

M. Slaying 751

Chapter 751: Sorry, I am an Undercover Agent

The Sea Master left the world peacefully.

...

Earlier...

The moment the Sea Master stepped out and ran into Grand Ancestor Wuchao, his initial reaction was fear—a fear that reached the depths of his bones.

Among the various sea demons in the Ruins of Return, those with weaker cultivation levels might not even know of Grand Ancestor Wuchao, an ancient being who had remained hidden for years. However, those who did know his name feared him to their very core. Grand Ancestor Wuchao was a looming shadow over the Ruins of Return.

After the initial trembling, the Sea Master remembered that he had allies supporting him.

The Black Golden Crow was also a powerful being who had lived since the era of the Demon Gods, and it was unlikely to lose to this old cuttlefish. Even if Wuchao held the advantage in the sea, they had the Celestial Master on their side.

The Sea Master yelled inwardly, Even if you have hundreds or even thousands of arms, how can you possibly withstand our combined might?

As for Wuchao's subordinates, Xuan Yinzi, Violet Gold Marquess, and the other small fries could easily handle them. I have gathered more than enough forces to secure victory!

With this thought, his confidence swelled, and with it came a surge of long-suppressed anger.

You have suppressed me for countless years! And now, I can finally hold my head high and breathe freely!

It was just unfortunate for the Sea Master that this breath would be somewhat short.

The moment he exhaled, the Sea Master realized that there was no one behind him. No one came out to help him.

Panic set in instantly as he thought, What's going on? We were supposed to stand together so why have my brothers left me here by myself?

The Sea Master had absolutely no courage to face Grand Ancestor Wuchao alone. Without hesitation, he turned to flee back into the pavilion, his safe and cozy home.

But how could Grand Ancestor Wuchao possibly let him escape so easily? When this ancient being made a move, it was always with the force of a raging storm!

Boom!

Thick, heavy black clouds surged toward the Sea Master at an alarming speed. The moment he was swallowed by them, he would become part of that endless darkness.

The Sea Master knew that the Great Dao that Wuchao controlled was the legendary Great Dao of Chaotic Mass!

This was the absolute darkness, the direct counterpart to the Great Dao of Primordial Origin, which represented the absolute brightness. Light and dark, being the two opposing forces, were renowned to be powerful.

This Great Dao shared the same name as one of the Four Great Vicious Beasts—Hundun. Hundun was this vicious beast that had come into existence through this Dao.[1]

As the pinnacle of darkness, its terrifying nature lay in its ability to assimilate anything it touched. Once tainted by that inky blackness, all things would be stripped of knowledge, awareness, and sensation, reduced to an eternal state of mindless chaos.

Even though the Sea Master controlled the Great Dao of the Bottomless Sea, he didn't dare to resist this darkness directly. While he was escaping, he erected this wall of highly compressed layers of water to block Wuchao's attack.

Yet, as the endless darkness encroached, the walls of water were instantly changed, becoming a part of the Chaotic Mass and pursuing the Sea Master. It would have been better if the Sea Master did nothing as the Chaotic Mass would have approached much slower.

"WAAAAAAAAAHHHH!" cried the Sea Master.

The distance to home was so close but felt so far. Even so, the Sea Master would be engulfed by the Chaotic Mass before he could reach the pavilion.

Since The Sea Master was ultimately a powerful figure of his generation, he decided that he would turn back and fight!

Kaboom!

In an instant, the Sea Master began to expand, transforming into a colossal giant of the sea. Within him, the waters of three rivers and four seas surged, and even the blink of an eye sent forth massive tidal waves.

By relying on its sheer size, the giant forced back the encroaching endless darkness, but that was the limit of its strength.

The colossal sea giant could be seen darkening at an alarming rate. At first, it was just a single drop of darkness, but that darkness rapidly spread and deepened. Even with its enormous size, the giant could only stop this spread of darkness for a fleeting moment.

Still, that moment was enough.

A wisp of azure mist, containing the Sea Master's primordial spirit, wafted out from the giant's back.

At this moment, he was pouring every last bit of his cultivation power into resisting Wuchao, leaving only his primordial spirit to flee. If his primordial spirit could escape, he could quickly regain the full extent of his strength within the vast sea.

As the Dao Master of the Bottomless Sea, he really should have been an invincible existence. Unfortunately, Grand Ancestor's ability really overpowered.

Just as the wisp of azure smoke, carrying the Sea Master's primordial spirit, was about to escape, a flicker of cold indifference flashed through Grand Ancestor Wuchao's eyes.

Swish!

The wisp of azure smoke the Sea Master had conjured to protect his primordial spirit began darkening from the tail end, as if it had caught fire and was burning away!

Oh shit!

The Sea Master struggled desperately to break free from the wisp of azure smoke, but the problem was that he had created it himself to envelop his primordial spirit. At that moment, the wisp of smoke had been tainted by Wuchao's power and was going out of control.

He desperately tried to wrench himself free from the blackened smoke. It was a race against time! As he fled, he finally reached the pavilion.

If someone could step in now and hold back the Chaotic Mass for even a moment, he could break free!

Right at that moment, two figures rushed out from the pavilion.

It's the Violet Golden Marquess and his big-eyed, thick-browed subordinate. Wait... Why does the Violet Gold Marquess suddenly look completely different? Whatever. That's not important right now.

The Sea Master, in sheer panic, screamed at the top of his lungs, "Hurry! Pull me!"

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As Chu Liang watched the Sea Master's primordial spirit flee toward him, countless figures flashed through his mind—Di Nufeng, Xuan Yinzi, the Demon King of the Great Marshlands...

If my teacher can steal so many kills, I don't see why I can't. Maybe this is just the fate of Silver Sword Peak.

Seeing that the situation was extremely dangerous, Chu Liang yelled, "Lin Bei! Help!"

"Huh?" Lin Bei stiffened. "What can I do?"

"Get farther away!" Chu Liang shouted.

"Got it! Leave it to me!" Lin Bei responded from afar, already darting to a safe distance.

During a battle, it was important to have a clear recognition of your own strength. Sometimes, staying out of the way and not becoming a burden was the best way to help.

As soon as Lin Bei steadied himself, he straightened his back and puffed out his chest, looking quite proud.

Meanwhile, Chu Liang stood his ground with his sword in hand. As he watched the Sea Master's primordial spirit hurtling toward him, he exhaled a breath of impure qi.

The Demon-Slaying Sword moved.

Since the battle in the Far West, his mastery of the Great Dao of Severing the Void had reached a new level—he had grasped the true essence of sword intent.

The one before him is an existence at the eighth realm, someone extremely hard to kill. But so what? No matter how many forms you take, I shall cut you down with a single strike! This is the Great Dao of Severing the Void!

Just one strike! The rise of the sword and the fall of the sword.

Swish!

A sharp sword intent tore through the air, howling like a raging wind. Its force was determined to cleave everything in its path in two!

The Sea Master was shocked.

"Violet Gold Marquess! What are you doing?!"

In normal situations, he wouldn't have cared about the strike of a seventh-realm cultivator. However, at this very moment, all his cultivation power had been left behind and his primordial spirit was being pursued by the Chaotic Mass. In this very moment, this strike of a seventh-realm cultivator could kill him!

Bam!

The strike first dispersed the wisp of azure smoke enveloping the primordial spirit.

Then, a dazzling cold light erupted from the center of his forehead!

Swish, swish, swish!

The sword intent of the Severing the Void Great Dao and the immense spiritual power within the Demon-Slaying Sword sliced through his very essence.

"Aaargh!" The Sea Master roared in rage and despair. "You tricked me! I swear, I will kill you!"

Boom!

Before he could finish his words, the Sea Master twisted his hands and his primordial spirit exploded!

Indeed, his primordial spirit had not been sliced apart. He had self-detonated!

The reality was that with the Chaotic Mass closing in from behind and a sword strike coming from the front, escaping unscathed was already impossible.

In this desperate moment, he resorted to his final life-saving technique—Self-Disintegration of the Primordial Spirit!

A massive explosion shook the sky, sending countless streaks of light scattering in every direction, like a rain of shooting stars.

If he had simply transformed into a Sea Giant to counter the enemy, he could have replenished his spiritual energy from the seawater later. But now, with his spiritual energy shattered into thousands of fragments, it would be impossible to recover within a short time.

However, as long as even one concentrated wisp of his spirit energy escaped, he could survive. But that surviving wisp of spirit energy would have to cultivate tens and hundreds of years to recover the great power he has today.

This was the price he had to pay to stay alive.

Still, Chu Liang had no intention of letting him escape. Since he had chosen to strike, he would see it through to the end.

At the very moment when countless fragments of light scattered like rain, Chu Liang reacted instantly. He hurled his sword in the air and drew a talismanic seal—the Talismanic Sword Seal!

This was one of the first sword techniques he had practiced alongside Jiang Yuebai. Though basic, its potential was immense, capable of becoming as powerful as even immortal arts. Back then, Chu Liang had astonished Jiang Yuebai by mastering it after practicing it just a few times.

But now, with Chu Liang at the seventh realm, wielding a far more powerful divine intent, his Talismanic Sword Seal had reached an entirely different level.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

Suddenly, a hundred thousand blazing sword lights burst into the air, scattering in all directions, each one precisely locking onto a wisp of true spirit.

It was the Hundred-Thousand-Character Talismanic Sword!

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

It was like a grand fireworks display, except that what exploded wasn't light and color, but the Sea Master's primordial spirit and life itself.

After this rain, he would remain here forever.

Boom!

The aftershocks of the explosion faded.

Even as every last wisp of true spirit seemed to have been eliminated, Chu Liang still didn't dare to relax. He hadn't sensed the golden imprint, which meant the Sea Master wasn't dead.

The Sea Master had survived!

Chu Liang swept the surroundings with his divine sense.

The dense Chaotic Mass lingering in the sky had seemingly halted, as if afraid that approaching any further might accidentally harm Chu Liang or Lin Bei.

At that moment, Lin Bei suddenly burst into laughter and exclaimed, "I caught you!"

With a swift grab, he yanked a glimmer of divine light from the mud beneath his feet.

"Hehehe!" Lin Bei clutched the tiny, weakened wisp of divine light, his entire body trembling with excitement.

"Brother Lin Bei!" The wisp of spirit energy screamed in desperation, "We're brothers!"

Lin Bei's expression turned cold.

"Sorry..." he said, "I'm an undercover agent."

Smack!

With that cold and ruthless response, the wisp of true spirit was dispersed. It was not dispersed by Lin Bei but by Chu Liang, who had just arrived and pinched the wisp of spirit energy.

As the fragmented spirit dissipated into the wind, Lin Bei stood there, utterly bewildered. He remained frozen for a long moment before finally lifting his gaze, looking aggrieved. "What was that for?"

Chu Liang, feeling the golden imprint merge into his body, finally relaxed. "Well..."

Seeing Lin Bei's teary-eyed expression, Chu Liang found himself unable to justify why he had stolen this kill. He could only say in a soft voice, "I needed it."

"I don't care," Lin Bei pouted. "You better count this as a major contribution from me."

"Of course." Chu Liang gave him a thumbs-up. "You've earned a divine merit."

Lin Bei suddenly burst into laughter. "Hehehe! Can you believe it? We actually took down an eighth-realm greater demon! My goodness, this is truly..."

Lin Bei laughed through his tears. Since Chu Liang had done most of the work, he had no real reason to be upset about him stealing the kill.

Besides, he was never the petty type, and with his relationship with Chu Liang, there was no way he'd let something like this bother him.

He laughed again and continued, "Truly so cool!"

Chapter 752: Fighting Side by Side

Boom!

It was in this small pavilion that these masters of the Heavenly Origin gathered and fought. Even so, the pavilion did not explode. The first reason for that was the Sea Master had fortified the formation pattern of the pavilion after Chu Liang stole the toad. The second reason was that the masters of the Heavenly Origin had yet to unleash the full extent of their spiritual energy.

Even the Black Golden Crow, who had been fighting in the most ostentatious manner, remained in one corner.

The Demon King of the Desolate Plains, the Black Golden Crow, was a mutated form of the celestial beast Golden Crow from ancient times. He was born destined to bear an ominous and evil fate.

The Golden Crows specialized in the Great Dao of the Ultimate Yang, a Great Dao that embodied the noonday sun. However, the Black Golden Crow was born mutated, and he couldn't cultivate the Great Dao of Ultimate Yang.

As fate would have it, when the Guardian Ruler of the Celestial Northern Prison ventured into the Divine Ruins, he stumbled upon the opportunity to comprehend the Great Dao of the Ultimate Yang—a legacy originally left behind by the ancient Golden Crows for their descendants. Unfortunately, the Golden Crow alive at the time was the Black Golden Crow, who could not cultivate it. Thus, the Guardian Ruler, an outsider, benefited from this without paying any price.

Nonetheless, the Black Golden Crow was a legendary existence.

From the moment he was born, he defeated countless demons with his innate divine abilities. When he attained the seventh realm, everyone thought he had reached the end of his cultivation journey. Yet, he defied all expectations and carved out a new path entirely on his own—the Great Dao of the Five Elemental Yin Metal.

The nature of metal embodied both sharpness and resilience, with yin and yang each governing different aspects. Yin Metal represented sharpness, while Yang Metal embodied resilience. Yin Metal was associated with slaughter, whereas Yang Metal was tied to defense.

Thus, the Great Dao of Yin Metal was known as Piercing Slaughter, while the Great Dao of Yang Metal was called Resilient Defense.

The Black Golden Crow was the Dao Master of the Piercing Slaughter! He was known to be unstoppable and able to pierce through anything.

The Dao Master of Resilient Defense, on the other hand, was a master of the Heavenly Origin and a member of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau. As the Deputy Guardian of the Celestial Northern Prison, he had been stationed at the Celestial Northern Prison for years, never once leaving.

One could say he was getting paid to serve a sentence.

The Black Golden Crow, wielding his innate divine fire and mastery over the Great Dao of Piercing Slaughter, moved like a raging storm. With every motion, howling winds followed. His black flames and feathers could effortlessly pierce through the bodies of even the most powerful Eminent Ones!

The one who trapped him was the Grand Ancestor Fuyou.

Grand Ancestor Fuyou had been working hard. Since Lin Bei had called him downstairs to help, his first strike was toward the strongest opponent.

In an instant, countless crimson starlights enveloped the Black Golden Crow. They were like countless mayflies rushing into flames! Each glimmering star represented a cycle of reincarnation.

All that the Black Golden Crow could sense was that he had arrived in a completely red world. Before him stood Grand Ancestor Fuyou. As Ancestor Fuyou launched an attack at the Black Golden Crow, the Black Golden Crow flicked his feathers, sending forth black flames like a volley of sharp arrows!

Bam!

Grand Ancestor Fuyou was instantly killed. But in the blink of an eye, Grand Ancestor Fuyou stepped forward once more. The Black Golden Crow could clearly sense that this was no clone—it was the real Fuyou.

Yet, why could he never be done killing?

The Black Golden Crow had no idea that even Grand Ancestor Wuchao had previously failed to kill Grand Ancestor Fuyou due to Fuyou's mastery over the Great Dao of Reincarnation.

In this world, Grand Ancestor Fuyou could die endlessly. No matter how many times he was slain, whether a thousand or ten thousand times, it was merely another turn in the cycle of reincarnation. He could revive at any moment.

Even someone as powerful as Grand Ancestor Wuchao had no choice but to trap him rather than kill him.

However, the Black Golden Crow had never been one for tricks or convoluted strategies. His divine abilities had always been straightforward and absolute. When faced with an enemy that kept reappearing, he had only one response—Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!

Countless feathers, seemingly endless in supply, shot forth like piercing blades. Each time the Black Golden Crow struck Grand Ancestor Fuyou down, the incarnation of Fuyou emerged in his place.

The Black Golden Crow grinned wickedly as he said, "Good! Let's see if my number of kills is greater than your number of lives!"

The Black Golden Crow had the strength to break free from this crimson world, but he still decided to stay and slaughter!

Meanwhile, each incarnation of Grand Ancestor Fuyou uttered a single word or sound just before being struck down. At first, they seemed meaningless, but as more fell, the fragments gradually formed a complete sentence.

"I... truly... apol...o...gize. How... about... we... call... it... even... if... it's... convenient? Oh... no? Well... then... forgive... my... impu...dence..."

...

Inside the pavilion, the Celestial Master had vanished and entered another world.

Most masters of the Heavenly Origin would use their Great Dao to fortify their hidden realm. In a battle, if a master of the Heavenly Origin could pull someone into their hidden realm, they would naturally gain the upper hand.

Earlier, amidst the upheaval of yin and yang, the Celestial Master had been momentarily caught off guard and was pulled into Baize's Yin-Yang Realm.

Yet, even as Baize interrogated him, he remained composed, his expression unwavering.

"Noble Baize, if you wish to know who plotted against you, I can certainly tell you," the Celestial Master said with a smile. "But everything comes at a price. We must do a trade."

"Hah," Baize let out a cold chuckle and waved her right hand.

Whoosh!

Ripples spread beneath the Celestial Master's feet as black and white light intertwined above him. In an instant, yin and yang reversed. His figure was obliterated, reduced to dust.

On the other end of the Yin-Yang Realm, the Celestial Master appeared again. He exhaled a sigh of relief as he said, "Noble Baize, your ability to reverse yin and yang is truly terrifying."

Baize's gaze remained icy as she raised her finger. "I wonder how many times you can use the technique Sacrificial Substitute."

Even when the Celestial Master had been surrounded by many masters of Heavenly Origin in the Capital of Yu, he had been calm. Yet, as he countered Baize now, his expression turned serious. His robes billowed violently, revealing countless thin threads extending from his arm.

Each of those threads had, at some point, latched onto Baize.

At that moment, a gray world emerged from within the Yin-Yang Realm. As the two realms clashed, a piercing screech echoed through the void. From within the gray world, the faint sounds of battle—blades clashing, warhorses charging—could be heard.

"Noble Baize, I knew I wouldn't be a match for you. Thankfully, I had a contingency plan. The moment you pulled me into your Yin-Yang Realm, I brought my Realm of Chaos and Separation into your realm."

The Celestial Master smiled again. "Now, our fates are intertwined. If I die, I'm afraid you'll die with me. You are at the threshold of being a Hallowed One. It would really not be worth it if you died with me."

Hearing this, Baize's eyes flickered with a sharp gleam.

Swish!

With a flick of her fingers, the light vanished from her eyes and the Celestial Master's simultaneously. In the next instant, both of them collapsed and became lifeless.

Yet, mere moments later, a crisp crack split the air—the sound of a jade talisman shattering. A radiant white glow enveloped Baize, restoring the divine light in her gaze.

As her vision refocused, the Celestial Master's body had already crumbled into nothing more than a withered leaf.

At that moment, a voice rose from within the leaf. "I knew it! Noble Baize, you can do more than killing with your ability to reverse yin and yang. Such an extraordinary ability transcends the laws of nature and even the will of gods and spirits."

The slow, deliberate voice belonged to none other than the Celestial Master. "I used my Ancient Sala Tree Leaf to create a clone, and this was the price I paid to find out about this. I guess it was not a waste."

Baize stared at the withered leaf, appearing to be deep in thought.

As the Celestial Master's voice faded, the palm-sized leaf drifted downward, settling onto the ground as it lost its final trace of spiritual energy.

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At the far end of the pavilion, Immortal Yuan Lu was struggling against the combined assault of Daoist Yan and Di Nufeng. Though he was a formidable master of the Heavenly Origin, even he was being relentlessly overpowered.

Being the Dao Master of Myriad Tribulations, a Great Dao of the diabolical cultivation path, he had to endure a tribulation every eighty-one days. Each trial he survived made him stronger, granting him unparalleled potential among diabolical cultivators. However, the tribulations grew more dangerous with each one. If he failed, it would be his fate to die in that tribulation.

Having cultivated for many years, his strength should have far surpassed that of Daoist Yan, who had only recently attained the Heavenly Origin. The only reason he had been wary of her before was not solely due to her power but because of the members of the Mount Shu Sect supporting her.

Aside from Daoist Yan, three others who had attained the Dao Attainment Realm—Wang Xuanling, Xu Ziyang, and Di Nufeng—were assisting her in battle. The members of the Mount Shu Sect fought with perfect coordination. Rather than disrupting the flow of combat, Wang Xuanling and Xu Ziyang of Jade Sword Peak seamlessly integrated their sword techniques to establish a formation in the area.

Meanwhile, Daoist Yan and Di Nufeng attacked from both sides, forcing Immortal Yuan Lu into a desperate defense. Whether it was Daoist Yan's sword qi or Di Nufeng's divine fire, both were forces he dared not make direct contact with.

For the time being, he was at a disadvantage.

As the fight continued, the situation changed. Baize came out from the Yin-Yang Realm and the realm disappeared. At the same time, with a thunderous tear, the Black Golden Crow shattered Grand Ancestor Fuyou's world, breaking free and returning to the real world.

Bam!

Immortal Yuan Lu fought off Daoist Yan and Di Nufeng before retreating to the Black Golden Crow's side. Gritting his teeth, he growled, "Demon King! The situation is dire! The Celestial Master and the Sea Master have both fled, and more members of the righteous sects are arriving! It's just the two of us left to fight side by side!"

Being at the eighth realm, they could naturally sense the presence of powerful beings approaching from the outside.

It wasn't just Grand Ancestor Wuchao. Even the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner had arrived without hiding his presence at all.

Soon, Immortal Yuan Lu and the Black Golden Crow would be completely surrounded!

"Is that so?" The Black Golden Crow let out a cold snort. "Do these humans truly believe they can trap me with such a scheme?"

With that, his body shot forward like an arrow, shattering the pavilion's ceiling with explosive force.

Grand Ancestor Wuchao's Sea of Darkness had engulfed the entire area outside the pavilion, sealing off any escape. Yet, the Demon King of the Desolate Plains charged straight into it without hesitation!

Swish!

Channeling the power of the Great Dao of Piercing Slaughter, his razor-sharp feathers tore through everything in his path, including Grand Ancestor Wuchao's Sea of Darkness. In the blink of an eye, he was gone.

As the master of this unbreakable and unstoppable Great Dao, the Black Golden Crow was one of the most difficult beings in the world to trap. Perhaps that was precisely why the demons had chosen him to take on this dangerous mission in the first place.

The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner didn't even try to stop him. Instead, he turned his overwhelming sword intent toward the pavilion.

A moment ago, Immortal Yuan Lu had been surrounded by allies. Now, he stood alone, staring at the massive hole the Black Golden Crow had left behind. He wore an expression of utter betrayal.

"...We said we'd fight side by side, you motherf—" he cursed. "I HAVEN'T LEFT YET!"

Chapter 753: A Mouth That Can't Be Burnt Shut

Immortal Yuan Lu stared at the pitch-black hole and suddenly felt this emptiness within him.

The Celestial Master, the Sea Master, and the Wing Master had just been so close earlier. And now, they suddenly disappeared. This moment felt like a dream. He was suddenly left all by himself and surrounded by enemies. He couldn't help but think about how absurd life was.

When Baize appeared, she saw Immortal Yuan Lu standing alone and showed no surprise.

From the very start, they knew that it was impossible to trap a powerhouse like the Black Golden Crow.

Without a legendary artifact, it was exceedingly difficult to kill a master of the Heavenly Origin. Unless the gap in power was immense—like that between Grand Ancestor Wuchao and the Sea Master—it was nearly impossible. Even then, if Chu Liang hadn't intercepted the Sea Master, and it had only been Grand Ancestor Wuchao fighting him alone, the Sea Master could have escaped without suffering too great a loss.

It just so happened that Chu Liang appeared at the exact moment when the Sea Master was at his weakest, leaving him no chance to replenish his strength in the sea. He had died feeling rather aggrieved.

The Black Golden Crow had already reached the pinnacle of the eighth realm, and whether he could step onto the brink of ascension depended on his comprehension of the Great Dao. Even so, his combat power remained formidable.

When facing someone of the Black Golden Crow's caliber, even possessing a legendary artifact ranked among the top ten in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures wouldn't be enough. The wielder would still need formidable cultivation power to stand a chance of trapping him here.

From the very start, the righteous forces' targets had been the Celestial Master, the Sea Master, and Immortal Yuan Lu.

There had been a chance that Grand Ancestor Wuchao, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner, and Baize could work together and kill these powerhouses. To slay even one monster of this level would be a monumental victory for the righteous forces.

However, no one had expected the Celestial Master to be so perceptive. There was no way he could have known about the ambush in advance. Most likely, he had foreseen an ominous shift in fate and sensed that something was amiss. Acting on this premonition, both he and his subordinate, Huo Tianya, arrived as clones rather than in their true forms.

Huo Tianya's clone was destroyed the moment the battle began. Meanwhile, the Celestial Master's clone, made from an Ancient Sala Tree Leaf, allowed him to hold his ground against Baize for a time, giving him the opportunity to understand her abilities.

Back when the Celestial Beast Baize emerged from seclusion, she struck such fear into the Dark King Sect's leader—a wielder of the True Form of Ksitigarbha—that he fled without a fight. Having slumbered for centuries, no living human had ever witnessed her true power in battle.

Though the Celestial Master had sacrificed a rare and precious clone, he gained invaluable insight into the divine abilities of a formidable opponent. It was hardly a loss. If he were to fight Baize in his true form in the future, the knowledge gained today would prove invaluable.

With the Sea Master dead and the Celestial Master having fled, the only remaining target was Immortal Yuan Lu.

Seeing this, Grand Ancestor Fuyou flicked his sleeve and said, "It seems my presence is no longer required. If there is nothing else, forgive me for taking my leave first."

He could sense Grand Ancestor Wuchao's presence outside and had no desire to confront his old rival. All he wanted was to leave as quickly as possible. Though he was no longer strong enough to challenge Grand Ancestor Wuchao, he was more than capable of making an early escape.

With that, his figure shimmered and dissolved into light, vanishing without a trace.

"Heh." Immortal Yuan Lu sneered as he looked at Baize and Daoist Yan before him. "It's just two masters of the Heavenly Origin. I might stand a chance."

However, the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes made it clear he was merely trying to steel himself.

Just then, a deep, resonant voice rumbled from outside. "Leaving without a word, old friend? Not even a proper greeting?"

It was Grand Ancestor Wuchao's voice.

Grand Ancestor Fuyou responded immediately, "Apologies, but I must be rude this time. If we meet again, I'll kneel and beg for your forgiveness—"

Even as he spoke, his voice grew fainter, fading into the distance. In the end, Grand Ancestor Wuchao could do nothing to stop him from leaving. Suppressing and overpowering an existence of Grand Ancestor Fuyou's level a second time was no easy feat.

Moments later, an elderly figure stepped into the pavilion. His eyes were cloudy with age, and a cane rested in his hand. He nodded slightly toward Baize before speaking in a measured tone, "Just this one left?"

"Yes," Baize replied.

"Noble Baize, please attack without worry. I will support you from the side," said Grand Ancestor Wuchao.

Immortal Yuan Lu: "?"

Are they just casually chatting now? Do I not even count as a person?

Fear and anger twisted his face into a scowl as he let out a cold snort.

"Hmph! So what if another half-buried old fossil joins the fight? It makes no difference!"

Before he even finished speaking, he heard the sharp hum of sword qi ringing in his ears.

The Imperial Supervisory Commissioner appeared in the pavilion, flickering as he landed. As he touched the ground, he quickly apologized, "Sorry, we're late."

Baize shook her head and said, "We had to start earlier because the Celestial Master was alerted. Regardless, taking down two masters of Heavenly Origin is more than enough."

"Heh." Immortal Yuan Lu's facial muscles twitched as he gritted his teeth and said, "Two? You're already counting me in? How arrogant—"

"I was late! I was late! Hahaha, let me apologize by giving him three punches..."

Before Immortal Yuan Lu even finished talking, another yellow-robed figure stepped into the pavilion. It was Shentu Yang, the Vice-Headmaster of Ascending Dragon Academy. This renowned Confucian master was the kind of person who would always answer a call to fight.

It was obvious that literature was just a part of his life, but martial arts was his true passion.

Immortal Yuan Lu's expression grew even stiffer.

Stop coming in! Stop coming in! Can't you all see the room is about to overflow? Have some basic decency, will you?!

Just as Immortal Yuan Lu was struggling to say some harsh words, Chu Liang and Lin Bei stepped in from outside.

Upon seeing Immortal Yuan Lu, the very man who had been calling him brother just moments ago, Lin Bei grinned and said, "Sect Leader Yuan, don't be stubborn. Surrendering isn't shameful."

"Alright!" Immortal Yuan Lu suddenly nodded with a cheerful smile. "Since Brother Lin Bei says so, I'll give you some face. Fighting to the bitter end here would only disrupt our harmony."

Lin Bei jolted in surprise. He never thought his words held such sway.

Everyone present could tell that Immortal Yuan Lu was just waiting for a way to back down.

Even as he waited, his legs were already trembling.

Then, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner stepped forward, infusing his sword qi, which was imbued with the Great Dao of Tai'a, into Immortal Yuan Lu's spine. He instantly lost all his cultivation power, and he was pinned to the ground with the Immortals' Talisman of Lunar Radiance.

Even while this was happening, Immortal Yuan Lu refused to stop talking. "Honestly, I've always thought the Yu Dynasty wasn't bad, and the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner is truly a hero of

this era. If it were anyone else, I would have fought to my last breath, even if it meant the destruction of my Dao—"

"Enough already," Di Nufeng interjected as she rolled her eyes. "I doubt even my Samadhi True Fire could burn his mouth shut."

Before this, she had been wondering whether she could increase her kill count of Heavenly Origin masters, but clearly, that wasn't happening today.

Instead, drawing on her wealth of experience, she began scanning her surroundings, searching for an opportunity to claim—no, confiscate—a few valuable treasures—no, stolen goods—the Sea Master had stowed away.

...

In an unnoticed corner, Chu Liang had already slipped a portion of his divine sense into the White Pagoda.

Without hesitation, he arrived before the cell that held the golden imprint.

Chu Liang exclaimed inwardly, An eighth-realm greater demon!

It was the first time an imprint of this level had ever appeared in the White Pagoda. Chu Liang couldn't help but wonder what pleasant surprises awaited him when he unboxed it.

With his heart pounding in excitement and his hands trembling slightly, Chu Liang pressed the word "Refine."

Boom!

A flash of red light erupted, and a blurred white glow drifted out from behind the prison door, taking the shape of an irregular stone. It was a scene Chu Liang had witnessed countless times, but it was his first time ever refining the imprint of a master of the Heavenly Origin.

[Precious Phantom Spirit Embryo: Upon contact with any artifact, this spirit embryo seamlessly transforms into an identical replica, retaining the artifact's power and durability. The replica lasts for two hours.]

"This..."

The moment Chu Liang read the description, his mind exploded with countless possibilities.

This Precious Phantom Spirit Embryo is...basically a tool replicator, but it only lasts for fifteen minutes. That's pretty short-lived compared to the original.

But... it didn't mention a limit? Does that mean I can use it to copy a legendary artifact?

I can only say... Thank you, Sea Master.

This reward was leagues beyond what Chu Liang had imagined.

After leaving the Ruins of Return, Chu Liang immediately took out the United Hearts Jade and sent a message to Jiang Yuebai.

[Chu]: "You won't believe this."

[Chu]: "I think I just stumbled upon a huge treasure."

Chapter 754: Scholars Are The Worst!

The fight ended and Immortal Yuan Lu was escorted to the Celestial Northern Prison.

Even as the most famous prison in the land of the nine provinces and four seas, it was rare to hold a prisoner at the eighth realm. Capturing the leader of the West Sea Diabolical Forces at a time when dark influences ran rampant across the land was a resounding victory—one that would surely bolster the people's morale.

The interrogation to follow would not be left solely to the imperial court. The Mount Shu Sect and the sea demons would also take part.

Every powerful cultivator at the eighth realm was like a treasure trove, possessing countless valuable treasures. There was much to be gained from such a cultivator, and the other forces would never allow the imperial court to handle this alone.

As for the Sea Master who had been killed, a joint effort with the sea demons would be made to search for his hidden realm and any treasures he might have left behind. In this case, a dead master of the Heavenly Origin was worth far less than a living one.

Grand Ancestor Wuchao would naturally oversee matters concerning the Ruins of Return Cult. With him present, the South Sea would never fall into chaos.

The one who benefited most from the Sea Master's death, however, was none other than Chu Liang.

A cultivator at the Dao Attainment Realm had managed to kill a master of Heavenly Origin!

It didn't matter who had forced the Sea Master to flee with his primordial spirit. It didn't matter who had driven him into a dead end or how many masters of the Heavenly Origin had stood in his way. The only thing that mattered was the person who had slain him!

If it was merely luck, then why didn't anyone else have such luck?

If Chu Liang had the luck to accomplish this, did that mean his teacher was lucky as well? Both master and disciple had slain opponents of higher cultivation. Both of them had the achievement of killing masters of the Heavenly Origin! How could that be explained?

It had to be strength!

At Silver Sword Peak of Mount Shu, killing masters of the Heavenly Origin was our specialty!

This was exactly what Di Nufeng had declared to everyone in the Circle of Immortal Friends.

Thus, before Chu Liang had even returned to Mount Shu, news of him killing a master of the Heavenly Origin had already spread across the nine provinces, shaking the entire realm of immortal cultivation.

Previously, Di Nufeng had killed the Demon King of the Great Marshlands. However, she was at least a cultivator at the pinnacle of the seventh realm. Moreover, the Demon King of the Great Marshlands had been struck by Daoist Cangsheng's Chrono Wheel of the East Sea in front of everyone. Given the circumstances, it was reasonable that the two would be evenly matched in battle.

But this time, it was said that the Sea Master of the Ruins of Return had been locked in combat with Grand Ancestor Wuchao when Chu Liang struck the fatal blow.

Most cultivators across the land were unfamiliar with the names of these two sea demons. However, the way they were spoken of suggested that it had been a fight between two mighty Eminent Ones who had attained the Heavenly Origin. Regardless, the fact that Chu Liang, who had only recently stepped into the seventh realm, could unleash a devastating strike and slay one of them was nothing short of terrifying.

After lying low in silence for six years, this rising star of Mount Shu suddenly ascended, soaring into the heavens in dazzling brilliance!

In actuality, Chu Liang was hoping that this would never be publicized. After all, he himself knew that the actually powerful person that killed the Sea Master was Grand Ancestor Wuchao, who possessed unfathomably great cultivation power.

If word of this spread too far, he would no doubt become a target for powerful opponents in the future. He would much rather everyone dismiss him as a mere fledgling and look down on him before a fight.

It was best to become rich in silence. However, his teacher always had this flamboyant personality. If he wanted her to keep quiet about this achievement, it would be impossible. Di Nufeng could light the dark night with her divine fire into daylight.

Thankfully, no one knew about Chu Liang's greatest reward from this kill—the Precious Phantom Spirit Embryo.

On the way back, Chu Liang's divine sense repeatedly traced over the embryo within the White Pagoda, sensing the spiritual energy coursing through it.

This artifact could replicate any enchanted tool for fifteen minutes...

If he could go bold and think about the possibilities, would this mean that this tool could temporarily fill Mount Shu's lack of a legendary artifact?

If his opponent didn't have one, it wouldn't matter. But if they did... he could instantly replicate the same artifact and wield it in the fight!

Of course, in a fight between Heavenly Origin Terminators, simply holding the same legendary artifact did not mean they could wield its power to the same extent.

For instance, no one in the world could wield the Chunyang Ancient Sword with the same devastating might as Old Li Ba, the Dao Master of Severing the Void. Nor could anyone command the Chrono Wheel of the East Sea as effortlessly as Daoist Cangsheng.

Regardless, it was better than having nothing. At the very least, it was an artifact of pseudo-legendary ranking. No matter what, it would be a massive boost of power.

Of course, there was no rush to hand it over. He could simply present it to Venerable Wen Yuan when Mount Shu faced a true crisis. Until then, keeping it in his possession would ensure he had a powerful trump card.

In truth, Chu Liang had someone else in mind as the ideal wielder of this treasure—his future father-in-law, the Whale-Riding Immortal.

As the Dao Master of the Water Mirror, the Whale-Riding Immortal could already replicate various divine skills and techniques. If combined with the Precious Phantom Spirit Embryo, which could replicate any enchanted tool, wouldn't fighting him be like fighting one's own reflection?

Moreover, he was about to enter the Sword Domain of the Heavenly Palace, and there was a chance he might need additional support. That was why Chu Liang immediately brought it up to Jiang Yuebai.

Otherwise, as someone who always upheld the principle of revealing nothing but wealth, he would never have revealed this artifact so easily.

...

As Chu Liang raced back to the Mount Shu Sect at lightning speed, he made his way straight to Red Cotton Peak and handed the Thundercloud Seeds, the seed that they had worked so hard to get, to Huan Leisheng, the leader of the Talismanic Sect.

Upon receiving the two invaluable materials—the Sea Soul Stones and the Thundercloud Seeds—Huan Leisheng was so moved that he nearly fell to his knees in gratitude. If Chu Liang hadn't stopped him quickly, the man might have actually kowtowed a few times.

As Chu Liang watched this unfold, he couldn't help but think to himself, The Great Dao of Politeness truly manifests in all things.

In actuality, the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner had promised Grand Ancestor Wuchao that eliminating Grand Ancestor Fuyou would take precedence over dealing with the Sea Master. Throughout the many years that Grand Ancestor Wuchao had dominated the South Sea, few had posed a true threat to him. However, Grand Ancestor Fuyou was undoubtedly one of the most troublesome.

Unfortunately for Grand Ancestor Wuchao, because Grand Ancestor Fuyou had fought alongside the righteous sects during the battle at the pavilion, Baize and Daoist Yan ultimately chose to let him go.

Grand Ancestor Wuchao couldn't blame them. In any case, he still benefited from the battle since the Sea Master was dead.

Meanwhile, Huan Leisheng, still brimming with excitement, immediately dragged Wen Yulong away to start research and development. As Chu Liang watched their distancing backs, he felt a sense of pride and comfort. It was the kind of gaze that looked kind and calm admiring two money trees.

However, this silence didn't last long. He suddenly heard a commotion happening outside.

Chu Liang immediately called out, "What's going on out there?"

Lackey A rushed in and reported urgently, "It's Yun Chaoxian from the Great Astral Sect and Feng Chaoyang from the Celestial King Sect... they're fighting outside!"

"Huh?" Chu Liang quickly got up. While he was on the way outside, he asked, "What happened?"

Lackey A explained, "They both brought people to introduce to you, but each one wanted to go first. Neither would back down, so they started fighting!"

By the time Chu Liang reached the main hall outside his private chamber, he found Yun Chaoxian and Feng Chaoyang locked in a fierce struggle, shoving against each other like two bulls locking horns.

The two had no deep-seated grudges, but because both of them had such brash temperament, they would start fighting over the smallest disagreement. Even so, they exercised some restraint. Rather than tearing the hall apart, they exchanged fist and palm strikes, gritting their teeth as they channeled their foundational qi into each strike. Clearly, both were dead set on launching the other through the air.

Behind each of them stood a figure, both of whom were clearly trying to mediate the fight. They seemed to be the very people Yun Chaoxian and Feng Chaoyang had wanted to introduce to Chu Liang.

Chu Liang hurriedly stepped forward and shouted, "Guys! Stop fighting!"

The two, who had been locked in a fierce struggle like bulls locking horns, finally separated and turned to look at Chu Liang.

Chu Liang advised in a reassuring tone. "We've all known each other for so long. Is there really anything we can't settle with words? Why resort to fists?"

Yun Chaoxian was the first to respond. "Don't blame me. We arrived at the same time, and I said I'd introduce my guy to you first. But he just had to insist on going ahead of me! So I told him. These were my exact words—'What kind of relationship do I have with Brother Chu? We're brothers who have faced death together! Do you really think you should go ahead of me?'"

Feng Chaoyang scoffed. "What's so great about that? I've known Chu Liang for years too! We were even love rivals once!"

Chu Liang rolled his eyes. "If that's your reasoning, then you should go outside and wait to be called."

"I don't care," Yun Chaoxian huffed, crossing his arms. "I'm going in first."

Feng Chaoyang clenched his fists. "And why should I let you? Do you want to see just how powerful my punches are?"

Yun Chaoxian retorted, "Oh? And do you think mine are any weaker?"

"Don't force me to activate my Constellation Orb right here on Mount Shu!" Feng Chaoyang threatened, reaching for his waist.

"I have my World-Dominating Halberd too!" Yun Chaoxian shot back, gripping the handle of his weapon.

"..."

Chu Liang's expression darkened as he scolded, "If you're going to fight, take it outside!"

Seeing that Chu Liang was actually getting angry, Yun Chaoxian and Feng Chaoyang immediately stopped messing around and turned to look at him.

"Can't you just do as I say?" Chu Liang frowned. "If there's something to discuss, can't we all just talk about it inside together?"

"NO!" Yun Chaoxian and Feng Chaoyang shouted at the same time.

Yun Chaoxian glanced at the person behind him and said, "I don't mind for other things, but not this. Today, I came to introduce a brother from the War Tomb Mountain to you."

Feng Chaoyang added, "And I brought a friend from the Great Lunar Dao Sect."

Hearing this, Chu Liang immediately figured out what was happening.

This obviously had much to do with the Selection of a Terrestrial Ten Sect. All of them wanted to recommend members of their allies and they had come to secure the Mount Shu Sect's support and secure an important vote from one of the Divine Nine.

Going straight to Venerable Wen Yuan wasn't a good idea since they didn't know his stance on the matter. So instead, they sought to win over Chu Liang first.

After all, Chu Liang's position in the sect was very unique. He was of the younger generation but was able to discuss matters with the higher-ups. His opinions carried weight and all the other major sects were aware of this.

"Haaaaa..." Chu Liang pinched his temples, already feeling a slight headache.

In matters like these, whoever spoke first could gain the upper hand. Even if he didn't convey his stance on the matter immediately, Yun Chaoxian and Feng Chaoyang would keep fighting. It was, without a doubt, a tricky situation.

Just then, a soft cough sounded from the entrance, followed by a voice that sounded sophisticated and well-mannered. "I might have a way to resolve this dispute for both of you."

"Hm?" Everyone turned toward the doorway.

Immediately, Chu Liang smiled and said, "Brother Zhang?"

The person standing there was none other than Zhang Chen, the head disciple of the Ascending Dragon Academy.

After the Assembly of Immortal Sects, Zhang Chen hadn't become an official in the imperial court, nor had he remained at the academy as a lecturer. Instead, he had seemingly disappeared. Rumors said he had gone to teach at a small academy in a remote mountainous region, a highly unusual choice for someone of his talent and status. Before today, he hadn't been seen in public for a long time.

Upon seeing him, Chu Liang sighed in relief. "Brother Zhang, what good advice do you have for us?"

Zhang Chen smiled as he stepped forward. "To be honest, I've been here for a while. I just arrived a little later than these two, but I witnessed their fight from start to finish. It was Brother Yun who threw the first insult, and Brother Feng who threw the first punch. If I must be fair... both of them are in the wrong. So why not just give them fifty beatings with the big boards and settle it that way?"

Yun Chaoxian frowned. "What do you mean? What kind of big board? I can definitely outlast him!"

"..." Chu Liang placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Brother Yun, let the scholar finish speaking."

Zhang Chen cupped his hands and said with a chuckle, "Hehe, I mean... why don't you two just wait a while and let me introduce the Headmaster of Yushan Academy first?"

"Screw you!" Yun Chaoxian roared. He waved his hand and shouted, "You scholars are the worst!"

Chapter 755: It's All Thanks To You

In a private chamber in the Boundless Palace, Venerable Wen Yuan sat behind his desk and let out a long sigh and remarked, "A favor owed to others weighs heavier than Mount Tai..."

Chu Liang sat obediently before him and remained very silent.

Just moments ago, Chu Liang had experienced much struggle to finally arrange a meeting with the three representatives of the War Tomb Mountain, the Great Lunar Dao Sect, and the Yushan Academy. Among them, the leader of the Yushan Academy even came personally, which was a rather great gesture of sincerity.

After much effort, Chu Liang had finally persuaded Yun Chaoxian, Feng Chaoyang, and Zhang Chen to leave. Then, without wasting a moment, he rushed to Venerable Wen Yuan to report everything he had learned. Obviously, this meeting with Venerable Wen Yuan was precisely why the three immortal sects had sought him out in the first place.

The War Tomb Mountain was an immortal sect that had upheld a cultivation legacy rooted in the Dao of Martial Arts for many years. Unlike the Great Astral Sect, they specialized in battle formations, seamlessly integrating beast-taming techniques and formation arts into their martial techniques.

Among cultivators, it was widely believed that in a one-on-one duel, a Great Astral Sect disciple would have the upper hand against a War Tomb Mountain disciple. However, in a ten-on-ten battle,

their strengths would be evenly matched. And in a large-scale battle of a hundred versus a hundred, War Tomb Mountain would have the upper hand.

Throughout history, many of the dynasty's greatest generals hailed from War Tomb Mountain, leading to frequent interactions between the sect and the Yu Dynasty's military.

Despite its strengths in battle formations, War Tomb Mountain had long lacked powerful individual cultivators. Therefore, they never stood out among the immortal sects. Qiu Fenglie, the current sect leader of War Tomb Mountain, had ascended to the peak of the seventh realm, making him the strongest leader in the sect's history.

With their overwhelming numbers and highly coordinated battle formations, the War Tomb Mountain was far more powerful than the records suggested. They were undoubtedly one of the strongest among the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten.

They wouldn't have pursued this if no positions were available. But with a spot in the Terrestrial Ten now open, they naturally sought to advance. Qiu Fenglie, as ambitious as ever, even promised the Mount Shu Sect generous rewards for their support.

As for the Great Lunar Dao Sect, which Feng Chaoyang had recommended, it was really supported by the Celestial King Sect, Celestial Pivot Pavilion, and Sea King Sect.

Back in the day, when the Heavenly Star Divine Cult split apart, some factions, like the Dark King Sect, fell into the diabolical sects, while others, like Starhold Island, aligned themselves with Penglai. The remaining righteous factions, however, remained closely connected, like branches from the same tree.

For these sects, securing more seats within the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten meant increasing their collective influence. That was why the three immortal sects were doing everything in their power to help the Great Lunar Dao Sect rise to the ranks of the Terrestrial Ten.

In reality, the Great Lunar Dao Sect was a sect that taught the cultivation of the spiritual qi of forests, grass, and wood. Their focus had always been on longevity rather than ambition."

The Celestial King Sect, Celestial Pivot Pavilion, and Sea King Sect had likely evaluated the various sects that branched from the Heavenly Star Divine Cult. After much deliberation, they decided that only the Great Lunar Dao Sect had the strength to qualify as a first-rate righteous sect. With that in mind, they put forth their recommendation.

The so-called 'friend' Feng Chaoyang brought along was nearly two hundred years old. The old man had dozed off midway through his conversation with Chu Liang, showing not the slightest interest in the discussion. In the end, Feng Chaoyang had to speak on his behalf.

And yet, despite this, the Great Lunar Dao Sect was still the most likely to win. After all, it had the backing of far more powerful sects.

Meanwhile, the Yushan Academy was an oddity.

With a long history, it was once one of the great ancient academies that had risen alongside the Confucian movement. In its prime, it had led the intellectual and cultural tide across the nine provinces. However, as the imperial dynasties started asserting control over Confucian factions, these ancient academies began to decline, with some even losing their entire cultivation heritage. Though the Yushan Academy still had students, it was merely struggling to survive.

It wasn't until a few years ago that the Ascending Dragon Academy intervened, pouring resources into the Yushan Academy and gathering esteemed scholars from across the land to lecture there. They had even sent their head disciple, Zhang Chen, which really showed their commitment to helping the Yushan Academy.

And now, the Ascending Dragon Academy even wanted to help the Yushan Academy secure a spot in the Terrestrial Ten. It was rather odd, as this academy had so few cultivators that it wasn't seen as serious competition among the immortal sects.

Based on the information that the Mount Shu Sect had collected, the imperial court would be supporting the Earthfire Sect, which was also another rising power among the immortal sects.

Yet, the Ascending Dragon Academy had its own agenda, leading many to question what was really at play.

The Mount Shu Sect wasn't particularly familiar with any of the three sects but were rather familiar with the forces supporting them. Regardless of who advanced, it would have no direct impact on the Mount Shu Sect.

Unfortunately, not long ago, during the battle to rescue Chu Liang, Venerable Wen Yuan had called upon the Mount Shu Sect's allies for aid.

In response, the Great Astral Sect, the Celestial King Sect, and the Ascending Dragon Academy had each dispatched eighth-realm cultivators to assist in the fight. Together, these sects helped the Mount Shu Sect battle the Seven Demon Kings of the Far West. This was not a small favor!

Had only one sect sought their support, Mount Shu would have had no choice but to show them due respect and cast a crucial vote for them as one of the Divine Nine.

But now, with all three sects arriving together, Venerable Wen Yuan found himself with a massive headache.

Venerable Wen Yuan glanced at Chu Liang, who had been sitting quietly, and suddenly asked, "Who do you think we should support?"

"Ah?" Chu Liang uttered, stumped by this question.

He forced a smile and replied, "Well... the brothers of the Great Astral Sect have always been on good terms with our sect, so we should definitely help them. The Celestial King Sect has been a loyal ally, so we should help them too. And the Ascending Dragon Academy has lent Mount Shu a hand before, so of course, we should help them as well..."

Venerable Wen Yuan nodded expressionlessly. "Mmm."

What Chu Liang said was just a bunch of words with no real meaning.

Chu Liang suddenly added, "But... since all three have come to us, we can't help any of them. If we support one, we'll offend the other two."

Venerable Wen Yuan asked, "But if you help none of them, wouldn't that mean offending all three?"

Chu Liang suddenly said, "That would be the case if we cast our vote for someone else, but what if we voted for ourselves?"

Venerable Wen Yuan's lips curled into a smile. "You mean... we nominate our own ally for the Terrestrial Ten? The problem is we don't have a suitable choice right now."

"It doesn't have to be suitable. It just has to exist," Chu Liang said with a grin. "We won't win anyway; it's just to fill the spot."

"Heh," Venerable Wen Yuan chuckled. "I've considered that, but the selection of the Terrestrial Ten isn't a game. You can't just nominate any sect to fill a gap. Besides, the sects vying for a spot might be resented by those already in the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten. If there's no real chance of winning, what sect would willingly serve as our placeholder?"

Chu Liang's eyes suddenly lit up. "Eh? I just might have the perfect choice."

...

Huan Leisheng was busy overseeing the final stages of building the Celestial Talismanic Wheel when he suddenly heard that Chu Liang had arrived. Without delay, he rushed out to greet him.

"CEO Chu! Good day to you!"

Ever since Chu Liang had swiftly acquired the two important materials, Huan Leisheng had come to genuinely recognize his authority as Chief Executive Overseer.

Chu Liang had wealth at his disposal and manpower at his command. Following a man like this could only lead the Talismanic Sect to greater heights, bringing their dreams to fruition!

"No need for formalities," Chu Liang said with a smile, waving a hand dismissively. "How's the progress?"

"We're down to the final step," Huan Leisheng declared, his robe sleeves billowing as he gestured. "Once the materials are embedded and the enchanted formation inscriptions are activated, the Celestial Talismanic Wheel will be fully operational. At that point, our talisman production speed will be as swift as the wind! Within a decade, we will be refining all the talismans in the entire immortal realm!"

"Haha." Chu Liang chuckled before speaking again. "Progress is a good thing, but don't get ahead of yourself. Even if the Celestial Talismanic Wheel is completed, do you really think it will revolutionize the immortal realm?"

"Our talisman-making speed will be thousands of times faster than traditional methods. How could it not?" Huan Leisheng asked, frowning in confusion.

Chu Liang continued, "Sure, you can make a lot of talismans, but does that mean they'll sell?"

Huan Leisheng retorted, "With my low cost, even if I sell them at half the market price, I'd still make a profit. Why wouldn't they buy from me?"

"Talismans aren't something people can test before buying," Chu Liang said. "If someone suddenly started selling a lot of talisman dirt cheap, would you trust them enough to buy?"

"Ah."

Huan Leisheng was stunned. This was a question that had never crossed his mind.

Talismans could only be used once. They couldn't be tested beforehand. At best, buyers could randomly select a few from a batch and test their strength, but that was hardly a reliable measure.

Because of this, purchasing talismans was much like purchasing pills. Most cultivators preferred to buy from trusted merchants—ones they were familiar with. After all, if a talisman failed at a critical moment while facing demons or monsters, the consequences could be dire.

Most cultivators would be wary of purchasing talismans if they suddenly flooded the market at unusually low prices.

"Unless... we have strong credibility," Huan Leisheng mused, turning to Chu Liang with hopeful eyes. "Could the Mount Shu Sect vouch for the Talisman Sect? Could you guarantee that our talismans are reliable?"

"So, Mister Huan, here's the situation," Chu Liang said with a slight smile. "The Talismanic Sect may be under my control, but the Mount Shu Sect isn't. I don't have the authority to make my sect vouch for the Celestial Talismanic Wheel. Besides, can you truly guarantee that every talisman produced will be flawless? If even a single defect appears, my sect's reputation will be ruined and that's a risk neither of us can afford to take."

Huan Leisheng frowned. "But... if that's the case, our only option is to enter the market slowly. We'd have to gradually earn the trust of cultivators before lowering prices and rely on word-of-mouth to build our reputation. That kind of expansion would take much longer."

"Exactly. The Talismanic Sect isn't a major sect. Outside of the Southern Regions, there's a good chance no one even knows it exists," Chu Liang said.

Then he blinked, and his tone shifted to excitement. "But there's a golden opportunity right now—one that could make the Talismanic Sect famous overnight and catch the attention of cultivators across the world. Do you know what it is?"

"Hmm?" Huan Leisheng's eyes lit up. "What is it?"

Chu Liang let the suspense build as he spoke at a measured pace. "The... selection of the Terrestrial Ten!"

"T-this..." Huan Leisheng reacted as if he had just heard the most absurd joke. "How could our Talismanic Sect possibly qualify for that? CEO Chu, you must be joking..."

Even though the Talismanic Sect had a seventh-realm cultivator, the sect itself was nowhere near the level of the Terrestrial Ten. The gap between them and the other contenders was like the difference between Chu Liang's appetite and that of Lackey B—colossal beyond measure.

The idea was nothing short of laughable.

"You may not qualify to participate, but Mount Shu has the right to nominate a contender," Chu Liang said. "Right now, Venerable Wen Yuan doesn't have a solid choice in mind. I can put in a word for you... As long as the Talismanic Sect enters the selection, you'll immediately be in the spotlight. And that's when we seize the chance to introduce the Celestial Talismanic Wheel to the world. Do you know what that's called? Generating traffic."

"Of course, we won't win, but that doesn't matter. This exposure will make the Celestial Talismanic Wheel known far and wide. Isn't that fantastic?"

"Absolutely fantastic!" Huan Leisheng exclaimed, clapping his hands in excitement. "CEO Chu, I can't thank you enough. This is all thanks to you!"

Chapter 756: I'm Fluent Too

At dawn, the fog over Holy Mountain had yet to disperse.

A group of black-robed people riding on horses hastily ascended the mountain. Against the backdrop of the snow-capped mountains that were thousands of years old, the group had a striking presence, looking stern and imposing.

"Honorable Chancellor, you're here early."

Dhyana Master Wu'e, who was quite bald, was standing at the mountain gate, awaiting the group's arrival with a smile.

"Since it was the Noble Dharma who summoned me, I dare not delay my arrival," the leader of the group replied nonchalantly. "As soon as His Majesty issued the decree, I set out overnight."

The leader of the group was Su Qian, the chancellor of the Yu Dynasty. He was accompanied by a group of elite guards from his Sixteen-Faction Alliance.

The entire group bore the marks of their hurried journey, proving Su Qian's words.

"His Majesty cares for the people of the nine provinces, and you, Chancellor, work tirelessly for the people as well," Dhyana Master Wu'e remarked as he led the group up the mountain. "The Noble Dharma has been in closed-door cultivation for years and rarely meets guests, so he won't be coming out to greet you."

Su Qian nodded, appearing not to mind at all. "I understand."

Upon reaching a secluded courtyard near the main hall of the temple, Dhyana Master Wu'e added, "The Noble Dharma wishes to convey that we, Holy Mountain, too hope for peace in the world. That is why we are acting as an intermediary. Whatever you discuss today has nothing to do with us. You need not base your decision out of respect for the Noble Dharma."

Su Qian nodded in acknowledgement.

Dhyana Master Wu'e then pushed open the courtyard door.

Su Qian's subordinates were about to follow Su Qian inside.

However, he turned back and told them, "Wait here."

Concerned, some of them hesitated to heed the order. "Honorable Chancellor..."

"This is the Northern Regions' Holy Mountain. What do you think will happen here?" Su Qian replied and then stepped inside alone.

Dhyana Master Wu'e, who also remained outside, was still smiling. "There is no need to worry about anyone's safety on Holy Mountain."

Inside the courtyard, the chancellor of the Yu Dynasty found himself face-to-face with an unexpected figure.

"City Lord Huyan?" Su Qian uttered, taken aback.

Since the fall of Taotie City, Huyan Dong and his son had vanished without a trace. The world had assumed they had met a grim fate. Yet, there they were, on this mountain.

Nevertheless, that alone wouldn't have shocked Su Qian.

He was at Holy Mountain because the imperial court had received an invitation from the Noble Dharma to have a peace talk with the rebels of Mount Mang. Consequently, Su Qian had expected to meet the rebels. Instead, the first person he saw was their victim. That was the real shocker.

The middle-aged man in the courtyard stood to greet Su Qian with a respectful bow. "I am Huyan Dong, but I am no longer a city lord. It's an honor to meet you, Honorable Chancellor."

"There's no need for such formalities between old acquaintances." Su Qian smiled as he took a seat. "I thought you had met an unfortunate fate. But seeing that you're safe and well, it seems the rebels of Mount Mang are genuinely sincere about this peace talk."

"Naturally." Huyan Dong nodded. "The rebels of Mount Mang were merely starving disaster victims on the brink of death. Fortunately, you managed to acquire the Immortals' Rice, saving the

people from starvation. Now that the famine is ending, the rebels have had a change of heart and wish to turn over a new leaf."

He was referring to how Su Qian had purchased the Immortals' Rice at the Buddhist Cloud Monastery's charity auction. Su Qian had spearheaded the efforts to cultivate and distribute the crop. In fact, the reason he was able to arrive at Holy Mountain in such haste was that he had been in the Southern Regions the day before, overseeing the cultivation and distribution of the Immortals' Rice there.

It was thanks to the Immortals' Rice that the imperial court was able to eliminate the greatest threat to the nine provinces in the aftermath of the recent natural disasters, resolving the dire crisis.

"We can end the famine, but it is impossible to revive Taotie City," Su Qian remarked. "City Lord Huyan, are you truly speaking on behalf of the rebels of Mount Mang?"

"I am," Huyan Dong affirmed. "After they abducted my son and me, I managed to convince them to abandon their ways."

"In that case, you've done a great service to the world."

"I wouldn't dare claim such merit. I only did it for my survival." Huyan Dong smiled. "But let's get to the point. The rebels of Mount Mang cannot return to their barren homeland. They would like to settle in the Northern Regions and establish a city of their own. They hope for their city to be recognized by the imperial court as an official city."

"That's all?" Su Qian's gaze wandered around them. "As long as they do not rebel again, there's nothing difficult about granting them a city to live in."

Huyan Dong's smile deepened.

That tale of rebels killing and setting fires until the imperial court accepted them into its ranks had truly come to life. In the past, the rebels of Mount Mang struggled in the barren lands of the Southern Region for years and were never officially recognized by the imperial court. Now, after wreaking all that havoc, the imperial court's stance quickly softened.

"But if they waver and commit unjust acts again..." Su Qian's expression turned grim. "Even if the Noble Dharma vouches for them, the imperial court will show them no mercy."

"You can rest easy about that," Huyan Dong replied quickly. "These people have suffered enough. With a place to call home, why would they rebel again? But... they do have one more request."

"Speak," Su Qian said, not surprised in the slightest.

He had known from the start that it wouldn't be that simple.

After all, it wasn't as if the imperial court had cornered the Mount Mang rebels and forced them to surrender. The Mount Mang rebels had been traversing freely through the nine provinces; the imperial court had not even come close to capturing them. They had come forward on their own accord to have a peace talk.

That meant the imperial court was at a disadvantage in this negotiation. As long as the demands of the Mount Mang rebels weren't excessive, it would be best for the imperial court to grant them in the interest of maintaining peace.

Nonetheless, what Huyan Dong said next shocked Su Qian.

"They wish to establish their own immortal sect and hope that the imperial court can nominate them to compete in the selection for the Terrestrial Ten."

...

With the matter of the Terrestrial Ten's Sect Selection settled, Chu Liang finally had some time to relax.

It wouldn't be long until the Celestial Talismanic Wheel was completed. Then talismans could be produced as quickly as snowflakes falling from the sky. When that time came, Chu Liang would have yet another lucrative stream of income.

He hadn't deceived Huan Leisheng. The Talismanic Sect obviously had no chance of being a serious competitor for the vacant spot in the Terrestrial Ten. Nevertheless, simply getting nominated would get the sect's name out there, which would be very beneficial in promoting the talisman business.

Nominating the Talismanic Sect also helped the Mount Shu Sect resolve the nomination dilemma with the Great Astral Sect and the Celestial King Sect. Nevertheless, that was merely a secondary concern in comparison.

Originally, construction would have been a highly profitable venture for the Mount Shu Sect. However, Starhold Island had raised its price drastically for the Mountain-Suppressing Rock, essentially blocking off the Mount Shu Sect's access to an important material. That meant the Hall of Construction did not have the resources to start large-scale projects.

Chu Liang had yet to find a quick solution for that. After all, Starhold Island had the support of the Penglai Supreme Sect. The Mount Shu Sect had been busy expanding its network and forging new alliances, but its relationship with the Penglai Supreme Sect and its lackeys had only worsened.

Even with the Divine Nine pressuring Starhold Island, Starhold Island refused to budge on its decision. So, all Chu Liang could do was wait.

After all, it would not make sense for Starhold Island to raise its prices just for the Mount Shu Sect. The moment any immortal sect managed to purchase Mountain-Suppressing Rock at a lower price, Chu Liang could just buy it from that sect at a higher price.

The longer Starhold Island hoarded its stock, the more severe the shortage of Mountain-Suppressing Rock would become across the world of immortality cultivators. Eventually, immortal sects from all over the world would pressure Starhold Island to lower its price. Starhold Island wouldn't be able to hold out forever.

Even if the Penglai Supreme Sect treated them like a favored child, surely their devotion wouldn't extend to outright self-destruction, right?

That meant Chu Liang was locked in a battle of patience with them for now.

At this moment, Chu Liang arrived at the fruit garden on Silver Sword Peak.

For a long time, Golden Vein Berries had been one of his main sources of income, but Berry Wonderland's importance gradually waned in recent years as Red Cotton Peak flourished. Eventually, Berry Wonderland was shut down entirely to spare Silver Sword Peak from the trouble of having to entertain the many tourists.

Now, Golden Vein Berries were only sold in limited-edition gift boxes instead of in large quantities, turning them into a truly premium spirit fruit. During festivals, being able to present a box of Golden Vein Berries as a gift was considered a mark of wealth and prestige among immortal sects.

Much of the fruit garden had been repurposed for cultivating various treasures of nature, and they grew even better than the treasures of nature in the Hall of Alchemy's plantation. After all, the remains of two powerful Eminent Ones, both slain by a certain teacher-disciple duo, had been buried in the ground of the fruit garden.

Di Nufeng and Chu Liang had a strong sense of responsibility when it came to helping people "rest in peace". Even if the deceased were bad people, the teacher-disciple duo would still bring them back to Silver Sword Peak and bury them, scattering spirit plant seeds over their graves as an offering. A few days later, Di Nufeng and Chu Liang would return to tidy the area, pay their respects... and most importantly scatter more seeds, of course.

Now, with the flourishing treasures of nature, this fruit garden was one of the places on Mount Shu that had the densest spiritual qi.

For that reason, Chu Liang was there to test the strength of the Precious Phantom Spirit Embryo.

He had gotten it as a reward from the White Pagoda for slaying the Sea Master, but he had yet to actually use it. His first instinct had been to use it to replicate the White Pagoda, but when he tried, nothing happened. It was perhaps because the White Pagoda no longer had a corporeal form.

After being busy for quite some time, Chu Liang finally had some time to experiment with it.

He took out the Precious Phantom Spirit Embryo and carefully cradled it in his hands. It looked like a gorgeous, vividly colored stone. Aside from that, it seemed pretty ordinary.

Yet, as soon as Chu Liang injected his foundational qi into the stone, it transformed into a dense swirling cloud of seven-colored mist. Any enchanted tool that came into contact with this mist would be replicated. It was virtually impossible to prevent the replication.

Chu Liang took out the Demon-Revealing Brick. Then he controlled the mist and had it engulf the brick.

Whoosh!

The mist swept over the Demon-Revealing Brick, followed by a flash of light. The light faded to reveal that a replica of the half-brick had actually materialized right there.

Holding the half-brick in his hands, Chu Liang examined it closely. Even the patterns on the brick were identical; there wasn't the slightest flaw.

Chu Liang was delighted. "Not bad."

Both the quality and power of the replica seemed indistinguishable from the original. The only question was whether the Precious Phantom Spirit Embryo could replicate more powerful enchanted tools just as flawlessly.

With that thought, Chu Liang decided to test it on the Demon-Slaying Sword.

After about fifteen minutes, the Precious Phantom Spirit Embryo reverted to its original stone form. However, it was no longer vibrant and colorful; it was now a dull gray stone.

There seemed to be pulsing veins running across the stone's surface, spreading the colorful mist from before bit by bit across its body. Once the mist had spread all over the stone, it repeated this process again and again like it was breathing.

Chu Liang injected his foundational qi into it again, but there was no response.

"So, that's how it works..."

Chu Liang finally figured something out.

The item description had not specified a cooldown time, making him assume it could be used indefinitely. However, it turned out that the stone had to replenish its spiritual qi before it could be activated again.

Judging by its current absorption rate, it would take at least four to six hours to fully recharge. He wasn't sure whether the spiritual qi consumption rate was fixed per use or if it scaled based on the strength of the replicated enchanted tool.

If the stone needed four to six hours to recharge after only replicating the Demon-Revealing Brick, then wouldn't it need at least a few months to replicate a Demon-Slaying Sword?

And what about if he wanted to replicate a legendary artifact? Chu Liang didn't even want to imagine how long that would take...

While he waited for the stone to recharge, Chu Liang thought it was boring to just sit around idly. Then he suddenly recalled the Talisman of Life Restoration.

His cultivation level had been too low when he obtained that precious cultivation legacy of the Celestial Talisman Master. All he could do back then was awaken the consciousness of some fruits and mountain rocks to guard his fruit garden. However, their lifespans were quite short, and they withered away after about half a year. He didn't know whether it was due to their limited spiritual qi or that his cultivation level had been too low.

Nonetheless, Chu Liang had since advanced to the seventh realm, and he now had a much bigger Sea of Qi than before. So... he should be able to awaken the consciousness of enchanted tools, right?

Chu Liang's gaze shifted to the Demon-Revealing Brick in his hand.

Why not... give it a try?

Once the idea took root, he didn't hesitate. He promptly summoned the Talisman of Life Restoration and pressed it firmly onto the brick.

Whoosh!

The Demon-Revealing Brick emitted a dazzling burst of white light, and in the next instant, its aura became lively and dynamic, as though it now had a spirit.

An enchanted tool with a spirit was totally different from an enchanted tool without one.

Chu Liang was so excited that he didn't even bother replenishing his drained foundational qi.

He immediately asked, "Demon-Revealing Brick... do you have a spirit now?"

There was no response.

He tried again. "Can you not speak? Or did I fail?"

Again, there was no response.

"If you gained sentience, you should be able to hear me, right? Even that berry from back then could talk... and quite fluently at that."

Chu Liang waited for a response, but all he got was silence.

He let out a small sigh. "Looks like I failed... but why?"

The experiment had failed, and his foundational qi was depleted. Furthermore, the Precious Phantom Spirit Embryo still recharging. With nothing else he could do there, Chu Liang decided to return to his wooden cabin and meditate for a while.

It was no easy feat for a seventh-realm cultivator to use up all of their cultivation energy. Yet, using the Talisman of Life Restoration had consumed so much of his foundational qi that it was absolutely terrifying.

After cultivating for around three hours, Chu Liang suddenly sensed a disturbance in the White Pagoda's space. He extended his divine sense inside and saw the Demon-Revealing Brick on the ground, flickering with light.

A dull voice spoke slowly, with long pauses between each word.

"I... do...

"I... can... speak...

"I... am... flu...ent... too..."

Chapter 757: Male and Female Cultivators, Charge Forward!

The Yu Dynasty had granted amnesty to the rebels of Mount Mang and enlisted them. This news was like a thunderclap, shocking everyone across the four seas and the nine provinces.

The fierce Mount Mang rebels had moved unpredictably, coming and going like the wind. Their recent activities had made them a nightmare for the citizens of the Yu Dynasty, prompting many large cities to increase. They were so afraid of a raid that even the sighs of the wind and calls of cranes would make them panic. Nevertheless, everyone still believed the problem would soon be resolved.

After all, the Mount Mang rebels were merely a group of half-demons on the brink of starvation, and the most powerful among them had only attained the seventh realm. They had taken advantage of the situation to breach Taotie City, but they lacked the power to fight against the top cultivators of the world. The moment they were captured by the Imperial Supervisory Bureau, they would be crushed immediately.

This public opinion was due to the reputation the imperial court had established over the years. The righteous forces might be delayed, but they never failed to deliver justice.

That was why no one had expected the matter involving the Mount Mang rebels to be resolved by granting amnesty and enlisting them...

Throughout the past several hundred years of the Yu Dynasty, there had been almost no precedent for such an approach. Could it be that the imperial court truly had no other means to deal with these outlaws and was forced to resort to this strategy?

By the next day, it became clear that the situation was not so simple. A new issue of The Seven Stars Gazette was released, providing detailed insight into the matter.

With the sudden rise of the Circle of Immortal Friends, The Seven Stars Gazette transitioned to a deeper and more analytical style of reporting—highlighting the advantages of full reports that the short posts on the Circle of Immortal Friends did not have.

On the front page of the "Chronicles of the Nine Provinces," the headline story was, without a doubt, the recent battle at the Ruins of Return in the South Sea.

Human cultivators and the sea tribes joined forces to eliminate the devilish sea demons who had previously thrown the South Sea into chaos. The devilish sea demons had colluded with the Celestial Charm Sect, the land demons, and diabolical sects to execute a terrifying plan. However, a group of quick-witted, brave, and outstanding heroes of the righteous path uncovered their plan in advance. The righteous heroes seized the opportunity to eliminate the Sea Master and Immortal Yuan Lu, protecting the peace in the South Sea.

This battle reaffirms the universal truth that evil can never triumph over good. It also showcases the unity between righteous Daoists and sea demons. Not all demons are vicious and extremely evil; some can coexist peacefully with humans, just like the sea demons.

The Celestial Pivot Pavilion's in-depth report clearly contained an agenda, as its focus was not on the battle itself but rather on emphasizing the newfound alliance between humans and the sea demons.

At the end of the article, the author lavishly praised the young hero from Mount Shu who ultimately slew the Sea Master—Chu Liang.

The champion of the last Assembly of Immortal Sects has returned to the world in an even more dazzling fashion!

Once again, his name shakes the world.

The others who participated in the battle were: the Imperial Supervisory Commissioner; the Ascending Dragon Academy's vice headmaster, Shentu Yang; the leader of the sea demons, Grand Ancestor Wuchao; Noble Baize; Daoist Yan; the Mount Shu Sect's grand peak master, Wang Xuanling; the young, talented, and handsome Xu Ziyang; the leader of the Four Overlords, Lin Bei; and an elite member of the Mount Shu Sect.

Seeing that the Celestial Pivot Pavilion had praised him again, Chu Liang couldn't help but shake his head with a wry smile. It was obvious he had a good relationship with the Celestial Pivot Pavilion, but wasn't the praise for him a bit excessive?

Of course, it was also obvious who didn't have a good relationship with the Celestial Pivot Pavilion.

Moments later, an angry roar erupted from Di Nufeng's pavilion.

“ZHOU YIJIAAAN!!!”

A streak of blazing fire shot straight toward the southwest.

...

Chu Liang grinned and continued reading this issue of The Seven Stars Gazette.

Under normal circumstances, the subject of the next article would have been front-page material. However, due to the battle at the Ruins of Return, it had to take a back seat. The article was about the Terrestrial Ten's Sect Selection.

The nomination round had already been underway for some time. The Divine Nine, the Terrestrial Ten, and the imperial court all had the right to nominate candidates. Sects that deemed themselves worthy could also nominate themselves. Of course, as for whether they stood a chance, that was another matter entirely.

The final list of nominees included:

Starhold Island, nominated by the Penglai Supreme Sect

The Ice Soul Sword Sect, nominated by the Greater-Yin Cult

The Great Lunar Dao Sect, nominated by the Celestial King Sect

War Tomb Mountain, nominated by the Great Astral Sect

The Xuantian Monastery of the Buddhist Order, nominated by the Buddhist Cloud Monastery

The Talismanic Sect, nominated by the Mount Shu Sect

The Yushan Academy, nominated by the Ascending Dragon Academy

Mount Mang City, nominated by the Imperial Court

It turned out that the imperial court did not just grant amnesty and enlist the Mount Mang rebels. The imperial court even allowed the Mount Mang rebels to establish an immortal sect and nominated them to take the vacant spot in the Terrestrial Ten.

At this point, most readers would be baffled.

The Seven Stars Gazette then proceeded with an in-depth analysis of each nominated sect. While most cultivators were familiar with these top immortal sects, the common folk knew little about them.

At the top of the list was Mount Mang City.

The section on Mount Mang City read as if a member of the Imperial Supervisory Bureau had written it, as it presented the imperial court's perspective on the matter.

The Mount Mang rebels, people of half-demon bloodlines, have suffered injustices for many years. The imperial court has indeed failed them. Their recent rebellion, triggered by natural disasters and famine, was an unforgivable crime, but the Mount Mang rebels are sincere about repenting. They are willing to establish a city on the border and guard the Northern Regions forever on behalf of the imperial court. In his benevolence, His Majesty has granted them a chance to redeem themselves and reintegrate into society.

After reading the previous narrative about the sea demons in the Ruins of Return, the idea of providing the Mount Mang rebels with a home seemed justifiable.

However, those with a keen eye could tell that this was ultimately all about power. Cultivators who knew a bit more about the situation had heard whispers that Mount Mang City might be deeply connected to the Noble Dharma, which would explain everything. After all, nothing was impossible if the Noble Dharma was involved.

After understanding the underlying reasons behind Mount Mang City's emergence, most of the readers turned back to scan the list of nominated sects again.

They all ended up with the same question. "Where on earth did this Talismanic Sect come from?"

The readers had never heard of Mount Mang City before, but they knew it had been established by the Mount Mang rebels. On the other hand, this Talismanic Sect... was completely unfamiliar to them.

The more knowledgeable folks in the Southern Regions might have heard of the Talismanic Sect. However, it was precisely because they knew about it that they found it even more perplexing.

How did the small Talismanic Sect, hidden deep in the mountains, suddenly end up on the stage for large sects?

The readers turned to the article introducing the Talismanic Sect and noticed the tone of the writing had changed.

The entire section focused on one thing—the Talismanic Sect had recently succeeded in making one of the greatest treasures of legends, the Celestial Talismanic Wheel.

You don't need to care about which legend this treasure originates from. All you need to know is that it was from a legend. The talismans made with this Celestial Talismanic Wheel are high quality and inexpensive. The quality of the talismans is guaranteed to meet expectations. Fellow Daoists, the Talismanic Sect's talismans will definitely become your first choice when you're buying talismans!

...

With the latest issue of The Seven Stars Gazette in hand, Huan Leisheng came looking for Chu Liang. He exclaimed, "CEO Chu, you are truly amazing! How did you manage to get the Celestial Pivot Pavilion to promote us?"

Chu Liang shrugged. "Paid them, of course."

He was all too familiar with this game. From the very beginning, he had relied on Celestial Pivot Pavilion to provide publicity for him, and naturally, he had always made sure the spirit-stone coins were delivered in full.

"But..." Huan Leisheng was stunned. "Celestial Pivot Pavilion is part of the Divine Nine. Would they really do this just for some spirit stones?"

Lackey A chuckled. "It's because we paid them a whole lot of spirit stones."

Chu Liang remained as calm as ever and said, "Mister Huan, you don't need to worry about any of this. Leave it all to me. Your only job is to ramp up the production of the talismans."

"Understood!" Huan Leisheng nodded firmly. "Now that the Celestial Talismanic Wheel is complete, the first batch of Five Elements Talismans has been successfully produced. They turned out great! The only thing is... I still don't know where we should sell them."

"I have shops on Red Cotton Peak. We'll have no problem in that regard." Chu Liang tapped his temple. "What we really need to figure out is how to make people want to buy our talismans."

They had already previously discussed how the talisman market was oversaturated. Everyone had their own trusted talisman masters and wouldn't make a switch so easily. After all, even if they were confident in the quality, people still preferred what they were accustomed to.

"Didn't we say... high quality and inexpensive?" Huan Leisheng asked in confusion. "Our production costs are so low. Why not just make our prices really low?"

"That won't work." Chu Liang shook his head. "If we enter the market rashly with a very low price, people will just assume our talismans are low-quality."

"Then what should we do?" Huan Leisheng asked.

He had realized that ever since he started working with Chu Liang, he was gradually growing addicted to this feeling of not having to use his brain. It had become second nature for him to stop thinking and just wait for Chu Liang's answer.

Just as Huan Leisheng expected, Chu Liang already had a plan.

Totally at ease, he explained, "We'll drive up the market price for talismans. Meanwhile, we'll keep selling ours at the original market price. This way, our price advantage will appear naturally. Once the market stabilizes and people are already used to buying our talismans, it won't be a problem if we lower our prices."

"Can we really manipulate market price?"

"All we need to do is increase demand," Chu Liang replied.

The highly saturated talisman market was a problem for both the sellers and the buyers. If demand suddenly surged, then naturally, sellers would raise their prices.

Following Chu Liang's train of thought, Huan Leisheng asked, "How do we increase demand for talismans...?"

"I know!" Lackey A blurted out. "If we want people to use more talismans, we just need to start a war somewhere!"

Chu Liang gave him a big thumbs-up. "Be a decent person, won't you?"

Well, then. It seems we have a war king in the making.

After a pause, Chu Liang continued, "In a couple of days, let's pick an auspicious date and host a shopping festival. Red Cotton Peak will give back to our dear friends and family by holding a large-scale event. Anyone who spends a certain amount at Red Cotton Peak will qualify to participate.

"The event will be a sword-riding challenge along cloud track, where participants will face multiple barriers of spiritual qi to get prizes. To pass through the barriers, they'll have to use the correct talismans at the right time. The more barriers they clear, the better the prizes will be. However, participants must bring their own talismans."

Chu Liang grinned. "I've already got the perfect name for the event—Male and Female Cultivators, Charge Forward!"

"But... wouldn't we have to give away a lot of valuable items as prizes?" Lackey A asked hesitantly. "Wouldn't we be taking a loss?"

Chu Liang explained, "This is only a short-term strategy to boost demand for the talismans. Even if we take a loss now, the real profits will come later. Besides, I doubt we'll actually lose anything.

"Don't forget... not everyone who participates will win, but every person that wants to participate will have to spend money."

Chapter 758: There's Another Xue Lingxue?

Ominous crimson-black currents were flowing throughout a pitch-black, rugged island. Just one glance would make a person's soul tremble.

This was Soul Flame Island, located in the West Sea.

Originally, it was a place that the West Sea Diabolical Forces used solely to refine souls. It had always been under the control of Immortal Yuan Lu, and he had forbidden outsiders from setting foot on its grounds. Nevertheless, his rule was no longer of any consequence.

The Imperial Supervisory Bureau had subdued Immortal Yuan Lu but officially declared him dead. The allied forces of the immortal sects set out to purge the West Sea of the diabolical cultivators, but the diabolical forces there stood no chance without their combat powerhouse. Their collapse was immediate, and they scattered like monkeys from a falling tree.

The orthodox diabolical disciples of the West Sea Diabolical Forces lost the land that their sects had occupied for thousands of years. Many fled or were killed. Those who survived were forced into hiding, becoming no different from the members of the infamous Dark King Sect that had to constantly live in hiding.

As a result, Soul Flame Island had become eerily quiet.

There was a woman on the island. She had smooth, glowing skin and was dressed in a flowing sky-blue muslin dress. She appeared to be walking, but a closer look would reveal that her feet never touched the ground. The woman hovered a few inches above it, drifting gracefully like a spirit born from nature itself. Her fairy-like presence was very distinct against the eerie backdrop of the pitch-black island.

The woman called out, "Over here! This way, Esteemed Senior Moth. Be careful not to step on the soul-burning lava. Even with your high cultivation level, it will still cause some discomfort."

She directed her words at a short, tired-looking man wrapped in a thick white robe. He appeared to be in his forties or fifties, with shriveled skin and a face lined with deep wrinkles.

Upon hearing what the woman said, the man let out a long yawn. "You dragged me over the moment I woke up. I'm still quite groggy. Maybe I could just step on the lava to wake up."

Despite what he said, he continued to hover over the ground, avoiding the flowing lava.

The woman responded politely, "Apologies for troubling you, Esteemed Senior."

"I missed that great battle, so doing this now isn't much trouble at all," the man replied, rubbing his eyes. He asked, "But I'm curious. Demon King of the Verdant Foxhills, why do you insist on having me accompany you?"

The woman answered nonchalantly, "Because no one else was willing to go with me."

She was Caiyi, the Demon King of the Verdant Foxhills in the Far West.

As for the man who looked tired and old, he was the Demon King of the Emerald Forest—Moth.

Long ago, when the land demons were forced into exile and fled to the Far West, the seven surviving demon kings divided the scarce livable land among themselves under the guidance of the Demon God's high priests. The territories were the Great Marshlands, the Verdant Foxhills, the Frostveil Domain, the Desolate Plains, Mount Thunder, the Abyss of Wrath, and the Emerald Forest.

It was clear at a glance that the Emerald Forest and Verdant Foxhills had the best terrain. At the very least, they had plants and vegetation, making them far more habitable than the other territories. That meant the two demon kings that had managed to claim those two territories were clearly very powerful.

Yet, when Venerable Wen Yuan led his forces to attack their lands, all the demon kings rose to the fight except for the Demon King of the Emerald Forest... because he had been asleep.

Unlike the Nightmare Demon King, who could only fight in his dreams, the Demon King of the Emerald Forest simply slept—a deep, uninterrupted slumber that nothing short of a life-threatening crisis could disturb. Of the past three thousand years, he had likely spent two thousand five hundred of them asleep.

Yet, no one dared to provoke him... because he always woke up stronger.

His sleep wasn't some cultivation technique. It was more like... digestion.

And even though his last nap had lasted for centuries... he was still tired.

Moth smiled and asked, "Why's that? Demon King of the Verdant Foxhills, you are young and incredibly intelligent. Why are you so unwelcome?"

"It's nothing, really," Caiyi replied, shaking her head. "It's just that my previous travel companion was Changfeng."

"Eh?"

Moth blinked, suddenly looking much more awake.

In the past three thousand years, Changfeng was the only one of the Far West's demon kings that had died in battle.

Is this fox... unlucky to be around?

Seeing that Moth was now fully alert, Caiyi simply smiled. Without another word, she turned and flew deeper into the island.

They ventured into the depths of the island's volcanic crater, where soul flames flowed like a river. As they pressed on, it got so dark that it became impossible for them to see anything.

Suddenly, Caiyi called out, "Nightmare Demon King!"

A long silence followed. Then, without warning, the vast soul flames ahead flared up violently, rumbling like a liquid reaching boiling point. The noise continued until, at last, the sound of rushing water echoed through the depths of the crater.

A pair of crimson eyes flickered to life, lighting up the pitch-black depths. That was the moment that calm finally returned.

Caiyi spoke to the glowing eyes. "The Demon King of the Great Marshlands fell in battle, and Immortal Yuan Lu was slain by the righteous sects. The Great High Priest ordered me and the Demon King of the Emerald Forest to come here to bring you back to the Far West. Esteemed Senior, the demon race needs your power."

"Oh..." The crimson eyes shifted slightly, followed by a low, rumbling voice.

"I was wondering who it was... Turns out it's Momothling."

"Nightmare Demon King," the Demon King of the Emerald Forest said with a bitter smile. "I've told you countless times that you can call me by my name, but can you stop calling me Momothling?"[1]

...

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

There was a series of explosions in the sky, releasing bursts of colorful qi.

A dazzling beam of swordlight streaked across the long path of clouds in an almost transcendent display of elegance.

Barriers of various colors emerged at intervals from within the sea of white clouds. To clear the barriers, the cultivator riding on that flying sword activated some talismans. Each one glowed brilliantly as it effortlessly removed a barrier.

In the blink of an eye, the cultivator completed the flight route along the cloud track, making a full circle around the peak before returning to the summit of Red Cotton Peak.

"WHOOOOOA!!!"

Thunderous cheers erupted from the crowd of cultivators on the peak. Their voices were so loud that they even shook the mountain winds.

Standing tall on the flying sword was, of course, the peak master of Red Cotton Peak—Chu Liang.

He was still very skilled at sword-flying. Moreover, with his ever-growing cultivation power, his speed had become even more blindingly fast.

In fact, he had actually deliberately slowed down for the demonstration. Otherwise, most of the cultivators present wouldn't have even been able to see him. And if they couldn't see him, then the demonstration would be pointless.

It had only taken Red Cotton Peak a few days to complete all the preparations for the event that was to be held during the shopping festival. Then Chu Liang casually chose a date, and they launched the shopping festival, once again bringing bustling crowds to the peak.

Most cultivators spent their days immersed in ascetic cultivation, so such festivities were rare sights for them. Consequently, Red Cotton Peak's excessive promotions of the shopping festival immediately drew them over.

As Chu Liang hovered midair upon his flying sword, two people appeared on the platform below—Lackey A and Lin Bei. They took turns to eagerly promote the event with loud, enthusiastic voices.

"Anyone who, like Young Hero Chu, makes it through the whole cloud track flawlessly will receive Red Cotton Peak's ultimate treasure—the legendary White Dragon Scale Armor!" Lin Bei announced in a booming voice. "Of course, even if you don't make it to the end, reaching specific points along the cloud track will still earn you corresponding treasures! And if you don't want them, you can exchange them for spirit-stone coins at market value!"

Lackey A explained, "Our event is completely free to participate in! Just bring your own talismans! Anyone who spends at least five hundred spirit-stone coins at any Red Cotton Peak store within the next month will qualify to participate. This is purely our way of giving back to you, our dear friends and family!"

"Don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!"

"Male and Female Cultivators, Charge Forward!"

"Play the music!"

At that command, the resounding notes of guqin, flutes, and string instruments filled the air, rousing the spirits of those in the crowd. Among the musical instruments, the notes of one particular guqin rang out with passionate intensity, its sound piercing the heavens.

Hearing that, the cheers across the peak grew even louder.

That was because the one playing the guqin on stage was none other than the South Melody Conservatory's Xue Lingxue, who had not made a public appearance in years.

As the saying went, "the new replaces the old." Six years had passed, and the South Melody Conservatory had ushered in a new generation of outstandingly talented disciples, gaining countless admirers across the nine provinces.

Shen Qingyan, the head disciple of the previous batch of disciples, now served under the master of the South Melody Conservatory. As for the rest of the batch, most of them had faded from the public eye.

Many had likely left the South Melody Conservatory to pursue careers elsewhere. A select few, like Xue Lingxue and Yu Xiang'er, devoted themselves entirely to the Great Dao of Music, preparing for future breakthroughs.

If it weren't for Chu Liang, Xue Lingxue would never have agreed to do a commercial performance.

As soon as her song ended, another musician took over. After all, someone of Xue Lingxue's status couldn't be expected to play all day like a hired performer, and this wasn't her concert either.

Nevertheless, just that one song was more than enough.

With the festivities in full swing, spirit beasts pulled extravagant flower carriages through the streets. There were even several beautiful men and women dancing gracefully on the carriages. This parade had been arranged with the help of Xue Lingxue, who had called upon retired South Melody Conservatory disciples for the festival.

Working at Red Cotton Peak was far more lucrative than being an ordinary dancer elsewhere, so these former disciples were more than happy to take part.

Originally, the flower carriages were occupied by the Koi Sisters, with the immensely popular Liu Xiaoyu'er leading the way. However, they needed to cultivate, so they couldn't be there for the festival.

Consequently, Chu Liang decided to gradually retire his people from roles like these.

That included the Golden-Furred Hou, who pulled the carriage, the Baize youngling, who acted as a traveling companion, and of course, the Koi Sisters, who served as mascots of good luck.

However, he would let his esteemed teacher continue with her debt-collecting duties. After all, she genuinely loved it with a passion.

Chu Liang stepped forward to greet Xue Lingxue. "Thank you for your hard work, Miss Xue."

Xue Lingxue stood alongside Yun Chaoxian, Tie Chui, and the other people from the South Melody Conservatory.

With a small smile, Xue Lingxue replied, "It was nothing, just a small favor."

It had been six years since Chu Liang last saw her, but Xue Lingxue's appearance had not changed much. Her fair, beautiful, and glowing jade-like skin remained as radiant as ever. She was dressed in an elegant sea-blue dress, highlighting her slender and graceful figure.

Under the countless gazes of the crowd, every expression Xue Lingxue made was impeccably beautiful. It was a testament to her status as a top disciple of the South Melody Conservatory, one on par with the head disciple. She had likely spent so much time controlling her facial muscles that she formed perfect expressions through muscle memory.

"Just a little token of appreciation," Chu Liang said, handing Xue Lingxue a storage jade slip.

With his current wealth, there was no way he would let a friend help for free. In fact, he would pay them more than if he had hired a stranger.

"What's this?" Xue Lingxue gently pushed the jade slip back. "I helped you because we're friends. There's no need for this."

"Don't worry about it." Chu Liang grinned. "You were helping me make money. Naturally, when the money comes in, we'll share the profits."

"That's right. Chu Liang is rich now," Yun Chaoxian chimed in. "Miss Xue, you don't have to be so courteous with him."

"Hahahah!" Tie Chui let out a booming laugh. "Lingxue doesn't need this. But Young Hero Chu, if you really wish to pay back the favor, there is something you could help her with."

"Tie Chui..." Xue Lingxue shot her a look. "Chu Liang is already very busy. There's no need to trouble him."

Tie Chui countered, "He has a very high cultivation level, and more importantly, he's got an incredibly sharp mind. Isn't he perfect for this?"

"What's the matter?" Chu Liang asked. "You don't need to be courteous with me. Even if I'm busy, I have a clone that can go down the mountain."

Tie Chui, being as loud and blunt as ever, immediately answered on Xue Lingxue's behalf. "Well, it's honestly quite strange... For the past few years, Lingxue has been completely focused on studying music at the South Melody Conservatory. She never once stepped outside.

"And yet, in the martial world... another Xue Lingxue has appeared."

"A fake Xue Lingxue?" Chu Liang asked.

"Well, that's the weird thing..." Tie Chui furrowed her brows. "That Xue Lingxue... seems to be real!"

Chapter 759: Suicide

"What does this mean?" Chu Liang asked, glancing at Xue Lingxue.

If that Xue Lingxue is real, then does that mean the Xue Lingxue standing beside us is fake?

Tie Chui waved her hand, dismissing what she said before. Choosing her words carefully, she explained, "Ah, no. What I meant is that she doesn't seem like a fake. I investigated that Xue Lingxue... and I really couldn't pick out anything that wasn't right. That Xue Lingxue looked exactly like the real one. Ugggh!"

Tie Chui punched the air fiercely in annoyance, producing audible bursts of wind.

Seeing that, the gazes of the people around her turned apprehensive. No one's forcing you to do this. Just tell us slowly. Why are you getting mad at yourself?

After a while, Tie Chui finally explained the situation clearly.

About half a month ago, there were rumors circulating in the martial world that Xue Lingxue would be performing at a certain location. Rumors like that were common for popular figures, so the South Melody Conservatory didn't bother paying attention to them.

Three days later, it was reported that the performance had indeed happened. That changed everything. If the performance had taken place, then someone had to have gone there to perform. This wasn't just a case of spreading rumors anymore. Someone was impersonating a disciple of the South Melody Conservatory to commit fraud.

This sort of thing had happened before. People would disguise themselves as disciples of the South Melody Conservatory, go to remote places, and scam others into giving them money or having sex with them. In the end, it was always the South Melody Conservatory that had to bear the consequences.

So, after finding out about the fake Xue Lingxue's performance, the South Melody Conservatory sent disciples to investigate the matter. Nevertheless, the impersonator was highly secretive and left no traces that could lead to their whereabouts.

In the meantime, they received news from another city that Xue Lingxue was scheduled to perform there. The South Melody Conservatory immediately sent their fiercest and mightiest combat musician, Miss Tie Chui. She took her drum and went there to investigate.

Tie Chui arrived at the concert location ahead of time and hid among the crowd, planning to expose the impersonator the moment they took the stage. However, when the concert started and "Xue Lingxue" stepped onto the stage, Tie Chui was stunned.

That person looked exactly like Xue Lingxue, and she even played the guqin with the same style and charm.

Even if someone could perfectly replicate someone else's appearance, they wouldn't be able to replicate their playing style as well—regardless of how advanced their illusory spells were.

That was why Tie Chui found herself in a confused daze. She thought that perhaps Xue Lingxue was truly short on money and had taken on some individual work.

Consequently, during the mid-concert break, Tie Chui barged into the backstage area. She approached that "Xue Lingxue" and tested her.

"I asked her why she was performing there," Tie Chui said. "She told me that she hadn't performed in a long time, so she snuck out to perform. She hoped I wouldn't report it to the conservatory master when we returned.

"When I spoke with her, she was just like Lingxue. Her expressions, her voice, the way she talked—everything was the same. So, I agreed to keep her secret and returned to the South Melody Conservatory. But not long after that, the real Lingxue came to my room and asked how the investigation had gone."

Xue Lingxue shared her account of the incident. "I had been in closed-door cultivation for days. When I came out, I heard someone had been impersonating me, so I went to ask Tie Chui about it. But she insisted that I was the one who told her to keep it a secret."

"It's so strange." Tie Chui looked very perplexed. "There wasn't any fluctuation in the impersonator's foundational qi. No matter how advanced an illusory divine skill she might have been using, it shouldn't be able to replicate Lingxue's music skills as well."

Someone replicated her appearance and even the way she played the guqin...?

Chu Liang found the matter quite strange too.

He was reminded of the Xiao sisters from the Celestial Charm Sect. They had mastered the world's most advanced illusory techniques and spells, but even they could only replicate appearances.

Then he recalled another situation that was similar to Xue Lingxue's. Previously, the Sea Master had made a fake Golden Toad and falsely delivered the decree of the South Sea's Hallowed Mother. The toad demon's disguise had been incredibly realistic, and it had been almost indistinguishable from the real Golden Toad.

Could these two incidents be connected?

However, even the fake Golden Toad hadn't been able to replicate the real Golden Toad's treasure-exchanging ability. It could only perform a crude imitation, producing subpar enchanted tools.

After thinking about it for a moment, Chu Liang asked, "Since you're seeking my help, I assume you already know where that impostor will be heading next?"

"That's right." Xue Lingxue nodded. "It's said that her concert tour will continue eastward and arrive at her next stop the day after tomorrow. It's... the Fuyao Kingdom."

...

By the shores of the East Sea, a tall, dark-skinned man with unnaturally long limbs that reached past his knees stood at the edge of a cliff. His dull, vacant eyes were filled with despair as he stared at the raging waves below.

He muttered sorrowfully, "To think that I would fall and wither like this for half my life..."

"I gave my all in everything, yet I've been branded a traitor who turned against his master. How could the heavens be so unfair? How could the world be so unjust?"

"It's true I killed someone... but does that mean I deserve to be condemned by everyone like this?"

This man was Du Wuhen, the former head disciple of the Thunderbolt Stronghold.

His downfall had begun when he was still part of the Thunderbolt Stronghold. Tempted by the great rewards that the Penglai Supreme Sect offered, Du Wuhen had agreed to secretly collude with them to stir up conflict between the Thunderbolt Stronghold and the Celestial King Sect. However, that ended up forcing the Thunderbolt Stronghold into a corner. Left with no other choice, the Thunderbolt Stronghold aligned with Penglai and became their pawn.

Huang Hanshan, the lord of the Thunderbolt Stronghold, secretly bore a grudge against Du Wuhen for that and nearly caused him to die. In the end, Du Wuhen had no choice but to sever ties with his sect and fully submit to the Penglai Supreme Sect.

He had thought the Penglai Supreme Sect would honor their promise and provide him with an abundance of spirit-stone coins, resources, and beautiful women... But in the end, Daoist Xuan Lu just coldly tossed Du Wuhen, in his severely injured state, into the Sea of Demons. If he died, so be it. They would only talk about everything else if he managed to kill his way out.

Du Wuhen struggled to survive in the Sea of Demons. Then the radiant Chu Liang appeared, and Du Wuhen was about to escape thanks to him...

But Yang Bujue suddenly entered the scene and nearly killed Du Wuhen with a saber-like knifehand strike. If not for his Azure Mysterious Wind Bird swiftly carrying him back to the Thunderbolt Stronghold for treatment, he would have perished in the depths of the Sea of Demons.

Fortunately, Huang Hanshan and Wei Tiandi were away at the time, and the soft-hearted Huang Ling'er had been left in charge. She secretly hid him elsewhere and treated him in secret for several days until he finally recovered.

However, once Du Wuhen was well again, Huang Ling'er drove him away, unwilling to have any further involvement with him. She had saved him because they used to be fellow disciples. That was all there was to it.

Huang Ling'er's look of disdain hurt Du Wuhen deeply.

I was once one of the immortal sects' top prodigies, the Thunderbolt Stronghold's most outstanding disciple of my generation. How did I end up like this?

Did I truly make terrible choices in the past?

Is there truly no way to wash away all of my shame in this lifetime?

If so, what's the point of living?

Du Wuhen raised his scythe and slashed his throat.

"Keeew!"

As a sharp cry rang out, the scythe emitted a flash of light. It transformed into the Azure Mysterious Wind Bird and broke free from Du Wuhen's grasp.

"Azure Mysterious Wind Bird?" Du Wuhen gazed at the large bird before him, gently stroking its neck. "In this world, you're the only one who still cares about me. You're the only one who still cares whether I live or die, right?"

With eyes full of disdain, the Azure Mysterious Wind Bird suddenly spoke in human language. "Initially, I thought you were a prodigy of this era and that if I accompanied you, I would have a bright future ahead, at least for the next hundred years. I might even be able to advance further in my cultivation.

"But seeing you now, so weak and miserable... You're just a useless person that seems strong, but you're actually all withered and weak inside. Don't go dying in front of me and giving me bad luck for no reason."

The Azure Mysterious Wind Bird then spread its wings, soared into the sky, and flew far away.

Du Wuhen watched the Azure Mysterious Wind Bird become a tiny speck in the distance, like a star in the night sky. He raised his hand and tried to grab it, but all he grasped was air.

He sank into a deep silence.

A moment later, he suddenly burst into tears.

"Even you have abandoned me... Now, there really is no reason left for me to live!" Du Wuhen cried out. "AAAAHHHHH!!!"

He struck his palm toward his heart.

However, just as his palm strike containing a thousand jun of force was about to hit his chest, an elderly man suddenly yelled from the sea. "STOP! You mustn't do that!"

"Eh?"

Du Wuhen had no intention of listening to what the elderly man said, but the moment he heard those words, his arm stopped moving, seemingly unwilling to finish the strike.

What is going on?

With a confused expression, Du Wuhen watched a large ball of red light float up from the sea. The light faded and revealed an elderly man with a kind smile and a courteous and amiable demeanor. At a glance, he seemed like an exceedingly polite elderly gentleman.

"Young man, I sincerely apologize for interrupting your suicide attempt. Please allow me to offer my earnest apologies first," the elderly man said, his tone incredibly polite. "But do you not know that the heavens cherish life? Since I have witnessed this today, I cannot allow you to die before my eyes."

"Sir..." Du Wuhen uttered hesitantly.

As a well-traveled prodigy of the immortal sects, Du Wuhen knew that most seventh-realm Eminent Ones would not possess such a gentle and polite demeanor.

This old man seems to be either a powerful cultivator at the pinnacle of the seventh realm... or an eighth-realm cultivator, a master of the Heavenly Origin.

But it seems like too much of a coincidence to randomly run into such a powerful cultivator in the vast East Sea. Could it be that the opportunity has arrived for me to turn my life around?

With that thought in mind, Du Wuhen lamented, "I spent half my life straying down the wrong path. Now, I have no family, no friends. I'm completely alone. I've lost all reason to live. I might as well just die now."

"That is a mistaken belief, young man." The elderly man chuckled and shook his head. "I, too, spent half my life making mistakes, and now I am also alone in the world. But as long as you spend the rest of your life doing good, you may still redeem your past sins. As long as you live, there is hope. If you die... then there is nothing left."

Du Wuhen might not have fully absorbed the latter half of what the elderly man said, but the first half struck him deeply. His brows twitched, and his eyes gleamed. He had made a decision.

Suddenly falling to his knees, Du Wuhen proclaimed loudly, "Sir, you have shown me great kindness by saving my life. If you do not mind, I would like to recognize you as my adoptive father and care for you in your old age!"

At this moment, he had already placed everything on the line, hoping to make this a positive turning point in his life. If the elderly man refused, Du Wuhen wouldn't be surprised in the least. And if the elderly man agreed, it would be the most pleasant surprise and blessing for Du Wuhen.

Nevertheless, the elderly man's reaction was completely unexpected—something Du Wuhen had not even considered.

The mysteriously powerful elderly man suddenly knelt down as well and exclaimed, "I wouldn't dare, I wouldn't dare! That would be far too presumptuous of me! I am grateful that you wish to do so, but I cannot agree to that. If you really want to form a bond with me, let's just become sworn brothers!"

Chapter 760: The Dragon Dancer

The City of Azure Waves, Fuyao Kingdom.

As the largest island kingdom in the vast East Sea, the Fuyao Kingdom was as prosperous and thriving as the nine provinces under the rule of the Yu Dynasty. The only difference was that the Yu Dynasty had more than ten large cities, whereas the Fuyao Kingdom could only sustain one—the City of Azure Waves. Beyond the city, the kingdom consisted mostly of rural fields and countryside, with the only exception being the capital city.

Even so, the prosperity of the City of Azure Waves alone was enough to astonish visitors.

On the third floor of the city's renowned Flower Pavilion, Chu Liang and Lin Bei sat in silence behind a thin curtain inside a private room.

"Can you appreciate this?" Chu Liang lowered his eyelids. "Because I sure can't."

In the Flower Pavilion's main hall, there was a group of female dancers performing on the grand stage. They all wore extravagant and lustrous gold-white dresses. This style of clothing was quite exotic, and the designs were rather unique.

However, the women's faces were covered in thick white powder, and their lips were strikingly red. Watching from a distance, ordinary people might not think there was anything strange about it, but cultivators had keen eyesight and would find it quite eerie.

"This crappy place is just like this." Lin Bei also seemed disinterested. "No wonder Miss Xue and Miss Tie didn't want to come."

At the moment, Lin Bei was dressed in a loose dark-blue robe and held a circular fan, looking every bit like a local of the Fuyao Kingdom.

There were two cups of clear wine and various small plates of snacks on the table in front of them... but the pair didn't find any of the snacks particularly appetizing.

...

Chu Liang was visiting the Fuyao Kingdom at Xue Lingxue's request to help investigate her impersonator.

If the goal was simply to cancel the concert in the Fuyao Kingdom, the South Melody Conservatory could have just announced that Xue Lingxue wasn't holding a concert tour and warned the public not to be deceived.

Nonetheless, if they did that, Xue Lingxue's mysterious impersonator would become even harder to track down and capture, making it impossible to resolve the problem for good. Thus, the South Melody Conservatory chose not to make any public announcements and instead planned to investigate the situation in secret.

If Xue Lingxue wanted to request the assistance of a seventh-realm Eminent One from her sect, she certainly could have. Nevertheless, it was widely acknowledged within the world of immortality cultivators that Chu Liang was incredibly intelligent. He would definitely be a far better choice than any of the seventh-realm Eminent Ones in her sect.

Yun Chaoxian was preoccupied with his sect's matters and couldn't accompany them, so originally, this trip was meant for just Chu Liang, Xue Lingxue, and Tie Chui.

However, when Lin Bei heard that Chu Liang was heading to the Fuyao Kingdom, he immediately said, "What a coincidence! I have a friend in the Fuyao Kingdom who just invited me over as a guest. Since you're all going too, why don't we travel together?"

Chu Liang was no longer surprised by Lin Bei's wide network of connections. Lin Bei had already demonstrated that before he even joined the Foreign Affairs Hall, and later, as the leader of Mount Shu's Four Overlords, it was inevitable that he would socialize with others. Most of the people he met sought to befriend him first, and given his loyal nature, it was only expected that he would have friends everywhere.

Now, Lin Bei was no longer the reckless youth he once was. In the martial world, he was known as "Mount Shu's Protector of Justice, Red Cotton Peak's Timely Helper", and it was not an exaggeration.

The friend who had invited him to the City of Azure Waves was the head of a prominent local family, who had previously visited Red Cotton Peak to discuss a partnership.

Thanks to Lin Bei's connections, Chu Liang's group was warmly welcomed upon arriving in the City of Azure Waves. Lin Bei's friend had prepared a spacious residence for the group to stay in and arranged for them to watch a performance at the Flower Pavilion that evening.

The Fuyao Kingdom had always flourished in the refined cultural pursuits of intellectuals[1], earning the title of the "Kingdom of the Wind, Flower, Snow, and Moon,"[2] with a particular reverence for music and dance.

Thanks to that, the South Melody Conservatory, which specialized in music and dance, enjoyed a prestigious status in the Fuyao Kingdom comparable to that of the sects in the Divine Nine. Unfortunately, the disciples of South Melody Conservatory had never paid much attention to this island kingdom in the East Sea and had never performed there before.

For that very reason, news of Xue Lingxue's tour had caused quite a sensation throughout the Fuyao Kingdom.

...

A while later, a skinny middle-aged man with a mustache stepped into the private room and greeted Lin Bei and Chu Liang.

"Brother Lin Bei! Ah, and this must be the renowned Young Hero Chu! I've looked forward to meeting you for a long time. It's an honor to meet you at last!"

Chu Liang and Lin Bei both stood up to greet him. "Master He Feng."

The He Family was one of the most prominent families in the Fuyao Kingdom. They had various businesses involving spirit plants, spirit beasts, medicinal pills, enchanted tools, and more. As a result, they had significant ties with Red Cotton Peak.

After the brief exchange of pleasantries, He Feng sat down with a smile. "It's been so long since we last met, Brother Lin Bei! I regret not inviting you here to have some fun earlier. To think that Young Hero Chu would come as well—what an unexpected honor!"

"Really?" Chu Liang smiled as well. "I was actually worried that I wouldn't be very welcome in the Fuyao Kingdom."

Chu Liang was not lying. Every member of Silver Sword Peak, starting from Di Nufeng to Chu Liang, had been considered a long-time enemy of the Fuyao Kingdom.

"Mm..." He Feng hesitated for a moment. "It's true that a small number of the Fuyao Kingdom's citizens aren't particularly fond of you. However, your victory was earned with your skills and power. You didn't use any devious methods; you fought honorably and won. Those who are sensible would naturally accept the loss."

He Feng then turned to Lin Bei and asked, "Brother Lin Bei, what do you think of Fuyao Kingdom's music and dance?"

Lin Bei looked at those pale, ghostly faces and hesitated for quite a while, trying to find the right words.

"Heheheh!" He let out a hearty laugh. "Fuyao is indeed worthy of its title as the Kingdom of the Wind, Flower, Snow, and Moon. This dance performance... certainly has a rather unique charm."

"Brother Lin Bei, there's no need for undue praise. Compared to the renowned dancers of the Yu Dynasty, the songstresses and dancers of the Fuyao kingdom hardly measure up." He Feng chuckled softly. "Nevertheless, those dancers are not the ones I want you to see. I invited you here today because there will be a performance by the Dragon Dancer later."

"Dragon Dancer?" Chu Liang uttered. He had never heard of that person before.

With a brief explanation from He Feng, Chu Liang and Lin Bei understood who the Dragon Dancer was.

It turned out that "Dragon Dancer" was the highest title for dancers in the Fuyao Kingdom. The current holder of the Dragon Dancer title had been recognized as the most exceptional dancer in the kingdom in recent years.

Lin Bei responded eagerly, "A performance by the finest dancer in the Fuyao Kingdom is certainly worth looking forward to."

The three of them continued their conversation while more performers went on stage. Female singers sang, accompanied by musicians playing instruments. They were quite good. Nonetheless, Chu Liang and Lin Bei were accustomed to the South Melody Conservatory's performances, so none of the performances in the Flower Pavilion left much of an impression.

A long while later, the performers on stage stepped down, and the atmosphere in the venue suddenly heated up.

"Whooooa!"

"

Excited cheers rang throughout the Flower Pavilion, calling for the arrival of the Dragon Dancer. It seemed she was immensely popular.

Amidst the resounding cheers, a long sheet of multicolored muslin dropped down from the top of the Flower Pavilion, gracefully landing on the center of the stage. Then, as if caught by a whirlwind, it spun several times, dazzling the audience with its movement.

In the blink of an eye, the long sheet of muslin seemed to have transformed into a woman wearing a dress with long, flowing sleeves. The woman was tall and well-proportioned, making the silky muslin dress look like a cascading waterfall.

This woman had flawless and radiant skin. Her brows were arched like distant hills, and her eyes limpid like calm waters, with subtle ripples running through them. Her face carried a cool yet gentle beauty, and her figure was so perfect that even the slightest change in size would diminish her allure.

Had she been the first one to appear, she would already be considered a rare beauty. However, appearing after the previous performers with their strange, heavily painted faces made her look like the most beautiful woman in the world.

Lin Bei immediately joined the cheering crowd. "Dragon Dancer!"

Chu Liang, on the other hand, remained seated, calmly and quietly appreciating the Dragon Dancer's beauty. Though he and Jiang Yuebai were far apart, he always kept in mind the principles of a virtuous man.

Once the cheers of the crowd subsided, the Dragon Dancer gave a gentle nod of gratitude to the audience. Then, with a graceful sweep of her flowing sleeves, she began her performance.

For anyone that had reached the first realm of cultivation and above, their flexibility and motor coordination far surpassed that of ordinary people. That meant there was no movement cultivators were incapable of doing, and that was why ordinary dance movements rarely left a lasting impression on them.

However, the Dragon Dancer's dancing was exceptionally fluid. From her very first movement, it was as if she had struck a hidden node in her body that connected her to the Heavenly Dao. The way she stretched her waist and limbs carried a rather magical allure, entrancing whoever was watching. It was like her dance had cast an illusory spell on the audience, though without any harmful intent.

"As expected, she seems to have connections to some Dao," Chu Liang remarked, nodding in admiration.

After reaching the seventh realm, his understanding of the Great Dao had deepened significantly. Whenever he observed the world, he couldn't help but view everything through the lens of "seeking the Dao." This was a common affliction among seventh-realm Eminent Ones. They instinctively searched for even the slightest opportunity for enlightenment. Perhaps this was the true meaning of what it meant to attain the Dao in the Dao Attainment Realm.

Just as the audience was becoming fully entranced by the Dragon Dancer's performance, a startled scream suddenly rang outside the Flower Pavilion. "Ah!!!"

Immediately after, there was a loud sound.

Boom!

A shadowy figure burst into the pavilion through a wall, appearing out of nowhere. The shadowy figure grabbed the Dragon Dancer and charged out of the pavilion through another wall.

In the blink of an eye, the Dragon Dancer, who had just been performing on stage, vanished before everyone's eyes.

All that remained was a sinister demonic qi lingering in the air.

There was a brief moment of stunned silence before someone in the crowd shouted, "The Dragon Dancer has been abducted!"