

## Stranger 391

### Chapter 391: Fierce Battle

At the beginning, the first Chu emperor had established the Intelligence Department just to supervise corrupt officials and those who abused the people. Later, it was further developed by the Martial Emperor, Emperor Tai Kang and Emperor Xuan Hua to concentrate their power and undermine the clans, despots and sects plaguing their rule. Because of this, the Intelligence Department kept growing in power until they became one of the most powerful departments in Chu.

Within the realm, they were responsible for supervising all officials and keeping an eye out for any signs of discord and unrest. Outside the realm, they spied on the empire's greatest competitors: Yan, Qi and Wei.

The Martial Emperor had flattened all the clans who might challenge the imperial court's rule within the realm, Emperor Gao Zong had silenced the *jianghu* with his sword, and Emperor Ying Zong repelled the invaders and established the roots of Chu. The Intelligence Department lurked in all of their shadows.

One could say that the Intelligence Department was the emperor of Chu's eyes and ears. They were responsible for supervising the realm, keeping an eye on Chu's enemies, and knowing what was going on in the world. Their influence could be seen among the officials, the *jianghu* and the people, and one could even say that the Intelligence possessed the authority to stick their nose into anyone's business so long that they were human.

As they were the emperor's personal guard and answered directly to him, they too were bestowed the power to be the judge, jury and executioner just like the Pacification Bureau. They could appeal directly to the emperor as well.

Naturally, the Intelligence Department was loathed and feared by the *jianghu*, their fellow officials, and even the people.

Since the Intelligence Department was derived from the supervisory authority the founder had established at the beginning, the old titles were maintained to this day. From top to bottom, the upper first rank title was called the Head of Intelligence, the upper second rank title was called the Minister of Works, the upper third rank title was called the Judicial Commissioner, the lower fourth rank title was called the Inspector General, and the lower fifth rank title was called the Inspector. Below that, there were shadow guards, spies, intelligencers and more.[1]

These were just the official titles. There were unofficial titles that wielded tremendous authority but wasn't made known to the public. Not even Ye Qing, someone who should be in the know, knew too much about them.

The young man claimed that he was an Inspector General, so he was a lower upper fourth rank official. Since the Intelligence Department was directly subordinate to the emperor, all officials working for the Intelligence Department should be treated as if they were one rank higher than their actual rank, meaning that the young man should be treated as a lower third rank official. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he commanded thousands and thousands of people.



*The Intelligence Department? No wonder they found us so quickly,* Fortune Taoist thought to himself. It was one thing if they were contending with bailiffs and common bailiffs. They were confident they could come and go as they pleased. But the Intelligence Department? Not at all.

They weren't called one of the most powerful departments of Chu for nothing.

Even if they managed to survive this crisis, what about the next? Attracting the Intelligence Department's attention was like attracting the attention of the King of Hell himself. If the King of Hell commanded someone to be executed by midnight, who would dare wait until dawn?

"Hehehe. Surrender now while you can. Otherwise, you will regret your decision," The plump man behind Chu Renhe chuckled.

Fortune Taoist decided to make a compromise, "My lord, would you believe me if I told you that we killed the Feng Clan's patriarch and the governor of Qing He? I swear that the annihilation of the clan has nothing to do with us."

"That doesn't matter. What matters is that you killed not one, but two officials. That is a death sentence." Chu Renhe sneered. "Plus, the Feng Clan isn't the only one you destroyed. Three years ago, you robbed three hundred thousand coins at He Xi and killed the one hundred and twenty five soldiers escorting the hoard. Two years ago, you killed thirty one common bailiffs and the governor of Chang Shan. And one year ago, you intercepted the Zhong Yuan Escort Agency's escort cart and stole nine Northern Sea Pearls, which were presents for the Harmony King's birthday..."

"Horseshit! We stole the coins, but we never killed anyone. We did kill that corrupt official and his goons at Chang Shan, but I've never heard of a Northern Sea Pearl. That wasn't us!" Killer Monk huffed angrily.

"That's what a criminal would say." Chu Renhe sneered disdainfully. "There is a mountain of evidence that proves that you have, indeed, committed those crimes. You're not talking your way out of this!"

"Killer Monk, Fortune Taoist, Sick Scholar, you have one chance to surrender to the law. Submit now, and you may die a painless death!"

"If you want to condemn someone, any pretext is fine, right?" Fortune Taoist's expression turned cold. "Very well then. Come at us."

"Scatter, my friends!"

Killer Monk, Fortune Taoist and Sick Scholar had cooperated with each other for a long time. As soon as Fortune Taoist gave the order, all three of them immediately scattered in different directions.

While escaping, Fortune Taoist waved his sleeve and summoned a gust of smoke. It swiftly spread throughout the entire inn until nothing could be seen.



“Stubborn curs!” Seeing this, Chu Renhe sneered and commanded his three subordinates to chase after the trio.

Halfway toward the exits, Killer Monk, Fortune Taoist and Sick Scholar suddenly turned back and raced toward Chu Renhe. It was said that the best way to defeat a group of enemies was to kill their leader first. The inn was completely surrounded, and it didn’t take a genius to know that their chances of breaking through were pretty slim. But if they could capture Chu Renhe, then they might yet get out of this situation alive.

Chu Renhe must have quite the background to become a lower fourth rank official at his age. His colleagues wouldn’t dare to attack them if they could use him as a hostage.

However, Chu Renhe was a formidable warrior, and his three lieutenants weren’t weaklings either. It would be incredibly difficult for them to capture him.

That was why Fortune Taoist decided to play a little trick. First, he created a smokescreen and announced that they were going to run for it. Naturally, Chu Renhe’s three lieutenants were going to leave his side. This would give them the opening to attack him three on one.

Besides that, the smoke he released was no ordinary smoke. It was the incense smoke commonly found in temples and other places of worship. Smoke that was mixed with the people’s power of wishes could only blind one’s eyes, but also disrupt one’s energies and blank out one’s spirit senses.

Chu Renhe might be a formidable warrior, but he would not be expecting them to turn back and ambush him. His youth also suggested that he might be lacking in *jianghu* experience. And finally, it was clear that Chu Renhe looked down on them and underestimated them greatly. That kind of mentality would only improve their chances of success. There should be no reason the three of them couldn’t kidnap a child with too much power for his own good.

Sometimes, power wasn’t everything.

Sometimes, you gotta use your brain as well.

“It’s a smart plan. Too bad...”

Ye Qing poured himself some wine despite the ongoing battle and smoke. He was looking at Chu Renhe’s direction almost as if the smokescreen couldn’t affect him at all.

Meanwhile, Killer Monk, Fortune Taoist and Sick Scholar had reached Chu Renhe. As they reached out to grab the man, the inspector general suddenly raised his eyebrows, sneered, and launched a series of palm strikes. As his hands had turned as white as jade, the flurry of attacks looked like a blooming white lotus.

Bang bang bang!

Killer Monk, Fortune Taoist and Sick Scholar stifled a groan as they were struck back whence they came. There was a pitch black palm mark on all of their chests, and layers of frost were seeping out of it.

The matter wasn’t over, however. While the trio were flung backward, Chu Renhe’s three lieutenants dashed toward them and unleashed their respective attacks.



The plump man launched a hail of hidden weapons at Fortune Taoist from less than ten meters away.

The thin man appeared behind Killer Monk like a phantom and swung his hand diagonally at the monk's neck to behead him.

And the Taoist nun pointed her fingers at Sick Scholar and caused her sword to shoot toward his heart.

At the last possible moment, Fortune Taoist's robes billowed on its own and bounced off all of the hidden weapons.

The surprise attack had failed, but the plump man ignored his failure and moved his hands so fast it looked like he had a thousand hands. He threw what looked like a stream of silver needles, poisonous sand, iron tribuluses[2], locust stones, willow darts and more.

By the time the storm of hidden weapons finally ended, Fortune Taoist's robe looked like a beggar's rags, and his whole body was covered in wounds. It was terrible.

Killer Monk manifested a golden light around his body that was shaped like a bell. When the thin man's hand struck the light, it actually elicited a loud bell ring.

Unperturbed, the thin man pressed harder and cut a hole in Killer Monk's golden bell. He might have failed to take his head off, but he was able to leave a deep gash on the monk's back.

Sick Scholar let out a violent cough that blew the sword flying toward his heart away. However, the Taoist nun let out a cold bark and sliced the air with her fingers. The sword moved as if she was holding it and cut off the Sick Scholar's arm before he could react.

Not only had their ploy failed miserably, they all took a massive amount of damage.

They thought they were tricking Chu Renhe, but Chu Renhe was tricking them as well.

Fortune Taoist used the incense smoke to mask his group's true intentions, but Chu Renhe saw through it and sent his lieutenants away on purpose. It was so that they could deal the trio a deadly blow.

The incense smoke didn't just neutralize their enemies' senses, but also their own. Therefore, they had no idea that Chu Renhe's lieutenants were lying in ambush.

The stroke of genius had also turned out to be the engineer of their defeat.

"So? Are you going to struggle some more?" Chu Renhe raised a hand to stop his lieutenants' attacks before looking at Killer Monk, Fortune Taoist and Sick Scholar.

Fortune Taoist looked up at Chu Renhe from the floor and uttered with a bitter expression, "You're smarter than we gave you credit, Lord Chu!"

He knew from the moment he got ambushed that his opponent had seen through his ploy. Now, their chances of escaping were lower than ever.

"Not at all. You're just too stupid." Chu Renhe wiped his fingers with his silk handkerchief. "Why would I set up an ambush without figuring out all of your tricks first?"



“As expected of the Intelligence Department. Your reputation is well deserved.”

Fortune Taoist sighed and looked at the plump man, the thin man, and the Taoist nun one by one. He asked, “The three of you are the ‘Laughing Shura’ Tang Chuan, the ‘Iron Man’ Yu Shi, and the ‘Grim Rakshasa’ Luo Changbing, aren’t you?”

“Looks like fortune telling isn’t your only expertise, Reverend!” The plump man declared with a sunny smile.

“Cough! Cough... You were famous warriors of the *jianghu* back then. Why did you become the imperial court’s dogs?” asked Sick Scholar with a violent cough. Maybe it was because he lost an arm and bled too much, but he looked as pale as a sheet right now. One could mistake him for a ghost.

#### Chapter 392: I Don’t Care

The “Smiling Asura” Tang Chuan was an early-stage Spirit Purifier and, if the rumors were to be believed, the disciple of Sichuan Tangmen[1]. Notorious for his hidden weapons, he could toss out hundreds of hidden weapons and kill just as many in a single breath. Since he often smiled when he killed his enemies, he came to be known as the Smiling Asura. He had a gray moral compass and could kill as easily as he save a life.

The “Iron Man” Yu Shu was also an early-stage Spirit Purifier, but he belonged to no one until he joined the Intelligence Department. He was a woodcutter until he stumbled upon a martial arts manual named the “Art of Eating Iron”. By eating and drinking all kinds of metal, he was able to make his body as tough as iron. That was why he was able to cut through Killer Monk’s Golden Bell Shield with his bare hands.

The “Grim Rakshasa” was also an early-stage Spirit Purifier. The scion of a prestigious clan, she was naturally cold and aloof. Her family wanted to marry her off to a worthless, hedonistic son of another powerful clan for political reasons, so she castrated him during her wedding night and left her family to become a Taoist nun. She mastered a sword art called the Supreme Palace Swordkinesis and could mentally control her sword without losing any potency.

These three had made a small name for themselves until one day, they suddenly vanished from the *jianghu*. Now, it would seem that they had joined the Intelligence Department.

“We just left for greener pastures,” Tang Chuan said smilingly. “Only a fool like you would slander us as dogs.”

“You seem to believe that you’re heroes, but a true hero would not resort to killing innocents to achieve their goals. I would rather be a dog—which I’m not—than a hypocritical, delusional ‘hero’ like you.”

“Cough, cough! And I would never become a dog who only knows how to wag its tail to please its master. As expected, you’ve become dogs so long that you couldn’t even differentiate black and white, right from wrong anymore. How pitiful! How laughable!” Sick Scholar shook his head regretfully.



“No wonder they say that a scholar's tongue may rival a warrior's sword. I wonder if your tongue will remain so sharp when you're inside our prison?” Tang Chuan was still smiling, but his words were clearly a threat.

“You think you've won? Cough...” Sick Scholar said indifferently while looking at Chu Renhe and Tang Chuan.

“Oh? Sounds like you have a plan to turn things around. Do show us what you're made of,” Tang Chuan retorted sarcastically.

Killer Monk, Fortune Taoist and Sick Scholar were on the same level as the lieutenants. If they were in top form, then it would be a coin toss which side ended up victorious. However, they weren't alone, and all three of them were seriously injured. Tang Chuan just couldn't see how they might get out of this alive.

“Cough cough... you never know until you try.” Sick Scholar's eyes were growing a shade of dark yellow, and his voice was turning raspy. “You said you were prepared for us, right? Then you should know why I'm called the Sick Scholar.”

Chu Renhe and his lieutenants frowned, puzzled.

“The reason I'm called Sick Scholar is because I'm gravely ill, but you probably don't know why I'm gravely ill, do you? Cough! Cough... This is the reason I'm sick...”

Sick Scholar coughed another two times and spat out a glob of bright red blood. An unnatural redness overtaking his complexion. By now, the incense smoke was fading, and everyone's vision was returning to normal.

When they looked down on Sick Scholar's bloody fingers, they noticed that the pool of blood on the ground was wriggling like it was alive. More accurately, there was something inside the blood that was writhing incessantly.

It was at this moment they realized that the blood was full of worms. They looked disgusting, strange and horrifying.

“Gu worms?!”

Chu Renhe paled a bit. “You practice the ‘Feed The Worms Art’?!”

“You're a knowledgeable man, Lord Chu.” Sick Scholar covered his mouth and coughed again.

“Hmph. So what? You don't think that the gu worms are enough to stop us, do you?”

Chu Renhe regained his composure quickly. The reason he turned pale wasn't because he was afraid of the cultivation art, but because its method and process were so cruel and inhumane that even he couldn't stand it.

The “Feed The Worms Art” was a cultivation art that allowed the practitioner to control gu worms, but it was even crueler, sinister, and inhumane than most gu insect cultivation arts. The practitioner



essentially turned their own body into a breeding ground for gu worms and fed them their own flesh and blood to fuel their growth and reproduction.

If the practitioner successfully reached the adept level of the “Feed The Worms Art”, their body would consist entirely of the insects. They could manipulate the worms like their own limb, alter their form as they pleased, and kill anyone with ease. Moreover, they no longer had any weakness or vital spot because their flesh and blood had been fully replaced by gu worms. They could lose most of their body and still live to fight another day.

Despite the strengths of the “Feed The Worms Art”, few people chose to practice it due to how torturous the method and process were. After all, you were basically feeding your body to the worms in exchange for power. To say that the pain was unbearable would be an understatement. One must endure being fed on by the worms practically every second of the day. Most people broke long before they reached the adept level, and those who gave up would immediately be consumed by the gu worms they cultivated. It was a literal do-or-die cultivation art.

Practitioners of this cultivation art either died or went crazy. Adept or not, no one could endure decades of non-stop torture and not go insane.

Chu Renhe didn’t know that the Sick Scholar cultivated the “Feed The Worms Art”. Even so, he didn’t think it was a problem. While the cultivation art was immensely powerful, the gu worms posed no threat to him.

“I know you’re not afraid of the gu worms. Your dogs are immune to my worms as well. But what about the others?”

The corners of Sick Scholar’s lips curled into a sick, disgusting grin. “Since you managed to identify my cultivation art, I assume that you’re aware of its characteristics as well. My gu worms are everywhere inside my body including my blood.”

“When Warrior Luo cut off my arm just now, I took the opportunity to spread them across the whole inn while the incense smoke still existed.”

“In other words, most of the people inside this inn are infected with my gu worms.”

“What?!”

“You are lying, Sick Scholar!”

The spectators inside the inn immediately erupted in shock and disbelief. It was bad enough that they were dragged into the Intelligence Department’s business, now they were infected by flesh-eating gu worms as well? What the fuck!

“I am not. Cough! Cough... I never lie.” Sick Scholar coughed and pointed at an Intelligence Guard standing close to the entrance. An Intelligence Guard referred to the Intelligence Department’s private soldiers and guards.

The guard’s facial features abruptly contorted with pain when Sick Scholar pointed a finger at him. A second later, he clutched his stomach and dropped to the floor, rolling back and forth from sheer pain.



“You see that?” Sick Scholar withdrew his finger with a smirk.

No one could pretend that Sick Scholar was lying after seeing this. They all glared at him and questioned, “What are you planning, Sick Scholar?”

“Nothing much. I just want to live, that’s all.” Sick Scholar looked at Chu Renhe and said, “I’m the only one who can remove my gu insects. You get what I’m saying, don’t you?”

“Are you threatening me?” Chu Renhe immediately figured out his ploy. He was using everyone in the inn as hostages.

“You can say that. You call yourself an imperial official, right? Surely you wouldn’t abandon the people to their fate, Lord Chu?” Sick Scholar asked.

“Hah! You turn your fellow warriors and innocent people into hostages, and you call yourself a hero of the people?” Tang Chuan scoffed.

“You can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.” Sick Scholar replied unhurriedly, “Plus, you’re the reason I have no choice but to do this. Otherwise, why on earth would I resort to such a method?”

“So? What do you say, Lord Chu?”

“I think—” Chu Renhe uttered through gritted teeth before dashing forward all of a sudden. He appeared in front of Sick Scholar in the blink of an eye and crushed his whole body with a devastating palm strike.

The attack was useless though. The Sick Scholar immediately broke down into countless gu worms and crawled away in every direction.

Chu Renhe sneered and attacked again. His cold energy flooded the room and froze all of the gu worms. After he landed on his feet, Chu Renhe swung his sleeve and scattered all of the frozen worms into nothing.

“I think I don’t care. No one threatens me, you see,” declared Chu Renhe while sweeping an arrogant gaze across the inn.

“I see you don’t care about the lives of these people. Thank you for confirming that you care nothing for our or the people’s lives.”

Before Chu Renhe finished speaking, Sick Scholar reappeared next to Fortune Taoist. However, he was many times smaller than he was originally. He was also wearing a sick grin as if he knew Chu Renhe would do this from the beginning.

“You see that, my brothers and sisters? These so-called officials don’t think of us as humans. They only see us as stepping stones that will propel them to greater status and authority. Cough! Cough cough... Rather than putting your fates in the hands of



someone who will never save you, why don't you save yourself? If you help us escape this place, I swear in the name of the sages that I will cure you all."

"But if I die, well... I don't need to tell you what's going to happen, do I? Cough cough..."

"Lies and trickery! Kill him!" Chu Renhe's face darkened as he barked out the order. Tang Chuan, Yu Shi and Luo Changbing immediately rushed forward to kill the trio.

But as soon as they made a move, a huge saber descended from above and slammed into the floor between the three lieutenants and the trio.

"Wait!" A loud voice resounded. "Let's talk this out, shall we?"

Tang Chuan, Yu Shi and Luo Changbing ignored the speaker and continued their charge. Seeing that they would not listen, a couple more people rushed out of the crowd and blocked in front of them, saying, "Please wait, my lords."

"You dare stop us? Do you know that the punishment for obstructing the Intelligence Department is death?" Tang Chuan yelled when he saw this.

One of the warriors said stiffly, "We're not trying to obstruct you, my lords. We just want to talk."

Yu Shi abruptly charged him and swung his right arm. As the trio were only Astral Refiners, his attack easily sent them flying into the air and forced blood out of their lips.

Chapter 393: Gut Worm

"The Intelligence Department really doesn't think of us as humans. We might as well fight them as save ourselves!" A lot of *jianghu* warriors grew angry when they saw this[1].

They didn't want to have anything to do with Sick Scholar, but they had to protect him because he held the key to their survival.

But now, they were pissed off with the Intelligence Department as well. How could they side with an organization who would leave them for dead for their own objective? An organization who, at least on surface, was supposed to protect the people?

"He's right. You should all be well aware of the Intelligence Department's behavior and conduct. They never cared about our lives, and they would rather kill an innocent than let a criminal escape. You know they're going to lock us up and interrogate us even after they killed the trio simply because we happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Could we even leave the place alive?"

"Yeah! I'd rather fight them to the death than go down like this!"

"To the death!"

"To the death!"



As the Hidden Dragon Meet was near, most of the people dining in the inn were warriors. In this *jianghu*, who hadn't taken at least one or two lives? If they submitted to the Intelligence Department, they would be guilty even if they weren't.

If before there was a chance the Intelligence Department would simply leave after capturing the trio, now they no longer had an option. Unless they did as Sick Scholar told, they were all going to suffer agonizing deaths.

The tension in the inn turned razor sharp in an instant. Everyone was staring at Chu Renhe and waiting for him to respond.

"Obstructing the Intelligence Department is akin to rebelling against Chu. Are you planning to rebel?" Chu Renhe's expression was so dark it painted a stark contrast with his pale skin. A terrible aura quickly encompassed the entire inn.

Earlier, Sick Scholar had purposely baited Chu Renhe into attacking him. As a result, the Intelligence Department suddenly found themselves pitted against the entire inn. *Jianghu* warriors were notoriously cowardly, so they would never allow Sick Scholar to be killed or captured until their affliction was cured. Add to the fact that some idiots had fanned the flames, and capturing the trio suddenly became a much harder task than before, much less killing them.

If Chu Renhe persisted in his ways, then a river of blood was sure to flow in this inn.

"Rebel?" A *jianghu* warrior snorted. "So what if we are? Kill us all if you can, *boy*."

"Yeah! It's your duty to eliminate rebels, no? I dare you to kill us all!"

"Hehehe, you don't dare, do you? Intelligence Department or not, imperial officials are all talk and no bite!"

"Hahahaha!"

For a time, most *jianghu* warriors laughed scornfully. They didn't believe that the Intelligence Department had the balls to act considering the situation.

"You want to die?" Chu Renhe's dark expression slowly spread into a cold, malicious grin. "As you wish!"

"I said this before, and I'll say it again. No one threatens me or the Intelligence Department."

"Intelligence Guards! Kill them all!"

Whoosh whoosh whoosh!

As soon as the orders were given, wooden clicks could be heard, and crossbow bolts poured in from every direction like the rain.

Tang Chuan, Yu Shi and Luo Changbing also rushed forward and attacked the closest warriors without hesitation.

The Intelligence Department's audacity was such that the *jianghu* warriors were completely caught off guard. They were so shocked that they even forgot to dodge or block the attacks.



“They’re too green!”

At the corner, Ye Qing shook his head at the *jianghu* warriors’ foolishness and inexperience. They had no idea who they were dealing with. As the emperor’s guardian, the Intelligence Department wielded near absolute authority that only the Pacification Bureau and the emperor himself could match. In fact, they were ruthless, pitiless, and even more audacious than even the Pacification Bureau because their main responsibilities involved people, not Strangers. Negotiation was a foreign concept to them even toward other empires, much less a ragtag band of *jianghu* warriors.

Not only that, it was obvious that the young Inspector General was not the type of person who could be negotiated with, and these *jianghu* warriors were literally challenging him to kill them all. It was akin to lighting a lantern inside the toilet.

Sighing, Ye Qing slowly disappeared from his seat like a mirage. The next moment, he appeared at the center of the dining hall and summoned a storm of wind that swept away all of the crossbow bolts in an instant.

Before anyone could react, Ye Qing tapped the space in front of him and executed the “Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul”. A wave of demonic thought immediately washed over everyone.

The Spirit Purifiers—Chu Renhe, Tang Chuan, Yu Shi, Luo Changbing; Fortune Taoist, Killer Monk and Sick Scholar—reacted the quickest out of everyone. As soon as Ye Qing appeared and sent the crossbow bolts flying, they immediately got ready to take action. Then, the “Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul” robbed them of their consciousness and froze them in place.

Ye Qing took one step forward and appeared behind Fortune Taoist, Killer Monk and Sick Scholar. He then knocked them all out with a hand knife to the neck.

Killer Monk in particular lost his Golden Bell Shield completely and let out a muffled groan. Such was Ye Qing’s strength that his knees sank into the ground, and his eyes rolled to the back of his head.

Suddenly, Ye Qing’s senses warned him of danger. Like a dragon, he immediately twisted around and threw a mighty punch.

Boom!

There was a loud impact, but Ye Qing didn’t move a step. The thin layer of frost on his fist quickly melted at a visible rate.

On the other hand, his attacker, Chu Renhe, was smoking like he was on fire and staggering backward. Every time he took a step, he would leave behind a scorched footprint. He caught himself only after he had taken nine steps.

“Who are you? Will you go against the Intelligence Department as well?” asked Chu Renhe grimly after sucking in a deep breath. His arm was shaking a little, his fingers were broken, and his elbow looked bruised. This was nothing compared to the fact that he felt like he was being barbecued over an inferno, however. His blood, true qi and mind were boiling, and he was experiencing major difficulties trying to gather his energies. It was uncomfortable to say the least.



The punch hadn't broken his arm and scattered his energies, it injected a tremendous amount of astral qi into his body and injured both his insides and his mind.

"Excuse me. I accidentally used too much strength." Ye Qing smiled apologetically.

It was at this moment Tang Chuan, Yu Shi and Luo Changbing broke out of the "Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul". When they noticed that Ye Qing was standing off against Chu Renhe, they immediately rushed forward to surround him.

Right after that, the *jianghu* warriors also snapped out of their stupor. Although they didn't know what happened, why Killer Monk, Fortune Taoist and Sick Scholar were all lying on the floor, and who the guy standing off against Chu Renhe was, it didn't stop them from taking a step forward and glaring at the duo. At the same time, they shot the Intelligence Guards outside the inn nervous look and threatened rather impotently, "What do you think you're doing, Lord Chu? Do you really want to go down with us?"

Chu Renhe ignored the *jianghu* warriors and stared at Ye Qing intently. "Who are you, warrior? At your level, I doubt you've been infected with the gu worms. Why are you getting involved?"

He raised a hand to stop the Intelligence Guards from approaching further before continuing, "This is between me and these murderers. It has nothing to do with you. I would advise you to stay out of it unless you want to implicate yourself, your friends and your family."

Tang Chuan, Yu Shi and Luo Changbing shot him a look of shock and disbelief. Chu Renhe's words sounded forceful and threatening, but they could tell that it was the opposite. Their normally uncompromising leader was actually offering a compromise.

"Please don't misunderstand. I'm not trying to stop you from carrying out your business, and I'm definitely not planning to become your enemy. I just want to lend you a hand." Ye Qing spread his arms wide to show that he didn't mean harm.

"Is that so?" A cold glint flickered behind his phoenix eyes as he squinted a little. "In that case, do you mind handing over the criminals to me?"

"You can't! We're all dead if you hand them to him!"

"Yeah! These officials clearly don't give a shit about our lives! Don't listen to him!"

"They're right, brother. These bastards are planning to kill us all. We should take these three with us and break out of this place."

"Get ready to fight these dogshit bastards to the death, brothers and sisters!"

"Yeah! They think they can do whatever they want? We'll show them!"

The *jianghu* warriors grew restless as soon as Chu Renhe spoke up. Blood and death were their norm after all. To call them short-tempered would be an understatement. Chu Renhe had literally ordered their deaths earlier, so why on earth would they stand around and submit to their fate?

About a dozen *jianghu* warriors didn't even bother to waste their breath. They charged straight toward the nearest Intelligence Guards, prompting the latter to draw their crossbows again.



“Seriously, give me a break.”

Ye Qing raised his foot half an inch and stomped the ground, eliciting a terrific boom that sounded like a thunderclap. The *jianghu* warriors and the Intelligence Guards immediately lost their footing and fell to the floor.

“Stop what you’re doing and listen to me.”

It was like a second thunderclap had erupted beside their ears. The yell had punched through their mental defenses, disoriented them and dispelled their energies.

There were a handful of people in the inn who managed to endure the disabling attack, but even they were looking at Ye Qing with shocked expressions. If they channeled their full strength, they could stomp the floor hard enough to shake the entire inn as well. But Ye Qing before them had done it without hurting the floor and knocked over every combatant in the area. This was unbelievable considering that even the weakest among them were Vessel Augmentors.

Besides that, the yell had dispelled their energies like nothing but did not real harm to them. This was definitely beyond their ability.

“Have you all calmed down?” Ye Qing asked while sweeping his gaze across the crowd. This time, the inn was as silent as a morgue.

“Good. Now listen to me.”

Ye Qing said slowly, “No side is in the wrong in this matter except these three bastards. You don’t really hold a grudge against one another either. Therefore, there is no need to resort to violence.”

“And how are we supposed to solve this conundrum without violence?” Chu Renhe asked coldly.

“The true reason you are butting heads with each other is the Sick Scholar. You want him because you want to live,” Ye Qing looked at the *jianghu* warriors before glancing at Chu Renhe, “and you want him because of the crimes he and his cohorts committed. However, your needs are not actually in conflict with one another.”

“There is only one Sick Scholar, but we both want him. Why wouldn’t there be conflict between our sides?” Chu Renhe asked ridiculingly. He had returned to his usual arrogant and cruel self.

“The reason they want Sick Scholar is because they were infected by his gu worms. As far as they know, the only way they could be cured is to save him. You want Sick Scholar himself because they broke the laws of Chu.”

Ye Qing smiled. “You don’t actually want the same thing. One side wants the cure, and the other wants the person. Naturally, it’s possible to solve this without conflict.”

Chu Renhe narrowed his eyes. “Really now? And how are we going to solve this, pray tell?”



Ye Qing answered, "Sick Scholar is under my control right now. After I get the cure from him and save my *jianghu* brethren, you may apprehend Sick Scholar and take him to your headquarters. It's that simple."

A clamor of murmurs broke out immediately. Assuming that the situation could be resolved as easily as Ye Qing claimed, then of course they would rather do it his way.

#### Chapter 394: Stomach Worm

"What if he doesn't have a cure?" A *jianghu* warrior voiced his doubt. "Sick Scholar isn't stupid. If he's audacious enough to hold an entire inn of people hostage, then I'm sure he would've hidden the cure at a secure location."

But Ye Qing shook his head. "There is no reason for Sick Scholar to hide the cure since he has no idea that the Intelligence Department was coming. That is why I'm fairly sure that the cure is on his person."

Ye Qing grabbed Sick Scholar's Nature's Shell and wiped away the Spirit Purifier's mental imprint with his demonic thought. Then, he searched the Strange Artifact for the cure.

A few breaths later, Ye Qing looked up at the *jianghu* warriors and let out an awkward laugh. "Ahem... it looks like I was wrong. He didn't have the cure after all."

The crowd's gaze immediately turned disdainful, but there was even more disappointment.

"It's not a problem though." Ye Qing moved on casually as if he hadn't just eaten his own words. "If I'm not mistaken, the gu insect inside Sick Scholar's body is most likely the Gut Worm. This means that you are all infected by the Gut Worms."

"Gut Worm? What's that?" Someone asked.

Ye Qing didn't keep them in suspense. "A Gut Worm is a Malice-class Stranger that infests a person's guts after entering their body. If it is not taken out in time, it could consume your whole gut and kill you."

Ye Qing suddenly looked down on Sick Scholar and asked, "Am I right, Sick Scholar?"

"You're quite the knowledgeable man, warrior. You have my respect." Sick Scholar opened his eyes and let out a quiet cough. He pushed himself to a sitting position and continued, "Since you know about the Gut Worm, you should also know that it's near impossible to remove the Gut Worm from a victim's body without the proper solution. Trying to pull it out by force is akin to disemboweling yourself. Hence the name."

"Cough cough... therefore, I would advise you not to extract the Gut Worm by force. It will be a dangerous endeavor to say the least."

Countless people's faces turned ugly when they heard this. Someone uttered through gritted teeth, "You deserve death, Sick Scholar."



Sick Scholar's grin grew increasingly manic. "I do, but if I'm dying, then you're all coming with me. It would be a worthy death."

However, Ye Qing chuckled and slapped Sick Scholar at the back of their head. "No one's dying today except you, brother."

Sick Scholar froze and withdrew his grin. He looked up at Ye Qing with cold calculation and iron scrutiny as he said, "It sounds like you have a way to save them? You better move quickly then. It won't be long before the Gut Worms eat through their intestines and spill out of their stomachs."

"Thank you for the reminder." Ye Qing's smile widened. "But I'm not worried. After all, it's quite easy to cure the Gut Worm."

"Oh? Do tell," Sick Scholar challenged.

"You just need the Stomach Worm, am I right?" Ye Qing replied.

"You—how did you know about that?" Sick Scholar's face turned ugly and panicked all of a sudden.

"Why wouldn't I know about the Stomach Worm?" Ye Qing countered. "Here's a quote from 'On Picking Up Strangers': The gut and the stomach are like a pair of crazed lovers. They desire each other like a couple who are madly in love."

Ye Qing sighed when he saw the confusion on most people's faces. *This is why you study, people!*

"The 'gut' and the 'stomach' in the passage refers to the Gut Worm and the Stomach Worm. The Gut Worm is male, and the Stomach Worm is female. If they sense their counterpart's presence, they would strive to meet up with them no matter the cost," Ye Qing explained.

"If that's true... then we can draw out the Gut Worms with the Stomach Worm!" Chu Renhe exclaimed in realization.

"Exactly!" Ye Qing smiled. "Am I correct, Sick Scholar?"

"You are," Sick Scholar regained his cool and replied in a calm voice.

His admission caused a smile to appear on everyone's face, but Sick Scholar immediately wiped it away with a taunt. "So what? A Stomach Worm is even rarer than a Gut Worm. By the time you found it, everyone here would be a pile of blood and skeleton already."

"Of course, the Intelligence Department is powerful. If they're willing to help, then you might be able to make it."

"But wait, you just threatened to kill them where they stand. I wonder if these heartless officials would do anything to help you. Cough cough..."

Ye Qing chuckled. "Still trying to sow dissension? You should've become a storyteller with a mouth like yours."



“Dissension? Is that what they call the truth these days?” Sick Scholar said scornfully. “I’m sure my *jianghu* brethren know better than me what kind of *monsters* these so-called ‘officials’ are. Tell me, brothers and sisters. Do you seriously think that the Intelligence Department will save you?”

“Not all officials are bad people, just like not all so-called ‘heroes’ are good,” Ye Qing remarked casually. “Besides, there’s no need to trouble them. The Stomach Worm may be rare, but it isn’t difficult to obtain.”

“What kind of nonsense is that? If something is rare, then how can it be easy to obtain?” Sick Scholar taunted.

Ye Qing looked down on him and smiled widely. “Of course it’s easy. After all, there’s one on your person, isn’t there?”

Sick Scholar blanched and looked away from Ye Qing as if to hide his shock. At the same time, he coughed so loudly it was a miracle he hadn’t coughed up a lung yet.

“Stop coughing. Your Gut Worms are useless against me,” Ye Qing wrinkled his nose in disgust. He could tell that countless Gut Worms so tiny that they were practically invisible spilled out of the Sick Scholar’s mouth every time he coughed. Of course, they were turned into ash long before they got close to Ye Qing.

Seemingly realizing the same thing, Sick Scholar abruptly lifted his hand and plunged it toward his heart, eyes burning with fatalistic determination. However, his fingers had just made contact with his skin when he suddenly froze, and his face became warped with fury and hatred. His body was shaking a little as well.

It was because a large hole had appeared on his chest before he knew it. His heart was also conspicuously missing.

“So, you were hiding it inside your heart,” said a taunting voice.

Sick Scholar looked up. Ye Qing was clutching his still beating heart. Unlike a normal heart, Sick Scholar’s heart was absolutely riddled with small holes. Slimy larvae could be seen curled up within the small holes, and even more adult Gut Worms were crawling in and out of the heart.

“How did you know?” Sick Scholar glared at Ye Qing.

Ye Qing smirked. “There are larvae and eggs in your spittle. I mentioned earlier that a Gut Worm is a male Stranger, and so it can’t reproduce on its own. But since there are larvae and eggs inside your body, clearly there is a Stomach Worm inside your body.”

“If I’m not mistaken, your ‘Feed The Worms Art’ begins by implanting a Stomach Worm in your body. Then, you follow up with a Gut Worm so they may copulate and produce even more Gut Worms. This method drastically cuts down on the time you need to practice the cultivation art and prevents the Gut Worms from betraying you because of the Stomach Worm.”



Ye Qing tightened his grip over the heart a little, and the larvae and eggs were stripped off layer by layer. Eventually, a big, fat worm was exposed for all to see.

The worm was about one meter long and was as thick as a baby's arm. It was light red in color and covered in barbs. At least one Gut Worm was clinging to each barb, which painted a strange and horrifying picture.

"So this is the Stomach Worm!" Ye Qing remarked while examining it curiously. He had read about the worm, but this was the first time he saw it for real.

Sick Scholar didn't say anything. He simply glared at Ye Qing with burning hatred.

"You were trying to kill the Stomach Worm, weren't you? It's too bad I'm faster than you." Ye Qing ignored his stare and chuckled. "And thanks to you, I don't need to dirty my hands to look for it."

Sick Scholar was without a doubt a ruthless man. The moment he pointed out that he possessed the Stomach Worm, he immediately tried to kill the Stomach Worm. Although it would drastically increase the amount of time he needed to practice the "Feed The Worms Art", it would have allowed him to maintain his hold over the *jianghu* warriors. Too bad for him, Ye Qing had been waiting for this.

In fact, Ye Qing had purposely provoked Sick Scholar. Although he knew that the Stomach Worm was inside his body, he didn't know where it was exactly. That was why he provoked Sick Scholar into revealing its location himself.

"I see... you..." Sick Scholar deflated after he understood everything. It looked like he had completely given up on hope after Ye Qing had ruined his final gambit.

"Can you save us now that you have the Stomach Worm, warrior?" "Yes, please!"

"We'll be eternally grateful if you can save us, warrior!"

Contrary to Sick Scholar's mood, everyone was brimming with joy and excitement when they saw the Stomach Worm.

"Give me a moment." Ye Qing smiled and removed the Gut Worms clinging to the Stomach Worm's fleshy barbs. Then, he gently pinched the Stomach Worm twice, causing it to swell up and give off a light red-colored scent.

A few breaths later, the *jianghu* warriors standing closest to Ye Qing suddenly started vomiting for seemingly no reason whatsoever. However, there were Gut Worms swimming in the puddle of vomit. They were so small that they were barely the size of a cow's hair.

After the Gut Worms had emerged into the open, they immediately started wriggling toward Ye Qing. A clear wind blew, and they all dissolved into ash.

"Blargh!"

"Ugh..."



At the same time, more and more people began throwing up the contents of their stomach. Strange noises and a disgusting stench immediately permeated the inn.

Ye Qing had expected this, so he sealed his sense of smell long before the first man began vomiting. Chu Renhe and the others weren't so lucky. Their complexion turned green when the horrible stench hit their noses.

Some of the Gut Worms were crushed by the furious *jianghu* warriors, and some were burned to ash by Ye Qing's Burning Wind.

Chapter 395: You Wanna Pull Rank? Ok

"Argh!!!"

Suddenly, Sick Scholar let out a bloodcurdling scream. Countless Gut Worms were pouring out of the hole in his chest and his bloody stump of an arm, and they were all moving toward Ye Qing. As a result, Sick Scholar deflated like a balloon in just the blink of an eye.

Ye Qing frowned a little and stomped the floor, burning all of the Gut Worms heading toward him. By the end of it, Sick Scholar was literally just skin and bones, dead.

"I see. He brought this upon himself." Ye Qing sighed when realization struck him.

There were many benefits to practicing the "Feed The Worms Art" using the Stomach Worm and Gut Worm, but it also had a fatal flaw. If the practitioner lost the Stomach Worm for whatever reason, then the Gut Worm would rebel and consume them alive.

If Sick Scholar reached the adept level before that point, then this wouldn't be an issue. But since he didn't, well... such was the fate of a man who chose to walk the razor's edge for power.

"Pah! He deserves this."

"Honestly, he should've suffered more."

"Yeah. If it wasn't for our hero here, we would have fallen for his evil scheme hook, line and sinker."

"Speaking of which, thank you so much for saving our lives, hero."

"Thank you, hero."

"We will never forget what you've done today, hero."

"If you don't mind, may we know your name, hero? I'm sure that some of us would like to pay back the favor in the future."

No one was saddened by Sick Scholar's death, of course. If anything, it was the best damn thing they had seen since their day suddenly turned to shit. After they were done cursing Sick Scholar, they turned to Ye Qing and gave him their thanks.

"You're welcome, everyone. I just happened to be at the right place at the right time."

Chu Renhe was no weakling, so he sensed the same thing as Ye Qing did. He secretly ordered Tang Chuan, Yu Shi and Luo Changbing to deal with them.



Those people couldn't resist Sick Scholar's Gut Worms, so they most likely hadn't entered the Spirit Purification stage yet. Ye Qing had no doubt that Tang Chuan, Yu Shi and Luo Changbing would destroy them without any problems whatsoever.

Ye Qing didn't pity them, however. Sick Scholar deserved to die, but these people were not far behind. If he hadn't stepped out, this incident most likely would've resulted in unnecessary conflict and bloodshed.

There were several reasons he decided to step up. One, he recognized the Gut Worm and was fairly confident that he could deal with it. Two, it would've been a disaster had the two sides fought. He wouldn't be able to pluck himself out of the shitshow, and if the Intelligence Department labeled him a traitor or something, then even he, a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau, would be in quite the conundrum.

That was just the kind of power the Intelligence Department wielded.

After nearly everyone in the restaurant was gone, Chu Renhe walked up to Ye Qing and asked, "Well handled, brother. May I inquire into your name and background?"

"I'm Ye Qing. I'm just a nobody." Ye Qing saluted.

"Ye Qing, is it? Very well. Please, follow us."

As soon as Chu Renhe said this, the Intelligence Guards lying in ambush outside the restaurant immediately flooded in with their Chu sabers gripped tightly in their hand. They quickly surrounded Ye Qing tighter than a fish's arse.

"What is the meaning of this, Lord Chu?" Ye Qing furrowed his brows with displeasure. "I just assisted you in solving a troublesome case, avoiding a bloodbath, and even capturing these three criminals. You wouldn't even wait until the next day to pretend I haven't done you a huge favor?"

Chu Renhe sneered. "Just to be clear, I never asked for your help. You're the one who chose to stick your nose into our business. Second, we would've handled them even without your intervention."

"Let's pretend that I was meddling in a business I don't belong to then. On what grounds are you detaining me?"

Ye Qing was seriously getting annoyed. He had heard rumors that the Intelligence was as tyrannical as they were arrogant, but he always thought it was just slander or radical remarks by people who didn't know better. But now, it was clear that the rumors had understated their tyranny. They had turned on him the moment the incident was resolved!

"That's simple. I suspect that you are affiliated with these criminals!" Chu Renhe let out a cold chuckle. "And don't say that I'm making baseless accusations. I saw with my own eyes you sharing a table with Killer Monk and enjoying a pleasant conversation with him. How are you going to explain this?"

"It's just a coincidence. If you saw me sharing a table with him, then surely you've heard our conversation as well," Ye Qing countered.



“That may be true, but what you see and hear may not necessarily be the truth. Besides, how do I know if the two of you aren’t putting up an act?”

Chu Renhe added meaningfully while wiping his fingers. “Besides, didn’t Killer Monk give you a jade thumb ring?”

“You mean this?” Ye Qing produced the thumb ring and explained, “Killer Monk gave me as a gift for giving him my wine, but so what?”

“So what?” An eerie, ridiculing smile spread across Chu Renhe’s lips. “Do you know how much that thumb ring you’re holding is worth? It was forged using the emerald jade of Chang Shan, and an inch of emerald jade is worth as much as an inch of gold. If you consider the labor cost, then this thumb ring is worth at least ten thousand gold.”

“Now tell me, do you think your wine is worth ten thousand gold?”

“No.” Ye Qing shook his head. He had no idea that the thumb ring Killer Monk gave him was this valuable.

“Do you know who this thumb ring belongs to?” Chu Renhe continued.

“Nope,” Ye Qing answered honestly.

“This thumb ring belongs to Feng Yixing, and Feng Yixing is the patriarch of the Feng Clan of Qing He.” Chu Renhe asked another question, “On top of that, Feng Yixing has a second identity. Do you know what it is?”

Ye Qing shook his head again. He was getting a bad feeling about this.

Chu Renhe narrowed his eyes into slits, and his voice grew low and soft like the spring waters of March. “Feng Yixing is also an Inspector in the Intelligence Department, and the thumb ring is none other than his proof of authority.”

“Do you understand how precious it is now?”

Ye Qing’s heart skipped a beat. He had envisioned many possibilities, but this was even worse than he thought. No one could’ve predicted that Killer Monk, Fortune Taoist and Sick Scholar would kill an Inspector. No wonder the Intelligence Department was out in force.

“With all that said, why did Killer Monk give you a jade thumb ring that’s worth over ten thousand gold?” Chu Renhe sneered.

“How would I know? You should ask him, not me.”

Ye Qing sighed and let out a bitter chuckle. “Look, it really is an accident. I’ve never even heard of a Killer Monk until today, and I’ve just arrived at Tian Yong two days ago. You can check it if you don’t believe me.”



“We will look into the matter. If you are innocent, then you won’t be harmed.” Chu Renhe said calmly and forcefully, “But for now, you’ll have to come with us.”

“Just in case you think we’re targeting you on purpose—even though it is a fact that you’re more suspicious than most—we’re not. Everyone in this building will be taken into custody for questioning.”

“And what if I don’t go with you?” Ye Qing’s smile didn’t reach the eye. “I’m fairly sure you don’t have the strength to stop me.”

Chu Renhe asked coldly, “Are you resisting arrest? Do you know what happens to those who make an enemy out of the Intelligence Department?”

“Do tell,” Ye Qing said fearlessly.

“If you’re against the Intelligence Department, then you’re a rebel. If you’re a rebel, you will be exterminated to the nine generations. It’s not just you either. Your friends, families, neighbors and more will be implicated as well.”

Chu Renhe’s cold eyes turned cruel and bloodthirsty. Ye Qing even spotted a glimmer of excitement amidst the emotions. “Would you like to give it a try?”

Ye Qing scoffed, “A rebel? Straight for the capital offense, huh? But I doubt even the Intelligence Department has the power to make that decision!”

“That is where you’re wrong. Outside of Chu, our eyes and ears are everywhere. Inside Chu, we are the law itself.” Chu Renhe said slowly, “If I say that you’re a good citizen, then you’re a good citizen. If I say you’re a rebel, then you are a rebel.”

“No wonder they say that the Intelligence Department is fair and righteous.” Ye Qing said sarcastically. The Intelligence Department was literally more tyrannical than the Pacification Bureau.

“And you better remember that. Now come on.” Chu Renhe knew that Ye Qing was being sarcastic of course, but he didn’t mind. Once they returned to their headquarters, he had all the time in the world to make him eat his words. He would learn to keep his mouth shut and stick his nose well out of the Intelligence Department’s business.

“So sorry to disappoint you, but I’m on official business myself. I’m afraid I won’t be able to oblige with your demands.” Ye Qing sighed. In the end, it had come to this.

“Hmm? Official business?” Chu Renhe was caught off guard by this. “Who are you?”

“I am the Patrolman of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau, Ye Qing,” Ye Qing introduced himself. “Well met, Lord Chu.”



“You’re a member of the Pacification Bureau?” Chu Renhe’s eyebrows rose imperceptibly.

The Intelligence Department and the Pacification Bureau were both departments that only answered to the emperor. Generally speaking, they rarely interacted with each other because their scope of work was different. However, two siblings could turn on each other for the family fortune, and two tigers definitely couldn’t share the same hill. It was why the Intelligence Department and the Pacification Bureau shared a poor relationship with each other.

On the surface, it looked like they were all one big family. But beneath the waters, it wouldn’t be surprising if one department stabbed the other in the back. Of course, they weren’t at the point where they were waging an all-out war against each other, but honestly, that point wasn’t too far away.

“Yessir, this is my badge.” Ye Qing handed over his badge to Chu Renhe for inspection.

Chu Renhe asked after glancing at the badge. “What is the Patrolman of Luo Shui doing in Tian Yong?”

“My boss ordered me to participate in the Hidden Dragon Meet,” Ye Qing answered.

“The Pacification Bureau... Ye Qing...” Chu Renhe’s pupils contracted suddenly as if he just recalled something. “Are you the Qing Emperor Junior, Ye Qing?”

Chapter 396: Warriorress

Chu Renhe said with a smile that didn’t reach the eye. Your fame is such that even I have heard about it, Qing Emperor Junior. Now that I have witnessed you firsthand, I can tell that you definitely deserve your title.

Don’t be humble, Lord Ye. You hail from August Hill Village, a place that might as well be a speck of dust in the grand scheme of things, but you were able to ascend from the Vessel Augmentation stage to the Spirit Purification stage, and a civilian official to the Patrolman of Luo Shui in a little over a year. We are all quite impressed with your achievements, Chu Renhe declared.

Really, I was just lucky, Ye Qing replied humbly again. He looked calm on the outside, but he was really shocked on the inside. How did the Intelligence Department know so much about him? Considering the amount of information Chu Renhe just revealed, he wouldn’t be surprised if he told him that they had investigated his entire lineage as well. Why on earth would the Intelligence Department pay so much attention to a small fry like him? Were they really that bored, or were they scheming something.

Luck too is a part of strength. Chu Renhe said slowly, But back to our earlier dialogue, I really need you to come with us, Lord Ye. The Intelligence Department’s secrets are involved, and it is my duty to investigate this incident to the best of my abilities. Since you’re an imperial official yourself, you should know the importance of abiding by the law better than anyone.

You still don’t believe me, Lord Chu? Ye Qing’s lips pursed into a stiff line.

It’s not that I don’t believe you, my personal beliefs have nothing to do with my duty. But don’t worry. We, the Intelligence Department, are the impartial arbiters of the law. Once our investigation is



complete, and we confirm that this incident really has nothing to do with you, we will release you immediately, Chu Renhe said.

In that case, how about you capture me after you finish your investigation?

He disliked trouble, but he wasn't afraid of trouble.

Are you going to break the law, Lord Ye? Chu Renhe's tone grew icy.

Break the law? When? You're going to arrest me just because I happened to share a table with Killer Monk, speak with him, and accept a jade thumb ring from him? Ye Qing replied just as icily. You don't have any real proof, and you're going to assume that I'm affiliated with these fools and throw me in prison? Just how sloppy can you get?

I'm not throwing you into prison, I'm taking you to our headquarters to assist with our investigation. The law of Chu dictates that everyone is obligated to assist the Intelligence Department in an investigation. If you don't cooperate, then you will be punished, Chu Renhe declared.

Trying to coerce me using the law? Okay! Let's talk about the law. It is true that the law of Chu dictates that everyone is obligated to assist the Intelligence Department in an investigation, but it didn't say that I must follow you back to the headquarters, did it? In fact, there isn't a single law that states that I must follow you back to the headquarters!

Ye Qing continued with a smirk, Also, I'm a member of the Pacification Bureau. The law dictates that any case involving the Pacification Bureau must be reviewed jointly by the Three Judicial Offices and judged by the emperor himself. Are you the emperor? No? Then you don't get to judge a member of the Pacification Bureau!

What audacity! As expected of the Pacification Bureau! Chu Renhe sneered.

We may be audacious, but we're certainly not lawbreakers like the Intelligence Department! Ye Qing didn't give an inch.

You definitely have a silver tongue, Lord Ye. Chu Renhe's tone was frigid at this point.

Oh, it's nothing compared to yours, Lord Chu. I wouldn't be able to invert black and white and distort the truth the way you did. Ye Qing shrugged arrogantly. Anyway, feel free to speak with my bureau and have them arrest me when you have actual evidence. Otherwise, please get out of my sight and leave me to my lunch. I haven't finished yet.

Good, very good. It's been a long time since someone dared to speak to me like this. The last person who tried it was fed to the fishes.

Chu Renhe was smiling, but his eyes were as cold as the ice of the coldest winter. He suddenly lowered his voice and whispered, Most people are afraid of the Pacification Bureau, but not us. Do you really think I can't lay a hand on you just because you're a member of the Pacification Bureau, and you're a little famous now?

The next moment, Chu Renhe crushed the Pacification Badge Ye Qing had given him like it was made of dough. Of course, the truth couldn't be any more different. A Pacification Badge was forged from cemented carbide and was incredibly tough. It was highly resistant to conventional weapons and elements. However, Chu Renhe had turned it into fine powder with his bare hands. It showed that he was incredibly strong.



Ye Qing tensed up when he saw this. As expected, Chu Renhe abruptly declared loudly and angrily, You dare pretend to be an official of the imperial court? You deserve death! Kill him!

As soon as he finished, he condensed his bloodthirst and killing intent into a sword and launched it at Ye Qing. Even being close to the attack shriveled ones mind and weakened ones energies.

At the same time, the dark red robe he was wearing unleashed a blood red halo of light. A closer looked revealed that they were countless red threads as thin as an oxs hair, but they were packed so tightly that they looked like blood.

The threads wrapped around Ye Qing like a cocoon, but Chu Renhe blanched. It was because the real Ye Qing was standing behind him and throwing out a punch.

A sheen of red energy appeared behind Chu Renhes back. The next second, it caved inward like someone had thrown a massive rock into a pond. A gale of astral qi washed out to the surroundings and threw a good number of Intelligent Guards into the air. Some slammed painfully into their colleagues and screamed in pain.

Chu Renhes bones popped and cracked like they were under great pressure. Bright red blood began pouring out of his orifices.

*Bang!*

Launched forward like an arrow, he slammed into a pillar so hard that cracks spread all across the stone, causing the entire inn to shake worryingly.

Hmm?

Ye Qing didnt press his advantage, however. Instead, he looked down on his fist. It was covered in countless tiny holes that looked like pinholes, and there were threads of blood lingering around the wounds. They were crawling into his flesh like they were alive.

They all say that Qing Emperor Juniors mastery of the fist is godlike. I can see that they werent exaggerating. Chu Renhe spat out some blood and looked down on his robe. Its color was a tad dimmer than before.

Although Ye Qing had gotten one over him before, he hadnt thought much of it. After all, he hadnt employed his full strength at the time, and they were both middle-stage Spirit Purifiers. In a straight fight, he didnt believe that he would be outmatched by a peer, much less someone from the backwaters.

But now, he could only stare at Ye Qing with astonishment and jealousy. He had gone all out and even used his trump card, the Strange Artifact called the Golden Bloodmaking Silkworm Robe.

The Golden Bloodmaking Silkworm Robe was the very robe he was wearing. It was a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact weaved by the Golden Bloodmaking Silkworms and possessed both offensive and defensive capabilities. The silk created by the Stranger was incredibly sharp, resilient, and impervious to most weapons and elements.

Besides that, the silk possessed the power to cut through qi, and the wearer could command thousands and thousands of silk threads to attack their enemies. The silk could even invade the victims body through the wounds it inflicted and automatically attack their internal organs. It was powerful to put it mildly.



Despite this, Chu Renhe had failed to block the attack completely. The amount of force contained within that punch had completely surpassed his expectations and overwhelmed even the Golden Bloodmaking Silkworm Robes defense, causing his internal organs to shift out of place, and his energies to fall into disarray.

He had no doubt that the punch would leave him half-dead if he didnt have the Strange Artifact.

How does my Golden Bloodmaking Silk Thread feel?

That said, it wasnt like Ye Qing had come off the attack completely unharmed. A savage smile crossed Chu Renhes lips as he stared at the bloody pinholes covering Ye Qings fist.

Eh, its okay.

Ye Qing raised his fist and clenched strongly and suddenly. There was a soft pop, followed by a thunderclap that left everyones eardrums ringing. Chu Renhe could only watch in shock when the threads that had slithered into the wound were forced out and burned into dust. Not only that, the wound itself healed back to normal in no time.

Is that all you got? I suppose that this is the extent of the Intelligence Departments power! Ye Qing chuckled while shaking his wrists.

Suddenly, a cold, ancient voice entered his ears. You dare look down on my Intelligence Department? Lets see how strong you really are, boy!

Ye Qing immediately raised his arm to block an attack that came from his flank. There was a loud boom, and he skidded a fair distance across the dining hall. The pair of scars his feet cut across the floor were at least several inches deep.

Ye Qings face was serious as he felt the burning pain on his arm. He then looked up at his attacker. It was none other than the woman who occupied a whole table with her son earlier[1].

Youre a member of the Intelligence Department? Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise. At the same time, he realized that he couldnt sense any life force from the woman whatsoever. She was as yin, cold and lifeless as a dead person. This was strange because she had felt perfectly human until this point.

The woman didnt answer him. Instead, she rushed forward like lightning and unleashed a colorful, positively gorgeous punch that looked like a blooming flower.

The problem with beautiful things, however, was that they usually hid thorns.

Sensing some sort of unknown danger from her fist, Ye Qing decided not to take it and sidestepped out of the way. Then, he split into three illusions that looked exactly like him.

The womans fist continued forward and crushed two of the illusions. Ye Qing himself appeared on her right and threw a punch at her temple.

The woman moved very, very quickly. As soon as the punch missed, she spun toward Ye Qing and flung her arm at his head like it was a staff. It looked like she was planning to trade wounds with him.

The womans strength was at least on par with his, and Ye Qing didnt think his head was tougher than her fist. Left with no choice, he changed his plan and struck her on her wrist instead.



The wrist was the weakest point of the arm, so his attack sent her arm flying despite her tremendous strength. While she was open, Ye Qing stepped forward and slammed an elbow into her chest.

### *Chaos Demon Ape Fist**The Demon Ape Rams A Mountain*

He didn't hold back. The elbow strike smashed the woman right through the inn's wall.

### Chapter 397: When The Frogs Cry

The next moment, the woman returned even faster than before and retaliated with another punch. It was like a whole garden of flowers blooming at the same time: awe-inspiring, beautiful, and spring-like. Her fist intent looked like it would encompass everything under the heavens.

Ye Qing didn't dare to treat it lightly. Manifesting the silhouette of a demonic ape around him, he roared at the top of his lungs and swung both his fists like he was throwing a mountain.

Their fists and astral qi met and mingled for an instant. Then, every piece of furniture in the dining hall crumbled into fine powder.

Both Ye Qing and the woman were sent flying, but they quickly met at the center and clashed once more. Now, the entire inn was in serious danger of crumbling.

The woman's fist art was a gorgeous spectacle. Each punch was like the flowers of spring, colorful, bright and welcoming. But despite the flamboyant display, its power wasn't weak in the slightest. Her techniques were exquisite, her fist force was overwhelming, and her fist intent seemed almost endless. He supposed he should've expected this. Spring was the season that chased away winter after all.

Like a demonic ape, Ye Qing darted all over the place and threw punch after punch with wanton regard and animalistic fervor. His attacks were brutish and forceful, but his incredible agility more than made up for it. For a time, the duo was locked in a stalemate.

Ye Qing knew that he was no match for the woman, however. There were multiple reasons. For one, the woman was also a body tempering warrior. Two, she was a Spirit Master. And three, her mastery of her fist art and her fist intent exceeded his by a considerable margin.

Despite this, he still managed to fight her temporarily stalemate because he wasn't a pure body tempering warrior. He didn't walk the path of one power overcoming everything. On top of that, he possessed a prodigious amount of astral qi and spiritual power, so he was overall more nimble than his opponent.

Speaking of movement, something wasn't quite right about the woman. Her fist art and fist intent were as strong as they came, but her movements felt a little stiff and robotic for some reason. It was almost like she was fighting with just the battle instincts that were drilled into his body for untold years. That was the other reason he was able to hold out for so long.

That said, it was only a matter of time before she overwhelmed him. Even if she didn't, there was no way he could outlast a Spirit Master.

Iron determination flickered in his eyes as he executed "Illusionist's Grace" and split into nine illusions. They all charged toward the woman at the same time.

In response, the woman clenched her fists and threw nine punches at each illusion. From a distance, it looked like nine blooming lotuses.



Eight of the silhouettes popped out of existence like bubbles. The real Ye Qing tanked the punch flying toward him head on.

There was a muffled thud as the “Illusionist’s Grace” was dispelled, and his entire body wobbled. Web-like cracks spread out from his feet.

“I knew it!”

Despite this, Ye Qing was delighted. Her strength was prodigious, but since she had to throw nine consecutive punches to ensure that she didn’t miss her target, it was inevitable that each individual punch was a lot weaker than before. Thanks to the “Nine Impetus of Tai Chi” and his tough body, he was able to take the one punch without any issue.

There was a lull between the woman’s movements after she dished out her attack. While she was still recovering, Ye Qing closed the distance and hit her right in the stomach.

*“Break Through”*

The lone cavalry charges the army. It was do or die.

The woman bent like a prawn as her muscles and bones popped ominously. It was the most effective strike he had landed since fighting her. A faithful believer of kicking a dog when it was down, he appeared behind her, punched her in the spine, and smashed her at least one meter deep into the floor.

Strangely, the woman never made a sound even after receiving the deadly blow. Surely even a mute would’ve let out a grunt of pain or something, right?

Ye Qing was still trying to figure out the woman when a frog’s cry suddenly resounded inside his headspace. The frog cry quickly grew into a chorus of cries and disoriented him.

Farmers often said that one could hear loud frog cries from the paddy fields if it was a harvest year. To them, a frog’s cry was something to be celebrated.

But right here and now, it was a noise that would rob Ye Qing of his life if he didn’t defend against it with all his might.

The frog cries felt like a sharp blade trying to slit his mind in half. The pain was so bad that his control slipped a little, and wisps of his astral qi shot here and there.

“Pwack!”

He threw up a mouthful of fresh blood as he pressed a hand to his forehead. He cycled the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra” at full force and slowly but surely suppressed the frog cries ravaging his headspace.

“Hehe, you’re a genius alright. Not only do you have a strong body, your spirit is strong enough to withstand my Frog Cry of the Reaper. However, you offended Lord Chu and even injured my darling. No one will be able to save you today, boy.”

It was at this moment the cold, ancient voice spoke up again. The next moment, the frog cries he just suppressed began growing in strength once more.



Ye Qing furrowed his brows and tapped the space in front of him. An invisible shockwave washed out as he executed the “Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul”.

If he couldn’t defend against the attack, then he might as well trade wounds with his attacker.

Buzz!

Invisible energies clashed and rippled within the inn. In an instant, a dozen or so Intelligence Guards shuddered, bled from all orifices, and died.

“You are dead!”

An angry shout erupted and caused the inn to groan ominously. Then, a massive frog appeared in the air. Strangely, the frog didn’t have eyes. Blood was flowing out of its pitch black, empty sockets.

There were strange patterns behind the frog’s back. They looked like the face of a laughing ghost. In fact, the face was laughing right now.

On its stomach was a mouth full of rows and rows of sharp teeth.

The frog’s belly swelled and deflated. Then, a booming croak blasted Ye Qing in body, mind, and spirit.

“CROAK!”

The interior of the inn turned ghastly and dark. His brain felt like someone was twisting a knife in it, his mind threatened to tear sunder, his vigor churned like a sea storm, and another mouthful of blood sprayed out of his lips.

Another Spirit Master?

Ye Qing’s eyes were bloodshot, and his heart was heavy as he considered his circumstances. If the woman was a half-baked Spirit Master, then whoever was attacking him with his Yin God was a Spirit Master through and through.

That’s right, the ghastly frog in front of him was the manifestation of a Spirit Master’s Yin God. Although his spirit was far out of the ordinary, he still wasn’t strong enough to go up against a Spirit Master who had created their Yin God. As a result, the single exchange had suppressed his demonic thought.

“CROAK!”

Unrelenting, the ghastly frog let loose another booming crack that caused blood to seep out of his eyes, ears, nose and mouth. His complexion was as pale as a sheet, and his face looked like he had pulled a couple of all-nighters.

That wasn’t all. Four ugly ghosts with twin horns on their heads and shrouded by a ghastly white flame swung their swords straight at him.

“Hmph!”

Ye Qing growled and swung his hands at the ghosts like sabers.

*“Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art”*



Red lotuses descended from above as his hand knives cleaved through the ghosts faster than they could kill him. Hellish red flames seeped out of their wounds and turned them into ash in an instant.

At the same time, a moderate-sized wound appeared on the frog's stomach. Yin qi mixed with wisps of Red Lotus Hellfire poured out of the wound like smoke.

The ghost frog tried to extinguish the flames with its yin qi, but it just refused to die no matter what. Its face was contorted with pain and anger.

Ye qing wasn't doing so hot, however. His head was hurting like a bitch because he had used up all of his spiritual power in one go.

Compared to "Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul", the "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art" obviously did more damage against yin creatures and ghosts. That was why he chose to attack the ghosts with it.

The effects were obvious. The attack was such that even the Yin God suffered a moderate wound.

Time to go!

Ye Qing didn't hesitate to dash toward the exit.

There was no reason to stay and fight an opponent he couldn't defeat.

As expected, crossbow bolts flew toward him the second he dashed out of the building.

He didn't need to dodge them though. A black astral qi and a white astral qi appeared around his body and formed a tai chi circle. It altered the trajectory of the crossbow bolts and caused them to smack into one another. Someone who didn't know what was going on might even think that the Intelligence Guards had purposely missed Ye Qing.

The Astral Breaking Crossbow was a fearsome weapon, but it failed to stop Ye Qing even a little.

It was at this moment someone suddenly burst out of the ground, grabbed Ye Qing's legs, and pulled him downward.

It was none other than the warrioress he fought earlier.

The woman's veil was nowhere to be seen. It had probably been destroyed by Ye Qing's final blow.

Her face didn't look human. Not exactly. Her eyes were lifeless, her pupils were dilated, and Ye Qing could sense no air flowing in or out of her nose or mouth. Her face was covered in white fur, and there were a pair of fangs on the corners of her mouth.

"A Vampire[1]..."

Ye Qing finally understood what she was when he saw her appearance.

The woman was probably a body tempering Spirit Master when she was still alive. After she died, someone refined her body into a weapon. That was why she possessed the body and strength of a Spirit Master, but none of the intelligence or awareness a Spirit Master should possess. It would also explain why her fist art seemed a little stiff and unnatural.

Now wasn't the time to think about such things though. He needed to get out as soon as possible.



Ye Qing detonated his astral qi and forced her to loosen her grip. Once he was out, he kicked her in the head and sent her crashing to the street like a meteor. At the same time, the momentum pushed him further toward safety.

Unfortunately, he had just traveled ten meters or so when a boy about five or six years old appeared on the rooftop directly in front of him. He was wearing a cold smile on his face.

“You think you can run?” The boy asked, but his voice sounded nothing like a child’s.

He was the other Spirit Master Ye Qing had fought briefly. He was also the boy sitting next to the woman earlier in the inn.

Clearly, the boy wasn’t a real boy. He was an old monster.

That short pause was all the woman needed to get up from the ground and catch up with him.

Clearly, she was the boy’s puppet.

“What is your name, senior?” Ye Qing sighed. No one wanted to be stuck between an old man and a dead woman, not to mention that Chu Renhe and a truck load of Intelligence Guards were watching from the sidelines. This escape was looking impossible.

“Hehehe! I’ll tell you after you’re dead!” The boy let out a harsh, evil laugh before he and the woman pounced toward Ye Qing at the same time.

The boy was a keeper of the Intelligence Department, Tong Zhen. He thought his puppet alone would be enough to kill Ye Qing, but the young man had wildly surpassed his expectations. Not only did he manage to repel his puppet, he even dealt a moderate wound to his Yin God.

That was why he showed himself. It was to kill Ye Qing for certain.

His name might be Tong Zhen (Childish Innocence), but he wasn’t childish or innocent at all. He wasn’t going to make the stupid mistake of talking too much and giving Ye Qing the time to call for help or something.

In fact, he went for the killing blow as soon as he was done speaking.

Ye Qing sighed. “You done watching, Brother Chen? If you are, then get your ass over already. If not, I’ll take you to the grave with me.”

“Your trickery won’t work on me!” Tong Zhen sneered. He moved faster and shot five powerful beams of force at Ye Qing.

Tong Zhen himself moved even faster than his attack, however. By the time Ye Qing neutralized the force beams with his “Nine Impetus of Tai Chi”, Tong Zhen was already on top of him and moving to crush his skull.

“Wayayaya! Who dares to attack my Brother Ye? Are you courting death?!”

It was at this moment a ridiculous shout broke out from the distance. There was a low rumble, and a massive hand grabbed Tong Zhen’s whole body from behind. At the same time, the man swung his left elbow and smashed the woman so hard that she left a ten-meter long mark on the floor.



“Don’t worry, brother! No one can harm a hair on your person as long as I’m around!” The man declared and shot Ye Qing a sincere-looking smile.

Chapter 398: Lei Xiaodan

“Har har. Did you enjoy the show, Brother Chen?” Ye Qing side-eyed Chen Wuxin with a knowing, ridiculing smile on his face.

Chen Wuxin was languishing away at the Beauty Pageant Palace, and the palace wasn’t far away from Ye Qing’s inn. He refused to believe that Chen Wuxin hadn’t sensed anything considering the commotion the Intelligence Department had caused. In fact, he knew for certain that the guy was hiding amidst the onlookers and enjoying the show.

“Enjoy the show? I don’t know what you’re looking about! I just came back, you see!” Chen Wuxin feigned ignorance.

“Who are you? Unhand me this instant!”

Meanwhile, Tong Zhen was struggling furiously to break out of Chen Wuxin’s grip. Despite flinging his astral qi and mental art at the huge man with all his might, he failed to inflict even the slightest wound on the man.

Chen Wuxin’s true identity was the Heartless Brain, and he was piloting the body of the Half-Step Grandmaster, Chen Ah Sheng. Not only that, the Heartless Brain could sever even the threads of karma itself, so of course he wouldn’t be affected by a puny mental art.

The woman Chen Wuxin had smashed out of the way rushed over as if she sensed that Tong Zhen was in danger. As she ran, her energies kept climbing until they reached the absolute peak. Once in front of Chen Wuxin, she threw a punch that could shatter a whole mountain.

Chen Wuxin paid her no heed, however. He simply lifted his left hand, caught the woman’s wrist, and severed her fist force in mid-release. Then, grabbed her head before she could react, pushed over half of her body into the ground, and stepped on her back to keep her pinned. She was unable to break free no matter how hard she struggled.

Throughout the process, Chen Wuxin never even looked at the woman. He kept chit-chatting with Ye Qing without a care in the world.

Stunned by Chen Wuxin’s strength, Tong Zhen threatened impotently, “I am Tong Zhen, a keeper serving the Intelligence Department! Let me go, and I will let bygones be bygones! Otherwise, you will regret this!”

“Like I give a damn who you are. Anyone who hurts my brother must die!” Chen Wuxin turned to look at Tong Zhen and smiled savagely. He then tried to crush Tong Zhen with his bare hand.

“Stop!”

It was at this moment a fierce cry came from afar. It sounded incredibly weak and distant at the beginning, but when it reached them it was as loud as a thunderclap. Following the sound were five lightning bolts—white, cyan, blue, red and yellow—striking straight toward the duo.



Even before the lightning came, every hair on Ye Qing's body was already standing on end. Even scarier was the fact that the surrounding space were filled with mini lightning that paralyzed both him and Chen Wuxin and prevented them from gathering their force. They were unable to leave even if they wanted to.

Ye Qing and Chen Wuxin exchanged a bitter smile with each other. It was clear that this newcomer was someone far beyond their ability to resist.

"You dare attack a member of the Pacification Bureau, Lei Xiaodan? Are you courting death?"

At the last moment, a man leaped out of the crowd and made a grab for the five lightning bolts. As if his hand was made of metal, the five lightning bolts abruptly changed course and flew into his palm. Over time, they slowly condensed into a ball of lightning.

"We meet again, Joyless," The man looked at Ye Qing and greeted him animably.

"Well met, Lord Hong! Thank you so much for saving our lives!" Ye Qing exclaimed in pleasant surprise and saluted his savior in a hurry.

The man was none other than Hong Jianglong.

"It's no problem. Like I would ever allow the Intelligence Bureau to bully the Pacification Bureau!" Hong Jianglong declared fearlessly before looking in a certain direction and yelling, "Show your face, Lei Xiaodan!"

Hong Jianglong's voice was so loud it was comparable to that of Gu Suitang's. Ye Qing's eardrums were ringing a little from how loud it was. Despite this, no one showed up.

"Not gonna show up, are you? Okay! I dare you to hide in your shell your whole life." Hong Jianglong sneered and tossed the ball of lightning in Chu Renhe's direction. The condensed lightning was as harmless as an actual ball in Hong Jianglong's hand, but as soon as it left his palm, it immediately returned to its violent, destructive self. The five lightning roared like they would smite anything and everything in their way. Chu Renhe turned as pale as a sheet when he realized what was happening.

A gentle, amiable voice rang right before the lightning bolts would kill Chu Renhe. "You couldn't wait a moment? And why are you taking out your frustration on a child?"

The lightning bolts abruptly froze in mid-air. At the same time, a man in his forties stepped out into the open. He was an ordinary-looking old man with yellowish, sparse hair and a crooked back. He was also wearing a set of white, starched clothes. He looked no different from an ordinary citizen whose individuality and backbone had been completely crushed by the hardships of life.

There was one thing about him that stood out, however. He had six fingers on both hands. That definitely wasn't a characteristic that you saw everyday.

His hands were hanging beside his waist, and he was wearing a genial smile as he stepped out of the corner of a street.



The man looked like he was moving slowly, but in reality he reached Chu Renhe in just a few steps. The five lightning bolts danced around him as soon as he got close, and Ye Qing actually picked up a hint of joy from the lightning bolts.

The man raised his hand, and the lightning bolts slithered into his sleeve. They were gone just like that.

“You sure took your time, Lei Xiaodan! And here I thought you care nothing for your disciple’s life!” Hong Jianglong taunted.

Lei Xiaodan seemed to care nothing for Hong Jianglong’s sass, however. Still wearing an honest smile on his face, he asked, “What are you doing, Brother Hong? Why possessed you to attack a junior? Even if my junior is foolish, you could’ve just taught him a lesson! There is no need to kill him, is there?”

Hong Jianglong sneered, “You’re just as shameless as ever, Lei Xiaodan. It is your men who attacked my men first. I’m just retaliating appropriately.”

“Your men? Are you talking about these two?” Lei Xiaodan exclaimed in astonishment before looking at Ye Qing and Chen Wuxin. “What an unfortunate coincidence! I thought you were just villains who were trying to take out my men! That was why I acted in haste.”

“But now, I see that it’s all a misunderstanding. Please accept my apologies, you two. If I wasn’t so old and blind, I would not have committed such a rookie mistake! So sorry.”

Lei Xiaodan was acting surprisingly humble considering that he was a Grandmaster.

“My name is Lei Xiaodan. I am the Judicial Commissioner of the Tian Yong Intelligence Department. May I know your names, please?”

“Well met, Lord Lei,” Ye Qing replied with a hint of surprise. A Judicial Commissioner was an upper rank official and on the same level as the Chief of Bureau. He was a rank higher than even Hong Jianglong, a Pacification Commissioner.

Ye Qing didn’t believe Lei Xiaodan’s claim that it was an unfortunate mistake in the slightest, but he didn’t dare to say it. The guy was a Grandmaster after all.

Hong Jianglong might have dared to insult the guy despite being a rank lower, but that was because he was a Grandmaster himself. As a puny Spirit Purifier and Peacemaker, Ye Qing had no intentions of making an enemy out of Lei Xiaodan if possible. “I am Ye Qing, and this over here is my friend, Chen Wuxin.”

“Oh, you’re the famous Qing Emperor Junior?” Lei Xiaodan wore a smile of pure surprise and delight when he heard this. “Your reputation is like thunder piercing the ear, and now that I’ve met you in person, I can tell that you definitely deserve it! It is the imperial court, Chu and the people’s fortune for the Pacification Bureau to obtain a dragon-in-human-skin like you!”



“You flatter me, my lord.” Ye Qing replied with a salute, but he didn’t let down his guard. There was no way that a Grandmaster and an upper third rank Judicial Commissioner of the Intelligence Department would lick his boots for no reason. Frankly, he was feeling quite worried and anxious here.

“My Intelligence Department came here today to capture some rebels. How did they clash with you, Qing Emperor Junior?” Lei Xiaodan asked concernedly.

“It’s like this, master—” Chu Renhe tried to pre-empt Ye Qing and get his version of the story out in the open first, but Lei Xiaodan interrupted him before he could say anything. “I’m asking Qing Emperor Junior right now. Stop interrupting, you rude child!”

Chu Renhe seemed to be very afraid of his own master because he fell silent immediately. He was still glaring coldly at Ye Qing though.

“Speak, Qing Emperor Junior!”

“You don’t need to address me by my title, my lord. Just address me directly,” Ye Qing said. He literally hadn’t heard of the nickname until today, and while he found it to be a rather cool nickname, he didn’t really need to hear it from the mouth of the Judicial Commissioner himself.

“Sure. Humility is a good thing. I shall address you as Young Ye instead.” Lei Xiaodan continued smilingly, “Speak, Young Ye.”

“Very well. It’s like this.” Ye Qing got ready to retell the story. He wasn’t in the wrong anyway, so he wasn’t afraid of telling the truth as it was.

But right before he could tell his story, Lei Xiaodan looked at Chen Wuxin and said, “Can you put Brother Tong down first, Brother Chen? He looks like he’s about to run out of breath.”

Chen Wuxin did as he said. The big boss had arrived, so there was no chance he could kill Tong Zhen if he wanted to. More importantly, Lei Xiaodan made him feel like a chick before a cat. He saw no reason to offend someone who was way stronger than him.

“Thank you, Brother Chen.” Lei Xiaodan thanked him before continuing, “You are a powerful body-tempering warrior whose fist art is peerless, Brother Chen. I am sure that you have a great future ahead of you if you manage to become a Grandmaster.”

“If I’m not mistaken, you cultivate the Chaos Demon Tempering Sect’s ‘Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra’, right? It so happens that their sect master and I are acquaintances. From what I know, there are only a handful of people who managed to practice the ‘Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra’ to the extent you did.”

“Now that I think about it, didn’t Chen Ah Sheng, the leader of the Chaos Heaven Brigands, practice the ‘Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra’ as well? I heard that



his attainment in the cultivation art was pretty advanced too. You know, your surname is Chen, and your appearance resembles his. I even heard that Chen Ah Sheng recently escaped to Tian Yong to escape his pursuers. It's a mighty coincidence, don't you agree?"

"Haha, it is pretty coincidental," Chen Wuxin's eyelids twitched as he replied.

Hong Jianglong realized something and rebuked Lei Xiaodan, "We're supposed to be talking about what happened between your disciple and Joyless, Lei Xiaodan! Stop getting off topic!"

"Hahaha! You're just as hasty as ever, Brother Hong! I was just about to get right into it!" Lei Xiaodan replied amiably and looked at Ye Qing. "I'm just saying that a notorious, wicked evildoer like Chen Ah Sheng could not possibly appear at West Yong, right Young Ye?"

Ye Qing stared into Lei Xiaodan's eyes for a long time before smiling as well. "You're absolutely right, Lord Lei."

"Hehehe. Where were we? Oh right! How did you and Renhe clash against each other? If Renhe is in the wrong, then I'll have him offer you a sincere apology!"

Lei Xiaodan beamed at Ye Qing as he said, "Don't be afraid, Young Ye. Tell me the truth and only the truth!"

#### Chapter 399: Aim For The Heart

"It's just a small misunderstanding, sir. Lord Chu mistook me for one of the rebels, that's all. It's really my fault for not clarifying things sooner," Ye Qing replied with a warm smile. But on the inside, he was cursing Lei Xiaodan's foxiness.

On the outside, Lei Xiaodan was encouraging him to tell the truth. But on the inside, he was really threatening him to gloss over the matter, or he would expose Chen Wuxin for who he was. Chen Ah Sheng was one of the leaders of the Thirteen Brigands, and unlike your petty criminal, he was so notorious that even the imperial court had a hefty bounty on his head. Anyone who colluded with him would be punished severely.

The reason Lei Xiaodan revealed the fact that he recognized Chen Ah Sheng but didn't call him out for who he was was to warn Ye Qing to say anything but the truth. Otherwise, he would not hesitate to drag him down with him.

Technically, there was no harm in revealing the truth. After all, there was nothing shameful about destroying the Chaos Heaven Brigands. The problem was that he couldn't reveal his deeds without explaining about his involvement with the Ghost Tower, and if his involvement with the Ghost Tower was revealed, then everything he did to shake them off would be for naught.

Besides that, the Thirteen Brigands were united in spirit. If they or Chen Ah Sheng's friends and family learned that he was the one behind the destruction of the Chaos Heaven Brigands, then he wouldn't survive very long at all, not unless he hid behind the Pacification Bureau's skirt forever.

Without the necessary strength, fame and glory were nothing more but death sentences.



Maybe it was because Lei Xiaodan didn't want to provoke the Pacification Bureau or Hong Jianglong, or maybe it was because he wasn't sure why Chen Ah Sheng was standing together with Ye Qing. In the end, he only chose to threaten him subtly.

Ye Qing understood his meaning, which was why he ultimately didn't reveal the full extent of Chu Renhe's actions and behavior. The way he glossed over it, you would think that they hadn't fought at all.

"It was just a misunderstanding? That's great! Even so, the right attitude is necessary to resolve a misunderstanding." Lei Xiaodan acted as a mediator and beckoned Chu Renhe over, "Come, Renhe. Apologize to Young Ye."

A cold glint flickered in Chu Renhe's eyes as he apologized, "I apologize for my recklessness, Brother Ye. I hope you will forgive me."

"I wasn't fully in the right either. I hope you will overlook my behavior," replied Ye Qing with a smile.

"This is good, isn't it? A family should always be in harmony," Lei Xiaodan chuckled, "and youngsters like you two should get to know each other better."

"Hmph." Chu Renhe grunted but didn't say anything.

"As you can see, Brother Hong, it's just a misunderstanding. Should we overlook this matter now?" Lei Xiaodan looked at Hong Jianglong.

Hong Jianglong sneered. "It's not like I can say anything else since both sides don't wish to pursue this matter any longer, can't I? A fair warning though, Lei Xiaodan. I don't care what you and your ilk do in the norm, but never plot against or heaven forbid, lay a finger on the Pacification Bureau. Otherwise, we will retaliate in full force."

"What are you talking about, Brother Hong? The Intelligence Department and the Pacification Bureau are the right and left hand of the Son of Heaven. We are united in our purpose to serve the emperor and the people, aren't we? Why would we ever scheme against our own?"

Lei Xiaodan declared in a fearful voice, "Don't you know me, Old Hong? I can't say for everyone, but you know that I would never do such a thing."

"Good. You best remember what you said today and act like it." Hong Jianglong declared imperiously. "This is the end of today's incident. There won't be an aftermath, and I better not hear anything untoward regarding Joyless and the Pacification Bureau in the near future, understand?"

"But of course," Lei Xiaodan said with an obsequious smile. "You know what, I have some time today. Why don't I negotiate a table with the Beauty Pageant Palace and treat Young Ye to a proper welcoming ceremony? It would make for a good apology, don't you think?"



“Forget it. Unlike you, the Pacification Bureau has a lot of work to do.” Hong Jianglong glanced at Ye Qing and ordered, “Join me, Joyless.”

“As you command,” Ye Qing replied before saluting Lei Xiaodan again. “I shall be taking my leave, Lord Lei.”

Ye Qing wanted nothing more than to stay far, far away from Lei Xiaodan. However, some amount of pretenses were still necessary.

“Off you go, Young Ye. Do visit the Intelligence Department when you have time. I’d like nothing more than to spend some time with you,” Lei Xiaodan said affectionately.

*I think not, you suspicious old man!* Ye Qing barely suppressed his impulse to break out in goosebumps as he replied, “Sure. I will make time.”

Lei Xiaodan guffawed. “Hahaha... I look forward to your arrival, Young Ye.”

“Be seeing you, Lord Lei,” Ye Qing said one last time before falling behind Hong Jianglong.

As the duo left, Lei Xiaodan called out to Hong Jianglong, “Let’s have a drink when you have time, Brother Hong!”

The Pacification Commissioner did not reply.

After Hong Jianglong and Ye Qing were gone, Chu Renhe’s expression suddenly morphed into an angry, vengeful snarl.

“Are you angry that I didn’t take revenge for you, Renhe?” Lei Xiaodan turned to look at his disciple.

“I wouldn’t dare!” Chu Renhe replied.

“So, you’re saying that you are angry.” Lei Xiaodan didn’t get angry despite his answer.

Chu Renhe hesitated for a moment before answering, “I’m not angry for myself, master. I’m angry for you.”

“You are the Judicial Commissioner of the Intelligence Department. Both your rank and your strength are greater than Hong Jianglong’s, not to mention that the Intelligence Department isn’t inferior to the Pacification Bureau in any way. Why must you always... always...”

“Act like a meek servant, am I right?” Lei Xiaodan smiled.

“I wouldn’t dare,” Chu Renhe replied again.

“You don’t really think I’m cowardly just because my name is Lei Xiaodan (Surname: Thunder, Name: Cowardly), do you?” Lei Xiaodan let out a chuckle. “I just think that most face aren’t worth fighting for, that’s all. Let’s say that I dominated Hong



Jianglong in a verbal spar and trampled all over his face. Would that really help me? Would it really hurt Hong Jianglong? Nay, it wouldn't. It would just be a waste of time and energy."

"If you're going to kill a snake, aim for the spot seven inches below its head. If you're going to kill a man, aim for the heart or the brain. If you're going to commit to something, you should make sure that said action is as effective as it is permanent."

"Otherwise, forget killing the snake, all you're going to do is to alert it. On top of that, you might give it the chance to bite you—just like what you did today."

Lei Xiaodan looked at Chu Renhe sternly. "You acted recklessly and didn't investigate if Ye Qing is alone or has a lot of backing. As a result, you not only failed to kill him, but also took a massive loss in return. Am I wrong?"

Chu Renhe opened his mouth, but he couldn't say anything.

"You're still too young. Too impatient." Lei Xiaodan gave him a consoling pat on the shoulder.

Chu Renhe sucked in a deep breath and saluted Lei Xiaodan. "This disciple recognizes his mistake, master."

"And if you can fix it, then it is all worth it." Lei Xiaodan smiled. "You're still young. You still have plenty of room to make mistakes. What is scary is not fixing your mistakes despite knowing them."

"Only those who are brave enough to recognize their shame, accept it, and never forget it may wash away their shame one day."

"I will remember this, master." Chu Renhe bowed his head deeply.

"Good. Now lead our men back to their posts, and remember to compensate those who were injured or killed properly. We mustn't maltreat those who serve us faithfully." Lei Xiaodan patted Chu Renhe's shoulder one last time before he slowly turned transparent. A paper doll fell from the center of his silhouette and burst into flames before it hit the ground.

Chu Renhe was stunned and in disbelief. He had no idea that his master had been a paper doll this whole time.

"Is this... the Judicial Commissioner's magic, the Paper Doll Art?!" Tong Zhen was just as shocked as Chu Renhe was. "To think that the Judicial Commissioner's magic could fool even Hong Jianglong. He must have gotten stronger."

"Yeah!" Chu Renhe replied enviously before ordering, "Anyway, let's clean up the scene and go home!"



Tong Zhen looked at the ruined inn and the warrioress who was still stuck in the ground, hurt and spent. His complexion slowly darkened as he asked, "Are we going to overlook this, Renhe?"

"Overlook?" Chu Renhe's expression turned cold and cruel. "I have never suffered such humiliation in my life, and you're asking me that?"

"What do you want to do?" As one of his long-time subordinates, Tong Zhen wasn't surprised by Chu Renhe's answer in the slightest.

"We will see!" Chu Renhe said coldly.

An idea suddenly occurred to Tong Zhen. "According to the Judicial Commissioner, the guy who protected Ye Qing is most likely Chen Ah Sheng. We can use that to our advantage, can't we? Chen Ah Shen is a member of the Thirteen Brigands, and we all know that it's a death sentence to collude with one of their ilk. If we expose this, no one can save Ye Qing even if he is a member of the Pacification Bureau, right?"

Chu Renhe's eyes lit up for an instant before dimming again. "No, no. Master didn't expose Ye Qing despite knowing who Chen Ah Sheng was. He must have his reasons. Besides, master promised Hong Jianglong that this is the end of today's incident, and bringing up Chen Ah Sheng would be to reopen old wounds and worse, bring shame to master."

"I shouldn't need to tell you the consequences of annoying master, should I?"

Tong Zhen gulped and turned as white as a sheet. The Judicial Commissioner might be the picture of kindness and benevolence in the norm, but when he gets angry, it was like an inner demon had awakened inside him. Not only that, Lei Xiaodan had the peculiar hobby of researching ancient punishments and applying them on his victims. He especially enjoyed the cruelest and most inhuman punishments such as Death By A Thousand Cuts, Human Swine[1], Wax Boiling[2] and more.

In fact, many of these Human Swines and wax statues decorated the interior of the Intelligence Department.

"What should we do then?" Tong Zhen asked.

"There's no hurry. We have plenty of time to come up with a perfect solution." Chu Renhe's expression loosened into a feminine, cruel grin. "Master is right. If you're going to kill a snake, aim for the spot seven inches below its head. If you're going to kill a man, aim for the heart or the brain."

"When next we strike, death will be his only fate!"

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"That was a hell of a 'pleasant surprise' you brought me, Joyless!"

On the way to the headquarters, Hong Jianglong teased Ye Qing while feeling both shocked and impressed at the same time.

When he first saw Ye Qing, he was still a late-stage Astral Refiner. Later, he entered the Spirit Purification stage after emerging from the Demon's Tomb. Less than a month after that, he had



entered the middle-stage of the Spirit Purification stage, and not as an empty shell that forsook everything for speed either. His senses told him that his spirit was potent and vast, and his vigor felt as strong as a mini sun. He had no idea how the young man managed to grow so strong in so short a time.

Forget Luo Zhan, even Chu Qingge might be no match for him anymore. This was just insane.

"I didn't want this either. I was just looking to eat lunch," Ye Qing argued with a bitter chuckle. He had told Hong Jianglong everything that truly happened in the restaurant earlier, so he knew that the guy was just making fun of him.

"It's fine though. The Intelligence Department more than anyone else needs someone to spank them once in a while. If they dare to provoke you in the future, don't hesitate to beat the shit out of their assholes. I will shield you from all consequences." Hong Jianglong waved his hand.

"My lord is strong," Ye Qing flattered before asking, "by the way, how did you know I was in trouble?"

Hong Jianglong scoffed, "What, you think that the Intelligence Department is the only one who has spies? Besides, the commotion you caused is loud enough to wake even the dead."

"It's my turn to ask you a question. Who is he? Is he really Chen Ah Sheng?" Hong Jianglong abruptly glanced at Chen Wuxin with a severe look.

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"He was, but no longer," Ye Qing replied.

"Cut the bullshit and just give it to me straight!"

Hong Jianglong's voice grew harsh. "Are you aware that anyone who colluded with the Thirteen Brigands will be sentenced to death? The Pacification Bureau may be open to drastic measures from time to time, but we will never tolerate a monstrous, vile criminal like him in our ranks. If you cannot give me a proper explanation, then I will have to mete out the appropriate punishment as our law dictates!"

"Don't worry, my lord. I know what is right and what is wrong. I will never collude with a criminal who is heinous beyond any redemption." Ye Qing turned serious and began telling his story. "It's like this..."

Ye Qing told Hong Jianglong about the Yin Market, the Ghost Tower, and Chen Ah Sheng. He even told him how he offended Chu Wangsun because he trusted Hong Jianglong to keep a secret.

But of course, he didn't tell Hong Jianglong about the Dark Overlord Token because that would kill him.

"You're... quite the troublemaker, aren't you?" Hong Jianglong remarked with a complicated expression after Ye Qing had finally reached the end of the story. In half a month's time, the young man had punched the Eight Legions in the eye, kicked the



Ghost Tower in the butt, pissed on Mister Nine's dignity, and shat on the Thirteen Brigands' face. Oh, and let's not forget that he had offended the Intelligence Department as well.

If he added the Nether Lord[1] and the Way of Taiping into the mix as well, then that was almost half of Chu's *jianghu*.

It was one thing if the factions he offended were inferior and insignificant, but no, each one was scarier than the last.

Even scarier was the fact that Ye Qing was still alive. No one could chalk it up as luck at this point.

"It's really just a series of unfortunate accidents." Ye Qing rubbed his nose with a sigh of frustration. He wanted to lead a quiet life killing Strangers, training martial arts, and discussing the intricacies of life with a pretty girl as well, but trouble just wouldn't stop barging through his doors, windows, and even mice holes. What could he do? Give up and wait for death to claim him?

"Hmph! Most people wouldn't encounter so many 'accidents' their whole lives even if they tried, you know that?" Hong Jianglong snorted. "What are you going to do now? By killing Chen Ah Sheng, you've eliminated the Chaos Heaven Brigands as well. If you report your achievement, you should be able to rise at least two or three ranks."

"Forget it. All I ask is that you keep this a secret." Ye Qing shook his head.

"Heh. Good to see that you haven't let fame and glory blind you." Hong Jianglong nodded in approval. "Fame and glory are like houses suspended in the air. They will fall and crush you if not supported by an unbreakable amount of strength. Be it in the court or the *jianghu*, there are countless people who lost their lives and future for fame and glory."

"If it was me, forget killing Chen Ah Sheng, I could annihilate the Way of Taiping itself, and no one would dare to say a thing about it. But not you. Right now, such an achievement would only earn you death, and the knife might even not come from the front."

"Nothing is more important than strength, understand?"

"I understand, my lord. Thank you for your guidance," Ye Qing thanked Hong Jianglong, though his expression was a little strange. It was because he felt like the Pacification Commissioner was boasting even though he was telling the truth. *Annihilate the Way of Taiping? Why not say you're going to dominate the Nine Heavens as well?*

"Good." Hong Jianglong smiled. "That said, the Pacification Bureau isn't a place that doesn't reward hard work. I may not be able to grant you a higher rank, but I can



reward you with Strange Artifacts, pills, martial arts, magics and more. Just tell me what you want.”

“Thank you, my lord!” Ye Qing exclaimed in pleasant surprise. “In that case... Can I enter the Martial Tower again?”

Ye Qing considered what he wanted carefully. He had an abundant number of martial arts and Strange Artifacts. He also didn’t need pills thanks to the Water of Life. The only thing he really needed was time.

Technically, Nanke was all the time he needed, but the Martial Tower was obviously the safer and more convenient solution.

“You wish to enter the Martial Tower?” Hong Jianglong shot Ye Qing a meaningful look before smiling. “It looks like you have plenty of good stuff on your person. That’s good though. Strange Artifacts are ultimately external power. It will never be as reliable as your own strength and power.”

“I must warn you though. You’ll only get a few days in the Martial Tower since the Hidden Dragon Meet is soon to begin. Is that okay with you?”

“It is. Please,” Ye Qing replied without any hesitation.

“Good. I will make the arrangements as soon as we return to the headquarters.” Hong Jianglong nodded.

“Oh right, do you know why Lord Lei didn’t expose Chen Ah Sheng even though he recognized him, my lord?” Ye Qing suddenly recalled what happened earlier and asked curiously.

“Lei Xiaodan is a man of his name, you see. Careful to the point of cowardice, he does not act unless he’s one hundred percent certain about his chances. Although he recognized Chen Ah Sheng, he didn’t know why the guy was with you. That is why he decided to hold back.”

Hong Jianglong added, “You must be careful of him though. He might look harmless and even obsequious on the outside, but in reality he is a cunning and ruthless bastard. If he doesn’t act, then all is well. If he does act, then you most likely wouldn’t live to see tomorrow’s sun.”

“Would he try and start something with Chen Ah Sheng in the future?” Ye Qing asked worriedly.

Hong Jianglong shook his head. “You don’t need to worry about that. Lei Xiaodan may be devious, but he’s surprisingly good at keeping promises. Since he promised that this is the end of the incident, he won’t bring up Chen Ah Sheng again.”

“But of course, this isn’t an excuse not to prepare against betrayal. I will prepare Chen Ah Sheng a proper identity when we get back.”



Pleasantly surprised, Chen Wuxin hurriedly bowed in Hong Jianglong's direction and thanked him profusely, "Thank you, my lord! I won't forget what you did for me!"

Hong Jianglong looked at Chen Wuxin and said, "You are a ghost, and we are humans. Normally, I would kill you as soon as I lay my eyes on you. But since you helped Joyless, I can let you live."

"But now that you're a human, you best act like one. If you dare to flout the law, commit crimes, and conspire against humanity, then I will ensure that you will never get a second chance in anything."

"I understand, my lord! I swear I will become a law-abiding and helpful citizen of humanity!" Chen Wuxin declared while patting his chest.

Hong Jianglong knew better than to take Chen Wuxin's promise seriously, of course. He simply said, "Protect Joyless well."

Chen Wuxin guffawed. "Brother Ye and I have been like brothers from the moment we first met. Of course I will protect him to the best of my abilities!"

*Brothers my ass. More like fake brothers!* Ye Qing rolled his eyes mentally.

"Oh right, I almost forgot. You should watch out for Chu Renhe and Tong Zhen, that midget as well, Joyless." Hong Jianglong looked at Ye Qing and said seriously, "It's easy to stand before the King of Hell, but not so easy to handle the smaller demons. Lei Xiaodan wouldn't lower himself to attack you, but neither Chu Renhe nor Tong Zhen are broad-minded, tolerant people. Beware of them."

"I will."

Ye Qing nodded. Hong Jianglong's warning was really unnecessary because he was already on guard against them. In fact, he wasn't really worried about them because both of them seemed to have shit for brains. No, the one he was really worried about was Chu Wangsun.

First Chu Wangsun, now Chu Renhe. How troublesome.

Oh well. I hope I'll overcome this just like I overcome my past tribulations.

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June sixth, the Tiankuang Festival.

Every sixth of June, the people celebrated the Tiankuang Festival. During the reign of Emperor Zhen Zong, he dreamed of receiving nine scriptures from heaven which showed "a wise ruler, an enlightened emperor could govern the country and bring peace to everyone". The emperor then set the day he received this sacred revelation to be a holiday and built the Tiankuang Hall to commemorate it.

Over time, the Tiankuang Festival became a longtime tradition that everyone in the realm celebrated. Every sixth of June, they would eat food made from wheat flour and syrup believing that it would bless them with good health and well-being. Some places would even organize all kinds of celebratory events. It was quite wonderful.



The Tiankuang Festival wasn't celebrated this year, however. Or rather, it was celebrated less because the triennial Hidden Dragon Meet would take place on the same day.

The Hidden Dragon Meet would be held at Flying Dragon Mount, and it was already jam-packed with people first thing in the morning.

The meet wasn't held in the city of Tian Yong as a matter of course. More famous than even the triennial prefectural exam, countless people traveled from all across the world to witness the next rising stars and possible entrants of the Jixia Academy. It couldn't be held in the city because the city couldn't accommodate this many people.

Flying Dragon Mount was a massive mountain about four hundred meters tall. It was quite dangerous not just because of its steep terrain, but also because it was shrouded by clouds all year long.

The reason Flying Dragon Mount was given its name was because it was a precipitous straight line from the bottom all the way to the top, giving it the appearance of a dragon that was about to soar to the heavens. Besides that, people used to imagine that its deep, seemingly bottomless ravines were the lair of dragons, and that they would one day emerge from their hideout and astound the world.

The first stage of the competition was very simple. The participants were requested to scale the mountains in twelve hours. Anyone who reached the peak during this time would advance to the next stage.

The second stage of the competition was even simpler. The surviving participants would duel each other in the Hidden Dragon Arena to decide a champion. The top three participants would receive a generous reward and be renowned throughout the world.

The peak of the Flying Dragon Mount was perfectly flat and smooth like someone had cut it off with a sword. At the center of the massive platform was a square-shaped hole surrounded by complex and mysterious runes.

A number of small kiosks surrounded the platform, and each kiosk were occupied by one or two people.

The spectators would quake in their boots if they could see the occupants. It was because everyone in the kiosk was a famous, influential person in Tian Yong. For example, there was Hong Jianglong, the Pacification Commissioner of the North; Lei Xiaodan, the Judicial Commissioner of the Tian Yong Intelligence Department, Mr. Nine, the ninth disciple of the Chief Libationist of the Jixia Academy, the Harmony King and his crown prince, an imperial envoy specifically dispatched to attend the Hidden Dragon Meet, Song Xilai of Purity Sword and more.

"It's almost time. Shall we begin now?" A handsome, awe-inspiring man wearing long robes asked.

The man had an intimidating appearance, but he carried himself like iris and orchid, elegant and welcoming, and spoke in a gentle and refined manner that invoked a favorable impression instead of fear.

The speaker was the imperial envoy dispatched by the imperial court to attend the Hidden Dragon Meet. The original purpose of the Hidden Dragon Meet was to unearth and recruit hidden talents



into the ranks of Chu after all. Even if the current court might think otherwise, they couldn't possibly ignore it altogether.

The imperial envoy this time was the eldest son of the Grand Mentor. His name was Fang Muyun. One of the Three Dukes, the Grand Mentor, Fang Zhiyong was famed for his infinite wisdom. He had mentored the current emperor when he was young, eliminated the traitors, purged the relatives who would challenge his claim, and more or less carried him to the throne singlehandedly.

Emperor Jin Run[2] was still young when he took the throne, so he was beset by both internal strife and external conflict. The only reason he wasn't dethroned prematurely was thanks to Fang Zhiyong somehow pulling off the herculean effort of uniting the realm and repelling the invading forces.

After Emperor Jin Run reached adulthood, Fang Zhiyong returned the power vested in him to the emperor without any reservation whatsoever. He knew the dangers of being more powerful and accomplished than your liege after all. He himself returned to his hometown to retire in peace—or at least he tried to, but was stopped by the emperor himself on account of everything he had done for him.

Fang Zhiyong had no choice but to obey, but he still excused himself from all court matters using his age as the excuse and opened a school instead. He would teach many students and nurture many talents for the imperial court.

Fang Muyun was somewhat famous for his age, but his ambitions lay not in becoming an official or entering the imperial court. Instead, he assisted his father in putting the school into order and teaching the students. Over time, he came to be known as Mister Farseeing.

This was why Fang Muyun was considered to be loftier and more important than most imperial officials despite not being one himself.

"What do you say, Lord Hong?" Fang Muyun looked to Hong Jianglong for approval.

"It is time. What do you say, Mister Nine?" Hong Jjianglong looked at Chu Wangsun, who was sitting next to Fang Muyun. Fang Muyun had studied under the Jixia Academy and the Chief Libationist before. Although he hadn't become the Chief Libationist's disciple, they treated each other as fellow disciples.

"Let's begin," Chu Wangsun replied indifferently, eyes firmly affixed to his books.