

Stranger 471

Chapter 471: Deciphering the Threads of Fate

“Hmm?”

Everyone frowned upon hearing this. An Yifang asked, “Apologies, but can you tell us exactly what ‘misfortune’ means in this context?”

Misfortune could mean many things. It could mean tripping on nothing while you were walking, or dying because of a freak accident. If the price was too severe, then he would rather seek out other methods to confirm Ye Qing’s status.

After all, their lives were a million times more valuable than a criminal who might already be dead.

“It depends,” Lei Xiaodan answered vaguely. “It could be as minor as a flu, or it could be as severe as death. The severity of the punishment hinges completely on the question that is asked. If the question you ask is perfectly trivial, then the punishment you receive would be inconsequential. But if the question can, say, change the fate of Chu itself, then the punishment could easily be fatal.”

“Of course, I’m certain that inquiring about Ye Qing’s status would not incur a severe punishment, not to mention that everyone here possesses more than enough power to protect yourselves. I’m certain that you have nothing.”

“That’s good to hear.” Everyone let out a sigh of relief.

“In that case, you can just ask the question yourself and tell us the result later, right? Why do you need all of us?” Hong Jianglong’s eyes glinted. “If there’s nothing else, then the chief and I will be taking our leave!”

Lei Xiaodan smiled. “Wait, Brother Hong. This matter relates to the Pacification Bureau, so your presence is necessary. Besides, the more people are present when Tattletale is used, the milder the punishment each person would receive would become. That’s because the misfortune is split between all of us.”

“Of course, that doesn’t mean that anyone’s fine. It must be someone who’s related to the question that will be asked. So please.”

You think you can run away after using my name to freeload in a brothel? Don’t even think about it.

Chu Qingge saluted everyone on behalf of her father. “Sorry for the trouble, my lords. On behalf of my father and my brother, I thank you all for lending us a hand today.”

The Harmony King also chimed in, “Please, help us.”

“There is no need for such courtesy, Your Highness! It’s our natural duty,” Everyone else replied politely as well.

“Fine. Let us begin then,” Hong Jianglong acquiesced.

“Very well.” Lei Xiaodan looked at Tattletale and asked, “We would like to know if Ye Qing, the Patrolman of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau, is still alive.”

“Are you kidding me? Considering how much you bitches were humming and hawing, I thought you guys had something deadly important to ask. What a waste of my feelings.”

Tattletale harrumphed with displeasure before beginning, “He’s—”

“—Huh? Strange.” Tattletale’s expression suddenly turned serious. As it shook its head left and right, its face began alternating between good and evil, yin and yang rapidly.

Tattletale’s expression only grew more serious after a few breaths. It gritted its teeth and uttered, “No fucking way I’m going to fail here.”

“Decipher the threads of fate, peer into yin and yang...” Tattletale chanted as ancient runes began appearing on its face. They looked both enigmatic and profound.

The word “Yang” was protruding on the yang side of Tattletale’s face. It looked majestic and grand.

The word “Yin” was sunken in the yin side of Tattletale’s face. It looked evil and bizarre.

The lines of the word “Yang” slowly came together into an eyeball and moved to the center of Tattletale’s forehead. It shone as bright and clear as the sun and moon, and it was looking upward at the heavens.

The lines of the word “Yin” writhed like worms before joining into an eyeball as well. Dark and murky like the abyss, it moved to the bottom of Tattletale’s chin and looked downward into the Nine Nethers.

When the eyeballs swept past Hong Jianglong, Tu Yulei, Zhou Hengshan, An Yifang and Tie Wuying, everyone felt exposed all of a sudden. It was as if the pair of eyes had seen through them completely; grasped the very essence of their being.

“Tattletale possesses a yang face and a yin face. The yang face peers into the living, and the yin face probes into the underworld. That is how it is able to find out everything,” Lei Xiaodan explained with a smile.

His smile didn’t last, however. The longer Tattletale took, the sterner his expression became.

Tattletale was a Disaster-class Strange Artifact, and Ye Qing was just a late-stage Spirit Purifier. Under normal circumstances, it should be able to find out Ye Qing’s fate in just a matter of breaths.

In reality, Tattletale wasn’t able to do so even after activating its yin and yang face. This was bad.

Throughout his career, he had witnessed many cases where someone asked a question that incurred a punishment that was far greater than they believed. One time, the Intelligence Department wanted to look into the whereabouts of a Grandmaster, and Tattletale took half a teatime to find out the answer. After that, everyone present at the scene mysteriously vanished and was never found.

Another time, a deputy head of the Intelligence Department—a Half-Step Sage—asked Tattletale about an ancient secret, and it took the Strange Artifact three whole days to find out the answer. However, Tattletale had just said three words when a lightning tribulation manifested and smote the deputy head into dust.

Generally speaking, the longer it took Tattletale to decipher the threads of fate, the worse the punishment the inquirers would receive. Naturally, he was getting worried.

He couldn't interrupt Tattletale from its work, however. Once the process had begun, it couldn't be stopped until it had run its course. If they did, then they would suffer the punishment *and* the rebound.

About half a teatime later, Tattletale suddenly let out a bloodcurdling scream at the same time its supernatural eyeballs exploded. The resulting shockwave was such that the entire room disintegrated into dust in an instant.

Luckily, nearly everyone in the room was a powerful warrior. The Harmony King and Chu Qingge were also unharmed thanks to their protection.

“What just happened, Xiaodan?” The Harmony King asked with trepidation. Was this the heavens' punishment? Did it normally appear so suddenly?

“Give me a moment, Your Highness.” Lei Xiaodan consoled the Harmony King distractedly while staring at Tattletale. “What happened?”

Tattletale's eyeballs were deflated and bleeding profusely right now. To say it was not enjoying a good time would be an understatement. When it heard Lei Xiaodan's question, it immediately flew into a rage, “Two-faced tiger, you fucking liar! Who *really* is this guy you want me to look into? You nearly got me killed because of it!”

“I don't understand. He's just an ordinary person,” Lei Xiaodan replied.

“An ordinary person?” Tattletale grew even angrier. “Are you kidding me? If he's really an ordinary person, then how the fuck did I fail to find anything about him?! Not even a speck!”

“You... don't know if he's alive or dead, then?” Lei Xiaodan exclaimed with surprise.

“Of course I don't! But it's not my fault!” Tattletale continued arrogantly despite its failure, “Either that Ye Qing is greatly entrenched in the rivers of fate, or some champion is obscuring his fate threads from view, or he possesses a powerful Strange Artifact that is at *least* in the same class as me. You're telling me that someone like that is an 'ordinary person'? Really?”

“Impossible. Ye Qing is just a small Patrolman. He is quite talented, but as far as I'm aware, his background is anything but extraordinary. You should be able to find his fate threads no matter what.”

Lei Xiaodan frowned and subconsciously shot Tu Yulei a glance, and the Chief of Bureau didn't miss it. He asked, "Are you suspecting that the Pacification Bureau may have something to do with this, Lord Lei?"

Lei Xiaodan hurriedly denied it. "You misunderstand, Chief Tu. That isn't what I think at all."

"He can't do it anyway. Someone who can obscure Ye Qing's fate threads from me is at *least* a Sage, and he is nowhere close to that level." Tattletale said bluntly, "None of you are close to that level."

"Well, it's not all bad news though. You may have failed to obtain the answer you wish, but at least you don't have to worry about being punished by the heavens, right? Always look for silver linings, people!"

Everyone: "... *If you're expecting thanks, then I'm sorry to say that you're going to be disappointed.*

"My deepest apologies for failing to be of help, Your Highness," Lei Xiaodan apologized to the Harmony King before putting away Tattletale.

The Harmony King waved dejectedly. "It's fine. It's just how it is sometimes."

"If we can't confirm Ye Qing's status, then what should we do?" An Yifang frowned.

"If he's alive, I want to see his person. If he's dead, I want to see his corpse. Since we can't confirm if Ye Qing's alive or dead, then we should treat him as if he's alive and issue a nation-wide bounty for his head," said Zhou Hengshan.

Suddenly, a servant stepped into the room and said, "That would be unwise."

Chapter 472: Directorate of Ceremonial, Zhou Dongchao

"Who are you? How dares you eavesdrop on our conversation! Get lost!" Zhou Hengshan yelled at the servant. It was bad enough that the servant had eavesdropped on their conversation, but he had criticized his decision as well. If this was his headquarters, he would've killed him already. What kind of lawless servant was this?

"Please don't be angry, General Zhou. The reason I came is because I have an imperial edict to share with you all," the slave replied amiably.

"Wait a second, an imperial edict?" An Yifang, Tu Yulei and everyone else suddenly felt that something was amiss. "Who are you... honored one?"

"Please don't call me that, it is too much for the likes of me. I am Zhou Dongchao. A pleasure to meet you all, Your Highnesses, my lords," The servant greeted them with a deep bow.

“Zhou Dongchao?” Tu Yulei and An Yifang exchanged a look of growing astonishment with each other. “If I may ask, are you Director Zhou of the Directorate of Ceremonial?”

“Please don’t call me director. I’m just a slave who’s currently acting as a messenger for his master,” the servant replied smilingly but didn’t object to the inquiry.

The atmosphere in the room changed immediately. Tu Yulei, An Yifang, Hong Jianglong, Lei Xiaodan and everyone else immediately shot to their feet and bowed deeply. “Well met, Director Zhou!”

Zhou Hengshan nearly dropped to his knees when he realized who he just offended. His face was white as a sheet, and his back was drenched in cold sweat.

Zhou Dongchao was the Seal-holding Director of Chu’s Directorate of Ceremonial. One of the twelve eunuch Directorates, the Directorate of Ceremonial was the de-facto chief of the imperial household staff and responsible for all eunuch-related matters such as composing the emperor’s answers to his subjects’ queries, issuing an imperial edict on behalf of the emperor and so on. They were also known as the “First Directorate”.

There were many posts in the Directorate of Ceremonial such as the Seal-holding Director, Superintendent, Secretary Eunuch[1], Assistant Secretary Eunuch and so on. The Seal-holding Director was the head of the directorate.

Although the Directorate of Ceremonial belonged to the Inner Court and forbidden from involving themselves in politics, they were the inner attendants of the Son of Heaven himself. No one could question their authority and status. The current Grand Mentor of Chu once said this: The Seal-holding Director of the Directorate of Ceremonial was to be treated with the utmost respect just like a Principal Support[2] of the Outer Court.[3]

Forget the likes of Tu Yulei, An Yifang or Zhou Hengshan, even the Grand Secretariat, the Three Dukes or the Nine Chamberlains wouldn’t dare to offend the Seal-holding Director.

As if that wasn’t enough, Zhou Dongchao was no ordinary Seal-holding Director. He had been serving Emperor Jin Run long before he ascended the throne. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that he had helped the emperor to put on his clothes, led his horse, stopped all kinds of disasters from befalling the emperor, and performed many meritorious services for the emperor and the realm. He was one of Emperor Jin Run’s most trusted aides.

Zhou Dongchao might have called himself a “slave who’s currently acting as a messenger for his master”, but no one took him seriously as a matter of course.

“Please rise. I cannot possibly receive your salutes.” Zhou Dongchao waved his hand a little, and everyone rose back to full height involuntarily.

The powerful warriors in the room had to hide their shock. They were all Grandmasters, and yet Zhou Dongchao had magicked them into standing up straight with the wave of a hand. Not only that, he did it in a way that didn’t feel forceful in the slightest.

The wind felt gentle, but the thunderclaps bespoke the true power of the distant storm.

An Yifang and Tu Yulei were the only ones in the room who had met Zhou Dongchao before, and only briefly. It was because the Seal-holding Director spent most of his time serving the emperor inside the palace. Most people knew that he was a trusted aide of the Son of Heaven and wielded a ton of power, but few knew that he was a powerful warrior as well.

As for how strong he really was, only those in the know could answer that question. He could be a Great Grandmaster or a Half-Sage. He could even be a true Sage—a god or celestial-on-earth.

The reason for this was very simple. Zhou Dongchao rarely revealed his power, and when he did, those in the know usually ended up dead.

“I have offended you with my reckless words, Lord Director. I hope you will forgive me.” Zhou Hengshan knelt on the floor again and apologized. He might be a general with a powerful army under his command, and as a third-rank official he was technically an equal of Zhou Dongchao, he wasn’t stupid enough to disrespect the eunuch intentionally. If Zhou Dongchao wanted to, he could remove him without lifting a finger. Literally, the eunuch could make a careless comment to the emperor, and he would no longer be a general.

There was a clan known as the Luo Clan of Jin Xiu. Back then, their power was unmatched by no one except the emperor because they had two Marquises in the family. During the day, their front entrance was packed with wealthy and influential people who wanted to curry favor with them, and during the night, the melodious sounds of songs and instruments were neverending.

Seeing this, Zhou Dongchao made a single remark, “Instead of investing their fortune on the people, they instead blow it all on songs and dances every night.” He was lamenting the fact that the Luo Clan was more focused on indulging themselves than serving their country.

He never even mentioned their name, but the very next day, countless memorials flooded the Sun-facing Palace, and every official suddenly had something to complain about the Luo Clan. A total of one thousand eight hundred and eight crimes ranging from something as minor as oppressing the meek to something as serious as forming cliques to further their self-interests were reported, and Emperor Ji Run demoted their Marquises to commoners on the spot.

In just one day, the proud and noble Luo Clan of Jin Rui had gone from a prestigious clan with two Marquises to a powerless commoner family. Where they were pleasuring themselves from night to day before, now their front entrance was as silent and empty as a wasteland. Not only that, they couldn’t take one foot out of their doorsteps without being attacked like mice.

If even a clan with two Marquises could collapse overnight, why wouldn’t Zhou Dongchao be able to ruin a mere general like him?

“It is just a small matter, General Zhou. You don’t need to think too much about it,” Zhou Dongchao replied amiably. “Besides, I was at fault. I shouldn’t have eavesdropped on your conversation without announcing myself.”

“Not at all, Director,” everyone responded.

“So, why have you come today, Director Zhou?” the Harmony King asked.

“Oh, right. I nearly forgot what I came here for. Time really is a relentless killer. Please forgive me for wasting your time, Your Highness.” Zhou Dongchao apologized before continuing, “My master has a message for you and everyone else in this room.”

Zhou Dongchao was referring to Emperor Jin Run, of course. Everyone dropped to their knees and touched their foreheads against the floor, saying, “We humbly receive the eternal emperor’s message!”

“The customs are quite tedious, aren’t they? Let’s skip it.”

Zhou Dongchao personally lifted the Harmony King to his feet before motioning for the others to rise as well. It was only then he said, “My master has four lines for you all. One, the dignity of the heavens is absolute, so Ye Qing must die. Two, this matter should be handled discreetly as it involves the Pacification Bureau, the Hengshan Army and the Harmony King. Three, His Majesty offers you his deepest condolences, Your Highness. And four, he entrusts the matter to the Intelligence Department and the Intelligence Department only. No one is to interfere with their work, or the consequences will be severe.”

“Have you understood, my lords?”

Tu Yulei, An Yifang and Lei Xiaodan were old foxes who had dabbled in the court for ages. It only took them a second to fully understand Zhou Dongchao’s message.

The first line was exactly what it sounded like. Ye Qing must die to preserve the Son of Heaven’s dignity.

The second line was saying that this matter had started with Ye Qing, and it would end with him. They were not to use this incident as an excuse to start some other trouble.

It made sense. Ye Qing was a member of the Pacification Bureau, but he had killed an imperial prince, massacred hundreds of Hengshan soldiers including a battalion commander, and ultimately succeeded in escaping from Tian Yong.

This was embarrassing enough, but if Zhou Hengshan suspected that the Pacification Bureau was behind Ye Qing’s escape and decided to take it out on them—and obviously the Pacification Bureau wasn’t going to take it lying down—then this was going to devolve into a bigger shitshow than it already was. When that happened, the Pacification Bureau, the Hengshan Army and even the imperial court’s face would be dragged through the mud, and that was plain unacceptable.

That was why the emperor ordered the matter to be handled discreetly.

The third line sounded like nothing special, but it was really a warning. The emperor was warning the Harmony King not to take out his son’s death on the Pacification Bureau.

As for the final line, it was a warning to the Pacification Bureau and the Hengshan Army to stay out of the matter. The Pacification Bureau especially mustn’t help Ye Qing in secret, or else.

In conclusion, Ye Qing was the reason behind Chu Qingli, Duan Zipao and the Hengshan soldiers’ deaths, and so they would settle this with his death. Nothing else.

As for whether there were more hidden meanings behind the message—for example, the emperor was really doing this to cover up some sort of secret—it wasn’t entirely out of the realm of

possibility. After all, this incident was serious, but was it really that serious that Zhou Dongchao himself had to play the messenger?

As if that wasn't enough, the Son of Heaven had responded to this incident at first notice. The implications were unsettling to say the least.

But Zhou Dongchao didn't tell them why, and so they didn't ask.

There were some things in life that must never be questioned.

In fact, there were some things that one shouldn't even think about.

In the end, one man bore it all alone.

Chapter 473: The Clouds Look Like Fire

"Eunuch Zhou, I need to speak to you about Ye—"

Chu Qingge stepped forward with a determined look on her face, but the Harmony King interrupted her before she could finish, "The adults are talking, Qingge. Return to your place."

The Harmony King's eyes were normally clouded with indulgence and foolishness, but right here and now, it was perfectly clear. He was also wearing a strong, dignified expression on his face.

Tu Yulei and Hong Jianglong were also shaking their heads at Chu Qingge. Since Zhou Dongchao had shown up with a personal message from Emperor Jin Run himself, it meant that they wouldn't accept any deviations to the plan. Bringing up the fact that Ye Qing was framed would be akin to objecting to the plan and potentially provoking Zhou Dongchao into taking action.

Zhou Dongchao paid no attention to their soundless gestures. He simply smiled and greeted Chu Qingge, "Long time no see, Your Highness. The first time I met you, you were just a wee little girl running round and round master like a cute little kitten. Time really does fly."

"Oh right, I almost forgot. Master also told me to inform Your Highnesses to pay him a visit at the capital when you're free."

"We are honored by His Majesty's concern," Both the Harmony King and Chu Qingge thanked him.

Everyone knew that this was the emperor's compensation to his uncle.

Suddenly, Zhou Hengshan asked, "If I may ask, do you know if Ye Qing is alive or dead, director?"

"Unfortunately, I have no idea." Zhou Dongchao shot Lei Xiaodan a smile. "But I'm sure that Lord Lei would find out the truth."

"I will carry out my duty," Lei Xiaodan responded with a salute.

"Well, I've wasted enough time here. It's almost lunchtime, and I need to head back and serve my master. I shan't bother you all any longer." Zhou Dongchao saluted everyone. "See you another day, everyone."

"Until then, director!" Everyone in the room returned the salute.

A kind, ordinary-looking old man abruptly stepped out of the servant's body. Then, he leaped into the sky. Every time he took a step, a blue cloud would appear underneath his feet. Just a few breaths later, he had vanished into the horizon.

"His will touches the heavens, and his feet cross the horizon in the span of one thought. He must be a Sage, isn't he?" An Yifang exclaimed in surprise.

"I would think so," Tu Yulei responded.

"Please return to the earth, people. What shall we do with Ye Qing?" Lei Xiaodan looked at the group and asked.

"Director Zhou has given you full power over the matter and forbidden us from getting involved, so just do as you please, Lord Lei," An Yifang replied.

"As he says, you may do whatever you want with Ye Qing. We, the Pacification Bureau, promise that we won't get involved," Tu Yulei replied in an indifferent tone while clasp his hands behind his back.

"Your Highness?" Lei Xiaodan looked at the Harmony King next.

The Harmony King sighed. "I will obey Eunuch Zhou's will."

Zhou Hengshan shook his head as well. He was unwilling to leave things at this, but he didn't dare to defy an order from the emperor himself either. He turned around and left the room without a room.

Lei Xiaodan nodded. "In that case, I shall be taking my leave. Goodbye, everyone."

"Goodbye."

"See you later, Lord Lei."

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The Hidden Dragon Meet and the final match that would decide its champion had been the main gossip of the entire prefecture for the past couple days. But not anymore. A certain incident had replaced it completely, and it was none other than the murder of Chu Qingli.

On one hand, Ye Qing was the Qing Emperor Junior and the rising star of the Pacification Bureau.

On the other hand, Chu Qingli was an imperial prince and the son of the Harmony King himself.

Their paths should never have crossed one another's, and yet somehow they did and created an epic storm.

Ye Qing had killed Chu Qingli. The Qing Emperor Junior had killed the son of the Harmony King.

The reason behind this wasn't a secret either. The Intelligence Department stated that it was because the two had an argument regarding the incident where the Wine Are Songs Boat was shut down, and Ye Qing lost control after one too many scathing insults from the prince.

Since neither the Harmony King nor the Pacification Bureau objected to this answer, it meant that they agreed with this version of the story as well.

Knowing the cause and effect, it was easy to decide his punishment. According to the laws of Chu, Ye Qing not only killed a prince by accident, but also resisted arrest. Normally, he and his family would be exterminated to the nine generations, but since he performed brilliantly in service for the people during his time in the Pacification Bureau, he and only he was sentenced to death. He was also stripped of his position as the Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau.

For the public, almost everyone was satisfied with this sentence. Although few people had a good impression of Chu Qingli—the guy was just an ignorant, incompetent and hedonistic good-for-nothing, and it was he who taunted Ye Qing first—it was also a fact that Ye Qing had killed him. As Chu Qingli was a member of the imperial family, it was perfectly normal for his murderer, Ye Qing, to be executed for his crimes.

Equality did not exist in this world. Some people were higher than most, and some murders carried more weight than other murders.

If anything, the people actually liked the fact that the emperor had not gone through with the nine familial exterminations even though that was the expected capital punishment for the crime of murdering a member of the imperial family.

Of course, some people lamented the fact that a rising star with a bright future ahead of him was damned because of the actions of a hedonistic bastard.

Most people were kind, but they were also cowardly. It was one thing to talk about this in a private setting, but no one actually dared to do anything about it.

There were also rumors saying that Ye Qing was actually framed, and that he had killed a lot of Hengshan soldiers during his escape, but they were suppressed almost as soon as they appeared. As a result, they failed to leave an impression whatsoever.

Wine must be drunk, food must be eaten, and life must go on. The incident had started with Chu Qingli and Ye Qing, and it had ended with just the two of them as well. Nothing more, nothing less.

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“These people are so stupid you can’t help but sympathize with them. It’s one thing to listen to such rumors, but to believe it?”

At the Western Wind Restaurant, a smiling Fugong remarked while listening in on the gossip of the diners at the lower floors.

“Most people are foolish,” Fang Muyun said in a clear, silvery voice after sipping his tea, “but there’s nothing wrong with being foolish. If anything, a fool often leads an easier and happier life.”

“Besides, this situation is probably his design. From his perspective, it would be an affront to his dignity if the matter is blown up. That is why he made it so that this incident begins and ends with Ye Qing.”

“You see, there is no one in the entire world who cares more about his reputation and dignity than him.”

Fugong smiled but didn't say anything. That man wasn't someone he could remark on. So, he changed the subject, "You know, it's surprising that not a single person in this restaurant—and probably everywhere else for that matter—is asking if Ye Qing is actually dead."

Fang Muyun said slowly, "That's because everyone thinks that Ye Qing is already dead."

"That's true." The Hengshan Army had caused a huge commotion and mobilized hundreds of men yesterday, and Ye Qing was just a Spirit Purifier. It was unthinkable that there could be any other outcome.

In reality, Ye Qing was still alive, and Fang Muyun knew this because the Blood Bond Grass in his lap was still alive.

"To be connected in flesh and blood, to live and die together." That was how the people described the Blood Bond Grass. A Hatred-class Stranger, it could form an invisible bond with the person whose blood it ate. If the person lives, then it would live. If the person dies, then it would die as well.

Not only that, the Blood Bond Grass could detect its bonded person's location almost like they were physically tethered to each other. Hence the name.

As the imperial envoy of the Hidden Dragon Meet, it was all too easy for him to acquire a drop of Ye Qing's blood. If not for the Blood Bond Grass, he would've believed that Ye Qing had died as well. After all, who could imagine that the young man, a mere Spirit Purifier, could escape the death trap the city had laid for him and even survive Zhou Hengshan, a Grandmaster? As if that wasn't enough, almost everyone had fallen for his trick and believed that he was dead.

Ye Qing's strength and cunning both impressed and shocked him. If managed to grow into his full potential, then his only limit would be the infinite skies.

Unfortunately for him, he made an enemy out of Fang Muyun.

A firefly was pretty, but how could it ever hope to compare with the bright moon?

Therefore, Ye Qing would never grow into his full potential. He would join his fellow mud and dirt and be squashed underfoot.

"I wonder what their expressions would look like if they learn that Ye Qing is still alive. The Intelligence Department would lose a lot of face, wouldn't they?"

"They won't."

Fang Muyun looked out of the window where the clouds were floating without a care for the world. "Lei Xiaodan is a cautious, meticulous man. Every time he does something, he always makes sure to leave himself an out. If you read the official statement closely, you would notice that it only says that Ye Qing is sentenced to death. Nowhere did it say that Ye Qing has already been executed for his crimes."

"If Ye Qing is dead, then all is well. If not, then they can track him down in secret and kill him. Should they fail to capture him, and the fact that Ye Qing is still alive somehow gets to the public, he can argue semantics and claim that he never said

that Ye Qing is already dead. This would still damage the Intelligence Department's reputation to an extent, of course, but it wouldn't be a crippling blow or even a serious one."

"Lei Xiaodan truly is a formidable man," Fugong paid a compliment before asking, "Should we inform him that Ye Qing is still alive and tell him his whereabouts? Ye Qing could not survive the Intelligence Department, and this would keep our hands clean."

"He is already doing our dirty work for us, isn't he? It would be folly to press him further."

Fang Muyun explained, "You said it yourself that Lei Xiaodan is a formidable man. I'm sure he already suspects that Ye Qing's murder of Chu Qingli is not as simple as it seems. Besides, don't forget that we've tried to kill Ye Qing twice. Although we haven't left behind any clues, Hong Jianglong and the Pacification Bureau must be investigating this in secret. If we inform Lei Xiaodan about Ye Qing's status and whereabouts now, then it would confirm that Ye Qing is indeed framed, wouldn't it?"

"Lei Xiaodan is not to be trifled with, and the Intelligence Department even more so. It would be troublesome if they were to turn their ire on us."

"The situation is already fixed. We should allow it to run its course peacefully."

"You're right. I should've known better." Fugong saluted Fang Muyun once before asking, "What do we do about Ye Qing then? Are we going to just ignore him?"

"Of course not." Fang Muyun shook his head. "I didn't want to dirty my hands earlier because he is the rising star of the Pacification Bureau, but he is no longer that, is he? Now, he is just a mouse that anyone can kill."

"I'll be counting on you, Fugong. Please kill Ye Qing for me."

"As you command, mister." Fugong clasped his hands solemnly.

"Make sure you don't alarm the Intelligence Department," Fang Muyun said while continuing to admire the distant clouds. "Everyone already thinks that Ye Qing is dead. He might as well disappear from this world forever."

The sun was setting near the horizon. The clouds looked as orange as fire and as red as blood.

And with that, we've arrived at the end of our first arc, and I present to you... a new cover page!

Here's also a version where the first and second cover page are combined!

For those who want the full resolution cover pages, do contact me on discord.

Also, obviously the cover page won't actually be up until the free readers catch up. It would be spoiler otherwise, yeah?

One thing I really want to point out now that we're at this point of the novel, is that this ending... *didn't have* to be Ye Qing's ending. If Chu had treated him fairly, he could've gone on to marry Chu Qingge and become royalty. There is obviously great chemistry and attraction between the two, especially since Ye Qing was not-so-subtly turned down by Feng Qingyou. He could've become the greatest warrior Chu has ever seen and secured their dynasty for the next thousand years to come.

But in the end, human nature ruined it all. The royal (literally) road was shut down because Chu Wangsun couldn't look past his pp for a second, and Fang Muyun decided that his personal vengeance was worth the fate of the entire realm. After all, no matter how talented Ye Qing was, he's just a commoner. A Spirit Purifier. A lowlife. Scum of the earth.

They drove him into the abyss. They succeeded.

And soon, the abyss is going stare back.

I'll leave it to you all to figure out what the moon in the cover page means. I promise it's quite simple.

Chapter 474: Longing Leaves

Knock knock knock!

“Scion Ye?”

Ye Qing opened his eyes. They looked as black and deep as the night. Floating in the middle of the darkness was a pair of black lotuses, and invisible ripples were washing out of the petals and into the real world. As a result, the room he was sleeping in was filled with profound, inexplicable, and anomalous mirages.

A few breaths later, the black lotuses in Ye Qing's eyes sank deeper into the darkness. It wasn't long before it was completely gone. However, Ye Qing's eyes remained as black as the abyss.

“Cough... cough... Come in, Miss Longing!”

Ye Qing coughed twice, and cracks suddenly spread open on his porcelain white face and oozed blood. Strangely, the blood felt frigid, murderous, and oozing with deadly saber intent.

“Are you okay, Scion Ye?”

A bone-chilling sensation gripped Longing as soon as she stepped into the room. The power Ye Qing's blood gave off intimidated even her, an Anomaly.

She couldn't help but recall the attack that had split open the river five days prior. The attack didn't just divide the Yong River in half, it had nearly crushed the Boat of Longing into pieces as well. If Ye Qing hadn't defended the ship with all his might, it would have.

Unfortunately, he had to pay a huge price to do so. Since he had blocked the attack with his own body, the saber force and intent seeped deep into his body and ravaged his insides. At the time, his physical body looked like a porcelain vase that had bounced off the stairs a couple of times, his aura were barely stronger than the ambient energies, and his consciousness flickered like the flame of a dying candle.

Longing honestly thought that Ye Qing would never wake up, but to her surprise, he did just two days later. He would spend the next three days recuperating on his bed, never even taking a step out of his room.

“I’m fine, Miss Longing. You don’t need to worry about me. Cough!” Ye Qing tried to smile at her.

“Okay?” Longing snapped out of her memories and replied with a complicated look on her face. “I’ve never seen such severe injuries”

When she first met Ye Qing, his strength was many times greater than a dragon elephant, his vigor was as full and round as the sun and moon, his muscles and bones looked like the finest and most enduring marble, and his shoulders looked like they could carry ten thousand mountains of blades with ease.

But now, his physical condition was as precarious as a bunch of eggs stacked on top of each other, his vitality felt as weak as a dying candle, and even the act of smiling caused his flesh to rip apart like rotten cloth, much less talking. It was beyond pitiful and terrible.

“Haha, you say that, but I was way worse two days ago, wasn’t I?” Ye Qing consoled her even though he was the one who was ailing miserably. “I’m still alive, and that’s enough for me.”

Considering the sheer power behind Zhou Hengshan’s final attack, he was seriously grateful that he was alive at all. Even with his powers temporarily boosted by the blood he consumed, even with the Boundless Mara Buddha doing everything in its power to protect him, the attack still nearly killed him. The power of a Grandmaster truly was nothing to scoff at.

Someone might say that he would be better off dead though. For starters, Zhou Hengshan’s saber force and intent had invaded his body. After all the punishment it had endured, the saber intent had nearly shattered his physical body like glass.

That was nothing compared to the bloodthirst and killing intent within the saber intent, however. That had nearly extinguished his mind and soul in one stroke. The only reason he survived was thanks to the Fog Demon giving it his all to defend his mind with the Boundless Mara Buddha.

Worse still, not even the most potent healing items he possessed such as the Nature’s Water or the dragon-serpent runes were able to treat his wounds. Duan Zipao’s Black Sky Divine Palm and Zhou Hengshan’s saber force and intent were constantly destroying his body from the inside, and the Nature’s Water and the dragon-serpent runes’ recuperative powers were just barely enough to outpace their destruction. He was in a precarious position to say the least.

The first step to recovering was to root out the Black Sky Divine Palm’s energy and Zhou Hengshan’s saber intent from his body. Unfortunately, it was easier said than done. The Black Sky Divine Palm was infamous for its insidious and tyrannical qualities, but what really confounded him was Zhou Hengshan’s saber intent; the saber intent of a Grandmaster.

Right now, his body was barely keeping it together like a broken vase that was put together with weak glue. If he was in tiptop condition, then he could definitely root out the two powers using violent, self-harming methods. But in his current state? To do so would be to commit suicide.

Therefore, the only way to root out the palm force and the saber intent was to eliminate them slowly. Very, very slowly. Assuming he could only make do with what he currently had—the Nature’s Water, the dragon-serpent runes and the “Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra”—it would take him three to five years *at*

least to return to his former strength.

Three to five years didn’t sound like a lot of time for a warrior, but that wasn’t the case for him. He was a murderer, a fugitive. He wasn’t sure if his faked death had managed to fool his enemies either. It was something he had come up with on the fly after he reached the Yong River.

If it worked, then he wouldn’t need to worry about pursuers or be on the run constantly. If it failed, it wasn’t like his situation could get any worse. That was why he had provoked Zhou Hengshan on purpose. Make no mistake, he absolutely wanted to sucker punch the fatso in the face, but inciting the Grandmaster into attacking him with all he got also made his death so much more believable.

He miscalculated Zhou Hengshan’s strength and underestimated the man’s determination to kill him though. He had been a fine line away from dying for real.

But how did he manage to extinguish his Soul Lamp? That was because he had contacted Faceless prior using the Longing Leaves.

The Longing Leaves were a Strange Artifact created from the leaves of a Longing Tree. The Longing Tree was a Hatred-class Stranger with a black leaf and a white leaf. Symbolizing yin and yang, the two leaves literally couldn’t live without the other. If either leaf was plucked first, then the other leaf would wither and die. Only by plucking them at the same time could both leaves be preserved.

The black leaf and the white leaf were known together as the Longing Leaves, and they each possessed a unique power of their own. The black leaf was yin in nature, so if its holder were to speak to it during nighttime, the white leaf holder would be able to hear their words. This would work even if the two holders were hundreds and hundreds of kilometers away from each other.

The white leaf was yang in nature, so its holder could write words on its surface and have it appear on the black leaf instantly. Again, this worked even if the two holders were far apart from each other.

The Longing Leaves were natural communication devices, and it was one of the loot he obtained from the *jianghu* warriors he killed. He gave the black Longing Leaf to Faceless and kept the white Longing Leaf for himself. After learning that he was going to attend the Hidden Dragon Meet, he came up with this arrangement so he could stay up to date on the happenings of Luo Shui even when he was away.

Then, things went to hell, and he had to contact Faceless to extinguish his Soul Lamp. He even made sure to time his “death” properly so it would coincide with the time the Soul Lamp was extinguished.

He had done everything in his power to fake his death. All he could do now was to pray and recover his strength as soon as possible.

Right now, his body was akin to a pile of rubble. He was a long way away from rebuilding it into a tower.

It wasn't all bad news though. His mind and the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" had grown by leaps and bounds thanks to his affliction. The bloodthirst and killing intent contained within Zhou Hengshan's attack counted as negative emotions, which was why he had spent the past few days cycling the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" to refine the saber intent inside his headsapce.

Every time his spirit ran dry, he would restore it with a golden dragon-serpent rune and resume his task tirelessly. Three days and nights later, he finally managed to refine the saber intent, grow his mind, and advance his cultivation of the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra".

Now, his spirit was as strong as a Spirit Master who had formed their Yin God.

For now, there was no point in honing his spirit further. The only way he could improve now was to create his Yin God and become a Spirit Master.

As usual, he needed a martial art to complete the next step. Depending on the martial art, the shape and power of his Yin God could be completely different. There was one thing that didn't change, however. The stronger the martial art he used to create a Yin God, the greater his Yin God and his potential would become.

Chapter 475: May Your Journey Be Safe And Sound

Right now, he had two martial arts that could aid him in creating a Yin God.

The first one was the "Blood Demon Sutra". The Yin God it created was called the Blood Demon.

When the Blood Demon appeared in the world, all blood would boil without question. Capable of boiling one's blood, changing their properties, and generally manipulating blood to slay its foes, the Blood Demon was definitely a powerful Yin God.

It was even described in the "Blood Demon Sutra" that the Blood Demon could turn tens of thousands of bodies into withered bones and startle gods and ghosts into hiding.

The second martial art that could make him a Yin God was the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra". The Yin God it created was called the "Heavenly Demon of Freedom".

The Heavenly Demon of Freedom could destroy all who lived with a single thought. It could summon a person's heart demon, greed, annoyance, foolishness, delusion, happiness, sorrow, anger and joy with a single thought. It could trap them in an infinite sea of desire, heart demon and karmic hindrance. It could kill without anyone knowing that it had killed.

Both the "Blood Demon Sutra" and the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" were Grandmaster-stage martial arts. Either one could guide him all the way to the Grandmaster stage.

Difficulty wise, the "Blood Demon Sutra" was obviously easier to cultivate. All he needed was an ample amount of fresh blood, and he could create a Blood Demon in a very short time.

On the other hand, the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" was clearly more mysterious and powerful. The Heavenly Demon of Freedom seemed to possess greater potential as well.

That was why Ye Qing ultimately chose to cultivate the Heavenly Demon of Freedom.

Besides that, the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" was his main cultivation art. Compared to the "Blood Demon Sutra", which he cultivated during his leisure only as a

supplementary martial art, he was much more familiar with the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra”. While the speed at which he cultivated the “Blood Demon Sutra” was no less slower than the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra” thanks to his unique blood, the latter martial art just suited him better.

He hadn’t just been focusing on recovering for the past few days. He had been cultivating the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra”’s method to create a Yin God as well. Thanks to his massive reservoir of spiritual power and potent demonic thought, his Yin God was already beginning to take shape.

Of course, he was still a ways away from creating a Heavenly Demon of Freedom, but the advancement meant that he was no longer as defenseless as before.

Longing couldn’t help but praise him, “You have a strong heart, scion Ye. Longing is most impressed.”

Not anyone could withstand such a terrible blow and still maintain a bright smile on his face.

“Don’t tease me, Miss Longing. I’m just finding the silver lining, that’s all,” Ye Qing replied easily.

His present looked grim, and his future looked grimmer. Even so, life must go on, right?

Rather than glooming over his situation, he would rather smile and laugh to his heart’s content—even if that smile was a bitter one.

“Have we reached our destination, Miss Longing?”

“Yes. We have left Tian Yong. Once you pass through Carefree Mountain Range, you’ll enter Northern Xinjiang.”

Longing’s tone grew a tad apologetic. “I’m truly sorry we can’t carry you further, Scion Ye.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. You’ve already taken a risk by saving my life and bringing me all the way here. I cannot possibly ask more of you.”

Ye Qing saluted her. “Besides, the Boat of Longing wouldn’t be damaged in the first place if it wasn’t for me. I’m the one who should be apologizing to you.”

The Boat of Longing could travel to any location with a body of water, but Zhou Hengshan’s final attack had severely damaged the Anomaly. As a result, its power became impaired, and just ferrying him out of Tian Yong had pushed it to its limits.

Of course, the Boat of Longing was an Anomaly, and an Anomaly was eternal. Given enough time, it would naturally recover and become as good as new.

It didn’t change the fact that he was the reason it took damage in the first place though.

“What a ludicrous statement. Did you not save us from our eternal torment earlier? It is only right that we aid you in your time of need,” Miss Longing said gently.

“Haha! I saved you before, and you saved me today, so let’s just say that the score is even and skip the pleasantries, okay?” Ye Qing laughed, but his movement caused his cheeks to rip open and bleed profusely again.

“As you wish.” Long smiled gently. “On an unrelated note, you should stop laughing, scion Ye. Or smiling in general.”

You look so much worse when you smile.

“Eh, I’ve gotten used to it.” Ye Qing shrugged even as the wound on his face began healing once more.

“Since we’ve arrived at our destination, I suppose it’s time I leave,” Ye Qing declared and rose to his feet.

“Why don’t you stay with us a little longer? I’m sure you can use the rest,” Longing suggested.

Ye Qing shook his head. “Thank you for the offer. but I can’t. For one, my body is in such a state that a few extra days of rest practically amounts to nothing. I need to find a way to treat my body, and staying here won’t help with that.”

“Second, my time is short. The longer I stay in one place, the higher the chance my enemies will be able to find me.”

Longing acquiesced, “Very well, but Hua Mei and Jue Yan are currently away to gather information. Will you stay with me until they return?”

“Sure, that’s not a problem.” Ye Qing nodded. Time is life, but he could afford to waste a bit of time.

Tian Yong city was far, far away from the border of Northern Xinjiang. An ordinary person would have to travel between three to five months to make it there, and even a warrior using a transportation Strange Artifact would be on the road for at least a month. However, the Boat of Longing had passed through Guang Ping, Chang Shan, Zhong Shan and more commanderies and arrived at the border separating Tian Yong and Northern Xinjiang in just five days. It showed just how powerful it was.

It was impossible to guess where the Boat of Longing was headed to or what their destination was, so even if Chu did announce a nation-wide bounty for his head, they shouldn’t be able to locate him immediately. Besides, he couldn’t make the most optimal decision without knowing the imperial court’s final verdict, how they planned to deal with him and so on.

He would’ve tried to gather the information himself if Hua Mei and Jue Yan weren’t already on the job. He was glad that they were doing it for him and saving him much time.

About half a teatime later, Hua Mei and Jue Yan returned one after another with some news. After they told him about the official statement issued by the Intelligence Department, he fell silent for a moment and let out a sigh.

The official statement didn't mention him massacring the Hengshan Army or the fact that he was framed. All it mentioned was his conflict with Chu Qingli. Clearly, the imperial court was planning to pin all the blame on him and minimize the negative effects of the situation.

In the end, he was made a scapegoat.

Of course, he was prepared for this outcome. He was neither too surprised nor saddened to see his prediction come true.

"It looks like your plan to fake your death is a success, scion Ye!" Longing didn't think as deeply as Ye Qing and congratulated him innocently, "Congratulations!"

"Eh. It's half-successful, I guess." Ye Qing's lips curled into disdain.

Longing looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Ye Qing explained, "Nowhere was it stated in the statement that I was dead. Of course, it didn't say that I was alive either, but clearly they have their suspicions. Therefore, my plan is only half-successful."

"So... you're still not out of danger?" The three girls exchanged a worried glance with each other.

"No one is an idiot. Of course it wouldn't be easy to fool them. I'm happy with this outcome though. It could've been so much worse," Ye Qing replied in a lighthearted tone.

Looking at the statement, the Intelligence Department wasn't able to announce a nation-wide bounty for his head because they weren't sure if he was still alive. The fact that the statement was issued by the Intelligence Department instead of the Three Judicial Offices and the Imperial Clan Court also meant that the imperial court had decided to leave it all in their hands, and that the local governments and military wouldn't be getting involved.

The Intelligence Department was a monster of an organization, but being hunted by them was still better than being hunted by the entire realm.

Besides that, judging from how ambiguous the statement read, it looked like the Intelligence Department wouldn't be dispatching a million agents to scour the entire realm for him or something. They would only be making inquiries and visiting certain places to find out if he was still alive. However, it was no easy feat to find a single person in the entire realm, not to mention that they weren't sure if he was still alive. Theoretically, he only needed to lie low long enough for the Intelligence Department to believe that he was truly dead.

"Thank you for gathering this information for me, Miss Hua Mei, Miss Jue Yan. This one is most grateful," Ye Qing thanked the two girls.

They replied in unison, "You're welcome, scion Ye."

"Alright, if there's nothing else, then I shall be taking my leave." Ye Qing rose to his feet and began walking toward the exit.

As usual, the Boat of Longing was surrounded by thick fog. However, it was thinner than before, and there were far less corpses on the waters than usual. Still, the corpses formed a path for Ye Qing to walk all the way to the rivershore.

After Ye Qing's feet were standing on solid ground, he turned back toward the Boat of Longing and saluted Longing, Hua Mei and Jue Yan, "The mountains are tall, and the waters are endless. May we meet again in the *jianghu*, Misses."

Longing, Hua Mei and Jue Yan too bowed to Ye Qing with respect. "The journey is long, so we surely will, scion Ye. Take care."

The mountains are tall, the waters are endless.

May the sun watch over you during the day,

May the stars and moon be your companions during the night,

And may the wind, rain and cloud guide you away from all dangers.

Be safe,

Be free,

And may we meet again, in the *jianghu*.

Chapter 476: Carefree Pass At Carefree Mountain Range

Carefree Mountain Range was a massive mountain range that spanned hundreds of kilometers from one end to another. Located between Tian Yong and Northern Xinjiang, it was a natural barrier that kept the two prefectures separate.

There was a saying regarding Carefree Mountain Range that went something like this: The Carefree Celestial lives on Carefree Mountain Range, and those beneath the mountains pray for peace.

Legend says that a thousand years ago, after the You Dynasty had fallen into decline, countless warlords waged war for power, fame and glory. The world was in chaos, and the people were suffering.

Noticing the abundance of the southern lands, the northern warlords decided to invade them and lead their armies south. When a celestial who was passing through the area saw this, he decided to raise a massive mountain range from the ground and stopped the invasion dead in its tracks. Countless people were saved and were able to live carefree lives as a result.

In order to commemorate this celestial, the people decided to name the mountain "Carefree Mountain Range" and build a shrine named "Carefree Shrine" for him. They called him the "Carefree Celestial". That was how the quote: "The Carefree Celestial lives on Carefree Mountain Range, and those beneath the mountains pray for peace" came to be.

Of course, the story was just a legend. It was impossible to say if it was real. One thing for certain, it was a symbol of the people's yearning for a peaceful and carefree life.

At the foot of Carefree Mountain Range was a huge pass named Carefree Pass. Pass through its gates, and you would have officially entered Northern Xinjiang.

To the north of Carefree Pass lay sixteen commanderies, to its south lay the Country of Heaven[1] itself. Someone who passed through Carefree Pass would be able to travel straight to the heart of

Chu. That was why Carefree Pass was also considered the final frontier between northern Chu and its enemies.

In the 16th year of the Yuanyou era, after Emperor Yuanyou had passed away, Chu was embroiled in civil war because the late emperor's nine sons were fighting each other for the throne. Yan seized this opportunity to raise a million soldiers and stormed Qing Wu, Xuan Hua, Huai Shuo, Bei You and more territories of Northern Xinjiang. It wasn't long before they were threatening the heart of Chu itself.

At a critical moment, with just an advantageous terrain, thirty thousand soldiers and a hundred thousand untrained militia, Li Liren, guard commander of Carefree Pass, somehow held the pass for a little over ten days until reinforcements finally arrived to beat back the Yan army of one million. In the end, the Country of Heaven was saved from being ravaged by the flames of war.

Had the Yan army succeeded in breaching Carefree Pass, they would be free to roam anywhere they pleased and conquer everything in their sight. They could even make a beeline straight for the capital of Chu. The consequences would've been unimaginable.

Since then, all future emperors of Chu learned from their predecessor's lesson and stationed a significant amount of troops at Carefree Pass. They also developed it into a military stronghold.

Carefree Pass became more important than after the Heavenly Martial Emperor ascended the throne of Yan. Overflowing with ambition, the emperor was like a starving beast eyeing the delicious piece of meat that was Chu. He constantly created all sorts of conflict and chaos at the borders of Northern Xinjiang in hopes of starting a new war, and in response, Emperor Jin Run stationed a significant amount of troops in the commanderies and passes of Northern Xinjiang as well.

Although Carefree Pass wasn't located at the frontier, it still enjoyed a ludicrous amount of troops due to the significance of its location. If rumors were to be believed, the small pass had a standing army of one hundred thousand and reserve troops of fifty thousand.

Of course, the security in Carefree Pass was very tight since it was a military stronghold. For starters, everyone who wishes to pass through it must own a travel pass.

Inside the Garrison Office of Carefree Pass, a man was sitting at the seat of honor and listening to his aide's report. After the report was complete, he waved his subordinate away and rubbed his forehead in irritation, muttering, "Damn it all. Why do I have to look for some random person when I'm busy enough already? How troublesome."

The man was in his forties. He had a muscular figure and a dark shade of skin that was distinct to a man of northern Chu.

He was the commandant of Carefree Pass, Deng Quan, and his responsibility entailed patrolling the pass, keeping safety and order, interrogating and processing everyone who enters or leaves Carefree Pass and so on.

His position wasn't high, but he wielded a lot of authority. He also earned a sizable income despite not having to do much.

Deng Quan wasn't having a good time lately, however. He couldn't sleep well, he couldn't eat well, he couldn't even drink well or fuck the women of Wind and Moon without being burdened in the mind.

It was because he recently received an order to investigate every person who wished to pass through Carefree Pass into Northern Xinjiang carefully. Specifically, he was to look out for a man named Ye Qing.

There was just a teensy-weensy problem with the order. One, the higher-ups had no idea if the guy was alive or dead. Two, they had no idea how long the order would stand.

“When will this finally be over?”

Suddenly, an icy voice rang from the inner hall. “From the moment you enter the Intelligence Department, you don’t complain about life or death. You should still remember the rules, no?”

Startled, Deng Quan shot to his feet. He gathered his energies and grabbed his saber from the table, yelling, “Who are you?”

“Spirits and demons watch the monsters in the morning...”

The icy voice rang once more.

Deng Quan subconsciously replied, “Sprites and fairies watch the nine provinces at night.”

“Sprite Thirty Six greets you, my lord!”

The couplet was a code that only the intelligencer and their handler would know, and “Sprite 36” was his code name.

There were four ranks among the intelligencers of the Intelligence Department: Spirit, Demon, Sprite and Fairy, and Deng Quan was a Sprite-rank intelligencer.

36 was just a number to separate him from the other Intelligencers. It didn’t mean that he was the thirty-sixth Sprite-rank intelligencer. Moreover, all Sprite-rank intelligencers were equal in status. Barring exceptional circumstances, they usually didn’t communicate with each other and kept unaware of each other’s existence.

All Sprite-rank intelligencers answered to Sprite 1, and only Sprite 1 knew everyone’s identity. Therefore, the person speaking to him right now was most likely Sprite 1, his superior. He was most likely the one who gave him the order to look for Ye Qing as well.

The icy voice said, “As a member of the Intelligence Department, you must never forget who you are and what your duties are. If you are found to be derelict in your duties, then you will be punished by our rules. Understand?”

“Perfectly, my lord. Please forgive me,” Deng Quan bowed his head and replied fearfully.

“This is your first and last chance. Don’t fail me again.” Sprite 1 continued, “How goes the investigation? Did you find anyone suspicious?”

Deng Quan answered, “No, my lord. There were some suspicious people, but I can confirm that none of them are Ye Qing.”

“Understood, but don’t let your guard down,” Sprite 1 said.

“As you command,” Deng Quan responded before hesitating a little. “Can I say something, my lord?”

Sprite 1 commanded, “Speak.”

Deng Quan took a moment to consider his words. “Assuming that Ye Qing is still alive, how do we know that he will pass through Carefree Pass to enter Northern Xinjiang?”

Sprite 1 answered, “A total of five prefectures borders Tian Yong such as Northern Xinjiang, Long Xi, He Dong and so on. Every single one of these territories besides Northern Xinjiang are close to the capital and firmly under the control of the imperial court. If Ye Qing wishes to survive, he can only depart for prefectures far away from the imperial court such as Northern Xinjiang, Tian Liang, Jian Nan and more. That’s because these places have complex power structures and an abundance of all sorts of factions. Since Northern Xinjiang borders Tian Yong, it should be his top choice.”

“Second, Ye Qing might be connected to the Corpse Ship. The Corpse Shp could appear on any body of water, and it so happens that Yong River originates from Carefree Mountain Range. That is why I have good reason to believe that Ye Qing has already arrived at Carefree Mountain, and why we need to be especially alert for the next few days to come.”

“I see. Thank you for answering my questions, my lord.” Deng Quan clasped his hands in salute. A short silence later, he asked another question, “Do we have a specific timeframe, my lord? I’m worried that someone might notice something wrong with my behavior and discover my identity.”

His identity as an intelligencer of the Intelligence Department was one that could never see the light. If he was exposed, not only would he lose his position, he might even be executed for his troubles.

Be it in the court or the *jianghu*, absolutely no one liked a spy in their midst.

“Don’t worry. It won’t take too long.” Sprite 1 answered, “What I said are just conjectures. If Ye Qing really is connected to the Corpse Ship, he has the option to escape to a place we couldn’t even dream of. He could be traveling in the opposite direction, he might already be inside Northern Xinjiang, or he might already be dead. That said, that is no excuse to be negligent.”

“You’re a responsible and diligent person, my lord. Color me impressed,” replied Deng Quan while mentally sighing in relief. He felt a lot less stressed now that he knew that this situation wouldn’t last forever.

“If you find anything, you know what to do. Find me at Wind and Moon, and I will speak with you,” Sprite 1 instructed before saying, “We keep the peace of the world and observe the rise and fall of the nine provinces.”

“We slay the evils of the Four Seas and protect the people’s happiness.”

Deng Quan clasped his hands and replied solemnly, "Until another day."

"Take care."

When the voice subsided, Deng Quan found that the inner hall was completely empty. Clearly, Sprite 1 was gone like a phantom.

"Men!" Deng Quan called out while massaging his forehead.

"Your orders, my lord?" A subordinate stepped into the room.

"Assistant Commander Cui, tell the men to increase security and investigate anyone who enters or leaves Carefree Pass carefully. Don't hesitate to report to me as soon as you find someone suspicious."

"As you command." The assistant commander didn't understand why, but he left to carry out his order without asking anything.

After the assistant commander was gone, Deng Quan muttered under his breath, "Ye Qing... what a pain in the ass... the reason I became an intelligencer is to protect my country, my family and the people, not to get saddled with stupid shit like this."

A savage expression flitted across his face. "If you're dead, then whatever. But if you're alive, I'll make you regret making my life miserable, Ye Qing."

He didn't know that Ye Qing hadn't come to Carefree Pass.

Instead, Ye Qing had climbed up Carefree Mountain Range and paid the Carefree Shrine a visit.

Chapter 477: Night Walker

Carefree Shrine was a living shrine[1] the people of Carefree Pass had created to commemorate the Carefree Celestial.

When Carefree Shrine was initially founded, it was said to enjoy an overwhelming amount of worship. Thousands and thousands of people came to pay their respects including scholars and other men of culture. They left behind many memorable, famous verses such as, "A mountain sprung where the celestial points and free humanity from the mortal coil forevermore," or "A celestial and a mountain saved a people, granting them everlasting happiness and freedom."

Alas, the march of time was unstoppable. As the dynasties changed, Carefree Shrine endured all kinds of disasters and was even scorched by the flames of war. In the end, the shrine lost all of its former glory and became abandoned.

Right now, Ye Qing was standing in front of Carefree Shrine and supporting himself with a wooden stick. He was wearing a mask and coughing non-stop.

The shrine's walls were bent, the roof was leaking, and it looked like it was suffocating amidst a floor of dead leaves and overgrown weeds. When the mountain wind blew across the area, it made this whiny, mournful noise that gave the shrine a ghastly atmosphere.

Once upon a time, the incense smoke of this shrine was thick enough to pierce through the nine heavens. Today, it was as lifeless as it was abandoned. What an ironic and terrible fate it was.

Of course, Ye Qing was a warrior. He wasn't the type to reminisce about past glories, much less weep for some lost history. He had come here today not because he wished to pay a worthy predecessor his respect, but because he had business to do.

After his cough subsided, and he no longer felt like he might collapse on his feet at any moment, Ye Qing tossed the wooden stick away and stepped into the shrine.

In the past, there were multiple statues depicting the Carefree Celestial inside the shrine so as to accommodate its many worshippers. Today, only one mud statue was still intact.

The mud statue looked surprisingly pristine considering the condition of the shrine. It was shaped like a Taoist carrying a horsetail whisk and pointing forward with his right hand, his middle and index finger pressed together. It was a very celestial-like pose.

The statue's face was blurry and unclear, however. The two small flags planted on his left and right flank were also tattered beyond imagination. Ye Qing could barely read the words, "The celestial touches your head" and "Bless you with boundless life and happiness" on the flags.

The corners of Ye Qing's lips turned up when he saw the Taoist statue. He turned his wrists and produced three incense sticks. After the incense sticks ignited on their own, he pointed them upside down and bowed three times.

The first bow was to invite the Night Walker.

The second bow was to request the gods and demons to open a path.

And the third bow was to bless his legs with the ability to tread between yin and yang.

Each time he bowed toward the statue, one of the incense sticks would burn out completely. When all three incense sticks had gone out, the smoke they produced poured down to the floor and spread across the whole shrine. They didn't rise to the sky or fade away like a normal smoke would.

Then, Ye Qing stomped his foot and declared in a loud voice, "Wind and rain cannot block the path between yin and yang, gods and demons cannot stop the Night Walker! The offerings are ready, so please show yourself, Night Walker!"

As soon as he was finished speaking, the smoke abruptly sank into the floor and vanished into nothing.

Nine breaths later, a puff of smoke emerged from the underground and formed a single word: "Wait."

It disappeared a second later.

"Phew..." Ye Qing let out a sigh of relief and smiled when he saw this. Everything he did earlier was to request a Night Walker to show himself.

The Night Walkers were a part of a mysterious transportation organization of the *jianghu*. His colleagues were the Traveling Celestial, the Yin Coachman, the Ghost Ferry.

Technically, their job was no different from their human counterpart. They transported goods and passengers from one location to another just like a horse carriage, a litter, a ferry and so on. They didn't serve the common people, however. Their services were only provided to *jianghu* people, the wealthy and influential, Strangers and Anomalies.

That's right. The Night Walkers, Traveling Celestials, Yin Coachmen and Ghost Ferries didn't just provide their services to humans. They were perfectly okay with serving Strangers as well. They didn't support one side or another, and they didn't care if you were good or bad, right or wrong, human or Stranger. So long as you paid them a worthy price—it could be in the form of money, treasures, or even your life—they would transport you anywhere you desired without leaving a trace behind.

The organization served only profit and possessed next to no principles, so their services had resulted in some major disasters. As a result, they were branded as heretics by the imperial court and the orthodox sects of the *jianghu* in all four realms. However, the demands for their services were endless, and their unnatural abilities made them incredibly difficult to detect, much less capture. That was why they were still in business to this day.

Of course, they weren't able to operate as openly and wantonly after they became wanted in all four realms, so they dipped under the radar and operated much more carefully than before. These days, not many people had even heard of their existence.

Although the Night Walkers, Traveling Celestials, Yin Coachmen and Ghost Ferries were all service providers, their target audience and the price they demanded were very different from one another.

A Night Walker mainly provided his services to humans, and he didn't care if they were male, female, good, evil, orthodox or heretic. Just pay him his due, and he would carry you anywhere you wanted to go.

A Traveling Celestial mainly provided his services to Strangers, and just like a Night Walker, he didn't care if his customer was intelligent or non-intelligent, neutral or hopelessly evil[2]. But unlike a Night Walker, he didn't accept cash. He demanded natural treasures of all kinds, Stranger materials and the like.

A Yin Coachman mainly provided his services to yin creatures such as ghosts, yin guards, yin judges and so on. He mainly requested nether artifacts—or to put it in more secular terms, funerary items.

Finally, a Ghost Ferry mainly provided water transportation services to humans and Strangers who needed to travel or transport their goods by water. They accepted anything, be it money or treasures.

The one Ye Qing chose to summon was a Night Walker, and Carefree Shrine was one of his bases of operations. All a customer needed to do was to light three incense sticks, worship the ground instead of the sky, and say the words necessary to invite a Night Walker. If the corresponding Night Walker agreed to the request, then it would provide some form of response. If not, the smoke would dissipate like a normal smoke would.

Ye Qing hadn't learned this trick from the books. Chen Wuxin—the Heartless Brain—was the one who told him about it. Since the Heartless Brain had occupied Chen Ah Sheng's brain, it naturally inherited the man's memories as well.

Before Chen Ah Sheng moved to Chaos Heaven Mountain, he was operating in Bei You of Northern Xinjiang. He traveled south because his nemesis was hunting him like a relentless hound. A Night Walker was how he was able to slip past Carefree Pass without being detected.

Although the Corpse Ship had provided him with the perfect cover, and the Intelligence Department was unable to ascertain his location or his status, Ye Qing didn't dare to let down his guard in the

slightest. The Intelligence Department was notorious for having eyes and ears in every part of the world, so it was entirely possible that they had moles working in Carefree Pass as well. They might even have an entire team of spies keeping watch at the garrison right now. If he tried to slip into Northern Xinjiang through Carefree Pass thinking that everything would be fine, he might very well pay the price for his arrogance and optimism.

That was why he decided to employ a Night Walker's services.

"Wind and rain cannot block the path between yin and yang, gods and demons cannot stop the Night Walker." What this line really meant was that a Night Walker possessed the incredible ability to cross freely between the yin and yang world and deliver his customers to their destination without leaving behind a trace.

That said, a Night Walker usually operated within the span of a commandery or several commanderies only. That was because each Night Walker was assigned a territory, and no one was allowed to infringe upon another Night Walker's territory barring exceptional circumstances.

For example, the Night Walker Ye Qing was summoning strictly dealt with customers within Carefree Pass only. If he left the region, he would have to seek out a different Night Walker or find other ways to escape his pursuers.

Ye Qing's thoughts ran free for about three incense sticks until suddenly, a powerful gale swept into the shrine and flung the dead leaves everywhere. Right after then, four people carrying a litter appeared from the horizon and ran straight toward him.

The mountainous terrain didn't seem to slow them in the slightest, and they crossed a hundred meters in the blink of an eye even though their movements suggested otherwise.

All four men were wearing black, form-fitting outfits and wearing square hats. They were also wearing a traditional-looking mask with the word "Night Walker" written at the center.

A closer look would reveal that only the guy standing at the forefront had a heartbeat and a pulse. The other three people were as lifeless as an inanimate object.

The litter they were carrying had a pyramid-shaped roof like a bridal sedan, but it was pitch-black in color and radiating a dark light. It didn't look like it belonged to this world, and it didn't.

"Greetings, dear customer. I am the Night Walker."

After the four men stopped in front of Ye Qing and set down the litter, the Night Walker with a heartbeat raised his hands and greeted Ye Qing politely.

Ye Qing returned the gesture and said, "A pleasure to meet you as well, Night Walker."

Chapter 478: Yin Yang Litter

"Your presence is unfamiliar to me. I'm assuming this is your first time, customer?" The Night Walker asked while looking Ye Qing up and down.

"I thought it's one of your motto to serve any paying customer without asking unnecessary questions?" Ye Qing said coldly.

“Hahaha, you’re right. I apologize for overstepping my bounds,” the Night Walker didn’t take offense and replied cordially. “So, where would you like to go?”

“Homesick Pavilion!” Ye Qing answered.

“Oh?” The Night Walker smiled. “Homesick Pavilion’s a wonderful place located at the junction between Bei You, Xuan Hua, Huai Shuo and Wu You[1]. Well connected and overflowing with merchants, it is one of the most prosperous places in Northern Xinjiang.”

“Are you there to visit a friend or relative, dear customer?”

Ye Qing side-eyed the Night Walker and said nothing. As if he just realized his mistake, the Night Walker let out an embarrassed chuckle. “Oh, I can’t believe I forgot my rule again. Much apologies, customer. I hope you won’t take offense.”

“Anyway, I require a payment of ten thousand silver if you wish to travel to Homesick Pavilion,” the Night Walker made a ridiculous request.

“Ten thousand silver?” Ye Qing fell silent for a moment before nodding. “Acceptable.”

What’s this? A cash cow with more money than sense?!

A stupidly wide grin suddenly appeared on the Night Walker’s face. His mask was hiding his expression, but his trembling arms and clenched fists still betrayed how happy he was.

Doing business was never easy, and easy prey showed up only once in a blue moon. How could he not be delighted by this discovery?

“Ah, my apologies for not explaining myself clearly, customer. What I really mean to say is that passing through Carefree Pass alone costs ten thousand silver. Traveling from Carefree Pass to Homesick Pavilion requires another ten thousand silver.”

Behind his mask, Ye Qing’s lips slowly curled into a devilish smirk. He could sense the Night Walker’s emotions, of course. Some people just couldn’t control their greed, could they?

“Twenty thousand silver? I can afford that.” Ye Qing said slowly, “But dare you accept it?”

Ye Qing lifted a finger as soon as he was done speaking.

A bad feeling suddenly overcame the Night Walker, and the three men standing behind him abruptly burst into cold, green flames. Then, they surrounded Ye Qing using the Three Powers Formation[2] and charged toward him.

Unfortunately for the Night Walker, there was no chance his lackeys could move faster than Ye Qing could tap the space in front of him. Demonic thought rippled out like a wave, and the three men abruptly froze in place.

The Night Walker blanched. Somehow, Ye Qing had severed his connection to his lackeys.

The three men were, in fact, not real people. They were puppets named the Suspended Puppets of Yin and Yang. The Suspended Puppets of Yin and Yang were created from corpses who were born on a yang year, a yang month, a yin day and a yin hour. Their dual nature allowed someone in the know to refine them into corpse puppets that neither feared yang energy, yin energy, and most evils. They could traverse freely between yin and yang, and even most Strangers would choose to avoid them than engage them in a fight.

The Night Walker had received his puppets from an expert corpse craftsman within his ranks, and he literally manipulated them like puppets on strings using threads of spirit. As strong as an early-stage Spirit Purifier, the three puppets could even give a late-stage Spirit Purifier a run for their money when using the Three Powers Formation. They were the source of his confidence.

The other reason he dared to scam Ye Qing was because he could sense how weak his body was. His body was frail, and his vigor was as weak as a candle flame.

In his opinion, Ye Qing must be the stupid, hedonistic son of some big clan. Somehow, he discovered the secret of the Carefree Shrine and decided to give it a try. The Night Walker was certain that he could trick him into coughing up big bags of cash using a combination of the carrot and the stick.

He wasn't going to kill Ye Qing, of course. There were rules within their group, and one of them explicitly stated that they could do anything to increase their profits except killing. Those who did would have their martial arts destroyed and expelled from the Night Walkers.

He wasn't expecting Ye Qing to attack him before they even began the negotiations, however, and he definitely wasn't expecting him to sever the threads he used to control his Suspended Puppets of Yin and Yang—also his biggest trump card—with a single flick of his finger.

Speechless, the Night Walker didn't hesitate to slip into the black litter behind him. The transport immediately started shining brightly and growing translucent as if it was entering a different world.

“Interesting.”

While examining the abnormal changes overtaking the black litter with his senses, Ye Qing's eyes turned black as the night, and a pair of black lotus slowly surfaced into view. He then lifted his finger and tapped the space in front of him again.

“Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul”

Heaven and earth trembled once,

The wind stopped blowing,

The clouds stopped moving,

And all sound ceased to exist.

The space surrounding the black litter folded upon itself like a piece of fabric, and the black litter turned solid once more.

Ye Qing lifted his finger a third time, but the Night Walker didn't wait for him to finish his move. He stumbled out of the litter and collapsed on his knees in front of Ye Qing, begging, “Please stop, my lord! I was wrong, I was wrong so please!”

“What’s wrong? You don’t want your money anymore?” Ye Qing teased him.

“No! No! I shouldn’t have allowed my greed to overtake my good senses! Please have mercy, my lord!”

The Night Walker was white-faced and shaking like a leaf. He never imagined that Ye Qing’s spirit would be strong enough to affect even his transport. The black litter was called the Yin Yang Litter, and it was a miraculous Strange Artifact that allowed him to travel between the cracks of yin and yang. To be more specific, there existed a strange space that was neither yin nor yang between the gaps of the yin and yang world.

It was how the Night Walkers were able to deliver a customer from one place to another without being detected.

The Yin Yang Litter was the Night Walker’s livelihood. It was also their final insurance. If, for whatever reason, they found themselves facing down a life-threatening threat, they could escape into the litter and slip into the cracks between yin and yang to live another day. In fact, he had escaped many ill-intentioned people who wished him harm using this exact method, and some of them were even Half-Step Grandmasters.

The Night Walker didn’t expect Ye Qing to use some sort of spirit art to pull him back into reality, however. The sheer power of his spirit and the profoundness of his secret art were terrifying to say the least.

He thought that Ye Qing was a young, stupid and hedonistic noble, but it was the opposite. He was certain that the young man was really an old monster pretending to be a young fool. He could even be a ruthless master of the Dark Ways.

Why is a powerful, prestigious champion like you pretending to be a small fry? Is it fun to tease us actual small fries like that?

The Night Walker felt like crying right now. Scratch that, he was crying.

“Please spare me, my lord! If you do, I swear to carry you safely to Homesick Pavilion for free!”

For a moment, Ye Qing didn’t say anything. Silence slowly cut away at the Night Walker’s mental defense like a sharp blade until he was shaking all over by the end of it.

What felt like a few years later—just when the Night Walker was sure that he would perish—Ye Qing finally said, “Stand.”

“Thank you, my lord! Thank you!” The Night Walker let out a huge sigh of relief. It had been too long since he felt death breathing down his neck, but he could confirm that he still hated it with every fiber of his body.

“You must have a death wish to try and scam *me*. You would’ve paid the price of death if I didn’t have urgent business at Homesick Pavilion.”

Ye Qing pretended to speak like an old monster the Night Walker misunderstood him to be. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, but try your little tricks again when we’re moving to Homesick Pavilion, and you will wish that you were dead.”

“Of course, of course!” The Night Walker nodded like a parrot.

Seeing that the time was right, Ye Qing finally showed the Night Walker the carrot. “However, I am not an unreasonable man. If you do a good job, then I will pay you ten thousand silver.”

Ye Qing had never planned to kill the Night Walker. After all, he needed the guy to take him through Carefree Pass, not to mention that he was a man-on-the-run. He hardly wanted to make an enemy out of a group who was notorious for their ability to appear anywhere, anytime.

The Night Walker didn’t have any principles. Or rather, they would do anything in the name of profit. Even if the Night Walker didn’t scam him earlier, Ye Qing was certain that the guy would intentionally make trouble for him on the way to his destination. Rather than suffer the trivialities later, he chose to intimidate the guy now and teach him that he was no one to be trifled with.

That said, pure intimidation would only breed resentment, so he promised to pay the Night Walker the ten thousand silver he requested at the beginning. If applied properly, there was nothing the carrot and the stick couldn’t do.

“Thank you, my lord! You are a generous and a magnanimous man!” The Night Walker immediately complimented Ye Qing. The budding resentment and defiance in his heart also evaporated into thin air.

“Enough flattery. Did you forget that I have urgent business to attend to? Take me there already,” Ye Qing ordered.

“Of course, my lord.” The Night Walker peeled away the curtains covering the entrance and said with an obsequious smile, “Please enter, my lord.”

Ye Qing stepped into the litter. It was exquisitely decorated, and even the floor was covered with an animal carpet. It was far more comfortable than it looked from outside.

Outside the litter, the Night Walker waved his hand and rebuilt his connection with the three Suspended Puppets of Yin and Yang. After the puppets moved into position and lifted the litter, the Night Walker called out, “Sit tight, my lord! We’re departing right away!”

“Wind and rain cannot block the path between yin and yang, gods and demons cannot stop the Night Walker! Let’s go!”

A powerful gale blew through the mountains, and the Night Walkers began running deeper into the mountains. Both the Night Walkers and the Yin Yang Litter grew increasingly transparent until they were completely gone.

When the wind subsided, the dead leaves returned to the ground, peace and tranquility returned to Carefree Shrine. It was almost as if nothing had ever happened.

Chapter 479: The Gap Between Yin and Yang

There existed a place that was neither yin nor yang, life or death. People called it the Yin Yang Gap.

To put it in simple terms, the Yin Yang Gap was the place where yin and yang blended together into a chaotic space where nothing was what it seemed, and logic didn’t exist as a concept. There were rivers that flowed upward, mountains that floated in the sky, rainbow clouds that sat on the ground,

forests that hung upside down on the sky, celestial bodies that were actually close enough to touch should you fly high enough and more. It was a bizarre and anomalous place to say the least.

Generally speaking, a yin creature could only live in the yin world, and a yang being could only live in the yang world. Since neither energy was dominant in the Yin Yang Gap, neither the living nor the dead could survive in the Yin Yang Gap without a secret art.

But of course, the same rule couldn't be applied to Strangers. Many anomalous and powerful Strangers lived in the Yin Yang Gap, and Ye Qing saw a lot just minutes into his journey. He saw a Stranger with a bull or goat-like body, but the head of a tiger, a leopard and a wolf. The three heads could spit a gale strong enough to uproot trees, a snowfall that was practically an avalanche, and water that could corrode stone.

There was a giant lake flying in the sky with a pair of wings. It was so big that it blotted out the sky, and gigantic aquatic creatures could be seen jumping out of its surface and forming a colorful "bridge" that connected heaven and earth.

He also saw clouds that spanned from one end of the sky to another. When they exhaled, the wind would howl, and thunder would deafen the ears. When they inhaled, the world would roar like a sandstorm, and mountains and rivers would be pulled into the clouds.

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The sights dazzled and terrified Ye Qing, but not the Night Walker. On the contrary, he easily navigated through the unusual terrain and bizarre Strangers with composure and control.

"Aren't you afraid of these Strangers?" Ye Qing asked curiously.

The Night Walker answered smilingly, "These Strangers look scary, but they're all unintelligent and can only act based on their instincts. So long as you keep your presence well under wraps, they wouldn't even notice your existence."

"We Night Walkers know a secret art that allows us to conceal our and our customers' presence, so these Strangers are annoying obstacles at best. There is nothing to be worried about."

Ye Qing nodded approvingly. The Night Walkers definitely possessed some skills.

The Night Walker asked a question, "In fact, the Strangers aren't the biggest dangers in the Yin Yang Gap. Care to venture a guess, my lord?"

Ye Qing said coldly, "I don't like suspenses. Speak!"

The Night Walker let out a chuckle. "The biggest dangers in the Yin Yang Gap are an avalanche, a flood, an earthquake and so on. It is the neverending natural disasters that happen without warning anywhere, anytime."

"Natural disasters?" Ye Qing furrowed his brows. He was just about to say something when he saw a pair of floating mountains crashing into each other with such force that it reminded Ye Qing of the world-ending meteor that had wiped out the dinosaurs. As an ominous groan resounded throughout the world, and the

mountains began crumbling into pieces, large chunks of rocks crashed into a floating river below.

The river had been flowing smoothly and peacefully when suddenly, the rocks cut it in half. Its waters and the rocks immediately spilled down the sides, crushing or drowning countless unsuspecting Strangers.

Not only that, the flood was heading straight toward them like a tidal wave.

The Night Walker looked completely unperturbed, however. He continued to run toward the incoming waters.

“Aren’t you afraid, my lord?” The Night Walker asked smilingly.

“Why would I be afraid when you are not?” Ye Qing replied in an indifferent tone. He was really about to piss his pants on the inside, but if he wasn’t about to appear weak before the Night Walker.

“Not everyone can face down such a scene and remain calm, my lord. You’re a true warrior,” the Night Walker flattered.

Bro, now is not the time to be licking my boots. You may be suicidal, but I’m certainly not!

Ye Qing remained outwardly calm despite the growing panic inside his heart. They were seconds away from running into the all-consuming flood when the Night Walker sang loudly, “I do not fear the dangers of humanity, for I have the power to rise up to the blue sky! Up, up we go!”

The Night Walker’s feet began shining with a black light, and both him and the litter began rising to the sky. Right before the rocks and flood would crash into them, they abruptly disappeared into thin air.

We’re back? I see!

When the scenery around them suddenly turned into a lush green forest, Ye Qing realized that they had returned to the yang world. He should’ve realized this sooner since their ability to traverse between the worlds formed the very basis of their transportation business.

“The Yin Yang Gap exists between the two worlds, and it is overflowing with yin and yang energy. Naturally, it is a highly unstable space where even the slightest fluctuations could create all kinds of terrifying natural disasters. For example, when it is daytime in the yang world, and yang energy is at its strongest, wildfires, windstorms, rainstorms and the like would manifest in the Yin Yang Gap. When it is nighttime in the yang world, and yin energy was at its strongest, snowstorms, hailstorms and so on would appear instead.”

“Yin energy and yang energy are opposing elements that cannot coexist in the same space. If they do, it would be like adding water into a pot of oil. All sorts of destructive natural phenomena such as avalanches, earthquakes, floods and more would happen. That is why I consider them far more dangerous than the Strangers.”

The Night Walker smiled. "But of course, the natural phenomena created in Yin Yang Gap cannot affect the yang world, and the Strangers definitely cannot pass into reality. No matter what kind of danger we encounter, we simply need to return to the yang world to avoid it."

"That is why I personally think that the Yin Yang Gap is a better place than the yang world."

Ye Qing neither agreed or disagreed with his statement. From the Night Walker's perspective, of course the Yin Yang Gap was an awesome place. After all, he could leave it behind whenever he wanted to. But for someone like him? If he ever found himself stranded in the Yin Yang Gap, he should probably do himself a favor and kill himself.

The Night Walker didn't take Ye Qing's refusal to heart and continued to run past the trees like the wind. A teatime later, he took them back into the Yin Yang Gap. The horrifying disaster from before was nowhere to be seen.

As the Night Walker said, natural disasters were constantly happening in the Yin Yang Gap, and they were as dangerous as they were unpredictable. In just six hours or so, he had witnessed more mountains crashing into each other, rivers falling from the sky like a burst dam, an inferno that swept through both heaven and earth, windstorms and hailstorms that felt like it could flatten the ground like a pancake, earthquakes that felt like the apocalypse was upon them and so on.

If their troubles were just confined to the Yin Yang Gap, then so be it. The problem was that the sun had set in the yang world, and all sorts of Strangers and Anomalies began showing their faces. He saw a mountain god marrying a bride, yin soldiers marching to heavens-know-where, a Resentful Fog that was notorious for its cruelty, a bizarre Bird of Ill Omen, a vicious Monkey Demon, a terrifying Old Man of the Mountain and so on.

They were never in any real danger thanks to the Night Walker's ability to traverse between the two worlds, however. When they ran into danger in the Yin Yang Gap, they would escape into the yang world. When they ran into danger in the yang world, then they would return to the Yin Yang Gap. If both worlds happened to be plagued by danger at the same time, fear not, for there was still the yin world to escape to.

The ability was so OP that even Ye Qing felt tempted to kill the Night Walker and steal his secret art, magic, Strange Artifacts, everything. It was just a passing thought though. The Night Walker's magic and secret arts required a special bloodline and body to master. There were also fail-safes in their souls that prevented them from revealing the details. If they tried, the fail-safes would immediately trigger and kill them. Soul searching and soul stealing wouldn't work either. It would simply result in soul destruction.

Besides that, the Night Walkers were a mysterious and powerful group who shared ties with certain sects and major clans; especially those that were branded heretics. If you killed a Night Walker over personal grievances, the most they would do was to blacklist you and never provide you their services again. But if you killed them because you coveted the very thing that made them what they were today, then every Night Walker in the world would hunt you to the ends of the earth.

Obviously, some people had tried to steal the Night Walker's secret arts before. A good number of them were prominent sects and clans as well. Once upon a time, the Hill of Hanging Moon, one of the thirty six unorthodox sects, actively hunted down Night Walkers in hopes of obtaining their

secret arts. Angered, they wiped out the sect to their last animal in a single night. Since then, no one dared to target the Night Walkers ever again.

Ye Qing didn't think he could succeed where countless had failed.

Chapter 480: The Nine Dragons And The Coffin

"Where are we now?"

Ye Qing asked.

Day and night didn't exist in the Yin Yang Gap. There was only an endless line of horror shows. That was why it was incredibly easy to lose track of time and direction while traversing the Yin Yang Gap. However, this didn't apply to the Night Walkers because they knew a system of methods that allowed them to keep track of time and direction without fail.

"We're deep inside Carefree Mountain Range right now. It should take us another two to four hours at most to pass through the area completely," the Night Walker answered.

"That fast?" Ye Qing exclaimed in astonishment.

Carefree Mountain Range spanned over fifty kilometers in width, not to mention that countless dangers resided within the mountains. Even if there was no danger, it should've taken them at least ten to fifteen days to pass through the mountain range. Generally speaking, it took around three to five *months* to cross over Carefree Mountain Range.

It had only been eight hours at most since they began their journey, and already they were almost through the region. It was miraculous to say the least.

"Have you ever heard of the saying: 'When yin is long, yang is short. When yang is long, yin is short', my lord?" The Night Walker asked.

"No." Ye Qing shook his head.

"There is a story in 'On Picking Up Strangers' that goes something like this. Once upon a time, there was a scholar named Wang Sheng who was enjoying a night walk. However, something startled him and caused his soul to become separate from his body. In his delirious state, he somehow appeared hundreds and hundreds of kilometers away from his body."

"Luckily for him, a kind Taoist who happened to be roaming the area with his Yin God noticed his soul and escorted him all the way back to his body. When Wang Sheng regained his consciousness, he realized what he did when he was a soul and asked the Taoist how on earth it was possible for his soul to travel hundreds of kilometers in a single night. The Taoist answered, 'When yang is long, yin is short. When yin is long, yang is short. Such is the profoundness of our world.'"

After he was done narrating the origin story of the saying, the Night Walker explained, "To put it in simple terms, the spacetime interval of the yang world and the yin world is different. Some places

in the yang world are very far apart from each other, but in the yin world, they could be within walking distance of each other. The opposite is the same.”

“The Yin Yang Gap also has its own unique spacetime interval. We Night Walkers know a secret art that would allow us to determine the spacetime interval gap between the yang world and the Yin Yang Gap. We then exploit this knowledge to drastically reduce the amount of time we need to carry our customers from one location to the next. That is why we are almost through Carefree Mountain Range in such a short amount of time.”

“When yang is long, yin is short. When yin is long, yang is short, huh? It really is incredible,” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization.

Rumble rumble!

A loud rumble came from in front of the litter while they were chatting. Thinking that they had run into yet another natural disaster, Ye Qing looked through the gap between the curtains to see what it was. It wasn't. What he saw stunned him so much that words failed him for a moment.

He saw nine massive Strangers in front of him. Each was one shaped differently from another. One had a dragon's head but a snake's body, another had a dragon's head and a jackal's body; the third Stranger was shaped like a lion, the fourth Stranger was shaped like a giant turtle and carrying a stele on its back, the fifth Stranger had a dragon's head but a tiger's body...

Each Stranger gave off an unbelievable amount of pressure. He knew at first glance that he could never defeat them as he was.

“Is that... the Dragon's Nine Sons?”

Ye Qing's eyes widened. Not only did he recognize the Nine Strangers, he actually knew them from his previous life. More accurately, they looked quite similar to the nine creatures depicted in the Legend of the Dragon's Nine Sons: Qiuniu, Yazhi, Chaofeng, Pulao, Suanni, Baxia, Bi'an, Fuxi, and Chiwen.

Qiuniu possessed a dragon's head and a snake's body. It loved music.

Yazhi possessed a dragon's head and a jackal's body. It was aggressive and enjoyed fighting.

Chaofeng resembled a mix between a phoenix and a dragon. It was extremely fond of adventuring.

Pulao was shaped like a dragon, but smaller in size. It loved roaring a lot.

Suanni was shaped like a lion and was fond of smoke and fire.

Baxia was shaped like a turtle and loved to carry heavy objects.

Bi'an possessed a tiger's head and a dragon's body. He enjoyed litigation and upholding justice for others.

Fuxi was shaped like a long dragon and loved words.

And finally, Chiwen was shaped like a lizard without a tail. It enjoyed swallowing fire.

What stunned Ye Qing even more than witnessing the legendary creatures themselves was the fact that they were covered in chains and dragging a coffin behind them. Not only that, the coffin made him feel worse than even the nine sons of the dragon.

He took one glance at the coffin—just one—and suddenly, he found his mind shaking like a leaf, and blood pouring out of the corners of his eyes.

“What kind of coffin requires nine dragons to pull it?!”

Ye Qing hurriedly closed his eyes and tried to control his trembling. Inexplicable fear gripped every part of his body.

“We need to—”

He couldn’t finish before the Night Walker suddenly let out a bloodcurdling scream. His demonic thought told him that the man was clutching his face, and blood was pouring profusely down his eyes.

“Return to the yang world, now!”

Ye Qing soothed the man’s fear and panic with his demonic thought before yelling again.

The Night Walker’s terror abruptly disappeared like it was never there. Knowing that they were at a critical moment, he shouted as soon as he collected himself, “Wind and rain cannot block the path between yin and yang, gods and demons cannot stop the Night Walker!”

The Yin Yang Litter swerved upward and grew transparent. They were rapidly transitioning into the yang world.

When familiar darkness assaulted his senses, Ye Qing could barely stop himself from letting out a sigh of relief. They were back in the yang world.

That was a little too close.

To say that the coffin and the nine dragons had left him a deep impression would be an understatement. Just now, he felt like he had one foot in the grave. Even now, he almost felt like he could hear the metallic clinks of the chains binding the nine dragons and the coffin together.

Wait... it’s not a hallucination! I can really hear it!

The blood drained away from Ye Qing’s face as the nine dragons and the coffin appeared before his eyes once more. This time though, something was different. A man—or more accurately, a withered, pale-faced corpse—was sitting crosslegged atop the coffin, and despite his obviously dead state, Ye Qing couldn’t help but feel terrified. He felt like he was in the presence of something many, many times greater than he was.

Suddenly, the corpse slowly raised his head. Space began shivering lightly as if a titan was pushing the sky upward.

“When I bow my head, the sky is barely taller than me.”

“When I look up, the world can no longer fit me.”

Ye Qing’s eyes bulged, and his mind shuddered like a leaf.

He wanted to say something, but he couldn't open his mouth.

He wanted to move, but his body was stiff all over.

Even his thoughts felt infinitely more sluggish than normal.

His scalp turned numb when he noticed that the corpse was looking straight at him.

Its eyes were empty and glassy. Paradoxically, it felt both distant and close at the same time. But one thing for certain, it was definitely staring at him.

For a moment, they were silently staring at each other. Then, the corners of the corpse's lips slowly turned up.

A human's smile was generally welcoming, but the smile of the dead could only be terrifying.

As soon as the corpse's smile spread to full length, darkness abruptly overtook Ye Qing's senses. He blacked out.

.....

"Phew, that was too close, my lord?"

The Night Walker had temporarily stopped his vehicle to catch his breath and wipe the blood on his face. There was lingering fear and trepidation on his face and he said, "What on earth is that thing? It's terrifying!"

He waited for a moment but heard no answer from Ye Qing. While his customer wasn't the most talkative man, the Night Walker thought that anyone would speak up after experiencing whatever the hell that was.

"My lord? My lord?"

The Night Walker called out twice and still received no response from Ye Qing. He thought with increasing puzzlement, *is he still in shock or something?*

"Are you alright, my lord?"

The Night Walker slowly lifted the curtains. "My lord, what—"

His eyes bulged, and his mouth turned into an O-shape before he could finish.

It was because the Yin Yang Litter was completely empty.

Ye Qing was nowhere to be seen.

Where is he?

He couldn't have disappeared without me noticing, right?

What the fuck?

.....

"Who am I?"

"Where am I?"

“What the hell happened?”

His head felt heavy. Ye Qing massaged his forehead furiously as he opened his eyes and saw... darkness.

He jumped to his feet. Maybe it was because his movement was too abrupt, but multiple wounds split open on his body.

He paid them no attention, however. He was too busy examining the unfamiliar environment around him.

It looked like he was shut inside a small, narrow room. He could literally touch the walls and the ceiling from where he stood. Judging from the coldness and somewhat coarse texture brushing against his skin, the room was probably carved out of some sort of bluestone.

There was a door in front of him, but he didn't open it immediately. Instead, he performed a thorough inspection on himself. A while later, he concluded that he hadn't lost anything or gained some sort of new affliction while he was unconscious.

“I remember... I remember seeing nine dragons and a coffin...”

Ye Qing slowly recalled what happened prior to his black out. He remembered seeing nine dragons dragging a coffin behind them, a corpse suddenly appearing on top of the coffin, the corpse smiling at him and...

That was it.