

Stranger 181

Chapter 181: Source of The Corpse Wax

“Screw you! You and your kind are oily and fatty! Someone who eats too much of you will get fat and sick! You’re not nearly as healthy as us noodles!” The rolling pin retorted immediately when it heard the lamb meat’s disparagement.

“Yeah, yeah! We spit in your face, meatarian!” The rice jar also echoed in agreement. It didn’t hesitate to ally itself with the rolling pin to fight against the lamb meat’s oppression.

Never thought I’d heard the word “meatarian” in this context, Ye Qing rubbed his nose as he eavesdropped on the Strangers. The argument had turned out to be more interesting than he thought.

“Cut it out already. Aren’t you guys embarrassed at how childish you’re behaving?”

It was at this moment the iron pot who kicked off the conversation at the very beginning interrupted, “Noodles are fine, but can you get that chewy feeling without me to cook you nice and proper? Rice is high class, but you’re nothing without me to steam you, aren’t you? And you, lamb meat, do you think there’s anyone out there who’d eat you raw except animals?”

“If you ask me, then all of you are inferior to me. It is I who bestows you your divine color and taste!”

“Heh. I’m surprised you didn’t sprain your tongue bragging like that [1],” The stove suddenly spoke up.

“Without me burning your ass all day and night, can the ingredients get cooked and release their delicious aroma? Speaking of ass, the one thing you can do is to point your ass in my direction. How dare you say that everyone is inferior to you!”

“Screw you! Like you can do anything without me!” The iron pot retorted, “Also, I said this many times already, and I’ll say it again. I’m pointing my belly toward you, not my butt!”

The furnace scoffed, “Your belly looks just like a butt. Who can say if it’s a belly or a butt?”

Finally, the carrying pole leaning against the wall interrupted, “Do you guys have too much energy? Is that why you people can’t stop running your mouth?”

“In my opinion, none of you are as great as master’s oil. It is said that oil is the essential component of all food, and it is a fact that these humans wouldn’t enjoy their food nearly as much without master’s oil. Just look at them! They look like they might lose their souls at any moment!”

“Oil?” It was at this moment Ye Qing’s eyes lit up. Could this oil be the corpse wax that he was looking for? It could very well be!

Ye Qing was going to eavesdrop some more hoping that the Strangers would reveal more information, but the old man suddenly paused his work and shot Ye Qing a kind smile, "Have you considered what you want, dear customer?"

Can I order some oil? Was what Ye Qing wanted to say, but on second thought he wasn't actually sure if the corpse wax actually originated from this stall. He should wait a little longer and see what happens.

"I've decided. Please cook me a menu [2], please!" Ye Qing replied. The bigger the sample size, the better his chance at identifying what he was looking for.

"You want me to cook you a... menu? What is that? I've never heard a phrase like that before," The old man said in confusion.

"Oh, I totally forgot you don't have a menu," Ye Qing changed his request, "Cook me a table then!"

"That... doesn't explain your request any better, customer." Is cook-a-table cook-a-menu's relative?

Ye Qing laughed, "Sorry, sorry! What I mean to say is, can you cook me a full table of dishes?"

"Oh, I see!" The old man exclaimed in realization, "I can do that, but can you really finish it all, customer?"

"I'll be fine! I've been a big eater since I was a kid!" Ye Qing waved away his concern. "Also, feel free to make my food saltier and oilier than normal. Salt and oil makes the world go round, and I very much want to maintain a healthy figure."

The old man: "... " I think your definition of a "healthy figure" might be a tad skewed.

"Okay, customer. Please give me a moment."

Ye Qing's request was unusual, but the old man paid it no heed. Forget him, everyone had encountered at least one person with extreme tastes at least once in their lives.

Heh. Humans.

Ye Qing played with his bamboo chopsticks once more, eyes flitting here and there seemingly at random. In reality, his attention was on the old man the entire time.

The old man's cooking skills were pretty great. For example, he could cut any meat or vegetable smoothly and without pause as if he had done it a million times before. But of course, Ye Qing's attention wasn't on his cooking skills. It was on the oil he used to cook said dishes.

Unfortunately, Ye Qing couldn't find anything out of the ordinary. As far as he could tell, the cooking oil he used to cook the dishes were normal cooking oil. This disappointed him as a matter of course.

At first, Ye Qing didn't notice anything amiss. The old man hadn't acted out of the ordinary, and the dishes seemed fine as well. But over time, he started noticing something odd. Maybe it was because the old man had been working non-stop since he received Ye Qing's order, or maybe it was because

he was sticking a little too close to the hot stove. In any case, his face was entirely drenched in sweat.

This was perfectly normal, of course. Some people sweat easily, so much so that they could sweat like a pig while eating even during a cold, winter night, much less a hot stove. It was why Ye Qing paid it no heed at the beginning. However, the old man started sweating from his neck, his hands, his exposed arms, his torso and more. It eventually escalated to the point where his shirt was utterly drenched in sweat.

Naturally, it was inevitable that his sweat got into the food. Loads of it.

“Oh my, it smells so good! Master smells so good I can eat him!”

All the Strangers—the iron pot, the rolling pin, the carrying pole, the rice jar and more made intoxicated noises. The old man himself was growing more and more excited for some reason. His face was contorted into a crazed expression, and the amount of sweat he was sweating was still increasing. Speaking of the sweat, it didn’t look as bright or clean as before either. Instead, it was mixed with some sort of smelly, yellowish oil that shone eerily in the light.

The next moment, the old man started melting like a literal candle. The droplets turned into trickles, and trickles turned into steady streams as the oil spilled into the iron pot.

The pork meat and vegetables sizzled loudly within the oil and gave off an unbelievably fragrant aroma. It was so fragrant that the Strangers started showering praises unto the old man again,

“It smells good...”

“It smells too good...”

“I can’t hold it in any longer... ahhhhhhhh!”

A particularly strange cry was mixed within the shower of compliments, but Ye Qing was too busy feeling disgusted at what he saw to register it in his brain. Urgh... I’m the one who ordered a heavy meal, sure, this is way too extreme!

Suddenly, the old man looked up and grinned slowly at Ye Qing. “Don’t worry, customer. Your stir-fried pork liver will be ready very soon.”

As his mouth literally split from ear to ear, more smelly oil slid off his face and into his mouth and the iron pot. It was unbelievably horrifying and disgusting.

Ye Qing: “...”

Can you stop smiling, brother? You look better when you aren’t smiling!

Of course, Ye Qing was the only one who could see this. Even if the other customers weren’t completely absorbed by their food, a special layer of energy permeated the mysterious cook and his stall. It masked the old man’s true appearance—crazed and dripping oil like crazy—and the kitchen equipment’s boisterous conversation with a convincing illusion.

If his spirit hadn’t grown by leaps and bounds after receiving the soul power of the souls, he might not have been able to see through the special energy either.

At this point, Ye Qing was almost certain that the smelly oil dripping was corpse wax, and the old man was the root cause behind Deng Qiang's transformation and the zombie outbreaks.

"Your stir-fried pork liver is ready, customer. As you requested, I'd added a copious amount of salt and oil into your dish. I guarantee that you'll be satisfied with the result."

Stop mentioning the damn oil, for heavens' sake.

Ye Qing examined the stir fried pork liver for a moment. The entire plate was covered in a thick layer of oil, or more accurately, corpse wax. Even now, the old man was dripping corpse wax until it formed a pool beneath his feet.

"You can start eating now, customer. Why aren't you eating?" the old man urged when he saw that Ye Qing wasn't moving.

"Go on! You can start eating now. Go on... why aren't you eating? WhY areN't YOu eaTiNG?"

After urging Ye Qing a couple more times to no avail, a hint of madness began creeping into his face bit by bit. The corners of his mouth split wide open, and copious amounts of corpse wax dripped off his eyes, his nose, and his mouth. It poured onto the stir-fried pork liver, spilled out of the plate, and spread toward Ye Qing bit by bit.

"deAR cUstoMER, WhY areN't yOU EATING my deliCiOUS FoOD?"

The old man slowly lowered his head. His wax-covered face inched closer and closer to Ye Qing.

"You're too close, bro! Are you trying to show off your big face or something!?"

When the disgusting face was just an inch away from Ye Qing, he abruptly grabbed the back of the old man's head and slammed it into the plate of stir-fried, corpse-waxed pork liver. There was so much force behind his arm that the wooden table shattered on impact.

Not done yet, Ye Qing clenched his left fist and threw a devastating uppercut that landed squarely on the old man's chest. His force easily blew the old man to pieces, but he spilled slimy, smelly corpse wax instead of flesh and blood.

"WhY areN't YOu eaTiNG?"

"whY aREn't yOU eAtinG?"

"Why AREN't YOU eATing?!"

After confirming that the old man was the mastermind behind it all, Ye Qing had ambushed the old man in hopes of killing him in one blow. However, he didn't even manage to breathe a sigh of relief before the corpse wax on the ground climbed upward and reformed the old man. He glared at Ye Qing like he would swallow him whole.

"iF yOU wON't EAT iT, TheN I'll eAt yOu!"

The next moment, the old man's mouth split all the way to the base of his neck like he was Pac-Man. Then, he pounced forward and attempted to chomp down Ye Qing's head off.

Ye Qing sidestepped the charge and lashed out with his sleeve. An avalanche of force easily shattered the mouth into bits. However, Ye Qing knew from previous experience that this was but a tickle to the old man. Taking every step like he would stomp the earth into the abyss, he rushed up to the old man and threw another punch.

“Cloud Vaporization Style”

Normally, the “Cloud Vaporization Style” was an incredibly forceful technique, but this time it was anything but. It practically made no sound as it slipped into the old man’s body like a soft, gentle breeze.

The next moment, the old man’s entire body caught on fire. Dark red flames jutted out of his body, and the surrounding temperature spiked all of a sudden.

When Ye Qing threw his second punch, he converted what was a “hard” force into a “soft” force; a ruinous thunderstorm into a gentle drizzle midway. By doing this, he was able to inject his full power into the old man’s body and detonate it from the inside. Like a shadow it slipped into the night, and like a storm it loudly announced its presence.

The combined explosion of the Burning Wind and his fist force caused the old man to start melting inch by inch, and like a candle that was tossed into a furnace, the entire process only took the blink of an eye. One moment he was still screaming, and the next he had evaporated into thin air. It was as if he had never existed.

Chapter 182: From Within

“Is it dead? It’s probably dead!”

Ye Qing examined his surroundings for a bit before letting out a sigh of relief. The old man’s whole body seemed to be made up of corpse wax, and he seemed to possess the ability to regenerate himself no matter how many times it was destroyed. Strangers like these were the absolute worst. The only real way to kill him was to annihilate him utterly in one go.

Had he not concentrated his fist force and tried to destroy the old man from the outside, there was a high chance he would just be wasting his energy. That was why he had condensed his force into a ball, inserted it into the old man’s body, and destroyed him from the inside out. Only then could he annihilate every speck of the Stranger.

“Wha... What just happened? Master is dead! Master is dead!”

“Killed! Killed! The human killed Master! What do we do now?”

“We need to run! We need to run as far away as we can!”

“But we don’t have legs. How can we possibly outrun him?”

“We need a plan, we need a plan n—he’s looking at us! He’s walking toward us! Oh shit, oh shit, it’s all over, we’re all gonna die!”

The iron pot, stove, rice jar and more Strangers were all panicking after the death of their master. Just when it looked like they were going to submit to their fate, the carrying pole leaning against the

wall said, "I have a plan. Flour, I want you to blind that human when he comes close. Rice, I want you to slip under his feet while he's blinded and trip him."

"While he's disoriented, we'll rush him together. Rolling Pin, I want you to smash his head in. Knife, I want you to cut his neck. Rice Jar will smash his legs, Iron Pot will spill him with boiling water, and Stove will burn him with its flames. We'll give him the ice-and-fire treatment..."

Ye Qing: "..."

Are they stupid? They're not even trying to lower their voice. Had I suddenly lost all of my powers or something, or are they just that arrogant?

Ye Qing didn't inform the Strangers that he was aware of their plan, of course. Instead, he slowly walked toward them exactly as they wanted. When he was about a meter away from the stall, he closed his eyes just in time to avoid being blinded by a shower of flour. At the same time, an army of rice rolled up to his feet and tried to trip him over.

"Let's fuck him up, everyone! Ahhhhh..."

As soon as Flour covered his face, Rolling Pin, Rice Jar, Knife and the rest of the Strangers let out a battle cry and charged toward Ye Qing like gangsters.

"Heh! Never thought I'd be swarmed by a bunch of food and kitchen equipment pretending to be gangsters one day!" Ye Qing smirked as he emitted a layer of astral qi to protect his body. Flour was immediately pushed out and away from Ye Qing. Then, he exerted a bit of strength and crushed the rice that had rolled under his feet.

Next, he grabbed Rolling Pin before the Stranger could smack him in the back of his head and swung it at Knife. Caught completely off guard, Knife was knocked right into a wall.

Not done yet, he swung Rolling Pin and sent Rice Jar flying before it could smash into his legs. Unable to arrest its momentum, it slammed into both Iron Pot and Stove and experienced the so-called ice-and-fire treatment.

"Argh! My back!"

"It hurts so much..."

"What the hell do you think you were doing, Iron Pot, Stove? Are you trying to kill us [1]!?"

"You're the idiot who slammed into us! What else are we supposed to do?"

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While the Strangers were busy picking themselves up, Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and took two steps forward. Like a raging torrent, he threw out a third punch.

"Cloud Vaporization Style"

A tsunami of Burning Wind washed over the entire space. By the time the Strangers realized what just happened, they were already burning to death.

“Wah! Wah! I’m burning alive! I need you to splash me with water now, Iron Pot!”

“What water? My water is long gone, you doofus! Can’t you see that I’m red hot right now?”

“You guys think you had it bad? Look at me! I’m a stove, and I’m melting because the fire’s too hot! Who would even believe this?”

“Ayayayayaa...”

The Strangers never stopped bickering until the end. Their voices grew weaker and weaker until finally, they were all gone.

“They were an interesting bunch. I would have kept them alive if I didn’t need to make up for the dragon-serpent runes I lost,” sighed Ye Qing while withdrawing his fist. Every single one of these Strangers was a Malice-class Stranger, and in the past they would’ve posed a huge problem. But now? They were just fodder for more runes.

It was at this moment Rolling Pin finally woke up from his short coma. It slurred, “Urgh... M-My head is spinning like I’ve been swung around at least a dozen times... D-Did we win, brothers? Is it over?”

Rolling Pin thought its side had won since it couldn’t hear anything. In response, Ye Qing replied smilingly, “It’s over.”

“That’s good—wait a second. You don’t sound right. You... You’re not dead!” Rolling Pin exclaimed in shock. It was only now it realized that Ye Qing had been holding it this whole time. Before it could struggle free, Ye Qing engulfed it in the Netherflame. It was burned down to dust in just the blink of an eye.

“Now it’s finally over.”

Ye Qing clapped his hands and got ready to leave. However, he suddenly realized that his hands were unusually slippery. It was almost as if they were covered in a sheen of oil. When he looked down, he discovered in horror that his hands were covered in a layer of yellowish oil. In fact, it wasn’t just hit hands. He soon realized that his face, his arms, his legs and all other parts of his body were covered in the oil.

“Is this... corpse wax?!”

Ye Qing couldn’t believe it. The smelly, yellowish “oil” looked exactly the same as the old man’s corpse wax. However, the old man should be dead already!

“The corpse wax is leaking from my pores; from inside of me! But how is this possible?”

When Ye Qing tried to wipe one of his arms clean, he quickly realized that more corpse wax was leaking out of his pores. It was like his inside were filled with corpse wax.

“What’s going on? When did this happen?”

For a time, Ye Qing was completely stumped. He just couldn’t figure out when he had been “infected” with corpse wax. He had never made physical contact with the old man or the corpse wax [2], so how did they enter his body?

“Unless... the air?” Ye Qing suddenly looked at the air around him. When he punched the old man so hard that he literally evaporated, he hadn’t actually wiped every trace of him out of existence. To be specific, the old man had left behind a cloud of yellow mist. He hadn’t paid it any attention because you know, it was just mist, but now, he realized that he was dead wrong.

Did the yellow mist turn into corpse wax after I inhaled it into my body? It must be!

It was at this moment Ye Qing noticed that the three customers were undergoing the same changes as him. In fact, their situation was much worse. Like melting candles, they were dripping so much corpse wax that large bodies of corpse wax had pooled underneath their feet. None of them noticed what was happening to them, however. They were still eating their meals with a look of bliss on their faces.

If before their expressions elicited emotions of warmth and harmony, then now it was pure horror and disgust.

The old man must still be alive!

Ye Qing immediately circulated the Burning Wind and burned away all the corpse wax inside his body—or at least, he tried to. The moment he tried to channel his astral qi, he discovered in horror that they were moving at a snail’s pace. It was as if his blood vessels and bodily points were clogged.

Suddenly, the corpse wax covering the scholar wriggled unnaturally. They condensed into a lump behind his shoulders and—

Pop!

The lump popped and revealed a head. It was none other than the old man’s head.

The old man’s head slowly turned around to glare at Ye Qing. Then, his mouth split open as he asked, “Food is the most wonderful thing in this world, so why do you refuse to eat?”

“Why do you refuse to eat?”

“WHy do YOu REfuSe to EAT?!”

More corpse wax poured out of the scholar, the down-to-earth man, and the woman’s body and onto the ground. Then, the corpse wax started spreading toward Ye Qing like a tidal wave.

Ye Qing lifted an eyebrow and tried to retreat, but his own body started secreting more corpse wax. He found himself unable to control his body for an instant—or more accurately, his reflex was a beat slower than it should be—and the flood of corpse wax reached him during that short delay.

The next moment, the corpse wax crawled up his legs and covered his body rapidly. It looked like he could easily pull away from it, but in reality the corpse wax was strong enough to pin him in place and immobilize him. He was completely covered in just the blink of an eye.

More corpse wax were being produced by the second. The three people's internal organs, flesh, blood and bone were all being melted to produce more corpse wax. It wasn't long before their insides were completely emptied, and only their skins were left. At the same time, a literal hill of corpse wax was pinning down Ye Qing.

Pop pop pop!

Three heads burst out of the surging corpse wax on Ye Qing's shoulders and chest. They all wore the old man's face.

"wHy dO yoU RefuSE TO EAAt?"

"WiLI YOu rEaLLY nOt EaT?"

"iF YOu won't eat, THEn I Will EAT YoU!"

The three heads said one after another.

"Pah!"

Ye Qing opened his mouth and spat out Lightning Bolt. White hot lightning instantly annihilated the corpse wax covering his face.

"You know why I don't want to eat your food. It's disgusting!"

Ye Qing didn't understand why the old man was asking such a stupid question again and again. There was no way he didn't realize just how fucking disgusting it was!

Ye Qing shook a little. His flesh and blood squirmed, and his bones made this popping noise that sounded like thunder. When he unleashed his Dragon Elephant strength, the thick corpse wax enveloping his body was blown away in an instant.

However, the scattered corpse wax quickly reformed itself in the sky, yellowish and smelly and sticky as ever. The way they spread out like a spider's web while writhing and twisting unto themselves could only be described as pure evil.

Eventually, it happened. The corpse wax fell down toward Ye Qing like a blanket.

While the corpse wax was falling, Ye Qing pulled out a gong and a mallet from his Nature's Shell. Grinning, he hit the gong with the mallet as hard as he could.

Chapter 183: Strange Monk

Dang!

There was a horrific scream as multiple heads suddenly wriggled out of the corpse wax. They all belonged to the old man's, and they all seemed to be contorted in pain. The corpse wax itself shuddered like it had taken a huge blow. It would seem that the Soul Absorbing Gong was very effective against the Stranger.

Dang! Dang! Dang!

Always one to kick a dog when it was down, Ye Qing didn't hesitate to hit the Soul Absorbing Gang again, and again, and again.

The heads started exploding one after another. The blanket of corpse wax falling toward Ye Qing were riddled with holes as well. They splattered lifelessly against the ground as if they had lost all of their vitality and strength. They didn't move again.

It was at this moment Ye Qing noticed that the corpse wax inside his body had lost its potency as well. His true qi began flowing as smoothly as before.

He didn't hesitate. Astral qi surging inside him like a raging sea, he turned his body into a furnace and burned it all into nothing. The corpse wax inside his internal organs, his veins, his flesh and his blood, not a single drop was left untouched.

Now that the biggest danger was resolved, Ye Qing continued to hit the Soul Absorbing Gong and unleashed his astral qi at the same time. The dark red Burning Wind swayed like a banner of victory as it swept across the entire space.

“Ahhh! Ahhhhh! AHHHHHHHHH!”

The corpse wax flew everywhere as the old man screamed on top of its lungs, but it was futile. Ye Qing had locked down this entire space with his Burning Wind. No matter where it ran to, the Burning Wind was always there to burn it all.

It took some time, but the corpse wax grew thinner and thinner, and the old man's scream got weaker and weaker as well. When the last drop of corpse wax evaporated into nothing, his scream finally came to an end.

“Is he dead?” Ye Qing released his spirit and carefully scanned every nook and cranny of the area. Although he couldn't sense the old man's aura or any corpse wax, he didn't let his guard down. Once was enough. He took out the Annon Sutra and checked the dragon-serpent runes. He let out a sigh of relief only when he confirmed that he had gained two silver runes from the battle.

The first silver rune had probably come from Rolling Pin, Furnace, Rice Jar and the rest of the band of comedic Strangers combined, and the second rune came from the old man.

“Phew... he's finally dead.”

It wasn't paranoia if they were really out to get you. The old man had lived even after he had blown the sonuvabitch into gas. Not only that, it had slipped inside his body as he breathed and affected the flow of his astral qi.

If his strength wasn't as formidable as it was, or if he didn't have a Hatred-class Strange Artifact that attacked the soul, he still would've won, but he might have to spend a week or two in the bed at least.

He didn't think that another Astral Refiner—even one who had reached the ceiling of the Astral Refinement stage—could've killed this guy. Defeat him, maybe, and it was far more likely that they would be melted into corpse wax just like those three poor customers. Kill him? Absolutely not.

“Urk... that’s it, I’m deleting this battle from my brain except the beginning and the end. And I gotta go home and take a bath ASAP.”

Driven by morbid curiosity, Ye Qing sniffed himself and nearly threw up on the spot. He might have annihilated the corpse wax with the Burning Wind, but it was inevitable that some of the stench would linger. If he did not go home now and take a thorough bath, heavens only know what his men and more importantly, Qingyou would think of him tomorrow.

Ye Qing looked around for a bit and confirmed that the mysterious power that separated this alley from the real world had disappeared. He could clearly hear the sounds of footsteps and conversations from outside the alley and the surrounding buildings. After inspecting the area one last time and confirming that he hadn’t missed anything, he finally made his way to the Pacification Bureau.

Ye Qing didn’t head to his residence immediately after he returned to the Pacification Bureau. Duty came first, and his duty entailed him to report what just happened to Gu Suitang. The Vice Chief of Bureau was extremely pleased to hear this and did not hesitate to lavish him with praises.

Obviously, he didn’t mention that the Annon Sutra was the one who led him to the mysterious cook in the first place. He chalked it all up to the Incense of Fortune and pure coincidence. After all, a man’s gotta step on dog shit at least a few times in their life, much less dog shit luck, right?

With this, the case was finally wrapped up. The mastermind behind the zombie outbreaks had been destroyed, so there wouldn’t be any more zombie outbreaks. There were, of course, still the loose ends and the aftermath to handle, but that was for his subordinates to worry about. What was the point of being a boss if he didn’t delegate?

Ye Qing took a bath as soon as he returned to his room. When he had thoroughly washed the stink off his person, he hit the bed and was out like a light.

He had not had a good night’s sleep since he started investigating this case. The trip to the Strange Market had turned out to be far more tumultuous than he expected as well. It might not sound like much on paper, but he knew just how exhausting this past week had been. Now that it was finally over, of course he was going to catch all the Zs he had missed until now.

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“Phew... the sky is bright, and the weather is clear. This is the perfect day to head out for a trip.”

Ye Qing was wearing a conical hat and stretching a little in front of the entrance of Luo Shui, the corners of his lips curled into a bright smile as he basked under the warm sunlight.

The reason he was leaving the commandery today was to visit the Thousand Buddhas Grotto, of course. He was going to use the Star Lotus and the Blood Jade Lotus to skyrocket through the cultivation levels.

It was dangerous to leave the commandery, of course. Even if he pretended that Wang Luori wasn’t looking for him anymore, it was practically guaranteed that he would encounter grave and unexpected dangers once he left the Pacification Bureau’s protection. Such was the world he lived in now.

That said, he had never planned on hiding under the umbrella that was the Pacification Bureau forever. Outside help was great, but the only one who could truly help him was himself.

But of course, that didn't mean that he was just going to waltz out of there without any preparation whatsoever. He had informed Gu Suitang and only Gu Suitang about his departure. He also asked Faceless to transform into him and pretend that he was still in the Inspection Department. As long as he showed his face and took care of some trivial matters once in a while, that should be enough to fool his observers into thinking that he was still in the Pacification Bureau. No one would think that the real Ye Qing had left the commandery.

The Thousand Buddhas Grotto was called the Thousand Buddhas Grotto because it was filled with all kinds of Buddhist statues. There were the Bodhisattvas, the Wisdom Kings, the Yaksha and the Buddha himself; the Sleeping Buddha, Reclining Buddha, Sitting Buddha, Standing Buddha, Apsara and more.

Their appearance was also incredibly diverse. Some statues were smiling, and some were yelling. Some looked kind and benevolent, while some were wide-eyed with anger. Some were noble and righteous, and some were lustful and bizarre. Even their shapes and sizes were very varied. There had to be at least thousands of statues down there, which was why the Thousand Buddhas Grotto was also nicknamed as the "Kingdom of Buddha on Earth [1]".

Of course, the nickname didn't mean that the Thousand Buddhas Grotto was a true Kingdom of Buddha where peace and harmony reigned, and paradise was everywhere. It just meant that the grotto had a lot of Buddhist statues.

In fact, the Thousand Buddhas Grotto was filled with evil, Strangers and taint. It was a dangerous, living hell that only the strong, the brave or the foolish would dare to venture into.

According to the records, the Thousand Buddhas Grotto was a real Buddhist temple centuries ago, but one night, the entire structure sank into the underground for some unknown reason. The monks living inside the temple had gone missing as well. No one knew if they were alive or dead.

Over time, Thousand Buddhas Grotto became infested with all kinds of evils and Strangers. It eventually transformed into a Strange Realm and a forbidden land to all living things.

The entrance of the Thousand Buddhas Grotto was located at the foot of a mountain. From above, it looked like the ground had suddenly split apart into a dark, sinister crack.

When Ye Qing stepped through the crack, he was immediately assaulted by an unnatural chill. It was surprisingly dark inside the cavern even though the entrance was right there. It was as if a mysterious power was keeping out all of the warmth and light so that there would only be cold, dark and evil. The underground world or the surface world; the Kingdom of Buddha or the Kingdom of Demons.

Ye Qing followed a series of small trails and ancient corridors deeper into the grotto. It wasn't long before he started seeing Buddhist statues of all shapes and sizes on both sides of the path.

Tok tok tok tok...

Suddenly, Ye Qing heard a series of distinct knocking sounds from deeper underground. He recognized it immediately.

"Someone's tapping on a wooden fish...?"

Ye Qing stopped in his tracks and listened for a bit. It was a steady, fairly rapid rhythm that reminded him of monks tapping on a wooden fish while chanting a sutra.

“But why would there be such a sound in this grotto?”

Ye Qing frowned and made his way toward the source of the noise. He had just stepped past a collapsed Buddhist statue when he saw a monk wearing a moon white monk robe sitting crosslegged on the ground with his back facing toward him. He couldn't see it, but the knocking sound came from directly in front of the monk.

A warm, golden light rippled out from the monk's body in intervals as the knocking sound continued. It gave him a holy and welcoming feeling that wasn't all that different from the rising sun.

The holy light and the melodious knocks of the wooden fish seemed to possess some sort of strange magic. It could pacify everything within a certain range.

Gradually, Ye Qing's expression turned warm and gentle. His lips were curled into a peaceful smile as he slowly stepped toward the monk as if he had forgotten his caution, his doubt, and his violent impulses.

When Ye Qing was about three meters away from the monk, the monks slowly turned around to reveal a kind, amicable face. However, beneath the face was a centipede-like body that was covered in thin, long legs. As it turned out, the knocking sound hadn't come from a wooden fish at all. It was the sound of the centipede tapping two of its legs together!

Even stranger was the fact that the centipede Stranger completely lacked the dark, sinister vibe of the Thousand Buddhas Grotto. Instead, it exuded an aura of peace, tranquility, and majesty not unlike the esteemed monks who had studied the sutras for decades and attained varying degrees of enlightenment.

In fact, no one would think that the monk was a Stranger if they only looked at his face or perceived his aura. They would've believed that he was a great, virtuous monk whose attainment in Buddhism could only be described as sublime.

The centipede Stranger's smile grew increasingly kind and merciful as Ye Qing stepped closer and closer. He was wobbling on his feet as if he wasn't completely in control of his faculties. And all this time, the centipede Stranger never stopped tapping its legs.

When Ye Qing was about an inch away from it, the centipede Stranger slowly opened its mouth to reveal a snake-like tongue. As the tongue slithered toward Ye Qing's face, it abruptly split in half to reveal rows and rows of barb-like teeth. Then, the split tongue bit down on Ye Qing's head horizontally.

The centipede Stranger's kind smile never faded even as it tried to murder Ye Qing. To save a life was a merciful act. To take a life, too, was a merciful act.

Right before Ye Qing would lose his head, his lips abruptly curled into an evil smirk. Then, he pulled back and dodged the bite with millimeters to spare.

Clank!

Sparks flew, and there was a loud, metallic bang when the split tongue clamped together. Before the centipede Stranger could react, Ye Qing reached out and grabbed its tongue with his left hand.

Tok tok tok tok tok!

The centipede Stranger clearly recognized that it was in danger. It started tapping one half of its legs faster than ever before, increasing the intensity of the golden light and the strange power that seemed capable of pacifying any violence or bloodthirst. At the same time, it thrust the other half of its legs forward in an attempt to stab Ye Qing in the stomach.

The sudden outburst of power could have thrown most Astral Refiners off balance for an instant, and in a battle, an instant could make the difference between life and death. However, Ye Qing was completely unmoved by the pacifying power. Eyes looking as clear as a pair of crystals, he unleashed the Netherflame and burned the centipede Stranger's tongue into ash in an instant. The unholy flame then continued to spread to its head.

At the same time, he swung his right hand downward and cut all of the attacking legs in one smooth motion. Then, he clenched his right hand into a fist and punched it right in the abdomen.

Boom!

The Stranger's golden light was crushed into smithereens, and the Burning Wind consumed it all. Like a piece of rotten wood, the centipede Stranger started eroding at an unbelievable rate. One second before, holes suddenly appeared all over its body. One second later, all that was left of the centipede Stranger was dust.

Chapter 184: Stone Child

"I can't believe I ran into a Buddhipepe so soon after I entered the Thousand Buddhas Grotto. How unfortunate."

Ye Qing shrugged. The centipede wearing a monk's head earlier was called a Buddhipepe, a Hatred-class Stranger.

The Buddhipepe was a special kind of Stranger with a human head but a centipede's body. It could only be born at a Buddhist site. Because it was born with Buddha-nature, A Buddhipepe naturally possessed the power to forbid murder, eliminate violent thoughts, and induce feelings of kindness and compassion in others. Anyone who got near a Buddhipepe would slowly let down their guard and their suspicion and turn peaceful and subdued. For example, a bloodthirsty murderer that was influenced by the Buddhipepe could be converted into a devotee of the Buddha instantly. It was why the Buddhipepe was also nicknamed the Protector of the Buddha.

However, a Buddhipepe's nature could vary drastically depending on their place of birth. If the Buddhist site was a proper Buddhist site, then all was well. If it was the opposite, then the Buddhipepe would become an evil, bloodthirsty killer instead.

It spoke volumes as to the type of place the Thousand Buddhas Grotto was considering that the Buddhipepe it gave birth to had just tried to murder him. It was quite the dangerous and unpredictable Stranger too. Its ability to pacify a victim subtly and without them noticing was almost impossible to defend against, and the sheen of golden light surrounding its body was called the Light of Commandment. It was so tough that it could block even the attack of a Spirit Purifier, making the Buddhipepe one of the harder Strangers to kill.

That said, the Buddhipepe had a critical weakness. Its tongue was incredibly frail, and severing it or destroying it would destroy its Light of Commandment as well. Of course, a Buddhipepe normally kept its weakness well tucked behind its throat. However, it must unfurl its tongue if it wished to feed, which was why Ye Qing pretended to be influenced by the Buddhipepe and waited until it had revealed its tongue before killing it in one strike. It would've cost him quite a bit of strength had he tried to kill the Buddhipepe the conventional way.

On a related note, Ye Qing didn't mean that the Buddhipepe was a formidable foe when he lamented how unfortunate the encounter was. It was said that the Buddhipepe was blessed by the Buddha because it was born with Buddha-nature. That was why anyone who killed a Buddhipepe would suffer terrible misfortune.

It was impossible to know if the Buddhipepe was actually blessed by the Buddha, but it was a fact that its killer would be very unlucky for a time.

"Sigh. I hope that everything will go smoothly."

Ye Qing didn't really let it occupy his mind though. For one, he was quite confident in his abilities. Two, he still had the Incense of Fortune. If the bad luck was too much for him to handle, he could just light an Incense of Fortune to keep the bad luck away.

Ye Qing continued deeper into the grotto after killing the Buddhipepe. According to the records, the Thousand Buddhas Grotto was a maze-like grotto that was filled with hundreds of tunnels and thousands of crevices, all of them traversable to a certain extent. If you got lost, then the chances of you making it back to the surface was incredibly unlikely. That said, there was one main path—which was really just a particularly big crevice—that led all the way to the deepest parts of Thousand Buddhas Grotto, so as long as you stuck to the main path, you would never get lost.

The main path wasn't without its dangers, however. Since it was the main path, it experienced far more traffic than the other paths, and not the human variety. Besides the Buddhipepe, Ye Qing had run into the Hundred Ears Mouse, the Bell Ghost, the Earth Puppet after just walking for an incense stick or so.

The Hundred Ears Mouse was a mouse that was covered in ears. It possessed exceptional hearing as a matter of course. The Bell Ghost was a bell-shaped ghost that could shake its own body to unleash a sound attack that sounded like the screams of an evil spirit. The Earth Golem was a massive golem that was entirely made out of soil.

Of course, none of these Strangers were particularly powerful. The Bell Ghost was the strongest of them all, but it was only a Malice-class Stranger. It barely took him any effort to defeat them.

As he continued deeper down the crevice, the atmosphere grew increasingly dark and unsettling. The surrounding statues, moss and soil had taken on a heavy dark gray color as well.

Suddenly, Ye Qing paused in his tracks. "Hmm? There's sounds of fighting up ahead."

He pulsed his spirit and grasped the situation quickly. "Three people are attacking a Stranger."

Ye Qing pushed off the ground and swooped closer to the battlefield without a sound. The humans were two men and one woman, and they were all late-stage Vessel Augmentors. The two men were handsome scholars wearing the same type of attire; a uniform. The dainty woman was wearing the same attire as the men, but her gender was obvious at first glance.

The Stranger they were attacking was a boulder. It was as big as a millstone, but its two arms and legs were as thin as chopsticks. It was a comedic appearance to say the least.

That said, the boulder Stranger was the opposite of its appearance. It could summon countless rocks to defend or attack its enemies with the wave of a limb, and it was giving the three scholars a lot of trouble.

“A Stone Child!” Ye Qing recognized the Stranger immediately. The Stone Child was just a Malice-class Stranger, but it was among the most annoying to deal with because it could control sand and stone like its own limb and was impervious to physical weapons, water and fire. In fact, it was on par with some of the weaker Hatred-class Strangers out there.

“The Stone Child isn’t an easy opponent, but these people... how are they losing when they are three on one?”

Ye Qing shook his head slightly as he observed the battle from behind a rocky pillar. Objectively speaking, the trio weren’t weak at all. They were late-stage Vessel Augmentors, their martial arts were pretty strong, their swordplay looked exquisite, and their true qi was enormous. However, they were performing so poorly it was like he was watching a cartoon show. There were multiple times they could’ve exploited a major opening and dealt the Stone Child a huge blow, but they never failed to miss it.

This was nothing compared to their teamwork though. Forget covering their companions’ weaknesses or bolstering their strengths, they would bump into each other from time to time or block each other’s paths. To call them pigs would probably be an insult to pigs, because pigs would have at least established a hierarchy beforehand. It was clear that the trio had next to no experience when it came to fighting Strangers.

“Uwah!?”

Suddenly, the woman accidentally slipped on the ground and landed with a thud. Instead of getting back to her feet and backing away from the Stranger, she actually clutched her right leg and started rubbing the sore spot.

“Did it hurt so much that death is preferable?”

Ye Qing couldn’t resist rolling his eyes. The woman’s action was akin to lighting a lantern in the toilet—courting death. [1]

Astoundingly, the two men’s reaction was just as idiotic as the woman’s. One of them abandoned the Stone Child instantly and raced toward the woman. The other guy continued to fight the Stone Child as if his companions hadn’t just hung him out to dry. He could’ve adopted a hit-and-run tactic or try to delay the Stone Child until his companions recovers, but no, he fought in the exact same way as before.

What could he possibly do by himself when three of them had failed to defeat the Stone Child? Just a few exchanges later, the Stone Child sent his sword flying and threw a punch at his head.

“Brother Mu Yuan!”

“Mu Yuan...”

The other man and the woman exclaimed in horror as they got back to their feet.

The guy named Mu Yuan seemed completely lost after he lost his sword. Instead of dodging out of the way, he just stood there with a slack-jawed expression as the fist rapidly approached his face.

“It’s a miracle you guys managed to live until now,” Ye Qing sighed and appeared in front of Mu Yuan. He swung his sleeve and struck the Stone Child with enough force to send it flying across the air. It shattered into a million pieces before it hit the ground.

“Shouldn’t you thank me for saving your lives?” Ye Qing looked back at Mu Yuan—the young man was still in shock—and said. The Stone Child was just a Malice-class Stranger, so he lost nothing by helping them.

“T... Thank you,” Mu Yuan subconsciously replied before he finally snapped back to reality and bowed, “Thank you so much for saving our lives, senior!”

Ye Qing was wearing a conical hat, and the Thousand Buddhas Grotto was extremely dark. As a result, Mu Yuan was unable to discern Ye Qing’s face. Despite his youthful voice, Mu Yuan still addressed Ye Qing as senior because he clearly possessed immense strength. There was no harm in being polite after all.

“It’s no trouble at all,” Ye Qing smiled and asked them a question, “Who are you people, and why have you come to the Thousand Buddhas Grotto?”

Mu Yuan replied respectfully, “I am Mu Yuan, a student of White Horse Academy. They are my senior and my junior sister, Cheng Yi and Chéng Youlan [2].”

Cheng Yi and Chéng Youlan harried forward and emulated their companion’s example, “We greet you, senior. Thank you so much for saving our lives.”

“White Horse Academy?” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise. He wasn’t expecting to hear this, but then again, they were dressed like scholars.

White Horse Academy was one of the three major factions of Luo Shui together with Sunset Hill and Blood Shadow Palace, but they weren’t a pure jianghu faction. Preferring civility over violence, everyone in the academy was a scholar. Members of White Horse Academy were expected to be well-versed in the Four Books, the Five Classics, the Six Arts and the Seven Stratagems. That said, they lived in a tumultuous world, so they were trained in martial arts as well. Everyone in White Horse Academy was expected to be a master of both the pen and the sword.

In fact, there were many White Horse Academy students who were martial arts experts, artists, musicians, Go game masters and of course, accomplished scholars all at the same time. Many of them had participated in a county-level examination or commandery-level examination with a significant amount of success as well.

As most White Horse Academy students chose to follow a civic path in their career, they quite often tangoed with the imperial court and various administrative divisions. This was why it wasn't viewed as a pure jianghu faction.

This was the second time he encountered another member of white Horse Academy. The first person he encountered was Wen Zilai at Cuiwei Boat. Frankly, his impression of Wen Zilai was bad. Not only was he a schemer, he was helping Wang Luori to scheme against him.

Ye Qing asked, "So, you're students of White Horse Academy. Why are you here risking your lives in Thousand Buddhas Grotto when you can be studying at your academy?"

What he really wanted to say was, "Ladies and gentlemen, do you wanna die that badly?"

Mu Yuan answered, "We were accompanied by Master Fu. However, we got separated from him halfway."

"I see!" Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. No wonder they were so bad. They were, to put in gamer terms, being carried.

"Thousand Buddhas Grotto is an incredibly dangerous place. The three of you aren't weak, but your experience is severely lacking. You should leave as soon as you can!" advised Ye Qing.

However, Mu Yuan hesitated and said, "We er... we can't leave yet."

"Excuse me? Do you really wanna die that badly?" Ye Qing exclaimed incredulously.

Mu Yuan explained with an awkward expression, "Our trial requires us to reach the inner area of the Thousand Buddhas Grotto at least. If we go back now, we'll be punished by the academy."

Ye Qing frowned, "The trial can't be more important than your life!"

It was at this moment Cheng Yi spoke up with a resolute voice, "In life, there are things a man of honor must do or mustn't do. If we cannot even complete a simple trial like this, how can we bridge the gap between the heavens and the earth, establish a life for the people, succeed the learnings of the ancient sages, and forge peace for all ages?"

"Heh," Ye Qing sneered, "And how are you going to accomplish any of that if you're dead?"

"You may have saved our lives, but you will not slander our grand ambition, senior!" Cheng Yi protested with displeasure, "Plus, it's just the Thousand Buddhas Grotto. Is there anything in this place that can stop us?"

"Senior brother, don't—" Chéng Youlan tugged at his sleeve, but Cheng Yi argued, "What? Im' not wrong!"

"..." Ye Qing was speechless for a moment.

Are you alright in the head, bud?

Who was the one who got wrecked by a Malice-class Stranger despite it being a three-on-one fight?

Who was the pathetic guy who could only scream helplessly when his junior brother was about to die?

Are you seriously that oblivious to your inexperience?

Chapter 185: No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

“Since you’re so confident, then I wish you all good luck!” Ye Qing said with a shrug. He wasn’t a merciful Buddhist who would try to save a person no matter how irredeemable. He had saved their lives and even given them sound advice, but if they wouldn’t listen to reason, then so be it. They themselves didn’t care about their lives, so why should he? It wasn’t like he was in any way responsible for their lives.

The good news was that not everyone in the group was an idiot like Cheng Yi. When Mu Yuan saw that Ye Qing was about to leave, he turned red and called out in a hurry, “Senior—”

Before he could say anything though, a scornful voice broke out, “Incredible. I thought people from White Horse Academy regard themselves as scholars who memorized the rules and etiquette by heart and know right from wrong? So why are you spurning the guy who not only saved your life, but also kindly advised you to leave like an ingrate? This is truly an eye-opening experience!”

“It’s because he studied so hard that he’s gone stupid!”

“The hell you’re saying? They’re stupid whether they studied the scriptures or not!”

“Hahahaha...”

A chorus of jeers and mocking laughter broke the silence as a group of people stepped out of the shadows. They were sixteen strong and dressed in the same style of clothes: long robes, collared uniform, golden-trimmed sleeves and a golden crown[1]. Their leader, a haughty-looking man wearing a look of scorn on his face, was the only one who wore a long, sparkling golden robe.

None of these people were weak. Their weakest warrior was an early-stage Vessel Augmentor, and their strongest—the leader—was a late-stage Astral Refiner. He was flanked by two early-stage Astral Refiners. But more importantly...

They’re from Sunset Hill!

Ye Qing recognized their uniforms instantly.

Why have they come to Thousand Buddhas Grotto? Are they here to catch me?

No, that can’t be right. If they were here for me, they wouldn’t show themselves like this. It doesn’t sound like the leader recognizes me either, which means that this is just a coincidence.

Besides that, Sunset Hill should be well aware that he was an early-stage Astral Refiner at the minimum. If they really were here for him, they wouldn’t have brought any Vessel Augmentor at all. They would only be fodder at best or nuisances at worst.

Ye Qing was just hiding a sigh of relief when Cheng Yi erupted in anger, “You dare insult my White Horse Academy, Wang Yang?”

It was clear that Cheng Yi recognized the leader, and it so happened that Ye Qing recognized the name as well.

Wang Yang? A late-stage Astral Refiner named Wang Yang? He's Wang Luori's only son!

Ye Qing had studied the Pacification Bureau's files on Sunset Hill as a matter of course. That was how he was able to match the record to the haughty man before him.

"Hahaha! Like you need me to insult your academy!" Wang Yang sneered disdainfully, "The White Horse Academy is a jianghu sect, but instead you put on this holier-than-thou appearance and address yourselves as scholars, study the four books and five whatever, and even proclaim yourself as a 'righteous' and 'honorable' people. That's like a prostitute swearing to the heavens that they're a virgin. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

His group immediately erupted in uproarious laughter once more.

"You..." Cheng Yi turned beet red with fury. To everyone's surprise, he actually rushed Wang Yang and shouted, "You dare slander my White Horse Academy? I'll kill you!"

"Hmph!" Wang Yang could hardly contain his disdain. He waved his hand like he was waving away dust and—

Bang!

Cheng Yi's chest abruptly caved in like he was struck by a massive, invisible hammer. He flew back where he came from and blacked out just like that.

"Senior brother!"

"Senior brother!"

Mu Yuan and Chéng Youlan hurried forward to catch him. Their faces were fraught with panic and worry.

"This guy can't even take a hit from me, and he dares to visit Thousand Buddhas Grotto? Just go home and read your books, kiddos!" Wang Yang scoffed as he stared at the trio.

"How dare you hurt my senior brother unprovoked and insult the White Horse Academy, Wang Yang! Senior Brother Luo will punish you for this!" Chéng Youlan threatened with a sob.

"Oh my, I'm so scared~" Wang Yang replied mockingly, "Do you think he's invincible just because he was named one of the four Gentlemen of Luo Shui or something? Forget Luo Feiliu, I could take him and your so-called Four Stars together!"

He really is Wang Luori's son. He's just as arrogant as his dad, Ye Qing thought while narrowing his eyes. Luo Feiliu was one of the four Gentlemen of Luo Shui just like Chu Nianjiu, the "Art Gentleman". Skilled in the art of ink wash painting both literally and martially, there was no one who could match him in this area.

Not only that, Luo Feiliu was Luo Feibai's older brother and Luo Chuncao's oldest son.

Speaking of Luo Cunchao, why hasn't the patriarch made a move even though he knew that Wang Luori was the one who indirectly killed Luo Feibai? Strange! Maybe he's preparing something big?

That was very likely. A dog that bites doesn't bark, and Luo Cunchao fit this stereotype perfectly. In fact, Luo Cunchao wasn't a dog. He was a wolf that devoured humans at his leisure.

"Lies! I know you haven't beaten Senior Brother Luo even once yet!" Chéng Youlan taunted, "And you never will!"

"Hmm? I dare you to say that again!" Wang Yang abruptly lost his smile and turned murderous. "Do you actually think I won't kill you three?"

Wang Yang slowly walked toward the trio. He didn't bother to conceal his bloodlust.

"W-What do you think you're doing, Wang Yang?"

Chéng Youlan and Mu Yuan knew they were in deep trouble when they saw this. Turning as pale as a sheet, Chéng Youlan tried another threat, "My... My dad is Chéng Qianzhi, and Senior Brother Cheng's uncle is the vice principal of our academy! If you kill us, neither my nor White Horse Academy will ever forgive you!"

The woman seemed to think that the threat was a good idea, but Ye Qing could only shake his head in disbelief. Did she seriously just try to bring up her dad and that idiot's dad? Wang Luori is the Hill Lord of Sunset Hill! He's the biggest daddy of them all! What is wrong with these people?

In fact, to call them an idiot would be an insult to idiots. No, these three didn't even have a brain in their skulls. They were weak, but they provoked their betters again and again. As if that wasn't enough, she just had to target Wang Yang's sore spot. Just what did she think was gonna happen? Wang Yang kowtowing to her in apology and chanting, "Long live the White Horse Academy"?

Any reasonable person would've submitted to the circumstances or at least pretend to submit until they could find an opportunity to turn the tables around. But her? She just soldiered on thinking she was one of the sages in her books or something. The sages could afford to do so because they were strong. Her? The only thing her action was going to garner was certain death.

As expected, Wang Yang scoffed as if he had heard an unbelievable joke. "Bring the White Horse Academy upon me then! Let me taste their righteous wrath! Oh wait, you can't because this is the Thousand Buddhas Grotto, not the White Horse Academy. I can literally end you right here and now, and what do you think the White Horse Academy and Chéng Qianzhi would do? Nothing. Do you know why? Because they'll never learn that I'm the killer!"

"I..." It finally clicked in Chéng Youlan's head just how screwed she was. Fear, despair, and regret welled inside her as she collapsed to the ground and waited for the inevitable.

"Ahem..."

Just when Wang Yang was about to end Chéng Youlan's life, a cough suddenly drew his attention. Wang Yang looked and saw the man wearing a conical hat coughing into his hand.

"Ahem ahem! Sorry, my throat's feeling a little itchy. Please, don't mind me."

Ye Qing pressed his hat downward and purposely leaked a hint of aura. He then said in a lackadaisical voice, “These idiots think they’re number one in the world just because they studied some martial arts and read some books. You should punish them so they’ll learn to be better in the future.”

Wang Yang narrowed his eyes dangerously. He could tell that Ye Qing was telling him to teach them a lesson, not kill them.

Frankly, Ye Qing didn’t want to get involved in this conflict at all, but he must because the next person Wang Yang was going to kill after taking out the trio was him. After all, loose lips sink ships. While he wasn’t afraid of the group, it was more trouble than it was worth, not to mention who knows what Strangers might be drawn to their battle?

That was why he chose to speak up and reveal his aura. He was reminding Wang Yang that he was still here, and that he was no one to be trifled with. Of course, he made sure to sweeten his words so that Wang Yang would not be forced to take action to protect his face in front of his men.

According to the files in the Pacification Bureau, Wang Yang was arrogant and ruthless, but not stupid. He should be smart enough to make the right decision, and assuming he wasn’t, he was prepared for a battle.

But before Wang Yang could say anything, Cheng Yi—he had just awakened from his short coma—let out an angry, hateful roar, “Bastard! I thought you’re a good person, but you’re no different from them! Despicable bastard, the White Horse Academy will never forgive you!”

“You mean well, brother, but it looks like the very people you’re trying to save don’t appreciate the gesture!” Wang Yang burst out laughing, “I can let you teach them a lesson if you want to!”

Ye Qing shrugged. “Eh, forget it. It’s unfortunate that a dog bit me, but I don’t gotta lower myself to its level, do you get what I’m saying?”

“That’s true,” Wang Yang responded with a nod, but for some reason he felt like Ye Qing was insulting him, not Cheng Yi.

In any case, the moment had passed, and Wang Yang didn’t feel like killing the trio anymore. He kicked Cheng Yi once and yelled, “Now get lost! I’ll overlook your transgressions this once because of the White Horse Academy, but there won’t be a second chance!”

“What are you waiting for? Get lost already. Do you actually have a death wish?” Ye Qing added when he saw the trio were still standing there like idiots. He too was fed up with them by this point.

“Let’s go, senior brother!” Chéng Youlan and Mu Yuan hurriedly carried Cheng Yi toward the exit. No matter how disgruntled they were feeling, they weren’t so stupid as to provoke Wang Yang again. They knew they would die if they tried anything.

When the trio were passing by Ye Qing, Cheng Yi suddenly turned around and shot Ye Qing a glare. It was filled with fury and hatred.

“Hmm?” Ye Qing’s eyes glinted. He could feel actual malice and killing intent from the young man. I saved your life, and this is how you repay me?

Sure, he hadn’t done it overtly, but anyone with even a bit of brain should be able to understand his actions. Unfortunately, Cheng Yi didn’t seem to have a brain at all.

If that is your desire, then so it shall be.

Ye Qing’s eyes flickered with ruthlessness as he bent his fingers slightly. A wisp of Blood Shadow entered Cheng Yi’s body without anyone noticing.

He didn’t want to do this either, but no good deed goes unpunished in this world. In that case, he would rather not be a good person.

Chapter 186: Plans

“May I know your name, brother?” Wang Yang asked curiously after the trio from White Horse Academy was gone.

Ye Qing replied smilingly, “My name is Ye Pingshan. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Brother Wang.”

“Ye Pingshan?” Wang Yang tried to recall if he ever heard such a name before. “I don’t think I recognize you. If you don’t mind me asking, which sect do you belong to, Brother Ye?”

Ye Qing clasped his fist. “I am but a wanderer with no sect or faction to my name. I’m not even a citizen of Luo Shui, in fact. I have only arrived at Luo Shui a few days ago, so it’d make sense that you don’t recognize me.”

“I see,” Wang Yang exclaimed in realization before growing wary, “By the way, why have you journeyed to the depths of Thousand Buddhas Grotto?”

Ye Qing nodded. “To tell you the truth, I’m a body-tempering warrior. I heard that there is a Thousand Buddhas Vine in this place that bears a fruit named the Thousand Buddhas Fruit, an excellent body-tempering spirit material. That is why I have come to test my luck.”

“A body-tempering warrior? You have my respect, brother!” Wang Yang exclaimed in astonishment. Body-tempering warriors were pretty rare in Luo Shui, and the most famous of them all was Gu Suitang, the guy who could beat up even his dad like nothing.

Ye Qing hid a smile when he saw the flash of disgruntlement and hatred on Wang Yang’s face. He hadn’t called himself a body-tempering warrior to annoy Wang Yang, of course. It was just another effort to mask his identity.

It had been a few months since he came to Luo Shui [1], and he hadn’t tried to conceal his power or the characteristics of his martial arts. Therefore, Sunset Hill must know that the astral qi he cultivated was the Burning Wind, which was unique in all of Luo Shui. The scion would absolutely recognize him if he used his Burning Wind in front of him.

That was why he decided to reveal the fact that he was a body-tempering warrior instead. For one, it was a good cover since it was the truth. Two, it was to lay down the groundwork necessary to

execute his plan—the plan to kill Wang Yang without a trace, which was only doable if he kept his identity a secret.

No reconciliation was possible between Wang Luori and himself. Since he was lucky enough to stumble onto Wang Yang today, he didn't mind collecting some interests first. The scion was a bad egg anyway.

“Are you headed for the inner depths of the Thousand Buddhas Grotto too, Brother Wang? Let us walk together then. There is safety in numbers, and I believe that Thousand Buddhas Grotto warrants that level of caution,” Ye Qing suggested.

He was planning to screw Wang Yang over after all. It would be a lot harder to do that if he chose to stay away from his group. Also, he was certain that Wang Yang would agree because one, the Thousand Buddhas Grotto was a very dangerous place. Two, Wang Yang was an arrogant and self-conceited man. He wouldn't fear a mere outsider even if they were scheming something.

And three, he was basically offering himself to be a minesweeper. There should be no reason why Wang Yang would turn down extra fodder.

As expected, Wang Yang agreed to Ye Qing's suggestion after just a few seconds of thought, “If that is agreeable with you, then let us travel together, Brother Ye!”

“Of course.”

.....

“Are you okay, Senior Brother Cheng?” Chéng Youlan asked worriedly.

“I'm fine,” A deathly pale Cheng Yi shook his head but grew hateful in an instant, “What happened today won't go unanswered, especially that bastard who colluded with the likes of Wang Yang. I swear I'll kill him one way or another.”

Mu Yuan frowned when he heard this and tried to explain, “Senior brother, that senior saved our lives, and he only did what he did just now to—”

Cheng Yi interrupted him rudely before he could finish, “Are you a member of White Horse Academy or what, Mu Yuan? Didn't you hear how he insulted us earlier? My name isn't Cheng Yi if I don't repay what he did to us ten fold!”

“But—” Mu Yuan tried again, but Cheng Yi interrupted him angrily, “But what? I'll expel you from White Horse Academy if you say one more word to defend that bastard!:

“Senior brother... I...”

Mu Yuan turned white when he heard this. Whatever he was trying to say quickly died in his throat.

“Let us make haste. As soon as we return to the academy, I'm going to report this to —” Cheng Yi muttered darkly when suddenly, he froze in his tracks. His pupils slowly dilated as he abruptly collapsed to the ground.

“Senior brother?”

“Senior brother!”

Both Chéng Youlan and Mu Yuan cried out and rushed to his side, but Cheng Yi didn’t react. Mu Yuan subconsciously tested his senior brother’s pulse and withdrew his palm just as quickly. His complexion was pale as he stammered, “He’s dead! Senior Brother Cheng is... dead!”

“What?” Chéng Youlan exclaimed in disbelief and tested Cheng Yi’s pulse as well. When she sensed what he sensed—which was nothing at all—she too collapsed on her feet and blurted, “He... he really is dead.”

“But how can this be? He was fine just now. How did he just... die all of a sudden?”

A long time later, Mu Yuan finally recovered his wits and murmured, “Maybe it was Wang Yang who did it. He could’ve shattered senior brother’s heart when he struck him earlier, but controlled his strength so that senior brother wouldn’t perish immediately. It was only now that the damage had caught up to him.”

“Yes, yes! It has to be Wang Yang! He was about to kill us all just a while ago! It must be him!” Chéng Youlan echoed in agreement. “So... what do we do now?”

Mu Yuan thought for a moment before answering, “There is no way we can take revenge for senior brother by ourselves. We should return to the academy immediately and report this to the vice principal. He would know what to do.”

“That’s a good idea. We should hurry!” Chéng Youlan replied while looking around paranoidly. It was as if she was afraid that Wang Yang would catch up to them at any moment.

After Mu Yuan carried Cheng Yi’s corpse on his back, the duo continued making their way toward the exit.

.....

Cheng Yi should be dead by now, Ye Qing thought with a smile while walking together with Wang Yang and his group.

Earlier, he had pierced the guy’s heart and lungs using a wisp of Blood Shadow. The reason he didn’t die immediately was because he had used the Blood Shadow to block the wounds. If the Blood Shadow dissipated, or if Cheng Yi’s pulse elevated considerably because he was angry or something, then he would drop dead immediately.

He felt his Blood Shadow dissipating into nothing just now. It was how he knew that Cheng Yi was probably dead.

The reason he did this was to incite a conflict between White Horse Academy and Sunset Hill, of course.

Considering Mu Yuan and Chéng Youlan’s lack of intelligence, they would definitely think that Wang Yang was the murderer and reported the situation as such to their academy. He remembered Chéng Youlan saying that Cheng Yi was the vice principal’s nephew or something, so there was no way White Horse was going to gloss over this murder. They would definitely round up the men and come to Thousand Buddhas Grotto to question Wang Yang.

When the time comes, all he needed to do was to fan the flames, and the two major sects in Luo Shui would be butting heads like no tomorrow.

Okay, that might be a little too much to hope for, but at the very least it was going to keep Wang Luori busy for a bit and buy him more time to grow stronger under the radar.

There were few things more exciting than making life difficult and making enemies for one's enemies. If he could watch his enemies putting out flames here and there and raging over the "injustices" that "the heavens" had sent their way, then even better. He couldn't wait.

He hadn't planned for this to happen when he saved the trio, of course. It was just that Cheng Yi's glare before he left reminded him of The Farmer and the Viper, Mr Dong Guo and The Wolf of Zhongshan, and The Old Man and the Sea—wait, I think that the last example isn't quite right but eh, whatever—The point was that he didn't mind murdering and recycling a murderous ingrate for his own use, especially one who was a bad egg through and through.

"Careful. Something's not right here."

Suddenly, a warning jolted him out of his reverie. Ye Qing looked around and found himself standing in the middle of a field of Buddhist statues.

The Buddhist statues all wore kind and gentle expressions on their faces, but the bones, skulls and bodies on the ground both human and Stranger suggested a very different story. The stark contrast was both eerie and disturbing.

"Careful, everyone, and don't touch anything. Now, let us go!" Wang Yang instructed in a hushed voice after scanning the area for a bit and finding no danger.

Wait a second. These statues are the Two-Faced Buddhas! That gives me an idea... Ye Qing concealed a devious smirk as he observed the kind-faced statues.

The group slowly walked through the field of Buddhist statues as per Wang Yang's instructions. They did everything perfectly, and they should have been able to pass through the field without any incident. Too bad for them, Ye Qing had different plans.

As Ye Qing was passing by a Buddhist statue, he secretly let loose a hint of bloodlust. The moment it happened, the statue's face slowly morphed into anger and swiveled its head toward the path.

Whoosh!

The next second, the Buddhist statue spat out a jet of flames that engulfed the two Sunset Hill disciples walking behind Ye Qing in an instant.

"Ahhh!"

Their screams were short-lived. The fire was so hot that it turned them to ash in practically the span of two seconds.

"Bastard!"

Wang Yang responded to the attack instantly. The second the two Sunset Hill disciples were turned into ash, he launched himself toward the statue and shattered its head with his astral qi.

This triggered a devastating chain reaction, however. As if his “murder” of the statue had awakened their wrath, they all turned toward the group with an angry expression on their faces. They spat either flames, yin wind, physical weapons or more at the nearest Sunset Hill disciple.

For a time, it was utter chaos. Those who couldn’t protect themselves in time or were weak in cultivation were burned into ash, corroded into a pile of goo, or skewered like a pincushion immediately. It was positively tragic.

“Useless trash. Get out of my way!” Wang Yang’s eyes turned bloodshot as pure white flames rushed out of his body. It was perfectly clean, pure, and unblemished. The moment it appeared, all of the filth, cold, taint and even the space surrounding the group vanished into a white so pure that it almost resembled the color of nothingness.

Then, using his palm like a saber and his legs as the pivot, he spun horizontally and summoned what looked like a white moon.

Everything turned white under the white moon, literally. The Buddhist statues were covered in a layer of pure white energy that enveloped their bodies in the blink of an eye. Then, they crumbled soundlessly and dissolved into nothingness before the pieces could even hit the ground.

“The White Flame of Nothingness...”

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes a little as he watched the disintegrating Buddhist statues. He had read about Wang Yang’s astral qi from the files of the Pacification Bureau as a matter of course, but it was another thing to witness it with his own eyes.

One of the thirty-six superior grade astral qis, the White Flame of Nothingness was also known as the Flames of Nothingness. Colorless and devoid of temperature, it could dissolve all five natural elements—Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Metal—into nothing. Naturally, it was incredibly powerful.

While the White Flame of Nothingness was weaker than the Burning Wind in terms of sheer power, it outclassed the Burning Wind in terms of flexibility and applicability.

But of course, it all depended on the people who wielded it. If the White Flame of Nothingness was wielded by an idiot like Cheng Yi, then Ye Qing daresaid that he could beat the guy as a Vessel Augmentor. If someone was strong, then all arts were strong in their hands, and vice versa.

Chapter 187: The Thousand Hands Bodhisattva

“We lost six junior brothers in that battle, senior brother. Three of them are grievously injured as well. I don’t think they’ll be able to follow us deeper into the grotto.”

After all of the statues were destroyed, a gloomy-looking man wrapped in thick black robe stepped forward and reported the casualties to Wang Yang. He was Wang Yang’s junior brother and one of the three Astral Refiners in the group, Yang Xuan.

Wang Yang had no sympathy for the dead, however. “So what if they died? They’re just a bunch of useless trash anyway. If they can’t even handle a few Malice-class Strangers, then they might as well die now and save Sunset Hill the embarrassment in the future.”

“What about those three?” Yang Xuan pointed at the injured trio on the ground.

Wang Yang shot them a glance. “They can head back to the surface on their own.”

“But senior brother, their injuries are quite severe. They can barely walk, much less handle the Strangers they might encounter on the way,” A Sunset Hill disciple spoke up despite his fear of Wang Yang. “We might... we might need to send someone to escort them back to the surface.”

“Hmm?” Wang Yang turned and eyed the disciple coldly, causing him to shiver and bow his head deeply. Wang Yang then walked up to the three near comatose disciples, smirked cruelly, and kicked his foot. A jet of white flames emerged and surrounded the trio in the blink of an eye. A moment later, all three warriors melted into nothing just like that.

Everyone gasped and stared at Wang Yang in shock and horror.

“This way, we won’t need to escort them back or even waste the energy to bury them. It’s the perfect solution, isn’t it?” Wang Yang smiled cruelly as if he was very satisfied with the crowd’s reaction.

“Now, let us continue.”

And so they continued deeper into the Thousand Buddhas Grotto.

Whew, what a ruthless bastard, Ye Qing raised a thoughtful eyebrow as he watched Wang Yang’s back. They all said that Wang Yang was a hot-tempered and cruel bastard who inherited the worst qualities of his dad. He could see now that the rumors were perfectly true. For him to murder his own people without batting an eyelid...

I love him! He’s the kind of guy I can hate without any reservation whatsoever!

Of course, the real murderer here was really Ye Qing since he was the one who triggered the Buddhist statues into attacking in the first place, but it didn’t count as long as no one knows about it, right?

Speaking of the Buddhist statues, they were statue Strangers known as the Two-Faced Buddha, a Malice-class Stranger. As its name obviously implied, the Stranger had exactly two sides. When it was wearing a kind face, it was a merciful Buddha who wouldn’t hurt a soul. But when it was wearing an angry face, then it would transform into a bloodthirsty Buddha who could spit water, fire, and weapons to eliminate a sinner and send them to hell.

It wasn’t safe to linger around the Two-Faced Buddha even when they were wearing a kind face because the slightest hint of bloodlust could change them into their evil side. All the Two-Faced Buddhas they encountered earlier were on their good side. It was entirely possible for the group to have passed through the field without any fanfare. But Ye Qing had purposely purposely leaked a bit of bloodlust, so that was that.

The reason only one Two-Faced Buddha had attacked at first was because the bloodlust was too subtle and weak. Obviously, the same couldn’t be said for the bloodlust Wang Yang exuded when he

destroyed the Two-Faced Buddha who killed his followers. As a result, every Two-Faced Buddha on the field had attacked them.

He had laid things out so that things would turn out this way, but strictly speaking, it was just a possibility. Had Wang Yang kept his cool and continued along his way, then their casualties could have been kept to a minimum. In other words, it was totally Wang Yang's fault that they had lost so many people.

So, why did he purposely kickstart this chain of events? It was of course to weaken Wang Yang's group and to sound out Wang Yang and his followers' strength, and the information he got was pretty satisfactory. Wang Yang was so strong that the battle was over before Yang Xuan and the other Astral Refiner, Liu Fan could take action.

Hehe. Since you're so strong, you won't mind me testing you a couple more times, will you?

A tiny smirk spread across Ye Qing's mouth as he stared at Wang Yang's back.

The next few battles were pretty insignificant. Wang Yang acted as the vanguard, and Ye Qing killed a couple of weak Strangers to keep up appearances. It wasn't that he had suddenly discovered his conscience and decided to requite evil with good, of course. If he did nothing at all and never participated in any battle, Wang Yang's group was going to resent him at best or suspect him at worst. He was acting after all. What kind of shitty actor would drop his act in the middle of a scene? Also, the Strangers, weak as they were, gave him some dragon-serpent runes, so he was motivated to kill them regardless.

It wasn't long before the group stopped in front of a large grotto that looked like a main hall. It was in such a state of disrepair that it only retained the outlook of a main hall and nothing else.

What really stopped the group in their tracks was a massive Buddhist statue at the center of the grotto. It was about ten meter tall and shaped like a Bodhisattva. It was sitting in a lotus position and had a thousand hands that fanned up from top to bottom, all holding the vitarka mudra [1] as well. The Buddhists called it the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva.

What was really strange was the fact that each palm held a lit oil lamp, the orange flames swaying gently in the darkness.

One oil lamp could only light up one meter of space at best, and poorly at that. But a thousand of them? It was like they were beholding the moon itself. It illuminated this section of the dark, gloomy grotto as bright as day.

The lampfire was warm and bright like the eternal flames people kept and worshiped in an actual Buddhist temple, calm and peaceful.

Not a single person in the group felt those emotions, however. In fact, a chill crept up their spines, and their hair stood on end. The reason was very simple. Rows and rows of people were kneeling in front of the statue, and almost all of them were dead.

Some of them were withered skeletons that had existed since heavens-know-when, and some of them were in the middle of rotting. The handful who were alive were barely breathing as if they were on their deathbeds.

Most importantly, both the living and the dead were kneeling before the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva with their hands pressed together in a prayer and wearing a peaceful smile on their

face. It was like they were faithful worshipers who were praying to the Buddha in their hearts: respectful, pious, and zealous. There wasn't the slightest room for blasphemy in their hearts, and they had no regrets dying for the sake of the Buddha.

"Those people belong to White Horse Academy," Yang Xuan pointed at the handful of still living people kneeling in front of the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva.

They must be the disciples who came to Thousand Buddhas Grotto to hone themselves, Ye Qing thought.

The White Horse Academy disciples were still alive, but they seemed to be completely unaware of what was going on around them at all. Their expressions were overflowing with piety and zealousness. They looked like they were going to kneel like this until the end of time itself.

Swoosh!

Wang Yang flicked his fingers and sent a speck of force through one of the disciples' shoulder. The wound immediately started bleeding profusely, but the man didn't react almost as if he wasn't in control of his own body. He maintained his position and continued to stare at the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva piously.

Wang Yang frowned and ordered, "Ma Yuanshan, go ahead and find out what's going on."

"M-Me?" The unlucky bastard named Ma Yuanshan blurted with wide-eyed shock and fear. Coincidentally or not, he was also the guy who suggested that they spare some men to escort the wounded back to the surface.

The rest of the disciples immediately stepped away from Ma Yuanshan. Some wore an expression of schadenfreude on their faces, and some looked sympathetic because they knew that they could easily have been chosen as well. There wasn't a single person here who wasn't aware that this "short, innocuous trip" was almost certainly going to end with his death.

"Senior brother, I..." Ma Yuanshan was reluctant to obey the order of course, but Liu Fan interrupted him as soon as he opened his mouth.

"What? Are you disobeying orders?" Liu Fan asked in a threatening voice. Young Fan was a gentleman's name, but the man himself was thick and burly. He gave off a tremendous amount of pressure just standing there.

"You could obey your order, or I could snap your neck right here and now!"

"I... I'll go!" A deathly pale Ma Yuanshan replied. Knowing Liu Fan, he did not doubt for a second that the burly man would snap his neck if he said no. If he was going to die either way, then he might as well go with the more hopeful option.

And so Ma Yuanshan stepped toward the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva with fatalistic determination and resolve.

At first, nothing happened at all. But as soon as Ma Yuanshan entered the range of the lamps, he suddenly froze and swayed like he was drunk or something. Then, his clear eyes slowly turned fanatical, and his fearful expression subsided into peace and tranquility.

The disciple pressed his hands together in a prayer and kowtowed to the statue. Then, he rose back to his feet, took a step, and kowtowed to the statue again. He would repeat this motion over and over.

With every step and kowtow, he was worshiping the Buddha in his heart!

“Yang Xuan!” Wang Yang growled when he saw this. Yang Xuan immediately threw out a vine from his sleeve and attempted to pull the disciple back to the group. However, the vine caught on fire as soon as it entered the lamps’ range. It dissolved into ash before Yang Xuan could pull it back.

Gravevine? Ye Qing recognized the strange vine Yang Xuan had tried to use to rescue Ma Yuanshan. It was a Red-class Stranger called the Gravevine.

As the name implied, a Gravevine was a kind of vine that grew near graves and burial mounds. Over time, it transformed into a Stranger because it was constantly exposed to yin qi. It usually wrapped itself around graves and burial mounds and captured any flesh-and-blood being who got too close to the grave such as a human who had come to pay their respects to their loved ones.

The Gravevine was weak and immobile, but it could grow indefinitely so long as there was a steady supply of yin qi. However, Yang Xuan’s Gravevine—all of it—had burned into ash as soon as it made contact with the lamps’ light.

“What happened?” Wang Yang asked seriously.

Yang Xuan answered with a frown, “It’s the light of those oil lamps. It burned my Gravevine into ash instantly.”

“Then why is Ma Yuanshan fine?” Wang Yang asked puzzledly.

For a given definition of fine, that was. The guy was acting like an insane zealot right now.

“I don’t know. Let me try something else!” Yang Xuan waved his sleeve and revealed a centipede covered in bluish green phosphorus flame [2]this time. It was about as thick as a baby’s arm.

A Phosphorus Flame Centipede! Ye Qing rubbed his nose thoughtfully as the centipede skittered across the ground.

The Phosphorus Flame Centipede was a Malice-class Stranger that was normally found in extremely cold and yin places. It possessed a deadly venom that could kill upon contact, and a phosphorus flame that could erode flesh and blood.

Incredibly agile and difficult to kill, the Phosphorus Flame Centipede could stay alive even after it had been severed into several pieces. Generally speaking, it was a very annoying Malice-class Stranger to handle.

Chapter 188: Self-Mutilation to Atone For One’s Sins

“Interesting!” Ye Qing rubbed his nose and smiled. First it was the Gravevine, and now the Phosphorus Flame Centipede. This more or less confirmed that Yang Xuan

could control Strangers to an extent. Thank goodness he found out about this now, or the Astral Refiner absolutely could've caught him by surprise.

Yang Xuan commanded the centipede to go forward, and it did. However, it suddenly grew restless when it reached the periphery of the lamps' range. No matter what he did, the centipede plainly refused to go further. It was clear that the Stranger recognized the danger.

Unfortunately, Wang Yang didn't give him the command to stop, so Yang Xuan had no choice but to force the Phosphorus Flame Centipede to move forward.

As soon as the Phosphorus Flame Centipede made contact with the light, its phosphorus abruptly extinguished. It also started smoking black qi and melting at an incredible rate.

Yang Xuan appeared right next to it and cut the Phosphorus Flame Centipede in half before the reaction could spread further. Then, he grabbed the untouched half of the centipede and hurried back to the group.

The part of the centipede that was touched by the light dissolved into ash as well.

Yang Xuan felt like someone had gouged his heart out as he examined his weakened, severed pet. He had fed this Phosphorus Flame Centipede with his heart's blood for several years to give it its current strength and intelligence. Now, it was right back to where it started. Of course he was distressed with this outcome. At least it was still alive. He optimistically hoped that it would recover in a year or two.

Meanwhile, Ma Yuanshan had made it to the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva and knelt next to the White Horse Academy disciples. Then, he maintained his posture and stayed there just like the others.

It was like he had turned into a statue.

Suddenly, Ye Qing took a few steps forward and said seriously, "Brother Wang... I've made a major discovery!"

"Oh? What did you discover, Brother Ye?" Wang Yang's eyes lit up when he heard this. The others were looking at Ye Qing curiously and urgently as well.

While rubbing his chin, Ye Qing paced back and forth a little and said, "According to my observation, something's wrong with the light."

Wang Yang: "..."

Yang Xuan: "..."

Everyone: "..."

Imagine that you had taken off your pants and were seconds away from having the time of your life with a sexy lady, and suddenly, she said, "I have AIDS." That was how more or less everyone was feeling right now.

We know that, you bloody joker! Do you think we're stupid!

"Calm, brothers. I haven't finished yet!" Ye Qing smiled and ignored the daggers that were being stared at his direction. "If I'm not mistaken, the light these oil lamps give

off possess the power to influence one's mind and take control of them. That is why these people are acting like this. Besides that, this light is quite deadly against Strangers and especially against yin type Strangers."

"Brother Yang has proven this with his demonstration."

Yang Xuan: "... Can you not rub salt in my wound, brother?"

"What is the commonality between all humans and Strangers? They are all alive, even if some Strangers exist in a form we do not understand. Assuming that the light is only effective against living things, then non-living things should be safe from the light. I say this because Brother Wang attacked that White Horse Academy disciple earlier using his astral qi. Your force was perfectly unaffected by the light, no?"

Ye Qing kicked a rock into the light then. As expected, nothing happened to it.

"See?"

"You are correct!" Wang Yang nodded but frowned, "But what use is this information, pray tell?"

So what if non-living things were immune to the light's effect? They, the living, were the ones who needed to pass through the area.

Ye Qing smiled. "Of course there is. Now that we know how the light works, there are two ways to circumvent it. One, we find another path and walk around this Thousand Hands Bodhisattva. Two, we make it so that the light cannot shine on us."

The first method seemed to be the safest method, but Thousand Buddhas Grotto was infamous for its myriad cracks, crevices and caves. While there were surely more than one way to reach the inner depths of the grotto, none of them were as straightforward and direct as the main path. It would be difficult to navigate through the twists and turns, and heavens only know how many dead ends were there. As if that wasn't bad enough, the strata of this place was hardly stable due to the existence of an underground river and cracks. It was entirely possible for a cave-in to happen without warning, and that was before mentioning the many Strangers that roamed these depths.

The second method sounded harder, but it was far more realistic than the first method.

"How can we make it so that the light can't shine on us?"

As expected, Wang Yang chose the second method after a quick thought. There was no harm in listening to Ye Qing's suggestion first. If it sounded unviable, he could always consider other ways.

The hint of a smile flickered across Ye Qing's face. "Where did the light come from? The oil lamps the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva is holding, of course. In other words, the oil lamps are the root cause of all our problems."

"Also, it's been more than a century since Thousand Buddhas Grotto was abandoned. Where did the oil lamps come from? How are they still burning?"

“As I said, the oil lamps are the cause behind all our troubles. If we deal with the lamps, then the light won’t be an issue anymore.”

“That is a good idea! If we take out the lamps, then we can walk past this area just like all the others!” Liu Fan clapped once. It sounded especially in this silent, confined space.

“It’s not just a good idea, it’s quite doable as well.”

Yang Xuan fell silent for a moment before suggesting, “Brother Ye proved that non-living objects would not be affected by the light. In other words, we can simply extinguish the lamps using rocks or our astral qis.”

Wang Yang mulled over the suggestion for a moment, “There’s no need to take out all the lamps. We just need to extinguish half of it so that the light can’t reach us.”

“Let’s get to it then. But be careful. Focus on extinguishing the lamps and nothing else.”

“Yes, senior brother.”

A chorus of yeses later, the group stood outside the light’s range and began extinguishing the lamps on the left side of the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva. Although they couldn’t get close, this bit of distance meant little to warriors like them and especially Yang Xuan and Liu Fan. An astral qi-filled punch and a palm strike was all they needed to extinguish a good number of oil lamps. However, the statue itself was perfectly unharmed because they could control their astral qi down to the finest detail. As for the Vessel Augmentors, they didn’t possess the Astral Refiners’ tremendous true qi nor fine control, so instead they threw stones to eliminate the oil lamps one by one.

Most of the lamps on the left side of the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva were extinguished just like that. The lighting in the grotto was much darker as a result.

There was something crucial that no one noticed, however. As more and more lamps were extinguished, the people kneeling in front of the statue be it the living or the dead began weeping bright red blood. The way it slid down those peaceful-looking faces looked beyond eerie.

“It’s done, senior brother.”

It wasn’t long before all the lamps on the left were extinguished. As a result, the left side of the hall turned dark and sinister.

“Let’s go. Be sure to stick to the walls,” Wang Yang instructed before ordering another disciple to test the waters first. As expected, nothing dangerous happened. The others quickly moved him and stepped into the darkness.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh!”

They were still walking toward the other side when suddenly, a Sunset Hill disciple let out a terrified scream.

“What is it!?”

“What the hell, man. Don’t scare us!”

A cacophony of complaints broke out from the group.

The Sunset Hill disciple stuttered, “Those... those heads... they’re looking at us! They’re looking at us!”

“What? What heads?”

“Speak sense, man! What do you mean they...”

Confused and annoyed, the group followed his gaze toward the right. Every hair on their body immediately stood on end.

As it turned out, the crowd kneeling in front of the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva wasn’t looking at the statue anymore. No, they were staring straight at them. Every single one of them was weeping blood, and their expressions weren’t as kind and peaceful as they were before. Instead, they were either smiling, weeping, or glaring at them. It sent a chill up everyone’s spine.

As they continued to watch the crowd, some people suddenly started bleeding from their eyes. Their expressions also contorted unnaturally almost as if they were slowly transforming into those people who were kneeling in front of the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva.

Then, it happened. Everyone who was weeping blood suddenly cut off their arm with their saber, or dug out their heart with their bare hands, or dug out their eyeballs from their eye sockets, or cut off their own tongue and more.

The stench of blood filled the air instantly, and yet the people mutilating themselves couldn’t seem to feel any pain or even realize what they were doing. They just kept mutilating themselves...

Not even Yang Xuan and Liu Fan were an exception to the rule. They were able to maintain their sanity at the beginning, but they had just taken two steps when blood started pouring out of their eyes, their bodies stiffened like someone had put a spell on them, and their eyes slowly grew out of focus.

“What on earth...”

Ye Qing’s spirit was strong, so he could tell that a strange, evil power was permeating around them. His Warding Pendant was shining brightly as well. Strangely though, the power didn’t influence him to mutilate himself like the others. It only pinned him in place.

There was one more person who was mentally unaffected just like him. It was Wang Yang.

It became clear that the power was attacking all those who had extinguished the oil lamps. More accurately, it was attacking all those who had blasphemed the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva.

All who blaspheme against the Buddha must mutilate themselves to atone for their sins!

Ye Qing breathed a sigh of relief in his head. Holy shit. Thank fuck I hadn’t succumbed to my impulse and joined the others.

The evil power was incredibly potent, so potent that he wasn’t sure if he could handle it had push come to shove.

In fact, he knew from the start that extinguishing the oil lamps was an effective but extremely risky action. If it was that easy, there would have been significantly less bodies in this hall. No one in this jianghu was an idiot after all.

Earlier, he had purposely misled Wang Yang and the others into thinking that extinguishing the oil lamps would allow them to safely pass through this hall. He was a mole after all. What kind of mole didn't dig a pitfall or two for his enemies?

Originally, he wanted to join the others and extinguish a couple of lamps himself. It would make Wang Yang less suspicious of his intentions, and he was fairly confident that he would be able to handle whatever the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva threw at him.

In the end though, his self-preservation instinct won out, and what a wise decision that had turned out to be. Had he blasphemed the Buddha just like the others, he would probably be struggling for his life right now.

Technically, he was the one who brought up the idea of extinguishing the lamps, but clearly the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva didn't consider that an act of blasphemy. If it had, he would most likely have to reveal his Burning Wind and expose the fact that he was Ye Qing, Wang Luori's sworn enemy.

He wouldn't die though. He would never.

Chapter 189: It's Not My Fault

Boom! It was at this moment Wang Yang unleashed a terrific outburst of energy. After breaking apart the invisible shackles entrapping him with the White Flame of Nothingness, he grabbed Yang Xuan—who was right next to him—and rushed into the tunnel behind the Thousand Buddhas Bodhisattva.

Ye Qing did the same thing and broke out of his shackles with sheer force and grabbed the two closest Sunset Hill disciples. Then, he threw them straight through the tunnel, perfectly showing off the greatest strength of a body-tempering warrior: strength.

Ye Qing moved very quickly. He was able to throw six people through the tunnel in the blink of an eye. However, his actions seemed to piss off the Thousand Buddhas Bodhisattva because its strange energy began spreading toward him.

Ye Qing stopped there and then. He was just putting on a show for Wang Yang after all, not because he actually wanted to save these people. Also, he only rescued those who were closest to him, and what did you know, Liu Fan wasn't one of them. How unfortunate!

The moment the strange energy reached him, Ye Qing bent his knees and launched himself toward the tunnel. He pretended to lack fine control and left a massive pit where he kicked off the ground.

"Phew... that was dangerous."

The strange energy and aura disappeared after he entered the tunnel. Ye Qing immediately let out a sigh of relief.

Wang Yang was about to rush back in to save Liu Fan, but Ye Qing held him back and said, "Don't! Look."

Wang Yang was enraged that Ye Qing would stop him from rescuing his subordinate, but when he turned around and looked, he noticed that the extinguished oil lamps were starting to light up as the Sunset Hill disciples continued to mutilate themselves. It wasn't long before orange red flames filled the hall once more, and the Sunset Hill disciples abruptly stopped mutilating themselves.

While wearing peaceful and joyous smiles on their faces, they kowtowed and stepped their way toward the Thousand Buddhas Bodhisattva until they reached Ma Yuanshan. Then, they knelt beside him and prayed to the statue... for eternity.

Liu Fan was no exception.

"Shit! How did it turn out like this?"

Seeing that Liu Fan had followed in Ma Yuanshan's footsteps and was virtually dead, Yang Xuan, who had just jolted back to reality, leaped to his feet and glared at Ye Qing hatefully, "It was you, wasn't it? It has to be you, Ye Pingshan!"

"What are you talking about?" Ye Qing took two steps away from him and watched him warily. "What do you mean it has to be me?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about!" Yang Xuan uttered coldly and angrily, "You knew those oil lamps were dangerous, but you still told us to extinguish them! What were you planning!?"

"Oh, I know. You wanted to use us to bypass that hall. No wonder you didn't touch any of them just now. What are you scheming, you bastard?"

"Freedom of speech does not mean freedom of consequences, bud." Ye Qing's expression turned cold as well. "I did warn you that the oil lamps were dangerous. You all knew that the oil lamps were dangerous. You even thought I was stupid for pointing out the obvious just now, so what the fuck are you talking about?"

"As for extinguishing the lamp, I never suggested you to extinguish the lamps. What I did say is that we should make it so that the light cannot shine on us, and there are plenty of ways to do that. For example, we could've dug a tunnel, used our clothes, branches and vines to make a thick curtain, or used a Strange Artifact to create a mist and so on. Never have I once suggested extinguishing the lamps."

"Think, Yang Xuan, think. The one who made the suggestion was Yang Fan, which you agreed with, and the one who confirmed the operation was..."

Ye Qing shot Wang Yang a glance before continuing, "As for why I haven't acted earlier, I'm a body-tempering warrior with shitty force control. Brother Wang himself said to avoid touching anything but the oil lamps to avoid unnecessary complications, which was why I decided to stay my hand."

"Plus, you had more than enough people to extinguish the lamps. Why would I risk bringing trouble on us all when my help isn't necessary?"

They were the ones who suggested and acted to extinguish the lamps. In other words, Ye Qing was saying that the blame lay wholly on them. I don't know, I didn't do anything, I'm innocent, and I ain't taking this fall!

So, the one I should be hating is... myself?

When Yang Xuan realized he couldn't actually refute Ye Qing, his embarrassment morphed into anger, and he yelled, "You... You... You are courting death!"

Yang Xuan aimed his sleeve at Ye Qing, and an emerald green snake the width of a thumb flew toward Ye Qing's neck.

Seemingly [1] caught off guard, Ye Qing could only lean backward and catch the emerald snake with his hand. However, the emerald snake was a living thing, so it simply bent down and bit Ye Qing on the back of his hand.

To the snake's surprise, not only did it fail to put a dent in Ye Qing's skin, its fangs were the one that snapped into several pieces. At the sidelines, Wang Yang narrowed his eyes a little.

Although Ye Pingshan had taken out a few Strangers earlier, they weren't anywhere strong enough to force him to unleash his true power. However, Yang Xuan had ambushed him just now and forced him to react on instinct. Despite this, he still didn't use anything but his body. The fact that his body was so tough that even the Malice-class Stranger, Emerald Jade Snake couldn't pierce his skin proved that he was telling the truth about him being a body-tempering warrior.

"What is the meaning of this, Yang Xuan? Are you venting because you know you're the one who fucked up, or are you trying to silence me?" Ye Qing roared with a savage expression on his face. He looked like he had suffered the deepest humiliation.

While saying this, Ye Qing crushed the Emerald Jade Snake into bits.

"How dare you kill my Stranger! I'll kill you!" Yang Xuan roared and threw himself at Ye Qing.

Ye Qing threw out a punch in response.

"Enough!"

It was at this moment Wang Yang growled and appeared between the two. He caught their fists with his bare hands.

Boom...

A terrific shockwave spread out from the trio and into their surroundings. Since they were in a cave, it caused a series of chain reactions that resulted in the destruction of a large number of walls, structures, and statues. They were lucky that the tunnel they were in hadn't collapsed. The commotion didn't stop until a long time later.

Their surroundings weren't the only casualties of the clash. The Sunset Hill disciples Ye Qing rescued awoke to the commotion, but before they could even celebrate the fact that they had survived, the shockwave shattered their hearts and killed them.

There was no greater pain in life than to die, live, then die again!

When the dust settled, Ye Qing and Yang Xuan looked as pale as a sheet as if they couldn't withstand Wang Yang's power. They were trembling a little as well.

On the other hand, Wang Yang was perfectly fine despite having withstood both men's attacks. The White Flame of Nothingness swirling around him also gave him an awe-inspiring appearance.

"Enough."

Wang Yang withdrew his hands and looked at Ye Qing. "Yang Xuan was overeager and misunderstood you, Brother Ye. On behalf of him, I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Brother Wang. It has nothing to do with you," Ye Qing relaxed a little and feigned a little awe and respect. Wang Yang was clearly very satisfied with his attitude.

In fact, Wang Yang had ordered Yang Xuan to attack Ye Pingshan. It was to sound out his strength.

Liu Fan had died, and most of the disciples he brought were dead or grievously injured. He and Yang Xuan were the only ones left, but they hadn't fulfilled their objective yet. Therefore, Ye Pingshan was the only one left they could rely on to be their meat shield and laborer.

Of course, this plan would only work if Ye Pingshan was a controllable variable. If the guy turned out to be stronger than expected, then he was a time bomb they needed to dismantle as soon as possible.

Thankfully, the test proved that Ye Pingshan was, indeed, a body-tempering warrior, an early-stage body-tempering warrior to be exact. He hadn't been concealing his strength either.

This meant that they could continue exploiting him to their advantage and use him as their vanguard.

As for whether Ye Pingshan had purposely killed his disciples, he didn't care. Dead people held no value. It was as simple as that.

"Brother Ye, I hope that we can cooperate with each other in good faith starting now. After all, Thousand Buddhas Grotto only gets more dangerous the deeper we go. It'll be very difficult for any one of us to reach the depths alone, so I hope you can forget all the unpleasantness from before and focus on the present."

"You will cooperate with us, right? After all, we've already come all the way to this place. It'll be a shame to give up halfway, right?"

Wang Yang's tone turned threatening. He also released his aura to add to the pressure.

Ye Qing pretended to mull over the "suggestion" and act troubled yet tempted. A moment of hesitation later, he finally said, "Fine. Let's cooperate in good faith."

"Very good. Let's go!" Wang Yang placed his hands behind his back and continued deeper into the grotto. He never spared the innocent Sunset Hill disciples who died for nothing a glance.

Sigh, I wasted my energy saving those disciples for nothing. Blame Wang Yang for caring nothing for your lives!

Ye Qing shook his head. He had to admit that Wang Yang was a formidable enemy though. He was ruthless and unfeeling, but smart, careful, and experienced. He was still young, but he could absolutely grow into a formidable villain in the future.

If his spirit wasn't so strong that he managed to eavesdrop on Wang Yang and Yang Xuan's sound transmission, if he hadn't known that his enemies wanted to test him, he might actually have exposed himself.

But for now, he could play a mole for a little while longer.

Ye Qing was also curious as to Wang Yang's objective. At first, he thought Wang Yang was here to give his disciples some hands-on experience. But clearly, he cared little for their lives. Despite having suffered horrific casualties, Wang Yang still insisted on venturing deeper into Thousand Buddhas Grotto.

He was almost certain that Wang Yang was gunning for some sort of treasure, and a treasure that could drive him, the scion of Sunset Hill and a late-stage Astral Refiner to this extent must be pretty incredible.

The deeper they ventured into the grotto, the more Strangers they encountered, though thankfully they hadn't encountered anything else like the Thousand Hands Bodhisattva. Since Ye Qing wanted to check out the treasure that had Wang Yang acting like an infatuated lady as well, he stopped causing trouble for them. As a result, they were able to reach the inner area of the Thousand Buddhas Grotto.

Surprisingly, the number of Strangers they encountered actually decreased after they entered the inner areas. Instead, they were beset by gusts of strange winds.

The winds weren't always the same. Some of them stank of rot and decay, some were colder than winter, and some were hot enough to burn the flesh off one's bones. Ye Qing was pretty certain that they were the three winds Fang Xiaoman spoke of: the corrosive Wind of Six Desires, the freezing Wind of Seven Emotions, and the burning Wind of Seven Emotions.

The corrosive Wind of Five Poisons could corrode one's flesh and blood. Vile and deadly, any flesh-and-blood being that made contact with it would rot into a pile of bones in just a short time.

The freezing Wind of Six Desires was chilly and unconventional. It wouldn't damage the body on the outside whatsoever, but it would penetrate the flesh and freeze their internal organs and their blood vessels.

The Winds of Five Poison was the Burning Wind. Brutal and unconventional, it could boil not just the flesh and blood, but also burn the mind into dust.

It was impossible for any flesh-and-blood being to live here naturally. It was why the Thousand Buddhas Grotto was considered a forbidden zone for the living.

Chapter 190: The Kingdom of Buddha and Hell

At first, the three of them were able to withstand the three divine winds. But the deeper they went, the more challenging it became—for Yang Xuan and Wang Yang, that was. Ye Qing possessed a

powerful body that was resistant to most weapons and practically immune to the Corrosive Wind. He wasn't afraid of the Icy Wind either because his body was like a furnace with the Burning Wind inside. And finally, his own astral qi was the Burning Wind, and his mind and spirit had been strengthened multiple times thanks to the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" and the soul power bestowed by the souls. So why on earth would he be afraid of the Burning Wind?

If anything, pretending that the winds were affecting him was harder.

Yang Xuan and Wang Guan weren't pretending though. Yang Xuan's complexion was as pale as death, and his eyes were dim and unfocused. He kept exhaling white breath as if he was walking through a snowstorm, and he had trouble maintaining a layer of protective astral qi around him. Even his arms, face, neck and other exposed parts started mottling and decaying slowly.

Wang Yang fared better because the White Flame of Nothingness shielded him from both the Icy Wind and the Corrosive Wind, but the Burning Wind was a different story. Not only could the Burning Wind penetrate everything, it could burn a person's mind as well. Naturally, it gave Wang Yang a migraine so bad that he had trouble maintaining his astral qi as well.

None of them looked as bad as Ye Qing, however. Right now, his clothes were in tatters, and his eyes were completely unfocused. He looked like a drunk as he swayed left, right, and center. His lips kept alternating between blue and white, and his complexion red and black as well. Sometimes, tiny icicles would form inside his pores, and sometimes, dark red flames would melt it all into vapor. It was the ice-and-fire treatment.

Schadenfreude was a unique emotion. If someone was getting it worse than you, then you would feel better even if you were allies. And if you were enemies, then even better.

"Are you okay, Brother Ye?" Yang Xuan asked seemingly out of concern, but he really just wanted to see Ye Qing embarrass himself.

Ye Qing swayed on his feet and cracked an ugly grin. "Not dead yet. I can go on a little longer."

Hmph! He should've just admitted weakness when he still can! It'll be most satisfying when he dies! Yang Xuan scoffed inside his head.

However, Wang Yang and Yang Xuan's schadenfreude subsided over time because the further they traveled, the worse the three divine winds became, which directly contributed to their suffering. On the other hand, Ye Qing looked the same as ever. He continued to sway back and forth like a drunkard, and it looked like one last breeze was all that was needed to kill him. But he didn't.

Some time passed, and both Wang Yang and Yang Xuan were struggling just to put their foot in front of the other. However, Ye Qing looked the same as ever.

"Are you okay, Brother Ye?" Wang Yang asked.

Ye Qing grinned. "I am fine. I think I can hold on a little while longer."

Hold on? With the way you're looking? It'll be most satisfying when he dies! Wang Yang scoffed internally and focused on the path ahead of him.

Some more time passed, and Ye Qing looked the same as ever. No matter how much he wobbled, he just refused to fall to the ground.

The heck? How is he not dead yet?

Wang Yang and Yang Xuan exchanged a glance with each other. They refused to believe that they, the geniuses of Sunset Hill, would lose to a jianghu wanderer of unknown origin.

And so they asked Ye Qing the same question every time they walked a certain distance,

“How are you feeling, Brother Ye?”

“Cough cough, I’m fine, I’m fine, I can hang on a little longer!”

“Are you doing okay, Brother Ye?”

“Huff huff, I’m fine, I’m fine, I can hang on a little longer!”

“Are you fine, Brother Ye?”

“Hah, hah, I’m fine, I’m fine, I can hang on a little longer!”

.....

Wang Yang and Yang Xuan felt like they were about to go insane. They just wanted to one-up the fodder, so why were they not getting their wish? Also, how long was Ye Qing’s “a little longer”, exactly? Did he mean “just a few more minutes”, or “until the end of fucking time” itself?

Screw it! I’m done with this act! I’m the motherfucking heir to Sunset Hill and a late-stage Astral Refiner! Why the hell was I trying to one-up a random nobody who’s going to die at the end anyway? Speaking of which, is it worth butting heads with a dead man? Of course not!

After Wang Yang had sufficiently placated himself, he flicked his wrist and summoned a bluish-green, palm-sized carp to his hand.

The carp’s scales looked like pieces of jade with cloud patterns on them. Its whiskers were bright red, and it held a bluish green orb in its mouth.

The moment the carp appeared, the cloud patterns shone, and a white, misty cloud appeared underneath the carp. It slowly lifted the carp into the air.

As whiskers floated, and its tail swished left and right, the bluish green orb slowly floated out of the carp’s mouth and spun in mid-air. It then gave off a gentle, bluish green light that slowly formed a protective shield around the trio.

The shield looked fragile, but in reality it was strong enough to keep the three divine winds away from the trio. More accurately, the winds themselves seemed to be swerving out of the way of the shield for some unknown reason.

“Phew! Finally!” uttered both Yang Xuan and Ye Qing, but their reasons were very different. Yang Xuan was sighing because he was finally free from the torture of the three divine winds, whereas Ye Qing was sighing because he could finally the drop the act.

Ye Qing’s eyes flickered with astonishment as he stared at the bluish green carp swam leisurely in the air. He recognized it as the Malice-class Stranger called the Wind Repelling Carp.

The Wind Repelling Carp had scales like pieces of jade and carried the Wind Repelling Orb in its mouth. It was why it was also nicknamed the Orb Carrying Carp. Although the Wind Repelling Carp was shaped like a fish, it really lived in the winds and could soar above the nine heavens. It possessed the unique ability to repel all winds so that there was nowhere in the sky it couldn't go.

The Wind Repelling Carp wasn't a strong Stranger by any means, but it was irreplaceable in certain circumstances such as this one. However, the Wind Repelling Carp usually lived high above the sky and flew wherever it wanted, so it was quite difficult to capture it to say the least. Ye Qing had no idea Wang Yang had one until he released it to repel the three divine winds.

In hindsight, there was no way Wang Yang would dare to venture into this place if he didn't have something to repel the three divine winds, but this also made Ye Qing a little resentful.

If you have something this amazing, then why didn't you bring it out earlier, you bastard? Acting isn't easy, man!

Wang Yang noticed Ye Qing's look and explained, "This is the Wind Repelling Carp, and it possesses the ability to repel all winds including the three divine winds of this place. However, it's only a Malice-class Stranger, and it has to protect not just itself, but all three of us, meaning that this protective shield won't hold for long. That is why I didn't use it earlier. I hope you won't take offense, Brother Ye."

"I understand," Ye Qing said with a nod. What Wang Yang said was the truth. While the Wind Repelling Carp was exceedingly good at repelling wind, the Corrosive Wind, Icy Wind and Burning Wind were all unusual winds in their own right. Of course a Malice-class Wind Repelling Carp was going to be hardpressed to protect itself and them.

It would take a Hatred-class Wind Repelling Carp to truly handle the three divine winds without trouble.

"There's no time to waste. Let's go."

Wang Yang and Yang Xuan swallowed a pill each. Then, they raced toward the next area as quickly as they could. With the Wind Repelling Carp to keep the three divine winds away, the two of them and Ye Qing were quickly able to reach a huge, majestic-looking temple.

The temple was square-shaped and extravagantly built. The bricks were gold, the tiles were jade, and the beams were colored and covered in engravings. It was also shining gold bright. Countless lotuses were floating amidst the golden light, and each lotus seemed to be carrying a Buddha, a Vajrapani, an Arhat, a Bodhisattva and more.

Their expressions were quite varied as well. Some were glaring like they were facing an enemy, some were holding a vitarka mudra and smiling beautifully, some looked like they were pitying someone or something, and some just wore a natural expression.

Golden lotuses gave birth to Buddhas, and Buddhas gave birth to a Kingdom of Buddha.

"So this is the Thousand Buddhas Temple. Its reputation is well-deserved!"

It was a stunning sight to say the least.

Whoosh whoosh whoosh...

Unfortunately, they didn't have long to admire the view. The three divine winds blew out from inside the Thousand Buddhas Temple, but unlike the ones they had endured before, this one looked almost solid. Like a tri-colored dragon, it blew out of the temple with seemingly enough power to annihilate the world itself.

"We need to get inside now!" Wang Yang jolted out of his reverie and urged. He then took the lead and charged toward the entrance. Ye Qing and Yang Xuan hurriedly followed behind him. Thankfully, they were able to make it into the temple before the Wind Repelling Carp used up its final sliver of strength.

As soon as they made it inside the Thousand Buddhas Temple, a road made of jade and gold suddenly appeared in front of them. Gold, transparent lotuses floated and bloomed in the air, and countless Buddhist statues aligned both sides of the path. They looked kind, serene, and at peace. It was like they were standing in paradise on earth—no, a Kingdom of Buddha on Earth.

It wasn't all good, however. The areas beyond the path were filled with the three divine winds, and they resembled black rivers due to how concentrated they were. They also made this unearthly howl like they were in the realm of the dead.

On one side, there was the Kingdom of Buddha, and on the other, there was hell.

"Let's go," Wang Yang ordered after observing his surroundings for a bit and finding no danger. He also put away the exhausted Wind Repelling Carp.

"Er, can we not?" Ye Qing licked his lips nervously. For whatever reason, he looked both tense and worried. It was as if he could see something they couldn't see.

In fact, he could. Wang Yang and Yang Xuan were seeing a golden road of divinity, but Ye Qing only saw a road of corpses. Literally, they were all pressed up and stacked together like bricks. Not only that, they were constantly twitching, struggling, screaming as if they still possessed consciousness, so the entire road kept undulating like waves.

The Buddhist statues lined on both sides of the road were real, but instead of stone, they were bodies. Words could not describe how grotesque they were. The only thing that came close was the skin giant Ye Qing had encountered back at Little August Hill, but that was one creature, and this was a literal hellscape.

He saw three or four heads bunched up together and staring at them like they would devour them alive, cackling. Their rotting lips were curved into hateful, greedy, and spine-chilling smiles. Putrid saliva streamed down the corners of their mouth and made sizzling noises when it dripped on the road of corpses.

The shiny, golden light and blooming lotuses weren't anything but what they appeared to be. The light was malevolent, twisted yin qi, and the lotuses were innumerable tortured souls. They laughed, screamed, or wept as they roamed here and there on the bridge. Occasionally, the three divine winds would slam into the road of corpses and annihilate countless tortured souls, but the yin qi shrouding the road was so thick that the road itself was undamaged.

Another person might think that this was a representation of the Kingdom of Buddha and hell in one place, but him? All he could see... was hell.

Frankly, Ye Qing was starting to regret his decision to join Wang Yang. He had already murdered most of his disciples, and he could have ended Wang Yang and Xuan Yang's lives while they were weakened by the three divine winds earlier. After that, all he needed to do was to do what he came for and leave. Why oh why had he chosen to indulge in his curiosity and greed?

Neither Wang Yang nor Yang Xuan possessed his level of spirit, so they had no idea that what they were seeing was just an illusion. They just thought that Ye Qing had suddenly regretted his decision and wanted out, which wasn't wrong. Wang Yang shot him a cold look and said, "You can come with us, or you can die right here and now!"

Wang Yang let loose an outburst of astral qi then. At this point, he couldn't be bothered to act anymore. He would kill Ye Qing if the young man dared to say no to his demands.

This was the moment you used a fodder anyway. This place might look safe, but his instincts were telling a different story. Plus, if Thousand Buddhas Temple really was a holy place, then why was it abandoned for over a century?

In short, it was time to put the fodder to work.