

Stranger 301

Chapter 301: With A Thought

“Cocoonoids!” An imperceptible smile crossed Ye Qing’s lips.

The big tree in front of him was called the Cocoon Tree, a Soulstealer-class stranger. The Cocoon Tree itself was almost harmless, but it could grow cocoons with Strangers in it. The winged humanoids were named Cocoonoids.

Bloodthirsty by nature, the Cocoonoids awoke to the smell of blood. It would attack any flesh-and-blood being to the death.

Generally speaking, the Cocoonoids’s power level was more or less the same as the Cocoon Tree[1], meaning that these Cocoonoids were most likely Soulstealer-class Strangers. This meant that Ye Qing was facing a small army of Soulstealer-class Strangers right now.

This was why the Cocoon Tree intimidated even some Phenomenon-class Strangers.

After confirming that the Cocoonoids had fully awakened, Ye Qing immediately turned around and ran away. The Strangers gave chase as a matter of course. When the time was right, Ye Qing shouted on top of his lungs, “Help! Help! Save me, dad!”

Meanwhile, Xue Beikun was meditating and recovering his wounds when suddenly, he heard his son crying for help, he immediately broke into a run in that direction.

By the time he reached his son, Xue Shiwu was already covered in blood and surrounded by a bunch of Cocoonoids. Realizing that his son had seconds at most, Xue Beikun let out an angry shout and thrust his spear forward. Spear-shaped astral qi immediately rained from above and skewered several Cocoonoids into pieces.

However, Xue Beikun’s action angered the remaining Cocoonoids. They immediately abandoned Xue Shiwu and attacked Xue Beikun instead.

The Cocoonoids flapped their wings and released a cloud of powder that transformed into a sea of flames. At the same time, they opened their mouths and emitted some sort of sound wave. The sound wave couldn’t be heard by the human ear, but it was potent enough to cause spatial tremors. Xue Beikun immediately felt a stabbing pain in his ears and his mind.

The powder the Cocoonoids released was a substance that caught on fire as soon as they made contact with force. It was also highly poisonous. As for the soundwave, it was something that could attack the mind.

If Xue Beikun was at his peak, he could’ve handled twice the number of Cocoonoids without trouble. But after suffering a serious blow from Feng Liunian, struggling the entire night to survive the Demon’s Tomb, and having to protect a good-for-nothing like Xue Shiwu, he was exhausted in both body and mind. And after the battle against the remnant of the Blackwind Bandits, it would be a stretch to say that he possessed even a tenth of his original strength. As a result, he was struggling against the Cocoonoids.

Things worsened when the Cocoonoids opened their mouths and emitted the inaudible sound waves together. His headache grew so horrid that he was just barely keeping it together.

No, no, I need to finish this as soon as possible. Otherwise, I'm going to die here.

Fatalistic determination flickered in Xue Beikun's eyes as the pattern of a Greedy Wolf appeared on his forehead. A bloody mist abruptly discharged from his pores, and his skin gradually turned translucent and bright red until he looked like red-hot iron.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!!"

Xue Beikun roared on top of his lungs as veins bulged across his forehead and exposed skin. He looked like he was enduring a lot of pain right now. However, his aura was also strengthening rapidly. It was as if he had returned to peak form in just the blink of an eye.

"Die!" Xue Bei let out a guttural growl as a violent gust of bloody wind swept across the area. Countless trees were ripped in half just like that, and the Cocoonoids could barely stand against the howling gale.

The next moment, Xue Beikun raised his bloodied spear and unleashed a series of rapid spear thrusts. He moved so fast it was as if a magical eraser had erased the Cocoonoids from existence. Just like that, the battle was over. The Greedy Wolf howled, and the stench of death was everywhere.

Except it wasn't over. Xue Beikun's bloodthirst only grew after he slew the Cocoonoids, and he started cutting down the nearest forest like a madman. Trees collapsed in clumps, rocks flew through the air, and the ground was shaking like an earthquake.

Motherfucker! Did he lose it? He's not going to kill me too, is he?

Ye Qing's scalp was numb with fear as he listened to the swishes and booms happening not far away him. Clearly, Xue Beikun wasn't in control of himself right now.

If he wasn't mistaken, Xue Beikun had activated some sort of secret art that would return him to his peak form or even beyond that in the blink of an eye. However, it came at a high price. For starters, it looked like he was barely clinging to the threads of his sanity. Second, Ye Qing had a feeling that Xue Beikun could only maintain this state for a short time. Once his time was up, he would become as weak as a baby.

I mean, that's how it goes in most web novels, right?

At the same time, Ye Qing was patting himself in the back for choosing not to attack Xue Beikun recklessly. Otherwise, he would be in deep shit right now.

Most warriors were poor as shit, but it made sense that a Spirit Master would have a trump card or two that could turn the tables against his enemies. It could be a Strange Artifact, or it could be a secret art. Regardless, trump cards must never be underestimated.

"Hah... hah..."

Ye Qing was still congratulating himself when a pair of murderous, scarlet eyes abruptly appeared before his eyes. It looked like they might devour him at any moment.

"D-Dad... Are you... alright...?"

The eyes belonged to Xue Beikun, of course. The man was still brimming with bloodthirst, and his eyes were bloodshot with murder. He was also panting like a wild beast that was just barely holding back the urge to devour Ye Qing.

Ye Qing could've attacked Xue Beikun right now, but he forced himself to act scared and worried. This was a good opportunity, but not the best he could strive for.

"Useless trash."

A hot, furious insult slipped through Xue Beikun's teeth. "You can't even forage food without stumbling into Strangers, you useless trash?"

"..."

"I had to use a secret art to save you. When it wears off, I'll become incredibly weakened. It will take me a full day to recover, so you must protect me until then. Fail, and we will both die here."

Ye Qing copied Xue Shiwu's tone and expression and mumbled helplessly, "Dad... I... What should I do?"

"You useless trash! Just how did I sow a useless son like you!?" Xue Beikun grew even angrier when he saw how lost Xue Shiwu looked. Seriously, he would have killed him ages ago if he wasn't his son.

"Just stay here and go nowhere. This forest is dominated by a powerful Cocoon Tree, so there shouldn't be any other Stranger in the area. Just in case, I left behind a potent mark that should ward off most Strangers. So just stay here and protect me to the best of your abilities. When I recover, we will leave this place immediately."

"G-Got it!" Ye Qing exclaimed with delight.

"Hmph! Dig a hole under the Cocoon Tree. That is where we'll be passing through the night. With luck, we should be able to survive the night safely," Xue Beikun instructed.

The commander had more to say, but his aura suddenly started weakening slowly. The intimidating red light in his eyes disappeared, and so did his killing intent. A short while later, he abruptly collapsed to the ground.

"Dad! Are you alright? Dad!" Ye Qing called out weakly and sorrowfully like a boy who lost the pillar of his life. If he was nominated for an Oscar, this would be the scene they played on the big screens.

A few breaths later, Ye Qing confirmed that Xue Beikun wasn't faking his unconsciousness. Not only that, he could sense that little to no energy inside the commander's body. He had used practically everything he had to save his son.

Slowly, Ye Qing's panicked and sorrowful expression was replaced by a devilish smile. His plan had worked perfectly, and now, Xue Beikun was no different from a fish waiting to be dissected on the chopping board.

Originally, his plan was to ambush Xue Beikun as Xue Shiwu. Judging from what he observed, there was no way Xue Beikun would be on guard against his own son. However, the encounter with the Cocoon Tree gave him a better idea, and he decided to use the Cocoonoids to deplete Xue Beikun's strength first.

However, Xue Beikun was even weaker than he imagined. He could hardly believe his good luck when the commander activated his secret art to wipe out a handful of Cocoonoids. He hadn't just achieved his objective, he had surpassed every expectation he had set for himself. It literally couldn't have gone any better than this.

Ye Qing raised his hand and gently dropped it on Xue Beikun's head. As soon as contact was made, the commander would die, and all of his troubles would be resolved.

However, Ye Qing stopped himself at the last possible moment. The Fog Demon asked tauntingly, "What's wrong, boy? Did you suddenly find your conscience?"

"The fuck? He wants me dead, and he's not even a pretty lady! Why the fuck would I feel any mercy toward him?" Ye Qing snorted. "I just realized that he's more useful to me alive than he is dead!"

The Fog Demon cackled. "Just spill it already."

Ye Qing rolled his eyes at the Fog Demon but explained, "Xue Beikun is the commander of the Black Feather Guards. Don't you think it's a bit of a waste to just kill him like this?"

This piqued the Fog Demon's interest. "It is a waste. Xue Beikun is the regional general of Luo Shui and the commander of ten thousand Black Feather Guards. If we can control him, those Black Feather Guards might as well be ours. When that happens, you could become a regional lord yourself and give the Pacification Bureau, Sunset Hill or whatever the middle finger."

"Not only that, if you can pull the same trick on key members of the Pacification Bureau as well, then you would become the king of Luo Shui in all but name. You want power? All of Luo Shui is yours to see fit. You want women? They would flock to you themselves without trying. You want wealth? Luo Shui is the city of wealth of Chu. You want strength? The Pacification Bureau is yours to plunder. You will obtain *everything*, kekekeke..."

The Fog Demon's voice was full of temptation. It seemed to possess the magic to draw out a person's deepest desires and heart demons.

In his headspace, Ye Qing saw a profoundly extraordinary seed bobbing up and down and absorbing his desires and heart demons. As it grew stronger, an evil power began emanating inside his headspace.

The "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" was powerful, but it was one hundred percent a cultivation art of the Dark Ways. This meant that he must absorb various heart demons and desires such as the Five Poisons, Six Desires, Seven Emotions, Eight Fears, Nine Terrors and more to strengthen his demonic thought.

At the beginning, the demonic thought was in the shape of a seed. As he nurtured it, it would eventually bloom into a nine-leaf demonic lotus. Each leaf represented a stage in his cultivation level.

He had just unlocked his Xuanguan point and entered the Spirit Purification stage, and he was just starting to practice the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra”. Therefore, he hadn’t converted all of his spiritual power into demonic thought yet. That was why his demonic thought was still in the form of a seed.

As the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra” had a peculiar appetite, whatever heart demons and desires the Fog Demon drew out of his mind were turned into its sustenance. Forget tempting him off the right path, he wouldn’t even feel it if he wasn’t constantly monitoring his headspace.

That wasn’t to say the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra” was completely risk free, however. Quite the contrary, if he failed to maintain a pure mind while practicing the cultivation art, it was entirely possible that his personality would be warped by the very thing he cultivated. The demonic thought could very well warp him into a perverse, ruthless, and heartless man.

In fact, all martial arts of the Dark Ways possessed this characteristic. They were easy to grasp but hard to master. If you ignored the warning signs and just focused on speed, then your cultivation would most likely suffer in the future.

The Fog Demon was still prattling while he was absorbed in his thoughts. It was clear that it carried impure motives as it kept drawing out Ye Qing’s greed, wrath, lust and other desires.

In fact, the Fog Demon was trying to drag Ye Qing into the Dark Ways. It would allow it to slowly take control of Ye Qing and eventually break free from his control.

Chapter 302: Wind Or Rain, All Shall Bow To My Will

Beneficial its useless rants might be, it really grated on the ears, so Ye Qing interrupted the Fog Demon with a sneer, “A king? Why don’t you ask me to become an emperor then? I would be ruling hundreds of times more people, wouldn’t I?”

“Anyway, I have something serious to do right now, so shut up and let me work.”

He knew what the Fog Demon was plotting, but he didn’t expressly forbid it from tempting him because it was more beneficial than not.

Of course, the Fog Demon had no idea that he was cultivating a powerful cultivation art of the Dark Ways. It knew that he had received a powerful inheritance, it wasn’t sure about the details or even the name of the cultivation art, and he was hardly going to talk.

The Fog Demon shut up feeling miffed and disappointed. All Nine Nethers Demons were experts at manipulation and temptation, but why wasn’t it working on Ye Qing?

“What are you going to do then?”

Ye Qing answered after a moment of thought, “My plan is to use Xue Beikun to bait Wang Luori out into the open. Then, I’ll murder that sonuvabitch.”

Everyone knows that Wang Luori was the one who was targeting the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau now. If the man wished to remain in Luo Shui, then his only option was to join Xue Beikun. Even

before they entered the Demon's Tomb, Ye Qing could already tell that Wang Luori was plotting something like that.

Therefore, baiting Wang Luori into showing himself with Xue Beikun was absolutely a workable plan. He would be able to kill the bastard and end his troubles once and for all.

"For someone with great power, your dreams sure are puny!" The Fog Demon scoffed.

"Can you control Xue Beikun, Fog Demon?" Ye Qing ignored its provocation and asked.

The Fog Demon answered, "If Xue Beikun was at his peak, then it would be somewhat difficult for me to control him. But now? Just say when."

"Is there any chance someone might notice you?" Ye Qing asked another question.

It was one thing if Xue Beikun was just an ordinary person, but he was the commander of the Black Feathers Guard, a regional general and an imperial official. He would be in deep shit if someone noticed the Fog Demon's manipulations.

"Kekeke... relax, boy." The Fog Demon declared arrogantly, "We Nine Nethers Demons are masters of manipulation and temptation. We can control anyone and extract their memories without them noticing. As long as you don't demand me to do something crazy, not even a Grandmaster would be able to detect something amiss."

Ye Qing frowned. He was still concerned despite the Fog Demon's assurances.

"I never knew you were such a coward!" The Fog Demon taunted Ye Qing before offering a suggestion, "If you're really that worried, then I can keep his soul alive and infect his mind instead. I will gradually influence his behavior until he subconsciously thinks of you as his master and becomes loyal to you. Besides that, he will act and behave exactly the same as before. It will be much harder for anyone to discover that he has been subverted."

"I like that. Let's go with the second plan," Ye Qing said.

The Fog Demon cackled delightedly before warning, "Don't say I didn't warn you, but both plans would require me to detach a fragment of my soul and control him directly."

"This is especially true for the second plan because I would have to continuously influence him over a long period. Otherwise, there's a high chance he might break free from my control and return to normal. I wouldn't be able to take my eyes—or rather, my soul—off of him until the deed is done."

Ye Qing smirked. "It's fine." Even if the Fog Demon detached his soul, that soul fragment would still be under his control. He wasn't afraid that the Fog Demon might plot something behind his back or break free from his control.

“Very well!” The Fog Demon let out a delighted laugh before sending a wisp of mist into Xue Beikun’s mind. A few breaths later, a hint of struggle and anger appeared on Xue Beikun’s face. Clearly, he was fighting against the Fog Demon’s corruptive influence.

Although Xue Beikun was seriously injured, mentally weakened, and completely unconscious, he was still alive. Of course he would try to fight off a foreign force, even if just subconsciously.

It was futile though. Just a moment later, his struggle and anger were slowly replaced by calm. At the same time, the Fog Demon’s voice resounded in Ye Qing’s head, “Phew! It’s done.”

“Oh right, Xue Beikun’s mind and body were weakened beyond imagination. His last bit of consciousness would’ve disappeared if not for my skill.”

“Thank you for your hard work,” Ye Qing replied in a deadpan and completely insincere voice.

“Oh right, what do you plan to do with the boy now?” The Fog Demon asked suddenly.

It was referring to Xue Shiwu, of course.

Ye Qing rubbed his nose in thought. The reason he kept Xue Shiwu alive was because he didn’t want to alert Xue Beikun until he was ready, and to use him as a bargaining chip should his plan end in failure. However, the plan had gone better than he could possibly have hoped, and he subverted Xue Beikun with nary an effort.

What this meant was that Xue Shiwu was useless to him.

There was no way he would let the guy go. The only thing that would achieve was to make his life harder.

Taking control of him like Xue Beikun was out of the question as well. There was literally no value to controlling him.

In that case, there was only one option.

“Kill him.”

Ye Qing rose to his feet and said, “Also, I want you to create a memory for Xue Beikun. Make him believe that his son was killed by the Strangers of Demon’s Tomb.”

“Kekeke... Mind control the dad, kill the son, and make the dad believe that his son is killed by Strangers? Kekeke...” The Fog Demon couldn’t stop cackling.

“What? You have a problem?” Ye Qing’s lips curled into a dangerous smirk.

“Hehe, not at all! In fact, this is right up my alley!” The Fog Demon wasn’t stupid enough to provoke Ye Qing in this situation.

The young man scoffed and returned to the spot where he had hidden Xue Shiwu. The Little Commander was still unconscious. Shaking his head, Ye Qing said, "Don't be my enemy in your next life."

He tapped the space in front of him and extinguished Xue Shiwu's mind and soul with the "Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul". Then, he waved a gust of Burning Wind into existence and burned the body into ash.

Ye Qing had technically killed a defenseless, unconscious man, but he felt precisely zero guilt from it. The loathsome fellow had tried to kill him even before they met in person, and he just kept coming like some sort of rabid dog. He was only all too happy to rid him from his life.

Xue Beikun was still unconscious when he went back to the commander. The Fog Demon asked tauntingly, "It'll take Xue Beikun a full day to wake up, boy. Are you going to wait for him to recover, or will you carry him on his back like a filial son?"

"And why would I do that? I'm not a dumbass like you!" Ye Qing retorted. He then produced a bottle containing the Water of Life and fed the commander a single drop.

"Tsk! How generous of you," The Fog Demon commented with clear jealousy. Countless humans and Strangers dreamed of getting the Water of Life, but Ye Qing was feeding it to his *enemy* like it was nothing. What would people think if they saw this?

The Water of Life contained a tremendous amount of life force and could, in a sense, reborn a person anew. Therefore, it was exceptionally effective at healing injuries and nurturing one's spirit. As soon as the droplet entered his throat, Xue Beikun's injuries began healing at a visible rate. His weak aura began strengthening at a rapid pace as well.

A moment later, Xue Beikun abruptly opened his eyes. His now powerful aura swept through the area like a typhoon as the silhouette of a Greedy Wolf appeared and howled at the sky. The powerful, constant gale eventually transformed into a bloody moon that painted the world red.

"He... broke through?!"

Ye Qing was stunned by this sight. He wasn't expecting a single drop of Water of Life to heal Xue Beikun and even increase his cultivation level to the late-stage of the Spirit Master Realm.

"It will be fine... right?" Ye Qing was feeling a bit nervous, to be honest. He didn't even want to imagine what would happen if Xue Beikun somehow escaped the Fog Demon's influence because of his breakthrough.

"Relax! It will be fine! Do you think my technique is made of sticks and stones or something?" The Fog Demon harrumphed. It seemed extremely displeased that Ye Qing would question its abilities.

A dozen breaths later, the unusual phenomenon disappeared, and the Greedy Wolf slipped into Xue Beikun's head. The terrifying aura surrounding him slowly disappeared as well.

"Master!"

Xue Beikun then faced Ye Qing and gave him a deferential bow. His expression was reserved and devout.

“Phew!”

Ye Qing let out a sigh of relief. Although the Fog Demon swore up and down that everything would be fine, he couldn’t help but be worried anyway. Thankfully, it looked like everything had gone without a hitch.

Ye Qing ordered, “Don’t call me master. Address me by my name when someone is around, and young master when no one is around.”

“As you command, young master!” Xue Beikun responded with a salute.

Ye Qing nodded. He then mentally ordered the Fog Demon to influence Xue Beikun into keeping their relationship a secret as much as possible.

The sky is tall, the sea is wide. Wind or rain, all shall bow to my will!

Ye Qing looked up at the sky of the Demon’s Tomb for a moment. A red sun was hanging high and casting blood red rays across the world. It painted an ominous yet undeniably gorgeous image of the world.

Finally, he declared, “Let’s go!”

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“What’s wrong, Miss?”

Standing in front of row of gravestones, Feng Liunian noticed a flicker of emotion from Feng Qingyou and asked concernedly.

Feng Qingyou stared at the gravestone in front of her as she replied, “Xue Shiwu’s dead. The Dream Seed I planted on him has dissipated.”

“He’s dead?” Feng Liunian frowned. “Would this impact your plans?”

She replied indifferently, “It will be fine. He is a pawn I set up to impede or control Xue Beikun, but not all parts of a plan will or have to play out as planned. If it works, then it works. If not, then I’ll improvise. His death matters not in the small or grand scheme of things.”

Feng Liunian grinned toothily. “You are as farsighted as ever, Miss. This one is most impressed.”

“Please don’t make fun of me, Uncle Feng.” Feng Qingyou smiled back. Her eyebrows were like distant mountains, and her eyes resembled pools of autumn. “Anyway, this is the Great Dream Origin Hiding Demon Controlling Major Array, so this grave most likely belongs to the Great Dreamer.”

“Nine *yao* and six *gua*, four *xian* and eight *ji*... yes, the eye of the array is right here.”

“Let’s go, Uncle Feng!”

Feng Qingyou began walking toward the gravestone in front of her. As soon as she took a step, the calm space abruptly shattered into a million pieces, and the fragments floated across the air. Each

spatial fragment seemed to reflect one corner of the world. There were flowers, grass, mountains, rivers, sun, moon, the mortal coil and everything there was in the world.

Feng Qingyou was an irregular element that existed outside the reflections of the world, however. Untouched by space or time, she walked through the fragments and slowly made her way toward the grave.

The gravestone was right in front of her, but she couldn't reach it no matter how many steps she took. What should be a few meters of distance at most felt like the distance between heaven and earth!

Feng Qingyou remained unperturbed, however. Sometimes she would walk, and sometimes she would stop for a moment. Sometimes she would go toward the left, and sometimes she would go toward the right. Slowly but surely, she was getting closer and closer toward the grave

When she was one meter away from the grave, the spatial fragments abruptly disappeared like it was never there. In fact, Feng Qingyou had only taken a single step forward in real life.

It was like what she experienced earlier was just a dream!

Feng Qingyou clasped her hands behind her back and smiled at the gravestone in front of her. She quietly recited its inscription, "To live is to dream while awake, to sleep is to dream while aslumber—The Great Dreamer."

Chapter 303: Humanity Remains the Same

"Finally. The exit."

With Xue Beikun, a late-stage Spirit Master to protect him, Ye Qing encountered no more trouble as he journeyed toward the north. Finally, he found the exit before the day turned into night once more.

The exit was really *an* exit. It was a rift between space-time that led to the outside world. All he needed to do was to walk into the rift, and he would be back in Luo Shui.

Ye Qing didn't leave immediately after finding the exit though. Instead, he searched for a safe spot close to the rift and sat down.

There were a few reasons why he sat here. One, he was hoping to kill Wang Luori. With Xue Beikun under his control, he had a one hundred percent chance of ending Wang Luori if the bastard showed up. Killing him in the Demon's Tomb would save him a lot of trouble as well.

But of course, this rift wasn't the only exit. Not even close. It was completely up to luck whether Wang Luori would leave the Demon's Tomb via this exit or not. If he was lucky, then all was well. If not, then it was fine too. He was just giving it a try.

Two, he wanted to practice the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra". He needed to absorb a human's Five Poisons, Six Desires, Seven Emotions, Eight Fears, Nine Terrors and so on to practice the cultivation art and strengthen his demonic thought, and the Demon's Tomb was the resting place of the Progenitor Demon, Rahu and countless more titans of the Dark Ways. The demonic qi of this place was pure and abundant, which made it the perfect place to practice the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra". It would be a shame to miss this opportunity.

After he was ready, Ye Qing ordered Xue Beikun to guard him and keep an eye out for any sign of Wang Luori. Then, he began practicing.

As soon as he started practicing the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra”, Ye Qing’s pupils slowly turned as black as ink, infinite and unfathomable. At the same time, the demonic qi in the air flowed into his body like a typhoon.

In Ye Qing’s headspace, the demonic seed floating before his mind began spinning lightly. The typhoon happening outside his headspace was happening inside as well. Like a whale, the demonic seed devoured both his spirit and the demonic qi with unbridled gluttony. The patterns on the seed’s surface grew increasingly complicated and enigmatic as a result.

The demonic seed’s devouring speed only increased over time. Soon, the typhoon outside his headspace had become so thick they looked like black rivers.

Still, the demonic seed devoured it all like a black hole. It was never satisfied no matter how much demonic qi it devoured. One thing for certain, it kept growing more and more profound.

If this was anywhere else, Ye Qing would be forced to stop practicing already. There was only so much demonic qi in the air.

Ye Qing forewent his stray thoughts and focused fully on practicing then.

Like a whirlpool in the middle of the sea, Ye Qing continued to absorb demonic qi at a prodigious rate. At the same time, he was causing all sorts of strange phenomena. Sometimes, heavenly demons could be seen dancing wildly in the sky. Sometimes, one could hear the whispers of celestials and gods. They were all illusions, but their influence was very real. Desires sprung like a wellspring, and few people in the area could calm their mind. To say that he was causing a scene would be an understatement.

The phenomenon was such that even Xue Beikun, a late-stage Spirit Master, was unable to withstand its disruptive influence for long. He had to move far, far away.

“What on earth did the boy get? How is it so terrifying?”

Inside the Boundless Mara Buddha, the Fog Demon was quaking in fear as well. The guy was just *practicing*, for Nether’s sake. If *this* was the level of phenomenon he could trigger at rest, just how terrifying he would be when he actually used it in battle?

“Motherfucker. Just how lucky can he get? And when am I ever going to get the chance to break free?”

When the shock had passed, the Fog Demon felt a deep sense of doom and gloom shrouding over it.

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“Oh, look! An unusual phenomenon! It must be the birth of a treasure!”

“Hahaha, it looks like today is my lucky day. I wasn’t expecting to run into a treasure while I was leaving!”

“Wonderful. I need to get there immediately!”

The phenomenon Ye Qing created didn’t escape the notice of the nearby warriors, of course. They all thought that it was a phenomenon created by the birth of a treasure, and they all homed in on his location like flies to honey.

But as soon as they got within a certain range, most of the warriors suddenly fell into insanity and began fighting among themselves. It wasn't long before they killed each other.

Those who came later saw the bodies, but not everyone was a believer of common sense. Or rather, once you had gained a certain amount of power, the word became so much more vague than what it used to. In any case, countless more rushed to Ye Qing's location and died.

There were warriors who were strong to resist the demonic thoughts and illusions, of course, but Xue Beikun was there. He killed them and dumped their bodies among the fallen as well.

Gradually, people got the message and stopped coming after the "treasure" completely. If only they knew that the so-called treasure was really just a fellow warrior practicing his cultivation art, and the man himself had no idea of the massacre he unwittingly caused.

Yes, Ye Qing had no idea. Right now, he was completely focused on practicing the Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra. The demonic seed had finally sprouted after all the demonic qi it absorbed, though it was still just a bud.

Over time, the bud bloomed a single petal. When the petal was fully unfolded, it was like a dam had broken. Demonic thoughts instantly filled half of his headspace like a lake, and a single black lotus floated on top of it. It was overflowed with seemingly infinite power.

It was at this moment the Fog Demon spoke to him mentally, "You done yet, boy? We need to go now unless you plan to stay here for eternity."

Already? It only felt like a few hours to me. Ye Qing felt a little disappointed, but he couldn't deny that he had gotten what he wanted.

Since the demonic seed had bloomed into a demonic lotus with a single petal, this meant he had officially become an initiate of the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra". He had converted all of his spiritual power into demonic thought. This would allow him to use "Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul" much better than before.

"What are you dilly-dallying about, boy? Do you actually want to grow old in the Demon's Tomb or what?" The Fog Demon urged again since Ye Qing hadn't responded to it.

"I'm back," Ye Qing replied simply before opening his eyes. His pupils were black as the night, strange and evil-looking, seemingly capable of sucking out a person's soul with a glance. The phenomenon in the sky grew increasingly dense and scary as his powerful demonic thought scanned his surroundings.

Ye Qing blinked, and the unnatural blackness and evil in his pupils faded away. The phenomenon also disappeared like it was never there. It was almost as if everything that had happened was a dream.

Ye Qing looked up. The sun was setting, and the sky was looking a little darker than before. The demonic qi in the air was creating all sorts of strange illusions.

"Has it been a full day and night already?" Ye Qing murmured to himself before hurrying toward the exit. The demon's Tomb would remain connected to the outside

world for three days before slipping to heavens-know-where. If he didn't get out while he could, this would be a short-lived web novel.

Not long after he left his hiding spot, Xue Beikun walked up to him and greeted, "Young master."

"Hmm? Why are there so many dead bodies at this place?" Ye Qing suddenly noticed that there were a *lot* of dead bodies in the surroundings. It looked like they had killed each other as well. Did he miss a war while he was practicing or something?

"They died because of you, young master!" Xue Beikun answered.

"Excuse me?" Ye Qing was very confused.

"It's like this..." Xue Beikun proceeded to tell him everything that had happened.

"Holy shit. I had no idea that would happen." Ye Qing rubbed his nose. Who would've thought that the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" would cause such a commotion?

The reason was twofold. One, the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" was a mysterious and incredibly potent cultivation art. Two, there was an excessive amount of demonic qi in the Demon's Tomb.

He didn't feel any guilt toward their deaths though. If they hadn't lost themselves to their greed, they could've withdrawn while they still could. In this world, the price of succumbing to one's greed but lacking the power to fulfill it was death.

"Did you see Wang Luori?" Ye Qing tossed the incident out of his mind and asked.

Xue Beikun shook his head. "No."

"Forget it then." Ye Qing sighed. He always knew there was a chance that his ploy might fail.

When they reached the rift, Ye Qing noticed that it had become a lot narrower than before. It was just wide enough for a single person to pass through. Had he arrived even a few minutes later, he might not be able to pass through the gap. Xue Beikun certainly wouldn't be able to.

Right before he stepped in, Ye Qing took one last look at the fading sunset of the Demon's Tomb and smiled.

Goodbye, Demon's Tomb.

Goodbye, master!

With that, he exited the rift and never returned.

.....

"Urgh, I feel like I was being spun around in a washing machine..."

"Where is this? Pan Hill? What the hell—right. The Demon's Tomb."

An indefinite amount of time later, Ye Qing finally recovered from his dizziness and scanned his surroundings. It took him a while to identify where he was.

Pan Hill was a moderate-sized hill about five kilometers from the city. It was famed for its beautiful scenery and relaxing environment. Unfortunately, the hill had collapsed into rubble, and the rest of the place looked to be in poor condition as well.

Pan Hill was hardly the only victim. Entire forests were gone just like that. Lakes and ponds were but dry basins with not a drop of water in them. Bigger mountains than Pan Hill had collapsed completely, and the earth had split into new chasms and caves.

This happened when the Demon's Tomb had manifested in Luo Shui. Its unnatural power had warped its surroundings and caused an unthinkable amount of damage.

Ye Qing didn't linger. He rushed toward Luo Shui after finding his bearings.

Pan Hill was pretty close to the city, so it only took him a moment to reach it. Obviously, he split up with Xue Beikun on the way to avoid drawing unnecessary suspicion.

Upon entering the city, Ye Qing found that, despite the destroyed lands beyond the walls of Luo Shui, the city itself was just as bustling and prosperous as before. The atmosphere was a little tense, but that was it.

"Thank goodness."

A wide smile spread across his face as he said this. Honestly, he was terrified that he would come back and find a sea of bodies and tortured screams everywhere. Luckily, his fear turned out to be groundless.

Luo Shui was still Luo Shui,

And humanity was still humanity.

Everything was as it should be.

After restoring his appearance to normal, Ye Qing made a beeline for the Inspection Bureau and confirmed that Wawa, Kung Fu Frog and Faceless were all safe and sound. Then, he ran to the Pacification Bureau.

"You're back, Joyless! Are you alright?" Gu Suitang strode up to Ye Qing as soon as he saw him.

"I'm fine, chief. Thanks for your concern." He could feel just how much Gu Suitang cared about him. He didn't hesitate to pay the deputy chief his due respect.

Since cultivating the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra", Ye Qing realized that he could now perceive the emotions of the people around him such as joy, anger, sorrow and more.

"Hahaha! As long as you're fine!" Gu Suitang laughed and gave Ye Qing a couple of hard slaps across the shoulder.

The sensation was most familiar to Ye Qing, but at the same time, it wasn't. When Gu Suitang noticed that Ye Qing wasn't perturbed by the shoulder slap in the slightest, he asked curiously, "Did your body grow stronger while you were inside?"

Then, his eyes widened all of a sudden. “Your cultivation is different as well. You’re a Spirit Purifier now?”

“You have sharp eyes, chief,” Ye Qing admitted. There was no need to hide this from the deputy chief.

“It looks like your journey to the Demon’s Tomb was a fruitful one!” Gu Suitang guffawed. He truly was happy for Ye Qing from the bottom of his heart. “So, how much dragon-elephant strength do you have now?”

“Around five!” Ye Qing answered honestly.

“Not bad, not—wait, what? Five dragon-elephant strength?” Gu Suitang abruptly realized what Ye Qing just said and exclaimed in shock, “Did I hear you wrong, or did you say it wrong?”

Ye Qing smirked. “You heard me correctly.”

“But... But you were just a journeyman! How the heck did you suddenly have five dragon-elephant strength?”

Gu Suitang still couldn’t believe his ears despite Ye Qing’s assurance. “Are you sure you went to the Demon’s Tomb and not the Celestial Realm?”

He, Gu Suitang, had never skipped a day of practice unless he was grievously wounded or something. Despite this, it had taken him *decades* to gain the five dragon-elephant strength. But Ye Qing wasn’t even twenty yet, and he was already on the same level as he was. It made him feel like all those decades of hard work were for naught!

Chapter 304: Meeting Hong Jianglong Again

“Haha, it’s like this...” Ye Qing told Gu Suitang how he encountered the Water of Life.

“The *Water of Life*? And there was enough that you could *guzzle it down* like it’s cheap wine?” Gu Suitang could barely control his voice when Ye Qing reached the end of his story. His breathing grew heavy, and his eyes were bloodshot with envy. Oh, he was so envious he could wring his own neck.

“You... You truly are a lucky brat!” In the end, Gu Suitang could only let it all out as a deep sigh. What else could he do?

“Haha, I won’t deny that.” Ye Qing smiled and handed Gu Suitang a porcelain bottle.

“What’s this?” The deputy chief accepted it with a grunt.

“The Water of Life.”

“Say *what*?” Gu Suitang’s hand shook, and he nearly tossed the bottle away like it was a Stranger. “Repeat yourself!”

You're the deputy chief, bro. Stop jumping at everything like a kid, Ye Qing thought unkindly before clarifying, "The Water of Life. It's filled to the brim with Water of Life."

Gu Suitang uncorked the bottle and was immediately treated to a faceful of life force. Its sweet scent alone was enough to make him feel energized and refreshed to the core. He could even feel his invisible injuries tingling as if it was recovering.

"It's definitely the Water of Life alright."

Gu Suitang hurriedly corked the bottle and handed it back to Ye Qing. He then said seriously, "Next time, don't show someone a treasure at this level willy-nilly. There's a reason why we say that owning something valuable is a sin in itself."

Ye Qing didn't accept it, however. He said, "This Water of Life is yours, deputy chief."

"You're... giving this to me?" Gu Suitang was stunned for a second. Then, he grew enraged, "Who do you think I am? Do you think I'm the kind of guy to covet my underlings' fortune? Or are you trying to bribe me?"

"Take it back and get out of my sight!"

Gu Suitang immediately tossed the bottle in Ye Qing's direction after saying that.

"You misunderstand, chief! I don't mean it that way!" Ye Qing hurriedly caught the porcelain bottle and explained himself, "Since I joined the Pacification Bureau, you've constantly had my back and even taught me your martial arts. I've always thought of you as my senior and my master."

"This Water of Life is my way of thanking you for everything you've done for me. It is neither a bribe nor an underhanded method to garner your favor. Please don't misunderstand, and please accept my good will."

"Oh! That's what you meant!" Gu Suitang exclaimed in realization and guffawed, "Sorry, sorry. For a second there, I thought you've picked up those political bullshit and what not."

"But you said it yourself, didn't you? I am your senior and your master. It is my responsibility to watch over you and teach you things. The Water of Life is your heaven-given opportunity and a priceless treasure, so you should save it for when you need it."

"It's okay. I still have plenty," Ye Qing replied smilingly.

"Plenty my ass! The Water of Life doesn't sprout on trees, boy!" Gu Suitang rebuked him jokingly. "Seriously, keep it. I'm the deputy chief of the Pacification Bureau. I'm hardly lacking in cultivation resources."

“No really, I have plenty.” Ye Qing knew then that Gu Suitang thought that parts of his story were exaggerated. So, he pulled out a dozen bottles from his Nature’s Shell and said, “Take a look, chief...”

Gu Suitang grew displeased. *This boy can be pretty stubborn when he wants to be.* “I told you to keep it for yourself. Don’t make me—”

But when he saw Ye Qing producing over ten bottles from his Nature’s Shell, he completely forgot what he was about to say. His eyes widened like saucers as he stammered, “T-They’re all Water of Life?”

I’m just a brute, dude! I would seriously kick your ass if you tell me it’s a joke!

“Really, I wasn’t exaggerating,” Ye Qing emphasized and uncorked two bottles. The room was immediately dyed in gold and filled with a fragrant, rejuvenating scent. “They’re all Water of Life.”

“Also, I drank so much Water of Life that I’ve practically grown immune to its growth effects. Now, I can only use it to heal my injuries. Surely you agree that it’d be a waste to use something as precious as the Water of Life to heal wounds?”

Gu Suitang: “...” *Drank too much Water of Life? Practically grown immune to its growth effects? A waste to use it to heal wounds? Are you even human, bro?*

Seriously, you’re lucky we’re having this discussion indoors. The heavens would literally smite your smug ass if we were outside.

He did think that Ye Qing was exaggerating his spoils to trick him into accepting the bottle of Water of Life. But as it turned out, the young man really was oozing gold.

“You get it now, chief? Please, just take it.”

Ye Qing couldn’t deny feeling a surge of satisfaction when he saw Gu Suitang’s stupefied expression. The man was so shocked he didn’t even react when Ye Qing gently shoved a bottle of Water of Life into his hands.

A few seconds later, Gu Suitang finally jolted back to reality and blurted, “What, you’re only giving me one bottle?”

Now that he knew how filthy rich Ye Qing was, he no longer had any qualms accepting the gift. It was one thing to turn down an expensive gift, and another to turn down an expensive gift from a fucking billionaire.

“Er...” Ye Qing was caught off guard by the sudden one-eighty. *That’s a little too abrupt, doncha think?*

“I was just joking. Thank you for the gift.”

Feeling much better after seeing the stupid expression on Ye Qing’s face, Gu Suitang put away the bottle and smiled. “Now put away the rest of the bottles already. No one likes a show-off, you know.”

“Are you sure one is enough?” Ye Qing blinked.

“Fuck off!” Gu Suitang yelled in jest. “One bottle is enough to fulfill my needs. Its effects would diminish even if you gave me a second bottle.”

Ye Qing chuckled and put away the Water of Life after that. He would’ve given away more Water of Life if Gu Suitang really wanted to, but he didn’t. So, he chose to respect the deputy chief’s wish.

Gu Suitang warned, “I’m repeating myself, but seriously, don’t reveal your wealth like that ever again. The Water of Life might be nothing to you now, but it’s still a priceless treasure to everyone else. You know the saying, ‘don’t show off the contents of your wallet when you pay’ and whatnot.”

“I understand.” Ye Qing nodded seriously before asking, “By the way, where is Brother Chu, Brother Lin, Yue Shan and the others? I don’t sense them in the Pacification Bureau.”

Gu Suitang answered, “Well, some Strangers thought that the appearance of the Demon’s Tomb was their opportunity to cause some havoc, and attacked a couple of nearby villages. That is why they went away to handle the threat.”

“Will they be fine?” Ye Qing asked, but he wasn’t too concerned. If the situation was serious, Gu Suitang wouldn’t be sitting here and doing nothing.

As expected, Gu Suitang replied easily, “It’s fine. The Strangers are all small fries. Just in case there’s a mastermind behind their backs, Xiaoman himself went out to make sure that everything’s okay, so there’s nothing to be worried about.”

“Sounds good.” With Fang Xiaoman to oversee things, nothing could possibly go wrong.

It was at this moment a loud, booming voice came from outside, “I’m back, Old Gu! You didn’t ruin Luo Shui while I was gone, did you?”

Before anyone could react, a tall, muscular figure strode into the room.

“Lord Hong.” Gu Suitang saluted the newcomer respectfully before answering, “All is well. Thank you for your concern.”

“Glad to hear that.”

Ye Qing could tell that the newcomer was the same type of person as Gu Suitang; someone who had little patience and regard for etiquette. Not even bothering to return the salute, he plopped down on the chair and let out a deep sigh of relief. It was at this moment he noticed Ye Qing and exclaimed in surprise, “It’s you? You came out sooner than we did!”

The newcomer was none other than Hong Jianglong. As if on cue, Chu Qingge, Luo Zhan, Gao Ningan and Sui Yan stepped into the room as well.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, my lord,” Ye Qing replied. He wasn’t surprised that Hong Jianglong was able to recognize him. Although his appearance looked completely

different from the one he wore in the Demon's Tomb, Hong Jianglong was a powerful Grandmaster. It was perfectly normal for the guy to see through his disguise.

Funnily enough, Chu Ningge failed to recognize him despite spending the most time with him.

"Thank you for helping me at the Demon's Tomb, my lord," Ye Qing said.

"Haha, I was just at the right place at the right time." Hong Jianglong waved him off with a smile. "Plus, you did me a huge favor as well, so we do not owe each other anything."

"I did?" Ye Qing looked confused. *I'm pretty sure I would remember doing a Grandmaster a favor.*

"Er... It's nothing. No need to dwell on it." Hong Jianglong laughed off the question. He could hardly tell Ye Qing that he had emulated his strategy and one-upped the fuckers who tried to rob his men as they left the Graveyard of Demons, could he? That kind of behavior was unbecoming of a Chief of Bureau after all.

"Looks like you're a Spirit Purifier now! You must have gotten a lot out of the Graveyard of Demons, eh?" Hong Jianglong changed the subject before anyone could dwell on it.

Ye Qing replied in a humble tone, "I did, yes."

"Good, good! Considering your age, your accomplishments are truly praiseworthy!" Hong Jianglong complimented him.

It was at this moment Chu Qingge finally exclaimed in realization, "It's you, Ye Shi?"

Ye Qing shot her a friendly smile and said, "We meet again, Miss Chu. I am Ye Qing, the Patrolman of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau. My apologies for concealing my identity back at the Demon's Tomb. I hope that you and your colleagues won't mind my deception."

Chu Qingge nodded understandingly. She was aware of Ye Qing's exploits and conundrums and understood exactly why he needed to conceal his identity.

"It's you! I was wondering why you look kinda familiar!" Gao Ning'an also exclaimed in realization before showering at Ye Qing with a passionate gaze. "What did you call yourself again? Ye Qing? Would you happen to be Joyless Ye?"

Ye Qing felt a little unsettled by his passionate gaze, but he still answered, "If you're referring to Ye Qing of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau, then yes."

"It really is you! Hahaha!" Gao Ning'an exploded with excitement, though his outburst only confused Ye Qing even more. *Is he alright? Does he need to see a doctor?*

"You know me, Brother Gao?"

“Know you? You’re practically my idol, brother!” Gao Ningnan explained, “It seems you’re not aware of this, but you’re famous throughout Tian Yong. They call you the ‘Wiseman Who Outwitted the Way of Taiping’, the ‘Fearless Hero Who Is Undaunted By Numbers’, the ‘Jester Who Played the *jianghu* Like a Fiddle’ and more. Storytellers have compiled tales of your exploits and spread it to every street and alley of Tian Yong for the people’s pleasure.”

“Do you understand now why I’m so excited? You’re a living legend, my man!”

Ye Qing frowned a little. *I didn’t know I was so famous.*

He rubbed his nose and replied in a helpless tone, “Er, it was really just a series of lucky coincidences and unfortunate circumstances.”

The coincidence referred to how he accidentally upended the Way of Taiping’s conspiracy, and the unfortunate circumstances referred to the *jianghu* warriors coming after his head and forcing him to take action.

I didn’t want any of this, I swear!

“Regardless, it is an immutable fact that your exploits have greatly bolstered the Pacification Bureau’s reputation!” Gao Ningnan said.

“Indeed! You did well, Joyless!” Hong Jianglong was guffawing. “It was about time we took these idiots down a peg anyway. Give them an inch, and these bastards would not hesitate to ruffle your fur like you’re a pet cat or something! The nerve!”

“If you ask me, you should’ve been more ruthless. If I were you, I would have mustered everyone in the Pacification Bureau and the garrison and massacred these so-called warriors, their families, and their sects. I would be very surprised if anyone else would dare to challenge our authority after we’ve annihilated ten or twenty sects or so!”

Ye Qing wiped some non-existent sweat from his shoulder. *I thought I was pretty ruthless, but I’m practically a chick before this guy!*

At the side, Gu Suitang sneered approvingly, “I agree, my lord. In fact, once our immediate business is over, I’m going to pay a couple people a personal visit and settle the score.”

“It seems that some parts of the world have forgotten that Strangers aren’t the only things our blades can cut down. I’m going to remind them all why the Pacification Bureau is untouchable!”

Chapter 305: The Jixia Academy

“So you did have a plan? And here I thought a few years of bureaucracy was enough to reduce you into a pussy cat!” Hong Jianglong joked.

Gu Suitang harrumphed. “When have I ever backed down from anything?”

Hong Jianglong broke into a vicious grin. "I look forward to the good news then. And don't worry about holding back. If you put a hole in the sky, the Tian Yong Pacification Bureau will cover for you. If not, there is still the emperor. No matter what happens, Chu will never be the playground of these *jianghu* rats!"

"Your support is much appreciated," Gu Suitang replied firmly.

"Oh right, where's Xiaoman?" Hong Jianglong asked.

"Some of the villages in Luo Shui were attacked by Strangers due to the Demon's Tomb's emergence. Xiaoman is currently handling it with some of my best men," Gu Suitang answered.

"That's a shame. I was planning to enjoy a drink with you two before returning to Tian Yong." Hong Jianglong sighed. "Well, there's always next time."

But Gu Suitang exposed him immediately. "Bullshit! You just want to tour the Eighteen Boats of Luo Shui!"

Caught off guard, Hong Jianglong let out an embarrassed cough before declaring, "The hell you're talking about? Do I look like that type of person? You need to change the way you think, Old Gu!"

Unbeknownst to the others, Hong Jianglong was holding another conversation with Gu Suitang via sound transmission, "You fucking bastard! Why are you saying this all of a sudden? Think of the children! How am I supposed to face them in the future?"

Gu Suitang scoffed, "I don't know you care about face so much—but not enough to quit your vices, evidently. Also, who are you calling a bastard? Every time we visit the Eighteen Boats, it's always Xiaoman or me who foots the bill! Never you!"

"Ahem... I'm your guest. It's only natural for the host to treat their guest, isn't it?"

Hong Jianglong argued weakly, "Plus, you know how expensive the prices in Tian Yong are. I barely have enough to cover my daily expenses with what I earn."

Gu Suitang exploded, "As if our salary or cost of living is any better than yours! Anyway, we don't have the money to treat you to a night with the prostitutes, so forget it! You'll get a cup of tea, and no more than that!"

"Come now, Old Gu!" Hong Jianglong chuckled. "I'm okay with not touring the Boats, but you gotta treat me to some wine at least! The tea you serve barely tastes any different from plain water. I have no idea why you stock it at all!"

"There's only tea at my place. If you don't like it, then you can fuck right off!" Gu Suitang harrumphed.

"So stingy!"

Their conversation was quite heated, but their face fu was impeccable. No one had a clue that the two Chiefs of Bureau had just had a most inappropriate conversation with each other. No one... except Ye Qing.

Ever since he practiced the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra”, and especially since he converted all of his spirit into demonic thought, Ye Qing had become much better at grasping people’s emotions and thoughts. As a result, he was able to eavesdrop on their private conversation even though he didn’t mean to.

He was surprised to say the least. Both Hong Jianglong and Gu Suitang looked the picture of a man who spurned all women for the sake of their career and self-improvement, but in reality... they were still men. He could barely keep his expression under control when he learned that they often frequented the Eighteen Boats for uh, stress relief purposes. Truly, one couldn’t judge a book by its cover!

More importantly, just how poor were these fuckers? Why did it sound like *he* was wealthier than the two of them combined?

On a more serious note, it was clear that Hong Jianglong, Gu Suitang and Fang Xiaoman shared a close relationship with each other.

“Oh right, I almost forgot.” Hong Jianglong recalled something. “One month later on the sixth of June, Tian Yong would be holding the triennial[1] Hidden Dragon Meet. Don’t forget to send your best men.”

Hidden Dragon Meet? Ye Qing frowned. He had never heard something like that.

Gu Suitang noticed Ye Qing’s expression and explained, “It’s nothing. It’s just a bunch of overly ambitious and free people competing against each other for meaningless fame and glory.”

“The fuck are you talking about? The Hidden Dragon Meet is hardly meaningless!” Hong Jianglong argued, “The Hidden Dragon Meet is a festival the imperial court holds every three years to unearth bright, young talents. The best and brightest of the clans and sects would be gathering at Tian Yong to show off their skills.”

“Barring exceptional circumstances, those who performed outstandingly would not only be famous throughout the *jianghu*, but also offered the chance to serve the imperial court. It’s the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“Even those who don’t wish to join the imperial court may become the disciple or guest warrior of major clans or sects. They could even become a student in the Jixia Academy[2].”

“The Jixia Academy?” Ye Qing was surprised to hear this. The Jixia Academy was an academy created by the founder of Chu himself. It was the center of a thousand years of knowledge, expertise, and all kinds of talents. It was one of the foundational stones of Chu and the academy that had produced many geniuses of the ages.

The founder’s son, Emperor Jin Run, inherited the throne after his father passed away, but at the time he was too young to possess much political clout. From the beginning, his court was rife with hidden enemies aiming for the throne themselves, and both Yan and Wei were just waiting for an opportunity to invade Chu. However, Bai Xinyue, a Jixia Academy student in his twenties, had stepped up to eradicate the traitors, repel the invaders, strengthen the borders, and save Chu from

disaster. He was later heralded as Chu's greatest prime minister, and he still held that title to this day.

During the third year of the Tai Kang era (ruled by Emperor Gao Zong of Tai Kang), Yan, Wei and Qi joined forces and attacked Chu's borders. Despite owning an army of over a million, Chu was unable to hold their borders against the combined might of three nations and lost over half of their territories in three months. When all hope seemed lost, three hundred students of the Jixia Academy entered the battlefield. They initially rushed to the borders and slew over ten thousand enemies. Then, they ran all across the realm destroying many enemy camps and slaying countless nemeses of Chu. Somehow, they were able to repel the three nations' army of millions with just the three hundred of them and protect Chu from destruction. When all was said and done, they were conferred as the The Three Hundred Divine Guardians of Chu by the emperor himself.

During the fifth year of the Xuan Hua era (ruled by Emperor Ying Zong of Xuan Hua), constant rain beset Chu and caused the rivers and lakes to overflow, destroying countless homes and killing countless civilians. It was a natural disaster like nothing Chu had ever experienced. Thankfully, Chen Changfeng of the Jixia Academy stepped up and submitted a proposal called the "Ten Strategies To Treat Water" to the imperial court. His irrigation strategies not only saved Chu from the natural disaster, but also greatly improved the livelihoods of the people. In fact, the people of Chu never had to worry about floods again to this day.

During the Jin An era, a scholar named Kong Ru created a national motto for Chu, established a national ideal for the people, paved the road for those who wished to pursue Sagehood, and planted the seeds that could lead to eternal peace for the realm with his books and his sword. He was the one who abolished the old custom where education was a right that only belonged to the privileged, enlightened countless people, and improved the education level of the entire country as a result.

During the An Ping era, Xu Changan was the single greatest swordsman who was said to have "saved the world" singlehandedly. His sword qi was said to span from one end of the world to the other, and he had trounced the enemies of Chu to the north *and* the south all by himself. No one in the entire world was a greater swordsman than him during that time, and he remained unrivaled until the very end.

During the Cheng Hua era, a qi practitioner named Shi An also performed many amazing feats in service of Chu. A master diviner and strategist, he often traveled everywhere to set in motion things that would benefit Chu one way or another. Not only that, he was an incredibly powerful warrior who had supposedly severed a Dragon Vein[3] with a single finger from thousands and thousands of kilometers away. He was also the reason Yan and Wei were caught up in turmoil for sixty years straight.

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When people said that Jixia had left its mark throughout the millennia-long history of the four human countries, they weren't joking. In fact, their influence and geniuses had long since escaped the boundaries of Chu and encompassed Yan, Wei and Qi as well. Some of them were the heads of a prestigious temple or court, some represented the pinnacle of the *jianghu*, some possessed knowledge that was countless years ahead of their time, and some created art that would be remembered for eternity.

Over time, the Jixia Academy became *the* place to join for all scholars *and* warriors of Chu. It was so prestigious that even millennia-old sects such as the Two Temples of Buddha or the Three Temples of Dao ranked lower under their priority. There was no one who didn't take pride in being able to join the Jixia Academy; not even a member of the royal family.

Although the Jixia Academy accepted people of all walks of life, they did have one criteria: anyone they recruited must possess outstanding talent. If you weren't a genius of some sort, you would not be accepted into the Jixia Academy even if you were royalty.

Back to the present, Gu Suitang popped Ye Qing's daydream with a scoff, "Don't listen to his bullshit. As if it is that easy to enter the Jixia Academy. Countless people have performed outstandingly in the Hidden Dragon Meet, but how many of them were actually recruited into the Jixia Academy?"

"Not many, but some *were* recruited into the Jixia Academy," Hong Jianglong retorted. "Seriously, I know you're still resentful that the Jixia Academy didn't pick you when you participated in the Hidden Dragon Meet, but that is no excuse to doom your men's prospects, is it?"

Gu Suitang denied the accusation indignantly, "What the fuck are you talking about? I'm not resentful!"

"Come now. You may be able to fool others, but I can read you like a book." Hong Jianglong guffawed. "Anyway, just because you failed doesn't mean that everyone else is gonna fail as well. Joyless, for example, has a pretty good chance of succeeding, don't you think?"

"You flatter me, my lord. I hardly think that I'm qualified to join the Jixia Academy."

Ye Qing wasn't acting humble. One of the main reasons he was able to survive until now was because he had good self-awareness. He was no weakling, but he hardly thought that he was the strongest warrior there was at his level.

"Why is the meet named 'Hidden Dragon', my lord?"

Gu Suitang answered, "There are two meanings. One, it refers to youngsters with unlimited potential like you. Two, it refers to those whose poor fame didn't match their incredible skill and power. The Hidden Dragon Meet is intended to bring these people to the light and give them the opportunity to soar to the heavens like the dragons they are."

"I see. Thank you for enlightening me, my lord." Ye Qing said.

Gu Suitang wasn't looking at him, however. Seeing that Hong Jianglong was gearing up to launch into another long rant, he interrupted, "Anyway, are you done? If you're done, then get lost already! Unlike you, I still have plenty of work to do!"

"Seriously? You can't even let me finish a cup of tea?" Hong Jianglong complained unhappily. "If you were ten years younger, I would definitely kick your ass until you call me daddy."

Noting that Gu Suitang's face was turning a fine shade of purple, Hong Jianglong wisely stopped taunting the middle-aged man and declared, "Alright, I'm leaving now! Don't forget! The Hidden Dragon Meet will happen a month from now!"

With that, Hong Jianglong rose to his feet and headed toward the exit.

Gu Suitang could pretend that Hong Jianglong didn't exist, but not Ye Qing. He hurriedly bade the chief goodbye, "See you later, Lord Hong!"

"Take care, Lord Gu, Brother Ye."

"Until we meet again, my lord, Brother Ye!"

Luo Zhan, Sui Yan and the others also bade him and Gu Suitang goodbye.

Gao Ning'an even offered, "Joyless, join me for a drink a month later! My treat!"

"I will if I decide to go to Tian Yong, Brother Gao. Thank you!" Ye Qing replied smilingly.

"Goodbye, Brother Ye." Chu Qingge shot him an indifferent look. "See you at Tian Yong!"

"But... I haven't decided if I'm going yet..." Ye Qing replied, but Chu Qingge was already gone.

After everyone was gone, Ye Qing saluted Gu Suitang and bade him goodbye, "If there's nothing else, I'm heading back to the Inspection Bureau, my lord."

"Yeah. Go catch some rest!" Gu Suitang nodded.

Right as Ye Qing was about to cross the threshold, Gu Suitang suddenly asked, "Do you want to join the Hidden Dragon Meet, Ye Qing?"

A pause later, Ye Qing looked back at the deputy chief and smiled. "I'll think about it."

"You should join," Gu Suitang said seriously, "You deserve to give yourself a better future."

"I'll definitely think about it, deputy chief. Thanks."

With that, Ye Qing finally left the room.

Gu Suitang watched as the young man strode away under the sun. His back looked tall, his footsteps were firm, and he had no one to prove to except himself.

It reminded him of himself when he was younger.

Chapter 306: Mara Buddha

"So? What did you find?" Ye Qing beckoned Faceless to his side after returning to the Inspection Bureau.

Faceless answered, "Wang Luori returned to Sunset Hill about a day ago, young master."

"I thought that might be the case!" Ye Qing sighed. Why couldn't the bastard do the world a favor and just die?

Earlier, he had ordered Faceless to head out and gather information on Wang Luori. Although Faceless' cultivation level was less than satisfactory right now, he still possessed an unrivaled advantage in terms of information gathering thanks to his ability to assume any form he wanted to, making him a good fit in the support role.

As expected, Faceless didn't disappoint. He was able to find out what he wanted very quickly.

"It's okay though. I can just kill him again," Ye Qing sneered.

Later, Ye Qing called Kung Fu Frog and Wawa over and gave all three Strangers three bottles of Water of Life. The Water of Life was just as precious to Strangers as it was to humans, so the trio could definitely use it.

Faceless' cultivation level was too low right now, so low that he could no longer provide him any aid in combat. In fact, his usefulness as a support was starting to fall off as well. He could only perform some simple tasks that, assuming that Ye Qing had the time, could do way better than him.

As for Kung Fu Frog and Wawa, they were family. Kung Fu Frog had stayed with him through thick and thin since August Hill Village, and Wawa since Anyang. Naturally, he wanted them to become as strong as possible. At the very least, they must be strong enough that they wouldn't have to worry about being kidnapped on the streets anymore. No one wanted a repeat of the Gold Toad incident, and the Water of Life was the perfect remedy to that conundrum.

After he was done basking in Faceless' infinite gratitude, Kung Fu Frog's tsun tsun, and Wawa's girlish laughter, Ye Qing went back to his room.

"How are you going to tackle Wang Luori, boy?"

The Fog Demon flew out of the Boundless Mara Buddha and asked excitedly, "How about you command Xue Beikun to flatten Sunset Hill with ten thousand Black Feather Guards?"

"You just want to see the world burn." Ye Qing saw through the Fog Demon's scheme immediately. "It's just Wang Luori. There's hardly any need to go to such lengths."

"Timid and boring!" The Fog Demon complained, "Like seriously, you're technically a war lord with a small army under your command now. Can you at least act like one? It's shameful to employ petty schemes for someone of your stature!"

"Timid and boring? No, this is called keeping a low profile. Sticking out like a sore thumb is a surefire way to get yourself killed," Ye Qing scoffed. "Plus, why would I go through all that effort when I could achieve the same result with far less?"

"Well, you're just a Nine Nethers Demon. I won't shame you for your ignorance."

The Fog Demon: "..."

“So!” The Fog Demon pretended that it hadn’t heard the insult and said, “Your plan is to bait out Wang Luori with Xue Beikun and play the fisherman. When will you take action?”

Ye Qing replied, “There’s no need for us to make a move. Wang Luori would visit us himself.”

“What do you mean?” The Fog Demon asked.

“Wang Luori had never been friendly with the Pacification Bureau, but now we have concrete proof that he was plotting against a member of the Pacification Bureau, namely me. Old Gu is currently busy dealing with matters regarding the Demon’s Tomb, but as soon as he is freed from his duties, Wang Luori and Sunset Hill would be eradicated. His only chance to survive this is to join Xue Beikun, which is why he would be seeking out the Black Feather Guard Commander as soon as possible.”

Ye Qing declared confidently, “That is why we simply need to wait for him to visit Xue Beikun. It would be less likely to draw suspicion as well.”

“Lastly, what can be more despairing than your savior pushing you into the depths of hell? The guy deserves it after everything he’s put me through.”

“Your heart is as black as coal, boy!” The Fog Demon sighed.

“Still not as black as yours, Fog Demon!” Ye Qing smirked.

.....

It was a quiet, starless, and moonless night.

At the Star Reacher Pavilion of the Star Reacher Restaurant, Wang Luori was toying with his wine glass and tilting his head slightly. It was an evil and unsettling look.

Creak...

It was at this moment the door opened, and Xue Beikun stepped into the room.

“Commander Xue!” Wang Luori rose to his feet when he saw Xue Beikun. “Please, take a seat.”

After Xue Beikun sat opposite Wang Luori, he asked, “Why did you invite me to a meeting at this time, Hill Lord Wang?”

Wang Luori leisurely poured Xue Beikun a glass of wine and said with a smile, “There’s no rush. This is the Star Reacher Restaurant’s specialty, a century-old Star Moon Brew. It has a rich and sweet taste. Why don’t you give it a try?”

“Did you invite me over for a drink only?” Xue Beikun raised the glass and gave it a sniff. “If that’s true, then I shall be taking my leave. One, I only like strong wine, and this one smells weak and probably tastes weak as well. I might as well drink water in that case.”

The commander then poured the wine on the floor and said coldly, “Also, I hate it when someone speaks to me in a pretentious, roundabout way.”

Wang Luori merely smiled. “You’re a direct man, Commander. I respect that.”

.....

“The fuck? Wang Luori has become a Spirit Master?”

At the building next to Star Reacher Restaurant, Ye Qing rubbed his nose with an odd expression. “And why do I feel like he’s acting kinda odd today?”

Because Xue Beikun was possessed by a fragment of the Fog Demon’s soul, and he could mentally communicate with the Stranger, he was able to eavesdrop on the duo’s conversation like he was right there with them.

A day ago, after coming up with the plan to kill Wang Luori, Ye Qing practiced the “Paranirmitava? avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra” in his room while waiting for Xue Beikun to bring him the good news.

As expected, Xue Beikun soon messaged him stating that Wang Luori had requested a meeting at Star Reacher Restaurant tomorrow night.

The next day, Ye Qing hid himself in the building next to Star Reacher Restaurant at least several hours ahead of the meeting time. As for why he didn’t just hide in the Star Reacher Restaurant, it was to avoid catching Wang Luori’s attention and drawing his suspicion, of course.

Originally, he was going to have Wang Luori killed immediately after he showed himself. Xue Beikun was now a late-stage Spirit Master, and he should have zero problems ambushing and killing a mere Half-Step Spirit Master.

That was until he discovered that Wang Luori had entered the Spirit Master Realm. Not so sure about his chances anymore, Ye Qing decided to tweak his plan slightly and have Xue Beikun engage Wang Luori in a conversation for now. When the old man dropped his guard or grew careless, Xue Beikun would take him out in a flash.

Something seemed strange, however. For some reason, he felt like Wang Luori wasn’t acting like himself today. The way he spoke, the way he acted, and even the way he carried himself were unlike what he knew of the man. It was almost as if he was a different man altogether.

The Fog Demon echoed in agreement, “It is odd. I don’t know why, but Wang Luori feels... familiar for some reason.”

Ye Qing was surprised to hear this. “Elaborate.”

The Fog Demon said, “I can’t. I myself don’t know *why* he feels familiar. He just feels... familiar.”

Ye Qing frowned. “Never mind. Let’s observe the situation a little longer.”

.....

Back in the room, Xue Beikun grunted impatiently, “What the hell is wrong with you today? Just spill it already. One more word that’s unrelated to business, and I’m out of this room.”

“Hahaha! In that case, I shall speak frankly,” Wang Luori complied. “I would like us to become partners, Commander Xue.”

“*Partners?*” Xue Beikun scoffed as if he had heard a funny joke. “You are a *jianghu* thug, and I’m an imperial officer and the commander of the Black Feather Guards. What makes you think you deserve to be my *partner?*”

Wang Luori didn’t get angry, however. He continued to smile as he said, “You will understand once I tell you everything, Commander Xue.”

“Is that so? Tell me then,” Xue Beikun urged.

Wang Luori drank his wine before saying, “You’re a strong and capable man, Commander Xue, and I know that you’ve been searching for a way out of the Pacification Bureau and the administrative division’s control for the longest time. I know you wish to become the crownless king of Luo Shui, and I can help you to fulfill your wish.”

“And how are you going to help me do that, exactly?” Xue Beikun squinted as if he couldn’t believe his ears. “Your plot against Ye Qing has been exposed, and it’s only a matter of time before Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang come after you. You can’t even protect yourself and the power you’ve built, and you’re saying that you can help me become the ‘crownless king of Luo Shui?’”

“I can’t, no. But my master can,” Wang Luo replied unexpectedly.

“Did I hear you right? Your *master*? I never knew that you were someone else’s dog,” Xue Beikun narrowed his eyes dangerously.

Still, Wang Luori didn’t get angry. Contrary to his usual self, Wang Luori was as steady as a turtle. “I’m not a dog. I’m just a faithful believer. Namō Maratabha.”

“Faithful... believer? And who do you believe in?” Xue Beikun asked.

“My master, the Mara Buddha.”

Xue Beikun frowned. “Mara who? I’ve never heard of him.”

.....

Xue Beikun had never heard of the Mara Buddha, but a certain young man in the next building certainly had. He was so startled he nearly jumped when he heard this.

If Wang Luori hadn’t brought it up, he would’ve forgotten that there was another powerhouse hiding somewhere in Luo Shui. In fact, he had stolen the guy’s Strange Artifact!

The Fog Demon asked, “Boy, is this Mara Buddha the original owner of the Boundless Mara Buddha?”

“Yeah.” Ye Qing nodded affirmatively.

“No wonder I thought that Wang Luori’s presence felt a little familiar. It’s because I’m sensing my own presence! Pah!” The Fog Demon spat. “Who is this Mara Buddha, boy? Is he strong?”

Ye Qing shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t even know if they’re a dude or a gal because I haven’t met them before. What I can tell you is that they are one of, if not the most black-hearted motherfucker I’ve known to date.”

Anyone who could sacrifice thousands and thousands of people and build that living hell just to create a Strange Artifact could only be black-hearted.

He had no doubt that the Mara Buddha was strong. They might not be a Grandmaster, but they must be pretty close.

The worst part was that the Mara Buddha had hidden himself so well that Ye Qing knew nothing about them except their name. He knew nothing about their current whereabouts, their appearance, their gender, their age, nothing.

An enemy you knew nothing about was the worst enemy you could go up against.

What was scarier was the fact that Wang Luori had been converted into their worshiper. He had briefly interacted with Wang Luori prior to entering the Demon’s Tomb, and at the time the Hill Lord was still in control of himself. It had only been three or four days, and Wang Luori had somehow been converted into the Mara Buddha’s worshiper. This was proof that the Mara Buddha was incredibly powerful.

If the Mara Buddha could convert Wang Luori into their worshiper without anyone knowing, they could certainly do the same to everyone else—anyone who was below Wang Luori’s level, at least. Even he wouldn’t have suspected anything if Wang Luori hadn’t revealed the truth himself?

With that in mind, how many worshipers did Mara Buddha have in Luo Shui? How much power had they gathered right under Luo Shui’s nose?

It was terrifying to even think about.

Chapter 307: Conspiracy

“It’s understandable that you haven’t heard of my master. They are a humble person who prefers the quiet.”

Wang Luori smiled. “My master possesses immeasurable power, however. You may not know this, but I suffered grievous injuries before I was able to escape the Demon’s Tomb. In fact, I would’ve died if not for my master. Not only did they heal me back to full health, they even fulfilled my lifelong wish and made me a Spirit Master.”

Wang Luori’s expression turned fervent and pious when he said this.

Xue Beikun looked curious. “Oh? Tell me. How is your master going to help me conquer Luo Shui?”

Wang Luori answered, “The main reason you are unable to become the crownless king of Luo Shui are the Pacification Bureau and the administrative division, or more accurately, just the Pacification Bureau. Without their support, the administrative division wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

“The two central pillars of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau are Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang. If you control the two of them, then Luo Shui would naturally fall under your control.”

“Hah! You make it sound so easy. If Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang are so easy to remove, I would’ve conquered Luo Shui a long time ago!”

Xue Beikun scoffed, “Let’s pretend that your master is strong enough to kill Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang themselves, both powerful Spirit Masters in their own right. What do you think is going to happen when you remove the Chief and Deputy Chief of Bureau? The Pacification Bureau will never let this go. Even if they turn up with nothing, they can just send another Fang Xiaoman or Gu Suitang to command Luo Shui. In the end, I would still be under someone’s beck and call. What is the point of all this then?”

“Short of wiping the Pacification Bureau from Chu altogether, I would never be able to conquer Luo Shui!”

“You are joking, Commander Xue. My master may possess immeasurable power, but even they would be hardpressed to wipe out the Pacification Bureau from Chu.”
Wang Luori shook his head.

“Hah!” Xue Beikun scoffed again. It was clear he thought that this was going to be a pointless discussion.

“Calm down, Commander Xue. I haven’t told you my master’s plan yet.”

Wang Luori remained completely confident, however. He said, “Do you remember what I said earlier? If you control Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang, then Luo Shui would naturally fall under your control.”

“You want to... *control* them?” Xue Beikun frowned.

“That’s right.” Wang Luori explained, “Some people are more useful alive than dead. If my master is able to convert Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang into his worshipers, then you would be free to control the Pacification Bureau as you please and avoid the scrutiny of the Tian Yong Pacification Bureau, effectively killing two birds with one stone.”

“That’s a pretty bold plan.” Xue Beikun smiled. “But you still haven’t answered my question: How is your master going to ‘convert’ Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang, both powerful Spirit Masters in their own right?”

“No worries, Commander Xue. My master has already planned everything.”

Wang Luori broke into a grin. “My fiftieth birthday will be happening in two days, and I will be inviting Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang to my birthday feast. My master will convert them then.”

“And how is he going to do that, exactly?” Xue Beikun asked.

Wang Luori answered, “You don’t have to worry about that, Commander Xue. My master will handle it. Just know that they will not be able to escape the moment they enter Sunset Hill.”

“You’re very confident,” Xue Beikun let out a cold chuckle, “but how do you ensure that Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang would attend your birthday feast?”

Wang Luori answered, “By using Ye Qing. I’ll tell them that I wish to discuss the matter regarding Ye Qing. They will definitely show up.”

Xue Beikun took a moment to think before chuckling again. “It sounds like you and your master have planned out everything. In fact, it sounds like you don’t need me at all. What is my role in all this?”

“One cannot plan for everything. My master is sure he has everything under his control, but that doesn’t mean he is infallible. That is why we need you to attend the birthday feast. If anything goes wrong, you will be there to ensure that it doesn’t.”

“Ah. And here I thought that your master is omnipotent.” Xue Beikun sneered. “Then again, your master wouldn’t need to pull such tricks if they really could handle everything by themselves.”

“Your plan sounds good, and I don’t mind lending you a hand. Before I agree to anything though, I must ask one thing: what is your goal? Wealth? Power? I don’t want to find out later that whatever you’re plotting involves my ‘unfortunate’ death, you see.”

Wang Luori chuckled. “Relax, Commander Xue. My master’s goal is loftier than that. In his opinion, wealth and power—soft power, at least—are but wisps of nothing that could melt under a ray of sunlight. No, my master’s one and only goal is to gain permission to promote their religion and be able to enlighten the people without government interference.”

“... Is that it?” Xue Beikun asked after a pause.

Wang Luori answered, “It’s that simple. I can swear an Oath of Heaven if you don’t believe me. If I break my oath, may I be smited by lightning, rejected by heaven and earth, and drowned in the Nine Nethers for eternity.”

It wasn’t an empty oath. Wang Luori literally extracted some of his heart’s blood and drew certain runes that overflowed with the air of Dao. The words seemingly communed with the surroundings for a bit before melting into Wang Luori and Xue Beikun’s forehead.

“I can’t really think of a reason to reject you,” Xue Beikun said after a moment of thought, “but I still don’t believe your master can defeat both Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang. If Fang Xiaoman escapes, you and your master are free to run to the ends of the world, but my family, assets and everything are all here. If I agree to your plan, and you fail to fulfill your end of the promise, then the only one who’s going to suffer the consequences is me.”

“You don’t believe in my master.” Wang Luori chuckled.

Xue Beikun retorted coldly, “Your master didn’t even dare to meet me in person. Why the hell would I believe a rat who’s too scared to reveal himself? Do you think I’m stupid?”

Wang Luori remained calm despite the insult. “I can’t deny the logic in your words. Don’t worry. Soon, you will see.”

“What do you mean?” Xue Beikun scrunched his eyebrows in puzzlement.

Wang Luori smiled but didn’t give him a straight answer. “All in due time, Commander Xue.”

Xue Beikun scoffed, “Whatever. In that case, you can hear my answer ‘in due time’ as well!”

“This is a serious matter. You should take your time to think things through. But I am sure that you will agree to my proposal. After all, some opportunities only appear once in a lifetime.”

Wang Luori was neither angry nor infuriated by Xue Beikun’s hesitation. On the contrary, he would suspect that something was amiss if Xue Beikun had agreed to the plan without hesitation.

“I will decide myself if the opportunity is what you say it is,” Xue Beikun said dismissively before asking another question. “There is one thing I’m very curious about.”

Wang Luori held out his hand. “Shoot.”

Xue Beikun smirked and rapped his knuckles on the table. “I am an imperial officer. Aren’t you afraid that I would divulge your plan to the Pacification Bureau the second I step out of this door?”

“Hahaha!” Wang Luori guffawed. “There is no hope for reconciliation between you and the Pacification Bureau, and the enemy of my enemy is my friend, is it not? If we work together, then we both stand to gain everything. I am certain that you wouldn’t make such a stupid decision.”

“Hahaha! Well said. I can definitely feel your sincerity.” Xue Beikun smiled and rose to his feet. When he reached the exit, he added, “But as you say, this is something I need to think through. I’ll give you an answer by tomorrow at the latest.”

Wang Luori rose to his feet and bade him goodbye, “Then I shall look forward to the good news, Commander Xue.”

Xue Beikun didn’t bother looking back. “If you give me the good news, maybe.”

After Xue Beikun was gone, Wang Luori downed a glass of wine before bursting into sudden laughter. His expression was contorted with madness, and wisps of demonic qi were rising from his pores.

“Gu Suitang and Fang Xiaoman won’t escape. *You* won’t escape either, Xue Beikun...”

.....

“You had the perfect opportunity to end Wang Luori earlier, boy. Why didn’t you do it?”

Inside the next building, the Fog Demon cackled. “Is it because you’ve switched targets to the Mara Buddha?”

“Basically, yeah.” Ye Qing rubbed his forehead while suppressing a groan. Why was it always him who ran into this shit? He couldn’t even pretend he hadn’t seen this because it involved Fang Xiaoman, Gu Suitang, and the Mara Buddha.

From the perspective of a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau, if something were to happen to Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang, and the Pacification Bureau were to fall into another person’s hands, there was no way he would be exempt from the calamity that would come.

From the perspective of himself, Gu Suitang was the man who took him in during his time of crisis, saved his life, and even taught him his martial arts. He also felt good vibes from Fang Xiaoman. No matter what, there was no way he could sit out of this.

Finally, he had taken the Strange Artifact the Mara Buddha had spent much effort to create. He couldn’t sit out of this even if he wanted to.

Once again, he was reluctantly pulled into a huge mess he wanted no part of, but it wasn’t all doom and gloom. In fact, Ye Qing saw this as a golden opportunity to end the lives of those who would threaten him once and for all.

Had the Mara Buddha stayed hidden, he would’ve been hardpressed to do anything against them. Hell, he didn’t even know what gender they were. But they were plotting something big and targeting those he cared about. Even better, they had unknowingly divulged their grand plan to him. He wouldn’t get a better chance than this to eliminate the Mara Buddha.

Wang Luori was probably already dead—the Wang Luori he knew would’ve scoffed at the very concept of religion, much less worship anyone—but Ye Qing was still going to take him out together with the Mara Buddha.

The reason he hadn’t killed the Hill Lord just now was because he didn’t want to draw the Mara Buddha’s attention.

It was for the same reason he didn’t command Xue Beikun to agree to the plan immediately. Although Xue Beikun was completely loyal to him, his mind was still alive and well. He would know better than him how to respond in a way that wouldn’t draw Wang Luori’s suspicion. Speaking of which, having Xue Beikun agreeing to Wang Luori’s plan too easily would certainly draw his suspicion.

If his opponent was Wang Luori only, then he wouldn’t have worried about it. Wang Luori was too stupid to save his own life. But the Mara Buddha? That was a threat he must take seriously.

“What are you going to do?” The Fog Demon asked.

“Well, Wang Luori is planning to invite us all to his birthday feast. It would be impolite to turn down his invitation, don’t you think?”

Ye Qing shot the Fog Demon a mysterious smile. “What I’m really curious is Wang Luori claiming that Xue Beikun would ‘see’ tomorrow. What did he mean by that?”

“Is the Mara Buddha planning to visit Xue Beikun in person? Or are they going to cause some trouble?”

“Why waste the brain cells thinking about something you’re going to find out tomorrow?” The Fog Demon replied lazily, “We already know what they’re planning. There is nothing they can do that can surprise us. In that case, why bother with the trifles?”

“True enough.” Ye Qing nodded. He knew exactly what the enemy was planning, and even their back-up plan, Xue Beikun, was really on his side. What could the Mara Buddha possibly do to turn the tables on him?

“The jar is empty, and the show’s over. It’s time to go.”

As Ye Qing left, a cool wind blew across the floor and swept up some dust.

Chapter 308: The Mara Buddha’s Plot

It was early morning. Morning sun rays peeked through the clouds and warmed the morning dew in preparation for the day. Bright, beautiful colors scattered everywhere as they hit the translucent liquid.

Ye Qing wasn’t lying in bed. He had woken up since the first ray of sun broke. Space trembled as he slowly thrust his fist forward. Soundless it might be, when his arm had completely straightened, the shuddering space caved in like a lake with its center gouged out by a spoon. The stones on the ground jumped a little in reaction, and dry thunder cracked somewhere in the distance.

“My lord, my lord!”

It was at this moment Zhou Xi barged into the courtyard with a panicked expression on his face.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?” Ye Qing asked while withdrawing his fist. Zhou Xi was one of the steadiest guys he had ever worked with. Something big must have happened for him to panic like this.

“My lord...” Zhou Xi took a second to catch his breath. “Chief Fang and his men just came back, but they were severely injured!”

“What? Do you know who is injured exactly? What happened?” Ye Qing waved for his subordinate to follow him and started toward the headquarters. “Are they at the headquarters right now? Tell me as we walk!”

“Chief Fang, Lord Chu and Lord Lin were covered in blood when they entered the city. Chief Fang threw up some blood and fainted right after that,” Zhou Xi replied succinctly.

Ye Qing was so shocked that he paused in his tracks for an instant. “What did you just say? *Chief Fang’s* the one who was severely injured? He even *fainted* at the entrance? How is that possible?”

Zhou Xi ran up to Ye Qing, panting. "That.... That's what happened though. Even senior Xuanhuang was seriously injured."

"Chief Fang had *Xuanhuang* with him, and he was still injured to this extent? Who could have done this? Stranger or human?"

Ye Qing frowned as a bad premonition hit him. "Never mind. You stay here. I'm going ahead to the headquarters."

"My lord—" Zhou Xi was about to say something when he realized that the Ye Qing speaking to him was slowly crumbling into fragments of light. It was just an illusion. The real Ye Qing had been gone before he knew it.

"How is Chief Fang, deputy chief?"

As soon as Ye Qing barged into the room, he saw Gu Suitang sitting beside a bed and Fang Xiaoman lying on top of it. The Chief of Bureau's eyes were tightly closed, and his complexion was as pale as a sheet. If he wasn't breathing ever so slightly, Ye Qing could've believed that he was dead.

Besides Gu Suitang and Fang Xiaoman, Chu Nianjiu, Lin Yuhuai and Wei Yueshan were present in the room as well. They all looked deeply worried.

"His channels are broken, and his mind is damaged. It's not good." Gu Suitang rose to his feet with a dark frown on his face. "The good news is that he ate the Pill of Extraordinary Rejuvenation. He should be in no danger of dying, for now."

"Yes. I fed Chief Fang a Pill of Extraordinary Rejuvenation after the battle," Lin Yuhuai replied.

"It's all our fault! Chief Fang wouldn't have caught even a scratch on his person if he wasn't trying to protect us!" Wei Yueshan growled and slammed the table next to him so hard that it crumbled to the floor. "Dammit!"

"Get out of the room if you want to vent. We have a patient here." Gu Suitang grunted before looking at Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai. "What happened, Nianjiu, Yuhuai? Who are the bastards who hurt Xiaoman?"

Ye Qing subconsciously asked, "Bastards? Was Chief Fang attacked by humans?"

Gu Suitang nodded. "There are nine wounds on Xiaoman's body. Four of them came from a sword, three from a saber, and one from a fist and another from a palm. The blade wounds are superficial though. The punch and the palm strike were the real attacks that put him in this state."

"Anyway, what the hell happened?"

Lin Yuhuai answered, "Frankly, we have no idea why we were attacked later. On the way back to the city after we took out with the Strangers plaguing the surrounding villages, we were suddenly ambushed by an incredible number of powerful warriors. Each one of them was at least a late-stage

Spirit Purifier or a Spirit Master, and the leader in particular was as strong as Chief Fang, if not stronger. It was he who severely injured Chief Fang while he was forced to protect us.”

“Those people were going to kill us all, but Chief Fang used a forbidden art that damaged Xuanhuang’s sentience and somehow broke out of the encirclement. However, it also worsened his injuries, and... you know the rest.”

Lin Yuhuai paused for a second before giving into his guilt and frustration. “If we weren’t there, Chief Fang could’ve easily escaped without too much trouble. We are the reason he’s in this state.”

“Now is not the time for self-blame. First things first, we need to identify the fucker who dared to attack the Pacification Bureau.” Gu Suitang pressed, “You’ve fought with those people. Did you recognize any of them?”

Chu Nianjiu shook his head. “They were all wearing masks and black outfits. It’s impossible to tell who is who.”

“What about their martial arts?”

Chu Nianjiu considered this for a moment before shaking his head, “They used all forms of martial arts, and some I’ve never seen before. I’m sorry to say I cannot identify their origin.”

“It is as Chu Nianjiu says.” Both Lin Yuhuai and Wei Yueshan shook their heads as well.

Gu Suitang’s frown deepened. “I’m assuming that you know nothing about their motive either?”

Once again, everyone shook their heads.

“Perhaps it’s a powerful warrior of the Dark Ways returning to settle some old scores? Or did Chief Fang offend someone he shouldn’t have in the past?” Ye Qing tried.

“No, it doesn’t feel like it,” Lin Yuhuai replied while recalling the details of that battle. “I don’t sense any hatred or desire for vengeance from their eyes. They were just there to kill us. But of course, I could be wrong.”

Ye Qing didn’t agree. Sometimes, feelings were accurate.

“Okay, let’s take a step back. Did you offend anyone or encounter anything strange while you were clearing out the Strangers plaguing those villages?”

Lin Yuhuai muttered absentmindedly, “I don’t think so. We fought Strangers and only Strangers, and I don’t remember any one of us crossing anyone. Strangers are naturally strange, but... again, I don’t recall anything that particularly stood out to me.”

“No, there is one thing.” Chu Nianjiu suddenly spoke up, “Remember Rice Fragrance Village?”

“Oh yeah, you’re right! That was pretty strange!” Lin Yuhuai exclaimed in realization.

“Good. Tell us about it!” Ye Qing urged.

“Ahem...” Lin Yuhuai took a moment to clear his throat before starting, “It’s like this. One of the villages we tackled is called Rice Fragrance Village. It’s a good name, but it’s extremely secluded and rarely visited.”

“While we were dealing with the Stranger plaguing Rice Fragrance Village, we noticed that the villagers are all extremely thin, pale, and generally unhealthy. They’re also extremely superstitious, so much so that they neglected their fields. Seriously, every single one of them prayed to a Buddha statue both during the day and the night. It was very unusual.”

“When we informed Chief Fang about this phenomenon, he decided to pay the five or six villages surrounding Rice Fragrance Village a visit and discovered that they all worshiped the same religion as well. But despite our best efforts, we were unable to find anything useful. The villagers themselves aren’t sure what kind of Buddha they were worshipping, only that their Buddha would protect them from all disasters and misfortunes. As far as I can tell, their faith is absolute.”

“A Buddha statue?” Ye Qing’s heart skipped a beat. “Do you still remember what the Buddha statue looks like? Is there anything particular that caught your attention?”

Chu Nianjiu tried his best to recall the memory. “The statue itself is nothing special, but its appearance gave me an evil feeling for some reason. It’s like... like...”

“It’s like a demonic Buddha, isn’t it?” Ye Qing supplied.

“Yes! That’s exactly it!” Chu Nianjiu agreed.

“Do you happen to have a picture of the Buddha statue or something? Something like a portrait or a figurine or something?” Ye Qing narrowed his eyes.

Wei Yueshan produced a figurine and handed it to Ye Qing. “In fact, we did. It’s a strange-looking Buddha, but we’ve got no idea what it is. Chief Fang inspected it himself but found nothing special about it either.”

Ye Qing accepted the figurine. It was a seated Buddha holding a prithvi mudra and wearing a merciful smile on his face. However, the smile was just a little off and gave it an unsettling, devilish charm.

“I knew it.” Ye Qing sneered. He now knew exactly who was behind Fang Xiaoman’s attack. This must be what Wang Luori meant when he said Xue Beikun would see last night. It was all because of the Mara Buddha.

Another person might not notice anything, but as the owner of the Boundless Mara Buddha, he could clearly sense the aura of the Mara Buddha hidden within the Buddha figurine.

The Mara Buddha was a shrewd person who had hidden themselves so well that few people were aware of their existence. But this time, they had revealed themselves and even plotted the

subversion of the chief and deputy chief of the Pacification Bureau. This clearly went against their normal behavior.

The Buddha statues erected across those villages explained everything though. Although he didn't know what the statues were for, it could only be for something bad. The reason the Mara Buddha had chosen to promote his "religion" at those villages was because they were so remote that even the Pacification Bureau didn't visit them frequently.

Logically speaking, the Mara Buddha could've built up his powerbase a little before he was discovered. However, the sudden appearance of the Demon's Tomb had caused the Pacification Bureau to launch a patrol sooner than expected, and of all the people who could've stumbled upon this discovery, it just had to be the Chief of Bureau himself.

Knowing Fang Xiaoman, there was no way the Chief of Bureau was going to stop investigating this strange religion until he was absolutely certain that it was harmless. This meant that there was a high chance the Mara Buddha would be exposed.

That was why the Mara Buddha decided to take action. First, they dispatched a group of assassins to ambush Fang Xiaoman's group. Then, they contacted Xue Beikun to set up a death trap for both Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang.

If the ambush was successful, then the Mara Buddha would've subverted and taken control of Fang Xiaoman. Gu Suitang would be all alone and powerless to change anything. There would be no need for Wang Luori to hold his so-called birthday feast. They could've controlled Gu Suitang's every action through Fang Xiaoman and effectively taken control of the Pacification Bureau.

If Plan A failed, then the assassins were to assassinate or deal Fang Xiaoman a serious blow. Xue Beikun would hear the news and cooperate with them, and they would be weakening the Pacification Bureau as well. When the birthday feast took place, it would be simply a matter of defeating Gu Suitang.

Ye Qing had to admit that the plan was an incredible one. They would have killed two birds with one stone.

However, the Mara Buddha had unwittingly exposed the fact that combat wise, they weren't too powerful. At the very least, they didn't possess the strength to kill Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang without considerable sacrifice, or even the confidence to beat them when they were together. There would be no need to come up with such an elaborate plot otherwise.

"You knew, what?" Everyone was puzzled by Ye Qing's reaction. From their perspective, it looked like he was having a stroke or something.

Ye Qing looked at Gu Suitang and asked, "Do you still remember the Mara Buddha, chief?"

"Mara Buddha?" Gu Suitang took a moment to search through his memories. "You mean that Mara Buddha that corrupted the Grandmaster monk, Jing Hui and created the Boundless Mara Buddha?"

"That's right." Ye Qing nodded.

"What does this have to do with them?" Gu Suitang asked.

Ye Qing sneered before declaring with absolute certainty, “The Mara Buddha is the one behind all this.”

Chapter 309: Counter Conspiracy

“What do you mean? The Mara Buddha is the one behind everything?” Gu Suitang hurriedly asked, “Explain!”

Ye Qing glanced outside, and the Pacification Sentinels guarding outside the room wisely took their leave. When they were alone, Ye Qing finally began, “Last night, I...”

Ye Qing told them everything about the meeting between Wang Luori and Xue Beikun last night and how it connected to the attack on Chief Fang and the others.

“That is why I came to the conclusion that the Mara Buddha is the one behind everything. The Buddha statues the villagers worshiped at Rice Fragrance Village and the other villages are something the Mara Buddha set up for an unknown purpose, and the ambush on Chief Fang is a ploy to take complete control of the Pacification Bureau.

“Can you swear that everything you told us is the truth, Joyless?”

Everyone was shocked and livid when they listened to Ye Qing’s explanation until the end.

“I solemnly swear.” Ye Qing nodded with gravity.

“I have a question. How did you find out about Wang Luori and Xue Beikun’s conspiracy?” Gu Suitang shot him a suspicious look. “Did you eavesdrop on them, or...?”

“Xue Beikun’s the one who told me himself,” Ye Qing replied smilingly.

“What? How is that possible? Weren’t the two of you enemies?” Gu Suitang grew even more confused.

Ye Qing had prepared for this exact scenario a while ago. He lied, “Back at the Demon’s Tomb, Xue Beikun and I accidentally stumbled upon a dangerous zone and were forced to fight side by side with each other. I even saved his life later on. As you know, sometimes it’s easier to reconcile than it is to maintain a grudge, and we became friends after the experience.”

“The reason we were enemies in the first place is purely because of Xue Shiwu. We wouldn’t know each other if it wasn’t for him. Since Xue Shiwu had perished in the Demon’s Tomb, there isn’t really a good reason for us to continue our feud.”

“In fact, Xue Beikun told me about the conspiracy to repay me for saving his life back then.”

He wasn’t going to reveal the fact that he was controlling Xue Beikun using the Fog Demon, of course. Some truths were better left hidden in the shadows. No one knew what really happened in the Demon’s Tomb anyway, so he could control the narrative however he liked.

“Really?” Gu Suitang was still suspicious, however. “Xue Beikun is an ambitious man who’s tried to escape the Pacification Bureau’s control for as long as I’ve known him. I can’t imagine that he would relinquish such a golden opportunity. Are you sure he’s not trying to trick you?”

“Of course not! If he wanted to trick me, he wouldn’t tell me about it in the first place!” Ye Qing argued, “Anyway, let’s focus on the more important and immediate task at hand. What should we do in light of this new information?”

“What else? We’re going to kill that piece of dog shit who calls himself Mara Buddha!” Wei Yueshan was furious. “The bastard’s plotting to take over the Pacification Bureau! How dare they!”

“Master, I’ll round up the men and kill the Mara Buddha and Wang Luori this instant!”

Lin Yuhuai hurriedly stopped him, “We will kill him, but we can’t act recklessly. We need to come up with a proper plan first.”

“What do you mean?” Wei Yueshan shot him a sullen look.

Lin Yuhuai explained, “Do you know who the Mara Buddha is? Do you know where he’s hiding? What if he’s not on Sunset Hill? If you act recklessly, the Mara Buddha will only learn of our intentions ahead of time and escape. It would be so much harder to capture them then.”

“That... makes sense.” Wei Yueshan admitted and scratched his head.

“Yuhuai is right. This Mara Buddha is extremely cunning and well hidden. We must end their life in one strike, or they would most likely rebound stronger than ever before,” Gu Suitang declared in a heavy tone.

Chu Nianjiu took a sip of wine and added, “It’s not just the Mara Buddha. It’s highly unlikely that Wang Luori is the only person they’ve converted into their worshiper. We must be ready to contend against not a handful of people, but a small army.”

“Agreed.” Gu Suitang nodded and looked at Ye Qing. “Do you know who the Mara Buddha is, Joyless?”

Ye Qing shook his head. “Unfortunately, Wang Luori didn’t reveal anything.”

Gu Suitang frowned. “That’s a problem.”

“Not as much as you think, chief.” Ye Qing grinned. “I have a plan that will allow us to catch the Mara Buddha and his hidden cohort all in one go.”

“Tell us.”

“Alright, huddle up, people. We’re going to do this... and then, we’re gonna...”

.....

The third day of May was a bright, cloudy day. It was a good day for a wedding, and a bad day for nasty people.

Every year at this time, Sunset Hill would be covered in festive lights and crowds, and the place would be bustling with activity. It was almost as if they were celebrating New Year's Eve or New Year.

It was because the third day of May was Wang Luori's birthday.

Wang Luori was a narcissist. Every year, he would hold a grand feast and invite everyone and their mothers to attend it. Famous or unknown, rich or poor, powerful or weak, anyone who visited Sunset Hill and offered compliments such as, "Hill Lord Wang is as blessed as the sun suspended in the Nine Heavens" or "Hill Lord Wang will live as long as the eternal sun" would be able to enjoy a sumptuous meal, mellow wine, and a number of wonderful songs and dances.

It was why the third day of May was the most energetic time for Sunset Hill. The melody of instruments sounded like it would never end, and the scent of wine could be smelled from fifty kilometers away.

This year, however, Sunset Hill was quieter than usual. There were fewer lights and colors than usual, and even the traffic was a lot smaller compared to the previous years. The contrast was such that it painted a forlorn and desolate picture.

It was almost as if Sunset Hill was welcoming a true sunset.

That said, the quality of its guests had skyrocketed. There were people who attended the birthday feast only once in a blue moon.

For starters, the patriarch of the Bai Clan, Bai Xinran and his advisor, Bai Xinhui were present. There was also the Deputy Head of Blood Shadow Palace Jiang Huanjian; the "One-Armed Sabersman" Du Yuanwu, a famous warrior of the *jianghu* of Tian Yong, "Lord of Three Rivers" Lu Fanjiang, the head of the Twelve Land and Water Routes of Jiang Huai[1]; the commander of the Black Feather Guards Xue Beikun, and the chief and deputy chief of the Pacification Bureau, Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang.

It was a strange mix of guests. Some of these people were allies of Sunset Hill such as Bai Xinran and Jiang Huanjian, some didn't seem to share any connection with it such as Du Yuanwu and Lu Fanjiang, and some were even enemies of Sunset Hill, namely the Pacification Bureau.

This was a group of people who should never appear at the same place and time unless the heavens themselves arranged a mighty coincidence, but it was a fact that they were all gathered in the Sunset Hall. The atmosphere was awkward to say the least.

At the main seat, Wang Luori raised his glass and declared joyfully, "Haha... I am most honored to welcome such prestigious guests to my birthday today, so allow me to make the first toast. Cheers, everyone!"

"Cheers, Hill Lord Wang!"

Everyone except Fang Xiaoman, Gu Suitang and Ye Qing raised their glass and drained their wine to the last drop.

“Chief Fang, Deputy Chief Gu, why aren’t you drinking your wine? Is it not to your taste?”

After Wang Luori had drained his wine, he looked down on Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang and asked with a smile that didn’t reach the eye.

“The wine is great, but the people in this hall are disgusting. It’s like trying to enjoy a meal in the sewers. It’s just impossible.”

Gu Suitang rapped his knuckles against the table and glanced at the other guests in the hall with ridicule. “You were acquaintances with Warrior Du and Head Lu, Red Bush? I had no idea that you knew this many people.”

“There are many things that you aren’t aware of, Chief Gu, just like you have no idea that all of us would soon become one big family,” Wang Luori replied with an enigmatic smirk on his face.

“One big family? I don’t remember sowing a son like you?” Gu Suitang cackled incredulously. “Why don’t you kowtow three times and call me daddy? Perhaps it will jog my memory.”

Wang Luori narrowed his eyes a little. “Gu Suitang... I’m giving you face here. Don’t abuse my good will.”

“Face? Hahaha! Who the fuck do you think you are do give *me* face?” Gu Suitang let out an arrogant laugh. “Anyway, we’re not here to listen to your nonsense. Wang Luori, you have schemed against the Pacification Bureau and thrown Luo Shui into havoc as a result. Such is your crime that it is unpardonable even if I feel like pardoning you, which I absolutely do not. So, how are you going to make up to the Pacification Bureau and Joyless?”

Wang Luori slowly shifted his gaze from Gu Suitang to Fang Xiaoman, then from Fang Xiaoman to Ye Qing. Then, his lips slowly curled into an evil, spine-chilling smile.

In response, Ye Qing looked up and responded with a calm, unperturbed smile.

Despite his transformation, Wang Luori couldn’t help but feel a surge of anger when he saw Ye Qing’s smile. It added a tinge of cruelty to his own smile.

“Hehe, that is exactly why I invited you two to my birthday feast, chiefs. I will give you and everyone a proper answer.”

“I look forward to it.” Gu Suitang leaned against his backrest and crossed his legs with an insufferable expression.

Wang Luori declared arrogantly and condescendingly, “I will give you one chance to worship my master.”

“Excuse me?” Gu Suitang looked like he wasn’t expecting where this was going at all. “You want us to worship what?”

“Control your mouth, Gu Suitang! You will *not* address my master as a what!” Wang Luori exploded in anger. “My master is the Mara who rules all the Buddhas, and the Buddha who enlightens all the demons. If you worship my master, you will possess the body of the Buddha and the heart of a demon. You would transcend all pain and suffering like the Buddha Himself, but also gain the freedom to soar the Nine Heavens like the Mara.”

“Worship my master, and you shall gain eternal bliss.”

Wang Luori’s expression slowly turned pious and fervent. “Gu Suitang, Fang Xiaoman, my master is offering you the honor of a lifetime. Don’t throw it away.”

“The Mara of Buddhas? The Buddha of demons? The fuck are you talking about?” Gu Suitang scoffed. “Wang Luori, you’re a piece of trash, but you used to be your own piece of trash. Why did you lower yourself to the level of a dog?”

“Gu Suitang, I’m presenting you with the obvious good choice here. Don’t be a daft fool and make the wrong choice!” Wang Luori harrumphed. “Also, stop blaspheming my master!”

“Cough... we care nothing for your faith. We don’t care if you want to be a human or a dog either.”

It was at this moment Fang Xiaoman interjected himself in the conversation. He let out a weak cough before continuing, “All we want to hear is your answer. If the answer you give us is satisfactory, then all is well. If not, then you won’t like what happens next.”

“But I already gave you my answer. I want you to worship my master. Is that not the best answer you could possibly receive?” Wang Luori tilted his head as if confused.

“Are you toying with us, Wang Luori?!” Gu Suitang exploded and smashed the table next to him.

“Of course not! As I said, worshiping my master is your honor and opportunity,” Wang Luori persuaded the duo with the patience of a preacher. “My master possesses limitless power. If you worship him, I promise him that you’ll be able to fulfill any wish and dream!”

“Haha! If your master is really powerful, why don’t you introduce him to us? A picture is worth a thousand words, isn’t it?” Gu Suitang scoffed.

“Of course! After you finish your wine, that is. It’s really rude to ignore a toast, you know?” Wang Luori smiled.

"I knew it. You were just making things up." Gu Suitang sneered. "Listen here, Red Bush. We don't fancy the idea of crashing someone's birthday feast either, but if you don't tell us what we want to hear, then we don't mind making your birthday your death anniversary!"

"Looks like you're opting for the suboptimal choice after all. Very well! If that is your wish!" Wang Luori let out a devilish chuckle, and the exit of Sunset Hall abruptly slammed shut on its own.

Chapter 310: My Fists Aren't Just Meant For Strangers

"What the fuck is the meaning of this, Red Bush?" Gu Suitang narrowed his eyes dangerously.

Fang Xiaoman and Ye Qing had risen to their feet in alarm as well.

"What else can I mean? My master is merciful, you see. If you worship them, they will accept you. If you refuse, they will accept you nonetheless!"

Wang Luori rose to his feet and leaned forward slightly. "In other words, no one is leaving this room until they've worshiped my master!"

"Hmph! It looks like joining a religion hasn't made you any brighter. You seriously think that *you* can force *me* to do anything?" Gu Suitang's voice dripped with disdain as he took one step forward and abruptly appeared in front of Wang Luori. The Hill Lord crossed his arms defensively as Gu Suitang threw a mighty punch.

Boom!

Sunset Hall shuddered, and Wang Luori dropped an inch lower. His feet hadn't moved, but the floor he was standing on had caved in a little.

"I'm a Spirit Master now, Gu Suitang. Your—"

"Just shut up and fight!"

A look of disdain flickered across Wang Luori's face, but before he could finish, Gu Suitang cut him off and slapped him across the face before he could react. The sound resounded throughout the hall as Wang Luori slammed into a pillar and rolled to the floor unceremoniously.

"So what if you're a Spirit Master now? You're still a piece of trash I can crush whenever I feel like it."

Gu Suitang dusted his hands disdainfully before using Earth Contraction. He appeared in front of Wang Luori and brought his foot to crush Wang Luori's head into bits.

Boom!

A deep pit appeared on the tough limestone floor, and stone scattered everywhere like hidden weapons. The hall's lamps and furniture were smashed into pieces as a result.

Wang Luori survived, however. It wasn't because Wang Luori's head was particularly tough or because Gu Suitang was holding back his strength. It was because a man had interfered at the last moment. The man had conjured what looked like a dragon's claw from water vapor and pulled Gu Suitang's foot an inch to the side. That single inch was enough for Wang Luori to escape a gory death.

"Will you become the Pacification Bureau's enemy as well, Lu Fanjiang?" Gu Suitang glared at the forty years old man wearing a white, swirly robe.

Wang Luori's rescuer was none other than "Lord of Three Rivers" Lu Fanjiang, the head of the Twelve Land and Water Routes of Jiang Huai. The attack he used to shift Gu Suitang's foot out of position was his signature martial art, the "Claw That Catches Dragons and Turns Rivers".

Lu Fanjiang simply smiled at the accusation. "Why resist? It is a blessing for both you and me to be able to worship my master."

"You're a worshiper of that whatever the fuck as well!?" Gu Suitang pretended to be surprised. "Anyone with half a brain cell would recognize that it's pure heresy!"

"Shut your mouth, Gu Suitang. I would sew your mouth if the master doesn't still have a use for you." Do Yuanwu's indifferent expression grew murderous, and his broken saber buzzed ominously.

"You're all... part of this so-called religion?" Gu Suitang slowly swept his gaze across Bai Xinran, Bai Xinhui, Jiang Huanjian and more. For the first time, he turned grave and solemn.

"My master is omnipotent, Gu Suitang. Please make the right choice while you still can!" Bai Xinran advised.

"Just how many have this Mara Buddha subverted? They're definitely a heretic scum alright!" Gu Suitang humphed coldly.

Some time ago, he was surprised that the likes of Bai Xinhui and Jiang Huanjian would dare to pressure the Pacification Bureau. At the time, he thought that they were emboldened by Xue Beikun's audacity. Now, he realized they were probably acting under the Mara Buddha's orders. The bastard had seen an opportunity to undermine the Pacification Bureau and took it.

What surprised him even more was the size of the Mara Buddha's forces. At the very least, the entire Bai Clan and the deputy head of Blood Shadow Palace were under their thumb.

Combined with Sunset Hill, nearly half of the major factions in Luo Shui were under his control, and that was before accounting for outside forces such as Lu Fanjiang and Du Yuanwu.

Thank goodness the Mara Buddha had exposed themselves. If not, they could've controlled the entire Luo Shui without anyone noticing.

He had been hoping to fish out the true Mara Buddha, but unfortunately, they were still in hiding.

That was fine though. The dog owner had to show themselves if he murdered every single one of their dogs, right?

Also, the time for acting wasn't over yet.

Gu Suitang turned around and glared at Xue Beikun with bloodshot eyes. "Xue Beikun, you're an imperial officer. Will you collude with these heretics as well?"

"Collude? Oh no. I'm just here to watch the show. Don't mind me," Xue Beikun replied uncaringly while sipping his wine.

"I knew it! Xue Beikun, the imperial court will have your head for this!" Gu Suitang roared.

Xue Beikun shrugged. "If you make it out of Sunset Hill, sure. You gotta admit that your prospects aren't looking too good though. Maybe you should consider accepting the compromise? It's better than dying a dog's death, right?"

"Hahaha!" Gu Suitang burst out laughing when he heard this. "You seriously think that these pieces of trash can kill me, Gu Suitang? Allow me to show you that my fists aren't just meant for Strangers!"

Like a drake rolling around in its slumber, Gu Suitang abruptly wheeled around and threw a devastating punch at Bai Xihu. The second patriarch was trying to ambush him while he was speaking with Xue Beikun, but instead he got a mouthful of bloody spittle instead.

Wang Luori managed to take a few blows from Gu Suitang because he was now a Spirit Master, but Bai Xihu was just a late-stage Spirit Purifier. He was lucky the punch only took half his life.

"Foolish cur!" Du Yuanwu hmphed coldly and shot toward Gu Suitang like lightning. He unleashed thirty six slashes before he even reached the deputy chief.

The thirty six saber forces abruptly came to a halt and snapped in half like an actual blade. Gu Suitang hadn't done anything, however. They had snapped in half on their own. Instead, they abruptly turned invisible and attacked the deputy chief's thirty six major points from various odd angles.

Du Yuanwu was called the One-Armed Sabersman because he only had one arm. His saber was also a broken saber named the Life Cutter. He named the saber art he invented himself the Art of Life Cutting, and it was a fusion of the essences of exactly one hundred tricky and diabolical saber arts. No more, no less.

It was how the storytellers came to describe his technique as such: "When Life Cutter leaves its sheath, a man's life is cut short without fail."

"Hah! You're trash, and your saber art is no different!:

Gu Suitang paid zero attention to the thirty six invisible saber forces flying toward him, however. He merely barked out in laughter and charged straight toward Bai Xihu.

Out of his five attackers, Bai Xihu was the weakest of them all. Naturally, he was going to kill him first. In this world, there was a saying that cutting an arm was better than bruising five fingers.

Dang dang dang!

The thirty six saber forces struck Gu Suitang, but they failed to leave even a ripple. That was how tough the barrier of astral qi he had surrounded himself in.

Bai Xinran was Bai Xinhui's older brother and the patriarch of the Bai Clan. Naturally, he wasn't going to allow Gu Suitang to kill Bai Xinhui. While walking like he was tracing the lines of an Eight Trigrams and moving his palms about like he was containing a small world, the silhouette of a dragon abruptly appeared in front of him. The eight forms of the Eight Trigrams: Qian, Kun, Kan, Li, Zhen, Gen, Xun and Dui abruptly manifested into existence and blocked Gu Suitang's way.

“Eight Trigrams of Roving Dragon”[1]

Bang!

Gu Suitang punched the eight trigrams blocking his way, causing it to flicker erratically. Just when it looked like it would shatter into pieces, the dragon roared and reflected the attack with even greater force.

The attack seemed to catch Gu Suitang completely off guard. A muffled groan escaped his lips as he was flung backward.

The Bai Clan's “Eight Trigrams of Roving Dragon” was a powerful force neutralizing technique. An adept practitioner could even reflect the attacker's force right back at them. Clearly, Bai Xinran had successfully reached the adept level of the “Eight Trigrams of Roving Dragon”.

Everyone present had heard of the legendary strength behind Gu Suitang's fists, if not experienced it themselves. Naturally, Gu Suitang was thrown back as quickly as he came at Bai Xinhui.

In fact, he was thrown back so fast that Jiang Huanjian, the unfortunate guy who happened to be standing in the direct line of collision, just barely managed to jump out of the way.

However, as Gu Suitang was brushing past the deputy head of Blood Shadow Palace, the deputy chief abruptly kicked out his legs and struck him squarely in the solar plexus.

“Serial Heart Piercing Kick”

The “Serial Heart Piercing Kick” was absolutely nothing to write home about. Practically every warrior in the *jianghu* knew the martial art to a certain extent. Its name wasn't half-bad, but its techniques were basic and crude. But in Gu Suitang's hands, Jiang Huanjian found himself unable to dodge or defend against the attack. The reason was very simple. Every kick was as quick as lightning and as heavy as a mountain.

Jiang Huanjian was spitting blood after taking just a single attack. Three kicks later, his heart and lungs were threatening to tear themselves apart.

At this point, Jiang Huanjian realized that the deputy chief wasn't targeting Bai Xinhui. No, he was targeting him, the second weakest guy of the group.

Weakness really was a sin.

Just when Jiang Huanjian thought he would die, a man riding a tidal wave cut in between the duo and saved his life. It was none other than Lu Fanjiang. He yelled while blocking Gu Suitang's attacks, “Brother Jiang, attack Fang Xiaoman and that boy with Brother Bai. Leave Gu Suitang to us.”

Jiang Huanjian wasn't stupid. He understood Lu Fanjiang's intentions immediately.

He and Bai Xinhui were a little too weak to be of any help against Gu Suitang, but an injured Fang Xiaoman and Ye Qing, an early-stage Spirit Purifier? They were more than enough.

Besides that, capturing the two of them would put Gu Suitang under immense pressure, if not force him to capitulate outright. It was a sound tactic.

"You dare!"

As expected, Gu Suitang let out a furious roar and punched Lu Fanjiang so hard that the man couldn't help but retreat with every punch.

Lu Fanjiang was a middle-stage Spirit Master who cultivated a cultivation art called "Crossing Rivers and Seas". Few people possessed a reservoir of astral qi as massive and potent as his. However, Gu Suitang was pummeling him like he was a boat trying to weather the storm.

"Let's get him together! No need to hold back!" Lu Fanjiang barked out another order as his astral qi condensed into solid waves. At the same time, a river and a blue koi with dragon whiskers appeared in the air. It was none other than his Yin God, the River Crossing Dragon Koi.

A broken saber appeared above Du Yuanwu's head. It looked exactly the same as the saber he was wielding, but this one was brimming with deadly saber intent.

A swordsman cultivated a "sword heart" to create their "sword soul". Therefore, most of them had Yin Gods that were shaped like a sword. The sword was all they needed to defeat everything.

Du Yuanwu was a saber, so he cultivated a "saber heart" and created a Yin God that was shaped like his saber. With this saber, he could cut through both heaven and earth.

Bai Xinran's Yin God was a dragon with the eight trigrams engraved to its body. It was a Roving Dragon of Eight Trigrams and a perfect match with his signature martial art.

As Du Yuanwu swung out with his saber, clear qi rose into the sky, and murky qi sank to the bottom. It resembled Pangu creating the universe by splitting the Original Chaos into two distinct energies.

Bai Xinran was far better at defense than offense, so he didn't bother attacking Gu Suitang. Instead, he had his dragon circle around Gu Suitang and created heaven and earth with Qian and Kun, water and fire with Kan and Li, wind and lightning with Zhen and Gen, and mountains and lakes with Xun and Dui. It was like he had created a pocket world that kept Gu Suitang trapped within.

When a warrior had become a Spirit Master and manifested their Yin God, they could commune with nature and bring any facade of the world into reality.

Art is like reality, and reality is like art.