hallowed Yang of the human race, and the more recent Demon God, the figures of the ninth realm felt like shadows of the past—distant, elusive, and half-forgotten.

It might simply be due to the passage of time...

However, Hallowed Li was the first human to break through mortal boundaries and ascend to the Profound Realm, the ninth realm. He was the one who overcame the limitations of the human world, paving the way for those who came after him.

Yet his deeds, the oldest of all, remained well known, while the legacies of those who followed faded into distant, fragmented myths.

Chu Liang couldn't shake the unsettling thought that this was no mere coincidence.

It felt deliberate.

Someone, somewhere, was erasing these records.

But who could wield such power—enough to alter the very fabric of history?

And more importantly, why?

...

There was blood and fire, wails and roars. Beneath the endless stars, the distant landscape burned like a vision of the netherworld.

This was Mount Mang, a land located at the southern border of the Yu Dynasty. It was a barren yet thriving land.

When the Demon God descended, the northwest was the first to fall, becoming a land ruled by countless demons. In time, the demon race withdrew to the Far West, but they left behind humans across the Western Continent—many of whom carried demon blood in their veins.

These half-demons were seen as ticking time bombs, shunned by common folk in other regions. Fear and distrust pushed them to the fringes of society.

However, if this kind of behavior by the common folk continued, it would only drive those people potentially with demon blood to the demons' side.

Thus, the dynasty of the human world launched a massive relocation effort, moving large numbers of Western Continent citizens to the Southern Regions. Though it was merely a shift from one frontier to another, leaving behind the old land brought new hope.

A driving force behind this migration was the fear that those left behind might one day reconnect with the demon race in the Far West.

The entire Western Continent was nearly emptied. After arriving in the Southern Regions, many struggled to adapt to the harsh life and perished. Over thousands of years, those who survived turned the region into the most chaotic part of the Yu Dynasty.

Successive dynasties attempted to bring order to the region, but the Southern Regions were nothing like the Western Continent. The area was mountainous and rugged. Once someone fled into the peaks, capturing them was nearly impossible.

After years of attempts to govern the place, the mountains instead became home to many esteemed heroes. Their ties to the commoners were deeply rooted, making it impossible to eradicate them. If anything, their influence only grew stronger.

The imperial court's heavy-handed measures only strengthened the bond between the people and the heroes, forging a relationship that surpassed their trust in the officials.

Even so, the commoners far outnumbered the rebels.

In recent years, Mount Mang had been ravaged by earthquakes and shrouded in poisonous mists, leaving the land barren and harvests scarce. Floods and heavy snow followed, drowning or freezing countless refugees.

Disaster after disaster struck without mercy.

Amid the chaos, the people of Mount Mang rose up—raiding nearby regions, pillaging and burning. Yet, much of what they seized was redistributed among the suffering refugees.

After repeated raids, the court could no longer stand by. Troops were dispatched to quell the unrest.

Under the cover of night, mounted soldiers stretched across the horizon like dark clouds smothering the moon. Their oppressive presence hung thick in the air. On the ground below, rows of armored troops formed tight battle lines, encircling the dense forest.

Their might loomed like a mountain, unshakable and heavy.

Atop a jagged peak, a ragged young man stood tall. His frame was thin, but confidence flickered in his eyes like fire.

"You dogs of the imperial court, come into the mountains if you dare!" he shouted.

The armored soldiers responded in unison, "Surrender and you shall live! Surrender and you shall live!"

"Surrender, my ass!" the young man shouted. "We are as good as dead anyway. Better to die standing than live kneeling!"

Boom!

Heavy footsteps resounded. A giant beast, as large as a hill, emerged from the depths of Mount Mang.

For a moment, silence gripped the battlefield.

Then, a banner toppled within the soldiers' ranks.

The entire army roared in unison, "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

...

Not far away, in another part of the forest, two figures stood silently, their eyes fixed on the distant glow of blood and fire.

A beautiful woman, wrapped in a heavy cloak, frowned slightly as though the sight before her was too much to bear.

Beside her, a defiant-looking young man smiled cruelly. "How delightful. Watching these humans tear each other apart is truly entertaining. I only regret I'm not down there myself."

His long hair drifted lazily in the wind, while three purple, scale-like markings stretched across the left side of his face.

The woman glanced at him, her expression full of disdain.

"Don't give me that look, Caiyi." The man chuckled. "You deserve more credit for this mess than I do. I had no intention of helping those fools, but you were quick to agree."

"I'll do whatever it takes to find the Demon God," Caiyi replied.

The man's sneer widened. "Is it the Demon God you're after... or that human lover of yours?"

"Changfeng," Caiyi said, her voice turning cold. She locked eyes with him and enunciated each word clearly. "Don't make me kill you."

Chapter 654: Senior Brother Chu, I Did It!

The crackling flames resounded incessantly through the forest. Half of the forest had been burned down, reduced to charred remains. The ground was littered with corpses.

A few people wandered through the aftermath, searching for any surviving enemies.

The young man who had shouted confidently at the imperial soldiers earlier now sat crouched on the hillside with a hollow gaze.

His long hair was disheveled, and his face was pale and gaunt. Though he had emerged from the bloody battle unscathed, he was covered in the blood of others. The fierceness he had displayed before had disappeared; only confusion remained in his eyes.

"Big Brother Jiangtong!" a child called out from behind him.

The young man turned his head and saw a frail, emaciated little girl holding a bundle of dry rations.

"Yaoyao?" Lu Jiangtong, the young man, regained his composure, life returning to his eyes. He turned around fully to face her. "What's the matter?"

"We found a lot of food. Mother told me to bring this to you first," Yaoyao said, offering him the food.

"I'm not hungry. You eat it, Yaoyao," Lu Jiangtong replied, gently patting Yaoyao's head.

"Mother said you haven't eaten for many days, and you just fought a battle. You can't go hungry," Yaoyao insisted.

"Heheh." Lu Jiangtong chuckled. "My cultivation level is high, and my demon blood is pure. I can survive on spiritual qi alone, but you and the others can't. You need this food more than I do. Go on back now. It might still be dangerous here."

After sending the little girl back down the mountain, Lu Jiangtong turned back to face the burning forest.

At this moment, a black-robed figure appeared before him. The figure's face was obscured, making them unidentifiable.

"Lu Jiangtong?" the black-robed figure asked.

"That's me," Lu Jiangtong answered, frowning. "You guys changed the contact person again? Why do you appear and disappear like deities and ghosts?"

"It isn't easy to provide you with support. If we hadn't been discreet, the Imperial Supervisory Bureau would have caught us a long time ago," the black-robed figure said, tossing a jade slip over.

Thud. Lu Jiangtong caught it midair.

The black-robed figure explained, "That has your next destination and enough supplies to get you there. Once you leave Mount Mang, someone will guide you to your destination. Make sure your men stay in line. If even the slightest bit of information leaks, no one will be able to save you."

"It's just food again..." Lu Jiangtong muttered. "You want us to fight the imperial court, but we need weapons, enchanted tools, and mounts. We, the people of Mount Mang, fear nothing. But with the right supplies, fewer of my brothers would have to die."

"Acquiring things like that leaves a paper trail. You'll have to seize them yourselves. Understand this—food is the most precious resource right now in the Yu Dynasty."

"Of course, I know that," Lu Jiangtong said, smiling bitterly.

The black-robed figure added, "One more thing... and this is crucial. If anyone starts turning into a demon, you must not hesitate. Kill them on the spot. The demons in the Southern Regions are stirring up a lot of trouble. If this continues, they'll likely come for you. You're already a great enemy of the imperial court. If you align with the demons, the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten will take action..."

"Hah."

Lu Jiangtong's smile widened into a smirk, but his eyes glinted with cold hostility.

The people of Mount Mang had been discriminated against for generations because of the demon blood flowing through their veins. In the eyes of many humans, just having even a trace of demon blood made the people of Mount Mang no different from demons.

Those with demon blood possessed extraordinary cultivation talent and progressed through their cultivation journey rapidly. However, they always carried the risk of turning into demons, reverting to the form of their ancestors. That meant it was likely those who were more gifted had purer demon blood, and the purer the demon blood they had, the greater the threat they would be if they turned into demons.

Moreover, having demon blood often led to having violent, cold, and difficult temperaments, further intensifying the conflicts they had with normal humans. Thus, even after thousands of years, the people of Mount Mang never fully integrated into the Southern Regions. This was why so many of them had turned to banditry.

Due to the intense conflicts, the imperial court enforced stricter control over the Mount Mang people. They forbade the Mount Mang people from cultivating to prevent potential disasters that would be difficult to resolve. They also forbade the Mount Mang people from marrying normal humans to stop the spread of demon blood.

The people of Mount Mang knew well that the outside world was waiting for them to die out.

At first, they managed to survive. As long as there was food, no one considered starting a revolt.

Then around thirty years ago, someone secretly provided the people of Mount Mang with cultivation manuals and resources, allowing the most talented among them to train in secret. The imperial court and immortal sects had forbidden such activities. Nevertheless, only a small number of the Mount Mang people became cultivators, and they didn't go out to cause trouble, so no one noticed.

In recent years, natural disasters swept across the nine provinces, causing widespread famine. Mount Mang's living conditions worsened to the point where it was impossible for them to survive on the little food they had.

Left with no other option, they robbed and plundered. That eventually led to today's revolt, where they killed government officials.

However, there was another force behind this revolt. They had approached Lu Jiangtong, leader of the Mount Mang rebels, beforehand and offered their assistance. Their sole condition was that anyone who turned into a demon had to be killed straight away.

The constant battles drastically increased the likelihood that the people of Mount Mang would revert to their demon forms. Now, everyone participating in the revolt fought with the huge risk of reverting hanging over them. That meant someone fighting for the survival of their people might ultimately be slain by their own people. It was an incredibly cruel fate.

Knowing that, the mysterious force had insisted on that condition, clearly wanting to draw a line between Lu Jiangtong's group and the demons.

Nevertheless, the mysterious force did not know that the demons had already approached Lu Jiangtong... just a while ago.

After the black-robed figure left, Lu Jiangtong crouched down again, his hollow gaze fixed on the scorched battlefield.

There was someone from Mount Mang who was so hungry that he wanted to carve flesh off the corpses and eat it, but a group of people stopped him. However, it wasn't because it was a taboo in their culture, as some of them had eaten human flesh before. The problem was that eating human flesh drastically increased the chance of transforming into demons. Once they turned, there was no going back.

Lu Jiangtong clenched his teeth, and his gaze hardened with resolve.

Before the Mount Mang rebels emerged, everyone loathed and rejected them. Then once they dared to revolt, everyone sought to wield them as a blade.

Humans refuse to see us as humans, and demons refuse to see us as demons.

It's time the whole world learns... that when the people of Mount Mang are full, we are humans. But when we're starving, we are demons!

...

"This snow toad meat is absolutely delicious!"

Lackey B gave a thumbs-up as he introduced the Red Moon Pavilion's top dishes.

Lackey B's real name was Meng Shouyang, but his nickname was Mountain Tiger—known as one of the famed Four Overlords of Mount Shu, a food and beverage magnate with shops across the world of immortal cultivators, and the dream lover of many young women.

Despite his rise in status and wealth, he remained true to his roots, tasting every new ingredient that was to be used at Red Moon Pavilion. No one knew Red Moon Pavilion's offerings better than him.

The friends and family of Silver Sword Peak had gathered at the peak to celebrate Chu Liang's return. Lackey B had personally selected all the dishes and brought them over from Red Moon Pavilion. Only the finest dishes made the cut.

Lackey B continued, "This meat comes from the Red-Tailed Ox. It's worlds apart from regular beef...

"And this. It's fresh from the Western Regions—a demonic beast that looks like a plant but has blood vessels. Locals call it the Man-Eating Demon Flower. I thought, 'It can eat people, but can people eat it?' Turns out, it tastes pretty great."

After Lackey B had finished serving and introducing the dishes, Shang Ziliang sighed. "Many places across the nine provinces have been suffering from famine in recent years. We are truly fortunate to be able to sit here and feast."

"Famine?" Chu Liang raised his eyes. "With Yao Dengxian overseeing things, shouldn't the harvests be unaffected?"

At the mention of Yao Dengxian, Lin Bei sighed. "Haaa... It's not that simple. The Great Dao of Cloud Dominion can alter meteorological phenomena, mitigating natural disasters like droughts and floods. But earthquakes, wildfires, tsunamis, landslides, gales, blizzards, locust swarms... these disasters strike relentlessly. They won't all be resolved simply by altering meteorological phenomena."

"How could this happen?" Chu Liang frowned. "After the Golden Dragon left, did the Yu Dynasty not find a new fate-suppressing beast?"

Shang Ziliang explained, "This isn't just about the fate-suppressing beast anymore... The auspicious celestial beasts of the four seas appeared across the nine provinces, probably rushing to suppress the declining fate of the Yu Dynasty's empire. But soon after, the fate of the empire entered a steep decline... I do not dare vouch for the validity of this information, but I heard that the celestial beasts that had rushed over and fought over who would be the one to suppress the empire's fate... they all left when the empire's fate started to decline rapidly."

The weakened fate of the empire heralded chaos and unrest. Chu Liang couldn't help but worry. This was not a good sign.

Lin Bei added, "As the world descends into chaos, evil entities and strange cases have increased in number. In recent years, the number of missions available at the Sword Exchange Pavilion missions has skyrocketed. Eldest Senior Brother leaves the mountain frequently to handle them. We rarely see him on Mount Shu these days."

The "Eldest Senior Brother" that Lin Bei referred to was, of course, Xu Ziyang. It had been two days since Chu Liang returned to Mount Shu, but he hadn't seen any sign of Senior Brother Xu this whole time.

"Red Cotton Peak's swift rise in popularity was partially due to this wave of chaos," Chu Yi chimed in. "As the world descends further into chaos, cultivators have become more concerned about their safety. It's with our delivery service that we surpassed Taotie City. Without this instability in the world, we wouldn't have dominated the market so quickly."

Despite Chu Yi pointing out the silver lining of the grim state of the world, Chu Liang couldn't feel the slightest bit of joy.

Cultivators stood high above the common folk. If even they feared for their safety, how much harder would life be for the ordinary people?

After a moment of thought, Chu Liang asked, "Should we organize some disaster relief efforts? Red Cotton Peak has earned quite a bit over the years. We have some funds to spare for that, right?"

Chu Yi replied, "Actually, it's always been very tight financially because we've been competing with Taotie City and the Immortals' Square, both overtly and covertly. But if we halt our expansion and focus on maintaining our current share of the market, we should be able to free up some money very quickly."

Lin Bei wanted to say something. "I heard the Buddhist Cloud Monastery is hosting a banquet in a few days—"

"Senior Brother Chu!" Wen Yulong called out as he burst in.

He was clearly late to the meal, but he paid no attention to the food on the table.

His face lit up with excitement. "I did it!"

Chapter 655: Circle of Immortal Friends

In high spirits, Wen Yulong launched into his explanation. "I studied the Dark King Sect's cultivation manuals all night yesterday, and I found that it's actually simpler than we thought."

Not minding that Wen Yulong was interrupting the meal, Chu Liang nodded, signaling him to continue.

Wen Yulong did just that. "The Dark King Sect's research on soul techniques and arts produced truly profound results. It's like you said. Many of their soul techniques and arts are dark magic, but there are quite a few we can use. This interdimensional soul domain is just one of them!

"I realized that they have to extract soul flames and use them in enchanted formations so that they can have a hold over the lives of their subordinate Soul Subjugators. With the soul flames of their subordinates in their possession, the higher-ranking members can use secret skills to kill their subordinates at any time. It's to threaten them into complying. However, since all we want is to communicate, leaving a fragment of our spirit sense[1] will do!"

Wen Yulong pulled out the Soul Subjugator Token from his inner chest pocket and a formation diagram, gesturing at it as he explained in further detail.

Chu Liang nodded repeatedly, wearing an expression that clearly said, I understand. Keep going.

Beside him, Little Chu Yi listened intently and nodded too.

Upon seeing that even a kid understood what Wen Yulong was saying, Lin Bei and Shang Ziliang felt too embarrassed to ask questions. They exchanged glances and just nodded as well.

Likewise, seeing that the other guys seemed to understand just fine, Lackey A and Lackey B just nodded along too.

When the koi fish sisters saw that, they straightened their postures, adopted a serious look, and nodded occasionally—all to show that they were listening in earnest.

The Golden-Furred Hou, the Fierce Draconic Colt, and the Baize youngling had been playing happily nearby. However, when these spirit beasts saw the group of people nodding, they calmed down and nodded too.

Di Nufeng, who was seated at the highest spot, observed that even the spirit beasts seemed to understand what Wen Yulong was talking about, so she nodded along as well.

From those with the highest to the lowest level of intelligence, everyone on Silver Sword Peak nodded repeatedly as they listened to Wen Yulong's explanation.

Of course, as for how many of them actually understood it—well, that wasn't quite everyone.

"By acquiring a bit of spirit sense from each person, the scale of the enchanted formation can expand dozens of times!" Wen Yulong said loudly. "With Violet Gold Marquess's high cultivation level, he could control around a hundred soul flames. But if we only need to use spirit sense, we can probably accommodate thousands of fragments of spirit sense!"

"Yesterday, you said the more the better. Now, the rough maximum number of people that can be connected simultaneously in one interdimensional soul domain is several thousand.

"With the Violet Gold Marquess's original method, each interdimensional soul domain can only contain four soul flames, and each soul flame has to be supported with minor enchanted formations. If we want to use only one enchanted formation for all of them, the strain on the enchanted formation would be significantly greater.

"Nevertheless, we can use spirit talismans to maintain the enchanted formation. It's more stable and lasts longer than using foundational qi. The Violet Gold Marquess probably didn't trust his subordinates, so he insisted on personally managing the main enchanted formation.

"In short, they've been using it wrong all this time! What a pity. If it's used only for communication, it will be an incredibly beneficial tool. It's far more advanced than the ordinary communication methods we use now."

Once Wen Yulong was done explaining, he pulled out a stack of golden tokens from his inner chest pocket.

"I worked overnight to make these ten tokens. Take a look."

Seeing the tokens, Chu Liang finally smiled. "Perfect. Let's each take one and have a trial run. Soon enough, everyone working on Silver Sword Peak will have one."

"Heheheh!" Lin Bei chuckled as he took a token. "That sounds great! But... if I may ask, what exactly is this?"

At his question, the line of people and spirit beasts nodded sincerely for the first time since Wen Yulong entered the scene.

Little Chu Yi explained, "It's a real-time communication tool."

"Ohhh," the rest of the group uttered.

The people and spirit beasts that had been nodding mindlessly finally understood something.

Lin Bei muttered, "So, it's an enchanted tool for communication. I thought it was... precisely that, yes."

Each person who received a token injected a fragment of their spirit sense into the jade talisman on Wen Yulong's palm. He had already inscribed the enchanted formation into the jade talisman in advance, so the preparations were completed in no time.

The first message appeared in the golden interdimensional soul domain.

[The Handsome and Elegant Little Lin Bei]: "Heheheh!"

Chu Liang chuckled. "This token is exclusive to one person. Once you've set it up with your chosen name, that name will be added to the enchanted formation. You only get to select your name once, so choose carefully."

Lin Bei: "?"

Wen Yulong said, "Actually, changing the name isn't that diffi—"

Chu Liang swiftly covered Wen Yulong's mouth as he warned the others again, "Remember, only members can purchase Name-Change Cards. One Name-Change Card allows for one name change."

"Eh?" Wen Yulong blinked. "Members?"

"Naturally, I'm referring to people paying to become our honored members. I'll explain in detail later," Chu Liang replied smoothly. Then he said, "We obviously can't keep calling this thing the Soul Subjugator Token. Have you given it a new name?"

Wen Yulong answered, "I was thinking... this item is small yet intricate, capable of transmitting thoughts across the four seas with a mere movement of a person's spirit sense... so I plan to name it... Skillful Movements Across the Sea!"

He looked rather proud of himself. "How about it?"

It is not great.

This isn't how a normal person names things, is it?

Inwardly, Chu Liang criticized the name, but outwardly, he nodded and maintained a polite smile. "Very nice. It's quite an elegant name. But... perhaps a slight change could improve it."

"What do you think should be changed, Senior Brother Chu?" Wen Yulong asked.

"How about calling it 'Circle of Immortal Friends' instead?" Chu Liang suggested. "After all, whoever gets this item would undoubtedly be people in the world of immortality cultivators who are good friends of the Mount Shu Sect. Everyone can share their thoughts within the circle."

Xiaoyu'er tilted her head as she thought about it. "But... what exactly do we post in it?"

"Anything you want everyone to see. We can all post something now to liven things up in there since it's just the few of us," Chu Liang replied.

However, none of them had even seen anything like this before, so they weren't sure of what to post.

At that moment, someone called out from outside. "Chu Liang!"

A handsome young monk landed on Silver Sword Peak.

He yelled, "I heard you returned! Why didn't you notify anyone? I only found out after arriving at Mount Shu! Do you know how worried everyone's been over the years? Is this how you treat us? Does that make any sense? Does that make any sense?? Does that make any sense???"

...

The battle was over, and smoke settled over the battlefield on Mount Mang.

A figure emerged slowly from the dense forest, clad in pale gold armor. His eyes were blue, an unnatural hue that looked quite fantastical[2]. He spread his spirit sense through the area, carefully scanning his surroundings with a cautious gaze.

After that, he pulled out a wooden bird from his inner chest pocket.

He said into the bird's ear, "I am Seal-Holding Official Ji Lingfeng of the Capital of Yu. Under the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner's order, I have come to investigate the incident at Mount Mang. There is something gravely amiss here.

"The rebels of Mount Mang are not poverty-stricken, displaced people. They have ample resources and great combat power. They even managed to relocate all of their people in a very short time. For them to have such great mobility... there must be a powerful force backing them.

"The revolt at Mount Mang might have been long in the making. Or perhaps... someone carefully orchestrated it.

"The rebels have all vanished from Mount Mang. All neighboring kingdoms must reinforce their defenses immediately."

Then Ji Lingfeng tapped the wooden bird with the index and middle fingers of his right hand. The wooden bird's eyes sprang open. It seemed to now have a spiritual nature and sentience.

The wooden bird flapped its wings, soaring skyward.

Six years ago, Ji Lingfeng left home and competed with his younger sister to see who could stay away from home the longest. After a series of twists and turns, he ended up joining the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, working his way up from the bottom.

At present, he was a seal-holding official, and he had recently gained the favor of the Imperial Commissioner. As for the contest with his younger sister—well, that was still ongoing...

Just as the wooden bird was about to ascend into the heavens, a beam of cold light shot toward it.

Seeing that, Ji Lingfeng's gaze turned sharp. He pointed his halberd at the wooden bird, and the space around it became distorted.

The cold light appeared to pierce through the wooden bird, but it did not split the wooden bird in two. Instead, the beam of light simply pierced through air.

Unharméd, the wooden bird continued its ascent into the sky.

In the next instant, a massive black shadowy figure rushed toward the wooden bird with a whoosh. It swallowed the wooden bird and then crashed to the ground before Ji Lingfeng.

Boom.

The shadowy figure was revealed to be a black wild boar with prominent tusks sticking out of its face and a vicious large python coiled around it.

Despite the creatures' demon appearances, Ji Lingfeng thought that their expressions were very human-like. Furthermore, the wild boar was standing upright on two legs like a human. One of its front feet was even gripping onto a long saber, wielding it as a weapon.

Seeing that, Ji Lingfeng figured it out.

He looked closely at the two demons and asked slowly, "Are you rebels of Mount Mang who have reverted to your demon forms?"

"That's right," a gaunt young man answered from behind Ji Lingfeng as he strolled forward.

With a sinister grin stretched across his face, the young man said in a hoarse voice, "Thanks to you imperial dogs... we, the people of Mount Mang, can no longer be humans."

Chapter 656: The Heavenly Peak Banquet

"Put it away, quickly!"

At the sound of that voice, Chu Liang's heart tightened. He swiftly put away the token in his hand, plastering a wide grin across his face as he stepped forward to greet the approaching figure.

"Pushan!"

Chu Liang's joy was genuine. After almost dying, he thought that seeing his chatterbox friend again was truly something to celebrate.

However, he couldn't risk letting Monk Pushan see the Circle of Immortal Friends. There was a real chance it could tank the product's user experience and approval ratings.

"Amitabha..."

Pushan's appearance hadn't changed much. His divine glow had dimmed slightly, lending him a more dignified air. But the moment he opened his mouth, it was unmistakably the same old Pushan.

"Come on, tell me where you've been these past years. I just saw Luo Yao two days ago, and she said she misses the days we went undercover together! The Dark King Sect and the West Sea Diabolical Forces have been at each other's throats lately. If you were around, we might have gotten involved! Seriously, you have no idea. This time, my senior brothers, Pucheng and Puyou, and I are visiting the major sects, and I picked Mount Shu Sect to be the first one. Fate must've brought us together!"

"Hey? I asked you to tell me how you have been these past few years. Why haven't you said anything yet?"

"..." Chu Liang smiled for a while before finally finding a chance to speak. "There's so much I want to tell you."

They chatted briefly.

Well, mostly Pushan talked, and Chu Liang eventually learned the reason for his visit.

As one of the Divine Nine sects, the Buddhist Cloud Monastery resided quite literally among the heavens, isolated from the other sects. They rarely mingled with the rest of the immortal world, maintaining a detached and lofty presence.

In the monastery, there was this spacious plaza illuminated by Buddha's light. At dusk, the setting sun would bathe the plaza in gold, as if draping the entire space in a shimmering veil.

This magnificent sight was known as "Buddha's Light on the Peak of the Heavens."

Whenever the monastery needed to announce major affairs to the sects, they held a grand banquet in the plaza, illuminated by the glow of Buddha's Light. This banquet was known as the Heavenly Peak Banquet. The scale of the event varied depending on the occasion. For the inauguration of a new abbot, invitations were typically extended to all sects in the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten. On rare occasions, all sects from the land of the nine provinces were summoned, transforming the gathering into a magnificent spectacle.

In short—the bigger the guest list, the greater the matter at hand.

This time, the Buddhist Cloud Monastery invited all sects from the land of the nine provinces and four seas. Of course, "all" really referred to the all prominent and mid-tier sects known to the monastery, as it was obviously hard to invite the smaller, lesser-known sects as well.

To emphasize the significance of the event, the monastery dispatched young monks to personally deliver each invitation.

"A matter this serious," Chu Liang mused aloud, "must have something to do with the common people—especially if the Buddhist Cloud Monastery is taking such steps."

"Precisely," Pushan replied. "The provinces are beset by disasters, and the kingdom's strength is waning. Our abbot seeks to convene the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten to discuss solutions and to gather alms for disaster relief during the banquet."

"Raising alms..."

So it would be a charity banquet.

Chu Liang nodded. "Red Cotton Peak wanted to start a relief donation, but we are not in the right position to gather people to do it too. If the Buddhist Cloud Monastery is willing to take the lead, that's the best outcome."

Pushan pressed his palms together and said, "Our abbot often reminds us that even though cultivators may seem removed from ordinary life, we depend on the people to survive. We should honor them as we honor our parents and feel their suffering as if it were our own."

"The abbot's compassion is admirable," Chu Liang said after a brief pause. "But I worry that simple alms may have limited impact. The immortal sects don't have much silver to spare, and even if they do, much of it may not directly help the common folk."

"We understand this," Pushan replied solemnly. "But even the smallest effort is still an effort. Disasters like these... are beyond what mortal hands can prevent."

"Actually, I have an idea," Chu Liang said suddenly. "What if, instead of simply raising alms... we hold a charity auction?"

...

After the gathering, Chu Liang bid farewell to Pushan and made his way toward the Dragon-Fishing Pool on the Solitude Peak.

The Little Golden Dragon had been placed there some time ago. After visiting his fellow disciples at Mount Shu, Chu Liang thought it was time to check in on the creature.

Upon arrival, he noticed the layout of the pool had changed. The waters seemed deeper, veiled in soft mist. A curved barrier now split the pool in two, dividing what was once a single, seamless body of water.

It looked oddly like a yin-yang hotpot.

This change had taken place after the Little Golden Dragon moved in. The disciples of the Mount Shu Sect dared not approach the home of the dragons here so they had no idea what had happened here. Occasionally, they would fly past and glance down from the skies and find the pool's new layout amusing.

The left side, where the White Dragon resided, was called the Big Dragon's Hollow while the right side, where the Little Golden Dragon had settled, became known as the Little Dragon's Hollow.

Chu Liang headed to Little Dragon's Hollow first. His divine sense drifted through the mist, scanning the waters below.

Ordinary Mount Shu disciples wouldn't dream of disturbing a True Dragon, wary of the consequences.

Nevertheless, Chu Liang wasn't the least bit concerned.

He knew exactly how that Little Golden Dragon had ended up here.

In terms of rarity, the Mount Shu Sect possessed two True Dragons, but there was only one Chu Liang.

If anything, the True Dragon risked punishment for disturbing Chu Liang.

Yet, even as he scanned the surroundings with his divine sense, he found nothing. With a shrug, Chu Liang submerged himself, diving deeper. Beneath the water, he discovered a massive cluster of golden light that illuminating the depths of the entire pool.

The Little Golden Dragon has turned into an egg again? Could it be digesting the Golden Dragon's Orb?

Chu Liang didn't fully understand the situation and refrained from acting rashly. As he surfaced, his gaze met a towering dragon head.

"Is that... Sovereign...Sovereign..." the dragon stammered, eyes wide with astonishment.

Chu Liang blinked, caught off guard by the unexpected form of address. For a moment, he hesitated before realization dawned.

He pointed to the Dragon God's mark on his forehead. "You're talking to this, aren't you?"

"That is the mark of the Eternal Sovereign of our dragon race, the supreme Dragon God..." the White Dragon's voice rumbled like thunder. "Where did you obtain it?"

"By chance, I suppose." Chu Liang shrugged, choosing not to elaborate on the Dragon God's Throne. Instead, he asked, "Have you ever seen the Dragon God?"

"Given my age, I have never witnessed the Dragon God," the White Dragon rumbled, lowering its head. "But its presence is etched deeply in the inherited memory of every pure-blooded True Dragon."

The dragon's massive form shifted, and with reverence, it bowed.

"From this day forth, you are the Dragon God's envoy. All dragons will listen to your command."

"You're too kind." Chu Liang smiled. "The legacy you gave me previously helped me quite a bit. I should be the one thanking you."

"The gift of a True Dragon's Scale was meant to avoid a great calamity," the White Dragon replied truthfully.

"A calamity?" Chu Liang's brow furrowed. He recalled the White Dragon mentioning this before but had never pressed for details. "What kind of calamity?"

The White Dragon explained, "It is a prophecy left behind when the Ancient Dragon Lair shattered. They foretold that ten thousand years later, a calamity would descend upon the world—one that would lead to the extinction of dragons."

In time, someone performed a divination for dragons. Those unwilling to face extinction could only seek refuge in places of great fate. Such places are rare in this world—that is why I chose Mount Shu. And there... I found you."

"You're saying I am someone with a great fate?" Chu Liang asked.

"Yes. Your fate isn't overly abundant, but it's remarkably dense[1], unlike that of ordinary mortals. Without careful observation, it remains hidden—like gold concealed within destiny."

The White Dragon continued slowly, "I hesitated before. You were merely the best choice available. But now, with the Dragon God's mark upon you, it appears fate has chosen you to guide our race through this looming calamity!"

"Haha," Chu Liang chuckled, not letting the dragon's flattery get to his head.

The White Dragon circled overhead, silent in thought before finally speaking. "A single scale is no longer sufficient. Please, allow me to offer my soul as tribute to the sovereign."

Chu Liang shrugged casually. "No need for that. I already have another dragon soul protecting me. Having more would just be excessive. If I ever need your help, I'll come find you."

After a brief exchange, Chu Liang ascended from the misty Dragon-Fishing Pool.

Usually, Chu Liang wouldn't pass up a free offer. Even if it served no immediate purpose, it was better to take it.

However, when it came to gifts from the White Dragon, Chu Liang was far more cautious.

He still remembered the first time the White Dragon had offered him the legacy of the dragon scale. Its words had made it clear—that wasn't a simple gift, but something given with the expectation of a favor in return.

Rather than a gift, it was more like an investment.

And now, here it was again, following the same pattern. If disaster struck and the dragon expected him to fight on the front lines, could he really stand against a calamity that even a seventh-realm being couldn't survive?

It was better not to take on more than he could handle.

Of course, he wasn't entirely brushing the dragon off.

Dragon souls were powerful, but having too many conflicting ones was pointless. It was better to have a pure dragon soul. The Little Golden Dragon held limitless potential, so staying tied to it was enough. If the two dragons that had conflict both gifted him a dragon soul, there was a chance that the dragon souls would clash in the future.

The main reason was that Chu Liang already had an abundance of dragon-related assets. With the Dragon God's mark, he was practically becoming a True Dragon himself. Why bother accepting favors from the White Dragon?

Would a billionaire care about a millionaire's tip—especially if they might have to repay it later?

Simply put, he didn't need it.

As Chu Liang mulled over his thoughts and walked away, a figure soared toward him from a distance.

The approaching figure had long, flowing hair, with bangs falling over most of his face, leaving only one eye visible. Dressed in black, his demeanor exuded cold arrogance.

Chu Liang's eyes lit up with pleasant surprise. "Ling Ao!"

At the sight of Chu Liang, the man's stern expression softened into a smile.

"Chu Liang?"

It was Ling Ao, who was now an attendant at the Mount Shu Sect, frequently tasked with assignments outside Mount Shu. Chu Liang hadn't seen him since his return and hadn't expected to cross paths with him here.

"As soon as I returned to Mount Shu, I heard you made it back safely," Ling Ao said. "I went straight to Silver Sword Peak to find you, but they told me you weren't there. What are you doing here?"

"Did you come here looking for me?" Chu Liang asked.

"Not exactly. They didn't know where you'd gone. I just ended up here out of habit," Ling Ao chuckled. "We did pretty well at the Immortal Sect Assembly, didn't we? My cultivation has improved since then—enough to catch the attention of the guardian of our sect, the True Dragon. The White Dragon gave me a scale. I guess you could say it's half my teacher now. Every time I return to Mount Shu, I make sure to stop by the Dragon-Fishing Pool to pay my respects."

Lowering his voice, he added, "I'm hoping that if I behave well enough, I could maybe ask for the cultivation legacy of a dragon soul one day."

Chapter 657: Jiuguan City

Chu Liang returned to Silver Sword Peak, only to see Xiaoyu'er rushing out in a panic. As soon as she spotted him, she called out anxiously, "Big Bro Chu Liang, someone's looking for you!"

"Hmm?" Chu Liang was puzzled by her appearance. Someone's looking for me?

Stepping into the pavilion, he was met with the sight of a bloodied figure sprawled on the ground. Liu Xiaoyu and Chu Yi knelt beside him, hurriedly tending to his wounds.

Nearby, Di Nufeng stood with her arms crossed, inspecting the scene with a bored expression. She mumbled aloud, half to herself, "Two strikes, yet neither hit the mark. All force, no finesse... Oh, one on his back too? Even worse. What a pity."

The wounded man couldn't hold back and said weakly, "Esteemed senior, are you actually hoping I don't make it...?"

Chu Liang stepped forward with a reassuring smile. "Brother Ji, don't take it to heart. It's just her work habit."

He recognized the gravely injured man. It was Ji Lingfeng, the Eighth Young Master of the Ji Family.

"I wouldn't dare," Ji Lingfeng replied with a bitter smile. "I'm already grateful you saved my life."

"How did you end up like this?" Chu Liang asked.

"I'm working as a seal-holding official in the Imperial Supervisory Bureau now..." Ji Lingfeng answered.

"You're already a seal-holding official?" Chu Liang was stunned by the first sentence. "You haven't returned home all these years?"

"I haven't." Ji Lingfeng gritted his teeth. "I even bought a house in the capital of Yu."

"What?" Chu Liang blinked in surprise. "Don't tell me... you and the Ninth Young Lady are still competing over that bet?"

"Hah, of course," Ji Lingfeng let out a cold laugh. "This is nothing. She's even married into the Great Astral Sect."

Chu Liang froze for a moment, struggling to process what he just heard.

The two of them ran away from home, and it escalated to one buying a house in the capital of Yu and the other getting married?

Chu Liang couldn't begin to imagine what kind of reward awaited the winner. Would it be a guaranteed ascension to the ninth realm or the title of head of the Ji Family?

What drove you two to keep this up for six years? Was it just an inexplicable desire to win?

But no matter what, Chu Liang had to admit... The members of the Ji Family are truly impressive.

Ji Lingfeng let out a slow breath. "Recently, the rebels from Mount Mang in the Southern Regions have risen in revolt. You might have heard of it. I went to investigate but ran into them. They have immense cultivation power. They injured me severely, and I barely escaped by relying on my invisibility ability. Even so, my wounds were too severe, and I lost consciousness. When I woke up... I had no idea how I ended up here."

"It was the brothers from Red Cotton Peak," Chu Yi chimed in. "They were out delivering goods and found Elder Brother Ji on the roadside. Senior Brother Chu, Big Bro Lin Bei recognized that Elder Brother Ji is your acquaintance, so he asked them to bring him to the Silver Sword Peak for treatment."

"Thankfully, Mount Shu Sect is in the Southern Regions, where cultivators frequently pass through. If I had passed out in the wilderness, I would have died and been left unburied," Ji Lingfeng said.

As he spoke, a thought struck him. Ji Lingfeng shuddered and said, "Before I passed out, I overheard the Mount Mang rebels talking among themselves!"

"What were they talking about?" Chu Liang asked.

"They said..." Ji Lingfeng recalled, "It's too late. Forget it... If we delay any longer, we won't be able to prevent the huge crisis in Jiuguan City!"

"Jiuguan City?" Chu Liang immediately pictured the location of the city in his mind. "It's indeed not far from Mount Mang. Are the rebels of Mount Mang planning to attack there?"

"Can you do me two favors?" Ji Lingfeng asked.

"Of course," Chu Liang nodded.

"First, notify the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner about this. The rebels of Mount Mang have already left the mountain, and they are powerful. Jiuguan City is likely their next target!"

Ji Lingfeng hesitated before adding, "Also... can you ask a few powerful cultivators from Mount Shu Sect to investigate? If the rebels are stirring up trouble in Jiuguan City, there might still be time to stop them."

"Alright," Chu Liang said. "I'll go."

Most of the cultivators on Mount Shu were currently at Red Cotton Peak. Although there were many people there, they were all just there for money. They were not the type to risk their lives for free.

To feel reassured, Chu Liang knew such important matters had to be entrusted to those he could rely on.

Since the more powerful seventh-realm cultivators rarely intervened, there was hardly anyone on Mount Shu who was stronger than Chu Liang.

However, Di Nufeng remained concerned. Ever since Chu Liang's six-year disappearance, she had grown increasingly worried about him.

"Why don't I go instead?" she volunteered.

"I'll carry the tracking jade talisman and I will report to you immediately if anything happens," Chu Liang said with a smile. "You're a seventh-realm cultivator, so you shouldn't be taking action easily. Besides, I am not the same as before. I won't easily encounter any life-threatening danger, so there's no need to worry too much."

There were things Chu Liang felt bad about telling Di Nufeng. This trip to Jiuguan City wasn't just to take action if the rebels of Mount Mang caused trouble. It was to prevent them from acting in the first place.

That required a preliminary investigation. Given his teacher's wisdom, the best she could do was not alert the enemies earlier than needed.

"You might be outnumbered if you go alone. Why not take some helpers along?" Di Nufeng suggested.

"Alright," Chu Liang said with a nod.

Having extra hands would make things easier. Time was tight, but a small delay wouldn't hurt. He planned to search Mount Shu for a few idle wanderers to accompany him.

...

"This airship is truly luxurious," Ling Ao remarked with genuine admiration.

Lin Bei chuckled. "Even with just the wealth he had six years ago, Chu Liang would still be the richest man on Mount Shu today."

After taking over the management of Red Cotton Peak, Chu Yi claimed only a small portion of the profits, leaving the bulk in the public account. When Chu Liang returned, Chu Yi readily handed over the fund records without hesitation.

When Chu Liang checked, he realized that after six years of sleep, his fortune had grown beyond measure.

But since Red Cotton Peak needed funds for operations, the money was still circulating there. He wasn't in a hurry to withdraw it. He also planned to donate more for disaster relief this time.

"I am not interested in money," Chu Liang sighed from behind them. "Honestly, my happiest days were when I was doing missions and earning a few dozen sword coins.[1]"

The three of them stood on the deck of the Lianglong, flying towards Jiuguan City. Ling Ao's bangs fluttered wildly in the wind.

"..." Ling Ao and Lin Bei exchanged glances.

Ling Ao's expression practically screamed, Why do I feel like punching him? Maybe I should stop restraining myself and just give him a punch...

Lin Bei's expression said... What are you even talking about? I can't see clearly. You're only showing half an eye. How am I supposed to understand that look...

"I'm guessing you two must have lived quite well these past few years?" Chu Liang remarked. "Lin Bei, you've become the Fragrant Tiger, and Ling Ao... you've grown your hair out again."

Judging by Ling Ao's habit of cutting his hair whenever he faced setbacks, he must not have encountered much failure in recent years.

"Heh," Ling Ao chuckled. "I just broke through to the sixth realm last year. But among our peers, my progress is considered slow. Senior Brother Xu, for example, is already at the peak of the sixth realm."

He glanced at Chu Liang and added, "It's such a shame. If your cultivation hadn't been delayed these past few years, you wouldn't have fallen behind the others."

Although Ling Ao also practiced the cultivation legacy of the Dragon Scale, the dragon breath within him was faint—far weaker than even ordinary draconic beasts. As a result, he could barely sense the Dragon God Mark on Chu Liang.

That was the nature of draconic bloodlines. The more a draconic descendant or cultivator drew power from the bloodline, the greater its hold over them. While Ling Ao could activate divine abilities through the dragon breath in him, his cultivation relied primarily on his own efforts. His dependence on the dragon bloodline was not as strong, which was why Chu Liang's presence had little effect on him.

Consequently, Ling Ao had no idea how powerful Chu Liang was. He saw Chu Liang as nothing more than a cultivator at the fourth level of the fifth realm. For someone his age, Chu Liang wasn't weak, but compared to the brilliance of his past achievements, it was hard for Ling Ao not to feel a sense of regret at how things had turned out.

Chu Liang was once such a dazzling presence, but I'm stronger than him now...

"Yeah." Chu Liang nodded in agreement, not bothering to explain. "These six years have really set me back."

Chapter 658: Let Me Handle This (I)

Jiuguan City was one of the poorest places in the barren Southern Regions. Its walls, built from bricks and stones during its founding, were old and worn. The enchanted tools used for defense and soldiers guarding the city showed clear signs of age. If the city faced an attack, it was uncertain how well the city could be defended.

However, Jiuguan City occupied an extremely important location in the Southern Regions. It served as a central hub connecting three provinces as well as the headquarters of the four government

offices[1], making it a vital water and land transport hub and a strategic point of contention for military forces.

For such a prime location to remain impoverished without enduring natural disasters year-round, the cause could only be attributed to humans.

The Southern Regions were filled with rugged mountains, far beyond the reach of imperial authority. Ambitious and capable officials were reluctant to serve here as they wouldn't be easily noticed for their achievements but without notable achievements, they would end up dying of old age here. The region had long been an exile for the imperial bureaucracy.

The mediocre officials who were sent here lost any hope of gaining power and sought to compensate themselves by getting more money. If they embezzled enough and managed their affairs carefully, they might even secure a chance to return to the capital of Yu.

The Yu Dynasty had stood for hundreds of years. Though wise rulers occasionally attempted to enforce stricter governance, corruption persisted. Five of the last ten chief officials of Jiuguan City had been convicted. Yet, the cycle remained unbroken.

Their power was granted by the emperor, so these officials just said words of flattery to the emperor, without doing their job and serving the common people properly. In this remote land, far from the emperor, they acted without restraint. No matter how harsh the crackdowns were, these parasites backed by imperial authority never dwindled.

Even under the reign of wise rulers, this situation remained unchanged. If a foolish emperor took the throne and chaos ensued, the people's suffering would only worsen.

Chu Liang and his two companions walked along the main road outside Jiuguan City, witnessing and feeling the weight of these truths.

As dusk approached, the road buzzed with travelers and merchants. A steady stream of people and carriages stretched beyond the city gates. Though the area thrived with activity, the city itself lay in ruin, and its people endured hardship. Whenever wealthy merchants brushed past thin, sallow-faced locals, it served as yet another stark reminder of the gap between rich and poor.

"They say the Yu Dynasty's fortune is fading. If there are many more places like Jiuguan City, the fall of the dynasty won't be far off," Ling Ao remarked with a frown.

“Not for now,” Chu Liang replied. “The Southern Regions may be barren, but the larger cities in the Eastern and Central Regions are still thriving. Talented people gather there, and ambitious officials favor those areas. Typically, the Eastern Regions grow wealthier while the Southern Regions fall further behind. Talented individuals from the Southern Regions continue to migrate east, leaving their homeland even poorer... Unless disaster strikes, this cycle could go on forever.”

“It’s the ordinary folks from the Southern Regions who suffer. What did they do to deserve being governed by these parasites?” Lin Bei cursed.

"Haaaaa." Chu Liang let out a long sigh. "The bureaucracy is complicated. Even if we see ourselves as righteous, we might not fare much better in their position. For now, let's just focus on the task at hand."

“This place still looks lively. I don't see any sign of the rebels of Mount Mang,” Ling Ao said. “Should we wait here for them to show up?”

“The rebels of Mount Mang are powerful. When they make their move, there will be casualties. Even if my esteemed teacher comes, it won’t prevent that...” Chu Liang trailed off.

If Di Nufeng went on a killing spree in the city, it wouldn’t stop the casualties—instead, it might create even more casualties.

Upon further thought, her actions might even result in more innocent lives being lost.

Though Chu Liang didn’t voice his thoughts, Lin Bei and Ling Ao understood.

All the time they had spent together at Silver Sword Peak naturally fostered this kind of unspoken understanding.

“We’d better figure out a way to uncover some clues ahead of time,” Chu Liang said, breaking the silence.

“Hahaha!” Lin Bei burst out laughing. "Fierce rebels of Mount Mang, today’s your unlucky day! You’ve crossed paths with the Twin Stars of Mount Shu!"

Ling Ao scratched his head, smiling awkwardly. "With Senior Sister Jiang and Senior Brother Xu around, how could I be worthy of sharing that title with Chu Liang..."

Lin Bei stared at him, bewildered. "I was talking about me and Chu Liang. What are you thinking?"

Ling Ao's face darkened. "What am I thinking? I'm thinking about spitting in your face."

"Alright," Chu Liang said, waving his hand to cut them off. His gaze lingered on the city ahead as he continued, "Jiuguan City might seem like it's falling apart, but that's just the outer walls. The defensive formations are renewed every year. It's the Imperial Supervisory Bureau's responsibility, and no city—big or small—is overlooked. There shouldn't be any weak points. Without large demonic beasts or enchanted tools, laying siege to the city would be difficult. If they can hold out long enough, reinforcements from the court would then arrive."

"But the rebels of Mount Mang only pillage and leave. They don't need to worry too much about time," Lin Bei said.

"They'd still care," Chu Liang replied. "If I were leading the Mount Mang rebels, I'd send people to infiltrate the city first. When the attack begins, they'd strike from within. That way, breaking the defensive formations would be much easier."

Ling Ao nodded in agreement. "That makes sense."

As Ling Ao said that, he suddenly realized something. Six years had passed, and he had long since become a capable attendant of the Mount Shu Sect. Yet, once Chu Liang returned, Ling Ao unconsciously switched off his brain and fell back into following Chu Liang's lead.

Ling Ao comforted himself with the thought that Chu Liang's cultivation had been hindered. He might not be able to think as fast as Chu Liang, but his cultivation level was higher than Chu Liang's. At the very least, that meant he wouldn't be useless, as he could handle the fighting.

With this reasoning, Ling Ao felt a bit more at ease.

...

Before long, Chu Liang led the two closer to the city gate. The moment they approached, soldiers on the wall raised their halberds, shouting, “Who goes there?”

“We are attendants of the Mount Shu Sect. We wish to see the general in charge of defending the city,” Chu Liang stated plainly.

The soldier scrutinized them and muttered, “Disciples of the Mount Shu Sect? What do you...”

Before he could finish, Chu Liang casually tossed a pouch of silver toward him, followed by a second. “This one’s for you. And that one’s for your friend.”

The pouches thudded softly against the soldier, and his expression immediately brightened. A wide, fawning grin spread across his face. “Of course! I’ll report this at once. Please, come in, young heroes. Right this way.”

With that, he hurried up the city wall, shouting as he went. The soldier’s faint voice saying “three male guests” drifted back down to them...

Before long, Chu Liang, Lin Bei, and Ling Ao were standing before the officer guarding the gate. Calling him a general was a stretch—he was barely a squad leader. Had he been even a low-ranking officer, Chu Liang might have used his status as the Imperial Younger Brother to gain leverage.

But dealing with these low-level parasites was different. Mentioning a very high-ranking title would only confuse them. Even if they recognized the rank, they’d probably assume he was lying.

To save time, Chu Liang opted for the quickest way through.

Plop.

A pouch of silver landed on the table. “I want to know if any unusual people entered the city today,” he said plainly. “Large groups.”

“What are you talking about?” The officer frowned. “As the one guarding this gate, I’d never let even a single suspicious person in...”

Plop.

Another pouch.

“Let me tell you, Jiuguan City is likely the Mount Mang rebels’ next target. We’re here to investigate,” Chu Liang said. “The Imperial Supervisory Bureau might arrive later as well. If you keep hiding things, we won’t be able to protect you.”

“Ah...” The officer’s face turned pale.

Plop.

Another pouch.

“I’m asking with money now. When the Imperial Supervisory Bureau asks, I don’t know how they will interrogate you,” Chu Liang said finally. “And if the Mount Mang rebels attack... do you think they’ll spare the one who let them in?”

“No one!” The officer’s face reddened as he scrambled to process the flood of information. He shot to his feet and stammered, “The only ones allowed in without inspection today... were the convoys carrying decrees from the chancellor’s residence. Everyone else was just a regular merchant. There’s no way the rebels of Mount Mang were among them!”

Chu Liang’s pupils contracted. “The chancellor’s residence?”

“Yes,” the officer replied. “The only large convoy that entered the city was theirs. They carried official decrees from the chancellor’s residence, and the commanding officer personally greeted them. How could I dare stop them? If something went wrong, that’s far above my rank. A lowly squad leader like me wouldn’t be the one to blame.”

“Location,” Chu Liang demanded without wasting words.

Two hours earlier, a convoy carrying decrees from the chancellor’s residence had entered the city, shrouded in heavy black coverings. From experience, the officer could tell the carriages were packed with people—around two hundred in total.

The convoy had proceeded to the Nangong Residence, a mansion within the city. The head of the Nangong family was known to serve as an attendant to the chancellor, a position that granted the family significant influence in Jiuguan City.

Chu Liang, Ling Ao, and Lin Bei came in a hurry and left just as quickly.

“Report Jiuguan City’s situation to the Imperial Supervisory Bureau later. Don’t let a single one of them slip away,” Chu Liang instructed Lin Bei as they walked. Then, with a quiet mutter, he added, “Did they really think they could take my money that easily?”

Chapter 659: Let Me Handle This (II)

Nangong Residence.

Night had fallen, casting a dim veil over Jiuguan City. Beneath the gray sky, the city’s crumbling walls and desolate streets looked even more run-down. Yet, in stark contrast, the Nangong Residence stood tall and grand. Large red lanterns hung inside and out, bathing the imposing mansion in warm, flickering light.

Chu Liang and Ling Ao approached the outer wall.

Chu Liang turned to Lin Bei and said, “Stay outside and cover us. We’ll head in and take a look.”

“Got it.” Lin Bei patted his chest confidently. “I’m good at this. Be careful in there.”

Having worked alongside Chu Liang countless times, Lin Bei was no stranger to lookout duty. It had become second nature to him—a role he filled without complaint.

After giving instructions, Chu Liang and Ling Ao leapt over the high walls.

In truth, Chu Liang could have transformed into wind for a quieter, swifter entry, but that would mean leaving Ling Ao behind. Since he had asked Ling Ao to assist, denying him the chance to prove himself felt would not be very nice. And so, Chu Liang decided to accommodate him.

Besides, with Ling Ao’s sixth-realm physical cultivation, his movements were nearly as fast as the wind. The difference in speed wasn’t significant enough to matter.

With two soft swishes, they slipped over the high wall, landing quietly in the rear courtyard of the Nangong Residence.

“They set up an enchanted formation here, be careful,” Chu Liang warned.

Ling Ao had already sensed something was amiss. While he was in mid-air, he twisted his body and glided over the open space, landing silently.

The two navigated the grounds with ease, slipping past all surveillance until they arrived at a courtyard packed with dozens of black carriages. The cloth covering the carriages obscured many streams of qi, which seemed to belong to humans.

“The qi feels quite weak,” Chu Liang muttered puzzledly. “They don’t seem like cultivators—certainly not anyone capable of attacking a city.”

Suspicious of who the people might be, Chu Liang swiftly darted forward and carefully lifted the cloth for a closer look.

Underneath the black cloth, several women were bound tightly inside the carriage. Their faces were pale and gaunt, appearing extremely weak.

As the cloth lifted, one woman gasped in fear and cried out, “Ah!”

The sharp cry pierced the quiet night, instantly alerting the guards.

“Who’s there?” a voice barked.

A squad of black-clad men rushed in from beyond the courtyard wall.

Just as Chu Liang was about to make his move, Ling Ao sprang forward with a shout.

“Let me handle this!”

In an instant, he lunged at the incoming guards, fists and feet moving in a blur.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

In mere moments, the entire squad of martial artists was sent sprawling, bones snapping as cries of pain echoed through the courtyard with each strike.

And that was Ling Ao holding back. With his current strength, ending their lives would have required little more than a flick of his finger.

However, the ruckus drew the attention of a truly powerful cultivator.

A sharp gust of wind signaled the arrival of a man in a bright red robe, drifting down gracefully from the rooftop. Four young women in colorful robes followed closely behind, each wielding a sword.

“How dare you trespass in the house of Nangong, you brazen thieves!” the red-robed man snapped. His pale face seemed ageless, and his piercing eyes gleamed with an unsettling light.

With a swift push of his palms, a dark cloud of blood erupted, surging forward with murderous intent.

“I’ll handle him!” Ling Ao stepped forward. “You take care of the girls!”

Sensing the red-robed man’s cultivation surpassed his own, Ling Ao feared Chu Liang might be at a disadvantage. Without hesitation, he took the initiative, ready to face the greater threat head-on.

Chu Liang hesitated briefly. But as Ling Ao had already rushed forward, Chu Liang chose not to stop him and instead turned his focus to the four sword-wielding girls.

The girls drew their swords in unison, chanting in sharp harmony. In an instant, their blades shimmered, and the swordlights merged into a single dazzling beam, casting disorienting reflections. Moments later, crimson light bloomed, unfurling like flowers in full blossom.

“An illusion technique?” Chu Liang muttered, blinking. He exhaled softly and whispered, “Disperse.”

Boom.

A gust of wind burst from Chu Liang, rippling outward and striking the four girls with force. They were sent flying, crashing to the ground where they lay unconscious.

The difference in strength was overwhelming—no amount of numbers could bridge the gap.

Ling Ao's side, however, wasn't so easy.

The red-robed man attacked with the cultivation at the peak of the sixth realm. The pool of blood before him twisted and transformed into nine red and pink skulls. Their terrifying ghastly forms opened their mouths wide, relentlessly lunging at Ling Ao with clawing ferocity.

Ling Ao's attacks were relentless, but eight of the crimson skulls circled protectively around the red-robed man. Each time Ling Ao charged, he crashed into the swirling skulls. Upon impact, they burst into plumes of red mist that seeped into the air.

Inhaling the mist clouded his mind and unsettled his spirit, sapping his will to fight.

Ling Ao's weakness had always been his soul. In mere moments, the mist affected his body several times and he was almost injured.

For a moment, he was in great danger.

Chu Liang observed the battle for a moment longer before calmly saying, "I'd better help you."

"You..." Ling Ao began, wanting to protest, but the thick mist clouded his senses, making his escape nearly impossible. Defeat seemed inevitable. "Be careful! His mist is power—"

Boom!

Before Ling Ao could finish, a bolt of violet-gold lightning streaked down from the sky. It struck the red-robed man with such force that he was slammed into the ground, unable to resist.

Golden lightning crackled and flickered, and as the last sparks faded, Chu Liang stood with his foot pressed firmly on the man's chest.

In the blink of an eye, Chu Liang had descended with the full power of the Dragon God's thunder, defeating the enemy with a single, decisive strike.

The divine thunder ripped through all flashy tricks with ease, shattering illusions and dispelling enchanted mist in an instant.

"This..." Ling Ao stared in shock, stunned for a long moment before speaking. "Your cultivation..."

What just happened? The enemy I struggled so hard against... is now on the ground with you standing on his chest?

Ling Ao hadn't gotten a good look at what happened.

"Yeah." Chu Liang sighed. "My cultivation... I've really fallen behind these past six years."

"..." Ling Ao felt a heaviness in his chest, as if something were lodged there, desperate to be let out.

Even if he didn't fully understand what had just happened, one truth became glaringly obvious—he had once again underestimated Chu Liang. Chu Liang's strength had grown far beyond his own, and the gap between them now seemed even wider than it had been six years ago.

Ling Ao recalled his earlier pity for Chu Liang, and a wave of embarrassment washed over him. He wished his hair were long enough to cover his entire face.

"Forget that. Let's ask him about the rebels of Mount Mang," Chu Liang said casually, giving the red-robed man a light kick. "Stop pretending to be dead. Talk!"

"Ah! Spare me, young hero..." the red-robed man pleaded. But his eyes flickered with confusion. "Rebels of Mount Mang? What are you talking about?"

“The rebels of Mount Mang, of course. You don’t know them?” Chu Liang asked. “They’re planning to attack the city, and today you just happened to smuggle people in. You’re saying you have nothing to do with them?”

“I don’t know anything about that. These are just weak women I bought from disaster-stricken areas. I wanted them to cultivate and serve as cauldrons,” the red-robed man whimpered under Chu Liang’s foot. “What does this have to do with the rebels of Mount Mang?”

“You’re Nangong Zhi?” Chu Liang suddenly recalled.

Chu Liang recalled something he had heard before—among the chancellor’s Sixteen-Faction Alliance, there was a sect known as the Fish Water Sect. This sect had a notorious practice of having women cultivate special techniques and then harvesting the womens’ yin energy to nourish their yang energy and enhance their own cultivation.

Since the sect relied on others to cultivate, periodically harvesting their energy—much like Chu Liang and his Large-Headed Dolls—Chu Liang had taken a particular interest in their practices.

It was said in the capital that Nangong Zhi earned the chancellor’s favor with this technique. Now, the chancellor’s residence housed hundreds of women, all serving as cultivation cauldrons.

After an entire year of cultivation, the women retained less than thirty percent of their gains. The rest was harvested. Since any woman with a talent in cultivation would never willingly do such things, the sect had to purchase daughters from impoverished families.

However, the laws of the Yu Dynasty forbade human trafficking. This might explain why Nangong Zhi was acting in secret.

With that realization, Chu Liang recognized the man’s identity—he was the leader of the Fish Water Sect.

Understanding this, another question surfaced.

If this had nothing to do with the rebels of Mount Mang, then where did those rebels of Mount Mang go?

...

Jiangnan, Wu'an City.

The moonlight bathed the streets of the city, as clear and serene as a pool of still water.

Suddenly, shadows darted across the streets, their dark forms cast like predatory sharks gliding through water. One after another, more figures followed—hundreds emerged from all directions.

“Move quickly,” ordered a gaunt young man, his sharp blade glinting in the light. “The Imperial Supervisory Bureau is still keeping a close watch on Mount Mang. Once we are done with this mission, we will be able to eat well for a long time!”

In the darkness of the night, the first cry of agony soon echoed!

Chapter 660: Now It Feels Safer

The servant outside stumbled back in a panic, shouting incoherently, "Mad, mad—they're on a mad killing spree!"

Tang Song stood at the entrance of the hall, gripping a weapon with a righteous expression. "Go hide in the painting! If those bandits dare break in, I'll deal with them using Mount Shu Sect's techniques!"

"Father, if you're scared, you don't need to pretend you're not," Tang Yu'an said. "Your legs are trembling."

Tang Song, once a humble painter, had learned some divine techniques from a teacher from the Mount Shu Sect and advanced to the second realm of cultivation. As that teacher was from the Mount Shu Sect, Tang Song had always felt a strong connection to the sect and had generously donated to it over the years.

The last time his son, Tang Yu'an, was pulled into the famous painting Ladies of the Eastern Suburbs by one of those female ghosts, it was Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai from the Mount Shu Sect who resolved the matter.

After the incident, the painting remained in their home. With his modest cultivation, Tang Song could open the portal into the painting occasionally. The hidden realm within the painting had a

slower flow of time, making it convenient to store vegetables and fruits—essentially serving as a magical cellar.

The streets outside roared with chaos—slaughter and screams echoing endlessly. From the shouts, it was clear that rebels had stormed Wu'an City, pillaging and setting fires as they went. Soldiers patrolled frantically, urging citizens to stay inside to avoid the spreading violence.

City guards and cultivators from the City Supervisory Division took action, activating the great city-protecting formation. Yet, the rebels' strength was overwhelming, and the sounds of the city guards' resistance grew fainter with each passing moment.

Tang Song, frail and thin, was just a painter. If the City Supervisory Division couldn't hold them back, what could someone with his low level of cultivation hope to accomplish?

Though he tried to appear brave, Tang Song's legs trembled uncontrollably. When his son called him out, he gritted his teeth. "I've collected so many antiques and paintings. If they're stolen, so be it. But what if those bandits destroy them?"

"What's more important, the paintings or your life?" Tang Yu'an exclaimed.

Tang Song finally relented. "Fine, the bandits are still far away. Let me gather a few more things, and I'll join you to hide in the painting."

Everyone in the Tang Residence rushed to the study in the back courtyard. Tang Song carefully unfurled Ladies of the Eastern Suburbs and activated the opening to the hidden realm within. One by one, they stepped inside, disappearing into the painting. A group of panicked figures then appeared on the painting.

Tang Song carefully tucked the painting away and hurried to gather the rest of his antiques and scrolls. Before he could finish, a loud thud echoed from outside.

No... it can't be. Tang Song's heart skipped a beat.

The attackers had entered from the south, and his home lay in the northern part of the city. They shouldn't have made it here so quickly... unless they came directly to rob his house first.

Tang Song cautiously peeked outside, but the courtyard was empty.

I'm just scaring myself...

Letting out a breath of relief, Tang Song turned back to continue gathering his things.

"Ahhhhhhh!"

Tang Song's scream echoed through the room as his eyes locked onto a gaunt young man lounging in his study chair. The intruder wore ill-fitting new clothes and smirked mischievously.

"You..." Tang Song asked in a trembling voice. "Who are you?"

"Me?" The young man squinted. "Who I am doesn't matter. Time is short, and I don't want to waste it. I just need one thing from you. Give it to me, and I'll leave without harming you or your family."

"What do you want?" Tang Song asked hurriedly.

"Do you have a painting from the previous dynasty?" the young man asked. "I think it's called Ladies of the Eastern Suburbs, right?"

"Ah?" Tang Song's face twisted in despair the moment he heard those words.

If you take that painting, you won't be sparing my family. That would be the same as killing my entire family...

...

"Young hero, I'll give you all my wealth. Can you let me go?" Nangong Zhi pleaded.

Bound in an awkward position by Chu Liang's Demon-Binding Rope, Nangong Zhi lay sprawled out in plain sight. He felt really embarrassed at the moment.

Chu Liang, Ling Ao, and Lin Bei busied themselves freeing the girls from the black carriages. The girls recoiled timidly, their fearful eyes reflecting the suffering they had endured.

"Half," Chu Liang replied casually.

"Ah?" Nangong Zhi's eyes lit up with sudden hope. Could there really be such a kind-hearted person in this world?

"I mean you can give me all your wealth, but I can't let you go," Chu Liang said coldly.

Well then...

So by "half," he meant half the sentence.

As a sect leader, Nangong Zhi was used to prestige and grand entourages in the capital. He never thought he'd encounter the enforcers of justice and run into trouble back in his hometown.

"Hm?" Nangong Zhi squinted at Chu Liang. "Young hero, I think I've seen you before."

"Don't try that trick," Lin Bei cut in. "Acting familiar won't get you out of this."

"No, I'm serious," Nangong Zhi insisted. "I've seen you before. Weren't you at the Assembly of Immortal Sects six years ago? You're Chu Liang from Mount Shu Sect, right? I watched you fight during the Battle at the Imperial City! I was a fan of the Mount Shu Sect's team! I heard you disappeared in the palace afterward... and now you're back?"

"You were that supportive of Mount Shu Sect's team?" Lin Bei raised an eyebrow. "Then who was on the team?"

"Of course I remember!" Nangong Zhi said proudly. "Jiang Yuebai, Xu Ziyang, and Young Hero Chu. The Mount Shu Sect disciples of that generation were brilliant—absolutely dazzling!"

Ling Ao stiffened slightly in front of him.

After a brief pause, he casually brushed his bangs aside, tilting his head to ensure his face was fully visible.

"Step aside, young hero," Nangong Zhi said to Ling Ao. "Let me speak properly with Chu Liang."

"The Imperial Supervisory Bureau will arrive soon. You can chat with them instead," Chu Liang replied as he shot Nangong Zhi a glare. As he freed the last of the girls, he asked, "Is this everyone?"

Nangong Zhi gave a quick nod. "Yes."

But a timid voice interrupted from nearby. "No."

Chu Liang glanced at her. "Hm?"

The girl hesitated, then softly added, "My sister and a few others were taken somewhere else..."

Chu Liang's eyes narrowed as he shot a sharp glance at Nangong Zhi. "I'll check the rest of the premises."

"Young Hero Chu!" Nangong Zhi cried out, his voice trembling with urgency.

Beaten and severely injured, he couldn't break free from the Demon-Binding Rope that Wen Yulong had modified and enhanced. The poison from the rope had spread through his entire body, leaving him weak and unsteady. As he struggled in frustration, his strength gave out, and he collapsed face-first into the dirt.

Chu Liang stepped out of the courtyard, his divine sense spreading across the Nangong Residence. Though no other presences revealed themselves, his attention locked onto an anomaly in the rear garden—an area that stood apart from the rest.

The surrounding grounds pulsed with the natural breath of plants, yet the soil in that patch felt barren and lifeless. It was a subtle difference, yet Chu Liang immediately picked up on it with his sharp senses.

Chu Liang pressed his foot firmly to the ground and suddenly applied force.

Boom!

The earth trembled, and with a single stomp, cracks spiderwebbed across the surface.

A deep rumbling followed as a massive hollow opened beneath him, revealing a hidden basement. The space had been carefully designed to block qi, masking its presence from detection. If not for the disturbed soil and the absence of grass, its existence might have gone unnoticed.

Inside the basement lay a chilling sight.

Several women hung limply from iron pillars, their bodies marred with wounds, barely clinging to life. In nearby cages, more women huddled together. All of them flinched in shock and fear the moment they saw Chu Liang.

The bloodstains on the ground and the dense resentment-filled qi hanging in the air clearly indicated the kind of place this was.

Obviously, not every woman was willing to serve as a cultivation cauldron. This basement was clearly where Nangong Zhi punished those who wouldn't obey him.

The overwhelming scent of blood hung heavy in the air, a grim reminder of the countless lives lost in this place.

Chu Liang's expression darkened.

He first freed the imprisoned women and guided them to a safe place.

Once they were safe, he leapt back to the courtyard.

By this time, the men from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau had arrived. They had come to Jiuguan City after receiving word from the Mount Shu Sect. The city appeared normal, with no signs of trouble—except for one irregularity recorded at Nangong Residence.

Upon arrival, they encountered the disciples of the Mount Shu Sect and Nangong Zhi.

Leading the group from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau was a tall, broad-shouldered man with sharp features and piercing eyes. His pupils glowed with a deep purple hue. It was Celestial Official Ji Zidian.

Nangong Zhi had been detained by the group from the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, tightly bound within a formation. Lin Bei was in the middle of recounting the events when Chu Liang reappeared.

Ji Zidian's eyes widened in surprise. "Chu Liang!"

"Celestial Official Ji," Chu Liang greeted with a slight bow.

"Where have you been all these years?" Ji Zidian asked. "We've searched everywhere for you."

"We can discuss that later," Chu Liang replied, shaking his head. "I don't think taking him away is the safest option."

"You doubt our ability to transport him?" Ji Zidian asked, feeling puzzled.

"I found more incriminating evidence in the basement. His crimes warrant death. If you take him back, can you guarantee his execution?" Chu Liang asked as he stepped closer.

Ji Zidian furrowed his brows, lost in thought. "This..."

Nangong Zhi served Chancellor Su Qian as one of the sect leaders in the Chancellor's Sixteen-Faction Alliance. His contributions to Su Qian were invaluable. Even if his crimes warranted death, as long as it wasn't treason, the chancellor could protect and save him. Nangong Zhi would probably be dealt with a harsh punishment at most, not execution.

The chancellor had to intervene to ensure that the people who serve him would continue to support and risk their lives for him. The factions handled many covert operations for him. If he abandoned them at the first sign of trouble, no one would risk their lives for him again.

Chu Liang approached Nangong Zhi as he spoke. "So..."

Seeing the terror on Nangong Zhi's face, Chu Liang struck without hesitation.

Even as Ji Zidian realized Chu Liang's intent, he merely called out, "Chu Liang?"

Ji Zidian had a high level of cultivation, so he could have intervened. However, in that instant, he chose not to.

Boom!

Chu Liang's fist, wreathed in crackling violet-gold divine thunder, descended like a stroke of heavenly judgment. Nangong Zhi's head was obliterated. It vanished as if swallowed by a black hole. The strike was clean, precise, leaving no trace behind.

In the blink of an eye, only Nangong Zhi's headless body remained, swaying slightly as if unaware of what had happened.

Chu Liang calmly flicked his wrist and turned to Ji Zidian. "Now it feels safer."