

Stranger 401

Chapter 401: Climbing

“Since Mister Farseeing and Mister Nine have both given their consent, let us begin the Hidden Dragon Meet.”

Hong Jianglong declared, “Lord Lei, Brother Song, please lend me a hand.”

“No problem.”

“It is our duty.”

Hong Jianglong rose to his feet and produced a small brazier. Then, he tossed it toward the square-shaped hole at the center of the platform.

The brazier kept growing bigger and bigger until it landed inside the hole. It was a perfect fit where not the slightest gap could be seen.

The brazier was called the Hidden Dragon Brazier, and it was the key to unlocking the Flying Dragon Mount’s array.

From a distance, Lei Xiaodan, Song Xilai and Hong Jianglai injected their astral qi into the brazier, causing the mysterious runes to grow brighter and brighter. When all of the runes had lit up, a massive golden dragon flew out of the brazier, punched through the clouds, soared through the nine heavens.

“ROAR”

The golden dragon circled in the sky and scattered all the clouds directly above Flying Dragon Mount. Its roar was such that it shook all four directions.

The *jianghu* warriors standing at the foot of the mountain and waiting for the meet to begin saw the golden dragon as a matter of course. Excited chatter broke out throughout the Hidden Dragon Meet.

They knew that the Hidden Dragon Meet was about to begin.

Some people were excited, and some people were calm. There was a small group of warriors that was extremely agitated, however.

“What is Joyless doing? The Hidden Dragon Meet will begin any minute now!”

They were none other than Chu Nianjiu, Lin Yuhuai and Qi Xuanyun.

The trio arrived at Tian Yong two days ago, and upon arrival, they were told that they missed Ye Qing because he had entered the Martial Tower. This wasn’t a problem of course, they thought for sure that he would show his face two days later. But now, he was still nowhere to be seen. He couldn’t be so absorbed in his training that he forgot about the Hidden Dragon Meet, could he?

“Dammit, if I’m qualified to train in the Martial Tower, I wouldn’t participate in the Hidden Dragon Meet either. What dogshit luck did Joyless step on this time?” Chu Nianjiu sighed while sipping his wine, but it didn’t feel as fragrant as it should be.

“Don’t worry. He will show up eventually,” Gao Ningnan consoled him.

Gao Ning'an was accompanied by Luo Zhan, Sui Yan, Chu Qingge and the rest of the rising stars of the Tian Yong Pacification Bureau. This included the commanderies and counties subordinate to Tian Yong as well. Of course, they were all youngsters.

"He knew that the Hidden Dragon Meet is starting today, and he didn't even show up for attendance? The Qing Emperor Junior sure is an arrogant bastard!" Someone taunted.

"If you're as strong as him, then you can be arrogant as well."

"The question is, is he the real thing, or is he all bark and no bite?"

"That's hard to say. The one thing this world doesn't lack are deceivers and pretenders!"

Countless others joined in on the ridicule as well.

An unhappy-looking Qi Xuanyun wanted to argue with the haters, but Lin Yuhuai grabbed him and said, "Ignore them. They're just feeling jealous is all."

The haters were the Pacification Bureau representatives from the counties and commanderies of Tian Yong. As they were young and impulsive, it was natural that they were envious of Ye Qing's fame. Add to the fact that Ye Qing was given a second chance to enter the Martial Tower, and it was no wonder that they were spouting sour grapes.

In fact, Lin Yuhuai had a few choice words himself if he wasn't friends with Ye Qing.

We're all humans here. What makes you so special, huh? Huh?

"ROAR"

It was at this moment the golden dragon roared again. A terrifying amount of pressure swept across the world, and beams of light descended from the sky. When the golden dragon shot upward and punched through the final cloud and darkness, a massive sun emerged into view and washed away all of the darkness and gloom.

"The Hidden Dragon Meet begins now!"

Hong Jianglong's powerful voice resounded from the peak.

"Go! Go!"

Before Hong Jianglong even finished talking, countless participants rushed toward Flying Dragon Mount. It took only a moment before the traffic had decreased by more than half. Those who remained were either fully confident in their strength and so didn't mind losing some time, or were just spectators.

"Brother Chu, Brother Lin, let's go. We're not actually going to wait until everyone is gone, are we?" Gao Ning'an said after the initial rush had subsided.

They only had twelve hours or half a day to make it to the peak. If they missed it, then they would fail the first stage. Gao Ning'an wasn't very confident in his own strength, and so he didn't want to waste time as much as possible.

“He’s right, Yuhuai. Let’s go,” Chu Nianjiu echoed in agreement. “Knowing Joyless’ strength, climbing the mountain is nothing to him. It will be fine even if he’s a little late. Why wait for him here when we can do the same on the peak?”

“That’s true.” Lin Yuhuai nodded. He then followed Gao Ning’an and the others up Flying Dragon Mount.

As soon as he entered the mountain, Lin Yuhuai discovered that his companions were nowhere to be seen. His body felt heavier than normal, and the air permeating the area felt gloomy and strange.

Of course, it wasn’t going to be this easy. If the first stage was purely about climbing, forget a four-hundred-meter tall mountain, they could climb even a four-thousand-meter tall mountain with ease.

A massive array was set across the Flying Dragon Mount. As soon as someone set foot in the mountain, they would be separated from their companions. The journey to the top was a lonely one where no one was allowed to help or cooperate with each other. They would encounter all kinds of dangers as well. Broken cliffs and precipitous walls were the kiddies’ challenges. The real challenge was the traps, restrictions, Strangers and Anomalies that littered the place. One misstep, and the challengers could be disqualified or even killed.

This was why the Hidden Dragon Meet was never a childish, meaningless stage show. It was a true life-or-death trial where countless people were injured or killed.

After all, a dragon who couldn’t even overcome the challenges of the pits didn’t deserve to rise to the heavens.

Lin Yuhuai had memorized all the rules of the Hidden Dragon Meet, so he knew what to expect. He kept a focused mind and slowly began his ascent.

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“Yo, that guy’s pretty quick! He’s reached the one hundredth meter mark already.”

“Hmm? That kid’s not bad either. He killed a Malice-class Stranger in one strike.”

“Is that guy a comedian or something? The task is to climb the mountain, and he’s sitting there and enjoying a picnic? Just how hungry is he?”

“Hmm, that girl is quite something. Not only is she strong and agile, she looks dignified, stylish, graceful, ladylike...”

The peak of Flying Dragon Mount had turned as transparent as a mirror. It displayed all the participants who were climbing the mountain.

Inside a kiosk, a doddering old man was staring at the screens and cheering those he supported, and booing those he didn’t like like a kid. From time to time, he would sip from his wine jar.

“Father, that’s sis you’re complimenting.”

A frail-looking young man reeking of alcohol and lying lazily in the lap of a servant girl remarked.

“And? Why wouldn’t I compliment her?” The old man shot him an incredulous look.

“Because she hasn’t done anything praiseworthy yet?” The young man opened his mouth, and a servant girl fed him a large grape. He looked like he was enjoying the time of his life.

“She’s my daughter. Who am I going to praise if not her? You? A sloppy, ignorant and incompetent fool I have the misfortune to call my son?” The old man ranted.

“I’m just warning you against celebrating prematurely. It’s not yet certain if sis could make it to the top, you know?” The young man replied lazily.

“Pooh! Shut your trap, you jinx! Do you think that Qingge is like you? With her strength, it would take her no effort to make it to the top!” The old man snarled. “Am I right, Jianglong?”

“You are correct, Your Highness. It won’t be a problem for Qingge to make it to the top,” Hong Jianglong answered.

The old man might act like a kid, but he was the emperor’s relative, his uncle to be exact. His name was Chu Yufeng, and he was conferred the Harmony King by the previous emperor. His fiefdom was located in Tian Yong.

When the Harmony King was young, he was a graceful, distinguished gentleman who enjoyed nothing more than to win the heart of a beautiful lady. After age caught up to him, his personality changed drastically as if he had regressed into a child.

Although the Harmony King had plenty of concubines and lovers in his life, he only had two children in his life; a boy and a girl to be exact. In fact, he was almost past the age he could realistically sow a child when Chu Qingge and Chu Qingli—the young man lazing next to him right now—were finally born.

That was why he pampered his children to the death. If he carried them in his arms, he was afraid that they would catch a chill. If he held them in his mouth, he was afraid that they would melt—or so went the metaphor. That was how much he cared for them. It was also why Chu Qingli grew up to be an arrogant, lawless and hedonistic young noble with exactly zero achievement to speak of—unless you count being infamous for frequenting brothels to the point of debility and poor health was an achievement, of course.

Surprisingly, the Harmony King’s daughter, Chu Qingge, was neither like her father nor her older brother. Extremely talented, humble and studious, she was quite accomplished in both literature and martial arts. After she joined the Pacification Bureau, she was well-liked and highly respected for her competence as well.

“Do you hear that, you unfilial son?” The Harmony King broke into a wide grin and taunted his son after hearing Hong Jianglong’s words.

“Fine, pretend I haven’t said anything. Just keep watching your show and stop bothering me.” Chu Qingge sipped his wine and closed his eyes as if he could fall asleep at any moment.

“Unfilial son! Unfilial son!” The Harmony King cursed his son angrily, but was reluctant to beat him up for real. In the end, that was all he said.

After stewing in anger for a bit, the Harmony King turned to Hong Jianglong and asked curiously, “Are there any other good seeds in this Hidden Dragon Meet besides my Qingge, Jianglong?”

“There are. For example, there is the young lord of the Flying Dragon Stronghold, the ‘Jade-faced Dragon’ Chen Shaoyu, Zhao Lan and Zhao Lu of the Ragged Villa, the four brothers ‘Wine’, ‘Sex’, ‘Wealth’ and ‘Popularity’ of the Tower of Wealth, four strange warriors operating in Guang Ping and Zhong Shan called ‘Eat’, ‘Drink’, ‘Fuck’ and ‘Gamble’, Lord Lei’s disciple Chu Renhe and more,” Hong Jianglong replied.

The Harmony King looked at Lei Xiaodan. “Your disciple is participating too, Xiaodan? He’s already an inspector general, why would he need to participate in the Hidden Dragon Meet?”

“You were young once. You know how they like to show off their strength.” Lei Xiaodan chuckled. “This is a good opportunity though. Renhe needs to recognize his peers so he won’t ever let his power get to his head.”

“Speaking of which, I think you left out someone, Brother Hong!”

“Oh? Who’s that?” The Harmony King asked curiously.

Lei Xiaodan smiled. “Why, I’m talking about the Qing Emperor Junior of Luo Shui Pacification Bureau, Ye Qing of course!”

“The ‘Qing Emperor Junior’ Ye Qing? I’ve heard of him! Is he here? Which one is he?” The Harmony King prodded excitedly.

Hong Jianglong replied awkwardly, “He has come to Tian Yong, but er, he was delayed by something. He hasn’t begun to climb the mountain yet.”

“What? If he isn’t climbing now, then he’ll never make it!” The Harmony King sighed in disappointment. “It’s a shame. I wanted to witness his power.”

“And what is delaying Young Ye, Brother Hong?” Lei Xiaodan asked curiously.

The Pacification Commissioner shot him a glance and said nothing, but Lei Xiaodan didn’t take offense. He simply smiled and pretended as if he had never asked the question.

Inside a different kiosk, one man asked his companion, “Who’s the Qing Emperor Junior, Brother Zhang? Is he the Qing Emperor’s disciple?”

The second guy shook his head smilingly. “You really don’t pay attention to anything, do you? How could you not know about the Qing Emperor Junior?”

The first guy was the patriarch of the Yang Clan, Yang Shixiu, and the second guy was the patriarch of the Zhang Clan, Zhang Huai’en. They were both prominent clans in Tian Yong.

No one here on the peak was a nobody.

“You know I wasn’t around until the past few days, Brother Zhang. I only know so much. Stop keeping me in suspense and just tell me already!” Yang Shixiu prodded.

Chapter 402: Give Your All, And Earth Might Turn Into Gold

“Fine, fine.”

Zhang Huai’en began, “First things first, the Qing Emperor Junior isn’t the Qing Emperor’s disciple. He is the Patrolman of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau, Ye Qing.”

“What? That doesn’t sound very... reliable. Are you sure you’re not playing me for a fool?” Yang Shixiu said skeptically.

“You’ll know once I tell you Ye Qing’s deeds.” Zhang Huai’en proceeded to tell Yang Shixiu all of Ye Qing’s achievements. “The Qing Emperor began from humble beginnings. After he joined the Pacification Bureau, he accomplished many legendary feats and eventually became one of the strongest warriors in the entire world. Ye Qing’s rise is pretty similar to the Qing Emperor’s, hence the nickname.”

“I see. He is quite the upstart,” Yang Shixiu exclaimed in realization before voicing his doubts, “But the Qing Emperor is the Qing Emperor. It’s been centuries, but he is the one and only to this day. It sounds like someone wants to elevate Ye Qing to a height he cannot survive before dropping him. Do you know who’s the one behind his nickname?”

“Of course not. Ye Qing offended too many people, you see.” Zhang Huai’en shook his head smilingly. “However, it is inevitable that a person who fights to improve will make a name for themselves. If he cannot survive even a nickname like this, then he is no more than a fake who rose too quickly to fame for his own good.”

“That’s true.” Yang Shixiu smiled. “The *jianghu* is never lacking in genius, but only a genius who survived can truly be called a genius.”

It was at this moment the Harmony King pointed at a cold-looking youngster wearing layers and layers of cloth around his arms and asked, “Xiaodan, Xiaodan! Who is that guy?”

The youngster was currently surrounded by a dozen or so Mud Bulls. A Mud Bull was a Hatred-class Stranger. Created from mud and shaped like a bull, it enjoyed suffocating a human to death with mud.

Individually, a Mud Bull was pretty weak. But because it was a social Stranger, it often appeared in a group of ten upward to a group of a hundred. Even a Spirit Purifier would want to stay out of its way.

In fact, the best way to deal with the Mud Bull was to run away from it. It was because the Stranger’s speed was quite poor. Any warrior who wasn’t crippled below the waist should be able to escape it without trouble.

The youngster on the screen did the opposite thing, however. Instead of avoiding the Mud Bull, he threw a punch when the first bull was almost on top of him.

The Mud Bull's head exploded like it was made of paper, but the fist force wasn't spent after the first attack. It pierced through the second Mud Bull, the third Mud Bull, the fourth...

The youngster's fist force was like an arrow. Once it was released, it didn't look back. The punch eventually pierced through the entire herd and allowed him to leave unimpeded.

"Your Highness, This youngster is probably Fu Chaogang of the Little Fist Sect. He's a middle-stage Spirit Purifier who practices the fist art called the Unwavering Fist. The key to the Unwavering Fist is to throw a punch with all one's heart, and to have no regrets no matter what the outcome might be. In less metaphorical terms, it means throwing a penetrating, all-crushing punch with a single breath of qi."

Lei Xiaodan answered, "Despite his young age, Fu Chaogang has already reached the adept level. He has a bright future ahead of him."

"Interesting, interesting."

The Harmony King nodded and glanced at the large brazier at the center of the platform. There was a name list floating above it, and the name "Jian Wusheng" was the highest of them all. He was currently the first place holder of this stage. "Who is this Jian Wusheng?"

Once again, Lei Xiaodan launched into a detailed explanation, "Jian Wusheng was originally called Jian Wusheng (Sound). A late-stage Spirit Purifier, he was a Purity Sword disciple until he was expelled for breaking a sect law. Luckily for him, he obtained Gentleman Wusheng's (Life) inheritance and learned the sword art called 'No Life, No I'. That was why he changed the word 'Sheng (Sound)' in his name to 'Sheng (Life)' to symbolize rebirth. He is famous throughout Guang Ping and Qing He."

"Not only that, Jian Wusheng is ranked ninety-eighth on the Human Champions Ranking. They call him 'Wusheng Swordsman' Jian Wusheng."

"He's ranked? No wonder he's so strong," the Harmony King exclaimed in shock while watching the young man slaughtering his way through all obstacles with his sword.

However, the old man quickly lost interest and looked at the second place holder, Luo Zhan.

"Jianglong, Luo Zhan is one of yours, right? The one called the 'Tyrant Blade'. Judging from the tyranny of his saber art, he deserves his name."

Hong Jianglong watched Luo Zhan cutting down all the trees and rocks within a hundred of meters of him in one strike before shaking his head. "Nah, he still has a long way to go. He has tyranny, but not the indomitable spirit of a tyrant. It will be some time before he grasps the essence of the Tyrant Blade."

Lei Xiaodan chuckled. "You ask too much, Brother Hong. Luo Zhan is still very young. If anything, it is impressive he managed to come so far in so short a time."

"Yeah, yeah! You can't ask too much from youngsters," the Harmony King echoed in agreement.

When the Harmony King saw that the third place holder was none other than his daughter, Chu Qingge, he immediately bragged loudly and radiantly to his son, “You see that, brat? Your sister’s at third place! Never mind, there’s no point talking to you. If you have even a sliver of your sister’s abilities, I would be able to rest in peace, you useless, incompetent prodigal.”

Chu Qingli: “...” *Did I say anything? Why am I getting attacked for no reason?*

Chu Renhe was the fourth place holder, and the names following Chu Renhe were all unfamiliar names. The Harmony King asked about them all.

As expected of the Judicial Commissioner, Lei Xiaodan was able to answer all of his questions. He knew everyone and everything like they were his juniors.

Time passed slowly, and soon it was afternoon. Over six hours had passed, and fewer and fewer people were still climbing the mountain.

Some people forfeited believing that they could climb no further.

Some people suffered serious injuries and had no choice but to give up.

And some died in the middle of climbing.

Less than one-third of the original participants were left, but everyone who was still climbing was an elite.

The ranking had also undergone a massive change as a matter of course. For starters, the first place holder was no longer Jian Wusheng. It was a strange man called Tou Jiao[1].

Despite the rarity of his name, that wasn’t what the spectators found strange. No, it was appearance and fighting style.

Tou Jiao was a late-stage Spirit Purifier in his thirties. He had a baby fist-sized wart on his forehead that gave him a savage, monstrous look. His weapon was a three-pronged fork, and his martial arts looked ruthless and brutal. He seemed to be incredibly strong.

The second place holder was a man who was older than he looked. His name was Wei Bulao, and he too was a late-stage Spirit Purifier. He used a palm art that wasn’t really all that impressive, but had the strange effect of aging whatever it hit slowly.

The third place holder was Chu Qingge, and the fourth place holder was Jian Wusheng. The fifth place holder was a woman nicknamed “Flower Butterfly”, and just like her moniker, she was accompanied by a swarm of colorful butterflies at all times. Wherever she went, Strangers dropped dead without warning. The sixth place holder was Qi Xuanyun.

Luo Zhan and Chu Renhe might have fallen off their original ranking, but they were still on the ranking list. The warriors Hong Jianglong mentioned earlier such as Chen Shaoyu,

Zhao Lan, the four brothers Wine, Sex, Wealth and Popularity, and the strange quartet Eat, Drink, Fuck and Gamble were also ranked.

Lin Yuhuai, Chu Nianjiu, Gao Ningnan and more were still on the mountain, but they were more or less sitting at the bottom of the list.

It was worth noting that the first place holder, Tou Jiao, had already completed two-thirds of the journey. The second to fifth place holders weren't too far behind him either. One could say that they were one step away from completing their journey.

This one step was like the chasm between heaven and earth, however. Why? Because almost everyone had run into a major obstacle.

Tou Jiao's obstacle was a grave. Ghosts were flying out of the grave to impede him, and every time he slew them, the grave would spawn new ghosts. Their numbers might as well be infinite.

Tou Jiao wasn't stupid, of course. He knew that destroying the grave was the only way to stop the endless tide of ghosts and so charged toward it.

There was just one problem. As soon as he made his intentions clear, the grave suddenly grew a pair of legs and took off into a run. It was ridiculously fast too.

Tou Jiao was stunned to say the least, but that wasn't the end of it. When he gave up chasing the grave and tried to change course, it would return and harass him with its ghosts again. It was miserable. It would be a while yet before Tou Jiao finally escaped from the grave.

Wei Bulao ran into a waterfall, one that flowed upward instead of downward. Realizing that something was amiss, he turned away and attempted to leave and find another way. But before he could do so, the waterfall opened its mouth and spat a mouthful of water at Wei Bulao, pushing him far, far away from the waterfall. Before he could seize the opportunity to escape, the water reversed and brought him all the way back to the waterfall. Then, the harassment began anew.

Wei Bulao's palm art was incredible for many things, but water? For a time, he was stuck trying to break free from the waterfall's saliva.

The Stranger Chu Qingge ran into was also plenty strange. It was a skinless man who looked like he had been skinned alive. Red muscles fully exposed and bleeding all over the place, he was easily one of the most horrifying Strangers the young woman had ever faced.

Its ability was even more anomalous. As soon as she entered a certain range, she must stare into his eyes without blinking. She couldn't look away, and she definitely couldn't close her eyes. If she closed her eyes or looked away from the skinned man's eyes for a moment, her skin would rip as if some sort of energy was trying to skin her alive.

Worse still, getting close to her opponent would result in the same thing. And so she was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Luo Zhan, Chu Renhe and everyone else had encountered a different, but equally troublesome obstacle as well. Their climb speed suffered greatly as a result.

"Come, come, it's time to gamble! Who will get the first place? The odds of Tou Jiao winning is one-to-one, the odds of Wei Bulao winning is one point two-to-one, the odds of Chu Qingge winning is two-to-one, the odds of Jian Wusheng winning is three-to-one..."

A ranking list was also displayed at the foot of Flying Dragon Mount. Although they couldn't see the participants competing live like those at the peak, they could see their ranking. It was why there

was a huge crowd sitting around the ranking list. Naturally, there was a makeshift gambling den as well.

This happened all the time, so no one gave two shits about it. The house was a man named Black Tai Sui [2] and the owner of the famous gambling house, Tai Sui Gambling House. As the gambling den was well-reputed and never reneged on their customers' winnings, a lot of people were participating in the gamble.

Someone yelled, "One hundred silver on Tou Jiao! Tou Jiao used to be the right hand man of the Eighteen Chain Docks and nicknamed the Three-Headed Hydra! His Eighteen Forms of Mad Hydra is incredibly powerful, and his *jianghu* experience is top-notch! There is no way the rest of the inexperienced fools could best him!"

"What use is *jianghu* experience? At most, he ate a couple more bowls of rice than us! I think Wei Bulao can make it to the top, so three hundred silvers on Wei Bulao!"

"You're the ones who are inexperienced. Flying Dragon Mount is littered with Strangers, and who knows Strangers best? The Pacification Bureau, of course! Two hundred silvers on Chu Qingge!"

Someone jeered, "What's the point of betting on these people? Even if you win, your winnings will be insignificant. Work hard enough, and a cart may turn into a carriage. Give your all, and earth may turn into gold. That's why I'm going to bet... one hundred silver on Luo Zhan!"

"Tsk!"

Everyone who heard the guy clicked their tongues at the same time. Luo Zhan was also one of the hot contenders to reach the peak of Flying Dragon Mount first. The pot calling the kettle black much?

It was at this moment a loud voice cut through the commotion like a hot knife through butter. "Well said, brother! Work hard enough, and a cart may turn into a carriage. Give your all, and earth may turn into gold! I bet ten thousand silver that Ye Qing will win!"

A huge man that dropped an entire sack of silvers in Black Tai Sui's hands.

Chapter 403: Bet

"Ten thousand silver?"

"Ye Qing?"

The crowd looked and saw a tall, muscular man that resembled a tower in human form. His mere stature was enough to cow most of the crowd into a stunned, temporary silence.

He was, of course, Chen Wuxin.

What a big man, they all thought at the same time.

"Who is Ye Qing?" Someone scanned the ranking list from top to bottom but couldn't find the name anywhere. "I don't see a Ye Qing."

"Not yet, but very soon," Chen Wuxin declared calmly.

“Very soon?”

“It means that Ye Qing will show up right about... now.”

As soon as he finished, a silhouette suddenly flickered across the crowd’s eyes. Before they knew it, it was gone.

“Did... Did someone just dash past us?”

“I think so, but I’m not sure.”

“I thought I was hallucinating! It was real?”

“Hey look, the name Ye Qing suddenly popped up on the ranking list!”

“Where?”

“Down there! The one at the bottom of the list.”

“... It can’t be the guy that just ran past us, right?”

“Why not?”

“Are you guys joking? Of course it’s the guy who ran past us just now! The name appeared only after he entered the mountain!”

An uproar immediately broke out.

“What is he thinking? It’s been over six hours since the climb began! He didn’t think he could make it, did he?” Someone snorted.

“I know right? And someone actually bet ten thousand silvers on him to win! Ten thousand!”

“Who’s it? They must have a screw loose in their head.”

“Shh! It’s that big guy over there, so you might wanna keep it down!” Someone pointed at Chen Wuxin.

“Man, there are more and more crazy people these days,” the guy lowered his voice as he sighed. “The worst part is, he’s fucking rich too. Like how is this fair?”

The hushed conversations didn’t escape Black Tai Sui’s ears, of course. He looked at Chen Wuxin and asked for confirmation, “Are you sure you want to bet on Ye Qing, brother?”

Chen Wuxin crossed his arms and smirked. “I’m the one who should ask you if you dare to accept my bet.”

“Heh. why wouldn’t I? His odds of winning is one hundred-to-one.” Black Tai Sui guffawed. “So? Is there anyone who would like to bet on Ye Qing?”

“Seriously? Do you I look dumb to you?”

“Today must be Black Tai Sui’s lucky day. I can’t believe someone is willing to donate ten thousand silver on him! Why can’t I be as lucky as him?”

“You? I haven’t forgotten that time you choked on water. You’re better off killing yourself and reincarnating into a better life.”

Suddenly, someone cried, “Stop arguing. Look! Ye Qing’s rank just went up.”

The crowd looked, and they saw Ye Qing surpassing the second last ranker and taking his place.

Someone scoffed, “So, he overtook the previous last person on the ranking list. So what? That’s pretty much noth—”

Before he could finish, another person cried out, “Look, his rank just went up again!”

The hater looked, and Ye Qing’s name was now sitting at the third last spot. Just a few breaths later, Ye Qing’s rank shot up again.

Slowly, the jeering, noisy crowd fell into stunned silence as Ye Qing shot up the ranks like he was on steroids. In just four hours, he had gone from dead last to the thirteenth spot!

But of course, Ye Qing couldn’t maintain this speed forever. As he slowed down, Black Tai Sui’s heart slowly lowered back into his chest cavity.

If Ye Qing actually reached the peak first, the amount of money he was going to loose could only be described as astronomical. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that he would have to give up even his underwear.

Even so, no one dared to question Ye Qing’s qualification anymore. In just four hours, the guy had surpassed countless others who had twice the amount of time he had. It was unbelievable to say the least.

“Say, do you think that this Ye Qing is *that* Ye Qing?” Someone finally found their voice.

“Which Ye Qing? Don’t keep us in suspense! Just say it already!”

“You know, the one from Luo Shui, the Qing Emperor Junior?”

“The Qing Emperor Junior? You’re right! It has to be him.”

“If he’s really the Qing Emperor Junior, then it all makes sense.”

“Is he the Qing Emperor Junior?” asked Black Tai Shui while looking at Chen Wuxin.

“You’re not going to burst into tears if I say yes, are you?” Chen Wuxin joked.

“A man doesn’t cry. He only bleeds.” Black Tai Sui declared bravely before asking another in a hushed voice, “Can I give you back your ten thousand silvers?”

Black Tai Sui had heard of the “Qing Emperor Junior” Ye Qing as well. It was why he couldn’t help but worry.

“Of course not. A man may die, but he must never become a pauper,” Chen Wuxin declared.

Black Tai Sui’s face crumpled.

Of course, he wasn’t actually too worried that Ye Qing would get first place. After all, the guy had literally missed the first half of the competition. But as the saying goes, just because it's improbable doesn't mean it's impossible. Black Tai Sui could only pray that the leading participants wouldn’t disappoint him.

The people on the ground weren’t the only ones who were discussing Ye Qing. The smaller, but much more important crowd at the peak were discussing him as well.

“Jianglong, that boy is the Qing Emperor Junior of Luo Shui Pacification Bureau, right?” The Harmony King exclaimed while watching the young man who surpassed most of the remaining participants in just four hours with astonishment.

It wasn’t just the Harmony King. Fang Muyun, Song Xilai, Zhang Huai’en, Yang Shixiu and more were watching Ye Qing as well. Even Chu Wangsun had set down his book to examine the young man, though unlike the others, he was far contemplative, not shocked.

“What’s wrong, Wangsun?” Fang Muyun asked after sensing his strange reaction.

“It’s nothing. I just feel like I recognize this Ye Qing from somewhere,” Chu Wangsun replied expressionlessly. “But I’m not sure yet. I’ll tell you about it later.”

Fang Muyun nodded and didn’t press him for clarification. He knew Chu Wangsun well, and he knew that the scholar would never share something he was unwilling to share.

Hong Jianglong wasn’t aware of Fang Muyun and Chu Wangsun’s conversation. He was focused on answering the Harmony King’s question, “You are correct, Your Highness. His name is Ye Qing.”

“Ye Qing? A good name! I can tell that he deserves his moniker!” The Harmony King stared fixatedly at the screen while saying, “In the future, he might become the second Qing Emperor.”

The Harmony King didn’t mean anything by it, but everyone who heard his comment was taken aback and contemplative.

“Hahaha, please, Your Highness. There is no way Ye Qing can compare to the Qing Emperor. He would be lucky if he was even half as accomplished as him.” Hong Jianglong tried to laugh it off.

“It is the natural order for the young to replace the old, Lord Hong. No one knows how Young Ye would do in the future. Personally, I’m pretty confident in his chances,” Lei Xiaodan chimed in casually.

Hong Jianglong shot him a glance but said nothing.

Fame was a double-edged sword. It could lift as much as it could drop someone. But then again, those who wished to bear the crown must also be able to carry its weight. This was a trial Ye Qing must face whether he liked it or not.

“Do you guys think the Qing Emperor Junior can reach the top first?” Someone asked suddenly.

“I definitely think well of his chances of making it to the top, but first? That seems unlikely.”

“It would be difficult. He started very late after all. Meanwhile, Yang Zhao isn’t far away from the peak.”

“Yes, it looks like Nephew Yang will be the champion of this stage. Congratulations, Brother Yang,” said Zhang Huai’en to Yang Shixiu.

Yang Zhao was Yang Shixiu’s eldest son. Extraordinarily talented, he was already a late-stage Spirit Purifier at his age and the ninety-second warrior on the Human Champions Ranking. They called him the Silver Flute Scholar.

“Haha, Nephew Zhang isn’t doing bad either. With luck, who is to say he couldn’t surpass expectations?” Yang Shixiu replied politely. He was talking about Zhang Huai’en’s son, Zhang Tiancheng, of course. Zhang Tiancheng was currently at ninth place.

While the duo were busy complimenting each other, Lei Xiaodan chimed in casually, “Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Considering Young Ye’s speed, it’s not impossible for him to make it to the top first.”

“No way! The higher you climb, the stronger the Strangers you’ll run into. Even with the Qing Emperor Junior’s strength, there is no way he can maintain this speed. There is no chance he’ll reach the peak first.” The Harmony King shook his head firmly.

“Everything is possible, Your Highness. You best not underestimate the young,” Lei Xiaodan declared smilingly.

“Hehe, it sounds like you don’t believe me, Xiaodan. That’s fine. Dare you make a bet with me?” The Harmony King challenged Lei Xiaodan.

“A bet? I wanna join too!” Chu Qingli abruptly jolted awake from his slumber and yelled.

“Get lost! Like you have anything you can bet that isn’t mine!” The Harmony King shot his son a glare before turning back to Lei Xiaodan. “So? What do you say, Xiaodan?”

“If that is your desire, then this one will oblige,” Lei Xiaodan answered.

“Good, good! You’re not such a wet blanket after all, Xiaodan!” The Harmony King exclaimed in excitement. “But first, what are the stakes?”

“What do you want, Your Highness?” Lei Xiaodan asked.

The Harmony King answered without hesitation almost as if he was waiting for this. “I heard that you have a Golden Celestial Offering Censer. I want it!”

Lei Xiaodan broke out in surprised laughter. “I see you’ve set your eyes on my precious treasure!”

The Golden Celestial Offering Censer was a special censer where the smoke of the incense would form a lifelike picture of celestials offering birthday gifts and felicitations. Besides that, the incense smoke could improve sleep quality and extend one’s lifespan.

“So? Will you bet your censer?” The Harmony King asked.

“Sure, I will. What about you, Your Highness? What will be your stake?” Lei Xiaodan asked.

“What do you want?” The Harmony King barely resisted the urge to let out a whoop when Lei Xiaodan agreed.

The Judicial Commissioner thought for a moment before replying, “I know that you have a strange book that records all kinds of extraordinary events. At night, one can experience any one of the scenarios via dreaming...”

“You want my ‘Strange Encounters’? Nope! Absolutely not! Forget it!” The Harmony King rejected Lei Xiaodan’s demand immediately and watched the Judicial Commissioner warily.

“Calm down, Your Highness. I’m not done talking yet.” Lei Xiaodan let out a bitter chuckle. “I just want to borrow it for a few days.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” It was only then the Harmony King relaxed his guard and said, “Alright. If I win, you will give me the Golden Celestial Offering Censer. If you win, I will lend you the ‘Strange Encounters’ for seven days.”

“You are most kind, Your Highness,” Lei Xiaodan replied. He didn’t seem worried that he would lose in the slightest.

The Harmony King wasn’t done yet, however. He looked at the rest of the group and challenged, “Hehe, is there anyone else who’d like to place your bets? Time is limited, so don’t wait until it’s too late!”

Everyone shook their heads. Everyone, except Hong Jianglong. “In that case, I’d like to bet on Ye Qing to win!”

Chapter 404: Reverse Waterfall, Ghost In The Grave

“Did someone bonk you in the head as well?” The Harmony King glanced at Hong Jianglong in astonishment.

“Ahem...” Hong Jianglong pretended he didn’t hear the insult and said, “I see no harm in indulging in a bit of gambling, not to mention that Ye Qing is a member of my Pacification Bureau. I’m obligated to show my support.”

“What is your stake then?” The Harmony King broke into a wide grin. “I don’t accept bets without stakes.”

Hong Jianglong replied, “I have a Luan and Phoenix Chirping painting that is drawn by the ‘Art Celestial’ Zhang Baiduan himself. That will be my stake. My request is the same as Lord Lei. I would like to borrow your ‘Strange Encounters’ for a couple of days.”

The Harmony King’s eyes glittered like stars when he heard this. He replied in a hurry as if afraid that Hong Jianglong would change his mind. “It’s a deal then! The betting is closed!”

When the Harmony King turned back to Ye Qing’s screen, he noticed something and burst out laughing. “Hahahaha! You guys are losing for sure! Look at what Ye Qing ran into!”

When the crowd looked, they saw Ye Qing running into the waterfall that had trapped Wei Bulao for a significant amount of time a while ago. The not-so-young young man had been forced to use some sort of secret art to finally break free from the waterfall, but he had to shave a few years off his lifespan and add a couple more wrinkles on his face to do it.

Now, it was Ye Qing’s turn to face the waterfall. The Harmony King didn’t believe for a second that the young man would be able to overcome it with ease. The rest of the group looked expectant as well.

Ye Qing slapped them all in the face just a second later. On the screen, the young man suddenly turned around and walked backward toward the waterfall. For whatever reason, the waterfall paid no attention to him and allowed him to get close. When he was right in front of the waterfall, the waterfall pushed Ye Qing to the top and...

There was no and. Ye Qing left the area just like that.

“What just happened?”

“How did he do that?”

Many people looked stunned and confused.

“Is he cheating, Jianglong?” The Harmony King glared at Hong Jianglong with bulging eyes. He looked like he might strangle the Pacification Commissioner to death if he didn’t give him a proper explanation.

“Hahaha, calm down, Your Highness,” said Lei Xiaodan placatingly before launching into an explanation. “The reason Young Ye wasn’t attacked by the waterfall wasn’t because Brother Hong was cheating for him, but because it’s the Reverse Waterfall.”

The explanation successfully distracted the Harmony King. “What’s a Reverse Waterfall?”

Lei Xiaodan answered, “People climb upward, whereas water flows downward. A Reverse Waterfall is an incredibly rare Stranger where its waters flow upward instead. The Reverse Waterfall is extremely powerful, and even its most common variant is a Soulstealer-class Stranger. If a human

walks toward it with the intention of getting on top of the waterfall, then it would get hostile and harass them endlessly.”

“However, the Reverse Waterfall has an exploitable weakness—or should I say, nature—as long as your back is facing toward the waterfall, and you walk backward toward it, then it wouldn’t get hostile. That is how Young Ye is able to overcome the Reverse Waterfall without any difficulties.”

“I see!” The Harmony King exclaimed in realization.

A while later, the Harmony King laughed again. “Look! Ye Qing ran into that grave that troubled Tou Jiao so that he lost his lead! It’s over for Ye Qing!”

The Harmony King was understating it. The grave had harassed Tou Jiao with an endless army of ghosts, run away when Tou Jiao tried to hunt it down, and gone right back to harassing him again as soon as he gave up. It was an incredibly intelligent Stranger, and there was absolutely nothing Tou Jiao could do against it. In the end, the warrior had to activate his secret art and push himself beyond his limits to finally catch up to the grave and kill it.

Unfortunately, the cost was too great. After the art had ended, he became so weak and fatigued that his climbing speed suffered greatly. As a result, he had fallen all the way to tenth place.

Everyone was watching Ye Qing’s screen intently. They wondered how Ye Qing was going to deal with the strange grave.

The start of the encounter went more or less the same as Tou Jiao’s. As soon as Ye Qing stumbled upon the grave, a bunch of ghosts immediately emerged from the grave and pounced toward him.

Ye Qing didn’t panic, however. He produced a single incense stick, lit it, and prayed toward the grave.

To everyone’s astonishment, the ghosts suddenly stopped in their tracks. When Ye Qing started toward the grave, the ghosts didn’t try to stop him, and the grave didn’t try to run away either. It allowed Ye Qing to move closer to it.

When Ye Qing was right in front of the grave, he bowed three times before planting the incense stick on the grave.

The next moment, the incense stick began burning rapidly. The cloud of smoke it produced floated about halfway toward the grave before vanishing all of a sudden. It was almost as if some invisible entity had inhaled the smoke.

That was exactly what happened. On the screen, an old, deathly pale face suddenly appeared on top of the grave and inhaled the smoke into its mouth greedily. It looked absolutely intoxicated by its taste.

While the face was busy enjoying the smoke, Ye Qing walked past the grave and took his leave. This was not the epic battle they had envisioned.

“What... What is that?” The Harmony King exclaimed in shock.

He looked to Lei Xiaodan for answers again, but this time the Judicial Commissioner threw his hands up in surrender. “Don’t look at me, I don’t know what he did either. You’ll have to ask Brother Hong for this.”

Hong Jianglong rubbed his nose and explained, “The grave is a Soulstealer-class Stranger called the Ghost In The Grave. It is not as rare as the Reverse Waterfall, but still pretty rare. A human lives in a house, and a ghost in a grave. A grave is basically a ghost’s dwelling. However, some ghosts didn’t have a grave because their deaths are sudden, and they are forced to take shelter in the nearest abandoned grave to avoid the sun and the astral winds. Over time, it formed the Ghost In The Grave. They can normally be found in the wilderness.”

“Since the Ghost In The Grave were made up of a bunch of lost, forgotten ghosts, and the grave itself was abandoned a long time ago, there is no one who offers sacrifices to them. If someone passes by a Ghost In The Grave, it would show itself and demand offerings from them.”

“If the person refuses to fulfill its request or attacks it, the Ghost In The Grave would fight back, drag them into the grave, and feast on their body and soul.”

The Harmony King thought for a moment. “So, you’re saying that you can get a Ghost In The Grave to release you if you give it the offering it desires.”

Hong Jianglong shook its head. “All ghosts are greedy, so it’s highly unlikely that an average offering can satisfy its demand. And if you can’t satisfy their demand, it’s still going to drag you into its grave.

“If I have to guess, the incense stick Joyless offered the Ghost In The Grave is no ordinary incense stick. That’s why the Stranger allowed him to leave.”

“I see!” Lei Xiaodan chimed in. “No wonder Young Ye’s incense stick looks divine and potent.”

“The incense stick is secondary. The man is the real reason he is able to overcome this obstacle without trouble.” Song Xilai suddenly broke his long-standing silence. “The young are often lacking in knowledge, but not Ye Qing. On top of that, he is cool-headed enough to identify the Stranger he’s dealing with and come up with the appropriate solution immediately. It’s quite impressive.”

“Hmph! He was just lucky. There’s no way the brat can remain this lucky!” The Harmony King replied sullenly.

Despite the Harmony King’s hopes, Ye Qing continued to climb the mountain at a blistering pace. If he encountered a weak Stranger, then he would crush them via brute force and continue along his way. If he encountered a strong Stranger, then he would appease them using all sorts of bizarre solutions. Even if the danger couldn’t be resolved peacefully, he would still find a way to deal with it in the shortest amount of time possible.

Because of this, Ye Qing quickly surpassed Tou Jiao, Chu Renhe, Wine, Sex, Wealth, Popularity, Eat, Drink, Fuck, Gamble and more and rose to the seventh spot. He was only behind Yang Zhao, Chu Qingge, Wei Bulao, Luo Zhan, Qi Xuanyun and more now.

Almost everyone had nothing but praises for Ye Qing. The Harmony King was the only one whose face grew blacker over time. In the end, he huffed in frustration, “You’re still saying your brat isn’t cheating, Jianglong? You must have told him the behavior of all the Strangers living in Flying Dragon Mount beforehand!”

“I couldn’t have even if I wanted to, Your Highness,” Hong Jianglong replied with a wry chuckle. He knew that the Harmony King was just complaining. He wasn’t really accusing him of cheating.

The Flying Dragon Mount was a Strange Artifact that could generate a massive biome with all kinds of flora and fauna in it. That was why the Strangers who appeared in the Hidden Dragon meet were different every time. As the Flying Dragon Mount was only open during the Hidden Dragon Meet, it was impossible to say what Strangers might be lurking in the mountain until the competition had begun. That was why Hong Jianglong said he couldn’t cheat for Ye Qing even if he wanted to.

The Harmony King’s frustration was understandable though. After all, Ye Qing’s performance might as well be cheating. He even managed to deal with the skinless man who severely wounded Chu Qingge using an unbelievable method that seemed so simple in hindsight. He simply used a paper doll and had it stare at the skinless man as he snuck away.

The Harmony King could not bring himself to blame his daughter for not arriving at a similar solution, but that didn’t stop him from feeling pissed and annoyed.

Someone consoled the Harmony King, “Chin up, Your Highness. Look! Ye Qing just ran into the Treant of Much Drivels. We all know that this Stranger can’t be circumvented easily.”

“The Treant of Much Drivel?” The Harmony King looked up and saw Ye Qing being surrounded by two massive Treant of Much Drivels. They seemed to be talking non-stop to Ye Qing.

The Harmony King’s interest was immediately piqued. “Quick! Quick! Make it so we can hear their conversation, Jianglong! Let’s see how this brat is gonna solve *this* crisis!”

Hong Jianglong hid a sigh and looked at Lei Xiaodan and Song Xilai. “Sorry.”

Lei Xiaodan and Song Xilai exchanged a helpless look with each other as well.

While it was possible to tweak the Flying Dragon Mount’s restrictions and array to eavesdrop on a certain person on a mountain, such an action would cost a certain amount of energy. However, they couldn’t deny the Harmony King’s request either, so they had no choice but to exert themselves.

Hong Jianglong, Lei Xiaodan and Song Xilai came together and injected their astral qi and spiritual power into the brazier. A second later, they could suddenly hear the Treant of Much Drivel’s voice.

One of the Treant of Much Drivel looked at Ye Qing and declared proudly, “I’m incredibly rich. Every day, I awake from a bed that is woven entirely from gold. When I open my eyes, I am greeted by a ceiling full of night pearls from the Eastern Sea. Thousands of maids assist me in gargling my mouth using mango pomelo sago, and washing my face using the Spring of Eternal Life. I wear

clothes that are woven using thousand-year-old natural silk, and ride to lunch on a once-in-a-century Dragon Horse.”

“My main course is a dragon’s liver and a phoenix’s marrow, and my soup is bejeweled nectar. I eat only one bite from each dish, and when I’m full, I realize that I haven’t even touched every dish on a single table corner.”

“After I’m done, I walked in a straight line for about four hours to digest my food, but I realized that I haven’t even left my own courtyard.”

“After the food in my belly has fully digested, I get ready to head out for work only to realize that I don’t need to work. After all, every coin in the world belongs to me. Bored, I decided to visit some of my childhood friends to pass the time. I entered a carriage and let my driver drive me there, but by the time I left the main entrance, my friends had long since died of old age, and I myself am in my twilight years.”

“Can you be richer than me?”

Chapter 405: The Treant of Much Drivel

At the peak, everyone’s jaws hit the floor after listening to the Treant of Much Drivel’s boasting. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they had never heard such a boast in their lives!

The Treant of Much Drivel was an incredibly unusual Stranger. Nicknamed the Boastful Treant, it was a humanoid-shaped tree that was insanely powerful. It was said that even the weakest Treant of Much Drivel was at least a Phenomenon-class Stranger.

Despite its tremendous strength, the Treant of Much Drivel actually loathed hurting humans. In that sense, it was practically harmless. What it did enjoy was spouting nonsense and bragging like its life depended on it. That was why it was nicknamed the Boastful Treant. If it encountered a human, it would brag about something and expect the human to outbrag it. If the human failed, then it would detain them and spout even more drivel out of its wooden mouth. The human wouldn’t be able to leave until they had outbragged the Treant of Much Drivel.

Once upon a time, a poor guy was caught by the Treant of Much Drivel and went insane because of it.

The problem was that the Treant of Much Drivel was extremely good at spouting nonsense and boasting. No one knew where it learned its “techniques”, only that few people ever managed to outtalk the Treant of Much Drivel.

In short, it was a major pain in the ass for anyone who had the misfortune of running into it.

“Hahaha! I wonder what his answer would be?” The Harmony King laughed.

“Personally, I wouldn’t know how to get through this! Nephew Fang, if you are Ye Qing, how would you answer the Treant of Much Drivel?”

Fang Muyun replied in a gentle voice, “I’m a scholar. I never lie.”

“What about you, Mister Nine?” The Harmony King asked Chu Wangsun next.

The scholar answered without looking up from his book, “I would say, ‘You’re actually penniless.’”

The Harmony King: “...”

Fang Muyun: “...”

Lei Xiaodan: “...”

The homework is to make a boast, and your answer is... truth and dare? Seriously?

“Well, what about you, Jianglong?” The Harmony King looked at Hong Jianglong next.

Hong Jianglong coughed. “Ahem, I’m sorry, Your Highness, but I can’t answer that question. I’ve never been rich, so I don’t even know how it feels like to be rich.”

When Lei Xiaodan sensed the Harmony King’s gaze, he hurriedly added, “I can’t answer that question either, Your Highness. I too am a pauper.”

“Boring!” The Harmony King complained before directing his attention back to Ye Qing.

On the screen, Ye Qing was bowing his head and looking thoughtful. Then, he said slowly, “I’m not very rich myself, but when are you paying me back the money you owe?”

The Treant of Much Drivel fell silent.

The Harmony King fell silent.

Everyone on the mountain fell silent.

The answer... was perfect. No matter how wealthy you are, how could you possibly be wealthier than your creditor?

Sensing its brethren’s defeat, the second Treant of Much Drivel stepped up and started, “I’m very powerful. When I yawn, clear qi rises to the sky, murky qi sink to the earth, and Original Chaos is created. When I open my eyes, the sun rises, the moon falls, and the world is filled with light. When I make a small turn, the earth rips asunder, and the heavens weep in sorrow. When I lose a few strands of hair, plants flourish, and mountains undulate. When I take a piss, it becomes a raging sea that threatens to flood the world. When I sigh, the wind howls, and nowhere is safe from my breath. When I fall asleep, the moon rises, the sun falls, and the world sinks into darkness.”

“Are you more powerful than me?”

“Heavens above! It might as well call itself the great Pangu!” The Harmony King shook his head in disbelief and tried to come up with an answer. Just a few seconds later, he shook his head again and gave up.

The rest of the spectators were watching Ye Qing curiously as well.

On the screen, Ye Qing smirked and answered unhurriedly, “First there was the Treant of Much Drivel, then the world. Now go and pour me a cup of tea, disciple.”

The Harmony King slapped his thighs in realization and guffawed. “That’s it! Of course the master is greater than the disciple! And just in case the Treant of Much Drivel argues that the disciple may surpass the master, he intentionally affirmed its drivel that it came before the world! So what if the Treant of Much Drivel created the world? He would still be the one who created the one who created the world! What an interesting brat, hahaha!”

Lei Xiaodan echoed in agreement. “Young Ye’s answer is definitely interesting.”

Ye Qing had no idea that he was being watched by a bunch of big bosses. After soundly trouncing the two Treants of Much Drivel, he lifted his head and declared haughtily, “You’re a hundred years too early to outbrag me, you talking trees!”

Then, he swaggered away amidst the treant’s look of adoration.

After he was completely out of the Strangers’ view, Ye Qing finally allowed himself to break out in cold sweat. To be honest, victory had not come to him nearly as easy as he made it look. The problem was that the Treant of Much Drivel could boast just about anything and everything. Had they boasted about something he had little to no knowledge about, it would’ve been so much harder for him to think of a winning solution.

More importantly, if he was disqualified from the competition because he ran out of time, Gu Suitang would definitely throw him into a cooking pot and boil him for dinner!

That was why Ye Qing ran like his life depended on it as soon as he escaped from the Treants of Much Drivel. He only had two or so hours left now. He had to give it his all.

He was so pissed he almost jumped the old man, damn the consequences. Luckily, the consequences and the fact that the old man would wipe the floor with him kept him from doing the stupid. Even so, he was over six hours late by the time he finally arrived at the scene, so he had no choice but to make his climb as quickly as possible.

Luckily for him, most of the Strangers he encountered so far were present in the books he read. He was able to exploit their behavior and weaknesses and overcome them in the shortest amount of time possible.

“Wait a second,” Ye Qing suddenly realized something, “I’m near the finish line even though I’m six hours late. That must mean that most people have already crossed the finish line. No, no! I need to go faster!”

Desperate, Ye Qing mustered his vigor and pushed himself even more.

At the peak, the Harmony King and everyone else were stunned when Ye Qing suddenly sped up even more. "He could go faster? Did he eat a pill when we weren't looking?"

If they knew what Ye Qing was thinking, they would've called him crazy.

Thanks to this new burst of speed, Ye Qing caught up to Yang Zhao, Luo Zhan, Jian Wusheng, Chu Qingge, Qi Xuanyun and the other top contenders in just half a teatime. At this point of the climb, they were just one step away from reaching the peak.

The final obstacle they faced was worthy of its title, however. Yang Zhao ran into a stone giant called the Rock Giant, a Phenomenon-class Stranger. It was impervious to most weapons and the elements, and its strength was quite formidable. Even if Yang Zhao managed to crush one part of its body, it simply needed to roll across the rocky floor to heal its injuries. It was an incredibly formidable opponent.

Luo Zhan's opponent was a strange quagmire with pale, bloated bodies floating on its surface. As soon as he got within a certain range, the corpses would open their eyes and stare at him, and he would experience various symptoms of drowning. For example, his body slowly grew bloated and waterlogged. The closer he got to the quagmire, the worse the phenomenon became.

The good news was that he returned to normal as soon as he left the quagmire's influence. The bad news was that the quagmire was large enough that circumventing it would take a considerable amount of time; long enough that he wasn't sure if he could reach the peak in time.

This meant that the only way forward was to face the dangers head on and cross the quagmire by force.

Jian Wusheng's final obstacle was a Sword Golem. A fairly rare Stranger, a Sword Golem is created when their sword spirit takes control of the deceased warrior's body as pilot it like a puppet. The deceased warrior is usually a champion in the Way of the Sword.

A Sword Golem usually retained its previous cultivation, insight and understanding of the sword, which was why it was incredibly powerful. It was obsessed with dueling people to the death and honing its sword intent.

The Sword Golem Jian Wusheng ran into was a Spirit Master in life, so the Sword Golem was a Phenomenon-class Stranger. As its sword intent was surprisingly similar to Jian Wusheng's, the duo were like sworn enemies from the moment they met.

The Sword Golem possessed a stronger cultivation and powerful sword intent, but its movements were pretty stiff because its body was dead.

Jian Wusheng's sword art was nimble and exquisite, but he was one cultivation stage weaker than the Sword Golem.

Both sides had their advantages and disadvantages, so they were locked in a stalemate for the moment.

Chu Qingge didn't run into a Stranger. Instead, she was trapped inside a great array. She had to navigate through the array while braving deadly attacks of wind, lightning, water and fire. The dangers were everywhere.

But luckily for her, the dangers of the array were overt and direct. They were neither strange nor unpredictable. That was why she was currently the most hopeful of them all to reach the peak first.

Qi Xuanyun was being stalled by a river. A river he couldn't seem to pass no matter what he tried.

The river was only three meters wide. Even an ordinary person can easily jump such a distance. But no matter how hard Qi Xuanyun jumped, he always landed right at the center of the river.

Not only that, he started sinking as soon as he fell into the river. It had nothing to do with his ability to swim. Any action he took that wasn't swimming back to the shore would only cause him to sink faster.

Ordinary vessels and Strange Artifacts didn't work either. They sank as soon as they made contact with the water. It was pretty similar to the Weak Water[2].

After a number of futile attempts, Qi Xuanyun decided to walk around the river since he couldn't cross it. But again, he couldn't find the source even though the river didn't look very big at all. His cute face scrunched up like he might break into tears, the poor Taoist was currently sitting by the riverside and racking his brain for an idea.

As for Ye Qing, he ran into a singing woman. She was gorgeous like she was the embodiment of all that was perfect in the world, and her singing was so melodious one could drown in it.

Ye Qing blanched when he saw her, however. His face had never looked this ugly since he began climbing the mountain.

At the peak, Hong Jianglong and Lei Xiaodan blanched as well. They hurriedly blocked out the woman's phantasmal voice.

"What are you doing, Jianglong? This is the first time I heard such a beautiful voice! I wanted to listen to her song until the end!" The Harmony King raged.

The others also echoed in agreement. "Yeah. It almost feels like it doesn't belong in this world."

"It's the kind of singing that will soothe the ears for at least three days straight."

"Don't be a spoilsport, Jianglong."

In response, Hong Jianglong sneered. "You certainly won't remain in this world for much longer if we hadn't blocked out her voice."

"Er... What do you mean?" Someone asked when they realized that Hong Jianglong wasn't playing around.

"That's the Age Songstress, isn't she?" Fang Muyun spoke up suddenly.

Hong Jianglong shot him a surprised look. "A good answer, Mister Farseeing. That is the Age Songstress."

"Age Songstress?" The Harmony King asked.

"That's right. That woman's an Age Songstress," Fang Muyun answered. "However, I've only read it in a book before. Do correct me if I make a mistake, Lord Hong."

“You are too humble, Mister Farseeing. Please, speak away,” Hong Jianglong replied.

Fang Muyun began his explanation, “The Age Songstress is a powerful Stranger who possesses an inhumanly beautiful appearance and a voice to die for, literally. She can usually be found singing at the peak of a mountain. Those who heard her singing would be hypnotized by it, and they would gradually grow old until they die.”

“In the book, there is a quote that went something like this: A song rides the wind, jubilant and free. But listen not to this song, for each verse brings you one step closer to death.”

“That’s why Lord Hong blocked out the sound. It’s to save everyone’s lives.”

The Harmony King gasped audibly, “Is... Is Nephew Fang telling the truth?”

“It is exactly as Mister Farseeing says,” Hong Jianglong confirmed. “In fact, the Age Songstress’ singing is a powerful curse. Those who heard her singing would continuously lose their life force and lifespan until they die.”

“Heavens above!” The Harmony King exclaimed in horror before touching his face and worrying that he might have grown some wrinkles.

Although the Harmony King was almost fifty[3], his skin was as smooth as a babe. It was because he took great care of his skin, and as a member of the royal family had access to all kinds of life-extending treasures. He let out a sigh of relief only when he found none.

“Don’t worry, Your Highness. We heard the singing through an array, so it’s already weaker than normal. And since Brother Hong blocked it out at first notice, the most you should feel is a bit of fatigue,” Lei Xiaodan consoled.

“I see! No wonder I’m suddenly aching all over,” the Harmony King exclaimed in realization.

Chapter 406: The Song That Ages

That one has nothing to do with the songstress. Its simply because you sat for too long, Chu Qingli retorted before looking back at the woman on the screen and sighing wistfully. What a beauty. If only I can enjoy a kiss and a night with her.

Are you crazy, boy? Shes a Stranger! The Harmony King kicked Chu Qingli hard to vent his annoyance. The boy was basically saying that he wouldnt mind dying if he could spend a night with the Stranger!

So what? Its better to die underneath such beauty than on a deathbed, Chu Qingli said distractedly, and I certainly wouldnt mind shaving decades of my lifespan for this woman

You unfilial son! Why must you anger me so? Im going to spank your butt in front of everyone! The Harmony King huffed out and raised his hand as if getting ready to hit Chu Qingli, but the young man paid him no heed whatsoever. Knowing that he couldnt get through his sons thick skin, the Harmony King ultimately gave up and returned his attention back to the Age Songstress.

How do you fight an Age Songstress, Jianglong? Can I shut her song out if I block my ears? The Harmony King asked.

Hong Jianglong answered while wearing a severe expression, No. The Age Songstress song is really a spiritual curse of sorts. You will hear it even if you seal off your hearing.

Dealing with it is quite simple though. You run. Although the Age Songstress is quite terrifying, she only acts within a certain area. If you leave the area, then you'll be able to escape to safety.

Hahaha that's good to hear. The boy would not be able to take first place! The Harmony King guffawed loudly when he heard this. If Ye Qing was forced to circumvent the Age Songstress, the chance that he would be able to surpass his peers became next to nothing.

Unfortunately for him, Ye Qing slapped him in the face in the next second. Instead of running away, the young man chose to take the curse head on and charge toward the Age Songstress.

Every time Ye Qing took a step forward, a new wrinkle would appear on his face. When he was around seventeen meters to the Stranger, his face looked like that of a middle-aged man, and his hair was graying in certain areas. His progress suffered greatly as a result.

What is he thinking? A grim-faced Hong Jianlong glared at the screen.

This is a little too reckless even for Young Ye, Lei Xiaodan also said seemingly with worry.

The Age Songstress was deadly because her curse was practically unstoppable. Assuming the victim wasn't bewitched by her song, the best way to deal with it was to run as far away as possible.

It wasn't impossible to kill her, of course. It just took a tremendous cost. The closer one got to the Age Songstress, the more powerful the curse would become. This meant that the victim would be aging faster as well. Worse still, one wouldn't regain their lost vitality and lifespan even if they killed the Age Songstress. While they could be replenished with natural treasures in the future, it would threaten one's martial foundation and cost them a lot of time. It was detrimental to one's cultivation to say the least.

This was why few people would try to kill an Age Songstress unless they were strong enough to resist her curse. For example, a Grandmaster-stage warrior was completely immune to it.

Ye Qing wasn't a Grandmaster-stage warrior, however. In fact, he was way weaker than the Age Songstress.

He must have thought that his body was strong enough to resist the curse! The fool! Hong Jianglong abruptly rose to his feet with an ugly expression.

What are you doing, Lord Hong? An official immediately raised his voice when he saw this. This is against the rules!

Are you the worm in my belly or something? I haven't done anything yet, and you're calling me a rulebreaker? Hong Jianglong glared at the official.

It's obvious you want to save that young man, Lord Hong, but according to the rules, no one can interfere with the competition unless something that absolutely requires our intervention occurs. Do you think this counts as one, Lord Hong? Countless participants were injured or killed earlier, but you didn't lend them a hand, did you? Another official said sarcastically.

The reason the official had no sympathy for Hong Jianglong whatsoever was because the Pacification Bureau and the Intelligence Department monopolized most of the stars of the Hidden Dragon Meet even though they were supposed to be shared evenly across the imperial court. As if that wasn't enough, the talents they got were average at best and mediocre at worst. And finally, he loathed Hong Jianglong's tyrannical methods and double standards.

Mister Nine and Mister Farseeing are present as well. Why don't we consult their opinion? The official gestured in Chu Wangsun and Fang Muyun's direction.

The rules must not be broken, Chu Wangsun looked at Hong Jianglong and said calmly, his tone making it clear that he wouldn't accept no as an answer.

Fang Muyun stepped up to smooth things over. Calm down, Lord Jing. Perhaps you misunderstood Lord Hong after all. He is the host of this year's Hidden Dragon Meet. Why would he smear his own reputation? Right, Lord Hong?

Hong Jianglong stared coldly at Lord Jing for a moment. Then, he let out a boisterous laugh. I'm just stretching my limbs a little because I've been sitting for too long. That counts as breaking the rules to you, Lord Jing? Your children must hate you with all their fiber then.

You! Lord Jing's face turned red with anger. Anyone who wasn't stupid or blind could see that Hong Jianglong was going to intervene in the competition and save Ye Qing.

Enough. Jianglong already said he was just stretching. I do that when I've been seated for too long, so stop overthinking things and enjoy the show, okay? The Harmony King also chimed in.

Fang Muyun added with finality, Sit down, Lord Jing.

Lord Jing's full name was Jing Huang. He knew that he had lost the fight then. As you wish, Your Highness, Mister Farseeing, he said reluctantly. It would be folly to go against the Harmony King's wishes. If he knew this would happen, he would've waited until after Hong Jianglong had taken action. Now, he had to back down and stew in frustration instead. How frustrating!

The argument was over, but Ye Qing's troubles had just begun. On the screen, Ye Qing was still struggling to get closer to the Age Songstress. Since he entered the ten-meter range, his face and hair would age with every step he took. It was clear that the curse was getting worse.

When he was in the six-meter range, his hair was fully white, his flesh was weak and smelly like an old man's, and his whole body would shake every time he took a shambling step. He looked like a man in his eighties.

Everyone on the mountain could tell that Ye Qing had reached his limit, but still the young man refused to back down. He continued to walk toward the Age Songstress.

The stubborn mule! Why is he still pushing forward?! The Harmony King abruptly slapped the table furiously. Ye Qing was now decades older than even him. He was angry that the young man didn't appreciate his own life, and even angrier than a genius like Ye Qing was going to lose his life like this. His own petty grievances aside, the loss of Ye Qing wouldn't undoubtedly be a great loss for Chu.

I thought that the Qing Emperor Junior is supposed to be wise beyond his age? What the hell is this? Someone asked in a low tone.

Yeah, I don't know what's going on with him either. Where there's life, there's hope. But if you insist on throwing it away, then no one can help you. At this point, it would be meaningless even if he could reach the top first.

As if he could do that in his current state! Look at him! He's moments away from death. Even if the Age Songstress dies this instant, and nothing else stands in his way, I doubt he'll be able to reach the peak.

Stubborn and foolish, some of the worst possible traits you might find in a man. What a shame.

Beside Song Xilai, a muscular man carrying a steel ruler on his waist asked, What do you think, Xilai?

He was one of the two legendary constables serving in the administration division of Tian Yong, the Ruler of Justice Tie Wuying.

Song Xilai replied indifferently, I've never seen Ye Qing in my life[1], but I have heard of his exploits. I don't think that someone who can see through the Nether Lords ploy, foil the Way of Taipings conspiracy, and ruin the Mara Buddha's plan would be a reckless fool.

Tie Wuying asked, You're saying that he still has something up his sleeves?

Song Xilai nodded. I believe so.

Tie Wuying shook his head. I disagree. He's become so weak that he has to rely on his Strange Artifacts to push forward. It's clear that he's on his last legs. Qing Emperor Junior? He doesn't deserve his fame!

It wasn't just Song Xilai and Tie Wuying. Almost everyone was pointing fingers and commenting on Ye Qing's final struggle.

Don't listen to their nonsense, Brother Hong. I don't think that Young Ye is a reckless fool either. He must have a plan of sorts, Lei Xiaodan said to Hong Jianglong because he was afraid that the Pacification Commissioner would try and pull some sort of stunt.

Do I look like I'm worried? If he wants to die, then it's his choice! Hong Jianglong grunted and drained his cup of wine in one gulp.

If someone were to pay close attention to his face, they would notice that he was no longer worried or frustrated. Instead, he looked puzzled.

He had allowed his emotion to get the better of him earlier, but he too noticed something off after he calmed down and regained his wits.

One, Ye Qing was anything but reckless and foolish. There was no way he would drive himself into a dead end.

Two, he knew of Ye Qing's strength more than anyone present. He was already a middle-stage Spirit Purifier prior to entering the Martial Tower, and he was currently cultivating Chen Ah Sheng's Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra. His strength was equal to seven dragon elephants, and

his vitality and vigor were far, far greater than your common warrior. Even if he assumed that Ye Qing had made no progress in the Martial Tower whatsoever, he shouldn't be struggling this badly.

And third, he knew that Ye Qing was in possession of a powerful Strange Artifact. However, the young man hadn't used it even now. Surely he would've used it already if he truly was on his last legs?

Could it be? Heh, that brat. Suddenly, Hong Jianglong remembered something and broke out in a wry chuckle.

Have you gone mad, Jianglong?! The Harmony King noticed the chuckle and blurted, You're laughing when Ye Qing is about to die?

Everyone else was shooting him strange looks as well.

Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that. Hong Jianglong grinned.

If you really are sick, then you should go visit a doctor, Jianglong. Don't force yourself, the Harmony King advised kindly. The reason he said this was simple. He just couldn't see any chance of Ye Qing turning this around. On the screen, Ye Qing was approaching the two-meter mark, but he had become so old that it was positively horrible to look at. His head was completely bald, his teeth had fallen out of their gums, his flesh looked like a piece of dead wood, and it was a miracle that he was still clinging to life at all.

As if on cue, Ye Qing took another step and stumbled on his feet. He fell on all fours, and he wasn't able to climb back to his feet.

Still, Ye Qing didn't give up. He slowly crawled toward the Age Songstress. It was both amusing and pitiful like an ant who was trying to reach the sky.

Chapter 407: How Did You

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Ye Qing slowly, very slowly crawled his way toward the Age Songstress. Like a man who was seconds away from death but was unwilling to give up just like that, he was putting on a final struggle. What should've been a trivial distance for him to cross had now become an impassable chasm.

When Ye Qing was one meter away from the Age Songstress, his pupils dilated, and his head and raised right hand abruptly fell to the ground. At the same time, his breathing ceased completely.

He was dead.

"Sigh. It didn't need to be like this."

On the peak, everyone felt a hint of pity and regret for the dead man. But of course, some people also felt the opposite emotion. To them, it was *good* that Ye Qing had perished. After all, it meant that their juniors, relatives, descendants and more had one less competitor. Besides, everyone on the peak was a bigshot with a vast amount of life experiences. It would be an understatement to say that they had witnessed far too many geniuses who rose like a star and fell like a meteor already.

When you were too familiar with something, you became desensitized. It was just a fact of life.

As expected, their lamentations disappeared into thin air just a few breaths later. They then shifted their attention to the rest of the competitors.

Chu Qingge had reached the end stage of the array. Fearless despite the storm of elements pouring down on her, she surrounded herself in purple qi and defended herself with an impressive variety of martial arts such as fist, palm, sword and finger. She intercepted water and fire and struck down wind and lightning like a war goddess.

Luo Zhan had reached the center of the quagmire. While carrying a pale, bloated body and leaking blood from all orifices, he did battle against a giant corpse made out of countless drowned bodies. His tyrannical, pitch black saber sundered the earth and filled the sky with intent.

The battle between Jian Wusheng and the sword puppet had reached the finale as well. Not only was Jian Wusheng covered from head to toe in blood, the gaping hole in his abdomen looked particularly scary. Deadly sword intent could be seen ravaging his insides. The sword puppet wasn't doing much better either. Its left arm was missing, and half of its head was gone and leaking black qi.

The head wound had come from Jian Wusheng's ultimate technique, "I Do Not Stand In A Sea Of Death[1]". If it was a human, it would've died long ago. But because the sword puppet wasn't alive in the first place, it was still functional. A winner would be decided any minute now.

It was the same for Yang Zhao. He was ranked even higher than Jian Wusheng on the Human Champions Ranking and a member of a prominent clan, so of course he was a powerful warrior in his own right. His fight against the rock giant had also reached the end stage, and speaking of the rock giant, it was at least twice as small as it was before. Shattered rock and fine sand could be seen everywhere.

The young Taoist Qi Xuanyun had finally seen through the secret of the river as well. He had willingly thrown himself to the bottom of the river and was currently fighting a fairly one-sided battle against a humanoid Stranger with a fish's head. His powerful lightning was making it sing like a canary.

But despite their strong performance, none of them were in the lead right now. No, the lead was currently being held by two other warriors.

The first warrior in the lead was a cold-faced, red-eyed man wielding a spear and wearing a black armor. His spear techniques were brutal, terrifying and bloodthirsty, and he had slain every single Stranger he encountered since he began climbing the mountain. He was fearless and relentless even when going up against a Stranger who was stronger than him.

The man's name was Xu Rulin. He served in the army, so his spear technique was honed by the horrors of the battlefield. Right now, Xu Rulin was battling against a tentacle Stranger called Mang Mang because it unleashed a highly toxic gas every time it cried, "Mang Mang!" It was an extremely dangerous foe, but Xu Rulin was pushing it back with his violent spear techniques.

If not for the fact that Xu Rulin was keeping it from escaping—he wanted to kill it just like all the Strangers he had encountered before—the battle would've been long over.

The second warrior in the lead was an extraordinarily ugly woman. Not only was her face jam packed with pimples like a toad's back, she was almost as tall as she was broad. When she moved, it looked like a giant rock with legs was moving across the terrain.

Her power was no joke despite her ugliness, however. The woman had a gentle, melodious name called Wen Xiaonuan[2], but for whatever reason, she was overflowing with decadence, loss, sorrow and despair. Her fighting style was quite bizarre as well. She fought like she was trying to commit suicide, and she always targeted the enemy's biggest weakness. Despite this, she was still alive, and every Stranger who tried to stand in her way had died.

Right now, Wen Xiaonuan was facing off against a cliff with countless arms hanging from the top. They looked like vines the way they flailed back and forth to the wind.

The cliff Stranger was called Cliff Arms for obvious reasons. It was a Phenomenon-class Stranger. It wasn't affected by Wen Xiaonuan's aura of despair because it didn't have a mind. Despite this, Wen Xiaonuan had snapped off over half of its arms, and the cliff itself was covered in cracks. It was clear that it was on its last legs.

Wen Xiaonuan looked at the web of arms flying her way with a sorrowful and despairing expression. Then, she leaped into the air and straight into the arms.

It looked like she was the prey and the cliff Stranger the predator, but right before the arms would catch her, they abruptly shattered into pieces and fell like the rain. Then, Wen Xiaonuan slammed head first into the cliff and shattered it into a million pieces.

Wen Xiaonuan didn't look happy despite her success in killing the Cliff Arms, however. She simply sighed in dejection and continued toward the peak at an even pace.

At nearly the same time, Xu Rulin killed Mang Mang and strode toward the peak as well.

On the peak, the same thought crossed everyone's mind: *It looks like the first place goes to Wen Xiaonuan, and the second place Xu Rulin.*

Then, the Harmony King jumped and cheered like a kid, "Hahaha! I won! I won!"

Although he was slightly disgruntled that Chu Qingge wouldn't be the champion of the first stage, the thought of getting the Golden Celestial Offering Censer and the Luan and Phoenix Chirping painting drawn by Zhang Baiduan cheered him up in no time.

"Xiaodan, Jianglong, prepare the items. I expect it to be delivered to my residence as soon as we get off this mountain. And you better not go back on your bet, you hear?"

Lei Xiaodan let out a bitter chuckle. "You bet, you pay. Don't worry, Your Highness. You will have your winnings."

"Hahahahahaha!" The Harmony King let loose a roaring laugh.

Suddenly, his laughter ceased like a chicken that was caught by the neck. It was because the person who climbed up the mountain was neither Wen Xiaonuan nor Xu Rulin. No, it was someone no one had expected to see again—Ye Qing!

"How did you get up here?" The Harmony King blurted out as his eyes widened like saucers.

The cry caught Ye Qing off guard and stupefied him before he could even catch his breath. When he looked in the direction of the voice and found an old man clad in luxurious clothing staring at him, he replied instinctively, "I... ran? What's wrong?"

When he looked around, he noticed that almost everyone was looking at him with varying expressions of shock and surprise as well.

"How are you not dead?" The old man blurted again and stunning Ye Qing even more.

"Excuse you? Why would I be dead, pray tell?" Ye Qing subconsciously retorted at the rude remark. *The fuck is going on here? Why is someone cursing me as soon as I reach the peak?*

"Control yourself, Joyless! This is the Harmony King you're speaking to!" Hong Jianglong interrupted before Ye Qing could offend the man even more.

"T-The Harmony King?" Ye Qing started in shock before taking a bow in a hurry. "This one greets you, Your Highness!"

"Well met." The Harmony King looked Ye Qing up and down with a deep frown. "We saw the Age Songstress killing you with our own eyes, so how did you come back to life?"

Not only that, Ye Qing looked just as young as he was before. Just how was this possible?

"You're not a ghost, are you?!"

Ye Qing felt a vein throbbing in his forehead. *Who are you calling a ghost? Don't think I'm going to take this lying down just because you're the... on second thought, never mind.*

By now, Ye Qing had noticed the screens floating on the peak and showing various competitors. Realizing what the Harmony King meant, he explained, "Your Highness, I was just pretending. I wasn't actually killed by the Age Songstress."

"You were just pretending?" The Harmony King repeated in confusion.

"Look over here, Your Highness!" Ye Qing was just about to explain himself when Hong Jianglong interrupted the conversation. When he turned to look, he saw Hong Jianglong waving a screen out of the large brazier at the center of the peak. It was showing the final moment of the battle between Ye Qing and the Age Songstress.

Ye Qing was stunned to say the least. *I'm already shocked that this world has livestreams, but replays too? WTF?*

On the screen, Ye Qing was lying on the ground perfectly still looking like he was dead. The Age Songstress certainly thought that was the case as she stopped singing and turned around to leave.

It was at this moment Ye Qing leaped into the air and closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye. Then a crimson light flashed and beheaded the Stranger.

Not done yet, Ye Qing clenched his left fist and summoned a tidal wave of Netherflame into existence, burning the Age Songstress' head and body into ash before it could do anything. His movements were so smooth it was like he had practiced this a thousand times.

After he confirmed that the Age Songstress was dead, Ye Qing whistled triumphantly and slowly returned to normal. His thin, frail body began filling up with muscles, and black hair began covering his head once more. He transformed back to his former appearance in just the blink of an eye.

Then, he raced toward the peak at top speed once more.

That was how the battle between Ye Qing and the Age Songstress had ended. However, most people stopped paying attention to him because they thought he was dead and so missed the epic comeback completely.

"I thought the Age Songstress is a powerful Stranger. Even if you caught her by surprise, how did you kill her like it was nothing?" The Harmony King voiced his puzzlement.

"Joyless, explain!" Hong Jianglong ordered.

"As you command, commissioner." Ye Qing performed a salute. "Your Highness, the Age Songstress' greatest strength is her cursed song. However, that's all she has. Her actual body is so fragile that even the average Hatred-class Stranger is tougher than her. That is why killing the Age Songstress is simply a matter of getting close to her."

"But of course, the Age Songstress is an intelligent Stranger. I didn't want to waste time chasing her around like a buffoon while she slowly ages me with her song. So, I pretended that I was rapidly succumbing to her curse while slowly closing the distance between us. Finally, I pretended to be dead and waited until she stopped singing before killing her."

Ye Qing made it sound oh-so-easy, but everyone present knew just how dangerous the situation was. Not everyone could act, and in this case, not everyone could last long enough to deceive the Age Songstress. A weaker warrior might've fumbled and turned the act into a real tragedy.

"Hmph! Intelligence Stranger my ass! I can't believe she got fooled by such a simple trick! Useless!" The Harmony King harrumphed with disdain.

Says the guy who was tricked by the same act? Shameless much? Ye Qing threw the Harmony King a meaningful look.

"Hmph! What are you looking at? You have an honest face, but you use it to deceive a lowly Stranger? How shameless! How inhuman!" The Harmony King harrumphed again.

Ye Qing: "... *I didn't even say anything yet!*"

It was at this moment Hong Jianglong let out a cough. "You bet, you pay, Your Highness."

“Hmph! It’s all your fault!” The Harmony King glared daggers at Ye Qing before sitting down angrily and looking away. He looked like a petulant child.

Chapter 408: It’s Just A Misunderstanding!

Fang Muyun praised Ye Qing with a warm smile on his face, “You’re Ye Qing, right? The proverb ‘heroes are often young’ shines in you.”

“You flatter me, my lord,” Ye Qing replied politely. Although he didn’t recognize the young man, he doubted that there was anyone present who was a small fry. At the very least, there was no harm in addressing the young man as “my lord”. “I just got lucky. If anything, I am most ashamed of my performance.”

“Ashamed?” Fang Muyun tilted his head in confusion.

“Yes. If I wasn’t delayed by something, I’m sure I could’ve done so much better,” Ye Qing replied with deep regret. Although he wasn’t eliminated, he was certain that his ranking was pathetic considering that he started so late. He didn’t even want to imagine what Gu Suitang would do when he heard about this.

Everyone fell silent and stared at him oddly as soon as he said this. It was such a strange reaction that Ye Qing couldn’t help but scratch his head in confusion. *What? Is it a sin to be humble?*

“Hmph! Youngsters these days are arrogant beyond imagination!” Jing Huang scoffed with dripping disdain. Ye Qing had reached the peak first in half the time everyone else took, and he said he was ashamed? If this wasn’t arrogance, then what was?

Ye Qing: “...” *Bruh, how much more humble do I need to be? I’m probably the last fucking person to make it up this mountain!*

Someone tried to smooth things over. “Hahaha... and where are you going to find a genius who’s humble, one as capable as the Qing Emperor Junior no less? Would you prefer him to act like a gloomy old man like us?”

His words only irked Ye Qing more, however. *Did your math teacher teach your language class? I’m as fucking humble as I could be! Is everyone here an illiterate idiot?*

“Hahaha, that’s right. For the past few decades, every genius who became the champion in such a short time is arrogant beyond imagination. Sixty years ago, the ‘Sword Qi Savant’ Sun Tzufu ascended the Flying Dragon Mount in sixteen hours[1] and declared everyone who came after him to be trash. Forty five years ago, the ‘Vast Blue Sky’ Ren Tianya ascended the mountain in twelve hours and declared mockingly that he lived in the Dark Age of Spring and Autumn period. And thirty years ago, the Qing Emperor ascended the mountain in six hours and declared that only he left his name in the annals of history while everyone else in a century languished in mediocrity...”

Lei Xiaodan ended his statement with a chuckle. "It is fine to be arrogant so long as you have the strength to support it."

"It so happens that Ye Qing is nicknamed the Qing Emperor Junior. Once upon a time, the Qing Emperor ascended the heavens in six steps. Today, the Qing Emperor Junior repeated his feat by starting during halftime. It makes for a great legend, doesn't it?" Fang Muyun said smilingly before looking at Chu Wangsun. "What do you think, Wangsun?"

"Not bad," Chu Wangsun replied indifferently, though his eyes were flickering with unknown meaning.

"You flatter him, Mister Farseeing, Mister Nine. He still has a long way to go before he can be mentioned in the same sentence as the Qing Emperor," Hong Jianglong said smilingly. "Besides, calling him a champion is too much. Just because he reached the peak first doesn't necessarily mean that he will conquer the tribulations ahead. Please don't flatter him too much and give him a big head."

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was feeling like he had been transported to a parallel universe. By now, he realized that he had misunderstood something, but he still couldn't help but ask, "Er, excuse me, but I thought I was the last participant to reach the peak?"

"Who told you that? You are the *first* person to make it to the peak!" Hong Jianglong shot him an incredulous look. Did the Age Songstress' curse lingered in him after all? Was it why Ye Qing was acting like a buffoon?

"I'm the first?" Ye Qing's eyes bulged in disbelief. He couldn't help but mutter under his breath, "I started six hours late, and I'm still the first person to make it to the peak? Just how useless are this year's participants?"

As if on cue, Wen Xiaonuan and Xu Rulin reached the peak from two different directions at the same time. Of course, they heard Ye Qing's mutterings.

Xu Rulin's eyes had just returned to normal, but Ye Qing's words immediately turned them red and infused him with fighting spirit again. Wen Xiaonuan let out a deep sigh and looked even more depressed than before.

"The arrogance! But I think you should save those words until after you become the champion," the Harmony King scoffed. He was pissed off because he lost the bet, and Ye Qing had unwittingly insulted his dearest daughter with his careless words. How could he not be angered by this?

The rest of the group looked annoyed and angry as well. They were fine with his earlier display of arrogance, but this was going a step too far. After all, their juniors were participating in the competition as well, and Ye Qing had just called them useless.

"Joyless! Where are your manners?" Hong Jianglong rebuked Ye Qing.

“Sorry, sorry! I misspoke! Please forgive me, my lords!” Ye Qing hurriedly apologized with a bitter smile on his face. It was just a careless remark, but he really should’ve known better. “I never—”

Ye Qing was just about to launch into a passionate explanation when Fang Muyun said, “It’s fine. For now, please move to the side so you won’t disturb the meet. The same goes for the rest of you.”

“Sure, just let me fi—” Ye Qing tried to explain himself again, but Hong Jianglong interrupted, “Cut the bullcrap and move to the side already!”

Ye Qing: “...” *If you would just give me one heavens damned minute to explain myself...*

He couldn’t ignore the order though. If he did, he would only leave an even worse impression. So, Ye Qing said, “Yes, commissioner,” and went to stand on the sidelines with Xu Rulin and Wen Xiaonuan.

“My name is Ye Qing. It’s a pleasure to meet you both,” Ye Qing greeted the two warriors after standing still. “I wasn’t thinking when I said what I said earlier. I hope you won’t take offense.”

“Unthinking words are the truest words in your heart,” Wen Xiaonuan said dejectedly. “Plus, you were speaking the truth. I failed to reach the peak first, so I am trash.”

“You misunderstand, miss. I wasn’t talking about you two,” Ye Qing tried to explain.

“You’re talking about the others? But so what? There is no difference between me and them,” Wen Xiaonuan sighed and pressed her chin against her chest.

“I really don’t mean it like that,” Ye Qing tried again.

“And what do you mean, exactly? Are you saying that we are worse than trash? Sigh...” Wen Xiaonuan grew even sadder.

She’s fucking with me, right? Ye Qing barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he turned to the—hopefully—saner one of the duo. “Brother—”

“No need to say anything. We will see who is truly strong on the battlefield,” Xu Rulin said coldly.

Ye Qing: “...” *What was that saying again? If you have yellow mud in your pants, then you might as well pretend that you’ve shat yourself because no one would believe otherwise. Sigh.*

... Fucking dammit! Why the fuck is this happening to me? I was six hours late! I didn’t want to get first place! Motherfucking...

Knowing that he couldn’t get through the two blockheads, Ye Qing gave up trying to defend his innocence.

It was at this moment the fourth person showed up. It was none other than Chu Qingge.

Chu Qingge looked injured and tired, but mentally, she was actually doing quite fantastic. After reaching the peak and performing a salute, she walked up to Ye Qing and greeted him cordially.

The fifth warrior to ascend the peak was Yang Zhao, but unlike Chu Qingge, he looked clean and untouched almost as if he hadn't fought a great battle earlier.

His smile froze a little when he spotted Ye Qing and the others, but it quickly turned back to normal. He was able to make a good impression just by smiling warmly.

The sixth warrior to make it was Jian Wusheng, though he looked way worse than Yang Zhao as a matter of course. His body was covered in wounds and bloodstain, and there were hostile sword qi lurking in some of the wounds as well.

The seventh warrior to make it was Luo Zhan, and he looked even worse than Jian Wusheng was. His body was sickly white and bloated like that of a drowned corpse, and he was literally soaked to the bone. Even now, mud and blood were slowly pouring out of his orifices. It was terrible.

The eighth warrior to make it was Qi Xuanyun. He looked pale, but he was mostly fine. He greeted Ye Qing excitedly when he saw him.

The ninth warrior to make it was Wei Bulao. Wei Bulao was similarly uninjured, though he felt like he had one foot in the grave.

The tenth warrior to make it was Chu Renhe. He was covered in frost and snow as if he just braved a blizzard, and his lips looked as white as snow. He grew even colder when he saw Ye Qing and the others.

As the time limit approached, more and more people ascended the peak. There were Tou Jiao, Zhang Tiancheng, Chen Shaoyu, Zhao Lan, Zhao Lu; Wine, Sex, Wealth and Popularity; Eat, Drink, Fuck and Gamble; and more.

A moment before the time was up, Lin Yuhuai, Chu Nianjiu, Gao Ning'an and more made it up the peak as well. Although they looked like they had just fought a war, at least they weren't disqualified in the first round.

When the time was up, the golden dragon circling above the nine heavens abruptly roared and swooped toward the ground. Such was its pressure that everyone felt suffocated and repressed.

Thankfully, the golden dragon disappeared just as quickly as it came. It slammed into the great array surrounding the peak and caused a golden ripple to spread across the whole mountain in an instant. Everyone who was still climbing was immediately flung out by it. To those watching from the foot of the mountain, it looked like the mountain was shooting golden meteors. It looked mighty impressive.

Of course, the warriors wrapped inside the golden light were unharmed despite the great height they fell from.

"This marks the end of the first round of the Hidden Dragon Meet."

After the golden dragon had completed its descent, Hong Jianglong rose to his feet and looked at the group of participants. "Good. A total of sixty five of you managed to make it to the peak in the allotted time. I won't congratulate you though, and you shouldn't be celebrating just yet. This is but the beginning of your journey to become a dragon. Will you rise to the heavens as a dragon, or will you fall to the ground like a worm? That all depends on your next performance."

“I will give you one piece of advice. Don’t let arrogance or impatience get to your head.”

Everyone bowed respectfully to Hong Jianglong. “We will remember your advice, my lord.”

Ye Qing was the only one who thought that Hong Jianglong’s advice was specifically targeted at him.

“Mister Farseeing, is there anything you would like to share with them?” Hong Jianglong looked to Fang Muyun next.

Fang Muyun rose to his feet and said in a refined manner, “You’ve said all that needs to be said, so I shan’t bore them any longer. Everyone, you are all young geniuses with a bright future ahead of you. I wish you all good luck in tomorrow’s tournament.”

The group saluted again. “Thank you, Mister Farseeing.”

“Wangsun, there are many people here who attended this meet for you. Would you like to speak with them?” Fang Muyun asked smilingly after noticing a lot of people staring at Chu Wangsun, who was sitting right next to him.

It was a harmless remark. He knew full well that his friend had exactly zero interest in addressing the crowd. He wasn’t even expecting him to say a single word.

That was why he was greatly surprised when Chu Wangsun actually rose to his feet and walked toward the crowd.

Chapter 409: A Common Man

Chu Wangsun’s action stunned everyone. Since the moment he showed up at the peak, he hadn’t engaged anyone in conversation except Fang Muyun. When someone else tried to speak with him, he would finish the conversation in as few words as possible. He looked extremely disinterested and barely paid attention to the climbers at all.

But now, he was walking toward the participants of his own accord. Did someone catch his eyes?

Nearly everyone in the group grew excited when they saw this. Even Jian Wusheng, Chu Renhe and Chu Qingge looked expectant and hopeful.

As Fang Muyun had mentioned earlier, most of the participants were attending the Hidden Dragon Meet for Chu Wangsun. If the scholar decided to bring them into the Jixia Academy, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that their lives would be transformed forever.

Out of everyone present, there was only one person who wanted to be anywhere but here. He was none other than Ye Qing.

Ye Qing had a feeling that Chu Wangsun was coming for him. He wasn’t planning to stick out in the Hidden Dragon Meet, but somehow he managed to achieve the complete opposite instead. He thought that the one silver lining to this situation was the fact that Chu Wangsun didn’t seem to recognize him, but he was wrong. Knowing how heartless the scholar really was, the fact that he was walking toward him could only mean...

Chu Wangsun ignored everyone's gaze and walked right up to Ye Qing. Then, he stared at him in silence and contemplation.

Cold sweat immediately broke out of Ye Qing's back. It took him an incredible amount of willpower to control himself and reveal not a hint of trepidation on his face or body language as he said, "Well met, Mister Nine."

Instead of answering, Chu Wangsun reached out to grab Ye Qing's shoulder.

Ye Qing's heart leaped to his throat in an instant. At this point, there was no denying that Chu Wangsun had sensed something, and he was acting to confirm his suspicions. After all, he had fought against the scholar at the Ghost Tower before.

What should I do? Should I run or beg on my knees? I need help immediately!

"Hahaha... are you planning to invite Joyless to the Jixia Academy, Mister Nine?"

At the last moment, Hong Jianglong suddenly appeared next to Chu Wangsun and hugged his shoulders. Naturally, this caused Chu Wangsun to pause his movement.

"What are you waiting for, Joyless? Thank Mister Nine now!"

Ye Qing understood that Hong Jianglong was helping him. He immediately took a few steps backward and saluted Chu Wangsun. "Thank you, Mister Nine."

Chu Wangsun was obviously displeased with the sudden contact. It could also be that he wasn't used to affectionate gestures like this. Furrowing his brows a little, he channeled his force and pushed Hong Jianglong away from him.

"Sorry, sorry! I got a little too excited there."

Hong Jianglong seamlessly inserted himself between Ye Qing and Chu Wangsun as he mouthed an apology, "It was my deepest regrets for failing to grasp the opportunity to join the Jixia Academy back in the day, so I got a little too excited. I hope you won't take offense, Mister Nine."

"It's fine," Chu Wangsun replied indifferently. "Also, you are mistaken. I don't have the power to decide if someone can enter the Jixia Academy. Anyway, I—"

"What, you can't? That's a shame."

Chu Wangsun obviously wanted to say something else, but Hong Jianglong interrupted him before he could begin. Ye Qing cooperatively put on a disappointed expression as well. "In that case, do you mind taking a gander at the rest of my people? They're all geniuses of their time. Step forth and greet Mister Nine, Luo Zhan, Qingge, Nianjiu, Yuhuai and Ning'an."

"Yes, commissioner. Well met, Mister Nine." Everyone he called out hurriedly stepped forward and saluted Chu Wangsun.

"What do you think of them, Mister Nine?" Hong Jianglong asked.

"They're okay," Chu Wangsun replied.

"Can they enter the Jixia Academy?" Hong Jianglong shot another question.

“In the future, maybe,” Chu Wangsun answered again with a hint of impatience. His meaning was very simple. The future was one thing, but they definitely weren’t getting into the Jixia Academy now.

“A shame...” Hong Jianglong sighed in disappointment before moving on. “If they’re not qualified, what about Lord Lei’s disciple? Oh, the disciple of one of the four legendary constables of Tian Yong, Constable Bai Tou possesses a lot of potential as well. What do you think?”

This time, Chu Wangsun didn’t say anything. He turned around and walked away.

“A shame. It looks like you all need to work harder,” said Hong Jianglong with a regretful shake of the head. After Chu Wangsun had returned to his seat, the Pacification Commissioner looked at Fang MUYUN and said, “Mister Farseeing, it’s getting late. I believe we should send the participants home so they may recover fully for tomorrow’s competition.”

“Sure. I see no problems with that,” Fang MUYUN replied indifferently.

Hong Jianglong immediately addressed the group, “Alright, it’s getting late, so feel free to head home and catch some well-deserved rest. Tomorrow, I expect to see you all here at 6 am sharp.”

“As you command!” Everyone replied affirmatively. Despite the grandness of the Hidden Dragon Meet, it was only a few days long.

The first day required the participants to reach the peak of the Flying Dragon Mount within the allotted time.

The second day was where they drew lots and began the preliminaries.

And a few days after that, they would fight it out all the way until the end to decide the quarter-finalists, semi-finalists, the runner-ups and the champion.

All in all, it was a very compact competition.

After Hong Jianglong was done, he waved his hand and weaved the golden light into a golden road that stretched from the peak all the way to the bottom. Naturally, it was to save the participants the time and effort of having to brave the dangers of the Flying Dragon Mount all over again when they took their leave. In fact, they were expected to use this road for the next few days to come.

The golden road was nicknamed the Rising Dragon Road. Only those who weren’t disqualified on the first round were permitted to use it.

After saluting the bigshots one last time, Ye Qing and all other participants slowly left the mountain via the Rising Dragon Road. The road was softer and lighter than anything they had ever experienced probably because it was made of light. Every time they took a step forward, a step would appear right underneath their foot. It was a miraculous construct to say the least.

“I’m surprised you’re so interested in Ye Qing, Brother Chu.”

While the participants were leaving, Fang Muyun looked at Chu Wangsun and joked, “Are you actually planning to invite him to the Jixia Academy?”

Chu Wangsun’s earlier action was seriously strange. It didn’t fit his usual behavior at all.

Chu Wangsun pondered for a moment before replying, “He’s the one who caused Sixue’s death.”

The scholar frowned immediately after he said this, however. It was because he recalled that there was someone else besides Ye Qing. He couldn’t quite remember it though.

“... Are you sure?” Fang Muyun’s smile slowly withered like a dying flower.

“I wasn’t sure before, but now I’m certain,” Chu Wangsun replied. “His aura felt a little familiar, but I couldn’t be sure if it was him. However, he was too calm when I acted to test him.”

A glint flashed in Fang Muyun’s eyes. “You’re right. You are the famous Mister Nine. Most people wouldn’t be able to contain themselves when they are graced by your attention. Someone who doesn’t react to your presence is either completely devoid of ambition... or guilty.”

Chu Wangsun continued, “Besides that, Hong Jianglong reacted quite strangely just now. He interrupted me again and again probably because he didn’t want me to test Ye Qing.”

“That makes sense.” Fang Muyun smiled. “I was wondering why Hong Jianglong was acting the way he did. Hong Jianglong was hostile toward the Jixia Academy for the longest time because he failed to join it. BUT today, he was acting like you and him were best friends. Yes, I do believe you’re right.”

“I will give you a proper closure, Farseeing,” Chu Wangsun turned to Fang Muyun and said seriously.

Fang Muyun smiled. “It’s fine. Sixue is my younger brother. If Ye Qing really is the reason he died, then I would deal with him myself.”

Chu Wangsun acquiesced. “Very well. Still, don’t hesitate to ask for my help if you need it. The responsibility of Sixue’s death is mine to bear.”

Fang Muyun sighed. “The sage says that one must be mindful of their behavior and conduct in order to protect themselves. However, Sixue was flighty, irritable, and impatient. Despite having studied the scriptures, he wasn’t able to embody their teachings at all. It was always a matter of time before he encountered a deadly threat and lost his life. Father entrusted Sixue to you because he was hoping that you would be able to influence him for the better, but circumstances beyond your control took over before you were able to change him. It is not your fault.”

“Plus, you’ve already offered father a humble apology, and father has already afforded you your forgiveness. Hence, you don’t need to feel guilty or responsible.”

Fang Muyun let out a self-derisive chuckle then. “I study the text of the sages and call myself a disciple of the sage, but in the end, I’m still just a common man. It was Sixue’s own fault that he died, and logically speaking, I shouldn’t bear any resentment or grudge. However, my emotion and love for my brother says otherwise.”

“Not even a sage could remain fair when their own children are involved, which was why they chose to leave their children’s education in another’s hands. A common man like me can only do worse. Sixue is my younger brother, and my father was forced to bear the pain of losing a son. No matter what, I must see this matter to the end and do what must be done.”

“For Sixue and my father’s sake, I will have retribution.”

Chu Wangsun asked, “What will you do?”

“I’m a common man, so I shall act as a common man does.” Fang Muyun smiled as softly as the spring wind and the fine rain. “His sin doesn’t deserve death, but he refused the life sentence you gave him, didn’t he? In that case, I have no choice but to mete out the death sentence.”

“A debt must be paid, and a blood debt has to be paid by blood. This... is natural.”

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“Is that Ye Qing?” “Yeah, he’s the guy they call the Qing Emperor Junior?”

“Qing Emperor Junior? How preposterous! That’s not a title anyone can bear!”

“He climbed the Flying Dragon Mount in six hours. If he doesn’t deserve the title, who is?”

“Hmph! The Qing Emperor Junior is the undisputed champion of the realm, but he is also a humble, magnanimous man. On the other hand, Ye Qing is just an arrogant bastard with some power and no virtue. To call him Qing Emperor Junior is to shame the Qing Emperor!”

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The next day early morning, Ye Qing became the center of attention as soon as he entered the people’s eyes as a matter of course. There were envy, jealousy, and even more hatred. It was all because he accidentally offended everyone with his careless remark.

“You’re famous again, Joyless!” Chu Nianjiu gave Ye Qing a slap on the shoulder and wore a shit-eating grin on his face.

However, Ye Qing simply shrugged and said, “I’m used to it. Even if I haven’t slipped up, they would still be talking shit about me. Such is the fate of a star.”

He knew this would happen the moment he made that careless remark. Only the bigshots had heard of the remark, and technically speaking, a bigshot shouldn’t be so petty as to slander a junior way younger than them. However, even the most important person in the world was just a human. Some of them had loose mouths, and some of them outright disliked him. It was perfectly natural for these people to leak his remark and paint a bullseye on his back.

In any case, it was far too late to change anything. The only thing he could do now was to have a thick skin and feign indifference.

It was his own bloody fault he was in this situation. It was only natural that he bore the consequences.

The good news was that no amount of backbiting could hurt him physically or mentally. He didn't even care about maintaining a good reputation. Power was what brought the rice home, not reputation.

What he was really worried about was Chu Wangsun. It was clear that the scholar suspected something yesterday, and if it wasn't for Hong Jianglong's intervention, he might have exposed himself already. And even then, who was to say that Chu Wangsun wouldn't continue to harass him in the future?

In fact, there was literally no bigger threat than Chu Wangsun right now.

Chapter 410: Midnight Hunt

"It's a good thing you're almost as shameless as me," Gao Ning'an joked.

"Haha..." Ye Qing shrugged noncommittally. He certainly agreed that he was no more shameless than the guy who wore the tag proudly on his shoulder.

Suddenly a cold voice came from behind a group of gossipers, "Backbiting is something only a coward would do. Defeat Ye Qing fair and square, or you're no more but the useless trash he claims you to be."

"The fuck? Who the fuck are you to—" One guy turned around to yell at the owner of the voice, but his words died in his throat when a pair of crimson eyes stabbed into his vision. He suddenly felt as if he was drowning in a sea of blood and corpses.

By the time he snapped out of the illusion, his whole body was drenched in cold sweat. The rest of his companions were white-faced and shaking in fear as well.

"Xu... Xu Rulin..." One man gulped as he recognized the speaker.

Xu Rulin stared at the group for a moment. His eyes were cold and emotionless like he was staring at a bunch of corpses.

"Come now, Brother Xu. We are all *jianghu* brethren here."

Right as the group felt like they were sinking into the abyss, a warm voice reached them and melted the unnatural chill gripping their body and limbs. When they looked up, they saw Yang Zhao, Zhang Tian, and a dozen other warriors walking toward them. They were all participants who had qualified for the second round of the Hidden Dragon Meet.

"I am Yang Zhao. It's a pleasure to meet you, Brother Xu!" Yang Zhao greeted.

Xu Rulin paid him no attention though. He simply turned around and walked toward the exit.

As he was passing by Ye Qing, Xu Rulin uttered, "I will defeat you." He was gone before Ye Qing could react to the statement of challenge.

“Phew... what terrific bloodthirst. I can hardly believe that his bloodthirst is stronger than someone who fights Strangers all year long like us,” mused Chu Nianjiu stared at Xu Rulin’s back thoughtfully. “Do you know who Xu Rulin is, Ningan?”

Gao Ningan shook his head. “I only know that he’s part of the border troops.”

“The border troops? That explains a lot!” Cu Nianjiu exclaimed in realization before looking at Ye Qing. “Joyless, you’re a late-stage Spirit Purifier now. Do you think you can beat him?”

Ye Qing shook his head. “I won’t know until we fight.”

Yes, Ye Qing was a late-stage Spirit Purifier now. He had made the breakthrough while he was training in the Martial Tower. Honestly, he wasn’t expecting to enter the late stage of the Spirit Purification stage so soon, but the Martial Tower of Tian Yong turned out to be better than expected. The power imbued in it was greater than the one in the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau, so his training speed was faster as well. Before he knew it, he had achieved a breakthrough.

He couldn’t help that he was so gifted.

“Yang Zhao is coming our way!” Lin Yuhuai warned suddenly.

As if on cue, Yang Zhao appeared and greeted them with a smile, “I am Yang Zhao. A pleasure to meet you, Brother Ye.”

Yang Zhao was wearing a scholar’s robe and a scholar’s hat. A silver flute was hanging on his waist. He looked cultured, refined, and friendly.

“Your name precedes you, Brother Ye, and I’ve been looking forward to meeting you for the longest time. I am very happy to learn that you are even greater than what your name suggests.”

“You flatter me, Brother Yang. The rumors are just rumors, and I hardly think that my reputation is greater than yours, the Silver Flute Scholar,” Ye Qing replied and saluted Yang Zhao politely.

“No need to be humble, Brother Ye. There is only one other person in the past century who has scaled the Flying Dragon Mount in six hours, and that person isn’t me. Believe me when I say that you have my deepest admiration,” Yang Zhao sighed. He looked so sincere that one couldn’t help but believe that his admiration was true.

Ye Qing chuckled. “I was just lucky. As a member of the Pacification Bureau, it is my bread and butter to deal with Strangers. Because of that, I recognized almost every Stranger I ran into during the climb. That is why I was able to do the almost impossible.”

“To tell you the truth, I have no confidence that I’ll be able to achieve the same feat if we were to ascend the mountain again. In fact, I’d be very lucky to reach the peak on time again.”

“Hahaha... You’re quite the joker, Brother Ye,” Yang Zhao remarked before turning to face Ye Qing’s companions. “The three of you must be Reverend Qi, Brother Chu and Brother Lin, right?”

“You are correct,” all three men responded.

“It is an honor to be able to meet you all. I’d like to treat you all to a drink at Beauty Pageant Palace after the meet is over. I hope you won’t spurn my invitation?” Yang Zhao asked.

“Of course not. We will be there,” the whole group saluted the man.

“Good, good! I look forward to it!” Yang Zhao returned the salute with a bright smile. “I shan’t take up your time any longer. See you later, everyone!”

Yang Zhao left with his men after saying that. It looked like he really just came to greet them.

“Yang Zhao is not someone to be underestimated!” Chu Nianjiu sighed after Yang Zhao was gone.

“He’s a named champion on the Human Champions Ranking. Of course he cannot be underestimated,” Lin Yuhuai replied.

The group continued to make conversation as more and more people ascended the Flying Dragon Mount. There were Chen Shaoyu, the two Zhao brothers, Jian Wusheng, Wei Bulao and more. Without exception, every single one of them afforded Ye Qing at least a glance of scorn, gravity, disgust, anger, hostility, cordiality and more.

Not only that, there were people who wished to make the acquaintance of Ye Qing or even recruit them into their faction. Ye Qing had no choice but to deal with them all.

Of course, no one tried to give him trouble. No one who made it into the second round was an idiot after all. No matter how displeased they were with Ye Qing, it was pure folly to harass him at this point of time. Best case scenario, they might expose Ye Qing for the braggart he really was, but worst case scenario, they could humiliate themselves and even disqualify themselves from the competition. The risk just wasn’t worth the reward.

A while later, Hong Jianglong, Lei Xiaodan, Fang Muyun, Chu Wangsun, Song Xilai and more ascended the mountain as well. The peak instantly fell quiet, and everyone saluted the bigshots.

After the bigshots had taken their seats, Hong Jianglong swept his gaze across the crowd and nodded. “It looks like all sixty five of you are present, and none of you are late. Very good.”

Ye Qing raised an eyebrow. Why did he feel like the remark was directed at him?

“Now then. Let’s get the show going!” Hong Jianglong declared before lifting his hand. The mountain shook, and rumbling noises blared for a moment. The commotion was such that the great array encompassing the entire peak flickered on and off. As the golden light glowed brightly, eight platforms were slowly raised from the ground.

After the platforms were fully raised, Hong Jianglong declared, “The rules are simple. Two of you will be duking it out on each platform until someone surrenders or dies. All methods are permitted, and the winner will advance to the next match.”

A low murmur broke out among the participants when Hong Jianglong finished his statement. A no-holds-barred tournament where it was acceptable to win a fight by killing their opponent? This was a little too much, wasn't it?

“What if someone cheats, my lord?” Someone asked.

“Cheating is also a form of skill. If you can do it, then feel free,” Hong Jianglong answered indifferently.

“What if someone intentionally fights with the intention of maiming or killing their opponent?” another participant asked.

“This is the Hidden Dragon Meet, not a children's playground where we hold your hands and make sure that you don't catch a scratch in the wrong places. From the moment you set foot on this platform, death becomes a very real possibility. If you're afraid, then you shouldn't be participating in the Hidden Dragon Meet in the first place. Chu does not need a bunch of cowards who can't put their life on the line when it matters.”

No one could say a word for a time.

“Are there any questions?” Hong Jianglong asked loudly. His eyes were glaring like a tiger's and full of pressure.

After waiting for a few seconds and receiving no reply, Hong Jianglong nodded in satisfaction and continued, “Good. I like that no one here is a fool. I was going to throw out the next person who asked me a stupid question.”

“Without further ado, let's draw the lots.”

Hong Jianglong slapped the large brazier beside him and caused a loud, resonant ringing that felt like it would last until eternity. Then, the brazier spat out a bunch of lights that flew into the participants' hands.

Ye Qing looked down on the glob of light in his palm. It was a draconic token made of golden light with the number “3” on it. Unless he was gravely mistaken, it meant that he was the number 3 participant.

“Have you all gotten your tokens? Good. The one who shares your number is your opponent,” Hong Jianglong declared.

Suddenly, Chu Qingge asked, “Why is my token blank, my lord?”

Hong Jianglong smiled. “There are a total of sixty five participants this time, so one person is allowed to advance immediately to the next match. Congratulations, you are that lucky winner.”

“Many thanks, my lord.” Chu Qingge saluted him, though her expression was indifferent. She looked less affected than many participants who were shooting her envious looks. Good luck was enviable after all.

The Harmony King in particular was brimming with excitement and joy for his daughter.

“The preliminaries will begin now. Contestants number one to number eight, please step onto your platforms!” Hong Jianglong declared.

As soon as Hong Jianglong finished, Ye Qing’s token shone brightly and enveloped him in a sheen of golden light. When it disappeared, Ye Qing found himself standing atop a small rooftop with a dark sky looming ominously over his head.

A rooftop? What’s this, a duel atop the Forbidden City[1]? Ye Qing snickered at his private joke.

In fact, the so-called “platform” wasn’t really a platform, but a small, isolated space where the battleground could be anything and everything. Some participants found themselves standing on opposite sides of a river. Some found themselves standing in the middle of a street. One pair found themselves baking in the middle of a desert, and another found themselves surrounded by a forest of lush, green trees.

Some environments were extremely advantageous to certain participants, but the opposite was equally true. It was completely up to fate whether the participant would get lucky or not. But then again, luck was also a kind of strength.

This was no secret. In fact, almost everyone participating in the Hidden Dragon Meet was aware of this.

Ye Qing’s participant muttered, “How unlucky!” when he saw who his opponent was. Thanks to Ye Qing’s screw up, there was no one on this peak who hadn’t heard of his name.

“I am Han Zhou. It’s an honor, Brother Ye,” Han Zhou raised a hand and greeted him.

It was a ruse. As soon as he raised his hand, something dark flew out of his sleeve straight toward Ye Qing.

The pitch black object was as fast as it was soundless. It was nighttime on this platform as well, so the hidden weapon was anything but conspicuous. It was one of Han Zhou’s killer move, Midnight Hunt.

Midnight Hunt was a hidden weapon and a Strange Artifact that was shaped like a dart. At night, it was perfectly invisible and untraceable. That was why the technique was named the Midnight Hunt.

Hao Zhou was well aware that he was no match for Ye Qing in a straight fight. That was why he distracted him with a greeting and used the cover of the night to unleash Midnight Hunt.

The good news was that Ye Qing caught the dart right before it would hit him in the forehead. The bad news was Han Zhou smiling as if he got Ye Qing right where he wanted him. The dart abruptly bloomed like a lotus and fired countless ox hair-sized needles straight at Ye Qing.

As it turned out, the dart was also a ruse. The needles concealed within the dart were the real trap. That was why the dart was named “Midnight”, and the needles were named “Hunt”. Together, they were undodgeable and indefensible.

Excitement flashed across Han Zhou's face when he thought that Ye Qing was going to perish under his Midnight Hunt.