

Stranger 311

Chapter 311: Namo Maratabha

“Haha! Well met!” Gu Suitang roared with laughter, hair floating like that of a carnivorous king of beasts. He then sucked in a deep breath that caused his stomach to boom like a series of thunderclaps, his bones to pop like firecrackers, and his height to shoot up several meters. Now, he looked like a literal giant whose muscles bulged with explosive strength.

“Divide”

Gu Suitang launched a punch at the ground in front of him like he was cutting off a river. At the same time, his astral qi hardened into solid walls that prevented Lu Fanjiang, Du Yuanhu and Bai Xinran’s attacks from reaching him.

His fist moved an inch forward, and the energies attacking him immediately surged back to their owners with the force of a raging tide.

All three attackers groaned in pain as they were treated to a taste of their own medicine. But before they could respond, Gu Suitang grabbed the edges of the pocket world around him and literally ripped it into shreds.

The roving dragon that was the core of the pocket world tried to escape, but Gu Suitang was too big and fast for it. Casually, he caught the dragon’s tail, pulled it close, and crumpled it into a ball.

“Pwack!”

The damage to his Yin God caused Bai Xinran to throw up a mouthful of fresh blood. He staggered away from Gu Suitang as his face turned as pale as a ghost.

Not done yet, Gu Suitang unleashed a Break Through straight at Lu Fanjiang. In response, Lu Fanjiang launched a series of palm strikes at the same time his River Crossing Dragon Koi summoned a bunch of blue waves.

Each palm strike and tidal wave was stronger than the last, and nine consecutive palm strikes later, the waves looked big and tall enough to flood the Sunset Hill itself. An endless river was suspended high, high up in the sky, and a gigantic koi was swimming proudly at the peak.[1] It looked threatening to say the least.

“The Palm That Crossing Rivers and Seas”

Gu Suitang’s fist force was able to punch through several waves, but they just kept coming without end. In fact, the heart of Lu Fanjiang’s “The Palm That Crossing Rivers and Seas” lay not in its towering stature, but its endless quality. Like a tide, the waves were endless so long as the ocean still existed.

On the opposite side, Du Yuanwu’s saber intent rippled out like a shockwave as he brought down his saber. Everything in the saber force’s path—wind, dust, and even space itself—was cut in half. It was an attack that could cut the heavens, cut the earth, cut a soul and a life.

“Art of Life Cutting: To Cut A Life”

Gu Suitang was caught in a deadly pincer attack of two Spirit Masters, but he didn't seem to be aware of the fact. Growling, he slammed his foot against the floor—the ground sinking a few inches lower as a result—and gathered so much strength that his arm grew a size bigger. Then, he thrust his fist forward an inch.

This time, his fist was able to punch through the ceaseless waves. It slammed squarely against Lu Fanjiang's chest, broke his bones, and caused bits of his internal organs to spray out of his mouth. The man shot backward like a cannonball until he crashed into a wall.

Gu Suitang managed to overcome Lu Fanjiang, but he was too late to block Du Yuanwu's "To Cut A Life". As a result, the sabersman was able to score a deep wound that stretched from his left shoulder all the way to his right waist.

No blood flowed from the wound, however. There were only wiggling muscles.

Gu Suitang trembled from the impact, but he spun around with impossible speed and smashed his arm into Du Yuanwu's body like he was swinging a whip. The sabersman's right shoulder broke just like that, and there was enough force to send him slamming into a nearby pillar[2]. Such was the impact that entire chunks of the pillar were blown away.

"Hahaha! Spirit Master or not, small fries will always be small fries!" Gu Suitang let out a bark of laughter and channeled his vigor. The horrific wound behind his back immediately started healing at a slow pace.

Gu Suitang's Yin God was merged with his physical body as he was a body-tempering warrior. As a result, he was unable to conjure a massive tidal wave like Lu Fanjiang or an all-cutting saber like Du Yuanwu. But in exchange, he gained an immense amount of vigor and impossible strength. There was theoretically nothing he couldn't break with his fists so long as his opponent's cultivation level didn't overwhelmingly exceed his.

"Xinhu, Brother Jiang! What's taking you so long?" Bai Xinran shouted. He was stunned how Gu Suitang was able to overcome and injure all three of them in a single exchange. Deciding that their chances of defeating him by themselves weren't good, he instinctively looked to Bai Xinhu and Jiang Huanjian for assistance. If the duo could capture Fang Xiaoman, then they would be able to use him as a hostage.

Fang Xiaoman had taken a huge blow from their master. While the Pacification Bureau wasn't lacking in miraculous medicine and expert doctors, there was no way the Chief of Bureau could recover in just a few days, not to mention that their master assured them that his wounds couldn't be healed.

Logically speaking, Bai Xinhu and Jiang Huanjian should've captured Fang Xiaoman already. In reality, they were still locked in a struggle for dominance.

As this was Sunset Hill, Wang Luori had of course arranged for some reinforcements. Bai Xinhu and Jiang Huanjian were doing battle with Fang Xiaoman, while Wang Luori's three disciples—his first disciple Lu Yuan, his second disciple Bai Song, and his third disciple Xu Wushang—were tackling Ye Qing.

The Chief of Bureau and the Patrolman were outnumbered five to two, but it was the group of five who were at a disadvantage. If Fang Xiaoman was going about even with Bai Xinhua and Jiang Huanjian because of his injuries, then Ye Qing was absolutely crushing his opponents.

Wang Luori was a terrible man, but he had pretty good luck with his disciples. His first disciple, Lu Yuan was a Half-Step Spirit Purifier and a fist practitioner. His style was aggressive and oppressive, and he had the personality to match it. They called him the “Killer Fist”.

His second disciple, Bai Song was a late-stage Astral Refiner whose personality was the complete opposite of Lu Yuan’s. Humble, polite and mild-tempered, he once passed the imperial examination with flying colors and became a licentiate. He was called the “Silver Flute” because it was his signature weapon.

His third disciple, Xu Wushang needed no introduction. Nicknamed the “Little Sword King”, he was the wooden, unsociable swordsman who had tried to intercept Ye Qing when he first arrived at Luo Shui.

Together with the dead Wang Yang and Xiao Yang, the five of them were known as the Five Heroes of Sunset Hill. Each and every one of them was a genius who possessed the talent to become a Spirit Master in the future, if not better.

Right now though, the trio was like helpless chicks before Ye Qing. Bai Song had taken a punch to the chest and was currently lying face down on the floor. Only the heavens knew if he was still alive. Xu Wushang had taken a Lightning Bolt to the shoulder and was barely breathing. Lu Yuan was the only one who was still standing, but that was literally all he could do as Ye Qing battered against his defenses. His pride and joy, the “Killer Fist” couldn’t even *tickle* Ye Qing’s protective astral qi, and he looked like he was seconds away from following in Bai Song and Xu Wushang’s footsteps.

Bai Xinran was surprised, to be honest. He knew that Ye Qing had left the Demon’s Tomb as a Spirit Purifier, but that was like two days ago. Even considering the gulf between cultivation levels, he was sure that the young man couldn’t have grown too strong.

Reality proved him wrong, however. In fact, Ye Qing was like a whole new person after ascending to the early-stage of the Spirit Purification Realm. In fact, he looked like he could go toe-to-toe against his younger brother, Bai Xinhua, a late-stage Spirit Purifier.

“You’re stubborn to the very end, old mule! In that case, you shall experience my master’s power firsthand!”

It was at this moment Wang Luori let out a low growl. His eyes slowly turned pitch black, and dark, demonic rays of light shone out of his person, evil and disturbing. Paradoxically, Wang Luori was wearing a pitying, Buddha-like smile on his face like he was pitying all who was suffering in the mortal coil.

“The mortal coil is a sea of suffering, and the world of mortals a filthy place. The only way to break free from the pain is to worship the Mara Buddha! Namō Marakaruna[3]!”

“Namō Marakaruna!”

“Namo Marakaruna!”

“Namo Marakaruna!”

Bai Xinran, Lu Fanjiang and Du Yuanwu all repeated the chant. They too wore a merciful smile on their faces and began emitting a demonic glow. A low, almost imperceptible Buddhist mantra began chanting from somewhere.

Basking in the light of the Mara Buddha, the trio began healing from their wounds and growing stronger. The light also seemed to strip them of their fear and drove them to attack Gu Suitang with reckless abandon.

Gu Suitang was never afraid of a good challenge. He clashed head on with the four Spirit Masters.

Before the demonic light and Buddhist chanting had appeared, the four Spirit Masters were like children before Gu Suitang. Now, they were unimaginably stronger. As if that wasn't enough, Gu Suitang quickly noticed that demonic light and the Buddhist chant possessed the ability to disrupt one's energies and mind. For a time, they were locked in a stalemate.

Wind blew, forces exploded, and rocks flew all over the place. What was a grandiose, magnificent-looking hall a while ago was now a shadow of itself. The pillars were broken, some sections of the walls were completely missing, and every combatant was covered in horrific wounds.

Wang Luori's neck spun a hundred and eighty degrees to the back, half of Lu Fanjiang's body was pulverized, both of Du Yuanwu's legs were broken, and Bai Xinran's heart was literally gouged out of his chest.

In the end, Gu Suitang was able to overcome all odds and come out victorious, but not without a huge cost. Practically every part of his body was covered in wounds so deep you could see his internal organs. He looked like a blood-soaked popsicle to put it mildly, and it was a testament to his resilience that his guts hadn't spilled out of his stomach. His right arm was spun round and round like mahua[4], and his left elbow all the way up to his hand was completely missing its flesh.

This particular injury was caused by Du Yuanhu's "Art of Filleting". The sabersman's signature martial art was the "Art of Life Cutting", but that didn't mean it was the only martial art he knew. The "Art of Filleting" was the cruelest and inhuman saber art he practiced. The good news was, he would never practice it again.

“Hahaha... trash, all of you! You can't defeat me even after your dog fart of a master gave you powers you don't deserve! What a waste of time you are!”

Gu Suitang grabbed his right hand with his bony left hand and forcefully twisted his right arm back to normal. One would think that he was just turning a screw as his face showed no signs of pain whatsoever. There was only unlimited arrogance and scorn for his enemies.

On the other side, Ye Qing was defending Fang Xiaoman from Bai Xinhu and Jiang Huanjian's attacks. Fang Xiaoman had long since run out of stamina and was currently doing his best to recover his energy, while the three Sunset Hill disciples were lying on the ground, unmoving. It was impossible to say if they were alive or dead.

Logically, Ye Qing should've succumbed to the two late-stage Spirit Purifiers a long time ago. In reality, Bai Xinhu and Jiang Huanjian found him harder to crack than even a fucking tortoise.

Although he was only an early-stage Spirit Purifier, his astral qi was immense, his movement art was sublime, his body was strong, and even his spirit was outstanding. He literally didn't have a single weak point they could exploit.

As if that wasn't enough, they would sometimes fall into a trance and experience all sorts of hallucinations. If they weren't long-time veterans with a galore of combat experience, Ye Qing might have defeated them already! An early-stage Spirit Purifier!

But of course, Ye Qing couldn't trounce them like he had with the three Sunset Hill disciples either. In fact, he couldn't have held on for this long if it wasn't for the "Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul". There was no denying that he was at a disadvantage right now.

Having crippled[5] all of his opponents, Gu Suitang finally found the window to lend Ye Qing and Fang Xiaoman a hand. It was at this moment a silhouette appeared behind Ye Qing and reached out to tap his head.

Ye Qing's demonic thought pulsed fiercely and warned him of the danger. He immediately gathered his astral qi and formed a solid wall around him. However, the unknown intruder's finger pierced through his defense like paper and made direct contact with the back of his head. He even heard the intruder chuckling, "You're the thief who stole my Strange Artifact."

On the outside, it looked like the intruder's attack was weak and powerless. In reality, a storm was raging inside his headspace. Unholy chants both demonic and Buddhist came together to form the word "Mara Buddha", and it corrupted every inch of headspace in a traceless but unstoppable fashion. His eyes immediately turned murky and out of focus.

The intruder ignored Ye Qing after incapacitating him. He then grabbed Fang Xiaoman's skull with his right hand and smiled at Gu Suitang. "Benefactor Gu, there are many people in this world who are drowning in the sea of suffering because they are foolish and clings to attachments. You are one of them. If you don't worship this poor monk, then you may never break free from the mortal coil."

"Namo Marakaruna..."

Chapter 312: Suppressing the Mara Buddha

"You're their master?"

Gu Suitang stopped in his tracks when he saw the man behind Fang Xiaoman and Ye Qing.

"It was you?"

If his first exclamation was both a question and confirmation, then his second exclamation was lined with shock and disbelief. It was because the man standing behind Fang Xiaoman was none other than Wang Luori's second disciple, the "Silver Flute" Bai Song.

Bai Song wasn't the most famous or even the strongest disciple among his lot. In fact, he was a moderate, humble, and gentle-natured man who resembled a student of the White Horse Academy far more than what one might expect from Wang Luori's disciple.

Wang Luori himself was displeased by this, but Bai Song was deeply loved and respected by the disciples of Sunset Hill. He also enjoyed a great reputation outside Sunset Hill. Even Zhang Lanjiang, the headmaster of White Horse Academy himself, called him a gentleman behind closed doors.

Earlier, Gu Suitang had tried to figure out who in Sunset Hall might be the Mara Buddha. Almost everyone including Xue Beikun, whom Ye Qing had sworn wasn't an enemy, was on his list of suspects. The one person he never suspected was Bai Song, but he was wrong.

Bai Song smiled. "It is I."

"I'll admit, you're the last person I suspect has anything to do with this!" Gu Suitang sneered. "Finally willing to show your face after I took out all your dogs? Who on earth are you?"

Bai Song remained smiling. "I am Mara Buddha."

"If you are Mara Buddha, then who is Bai Song?" Gu Suitang asked.

Bai Song—or rather Mara Buddha replied, "There has never been a Bai Song. There is only Mara Buddha."

"Hahaha! I see. No wonder!"

This meant that Mara Buddha had been hiding at Sunset Hill as Bai Song since the beginning. No wonder he was able to convert Wang Luori into his worshiper. The Hill Lord probably had no idea that Mara Buddha even existed until the very last moment.

"Mara Buddha, Mara Buddha. Sounds like a monk, but why do you have hair?" Gu Suitang looked Mara Buddha up and down wantonly.

"The mortal shell is a fickle and transient thing. Those who obsess over their mortal shell may not meet Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha himself, Benefactor Gu."

Mara Buddha smiled as a thin crack abruptly split from his forehead all the way to the bottom. As the human skin rolled off to each side like fabric, a wrinkly old monk wearing a black monk's robe stepped out of the shell that was Bai Song.

The old monk had a kind face and wore a Buddha's smile, but the presence he gave off could only be described as evil. Demonic and Buddha light mingled as one as hallucinatory, corruptive black lotuses descended from above.

"Attachment is the poison that kills the world and tortures humanity. Take you for example, Benefactor Gu. Had you chosen to worship me from the start, you wouldn't have needed to suffer such pain, would you?"

"Nothing I can do about my nature. I acknowledge that I'm a shallow guy who only sees things skin deep." Gu Suitang shrugged. "If you were a cute lady, then maybe I might have said yes. But no, you're an ugly old fuck. The mere idea of being thought of as your worshiper makes me want to puke, much less becoming one for real."

"This is my advice for you, but an ugly fuck like you shouldn't be going around hurting people. You in particular should just do us all a favor and hang yourself."

Mara Buddha's merciful smile slowly turned demonic. "Why must you be stubborn, Benefactor Gu? Benefactor Fang is my hostage, and you are far from being in top shape. There is no chance you might turn things around. Why must you struggle to the bitter end?"

"Hahaha! Says the cowardly rat who sends his dogs to die instead of challenging me himself! There's no one I despise more than spineless, balless cowards like you!"

Gu Suitang spat, "Come get me if you can, bitch."

Mara Buddha's demonic qi grew thicker and thicker until the entire hall was brimming with it. Shadowy tentacles danced in the air, and a terrifying aura caused the entire hall to tremble like an earthquake. At the same time, a chaotic, warped noise resounded in everyone's heart.

"You will join me whether you like it or not."

"Namo Marakaruna..."

A Buddha with a thousand arms appeared behind Mara Buddha as he chanted. When the Buddha brought down his one thousand arms, countless demons manifested into existence to drag Gu Suitang to hell.

"Demonic Palm of Gautama—All Ways Lead to Hell"

It was at this moment Fang Xiaoman suddenly broke free from Mara Buddha's grip and landed a palm strike on his chest.

THANG!

It was like he was hitting a massive bronze bell or something. The massive noise would continue to reverberate throughout the hall for tens of seconds.

The surprise attack had failed to deal any damage to Mara Buddha because a black ripple had appeared on his skin and hardened it like black steel. Fang Xiaoman didn't stop, however. The next moment, he summoned Xuanhuang and attacked Mara Buddha again. The old monk never managed to react because he was completely and utterly caught off guard.

Xuanhuang was a longbow, but in Fang Xiaoman's hands, it was like eighteen weapons combined into one. He used its limb like a saber or a stick, and its string like a whip or a sword. In less than a second, he cut, carved, smashed, twisted, whipped or strangled Mara Buddha and carved up the whole hall like it was made of tofu.

"Roar!"

When Mara Buddha was sent flying, Fang Xiaoman jumped backward and performed a full draw. Then, he loosed an arrow that was also a golden dragon straight at Mara Buddha.

Rumble!

A draconic cyclone ripped into Mara Buddha's body and blasted him through a pillar, a wall, and finally into the ground. Sunset Hall also collapsed after all the abuse it took.

Fang Xiaoman grabbed Ye Qing and escaped the hall before it could crash down on them. Gu Suitang was right beside him. A massive dust cloud was kicked up in the aftermath.

“Is he dead?” The cloudiness in Ye Qing’s eyes disappeared as he asked.

When Mara Buddha tapped his head with a finger earlier, he was probably trying to corrupt his mind with his power and control him. And if he was who he was in the past, he might have lost the mental battle and transformed into a religious puppet.

But the “Paranirmitavaṣaṭin Heavenly Demon Sutra” was a cultivation art that fed on desires and dark powers. Not only was Mara Buddha’s mental attack completely ineffective against him, it even strengthened his demonic thought. He was just faking his reaction so that Mara Buddha wouldn’t pay him any attention or get any funny ideas.

“I don’t think so, but he’s definitely taken a huge hit,” Fang Xiaoman replied slowly.

As if on cue, there was a mighty blast that blew away the dust clouds, revealing Mara Buddha and Xue Beikun.

“Cough! Cough!”

A trickle of blood flowed down the corner of his lips as Mara Buddha coughed, but his blood was blackish gold in color. When it hit the floor, it bloomed into black gold lotus.

Right now, Mara Buddha was definitely not in a good state. His demonic qi was flying about haphazardly, and there was a fist-sized hole in his chest. No blood was flowing out of the chest wound, however. In fact, Ye Qing could see a gold energy clashing against a black energy inside the hole. Every time the monk’s flesh writhed as if trying to heal itself, the gold energy would destroy the newly grown flesh and force it to restart the cycle anew.

Clearly, Xuanhuang’s power was preventing it from healing.

Mara Buddha paid no attention to his wounds, however. He was busy staring at Fang Xiaoman with contracted pupils. “Were you faking your injuries?”

Fang Xiaoman answered, “I was hurt, but I got better.”

There was nothing complicated about his answer, but it was precisely why Mara Buddha couldn’t accept it. “Impossible. You took a solid blow from my “Demonic Palm of Gautama”, and your internal organs were infected by my demonic qi. There’s no way you could have healed so quickly even if you have access to the best medicine in the world.”

“You’re right. The best *man-made* medicine in the world couldn’t save me. But a miraculous one? That’s a different story.” Fang Xiaoman smiled.

It was at this moment Mara Buddha sensed something and looked in Gu Suitang’s direction. His eyes widened when the deputy chief suddenly began healing at a visible rate. Even his weakened energies were rapidly recovering.

“The Water of Life?!” Mara Buddha exclaimed in shock.

“Surprise! Do you like it?” Gu Suitang grinned widely.

“Impossible! I am certain that the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau doesn’t have the Water of Life.” Mara Buddha shook his head as if he was trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Then, he recalled something and looked at Ye Qing. “Unless...”

“Yep! I found some in the Demon’s Tomb and shared it with Chief Fang and Chief Gu,” Ye Qing admitted without hesitation.

This was the reason he was confident that his plan would go without a hitch. There was no such thing as cure-all, but the Water of Life was a pretty close one. At the very least, it was good enough to heal Fang Xiaoman to full health, which it had.

However, Ye Qing had told Fang Xiaoman to feign weakness. It was so that they could fish out Mara Buddha. Although they were certain that Mara Buddha would be present for the birthday feast, they still didn’t know who he was or where he was hiding. Just now at Sunset Hall, they couldn’t even tell if he was hiding in their midst. That was why Fang Xiaoman couldn’t reveal his recovery overly quickly. Otherwise, there was a high chance Mara Buddha would choose to cut his losses and escape.

It had proven to be a wise decision. Paranoid and cautious, Mara Buddha had waited until all five of his Spirit Masters were dead, Gu Suitang was battered and seriously injured, and he was absolutely certain that his chances of victory were one hundred percent before he finally revealed himself.

That was fine though. That was also the moment he was most unguarded. As a result, Fang Xiaoman was able to catch him by surprise and even deal him a serious blow. So far, their plan was a resounding success.

“It was you?” Mara Buddha’s eyes glinted dangerously when suddenly, another question occurred to him. He looked at Fang Xiaoman and asked, “No, no. If you regained your strength, then why did you hide it? There should be no reason for you to do so.”

“Unless... you already knew that Wang Luori’s birthday feast was a ploy. In fact, you knew of my existence and were waiting for me to show myself! Otherwise, you wouldn’t have waited until now to act!”

“That’s correct. We knew from the start.” Fang Xiaoman answered honestly as he was an honest man.

“But how did you know? The boy might have told you about me, but there is no way you would know that I was hiding in Sunset Hill, much less plotting to capture you all in one fell swoop!”

The answer came to Mara Buddha even as his eyes widened slowly in shock and realization. “There is no way, unless someone leaked my plans to you!”

“It was me[1].” Xue Beikun’s voice rang behind Mara Buddha. At the same time, a wolf howl deafened everyone’s ears, and the sky began raining blood. Countless spear forces fell from the sky and engulfed Mara Buddha instantly.

As if on cue, Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang charged Mara Buddha as well.

Rumble rumble rumble!

The ground shook, and the wind howled. Words couldn't describe the battle that took place afterward.

If the fully healed Fang Xiaoman was Ye Qing's first trump card, then Xue Beikun was his second. His role was very simple. When the time was right, Xue Beikun would coordinate with Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang to kill Mara Buddha.

He refused to believe that Mara Buddha could survive being attacked by three top-tier Spirit Masters in his state.

A few breaths later, a mournful and angry voice boomed out from the center of the battlefield. There was a huge explosion, and Fang Xiaoman, Gu Suitang and Xue Beikun were sent flying into the air. Their faces were white, and their auras were unsteady. Even Ye Qing was pushed backward by the sudden gust of force.

A huge, blackened pit appeared where the four men had fought earlier. The surrounding buildings had completely collapsed into rubble as well.

Chapter 313: The Black Feather Guards

"Is he dead now?"

Ye Qing looked toward the rubble but couldn't find a corpse. He was unable to sense Mara Buddha's presence with his demonic thought either.

"He detonated his mind, so he's probably dead," Gu Suitang answered.

Fang Xiaoman pondered for a moment before saying solemnly, "We should still stay on our toes. Mara Buddha is a cunning and cautious man with an unpredictable bag of tricks. I wouldn't be surprised if he prepared something in the wake of his death."

"Namo Marakaruna..."

"Namo Marakaruna..."

"Namo Marakaruna..."

It was at this moment every elder, disciple, and servant in Sunset Hill suddenly lost their minds and started chanting "Namo Marakaruna". Eyes devoid of the light of reason, they abruptly started charging toward Ye Qing, Gui Suitang and Fang Xiaoman.

The cacophony of voices sounded like a series of thunderclaps, and wisps of demonic qi could be seen flying out of their body. They eventually gathered together to form an image of the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama himself, but one that was overflowing with malice. His lips were smiling, but his eyes were weeping blood, and his head was bowed.

The world wept in sorrow when the Buddha bowed his head.

"Mara Buddha!"

"Mara Buddha!"

"Mara Buddha!"

Chaotic, discordant and demonic voices resounded throughout Sunset Hill as black clouds gathered in the sky. The world darkened as if hell itself had descended upon the world.

Despite his cultivation art, Ye Qing felt like his mind was being warped by the sudden onslaught of dark powers. His desires were spiraling out of control, and his vigor was spiraling out of control. He was actually sliding uncontrollably toward a deviation until his demonic lotus absorbed all of the chaotic, distorting mental energy ravaging his headspace.

As soon as he returned to normal, he noticed the Sunset Hill elders, disciples and servants growing exponentially stronger in mid-charge. Not only that, the four men Gu Suitang had severely crippled but not killed—Bai Xinran, Lu Fanjiang, Du Yuanwu and Wang Luori—had gotten back on their feet and were charging them as well. They looked like rabid dogs to put it mildly.

“What should we do?” Ye Qing asked while narrowing his eyes a little. It was clear that these people had been corrupted and controlled by Mara Buddha. He wasn’t surprised, to be honest. Mara Buddha had hidden himself in Sunset Hill since who-knows-when as Bai Song, and even Wang Luori had succumbed to his manipulations in the end. Of course the ordinary disciples wouldn’t be able to resist him.

“These people have been completely corrupted and twisted by Mara Buddha’s power. There’s no saving them.” Fang Xiaoman’s eyes flickered with gritty determination. “So, we kill them all.”

“... Very well.” Gu Suitang hesitated for an instant but resolved himself immediately. “Evil must be rooted out completely.”

Most of these people were innocent. If it was possible to save them, they would. Unfortunately, they had been irreversibly warped into mindless beasts who knew nothing but murder. Even if they let them go, they would only bring harm to others. In that case, they could only grant them the mercy of death.

“Suitang, let’s deal with that false Buddha first.”

Fang Xiaoman stomped the ground and caused the ground to undulate outward like a shockwave, causing the Sunset Hill disciples at the forefront to fall to the ground. It caused a chain reaction and dropped the people behind them to the ground as well.

“Joyless, tell Yuhuai and Nianjiu to get here immediately. They were to kill any Sunset Hill member they ran into!”

“At once!” Ye Qing immediately produced a badge from his Nature’s Shell and activated it. The word “Order” appeared in the sky and shone like a second sun.

Ye Qing ordered, “All Pacification Sentinels, attack Sunset Hill! You are to kill all Sunset Hill members without fail!”

“Kill them all!”

“Kill them all!”

The battle cries of the Pacification Sentinel rang throughout the whole Sunset Hill.

“Commander Xue, you’ve brought the Black Feather Guards, right?” Ye Qing glanced at Xue Beikun next.

The commander replied, “Five thousand Black Feather Guards are already standing by for orders at the foot of the hill.”

“Good. Tell them to cooperate with the Pacification Sentinels and kill any and all Sunset Hill disciples they encounter!” Ye Qing ordered in a cold voice. This was a part of his plan too, of course.

“Very well,” Xue Beikun responded before flying into the air and shouting, “Right Guard of the Black Feather Guards, attention! Attack Sunset Hill and kill all Sunset Hill members you see! Show no mercy!”

“No mercy!”

“No mercy!”

Ye Qing had to use a Strange Artifact to make his voice heard throughout Sunset Hill. But Xue Beikun? That was pure power.

“Take care of Wang Luori and the others, Commander Xue. Leave the rest to me.”

Meanwhile, Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang were already battling against Mara Buddha. Wang Luori and the rest of the Spirit Masters were a mere second or two away from reaching them as well.

“Take care, yo—Joyless!” Xue Beikun nodded before turning around and clashing against Wang Luori, Lu Fanjiang, Du Yuanwu and Bai Xinran.

Boom!

With a single spear sweep, Xue Beikun sent the four Spirit Masters flying where they came like he was sweeping some dry leaves. But that was only because Xue Beikun was a late-stage Spirit Master. If it was him, he would have to summon the Boundless Mara Buddha and unleash its full power at the very least.

The four Spirit Masters were mindless and crippled, but even so, they were still Spirit Masters. That was why he left them to Xue Beikun and focused on the elders and disciples instead.

“Happ!”

Ye qing sucked in a deep breath before charging toward the incoming Sunset Hill disciples. When they were less than a meter away from him, he unleashed a devastating punch that surged forth like a raging river.

“*Break Through*”

Boom!

Ye Qing forcefully blew open a hole in the sea of people and escaped the encirclement. Anyone who was unfortunate enough to stand in his way were either sent flying or outright crushed into gory bits.

As soon as he broke out of the encirclement, a saber that resembled the falling sunset swung toward his back. The sky turned red, and a sea of saber forces descended from above.

“Sunset Saber”

Ye Qing blurred and reached into the red light. The next moment, the sunset disappeared, and Ye Qing’s fingers caught a steel saber that was aimed at his back.

He tapped his fingers on the blade and shattered it like glass. The pieces scattered everywhere and killed a dozen Sunset Hill disciples in an instant.

There was no reprieve, however. More Sunset Hill disciples stepped over their brethren’s dead bodies and attacked him.

Ye Qing smirked as a demonic lotus appeared in both his pupils. Then, he tapped the space in front of him with his right hand.

“Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul”

An invisible ripple of demonic thought washed out of him, and another dozen Sunset Hill disciples died just like that.

Boom!

It was at this moment a massive sun descended from above. The entire place was basked in the fiery light that was sunset.

At the same time, a crescent emerged from the clouds and shone beams of cold, icy moonlight on the ground. It seemed capable of freezing anything and everything.

Ye Qing was caught between the manifestation of sun and moon, ice and fire.

His attackers were a man and a woman, both elders of Sunset Hill. They were both at the middle-stage of the Spirit Purification stage. The man practiced the “Sunset Hill Fist”, whereas the woman practiced the “Bright Moon Palm”. As they were a man and a woman who cultivated martial arts that were the polar opposites of each other, they were nicknamed the “Old Sun” and the “Aged Moon”. When they were together, they were known as “Sun and Moon” or “Ice and Fire”.

“Not bad.”

Ye Qing smiled despite the dangerous situation he was in. “Fog Demon?”

An eerie cackle and a rattling of chains broke out. The Boundless Mara Buddha appeared in the sky and unleashed a palm strike, the reversed mudra intending to damn his target instead of saving them.

The sun fell, and the moon vanished back into the clouds. The two Spirit Purifiers were batted away like flies.

“Deal with them, Fog Demon,” Ye Qing instructed before stepping into the crowd. Wherever his fists traveled, people fell, and lives were snuffed out. No one could stand in his way.

Tens of breaths later, Lin Yuhuai and Chu Nianjiu finally showed up with a troop of Pacification Sentinels. Following right behind them was a bunch of soldiers clad in black armor with cloud patterns on it and wielding Chu sabers. They were also flying a banner with the same symbol. It was simple yet beyond intimidating.

Every soldier had at least some blood on their sabers. It was clear they had just fought a great battle. However, they maintained an orderly formation and a dignified appearance.

The Black Feather Guards marched swiftly yet soundlessly toward the Sunset Hill members. The cloud patterns on their armor made them look like black feathers cruising soundlessly along the wind and clouds.

In fact, the Black Feather Guards were famed for their speed and unusual armor. Few armies were as suited as them to be a strike force.

“RAISE SPEARS!” A captain wearing a grave expression barked as soon as the troops had reached the peak. The soldiers immediately produced a short spear from their backs and raised it. Their reaction speed was impressive, but what was even more impressive was how they moved with perfect oneness. It was almost as if they were a single entity.

“THROW!”

The captain waved, and the soldiers tossed their spears at the Sunset Hill disciples.

Rumble!

The rain of forceful spears descended like the judgment of heavens. There were thousands of Sunset Hill disciples at the peak of the hill, and this one volley had taken out at least half of them.

The short spears were forged from a kind of dense metal. A steel spear of the same shape and size was at least ten times lighter than these spears. Combined with the soldiers’ own strength, there was no chance the Sunset Hill disciples’ protective qi and body could block the spear throw.

In fact, these short spears were specifically made to make quick work of most *jianghu* warriors. A single volley from a squad of twenty five soldiers could force back even an Astral Refiner.

Any other group would have routed already, but these Sunset Hill disciples had completely lost their minds. Instead of running away, they continued to charge toward the Black Feather Guards like crazy.

“CROSSBOWS!” The captain ordered unhurriedly, and the soldiers grabbed the hand crossbows hanging on their waist and took aim at the incoming horde.

“LOOSE!”

If the spear volley was a downpour, then the crossbow bolts were a locust swarm. Dozens of Sunset Hill disciples were turned into beehives in an instant.

That said, the crossbow was much less effective against a *jianghu* warrior. By the time they loosed a volley, the surviving disciples were already close enough to unleash their own counterattacks.

“SHIELDS!” The captain ordered again, and the vanguard stepped aside to allow the shieldbearers to take the front.

The shields they used were a little taller than the average human, and it was thick, sturdy, and pitch black. The shieldbearers split up into two tight rows. One row was crouching on one knee and planting their shields on the ground, whereas the second row was holding their shields above the shields, forming a sturdy shield wall.

Boom boom boom!

The Sunset Hill disciples slammed into the shield wall, but the shields didn’t budge even a little. The next moment, numerous blades slipped through the gaps between the shields and pierced the warriors directly in front of them.

The Sunset Hill disciples were mindless, but they hadn’t lost their martial instinct. Some of them jumped into the sky in an attempt to slip in between their ranks and disrupt their formation.

However, the second row of shieldbearers immediately raised their shields above their heads and stopped the disciples from descending. Then, they thrust their sabers through the gaps and skewered them all.

“FORWARD!”

The captain ordered, and the shieldbearers began pushing forward while the rest of the soldiers followed closely behind.

“HU!”

“HU!”

“HU!”

Metal clanged against metal, and the soldiers roared as one. Like a black tide of steel, the Black Feather Guards charged into the enemy group and systematically divided, surrounded, and slaughtered everyone.

Soon, the Sunset Hill disciples were overwhelmed by the black tide that was the Black Feather Guards.

Chapter 314: Extermination

“Scary.”

Ye Qing muttered as he watched the Black Feather Guards ripping through everything with impunity.

Technically speaking, this wasn’t the first time he saw an organized group fighting against a bunch of *jianghu* warriors. Back at Sky Gate Abyss, he had witnessed the Pacification Sentinels taking out opponents who were leagues above their level. However, the Pacification Sentinels normally fought in groups of five or ten, not thousands. Naturally, this battle was stunning on a level Ye Qing had never seen.

The Black Feather Guards operated like a robust yet intricate war machine. They were numerous, fast, aggressive, defensive, and capable of responding to orders at a moment's notice. Technically speaking, the Sunset Hill disciples were stronger than the Black Feather Guards in terms of cultivation. But in an actual fight, it was a massacre completely in favor of the Black Feather Guards.

No wonder there were so few stories of *jianghu* warriors successfully resisting a regime. Even the strongest *jianghu* warrior in the world was just a bigger fish to fry before an endless sea of soldiers.

The Black Feather Guards weren't even true elites. They were just the garrison troops of Luo Shui and the cooperators of the Pacification Bureau.

The true elites of the elites were the armies stationed at the borders facing Yan and Wei such as Dragon Serpent, Black Cavalry, White Horse, Green Wolf and more.

The Dragon Serpents once slew a Grandmaster of Wei, Zong Zhaotian, with a thousand soldiers.

The White Horses once slew the Nine Swords of Yan—all of them Grandmasters—with ten thousand soldiers.

And the Black Cavalry once exterminated a major sect called the Qianyuan Mountain of the Unbound with fifty thousand soldiers. The sect was guarded by one Sage, two Grandmasters, and over ten thousand disciples.

When a man got angry, blood was spilled.

When the Son of Heaven got angry, corpses floated for hundreds and hundreds of kilometers.

There were no exceptions.

Of course, this didn't mean that warriors were weak. On the contrary, it was beyond stunning that a warrior could grow strong enough to battle thousands and thousands of soldiers by themselves. It was just that there was only so much one person could do sometimes.

The Black Feather Guards were pulling their weight. Naturally, Lin Yuhuai and Chu Nianjiu weren't going to stand by and do nothing. They each led a troop of Pacification Sentinels and clashed against the Sunset Hill elders.

As more and more Sunset Hill disciples were killed, Mara Buddha grew weaker and weaker as well. In the end, he let out a scream of anger and exploded into countless fragments. While Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang were pushed away, he wrapped his Yin God and soul fragments in multiple gusts of demonic qi and scattered in every direction.

Fang Xiaoman was ready for this, however. Drawing Xuanhuang until it resembled a full moon, he shot a single arrow into the sky. A breath later, a massive column of light descended from above; each and every ray an arrow that vanquished all evil. Not a single wisp of demonic qi or Yin God was able to escape.

Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang had vanquished Mara Buddha. Xue Beikun had also killed Wang Luori, Lu Fanjiang, Du Yuanwu and Bai Xinran. Their heads were lined up in a row for all to see.

In fact, Xue Beikun had messaged Ye Qing in secret and asked him if he wanted to execute Wang Luori by his own hands. However, he wasn't that type of person. He was fine so long as his

vengeance was fulfilled, his enemies lay dead before his feet, and his troubles were resolved. So, he left it to Xue Beikun to finish the job.

Now that Mara Buddha and the Spirit Masters were dead, there was nothing Sunset Hill could possibly do to turn things around. A short while later, only a few pockets of Sunset Hill members still eluded annihilation.

The captain who took charge of the battlefield earlier reported to Xue Beikun, "Commander, we've annihilated everyone we can find. We lost twenty and suffered a hundred injuries."

Xue Beikun ordered, "Good. Have a thousand men sweep the battlefield for stragglers. The rest of you may leave the hill and stand by for orders."

"As you command!" The captain withdrew after receiving his orders.

"Chief."

"Chief."

Not far away, Lin Yuhuai and the others were also making reports to Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang. When they were done, Gu Suitang said, ""Good. Good job, everyone. Yuhuai, go gather some men and coordinate with Commander Xue to annihilate the stragglers. No one must be left alive."

After that, he and Fang Xiaoman made their way to Xue Beikun and saluted him. "It's all thanks to your aid that we are able to annihilate Mara Buddha. Otherwise, the consequences would've been unimaginable. On behalf of the Pacification Bureau and the people of Luo Shui, we solemnly thank you for your service."

"I am an imperial officer, and it is my duty to eliminate evil and protect the people. Your thanks are unnecessary," Xue Beikun replied coolly.

"You are a good man, Commander Xue," Fang Xiaoman offered him a compliment regardless.

Gu Suitang added, "Considering your score with the Pacification Bureau fully settled after what you did today, Commander Xue."

He still thought that something was off with Xue Beikun, but he couldn't really say what was strange with him either. So, he kept his mouth shut.

Xue Beikun didn't even look at Gu Suitang. "Do correct yourself, Chief Gu. There were never any grievances between the Pacification Bureau and I, only Joyless. But since I have reconciled with Joyless, that is a moot point as well. In short, I don't owe your shit."

A vein immediately throbbed on Gu Suitang's forehead. *Bitch, if you haven't done us a huge favor, I swear...*

To be fair, Xue Beikun's words made a lot of sense. However, the revelation only pissed off Gu Suitang even more.

Sensing the tension in the air, Ye Qing hurriedly interjected, "Let's focus on the important matters, shall we? This isn't over yet."

Fang Xiaoman agreed. "Yes. Mara Buddha is dead, and Sunset Hill is no more, but the co-conspirators are still alive and well. So please accompany us for a while longer, Commander Xue."

Xue Beikun answered simply, "It is my duty."

When Fang Xiaoman talked about co-conspirators, he was referring to the Bai Clan and the Blood Shadow Palace. Both of the Bai Clan's patriarchs and the deputy head of the Blood Shadow Palace were puppets of Mara Buddha, meaning that there was a chance that some of their members were puppets as well. That was why they needed to pay them a visit and root out the traitors as well.

The faction Lu Fanjiang belonged to wasn't in Luo Shui, so they would deal with them at a later date.

"Come. Let's visit the Bai Clan first," Fang Xiaoman beckoned everyone before descending the hill. Before Ye Qing left, he looked back at the mountain of corpses littered across the hill and Wang Luori's open-eyed head and let out a small sigh.

Wang Luori deserved what happened to him, but the Sunset Hill disciples including Xu Wushang and Lu Yuan could only be innocent of this matter.

Unfortunately, this was a world where the pitiful and innocent died every day.

Sometimes, you could only blame it all on fate.

The sun slowly rose to the center and cast down its bright rays across the world. Despite the massacre that just occurred, it all looked as beautiful as a painting.

"It's a good day today."

Ye Qing exhaled slightly before getting off the hill.

When they walked up the steps, the sky was cloudy, and their footsteps were heavy.

But now, they were walking briskly in the light.

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Luo Shui's wealth mostly came from two clans: The Luo Clan and the Bai Clan.

The Bai Clan was situated to the south of Luo Shui, and the Luo Clan to the north. Together, they held nearly half of Luo Shui's wealth in their grasp. It was why people said that the two clans controlled half of the skies in Luo Shui.

The Bai Clan possessed hundreds of acres of land, and their residences were overflowing with luxury both inside and outside. They had entire forests full of flora and fauna as their garden, they had small streams running through ornamental bridges, they had towers, pavilions and kiosks of all shapes and sizes, they had everything.

The extravagance didn't stick out like a sore thumb either. Somehow, they were a perfect blend of uniqueness and convention.

Normally, the Bai Clan was a boisterous place where countless people visited them to negotiate business, ask for a job, or even to admire their extravagance. But today, it was surrounded with soldiers with their armor coated in dry blood, and their sabers already unsheathed.

“What’s happening?” “How would I know?”

“Look! Chief Fang, Chief Gu and Commander Xue are all present, and the soldiers are a mix of Black Feather Guards and Pacification Sentinels. The Bai Clan must have committed a grave crime for all these people to show up at once.”

“One hundred percent.”

“What do you think they did to earn the ire of the Pacification Bureau *and* the Black Feather Guards?”

“Who cares? It’s not like the Bai Clan doesn’t deserve it. Everyone here has suffered in their hands in one way or another. They think they can do anything just because they’re rich. They should’ve been wiped out a long time ago.”

“Agreed, brother!”

Outside the encirclement, countless people were gossiping about the Bai Clan’s plight. Only a handful of them were sympathizers.

At the entrance, the Bai Clan’s steward, Bai Ren, was quaking in his boots. Cold sweat was dripping profusely from his forehead.

Gu Suitang took a step forward and declared, “Bai Xinran and Bai Xinhui have been found guilty of colluding with demons, entrapping members of the Pacification Bureau, and doing harm to Luo Shui. They had already been executed for their crimes.”

“I am now ordering every member of the Bai Clan to step out and be interrogated. Anyone who resists will be killed without question.”

“W-what? That’s impossible!” Bai Ren’s face turned as pale as a sheet. “My lord has always been a kind and compassionate person. There’s no way he would do such a thing!”

“Hmph! Show him!” Gu Suitang ordered, and a Pacification Sentinel stepped forth to toss two human heads on the ground.

When Bai Ren saw the heads—the heads of Bai Xinran and Bai Xinhui—he collapsed to the ground and screamed, “Ahhhh! My lords! Ah... ah...”

His eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he fainted just like that.

“Hmph! Useless.” Gu Suitang harrumphed and sucked in a deep breath. His voice boomed across the entire residence. “All Bai Clan members are to show themselves and accept interrogation this instant! Otherwise, we will kill all of you on sight!”

“Close the gates!”

It was at this moment a shrill voice broke out. Then, the Bai Clan’s gates slammed shut on its own.

“How nice of them to confirm our suspicions!” Gu Suitang sneered. He then stepped forward and punched the doors with his fist.

The doors were made of refined steel and weighed at least hundreds of kilograms, but one punch was all he needed to send them flying off their hinges. A few guards and guest warriors who failed to get out of the way in time were flattened like pancakes as a result.

“The Bai Clan colluded with demons but refused to repent for their sins. Men! Enter the residence and capture all Bai Clan members. Don’t allow even a fly to escape your grasp. If anyone resists, kill them.”

“At once!”

“Black Feather Guards, coordinate with the Pacification Sentinels and capture the Bai Clan members. Kill anyone who resists.”

“Hu!”

“Hu!”

“Hu!”

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The battle ended even faster than the one that had taken place at Sunset Hill. With Fang Xiaoman, Gu Suitang and Xue Beikun to suppress the Bai Clan’s strongest combatants, and thousands and thousands of Pacification Sentinels and Black Feather Guards to sweep every nook and cranny without fail, there was simply nothing the Bai Clan could do to resist. The battle was over just half a teatime later.

This time, both armies only suffered a dozen or so injuries. No one was killed in the process. On the other hand, the Bai Clan lost over half their numbers. Not only that, they discovered that Bai Xinran and Bai Xinhui’s descendants and a handful of guest warriors had Mara Buddha’s scent on them. Clearly, they had been corrupted and twisted by Mara Buddha.

Surprisingly—and thankfully—most of the servants were in the clear. They were still escorted back to the Pacification Bureau for further inspection, but they would be released eventually.

They wouldn’t have a Bai Clan to return to, however. Today was the day the Bai Clan was no more.

“Come. It’s time to visit the Blood Shadow Palace next.”

Chapter 315: Fu Qianqiu

Blood Shadow Palace was the complete opposite of Sunset Hill in the sense that their sect was located in a valley, not the top of a hill.

It was a beautiful valley full of lush greenery and colorful flowers. In fact, spring graced this little paradise four seasons a year.

When Ye Qing followed Fang Xiaoman, Gu Suitang and Xue Beikun to the valley entrance, the head of Blood Shadow Palace, Fu Qianqiu was already waiting for them with all of his elders and disciples. They looked like they were ready for war.

In response, Gu Suitang commanded the Pacification Sentinels and the Black Feather Guards to stop with the wave of a hand. The sound of armor metal smacking into one another sounded as loud as thunder.

The Blood Shadow Palace disciples behind Fu Qianqiu looked panicked and afraid. On second thought, they probably weren't ready for war after all.

Gu Suitang stepped forward and barked out a laugh. "Is this a welcome ceremony, Head Fu?"

Fu Qianqiu saluted smilingly. "It's not everyday Chief Fang, Chief Gu and Commander Xue personally pay me a visit. It's only natural that I should welcome you in person."

Fu Qianqiu was a man in his fifties with a scholarly appearance and a long, thin beard. He looked refined despite the dark red robe he wore. His amicable appearance didn't match Ye Qing's impression of him, a man who betrayed his master, Fu Xueying, for his personal interests[1].

"Haha, it is our honor as well." Gu Suitang smiled. "You're a smart man, Head Fu. You should already know why we're here."

"I just received word, yes," Fu Qianqiu admitted. "It would seem that my deputy head, Jiang Huanjian, has colluded with heretics to harm imperial officials and endanger Luo Shui itself. His crimes cannot be pardoned. I and the Blood Shadow Palace are infinitely grateful to Chief Fang, Chief Gu and Commander Xue for eliminating a hidden threat in our sect."

Behind him, the Blood Shadow Palace disciples also saluted them. "We are grateful!"

Gu Suitang said in a provocative tone, "Oh? It seems you're suggesting that Jiang Huanjian's actions have nothing to do with you, Head Fu."

They weren't surprised that Fu Qianqiu knew why they were showing at his doorsteps with two armies. Blood Shadow Palace's reputation as one of the three major sects in Luo Shui would be undeserved otherwise.

"Of course it has nothing to me," Fu Qianqiu replied calmly as if he didn't hear the provocation. "As you know, I've been secluding myself to heal my injuries since I suffered a deviation a few years ago. Not only that, I only check in on the sect once in a blue moon. Jiang Huanjian was the one who handled everything in Blood Shadow Palace while I was absent, which was why I had no idea about his behavior and actions until now."

Fang Xiaoman bumped Ye Qing's shoulder. "Joyless..."

Knowing what he meant, Ye Qing said to Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang via sound transmission, "I cannot sense the Mara Buddha's aura on Fu Qianqiu. It's the same for the disciples."

In fact, they knew that the Blood Shadow Palace was most likely clean except for Fu Qianqiu, his friends and his family. Otherwise, Fu Qianqiu would have shown up at the Sunset Hall himself. There was no reason Mara Buddha would not use Fu Qianqiu, a late-stage Spirit Master for his grand scheme if the option was available.

Fu Qianqiu was strong, cunning and ruthless. The reason Mara Buddha hadn't tried to subvert him was probably because he wasn't sure he would succeed. That was why he only subverted Jiang Huanjian.

Gu Suitang didn't speak immediately. As the silence lengthened, the tension grew heavier and heavier until the Blood Shadow Palace disciples grew nervous, and Fu Qianqiu's back was covered in a sheen of cold sweat.

Ten breaths later, Gu Suitang finally said with a cold glint in his eyes, "I trust you, Head Fu. I trust that you won't disappoint me. You know what to do, right?"

Fu Qianqiu's smile looked the same as before, but on the inside he let out a long sigh of relief. "Of course, Chief Gu. Please give me a moment."

"Bring it over."

The crowd split in half, and dozens of Blood Shadow Palace disciples stepped out while carrying salvers. Sitting on each salver was a round-shaped object that was covered up by a red cloth.

Ye Qing sniffed as a hint of shock and coldness flickered through his eyes. The next moment, the disciples pulled away the red cloth to reveal many, many human heads.

The age and gender of the heads varied, but their expressions were all frozen in fear.

"Chief Fang, Chief Gu, Commander Xue..." Fu Qianqiu walked up to a salver and pointed at a woman's head. "This here is Jiang Huanjian's wife."

He then moved onto the next salver and introduced the next head. "This is his oldest son."

"This is his youngest son."

"This is his daughter."

"This is his first disciple."

"This is his second disciple."

"This is his best friend."

"This is his personal bodyguard."

.....

And finally, this is his personal servant."

Fu Qianqiu patiently introduced every head at the scene before smiling gently. "In summary, I have executed one hundred and fifty three people, and they are Jiang Huanjian's family, friends, disciples, servants and other related people. As far as I'm aware, I have not missed anyone."

"Are you satisfied with this outcome?"

Heavens above, what a ruthless motherfucker, Ye Qing thought while inhaling deeply. He should've known better than to judge a book by its cover. Fu Qianqiu might look refined, but he was a far harder man than Wang Luori. It was cruel enough that he exterminated Jiang Huanjian's family to the three generations, his friends, his disciples and even his servants didn't escape his persecution.

There were more than a couple of children—some only five or six years old at most—mixed among the casualties as well. To call him heartless would be an understatement.

“You sure are a ruthless man, Head Fu!” Gu Suitang lamented. It was impossible to say if he was voicing his shock at Fu Qianqiu’s ruthlessness, or sighing for the lives who were lost.

He only wanted Fu Qianqiu to capture everyone who was related to Jiang Huanjian and give them to the Pacification Bureau so they could differentiate who was corrupted and who wasn’t. However, Fu Qianqiu took it one step further and killed all of them.

At least it saved them some time and effort.

“Heretics deserve no mercy,” Fu Qianqiu answered matter-of-factly.

“Indeed!” Gu Suitang barked out a laugh. “You are a capable man, Head Fu. No wonder you were able to make Blood Shadow Palace the strongest sect in Luo Shui in just a matter of years. I am truly impressed!”

“You flatter me, Chief Gu. So long as I meet your expectations,” Fu Qianqiu replied.

“You certainly have,” Gu Suitang replied with a nod, “but I’m still going to have to inspect your people just in case.”

“I’ve already gathered everyone here. Do as you wish.” Fu Qianqiu waved his hand. Some people might consider it humiliating to submit to the Pacification Bureau’s authority like meek dogs, but he thought this was nothing at all compared to the total annihilation Sunset Hill and the Bai Clan had suffered.

An incense stick later, they had inspected everyone in the Blood Shadow Palace including the elders, disciples, servants and more. As expected, no one was controlled by Mara Buddha.

It was at this moment Ye Qing asked suddenly, “Head Fu, are you sure that everyone in Blood Shadow Palace is here?”

“Yes. They are all present.” Fu Qianqiu answered Ye Qing dutifully even though he was “just” a Patrolman. He didn’t underestimate or look down on the young man.

Ye Qing smiled. “No, there is one more person. I’m pretty sure that one of the Four Gentlemen, Chen Cang the Sword Gentleman, is a member of the Blood Shadow Palace. In fact, he is your direct disciple, isn’t he?”

He hadn’t forgotten about Chen Cang. Chen Cang was an insane man who wanted to kill him and take revenge for his younger brother, Chen Zheng. There was no hope for reconciliation between them either. Obviously, he couldn’t kill Chen Cang right in front of Fu Qianqiu, but he could at least make him regret antagonizing him a little.

Fu Qianqiu replied calmly, “Chen Cang is my disciple, but he had left Luo Shui to explore the *jianghu*

a few days ago. I’m not sure where he is right now.”

“You have my word that he has nothing to do with Jiang Huanjian or the heretics though.”

“He left Luo Shui?” Ye Qing stared at Fu Qianqiu dubiously, but the man looked like he was telling the truth. So, he shrugged and nodded. “Very well.”

Fu Qianqiu let out a chuckle. “I’m aware that my disciple and you share a grudge with each other, but it is better to resolve the grudge peacefully than not, don’t you think? That is why I’ve prepared a gift for you. I hope you will accept it and forgive my disciple.”

The head produced an embroidered box from his Nature’s Shell and presented it to Ye Qing.

“A gift?” Ye Qing subconsciously accepted it and opened it on the spot. His eyes were immediately attracted to a demonically gorgeous curved saber, a martial arts manual and a lingzhi that was shaped like a full moon.

The curved saber had a short, scarlet blade that was as thin as a cicada’s wing. Its spine was snow white like a translucent white jade. It glowed watery red when it was hit by sunlight, and its blade was curved just right like the comely waist of a gorgeous woman. It was mysterious yet elegant, beautiful yet deadly.

Sitting next to the curved saber was a martial arts manual named the “Saber of Spring Wind and Fine Rain”. The moon-shaped lingzhi looked pretty awesome as well.

“What a great saber!” Ye Qing complimented from the bottom of his heart. In his eyes, the red saber looked like a gorgeous woman in red: bright as blood, passionate as fire, and beautiful as a painting.

“I’m very glad to hear that.” Fu Qianqiu smiled. “I heard that you’re an expert in saber arts, and it so happens that I have a Hatred-class curved saber and a Spirit Purification-stage saber art. The saber’s name is “Red Sleeve”, and it is 66.66 cm long and 175.6 grams heavy[2]. It’s named Red Sleeve as it’s as beautiful as a woman and could be hidden in one’s sleeve. It whistles like a flute and gives off a light but fragrant scent when it swings through the air. It is a bloodthirsty saber, however. If it is drenched in blood, its blade would turn redder, and its power would grow stronger.”

“The saber art is called the ‘Saber of Spring Wind and Fine Rain’. Its techniques are long, connected, and gentle as a spring wind and fine rain. So gentle, that your enemies wouldn’t even realize that they were dead until after the fact.”

“If you execute the ‘Saber of Spring Wind and Fine Rain’ with Red Sleeve, it would be like a fiery, gorgeous woman dancing amidst the wind and rain—fiery and passionate, invisible and deadly.”

Fu Qianqiu paused for a moment before continuing, "As for this lingzhi, it is called the 'Moon Lingzhi'. It possesses the ability to condense one's mind and spirit and is greatly beneficial to any Spirit Purifier."

"On behalf of my disciple, these are my apology gifts to you. I sincerely hope you will accept them."

Gu Suitang laughed. "Hahaha! You sure don't skimp on gifts, Head Fu. But if I remember correctly, Red Sleeve is a Strange Artifact of unknown origin and mysterious qualities despite its power. In fact, almost everyone who wielded it had met a terrible fate. You're not trying to curse my Patrolman to an early grave, are you?"

Fu Qianqiu chuckled. "Of course not. Lord Ye is already a dragon among men at his age. The previous saber wielders were unable to hold onto the weapon because they were weak in fate and power, but Lord Ye is the opposite. I am sure that he is deserving of this saber."

"Also, I simply wish to find a good belonging for Red Sleeve. I don't mean any harm by it."

"Hahaha, I was just joking. No need to take it seriously." Gu Suitang laughed again. "I see no reason to spurn Head Fu's gifts, so feel free to keep them, Joyless."

"Thank you, Head Fu." Ye Qing obliged and put away the gifts. While he had accrued a ton of Strange Artifacts and martial arts manuals, he hadn't been able to find a saber and saber art that suited him. To be fair, the "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art" was an amazing saber art, but it was best used as a trump card even with his new power. That was why Fu Qianqiu's gifts were absolutely perfect.

In fact, he had fallen in love with Red Sleeve at first sight. A Buddhist would say that he and the saber were destined for each other.

As for Gu Suitang's warning, he didn't take it to heart. He had the Annon Sutra after all, and Fu Qianqiu was trying to save his sect and himself from annihilation. It would be counterproductive if he gave him a cursed gift. Not only that, he was pretty sure that Fu Qianqiu still had more to offer.

"I'm glad you like it." As if on cue, Fu Qianqiu grinned wider and said, "I've also prepared a feast and more gifts as thanks for eliminating the hidden threat in my sect, everyone. I humbly invite you all to partake in it."

"We'll take the gifts, but we won't be joining the feast," Gu Suitang replied. "Our work isn't done, you see. We'll be leaving in a moment."

Fu Qianqiu saluted him. "In that case, I shan't hold you back any longer. I will pay you another visit tomorrow."

"I can feel your sincerity, Head Fu," Gu Suitang replied indifferently, "but I must say this regardless. Remember Jiang Huanjian's downfall and never commit the mistakes he did. Otherwise, I don't mind turning Blood Shadow Palace into the next Sunset Hill."

Fu Qianqiu hurriedly replied, "I understand. I will shut off my sect for a year and reorganize things during that time. I promise that my disciples will not misbehave or commit any crimes from now on."

"Good. I will remember this." Gu Suitang smiled and turned around. "Let's go."

After the Pacification Bureau and the Black Feather Guards left, Fu Qianqiu's smile disappeared into coldness and ruthlessness. "Toss the bodies to the wilderness. Also, the sect will be shut down for a year starting down. No one is allowed to leave the sect grounds without good reason, or they will be executed without mercy."

"At once!"

Chapter 316: Buddha Taoist

"What did you say? The Pacification Bureau and the Black Feather Guards annihilated Sunset Hill, massacred the White Clan, and forced the Blood Shadow Palace to shut themselves down for a whole year?"

Inside White Horse Academy, the normally calm-looking Zhang Lanjiang was looking at a teacher with a stunned expression. "Do we know why?"

The teacher answered, "I heard it's because Wang Luori, Bai Xinran and Jiang Huanjian colluded with heretics and were plotting great harm against the people, but the Pacification Bureau and the Black Feather Guards were able to turn it around and smite them where they stood. Sunset Hill, the Bai Clan and the Blood Shadow Palace were just the collateral damage."

"As for who these heretics are and what they were plotting, we have no answer yet."

"Heretics, huh? The heretics are probably just part of the reason they went to such drastic lengths," Zhang Lanjiang said slowly while tapping the table.

The teacher voiced his confusion, "I don't understand, headmaster."

Zhang Lanjiang explained, "The Pacification Bureau is making an example out of Sunset Hill, the Bai Clan and the Blood Shadow Palace. Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang aren't normally this ruthless, but the *jianghu* warriors went way overboard with their attack on Ye Qing. That is why they took the opportunity to tell everyone that they are not to be fucked with. They want everyone to remember what happened today every time they plot against Luo Shui."

"Do you think the Pacification Bureau would seek us out, headmaster?" The teacher asked worriedly.

"White Horse Academy is a refined, upright and proper academy that practices what we preach! Whatever their plan may be, they cannot lay a hand on us when we've not committed any offense!" Zhang Lanjiang declared imperiously.

"That's true enough," the teacher echoed in agreement.

However, Zhang Lanjiang abruptly changed his tune and said, “That said, you remember what happened with Sunset Hill. The brush is mightier than the sword only when the person wielding the sword is willing to reason with you.”

“I heard that one of our disciples, Wen Zilai, shares a close relationship with Wang Luori. He’s also been spreading rumors and fanning the flames regarding Ye Qing. We would have no choice but to capitulate if Gu Suitang decides to attack us through this.”

The teacher understood his meaning immediately and declared in an indignant, sanctimonious tone, “A scholar should conduct themselves in a respectful manner showing dignity, self-respect, compassion, kindness and honesty. But despite our teachings, Wen Zilai is anything but that. For the good of all, I shall expel him from White Horse Academy this instant!”

Zhang Lanjiang didn’t respond immediately. He thought for a few seconds before replying, “It’s one thing if he’s just corrupt and unscrupulous, he has the gall to plot against a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau as well. That is a major crime that cannot be forgiven easily.”

“Wen Xuan, you will round up some men and escort Wen Zilai to the Pacification Bureau personally. Do whatever you must to garner the Pacification Bureau’s forgiveness!”

“That’s...” The teacher flinched, but Zhang Lanjiang cut him off before he could say anything, “Go!”

“As you wish, headmaster.” The teacher left with his orders.

After Wen Xuan was gone, Zhang Lanjiang looked out of the window and murmured, “I have no choice but to cooperate with the Pacification Bureau on this matter.”

However, Wen Xuan came back much sooner than expected and reported, “Headmaster, Wen Zilai is not in the academy right now. We don’t know where he has gone to.”

“He must have escaped.” Zhang Lanjiang massaged his forehead. “Find him immediately. If he cannot be found, then you will head to the Pacification Bureau and ask for Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang’s forgiveness.”

Wen Xuan replied, “Understood, headmaster,” but Zhang Lanjiang changed his mind a second later. “Actually, forget it. If you can’t find him, then I will pay them a visit myself. Also, make an announcement saying that White Horse Academy will be shutting down for a year. Tell the public that we are planning to forge our body, hone our minds, and expand our knowledge.”

It’s not a tactical retreat, it’s called cultivating for a better future.

“As you wish, headmaster.”

.....

At the commandery hall, Jiang MUYANG frowned deeply after listening to Li Lang’s full report. A moment later, he arrived at a decision and ordered, “Send Song Yushu[1] in.”

A while later, Song Yushu followed Li Lang into the commandery hall. As soon as the right minister saw Jiang MUYANG, he immediately said in an excited voice, "Governor, the Pacification Bureau mobilized the Black Feather Guards without going through use first. That is a major offense, is it not? I urge you to notify Lord Zhou Mu about this and have Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang punished for their transgression!"

"You want punishment?" Jiang MUYANG looked at the excited Song Yushu with pity in his eyes. "You may have it."

"Right Minister Song Yushu, you are found guilty of colluding with the likes of Bai Xinhui and Jiang Huanjian to commit various unforgivable crimes against Chu. Your seal is revoked, your position is no more, and you will be locked up in jail until it is time to transfer you to the Pacification Bureau, which is tomorrow. They shall be the ones to decide your fate!"

"W-What?" Song Yushu could hardly believe his ears, but when his seal was ripped out of his robes without resistance, he knew he wasn't dreaming.

"I didn't do it, my lord! I'm innocent!" Song Yushu screamed as he attempted to run up to Jiang MUYANG and begged for mercy.

Jiang MUYANG barked harshly, "What are you waiting for, Li Lang? Take him away!"

"At once!" Li Lang immediately stepped forward and apprehended Song Yushu. Then, he dragged the flailing, screaming man out of the door.

Stripped of his seal and position, Song Yushu was no more powerful than an ordinary person. Naturally, he was no match for Li Lang.

"I'm innocent, my lord! I'm innocent! Please, please!"

The screams grew weaker and weaker until the commandery hall fell completely silent. Jiang MUYANG stared in the direction Song Yushu had disappeared to and sighed. "I told you not to provoke the Pacification Bureau, but you just wouldn't listen to reason."

"How can I save you now that the Pacification Bureau is making an example out of everyone who had transgressed them?"

.....

At the Pacification Bureau's headquarters, every Pacification Bureau member save for a handful of essential personnel were currently gathered at the training grounds.

Fang Xiaoman and Gu SUitang were standing on an elevated platform, while the Peacemakers—Ye Qing, Lin Yuhuai, Chu Nianjiu and more—were standing in a line behind them.

"Zhou Chaosheng, Zhan Yang, Deng Sheng, Jin Chen, Sun Shangwen, Xu Feilong..."

Gu Suitang named twelve people in a row before sweeping his gaze across the Pacification Sentinels and crushing everyone with his aura. For a moment, everyone felt like a wooden raft desperately trying to survive a rainstorm on the sea.

“Bring them forward.”

The next moment, two dozen Pacification Sentinels dragged the twelve prisoners onto the platform.

“Kneel.”

As Gu Suitang commanded in a murderous tone, the twenty four Pacification Sentinels raised their sabers and smashed the prisoners’ kneecaps into bits, dropping them onto the floor. All twelve men writhed like worms but could only make desperate, whiny noises from their throats. It was because their tongues had already been severed.

Gu Suitang looked at the confused crowd and sneered. “Do you know what crimes these twelve have committed? Do you know why I’m making them kneel in front of y’all?”

The crowd was as silent as they were solemn.

Gu Suitang continued, “It’s very simple, really. As Pacification Sentinels, it is their duty to protect the people and slay all those who will threaten Chu. Instead, they betrayed us by colluding with outsiders, selling our secrets, aiding our villains, and generally undermining the Pacification Bureau.”

“While we are slaying Strangers and heretics and protecting the people, the ones who are supposed to watch our backs are scheming against us and pointing their blades at our backs. What do you think they death?”

For a moment, no one could say anything. Then, a man roared, “They deserve death!”

It was like the spark that lit the powder keg. Everyone’s fury was lit, and that fury joined together into a chorus of full-throated shouts,

“THEY DESERVE DEATH!”

“THEY DESERVE DEATH!”

“THEY DESERVE DEATH!”

When the cries had subsided a little, Gu Suitang uttered, “They do deserve death. According to the law of Chu, those who collude with heretics, leak our secrets, and plot against their own are to be executed without mercy. So it shall be.”

“Kill them!”

Gu Suitang waved his hand, and the sabers were lowered. A second later, twelve bloody heads were rolling across the floor and dyeing the limestone floor red.

“Ding Bumian, Lin Zhao, step forth!” Gu Suitang ordered next.

The Chief Enforcer Ding Bumian and the Flying Dragon Officer Lin Zhao stepped out of the crowd with crestfallen expressions.

“You’re my Chief Enforcer and Flying Dragon Officer, but you failed to recognize the villains right in front of you and were manipulated into harming your own colleagues. Do you plead guilty?” Gu Suitang said harshly.

“We plead guilty,” The two men admitted without any fanfare.

It was far too late to defend themselves anyway. Last night, Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang had summoned them and the twelve prisoners before capturing them all in one fell swoop. After they were escorted into a black site, they were interrogated the whole night and forced to spill everything they should and shouldn't say. Therefore, there was no point denying their crimes anymore.

They could try, but they would face the twelve prisoners' fate. It was that simple.

“Good. You have brought shame to the Pacification Bureau, but at least you're taking responsibility for your crimes.”

Gu Suitang declared, “I hereby announce that Chief Enforcer Ding Bumian and Flying Dragon Officer Lin Zhao are stripped of their posts and demoted to Pacification Sentinels.”

“Thank you for the mercy, chief.” Lin Zhao and Ding Bumian were extremely relieved to hear this. Losing their posts was far more preferable to losing their lives.

“Remember. As members of the Pacification Bureau, it is our duty to stay true to ourselves, uphold all that is virtuous and just, eliminate the strange, and protect the people.”

Fang Xiaoman then declared in a loud, dignified voice, “Pacification for the people!”

“Pacification for the people!”

“Pacification for the people!”

“Pacification for the people!”

Their loud, passionate cries would not fade until much later.

.....

While every faction in Luo Shui was fearing for their existence, and their bosses their lives, something strange was happening at a village located at the periphery of Luo Shui.

Many villagers were flooding into a clearing from every direction and kneeling on the ground. They kept muttering the name “Mara Buddha” again and again with empty eyes. Wisps of faith energy flew out of their bodies and gathered at a certain point in the sky, and eventually, it formed the silhouette of a massive, demonic-looking Buddha.

At the same time, every Mara Buddha statue in the village slowly crumbled and released wisps of demonic qi. They formed a pitch black heart at the center of the Buddha's body.

Thump!

Thump!

Suddenly, the heart started beating slowly. The whole world fell silent, and the demonic Buddha shrank and condensed until it took the form of a young, handsome, and demonic-looking monk.

It was at this moment dark clouds abruptly flooded in from the horizon and gathered above the monk. The howling wind raged like hurricanes, the rain poured like waterfalls, and lightning as thick as dragons shot through the sky.

Strangely, there was no thunder. There were only the howling noises of the wind and rain.

The next moment, silver lightning poured from the black clouds and struck the demonic monk, spilling demonic qi everywhere. It was a scene that could only be described as brutal. Still, there was no thunder. The sharp contrast between the violent imagery and lack of thunder painted a gorgeous picture that was unlike anything the world had ever seen.

As the soundless lightning hit the demonic monk again and again, his skin began cracking all over the place like a porcelain vase that could break at any moment. His heartbeat was growing slower and quieter as well.

“Amita Atman[2], is that the Tribulation of Nirvana?”

It was at this moment an old Buddhist monk wearing a Taoist robe appeared in the village. He was muttering a gatha[3] that was half Taoist and half Buddhist, and so didn't fit in either religion at all under his breath.

“He's using faith energy to forge his golden body and demonic qi to forge his demonic heart. This is how he's planning to come back to life. No wonder he summoned the Tribulation of Nirvana of all things!”

The half-Taoist, half-Buddhist monk smiled mercifully while holding a horsetail whisk[4] in one hand and prayer beads on the other.

“A golden body with a demonic heart? What a wonderful seedling. I shan't allow you to be destroyed by the damned heavens.”

The old man smiled and waved his horsetail whisk. The world shuddered, and every wind and rain within five kilometers of the site flew upward in reverse. It didn't stop until it annihilated the soundless lightning and scattered the black clouds into nothing, returning light and warmth to the world.

After the tribulation was destroyed, the demonic monk's heart started beating once more, and the cracks covering his body began healing slowly. The surrounding demonic qi was also gradually replaced by golden light until he resembled a second sun, divine and untouchable.

A moment later, the monk opened his eyes and slowly looked at the villagers. The villagers immediately dropped to their knees and chanted “Mara Buddha” like humble servants.

“Namo Marakaruna...”

“Namo Marakaruna...”

“Namo Marakaruna...”

“Namo Marakaruna[5], please allow us to become your followers...”

The demonic monk smiled, and every flower in the mountain where the village was located bloomed at the same time. However, the villagers began rotting and withering rapidly. Their vitality was vanishing like that of an old tree at death's door.

When Buddha smiles, flowers bloom everywhere. When Mara kills, no grass will be left alive.

After the villagers had all turned into dust, the demonic monk faced toward the old man and knelt on his knees. "Master..."

The old man laughed. "Since you're joining my sect, you should know my name. I am Dao Fo[6]. They call me Buddha Taoist in the *jianghu*. As the abbot of Little Western Paradise, I grant you the Dharma name, 'Demon Heart'."

The demonic monk bowed deeply. "Demon Heart thanks you for the name, master."

"Good. Let us go."

Dao Fo let out a hearty laugh before he started singing,

"Half monk, half Taoist, destined for both,

Not Buddha, not Tao, not human either.

Like a demon, like a Buddha,

Like a God, like a ghost.

I decide who and what I am, no one else."

"Amita Atman..."

As the old man sang, the flowers bloomed like spring, and gentle winds blew through the village, warm and healing. But no one wasn't there. Humanity was gone.

Chapter 317: Martial Tower

After taking out the traitors and spies inside the Pacification Bureau, the matter regarding Mara Buddha and Wang Luori was finally over. There were loose ends, but they weren't Fang Xiaoman and Gu Suitang's concerns, not his. That was why Ye Qing was basking in happiness and catharsis right now.

Mara Buddha was dead, and Wang Luori was no more. Naturally, the rock that had been sitting on his chest this whole time was gone as well. Of course he was elated.

Besides that, the Pacification Bureau and the Black Feather Guards had come to gather to destroy Sunset Hill, massacre the Bai Clan, and force the Blood Shadow Palace to shut themselves down for a year. They had set a big example and showed the *jianghu* of Luo Shui and even the world itself that the Pacification Bureau's blade hadn't dulled, and their men were still untouchable.

This meant he would be free from those pesky little *jianghu* warriors for a long time to come.

"Hahaha! I'm so happy! It's been a long time since I felt this good!"

Inside a room, Wei Yueshan took a gulp of wine before bursting out laughing. "We destroyed Sunset Hill and massacred the Bai Clan, and enough heads rolled that their blood could fill up a river. The

days where everyone and their mothers thought they could take a poop on our heads is finally over!"

For the past few weeks, countless people had treated the Pacification Bureau like a declawed and defanged tiger. They were mocking them both in front of them and behind their backs. It was no wonder that Wei Yueshan was feeling as elated as he was.

"It would've been even better if we took out Blood Shadow Palace though! A shame!" Wei Yueshan said regretfully, "I mean, why didn't we? We were going to set an example anyway."

Lin Yuhuai answered smilingly, "We couldn't, but we couldn't."

Wei Yueshan looked confused. "Can you speak human, brother?"

Ye Qing answered, "What he means is that there's no need to wipe them out. One, Blood Shadow Palace hadn't fallen completely under Mara Buddha's control like Sunset Hill. Two, Fu Qianqiu was ready for us. It would've cost us far more to wipe out Blood Shadow Palace than it was to wipe out Sunset Hill or the Bai Clan. In fact, it would most likely end up in a stalemate of sorts, so it just isn't worth it. And three, we don't want White Horse Academy to become the one biggest sect in Luo Shui. That future comes with its own set of problems."

"Also, everything is bad in excess, and we've set a big enough example already. It would probably backfire on us if we destroyed Blood Shadow Palace as well."

"Do you guys always think so much every time you do anything?" Wei Yueshan scratched his head. "I can't imagine leading a life as difficult as yours!"

"Difficult? No, you're just too stupid to understand the simple and obvious!"

It was at this moment Gu Suitang stepped into the room and shot Wei Yueshan a disdainful look. "If everyone in the Pacification Bureau has brains like yours, we would've been wiped out a million years ago!"

Wei Yueshan: "... *As expected of my master. That insult pierced right through my heart!*"

Gu Suitang looked at Ye Qing and said in a grateful tone, "Thanks again for everything, Joyless. If it wasn't for you, Mara Buddha most likely would've succeeded in taking over the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau."

"You flatter me, chief. I am sure that you and Chief Fang could've protected the Pacification Bureau even if I hadn't accidentally stumbled upon the bastard's conspiracy," Ye Qing replied humbly. "Besides, Commander Xue's the one who deserves the most credit this time, whereas I was just performing my duty."

"It's one thing to show humility, and another to depreciate self. You deserve this compliment, so just take it." Gu Suitang waved off his show of humility. "By the way, I came to tell you that the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau deeply appreciates what you've done for Luo Shui. You have exposed the Taiping cultists' conspiracy and saved Luo Shui from annihilation. Recently, you've uncovered Mara Buddha's conspiracy and

saved the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau from disaster as well. That is why Xiaoman and I have agreed to reward you for your meritorious service. You have two choices."

"What are they?" Ye Qing's curiosity was piqued.

Gu Suitang explained, "One, we'll allow you to enter the Tower of Secrets and pick any one Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact as your reward. You would also be awarded two Spirit Purification-stage martial arts manuals and one Qilin Pill, and you would become our Assistant Deputy Chief of Bureau. In Luo Shui, the only people you would answer to are me and Xiaoman."

"There's a post like that?" Ye Qing blinked in surprise. He was tempted, but he didn't make a decision immediately. Instead, he asked, "And what is the second option?"

Gu Suitang replied, "You may cultivate ten days in the Martial Tower."

"Martial Tower?" Ye Qing didn't know what that was.

"Martial Tower!" Lin Yuhuai, Chu Nianjiu and Wei Yueshan were clearly aware, however. They all wore shocked and envious expressions on their faces.

Seeing Ye Qing's confusion, Chu Nianjiu explained, "The Martial Tower is an extremely powerful Strange Artifact that belongs to all Pacification Bureaus in Chu. Legend says that it is the place where the Martial Emperor had completed his Way, and it contains a pocket space that is filled with the air of Dao. Inside this way, anyone below the Grandmaster stage would be able to grow their cultivation, practice their martial arts or perceive magic at least ten times faster than normal."

"In simpler terms, entering the Martial Tower would save any warrior at least years of hard work. There is a quote that describes its effects perfectly: 'Five days in the Martial Tower is equal to one thousand years in the outside world'."

Ye Qing hadn't heard of the Martial Tower, but he had definitely heard of the Martial Emperor before. The Martial Emperor was a peak champion several thousand years ago, and he was the man who invented and popularized the martial way. To this day, there was a Martial Emperor City in the Eastern Sea, and the lord of the city was titled the Martial Emperor. They were always named warriors in the Heaven Ranking and one of, if not the greatest warriors in the entire world. It was why the Martial Emperor City was also the sanctuary of the martial way.

"The Martial Tower is located in Luo Shui? I had no idea!" Ye Qing's eyes lit up.

But Chu Nianjiu shook his head and corrected his misunderstanding, "Yes and no. The true body of the Martial Tower is located at the capital of Chu, specifically the headquarters of the Pacification Bureau. The Martial Tower in our Pacification Bureau is but a Dao projection of the real thing. In fact, we're not the only ones who have it. Some big prefectures and commanderies were also bestowed with a projection of the Martial Tower for cultivation purposes."

"Oh, I see. Well, that makes a lot more sense. There's no way our Pacification Bureau could've protected the real thing," Ye Qing exclaimed in realization.

Gu Suitang: "... Should I teach him a lesson?"

Ye Qing hurriedly changed the subject when he noticed Gu Suitang's unfriendly gaze. "So er, obviously the projection's effect isn't as strong as the original, right?"

Chu Nianjiu sipped his wine before continuing, "But of course. One, the projection only has a tenth of the true Martial Tower's effects, so its accelerating effects are much weaker. That said, you'd still be improving five to six times faster than you normally would. Two, it takes the projection a very, very long time to recover its strength every time someone uses it. It cannot be used infinitely like the true Martial Tower."

"That is why only those who have done the Pacification Bureau a great service are allowed to enter the projection. Assuming you choose to enter the Martial Tower, I would urge you to cherish every second."

Gu Suitang asked, "So, what is your choice, Joyless?"

Ye Qing thought for a moment before declaring, "I choose to enter the Martial Tower."

The first option sounded very tempting—he would gain martial arts, a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact, and even become the third highest authority in the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau—but if he really thought about it, he didn't really need any of it.

He had amassed an overwhelming number of Strange Artifacts after entrapping and murdering the *jianghu* warriors who came after him. For example, he had the Soulstealer-class Boundless Mara Buddha, the Hatred-class Red Sleeve and Soul Absorbing Gong, and at least dozens of Malice-class Strange Artifacts. In fact, most of them were molding inside his Nature's Shells and never seeing use.

Finally, he could technically rely on the mysterious Annon Sutra to locate anything he wanted, so if he ever felt like obtaining another Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact, he could just ask.

Also, a Strange Artifact was ultimately a power that wasn't his. He would rather cultivate the powers that belonged to him and him alone.

He wasn't lacking in martial arts either. The "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" would last him until the Grandmaster-stage, he had plenty of powerful martial arts such as the "Saber of Spring Wind and Fine Rain", the "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art", the "Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul", "Break Through", "Divide", "Cloud Vaporization Style" and more. Technically, he could upgrade his movement art, "Illusionist's Grace", to a Spirit Purification stage one, but was it really necessary?

This was before mentioning the partial inheritance he received from the "Blood Demon" Shangguan Wuwo, and the "Nine Impetus of Tai Chi" he obtained from the wooden hut surrounded by the Reincarnating Flowers of the Four Seasons...

He hadn't even sorted out the martial arts he currently possessed yet. It would be avaricious of him to seek out more.

As for medicine, it was the one thing he didn't need to worry about. One of the best medicines one could obtain, the Water of Life, was already useless to him, and if he ever needed something better, he could just consult the Annon Sutra.

In conclusion, entering the Martial Tower was the best option of the two.

“Very good.” Gu Suitang smiled gladly. “External power is great, but internal power is better. It is the foundation of all warriors.”

“Yuhuai, Nianjiu, you will be joining Joyless as well.”

“W-What? Are you sure, chief?” Both men were stunned to hear this.

“But of course!” Gu Suitang replied without hesitation. “Both of you are qualified considering your long and meritorious service to the Pacification Bureau, and the Hidden Dragon Meet will be happening in a month, isn’t it? It’s been a while since we participated in the event. If we skip it again, someone is going to find something to talk about. That is why I’m planning to send the three of you as participants.”

“Of course, I expect you to perform exceptionally. You have my word that I will beat the crap out of you if you embarrass our Pacification Bureau.”

“That is why I’m sending all of you into the Martial Tower. Train hard and grow your strength as much as possible—especially you two, Nianjiu, Yuhuai. You are much older than Joyless, but you’re still stuck at the late-stage of the Astral Refinement stage. Aren’t you embarrassed? I expect the two of you to become Spirit Purifiers when you emerge from the Martial Tower.”

“As you command.” Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai nodded with bitter smiles. *Meritorious service my ass, you just don’t want us to embarrass you at the Hidden Dragon Meet. And why are you comparing us with Ye Qing? The guy is a Stranger in human skin. How the hell are we supposed to compete with that?*

Meanwhile, Wei Yueshan finally couldn’t suppress his anxiety any longer and asked, “What about me, master?”

“You, what?” Gu Suitang side-eyed at his disciple. The guy was jumping up and down.

Wei Yueshan immediately said, “I want to enter the Martial Tower and the Hidden Dragon Meet too, master!”

“Sure,” Gu Suitang replied. “Go take a nap, and you will have everything.”

Wei Yueshan: “...” *Are you sure I’m your disciple?*

“The Hidden Dragon Meet is only meant for dragons. Are you a dragon? No, you’re a worm. You’re only going to embarrass me if you attend!” Gu Suitang rebuked his disciple mercilessly. “Instead of practicing diligently, you consistently overestimate your abilities, get carried away by wishful thinking, and bite off more than you can chew. You truly are one of the stupidest, delusional, reckless and suicidal people I’ve ever met!”

Wei Yueshan opened his mouth but couldn’t think of anything to say. In the end, he muttered, “You’re a master of adjectives, master!”

Gu Suitang: "... Ah, *what did I do to end up with such an idiot disciple?*

"Get out of my sight before I kick your ass!" Gu Suitang pointed at the exit. "Actually, I'm going to train you personally starting tomorrow. If you can't grow even with my supervision, then you will die. Get ready."

Wei Yueshan: "... *He's definitely my master alright.*

Gu Suitang looked at the trio after he was done scolding Wei Yueshan. "Joyless, Nianjiu, Yuhuai, the three of you should get ready as well. You'll be entering the Martial Tower tomorrow morning."

"As you command," they answered with a salute.

Chapter 318: Mister Nine

Ye Qing didn't hurry back to the Inspection Department after leaving the building. Instead, he went to the Artificing Department.

"Joyless! You usually don't visit me at this time. Are you on official business?"

The Artificing Department was the place where the Pacification Bureau forged, refined, and repaired their Strange Artifacts. As soon as Ye Qing had entered the department, he immediately went up to a steaming workshop where the blazing flames were so bright that they overpowered the natural light outside the building.

A white-haired, spirited-looking old man sitting on a rocking chair inside the building couldn't seem to feel the heat, however. He was sipping his wine when he saw Ye Qing and called out to him.

"What, I can't visit you when I'm free?" Ye Qing smiled while handing over a pair of wine jars.

The old man was none other than the one who had refined the Fog Demon into the Boundless Mara Buddha's artifact spirit before, Old Zhang. He might look and feel like a normal person, but in reality he was powerful beyond measure. The workshop was so hot that even he, the guy who was reformed by a fucking flaming tornado, was feeling a little uncomfortable, but Old Zhang couldn't even seem to feel it.

Since he cultivated the "Paranirmitavaṣaṭin Heavenly Demon Sutra", his spiritual power was far greater than before. That was why he could clearly sense the terrifying power hidden within the old man's seemingly frail body.

"A thirty-years-old Pear Blossom wine? Wonderful!" Old Zhang took a sniff and poured the sweet liquid down his throat twice.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense. What do you need me for?" Old Zhang asked after he had had his fill.

"Hahaha..." Ye Qing took off the Blue Demon Hand and asked, "Can you check if it's possible to refine this pair of gloves? Upgrade its level so to speak?"

Although the Blue Demon Hand was just a Red-class Strange Artifact, it had saved Ye Qing's behind time and again. This was especially true for Hundred Poison, a stealthy and deadly poisonous gas that was useful even to this day. That was why Ye Qing was hoping that Old Zhang, the first or second greatest artificer of Strange Artifacts in Luo Shui, could improve its quality and extend its longevity.

"Oh? Let me see."

Old Zhang accepted the Blue Demon Hand and gave it a casual glance. He then said, "It's made from the scalp of the Hatred-class Stranger, the Blue Demon, tempered with the Hundred Poison, and forged using the Netherflame. Judging from the materials used, whoever made this was very ambitious. Unfortunately, their skill is so shoddy that the end product couldn't even survive the tribulation, which damaged its roots and made it far weaker than it should have been. Shame, shame."

"Impressive, Old Zhang! I can't believe how much you figured just by looking at it!" Ye Qing praised. It wasn't an empty compliment. He found out the Blue Demon Hand's origin only because he had the Annon Sutra. Old Zhang found out through countless years of experience.

"Keep the bootlicking to yourself. Anyway, you're lucky that the glove is made using very fine materials, but I'm still going to need a ton of materials to remake it better than what it was. In short, you best prepare your wallet for the worst." Old Zhang set down the Blue Demon Hand and took another gulp of wine.

Ye Qing smiled and dropped a whole pile of Strange Artifacts and materials on the floor. "Will these work, Old Zhang?"

The pile consisted of countless Malice-class Strange Artifacts and materials and even four or five Hatred-class Strange Artifacts. He had gotten it from the *jianghu* warriors he killed, of course. He had kept a select few that he deemed were useful, but the rest were useless to him.

He was going to sell them or exchange them for contribution points down the line, but he absolutely didn't mind spending them on the Blue Demon Hand if that was possible.

"Oh ho? It looks like you've collected quite the pile of useful garbage!" Old Zhang chuckled.

Ye Qing grinned. "Do you think they're usable, Old Zhang?"

"More or less. I can see a handful of items that will be beneficial to the Blue Demon Hand's upgrade." Old Zhang dug through the pile a bit before asking lazily, "Oh right, didn't Li'l Xuan give you a scale?"

"Li'l who?" Ye Qing was confused.

"I'm talking about Xuanhuang. Just gimme that scale already!" Old Zhang said impatiently.

“Oh, you mean Brother Xuanhuang?” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization before producing the scale the Xuanhuang Bow had gifted him. “Is this the one?”

“It is,” Old Zhang replied and made a grabbing motion. His hand was nowhere near Ye Qing, but the scale automatically slipped out of Ye Qing’s hand and into his own. “Li’l Xuan is a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact made from the muscles, bones and scales of the Disaster-class Stranger, the Xuanhuang Drake, and this is a scale from the Xuanhuang Drake itself. It’s naturally an extraordinary artificing material.”

“I asked Li’l Xuan many times for a scale in the past, but that brat just wouldn’t agree no matter what. Hmph!”

Xuanhuang is a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact? No wonder it’s so powerful, Ye Qing thought. “Do you need it to upgrade the Blue Demon Hand?”

The scale contained one full-powered attack of Xuanhuang, so it could save his life at a critical time. That was why he was reluctant to part with it.

“Yes. With this scale, I am certain I can upgrade the glove to Hatred-class,” Old Zhang answered.

“Just Hatred-class?” Ye Qing was a bit disappointed.

“Do you want to upgrade your Strange Artifact or not? If not, then get out of my sight!” Old Zhang immediately exploded.

“Of course I do! I never said I didn’t want to upgrade it!” Ye Qing hurriedly begged for forgiveness. “So, how long do you need to reforge the Blue Demon Hand?”

“What? You’re in a hurry or something?” Old Zhang asked.

Ye Qing replied, “Chief Gu is sending me to Tian Yong to participate in the Hidden Dragon Meet. I’ll have to depart in ten days if I want to make it there in time.”

“Oh, the Hidden Dragon Meet? That’s great. I expect to hear good things about you.” Old Zhang smiled. “Anyway, there’s nothing to worry about. You can come back ten days later to grab your Strange Artifact ten days later.”

“Thanks, Old Zhang. I’ll be taking my leave now.” Ye Qing took his leave after thanking Old Zhang.

The artificer gulped down some more wine and stared at Ye Qing’s back for a bit. He then let out a chuckle and muttered, “The Hidden Dragon Meet, huh? That is the competition that will decide if you’re a worm or a dragon; if you will soar to the heavens, and lay in the mud like the rest of us.”

“Do your best, boy.”

.....

After Ye Qing left the Artificing Department, he went straight to Heavenly Heart Clinic and caught up with Uncle Feng for a bit. Then, he met up with Feng Qingyou, who had just finished seeing a patient.

“Are you here for the ‘Nine Impetus of Tai Chi’?” A smiling Feng Qingyou asked while pouring him a cup of tea.

“You’re half-right.” Ye Qing gratefully accepted the tea and took a sip. The refreshing flavors spreading inside his mouth seemed to wipe away the fatigue he had accumulated for the past few weeks in a flash.

Two days ago, he had paid the Heavenly Heart Clinic a visit to thank Feng Liunian for his protection and enjoy some quality time with Feng Qingyou as usual. While he was talking about the “Nine Impetus of Tai Chi”, Feng Qingyou mentioned that she could read tadpole script, so he requested her aid to translate the martial arts manual.

He was entering the Martial Tower tomorrow. If the “Nine Impetus of Tai Chi” was as good as he believed, he was planning to add it into his training schedule.

That said, the “Nine Impetus of Tai Chi” wasn’t the only reason he came to the clinic today.

“Oh? Before you give me the answer, allow me to venture a guess.” Feng Qingyou elegantly sipped her own tea and shot him a pure, tranquil smile. “Are you going to leave Tian Yong and participate in the Hidden Dragon Meet soon?”

“Cough! Cough...” Despite being a Spirit Purifier, Ye Qing was this close from spilling tea through his nose and mouth. He voiced his puzzlement after he collected himself, “How did you know, Qingyou?”

Gu Suitang had only informed him of the decision today. How did Feng Qingyou find out about it so quickly?

Feng Qingyou smirked. “It’s quite easy to guess, actually. June sixth is when the Hidden Dragon Meet would take place, and it is a grand festival that is celebrated not just in Tian Yong, but all of Chu. Since the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau is subordinate to Tian Yong, it makes sense that they would send someone to participate in the event. Finally, this year’s Hidden Dragon Meet is slightly special compared to the ones before.”

“Special?” Ye Qing didn’t understand what she meant.

“Hasn’t Chief Gu told you about this? Oh, right. He might not have caught wind of the news yet.” Feng Qingyou explained slowly, “I heard that Mister Nine from Jixia Academy would be attending the meet as a spectator.”

“Mister Nine? Who’s that?” Ye Qing blinked.

“You really don’t keep up to date with anything, do you?” Feng Qingyou’s eyes curled into crescents as she chuckled. “Mister Nine is the ninth disciple of the Chief Libationist, also a member of the Jixia Academy. He was the top scorer of both the

literary and the martial examinations three years ago, and his name is Chu Wangsun. It is said that the blood of the imperial family flows in his veins.”

“After becoming the top scorer of both the literary and the martial examinations and taking the realm by storm, he turned down the major clans' and sects' attempts to recruit him and even refused the post offered to him by the emperor himself. Instead, he asked to become the Chief Libationist's disciple. It was said flocks of birds circled the sky, and extraordinary sights appeared in celebration when this happened. The Chief Libationist took him as his ninth disciple on the spot.”

“Since then, everyone calls him Mister Nine.”

“The Chief Libationist?” Ye Qing's eyes lit up. The Chief Libationist

was the highest authority in the Jixia Academy. In a sense, he was similar to the headmaster of an academy or the head of a sect.

Not anyone could become the Chief Libationist as a matter of course. Only someone who possessed both a treasure trove of knowledge and immense strength was entrusted with this position. To provide a clear picture, anyone who was the Chief Libationist's disciple might as well be standing at the center of Chu.

Besides that, Chu Wangsun sounded like an impressive fellow. Not anyone could become the top scorer of both the martial and the literary examinations of Chu.

Feng Qingyou continued, “Because Chu Wangsun is attending this meet, this year's Hidden Dragon Meet is sure to be exceptionally grand. Anyone who catches his eyes would most likely be recommended into the Jixia Academy and rise to the top of the heavens.”

“Oh! Now I get it.” Ye Qing asked curiously, “But how did you know about this?”

Feng Qingyou smiled. “It's not really a secret. A lot of people knew about it.”

Ye Qing squinted at her suspiciously. *Are you trying to hoodwink me? If “a lot of people knew about it”, then why did Old Gu know nothing about it? Or maybe he knew, but didn't tell me for some reason?*

“If you are participating in the Hidden Dragon Meet, you may put on a good showing and try to join the Jixia Academy. It would not be a bad career path for you,” Feng Qingyou ended in an indifferent tone before producing a martial arts manual. “Anyway, here's the translated version of the ‘Nine Impetus of Tai Chi’. It's a Grandmaster-stage martial art.”

“Grandmaster stage?!” Ye Qing's eyes lit up when he heard this.

Feng Qingyou took a sip of tea before continuing, “Technically, the ‘Nine Impetus of Tai Chi’ doesn't count as an offensive-type martial art. It is a martial art about neutralizing and borrowing forces. Someone who grasps the nine impetus—activity or inactivity, rigidity or flexibility, fast or slow, light or heavy, leisure or urgent, real and unreal, strong and weak, yin or yang, life or death—shall grasp the timing of movement, the theory of weight, the concept of rigidity and flexibility, the

idea of what is real and unreal, and finally achieve harmony in both yin and yang, and life and death. They would attain 'Tai Chi' and become impervious to anything and everything."

"So, it's a defensive-type martial art?" Ye Qing asked[1].

"Yes, and no. You're half-right." Feng Qingyou returned his earlier words to him.

"What do you mean?" Ye Qing couldn't figure out her meaning since he didn't possess her wealth of knowledge or experience. Luckily, he was never ashamed to ask a question.

Feng Qingyou answered dutifully, "The 'Nine Impetus of Tai Chi' is a defensive-type martial art, but it can be used offensively once you have mastered the nine impetus, familiarized yourselves with many martial arts and magic, obtained the keys to yin and yang, understood the power of life and death, and figured out the Way of Change. To put it in simpler terms, you would be able to borrow anyone's strength as your own and reflect any attack that is thrown at you right back at them. This martial art has amazing potential."

"What the heck? That's Star Shift[2]!" Ye Qing blurted out without thinking.

"Star Shift? What's a Star Shift?" Feng Qingyou tilted her head to one side in puzzlement.

"Ahem... it's er, it's also a godlike martial art that could borrow another's strength and reflect any martial technique right back at the attacker," Ye Qing explained.

"Hmm? That sounds very similar to the 'Nine Impetus of Tai Chi'. But why haven't I heard of it before?" It was Feng Qingyou's turn to scrutinize him now.

Ye Qing tried to laugh it off, "There are countless martial arts in this world, haha. It's perfectly natural that you wouldn't know about it."

"Those are reasonable words, but I'll have you know that I know at least one to two thousand martial arts," Feng Qingyou replied unhurriedly before enjoying a sip of tea.

Ye Qing: "... *I suspect you're one-upping me, but I didn't dare to question you because it might actually be the truth!*

"Anyway, that's not important." Ye Qing forcefully changed the subject. "What is important, is that anyone who masters this martial art is no one to be scoffed at."

"Correct. This is a martial art with amazing potential. Here, this is the translated version. I'll be keeping the original for myself. You don't mind, do you?" Feng Qingyou asked smilingly while handing over the translated version of the "Nine Impetus of Tai Chi". She knew Ye Qing was changing the subject but didn't press the matter.

"No problem. It's not like I can read the original anyway," Ye Qing answered happily while putting away the martial arts manual. Assuming that what Feng Qingyou said

was accurate, to say that it had amazing potential would be an understatement. Sure, it was no match for the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra”, but it was still leagues above your average martial arts.

The good news was that this martial art was incredible. The bad news was that the pile of martial arts he needed to study after entering the Martial Tower had increased by one. *It’s back to school, dammit!*

The duo conversed with each other for a while longer before Ye Qing finally took his leave. He still had to arrange Kung Fu Frog and Wawa accordingly and make his preparations.

“Would you be attending the Hidden Dragon Meet, Miss?” Uncle Feng appeared in the room and asked after Ye Qing was gone.

Feng Qingyou replied indifferently, “Who knows? I may get involved if it turns out to be interesting.”

Uncle Feng grinned. “Understood. I shall make the preparations then.”

After Uncle Feng was gone, Feng Qingyou caressed her cup and spoke to herself, “Wannabe dragons and tigers will be fighting in the Hidden Dragon Meet. Will they soar to the heavens, or be buried in mud?”

“This should be interesting.”

Chapter 319: Strange Artifact Tribulation

“*This* is the Martial Tower?”

Ye Qing sounded puzzled as he stared at the ordinary, old, downright decrepit pagoda in front of him. This was not what he had imagined when he heard about it.

“Yes, it might look a little... shabby, but it’s definitely the Martial Tower,” Lin Yuhuai answered. “A mountain is tall, but you only give it a name if a celestial lives in it. The Martial Tower was an ordinary pagoda until the Martial Emperor completed his Way in it. That was how it came to be recognized as the Martial Tower.”

“Alright. Let’s stop wasting time,” Gu Suitang urged before walking up to an old man sweeping the floor in front of the Martial Tower and saluting him. “Three Pacification Bureau disciples would like to enter the Martial Tower, Old Shen[1]. Can you please open the Martial Tower for them?”

Old Shen slowly turned around and swept his glance across Ye Qing, Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai. His old, wrinkly face squeezed into a smile as he asked, “Are they the ones?”

Gu Suitang replied in a respectful tone, “Yes, they are.”

“Not bad. They are all excellent seedlings.” Old Shen smiled and shambled his way over to the door. Then, he removed a set of keys from his waist and unlocked the door.

The instant the door was unlocked, a terrifying spiritual pressure swept out of the Martial Tower like a shockwave. It was like a sick cat had suddenly turned into a ferocious tiger. Ye Qing's face paled a little, but he quickly recovered. However, Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai felt suffocated and nearly dropped to their knees.

Old Shen stood at the forefront, but he couldn't seem to feel the shockwave. He pressed a wrinkly hand on the door and slowly pushed it open.

The more the door opened, the greater the pressure became. If the initial pressure was just a storm, then it was now a raging river.

"The door is open. You may enter now."

Old Shen stepped aside and smiled at the trio.

"The entrance to the Martial Tower is now open. Whether you can enter it and grasp your opportunity... is up to you." Gu Suitang was also smiling at them, though his was a sly, shit-eating grin.

The trio barely resisted the urge to roll their eyes. *You could've told us that we would need to be tested before we are allowed to enter the Martial Tower!*

Gu Suitang's grin widened as he basked in their aggrieved expressions. "Don't look at me like that. I'm not the one who set the rules. Plus, if you can't even withstand this amount of pressure, you're just going to die inside the Martial Tower. I'm doing this for your own good."

Like hell we're gonna believe your lies, you shitty old man!

This time, they *did* roll their eyes. Still, they didn't hesitate to walk toward the Martial Tower.

Ye Qing pressed a finger on his forehead and pulsed his demonic lotus. Demonic thought immediately flooded out like a river and neutralized the spiritual pressure permeating the air. Then, he slowly walked toward the Martial Tower like he was taking a leisurely stroll at a beautiful meadow.

Right before he entered the door, Ye Qing turned back and shot Gu Suitang a smug look. The Martial Tower's spiritual pressure was strong, but not strong enough to truly pressure him yet.

"This brat..." Gu Suitang shook his head.

Old Shen's eyes also flickered with a hint of surprise and curiosity.

Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai weren't Spirit Purifiers, and they didn't possess a powerful cultivation art that gave them immense mental strength like the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra". Therefore, both men were pale-faced and sweating buckets.

They didn't give up, however. They slowly but surely made their way toward the entrance.

Every time Lin Yuhuai took a step, a yellow talisman would fall from the sky and draw ripples

Every time Chu Nianjiu took a step, snow would fall, and ice would freeze the ground.

It wasn't easy, but the duo were ultimately able to make it to the entrance through sheer willpower.

As soon as Lin Yuhuai and Chu Nianjiu entered the building, the door immediately slammed shut behind them. The terrible pressure permeating the air was gone as well.

“The kids this time are pretty great.” Old Shen commented after the door was shut. “That kid named Joyless is especially exceptional.”

“By the way, you wouldn’t happen to know what cultivation art he practices, would you?”

Gu Suitang shook his head.

Old Shen was surprised by this. “You don’t know? I thought he ascended to the Spirit Purification stage using one of our cultivation arts?”

Gu Suitang answered, “No, he ascended while he was inside the Demon’s Tomb. He probably obtained the inheritance of a venerable senior or something. Is that a problem?”

“He entered the Demon’s Tomb? No wonder.” Old Shen exclaimed in realization. “I just noticed that his spiritual power is extremely unorthodox. One might even call it evil.”

Gu Suitang didn’t care. “There is no such thing as an evil skill or martial art, only evil men. So what if he practices a cultivation art of the Dark Ways? So long as he doesn’t use it to harm innocents, then all is well.”

“That may be true, but he’s really young. I’m worried that he would succumb to the temptation of power and stray off the right path,” Old Shen replied worriedly.

Gu Suitang chuckled. “He won’t. If he was anyone else, then I would share your worry. But not Joyless. I believe in him.”

Old Shen shook his head. “As long as you’re confident. I’m just voicing my concern, and it’s not like that the opinion of a lowly watchman matters.”

“A lowly watchman? Your jokes are getting funnier, Old Shen.” Gu Suitang smiled, and the conversation ended there.

Inside the Martial Tower, Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai felt much lighter after the door was closed. The terrifying spiritual pressure had also decreased considerably. It wasn’t gone, but it was within their ability to endure.

The interior of the Martial Tower was surprisingly clean and minimalistic. There were no furniture, and there were only a handful of praying mats on the floor. They were clearly meant to sit on them.

Despite the minimalist interior, Ye Qing could sense a rich amount of origin energy and spiritual intent flowing inside the Martial Tower. The origin energy was unbelievably pure, and the spiritual intent contained various insights and understanding regarding the martial way and all sorts of martial arts. They were clearly left behind by the Martial Emperor himself.

Legend says that the Martial Emperor was a one-of-a-kind genius who was a master of all martial arts and magic. Not only that, he was also incredibly well-learned and knowledgeable.

He understood now why those who entered the Martial Tower experienced incredible growth. With such a potent spiritual intent, it would be impossible not to.

“You can literally feel the Martial Emperor’s strength just by perceiving this spiritual intent!” Chu Nianjiu sighed.

“Yes, only a champion like the Martial Emperor could leave behind such a miracle,” Lin Yuhuai echoed in agreement.

Ye Qing wanted to voice a compliment or two as well, but when the words traveled to his mouth, it turned into, “Yeah, he’s strong as fuck!”

Chu Nianjiu: “...”

Lin Yuhuai: “...”

It might’ve been better if you didn’t speak.

Ye Qing realized that he had ruined the atmosphere as well and coughed, “Ahem, let’s start training already. Don’t forget that we only have ten days.”

The duo agreed. They quickly sought out a suitable praying mat, sat down, and began their training.

.....

Creak...

When you get absorbed in training, you lose track of time pretty quickly. Ten days came and went in the blink of an eye, and the door of the Martial Tower opened exactly on time. Not long after, Ye Qing, Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai reluctantly returned to the real world.

“Not bad! You’ve both reached the Spirit Purification stage, Nianjiu, Yuhuai! Not bad at all!” Gu Suitang’s eyes lit up with delight.

Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai were clearly gladdened by their own progress. They saluted Gu Suitang deeply and said, “It’s all thanks to you, chief. We’re glad we’re able to meet your expectations.”

Next, Gu Suitang looked at Ye Qing. The young man’s cultivation level hadn’t increased at all, but that didn’t mean that he hadn’t changed. For an instant, he noticed an air around Ye Qing that was as dark as the night and as bottomless as the abyss before it disappeared—no, it was more like it blended with its surroundings so as not to draw attention to itself.

How strange, Gu Suitang thought to himself but didn’t prod Ye Qing for details as a matter of course. “The three of you may take a day’s break. Tomorrow, you will travel to Tian Yong.”

“Tomorrow? Isn’t that a little too hasty?” Chu Nianjiu.

“Not at all. It is just right.” Gu Suitang answered, “There are twenty or so days left before the Hidden Dragon Meet, and I expect you to hone yourself even more as you make your way to Tian Yong. It will be a true test since Xiaoman and I won’t be shadowing you in secret this time.”

“As you command.” Now they understood why Gu Suitang had only given them ten days to train in the Martial Tower. He had calculated everything.

“You may leave now.” Gu Suitang waved them away.

After the trio left the Martial Tower, Ye Qing bade his colleagues goodbye and made a beeline for the Artificing Department. He wanted to check if Old Zhang was done reforging the Blue Demon Hand. But as soon as he reached the entrance, he heard Old Zhang yelling, "Give me your blood essence now, Joyless!"

Ye Qing was speechless for a moment. *Ayo, you want my blood the second I stepped through the door? The fuck's going on in there?*

"Blood essence, now!" Old Zhang urged again when he saw that Ye Qing wasn't moving.

Realizing that it wasn't a shitty prank, Ye Qing mustered a mouthful of blood essence in his throat and asked, "Weh wo you want wit?"

It took Old Zhang a second to understand that Ye Qing was asking, "Where do you want me to spit my blood?"

"That thing on that table! Spit on it immediately!"

Ye Qing looked. There was a black, ashen-colored item on the table. It looked like a glove, but it looked so ugly he could throw up on the spot.

His eyes bulged. *It's my Blue Demon Hand! My beautiful Blue Demon Hand! What did the old bastard do to you?!*

"Just spit your fucking blood already!" Old Zhang was so impatient that he slapped Ye Qing in the back, causing him to throw up his fresh blood all over the glove.

As soon as his blood essence hit the glove, it gradually vanished as if it was being absorbed by the glove. The next moment, the glove shot right through the roof and into the sky.

At the same time, a dark cloud started gathering above the glove. Thunder cracked, and silver lightning bolts struck the glove again and again.

Every time a lightning bolt struck, the blackness enveloping the glove would decrease just a little. Then, the glove emitted a ray of bluish black light, and pitch black flames rapidly expanded in every direction like clouds, shrouding half the sky. An odorless scent was also spreading from the flames.

The pitch black flames were extremely deadly. The buildings directly underneath it began melting and crumbling without a sound, and the surrounding grass and trees started withering rapidly as well. It was a horrifying sight to say the least.

"Get out, everyone! Do not come closer!" Old Zhang roared and made a grabbing motion. A restriction was activated, and invisible energies confined the black flames to a certain area.

Thankfully, the Artificing Department enjoyed a wide space and was situated at a fairly remote and unpopulated area. The artificers seemed to be used to this as well as they evacuated the area in an orderly area. Otherwise, it might have resulted in massive chaos and unnecessary death and destruction.

“That’s... a Strange Artifact Tribulation?!”

“Old Zhang must be refining something again.”

“It’s a high quality one too from the looks of it!”

“Heh, that depends if it survives its tribulation!”

“True enough. One thing for certain, Old Zhang is going broke again. Look at all that property damage... hehe.”

Outside the affected area, a bunch of Pacification Bureau members and artificers were watching the tribulation and gossiping about it. Some of their voices were full of schadenfreude.

Chapter 320: Dragon Sacrifice Bay

“What’s this, Old Zhang?” Ye Qing asked while frowning at the pitch black flames ravaging the sky.

Old Zhang replied, “It’s a Strange Artifact Tribulation. Your Blue Demon Hand is considered too anomalous and heretical by the heavens, which was why a tribulation has descended to prevent its birth.”

“Can I do anything?” Ye Qing asked.

Old Zhang answered, “No. The Strange Artifact must survive the tribulation via its own power. If it succeeds, it will become stronger than ever before. If not, then it will crumble into dust, just like how a butterfly who fails to break out of its cocoon will die.”

“Everything will go well, right?” Ye Qing said worriedly.

Old Zhang shot him an unfriendly look. “What’s that? Are you questioning my artificing skills?”

Ye Qing flinched and replied hurriedly, “Of course not! I was just worried!” *I should’ve known better than to antagonize my artificer!*

As the dark cloud continued to shoot lightning at the Blue Demon Hand, the amount of black flames was growing rapidly as well. In response, the tribulation grew stronger until it looked like silver serpents were dancing in the sky.

Rumble rumble rumble!

Black flames scattered everywhere as the silver lightning struck it again and again. Eventually, the entire sky was shrouded by clashing silver and black. The dark cloud and silver lightning were still growing thicker and thicker.

“ROAR!”

An indefinite amount of time later, a furious roar suddenly cut through the roars of lightning, and the pitch black flames joined together and formed the shape of a serpent. It shot straight toward the cloud despite the barrage of silver lightning pouring down on it.

If a carp that overcame the Dragon Gate would become a true dragon, then a serpent that overcame the gate of heavens would become a sky dragon.

When the serpent finally punched through the clouds and scattered it like dust, a draconic roar resounded throughout heaven and earth. This should be a glorious, uplifting sight, but the world only grew darker and darker. The wind howled, and the rain poured like a waterfall. It was like the world itself was weeping at its failure. Many people couldn't help but feel sad as well even though they didn't understand the reason.

The dragon circled the sky a few times before finally descending toward Ye Qing. When it arrived, the black flames faded away to reveal a glove that looked as thin as a cicada's wings. It was bluish black in color and covered in tiny dragon scales. Black qi swirled around it, and it looked like a mini dragon swimming freely in the air.

"On top of what the Blue Demon Hand already has, I added the Xuanhuang Drake's scale, the skin of the River Devouring Toad, the Sky Nether Stone, the Azure Purple Gold and other precious materials. Besides that, I forged it using the Netherflame and the Cold Spring of Myriad Poison and greatly enhanced its Netherflame and Hundred Poison. To make a comparison, both abilities are at least dozens of times more potent than they were before. It has other abilities, but let's just keep it short and say that it's now a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact."

Old Zhang looked immensely proud as he stared at the Blue Demon Hand. Ye Qing's hands shook as he stared at Old Zhang with widened eyes of shock and delight. "A Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact?"

"Yep. Since the Blue Demon Hand is reborn, would you like to give it a new name?" Old Zhang asked.

"It's fine. I still prefer to call it the Blue Demon Hand," said Ye Qing as he put it on his left hand. He could clearly sense the tremendous amount of power contained within its fabric. If he channeled its power right now, he was confident he could burn everything within a sixty-meter radius into dust.

"I thought you said that you could only upgrade it to a Hatred-class Strange Artifact, Old Zhang?" Ye Qing asked while caressing the glove lovingly.

Old Zhang snorted. "I was just being humble. It's all too easy for me to forge a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact, understand?"

"I do. Thank you, Old Zhang," Ye Qing said sincerely.

"You're welcome." Old Zhang waved off the thank you. "Just remember to pay me one thousand contribution points."

"ONE THOUSAND?!" Ye Qing was so appalled that he nearly tossed the Blue Demon Hand back to Old Zhang. Since he joined the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau, he had slain countless Strangers and made many major contributions including saving Luo Shui from the Way of Taiping and the Pacification Bureau from being controlled by Mara Buddha. Despite this, he had only accrued a little over a thousand contribution

points. That was how difficult it was to earn contribution points in the Pacification Bureau.

But now, Old Zhang was asking for a thousand contribution points. That was like asking him to give up half of his entire fortune. No, more than that.

“Too little? Should I make it two thousand then?” Old Zhang shot Ye Qing a disdainful look. “Some of the main materials used to reforge your Blue Demon Hand such as the River Devouring Toad, the Sky Nether Stone, the Cold Spring of Myriad Poison and so on all came from *my* pockets. Did you seriously think your shitty little glove could become a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact without those materials? Dream on.”

“Without exaggeration, those materials alone are worth over one thousand contribution points, and I didn’t even ask you to pay me the labor cost. The fuck you’re screaming about, huh?”

Ye Qing: “...” *Yes sir. It’s all my fault, sir.*

After Ye Qing paid Old Zhang the contribution points, he got ready to take his leave. It was at this moment the artificer recalled something and called out, “Oh right, I expect you to pay for the destroyed buildings as well.”

“Why me?!” Ye Qing burst out, aghast.

Old Zhang replied matter-of-factly, “It’s *your* Strange Artifact that destroyed the buildings. Who should pay for them if not you?”

Ye Qing: “...” *You’re the boss.*

“One last thing. Make sure you nurture the Blue Demon Hand properly. There is a high chance it might become sentient!” The old man finally left after saying that.

“It might become sentient?!” Ye Qing burst out again, but this time it was a cry of pure joy. He was so elated he couldn’t even feel the pain of losing a thousand contribution points anymore. It was because the Blue Demon Hand would have unlimited potential if it became sentient.

Ye Qing went over to the Pacification Sentinels keeping the order and negotiated with them for a bit. Then, he hurried back to the Inspection Department to test out the Blue Demon Hand’s newfound power.

.....

Dang...

The next day morning, three youngsters left the city as soon as the morning gong rang.

At the city entrance, Wei Yueshan, Xu Banren, Ugly Monk, Amorous Nun and more stood side by side and called out to the trio, “May you have a safe journey, my lords! May you soar to the heavens!”

“May you have a safe journey, my lords! May you soar to the heavens!”

“May you have a safe journey, my lords! May you soar to the heavens!”

“May you have a safe journey, my lords! May you soar to the heavens!”

The cries sounded like thunder, but instead of intimidation, it was full of hope and expectations.

Outside the gates, Ye Qing, Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai saluted their colleagues before promising solemnly, “We will.”

After they said their goodbyes, the trio made haste for Luo Shui Point. The plan was to catch a boat to the south before continuing toward Tian Yong on foot.

“Is it just me, or are you unhappy about something, Joyless?”

On the way, Chu Nianjiu noticed Ye Qing was looking downcast for some reason and voiced his concern.

“Am I?” Ye Qing shrugged before shooting him a reassuring smile. “I’m fine.”

Chu Nianjiu was right on the mark though. Yesterday, he went to Heavenly Heart Clinic to bid Feng Qingyou goodbye only to learn from a medical student that she and Uncle Feng had left the place three days ago. The student had no idea where the duo had gone to, nor had they left him a parting message. His disappointment was such that even his joy at acquiring the reborn Blue Demon Hand was washed away completely.

He didn’t know what he was feeling—or rather, it was too complicated to sum up in one word. It was a mix of sorrow, disappointment, worry, longing and more.

Chu Nianjiu thought Ye Qing was missing Luo Shui and consoled him, “Come now. We’ll be back as soon as the Hidden Dragon Meet is over. There’s nothing to be sad about.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine. Come on.” Ye Qing shook off his complicated feelings and put on a bright smile on his face. The *jianghu* was big, and the path was long. If fate willed it so, then they would definitely meet each other again.

It wasn’t long before the trio reached Luo Shui Point. They quickly got on a boat that was headed toward Feng Yang[1]. Once there, they would take the road that passes through He Jian and Guang Ping. After that, it was a one way street into Tian Yong prefecture and the city of Tian Yong.

The trio chatted on the deck and admired the scenery for a bit after boarding the boat. Then, they returned to their rooms to train.

A last-minute effort might not amount to much, but not putting in the effort at all was definitely not going to improve their chances.

Nighttime soon arrived, and a bright moon shone above Luo Shui. From time to time, a cool breeze would blow over the river and scatter the reflections of the stars and moon.

Inside his room, Ye Qing was sitting crosslegged on his bed and practicing the “Paranirmitava? avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra” with his eyes closed. His demonic thought rippled out like waves and manifested all sorts of strange, eerie and disturbing illusions, but they were confined within his room only. Not one bit of the unusual phenomenon leaked out of his room.

Suddenly, Ye Qing opened his eyes, and the bizarre illusions vanished like they never were. A hint of steel flickered behind his eyes.

Something's wrong.

Ye Qing stepped out of his room and appeared on the deck soon after. When he scanned around, he discovered that the guards, sailors, servants and more had completely disappeared for some reason.

He stretched his demonic thought until it enveloped the entire boat. He let out a sigh of relief when he found that the crew and passengers were all safe and sound, but he frowned when he noticed that they were all holed up inside their rooms with nervous, practically terrified expressions on their faces.

Normally, some guards would be manning the deck in case a Stranger or some sort of danger showed up. However, these people were neither catching a break or sleeping. They were just hugging themselves and shivering like it was the end of the world. He couldn't understand what was going on.

It was at this moment an old man stepped out of his room and saw Ye Qing standing on the deck. He immediately rushed over to his side while crying urgently, "Why are you outside, customer? Get back to your room now!"

"What's wrong, Steward Wu?" Ye Qing asked. The old man was a steward on the boat, Wu Zhao.

"No time for questions. We need to get inside, now!"

Wu Zhao grabbed Ye Qing's arm and forcefully dragged him into his own room. Wu Zhao was only a late-stage Vessel Augmentor, so Ye Qing could've easily dodged his grab or pushed him away. He didn't though. He wanted to know what Wu Zhao was thinking, or more accurately, what was going on with this boat.

Wu Zhao let out a sigh of relief as soon as he shut the door behind them. He then looked at Ye Qing and rebuked him, "Customer, did we not tell you not to leave your rooms during the night no matter what? Why didn't you listen to us?"

"I'm sorry. I forgot," Ye Qing apologized. He didn't take offense with Wu Zhao's harsh words because he could tell that Wu Zhao was just concerned for him. "But what's going on, Steward Wu? Why can't we leave during the night?"

Wu Zhao sighed. "Take a seat while I grab you some tea."

After Wu Zhao poured Ye Qing a cup of tea and took a deep gulp from his own cup, he finally said, "It's not a complicated story. To put it simply, this part of the river is quite dangerous during the night."

"Dangerous?" Ye Qing raised an eyebrow.

Wu Zhao sipped his tea again as if to calm his own nerves. "This part of the river is called the Dragon Sacrifice Bay. It was said to be the lair of an evil dragon who caused much trouble for the residents who lived here a hundred years ago."

“Later, the dragon sent the residents a dream and claimed that it would give them its blessing if they perform a ritual sacrifice every month; a boy and a girl to be exact. If they did this, then it would protect their families from harm, promise good weather, ensure that the crops grow well and so on.”

“There was nothing the people could do against the dragon, so they had no choice but to obey its demands. At the beginning, they didn’t truly believe the dragon. They thought it was just a ploy to torment them even more than they already were. However, after they performed the sacrifice, they quickly discovered that the disasters that plagued them for the longest time plagued them no longer. Not only that, the weather was fine, and their crops were growing finer than ever before. Over time, everyone living at these shores became quite wealthy.”

Wu Zhao let out a deep sigh when he reached this point in the story. “However, wealth gave way to sloth, and sloth gave way to greed. Realizing that they could just sacrifice a pair of children to enjoy a good life, they stopped working altogether and just performed ritual sacrifices in exchange for food and survival.”

“This wasn’t a sustainable way of living, of course. After they ran out of children to sacrifice in their own village, they began buying children from slavers. When the demand eventually outweighed the supply, they took up the slave trade and began kidnapping children themselves. Still, their greed was endless. They went from stealing children in secret to openly kidnapping them in plain sight. Their scope of activity kept growing and growing as well.”

“Finally, their heinous actions caught the attention of the local government, and in a fit of righteous rage the government executed every villager that was involved and tossed them into the river. Then, they lured out the evil dragon and slew it once and for all.”

“But it was already too late. So many children were sacrificed at these waters that their accumulated resentment had transformed into an Anomaly. When the sun set, and nighttime had arrived, those horrible rituals from the past would replay itself like it had never been gone. Anyone who encountered the Anomaly and saw the ritual during the night would be pulled into the Anomaly and turned into a sacrifice themselves. This is why this place was eventually known as Dragon Sacrifice Bay.”