

Stranger 591

Chapter 591: I Have A Book That Is Like Infinity

Pei Qiansui roared, and his hands sank into Chu Wang's body. Then, he began pulling outward.

The Soul Refining Hand refined souls to strengthen the practitioner's hands. It also gave the hands the ability to turn intangible and sink into the victim's headspace. That was how the martial art was able to extract one's soul and refine it. As the victim's soul was pinned in place, they usually could not move until they were dead.

Pei Qiansui's intangible hands were being melted by Chu Wangsun's righteous qi, but he kept pulling as if he couldn't feel the pain. Face warped into a vicious snarl, he slowly pulled out a semi-transparent silhouette from Chu Wangsun's body.

It was none other than his Yin God.

"A sage treats others with leniency. You can still turn around, Pei Qiansui!" Chu Wangsun with his usual indifference. It was almost as if the Yin God being pulled out wasn't his.

"Hahaha! Fuck your sage nonsense! Just die!" Delight and excitement danced on Pei Qiansui's face when he saw that he was moments away from extracting Chu Wangsun's Yin God from his body. Chu Wangsun was a Half-Step Grandmaster with an exceptionally sturdy Yin God, so of course he wasn't able to refine and annihilate it at first notice. But if he could pull Chu Wangsun's Yin God out of his body, then he could shove it into the Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact his master gave him, the Soul Refining Furnace, and refine it until it perished.

Unfortunately, Chu Wangsun's Yin God became stuck after he reached the halfway point. No matter how hard he pulled, the Yin God refused to budge an inch further.

"How about this?!"

Pei Qiansui growled, and a pair of arms reached out from the void. The arms were pitch black and looked semi-transparent. Strange, demonic patterns covered its skin, and it formed a human face each on the back of the hands. The human face looked warped and hateful, and it was letting out a cacophony of unholy screams and wails that disturbed the mind.

Invisible, formless tentacles began growing out of the mouth at the back of the hands. They swayed left and right in the air.

"Yin God: Demon Extracting Hands"

The tentacles growing out of the Demon Extracting Hands wasted no time in penetrating Chu Wangsun's body and wrapping around his Yin God.

Now that the Yin God was in play, Chu Wangsun's Yin God finally began moving once.

At the same time, an oddly-shaped furnace appeared above Pei Qiansui's head. It was shaped like a human head where scarlet blood was constantly gushing out of the eyes, ears, nose and mouth. The blood converged at the bottom of the furnace and formed a blazing red inferno.

This was Pei Qiansui's Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact, the Soul Refining Furnace, and it could refine all yin-type beings in the world. So long as the target was a yin soul or a ghost and not a Grandmaster or higher, then they could not break free from the Soul Refining Furnace's confinement. They would be refined and converted into Pei Qiansui's strength.

Trapped within the Soul Refining Furnace, no ghost or yin soul would ever see the light of day.

"Hahaha! You're dead, Chu Wangsun! Dead!"

After Chu Wangsun's Yin God was fully pulled out of his body, the human mouth of the Soul Refining Furnace opened wide as if it would swallow the Yin God whole.

Chu Wangsun was too arrogant. So arrogant, that he never even took away his Strange Artifact or placed a restriction on him.

A swimmer often died because they drowned. The overconfident usually died because they were overconfident. That was why Chu Wangsun was going to die today.

"Stubborn and unrepentant. It looks like there's no saving you."

It was at this moment Chu Wangsun's Yin God spoke up. Despite the dire circumstances he was in, the scholar's tone never changed even a little. "The sage said, 'To slay before teaching is not good, but to slay one who does not repent after teaching is good!'"

As it spoke, Chu Wangsun's Yin God grew increasingly tangible until it took the form of a sage wearing a loose robe with big sleeves and a square crown on its head. It was also holding a book named "On The Subject of Wisdom".

"The sage disciplines himself and so is immune to all evils. Freeze!"

The sage spoke, and his power followed. As soon as Chu Wangsun's Yin God made its solemn, eminent declaration, the guests still inside the restaurant, the Soul Refining Furnace falling toward it, and the cackling Pei Qiansui all froze in place.

"The sage loathes evil and so slays demons and monsters. Slay!"

As soon as it said this, killing intent unlike anything anyone had ever felt filled the restaurant in an instant. It was like the rage of the Son of Heaven, a million deaths on the battlefield, and rivers of blood that flowed hundreds and hundreds of kilometers without end.

First, the invisible tentacles wrapped around Chu Wangsun's Yin God crumbled into nothing.

Then, Pei Qiansui's arms were sliced clean through from the shoulders.

Finally, a red mark slowly appeared on his neck. When the freezing stopped, his head would probably fall right off his neck.

Shock and fear churned in Pei Qiansui's eyes. However, none were as strong as his regret.

He thought he had already made up his mind. He was going to lie low until he grew strong enough to kill Chu Wangsun and everyone here and wash away the humiliation he suffered today. So why was it that he was able to swallow his indignity while the humiliating punishment was going on, but he suddenly lost his cool after it was finally over?

It was almost as if a voice was whispering sweet nothings beside his ears. It told him that his tolerance was unnecessary, and that the only way he might vent his hatred and wash away today's humiliation was if he acted now. At that moment, his anger, hatred and killing intent punched right through his mental defense like a volcano that could not be stopped and annihilated his initial plan to endure.

At that moment, all that was left in him was murder.

His regret lasted only for an instant, however. After all, it was already too late to change the outcome. And if it was already too late to change the outcome, then why bother? If he died, he died. Since ancient times, countless sons and daughters of the jianghu had died for one reason or another. What was there to be afraid of?

He wasn't going to die with a whimper though, and he definitely wasn't going to give Chu Wangsun or the bastards who were watching from the sidelines and laughing at his misery a good time. He might not be able to kill Chu Wangsun, but he was going to take everyone else to the grave with him.

“Hahaha! You love being a sage, don't you? Okay! I'll fulfill your wish!”

Right as Pei Qiansui's head rolled off his neck, his Yin God, the Demon Extracting Hands abruptly broke free from the sage's shackles. At the same time, Pei Qiansui's face appeared on the back of the Demon Extracting Hands, laughing.

“Everyone here is coming to the afterlife with me. You will become the reason they all died today!”

“If you fail to save even one of them, then you can't possibly call yourself a disciple of the sages anymore, can you? Ahahahahaha!”

Pei Qiansui's maddened laughter continued as the demonic patterns etched on the Demon Extracting Hands began swelling and discharging demonic qi in every direction. At the same time, a terrifying, destructive pressure began seeping out of the Yin God.

“He's going to detonate his Yin God! Everyone, run!”

Xie Taohua blanched and appeared outside the restaurant in the blink of an eye. Unfortunately, the rest of the guests were still standing in place with dumbfounded expressions.

Chu Wangsun had discovered Pei Qiansui's scheme at first notice, but despite his best efforts, he was still too late to stifle his efforts. For the first time, his eyebrows wrinkled a little.

Pei Qiansui was the eighteenth ranker on the Human Champions Ranking and a powerful late-stage Spirit Master. If he was allowed to detonate his Yin God, then Number One and everything within a hundred meters of him was going to be annihilated into dust.

Number One was the most famous restaurant in Bei You, and countless guests visited it everyday. Not only that, Number One was located at the city center and dining area. The amount of traffic that went through this place was considerable to say the least. If Pei Qiansui succeeded, then the consequences were unimaginable to say the least.

He could not allow it to happen no matter what.

The book Chu Wangsun's Yin God was holding began flipping open on its own. Countless ancient seal scripts flew out of the book, and the sounds of reading filled the restaurant. It sounded like countless scholars were reading the sages' scriptures out loud.

"The wind, the rain, the sounds of reading.

Family matters, national matters, worldly matters."

The ancient seal scripts came together to form a profound image that looked like an infinite expanse and stars. It wrapped around Pei Qiansui's Yin God.

Buzz!

As soon as the ancient seal scripts wrapped around Pei Qiansui's Yin God, the latter finally reached its limit and exploded. There was no sound, and the shockwave that rippled across the restaurant was barely noticeable. Still, everyone's heart skipped a beat despite themselves.

In the sky, a giant fireball was burning furiously and attempting to expand in every direction. Countless ancient seal scripts were destroyed in the attempt to contain the fireball, but the seal scripts were endless. They formed a tapestry of an eternal, infinite sky that could not be overcome no matter what. The Yin God's detonation was powerful, but what was a supernova in the tapestry that was the infinite universe itself? A flash in the pan. A dot in the sky.

Naturally, a mere dot in the sky could produce no waves.

"I have a book that is like infinity.

The sun may fall,

The moon may crumble,

But my book shall encompass it all."

Chapter 592: Righteous Qi Like The Blue Sun

The star extinguished, regenerated, then extinguished again. It seemed infinite and unending, but even the brightest stars must go dark eventually.

It felt like time was crawling at a snail's pace, and the giant fireball might burn forever. In reality, it only last an instant. When the energy generated from Pei Qiansui's suicide had vanished completely, an involuntary tremble coursed through Chu Wangsun's body. The book in his hand also turned tattered and dim.

However, Chu Wangsun's face twitched yet again. It was because the Soul Refining Furnace suddenly began shaking all of a sudden. Scarlet flames were gushing out of its orifices, the flames themselves were bubbling with unimaginable heat, and the unholy screams were growing louder by the second. At the same time, the Soul Refining Furnace grew larger, and the face on the Strange Artifact was slowly coming alive. It was laughing at everyone and everything.

One could vaguely see what seemed like infinite darkness and evil in its gaping maw.

The next moment, countless eerie white arms stretched out of its mouth. Their frantic movements resembled the ghosts of Nine Nethers trying to escape the eternal prison and descend onto the human world.

The atmosphere in Number One instantly turned cold and dark. Yin wind blew furiously, and ghastly screams filled the ears. Everyone felt as cold as ice and almost distracted by the sudden change. It was like the restaurant had plunged into a ghastly domain.

“The Strange Artifact is resurrecting?!”

At the distance, Xie Taohua's already pale complexion grew even paler. Even he had underestimated Pei Qiansui's ruthlessness and viciousness. Not only had he destroyed his own Yin God, he had resurrected his Strange Artifact as well.

In essence, a Strange Artifact was a special kind of Stranger. When people said that a Strange Artifact had resurrected, they meant that the Strange Artifact was transforming into a Stranger that was no longer under anyone's command.

Of course, resurrecting a Strange Artifact was no easy feat. At the very least, it wasn't something that could be done with, say, the mere press of a button.

First, the Strange Artifact must be ownerless or at a near uncontrollable state for a long time.

Second, the darker, stranger, and more powerful a Strange Artifact was, the higher the chances it might come back to life.

It was said that the main ingredient used to forge the Soul Refining Furnace was the skull of the Disaster-class Stranger, Devourer of Souls[1].

Devourer of Souls had a human head but a monkey's body. Its laughter sounded like a wail, and it lived on living souls. Whenever it made an appearance, everything within tens of kilometers would transform into a ghastly hell where countless ghosts were loose. Any living being who was unfortunate enough to appear in its domain would be hunted down and consumed by the ghosts.

When the ghosts had consumed every living soul in its domain, Devourer of Souls would disappear somewhere. However, the ghastly hell where all living souls had been consumed would remain for all to witness.

Every time Devourer of Souls appeared, there would be terrible casualties. It was why it was deemed as evil and terrifying.

The Soul Refining Furnace was made from Devourer of Souls' skull. Naturally, it was evil, deadly, and had an extremely high chance of resurrecting, not to mention that Pei Qiansui often used it to

slaughter innocents and other inhuman atrocities and intentionally pushed it to the brink of resurrection.

And why did he do such a thing, pray tell? The answer was simple: to use it as a trump card if he encountered a danger that he could not possibly defeat. Devourer of Souls would return to the world and transform a whole region into a ghastly domain of hell. Best case scenario, the Stranger would keep his enemy occupied while he made his escape. If his enemy turned out to be stronger than expected, he could still use the surrounding people as hostages and negotiate for his freedom.

After all, few people would be willing to allow Devourer of Souls to resurrect in the middle of a highly populated city, especially those who fancied themselves as noblemen of righteous sects or so-called virtuous heroes.

Some people might think that his scheme to use innocent lives as hostages to negotiate for his survival was despicable, shameless and cruel, there was a reason he was labeled as a heretic and a monster. If the sanctity of life meant anything to him at all, then he would be loathed and hunted no matter where he went. Selfishness and indifference toward all life were their motto.

Pei Qiansui wasn't unique among his brethren. There were many heretics who carried at least one such "trump card" with them, if not more—and that brought up a curious question. Why didn't Pei Qiansui use his trump card to threaten Chu Wangsun and negotiate for his freedom? That was the point of the trump card, wasn't it? Instead, he chose to stain his reputation and throw his Saint's Heart into disarray at the cost of his own life. Just why?

Now was the time to think about this, however. The resurrection of the Soul Refining Furnace took precedence.

The Soul Refining Furnace was a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact. If it resurrected, it could not hope to compare with a true Devourer of Souls, but it could still transform everything within several kilometers into a ghastly hell. As this was the city center and the most prosperous area of Bei You, thousands, if not tens of thousands of people would suffer if Pei Qiansui succeeded.

"Brother Chu, we need to stop it! We can't allow it to resurrect no matter what!"

Xie Taohua was no sage, but he was no heartless villain either. He had no desire to witness a bloody massacre. Without hesitation, he rushed toward the Soul Refining Furnace.

Xie Taohua knew full well what would happen if the Soul Refining Furnace was allowed to resurrect, and Chu Wangsun was no exception. The second he spoke, Chu Wangsun abruptly grabbed the resurrecting Strange Artifact and took a step toward the exit.

A strange, illusory door abruptly appeared at the exit, and Chu Wangsun stepped right through it. The door shook a little, and Chu Wangsun vanished into thin air just like that.

After he was gone, the eerie, dark atmosphere gripping everyone by their throats abruptly disappeared as well.

It was at this moment everyone in Number One finally awakened from their stupor and exchanged confused glances with each other. They had no idea what just happened. They had no idea that they had been one moment away from hell.

Xie Taohua shot the guests a glance before dashing toward the city gates as fast as he was able. He had no idea that one man had disappeared from the second floor as well.

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There was a withered forest where not a soul could be spotted anywhere about five kilometers away from Bei You.

The forest was called the Withered Forest, and as its name implied, every single tree in this forest was dead and lifeless.

It wasn't because Bei You's environment was poor, however. Yes, Bei You had poor rainfall and was generally unsuitable for plant growth, but these trees were born this way. It was also why they were called "Withered Trees".

A Withered Tree was a Malice-class Stranger that was shaped like a withered tree. It usually lived in groups, and any living being who wandered into a forest of Withered Trees would become withered, drained and fatigued over time. While a human would not die if they approached the Withered Forest, they would feel thirsty and tired much faster than usual.

This was why there was no human or animal within several kilometers of Withered Forest.

Today, the peace of Withered Forest was disturbed by an uninvited guest. An illusory door suddenly opened above their heads, and a man stepped out from behind that door. The second he did, the sky darkened, the yin wind blew, and the ghosts wailed of torture and suffering.

The unholy phenomenon came from the furnace the man was holding in his hand. It was none other than Chu Wangsun and the Soul Refining Furnace.

By now, the Soul Refining Furnace had already resurrected. The darkened environment and myriad ghosts were proof of this. However, Chu Wangsun paid them no attention. He simply gripped the Soul Refining Furnace tighter and tighter.

"Uwah!"

Laughter that wasn't laughter and cries that weren't cries came from the furnace. Countless cold, white arms reached out from the Soul Refining Furnace and grabbed Chu Wangsun's arm. It looked like they were planning to drag him into the furnace.

The swarm of ghosts roaming the Withered Forest also turned around and surged toward Chu Wangsun like a tidal wave.

"Righteous qi is like the blue sun..." Chu Wangsun whispered without looking at the ghosts. Light descended from above as if the sun was slowly rising from the horizon.

"... it repels the shadows and exposes the monsters."

The ghosts had nowhere to hide under the light. They didn't even have the time to struggle before the tidal wave of ghosts dissolved into green smoke.

The pale arms grabbing Chu Wangsun also let go as if his arm was made of molten steel. Most of them sizzled and melted into nothing just like that, and those that somehow survived hastily pulled back into the Soul Refining Furnace.

Chapter 593: Wind And Thunder From My Fist

Crack... crack...

Chu Wangsun continued to tighten his grip around the Soul Refining Furnace until it began to warp and crack. Spider webs began spreading across its surface, and black liquid leaked out of the cracks.

The black liquid was filthy and tainted. As it slid down Chu Wangsun's fingers, they transformed into all kinds of faces that made all kinds of noises. There were children, old men, beauties and scary-looking men; cries, laughter, begging and threats...

But Chu Wangsun ignored it all. A selfless person needed not be plagued by the troubles of red dust.

In the end, a hateful, defiant scream erupted from the Soul Refining Furnace before it exploded into smithereens.

Buzz!

The wind changed, and the clouds trembled. A shockwave so potent it felt like it could flatten mountains and overturn seas washed out from the Soul Refining Furnace.

The thick, earthen ground was flipped upside down, the tough Withered Trees were uprooted like nothing, and even the morning sun was blown off the sky.

At that moment, heaven and earth changed places, and the wind and rain howled like the apocalypse.

The white-robed man at the center of the shockwave remained unmoved, however. The wind could not push him, and the rain could not touch him. Small he might be, he was as tough as an immovable rock in a raging river. He could not be moved no matter how hard the elements tried to wear him down.

The shockwave lasted about a dozen or so breaths. By the time it finally ended, everything within several kilometers was completely destroyed. What was once a forest was now just a barren, empty wasteland.

Chu Wangsun remained untouched, however. Not one corner of his white robe was ruffled, and his indifferent expression had not changed one bit. If someone didn't know better, they would have thought that nothing had happened at all.

He took a moment to wipe away the dust that had attached themselves to his sleeves and straightened his attire. Once done, he got ready to leave. At that moment, there was no doubt that he looked both cool and impressive.

However, Chu Wangsun had just lifted his foot off the ground when suddenly, his brow wrinkled a little. Then, he moved his hand forward.

The gesture seemed as harmless as it was ordinary, but it resulted in a surprise thunderclap that deafened the ears. The ground beneath his foot also rippled like waves. It looked calm and peaceful, but it was anything but.

The next moment, a person abruptly appeared in front of Chu Wangsun. Their fist was caught firmly in Chu Wangsun's palm.

“Who are you?” Chu Wangsun asked indifferently. He sounded so calm it was almost as if he was speaking to a harmless stranger, not a dangerous warrior who just tried to ambush him.

Instead of answering, the man raised and dropped his shoulders. His movements looked simple, but it was really like he was shaking off a mountain range from his shoulders: vast, heavy, and unshakeable.

The arm pressed up against Chu Wangsun’s palm relaxed and tightened in tandem with the gesture. When it relaxed, all was calm, and not a ripple could be spotted across the four seas. When it tightened, wrath filled the heavens, and dragons got ready to turn the earth upside down.

BOOM!!!

A thunderclap erupted from the point between the fist and the palm once more. It was shorter but louder than the previous noise.

As soon as the thunderclap happened, the space surrounding the duo shook violently. Then, it began to shatter bit by bit like glass.

Wind and thunder could happen in a room. A world could be held at the center of one’s palm.

Slowly, a hint of astonishment spread across Chu Wangsun’s face. His arm was slowly being pushed backward, and every time it was pushed back an inch, his spotless sleeve would crumble a little. Three inches later, the sleeve was completely destroyed, and his elbow just happened to hit him in his chest.

BANG!

It sounded like a celestial striking the gong of heaven, loud and powerful. The ground behind Chu Wangsun’s back abruptly soared at least dozens of meters into the air like a wave that struck a reef.

“Who sent you?”

Despite looking like he had lost the bout, Chu Wangsun remained as calm as ever.

He wasn’t arrogant, he just knew that he could not be beaten. After all, his opponent was just an early-stage Spirit Master.

In his opinion, there was no qualitative difference between an early-stage Spirit Master and an ant. Both could be squashed with a single finger.

It was also why he wanted to know what gave an early-stage Spirit Master the audacity to ambush him.

Had he had enough of life?

Or was he acting under someone else’s orders?

Chu Wangsun personally believed that it was the latter. Despite being an early-stage Spirit Master, the fist art his attacker displayed was most sublime. He could not possibly be a nobody. That was why he asked that question.

He had come to Bei You for the Dark Overlord's inheritance. He hadn't exactly kept a low profile, but he certainly wasn't announcing his itinerary for all to know either. So why did someone try to kill him as soon as he arrived at Bei You?

He wanted to know who was the mastermind behind this. That was why he hadn't killed the attacker immediately or asked them about their objective.

The answer he got was a fist to the face. Frowning, Chu Wangsun pressed his index and middle fingers together and thrust it toward the fist.

The gesture looked harmless, but rules existed even in the middle of nowhere, and the traces of the sages were everywhere. It was as if the world was a classroom, and the traces were the marks a sage left behind while educating a disciple.

A finger was both a ruler and a rule of some sort. More importantly, it represented the words of a sage.

A disciple could not help but obey the words of a sage, no?

That was why the technique Chu Wangsun used was called, "Follow The Rule". It was proper etiquette for a disciple to follow a rule, and when someone was following a rule, they should withdraw their force, quell their intent, extinguish their qi, and bow their heads. After all, what kind of disciple would tower over his teacher?

The fist was overflowing with power and speed at the beginning, but over time, it grew slower and gentler.

What was a fist with neither power nor speed? A toothless tiger. And what could a toothless tiger kill? Nothing.

When Chu Wangsun's fingers made contact with the person's fist, they immediately let out a muffled groan. Their arm popped and cracked like the muscles and bones were shattering inch by inch, their complexion kept alternating between blue and white, blood was spurting out of their orifices, and their legs sank all the way to the knees. Thunder could be heard rumbling beneath the earth.

But Chu Wangsun was surprised. He knew full well how powerful his technique was. Influenced by "Follow The Rule", his opponent's fist force, fist intent and strength were weakened to the max. It would not be an exaggeration to say that ninety-nine percent of their power was suppressed.

That was why few people at his cultivation level could take the technique head on, much less an early-stage Spirit Master. And yet, his attacker did.

This was the end of the line for them though. His technique had broken their arm bones and damaged their internal organs. They should not be able to put up a fight anymore.

He was wrong. As the man's feet sank into the ground, he abruptly loosened his clenched fingers and turned his wrist around. At the same time, a series of crisp and dense pops erupted from his arm like a string of firecrackers.

The person's fingers wrapped around his wrist, and a tremendous strength pulled Cu Wangsun forward. Even with his power, he was caught off guard and pulled forward against his will. The person themselves were leaning toward him as well.

From a distance, it looked like two best friends who hadn't seen each other for years hugging each other to express their boundless joy. In reality, the scene was nowhere as touching or harmless.

For the first time, anger appeared on Chu Wangsun's face. It was because he knew his attacker had tricked him—or more accurately, he had underestimated their strength.

The power his opponent had displayed up until now was that of an early-stage Spirit Master. Although their explosive power and the perfect blend of strength, force and intent were quite something, it was at most equal to the full-powered attack of a middle-stage Spirit Master. To him, it was akin to a child reciting a poem at the age of three. It was impressive, but that was it.

But now, the strength of the pull told him loud and clear that his opponent had been hiding their strength. He wasn't an early-stage Spirit Master at all—they were a late-stage Spirit Master.

They were no ordinary late-stage Spirit Master either. They were a body-tempering late-stage Spirit Master.

It was never a good thing to allow a body-tempering warrior to get within melee range. Although he was a Half-Step Grandmaster who was accomplished both in the way of literature and martial, he did just endure the explosion of Pei Qiansui's Yin God and singlehandedly quelled the resurrection of a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact. He was quite tired to say the least. That was why the attacker's ploy made him feel just a little threatened, and why he was angry.

Chapter 594: That All You Got, Chu Wangsun?

When a Son of Heaven was angry, millions died, and the blood ran for hundreds of kilometers.

When a sage was angry, the sky cowered, and the demons went into hiding to avoid their wrath.

Chu Wangsun was neither a Son of Heaven nor a sage, but he was born with a Saint's Heart. That was why he conducted himself like a sage, respected the deeds of a sage, and nurtured the Qi of Greatness in his chest.

It was also why the wind scattered, the clouds crumbled, and the silhouette of a sage appeared in the sky when he was angry. Carrying a book in his hand, it looked both solemn and untouchable.

Chu Wangsun himself was surrounded by a cyclone of righteous qi. It ran like an endless river and shone like the morning sun itself.

At a distance, it was as if the sun itself had crashed against the ground. Blinding white light filled the world in an instant, and nothing could be seen except pure white. The only proof that the world hadn't disappeared outright was the rumbling earth beneath one's feet, and even then, everything except the earth was dissolving into ash or outright nothingness.

The evils were annihilated; the demons were fading away. At the center of the light was Chu Wangsun, and he was the morning sun that just crashed upon the world.

The person opposite him was, of course, the foolish evil and demon who dared to challenge the light.

The terrible outburst of righteous qi stripped away the attacker's flesh and blood like the sun melted away ice and snow, but much, much faster. Their arm turned into skeleton in an instant, and even the white bones grew ashen and withered in no time at all.

But despite the fact that their arm had turned into charcoal, the attacker still did not let go of Chu Wangsun. In fact, the strength of their pull had not diminished in the slightest, leaving the scholar no choice but to fall into their embrace.

When Chu Wangsun was just three inches away from his opponent, the attacker suddenly pulled their right leg out of the ground and thrust his knee upward. Lift, bend, knee. The three actions were performed so smoothly they might as well be one.

There was nothing unusual or complicated about a knee strike, and yet Chu Wangsun's heart fluttered against his will. The lift was as swift as a sudden hurricane, the bend was like a dragon getting ready to burst out of the abyss, and the knee was the dragon shooting through the air and piercing the nine heavens themselves.

Chu Wangsun dared not underestimate the attack. He immediately let go of the attacker's right hand and brought his palm down on the rising knee.

The dragon sought to rise above the nine heavens?

Did they ask if the nine heavens agree?

The palm and the knee parted as soon as they made contact. Before the sound of impact could even begin, Chu Wangsun's left hand was thrown up with enough force to shatter wind and clouds, whereas the attacker's right leg fell to the ground even faster than when they raised it.

BOOM

As soon as the attacker's right foot touched the soil, the ground within sixty meters of the duo abruptly shattered into pieces and collapsed.

The thunder was loud, and the lightning was no less fierce. At first glance, it seemed like the result of the clash was a stalemate. However, Chu Wangsun was frowning, and the attacker had broken into a grin.

The clash looked like it had ended in a stalemate, but in reality, it was Chu Wangsun who suffered a minor loss. It was because the knee strike had successfully thrown his left arm upward despite himself. His right arm was still caught by his opponent, and his left arm was currently suspended above his head.

This meant that he was completely open right now.

Chu Wangsun thought that this was exactly what his attacker was aiming for, and he was right. As soon as his guard was blown apart, the man's right fist immediately withdrew an inch like a viper getting ready to pounce on its prey. It was just an inch, but it was enough for the fist to refresh its energies and accumulate its strength.

Then, the dragon soared.

A cyclone of righteous qi attempted to block the rising dragon's path, but it kept climbing like a koi climbing a waterfall. Neither wind nor wave could stop its ascent. It crushed them all.

The righteous qi cleaved his fist in half as a result.

Chu Wangsun's response toward the dragon that was soaring straight for his face was to open his mouth and blow out a puff of bright, shiny air.

The puff of air wasn't as vast or sharp as the righteous qi surrounding Chu Wangsun, but it was as clear as the moon and as bright as the stars. It was neutral, warm, and soothing.

The puff of air clashed against the rising dragon, and it looked like the outcome was obvious. The air was weak, and the dragon was strong. The dragon should have blown away the air like a tree crashing on top of an ant.

In reality, it was the dragon who lost. Not only that, it was cleaved in half without any resistance.

"I have a puff of air that slays rising dragons. Hence, its name is Dragon Slayer."

The "rising dragon" wasn't actually a dragon, of course. The "Dragon Slayer" wasn't actually meant to slay a true dragon either. The "dragon" in its name was an allusion to a person's arm.

Half of the attacker's arm was gone just like that. It started from the palm and ended at the shoulder. It was a horrific sight.

It also looked like Chu Wangsun had won the war.

Then, the attacker did something Chu Wangsun wasn't expecting at all. They leaned forward and abruptly headbutted him.

Chu Wangsun had never been put in a position where such a crude and brutish method could work against him. So, he took the headbutt head—or more accurately, *nose* on.

Chu Wangsun wasn't a body-tempering warrior either. Although his body was definitely stronger than your average Half-Step Grandmaster, it was still incomparable to a body-tempering warrior of the same cultivation level. Not only that, his opponent had aimed at his nose and eyes; both the weakest spots on his face. Naturally, his nose was shattered like glass, tears and snot streamed down his face, and stars flew circles around his head.

Before he could react, the alarm bells in his head rang louder and faster than ever before. He saw the man spitting out a jet of purple flames from his mouth.

As soon as the purple flame appeared, the surrounding space warped and smelled like ash. The dazzling light was dyed purple in an instant.

Purple intent filled the air, and scorching heat burned the sky.

The flame looked puny, but it was more potent than even the righteous qi surrounding Chu Wangsun.

The Purple Sun Trueflame?!

The thought flashed through Chu Wangsun's head as he attempted to spit out his brilliant puff of air once more.

He just slayed a dragon earlier. He did not mind piercing a purple sun as a bonus.

Unfortunately, he was too late. They were mere inches away from one another after all. His "Dragon Slayer" had just reached his lips when the Purple Sun Trueflame closed the distance

completely, not to mention that his right hand was still caught in a death grip. There was nowhere he could run, nowhere he could hide.

The Purple Sun Trueflame enveloped his head completely.

The powerful flame burned through Chu Wangsun's flesh and blood in just the blink of an eye. At that monster, he looked like a monster masquerading as a human.

The purple flames failed to burn through Chu Wangsun's eyes, however. It shone as brilliant, cold, and heartless as the moon itself.

The next moment, a sun appeared in Chu Wangsun's left eye, and the moon in his right. The sun was rising, and the moon was falling.

The sun and moon had traded places for eons before, never to appear at the same time for too long, and it would continue for eons more. The world wept at the eternal, never-changing cycle.

The next moment, the sun and moon seemingly crossed through the eternal river of time and space and appeared in the attacker's mind.

The technique was a Magia, a mental offensive-type Magia to be exact. Its name was "Eternal Sorrow", and it was meant to allude to the eternal cycle of sun and moon. It could wither one's mind as if eons had passed in an instant and wipe out their Yin God's consciousness.

He wanted to know who the mastermind was, but now, he just wanted his foe to die.

Why? The answer was simple. He had never looked this bad in his life, nor so angry. That was why he didn't hold back any longer. He was going to wipe out his foe's mind and consciousness directly.

However, a sudden grunt escaped Chu Wangsun's lips, and the sun and moon in his eyes abruptly shattered into pieces. Blood streamed down the corner of his eyes as he staggered away from his foe.

His foe looked just as bad. Actually, no, they looked worse. Blood was streaming down from every orifice, and they stumbled backward like they were drunk. Their eyes were blank and unfocused, and they looked like they might collapse on the ground and die at any moment.

They didn't though. After backing a dozen or so steps from Chu Wangsun, they caught themselves and stared straight at Chu Wangsun.

Just when Chu Wangsun thought his opponent would resume the assault, their mouth slowly spread into a wide, toothy grin.

"Hahaha... That all you got, Chu Wangsun?"

Chu Wangsun could only watch in astonishment as the attacker abruptly dashed toward the distance.

Chapter 595: Pyrrhic Victory

"They ran?"

Chu Wangsun blanked out for an instant. He wasn't expecting his attacker to make a sudden retreat, but then again, it made sense. It was true that he had taken a significant amount of damage, but the attacker had also suffered a worse blow. If they kept this up, then the battle could only end with their death. That was why they chose to retreat.

Chu Wangsun did not give chase. If the attacker had laid down a trap for him, then he was the one who would be in mortal peril.

The injuries he had taken were no joke. First, he had singlehandedly dealt with Pei Qiansui's self-destruction and the resurrection of the Soul Refining Furnace. As a result, his energy reserves were severely depleted. Later, the mysterious attacker ambushed him, and while the battle only lasted a short time, it had been an extremely dangerous and exhausting affair as well.

Second, his face injury. Now that the man was gone, the Purple Sun Trueflame eating away at his flesh no longer had a source to fuel it. He was able to extinguish it easily as a result. However, it did not change the fact that his face was ruined by the Purple Sun Trueflame, and even with his strength, it would take him a long, long time to uproot the fiery poison within his charred flesh and restore his face.

Third, his Yin God's injury. Yes, his "Eternal Sorrow" had severely injured the attacker, but he too suffered a rebound because of the attack. This was also what surprised him the most out of everything.

"Eternal Sorrow" was an extremely powerful mental offensive-type Magia. It was the emperor of Chu's gift to him after he took first place in both the civil and martial examination. It came from the imperial family's martial vault, and only an imperial descendant was allowed to learn it. It was praised as the greatest Spirit Master-stage mental offensive-type secret art within the martial vault.

But of course, the rating was subjective. Not only that, a good martial art was only good in the hands of a talented warrior. The greatest martial art in the world might look no better than a hoe swing in the hands of a warrior of inferior talent, while a hoe swing might look like the greatest martial art in the world in the hands of a genius warrior.

He was undoubtedly the heaven-favored genius who could make a hoe swing look like the greatest martial art in the world, much less a martial art that was already incredible to begin with. Ever since he mastered "Eternal Sorrow", countless geniuses had lost or perished to the technique.

He could not deny that "Eternal Sorrow" played a role in him becoming undefeated during his younger days and the fourth named warrior on the Human Champions Ranking today.

The world wept because the sun and moon could never remain in the same sky for too long. Countless geniuses of his age too wept over the fact that he knew "Eternal Sorrow". One might say that "Eternal Sorrow" was one of his greatest trump cards.

When he used it against his attacker, he was sure it was the right move because a body-tempering warrior honed the body but not the mind. A weak mind was easily the biggest weakness of all body-tempering warriors. That was why he was certain that "Eternal Sorrow" could easily wipe out their mind.

He realized he was wrong when he entered his opponent's headspace though. The first thing he saw wasn't his opponent's Yin God, but a vast, seemingly boundless space where the sky and the earth were nowhere to be seen.

At the center of the unusual world was a throne fashioned from a black lotus, and seated on the throne was a grand, massive figure.

The silhouette had no distinct shape or face. No rules bound them, and its power seemed boundless. It waved its hand and attempted to shatter his sun, moon, and Eternal Sorrow.

He wasn't going to allow it, of course. The sun and moon changed places, and everything in the world began aging rapidly. He attempted to wipe out his opponent's Yin God with the power of time.

Two wisps of consciousness clashed, and although his sun and moon successfully dealt his opponent a huge blow, he was in their domain. The grand figure too shattered his Eternal Sorrow and annihilated his wisp of consciousness, triggering a rebound.

The end result was a double injury. He was the minor victor of this clash, but the fact that it was a small victory felt like a defeat.

Why? Because his name was Chu Wangsun.

He had never suffered a defeat since he became a warrior.

To him, fighting a peer to a draw was no different from defeat, not to mention that his opponent's cultivation level was lower than his. Even if the fight had started with him being severely depleted, even if he had underestimated his opponent, even if his opponent was an extremely rare warrior who cultivated both body and mind, it still did not justify his defeat.

After all, assuming his opponent was on the same cultivation level as him, then he would be the one making a run for it instead of his opponent, right?

So he lost. It was a terrible defeat too.

A flinty glint flickered in his eyes as Chu Wangsun bowed his head. A dark and suffocating pressure surrounded his person.

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, Chu Wangsun lifted his head and looked in a certain direction.

A man wearing pink robes was dashing toward him at high speed. It was none other than Xie Taohua.

Xie Taohua was wearing a look of shock and fear on his face as he stared at the ruins around him and felt the terrifying mixture of energies in the air.

It was nothing compared to the shock he felt when he saw Chu Wangsun's charred face, however.

What on earth?

What happened to Mister Nine? Why did he look like this?

What on earth could push the powerful, terrifying, invincible Chu Wangsun to this extent?

Have I gone blind?

Or was the resurrection of a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact much greater than I expected?

A while later, Xie Taohua finally managed to push down his shock and ask, "Are... Are you alright, Brother Chu?"

“I’m fine.”

As Chu Wangsun spoke, the charred flesh on his face fell off to reveal smooth, unblemished skin. However, the new skin seemed to be emitting wisps of hot, purple aura. Xie Taohua could still feel it even though he was standing about ten meters away from Chu Wangsun.

Chu Wangsun couldn’t seem to feel it, however. With a single wave of his hand, his tattered, filthy clothes returned to its usual state: clean and unblemished. He looked at Xie Taohua and asked, “Why are you here?”

Instead of countering with one of the many questions brewing inside his head, Xie Taohua answered, “I came to see if I could lend you a hand.”

“There’s no need. I’ve resolved everything,” Chu Wangsun answered.

At what cost? Xie Taohua thought, but of course he wasn’t stupid enough to voice it. “As expected of you, Brother Chu. This one is most impressed.”

Xie Tao hesitated for a moment after paying the compliment. “Can I say something, Brother Chu?”

“Share me your thoughts, Brother Xie!” Chu Wangsun answered.

Xie Taohua obliged with a frown, “I feel like Pei Qiansui wasn’t acting like himself back at the restaurant.”

“What do you mean?” Chu Wangsun asked.

Xie Taohua took a moment to organize his thoughts before answering, “The Pei Qiansui I know isn’t just a cruel man. He is also cunning and capable of great forbearance. Once, he pretended to be his target’s underling for an entire year and never slipped up no matter how much work, pain, and humiliation his target dished out to him without slipping up. Then, when the time was right, he slew his target flawlessly.”

“A man like him would never attack unless he was certain he could kill you. Therefore, I suspect that foul play is involved. Someone may have been behind this incident.”

As he spoke, the strange man Xie Taohua saw on Peach Blossom Mountain suddenly entered his mind.

Could it be him?

“You’re right. Someone did make this happen.” Chu Wangsun nodded.

“Oh? How did you know?” Xie Taohua exclaimed in astonishment.

Chu Wangsun answered honestly, “I just fought them.”

During the mental battle against his mysterious attacker, he had experienced their evil and anomalous Yin God firsthand. He was born with a Saint’s Heart and extremely fair, but even he had come under assault by all sorts of illusions and emotional influences.

Now that Xie Taohua mentioned it, he immediately figured out the ins and outs of the situation.

So, it was all a ploy by the person. The goal was to pit them against each other and reap the rewards in the end.

The coldness in Chu Wangsun's eyes deepened.

"You fought them?" Xie Taohua's mind failed to process Chu Wangsun's words in time before he blurted, "Were they the one who dealt you your injuries, Brother Chu?"

Chu Wangsun did not answer, but the pressure around him grew even more suffocating.

Chapter 596: A Shame, But Not Really

"Ahem..."

Xie Taohua realized his mistake as soon as he said it. "Please don't misunderstand, Brother Chu. What I mean is... where is that person right now?"

"They escaped!" Chu Wangsun answered simply.

Xie Taohua seized the opportunity to pay him a compliment. "They still lost to you despite their meticulous planning. You are incredible, Brother Chu."

"I lost," Chu Wangsun said indifferently.

Xie Taohua: "... Bro, can you be less honest? Can't you tell that I'm complimenting you?"

Xie Taohua tried again, "Ahem... still, you managed to repel a formidable foe when you're already spent. It's a commendable feat."

"They were weaker than me," Chu Wangsun shut him down yet again.

If that's true, then why did you say it?! Isn't it normal to hide one's shame, not the other way around?! Xie Taohua ranted mentally.

Having no idea how to deal with Chu Wangsun's self-depreciation, Xie Taohua ultimately changed the subject. "Do you know who they are, and why they're trying to kill you?"

"I don't know." Chu Wangsun shook his head. Although he had seen his attacker's face—and it was a very ordinary face of a man, the kind that no one would pay attention to in a crowd—and he was certain that he didn't recognize the face, there was a huge chance that it wasn't their real face. They might not even be male for all he knew.

He was unable to tell anything from their presence and the techniques they used either.

More accurately, his opponent hadn't used any techniques at all. From the start until the end, they had fought with just basic movements and strength. Even a plow swing had more technique than what they displayed.

The attacker's attempt to conceal their identity wasn't flawless, of course. They had inevitably revealed their enigmatic Yin God and Purple Sun Trueflame to him.

Unfortunately, it still wasn't enough for him to guess their identity or even their general background.

“It’s fine. The next time we meet, I will recognize them and kill them.”

He was speaking from the heart, and it was no empty boast. He never made the same mistake twice, and he did not intend to start now.

“Hahaha...”

Xie Taohua was going to console Chu Wangsun, but the scholar had gotten out of the funk on his own. In fact, he might not be in a funk to begin with. As expected of Chu Wangsun.

He wasn’t going to praise the guy a third time, of course. After all, he was the ninth named warrior on the Human Champions Ranking, and he wasn’t a shameless bastard who cared nothing for his dignity. Two compliments were all he could pay Chu Wangsun before it really felt like he was debasing himself.

Besides, he had no intentions of being let down again. He had never felt so tired and annoyed complimenting someone.

It was at this moment Xie Taohua recalled something and reminded, “Oh right, there’s one more thing I need to speak with you about, Brother Chu. Pei Qiansui is Old Man of A Hundred Virtues’ most cherished disciple, and he is very protective of his own. Although it is a third party who manipulated the events so that Pei Qiansui would die in your hands, in the end, you did kill him. Beware of Old Man of A Hundred Virtues, for he is almost certainly going to come after you for revenge.”

“It’s just one heretic. I have nothing to fear from him.” Chu Wangsun said indifferently, “Is there anything else, Brother Xie? If not, then I’ll be taking my leave.”

“There’s nothing else, Brother Chu. Please do as you please,” Xie Taohua hurriedly replied.

There were two reasons he came over. One, he wanted to offer his help if it turned out to be necessary. The resurrection of a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact was no joke after all. His suspicions also played a huge role in his initiative.

Second, he wanted to make Chu Wangsun owe him a favor if possible, but from the looks of it, it wasn’t going to happen.

“Very well. May we meet again someday,” Chu Wangsun replied before taking his leave.

“May we meet again.”

After Chu Wangsun was gone, Xie Taohua perceived the chaotic energies still floating in the surrounding air and muttered to himself, “Could it be him?”

Logically speaking, it should be impossible. It was true that the mysterious man on Peach Blossom Mountain possessed the skill and power to influence one’s mind and toy with one’s heart without a trace, but he had also just come into his Yin God and become a Spirit Master. It should be impossible for him to be able to injure Chu Wangsun to this extent.

The power gap was just too wide no matter how he looked at it.

And yet... his subconscious just wouldn't stop saying otherwise. That that man was, against all odds, the one who injured Chu Wangsun.

“Forget it. Why am I even thinking about this? It has nothing to do with me to begin with.”

Suddenly, Xie Taohua broke into a self-derisive smile and said to himself, “I have not yet enjoyed all the beauties and colors the world has to offer. I have no time to stick my nose into other people's business, do I? Let it go! Let it go!”

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“Hah... hah... thank goodness he didn't chase me.”

On a small hill, Ye Qing was panting heavily while his powerful vigor healed his festering skin and horrid injuries bit by bit.

When he confirmed that Chu Wangsun hadn't given chase, he finally allowed himself to fall on his ass and scratch his heavy, disoriented head with lingering trepidation.

It should not need to be said, but the person who ambushed Chu Wangsun earlier was, of course, Ye Qing. But unlike what Chu Wangsun and Xie Taohua thought, it wasn't premeditated. It was just an impulse that he chose to indulge when the opportunity presented itself.

At the beginning, he just wanted to make trouble for Chu Wangsun and test his strength a little. After all, Chu Wangsun was one of his sworn enemies. If it wasn't for the bastard, he would never have been in this situation. It was only a matter of time before he sought Chu Wangsun out for revenge anyway, so why would he allow the opportunity to find out just how strong the famous Mister Nine really was slip through his finger?

However, Pei Qiansui turned out to be far more volatile than he expected. In a good way, of course. First, the man had detonated his Yin God. Then, he spurred his Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact to resurrect and forced Chu Wangsun to give it his all.

When he realized that the scholar was spent, he realized that a golden opportunity had landed in his lap, and a voice suddenly spoke in his ears:

Hey, this looks like a great opportunity to eliminate Chu Wangsun. It's not everyday your greatest foe is in such a vulnerable state. Are you sure you want to capitalize on this opportunity?

He agreed with his inner voice, so he allowed his impulse to get the better of himself. He attacked Chu Wangsun.

Unfortunately, reality was a harsh mistress. It was only after he clashed against Chu Wangsun that he realized that, despite having expended most of his energies and even suffered a certain extent of injuries to stop Pei Qiansui's self-destruction and the resurrection of the Soul Refining Furnace, the scholar remained unbelievably strong.

Even when everything went his way, and Chu Wangsun wasn't expecting him at all, the most he could manage was injuring him.

Sure, he successfully burned Chu Wangsun's face with the Purple Sun Trueflame and even damaged Chu Wangsun's mind with his Heavenly Demon Yin God. Sure, it looked like everything had gone his way. But in reality? He was going to die if they kept fighting.

And how did he know this? Because Chu Wangsun had never used a single Strange Artifact from start until the end. He refused to believe that a man like Chu Wangsun would not have one or more Strange Artifacts that could save his life or turn the tables against his opponent when all hope seemed lost.

Besides that, Chu Wangsun's "Eternal Sorrow" was seriously terrifying. It had shattered his Heavenly Demon Yin God and Paranirmita Vasavartin Heaven, and damaged his mind. Had he stayed for round two, his newly manifested Yin God would most likely become permanently destroyed, and he would fall back to the Spirit Purification stage. The risks were simply too great.

Realizing that his ultimate objective could not be achieved, and he had already dished out all the damage he could, Ye Qing did not hesitate to book it.

That was his plan from the beginning anyway. If he could kill Chu Wangsun, then hurray! If not, then he was going to run like hell.

He had never walked into this ambush with the determination to kill his opponent at the cost of his own life. That was why he fought Chu Wangsun with basic techniques and pure strength only. The thought of using his "Hellfire Red Lotus Saber Art", "Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra", "Divide", "Break Through" or more had never crossed his mind. After all, he had employed all these techniques at least once during the Hidden Dragon Conference, and if he still failed to kill Chu Wangsun in the end... it would basically be an announcement to the whole world that he, Ye Qing, was still alive, wouldn't it?

That was the last thing he wanted to say the least.

That was why he stuck to basic techniques only. Hell, he wouldn't even call them techniques. Any human could throw a punch, pull someone toward them, and lift a knee.

He did use his Purple Sun Trueflame and Heavenly Demon Yin God as well, but those were trump cards he gained after escaping from Tian Yong. Almost no one had seen them in action before, so he did not think Chu Wangsun could find anything from it.

It was a bit of a shame that he failed to kill Chu Wangsun despite the scholar practically being handed to him on a silver platter. He would be lying if he said he wasn't frustrated by this failure.

Had he gone into this fight with fatalistic determination, had he unleashed everything he had, and had he successfully grasped the "Boundless Heart Demon Tribulation"... would today's outcome be different?

It was possible.

But it was also just a possibility.

He hadn't gone all out, but Chu Wangsun sure as hell hadn't either.

So yes, it was a shame he failed to end Chu Wangsun here. But it wasn't a big shame.

Chapter 597: Tomorrow, I Shall Cleave Chu Wangsun

It wasn't like he got nothing out of his fight against Chu Wangsun, of course. At the very least, he found out just how strong his opponent was and what was the power gap between the two of them.

The first time he encountered Chu Wangsun at the Ghost Tower, the scholar had sent him fleeing with his tail tucked between his legs with a single finger. Today, the man he was once forced to look up to was now rolling on the floor trying to wipe away the shame and real injuries he had inflicted upon him. The memory alone was worth the trouble.

A tiny smirk crept on Ye Qing's face when he thought this. He fell back on his back and stared at the white clouds in the blue sky for a moment. Then, he laughed at the top of his lungs.

Laughter should come to the young like breathing. The young should cut open the sky with a smile on their faces.

"Today, I humiliated my nemesis with my fists. Tomorrow, I shall cleave a Wangsun with my saber."

Ye Qing sang out loud while crossing his legs and tapping the ground with his fingers. For today at least, he deserved to be happy.

A while later, when Ye Qing was finally done venting his emotions, his smile was slowly replaced by a serious expression.

Despite how he made light of Chu Wangsun verbally, he had to admit that the scholar was extremely strong. If the man had been in peak condition, he would probably be dead or half-dead by now. He would not have the leisure to sing insulting songs about his nemesis.

He didn't feel too dejected though. Back at the Ghost Tower, he couldn't even take a single finger from Chu Wangsun. During the Hidden Dragon Conference, Chu Wangsun remained as untouchable as a celestial. But today? He proved that he was now strong enough to trade blows with him. In the future, who knows what will happen? Their positions could be reversed completely, couldn't it?

"Never bully the young and downtrodden, for they won't remain that way forever." Ye Qing was absolutely certain that he would surpass Chu Wangsun one day.

For now though, he should focus on his cultivation.

The Dark Overlord's inheritance was tempting, but... well, he would make up his mind later.

There were still over three months before the Death Sea emerged. He had plenty of time to mull over his options.

After lying on the hill for a little over two hours, and his external injuries had mostly recovered, Ye Qing got up and slowly made his way back to Bei You City.

Sunrays shone down from the blue sky and covered the young man in layers of gold. It gave him the appearance of a morning sun.

This was just the beginning. When the sun reaches the middle, none shall shine brighter than it.

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“The previous year passes with the pop of firecrackers,

Spring wind delivers warmth into every house,

Tusu wine are shared to spread the joy,

And a new year is upon us. A new year!”

Inside the Temple of Divination, Ye Qing sighed while listening to the firecrackers popping all over Bei You City while enjoying a jar of Tusu wine.

“Indeed, a new year has replaced the old yet again. Time sure flies quickly!”

Yi Pin was also sitting on a recliner and enjoying a jar of Tusu wine that was warmed just right. He glanced at Li Longxiang—the young man was busy warming the wine at the moment—and sighed wistfully. “And this foolish boy is a year older.”

“You’re a year older as well, master,” Li Longxiang replied smilingly.

“Screw you! Who are you calling old?!” Yi Pin got angry and kicked Li Longxiang in the butt.

“Hehe...” Li Longxiang didn’t dodge out of the way. He simply took the hit and let out a chuckle.

“Is he wrong though? You are a year older like the rest of us. The wrinkles on your face are so deep I reckon they can squeeze a fly to death!” Ye Qing echoed in agreement. When he noticed the unkind look in the old Taoist’s eyes, he hurriedly added, “But! You remain hale and hearty despite the years, so who cares?”

It was New Year’s Eve, so Yi Pin kicked him out of his room first thing in the morning and made him work like a horse. Together, they swept the courtyard, bought a ton of New Year goods, slapped some good couplets on the walls, changed the peachwood charms and more. They worked practically the whole day, and it wasn’t until late at night that they finally got the time to relax a little. Right now, they were sitting around a small stove, chatting and enjoying wine in the courtyard.

“Hmph!” Yi Pin harrumphed and looked away in a tsundere fashion.

“Your wine cup is empty, senior uncle. I’ll fill it for you.”

Li Longxiang raised the pot cooking on the stove and poured some Tusu wine into Ye Qing’s cup.

“My master used rhubarb, atractylodes rhizome, cinnamon, siler, pepper, aconitum, monkshood and more herbal medicine to create this Tusu wine. Not only is it nutritious and healthy, it can prevent illnesses, cure diseases, drive out the evils and repel miasma. It’s also tasty to boot. They’re one of my master’s most cherished possessions, and he almost never brings them out unless it’s a special occasion!”

“Yes, the herbal aroma is strong, and the taste is thick and sublime. It’s certainly tastier than all the wine I’ve tasted until now!” Ye Qing complimented loudly on

purpose, though he must admit that the old Taoist's Tusu wine was one of a kind.

The Tusu wine was also known as the Age Wine. It was a drink every citizen of Chu enjoyed during New Year's Eve or New Year. It represented the departure of the old and ushering in the new.

"Hmph! At least your sense of taste is still intact." Yi Pin's expression remained stern, but the tiny curls at the corner of his lips made it clear how he really felt.

After saying that, Yi Pin kicked his disciple again and said, "What about your master, boy? My cup is empty as well! Ever since your senior uncle showed up, you barely paid any attention to me..."

"Yes, master." Li Longxiang did not get angry. He simply smiled and dutifully filled Yi Pin's cup as well.

Yi Pin took a small sip before ordering, "Longxiang, head to my room and bring the wooden box on the table to me."

"Yes, master," Li Longxiang responded and left immediately.

After Li Longxiang was gone, Yi Pin hesitated for a moment before asking, "Are you sure you're going to leave Bei You tomorrow?"

"I'm sure." Ye Qing nodded.

He had mulled over his decision again and again during his secluded cultivation. In the end, he was unable to resist the temptation that was the Dark Overlord's inheritance.

For one, he was hoping to get lucky. Yes, he would be going up against powerful champions such as the Sun Sovereign and Madman Chu, and there were even more young, gifted warriors like Chu Wangsun, and yes, his chances of obtaining the Dark Overlord's inheritance was next to nothing.

But what if he succeeded? What household hadn't enjoyed at least one bowl of dumplings during New Year? What human hadn't gotten dogshit lucky at least several times in their life?

Even if Lady Luck did not favor him this time, the experience would still be worth it.

Two, he had several paybacks he needed to dish out. Chu Wangsun was one, Greenlake Bai was another, and the Ghost Tower—while not as severe as the previous two—was a third. Chu Wangsun was the one who damned him, Greenlake Bai had framed him for a crime he didn't commit and put his life in danger, and Ghost Tower had tried to chase him down and kill him. This was a great opportunity to get all of them.

Although Chu Wangsun was strong, Greenlake Bai's power level was unknown, and Ghost Tower was a powerful faction, the Death Sea was a dangerous place. No one was truly safe in a place where anything could happen. Besides, there was only one Dark Overlord inheritance, so a battle was sure to break out. Who was to say he didn't have a chance if he roleplayed the oriole?

Finally, he had a strong premonition that his chance of perfecting the "Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra" and becoming a Grandmaster through his body lay in the Death Sea.

Even before he took part in Joy Bodhisattva's Trueman feast, his body had already reached the limit of what a late-stage Spirit Master could achieve. After refining a good amount of Profound Yellow Qi for the past couple days, he was finally able to advance the "Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra" and improve his body to the Half-Step Grandmaster stage.

Of course, he was still a ways away from a Half-Step Grandmaster like Chen Ah Sheng as the brigand leader had had years to hone his cultivation, much less a genius like Chu Wangsun. The scholar could have entered the Grandmaster stage a long time ago if he wanted to.

There were still over three months before the Death Sea emerged. The reason he wanted to leave tomorrow was because he was hoping to temper himself on the way there. If possible, he wanted to lock down his body at the Half-Step Grandmaster stage completely during this time so he could enter the Grandmaster stage at any moment.

These were the reasons why he must head to the Death Sea. It was also why he told Yi Pin that he was leaving Bei You tomorrow. Of course, he wasn't able to tell the truth because of the Oath of Burden, and because he didn't want to worry the old Taoist. It was why he lied partially claiming that he was going on a long trip to temper himself.

"Must you go?" Yi Pin asked with a frown.

"Huh? Are you trying to say something, brother? You can be frank with me!" Ye Qing frowned, puzzled. Hesitation was unbecoming of the old man.

Yi Pin fell silent for a moment before staring at Ye Qing. "You're not heading out just for a simple trip, are you?"

Chapter 598: Tian Ling Ling, Di Ling Ling

"What are you trying to say, brother?" Ye Qing's eyes glinted.

Yi Pin answered, "I performed a divination for you earlier. It states that your trip promises great opportunities."

"That's a good thing, isn't it? So why do you look unhappy?" Ye Qing didn't think that Yi Pin would perform a divination for him. More importantly, he did not think that he would succeed. He was the man with the Annon Sutra, and he knew that the Strange Artifact could conceal his fate completely—or at least, it did. Somehow, Yi Pin managed to circumvent the Annon Sutra's protection and divine his future. As expected of a former champion, he could do things he shouldn't be able to do even in his current state.

"I'm not finished yet."

Yi Pin said seriously, "Great opportunities are often accompanied with great dangers, and this is no exception. My divination also told me that the dangers you face... may cost you your life."

"Really? Like what?" Ye Qing feigned ignorance. Of course he knew he was going to face life-threatening dangers in the upcoming adventure. It was the Death Sea after all. It would be stranger if he didn't encounter any danger. He was curious to know if the old Taoist found out any specifics though.

“I don’t know. Your fate is concealed, and the fate of the place you’re headed to is also concealed. The threads of karma are so thick that it is impossible to make out anything.” Yi Pin shook his head with a severe expression.

That’s more like it! Ye Qing thought to himself. He had the Annon Sutra, and the Death Sea was where the Dark Overlord’s inheritance was hidden. The man was an invincible, overpowered champion when he was alive, so it made sense that his burial place was just as deadly. Otherwise, small fries like them would never have gotten a shot at the inheritance. The giants would have claimed it for themselves a long time ago.

Ye Qing teased Yi Pin, “You found nothing? I knew you’re a charlatan!”

That was what he said, but he was pretty touched by the old Taoist’s gesture. The old man had gone through the effort of performing a divination for him as soon as he heard of the trip from Ye Qing.

“Hmph! You know nothing about divination! Just as some things should not be said too clearly, one should not attempt to look into the rivers of fate too closely either. In fact, the rivers of fate represent one facade of the will of the heavens. To look into it is to fight against the heavens themselves, and that is one battle one simply cannot win unless they have joined the heavens themselves!”

Yi Pin huffed in annoyance. “Besides, your karmic entanglement is one of the most complex I’ve seen, not to mention that the place you’re headed is just as mysterious and hidden. It’s incredible I managed to find out that your journey will be accompanied with great opportunities and greater dangers already, okay? I dare say any other diviner in my position would have suffered retribution from the heavens and died before they even began their work!”

“I’m not playing with you, brother. This trip of yours is seriously going to endanger your life. You best take me seriously!”

“Fine, fine! Sorry for questioning your expertise!” Ye Qing apologized smilingly. “What advice do you have for me then?”

“The will of the heavens is difficult to disobey. The best thing you can do is to not tempt fate at all. In more secular terms, that means you just stay here and go nowhere!”

Yi Pin stroked his beard as he continued, “If you must go on an adventure, at least avoid this place and head elsewhere.”

Ye Qing fell silent for a moment before sighing. “You said it yourself, brother. The will of the heavens is difficult to disobey.”

A rare silence overcame Yi Pin. He then asked, “Must you go?”

Ye Qing nodded. “I must.”

Yi Pin did not say anything, and the conversation died there. For a while, there was only the crackling fire of the stove, popping wine bubbles, and the rich fragrance of wine.

A wine could not know the sorrow of parting. No matter the circumstances, it could only offer its unique scent and taste.

“Alright. There’s nothing to worry about. A man should have an optimistic outlook toward life. Didn’t you say it yourself? Yes, there will be great dangers up ahead, but also great opportunities.”

Ye Qing grabbed the wine pot and personally filled Yi Pin’s cup for him. He said in a carefree tone, “Who knows, maybe I’ll return from my journey as a Grandmaster. You’ll finally be able to walk around Bei You as you please!”

“I already *can* walk around Bei You as I please, you impudent bastard!” Yi Pin grunted, though it quickly morphed into a wistful, helpless sigh. “I just don’t understand why so many people are willing to risk their lives over some fortune they didn’t even know if it was real when they could be leading a peaceful, stable life.”

“Are you kidding me? That sounds awesome. Who doesn’t want a peaceful, stable life? But a dream is simple, and reality is harsh. You make it sound easy, but for some people, a stable life is but a fantasy that’s always out of reach. After all, there are too many things in this world that are out of one’s control; too many greater goods that outweigh the smaller ones.”

“I seek a good, stable life myself. That is why I have to fight. That is why I cannot allow a single opportunity to slip through my grasp. Who knows, maybe I’ll actually be able to dictate my fate one day?”

Yi Pin fell silent. He knew that Ye Qing was speaking the truth. He also knew what Ye Qing had experienced in the past, and what he was going to face in the future. Even if the young man himself sought stability and peace, the choice was not in his hands just like so, so many other things in this world.

He was old and weary. His time was long behind him. That was why he believed that there was nothing better than leading a stable, peaceful life. It was why he was willing to seclude himself in this backwater region and live in this shabby temple. It was why he asked for nothing more but a full belly and a roof over his head every day.

But Ye Qing was young. He was at the age where his heart would not settle, and the horizon seemed full of possibilities. You only live once in your life, so how could he not do his best to lead the best life he could possibly have? How could he tolerate mediocrity and stagnation when it was clear that he wasn’t even close to his fullest potential?

In the end, Bei You was just too small for a dragonling ready to take to the skies and become a dragon.

“Heh. Longxiang is right. I have gotten old!” Yi Pin sighed after a long time.

“No one’s doubting that, brother. But you are still hale and hearty, long and hard, and a pervert and a child at heart!” Ye Qing paid him a compliment.

“You’re the pervert and the child here, you bastard!” Yi Pin nearly spat out his wine when he heard this. The heavy atmosphere hanging over the courtyard was gone just like that.

It was at this moment Li Longxiang appeared with the wooden box Yi Pin told him to bring over.

“Master, your box.”

Yi Pin accepted the box and removed the lid. Then, he grabbed a palm-sized tortoise shell from it.

The tortoise shell looked ancient and covered in cracks. It looked like it had existed for a very, very long time.

Yi Pin caressed the tortoise shell while explaining, “This is a Strange Artifact I came by during my adventures while I was still young. It’s called Tian Ling Ling[1].”

“Tian Ling Ling? What a strange name!” Ye Qing responded curiously.

“Tian Ling Ling is a rather unique Strange Artifact. It possesses no offensive or defensive capabilities whatsoever, but if you ever find yourself in a situation where there is nothing you can possibly do to save yourself, and there is no one around who can save you, then you may summon it. It will light the path of survival for you.”

Yi Pin chanted, “‘*Tian ling ling, di ling ling*, Taishang Laojun please save me!’ That more or less sums up how the Strange Artifact works.”

“That sounds incredible!” Ye Qing’s eyes lit up.

Yi Pin chuckled. “It depends. Tian Ling Ling only triggers if an extremely strict set of conditions are met. First, you can use it only during an actual fatal crisis. Otherwise, it would not activate. Second, Tian Ling Ling will show you the way to survive your crisis, but in the end, it is just a vision. It’s up to you to turn it into reality. Finally, Tian Ling Ling needs a certain amount of time to activate, so there is no way you’ll be able to activate it during combat. You can see why that narrows its applicability a lot.”

Ye Qing shook his head. “It’s still incredible.”

It was a Strange Artifact that would show him the way to survive a fatal crisis. Despite its many restrictions, it could mean the difference between life or death. That quality alone made it a priceless treasure.

“Catch!” Yi Pin tossed Tian Ling Ling into Ye Qing’s hands.

“You’re giving it to me?” Ye Qing caught it and broke into a grin.

“Keep dreaming! I’m just lending it to you. I fully expect you to return it to me in the future.” Yi Pin rolled his eyes at Ye Qing. “Your journey this time would be rife with dangers. Tian Ling Ling is useless to me, but it could save your life at a critical moment. Naturally, you need it more than me right now.”

“The way to activate Tian Ling Ling is very simple. You simply need to kneel on the ground with Tian Ling Ling in front of you, lift your hands high and shout, ‘Tian ling ling, di ling ling, Taishang Laojun please save me!’, and Tian Ling Ling will guide you to safety.”

“Thanks, brother.” Ye Qing thanked him warmly and sincerely.

He had to say that this non-blood brother of his was worth it. Not only did he divine his future for him, he even lent him a Strange Artifact so he might survive the coming journey. He was like a dad doing his best to see his son safe and sound.

The world is hypocritical and everchanging,

But there exists true bonds in the world as well.

Chapter 599: Age Ender

“I don’t need verbal thanks. If you really want to thank me, then bring me something good when you get back from your trip. I’m not lending Tian Ling Ling to you for free.”

Yi Pin sipped his wine.

Ye Qing: “...” *And just like that, all those sappy emotions I was feeling went down the drain.*

“Ahem... I thought you’d have a lot of good stuff stowed under your bed since you’re technically an old monster, but to think you’re so poor you couldn’t even afford to give one to a brother, tsk tsk tsk...” Ye Qing clicked his tongue and shook his head.

“I *do* have a lot of good stuff, but they’re reserved for my *disciple*. You’re not my disciple, are you? Why should I give you anything?” Yi Pin harrumphed.

“I may not be your disciple, but I am your junior, and junior is synonymous to disciple, isn’t I?” Ye Qing grinned.

“Like hell it is! My disciple will serve me tea, wash my clothes, cook my meals, make my bed and generally take care of every aspect of my life for me. When I’m bored, I can yell at him, beat him up, make idle chat with him to stave away the boredom and more. Even when I’m too old to take care of myself, he can look after me and arrange for a proper burial after I die. Can you do any of that?” Yi Pin argued vehemently.

Ye Qing: “...” *Are you sure you’re talking about a disciple, not a servant?*

“Fine, you win!” Ye Qing shrugged.

Heh! You’re ten years too young to take advantage of me! Yi Pin thought with a triumphant smirk.

Dang!

Dang!

Dang!

Suddenly, three loud gongs resounded throughout Bei You City. It was loud and resonant, long and ancient at the same time.

As if on cue, countless fireworks streaked across the sky and erupted into brilliant colors. It chased away the dark and illuminated the night.

“Master, master! We’ve entered the Zi Hour[1]!” Li Longxiang yelled excitedly as he jumped to his feet.

“You’re still like a child even though you’re a young adult now. Fine. You may go.” Yi Pin waved.

“Hurray!” Like the excitable child his master described him to be, Li Longxiang rushed into the house and returned with an entire pile of fireworks in his hands. On the opposite side of the street, Wen Shu too emerged from the coffin shop with a pile of fireworks.

The duo proceeded to lay out the fireworks and the firecrackers in a straight line along the street. Once done, they counted to three and ignited the fireworks at the same time. They immediately covered up their ears, ran to the side, and watched the sparking threads excitedly.

They were both strong warriors in their own right. They could’ve sat in the middle of the fireworks, and it wouldn’t even be able to deafen them, much less hurt them. Even so, they stayed far, far away from the firecrackers like actual children.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang...

The next moment, the fireworks shot into the sky and burst into brilliant, dazzling colors. They painted the ground white and made it look like it was daytime.

The neighbor’s children came over to spectate the gorgeous sight as well. They stood together with Li Longxiang and Wen Shu and cheered loudly at the sight of the fireworks.

“Seriously, how are they still like kids when they’re already young adults?” Yi Pin shook his head smilingly after watching Li Longxiang and Wen Shu for a bit.

“There is nothing wrong with having an innocent, carefree heart,” Ye Qing replied with a gentle look in his eyes as well.

Suddenly, a naughty idea occurred to Ye Qing. The corners of his lips curling into a devious smirk, he produced a line of firecrackers from his Nature’s Shell, lit it in secret, and tossed it under Li Longxiang, Wenshu, and the children’s feet.

The children scattered like headless chickens as soon as the first firecracker popped. When Wen Shu realized what happened, he immediately spun on Ye Qing and glared at him. Li Longxiang simply scratched the back of his head and smiled.

Having succeeded in playing a prank on the kids, Ye Qing winked at the duo, pretended that he couldn’t see Wen Shu’s glare, and retreated back into the courtyard.

“What on earth are you doing? Do you think you’re three or something?” Yi Pin rolled his eyes at Ye Qing.

“I’m not three, but I’m a young man too, you know. If Li Longxiang and Wen Shu can fool around like kids, why not me?” Ye Qing countered.

Yi Pin fell silent. Now that he thought about it, Ye Qing had just entered his twenties, meaning that he was barely a few years older than Li Longxiang and Wen Shu. He just didn’t realize it because of how mature and cunning Ye Qing usually acted.

“You’re right. I forgot that you’re a youngster as well!” Yi Pin muttered.

“I *am* young. Unlike you, I don’t look like I have one foot in the grave, and I’m full of energy.” Ye Qing smirked.

“And because you’re full of energy, you feel the urge to play a prank on kids?” Yi Pin scoffed disdainfully. “That’s not energy. That’s just childishness.”

“Jealousy is unbecoming of you, brother. Jealousy toward the youth is especially unbecoming of someone your stature.” Ye Qing raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not jealous! I was young too, you know?” Yi Pin raised his voice.

Ye Qing shrugged and stopped triggering the old man. Wouldn’t want the old man to have a heart attack because he was too excited, you know?

“It comes.” Suddenly, Yi Pin looked up.

Ye Qing too looked toward the vast, infinite night sky above his head.

Some sort of invisible energy peeked out from the night sky. It thickened the darkness until it was nigh impenetrable.

It was then Ye Qing realized that he was looking at a shadow. It was so massive, so vast that he could scarcely imagine its true size. It neither looked humanoid nor bestial. In fact, he was having difficulty drawing its shape in his mind.

One look at the creature was enough to send Ye Qing’s heart into overdrive and fill his headspace with tainted power. His eye sockets suddenly felt unbelievably itchy as if countless insects were crawling over it.

Stunned, Ye Qing hurriedly bowed his head and stopped looking at the creature. It was only then the taint and the unnatural itchiness began to fade away.

When he finally returned to normal, Ye Qing looked at Yi Pin and realized that the old Taoist was shaking his wine cup a little and watching him, smirking. Clearly, Yi Pin knew whatever that creature was, and clearly, he did not warn him about it because he wanted to enjoy his reaction.

Ye Qing wasn’t in the mood to take offense, however. He asked in a hurry, “What on earth is that, brother?”

Yi Pin slowly drank his Tusu wine as if he was basking in Ye Qing's embarrassment. It wasn't until he finished the last drop that he finally said, "That's the Age Ender."

"The Age Ender?" Ye Qing thought for a moment until a memory came to mind. His eyes slowly widened as he blurted, "That Age Ender?"

"The one!" Yi Pin nodded in confirmation.

Ye Qing licked his lips. It took him a good few breaths before he finally managed to calm down.

The Age Ender was an Ancient-class Stranger. In terms of power level, it was equal to a Sage. A Sage!

Worshiped like a living god, a Sage was so powerful that a single one could protect an entire country from harm. Naturally, an Ancient-class Stranger was even more powerful and mysterious. They were nigh immortal and in possession of unimaginable power.

Some evil Ancient-class Strangers could inflict an unimaginable amount of damage to humans the moment they revealed themselves. Some could even annihilate an entire country.

Five hundred years ago, a country named Donghai Yunlai (The Clouds Come From The Eastern Sea) was struck by an Ancient-class Stranger. According to historical records, a River Patrolling Koi had summoned a tsunami like nothing the world had ever seen and flooded the entire country—the biggest at the Eastern Sea at the time—and ended millions of lives in a single day. Because of this, Donghai Yunlai turned into a footnote in history.

It wasn't the only one. There were many other countries who had suffered such an unfortunate fate.

Of course, all Ancient-class Strangers were intelligent, and only those deeply steeped in evil would actively antagonize the humans. After all, the one thing humans did not lack were champions. If an Ancient-class Stranger stirred too much trouble, it was entirely possible that multiple Sages would come together as a group to vanquish them. Not even an Ancient-class Stranger could fight against that many living gods.

The Age Ender was one of the Ancient-class Strangers who held no animosity toward humans. In fact, it was one of the more well-documented Strangers.

Ye Qing had read about it in the Pacification Bureau's file room before.

Chapter 600: Welcoming A New Spring

The Age Ender loved to appear when it was time for the new to replace the old. It eliminated the old filth tainting the human world and welcomed the new age. It enjoyed basking in that one vigorous, hopeful moment where the old faded into the past, and the new entered the present.

Therefore, the Age Ender didn't hurt humans unless they hurt it first. In fact, most people couldn't see the Age Ender unless they possessed an exceptionally strong spirit.

The Age Ender would gladly eliminate the old filth, misfortune, darkness and more inauspicious things polluting the human world. This allowed the humans to welcome a new year clean and refreshed. This was why the saying, "Out with the old, in with the new. A bright new year awaits us all," existed.

Any location where the Age Ender visited would usually experience a smooth, prosperous new year. The people would enjoy a healthy, peaceful and happy life.

This was why most people viewed the Age Ender as an auspicious beast.

Of course, the Age Ender itself was a Stranger full of taint and corruption. It was a bad idea to look at it directly. That was why Ye Qing took a mental blow earlier.

“Why would the Age Ender appear in Bei You?” Ye Qing asked curiously.

Yi Pin shrugged. “Who knows? It’s not like I can read its mind. You though, I can tell you dislike this place. Your face says it all. You think it’s beneath you, don’t you?”

“Why are you slandering me?” Ye Qing rolled his eyes. *Did he eat something wrong today? He’s been attacking me every two or three sentences!*

Yi Pin was right though. The Age Ender was a powerful, mysterious Stranger. No one except the Age Ender itself knew why it had appeared in Bei You.

“The Age Ender started appearing in Bei You three years ago. Since then, it had not stopped appearing during the moment when the old year passed, and the new year arrived. No one knows when it’ll leave.”

Yi Pin explained even though Ye Qing hadn’t asked anything. “By the way, the moment is almost upon us. Don’t blink, or you’ll surely regret it!”

A short while later, the Age Ender suddenly waved its hands, and the clouds in the sky soundlessly dissipated into nothing. As the night sky cleared, it felt as if a gentle breeze was passing through Bei You. Ye Qing’s demonic thought told him that some sort of darkness had been lifted from the city, and he felt unburdened even though he couldn’t tell exactly what he was relieved from.

It was at this moment countless bizarre images began appearing in the sky. It looked like a reflection of the mortal coil. It was blurry, indistinct, and shrouded in darkness, however. It also gave off an old, almost rotten feeling.

Suddenly, the sound of a drum broke the night’s silence.

It was loud and crisp as if it had taken place right next to one’s ears and heart. And yet, most people couldn’t hear it at all.

The sound reached all the way to the sky and awakened the good in humanity.

The blurry, indistinct images in the sky abruptly shattered, and a single ray of light cut through the pitch black sky like a sword.

It was a stunning sight. It was a sight filled with beauty, hopefulness and life.

The light slowly spread apart and became intertwined with the darkness. It seemed to symbolize the cycle of yin and yang; life and death.

Exist in darkness, but yearn for the light.

When light replaced the darkness and enveloped the Age Ender, it began emitting dazzling, rainbow light from its whole body. It was more colorful than fireworks and brighter than the sun itself.

Rainbow light filled the sky and descended onto the world, dyeing it in fantastical dream-like colors.

“It’s spectacular!” Ye Qing murmured. It was a true shame that the average person couldn’t see this.

“The new replaces the old, and all things are renewed. This is the mortal vigor and numerology of all things when the Age Ender basks in this moment,” Yi Pin said distractedly.

The unusual phenomenon in the sky lasted a dozen or so breaths before it finally disappeared.

The Age Ender stood in the sky and gazed downward on humanity when the light faded completely.

Then, white snow the size of goose feathers began falling earnestly.

The snow wasn’t particularly huge or cold, but it was most celebratory.

“It’s snowing!”

“It’s snowing!”

Delighted cheers and happy cries erupted from outside the courtyard.

“They say that a timely snow promises a good harvest.”

Yi Pin looked at Ye Qing and raised his wine cup for a toast. “Happy new year, brother. I wish you safe tidings on your journey.”

Ye Qing returned the gesture. “I wish you a healthy life as well, brother. Happy new year.”

Out with the old, in with the new.

A new year begins, and spring warms every heart.

May your friends prosper and thrive,

May your family be safe and healthy,

And may humanity enjoy peace for years to come.

.....

“We’ve arrived at Celestial Spring. Please have a good rest, everyone. We’ll be home once we’re through here.”

A dark-skinned, muscular man looked at the oasis in front of him, a relieved smile spreading across his dusty face.

It was mid winter, but the man was only wearing a thin singlet. His arm muscles oozed with strength and vigor.

“We’re finally home... This trip took over half a year, didn’t it? It’s been a long time since I had a taste of our local wine. I can’t wait!”

“Wine? I think you really miss the women of our brothels!”

“Hehe. Like you don’t?”

“Of course I do, but I miss my wife even more. I wonder how she’s been in the past year?”

“Hehe... Don’t say I didn’t warn you, Yao Chong, but if your wife ran off with another during the half a year you were gone...”

“Fuck you! My wife is as loyal as she gets! Besides, she’s old and faded. Who on earth would set their sights on her?”

“You did, didn’t you?”

“Fine! I’m blind! You happy?”

“Well, you’re a wealthy man now. You have the option to get a new wife if you want to.”

The brawny man leading the group immediately looked back with a stern expression. “Sun Bo, I don’t care that you’re an amoral man, but don’t you dare corrupt Yao Chong. Yao Chong, Yue Gui is a good woman. Her looks may be average, but she’s gentle, wise, kind, hardworking, and filial to boot. While you were gone, she had to take care of your mother and the house all by herself. It’s no easy task. You better not let her down, or you will regret it.”

“I won’t, boss. You know how I am. We made it big this time, and this trip was quite tiring. I’m definitely going to stay at home and keep Yue Gui company for a while,” Yao Chong replied while scratching his head.

The brawny man nodded and looked at Sun Bo, the guy who tried to tease Yao Chong earlier. He was a scrawny guy with a handsome, almost feminine face, though his years on the road had toughened his skin and given him a bit of manliness.

“Sun Bo, you’re getting on the years as well. Stop frequenting brothels and wasting away your life and money. Now that you have some ingots in your pockets, you should find yourself a wife and lead a proper life.”

“I want to, but if I’m wed, then what will happen to my Little Red[1], Little Green, Chun Xiang and Piao Xue? They’d be heartbroken!” Sun Bo shrugged with a “What can I do?” expression.

“Oh, you...” The brawny man shook his head. There was nothing he could say that could change the young man’s mind.

Sun Bo urged his horse to move next to the brawny man before asking, “What about you, boss? Home’s just a stone’s throw away. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking about my Niu Niu. It’s been over half a year since we met. I wonder if she ate well and how much taller she’s become since I last saw her... and I wonder if she’ll still recognize me after so long.”

The brawny man’s tough, hardened features softened as he spoke of his daughter. There was a hint of worry and fear as well. “She was just a wee girl when I left her. She couldn’t even walk properly at the time.”

Yao Chong consoled him, “We made a lot of money this time, boss. You can stay at home and keep Niu Niu company for a long time to come.”

“Yeah, boss,” Sun Bo echoed in agreement.

A middle-aged man with a weary expression sighed sorrowfully as if the talk of family brought up memories he didn’t want to recall. “Sigh... I can’t believe that only we returned from this trip. Old Zhong, Old Wang, Young An... they’re gone forever.”

The easy atmosphere immediately turned somewhat heavy and sorrowful.