

Stranger 231

Chapter 231: A Good Wine Deserves A Good Kill

“Still sounds like a threat to me, but sure, whatever.”

Ye Qing shrugged casually as if Moth Lady hadn't just threatened to kill hundreds of people. “I'm a man of fairness, however. You may leave, but only after you've taken a punch from me. After all, you attacked me with the Beauty Moth earlier. It's only fair that I pay you back for what you did, right?”

“If you can survive my punch, then your debt to me is settled. It's very fair, right?”

“I'm assuming that your silence means that you accept my proposal. Here I come!”

Ye Qing rushed forward before he finished his sentence.

“You—”

Ye Qing had charged Moth Lady before Moth Lady could make sense of his nonsensical “proposal”. Caught off guard, she reacted instinctively and summoned her Beauty Moths to defend her instead of attacking the civilians as she had originally planned. A thick cloud of white powder filled the air in an instant, and the human faces on the moths' abdomen released a strange, invisible power that seemed capable of sucking the soul right out of a person's body.

Ye Qing ignored it all, however. Although he was one against many, he continued forward fearlessly like a cavalry troop ready to punch through a thousand formations. The wind howled, and the heart blazed with dauntlessness and audacity.

“Break Through”

His fist punched through the invisible power and countless Beauty Moths like they were nothing more but the wind. “Break Through” was best employed against tough defenses and could supposedly penetrate even ten thousand formations like nothing, but less a bunch of Beauty Moths.

By the time Moth Lady realized what was going on, Ye Qing had broken through the obstacle and appeared in front of her. Then, he punched her right in the face.

His fist easily punched through her astral qi like it was made of paper. The next second, her head exploded into bits of red and white.

After Moth Lady was dead, the Beauty Moths in the air abruptly fell from the sky as if their source of power was cut off. Ye Qing scanned them with his spirit and confirmed that they were all dead.

Ye Qing withdrew his hand and shrugged innocently. “I wanted to let you go, really. It's not my fault you're too weak to withstand my punch.”

“Ahhh!”

It was at this moment the civilians finally screamed out in earnest, but only because it was suddenly raining moths, and they saw Moth Lady's headless corpse. Most of them didn't realize that Ye Qing and Moth Lady were fighting each other, or that the dark cloud that suddenly blotted out the sky temporarily was really a bunch of killer moths, much less the fact that they were a hair away from

being killed. You would be surprised how many people wouldn't notice something that was right above their heads.

Speaking of people, the jianghu warriors who were watching the battle from the shadows and waiting for an opportunity were all wearing grim looks on their faces.

Who was Moth Lady? She was a powerful jianghu warrior who was infamous throughout Tian Yong. Moth Lady was only a middle-stage Astral Refiner, but she was proficient at manipulating the Beauty Moths and incredibly ruthless. Once, she had infested an entire county of people just to nurture her Beauty Moths and was pursued by the government and Purity Sword, one of the Five Profound Sects. However, she ultimately managed to escape pursuit.

Not only that, Moth Lady once ambushed and killed a Spirit Purifier from the Intelligence Department of Chu. It was this feat that made her famous throughout Tian Yong.

The Intelligence Department was an espionage agency Chu had set up to spy on other countries and monitor all intelligence within Chu. Few things were known about the Intelligence Department, and everyone who served it was an elite. Strength wise, they were on par with the Pacification Bureau.

Moth Lady was no weakling, and yet Ye Qing had still crushed her with insulting ease. Was she really that weak, or was Ye Qing too strong?

The answer was self-evident.

"Idiots. There's a reason the Way of Taiping issued those rewards instead of killing Ye Qing themselves."

On the top floor of the highest restaurant in the city, a middle-aged man with fiery red hair and a rough appearance was observing the battle with a disdainful expression. He was wearing a fiery red robe as well.

The restaurant was almost two kilometers away from the battlefield, but the red-haired man was acting like he had witnessed every detail of the battle from beginning until the end.

"It's a good thing they're so stupid though. They've given me a golden opportunity to claim the reward myself."

"His breath is murky, his back is slumped, his muscles are relaxed, his spirit is unfocused, and his energy is spent. Yes, this is a great opportunity."

He abruptly swiped the wine jar on the table and took a greedy gulp. Some of the wine trickled down the corners of his lips and drenched his shirt, giving him a wild and uninhibited appearance.

"Hahaha! A good wine deserves a good kill!" The man laughed loudly before kicking a massive red bow into his hands.

As soon as the bow entered his hands, he immediately bent his knees and slowly drew the bow into a full draw.

An invisible force spread throughout the room. The entire restaurant was shaking a little like it was experiencing an earthquake.

Whoosh!

The man let go as soon as he had drawn the bow fully. The arrow disappeared faster than the eye could blink.

With that done, the man abruptly collapsed back into his chair as if he had spent all of his energy. His forehead was covered in sweat as well.

He looked extremely excited, however. He swiped the wine jar and downed a few gulps of wine again. His face was unusually red as he laughed, “Hahaha! The wine is great, and so is my shot! Hahahaha!”

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Ye Qing pulsed his spirit after killing Moth Lady. After confirming that the mice lurking in the shadows were intimidated, he hid a sigh of relief and released his energies.

He made it look easy, but he knew it was anything but. Moth Lady—or more accurately, the horde of Beauty Moths she raised because the woman herself wasn’t strong—was extremely dangerous, and the only reason he managed to kill her in one punch was thanks to Gu Suitang’s teachings. Otherwise, it would’ve been a pyrrhic victory at best.

“Wait... something is—”

Suddenly, Ye Qing’s spirit pulsed painfully like it had a life of its own. His skin prickled like a thousand needles, and his body felt ice cold.

The next instant, a blood red arrow abruptly appeared in front of him.

The arrow was as red as blood, and the silhouette of a dragon was swimming around its shaft. He could hear faint draconic roars as well.

The blood red arrow had appeared without a sound and seemingly out of nowhere. By the time he noticed it, it was already right in front of him.

Caught off guard, Ye Qing could only grab the arrow and try to stop it with his bare hands.

“Hmph!”

Ye Qing let out a muffled groan as soon as his hands made contact with the arrow. A blazing, terrifying energy poured into his body as the arrow pushed back his arms until the tip touched his forehead.

Bang bang bang!

The streets behind Ye Qing abruptly exploded into pieces. The trail of destruction was at least fifty meters long, and it was ashen black like it was scorched by fire.

“Phew...”

When the explosion came to a stop, Ye Qing breathed out a puff of fiery red force, and the surrounding air suddenly became unbearably hot.

“I can’t possibly receive a gift from a stranger! Here, you can have it back!”

Ye Qing’s complexion returned to normal after he breathed out the force. Despite his quip, his expression was as furious as it was murderous.

Holding the arrow like a javelin, he spun a full circle on his right foot before tossing it into the air. The arrow shot back into the sky just as quickly as before, and the limestone floor beneath Ye Qing's foot cracked like a spider's web.

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"He's probably dead, but I should check!"

At the restaurant, the red-haired man set down the wine jar and slowly rose to his feet. Then, he looked out of the window.

It was at this moment a shrill sonic boom deafened his ears. Before he could figure out what was going on, he saw his arrow flying back even faster than when he released it a moment ago.

What the—?

The thought hadn't even disappeared from the red-haired man's mind when the arrow pierced through his heart and hit the pillar behind him. It kept shaking like it was mocking the red-haired man.

"How can this be? How can... this..."

Why did my arrow fly back?

Why did my arrow kill me?

Bright red blood bubbled between the man's lips as his wide open eyes slowly lost their liveliness.

He died without finding out the answer.

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"I wonder if the archer is dead?" Ye Qing wondered out loud. He wasn't planning to check his kill because he literally couldn't. He had tossed the arrow back to where it was originally released, but he didn't actually know where it came from. If his counterattack successfully killed his opponent, then all was well. If not, well, he wasn't going to waste his time searching for them when it was entirely possible that they had run away.

Plus, he didn't want to give the archer another opportunity to shoot him. The arrow was untraceable until the moment it was about to hit, and it contained so much power that it came very, very close to killing him.

"You really can't underestimate the jianghu!"

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and frowned. "This is going to be a pain."

It was clear that Moth Lady and the mysterious archer were targeting him because of the Way of Taiping's bounty.

Before this, he thought that these jianghu warriors would think twice before attacking a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau. However, reality proved that he had sorely underestimated their courage and their greed. Who would've thought that these bastards would attack him in broad daylight?

Anyone could be bought. It was just a matter of how much!

Worst of all, this wasn't the end, but the beginning. More and more jianghu warriors were entering Luo Shui every day, and his troubles had just begun.

"Ugh! What a headache!" Ye Qing rubbed his forehead in annoyance. He could tell that he was going to be busy for a long time to come.

It was at this moment someone called out, "Lord Ye! What happened?"

Ye Qing turned around. It was Li Lang [1] and a squad of bailiffs walking toward him.

Ye Qing's eyes immediately lit up. "Constable Li, someone just tried to have me killed. Surely this falls under the commandery hall's jurisdiction?"

Li Lang took a moment to scan his surroundings and listened to the people's gossipings. He quickly figured out what was going on and let out a bitter chuckle. "About that..."

The administrative division was in charge of public security and civil affairs, so technically, Ye Qing was perfectly right.

However, everyone and their mothers had heard of Ye Qing's exploits, and the victim of his heroism, the Way of Taiping, was so pissed that they issued an official bounty for his head. As a result, countless jianghu warriors were converging on Luo Shui to kill Ye Qing. How the hell were they supposed to handle them all?

In fact, they had been working non-stop to quell these people for the past week or so. Jianghu warriors were used to living by their own rules, and many of them were hard-boiled criminals, killers or madmen who would kill without batting an eyelid. Their presence already meant trouble, but it was a powder keg waiting to explode when they were all gathered in one place. Already, they had dealt much damage to Luo Shui.

As if that wasn't bad enough, jianghu warriors weren't ordinary civilians that they could push around as they pleased. Every single one of them was a powerhouse in their own right. Even with the aid of the Black Feathers Guard and constant patrols, they were only treating the symptom and not the cure.

That was why Li Lang really wanted to say, "Yes, but what can we possibly do to stop this?"

Li Lang wasn't stupid enough to voice his thoughts out loud, of course. He adopted a righteous tone and answered, "But of course! If it is okay to assassinate an imperial official in public, then what is the point of law and order?"

"Do not worry, Lord Ye. The administrative division has you covered. I will mobilize the men to arrest your assassins this instant."

"Let's go, men!"

Of the Thirty-Six Stratagems, fleeing is best. Sorry, Lord Ye, but you're on your own!

Ye Qing: "... The gall of this guy! His words sounded pretty, but it's completely useless! The assassins are lying right there on the floor, so who the fuck are you trying to arrest? A corpse? You might as well tell me that you're going to arrest the bitches who sicced these idiots on me, the Way of Taiping then!

Don't think I don't know that you're just trying to abscond your responsibility! Where is your sense of duty and professionalism as a public official? Have you fed it all to the dogs?

Chapter 232: Good Luck

Li Lang was just about to pull off his great escape when suddenly, three bailiffs stepped out of the crowd while carrying a body. One of them reported, "Lord Li, we found a body in the Star Reacher Restaurant. We've gotten confirmation that it belongs to... Wu Yijian."

"Wu Yijian? The One Shot Kill, Wu Yijian?" A surprised Li Lang paused in his tracks. "Are you sure?"

The bailiffs dropped the body on the floor and replied, "We think so. He has red hair, wears a red shirt, and wields a red bow. He is most likely Wu Yijian."

Li Lang stepped over to the corpse and examined it for a bit. A short while later, he nodded in agreement. "It's him alright. How did he die?"

A bailiff answered, "He was shot through his heart. We believe that the murder weapon is his own arrow."

The bailiff then produced a red arrow and handed it to Li Lang. "We found this sticking to a pillar in Wu Yijian's room. Judging from the location of the body and the direction of the arrow, we're pretty certain that he was killed by his own weapon."

"You're not kidding me, are you?" Li Lang could hardly believe his ears. His subordinates were telling him that the One Shot Kill was killed by his own arrow. Surely this must be a mistake?

"But it's true, chief!" The bailiff replied firmly even though he was scratching his own head, puzzled. "We believe that he committed suicide."

"Suicide?" Li Lang parroted while staring at the guy incredulously.

Why would Wu Yijian suddenly want to commit suicide?

Was he suggesting that Wu Yijian suddenly realized what a sonuvabitch he was and decided death was the only way to atone for his sins?

Not even a baby would believe such a thing!

It was at this moment Ye Qing spoke up, "You can stop guessing now. I'm pretty sure that I'm the one who killed this Wu Yijian!"

He knew this because he recognized the red arrow.

"You what?" Li Lang wheeled around and stared at him in disbelief. Is it Prank-Your-Constable Day or something? We're almost two kilometers away from Star Reacher Restaurant. Heck, you can't even see the restaurant from here, and you're telling me that you're the one who killed Wu Yijian? Do you fancy yourself a Spirit Master or something? Or do I look like an honest fool to you?

Ye Qing shrugged. “Yeah, I killed him. After I killed Moth Lady, the arrow suddenly appeared out of nowhere and almost killed me. So, I tossed it right back where it came from. I was just testing my luck, I didn’t think I would actually get the guy because you know, you can’t even see the restaurant from here. And what kind of idiot would remain where he was after firing his shot? He must be pretty weak.”

“Weak? Do you know who he is?” Li Lang blurted. He didn’t think Ye Qing was lying, but he still found it hard to believe that what he was saying was true. Ye Qing was claiming that he had tossed the arrow back to the archer and killed him across a distance of almost two kilometers. Not two hundred meters, but two kilometers. What was this, a fairy tale?

The fact that Ye Qing was just a late-stage Astral Refiner was even more ludicrous. He was a late-stage Astral Refiner himself, but if he were to throw an arrow with all his might, it was unlikely he would be able to make the same distance, much less kill a renowned jianghu warrior.

There was no denying the facts before his eyes though.

“I don’t. Tell me?” Ye Qing asked. He had never heard of a Wu Yijian or a One Shot Kill.

Judging from Ye Qing’s expression, he really didn’t know who Wu Yijian was, so he explained, “Wu Yijian hails from Guang Ping[1], and most of his exploits were made in Guang Ping. You haven’t been Luo Shui for long, so I’m not surprised that you haven’t heard of him.”

“Wu Yijian learned his martial arts under a major sect in Guang Ping called the Dragonslaying Sect, and he was famed for his ability to fire the Dragonslaying Shot, an ultimate technique of his sect. Not only was he an expert at killing enemies from a great distance, he was born with great strength and sharp eyes. Supposedly, he could spot a speck of dust from hundreds of meters away, which makes him a perfect fit with the Dragonslaying Shot.”

“As a late-stage Astral Refiner, Wu Yijian once killed a Soulstealer-class Stranger and a Spirit Purifier from 1.5 kilometers away. Such was his fame that they praised him as the man who could slay a dragon with a single shot. There is no one in Tian Yong who hasn’t heard of him.”

Ye Qing shrugged and cast the body an indifferent glance. “Well, I think his reputation is mostly exaggerated.”

He had more or less figured out how he managed to kill Wu Yijian. The archer probably couldn’t move for a bit after injecting all of his strength to fire his Dragonslaying Shot. That was why he was able to hit the guy with his own arrow.

No wonder they call him One Shot Kill. He literally only has one shot in his chamber. If he fails to kill his target with his shot, then he would die. Small fry!

Li Lang: “...” What do you mean his reputation is exaggerated? He killed a Spirit Purifier and a Soulstealer-class Stranger as an Astral Refiner!

Then, Li Lang took one look at Wu Yijian's lifeless body and decided to keep his mouth shut. No sense in antagonizing the man who killed Wu Yijian.

Another question occurred to Ye Qing. "Why is Wu Yijian risking his neck over a bounty when he's a disciple of the Dragonslaying Sect? He shouldn't be lacking in martial arts or pills."

Li Lang answered, "That's because Wu Yijian broke one too many rules and was expelled from his sect a few years ago."

"I see." That explains a lot.

"Oh right, what can you tell me about this Moth Lady?" Ye Qing pointed at Moth Lady's corpse next.

"Moth Lady? D-Did you just say she's the Moth Lady?" Li Lang stuttered.

"..." That's what I said, bud.

A few seconds later, Li Lang finally let out a mental sigh. He finally understood why Ye Qing was famous throughout Luo Shui, and why he could only clean up his mess after him. He was just that much stronger than him.

After Li Lang gave Ye Qing a rundown of Moth Lady's background, the Patrolman let out a deep sigh. "Hah. She's quite the character too, isn't she?"

This was just the beginning, and already he was being hunted by jianghu warriors who could fight above their cultivation level. He couldn't even imagine who he was going to face in the future.

"Where are you going, Constable Li? My assassins are right here."

Li Lang had tried to pull off a great escape yet again while he was musing, but of course his attempt to sneak away didn't escape Ye Qing's notice. The Patrolman rolled his eyes. He wasn't this scaredy cat when I met him at Cui Wei Boat. Heck, he was even going to detain me when he thought I was Luo Feibai's killer.

Li Lang paused in his tracks and let out an awkward laugh. "Since your attackers are dead, there's no reason for us to stay behind, is there? We still have a patrol to finish!"

Wu Yijian and Moth Lady were just the beginning. Li Lang knew full well that the quality of Ye Qing's attackers would only increase as time passed. Until the winds of turmoil had settled, Li Lang was fully prepared to stay as far away from Ye Qing as possible!

Ye Qing complained, "How can you say that, Constable Li? My attackers are dead, true, but the mastermind behind this is still alive and well, aren't they? I've bled for the people, served Luo Shui faithfully, and even made some major contributions to Chu. Surely you're not going to abandon me to my fate, Constable Li?"

Of course I'm going to abandon you to your fate! You fucking know there's nothing a small fry like me can really do to help you, so why are you making this difficult for me?

Li Lang swore mentally even as he shot Ye Qing a bitter grin. "Lord Ye, it's not that we don't want to help you. We just... don't have the strength."

They could request the Black Feathers Guard to step in and kill them all, but these bastards most likely weren't going to go down without a fight. That meant that innocents would die, and the city would incur heavy damage.

And even if they managed to kill the first batch, the stream of jianghu warriors lining up to kill Ye Qing would never end so long as the bounty was still valid.

Of course, if they could uproot the Way of Taiping once and for all, then this matter would be over. But who could do that? Entire countries had mobilized to root out the Way of Taiping, but the damn cult still existed to this day.

Sure, the Way of Taiping were nowhere close to their prime especially after the latest blow they took, and if the imperial court really wanted to, they could probably eliminate all traces of the cult from Chu. But would Chu really invest that much time and effort just to protect an insignificant Patrolman? Obviously not.

Therefore, all the administrative division could do was increase patrol and maintain public order as best they could. He supposed they could make an example by violently killing a handful of jianghu warriors, but again, that would only treat the symptom but not the cause.

“Good luck, Lord Ye. You're going to need it.”

Ye Qing: “...” Someone needs to give you a lesson on how to comfort others.

Noticing the unfriendly look on Ye Qing's face, Li Lang coughed awkwardly and said, “Don't worry, this can't go on forever. You just need to stay alive for a bit, and the jianghu warriors would eventually learn that you're no one they can trifle with. You'll be safe then.”

Ye Qing: “...” I bet this guy leaves it to his subordinates to comfort grieving families. The fuck do you mean by ‘stay alive for a bit’? You're basically telling me to tough it out on my own!

“You're a strong warrior, Lord Ye. I'm sure you'll be able to defy the odds. I believe in you!” Li Lang patted Ye Qing's shoulder pretentiously.

Ye Qing finally couldn't hold in his reaction any longer and rolled his eyes. “I don't need your fucking belief, I need your—”

“My wife is waiting for me for dinner, so see you next time, Lord Ye!” Li Lang loudly cut him off before walking away without any hesitation whatsoever.

Despicable. Back in the day, the—wait, this is technically the ancient times, just in a different world. Fuck!

Ye Qing wanted to throw his hands up in the air, but if he were to be honest, he knew this would happen.

That said, the administrative division might abandon him to his fate, but the Pacification Bureau wouldn't. After all, he was a member of the Pacification Bureau, and they were the reason the mad dogs had targeted him in the first place. Plus, the Pacification Bureau wasn't scared of the Way of Taiping.

Yeah, I'm going to visit Gu Suitang tomorrow and ask him for a solution.

His mind made up, Ye Qing looted the bodies, tossed a fire talisman to burn them to ash, and walked away.

After he returned to the Inspection Department, Ye Qing spent some time crunching through the work he had neglected for the past couple days. A while later, he finally went back to his residence.

As soon as he stepped through the door, a silhouette abruptly appeared on his shoulder and flew a circle around him. "Why aren't you hurt, friend? Why aren't you bleeding?"

Ye Qing shot Wawa an incredulous look. Do you want me to bleed and get hurt?

It wasn't Wawa's fault, of course. Half a month ago, when Gu Suitang began training him, he was beaten up so badly that he literally needed to be carried home on a stretcher. The girl had burst out crying as soon as she saw him.

However, he had recovered the next day and went back to get beaten up all over again. Over time, even the Book Sprite had become desensitized to his injuries.

Wawa was surprised because Ye Qing was able to walk through the door on his own two feet today, something that hadn't happened for the past two weeks or so.

"I am hurt. It's an internal injury." That you gave me because of your hurtful remark.

It was at this moment Faceless walked over and greeted him, "You've returned, young master."

"I have." Ye Qing nodded and clarified, "You know what's going on outside, don't you?"

"I do."

Faceless nodded and turned serious. "According to my investigations, the rumors seem to originate from White Horse Academy."

"White Horse Academy?" Ye Qing frowned deeply. "But I never did anything to them. Why would they do such a thing?"

Did they find out about Cheng Nuo? No, that's impossible.

Faceless replied, "From what I heard, Luo Feiliu is the mastermind because you had a hand in his younger brother's death, Luo Feibai. That is why he spread the rumors in hopes that you will perish under the weight of your own fame."

Ye Qing rubbed his nose and sneered. "Luo Feiliu? Interesting. Do you think that the information can be trusted, Faceless?"

Faceless answered, "I believe so. I can confirm that the rumors definitely started from White Horse Academy."

Ye Qing wagged his fingers imperiously. "Heh. That is incorrect. Only an idiot would believe that."

Faceless: "... Can we do away with the insults, please?"

Before this, Ye Qing wasn't sure who was the mastermind. But now, he was certain it was Wang Luori.

Faceless didn't know the truth, so it was understandable that he would think that Luo Feiliu was the one behind the rumors. But he knew Luo Chunchao knew that Wang Luori was the one who killed Luo Feibai to set him up. There was no way the patriarch would order his son to spread such rumors.

That said, Faceless' claim that the rumors had probably originated from White Horse Academy was probably true. Since it was impossible for Luo Feiliu to have spread the rumors, the only one who could have done this was Wen Zilai.

Wang Luori was Wen Zilai's savior, so Wen Zilai absolutely had a reason to do such a thing.

As for why he decided to pin the blame on White Horse Academy and Luo Feiliu, it was obvious. It was to pit the Pacification Bureau and White Horse Academy against each other so that Sunset Hill would profit from their loss.

"Killing two birds with one stone, eh? As expected of the Deceitful Scholar!" Ye Qing sneered.

The chances that Hill Lord himself was the one who came up with this plan was minimal because Wang Luori was an idiot.

Ye Qing had to admit that the plan was sublime though. If Cui Wei hadn't illuminated him on Wen Zilai's relationship with Wang Luori, Wen Zilai's plan would most likely have succeeded, and he would never have figured out that the guy was the mastermind slowly maneuvering him toward his death.

"Wang Luori, you fucking son of a fuck." Ye Qing's eyes burned with killing intent. He was sure that the old fucker had forgotten all about him, but no, it hadn't even been a month since his son died before he targeted him again. What the fuck was wrong with the guy?

In any case, it was time to reunite the old fucker and his son. Oh, and he mustn't forget Wen Zilai as well. A family should be together.

"What do we do, young master? I can accompany you if you need my strength!" Faceless offered.

"It's fine. You're too weak," Ye Qing replied bluntly.

Faceless: "... Ow.

"Just stay here and take care of Kung Fu Frog and Wawa. Don't even go to the Inspection Department until this matter is behind us," Ye Qing instructed carefully. "If anyone tries to enter the residence without permission, and you're sure you've never seen them before, don't hesitate to kill them."

"I will handle this myself."

Chapter 233: Granny Xiong's Roasted Chestnuts

"Roasted chestnuts for sale..."

“Sweet and tasty roasted chestnuts for sale! It’s free if it’s not tasty!”

“Roasted chestnuts for sale...”

It was dark, moonless midnight where most households had extinguished their lights, and the hustle and bustle of the day had come to an end. A cool breeze kicked up some dust and added some cold and forlornness to the streets.

Suddenly, a low and raspy voice broke the silence of the night. It sounded old, tired, and heavy. It sounded like the voice of a civilian who had worked themselves to the bone since dawn and was hoping to catch a glass of warm water, a hot meal, and the warm words of their family.

“Roasted chestnuts for sale...”

“Sweet and tasty roasted chestnuts for sale! It’s free if it’s not tasty!”

As the voice grew louder and louder, a wrinkly old woman with a hunched back slowly came into view. She was also pushing a small cart. Inside the cart was a pot filled with steaming, roasted chestnuts. It gave off a sweet, delicious scent that could be smelled even from far, far away.

“Your chestnuts smell pretty nice, old woman.”

It was at this moment three people wearing form-fitting outfits and carrying sabers or swords on their waists walked up to the old woman. The speaker was a muscular, fearsome-looking man with a scar on his face.

The old woman didn’t pay the man’s rude behavior any heed. She maintained a careful, obsequious smile and said, “Hehe, it’s a family recipe that’s been passed down for many generations, and I just roasted them a while ago. Why don’t you give it a try? You don’t have to pay if you think it’s not tasty.”

“Why not?” The fearsome man picked up a roasted chestnut, peeled away its shell, and tossed it into his mouth. He exclaimed in surprise when the delicious flavors bloomed inside his mouth, “Huh, it really is pretty tasty. Come give it a taste, you two.”

“Mm hmm! It’s seriously delicious! I haven’t eaten such an authentic roasted chestnut in a very long time!”

His two companions immediately stepped and shoved a couple of chestnuts into their mouths as well. They couldn’t stop praising how good it was.

“Burp... delicious.”

“Well, time to go. Shall we head to Apricot Brothel and have some fun?”

“Again? You were there the whole night last night! You’re going to die during sex and give the women a fright one day!”

“Hehe, what’s the point of living if not to enjoy life?”

“Three is right. I quote: One desires lust when they are warm and full. Come, let’s head to Apricot Brothel and enjoy some ‘apricot blossoms’...”

“I didn’t know you’re a cultured man, brother! Indeed, let’s head to Apricot Brothel and enjoy some blossoms, drink some wine, and kill some men!”

“Hahaha! Well said, well said! Let’s go!”

Seeing that the trio were about to take their leave, the old woman hurriedly blocked in front of them. “Dear customers, you haven’t paid for my roasted chestnuts yet!”

“Huh?” The formidable-looking man and the boss of the group immediately glared at her.

The old woman tried an obsequious smile and repeated, “You haven’t paid for my roasted chestnuts yet. I’m in a hurry to return home myself, so just pay me the cost price, and I’ll take my leave immediately!”

“Didn’t you say that your roasted chestnuts are free, old woman?” Two grinned.

The old woman replied carefully, “I said that it’s free if it’s not tasty.”

“Is that so?” Three frowned and said, “In that case, it tastes horrible. It’s so horrible I can die.”

“Dear customers...”

“Listen here, you decrepit thing. It was your honor that we chose to eat your stuff, so you should be. Now get out of our way, or we’ll rip you in half, get it?”

“You heard the boss, old woman. Get lost!” Three ordered before deciding that it would be faster to just kick her out of the way. However, he had just lifted his foot halfway when suddenly, he froze in terror. The next moment, his body melted into a puddle like he was made of candle wax.

Strangely, the puddle of blood and melted flesh didn’t seep into the soil. Instead, they wriggled and split into many round-shaped objects. A second later, they transformed into hot, delicious-smelling roasted chestnuts.

“Ahh! You... You’re Granny Xiong! You’re Granny Xiong! We need to run!”

After witnessing Three’s horrific death with their own eyes, the two men recalled something and turned as pale as a sheet. They were both Astral Refiners, but the thought of taking revenge for Three never crossed their minds. Like scared rabbits, they pushed their movement arts to the limits and escaped in opposite directions as quickly as they could.

However, the duo had only taken two steps when they suddenly shuddered, and their bodies collapsed into a puddle just like Three. Their flesh and blood then transformed into many more roasted chestnuts.

"If you're not going to pay up after eating my chestnuts, then I'm afraid that I'd have to take your life as compensation!" Granny Xiong shook her head slowly as she stared at the floor of roasted chestnuts. "Kids these days!"

She went back to her cart and tapped the pot twice, saying, "Come into the pot!"

As if they had a life of their own, the roasted chestnuts abruptly stood up and hopped back into the pot. A few breaths later, what was an empty pot was filled with roasted chestnuts once more. In fact, there were more of them than there were before.

"Not bad. It's a small profit, but a profit nonetheless."

Granny Xiong smiled as her wrinkles smoothed out. Then, she pushed her cart forward once more while calling out, "Roasted chestnuts for sale... Sweet and tasty roasted chestnuts for sale! It's free if it's not tasty!"

She didn't go far before a troop of Pacification Sentinels wearing black armor and carrying swords and sabers walked up to her. The leader of the group was none other than a familiar face, Ugly Monk.

He had just finished dealing with a Stranger incident, and he hadn't had a grain of rice or even a drop of water for the whole day. He was so hungry he could eat a cow or two. That was why his stomach immediately started grumbling when he smelled the roasted chestnuts.

"Come, let's eat some roasted chestnuts and fill our stomachs."

Ugly Monk led his men to Granny Xiong and asked, "How much for one bag of roasted chestnuts, ma'am?"

Granny Xiong smiled. "Just two Tongbaos [1]."

"That is cheap." Ugly Monk picked up a roasted chestnut and tossed it into his mouth. He quickly praised, "Oh, this is seriously delicious! Come on, guys, I know you're just as hungry as me. It's my treat, so feel free to eat to your heart's content!"

"Haha. Thanks boss!"

"We'll take you up on your offer!"

The Pacification Sentinels had been starving for a while now. They immediately rushed forward and partook in the delicious snack as well.

"Your roasted chestnuts are seriously great, ma'am. I haven't felt such an authentic taste for a long time," Zhou Xi praised.

"Haha, I'm glad you like it." Granny Xiong smiled wider. "This might sound like a boast, but everyone who's ever eaten my roasted chestnuts thinks they're delicious. After all, they're freshly made."

Zhou Xi asked, "Oh right, is this where you set up your stall, ma'am? Why haven't I seen you before?"

Granny Xiong replied, “No, I used to work at Chang Shan[2]. I’ve only arrived at Luo Shui two days ago.”

“Chang Shan?” Zhou Xi exclaimed in surprise. “That’s pretty far out. Did you come with your family or something?”

Granny Xiong shook her head. “No, I came alone.”

“Alone?” Ugly Monk was the one who spoke up this time. “You must be one tough lady then. Chang Shan is tens of thousands of kilometers[3] away from here. Even if you took a ship, it’ll take at least five to six days to make it here. Did you?”

Granny Xiong beamed at him. “No, how can I possibly afford to take a ship? I just walked. It only took a day, so it’s not really as far as you say.”

“A... day? You’re a funny woman, ma’am. There’s just no way you could’ve walked over from Chang Shan to Luo Shui in a day. Even I couldn’t do that,” Ugly Monk said laughingly. Obviously, he thought that Granny Xiong was just joking with him.

Granny Xiong laughed with him and said, “Don’t you look down on this old woman, dear customer. I’m still quite healthy and fit despite my appearance. In fact I just murdered three unruly boys who ate my roasted chestnuts without paying a while ago.”

“Plus, Granny Xiong never jokes. I just don’t see the point, you see?”

“You? A killer? Oh, you!” The Pacification Sentinels all burst out laughing, but they soon realized that Ugly Monk and Zhou Xi weren’t. In fact, their expressions were one of dawning horror and nervousness.

“You’re Granny Xiong?”

“That is me.” She nodded affirmatively.

“The Granny Xiong who sells roasted chestnuts?” asked Ugly Monk while swallowing and gathering his strength.

Granny Xiong replied, “The one and only. I didn’t know I’m so famous that even the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau had heard of me though. It is my honor.”

When Granny Xiong admitted to being who Ugly Monk thought she was, he immediately channeled his vigor and attempted to put some distance between himself and the woman. However, he froze as soon as he took a step, and his aura disappeared as quickly as it came. Zhou Xi and the others were the same as well.

“Don’t worry, my lords. I won’t harm your lives,” Granny Xiong comforted them with a beaming smile. “However, I will have to trouble you to help me. Just treat it as payment for eating my roasted chestnuts. I’m a fair woman after all. Do you agree with my proposal?”

Granny Xiong enjoyed their fearful, struggling expressions for a bit before saying, "It doesn't matter even if you don't agree. It's not like I need your permission."

"Come, take this bag of roasted chestnuts to your Lord Ye. I dearly wish to know his opinion of my handicraft."

Ugly Monk was anything but willing, but he accepted the bag as if his body wasn't his own.

"What a good boy." Granny Xiong nodded in satisfaction. "Oh right, when tomorrow comes, I want you to..."

She walked up to Ugly Monk and whispered something into his ear. When she was finished, she waved them away and said, "You may go home now. I still have a lot of things I need to prepare!"

A finger snap later, a strange energy rippled out and caused everyone's eyes to grow unfocused. It wasn't until Granny Xiong was gone did they finally regain their consciousness.

"Did... Did something happen just now?" Zhou Xi asked while shaking his head.

Ugly Monk chuckled. "What? We were just eating some roasted chestnuts. Were you daydreaming because you're too tired or something?"

"I guess so." Zhou Xi smiled self-deprecatingly before licking his lips. "Those roasted chestnuts are seriously delicious though. It's a shame that Lord Ye and the rest of our brothers wouldn't be able to get a taste."

Ugly Monk chided him jokingly, "I already left some for them, unlike you gluttons who only care about filling your stomachs!"

Everyone guffawed at that.

"Alright, it's really getting late, so let's head home already. Roasted chestnuts are less delicious when they're cold." "Yeah, roasted chestnuts should be eaten while they're warm."

Chapter 234: An Ox Who Knows Kung Fu

"How much longer do we have to go, Ugly Monk?" Ye Qing asked while glancing at his subordinate.

"We're almost there, my lord," Ugly Monk replied.

Ye Qing's eyes glinted as their surroundings grew more and more remote. Not long after he fell asleep, Ugly Monk and Zhou Xi had woken up for an urgent matter. They claimed that they had accidentally come across an area that was covered in white mist and decided that it was worth investigating. However, the two Pacification Sentinels who were dispatched to scout out the place never returned, and they didn't dare to venture inside without knowing exactly what they were dealing with. So, they decided to come back first and recruit Ye Qing's aid.

A short while later, Ugly Monk pointed ahead and said, "That's the place, my lord!"

Ye Qing looked. The white mist wasn't too thick, so he could vaguely see what was behind it. It was a cluster of dilapidated buildings that had been abandoned for heavens-know-how-long. At this time, the white mist surrounding the area resembled deadly Strangers that were just waiting for him to enter their maws.

Ye Qing pulsed his spirit but couldn't detect any danger nearby. So, he instructed, "I'm going to take a look. Stay here."

"Let us come with you, my lord," Ugly Monk insisted.

Zhou Xi echoed in agreement, "He's right, my lord. We don't know what's inside yet. You could use the backup."

Ye Qing pondered for a moment before agreeing, "Very well. Ugly Monk, Zhou Xi, the two of you will be coming with me. The rest of you will stay here. Keep your eyes open."

"As you command!" The Pacification Sentinels replied.

Ye Qing didn't sense anything special about the white mist when he was outside, but as soon as he went in, he felt a strong, invisible pressure compressing his spirit and his five senses to just a few meters.

"Something's wrong with this mist. Be careful, and don't get lost," Ye Qing instructed before venturing deeper into the mist.

It was dead silent inside the mist. Literally, they couldn't even hear an insect chirp. Add to the fact that the mist was suppressing their senses, and it felt like they were trekking through the desolate wilderness, lonely and suffocating.

"This isn't right..."

A while later, Ye Qing noted something strange. This mist-covered area wasn't really that big, and with their speed they should've exited the place a while ago. However, not only were they still inside, they couldn't even find the exit anymore. Something strange was clearly going on here.

Whoosh!

Suddenly, Ye Qing's spirit warned him of danger. The next second, he heard a soft whistling sound behind his back.

Ye Qing sidestepped out of harm's way and raised his hand to block an attack.

Bang!

The clash of force pushed the surrounding mist away, and it was revealed that Ye Qing's attacker was none other than... Ugly Monk.

"What are you doing, Ugly Monk?" Ye Qing yelled. Before he could get a response, a saber flew straight toward his head.

Instead of dodging, Ye Qing tapped the blade and snapped it in half with one finger. The gesture looked weak, but the attacker staggered back with blood spilling out from between his fingers.

"Zhou Xi? You—"

Ye Qing was going to rebuke them both when suddenly, he noticed that their eyes looked blank and unfocused.

Someone's controlling them? Ye Qing thought with a deep frown. While he was hesitating, Ugly Monk's arm abruptly bulged with muscles, and he was able to break free with a powerful pull. A golden sheen covered his hand as he unleashed a powerful palm strike.

“Vajra Palm”

At the same time, Zhou Xi leaped into the air and kicked out with both legs, the fall wind suddenly blowing out of nowhere.

“Fall Wind Kick”

Vajra Palm was one of Ugly Monk's ultimate techniques. Fall Wind Kick was Zhou Xi's trump card as well. The duo went all out from the start, but Ye Qing couldn't because they were allies.

That said, Ye Qing could defeat them even without going all out. The best defense was a good offense, so Ye Qing took one step forward and met Ugly Monk's palm with his fist, crushing the Vajra Palm's force before it could even enter his body. Ugly Monk let out a muffled groan as he staggered away.

At the same time, Ye Qing whipped his palm around like a saber and struck Zhou Xi at the weakest spot of his martial art. The fall wind dissipated, and the flurry of kicks died down. While Zhou Xi was recovering himself, Ye Qing stepped forward and hit him right on the neck. The man's eyes rolled to the back of his head as he fainted.

Ugly Monk caught himself during this time, but he was still trying to neutralize the force wreaking havoc inside the body. Ye Qing smirked, dashed forward, and knocked him out in the exact same manner.

“And done!”

Ye Qing clapped his hands and got ready to inspect Ugly Monk and Zhou Xi. After all, he hadn't sensed anything out of the ordinary since the beginning. He wanted to know what was controlling them, and when.

Suddenly, the unconscious duo rose to their feet like someone was pulling them up by their necks. Then, they rushed Ye Qing once more. However, Ye Qing could clearly see that their eyes were closed. His spirit also told him that they were still unconscious.

Ye Qing frowned harder and passed through the duo in the blink of an eye. When he stood still, Ugly Monk and Zhou Xi dropped to the ground once more...

... And climbed back to their feet like zombies.

Ye Qing: “...” So, this is what stun immunity looks like in real life.

This time, Ye Qing summoned a thick swathe of Blood Shadows and trapped them in place. He might not be able to knock them out, but trapping them was a different story.

Just when Ye Qing thought that the matter was over, the sound of crossbow bolts being released suddenly entered his ears. A bad feeling suddenly gripped him as he swung his sleeves and scattered the arrow rain in one strike. The next moment, he saw a bunch of guards wearing black armor and

carrying sabers and swords stepping into view. It was one other than the Pacification Sentinels he had ordered to stay outside the mist.

I thought so. If whoever's behind this can control Ugly Monk and Zhou Xi, why wouldn't they be able to take control of the Pacification Sentinels?

Ye Qing sighed as the Pacification Sentinels rushed him. He lowered his palm like he was pushing something, and the group abruptly froze in their tracks like they were pinned by a mountain. Then, the Blood Shadows bound them tightly.

"Show yourself. You'll need more than my own men to kill me," Ye Qing said with a sneer as he scanned his surroundings.

"Moo... I told you we won't be able to kill Lord Ye with such petty tricks. In the end, we have to do this ourselves."

A strange voice came from behind a curtain of white mist. Then, an old ox slowly stepped into view.

Noticing Ye Qing's strange expression, the ox rolled his eyes at him and said, "What? You never seen an ox before? Moo!"

Ye Qing replied honestly, "I've seen an ox, but I've never seen one who can talk."

The ox scoffed, "You think this is special? Wait till I beat your ass with my horns!"

The ox shook his head, and its crescent-shaped horns abruptly glowed like a pair of curved sabers. It was a saber technique, and a two-saber technique to be exact. Strange and treacherous, a flurry of saber forces shot toward Ye Qing like the rain.

Ye Qing conjured his own saber and swung it as swift as the wind.

Dang!

There was a soft shink as a thin line divided the mournful rain. At the same time, a bloody wound appeared on the ox's forehead.

"What a fast saber. Not bad!" The ox swayed its head back and forth as the wound gradually recovered.

"You, on the other hand, have average skill at best. But only if I judge you by human standards, of course," Ye Qing said with a sneer.

"Do you think I'm afraid of you, brat? You asked for this! Moo!"

The ox let out a loud moo as its stomach abruptly split open. But instead of blood, a pair of human hands stretched out of the wound and split it wider. A man then crawled out into the open.

He had a surly face, and his upper body was bare not because he couldn't afford a shirt, but because he was covered in ox fur.

"Ox fur? You're Niu Ben!" Ye Qing immediately recalled a certain memory in his mind.

Yesterday, after he returned to the Pacification Bureau, he had requested a name list of all the jianghu warriors who entered Luo Shui from Li Lang. Li Lang was the chief constable of the Three

Companies and Six Offices of the administrative division and responsible for public security. There was no way he wouldn't keep a record of all the jianghu warriors who had entered Luo Shui.

Of course, it was impossible for the guards to keep track of everyone, not to mention that some jianghu warriors were pretty good at disguising themselves. Niu Ben wasn't one of them, however.

Supposedly, Niu Ben was an orphan who had been abandoned in a cow shed. He only survived because an old cow had fed him its milk every day. He also gained an ox bloodline as a result.

The ox bloodline was strong, and he was very young when he gained his bloodline. As a result, he became a half-ox half-human and was covered in ox fur. His personality was strange, and his mood was unpredictable.

Niu Ben was a middle-stage Astral Refiner and an expert at stick arts. His fighting style was wild and violent, and completely fearless. Over time, he came to be known as Niu Ben the Mad Ox.

"Hahaha! It's a bit too late to be afraid!" Niu Ben let out a mad cackle and produced a stick from the old ox's stomach. It was at least as thick as a human's arm and incredibly long. Heavens only know how the old ox's stomach managed to fit both the human and the stick.

Niu Ben's eyes grew bloodshot as he let out a mighty roar. His fur started growing like crazy, and his stick was covered in a layer of lightning. He then charged toward Ye Qing and aimed a powerful downward swing at his head.

Space itself was shredded as the lightning stick cut through the air, but Ye Qing ignored it right until the moment it would hit his head. Then, he sidestepped out of harm's way by a hair's breadth.

Boom!

The ground shattered like powder when it was hit by the stick. Before Niu Ben could lift it up, Ye Qing stepped it back into the ground.

The lightning slithering across the stick spread to Ye Qing as a matter of course, but it was like he couldn't even feel it. Since Niu Ben refused to let go of his weapon, Ye Qing put some more strength into his right foot and forced Niu Ben to his knees.

Niu Ben was stunned to say the least. The Great Ox was a Hatred-class Stranger who possessed incredible strength, and since he inherited its bloodline he naturally possessed formidable strength as well. However, he felt as helpless as a child before Ye Qing. And in a sense, he was.

While Niu Ben was being forced to his knees, Ye Qing took one step forward and touched his head like he was petting an animal. Then, the guy's head exploded into a million pieces.

Chapter 235: Wind and Rain

"Throwing garbage at me is only going to piss me off. You're going to have to attack me together if you want to kill me."

A wisp of invisible flame burned away the goo of red and white in Ye Qing's hands. He then tilted his head to one side and smiled evilly at his hidden watchers.

By now, he had figured out that this was a trap his dear bounty hunters had prepared for him.

“The arrogance of this brat. That said, there is no need to drag this out. Let’s attack him together and stop wasting time already.”

The cold snort came from Ye Qing’s left, but the attack actually came from the right. It was a sword force slithering silently yet quickly across the ground like a venomous viper while under the cover of the mist. At the same time, an erhu[1] started playing a bleak and sorrowful tune. It sang of the trials and tribulations of the long, long journey that was life.

More importantly, Ye Qing immediately resonated with the tune and became gripped by bleakness and sorrow as well. He found himself unable to focus on the very deadly situation he was facing.

While Ye Qing was distracted, the sword force abruptly pounced toward him and spread out like an umbrella. They actually transformed into hissing snakes and targeted each and every one of his vital spots.

Shing shing!

However, Ye Qing’s body turned out to be harder than expected. The sword force splashed uselessly against his skin almost like his body was made of metal, not flesh.

“‘Ghost Snake’ Cao Xiaoting!”

“The ‘Miserable Wind and Rain’ Shangguan Wuqing!”

Ye Qing identified his attackers immediately after he saw their attacks.

“You have a discerning eye, brat,” said the gloomy voice who requested his companion to attack Ye Qing earlier as two silhouettes stepped out into the open.

The first attacker looked haggard, thin, and sickly pale. His aura was as dark as his appearance suggested as well. However, he had red, vertical pupils that very much resembled a snake. He also carried three snake-like swords. Literally, the blade was the snake’s body, and the handle was the snake’s head. They were red, green and black in color each, and the snake’s head was hissing like it was alive.

The second attacker was a middle-aged man in his forties. He sat on a litter[2] that was being supported by four beautiful girls, though their eyes were glassy and lifeless.

The second attacker was quite handsome for his age, but his eyes were filled with melancholic sorrow. He was holding an erhu that played sad tunes on its own even though his hands weren’t moving, which made the atmosphere even bleaker and more desolate than before.

The swordsman was the ‘Ghost Snake’ Cao Xiaoting, and the bleak-looking man was the ‘Miserable Wind and Rain’ Shangguan Wuqing.

“So you’re the ones who laid this trap for me?” Ye Qing crossed his arms and tilted his head at his attackers. “I can tell that you guys are going all out!”

“But it’s one thing to kill me, and another to kill this many Pacification Bureau members. Are you sure you’ve carefully considered the consequences? Are you sure you want to put yourself on the Pacification Bureau’s hit list just for a handful of cultivation manuals, pills and whatever?”

“The Pacification Bureau will never let this go unanswered, you know. You can run to the ends of the earth, and they will still hunt you down like dogs. Is it really worth it?”

Shangguan Wuqing coughed. “We appreciate your concern, but we’re not that stupid. Your colleagues aren’t dead yet. They just ate Granny Xiong’s roasted chestnuts is all. Once you’re dead, they’ll return to normal.”

“Granny Xiong?” Ye Qing frowned. Not only did he recognize the name, it was quite the infamous name throughout the jianghu.

It was said that an old woman who sells roasted chestnuts would appear on the streets every midnight, and anyone who ate her food would die in all sorts of bizarre ways. Almost no one had seen her before because barring a handful of exceptions, everyone who had met her had died.

However, Granny Xiong’s base of operations was Chang Shan. He wasn’t expecting the woman to come all the way here just for the bounty. These jianghu warriors must be even poorer than he thought.

“Granny Xiong is here too? What an honor!” Ye Qing exclaimed with mock surprise before putting on a hesitant expression. “However, there are three of you, and the bounty is only big enough for one person. Surely you’re not planning to split them between you three?”

“If only the Taiping cultists aren’t so stingy, don’t you agree?”

“Do you actually think you can drive a wedge between us with such blatant deception, brat? Spare us the drama!” Cao Xiaoting sneered. “And don’t think we don’t know you’re trying to buy time either. This whole place is surrounded by an array. You can scream on top of your lungs, and no one is going to hear it and get help.”

Ye Qing sighed. Everyone’s brain is online, it seems. I knew that the web novels were lying to me. It was stupid of me to think I could incite my enemies to fight among themselves with just words.

“Let us begin then.”

As soon as he finished, Lightning Bolt shot out of Ye Qing’s mouth straight toward Cao Xiaoting. He then followed right behind his mini sword.

“Go!”

Cao Xiaoting’s swords flew out of their sheaths and unleashed their power. The red sword unleashed ripples of fire, the green sword released clouds of poisonous smoke, and the black sword hissed like it was a living snake.

The fire was a red flame that could char flesh and blood, the smoke was a deadly poison that could rot bones like nothing, and the hissing sound was a sound attack that could disorient the mind.

This was also why the three swords were named Blaze, Poison and Disorient.

The three swords swished and swerved past each other seemingly at random, when in reality it was the complete opposite. They followed a strict pattern that maximized their power and concealed the true threat amidst a flurry of bright, colorful lights.

They engulfed Lightning Bolt before it could even reach its target.

Ye Qing was far tougher than his hidden weapon, however. Channeling his strength and his willpower, he threw a forceful punch.

Break Through”

The fist force easily shredded the web of light and sent all three swords flying. The forceful disintegration of his power destabilized Chao Xiaoting’s vigor and caused him to let out a muffled groan. He stared at Ye Qing in disbelief.

Since they were plotting to kill Ye Qing, they had studied his information as a matter of course. They knew that he was an expert in fist arts and possessed a powerful physique, which meant that he was most likely a body-tempering warrior. Generally speaking, body-tempering warriors possessed a weak spirit and mind, which was why he used Disorient to disorient Ye Qing, and Poison to rot his internal organs from the inside.

But not only were his counters completely useless, Ye Qing had dismantled his attack in a single punch.

Ye Qing wasn’t going to give Cao Xiaoting the chance to stabilize his energies, of course. He rushed forward to end the swordsman’s life.

Suddenly, the sorrowful sound of an erhu filled the air. An unnatural sorrow immediately gripped his body and mind once more. However, Ye Qing was prepared this time. He immediately visualized the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” to shield himself from the music’s effects and continued toward Cao Xiaoting.

Seeing that his sound attack was ineffective, Shangguan Wuqing abruptly changed his tactic and played a tune of chaos and turmoil. A pounding headache struck Ye Qing out of nowhere, and his vigor churned so much that his heart was beating twice as hard as before.

“HAH!!!”

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and let out a mighty roar, overwhelming the disruptive sound of the erhu. While the music was temporarily disrupted, Ye Qing changed targets and threw a punch at Shangguan Wuqing instead.

The Burning Wind claimed the stage while the wind and rain were taking a break.

The world plunged into a fiery hell all of a sudden, and it was hot enough to cook rivers and mountains. The stars flickered erratically as Ye Qing punched out with the audacity and ambition to give the sky itself a new makeup.

“Cloud Vaporization Style”

If his “Cloud Vaporization Style” only got the shape but not the essence in the past, then now it was truly complete in every way. With this punch, he would burn the world, challenge the sun and moon, and wipe the slate clean.

Buzz...

The desolate wind and rain that surrounded the whole area was annihilated by the punch just like that. It even cleared out the mist and revealed the sky once more.

Cao Xiaoting and Shangguan Wuqing were beyond shocked at this point. Ye Qing's fist intent had forcefully locked them in place and forced them to bear the full brunt of his attack. It wasn't even close yet, but already their astral qi was dissipating, their skin was cracking, their blood was boiling, their mind was flickering, and an unbelievable force was crushing every inch of their flesh bit by bit.

"Nine Swords of Dominance!" Cao Xiaoting growled as a puff of invisible flame escaped his throat. He did not hesitate to execute his ultimate technique because he knew it was do or die. Blaze, Poison and Disorient flew in front of him and unleashed three vertical slashes, three horizontal slashes, and three thrusts. That was nine attacks in total.

Everyone thought that the Ghost Snake was a sneak attacker who could only stab someone when they weren't looking, when in reality his trump card was the complete opposite.

A sword was dominant, a man was dominant, and a man mastered the sword to become the best of both worlds.

The first six sword qis cut open a crisscrossing path between the fist force. It allowed the last three sword qis to punch through unhindered.

While Cao Xiaoting was unleashing his ultimate attack, Shangguan Wuqing also closed his eyes and slowly, very slowly, pulled his bow stick across the string.

Every time the bow moved an inch, the surrounding space would grow just a tad denser. When the string was fully drawn like a bow, and the erhu was screeching in pain, Shangguan Wuqing finally stopped his action.

By now, Shangguan Wuqing was deathly pale and sweating bullets. His arms were shaking as if they were withstanding a terrible weight because he was. An entire river lay between the strings.

Buzz!

When Shangguan Wuqing finally let go, the string rebounded back to its original position. The earth shuddered, and space shook as if it was straining under a terrible weight. Strangely, no sound could be heard whatsoever.

Then again, a powerful sound was inaudible.

Bang! Bang!

The only two strings on the erhu abruptly snapped at the same time, and it was like a dam had broken. The swords were opening the way, and behind the swords were a massive river that would crush it all and flood the world, leaving behind only desolation and misery.

"Now we're talking."

Ye Qing raised an eyebrow and took half a step forward. Crouching deeply, he punched the ground diagonally and sent the entire chunk into the air. It not only blocked the tidal wave of force, but also reflected it after a brief stalemate.

This gift is too big for me. You can have it back!

Rumble!

The unexpected counterattack caught Cao Xiaoting and Shangguan Wuqing completely off guard, and they were spent after unleashing their strongest attack. As the torrent of force sent them flying, Ye Qing appeared in the air and punched them both into the ground, hard.

Buzz...

It was only now that a certain pot arrived fashionably late. It flew into the air and stopped when it was directly above Ye Qing. Then, an old voice called out,

“Come into the pot!”

An unbelievable suction force suddenly locked the surrounding space and trapped Ye Qing in place. Even with his strength, he was unable to break free immediately.

At the same time, countless roasted chestnuts fell out of the pot.

The roasted chestnuts immediately rolled up to Ye Qing’s feet and broke their own shells. What crawled out of the shells weren’t chestnuts, but tiny, insect-like Strangers with humanoid arms and legs.

Chapter 236: Heart Infestor

The worms were fat, white, and thumb-sized. It had humanoid limbs that were as thin as a strand of hair, and its two eyes covered almost the entire front of its head. Ignoring the fact that it was a Stranger, it looked charmingly naive.

“Heart Infestors?”

Ye Qing blanched when he saw the worms, however. He stomped the ground and sent the worms flying with a powerful gust of Burning Wind, but not only did they climb back to their feet, it was as if his astral qi had done no damage to them at all; the astral qi that could melt metal and annihilate rocks as easily as breathing.

“There’s no mistake!” Ye Qing’s expression turned severe. The Heart Infestor was a Malice-class Stranger that was shaped like a caterpillar but possessed humanoid limbs. It could climb into a human’s body through their orifices and take root inside their heart. It could then pilot the victim like a puppet or lay a ton of eggs to eat them from the inside out.

If he wasn’t mistaken, the roasted chestnuts Ugly Monk, Zhou Xi and the rest of the Pacification Sentinels ate must contain the Heart Infestor. That was how Granny Xiong was controlling them.

The Heart Infestor looked fragile, but in reality it was the complete opposite. Unbelievably tough, they were like mini body-tempering warriors that were near immune to fire, water, weapons and strength.

He couldn't use his full strength to wipe out the Heart Infestors because the pot was keeping him pinned. If the Heart Infestors managed to slip inside his body, then he would die. That was probably the ideal outcome Granny Xiong was striving toward.

A second before the Heart Infestors would reach him again, Ye Qing abruptly stopped resisting and allowed the pot to pull him into the sky.

"Kekeke..."

In the shadows, Granny Xiong let out a delighted cackle. It was because Ye Qing was dead as soon as he entered the pot.

The pot was called the Roasted Chestnut Pot, and it was quite the unique Hatred-class Strange Artifact. It was said that the Roasted Chestnut Pot was created by an artificer who loved eating roasted chestnuts like nothing else and so created many corresponding Strange Artifacts as a result.

For example, he had created a Braised Chestnut Chicken Pot that could instantly create a braised chestnut chicken dish just by placing a chicken and a plate of chestnuts into the pot, a Pork Ribs With Chestnut Hot Pot that could create a pork ribs with chestnut hotpot dish, a Chestnut Porridge Bowl that could create a chestnut porridge dish and so on.

The guy had created an entire series of cooking Strange Artifacts just to cook chestnuts, and the Roasted Chestnut Pot was one of them. In fact, the Roasted Chestnut Pot was one of the more better designed Strange Artifacts of the series because roasted chestnuts were the artificer's favorite food.

Unlike the other Strange Artifacts, the Roasted Chestnut Pot didn't need any raw ingredients to create the dish. It could convert anything with origin qi in it including living beings into roasted chestnuts. For convenience sake, he also gave the Roasted Chestnut Pot the ability to draw in and capture any creature that fit the criteria. He also imbued it with a massive number of potent binding runes and restrictions probably to prevent the target from resisting.

Not only that, the greater the amount of origin qi it absorbed, the sweeter and more delicious the roasted chestnuts it produced.

Despite some of the more disturbing features of the Roasted Chestnut Pot, the artificer didn't actually mean any harm. He just wanted to be able to eat his favorite food anytime, anywhere.

It was the opposite for Granny Xiong, however. The roasted chestnuts were a means, not an end.

To be fair, the Roasted Chestnut Pot was surprisingly good at killing people. It was as easy as making a potful of roasted chestnuts.

The reason she hadn't shown herself until now was very simple. One, she wanted Cao Xiaoting and Shangguan Wuqing to exhaust Ye Qing as much as possible. Two, she wanted Ye Qing to kill them both because as he said, the reward the Way of Taiping offered was just enough for one person. Even one extra person was too much, much less two. She would have taken them out herself if Ye Qing hadn't done her dirty work for her.

Someone might think that she was too callous, but callousness was how you survived in the jianghu. Everyone was narrow-minded before the promise of great riches.

Granny Xiong's smile grew wider as Ye Qing flew closer and closer to the Roasted Chestnut Pot. However, Ye Qing was smiling as well. When he was about three inches away from the opening, Ye

Qing abruptly sucked in a deep breath and channeled his power. His bones popped, and his vigor surged. The change was so sudden and explosive that the space within several meters of him collapsed inch by inch.

The next moment, Ye Qing ripped himself free from the Roasted Chestnut Pot's restriction and punched it in the side. The Strange Artifact let out a resonant clang before turning into a star in the sky.

Granny Xiong's energies were tied to the Roasted Chestnut Pot as she was wielding it. As a result, the sudden attack didn't just send the pot flying, but also hurt her to a certain extent. She let out a muffled groan as blood spilled through her lips, and her aura fell into disorder.

"Found you."

Ye Qing had been keeping his spirit out to keep track of any sudden fluctuations. He identified Granny Xiong's location as soon as her aura fluctuated erratically and threw a mighty punch from above like a god laying judgment upon the sinner.

Entire swathes of space collapsed as the fist force flew straight toward Granny Xiong. The old woman let out another muffled groan as her knees were driven into the ground, and her bones were snapping like twigs.

"ARGH!" Granny Xiong screamed in pain. Most of her power came from the Roasted Chestnut Pot and the Heart Infestors. She herself wasn't really strong at all. In a direct clash, she couldn't even defeat Cao Xiaoting or Shangguan Wuqing, much less defend herself against the fist force that had sorely pressed the two warriors.

"Y-You can't kill me! If you kill me, then your colleagues will die!" Granny Xiong shouted. She could tell that Ye Qing wanted her dead from the sheer amount of bloodthirst his fist force was exuding. "They're still infested by my Heart Infestors! There is no one in the world who can save them if you kill me!"

"Ye Qing! Are you really going to let them die!?"

"No—"

But Ye Qing paid no heed to her pleas. He just kept getting closer and closer until his fist crushed her head like a watermelon.

As Granny Xiong's headless body slowly fell to the ground, Ye Qing clasped his hands behind his back and said with a vicious smile, "That's where you're wrong. I can save them even without your 'help'."

Ye Qing let out a sigh of relief after killing Granny Xiong. The reason he killed her immediately and without hesitation was precisely because Granny Xiong had full control over the Heart Infestors. If he agreed to her demands or even showed the slightest bit of hesitation, he had no doubt that Granny Xiong would use their lives to threaten him, which also meant that he would be giving up the initiative.

Why compromise when he could get what he wanted without?

He wasn't lying when he said he could save his colleagues without Granny Xiong's help either. Ye Qing bent down over the dead woman's body and ripped her heart out of her chest. Then, he pulled everyone to his side using the Blood Shadows before placing Granny Xiong's heart at the center of the group.

Everyone's flesh began squirming unnaturally almost as if there were worms wriggling under their skin.

Then, white, fat Heart Infestors crawled out of their mouths and crawled toward Granny Xiong's heart. Even the Heart Infestors Ye Qing had sent flying earlier were moving rapidly toward her heart as well.

Not only did a Heart Infestor feed on human hearts, they usually lived in it as well. Since Granny Xiong was their caretaker, her heart must be far more attractive to the Heart Infestors than any other human heart. That was why he ripped out her heart to lure the Heart Infestors out into the open.

In fact, he was willing to bet that Granny Xiong's plan was the same as his—excluding the part where he ripped her heart out, of course. She was just going to use her heart's blood to draw them out slowly.

After the Heart Infestors were all gathered in one place, Ye Qing detonated Granny Xiong's heart with his force. The worm Strangers immediately feasted on the pool of blood and gore.

Suddenly, the worm Strangers' white skin took on a bluish black hue. A few seconds later, they abruptly fell still and died.

Ye Qing smiled. One Heart Infestor was already a massive threat, much less a whole host of them. If he ignored them, it was only a matter of time before they started a mini apocalypse.

A Heart Infestor was near immune to external forces, but they were incredibly fragile on the inside. Therefore, poison was one way to kill them. However, a Heart Infestor only fed on human hearts, and they normally sealed off their respiratory organs and esophagus when they weren't eating. That was why he injected Granny Xiong's heart with the Blue Demon Hand's Hundred Poison and waited until the Heart Infestors were fully drawn out before shattering the heart. This ensured that every Heart Infestor would feed on the poisonous flesh and blood and kill themselves. The outcome was satisfactory to say the least.

Although the Heart Infestors had been drawn out of the Pacification Sentinels' bodies, it would take a while yet before their power would fully dissipate. So, Ye Qing stayed by their side and waited patiently for them to awaken.

He didn't notice that a round head was peeking out from where Cao Xiaoting and Shangguan Wuqing had died and sneaking glances at him, lips curled into a cunning smile.

"Now this is what I call a big haul! Last time, you stole most of my stuff at the Strange Market. It's only right that I take what is yours, right? I, Tang Shi, am a believer of an eye for an eye after all."

If Ye Qing was here, he might have recognized the guy as the stall owner who tried to ambush him only to lose almost everything back at the Strange Market.

Tang Shi's palms moved so quickly across Cao Xiaoting's body that they left behind a series of afterimages. When the afterimages vanished, Tang Shi was holding the swordsman's Nature's Shell, jade pendant, wallet, necklace, and even the golden tooth in his mouth.

The guy had literally stolen everything that was of value in the blink of an eye.

"Hehe..."

Tang Shi flicked his wrist, and the items vanished into thin air just like that. He would do the same thing to Shangguan Suqing and steal everything as well.

"Huh? Is this... Hong Xiu's undergarments? My oh my, this Shangguan Wuqing normally acts like he's too sad for companionship, but in reality he's an undergarment thief, eh? What a scumbag, what a scumbag! Hehehe..."

Tang Shi said scornfully, but he carefully slipped the undergarments into his Nature's Shell.

And how did he know it belonged to Hong Xiu of Red Candle Boat? If you must know the answer, then the answer is yes.

Chapter 237: Good Evening, My Lord. Good Bye, My Lord

Tang Shi dipped into hard, solid earth beneath his feet like it was water and disappeared after looting Cao Xiaoting and Shangguan Wuqing's corpses. When next he reappeared, he was crouching in front of Blaze, one of the three swords Cao Xiaoting wielded.

The sword wasn't by Cao Xiaoting's side because Ye Qing's punch had sent it flying. Tang Shi licked his lips and lifted it into the air.

"It's a Malice-class Strange Artifact! Hell yeah!" Tang Shi cheered silently while grinning from ear to ear.

This was just the beginning though. After putting away Blaze, Tang Shi proceeded to look at Poison, Disorient, and Shangguan Wuqing's erhu. He was literally salivating as his eyes blazed with greed.

All three of Cao Xiaoting's swords were Malice-class Strange Artifacts, and while they all had their uses, Disorient was easily the most valuable of the three.

Shangguan Wuqing's erhu was named Heartbroken, and it was said to be made from the wood of a Heartbroken Tree. The Heartbroken Tree was a Hatred-class Stranger that gave off a bleak and sorrowful aura at all times. Any living creature that entered its range would automatically feel sorrowful and break into tears. In severe cases, the victim wouldn't be able to break free from its effects and weep until they died. Hence the name.

This meant that Shangguan Wuqing's Heartbroken was worth all three of Cao Xiaoting's swords combined.

In fact, Shangguan Wuqing gained his infamy mostly thanks to his erhu. His cultivation art was called "The Miserable Wind and Rain", and it gave him a large reservoir of internal energy and astral qi and the ability to affect another's emotions. It was the perfect complement to Heartbroken. Through the use of sound waves, he could afflict his targets with drowning, inescapable sorrow before he shattered their heart and mind with true qi.

Yes, Heartbroken could be quite literal in some cases.

Shangguan Wuqing should've had a smooth journey until the Spirit Purification stage at least, but unfortunately he ran into Ye Qing. Most warriors were strong in one area and weak in all others, but Ye Qing was strong in body, true qi, and even spirit. It was as unfortunate as it was ridiculous.

But of course, none of this had anything to do with Tang Shi. In fact, he wanted Ye Qing to be strong. How else could he profit from his troubles?

Plus, the reason he came here in the first place was to gather information regarding Ye Qing and sell it to his attackers. The stronger Ye Qing was, the more trump cards he revealed, the higher the price he could slap on his intel. How awesome was that?

Tang Shi was pretty sure that he could live his ideal life when this business was over, which was visiting Hong Xiu every day and talking about life.

As for killing Ye Qing to claim the Way of Taiping's reward for himself, he had extinguished the thought after recognizing how powerful the Patrolman was. Why on earth would he risk his life when he could earn his profit in a much, much safer way? Why would he give up on visiting Hong Xiu? Heck, why would he give up on life in general? He really didn't get his jianghu brethren sometimes. Why did most of them want to die so badly?

Tang Shi's face crumpled all of a sudden. It was because he noticed that Poison, Disorient and Heartbroken were closer to Ye Qing than he was comfortable with. It would be troublesome if Ye Qing noticed him, but he didn't feel like giving up on the loot either.

"Oh right! If it's dangerous to get close, then I'll just do it without!"

Tang Shi mentally praised his own intelligence before producing a yellow talisman. When he crushed it, the ground beneath the three Strange Artifacts soundlessly transformed into a pool of mud and engulfed them all.

The mud talisman was a talisman that could transform a solid patch of earth into a pool of mud, but it was normally used to trap or restrict a target. The master who invented the talisman himself probably didn't realize that it could be used to steal items as well.

Yes, I'm definitely the first person ever to discover this, Tang Shi thought with a smile while grabbing the three Strange Artifacts. I'm smart, honest and sharp unlike a certain Patrolman after all!

It would take a while before Tang Shi finally broke free from his own narcissism.

Tang Shi cast his gaze on Niu Ben and Granny Xiong's bodies next. Poison, Disorient and Heartbroken were lying pretty close to Ye Qing, but since the Patrolman was facing away from the Strange Artifacts, he ultimately managed to come up with a plan to steal it. But Niu Ben And Granny Xiong's corpses were right in front of Ye Qing, and not even a genius like him could think of a way of looting their bodies from right under his nose. The Patrolman wasn't blind after all.

In the end, Tang Shi had no choice but to give up. "Fine, you can have their possessions. It's bad form to work someone without paying their due compensation after all. Sigh, if only I'm not a good person."

One should be satisfied with what he had, right?

Ye Qing's men were going to wake up any moment now, so Tang Shi peeled his gaze away from his precious and got ready to leave. It was at this moment he heard a whistling sound that seemed to be coming from above him. He looked up just in time to see a big pot falling from the sky and smashing into his forehead.

"Ouch!"

The pot was big, hard, and painful. Since Tang Shi had been diverting most of his attention on Ye Qing, he never noticed the black pot until it was too late. It took him a while before he finally shook off the dizziness and stared at the black pot, ready to call it every name under the sun.

Suddenly, he recalled something and grabbed the pot. "Wait a second, this is Granny Xiong's black pot! It's a great item!"

Then, he recalled a different matter and slowly turned his head. He immediately saw Ye Qing standing beside him and staring with a curious smile on his face.

Ah fuck! This stupid pot! Of all the times you could've fallen from the sky, you choose now? And of all the places you could've fallen, you chose my head!?

It was his own fault, really. He knew full well that he was risking his life stealing Ye Qing's loot from under his nose, but he just couldn't control his greed. Now, it was too late for regrets.

"Good evening, my lord."

Tang Shi smiled stiffly and slowly withdrew his hand from the black pot.

"Goodbye, my lord."

He then dove into the underground and escaped.

The solid earth was like water to Tang Shi. Not only did it pose no resistance to him, it acted as a propeller and pushed him toward his destination swiftly and soundlessly.

The Earth Escape spell he practiced was called the Instantaneous Earth Escape. It was a kind of magic that allowed the user to travel tens of kilometers away in a single breath.

Of course, tens of kilometers was an exaggeration. At the very least, Tang Shi couldn't perform such a feat at his current cultivation level. But a few hundred meters? That was well within his ability. It was why he dared to risk Ye Qing's wrath.

Unfortunately for him, he had just traveled a few meters when the earth suddenly shook, and a tremendous force struck him squarely on the head. It felt just like when he was hit by black pot, painful and dizzying.

Tang Shi turned his plump body like a fish and took off in a different direction, but once again something struck him in the head as soon as he made a move.

Tang Shi hesitated for a moment and pulled out a few strands of hair from his head. When he blew them away, they transformed into him and took off in three separate directions.

All three doppelgangers shared the exact same shape and aura as him. Tang Shi himself withdrew his aura completely and stayed still. In his opinion, the reason Ye Qing could identify his location was because of his aura. That was why he decided to use his innate bloodline magic to create

several doppelgangers that shared the exact same aura as him to lure him away. While Ye Qing was chasing down his doppelgangers, he could simply climb back out into the open and leave.

There was also a chance Ye Qing wouldn't have the time to pick up the black pot. If he was lucky, he would be able to obtain a fourth Strange Artifact.

He was a man after all. A man should get back on their feet where they fell!

As expected, he heard a few rumbles and booms as his doppelgangers grew further and further away. It would continue until it was completely gone.

A few breaths later, when Tang Shi was sure that he couldn't hear anything else, he poked his head out of the ground—not exactly where he was before, of course, that would be a little too bold—and looked around. Satisfied that Ye Qing was nowhere to be seen, he left the earth completely and walked over to the black pot, and picked it up.

He chuckled. “This is mine now. Hehehe! He has the brawn, but not the brain.”

As soon as he finished, he immediately heard a taunting voice, “Are you talking about me?”

Tang Shi's reaction was swift. He took off like the wind as soon as he heard the first word and crossed fifty meters of distance in the blink of an eye.

“Do you seriously think you can run?”

Before Tang Shi could even breathe a sigh of relief, the taunting voice rang again like it had never left. In fact, it was even closer than before!

Flabbergasted, Tang Shi ripped an entire clump of hair from his head and scattered them in front of him. They immediately transformed into dozens of Tang Shi and took off in every direction.

“What a mistake! I'm going to turn bald at this rate!” Tang Shi complained to himself while hiding himself amidst his doppelgangers. However, he had just taken two steps when a violent gust of scorching wind blew across the area and ignited every single one of his doppelgangers. He was alone again before he knew it.

Tang Shi subconsciously reached out over his head to pull out another clump of hair, but he gave up the idea when his reason caught up to him. The doppelgangers he created with his hair could emulate his aura and move very quickly, but they were also extremely fragile. It was the perfect escape tool, but he could never use them in battle because they would break in a single hit. And now, it couldn't even function as an escape tool because Ye Qing's astral qi could encompass the area much faster than he or his doppelgangers could run. The only thing he would achieve by pulling out his hair was just that: making himself balder.

“Why did you stop? Keep pulling! It's not everyday I get to see someone shaving their head manually!” The taunting voice said.

How can he say that as a fellow man!? Tang Shi grumbled mentally and turned around to see Ye Qing standing just ten meters away from him.

“Hehe, it’s just a misunderstanding, my lord.” Tang Shi put on an honest smile and began lying, “I was passing through the area when I heard the commotion. That’s why I decided to take a look. Really, that’s all I did.”

Look at my face! There’s no way an honest-looking guy like me would lie to you, right?

Ye Qing merely smiled. “Keep going. I want to know where you’re going with this lie.”

“I’m not lying, my lord! I really was just passing through the area! Everyone in the neighborhood knows that I’m an honest and reliable guy since I was a boy, and I’ve never lied even once in my life! There is nothing more I enjoy then performing good deeds without asking anything in return. I especially like saving poor women and caring for lonely housewives!”

Tang Shi ended with a perfectly straight and sincere face, “You must believe me, my lord!”

Saving poor women and caring for lonely housewives? You couldn’t come up with a more convincing lie?

Ye Qing’s mouth twitched. “So, it’s a coincidence my dozens of Strange Artifacts and martial arts manuals vanished into your pockets while you were ‘passing through the area’?”

Dozens of Strange Artifacts and martial arts manuals!?

Tang Shi nearly spat a mouthful of blood at Ye Qing’s face when he heard this. He had taken only two Nature’s Shell and four Strange Artifacts at most! Dozens of Strange Artifacts and martial arts manuals? It was clear that Ye Qing was trying to scam him.

“Hahaha, you must be joking. I picked up the items only because I didn’t want them to trip up an old man or a child or something. Even if the people are fine, it would be bad if they tripped up a cat or a dog, right?”

Tang Shi laughed innocently. “Like I said, I’m only performing my civic duty. I never knew that they belonged to you. Here, you can have them back.”

Tang Shi produced the Nature’s Shells and the four Strange Artifacts and tossed them in Ye Qing’s direction.

Chapter 238: Extortion

Pop!

The Strange Artifacts were right in front of Ye Qing when suddenly, a bright, piercing flash filled his vision.

The flash talisman was a talisman that could create an instantaneous burst of light strong enough to blind a warrior temporarily.

At the same time, Tang Shi brought out a conch shell and blew it. His body immediately transformed into a cloud and floated into the sky like smoke.

The Cloud Conch was a Malice-class Strange Artifact. Blowing it would transform the user into a cloud that was impervious to weapons and various elements. It was a powerful life-saving Strange Artifact.

Ye Qing had witnessed his Instantaneous Earth Escape and his doppelgangers earlier, so there was no point trying them again.

He was denied the underground and the surface, but that was fine. He still had the sky.

When Ye Qing recovered, he would most likely think that Tang Shi had escaped using either one of the two methods he had shown earlier. He could never imagine that he had transformed into a cloud and escaped into the sky. It was just unthinkable.

I'm a fucking gen—

Dang!

Tang Shi was about to compliment himself again when suddenly, he heard a gong sound that shook his mind and disoriented him greatly. It was so unexpected and potent that he nearly lost control of his form.

Dang! Dang! Dang!

The gong rang a couple more times, and Tang Shi couldn't maintain his form any longer. He abruptly turned back to human and hit the ground with a loud thud.

"Ouch!"

The moment he awoke, Tang Shi discovered that he was tied up like a mummy by countless invisible Blood Shadow.

"It's incredibly rude to leave when a conversation is still ongoing." Ye Qing grinned toothily at Tang Shi. "Try it again, and you will die."

I can't even if I want to! I can hardly breathe in these bindings!

Tang Shi shivered even as he shot Ye Qing an obsequious smile. He had no idea that Ye Qing had a Strange Artifact that could affect the mind. This meant that the guy hadn't used his full strength when he fought against Cang Xiaoting, Shangguan Wuqing and Granny Xiong at all. What a monster!

"Now speak. Who are you? Are you in cahoots with Granny Xiong and her cohort? Have you come to kill me as well?"

Ye Qing said slowly, "And do try to speak the truth this time, If I run out of patience before you can finish, the only one who'd be interested in listening to your words afterward would be the king of hell."

"M-My name is Tang Shi," Tang Shi stammered, "And I'm not in cahoots with Granny Xiong! I'm not here to kill you, seriously! The thought has never even crossed my mind."

Ye Qing nodded. It was true he hadn't sensed any killing intent from Tang Shi, which was why he hadn't killed the lying bastard... yet. "Then what are you doing here? And you better not tell me you're passing through the area. We both know that isn't true."

Tang Shi fell silent for a moment before answering sincerely, "You might not know this, but there is no one in the jianghu who hasn't heard of your achievements. You are the model of our kind, and our respect and adoration for you is like the Luo River, ceaseless and never-ending."

"In short, I came here because I wish to see the legendary warrior with my own eyes."

Can you feel my sincerity? It's pretty damn sincere, isn't it?

The ground beneath Ye Qing's right foot suddenly cracked without warning, and Tang Shi was dragged right back to cruel reality. He hurriedly added, "And I want to know how strong you are."

Ye Qing's face turned unfriendly. "So, you've come to spy on me."

Tang Shi put on a terrified expression and started weeping, "I mean no harm, my lord! I just want to make a living is all! I have a mother to raise and a son to—er, I mean I have a son to raise and a mother to feed, so please overlook my transgressions this once! I swear I'll never do it again!"

Ye Qing ignored Tang Shi's antics and examined him closely for a moment. "Why do I feel like I met you before? Wait, now I remember! You're that stall owner who tried to kill me back at the Strange Market!"

Tang Shi's act abruptly skidded to a halt. He recognized Ye Qing because his bloodline[1] was special, but he didn't think that Ye Qing would be able to recognize him. He hurriedly said, "I wasn't trying to kill you! It was just a joke, a harmless joke! And haven't I apologized for my mistake and compensated you for your troubles?"

"I even gave you a Star Lotus as compensation. You're a generous and forgiving man, I'm sure you would bring up old debts that are already settled, right my lord?"

"Speaking of which, the three swords Cao Xiaoting wielded are called Blaze, Poison and Disorient. They are all Malice-class Strange Artifacts. The erhu wielded by Shangguan Wuqing is a Malice-class Strange Artifact as well, but it is made from the food of a Heartbroken Tree, so it's mighty impressive!"

"I've also inspected their Nature's Shells for you. Cao Xiaoting has three martial arts manuals in his Nature's Shell. The first one is his ultimate technique, the Nine Swords of Dominance. The second one is the Eight Steps of Snake and Crane, a movement art. And the third one isn't worth mentioning; it's just a third-rate martial art."

"The most valuable item in Cao Xiaoting's Nature's Shell is the Yellow Court Pill. It's a pill that could be used to unlock the Xuanguan point on your forehead and allow you to enter the Spirit Purification stage. Cao Xiaoting had probably prepared this for himself, but in the end his fortune ended up in your hands. What a lucky man you are, my lord!"

Tang Shi knew that his life was on the line and so spoke as quickly as possible. “Shangguan Wuqing’s Nature’s Shell is also filled with all kinds of random shit. The three most valuable items in his possessions are one, his Astral Refinement stage cultivation art, ‘The Miserable Wind and Rain’ that could be used to cultivate the Miserable Wind and Rain Qi. Two, a Stranger bone that, in my humble opinion, is the eyeball of the Soulstealer-class Stranger called the Lovesick Duck. The eyeball of a Lovesick Duck is an excellent crafting material and a medicinal ingredient. It’s incredibly valuable.”

“And three...”

Tang Shi paused for a moment for the suspense before breaking into a lascivious grin. “Three isn’t one item, but rather an assortment of valuable items. For starters, there is the undergarments of the star of Red Candle Boat, Hong Xiu, the undergarments of the three stars of the Red Sleeve Boat, the handkerchief of Li Ruyi of the Ruyi Boat, the handwritten letter of the concubine of Proprietor Li, head of the Tongbao Bank, the hair and hairpin of the wife of Feng Long Textile Farm and more. There’s even the embroidered shoes of a scribe in the administrative division, the—”

“Ahem!” Ye Qing coughed to stop Tang Shi from continuing further. What the hell was wrong with this fatty, and how the fuck did he even recognize these items? Was he secretly friends with Shangguan Wuqing, or did he share the same fetish as the guy?

In any case, Tang Shi was definitely born with the wrong exterior.

Still, Ye Qing had to admit that Tang Shi’s eye for valuables was pretty good. Not everyone could look at an item and figure out their origin and use immediately.

Tang Shi looked reluctant, but he ultimately stopped his rant and handed the treasures into Ye Qing’s hands. Ye Qing made it all disappear with the flick of a wrist.

After the items were put away, Ye Qing looked at Tang Shi and smiled. “Is that all? I’m pretty sure these aren’t the only things they have...”

Tang Shi: “...” I bloody knew he wouldn’t let me go without bleeding me a bit. Bastard! I’m gonna... do nothing because he’s stronger than me. Dammit!

“Oh, look at me! I can’t believe I made a mistake!”

Tang Shi took out a Malice-class Strange Artifact called the Crane Cry Bow and handed it to Ye Qing. He was all smiles on the outside, but weeping uncontrollably on the inside because it was one of his prized possessions.

Ye Qing looked very satisfied, but he wanted more. “Is there anything else? I’m pretty sure there’s more...”

Enough you piece of shit! Was what Tang Shi wanted to say, but his courage suddenly vanished into thin air when he met Ye Qing’s eyes. So, he produced a light green-colored, black-edged, long-sleeved shirt with bamboo patterns on it and handed it to Ye Qing, saying, “This shirt is called Green Ink Shirt, a Malice-class Strange Artifact. It’s always clean, it smells like bamboo and ink, and it can grow bigger or smaller depending on the person’s size. It also has a certain level of defensive capabilities.”

“Ohh!” Ye Qing’s eyes lit up. This was exactly what he needed right now because of his powerful physique, and the fact that his clothes tended to go boom whenever he fought a powerful warrior. This Green Ink Shirt should save him a handful of silvers at least.

Ye Qing accepted the Green Ink Shirt and put it on right in front of a disgruntled Tang Shi. After moving around for a bit, he decided that he was very pleased with the results.

Meanwhile, Tang Shi was horrified by Ye Qing’s audacity. The Patrolman didn’t even have the courtesy to change into his shirt when he wasn’t looking! It’s my shirt, dammit! Mine! He screamed inside his head.

“What else do you have?” Ye Qing beamed at Tang Shi after he was ready. He looked like he was looking at a lamb waiting to be slaughtered.

“Nonono, you must be mistaken, my lord. This is everything.”

It was obvious that Ye Qing was going to squeeze him for all his worth, and this time Tang Shi didn’t back down. Do you think I’m stupid? Push me again, and I’ll fight you to the death!

Noticing Tang Shi’s defiance, Ye Qing narrowed his eyes dangerously. “No, I’m pretty sure there was one more.”

Tang Shi wanted to cry, really. He wanted to say no, but once again he discovered that his courage had fled him, and for good reason. Left with no choice, he brought out a martial arts manual and handed it to Ye Qing. “This is an Astral Refinement stage movement art called the ‘Illusionist’s Grace’. A top-rate movement art, it specializes in flexible, unpredictable and illusory movements.”

“This really is the last one, my lord. If I’m hiding anything else that is yours, then the heavens smite me with lightning, my children will be born without a buttohole, and my wife will be—”

He knew from the start that Ye Qing wasn’t planning to kill him. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be breathing already. But just because the Patrolman wasn’t planning to kill him now, didn’t mean that he wouldn’t change his mind later. The items Ye Qing was extorting from him were the price of his life, which was why Tang Shi had never thought to cheat the Patrolman.

Ye Qing had given him a chance to live, and he wasn’t stupid enough to waste it.

“The ‘Illusionist’s Grace’? Sounds amazing!” Ye Qing accepted the martial arts manual happily. Right now, he was still using his Vessel Augmentation stage movement art, the “Blood Sea Fragrance”. It was a great movement art, mind you, but its rank was ultimately too low to support him for long.

In fact, he was going to spend some contribution points and exchange for an Astral Refinement stage movement art at the Pacification Bureau, but he just couldn’t find the time because of all the shit that had been happening to him as of late. He was glad to save those contribution points especially since the “Illusionist’s Grace” sounded like an excellent replacement.

Chapter 239: Fishing Using Oneself As Bait

“That is all. Thank you so much for picking up my loot for me, bud.” Ye Qing smiled in satisfaction after putting away the “Illusionist’s Grace”.

He neither pushed Tang Shi too far nor tried to kill him mainly because the fatty had proven himself to be a wise man. Some people would’ve given him trash, but Tang Shi knew that he was paying the price of his own life and so didn’t try to cheat him. Ye Qing wouldn’t mind creating another body otherwise.

“Thank you for your kindness and generosity, my lord!”

Tang Shi let out a sigh of relief. Although his heart was bleeding on the inside, he still smiled from ear to ear. After all, losses could be recouped in the future, but the same couldn’t be said for one’s life.

“Alright. Now that that is behind us, let’s talk about business!” Ye Qing dropped his smile and said seriously.

Tang Shi also turned serious. He had been expecting this. “Please, tell me!”

Ye Qing asked, “Would you like to get rich?”

What? Did he suddenly find his conscience or something? Is he going to give back what he extorted from me?

Tang Shi asked, puzzled. “Can you clarify, my lord?”

Ye Qing answered, “You’re spying on me because you collect information on me and sell that intel to my attackers, am I right?”

Tang Shi’s heart skipped a beat. Was that what the Patrolman meant? Their old debts were settled, but not the present?

“Forgive me, my lord. I was blinded by greed when I first made the decision, but now that I had witnessed your glorious power, I had realized the error of my ways,” Tang Shi said with a regretful expression, “In the name of my grandmother, I solemnly swear that I will never leak your intel to anyone starting today. If I do, may the heavens smite me with its righteous lightning!”

But to Tang Shi’s surprise, Ye Qing shook his head and said, “You misunderstand me. I want you to sell my intel to my attackers. I will even tell you my skills, tactics, habits and so on.”

“What?” Tang Shi couldn’t believe his ears. “Have you gotten tired of living, my lord?”

Ye Qing’s face darkened in an instant. Are you trying to provoke me?

Noticing his slip of the tongue, Tang Shi hurriedly corrected himself, “I mean, why would you want to do this, my lord?”

“To play the fisherman, of course.” Ye Qing chuckled. “Right now, I am out in the open, and the jianghu warriors are in the dark. Not only do I have to watch out for them day and night, I will always be playing their game. Although I’m strong enough

to handle anything they throw at me, reacting passively to my attackers' schemes is hardly a permanent solution."

"That is why I'm going to turn the tables on them. I'm going to use myself as bait and let them come to me instead."

"That's a great idea!" Tang Shi's eyes lit up. "This would allow you to take control of the situation and their possessions. These jianghu warriors have a lot of good stuff. I can only imagine the amount of riches you'll gain from their deaths, my lord!"

"Ahem... What are you talking about? I'm not that kind of person," Ye Qing denied the allegations smoothly. He was mainly doing this to solve his troubles. Getting rich was just a side benefit.

Tang Shi asked in a greedy tone, "What do you need me to do, my lord?"

Ye Qing answered, "Your job is very simple. I want you to sell my information to my attackers. However, I don't want you to sell to those who are too powerful, nor should you sell my information to too many people at once. Otherwise, the situation might spiral out of control."

"Also, I want you to look into my attackers' backgrounds, strengths, martial arts and more as well. You will tell me exactly what these people are capable of."

Tang Shi scoffed internally when he heard this. If Ye Qing really wanted to stem the flow, he would have rounded up the strongest warriors in town and murdered them all. That was the best way to intimidate the small fries. Instead, he wanted Tang Shi to round up the weaklings. Clearly, it was because he wanted to profit from their deaths.

He wasn't going to point this out, of course. A wise man knows when to keep his mouth shut.

Ye Qing smiled. "Granny Xiong's scheme should only be known to herself and cohort, and yet you somehow managed to find out about it. I'm sure you'd be able to pull this off perfectly."

Tang Shi immediately forgot himself when he heard the compliment. "Hahaha! I'm not bragging, but I know exactly how many jianghu warriors had entered Luo Shui, what their names, cultivation levels, and skills are, how many wives they have and what even undergarments their wives are wearing! This is easy peasy, so just leave it to me!"

Tang Shi then rubbed his hands together. "There is just one tiny problem. How are we going to split the profits?"

Ye Qing pretended not to get his meaning. "What profit?"

Tang Shi explained, "The loot you'll get after killing your wrongdoers, of course! How are we going to split them?"

"And why should I give you anything?" Ye Qing scoffed. "I'm the one who came up with the idea, and I'm the one who would be risking my life to kill these people. Do you seriously think you deserve a portion of the loot?"

“Also, I’m already giving you my information for free, so what else can you possibly want? You shouldn’t be too greedy, Brother Tang!”

Tang Shi: “...” I have never met such a shameless person in my life!

The stall owner argued, “But I am doing something, my lord! It takes effort to look into the attackers’ background, and if I slip up it’s entirely possible that I might die in the process! Plus, if someone finds out that we are working together, then I will be targeted by the jianghu warriors as well! In that sense, the risk I would be shouldering is no less smaller than yours! You can’t do this to your business partner, my lord!”

Ye Qing smirked. “Didn’t you say that it would be ‘easy peasy’ for you to pull this off? If it’s that easy, then surely there is no risk?”

Tang Shi: “...” Why did you have to go and say that, mouth?

Tang Shi immediately tried to fix his mistake, “I was just bragging, my lord! You shouldn’t take it seriously!”

“I’m not kidding, the risk I shoulder when looking into these jianghu warriors is no joke. After all, it’s not like these people are small fries. I would be in deep shit if they found out what I was doing.”

“Of course, my safety is none of your concern, but if I have to be excessively cautious to preserve my own life, and as a result give you inaccurate information that might put you in danger, that would be terrible, wouldn’t it?”

“Hoh? Are you threatening me?” Ye Qing raised an eyebrow.

Tang Shi didn’t say anything, but it was clear that that was exactly what he meant. There’s no way I’m going to work for free, bud! Even slaves get paid a meal a day!

Ye Qing gave it some thought and acquiesced, “Very well. Since your work is so risky, I suppose I won’t ask for a share of the profits you’ll get for selling my information.”

Tang Shi: “...” This guy is totally fucking with me. The profit I make from selling his intel is already pitiful, and he was going to ask for a share? Plus, I’m talking about the loot he’s going to get from his kills, dammit! The loot!

“Relax, bud. It’s just a joke,” Ye Qing clarified before Tang Shi could say something. “We’ll split the profits seventy-thirty.”

Tang Shi instinctively asked, “The seventy goes to me, right?”

“Hahaha... You must be dreaming.” Ye Qing side-eyed him and clarified again, “I’ll get seventy percent of the profits, and you thirty.”

“That’s too little! Too little!” Tang Shi started bargaining, “How about a fifty-fifty split? We’re business partners, aren’t we?”

“Fine,” Ye Qing nodded, “We’ll do a eighty-twenty split in my favor.”

“What?” Tang Shi wasn’t expecting this. This was the opposite of a compromise, wasn’t it?

“My lord—”

Before Tang Shi could finish, Ye Qing interrupted him rudely. “What a greedy man you are. Fine, we’ll do a ninety-ten split in my favor!”

Tang Shi was just about ready to blow his top. “This is absurd, my lord! Do you really think you can screw me over like this... without...”

Tang Shi was about halfway through his rant when suddenly, he noticed the cold, unfeeling smile on Ye Qing’s face. His voice grew smaller and smaller until he could continue no more.

Ye Qing slowly dropped his smile. “I think you’ve forgotten something, but this is not a negotiation. This is charity. When I offer you something, you best accept it. If not, then you can have nothing at all—not even your life.”

Tang Shi blanched as a bead of cold sweat formed on his forehead. It was only now he recalled that he was a prisoner, not a guest. He didn’t have the right to negotiate any terms.

I can’t believe I forgot myself, again!

Tang Shi wiped away the sweat and forced out a chuckle. “Hahaha... you’re too serious, my lord. It was just a joke. As you say, we’ll split the profits ninety-ten in your favor.”

Ye Qing kept quiet, and another bead of cold sweat slid down Tang Shi’s nose. In fact, his back was rapidly becoming drenched in cold sweat. He was so afraid for his life that he didn’t even dare to breathe too loudly for fear that the bogeyman would send him flying all the way to the afterlife in one punch.

Greed without strength truly was a sin

Just when Tang Shi was getting ready to drop to his knees and beg for his life, Ye Qing suddenly broke into a smile. “You’re a wise man, and I’m a generous soul, so we won’t be doing a ninety-ten split. A seventy-thirty split as we discussed before is just fine.”

“Ah?” Tang Shi replied dumbly. When his brain finally processed the information, he blurted out in gratitude and joy, “Thank you, my lord, thank you! You truly are a magnanimous person! Don’t worry, my lord! I swear on my life I’ll perform the job you requested perfectly!”

“You’re welcome, Brother Tang.” Ye Qing said with a smile. Some people were like this. When you gave them a fair offer, they would think you were a bitch and try to take advantage of you. When you put your foot down, they would suddenly do a one-eighty and beg you to cut them an unfair deal.

“A pleasure to cooperate with you, Brother Tang.”

“Same here, my lord.”

The duo would spend the next moment discussing details such as how they should communicate with each other, where they should meet to exchange the intel and so on. A short while later, when Ye Qing noticed that Ugly Monk and the others were about to awaken, Ye Qing finally said, "If there's nothing else, you may take your leave. My colleagues will be waking up any moment now!"

"Understood, my lord. I'll see you soon."

Tang Shi saluted Ye Qing and got ready to leave, but at the last moment he turned back around and asked, "My lord, I have a question. You're letting me go without putting a curse on me or anything. Aren't you afraid that I would try to cheat you and leak your information to those who could really do you harm?"

Ye Qing smiled and clasped his hands behind his back. "You're a wise man, Brother Tang. A wise man isn't immune to stupidity, but they would never intentionally make a stupid choice."

"If you cooperate with me, it's a win-win scenario. If you screw me over, then it's a lose-lose scenario. Also, do you believe me when I say I have a million ways to drag you out of your hidey-hole and make you regret ever betraying me?"

Tang Shi laughed. "I'm just kidding. Don't worry, I never go back on my word when doing business with others. I'm called Tang Shi after all. I'm as honest as you can be!"

The stall owner then slipped into the underground and disappeared just like that.

Ye Qing scoffed disdainfully as he stared in the direction Tang Shi had disappeared to. "Heh. Even until the end, he couldn't help but lie through his teeth."

Chapter 240: Seven Warriors of Laoshan

"Are you the Seven Warriors of Laoshan?" asked Ye Qing while smiling at the seven men who had him surrounded.

"That's right!" one guy said with a sneer. He was well-groomed, but it did little to offset the fact he was an ugly, perverted-looking sonuvabitch. "Give it up, Ye Qing. Your subordinates are still at the foot of the mountain, aren't they? There is no way they'll be able to arrive in time to save you."

The speaker was the second strongest warrior of the seven, the "Powder-faced Fox" Zhong Chong.

"Are you sure you'd be able to kill me?" Ye Qing didn't look afraid in the slightest despite the fact that he was outnumbered seven to one.

"Hmph! Do you fancy yourself invincible just because you killed a couple useless pieces of trash?"

The boss of the Seven Warriors of Laoshan, "Soaring Hawk" Li Yun scoffed. "We are all Astral Refiners. There is no way you can survive us even if you have three heads and six arms."

The title "Seven Warriors of Laoshan" sounded pretty cool. But in reality they were just seven evil randos who had claimed this area of Laoshan as their own and did every evil under the sun for their own gains.

That said, they had the brawn to back up their misdeeds. Li Yun and Zhong Chong were late-stage Astral Refiners, and the rest of them were middle-stage or early-stage Astral Refiners as well. If Ye Qing was an ordinary late-stage Astral Refiner, then this situation would most likely end poorly for him.

“Heh. We’ll see, won’t we?” Ye Qing sneered and took one step forward. He abruptly split into seven silhouettes and charged toward the group of seven.

“Illusionist’s Grace”

It might sound like the Seven Warriors of Laoshan were underestimating Ye Qing, but in reality it was the opposite. There was a reason the Patrolman was famous throughout Luo Shui, and poor skill wasn’t one of them. Despite this, they were still caught off guard when Ye Qing abruptly split into seven people.

They were just trying to defend themselves when one of their numbers suddenly let out a bloodcurdling scream. When they looked, they saw their six, the “Cloudchasing Crane” Liu San clutching his bleeding neck and falling to the ground. Beside Liu San, Ye Qing was holding a crescent-shaped saber with a bead of blood slowly sliding down the blade. When it hit the ground, it scattered like a winter plum in full bloom.

“The ‘Sunchasing Crane’ Liu San is an early-stage Astral Refiner who’s an expert in movement arts and hidden weapons. He practices the ‘Crane Flip’ and the ‘Rain on Palm Leaf’.”

Liu San’s expertise was the reason Ye Qing decided to eliminate him first before everyone else. It would be annoying if the guy decided to hit him from range or run away because his colleagues were being slaughtered.

It wasn’t everyday he got to spring a trap on his enemies. Naturally, he should do his best to ensure that everything went smoothly.

“Six!”

“Six...”

The other six warriors screamed in shock and anger when they saw their brother falling to Ye Qing.

The fourth and fifth strongest warriors of the group, Huang Kang and Xu Ying were the closest people to Ye Qing, and they didn’t hesitate to attack him together. Huang Kang let out an angry roar and discharged what looked like a blood mist from his body. His vigor surged like a tidal wave, and his aura grew like crazy as he threw a punch at Ye Qing.

Xu Yingying was the only woman of the seven and wielded a soft sword. She tapped the air around her lightly like she was dancing, but ripples of dark green energy spread out from the tip of her sword and caused the air to sizzle. It was clear that it contained some sort of deadly poison.

Once again, their intel flickered across Ye Qing’s head:

“The ‘Mountain Flipping Panther’ Huang Kang is a middle-stage Astral Refiner and a fist practitioner. He practices the ‘Mountain Flipping Fist’ that could supposedly turn a

mountain upside down like nothing. He also has a blood ignition art that greatly increases the potency of his fist art."

"However, Huang Kang would descend into uncontrollable rage for a bit after using the blood ignition art. He would also be weakened for an extended period after the blood ignition art has ended."

"The 'Beauty Snake' Xu Yingying is an early-stage Astral Refiner who is well known for her sword art and poison. Her sword art is called the 'Pear Blossom Sword Art', but it's nothing to write home about. Her true threat lies in her unique poison, the 'Beauty Rots Bones'."

"'Beauty Rots Bones' is a deadly poison that could rot the flesh and melt the bones upon contact. Not only is it incredibly difficult to remove, it doesn't inflict any pain on the victim. Some of her victims didn't even know they were poisoned until they body gave out from under them like a man falling for the woman of their dreams. Hence the name."

Ye Qing charged toward Huang Kang first and threw his own punch. It looked like he was planning to clash fists with Huang Kang.

"Die!" Huang Kang roared as his bloodshot eyes grew even redder. He looked like he would rip and tear Ye Qing into a million pieces. But right before the attack would connect, Ye Qing abruptly stepped sideways and dodged his fist. At the same time, he left behind an afterimage that looked just like him.

"Illusionist's Grace" was a movement art that combined the essences of both the Taoist Way and the Dark Ways. It possessed both the profoundness of the Taoist and the unpredictability of the dark. That was why Ye Qing was able to dodge Huang Kang's attack with just a few millimeters to spare. Otherwise, he couldn't have done it with such minute precision and grace.

Huang Kang had lost his reason the moment he used his blood ignition art. He could barely tell friend from foe, much less control his fist force. As a result, his punch struck Xu Yingying's sword instead of Ye Qing.

Xu Yingying was only an early-stage Astral Refiner, and the sword art she practiced was trash. As a result, Huang Kang's fist easily punched through her sword and turned her into a fine mist of blood and gore.

At the same time, a saber flashed behind Huang Kang and sent his head flying. At least he wouldn't have to deal with the shock and regret of killing his own brethren.

"Brother! Sister! Ahhhhh! I will rip you limb from limb, Ye Qing!"

Li Yun had just reached Ye Qing, and so got a front row view of Huang Kang and Xu Yingying's horrifying deaths. Eyes bulging with infinite madness and hatred, he leaped into the air and swiped

his hands at Ye Qing like a hawk. At the same time, a hawk's cry pierced through the air, and a handsome red hawk appeared behind his back. A blood rain suddenly started falling as well.

"When the sky weeps blood, the blood hawk shall rise."

"The Soaring Hawk Li Yun is a late-stage Astral Refiner and an expert in claw arts. He practices the 'Blood Eagle Divine Claw'. It is a martial art that's best used when attacking from an elevated position. The higher the starting position, and the more power the practitioner built up as he descends from the sky, the stronger the attack would become."

The simplest and most effective way to dismantle the "Blood Eagle Divine Claw" was to kill Li Yun before he fully charged his attack, so Ye Qing pushed off the ground with an explosive jump and scattered the blood rain surrounding Li Yun in an instant.

He didn't hit Li Yun from the bottom, however. Instead, he sucked in a deep breath to renew his energies, swerved around Li Yun's attack, and took the high ground instead. Now he was the hawk, and Li Yun the prey. Then, he unleashed a devastating punch at Li Yun's back.

Li Yun didn't have Ye Qing's ability to change his energies mid-jump, nor could he switch up his moves now because the "Blood Eagle Divine Claw" was a one-move technique intended to end the enemy's life in one strike. As a result, he could only watch helplessly as Ye Qing's punch broke his spine, shattered his innards, and sent him flying straight toward Zhong Chong.

Although Zhong Chong was a man, he practiced a lithe and graceful movement art. Thanks to that, he was able to dodge out of the way before Li Yun's corpse could hit him. Unfortunately, he didn't even have the time to thank his own good fortune when the alarm bells inside his head suddenly rang loudly. He immediately tried to jump away from Li Yun.

Unfortunately, it was too late. A man had been clinging to Li Yun's corpse this whole time, and Zhong Chong failed to notice it until the last second because he had moved too quickly. It was, of course, Ye Qing.

Too late to dodge out of the way, Zhong Chong changed tactics and swung a flowery whip at Ye Qing instead. Suddenly, Ye Qing felt like he had been teleported into a different world, a world where the wind blew, the rain poured, and the stars and moon were falling straight toward him. He felt as helpless as an ant before the natural disasters.

"What an illusion!" Ye Qing sighed in admiration. The illusion was so perfect that it could fool one's senses perfectly. Even he would've fallen for it if he hadn't known that Powderfaced Fox was an expert in illusion arts.

Zhong Chong practiced an extremely rare type of illusion art called the "Heart Clouding Art". It could interfere with one's senses and create illusions out of nowhere. Moreover, his astral qi was the average grade astral qi, the Mirage Qi, and his Strange Artifact was the Malice-class Strange Artifact, the Illusion Whip. As a result, his illusions looked almost no different from the real thing.

That said, illusions were just illusions. No matter how real they looked, they were ultimately fake and so couldn't do any damage to Ye Qing whatsoever. While there were warriors out there who could turn illusions into reality, Zhong Chong was not yet at that level.

So, Ye Qing ignored the horrific scene happening around him and threw a punch. So what if the illusions were real? He would still break it all with his fist.

“Break Through”

Like a knife, his fist severed the illusion in half and brought him back to the real world. It felt incredibly soothing as the wind, rain, and falling celestial objects abruptly disappeared, and the world was filled with light and warmth once more.

Zhong Chong was going to run away while Ye Qing was trapped in his illusion. When he looked down, he saw that a massive hole had appeared on his abdomen, and the wound was so smooth that not a drop of blood could be seen. It was because the Burning Wind had boiled all of his blood in an instant.

The next second, Zhong Chong hit the ground and shattered into several pieces like dry wood.

On paper, it looked like the battle had been ongoing for a few minutes at least. In reality, only a few breaths had passed. It was only now the “Mountain Tiger” Zhang An and the “Night Bat” Tu Sheng recovered their wits and realized that they were the only ones left.

Obviously, they had lost desire to fight Ye Qing. They immediately took off in different directions. Considering the circumstances, it was a victory if even one of them managed to escape.

“What makes you think you can outrun me?” Ye Qing chuckled and spat Lightning Bolt at Tu Sheng. Not even bothering to check his kill, he dashed after Zhang An like a ghost.

The reason Zhang An was nicknamed the “Mountain Tiger” was because of his explosive speed and strength. Out of the seven of them, no one could sprint faster than him.

Unfortunately for him, Ye Qing was even faster. One breath ago, both men had crossed over fifty meters of distance. One breath later, Ye Qing was already behind Zhang An’s back.

Zhang An did not look back or even react to Ye Qing’s presence, however. It was as if he couldn’t sense the young man and all. Another ten meters or so later, he abruptly dropped to the ground and died just like that. Ye Qing also stopped in his tracks and put away his curved saber.

“I told you you can’t outrun me!”

Ye Qing lifted Zhang An’s body over his shoulder and went back to his battlefield. Not far away, Tu Sheng was lying on the ground with a leek-sized hole on his forehead. The wound was also crawling with lightning.

“Phew! That’s seven bodies in a single day, and a total of thirty five in the past seven days. Why do they value their lives so little?” Ye Qing said with a sneer as he looted the bodies like he had done this a hundred times already. Which he had.

It had been seven days since he and Tang Shi had cooked up a devious plan, and during these seven days he had been attacked twenty three times. Each time, he would purposely create an opening so that these wannabe assassins would attack him, die, and donate him their valuables. It was a wonderful week.

All thirty five attackers were Astral Refiners, and fifteen of them were powerful late-stage Astral Refiners with a terrible reputation in their respective counties or commanderies. He had handpicked them himself after Tang Shi had provided him with a list. The reason he chose them was because they were weak, possess a narrow skillset, and have no background. It took him little to no difficulty to kill them all.

Unfortunately, he also noticed that the number of people who attacked him since yesterday or the day before had decreased drastically. This meant that the jianghu warriors were beginning to suspect foul play and even Tang Shi himself. Today could very well be the last day he reeled in easy prey before the real predators began to show their faces. Things would get dangerous then.

That was what he was hoping to happen though. These jianghu warriors would do anything for profit, sure, but most of them were bullies who only targeted the weak. When they realized that he wasn't the small fry they thought he was, they would fear him, they would hesitate, and they would eventually leave him alone. When that happened, his enemies' plan would fail, and his crisis would resolve on his own.

That was why he wasn't lying to Tang Shi when he said he wanted to stop this farce permanently. Him making a killing in the process was just the side benefit.