

Stranger 131

Chapter 131: True Love

“Is there anyone who’d dare to emulate me?” The gambler yelled.

“I’ll do it!” An old man with white hair and beard stepped out of the crowd.

“...” Are these people stupid or suicidal? Wait, can a ghost even die? Hmm...

By now, Ye Qing had figured out that every single one of these villagers was a yin soul of sorts. The old man walked up to the cooking pot, dug out his eyeballs, and tossed it into the pot. The eyeball turned golden brown and even let out a fragrant scent almost immediately. Knowing he didn’t have much time, the old man tried to fish out his eyeball before it could sink to the bottom.

Something worse happened, however: his eyeballs had charred and melted into the oil in just the blink of an eye, never to be found again.

“My eyeball! My eyeball!” The old man wailed. He saw what had happened, but he refused to believe that his eyeball was gone. He kept fishing inside the pot until his arm had crumbled away as well. Still unwilling to give up, he stuck his left arm into the oil, then his upper torso, then his lower torso. Just like that, the old man was completely gone.

After that, Ye Qing was treated to a horror show that one could never find in a human society. The man would proceed to challenge his fellow ghosts to scoop their ear, their nose, their tongue, their head and so on from the cooking pot, and they all just went with it. It was an eye-opening experience to put it mildly.

Despite the variety, there was one thing that never changed. The gambler never lost a single game, and the losers were all cooking inside the cooking pot!

Inevitably, the gambler walked up to Ye Qing and challenged, “Would you like to bet with me, youngster?”

Ye Qing rubbed his nose and asked a reasonable question, “Can I say no?”

The second he said this, a terrifying amount of yin qi rolled out of the gambler’s body. The faces of the deceased yin souls also pressed out of the boiling oil to glare hatefully at Ye Qing. It looked like they would attack him all at once if he refused, and frankly it was a little scary.

“Fine, fine, since you invited me so passionately, it would be ungracious of me to say no.” Ye Qing shrugged. “However, you’re only betting your coins, your eyeballs, your head and whatever. Frankly, the stakes aren’t nearly high enough to pique my interest. Do you want to raise the stakes?”

“Raise the stakes?” The gambler was caught off guard. “I don’t understand.”

Ye Qing smiled. “What I mean is that you’re only betting one part of your body such as your hands, your ears, your eyeballs and so on. Instead, why don’t we bet our whole body? Let’s bet who can stay under the oil the longest!”

Faceless: "... *That's one way to raise the stakes alright.*

"Why not?" The gambler let out a confident chuckle. "If that's what you want, then let's go for it!"

"Good!" Ye Qing rubbed his hands excitedly. "Since you're such a good sport, it's only right that I reciprocate. You may make the first move!"

The gambler: "... *I don't think you get how reciprocation works.*

Ye Qing grinned confidently. "This is for your own good, brother. You'll never win if I go first!"

Faceless hurriedly echoed in agreement, "Yeah! My young master is the greatest gambler of them all!"

The gambler had to resist the urge to facepalm. Just how shameless could this pair of master and servant be?

In the end, the gambler agreed. He had been "taking the first turn" the entire time anyway, so what was one more? He leaped into the air and dove into the pot like a professional diver.

"*Magnifico!*" Ye Qing yelled the only Italian word he knew, grabbed a massive stone slab from nearby, and slammed it over the pot in the blink of an eye.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The gambler struggled with all his might as a matter of course. In fact, Ye Qing could tell through his spirit that the cooking pot itself was attempting to push the slab away or break it in half. Unfortunately for them, Ye Qing's strength was at the level of a dragon elephant", so their struggle was about as useful as a breeze.

When their thumpings became weak and useless, Ye Qing pushed both the slab and the cooking pot beneath it all the way into the ground. Once done, he clapped his hands in satisfaction and said, "What did I tell you? You should've made that first move count, brother! Also, gambling is bad for yourself and others!"

"Hahaha..." Faceless laughed dryly. Hell hath no fury like a shameless, brutal bastard!

They stepped around the big locust tree and continued down the road. This time, Ye Qing saw an old woman with a wrinkled face and gray hair sharpening an iron stick at a three-way junction. To be more specific, she was sharpening an unusually huge iron stick that was as thick as a bowl and over three meters long.

The iron stick was pitch black, dense, and shiny even in the darkness. It had to weigh twenty-five to thirty kilograms at least, a weight that even a young, fit lad would be hardpressed to carry. The old woman seemed to have no problem with it, however. She was grinding it against a whetstone the size of a millstone and sending sparks everywhere. She almost looked... cool, assuming that she was an allusion to that famous folklore [1].

There was a strange song mixed within the screeches of metal as well. It sang in a shrill, mocking voice,

"A granny lost her needle,

So she took an iron stick to make a new needle.

Eeeee screeched the iron,

Aaaaa squealed the whetstone,

Day after day,

Year after year!

But the stick never shrank,

Nor did it grow thin.

Day after day,

Year after year!

The granny's shoes are torn,

Her hat is ripped,

And her clothes are covered in holes,

But the stick never shrank,

Nor did it grow thin.

Foolish old granny!

Foolish old granny!

Hehehehahahahaha..."

"Huh..." Ye Qing rubbed his nose curiously, "It sounds better than I expected!"

When Ye Qing got closer, he realized that the song was coming from the iron stick itself. As if on cue, the old woman looked up at Ye Qing and asked, "Tell me, young man. Do you think I can grind this iron stick into a needle?"

Ye Qing smiled and nodded firmly. "As long as your kung fu is up to par, who says you cannot grind an iron stick into a needle? You can do it, granny!"

"Kakaka... you have a sweet mouth, young man!" The old woman let out a strange cackle that literally sounded like a million crows cawing at the same time. It was extremely noisy and unpleasant to hear.

Faceless and Kung Fu Frog immediately covered their ears and staggered away from the old woman, proving that the cackle wasn't as harmless as it seemed. However, Ye Qing continued to smile as if he couldn't feel the sound attack at all.

Speaking of smiles, the old woman's mouth kept widening until her cheeks split apart and revealed rows and rows of sharp teeth. It was incredibly unsettling to look at.

"But young man, I've been grinding this stick for one thousand and two hundred years, and I still wasn't able to make a needle. Would you happen to know a solution?"

“Do you?”

“Do you?”

The extraordinarily unkind and malicious-sounding “do you”s didn’t come from the old woman. It came from inside the iron stick.

Ye Qing pretended not to hear the voice and thought for a couple of seconds. Then, he clapped his hands and declared, “I got it!”

“How? Please, tell us!” Both the old woman and the entity inside the iron stick asked in unison.

Ye Qing smiled. “It’s simple. You just need to beg me.”

“Excuse me?” The old woman could not understand what he meant.

“If you beg me properly, then I’ll grind that stick into a needle for you!” Ye Qing clarified.

Finally realizing that Ye Qing was toying with her, the old woman flew into a rage, “How dare you make fun of me!”

The old woman’s upper and lower jaw smashed together and sent sparks flying all over the place. The iron stick in her hands was vibrating ominously as well.

“I’m not though.” Ye Qing shrugged. “I’m serious! Or are you so jaded that you don’t believe I can do it? I can’t help you if you don’t want to be helped, man.”

The moment the enraged old woman opened her mouth to say something, Ye Qing immediately punched her in the mouth. She bit down on his arm expecting to taste his juicy flesh and blood, but instead her sharp teeth broke into smithereens. The next second, she let out a bloodcurdling scream and disappeared as the Burning Wind consumed her from the inside out.

The battle wasn’t over yet though. The three meter long iron stick let out a loud “Aaaaaaaaahh!” and attempted to bash Ye Qing’s brain in. However, he easily caught it with both hands before shifting his grip to the center of the stick. It couldn’t break free no matter how hard it struggled. Ye Qing then squeezed it as hard as he could without snapping it in half before he started pulling toward both ends of the stick and rubbing it in a circular motion.

Sparks flew everywhere as entire chunks of metal were rubbed off the stick’s body. The entity possessing the iron stick let out a howl so terrible that it would’ve chilled even the most hardened man to the core. Ye Qing paid no attention to it, however. He just kept rubbing the stick until it had finally been reduced to a sewing needle.

“See? I told you I could do it. It’s really not that difficult!” Ye Qing admired his creation for a bit before shaking his head with a sigh. “It’s too bad you’re too impulsive, granny! You would have loved to see it!”

Ye Qing then looked at Faceless and advised, “Remember this, Faceless. Impulse is the devil, and you must never succumb to it.”

Faceless let out a dry laugh. *I wonder. I'm pretty sure the real devil is standing in front of me!*

With that done, Ye Qing stored the sewing needle in his Nature's Shell. The Stranger inside the sewing needle wasn't dead yet, so it was technically a Strange Artifact. He could probably sell it for money if he wanted to.

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Thump thump!

This time, the village did not wait for him to stumble upon its next horror. The cheerful, celebratory sounds of drums and suonas quickly filled the air.

Ye Qing listened for a moment before muttering, "It sounds like a wedding parade."

Before he could finish, another musical parade broke out from the other end of the village. However, this one sounded sad and mournful.

"And that's... a funeral procession."

Ye Qing didn't know what expression to make to say the least. It wasn't everyday that a wedding parade and a funeral procession happened at the exact same time!

Both music grew louder and clearer over time. It would seem that both processions were headed toward the village center.

"Are they going to clash?" Ye Qing couldn't help but smirk at the idea. "It would be fun if they did!"

His prediction was spot on. Not long later, both processions encountered one another under the massive locust tree. The music ceased abruptly as they came to a standstill, leaving only eerie silence.

On one side, the people conducting the wedding procession were wearing auspicious colors such as red and green. Everyone looked happy and cheerful. The man leading in front of the wedding procession was dressed in wedding garments and riding a white horse. He was obviously the groom. However, his face looked blurry from Ye Qing's perspective probably because the angle was bad, and the moonlight was somewhat blinding.

On the other side, everyone in the funeral procession was dressed in white and wearing white bands around their hands. Their expressions were dark and gloomy. At the center of the procession were eight people carrying a black coffin. What was strange was that a big red flower was tied to the center of the coffin, and the 囍 [2] word was taped to both sides of the coffin.

Finally, the person leading the procession was carrying a memorial tablet. The upper edges of the memorial tablet was covered in red cloth and the word 囍 as well. The center of the tablet read: "In Memory of Guo Yuniang".

"A ghost marriage?" Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise. The deceased was clearly a woman judging from the name on the memorial tablet, and a real funeral procession

would not have red flowers and words on the coffin and the memorial tablet. Therefore, this was most likely a ghost marriage, one between a living groom and a dead bride. Now he understood why the two processions had met each other at the center of the village.

For obvious reasons, ghost marriages were incredibly rare.

Guo Yuniang's corpse isn't actually in that coffin... right? Ye Qing thought, but there was no other explanation. This groom was so infatuated with the woman that he would go so far as to bring her corpse with him. *It's gotta be true love!*

Chapter 132: Yin Locust Tree

Suddenly, Wawa crawled out of his hair and stared at the groom on the white horse for a bit. Then, she said in puzzlement, "Hmm? Hey friend, the groom looks exactly the same as you."

"Is that so?" Ye Qing turned serious. He knew that Wawa was no ordinary Stranger. She was a pure soul who could see what most people couldn't see. When he looked up to check out the groom's face once more, the groom turned around to stare at him as well!

Ye Qing shivered. As Wawa said, the groom looked a lot like him. Scratch that, he looked exactly the same as him. Even his gaze was a mirror reflection of his.

It was at this moment a familiar grin spread across the groom's face. Ye Qing blanked out for second, and the next thing he knew, he was sitting on the white horse. He had become the groom himself.

"Please welcome the bride, groom!" The matchmaker, an old woman, said loudly.

Ye Qing slowly got off the horse and walked up to the coffin. He didn't feel in control of himself.

"Please kick the coffin, groom!" The matchmaker yelled again.

Once again, Ye Qing couldn't stop himself from kicking the coffin. *Seriously? I know it's tradition to kick the carriage to symbolise having wed one's beautiful bride, but a coffin? My dear dead bride is totally going to come back to life and haunt me, isn't she?*

"Please carry the bride, groom!" The matchmaker yelled a third time, and the coffin lid opened on its own. Then, the woman wearing a bridal dress and a red veil over her face sat up without warning.

If he ignored the bride's deathly pale hands, her bony stature, and the suspicious scent permeating the air, he could see that she was quite the beautiful woman in life. But right here and now, the only thing Ye Qing felt was goosebumps!

"Please carry the bride, groom!" The matchmaker yelled again when she saw that Ye Qing wasn't moving.

Ye Qing swallowed. He wanted to carry the bride and get it over with as well, but his legs just refused to listen to him!

When it became apparent that Ye Qing wasn't going to move, the bride slowly floated out of her coffin and landed behind his back. Then, a pair of unblemished arms slithered down his shoulders and wrapped around his neck.

Wow, you're a bold woman, ain'tcha? Ye Qing thought to himself. To say that the bride felt cold would be an understatement. He felt like he was carrying a block of ice.

"Please carry the bride home, groom!" The matchmaker barked a new order.

This is my second life, but I haven't tried carrying a bride before. This should be interesting! Thought Ye Qing as he began walking. However, the longer he walked, the colder and heavier the bride became. Eventually, he felt like he wasn't carrying a block of ice, but a mountain.

It wasn't just a feeling. If Ye Qing could look behind him, he would notice that he wasn't carrying not one, but a mountain of ghosts. She was accompanied by a mountain of ghosts. The ghosts were stacked on top of each other until they reached all the way to the top. When they could not go any higher, they spread out to the surroundings like branches and leaves. From a distance, it almost looked like Ye Qing was carrying a gigantic tree.

Ye Qing was hunchbacked at this point. Every time he took a step, his feet would sink deeper into the ground. His surroundings were covered in a thick layer of frost as well.

"Do you not love me anymore, husband? Or are you having second thoughts about marrying me? If not, why are you walking slower and slower?"

Ye Qing had just pulled his feet out of the earth when Guo Yuniang whispered beside his ear. At the same time, he felt her icy cold arms slowly tightening around his neck as if she would strangle him if she did not like his answer.

What Ye Qing really wanted to say was, "It's because you're way too heavy, woman!" But he was pretty sure his health would be in grave danger if he answered honestly. Instead, he said, "Of course I love you, dear! I love you to death!" *Literally, since you know, you're already dead?*

"If you really love me, will you stay with me until the end of time?"

As it turned out, his answer didn't really matter. Guo Yuniang continued to tighten her arm around his neck until there was no doubt that she was strangling him. Ye Qing could not seem to feel it, however. He answered, "Sure!" and continued forward.

Guo Yuniang sounded extremely pleased with his answer. "Good, good! Yuniang will stay with you forever, husband. We will never be separated from each other!" She then draped her head over his shoulder and tightened her arms with everything she got.

If Ye Qing died, then they would truly be together forever.

One breath passed...

Three breaths passed...

Five breaths...

Ten breaths...

Guo Yuniang's smile slowly stiffened because the man she was trying to strangle was completely fine. Not only that, cracks were slowly appearing across her arms because she was using too much strength.

"What's wrong? Don't stop! I've never had a neck massage before, but this is more comfortable than I thought!" Ye Qing joked while cracking his neck. "If you're done, then it's my turn now!"

Ye Qing very, very slowly raised his right leg so he wouldn't accidentally topple over from the sheer amount of weight on his back. At the same time, the ground began shaking unnaturally almost as if it was afraid!

After he had raised his foot about three inches into the air, he brought it down and caused the ground to undulate outward like a piece of fabric. Every house in the village collapsed when the "wave" passed under them. At the same time, his hunched back abruptly straightened not unlike a drawn bow that was released, or a spring that had bounced back to its original shape. The mountain of ghosts behind his back were tossed straight in the sky, and his spine was as straight as an arrow once more.

"So that's what I've been carrying this whole time? No wonder it was so heavy!" Ye Qing commented when he turned around and saw the ghosts. He then assumed a stance and threw a punch at them.

"Cloud Vaporization Style"

The Burning Wind washed over the mountain of ghosts. Like a sand castle that was struck by a tidal wave, the ghosts disappeared like they never were.

"It's too bad I didn't actually get to marry my bride. I haven't even seen her face yet," Ye Qing sighed wistfully.

After the ghosts were destroyed, the red suit he was wearing abruptly vanished into nothing, and Faceless, Kung Fu Frog, and his donkey reappeared on the road looking dazed and confused. The trio had suddenly disappeared when he replaced the groom, and it looked like they had no idea what just happened.

Rustle rustle...

A cool breeze blew through the area, and the giant locust tree at the center of the ruined village swayed a little to the wind. Then, without any warning whatsoever, the tree suddenly reached out toward Ye Qing with its branches and roots. It moved so silently that not even Faceless and the others noticed anything amiss!

The branches and roots were less than a meter away from Ye Qing when he suddenly turned around and grinned at the locust tree. "Hehe! I knew it was your doing from the start, Yin Locust Tree!"

As if embarrassed that their true colors were revealed, the branches and roots moved toward Ye Qing even faster than before. In response, the Astral Refiner simply executed another Cloud Vaporization Style punch and turned it all into ash.

Ye Qing dashed forward and approached the Yin Locust Tree's main body at high speed. He then slammed his fist straight against its tree trunk.

The Yin Locust Tree was incredibly huge. Ye Qing looked like an ant compared to it, and his punch seemed just as futile. However, countless faces suddenly pressed out of the branches and leaves and howled on top of their lungs as if they were in abject pain. Some of the faces looked very familiar as well. Ye Qing saw the three men who were arguing whose ghost story was better, the gambler, the groom on the white horse, the bride in the coffin and more.

The next moment, dark red flames and Burning Wind poured out of their orifices and consumed them all. Just a dozen or so breaths later, the entire tree had burned into ash.

"You're free now!" Ye Qing said with a smile. The unnatural fog and darkness trapping the whole village slowly vanished into nothing, and the moon and the stars suddenly appeared in the sky as if an invisible veil had been removed. The light painted a dreamlike scene that was both picturesque and freeing.

The clear moonlight illuminated their surroundings as clear as day. They had never been inside a village. It was a gravesite filled with haphazardly erected gravestones and even unburied bones all along.

Ye Qing and his companions were standing at the center of the gravesite. There was also a pile of ashes in front of him. If he had to guess, it was most likely the ash of the Yin Locust Tree.

"What on earth was that thing, young master?" Faceless asked.

Everything had returned to normal after that locust tree had burned into ashes. Clearly, it was the mastermind behind it all.

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Ye Qing scooped up a pinch of ashes as he answered, "That tree is a Hatred-class Stranger called the Yin Locust Tree. The Yin Locust Tree is only born in a land of great yin, which is why it is commonly spotted in gravesites and battlefields."

"In and of itself, the Yin Locust Tree is pretty weak. However, it can absorb the yin energy of the dead and create all kinds of minions such as Yin Souls, Zombies and the like. A Yin Locust Tree that has reached the height of its power is far, far stronger than your average Hatred-class Stranger. In fact, it is a match for some Soulstealer-class Strangers."

Faceless nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Every single ghost we encountered earlier is at least a Malice-class Stranger. The ghost bride might even be a Hatred-class Stranger."

Ye Qing continued, "That said, the Yin Locust Tree's birth condition is too strict, and it takes a long time to reach its full power. Even if that isn't the case, its true body is incredibly fragile. That is why it is only classified as a Hatred-class Stranger."

"I get it now. Thanks for the lesson, young master!" Faceless hurriedly served up a compliment.

Ye Qing nodded and said, "If you're ready, then I want you to collect the Yin Locust Tree's ashes and store them properly!"

"Huh? But why?" Faceless looked confused.

"Just do it."

The ash of the Yin Locust Tree was a key ingredient in making the Incense of Sickness. It was why Ye Qing had deliberately left the ashes behind.

"Yes, young master!" Faceless replied affirmatively and scooped all the ashes into a clay bottle. He handed the bottle over to Ye Qing after he was done.

After Ye Qing had put the bottle in his Nature's Shell, Faceless asked another question, "So, should we continue our journey, or should we stay here for the night?"

Ye Qing smiled. "We're staying, of course. This was the Yin Locust Tree's territory until we came through. Now that it's gone, this place is practically a safe zone for the moment. Besides that, I'm expecting some guests."

Guests who should've known better and left when they still had the chance!

Chapter 133: A Moment of Tranquility

"Can we hurry up, Brother Tian? What if someone else claims our mark before us?"

Tian Hang and his group had been moving at a slow and steady pace toward the gravesite. Mu, the vicious man who wanted to kill Ye Qing earlier, was urging Tian Hang to move faster after finally losing his patience.

Tian Hang glanced at Mu coldly. "What did I tell you yesterday? A Stranger Hunter must always be patient and careful! If not, it's only a matter of time before they die! If you can't even do something so simple, then you might as well go back to your home and till the soil! At least you'd still be alive then!"

Mu visibly flinched and put on an obsequious smile to appease his leader. "Haha, don't be mad, Brother Tian. I'm just worried that they'll get away, you know?" It was clear that he was terrified of the man.

Tian Hang snorted. "That won't happen. The gravesite appears at night and vanishes in the morning. If we get there too early, there's a chance we might be pulled into it. Do you know how dangerous that is? Forget robbing the guy, it'd be a miracle if even one of us manages to make it out alive!"

"At our current pace, the sun should just be rising when we get to the gravesite, so we would be safe. If the boy died, then all is well. If not, he should still be exhausted enough that we can defeat him with ease!"

"Brother Tian is wise!"

"Brother Tian is so awesome he can plan ten steps ahead!"

Tian Hao chided them goodnaturedly, "Enough, you bootlickers. We're getting close, so get ready. I expect all of you to pull your weight if that boy somehow survived the gravesite."

Mu snorted in disdain. "There is such a thing as over-worrying, Brother Tian. That gravesite is so dangerous that I've never heard of anyone walking out of it alive."

Tian Hang smiled. "Perhaps, but one should always be prepared for the worst. It is the only way you can lead a good life in this world."

"We won't forget, Brother Tian!" Everyone responded affirmatively.

As Tian Hang had predicted, the sun rose just as they got to the gravesite. Its warm rays pierced through the heavens, chased away the darkness, and illuminated the world once more.

"Huh?" Mu was leading the way when suddenly, he cried out in surprise, "Brother Tian, look! That locust tree is gone!"

Tian Hang stepped forward and gazed into the distance. "Huh. It really is gone. What happened here?"

"And that boy is right over there, Brother Tian! But... huh? He really is still alive! But he's lying on the ground and breathing very lightly. He must be badly injured or near death already!"

Mu's eyes lit up when he glimpsed Ye Qing in the middle of the gravesite and sensed his faint breathing. He immediately took off while yelling, "I'm going to kill that boy right now, Brother Tian!"

"Come back, Mu!" Tian Hang blanched, but it was already too late. He muttered "dumbass" under his breath before waving for the others to follow, "Let's go, boys! Be careful!"

"Someone's coming, young master!" Beside Ye Qing, Faceless opened his eyes and shot Tian Hang's group a glance. "It's the Stranger Hunters from yesterday, and they do not look friendly. Should I take them out?"

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"Those greedy bastards. I knew they would show up," Ye Qing sighed. Tian Hang thought they were unnoticed when they hid in the forest yesterday, but his spirit was far greater than they could imagine. He could even tell that they were watching him with unfriendly eyes. It was then he knew then that they were plotting something heinous against him.

After they ran into the Yin Locust Tree, he quickly figured out that the Stranger Hunters were hoping that the Stranger would kill him or severely wound him at least. That way, they would be able to take advantage and profit from his dead body.

I saved them, and their way of repaying me is to kill me. This world.

"Go!" Ye Qing waved. "No need to hold back!"

“Hehehe! Don’t worry, young master. You have my word that their deaths would be painless!” Faceless let out an evil cackle and slowly made his way toward the Stranger Hunters.

“Get out of my way if you want to live, you decrepit thing!” Mu yelled in disdain when he saw Faceless walking toward him.

Instead of getting angry, the Stranger Faceless replied with a polite smile, “I’m afraid I can’t do that. My young master has ordered me to entertain you and your friends. Without further ado…”

As soon as Faceless said this, Mu abruptly froze in his tracks. Then, his eyes, his nose, his mouth and his ears slowly vanished into nothing. He hit the ground with a thump and died just like that.

“Mu! Watch out, everyone!” Tian Hang turned pale and cried out a warning when he saw this. The rest of the group hurriedly drew their weapons and spread out. However, they didn’t even manage to get close to Faceless when suddenly they felt a strange energy invading their bodies. The next thing they knew, their faces slowly started disappearing as well.

“I can’t see! I can’t see! My eyes!”

“My nose! I can’t feel my nose! Brother Tian, help!”

“Mm! Mmmmmm!”

Everyone was screaming in terror and running their hands over their own faces as if the gesture would somehow prevent their facial features from vanishing. But of course, it was no use.

Out of everyone present, Tian Hang was the only one who managed to stop the unnatural power from killing him. Even so, the fact didn’t bring him any comfort at all. Everyone in their group was a Vessel Augmentor, and three were middle-stage Vessel Augmentors. No one was a newbie either. So how did everything go wrong so fast?

When they had chosen to come after Ye Qing, Tian Hang was certain that the worst that could happen was a death or two; practically par for the course for Stranger Hunters. Instead, everyone had died in just a scant few seconds. As if that wasn’t bad enough, the boy didn’t even look injured or tired from the night’s ordeal. It was clear he was ready for them as well.

It was a trap!

The sandpiper and clam war together, and the fisherman catches both. That was what should have happened, except that the sandpiper was really a flesh-eating monster, and after devouring the clam it waited for the fisherman to show up so it could eat him as well. To say that Tian Hang was terrified and dismal would be an understatement. If the servant alone was enough to wipe them out, he could only imagine how strong the boy was!

Flee! I need to flee!

Tian Hang turned around and fled immediately. If he waited a few seconds longer, he worried that he would never get the opportunity to worry again. As for revenge, the thought had never even crossed his mind. Death was a constant in this line of work, and the risks were often as high as the

rewards, if not higher. If the Stranger Hunter came through, then the rewards could transform their lives forever. If not, then they would die like the rest. The only one to blame if that happened was themselves.

Alas, Tian Hang had only managed a few steps when he felt a hot wind blowing past his face. The next thing he knew, his blood began boiling, his internal organs started charring, and a raging bonfire suddenly ignited inside his head. His mind felt like it was on fire.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!” The pain was so bad that Tian Hang could not help but let out a scream. When he did, dark red flames shot straight out of his mouth. His pores began to leak dark red flames as well.

As Tian Hang burst into flames, he hit the ground with a soft thud. A few breaths later, all that was left was a pile of ash that was quickly scattered by the wind.

“I could’ve taken him, young master!” Faceless turned around and said. It was the truth. Tian Hang wasn’t weak, but there was little chance he would be able to defeat Faceless.

Ye Qing shot him a lazy smile. “You could, but it would’ve taken too long. I’d rather end it now so we can get to our destination as soon as possible.”

Faceless slapped his own head in disbelief and chagrin. “I can’t believe I almost forgot about it! The shame, the shame! Please forgive me, young master! Next time, I swear I’ll prioritize your time and business like I value my own life!”

Faceless had always been a bootlicker, but this was a tad too far even for Kung Fu Frog, who had gotten used to his antics at this point. It rolled its beady eyes and croaked disdainfully at the Stranger.

In response, Faceless puffed up his chest and declared, “How can you say that, Brother Frog? I’m not trying to butter up the young master. I only speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! What do you say, Wawa?”

Wawa was currently sitting on Ye Qing’s shoulder. She made a face at Faceless and booed him, “Shameless bootlicker!”

Faceless sighed thematically, “I suppose it was too much to expect the sparrow and the swallow to know the dream of the great swan! A shame!”

Ye Qing interrupted suddenly, “Now I’m curious. What is your dream, Faceless?”

Faceless couldn’t say that his dream was to rebel against his master and beat his sorry ass, of course. He let out a good-natured chuckle and answered, “My dream is to serve you as your most faithful servant, and that you will live as long as the heavens themselves, of course!”

Ye Qing shot him a noncommittal smile and stared at the rising sun to the east. He said quietly, “I don’t need eternal life. I just want to live my life happily and peacefully.”

“Let’s go.”

And so they resumed their journey on the peaceful, earthly road while the sun was still warm.

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The reason Maple Leaf Point was called the Maple Leaf Point was because it was situated inside a red maple forest. The leaves turned as red as fire when autumn came, and they were even more beautiful than the red flowers in February. It would not be wrong to say that they were a symbol of humanity's prosperity and passion.

The river running through Maple Leaf Point was called the Luo Shui River. It passed through two commanderies, Luo Shui and Feng Yang, and dozens of villages. Without exaggeration, it had spawned over tens of thousands of acres of fertile land and provided a near endless source of aquatic food. Naturally, it was a center of trade and businesses as well. It was even called the "ribbon of jade that wraps around the Land of Heavens, and produces more goods than Shendu itself".

The "Land of Heavens" in the line was referring to Luo Shui, the commandery famed for its aquatic food, rice, and commerce. Once a traveler had gotten to Maple Leaf Point, they could travel all the way to Luo Shui by boat.

Although Maple Leaf Point was just a ferry terminal, it was as big as a village and much more prosperous than the likes of August Hill Village. It even had a small garrison to defend its denizens from threats.

Unfortunately, this meant that its entry inspection was extremely stringent. Even with the badge he received from the Anyang Pacification Bureau, Ye Qing still had to undergo a detailed interrogation and special registration before he was finally allowed into the terminal. It was mostly because he brought three Strangers with him.

Faceless wasn't afraid of being found out because of his transformation ability and the Invisible Cicada, but Kung Fu Frog and Wawa did not have such luxury. There were plenty of warriors who used Strangers in combat, or wealthy people who kept pet Strangers in this world, so Stranger servants and pets were hardly uncommon. Chu couldn't exactly enforce a realm-wide ban on such practices either.

To make up for this, the imperial court decreed that everyone who wished to bring a Stranger or two with them on their travels or raise a pet Stranger must subject themselves to careful scrutiny and registration. This was to prevent Strangers from controlling a human to infiltrate a human settlement, or to prevent *humans* from using their Strangers to wreak havoc to their surroundings. Every time there was a supernatural incident, these people were usually the first ones to be investigated as well.

The good news was that the badge was useful, and the guards were perfectly respectful with him. After he completed the processes as per the rules demanded, he was let into Maple Leaf Point without any fanfare.

Ye Qing did not linger after entering Maple Leaf Point. He went straight to the ferry terminal just in time to catch a tower ship that was bound for Luo Shui.

The tower ship was called Cloud Mountain, and it was just as big as its name might suggest. Thirty meters long, thirteen meters wide, and twenty-six meters tall, it resembled a small mountain. Silver clouds were engraved into various parts of the ship such as the hull, the bow, the four-storey tower, the deck and more to give it a mystical and elegant, noble and exquisite appearance as well.

Ye Qing had just set foot on the ship when a ship steward named Qian greeted him. The steward's smile grew wider when he took note of the group's appearance. As a general rule, people who brought Strangers with them should be treated respectfully, and Ye Qing was almost certainly no one to be trifled with.

Chapter 134: I Have Money

Steward Qian began explaining to Ye Qing, "There are three types of lodgings in Cloud Mountain, esteemed guests. The economical lodging offers a bunk room that you will share with up to ten people at the same time. Of course, the bunk room is perfectly clean, and the beddings are all new."

"The standard lodging offers a standard room that you will share with three people at a time. Although you'll all be living in the same room, it has three separate fully-furnished bedrooms. You may not interact with your roommates at all if that is your wish."

"The premium lodging offers a private room that belongs to you and you alone. Not only that, it comes in eight different styles, namely plum, orchid, chrysanthemum, bamboo; spring, summer, fall and winter. It is your choice which style you want your room to be. We want to ensure that you are perfectly comfortable during your time with us."

"Not only that, esteemed guests who stay in our premium lodgings are offered the option to hire a private housekeeper. Your food and beverages will be completely free as well."

Ye Qing asked, "Sounds great. Which room would you recommend I stay in, Steward Qian?"

Steward Qian smiled. "You, your servant, and your pets are going to take up a lot of space, but it would be very inconvenient for you to stay in a bunk room. Your pets especially are going to cause alarm among your bunkmates. Therefore, I would suggest that you choose the standard lodging or the premium lodging."

Ye Qing nodded. "How much do they cost?"

Steward Qian answered, "The standard lodging costs five silvers. If you wish to reserve the whole room, then you will have to pay ten silvers instead. The premium lodging costs fifteen silvers."

"Fifteen silvers? That is crazy expensive!" Ye Qing gasped. He already knew that Cloud Mountain's lodgings were going to be expensive, but he was still surprised when he heard Steward Qian's answer. Fifteen silvers were enough for an ordinary household to live comfortably for over half a year.

"If the premium lodging is too much for you, then—" Steward Qian thought Ye Qing couldn't afford the premium lodging because of his reaction. He was just about to offer him the standard lodging when Ye Qing interrupted him and said,

"I choose the premium lodging!"

“As you—huh? Excuse me?” Steward Qian thought he was mishearing things.

Ye Qing tilted his head at his reaction. “What? It is an option, isn’t it? Or are you afraid that I can’t afford it?”

Steward Qian smiled awkwardly. That was exactly what he thought, but he didn’t dare to say it out loud as a matter of course.

Ye Qing chuckled. “Don’t worry. It’s true that I think that your prices are expensive, but that doesn’t mean I can’t afford it. I have a couple hundred silvers in my purse, so you can be rest assured that I’m not trying to swindle you or whatever.”

He was telling the truth. He had taken over the Iron Shirt Gang and robbed the Zheng Clan, the Shen Clan and the Li Clan. Not including the Pacification Bureau, the only major power in Anyang that he hadn’t robbed was Qiao Six, so he was filthy rich to say the least. Fifteen silvers were nothing to him.

“Wonderful! I shall make the preparations immediately. By the way, did you know that you’re an incredibly lucky man? There is exactly one premium room left.”

Delighted, Steward Qian was just about to lead Ye Qing to his room when suddenly, a cunning-looking middle-aged man with a hook mustache blocked his path. He said, “Excuse me, Qian Yong, but I’ve already reserved the last premium room for my guest. You should find another room.”

The guest the middle-aged man spoke off was a suspicious-looking man wearing a black robe and a hood that covered up most of his face. His appearance was gloomy enough, but nothing was more gloomy than the literal coffin he carried behind his back. The coffin looked like it was forged from metal, but it was dark and unreflective. It was as if it was consuming all the light that shone its way. It looked dark and gloomy, enigmatic and sinister.

“It’s already reserved? Why am I not aware of this, Jiang Shan?” Qian Yong asked with a puzzled expression.

Jiang Shan sneered. “And what does your ignorance have anything to do with me?”

Qian Yong’s expression turned a little ugly, but he swallowed his displeasure and said, “I would know if a room has already been reserved. Let us bring this up with the chief steward.”

The corners of Jiang Shan’s lips immediately curled down as he rebuked Qian Yong, “I gave you face, Qian Yong! You’re the one who decided to throw it away. Do you think you can bear the consequences of obstructing *my* guest’s registration?”

“You... you shut your mouth!” Qian Yong replied rather weakly despite his beet red complexion. Jiang Shan was a distant nephew of the chief steward, which was why everyone on Cloud Mountain tolerated him and gave him special treatment to a certain extent. Unfortunately, this made Jiang Shan bossy and domineering to the point where he no longer hesitated to steal their business from right under their nose. It was their own fault, but it was far too late to correct that mistake.

Jiang Shan hmped loudly as he glared at Qian Yong, “This is your last warning, Qian Yong. Let this go, or I swear you will regret this!”

Qian Yong shuddered as the blood drained away from his face. He was angry and indignant, but he knew that the temporary ecstasy he would feel for standing up to Jiang Shan wasn’t worth the consequences. So, he turned back to Ye Qing and said, “My apologies, esteemed guest, but—”

“You have nothing to apologize for, steward! Just leave this to me!”

Ye Qing patted Qian Yong on the shoulder before stepping forward and smirking evilly at Jiang Shan. “Steward Jiang, is it? I don’t know what gave you this impression, but you seem to think that I am somehow *less esteemed* than your dear guest. You claim Steward Qian can’t bear the consequences of obstructing your guest’s registration, but has it crossed your mind that the same also applies to *me*?”

He wasn’t a meddlesome person by nature. If Jiang Shan had spoken nicely, he would’ve given up the premium room without fanfare and stayed in a standard room instead. He wasn’t a pampered young master who couldn’t stand anything but the highest quality anyway. Heck, he had slept in an abandoned temple that was haunted by literal man-eating women not long ago. What was that meme again? If it fits, he sleeps!

But Jiang Shan’s attitude was just unbearable. It was one thing if he lorded over his colleagues only, but his attitude also extended to their customers. Did his daddy never teach him that there were people out there he couldn’t afford to offend?

“Hah! You’re just a poor scholar! Like the likes of you can do anything against me!”
Jian Shan snorted in disdain. “Now get lost, or I’ll—”

“I’ll pay twenty silvers for the premium room.”

It was at this moment Jiang Shan’s mysterious customer stepped into the argument. His voice was cold, dark and emotionless as if everything in the world was beneath his notice.

Jiang Shan was surprised by the interruption, but he quickly looked over to Ye Qing and raised his head arrogantly. “You heard that, *scholar*? Twenty silvers. Do you think you can afford that?”

“Thirty silvers,” and a smile was Ye Qing’s response. *You think you’re made of money? What a coincidence! So am I!*

Jiang Shan’s smile immediately stiffened.

The mysterious man didn’t seem displeased or angered by Ye Qing’s retaliation, however. He responded in his icy voice, “Forty.”

“Fifty.”

“Sixty.”

“Seventy.” One thing Ye Qing learned in his previous life was that bluffing was a powerful weapon. So what if you didn’t actually have the money in your pockets? If you could convince your opponent into believing that you were a million bucks, then you were, essentially, a million bucks. Even better, he wasn’t even bluffing this time!

“Eighty,” the mysterious man was still upping the price, but this time he was two breaths slower. It was clear he needed to think if he could really afford it.

“Ninety!” Ye Qing answered without hesitation. *Good! This is my win!*

This time, the mysterious man hesitated for a long time before he finally said, “One hundred!”

“Most impressive, brother!” Ye Qing abruptly complimented the guy and gave him a thumbs-up. “The room is yours!”

Qian Yong: “...”

Jiang Shan: “...”

The mysterious man: “...”

A long time later, the mysterious man finally squeezed out an incredulous question, “W... Why did you stop?”

Ye Qing tilted his head in confusion. “You must have a heck of a reason to be willing to pay a hundred silvers to get this room, which is why I decided to be the better man this time. What’s wrong?”

The mysterious man’s mouth twitched under his hood. *I wouldn’t mind it if you chose not to be the better man though!*

“Also, it’ll take two days at most to go from here to Luo Shui. Worst case scenario, I could just find a random floor and meditate until the ride is over. I’d rather spend a hundred silvers on a high-class restaurant in Luo Shui than a room that I’ll be leaving in two days. What, do you think I’m stupid?”

“...” The mysterious man’s arms shook under his sleeves. *He’s definitely calling me stupid in a roundabout fashion. You sonuvabitch. I don’t even know you, and you screw me over like this? I might be well-off, but I’m not that well-off that I could afford to fuel a forge with silver! Is it too late to change my mind?*

“You paid a hundred silvers for this room, so you first, brother!” Ye Qing goaded and stepped aside to let Jiang Shan and the mysterious man through.

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Seeing that the argument was over, Jiang Shan also let out a cough and beckoned, “This way please, esteemed guest!” He then led the way toward the upper floors where the premium rooms were located.

The mysterious man wasn’t done with Ye Qing though. When he was walking past Ye Qing, he “accidentally” bumped his shoulder against Ye Qing’s. It looked as harmless as a breeze, and the contact had lasted only for an instant. However, when the duo were three or four steps apart from each other, the entire ship abruptly sank a meter into the water as if a mountain had suddenly sat on it. It was so forceful that it kicked up a massive wave that was at least dozens of meters tall. The passengers, the crew and everyone else aboard the ship were all crying out in surprise.

It was at this moment cloud-shaped runes appeared around the ship. Like a calming breeze, it neutralized the unknown force and returned everything back to normal.

“Huh? Did I just sense a clash aboard the ship?”

Inside a luxurious room, a thin but healthy-looking middle-aged man with a long beard suddenly opened his eyes. “What powerful auras. They’re both Astral Refiners. Thank goodness they’re only sounding each other out, or my Cloud Mountain would’ve suffered serious damage!”

In a differently-styled but equally luxurious room, a woman was playing her yaoqin when she sensed the clash as well. Her fingers paused, and a hundred flowers suddenly bloomed inside the room.

“Oh? I wasn’t expecting to see him here!” The woman said smilingly before resuming her play once more. The resonant plucks of her strings slowly washed away the beautiful flowers until everything had returned back to normal. It was almost as if the flowers were a desert mirage or a reflection of the moon.

The two of them weren’t the only ones who noticed the clash. Every warrior aboard the ship had noticed the sudden outburst of power, and their reactions were fairly mixed. There were people who were surprised, wary, afraid, disdainful and more.

Ironically, the two people who had caused the commotion in the first place simply gave each other a nod and continued on their way. It was almost as if nothing had happened.

The mysterious man sent Jiang Shan away after he was led to his room. After the steward was gone, he abruptly let out a violent cough that caused a small amount of blood to trickle down his lips.

“An Astral Refiner... and not just any Astral Refiner either!”

He had wanted to teach the young man a lesson, but it turned out to be a big mistake. Like an ant trying to topple a mountain, the only one hurt in the collision was himself. His energy had rebounded and damaged his own internal organs. *Man, I am so unlucky today.*

The mysterious man’s face turned increasingly pale as he coughed a couple times more. Knowing that he couldn’t dilly-dally any longer, he immediately assumed a meditative stance and channeled his energy. Wisps of dark energy started flying out of the coffin and into his body. Some time later, his aura finally returned to normal.

A few breaths later, the mysterious man finally opened his eyes and allowed himself to think once more. *That Astral Refiner is incredibly young too. I should recognize him, but I don’t. Is he a genius from a major clan or something?*

You can practically hear Xu Banren's internal scream when Ye Qing suddenly left the negotiation table.

Chapter 135: The Hundred Mouth Dragon

“I knew he was an Astral Refiner. He’s pretty strong too!” Ye Qing muttered under his breath while massaging his slightly sore shoulder. The mysterious man probably possessed some sort of Strange Artifact that allowed him to hide his aura or

cultivation level, because he wasn't able to tell until they bumped shoulders with one another.

He had only used fifty percent of his strength because it was one thing to teach someone a lesson, and another to hit them with a full-powered attack. Despite this, he could tell that the mysterious man was injured by his retaliation. It wasn't a serious injury, but it certainly wasn't something he could just ignore either.

"I wonder how he's feeling right now, paying a hundred silvers for a single room *and* getting schooled by the very guy who screwed him over, hehe!"

"Esteemed guest? Did you say something?" Qian Yong asked curiously.

Ye Qing smiled. "It's nothing. Please get me a standard room, Steward Qian. Of course, I'll be reserving the whole thing!"

"As you wish, esteemed guest! Please, follow me!" Qian Yong smiled back. He was grateful that Ye Qing was willing to stand up for him, so he quickly led Ye Qing to his room and did his best to accommodate him.

After everything was ready, Qian Yong said, "I'll be taking my leave now, esteemed guest. I hope you'll enjoy your stay with us. In the meantime, do not hesitate to seek me out for anything!"

"I will. Thanks, Steward Qian!" Ye Qing said.

"I'm the one who should be thanking you, esteemed guest, not to mention that it is my duty to serve. See you later!" Qian Yong saluted him and left after that.

"Brother Frog, Wawa, Faceless, feel free to catch some rest. I'm going to train for a bit!" Ye Qing told his companions before he started practicing the Cloud Vaporization Style once more.

Training was very important. Without training, not even the most talented person in the world could become proficient in anything. This was especially true when it came to fist martial arts.

Since he had grasped the basics of applying the Cloud Vaporization Style in combat, it was time to master the little details such as weight, speed, movement, control, power and so on. Everything must be honed into perfection, and he must know his moves so well that it was practically second instinct. Only then could he unleash the Cloud Vaporization Style's full potential all the time.

Right now, he was still a long, long way from reaching that ideal state. That was why he must train as often as he could. Besides that, practicing the Cloud Vaporization Style could temper his astral qi. Once he had fully mastered the Burning Wind, he would use the Blood Jade Lotus to refine his astral qi and enter the late stage of the Astral Refinement stage in one go.

Finally, he was training like his life depended on it because it did. He could not rest easy until Sunset Hill and Wang Luori were dealt with. Sure, the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau would keep him safe, but even they could not protect him forever. In the end, the only one he could truly rely on was himself.

The foghorn sounded, and the Cloud Mountain began cutting through the waves. Soon, it was speeding toward a foreign and unfamiliar land.

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Ye Qing spent the entire morning practicing the Cloud Vaporization Style in his room. It was a fulfilling and peaceful experience.

“Friend! Look!”

He had just finished going through the motions for the nth time and was enjoying a cup of wine when Wawa caught his attention. He turned around and saw the Book Sprite lying on top of the window sill and shouting excitedly at something outside.

Ye Qing walked over to her and looked outside the window. He immediately saw a school of big fishes with translucent wings riding the waves kicked up by Cloud Mountain and jumping in and out of the water. Sometimes, they jumped so high and far that it almost looked like they were flying. The fact that their wings glittered like rainbows under the sunlight only made the scene even more picturesque.

“These fishes are so big and beautiful! Wawa loves them!” The young girl squealed with joy and clapped her hands.

Ye Qing leaned on top of the window sill with a smile as he explained, “This fish is called the Wavechaser. Despite being a Red-class Stranger, it is perfectly harmless and enjoys nothing more than to ride the waves.”

“We should go to the deck for a better view. It would look even more impressive if they formed a fish tide!” Ye Qing beckoned Wawa and started toward the exit.

Still clapping her hands in excitement, Wawa immediately leaped over to Ye Qing’s shoulder and cried, “Okay!” She was so happy that her eyes were curved like crescents.

There were a lot of people on the deck when they got there. Clearly, they had come to watch the Wavechasers as well. It was at this moment someone shouted, “Here they come!”

Ye Qing looked. Countless Wavechasers had come together to form a tidal wave behind Cloud Mountain, chasing after its waves. When they finally reached the ship’s sides, they leaped into the air, unfolded their wings, and cut through the air like living rainbows for several seconds before falling back into the river. They would repeat this feat again and again as if they were tireless. It was a colorful, picturesque scene straight out of a dream.

“It’s beautiful!”

“It’s magnificent!”

“I can’t believe this is real!”

The scenery was so fantastical that it almost felt insulting that the crowd could only muster simple words to describe it. But then again, did it really need to be fanciful? Sometimes, simple was the best.

Unfortunately, the good moment didn't last. Out of seemingly nowhere, gaping maws with rows and rows of sharp teeth suddenly appeared on the river surface. Not only were they everywhere, they were at least thirty meters wide in diameter. Caught off guard, the tidal wave of Wavechasers had no choice but to fall right on top of them!

This wasn't a kid-friendly show where certain details were fudged or cut out, or the camera would conveniently move out of the way right before a gruesome scene would take place. Everyone who was watching the scenery be it young, old, male or female was treated to the horrific sight of the maws chewing up the helpless fishes until this entire section of the river ran red. It was brutal and unbearable to look at.

"Aaaahhh!" Many timid people screamed at the sight. Some were even covering up their eyes. This was just the beginning, however.

Boom!

After the maws had eaten every Wavechaser around the ship, the river suddenly exploded and kicked up a massive wave that was at least tens of meters tall. It was as if a giant had suddenly burst through the water surface.

The wave crashed against the Cloud Mountain's hull and shook it heavily, causing some people to fall over their feet. The good news was that the ship's defenses came alive and blocked the wave. The bad news was that everyone was staring in a certain direction with wide eyes and gaping mouths. Something had captured their attention fully, and that something was, of course, a Stranger.

The Stranger resembled a giant worm. Its body was as thick as a millstone, and the part suspended above the waters alone was over fifty meters long. It was also covered in colorful, bowl-sized scales that glittered ominously under the sun and formed mysterious patterns that looked like the huge maws that devoured the Wavechasers.

Ooooooooooooh...

A loud, unspeakable noise resounded from inside the worm Stranger's body. It sounded like an angry roar. The next second, the mysterious patterns abruptly spread open into big, toothy maws. The Stranger roared again, and this time the maws joined in as well. It was loud enough to deafen the ears, and its breath smelled so bad it was a surprise no one fainted from it.

"I-It's a S-S-Stranger! RUN!" Someone finally shouted and jolted the stupefied crowd from their daze. Panicked screams filled the air as everyone started running in every direction. It was utter chaos.

Suddenly, a middle-aged man appeared on the deck. He looked thin but healthy. He yelled, "Calm down, people! Calm down! This Stranger is not strong enough to break through Cloud Mountain's defenses!"

At the same time, an invisible energy spread throughout the deck and separated the people from one another. It was just in time to prevent the people from causing a stampede and injuring one another. Moreover, the middle-aged man's voice was gentle, kind, and seemingly infused with some sort of calming power. Slowly but surely, the crowd calmed down somewhat.

Boom!

It was at this moment the worm Stranger swooped down from above in an attempt to strike Cloud Mountain's side like a battering ram. The cloud engravings covering the ship immediately lit up and conjured what looked like a sea of clouds around the ship. For a moment, it looked as if Cloud Mountain was riding the clouds.

The worm Stranger managed to sink a few meters deep when it struck the clouds, but a tremendous force sent its whole body flying through the air. It caused a gigantic splash when it finally crashed back into the river.

"I am the chief steward of Cloud Mountain, Jiang Yuzhen. You have my word that this Stranger won't be able to hurt us!"

Jiang Yuzhen relaxed after the worm Stranger was bounced away and added, "Cloud Mountain is protected by one hundred and eight Profound Cloud Restrictions, a restriction that is excellent for defense. At full strength, it can block a full-powered attack from any Stranger below the Soulstealer-class, so please, be at ease!"

Some of the passengers looked convinced by Jiang Yuzhen's assurance, but Ye Qing only shook his head. "Is he joking?"

As if on cue, the tower ship started shaking violently as the worm Stranger reappeared from the waters and crossed over the ship to the other side. It would repeat this another three times like a python that was wrapping around its prey. Once it was ready, it began squeezing the ship while releasing filthy, most likely corrosive breath from its many maws. Slowly but surely, the surrounding clouds began straining under the pressure.

Jiang Yuzhen's expression immediately turned ugly. As the one controlling the ship, he could clearly feel how much pressure the Profound Cloud Restrictions were under. The corrosive breath especially had corrupted the restrictions and made them far less potent than they would be otherwise.

I just told everyone that they would be safe!

Before Jiang Yuzhen could muster a response, the worm Stranger abruptly exerted its full strength and destroyed many Profound Cloud Restrictions.

"Dammit!" Jiang Yuzhen cursed. Knowing he had no time to waste, he immediately flew into the sky and summoned a whip to his hand. The whip looked firm, flexible, and completely useless in this situation. But when the chief steward swung the weapon, it conjured countless transparent whips and water threads that wrapped around the worm Strangers like chains.

The worm Stranger roared furiously and struggled with all its might, but it was unable to break free for a time.

"That's the inferior-grade astral qi, Soft Water!" Ye Qing exclaimed in recognition. The ship was shaking violently from the clash of powers, but his feet were firmly rooted to the floor.

Soft Water was an inferior-grade astral qi and the embodiment of the softness of water. Out of all the types of water astral qi out there, it was the softest and most flexible of them all. Its flexibility could defeat brute strength if applied properly, and it could transform into a million things depending on the warrior's skill and imagination.

Although Soft Water was unsuited for offense, it was extraordinarily capable in terms of defense and control. It was why the worm Stranger couldn't break free even though the watery chains keeping it pinned might look as thin as threads.

"It's not enough though!" Ye Qing sighed. Jiang Yuzhen's skill in water manipulation was incredibly impressive, but he was only an early-stage Astral Refiner.

The worm Stranger was a Hatred-class Stranger called the Hundred Mouth Dragon. Despite its name, it was really a kind of earthworm that was usually born in rivers. As massive as it was strong, its body was covered in huge maws filled with rows and rows of sharp teeth. Obviously, it was carnivorous.

The Hundred Mouth Dragon was also as tenacious as an earthworm. It would live even if it was cut into two or more parts.

The Hundred Mouth Dragon was one of the stronger Hatred-class Strangers among its peers. Not only that, it was twenty to thirty percent stronger in water than it was on land. Jiang Yuzhen wasn't weak, but there was little chance he would be able to defeat the Stranger by himself.

Chapter 136: Nightmare

What happened next did not exceed Ye Qing's expectations. The Hundred Mouth Dragon visibly gathered its strength, opened its maws, and let out a mighty roar. At the same time, its body grew bigger than before. The watery chains immediately snapped inch by inch.

"Pwack!" Jiang Yuzhen spat out a mouthful of fresh blood and turned as pale as a sheet. While he struggled to soothe his damaged energy, the enraged Hundred Mouth Dragon squeezed even harder around the ship. The hull began to break little by little.

"Dammit!"

Jian Yuzhen's eyes flickered with regret and despair. The passengers had long since lost their cool and were running all over the place like headless chickens. But where could they run, when even jumping off the ship wasn't an option? The Strangers lurking in the river would consume them long before they reached the shore.

"Aren't you going to stop it, young master?" Faceless asked Ye Qing in a hushed voice. The Stranger had rushed to Ye Qing's side a while ago.

Ye Qing shook his head. "Not yet. Backup should arrive any moment now!"

Before he even finished saying this, a man wearing a black robe and a hood appeared in the sky. He was none other than the mysterious man from before.

Floating above the Hundred Mouth Dragon, the mysterious man brought his hand down and conjured a massive gray palm. His hand had turned grayish black as well. The attack hit the Hundred Mouth Dragon squarely on the body and pressed it back into the water.

“Roar!”

Of course, the Stranger wasn’t going to go down so easily. The next second, it burst out of the river and pounced toward the mysterious man.

The mysterious man hmphed as thick corpse energy seeped out of his body, and his limbs gradually stiffened as if he was actually turning into a corpse. The next moment, he raised his stiff right arm and met the Hundred Mouth Dragon’s charge with his own fist.

Logically speaking, the mysterious man should have turned into a star in the sky. In reality, it was the Hundred Mouth Dragon whose head was crushed like a watermelon, spilling blood and gore everywhere. Not only that, his corpse energy quickly spread from the wound to the rest of the Stranger’s body, dyeing it grayish black and robbing it of its vitality. The flesh and blood that had rotted completely automatically fell off the Hundred Mouth Dragon’s body and sank into the blue waters.

“The Heavenly Yin Corpse Qi...” Ye Qing narrowed his eyes a little when he identified the mysterious man’s astral qi.

The Heavenly Yin Corpse Qi was one of the best average grade astral qis out there. Normally found in wastelands where all life had perished, anyone who made contact with it would immediately start rotting and dying at an exponential rate. As if that wasn’t enough, it could inflict its victims with Corpse Poison as well. It was why the Heavenly Yin Corpse Qi was considered the equal of some superior grade astral qis in terms of potency.

Unfortunately, the Heavenly Yin Corpse Qi was a double-edged sword. A warrior who cultivated the Heavenly Yin Corpse Qi would gradually be corrupted by the astral qi and lose their humanity in every sense of the word. Their vitality would die, their flesh and blood would stiffen, and even their personality would gradually take on a darker tone. Those who were weak-willed could even be taken over by their own astral qi and transformed into a zombie, a ghoul, or other similar Strangers who knew nothing but slaughter.

Thankfully, the mysterious man was anything but weak-willed. Ye Qing could tell that his core hadn’t changed despite cultivating such an insidious astral qi because one, he didn’t go overboard when he was testing him out yesterday, and two, he had stepped forward to battle against the Hundred Mouth Dragon even though he could’ve stayed out of it.

He might be a little slow probably because of his astral qi, but he was definitely a good person.

“Roar!”

Back to the battle, the Hundred Mouth Dragon let out a furious roar and tried spitting its corrosive breath after taking a tremendous amount of damage, but the mysterious man easily canceled it with a single punch.

His limbs looked stiff, and his fighting style was one-note. He was basically throwing straight punch after straight punch at the Hundred Mouth Dragon. However, it was enough to push back the Stranger again and again.

Unfortunately, the Hundred Mouth Dragon was a tenacious being. Not only was it still alive, its retaliation was growing more violent by the second.

It was at this moment Ye Qing called out via sound transmission, “Brother, the Hundred Mouth Dragon is like an earthworm! You can break it into a million segments, and it’s still going to survive unless you hit it in its weak point!”

The mysterious man was slow, but he wasn’t a bad person. That was enough for Ye Qing to lend him a hand.

The mysterious man visibly slowed down and glanced at Ye Qing’s direction. It was clear that he had heard his voice. His hands hadn’t stopped, but he was clearly waiting for Ye Qing to say his piece.

Ye Qing continued, “To kill a snake, one should hit it seven inches from its head. It’s because that’s where its heart is located. As it happens, the Hundred Mouth Dragon’s weakness is its seventh mouth. Destroy it, and it will cease to be.”

“Hundred Mouth Dragon? The seventh mouth?” The mysterious man slowly processed the information. The Hundred Mouth Dragon must be the name of the Stranger it was fighting, and the seventh mouth... The mysterious man started counting down from its head, and as expected, he noticed something strange about its seventh mouth.

Every other mouth on the Hundred Mouth Dragon’s body was agape, but its seventh mouth was only half-open almost as if it was afraid to get hurt. It was confirmation that the Stranger’s weakness was, indeed, its seventh mouth.

Choosing to believe in Ye Qing’s words, the mysterious man took one step forward and appeared on the river surface where the seventh mouth was in the blink of an eye. Then, he punched it with his full power.

For the first time, the Hundred Mouth Dragon let out a panicked roar and tried to twist out of the way. Although the mysterious man’s movements were stiff, his speed was a completely different story. The punch landed squarely on its target and ripped it in half. This time, it neither regenerated nor continued its mad attacks like before. It was over.

It was at this moment Ye Qing disappeared from the deck and reappeared at the spot where the Hundred Mouth Dragon had split apart. He grabbed something from its severed torso and returned to the deck just as quickly as before.

Ye Qing had moved so fast that no one except the mysterious man, Jiang Yuzhen and a handful others even noticed his movement, and even they couldn’t capture his movements perfectly or figure out what he took from the Hundred Mouth Dragon’s body. Not that it mattered. Even if the item he took turned out to be exceedingly valuable, his one move had made it clear that he was no one to be trifled with.

After the Hundred Mouth Dragon was dead, and the mysterious man had returned to the ship, Jiang Yuzhen hurriedly went over to him. “On behalf of everyone on the ship, thank you so much for saving our lives, senior!”

The mysterious man replied coldly, “Your thanks is unnecessary. Jiang Shan helped me, so I’m just repaying the favor. With this, my debt is settled.”

He then pointed at Ye Qing and added, “Also, the one you should really be thanking is him, not me!”

Jiang Yuzhen did not understand why—he hadn’t heard the silent conversation between Ye Qing and the mysterious man—but he still went over to Ye Qing to thank him. The young man looked like an extraordinary person anyway, so there was no harm making his acquaintance whatsoever.

Before Jiang Yuzhen could say anything, Ye Qing said smilingly, “It’s fine. I’ve already received my compensation.”

He was telling the truth. The Hundred Mouth Dragon was a tenacious bastard, so it wasn’t immediately dead even after taking a fatal strike to its weak spot. That was when Ye Qing stole its exposed gallbladder away. The gallbladder was the Hundred Mouth Dragon’s true weakness; the beating heart of a monster that didn’t possess a true heart. It was only then the Stranger truly died.

The Hundred Mouth Dragon’s gallbladder was extremely valuable. It was a potent medicine that could strengthen one’s vigor and body. Not only that, scoring the last hit had netted him a silver dragon-serpent rune as well, so Ye Qing had essentially killed two birds with one stone.

Ye Qing then looked at the mysterious man and asked, “My name is Ye Qing, and my moniker is Joyless. May I know your name, brother?”

The mysterious man hesitated, but not because he didn’t want to tell Ye Qing his name. He just seemed uncomfortable with social situations in general. A while later, he finally said, “My name is Xu Banren. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Brother Ye!”

He turned around and left after saying that.

“Xu Banren? He’s Halfman Xu!” Jiang Yuzhen exclaimed in surprise when he put two and two together.

Ye Qing asked curiously, “Halfman Xu? Is he famous?”

Jiang Yuzhen told Ye Qing everything he knew. “Xu Banren is an Astral Refiner and a Lieutenant of the Pacification Bureau. Although he is withdrawn and unsociable, he is famed for his strength and has slain many Hatred-class Strangers singlehandedly. In Luo Shui, everyone calls him Halfman Xu.”

“I see! I didn’t realize he’s a colleague!” Ye Qing rubbed his nose in relief. Thank goodness he hadn’t gone *too* overboard during their first meeting, or else... “Halfman Xu, eh? That’s a pretty cool moniker!”

Jiang Yuzhen: “...” *Are you sure? Because it sure sounds more like an insult to me. And it would be an insult if he isn’t as strong as he is...*

“If there’s nothing else, then I shan’t keep you from your duties any longer, Steward Jiang. See you later!” Ye Qing waved him goodbye and left just like that.

“See you later, Warrior Ye!” Jiang Yuzhen really wanted to curry favor with Ye Qing, but the ship had just survived a Stranger attack. If he, the chief steward, did not assuage his passengers’ fears as soon as possible, then Cloud Mountain’s reputation would suffer for sure. So, he had no choice but to leave and perform his duties.

Ye Qing immediately resumed his training after returning to his room. The sky may fall, but training must never stop. Cloud Mountain would continue to encounter more Strangers during their voyage, but thankfully, none were nearly as malicious or deadly as the Hundred Mouth Dragon.

Night soon fell, and everyone was feeling tired after the day’s excitement. It wasn’t long before the passengers returned to their rooms and fell into a deep slumber.

For a time, everything was quiet and peaceful. The only sound that could be heard was the river sloshing in the background. It was almost dreamlike.

Suddenly, a cool breeze blew through the air and caused some ripples. Then a curtain of fog gently draped over the waters and added a mysterious and dreamlike quality to the night sky.

The unexpected phenomenon was supposed to make the night even more pleasant, but the sleeping faces of the passengers on Cloud Mountain suddenly grew uncomfortable. Their expressions looked fearful, and beads of sweat rolled down their foreheads as if they were experiencing a nightmare.

What was really strange, however, was the fact that not a single one of them was able to wake up from the nightmare!

In his room, Ye Qing was sleeping soundly when his eyebrows suddenly twitched imperceptibly. It was because he was being chased by a rabbit inside his dream. No, the rabbit was neither a normal rabbit nor a bunny girl. Instead, it was the Arnold Schwarzenegger of all rabbits! Not only was it taller and bigger than him in every way, it was also a kung fu rabbit! Although he was an Astral Refiner, the rabbit had easily beaten him blue and black without being able to resist whatsoever with its Mad Rabbit Fist! That was why he was running for his life right now!

Even in this strange, new world, Ye Qing reckoned that he was the first person ever to be hunted by a rabbit. No one would ever believe it if he told them.

Ye Qing knew he was dreaming because the higher a warrior’s cultivation was, the greater their control over their essence, qi and spirit would become. That was how he was able to distinguish the difference between dream and reality. Strangely, he wasn’t able to wake up even though he was fully aware, and he was done getting his ass kicked by a kung fu rabbit since practically the beginning.

“No. No. Something’s wrong! This must be some sort of mental attack!”

His fear seemed to fuel the kung fu rabbit’s growth, because the greater his fear, the stronger the kung fu rabbit became. Not only that, his surroundings kept growing more and more bizarre as he ran. He had seen a battlefield of corpses, scarecrows that ate hearts, dolls with wicked grins on their faces, flying rivers with mountains covered in giant maws growing out of their waters and more.

“I need to wake up now!”

He had a strong inkling that this nightmare would never end so long as he was still asleep. Worst case scenario, he would be stuck in this nightmare until he died!

Chapter 137: Fog of Nightmare

"Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method"

Having realized what was happening to him, Ye Qing immediately visualized the Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method. The majestic image of Emperor Fuxi appeared inside his dream at once and unleashed an incredible amount of light. It was like he was the sun itself.

Rumble...

As if crushed by an invisible power, the bizarre, monstrous dream that had trapped Ye Qing's consciousness abruptly shattered into a million pieces. The next moment, Ye Qing opened his eyes and realized he was back in his room, eyes still glowing white with power.

"Huh? Why is there so much fog?" The first thing Ye Qing noticed after waking up was a thick white fog shrouding his whole room.

"Is this the source of that strange nightmare?" He tried probing the fog with his spirit, but it felt? just like a normal fog would.

"Ahhhhhhh!"

It was at this moment a loud scream came from Wawa's room. He immediately dashed over to see what was going on.

As soon as Wawa saw him, she immediately flew over to his shoulder and hugged him tightly. She sobbed, "Friend, friend! A really, really, really big worm wanted to eat me! I'm so scared! Uuuu..."

"It's okay, it's okay. I've already squashed the big worm, so don't be scared!" Ye Qing consoled her, though he was surprised that she was able to wake up on her own. He reckoned that it was because Wawa was really a book, and her mind was pure and simple. That was why the nightmare couldn't really entrap her.

"Let's check up on Kung Fu Frog and Faceless!" Ye Qing declared and went over to his companions' room in an instant, thinking that there was also the possibility that the nightmare only affected humans. He was wrong. Faceless and Kung Fu Frog's faces were contorted in fear, and their entire bodies were drenched in cold sweat. They were even rolling back and forth as if trying to shake themselves awake. Unfortunately, it was no use.

Ye Qing tried calling out to their minds with his spirit, but nothing happened. He couldn't help but frown deeply. "What on earth is going on here?"

"I should ask the Annon Sutra!" When in doubt, just ask the Annon Sutra!

Ye Qing encountered a small problem when he was attempting to cut his finger though. It had been a while since he used the Strange Artifact, so it was only now he realized that his body had become too resilient. He literally could not cut his finger even with the sharpest tool he could find. Eventually, he had no choice but to punch himself in the chest and spray out a mouthful of blood.

His blood wriggled atop the vellum for a bit before slowly disappearing. Soon, the familiar blood text surfaced once more.

“I had encountered a strange incident while traveling to Luo Shui. Everyone on Cloud Mountain had fallen into a nightmare, from which they could not awaken.”

“I managed to avoid the same fate thanks to the Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method, but I do not know who or what is behind this nightmare.”

“Perhaps I should observe the fog closer. Something doesn’t feel right about it!”

“The fog?” Ye Qing withdrew the Annon Sutra and frowned. The fog was the first thing he suspected since waking up, but he hadn’t discovered anything strange about it. Was he mistaken?

Suddenly, Ye Qing looked toward the exit. “Someone’s awake!?” He could feel someone exiting his room and appearing on the deck. Not only that, he was someone he had just recently gotten acquainted with. It was none other than Xu Banren.

“He’s awake too?” Ye Qing immediately chased after the guy.

As soon as he appeared on the deck, Xu Banren turned around to face him. Ye Qing greeted him first, “You had a nightmare too, Brother Xu?”

Xu Banren hummed affirmatively before asking, “You too?”

Ye Qing nodded. “It’s not just me, my two friends are having a nightmare as well. However, they wouldn’t wake up no matter what I did. If I’m not mistaken, everyone besides the two of us are trapped in a nightmare as well.”

Xu Banren looked surprised. He had come out because he noticed something odd, but he wasn’t expecting everyone on the ship to be trapped in a nightmare as well. At the same time, he was curious how Ye Qing managed to wake up from the nightmare. He succeeded only thanks to his coffin, but what about Ye Qing?

Xu Banren didn’t say anything though. He was, by nature, not a very curious person, and this was hardly the time to indulge in his curiosity.

“Brother Xu, you’re a Lieutenant of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau, right? Do you know what Stranger this is?” Ye Qing asked.

Caught off guard, Xu Banren grew wary and stared at ye Qing with cold eyes. He did not answer his question.

Realizing why Xu Banren was acting like this, he quickly explained, “You misunderstood me, Brother Xu. Jiang Yuzhen is the one who told me about you!”

Xu Banren was still silent, but most of the wariness in his eyes vanished after he heard Ye Qing’s answer. He fell into thought for a good few minutes before he finally shook his head. “I do not know.”

Ye Qing frowned deeply. "This isn't good. I have a feeling that something bad would happen if we cannot wake everyone up as soon as possible!"

"I agree." Xu Banren's tone was still icy, but now there was a tinge of severity in it as well. "Have you found anything yet, Brother Ye?"

Ye Qing purposely looked out to the thick fog shrouding the river and mused out loud, "I think something's not right with this fog!"

"The fog?" Xu Banren followed his gaze and fell into deep thought. Just when Ye Qing thought he would turn into a pest and ask a million questions, Xu Banren raised his fist and launched a mighty punch at the fog.

The Heavenly Yin Corpse Qi swept through the river and stirred up the waters like crazy. It should've been more than powerful enough to dispel the fog completely, but it didn't. More accurately, the fog had rolled back into the clear space after just a short while.

"You're right. Something is wrong with this fog!" Xu Banren confirmed and withdrew his fist.

Ye Qing blinked and swallowed his justification back down his throat. As expected of Halfman Xu, his tactic was simple yet effective!

"So, did *you* find anything, Brother Xu?" Ye Qing asked.

"No."

Fuck, I feel like I completely wasted my time there, Ye Qing thought as he resisted the urge to roll his eyes. In the end, the only one he could rely on was himself.

Ye Qing closed his eyes and spread out his spirit in every direction like the wind. He was trying to see if there was anything unusual around them. There were bad news and worse news. The bad news was that he couldn't sense anything unusual whatsoever. The worse news was that this made no sense, because even the shores were completely devoid of activity. He couldn't hear any Stranger, people, animals, or even insects! It was the entire world had fallen dead!

"Phew..."

In the end, Ye Qing withdrew his spirit without anything to show. A wave of fatigue washed over him as he rubbed his forehead.

So, the fog was strange. But how was it strange, and what could he do about it?

This was the first time he encountered a Stranger that he had absolutely no idea how to deal with. What a conundrum!

"What do we do, Brother Ye?" Xu Banren asked.

"I'm the one who should be asking you that!" This time, Ye Qing did roll his eyes at the man before suggesting, "What if we carry the passengers out of the fog? Perhaps they'll return to normal after they get out of its range!"

Xu Banren frowned. “But there’s only two of us. How many people can we save before it’s too late?”

Ye Qing sighed. “I know. But it’s better than saving no one.”

Xu Banren wasn’t a pedantic man. A few seconds later, he nodded. “Very well. We shall do as you say.”

But right as they were about to move, a gentle voice rang beside their ears, “There’s no need to go through all that trouble. This is the Fog of Nightmare, a Hatred-class Stranger. It has no fixed body, shape, form or substance. It usually appears during the night and at places with huge bodies of water as a fog.”

“When the Fog of Nightmare appears, everyone who is asleep will fall into an eternal nightmare. If they do not awake, their mind would eventually perish, and they would turn into a vegetable [1].”

“Since the Fog of Nightmare has no form, it cannot be dispelled or killed. Although it’s just a Hatred-class Stranger, it is extremely dangerous and difficult to deal with. Barring a handful of exceptions, any warrior below the Astral Refinement stage is probably not going to walk away from a Fog of Nightmare alive.”

“The Fog of Nightmare?” Xu Banren shuddered as if he recalled something. “Now I remember. I’ve read a few cases in the archives where the Fog of Nightmare is the culprit. Everyone in those cases were dead.”

“According to the records, the Fog of Nightmare has no obvious weaknesses except sunlight. Every time the sun rises from the east, it would naturally disappear into nothing.”

Ye Qing rubbed his nose. “So, we just need to wait until daybreak?”

Xu Banren nodded once but shook his head quickly. “You and I can afford to wait until daybreak because we’re awake, but those trapped inside the nightmare are most likely going to die.”

Ye Qing thought for a moment before clasping his hands together. He asked, “Miss, you recognize the Fog of Nightmare, and you’re the one who said that there’s a better way of handling this, so...”

Once again, the woman’s clear, quiet voice rang beside their ears like dark orchids in an empty valley, “The Fog of Nightmare is a dreamweaver who weaves nightmares to kill its victims. Therefore, all you need to do is to enter a dream and destroy the nightmares it weaved to wake everyone up. It’s very simple!”

Ye Qing: “...”

Xu Banren: “...”

Excuse me, but what part of that line sounds simple?

Plunk...

Suddenly, they heard a sound that sounded like a stone falling into a spring. It was crisp, clear, and melodious. It was the sound of a qin being plucked.

Ye Qing and Xu Banren immediately sharpened their hearing. The woman had only plucked the first note, and already their minds were drawn to it.

What followed was a peaceful, auspicious song that sounded like the spring wind blowing past a massive stretch of plum blossom trees and blooming them all at once; or a single flame lighting the candles of ten thousand households at once. It was a song of peace and prosperity.

The music was quiet, but not one-note. It was mild, but not uninteresting. Just because the world is big and chaotic, doesn't mean you can't lead a pure, peaceful life.

“This tune... it's the Song of Purity and Peace!”

Ye Qing's eyes lit up. The song the woman was playing was a very famous song. He had heard it in Coming Clouds before.

The Song of Purity and Peace was a quiet, mild song that most people might find boring be it sung or played using an instrument, which was why most songstresses and musicians tried to mix it up and add some richness to the tune so to speak. Regardless of the successes, it was a fact that the song's original meaning and intent had been distorted by the alterations.

On the other hand, the woman did not make any changes to the song. She played it exactly as it was meant to be—pure and peaceful.

“Clouds, one thinks of her clothes; flowers, one thinks of her countenance;

the spring wind sweeps dew from her balustrade, splendid and dense.

If not seen at the peak of the Jade Mountain,

then she will be encountered under the moon on the gemstone terrace...” [2]

Ye Qing and Xu Banren were more or less tone deaf, but even they were fully absorbed in the wonderful music. Their irritation, worry, fear, sorrow, anger, and all other negative emotions were silently removed from their hearts, leaving only peace, purity, and calm.

Plunk...

They didn't know when it happened, but when the music finally ceased, silver light shone down from above like the grace of heavens. A beautiful moon hung in the sky, and the river glittered like a bed of stars.

Chapter 138: My Name Is Pockface Zhang

“The fog's gone!” It was only now Ye Qing realized that the thick fog surrounding both the ship and the river had disappeared without warning. He immediately scanned the passengers with his spirit and discovered that their breathing was calm, and their lips were curled into an unconscious smile of relief. It was confirmation that the nightmare plaguing their mind really was gone.

“May you all have a nice dream tonight!” Ye Qing said with a smile. Not only was the Fog of Nightmare gone, it looked like everyone was going to have a nice dream tonight. He wondered if they would ever find out that they had nearly slept to death tonight. Sometimes, ignorance really was bliss.

“Speaking of which, I feel like I’ve heard the woman’s voice before. I think I’ve heard her playing her qin as well. But where?”

Ye Qing rubbed his forehead firmly as if trying to jolt the memory back from his mind. “Where? Where have I met her, exactly?”

“Wait, was it Firewind Valley? It must be! She’s the one who saved my life back then!”

Overjoyed, Ye Qing immediately shouted, “Miss! Miss! Are you still here?”

Earlier, the woman had made it so that her voice seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Even with his powerful spirit, he was unable to pinpoint her location. That was why he had no choice but to call out to her and pray that she would respond.

Unfortunately, nothing happened after he waited for several breaths.

“Miss? Miss Goddess?” Ye Qing called out again, but still not one responded to him. Disappointed but unwilling to give up without exhausting all of his options, he started singing,

“Goddess, I know that you are good

You came to rescue me

So please, hear my humble plea...”

He stopped and waited after singing the first half of the song, but the only sound he could hear was silence. Knowing that she probably wouldn’t speak to him anymore, he let out a mournful and disappointed sigh.

It was at this moment he heard a giggle. “I see you haven’t improved at all even though it’s been a few days since we last met. Just how tone deaf are you?”

Ye Qing’s expression morphed into one of pure happiness when he obtained her answer. “Of course my singing is nowhere as good as yours, Miss Goddess!”

“Oh right, my name is Ye Qing, and my moniker is Joyless. Thank you for saving me at Firewind Valley that day!” Ye Qing declared seriously and performed a salute even though he couldn’t see her.

“You’re welcome, but I just happened to be at the right place at the right time!” She replied.

Ye Qing beamed. “Perhaps, but that doesn’t change the fact you have saved my life. It is a favor that I will remember for a lifetime! If I may be so bold, may I know your name?”

The woman giggled again. “You’ve already given me a name, haven’t you?”

“You mean ‘Miss Goddess?’” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise, but she interrupted him before he could say anything more, “It’s a good name.”

Ye Qing didn’t press the issue since the woman obviously didn’t want to reveal her name. “If that is what you wish, then so it shall be. Instead, can I visit you so I may thank you in person?”

She turned him down again, “Perhaps another time!”

Ye Qing felt disappointed, but he asked hopefully, “Will there be another time, Miss?”

This time, she answered, “If fate deems it so, then why not?”

“Fate?” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise, but he quickly burst out laughing. “It’s a promise then! The next time we meet, you must tell me your name, Miss Goddess!”

The woman neither agreed nor disagreed with his presumptuous statement. In fact, she didn’t say anything at all after that. That was the end of their conversation.

Ye Qing was disappointed, but not nearly as much as he was at the beginning. It sounded like the woman was letting him down gently, but fate was a fickle thing. Not long ago, Miss Goddess had saved his life at Firewind Valley. Just days later, he had run into her on the Luo Shui River, and she had taken care of the Fog of Nightmare for him. Who could say they weren’t fated for each other?

Someone else might say that it was just a coincidence, but who gave a shit about their opinion? What mattered was that he believed that they would meet again someday. He couldn’t wait.

“Hehe...” Ye Qing let out a silly chuckle as he imagined how their first—technically second, but he was more or less unconscious the first time they met—meeting would turn out.

It was at this moment a wary voice snapped him back to reality, “Brother Ye... what... are you doing?”

From Xu Banren’s perspective, it looked like Ye Qing had suddenly launched into conversation with himself, sang a song that was equal parts creepy and off-key, and finally laughed like he had gone completely cuckoo. Who wouldn’t be alarmed in his position? He even took a few steps away from Ye Qing just in case the guy had gone insane or something.

“Oh, ahem... Worry not, Brother Xu. I was just, er, happy is all!” Ye Qing let out an embarrassed cough. Clearly, Xu Banren hadn’t been clued in on their conversation. If he thought about his own behavior from Xu Banren’s perspective, he could see why the man was looking at him like he was a mental patient. A seriously ill mental patient no less.

Luckily, Xu Banren wasn’t a very curious person. After confirming that Ye Qing had truly returned to normal, he said, “I’m glad you’re okay. Did you know where that woman went?”

Ye Qing answered, “I have no idea. She probably left.”

Xu Banren paused for a second before asking another question, “The Fog of Nightmare is gone, so the people on the ship should be safe now, right?”

Ye Qing nodded. "Not only that, they're all gonna enjoy a pleasant dream tonight."

Xu Banren had no reason to disbelieve Ye Qing's words, so he saluted him and said, "In that case, I shall return to my room to catch some rest." He then walked toward the passenger cabins.

But right before he slipped into the shadows, he suddenly turned as if he just recalled something. He added, "You should catch some rest as well!" before finally stepping through the entrance and disappearing.

"Hah... he's a little cold, but he really is a good man!" Ye Qing smiled.

Despite Xu Banren's advice, Ye Qing did not go back to his room. Instead, he remained on the ship's railings to enjoy the scenery and the beautiful night sky of Luo Shui with Wawa. The duo would continue to make idle chat with each other until the first golden ray pierced through the sky, and a gorgeous red sun slowly rose from the far end of Luo Shui River.

"This is sunrise and light..." Ye Qing whispered as his eyes reflected the rising sun and white moon still hanging in the sky. At the same time, it looked like he was carrying the invisible weight of the world on his shoulders.

"And this too, is humanity!"

.....

Chu had nine prefectures in total, and Luo Shui was one of the nine commanderies under the jurisdiction of Tian Yong, a prefecture of Chu. If Jin Xiu was the prefecture of culture, and Tian Liang the prefecture of might, then Tian Yong was the prefecture of wealth.

At least eighty percent of Tian Yong's wealth came from Luo Shui, but it wasn't just referring to Luo Shui, the commandery. A good part of that wealth came from the cantons bordering the Luo Shui River as well. But of course, the commandery was definitely the biggest contributor to their prosperity.

As soon as Cloud Mountain passed through the borders, the river immediately became much wider and stable. Despite this, it nearly wasn't big enough to fit the sheer amount of vessels that were traversing it. It was the picture of prosperity in Chu.

"Man, just look at the hustle and bustle!" Ye Qing couldn't help but raise a compliment as he stared at the countless ships and boats populating the area. The young man was currently standing on the bow of the ship and admiring the view right now.

Xu Banren replied in his usual impassive voice, "This is just the outskirts of Luo Shui. Once we pass through the gates, you will be bombarded to colors, lights, and people like you've never seen before. I promise that the hustle and bustle you witness then will be tens of times greater than this."

"Really?" Ye Qing exclaimed in pleasant surprise, "I can't wait to explore the commandery already!"

It was at this moment Ye Qing suddenly frowned and looked in a certain direction. A few breaths later, Xu Banren did the same thing and said, “That’s... the Little Sword King of Sunset Hill, Xu Wushang!”

A young man about twenty-five or twenty-six years old carrying a broadsword behind his back was making a beeline for the ship on a bamboo raft. The vessel was moving on its own very quickly even though it looked like Xu Wushang wasn’t doing anything.

Sunset Hill? Ye Qing’s heart skipped a beat. *Is it just a coincidence... or did they already find out that I’m on this ship?*

Xu Banren frowned under his hood when Xu Wushang came closer and closer toward them. It looks like he’s coming toward our ship!”

Ye Qing asked, “Who is this Xu Wushang?”

At this point, Ye Qing had no doubt that Xu Wushang was coming for him. That was why he wanted to learn about the young man as much as possible.

Xu Banren suspected nothing as he answered, “Xu Wushang is the third disciple of the Hill Lord of Sunset Hill, Wang Luori. Although silent and unsociable, he is exceptionally talented with the sword and single-minded in his pursuit for the pinnacle of swordsmanship. He is on the same level as the Sword Gentleman of Luo Shui, Chen Cang.”

“Chen Cang?” Ye Qing’s heart skipped another beat. He loathed to admit it, but he had nearly forgotten that Chen Cang existed until Xu Banren brought him up. That was yet another sworn enemy he had to watch out for even though he had never met the man in his life.

Meanwhile, Xu Wushang had come closer enough for Ye Qing to see his face. As Xu Banren described, Xu Wushang was an ordinary-looking man with listless, clouded eyes. His expression was extremely wooden as well. If he didn’t know better, he would’ve thought that Xu Wushang was mentally handicapped or something.

The bamboo raft slowed down when it was about ten meters away from Cloud Mountain. Then, Xu Wushang looked up and carefully examined every face aboard the ship.

Xu Wushang gave Xu Banren a slow nod when he saw him. Xu Banren also responded in a similar fashion. Both men were pretty unsocial, so they didn’t say a single word during the exchange.

Xu Wushang moved onto Ye Qing next and stared at him for a bit. A few seconds later, he finally asked, “Are you Ye Qing?”

I bloody knew it, Ye Qing mentally sighed as he answered, “I am not. My name is Pockface Zhang. Have you perchance gotten the wrong person?”

Xu Banren glanced at Ye Qing incredulously. *There isn’t a single pock mark on your face, and you call yourself Pockface Zhang? Can you be any more obvious that you’re lying?*

Ye Qing didn’t react to his reaction though. Whoever said you couldn’t have a name that didn’t fit your appearance at all?

Xu Wushang mulled over Ye Qing's words seriously before answering, "I've seen your portrait before, so I'm sure you're Ye Qing, not Pockface Zhang."

Ye Qing argued, "But I'm *not* Ye Qing. There are plenty of people who share similar or even identical faces in this world. Maybe I just happen to look like Ye Qing!"

Xu Wushang mulled over Ye Qing's words again and nodded in agreement, but he said, "That is a possibility, but I also heard that Ye Qing is accompanied by a frog Stranger and a servant, and it so happens that you are the same. Therefore, you must be Ye Qing!"

Ye Qing threw his arms up. "It's just a coincidence! Coincidences *can* happen!"

"Warrior Ye! It's nice to see you again. I—"

Ye Qing was just about to argue some more when suddenly, Jiang Yuzhen walked out of the passenger cabin and saw him. He immediately greeted the young man and tried to say something, but he paused when he noticed that something was off. Unfortunately, the damage had already been done.

For a time, Ye Qing and Xu Wushang stared at each other without a word. Then, Xu Wushang declared, "You are not Pockface Zhang. You are Ye Qing, the one they call Joyless Ye in the jianghu!"

Xu Wushang didn't get angry despite Ye Qing's denial. He simply said in his impassive voice, "You killed my junior brother, Xiao Yang, and my master has ordered me to take you back to Sunset Hill. Please comply."

Xu Banren and Jiang Yuzhen were silent for a second. Then, they exclaimed in shock at the same time, "You did *what*, Ye Qing?!"

Ye Qing looked at the sky and let out a long sigh. What must be, must be.

Chapter 139: Cloud Vaporization

"Fine, fine. I am Ye Qing, But before I greet you, I must clarify something. I did *not*, in fact, kill Brother Xiao Yang. Brother Xiao Yang and I had hit it off practically? from the moment we first met. There is no way I would ever kill him."

"To tell you the truth, Xiao Yang was killed by a Stranger named Evergreen Ivy. She was the one who masterminded the destruction of Anyang, and she hates me because I was the one who ruined her plans."

"After learning that Brother Xiao Yang is a disciple of Sunset Hill, she came up with the devious plan of killing him and pinning his death on me. We were so close to capturing Evergreen Ivy and taking revenge for Brother Xiao Yang, but in the end, she still managed to escape. In that, I accept the full blame for my failure."

Finally, Ye Qing let out a long sigh and declared in a sincere voice, "But do not worry, Brother Xu. I swear I will hunt Evergreen Ivy down to the ends of the earth and kill her if only to take revenge for Brother Xiao Yang!"

If Evergreen Ivy thought she was the only one who knew how to incriminate others, then she was going to be very sorry.

However, Xu Wushang replied in a serious voice, "Whether or not you are innocent or guilty does not matter to me. My master will be the one to decide that. My one and only mission right now is to take you back to Sunset Hill."

Ye Qing: "... *You sonuvabitch! I feel like I'm talking to a block of wood here!*

"By the way, how did you find me?"

He had left Anyang the day after Evergreen Ivy told him about her incrimination. No one except a handful of trustworthy people knew about his departure, and he had made it to Luo Shui stealthily and with almost no delays whatsoever. With that in mind, how on earth had Xu Wushang managed to track him down?

The swordsman explained, "My first senior brother had gone to Anyang yesterday. When he couldn't find you and asked around, he learned that you were probably headed for Luo Shui. After my master received his message, he quickly deployed us to various key intersections that you must pass through if you wish to reach Luo Shui. I am in charge of the river route. Even if you had picked another route, you would've run into one of my senior or junior brothers."

"Just give it up and come with me to Sunset Hill, Ye Qing. If you are as innocent as you claim, I am sure my master will let you go free!"

"Oh, you sweet summer child..." Ye Qing couldn't help but shoot Xu Wushang a derisive smirk. If he actually went with Xu Wushang, then everyone would think that he had killed Xiao Yang. After all, why would he capitulate to his captors if he hadn't actually done anything wrong, not to mention that he *had*, in fact, killed Xiao Yang? That was why he couldn't comply with Xu Wushang's wish no matter what!

"I appreciate the offer, Brother Xu, but I cannot come with you no matter what!"

Xu Wushang must have predicted Ye Qing's answer from the start because he didn't look surprised or dissatisfied. He simply said, "In that case, I'm sorry for what I have to do next!"

The young man slowly grabbed the hilt of his sword. At that moment, his listlessness and woodenness suddenly disappeared without warning, his eyes shone like a pair of bright mirrors, and his aura turned as sharp and intimidating as an unsheathed sword. It was like he was a completely different person from before.

"My sword is called Heavy Abyss. It is 1.43 meters long, 0.33 meters wide, and weighs 168 kilograms. May the best man win."

Xu Wushang lightly tapped the rainguard of his broadsword. Without warning, it flew out of its scabbard and shot straight toward Ye Qing!

Long before the broadsword even got close, both Xu Banren and Jiang Yuzhen felt a stinging sensation across their skin. Xu Banren was only frowning, but Jiang Yuzhen broke out in cold sweat and staggered away from Xu Wushang as if the sword was aimed at him, not Ye Qing.

He could kill me in a single hit!

Jiang Yuzhen thought in shock and dejection. *We are both Astral Refiners, and yet the gulf between us might as well be heaven and earth!*

Ye Qing's response toward the attack was to smile and sweep his arms in front of himself. His sleeves immediately conjured a cyclone of invisible, formless force that slowed down Heavy Abyss like a bog. The closer it got to Ye Qing, the slower it flew. Not even its cold, sharp sword qi was able to cut through the obstructive force of "Flowing Clouds, Flying Sleeves". When the broadsword finally got within melee range, Ye Qing lashed out with an even greater force and struck it in the blade. Heavy Abyss let out a metallic shriek and flew back to Xu Wushang even faster than before.

Xu Wushang frowned and reached out to grab his broadsword. It looked like he was planning to neutralize the foreign force afflicting Heavy Abyss. However, as soon as his fingers brushed against the hilt, the broadsword abruptly turned as red as iron, and the air burned like fire. He felt as if invisible flames were invading his pores and boiling his flesh, blood, and even his mind. It was a disturbing sensation to say the least.

Bang!

Xu Wushang's face turned beet red as he staggered backward. He left behind a burning footprint every time he took a step.

The bamboo raft was about three meters or nine steps long. It wasn't until his ninth step when the unnatural redness on Xu Wushang's face finally subsided, and he let out a puff of burning hot air. His weapon arm was trembling slightly, and his expression was as serious as it could be.

"Xu Wushang... lost the exchange?!" Jiang Yuzhen could hardly believe his own eyes. Although they were both Astral Refiners, Xu Wushang was a famous genius in Luo Shui, whereas Ye Qing was just a nobody. This should have gone the other way.

Xu Banren was less surprised than Jiang Yuzhen—he had a rough idea how strong Ye Qing really was since they had "fought" briefly—but he didn't know that Ye Qing possessed such an unusual astral qi. Its potency was clearly greater than expected as well, considering that it had caught Xu Wushang off guard.

"You are strong. I underestimated you!" Xu Wushang said slowly after eliminating the Burning Wind Astral Qi inside his body. Every time he said a word, dark yellow astral qi would pour out of his body, and his aura would grow just a little stronger. "I'm going to get serious now!"

As soon as he said this, Xu Wushang grabbed his broadsword with both hands and started running, dragging the weapon behind him. Every time he took a step, the river would shake like a heavenly gong was sounded, and Xu Wushang would raise his sword just a little higher. Nine steps later, Xu Wushang leaped into the air while still lifting his sword over his back.

Heavy Abyss wasn't the only thing he lifted into the air, however. The river itself was trailing behind him like a piece of fabric being pulled by a giant, invisible hand! The water kept hiking higher and higher into the sky until it resembled a tidal wave, and when Xu Wushang finally

reached the highest point of his jump, his sword came to a stop right above his head. For a moment, the man, the sword, and the river floated in the sky and refused to fall!

“Vast Expanse Sword, Mountain River Change”

The technique was neither flexible, uncanny, or meaningful. It was just a basic overhead swing that was as immense and heavy as a mountain. And that was enough.

“One sword to move mountains, shift rivers, and warp the sky itself”

Everyone on the ship turned as white as a sheet. When Xu Wushang’s sword finally moved forward an inch, a dark yellow Qilin appeared behind his back and let out a mighty roar.

The wall of water suspended in the sky fell toward Cloud Mountain as if on cue. Neither the tidal wave nor the broadsword had struck the ship—or more accurately, Ye Qing—yet, but everyone was holding their breaths and staring at the incoming attack with pure, unadulterated terror.

“Houtu [1] Qilin Qi!” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. He finally figured out why Xu Wushang’s sword was so heavy and powerful.

Houtu Qilin Qi was an average grade Earth element astral qi, and its key attributes were weight and size. Conceptually, a warrior who cultivated the Houtu Qilin Qi wanted to become as big as a mountain, as forceful as a river, and as heavy as the earth itself. It was most suitable for steadfast warriors who were so unwavering that they seemed foolish to the public’s eyes, and martial arts that were attuned to the natural order. In terms of application, it could be summed up in one short sentence: to crush anything and everything with overwhelming power.

Looking at Xu Wushang, it was clear that he had mastered at least one part of the heart of the Houtu Qilin Qi. Otherwise, there was no way he could move the river with a simple overhead swing.

“Most impressive!” Ye Qing praised Xu Wushang’s technique from the bottom of his heart. The swordsman might share the same cultivation level as Xiao Yang, but it was clear that he was much stronger than his junior brother.

Too bad for Xu Wushang, he wasn’t the budding Astral Refiner he was before. Ye Qing took half a step backward and bent his knees slightly, causing the entire ship to sink three inches into the water. Strangely, the sudden movement didn’t cause even the slightest splash. When Cloud Mountain slowly rose back to its previous water level, Ye Qing threw a punch into the mountain in the sky.

“Cloud Vaporization Style”

Like a galore of war banners, the Burning Wind spread across the sky like wildfire and dyed everything red. When it clashed against the tidal wave of water crashing down on Cloud Mountain, it instantly evaporated it all into a massive cloud of mist that could be seen throughout Luo Shui, unintentionally matching the defining quote in the martial arts manual, “Vapor comes up from the lowland of clouds and dreams; surging waves strike against the city wall of Yueyang.”

Whoosh!

Trapped inside the mist of its own making, Xu Wushang’s Qilin had no choice but to be blown apart by the force of Ye Qing’s fist and scatter dark yellow sword qi everywhere. Clearly, the Qilin was the coalescence of the swordsman’s Houtu Qilin Qi and sword qi.

Although the Qilin was destroyed, the sword qi was still impossibly sharp. It ripped apart the surrounding mist and Burning Wind and created a clearing. It was inside this clearing where Xu Wushang's Heavy Abyss and Ye Qing's fist clashed.

Boom!

The Houtu Qilin Qi and sword qi washed over Ye Qing's body and sliced much of his shirt to shreds. The plank beneath his feet also snapped in half due to the sheer amount of pressure it was under. Not only that, the storm of sword qis thoroughly annihilated many parts of the decks, and not even Xu Banren and Jiang Yuzhen were brave enough to stand anywhere close to it. They both withdrew into the entrances and watched the battle from there.

Ye Qing, the man at the center of the storm, was unmoved, however. In fact, the deadly sword qis failed to leave even the slightest mark on his body.

"What the... how strong is his body!?"

Xu Banren and Jiang Yuzhen were stunned to say the least. Xu Wushang's sword qi was so deadly that the hair on their skin was standing on end even at this distance, and yet Ye Qing was completely unaffected. They didn't even know it was possible for a warrior to train their physique to such a level until they saw it with their own eyes!

"You're not weak, but I'm stronger!" Ye Qing declared simply before pushing his fist forward. It was just an inch, but it was all he needed to shatter Heavy Abyss into smithereens with his dragon elephant strength!

The punch broke not just Xu Wushang's weapon, but also his arm and his chest. Like a rag doll, Xu Wushang was smashed into the river all the way to the bottom. A muffled boom later, Ye Qing lowered his fist and stared murky waters underneath. "I could've taken your life just like how I took your sword, but I won't. Instead, I want you to go back to the Hill Lord and tell him that Evergreen Ivy is the one who killed Xiao Yang, not me. He should be searching for her if he really wants revenge for his dead disciple!"

"I'm not a tolerant man. In fact, my patience is far from unlimited, so don't test me!"

"I will carry your message to my master!" Xu Wushang's weak voice came from the river bed. "And I will see you soon!"

"If you mean to treat me to a drink, then I welcome you anytime!" Ye Qing smiled. "If you mean trouble, then I'm not afraid either!"

Ye Qing threw a punch at the river immediately after saying this. His punch was soundless, powerless, and caused seemingly no ripples whatsoever. It almost looked like he was punching the air like an ordinary person. It was at this moment the waters within tens of meters suddenly churned like thunder. It was almost as if an undercurrent had suddenly come to life under the river. It kicked up a ton of dirt and silted out the river in an instant.

A dozen or so breaths later, a man slowly floated to the surface. His breathing was almost non-existent, and he wasn't moving at all. He could have easily been mistaken for a floating body.

Xu Banren and Jiang Yuzhen recognized the man immediately. He was of course Xu Wushang. Clearly, he was knocked out by Ye Qing's seemingly useless punch.

"You didn't have to do that, Brother Ye. He'd already lost!" Xu Banren spoke up after a moment of silence.

Ye Qing hmphed coldly. "There is nothing I loathe more than being threatened by my enemies. I'd already shown him mercy by not killing him!"

"Threaten?" Xu Banren could not understand what Ye Qing meant for a time. It took him a while before he finally realized that Ye Qing had misinterpreted Xu Wushang's last words. He let out a wry chuckle and explained, "You misunderstood, Brother Ye. Xu Wushang wasn't threatening you. He's a martial arts addict who only cares about furthering his martial skills, so he was probably just asking you to spar with you in the future!"

"I-Is that so?" Ye Qing's grin stiffened as he rubbed his nose. "Ah... I guess I shouldn't have done that then."

"It's not my fault though! Anyone would've mistaken what he said as a threat! He should've clarified his meaning exactly!"

"..." Perhaps so, but don't you think that you were overreacting as well?"

Xu Banren decided that he would keep Ye Qing at a distance there and then. He was a man of few words as well. He would be very sorry for himself if one day Ye Qing accidentally killed him because he hadn't explained himself enough.

"Never mind!" Xu Banren let out a sigh and said, "He's completely unconscious right now, so there's no way he'd be able to defend himself? from a river Stranger. If you truly don't mean to kill him, then allow me to send him back to Sunset Hill. You wouldn't want them to pin his death on you as well, right?"

"Er... sure. Sorry for the inconvenience, Brother Xu, and thank you!" Ye Qing saluted him.

Although Sunset Hill was a major faction of Luo Shui, its base wasn't located in the commandery itself. That was why Xu Banren did not accompany Ye Qing to Luo Shui. After bidding Ye Qing goodbye, he borrowed a boat from Jiang Yuzhen and left with the unconscious Xu Wushang.

After Xu Banren had left, the corners of Ye Qing's lips abruptly curled into a diabolical smirk. He knew that Xu Wushang hadn't meant to threaten him, of course. The reason he knocked him out anyway was because he was displeased. If he hadn't been strong enough to defeat Xu Wushang, it was he who would be feeling very sorry for himself right now. Sure, Xu Wushang had turned out to be a better man than expected, but that was no excuse not to retaliate against the woes that had been done unto him.

“It looks like I can’t delay using the Blood Jade Lotus for much longer!” Ye Qing sighed. He was hoping to refine his Burning Wind a little longer before entering the late-stage of the Astral Refinement stage, but it would seem that he had even less time than he thought. The only thing he could do now was climb the cultivation ladder and become a Spirit Purifier as soon as possible. Only then would he truly be safe.

But that could wait until later. First things first, he should report to the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau.

After the ship had docked, Ye Qing paid his due and politely turned down Jiang Yuzhen’s invitation to join Cloud Mountain. Then, he registered at the gates and entered the commandery.

While Ye Qing was walking away, the gate captain responsible for inspecting and registering the travelers called over a guard and ordered, “Tell Young Master Luo that I’ve found the Stranger he’s looking for. A scholar studying away from Anyang has a Book Sprite with him!”

“At once!” The guard left after receiving his orders.

Chapter 140: Trouble

“Ribbons of jade wrapped around the watchtowers,

myriad barges compete along the rivers.

Merchants packed together like clouds,

pedestrians come and go like streams.

Sculpted beams that belonged to celestial palaces,

ornamented walls that are anything but ordinary.

Jade altars that welcome a golden dawn,

clouds that hover atop the tallest peaks.

Eighteen boats to connect all of Luo Shui,

endless lamps to keep the darkness at bay.

When spring arrives with the wind,

flowers bloom,

and all is right in the world.”

The poem spoke of the prosperity and growth of Luo Shui. In just a few lines, it had painted a clear picture of the commandery’s grandeur and flavor.

It was unfortunate Ye Qing had no time to admire its beauty right now. He made a beeline for the Pacification Bureau as soon as he was done asking for directions.

Unfortunately, he had just walked past Greenbird Street and set foot on Pacification Street when a group of people blocked his way. Specifically, it was a handsome youngster wearing expensive, well-tailored clothes. He was probably eighteen or nineteen years old.

The youngster was wearing an arrogant, lofty expression that didn't really fit with his age, though that was mitigated by the fact that he was a late-stage Vessel Augmentor. It was clear that his upbringing wasn't normal. He was accompanied by what Ye Qing presumed to be his guards and attendants. They were much weaker and only in the Qi Invocation stage.

"Do you have business with me?" Ye Qing frowned. This was literally his first day in Luo Shui, and as far as he was aware the only faction that had beef with him was Sunset Hill. The young man in front of him didn't look like a Sunset Hill disciple, but he clearly did not harbor good intentions either.

The young man clapped his hand against the white jade folding fan he was holding and said directly, "I heard you have a Book Sprite. Will you sell it to me?"

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes dangerously. "How did you know about that?"

Everyone in the area immediately felt a chill down their spine. It was like someone was pressing a knife to their back, and yet they couldn't tell where the inexplicable feeling had come from.

The young man did not seem to notice anything, however. He continued arrogantly, "So you do have a Book Sprite. Name your price!"

"Please don't sell Wawa, friend! Please!" Wawa immediately crawled out of Ye Qing's hair and sobbed.

"A female Book Sprite? Perfect!" The youngster's eyes lit up when he saw her.

"Don't cry, Wawa. I could never sell a cute girl like you!" Ye Qing rubbed her head gently and looked back at the youngster. "Apologies, but I'm not selling her!"

"If you're not going to name a price, how about I make you an offer instead?" The youngster raised a finger and declared arrogantly, "One thousand silvers."

"I said no!" Ye Qing rejected him firmly. One thousand silvers was a lot of money, but even if Wawa wasn't his family, it wasn't enough to buy a Book Sprite at all.

"Two thousand silvers!" The youngster raised another finger when he saw that Ye Qing was unmoved.

"I'm in a hurry. Please step aside!" Ye Qing started stepping to the side to circle around the group.

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"Five thousand silvers!" The youngster more than doubled his price this time. "Five thousand silvers is more than enough money for you to marry two concubines and live comfortably for the rest of your life, friend. You best not get any greedier than this."

Ye Qing responded with a smile that didn't reach the eye, "I already told you: no. Also, I'm pretty rich myself, so you can save it."

It was the truth. He was probably wealthier than all of them combined.

“You think we’d believe that, you pauper!? Just sell it to us while we’re still in the mood to negotiate! Do you even know who my young master is?” One of the youngster’s attendants yelled after noting that Ye Qing was adamant in his rejection.

Would you look at that, that’s a line straight out of a web novel! It’s too bad they have no idea who they’re dealing with.

When the attendant noticed that Ye Qing was shooting him a playful, almost pitying look, he grew angry and declared, “My young master is the second young master of the Luo Clan, Luo Feibai, and he’s already giving you face by offering to pay you five thousand silvers! Give it to us now, or you will regret what comes next!”

The attendant then rushed toward Ye Qing and attempted to snatch Wawa from his shoulders.

“Ah!” Wawa cried out in fear.

However, something hit him in the chest before he could react and smashed him into the ground. Blood sprayed out of his mouth, and his chest was caved in.

Beside Ye Qing, Kung Fu Frog let out a disdainful, “Croak!”

“What the? How dare you hurt my men!” Luo Feibai erupted in anger after he recovered from his shock. “Get him! Kill him!”

His attendants immediately charged Ye Qing while letting out a battle cry. However, Kung Fu Frog leaped into the air and thrust all four of its limbs at the attendants, unleashing a gale of force that knocked all of them to the ground.

As usual, Kung Fu Frog was very careful with its attack. Although the men were all spitting blood and looking as pale as a sheet, none of them were in danger of dying.

Luo Feibai could not seem to believe that Ye Qing would dare to fight back. It took him a good few seconds to finally recognize the reality before him and fly into a rage. “You... You are courting death!”

He folded his fan and performed a downward thrust with it. Fast and unpredictable, it looked like it was coming from multiple directions at once. It was a surprisingly high level sword technique.

Sadly, he was still some distance away from Ye Qing when a voice stopped him dead in his tracks, “You better not move, little scion!”

Faceless had somehow taken Luo Feibai’s back by surprise, and his fingers were resting on his throat. He would not hesitate to rip the scion’s throat out if he tried anything stupid.

“Y-you... How dare you! I’m the second young master of the Luo Clan! M-my dad will never forgive you if you dare to harm a hair on my person!”

Luo Feibai looked as pale as a ghost as he gulped, “Now let me go!”

“Don’t wanna. Whatcha gonna do about it?” Ye Qing tilted his head and shot Luo Feibai a shit-eating grin.

“You... you...!”

For a long time, the scion was unable to stammer out a full sentence. After all, he had never encountered a situation like this in his life. What should he do?

It was at this moment the sound of orderly footsteps came from the distance. Ye Qing looked up and saw a platoon of Pacification Sentinels clad in black armor and tiger boots marching toward them. They wielded a hand crossbow on one hand and had a long saber strapped to their waist.

“Tian Wu! Tian Wu! Save me! Save me now!” Luo Feibai screamed like he had found his savior as soon as caught sight of the Pacification Sentinels out of the corner of his eyes.

A portly man in his thirties stepped out in the open. He had a hook mustache and a pair of beady eyes that gave him the appearance of a cartoon villain. After observing the situation and confirming that he didn’t recognize Ye Qing’s group, he put on a frown and yelled angrily, “How dare you attack the citizens of Luo Shui with your Stranger and even take a hostage! Let go of Young Master Luo now, or else!”

“Yes, yes!” Luo Feibai wasn’t stupid. He immediately figured out what Tian Wu was doing and lied through his teeth, “Tian Wu—sorry, I mean Guardian Tian, I was negotiating a deal with this scholar when he suddenly sicced his Stranger on me. As you can see, he seriously injured my men and even took me hostage! You must help me, Guardian Tian!”

“Negotiate a deal?” Ye Qing shrugged uncaringly. “If by ‘negotiate’ you mean forcing me into a deal I never asked for, then sure!”

Tian Wu ignored Ye Qing’s words and declared in a righteous voice, “The law of Chu states anyone who commits wrongdoings through Strangers will have their cultivation sealed and be escorted to the Demon Suppression Prison to await their punishment.”

“Do not resist, or we will employ deadly force against you!”

As soon as he said this, the Pacification Sentinels immediately unsheathed their sabers and loaded their crossbows. At the same time, they spread out into a circle and surrounded Ye Qing from all sides.

“Well? What are you waiting for? Let Young Master Luo go before it’s too late, criminal!” Tian Wu yelled again.

Ye Qing didn’t seem to notice the deadly intent all around him, however. He chuckled. “Criminal? As I told you, it was your ‘Young Master Luo’ who tried to force me into a deal I never asked for. In fact, he was the one who sicced his men on me first, which was why my Stranger beat them up in self-defense.”

Luo Feibai lied again, “Bullshit! I’m the second young master of the Luo Clan! I would never do such a thing!”

Tian Wu uttered coldly, "Hmph! We haven't seen Young Master Luo trying to force you into a deal, but you admitted yourself that this carnage is your Stranger's doing! So quit the bullshit and come with us to the Pacification Bureau already, criminal!"

"Criminal, criminal, criminal. You just can't stop using that word, can you?" Ye Qing smiled mirthlessly. "I'm assuming that you won't change your mind no matter what, Guardian Tian?"

"Why would I? It is the truth! Not only that, I suspect that you're plotting something against Luo Shui because you brought Strangers into the commandery!" Tian Wu waved his hand and ordered, "Capture him!"

The Pacification Sentinels immediately obeyed and marched toward Ye Qing. Although they were only Qi Invokers, their auras were strong, and their eyes were fully focused. They were good men who just had the misfortune of serving under a bad boss.

Ye Qing shook his head and stomped his feet. Like a wave, the earth rolled toward the Pacification Sentinels and knocked them all to the ground. Their faces turned beet red, and their auras grew unstable. For a time, they were unable to muster their energies no matter what they tried.

"What?" Tian Wu was farther away from Ye Qing, but the attack still made him feel a sudden tightness in his chest and threw his breathing out of order. The only reason he didn't drop to his feet like the rest of the Pacification Sentinels was because he was a late-stage Vessel Augmentor. Even so, he could tell immediately that Ye Qing was an Astral Refiner.

Fuck! I thought he was a worm, but he's really a dragon! Tian Wu swore loudly inside his head. He and Luo Feibai were acquaintances, and Ye Qing was a stranger with a weak aura. That was why he took this as an opportunity to curry favor with Luo Feibai. Instead, he had offended someone he shouldn't have offended.

He was still a Guardian of the Pacification Bureau, but if he managed this poorly...

"Ahhh!"

Suddenly, Luo Feibai let out a surprised cry and jolted Tian Wu out of his thoughts. He saw the young man sucking Luo Feibai out of the old servant's hands and into his own.

"What do you think you're doing? Calm down. There's no need for drastic action..."

Tian Wu stammered. He was terrified that the young man would get impulsive and kill Luo Feibai. It would be an absolute shitshow if that happened!

Ye Qing grabbed Luo Feibai firmly with his left hand. It looked like he wasn't using any strength, but Luo Feibai couldn't break free because he felt unusually weak and sore. Ye Qing then looked to Tian Wu and smiled, "Relax, Guardian Tian. You wanted to go to the Pacification Bureau, right? C'mon then! Let's walk there together!"

Before Tian Wu could react, Ye Qing steered Luo Feibai like a chick and started walking in the direction of the Pacification Bureau. The Pacification Sentinels who had just gotten back to their feet instinctively stepped out of Ye Qing's way and stared at his back.

Tian Wu blinked in confusion. He didn't understand what the young man was plotting. He didn't actually think that the Pacification Bureau would believe him over one of their own, did he? Or did he have an actual trick up his sleeves?

Suddenly, Tian Wu had a bad, bad feeling about this.

"Come on! What are you waiting for?" Ye Qing beckoned when he took another two steps and noticed that Tian Wu wasn't following. "Oh right, bring this idiot's underlings with you as well, Guardian Tian."

Tian Wu: "... *Who's the Guardian here, you or me?*

Despite his inner rant, he ultimately ordered his men to carry Luo Feibai's underlings and followed Ye Qing into the Pacification Bureau.