

## Stranger 211

### Chapter 211: Woman of Taint

Boom...

The clash was so explosive that the tower—having endured a not insignificant hit when Ye Qing had barged in the first time—finally collapsed in earnest. Most of the debris was blown away and annihilated by the shockwave before they could even hit the ground.

Amidst the rubble, the old woman blanched as her arms exploded, and her chest caved inward. Ye Qing's fist force proved to be even greater than she expected. She tried to create some distance as she stumbled backward, but Ye Qing gave her no quarter and swung his arm like a hammer. It smashed into the old woman's left chest and exploded half of her body just like that. She was flung across the residence like a rag doll before she hit the ground and dug a long trench.

Ye Qing was going to dash forward and end her there and then, but a sobbing sound suddenly interrupted him. It sounded so sorrowful that he felt the urge to cry even though it didn't make any sense.

A drizzle suddenly poured down from the sky. Normally, a rain like this should be calming, soothing and rejuvenating, but instead it dyed the emerald green plants in the residence pitch black. Not only that, the grass started growing jagged teeth, the tree branches transformed into venomous snakes, and the flower turned into giant maws filled with rows and rows of sharp teeth.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the servants, attendants and everyone else who was still in the residence and weren't under a roof started suffering all kinds of maledictions. Some people's flesh started festering everywhere, some people started aging rapidly, some people were coughing blood uncontrollably, and some people's bodies were even splitting open and growing limbs, eyeballs and whatnot. It was bizarre and evil to the extreme.

"She's..."

Ye Qing's spirit was telling him that the rainwater contained all kinds of taint such as illness, decay, aging, pain and so on. It was the reason behind the unfortunate humans' transformation.

"The Woman of Taint..."

Ye Qing muttered under his breath as he stared at Lady Zuo's direction, frowning. The woman had regained her form before he knew it, and she was currently carrying a red umbrella and sobbing non-stop.

The Woman of Taint was a Stranger who possessed all sorts of dark, filthy, and evil powers. Despite possessing the desirable exterior of a graceful, gentle, and loveable woman, she was overflowing with taint such as illness, poverty, decay, sorrow, pain and more on the inside. When she cried, a tainted rain that devastated all living things would fall from the sky.

In and of itself, the Woman of Taint was pretty weak. She was impervious to most weapons because she could transform into rain, but that was it. However, the damage she could cause with her rain could only be described as devastating. Not only could it cover a wide range, the taint itself could spread like a disease. If she wasn't suppressed as soon as possible, she could singlehandedly wreck an entire portion of the commandery.

If she was any other Stranger, Ye Qing would've left her to kill Gold Toad first. Both Strangers were going to die one way or another, and it didn't matter who went to the afterlife first. But in this case, he had to deal with the Woman of Taint before she could cause any more damage than she already had.

Ye Qing turned around and faced the Woman of Taint. His spine and body straightened in an instant as he threw a punch.

As his will climbed to incredible heights, the world abruptly warped like a mirage. The picture of an invisible wind boiling rivers and lakes and threatening even gods and demons slowly unfolded in the sky. It looked both awe-inspiring and seemingly omnipotent.

Space itself turned into a furnace as the surrounding air heated up rapidly. Then, the invisible flames spread out and boiled the tainted rain into nothing.

The Woman of Taint melted into water once more as her cries grew increasingly sorrowful and aggrieved. What was a drizzle instantly turned into a downpour, and since the rainwater was black in color, it looked like the sky itself had turned as black as tar.

A crazy amount of black clouds gathered around the area, and the rain poured like it would never end. But no matter how hard it fell, it just couldn't eliminate the picture in the sky. The lakes and rivers continued to boil, and cloudy vapors continued to rise into the sky. The lakes, rivers and clouds were a representation of the will of his fist. In fact, the will of his fist was everywhere.

The downpour evaporated into nothing in an instant, and the pitch black sky collapsed just like that.

When light returned to the world once more, it was revealed that invisible flames were burning everywhere including the Woman of Taint herself. Like boiled water, she kept evaporating until she was no more.

Bang!

The second he killed the Woman of Taint, the old woman he had smashed away a while ago abruptly appeared behind Ye Qing. Her shoulder, arms, and torso had all returned to normal, and she was covered from head to toe in golden scales. She landed a solid punch against his back.

There was a loud boom, but Ye Qing didn't move an inch from his place. It was the old woman who was pushed back and felt like her bones could crumble into pieces at any moment.

"How did you find out that I am here, Ye Qing?" The old woman screamed on top of her lungs while withdrawing, "Your pets are in my hands right now, so you best restrain yourself! One signal is all I need to order my men to kill them!"

"Hehehe... why don't you try it then?" Ye Qing patted away the dust on his shirt and shot her a lazy smile. "If I could find you, what makes you think I couldn't find them? Seriously, I dare you to send the signal. Let's see if things will turn out the way you hope it will."

The old woman—or rather, Gold Toad visibly deflated at his reply. She had been wondering if Ye Qing had rescued his companions already, and judging from his reaction, the answer could only be yes.

Worse still, Ye Qing wasn't the early-stage Astral Refiner she thought he was at all. He was now a bonafide late-stage Astral Refiner.

She had thought that her plan was perfect. She had taken his companions as hostages, and she was a powerful Stranger and the knife in the dark. If Ye Qing rejected their request and flipped the table, she was certain that she could make him regret his decision. Even if the Patrolman somehow defied all odds and rescued his companions, she was sure he wouldn't be able to find her.

However, the Patrolman had proven to be far, far more capable than her predictions. She was certain he wouldn't be able to locate Kung Fu Frog and Wawa and rescue them, but he did. She was certain he wouldn't be able to find her, but he did. And she was certain that he was an early-stage Astral Refiner when he last fought Silver Toad, and yet somehow, he had become a late-stage Astral Refiner.

She felt like her plots and schemes were jokes before the young man, and she felt like a jester trying to make fun of a king. It wasn't until the last moment that she realized that she was courting death!

It was no wonder Gold Toad was panicking even with her wits and strength.

"How the hell did you find me, Ye Qing? Was it Paper Taoist? Grudge Mother? Or Jasper Boat? No, no, it can't be them, none of them knew where I was hiding. Just how the hell did you find me!? This is impossible, impossible!"

"You want to know the truth?" Ye Qing smiled evilly. "Not telling!"

He abruptly closed the distance between them and lashed out with his sleeves. Gold Toad hurriedly tried to leap backward, but as soon as she moved a muscle, she suddenly felt like the space tens of meters around her had frozen solid. Before she could do anything else, Ye Qing's sleeve struck her right across the torso, and she collapsed into the ground with a bloodcurdling scream. The ground itself sank deeper into the earth.

"Mercy! Mercy! Let me leave, and I'll tell you the secret of the silver page!" Gold Toad begged as she looked up at Ye Qing. She was missing half of her golden scales, and golden blood was all over the place. She looked like an absolute mess right now.

"So sorry, but Paper Taoist has already told me about its secrets." Ye Qing chuckled, but his smile didn't reach the eye. "All I want is for you to die!"

As he said this, he slowly started walking down the pit where Gold Toad was lying. Pressing both hands against the ground, Gold Toad grew more scales from under her skin until her whole body was covered in it. A terrific amount of power gushed out of her body as she slowly, very slowly tried to push herself up into a standing position. It was like she was being sat on by a mountain, and she was attempting to shove it away.

But the closer Ye Qing got, the dimmer her light became. More scales and blood were spilled, and her body slowly but surely sank back down to the earth once more.

It was as if every step Ye Qing took was the mountain crushing down on her.

Nine steps later, Ye Qing was standing right in front of Gold Toad. The Stranger was buried so deep that she couldn't even raise her head.

“Who dares invade my residence and commit murder!?”

Ye Qing was just about to kill Gold Toad when suddenly, a righteous cry cut through the air. The next thing he knew, people were shooting arrows at him. Astral Breaking Arrows to be exact.

Ye Qing could tell what kind of projectile was being fired at him based on the sound alone. If the Pacification Sentinels were equipped with Starbreaker Crossbows and Starbreaker Arrows, then the bailiffs of the Imperial Clan Court and the Three Companies and Six Offices were equipped with Astral Breaking Crossbows and Astral Breaking Arrows.

The two names sounded similar, but their ability was very different from one another. The Starbreaker Crossbows packed a massive punch, and the Starbreaker Arrows possessed Stranger piercing and sealing properties because their enemies were mostly Strangers. On the other hand, the bailiffs of the Imperial Clan Court and the Three Companies and Six Offices mainly faced jianghu warriors, and so were equipped with weapons that could pierce astral qi, break bones, and sever veins.

The Astral Breaking Arrows were very effective against ordinary warriors, but Ye Qing was anything but ordinary. A casual wave was all he needed to send the arrows scattering as if they had slammed into an invisible barrier.

“We meet again, Bookkeeper Li! How have you been?” Ye Qing greeted after batting away the arrows. The leader of the group who shot at him was none other than Li Yuechun, the idiotic official who had tried to abuse his authority and escape from Fish Dragon Market some days ago.

When Ye Qing learned that this place belonged to a bookkeeper, he had wondered if it was the one he had batted away like a fly. He didn’t think that it would actually be the case.

It was looking like the poor man was going to endure another bout of face-slapping, and to that, Ye Qing could only say: Fate is quite the curious thing, ain’t it?

“It’s you!”

Li Yuechun recognized the man who had publicly humiliated him at Fish Dragon Market, of course. At the time, there was nothing he could do because the Pacification Bureau’s authority exceeded all. But now that Ye Qing was literally wrecking his own home, he finally couldn’t suppress his anger any longer and yelled, “According to the law of Chu, invading an imperial official’s residence is a serious crime! You are an official yourself, and yet you not only invaded my home, but also massacred my people as you pleased! Do you know your sin, Lord Ye!?”

Li Yuechun’s reaction didn’t surprise Ye Qing whatsoever. He chuckled, “I should be asking you that question, Lord Li. According to the law of Chu, anyone who harbors Strangers should be executed to the three generations.”

“You dare! I am an imperial official! I would never do such a thing!” Li Yuechun retorted, “Anyone with eyes can see that you’re trying to shift the blame on me despite openly invading my home and murdering my men! I am definitely going to report this to the senior commandery official and get you dismissed for this!”

“Men! Capture him!”

“Oh my, I’m so scared!”

Ye Qing sneered and stomped the ground once. The earth immediately undulated outward like a tidal wave and threw the dozen guards and servants off their feet. Their faces were unnaturally red, and their energies were disrupted.

“I can see you’re the type of guy who refuses to be convinced until you’re faced with grim reality. So be it.”

Ye Qing swung his sleeves and tossed Gold Toad out of the pit. After the Stranger landed in front of Li Yuechun, she slowly lost her human shell and revealed her true self: a golden, millstone-sized toad.

Chapter 212: Divine Rope

“This... This can’t be. Why is there a Stranger in my residence?”

“This can’t be... it just can’t...”

All the color and arrogance drained away from Li Yuechun’s face when he saw Gold Toad’s true form. He collapsed on the ground and couldn’t say anything for a long time.

He honestly didn’t know that a Stranger was hiding in his residence; didn’t think that a Stranger would even dare to do such a thing.

Naturally, he had no idea how Ye Qing had traced this Stranger to his residence.

One thing for certain, it was over for him.

At the lightest, the crime of harboring a Stranger would see him dismissed and imprisoned. At worst, it was execution to the three generations as Ye Qing said.

The court wouldn’t sentence him to death since he hadn’t harbored the Stranger on purpose, but he would definitely be charged for dereliction of duty for failing to notice the enemy hiding in his own backyard. Even if the court ultimately gave him a verdict of not guilty, he would still lose his post, and his reputation would be tarnished forever.

A scholar without reputation was like a jianghu warrior without martial arts. It was basically the end of the road for them.

All light vanished from Li Yuechun’s pupils when he realized this.

“Do you have anything else to say, Lord Li?” Ye Qing asked while shaking his head. It was clear that Li Yuechun wasn’t faking his reaction. The bookkeeper was just too unlucky.

Ye Qing’s voice jolted Li Yuechun back to reality and injected a sliver of hope back into his body. He asked in a hurry, “Lord Ye, I have no knowledge of this whatsoever! I don’t even know how they made it inside my residence! Please understand that I’m just a victim in this matter!”

“Perhaps,” Ye Qing replied indifferently, “but you should save your protests for the Inquisition Department. There is nothing I can do to help you.”

Li Yuechun had done a one-eighty the second he learned that there was, in fact, a Stranger hiding in his residence. At least he was smart enough not to protest his innocence or worse, attack him in an attempt to silence him. Otherwise, Ye Qing possessed the right to end him on the spot.

The Pacification Bureau had always abided by the presumption of guilt when it came to Strangers.

Suddenly, the dying Gold Toad looked up at a certain person and cried, "Save me, Steward Zhou! I know who you really are! Save me, and I will tell you a great secret; one that is connected to the Demon Lord himself! Refuse, and I will bring you down with me!"

Ye Qing followed her gaze and saw a middle-aged man in his forties. He had an ordinary appearance and was slightly overweight. He was also wearing a smile that looked like it would never fade.

The man was the steward of the residence, and he had an ordinary name that befit his ordinary appearance, Zhou San.

Ye Qing and Zhou San stared at each other for a few seconds. Then, the steward's smile suddenly grew just a tad sinister.

Sensing that something was amiss, Ye Qing immediately launched a palm strike at Gold Toad. However, a dark cloud suddenly floated over and dropped a rope on top of the Stranger. The rope wrapped around her neck and pulled her into the sky. She was gone in the blink of an eye.

After Gold Toad was pulled into the cloud, it slowly faded away and revealed a clear sky. Strangely, neither the rope nor Gold Toad was anywhere to be found. It was like they had disappeared into thin air.

Boom!

It was only now Ye Qing's palm force finally hit the spot where Gold Toad was. It blew up a deep pit in the ground like a bomb.

"The Divine Rope?" Ye Qing raised an eyebrow at Zhou San.

The steward smiled back and replied, "You are quite the knowledgeable man, Lord Ye! That's right. It is none other than the Divine Rope."

The so-called Divine Rope was really a popular circus trick performers often used to entertain their audience. There were many versions of it, but generally speaking it involved a cloud dropping a rope down to the performer, and the performer climbing up into the cloud and seemingly vanishing into thin air.

"Who are you?" Ye Qing asked curiously.

Zhou San saluted him and answered, "I am Zhou San. It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Ye."

"Zhou San?" Ye Qing skimmed through his memories but couldn't recall anyone with such a name. "I don't know who you are or what you're plotting, but you are aware that obstructing the Pacification Bureau from carrying out their duties and colluding with Strangers are both crimes that are punishable by death, right?"

Zhou San didn't seem to hear Ye Qing's threat. He continued to smile as if nothing was going on and replied, "I don't understand, my lord? The Stranger disappeared on her own. What does it have anything to do with me?"

"Heh..." Ye Qing let out a cold chuckle. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Ye Qing charged toward Zhou San as soon as he said this. He was about halfway there when suddenly, he changed directions and threw a punch at what looked like an empty patch of space. His action looked completely random, but then the space rippled and collapsed all of a sudden, revealing Gold Toad.

It looked like his fist force would kill Gold Toad, but Zhou San abruptly appeared in front of her with his palms pointed at each other and circling in opposite directions. A pair of flood dragons—one made of fire, and another made of water—manifested into existence, and they formed a tai chi circle of fire and water, hard and soft, yin and yang.

When Ye Qing's punch struck the fire-and-water tai chi circle, he immediately felt like he was punching rubber. At first, his fist force sank into the tai chi circle and vanished into nothing. The next moment, it rebounded with even greater strength than before.

Caught off guard, Ye Qing took a solid hit to his torso and let out a pained grunt. As he was pushed back, he left behind footprints that were at least several inches deep. When he finally neutralized the offending force, Ye Qing watched the man intently and asked, "A Half-Step Spirit Purifier who knows the Fire Water Flood Dragon Palm? Are you a member of the Bai Clan?"

The Fire Water Flood Dragon Palm was the signature martial art of the Bai Clan, a major clan in Luo Shui. Inspired by the complementary attributes of yin and yang, it was a palm art that used fire and water astral qi to embody the qualities of yin and yang; soft and hard. At the adept level, one could not only neutralize the force of a thousand mountains, but also redirect it back against one's opponent. It was a potent palm art that was equally good in both offense and defense.

It was said that the patriarch of the Bai Clan had earned its current status, wealth and influence thanks to the Fire Water Flood Dragon Palm. Although the Bai Clan had recently diverted their focus from martial art to business, the Fire Water Flood Dragon Palm had remained a family secret to this day. Only a direct descendant of the family was allowed to learn it, which was why Ye Qing was certain that Zhou San was a member of the Bai Clan.

"Haha, the Bai Clan is a lofty and prestigious family. How could humble old me have anything to do with them?" Zhou San denied the accusation before changing the topic, "How did you know Gold Toad is here, my lord?"

"Are you serious? There's a reason the Divine Rope is more known as a circus trick than anything else!" Ye Qing scoffed disdainfully. The Divine Rope was, essentially, just an illusion trick. To put it simply, everything he saw just now was just an illusion.

At the beginning, Zhou San used some sort of concealment and transference-type talisman to move Gold Toad to this location. Then, he created that flashy illusion to misdirect his attention. It was nothing special at all.

“Hehe, it is true that the Divine Rope is just a circus trick,” said Zhou San with a careless chuckle. “Speaking of circus tricks, I have a couple more up my sleeves. Would you like to try them, my lord?”

As soon as he said this, Zhou San abruptly went poof in a puff of blue smoke. At the same time, the real Zhou San appeared behind Ye Qing with a pair of mandarin duck sabers. The weapons burst into black flames when he brought them down on Ye Qing’s neck.

Ye Qing wheeled around instantaneously almost as if he knew that Zhou San was there the entire time. Swinging his arms like a pair of whips, he easily crushed the black flames into bits.

He wanted to crush Zhou San with the flames, but the middle-aged man proved more elusive than he appeared. Narrowly dodging Ye Qing’s fist force and astral qi by a hair’s breadth, he swung his mandarin duck sabers again at the Patrolman’s vital spots from an unpredictable angle. At the same time, the air suddenly became filled with ghastly, disorienting wails, and ghastly faces emerged from the torrent of flames and pounced toward Ye Qing.

“Ghastly wails that disorient the mind, and deadly sabers that kill the soul”. Is this the Screaming Ghosts Saber?

Ye Qing recognized Zhou San’s saber art in an instant. The “Screaming Ghosts Saber” sounded pretty intimidating, but in reality it was a third-rate saber art at best. To make a comparison, it was on the same level as the “Door Breaking Five Tigers”.

However, it was the warrior who decided the power of a martial art, not the other way around. In Zhou San’s hands, the saber art actually rivaled some potent Astral Refinement martial arts.

Zhou San was hoping to disorient Ye Qing with the saber art, but unfortunately for him, Ye Qing’s spirit and mind far exceeded the norm. The Patrolman easily sidestepped out of the way and counterattacked with a palm strike. At the same time, his left palm burst into lightning and Netherflame.

“Boundless Lightning Palm”

“Blue Demon Hand”

There was a loud explosion as Ye Qing’s palm strike punched through Zhou San’s torrent of flames like wet tissue. Before the middle-aged man could pull back, Ye Qing closed the distance with “Blood Sea Fragrance” and swung his sleeve.

“Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve”

The sleeve strike was as thunderous as it was forceful, but it hit Zhou San about as effectively as the wind blowing against a leaf. He floated harmlessly away from Ye Qing before splitting into four all of a sudden.

All four silhouettes were incredibly lifelike and indistinguishable from the real thing. After they had Ye Qing surrounded, they all started executing a martial technique.

One silhouette pointed a finger at Ye Qing and conjured what looked like a sea of shooting stars.

Another curled his hands into claws and ripped at the space in front of him like a vicious, bloodthirsty animal.

The third silhouette formed a fist and punched down on Ye Qing, and the fist force descended like a massive, unstoppable spear.

And the last person unleashed a series of rapid, powerful kicks that roared like dragons.

Starfall Finger, Soul Scattering Claw, Great Spear Fist and Dragon Serpent Kick!

Ye Qing was quite astonished. He had never seen someone executing four different styles of martial arts at the same time. It was like trying to write with your left hand, juggle with your right hand, practice kicks with your left leg and draw with your right leg all at the same time. It was an incredible feat to say the least.

No, it's not just four martial arts. Whatever martial art he used to split into four earlier is a fifth martial art. In fact, it's the main reason he's able to execute four different types of martial arts at the same time.

Astonished he might be, Ye Qing's reaction was swift and immediate. Sucking a deep breath until his bones popped as loud as thunder, he raised his fist and threw a punch that shook the heavens.

“Cloud Vaporization Style”

The clouds in the sky were instantly scattered by the punch. The Burning Wind transformed into a raging cyclone, and invisible flames descended from above.

The cyclone crushed all four attacks into bits, and the invisible flames enveloped it all and popped three of the four silhouettes like bubbles, leaving only the real Zhou San behind. So what if he had a million transformations? Ye Qing could still destroy it all with one punch.

“Most impressive, Lord Ye!”

Zhou San didn't panic even though the cyclone was moving straight toward him. Cupping his mouth with both hands, he blew out like he was blowing a horn.

A lightning snake covered in purple lightning emerged into existence. When it first crawled out of Zhou San's mouth, it wasn't even a third of a meter long. Just a few seconds later, it was much bigger and grew a pair of legs on its head and four claws under its belly. Purple lightning and silver snakes shot everywhere.

Chapter 213: Talisman Eating

Snakes exited Zhou San's mouth, and when they soared into the sky, they transformed into lightning dragons. They charged straight toward the cyclone.

Boom!

The two elemental powers clashed and spilled force everywhere. The surrounding fake hills, greeneries, buildings and more were easily torn to shreds. The ground was shaking violently as well.

As soon as the dust clouds covered in from view, Ye Qing immediately rushed into the violent storm of astral qis and punched right through it. He was able to close his distance with Zhou San in an instant.

Zhou San wasn't expecting Ye Qing to be so gung ho about getting in his face. By the time he realized what happened, it was already too late to dodge out of the way. He immediately released a thick purple smoke from his body that caused Ye Qing to blank out for an instant.

It's one of the seventy two average-grade astral qi, the Disorienting Purple Smoke, Ye Qing realized. No wonder all the moves and techniques and moves Zhou San had executed until now possessed some sort of mind-bending influence. It was because of his astral qi.

The Disorienting Purple Smoke was formless, smoke-like, and capable of bending the mind and influencing the spirit. Although it wasn't even close to being as deadly as astral qis such as the Burning Wind, the Taibai Gengjin Qi, the Samadhi True Fire and more, it was potent in the sense that it was incredibly insidious and difficult to detect.

A savage smile flickered across Zhou San's face when Ye Qing's eyes grew unfocused. His palm turned purple as he launched a palm strike at his chest.

### "Gut Shredding Palm"

The attack made no sound and seemed no different from the techniques he had used earlier, but in reality it was the opposite.

The Gut Shredding Palm was one of Zhou San's trump cards. Its force was yin and soft, and it specifically targeted one's internal organs. On the outside, the attack would only leave an insignificant imprint on one's skin. But on the inside, it would shatter one's internal organs, guts, and blood vessels. It wouldn't kill its victim immediately, however. Instead, the victim would feel their guts disintegrating inch by inch until the agony finally overwhelmed them.

This was why the Gut Shredding Palm was known as one of the cruelest and insidious martial arts in the jianghu.

Bang!

The attack landed on Ye Qing's chest as softly as a raindrop, but Ye Qing shuddered a little as if he had just suffered a huge blow. Just when Zhou San thought that the young man would start writhing in abject pain, the corners of Ye Qing's lips abruptly curled into a disdainful smirk.

Alarm bells rang in Zhou San's head as he attempted to pull away. However, Ye Qing landed a punch on his chest before he could do so.

You hit me first, so I'm gonna punch you right back. It's perfectly fair, right?

The next moment, the blood drained away from Zhou San's face. As a tremendous, unstoppable force poured into his body, his chest caved in, and his internal organs were pushed out of the way. What was worse was the fact that the force was infused with some sort of all-consuming heat that boiled his blood, cooked his flesh, and withered his mind. As invisible flames jetted out of his pores, his skin started charring and crumbling like charcoal.

"Argh!"

Zhou San couldn't stop himself from letting out a bloodcurdling scream as he staggered away from Ye Qing. Every time he took a step, he would leave behind a scorching footprint that melted the earth below, and his body would wither just a little more. He looked horrible to say the least.

It was at this moment Zhou San summoned a bowl filled with clear water into his hand. He then snatched a yellow talisman out of thin air, set it on fire, chanted some sort of mantra and threw it into the bowl.

After the yellow talisman had burned into a crisp, Zhou San raised the bowl above his head and cried, “The Azure Sky is already dead; the Yellow Sky will soon rise. When the year is jiǎzǐ, there will be Taiping under the heavens!”

With that, he raised the bowl and drank the talisman water in one gulp.

As soon as he did this, the invisible flames burning his insides began extinguishing bit by bit. His energies turned stable, and his withered skin and flesh started regaining their vitality bit by bit. In the end, it was like he was never hurt in the first place. Its efficacy rivaled that of Ye qing’s dragon-serpent runes.

“Talisman Eating?”

Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise when he put two and two together, “You’re a Taiping cultist?!”

The Way of Taiping might sound like an orthodox sect of the Taoist, but it was a heretical sect through and through and one of the Nine Demonic Ways.

The Way of Taiping worshiped the Yellow Sky and believed that the Yellow God was the one who created the world and the humans. When the Yellow Sky was reigning, the world was at peace, and humanity enjoyed its greatest, most prosperous era. There was no oppression, no starvation, no natural disaster, no sickness, and most definitely no Strangers. At the time, every human was living a free and happy life.

It was on top of this belief that the Way of Taiping created the slogan, “The Azure Sky is already dead; the Yellow Sky will soon rise. When the year is jiǎzǐ, there will be Taiping under the heavens!” They spoke about the wonders of the world under the Yellow Sky and preached to others to worship the Yellow Sky. They claimed that anyone who worshiped the Yellow Sky and drank talisman water could invite good luck, avoid misfortune, gain strength, acquire a healthy body, and be free from all evil influences and dangers.

Of course, if the Way of Taiping only preached their faith peacefully, then they would be considered a religion at best. The reason they were labeled a demonic cult was because they enjoyed nothing more than to preach their faith in poverty-stricken lands and encourage the populace, rebel against their superiors, and take over the territory. Then, they would dress up the senseless massacre as glorious conquest and chant, “The Azure Sky is already dead; the Yellow Sky will soon rise!”

At the time of the founding of Chu, the way of Taiping had once gathered a peasant army of one hundred and fifty thousand in Tian Liang, Long Xi and He Dong and sparked countless wars. They were this close to destroying the foundation of Chu.

Thankfully, the Son of Heaven at the time and founder of Chu, Chu Qiuyang personally invaded the Way of Taiping’s main camp and fought their leader, Huang Sangong the “Taiping Sage” for three days and nights. With the Human Emperor Brush, he was ultimately able to slay him at Giant Deer Mountain.

Their battle was said to be so epic that the mountains were crushed, entire lands were wiped from the surface of the earth, and the sky was pitch black with dust. It was like the apocalypse was upon Chu.

Although Chu Qiuyang managed to slay Huang Sangong, he himself suffered grievous injuries that he wouldn't heal from. He would pass away in sickness after finally uniting the country.

As the Way of Taiping had proven themselves to be a great threat, Chu named the Way of Taiping as a demonic cult that must be eradicated at all cost. There were multiple times in history where armies were dispatched to eradicate the Way of Taiping. However, they were never able to completely uproot the cult from the land of Chu. In fact, an outstanding talent would crop up in the Way of Taiping every once in a while, lead them to glory, and continue to cause problems for Chu here and there.

Talisman Eating was a unique art that only members of the Way of Taiping could use. Normally, talismans were used externally, but the Way of Taiping did the opposite. They consumed their talismans to imbue themselves with various powers. That was why people named it Talisman Eating.

Zhou San's actions just now were pretty much a declaration that he was a member of the Way of Taiping. Now that Ye Qing thought about it, his martial arts resembled that of a Taiping cultist as well.

The martial arts of the Way of Taiping emphasized on the Five Elements, the yin and yang, and the practice of qi. Their signature martial arts such as the "Book of Taiping Heaven", the "Yin Yang Five Talisman Scripture", the "Five Pecks of Rice Scripture", the "Liuding Liuja Incantations" and more were all talismanic and qi-focused martial arts. Zhou San's ability to split himself into several illusory bodies, exhaling qi that transformed into dragons and more were right up the alley of the Way of Taiping as well.

"You are quite knowledgeable, Lord Ye."

A hint of viciousness flickered in Zhou San's eyes. "But it's not necessarily a good thing to know too much. Surely you've heard the saying that the more you know, the sooner you die?"

Although he was quite wary of Ye Qing's strength, there was no way he could leave the young man alive now that he had figured out his true identity.

At first, he only interfered because he wanted to know this secret regarding the Demon Lord. Five hundred years ago, Yu Xiaoyao, the man would come to be known as the Demon Lord, was famed as the greatest warrior in the jianghu. Supposedly, he had reached the apex during his prime and spent the rest of his life doing whatever the hell he wanted and spreading love across the world. No one was as free and unfettered as he.

The stories regarding Yu Xiaoyao could only be described as epic. He was most famous for his sword, his poetry, and his love for wine. His swordsmanship was unmatched, his poetry skills were unmatched, his fondness and stomach for wine was unmatched, and no single person in his area of expertise could even come close to defeating him.

In the jianghu, he had challenged countless warriors with his sword and supposedly never suffered a defeat.

In the court, he could supposedly drink everyone in the room under the table, and while doing so create a hundred poems that all deserved to be remembered for eternity.

On the battlefield, he alone was worth an army of tens of thousands. Armed with only a saber, a qin, and a stomach full of poems and songs, it was said that he had singlehandedly stopped a hundred thousand well-equipped barbarians from breaking through Fangcun Pass.

And as a hero, there was no one closer to the definition of hero than him. Free and unfettered, he was a man who died as he lived.

Because Yu Xiaoyao hailed from the Demon Palace of Kunlun and cared little for rules, laws, and societal norms, he was eventually known as the Demon Lord.

Zhou San wasn't really expecting Gold Toad to know much about the Demon Lord, but even a simple lead could potentially lead him to his inheritance. What if Gold Toad was telling the truth? What if he could obtain the Demon Lord's inheritance and become the next Demon Lord?

Besides, Gold Toad knew of his, or rather, his sect's secrets and was threatening to divulge it all if he didn't save her. Frankly, he was surprised that there were Strangers hiding in the very same residence he had been using as a base this whole time. The Yellow Sky only knows how many secrets he had accidentally let slip during this time. That was why he ultimately decided to intervene [1].

He thought that this would be easy, really. He had arrived late, and Ye Qing was exuding the aura of an early-stage Astral Refiner, so he thought it would take him little to no effort to defeat him. However, not only was Ye Qing a late-stage Astral Refiner, his astral qi was powerful, his body was strong, and his will of the fist was supreme. It was such that even he, a Half-Step Spirit Purifier, had fallen into a disadvantage.

If he hadn't learned "Talisman Eating" from the "Five Pecks of Rice Scripture", he might actually have died here.

Frankly, he was starting to regret getting involved in this business at all, but at this point, he only had one course of action. Ye Qing must die not just for the Demon Lord's inheritance, but also to preserve the Way of Taiping's secrets.

"Oh, you're going to silence me? Can you do it though?" Ye Qing snorted in disdain. "I was just gonna catch a loach and call it a day, but a shark? Today must be my lucky day!"

"Hmph! Just because you learned a few years of kung fu and slayed a few Strangers doesn't mean that you're invincible. Allow me to show you the ways of Taiping!"

Zhou San's expression darkened as he dropped his smile. He shook his bowl once and elicited some clinking noises. The water was gone, replaced by a handful of yellow beans. The beans were engraved with tiny runes.

Zhou San grabbed a bunch of beans and tossed them in front of him. When they hit the floor, they transformed into thirty six halberd-wielding soldiers that were clad in thick armor.

"Taiping Thirty Six Arts: Scatter Beans Into Troops"

“Oh my... that’s pretty impressive!” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise. All thirty six soldiers possessed the strength of an early-stage Astral Refiner, and their charge while swift was very organized. They were also using some sort of battle formation.

If the thirty six soldiers managed to entrap him, even he would be hardpressed to defeat them without suffering a major injury or two. That was why Ye Qing didn’t hesitate to put on a bronze mask on his face.

“Bronze Tiger Head”

Blood began flowing down the eyeholes of the mask. At the same time, an unbelievable amount of killing intent gushed out of Ye Qing’s body and formed the silhouette of a war general above him. The general wielded a Green Dragon Crescent Blade, and his eyes were bloodshot with murder.

Chapter 214: All Is Well Talisman

“Kill!” The general faced toward the incoming soldiers and roared. The moment he lifted his blade, the sky changed, and deadly saber qis filled the air.

The saber qis were the culmination of fifteen thousand kilometers worth of war and bloodshed. No one shall survive the general’s wrath!

The saber qis swept toward thirty six soldiers like a giant web, and it easily hacked and slashed them into itsy bitsy pieces.

Blanching, Zhou San hurriedly raised his bowl and tossed some water—once again, its content had changed without warning—into the air. Somehow, it transformed into an entire lake and destroyed the web of saber qis flying toward Zhou San.

“KILL!” The general roared again and swung his Green Dragon Crescent Blade eight times in a row; his movements grandiose and flashy.

“Eight Swings of Spring and Autumn”

The eight consecutive attacks didn’t just dismantle the tidal wave of water flooding Ye Qing’s way, it also left eight growing cracks on Zhou San’s bowl. Before the Astral Refiner could react, his Strange Artifact abruptly shattered into smithereens.

“Impossible!” Blood spilled through Zhou San’s lips, and his energies fell into disarray. He looked completely stunned by this outcome.

The bowl was called the Sky Lake Bowl, and as its name might suggest, it was a bowl that could hold an entire lake in it. A Hatred-class Strange Artifact, not only could it hold an entire lake, it could also be used to execute all sorts of talismanic arts. At a critical moment, one could even toss out the lake it contained to flood the enemy.

The branch had rewarded him with the Sky Lake Bowl after he successfully infiltrated Lord Li’s residence and stole a few pieces of valuable intel. He had treasured it like his life since. It was his greatest trump card, and now that it was gone, so did his confidence and arrogance.

I need to escape!

Zhou San immediately tried to escape. Gold Toad's so-called secret could wait until he was safe and sound. After all, there was nothing he could do with the secret if he was dead!

Besides that, he needed to inform the branch leader about this as soon as possible. The branch leader would surely be able to kill Ye Qing!

“The Way of Taiping would not forget this, Ye Qing!”

Zhou San left behind a classic villain phrase and filled the entire residence with his purple smoke in no time. The purple smoke didn't just turn everything blurry and indistinguishable, it could also influence the mind.

“Disorienting Purple Smoke”

Zhou San tried to escape while under the cover of his Disorienting Purple Smoke. It was at this moment the sound of a gong rang throughout the residence.

Tang!

As the gong sound kept going, the purple smoke suddenly began receding at a rapid pace. Zhou San too abruptly stopped in his tracks and forgot what he was doing. When he finally regained his senses, it was because his entire body suddenly hurt like he was being chewed by a million ants from the inside out. His bones and internal organs had shifted out of place, and his vigor was flowing in reverse. It was a pain unlike anything he had ever experienced.

“Split Muscles Lock Bones[1]?”

“Hehe. You're quite knowledgeable yourself. Yes, it is none other than Split Muscles Lock Bones.”

Ye Qing walked up to Zhou San smilingly. “Split Muscles Lock Bones is one of the Pacification Bureau's most famous interrogation techniques. It could split the muscles, lock the bones, reverse the vigor, and make it feel like you're being bitten by a million ants. Not even the vilest criminals could withstand this technique for long.”

“So? How does it feel?”

“What... are you plotting?” Zhou San asked. It had only been less than a minute since he was subjected to the technique, but his face was contorted, his muscles were spasming, and his whole body was drenched in cold sweat.

Ye Qing's smile widened. “You're a smart man. I'm sure you know what I want.”

“Tell me, how many Taiping cultists are hiding in Luo Shui, and for what? If you tell me everything truthfully, I can grant you a swift, painless death.”

Normally, the Pacification Bureau didn't interfere with jianghu business, but heretical sects like the Way of Taiping, Court of Chaos, World Destroy Sect and more were exceptions to the rule. It was because these sects carried a banner of righteousness but often encouraged the people to rebel against their betters. Chu wasn't the only country who loathed them either. Even Yan, Wei and more viewed them as traitors of humanity that must be exterminated upon sight. Anyone who got

involved with these sects would be eliminated to the nine generations, and those who harbored them or ignored their crimes were punished as well.

The punishment sounded ruthless and overbearing, but the simple fact was that the disciples of the Way of Taiping absolutely deserved it. They were cruel, ruthless, willing to do anything to achieve their goals, bigoted and just insane. Wherever they went, a river of blood would flow, and the people would suffer.

To put it simply, the cultists were a bunch of maniacs who just wanted to see the world burn.

Rationally or emotionally, there was absolutely no reason for Ye Qing to overlook this.

“Dream... Dream on!” Zhou San uttered through gritted teeth, “How dare a small Patrolman like you dare to get in our way! Aren’t you afraid that the Yellow God would punish you?”

“Dude, I just praised your intelligence,” tsked Ye Qing while slowly brushing his fingers across Zhou San’s arm and grinding every bone along the way into powder.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!”

It was so painful that Zhou San let out another bloodcurdling scream.

“If I was afraid of your Yellow God, I wouldn’t have caught you in the first place, would I?”

Ye Qing didn’t stop what he was doing even though he was talking, “Also, if your so-called Yellow God really is that powerful, then why didn’t he show up to save you?”

“How dare you blaspheme our god!? He will punish you! Our Sage will never forgive you—ah! Ah!”

Zhou San was trying to threaten Ye Qing, but he quickly lost himself to pai because Ye Qing had crushed his other arm as well.

“Seriously? You’re breaking already? I’m not trying to scare you, but this is practically the gentlest interrogation technique the Pacification Bureau know of. The more severe ones include piercing your bones with the Bone Piercing Needles, stripping your skin off your flesh bit by bit, feeding you a Hearteater Worm so it could gobble up all your internal organs, or attaching a Brain Feeder that will feed on your brain little by little...”

“I swear, any one of these interrogation techniques is ten thousand times more painful than whatever you’re experiencing right now.”

“Oh right, we also know all kinds of soul scouring arts. Would you like to give them a go?”

Zhou San shivered every time Ye Qing said a word. Looking as pale as a sheet, he uttered, “You’re beyond cruel!”

“Excuse me? Who are you to call me cruel?”

Ye Qing’s smile didn’t change, but his voice was colder and more scornful than before. “Five years ago, when northern Chu was experiencing a terrible drought, it was your Way of Taiping who spurred the people to rebel and ruined at least dozens of counties and villages. At least a hundred thousand citizens lost their homes and starved to death as a result.”

“Three years ago, a disciple of the Way of Taiping colluded with Strangers and destroyed an entire commandery because he needed their souls to cultivate his Brocade Soul Stealing Art.”

“And one year ago, you teamed up with the World Destroy Sect and sacrificed countless lives to summon the Hundred Ghosts Parade and transformed countless lands into living hell...”

“There are many people in the world who have the right to call me cruel, but the Way of Taiping isn’t one of them.”

“After all, you’re not even humans. You are disgusting filth who are even lower than even Strangers.”

Ye Qing’s voice was filled with condemnation and killing intent at this point. Strangers and humans were naturally opposed to one another, but these people were humans who chose to commit atrocities that even a Stranger might find abhorrent. Of course they were disgusting, loathsome, and deserving of every ounce of his hate.

“My patience is limited, so I’d advise you to tell me what I want as soon as possible. Otherwise, I promise you’d suffer a fate worse than death!”

However, Zhou San let out a mad cackle and retorted, “Those people deserved their fate! The Azure Sky is already dead; the Yellow Sky will soon rise. All who refuse the Yellow Sky shall not partake in our immortality!”

“You’re the same. You’re all the same! The Yellow God will punish you all, but we? Hahaha! Ahahahahaha! We are immortal! We are immortal!”

“The Azure Sky is already dead; the Yellow Sky will soon rise...”

It was like he had gone completely mad. He just kept laughing and laughing as a yellow talisman abruptly floated out of his forehead. It was covered in mysterious, complicated-looking runes. Only one of the runes was identifiable, and it said, “Taiping”.

The Way of Taiping’s All Is Well Talisman? Shit! He’s going to self-destruct!

The All Is Well Talisman was a secret art that the disciples of the Way of Taiping normally used to protect their minds from external influence. If they were caught, or if they encountered a danger they couldn’t resist, then they had the option to activate the All Is Well Talisman and annihilate their minds. The destruction was so thorough that no information could be gleaned from their minds even if someone were to scour their soul or even reverse time. It was probably why the bastards named it the “All Is Well Talisman”.

Ye Qing tried to stop Zhou San, but it was already too late. The middle-aged man's head abruptly exploded into red and white bits. Not only that, his body started rotting at a rapid pace, and an insidious, inexplicable air quickly spread to the surroundings.

“A plague!?”

Ye Qing frowned when the air made contact with his body. Somehow, the guy's body was spreading some sort of plague as it rotted. He could tell from his bodily reactions that it was extremely infectious. If he didn't deal with it in time, everyone in White Horse Alley and even Luo Shui might be affected by it.

“Bunch of fucking crazies!” Ye Qing cursed out loud and waved his sleeve. The air immediately turned red hot as the Burning Wind swept everything including Zhou San's body. Thankfully, he was able to wipe out the plague before it could spread beyond the residence.

They all said that the cultists of Way of Taiping are crazies, and Ye Qing now knew for a fact that it was true. It was one thing to be fearless, and another to turn themselves into a living carrier that would kill them and everyone else in an entire fucking region. Just what the hell was wrong with these people?

In fact, the Way of Taiping often created plagues to show off their ability to cure people with their talismans. It was one of the main ways they spread their unholy religion.

Ye Qing had failed to interrogate any useful information from Zhou San, but frankly, he wasn't too surprised by this. The cultists were a bunch of crazy zealots at best, or zealous crazies at worst. He would be wary if Zhou San had actually told him something. It was a “good if it worked, no harm done if it didn't” attempt.

After all, there was nothing the Annon Sutra couldn't find.

“It's your turn now!” Ye Qing turned to face Gold Toad after killing Zhou San. The Stranger was grievously injured to begin with, and the shockwaves of Ye Qing and Zhou San's battle were hardly harmless. Naturally, it wasn't able to muster even the energy to escape.

Despair filled Gold Toad's eyes when she saw Ye Qing walking toward her, but she recalled something and blurted, “I, I know where Zhou San's cohort is hiding!”

“Oh?” Ye Qing paused. That was a pleasant surprise. It would save him a lot of trouble if she was actually telling the truth.

Chapter 215: Cow Ghost Market

“Y-Yes, I know where they're hiding! I'll tell you about it as long as you let me live!” Gold Toad said hurriedly like a drowning Stranger clutching at a straw.

Ye Qing pretended to mull over her offer and replied, “Give me the intel first. I'll decide later if it's worth your life.”

Gold Toad didn't hesitate. "Every once in a while, Zhou San would visit the Thaiping Grain Retailer at Cow Ghost Market, and the shopkeeper of Thaiping Grain Retailer would secretly come to this residence to meet up with Zhou San. Therefore, Thaiping Grain Retailer is their hideout."

"Thaiping Grain Retailer? Thaiping, Taiping..." Ye Qing rubbed his chin with a strange expression. Talk about boldness. If he was suspecting that Gold Toad was just tricking him before, now he was certain that it was the truth. It was very much like the Way of Taiping to pull something like this.

"Okay, I'll admit that your intel is very valuable," Ye Qing said while smiling down on Gold Toad.

The Stranger was very happy to hear that. Just when she thought she would actually escape with her life, her mind abruptly grew dim without warning. When she looked down, she saw invisible flames pouring out of her pores, and infinite pain burning her from all sides.

"You... You broke your promise!"

"No I didn't. I only promised to let you live if your intel is worth your life, and after hearing what you have to say, my answer is no."

Ye Qing was smiling, but his voice was cold and unfeeling. "Even if that wasn't the case, why on earth would I keep my promise to a devious Stranger who has claimed countless human lives, not to mention that you had the bright idea to use my friends to threaten me? Do you actually think there was any chance I was going to let you live?"

"All humans and Strangers must take responsibility for their actions, and the price you must pay for your foolishness is death!"

As soon as he finished, the Burning Wind burned Gold Toad's mind into nothing. All that was left was an empty husk.

"My lord!"

"Lord Ye!"

He had just killed Gold Toad when the orderly noise of clinking armor came from the main exit. Then, Xu Banren, Ugly Monk, and Amorous Nun burst into view.

The trio had just rushed in when they saw the tattered garden and felt the terrifying auras still permeating the air.

Ugly Monk was an impatient man, so he asked immediately, "Where is the Stranger, my lord?"

Ye Qing pointed a thumb at Gold Toad. "Right here. There were two, but I annihilated the other one because she wasn't particularly powerful."

Ugly Monk: "..."

Amorous Nun: "..."

Xu Banren: "..."

Excluding Ye Qing, they picked up a total of three powerful auras at the scene, and each one was probably strong enough to give them a run for their money. And yet this guy neglected to mention one of them and even claimed that they weren't particularly powerful.

We suspect that someone is boasting—actually scratch that, he isn't boasting. He literally killed three powerful enemies by himself, he deserved to call them weaklings and such.

All three Lieutenants felt varying degrees of mixed emotions. Xu Banren took it easier because he had gotten... numb to Ye Qing blowing up his expectations again and again, but Ugly Monk and Amorous Nun were new to this. They were so stunned that they were having second thoughts about their little schemes.

“Lord Ye, you mentioned that there were two Strangers, but I'm picking up three auras beside yours. Who does it belong to?” Xu Banren asked.

“A big fish,” Ye Qing replied indifferently. “Come. Today's the day we all get a promotion!”

“Er...?”

Since Ye Qing didn't state things clearly, Xu Banren, Ugly Monk and Amorous Nun were all exchanging confused glances with one another.

“Come on already. Trust me, today's the day you get a pay raise, a promotion, a gorgeous partner, and the path that leads to the peak of your life!”

.....

Cow Ghost Market was located underground to the south of Luo Shui.

Specifically, it was located in the underground city to the south of the city. It was because Luo Shui was built atop the ruins of Sky Gate, a city from five hundred years ago.

According to the annals of geography of Luo Shui, the epic battle between two peak champions was what sank the ancient city and its hundreds of thousands of citizens into the underground.

Later, Chu unearthed the city and founded Luo Shui on top of it, but some parts of Sky Gate's buildings were still stuck underground. Knowing that it would risk the structural foundation of the city if the buildings were to be removed by force, the Earth Wood Sage at the time, Lou Gaoju decided to preserve it and treat it as a city expansion.

After the buildings were reinforced, and the people were allowed to occupy them for their own use, the place became known as Sky Gate Market.

However, Sky Gate Market was located underground, and it eventually became the gathering spot of people of all trades including the “Cow Ghosts and Snake Gods”, which generally referred to bad people. As a result, some people started calling it the “Cow Ghost Market” or the “Ghost Market” as a warning to the good folk. Over time, Cow Ghost Market replaced Sky Gate Market as its new name.

If the Pacification Street, White Horse Alley and Fish Dragon Market of Luo Shui represented light, order, cleanliness and safety, then the Cow Ghost Market represented darkness, lawlessness, filth and danger.

Due to the sheer number of illegal factions that existed in Cow Ghost Market and the complexity of its power structure, not even the government of Luo Shui was able to govern it properly. Over time, they decided that they couldn't be bothered at all. As a result, it gradually turned into a unique "tourist spot" in Luo Shui.

Thaiping Grain Retailer was located in Cow Ghost Market. People gotta eat no matter how filthy, chaotic and dangerous a place was after all.

Of course, there were people who envied their prosperity and tried to take them over, but not only did Thaiping Grain Retailer remain strong, it was growing bigger and bigger. The reason was very simple: their fist was bigger, was all. More specifically, Xing The Third's fist was bigger than all of his competitors.

And how big was Xing The Third's fist, exactly? It was rumored that he had singlehandedly annihilated the biggest faction in Cow Ghost Market, the Skywolf Gang with his fist and saber simply because the gang boss, Skywolf Duan took five bags of grain without paying.

It was also rumored that he had chased the Sky Fox, Yu Chuntang for over five thousand kilometers before finally capturing him and severing his tendons because the man killed a shop assistant in Thaiping Grain Retailer.

It was even said that he was so inhuman that he enjoyed feeding on women's flesh and drinking children's blood.

As a result, Xing The Third became a household name in Cow Ghost Market.

But of course, rumors were often exaggerated. In truth, Xing The Third definitely didn't enjoy drinking a child's blood or feeding on women's flesh. No, he enjoyed eating hotpot and drinking pepper soup.

Right now, Xing The third was doing just that in his backyard. He was drinking a bowl of pepper soup from his hand and picking up a piece of meat from his hotpot.

To be honest, he almost couldn't remember the last time he enjoyed such a good meal. He didn't know when it started, but he started living his life as cautiously and timidly as a mouse. He didn't dare to turn off the lights when he slept, and he kept a dagger under his pillow. He didn't dare to open his heart to anyone no matter who he was speaking to, and he didn't even dare to reveal his true kung fu when he killed someone. It was all to keep his secret intact.

If he had to guess, it had probably begun since he entered Luo Shui and built the Thaiping Grain Retailer.

After all, he was a cultist of the Way of Taiping, and what he was doing was no different from pointing a middle finger at Chu and crying, "Come at get me!" It was no wonder he became so timid and cautious later on.

Their ploy worked though. The authorities thought that the Way of Taiping wouldn't dare to act openly because they had had their shit beaten out of them, so they tried exploiting that blindspot and established themselves in an arrogant and high-profile manner instead. It worked. Today, they had successfully solidified their position in Cow Ghost Market and even established a foothold in the city of Luo Shui itself.

Now, their grand plan was but a moment away from succeeding. Assuming that everything went well, this underground city would become their Stronghold, and even the one on the surface would fall into their control as well.

That was why he had been feeling very good as of late, so good that he couldn't stop indulging in his favorite food like before. He felt like he could devour another five to six bowls before he was finally full.

“Slurp... so tasty...”

It was at this moment he heard a commotion from outside. The next thing he knew, one of his shop assistants stepped into the backyard with three people in tow. They were two men and a woman. The young man was young and handsome, the older man was brawny and fierce-looking, and the woman was so sexy that he could barely move her eyes away from her.

Still, his many years of steadfastness allowed him to suppress his urges and shoot his shop assistant a death glare. “The hell's going on here?”

The shop assistant flinched. He knew exactly how ruthless and bloodthirsty his boss was, so he explained in a small voice, “They said they have a big business idea they'd like to sell you.”

Fucking trash, Xing The Third cursed in his head. There was nothing he hated more than someone interrupting his meal, so much so that he was going to refine the trio into armored puppets no matter what this “big business idea” was.

He looked at the woman again and changed his mind. Actually, the woman can live.

“So? What is this ‘big business idea’ you'd like to pitch me?” Xing The Third asked rudely and directly. There was no point in being polite to would-be-dead men.

“Oh yes, it's big alright.” The young man stepped out and slowly walked toward him with a smile. “It involves the Way of Taiping after all.”

“What?” Xing The Third felt like he had just been punched in the face. Still, he didn't hesitate to throw himself at the trio. He didn't know who they were, but he was sure that his problems would be solved if he took them down.

Boom!

Black purple lightning abruptly shot out of Xing The Third's body. It formed a thunderous ghost god in the sky.

The ghost god had two faces. One of them was divinely dignified, and the other was demonically savage. He carried serpents and dragons on his shoulders and wielded a lightning halberd. He looked very imposing.

This was the “Ghost God Sutra” of the “Eight Thunder Gods Art” and Xing The Third's trump card. It was also why some of the rumors regarding him were pretty bloody.

“Slay!”

When Xing The Third brought down his arm, the ghost god behind him brought down its halberd. The lightning seemed potent enough to destroy the entire place.

He hadn't held back because this was a matter of life and death. Only an idiot would hold back in this situation.

However, the halberd had only reached halfway when the young man conjured a mallet into his hand. He tapped it against the halberd, and the weapon popped out of existence like a bubble just like that.

Before he could react, he heard a loud tang that made him feel like his head just exploded. His mind shook like a boat under siege by a raging storm, and his consciousness faded into black for a moment.

By the time he awoke, his dantian was destroyed, and his tendons were severed. He had become a cripple. His shop assistant had also been captured by the gorgeous woman.

"Who... Who are you people?" Xing The Third asked while suppressing his shock.

The young man smiled at him. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Ye Qing, and I am a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau."

"The Pacification Bureau?!" Xing The Third's eyes widened like saucers.

As if on cue, the sound of orderly footsteps entered his ears, and countless Pacification Sentinels surrounded the entire Thaiping Grain Retailer. Their black armor and crossbows could only be described as imposing.

"Search every inch of this place and let no one escape. Kill anyone who tries to resist."

"At once!" The Pacification Sentinels responded before taking their leave.

It's over.

Xing The Third closed his eyes in despair when he saw the Pacification Sentinels marching into his property with impunity.

#### Chapter 216: Soul Scouring

Ye Qing crouched beside Xing The Third and asked slowly, "You can start talking now. Who are you? What is your identity in the Way of Taiping? Do you have any other bases in Luo Shui besides here?"

Xing The Third grunted and kept his silence. He didn't bother answering Ye Qing's question, nor did he try to defend himself. There was just no point at this point.

He was also waiting to see if his fellow cultists still hiding inside the building might be able to make an escape. If they did, then he might still have a chance to survive this.

Seemingly capable of reading Xing The Third's thoughts, Ye Qing added with a chuckle, "Oh? Are you waiting for someone to rescue you? Save your thoughts. We have this place completely surrounded. Not even a fly will be able to escape this place."

As he spoke, rumblings and echoes of battle came from inside the building. It was often accompanied by the sounds of muffled groans and painful screams. As Xing The Third listened to the screams, the hope in his eyes faded, and his expression grew darker and darker. In the end, there was only despair.

About half a teatime later, Xu Banren, Ugly Monk and Amorous Nun returned to his side. Their clothes were stained with blood, and their aura was a lot more erratic than before. It was impossible to say if the blood belonged to them or their victims.

“Lord Ye, we’ve captured a total of fifty six people. Two of them were Astral Refiners, thirty of them were Vessel Augmentors, eighteen of them were Qi Invokers, and the rest were ordinary people,” reported Xu Banren after taking a moment to calm his true qi [1].

“My lord, we also discovered a hidden room in the granary filled with gold, treasures, and cultivation manuals,” A red-faced Ugly Monk reported while licking his lips. Ye Qing wondered if it was due to exertion or excitement.

Not to be outdone, Amorous Nun reported her findings as well, “My lord, I too discovered something incredible. There is a water prison [2] beneath the granary, and an incredible amount of Cow Ghost Market warriors are imprisoned in it. In fact, most of them were gang bosses or people of importance. If I’m not mistaken, most of the gangs in Cow Ghost Market have been subverted by the Way of Taiping openly or covertly.”

Right now, Ugly Monk and Amorous Nun were brimming with happiness. Even their hostility toward Ye Qing had decreased considerably. After all, the young man had brought them on a mission to destroy a deadly faction that was hiding right under Luo Shui’s nose, the Way of Taiping. A merit like this was greatly beneficial for their future to say the least.

They were also starting to grow a measure of true respect toward Ye Qing. His earlier battle against two powerful Hatred-class Strangers and a warrior could still be rationalized as a fluke—after all, who hasn't gotten lucky with their opponents once in a while?—but just now, they saw with their own eyes how Ye Qing had incapacitated Xing The Third in a single exchange.

Xing The Third was an infamous gang boss and a late-stage Astral Refiner. While some of the rumors were definitely exaggerated, there was no denying that he was a powerful enemy. Even so, Ye Qing still defeated him in a single exchange. Sure, he used a Strange Artifact and caught the man by surprise, but a victory was a victory. The fact that he could employ such a potent Strange Artifact also proved that he was strong.

In this world, the strong were always deserving of respect. That was why their impression of Ye Qing had improved massively.

“Wow! To think you guys almost took over the Cow Ghost Market!” Ye Qing remarked teasingly, “You guys must be plotting something big!”

However, his expression quickly turned into a frown. “Still, something isn’t quite right about this. This is your hidden base, right? Why would it be guarded by three Astral Refiners only? You’re the boss of this place, and yet you’re not even close to being at Zhou San’s level. Nah, something’s definitely fishy.”

“Zhou San? Did he... betray us?” A shocked Xing The Third abruptly broke his silence. “No, no, it can’t be. Envoy Zhou would never betray the Yellow God!”

“Envoy Zhou? Sounds like he’s more important than I thought.” Ye Qing shrugged and continued his musings, “Where was I? Right. There’s no way you guys could’ve stood your ground in Cow Ghost Market if this is all you have, much less subvert most of its gangs. Therefore, you must have a bigger army elsewhere!”

Ye Qing clapped his hands and looked at Xing The Third all of a sudden. The man subconsciously looked away to avoid Ye Qing’s eyes.

“Gotcha.” Ye Qing grew certain of his deduction when he saw Xing The Third’s guilty reaction.

“Tell me, who else is in your group, and where are they hiding? If you’re honest, I can grant you a swift death. Otherwise, you will wish that you were dead!”

“Haha! So what if you managed to guess the truth? There’s nothing you can do without the details.”

A vicious grin suddenly spread across Xing The Third’s face as he spat, “It wouldn’t be long before the Yellow God enacts his divine judgment upon you all. It’s not just the Pacification Bureau, the entire Luo Shui will be destroyed for their sins! Only those who worship Him may partake in his immortality!”

“Hahahaha! The Azure Sky is already dead; the Yellow Sky will soon rise...”

Xing The Third laughed madly as a yellow talisman surfaced from his forehead, but the talisman had just lit up when a soft tang suddenly disrupted his concentration and destabilized his mind. The gong sound would continue until he felt like the apocalypse was taking place inside his head, and his consciousness was growing blurrier and blurrier. Finally, the All Is Well Talisman turned dim and disappeared into nothing.

“Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me,” Ye Qing recited with a sneer as he put away the Soul Absorbing Gong. “You’re not allowed to die until we have wrung every drop of information from you.”

“You...” Xing The Third was stunned by this outcome to say the least. He didn’t think that Ye Qing would have a way to disrupt the All Is Well Talisman from manifesting.

Ye Qing shot him a diabolical grin. “Heh. Death is the easiest thing in this world, but sometimes, it is a luxury.”

“Can I give it a go, my lord?”

Ye Qing was just about to interrogate Xing The Third when suddenly, Amorous Nun stepped forward and offered her service.

“What is your plan?” Ye Qing asked curiously.

Amorous Nun smiled. “I happened to learn a soul scouring art in the past. It is most effective against a pig-headed person like him.”

Ye Qing hesitated for a moment but nodded. “Very well. I leave it to you.”

“Soul scouring!?” Xing The Third blanched and tried to resist, but as soon as Amorous Nun chanted something only he could hear, his eyes immediately grew unfocused.

Amorous Nun’s eyes gradually turned as black and boundless as the night. It looked like it had the power to submerge the entire world in eternal darkness. The next moment, a pitch black, mysterious eyeball appeared above Xing The Third’s head.

The eyeball turned slowly and cast invisible light into Xing The Third’s head. Slowly, his slackened expression became overwritten by struggle and pain. Despite this, he never woke up.

A dozen or so breaths later, the blackness in Amorous Nun’s eyes faded, and her face turned as pale as a sheet. She staggered away from Xing The Third as if she had just spent most of her strength.

On the other hand, Xing The Third was bleeding out of all of his orifices. His breathing had stopped a while ago.

This was normal. Soul scouring arts were extremely brutal interrogation techniques meant to forcefully drag out the memories of the victim from their minds. Naturally, it damaged one’s mind severely. In the best case scenario, the art would damage the victim’s mind and turn them into retards. In the worst case scenario, their mind would be annihilated, and they would die.

Ye Qing stepped forward and caught Amorous Nun before she could fall to the ground. Sensing an opportunity, the Lieutenant tried to lean against his chest.

Ye Qing didn’t step out of the way, but he did release a wisp of killing intent. Amorous Nun froze in mid-movement and hurriedly caught herself. She cursed inside her own head, what a dull man!

“So? Did you find anything useful?” Ye Qing asked seriously.

Amorous Nun wasn’t so far gone that she would fail to recognize the severity of the situation, so she turned serious as well and reported, “Xing The Third’s mind is protected by a powerful restriction, and my soul scouring art is incomplete in some ways. As a result, I only managed to glimpse a handful of memory fragments.”

She was telling the truth, not to mention that all soul scouring arts required the user to possess a certain level of spiritual power. Xing The Third’s spirit wasn’t too far behind hers because they were at the same cultivation level, so a handful of memory fragments were about the best one could expect.

“Tell me!” Ye Qing urged. He didn’t blame her for doing a “poor” job because he knew that she had done her best, and the longer they delayed, the greater the chance the Way of Taiping might notice the destruction of their hidden base and react accordingly.

Amorous Nun took a moment to organize her thoughts before answering, “I saw Xing The Third and his cohort planning something big that could potentially subject the entire city in danger, but I am unsure about the details.”

“So, he wasn’t lying when he said that the Yellow God would soon enact its ‘divine judgment’ upon Luo Shui,” Ye Qing muttered with a frown. He looked calm on the outside, but on the inside he was swearing left, right, and center.

How do I keep running into city-level disasters like this? First it was Anyang, now it was Luo Shui. All I wanted was to get revenge against my wrongdoers! How the fuck did I get into this mess?

I'm just a kid, man. I'm not nearly strong or tall enough to carry the heavens if they collapse!

Amorous Nun didn't interrupt Ye Qing thinking that he was mulling over the situation. A while later, Ye Qing finally came back to reality and let out a resigned sigh. If there was one silver lining to this mess, it was that he had already informed the Pacification Bureau about the Way of Taiping. It shouldn't take too long before they sent an actual professional to handle this.

"Did you find out anything about his cohort?"

"No." Amorous Nun shook her head but added, "However, I did find something unusual. Every three to five days or so, Xing The Third would deliver a large shipment of grain to the Sky Gate Abyss of Cow Ghost Market."

"Sky Gate Abyss?" Ye Qing repeated while narrowing his eyes. Sky Gate Abyss was a natural crack in the ground deep within Cow Ghost Market. It also functioned as a border of some sort. It was said that Sky Gate Abyss was constantly shrouded by a fog of cold, dead energy, and there was no signs of life in the area whatsoever. As it was labeled as a forbidden zone, few people would get close to that place.

If what Amorous Nun said was true, then it made little sense that Xing The Third would send large shipments of grain to Sky Gate Abyss every three to five days.

Grain was food, and food was meant to be consumed. This meant that there was a group residing in Sky Gate Abyss for some reason, a pretty massive one too considering the amount of food that was delivered.

Who could these people be, and what were they doing at Sky Gate Abyss? The answer was blindingly obvious. These people were most likely cultists of the Way of Taiping, and they were doing something bad at Sky Gate Abyss!

This would also explain why Thaiping Grain Retailer was guarded by so few people. It was because the large majority of the group was entrenched in Sky Gate Abyss.

#### Chapter 217: A Ghastly Surprise

Ye Qing mulled over the situation for a bit before ordering, "I'm going to Sky Gate Abyss to take a look, so round up the men and safeguard the entrances to Cow Ghost Market. Don't allow anyone to get in or out until Chief Gu shows up."

But Xu Banren disagreed, "Lord Ye, we haven't been silent when we took over Thaiping Grain Retailer. Assuming that the Way of Taiping really is hiding in Sky Gate Abyss, I reckon that they have already heard about our appearance. Considering the potential dangers, I think it's best if we come with you."

"It's exactly because it's dangerous that it's best if I head there alone."

The Way of Taiping must have worked on Cow Ghost Market for years to have taken control of most of its gangs. It wouldn't be surprising if they had eyes and ears everywhere, which was why it was most likely that the bigger group hiding in Sky Gate Abyss had already heard of their presence.

If they were to travel to Sky Gate Abyss as they were, there was a huge chance they would fall into an ambush and be annihilated.

Therefore, the better plan was to secure the entrances and pretend that they weren't aware of the group hiding at Sky Gate Abyss. Best case scenario, the group would think that Xing The Third was just unlucky to be caught by the Pacification Bureau and let down their guard. They could always storm Sky Gate Abyss after Gu Suitang and their reinforcements had arrived.

That said, their job would be made easier if they could send someone to check out the situation at Sky Gate Abyss and scout out their enemies' numbers, arrangements and such, and the person Ye Qing decided to send was himself. It was still a risky venture, but far less risky than their whole team banging down on the Way of Taiping's door openly.

"Lord Ye..."

Xu Banren frowned and tried to convince Ye Qing further, but Ye Qing interrupted him and said, "Enough. Just trust me and do as I say."

Xu Banren stayed silent for a moment before offering a compromise, "How about this: Ugly Monk and I will come with you, and Amorous Nun will stay behind. She's too hurt to participate in another battle immediately anyway."

"It's fine. The three of you should stick together."

Ye Qing knew that Xu Banren was concerned for his safety, but there really was no need for additional manpower. "I'll be frank: I don't want to have to watch the enemy and take care of you two at the same time. It's just too much trouble."

Xu Banren: "..."

Ugly Monk: "..."

The two Lieutenants exchanged glances with each other. Did... Did he just imply what he did?

We're famous warriors and Lieutenants of the Pacification Bureau, and he's saying that we would slow him down?

Just how arrogant can he be?

Irritated and angry, Ugly Monk opened his mouth to retort only to find Ye Qing suddenly fading away like some sort of mirage. He was gone in just a matter of seconds.

It was an afterimage. The real Ye Qing had left a short while ago.

Ugly Monk did a double take and stared at the spot where Ye Qing used to be. He didn't even know Ye Qing was gone until the afterimage started fading, much less how he pulled off such a stunt.

If the guy attacks me during this time... I would probably be dead before I could even defend myself, couldn't I?

The three Lieutenants exchanged another glance with each other and said nothing.

I guess we really are burdens to him. Sigh. Guard duty it is.

.....

How deep was the Sky Gate Abyss? No one knows.

How wide was the Sky Gate Abyss? No one knows.

What was hiding under the bottomless chasm of Sky Gate Abyss? No one knows either!

Sky Gate Abyss was an extremely mysterious place with little known facts. In a sense, it was just like the sun. Everyone knows that the sun was bright, hot, and round, but besides that, not much was known about it at all.

Ye Qing was currently standing in a secluded spot and staring at the bottomless, fog-shrouded chasm that was Sky Gate Abyss. Frankly, he wouldn't be surprised if someone told him that the chasm was connected to a different world. The view was mind-blowing to say the least.

He was also certain that the intel Amorous Nun pried from Zhou San's soul was true because he could sense at least five Astral Refiners hiding in the vicinity. Their auras were solid, well-hidden, and quite powerful. It was clear that they were guarding the place against any outsider.

Unfortunately for them, their auras were as obvious as fireflies in the dark to his spirit. It took him little effort to sneak past them and venture deeper into Sky Gate Abyss.

However, he couldn't find anyone else on the surface besides these hidden guards. It was because they were inside the chasm.

That's right, they were past the fog-shrouded, seemingly bottomless chasm.

And how did he know this? It was because he saw plenty of suspicious markings on the edge of the cliffs. They were obviously caused by people climbing up and down the cliffs for a long time.

Some effort had been done to mask the markings, but he still noticed them as soon as they came into view.

So sorry that I have better eyesight than all of you, readers.

"What could those crazies possibly be doing underground?" Ye Qing muttered to himself. He hesitated for a moment, but ultimately decided to head down and take a look.

With his strength, he should survive so long as he didn't commit suicide.

His mind made up, Ye Qing leaped over the edge and into the chasm.

Whoosh!

It was like tossing a stone into the sea. One second he was there, and the next he could see nothing but thick fog and hear nothing but the howling wind. It was disturbing to put it mildly.

After falling into the chasm for about thirty meters give or take, Ye Qing abruptly plunged his left hand into the wall and clenched. His muscles and bones made a series of thunderous pops as he seized his downward momentum instantly.

An ordinary human would've easily ripped their muscles and snapped their bones like twigs if they tried this. But to an Astral Refiner like Ye Qing, he didn't even feel any real pressure.

After pulsing his spirit and finding no danger or anomalies in the vicinity, Ye Qing let go and fell deeper into the chasm. He would be repeating this for a while to come.

The deeper he traveled, the thicker the fog and the yin qi shrouding the Sky Gate Abyss became. It was also as dead as the rumors claimed. Forget people, he couldn't sense a single Stranger in the area.

Ye Qing was a bit weirded out by this, to be honest. Sky Gate Abyss was chock-full of yin qi and unsuited for life, but it should've been a haven for Yin Spirits, Vengeful Souls, Walkers and the like. However, he couldn't sense even a single Yin Spirit in the area despite having come this far. It was strange to say the least.

Eventually, Ye Qing began sensing something other than yin qi. To be more specific, it was some sort of aura. An ominous one.

At the beginning, it was so faint that he couldn't tell what it was beyond the basics. But the deeper he went, the more obvious the aura became. It was bizarre and overflowing with evil in the sense that it filled one's head with illusions and one's heart with desires. If Ye Qing had to describe it somehow, it would be temptation on steroids.

After falling down the chasm for another kilometer or so, Ye Qing finally saw the bottom. It was covered in crisscrossing crevices and upturned earth. He also saw many broken walls and ruins. He could vaguely see collapsed buildings, shattered bricks, rotting wood and more signs of decay. They looked like monsters hiding in the dark to ambush their prey.

"This... This must be the ruins of Sky Gate."

Ye Qing wasn't expecting to find more remnants of the old city so deep in the underground. Sensing a small trail that had probably been created from the footsteps of the cultists, he carefully followed it while keeping his spirit out in the open.

He still couldn't quite make heads or tails of the situation. There was no life here whatsoever, and while an archeologist might find this place interesting, what did it matter to the Way of Taiping?

Snap!

Ye Qing had been treading through the area as carefully as he could, but one of the tiles he was stepping on had become impossibly fragile after years and years of erosion. As a result, he accidentally crushed it underneath his foot. The soft noise sounded impossibly loud in this dead valley.

It was a mistake. As if the lock on the gates of hell had suddenly been released, countless Yin Spirits started flying out of the fog and the ruins around him.

No, they're not Yin Spirits. They're Grudge Spirits!

The two names were almost identical, but a Yin Spirit was just an ordinary, yin soul-type stranger that was born from one's attachments. That attachment could be love, regret, longing and more. On the other hand, a Grudge Spirit was born from resentment and hatred. Much more cruel and violent than a Yin Spirit, a Grudge Spirit knew slaughter and nothing else.

The Grudge Spirits in front of him had black pupils that burned like a pair of black orbs, savage and eerie. They were also overflowing with so much resentment it was almost tangible. Soon, Ye Qing found himself staring down at least tens of thousands of Grudge Spirits. There were male, female, young and old, but they were overflowing with resentment and hatred.

“What the fuck? Why are there so many Grudge Spirits in this place?” Ye Qing muttered with a deep frown. It was strange enough that each and every one of these Grudge Spirits was at least as strong as a Vessel Augmentor, but what puzzled him even more was their numbers.

Normally, Grudge Spirits could be found in places where a large number of people had died unjustified deaths. However, Sky Gate Abyss was a forbidden zone, and few people frequented this place, if at all. Even if he presumed that the Way of Taiping was behind this, it should be impossible for them to kill this many people without alarming the Pacification Bureau ages ago.

Were they born from the dead of Sky Gate?

Five hundred years ago, the battle between two peak champions had resulted in the destruction of the city and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. It would make sense if these Grudge Spirits were the remnants of those who died.

But if that was true, then why had Luo Shui never experienced a Grudge Spirit outbreak during the centuries it had existed? Heck, Cow Ghost Market was right up there, but they had never logged a massive or even a minor attack by Grudge Spirits either.

I’m still missing pieces of the puzzle.

Ye Qing was still thinking when the Grudge Spirits in the air rushed toward him like a tidal wave probably because they sensed his vitality.

An ordinary person would’ve collapsed on all fours already, but Ye Qing was no ordinary person. Before they could get close, a magnificent golden light shone out of Ye Qing’s body and melted it all like snow. At least half of the Grudge Spirits were vanquished just like that.

A golden Buddha with his hands pressed together in prayer and wearing a merciful expression appeared behind Ye Qing’s back. At the same time, Buddhist chants began resounding across the valley.

Countless Buddhist necklaces and golden lotuses started flying in the air, and the golden light felt as warm as the sun itself. Incredibly, the Grudge Spirits were exorcised of their negative emotions and returned to the cycle of reincarnation just like that.

Only a handful of Grudge Spirits were left after the powerful attack. Even the dark, gloomy fog surrounding the area had dissipated slightly.

“As expected of the Boundless Mara Buddha.”

This was the first time Ye Qing used his latest Strange Artifact, and he was very satisfied with what he saw. He hadn’t even unsealed it yet.

In its sealed state, the Boundless Mara Buddha was a Hatred-class Strange Artifact. As it was forged from the husk of an enlightened monk and a Buddhist artifact, it naturally possessed the power of the Buddha. Not only could it be used to protect his mind, spirit, and soul, it could also suppress demons and exorcise yin spirits.

In short, the sealed Boundless Mara Buddha was the bane of these Grudge Spirits.

If he didn't have the Boundless Mara Buddha, he would've booked it long before they gathered en masse. Forget him, even a Spirit Purifier would have to run and fight another day.

So long as the Boundless Mara Buddha had power, no number of Grudge Spirits could threaten him.

“An EXP rush! It's been too long, man!”

For Ye Qing, this meant that he could farm these Grudge Spirits for dragon-serpent runes to his heart's content. He was immediately reminded of the jubilation and excitement he felt when he first realized that he was immune to them. He thought he would never feel this rush again, but here he was!

Chapter 218: Cutting An Official Today With A Sword From Before

Ye Qing's eyes glowed with greed as he stared at the Grudge Spirits in the air. Every time he took a step deeper into the fog, an invisible shockwave would spread out from his foot and shatter bricks and tiles. Sometimes, an entire wall or even building would collapse due to how old and eroded they were.

The noise awoke countless Grudge Spirits and drew them all toward him. When they saw him shining like a light bulb in the darkness, they immediately rushed him and became exorcised by the light of the Boundless Mara Buddha.

Death was a great deterrent for most living things, but these Grudge Spirits kept coming like moths to flames. It was because they didn't possess any intelligence and knew only slaughter.

Tang! Tang! Tang!

Ye Qing was having the time of his life when suddenly, a series of gong sounds appeared from the fog. It rang every two breaths, and it sounded sharp, loud, and sonorous. As the fog slowly parted, the Grudge Spirits abruptly stopped charging Ye Qing and moved to the sides. They were even kneeling on the floor and shaking as if they were welcoming an important official or something.

Slowly, Ye Qing saw a bunch of common bailiffs stepping out of the fog while carrying signs that said, “Away” and “Silence”. Behind the common bailiffs were workmen carrying all sorts of items such as chains, sticks, black whips, pumpkins, spears, black fans, yellow umbrellas and more. Finally, they were accompanied by a bunch of soldiers riding large horses. At the center of the entourage was a jade-encrusted carriage. It looked mighty impressive if nothing else.

“This official must be pretty important,” Ye Qing commented with a raised eyebrow. In fact, only a commandery governor or higher were allowed to enjoy such fanfare.

Obviously, the bailiffs, workmen, soldiers and more were either Grudge Spirits or manifestations of yin qi. The jade-encrusted carriage stood out even among these ghosts though. It looked luxurious, mysterious, and eerie. Its whole body was burning a ghastly green ghost fire. Its curtains were made not from yin qi or silk, but human skins. In fact, they were the skins of young, beautiful women. Their faces were either smiling, snarling, weeping, sneering and more.

The silhouette of an imposing figure wearing a tall hat and wide robes could be seen behind the “curtain”. When the group came to a stop about ten meters away from Ye Qing, a booming voice then entered his ears, “Why aren't you paying respects to me?”

The official's voice was shrill and dark like the screams of innumerable ghosts, intimidating and eerie. An entire group of Grudge Spirits actually exploded into yin qi after hearing his command.

Ye Qing didn't answer. It was because the official wasn't speaking to him.

As expected, a strange giggle appeared from the fog to Ye Qing's left, "We're not your underlings, Yin Governor. You can't command us to do anything."

Four other voices echoed in agreement, "We're not afraid of you!"

A person slowly stepped into the open. Strangely, their figure kept changing amidst the fog. Sometimes they were tall, and sometimes they were short. Sometimes they were fat, and sometimes they were thin. Ye Qing could also hear a constant cackle from them.

It wasn't until they were close that Ye Qing finally saw them for who they were. They weren't one person, they were five children wearing a round hat and a black, gold, white and red-colored round collar robe.

The children's faces were covered in drawings. One kid had a rising sun drawn on his forehead, and another had wrinkles. A third had eye circles drawn around his eyes, and a tongue drawn beneath his bottom lip, and the fourth kid had crescents drawn around their eyes and nose. The last kid had bones drawn on his cheeks. It looked both strange, amusing, and cute.

Before they stepped out of the fog, it looked like they had an amorphous figure that was constantly changing. In reality, it was because they were moving all the time. Sometimes, they would stack on top of one another. Sometimes, they would hug each other. And sometimes, they would line up in a row. This was why they looked the way they did.

Before Yin Governor could respond, a Grudge Spirit riding a handsome horse and wearing a set of silver armor rebuked them harshly, "How dare you! You are my lord's citizens be it in life or death, ghost boys! Kneel now before it's too late!"

The Grudge Spirit seemed to be a senior military officer. He also didn't have a head. Pale ghostfire kept seeping out of his throat. It looked like he had been beheaded.

"Absolutely not!"

"No way!"

"Don't wanna!"

"Ain't gonna!"

"I would rather die!"

The five children replied one after another before sticking their tongue out in unison, "We will never ever kneel before your governor! Lelele!"

"You dare—!" The headless officer was about to blow his top when suddenly, he broke into pieces and collapsed to the ground. He hadn't been attacked or anything. He just suddenly fell apart as if the invisible glue holding his body together had disappeared all of a sudden.

The second the headless officer collapsed, the yin soldiers unsheathed their weapons and glared at the ghost boys with fiery eyes. One order was all they needed to rush forward and tear the Strangers to shreds.

“Ahhhh! So scary!”

“Hehehe! I’m soooo scared~”

“Save us, Sister Bride!”

As soon as the kid called for help, the fog to Ye Qing’s right suddenly turned bright red like blood or fire. As it spread, it quickly took the form of a woman wearing a red wedding dress and a red veil.

As soon as the ghost bride appeared, the surrounding yin qi were immediately dyed red. It looked both bleak and eerie.

“Enough!”

Finally, Yin Governor spoke up. It was impossible to say if he was wary of the ghost boys, the ghost bride, or both, but he decided to cut the internal conflict here. “We have come today to capture the rebel who dared to invade my Sky Gate and kill my people. If he ruins our plans, then all of our efforts would be all for naught. Will you be the ones to justify our failure to the Ghost King if that happens? Or do you wish to stay in this dark prison for eternity?”

Both the ghost boys and the ghost bride fell silent. Then, they all looked at Ye Qing.

“Murderous rebel, get on your knees, surrender your soul, and divulge your intentions for coming here now! I’ll let you live if you do!” Yin Governor addressed Ye Qing this time.

Ye Qing sighed. It was obvious that none of these ghosts were easy to beat, which was why he had been keeping his head down and hoping that they would fight among themselves. Alas, it wasn’t meant to be.

“Er... if I may be so bold, may I know your full title? And who was the one who conferred it?” Ye Qing asked.

“I am Jiang Yu, Commandery Governor of Sky Gate and a fourth rank official of the imperial court! I was conferred this title by Emperor You Huang himself!” Yin Governor screeched out of his carriage. The curtains flapped wildly before taking to the air and flying circles around the carriage. “Will you surrender now, rebel?”

I thought so, Ye Qing thought to himself. Both Emperor You Huang and the governor were people from five hundred years ago, meaning that the ghosts surrounding him were the dead of Sky Gate.

Having confirmed his suspicions, Ye Qing pretended to be afraid for his life and begged, “This subject will die if that is your wish, my lord, but can you please tell me what your grand plan is before you kill me?”

Yin Governor wasn’t stupid, however. He sneered, “Hah. Did you think you could trick me, cunning rebel? You may hear of my plans after you’re dead!”

Yin Governor pointed a finger at Ye Qing and fired a sword made of yin qi. It sucked the surrounding yin qi to form a gigantic sword and fell toward Ye Qing's head.

Even before the sword fell, the surrounding Grudge Spirits were already trembling like leaves. The ghost boys and ghost bride—both Hatred-class Strangers—were watching the sword warily as well.

“This is the Son of Heaven Sword His Imperial Majesty himself bestowed to me. As it is a representation of him, it can be used to cut down a disloyal relative of the imperial family, corrupt officials, or traitorous rebels like you. Be honored that you get to die under this sword!”

“Says the guy who's plotting to cut down an official of the current dynasty with a sword from the previous dynasty [1]! You really are too bold, Lord Jiang!”

Realizing that he wouldn't be able to pry any information from the governor, Ye Qing sneered and activated the Boundless Mara Buddha. The Buddha image behind him immediately shone like a proud, golden sun and melted all the yin qi that made up the gigantic sword, revealing its true body. Then, Ye Qing took one step forward, leaped into the sky like a soaring dragon, and punched the Son of Heaven Sword across the blade.

The Son of Heaven Sword shook violently as invisible flames turned its blade bright red. It was sent back to Yin Governor even faster than when it was flying toward Ye Qing.

“It is against etiquette not to reciprocate a gesture, so here you go!”

The Burning Wind reached the group first before the sword. It was as if this section of the valley had turned into a furnace as invisible flames swept across them.

“Argh!” The governor's entourage screamed in pain and dissolved into dust instantly. They were just too weak to withstand the astral qi.

“You are courting death, rebel!”

Enraged, Yin Governor charged out of his carriage to meet Ye Qing in battle. He was wearing a golden swallow mianfu [2] and a tall crown.

A shadow wielding an official seal in one hand and a golden brush on the other appeared in front of Yin Governor. When the seal was raised, a dragon made completely of yin qi soared out and charged straight toward the Son of Heaven Sword.

There was a huge explosion, and both the dragon and the shadow disappeared. However, the Son of Heaven Sword was also repelled. Unfortunately, a silhouette landed on top of Yin Governor's carriage before he could take any joy in his success. Such was the force of his landing that the carriage shook violently, and its eerie green flames were scattered.

Countless Yin Souls and Grudge Spirits flew out of the carriage to attack Ye Qing, but they disappeared practically as soon as they emerged. The carriage and Yin Governor himself were dissolving as well.

“What else are you waiting for? The Ghost King will slaughter you both if your negligence causes our plan to fail!” Yin Governor uttered angrily and agitatedly. Gone was his earlier air of confidence and superiority, replaced by deep hatred and panic.

“Useless...”

“Trash...”

“Stupid...”

“Is there anything else you can do besides using the Ghost King to oppress us?”

The ghost boys complained loudly, but they didn’t hesitate to come to Yin Governor’s aid. The drawings on their faces suddenly came alive and unleashed a strange power.

The boy with wrinkles drawn on his forehead inhaled slightly. A powerful yin wind immediately started blowing, and Ye Qing felt an unnatural chill stealing away his vigor and vitality.

The boy with eye circles and a tongue drawn on his face covered his mouth and let out a small, lazy yawn. The next moment, Ye Qing felt as if he was plunged into a pool of ice, and his head suddenly hurt like a bitch. He also felt nausea, dizziness, and other debilitating sensations. It was like he was a gravely ill person on his deathbed.

Chapter 219: The Five Boys of Suffering

“What a strange power.”

Ye Qing frowned and channeled the Burning Wind to cleanse away the unholy energies, but before he could do so, a terrible weight suddenly pressed down on his back. His feet abruptly sank into the ground as if he was carrying a million mountains, and a grayish fire started burning within thirty meters of him. Strangely, it was cold, lifeless, and completely devoid of temperature. It felt like a flame that should only exist during the Hundred Ghosts Parade, or the depths of hell.

This was just the beginning, however. While Ye Qing was struggling to break free from the powers afflicting him, a terrible onslaught of emotions suddenly assaulted his mind. He felt terribly lost and sorrowful as if he had just lost his loved ones. He felt as if nothing in life was meaningless and hopeless, and that there wasn’t even a soul he could rely on in this trying time. He was so sad, so lonely, so in despair that he thought he might as well die.

He should just... die.

As soon as the idea took root, it quickly spread throughout his heart and filled him with a sense of bleakness and despair. He actually stopped resisting and allowed the deathly fire to erode his flesh, his vigor and vitality to leak freely, and all sorts of illness to spread throughout his body.

I should die. I should die. I should—

“Amitabha...”

It was at this moment the Boundless Mara Buddha unleashed a halo of golden light. The deathly flames receded, the yin qi dissipated, and the chant resounded throughout Ye Qing’s mind and soul like a loud bell. It dispelled all of the negative emotions and restored Ye Qing’s mind to full clarity in an instant.

No evil might take root so long as the Boundless Mara Buddha was present.

“What the hell just happened to me?”

The moment Ye Qing returned to normal, he immediately noted that he was in trouble. His body felt weak in a way he had never felt since he reached the journeyman level of body-tempering. Not wanting to tempt fate, he immediately visualized the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” to protect his mind from the emotional influence, and channeled the “Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind” to circulate his astral qi in the most efficient way possible. His vigor pulsed, and his body turned as hot as a furnace. The evil energies afflicting his body were dissolved into nothing in just the blink of an eye.

As soon as he was cured, his powerful body began repairing itself. At the same time, he formed a shield around himself with his astral qi and encompassed himself in the light of the Mara Boundless Buddha to ensure that no more evil energies could enter his body. It was only he let out a sigh of relief and inspected the ghost boys.

“Aging, sickness, death, and parting? Could it be... the Five Boys of Suffering!” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization when a memory suddenly rose to the surface of his mind.

The Buddha stated that there were eight sufferings in one’s life, and they were living, aging, sickness, death, love, hatred, greed for what one couldn’t have, and reluctance to relinquish what should be relinquished. So long as the eight sufferings existed, then it was only a matter of time before evil was born in one’s heart.

The Five Boys of Suffering were ghost boys who were born from the suffering caused by living, aging, sickness, death, and parting. In fact, the drawings on their faces showed exactly which boy commanded which suffering. The rising sun was a symbol of life, which was why the boy with the rising sun on his face was the Life Boy.

The Old Boy was the one with wrinkles on his face, the Ill Boy had eye circles and a tongue on his face, the Death Boy a pair of bones on his cheeks, and the Parting Boy had crescents on his face.

Obviously, their magic were as their names implied. The Life Boy commanded the magic of life and could heal his brothers and himself of injuries. The Old Boy commanded the magic of aging and could absorb a living being’s vigor and vitality to age them. The Ill Boy commanded the magic of ailments and could infect someone with all kinds of illnesses, the Death Boy commanded the magic of death and could turn fifty kilometers of land into a ghastly hell with the snap of a finger, and the Parting Boy commanded the power of separation and could afflict one with certain emotions to the point where they would rather die than continue living in this world.

Some of their magic was tangible, and some weren’t. Regardless, they were all incredibly strange and unpredictable.

The Five Boys of Suffering might appear to be five different entities, but in reality they were a five-in-one Stranger. Their minds were connected to each other, so they could cooperate perfectly and pose a greater threat against their enemies. It was why they were on par with some weak Soulstealer-class Strangers despite being classified as Hatred-class. At the very least, they were stronger than the Grudge Mother and Grudge Infants he fought before. The fact that he nearly died just now was proof of their strength.

Still, they had lost the element of surprise, so their ability to threaten him had decreased considerably.

Seeing that their attacks weren't working, the Life Boy—he had been verbally cheering his brothers on this whole time—performed a backflip. The rising sun drawing on his head started floating above his head and poured down rays of sunlight.

The four ghost boys were a little tired after attacking for so long, but the presence of the rising sun immediately restored their strength and even strengthened their power.

“Huh... it can suppress my power too? How magical,” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise. The sunrays couldn't just replenish the ghost boys' strength, they could suppress the power of his Boundless Mara Buddha and his astral qi as well. It was quite impressive.

The Five Boys of Suffering weren't his only enemies, however. While the Hatred-class Stranger was keeping him pinned, the red veil covering the ghost bride's face flew into the air and grew bigger and bigger, all the while spinning like a top. It wasn't long before it had become as big as the sky itself. The way the fabric undulated somewhat resembled the waves of a sea.

The next moment, a literal sea of blood poured down from above like the flood from heaven.

Ye Qing's senses told him that the sea of blood wasn't actually blood, however. It was a manifestation of resentment and yin qi.

Besides that, he could vaguely hear music from the red sea. It sounded both like wedding music and funeral music. They mingled together to form a positively eerie tune.

She harbors within her an ocean of resentment, Ye Qing thought to himself. As if on cue, Yin Governor's aura suddenly flared up in his perception.

Yin Governor had gone into hiding after the Five Boys of Suffering took over. When the ghost bride launched her attack, he decided that this was a good opportunity and emerged from his hiding spot. While riding a thick gust of yin wind, he grabbed his golden brush and wrote a sage's essay in the air in one smooth motion.

A sage's essay should be noble and glorious, but this one was brimming with yin qi and ghastly wails. Countless yin soldiers emerged from it and charged straight toward Ye Qing.

“How dare you wound me, rebel! I'm going to extract your soul and use it to fuel a sky lantern! You will wish that you were dead!”

“Perfect. I'd rather deal with all three of you at once than one by one anyway.”

Ye Qing smirked coolly despite the danger he was in. A crescent blade abruptly appeared in his hand, and he swung it horizontally in front of him. His movement was perfectly bland, but the red lotuses that suddenly bloomed all over the place weren't. They looked as dreamy as they were demonic, and they seemed capable of reflecting the sin and desire hidden in the deepest part of one's heart.

The red lotus reflected one's sins and slayed both man and sin.

“Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art”

When the red lotuses descended, all three Strangers abruptly froze in their tracks and blanked out. The next moment, dark red hellfire erupted all across their bodies, and no matter how hard they tried to struggle, they were unable to extinguish the flames eating away at their bodies. If anything, it was growing larger and larger.

The Red Lotus Hellfire was fueled by its victim's sin. So long as there was sin to burn, the hellfire would never fade.

These three Strangers were born from infinite resentment, and they were as cruel as they were ruthless. They hadn't been good people when they were alive, and even after they died they continued to haunt the world as evil spirits. Of course centuries of sin couldn't be extinguished so easily.

As the hellfire grew into an inferno, the evil aura the three Strangers emanated grew thinner and thinner. Their expressions were growing increasingly peaceful as well. In the end, they dissolved into ashes in peace.

"Phew. That was harder than I thought," Ye Qing sighed as he put away his saber. The light in his eyes was weak, and his complexion was as pale as a sheet.

The "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art" was powerful, but it was a Spirit Purification-stage saber art. Despite his outstanding spirit and ample amount of astral qi, it still strained him greatly to execute its technique. His spirit in particular was nearing the bottom of the barrel.

At his current level, he could only use the saber art as a final blow or a do-or-die move. If the enemy was still standing after the attack, then he would be very sorry.

The good news was that the "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art" was so powerful that practically anyone below the Spirit Purification stage was going to die in one strike, if not two. If even two strikes weren't enough to slay the enemy, then... he could only book it with his tail between his legs.

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and popped two silver dragon-serpent runes to replenish his strength. Now wasn't the time to be frugal.

"What? Why are there only fourteen silver runes??"

When Ye Qing glanced at the Annon Sutra, he was expecting it to be absolutely covered in silver runes. Instead, he counted only fourteen not including the two he just popped to restore his own strength. This made no sense considering how many Grudge Spirits he just killed.

He was just feeling miffed when suddenly, he caught a glimpse of gold amidst the silver runes. It was shaped like a dragon.

"Is this a... golden rune? Could it be...?"

Ye Qing's eyes lit up. If a sufficient number of gray dragon-serpent runes could combine into a silver rune, it made sense then a sufficient number of silver dragon-serpent runes could combine into a gold rune as well.

"The gray runes could be used to replenish vigor, whereas the silver runes could be used to replenish true qi. I wonder what a golden dragon-serpent rune could do?"

Curiosity tickled at Ye Qing's chest cavity, and he was just about to ask the Annon Sutra about its effects when suddenly, he heard a series of footsteps from somewhere. They seemed to be approaching his location.

Footsteps? The Way of Taiping! A glint flickered in Ye Qing's eyes as he put away the Annon Sutra and ducked into a nearby rubble. He was almost certain it was the bastards because ghosts couldn't produce footsteps.

As expected, a man and a woman stepped into the battlefield. Their attire was incredibly strange. The man was wearing a theater costume and make-up [1], which was... actually a pretty good fit with this eerie place. The woman was wearing a hibiscus on her head and theater makeup as well. She had a black mole on her left upper lip and carried a square handkerchief on her left hand and a maid's fan on her right. It reminded Ye Qing of a matchmaker [2].

"So? Did the Pacification Bureau come, Actor?" The woman waved her handkerchief and spoke in a frivolous tone. She was definitely acting like a matchmaker.

The makeup on Actor's face turned from blue to white. His eyes flickered with puzzlement and cunning as he answered, "It's hard to say. I can only sense one human's aura in the area, and they're fairly powerful."

"Is he alive or dead?" The woman giggled.

Actor shook his head. "I'm not sure, but I reckon that they were annihilated by the Ghost King's three subordinates. They're more than a match for most warriors."

"That's very true!" The woman nodded earnestly. "We really should've come sooner. If we could catch them alive, we could've interrogated them and found out if the Pacification Bureau had discovered us."

Actor frowned as his makeup changed colors repeatedly as if to reflect his uncertain emotions. "I doubt it. First, Xing The Third is a veteran who has served our sect faithfully for many years. There is no way he would betray us. Second, the Pacification Bureau wouldn't send a single person to scout out this place, much less one who would cause such a big commotion. It's probably just a curious jianghu warrior or something."

"Finally, didn't the spies we plant at Cow Ghost Market just send word saying that the Pacification Bureau is still hanging out at Thaiping Grain Retailer? This proves that they haven't discovered anything beyond that. There is nothing to worry about."

"Haha... you are correct," The woman said with a giggle. "Not that it would matter even if they did find this place. The Ghost King had deployed his three dogs and over ten thousand Grudge Spirits to guard this place. Those fools would just die if they dared to show their faces around here."

"Besides that, we're just a few hours away from completing our plan. When the boss finally finishes widening the crack leading to the Nine Nethers and draws out its demonic qi, the Grudge Spirits that had been trapped in Sky Gate for centuries would

finally be released. When that happens, the entire city and even the commandery itself would become a living hell.”

“Both Luo Shui and the world would plunge into chaos, and our sect would rise from their ashes.”

“Waha! Wahaha!” Actor laughed, but it sounded like he was reciting a script.

“What will you do when the time comes, Matchmaker?”

“Me? Well, my dream is to open a ton of brothels...”

“Wahaha, so your dream is to become a pimp? Then why did you choose ‘Matchmaker’ as your moniker instead of ‘Pimp’ back then?”

“Well, both jobs require matching people together, so there isn’t really a difference, is there? Hahaha...”

Chapter 220: The Crack

“Demonic qi? The Grudge Spirits would finally be freed?” Ye Qing mulled over their conversation carefully as Actor and Matchmaker slowly walked out of sight. Their conversation was short, but it was more or less enough for Ye Qing to piece together their true plan and objective.

Five hundred years ago, the battle between two peak champions caused Sky Gate to be destroyed and sink into the underground. Hundreds of thousands had died as a result. At the same time, their battle opened a gap to the Nine Nethers and caused a small amount of demonic qi to leak into the surface.

Humans could be good or evil, and nature could be yin and yang. Naturally, there was a world of light and a world of darkness as well. The Nine Nethers was the place where the greatest darkness, yin energy, wickedness and evil were gathered. Humanity wasn’t meant to live here to put it mildly. Its demonic qi—or the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi in full—was the culmination of all that was dark and possessed incredible corruptive power. It could tempt someone to fall or indulge and give rise to all sorts of evil desires.

The people of Sky Gate were resentful to begin with as they had died an unjustified death. Throw in the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi into the mix, and their ghosts started transforming into Grudge Spirits en masse.

There was a silver lining, however. As the amount of Nine Nethers Demonic Qi leaking into the surface was limited and confined to the bottom of Sky Gate Abyss only, the Grudge Spirits it gave birth was unable to leave its range. That was why Cow Ghost Market and Luo Shui had remained safe for hundreds of years.

Somehow, the Way of Taiping found out about this place and decided to cooperate with the Strangers residing at the bottom of Sky Gate Abyss, namely Yin Governor, the Five Boys of Suffering, the ghost bride, and the ghost king they spoke of. Their plan was to widen this crack into a full opening so that the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi could manifest on the surface in full.

This way, the ghost king and his cohorts could descend upon the living, the Way of Taiping could seize the opportunity to promote their so-called faith and kickstart a rebellion.

Of course, the people were the ones who would suffer the most in this scenario. In fact, the people often suffered during times of crisis or prosperity.

“An insane person who’s strong can be locked behind bars, but an insane person who’s smart? Dammit!” Ye Qing cursed under his breath. The Way of Taiping truly had no qualms when it came to promoting their religion. They were monsters worse than Strangers in every sense of the word.

According to Actor and Matchmaker, the horde, no, the army of Grudge Spirits he encountered earlier was a trap the Ghost King had laid for the Pacification Bureau. A lot of people could have died had they shown up without knowing what was waiting for them. It was a coincidence, but he had eliminated what was possibly the biggest threat to his fellow colleagues.

Okay, it totally wasn’t a coincidence. How could he overlook the Grudge Spirits when they were dangling right in front of him? How could he allow all this experience to go to waste?

Plus, it wasn’t completely his greed that drove him to take such a risky action. The first horde of Grudge Spirits he triggered was definitely an accident, but later, he decided he would use himself as bait.

The bottom of Sky Gate Abyss was just too huge. Trying to find the Way of Taiping in this fog was like trying to search for a needle in the ocean. That was why he decided to massacre the Grudge Spirits and bait them into coming to him instead. The plan was to capture them and interrogate the location of their main group, or tail them to their hideout.

Both plans were better than searching mindlessly in this foggy valley, and he would be killing two birds with one stone as well. What’s not to like?

While things hadn’t gone exactly as he planned, the outcome was ultimately positive.

After Actor and Matchmaker were gone, Ye Qing crawled out of the ruins and trailed after the duo carefully. Both warriors were late-stage Astral Refiners, so Ye Qing followed behind them from at least one hundred meters away. With his powerful spirit and the fog to act as a great cover, he wasn’t worried about losing the duo or being discovered.

Actor and Matchmaker had no idea that someone was tailing them in secret. They continued to make conversation with each other until they reached their hideout.

Their hideout was a huge basin, and surrounding the basin were twelve pillars engraved with mysterious runes. Sticking atop the pillars were banners sewn with all sorts of gods, demons, and strange beasts. Not only did they give off a powerful aura, they made this strange howl when they flapped in the wind.

The twelve pillars and twelve banners formed a mysterious array. At the center of the array was a thin crack about one meter in length and a finger wide.

It wasn’t until now that Ye Qing realized that the so-called crack was more like a mark left behind by a sword attack. The crack looked bottomless as far as he could tell, and pitch black air was seeping out of it. Despite his distance, he could still sense a powerful darkness and evil from the qi.

“That’s definitely the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi!”

Ye Qing used an Invisibility Talisman and hid behind a giant rock. His eyebrows were scrunched together in thought. There was something strange he noticed about the crack. Every time a wisp of demonic qi poured out of the crack, it would immediately turn so thin it was almost invisible. It was almost as if it was diluted or suppressed by some sort of power.

Curious, Ye Qing tried to extend his spirit over to the crack. However, he had just crossed a short distance when suddenly, he blanched in fear, “Shit! That’s—Pff!”

Blood burst out of his orifices despite his best attempt to control his reaction. His head pounded like someone was beating it with a jackhammer, and he would’ve been exposed if he hadn’t used the Invisibility Talisman.

“A sword intent. I’ve never sensed such a powerful sword intent in my life!”

It took Ye Qing a few deep breaths before he finally recovered. To say that he was shocked would be an understatement.

A sword intent unlike anything he had ever felt before was what was keeping the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi suppressed. When he tried to perceive it with his spirit, a massive, impossibly sharp sword had suddenly appeared in his head and attempted to sever his mind. He absolutely could’ve died if his mind wasn’t as strong as it was.

“This is the second time looking at the wrong things had almost cost me my life.”

Back in his world, saying the wrong things could potentially lead to death. But here? Taking one look at the wrong things could mean death. This fucking world.

Seeing as the sword intent was the reason the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi was suppressed, Ye Qing reckoned that the crack really was a mark left behind by a sword attack.

“Who on earth could have done such a thing? Not only did it pierce through the Nine Nethers, it left behind a sword intent that’s potent enough to suppress the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi... Wait... It couldn’t be...”

Suddenly, fear and disbelief overwrote Ye Qing’s expression. “Was it a remnant of the two peak champions who fought to the death five hundred years ago?”

“If that’s true, then just how strong were they? Five hundred years is enough time to erode countless things, but this sword intent is still so strong it almost killed me for taking a look at it. Getting close to it physically would probably kill me, wouldn’t it?”

Then again, their battle did result in the destruction of an entire city, so he supposed that it wasn’t too surprising?

“Boss! Is the Twelve Sky Gods and Demons Array ready yet?”

Meanwhile, Actor and Matchmaker was speaking to a boy at the periphery of the array. The boy wore a standing pigtail and looked to be twelve or thirteen years old at most.

“Hehehe. Almost. The array itself is ready to activate at any moment. When the Black Tide occurs half a teatime later, we’ll activate it and annihilate the sword intent stuck inside the crack in one go. The Nine Nethers Demonic Qi would spill out like a tidal wave then.”

The boy giggled. “Oh right. Did you two find anything? Was it a member of the Pacification Bureau?”

“We think not!” Actor shook his head before repeating his earlier deductions.

The boy smiled. “Well, it doesn’t matter even if it was them. It’s already too late.”

“The boss is right!”

“The boss is wise!”

A pair of women wearing colorful clothes piped in while gesticulating like they were dancing.

In fact, their monikers were Dancer 1 and Dancer 2. The woman who loved swinging her arms around was Dancer 1, and the one who loved to hop up and down was Dancer 2. They were twins as well.

Dancer 1 huffed, “If it wasn’t for that—”

“—damned sword qi!” Dancer 2 continued.

“Our plan would’ve succeeded—”

“—a long time ago!”

Matchmaker swung her handkerchief and bent down seductively. “Come now, that sword qi was left behind by Jun Wuyan, the man who was renowned for his ‘Fifteen Thousand Kilometers of Sword Intent’. Of course it would be potent even after five hundred years.”

“It’s been years since we started this project, and to this day we still couldn’t get within a meter of it!”

It was at this moment a paper crane flew out of the fog and landed in the boy’s palm. When he unfolded the crane and checked out its contents, he blanched. “Oh no. Paper Celestial just messaged me saying that Gu Suitang had shown up with the reinforcements. In fact, they’re already here at Sky Gate Abyss!”

“What? What’s going on? Why would Gu Suitang himself show up, and why would he come here?” Actor exclaimed in puzzlement as his make-up suddenly turned blue.

“No, no, we are literally moments away from succeeding. The plan mustn’t fail at the final step!”

“What should we do, boss?”

“The Black Tide will be appearing in less than half a teatime.” The boy thought for a moment before replying, “Inform Ghost King about this. We’re going to delay Gu Suitang for as long as possible!”

“Can we though? Gu Suitang is a Spirit Master!” Matchmaker voiced her worry.

The boy answered, “I’m not planning to kill Gu Suitang, I only want to delay him. We just need to lead them around for half a teatime or so, and not even three Gu Suitangs would be able to change the outcome.”

“Also, inform Paper Celestial and Dog King to wreak some havoc in Cow Ghost Market. The distraction may be able to buy us some time as well.”

“The boss is wise!” Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 chirped in unison.

“Let’s go!” The boy beckoned for everyone to join him, and they were gone in just a moment.

The basin quickly turned silent, disturbed only by the incessant noise of the flapping banners.

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“Squeak squeak!”

A four-eared, palm-sized silver mouse was slowly making its way through the fog while followed by Gu Suitang, Lin Yuhuai, Chu Nianjiu and more. They numbered at least several hundred people.

“Chief, Joyless went this way judging from the signs he left behind.”

The silver mouse was called the Silver Tracker, and it was a tracking Stranger the Pacification Bureau specifically bred to track down certain signs. For starters, it could track down the unique scent of a special concoction all Pacification Bureau members were equipped with for various purposes.

Gu Suitang looked around the area while responding in an indifferent voice, “Joyless had definitely passed through here. There are signs of battles and leftover auras in this place.”

“Heh. Lord Ye is seriously amazing. I still can’t believe he found the Taiping cultist’s hideout of all things! He’s so getting a pay raise if we manage to uproot them all in Luo Shui!” Wei Yueshan said happily behind Gu Suitang.

Slap!

The Lieutenant had just finished talking when Gu Suitang wheeled around and slapped him in the face. The Deputy Chief of Bureau swore, “Amazing my ass! More like stupid beyond imagination!”

“He knew this was their main hideout, and he knew they were prepared for intruders, and he still came alone like he was a greenhorn! Did he really think he’s invincible under the heavens just because he had learned a few years of kung fu? I’m fucking bald at the center, and even I wouldn’t dare to make such a claim! Who the fuck does he think he is?”

“The rest of you kiddos better not emulate his example, you hear me? You only have one life. Why would you waste it like this when you can spend it on eating and drinking instead?”

Wei Yueshan rubbed the back of his head, chuckling. It looked like Gu Suitang was abusing them, but anyone could tell that he was just concerned for their safety.

Lin Yuhuai smiled. “You don’t have to worry too much, Chief. Joyless is not a reckless man, nor is he the type of person to treat his life like a joke. He must be fully confident in his abilities to come here alone. He will be fine.”

Gu Suitang harrumphed. “He best hope so! When we return, I’m going to beat up his arrogant ass so he won’t forget that there’s always a bigger heaven out there!”

“Chief!”

Suddenly, a Pacification Sentinel ran over and reported, “A riot is taking place at Cow Ghost Market right now. We believe it’s incited by the Taiping cultists.”