

Stranger 421

Chapter 421: The Lightless Silverfish

Ye Qing became even more careful after his harrowing experience on the first floor. Upon crossing the threshold, he executed “Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul” to check for dangers first before walking down the stairs.

While “Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul” wasn’t as deadly as the “Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art”, it was far more invisible and untraceable. It was the safest way to probe his surroundings without drawing the attention of the second floor’s inhabitants.

It was even smellier on the second level than it was on the first level. Not only that, the air felt humid and slimy, and every corner of the place—the stairs, the handrails, the walls and more—were covered in some sort of slimy liquid. It was beyond disgusting.

When Ye Qing reached the second level, he was flabbergasted to find that the place was flooded. No, it wasn’t an illusion. The level really was flooded with some sort of smelly, murky, and acidic water. Bubbles were popping on the water’s surface, and his exposed skin was stinging and festering just being close to the water.

Ye Qing’s brows were tightly knitted. If the “theme” of the first level was corruption, then the “theme” of the second level was corrosion.

“What a pain,” Ye Qing muttered in annoyance while rubbing his nose habitually. According to the layout the girls showed him, the entrance to the third and final level was situated at the lower right hand corner of the chamber. It was also directly opposite the staircase he was at. In other words, he must cross the pool of acidic water if he wished to make it to his destination, the orlop deck.

Honestly, Ye Qing wanted nothing more than to punch a hole in the floor and forge his own path, but that was impossible. It was because every part of the ship had become unnaturally tough since becoming a part of an Anomaly. The gigantic spiderman he killed earlier was incredibly strong, but even its attacks failed to leave a single scratch on the floor. As much as he wanted to take a shortcut, it just couldn’t be done.

Ye Qing thought on how he should advance for a moment before tossing out a yellow talisman. It transformed into a small boat and landed snugly on the waters. The plan was to cross the waters on the boat, but the acidic water easily ate through the hull and caused it to turn back into a paper talisman. It dissolved into nothing almost all too quickly.

“I guess an ordinary talisman wouldn’t be able to withstand it,” Ye Qing sighed. To be honest, the quality of his talismans weren’t at fault here. The acidic water was just too corrosive.

“If a talisman won’t work, then what about a Strange Artifact?”

This time, Ye Qing produced an emerald green bamboo raft from Nine Heavens. It was emerald green like it was made from young bamboo. There were also green shoots and leaves growing out of its joints.

The bamboo raft was called the Blue Wave Green Bamboo Raft. It was a Malice-class Strange Artifact made from the Blue Wave Green Bamboo. As the Blue Wave Green Bamboo was born in water, it was naturally buoyant and an excellent material for making vessel-type Strange Artifacts.

Besides that, the Blue Wave Green Bamboo possessed a powerful life force. It wouldn't die even after it was chopped and made into a vessel. So long as there was water, it could theoretically live forever.

Ye Qing gingerly placed the Blue Wave Green Bamboo Raft into the acidic water. It quickly grew until it could fit one or two passengers. Ye Qing's heart skipped a beat when he saw the bamboos slowly turning grayish and spotty like it was dying. Its branches and leaves also withered and fell off its body.

Luckily, that was the end of its degradation. It didn't dissolve into nothing and sink like the yellow talisman did. Ye Qing allowed himself to let out a small sigh of relief.

After boarding the raft and confirming that it wouldn't sink, Ye Qing used his astral qi to push the raft toward the entrance to the third floor.

At first, everything was normal. He was about halfway there when his surroundings gradually turned dark like something was devouring the light. Then, darkness.

It was nighttime, it was foggy, and he was deep within the belly of the Boat of Longing. He had expected his surroundings to be pitch black. With his eyesight, he could see six to ten meters in front of him even in this pitch black darkness.

But now? He couldn't see anything. The darkness was so absolute he literally couldn't see his hand in front of his face. Not only that, his demonic thought was blind as well. For some reason, he could sense darkness and only darkness.

Snap!

Ye Qing snapped his fingers and produced a small flame on his fingertip. However, he could neither see its light nor perceive it with his demonic thought. If not for the hot temperature on his fingertip, he would've thought he had failed to ignite the flame at all.

"What's going on?"

"Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul"

Ye Qing tapped the space in front of him and produced a wave of demonic thought. However, his surroundings remained exactly the same.

"What?"

Perhaps the illusion was too strong for the "Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul" to pierce. Ye Qing made a hand knife with his left hand and swung it diagonally in front of him.

Demonic red lotuses fell all around him, but still the blanket of darkness was unbreachable.

"It's... not an illusion?"

Ye Qing frowned deeply. This was the first time both the "Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul" and the "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art" had failed him.

“I should turn back.”

Unsure what was going on here, Ye Qing decided that the best course of action for now was to return to the staircase and figure out the situation. So, he channeled his astral qi and pushed the bamboo raft back to where it started.

But there was nothing. It was the same situation as when he first stumbled upon the fog at Yonghe Lake. No matter which direction he sailed, he was unable to return to the staircase or touch the walls of a chamber. It was like he was stranded in the middle of an ocean.

Worse still, he was far more bewildered than when he was stranded in the fog. At least he could still see things at the time. But right here and now, it was like he had gone completely blind in every way. He could see and feel nothing but pitch black darkness.

The darkness didn't just herald loneliness and the unknown. It was heralded fear.

Unwilling to give up, Ye Qing made several more attempts to break out of this black hell using his spiritual power, pure astral qi, and even his physical strength. Unfortunately, it all ended up being futile.

“Am I going to die here?” A moment of doubt gripped Ye Qing as he whispered.

“No. I refuse to give up! Fog Demon!” Determination flashed in Ye Qing's eyes as he produced the Boundless Mara Buddha and loosened the Moko Boundless Chains. A demonic Buddha immediately appeared in the air.

“Kekeke... finally willing to let me out, boy?” The Fog Demon let out its signature cackle before realizing something was amiss. “Huh? Where is this place? Why can't I see anything?”

“I don't know either. Anyway, I want you to unleash your full strength,” Ye Qing ordered icily.

“Okay. Against what?” The Fog Demon was confused.

“Anything is fine! Just trash the place!” Ye Qing yelled.

“Okay!” Another cackle later, the demonic Buddha mustered its demonic energies and let loose an evil and anomalous noise. Then, he launched a palm strike against the acidic waters while mountains of corpses, sea of blood, and the eternal kingdom of demons appeared behind his back.

Boom!

The palm strike caused a massive wave that threw the bamboo raft high, high into the air. It was a long time before it finally landed back in the water.

Some of the water splashed onto the bamboo raft and Ye Qing and caused a sizzling noise. Ye Qing could clearly feel his skin and astral qi being eroded by the acidic water.

He didn't look like he felt the pain though. In fact, he was smiling widely like he finally figured out something.

Boom!

The Boundless Mara Buddha hit the acidic waters again, kicking up a gigantic wave that surged toward Ye Qing and the bamboo raft like a waterfall.

Right before the wave would engulf Ye Qing and the bamboo raft, he suddenly threw a punch and destroyed it in the blink of an eye. Then, he yelled, “Fog Demon, stop!”

The Boundless Mara Buddha halted its third attack midway, and the Fog Demon grumbled with displeasure, “What the hell do you want, kid? Do you want me to trash up the place or not[1]?”

“I think I know where we are now!” Ye Qing exclaimed with delight.

The Fog Demon was still grumbling, “Where, what? What the hell are you talking about, boy?”

Ye Qing ignored it and said, “I believe we are inside the stomach of the Lightless Silverfish.”

“The Lightless Silverfish? What’s that?” The Fog Demon asked.

Ye Qing answered, “According to the ‘Records of the Mountains and the Sea’, there exists a fish in the eastern sea that is shaped like a waterskin and has black scales. Its mouth is as big as a mountain, its body is perfectly black and reflects no light. That is why it cannot be seen or perceived by the spirit, and why it is named the Lightless Silverfish.”

“Usually, the Lightless Silverfish feeds by opening its mouth at a river mouth and swallowing any and all living prey that flows into its mouth. Any creature no matter what size would shrink to the size of a grain of sand and fall into a world of eternal darkness. Tormented by helplessness, despair and fear, most of them are fated to be corroded by its stomach acid and consumed.”

“The Lightless Silverfish, you say? But how can you be sure that we are inside its belly?” The Fog Demon asked.

Ye Qing explained, “For one, it’s perfectly lightless inside the Lightless Silverfish. It’s impossible to see with your eyes or perceive your surroundings with your spirit. That is exactly what we’re experiencing, isn’t it?”

“Next, any living beings that fall into the Lightless Silverfish’s stomach would unknowingly shrink down to the size of a grain of sand. Since it’s impossible to perceive the Lightless Silverfish from the outside, there’s almost no way to avoid this fate until it’s too late.”

“This explains why I can’t leave this place even though I know I’m not trapped in an illusion. It would also explain why a pool of water could produce a massive wave almost like we are trapped in the sea. It’s because we have shrunk down to the size of a grain of sand.”

“At our current size, nearly any body of water would appear like a sea to us.”

He only realized this when the Fog Demon hit the water so hard that it kicked up a wave that was at least a hundred meters tall. Although he hadn’t measured the depth of the acidic pool in the

chamber, there was no way it contained enough water to kick up a wave that was over a hundred meters tall. Heck, the ship itself wasn't that tall.

When the clues finally came together inside his head, Ye Qing suddenly recalled a small story regarding the Lightless Silverfish he read in the 'Records of the Mountains and the Sea'.

The story spoke of a warrior who accidentally entered the belly of the Lightless Silverfish while he was sailing. Having no idea that his body had shrunk, the warrior simply thought that he had accidentally strayed into a bizarre part of the ocean and struggled with all his might to survive. Without divine intervention, it was likely that he would never leave the place alive.

Luckily for him, a champion who happened to be passing through the area noticed something amiss and killed the Lightless Silverfish. That was how the warrior was rescued, and just in time as well. It was because his whole body had eroded to the point where some of his bones were showing. Later, the warrior would learn that the bizarre sea that he struggled to survive was just the stomach acid of the Lightless Silverfish.

That was how Ye Qing was able to put two and two together. But of course, it was just a theory. He wouldn't know if it was right until tested it.

"Alright. Let's assume that you're right. How are we going to escape this place?" The Fog Demon asked.

Ye Qing smirked. "You."

"Me?" The Fog Demon sounded confused.

Ye Qing explained, "The reason the Lightless Silverfish had the word 'lightless' in its name isn't just because it's perfectly black, but also because it loathes light."

"Therefore, I need you to reseal the Boundless Mara Buddha and unleash its Buddha light as much as you can. This would annoy the Lightless Silverfish enough to spit us out of its stomach."

Chapter 422: The Corpse

"Are you sure?" The Fog Demon said doubtfully.

Ye Qing shrugged. "We'll find out, won't we?"

To be honest, Ye Qing wasn't as confident as he pretended to be, but it was the only lead he had. He would rather try and fail than not trying at all. If he failed, then he would die. That was all there was to it.

The Moko Boundless Chains clattered and wrapped around the Boundless Mara Buddha once more, causing its thick demonic qi to shrink back into his body. Its evil, vicious expression slowly turned calm and merciful as it emitted the light and the sound of the Buddha.

For the first time, a faint glow pierced through the thick blanket of darkness. Ye Qing could actually see his Strange Artifact. It wasn't enough, however.

"More, Fog Demon. Give me more light," Ye Qing ordered.

The Fog Demon obeyed, and the Boundless Mara Buddha shone brighter. Not only that, it grew bigger and bigger until it looked like the sun in the sky.

Ye Qing himself didn't stay idle. After he crouched down and touched the acidic water with his left hand, bluish black fire abruptly burst into existence and spread to a hundred meters in radius in just the blink of an eye. Ye Qing didn't hold back and kept pushing the flames to spread further.

The flame was the Netherflame, of course. Now that the Blue Demon Hand was a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact, the Netherflame was ten times, no, a hundred times stronger than what it was before. Although the Netherflame was a yin-type fire, it still produced light. It might be bluish black in color, but it would still disgust the Lightless Silverfish.

Now, two Soulstealer-class Strange Artifacts were unleashing their full power. The Boundless Mara Buddha was shining like the sun above, while bluish black flames burned hundreds of kilometers at the bottom like a reflection of its true nature.

If the Buddha's light was vast, overwhelming, and capable of piercing all evils, then the Netherflame was irremovable, inescapable, and capable of burning everything. As if that wasn't enough, the light and the flame were working in perfect harmony like taichi because they belonged to Ye Qing and served his will.

Because of this, the acidic water began boiling furiously. In fact, the combined power of the two Strange Artifacts evaporated every drop of liquid within its range. From a bird's eye point of view, it would look like someone had dipped a gigantic, invisible finger into the waters.

About a teatime later, the Fog Demon grew impatient. "Are you *sure* this is going to work, boy?"

"Be patient. We need to let it burn a little longer," Ye Qing replied unhurriedly.

As mentioned earlier, there was nothing the Lightless Silverfish loathed more than light. If they were out in the real world, a simple candlelight was all they needed to repel it. However, they were inside the Lightless Silverfish's belly and shrank to the size of a grain of sand. The light they were generating might look massive from their perspective, but from the Lightless Silverfish's perspective, it was probably smaller than a firefly's glow. Of course the Lightless Silverfish wasn't going to notice it immediately.

The Lightless Silverfish might not register a small blip on its radar, but it was only a matter of time before it realized that the blip was really a fish bone stuck in its throat. When that happened, it would be all too happy to spit them out of its stomach.

Another half an incense stick passed, and the Boundless Mara Buddha's light began fading bit by bit. The Netherflame scorching the surface of the acidic water had grown weaker as well.

"I don't like repeating myself, but are you really, really sure that this is going to work, boy?" The Fog Demon asked weakly, though Ye Qing looked even worse. Bluish black smoke was rising from his body, and Netherflame seeped out of its pores every once in a while. His aura was weak, and his complexion looked ill.

The reason Ye Qing looked like this was because he was suffering from the Blue Demon Hand's rebound. Since the Blue Demon Hand was upgraded into a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact, it was at least a hundred times stronger than before. However, its requirements and rebound were also a

hundred times worse. Prolonged use of the Myriad Poison[1] or Netherflame were sure to cause damage to his body.

If he wasn't extraordinarily vigorous and immune to poison, if he didn't have the Nature's Water or the dragon-serpent runes to constantly recharge his astral qi and spiritual power, he would've run out of strength a long time ago.

Even so, the fatigue was getting to him. More importantly, his self-doubt was getting to him. If he was wrong about them being stuck inside the Lightless Silverfish's belly, then all of this would be for naught. While he had known that this was a possibility, he still couldn't help but feel disappointment and despair.

"Continue..." Ye Qing forcefully pushed away his feelings and uttered through gritted teeth.

Even so, he couldn't quit now. The absolute worst thing he could do now was to quit halfway. Even if he was wrong, he must follow through on his decision until the very end.

Another teatime passed, and Ye Qing was moments away from giving up and falling into despair. Suddenly, the acidic water began shaking violently, and the darkness writhed like countless black tentacles. A loud, muffled noise emerged from the distance and hit Ye Qing so hard that it nearly knocked him to his feet, followed by a blast of a putrid, rotten stench. The next thing he knew, the waters began flowing in reverse toward a certain direction and pulling the bamboo raft and Ye Qing with it.

The Blue Wave Green Bamboo Raft had performed admirably, but it was only a matter of time before it broke under the massive waves and powerful gale. When it broke, Ye Qing inevitably fell into the highly corrosive water.

The water ate through his protective astral qi and his body and caused disturbing sizzling noises, but instead of panicking, Ye Qing looked happier than ever.

"You haven't gone insane, have you boy? I can't believe you're laughing in this situation!" The Fog Demon said. Ye Qing was currently clinging to the Boundless Mara Buddha with his right arm.

"I'm laughing because my guess is correct," Ye Qing replied using his demonic thought. "It won't be long before we're out of this place."

Earlier, he was losing hope because his efforts had failed to elicit any reaction. But now, something was clearly happening. This crazy turbulence, more than anything, was the proof that his theory was true.

"I don't read many books, so you better not be lying to me!" The Fog Demon grumbled, "I have no intentions of growing old in this horrible, lightless place, you hear me?"

"Don't worry. I'm not done living myself." Ye Qing chuckled and put the Boundless Mara Buddha back into Nine Heavens. Then, he concentrated on protecting his body and staying afloat with his body.

The water moved so rapidly that even with his physique, he was beset by severe dizziness and motion sickness. He didn't know how much time had passed, but at some point he heard a strange ptooeey noise and found himself sailing through the air. A second later, he hit solid ground with a thud, and rays of weak light beamed into his vision.

Ye Qing was immediately alert. He leaped to his feet and scanned his surroundings carefully.

"This is... the chamber on the first level?!"

Ye Qing's eyes lit up, and a boisterous laugh escaped his lips uncontrollably. "I'm out! I'm out! Hahahahaha!"

He was right after all. He really was dealing with the Lightless Silverfish. Looking down the staircase leading to the second level, he reckoned that the entrance leading to the third level was also the Lightless Silverfish's mouth, and the pool of acidic water he found was the Lightless Silverfish's stomach acid. That was why he was spat back to the first level chamber.

Since he was out of the Lightless Silverfish's stomach, his body had returned to its normal size as well.

After figuring out the whole truth, Ye Qing finally examined his body for wounds. Right now, he was covered in smelly, slimy fluid, and there were holes all over his Green Ink Shirt. The stomach acid had almost chewed through the Strange Artifact completely.

"Can't believe I lost two Strange Artifacts in a row. What a shame."

Ye Qing burned the slimy fluid and the Green Ink Shirt into ash with a burst of astral qi. He sighed as he put on a new set of clothes.

The Blue Wave Green Bamboo Raft was nowhere to be seen. It was probably melting inside the Lightless Silverfish's stomach right now.

After taking a moment to recover his astral qi and spiritual power, Ye Qing walked down the staircase once more. About halfway to the entrance, he raised his left hand and summoned the Netherflame once more. It burned as brightly as a torch.

The entrance shook a little before Ye Qing saw a massive shadow retreating into the distance. It was so strong that it actually ripped the staircase he was standing on in half.

The Lightless Silverfish loathed all light. That was why it usually stayed far, far away from it. However, it didn't mean that it feared the light. The Lightless Silverfish was incredibly strong. If someone or something pissed it off or threatened its life, it wouldn't hesitate to show them who's boss.

That was why Ye Qing had no plans to kill the Lightless Silverfish. He simply chased it away so he could continue onward to the third level.

Ye Qing jumped over the gap and entered the second level chamber, and this time, he didn't find a pool of acidic water. Not far away from him, he saw a massive, sack-like object lying on the floor. It was impossible to make out its appearance completely even though he was looking at it directly.

"That's the Lightless Silverfish? It's smaller than I thought!" The Fog Demon appeared from the Boundless Mara Buddha and commented.

“Yeah, but it’s still terrifying, isn’t it?” Ye Qing replied while watching the Stranger warily. How could he not, when the “small” fish had nearly claimed his life?

Ye Qing kept his left hand in front of him while retreating to the far corner opposite of the Lightless Silverfish. Then, he carefully made his way to the entrance to the third level.

The one good thing about the Lightless Silverfish was that its presence chased away most other Strangers. It was why Ye Qing had little trouble making it to the entrance to the third level. He hesitated when his fingers touched the floorboard, however[2]

On the first level, he had been ambushed by a terrifying predator and almost killed. On the second level, he was nearly trapped inside the Lightless Silverfish’s belly for eternity. Could he really survive the third level—the orlop deck—where the corpse was supposedly kept?

A moment later, Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and lifted the floorboard. It was far too late for second thoughts at this point. The only way forward was to see through this until the end.

He knew that the third level would be dangerous, but he couldn’t have anticipated how early things would turn awry. As soon as he lifted the floorboard, several human corpses poured out of the gap like trash!

Ye Qing hurriedly jumped back as five or six deformed corpses spilled out into the open. They barely looked human due to how deformed they were. It looked like they had been squeezed into a small space and left there for heavens-knows-how-long.

After observing the corpses for a moment and discovering that they weren’t Strangers, Ye Qing stepped a little closer and scrutinized the corpses some more. Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to pick up any clues from it. With that done, he began removing the corpses from the entrance. They were blocking the way after all.

One body, three bodies, five bodies, ten bodies...

In just a moment, Ye Qing had removed sixteen bodies from the entrance. It was only then he finally saw the staircase leading to the third and bottom-most level of the ship—the orlop deck. Without further ado, Ye Qing descended deeper into the darkness.

As soon as Ye Qing entered the third level chamber, his eyes immediately widened like saucers. The fog in the chamber was so thick that he could barely see anything, but not thick enough to conceal the hill-like shadows that could be found everywhere in the room. They were bodies, all of them. Men, women, old and young. It was horrifying to say the least.

Ye Qing could tell that they were all real. He thought that the bodies surrounding the Corpse Ship were numerous enough, but this was insane. So many corpses were packed into the space that there was barely enough room for a single person to squeeze through, and thank the heavens for that. He didn’t know what he would do if the place was literally jam-packed with corpses.

Ye Qing instinctively knew that the corpse he was searching for wasn’t among the ungodly piles of corpses. According to Longing, the corpse had been deposited inside a coffin and left at the center of the third floor chamber. There was a chance that the coffin was buried under one of the piles of corpses, but that seemed very unlikely.

Mustering his courage, Ye Qing gingerly stepped inside the one-man passage. From time to time, he was forced to twist his body to avoid making contact with the bodies. He was so close he could even see the pores and hair on their skin. If he wasn't mistaken, the bodies were innocent people the Corpse Ship had kidnapped throughout the years.

Speaking of which, this was the second time he was in such close proximity with this many corpses. His first time was when he entered the temple of corpses in the Thousand Buddhas Grotto. It was a good thing, because the experience meant that the unholy crawl induced more anxiety than fear.

Chapter 423: Nowhere To Run

The fog grew thicker as he continued forward. It didn't need to be said how terrifying it was to walk amidst piles and piles of bodies, all of them more than close enough to touch. The fact that they were partially covered by the fog only added to the horror.

"I sure hope these corpses aren't dangerous..." Ye Qing couldn't help but mutter under his breath.

"Wait... did that corpse just move?"

Suddenly, Ye Qing took two steps backward and stared intently at a particular corpse. He thought he saw its arm moving when he was glancing in that direction, but when he actually stared at it, it was completely motionless.

"Was my eyes playing tricks on me?"

Ye Qing licked his lips nervously and slowly approached the corpse, wanting to observe it at close range and confirm if it was dead or alive.

"!?"

The corpse's eyes abruptly fluttered open when he was standing in front of it.

It wasn't the only one. Every corpse had abruptly opened their eyes to stare straight at him.

"Motherf—!"

Every hair on Ye Qing's body stood on end as he tried to withdraw. However, he had just taken two steps when he felt his back bumping into something soft. He turned around and saw a pile of corpses that was supposed to be several meters away from him pressed up against his back.

It didn't need to be said just how horrifying it was to be stared at and squeezed by countless dead bodies from multiple directions. As if that wasn't bad enough, more corpses were dogpiling toward him from all sides.

Without hesitation, Ye Qing leaped into the air in an attempt to avoid being piled on by the corpses. However, a bunch of bodies suddenly rained down from above right as his feet left the floor. The closest pile of corpses also collapsed on top of him before he could react.

There was just no room for maneuver or even time to react. Before he knew it, he was buried under hundreds and hundreds of bodies.

That wasn't all. As if they were puppeteered by an invisible power, the bodies kept piling on top of Ye Qing while oozing bright red blood and disgusting corpse wax at the same time. This should be

impossible considering that these corpses had been left to dry for heavens-know-how-many-years, but it was happening anyway. It would seem that they were trying to squeeze or suffocate Ye Qing to death.

Boom!

The next moment, a terrific boom scattered the hill of corpses in every direction, revealing a blood-soaked Ye Qing who looked incredibly pissed off. As more corpses raced toward him to dogpile him again, Ye Qing charged forward and unleashed a violent, tyrannical burst of energy. It felt like the birth of a Chaos Demon Ape.

Boom boom boom!

Every corpse pile that was foolish enough to block his way was crushed into bits. Flesh, blood and bones scattered everywhere. In just the span of a few breaths, Ye Qing was able to run through the corpses and cover ten meters of distance.

There was no turning back now that violence had been engaged. He was going to give everything he could to make it to the center of the chamber and locate the corpse behind it all.

Is that the coffin Longing and the others spoke of?!

After running through a couple more corpse piles, Ye Qing burst into a clearing and saw a wooden coffin directly in front of him. It was covered up, and an insane amount of fog was pouring out of it at all times.

Ye Qing slowed down and approached the coffin carefully. The closer he got, the more nervous and anxious he became. He couldn't help but recall everything Longing, Hua Mei and Jue Yan had told him earlier.

He should've known this would happen, and it did. The coffin was only two or so meters away from him, but now matter how much he ran, he just couldn't get close to it no matter what. That short distance felt like the chasm between heaven and earth.

"Destroy!"

Ye Qing yelled as he tapped the space in front of him. A wave of demonic thought washed out, and the space around him abruptly shattered like glass.

Not about to waste this golden opportunity, Ye Qing crossed the distance in one step and looked inside the coffin.

Buzz!

The moment he looked inside the coffin, a pair of pale, murky eyes opened amidst the fog. A terrible fear unlike anything he ever felt before enveloped Ye Qing in that instant. He felt like an ant facing off against the world, the moon, or even the sun itself. He felt like he would never be able to close the gap between himself at the corpse. Its presence alone was so powerful, terrible and vast that he felt like his body and mind were being crushed. His thoughts were stuttering to a halt, and the blood in his veins were frozen like ice.

His body began decaying bit by bit under the eyes' watchful gaze. His flesh began falling off his bones, his blood began decaying at an accelerated rate, and even his mind was dying bit by bit.

He knew that he would die if this continued, but for some reason, he just couldn't muster the courage to resist or escape. He felt like the land of the dead was where he truly belonged.

No! No! I don't want to die! I refuse!

Ye Qing roared inside his head and circulated the "Paranirmitavaśavartin Heavenly Demon Sutra". The demonic lotus that was so close from withering abruptly gained new life and unfurled its three petals. Slowly but surely, the unopposable fear and despair clutching his mind in a death grip were slowly absorbed by it.

The "Paranirmitavaśavartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" was a demonic art, and it fed on the Five Poisons, Six Desires, Seven Emotions, Eight Fears, Nine Terrors and more negative emotions to grow stronger. In other words, the fear and despair afflicting him right now was the perfect fodder for it.

Eventually, Ye Qing regained control of his body and tapped the space in front of him without hesitation.

Thud!

Space rippled, and it was like someone had tossed a rock into a calm lake. A massive amount of fog was pushed away just like that.

When the fog scattered, Ye Qing abruptly realized that there was no coffin in front of him. There were no eyes of death staring into his soul earlier. In fact, the coffin was still several meters away from him.

The fog inside the chamber grew ever thicker.

"It was all an illusion?!"

Ye Qing furrowed his brows deeply as he wiped the sweat on his forehead.

"That was terrifying, but still, at least I don't have to deal with other Strangers."

He really shouldn't have said that. As soon as the words slipped out of his tongue, countless silhouettes suddenly emerged from the fog. He saw the spidermen he had fought earlier, a giant corpse Stranger that was made up of countless corpses, a giant skull that was sewn from countless skulls and more. He also sensed powerful, dangerous presences lurking deeper within the fog where he couldn't see. To say that he was in deep shit would be an understatement.

"You fucking idiot! Why did you jinx yourself?" Ye Qing swore. That was all he managed to do before the Strangers rushed him.

Red Sleeve slipped into his hand as he slashed diagonally at the closest Strangers. The Red Lotus hellfire immediately immolated them and dissolved them into fog.

Before the Red Lotus hellfire could run its course, nine silhouettes descended on top of the gigantic, four-headed spiderman and beheaded him in the blink of an eye. Growling, Ye Qing pushed against the floor and detonated its body like a bomb. The violent outburst of force and astral qi slammed into several spidermen and bowled them over.

There was no time to catch a breath though. Already, the giant skull made of countless human skulls were descending on top of him like a waterfall.

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and shot up a full meter in height. Small clumps of black fur grew out of his exposed skin, and a violent, tyrannical aura filled the sky.

Ye Qing had reached the journeyman level in the “Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra” and the Chaos Demon Ape Body some time ago. Although he couldn’t transform fully into the Chaos Demon Ape like Chen Ah Sheng had, a minor transformation was more than doable.

After transforming into the Chaos Demon Ape, Ye Qing let out a lung-bursting roar that scattered the thick fog surrounding him. Then, he punched up at the giant skull descending toward him.

There was a loud bang that sounded like a very, very loud gunshot, and Ye Qing’s fist punched right through the gigantic skull. Even the waterfall of human skulls streaming behind it were scattered and pushed back where they came from.

After defeating the giant skull, Ye Qing crossed his arms above his head like he was guarding the gate of heavens. The next moment, a gigantic arm smashed into his guard and elicited a dull grunt from him. Even in his current form, his knees bent a little as if the weight was too much.

This was just the beginning. The giant made of countless corpses punched him in his guard again.

Bang!

One of Ye Qing’s knees slammed into the floor like a thunderclap.

The corpse giant wasn’t going to let up its assault, of course. It pressed down with both arms like it was going to crush him to death.

Ye Qing’s face warped into a savage snarl as he let out an animalistic roar. His muscles and bones popped ominously, and his aura grew even stronger. Slowly but surely, he pushed back the corpse giant’s arms and climbed back to his feet.

“RAAAAAARGH!”

Ye Qing roared again as he pushed up with all he got, throwing the corpse giant’s arms upward and leaving him wide open. While the corpse giant was still catching its balance, Ye Qing took one step forward and slammed his elbow into its body.

It was like a giant knocking over the heavens so hard that the reverberations could be felt throughout the nine provinces. The corpse giant was sent flying just like that.

Ye Qing thought that the crisis was temporarily over, but he had just let out a sigh of relief when many, many more Strangers rushed out of the fog.

His face turned ugly. This was getting ridiculous.

“Wait, something’s wrong. There’s no way this chamber could hold this many Strangers, not to mention that some of them are so massive there’s no way they could’ve fit in the corridors. Are they illusions, or am I hallucinating?” Ye Qing suddenly realized something. Then, he shook his head and muttered to himself, “No, it’s possible. Supposedly, the corpse is located in the orlop deck. In reality, it really

exists in its own created space. It wouldn't be surprising for such a space to contain this many Strangers."

"There's no point fighting them though. It'll take way too much time and effort. I should focus on the corpse and cut it at its roots!"

Having made up his mind, Ye Qing circulated the "Nine Impetus of Tai Chi" and dashed forward using the "Illusionist's Grace". For a time, he was able to slip past the Strangers as easily as he was playing in his own backyard. On the rare occasion the enemies managed to land a hit on him, the attack would be misdirected to another Stranger instead. The combination of the two arts was absolutely exquisite.

Ye Qing reached the coffin very quickly, and it looked like he needed only one step to get close to it. However, he just couldn't close that final step no matter what he tried. He even used the "Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul" and the "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art" multiple times thinking that it was an illusion again to no avail.

Worse still, Strangers were still pouring out of the fog and attacking him from every direction. He had no choice but to fight off the Strangers while trying every way he could think of to get close to the coffin.

The number of Strangers kept growing, and Ye Qing inevitably received many wounds in the process. However, the distance between himself and the coffin only grew over time.

Eyes bloodshot, Ye Qing clenched his fingers and smashed the ground with his left fist. The Netherflame immediately spread out like a tidal wave and burned countless Strangers into ash. The attack managed to clear out every Stranger within ten meters of him and bought himself some time.

Chapter 424: The Fog Demon's Ploy

"Phew..." A rotten, anomalous breath escaped Ye Qing's lips. He had to give his head a strong shake to preserve his clarity of mind.

After fighting in this debilitating fog for such a long time, he was tired in both body and spirit. It was to the point where he could no longer tell if a certain object in front of him was an illusion. Although the Nature's Water and the golden dragon-serpent runes could restore him to peak form immediately, the problem was that the doubt was really starting to get to him. He was starting to think that he would never find the corpse.

At this rate, he would run out of Nature's Water and golden dragon-serpent runes eventually. When that happened, he would die.

Worse still, he still had no idea how to get the corpse or confirm that it was real. Longing, Hua Mei and Jue Yan's suggestions and advices were completely useless here.

However, letting them out was the last resort. If he did it, there would truly be no turning back, not to mention that there was a huge chance the girls would attack him because of his failure. The mere thought of the three women ganging up on him—and not in the oh yeah way—sent shivers up his spine.

Heavens dammit, I should never have come to Tian Yong. I should've just stayed at Luo Shui and grind weak Strangers like a good boy. Practically nothing has gone smoothly since I embarked on this journey, and now, I might even lose my life. The adventure wasn't worth it at all.

Regret and helplessness flitted across his features.

In fact, he had a second last resort. He could bring out the Annon Sutra to lure the corpse out into the open before pitting the three women against it. It would give him the opportunity to escape.

The Annon Sutra's earlier reaction proved that revealing it would most likely draw the attention of a powerful, terrible existence, and on this ship, the only ones who fit the bill were Longing, Hua Mei, Jue Yan, and the mysterious corpse.

However, this was an unreliable last resort at best. For one, he wasn't willing to give up the Annon Sutra. Two, there was a non-zero chance the Annon Sutra would play dead and refuse to reveal its power. His effort would be completely useless.

Therefore, this could only be the true last resort. He could only enact this plan if the three women proved useless after he released them.

"Well, it's not over yet. I'll make that decision when I'm truly out of options." Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and patched up his wavering determination. He had experienced many dangers and led a full life of conflict and strife in the Nanke Dream, so he was no longer the naive and weak-minded young man he used to be. He would never give up until the very end.

Suddenly, the Fog Demon's voice rang beside Ye Qing's ears. "Kekeke... you'll never find the coffin like this, boy."

"Hmm? What do you mean?" Ye Qing asked while punching a few Strangers away with his fists. It sounded like the Fog Demon knew something. "What do you know?"

"I must say that you're a very smart person, boy," the Fog Demon said leisurely.

"I know I'm smart, but there are better times to lick my boots. Get to the point!" Ye Qing chided the Fog Demon impatiently. What made it think that a life-and-death battle was a good place to lick his boots?

"Pooh! What makes you think I'm licking your boots? When I was ruling over the Nine Nethers, you were just a brat playing mud with your dick hanging out of your pants!" The Fog Demon scoffed. "I'm just trying to say that your intelligence, while a good trait in most circumstances, is the very reason you're caught in this quicksand right now!"

"Be more specific." Ye Qing was confused by its statement.

"I'm saying that you are too cunning, and think too much."

"I... still don't see the problem here." It was always better to be careful than careless; safe than sorry. How could that be a mistake?

The Fog Demon didn't keep him in suspense. "Like I said, it's a good trait in most circumstances. But here on this level? It can only be a bad thing."

"Seriously, what the fuck are you talking about?" He was only getting more and more confused.

"Excuse you? Is that how you beg for help from someone?" The Fog Demon harrumphed imperiously.

Seemingly satisfied with Ye Qing's response, the Fog Demon said seriously, "This place is strange."

Unaware of Ye Qing's thoughts, the Fog Demon continued, "Did you notice? Ever since you entered this chamber, every danger you encountered has something to do with your thoughts?"

"You were worried that the corpses would come back to life, and lo and behold, they did. You wanted to find that corpse, so the coffin appeared before you. You were sure that the corpse inside the coffin was dangerous, so it opened its eyes and nearly killed you. You wondered if there are Strangers lurking within the fog, and as if on cue, the Strangers came. Don't you think it's too much of a coincidence?"

"You're... right!" Ye Qing thought back to what happened before and concluded that the Fog Demon was telling the truth. "Are these all illusions then?"

The Fog Demon denied it. "Not at all. They were all real. Your thoughts have made them a reality."

"You're saying that anything that I imagine in this place will come true?"

The Fog Demon shook its head. "No, no, only your fears and your worries would come true. To put it in human terms, it's like your heart demon is made manifest. The more you think, worry, and fear, the worse your situation will become."

"I see. In other words, this place could theoretically be perfectly safe so long as I keep a tight rein over my thoughts," Ye Qing mused thoughtfully.

"Correct," The Fog Demon confirmed. "The smarter and more complex you are, the greater the dangers you will face in this place. On the other hand, someone who is pure in heart, stupid or retarded are far less likely to run into danger."

"But how can I find that corpse?" Ye Qing asked and killed several charging Strangers with a stomp of his foot. At the same time, he reined in his mind and focused solely on what was in front of him.

"This is one strange corpse you have here, and the fog makes it so much worse. In my opinion, the greater your desire to find the corpse, the harder it is you'll be able to find it." The Fog Demon explained, "Therefore, the only way to find the corpse is clear your mind and enter a state of nirvana—no desire, no love, and no wish. Only then can you find the corpse."

Before Ye Qing could react, the Fog Demon continued, “However, this is near impossible for you humans. This is doubly true for smart people like you.”

“All humans possess desires, love, and wishes. Even your Buddhist monks, Taoists, Bodhisattvas and Buddhas cannot truly rid themselves of their mortal restraints, much less a heretical boy like you. Your mind is some of the most devilish I met, and you even cultivated the ‘Paranirmitavaśavartin Heavenly Demon Sutra’, a demonic art. As a result, your heart demon and desires are much stronger than most. You of all people have the least chance of entering a state of nirvana, keke!”

Ye Qing frowned, but he couldn’t deny the truth in the Fog Demon’s words. The “Paranirmitavaśavartin Heavenly Demon Sutra” fed on negative emotions to grow his demonic thought, so his heart demon and thoughts were greater than average. If he wasn’t careful, he could easily suffer a deviation and potentially perish. That was why he made sure not to cultivate his power too quickly.

In fact, this was a common characteristic of all martial arts of the Dark Ways. While fast to progress and incredibly powerful, martial arts of the Dark Ways possessed clear, oftentimes severe flaws as well.

“How did you know about this?” Ye Qing ignored the Fog Demon’s insult and asked doubtfully.

“Who do you think I am? I’m a glorious Fog Demon of the Nine Nethers! I’ve eaten more salt than you have rice, and I have witnessed countless fools falling for the same trap as you!” The Fog Demon declared arrogantly.

There was no way the Fog Demon was going to admit that it was the one who fell into the trap and almost died as a result.

“Well, you are definitely a knowledgeable and perspicacious Stranger, senior,” Ye Qing mused thoughtfully. “I’m assuming that you know a solution for this?”

The Fog Demon grinned. “I do, but you’ll have to beg me if you want my help.”

“Sure! Please help me, senior!” Ye Qing begged without hesitation.

The Fog Demon was hoping to see Ye Qing beg him with an ugly, humiliated expression, so it was a little miffed. Still, it had given its word, so it replied, “I’m a Nine Nethers Demon, and my expertise lies in toying and controlling with the human heart. If you lower your guard and open your mind to me, I promise I’ll conceal your heart demon and desires well enough to find that corpse.”

“Really now? You’re not lying to me, are you?” Ye Qing asked.

“Hmph. You and I are grasshoppers bound by the same rope. If you die, I die as well. Why would I lie to you at this juncture?” The Fog Demon scoffed with displeasure.

“True.” Ye Qing nodded, though there was a cold glint in his eyes the Fog Demon didn’t notice.

“Hmph. Guess you’re not an ingrate after all. If not for the fact that my life is bound to yours, and you’re not the worst master I ever served, I would never have made you the offer,” the Fog Demon said disdainfully.

“I didn’t know it pains you so much to help me. In that case, allow me to try my method first.” Ye Qing’s lips curled into a devilish smirk.

“W-What? You’re not actually suicidal, are you?” The Fog Demon was caught off guard by this declaration.

“Of course not. I still have much to live for. But like I said, let me try my method first,” Ye Qing said while killing the Strangers one by one.

It would appear that the Fog Demon was telling the truth. After he focused his thoughts and stopped his imagination from running wild, no more Strangers appeared while he slew the existing ones.

Of course, the same couldn’t be said for its so-called method. No, he wasn’t doubting its efficacy. As the Fog Demon said, its life was on the line as well. However, that didn’t mean it didn’t harbor some sort of ulterior motive.

In fact, he reckoned that the Fog Demon had figured out the trick behind the fog a long time ago. However, it chose not to tell him about it immediately because one, it wanted to see him struggle, and two, it wanted to offer him the solution after he had fallen into despair. Theoretically, he would be too distraught to consider the dangers of opening his mind to a Nine Nethers Demon and allowing it to do as it pleased.

The Fog Demon itself claimed that it was an expert in toying and controlling with the human heart, and Ye Qing always knew that it harbored malicious intent toward him. He would be in deep shit if the Fog Demon tried something while it was in control of his mind.

Plus, he wasn’t lying when he told the Fog Demon that he had his own method. Why would he resort to the risky method when he wasn’t out of ideas yet?

“Now’s not the time to crack a joke, boy. You may be suicidal, but I don’t want to die yet!” The Fog Demon wasn’t expecting Ye Qing to reject him. Assuming the boy really wasn’t joking, then everything he did would be for naught.

Although its life was in Ye Qing’s hands from the moment it became his artifact spirit—in fact, its situation was little better than the other Strangers who signed an Oath of Burden with Ye Qing—but as a Nine Nethers Demon, it had ways to circumvent its death.

For example, it could corrupt and control Ye Qing just like it had done to Xue Beikun. No one would notice anything amiss because the boy’s mind and energies were still intact. He just wouldn’t be the absolute authority of himself anymore.

While the Fog Demon was sure that Ye Qing would be on guard against foul play, it was confident that it could find an opportunity to corrupt and control Ye Qing once he opened his mind to him.

Even if it failed, it could leave behind some suggestions that would tempt Ye Qing into the Dark Ways. Once he fell, it was only a matter of time before he became its puppet.

If that failed as well, then it could still unearth Ye Qing's deepest secrets or weaknesses.

However, Ye Qing was saying that he didn't need it. If it couldn't gain access to his mind, then all of its planning would be for naught.

Chapter 425: Qi of Ultimate Purity

"Don't worry. If I live, you live." Ye Qing smiled confidently.

The subtext was if he dies, the Fog Demon dies as well.

"Ho-hum. Let's see what you got then. You better not come crying to me for help when your method fails later!" The Fog Demon harrumphed. It was definitely going to make Ye Qing regret his decision later!

"Trust me, you won't be disappointed."

Right after Ye Qing said that, he charged into a group of Strangers while yin and yang energy circulated around him. A bunch of rumblings later, the place was completely cleared out of Strangers.

Ye Qing let out a sigh of relief deeply before consuming a drop of Nature's Water and restoring himself to peak condition. Then, a goblet appeared in his hand. It was filled with wisps of clear qi instead of wine, however.

The clear qi was bluish in color and perfectly pure. Light and ephemeral, it also emanated the air and intent of dao.

"Is that... the Qi of Ultimate Purity?!" The Fog Demon exclaimed in surprise. It completely forgot that Ye Qing possessed the item.

Ye Qing had used it to intimidate Yi Pin when he was extorting the item, so the Fog Demon was aware of the item. It just forgot about it until now.

"The Qi of Ultimate Purity should help clear my thoughts and put me in a state of nirvana, no?" Ye Qing smirked.

The Qi of Ultimate Purity was one of the primordial spiritual qi and possessed the ability to calm one's mind, solidify one's spirit, eliminate one's karmic hindrance, and purify their thoughts. To put it in simpler terms, it could bestow someone perfect clarity of the mind and protect them from any negative influence. It was the perfect solution to his current situation.

"Of course the Qi of Ultimate Purity can protect you from the fog's influence, but are you sure you want to waste such a valuable treasure in this place?" The Fog Demon replied reluctantly.

Ye Qing shrugged. "A valuable treasure is only valuable if you use it. Plus, what use is it to me if I'm dead?"

Without further ado, Ye Qing inhaled deeply. A wisp of Qi of Ultimate Purity, bluish and dreamlike, rose from the goblet like smoke and entered his nostrils.

As soon as the Qi of Ultimate Purity entered his body, Ye Qing felt a gentle and refreshing energy spreading inside his body. It felt like bathing inside a cool mountain spring, soothing and calming. His stray thoughts, his worries, his distress and more, they all disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Like still water, his heart was devoid of desire or emotions, and like a mirror, his mind was perfectly clean and unblemished.

Despite the strange state, Ye Qing was perfectly aware of himself and his surroundings. Like an indifferent god who had broken free from the chains of mortality, his consciousness sat loftier than the nine heavens themselves. He felt like everything and nothing at the same time.

Ye Qing put away the goblet and stepped forward. He had no aim, no thoughts, no desire he must fulfill no matter what. He just... walked.

The world around him began fizzling out like a TV with poor or no signal, but far more unusual, colorful, and dreamlike. Ye Qing paid no attention to them, however.

If I do not see, then it doesn't exist.

If I do not think, then it is not there.

The strange and colorful reality began crumbling upon itself. When it was completely gone, a grayish, narrow chamber appeared around him, and at the center of the chamber... was a coffin.

The coffin didn't look too different from the fake one he saw earlier. It was the same shape and size, and it wasn't lidded. However, no fog was pouring out of the coffin, nor was there a pair of eyes threatening to crush him where he stood.

There was only a corpse. A bloated, rotten corpse. A corpse that looked just like any other drowned corpse that was submerged in water for too long.

Something was odd, however. Wisps of fog would exit its mouth and nose from time to time. It almost looked like it was breathing.

Ye Qing came to a stop when he was one meter away from the coffin. He didn't go further because he had a feeling that something bad would happen if he got any closer to it.

Without hesitation, Ye Qing pulled Longing, Hua Mei and Jue Yan's objects out of his Nine Heavens, causing the three women to appear one after another.

When they saw the coffin and the corpse inside it, shock, joy, surprise, anger, hatred, disgust, fear and more emotions flitted across their features in an instant. Then, they charged the corpse without even looking at Ye Qing.

Longing's painting rapidly grew in size, and the peach blossom trees grew out of the painting and filled the entire chamber with pink petals.

Jue Yan's bronze mirror spat out a seemingly endless amount of black hair that towered over the corpse like a black tide.

And Hua Mei's pipa played a loud and forceful war song that was furious, hateful and bloodthirsty all at the same time.

Sensing danger, the fog flowing out of the corpse's mouth and nose abruptly thickened significantly. It was also far more anomalous and dangerous than before.

Ye Qing didn't hesitate to jump away from the fog. As it spread out, the fog ripped through the peach blossom forest and tidal wave of black hair like nothing, and threw the pipa song into disarray. Then, it engulfed all three women before they could react.

That wasn't all. More fog began pouring in from everywhere. It looked like the corpse was withdrawing it unto itself, the source of its strength.

In the end, the fog was so thick it was almost solid. Although Ye Qing was just a meter away from the battlefield, he couldn't see what was going on inside of it.

That said, the fog would disperse from time to time and leak a gust of aura that could only be described as terrifying. Clearly, Longing, Hua Mei and Hue Yan were fighting against the corpse.

Ye Qing didn't try to intervene because he knew full well that there was nothing he could do to help the girls. To rush into the fog was to commit suicide.

Boom!

A dozen or so breaths later, the ball of fog abruptly exploded, exposing the three girls and the corpse at the center.

It looked like the girls had won. The coffin had exploded into smithereens, and the corpse had been ripped apart into several pieces. Its head was being held by Longing, its feet by Hua Mei, and its arms by Jue Yan. Only its torso was left on the floor.

That said, the girls weren't faring much better. Longing's painting looked like someone had taken a knife to it, and the gorgeous peach blossom forest inside the painting was completely withered. Strange wisps of fog could be seen slithering between the trees and adding to the eerie atmosphere.

Deep within the forest, Longing was barefooted and stepping on the corpse's head.

Jue Yan's bronze mirror was completely covered in cracks, and fog was slipping out of it all the time. Inside the mirror, Jue Yan's sea of black hair had turned into a sea of gray hair instead. Ye Qing could vaguely see a pair of legs being trapped within the hair.

As for Hua Mei's pipa, the strings were completely snapped. There were severed fingers curled around the broken strings, and blood was dripping out of the stumps.

All three items were floating in the air, unmoving. It looked like Longing, Hua Mei and Jue Yan were suppressing parts of the corpse's body inside their objects.

Suddenly, a massive amount of fog poured out of the torso where its head, arms and legs used to be. Instead of dispersing, it wrapped tightly around the torso.

Longing cried urgently from inside her painting, "Scion Ye, you need to destroy the torso now! If it manages to escape, then we would be back to square one!"

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes a little but didn't act immediately.

"Scion Ye, we're using all of our power to suppress its head and limbs right now. We literally cannot spare the strength to suppress its torso as well. Moreover, it's no longer in danger after it abandoned its head and limbs!" Longing said hurriedly.

“Please, Scion Ye! It’s going to escape any second now! If you don’t act now, then it would be too late!”

“Got it.” Ye Qing finally accepted her plan and took one step forward, appearing right in front of the fog-shrouded torso. Then, he clenched his left fist and punched the torso with all his might.

The Netherflame spread, and the Burning Wind howled. Fire was stronger when in the presence of the wind, so the Netherflame quickly transformed into a fiery cyclone and pressed against the fog from all sides.

Some of the fog were pulled into the cyclone and burned into nothing. In fact, it fueled the Netherflame and made it even stronger. However, Ye Qing noticed that the torso at the eye of the storm was still fine. Any Netherflame that got too close to the corpse would gradually disappear as if some sort of invisible power was protecting it.

Frowning, Ye Qing swung his arm downward and split the cyclone in half. A crimson light fell straight toward the corpse.

However, a clump of fog caught the saber force before it could hit its target. Then, it gradually disappeared. At the same time, the fog surrounding the torso grew thicker and smaller over time.

Technically, the fog wasn’t growing smaller. It was the torso slowly moving away from Ye Qing and into a different space with the fog. That was why it looked like it was shrinking.

As for how it was doing this, Ye Qing had no idea.

“Scion Ye, quick! That corpse is about to escape! There’s no time!” Longing pressed with deep urgency and fear.

“You can’t let it escape, Scion Ye! Otherwise, everything would be for naught!”

“Kill it now!”

Hua Mei and Jue Yan’s urgent voice reached him as well.

Ye Qing understood the folly of allowing your enemy to escape, of course. Without hesitation, he dashed toward the torso at top speed.

His first two attacks were just probing attacks, and it confirmed that the corpse was much weaker than it used to be. Losing its head and its limbs had robbed it of most of its strength.

It looked like the torso was only a single step away from him, but in reality, he wasn’t able to reach it even after dashing after it for a few breaths. Not only that, the torso launched another clump of fog at him in an attempt to stall him.

Ye Qing didn’t try to dodge out of the way. He simply swung Red Sleeve and cut the fog in half using the “Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art”. The attack had failed to slow him even a little.

A few breaths later, Ye Qing finally reached the torso. He made a grab with his left hand, and a torrent of Netherflame crashed onto his target. Even as the fog kept the Netherflame at bay, the torso was withering rapidly like it couldn’t withstand the supernatural temperature of the Netherflame.

Unfortunately, the corpse shrank yet again and somehow broke out of the Netherflame's range. It was still moving toward some sort of unknown space.

Unwilling to let it go, Ye Qing raced forward and caught up to the torso once more. Then, he abruptly clenched his fingers into a fist.

The space around the torso exploded, and the withering body finally crumbled piece by piece. As it disintegrated, Ye Qing unleashed another wave of Netherflame and burned it all into ash.

"Boy, watch out!"

Ye Qing thought it was finally over when suddenly, the Fog Demon shouted beside his ears. Sensing something amiss, Ye Qing immediately backpedaled as quickly as it could. However, he had just moved a muscle when a wisp of fog—darker, stranger and more evil than any other fog Ye Qing had seen to date—burst out of the Netherflame and flew toward Ye Qing faster than he could retreat.

Growling, Ye Qing unleashed Divide and summoned a mountain of fist force in front of himself. At the same time, he surrounded his body in thick energies of yin and yang.

Not only that, the Mara Buddha appeared behind Ye Qing, roared, and made a grab for the wisp of fog.

It was all futile. As if it was existing in a different space, the fog easily passed through the astral qi, the Mara Buddha's palm, and the yin and yang energies before entering Ye Qing's body.

Chapter 426: Blood Demon Sutra

The fog spread rapidly as soon as it entered Ye Qing's body. In just the blink of an eye, it had spread to every corner of his body through his veins, flesh and blood. Faint mist could be seen seeping out of his pores.

If this was all the fog did, then Ye Qing had a million and one ways to eliminate it from his body. The problem was that the fog was slowly corrupting and assimilating him from the inside. Forget expelling the fog from his body, his astral qi was slowly being consumed and assimilated as well.

A few breaths later, the fog appeared inside his headspace as well. He could vaguely see a torso suspended in the middle of the thick fog.

"It's trying to take over my body!" Ye Qing frowned. If he didn't come up with a solution soon, he would become the corpse's new host.

"Open your mind and let me in to protect your mind, boy! I might be able to resist this fog!" The Fog Demon's voice rang beside Ye Qing's ears urgently. When he saw that Ye Qing wasn't reacting, it urged again, "We're past the time for caution, boy! Do you really want to die?"

The Fog Demon wasn't plotting something this time. If Ye Qing died, it would die as well. For once, it truly wanted to save Ye Qing from the bottom of its heart, even though it was because it viewed Ye Qing as its personal prey and couldn't stand anyone else taking that glory from it.

“Are you sure you can stop it?” Ye Qing mentally asked the Fog Demon. Maybe it was because he was still under the effects of the Qi of Ultimate Purity, but the life-or-death crisis only cooled his head even more.

“Honestly? I’m not sure. I can only say that I’ll do my best,” the Fog Demon answered.

Ye Qing furrowed his brows and didn’t give the Fog Demon an answer. Inside his headspace, he condensed his demonic thought into a saber and executed the “Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art” and the “Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul” repeatedly. However, all that did was to slow the fog’s progress slightly. It wasn’t enough to eliminate the fog completely.

“What are you waiting for, boy? Let me in already!” The Fog Demon urged again.

Ye Qing didn’t stray from his current course of action, however. He remained calm and tried everything he thought might work against the fog one by one.

He wasn’t worried that the Fog Demon might screw him over. After all, their lives were on the line here. If there was one thing about the Fog Demon he could trust, it would be its desire to live. The only reason he hadn’t let the Fog Demon in was because the Fog Demon itself wasn’t certain if it could handle the fog, which made the option high risk and low reward. There was no simply reason to pick it until all other options had been exhausted.

“Hmm?”

Suddenly, Ye Qing noticed something. The fog attacking his blood was failing to corrupt it. Not only that, his blood was actually devouring the fog in turn!

After his blood had devoured the fog, Ye Qing was struck by a sudden pang of desire and hunger. It had been a long time since he felt this sensation—specifically after he began cultivating the “Blood Demon Sutra”.

It had been so long that he completely forgot that he had consumed a drop of strange blood belonging to a powerful, unknown existence residing at the Jade Dragon Lake. As a result, his blood underwent a mutation and gained the ability to devour other people’s blood as well. Technically speaking, he was now a Strangerkin.

At the beginning, he was too weak to master the powerful blood completely. From time to time, he would be struck by the urge to feed on fresh blood. However, he soon grew strong enough to wrestle down the urge with ease, and after he cultivated Shangguan Wuwo’s “Blood Demon Sutra”, the urge was completely gone... until now.

The “Blood Demon Sutra” was a martial art of blood control. It enabled the practitioner to absorb and refine other people’s blood for their own use and improve their fine control over their own blood. That was how he resolved the hidden threat posed by his own blood.

He didn’t realize that his blood could devour the fog until after the fact, however. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Of course, there was the possibility that devouring the fog might threaten his life down the line, but he was dying now. Even if his fears were proven true, he would deal with it in the future.

“Guard me, Fog Demon. Do not allow anyone to approach me,” Ye Qing ordered.

“Did you find a solution, boy?” The Fog Demon felt its non-existent heart sliding back into its chest.

“Yeah,” Ye Qing replied indifferently before focusing on cycling the “Blood Demon Sutra”. He began mobilizing every drop of blood in his body to devour the fog.

His blood stirred like a hibernating beast awakening to extreme starvation. It pounced on top of the fog and consumed every last wisp of it.

Inside Ye Qing’s headspace, the fog sensed the danger and quickly gathered itself to escape. Ye Qing sneered disdainfully when he saw this. “You think you can come and go as you please? Stay!”

The blood in his body took the form of a large hand. It caught the fog in a death grip before it could go anywhere.

Of course, a good amount of fog simply slipped through the bloody hand’s fingers and continued its escape, but it barely traveled a few inches before the invisible Blood Shadows trapped it and began consuming it as well.

The fog grew thinner and thinner over time. Eventually, it disappeared completely. The blood hand crumbled and returned to its original form after that.

Ye Qing’s face didn’t relax, however. It was because his blood was the one stirring up trouble this time. Like a tidal wave, it slammed against his blood vessels, nerves and internal organs again and again. Even with his tenacity, the pain was slowly but surely growing.

It looked even worse from the outside. His blood vessels were swollen and bulging out of every part of his body. It was almost to the point where his skin looked transparent. They looked like they could burst at any moment.

Not only was he bleeding from every orifice, tiny beads of blood were leaking out of his pores as well. More importantly, the blood was giving off thick fog as well. His face was also warped to the point where it was nearly indistinguishable.

It was at this moment a painting, a bronze mirror and a pipa flew over to Ye Qing. They were about ten meters away when a massive demonic Buddha manifested in the air and blocked their way.

“Halt, you three.”

The items stopped, and the three women appeared one after another.

“We mean no harm. We simply wish to assist Scion Ye,” Longing explained as she gauged the Boundless Mara Buddha’s strength. “Scion Ye has been invaded by the corpse’s original fog. If we don’t help him now, his life would be in grave danger.”

“Can you help him?” The Fog Demon asked while watching the trio warily.

Longing replied, “Our power originates from the fog, so we can suppress it to a certain extent. I believe we can be of help to Scion Ye.”

“Kekeke...” The Fog Demon suddenly let out a strange cackle. “You’re welcome, but this brat never throws himself into something he isn’t sure about. I’ll ask for your help only if the fog turns out to be too much for him to handle.”

As a Nine Nethers Demon and an expert in toying with the human heart, it could tell that Longing's offer was only half true.

It was true that she and her sisters possessed the power to quell the fog inside Ye Qing's body, but she was lying when she said it was to save Ye Qing. They were simply coveting the fog currently inside his body.

"You're an artifact spirit, aren't you? This one greets you, senior." Longing bowed politely to the Fog Demon before pleading, "Scion Ye saved us, senior. We would never turn against our savior and liberator, so please, allow us to return the favor."

"It's clear that Scion Ye can lose his life at any moment. Surely you don't want that to happen?"

Longing was about to say more when suddenly, Hua Mei spoke up, "Sister, I personally think that Scion Ye can resolve his own situation. Why don't we give him some time?"

"Hua Mei?" Longing glanced at Hua Mei in surprise.

Jue Yan pondered for a moment before voicing her agreement as well. "I agree with Hua Mei. Let us wait and see what happens."

"... If that is what you think, then I shall drop this matter." Longing stopped insisting and nodded. "But again, please don't hesitate to ask for our help should you deem it necessary, senior. We promise that we will do everything in our power to save Scion Ye."

Its thoughts quickly turned back to worry though. If Ye Qing really couldn't handle the fog ravaging his body, then it would have no choice but to let the three women take over.

Ye Qing's situation only seemed to worsen over time. His skin began cracking like glass, and some of his blood vessels literally burst from how much pressure they were subjected to.

Just when everyone including the Fog Demon thought that Ye Qing would falter, the young man's lips abruptly curled into a strange, somewhat unsettling smirk.

The next moment, they watched in astonishment as the blood pouring out of his wounds began flowing back in reverse. His wounds slowly began healing as well. At the same time, his astral qi, his vigor and the fog began intermingling with each other and forming a small cyclone around Ye Qing.

A teatime later, Ye Qing slowly rose to his feet. However, the Fog Demon quickly noticed that it wasn't Ye Qing at all. No, it was just some sort of silhouette. The real Ye Qing was still seated on the floor.

Whatever the silhouette was, it had come out of Ye Qing's body. Although it was right in front of it, the Fog Demon couldn't see its face at all. It was covered in fog and looked quite mysterious.

The next moment, the cyclone of qi, vigor and fog merged into the silhouette. It was only then its face was revealed to the Fog Demon and the three girls. It was a humanoid creature that was completely made of fog. Its features were constantly changing and shifting, and there were wisps of red mixed with the white fog.

Shocked, Longing, Hua Mei and Jue Yan immediately charged the fog person. It was because they sensed the original fog in the fog person and thought that the corpse had returned to life.

“Calm down, Misses.”

It was at this moment Ye Qing opened his eyes and climbed to his feet with a smile. From their point of view, it looked like the fog person had overlapped with Ye Qing to give him a misty, light red appearance. The fact he was smiling also added to the unsettling atmosphere.

“Is it you, Scion Ye?” The three women stopped in their tracks and stared at Ye Qing intently. “Are you alright?”

Ye Qing took two steps forward and passed through the fog person. He then replied cordially, “Thank you for your concern. I am fine.”

“What... What is that fog person behind you, Scion Ye?” Longing asked concernedly.

Ye Qing took two steps to the side so they could have a full view of the fog person. “Oh, this? This is the fog that tried to corrupt me earlier. But don’t worry, I now have full control over it. It is no longer a threat to anyone.”

As he said this, the fog person crumbled into wisps and flowed into Ye Qing’s body.

After probing Ye Qing with her senses carefully and confirming that he really had become the master of the original fog, Longing complimented him with a mixed expression on her face, “You truly are a genius, Scion Ye. I don’t mean any slight, but I still can’t believe that you actually managed to control the original fog with your own strength. You have my deepest respect.”

They knew more than anyone just how terrible the original fog was. Even with their power, they had no choice but to split the body into four parts and suppress three of them inside their objects. Even so, the effort had consumed nearly every sliver of power they possessed. That was why they didn’t think that Ye Qing could truly deal with the torso and the original fog inside his body at all. When Longing had asked Ye Qing to destroy the torso, she really just wanted him to buy enough time for them to properly suppress the body parts and original fog inside their objects before coming to his aid.

They had misjudged his power, however. Against all expectations, Ye Qing had saved himself.

Chapter 427: Fang Muyun’s Ploy

“Thank you, I appreciate that. But honestly, I just got lucky. I just happened to have a martial art that is a good counter to this fog,” Ye Qing smiled and spoke a half-truth.

His blood had quelled the fog, but his martial art, the “Blood Demon Sutra”, was what suppressed the violent reaction at the end.

The core of “Blood Demon Sutra” was composed of two martial arts. The first one was the “Art of Blood Control”, a martial art where the practitioner absorbed and refined another person’s blood for their own use. The second one was the art that creates the Children of Blood Demon, the “Art of Blood Demon”.

Of the two, the art to create the Children of Blood Demon was the more important one. It was also the one the people of the *jianghu* feared the most.

He had learned the way to create the Children of Blood Demon back when he obtained Shangguan Wuwo's "Blood Demon Sutra" in the Demon's Tomb. However, Chu Qingge clearly loathed the Children of Blood Demon, and he didn't know her well enough to trust that she wouldn't turn on him at the time. That was why he chose to hide the fact from her.

When he was busy suppressing his fog-possessed blood, he suddenly recalled the "Art of Blood Demon" and the Children of Blood Demon. The "Art of Blood Demon" could transform one's blood into the Children of Blood Demon, so why not try it on the fog?

Sure, the "Art of Blood Demon" only worked on blood, but the fog had been subsumed into his blood. Logically speaking, there should be no problems for him to impose the "Art of Blood Demon" on it. So, he used the "Art of Blood Demon" and created exactly one Child of Blood Demon. The violent reaction ravaging his insides was gone after that.

Since his blood was mixed within the fog, the Child of Blood Demon was a mixture of both blood and fog. It was why it looked light red in color.

"We are very happy to see that you're fine, Scion Ye," Hua Mei said while hugging her pipa. "Earlier, our mistake had nearly cost you your life. You only survived because you are as strong as you are blessed. We are truly sorry for what happened to you, and we can only hope that you can forgive us for our grave mistake."

"You exaggerate, Miss Hua Mei. I am fine, am I not?" Ye Qing smiled. "By the way, can I ask you a question?"

"By all means, ask away," Hua Mei replied.

Ye Qing took a moment to compose his words before starting, "After I took control of the fog, I noticed that I now share a connection with the Boat of Longing. Why did this happen? Is it something I need to watch out about?"

A gentle smile crossed Hua Mei's lips. "It's nothing to worry about, Scion Ye. The fog is the reason the Boat of Longing turned into an Anomaly. Now that you've refined a wisp of the corpse's original fog, you have gained partial ownership of the Boat of Longing. That is why you share a connection with it. It is perfectly harmless."

"In fact, the reason we're suppressing the corpse's head and limbs inside our objects despite the danger is to obtain the original fog. Only then can we take control of the Boat of Longing."

"I see!" Ye Qing nodded in understanding, though he already had an inkling that that was the case. He then apologized to the three girls, "I'm sorry. I didn't know that the fog is so important to you. You may have it back if you so wish."

"There's no need, Scion Ye. You misunderstand me." Hua Mei stopped him. "You are the one who saved and liberated us from our eternal misery. We are not so greedy that we would deny you your just reward, not to mention that the fog belongs to no one."

“What I’m trying to say is, you’ve become one of the masters of the Boat of Longing. If the need arises, you may summon us and the Boat of Longing to anywhere with a large body of water such as a river or a lake. We will answer your summons no matter what.”

“You’re welcome, though I must clarify that I was just fighting to fulfill my promise to you, and to save my own life,” Ye Qing replied with a salute.

He offered to return the original fog to the three girls not because he didn’t want it—on the contrary, he was extremely reluctant to give up the unique Child of Blood Demon he created using it—but now that they no longer shared a common enemy, it was possible that the girls might turn on him. On the off chance they harbored such thoughts, he was hoping that his show of goodwill would appease them.

Thankfully, they turned out to be better people than he thought.

“What you did for us is a favor we may never repay for eternity. As Hua Mei says, don’t hesitate to call for our help if you need us. We will be there for you,” Longing also echoed in agreement.

“You don’t need to play coy with us, Scion Ye,” Jue Yan replied in a cold tone, though it was clear that that was just the way she spoke.

Ye Qing smiled wider. “In that case, I shall happily accept your gift. Also, allow me to extend the same offer. If you ever need my help again, just send me a message, and I promise I’ll be there for you as well.”

“Thank you, Scion Ye.” Longing, Hua Mei and Jue Yan returned smilingly.

A brief conversation later, Ye Qing bade the three girls goodbye. For one, he had been stranded in the Boat of Longing for almost the entire midnight. To say he was tired in both mind and body would be an understatement. He needed a well-deserved rest as soon as possible.

While he could just rest in the Boat of Longing, the Yonghe Lake was located inside the city of Tian Yong. If someone like, for example, the Pacification Bureau noticed their existence and decided to take action, it would be troublesome to say the least.

And third, the three girls were in pretty rough shape themselves. They still hadn’t dealt with the body parts suppressed inside their objects completely. Ye Qing wasn’t stupid enough to impose on them any longer.

Right before Ye Qing left, he suddenly recalled something and voiced his curiosity, “Oh right, Miss Longing. Can I ask you something? There were many other people who toured Yonghe Lake at this time. Why did you pick me out of everyone you could’ve chosen?”

“Every time the Hidden Dragon Conference takes place, the three of us would come to Yonghe Lake and seek out young geniuses like you to help us,” Hua Mei replied honestly. “Yesterday, we sensed your power almost as soon as you entered Yonghe Lake. That was why we invited you onto the ship.”

“Just to clarify, but you didn’t know who I was until then, right? You only sensed me after I entered Yonghe Lake?” Ye Qing asked.

“That’s right,” Hua Mei confirmed.

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes a little. “In that case, do you know Ah Fu?”

Longing shook her head. “Who’s that?”

Ye Qing replied, “He’s my boat rower. Do you recognize him?”

Hua Mei looked confused. “No, we don’t. I thought he’s one of yours? Is there something wrong?”

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes some more before he relaxed into a smile and gave them a wave. “No, it’s nothing. Have a good night, girls.”

He turned around and left. Since he obtained the corpse’s original fog, he was a partial owner of the Boat of Longing. Naturally, the fog permeating the lake could no longer entrap him. In fact, the corpses floating on the lake automatically formed a path that led all the way to the shore for him. It was almost insultingly easy considering everything he had suffered to escape the ship, but hey, he wasn’t complaining.

“Take care, Scion Ye.”

On the Boat of Longing, Longing, Hua Mei and Jue Yan said with bright smiles on their faces.

“You too!” Ye Qing gave them another wave.

The next second, a thick fog surged from the lake and shrouded the entire ship. Then, the Boat of Longing slowly sailed away until it was gone.

Despite this, Ye Qing could still sense a faint thread between himself and the ship. If he wanted to, he could reach out and summon it to his side anywhere, anytime.

“This is an Anomaly we’re talking about, boy. Are you sure this is the right thing to do?”

While Ye Qing was watching the ship leave, the Fog Demon’s voice rang beside his ears, “Their words are pretty, but surely you didn’t forget that they were using you from the start until the end, have you? Besides, they were exhausted after the battle against the corpse. If you acted just now, you might have been able to kill them all, take revenge, and claim the credit for solving a case that not even a Grandmaster was able to solve. You could’ve killed two birds with one stone.”

“Heh. You make it sound easy, but Longing and the girls are quite formidable. It’s far more likely that I would go for wool and come back shorn,” Ye Qing said indifferently. “Besides, what’s so bad about my current circumstances? I’m alive, I’ve made some useful friends, and I’ve even gained partial control of an Anomaly. There is simply no reason to ruin such a perfect ending with my greed.”

“Friends, you said? Are you sure you’re a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau? If someone finds out that the Qing Emperor Junior is ‘friends’ with an Anomaly, hehehe...” The Fog Demon cackled.

“So what? All I need to do is to make sure that my secret isn’t leaked, right?” Ye Qing smirked. “Also, I have better things to focus on right now. For starters, who’s that Ah Fu? Someone is trying to kill me.”

He was certain that Ah Fu was a human being. Barring a few exceptions, no Stranger would dare to waltz into the Pacification Bureau like it was their own residence. That was why he suspected that something was amiss from the very beginning. His suspicion only grew stronger after he obtained his answers from the girls.

Whoever was plotting his death, they somehow knew that the Corpse Ship would appear at Yonghe Lake beforehand. That was why they lured him to Yonghe Lake and tried to kill him using the Corpse Ship.

“Do you know who might be behind this?” The Fog Demon asked.

“Not in the slightest,” Ye Qing shook his head, “but just because I don’t have a clue now, doesn’t mean I won’t have a clue in the future.”

“Anyway, let’s not dilly-dally any longer. It’s time to head back to the Pacification Bureau.”

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“Why did you help Ye Qing and even gave him the original fog, sister?”

Back inside the Boat of Longing, Longing voiced her puzzlement to Hua Mei after they left the shores.

“I’m not helping him, sister. I’m helping ourselves,” Hua Mei replied calmly.

“What do you mean?” Longing asked.

Hua Mei explained, “First, we were all injured and exhausted after the battle against the corpse, and Scion Ye is no ordinary warrior. He was also protected by a powerful Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact. I’m not confident that we would win if we chose to clash against him.”

“Second, Scion Ye is a dragon among humans. He has a bright future ahead of him. I see no harm in befriending such a person.”

“And third, most of the original fog went to us, which makes us the unshakeable masters of the Boat of Longing. Although Scion Ye also owns a portion of the original fog, his share isn’t nearly big enough to threaten us in any way.”

“In conclusion, I see far more benefits to befriending Scion Ye than antagonizing him. What do you think, sister?”

Longing pondered her words for a moment before nodding. “Your words make a lot of sense, sister. I am glad you managed to stop me before I made an irrational decision. Thank you.”

Hua Mei smiled. “Why are you thanking me? We’re sisters, aren’t we? Anyway, let’s master the original fog immediately. Our sisters have suffered long enough. It is time to save them all.”

“You’re right.” Jue Yan nodded.

“Indeed.”

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Inside an elegantly furnished study, Fang Muiyun was reading the “Annotations of the Analects” with a serious expression on his face.

Suddenly, the candle flame illuminating the room flickered a little.

“How did it go, Fugong[1]?”

A voice answered, “Mister. Ye Qing came back from the Corpse Ship alive.”

A man slowly stepped out of the darkness. He was a rotund and genial-looking man with a long beard. He wore a square hat and a baggy red robe with the word “Fortune” sewn at the center. He looked like he was celebrating the New Year, jubilant and festive.

“He came back alive? He deserves his fame after all.” Fang Muiyun set down his book with a surprised look on his face.

“I could have killed him myself, mister. Why didn’t you send me to deal with him?” Fugong asked with a grin.

Fang Muiyun picked up his book again and replied, “We are in Tian Yong, and Ye Qing is a Patrolman. Anyone can kill him, but not us.”

“After all, it’s not easy to wash the blood out of your hands.”

“I understand.” Fugong nodded.

Fang Muiyun asked another question, “Did you clean up properly?”

Fugong chuckled. “But of course, mister. All the witnesses, evidence and such have been dealt with. Even if Ye Qing suspects something, the only ones he can suspect are the ‘Wine Are Songs Boat’ and the real Ah Fu who works there. Too bad for him, the real Ah Fu is forever gone.”

“Well done,” Fang Muiyun replied.

Fugong voiced his worries, “Still, we have alerted the snake in the bush. Ye Qing is on his guard now, and it’s going to be so much harder to kill him in the future.”

“Is it?” Fang Muiyun smiled as his eyes reflected the warm light of the candles.

“Preparation is the key to success. So long as we prepare accordingly, then we will succeed, won’t we?”

“Do you have a plan, mister?” Fugong’s eyes lit up.

Fang Muiyun responded to his question with a question of his own, “Do you know who’s the real owner of Wine Are Songs Boat?”

Fugong shook his head. “Please enlighten me, mister.”

Fang Muiyun answered, “It belongs to the Harmony King’s son.”

Realization flashed across Fugong's face. "Are you planning to pit the Harmony King against the Pacification Bureau, mister?"

But Fugong shook his head immediately after he finished. "No, that's not right. Hong Jianglong and the Harmony King shared a good relationship with each other, and the Harmony King is infamous for his slothfulness. He wouldn't sour his relationship with the Pacification Bureau over a mere pleasure boat."

"You should expand your horizons more, Fugong." Fang Muyun shook his head smilingly. "I'm not aiming to sow dissent between the pacification Bureau and the Harmony King. That's completely meaningless."

"My real goal is Ye Qing and Chu Qingli."

His answer only confused Fugong even more. "My apologies, mister, but I don't understand your meaning."

Fugong looked up at Fugong with warm eyes that were as black and infinite as the night. "And you don't need to. You only need to understand that I've never failed at what I set out to do."

"Ye Qing will not walk out of Tian Yong alive."

Chapter 428: A Deliberate Show of Strength

The next day, on the way to Flying Dragon Mount, Ye Qing moved closer to Hong Jianglong and asked in a low voice, "How did it go, Lord Hong?"

After he went back to the Pacification Bureau, the first thing he did was to tell Hong Jianglong everything that happened and his suspicion that someone was trying to kill him.

Of course, he didn't reveal the fact that he aided Longing, Hua Mei and Jue Yan. He only described how he barely managed to escape the Corpse Ship after a harrowing experience. It might not be the whole truth, but it was the truth.

He wasn't afraid of beating the grass and startling the snake. In fact, he wanted to startle the snake.

The enemy had already tried to kill him once, but he had no idea who they were. Not only that, they were as dangerous as they were well hidden. He knew this because not even the Annon Sutra could tell him who that fake Ah Fu really was.

On his own, his chances of unmasking the mastermind was less than zero. Moreover, his silence could easily be mistaken as weakness and submission. He somehow survived the first assassination attempt, but what about the second, third, and forth?

No, staying silent would be a mistake. What he needed to do now was to make a show of strength and intimidate his enemy. If he could force them into making a mistake, then even better.

He told Hong Jianglong about the assassination attempt because the man possessed the power to blow this up as much as possible. For one, the Pacification Bureau was one of the most powerful departments in Chu. There was a chance they might be able to unearth that fake Ah Fu's identity. Two, he wanted his enemy to know that the Pacification Bureau had decided to intervene in this matter, and that any further attempts would be an attack against the Pacification Bureau itself.

The reason people usually avoided beating the bush and startling the snake was because it would cause the snake to hide even deeper inside the bush, but it was still a better outcome than being bitten by the snake.

“Unfortunately, no. By the time we make it to Yonghe Lake, the Corpse Ship is nowhere to be seen,” Hong Jianglong replied with cold eyes and a hint of bloodthirst.

For the past few years, a couple of geniuses participating in the Hidden Dragon Conference would often go missing for no reason. However, he always thought that they were murders caused by vengeance or competition, something that happened everyday in the *jianghu*. Besides that, *jianghu* matters didn’t fall under the Pacification Bureau’s jurisdiction, and not enough people disappeared every Hidden Dragon Meet for them to change their opinion and consider if it might be related to the supernatural.

But now, Hong Jianglong was almost certain that the disappearances were tied to the Corpse Ship. If Ye Qing hadn’t survived the Anomaly, he would still have no idea to this day.

To think that an Anomaly had been kidnapping people right under their nose for years! To say that this was a huge slap to the Pacification Bureau’s face would be an understatement. Heavens only know what the people would say if they found out about this!

“How is the investigation into Ah Fu?” Ye Qing asked. He didn’t care about the Corpse Ship. He only cared about the mastermind behind Ah Fu.

Hong Jianglong replied, “My men reported that there is a waiter named Ah Fu in Wine Are Songs Boat, but he has been missing since noon today.”

Ye Qing furrowed his brows and bowed his head. He already knew that the real Ah Fu was dead thanks to the Annon Sutra. He was hoping that Hong Jianglong would find something about the fake Ah Fu, but it was clear that they had failed.

“Do you think that this has something to do with Wine Are Songs Boat?” Ye Qing asked after pondering for a moment.

“I doubt it.” Hong Jianglong shook his head. “The true owner of Wine Are Songs Boat is Chu Qingli, and he doesn’t know you at all besides watching you fight during the first stage of the Hidden Dragon Meet. Why on earth would he try to kill you?”

“The Harmony King’s son?!” Ye Qing nodded in agreement, but the dead end only confused him even more.

“That said, that doesn’t mean that the employees are completely innocent. We’ve already rounded up everyone and brought them back to the Pacification Bureau. We will interrogate them all and find out if any of them has something to do with your attempted murder,” Hong Jianglong ended in a cold voice.

Ye Qing said slowly, “I haven’t been in Tian Yong long enough to feud with anyone. But if I must accuse someone, I suppose there’s one person who fits the bill.”

“You’re talking about Chu Renhe?” Hong Jianglong glanced at Ye Qing. “It’s definitely possible, and the way you were tricked does remind me of Lei Xiaodan. However, they’re hardly the only suspects. You’ve offended a lot of people such as the Way of Taiping or the Nether Lord. It’s possible that one of their agents had pulled off this stunt.”

Hong Jianglong grunted with a hint of helplessness and resignation, “There are just too many people who want to kill you.”

“Ahem... so, about Ah Fu...” Ye Qing hurriedly changed the subject. *I don’t want to offend those forces either, okay?! Trouble just has its way of finding me!*

“Just leave it to me and focus on performing well in the Hidden Dragon Meet. You have my word that last night’s assassination attempt will be the last.” Hong Jianglong’s voice turned grim and frigid.

“When the Hidden Dragon Meet ends, I promise that I and the Pacification Bureau will give you a proper answer.”

“Anyone who dares to lay a hand on the Pacification Bureau and harm our people without reason must pay the price!”

Ye Qing pressed his fist to his palm. “Thank you, my lord.”

As soon as Ye Qing’s group made it to the peak, Lei Xiaodan walked over with a smile on his face and said, “I heard that you shut down Wine Are Songs Boat, Brother Hong! Did something happen?”

Hong Jianglong taunted him, “Your ears are sharper than a dog’s, Lord Lei.”

“You flatter me. My skills are nothing compared to yours,” Lei Xiaodan replied as if he couldn’t understand Hong Jianglong’s sarcasm. “You don’t need to tell me about it if it’s an important matter, of course. But I must warn you that the Harmony King would like to have words with you.”

“None of your business. I can handle myself,” Hong Jianglong replied indifferently.

“Did you have a good rest, Young Ye?” Lei Xiaodan ignored Hong Jianglong and turned to Ye Qing instead.

“Thank you for your concern, my lord. I am fine,” Ye Qing replied with a salute. Lei Xiaodan might look amiable, but Ye Qing could never stand in his presence without feeling threatened and uncomfortable. It was why he was unwilling to interact with the Judicial Commissioner if at all possible.

“Are you confident that you’ll become the champion of the Hidden Dragon Meet?” Lei Xiaodan asked another question.

Ye Qing replied smilingly while rubbing his nose, "You flatter me, my lord. There are countless geniuses who are participating in this Hidden Dragon Meet. I wouldn't dream of taking first place. Top ten is good enough for me."

The corners of Hong Jianglong's lips curled downward when he heard this, however. "The fuck did you just say? If you're not here to become the champion, then why are you participating at all?"

The Pacification Commissioner slapped his shoulder hard before threatening, "You better not bring shame to the Pacification Bureau, or I'll break your legs with my own hands!"

Ye Qing: "... Bro, I was just acting humble. Why are you treating it as real?"

Lei Xiaodan noticed Ye Qing's dumbfounded expression and chuckled. "Young Ye was just being humble, Brother Hong. With his strength, I'm certain he would be able to obtain a good placement. Right, Young Ye?"

Hong Jianglong was still glaring at him, so Ye Qing had no choice but to nod his head mechanically.

"Hmph!" Hong Jianglong hmphed loudly.

"Why do you sound so annoyed, Hong Jianglong? Is it because you don't want to see me?" A powerful voice suddenly came from the distance. Then, a pissed off Harmony King strode into view.

"That's not it, Your Highness..." Hong Jianglong's annoyed expression immediately melted into an awkward smile.

"What is it then?" The Harmony King pressed. He might be a full head shorter than Hong Jianglong, but he wasn't afraid to give him a piece of his mind at all. "Why did you shut down Qingli's Wine Are Songs Boat, Hong Jianglong? You even detained all the employees!"

"Give me a moment to explain, Your Highness!" Hong Jianglong pleaded.

"You better! Otherwise, I'll... I'll..." The Harmony King thought for a moment before threatening, "I'm gonna stay rent free at your headquarters!"

Hong Jianglong felt a small headache coming onto him. "We recently discovered that the Wine Are Songs Boat was involved with an Anomaly. That's why we're performing a detailed investigation on everyone working in Wine Are Songs Boat. Of course, they'll be released once their innocence is confirmed."

"An Anomaly? What Anomaly?" The Harmony King blinked. The moment he heard about this, he shoved his anger to the back of his head and focused on indulging his curiosity instead.

"The Corpse Ship Incident," Hong Jianglong clarified.

"The Corpse Ship Incident? If I remember correctly, it's one of the most concerning Anomaly cases in the Pacification Bureau, right?" The Harmony King asked.

“That is correct,” Hong Jianglong responded.

“To think it would actually be the Corpse Ship!” The Harmony King exclaimed in surprise. “Where is it right now? Have you dealt with it?”

Hong Jianglong shook his head. “No. By the time we noticed its presence and dispatched a squad, the Corpse Ship was long gone. Luckily for us, it didn’t cause too much trouble. One of the waiters working in Wine Are Songs Boat was involved in the incident. That is why we’re detaining everyone working in the boat and interrogating them.”

“I’m glad to hear that. My stupid son was at the pleasure boat last night. If the Corpse Ship had gotten to him...” The Harmony King patted his chest a couple of times to calm himself before cursing, “I can’t believe he didn’t tell me about it!”

The Harmony King was referring to Chu Qingli, of course. Hong Jianglong apologized, “Sorry. I should’ve explained things to him properly last night.”

Chu Qingli was drinking at Wine Are Songs Boat when he left to shut down the establishment last night. They even had a minor scuffle because of it.

The Harmony King waved off his apology. “It’s fine. Your action makes perfect sense considering that an Anomaly was involved.”

“But Jianglong, you are the Pacification Commissioner of the North. You should’ve noticed the Corpse Ship as soon as it appeared in Tian Yong. Had something terrible happened, the responsibility and the consequences would’ve fallen squarely on your shoulders. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Hong Jianglong saluted the Harmony King and promised, “You’re right. I should’ve done better. I promise to be more careful in the future so that nothing like this will happen again.”

“Good.” The Harmony King nodded before checking the time. “It’s almost time. I shan’t keep you from your duties any longer.”

“Thank you for your understanding, Your Highness.” Hong Jianglong saluted the Harmony King again before turning around to face Ye Qing’s group and offering a few pieces of advice. Then, he went away to attend to his responsibilities.

The Harmony King and Hong Jianglong hadn’t tried to hide their conversation, so everyone present heard it loud and clear. A murmur broke out as soon as Hong Jianglong was out of sight.

The Corpse Ship was an infamous Anomaly after all.

Inside a kiosk, Chu Wangsun shot Fang Muyun a glance. Fang Muyun responded with a small, careless smile that suggested everything was under his control.

An hour later, Hong Jianglong’s voice boomed across the place. “The battle to enter the quarter finals begins now!”

Silence immediately enveloped the peak.

“Draw your lots. As per before, one person will be able to advance to the next round without fighting.”

Hong Jianglong slapped the large brazier beside him, and glowing tokens flew out of its mouth and into everyone’s hands.

Ye Qing took a look at his token and noted that his number was eight. He sighed. It would seem that luck was not on his side.

Chapter 429: Stunning Dragon, Tiger Roar

“Congratulations, Brother Yang!”

After receiving their tokens, the participants wasted no time in seeking out and identifying their opponents. It was at this moment Yang Zhao heard Zhang Tiancheng’s voice in his head.

“Haha, I was just lucky,” Yang Zhao replied in a warm and gentle voice. Clearly, he was the lucky winner who got to advance to the next round without fighting this time.

“Congratulations, Brother Yang.”

“Congratulations.”

Zhao Lan, Chen Shaoyu, Chu Renhe, Jian Wusheng and more all congratulated Yang Zhao. Everyone was at least a little envious of his luck.

“Do your best, everyone. I’ll be waiting for you in the quarter finals.” Yang Zhao saluted everyone with a smile on his face.

“Sigh. Why is it always someone else who gets to skip a battle? Why is my luck so terrible? I’m truly born under a lucky star, sigh!” Wen Xiaonuan complained while staring at Yang Zhao forlornly. An aura of sorrow, despair, and depression immediately washed out of her like a wave.

Ye Qing, Xu Rulin, Wei Bulao, Qi Xuanyun and every other participant immediately took a few steps away from her. No one wanted to be infected by her power.

“Sigh. Not even the rest of you can stand my presence? I guess I’m not just unlucky, I’m a failure of a human being as well...” Wen Xiaonuan sighed at this sight, and her debilitating aura became even stronger than before.

“Ahem. I just got lucky, Mis Wen. I’m sure you don’t need luck to advance to the next round,” Yang Zhao coughed twice and tried to console her.

He wasn’t lying. Whatever Wen Xiaonuan might think, she was among the strongest warriors out of everyone. Yang Zhao consoled her because he was hoping that he could build a good relationship with her and potentially recruit her into the Yang Clan.

“You don’t need to console me. I couldn’t even make it to the peak of Flying Dragon Mount first, much less become the champion of the Hidden Dragon Meet.” Wen Xiaonuan sighed. “Qing Emperor Junior is right. I am just a useless trash.”

Everyone subconsciously turned around and looked at Ye Qing. Their gaze was disdainful, disgusted, murderous and more.

Lin YUhuai gave Ye Qing a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. Sometimes, misfortune just falls from the sky out nowhere!

“All participants, please enter your platform right now...”

Luckily for Ye Qing, Hong Jianglong saved him with a timely announcement. Since Ye Qing’s token was number eight, he immediately strode over to the eighth platform. He was slightly taken aback when he saw his opponent. It was none other than Chu Qingge.

“Miss Qingge...” Ye Qing knew that it was only a matter of time before he ran into a familiar face, but this was still sooner than he expected. He couldn’t help but have mixed feelings about this.

For one, they had fought together at the Demon’s Tomb, and two, Chu Qingge was one of the few people who legitimately possessed the strength to defeat him.

“Brother Ye...” Chu Qingge was much less perturbed than Ye Qing was. She saluted him candidly and said, “I’ve been looking forward to this battle, Qing Emperor Junior. Please, offer me your guidance.”

In just two sentences, Chu Qingge chased away the awkward feeling plaguing Ye Qing’s heart. He lifted an eyebrow and broke into a small smile. “You too, Miss Qing.”

Chu Qingge was truly a refreshingly candid and carefree woman. He couldn’t help but admire her a little.

The battlefield was set in a desert. The duo looked good standing under the yellow sand and evening sun. However, that beauty was shattered when Ye Qing abruptly faded like a mirage, and the real Ye Qing appeared behind Chu Qingge to throw a surprise punch.

Outside the platform, the Harmony King abruptly shot to his feet and yelled, “I cannot believe that brat would ambush a girl like that! Where is his shame! His shame!”

Everyone was used to his antics by this point. They ignored him and continued watching the duel between Ye Qing and Chu Qingge.

Chu Qingge seemed aware that this would happen, however. Her surrounding force abruptly flowed in an unnatural manner, and the image of a Black Tortoise appeared in the air. Watery ripples slowly spread out of the image and enveloped Chu Qingge completely.

When Ye Qing’s fist landed on Chu Qingge, he felt like he was punching air. Not only that, the force surrounding Chu Qingge was like an invisible quagmire that slowed down his whole body after his fist entered a certain range. Even his reaction speed was a few beats slower than before.

In a battle between warriors, a few beats of difference could mean the difference between life and death.

Before Ye Qing could pull free, Chu Qingge took a step backward and leaned into Ye Qing's chest like he was her lover. Ye Qing didn't look happy in the slightest, however. As soon as Chu Qingge leaned into his chest, she threw her elbows backward like she was swinging a pair of hammers into his chest.

Ye Qing raised his left arm and blocked the double attack. Right before the duo would separate from one another, Chu Qingge raised her leg and attempted to kick Ye Qing in the calf. At the same time, she dropped and lifted her left shoulder like she was carrying a mountain and launched a shoulder strike.

Ye Qing bent his knees a little and took Chu Qingge's kick head on, refusing to budge even a little. Then, he brought down his left arm and met Chu Qingge's shoulder strike with a cascade of pure power.

When the two warriors finally landed on solid ground, Chu Qingge abruptly dashed away from Ye Qing. On the other hand, Ye Qing simply stood there with a smile on his face.

"What's going on? Who's winning?" The Harmony King asked urgently while his eyes were glued to the screen.

"It's too early to say who's winning yet," Lei Xiaodan began slowly, "but Miss Chu lost the exchange by a small margin."

The duo had only been fighting for a few breaths, but to a spectator, every move looked like it was a move that could end the battle and even the participant's life.

"She lost? How?" The Harmony King asked worriedly and urgently.

Lei Xiaodan explained, "Ye Qing's cultivation level is equal to Miss Chu's, and their combat experience and reaction speed are almost the same. While Miss Chu holds the advantage in terms of technique, Ye Qing is the superior one in terms of physical tenacity and strength. In melee combat, the greatest factors that decide the victor is body, reaction, and experience, which is why Miss Chu lost the exchange—but only slightly. She can easily turn it around at a later time."

"For now, I can't say who's going to win this battle."

The Harmony King relaxed a little and let out a hmph. "I can tell at first glance that that boy is all brawn and no brain. He's still a long way away from being able to defeat Qingge."

Everyone paying attention to Ye Qing and Chu Qingge's battle smiled noncommittally and maintained their silence.

Back in the desert, a hint of astonishment and respect flickered in Chu Qingge's eyes. "You truly are a genius, Brother Ye. You have my utmost respect."

When they first met at the Demon's Tomb, Ye Qing was just a late-stage Astral Refiner. Strong as he was, there was no chance he could have defeated her back then. A month had passed then, and not only was he almost at the same cultivation level as she was, his strength and skill were at least on par with hers, if not better.

It was one thing if he only ascended the cultivation levels quickly. There were plenty of natural treasures out there that could quickly increase a warrior's cultivation level in a short time. It wasn't really something to be proud about.

His combat knowledge and experience was a whole different story, however. As the daughter of the Harmony King, she had received a comprehensive education from famous tutors since young. She also fought in the army for a time before joining the Pacification Bureau. Since Hong Jianglong spared no effort in teaching her, there was almost no one at her age whose combat knowledge and experience was a match for her.

However, Ye Qing had caught up to her despite all of her advantages. No, that wasn't right. He had surpassed her. His reputation was well-deserved.

"You flatter me, Miss Qingge. You're quite the warrioress yourself," Ye Qing returned the compliment wholeheartedly. He had already witnessed her strength back at the Demon's Tomb, and at the time she was only a middle-stage Spirit Purifier. Now that she had entered the late stage, he could tell that she was at least twice as strong as she was before. If it wasn't for the lifelong training he experienced inside the Nanke Dream, she could've put him at a disadvantage in a single exchange.

"I'm glad to hear that." Chu Qingge shot him a dazzling smile. "Here I come!"

As soon as she finished, Chu Qingge pointed a finger at Ye Qing and summoned a sky of stars.

The sky shuddered, and the stars rained down on Ye Qing like the apocalypse. The power behind the martial art was such that it shook the world.

"Well met!"

Ye Qing smiled at this sight and took off with a loud boom. Every time he moved three meters, his energy would grow just a tad stronger. By the time the finger beams got close, his fist intent was as tall as a mountain. He punched forward.

The Burning Wind howled, and a mini sandstorm overtook the battlefield. Heaven and earth cooked like the whole world was a furnace.

The stars resisted valiantly against the melting heat, but in the end, they all melted into nothing. At the same time, the Burning Wind mixed with a ton of sand overwhelmed Chu Qingge completely.

Scree!

Suddenly, a high-pitched, resonant cry of a vermillion bird pierced through the air. A pentacolored vermillion bird appeared in the sky and swam between the Burning Wind, the sand and its own flames.

There was a flash of colors, and Ye Qing suddenly felt every hair on his body standing on end. Without hesitation, he surrounded himself in yin and yang energy, moved his right foot forward diagonally, and spun around so fast it defied logic. Remember that he was running at high speed before he executed the maneuver. He then punched the ground with his fist.

His astral qi mixed with the yellow sand rolled back to his side and took the shape of a wall, all the while flowing rapidly like a river.

The instant after “Divide” appeared, a draconic cry deafened everyone’s ears and punched a hole in the raging river. Ye Qing could only watch as a silky smooth fist grew bigger and bigger in his eyes until it finally hit him in the face.

A wave of dizziness overcame him. Chu Qingge’s punch was so powerful that he actually staggered nine steps away from her.

Every time his foot smashed into the sand, it was like a drake was rolling on its back.

Chu Qingge wasn’t one to let go of such an excellent opportunity, of course. A vermillion bird cry pierced the air, and the image of a penta-colored vermillion bird appeared around her body in a flash. Leaning forward, she sprinted toward Ye Qing like a bolt of lightning and swiped both hands at Ye Qing like a starved predator.

“Roar!”

That wasn’t all. A fiendish, incredibly handsome white tiger appeared in the sky as Chu Qingge swooped down on Ye Qing. It felt as terrible as it was invincible. When it let out a roar, everyone including those standing outside the platform felt their minds wobbling, and their heads pounding like someone had taken a hammer to it.

When the tiger descends from its mountain, its roar resounds across the Nether.

Right here and now, Ye Qing looked as helpless as a lamb. Chu Qingge was able to land a pair of palm strikes on his chest and sent him crashing into a nearby sand dune. The sand dune crumbled, and Ye Qing was buried underneath.

“Hahaha! I told y’all that that boy only has brawn! There is no way he could defeat Qingge!”

The Harmony King’s nervousness was wiped clean by an onslaught of pure ecstasy. He was so delighted by Chu Qingge’s successful attack that he was dancing on his feet.

“Miss Chu is definitely gifted.”

Even Fang Muyun was paying her a compliment, “She’s still very young, but she has already mastered the ‘Four Symbols of Supremacy’ to the point where she could execute it with grace and display its essence. She has a bright future ahead of her.”

The “Four Symbols of Supremacy” was an ultimate martial art that only a member of the imperial family of Chu could learn. In fact, only those who bore the Will of the Dragon could unleash its true strength.

As its name might suggest, the “Four Symbols of Supremacy” was made up of four ultimate martial arts. They were called the Stunning Dragon Fist, the Vermillion Bird Step, the White Tiger Palm and the Black Tortoise Force.

The Stunning Dragon Fist was an aural martial art derived from the Azure Dragon of the east. When the practitioner executed the Stunning Dragon Fist, the Nine Heavens were stunned, and the dragon could soar thousands and thousands of kilometers without end.

The White Tiger Palm was an offensive martial art derived from the White Tiger of the west. It was especially effective against the mind. Its roar could sever the mind, and its palm the body.

The Vermillion Bird Step was an evasive martial art derived from the Vermillion Bird of the south. Speed was its greatest strength, and it bestowed upon its practitioner a pair of colorful wings that granted incredible speed.

The Black Tortoise Force was a defensive martial art derived from the Black Tortoise of the north. Its defensive capabilities were said to rival an abyss that could accommodate a hundred rivers. The force could freely change between the tangible and the intangible, making it very difficult for enemies to breach through its defense.

Offense, defense, movement, and mental. The four martial arts encompassed everything a warrior might need. If the martial practitioner reached the adept level in all four martial arts, they would achieve a union and become even stronger than they already were.

Chapter 430: The Sword Rises, Azure Dragon Soars

“Hahaha... you have a discerning eye, Farseeing!”

The Harmony King’s joy doubled when he heard Fang Muyun’s compliment. He was even happier than if Fang Muyun had praised him instead. He then looked in Hong Jianglong’s direction and bragged, “So what if he’s the Qing Emperor Junior? He’s still lousier than my daughter, right Jianglong?”

“Sure, Your Highness.” Hong Jianglong smiled but didn’t argue against him.

“It’s too soon to make a verdict.”

The Harmony King was just about to let out a boisterous laugh when Chu Wangsun set down his book and said in an indifferent tone, “Ye Qing may have lost this exchange, but he hasn’t actually taken any damage. The battle may yet swing either way.”

Hong Jianglong, Lei Xiaodan and Song Xilai shot Chu Wangsun an astonished look. At their level, of course they could see that Chu Qingge’s attack, while fierce, was mostly neutralized by the yin and yang energies surrounding Ye Qing’s body. That was why the young man had only taken a minimum amount of damage. However, the Harmony King was a member of the royal family, and his martial cultivation and insight were so lousy that arguing with him was like talking semantics with a layman—he wouldn’t understand even if they laid things out for him piece by piece. That was why most of them just agreed with the Harmony King’s opinions.

However, Chu Wangsun had revealed the truth bluntly. It soured the mood a little.

Most people were just surprised by Chu Wangsun’s statement—the young scholar had proven himself to be a very taciturn person for the past few days—but Hong Jianglong knew that Chu Wangsun held a grudge against Ye Qing. He wondered if the scholar had a goal when he talked up Ye Qing.

Everyone thought that Chu Wangsun had more to say, but he didn't. He simply returned to his book and left behind a confused crowd.

Back in the desert, Chu Qingge was frowning as well. As the one fighting against Ye Qing, she knew that she hadn't dealt any effective damage better than those who were watching from the sidelines. Both her fist force and her palm force were mostly neutralized by the yin and yang energies surrounding Ye Qing's body. He looked like he was in a sorry state, but he wasn't. Not even close.

She supposed she would have to try harder then.

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Chu Qingge stepped toward Ye Qing and moved her right hand behind her back. Every time she took a step forward, her hand would raise just a tad, and the yellow sand behind her would grow taller.

By the time she had taken three steps, Chu Qingge's hand was held above her head, and the sand behind her was hundreds, if not thousands of meters tall. It looked like it was touching the heavens themselves.

When she was ten meters away from Ye Qing, Chu Qingge brought down her palm in one smooth motion. The gigantic wave of sand immediately crashed down on the young man like an avalanche.

"It looks like the river of heavens crashing down on the world itself! Wonderfully executed! Miss Chu's 'Hand of Yellow Sand' pales in comparison to Brother Luo's as a matter of course, but this is still quite impressive!" Lei Xiaodan nodded approvingly at the awe-inspiring attack taking place on the platform before looking at Hong Jianglong. "Color me surprised. I didn't think Brother Luo would teach this to her!"

"I agree. I had no idea that the old bastard had taught her one of his trump cards until now," Hong Jianglong replied with knitted brows.

The Brother Luo they were speaking of was the Pacification Commissioner of the South, Luo Sa. He practiced a cultivation art known as the "True Canon of Yellow Sand".

The "True Cannon of Yellow Sand" could steal the water existing in the practitioner's surroundings and transform hundreds of acres of land into a barren, yellow desert. It was ridiculously powerful to say the least. One of the martial art's ultimate techniques, the "Hand of Yellow Sand" could summon a river of yellow sand to crash down on one's enemies. Obviously, the technique was even more powerful in a desert.

Luo Sa was a proud loner with no friends, family, or even disciples. Most people thought him to be a cold and unpleasant person, which was why Lei Xiaodan and Hong Jianglong were surprised to learn that the man had taught Chu Qingge one of the ultimate techniques of the "True Canon of Yellow Sand". Moreover, it was clear from her mastery that she had been practicing the technique for some time.

"Young Ye isn't going to like this one." Lei Xiaodan chuckled. The "Hand of Yellow Sand" was especially powerful in an advantageous terrain, and it so happened that they were fighting in a desert. Therefore, Chu Qingge held a powerful advantage in this exchange.

“A powerful advantage doesn’t necessarily decide the outcome of a fight, and this is doubly true against an opponent like Ye Qing,” Hong Jianglong said indifferently. “Also, you might want to pay attention to your own disciple. He’s going to lose any minute now.”

On the fifth platform, Chu Renhe had fallen into a complete disadvantage. His opponent was Zhao Bu’er, also a middle-stage Spirit Purifier. Zhao Bu’er wasn’t just stronger than Chu Renhe, his martial arts were extremely unorthodox. His movement art was as swift and unpredictable as a phantom, and his weapon was an ordinary razor. In fact, the razor looked rusted and dirty.

The main reason Chu Renhe was having trouble was thanks to his movement art. The warrior kept flitting about Chu Renhe like an actual phantom, and Chu Renhe was unable to detect Zhao Bu’er’s energies, grasp his movement patterns, or catch up to his speed at all. Naturally, it was impossible for him to land a hit on Zhao Bu’er.

Every time Zhao Bu’er dashed past Chu Renhe, he would shave a clump of hair from Chu Renhe’s head. And every time this happened, a sliver of resentment would attach itself to Chu Renhe’s body and diminish his strength.

“This isn’t a fight, Zhao Bu’er! Face me fair and square!” The longer the battle went on, the more frustrated Chu Renhe became. It was bad enough that he failed to land even a single hit on Zhao Bu’er, but the bastard had shaved off the large majority of his hair as well. His partially shaved head looked ugly to say the least.

“I’m just a barber, and shaving is all I know. This is the only way I know to defeat you, my lord,” Zhao Bu’er responded with a bumpkin smile and didn’t change his fighting smile in the slightest. Chu Renhe was pissed off like you wouldn’t believe, but there was nothing he could do to force Zhao Bu’er into a straight fight.

“A win is a win, and a loss is a learning experience. This’ll teach him that there are always greater foes out there,” Lei Xiaodan said smilingly. “On a related note, have you figured out Zhao Bu’er’s background, Brother Hong?”

Lei Xiaodan didn’t take offense. “I’m just a man of humble talent and shallow learning. Of course my intelligence can’t compare to yours, Brother Hong.”

“You truly are a pretentious bastard,” Hong Jianglong remarked indifferently. “I know nothing about Zhao Bu’er’s movement art, but I do recognize the razor he’s using. If I’m not mistaken, it’s the ninety-third Strange Artifact on the Strange Artifact Register, the Ghost Razor.”

“A Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact, it is said that the Ghost Razor was made from the skull of a terrible sinner. The sinner looks like an honest, down-to-earth barber, but in reality they are a homicidal maniac who killed hundreds of people while pretending to shave their heads. That is why resentment clings to them like a thick, putrid fog, and why their skull could be made into the Ghost Razor.”

“Every time the Ghost Razor cuts a clump of hair, it afflicts resentment upon their target and weakens them. If the target’s head was fully shaved, then they would either lose their heads or become a puppet of the Ghost Razor.”

“At this rate, your disciple is going to lose horribly.”

“The Ghost Razor?” Lei Xiaodan exclaimed in surprise as if he didn’t already know about this information. “The Ghost Razor is the signature weapon of the Barber, the eighteenth warrior on the Black List.[1] Could Zhao Bu’er be a disciple of the Barber?”

“Who knows?” Hong Jianglong shook his head. “The Barber might be named on the Black List, but he is neither a despicable scumbag nor an irredeemable scoundrel, so it doesn’t matter to me if there is a connection between the two or not.”

“Haha, you’re right.” Lei Xiaodan chuckled.

While the duo were conversing, Chu Renhe lost a couple more clumps of hair and became even weaker as a result. It looked like it was only a matter of time before he lost.

“Renhe lost his cool. I don’t think there is a chance for him to make a comeback either.” Lei Xiaodan watched the battle for a little longer before shaking his head. “He’s still too young. Young Luo, on the other hand, hasn’t fallen into a disadvantage despite facing off a named warrior on the Human Champions Ranking, Jian Wusheng. He’s way better than Renhe in that regard.”

Lei Xiaodan was talking about Luo Zhan. The battle between Luo Zhan and Jian Wusheng was far more interesting than the one-sided fight between Zhao Bu’er and Chu Renhe.

The two men were fighting on a cliff covered in misty clouds. The cliffside was steep and lofty like a sword, and it was the perfect backdrop for both Luo Zhan and Jian Wusheng.

Luo Zhan was a sabersman who fought using a forceful fighting style. The Tyrant Blade in particular was one of the most forceful saber arts under the heavens. Theoretically, there was nothing the Tyrant Blade couldn’t cut; no obstacle too difficult to overcome. It was a saber art that thrived on being unstoppable, indefensible, and invincible.

One might say that Luo Zhan and Jian Wusheng were born to be rivals. No one was willing to give an inch to the other person.

Luo Zhan wielded his saber with both hands, and his techniques were basic and nothing to write home about. The power behind those techniques was a different story, however. His horizontal slash felt like it could cut a hole in the sky, and his downward swings felt like it would split the ground in half. His saber force encompassed both heaven and earth.

Jian Wusheng was devoid of fear despite facing off against a seam of saber beams that could easily rip him into shreds. Sword and body as one, he rushed forward as his sword intent circled around his sword like a dragon. Wherever it traveled, the saber beams were destroyed like nothing.

Luo Zhan was running toward Jian Wusheng as well, swinging his saber every time he took a step. This time though, the saber beam didn't fly toward Jian Wusheng. Instead, it gathered in the sky like a river of heaven.

When the two participants were three meters away from each other, it was Luo Zhan who came to a stop first. His muscles bulged as he raised his saber above his head and brought it down with all his might.

The river of saber force suspended in the air transformed into a giant saber that pierced through the heavens. Then, it crashed down on top of Jian Wusheng. Such was its power that the weather turned stormy and violent.

Jian Wusheng moved closer to Luo Zhan while holding his sword in front of him. Then, he unsheathed his sword by a single inch, summoning an Azure Dragon out of seemingly nowhere.

You may have a saber that splits heaven and earth,

But I too have an Azure Dragon that defends humanity from all harm.

Boom!

The Azure Dragon of sword qi and giant saber of saber qi clashed against each other. The storm that resulted from the impact was so powerful that the topmost layer of the cliff was shaved away just like that, leaving behind countless scars.

Ding!

Suddenly, a crisp, metallic ringing pierced through the eardrums. It was somehow clearer than the massive explosion that was still going on.

As soon as this happened, the violent storm of sword and saber qi froze as if someone had cast a freezing spell on them. At the eye of the storm, Jian Wusheng and Luo Zhan were standing just two meters away from each other.

The tip of Jian Wusheng's sword was pressed against the tip of Luo Zhan's saber. The ringing sound had come from the clash.

Both man and weapon were completely motionless for a time, but outside the platform, Hong Jianglong let out a small sigh. "Luo Zhan lost."

"It's not his fault. Jian Wusheng's cultivation level and understanding of the sword are both a tad higher than Young Luo's." Lei Xiaodan chuckled. "If anything, the fact that Young Luo managed to fight Jian Wusheng to this extent and even dealt him a heavy blow shows just how talented he is."

"He lost. There's no need to justify it," Hong Jianglong replied unconcernedly, "No one can win forever. He just needs to make it up with a victory in the future."

"Jian Wusheng is undoubtedly an excellent talent though. The Pacification Bureau will have him."

"Hahaha, I think he suits the Intelligence Department better," Lei Xiaodan argued smilingly.

“Bullshit. A genius like this should join the Pacification Bureau, fight Strangers, and protect the people from danger. If he joins the Intelligence Department, all he’ll ever do in his life are underhanded, loathsome things that can never see the light,” Hong Jianglong scoffed disdainfully. “I’m not saying that your job is unnecessary, but it’d be a complete waste of his talent.”

Hong Jianglong hmphed. “We’ll see.”

While the two men were fighting over Jian Wushen, the two participants still hadn’t made a move. One would almost think that they were frozen in time if not for the fact that the ground was splitting under their feet like a spider web.

As soon as the cracks appeared, Luo Zhan abruptly staggered and stepped away from Jian Wusheng. Every time he took a step, blood would flow out of his eyes, ears, nose and mouth and drip toward the ground. But before it hit the ground, the blood would explode soundlessly and leave tiny sword marks on the ground.

It was clear that his blood had been infected with a terrifying amount of sword intent.

Nine steps later, Luo Zhan was positively bathed in blood. He saluted Jian Wusheng and said, “The victory is yours.”

“Only because you let me,” said Jian Wusheng before returning the gesture. Judging from his shaking arms and pale complexion, it was obvious that Luo Zhan hadn’t lost without leaving his mark on the swordsman.

Both participants were teleported out of the platform after Luo Zhan surrendered.