

## Stranger 201

### Chapter 201: The Sage's Notes

“The principal is getting beaten up?!”

Inside the academy, Cheng Nuo and the rest of the disciples were watching the battle with shock and disbelief. The principal of White Horse Academy and one of the few Spirit Masters in all of Luo Shui, Zhang Lanjiang the “Righteous One”, was being beaten up by Wang Luori, his inferior! Not only that, the battle was so one-sided that he could only defend passively!

Just what the hell was going on?

“The Hill Lord is beating up a Spirit Master?!”

At the foot of the mountain, the Sunset Hill disciples were just as stunned as their White Horse Academy counterpart, though their surprise was the pleasant kind as a matter of course.

Although Sunset Hill was known as one of the three biggest sects in Luo Shui together with White Horse Academy and Blood Shadow Palace, they had always been viewed as inferior to their peers. The reason was very simple. White Horse Academy and Blood Shadow Palace were helmed by Spirit Masters, but their Hill Lord was only a Half-Step Spirit Master.

It might sound like their Hill Lord was only “half a step” behind his peers, but the actual difference was like night and day. It was why they were so impressed. The fact that Wang Luori, a Half-Step Spirit Master, was beating the crap out of Zhang Lanjiang, a veteran Spirit Master, proved that he was strong enough to transcend the cultivation level.

Assuming that Wang Luori did defeat Zhang Lanjiang, no one would ever dare to laugh at Sunset Hill claiming that they didn’t have a Spirit Master anymore. Not only that, they would never have to bow their heads to White Horse Academy either.

White Horse Academy: Our principal is a veteran Spirit Master!

Sunset Hill: So sorry, but our Hill Lord kicked his ass before.

White Horse Academy: Our principal can summon the wind and rain and spit lightning!

Sunset Hill: So sorry, but our Hill Lord kicked his ass before.

White Horse Academy: Our principal is a man of great erudition, scholarship, and talent! He’s even the student of a sage!

Sunset Hill: So sorry, but our Hill Lord kicked his ass before.

The imaginary catharsis alone was almost enough to make them cum.

The White Horse Academy disciples were confused, and the Sunset Hill disciples were overjoyed. As for Zhang Lanjiang himself? He was feeling extremely frustrated right now.

He was obviously stronger than Wang Luori, but the more he lingered within the purple qi, the weaker he became. At first, it was just his internal energies that were flowing sluggishly. Then, his astral qi started moving sluggishly as well. Later, even his consciousness and reflex were slowing down. It was like he was remotely piloting his body with incremental lag. Strong he might be, he was simply unable to unleash his full power.

Even worse, the Eight Directions Bell of Wind and Rain's power was suppressed as well. Clearly, the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele was the culprit behind his woes.

This was the first time Zhang Lanjiang witnessed the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele's power first hand.

The Eastern Purple Cloud Stele was the Strange Artifact that gave Sunset Hill their status and influence today, of course Zhan Lanjiang was aware of it. It was rumored that the founder of Sunset Hill had intercepted a wisp of natural purple qi and refined it into a Strange Artifact. Natural purple qi wasn't included in the five elements despite being one because it was the symbol of sovereignty. All things must submit to it.

The Eastern Purple Cloud Stele wasn't an offensive-type Strange Artifact like the Eight Directions Bell of Wind and Rain, but it could greatly weaken anyone who entered its range. It was said to be capable of suppressing as much as ninety percent of one's power.

Zhang Lanjiang had never witnessed the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele in action before, much less faced it in person. That was why he thought that the rumors regarding the Strange Artifact were highly exaggerated. He even believed that it was a ploy by Sunset Hill to keep others from realizing that they were vulnerable. As a result, he was caught off guard, and Wang Luori never gave him the opportunity to regret his decision.

Back in the present, Wang Luori landed another punch against the Eight Directions Bell of Wind and Rain and caused it to screech like ripping metal. Sound waves rippled out to the surroundings as Zhang Lanjiang was flung helplessly into another hill. There was a loud boom as the entire hill collapsed on top of the principal.

"Zhan Lanjiang the 'Righteous One' my ass! Hahahahaha!"

Wang Luori crossed his arms and let out a wild, unrestrained laugh after sending Zhang Lanjiang flying with a punch. And how could he not? He was trouncing a Spirit Master as a Half-Step Spirit Master thanks to the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele. It was only right considering that the principal had looked down on him earlier.

Also, it took a considerable amount of energy to use the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele, not to mention that the purple qi was suppressing him to a certain extent as well. It wasn't nearly as bad as what Zhang Lanjiang was feeling right now, but it was one of the Strange Artifact's biggest downsides.

That was why he had no choice but to pause his attack and take a moment to catch his breath.

"There is nothing to be proud of, Wang Luori. It is not your strength that has me cornered, but your sect's treasure," said Zhang Lanjiang as he slowly stepped out of the dust clouds. He was holding the Eight Directions Bell of Wind and Rain in his left hand, and the Strange Artifact was spinning slowly and pushing away the dust with wind and rain, "You don't actually think you're invincible under the heavens, do you?"

"Hahaha! I wouldn't dare!" Wang Luori laughed arrogantly, "But I do believe I'm strong enough to defeat you."

"Zhang Lanjiang, today is the day you learn that me and my Sunset Hill will not stand for humiliation!"

“You’re too arrogant, Wang Luori. You actually believe that the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele is all you need to do as you pleased in White Horse Academy.”

Zhang Lanjiang let out a cold hmph. “Today is the day I teach you that there are always people beyond this person, and skies beyond this sky [1]!”

As soon as he said this, the principal put away the Eight Directions Bell of Wind and Rain and turned his back on Wang Luori. Facing toward White Horse Academy, he wiped away the dust on his clothes with his hand, and the bloodstains on his mouth with a handkerchief. His movements were relaxed, but strict, meticulous, and completely serious.

It was almost like he was facing the sage himself.

Zhang Lanjiang’s actions made no sense to Wang Luori. What kind of person would turn their backs against a deadly foe? But more importantly, he had a feeling that something bad was about to happen.

“Stop pretending and just die!” Wang Luori roared and pounced toward Zhang Lanjiang like a tiger once more.

The best way to deal with a trump card was to make sure that it couldn’t be played in the first place. However, Zhang Lanjiang continued his act as if he couldn’t sense Wang Luori’s movement, or he simply didn’t care. Face solemn, he clasped his hands together, bowed three times toward White Horse Academy, and performed the Three Rites.

One who knows the Three Rites knows the ancient customs of Confucianism. The Three Rites were the rites a child performed when facing their parents, a student performed when facing their teacher, and a Confucianist performed when facing a sage. They were a noble and respectable custom.

“Please come to my aid, Sage's Notes...”

A light suddenly flew out of the academy. It looked like nothing special, but it was so fast that it actually reached Zhang Lanjiang first before Wang Luori. The light faded away to reveal a tattered book, and Wang Luo’s fist landed squarely on its pages.

A soft white light rippled out of the tattered book. It looked fragile and completely powerless, but it ate away at Wang Luori’s fist force like acid. Before the Hill Lord could react, the white light pushed out an inch further and threw him back like he was nothing more but a speck of dust. He stumbled at least a dozen steps before he was finally able to catch himself.

Wang Luori’s expression turned ugly as he glared daggers at the tattered book. Although the white light hadn’t dealt any damage to him, he had felt a terrifying and unstoppable force when he was flung away.

It was only then Zhang Lanjiang turned around to catch the book. The white light slowly faded and revealed its true form.

The book looked wrinkled and tattered. Its cover was even covered in blotches of ink. Its title was, “A Commentary On The Sights Of Tian Yong”, and it was written using ancient seal scripts.

Frankly, the book looked like nothing special. It was just an old, tattered book that looked like it had gone through at least a thousand readers. However, it was this inconspicuous, ordinary-looking book that had pushed back Wang Luori.

“What the hell is that?” Wang Luori licked his lips grimly.

Zhang Lanjiang replied, “We call this the Sage’s Notes. Your founder left the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele behind to protect your Sunset Hill. Surely you don’t think that our sage would neglect to do the same to protect my White Horse Academy?”

“White Horse Academy is no place for ruffians like you, and we don’t stand for humiliation as well, Wang Luori!”

“Hahaha! Sage’s Notes my ass. It’s just a shitty book. Just watch me as I burn it into ash!”

Wang Luori’s expression and words were scornful, but his attack was as serious as it could get. One should scorn the enemy in strategy, but take them seriously in tactics.

Wang Luori took one step forward and threw a right punch. It looked like an ordinary punch at first, but every time it traveled an inch forward, his fist would raise a sixth of a meter higher, and his fist force and astral qi would grow a little denser. It was like a white sun slowly climbing over the horizon.

Three inches later, his fist was over his head, and the sun had risen to the middle of the sky. Floating at the center of the sun was none other than the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele. Shaking a little and releasing a thick amount of purple qi, it dyed the massive sun purple. Its light turned purple, and the entire eastern sky turned purple as well.

The rising sun rose to the center of the sky, and the purple qi came from the east.

The next second, the fist dropped, the sun descended, and the sky fell.

An all-encompassing, unimaginable pressure consumed the world. As the purple sun created by the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele shone an ominous light, everyone and everything in this corner of the world started shaking uncontrollably. Forget the Sunset Hill disciples, not even the White Horse Academy disciples hiding in the academy were exempt from its influence. Their breaths were stifled, their astral qis were stuttering, and their minds were quaking in fear. No one could muster the courage to resist—

—No one, except Zhang Lanjiang.

“Impudence.”

Zhang Lanjiang could feel the pressure coming from the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele as a matter of course, but he wasn’t afraid in the slightest. He simply raised the Sage’s Notes half an inch above his head to pay his respects to the sage.

“This student humble requests the sage to protect his academy.”

Flip flip flip!

The Sage's Notes started flipping through its pages on its own. It was a soothing, melodious sound that reminded one of the wind and rain.

Wind, rain, sounds of reading; mountains, rivers, humanity in between.

Silhouettes of male, female, old and young stepped out of the book. They were smiling and chatting with each other as if nothing was happening.

Following behind the humans were many gorgeous mountains and hills surrounded by many rivers and streams. Animals and Strangers ran across the terrain while making all sorts of noises.

Together, they formed an ink wash painting that inspired countless imaginations, and what an epic world it was! [2]

The purple qi should've been able to suppress anyone and anything, and yet it could not suppress this pocket world. In fact, the painting was pushing away the purple qi, the fist force, and the all-encompassing terror. Before they knew it, peace and tranquility had returned to the world.

Wang Luori's eyes bugged out as he exclaimed in disbelief, "How... is this possible? How can your shitty book possibly suppress my Eastern Purple Cloud Stele?"

He had not underestimated his opponent's Strange Artifact. He had combined his strength with the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele and unleashed one of his most powerful attacks to crush it in one go. And yet, the Sage's Notes had easily neutralized the attack and even the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele's purple qi.

Clearly, the Sage's Notes was also a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact, one that was even stronger than the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele.

Chapter 202: Shit Talking

"Impossible! There is no way my Eastern Purple Cloud Stele would lose to a shitty book!" Wang Luori roared.

Gritting his teeth, the Hill Lord poured all of his astral qi and spirit into the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele. An incredible amount of dark purple qi immediately gushed out of the Strange Artifact, and a three-footed, golden purple bird carrying a sun in its mouth appeared in the sky.

The oddly-shaped bird flapped its wings and unleashed a jet of purple flames from its mouth. The painting of humanity, mountains and rivers shook violently under the assault before dissolving into nothingness.

Wang Luori let out a crazed laugh when he saw this. "Hahaha! I knew there's no way that shitty book can resist my Eastern Purple Cloud Stele! Today is the day I turn your academy into dust, Zhang Lanjiang!"

The original Eastern Purple Cloud Stele possessed no offensive capabilities, but when it fell into his hands, he came up with a way to give it one. He sealed the soul essence of a Phenomenon-class Stranger called the Sunbearing Golden Crow inside the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele and fed it his spirit and blood essence day and night. Over time, the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele gained the ability to attack.

But of course, this wasn't his true objective. His true objective was to make the Sunbearing Golden Crow sentient so it could become the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele's artifact spirit. This way, the Strange Artifact would gain limitless potential for growth.

Unfortunately, the Sunbearing Golden Crow still hadn't shown any signs of sentience to this day. Even so, its powers couldn't be underestimated.

"Who are you calling a shitty book?!"

The Sunbearing Golden Crow was about to hit Zhang Lanjiang after punching through the painting when suddenly, the Sage's Notes stood up of its own accord. A pair of muscular arms abruptly shot out of its front and back cover, and they rapidly grew in size in just a fraction of a second. At the beginning, its hands were only as big as a millstone. Later, they were the size of an entire house.

The book easily caught the Sunbearing Golden Crow with its left hand and crushed it to pieces. Before anyone could react, it swiped the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele out of the air with its right hand and brought it down on a stunned Wang Luori.

Boom!

By the time Wang Luori realized he was in deep shit, it was already too late. He was smashed into the ground without any resistance.

This was just the beginning, however. The Sage's Notes hit Wang Luori with his own Strange Artifact again and again while yelling a stream of expletives,

"Shitty book? I overlooked your transgression once because you're just a wee, but you just can't help yourself, can you? Who the fuck do you think you are to swear at me?"

"You're a shitty brat who doesn't have a bush under your pants, and you think you can destroy my White Horse Academy with a shitty stele and a mindless bird? Your own bloody founder wouldn't dare to make such a claim, and you're nothing compared to him!"

"I thought you said you wanna wipe out my White Horse Academy? What are you waiting for? You'll get your wish as long as you defeat me, so get up! Get up and face me you useless, worthless sack of shit!"

"Your founder would be rolling in his grave if he knew the kind of shitstain who's commanding his Sunset Hill right now! It's fine though! I'll teach a lesson on his behalf! Eat shit, you worthless piece of shit!"

"Take this! And that! And another!"

As the Sage's Notes continued to kick ass and shit talk Wang Luori, everyone wore shocked and bewildered expressions on their faces.

They were shocked because the tables had been turned in just the blink of an eye. A moment ago, Wang Luori was kicking Zhang Lianjiang's ass to orbit. Now, it looked like the Sage's Notes would hammer him to the center of the planet.

They looked bewildered because the Hill Lord was being done in by a book, and the book was also swearing like a jianghu ruffian.

“I knew this was going to happen. Sigh...”

Even Zhang Lianjiang was wearing an embarrassed expression. He looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here.

“A Commentary On The Sights Of Tian Yong” was a famous work written by the first principal of White Horse Academy. It was a record of the geography and culture of the prefecture of Tian Yong based on his travels and experiences.

The book wasn’t just comprehensive and accurate, it was quite humorous and easy to understand. It was adored by the populace and heralded as one of the greatest masterpieces of Chu even to this day. It was also why Feng Moyu came to be known as the Sage.

The book Zhang Lanjiang was holding was the first draft. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that it was the culmination of Feng Moyu’s life’s work. That was how it transformed into a Strange Artifact.

Later, the first draft was enshrined in the Sage’s Hall of the academy and nurtured with the righteous qi of Confucianism. As a result, it eventually gained sentience.

It was said that Feng Moyu was an exceptionally hot-tempered and upright man despite being a scholar. Since the first draft was born from Feng Moyu’s will, it naturally inherited its writer’s character: fiery, upright, and violently virtuous. If someone said or did something it didn’t like, it would not hesitate to kick ass and chew bubblegum.

Of course, this type of personality was nothing special in the jianghu whatsoever, but in a lawful, cultured place like the White Horse Academy? It stood out to say the least.

Personally, Zhang Lanjiang was exasperated that the academy’s ultimate treasure and the life’s work of a great sage was a shit talking gangster. To say that it singlehandedly ruined a scholar’s image of impeccable etiquette and manners would be an understatement.

It was also why he allowed only a handful of trusted aides to learn about its existence, much less outsiders. For one, a trump card should remain hidden until it was time for it to shine. And two, it was just highly embarrassing. So embarrassing, in fact, that Zhang Lanjiang wouldn’t have used it if he had any other option.

That said, the Sage’s Notes were unquestionably powerful. It was single-handedly trouncing a Half-Step Spirit Master and another Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact like they were babies.

Zhang Lanjiang couldn’t deny feeling a deep, deep sense of satisfaction as he watched the Sage’s Notes wrecking Wang Luori both physically and mentally. If he wasn’t the principal, and this wasn’t a public space, he might even be tempted to cheer on the Sage’s Notes and join in on the abuse!

“Oh, what was I thinking? Such thoughts are not befitting for a scholar!” Zhang Lanjiang chided himself for his ungentlemanly thoughts before returning his attention to the wonderful show.

Meanwhile, after pummeling Wang Luori with its massive fists about two dozen times, the Sage's Notes grabbed both ends of the stele. Muscles bulging and arms growing even bigger than before, it let out a cringeworthy scream, "Hiyaah!" and exerted its strength.

Crack crack crack...

Cracks began appearing on the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele's surface. Every Sunset Hill disciple looked beyond horrified.

"Ahhh! No! No!"

No one was more horrified than the Hill Lord himself, however. His fearful cries seeped out of the deep, dark pit he was in, and he appeared on the edge a second later. However, his clothes were tattered, his appearance was unseemly, and his aura was far, far weaker than before. He was so weakened that he couldn't even stand straight.

Wang Luori's eyes widened like saucers as he stared at the breaking Eastern Purple Cloud Stele.

It's going to destroy my Eastern Purple Cloud Stele?

It's actually going to destroy my Eastern Purple Cloud Stele?!

There was nothing he could do to stop the book, however. Right now, his body was hurt and numb, his astral qi was in shambles, and his energies were circulating sluggishly. He could only watch as his prized Strange Artifact broke bit by bit.

"You called me a shitty book, didn't you? Let's see who's shittier after I snapped your shitty stele in half!" the Sage's Notes taunted while continuing its work.

"No, I... I'm sorry, senior. I shouldn't have insulted you. I'm the shitty one here, so please..."

Hatred and frustration flickered within Wang Luori's eyes, but he had no choice but to beg for mercy. After all, the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele was the source of his confidence and strength. Without it, Sunset Hill would suffer a massive decline. Therefore, he couldn't afford to lose it no matter what!

He didn't like his revenge served cold, but that didn't mean he was incapable of waiting. Whatever humiliation he suffered now could always be repaid tenfold later.

"Hehehe. Don't you think that your apology came a little too late? Also, it doesn't really sound all that sincere. You're plotting to take revenge in the future, aren't you? Do you think I'm stupid? Eat shit, you stupid fuck!"

The Sage's Notes practically laughed in Wang Luori's face before letting out another "Hiyaah!" A second later, the stele snapped in half just like that.

"You—pwack!"

As the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele was bonded with Wang Luori through his heart's blood, its destruction also dealt Wang Luori a severe blow. He looked downright pitiful as he stared at the broken stele in a daze.



“Aw man, it broke before I could use my full strength. What a shitty, lousy stele it is! Ptooey!” The Sage’s Notes shook the two halves of the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele left and right before tossing them away like trash.

“I... I... You... You...!”

Wang Luori could only point a finger at the Sage’s Notes and tremble in hatred and fury.

“What? Do you miss that shitty trash that badly? Fine! I suppose I can do you one favor!”

The Sage’s Notes slapped Wang Luori across the torso as soon as it finished. The Hill Lord was turned into a star in the sky just like that.

“The rest of you can get lost as well! Or do you need me to send you off as well?”

The Sage’s Notes then wheeled around and shook its fist at the Sunset Hill disciples standing not far away from it.

“C’mo!”

They obeyed its command, of course. What could they possibly do when even Wang Luori had been swatted away like a fly? No one wanted to taste the fists of the Sage’s Notes, so they were gone in just the blink of an eye.

After the Sunset Hill group was gone, Zhang Lanjiang gave the Sage’s Notes a deep bow and said, “Thank you for your timely assistance, great sage!”

“You’re welcome, but I have a question. Why didn’t you let me kill them all? Those walking garbage don’t deserve to live, man!” The Sage’s Notes complained unhappily.

Zhang Lanjiang shook his head. “We’re both in the wrong in this matter, and we are both sects of Luo Shui. We should be watching out for each other, not killing each other to the last!”

“Why do scholars study? Is it not to learn how to spread kindness to all people?”

“Hmph! Are you secretly a woman? Or did you read so many books that you accidentally rotted your own brain?”

The Sage’s Notes scoffed in disdain, “Kindness is a virtue, but it isn’t something all people deserve. Good people are deserving of kindness, but bad people deserve punishment. Why do you think saints and sages get wrathful sometimes?”

“These people literally kicked down your door and screamed how they were going to destroy your sect, and not only did you let them slap you in the face, you’re going to offer the other side of your cheek as well? Are you stupid or senile?”

Zhang Lanjiang could only let out a helpless laugh. Unwilling to argue against the Sage’s Notes, the principal echoed awkwardly, “You are right, great sage.”

The Sage's Notes bobbed up and down in satisfaction, "Hmph hmph! Of course I'm right! Don't hesitate to wake me up the next time something like this happens again! I promise I'll beat the shit out of them!"

"Remember this, Young Zhang. We White Horse Academy don't enjoy causing trouble, but that doesn't mean we're afraid of trouble. A gentleman must stand up for himself before he can be strong!"

"This student will remember this!" Zhang Lanjiang saluted.

"Alright. I'm heading back to my place now," The Sage's Notes said and flew back to White Horse Academy in a beam of light.

"Farewell, great sage!"

"Farewell, great sage!"

Zhang Lanjiang and every other White Horse Academy disciple chanted as they bowed their bodies in salute. Their voices would reverberate throughout the academy and soar through the heavens for a very long time.

#### Chapter 203: Sudden Attack

Xu Wushang was supporting Wang Luori on their way back to Sunset Hill. He asked in a low tone, "Are you alright, master?"

"I'll live!" Wang Luori grunted before launching into a tirade, "What were you guys doing while I was fighting against that old fucker? I cannot believe so many of you couldn't take out even one Cheng Nuo. Trash!"

Xu Wushang and the others kept quiet. Contrary to Wang Luori's words, there was nothing they could do while he was duking it out with Zhang Lanjiang. Had he won, they would be all over Cheng Nuo's corpse already. But since he lost, they could only withdraw with their tails tucked between their legs. Such was the way of this world.

Of course, no one was stupid enough to voice their opinion out loud. It would be no different from committing suicide.

Wang Luori was the tyrant of Sunset Hill. Rarely anyone dared to challenge his authority, not to mention that the man was furious right now. Voicing a retort now would surely earn them a swift and undignified death.

"Trash. Trash!"

Wang Luori grew even more furious when no one spoke up. He pushed Xu Wushang away and yelled, "Why are you still standing here? Go find my Eastern Purple Cloud Stele already! Both halves! If anything happens to my Strange Artifact because you were slacking, I swear I'll rip you all to shreds!"

"As you command, master."

"At once!"

The group received their orders and left immediately. Only a handful of disciples stayed behind to guard Wang Luori.

“Dammit! Dammit! Zhang Lanjiang and that shitty book, how dare you destroy my Eastern Purple Cloud Stele and humiliate me! Just you wait. When my Strange Artifact is repaired, and I have become a Spirit Master after retaking the ‘Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method’ from Ye Qing, I will come back and destroy you all!”

“Graaaaaaaaah!” Wang Luori ended his rant with an angry roar and a punch against a giant rock standing in front of him. Despite his weakened state, it shattered into smithereens easily.

At this point, the Hill Lord’s hatred for Zhang Lanjiang had exceeded even his hatred for Cheng Nuo, the man who killed his son.

He could always sow more sons in the future, but if he lost the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele, then that was it. Sunset Hill would be in grave danger, and he would lose the one item that allowed him to stand toe-to-toe with the other two sects!

Therefore, he must retrieve the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele no matter what. Although that shitty book had snapped it in half, it might still be possible to repair it. Only then could he take revenge against White Horse Academy.

Suddenly, Wang Luori saw a man walking toward them. It was an outer steward who went away to search for the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele earlier.

“Why are you back, Tang Shong? Did you find the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele already?” Wang Luori asked. However, the man didn’t respond to his call.

“Are you deaf or mute? I’m asking you a question!” Wang Luori’s tone grew a little impatient. However, the man still didn’t respond and continued to close the distance between them.

“Tang Shong, you—” Wang Luori was about to fly into a rage when suddenly, Tang Shong rushed forward and landed a palm strike squarely on his chest.

Tan Shong was an outer steward of Sunset Hill, so he was pretty strong—a Half-Step Spirit Purifier to be exact. The steward hadn’t held back, and Wang Luori was both severely injured and mentally unguarded. As a result, the sudden attack shattered his bones and sent him flying into a tree.

“Pwack! What the hell do you think you’re doing, Tan Shong? Have you gone mad?” Wang Luori exclaimed in shock and confusion while spitting blood. Tan Shong was among the last people he thought would attack him.

“No... wait... what happened to you, Tan Shong?”

It was at this moment Wang Luori noticed something amidst. The outer steward’s expression was blank and wooden almost as if he was a puppet.

“You lot, what are you waiting for? Come protect me already!”

His disciples turned around to face him, but their expressions were just as wooden as Tan Shong's. As if that wasn't bad enough, over twenty warriors stepped out from the nearby forest. Their clothes, weapons, and cultivation levels all differed greatly. They were clearly independent warriors. The one commonality they shared was the wooden expression on their faces.

The next moment, they all pounced toward Wang Luori.

"An assassination attempt?!"

Wang Luori frowned deeply as he met the group head on. When two swordsmen got close, he raised his fists and punched their swords hard. The blades exploded into a shower of deadly projectiles and killed a handful of attackers. Then, he took a few steps forward—every time he took a step, it was like an elephant was stomping the ground—and shook the ground hard enough to knock the warriors off balance. The next moment, they burst into flames and burned down to ashes without resistance.

Wang Luori walked across the sea of flames. His movement looked slow and leisurely, but it took him only a second to appear in front of Tang Shong. He grabbed the outward steward with his bare hand and crushed it like a watermelon, sending red gore and white brain matter everywhere.

"Do you really think you can kill me with a bunch of mindless puppets?" Wang Luori taunted his unseen attacker. The warrior group looked menacing, but they were mindless. They were probably easier to kill than even a bunch of crazed animals.

"Show yourself, friend. Surely you're man enough to fight me face to face?" Wang Luori continued to provoke his enemy in a scornful voice.

"Sigh. I just can't manipulate these dolls as well as that old timer. I guess I'm just not talented in this department," complained an annoyed, feminine voice. "Oh well! I should just stick to my earth dolls!"

Her voice was coming from the forest, but Wang Luori was unable to pinpoint her location because it was coming from everywhere at once. The next moment, the soil and stone around Wang Luori flowed like water and converged into many earth dolls.

The earth dolls had a humanoid body and face. They looked so lifelike they could probably be mistaken for a human being in the dark. Not only that, they were crying with clear excitement and delight,

"Woohoo! Another day, another murder!"

"Get him, brothers!"

It was almost as if they were sentient. They split up into several groups and surrounded Wang Luori from all sides.

"Earth dolls?"

Wang Luori frowned deeply. His senses were telling that each and every one of these earth dolls was as strong as a late-stage Astral Refiner. They were just as intelligent as a human being as well.

Before Wang Luori could decide on a course of action, the three earth dolls at the forefront raised their earth swords and attacked him from three positions: Heaven, Earth, and Human. They were all using a profound sword technique!

“The Three Powers Sword...”

The Three Powers Sword was a third-rate sword art that many people in the jianghu knew. It was pretty weak when executed by a single person, but it was a different story if three people came together to form the Three Powers Formation.

Wang Luori didn't dare to treat it lightly. Exploiting his greater cultivation, he managed to reach the earth dolls first and punch one of the earth dolls into oblivion before the Three Powers Formation could fully take form. Then, like a dragon flicking its tail, he swung his arm horizontally and unleashed a fiery dragon that consumed the other two dolls.

Unfortunately, another three dolls crawled out of the ground before he could even sigh in relief. They yelled, “We got a tough customer, brothers! Let's get him together!”

The earth dolls rushed Wang Luori at once, but they weren't going after him like an unorganized group. Not even close. Three dolls formed the Three Powers, four dolls emulated the Four Symbols, five people conjured the Five Elements, eight dolls embodied the Eight Trigrams, and nine dolls acted like one single entity.

If Wang Luori was at his full strength, he could've crushed these dolls in a single punch. However, he was seriously injured, and these earth dolls cooperated perfectly with one another and possessed seemingly endless numbers. Over time, he accumulated more and more injuries and was actually pushed into a corner.

Not all Sunset Hill disciples were mind-controlled by the unseen attacker, and not all of them had walked so far away that they couldn't hear the commotion. They immediately rushed back to the Hill Lord's rescue, but more earth dolls emerged from the ground and kept them pinned.

It wasn't long before everyone was fighting to save themselves, and Wang Luori was the most desperate of them all.

The Hill Lord continued to weaken as he accrued more and more injuries. Then—

Pssh!

Wang Luori was exhausted both physically and mentally after all the battles he had fought today. As a result, a pair of dolls were able to exploit a slip in his concentration and stab him in the chest.

Behind him, a pair of swords and sabers were swinging toward his back as well. They were a perfect blend of real, unreal, straightforward and feint like yin and yang. A patch of chaos abruptly surged out into the open, and it seemed potent enough to return all things to zero.

Wang Luori let out a furious growl when he sensed the sudden crisis. He detonated his remaining astral qi and was able to destroy all the earth dolls in a wash of golden flames, but the loss of power only put him in direr straits.

A white-faced Wang Luori staggered on his feet when he finally recognized his attacker, “You... You're the Earth Puppeteer of Jester Tower [1]?!”

“Huh! I must be more famous than I thought if the great Hill Lord of Sunset Hill would recognize me! A pleasure to make your acquaintance!” the feminine voice replied.

“Of course I have heard of you. There are few people at my level who don't know about Jester Tower.” Wang Luori said slowly, “However, I don't remember offending you or Jester Tower in any way. Why are you attacking me?”

The Earth Puppeteer replied, “Since you know our name, you should know exactly what kind of organization we are. We'll work for anyone who pays the right price. To put it simply, someone hired us to kill you.”

“And who might your employer be, pray tell?” Hatred flickered within Wang Luori's eyes.

It was said that Jester Tower loved nothing more than to steal fate and toy lives. They were one of the most mysterious yet infamous killer organizations in the jianghu.

They were mysterious because the location of their headquarters, their organizational structure, their numbers, their strength and more were completely unknown. They were infamous because they had killed Grandmasters, Truemen, and imperial personnel, and even annihilated famous sects in the past. To say that their hands were caked in blood would be an understatement. They continued to exist in this world even after several famous sects had come together to squash them.

The Earth Puppeteer was one of the more famous killers of Jester Tower as of late. Famed for their ability to control earth dolls, they once commanded hundreds of earth dolls and ground down the veteran Spirit Master and castellan of the Twelve Castles of the Owls of Feng Yang, Zuo Tianying the “Ghost Owl”. It was this feat that caused their name to be whispered throughout the jianghu.

Strangely, the Earth Puppeteer's true name, background, appearance, cultivation level and more were a complete mystery. It was probably because everyone who knew their personal information was dead.

Wang Luori didn't think he deserved such a famous killer. The timing of the attack was practically perfect as well.

Who in the world hates me so much that they would hire the Earth Puppeteer of all things to kill me?

He might be an arrogant man who condescended on everyone and everything, he wasn't stupid. He knew who he could abuse, and who to avoid. He would've died a long time ago if he didn't know at least this much.

Unfortunately, he was unable to figure out the answer.

His impulse told him that it was Ye Qing or the Pacification Bureau, but his reason said otherwise. If the Pacification Bureau wanted him dead, they would have marched to his hill in person. It was beneath them to hire a killer organization to kill him.

Ye Qing was even more out of the question. It was unthinkable that the young man was rich enough to hire the Earth Puppeteer. If he was, he wouldn't need to come to the Pacification Bureau for protection.

So who was it?

Chapter 204: The Bewitching Fish

"So sorry, but we have a rule that prevents us from divulging our employer's information. After all, who would hire us if we do that?"

The Earth Puppeteer's voice kept fluctuating in pitch and direction as they [1]spoke, "I know you're trying to buy time, Hill Lord Wang, but it's useless. No one will come to save you, so just be a good boy and die, will you?"

"Hahaha! You think you can kill me just because you got lucky with that trash, Zhuo Tianying? You must be quite new to your profession despite your fame!" Wang Luori suddenly burst out laughing. "I will remember this, Earth Puppeteer."

He said "Earth Puppeteer" instead of "Jester Tower" because the killer was just a member of the organization, not their representative. Also, it was one thing to make an enemy out of Earth Puppeteer, and another to declare the whole organization as his enemy. He didn't have a death wish, and he was no fool.

Sensing that something wasn't right, Earth Puppeteer hurriedly commanded their earth dolls to attack Wang Luori. It was at this moment a massive ship with an equally massive sun floating above its sails appeared in the sky. It was none other than the Heaven Patrolling Sun Ship.

The Heaven Patrolling Sun Ship was a Hatred-class Strange Artifact just like that Seven Bejeweled Glazed Lamps. Although it lacked any offensive capabilities whatsoever, it made up for it by being incredibly fast. Capable of traveling hundreds of kilometers in the blink of an eye, it was one of Wang Luori's lifesaving trump cards.

Wang Luori spat out a mouthful of fresh blood and growled. The Heaven Patrolling Sun Ship abruptly shone like a golden sun before vanishing in a flash of light. Wang Luori himself was nowhere to be seen.

"Dammit! I screwed up! I can't believe I forgot that Wang Luori had the Heaven Patrolling Sun Ship! Oh, this is going to be so annoying!"

Earth Puppeteer let out a deep, frustrated sigh, "Calm down, girl [2], it's not entirely your fault. Who would've thought that a macho guy like Wang Luori was really a scaredy cat who keeps his Heaven Patrolling Sun Ship with him all the time? The spineless coward should be ashamed of himself! Ugh!"

"Thankfully, his cadre is still around. Hopefully, killing them would be enough to convince my employer not to take back most of his money!"

"Sigh, the smoked chicken and duck-in-wine from Smoke and Fire, the sweet prawn and hibiscus brew from Cloud Tower, and the osmanthus biscuits and rice-ball-in-

wine from Yuxiu Diner... I won't be able to enjoy these delicacies this time or meet up with my cute and beautiful Cui, Hong and Red either. Whatever shall I do...?"

"I need to work harder to earn more money. Beautiful people and delicious food are the two things one must never betray..."

.....

Back in Thousand Buddhas Temple, the space around Ye Qing had turned into a vacuum. The three divine winds were still pouring into the temple, but they automatically vanished when they came within a meter of the young man.

A closer look would reveal that Ye Qing wasn't really surrounded by a vacuum, but an invisible cyclone of air. The wind looked weak and powerless, but in reality it was hot enough to boil even space itself. In fact, the ground underneath Ye Qing had melted into molten lava a long time ago.

Ye Qing seemed completely unperturbed though. It was almost as if he was existing in a completely separate space.

Boom!

Suddenly, a terrific amount of power gushed out of Ye Qing. The invisible cyclone abruptly grew much bigger, and the three divine winds inside the temple were blown away in an instant. Speaking of the temple, the structure had stood strong despite a century of erosion and the constant battering of the three divine winds, but now, it was melting inch by inch under the invisible cyclone's influence. The entire Thousand Buddhas Temple was gone in just the blink of an eye.

"Phew..."

The next moment, Ye Qing opened his eyes and inhaled deeply. Like a whale taking a deep breath, he somehow inhaled the invisible cyclone back into his abdomen. It cleared up his mind in an instant and made him feel like he just had a satisfying meal.

Ye Qing rose to his feet and walked forward, his feet flowing seamlessly from one step to another like a stream. Then, he threw out a punch.

BOOM!

The wind howled, and the air was blown away in an instant. The cavern he was in and all the life in it abruptly disintegrated into nothing just like that.

Now this was a punch that could vaporize lakes and change the sky itself!

"Hahaha! My astral qi is now rich, dense and pure in every sense of the word. I've finally entered the late-stage of the Astral Refinement stage." Ye Qing let out a boisterous laugh as he admired his handiwork.

Thanks to the Star Lotus and the Blood Jade Lotus, he was able to skip the middle stage and enter the late-stage of the Astral Refinement stage in one fell swoop. Not only that, his astral qi was at least as rich, dense and pure as those warriors who tirelessly cultivated their astral qi for over a decade, if not more.



Even better, the Blood Jade Lotus had purified his Burning Wind to the point where it turned invisible and resembled its truest essence. As a result, his astral qi was at least several times stronger than before.

After this, all he needed to do was to improve his fine control until he could manifest his Expression, and he would finally be able to call himself a true late-stage Astral Refiner.

“Alright. It’s finally time to go home.”

It had been a few days since he came to Thousand Buddhas Grotto, and he was still the Patrolman of Luo Shui. It was one thing to take a few days leave for important business, and another to actively abscond his responsibilities for personal pleasure.

Besides, he wanted to know if his ploy had worked. Wang Luori should’ve learned of his son’s death a few days ago. Had he gone to White Horse Academy for revenge? And had he died for his foolishness? As the one who had single-handedly directed this scene, he could hardly wait to enjoy the final product.

I sure hope I’m not too late for the show.

Whoosh!

Ye Qing was just about to take his leave when a school of fishes abruptly swam in from the surrounding cracks and crevices. That’s right, swam. It was as if the Stranger was born to the three divine winds like fish to water. They also wore a human woman’s face.

“Hehehe...”

“Hahaha...”

“Kekeke...”

The fishes giggled melodiously as they swam. Although the faces were all different, they were all unnaturally beautiful and seductive. At the same time, an inexplicable energy spread across the area and conjured countless half-naked women in all sorts of embarrassing poses into existence. It was like he was suddenly teleported to the imperial harem.

“The Bewitching Fish?” Ye Qing muttered while the corners of his lips turned up. Eyes completely free from desire, he ignored the half-naked women trying to draw his attention and simply examined the fish Strangers curiously.

The fish Strangers swimming in the air was called the Bewitching Fish. They were a rare Malice-class Stranger.

The Bewitching Fish possessed a fish’s body and a human’s face, and although it was called a fish, it was actually terrestrial. Born from a multitude of vengeful souls, it possessed the ability to conjure illusions. It fed on its victims’ souls by conjuring seductive illusions and keeping them distracted until it was too late. The action allowed them to gain control over their victim’s body and mind.

Although the Bewitching Fish was just a Malice-class Stranger, it lacked a physical body and was immune to physical attacks as it was a ghost-type Stranger. Normally, it would take a considerable amount of effort to vanquish them.

Even worse, the Bewitching Fish normally lived in groups. A handful of Bewitching Fishes alone could create an illusion that would drown even an Astral Refiner. In bigger numbers? They could scare off even Spirit Purifiers.

Right now, Ye Qing was facing over two dozen Bewitching Fishes. If his spirit wasn't as strong as it was, he would be cumming out his brains already. Possibly literally.

As for why the Bewitching Fishes hadn't shown themselves until now, he reckoned that it was because Jing Hui's heart demon was in control of this place until recently. Now that the heart demon was sealed, and even the Thousand Buddhas Temple itself was destroyed, the Bewitching Fishes finally gathered enough courage to enter this place.

"Heh. it looks like someone's underestimating my strength!" Ye Qing smirked diabolically. "This is the perfect opportunity to test out my new Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art!"

Ye Qing straightened his palm and swung it downward. The first thing he learned when studying the saber art was that there was no specific form he must abide to when executing the saber art. He could use his saber, his hands, his legs, or anything to execute a technique.

Countless demonic red lotuses bloomed in the air in an instant. The way the red flowers floated across the air painted a paradisiacal scene, and yet it was bewitching in the sense that it could somehow unearth one's emotions, desires, and sins.

The illusion conjured by the Bewitching Fishes vanished as soon as the red lotuses descended. They themselves shuddered unnaturally as their human faces turned blank and seemingly confused. The next second, countless demonic flames burst out of their orifices and consumed them from the inside out.

The Bewitching Fishes couldn't break free no matter how hard they struggled. Even stranger was the fact that their expressions grew increasingly calm and peaceful as time passed. This shouldn't be possible as they were the embodiment of vengeance and darkness. Over time, the Strangers forgot how to struggle or despair. They even looked relieved and happy when the flames finally burned them into ashes.

"Heavens... what a demonic art this is!" Ye Qing couldn't help but gulp as he stared at the pile of ashes that were once the Bewitching Fishes.

He hadn't used his Burning Wind earlier because he wanted to test out the strength of the saber art. Instead, he had executed the technique using his spirit. The flames were not the flames of the Burning Wind, and it was named the Red Lotus Hellfire.

As the flames were created from the sins of the Bewitching Fishes, one could say that Ye Qing wasn't their true killer. They had died to their own sins. Not only that, not a sound could be heard as the fishes burned to death. Assuming that the circumstances were right, he could probably use this to assassinate someone without a trace.

On a related note, he had practiced the Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art while he was refining his astral qi. As Jing Hui had imprinted his martial arts essence directly into his mind, it took him little effort to grasp the basics of the saber art.

This was the first time he applied it in true combat, and he must say that he was extremely pleased with the outcome.

He could see why it was classified as a Spirit Purification stage saber art. He wasn't even a Spirit Purifier yet, and its potency was still far greater than any Astral Refinement stage martial art he had ever seen.

Of course, he was just an initiate of the art right now. If he wished to unleash its true power, he would have to merge his spirit, astral qi, and saber intent into one and combine his essence, qi and spirit first.

"It's a shame," Ye Qing sighed regretfully. If he knew he was going to pick up this saber art in the future, he might have considered cultivating the Red Lotus Hellfire as his astral qi instead of the Burning Wind to maximize its potential. The Red Lotus Hellfire was one of the thirty six superior astral qis and rarer than even the Burning Wind.

Of course, the combination of his formless Burning Wind and the saber art wasn't necessarily weaker than if he had cultivated the Red Lotus Hellfire. After all, the warrior was the one who decided the strength of a martial art, not the other way around.

"Alright. Now it's really time to say goodbye to this place."

Ye Qing withdrew his palm, looked around the ashen cavern that was once the Thousand Buddhas Temple, and smiled. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

It was time to go home.

## Chapter 205: Paper Doll

Ye Qing didn't linger after exiting the Thousand Buddhas Grotto. He immediately made a beeline for Luo Shui. However, he had just stepped on a marked road when suddenly, a sparrowhawk descended from above and landed on his shoulder.

It's a message from Faceless. Did something happen? Ye Qing thought worriedly as he untied the letter tied to the sparrowhawk's leg and took a peek. The next second, his eyes turned bloodshot, and a terrible pressure gushed out of his person.

"Brother Frog and Wawa went missing?!" Ye Qing burst out uncontrollably before he forced himself to calm down.

According to Faceless, Kung Fu Frog and Wawa never returned after leaving the Pacification Bureau to explore the city [1] about two days ago. He had dispatched every Pacification Sentinel at his disposal and searched every location they might have visited to no avail. It was almost as if they had vanished into thin air.

"Who in the world would capture Brother Frog and Wawa?" Ye Qing crushed the letter between his fingers as he racked his brain for an answer.

Kung Fu Frog and Wawa couldn't have gone missing on their own. Wawa was one thing, but Brother Frog was neither stupid nor inattentive. The chances of them somehow getting lost in the city for two whole days without informing Faceless was non-existent.

Moreover, Faceless claimed that he couldn't find the trace of a battle anywhere. As Kung Fu Frog was a powerful Malice-class Stranger, this could only mean that the kidnapping was premeditated, and their kidnappers were quite powerful. Otherwise, there was no way they would be able to pull off the kidnapping without leaving a trace behind.

So, the culprit was both powerful and a somebody. They should be well aware that Kung Fu Frog and Wawa were his Strangers as well. He had never tried to conceal their existence. In fact, he often took them to the streets so that people would know Kung Fu Frog and Wawa were his Strangers. It was also one of the main reasons Faceless wasn't scared of leaving Kung Fu Frog and Wawa to explore the city on their own.

Despite this, the culprit still dared to kidnap the duo. There were two possibilities. One, an outsider who just recently entered Luo Shui noticed Kung Fu Frog and Wawa and decided to kidnap them. He couldn't rule out the possibility, but at the same time, he didn't think it was very likely.

The second possibility was that one of his enemies had kidnapped them for one reason or another. This was by far the likelier possibility between the two.

His impulse said that it was Wang Luori, but Ye Qing discarded the thought almost as soon as it entered his head. The Hill Lord had just lost his son, and he should be busy plotting bloody vengeance against White Horse Academy right now. He shouldn't be able to spare him any attention at the moment.

Who else besides Wang Luori had beef with him?

"Could it be the Luo Clan? No, it can't be."

"Wait. What about the Strangers lurking within the city?"

Suddenly, Ye Qing recalled the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia. Perhaps one of its friends or family had decided to take revenge?

Silver Toad itself was one such example. It had gathered a bunch of friends and ambushed Ye Qing during the zombie outbreak incident because it wanted to take revenge for Bronze Toad. But realizing that the direct approach wouldn't work, they decided to kidnap Kung Fu Frog and Wawa to use as hostages instead.

"Yes... I think I'm on the right track!" Ye Qing muttered to himself.

Assuming his theory was true, Kung Fu Frog and Wawa should be safe for now. After all, if the enemy could kidnap them without a trace, they could have killed them just as easily. And if the plan was to kill them, then there would be no need to vanish the bodies. It would just be a waste of time and energy. So, it had to be a kidnapping, and the reason was to use them as hostages.

His eyes shone a cold, murderous glint as he muttered, "It doesn't matter who it is. Whoever kidnapped Brother Frog and Wawa must pay the price!"

.....

"Excuse me!"

Ye Qing made haste for Luo Shui as soon as his mind was made up, but he had just barely taken a few steps when a Taoist wearing a bagua robe and wielding a horsetail-whisk abruptly stepped—or

rather, glided out of the nearby forest. That's right, the man's feet were floating about half a meter above the ground almost as if he was riding the wind.

Also, the Taoist was moving quite fast despite his seemingly slow speed. He had blocked in front of Ye Qing in just the blink of an eye.

"Stranger?"

The man didn't look like a Stranger, but then he got close, and Ye Qing caught a whiff of something unnatural. He didn't hesitate to lash out and punch the guy into oblivion.

"Paper?"

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes as the Taoist burned into ashes. It was clearly a paper doll of some sort. He paid it no heed though. He was in a hurry to get back to Luo Shui and could not afford to waste his time on the pesky little things as usual. Killing it was the fastest and simplest solution.

Unfortunately, he had just taken two steps when another Taoist floated down from a nearby tree. He looked exactly the same as the Taoist from before.

"Wait, friend! Please allow me to s—"

This time, the Taoist spoke as soon as he revealed himself—Ye Qing had proven too impatient for pleasantries after all—but once again, invisible fire suddenly gushed out of its body and turned it to ash.

"Wait... was he trying to say something?"

It wasn't until after the fact that Ye Qing realized that the Stranger was trying to hold a conversation with him. But then he recalled Kung Fu Frog and Wawa and decided that this outcome was for the best.

While he was passing by a giant rock, a voice suddenly came from above, "Your pets are in our hands, so you best—"

This time, the paper Taoist didn't even bother approaching Ye Qing. He stood far, far away from the Patrolman and voiced his intention as quickly as he could. Unfortunately, he still couldn't finish his sentence before an invisible wind blew over him and turned him to ash yet again.

"What did he just say? 'Your pets are in our hands, so you best'... Is he talking about Brother Frog and Wawa?!"

Ye Qing stiffened when he finally connected the dots. Did I just annihilate... a free source of intel?

But what could he do? The months he spent in this world had instilled the need to respond to Stranger threats as quickly as possible, and frankly, it was the paper Taoist's fault for dying so easily!

"Well, he already showed himself three times. He should have a fourth paper doll in stock... I hope!" Ye Qing consoled himself while rubbing his nose.

There was a chance the paper Taoist would say fuck it and just leave, but since they had purposely come all the way to this place to convey a message, they probably wouldn't give up so easily.

As expected, a fourth paper Taoist soon floated out of the forest, and he wasted no time in threatening Ye Qing, “Do you want your pets to die this badly, Lord Ye? Don’t say I didn’t warn you, but attack me again, and you will suffer the consequences!”

Ye Qing pretended not to get his meaning, “I’m sorry? What are you talking about?”

The paper Taoist sneered, “You know exactly what I’m talking about. That sparrowhawk just now is your messenger, and I’m willing to bet it told you exactly what happened to your pets!”

Ye Qing furrowed his brow and asked, “I don’t remember offending you. Why would you capture my pets?”

“Is that so?” The paper Taoist replied in a scornful tone, “were you not murder my brothers and sisters in Luo Shui? Or are you so busy that you’ve forgotten all about them already?”

“Plus, I am Stranger, and you are human. We are destined to fight each other to the death since we are born, aren’t we?”

This confirms that a Stranger group affiliated with Bronze Toad or Silver Toad is behind this, Ye Qing thought to himself as he crossed his arms.

“That makes sense. What do you want?”

The paper Taoist replied coldly, “You will learn. Now, follow me!”

The paper Taoist glided forward for a bit when he suddenly noticed that Ye Qing wasn’t following him. He taunted, “You’re not afraid, are you Lord Ye? Or are you planning to abandon your two pets to their deaths?”

Still crossing his arms, Ye Qing smirked. “You said it yourself. Why would I risk my life for mere pets?”

“Is that so?” The paper Taoist sneered and waited patiently. It was as if he wasn’t worried that Ye Qing would choose not to follow him.

His group had done their homework, of course. He knew that Ye Qing shared a deep bond with Kung Fu Frog and Wawa, and that they were close enough to be called family. That was why they went through the trouble of kidnapping them in the first place, and why he knew that Ye Qing would cave in in the end.

As expected, Ye Qing shrugged after stalling him out for a moment longer. “You win this time. Lead the way!”

He just wanted to confirm that the Strangers had definitely done their homework. He was also certain that the Strangers wouldn’t kill him—for now. If they really wanted him dead, they would’ve just ambushed him while he was traveling back to Luo Shui. After all, they knew exactly where he was, so it would’ve been trivial to set up. They probably wouldn’t go through the trouble of kidnapping Kung Fu Frog and Wawa either.

Assuming he wasn’t mistaken, these Strangers wanted something from him, and they were using Kung Fu Frog and Wawa as their bargaining chip.

Finally, the reason he dared to follow the paper doll Stranger was because he was confident in his own strength. It didn't matter how devious their scheme was, he was certain he was now strong enough to crush it all.

"Hahaha! You're a courageous man, Lord Ye," the paper doll Stranger said sarcastically before continuing on its way.

About half a teatime later, the paper doll Stranger led him to a Taoist temple. Almost as soon as they reached the entrance, the Stranger abruptly turned limp and transformed into a palm-sized paper doll. The wind easily blew it away without resistance.

I see. There's a limit to how long he can maintain these paper dolls. No wonder he needed to bring me to his hideout.

If the paper doll Stranger could maintain the paper dolls indefinitely, there would be no need for him to risk himself like this. He absolutely could've held a remote conversation to ensure his own safety.

Of course, it could also be because the paper doll Stranger was that confident in his abilities. Although Ye Qing was now a late-stage Astral Refiner, he still appeared to be an early-stage Astral Refiner on the outside. His blood's ability to conceal his cultivation was very handy in times like this.

Ye Qing examined the Taoist temple closely. On the surface, it was a lofty and exquisite-looking structure. However, he quickly realized that the entire thing was really made of paper. Even the board hanging above the entrance stated, "Paper Taoist Temple".

Paper Taoist Temple, huh? An apt name, it is. Ye Qing rubbed his nose to cover up a smirk. I wonder what will happen when I hit it with my Cloud Vaporization Style? Oh, the wolf can't wait to blow down the piglet's paper house...

The entrance to the temple swung open, and a bunch of white-skinned and red-lipped paper doll children filed out into the open and split into two lines. Then, they greeted Ye Qing, "This way, Lord Ye."

This guy is such a show-off, Ye Qing thought disdainfully but obeyed the unspoken command.

At first, Ye Qing was worried that the paper temple wouldn't be able to withstand his weight. After all, it was made of paper. Thankfully, the structure looked tougher than it seemed, and it was even bouncy to a certain extent. It might be a good playground for children—without the obviously hostile Strangers, of course.

Ye Qing was greeted by the sight of a gigantic tree as soon as he entered the courtyard. It was covered in fruits that were shaped like babies, but their expressions were savage and full of resentment.

Chapter 206: Paper Taoist

"Keke..."

"Keke..."

"Keke..."

Ye Qing could sense through his spirit the infant-shaped fruits on the tree shaking slightly and letting out dark, resentful laughter. They were also turning every time he took a step and staring fixatedly at him. It was like they wanted to swallow him whole.

There was a stone table underneath the tree, and a Taoist with white hair and beard was sitting next to it. It looked exactly the same as the paper Taoists he encountered earlier, but this one exuded a much stronger aura. He was obviously the head.

“Greetings, Lord Ye. My name is Paper Taoist, and I am honored to make your acquaintance.”

Despite what he said, Paper Taoist didn’t rise to his feet. He was the owner of this place after all. “Please, take a seat!”

“No thanks. Just tell me what you want already!” Ye Qing replied directly.

Paper Taoist didn’t dilly dally. “You just need to do two things for us, and we will release your pets.”

“Spill it.”

Paper Taoist smiled. “Our request is very simple. I’m sure you won’t reject us.”

Ye Qing didn’t give him a response.

Paper Taoist began, “First, we want you to give us the silver page you obtained from Bronze Toad.”

“Silver page?” Ye Qing raised his eyebrows in surprise. He didn’t think that the Stranger would ask for it.

In hindsight, Bronze Toad was unwilling to abandon the silver page even on the verge of death. He didn’t know why, but it must be exceptionally valuable to these Strangers. Silver Toad must have been gunning for the silver page as well.

“What on earth is that silver page?” Ye Qing asked curiously.

Paper Taoist smiled. “You don’t need to know about that. Just give it to me, and your first request is settled!”

Ye Qing shrugged. “I can give you the silver page, but it’s not with me right now. Can I head back first and give it to you afterward?”

Paper Taoist’s smile grew a little cruel. “It seems you need a little motivation. Do you know who’s holding your pets hostage right now? Her name is Gold Toad, and as you might be able to guess, she is Bronze Toad and Silver Toad’s older sister. She is only all too happy to kill your cute little pets and take revenge for her younger brothers, so please, save your tricks!”

Gold Toad? Bronze Toad and Silver Toad’s older sister? Ye Qing squinted a little. Assuming he understood Paper Toad correctly, Gold Toad was the one who planned everything, and her ultimate objective besides taking revenge for her younger brothers was the silver page.

This would also explain why the Strangers were able to see through Faceless’ disguise. Bronze Toad had cursed him with the Dying Grudge prior to his death. Although Faceless could mimic his



appearance perfectly, he was unable to mimic the Dying Grudge. It was no wonder Gold Toad was able to see through his disguise.

“Gold Toad, is it?” Ye Qing’s lips curled into a diabolical smile. One of the reasons he was indulging in Paper Taoist’s whims was to find out who was the mastermind behind this, but the Stranger had divulged it on his own. He sure saved him a lot of trouble.

Paper Taoist had no idea about Ye Qing’s thoughts as he continued, “You’re a smart man, Lord Ye. You should know better than to overreach yourself!”

“Fine. You win!” Ye Qing pulled out the silver page and tossed it to Paper Taoist.

Paper Taoist wasn’t expecting Ye Qing to be so decisive and clumsily caught the silver page. A flash of manic delight flickered behind his eyes.

“You’re definitely a smart man, Lord Ye!” Paper Taoist grinned widely.

“Har har... now cut the bootlicking and tell me your second request already,” said Ye Qing with a sneer.

“Sure thing!” Paper Taoist agreed before launching into his second request, “Our second request is that you obtain a certain item from the Demon’s Graveyard after it opens.”

“Demon’s Graveyard? What is that?” Ye Qing asked.

“Legend says that the Demon’s Tomb is the resting place of Rahu, the Progenitor Demon. Normally, it floats in the infinite void and is impossible to locate. It is one of the most mysterious places in the world.”

“But every once in a while, the Demon’s Tomb would take form in our world. Everyone and everything can enter during this time.”

“Due to how special the Demon’s Tomb is, some demonic sects or Strangers believe it to be their ancestral land of some sort. Some even take pride in being buried in the Demon’s Tomb after they die. As a result, some powerful Strangers or titans of the Dark Ways would enter the Demon’s Tomb and await their deaths when nearing the end of their lifespan. Over time, the Demon’s Tomb became a true tomb of demons where countless demons were buried.”

“Most of these titans and Strangers were exceptionally powerful when they still lived, so their possessions and even their corpses were priceless to put it mildly. Even if that wasn’t the case, the Demon’s Tomb itself was a strange land overgrown with all sorts of treasures. Any one of these items can accelerate a person’s growth beyond their wildest imaginations.”

“It is also why the Demon’s Tomb also became a land of opportunity over time.”

“In short, it’s a Strange Realm,” Ye Qing summarized succinctly.

Paper Taoist lost his voice for a second. “... You can say that.”

Ye Qing asked curiously, “What is this item you want me to obtain? Is it related to the silver page?”

Paper Taoist’s expression abruptly turned icy and distant. It was as if Ye Qing had crossed a certain line he shouldn’t cross. “Again, you didn’t need to know about that. When the time comes, all you need to do is to obey our instructions.”

“Fine.” Ye Qing shrugged carelessly. “When and where will the Demon’s Tomb open? I gotta know at least that much, right?”

Paper Taoist answered, “We don’t know the exact time and location ourselves, but it should appear fairly close to Luo Shui within a month or two. Unnatural phenomena will occur throughout the area when it opens, so you’ll know when the time comes.”

“So, you’ll release Brother Frog and Wawa if I get you the item from the Demon’s Tomb, correct?” Ye Qing asked.

Paper Taoist replied smilingly, “That is correct.”

Ye Qing furrowed his brow and narrowed his eyes a little. “And how can I trust your word?” Paper Taoist stroked his beard smilingly, “We can’t give you any guarantees, but can you afford not to trust our word while your two little cuties are still in our hands?”

“Makes sense.” Ye Qing tilted his head and abruptly shot Paper Taoist an evil smirk. “But you know what? I think I can.”

He didn’t trust Paper Taoist and his cohort as a matter of course. He had killed both of Gold Toad’s family, Bronze Toad and Silver Toad. Even a human would swear bloody vengeance against the enemy who killed their family, much less a Stranger like Gold Toad. And speaking of which, this was a bunch of Strangers he was negotiating with. He trusted them to keep their word as much as a child could throw them. He had no doubt that they would turn on him as soon as he obtained said item for them.

Only a fool would negotiate with an evil person and expect to receive good faith in return.

As soon as Ye Qing said this, he suddenly shivered a little and grew transparent. It was an afterimage!

Paper Taoist wasn’t expecting Ye Qing to attack him at all. Cursing under his breath, his Taoist robe suddenly flapped incessantly like a bunch of tree leaves.

As it turned out, his Taoist robe was made of countless black and white paper dolls. They floated into the air. They danced around Paper Taoist seemingly at random, but in reality there was a clear pattern to it. Black and white mingled to form yin and yang, life and death. It was obviously the Taoist’s tai chi symbol, and it was protecting Paper Taoist from all sides.

At the same time, Ye Qing appeared behind Paper Taoist and threw a punch. His force flowed toward the Stranger like a raging, thunderous river. However, the normally unstoppable punch only shook the tai chi symbol slightly. One would almost think that he was fooling around.

“Huh... I guess you’re not all talk after all!” Ye Qing could clearly sense the yin and yang of the tai chi symbol neutralizing his attack by spreading it evenly across all of the paper dolls. As a result, his thunderous punch only managed to shatter a handful of paper dolls.

“Tsk tsk, to think that a mere Stranger would figure out the secrets of tai chi. It’s truly a shame that you weren’t born a human. It’s fine though! I’ll send you to the afterlife now. Be sure to come back as a human in your next life!”

Ye Qing smiled and pulled back his fist an inch. Then, he punched down on Paper Taoist once more. Rumble!

As an ordinary human being, Bruce Lee was able to break a wooden board with ease with the one-inch punch. In Ye Qing’s case, he was unleashing the full extent of his dragon elephant strength in one inch. Space shattered into smithereens like glass, and this time, the tai chi symbol had no time to neutralize the overwhelming force. The black and white paper dolls shuddered in unison before scattering into countless paper scraps. They looked like snow from a distance.

“You—” Paper Taoist’s eyes bugged out in disbelief. He wanted to say something, but Ye Qing annihilated him in one punch.

“What are you doing, Ye Qing? Don’t you want your pets to live anymore?!”

It wasn’t the end though. Of course it wasn’t. Paper Taoist’s voice came from everywhere inside the temple, though he sounded a lot weaker than before.

“Of course I want them to live!” Ye Qing laughed madly, “I want them to live, and you to die!”

“Something’s not right with your head! Fine, I’ll kill you first and those two little shits later!” Paper Taoist roared.

Countless paper dolls abruptly flew out from underneath Ye Qing and enveloped him in the blink of an eye. Then, a hundred and eight paper dolls flew out from various corners of the temple. Each and every one of them possessed immense aura and strength. They assumed their positions based on the thirty six Heavenly Stars and seventy two Earthly Fiends and attacked Ye Qing immediately.

Some paper dolls opened their mouth and spat lightning, Some paper dolls waved their sleeves and summoned wind and rain, Some paper dolls wielded talismans and commanded a storm, Some paper dolls mouthed incantations and summoned steel from the earth, and more.

It was like the one hundred and eight paper dolls were all Taoist masters, and they specialized in the orthodox magics of the thirty six Heavenly Stars and seventy two Earthly Fiends. The spells engulfed Ye Qing in the blink of an eye, but—

“Hah... your bark is worse than your bite.”

Ye Qing couldn't seem to feel the spell at all. In fact, he didn't. They all disappeared as soon as they came within three meters of him.

The spells looked incredibly intimidating and deadly, but in reality it was a quantity over quality thing. They would be effective against an ordinary Astral Refiner, but him? One might say that Paper Taoist still had a long way to go.

The temperature inside the Taoist temple suddenly rose rapidly. It was as if the interior was being cooked by an invisible flame. The one hundred and eight paper dolls gradually yellowed, blackened, and turned into ash in just a matter of seconds.

"What else are you waiting for? If I die, then the rest of you are going to die as well!" Paper Taoist howled in a flustered voice. It was clear that losing the one hundred and eight paper dolls hurt him deeply.

"Keke..."

Keke..."

As soon as Paper Taoist said this, the massive tree at the courtyard started swaying on its own. Its leaves made rustling noises, and its infant-shaped fruits wobbled and cackled eerily.

Their strange laughter grew louder and louder over time, evil and terrifying. A yin wind started blowing earnestly. The Taoist temple now looked more like a ghost realm than a temple.

Chapter 207: Grudge Mother

"Keke..."

"Keke..."

As the yin wind continued to blow across the temple, the infant-shaped fruits on the tree suddenly began weeping blood. Then, ghastly infants began floating out of the fruits.

The infants were all smaller than what a newborn should look. They all looked plump and healthy, but their cheeks were covered in blood trails, their faces were pulled into a savage snarl, and their pitch black pupils were full of resentment and hatred. T

Their emotions were so potent that it could be felt throughout the temple. It was clear that they hated everyone and everything. Such was their hatred that even Ye Qing felt his mental defenses wobbling, and his spirit dyeing black bit by bit. If he wasn't careful, he could easily lose himself in their sea of resentment and hatred.

"They're Grudge Infants!"

Ye Qing hurriedly touched his forehead and visualized the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" to preserve his clarity of mind. While doing so, he glared at the floating infants with shock and fury.

A Grudge Infant was born when a ten-month-old infant died before it could be born into this world. Infants at this age already possessed a certain level of consciousness, and so they were filled with love and hope toward the new life ahead of them. However, they died for one reason or another, and so their love soured into hatred, and they grew resentful of their parents, the people, and generally everyone and everything in the world.

However, most Grudge Infants never accumulated as much hatred and resentment as the ones before his eyes. They had to be stillborn for at least five or six incarnations in a row.

Luck was a fickle thing, and this world was a cruel place. So, it was actually quite common for a soul to be stillborn one or two incarnations in a row. However, it was rare for them to be stillborn three or four incarnations in a row. Five or six? That was statistically improbable.

Ye Qing counted at least dozens of Grudge Infants who had accumulated at least five incarnations worth of hatred before his eyes, and the chances that this could occur naturally was zero, so... it could only have been engineered.

This was why Ye Qing was furious. Life was fickle, and humanity possessed both light and darkness. However, an infant could only be innocent, much less one that wasn't born yet!

Whoever created these Grudge Infants deserved his pure, unadulterated anger!

They deserved death!

Ye Qing spread his spirit like a net. It wasn't long before he detected a mass of black hair floating just above the temple. They twisted and turned like streams, and he could vaguely make out the face of a woman.

The woman wore a kind, benevolent smile and brimmed with a motherly aura. However, a closer look would reveal that her stomach was as round and swollen as a pregnant lady. One could almost see the outline of an infant lying inside her stomach as well.

Although the infant was still inside the woman's stomach, Ye Qing could sense a shocking level of resentment of hatred coming from it. It was even worse than the infants he was facing right now. The only reason he hadn't detected it sooner—heck, hadn't detected it long before he even got close to the temple—was because a strange energy was keeping it concealed.

“A Grudge Mother. I knew it.”

Ye Qing's eyes flickered with bloodthirst as he glared daggers at the woman.

The Grudge Mother was a yin soul-type Stranger just like the Grudge Infant, and even the way they came to be were pretty similar. A Grudge Mother was a mother who was ten months pregnant, but she died because of the infant she was carrying. For example, it could be the bastard son of an influential family, and someone decided that both mother and child were better off dead; a daughter that earned the hatred of the entire family, a tragic death when she was in labor, so on and so on. In any case, the deep resentment she carried allowed her yin soul to live on despite the demise of her physical body. One thing led to another, and the yin soul eventually evolved into a Grudge Mother.

As the Grudge Mother had died an undeserved death because of her baby, she deeply resented everyone and everything. She especially hated pregnant women and unborn infants and liked nothing more than to torture the pregnant woman to death, sucking out the soul of the infant, and injecting it into another pregnant woman's belly. Right before the infant was about to be born, she would kill the pregnant woman and repeat the process all over again, eventually creating an army of Grudge Infants for herself.

The Grudge Mother was easily one of the cruelest Strangers in the world. There were few humans in the world—even irredeemable monsters—who could tolerate the existence of a Grudge Mother.

Unfortunately, a Grudge Mother was incredibly powerful. She might just be a Hatred-class Strangers, but she could intimidate even Spirit Purifiers if she had assembled a large enough group of Grudge Infants. That was exactly the problem Ye Qing was facing right now.

Even so, there is no way I would allow a Stranger like you to continue existing in this world!

Ye Qing bent his legs slightly and lowered his spine. Then, he slowly raised his right fist like he was lifting an entire river. When his elbow was on the same height as his shoulder, he abruptly stood up straight—his feet literally sinking into the ground due the sheer amount of force—and he unleashed a mighty punch at the Grudge Mother.

A warrior who learned to fight should have the courage to challenge the heavens, the earth, and humanity. If someone told them to jump, they should ask, “How high?” If someone told them to dig into the earth, they should ask, “How deep?” And if someone asked them if they ever regretted their way of living, they should ask, “What regret?”

Today, Ye Qing discovered something he couldn’t possibly overlook, and he wasn’t entirely sure he could overcome it. How should he respond to this formidable challenge?

Bring. It. On!

His spine straightened like a dragon breaking free from its shackles and soaring into the heavens.

His fist shot up unerringly, never questioning if it could pierce the nine heavens, only when.

Rumble...

Space shuddered, and the image of a massive lake and winding rivers suddenly appeared in the sky. It seemed impossible to endanger them in any way, but the Burning Wind blew, and suddenly, they were no more. It was like the world itself was returning to zero, and all gods and demons bowed before such power.

“Cloud Vaporization Style”

The formless Grudge Infants blocking in front of Ye Qing dissipated into nothing without a sound. The Grudge Mother floating in the sky howled in rage as her stomach split open to unveil a Grudge Infant so black it almost looked tangible. The baby let out a soundless howl after it climbed out of the Grudge Mother’s stomach, and its infinite hatred poured down from the sky like a waterfall at the Yellow Spring.

However, not even the torrent of hatred worthy of the Yellow Spring was strong enough to withstand the Burning Wind’s heat. It all evaporated into clear, soothing air in just a matter of seconds.

Shocked and afraid, the Grudge Mother’s black hair abruptly spread far and wide like a drop of ink on a piece of white paper. The hair was actually created from her resentment. After it wrapped around the Grudge Mother in a protective cocoon, she sped toward the horizon in an attempt to escape.

Unfortunately, it was too late for her. The second she made a move, the wind and the clouds descended from the sky like snow and cleansed all of the ink blank surrounding the Grudge Mother, leaving behind only a patch of pale white. Inside the patch the Grudge Mother screamed in rage and

bounced all over the place in an attempt to break out of her confinement, but her efforts only made her look like a headless fly trapped inside a glass.

Then, invisible fire began sprouting from all over her body. The flames were completely invisible, but they were hot enough to cook the surrounding space until they looked as blurry as a dream. Finally, the wind scattered the ashes until they were all gone.

Burn in hell and never come back.

Ye Qing withdrew his fist and clasped his hands behind his back. The next moment, the Taoist temple—one capable of withstanding fire, rain, wind and thunder despite its fragile material—burst into flames earnestly.

“Heh, what a good fire it is,” Ye Qing commented while smirking like that girl in the Disaster Girl meme. He had wanted to test out his “Cloud Vaporization Style” against this Taoist temple from the moment he set his eyes on it, and he had to admit that the results were pretty great.

“How dare you destroy my temple! I’ll never forgive you, Ye Qing!”

The second the paper temple burst into flames, countless paper dolls abruptly flew out of it and escaped in every direction. Paper Taoist’s voice was coming from them. His voice was laced with anger, frustration, and fear. In fact, his fear was easily the dominant emotion in his voice!

Didn’t they say that Ye Qing is only an early-stage Astral Refiner? If that’s true, then how the hell did he destroy the Grudge Mother in one punch?

This is the Grudge Mother we’re talking about, a powerful Hatred-class Stranger that surpasses even some Soulstealer-class Stranger at her full strength! How could an Astral Refiner possibly destroy her in one strike?

Have I gone crazy, or did the world change before I knew it?

Paper Taoist was pretty proud of his intelligence and even styled himself as the wiseman among his fellow Strangers. The initiative and the geographical conditions were all in his favor, and just in case Ye Qing proved to be more troublesome than expected, he even invited the Grudge Mother to secure the scene.

This particular Grudge Mother was on the same power level as a Soulstealer-class Stranger because she possessed an army of Grudge Infants. It was also why he was sure that everything would go his way. If Ye Qing accepted his terms, then all was well. If not, they could just kill him and take revenge on behalf of Gold Toad. No matter how he looked at it, there was no way this negotiation would end poorly for him.

However, Ye Qing had surprised him by refusing to play his game at all and launching an all-out attack. Not only that, he had annihilated his trump card in one punch! Just how was this possible?

The punch hadn’t just killed the Grudge Mother, it also vanquished Paper Taoist’s confidence and will to fight. So, the Stranger ran.

There was a silver lining though. He was an overly cautious Stranger who always considered the possibility of failure before he pondered on the fruits of success. As a result, he had a treasure trove of escape plans and escape tools in store.

Someone might call him a coward, but you only have one life. It was always better to be safe than sorry, and it was how he managed to survive to this day.

The thought of taking revenge against Ye Qing in the future never crossed his mind because he knew it was impossible. He had never witnessed an Astral Refiner who could annihilate a Hatred-class Stranger—one on par with some Soulstealer-class Strangers—in one punch, and he had no intentions of meeting him ever again.

But of course, he couldn't withdraw without making a quip or two. It wasn't like it would cost him anything, right?

"I will be back!" quipped Paper Taoist.

He didn't know that the seemingly harmless remark would cost him the one thing he didn't want to lose: his life.

.....

Back to Ye Qing, the young man was going to kill Paper Taoist after killing the Grudge Mother—after all, it would be incredibly troublesome if he lived to send word back to Gold Toad—but while the Stranger was severely lacking in offense, his ability to conceal himself and escape were a different story.

From the moment he dealt Paper Taoist a severe blow, he was unable to detect his aura anymore. It was as if the Stranger had suddenly vanished into thin air.

Of course, he knew that Paper Taoist was still inside the temple. He was just concealing his aura somehow. That was why Ye Qing had burned the paper temple right after he annihilated the Grudge Mother in one punch. It was to force Paper Taoist out of his hidey-hole.

His plan succeeded, but Paper Taoist had more tricks up his sleeves. Instead of one Stranger, he found himself staring down an innumerable number of paper dolls, all escaping in every direction at top speed. As if that wasn't bad enough, his senses told him that every paper doll was imbued with Paper Taoist's aura. In other words, he could be any one of them. Not even his spirit was capable of identifying the real thing.

He was just about to take a gamble and chase after a random paper doll when suddenly, Paper Taoist threw him the classic villain quote.

His voice sounded like it was coming from the paper dolls, but his spirit picked up a faint, almost indiscernible fluctuation of energy. When he traced it, he was surprised to find that Paper Taoist's true body wasn't hiding among the scattering paper dolls at all. They were all smokescreens meant to lead him astray. The Stranger... was hiding in the underground!

Paper Taoist riding an oddly-shaped carriage about ten meters under the ground. The vehicle was box-shaped and seemingly made from bamboo. It also had four wooden wheels. What was strange was that the carriage wasn't drawn by an animal. No, it was an ink wash painting of an old man.



Ink-like ripples spread out of the old man and wrapped around the entire carriage. It pushed away the soil and stone and allowed the carriage to cut through the underground like a boat on the sea.

Not only that, the old man was moving around like it was alive. Right now, he was glaring at Paper Taoist and huffing, “I thought you said that everything will be fine, you stinking Taoist? So how did your hideout get boiled into a crisp?”

“Also, what the hell was that while you were escaping earlier? Do you actually want the human to find you?”

“You might be suicidal, but I still have a lot to live for, you unlucky bastard!”

Completely unrelated to the chapter itself, but I just realized Neytirix's Pokemon horror fan arts are a perfect depiction of some of the horrors present in this book. So here you go!

Chapter 208: Jasper Boat

“You don’t understand, Painting. There is no such thing as one hundred percent in this world. If some humans could choke to death while eating, then of course cornering a dangerous beast would have a chance to fail.”

Paper Taoist didn’t get angry despite the ink wash old man’s provocation. He mused, “So long as you’re still alive, then you are a victor. Why else would I invite you over? It’s because I know your speed is unmatched, and that you can even travel underground. There is no one who can outrun you, is there?”

“Hahaha! That’s right. So long as I am your driver, you’ll never have to worry about pursuers!”

The ink wash old man was incredibly pleased to hear Paper Taoist’s praise. The way his beard swayed and spilled ink everywhere was quite comical. “Your smokescreen was pretty good too, paperboy. Who would’ve thought that all those paper dolls were fake? There’s no way that boy would find out the truth!”

“Hahaha... you flatter me, Painting! My smokescreen is nothing compared to your skills!” Paper Taoist replied humbly. Although he found the nickname “paperboy” insulting—he was a bonafide Taoist master, dammit!—there was no harm in indulging an idiot.

Paper Taoist and the ink wash old man were still licking each other’s boots when suddenly, the earth shook unnaturally, and everything started melting like they were ice or snow. The soil, the sand, the rocks; they all melted into molten lava and surrounded the Strangers. Then, an invisible flame yet deadly heat washed over them!

“Argh!”

Paper Taoist and the ink wash old man screamed in pain at the same time. Paper Taoist’s paper body started yellowing and smoking, whereas the ink wash painting and his bamboo carriage straight up burst into invisible flames.

“Seventy Two Arts of the Earthly Fiends—Fire Escape” [1]

Paper Taoist made a hand seal and engulfed himself in flames. He was gone in the blink of an eye.

The ink wash old man screamed and release ink ripples in an attempt to extinguish the invisible flames eating away at his painting, but it was futile. His power vanished as soon as it made contact with them.

“Argh! How can this be? How can this be?”

Shocked, panicking, and unable to think of any other solution, the ink wash old man detached himself completely from his painting and withdraw unto itself. Then, it attempted to escape the fiery hell.

“Heh. They’re all so good at running away. Can they escape though?”

On the surface, Ye Qing smirked evilly as he clasped his hands behind his back and walked after the two Strangers. He looked like he was taking a leisurely stroll in the park, but in reality he was moving at unnatural speeds. In fact, every step he took seemed to resonate with the world itself. It was as if he had tapped into some sort of invisible rhythm.

At first, the earth was only shaking slightly. An inattentive person could easily have missed the tremors. But when Ye Qing came to a stop, the light tremors abruptly joined together to form a thunderous explosion.

Rumble...

The earth within ten meters from Ye Qing abruptly caved into the underground. Directly beneath him, Purple Taoist and the ink wash old man felt like the world had been turned upside down as they struggled to weather the sudden cave-in. Then, a crushing force pressed down from above, and the ink wash old man exploded into smithereens after a pathetic scream. One down, one more to go.

Paper Taoist was stronger than the ink wash old man and so was just barely able to hold back the crushing force with a spell. He screamed, “Y-You can’t kill me, Lord Ye! If Gold Toad doesn’t hear from me tonight, she will kill your two pets for sure! But if you let me live, then I swear I’ll assist you in rescuing your pets! What do you say?”

Unfortunately, he didn’t receive a response despite waiting for a few breaths. More accurately, Ye Qing responded by increasing his force even further.

“No! You can’t kill me, Lord Ye! I can... I can become your slave! I’m a useful Stranger! Surely you have a use for someone like me?”

“No... m-mercy... I don’t want to die, I don’t want to—”

Boom!

That was all Paper Taoist managed to say before he burned into ash.

“Heh... I have no need of your service!” Ye Qing sneered after confirming that Paper Taoist had burned to death. His eyes were brimming with bloodthirst even now.

As he said, he didn’t need Paper Taoist’s service. He didn’t require Paper Taoist to help him save Brother Frog and Wawa, nor did he need another servant. If there was one thing he wanted from the Stranger, it was his death, plain and simple.

He could easily locate his companions with the Annon Sutra and the Incense of Fortune, and saving them would be even easier. Not only that, keeping Paper Taoist alive would give him the opportunity to betray him at an inopportune moment, not to mention that the Stranger had more than proved his cunning during the short time he knew him.

He had to act with the utmost caution since Kung Fu Frog and Wawa's lives were on the line here.

Besides, the city was protected by the Heavens' Eye. Faceless was able to subvert its detection thanks to the Invisible Cicada, but he strongly doubted that Paper Taoist could do the same thing. In fact, it was far more likely that Paper Taoist had no idea where Gold Toad was hiding Kung Fu Frog and Wawa, and he was just lying to save his own ass.

Killing him would be the safest move here. Killing him would also give him a silver dragon-serpent rune, so why not?

Speaking of which, he had used up almost all of his silver runes when he was tempering his astral qi in the Thousand Buddhas Temple. To be specific, he only had three silver runes left. He was just worrying that he wouldn't be able to use the Orbit of Fate with so few runes when Paper Taoist delivered not one, not two, but three silver runes straight to his doorstep. The intel he provided he was still alive was quite useful as well. What a kind Stranger he was!

"No time to waste. I need to ask the Annon Sutra where Brother Frog and Wawa are hidden right away."

Paper Taoist had claimed that Gold Toad would kill Kung Fu Frog and Wawa if she didn't hear anything from him when it was nighttime. That was why he needed to act as soon as possible. Revenge could happen after he rescued his companions.

And so Ye Qing bit his tongue and spat a couple mouthfuls of blood on the Annon Sutra. A short while later, a couple rows of blood red text rose to the surface:

"Ye Qing sallied forth into the Thousand Buddhas Grotto for treasures,

knowing not the dangers that befell his companions.

Brother Frog and Wawa both went missing,

and he was oh so worried and oh so lost.

But good news delivered themselves to his doorstep,

and now it's time for the Annon Sutra to show off its power!

Where are Brother Frog and Wawa hidden, you ask?

Why, Jasper Boat of Luo Shui River is my answer!"

"Changing your style again? It's even a self-flattering doggerel with no real rhyme or reason either. Can you have some shame, brother?" Ye Qing complained as he put away the Annon Sutra.

That said, the Annon Sutra was unusually direct this time. It had told him exactly what he wanted to know. Perhaps even the Strange Artifact wanted to rescue Kung Fu Frog and Wawa as soon as possible.

“Jasper Boat, huh? Wait for me, Brother Frog, Wawa!” Ye Qing’s eyes flickered with murder as he whispered.

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Jasper Boat was one of the eighteen boats of Luo Shui, but unlike Cui Wei Boat, it was a brothel through and through, and quite the famous one too.

Who would’ve thought that Kung Fu Frog and Wawa would be hidden at this place? Gold Toad sure is one smart cookie! Ye Qing sneered internally after slipping into Jasper Boat and observing the crowd.

There were many benefits to hiding Kung Fu Frog and Wawa at a populated place like this. One, there were enough humans in the boat to mask Kung Fu Frog and Wawa’s presence completely all the time.

Two, Jasper Boat was one of the eighteen boats of Luo Shui and extremely famous. Few people would think that Gold Toad would hide her important hostages in such a conspicuous location, which also meant that the Pacification Sentinels would subconsciously relax their guard when they searched this place. It was a blind spot so to speak.

Three, the customers could be used as hostages if the plan failed, and they needed a way out. Even if the Pacification Bureau decided that killing them was worth sacrificing some innocents, they wouldn’t be lonely in the afterlife.

Four, Jasper Boat was a restaurant slash brothel where people from all walks of life frequented. If an incident were to break out, Gold Toad would hear about it immediately and be able to prepare against it.

And five, Gold Toad wasn’t hiding in Jasper Boat. Yes, the Stranger had stowed Kung Fu Frog and Wawa in Jasper Boat, but she herself was hiding elsewhere.

Ye Qing himself thought that Gold Toad was hiding in Jasper Boat until he inquired the Annon Sutra about it.

He had to admit that it was a smart plan. This way, even if he somehow defied the odds and rescued Kung Fu Frog and Wawa, he would not be able to find her and end her once and for all. She would be able to continue plotting against him from the shadows.

It was too bad she didn’t—and couldn’t—account for his cheat, the Annon Sutra.

Since he knew exactly what Gold Toad was planning, of course he wasn’t going to play her game. Instead of barging into Jasper Boat with an army of Pacification Sentinels, he snuck in to rescue Kung Fu Frog and Wawa first. As soon as he succeeded, he was going to rush to Gold Toad’s hideout and end her before she could react.

This time, there wouldn’t be any loose ends.

After sneaking into Jasper Boat, Ye Qing walked to a fairly secluded place and lit the Incense of Fortune. He prayed into the air and requested, “Please help me find Brother Frog and Wawa, Brother Incense!”

He hid the Incense of Fortune inside his sleeve. Then, he started chasing after the blue smoke it emitted.

Since Jasper Boat was jam-packed with people, no one noticed a faint blue smoke sailing harmlessly through the air. Ye Qing soon arrived at the boat's hold where most of their wares were stored.

The hold was normally left unattended, but not this time. As soon as Ye Qing rounded the corner, he saw a pair of tall, muscular men guarding the entrance. The blue smoke slipped through the door gap and disappeared from view.

Ye Qing was certain that Brother Frog and Wawa were held inside the hold. His senses were telling him that the two men were just late-stage Qi Invokers, but he didn't act rashly. Instead, he took a moment to finecomb his surroundings with his spirit. When he was sure that there were no traps or hidden observers in the area, he smiled and produced a yellow talisman between his fingers. It caught on fire after he shook it a little.

As soon as the yellow talisman caught on fire, a strange energy immediately spread across the area. Ye Qing immediately darted toward the entrance, opened the door, and vanished into the hold. Strangely, the two Qi Invokers didn't seem to notice his intrusion. In fact, their eyes looked blurry and unfocused.

The talisman he used just now was a Red-class talisman known as the Dream Talisman. It could be used to lull a person with a weak spirit into a daydream. However, any external stimulus could potentially jolt them awake, so it was generally viewed as a common and lackluster talisman.

That said, the Dream Talisman had one very useful effect. The victims would not remember the fact that they had fallen into a dream. They would only think that they had blanked out for a bit.

Realizing that the Dream Talisman could be extremely useful in certain situations, he had exchanged a stack of them with his contribution points. This situation proved that his preparation was wise.

He could've crushed these two Qi Invokers with a literal finger, but it was extremely likely that it would alert the hidden guard watching over Kung Fu Frog and Wawa.

Besides that, it was obvious that these two people were just lackeys. He simply couldn't believe that Gold Toad would dispatch them to guard Kung Fu Frog and Wawa.

Finally, Jasper Boat wasn't a place one could come and go as they pleased. Since Gold Toad was able to hide Kung Fu Frog and Wawa here, she must have plants throughout Jasper Boat. She must also be a pretty high-ranking member of Jasper Boat herself, if not the puppet master behind it all. Therefore, killing them just wasn't worth the risk.

On a related note, the Dream Talisman wasn't the only item he exchanged from the Pacification Bureau. He had a small hoard of talismans and other items that were useless in most situations, but could be exceptionally useful in the right circumstances.

This world was strange, and there was no harm in being prepared. Better safe than sorry!

Chapter 209: You're A God Among Men, My Lord!

Ye Qing quickly checked the entire hold, but he wasn't able to find anything. Specifically, he only used his spirit to scan the place because he was worried that one of the rooms might be booby-trapped.

“Was I mistaken?”

“No, the Annon Sutra and the Incense of Fortune can’t be wrong. Something must be obscuring my spirit!”

Ye Qing rubbed his nose in thought when he suddenly realized something. “Now that I think about it, the third room is pretty sus.”

Ye Qing walked back to the third room as he recalled what his spirit had sensed—or rather, the lack thereof. The third room was just an empty room with nothing in it whatsoever, but that in itself was very suspicious. The hold was where the Jasper Boat stored the large majority of their goods, and each room were more or less piled with random stuff. However, the third room was completely empty. Logically speaking, there should be no reason why the crew would leave such a valuable space unused.

Ye Qing furrowed his brow and concentrated his spirit onto the third room and third room alone. A rock could block a stream, but not a river. His spirit overwhelmed whatever was keeping him from sensing the room properly, and he finally saw it for what it was.

Kung Fu Frog was sitting at the end of the room. A noose was wrapped around his neck, and his eyes looked unfocused and lost.

Lying next to Kung Fu Frog was a book, and a bronze paperweight was sitting on top of it. It was none other than Wawa’s true body.

“Two Malice-class Strangers?! How cautious of you, Gold Toad!” Ye Qing let out a cold chuckle. The room had been camouflaged with an illusory array, and it was potent enough to fool even his spirit at the beginning. He would’ve missed Kung Fu Frog and Wawa if he hadn’t discovered the oddities of the room earlier.

Most schemers would be satisfied with just the illusory-type array, but Gold Toad had arranged not one, but two Malice-class Strangers to watch over her hostages as well.

The first Stranger was the noose wrapped around Kung Fu Frog’s neck. It looked like an ordinary rope at first glance, but Ye Qing could sense a gloomy, deathly aura rising from its body. It felt like countless Vengeful Souls were hiding inside the noose.

The second Stranger was the bronze paperweight sitting atop Wawa’s true body. Normally, a paperweight was long-shaped and inscribed with poems, epigrams, or tasteful images. However, this one only had six words on its surface, and it stated: “Kill Until You Become A Demon”. The words looked plenty evil, but black, filthy energies were leaking out of them and enveloping Wawa’s true body as well.

Clearly, the bronze paperweight was sealing Wawa and preventing her from manifesting her sprite form.

These preparations showed just how careful Gold Toad was. In fact, he would say she was a little too careful.

From what he remembered, Bronze Toad was simple, and Silver Toad was dumb. They might be intelligent Strangers, but it would be a stretch to call them intelligent. Gold Toad was the complete

opposite, however. She had proven to be incredibly smart and careful. How was she so different from her siblings when they were all born from the same toad?

“Two Malice-class Strangers, huh?” Ye Qing smirked. “This would’ve been a problem, but the heavens are on my side today.”

He could annihilate these two Malice-class Strangers with one hand, but he was worried that the commotion would jolt the two men guarding outside the hold awake. It would be very troublesome if that happened.

Thankfully, the illusory array didn’t just mask light and aura, but also sound to a certain extent. It was probably a precautionary measure just in case Kung Fu Frog somehow woke up and caused a loud commotion. In this case, it worked to his advantage.

Ye Qing sucked in a short breath. Then, he opened the door, dashed in, and closed the door in one smooth and lightning fast motion.

The two Strangers in the room responded quickly. The second Ye Qing entered the room, bloodthirst and ripples of black energy immediately burst out from the ominous words on the paperweight Stranger’s body. It flew toward Ye Qing in an arc and attempted to bash his head in.

Instead of defending himself, Ye Qing charged toward the paperweight Stranger and caught it right before it would hit his head. Then, he crushed it into smithereens with his bare hand. Before the bronze fragments even hit the floor, he burned it all with the Blue Demon Hand’s Netherflame.

Ye Qing had just taken out the paperweight Stranger when suddenly, he felt an unnatural chill around his neck. Somehow, the noose Stranger had wrapped itself around his neck before he knew it. It released a tremendous amount of deathly energy and filled his head with macabre images of death and decay. He could hear countless Vengeful Souls screaming into his ears as well. At the same time, the noose Stranger rapidly tightened around his neck and attempted to squeeze his head right off his shoulders.

Ye Qing’s neck was perfectly fine, however. In fact, the neck Stranger was the one who used too much force and snapped itself into several pieces. It dissolved into yin qi and disappeared after that.

“Vengeful Souls. Interesting.”

Ye Qing looked up. The ceiling was empty before, but now it was hanging with countless nooses and corpses. The swaying bodies were all staring at him with their empty, soulless eyes.

His senses told him that the corpses were just Vengeful Souls, or more accurately, the Vengeful Souls that the noose had killed. If he made contact with them, the nooses would automatically appear around his neck and attempt to strangle him to death.

“So flashy, but where’s the substance?” Ye Qing sneered as the Burning Wind blew out of his body. The room immediately turned unbearably hot, and the invisible flames burned it all into nothingness.

While the Vengeful Souls were disappearing, Ye Qing reached out and caught the noose’s true body. It had been half a second away from escaping the room, but unfortunately for it, it just wasn’t fast enough. It burned down into ash between Ye Qing’s fingers.

The noose Stranger's ability was actually quite unpredictable and strong. It was definitely one of the stronger Malice-class Strangers out there. It was just unfortunate that its opponent was him. The gap between their power was just too huge.

Ye Qing's battle with the two Strangers sounded complicated, but in reality only a few breaths had passed. Thanks to the illusory array, the two men guarding outside the exit were still completely oblivious to what was happening inside.

"You finally came, friend! Uwaaaaah! Wawa was so scared, so scared."

As soon as the paperweight Stranger and noose Stranger were killed, Wawa and Kung Fu Frog woke up from their enforced coma. When Wawa saw Ye Qing, she immediately flew over to his shoulder, grabbed his hair, and bawled like a baby. Her face was covered in streaks of tears.

"Don't cry, Wawa. I'm here now," Ye Qing consoled her while checking his companions' bodies for injuries. He let out a sigh of relief when he noticed that there were none.

Ye Qing gave Wawa a few more seconds to collect her feelings before asking gently, "I'm sorry, Wawa, but I need you to stop crying now. There are still bad people outside. It would be bad if they heard your cries."

Wawa immediately ceased her sobbing and covered her mouth with both hands. She looked paralyzed with fear and panic.

Ye Qing shook his head in amusement as he put Wawa's true body back into his Nature's Shell. Then, he looked at Kung Fu Frog and asked, "Are you alright, Brother Frog?"

Kung Fu Frog croaked twice and shook his head to indicate that he was alright, but his beady eyes were overflowing with anger and bloodthirst.

Ye Qing gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder and said, "Don't worry. I swear I'll take revenge for you both."

A pair of paper dolls appeared in his hands. When Ye Qing blew at them gently, they landed on the form and transformed into a bound Kung Fu Frog and Wawa.

The Shapeshifting Paper Doll was one of the situational tools he had exchanged from the Tower of Secrets. The paper doll possessed one and only one ability, and that was to create an illusion based on one's memories. Visually, it was indistinguishable from the real thing. However, if someone were to try and touch the illusion, then they would discover that it was fake. Not only that, the illusion would only last for an incense stick.

"Let's go. Stay close, and don't get caught!"

The trio escaped through the windows after finishing his preparations. It was to minimize the chances of them being spotted or caught. Before Ye Qing left, he purposely created some noise and jolted the two guards awake. It would be suspicious if someone happened to pass by the area and discover that both guards were dreaming after all.



Ye Qing didn't know that a beautiful woman residing in the top floor of Jasper Boat suddenly had a bad feeling practically the minute after he escaped with Kung Fu Frog and Wawa. She took out a stone mirror, made a hand gesture, and slapped her hand on its surface.

The stone mirror flashed once before displaying the boat's hold. First, the woman checked out her guards. Her eyebrows relaxed a little when she saw that both men were fine.

Then, the image shifted to the third room in the hold. In the mirror, Kung Fu Frog was still being tied by the noose Stranger, and Wawa was still being suppressed by the paperweight Stranger. Everything looked exactly as it should be.

"Everything's fine. I'm just paranoid," the woman shook her head and chuckled derisively at herself before putting away the stone mirror. The room returned to silence once more.

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"Young master—Brother Frog! Wawa!"

A short distance away from White Horse Alley, Faceless was greeting Ye Qing and walking up to him when he saw Kung Fu Frog and Wawa behind him. The Stranger immediately exclaimed in delight, "You found them, young master! It's wonderful!"

"You truly are a god among men, young master! This old slave wasn't able to find even a trace of them despite all that time and effort, and yet you managed to find and rescue them the moment you came back!"

"The bootlicking can wait until later. Have you brought the men?" Ye Qing cut off Faceless before he could continue.

"I have. They're just waiting at the entrance!" Faceless immediately dropped his obsequious smile as per Ye Qing's command and asked, "By the way, what are we doing here?"

"To draw some blood, of course!" Ye Qing's eyes flickered with killing intent as he ordered, "You can give me back my face now!"

Before he infiltrated Jasper Boat, he already messaged Faceless to bring everyone in the Inspection Department to White Horse Alley and stand by for orders. It was to take revenge against Gold Toad, of course. The Annon Sutra had stated that Gold Toad was hiding at White Horse Alley.

He alone was enough to deal with Gold Toad, but White Horse Alley was famous for being a wealthy people's location. Not only did it enjoy a good amount of traffic, there were a lot of politicians, businessmen, and generally powerful people who lived in this place. That was why it was necessary to bring the men not just to keep the order, but also to prevent innocents from being harmed.

It was also to minimize the chances of some Strangers from being able to slip through his grasp. He was powerful, but he was still just one man. Of course he should do his best to ensure that there wouldn't be any loose ends.

“My lord!”

“My lord.”

“My lord...”

Faceless followed Ye Qing to the entrance after he transformed back into himself. Xu Banren, Zhou Xi, Tang Yi and more saluted Ye Qing as soon as they saw him.

“Good evening, everyone!” Ye Qing greeted them before looking at Xu Banren, “Have you brought everyone, Lieutenant Xu?”

Xu Banren answered, “I have, but what is it we’re doing here tonight?”

Before Ye Qing could answer, a man muttered in a sarcastic tone, “What else could it be? A show, of course!”

The man had a muscular body but an ugly face. He looked like a monk with his monk’s robe and monastic scars on his head. The exposed half of his torso was tattooed with the image of a bull.

The bull had a pair of curved horns that made it looked like it was carrying a full moon. It was also surrounded by lightning.

Chapter 210: The Ugly Monk and the Amorous Nun

“You should tread carefully around Lord Ye, Ugly Monk. If he gets angry, he might make a complaint to Chief Gu!”

A seductive, feminine voice spoke up next. The woman was over thirty years old and quite beautiful. She wore a nun’s robe and a hat and wielded a horsetail whisk.

Her voluptuous curves were peeking through her robe even though it was quite big and loose. In fact, she was obviously behaving in an erotic and seductive manner.

She wasn’t defending Ye Qing either. It sounded like she was trying to placate the monk, but in reality she was implying that Ye Qing was the boss’ pet; someone who could only cry to Gu Suitang whenever he encountered a problem.

Xu Banren immediately glared at the duo. “You dare disrespect Lord Ye, Ugly Monk, Amorous Nun?”

Ugly Monk? Amorous Nun? Ye Qing thought to himself. He had noticed the duo since the beginning, but he didn’t recognize them. It wasn’t until Xu Banren addressed them by their monikers that a memory came to mind.

Ugly Monk and Amorous Nun were two of the six Lieutenants serving under the Inspection Department. They were both middle-stage Astral Refiners, and the strongest warriors in the department.

According to the records, Ugly Monk was originally a disciple of a major sect in Northern Xinjiang, the Yamāntaka Temple. However, due to his hot-tempered nature and violent nature, he broke a commandment and was exiled from the temple. He eventually joined the Pacification Bureau of Luo Shui.

Amorous Monk was rumored to be a disciple of one of the thirty six unorthodox sects, the Temptation Nunnery. The Temptation Nunnery was an infamous sect well known for their art of harvesting cultivation through sex until one day, one of their elders made the mistake of harvesting a disciple of “Sword From The West” Song Xilai to the point where their cultivation and internal energies was utterly ruined.

Song Xilai hailed from a sect called the “Purity Sword”, one of the Five Profound Sects. Naturally, he was beyond furious when he learned of this tragedy. On the same day, he marched up to the nunnery and annihilated them all singlehandedly. Amorous Nun was the only one who managed to slip through his grasp thanks to a combination of luck and weakness [1]. Later, she joined the Pacification Bureau to hide herself from Purity Sword.

Obviously, the Pacification Bureau didn’t just accept anyone into their midst. Although Ugly Monk was a sinner to his sect, and Amorous Nun hailed from an immoral place, they were neither rotten to the core nor committed a sin that was utterly unforgivable from their Pacification Bureau’s point of view. That was why it had accepted them into its fold.

The reason the duo were insulting Ye Qing openly and subtly was probably because he was made the Patrolman of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau. Both Ugly Monk and Amorous Nun were powerful, experienced warriors who had served the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau faithfully for a long time.

When Xiao Yang was the Patrolman, they couldn’t really complain because he was stronger than them, and he was backed by Sunset Hill and Wang Luori. After he was dead, they thought that one of them would be promoted to the position. Then, out of nowhere, Ye Qing popped up and claimed the position with no experience, no background, and more importantly, no strength[2]. So of course they had a problem with him.

“Hahaha! I don’t think we’ve been away for that long. When did the famous Halfman Xu become someone else’s dog?” Amorous Nun giggled.

Xu Banren’s pupils turned pale white in an instant. “Is that a death wish, Amorous Nun?” He asked before unleashing his Heavenly Yin Corpse Qi and throwing a punch straight at the woman. However, Ugly Monk huffed and got in his way first. He took one step forward and threw his arm like he was swinging an axe or a hammer.

On one side, Xu Banren’s punch looked like it could crush a mountain. On the other, Ugly Monk’s arm throw looked like it could cut a mountain in half. Their limbs hadn’t even met yet, and already their force was pushing everyone away from them.

Well, almost everyone. Ye Qing abruptly appeared between the two men, and he trapped Xu Banren’s fist with his sleeve, and blocked Ugly Monk’s arm with his own.

The clash of forces should have resulted in a loud bang, but strangely, it was like they were fighting inside a vacuum. Both Xu Banren and Ugly Monk froze in place and bugged out at the Patrolman.

Xu Banren felt like his fist force had sunk into a black hole of sorts. Not only was it completely gone, the sleeve had somehow stopped his energies dead in their tracks, preventing him from moving even a muscle.

Xu Banren was surprised by the display of power, but he had borne witness to Ye Qing's strength time and again. It was nothing compared to Ugly Monk's shock.

Ugly Monk felt like he was an ordinary human smashing his arm against a stick bar of steel. Not only did his bones hurt, his force was completely pushed back into his body. As a result, his energies were bouncing all over the place, and he was feeling very uncomfortable right now.

He was a monk in the Yamāntaka Temple, and the Yamāntaka Temple was famous for their Yamāntaka dharmakāya [3] and body-tempering arts. Although he was exiled before he was able to cultivate their strongest martial arts, he had still trained his physique since a young age. He possessed literally the second strongest physique in the Pacification Bureau besides Gu Suitang, and not even Gu Suitang's disciple, Wei Yueshan was a match for him.

But now, not only was he pushed back, Ye Qing looked like he wasn't fazed in the slightest. How could he not be shocked by this?

Ugly Monk immediately tried to pull back, but Ye Qing grabbed his wrist and pulled him forward before he could react. When he finally mustered his strength to resist, Ye Qing slapped him on the shoulder so hard that his knees buckled a little, his bones cracked audibly, and the force he was gathering abruptly dissipated into nothing. His muscles felt sore, and he was unable to muster his strength at all.

Ye Qing slapped Ugly Monk's shoulder slowly as he said in an icy voice, "We're all brothers here. It's perfectly fine to bicker and even beat each other up when we're behind closed doors, but I have official business to carry out today, and I'm not in a good mood. You guys best obey me like good little subordinates, understand?"

"Seriously, I don't care how frustrated or angry you're feeling, you best hold it all inside until this is all over. Don't you dare ruin my business and test my patience, understand?"

"As you command, Lord Ye!" Xu Banren saluted Ye Qing as soon as he let go. Ugly Monk grunted, but it was clear that he had gotten the message.

"Good. Now wait for my signal!" Ye Qing turned around and left after that.

Amorous Nun teased Ugly Monk after Ye Qing was gone, "I wasn't expecting you to be so meek, Ugly Monk. I thought you were a baby for a second there!"

"Hmph! Look at my feet, fool!" Ugly Monk motioned at his legs. When Amorous Nun and the others looked down, they were shocked to find that his feet had completely sunk into the ground. Not only that, the patch of ground ten meters from him had sunk at least a full meter into the earth!

"What the..." Amorous Nun was both stunned and in disbelief. How did she not notice that the ground had turned like this until now?

When Amorous Nun's eyes met with Ugly Monk's, the same thought crossed both their minds: It looks like our newly appointed Patrolman is scarier than we thought!

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“Gold Toad sure knows how to choose a hideout!” Ye Qing let out a soft chuckle as he followed the blue smoke created by the Incense of Fortune into a residence.

“To think she would hide herself in the residence of a bookkeeper of Luo Shui... Cautious she may be, she is anything but cowardly!”

Bookkeeping was anything but glamorous, but it was still an official post, meaning that the bookkeeper was protected by the Will of the Dragon. Most Strangers and evils would naturally avoid it like the plague. Instead, Gold Toad had done the opposite and turned the guy’s place into her hideout. She was both bold and intelligent.

“Now that I think about it, I offended a bookkeeper during the zombie outbreak incident... this can’t possibly be his residence, right?” Ye Qing mused to himself while sneaking into the residence. He followed the Incense of Fortune to a tower-like structure.

“The inner chambers? What’s this, a harem raid?” Ye Qing chuckled at his own silly joke. It made sense though. According to Paper Taoist, Gold Toad was a female Stranger. It made perfect sense that she would hide herself in the inner chambers where the women rarely left the place.

Ye Qing pulsed his spirit and examined the interior of the building closely.

“One, two, three... there are five people inside the building; three humans and two Strangers to be exact.”

There was one mistress and four servants in the room, and they were all women. Judging from their conversation, the mistress—or more accurately, the concubine—was in charge of this building, and her name was Lady Zuo. Lady Zuo herself and the old woman feeding her dinner now were Strangers, while the rest of the servants were humans.

Ye Qing was looking for an opportunity to ambush the two Strangers when suddenly, the old woman suddenly raised her head and looked at the entrance.

“Huh? Her senses are pretty sharp,” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise before he realized something. His lips curled into a diabolical smirk. “So you’re the real one. You almost fooled me.”

Both Strangers were hatred-class Strangers, and at first he thought that Lady Zuo was Gold Toad. However, the old woman was the one who sensed his spiritual gaze, not Lady Zuo. This meant that the old woman was the stronger between the two.

Strangers usually worshiped the law of the jungle. Under most circumstances, they would never obey someone who was weaker than them. Sure, there were always exceptions, but it was far more likely that Lady Zuo was just a puppet and a smokescreen, and the old woman was the real Gold Toad.

Ye Qing slammed his elbow into the wooden door. Since Gold Toad had already noticed him, there was no need to conceal himself any longer. He preferred getting his revenge the straightforward way anyway.

Boom!

The entire tower shook as the wooden door shattered into bits. The wooden fragments shot toward Lady Zuo and the old woman at incredible speed, but missed the three female attendants completely.

Ye Qing had given neither Stranger any time to react, so they had no choice but to reveal themselves. Lady Zuo abruptly turned into liquid and took no damage from the wooden fragments even though they were powerful enough to pierce through her body and smash the screens behind her.

The old woman simply opened her mouth and sucked all the wooden fragments flying toward her into her stomach.

While the two Strangers were busy defending themselves, Ye Qing had already rushed into the building and swept the three human attendants into his sleeves. Then, he sent them away firmly but harmlessly.

After the three human attendants were gone, Ye Qing walked like a river and reached his peak form in just a few steps. Moving faster than he appeared to be, he slammed into Lady Zuo before she could react and scattered her into a million water droplets. Then, he closed the distance between himself and the old woman and unleashed a devastating punch.

The old woman was caught completely off guard, and Ye Qing's attack was even swifter and more thunderous than expected. Unable to dodge out of the way in time, she had no choice but to cross her arms in front of her.

Thunk!

Fist met arm, but the noise it generated was that of metal. It was because a sheen of golden light was covering her arms and turning them as hard as metal.