

Stranger 441

Chapter 441: Mad Demon Spear

“Losing isn’t scary. What’s scary is losing heart.”

Song Xilai said while watching Jian Wusheng, “Like a sword, a swordsman’s body will break before it bends[1]. Like a sword, a swordsman’s heart will plow ahead no matter the opposition.”

“To have a sword without a heart is like having no sword at all.”

“But if your heart is there, then your sword will never falter even if you don’t wield a sword.”

“We swordsmen may bow our heads from time to time, but never our hearts.”

Song Xilai raised his voice, “Tell me. Is your heart still there?”

“It is!” Jian Wusheng replied loudly.

“Did it fall?”

“Never!”

“Did it bend?”

“Never!”

It was like someone had shown Jian Wusheng the light. His lost, dejected eyes slowly regained their previous clarity, and determination returned to his face once more. The dust covering his sword was removed, and its gleam was bright enough to pierce the nine heavens.

“Thank you for your guidance, senior uncle. Wusheng understands now.”

“If your heart hasn’t fallen or bent, then your sword should advance courageously as well. If a man stands in your way, kill him. If a Buddha stands in your way, kill him as well.”

“I understand, senior uncle!”

Ye Qing heard Song Xilai’s counsel as soon as he left the platform. When he saw Jian Wusheng regaining his previous confidence, he too let out a sigh of relief.

Assuming he heard their dialogue correctly, Jian Wusheng must have joined Purity Sword. In fact, Song Xilai was his senior uncle. Purity Sword would have skinned him alive had Jian Wusheng been unable to recover from this setback, so he was very happy with this outcome to say the least.

“Congratulations, Joyless.”

“Not bad at all, Joyless! To think you would overcome even Jian Wusheng.”

“Thank the heavens you managed to win, man. Otherwise, I would’ve lost everything!”

His friends congratulated him immediately after he walked up to them. Qi Xuanyun also congratulated him excitedly, "Congratulations, Brother Ye! Now that you've defeated Jian Wusheng, you're officially the ninety-eighth warrior on the Human Champions Ranking!"

"Oh right! He is, isn't he? You better treat us to dinner later, man."

"Yeah! For almost twenty years, you were just a nobody. Now, everyone and their mothers would soon know your name. If this isn't worth celebrating, what is?"

Gao Ningan and Chu Nianjiu teased Ye Qing relentlessly. The spectators nearby were shooting him envious looks as well.

If someone managed to defeat a named warrior on the Heaven, Earth and Human Champions Ranking, then the victor would take over their rank, and the loser would fall one rank lower.

If the ranker was killed, then their name would automatically disappear from the list.

Since Ye Qing defeated Jian Wusheng fair and square, he was now the new ninety-eighth warrior on the Human Champions Ranking. Jian Wusheng became the new ninety-ninth ranker, the previous ninety-ninth ranker became the new one hundredth ranker, and the previous one hundredth ranker fell out of the ranking list completely.

Ye Qing had zero interest in climbing the Human Champions Ranking, however. He even thought it was a massive pain in the ass.

Establishments seek power, and *jianghu* warriors seek fame. One of the fastest ways to become famous was to enter the Heaven, Earth and Human Champions Ranking. Countless people fought each other to the death for the chance to enter the ranking lists, and this was doubly true for the Human Champions Ranking.

The Heaven Champions Ranking was dominated by Sages, and the Earth Champions Ranking by Grandmasters. These two ranking lists were usually quite stable.

The same couldn't be said for the Human Champions Ranking, however. Some people went to extreme lengths to enter the ranking list and become famous such as issuing challenge requests or assassinating a certain target. The ranking list was refreshed so frequently that it could look completely different just a few weeks later.

This was doubly true for the last few spots on the Human Champions Ranking. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that everyone wanted a piece of them, and the things they would do to achieve that goal could only be described as heinous.

That was why the placement wasn't a good thing to Ye Qing at all. To him, it represented an endless source of trouble.

"Congratulations, Brother Ye."

It was at this moment Jian Wusheng walked over and congratulated him. His expression was sincere, and his eyes were crystal clear.

"Thank you, Brother Wusheng," Ye Qing replied politely.

To be honest, Ye Qing found such interactions irksome, but he didn't express it as a matter of course. That would just be assholeish.

“But I will win our next match,” Jian Wusheng declared seriously.

Ye Qing smirked. “Sure. I’ll be waiting.”

They talked idly with each other for a bit before Jian Wusheng bade Ye Qing goodbye, but he didn’t take his leave immediately. Instead, he spoke with Luo Zhan, Qi Xuanyun and everyone else.

While this was happening, the rest of the matches began growing more and more heated probably because they were finally past the probing stage.

On the first platform, Xu Rulin and Yang Zhao’s fight were growing bloodier and bloodier.

Xu Rulin was a border soldier, so his spear techniques were full of killing intent. He fought to kill the enemy in front of him no matter the price.

Yang Zhao was a noble gentleman from the Yang Clan of Tian Yong famed for his kindness and amiability. He tried to be courteous by avoiding lethal techniques and fighting only with the intention to win, not to maim or kill Xu Rulin.

However, Xu Rulin relentlessly exploited his courtesy and nearly dealt him a serious blow multiple times. Even a Buddha can get angry, much less a mere mortal. So, Yang Zhao went on the offensive and began wielding his silver flute like a shortsword. He moved like the wind and targeted Xu Rulin’s vital spots with every strike.

Not only that, Yang Zhao’s silver flute would release a melodious tune that could disrupt the mind from time to time. It wasn’t long before the gentleman put a couple of bloody holes in Xu Rulin’s body.

The injuries didn’t intimidate Xu Rulin, however. On the contrary, it brought out his bloodthirst in full force. He abruptly twisted his spear in the middle and split it into two short spears.

Now that he was wielding two short spears, his spear techniques were much, much different from before. If before his spear technique was like that of a general’s, strong, heavy, and powerful, now it was like he was wielding a pair of vipers. Vicious and cunning, his attacks seemed to follow no discernible form or pattern whatsoever. There were only doing whatever it took to kill the enemy.

“Kill! Kill! Kill!”

Eyes bloodshot and killing intent spilling out of his body like a fountain, Xu Rulin charged toward Yang Zhao with exactly zero regard for his life. He looked like a ghou of Fengdu who wanted nothing more than to drag Yang Zhao to the grave with him.

“What... What a monster.”

Even those watching from outside felt intimidated and suffocated by his crazed behavior. Those who were weak-willed were pale-faced and shaking already.

Turning a little white, the Harmony King wiped some sweat from his forehead and asked, “What is that spear technique?”

The Harmony King was by no means an accomplished man in any area. Even so, his royal background still gave him a broader horizon and a stronger backbone than most. That was why he was surprised to feel a not insignificant amount of pressure from Xu Rulin’s spear technique.

Hong Jianglong sat up straight and narrowed his eyes a little. “That’s the ‘Mad Demon Spear’.”

“The ‘Mad Demon Spear’ of the Northern Spear King, Xu Xiu?” Someone asked. “Yes, it must be him! The Northern Spear King is the battalion commander of the Silver Spears of Northern Xinjiang, and Xu Rulin is a border soldier. Is he a member of the Silver Spears?!”

“Xu Xiu? Are you talking about Madman Xu?” The Harmony King asked.

“Ahem... that is correct, Your Highness.” Lei Xiaodan coughed.

The Northern Spear King Xu Xiu was born in a literary clan in the capital. After realizing that the pen could govern the realm, but it was the sword that protected the realm from harm, he gave up his original calling and embarked on the martial way instead. He changed his name and joined the border troops at Northern Xinjiang as a lowly conscript. In less than twenty years, he became a battalion commander with a string of meritorious accomplishments under his belt.

Despite his background, Xu Xiu was courageous, fierce, and extremely bloodthirsty. He was always the man who led the charge during battle, and he took pleasure in killing his enemies. The number of times he was caught behind enemy lines was too numerous to count, but each time he was able to crawl back to the living to fight another day. Over time, people came to know him as Madman Xu.

Xu Buxiu was a martial genius. He had never learned martial arts until he joined the border army, but it took him only a decade or so to become a Grandmaster and invent his own spear art. That was why they also called him the Northern Spear King.

The Mad Demon Spear was a spear art Xu Xu invented after fighting countless battles, and the best way to describe it was madness and death incarnate. Once battle was engaged, the only way to stop the Mad Demon Spear was to kill its wielder, or be killed by it. The words “compromise” and “peaceful resolution” didn’t exist in its dictionary. Hence the name.

Xu Xiu was the battalion commander of the Silver Spears, and everyone who joined the battalion must learn the Mad Demon Spear. Not all practitioners of the Mad Demon Spear were Silver Spears, but all Silver Spears were practitioners of the Mad Demon Spear.

It was all thanks to the Mad Demon Spear that the Silver Spears were able to dominate the battlefield. Their allies called them the Battalion of Hundred Victories, whereas their enemies called them the Mad Army.

Although the Mad Demon Spear was pretty widespread, few people actually dared to learn it. The Mad Demon Spear was an insanely bloodthirsty spear art that only those with great willpower and fearlessness could withstand. Otherwise, the killing intent would eventually erode their mind and turn them into crazy, bloodthirsty monsters who knew nothing but murder.

“If he serves under Madman Xu, then it all makes sense,” The Harmony King remarked. He once saw Xu Xiu in a morning meeting at the capital. It was just a careless look from a far distance, but Xu Xiu’s killing intent and bloodthirst still scared him so that he nearly blacked out on the spot. That very same day, he would fall ill and spend days in bed before he finally recovered.

Back on the platform, Xu Rulin managed to catch Yang Zhao off guard and turn it into an insurmountable advantage. Just a short time later, the gentleman took a spear in the solar plexus and was forced to surrender.

Of course, Xu Rulin himself wasn't doing very well. His left arm was ripped off the sockets from a counterattack, and his forehead was cut deep enough to reveal the skull.

All things considered, Xu Rulin's injuries were actually much more severe than Yang Zhao even though he was the victor. It was because Yang Zhao cherished his life, and Xu Rulin did not.

Yang Zhao most likely could have won the match if he just gritted his teeth and soldiered on, but he would have to pay a hefty price to do so. That price might even include his future, so what was the point?

Xu Rulin's victory over Yang Zhao was celebrated even louder than Ye Qing's victory over Jian Wusheng. It was because Yang Zhao was the ninety-second warrior on the Human Champions Ranking, whereas Xu Rulin was a true nobody who was even less known than Ye Qing. At least Ye Qing was famous for his meritorious deeds and known as the "Qing Emperor Junior". But Xu Rulin? There was nothing remarkable about him besides the fact that he was a Silver Spear.

"I can't believe Yang Zhao actually lost." Someone sighed.

"Indeed. Who would've thought that only two people in the Human Champions Ranking would fail to make it to the end of the Hidden Dragon Meet?" Someone chuckled. From time to time, they would look in Jian Wusheng's direction. The swordsman was completely unperturbed by their meaningful looks and words, however.

"Yang Zhao lost only because he was caught off guard. He's really much stronger than Xu Rulin. Assuming they fought again, Xu Rulin would lose for sure," Jian Wusheng commented.

"Yeah." Ye Qing nodded in agreement. Even they wouldn't fare much better assuming they were encountering Xu Rulin's Mad Demon Spear for the first time.

"Yang Zhao would have won had he chosen to keep fighting."

"What's the point?" Luo Zhan shook his head.

"Indeed. It isn't worth it." Ye Qing chuckled.

Even if Yang Zhao won, it would be a pyrrhic victory at best. Depending on the injuries he suffered, it was highly unlikely he would be able to advance further in the Hidden Dragon Meet. But now, he still wasn't out of the Hidden Dragon Meet. With Yang Zhao's strength, it was entirely possible for him to sweep the whole losers bracket and even become the champion.

Yang Zhao had chosen wisely. If he was in his position, he would have made the same choice.

Yao Zhao and Xu Rulin teleported out of the platform at the same time.

Yang Zhao was pressing one hand to his chest wound, but he gave to Xu Rulin and the surrounding crowd a bow just like a primp and proper gentleman before returning to Yang Shixiu's side.

On the other hand, Xu Rulin only took two steps before he suddenly collapsed on the ground and spilled his blood everywhere.

While everyone was panicking, three people appeared in front of Xu Rulin at the same time. The first person was Hong Jianglong, the second was Lei Xiaodan, and the third was a fat, ugly man who was almost as broad as he was tall.

When he landed on the floor, it felt like the entire mountain was shaking a little.

No one dared to laugh in his face, however. He was Zhou Hengshan, the commander-in-chief of the Hengshan Army.

Hong Jianglong glanced at the duo before crouching on one knee and placing a finger on Xu Rulin's wrist.

"How is it?" Lei Xiaodan asked.

He's hurt very badly. His mind in particular is tethering on the brink of collapse," Hong Jianglong said seriously. "He needs immediate medical treatment."

"Xu Rulin is a soldier. Leave him to me," Zhou Hengshan declared in a tone that wouldn't accept any other answer.

"Sure." Hong Jianglong didn't stop him. Every second counted considering Xu Rulin's condition.

Zhou Hengshan ordered his men to take Xu Rulin away. The surrounding murmurs only subsided after Xu Rulin was out of sight and out of mind.

"I knew it. Can Xu Rulin even recover in time to take part in the next round?" Luo Zhan wondered out loud.

"Who knows?" Ye Qing shrugged. He was happy though. If Xu Rulin really was too injured to participate in the next round, that was one less competitor standing in his way of becoming the champion. "Let's focus on the remaining matches, shall we?"

Two matches were still in progress, and one of them was the match between Zhao Lan and Zhao Bu'er. After so much time had passed, their battle was nearing its end. From the start until the end, Zhao Lan was able to stay a step ahead of Zhao Bu'er using the sheer resilience and recovery speed of the Eight Directions Art of Begging. However, that didn't mean that Zhao Bu'er didn't put up a good fight. With the Ghost Razor, he was able to launch multiple counterattacks that could've downed Zhao Lan if not for his cultivation art. At the very end, he even shaved his own head using the Ghost Razor and allowed himself to be possessed by hundreds of ghosts in hopes of making the ultimate comeback.

Unfortunately for Zhao Bu'er, it still wasn't enough. That was what ultimately cemented his defeat.

Zhuo Henshui and Wen Xiaonuan's battle was far more one-sided, but it was very different from what most people had imagined. Almost everyone thought that Wen Xiaonuan would easily defeat Zhuo Henshui with her aura of depression and despair, but in reality, it was the other way around.

Just yesterday, the head of the Little Fist Sect and his men had attacked Zhuo Henshui to take revenge for his disciple. While Zhuo Henshui astounded everyone by overcoming not just numbers, but an entire cultivation level by grievously wounding Lu Youwang, a late-stage Spirit Master, there was no way she could've done it without a terrible price. They all expected her to lose going into the match.

They were wrong, however. From the start until the end, Zhuo Henshui was kicking Wen Xiaonuan's ass like nobody's business. For whatever reason, Wen Xiaonuan's debilitating aura was unable to affect Zhuo Henshui one bit, and it was the same for her bizarre, almost suicidal martial art.

In fact, Zhuo Henshui dealt with everything Wen Xiaonuan threw at her with one move: a simple punch. Her techniques were neither profound nor impressive, but each punch seemed powerful enough to shatter a mountain or split a river.

When Wen Xiaonuan attacked her from range, she crushed all of the projectiles with her bare fists.

When Wen Xiaonuan tried to get close, Zhuo Henshui sent her flying with a single punch.

No matter what Wen Xiaonuan tried to do, she needed only one punch to dismantle it all.

Naturally, it was only a matter of time before Wen Xiaonuan lost.

A teatime later, the curtains fell on both matches. As expected, the victors were Zhao Lan and Zhuo Henshui.

After the quarter finals was over, the participants were once again given three days of rest. The four participants in the losers group would be duking it out with each other first to decide two victors and two losers, and the two losers would duke it out to decide the seventh and eighth place. After that, the two victors would fight against the two losers who faltered in the winner's bracket to decide the sixth and fifth place.

Everyone left the mountain after Hong Jianglong declared the end of the quarter finals.

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"You defeated a formidable opponent today, Brother Zhao. Do you want to go grab a drink and celebrate a little?"

"Do you even need to ask? It's my treat tonight! How does Beauty Pageant Palace sound?"

"What are we waiting for? Let's go!"

At the foot of Flying Dragon Mountain, Zhao Lan was walking back to the city while surrounded by a bunch of people.

Zhao Lan shook his head. "Thank you very much for the offer, but I need to head back and take care of my younger brother. So please, count me out."

“Come on, Brother Zhao! Your younger brother’s only banged up a little, not dying! Surely he doesn’t need his older brother to take care of him!” Someone snorted.

However, Zhao Lan’s expression abruptly turned cold, and he grabbed the man’s neck before he could react. “What did you say?”

“Urgh... khh...” The guy’s face turned purple in just a matter of seconds. No matter how hard he struggled, he was unable to break free from Zhao Lan’s grasp.

Zhao Lan’s grip kept tightening as his eyes burned with killing intent. “Who are you to make fun of my younger brother? Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Calm down, Brother Zhao!”

“Deng Zhen was just making a joke, man! He didn’t mean anything by it!”

“Yeah, Brother Zhao! We’re all brothers here. Don’t let a harmless joke put a rift between us!”

The rest of the group hurriedly tried to talk Zhao Lan down.

With that said, Zhao Lan walked away just like that.

Zhao Lan didn’t return to the city after leaving his group. Instead, he twisted and turned until he arrived at a shabby-looking temple.

“You... You’re back, boss?”

Inside the temple, a bunch of beggars automatically opened up a path for Zhao Lan while watching him with fear in their eyes.

“How is my brother?” Zhao Lan asked.

“He... he’s doing okay. We did everything you asked us to,” a beggar answered stutteringly.

“Good.” Zhao Lan nodded and walked toward the only side room in the temple. He never even looked at the beggars.

As soon as he stepped through the entrance, the thick smell of medicine entered his nostrils. Lying on a bed was a pale-faced, frail-looking Zhao Lu.

“Big brother—cough! Cough...”

Zhao Lu struggled to sit up as soon as he saw Zhao Lan. The older brother hurriedly ran forward to support him before gently setting him down on the headboard. He then asked concernedly, “How do you feel, brother?”

“I’m fine. Dough! I’m doing much better.” Zhao Lu shot him a weak smile before asking, “How is your match today, brother?”

Zhao Lan answered simply, “I won.”

Zhao Lu cheered, "I knew you'd be able to win, big brother! You've always been so—cough! Cough!"

Zhao Lu patted his back gently while injecting wisps of internal energy into his body. He chided Zhao Lu, "You know better than to let your emotions run out of control while you're this hurt."

Zhao Lu chuckled. "Well, I can't help but be happy for you!"

Zhao Lu's weakness ignited an ember of hatred in Zhao Lan's eyes. "It's all because of that Ye Qing. If it wasn't for him, you wouldn't be hurt like this."

"It's all his fault!"

Zhao Lu hurriedly advised, "Calm down, big brother. Ye Qing is a member of the Pacification Bureau and a strong foe. Please don't get reckless because of me."

The hard lines on Zhao Lan's face softened as he consoled Zhao Lu, "Relax. I know what to do."

Zhao Lu let out a sigh of relief before deflating a bit. "Sigh. It's my fault for being so weak. I didn't want to worry you like this."

Zhao Lan patted his head and said gently, "What are you talking about? You're my brother. If I don't worry about you, who will?"

"Anyway, you should catch some rest. The sooner you heal, the better it is for everyone. Leave the rest to me!"

"Got it." Zhao Lu nodded. "You should catch some rest too, big brother. You just came back from outside."

"Yeah, I know." Zhao Lan tucked Zhao Lu back into bed and straightened out his blanket for him. Then, he quietly left the side room.

After he returned to the main hall, he glanced at the beggars and ordered in a cold, unfeeling tone, "I'm heading out for a bit. Take care of my brother. I will take your heads if he loses a single hair on his body, understand?"

"Y-Yes boss! We swear we'll take good care of your brother!" Every beggar stammered with terror.

After he exited the temple, Zhao Lan suddenly let out a small cough, and blood trickled down a corner of his lips. He looked disturbed.

Although he had dominated the fight against Zhao Bu'er from the start until the end, the warrior's final counterattack still hurt him a little.

Of course, that wasn't the point. He could heal from such an injury easily. The point was that he was unable to win against Zhao Bu'er, a middle-stage Spirit Purifier without suffering some injuries, while Ye Qing had defeated Jian Wusheng, a named warrior on the Human Champions Ranking with relatively few wounds.

Although he hadn't watched Ye Qing and Jian Wusheng's battle, he heard enough to piece together more or less everything that had happened in that fight. The long story short was that Ye Qing had defeated Jian Wusheng fair and square.

Zhao Lan was very confident in his abilities, but he wasn't that confident that he thought he could defeat Jian Wusheng. However, Ye Qing had done the impossible. It surprised him as much as it disgusted him. Jealousy and anger threatened to rip him apart from the inside.

Ye Qing had hurt his younger brother so badly that his martial foundation was damaged. Without a great boon, his future as a warrior was more or less ruined. How could he not resent Ye Qing for it? Loath him for it?

He must have revenge for his younger brother. That was why he had purposely injured Ye Qing's friend.

Because of this, Ye Qing too wanted to kill him. Compromise was impossible. The only way they would be satisfied was if the other party died.

Before, he didn't think much of Ye Qing. He was sure he could cripple the bastard fair and square and take revenge for his younger brother. Not even the Pacification Bureau would dare to interfere with the outcome of a match of the Hidden Dragon Meet. But now, things had changed. Ye Qing had surpassed his expectations and defeated Jian Wusheng. He was a real threat he couldn't afford to underestimate even a little.

If he lost, and Ye Qing killed him, there was a not insignificant chance the bastard might kill Zhao Lu as well. After all, it was common sense to wipe out one's enemies when they could. The mere thought of his brother dying caused waves of worry and anger in his head.

It was at this moment a young man appeared at the distance. "Brother Zhao! You're here? Man, it sure is difficult to find you."

"What's your business with me, Ding Xuan?" Zhao Lan glared at Ding Xuan unhappily. Right now, he felt like killing someone to vent his frustrations.

As if he couldn't feel Zhao Lan's unfriendly gaze, Ding Xuan said excitedly, "I have good news, Brother Zhao! There might be a way to save your brother!"

"What? What did you say?" Zhao Lan appeared in front of Ding Xuan and grabbed his shoulders tightly.

Chapter 443: Hanba Blood Essence

"I heard that the champion of the Hidden Dragon Meet would receive a Profound Fruit of Nature," Ding Xuan began. "You've heard of the Profound Fruit of Nature, right? It's a powerful treasure that can purify the body, repair hidden wounds, and improve one's martial talent."

"Your younger brother's martial foundation was damaged by Ye Qing, right? The Profound Fruit of Nature wouldn't just heal him back to full health, it would purify his body and improve his martial talent."

“You’re sure about this?!” Zhao Lan said in a hushed voice, barely able to control his excitement. His grip on Ding Xuan’s shoulders increased to the point where veins were clearly popping on his arms.

“Ow ow ow! You’re gonna break my shoulders, man!” Ding Xuan yelled in pain.

“Sorry. I got too excited.” Zhao Lan let go of Ding Xuan’s shoulder before asking again, “You’re sure about this? You’re not lying to me?”

Ding Xuan smiled. “Of course I’m not lying to you! I have a relative who works in the Pacification Bureau. He’s the one who told me about this.”

“Thank the heavens! My brother will recover from this ordeal!” Zhao Lan exclaimed with pure joy.

The Ding Clan wasn’t a noble clan in Tian Yong, but they were a noble clan in Chang Shan. They were also quite powerful, so Zhao Lan wasn’t surprised that they had someone inside the Tian Yong Pacification Bureau.

Zhao Lan’s delight only lasted for a few seconds, however. In fact, his expression soured the more he really thought about this.

Ding Xuan noticed his mood and aahed knowingly. “You’re worried that you won’t be able to win the Hidden Dragon Meet, right?”

Zhao Lan nodded without a word.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I have a plan!” Ding Xuan declared confidently.

“What do you mean?” Zhao Lan watched Ding Xuan with suspicion.

“Take a look at this, Brother Zhao.”

Ding Xuan produced a porcelain bottle from his shirt and slowly opened it. As soon as the cork was removed, a scalding, violent, and terrible aura spilled out of the bottle. Whatever was inside the bottle, it was so potent that its aura alone was enough to warp the space around them, wither the plants, and dry the ground.

Even a powerful warrior like Zhao Lan felt stifled by its aura.

The blood drained away from Ding Xuan’s face as he hurriedly corked the bottle once more. It was only then the terrible aura slowly dissipated.

“What is this item?” Zhao Lan asked seriously.

“This is the blood essence of the Hanba. It is said that a dead body that is destined to transform into a Hanba will never rot, that its grave will be devoid of grass, that its gravestone will be soaked in water, and that the place where it is buried would be beset by successive, severe droughts. If left untouched, it would transform into a Hanba a century later.”

“A Hanba is a naked, humanoid-shaped Stranger between six to ten meters tall. Its eyes were grown on the top of its skull, and it is capable of moving like the wind. Any realm it lays its eyes on would be struck by a severe drought, and anywhere it sets foot on would turn into a scorching hot, unlivable land as far as the eyes can see. All mature Hanbas are Disaster-class Strangers.”

Ding Xuan ended his explanation before saying, “I have three drops of Hanba blood essences with me. They’re not the blood essences of a mature Hanba, but it’s still incredibly potent. I’m not exaggerating when I say that each drop contains that power of a Half-Step Grandmaster at least.”

“If you encounter a foe that you cannot beat, you only need to consume a single drop to temporarily gain the power of a Hanba. No one will be able to stand in your way.”

“You’re going to give all three blood essences to me?!” Zhao Lan’s eyes flickered with even deeper suspicion. “There is no such thing as a free lunch in this world. Why are you doing this?”

“You’re a gifted warrior, and your younger brother is no less talented. You both have a bright future ahead of you,” Ding Xuan said frankly. “I want the two of you to join my clan. Consider these blood essences my down payment to buy your lifelong servitude.”

Zhao Lan bowed his head and didn’t say anything for a time. Seeing this, Ding Xuan smiled and said, “But of course, I won’t force you into anything you don’t want to. I’m happy just befriending you as well.”

“No, I’m fine with your terms,” Zhao Lan replied. “If I can obtain the Profound Fruit of Nature, and if it really can heal my brother back to full health, then you have my word that I will join the Ding Clan.”

“That’s wonderful!” Ding Xuan exclaimed in excitement. “With your strength and the Hanba blood essence, taking first place in the Hidden Dragon Meet will be child’s play for you!”

“I certainly hope so,” Zhao Lan replied and accepted the porcelain bottle containing the Hanba blood essences.

“Oh right, the Hanba blood essence is strong, but it can only empower you for a short time. Not only that, it will damage your body to a certain extent. You must be careful,” Ding Xuan advised.

“I understand.”

“Alright, I shan’t disturb your rest any longer.” Ding Xuan saluted Zhao Lan. “Be seeing you.”

“You too.” Zhao Lan returned the salute.

After Ding Xuan left, Zhao Lan stared the porcelain bottle in his hand for a bit before bursting into a mad laugh.

A far distance away, Ding Xuan heard Zhao Lan's laughter and felt his lips curling into a strange smile as well.

"You best not disappoint my mister, Zhao Lan."

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Three days later, the Hidden Dragon Meet resumed with the losers group tournament first. After everyone had drawn their lots, it was determined that Yang Zhao would fight against Wen Xiaonuan, and Jian Wusheng against Zhao Bu'er.

Yang Zhao was a named warrior on the Human Champions Ranking, and Xu Rulin was lucky to be able to beat him. Wen Xiaonuan didn't possess such luck.

The second the battle kicked off, Yang Zhao immediately unleashed his full power and blew a "Spring Blossoms On The Moonlit River" with his silver flute. The tune was as beautiful as it was terrifying. The sheer astral qi and spirit contained within the flute somehow recreated the fantastical scene as described in the tune and pinned Wen Xiaonuan in place, making it difficult for her to take even a single step. Until the end, the warrioress never managed to enter within three meters of Yang Zhao.

This was the first time Yang Zhao showed everyone the true strength of a named warrior on the Human Champions Ranking and why he was called the Silver Flute Scholar.

The battle between Jian Wusheng and Zhao Bu'er was even more predictable. During the battle against Zhao Lan, Zhao Bu'er had shaved his own head using the Ghost Razor and allowed himself to be possessed in hopes of making an ultimate comeback. He failed, and he remained exhausted even after three days of recovery. Rather than fighting to win, it was more like he was showing courtesy to his opponent. After a few exchanges, he threw in the towel and left the platform.

The next day, the winners group tournament was held. Ye Qing, Xu Rulin, Zhuo Henshui and Zhao Lan were supposed to compete against each other, but Xu Rulin forfeited the match because his condition was even worse than Zhao Bu'er's.

After drawing lots, Zhuo Henshui became the lucky winner to advance to the next round without having to fight anyone, leaving Ye Qing and Zhao Lan to duke it out with each other.

"Haha, this is going to be a show," Lei Xiaodan commented with a chuckle after the lots were drawn. Yang Shixiu, Zhang Hua'en and the others looked interested as well.

Almost everyone present was aware of the grudge between Ye Qing and Zhao Lan. Ye Qing had whispered, "I want to kill you with my own hands." His voice might be too low for most of the participants to hear, but not them.

They didn't know if Ye Qing was just being emotional, but the grudge between the two warriors was very real. They might not duel each other to the death, but they certainly weren't going to hold back against each other.

"Aren't you worried at all, Brother Hong?" Lei Xiaodan noticed Hong Jianglong's calm expression and teased.

Hong Jianglong replied, "What can I do? This is their fight, not mine."

"Lord Hong, the point of the Hidden Dragon Meet is to seek out the future pillars who will support the imperial court. Any death incurred during this tournament is a huge loss for Chu, so if it's possible to resolve this situation with peace, then why not?"

Fang Muyun advised.

"I agree, Mister Farseeing," Hong Jianglong echoed in agreement before shrugging. "But this is a no-holds-barred tournament where killing is permitted. It truly is out of my hands."

Fang Muyun sighed but didn't say anything more.

While they were conversing, Ye Qing and Zhao Lan had already entered the platform. Their surroundings warped until it took the form of an old-styled town. The evening lanterns were just lit, and everything seemed peaceful and tranquil in the town. The only two people in the town were smiling as well.

But of course, their smiles were anything but friendly.

"You probably have no idea how much I anticipated this moment."

Zhao Lan wore an odd smile on his face as he stared at Ye Qing.

"From the day you hurt my brother, I'd spent every second thinking how best to teach you my pain."

"That is why I hurt your friend, but it's not enough. After all, you healed him all too quickly, while my brother is still lying in bed. How is that fair? How is that fair?!"

Zhao Lan's face grew contorted. "Did you know? I wanted to say damn the consequences and cut you into many pieces back then. It is the only way I could vent this hatred inside me."

"But on second thought, I realized that killing you would be too easy; too good for the likes of you. So, I came up with a better plan."

"Do you want to hear about it?"

Ye Qing didn't say anything. His lips were curled into a small, seemingly uncaring smile. And yet, it seemed to contain all the disdain there was in the world.

It wasn't an aggressive smile, but it certainly was a scornful one.

Noting Ye Qing's disdainful expression, Zhao Lan's anger and hatred burned even brighter. "I'm going to break your bones and rip it off your sockets piece by piece. I'm going to snap every tendon in your arms and limbs. And I'm going to break your dantian and every point inside your body."

"I want you to become a cripple forever. I want you to spend the rest of your life in bed."

"That is the only way I can vent my hatred. Do you agree?"

“Are you done bullshitting?” Ye Qing said unhurriedly, “If you are, then I’m going to send you to hell now!”

“You think you can—” Zhao Lan sneered, but Ye Qing abruptly split into nine silhouettes and charged him before he could finish. In response, Zhao Lan thrust his bamboo stick forward and surrounded himself in a flurry of stick afterimages.

“Dog Beating Stick Technique: Eight Directions Beating”

All nine silhouettes were crushed by the technique, but Zhao Lan flinched. It was because he felt pain erupting from multiple parts of his body. When he looked down, he saw a thin, long wound on his chest, his arms, his legs and more parts of his body. There were nine wounds in total.

At the same time, Ye Qing appeared behind Zhao Lan with a long, slender saber held lightly beside his waist. Clearly, Zhao Lan’s defense was completely useless. Ye Qing had dished out nine cut and landed all of them.

Zhao Lan sneered and fell backward. In the process, he struck the floor with his bamboo stick like the rain pitter-pattering against a banana leaf. The stone split apart, and the cracks spread toward Ye Qing from multiple directions.

Treating the floor like a gong, Ye Qing stomped it so hard that dust was flung into the air, and the entire town shook a little.

Using the dust cloud as cover, Ye Qing disappeared and reappeared in front of Zhao Lan. The ragged warrior quickly found himself gaining a couple more wounds.

“Your saber is seriously fast,” Zhao Lan looked down on his wounds again with a sneer, “but it’s no use.”

Even as he spoke, his wounds began healing slowly. Recovery was the theme of the “Eight Directions Art of Begging”.

“Is that so?” Ye Qing mused indifferently. “If one cut isn’t enough, then two cuts will do it. If two cuts aren’t enough, then ten cuts will do it. If ten cuts aren’t enough, then a hundred cuts will do it.”

“I wonder how much blood you can bleed before you die? Show me.”

Ye Qing charged toward Zhao Lan again, and this time his illusions seemed to be anywhere and everywhere at the same time. His silhouettes looked like the leaves of autumn raining endlessly from the trees.

It looked like Ye Qing was moving randomly, but in reality his movements were perfectly compatible with the nature around him. The profoundness of dao and the strangeness of the dark could both be found in his technique.

Zhao Lan could only endure the beating one-sidedly like a grass weathering the storm.

Chapter 444: Hanba

The wounds kept appearing on Zhao Lan’s body.

The blood kept blossoming in the air and the floor.

It wasn't long before Zhao Lan was covered in blood from head to toe. The ground within ten meters of him was dyed red with his own blood, and his energies weren't nearly as strong as it was at the beginning.

"Face me directly if you dare, Ye Qing! Fight me fair and square!"

Zhao Lan roared with bloodshot eyes. "I thought you wanted to kill me? Come on, then! Come on!"

"Nah. Your idea about cutting me into pieces and crippling me yada yada sounds pretty good, so I've decided to reciprocate the favor. I'm going to bleed you until you have no more blood to bleed. What do you say? Nothing? I'll take that as a yes then."

Even as he spoke, more wounds were appearing on Zhao Lan's body. When the spectators saw Ye Qing trouncing Zhao Lan like an adult beating up a defenseless child, they couldn't help but complain,

"How come Zhao Lan couldn't put up a fight at all? I thought he was better than this!"

"Yeah. He thought he could take revenge for his brother like this? He would have a better chance begging for Ye Qing's mercy!"

The disparaging comments kept getting worse and worse, so Yang Zhao decided to put an end to it and explained, "It's not that Zhao Lan is too weak. It's just that the Qing Emperor Junior's martial arts just so happens to counter Zhao Lan's perfectly."

"Zhao Lan has poor mobility, but that's fine because his fighting style is a defensive one. He wins his battles by being on the defense and outlasting his opponents."

"However, not only is the Qing Emperor Junior's movement art profound, his saber is as swift and unpredictable as a phantom. He is the antithesis of Zhao Lan's fighting style, which is why Zhao Lan is unable to put up a fight at all."

Someone recalled Zhao Lan and Zhao Bu'er's match and voiced his doubts, "That's not right. Zhao Bu'er's movement art is pretty strong as well, but he wasn't able to defeat Zhao Lan. Why's that?"

"There are two reasons. One, Zhao Bu'er's cultivation level is slightly lower than Zhao Lan's. Two, Zhao Bu'er's movement art is strong, but he attacks far too slowly to take advantage of it, not to mention that his Ghost Razor couldn't leave a scratch on Zhao Lan. That is why he ultimately lost his battle."

Enlightened by Yang Zhao's explanation, someone asked, "At this rate, Zhao Lan is going to lose, isn't he?"

"If this is the extent of Zhao Lan's skill, then yes, he will lose for sure," Yang Zhao answered.

As Yang Zhao predicted, Zhao Lan gained dozens more wounds in just a dozen or so breaths. Each wound was deep enough to reveal the bones.

By now, Zhao Lan's "Eight Directions Art of Begging" could no longer keep up with the rate he was receiving wounds.

Zhao Lan felt himself getting weaker and weaker. This was natural considering that he was losing too much blood. But the weaker he got, the more excited he became. His bloodshot eyes were positively shining with madness.

After all, the stronger his foe, the more pleasurable it would be to ruin him later.

"Hahaha... good, very good, Ye Qing! I'm glad you didn't disappoint me!"

Zhao Lan laughed madly. "I was worried that you might be too weak to withstand what I'm about to do to you. That would've sucked out the fun and diminished my vengeance. But now? Hahaha! Hahahahaha!"

"Has Zhao Lan gone insane? Did he seriously think he can still turn things around considering his condition?" Chu Nianjiu scoffed when he heard Zhao Lan's taunt. He wasn't the only one. Most people thought the same thing as well.

But not Ye Qing. He was one of the few people who suddenly felt a bad, bad feeling about this. Pushing off the air and rounding back toward Zhao Lan like a returning swift, he swung Red Sleeve with the intent to slice the warrior into two halves.

Ye Qing could have ended this much sooner. The only reason he dragged it out was to pay back Zhao Lan for what he did to Lin Yuhuai. But now that the situation had changed, he didn't hesitate to attack with the intent to kill.

"Hahaha... Are you ready to receive my gift?"

But as Ye Qing got close, he noticed an unnatural redness creeping over Zhao Lan's face. Blue and black veins criss-crossed his face and gave him the impression of a ghoul.

The next moment, Zhao Lan opened his mouth and let loose a mighty roar. A terrible, scorching hot heat wave swept across the entire battlefield and turned the town into a sea of fire. But unlike a normal fire, this one was filled with death, epidemic, filth and squalor.

And Ye Qing was caught in the middle of it.

"Gasp! What the..."

"What an evil presence!"

To say that the sudden turn of events caught everyone by surprise would be an understatement. Even Hong Jianglong had shot up to his feet.

A Disaster-class Stranger?! Hong Jianglong's thoughts raced. Did Zhao Lan use a Disaster-class Strange Artifact or swallow the blood essence of a Disaster-class Stranger?

No, that can't be right. There is no way Zhao Lan can endure the rebound of a Disaster-class Strange Artifact or the blood essence of a Disaster-class Stranger. He can't be that stupid, can he?

One thing for certain, Ye Qing was in danger. The aura coming from the platform felt threatening even to him, much less anyone else.

“Roar!”

A furious roar erupted from the platform, and the sea of fire grew even fiercer. Some parts of the dry, sundered ground actually turned into molten lava as a silhouette slowly stepped out of the sea of fire.

The silhouette was about ten meters tall, and his face still bore some resemblance to Zhao Lan. However, he was completely bare and withered like a corpse. A sheen of dark light covered his body, and a scarlet eyeball had grown out of the top of its head. It rotated here and there like it was alive.

The ground Zhao Lan stepped on was cracked and melted. He was also giving off an inauspicious, burning aura of death, epidemic, filth and squalor.

Forget Ye Qing, even those outside the platform felt hot and uncomfortable. Everyone was losing water rapidly as the corrupted energy invaded their bodies.

“The noble man says that those who keep to the straight path shall be immune to all evils!”

When Fang Muyun saw this, he waved his sleeve and summoned a gust of wind through the peak. Like a soothing breeze in the middle of a hot summer, the breeze took away the heat and suffocation completely and left behind only refreshment and calm.

“Thank you, Mister Farseeing.”

Everyone bowed in Fang Muyun’s direction and thanked him.

“Is that the legendary Hanba?” Lei Xiaodan spoke up.

“Hanba?” Surprise overcame Yang Shixiu. “Do you mean the legendary Hanba whose gaze can curse any realm with a terrible drought, and whose footsteps can turn any land into a scorching wasteland that spans at least hundreds of kilometers?!”

Hanba was a drought ghost born from a dead body[1]. It possessed a baleful aura because its appearance always heralded the coming of death and disaster.

“Does this mean that Zhao Lan consumed the Hanba’s blood essence?” Zhang Tiancheng exclaimed in shock. “The Hanba is a Disaster-class Stranger. Even a single drop of blood essence contains an unimaginable amount of power, and... it looks like Zhao Lan consumed an undiluted drop of blood essence? Is he suicidal?”

Hong Jianglong frowned even harder and took a step forward. However, Zhou Hengshan immediately blocked his way.

“What are you doing, Lord Hong? You’re not planning on breaking the rules of the Hidden Dragon Meet, are you?” A hint of ridicule flashed within Zhou Hengshan’s narrow, flabby eyes.

“He’s right, Lord Hong. Are you really going to break the rules when you’re the host of this tournament?”

“Calm down, Lord Hong!”

A couple of people joined in and taunted Hong Jianglong as well.”

“Hmph. The Hanba is a Disaster-class Stranger, and Zhao Lan is nowhere strong enough to endure its power. He is absolutely going to succumb to its power and transform into a Stranger.”

Hong Jianglong replied coldly, “If Zhao Lan turns into a Stranger—a Hanba—I shouldn’t need to tell you what’s going to happen, do I? Do you really want to see Tian Yong burn?”

“You exaggerate, Lord Hong!” Someone laughed unkindly. “There are at least five Grandmasters present at the scene. Surely you’re not telling me that a puny Stranger like that can burn Tian Yong?”

“A puny Stranger? You don’t understand shit.” Hong Jianglong retorted mercilessly. “Do you know why we call them Disaster-class Strangers? Every time they appear, their energies would mingle and alter the world around it. Usually, it manifests itself as some sort of destructive phenomenon; a calamity.”

“Even if you managed to kill the Disaster-class Stranger instantly, the disaster that results from its appearance would not disappear until it has run its course. To say it’s a pain in the ass to deal with would be an understatement.”

“Not only that, Zhao Lan consumed the blood essence of a Hanba, one of the most terrifying Disaster-class Strangers out there. Zhao Lan wouldn’t possess its full strength as a matter of course, there is a chance that his transformation may trigger some sort of disaster. If it did happen, and innocents were harmed as a result, who’s going to take responsibility for it? Me, or you?”

“Er...” This time, no one could say a word against Hong Jianglong. His concerns were valid after all.

“Get lost!” Hong Jianglong took a step forward and slammed into Zhou Hengshan. There was a soundless rumble, and the entire mountain seemed to shudder a little.

“Wait, Lord Hong.”

Chu Wangsun suddenly broke his silence. “I am gladdened by your concern for the people, but look closely. Although Zhao Lan possessed the aura of a Disaster-class Stranger, he didn’t possess its power. If I’m not mistaken, the blood essence Zhao Lan consumed probably belonged to an immature Hanba, and even at its strongest, an immature Hanba is a Phenomenon-class Stranger at most. Theoretically speaking, this power should still be within Zhao Lan’s control, so you don’t need to worry too much about it.”

“Yeah, Brother Hong. The situation is not as bad as you think,” Lei Xiaodan also advised.

Hong Jianglong narrowed his eyes and perceived Zhao Lan's aura carefully. A moment later, his expression turned ugly.

He was hoping to interfere with the match on account of exceptional circumstances to one, prevent the worst case scenario he feared from happening, and two, to save Ye Qing. But if Zhao Lan really could control the blood essence he consumed, then his intervention would be viewed as interfering with the Hidden Dragon Meet. The consequences would be severe to put it mildly.

"Is there anything else you'd like to say, Lord Hong?" Zhou Hengshan asked with an ugly smirk that made his already ugly face even uglier than before.

"Hmph." Although Hong Jianglong was anxious, he had no choice but to return to his kiosk.

"Hahahaha!" Zhou Hengshan laughed a little before pouring salt on the wound.

"Don't worry, Lord Hong. The Qing Emperor Junior is a member of the Pacification Bureau. I doubt that Zhao Lan would dare to kill him. At worst, he's going to cripple him, so relax, okay? Hahahahaha!"

Zhou Hengshan was laughing, and Hong Jianglong was grim and silent. Everyone else was silent because they weren't foolish enough to draw the Grandmasters' attention. They could only set their sights on the platform once more.

On the platform, the Hanba Zhao Lan had transformed to looked around for a bit before charging into the sea of fire. There was a loud explosion and a scattering of flames, and a man rushed out of the fire. It was none other than Ye Qing.

Right now, the young man cut quite the sorry figure. He was completely covered in soot, and he looked like he had taken quite the blow.

While he was flying away from Zhao Lan, he swung his sleeve to change his trajectory and fall back toward the ground. He had just steadied himself when a shadow suddenly loomed over him. A millstone-sized hand was descending from above to grab him.

The second his right foot touched the scorched earth, he kicked off and leaned forward almost parallel to the ground. He just barely avoided Zhao Lan's grab.

Chapter 445: Life and Death Struggle

Boom!

The hand struck the ground where Ye Qing was a moment ago and left behind a deep pit. The earth melted, and the resulting shockwave was so hot that Ye Qing's skin turned bright red in color.

Ye Qing kicked off the ground and pushed "Illusionist's Grace" to the maximum, crossing sixty meters in an instant. But as he reached the end of his spurt, a roaring Zhao Lan rushed out of the sea of flames and reached him in the blink of an eye. He punched him before he could do anything.

Like a rock, Ye Qing punched through dozens of burning buildings before he finally slammed into a cliffside. Cracks spread out all around him like a spider web.

"Pwack!"

Ye Qing spat out a mouthful of fresh blood, but it evaporated into nothing before it even hit the ground. His whole body was burning and in pain, his blood was boiling like oil, and his headspace was overflowing with filthy aura. His head felt like a lead weight, and it was pounding like a jackhammer.

“The Hanba...”

Ye Qing’s pupils contracted as a scorching aura of death, epidemic, drought and filth burned all around him. Zhao Lan’s appearance and aura now resembled the legendary Stranger perfectly.

The Hanba was synonymous to drought, famine, epidemic and death. Just by existing, it could turn every square inch of land within hundreds of kilometers into a barren wasteland. It was a Disaster-class Stranger through and through.

“A Disaster-class Stranger, huh...?”

Powerlessness welled inside Ye Qing as the horrifying aura pressed against his skin from every direction, but he quickly pushed the feeling away. If he had the time to be afraid, then he had time to find a way to survive this.

Surrender was impossible not because he didn’t want to, but because it couldn’t be done. The teleportation that occurred after someone called for surrender wasn’t instantaneous. There was a lull before the participant was teleported away. If the participant attacked or was attacked during that time, then the teleportation would be canceled.

Death was a shadow that accompanied every duel. In fact, many people had used duels as a justification to kill their opponents for whatever reason. It wasn’t explicitly mentioned, but this was permitted in the Hidden Dragon Meet as well.

In other words, the only way he might survive this was to kill Zhao Lan.

The reason Zhao Lan turned into the Hanba could only be because he had consumed its blood essence. It was commonly known that consuming the blood essence of a powerful Stranger could grant a warrior a tremendous boost in power. However, doing this greatly taxed the body, and the boost was only temporary. Moreover, the more potent the blood essence, the greater the warrior’s physique and cultivation level must be to endure its power. The amount of time the boost would last was dependent on the same factors as well.

Zhao Lan had consumed the blood essence of a Hanba, a monstrous existence that sat on the top rung even among Disaster-class Strangers. He had no idea how Zhao Lan, a mere middle-stage Spirit Purifier, managed to consume the blood essence without exploding or losing his mind in an instant, but there was no way he could maintain this transformation for long.

This meant that he could endure until the Hanba’s blood essence had run its course, or until Zhao Lan’s body broke down from the pressure.

Ye Qing came up with a plan very quickly. As the cliff walls shook ominously around him, he leaned forward and kicked off the ground like a bolt of lightning. The second he was gone, Zhao Lan appeared from above and punched the spot where Ye Qing was a while ago. The cliff wall exploded and scattered rocks everywhere.

This time though, Zhao Lan was ready. As soon as his punch missed, Zhao Lan twisted around and kicked off the cliff walls with both legs. His speed was such that he split apart the sea of fire with a deafening sonic boom.

Ye Qing had just picked up Zhao Lan with his demonic thought when the Hanba incarnate reached him and slapped him in the back. His protective yin and yang energy crumbled into pieces as he skipped across the ground like a skipping rock. Every time he hit the ground, a deep pit would be left behind.

After rolling uncontrollably for about fifty meters or so, Ye Qing abruptly kicked off the ground and shot toward a different direction. However, Zhao Lan immediately appeared beside him and punched him into the ground with his millstone-sized fists.

Before Ye Qing could resist, Zhao Lan stepped on his back and pushed him further into the pit. The ground ten meters around him crumbled and turned into molten lava.

“You have a good movement art, don’t you? You like to run, don’t you? Keep running then!”

Zhao Lan rotated his foot left and right, and the ground crumbled a couple more meters deeper.

“Run!”

“Run!”

After grinding Ye Qing several times with his soles, Zhao Lan raised his foot and stomped on Ye Qing again, and again, and again. Every time he did this, Zhao Lan would let out an exultant, violent roar. Heaven and earth shook as molten lava continuously poured into the deep pit.

“Ru—”

Zhao Lan was about to bring his foot down again when a fist thrust out of the pool of lava and smashed into his calf, causing him to stagger backward. At the same time, a giant ape burst out into the open, caught Zhao Lan by the waist, and slammed his back into a protruding rock.

The rock shattered, and the two men collapsed on the ground. A vicious snarl escaping his throat, the Chaos Demon Ape Ye Qing had transformed into sat on top of Zhao Lan’s body and punched him in the head again and again.

He wasn’t going to stop until the sonuvabitch was dead.

Every punch pushed Zhao Lan’s head deeper into the ground. The Hanba was as fast as the wind, so Zhao Lan was much faster than before even though he was originally a slowpoke. Moreover, the “Illusionist’s Grace” was really an evasion art that functioned best within a certain range, not a long-distance movement art. If he stuck to his previous course of action, forget getting away from Zhao Lan, he would be lucky to last even thirty seconds.

Since running away wasn’t an option, then he would fight Zhao Lan head on. The bastard wasn’t the only one who could transform!

Ye Qing threw at least thirty punches in just the span of a few breaths. It was like he was playing the drum, not fighting for his life.

Suddenly, Zhao Lan caught Ye Qing's fists with both hands and slowly pulled them away from his face. In response, Ye Qing snarled and did everything he could to resist the unnatural strength. The contest of strength was such that the ground beneath them cracked everywhere like a giant spider web.

The next moment, Zhao Lan lifted his head and smashed his skull into Ye Qing's face. Caught completely off guard, Ye Qing felt like a meteor just punched him in the face. It damned near knocked the lights out of his head and made him see stars.

Before Ye Qing could recover his wits, Zhao Lan roared and smashed his head into Ye Qing's face again. And again. And again. Several hits later, the young man's face was barely recognizable. A final, deafening hit sent him crashing into the ground and leaving behind a long, deep trail.

Freed from his bindings, Zhao Lan immediately leaped to his feet and stepped on Ye Qing's chest with his right foot. A crazed laugh escaped his chest as he said, "I knew you wouldn't disappoint me! Keep it up, Ye Qing! The more you struggle, the happier you'll make me! Hahahahaha!"

As he laughed, Zhao Lan grabbed Ye Qing's left arm with both hands and pulled with all his might.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRGHHHHHHHH!!!"

Ye Qing let out a bloodcurdling scream as his entire arm was ripped free from its sockets. As he was in his giant form, the amount of blood he spilled seemed great enough to fill a lake.

"No!"

"Joyless!"

"Brother Ye!"

Everyone outside the platform blanched when they saw this. Lin Yuhuai, Chu Nianjiu and Qi Xuanyun could stand this no longer and charged toward the platform.

"Tsk tsk, how cruel." Zhou Hengshan clicked his tongue without bothering to hide his evil grin at all. "But cruelty is my rice and soup[1], so it's perfect."

"Oh right. Interfering with the Hidden Dragon Meet is a serious crime, Lord Hong. Are you sure you don't want to stop your subordinates before it's too late?"

"Back off! Anyone who interferes with the Hidden Dragon Meet will be punished by the law!" a grim-faced Hong Jianglong growled at Chu Nianjiu and Qi Xuanyun.

"But my lord! Joyless is—" Lin Yuhuai tried to argue.

"I said, back off!" A terrific aura abruptly burst out of Hong Jianglong's body. His energies were such that the peak was covered in black clouds and white lightning in just the blink of an eye.

"Remember. This is a no-holds-barred tournament where killing is permitted."

Left with no choice, the trio reluctantly returned to their original spots.

“Hahaha, well said, Lord Hong! You truly are a fair and righteous official! Hahaha...”
Zhou Hengshan laughed loudly and tauntingly.

Hong Jianglong didn’t say anything.

Some people looked worried, some people looked delighted, some people were uncaring, and some people looked sympathetic. For a time, all sorts of expressions could be found on everyone’s face.

“I told you I’m going to cripple you, and this is just the beginning! Hahahahaha!”

Back on the platform, Zhao Lan was grabbing Ye Qing’s ripped arm and laughing crazily.

“Fog Demon!”

On the ground, Ye Qing’s complexion was pallid and dull, but his eyes looked as calm as ever. A gigantic demonic Buddha abruptly appeared in the sky with one hand pointed toward the sky, and the other pointed toward the earth. It was a silent yet arrogant declaration that the demon stood above both heaven and earth.

By the time Zhao Lan saw it, it was already too late. The demonic Buddha sent him flying with a single punch.

“Hahaha! Good, good! Keep struggling! It wouldn’t be fun otherwise!”

However, Zhao Lan returned even faster and returned the gesture with a punch of his own, and unlike Zhao Lan, the demonic Buddha was much, much frailer. One punch was all the Hanba incarnate needed to dissolve it into a cloud of demonic qi.

This was just the beginning though. The Buddhist chanting in the air grew louder as the thick cloud of demonic qi surrounded Zhao Lan from all sides. At the same time, the Moko Boundless Chains wrapped around his body and attempted to pin him in place.

“Hahaha! You think you can stop me with just this?”

Zhao Lan laughed again and unleashed a terrible shockwave. The earth was baked, cracked, and melted instantly like nine suns had suddenly appeared in the sky.

The chains were snapped like twigs, and so much of demonic qi was blown away that the Boundless Mara Buddha was exposed.

Bang!

Not one to let go of an opportunity, Zhao Lan appeared in front of the Boundless Mara Buddha and threw a devastating punch.

The Boundless Mara Buddha shook violently as its chains clattered, and its demonic qi scattered everywhere. Despite the terrible blow, it valiantly manifested the Kingdom of Buddha and Hell and attempted to exorcise Zhao Lan with darkness.

The Boundless Mara Buddha was forged from Jing Hui’s corpse, and Jing Hui was a Grandmaster. Therefore, Zhao Lan wasn’t able to shatter it in a single hit.

However, the Boundless Mara Buddha was also just a Soustealer-class Strange Artifact. It was nowhere as powerful as Zhao Lan in his current form. Just a few breaths later, Zhao Lan was able to dismantle both its offense and defense and land another devastating punch.

The Boundless Mara Buddha fell like a meteor, but the Fog Demon quickly regained control and blocked Zhao Lan's way yet again.

Maybe it was because he was getting impatient with the Boundless Mara Buddha's incessant harassment, but Zhao Lan decided that enough was enough. Roaring, he charged toward Ye Qing as soon as he sent it flying for a third time.

Now is the time!

Ye Qing's eyes glittered like the stars as Zhao Lan closed the distance between them. At the same time, a thick fog gushed out of his body and enveloped both him and Zhao Lan.

"Huh? What's with that fog? I can't see anything!"

"How strange. I can't pierce through the fog even with my spirit!"

The people outside the platform lost sight of Ye Qing and Zhao Lan as soon as the fog spread. Not only that, their spirit was unable to pierce the fog and see what was happening as well.

The next moment, a series of terrible shockwaves and waves of fire burst out of the center of the battlefield. It was accompanied by a series of angry roars and bloodcurdling screams.

"Sigh, what a shame..."

"Indeed, it is a terrible loss for Chu."

"The Qing Emperor Junior is destined for greatness. It's too bad that his luck ran out too soon."

"Of all the people the Qing Emperor Junior could fight, it just had to be Zhao Lan. But then again, who would've thought that Zhao Lan would obtain the blood essence of a Hanba?"

"There is something seriously wrong with Zhao Lan's head. Who in their right mind would go to such lengths over a petty grudge?"

As the shockwaves washing out of the fog grew weaker and weaker, everyone thought that the battle was approaching its end. Not a single person on the peak thought well of Ye Qing's chances.

But when the fog faded away, and a single silhouette came into view, their eyes and their mouths slowly widened into huge Os. For a few seconds, no one could say anything. Then, explosive cries of astonishment and disbelief broke out at the same time.

"Impossible! Impossible!"

"My eyes must be playing tricks on me!"

"What the hell happened?"

"How is Ye Qing still alive?"

Chapter 446: I Won, Brother

Everyone was expecting Zhao Lan to be the one left standing on the platform, but no, it was Ye Qing. His face was a right mess, blood was jutting out of his stump like a fountain, and his whole body was covered in blood. Anyone could tell that he was in a terrible condition.

But he was alive.

And Zhao Lan was nowhere to be seen.

As impossible as it might seem, Ye Qing's survival could only mean Zhao Lan's death.

But how?

How did Ye Qing do the impossible?

They had envisioned all kinds of possibilities while the fog covered up the last bits of the battle. They had imagined Zhao Lan ripping Ye Qing's remaining limbs off, Zhao Lan destroying Ye Qing's dantian and meridians, even Zhao Lan beating Ye Qing to death with his bare hands.

The one thing they didn't expect was Ye Qing to live, and Zhao Lan to die.

For a time, the entire peak was engulfed in a strange, oppressive silence. Even Fang Muyun and Chu Wangsun were looking at Ye Qing with indecipherable expressions on their faces.

"How... How on earth did Zhao Lan lose? I thought he consumed the Hanba's blood essence?" The Harmony King rubbed his eyes furiously, but Ye Qing's silhouette didn't waver. Zhao Lan didn't just lose the battle, he was so dead they couldn't even find a speck of him on the battlefield.

"Incredible. He is everything we hope to find in our youth and more," Lei Xiaodan showered Ye Qing with praise after a long exhalation.

"Do you know what happened, Xiaodan? Tell us already!" The Harmony King immediately spun on the Judicial Commissioner. Everyone else looked curious as well.

Lei Xiaodan began his explanation, "After consuming the Hanba's blood essence, Zhao Lan was as strong as a Half-Step Grandmaster. This power comes with a huge flaw, however. It's only a temporary power boost. As soon as the blood essence had run out of power, Zhao Lan would be weaker than he ever was."

"Young Ye knew this, which was why he fought to drag out the battle as much as possible. In fact, Zhao Lan's power was already declining when he was fighting against Young Ye's Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact. Zhao Lan himself noticed this, which was why he stopped wasting time on the Strange Artifact and went for Young Ye."

"Unfortunately for him, Young Ye was ultimately stronger than him. He used that strange fog and something to kill Zhao Lan and win the match."

Everyone fell silent for a time. Lei Xiaodan made it easy, but Zhao Lan was as strong as a Half-Step Grandmaster after he consumed the Hanba's blood essence. Forget a late-stage Spirit Purifier like

Ye Qing, not even some of them could claim that they could definitely drag out the fight long enough to kill Zhao Lan.

Despite the massive gap in power, Ye Qing had kept his cool, figured out the way to defeat Zhao Lan, used his strength to delay Zhao Lan long enough for him to start weakening, and even killed Zhao Lan at the very end. What a monster!

If before they thought that the nickname “Qing Emperor Junior” was just the ramblings of the foolish and ignorant, now they were really starting to think that Ye Qing deserved it.

“Forgive my ignorance, but do you know what sort of method or technique the Qing Emperor Junior used to turn the tables around, Lord Lei?”

Lei Xiaodan shook his head. “My apologies, but I would like to know that answer myself. Mayhaps Lord Hong can answer our question?”

Everyone turned to look at Hong Jianglong, but the man was grim-faced and unmoving like a statue. He clearly had no intention of entertaining their question.

There was a golden flash, and Ye Qing was finally teleported out of the platform.

“Joyless!”

“Are you okay, Joyless?”

“What medicine do you need?”

Lin Yuhuai, Chu Nianjiu, Qi Xuanyun, Gao Ning'an and more had been waiting for him. They immediately swarmed the young man and showered him with concern.

“I’m fine.” Ye Qing raised his head with difficulty and shot them a smile, though it was difficult to tell since his face had taken a literal pounding from a pseudo Disaster-class Stranger.

He then looked at Lin Yuhuai and declared in a solemn voice, “I won, brother.”

“Joyless...” Tears welled in Lin Yuhuai’s eyes. Although he wasn’t the reason Ye Qing and Zhao Lan clashed—he was just an unfortunate victim who was caught in an insane man’s scheme—but it was a fact that Ye Qing tried to kill Zhao Lan because the bastard had hurt him. If it wasn’t for him, there was a chance this wouldn’t devolve into a life-or-death struggle, small as it was.

But before Lin Yuhuai could say anything, Ye Qing continued, “Hehe, thank the *heavens* I bloody won, man! I bet ten thousand silvers that I would kick that bastard’s ass! Had I lost, I would be completely broke! I swear, my heart had never raced harder than just now!”

“Er...” Lin Yuhuai swallowed whatever words he wanted to say back down his throat. It looked like he was touched for nothing.

“So? What do you all think?” Ye Qing winked at his companions proudly and arrogantly. “I’m super strong, aren’t I? Do you want to know I turned the tables around and killed Zhao Lan in the end?”

“Yes!” Qi Xuanyun replied honestly like the good boy he was. The surrounding people couldn’t help but incline their ears in his direction as well.

“Hehe, the answer is... I’ll tell you later!” Ye Qing cackled.

“You and your jokes! Well, at least that proves that you’re okay.” Chu Nianjiu let out a sigh of relief.

“Of course I’m okay. I’ll be better than okay if someone can give me some of his wine!” Ye Qing grinned.

“Keep dreaming, bud. Can you even open your mouth right now?” Chu Nianjiu rejected the request mercilessly.

“Heavens, my friend is so heartless he wouldn’t offer me a drink even when I’m on the brink of death.” Ye Qing sighed sorrowfully. “What’s even the point of living anymore? I think I’ll just die.”

As soon as he said this, Ye Qing collapsed on the floor. He wasn’t moving.

“Joyless?!”

“Brother Ye!”

Lin Yuhuai and Qi Xuanyun exclaimed in shock and horror.

Chu Nianjiu’s wine gourd slipped out of his hand and hit the ground as he blurted, “You gotta be kidding me! You’re actually dying because I didn’t give you my wine?!”

It was at this moment Hong Jianglong appeared next to Ye Qing and checked his pulse. A few seconds later, his expression turned extremely ugly. “Hmph! What was he thinking acting like he was fine when he’s anything but?”

“Is Joyless okay, my lord?” Lin Yuhuai asked worriedly.

“His spirit is spent, his mind is damaged, his internal organs are covered in wounds, his blood vessels are damaged, and he’s missing an arm. He’s not dead yet, but he’s going to die if we don’t get him treatment soon,” Hong Jianglong uttered coldly. “What the hell are you guys still standing here for? Take him to the Pacification Bureau already!”

“R-Right! At once!” Everyone responded.

“Actually, never mind. I’ll take him there myself.” Suddenly, Hong Jianglong changed his tune. “Mister Farseeing, can you take over as the host for a bit? I’ll return as soon as I take him to the Pacification Bureau. His condition can’t wait.”

"It's more important to save lives. Please do as you wish, Lord Hong," Fang Muyun replied quietly.

"Thank you for your understanding." Hong Jianglong nodded and carried Ye Qing into his arms. A flash later, he was soaring down the peak.

.....

After Hong Jianglong reached the foot of Flying Dragon Mount, Hong Jianglong suddenly said, "There's no one here. You can stop pretending now."

"My lord..." Ye Qing opened his eyes and coughed a little.

"So? What did you want to talk about?" Hong Jianglong asked. He was the one who checked Ye Qing's pulse after he collapsed, so he knew that the young man was faking unconsciousness. The reason he did this was because he had something to tell him.

"Can you please find out where Zhao Lan got the Hanba's blood essence?" Ye Qing asked weakly.

Hong Jianglong understood his meaning immediately. "You think that someone gave Zhao Lan the Hanba's blood essence to kill you? Maybe the same one who lured you to the Corpse Ship last time?"

"Got it in one." Ye Qing nodded.

"Do you have evidence?" Hong Jianglong asked.

Ye Qing shook his head. "No. It's just a feeling, but I don't think I'm wrong. You know as I do how precious a Hanba's blood essence is, and I highly doubt anyone from Ragged Villa can afford such a thing. Even if they could, they wouldn't waste it on a disciple."

A Stranger's blood essence had many uses. It could be used to forge Strange Artifacts, create pills, cultivate martial arts, and even nurture or awaken a Stranger's bloodline. It was as valuable as a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact, if not more. It made little sense that the Ragged Villa would give Zhao Lan a Hanba's blood essence just to win the Hidden Dragon Meet.

Of course, there was a chance Zhao Lan had come across the blood essence on his journey, but it was worth looking into regardless.

"Makes sense." Hong Jianglong agreed with Ye Qing's assessment. "I'll send someone to investigate Zhao Lan's residence and everyone he has contact with as soon as possible."

Another question occurred to Hong Jianglong afterward. "If you suspect that Zhao Lan did not come by the Hanba's blood essence by accident, then why didn't you keep him alive for interrogation?"

"Trust me, I want to. But had I held back during that match, then I wouldn't be here to speak to you at all. Cough! Cough!"

When Zhao Lan sensed that the blood essence was running out of power and charged him, Ye Qing immediately used the Child of Blood Demon to blind Zhao Lan in both sight and spiritual perception. It was to buy more time and deplete the blood essence's power even more.

The Child of Blood Demon was created from the original fog he obtained from the Corpse Ship, so of course it inherited its anomalous qualities as well. Besides disrupting one's senses, it could also induce hallucinations in his target.

When Zhao Lan's power had declined to a certain degree, Ye Qing used up all of his spiritual power and executed a full-powered "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art".

Zhao Lan wasn't just ungodly strong after transforming into a Hanba, he was impervious to all physical damage as well. At the very least, his fist art, saber art and more couldn't get through at his current level. Therefore, he could only attack Zhao Lan's mind.

The "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art" had less application than the "Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul", but it was deadlier. Sin and karmic hindrance also fueled its power, and the Hanba was *the* representative of disaster and calamity. It would take more than several books to detail the sheer amount of sin and karmic hindrance a Hanba had accrued in a lifetime, much less all of them. Therefore, the Hanba was the perfect prey for the "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art".

As expected, the "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art" was able to inflict serious damage to Zhao Lan on the first strike, but he wasn't dead yet. So, Ye Qing consumed a golden dragon-serpent rune to restore his spirit to the max before unleashing "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art" a second time. It was only then the Hanba incarnate finally burned to ash.

Ye Qing didn't make a single mistake or show a shred of mercy throughout the process. He couldn't. After all, one misstep was all it took to ruin it all, and the price of failure was death.

Of course, the other reason he used the Child of Blood Demon was to prevent the spectators—or more specifically, Chu Wangsun—from finding out that he could use the "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art".

Chu Wangsun already suspected that he was the "thief" who took his Duckweed Flower and forced him to kill his student back then, and he had used the saber art against him before. To reveal the "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art" right now would be the same as admitting he was guilty. Heavens only know how much trouble he would be in.

He had no intention of entering the frying pan so soon after he leaped out of the fire. He just knew that it was going to be a most miserable experience.

Chapter 447: Food Is Heaven

"It was a joke. It's already a miracle you managed to survive considering the circumstances." Hong Jianglong sighed.

"You're a great man, my lord." Ye Qing paid the Pacification Commissioner a compliment.

"Are you sure you want to spend your energy licking my boots?" Hong Jianglong snorted. "Anyway, it's going to take between ten to fifteen days to treat your injuries. Moreover, it's imperative that they are treated as soon as possible, or the sequelae

will haunt you for a very, very long time. It's unfortunate, but I think your journey in the Hidden Dragon Meet ends here."

"It's fine. I'm satisfied with just being a quarter finalist." Ye Qing smiled. He was already planning to throw in the towel after killing Zhao Lan anyway. The fact that Zhao Lan went super saiyan on him just made things easier. He preferred keeping a low profile much more than the opposite.

"Hmph! A young man shouldn't be this unambitious! You disappoint me!" Hong Jianglong ranted.

"Hehe—cough! Cough!" Ye Qing spat out bloody spittle before saying, "By the way, and I apologize for my rudeness, but can you move as we speak, my lord? I'm seriously gonna die if you keep standing here and doing nothing!"

"Hah! The good die young, and the bad lives forever. Seeing how talkative you are, I'm certain you'll live for another thousand years!" Hong Jianglong sneered.

Ye Qing: "... *Cursing a patient is bad form, bud.*

.....

The duel between Ye Qing and Zhao Lan spread like wildfire throughout Tian Yong in just a matter of days, and everyone was talking about the Qing Emperor Junior.

Some people praised that Zhuo Henshui and Ye Qing were once-in-a-century geniuses. Rare even among the geniuses of the Hidden Dragon Meet, they were expected to surpass the likes of Yang Zhao and Jian Wusheng in terms of accomplishments very soon.

Their expectations were well justified. Zhuo Henshui, a late-stage Spirit Purifier, had fought the late-stage Spirit Master in a one-on-one duel and defeated him resoundingly, whereas Ye Qing, also a late-stage Spirit Purifier, had killed Zhao Lan after he consumed the Hanba's blood essence and temporarily gained the power of a Half-Step Grandmaster.

Since ancient times, everyone loved a good the-weak-defeat-the-strong story, much less two of them.

Unfortunately, Ye Qing's injuries were too severe to continue participating in the Hidden Dragon Meet after his battle with Zhao Lan. This disappointed many of his supporters.

Since Ye Qing had forfeited the tournament, Zhuo Henshui automatically became the champion of the winners group. This made her one of, if not the luckiest Hidden Dragon Meet participant to date.

Several days later, the rankings in the losers group were decided as well.

Zhao Bu'er was pit against Wen Xiaonuan. Since Wen Xiaonuan won, Zhao Bu'er was ranked at the eighth place, and Wen Xiaonuan the seventh place.

The fifth and sixth place should've been decided by the battle between the loser of the winners group and the winner of the winners group. However, Xu Rulin and Ye Qing both had to forfeit the tournament due to severe injuries, and Zhao Lan was straight up dead. As a result, Yang Zhao and Jian Wusheng advanced to the next round by default.

Based on the participants' performance and when they were eliminated from the tournament, it was decided that Xu Rulin was the sixth place, Zhao Lan was the fifth, and Ye Qing the fourth.

Although Zhao Lan died, his name wasn't removed from the ranking list. This was a rule the Hidden Dragon Meet had been practicing since a long time ago.

After that, Jian Wusheng and Yang Zhao fought to decide who was the second and first runner-up. This was a battle between the ninety-ninth and the ninety-second named warriors of the Human Champions Ranking, and both men were quite famous due to their youth, strength, and accomplishments. Naturally, it was a most entertaining fight.

Maybe it was because Jian Wusheng was enlightened after his duel against Ye Qing, or maybe it was because Song Xilai had taught him a thing or two, but Jian Wusheng's "No Life, No I" was obviously greater than what it was before. His sword heart was clear, his qi was strong, and his intent was like an unending river. Despite the gap between their placement, he was able to give Yang Zhao a serious challenge.

However, Yang Zhao had also grown stronger since his battle against Xu Rulin. There was nothing Jian Wusheng could throw at him to catch him off guard or knock him off his stride. Like an unshakeable mountain, he ultimately outlasted Jian Wusheng with a bigger reservoir of astral qi and spirit and became the champion of the losers group.

And so only one match was left; the match between the champion of the winners group and the champion of the losers group. Everyone was looking forward to it.

The people debated who would become the ultimate champion of the Hidden Dragon meet as a matter of course, and at the beginning, the debates were fairly harmless. But over time, it grew more and more heated until people were literally fighting each other to prove that they were right, never mind that it was completely pointless. The major gambling dens in Tian Yong were having the time of their lives accepting bets from anyone and everyone. When the betting window was finally closed, the final prize pools were staggering to put it mildly.

"Who do you think would win, Joyless? Zhuo Henshui or Yang Zhao?"

Ye Qing, Chu Nianjiu, Lin Yuhuai and Gao Ning'an were currently dining in a restaurant called Food Is Heaven. As everyone and their mothers were discussing the battle between Zhuo Henshui and Yang Zhao and predicting the outcome, Chu Nianjiu couldn't help but look to Ye Qing to obtain his opinion.

Speaking of Ye Qing, he looked much better than the day he stepped off the platform. His face was back to normal, and his arm had regrown as well. It was almost as if he had never been injured in the first place.

While his injuries were quite severe, his flesh wounds were just that, flesh wounds. Losing an arm would be a crippling injury for most warriors, not to mention that his internal organs, muscles, meridians, bodily points and more were severely injured as well. However, his vitality was many times stronger than most since he possessed the Chaos Demon Ape Body. He could literally come back to life from a single drop of blood, not to mention that the Nature's Water was a miraculous elixir that could treat most wounds. It was why it only took him a while to recover physically.

But only physically. The Hanba's energies were filled with curses of epidemic, disaster, filth and more, and they were deeply entrenched in every corner of his body like maggots. The worst part

was that they constantly attacked his mind and spirit, forcing him to mentally shield himself every second of the day. It was mentally exhausting to say the least.

Not even the Nature's Water or golden dragon-serpent runes could eliminate the energies entirely, leaving him with no choice but to root them out bit by bit. To this day, he had only eliminated about seventy or eighty percent of the energies.

That was why he and his friends were here at Food Is Heaven today. He caught wind that Food Is Heaven was launching a strange dish recently that was, assuming it wasn't pure advertisement, beneficial to his recovery.

Food Is Heaven was both a restaurant and a massive, enigmatic faction in the *jianghu*. It had branches in many places, and they cook strange cuisines for a living.

A strange cuisine was, as its name implied, a cuisine that were based on Strangers.

There were Strangers of all shapes, sizes, and abilities out there, so of course a meal made from their body parts contained all sorts of effects as well. Some could heal injuries, improve one's martial talent, increase one's realm and more. Not only that, they were almost as potent as a specialized pill or a natural treasure. It was why *jianghu* warriors greatly enjoyed strange cuisines.

As a matter of course, most Strangers were born from filth or anomalies and so were harmful or outright lethal to eat directly. However, all things in life had an antithesis. Through the proper mixing, blending and processing of various ingredients, one could convert the negative effects into positives.

Obviously, this required a treasure trove of knowledge and great expertise. It wasn't a job anyone could perform as they pleased.

A person who cooked strange cuisines was called a strange cook. It was a profession like any other, but there were much less strange cooks than there were doctors, pillmakers, talisman masters and more.

All strange cooks were revered in the *jianghu*. They were considered honored guests even among influential officials and noble clans.

Food Is Heaven was a major business that specifically served strange dishes to customers. They owned a tremendous number of strange cooks, and a small percentage of them were considered gods or demons of cooking in the entire *jianghu*. They were a powerful faction few dared to offend to put it mildly.

But why would such a massive, popular establishment be considered enigmatic? It was because the identity of the owner was a complete mystery. Some people thought that Food Is Heaven didn't have an owner at all, and that they were just a loose coalition of strange cooks helping with each other's needs. Regardless, the truth remained a mystery to this day.

Of course, none of this concerned Ye Qing's group at all. Today, they were here to feast.

"I don't know, and I don't care," Ye Qing answered while lying lazily against his chair. "I don't have a stake in this, so why would I care?"

"But I did, so please?" Gao Ning'an urged.

Instead of answering his question, Ye Qing looked at Gao Ningnan and asked, “Who did you place your bets on?”

“Zhuo Henshui, of course!” Gao Ningnan replied.

Ye Qing raised an eyebrow. “Of course, he says. If you’re so sure, then why even ask for my opinion?”

Gao Ningnan replied matter-of-factly, “It’s because I’m not entirely confident in my insight, duh! You’re a much better warrior than me, so your insight is more trustworthy than my own. So? Who do you think is gonna win?”

Ye Qing mulled it over seriously before answering, “I think Zhuo Henshui would win as well.”

“And why’s that?” Chu Nianjiu asked.

“It’s just a feeling.” Ye Qing explained, “It’s been several years since Yang Zhao entered the Human Champions Ranking, and everyone has more or less figured out his abilities. On the other hand, Zhuo Henshui was a nobody until she had a meteoric rise to fame. No one knows how strong she is or what her abilities are, but one thing for certain, she’s kicked the ass of a late-stage Spirit Master before. With that in mind, I believe Zhuo Henshui has a better chance of becoming the champion.”

“Yes, I think so too.” Lin Yuhuai also nodded in agreement. “Yang Zhao has been famous for a long time, but I never heard that he was strong enough to take down a late-stage Spirit Master. On the other hand, Zhuo Henshui defeated Lu Youwang fair and square, so I think Zhuo Henshui had a bigger chance of winning as well.”

“I’m glad to hear that!” Gao Ningnan patted his chest. “When I get back, I’m gonna bet every coin in my secret stash on Zhuo Henshui. If she wins, I’ll have enough money to marry not one, not two, but three concubines at the very least!”

Ye Qing rolled his eyes at Gao Ningnan before shooting him down mercilessly, “Why don’t you start by getting a girlfriend before you dream about getting a concubine, virgin.”

Gao Ningnan: “...” *You didn’t need to stab me in the heart like that.*

“Apologies for the wait, customers, but your food has arrived.”

While they were speaking, a man wearing a fiery red robe came over with a large tray. It was one of the waiters of Food Is Heaven. The word “Food” surrounded by a circle sewn to the center of the robe. It was a design unique to the waiters of Food Is Heaven.

The large tray was square-shaped and absolutely massive. It was filled with several different dishes.

The waiter was moving quite quickly, but his hand was perfectly stable. Not a drop of oil had spilled out of the containers. Clearly, the waiters of Food Is Heaven possessed a certain level of cultivation.

“Bathing Beauty, simmer-fried koi, Blooming Wealth, Everlaughing and Where Goes The Soul. That’s everything you ordered, am I right?” The waiter recited.

Most of the dishes had a wonderful, poetic name, but the appearance of the dishes... Well, they were unique to say the least.

Chapter 448: Strange Cuisine

“Bathing Beauty?”

Chu Nianjiu stared wide-eyed at the strange dish named “Bathing Beauty”, blurting, “But where’s the beauty?”

Bathing Beauty was a stick, milky white soup that looked suspiciously like snot. It was filled with clumps of black hair. No one could understand why it was called Bathing Beauty when it should rightfully be called Snot and Hair.

“This soup is made from the honey of the Cotton Rose Flower and the roots of the Beauty Grass. It can invigorate the mind and strengthen the foundation.”

The waiter was completely unperturbed by their reactions. It was clear that he was used to such a scene. “Since the honey is the water, and the grass is the beauty, there is nothing wrong with naming it the Bathing Beauty, is there?”

The Cotton Rose Flower was a Red-class Stranger whose honey tasted surprisingly delicious and refreshing despite its viscosity. However, it couldn’t be eaten raw because it was poisonous. The Beauty Grass was a Malice-class Stranger with grass that looked as lithe as a beauty, and roots that resembled a woman’s fine hair. That was why it was named the Beauty Grass. Just like the honey of the Cotton Rose Flower, its roots were highly poisonous.

Few people at this table thought it was possible to neutralize the ingredients’ poison and turn it into food, but Food Is Heaven clearly proved them wrong.

“Okay. What about this simmer-fried koi?” Chu Nianjiu looked at the fish next.

The koi was a real koi, and it was definitely simmer-fried—he could tell just by inhaling its unique, delicious aroma—but why oh why was the fish flailing its body back and forth like it was alive? Scratch that, it was alive!

The waiter explained patiently, “This simmer-fried koi was cooked using a River Climbing Koi. A River Climbing Koi is an exceptionally vigorous koi that can survive being burned by fire or boiled inside a pot of oil. That is why we decided to simmer fry it via a certain method. This way, it will be the freshest fish you ever tasted even though its flesh is fully cooked.”

“He’s right. The simmer-fried koi is one of the signature dishes of Food Is Heaven. I would seriously urge you all to give it a taste,” Gao Ning’an echoed in agreement.

Gao Ning’an was a local, and he frequented Food Is Heaven almost every first and fifteenth of each month to enjoy a fulfilling meal.

I understand the logic, but don’t you think this too cruel a way to die even for a Stranger? Chu Nianjiu couldn’t help but think.

“What about this Blooming Wealth?” Lin Yuhuai pointed at the next dish.

Blooming Wealth sounded like a fantastic, wealthy dish, but once again, its appearance sent chills up everyone's spine. The dish was a humanoid head—it wasn't an actual human's head, of course. That would be illegal to say the least—with its skull removed to expose its fleshy white brains. Blooming flowers could be seen floating on the brain fluid.

Despite its horrifying appearance, the aroma it gave off was thick and delicious. Their stomachs growled involuntarily even though their minds were reeling from the horrific scene.

This time, Gao Ningan took over the explanation, "This is yet another signature dish in Food Is Heaven. This is the head of the Wealth Monkey, and the flowers floating around its brains are called the Brain Flowers. That is why it's called the Blooming Wealth."

"First, the skull of the Wealth Monkey is removed. Then, the seeds of the Brain Flower are planted inside its brain. The Brain Flower got its name because it grows on brains, not soil. Throughout the process, it would release enough heat to cook the brain completely and produce a rich aroma."

"This cooking method requires no seasoning whatsoever. The brain would retain most of its original flavor, and the Brain Flowers would neutralize any unsavory taste and add a sweet scent to the dish. Superbly rich in flavor, aroma, and appearance, it is as rare as it is precious. You simply *must* try it out."

Gao Ningan licked his lips greedily after he finished his explanation, unaware that his friends were looking at him like he was insane. If the guy thought that his explanation would improve their impression of the dish, then he couldn't be any more wrong!

The worst part was his claims that the dish was "superbly rich in flavor, aroma and appearance". Maybe they could agree with the flavor and aroma part, but appearance? It looked just like a human head! What the hell was he talking about?

"This is the Everlaughing Mushroom, right?" Ye Qing removed his gaze from the horrifying-looking dish and looked at the plate set next to it. "Is that why the dish is called Everlaughing?"

Shaped like a human smile, the Everlaughing Mushroom was highly poisonous. Ingesting it would induce an unstoppable laughter that will only cease when the victim has perished. Hence the name.

The waiter immediately paid him a compliment, "You're quite the knowledgeable one, aren't you customer? That's right. This dish is based on the Everlaughing Mushroom."

"Okay... but what about the maggots?" Ye Qing asked with barely concealed disgust. He could handle mushrooms, but why the flying *fuck* were there maggots in his mushrooms?

The waiter explained smilingly, "If you know of the Everlaughing Mushroom, then you must know that it is highly poisonous. Ingesting directly is akin to committing suicide."

“These maggots are known as the Poison Eating Maggots. As its name implied, they are maggots that feed on toxins and the like. This removes all of the poison in the Everlaughing Mushrooms and make them edible.”

Lin Yuhuai tried to hold it in, he really did. But in the end, he couldn't help but ask, “But why didn't you remove the maggots afterward?”

Was Food Is Heaven trying to kill their customer's appetite? If so, they were certainly succeeding.

The waiter continued to smile. “Ah, I understand your confusion. You see, the Poison Eating Maggots themselves are a top-class delicacy. The Poison Eating Maggot can consume *and* neutralize the poison it eats. That is why it is perfectly safe to eat. In fact, the stronger the poison it consumes, the tastier its flesh becomes. A lot of people enjoy it.”

Lin Yuhuai was normally a refined man, but he couldn't help but think to himself: *And where are these people, exactly? I dare you to point out a single person who enjoys eating maggots!*

As if on cue, Gao Ning'an spoke up, “The waiter is right, you know. The Poison Eating Maggot is exceptionally delicious. Despite its appearance, it is absolutely worth a taste.”

Lin Yuhuai rolled his eyes at him. *Ah. Damn. Is it too late to cut ties with him?*

The waiter continued, “If you're wondering where we source our Poison Eating Maggots, then you have nothing to worry about. We raise our own Poison Eating Maggots in specialized farms. We swear on our honor that they are absolutely clean and safe for consumption.”

You say that, but it's still a maggot, bro! The same thought crossed everyone's mind at the same time. Who would eat *maggots* if they could help it? Not counting Gao Ning'an, of course.

“Enough about the maggots. Let's talk about this Where Goes The Soul. You're you sure my soul won't depart for the heavens after I drink it?” Ye Qing said sarcastically as he set his gaze on the final dish.

The previous four dishes looked horrendous, but at least they smelled delicious. But Where Goes The Soul? It looked and smelled like something the imps of hell used to torture its sinners.

Where Goes The Soul was a soup, but it was pitch black in color and covered in smelly yellow oil stains, toads, centipedes, spiders and more stuff that did *not* belong on the dining table. It was also bubbling like a fire was lit under its arse. Every time a bubble popped, a ghastly scream would pierce the ears, and a rotten, disgusting stench would permeate the air.

Forget drinking it, the mere sight of it made Ye Qing feel dead on the inside. If this was what Food Is Heaven meant when they named the dish Where Goes The Soul, then they sure as hell succeeded.

Personally, he would name it Drink And Die.

This wasn't the worst part, however. The worst part was that Where Goes The Soul was *the* strange dish he heard could accelerate his recovery. For the past few days, he and his friends heard that Food Is Heaven had launched a new strange dish that could eliminate filth, strengthen the foundation, and restore a damaged mind. It was apparently so effective that it was sold out everyday. That was why he decided to give it a try.

Now, Ye Qing regretted everything. If he could turn back time, he would sooner kill Gao Ningang before he agreed to this venture.

“You jest, customer.” The waiter took the barb like it was nothing. “Where Goes The Soul is the signature dish of our new strange chef. The main ingredients are the Gilted Toad of Fortune, Bluewood Centipede, Blue Jade Scorpion, Fiery Snake of Red Ribbons and the Coarse Earth Stone Spider, and the auxiliary ingredient is the dew of the Resentful Woman Flower.”

“Each one of the five Strangers belongs to one element of the Five Poisons and the Five Phases, and they are cooked based on the fact that the elements both give birth and destroy each other. The Civil Martial Flame is used to remove all the poison and leave behind only the essence. The soup can purify the filth in one’s body, restore one’s mental damage, and strengthen the foundation. It is absolutely one of the most outstanding strange dishes we offer.”

“This is not a boast, customer, but Where Goes The Soul is sold out everyday since the day we launched it. Moreover, everyone who ever drank it all wept tears of joy.”

“Har har...” Ye Qing deadpanned. *Tears of joy? Are you sure they’re not tears of misery?*

“Joyless, the entire reason we’re here is for this Where Goes The Soul, and it costs a thousand silver per dish. You better not waste it,” Chu Nianjiu said with an evil smirk.

“I understand your feelings, Joyless, I truly do. But this dish might be beneficial to your recovery. It would be remiss to waste it,” Lin Yuhuai also advised.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, Joyless. Who knows, maybe this dish smells bad but tastes incredibly just like stinky tofu?” Gao Ningang chuckled.

“Really?” Ye Qing asked doubtfully while watching the bubbling bowl of soup.

The waiter said smilingly, “Don’t worry, customer. Food Is Heaven only serves world class strange cuisine. Of course, a small number of our dishes have a unique taste, but we guarantee that you won’t die from it, so just relax and enjoy.”

“So, your bottom line is that I won’t die? That doesn’t assure me at all!” Ye Qing rubbed his nose furiously.

“Anyway, I’ve dilly-dallied long enough. If there’s nothing else, then I shall return to my duties.” The waiter left after saying that.

Chapter 449: Where Goes The Soul

“Enough stalling and drink it already, Joyless! What if it tastes worse after it’s turned cold?” Gao Ningang urged.

“What a good friend you are, you bastard.” Ye Qing sighed but surrendered to his fate. He scooped a spoonful of Where Goes The Soul, closed his eyes, and poured it into his mouth.

As soon as the soup entered his mouth, an indescribable taste immediately erupted across his taste buds. It tasted like leftovers that had been submerged in sewage waters for a whole night, and it flowed down his throat like a million stinking vermin struggling to find a way out of his insides. The portion that flowed into his stomach was chewing away at his stomach walls, and the portion that surged into his brain was ripping into his brains.

Tears immediately streamed down Ye Qing’s face. If he could turn back time...

The indescribable sensation lasted for a dozen or so breaths when suddenly, they disappeared all at once. It was replaced by an indescribably refreshing feeling that seeped not just throughout his body, but also the soul. Like a pool of clear water, it washed away the filth entrenched inside his body and soothed his injuries. His mind felt cool and comfortable like he was bathing under a mountain stream.

Just like that, he found the strength to live again.

“How is it, Joyless?” His companions asked in a hurry after Ye Qing opened his eyes.

“For one moment, I was in hell. Then, paradise,” Ye Qing replied honestly.

He now understood why the dish was named Where Goes The Soul. For one moment, he felt like he was being tortured in hell. The next, he found himself in the Kingdom of Buddha, enlightened and refreshed. It was aptly named.

“What does that mean? I’m asking you about the taste!” Gao Ningnan pressed.

Ye Qing shot Gao Ningnan a look. Then, he smirked and pointed at his tear-covered cheeks, saying, “I shed tears of joy just like the waiter said I would. What do you think? Is there anyone who would like to give it a try?”

“Hah! Like we would fall for that!” Gao Ningnan sneered. “If it’s that tasty, then you should keep it to yourself. It’s not like there’s no other dishes on the table.”

“Does it help your injuries, Joyless?” Lin Yuhuai asked concernedly.

Ye Qing nodded. “Yes, it helps a little.”

“Good, good! You should drink more of it when you’re ready!” Lin Yuhuai exclaimed with delight.

Disappointed that Ye Qing hadn’t embarrassed himself, Gao Ningnan returned to his seat and beckoned, “Alright, it’s time to eat. These Poison Eating Maggots are extremely delicious, so don’t waste it. Oh, we should eat the Wealth Monkey’s brain while it’s still hot. It’s not as good after it turns cold.”

At the beginning, Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai were understandably wary of the suspicious-looking food. But when they saw Gao Ningnan engorging himself like no tomorrow, they couldn’t help but

give it a taste as well. For one moment, their eyes widened like saucers. Then, they went to town on the food just like Gao Ning'an as well.

Noting their enthusiasm, Ye Qing gave the rest of the dishes a try. The moment he took the first bite, he realized that everything he ate until this point in life was trash.

The strange dishes might have a horrifying appearance, but they were delicacies unlike anything he had ever tasted. The Cotton Rose Flower's honey was sweet and fragrant, the Beauty Grass' roots were crisp and crunchy, the River Climbing Koi's meat was impossibly fresh, and the Everlaughing Mushrooms were unbelievably delicious.

What surprised him the most was the Poison Eating Maggots, however. The way its flesh burst inside his mouth and filled it with delicious juice... it was a taste that he would remember for a lifetime.

Each dish had its own special flavor and characteristics, but one thing for certain, they all tasted divine. Not only that, they contained a tremendous amount of origin energy. For an ordinary person, the dishes could strengthen their body and increase their lifespan. For a warrior, they could solidify their foundation and make them stronger. The benefits were substantial even for warriors at their level.

Now they understood why strange chefs were so popular in the *jianghu*. Even ignoring the solid benefits it offered, the taste alone was worth the money.

Of course, the strange food was as expensive as it was extraordinary. For example, the five dishes on their table cost almost four thousand silvers. Where Goes The Soul alone was worth a thousand silvers. It was no different from eating money.

Forget the ordinary citizens, even a fairly wealthy man like Ye Qing couldn't afford to visit this place everyday. If he did, he would be begging on the streets in a couple of weeks tops. The strange cuisine was definitely worth its price though.

And so the food quickly disappeared into everyone's stomachs. As for Where Goes The Soul, most of it vanished into Ye Qing's stomach.

It wasn't because Ye Qing was unwilling to share it with his friends. In fact, he very, very much wanted them to experience how it felt to fall to hell for a moment, and then ascend to the Kingdom of Buddha in the next. Unfortunately, they cried uncle as soon as they sampled the dish. When he tried to goad them, they actually ganged up on him and came within a hair's breadth of beating the shit out of him. He obediently drank his soup after that.

When dinner was finally over, all four men leaned lazily against their chairs with satisfied looks on their faces. Even Ye Qing was closing his eyes and allowing the soothing, wonderful sensation that permeated both body and soul to wash away all of his fatigue and worries. He was as satisfied and relaxed as he could be.

From the day he arrived at Tian Yong, a series of unfortunate events had been slowly but surely wearing him down to the brink of collapse. This was doubly true since he learned that there was a mysterious mastermind out there who was plotting to take his life.

The biggest problem was the fact that he still had no idea who was trying to kill him. Not even a little. The employees of the Wine Are Songs Boat had failed to yield any information whatsoever,

and it was the same for Zhao Lu. The only thing they learned from questioning the younger brother was the fact that Zhao Lan didn't have the Hanba's blood essence until recently, which was as they suspected. However, he knew nothing regarding the origin of the blood essence, the circumstances surrounding it and more, meaning that this lead was yet another dead end.

All it proved was that Ye Qing was right that Zhao Lan's transformation was yet another conspiracy to kill him. Honestly, he would rather not know about it since it added to his worries but did nothing to solve it.

Just who was the bastard who was trying so hard to kill him[1]? Their strategy was only getting deadlier and more refined as time passed. If he wasn't one lucky sonuvabitch, the weed before his grave would be over one meter tall already.

That was why he had been plagued by worry and anxiety for the past few days. It was so bad that he even lost some hair. Today was one of the rare moments he was able to forget all his troubles—if only for a moment—and enjoy a moment of peace.

Alas...

“Hmph. Looks like you're having a great time here!”

Ye Qing's eyelids stirred a little. His demonic thought told him that someone was approaching their table, and that they harbored malicious intent. His fears were proven true just a second later.

“Your Highness.” Ye Qing, Gao Ning'an, Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai all rose to their feet and saluted the newcomer. He was none other than the Harmony King's son, Chu Qingli.

Chu Qingli was accompanied by several youngsters with unsteady feet and slightly pale complexion. It was clear that they were wastrels who ruined their health through wine and sex just like Chu Qingli.

“Your Highness? Oh no, I couldn't possibly accept that title.” Chu Qingli said scornfully, “In your eyes, I'm probably lower than a dog, aren't I? In fact, you probably thought the same thing about my dad too, am I right?!”

“You jest, Your Highness,” Ye Qing replied politely. It sounded like Chu Qingli was disparaging the Pacification Bureau, but he was really targeting him only. If he wasn't mistaken, it was probably because of what happened to the employees of the Wine Are Songs Boat.

“A jest? Your Pacification Bureau shut down my Wine Are Songs Boat without warning and took my employees for interrogation, and I don't even know if they're alive or dead! You tell me if the Pacification Bureau takes me seriously or not!” Chu Qingli said with a cold sneer.

Ye Qing explained, “You don't know this, Your Highness, but the Wine Are Songs Boat was involved with the Corpse Ship incident. That is what we're investigating right now. We will release your people as soon as we confirm that they are unrelated to the incident.”

“Is that so? When will you finish your investigation then? When will you release my men?” Chu Qingge said aggressively. “It’s been over a week since the investigation began. If there was anything to find, then surely you would’ve found it already?”

“We will release them when it’s time to release them, Your Highness,” Ye Qing replied indifferently.

“You’ll release them when it’s time to release them!” Chu Qingli suddenly burst out laughing. “You may be young, but the way you speak sounds just like a seasoned official!”

“Well, it makes sense. If I can point my finger at someone or something, say ‘Anomaly!’ or ‘Corpse Ship!’, and get them arrested or shut down, then I probably wouldn’t be able to resist such power myself. And judging from how fast you shut down my pleasure boat, I bet you must have had a lot of practice, haven’t you?”

Ye Qing frowned and said seriously, “Your Highness, you’ve crossed the line. Please control yourself.”

Chapter 450: The Beginning Of The End

“Control myself? Hah! I know what you’re thinking. Oh yes, I’ve met countless people like you. You just want a bribe, don’t you?”

Chu Qingli stared directly into Ye Qing’s eyes as he took a step forward. “How much do you want? A hundred silvers? Two hundred silvers?”

Every time he announced a price, Chu Qingli would toss a silver certificate at Ye Qing’s face. The gesture was as arrogant as it was disparaging.

“Is it too little? Don’t worry, I’ve got plenty of money. Three hundred, four hundred, five hundred. I’m nothing in a lot of things, but the one thing I have is money!”

“The Pacification Bureau has always handled its affairs impartially. We don’t tolerate bribes and definitely not corruption. What do you think you’re doing, Your Highness?” Gao Ningan said coldly while taking a step forward.

“Am I talking to you? No? Then get the fuck out of my sight!” Chu Qingli sent spittle flying all over Gao Ningan’s face before turning back to Ye Qing. He said haughtily, “When you get back, I expect you to release my men and kowtow to me at my residence. Otherwise, you will learn what it means to make an enemy out of a prince! Understand?”

“No can do, Your Highness.” Something inexplicable flashed in Ye Qing’s eyes.

“No can do?” Chu Qingli’s voice rose an octave as if he heard a funny joke. Then, he let out a disdainful scoff. “Do you think you’re the Qing Emperor just because they call you the Qing Emperor Junior? Hahaha! I don’t know what you think you are, but

you're lesser than a fart to me! A fart could at least make some noise and entertain a crowd, but you couldn't even do that! Hahaha..."

The hedonistic youngsters accompanying Chu Qingli were laughing as well.

They were sitting in a public space, so of course the rest of the customers noticed the commotion and were pointing fingers at them. No one had any intention of stepping in, of course. After all, it was a conflict between the Pacification Bureau and a prince. *Jianghu* warriors or not, to get involved in this matter was no different from committing suicide.

"You are going too far, Your Highness!" Lin Yuhuai raised his voice as well.

"Am I? So what if I am? What are you gonna do about it?" Chu Qingli declared arrogantly. "Plus, am I not telling the truth?"

"He's just a commoner who popped out of the butt end of nowhere and learned some shitty ass martial arts, and he thinks he deserves to be called the Qing Emperor Junior? Who does he think he is? What do you guys think?"

"Yeah!"

"You're totally right, Your Highness."

His followers echoed in agreement.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Stay away from my sister, you piece of shit. How dare a shitstain like you dare to lust after her." Chu Qingli suddenly moved closer and lowered his voice. "If I ever see you around my sister again, if you so much as say a single word to her, I swear I will snuff you out like an ant. Understand?"

As Chu Qingli said this, he raised his hand and hit Ye Qing's face lightly. It wasn't a slap, but it was crisp and loud enough to be heard throughout the restaurant.

Everyone flinched when they saw this. The gesture wasn't even painful, but it was degrading to the highest degree.

The next moment, Chu Qingli's hand suddenly froze in the air. His arrogant face stiffened, his eyes slowly widened, and his pupils slowly contracted little by little.

At the same time, blood slowly dripped on the floor and scattered like blooming flowers.

"You... you..."

Chu Qingli staggered away from Ye Qing as he pointed a finger at Ye Qing. Every time he took a step, intestines would spill out of his stomach and onto the ground. A few steps later, he collapsed on the floor and fell limp.

He was dead.

"Ah... ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

The youngsters accompanying Chu Qingli suddenly screamed on top of their lungs. Some grew weak at the knees and collapsed to the ground, and some literally pissed their own pants.

There was a huge cut spanning from Chu Qingli's chest all the way to the belly button, and Ye Qing was holding a slender, beautiful saber. There was no mistake. The Patrolman had disemboweled the prince and spilled his internal organs and intestines everywhere.

"Joyless!"

"Joyless, why did you...?"

Gao Ning'an, Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai's mouths were wide open. It was like lightning had struck them all. No one had any idea what to do.

Out of all the things they had anticipated from this conflict, Ye Qing killing Chu Qingge was the last thing they expected.

He just couldn't!

He wouldn't dare even if he wanted to!

Yes, Chu Qingli's words were beyond insulting. In his position, they would've lost their cool as well.

However, the worst they would do to Chu Qingli was to beat the shit out of him. Killing him was absolutely out of the question!

It was one thing if Chu Qingli was just your average person, but the prince was anything but average. He was a *prince*, for heavens sake! The son of the Harmony King and a member of the imperial family itself! He was naturally above them from the moment he was born! Hell, he could commit *treason*, and they still wouldn't have the authority to punish him!

According to the laws of Chu, if a member of the imperial family committed a crime, they must be tried at the Three Judicial Offices, and only the Son of Heaven possessed the authority to judge him. Anyone who killed a member of the imperial family without permission would be exterminated to the nine generations without question.

Naturally, Ye Qing wasn't exempt from this law. Gu Suitang couldn't protect him. Hong Jianglong couldn't protect him. Not even the Bureau Chief General[1] of the Capital Pacification Bureau, Sifeng Wudi could protect him. No one could.

As if that wasn't enough, Chu Qingli was the Harmony King's only son, and everyone who knew him knew just how much he adored his son. If, no, when he hears about this, he was going to flip Tian Yong upside down and rip Ye Qing to shreds!

Tian Yong... was about to experience a major turning point in its history!

"What... What am I..."

As if he just regained his senses, a dazed Ye Qing slowly turned toward his companions and asked, "What... did I do?"

When he looked down and saw Red Sleeve in his hand, and Chu Qingli's body on the floor, his pupils abruptly contracted into pins. "How did this happen?"

"No... It wasn't me... I didn't..."

"My prince!"

“Your Highness!”

It was at this moment three men wearing embroidered robes burst into the restaurant. The blood drained away from their face when they saw Chu Qingli’s lifeless body on the floor.

They were Chu Qingli’s shadow guards, and it was their responsibility to keep him safe from the shadows. But because Chu Qingli was a prince, and they were in public right now, no one thought that a member of the Pacification Bureau would dare to kill Chu Qingli. By the time the unthinkable happened, it was already too late.

“You killed the prince! You will pay for it with your life!”

One shadow guard launched a furious palm strike at Ye Qing. Chu Qingli was their responsibility, and now their charge was dead. They had no doubt in their minds that they and maybe even their families were going to pay for the mistake. At the very least, the Harmony King would see them dead for this dereliction of duty. With that in mind, how could they not loathe Ye Qing for what he did?

Seemingly in a daze, Ye Qing didn’t respond to the sudden attack. Moreover, the shadow guard was pretty strong, and the two men were standing just a few meters away from each other. By the time Gao Ningan, Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai tried to react, it was already too late. They could only watch as the palm strike landed squarely on Ye Qing’s forehead.

Bang!

The shadow guard was an early-stage Spirit Purifier, and he was angry beyond imagination. Naturally, his full-powered attack possessed enough power to crush a head like a watermelon.

The shadow guard blanched, however. Ye Qing had taken the full brunt of his attack, but he could feel his force sinking into what felt like a bottomless pit. It failed to do any damage to Ye Qing whatsoever.

“That’s not it... that’s not it either... wait. Was it that Where Goes The Soul?!”

Suddenly, Ye Qing looked up and brushed off the shadow guard. The man staggered backward as an indescribable power scattered his energies completely. He could only watch Ye Qing with shock and disbelief.

Ye Qing never looked at the shadow guard. In fact, the guy didn’t even register as a blip in his mind. All his whole focus was on what the hell had just happened to him.

When Chu Qingli had humiliated him, his anger and bloodthirst began growing at an unstoppable rate. When they hit the absolute peak, his mind suddenly blanked out for a brief moment. When he came to, Chu Qingli was already dead by his hands.

He was angry with Chu Qingli, of course. It was also true he felt the impulse to kill the man. The problem was, why on earth had he allowed his emotions to overtake him? Or more accurately, how did his emotions swell to the point where he completely lost his head?

He was a careful, calculative man. Normally, Chu Qingli could humiliate him a hundred times worse than this, and he would still brush it off like it was no more than a feather. Even if he felt like killing the bastard, he would never do it in front of everyone. He wasn’t stupid. He knew just like everyone else what the consequences of killing a prince was.

This should never have happened, and yet it had. This could only mean that an external force was in play.

All things in this world are connected. Nothing can happen without a reason. So, what was the reason he lost control and killed Chu Qingli?