

M. Slaying 681

Chapter 681: A Love Story at the Great Astral Sect

The person who had appeared from behind the woman was a towering, burly man with muscles so defined they seemed to ripple with the force of hidden dragons beneath his sleeves. His muscles were visible even through the fabric.

As soon as he and Chu Liang locked eyes, they immediately began calling out to each other.

"Brother Chu?"

"Brother Yun?"

"Brother Chuuu!"

"Brother Yunnn!"

"Brother Chuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu..."

"Brother Yunnnnnnnnnnnnnnn..."

And so it went, their voices growing louder and more drawn out with each exchange.

"Alright, enough!" Lin Bei and the woman yelled at the same time.

"Brother Chu!" The burly man lunged forward, wrapping Chu Liang in a bear hug that pressed him tightly against his massive chest muscles. He locked his biceps and triceps around Chu Liang's neck as he exclaimed, "I knew you were still alive!"

"If you don't let go soon, I really might... might die..." Chu Liang wheezed.

He wriggled free from the hug, stumbling back and gasping for air. Once he caught his breath, he smiled and said, "It's really great to see you again!"

Chu Liang then led the group to his cabin, and they sat down outside.

Once everyone was settled, Chu Liang turned to Yun Chaoxian. "I haven't asked yet. Who is this young lady...?"

Yun Chaoxian grinned broadly and took the woman's hand.

"Tie Chui, of course. Haven't you met her before?" he said with a hearty laugh.

"Tie Chui from the South Melody Conservatory?" Chu Liang asked, studying the woman with her striking figure and heroic aura. Now that Yun Chaoxian mentioned, she did look somewhat similar to the Tie Chui he had met before.

"WAHAHAHAHA!" The woman burst into hearty laughter. "I've grown much more beautiful since then. It's no surprise he didn't recognize me."

Yup. This is definitely Tie Chui.

As soon as Chu Liang heard that laugh, he knew this was Tie Chui.

"I had heard that you two fell in love. But now that I am seeing it with my own eyes, it still feels magical," Chu Liang said with a smile.

"Haaaaa, it's life," Yun Chaoxian said with a sigh.

"What's that supposed to mean? You don't sound too happy about it," Tie Chui said, narrowing her eyes as she cast a glare over at Yun Chaoxian.

"No, no, not at all..." Yun Chaoxian quickly shook his head. "I meant... it's fate."

"Fate is truly a marvelous thing, beyond what words can describe. You and your fellow brothers are blessed to have good fates," Chu Liang remarked.

"If it weren't for you, we might not have ended up together so soon," Yun Chaoxian said, scratching his head with a sheepish chuckle.

"Oh?" Chu Liang waited for him to explain.

"We first met because of you, in the Divine Mirror of the Eight Trigrams," Yun Chaoxian said. He continued, "After you disappeared, we split up and searched everywhere for you. Li Fujian said that he was terrible with directions and insisted that Miss Ji accompany him.

"Back then, we all laughed at how much of a fool he was..."

Yun Chaoxian paused there, feeling a bit embarrassed. It was not until three months later that they understood who the real fools were.

Yun Chaoxian had intended to keep searching for Chu Liang, scouring every possible place outside. But suddenly, a message from the sect arrived, summoning him back. If it had been something minor, he would have ignored it without hesitation. However, the news was about Li Fujian and Ji Lingyu's wedding...

The two had fallen for each other during their journey and decided to get married.

"Well then..." Chu Liang chuckled in surprise. "Who would've thought I'd be the greatest matchmaker in this story?"

"When there's a wedding within the sect, it's always a grand affair, inviting many disciples from the Divine Nine and the Terrestrial Ten," Yun Chaoxian continued. "Tie Chui came as well. We already had a grudge against each other, so naturally, we started arguing the moment we crossed paths—even on the wedding day. But since it was a wedding day, we couldn't actually fight. So, we decided to settle things with a drinking contest instead.

"The next morning, when I woke up—"

Before Yun Chaoxian could finish, Tie Chui cut him off with a soft punch to his chest, her small fist landing with a solid boom!

After that, she covered her face with her hands and said, "Don't go into details. I'm shyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

"Alright..." Yun Chaoxian muttered, wiping the blood off his chest and swallowing the rest of the sentence he hadn't managed to say. "After that, Tie Chui ran straight back to the South Melody Conservatory without saying a word. I went after her, but the people there told me she didn't want to see me. So, I waited outside her sect for several months..."

"But then, she came out looking like this," Yun Chaoxian said as he gestured to Tie Chui beside him. "I was stunned. At that time, I said I am looking for Tie Chui. Who are you?"

Yun Chaoxian continued with a chuckle, "So it turned out that she had been secretly training to make her figure look better, but I almost didn't recognize her."

It was hard for cultivators to change their appearance. However, to make their figure look better and their skin fairer, and what not were rather easy. For Tie Chui to transform into Chuichui would take only a few adjustments.

"You did not recognize me. I had to beat you up for you to figure it out," Tie Chui said angrily

Chu Liang and Lin Bei exchanged glances and chuckled. "Haha."

What could they say about this love story?

"Maybe this is what people mean when they say you don't really know someone until after a fight," Chu Liang said with a grin.

"I actually preferred how she looked before, but she insists this is better," Yun Chaoxian said helplessly, shaking his head. "All delicate and soft... what kind of look is this—Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Bam!

Before Yun Chaoxian could finish speaking, he suddenly vanished from his seat.

"You dare say I'm not beautiful?!" Tie Chui growled, standing over him with her foot firmly planted on his chest.

"Beautiful! You're beautiful!" Yun Chaoxian hastily raised a hand in surrender.

...

Boom, boom, boom.

A series of explosions echoed across the dark mountain, accompanied by faint roars of an exotic beast. The roars rose sharply but faded almost as quickly as they came.

Dozens of sword lights streaked through the air, desperately fleeing, only to be halted by a fierce gust of wind that froze them in place.

One by one, the sword lights drifted downward, landing with soft thuds. Upon impact, they shattered like fragile hollow shells, crumbling into dust as if drained of all vitality.

That gust of wind seemed to have dried them out completely.

This place was known as Beast-Barring Mountain. During the War against the Demon God, the human army had subdued the vicious Taotie here. After their victory, they retreated a hundred li south, where they built a mighty fortress, which they called Taotie City.

For thousands of years, the subdued beast had been kept within Beast-Barring Mountain.

Every day, large quantities of demonic beast flesh were transported in because the beast's appetite was insatiable. It needed to eat constantly, yet it remained perpetually hungry. This was the nature of Taotie, one of the Four Great Vicious Beasts.

Bam!

The massive beast crashed hard against the mountain wall. It had four hooved legs like a goat, sharp tiger-like fangs, leathery wings, and a pair of curved horns. It had some facial features of a human and appeared extremely ferocious.

The Four Great Vicious Beasts had been born from the very essence of the Heavenly Dao. Since ancient times, Taotie had been the strongest among them. Its unquenchable hunger drove it to hunt constantly, making feeding its primary instinct.

For the past thousands of years, it had been fed by humans and no longer needed to fight. All it had to do was follow its instincts to eat each day. As long as it didn't leave Beast-Barring Mountain to cause trouble, fresh meat would continue to be delivered for it to consume.

It had grown noticeably fatter over the years.

It was no longer as ferocious and vicious as it once was. Now, facing a fight again, it felt a sense of unfamiliarity, especially since the two figures looming above were incredibly powerful.

"RAAAAAAAR!!!"

Taotie let out a deafening roar, shaking the forest as it spread its wings and launched one final charge.

Boom!

The fight went on just as expected. The man raised his hand and pointed at Taotie, sending a gust of Bifeng to strike it down. If Taotie hadn't had an extraordinary body, it would have been reduced to dust.

These two cold-hearted individuals were greater demons at the eighth realm!

Seeing that its roar had no effect, Taotie lowered its head in a show of submission, displaying a readiness to surrender.

"Want to become my mount?" Changfeng descended, his lips curling into a cruel smile. "Too bad that you can't."

He placed one hand on top of Taotie's head.

Boom!

A sudden explosion echoed. From the outside, Taotie's massive body appeared unchanged. Inside, however, it had been completely hollowed out.

Something invisible seemed to scatter into the air. Caiyi raised her right hand and snatched something in the air. Then, she took out a small jar.

When she opened her right hand again, drops of what seemed like blood fell. As she let the blood drip into the jar, it emitted a restless and agitated sound.

The blood seemed to possess a spirit of its own.

"We're almost there," she said coldly. "All that's left is the Sea-Devouring Demonic Urn."

"Heheh," Changfeng chuckled. "That day is finally approaching!"

Chapter 682: Rage

Taotie City, the Northern Regions.

Red Cotton Peak and the Immortals' Square rose to prominence one after the other in a very short time, and the resulting impact on Taotie City was obvious.

Though the Huyan Family had made numerous efforts to remedy the situation, there was still a visible decline in visitor traffic in Taotie City. Soon, the merchants started relocating their businesses elsewhere and the honored allies gradually started leaving as well.

A charity auction only added insult to injury for the already struggling Taotie City.

"Two and a half million Vermillion-Bird coins, for a mere broken Celestial Cosmic Ring..."

Huyan Dong's chest heaved, his eyes red with fury as he fixed his gaze on his kneeling son. His breath quickened and grew heavy.

Just two days ago, he had made a trip to the Eastern Regions and used the name of the Penglai Supreme Sect to secure support from various factions. But upon his return, he was greeted with this crushing news.

If this had been back when Taotie City stood alone at the top, he would have let it go. But now, with the fierce competition against the Red Cotton Peak and the Immortals' Square, drawing on such a large sum would mean forfeiting many opportunities to fight.

"Father, please calm down..." Huyan Bin knelt, lifting his eyes with a pleading expression.

"Thankfully, both the court and Mount Shu paid substantial sums. In the end, this charity auction resulted in all three sides at a loss."

"They suffered losses but still walked away with something. What have you brought back?" Huyan Dong asked in an irritated tone.

"I got..." Huyan Bin hesitated for a moment before answering, "The friendship of the Penglai Supreme Sect."

"I—"

Huyan Dong raised his hand in anger, but remembering that this was his own flesh and blood, he lowered it without striking.

Huyan Dong gnashed his teeth as he lectured, "You should know that they only befriended you because you have money. Once they've drained you dry, will they still see you as a person? Do you even know what kind of people the Penglai members are? They are outlaws, bandits at their core! Do you really think there's any good in them?"

"Father, you know this too?" Huyan Bin murmured, his voice barely audible. "I didn't want to spend this money, but given the situation, if I had refused, Daoist Xuan Lu would've turned against us on the spot! I might not have even made it back to see you..."

Huyan Dong's veins bulged with fury. "Which do you think I would want to see—you or the two and a half million?"

Huyan Bin thought quickly, racking his brains to calm his father. He quickly added, "But the Penglai Supreme Sect isn't doing nothing for us. They made some promises."

"What promises?" Huyan Dong asked.

"Daoist Xuan Lu suggested we could use some unconventional methods, like attacking Red Cotton Peak's Four Extremities Hall to disrupt their deliveries..." Huyan Bin said. "Then over time, no one will go to Mount Shu to buy goods anymore. Even if Mount Shu finds evidence and decides to declare war on Taotie City, the Penglai Supreme Sect will step in to help us..."

Huyan Dong looked intently at his son, his vision momentarily darkening. He felt at a loss for words.

Huyan Bin tilted his head with innocence shining in his eyes and asked, "What do you think?"

Huyan Dong's hand trembled as he pointed at him. In the end, all he said was, "That brain of yours... it takes after your mother."

He then stood up and scolded angrily, "He promised he will help, but when we've made Mount Shu our enemy and war breaks out, do you honestly think he'll take a stand against a sect in the Divine Nine for us? The Mount Shu Sect may be weak, but they have very good connections with a huge number of sects. Wouldn't the Celestial King Sect take action? Would the Great Astral Sect just sit by and watch?

"Did you not see how the Thunderbolt Stronghold was crushed? And now, they don't even dare to breathe loudly. That is the ending of a force that relies entirely on the Penglai Supreme Sect! Asking for help is one thing, but expecting them to save your life? It's a pipe dream! And even if they do save us, we would end as their servants forever!"

Seeing his father in such a fury, Huyan Bin's lips trembled in fear.

After a long silence, he managed to speak in a soft voice, "Father, Daoist Xuan Lu made one more promise..."

"Speak!" Huyan Dong said with a flick of his sleeve.

Huyan Bin, trembling, finally said, "He promised that Penglai would pay us back whenever they have money."

"Fuck off!"

Huyan Dong could no longer hold back. Lifting his leg, he kicked Huyan Bin, sending him flying into a screen with a thunderous crash.

Bam!

After venting his anger, Huyan Dong let out a long sigh, "Haaaaaaaaaaaa. At this point, we have no other option but to cut expenses and sell off assets to ride out this crisis. It cost us a fortune to feed that vicious beast, Taotie. Huang Hanshan has been offering me a generous price for it for years; we might as well sell it to him."

Huyan Bin struggled to get up as he said, "Father... But that is what represents Taotie City..."

"What choice do we have at this point?" Huyan Dong replied. "If Taotie City ceases to exist in the future, what's the point of keeping the symbol of the city? My decision is final; no need to try and persuade me."

Just as he was about to issue the order, urgent footsteps echoed from outside.

An honored ally burst in, ignoring the disorder, and cried out, "City Lord, something terrible has happened! We just received word from Beast-Barring Mountain. The vicious beast Taotie... has been killed!"

...

It had only been two days. When Chu Liang returned to the Buddhist Cloud Monastery, everything had been turned upside down.

Unlike the simple wooden huts at Mount Shu, which could be swiftly assembled by a handful of disciples from the Hall of Construction, the collapsed buildings of the Buddhist Cloud Monastery were ancient halls that had stood for centuries. Rebuilding them would be extremely challenging.

It wasn't merely a matter of erecting new structures. As the Buddhist Cloud Monastery was located on the highest sea of clouds, even clearing the ruins would demand a lot of effort, with large mounts needing to transport the debris over countless trips.

Of course, throwing the debris from above would be convenient, but should it strike an unfortunate passerby, it could kill them.

When Chu Liang arrived, he saw that half the site was still covered in uncleared ruins, while the other half had new halls under construction. For the past two days, the spirit beasts raised by the Buddhist Cloud Monastery had been tirelessly transporting debris down and carrying building materials up. Their heads hung low from the work, clearly exhausted.

"Life really is unpredictable," Pushan said with a shake of his head. "Just two days ago, we were focused on finding ways to help disaster victims. Who would have imagined we'd end up as victims ourselves?"

Hearing this, Chu Liang immediately became alert. "You'd better not spend that money on yourselves."

"Don't worry..." Pushan replied. "Feel free to supervise us anytime later on."

Chu Liang had come this time to personally deliver the enormous sum of money for the Demon-Slaying Sword. To ensure its safety, he even brought Wang Xuanling[1] along for protection.

The reason he chose Old Wang instead of his esteemed teacher was because Chu Liang feared that Di Nufeng would be tempted by the money and develop ill intentions.

Although the Buddhist Cloud Monastery was overwhelmed with work at the moment, this matter was still treated as the top priority. Dhyana Master Shenjie had personally stepped in to coordinate with various parties, striving to deliver the first batch of supplies to the Southern Regions as quickly as possible. The Whale Gang and the Mount Shu Sect had also contributed significantly to this effort.

"Haah!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

After delivering the money, Pushan escorted Chu Liang out, and they encountered a construction site ahead. A group of three to five monks stood in line, working together to lift a murky crystalline pillar.

Dhyana Master Shenyoun stood at the front.

As the monks let out a series of synchronized shouts, Dhyana Master Shenyoun brought his palms together like a saber, striking down with tremendous force and slicing the pillar into several segments.

"What are they doing?" Chu Liang asked.

"That's a crucial material for constructing the great hall," Pushan explained. "In our Buddhist sect, it's known as Sumeru Crystal, or Earth Mother Sand. This material can condense spiritual energy and be integrated into enchanted formations. Without it, the formation on the building would not be able to have any effect on the inside of the wall, and the buildings would become far less durable.

"However, the Sumeru Crystal is incredibly tough, and only those at the seventh realm could cut through it, though with great difficulty. These crystals naturally form in long prisms, and the smaller the fragments, the greater their effect. Unfortunately, even my teacher could only cut this crystal into a few segments, though that was sufficient for our needs.

"When embedded into the walls, this material fuses the great hall with the enchanted formations, rendering it indestructible for tens of thousands of years. Only fights between the Eminent Ones could cause any significant damage."

Chu Liang's simple question immediately prompted Pushan's detailed explanation.

Just as he said, even with Dhyana Master Shenyoun's cultivation level, he could only cut the Sumeru Crystal into a few pieces before it became too difficult to cut further. The resulting smaller stone pillars could only be used as they were.

"Very hard?" Chu Liang asked, feeling intrigued.

He stepped forward, picked up a fragment of Sumeru Crystal about the thickness and length of a child's arm, and took out the Crimson Augmented Shears.

The monks looked on, confused, wondering what his next move would be. With a strong squeeze of the shears, Chu Liang cut down.

Snap.

The augmented qi surged, and the Sumeru Crystal broke cleanly into two pieces.

The monks, seeing this, felt a sudden chill run down their spines, and they instinctively pulled their head backward.

Chu Liang smirked and said, "It's not that hard..."

Chapter 683: Hall of Construction

After returning to Mount Shu, Chu Liang stood on Red Cotton Peak, staring blankly at the bustling and lively buildings before him.

"What are you thinking about?" Lin Bei asked.

Having heard that Chu Liang had come to Red Cotton Peak, Lin Bei came to meet him, only to find Chu Liang staring blankly at the peaks before him, as if he was envisioning the entire future of the Red Cotton Peak.

"I went to the Buddhist Cloud Monastery today. It was attacked by two demon kings, and many of the grand halls have been reduced to rubble," Chu Liang replied. "I'm a bit worried. The world is becoming more chaotic. What if Red Cotton Peak ends up like that after a fight?"

"It's impossible," Lin Bei said.

"Why are you so confident?" Chu Liang asked.

Lin Bei explained with a calm demeanor, "How can Mount Shu's peaks possibly compare to the buildings at the Buddhist Cloud Monastery? Except for the Heaven-Reaching Peak, all the other peaks on Mount Shu are only etched with enchanted formation inscriptions on the surface, leaving the peaks themselves unreinforced. In contrast, the Buddhist Cloud Monastery has even reinforced its great hall with Earth Mother Sand.

"Besides, all the buildings on Mount Shu are just regular structures. If a fight broke out, even a few seventh-realm cultivators could bring down the entire hill, let alone an eighth-realm greater demon, So it's impossible for us to end up like them. We're far inferior."

"..."

Chu Liang stood in silence for a moment, feeling speechless by this analysis.

He then asked, "How do you know so much?"

"I have two friends in the Hall of Construction," Lin Bei replied casually. "So I know a bit."

"Then why was the Buddhist Cloud Monastery reinforced, while ours wasn't?" Chu Liang asked in a puzzled tone.

During the last great battle on Mount Shu, the Dark King Sect had caused significant damage. While it was quickly rebuilt afterward, the restoration was relatively simple because there was little of true value to recover.

At this moment, Red Cotton Peak was worth its weight in gold. If it were destroyed, the entire peak would need to be reconstructed, and the extent of the losses from such devastation was beyond reckoning.

At the thought of this, Chu Liang suddenly felt a strong sense of crisis.

Moreover, Mount Shu was different from the Buddhist Cloud Monastery. The Buddhist Cloud Monastery was protected by a legendary artifact. As long as the Dharma Lotus Platform remained, no one would dare to act recklessly. Mount Shu, however, was different. If an eighth-realm cultivator were to cause trouble, they could easily topple several peaks and obliterate countless buildings. It would be an entirely plausible outcome.

Chu Liang imagined Venerable Wen Yuan tossing Chu Liang's carefully managed Red Cotton Peak at a demon king like it was a mere rock and missing the target...

At the thought of this, Chu Liang could feel his blood pressure rising.

"No, I must figure out a way to reinforce this peak. I won't care about the others, but Red Cotton Peak must be sturdier," he said with firm resolve.

"If you're intent on reinforcing the mountain..." Lin Bei replied, thoughtfully stroking his chin, "I have two friends in the Western Regions who can provide the necessary materials. As for how to incorporate it into the construction, you'll need to speak to the Hall of Construction. You can ask them about it. I am sure they'll be very happy to help."

A few years ago, it had been very tough for the attendants of the Hall of Construction.

Every day felt the same—fixing things in the sect, building houses, and constructing scenery on Mount Shu. It was monotonous work with no financial gain, and there were very few peaks left that needed new buildings. The only thing that kept them occupied was trying to recruit new members for the Hall of Construction. However, hardly anyone wanted to join, and at one point, they were left with just three to five attendants.

Everything changed with the establishment of Red Cotton Peak. The demand for construction skyrocketed, and with most clients being outsiders, they were able to charge higher prices.

Those who had stayed in the Hall of Construction through thick and thin suddenly found themselves in the midst of a golden age, rising quickly to wealth and prosperity.

In many ways, Red Cotton Peak revitalized all of Mount Shu.

To them, Chu Liang was naturally regarded as a little god of wealth.

Thus, as soon as Chu Liang arrived at the entrance of the Hall of Construction, he was warmly welcomed.

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"Junior Brother Chu!"

"Oh my! Junior Brother Chu! What brings you here today!"

Two Senior Brothers, covered in dust and grime, looking somewhere between young and middle-aged, grinned warmly, flashing their white teeth as they greeted him with such enthusiasm.

"Senior Brothers..." Chu Liang smiled. "Did you just return from work?"

"Yeah," the shorter, dusty one chuckled. "I'm at the construction site every day, and by the end of it, I'm covered in dust. Even if I clean up, I just end up dirty again, so I gave up on trying to stay clean."

"I was accompanying the attendants of the Hall of Discipline, who come to inspect our work every day," said the taller, dusty one. "It's just a small project, yet they check us daily. It's so irritating. I've even decided not to wash my face when I see them."

"The senior brothers from the Hall of Discipline are simply concerned about safety," Chu Liang said with a smile. "I'd like to speak with the supervising elder of the Hall of Construction. Is he available?"

"Of course!" The shorter tanned man grinned. "The Construction Master will definitely be glad to see you."

With that, the two of them escorted him to the third floor, stopping outside the Construction Master's private chamber and knocking on the door.

When Chu Liang entered, he saw a middle-aged man with slightly tanned skin and a protruding belly. Despite his position as elder, he looked to be in his forties or fifties, no older than his esteemed teacher.

This was Mount Shu Sect's Construction Master, Xu Heng.

"Construction Master Xu," Chu Liang greeted with a polite nod. "I have an idea and wanted to hear your thoughts on it."

"Oh?" Xu Heng poured Chu Liang a cup of tea. "Let's hear it."

"I want to reinforce Red Cotton Peak," Chu Liang began. "Renovate the mountain structure and all its buildings to make them more defensible."

"Reinforce Red Cotton Peak?" Xu Heng's eyes lit up, his smile growing wider. "That's a huge project. How strong do you want it to be?"

"At a minimum, it should withstand a full-force strike from a seventh-realm cultivator. Ideally, it should hold up against a large-scale attack from an eighth-realm cultivator," Chu Liang replied.

"That's impossible," Construction Master Xu said, shaking his head immediately.

"Is it that difficult?" Chu Liang asked, frowning.

"It's not just a question of difficulty," Xu Heng replied with a wry smile, setting down his teacup. "Anything that can endure a full-force strike from a seventh-realm expert or a large-scale attack from an eighth-realm expert would be on par with the artifacts recorded in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures. Don't tell me you want us to turn the Red Cotton Peak into a massive enchanted artifact?"

"Exactly!" Chu Liang exclaimed as he nodded. "As expected of one of Mount Shu's elders, you've understood me perfectly."

"I..." Construction Master Xu paused, wondering if there was something wrong with his tone that caused Chu Liang to misunderstand him.

"That wasn't a question," he clarified firmly. "I'm telling you this is absolutely impossible. Even if you brought someone from the Hall of Weapons, it would still be impossible."

"Actually, this should be simpler than refining an enchanted tool," Chu Liang pressed on. "I can invite Formation Sage Dong Futu to design a complete Grand Mountain-Protecting Formation, and I'll procure whatever materials you need—"

"This isn't a matter of formations," Construction Master Xu interrupted, trying to explain to Chu Liang again. "Formations have their limits. Even the ones on Heaven-Reaching Peak can only do so much. They protect the surface, but they can't change the inherent fragility of the mountain's core. The same goes for buildings. If a structure takes a heavy blow, no matter how strong the formation around it is, the overwhelming force will still destroy everything inside."

"I can get this," Chu Liang said, extending his hand to reveal a handful of cloudy, crystalline sand.

"This is... Earth Mother Sand?" Construction Master Xu's eyes widened in recognition before narrowing in surprise. "How did you manage to get it in such a fine form?"

"If I can acquire a large quantity of this Earth Mother Sand," Chu Liang countered confidently, "would completing the project then be possible?"

Naturally, Chu Liang had gotten it from the Buddhist Cloud Monastery. He had brought that piece of Sumeru Crystal back and cut it back and forth repeatedly until it was reduced to these fine, sand-like fragments.

"If we could incorporate this Earth Mother Sand into the mountain structure and buildings," Construction Master Xu mused, "the spiritual energy of the formations could permeate the interior, enhancing their effects by at least tenfold. It does seem quite feasible."

"That's fantastic," Chu Liang said with a smile. "That's exactly what I want."

"But about that..." Construction Master Xu chuckled. "You know, we've never attempted anything like this before. It's definitely going to be a challenge, and the cost will undoubtedly be significantly higher."

"Money isn't an issue," Chu Liang replied firmly. After a brief pause, he asked, "I heard that attendant disciples of the Hall of Construction get discounted rates for construction of houses, is that true?"

"Yes, that's right," Construction Master Xu said with a nod. "Back in the day, it was hard to recruit people, so we introduced those discounts as an incentive."

"Good." Then, Chu Liang suddenly said something that left the Construction Master dumbfounded: "Then I'll join the Hall of Construction."

"Huh?" Construction Master Xu froze, staring at Chu Liang in disbelief before hurriedly waving his hand. "Absolutely not. Aren't you just trying to exploit a loophole in our system? Discounts for building a house don't extend to construction on an entire mountain!"

"Come now," Chu Liang said with a smile. "Once I join the Hall of Construction, we'll all be family. And when you're family, everything's negotiable, right?"

"I won't agree to this," Xu Heng quickly declared. "As long as I'm still the Construction Master, this will never be negotiable."

Initially, he had seen this as a golden opportunity—a major project with ample chances to pocket some extra benefits. If Chu Liang joined, he would be able to see every operation. With Chu Liang keeping a close watch, how could he get away with anything?

"Alright then..." Chu Liang said regretfully as he stood up.

Without another word, he descended the stairs and exited the Hall of Construction. Then, he made a turn and headed toward the nearby Boundless Palace.

Chu Liang said, "Sect Leader Venerable, I have an important matter to report."

Chapter 684: Not Every Hall Needs a Supervising Elder

The Construction Master left peacefully.

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Xu Heng packed up his belongings and stepped out of the Hall of Construction. He stood at the entrance with a bucket in hand, feeling as though he were in a dream.

I've served as the Construction Master for over twenty years, and now I'm dismissed just like that? I'm not even sixty-five yet! he fumed inwardly.

His gaze shifted to Chu Liang, who was standing nearby with a bright smile. A wave of shame and anger welled up within him. "What lies did you tell the sect leader about me?"

"I simply shared a few minor proposals for the sect's development," Chu Liang replied with a casual shrug.

Just moments earlier, Chu Liang had stepped into the Boundless Palace, standing directly before Venerable Wen Yuan. Except for the Four Guardian Elders of Mount Shu, ordinary peak masters and elders had to have their arrival announced and wait outside to be informed whether Venerable Wen Yuan was available to see them.

Chu Liang was the sole exception. Venerable Wen Yuan had issued strict orders: whenever Chu Liang arrived, he was to be brought directly to him without delay.

As the sect leader, Venerable Wen Yuan understood better than anyone the immense value a disciple like Chu Liang brought to the sect. The most noticeable impact was the significant increase in talented individuals among the latest generation of disciples joining the Mount Shu Sect.

Chu Liang might not have been able to provide a legendary artifact, but he had single-handedly resolved most of the problems that had placed the Mount Shu Sect at a disadvantage when compared to the other sects in the Divine Nine. What made his accomplishments even more extraordinary was that he had achieved them all as a teenager. Who could predict the heights he might reach in the future once he grew into a real powerful top-tier cultivator?

Venerable Wen Yuan was filled with anticipation to find out the answer to that question. As such, he willingly granted Chu Liang any privilege within his power.

And Chu Liang wouldn't come to the Boundless Palace without reason. This time, he presented Venerable Wen Yuan with thoughts inspired by the tragedy at the Buddhist Cloud Monastery. He described the fragile foundation of Mount Shu Sect's current prosperity, pointing out a glaring contradiction: the ever-increasing value of Red Cotton Peak versus its defenses, which could crumble under a single decisive strike. From this, he proposed the comprehensive Red Cotton Peak Renovation Plan.

Chu Liang even set up a stand and hung a stack of meticulously drawn plans on it. Each page detailed his ideas and supporting data, which he removed one by one as he outlined his vision.

"In one year, Red Cotton Peak will be completely transformed! In two years, Mount Shu will become an impenetrable fortress! And in three years, the entire world of immortal cultivation will be living in houses we built!" Chu Liang declared with fervor, his finger tracing the final part of his proposal. "Just think of it—thousands of houses, each bringing us immense profit! Sect Leader Venerable, Red Cotton Peak must be renovated urgently!"

The renovation of the Red Cotton Peak was now intricately linked to the bright and prosperous future of Mount Shu.

Venerable Wen Yuan listened in a daze. He couldn't help but wonder, What is this boy's head made of? Why does he always have so many peculiar ideas?

After a moment of contemplation, he asked, "What kind of support do you need from the sect?"

"The Hall of Construction," Chu Liang answered without a hint of hesitation. "This project will require significant effort from the Hall of Construction, and I want to be in charge."

"That's not a problem," Venerable Wen Yuan said, waving his hand with the writing brush in it. "I'll appoint you as the Head Attendant of the Hall of Construction. From now on, you will oversee all matters within the Construction Hall, and the Construction Master will be required to fully cooperate with you."

The Hall of Construction was originally tasked with tedious and laborious work and wasn't important to Mount Shu. Otherwise, they wouldn't have sent someone as unremarkable in qualifications and cultivation as Xu Heng to oversee it. Since Chu Liang had ideas, it was better to let him take charge.

"Thank you, Sect Leader Venerable!" Chu Liang quickly expressed his gratitude, but then hesitated for a moment before cautiously adding, "Actually, I feel that the Hall of Construction doesn't necessarily need a supervising elder..."

If an ordinary disciple had dared to say such a thing, it would have been met with an eye roll. But coming from Chu Liang, Venerable Wen Yuan paused to give the suggestion serious thought.

Then he nodded. "Indeed."

...

"Hmph!" The Construction Master flung his sleeves as he stormed off, muttering angrily under his breath, "The Hall of Construction is full of my people. Let's see how you manage."

When Chu Liang stepped into the hall, he was met by five of his senior brothers covered in dust, standing in a neat row.

Though they stood in formation, their gazes toward Chu Liang were far from friendly. After all, the Hall of Construction's attendants had all been brought up by Xu Heng, and now that he had been ousted by Chu Liang, it was inevitable that they would be hostile.

Chu Liang, however, didn't mind at all. With a cheerful smile, he said, "From now on, I'll be relying on all of you. Please introduce yourselves so I can get to know you better."

Although the group was visibly displeased, Chu Liang's authority over the Hall of Construction had been decreed by the Sect Leader himself. They dared not openly defy Chu Liang, though they still felt somewhat gloomy.

The first person lazily said, "I'm Li Wanda."

The second, bearing a striking resemblance to the first, added, "I'm his younger brother, Li Wanke."

"Fang Zhonghai," the third mumbled. His introduction was even more casual.

"I'm Chen Baoli," said the fourth.

"Bi Guiyuan," said the fifth just as succinctly.

The five men, covered entirely in dust and dirt, were distinguishable only by their varying heights and builds.

After hearing their introductions, Chu Liang couldn't help but chuckle, then turned to them with a bright smile. "Alright, Senior Brothers. I didn't bring any gifts today, but from now on, the Hall of Construction's base monthly stipend will be tripled. For every building we construct, you'll get an additional ten percent cut of the revenue—provided the quality meets the standards, of course.

"And if we make enough profit this year, there will be year-end bonuses proportional to the earnings. I can't promise much, but I can guarantee that hard work in the Hall of Construction will always be rewarded.

"It's okay if you don't accept me now, as long as—"

Chu Liang turned back, only to stop mid-sentence.

Before him now stood five men, their faces radiant and glowing, smiles brimming with joy. Their eyes shone with hope and admiration.

Bi Guiyuan grabbed Chu Liang's hand firmly. "Junior Brother Chu, anyone who dares make your life difficult in this Hall of Construction will be going against me!!"

"It would be against all of us!" the other four shouted in unison.

"I knew it..." Chu Liang said, a touch of emotion in his voice as he nodded. "There are still so many good people on Mount Shu."

He led them into the private chamber and had them sit down before taking out the handful of Earth Mother Sand and showing it to them.

He then explained, "I plan to invite Formation Sage Dong Futu to design the enchanted formation inscription and integrate this Earth Mother Sand into the building materials so that the enchanted formation inscription can display the best effect possible. Senior Brothers, I'd like your help in designing the building structures to ensure we achieve the best possible result."

"Earth Mother Sand? Formation Sage Dong Futu?"

The group listened to Chu Liang's words and felt utterly astonished. It seemed as if this young man had elevated their entire level to a whole new dimension the moment he arrived.

They couldn't help but think, Is this really something we can accomplish?

Seeing their hesitant expressions, Chu Liang encouraged, "Senior Brothers, I believe you are the best construction experts in the world. You've got this!"

Li Wanda clasped his fists and said earnestly, "We've wandered through life without ever having a true leader... Junior Brother Chu, if you don't cast us aside..."

"No need for such words of gratitude..." Chu Liang quickly stood up, waving his hand. "Just focus on drafting a plan for me, Senior Brothers. I'll handle the rest later."

...

After returning to Silver Sword Peak, Chu Liang tidied up and prepared to head to the capital of Yu to see Dong Futu.

Although Chu Liang had met Formation Sage Dong Futu before, they weren't particularly close. However, Xu Hongqiu, one of Dong Futu's disciples, was a close friend of Chu Liang's. Dong Futu had even taught Wen Yulong formations for a time, so their bond was quite strong.

For this visit to Dong Futu, Chu Liang planned to bring Wen Yulong along, but he figured that as long as enough compensation was given, there wouldn't be any issue.

Recently, he had spent too much money, mostly due to the steep cost of purchasing the Demon-Slaying Sword. Even as the wealthiest disciple of the Mount Shu Sect, this purchase had nearly emptied his wallet. However, the price he paid was well worth it.

He took out the Demon-Slaying Sword and gently polished its sharp edge. As he did, he felt an abyssal aura of power emanating from it. With this sword in hand, surely even the flowers and grass on Silver Sword Peak would not dare to meet his gaze.

Just as he was about to set out to find Wen Yulong, he suddenly heard a cry outside. "Kaw~"

A white crane flew down.

It turned out to be this month's issue of The Seven Stars Gazette.

After six years, the format of The Seven Stars Gazette had changed. When Chu Liang opened it up to the first page, he found a simple table of contents, listing several eye-catching headlines.

For example, the first headline read: Dhyana Master Dayu Calms the South Sea on a Lotus as Two Demons Attack the Buddhist Cloud Monastery From Both Front and Rear.

The second headline was: Mount Mang Rebels Raid Wu'an City, But What Made Them Cross a Thousand Li?

Seeing these headlines, Chu Liang wanted to laugh, thinking how the gazette had become more like a tabloid over the years.

Then suddenly, his smile disappeared.

The third headline read: The Return of the Young Hero with the Divine Whip: A Display of Wealth at the Heavenly Peak Banquet.

Chapter 685: Feng-grade Architecture

What Chu Liang didn't know was that he had something to do with why the format of the Seven Stars Gazette had changed.

Since the Circle of Immortal Friends Token was introduced, information spread throughout the immortal realm at an astonishing speed.

Whenever a significant event occurred, someone in the immortal sects would instantly be informed, and the news would spread like wildfire.

In the past, much of the news was only known through The Seven Stars Gazette, but now, as soon as a witness posted on the Circle of Immortal Friends Token, everyone would know instantly.

The Seven Stars Gazette lost its significance in spreading news, at least within the major immortal sects for now.

Although the Circle of Immortal Friends token hadn't fully gained widespread adoption, the perceptive Celestial Pivot Pavilion had already noticed the impending crisis.

Once people knew about the news that had been spread through the Circle of Immortal Friends, it was natural that they would not anticipate The Seven Stars Gazette for this month as eagerly.

If this continued, the magazine might gradually lose its readership. To address this, Zhou Yijian, the master of the Wind-Catching Hall, decided to revamp the layout and title to make The Seven Stars Gazette more captivating.

The major events of this month revolved around two monumental occurrences: the demon king's surprise attack on the Buddhist Cloud Monastery after the chaos in the South Sea, and the sudden and mysterious reappearance of the Mount Mang rebels in Wu'an City. One took place in the sky, the other on the ground—both were undeniably the most significant news of the month.

While Chu Liang's return might have once made headlines, it was now overshadowed by these two events. After all, Chu Liang had become Champion of the Assembly of Immortal Sects six years ago, and he was no longer the center of attention.

However, thanks to The Seven Stars Gazette, Chu Liang no longer had to explain his reappearance everywhere he went. Soon, the entire world would know of his return.

Moreover, his grand gesture of purchasing the Demon-Slaying Sword upon his return served as a fitting declaration, showcasing him as the richest man of Mount Shu.

"The Chronicles of the Nine Provinces" were filled with major events, but only a few stood out. The rest seemed trivial in comparison.

For instance, the Sea King Sect's Cloudcrest Dragon Banner had been stolen. Investigations revealed that the theft had been carried out by a master in stealth techniques.

Chu Liang recalled that when he and Wang Xuanling entered the sea, they had seen Huo Tianya of the Celestial Charm Sect holding this treasure, which he had later handed over to the Sea Master.

So, it had been stolen from the Sea King Sect?

As Chu Liang thought about the theft, he realized that it was likely the work of the evil Celestial Charm Sect. Specifically, it could have been Yang Bujue, the expert in stealth techniques whom he had met before.

Lately, the nine provinces had been plagued with chaos, as evildoers often caused trouble. Despite The Seven Stars Gazette adopting a lighthearted tone, the overall atmosphere remained heavy.

Thankfully, after "The Chronicles of the Nine Provinces," there was still "The Uncommon Tales of the Martial World" to provide some entertainment.

The headline of the "Uncommon Tales of the Martial World" centered around Huyan Dong, the City Lord of Taotie City.

There had been rumors about Huyan Dong's secret affairs with women, but nothing ever came of it. His wife, ever composed, maintained a public image of calm, and their household seemed to remain in perfect harmony.

Recently, the Celestial Pivot Pavilion received word that Huyan Dong had been meeting with several women in private. The Wind-Catching Hall managed to track down one anonymous woman who claimed that Huyan Dong had promised to take her as a concubine if she became pregnant.

It seemed that Huyan Dong was desperately seeking to have another child. Given that both he and his wife were powerful cultivators, conceiving a child naturally was difficult. Seeking out a woman with a lower cultivation level offered him a better chance of success.

Huyan Dong's behavior was likely tied to the repeated failures of his son, Huyan Bin.

Huyan Bin had once been on a steady path, diligently following his father's guidance. He wasn't the sharpest, but he did not make any big mistakes. However, everything took a turn six years ago when he made the decision to invest in Red Cotton Peak.

That one choice nearly crumbled the foundation Taotie City had spent a millennium establishing.

If he had the choice, Huyan Dong wouldn't even bother thinking about having a second child.. He just wished he could return to that night thirty years ago, when his younger self received an invitation from his wife. He'd tell himself to take a walk, enjoy some fresh air, eat some hotpot—anything but reply to her. He would have begged his younger self to never respond, no matter the reason!

...

Fifteen days later, on the open grounds of Red Cotton Peak.

"Welcome, Venerable Sect Leader!" Chu Liang announced loudly.

Clap clap clap.

The disciples of the Hall of Construction clapped together, their freshly scrubbed faces showing a mix of anxiety and anticipation. Some had served in the Hall for over a decade, while others were newer, having joined only five or six years ago. Yet, none had ever witnessed the sect leader's visit to their hall before.

Who would have thought that Chu Liang's joining the hall would somehow bring the sect leader to visit in person?

"Stop!" Chu Liang ordered, and the clapping immediately stopped. He turned around and said, "Sect Leader, these are the sample houses we've rushed to complete. Please inspect them!"

With a sweep of his arm, he pointed to the five houses that stood on the open grounds. These were no longer the usual wooden cabins found on Mount Shu but rather well-constructed and sturdy homes.

"We've graded the houses into five categories: Ding, Bing, Yi, Jia, and Feng," Chu Liang said, gesturing to each. "The level of defense becomes stronger with each grade."

"Oh?" Venerable Wen Yuan stood with his hands clasped behind his back, accompanied by the Weapons Master and the Alchemy Master. All three appeared intrigued and one of them asked, "What differences do these houses have?"

Chu Liang explained, "The Ding-grade house can withstand a full-force strike from a fourth-realm cultivator without sustaining damage."

As his words echoed, a fourth-realm disciple stepped out of the house. After a respectful salute to the sect leader and elders, he turned and unsheathed his sword.

Whoosh!

Bam!

A surge of sword qi lashed out with great force, yet when it struck the wall of the house, it only produced a faint white glow.

"The Bing-grade house can withstand a full-force strike from a fifth-realm cultivator without breaking," Chu Liang continued.

Immediately, a fifth-realm disciple of Mount Shu stepped out of the house. Forming a seal with both hands, he turned and launched an attack.

Boom!

After the strike, the house remained perfectly intact.

"The Yi-grade house can withstand a full-force strike from a sixth-realm cultivator," Chu Liang explained.

In that instant, Lin Bei stepped out of the house. He greeted those nearby with a nod before turning, drawing his sword, and unleashing a clean strike at the house.

Boom!

The sword qi whistled through the air, yet the wall stood firm, showing no damage.

"The Jia-grade house is capable of enduring a full-force strike from a Seventh Realm expert without breaking," Chu Liang said. "Would either of the two elders be willing to test it?"

"If this works, it will be truly remarkable," said the Weapons Master. "I'll give it a try."

As someone who had spent years crafting enchanted tools, the Weapons Master naturally understood the level of quality required for a tool to endure a full-force strike from a seventh-realm cultivator. It would be simply astonishing if a building could achieve such a level of defense.

With that, he raised his black-iron hand high, circulating his foundational qi throughout his body, and punched with all his might!

Although he didn't want to embarrass Chu Liang, the Weapons Master maintained a rigorous approach to the test. This punch was infused with the entirety of his cultivation power, with no holding back whatsoever!

Boom!

As the punch landed, the house trembled violently and swayed for a moment, yet it remained standing. The enchanted formation inscription seemed rather interesting as it likely used the tremors of the house to dissipate much of the impact.

"This is indeed remarkable," remarked the Weapons Master with a smile. "The endurance of the outer wall is as strong as some enchanted tools ranked in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures."

"Wait..." The Alchemy Master's eyes widened as realization hit him. "Don't tell me the Feng-grade is..."

"Precisely," Chu Liang said as he nodded with a smile. "It can withstand a full-force strike from my esteemed teacher without exploding."

"What?" The three old men looked at him at the same time in shock.

Just then, Di Nufeng stepped out from the house, her laughter ringing out like a bell.

"To prove that my teacher and I aren't putting on a show," Chu Liang called out, "Esteemed Teacher, if you can destroy this house with a single punch, I'll give you an extra ten thousand sword coins."

"What?" Di Nufeng's eyes flared with excitement, nearly sparking with fire.

She rolled up her sleeves, and violet-gold flames erupted from her arms. The flames spread like wings, moving with her arms, cutting through the air with a sharp, shrill cry.

Boom!!

As her punch landed, the entire mountain trembled.

When the dust cleared, everyone looked over to see that although the stone walls of the house were cracked, they still held together. The house seemed on the verge of collapse, but it hadn't fallen. At this point, a single kick could bring it down.

But in the end, it withstood the attack.

"Tch," Di Nufeng clicked her tongue in annoyance.

"Good!" Venerable Wen Yuan clapped lightly and nodded. "I knew choosing you for this task was the right decision. If Red Cotton Peak is renovated to this standard, we'll have nothing to worry about."

Before he turned to leave, he whispered, "Maybe you can look into reinforcing Boundless Palace as well."

The Weapons Master stepped closer and asked, "How much does this house cost? I need one too."

The Alchemy Master, not wanting to be left behind, eagerly added, "And me! I would like one, please!"

For these old men, fireproofing or theft prevention didn't matter. What truly captivated them was the house's ability to stand against Di Nufeng's might.

"Everything is negotiable," Chu Liang replied with a smile.

In the midst of the cheerful moment, a sudden surge of terrifying sword qi erupted from Azure Falling Peak, engulfing Mount Shu in a chilling cold.

"That's..." Di Nufeng reacted first, her eyes glinting with excitement. "Yan Zi!"

Chu Liang also looked up and immediately realized what had happened.

"Senior Aunt Yan has finally come out of her closed-door cultivation!"

Chapter 686: Emerged from Closed-Door Cultivation

Daoist Yan stood atop the ancient tree of Azure Falling Peak with her robes fluttering in the fierce wind.

The ancient tree faced the entrance to Mount Shu. As she lifted her gaze, she saw the Red Cotton Peak, where radiant lights cascaded like rain and spirit birds flitted about. Its prosperity seemed almost unreal.

She was momentarily stunned.

How many years had passed during her closed-door cultivation? How had Mount Shu transformed into this state? Could it truly be that the world had undergone such dramatic change?

Everything felt unfamiliar. Thankfully, the Azure Falling Peak's ancient tree remained unchanged, as did her own Azure Falling Peak. She didn't dwell too much on these thoughts.

The very instant she emerged from her closed-door cultivation was when her qi was the sharpest. Her sword qi soared straight into the heavens, and every sword cultivator across the nine provinces felt its presence.

Within three breaths, a sword qi formed from white clouds came rushing in from the west.

It was vast and overwhelming, its power dominating the nine provinces like the mighty force of celestial soldiers descending from the heavens.

It was a cloud from the West Sea that had been condensed into the shape of a sword and had travelled across seas and mountains to Mount Shu.

It carried the power of the supreme Sword Dao, and one could easily guess who the creator was. The moment Daoist Yan emerged, the Daos of the Sword trembled.

A fierce collision reverberated within the Great Dao of the Cloud of Determination. Naturally, the Sword Emperor of the West Sea felt it, and this sword-shaped cloud was a test he had sent her.

The wind howled as the sword-shaped cloud descended, seemingly trying to suppress the sharpness radiating from Daoist Yan upon her emergence.

The Great Dao of the Cloud of Determination could be ruled by only one sword, and no sharper blade could be allowed to exist.

Daoist Yan merely responded with a faint smile.

She raised two fingers, drawing them through the air with a swift, graceful motion.

SZZZZ——

A beam of clear light shot into the sky, crackling as it transformed into an ancient, profound swordlight. With a thunderous roar, it pierced through the air!

The clash between the swordlight and the sword cloud was like wind and lightning meeting in the skies, shaking the heavens and earth!

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

A series of deafening booms reverberated across the thirty-six peaks of Mount Shu. The surrounding mountains, rivers, and streams quaked, and the rumbling echoed for thousands of miles, as clear as thunder on a sunny day.

When Di Nufeng saw the two immense sword qi collide above, she furrowed her brows and was about to fly up and help.

"Stay calm," said Venerable Wen Yuan without looking away from the sky. He gently pressed his hand toward her. "The fight for control of a Great Dao is not something outsiders can intervene in."

Bang!

The sword light and sword-shaped cloud were locked in a stalemate for a brief moment before both began to unravel from their tips. Eventually, they vanished into the air. The turbulent skies calmed, and the vast blue heavens cleared with not a single cloud left in sight.

At that moment, in the Sword-Hanging Kingdom by the West Sea, a figure in white stood with his hands behind his back on the wide steps of the palace square.

A faint smile appeared on his face as he nodded and said, "Not bad."

In face of a challenge, a truly powerful cultivator of the Dao of Sword would be filled with anticipation.

Meanwhile, on Azure Falling Peak of Mount Shu, Daoist Yan called out across the distance, "I will come to the Sword-Hanging Kingdom to see you in three days."

As Venerable Wen Yuan watched this unfold, he frowned.

At this moment, Daoist Yan's sword qi was at its sharpest. The Sword Emperor of the West Sea had launched a simple strike, but the sword qi had to travel tens of thousands of miles across mountains and seas to reach Mount Shu, losing much of its strength along the way. Even so, Daoist Yan barely managed to force a draw.

Though achieving this as a seventh-realm cultivator was remarkable, it seemed unlikely that Daoist Yan was powerful enough to defeat the Sword Emperor of the West Sea in just three days.

However, since Daoist Yan had already spoken, there was no turning back. Even if those at Mount Shu were worried for her, they could only discuss it later.

At this moment, a streak of fire shot straight toward Azure Falling Peak, accompanied by loud shouts.

"Yan Zi!

"We are finally seeing each other again! Yan Zi! I have missed you so much!"

...

Moments later, Daoist Yan was seen holding Di Nufeng back, her hand pressed firmly against Di Nufeng's chest to stop her from lunging forward.

Di Nufeng, on the other hand, had her arms stretched out, reaching for Daoist Yan wildly. She mumbled incoherently, "Hug me, hug me..."

While this was happening, Daoist Yan fixed a calm gaze on Red Cotton Peak and asked, "What's going on here? How long was I in closed-door cultivation?"

"Over six years!" Di Nufeng replied loudly. "Do you have any idea how I survived these six years?"

"Only six years? Then this place..." Daoist Yan looked puzzled.

"My disciple did this. Yan Zi, both of my disciples are great at making money. We're rich now. Hehe, from now on, I'll take care of you," Di Nufeng continued.

"Chu Liang?" Daoist Yan recalled that figure.

If anyone could accomplish such extraordinary feats, it had to be him, she thought.

She then asked again, "Where is Yuebai?"

With her divine sense spread across Azure Falling Peak, Daoist Yan saw that the majority of the disciples were assembled beneath the ancient tree, eager to welcome her out of closed-door cultivation. Yet, Jiang Yuebai was nowhere to be seen.

"Jiang Yuebai left with her father. Now, she and Chu Liang are in a long-distance relationship," Di Nufeng explained without holding back.

"Jiang... Tiankuo?"

For the first time, a hint of emotion flickered across Yan Zi's usually calm face.

Di Nufeng, who had been trying to pounce on Yan Zi, finally found her chance. She let out a mischievous chuckle and said, "Stop thinking about that stupid man! Let's enjoy a good cuddle instead!"

Thud...

As Chu Liang approached, he saw Di Nufeng cackling madly while pinning Yan Zi to the ground. Their hair and clothes were a mess.

He couldn't help but grin awkwardly.

Esteemed teacher, you seem a little too hungry...

When Di Nufeng noticed Chu Liang, she sat up and said with a chuckle, "Hehe, you're here, my dear disciple."

While tidying her slightly messy hair, she added, "I was just reminiscing with your Senior Aunt Yan about the good old days."

"That's understandable. Senior Aunt Yan has been in closed-door cultivation for so long; it's natural for you to miss her," Chu Liang replied.

"Exactly... Yan Zi, a lot has happened during the years you were in closed-door cultivation. Come to my room tonight, and I'll tell you all about it."

"I'd better meet with the sect leader first." Daoist Yan said, ignoring whatever Di Nufeng said. She stood up, and with a flash of sword light, headed straight for Heaven-Reaching Peak.

"Yan Zi..." Di Nufeng called out weakly as she watched her figure fade into the distance.

Chu Liang whispered from the side, "Esteemed teacher, Senior Aunt Yan is already gone. Let's focus on the matter at hand."

"What matter?"

"The renovation plan for Red Cotton Peak is about to begin, right? But I worry that just convincing people with words might not be enough."

For the renovation of Red Cotton Peak, part of the housing costs would be subsidized. However, since the shopkeepers there were also benefiting, they needed to contribute a portion of the renovation costs. Given that the new houses weren't cheap, a little extra push might be needed to get them on board.

"What do you plan to do?" Di Nufeng asked.

"I want everyone to experience the defensive power of the new buildings, so you'll need to play the role of a bad guy," Chu Liang said.

"How do I play a bad guy?" Di Nufeng frowned. "I don't know how to do that."

Chu Liang responded seriously, "Just be yourself but tone it down just a bit."

...

The next day, Red Cotton Peak was as bustling as ever.

Suddenly, a scream echoed from a street corner. "Help!"

A young man with thick brows and big eyes came sprinting down the street, dashing into a pavilion at the end of the road, followed closely by a burst of flames.

Kaboom!

The pavilion exploded in a cloud of smoke and dust, and the young man, thrown by the blast, tumbled before crashing hard onto the ground.

From within the flames, Di Nufeng's figure emerged. She stood there laughing theatrically, "Trying to escape? If you surrender willingly, I'll give you a swift end! But if you run again, hee-hee-hee..."

Flames danced around her, making her look like a demon. The onlookers, struck with terror, stood frozen. They were trembling, and their hairs were standing on end. They were too afraid to move, lest they get caught in the chaos.

The young man, with nowhere else to go, rolled and dashed into the nearest brand-new building.

Kaboom!

The flames followed in an instant, crashing into the building.

This time, after a loud explosion, a flash of white light flickered over the house, protecting it from the full force of the blast. Aside from a few blackened scorch marks, the structure remained mostly unscathed.

Di Nufeng emerged from the fire, her eyes wide with surprise as she stared at the house. "Ehhhhh?"

"Esteemed teacher!" Chu Liang stepped out of the house and declared loudly, "The last fish ball in the hotpot wasn't eaten by Lin Bei. It was actually... me! Please spare him!"

When Di Nufeng heard his plea, she paused, then waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, it was you? In that case, I'll let him go. Almost caused a misunderstanding there."

At this moment, Chu Liang turned toward the crowd and announced loudly, "Thanks to this Feng-grade house, constructed with the latest technology from Mount Shu Sect's Hall of Construction, it withstood your punch. Otherwise, all the valuables inside could have been destroyed, costing a cultivator their whole life's savings!"

"Oh my!" Di Nufeng exclaimed, slapping her forehead dramatically. "How thoughtless of me! Luckily, you had this Feng-grade house built with the latest technology from Mount Shu Sect's Hall of Construction. Otherwise, the consequences would have been unimaginable."

"Exactly!" Lin Bei chimed in as he approached from behind. "If not for this Feng-grade house built by Mount Shu Sect's Hall of Construction, wouldn't my life have been lost unjustly? Let's all give it our thanks!"

"Now that it's all clear," Chu Liang said as he grabbed his teacher and Lin Bei, "Let's step into this perfectly designed house, warm in winter and cool in summer, safe and cozy for every occasion!"

Then, the three of them chanted in unison dramatically, "Now, let's eat! Hot! Pot!"

Chapter 687: The Challenge

The Sword-Hanging Kingdom was located on an island in the West Sea. Although it was much smaller than the Fuyao Kingdom, which was also located on an island, it was ranked second among the kingdoms in the four seas. Like many minor kingdoms in the Western Regions, it had only one major city, which shared the kingdom's name—Sword-Hanging City.

In Sword-Hanging City, everyone carried swords, and in the countryside, every household forged them. In this kingdom that revered the sword as the most beautiful thing, it was common for powerful sword cultivators to emerge. Among them, the current Sword Emperor, Chen Erniu, was considered one of the finest rulers in the kingdom's history.[1]

At this moment, in Sword-Hanging City, both men and women walked the streets dressed in white with swords at their sides. This was the aesthetic standard of the kingdom. Anyone dressed in different colors was likely a foreigner.

"What a remarkable place," a man in the crowd wearing a conical hat remarked.

Though the conical hat obscured most of his face, the faint stubble and strong jawline revealed a rugged, mature handsomeness.

Beside him stood a woman in a simple white dress, also wearing a conical hat. Although her face was hidden, her aura alone drew the frequent glances of passersby.

These two were none other than the Whale-Riding Immortal and Jiang Yuebai.

They walked to the palace, where two towering platforms were under construction. To call them platforms was an understatement; they were more like two enormous white stone pillars, nearly a hundred zhang tall, piercing into the clouds.

That was where Daoist Yan and the Sword Emperor of the West Sea would compete.

Sword cultivators fighting for control of a Great Dao would never resort to flashy techniques. They communicated solely through their swords without exchanging needless words.

In this case, there could only be one eighth-realm cultivator.

The winner would ascend while the loser would step down.

The citizens of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom were thrilled. This was unlike the previous duel between the Sword Saint of the nine provinces and the Sword Emperor of the West Sea. That duel had just been an opening performance at the Assembly of Immortal Sects, and as a performance, there was a limit to how serious and intense it could be.

But now, the stakes were unimaginable. A fight for the title of Dao Master, where every strike could be the last—where life and death were but mere whispers in the wind.

It had been many years since the citizens of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom had seen their king unleash his full power. This time, they hoped to witness the brilliance he had displayed in his youth.

"I'm just worried that Daoist Yan from the Mount Shu Sect might be defeated in one strike. I hope she's strong enough so we can see more of the king's swordsmanship!" a young passerby said loudly.

"Haha, exactly!" his companion agreed quickly. "She might be too weak."

Indeed, this was what the citizens of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom generally thought.

The fight between the Sword Emperor of the West Sea and Daoist Yan was a fight between an eighth-realm and a seventh-realm, which meant that the Sword Emperor of the West Sea held an overwhelming advantage. Furthermore, the Mount Shu Sect had no legendary artifact to rely on, leaving Daoist Yan without even the chance to cheat with such tools.

What could she possibly do to bridge the vast chasm between the seventh and eighth realms?

"Esteemed teacher..." Jiang Yuebai murmured, her voice trembling with worry as she spoke the words.

"Don't worry," the Whale-Riding Immortal said with a hearty laugh. "Yan Zi has always been the most reliable. She never does anything she's not confident about. No matter how strong the Sword Emperor of the West Sea is, could he possibly be stronger than me? Yan Zi has defeated me before, after all..."

Right then, he suddenly raised his gaze.

He tilted his conical hat upward, just enough to reveal his eyes. His gaze, sharp as a sword, shot toward a nearby pavilion. He stared at it intensely for quite a while. After a moment of hesitation, he turned and walked away with his daughter.

Inside the pavilion, an elegant youth with smooth skin and a scale on his forehead and a sickly-looking middle-aged man were lying on the ground, flat on their stomachs.

Both of them were gasping for air.

These two were Ji Lingjue and Yang Bujue from the Celestial Charm Sect.

"Who was that?" Ji Lingjue asked in a deep voice. "Such immense cultivation power."

"We were so close to being discovered," Yang Bujue muttered, cold sweat glistening on his forehead. "They don't appear to be members of the Divine Nine. Maybe they're simply here for the show."

"We must be incredibly careful moving forward," Ji Lingjue said, still shaken by the near discovery.

...

"I have two friends in Sword-Hanging City. They can help arrange accommodations," Lin Bei said with a smile.

The duel between Daoist Yan and the Sword Emperor of the West Sea was set for the following day. However, Mount Shu was far from the sea. While Daoist Yan and Di Nufeng could easily get there with a streak of sword light or fire, those like Chu Liang's group, who traveled at a normal pace aboard an airship, would have to leave early in the morning to arrive the same day. Arriving a day earlier seemed like the better choice.

Upon their arrival, Lin Bei immediately sought out his friends, and together, they secured a secluded courtyard, tucked away in the quietest part of the city. The arrangement was quite excellent.

Chu Liang, Shang Ziliang, Xu Ziyang, Lin Bei, Ling Ao—this group of young people who knew each other well were eager to witness tomorrow's grand battle.

When the time came, the Sword Emperor of the West Sea would have the advantage of being on his home ground, with countless citizens of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom cheering him on. As a result, many disciples from Mount Shu were planning to attend, with many others staying in inns around the city.

It could be said that Lin Bei, having built strong connections through the Foreign Affairs Hall, had flourished even more with the stage provided by Red Cotton Peak, where his networking talents bloomed to their fullest extent.

As everyone settled into their accommodations and thought about where to have dinner that evening, a sudden knock came from outside the door.

"Who's knocking?" Lin Bei asked as he went to open the door.

When he opened it, a group of men dressed in white, swords strapped to their backs, strode in without hesitation.

The leader of the group was a young man in his late twenties, with an honest and steadfast appearance. His sharp gaze and aura indicated a high level of cultivation.

Chu Liang found the man somewhat familiar.

"Honored disciples of Mount Shu..." The man stepped into the courtyard, bowing before introducing himself. "I am Chen Kaitai of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom."

It turned out he was the crown prince of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom.

Chu Liang suddenly remembered. During the Assembly of Immortal Sects, he had teamed up with his brothers and sisters from the Great Astral Sect and South Melody Conservatory to scheme against the Sword-Hanging Kingdom's team, eliminating them.

He stood up immediately and asked politely, "So it's the Crown Prince of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom. To what do we owe the honor of your visit?"

"My father will be engaging in a duel with Esteemed Senior Daoist Yan for control of his Great Dao tomorrow. Before that, I have a request," Chen Kaitai said. He then turned to Xu Ziyang and continued, "I wish to challenge you."

"Hmm?" Xu Ziyang raised his eyes to meet his gaze. "Why?"

He didn't have any grudge with Chen Kaitai. In fact, he had been eliminated from the competition and sent home earlier than the Sword-Hanging Kingdom's team.

"Back during the Assembly of Immortal Sects, I was eliminated by Mount Shu Sect's team. That failure has haunted me ever since, becoming a barrier in my cultivation of sword," Chen Kaitai confessed.

He went on, explaining his reasoning. "Initially, I intended to challenge Young Hero Chu to rid myself of this inner demon. But after the great ordeal he endured, his cultivation level still has yet reached the sixth realm. To challenge him now would be exploiting his weakness in a moment of vulnerability. But aside from him, you are the only disciple of the Mount Shu Sect who participated in the assembly, so I am challenging you instead."

In truth, this stemmed from the Sword Emperor of the West Sea's training philosophy. In his youth, he was repeatedly defeated, yet he rose time and again, overcoming every opponent, no matter how many losses he endured. In the end, he conquered every obstacle that stood in his way.

Chen Kaitai had always looked up to his father, striving to follow in his footsteps. Without a doubt, his greatest failure in life was being eliminated during the Assembly of Immortal Sects.

Now that he had reached the peak of the sixth realm and was striving to break through to the seventh, he needed to overcome every obstacle in his cultivation of the sword.

Since he couldn't challenge Chu Liang, and Jiang Yuebai was not at Mount Shu, he could only choose Xu Ziyang.

Ling Ao, off to the side, quietly watched the scene play out before him. With a gentle breath, he blew away the tea leaves swirling on the surface of his cup, pretending as though he had no idea of what was happening around him.

"If that's the case..." Chu Liang stepped forward and said, "I suggest that Your Highness challenge me first. If you truly find my abilities lacking, you can then challenge Senior Brother Xu."

"Young Hero Chu..." Chen Kaitai started to speak, but as he locked eyes with Chu Liang's unwavering gaze, he figured that Chu Liang was not one to recklessly stand up for others. He paused, then said, "In that case, please enlighten me."

The challenge came out of nowhere, but the disciples of Mount Shu Sect were unfazed, calmly sipping their tea and watching from beneath the pavilion.

If Xu Ziyang were to fight, they would not have felt as confident. But with Chu Liang, for some reason, they always felt this unshakable sense of confidence.

"Let's spar a bit, just to exchange pointers. I kindly ask Your Highness to go easy on me," Chu Liang said with a smile.

With that, he summoned an ancient-looking flying sword, which hovered in front of his chest.

Chen Kaitai looked at the sword, finding it somewhat familiar but didn't think much of it.

He had read in The Seven Stars Gazette about the Demon-Slaying Sword being auctioned by Chu Liang, but he had assumed it was bought by Mount Shu Sect. It never once crossed his mind that the Demon-Slaying Sword had been a personal purchase made by Chu Liang.

Immediately, he summoned his own flying sword as well.

He remained focused, sharp, and fierce.

His gaze was strikingly similar to that of Chen Erniu in his youth. The entire Sword-Hanging Kingdom believed that this crown prince would one day become another Sword Emperor of the West Sea.

Chen Kaitai held himself to the same standard.

With foundational qi flowing through his body, he raised his sword high, and in an instant, his aura surged, soaring a hundred zhang as though it could pierce the heavens themselves!

The moment the sword was in his hand, his once honest demeanor was replaced by an overwhelming sharpness.

Boom!

The full-force strike of a sword cultivator at the peak of the sixth realm was terrifying. It felt as if the very air in the courtyard had been stripped away, and even the bystanders felt a sense of suffocation.

The vast and overwhelming sword qi, carrying the essence of the Great Dao of the Cloud of Determination, seemed powerful enough to tear Chu Liang apart with just a single thread of its force.

Yet Chu Liang remained completely calm, casually waving his sword.

Swish.

A streak of sword qi, ablaze with radiant flames, shot forward in an instant.

He unleashed the Sword Strike of Severing the Void.

Given Chu Liang's current level of foundational qi, the power of this strike might not match Chen Kaitai's. Somehow, when released from this sword, it carried an unexpected divine strength, slicing through the sword qi that carried the very essence of the Great Dao of the Cloud of Determination, severing it in an instant.

Chen Kaitai's expression changed in an instant. He quickly lifted his sword to block, but the sheer force of the sword intent was too much, sending him flying more than ten zhang before he collided violently with a high wall.

Boom!

Meanwhile, the dissipating remnants of Chen Kaitai's sword qi grazed past Chu Liang's shoulders. Chu Liang didn't even bother to block, allowing the sword qi to strike his body.

Thud, thud!

He stood motionless, but not a single strand of his hair was harmed. The power of the sword qi was neutralized. With his high level of physical endurance, even a full strike of sword qi might not harm him, let alone these lingering threads of sword qi.

Chu Liang felt a deep sense of satisfaction as he sheathed the sword. He had accepted this challenge specifically to test the Demon-Slaying Sword's effectiveness against humans. It was said that while the sword was highly effective against demons, it was less so when used against people. He had been curious to see how true that was.

As it turned out, the sword was only slightly less effective against humans. It was still powerful enough to be ranked near the top in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures. The conclusion was that it would likely be a fair statement to say that the sword ranked in the top twenty and forty against demons and humans respectively.

After a moment of stunned silence, Chen Kaitai blurted out, "The Demon-Slaying Sword!"

He had finally regained his senses and suddenly remembered where he had seen this sword before.

The sword that Chu Liang had pulled out while asking him to go easy was the Demon-Slaying Sword!

Chapter 688: If You Keep Babbling, Fight Him Yourself

Chen Kaitai left peacefully.

...

After Chen Kaitai's defeat, the disciples from the Sword-Hanging Kingdom were left dumbfounded. In fact, even the disciples of the Mount Shu Sect were shocked.

They had known before the spar that the Demon-Slaying Sword belonged to Chu Liang, but they were still surprised to see him draw it in such a moment. Although they now held high positions within their sects, owning a legendary artifact ranked among the top thirty in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures seemed like an unachievable dream.

Eventually, a disciple from the Sword-Hanging Kingdom behind Chen Kaitai muttered a quiet complaint. "Isn't it... a bit too much to use the Demon-Slaying Sword in a duel against our crown prince?"

He sounded hesitant, clearly afraid that Chu Liang would retaliate.

However, when Chu Liang heard what he said, he actually put the Demon-Slaying Sword away.

"My apologies, Your Highness," Chu Liang said with an apologetic smile. "I just bought this legendary sword and was just eager to test its power. I'll put it away now, and we can spar again."

Chu Liang hadn't gone all out earlier, so Chen Kaitai wasn't seriously injured, just a little confused.

After getting back to his feet, Chen Kaitai thought for a moment before saying with a nod, "Alright."

An ordinary swordsman might have felt too humiliated to continue, but a descendant of the Sword Emperor of the West Sea would never behave that way. Once defeated, they would always seek an opportunity to win again. As long as even the slightest chance of victory remained, they would never give up.

Chen Kaitai embodied this spirit, and since Chu Liang represented an obstacle in his heart, defeating him was essential for Chen Kaitai in breaking through and advancing to the Dao Attainment Realm.

He stood up and said once again, "In that case, please enlighten me, Young Hero Chu."

After adjusting his Sea of Qi, he twisted his wrist and summoned his flying sword into the air.

Whoosh!

Then, with a sharp command, he bellowed, "Go!"

Boom!

The sword light suddenly fractured into hundreds of streaks, fanning out into a dazzling horizontal line. In an instant, it erupted with a surge of powerful sword qi, crashing forward like a relentless tidal wave!

"The West Sea's Decisive Slash!" someone exclaimed in shock.

Chen Kaitai had underestimated Chu Liang's strength earlier, which was why he did not use his most powerful technique at the start.

However, being defeated in a single strike made him realize that Chu Liang's abilities could not be measured by conventional standards.

He learned from his mistake and he now unleashed the legendary strike that made the Sword Emperor of the West Sea famous.

The wave of sword light surged forth like the roaring tides of the West Sea and was about to engulf Chu Liang!

The intensity of the sword qi was overwhelming. If it struck Chu Liang, even his exceptional physical endurance wouldn't spare him from injury. Without a moment's hesitation, he sprang into the sky, attempting to evade the oncoming force.

Chen Kaitai raised two fingers, and the massive wave of sword qi veered upward, surging toward its target with a thunderous roar. At this moment, even a mountain would have been crushed beneath its weight.

But Chu Liang wasn't a mountain; he could move.

Swish!

Chu Liang suddenly leaped forward, covering a distance of more than ten zhang. He now stood just a few zhang from Chen Kaitai.

With a flick of his fingers, Chen Kaitai directed the enormous sword wave to chase after Chu Liang once more.

In that instant, Chu Liang used his right hand to flick out three translucent beads toward Chen Kaitai, and they surrounded him in an instant.

Before he could see clearly what those things around him were, his vision went dark, his hearing was cut off, and his divine sense was sealed.

In a flash, his senses were distorted, leaving him lost in an endless whirlpool of disorder!

However, with his high cultivation level, the chaos lasted only a brief moment before he regained his focus and cleared his mind of all distractions.

"Your Highness, thank you for letting me win," Chu Liang's voice sounded from behind him.

While Chen Kaitai was in that moment of disorientation, Chu Liang made his move. With the use of Dimension Compression, he instantly appeared behind Chen Kaitai and pressed his palm onto his back.

A simple push from Chu Liang could have ended Chen Kaitai's life. The outcome of this fight was obvious.

"I've lost again..." Chen Kaitai murmured to himself, his voice barely audible, filled with sadness.

Chu Liang raised his hand and retrieved the three Bewildering Beads that had fallen. The reason he insisted on a second match with Chen Kaitai was to test the beads' effectiveness.

While it was unlikely these beads could affect a seventh-realm cultivator, they were good enough if they were effective against cultivators at the peak of the sixth realm.

Chu Liang was highly satisfied with the strength of the Bewildering Beads.

As the crowd slowly realized the match had ended in an instant, a voice from among the Sword-Hanging Kingdom disciples murmured, "Isn't it a bit dishonorable to use hidden weapons?"

Even before Chu Liang responded, Chen Kaitai's eyelid twitched involuntarily.

With a sheepish grin, Chu Liang replied, "You're right, it wasn't fair of me. Let me put my enchanted tool away, and how about a rematch, Your Highness?"

"This..." Chen Kaitai muttered hesitantly.

Having already lost twice, he wanted to say it wasn't necessary. However, he couldn't shake the feeling of dissatisfaction. Deep down, he was convinced that in terms of raw strength, he was far stronger than Chu Liang.

Had he been more wary of Chu Liang's crafty enchanted tools, he wouldn't have fallen for the same trick again.

If he left now, who knew when he'd cross paths with Chu Liang again?

Not wanting to leave with unresolved matters, he forced a nod and said, "Let's go for another round. Regardless of the result of the next match, I will have lost today. From now on, it's just friendly sparring."

"Alright," Chu Liang replied, moving back to his spot with a smile once again.

Chen Kaitai stared at Chu Liang, thinking silently to himself, This man has a never-ending amount of enchanted tools and rare treasures. If I let him act freely again, I might fall into his traps once more.

I might as well move closer and force him to engage in close combat. My cultivation has advantages in every aspect, and surely his physical body can't match mine...

Before Chen Kaitai could finish his thoughts, Chu Liang had already made the first move, closing the distance with Dimension Compression. He was shrouded in darkness, and behind him rose two dark dragon wings, formed by condensed foundational qi.

It was the Mystical Winged Divine Dragon Transcendent Form!

Seeing an almost fully realized transcendent form from a fifth-realm cultivator like Chu Liang, Chen Kaitai's feelings could only be described as utter shock. The successive surprises had left him somewhat numb, so he wasn't as shocked as he would have been otherwise.

He swung his sword to meet the attack, but in the next moment, his vision went dark once again.

Before Chu Liang even arrived, the mark on his forehead flashed, and a divine lightning bolt descended from the heavens. Boom!

The divine lightning didn't completely crush Chen Kaitai's foundational qi, but it left him paralyzed and unable to move. And then, Chu Liang appeared in front of him.

Bang!

With one punch, Chen Kaitai's body shot out like a projectile, embedding itself into the wall.

"Your Highness!"

"Crown Prince!"

A group of Sword-Hanging Kingdom disciples rushed forward and pried him out of the wall. Chu Liang had held back his strength, so Chen Kaitai did not sustain any serious injuries. Still, it was far from a pleasant experience for Chen Kaitai.

Chen Kaitai, in pain from his injuries, shut his eyes for a moment.

A disciple of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom turned toward Chu Liang and complained again, "As a disciple of the Mount Shu Sect, why are you using techniques of the dragon race..."

Chen Kaitai suddenly opened his eyes with difficulty and snapped as he grabbed the person complaining, "That's enough... Just shut up already..."

Fucking hell.

If you keep babbling, go fight him yourself.

...

When Jiang Yuebai arrived at the courtyard, the large person-shaped hole in the wall still hadn't been repaired. After all, it wasn't like any Mount Shu disciple carried bricks with them—well, specifically the kind of bricks for mending walls.

Through the gaping hole in the wall, the disciples of Mount Shu in the courtyard immediately spotted the figure outside.

It was Jiang Yuebai. She had been away from Mount Shu for six years, and back then, these disciples had been her most loyal supporters. They quickly gathered around the door.

"Senior Sister Jiang!"

"Jiangjiang!"

"Jiangjiang, Jiangjiang!"

Around a dozen people blocked the entrance, scrambling to get out to greet her, but no one managed to do so.

Xu Ziyang, however, remained calm as he stood in the courtyard and observed, knowing someone would eventually welcome her. Meanwhile, Ling Ao continued sipping his tea. He realized that no one would notice him even if he were to rush out there. He might as well enjoy his tea in peace.

Seeing the entrance completely blocked, Chu Liang went out through the person-shaped hole in the wall.

He greeted her with a wide grin. "You're here!"

Obviously, Chu Liang had been the one who invited Jiang Yuebai over. For the past several days, they had kept in touch using the United Hearts Jade. When Chu Liang found out that she would also be in Sword-Hanging City, they made plans to meet.

Upon seeing Chu Liang approach her, the disciples of the Mount Shu Sect at the entrance stood still, quietly observing the pair.

"Mm." Jiang Yuebai gave a slight nod before turning her gaze past Chu Liang, her eyes resting on the other disciples at the entrance.

The group immediately averted their gazes, pretending to look at the sky, the ground, the flowers, and the grass...

"Hehe, seems like everyone really missed you... Let's go for a walk," Chu Liang remarked with a smile.

"Alright," Jiang Yuebai responded.

The two of them walked side by side down the long streets of Sword-Hanging City.

With dusk settling in, the fiery evening glow bathed the western skies, casting a reddish veil over their shoulders as they walked. It gave off the feeling that they were headed toward something magnificent.

The disciples of the Mount Shu Sect behind them watched in a daze until the pair vanished from sight.

Once they were out of everyone's view, Chu Liang gently took Jiang Yuebai's hand without saying a word.

Jiang Yuebai didn't pull away but gently whispered, "My father might be watching us..."

Chu Liang's hand froze for a moment. Then he gripped her hand even tighter.

He muttered, "He owes me a favor. Was I not the one who gave him half of the pieces that make up the Divine Ruins' Scroll?"

"You little rascal!" A voice rang out in Chu Liang's ears, sounding like a mix of teasing, scolding and laughing. "Just behave yourself! Enjoy your walk. I'll go wander somewhere else."

The Whale-Riding Immortal had indeed been watching over his daughter with his divine sense, but after hearing Chu Liang's comment, he left.

Jiang Yuebai didn't hear the Whale-Riding Immortal. She only heard Chu Liang's remark, in which she responded with a sigh, "Haaaaaaa."

Chapter 689: I'm Just Like Your Father

Noticing Jiang Yuebai's unease, Chu Liang asked, "What's wrong?"

"I was worried that we might never be able to complete the Divine Ruins' Scroll. But now that it's suddenly complete, I don't know if it's a blessing or a curse," Jiang Yuebai said, her eyebrows knitting together tightly.

She continued, "Initially, Father was very calm; he wasn't in any rush to seek out the Divine Ruins Monastery. But two days ago, he went to the Holy Mountain in the Northern Regions. I don't know what he and the Noble Dharma planned, but he suddenly became very cheerful. He said we needed to come here to bid farewell to my teacher. Afterward, we'll enter the Divine Ruins... and our survival will be uncertain. It seems... he's determined to go."

Chu Liang squeezed her hand gently.

Jiang Yuebai and her father were incredibly powerful. However, the place in question was the legendary Divine Ruins Monastery—the hidden hand that had very likely erased traces of fallen ninth-realm cultivators. Could the two of them really stand against such a force?

Nevertheless, Chu Liang knew that it would be pointless to try and dissuade them. Once the Jiang Family made their minds up about something, they were resolute about it. That was plain to see. If not for their stubbornness, how could such an ancient aristocratic family have been almost wiped out?

Filled with mixed emotions, all Chu Liang managed to say was, "Make sure you come back."

After a pause, he added, "If you don't come back, then it'll be my turn to go find you."

Jiang Yuebai blurted out, "You can't..."

"Tell your father not to go looking for your mother. Do you think he'd listen?" Chu Liang asked. Jiang Yuebai fell silent for a moment and stopped trying to dissuade him.

"So, you see..." Chu Liang said slowly, "I'm just like your father."

At first, Jiang Yuebai felt touched by his words, but the more she thought about them, the more something seemed off. She turned her head, frowned, and glared at Chu Liang, giving him a light punch.

Chu Liang chuckled, "Hehe."

He was about to say more, but his expression changed suddenly. His gaze shot to the street corner, where a figure wearing a white-robed with a hood had just slipped past.

Chu Liang's expression turned fierce, and he quickly stepped forward. "Let's go check that out."

"What's wrong?" Jiang Yuebai asked.

Chu Liang replied quietly, "Something feels off..."

...

Following the local customs, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai were wearing the white robes of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom. This young man and young woman, both extraordinarily attractive, made a striking pair as they walked together. They were a pleasant sight for the many passersby on the street, warming their hearts and delighting their eyes.

The passersby had watched the couple chat and laugh. Then they saw the young man suddenly pull the young woman along, walking briskly as they hurriedly turned into an alley. The passersby exchanged knowing smiles.

Ah, young people.

Such impatient little monkeys.

...

Once Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai turned into the alley, they concealed their qi and cautiously used their divine senses to carefully track their target.

The white-robed figure weaved through several streets before exiting the city. He headed over to a courtyard, and upon arriving, he lifted his hood. Someone opened the gate from the inside, took a look at him, and then allowed him in.

During that moment, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai managed to get a clear look of what was under the white-robed figure's hood, and it wasn't a human's head. The person's head had scales and a pair of horns; it was a dragon's head.

"Jimeng," Chu Liang muttered.

So, it really was as I thought...

Due to the Dragon God's mark, Chu Liang was sensitive to the aura of draconic descendants. When the white-robed figure passed through the streets earlier, he had already sensed the mixed dragon bloodline.

This wasn't the first time he had encountered a draconic descendant with a dragon's head and human body.

Back in Python Belly City, Chu Liang had learned that Ji Lingjue, a member of the Celestial Charm Sect, had killed his own mother, the Jimeng Dragoness and head of the Jimeng Clan. He then became the new leader, with many Jimeng Dragon Cavalry under his command in Python Belly City.

Could this member of the Jimeng Clan be connected to Ji Lingjue?

Gazing at the pavilion inside the courtyard, Jiang Yuebai said, "But this place... This is Baili Tong's sword hut!"

...

Baili Tong, an imperial swordsmith who lived in the imperial city, was originally from the Sword-Hanging Kingdom. However, when his sword-forging skills reached their peak and he could no longer make progress in the kingdom, he crossed the seas to the land of the Yu Dynasty to further his craft.

In this duel for the control of the Great Dao, Daoist Yan would be wielding the Heavenly Cloud Ancient Sword, which was ranked thirty-first in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures, while the Sword Emperor of the West Sea would be using the ancient sword Shadow Bearer, which was ranked seventy-first in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures.

There were great gaps in quality grading within the upper ranks of the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures. A difference in ranking of forty places likely didn't represent a narrow gap of just one or two grades but rather a wide difference spanning more than ten grades.

The Sword-Hanging Kingdom was filled with an inflated confidence in the Sword Emperor's inevitable victory, and the Sword Emperor himself was confident he would retain control over the Great Dao of the Cloud of Determination. Nonetheless, he remained cautious of the possible tactics that Daoist Yan might employ; he knew better than to underestimate his opponent's ability to strategize.

That was why the Sword Emperor specially invited Baili Tong to return to the kingdom to enhance the Shadow Bearer. That was six years ago. However, it took Baili Tong three years just to devise a plan and gather the necessary materials for the upgrade. After that, he went to the Sword-Hanging Kingdom and spent another three years in closed-door cultivation, working on the sword.

To this day, he still had yet to emerge from the sword hut. If Baili Tong failed to upgrade the sword but at least returned the Shadow Bearer in its original state, Chen Erniu could still wield a reliable weapon in the duel. On the other hand, if the Shadow Bearer ended up as a half-finished work, things would become much more difficult for Chen Erniu.

If the citizens of the Sword-Hanging Kingdom had any concerns about their Sword Emperor's duel with Daoist Yan, it was the potential disadvantage caused by the disparity in quality between their flying swords.

Nevertheless, the Sword Emperor of the West Sea remained calm and unbothered as clouds drifting in the wind. He forbade anyone from disturbing Baili Tong. Adhering to the principle of "trust those you employ, and don't employ those you distrust," he insisted on letting Baili Tong focus on forging the sword in peace, even though the duel was scheduled for the next day.

The Whale-Riding Immortal always conducted meticulous investigations wherever he went, so it wasn't surprising that Jiang Yuebai had a thorough understanding of Sword-Hanging City's layout. Consequently, Chu Liang believed her when she said this place was a sword hut, especially since there was such intense sword qi and heat emanating from within.

"But why would there be members of the Jimeng Clan here?" Chu Liang muttered. "Those people inside are clearly Ji Lingjue's subordinates..."

"Maybe some stray Jimeng Clansmen are working for the Sword-Hanging Kingdom. It's quite possible that's the case," Jiang Yuebai replied.

"That's true..." Chu Liang agreed with a nod, but he still felt that something was off. "I'll go take a look."

"Let me go instead. That place is bound to be heavily guarded. I'm better at stealth techniques than you are."

"It's fine," Chu Liang said with a small smile. "I have a way to approach silently."

Jiang Yuebai nodded. "Alright."

Then she turned around and vanished. She had transformed into a wisp of smoke that flowed along the fallen leaves on the ground and climbed up the courtyard wall. Her presence seemed to disappear completely, leaving only a faint shadow.

Yet, as Jiang Yuebai clung to the wall, she couldn't see any sign of Chu Liang. Eventually, she turned around and found that Chu Liang had stopped near the wall. He was approaching with a slow, deliberate gait, looking like an old lady crossing the street.

"What are you doing?" Jiang Yuebai asked, unable to suppress her confusion.

"Shh..." Chu Liang raised a finger and whispered, "Stealth."

Chu Liang was, of course, using his newly acquired stealth technique, Spirit Cat's Tiny Steps—a divine skill for sneaking around. He regulated his breathing and climbed the wall step by step like a gecko.

Jiang Yuebai sighed helplessly and hid in his shadow, moving in sync with him.

Chu Liang continued with his slow, deliberate steps, seemingly making no effort to conceal himself—akin to an old man boldly ogling at beautiful women on the street.

Yet, strangely, not a single guard noticed him. It was likely there were enchanted formations in place, but there wasn't even a little response to Chu Liang's presence.

Jiang Yuebai knew Chu Liang was there. However, if she used her divine sense instead of her eyes to see, she wouldn't be able to detect Chu Liang's presence at all.

She was quite astounded. What an amazing movement technique.

Just like that, the pair crept along the wall until they reached the back of the sword hut. By then, it was late in the day, and the sky was turning dark.

Right when Chu Liang was growing impatient with his tiny cat steps, there was a sudden rumble of thunder, and an astonishing scene unfolded before them.

...

At the rear of the courtyard, there appeared to be an enchanted formation, separating a hidden realm from the outside world. Within that hidden realm lay Baili Tong's true sword-forging site.

At this moment, rumbles of thunder and crackles of lightning rang out from within. There was a flash of light, and a crack ripped through the enchanted formation.

"You were right!" someone exclaimed, sounding weary but excited. "To elevate the Shadow Bearer to the level of a legendary sword, it truly requires a stronger sword spirit!"

"It's time..."

"What are you doing?!" The weary man's excited tone abruptly shifted to one of shock and fury. "You agreed that I would handle the sword spirit myself—ah!"

It was clear that there was more than one person present. The weary man's voice was abruptly cut off, replaced by the roaring of the sword furnace. A turbulent stream of crimson-gold fire erupted from the crack in the enchanted formation with a whoosh!

Boom!

The crack widened instantly, and in that moment, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai caught a glimpse of the scene within the hidden realm.

Chu Liang spotted a young man that looked rather familiar.

The young man lifted up someone dressed in white robes by the collar and tossed him into the roaring furnace.

It really is him! Chu Liang thought. It's Ji Lingjue!

Chapter 690: Banished

When the crack in the enchanted formation tore open, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai spotted Ji Lingjue inside the hidden realm. Likewise, Ji Lingjue sensed the prying gazes from outside the hidden realm and swiftly turned to look.

At that moment, his eyes met theirs.

Chu Liang shouted, "Run!"

When he noticed that there were Jimeng Clansmen there, he realized that something strange might be happening in Baili Tong's sword hut. However, he really did not expect that Ji Lingjue would be inside the sword hut as well.

Turns out the Celestial Charm Sect is involved. But what is Baili Tong doing there with them?

Among the seventh-realm cultivators that Chu Liang had encountered, the only one he thought might be able to exchange more than two blows with his teacher was Ji Lingjue. Not even Huo Tianya had exuded such immense pressure that could suppress Chu Liang.

With his powerful bloodline and cultivation power, Ji Lingjue could be considered at the pinnacle of the Dao Attainment Realm.

Chu Liang turned and fled with Jiang Yuebai. He didn't bother with using Spirit Cat's Tiny Steps this time. He instantly transformed into a gust of howling wind! Chu Liang was absolutely confident that Jiang Yuebai wouldn't lag behind him.

Seeing that, Ji Lingjue merely furrowed his eyebrows and transformed into a ball of golden light!

Whoosh!

Feeling a rush of cold wind on their backs, Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai turned in midair simultaneously and yelled in unison, "I'll hold him off, you go!"

The pair were so in sync that neither one left the other any time to react.

Boom!

Chu Liang activated the Mystical Winged Divine Dragon Transcendent Form. His dragon aura ran rampant around him. Howling winds and crackling lightning surrounded them as a shield.

Meanwhile, golden light shot out from Jiang Yuebai's fingertips. She instantly sealed the space around them, attempting to delay Ji Lingjue for a moment.

It was the Immortal Art: Ring of Confinement!

Unfortunately, Chu Liang's and Jiang Yuebai's efforts were futile in the face of the massive disparity in cultivation power. Chu Liang had managed to hold back a seventh-realm greater demon for a moment, but he couldn't truly block even one strike from Ji Lingjue.

The pair were slammed down, crashing heavily and noisily on the ground. Blood trickled from the corners of their mouths.

"What a devoted and deeply affectionate couple," Ji Lingjue remarked expressionlessly. His gaze exuded a frigid chill as he looked at Chu Liang. "Hmm, I guess I should kill you first."

As a member of the Celestial Charm Sect, Ji Lingjue knew the Celestial Master held some apprehension toward this young man from the Mount Shu Sect. Chu Liang seemed to have an extraordinary destiny.

This unease had driven the Celestial Master to personally orchestrate and execute a plan to kill him six years ago, but Chu Liang had managed to escape. Later, news of his return signified the Celestial Master's scheme had failed.

Who would have thought he'd deliver himself right into our hands?

Ji Lingjue decided to skip the talk and swiftly made his move. However, just as his killing intent stirred, he felt a mighty and overwhelming pressure—an instinctual fear that ran down to the bone.

Gritting his teeth in resistance, he was forced to change tactics. Instead of pushing through with his deadly strike, he unleashed beams of golden light from his golden eyes, enveloping Chu Liang and Jiang Yuebai in an instant.

The pair vanished, disappearing to an unknown location.

Ji Lingjue returned to the hidden realm, looking a little puzzled.

Yang Bujue approached him and asked, "Did you kill them?"

"No." Ji Lingjue shook his head. "That guy possessed a will that I could not defy. It stopped my fatal strike. The best I could do was banish them..."

He had inherited half of his talents from the Ji Family, and the other half from the Jimeng's draconic lineage. As long as he benefited from the draconic bloodline, it meant that he would inherently be subjected to certain limitations.

With his immense cultivation power, he could usually disregard most disparities in bloodline purity. Yet, this time, he could not disobey the command because of the genetic imprint in his bloodline.

"What was it?" Yang Bujue asked.

Ji Lingjue muttered, "It seemed to be... the will of the Dragon God."

"This... Why didn't you temporarily subdue them and wait for me to finish them off?"

"The will wasn't overpowering, but it came suddenly and was impossible to resist in that moment. I couldn't retract my divine skill in time and had to make it non-lethal instead... However, it shouldn't be easy for them to escape from the place I banished them to. If you go there now, you can still kill them both."

"Where are they?"

Ji Lingjue answered slowly, "The Sea of Demons."

...

Boom!

Waves of spiritual qi surged amidst the turbulent seawaters. Du Wuhen swung his saber, but his foundational qi was carried away by the peculiar seawater and violently dispersed.

His attack was weakened by thirty percent before it even reached his target. He had used a divine skill that did not require foundational qi, but if he had used one that did, it would have been weakened by seventy percent.

During his time in the Sea of Demons, he had figured out the rules of this treacherous world. Divine skills were ineffective; only those with immensely strong corporeal bodies could reign supreme.

Begging for mercy was futile. He had to slay every demon and beast in his path!

This place was a breeding ground for bloodthirsty beasts!

Swoosh!

Standing before Du Wuhen was a bizarre sea beast that resembled a giant sea urchin. It was covered in seemingly venomous spikes. Du Wuhen's saber strike barely breached its defenses. He only managed to deal a small shallow wound, from which dark, inky blood seeped.

Du Wuhen didn't go after the sea beast; he just turned and fled. The injured sea beast also retreated swiftly, its inky blood dripping out incessantly, dying the seawater black. The sea beast left a trail of black blood that spread through the sea like fog clouds in the air.

All sea beasts that came into contact with the blackened water seemed to fall into a daze, sinking sluggishly to the depths of the sea.

Taking advantage of that, Du Wuhen hid within a vibrant mountain of corals to catch his breath. He only allowed himself a moment to regulate his breathing; he did not dare to circulate his foundational qi recklessly.

It was incredibly difficult to obtain spiritual qi there, and using cultivation power to recover was a painfully slow process. The sea beasts gained spiritual qi by hunting one another. It was the fastest method but also the most dangerous. Every hunter could easily become the hunted.

The sea beasts had evolved abilities tailored for survival in this harsh environment, whereas Du Wuhen, a newcomer, could only temper himself through repeated brushes with death. By now, he had cursed Daoist Xuan Lu and every single one of his ancestors, ranging back to the dawn of time.

"If I ever break through to the seventh realm in this damned place, you'll be the first one I slaughter when I return," Du Wuhen muttered through gritted teeth.

Suddenly, a wave of dizziness washed over him. The surrounding coral drew close to Du Wuhen, revealing sharp spikes that were about to pierce him.

Shit! This mountain of corals is a trap!

The coral thickets in the Sea of Demons were vast and dense, often growing as large as mountains. For many injured or hunted sea beasts, the coral thickets were their only refuge. Thus, there was an unspoken agreement among sea beasts to not destroy the mountains of coral, allowing them to be used as safe havens.

However, some sea beasts would disguise themselves as coral to hunt!

This was Du Wuhen's first encounter with such a trap, and it might very well be his last. After all, he was already extremely exhausted.

One of the sharp spikes pierced him, and he suddenly felt like he couldn't breathe.

"Aaaaahhhh..."

Unwilling to succumb to this fate, he swung his scythe, but his strength was quickly drained. He hurled the scythe away, and it instantly transformed into its true form—the Azure Wind Onyx Bird. However, the bird could not fight well in the water. It tried to break through the coral to save Du Wuhen but ended up ensnared as well.

As death loomed over him, Du Wuhen roared furiously, "I can't die here! I refuse... I still have so many people to defeat..."

He recalled his enemies. "Xuan Lu, Qi Lin'er, Yang Shenlong... There's also Feng Chaoyang, Chu Liang..."

"Huh? I think I heard someone calling me," a young man said outside the coral mountain.

"Could it be an illusion?" a young woman asked. "This coral... It's got dense demonic qi."

"Let's cut it open and take a look."

A flash of sword qi swept through, splitting the coral thicket that had been tightly enclosing Du Wuhen like an impenetrable wall. He could now see that the two people speaking earlier were a strikingly handsome man and a beautiful woman.

Du Wuhen thought, They look quite familiar.

"Hm?" Chu Liang was surprised. "So, it really is someone I know. Were you the one calling me earlier?"

"Yes..." Du Wuhen, on the verge of fainting, extended his arm for help. "I mean..."

"Chu Liang, give your brother a hand!"