

Stranger 221

Chapter 221: King of Sky Gate

“Hah! They’re panicking. It’s clear that they’re trying to lure us away or split up our manpower since we found their hideout. They must think we’re stupid or something!” Chu Nianjiu commented while sipping from his wine gourd.

He had just finished saying this when Gu Suitang said, “Squad 1 and 2, head back and assist our brothers at Cow Ghost Market. Don’t allow a single Taiping cultist to slip through your grasp.”

“At once!”

Two squads of Pacification Sentinels received the order and went back immediately.

Wine spilled out of Chu Nianjiu’s mouth as he coughed loudly. “Cough! Cough! My lord, er....”

He just said that the Taiping cultists were trying to lure them away or split them up, and Gu Suitang immediately dispatched not one, but two squads back to Cow Ghost Market. Was Gu Suitang really that dumb, or was he undermining him?

In response, Gu Suitang snorted. “I’m all the manpower we need, and the fact that they’re trying to pull such a trick proves that they’re not confident in their ability to stop us. Plus, too many people can be a burden sometimes.”

“Hehe! You are as wise as you are mighty, master!” Wei Yueshan hurriedly flattered Gu Suitang, but his effort to placate his master only earned another slap to the back of his head.

The Deputy Chief of Bureau rebuked him, “Is flattery the only thing you’ve learned properly? Our enemy is already upon us, you fool!”

Gu Suitang stomped the ground hard and sent a tidal wave of earth into the thick fog. He then yelled, “Why aren’t you showing yourself when you’re already here? Are you trying to ambush us?”

Rumble...

The next moment, a sword lit up and fell down on the tsunami of earth. Shrouded in an enormous amount of yin qi, it successfully cut the deadly wave in half.

“Who dares to offend the dignity of a king? You should submit and extinguish your own soul for the offense!”

A majestic voice boomed out from deeper within the valley, and the fog itself trembled and receded as if it was afraid of the owner of the voice, revealing a tall and imposing figure.

The figure had a cow’s head but a human’s body. His eyes were as big as millstones, and its pitch black horns were curved like crescents. The horns were also burning a ghastly flame that looked like countless wailing souls, eerie and horrifying.

Even more imposing was the ridiculously huge sword he was carrying. A golden dragon was encircling the sword, and it roared loudly like it was alive. It made the imposing figure look like a god or demon incarnate.

Standing behind the cow-faced giant was several thousand yin soldiers, all fully armored and equipped with weapons. Their resentment and bloodthirst merged together to form a dark cloud where ghastly wails could be heard all the time.

“Did you just call yourself a king? You shouldn’t make claims you don’t deserve just because you have a big head, bud. If a piece of shit like you could become king, then I would be an emperor already!”

Gu Suitang looked like a child compared to the cow-faced giant, but he wasn’t afraid in the slightest. If anything, he was looking the Stranger up and down with obvious disdain on his face.

“Blasphemer! I was made the King of Sky Gate by Emperor You Feng himself. I command thirty thousand Sky Gate Guards and protect the eastern capital from all danger! You ants would dare to besmirch my good name? I shall tear you all to shreds!”

The King of Sky Gate let out an angry roar and plunged his massive sword into the ground with both hands. Yin wind howled as the earth split apart inch by inch.

“The King of Sky Gate, huh? Hah! Your name sounds impressive, but you still died, didn’t you?”

Gu Suitang taunted, “Anyway, let’s get on with the fight already. You’re trying to buy time for something, aren’t you? Do you think I’m stupid?”

As soon as Gu Suitang said this, the earth beneath his feet abruptly sank a few inches. He abruptly appeared in front of the King of Sky Gate and threw a devastating punch.

The King of Sky Gate crossed his sword in front of himself like a shield. Fist met metal, and—
THAAAAAAAAAANG!

It sounded like a massive bell was struck. The sound wave that emanated from the impact was so loud and potent that an entire swath of yin soldiers were crushed just like that.

“Rraaaagh! You are courting death!”

The King of Sky Gate was extremely peeved right now. Over half of his soldiers were dead before they could be of use, and for whatever reason, the tens of thousands of Grudge Spirits he had deployed here were nowhere to be found. Even his three trusted subordinates—Yin Governor, the ghostface boys and ghost bride were nowhere to be found. Not nearly enough time had passed for him to get over their deaths, and now he had lost over half of his troops. How could he be okay with this?

A tremendous amount of yin qi gushed out of the King of Sky Gate’s body as he held his sword in front of him and swept it sideways like a fan, driving Gu Suitang backward. Then, he slashed at the deputy chief from nine different directions. His force was unstoppable, and his yin qi was all-encompassing. The attack felt righteous not unlike a king attacking an usurper who dared to

challenge his throne. Just like all life must stand under the heavens, so must all subjects submit to their king.

“"King's Sword"”

“Hah! You’re just a Stranger, and you dream of turning all life into your subject? You dare to make me submit? Dream on!”

Disdain flickered in Gu Suitang’s eyes as he cracked his neck and gathered his muscles. His bones made a series of audible pops as a terrifying aura washed out of his body and kicked up his hair and beard. Now he too looked like a god or demon incarnate.

Gu Suitang’s response toward the nine consecutive attacks was to launch a straight punch. The punch looked completely basic and simple. It was empowered only by an unstoppable force and a fist intent taller than even a mountain.

“Mountain Shaking Punch” [1]

His fists could shake mountains and turn them all into rubble, much less a sword. It easily disintegrated the King of Sky Gate’s sword technique into nothing.

Gu Suitang’s attainment in the way of the fist was very high. The man followed the fist, and the fist followed the intent. He appeared in front of the King of Sky Gate right after he defeated the sword technique and swung his arm sideways like a dragon’s tail.

Once again, the King of Sky Gate raised his sword to block the attack. There was a loud bang, and the Stranger was pushed back three steps before he caught himself. However, every time he took a step backward, he would launch a counterattack. That was three attacks in total since he moved three steps. Intent raged like a torrential river as the slashes crashed into Gu Suitang like a stream.

Gu Suitang ignored the attack, however. Vigor rising, he just charged right through the slashes like they were nothing and threw another Mountain Shaking Fist.

This time, the punch landed squarely on the King of Sky Gate’s chest and exploded half of his body just like that. The Stranger was stunned and in disbelief to put it mildly.

Outdated as it was, the "King's Sword" was one of the empire’s ultimate arts five hundred years ago. Its name alone was an indicator how powerful it was. Grand and majestic, it naturally elicited fear and submission from all who faced it and could suppress most martial arts in the world.

The "King's Sword" could only unleash its true power when infused with the Will of the Dragon and the Will of the People. Since the previous dynasty was gone, and he himself couldn’t receive the Will of the Dragon as he was already dead, the sword art was a lot weaker than it should be. However, during the five hundred years he was imprisoned at the bottom of Sky Gate Abyss, he had studied the sword intent that penetrated all the way to the Nine Nethers enough to incorporate it into his “King’s Sword”. As a result, the sword art actually improved in power over time.

It was easily his proudest achievement as a dead man.

He thought that his modified sword art would give him a chance to go toe to toe with Gu Suitang, but he couldn’t have been more wrong. Thank goodness he was a Grudge Spirit, or that one punch would’ve been enough to kill him.

The King of Sky Gate inhaled deeply, and yin qi flowed into his mouth like a river. He quickly restored his half-destroyed body.

Meanwhile, Gu Suitang had gotten close and unleashed his Mountain Shaking Punch yet again. The fist art was simple and barbaric, but there was no denying its power and efficacy. Like a child fighting against an adult, the King of Sky Gate could do nothing but be blown into bits of yin qi yet again and again.

“Shit, Gu Suitang’s as strong as the rumors say.”

Meanwhile, Actor, Matchmaker, Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 were all watching Gu Suitang brutalizing the King of Sky Gate in shock and fear.

The King of Sky Gate was a Phenomenon-class Stranger. He was just as skilled and experienced as he was in his previous life as he hadn’t lost his intelligence or memories, but now he possessed the undying body of a yin spirit as well. Therefore, he was even stronger than your average Phenomenon-class Stranger, so much so that even they didn’t dare to treat him lightly.

And yet, Gu Suitang was thrashing him like he was a Mundane-class Stranger.

Gu Suitang’s fist was nothing special. There were no fancy moves, complicated variations, or sublime intent. There was only power and purity.

His power was heavier than a mountain, and his fist intent was so pure that it transcended the heavens.

He might never encounter a soul mate in his life, but his fist would transcend the nine heavens.

Gu Suitang had perfectly joined his strength and intent into one and tempered their union many times over. His skill was also nearing the level of a way. His fists weren’t the only things that were strong either. Literally every part of his body be it his arms, his legs, his shoulders, even his head was a weapon that he could use to crush his enemies. Every blow he threw was as heavy as a mountain and taller than the heavens. Forget that the King of Sky Gate was unable to keep up with Gu Suitang’s movements at all, even if he could, he wouldn’t be able to stop them. It took only a short time before he fell into a complete disadvantage and could only defend himself.

Given enough power, all skills and arts can be dismantled via brute force.

“White Lotus, our Holy Envoy once commented that Gu Suitang’s words, body and actions were as light as a feather, but his heart was higher than the tallest mountain, and his fist intent greater than even the blue sky. If he survives, he is guaranteed to be remembered throughout history.”

Beside them, the child said in a grave voice, “He is a man that even our Holy Envoy would praise. Of course he wouldn’t be an ordinary person.”

Actor exclaimed in astonishment, “That... has to be an exaggeration, right?”

An evil smirk crossed the child’s lips. “That depends. If he survives this tribulation, then sure. If not...”

“True. I’m sure he’ll be pleasantly surprised when he finds out what we have in store for him.” Matchmaker covered her mouth and snickered.

Meanwhile, the King of Sky Gate's defeat was all but certain. In fact, he could die if he made the slightest mistake.

"Should we help him, boss?" Actor asked.

The child replied without hesitation, "Of course! The King of Sky Gate can't die yet. The Yellow Sky still have many uses for a Stranger of his caliber."

"I'll help the King of Sky Gate. You guys go keep the Pacification Sentinels busy. But make sure you don't throw your life away, okay? I only want you to delay them, not annihilate them."

"Got it, boss!" His subordinates replied before entering the fog and disappearing from view.

On the Pacification Bureau's side, Lin Yuhuai ordered, "Yueshan, stay behind and support the deputy chief if need be. Nianjiu, you and I are going to follow the Silver Tracker and locate Joyless."

He made the decision after seeing that the King of Sky Gate was but moments away from dying. However, they had only taken a few steps when a strange song appeared from the fog:

"Rabbit One is sick,

Rabbit Two looks on,

Rabbit Three left to buy some medicine,

Rabbit Four is in pain,

Rabbit Five is dead,

Rabbit Six carries the body,

Rabbit Seven digs a hole,

Rabbit Eight buries the body,

And Rabbit Nine sits on the ground and cries.

When Rabbit Ten asks it why it's crying,

It said,

Rabbit Five will never come back!"

A chill gripped everyone as they listened to the strange song. When it was over, the dozen Pacification Sentinels standing at the outer edge suddenly started shrinking and growing white fur on their skin. They all transformed into white rabbits in just the blink of an eye.

Chapter 222: The Twelve Fiends of Taiping

"A curse? Watch out!"

Lin Yuhuai narrowed his eyes and wrote the word “Cleanse” with his brush. Word: Cleanse was a talisman that specifically targeted curses and evil energies and dispel their influences. The word shone a warm, dewy light full of cleansing power and vitality.

When the light reached the cute and dumb-looking rabbits the Pacification Sentinels had transformed into, they suddenly started screaming in pain. Eerie, black qi seeped out of their bodies profusely, and their stomachs suddenly swelled like they were pregnant. When the swelling reached a critical point, their stomachs burst open, and the Pacification Sentinels fell out of their stomachs.

Unfortunately, the Pacification Sentinels were long dead. They had been crushed into a horrifying ball of blood, bone and gore.

“Bastard!”

Fury flashed in Chu Nianjiu’s eyes as he spat out a mouthful of wine. It transformed into a shower of icicle swords and plunged into the fog. When auras flared from behind the fog—their hidden attackers had to channel their energies to block or dodge the attack—Chu Nianjiu immediately homed in on the auras and charged into the fog.

There were several loud booms as the fog trembled unnaturally. A moment later, Chu Nianjiu flew back out of the fog while surrounded by cold, white air. He looked like he had taken some injuries.

“The Twelve Fiends of Taiping?”

“Wahaha~~~”

Someone let out a strange laugh as four figures slowly stepped out of the fog. They were none other than Actor, Matchmaker, Dancer 1 and Dancer 2. “Well met, Wine Gentleman. That’s right. We are the Twelve Fiends of Taiping.”

“I am Actor,” Actor introduced himself in a strangely-pitched voice[1]. The color of his makeup also changed accordingly.

“I am Matchmaker.” Matchmaker giggled and waved a handkerchief at Chu Nianjiu.

“And we are—” Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 moved their bodies like they were dancing. “—Dancer 1 and Dancer 2!”

“The Twelve Fiends of Taiping, huh?” Chu Nianjiu said while taking a careless sip from his wine gourd. Just now, the four cultists had attacked him together as soon as he entered the fog and scored a few blows. Despite this, he didn’t look worried in the slightest. “I think the Twelve Dogs of Taiping fit you more though.”

“You think? No, they are the Twelve Dogs of Taiping, Nianjiu.”

Lin Yuhuai echoed in agreement as he walked over to his colleague’s side with a warm, impenetrable smile on his face. “And these four are just stray dogs who deserve to be killed for biting whoever they pleased.”

“Ayaya! I am so angry!” Actor’s makeup changed from red to black as he cried out in anger.

Matchmaker's smile grew a little more sinister as well. "This was a good day, and I didn't want to stain it with blood. Now though, I think I'm going to sew up your mouths."

The Twelve Fiends of Taiping sounded a scary title, but in reality they were infamous criminals whom everyone loathed. There was nowhere they could go where they weren't hunted like dogs, which was why they had no choice but to join the Way of Taiping. It was only then they managed to survive. Later, they formed the Twelve Fiends of Taiping and slowly made a name under that title.

This was why they absolutely loathed it when someone dredged up their past. They loathed it even more when someone called them a dog.

"Cut the bullshit and fight us already."

Chu Nianjiu huffed disdainfully before launching five consecutive palm strikes at the four warriors. From a distance, the four palm forces looked like the petals of a winter plum blossom. The ground suddenly became encased in ice, and even the fog was frozen in ice.

—When the plum falls, heaven and earth become as cold as ice. [2]

"Winter Plum Blossom Palm"

Actor, Matchmaker, Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 immediately felt a terrible chill assaulting their senses. It was so that even their blood was showing signs of freezing. They were surprised.

Earlier, they really thought much of Chu Nianjiu's power because it was a four-versus-one. It was only now they realized that he was a force to be reckoned with.

The good news was that they were all late-stage Astral Refiners and on the same level as Chu Nianjiu. Surprised they might be, they weren't afraid of him. Actor flapped the cloak he was wearing, and the accessory immediately burst into flames. It spun like a top and flew toward Chu Nianjiu like a fire dragon.

Unfortunately, it had only flown about halfway before it froze into ice and shattered into smithereens. The next moment, Chu Nianjiu appeared in front of Actor and launched another palm strike.

Actor's theater costume suddenly swelled up like it was a balloon. The hit landed, but Chu Nianjiu felt like he was hitting a ball of cotton. His force was transmitting properly at all.

Suddenly, Actor's makeup flew away from his face like it was a tangible thing and landed on Chu Nianjiu's face. The Peacemaker's movements immediately stiffened, and his eyes lost their focus.

"Not good."

Lin Yuhuai was going to go to his aid, but his senses suddenly screamed danger, and he was forced to jump backward. Not a moment too soon, a shower of silver needles coated in greenish substance just barely missed his face. It was obvious that the greenish substance was deadly poison.

"Silver Bone Piercing Needles?"

Lin Yuhuai squinted a little. The silver needles had pierced through the hard, limestone ground like it was nothing.

The Silver Bone Piercing Needle was an insidious hidden weapon that could pierce through most things with little effort, not to mention that these ones were coated in poison as well. Getting hit was not an option here.

“That’s right. I said I was going to sew up your mouths, didn’t I? You can be my first victim,” said Matchmaker while swaying her hips and slowly making her way toward Lin Yuhuai.

Matchmaker looked slow, but in reality she was traveling at high speed. She reached in front of Lin Yuhuai in just the blink of an eye and waved a palm-leaf fan. Pink petals fell from the sky as a sickly sweet scent spread across the air. At the same time, a couple more Silver Bone Piercing Needles flew toward Lin Yuhuai’s eyes from hard-to-notice angles.

“Plum Blossom Miasma?” Lin Yuhuai frowned again. He had a feeling since Matchmaker shot poisoned needles at him, but now he was certain that she was a poison user.

Plum Blossom Miasma was a kind of miasmatic astral qi and one of the seventy two average-grade astral qis. It could only be found off the beaten tracks of a deep mountain. Although it looked beautiful and smelled good, it was incredibly poisonous. Anyone who inhaled it would hallucinate like they were dreaming and perish in their dreams.

As the brains of the Pacification Bureau of Luo Shui, Lin Yuhuai knew exactly how dangerous the Plum Blossom Miasma was. Naturally, he wasn’t going to treat it lightly. He let loose a string of yellow talismans from his sleeves that surrounded him and protected him from all sides. They looked like they were flying around at random, but not a wisp of Plum Blossom Miasma was able to get to the Peacemaker, much less the silver needles.

While the yellow talismans were protecting him, Lin Yuhuai wrote the word “Seal” and “Suppress”. The word “Seal” transformed into a chain and attempted to bind Matchmaker, while the word “Suppress” transformed into a hill and fell toward her head.

“Hahaha!”

Matchmaker giggled as she released the handkerchief she was holding. It flew over her head, and the peony flowers on the fabric came to life and bloomed a thousand petals.

The petals were as sharp as a blade despite its gentle appearance. They easily cut the chain into pieces and hacked the hill into bits.

As it turned out, the handkerchief was a Strange Artifact. It was quite the powerful one to stop Lin Yuhuai’s “Seal” and “Suppress” too. Having successfully defended herself, Matchmaker launched into a dance and shot an endless hail of Silver Bone Piercing Needles at the Peacemaker.

Lin Yuhuai was unable to break the stalemate for a time. The Silver Bone Piercing Needles were already a pain to defend against, but Matchmaker’s movement art was good enough that he was unable to catch up to her immediately. If he tried to use his talismans to seal her, she would simply release her handkerchief and block them again.

On the other side, Actor’s lips curled into a cruel smile after Chu Nianjiu had fallen into his trap. One of the martial arts he cultivated was called the “Four Secrets of Emotions”, and it possessed the

power to influence one's spirit and emotions. Combined with his makeup, which was a Hatred-class Strange Artifact, he could directly take over another person's mind and use them like a puppet.

Of course, Chu Nianjiu was just a late-stage Astral Refiner just like him, and his spirit was quite strong as well. There was no way he would be able to control him like he controlled his victims. However, the surprise attack was enough to daze him for a short while. It would last a few breaths at most, but in a battle between warriors, even an instant could mean the difference between life and death.

Actor rushed forward and curled three of his fingers. The curled fingers turned as red as molten steel as he made a grab for Chu Nianjiu's chest.

"Heart Plucking Claw"

Heart Plucking Claw was a sinister and vicious claw art that enabled a warrior to rip out their enemy's heart from their chest in an instant without drawing blood. It was also why the people of jianghu, in their infinitely black humor, called it a "bloodless and heartless" martial art.

The Heart Plucking Claw had several weaknesses, and one of it was that it could only be executed at close range. Luckily for Actor, Chu Nianjiu was more than close enough. An evil, savage grin crossed the Fiend's face as his fingers moved ever closer to Chu Nianjiu's chest.

Almost. Almost...

Actor trembled with excitement. He could literally feel the chill rising from the Peacemaker's skin.

However, Actor's eyes bugged out in disbelief as soon his fingers made contact with Chu Nianjiu's body. The next moment, white ice appeared on his fingertips and spread across his whole body in the blink of an eye. It happened so quickly that the ice sculpture captured his shocked and fearful expression perfectly.

"Heh. What an idiot. Did you really think I would fall for such a petty trick?" Chu Nianjiu smirked disdainfully as his eyes abruptly regained their focus. He flicked a finger against the ice sculpture, and it abruptly shattered into a million pieces like glass.

Chu Nianjiu didn't look happy, however. It was because the pieces of the sculpture suddenly transformed into hundreds and hundreds of Actors.

"The Ice of Nine Heavens? Ahaha. As expected of the Wine Gentleman."

Every Actor let out a strange laugh as their makeup changed colors. By now, he had figured out that Chu Nianjiu was just pretending to be affected by his "Four Secrets of Emotions". It would have killed him if he didn't have a trump card or two up his sleeves.

"I guess you aren't completely ignorant," Chu Nianjiu replied in an uncaring voice while sipping his wine.

Chu Nianjiu cultivated the Ice of Nine Heavens, one of the thirty six superior grade astral qi. It was one of the coldest and darkest astral qis out there and could only be found in an equally cold and dark place. A mere brush against the astral qi could freeze flesh and blood, and a concentrated gust could freeze even one's soul.

His cultivation art was called the “Winter Plum Blossom Art”. Yin and cold, it complemented the Ice of Nine Heavens well and could unleash an unbelievable amount of freezing cold in an instant. It was how he had frozen Actor earlier.

“You should know how powerful the Ice of Nine Heavens is now, dog. Surrender now, and I might yet let you live.”

“Hah! Say that again after you caught me!” Actor cackled. Their aim was to buy time until the sword intent stopping the Nine Nether Demonic Qi from manifesting was destroyed, so there was no need to risk his life. If he could kill Chu Nianjiu, then that would be for the best. If not, he could just fool around and waste as much of his time as possible.

All the illusions rushed Chu Nianjiu as soon as he finished, but the Peacemaker sneered. “Another petty trick.”

Chu Nianjiu took a step forward and filled the entire area with icy qi in the blink of an eye. All the Actors except one abruptly disappeared into nothing. Of course, that was the true Actor.

Chapter 223: One Way Out

“You think my tricks are petty, don’t you? Let’s see if you can still say that after you experienced the true power of my ‘Four Secrets of Emotions!’”

Actor wiped a hand across his face, and his makeup turned bright red in color. That wasn’t the only thing that changed, however. His expression and demeanor suddenly turned courageous and ferocious, and a silver spear appeared into his hand. It was like he was a war general. When he thrust it in Chu Nianjiu’s direction, it was like a thousand pear flowers blooming at the same time.

“Storm Crushed Pear Blossom Spear”

The Storm Crushed Pear Blossom Spear was a military martial art. Simple but not basic, it was fast and ferocious like a storm beating down on a pear blossom. Ideally, its practitioner was expected to kill their opponent in one hit.

In response, Chu Nianjiu waved his palms around and conjured a curtain of palm strikes that were fusing and separating repeatedly. It looked like a sea of winter plums that were blooming and withering over and over again, proud and cold.

The duo clashed fiercely against one another as spear met palm. For a few breaths, it sounded like the collision of force would never end. Then, Actor was thrown back with his silver spear snapped in half, and an icy, hand-shaped mark left on his chest. Over half his body was encased in ice as a result.

“Hooo—”

Actor exhaled and wiped his face once more. The makeup changed from red to white, and once again, his expression and demeanor changed drastically. He went from being courageous and ferocious to cunning and sinister.

Actor produced a sword next, and it was almost as thin as a willow leaf. He then charged toward Chu Nianjiu again. He was now using a completely different martial art and a movement art; one that resembled the spring wind brushing against willow trees. It was light, flexible, and whimsical.

“Willow Wind Dance Sword Art”

The Willow Wind Dance Sword Art was a martial art practiced by the Myriad Willows Sect. It emphasized on being nimble with the sword and running together with the wind. It was best used to pierce bodily points, sever veins, and tie up an enemy.

A short while later, Actor changed his makeup color from white to black. His aura immediately turned tyrannical and bloodthirsty as a pair of massive axes appeared in his hands. He charged toward Chu Nianjiu and swung his axes thirty six times in a row, each one more forceful and violent than the last.

“Thirty Six Hurricane Axes”

The “Thirty Six Hurricane Axes” was a martial art practiced by the Hurricane Bandits. Forceful and unyielding, it was a top-rate do-or-die martial art in the jianghu.

As soon as Actor executed the thirty sixth attack, he changed his makeup from black to yellow. This time, he used a martial art that was grandiose, royal and imposing.

In just a scant few breaths, Actor had assumed four different personalities and executed four completely different martial arts. Despite being weaker than Chu Nianjiu, he actually managed to lock up the Peacemaker in a temporary stalemate.

Neither Chu Nianjiu nor Lin Yuhuai noticed that Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 were hopping, skipping and jumping their way to the troops while they were tied up with Actor and Matchmaker.

The Pacification Sentinels weren’t just going to wait until they got close, of course. They immediately loaded their crossbow bolts, took aim, and fired when the two enemies were about ten meters away from them.

Instead of dodging out of the way, Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 remained where they were as if nothing was happening. When the crossbow bolts were about one meter away from them, it abruptly froze in the air as if caught by some sort of invisible energy.

Xu Banren, Ugly Monk and Amorous Monk were standing in front of the Pacification Sentinels, so they had a front row seat of the duo’s odd behavior. They exchanged puzzled glances with each other while Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 were still “dancing” to their heart’s content.

They didn’t understand what the hell their enemies were doing. Did they have hyperactive child syndrome[1], or was this their way of asking for a truce?

If it was, couldn’t they have chosen a better dance? It looked more like a taunt than anything!

Xu Banren, Ugly Monk and Amorous Monk ordered the men to remain on the defensive since they couldn’t figure out what Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 were doing. They were late-stage Astral Refiners. If the enemy wasn’t going to attack them, then it was better to wait and see what happens.

At first, nothing out of the ordinary happened. Despite Dancer 1 and Dancer 2’s horrible dancing, things were relatively normal. However, some of the weaker Pacification Sentinels suddenly started

dancing without warning as if the two dancers had infected them with some sort of dancing syndrome.

As they danced, these people broke their arms, their legs, their waist, and even their neck. Strangely, the victims didn't notice their odd behavior or feel any pain at all. They continued to dance as if they wouldn't stop until they died[2].

"An illusion spell?"

Amorous Nun hailed from Temptation Nunnery, and Temptation Nunnery was infamous for their illusion spells and sexual harvesting arts. That was why she was the first one to notice what was really going on here.

"HUM!" Ugly Monk immediately responded with a Buddhist incantation. His voice was loud, clear, and bright, and it repelled the evil spell like a Vajrapani would beat down on a demon.

"Om Mani Padme Hum: Hum" [3]

Hum was one of the six-syllabled Buddhist mantras and possessed the power to repel all ghosts and demons. Ugly Monk's voice ripped out like a shockwave and revealed many transparent springs in the air. They stretched across the sky and ended in the afflicted Pacification Sentinels' skulls. It was most likely how she was able to cloud their minds and pilot their bodies.

The strings wobbled for a moment before snapping in half. The afflicted Pacification Sentinels immediately returned to normal.

"Demon Subjugation Formation! Kill!" Xu Banren growled. Those who weren't injured immediately rushed forward and formed a military formation around Xu Banren, Ugly Monk and Amorous Nun.

They had ignored Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 earlier because their action seemed harmless, as ugly as their dance was. But as it turned out, it was an attempt on their lives. Did they really think that the Pacification Bureau made their name through peace and harmony?

Xu Banren stood at the center of the military formation, and Ugly Monk and Amorous Nun on the left and right wing. When the Lieutenant gave the signal, the left and right wing spread out, and the core charged toward Dancer 1 and Dancer 2.

A hail of bolts streaked across the sky and forced Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 to stop them with their strange martial art. While they were distracted, Xu Banren and his men had already reached the two Fiends, and the left and right wing seized the opportunity to surround them from all sides.

The group formed three tight circles around Dancer 1 and Dancer 2. It would take an incredible amount of effort to punch them.

"KILL!" Xu Banren roared with a wave of his hand. The innermost ring of Pacification Sentinels immediately unsheathed their weapons and attacked the duo.

In response, Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 tossed out a rag doll each. Both dolls were wielding a saber each. The second the dolls left their hands, they immediately slipped between the gaps of the Pacification Sentinels at high speed. A series of metallic clangs resounded throughout the valley as

the two dolls blocked all of the attacks aimed at Dancer 1 and Dancer 2. Not only that, every attacker had taken some wounds from the dolls.

“KILL!”

Xu Banren was unmoved, however. The injured personnel backed down, and the second wave rushed forward to engage the enemies in battle. Their formation remained airtight, and not one person panicked.

At first, Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 were able to handle the assault with ease. But over time, they slowly but surely ran out of vigor and stamina.

Complexion pale and breathing out of order, Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 exchanged a glance with each other.

“We can’t keep this up.”

“We need to run.”

The duo leaped into the air and attempted to escape after forcing back another squad of Pacification Sentinels.

“Hmph! Do you think you can escape?” Xu Banren scoffed in disdain when he saw this. Jianghu warriors were deadly, but that was only in a small-scale battle with no order whatsoever. On the other hand, the Pacification Sentinels had been trained to work in groups and obey orders perfectly. Like a tiger surrounded by spearmen from all sides, there was just nothing the duo could possibly do against these numbers.

"A colony of ants can kill an elephant" was never a meaningless saying. Ten soldiers could fight a Vessel Augmentor, a hundred soldiers could fight an Astral Refiner, a thousand soldiers could fight a Spirit Master, ten thousand soldiers could fight a Grandmaster, and a hundred thousand soldiers were invincible in the jianghu.

Plus, not all soldiers were made of the same mettle. Some were formidable warriors who possessed the strength to fight thousands and thousands of enemies alone. This was why a jianghu warrior could be unrivaled in their pond, but never the sea that was the world itself.

History was the proof of this. Many years ago, when Yan and Wei were at war with one another, Wei had employed fifty thousand Blue Wolves [4]to wear out and slay the mighty general protecting the borders of Yan, Duan Murun the “Sword Sage”.

When Chu was still in its inception, the founder of Chu, Chu Qiuyang led a great army and destroyed countless jianghu sects who dared to challenge his authority. Many of these sects had champions who could pluck the stars out of the sky, and yet didn’t even dare to breathe in the wrong direction when Chu Qiuyang destroyed it all.

Were they afraid of the founder and the first emperor of Chu? Of course not.

No, they were afraid of his army of hundreds of thousands.

“Demon Subjugation Slash!” Xu Banren roared, and every Pacification Sentinel swung their sabers at the same time. What should have been a haphazard hail of saber qis

actually joined together to form a massive, incredibly potent saber qi because of their formation. Such was its power that it rivaled the strength of a Spirit Purifier.

Boom!

Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 never managed to react in time. The saber qi annihilated them in an instant and scattered their flesh and blood across the valley.

“Come. We need to reinforce Lord Chu and Lord Lin.”

.....

Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 are dead!

The blood drained away from Actor’s face when he sensed his colleagues’ deaths. The desire to withdraw immediately expanded in his mind.

He knew from the start that there was no way Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 could defeat several hundred Pacification Sentinels on their own, but he thought that they should be able to escape at the very least. Instead, the two late-stage Astral Refiners had died just like that.

The Pacification Sentinels would soon arrive to support their colleague. When that happened, both him and Matchmaker would be in grave danger.

Their demise wasn’t the true reason he wanted to pull back, however. It was the fact that Chu Nianjiu was even more formidable than he thought.

The greatest merit of his “Four Secrets of Emotions” wasn’t his ability to influence another’s spirit and emotions. Or even his ability to control them. After all, most warriors at the same cultivation level would be able to defend themselves from the mental attacks. Not, it was his ability to change his personality and use a corresponding martial art every time he changed his makeup.

Most people would be caught off guard by his transformations and die as a result. After all, it was like he had transformed into a completely different warrior. But not Chu Nianjiu. He had changed his makeup twelve times and used twelve completely different martial arts at this point, but Chu Nianjiu was able to stop them all. Not only that, he was gradually adapting to his tactics as time passed.

On the other hand, his body was overflowing with icy qi, his internal organs were hurting slightly, and he was having trouble cycling his true qi properly. At this rate, he was going to lose even if the Pacification Sentinels showed up.

More importantly, his sixth sense was telling him that something was off. He physically and mentally couldn’t sense anything amiss, and yet he just couldn’t shake off this sliver of worry. That was why he wanted to withdraw for now.

“Oh? You want to run? As expected of a dog who could only bully those who are weaker than him!” Chu Nianjiu scoffed as if he could read Actor’s mind.

“It’s too late though.”

“Too late?” Actor’s heart skipped a beat, but he still couldn’t figure out what Chu Nianjiu was saying.

Chu Nianjiu reached out to catch a snowflake and answered, “Winter has arrived.”

“Winter has arrived?” Actor instinctively parroted and looked up at the sky. It really was snowing, and he had no idea when it started.

The falling snow looked like goose feathers, big and pretty. However, Actor only felt chilled to the core.

It wasn’t just an expression either. Actor abruptly realized that it wasn’t just a feeling. His arms, his legs, his head, his heart—everything had become as cold as ice.

How did I not notice this sooner?

Realizing that he was in grave danger, Actor split into several images and dashed off in different directions. He wanted to escape this unsettling place as soon as possible even though he still didn’t know where his worry was coming from.

“Winter has arrived, and this place is naught but a world of ice and snow!”

Chu Nianjiu’s eyes abruptly turned indigo. The snow started falling earnestly, and the chill in the air grew colder than ever before. Ice started growing on everything that was touched by the snow, and Actor was, of course, not an exception. It was outright comical how he was encased in ice while still in a running pose. His expression was fraught with shock and resistance.

Snap!

Chu Nianjiu snapped his fingers, and the frozen Actor shattered inch by inch into powder. Just like that, the man was gone like he never was.

.....

On another battlefield, Lin Yuhuai asked Matchmaker with a gentle smile dancing on his lips, “Dancer 1 and 2 are dead, and so is Actor. Won’t you join them on the other side?”

Matchmaker was currently standing in the middle of a peachy, flowery world that stretched at least five kilometers in every direction. It would’ve been a most beautiful sight if not for the fact that the ground was covered in Silver Bone Piercing Needles and rot, and the peach flowers and its scent were deadly poisonous.

Matchmaker giggled and waved her somewhat tattered handkerchief. “Haha... I hate crowds, and three is already too much for me.”

She abruptly dashed away and bade Lin Yuhuai goodbye, “Goodbye, handsome! I’ll see you some other time!”

Dancer 1, Dancer 2, and Actor were all dead. She shared a good relationship with them and wanted very much to take revenge for them, but it was just impossible. Lin Yuhuai had proven to be even more formidable than she imagined, and his ability to create runes and talismans practically from thin air was downright scary. If she didn’t leave now, she might really join her friends in the afterlife.

“They’ll be sad if you don’t join them. I’ll do you a favor and reunite you all.”

Lin Yuhuai’s smile grew warmer. “A family should be together, don’t you agree?”

An invisible energy rippled out of the tip of his brush, and he started drawing again as he had done up until this point. But instead of his usual words of power, he only drew a simple cross. One horizontal line to split the sky, and one vertical line to sever the earth.

A massive cross appeared out of nowhere and cut into the fog.

And Matchmaker was at the center of it.

The woman was still running when suddenly, the cross split her body into four even halves. The wounds were perfectly smooth, and not a drop of blood seeped out of them.

“That’s another good deed fulfilled. The deputy chief should be almost done with his battle as well.”

Lin Yuhuai gazed into the fog where a pair of auras were slowly fading with a smile.

Chapter 224: You’re Not Joking?

The battlefield where Gu Suitang and the King of Sky Gate were fighting were in tatters as a matter of course. The ground was sundered here and there like it was hit by an earthquake, and there were no intact ruins in the area whatsoever.

The King of Sky Gate was looking a lot more transparent and indistinct than before. His giant sword was shattered, and his yin soldiers were long dead. He looked anything but imposing right now.

A pale and sickly child was also standing next to the King of Sky Gate. The battlefield was littered with the bodies of children, and each and every one of them looked exactly the same as the child. Even stranger was the fact that they weren’t illusions. They were all flesh-and-blood bodies.

On the opposite side of the battlefield, Gu Suitang cracked his neck with a disdainful expression. “Is that all you got, Child Emperor? Your ‘Blood Puppet True Sutra’ is just as flimsy as your companion.”

The Deputy Chief of Bureau looked way better than his opponents. His clothes had some holes in it, but he himself was almost completely unharmed. His vigor poured like an endless flood, and his voice was as loud and powerful as ever. It was like the two-versus-one battle had barely cost any energy.

“Hmph! I admit that you’re incredibly strong, Gu Suitang. Even the two of us together are no match for you,” replied the boy, Child Emperor, with a dark chuckle.

Child Emperor was telling the truth. Gu Suitang was so ridiculously strong that he had trampled over the King of Sky Gate, a Phenomenon-class Stranger, and him, a Half-Step Spirit Master, like they were ants.

It wasn’t like Child Emperor had never fought a Spirit Master in his life. In fact, he had slain a handful of early-stage Spirit Masters using his cultivation art, the “Blood Puppet True Sutra” before. The cultivation art allowed him to create flesh puppets using his blood essence, and each puppet would inherit a portion of his martial arts and strength.

At his current level, he could create a maximum of nine flesh puppets, and each one inherited around seventy percent of his strength. The weaker ones were in the early-stage of the Spirit Purification Realm, while the stronger ones were in the late-stage.

This was why he usually had the numbers advantage when he fought an enemy. Moreover, his flesh puppets shared one mind with him and were completely fearless, so they were an even greater threat than the average Spirit Purifier.

The problem was that his flesh puppets might as well be made of paper before Gu Suitang. A glancing blow was enough to injure them, and a direct hit would shatter them outright. If possible, he didn't want to get into a fight with Gu Suitang at all.

Thankfully, the end was near. Child Emperor mentally checked the time before shooting Gu Suitang a provocative grin. "But we've bought enough time. You may have won the battle, but the war is ours."

"What?" Gu Suitang suddenly had a bad feeling about this. "You're not suggesting that you can somehow turn this around, are you?"

Child Emperor chuckled darkly. "Oh, but I am, and I'm not afraid to tell you at this point. Luo Shui is about to undergo a transformation, you see. It will be subsumed by the Nine Nethers and transformed into a living hell very soon!"

"The Nine Nethers!?"

Gu Suitang wasn't expecting this, but he maintained a strong front and scoffed, "Is that it? You think you can scare me away?"

But the King of Sky Gate didn't miss his reaction. Feeling catharsis after all the pain and humiliation he had suffered in Gu Suitang's hands, the Phenomenon-class Stranger laughed boisterously. "Hahahaha! Like anyone has the time for that! Five hundred years ago, the battle between the two peak champions didn't just destroy Sky Gate, but also punched a hole in the ground deep enough to connect to the Nine Nethers. How else are we still alive? Why do you think our hatred remained as bright as ever despite five hundred years?"

"Unfortunately, the crack is too small, and the amount of Nine Nethers Demonic Qi that leaked to the surface is too weak. As a result, we were unable to die or leave Sky Gate Abyss."

"But that won't be a problem anymore. The Black Tide will happen any moment now, and the crack would soon split wide open like a watermelon. When that happens, your precious city will become my domain, and everyone you cherished will become my food and slave. Ahahahahahaha!"

"You're opening a passage that leads to the Nine Nethers? Have you gone insane, Child Emperor?!"

Gu Suitang wasn't stupid. He figured out the King of Sky Gate's meaning instantly. "Do you even understand what the hell you're trying to do? Not only would drawing the Nine Nethers Demonic

Qi to the surface claim countless lives, some natives of the Nine Nethers may break free and plunge humanity into chaos as well!”

By native, he meant the Strangers who were born and bred in the Nine Nethers. Born from the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi, they were as strong as they were evil. Not only that, they came in all shapes and sizes and could conceal their presence so well that most detection methods were ineffective against them. Dangerous beyond belief, they would absolutely throw the world into chaos if they were given free passage into the surface world.

In response, Child Emperor simply let out an insane cackle. “The Azure Sky is already dead; the Yellow Sky will soon rise. Those who worship the Yellow God will naturally earn His protection and live forever.”

“But who cares about those who don’t worship our Lord, and who cares if the world is plunged into chaos as a result? It has nothing to do with us, does it?”

“Screw your Yellow God! These fucking crazies!” Gu Suitang cursed. Assuming that Child Emperor and the King of Sky Gate were telling the truth, then the situation had just spiraled out of control. He needed to stop this one way or another.

Noticing Gu Suitang’s worry and anxiety, Child Emperor let out a satisfied cackle. “Just save your strength, Chief Gu. There’s no way you could find that place, and even if you could, it is already too late.”

“It’s already too late, Chief Gu! Hehehehe...”

“Too late, is it? Then you will die for what you’ve done!”

Gu Suitang’s eyes turned bloodshot as he roared out in anger. His vigor surged violently as the ground within thirty meters of him abruptly flattened like it was struck by a mountain.

Child Emperor and the King of Sky Gate hurriedly backed away from him. It was one thing to fight Gu Suitang while he was toying with them, and another when he was going all out.

Child Emperor glanced at the King of Sky Gate and said in a hurry, “Where are your three aides, King of Sky Gate? Tell them to come out and help us already. That bastard’s going to kill us both at this rate!”

“What aide?” The King of Sky Gate tilted his head in confusion before exclaiming in realization, “Oh, you mean Yin Governor, the ghostfaced boys and the ghost bride?”

“Who else?”

Child Emperor shot him a glare. “Seriously, now is not the time to be scheming against your own ally. Tell them to delay Gu Suitang and buy us time to escape. None of this matters if we die, no?”

“Er...” The King of Sky Gate looked visibly confused by Child Emperor’s accusation. “I’m not scheming against you though. All three of them are already dead. In fact, the army of Grudge Spirits I stationed here to guard this place are gone as well.”

“Excuse me? You’re not joking, are you?”

At first, Child Emperor thought that the King of Sky Gate was lying to him in order to minimize his casualties. When he saw the confused look on the Stranger's face though, he immediately realized that he wasn't lying.

If the King of Sky Gate wasn't lying, then Actor and Matchmaker must be wrong. They had thought that the ghost king's subordinates had captured the unknown person who infiltrated Sky Gate Abyss, but in reality, the unknown person had taken out all three Strangers and tens of thousands of Grudge Spirits.

That person hadn't shown themselves for this fight, so... where could they be right now?

"No... It can't be... I have to be overthinking this..." Child Emperor's complexion grew increasingly pale despite his desperate attempts to convince himself that everything was fine.

There was a high chance that that unknown person had followed Actor and Matchmaker to the location of the crack. There was also a high chance that they were the reason Gu Suitang had shown up and come to the Sky Gate Abyss immediately. This meant that the infiltrator wasn't a random jianghu warrior, but a member of the Pacification Bureau.

Assuming his theory was true, then what could this person possibly be doing at the crack right now?

.....

If Ye Qing could hear Child Emperor's thoughts, he would definitely say, "Oh, I'm just demolishing your array. And picking up some treasures here and there."

To be specific, he was demolishing the twelve stone pillars. They were clearly a key component of the boy's so-called Twelve Sky Gods and Demons Array, so as long as he destroyed them all, the Way of Taiping's conspiracy would fall apart on its own.

It wasn't the most efficient way to destroy the array—it would have been far easier and faster to just destroy the core—but Ye Qing knew nothing about arrays, so of course he didn't know where the core was. Luckily for him, smashing up the framework achieved the same result, so that was the plan he went with.

Just in case, he remained at his hiding spot for a little while after the Way of Taiping was gone. After checking for hidden observers and traps and finding nothing, he finally started his demolition work.

Ye Qing walked up to a stone pillar, lowered his waist slightly, and threw a punch. It immediately crumbled into pieces like rotten wood, though thanks to his force control the collapse made no noise whatsoever. Then, he caught the banner before it could hit the ground.

"Caw!"

Suddenly, the banner started struggling violently. Then, the picture on the banner—a bird with a human head and eyes all over its wings let out a strange caw. The eyes blinked rapidly as it released a strange power.

Ye Qing's eyes felt unbelievably heavy all of a sudden. If he wasn't prepared, he could have fallen asleep right there and then. He immediately visualized the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" and wiped clean the unnatural sleepiness in an instant.

The Drowsy Bird was a Soulstealer-class Stranger with a human head but a bird's body. Its wings were also covered in human eyes. Both its voice and its eyes possessed the power to hypnotize a person to sleep. They would then eat their victim's eyeballs while they were trapped in an unnatural slumber.

The bird picture in the banner was the Drowsy Bird, and its soul was sealed inside the banner. Its hypnotizing power was much weaker because of this, but it was still an outstanding Malice-class Strange Artifact.

Each pillar had a banner like this, though the souls that were sealed in it were different. There was the Blazing Tiger, Faceless Moth, All Withering Ghost Vine, Crying Wind, Rain Child, Fog Spirit and more. They were all Soulstealer-class Strangers.

The twelve banners were the treasures he was talking about earlier. After all, they were all Malice-class Strange Artifacts.

This trip to Sky Gate Abyss had turned out to be far more fruitful than he could possibly imagine. Just now, the Grudge Spirits had gifted him a ton of silver runes. Now, the Way of Taiping was giving him twelve Malice-class Strange Artifacts. They were such good people he just had to reciprocate the favor.

Ye Qing chuckled and destroyed the last pillar. The unusual cyclone spinning above the basin slowly faded into nothing, and the strange energy permeating the surroundings disappeared as well. At the same time, a terrific sword intent exploded from the center of the basin—the crack—and annihilated the fog directly above it, revealing great patches of white.

“Holy shit!”

The blood drained away from Ye Qing's face as he staggered away from the sword intent. It was clear that the Twelve Sky Gods and Demons Array was keeping its true power suppressed until now.

“No wonder it could penetrate the ground all the way to the Nine Nethers. I wonder who they were and why they fought at Sky Gate? Such sinful people!”

Ye Qing sighed. He was just about to message Gu Suitang and the others when suddenly, the ground beneath his feet shook unnaturally, and the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi leaking from the crack grew much richer even though the sword intent was still working hard to neutralize it.

Chapter 225: Fog Demon

“This is probably the Black Tide the Way of Taiping spoke of.”

An invisible flame rippled out of Ye Qing and extinguished the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi surging in his direction. At the same time, he visualized the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” to protect his mind.

The Nine Nethers Demonic Qi was infamous for its treacherous and corruptive quality. It could pollute a person's mind and spirit without them noticing and tempt them toward degeneration, which was why he didn't dare to be careless even with the Boundless Mara Buddha in hand.

Rumble rumble!

It felt like a tidal wave was rumbling under his feet as the ground shook. Thick puffs of Nine Nether Demonic Qi kept seeping out of the crack and into the air. Ye Qing backed further and further away from it.

“It’s not going to pour out of Sky Gate Abyss, is it?”

Ye Qing couldn’t help but be worried despite his success at dismantling the array. What if the Black Tide was potent enough to break through the sword intent even without the array to assist it? Or what if enough Nine Nethers Demonic Qi spilled out of the crack to leak out of the Sky Gate Abyss? Forget the Grudge Spirits, the demonic qi alone could cause an unimaginable amount of damage.

His worries quickly subsided, however. Looking at the state of the crack and the amount of Nine Nethers Demonic Qi it was gushing, it didn’t look like it was going to form a tide any time soon. If the Black Tide alone was enough to achieve what the Way of Taiping was trying to achieve, then they wouldn’t have to spend years trying to set everything up.

The rumbles were scary, but it only lasted dozens of breaths before subsiding in intensity. The Nine Nethers Demonic Qi grew weaker and weaker until it was the same as before.

The Black Tide was over, and the worst case scenario... ultimately didn’t happen.

“It’s over.”

It was only now Ye Qing let out a sigh of relief. A big one. The heavens were watching over Luo Shui after all.

If he hadn’t gone to Li Yuechun’s residence to kill Gold Toad, if Zhou San hadn’t outed himself out of greed, if he hadn’t made his way to Thaiping Grain Retailer, if he wasn’t strong enough to enter Sky Gate Abyss alone, if he hadn’t made the risky decision to cause a commotion and attract the Way of Taiping’s attention, and if he hadn’t followed Actor and Matchmaker to the location of the crack and find out the truth of the conspiracy... Luo Shui might be a hell on earth right now.

He probably would have perished as well. It would have been a disaster on the same scale as the Nether Lord manifesting in the human world.

Considering how many coincidences it took to lead up to this point, Ye Qing could only sum it all up as fate.

Ye Qing thought it was all over, but he did not notice a wisp of pitch black fog slithering across the floor and approaching him silently. His spirit should be powerful enough to detect anything within a certain radius, and yet he never even noticed it melting into his body until a sudden chill came over him.

“Huh?”

The Boundless Mara Buddha suddenly shook on its own. Buddhist chants and purifying light immediately filled the air.

“What the hell?” Ye Qing blurted. Realizing that something was wrong, he hurriedly concentrated his spirit and looked into himself. As expected, he saw a wisp of black qi slowly spreading across his blood vessels. However, the process was so smooth and

traceless he literally couldn't feel it even though it was happening right before his eyes.

Shocked, Ye Qing immediately channeled his astral qi and turned his body into a furnace. He thought that the Burning Wind would be able to extinguish the black qi for sure, but in reality, it continued to cling to his insides like a maggot!

Strange, distorted faces began appearing in the black qi. It let out an evil cackle and asked, "Do you know who I am, human? No? Hehehe."

"I am the Fog Demon, the great and noble Fog Demon. You would be wise to submit to me while I'm still in a good mood."

While the Fog Demon was cackling, Ye Qing realized in horror that the black qi was seeping into his mental space as well. The twisted, insidious power was attempting to corrupt his mind!

The second the power made contact with his mind, his physical body immediately started leaking black qi, and his face was contorted into a vicious snarl. He looked like an evil version of himself.

"Fog Demon? Doesn't matter! Get the fuck out of my head!"

Ye Qing roared as he pulsed his spirit. The "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" pulsed a light so bright it was as if a sun had leaped out of the eastern sea and reached the highest point of the sky in an instant. Its heat swept across Ye Qing's head like a blazing inferno. However...

"Oh my, what a pure soul and tough body! You are an even better host than I expected! It's wonderful!"

Not only did the Fog Demon continue to stand in the middle of the blazing inferno as if it didn't exist, it took Ye Qing's appearance and grinned evilly at him. "Stop struggling and submit to the mighty Fog Demon. I promise I will lead you to the peak of your life."

Ye Qing was shaken. This was the first time he encountered a Stranger who wasn't afraid of the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method". Even now, his spirit was slowly but surely being corrupted by its power.

What do I do?

If he didn't come up with a plan soon, it wouldn't be long before his mind and spirit were fully corrupted. When that happened, he would most likely transform into the Fog Demon's puppet.

Fuck! I can't believe the 'Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method' didn't work! What do I do? What do I do?

Ye Qing's mind raced for a solution.

"Just cease your struggling. Your spirit is strong, but you don't know how to use it. There is no way you can ever defeat me," The Fog Demon's said scornfully. "It is your honor that I deem you worthy to be my host, so stop resisting and give me a smile, kay?"

I don't know how to use it?

The Fog Demon didn't realize it, but its casual remark had accidentally inspired Ye Qing. The "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method", while potent, was ultimately a spirit training technique, not an offensive technique. Effective against a weaker Stranger it might be, it made sense that it would falter before the Fog Demon.

However, he did have an offensive technique that attacked the spirit—the Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art! In fact, it worked on both the physical body and the spirit.

Having made his decision, Ye Qing connected his mind to Jing Hui's martial arts essence and transformed both his mind and his spirit into a blade. Then, he attacked the Fog Demon.

There was a soft whistle as his mental space shook slightly. Then, pure, demonic red lotuses bloomed into existence.

The Fog Demon abruptly ceased speaking and shuddered unnaturally. Then, it started screaming as hellfire seeped out of its body.

Not about to let the golden opportunity go to waste, Ye Qing unleashed the Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art a second time with his spirit. The Fog Demon screamed even harder as the hellfire burned brighter.

"Argh!"

The Fog Demon struggled with all its might, but it just couldn't extinguish the hellfire no matter what it tried. In the end, it transformed into a wisp of black light and disappeared from view.

The Fog Demon was back in the physical world when it reappeared again. It dissolved into a curtain of black fog and drew in the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi around it. The space around it abruptly turned pitch black as if it was a black hole that devoured all light, pure and unblemished. It was like the darkest night where no light could possibly exist—not even the Hellfire Red Lotus. It slowly vanished into nothing.

"Human, it is an honor to be chosen by me. Why do you resist? Why do you escape?"

After the hellfire was fully extinguished, the fog surged toward the escaping Ye Qing. "I don't like this. Oh, I don't like this at all."

"It's because you're an ugly son of a fuck," Ye Qing quipped back, but his face was looking a little pale. He was currently pushing "Blood Sea Fragrance" and running away as quickly as he could.

He had used up nearly all of his spirit after executing the Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art twice, and his head was pounding like a bitch right now. However, not only was the Fog Demon still alive, it looked like it had healed back to full health. Considering the circumstances, escape was his only option!

"Ugly?" The Fog Demon exclaimed with mock hurt as it chased after Ye Qing with extreme speed. As it traveled, it pulled more and more Nine Nethers Demonic Qi into its body and grew stronger as a result. It took only a moment for its power to exceed the late-stage Astral Refinement Realm and enter the Spirit Purification Realm.

"How about this?"

The Fog Demon transformed into a person. It now looked exactly the same as Ye Qing, but black qi was rising from its body, and it was wearing a grin that could only be described as pure evil. Then, it appeared in front of Ye Qing in an instant and blocked his path.

“Am I still ugly?”

Ye Qing stopped in his tracks and let out a mental sigh. It was clear that he wouldn’t be able to escape from this Stranger. He could only fight with everything he got and pray that he could hold on until his colleagues showed up.

“You may transform into handsome ol’ me, but it will never change the fact that you’re an ugly son of a fuck.”

Ye Qing threw a punch as soon as he finished. The Burning Wind blew, and clouds dissolved into nothing.

The Fog Demon copied his movement and threw the exact same punch, but this one was filled with black, demonic qi. It was so powerful that the Burning Wind was blown away like nothing.

A frown came over Fog Demon’s face, however. Ye Qing’s punch was weaker than it appeared to be.

It was at this moment Ye Qing appeared behind the Fog Demon. His essence, qi and spirit all condensed into his fist, he struck the Stranger in the back with everything he got.

“Dragon Elephant strength”

“Cloud Vaporization Art”

Half of the Fog Demon’s body was crushed into bits just like that, but it simply grew an arm out of its back and repaid the favor with a punch to the chest.

Ye Qing flew back and slammed into the ground, hard. The ground shattered, and dust clouds were everywhere.

The next moment, Ye Qing leaped out of the pit and attempted to use the dust clouds as cover, but his feet had just left the ground when the Fog Demon appeared behind him—or perhaps it was there even before he got back to his feet—and struck him in the back once more.

Ye Qing crashed right back into the ground.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Again and again Ye Qing tried to escape, but again and again the Fog Demon knocked him back into the ground. There was literally nothing he could do to escape his situation.

“It’s too strong. Thank goodness I’m a tough guy.” Ye Qing spat out a bloody spittle while ignoring the dull pain in his chest.

Seriously, any other late-stage Astral Refiner in his position would be dead or half-dead already.

“What a disobedient child you are. I suppose that the only way to make you listen is to beat the disobedience out of you.”

The Fog Demon cackled as it stepped toward Ye Qing once more. “But don’t worry, I won’t pummel you overly much. That is my body after all.”

“Keep dreaming, demon.”

Ye Qing spat out another bloody spittle. I’m not out of trump cards yet, bud!

There was no room for hesitation. He made a mudra, and the chains surrounding the Boundless Mara Buddha slowly fell off. A terrifying amount of demonic qi immediately swept across the area.

A smiling Buddha appeared at the peak of the demonic qi. His left hand was holding the swastika mudra, and his right the exorcism mudra. Its body was covered in the Moko Boundless Chains. As the chains loosened, a sea of blood of corpses manifested into reality, and countless silhouettes kowtowed to the unholy Buddha with zealous expressions on their faces.

At that moment, a grandiose, formless, mighty voice resounded throughout the valley.

“Mara Buddha!”

“Mara Buddha!”

“Mara Buddha!”

The outburst of demonic qi was such that even the Fog Demon was sent flying. Then, the Boundless Mara Buddha brought down its left hand and reversed its swastika mudra. It would enlighten the living... via the demonic way.

The Nine Nethers Demonic Qi clinging to the Fog Demon suddenly left its body against its will and was absorbed into the reverse swastika mudra. It grew bigger and dense as a result.

Rumble!

The Fog Demon was crushed just like that.

Chapter 226: I’m Just Playing With You

“You seem to have a lot of good stuff, human.”

The Fog Demon was crushed, but not defeated. Multiple faces spawned from the scattered fog—all of them Ye Qing—as it said, “I’m so glad because they’re all going to be mine eventually. Keep up the resistance, human! Kekekeke...”

The Fog Demon cackled as if the Boundless Mara Buddha’s powerful attack did no real damage to it.

Unperturbed, Ye Qing unshackled another portion of the Boundless Mara Buddha’s strength. Its demonic qi grew thicker and thicker until it burst into flames.

The demonic flame was dark yet holy, dead yet vigorous. Somehow, the paradoxical energies were existing in harmony.

“Boundless Mara Buddha—Boundless Demonic Flame”

The Boundless Demonic Flame crashed down on the Fog Demon like the tidal wave. There was no room for it to dodge even in its current form.

“Argh!”

The Fog Demon let out a bloodcurdling scream as soon as it made contact with the fire. Somehow, it was burning even though it was supposed to be intangible.

“Aaaaaaaargh! What the hell is this flame? How the hell is it burning me? Owwwwwww!” The Fog Demon screeched in pain as the fire ate away at its foggy body.

“There is no way I’m going to die to this!” The Fog Demon roared, and every wisp of Nine Nethers Demonic Qi in Sky Gate Abyss surged toward it as if drawn by its shout.

“Mara Buddha!”

“Mara Buddha!”

“Mara Buddha!”

The Boundless Mara Buddha let out a loud and powerful chant, and the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi were either scattered or outright extinguished by the Boundless Demonic Flames before they could empower the Fog Demon.

Countless chains shrouded in Boundless Demonic Flames whipped out from behind the Boundless Mara Buddha and cut through both the Fog Demon and the ground like tofu. The gorges they left behind were at least thirty meters deep.

“Ahhhhhhhhh! It hurts! It hurts! I’m gonna die! I’m gonna die any second now!”

The Fog Demon continued to wail amidst the Boundless Demonic Flames, but despite its loud claims, it still refused to die. If anything, its cries were growing louder and louder over time.

Why isn’t it dead yet? I’m not going to last at this rate, dammit!

It looked like Ye Qing was holding the upper hand, but in reality he wasn’t doing well at all. Demonic qi was gushing out of his body like crazy, his eyes kept clouding no matter how many times he blinked it away, and his expression was flitting between madness and struggle.

Worse still, his mental space was covered in taint right now. His desires were running rampant, and demonic qi was everywhere. The only reason he hadn’t succumbed yet was because the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” was maintaining his last vestiges of sanity.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to last long though. The rate at which he was accumulating corruption was much higher than the rate “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” was cleansing it. If he couldn’t defeat the Fog Demon before his mind was completely corrupted, his soul would fall apart, and he would transform into the Boundless Mara Buddha’s puppet.

The Boundless Mara Buddha was powerful even though he hadn’t completely unsealed its power. Right now, it was on the same level as an early-stage Spirit Purifier. However, the price could only be described as severe. It had only been a dozen or so breaths since he unsealed it, and already he was close to the point of no return.

The reason he was running out of steam so quickly was partially because his spirit was exhausted from executing Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art twice in a row earlier. But even if his spirit was in optimal condition, he couldn't have last more than a hundred breaths.

He didn't have a choice though. It was do, or die.

A while later, Ye Qing was completely shrouded in demonic qi. The vicious snarl on his face had also become permanent. However, the Fog Demon's voice had finally fallen silent. It would seem that it was finally dead.

Is it... dead?

Ye Qing thought a little disjointedly. He was just barely clinging to his consciousness right now. Despite this, he was glad to see that the damn Stranger had finally died.

"Fwah! I live again! Hahahahahaha! Are you surprised?"

It was at this moment the Fog Demon's voice boomed from the demonic flames once more, and it was full of delight and wickedness. "I was just playing with you. If you could maintain these flames for a full incense stick, then maybe you could've killed me. But you're only seconds away from the brink, aren't you? Why must you torture yourself so?"

The Fog Demon's voice grew increasingly delightful. "This is for the best though. There is nothing more I like than a despairing soul and a corrupted body. Hahahahahaha!"

"Motherfucker!"

The last bit of hope in Ye Qing's heart was snuffed out, replaced by resentment and the unwillingness to die like this. The last bit of clarity vanished from his eyes, and he screamed, "If I must die, then you're coming with me!"

As if it could sense Ye Qing's feelings, the chains surrounding the Boundless Mara Buddha fell away completely. At that moment, the demonic qi gushed out like never before, and the world darkened ominously as if cowering in fear.

"MARA BUDDHA!"

"MARA BUDDHA!"

"MARA BUDDHA!"

For a time, it sounded like the grandiose yet horrifying chants would never end. Then—

"Are you stupid? Kids these days!"

A loud roar boomed from somewhere, and it was so powerful it actually overwhelmed the Boundless Mara Buddha's chants. Then, a man appeared in the distance. He moved so fast that he left sonic booms and annihilated all the demonic qi in his way. He appeared in front of Ye Qing in just the blink of an eye. He was none other than Gu Suitang.

"Seriously!"

Gu Suitang shot a disgruntled look at Ye Qing and slapped him on the back of his head. It looked like he was venting, but it really shattered the demonic qi entrenched in Ye Qing's mental space. It

should've extinguished the Patrolman's incredibly frail mind as well, but somehow, he didn't take any damage whatsoever.

As soon as the demonic qi was gone, Ye Qing's clouded, vicious-looking eyes regained their clarity instantly. The Emperor Fuxi's dharma also slowly picked itself up and shone its warming, nurturing light throughout his mind once more.

"Chief? I was..."

The first thing Ye Qing saw after returning to consciousness was Gu Suitang. As the man looked very displeased, he couldn't help but flinch a little.

Slap!

Before he could even say a word, Gu Suitang slapped Ye Qing on the back of his head once more. It was such a blow that even with his body, he nearly tripped and fell. A different person would've fallen completely unconscious.

Ye Qing: "..."

What are you hitting me for? What did I do?

"Save your excuses for later and focus on nurturing your mind. I'll kick your ass later," Gu Suitang threatened before looking at the Boundless Mara Buddha in the sky. The Strange Artifact was completely out of control at this point, so it fired a wave of demonic qi and Gu Suitang and Ye Qing.

"Hmph! A Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact thinks it can corrupt me?"

Gu Suitang harrumphed and casually swung his arm in front of him. The tidal wave of demonic qi was cut in half just like that.

The Deputy Chief abruptly disappeared and reappeared in front of the Boundless Mara Buddha. The ground where he was standing abruptly caved in as if it couldn't withstand his weight and pressure.

"MARA BUDDHA!"

The Boundless Mara Buddha lowered its left hand and attempted to crush Gu Suitang with the reverse swastika mudra. The Boundless Demonic Flames burned so hot that it created a mirage of a living hell above its flames. So much demonic qi was rolling off the Buddha's body it was incredible the deputy chief didn't seem affected in the slightest.

With this attack, the Boundless Mara Buddha would exorcise the Deputy Chief of Bureau into hell.

"Chief, watch out!"

Ye Qing turned as white as a sheet. He could sense just how powerful the attack was even from this distance. He let out a cry of warning, but before he could even finish, Gu Suitang pushed himself off the ground and faced the palm head on.

If the sky would fall on top of me, then I would crush it with my fist.

If a demon dared to stand in my way, then I would smite it with my fist as well.

His fist punched right through the gigantic palm and brought him in front of the Boundless Mara Buddha. Just like before, he threw another punch.

RUMBLE!

It was like the punch of a god or a demon. The gigantic Buddha was smashed into a million pieces, exposing the Strange Artifact within.

The Boundless Mara Buddha hurriedly flew away from Gu Suitang. It was almost as if it was sentient and could tell just how powerful Gu Suitang was.

“Hmph!” Gu Suitang snorted and used Earth Contraction. He abruptly appeared in the Boundless Mara Buddha’s path and caught it with a firm grip.

The Boundless Mara Buddha burst into flames and struggled with all its might. Impatient, Gu Suitang tightened his grip and clenched the Strange Artifact so hard that its body cracked ominously under pressure. The demonic qi dissipated immediately, and just like that, the Strange Artifact was under control once more.

Suddenly, Gu Suitang looked in Ye Qing’s direction with a livid expression. He then tossed the Boundless Mara Buddha straight at him!

Ye Qing was stunned. He thought Gu Suitang was so displeased with his behavior that he wanted to kill him. He wanted to dodge out of the way, but the Strange Artifact was moving so fast that he couldn’t do anything. By the time he wanted to react, the Boundless Mara Buddha had already slipped past his cheek and deafened his eardrums.

The resulting explosion was so potent that it sent Ye Qing stumbling a few steps forward. For a time, he couldn’t see anything because of the dust clouds.

When the dust clouds dissipated, he saw Gu Suitang standing behind him inside a deep, massive pit. He was clutching a wisp of black qi with his right hand and keeping the struggling Boundless Mara Buddha pinned with his left leg.

“The Fog Demon?”

When Ye Qing saw the wisp of black qi in Gu Suitang’s hand, he abruptly realized that Gu Suitang wasn’t planning to kill him at all. It was the Fog Demon he was targeting. The bastard must have been trying to corrupt him while he was distracted, and Gu Suitang was battling against the Boundless Mara Buddha. However, Gu Suitang noticed it at the last moment and neutralized its threat.

“Bastard! Even now, it’s lusting for my body!”

Ye Qing cracked a joke to hide his fear. Considering his current condition, there was a real chance the Fog Demon could have entered his mental space and killed his mind before he could react. Thank goodness Gu Suitang was here to save him.

“Thank you for saving my life, Chief,” Ye Qing thanked him before warning, “But be careful. That Fog Demon is ridiculously powerful and extremely tricky. You don’t want to let it slip through your grasp.”

Even as he spoke, the Fog Demon had tried turning intangible, dissolving into wisps of fog, and creating illusions to escape Gu Suitang's grasp. But for some reason, it just couldn't escape Gu Suitang's hand almost as if it was magic.

"Don't worry. It's just a Nine Nethers Demon. It would take much bigger demons than it to escape me."

"Nine Nethers Demon?" Ye Qing voiced his doubt.

Gu Suitang explained, "A Nine Nethers Demon is a kind of monster that is born in the Nine Nethers. You may treat it as some sort of special demon."

"However, most Nine Nethers Demons are extremely powerful. I bet that this one was hurt by the sword qi when it passed through that crack and into our world, which is why it is a lot weaker than it should be. Otherwise, it would've taken you over long before I could save you."

"Oh! No wonder it's so damned hard to kill!" Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. If Gu Suitang's assumption was correct, he had been fighting a wounded version of the Fog Demon this whole time. He could only imagine how powerful it was at its prime.

Heavens! This world is fucking terrifying!

"What's wrong? Are you scared? weren't you the guy who dared to venture into Sky Gate Abyss alone?"

Although Gu Suitang's tone was harsh, icy, and seemingly sarcastic, Ye Qing knew that he was really concerned for his safety. He broke into a grin. "Hahaha, that's because I knew you would come to my rescue no matter what. Otherwise, I would never dare to enter this place alone."

"Heh. You wouldn't dare?"

The corners of Gu Suitang's lips twitched a little. Ye Qing's praise was clearly working, but he maintained his stiff expression and uttered, "I think you would put a hole in Luo Shui's sky if given the opportunity."

"No way! I'm the most obedient employee there is!" Ye Qing defended himself.

Gu Suitang laughed incredulously. "Can you not besmirch the word 'obedience'? I can hear it rolling in its dictionary."

Ye Qing: "..."

"We'll speak of your disobedience later. First, tell me what happened."

Gu Suitang looked at the crack and asked, "The King of Sky Gate and Child Emperor said they were going to widen a crack leading to the Nine Nethers using the Black Tide and flood Luo Shui with the Nine Nethers Demonic Qi or something, but that is all I know. What the fuck were those fuckheads planning?"

“It’s like this...” Ye Qing proceeded to tell Gu Suitang everything he encountered after coming to Sky Gate Abyss.

Ye Qing’s story was simple, but Gu Suitang couldn’t help but feel shocked, scared, and relieved all at the same time when he listened until the end. If Ye Qing hadn’t stumbled upon the Way of Taiping by accident, if he hadn’t followed Actor and Matchmaker to the site, and if he hadn’t destroyed the Twelve Sky Gods and Demons Array, Luo Shui would have faced its greatest disaster in history.

His Pacification Bureau would never be able to wash away the dishonor even if they all died in defense of Luo Shui, and he, the Deputy Chief of Bureau, would forever be remembered as the sinner who allowed it to happen.

Chapter 227: Two Options

“These fucking maniacs!”

Gu Suitang was so angry that he pushed his foot harder and caused the ground to depress a few inches deeper. The Boundless Mara Buddha had it worse because it was directly under the Deputy Chief’s foot. Its demonic qi crumbled and it was pushed a few inches deeper into the ground.

“Ahem, chief? That’s my Strange Artifact you’re stepping on. Please don’t break it if you can.”

Ye Qing’s heart ached at the sight. Although the Boundless Mara Buddha had nearly damned him just now, he didn’t blame it because it was his fault for being too weak to control it. Plus, he would already be dead if it wasn’t for the Boundless Mara Buddha.

“Relax. It won’t happen.”

Gu Suitang removed his foot and picked up the Strange Artifact. “The main body of your Strange Artifact is the remnant of a Grandmaster monk, and they were a body-tempering warrior as well, right? There’s no way I’d be able to break it unless I were to use my full strength.”

“Speaking of which, a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact is rare even in Luo Shui. Where on earth did you get this?” Gu Suitang asked curiously, “Of course, you don’t need to answer if it’s a sensitive issue.”

“Not at all! I got it from Thousand Buddhas Grotto.” Ye Qing proceeded to tell Gu Suitang how he came by the Boundless Mara Buddha, though he didn’t mention his encounter with the White Horse Academy or Wang Yang. After all, no one must know that he was the one who killed Wang Yang.

“I see. You are one of the luckiest brat I’ve ever seen,” Gu Suitang commented enviously. Not only did Ye Qing obtain a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact during his trip, he even obtained a Spirit Purification stage martial art. If this wasn’t considered lucky, then what was? If he was this lucky when he was younger, he would probably be a Grandmaster by now.

Is this kid the reincarnation of a great one or something? It would explain why he's so unbelievably lucky. It was one thing when he ruined the Nether Lord's plan to descend on Anyang, but this time he just happened to stumble on the Way of Taiping's plan and save Luo Shui from disaster as well.

Also, he hailed from a no-name village and somehow grew from an ordinary human being to a late-stage Astral Refiner in just a year. To call him lucky would be an understatement.

It didn't matter to Gu Suitang though. Everyone had their own destiny, and he was a firm believer of creating one's own destiny.

"It's not luck, it's skill, okay!" Ye Qing complained. He couldn't hear Gu Suitang's thoughts, so he thought that his remark about him being lucky was pretty unfair.

"Oh right, did you happen to run into Wang Yang or the White Horse Academy during your time there?" Gu Suitang recalled something and asked suddenly.

W-What? He didn't find out what I did, did he? Ye Qing's heart skipped a beat when he heard this. However, he quickly realized that he was overthinking this. He had pulled off what was practically the perfect crime. There was no way anyone would find out about his involvement.

"No, I haven't run into anyone. What's the matter?"

Gu Suitang replied, "Oh, nothing. It's just that two White Horse Academy disciples claimed that Wang Yang had killed the vice principal's nephew, Cheng Yi. Do you know who Wang Yang is? He's Red Bush's only son."

"Cheng Nuo didn't have any children, so he raised his nephew like his own son. Naturally, he was so pissed that he caught Wang Yang at the entrance of Thousand Buddhas Grotto and killed him."

"That said, I know Cheng Nuo. The guy's been a coward and a schemer his whole life. It doesn't really make sense that he would kill Wang Yang no matter how angry he was."

Gu Suitang paused for a moment to scratch his nose.

"Ahem..." Ye Qing coughed awkwardly and scratched his nose as well. That's because I'm the one who gave him the final push. Not that you'll ever learn about it. "What happens next?"

Gu Suitang didn't notice Ye Qing's gesture and continued, "What happens next? They clashed of course."

"Wang Luori only had one son, and you know better than most just how protective he is over his own. He gathered his men, strode up to White Horse Academy, and demanded that they surrender Cheng Nuo."

"White Horse Academy is a smelly place, but even they can't stand someone just waltzing up to their doorsteps and demanding that they surrender their vice principal. A failed negotiation later, they fought to see who had the bigger fist."

“Luckily, Red Bush turns out to be even more useless than he looks. Not only did he get his teeth kicked in by the principal, his prized treasure, the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele was shattered as well.”

“Really? That’s awesome!” Ye Qing’s eyes lit up. This was exactly what he was hoping to see when he came up with the plan!

“Indeed, it is.” Gu Suitang chuckled as well. “But that’s not the end of it.”

“While Red Bush was making his way back home, he was ambushed by a killer from Joker Tower. He would’ve died if he hadn’t brought the Heaven Patrolling Sun Ship with him.”

“Someone must hate Red Bush real bad to go so far as to hire a killer from Joker Tower to kill him. Their timing was perfect as well.”

“Who could’ve done this?” Ye Qing wondered out loud when the name “Luo Chunchao” suddenly flashed in his head. He was the only person in Luo Shui who had a murderous grudge with Wang Luori, was wealthy enough to employ the services of Joker Tower, and knew Wang Luori’s schedule like the back of his hand.

Luo Chunchao really was a dog, no, a wolf whose bite was far worse than its bark. When it was time to lay low, he had laid perfectly still. When it was time to act, he had spared no effort to see his plans through.

It was a shame that Wang Luori still managed to get away in the end.

“Dammit, this story would have a perfect ending if Wang Luori died...” Ye Qing sighed.

“Few stories have a perfect ending, brat.”

Gu Suitang shot him a look of amusement before breaking into a shit eating grin. “Relax. Red Bush might have survived the assassination attempt, but he is injured so badly it would take him at least three to five months to recover. Also, the killer from Joker Tower killed a ton of Sunset Hill disciples probably hoping that they could placate their employers somewhat. Add to the fact that the Eastern Purple Cloud Stele is destroyed, and Sunset Hill has never been weaker.”

“Hehehe, that’s decades of hard work gone just like that. He’ll be crying for a long time yet.”

Why do you look happier than me, the perpetrator who’s behind everything? Ye Qing rolled his eyes at the Deputy Chief’s reaction, but he himself could hardly control his delight. Wang Luori might have survived, but he wouldn’t be bothering him for a couple of months at least.

“Wang Luori doesn’t seem like the person to leave it at that though,” Ye Qing said after thinking for a moment. The Hill Lord was fueled by sheer spite. He couldn’t imagine the guy giving up on revenge especially after he suffered this much.

Gu Suitang scoffed. "What else can he do? He can't beat White Horse Academy, and it was his son who killed the vice principal's nephew first. I don't doubt for a second that he's plotting bloody vengeance, but for now he can only swallow his humiliation and anger."

"But of course, if he's stupid enough to take the fight to White Horse Academy again, then it's cheers to everyone. I only wish he would put on a show like this for us everyday!" Gu Suitang didn't hide his schadenfreude at all. "In any case, this is probably the biggest defeat Red Bush has ever suffered in his life!"

Gu Suitang recalled something and added, "Oh right, make sure you keep your trip to Thousand Buddhas Grotto a secret. If Red Bush finds out about this, he might think that you're related somehow and vent his frustrations on you."

"Ahem... I understand, chief. Thank you for the concern," replied Ye Qing with an obedient nod. There is no way I would out myself. That would be pure stupidity.

"One more thing. Your strange Artifact is powerful, but its demonic qi is too strong for you to control right now. At your current strength, the best you can hope for if you use it is a pyrrhic victory. At worst, you would be corrupted by its demonic qi like just now. So try not to use it if at all possible," Gu Suitang advised while handing the Boundless Mara Buddha back to Ye Qing.

"Yeah. Thanks." Ye Qing nodded after receiving the Boundless Mara Buddha from Gu Suitang. He then looked at the Fog Demon still in the Deputy Chief's hand and asked, "What are you going to do with this Fog Demon?"

Gu Suitang sneered. "Nine Nethers Demons are extremely hard to kill, and the havoc they can wreak is unthinkable if they managed to escape."

"I'm sure you felt it already, but Nine Nethers Demons are most proficient at corrupting one's heart and taking control of them. Not only that, they're pretty good actors, so it's quite difficult to spot their victims."

"A long time ago, we once had a Nine Nethers Demon who corrupted over a dozen major clans and sects and pitted everyone against each other. It was a tumultuous, troubled time."

"Therefore, the best way to deal with these things is to burn them using the Demon Subjugation Furnace. It'll end the threat once and for all."

"No! Don't burn me! Please, don't burn me!" The Fog Demon suddenly cried out in panic.

Ever since it realized it couldn't escape Gu Suitang's grasp, it had been playing dead and hoping that Gu Suitang would get sloppy. It was its only chance at escaping the Spirit Master.

In fact, it had been chiding itself for not escaping when it could. Why oh why did I stay behind like an idiot? Now I'm going to die for that idiocy!

“And why would I do that?” Gu Suitang asked.

The Fog Demon hurriedly answered, “I’m afraid of pain.”

Ye Qing: “...”

The Deputy Chief broke into a wide grin. “Is that so? Hmm, I was only going to burn you for a day or two, but since you’re afraid of pain, I suppose I can drag it out to two weeks or so.”

The Fog Demon: “...” Who’s the demon here, you or me?

The Fog Demon offered, “I-I can become your servant! All I ask is that you don’t kill me!”

Gu Suitang scoffed. “Seriously? You’re so weak I can’t see how you could possibly be of use to me.”

The Fog Demon: “...” If I was stronger than you, I wouldn’t be making this offer, would I? I would be beating the crap out of you and making you my servant, okay?

The Fog Demon panicked. It had taken it a great deal of effort to pass through the gap and into the human world. How could it die before it could do anything? “I... I may be weaker than you, but I have my uses!”

“I’m a Fog Demon. I can transform into anything and everything, and I can assassinate your enemies without a trace.”

“As a being of corruption, I can control all kinds of people and have them serve you. They’ll pave the path to your ascension.”

“And in the norm, I can entertain you and relieve your boredom. See? Am I not useful?”

The Fog Demon prattled on and on in a seductive voice.

“Even now, you’re still trying to tempt me. You just can’t help your nature, can you?”

Gu Suitang scoffed disdainfully. “In any case, I will get whatever I want with my own two hands. I wouldn’t resort to such unscrupulous methods.”

Bang!

Gu Suitang abruptly squeezed his fingers. There was a loud bang as the Fog Demon let out a bloodcurdling scream and leaked a ton of demonic qi.

“That said, you did give me an idea. I can let you live if you agree to it,” Gu Suitang said suddenly just when the Fog Demon thought it was dead.

“W-What is it? I’ll do anything so long as you let me live! Anything!” The Fog Demon replied in a hurry.

“You have two options. One, I’ll toss you into the Demon Subjugation Furnace and burn you into a pile of ash for two weeks. Two, you’ll become the artifact spirit of this Strange Artifact.”

“Huh?” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise when he realized that Gu Suitang was talking about the Boundless Mara Buddha. You can do that?

The Fog Demon fell silent. As a Nine Nethers Demon, it was born with intelligence and memories. It knew it would never be able to leave the Strange Artifact if it was refined into an artifact spirit, and that it would have to do whatever its master told him to. It wasn't an unbreakable bond, but it would be so, so much harder for it to escape its bindings than otherwise.

Originally, its plan was to submit to Gu Suitang and find an opportunity to escape later. As a Nine Nethers Demon, it was born with all sorts of miraculous abilities, so it wasn't impossible for it to escape even a Spirit Master.

Unfortunately, Gu Suitang was smarter than it gave him credit for. He had shattered its delusions in an instant.

“What's wrong? You don't like option two? That's fair. I prefer option one myself.” Gu Suitang shrugged when he saw that the Fog Demon was silent.

“I agree! I agree!” The Fog Demon agreed hurriedly. If it refused, then it would die. If it agreed, then it would live, and it would still have a chance to break free. It was obvious which option was better.

“A wise choice.” Gu Suitang chuckled. “Let's go. We'll seek out Old Ling when we get back and have him forge this Fog Demon into your Strange Artifact's artifact spirit.”

“Forge? You can forge artifact spirits?” Ye Qing asked curiously.

Gu Suitang explained, “Artifact spirits can be split into two categories: natural and artificial. Generally speaking, it's easier but slower to wait for a Strange Artifact to manifest an artifact spirit on its own, and harder but faster to create one.”

“Take your Boundless Mara Buddha for example. One way to make it manifest an artifact spirit is to spend a long time nurturing its intelligence. The artifact spirit will be perfectly compatible with the Strange Artifact and be capable of unleashing its full power. Not only that, it can grow stronger and possess a limitless future.”

“However, this would be a long and arduous process. It can be as quick as a few years, or as long as several decades. It's completely up to the heavens.”

“The second method is to forge an artifact spirit. To put it simply, it's the process of merging the soul of a compatible Stranger into the Strange Artifact. This method is way faster than the first one, but its success rate is usually pretty low. After all, not only must the Stranger's soul be compatible with the Strange Artifact, it must be strong enough to withstand the forging process. If it disintegrated in the middle of the process, then that was it.”

“On that note, the Strange Artifact must be pretty tough as well, or it too can be damaged or destroyed during the process.”

“Obviously, there’s a high chance the Strange Artifact would be damaged if the forging process had ended in failure. It would also permanently lose the ability to gain its own sentience.”

“In short, both methods are both pros and cons.”

“Why did you even make me the offer? Who would compensate me if the forging fails, and the Boundless Mara Buddha is destroyed?” Ye Qing blurted.

“Hah! I’m doing this for your sake, brat!” Gu Suitang chided him, though it wasn’t serious. “Your Strange Artifact is far too powerful for you to control right now. The only way you can unleash its full power without pushing yourself to the brink is to rely on an artifact spirit to shoulder most of the burden.”

“Besides, your Boundless Mara Buddha is extremely tough, yin and evil, so it’s very compatible with a Nine Nethers Demon. A Nine Nethers Demon is also very resilient and difficult to kill, which makes them one of the most suitable materials to forge an artifact spirit. I am eighty percent sure that everything will go smoothly.”

“But of course, I won’t force you to go through with this if you still think that it’s a bad idea.”

“No, no, it’s a great idea! Thanks chief!” Ye Qing relaxed immediately when he heard this. An eighty percent chance of success was pretty high.

The first method had never fallen into Ye Qing’s consideration because it would take too long. By the time the Boundless Mara Buddha had gained an artifact spirit, it was entirely possible that he had outgrown it. Therefore, this was an opportunity he couldn’t let slip.

“Hmph!” Gu Suitang shook his head wryly. “Well, let’s not dilly-dally any longer!”

“But what about the leak? Are we just going to ignore it?” Ye Qing pointed at the crack on the ground and asked worriedly, “And what about the rest of the Way of Taiping?”

“Relax. They’re already dead. I brought Yuhuai and Nianjiu with me. Do you really think those crazies can defeat those two?”

Gu Suitang snorted in disdain. “As for the leak, I’ll dispatch someone to bury this place as soon as we get back. That’ll end the threat once and for all.”

“But...” Ye Qing frowned.

“Enough. Your mental space was just invaded by a Nine Nethers Demon. You need to nurture your mind and spirit as soon as possible to avoid any lingering effects.”

Gu Suitang slapped Ye Qing on the back of his head lightly and joked, “You’ve already taken most of the credit. You gotta leave some for the rest of your colleagues, right?”

“It’s a bad habit to claim all the profits anyway. You’re more likely to overeat and ruin your relationships.”

“Now move it!”

Chapter 228: The Wind Rises

Bang!

“Cough! Cough cough...”

Inside a private room at Sunset Hill, Wang Luori suddenly crushed an expensive glass-and-jade table into pieces. He immediately turned as white as a sheet and coughed loudly after that.

A man walked up to him and asked with a concerned voice, “Are you alright, father?”

“I’m fine.” Wang Luori waved him down and asked for clarification, “Are you sure everything you told me is the truth, Zilai?”

If Ye Qing was here, he would definitely recognize the man who addressed Wang Luori as father—his foster father to be exact—as Wen Zilai.

After confirming that Wang Luori was fine, Wen Zilai answered, “It’s definitely true. I was told this by a friend in the Pacification Bureau.”

“Dammit!” Wang Luori cursed loudly. “Just how lucky is that brat? Not only did he discover the Way of Taiping’s lair in Luo Shui, he even played a pivotal role in thwarting their plans. Gu Suitang would value Ye Qing more than ever before, and it’ll be that much harder to capture him!”

“What should I do... What should I do...”

Wang Luori’s eyes were bulging furiously like a tiger, but Wen Zilai paid his reaction no heed. He said, “Calm down, father. There is a simple way to solve this matter.”

“There is?” Wang Luori asked in a hurry, “Tell me!”

Wen Zilai smiled. “Ye Qing became pretty famous because of this incident, right? Let’s make him even more famous.”

“What do you mean?” Wang Luori looked puzzled. “How is that going to help us?”

Wen Zilai explained calmly, “Sometimes, too much of a good thing is a bad thing, and fame is one such example.”

“You know how the Way of Taiping is, They are as ruthless as they are vengeful. If we publicize Ye Qing’s role in the sabotage and besmirch the Way of Taiping’s reputation at the same time, those madmen would definitely come after Ye Qing no matter the cost.”

“All we need to do then is to wait for the Way of Taiping to kill him.”

Sometimes, words were so much more effective than the sword.

But as soon as Wen Zilai finished, Wang Luori shook his head and said, “No. Ye Qing must live.”

Wen Zilai looked puzzled. “Why not, father?”

Wang Luori’s eyes flickered. Wen Zilai’s plan was good, but if the Way of Taiping managed to kill Ye Qing, then the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” would most likely fall in their hands. Was retrieving the painting from Ye Qing harder than retrieving it from the Way of Taiping? Of course not.

He didn’t care if Ye Qing lived or died, but he mustn’t die in another’s hands no matter what.

Of course, Wang Luori wasn’t going to tell his adopted son about the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”, so he said, “Xiao Yang was my favorite disciple, and I’m pretty sure that he is behind Yang’er’s death. That is why Ye Qing must die in my hands.”

The excuse was completely bullshit as a matter of course, but if Ye Qing was here, he would’ve been very impressed with the Hill Lord. It wasn’t everyday you made something up, and it turned out to be the truth.

Wen Zilai looked surprised. “And how would you know that, father? Everyone seems to agree that the Stranger was the one who killed him.”

Wang Luori replied simply, “I have my ways. All you need to know is that Ye Qing must die in my hands.”

Wen Zilai fell into thought for a moment. “The plan is still a go, we just need to tweak a few things here and there. We can pretend to be the Way of Taiping and announce to the world that anyone who kills Ye Qing will be gifted a Spirit Purification stage martial art, a Hatred-class Strange Artifact, a Taiping Godkiller Pill and so on.”

“There are countless greedy people in the jianghu. They will surely set their sights on Luo Shui and infiltrate the city to kill him. While the waters are muddied, the opportunity to kill Ye Qing will present itself.”

“Are you sure it would work?” Wang Luori asked with a frown.

Wen Zilai replied confidently, “One hundred percent.”

“The rewards I mentioned would catch the interest of any Spirit Purifier, but not a Spirit Master. Therefore, only Spirit Purifiers and below would target Ye Qing.”

“Ye Qing wouldn’t be able to kill them easily, but they wouldn’t be able to take out Ye Qing either. Therefore, you don’t need to worry about them. We just need them to muddy the waters enough so that you can take advantage of it.”

“Not only that, you can pin the blame on them whether you capture or kill Ye Qing. It would be killing two birds with one stone.”

Wang Luori’s eyes lit up, but another worry came over him. “The plan sounds good, but would the jianghu warriors really fall for your ploy? And what if the Way of Taiping denies the announcement?”

“They will,” Wen Zilai said confidently. “All men are greedy, and jianghu people even more so. They will go after Ye Qing no matter how untrustworthy the rumor was.”

“As for the way of Taiping, they are even less of an issue. Ye Qing was the one who ruined their grand plan, and they only wished they could kill him this instant. Not only would they not deny the announcement, they might even support it even if they weren’t the one who came up with the idea.”

“That is true!” Wang Luori nodded gladly. “Very well. We shall do as you say.”

He immediately added, “But be careful. No one must find out that we are the ones who spread the rumors. Otherwise, that old fucker, Gu Suitang will knock on our doors.”

Wen Zilai smiled. “Don’t worry, father. I will. In fact, I’m planning to pin the blame on White Horse Academy. Luo Feiliu’s younger brother died because of Ye Qing, so he has a motive to want him dead. If Gu Suitang really is going to take action, he could only target White Horse Academy. That would be very poetic, no?”

“Hahahaha! That is a great idea!” Wang Luori guffawed. “Everyone praises you to be a cunning and knowledgeable man, and you are most definitely deserving of your reputation! I’m so glad I still have you, or I honestly wouldn’t know how to take revenge against my wrongdoers or rebuild Sunset Hill. Sigh...”

“You flatter me, father. You are the one who possesses the talent and ability to become a great warrior who will go down in history. The reason the idea didn’t come to you immediately is because such tactics are beneath you,” said Wen Zilai to butter up his father. “As for Sunset Hill, so long as you are still standing, Sunset Hill will never fall.”

Wang Luo let out another burst of laughter. “Well said! So long as I, Wang Luori, am still standing, Sunset Hill will never fall! Once I’ve recovered from my injuries, everyone who ever wronged me shall face my wrath!”

When I caught Ye Qing and obtained the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”, I’d become a Spirit Master. When that happens, White Horse Academy will pay the price of blood, Gu Suitang will pay the price of blood, and the mice who tried to have me killed while I was weakened will be exterminated to the three generations!

.....

Bang!

Ye Qing flew back like a sack of grain and hit the ground so hard that he bounced twice. His bones felt like they were completely disjointed, and blood was pooling underneath his skin.

“Do you know why ‘Break Through’ is called ‘Break Through’? It’s because it represents the unwavering courage, if not the power, one must possess in order to break through a wall, a ceiling, or even a formation made up of hundreds of thousands of soldiers.”

“But you? Your fist is completely lacking in both qualities. Power can be built up with time, but what the fuck was that pussy ass punch you tried to hit me with earlier? My neighbor, Old Wang, had more courage than you when his wife caught him trying to sneak out for a drink!”

Gu Suitang withdrew his fist and yelled, “We body-tempering warriors may hesitate before we throw a punch, but once we’ve made the decision, then it’s all in! So what if a god, a demon, or even the heavens themselves stand in your way? You will punch through them even if you physically cannot!”

“There is a puff of air in your chest that must dare to challenge heaven or earth. Only then could you stand a chance of slaying gods and demons. But your fists are hesitant both before and after you threw it. Where the fuck is your courage? Your fighting spirit?”

“Also, is it just me, or are you looking down on fist art? Isn’t it better to hide your astral qi and fist intent like a dragon lurking in the abyss, unleashing it all only when the time is right? Isn’t it nice to be able to punch through the sky in one punch?”

“When you punch, your astral qi is leaking all over the place, your force is exposed, your intent is bare for all to see. Oh, it looks very flashy, I’ll give you that, but to someone in the know you look like a leaky bag who’s completely wasting your energy. You might be able to intimidate a useless piece of trash, but anyone who’s even remotely stronger than you would be able to kick your ass like nothing!”

“You’re a journeyman body-tempering warrior with the power of a dragon-elephant in you, but instead of exploiting your own strength you choose to master those superficial shit those with frail bodies have no choice but to master. Are you an idiot or what?”

“It’s truly a miracle that you didn’t die when you entered Sky Gate Abyss alone!”

Ye Qing didn’t dare to talk back even though Gu Suitang was berating the shit out of him. It was also because he knew that the Deputy Chief was chiding him for his own good.

Two days after he returned from Sky Gate Abyss and got some well-deserved rest, Gu Suitang had called him over to his place and beat the shit out of him.

It was training, of course. Every day, Gu Suitang would spend four to six hours tempering his body, focusing his fist intent, and pointing out the flaws in his fist techniques.

His teaching method was a little unorthodox though. Most people would guide their students onto the right path via words and actions. They would use violence only when a student was particularly unruly. But Gu Suitang? Gu Suitang’s teaching method was to beat the shit out of him.

The guy didn’t have brakes either, or rather, his brake was right before the point where he would kill or cripple him. Gu Suitang beat him up until he wondered if there were times where he genuinely wondered if he had imagined his OPness, or if his whole life was a lie.

Every day, Gu Suitang would shatter his flesh, break his bones, and scatter his astral qi during training. The Gu Suitang special guaranteed that, no matter how healthy or confident he felt, he would always leave the compound on a stretcher.

Physical attacks weren't the only things Gu Suitang mastered. His verbal abuses, slurs, and demeaning comments were such that sometimes, they were worse than the beating itself.

Seriously, he would have broken a long time ago if his willpower was weak.

Thankfully, his improvements were just as obvious. Ever since Gu Suitang started training him, his body had undergone a small improvement. Some other people might scoff at such a minor improvement, but he was a journeyman body-tempering warrior. Any improvement starting from this level was difficult unless he consumed a priceless medicine or encountered a great boon or something.

What delighted Ye Qing the most was Gu Suitang's understanding of fist intent and fist theory, however. Theory was the foundation of all things, and fist arts weren't an exception. Someone who had never studied the theory before wouldn't know what to do or what not to do, much less become proficient in a martial art. Even the exceptionally gifted must grasp the knowledge in order to avoid wasting their time and effort.

Ye Qing had been self-learning from the moment he set foot on the Way of the Fist. The "Cloud Vaporization Style" was the only reference he had, and he had never studied under a true master. Although he was always able to surpass expectations, it was only because the Annon Sutra was there to keep him from going astray.

Even so, he had inevitably wasted much time and effort and formed many bad habits. For starters, he was a jack of all and master of none. There was a lot of hesitation behind his fists, and he had gotten used to planning for failure—which was a good thing in most cases, but a bad thing for a practitioner of the Way of the Fist. He mastered qi, but neglected his intent. His techniques looked strong, but were really devoid of substance. His grit was lacking, and he was bogged down by too many thoughts. So on and so on.

To make a metaphor, he looked like a tall, strong and healthy tree on the outside, but on the inside he was weighed down by many unnecessary branches and leaves, and his balance was completely off. He might be strong enough to provide shade to some people, but he still had a long way to go if he wished to become a pillar that could withstand the heavens themselves.

Gu Suitang's fist theory was like an axe that cut off all of the unnecessary branches, leaving only the things that truly mattered behind. It wouldn't make him a master of the fists overnight, but it laid down the foundation that would make him a master in the future.

To an outsider, it looked like Gu Suitang was just abusing him for no real reason. In reality, he was teaching him the theory with his fists, and the intent with his verbal abuses. He was violently uprooting all the bad habits that he had unknowingly ingrained in his body, and building him a better foundation and future.

Not only that, Gu Suitang had taught him two fist techniques. The first one was Divide, and the second Break Through.

Chapter 229: Divide and Break Through

Strength and dominance were key factors when executing Divide. The practitioner must punch like they would divide mountains or sever rivers. A defensive fist technique that sought to break an enemy while defending, it could supposedly preserve the practitioner from all attacks and divide their opponent's vitality and force in half.

Break Through was an offensive fist technique that focused on intent and dominance. Its best trait was its ability to pierce through tough defenses. Like a cavalry charge cutting through a military formation, the punch would never stop until its strength had faded, or the enemy was broken.

Just now, Ye Qing had tried to hit Gu Suitang with a Break Through, but the Deputy Chief had easily sent him flying. Gu Suitang had kept his power on the same level as a late-stage Astral Refiner and used the exact same technique, but the outcome was so one-sided it was like a child trying to outpunch an adult.

"The fuck are you waiting for? Get back on your feet and punch me again, trash!"

Gu Suitang yelled, "Remember what I said and try again!"

Ye Qing's spine cracked and popped ominously as he leaped back to his feet. Then, he charged toward Gu Suitang like a lone cavalry facing down an entire army, despairing yet fearless, hopeless yet unwavering. When he reached the Deputy Chief, he threw his punch and unleashed his intent, qi, and power at once in a single point not unlike a cavalry troop targeting a weak point of a formation. A terrifying amount of fist intent immediately filled the air.

Gu Suitang hid a smile and met Ye Qing's attack head on. Again, he was using Break Through.

Gu Suitang's Break Through was a lot more reticent than Ye Qing's fist and completely soundless until the moment it was unleashed. But when it did, it was like a storm that would end the world itself.

BOOM!

Fist met fist, and Ye Qing's fist intent was destroyed like it was made of rotten wood. Unstoppable force poured into his body and destroyed his astral qi and force as well. He flew back like a rag doll and hit a plum blossom pile, shattering it into smithereens.

Break Through could have easily punched him through the next couple plum blossom piles behind him and even the wall at the far end should he allow it to happen, but Ye Qing's Divide eventually neutralized the attack and caused it to swerve to the side instead. Not only that, it cut off the stream of force and caused it to surge back to its user.

While riding on the coattail of Gu Suitang's force, Ye Qing charged toward the Deputy Chief and unleashed a second Break Through. This time though, it was soundless and reticent just like the Deputy Chief's. Its flow wasn't impeded, however. It was like a powerful air current with no shape, an inferno with no smoke, or a running river that made no sound. Silence was the norm when one's fist had reached the peak.

When his fist landed on its target, his power, qi, and intent exploded at the same time and poured a tidal wave of force into Gu Suitang's body.

Ye Qing wasn't done yet, however. He unleashed a third Break Through with his left fist, and this punch was even more unstoppable than the first. His intent was taller than the sky and wider than

the sea, and it even pulled Gu Suitang's fist force unto its own fist force before striking Gu Suitang with twice as much power as before.

The Deputy Chief let out a dull grunt and staggered back two steps. Each time he took a step, his stomach would rumble like a drumbeat, and his complexion would flicker between blue and red. It took him a few breaths before he finally returned to normal.

"So, you can adapt after all. I guess you're not too stupid." Gu Suitang snorted.

"You flatter me, chief. It's because you're a good teacher." Ye Qing withdrew his fists and grinned widely.

He was speaking from the heart. It wasn't like he hadn't unleashed a similar punch in the past, but it had never been this smooth or full of heart.

Ye Qing's grin was so punchable that Gu Suitang couldn't help but rebuke him, "Hmph! You've only been learning Divide and Break Through for two days, and you think you're hot shit already? You still have a long way to go, brat!"

Despite his remark, Gu Suitang was pretty satisfied with Ye Qing's performance. He was old enough to have witnessed many geniuses in his life, and a plethora of them were more gifted, talented, or in possession of a firmer foundation than Ye Qing. However, few possessed the young man's mental toughness.

His teaching method didn't fit everyone as a matter of course. In fact, few people could have their muscles pummeled to bits, and every bone in their body broken every day. It was little different from torture. Few people could endure this for an hour, much less two whole weeks.

But not only did Ye Qing persist, he actually listened to the knowledge contained within his fists and his slurs. Moreover, he wasn't stuck in a box and could improvise when necessary. These were rare traits that most people didn't possess.

That said, this brat was so wild that he needed a beating once in a while. If not, he might wake up and find a hole in the sky one day.

"Hehe. You're right, chief. I still have a long way to go," Ye Qing said with a salute.

Satisfied with Ye Qing's response, Gu Suitang continued, "Why do we stick the word 'art' behind fist? That's because the Way of the Fist possesses limitless variations. It could be big or small, active or immobile, hard or soft. But no matter how it changes, it will always have its roots in theory and intent."

"If your theory is good, then your fists will flow smoothly, and your mind will never be clouded. If your intent is high, then your fist will be high enough to surpass the heavens themselves. Only with good theory and intent can your fist art enter the annals of history and be remembered for eternity."

"I understand, chief. I will engrave your teachings to my heart. Thank you so much for everything you've taught me," Ye Qing replied sincerely and gratefully.

Gu Suitang was a master of the Way of the Fist, and yet he had freely shared his theories and techniques with Ye Qing. Generally speaking, only direct disciples or descendants were granted

such honor, which meant that Gu Suitang truly thought of him as his disciple. How could he not be grateful?

“It’s one thing to engrave something to your heart, and another thing to carry it out for real. If you’re all talk and no action, then you’ll still lose everything you’ve learned today.”

Gu Suitang gave him one last piece of advice before saying, “Alright. We can end things here.”

“Huh? It’s still early. Did something happen?” Ye Qing asked, puzzled. Previously, Gu Suitang hadn’t stopped even after he had punched the daylights out of him. The Deputy Chief of Bureau was surprisingly punctual considering his behavior.

Gu Suitang grinned. “Oh? Did you like getting beaten up so much? I can fulfill your wish if that’s what you want.”

Ye Qing hurriedly waved his hands. “Nonono, I was just saying.” He could endure a punishment or ten if there was something to be gained from it, but he absolutely wasn’t a masochist like a certain late-stage Astral Refiner.

“I’m letting you go because I’ve already taught you everything you need to know. It’s up to you how you’re going to walk your path and how far you can go now.”

Gu Suitang smiled and waved him off. “Now get lost. You’ve rested long enough. Skip another day of work, and I will skin you alive myself.”

“At once, deputy chief. I hope to learn from you again when I’m free,” Ye Qing replied brightly. Honestly, he wanted to study under Gu Suitang a little longer, but he was still the Patrolman of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau. While his department could handle itself quite well, that was no excuse to be derelict in his duties.

Ye Qing saluted Gu Suitang and got ready to leave. He had just reached the exit when Gu Suitang suddenly called out, “Oh right. Watch your back when you’re out there, Joyless.”

“Watch my back? But why?” Ye Qing looked back in confusion.

Gu Suitang merely smiled mysteriously and replied, “You’ll find out very soon.”

“...” The fuck does that mean?

Unfortunately, the Deputy Chief of Bureau wasn’t going to give him an answer. He had already turned his back on him and ignored his follow-up questions.

“Bah, whatever.”

Seeing that he wasn’t going to get an answer, Ye Qing rubbed his nose and left just like that.

After Ye Qing was gone, Chu Nianjiu, Lin Yuhuai and Wei Yueshan appeared in the compound and asked, “Are you sure you don’t want to tell Joyless what’s going on out there, chief?”

Gu Suitang grunted. “And what would be the point? He’s going to find out himself very soon.”

Lin Yuhuai looked worried. “But a lot of jianghu warriors have entered Luo Shui, and most of them harbor malicious designs. If they attack Joyless before he realizes the truth...”

Gu Suitang scoffed. “He will be fine. I tutored him for two weeks straight. If he couldn’t even handle something so minor, then he deserves what he gets.”

Chu Nianjiu took a sip of wine and asked, “Are we just going to ignore this then?”

Gu Suitang answered, “Yep. For now at least. We won’t be able to catch the big fish if we join the fray too soon. Just keep watch and let Joyless handle this.”

“Oh right, have we caught the rest of the Way of Taiping yet?”

Lin Yuhuai shook his head. “No. But assuming that our intel is reliable, the only ones who are still at large are Dog King, Paper Celestial, Husband and Wife; the remnants of the Twelve Fiends of Taiping.”

Gu Suitang thought for a moment before replying, “It’s fine. We’ll catch them eventually. In fact, we can let Jiang Muyang and Xue Beikun handle this. We’ve already earned quite the merit anyway, we might as well share them the leftovers. Otherwise, they might be tempted to cause some unnecessary waves.”

Jiang Muyang was the commandery governor of Luo Shui, and Xue Beikun was the commander of the Black Feathers Guard.

“Got it, chief.” Lin Yuhuai and Chu Nianjiu nodded in understanding. Wei Yueshan was the only one who looked as clueless as ever.

“For fuck’s sake, why did I ever recruit an idiot like you?”

Gu Suitang knew immediately from Wei Yueshan’s stupid expression that his disciple hadn’t understood the conversation at all. When he recalled how quickly Ye Qing had grasped Divide and Break Through in the past two days, he grew annoyed and slapped Wei Yueshan on the back of his head.

Wei Yueshan: “...” What did I do? I didn’t even say anything!

Gu Suitang grew even more annoyed and yelled at his disciple, “Don’t tell anyone you’re my disciple from now on! It embarrasses me!”

“Now get lost! The two of you may take your leave as well!”

“As you command.” All three Peacemakers saluted Gu Suitang before taking their leave.

.....

“Look! It’s Lord Ye!”

“Yeah. He’s the guy who slayed the cultists hiding in Luo Shui, ruined the Way of Taiping’s conspiracy, and saved Luo Shui from disaster.”

“I heard that Lord Ye singlehandedly killed twelve cultists on his own. All twelve cultists were immensely powerful, but Lord Ye courageously fought them for three hundred rounds and ultimately defeated them all. What a hero!”

“Twelve people? I heard that there were thirty three people, and they were called the Thirty Three Ghost God Generals of Taiping or something. He didn’t fight them for three hundred rounds though. Lord Ye had beheaded them in a single slash.”

“Bullshit! It was ninety nine cultists, and they were called the Ninety Nine Killers of Taiping! Lord Ye blew them all apart with a single breath!”

Ye Qing: “...”

What the fuck’s going on? Why did everyone and their mother know about what I did at Sky Gate? And what the hell are these rumors? Thirty Three Ghost God Generals? Ninety Nine Killers of Taiping? And I killed them all with a single breath? Who the fuck do they think I am, the One Puff Man?

“I thought for sure that the man who could slay the Taiping cultists in one puff would have three heads, six arms, eight mouths and ten tongues, but... huh. He’s a pretty handsome lad, isn’t he?”

“Oh yes! He’s very young too!”

“What a cute boy. I want to have his babies...”

Ye Qing: “.....”

Sis, is there anyone in the entire world who has three heads, six arms, eight mouths and ten tongues? Like can you show me a photo?

And you, auntie, can you please take a look in the mirror before you think about babies? Heck, you’re almost old enough to be my grandma!

It’s true that I’m young and handsome though. I have zero qualms with gossiping when it is the truth!

Of course, the women wasn’t openly gossiping about Ye Qing. He only overheard their conversation because he was a warrior, and he had sharper ears and most.

Chapter 230: Beauty Moth

While Ye Qing was passing by a restaurant when suddenly, he heard the crisp sound of a gavel striking wood, and a storyteller speaking in a loud, melodious voice:

“In one strike, Ye Qing cut through five lakes and four seas, blew apart five hills and three mountains, slayed the Taiping cultists and toppled the agents of hell.”

“After the Taiping cultists were slain, Ye Qing jumped into the sky and carved a poem into a stone wall with his bare hands. Did you know what he wrote?”

“For ten years, I had honed this blade without end.

Today, I used it to slay the Taiping cultists,
and tomorrow, I shall use it to destroy the Way of Taiping.
All shall fall before my might like the fall leaves.

“I am invincible, indomitable, and the king of the world.”

“Well said!”

“What an amazing story!”

“Here’s your tip!”

A chorus of applause and cheers broke out as soon as the storyteller finished telling his story. The commotion was so loud that it could be felt outside the restaurant.

Speaking of which, Ye Qing was having trouble picking up his jaw from the floor outside the restaurant. It was one thing to exaggerate a story, and another to blow it up with so much bullshit it was a miracle that it didn’t stink up the whole Luo Shui. Destroy the Way of Taiping? All shall fall like the fall leaves? Invincible, indomitable, and the king of the world? Like what the fuck?

Maybe the storyteller didn’t need to stick to facts. He was telling a story after all. But why the fuck was the audience cheering like he just told the greatest story in the world? Anyone with even a speck of brain in their heads should realize that what the guy said was utterly ludicrous, so why the fuck were they supporting him? Did they want to watch the world burn that badly?

He had only been gone for half a month at most. Why did it feel like he had stepped into a different world?

He was just a puny Patrolman of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau. You would think that he was the bastard son of the Emperor of Chu judging from the way they were talking about him.

“There is definitely a conspiracy behind this. Who’s the bastard who’s plotting my death?” Ye Qing rubbed his nose and muttered. He had put two and two together immediately.

Generally speaking, an operation like this wouldn’t be publicized due to various concerns. However, it looked like everyone and their mothers had heard of his exploits. This could only mean that someone in the Pacification Bureau had leaked the news.

Second, someone was definitely adding fuel to the rumors, and he was at the center of it all. It was true that he had played a pivotal role in the operation, but he was hardly the only one who had made a major contribution in the operation. Lin Yuhuai had split the heavens with a single talisman, Chu Nianjiu had conjured a world of snow, and Gu Suitang had singlehandedly slaughtered the King of Sky Gate and Child Emperor. But in all the stories he had heard so far, you would think that the Pacification Bureau was just sitting on their asses while he was doing all the work. Not only that, the rumors were so exaggerated that it just had to be intentional.

The Way of Taiping already loathed him for ruining their plans, but now their hatred would be greater than ever before. After all, everyone knew of their shameful defeat now. They were going to kill him if it was the last thing they did. Some heretics would be more than happy to join in on the fun and add fuel to the fire as well.

That said, the Way of Taiping probably wasn't the one behind this. It didn't make sense for them to besmirch their own reputation and make it harder for them to promote their insane religion.

"Someone's painted a big, red bullseye on my back. Bastard."

Ye Qing muttered to himself, "But the Way of Taiping alone isn't enough. If I was the bastard, I would pretend to be the Way of Taiping and put a juicy bounty on my head or something. That would mobilize every jianghu warrior in and out of Luo Shui to attack me as well. What a cunning ploy."

It was at this moment another conversation caught his attention.

"I can't believe how fast the rumors are spreading. There's practically no one in the jianghu who hasn't heard of Ye Qing now."

"Heh, he's famous now, but I doubt he'll live long enough to enjoy it. He's humiliated the Way of Taiping, and you know how those crazies are. They'll never stop coming after him until he's dead."

"Oh, I know. The Way of Taiping has already issued an official bounty for his head. Anyone who manages to kill Ye Qing would be rewarded with a Spirit Purification stage martial art, a Taiping Godkiller Pill, an Earth Dragon Lingzhi and a Hatred-class Strange Artifact. It's crazy!"

"I know. If I wasn't strong enough, I swear—"

"Shh! Quiet. Ye Qing's looking this way. Come, let us drink."

The speakers were three jianghu warriors wearing form-fitting outfits and wielding swords and sabers.

Ye Qing: "... " Fuck, I didn't want to be right, but I am. Seriously, who's the sonuvabitch who came up with such a sordid idea?

The city's too much for me, I wanna go home. But the roads at home are too slippery, and the human heart is just as complex!

"Ye Qing..."

"Ye Qing..." "Ye Qing..."

Ye Qing was raging when suddenly, he heard someone calling out to him. For some reason, the cries seemed to possess some sort of irresistible sway.

He turned around to see who was calling out to him and was greeted by a supernaturally seductive face. It seemed capable of making any expression that tugged at his heartstrings the most and tempted him to decline and indulgence. Slowly, his eyes grew dazed.

Strangely, no one else seemed to hear the cries. In fact, they didn't even see the soulsucking beauty Ye Qing was seeing. From their perspective, Ye Qing had suddenly turned to one side and daydreamed.

No one noticed a fingertip-sized moth flying toward Ye Qing either.

The moth was smaller than your ordinary moth and grayish brown in color. It had large eyes and bright, colorful patterns at its abdominal area. The patterns seemed to form a woman's smile.

"Your Beauty Moth is impressive, Moth Lady. Even Ye Qing has fallen for your trick," a man complimented a middle-aged woman with waxy yellow complexion who was dressed in rags. "The Way of Taiping's bounty will be ours, and we'll surely become powerful and famous warriors in the future."

The woman responded with an honest smile, "I don't care about being famous. All I want is to enjoy a good meal every day and raise my children well."

"Hehehe... You can dine like an emperor if we successfully claim this bounty."

The man was chuckling when suddenly, his voice came to a stop. It was because a moth was sitting on his forehead. He exclaimed in shock and terror, "What are you doing, Moth Lady?"

"The bounty's not enough for the both of us."

Moth Lady continued to smile like everything was normal. "And I need a scapegoat since I do not plan on dying anytime soon."

"You—"

The man was just about to resist when the moth suddenly flapped its wings. A cloud of pinkish powder engulfed his face, and his eyes became just as dazed as Ye Qing's. The next moment, the moth crawled down his nose and entered his mouth.

Moth Lady smiled wider when the moth had disappeared completely into the man's mouth. Then, she looked at the moth still flying toward Ye Qing with gentleness and expectation.

But right before the moth would land on Ye Qing's forehead, the blankness in his eyes was abruptly replaced by intelligence. Then, he caught the moth between his fingers.

"The Beauty Moth, huh. It hasn't even been an hour since I left the Pacification Bureau, and the bounty hunters are already saying hello."

The moth he was holding was called the Beauty Moth. It was a moth-like Malice-class Stranger with large eyes and a pattern that resembled a human face on its abdomen.

The Beauty Moth's powder possessed a powerful hallucinatory effect. The pattern on its abdomen could also bewitch a weak-willed person. Once its victim was bewitched, it would crawl through their mouths or other orifices into the body. Depending on its needs, it would either pilot the victim like a puppet, or build a nest inside their flesh and blood.

He hadn't been bewitched by the Beauty Moth, of course. It was just an act.

Sure, he had used this tactic countless times already, but hey, don't fix what isn't broken, right?

A wisp of blue flame surged out of the Blue Demon Hand. The Beauty Moth was burned into ash just like that.

While this was happening, a man leaped into the air and tried to escape through the rooftop.

“You think you can run?”

A savage grin flashed across Ye Qing’s face as he bounded after the man. However, he suddenly paused mid-way and spat Lightning Bolt at him. At the sametime, he rushed straight toward Moth Lady and swept his sleeves at her.

Bang!

Two explosions happened at the same time. One of them was the sound of Lightning Bolt crushing the man’s head into bits, and the other was a clash of forces.

The headless man fell from the sky and hit the ground with a thud. Moth Lady was literally steaming from her pores and staggering away from Ye Qing with an unnaturally red complexion. Every time she took a step, she would leave behind a scorched mark on the ground.

“How did you find me out?” Moth Lady asked after she finally caught herself. She looked both shocked and stern.

Ye Qing chuckled. “It’s very simple. Your hands are too pale and smooth. An actual middle-aged woman who worked all day and night would never have hands as pale and smooth as yours. If I’m not mistaken, you must take very good care of your hands probably because of your profession.

“I was careless,” Moth Lady admitted with a sigh. Besides controlling the Beauty Moth, she was an expert in hidden weapons as well. That was why she took very good care of her hands. Unfortunately, she had forgotten to disguise her hands when she was donning her disguise.

“Also, I heard your conversation loud and clear just now. The next time you wanna do something bad, do try to keep your voice down,” Ye Qing added. This was the true reason he discovered that Moth Lady was the true attacker, and not the man.

“What?” Moth Lady was shocked to say the least. She had spoken with the man via sound transmission, and it was impossible to eavesdrop on a sound transmission unless one possessed a powerful spirit.

Moth Lady turned a little paler. “I made a mistake, my lord. I will leave Luo Shui this instant and never return.”

Before Ye Qing could reply, she added, “If you refuse, then I will take them to the grave with me.”

Moth Lady looked at her surroundings as she said this. Her voice was pure, but the contents were anything but.

“Are you threatening me?” Ye Qing’s voice grew a little colder.

Moth Lady giggled, and as she did, pimples started popping on her face, her arms, and other exposed parts of her body. They were also wriggling like there was something alive inside the pimples. It looked horrifying to say the least.

Pop pop pop!

The pimples popped, and blood spilled everywhere. Countless Beauty Moths flew out of Moth Lady's body and into the air.

She's feeding her moths with her own flesh and blood? Talk about crazy, Ye Qing thought to himself as he stared at the bloodied Moth Lady.

"Ah!"

Suddenly, he heard an outburst of cries from a different direction. He turned and saw the headless man he killed growing a ton of pimples just like Moth Lady. A lot more, in fact. The next moment, countless moths burst out of the corpse in a sickly shower of blood and gore.

The man's face and stomach was utterly chewed through, and Ye Qing could vaguely see that his internal organs had been completely eaten. It was replaced by a ton of white eggs instead. Even now, the white eggs were still hatching more Beauty Moths. It wasn't long before a massive swath of Beauty Moths hung in the sky like a dark cloud.

Moth Lady watched the Beauty Moths with gentle eyes like they were her own children. She said gently, "I'm not threatening you. I'm just stating a fact."

She definitely had the strength to back up a threat. They were in the middle of a market, and there were countless people in the area. Considering how many Beauty Moths there were, they could inflict an insane number of casualties if they were to attack everyone indiscriminately. That was why Moth Lady said that she was just stating a fact, and why she dared to attack Ye Qing in the middle of a street.