

## Stranger 61

### Chapter 61: Petty Schemes Galore

The vice magistrate flew into a rage when he heard this, "What!? Who was the culprit? How dare they!"

"I'm still looking into it, but I'm sure we'll find the culprit very soon. In the meantime, will you please rally the men and remove this Shing Wong temple immediately? The people must be made aware of the danger, and it'll serve as a warning to all criminals who might be harboring similar ideas!"

"As you command!" The vice magistrate saluted Yan Yufei before ordering, "Yi'an, rally the men and remove this Shing Wong temple immediately! Make haste!"

"Got it, brother-in-law!" The young man named Yi'an answered. He was none other than Tang Yi'an, the gate captain of Anyang.

"Tang Yi'an? Why are you here? Shouldn't you be at the gates?" Yan Yufei frowned the moment he noticed the gate captain.

"That's because I noticed an unusual disturbance in this direction earlier, my lord! I thought I should check it out just in case it was a Stranger attack!" Tang Yi'an responded in a righteous tone.

However, Yan Yufei let out a cold hmph and said, "You are the gate captain of Anyang. Your main responsibility is to guard the gates and prevent any malevolent souls from infiltrating the county. Unless we specifically called for you to come to our aid, you should leave the incidents within the county to us."

"Since you've come out of the goodness of your heart, I will not punish you for the crime of leaving your post without permission. But do not do it again, understand?"

"I'm sorry, my lord, I'm sorry. Please forgive me!" Tang Yi'an said hurriedly even as his expression darkened. He had been hoping to earn Yan Yufei's favor with this initiative, but instead it almost landed him in hot waters. His heart immediately boiled with resentment and hatred.

"Please forgive him, my lord. It is I who failed to teach him properly. When we get back, I'll be sure to brush up on his education!" The vice magistrate smiled awkwardly as he apologized on behalf of Tang Yi'an. He then turned back to the young man and chided in a stern tone, "What are you waiting for? Get back to the Shushou Gate already! I will hold you responsible if anything happened at the gates while you were gone! Now get lost!"

“Yes, my lord. I’ll be returning to my post now!” Tang Yi’an replied and turned away, but right before he left he glared at Ye Qing with a hint of hatred and bloodthirst behind his eyes.

*Yan Yufei’s the one who raked you over the coals, and your own brother-in-law’s who scolded you, so why is the idiot looking at me instead of them? Does he have a screw loose in his head?* Ye Qing thought idly to himself. Tang Yi’an’s action, while inconspicuous, hadn’t escaped his notice thanks to his fine senses.

He paid the clown no heed though. He could beat a hundred Tang Yi’an should he ever grow the nerve to challenge him. The military officer on the other hand, now that was someone he needed to be wary of!

Yan Yufei had addressed the military officer as the vice magistrate, and Tang Yi’an his brother-in-law. He could only be the vice magistrate responsible for the military defense of Anyang, You Da!

You Da had a rugged appearance, but his vigor was thick and strong. Like a sun, he was blinding in the auric sense even from a long distance away. Ye Qing had no doubt that he was a powerful martial practitioner and a Vessel Augmentor at least. He couldn’t tell if You Da was a middle-stage or late-stage Vessel Augmentor, but one thing for certain, his cultivation level was definitely stronger than his right now.

There was one more person of note besides You Da. He was another middle-aged man in his forties wearing a black, form-fitting outfit. He had long, straight eyebrows, and eyes that glittered like stars. His aura was as cold and biting as winter, and his face looked like it was carved out of stone, stiff and expressionless. Ye Qing might believe it if someone told him that the man wasn’t really a human, but a heartless golem.

He’s also a Vessel Augmentor, and not just any Vessel Augmentor either. He’s even stronger than You Da!

At first glance, the middle-aged man’s presence was weaker than You Da’s. In reality, it was just withdrawn because he had full control over his power. To Ye Qing, his aura felt rounded, fully integrated, and unfathomable. This meant that he was actually much stronger than You Da.

“Lord Yan. Did you fight against the suspect earlier?” The middle-aged man asked suddenly.

“Well met, Chief Ling!” Yan Yufei turned toward him and nodded. “As to your question, the answer is both yes and no. I had fought against the General of Punishment—the golden statue that had grown some measure of sentience and transformed into a Stranger due to all the power of wishes it had received throughout the year. As for the mastermind behind this, I’m still in the middle of investigating!”

*Chief Ling? He’s probably the chief of the Pacification Bureau in Anyang, the “One Sword Autumn” Ling Jianqiu then. No wonder he gave me a dangerous feeling,* Ye Qing thought while rubbing his chin.

The reason he came to Anyang was to massacre the Zheng Clan and take revenge for August Hill Village and himself. Naturally, he had made sure to investigate every faction, notable person, and any other variables in Anyang that might pose a concern to his mission, and Ling Jianqiu, the chief of the Pacification Bureau was one of them. To do any less was to court failure at best, or a fate-worse-than-death at worst.

Ling Jianqiu was the chief of the Pacification Bureau. Naturally, he had done some research on him.

It was at this moment the bailiffs carried their dead colleagues out of the Shing Wong temple. You Da's face darkened as he asked, "My lord?"

Yan Yufei sighed deeply. "I did not think that the mastermind would still be in the temple, and he was able to kill some of our brothers and escape while I was battling the General of Punishment!"

Ling Jianqiu interrupted, "You should've reported this case to my Pacification Bureau since it relates to Strangers, Lord Yan. We would have destroyed the false deity and captured the mastermind without suffering any casualties!"

"Because of your wilful actions, you have cost several bailiffs their lives and even alerted the mastermind. Now, it'll be far more difficult to capture the bastards!"

"Are you accusing me of incompetence, Chief Ling?" Yan Yufei asked coldly. He could stomach the first half of Ling Jianqiu's reprimand, but the second half was just a put-down through and through. The Pacification Bureau and the administration division were technically on the same level even though their functions were very different from one another. However, Ling Jianqiu had borne down on him arrogantly and accusingly like he was his superior. It was no wonder that Yan Yufei was displeased.

"You misunderstand me. I'm simply stating the facts as they are!" Ling Jianqiu replied as cool as ever.

*Wow, this guy is exactly like the rumors said!* Ye Qing narrowed his eyes a little. It was rumored that Ling Jianqiu was cold and heartless, cynical and insensitive, pitiless and strict and more. It would seem that the rumors were not unfounded.

"You want to talk about facts, don't you? Okay! I'll give you some facts" Yan Yufei retorted, "This was just a serial murder case at the beginning. We had no idea if a Stranger was actually behind the murders. It's only after we chased the clues to this place that we stumbled upon the Stranger, and by then we were already engaged in battle! We did not inform the Pacification Bureau in time not because we didn't want to, but because there was no time!"

"Second, could the Pacification Bureau really have done better than us? I could tell from my battle against the Stranger that it had been stealing the power of wishes for some time, and yet the Pacification Bureau had not noticed a thing until now. If I hadn't stumbled upon it by accident, a terrible tragedy would've befallen Anyang, and

I don't need to tell you what would've happened to your Pacification Bureau if the emperor heard about this!"

"I haven't even begun to hold you responsible for your negligence, and you have the gall to criticize me, Chief Ling?"

Yan Yufei had mixed quite a bit of lies into his counter-accusation—for example, he was lying about not knowing that a Stranger might be behind the murder case at all—but it was so well-reasoned and intimidating that a lesser official might've caved under the pressure. Unfortunately, Ling Jianqiu was no lesser official. Expressionless as ever, he took the full brunt of the counter-accusation like it was nothing and said, "If a tragedy were to break out as a result of my negligence, then so be it. As the chief of the Pacification Bureau, I am willing to bear the sins and consequences that resulted from my mistakes. But just the same, there is no denying that you've committed a mistake today, one that you should take responsibility for."

"In any case, now that we know for certain that a Stranger *is* behind this, I would urge you to hand this case over to the Pacification Bureau immediately. The mastermind must be apprehended as soon as possible!"

Yan Yufei sneered. "Thanks but no thanks. Since Chief Ling insists that this matter is a mistake on my part, then allow me to make up for it by resolving this case! You do not need to interfere or worry over this, Chief Ling!"

"Men, let us depart!" Yan Yufei ordered curtly after that and left without even bothering to bid Ling Jianqiu goodbye.

"I need to go, Chief Ling. I'll see you later!" You Da also took his leave after saluting Ling Jianqiu.

When everyone was gone, a young woman behind Ling Jianqiu asked him, "Foster father, Lord Yan is the newly appointed magistrate of Anyang, and I am sure that his backing is considerable. Why did you butt heads with him instead of trying to foster a good relationship with him? Won't it make things difficult and impact the Pacification Bureau and the administrative division's future relationship?"

The young woman was about twenty years old and wearing a long, dark green dress. She had a beautiful countenance, a shapely figure, a gentle temperament, and a natural aura around her that was unique to a waterfront woman.

"I'm not targeting Yan Yufei. I just want to apprehend the Stranger as soon as possible. Strangers are cunning by nature. Every second we waste may result in the death of another person!" Ling Jianqiu replied evenly.

The young woman said gently, "Yun Yan understands that you just want to do right by the people of Anyang, but your temper is causing the opposite effect, foster father. Angering Lord Yan has only made it harder for us to take over this case!"

Ling Jianqiu asked coolly, "Has it though?"

Yun Yan thought for a second before blooming into a smile. “Oh, I get it. You had done it on purpose. You want Yan Yufei to do the investigation part for you so you don’t have to!”

“It makes sense. The Pacification Bureau is busy with August Hill Village and quite undermanned right now. It is better to leave the investigation to Lord Yan and lend a hand only after he has found something!”

“I should’ve known better than to question your judgment, foster father!”

“You know me well, Yun Yan. It’s a shame you cannot practice martial arts, or else...” A hint of rare sorrow appeared on Ling Jian’s features but disappeared immediately after.

“You don’t need to be sad, foster father. Yun Yan might be too frail to practice martial arts, but I am well read in a wide range of subjects. The pen can be mightier than the sword, am I right?” Yun Yan said kindly.

Ling Jianqiu let out a quiet sigh and patted her on the head affectionately. “I know. I just wish you could have a better life!”

Yun Yan shook her head with a bright smile on her face. “Yun Yan is happy with her life. Being able to keep you company and solve your troubles is good enough for me.”

“You are a smart and sensible girl, Yun Yan. I am most happy to have you as well!”

Ling Jianqiu smiled one last time before returning to his cold self. “How goes the investigation of August Hill Village?”

Yun Yan shook her head. “Nothing yet. Whatever happened to August Hill Village, it is stranger than anything we could imagine. Not only did the village vanish into thin air, the place where it used to be had transformed into a lake of blood. It has become a forbidden area that pollutes and dissolves anyone that gets close to it. As a result, we’re unable to find any clues as of now.”

“Was there any survivors or witnesses?”

“Unfortunately, no. Since the village itself had vanished into nothing, it’s probably safe to say that none of the villagers had survived. It’s the main reason we’re still unable to determine what had happened.”

Ling Jianqiu frowned deeply. “Regardless of the difficulties, we must find out what happened to August Hill Village as soon as possible. Is it a natural disaster, or is it a Stranger’s doing? Is it a one-time thing, or will it spread to Anyang? We *must* know.”

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“I know!” Yun Yan nodded with a smile before bidding her foster father goodbye and taking her leave.

Chapter 62: Conspiracy

“The General of Punishment’s Martial Courage, huh. It was worth the trip!”

After bidding Yan Yufei and the others goodbye, Ye Qing returned to Endless Horizons and sat on his chair. He then took out what looked like a golden rock from his Nature's Shell and examined it curiously.

The golden rock was none other than the golden heart he had swiped from the General of Punishment's shattered body. It was called the Martial Courage, and it was the coalescence of the people's worship and wishes.

Strangers who absorbed the people's worship and wishes to grow sentience and strength could usually be split into two types. A Stranger who had received permission and an official title from the imperial court was recognized as a deity, and one who hadn't was known as a false deity or a heretic deity. In any case, both types of Strangers needed the people's belief to forge a heart, their wishes to forge a gut, their worship to forge a body, and the Human Way to forge a soul. Only then would the golden body be complete, and the Stranger would become a true deity.

The Martial Courage was one small part of the General of Punishment's golden body. Since the Stranger hadn't been worshiped for long, it only managed to forge its heart—the Martial Courage—before it was destroyed.

“Wah wah wah! Something smells very nice...”

Ye Qing had only brought out the Martial Courage for a few seconds or so when suddenly, a childish voice entered his ears. The next moment, a young girl flew out of a book on the table and stared at the Martial Courage with saliva dripping down her mouth.

“What is this thing, friend? It smells incredible! Can I sniff it?”

“Sure, but you'll have to read an extra book for me tonight!” Ye Qing replied smilingly. Similar to delicious food, stuff like this was very enticing to Strangers.

It was at this moment Kung Fu Frog leaped out from somewhere and landed on the chair next to his and watched over Wawa with a doting look. Unlike Wawa, it didn't care for the Martial Courage at all. The scorn on its face was as clear as day.

“It's a deal, friend!” Wawa nodded happily and moved closer to the Martial Courage. She then stood on her tiptoes and took a long, intoxicating sniff.

A while later, Wawa asked dazedly, “Can I lick it, friend?”

“You can, but what happens next isn't my fault, okay?” Ye Qing agreed as the hint of a cunning smile crossed his lips.

Wawa was just a kid, so she let out a loud whoop, “You're a good friend, friend!” before giving the Martial Courage a lick. The second she finished, she immediately spat on the ground and grimaced like a bun. “Ugh... it's so bitter! It's so bitter Wawa can die! You lied to me, friend! You lied to me! Waaaaaaaah!”

The Book Sprite immediately started bawling. Ye Qing replied in an innocent tone, “Hey, you're the one who wanted to lick it. It's not my fault!”

“I don't care! It's your fault, you baddie, you liar, you bad, bad friend! Wawa doesn't care about you anymore!” She threw a fit before vanishing in the blink of an eye.

Ye Qing shrugged. The bitterness Wawa tasted was of course, the taint that made up part of the Martial Courage. Because the General of Punishment was a fake deity, the Martial Courage it formed was nowhere as pure as the real thing.

Next, Ye Qing turned to Kung Fu Frog—the frog Stranger was drinking a jar of wine as usual—and grinned wickedly. “What about you, Brother Frog? Care to give it a lick?”

Kung Fu Frog merely croaked and rolled its large eyes. Do-you-think-I’m-stupid was the expression on its face.

“Never mind then!” Ye Qing shrugged again before putting the Martial Courage away. The reason he interrupted Yan Yufei and stole the heart earlier was because it was a key ingredient in creating the Incense of Worship, the Incense of Ghost Summoning and more. And of course, he had done it to earn some dragon-serpent runes as well.

The result was impressive. A single General of Punishment had netted him three silver dragon-serpent runes in total. That was incredible to say the least. He could finally begin cultivating his “Blood Shadow Divine Art” again!

“Without further ado, it’s cultivation time...”

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Creak... creak...

Bright, cold moonlight, peered through a window frame and illuminated a mostly empty room. It was simple, decrepit, and devoid of any furniture besides one long wooden table and five wooden stools.

The room was completely empty, but the furniture were surprisingly clean. So clean, in fact, it was as if someone was cleaning them everyday. However, this was a room in an ancient, abandoned house, so that couldn’t be right...

Right?

Bang! Bang, bang! Bang, bang!

Suddenly, a stool in the house swayed back and forth without warning, its feet hitting the floor and making a crisp, banging noise each time. It was as if someone was sitting on the stool and shaking it on purpose.

“I heard you failed your mission, Faceless!”

A playful, childish voice resounded throughout the room, and the silhouette of a person abruptly appeared on the stool. It was almost as if they were there this whole time.

The person was a young girl with a pair of twintails. She looked to be eight or nine years old. However, her head was utterly rotten, and rotting meat and pus continuously dripped off her face and hit the floor, sizzling. They were most likely corrosive.

“Keep your rotting nose out of my business, Rotten Crown!”

A rickety, spindly man appeared on the stool opposite of the young girl. His face was a smooth marble devoid of any facial features whatsoever. He was none other than the incense acolyte who had murdered six bailiffs at the Shing Wong temple.

“Hehe, *now* you want us to stay out of your business? Who the hell do you think you are, Faceless?”

A sarcastic voice spoke next as a young man appeared on the stool at the farther end of the table. His posture was sloppy, and he was fanning himself without a care in the world. Countless terrifying, dark green eyeballs could be seen squeezing in and out of his face.

“Are you done living, Dark Eye?” Faceless asked in a cold, murderous tone.

“Enough. You can argue after Evergreen Ivy [1] has arrived!” A slow, raspy voice interrupted as an old man slowly sat down on the stool.

At first glance, the old man looked no different from an ordinary old man. However, a closer look would reveal that only half of his face was flesh and blood. The other half of his face was made of weeds, and his hair were really clumps of green grass!

“You’re late, Old Grass!” Rotten Crown teased him while shaking her legs back and forth.

“I’m old. My legs aren’t what they used to be!” The old man named Old Grass rasped.

“What happened, Faceless? How did the humans find out about the General of Punishment?”

A woman suddenly spoke from the main seat. Her voice was kind and gentle, but darkness surrounded her like a cloak of invisibility and masked her face completely. She was, of course, Evergreen Ivy.

Faceless, Dark Eye and Rotten Crown instinctively straightened their backs when they heard the voice. Faceless then answered in a dark tone, “I don’t know what happened either. Earlier this noon, Yan Yufei suddenly showed up at the Shing Wong temple with a small force and searched the whole place. It was how he discovered that the General of Punishment was hiding inside the Shing Wong statue. He might even have found me if I hadn’t acted quickly and escaped!”

“The General of Punishment probably killed one too many people as of late and drew suspicion. One thing led to another, and Yan Yufei realized that a Stranger was behind the murders!” Evergreen Ivy deduced gently. Despite Faceless’ failure, she didn’t sound angry at all.

Faceless abruptly slapped the wooden table and uttered in a cold, bloodthirsty voice, “Dammit! We were one step away from succeeding, and now we have to start all over from the beginning! The smartass bailiff who found out the truth better be ready for me. I’m going to make him wish he was dead as soon as I find out who he is!”

“Hehe, it’s your fault for being careless!” Dark Eye taunted him from the other end of the table.



Face abruptly shot to his feet and uttered, “Do you want to die, Dark Eye?”

The other Stranger snarked back fearlessly. “What, are we not allowed to point out your mistakes?”

“I will—”

“Enough!”

Evergreen Ivy interrupted the duo before a full-blown brawl could break out, “Faceless, I will report your mistake to the Dark Lord as it is. Instead of regretting what could have been, we should come up with another plan to make up for it.”

“Do you have a plan, Evergreen Ivy?” Old Grass asked.

“Something has happened to August Hill Village recently. The entire place suddenly up and disappeared into thin air, and the Pacification Bureau had to dispatch most of their personnel to investigate the incident. Suffice to say, they are severely undermanned right now. We can work on this, can’t we?”

Old Grass nodded in agreement. “This is an excellent opportunity. Assuming that we come up with a good plan, the result may even surpass our initial expectations!”

“I’m glad that you agree. Now, let us discuss how best to utilize this opportunity to destroy Anyang!”

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Some time later, Evergreen Ivy clapped her hands together and declared, “Now that the plan is set, let us fulfill our roles to the best of our abilities! Please remember to be careful, or you may face the wrath of the Dark Lord.”

“She’s talking about you, Faceless! You better not slip up another time, old man!”

Dark Eye taunted and vanished into thin air.

“Be careful, Faceless...” Rotten Crown also ridiculed him.

When everyone was gone, Faceless was positively boiling with murderous rage as he slammed the table. “Who’s the bastard who ruined my business? I swear I will rip them to a million pieces!”

“As for the rest of you... I swear I’ll devour you all when the plan is complete!”

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“Achoo! Achoo! Achoo!”

Inside his room, Ye Qing suddenly opened his eyes and sneezed a couple of times. When he recovered, he rubbed his nose and complained, “The bloody hell just happened? Did someone curse me or think of me or something?”

“Nah, I’m such a good boy. I’m sure it’s just a beautiful woman or ten missing my handsome looks!”

Ye Qing rose to his feet and stretched a little. It was at this moment a naughty idea entered his mind. He unleashed his Blood Shadows and carefully sent them over to Wawa and Kung Fu Frog. Wawa was playing when suddenly, she sensed danger and let out a frightened scream. She immediately flew into a book and vanished. Kung Fu Frog abruptly opened its eyes and watched its surroundings warily. It stared at the invisible wisps of Blood Shadows and croaked a few times in warning.

“Hehe...”

Feeling much better after playing a joke on Wawa and Kung Fu Frog, Ye Qing withdrew his Blood Shadows and took a moment to perceive his newfound strength. He was very pleased when all was said and done.

Yesterday, he had used three silver dragon-serpent runes and improved the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” to a new level. His internal energy had grown tremendously, and the amount of Blood Shadows under his command had doubled to seventy-two.

In essence, his Blood Shadows were the coalescence of the Blood Shadow true qi and his vigor. Theoretically speaking, Blood Shadow Magic possessed limitless potential so long as the practitioner’s true qi was strong, and their vigor was sufficient. That was the ideal the creator of the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” had in mind when he authored the cultivation art.

Unfortunately, a person only had so much time and energy. There were few warriors who could grow both elements at the same time,<sup>?</sup> not to mention that the art of honing one’s body was easy to grasp, but difficult to master. To put it simply, it consumed an insane amount of time and precious natural resources to hone one’s body to the absolute pinnacle, and the end result, as far as most warriors were concerned, wasn’t as good as the pinnacle of qi or spirit.

This was why most warriors focused on cultivating their true qi and spirit instead of their body, and why there were very few people in Blood Shadow Castle’s history that converted all of their Blood Shadow True Qi into Blood Shadows.

According to the manual, a practitioner who successfully created thirty six Blood Shadows was considered to have reached the journeymen level, seventy two to reach the adept level, and one hundred and eight to achieve complete mastery. Add to the fact that the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” was just a Vessel Augmentation stage cultivation art, and Blood Shadow Magic was just a method to apply it offensively, there were very few practitioners who truly mastered Blood Shadow Magic.

According to the manual, Ye Qing had already reached the journeyman level of the magic art. He could stop creating more Blood Shadows now and just focus on augmenting his vessels.

Of course, Ye Qing disagreed with this opinion. It was because of the dragon-serpent runes. The gray dragon-serpent runes would increase his vigor, and the silver dragon-serpent runes his true qi. Knowing this, he knew there was every chance he could convert all of his Blood Shadow true qi into Blood Shadows and attain complete mastery of Blood Shadow Magic.

Not only that, his blood was capable of devouring energy. He was going to carry the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” to unprecedented heights.

His goal had always been to convert all of his Blood Shadow true qi into Blood Shadows. Seventy-two was just the beginning, and the end was, as the creator of the cultivation art had envisioned, theoretically endless.

“My internal energy is stronger than ever before, and I still have some leftover dragon-serpent energy in my body. Let’s see if it’s enough to get me all the way to the middle-stage of the Vessel Augmentation stage!” Ye Qing mumbled to himself before turning to Kung Fu Frog. “Please protect me while I cultivate, Brother Frog!”

Chapter 63: Faceless

“Who is it?” Ye Qing opened his eyes and called out in response. He sounded a little puzzled.

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“It’s me, Boss Ye! It’s Zhou Gui!” Zhou Gui’s voice rang from outside the door.

“Zhou Gui? Why is he here at this time?” Ye Qing mumbled but rose to his feet. After heading downstairs and opening the door, he saw the owner of Coming Clouds beaming at him at his doorsteps.

“Good evening, Boss Zhou! Do you need anything?” Ye Qing asked smilingly while leaning against the door frame.

Zhou Gui lifted the package of food he was holding and said, “On the contrary, I’m the one who’s come to help a man in need! You haven’t left the bookstore the entire day, so I reckon that you must’ve been too busy with your cultivation to eat anything. That is why I brought you a jar of high quality Pear Blossom wine and squirrel fish for dinner!”

“That’s very thoughtful of you! Now that you mentioned it, I am feeling hungry!” Ye Qing’s eyes lit up as he waved Zhou Gui in. “Come in, Boss Zhou! Since you’re already here, you might as well join me for a drink!”

“Sure!” The restaurant owner replied smilingly and followed Ye Qing into Endless Horizons. It wasn’t long before the food and wine were placed on the table, and a delicious scent spread throughout the bookstore.

“Damn, that smells good!” Ye Qing sniffed the air and praised, “Your cooking skills are getting better and better, Boss Zhou!”

“Haha! I’m honored that my food is to your liking!” Zhou Gui chuckled and poured Ye Qing a cup of wine. “A toast to you, Boss Ye.”

“Thank you!” Ye Qing accepted the cup before asking, “Oh right, how is Hui’er doing now, Boss Zhou? Has he recovered from his cold already?”

“He’s much better. Thanks for your concern!” Boss Zhou replied smilingly.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Ye Qing said with a smile before twisting his wrist. The next second, the cup flew straight toward Zhou Gui’s head like an arrow!

A bewildered look flitted across Zhou Gui's face, but he caught the wine cup with two fingers right before it would hit his forehead. He then set down the cup and asked curiously, "Interesting. How did you know that I'm not Zhou Gui?"

Ye Qing replied casually, "Since the moment you started talking, really. It's true that Zhou Gui and I aren't close, but I've never told him that I'm a martial arts practitioner. In fact, I told everyone that I'm a wandering scholar looking to broaden my horizons in Anyang, and I haven't given them any reason to believe otherwise. If you really were Zhou Gui, why would you guess that I was cultivating?"

"But of course, it's just a guess. Zhou Gui is a restaurant owner, so he might've heard something from a loose mouth or two. That's why I decided to test you by asking how Zhou Gui's son is doing. You don't know this, but I visited Zhou Gui's place just yesterday. Hui'er was sick, but not because he caught a cold, but because he was infected by an Everhungry Worm. In fact, I'm the one who saved his life."

"In conclusion, you cannot be Zhou Gui. Who are you?"

"Haha! You're smarter than I thought. I suppose I should've known better to pay you a visit before conducting a proper investigation." The fake Zhou Gui's smile slowly morphed into a sneer. "Since this is our first meeting, allow me to introduce myself: I am Faceless, and I have come to kill you!"

Faceless was telling the truth. He was faceless, but he could take on anyone's face almost perfectly as long as he had seen it at least once. Earlier, he had taken on the face of a common bailiff and infiltrated the county hall. It was there he discovered that the person who discovered the General of Punishment and ruined their grand plan was a young man named Ye Qing and the current owner of Endless Horizons.

Enthralled by unspeakable hatred and anger, Faceless immediately traveled to Endless Horizons to kill Ye Qing. Unfortunately, Ye Qing spent the whole day in the bookstore doing god-knows-what and gave him no opportunities to knife him in a secluded back alley or something. He did not want to barge into Endless Horizons either because it would only escalate the situation unnecessarily and draw attention to himself.

Later, he was drinking his woes away at Coming Clouds when he accidentally overheard that the owner of the restaurant, Zhou Gui happened to be acquaintances with Ye Qing. After briefly interrogating the gossip about their relationship—the gossip himself had no idea that he was being interrogated, of course—he took on Zhou Gui's face and visited Ye Qing on the pretext of delivering him dinner. The rest was history.

Faceless had been stewing in hatred and anger since yesterday. The only way he could rid himself of these loathsome emotions was to kill Ye Qing. However, the young man was far more alert than he expected and saw through him before he could do anything.

He only had himself to blame, to be honest. He had acted recklessly and visited Ye Qing before he found out exactly how the young man and Zhou Gui were related. Otherwise, this could've gone a lot better.

“Faceless?” Ye Qing repeated the name with a frown. “I’m positive I have never met you until now, so why do you want to kill me, stranger?”

“Hehe! It’s because you ruined our grand plan, of course!” Faceless let out a dark and violent laugh.

“Grand plan?” Ye Qing thought for a second before clapping his hands. “Oh, you’re talking about the General of Punishment? That’s right! I’m the one who dunnit!”

“Not even going to try to deny it, huh? Do you know that we were one step away from completing our plan? Do you know how many years of hard work were wasted because of your actions? You deserve to die, boy!” Faceless uttered through gritted teeth as his eyes turned bloodshot.

His group had infiltrated Anyang and secretly forged the General of Punishment within the Shing Wong statue. Once the false deity’s golden body was complete, he would take control of the people of Anyang through the power of wishes he stole and drive them into a frenzy, throwing the entire county into turmoil. When that happened, Anyang would fall completely under the Strangers’ control.

Their plan had progressed smoothly until the final step. The General of Punishment needed to kill forty-nine humans to complete his golden body, and he must not be discovered until he was ready to enact the plan. That was why they had gone through great lengths to ensure that the General of Punishment only killed ordinary people. They also made sure to select targets who were completely unrelated to one another so that the administration division or the Pacification Bureau could not make the connection.

The group had believed that their cover-up was perfect, and that the final step of their plan would go just as smoothly as the rest. Instead, a nobody had led the magistrate straight to the Shing Wong temple and ruined everything. How could Faceless stay calm knowing this? He was so angry his face was contorted. He was so angry he wanted to rip a certain piece of shit into shreds!

“Wow! It’s that serious?” Ye Qing scratched his head and broke into a wide grin. “I’m so glad to hear that!”

“DIE!” Faceless roared as his facial features abruptly vanished one by one. When they were all gone, a cold, evil energy permeated the room and attempted to invade Ye Qing’s body. The young man could clearly sense some sort of evil power infiltrating his body and attempting to erase both his facial features and his mind completely.

“You’re that incense acolyte who killed the six bailiffs? A Malice-class Stranger?” Ye Qing immediately put two and two together.

“You’re really quick-witted. It’s too bad you figured out the truth too late!” Faceless laughed darkly. He thought he would savor the young man’s final expression before he died, but his laughter was abruptly cut short when a few seconds passed, and he

realized that the young man wasn't losing his facial features or his life. In fact, he was smirking at him like he was looking down on an idiot!

"You're a Vessel Augmentor?!" Faceless exclaimed in shock and realization. His ability corrupted any warrior or Stranger who was below his power level, a.k.a the Malice class or the Vessel Augmentation stage. Their facial features would be erased, and their soul would disintegrate into nothing. Since Ye Qing was fine, it could only mean he was on the same level as him or higher, or he possessed some sort of Strange Artifact that shielded him from his ability!

"Why don't you guess?" Ye Qing said smilingly and moved his fingers like he was playing a string instrument. The next moment, a few throwing knives shot toward Faceless like thunder.

"This is nothing!" Faceless sneered and grabbed the air. An invisible force twisted the air until it exploded and knocked all of the throwing knives away.

Suddenly, Faceless disappeared and reappeared next to Ye Qing. He then swung his boneless arms at the young man's head like a whip.

Crack!

The air cracked, and Ye Qing shattered into smithereens. However, Faceless wasn't happy in the slightest. It was because the person he just "killed" was just an illusion.

The Stranger proceeded to show off an inhuman level of flexibility by twisting his upper body and only his upper one hundred and eighty degrees around and facing Ye Qing, who had somehow gotten behind his back without him noticing. He launched a palm strike at the young man's torso, but the young man suddenly floated like a feather that was being pushed by the wind. He was able to dodge the deadly attack with just millimeters to spare.

"Argh! Die, die, die, die, die!"

Faceless tried to attack Ye Qing a couple more times but missed all of his attacks. Losing his cool, he let out a dark, twisted growl that sounded like a hundred ghosts screeching at the same time and unleashed a deadly claw technique. The growl possessed a mind-bending quality, and the claw-shaped hands moved so fast it seemed impossible that Ye Qing, standing right in front of Faceless, would not be cut into a million pieces.

And yet he wasn't. No matter how rapid the attacks came, they could not harm even the fabric of his shirt. It was like Ye Qing was a gust of air that could make minute adjustments and avoid the storm of claws blowing his way by a hair's breadth. He wasn't a celestial, but he certainly looked like one right now.

"You've made me angry, human! You won't like it when I'm angry!"

Faceless let out a full-throated roar as his smooth, marble face abruptly split open from the forehead all the way to his chin. Then, pitch black light shone out of the gap and enveloped everything within the bookstore.

It was as black as tar and as thick as ink. Whatever it touched immediately transformed into strange monsters as if they were corrupted by its power. The tables and chairs grew giant mouths with rows and rows of sharp teeth. They kept grinding their teeth together to make this screeching noise that was both shrill and uncomfortable. The wine glasses grew long, oddly-shaped arms that were covered in thorns, the books grew eyeballs that were overflowing with malice, madness and rage, and the pests grew impossibly huge noses that dripped smelly, poisonous liquid and more.

The next moment, everything that was corrupted by the black light charged toward Ye Qing at the same time.

“How unsightly!” Ye Qing shook his head in disgust and started charging the Toad Force. Five loud croaks later, when his strength, qi and spirit had joined into one, and his aura grew so powerful that it was almost tangible, he unleashed a punch that shattered every creature charging toward him and scattered the pitch black light in an instant.

“Argh!”

Faceless let out a painful howl the second the unnatural light was dispersed. Blood started leaking through the gap on his face.

The Stranger did not hesitate. He immediately made a run for the exit.

“You think you can escape?”

Ye Qing squinted a little and made a grabbing motion in Faceless’ direction. The Blood Shadows that had been lurking throughout the bookstore all this time immediately slipped into Faceless’ body.

“ARGH!”

Faceless let out a louder scream as countless lines abruptly cut into his body. Each line ran so deep that his bones were exposed, and blood poured profusely on the ground. The lines had even cut off half of his face.

That wasn’t what stunned him the most, however. He could feel something devouring his blood at a terrifying pace. At this rate, he was going to turn into a withered husk in two or three breaths at most!

“Ye Qing... I won’t forget this!”

Faceless did not dare to treat the life-threatening danger lightly. He roared one last time before transforming into a beam of light, crashing out of a window, and vanishing from view.

Chapter 64: Old Grass

“Is that it? I was expecting a bigger challenge!”

Ye Qing raised an eyebrow as he stared at the broken window where Faceless had escaped from.

One of the main reasons he had bested Faceless so easily was because he had entered the middle-stage of the Vessel Augmentation stage, augmenting another four Standard Meridians, two Extraordinary Meridians, and one hundred and eight points all in one day. A middle-stage Vessel

Augmentor's internal energy was much stronger than an early-stage's, not to mention that he had reached the adept level in the "Blood Shadow Divine Art".

Admittedly, it would've taken him much more effort to defeat Faceless if he hadn't made these breakthroughs. He still would've won, but he certainly could not have gotten away without any injuries either. The fact that his enemy still managed to escape despite his overwhelming dominance was proof that Faceless was a formidable foe. In general, a Stranger's resilience, abilities, talent, magic and more were just far, far greater than a human's.

Of course, just because he failed to kill Faceless now didn't mean he wasn't going to kill him later. From the start, Ye Qing had never intended to let the Stranger live. A Malice-class Stranger who wanted him dead and possessed the ability to look like anyone he wanted was just too great a threat to let go. If he did not kill him as soon as possible, it was only a matter of time before he or the people he cared about fell in danger!

"I already told him this, but did he really think he could escape me?" Ye Qing sneered while sucking in a deep breath to quell his blood. As usual, it had grown a tad restless after consuming Faceless' fresh blood. Once he was ready, he dashed out to the streets, pinpointed the direction Faceless was heading, and leaped onto the roof. Then, he chased after the Stranger as fast as the wind.

He had left a wisp of Blood Shadow in Faceless' body earlier. That was how he knew that he was able to identify Faceless' current location. Of course, the Blood Shadow could only last so long away from him, so he had to catch up to his quarry as soon as possible.

It didn't take long before Ye Qing found him. However, the Stranger had taken on a new face and even changed his clothes. Wearing an ordinary-looking face and ordinary clothes, he looked no different from an ordinary pedestrian right now. He calmly walked along the street while hiding himself amidst a throng of people.

Ye Qing was impressed. If he couldn't sense the Blood Shadow in Faceless' body or erratic fluctuations of his aura, he would never suspect that the ordinary pedestrian was the Stranger he was looking for.

Faceless' acting was sublime. Occasionally, he would pause in front of a stall and pretend to be interested in a certain item when he was scanning his surroundings and checking if Ye Qing had caught up to him. Once he was sure Ye Qing wasn't around, he would leave the stall and continue to creep along the street toward somewhere. His caution was commendable, but it was pointless because he never discovered the shadow hiding in the rooftops and following closely like a ghost. Like a clown, all he achieved was to create more comedic material for Ye Qing to laugh at.

Many twists, turns, and streets later, Faceless arrived at an ordinary peasant household and leaped over the wall. This was Ye Qing's cue to give chase, but instead he remained where he was with a smirk on his face. Ye Qing was going to lose track of the Stranger at this rate, but for some reason he didn't seem worried in the slightest.

Five or six breaths later, Faceless leaped back onto the streets and sighed, "Good. It looks like I've really shaken him off!"

Then, he leaped into the tofu shop directly opposite of the peasant household.



"I knew he was trying to trick me!" Ye Qing said with a cold chuckle. No amount of precaution was too much against a foe like him, and he had to admit that Faceless would've gotten him if he was less smart than he was.

There was also another reason he hadn't killed Faceless yet. For one, he looked like he was heading somewhere. The Stranger had also used the word "we" and "us" time and again during their conversation earlier, meaning that he had a group behind his back. Chances were, he was going to his companions to get help. Knowing this, why would he kill Faceless now when he could annihilate the whole group in one fell swoop? Even if the enemy turned out to be too numerous or powerful for him to destroy singlehandedly, he would still learn exactly who he was dealing with.

Ye Qing pushed off the roof and landed on a tree beside the courtyard of the tofu shop. He didn't make the slightest noise.

As if on cue, he heard an old voice calling out from inside the house, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Old Grass!" Faceless replied.

"Faceless? *Cough cough!* Come in!" Old Grass coughed once and opened the door. Faceless immediately slipped inside the house.

"Why have you come at this time, Faceless? Did you need something from me?"

It was at this moment Old Grass noticed Faceless' injuries and exclaimed in astonishment, "You're hurt! What happened?"

Faceless coughed a little and accidentally ripped a wound on his neck. The wound looked shallow from the outside, but in reality it had nearly beheaded him. His neck was barely kept together by a thin stretch of flesh.

A human being would've died a long time ago if they sustained such an injury. But for Faceless, it was just a serious injury he could recover from.

"That is no minor injury, Faceless. What on earth happened to you?" Old Grass blanched when he noticed the neck wound.

"It's a mess is what. I almost didn't make it back alive!" Faceless sighed. "You know I've been looking into the culprit who ruined our plans, right?"

"Did you find them?" Old Grass asked.

"I did. He's the owner of a bookstore called Endless Horizons. His name is Ye Qing, and he's a youngster around eighteen or nineteen years old."

"Eighteen? He should be a breeze to deal with then! But how did you sustain such severe injuries?"

"The guy's the one who did it!" Faceless uttered through gritted teeth. "He looks young, but his power is something else. Not only is he a middle-stage Vessel Augmentor, he practices a strange art that allows him to control invisible forces and

absorb someone's blood. He somehow beat my innate magic, Light of the Black Fiends, sucked my blood dry and almost beheaded me!"

"No wonder you look so weak!" Old Grass said slowly, "That youngster must be the pretigious disciple of a major clan or a sect who's out to broaden his horizons!"

"Hmph! I don't care who he is, I swear I will pay back everything he's done to me ten times over and swallow him alive!" Faceless uttered with a vicious, bloodthirsty snarl. However, Old Grass disagreed.

"If the young man is as strong as you say, then it's best if you avoid him completely. The missions Evergreen Ivy has given us should be our first priority above all else. Once Anyang is destroyed, you can toy with him however you like!"

"Unacceptable! I must rip him to shreds first before I can focus on anything else!"

Old Grass's expression turned cold. "Do not forget why we're here, Faceless. I will take action if you fail your mission again, understand?"

"... Fine. That lucky bastard. I suppose he can live a while longer!"

Faceless looked disgruntled, but his fear of Old Grass seemed to win out over his anger at Ye Qing. He nodded and put a lid on his emotions, but a new thought almost shattered his composure the next moment. "Shit! I'll never hear the end of it if Dark Eye and Rotten Crown learn that I allowed the bastard who nearly killed me to go scot free, if only for a moment!"

"So? Would you rather fight that young man now and die for certain, especially since he's aware of most of your abilities?" Old Grass shook his head. "Just treat this as a valuable lesson and learn from your mistakes. In the future, don't let your recklessness lead you by the nose again!"

"Now then, let us see to your wounds, shall we?"

"Yeah. Sorry for the trouble, Old Grass!" Faceless apologized in a grim tone.

Old Grass plucked two strands of hair from his head. They immediately transformed into a pair of grass that he placed on Faceless' neck. As soon as they had taken root, the grasses immediately withered at an accelerated rate while Faceless' neck wound healed slowly. The Stranger was fully healed by the time the two grasses had decayed into dust.

"It's done!" Old Grass declared in a slightly weary tone. "Just rest for a few days, and you should be back to full health. Do try to be more careful in the future, okay?"

"I know!" Faceless replied uncaring while twisting his neck tentatively.

Suddenly, the two Strangers grew quiet, and a gentle breeze stirred the air. The next moment, yellow grass sprouted in the courtyard, the walls, and even the tree just outside the tofu shop. They painted a cold, bleak picture in the evening as they swayed lightly in the wind.

A few seconds later, the yellow grass gradually withered and disappeared. Faceless could be heard saying,

“You’re way too cautious, Old Grass. There’s no one who can elude both of our senses.”

“Better to be safe than sorry. We cannot afford to screw up again, Faceless.”

“I get it. I promise you that everything will be smooth-sailing from here!”

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“That was too close!” Ye Qing wiped some sweat off his forehead while hiding on the peasant household’s rooftop. A second before Old Grass had suddenly covered the courtyard with grass, he had sensed something amiss and ran away. If he was even half a second slower, the Stranger named Old Grass might have discovered him. Some Strangers’ ability and magic were just incredibly difficult to guard against!

“They said they were going to destroy Anyang. What on earth are they planning?”

Ye Qing flipped over to the other side of the roof and lay down on his back. Staring at the pitch black sky above his head, he muttered, “The group is bigger than I expected as well. Evergreen Ivy, Rotten Crown and Dark Eye? That’s at least five Strangers plotting to destroy Anyang, and who knows if there are more Strangers behind this conspiracy?”

“Should I try and thin their numbers now?” Ye Qing thought for a moment but let out a sigh in the end. “Nah, it’s too risky!”

Old Grass was obviously a Malice-class Stranger, and he was clearly much stronger than Faceless. Even with his new power, he wasn’t absolutely certain that he could defeat him for sure. Besides that, there were a lot more members in this group than he expected. If he failed to kill Old Grass and Faceless in one hit, they would almost certainly escape and know that he was onto them. That could only end poorly for him.

Thirdly, it sounded like the group of Strangers was plotting something big enough to destroy the entire county. It was one thing if he hadn’t heard about the conspiracy, but since he had, he couldn’t just do nothing and live his life as usual. Until he learned the specifics of this plan and confirmed the number of Strangers who were hiding in Anyang, it would be wise to avoid alerting the enemy prematurely.

“Should I tell Yan Yufei or the Pacification Bureau about this?” Ye Qing toyed with the idea for a bit before shaking his head. Again, he didn’t want to alert the enemy. The Pacification Bureau currently lacked the manpower to carry out any sort of operation, whereas the administrative division lacked the ability. If he informed any one of them, they would be forced to take action no matter how unprepared they were. That would lead to the Strangers being more careful with their plan and make it harder to stop them.

That was why Ye Qing thought it would be better to lie low while the advantage of surprise was still in his court. Only after he had discovered the specifics of their plan and identified every Stranger who was involved in this conspiracy could he eliminate them in one fell swoop.

“Alright then. Let’s do this!” Ye Qing declared with a smile before leaping into the air and vanishing into the night.

## Chapter 65: A Good Day To Kill

“Captain, the guy you told us to monitor just left the county!”

It was very early in the morning. Dawn had just broken, and the sky was still dark like a woman who was just opening her eyes to greet her first ray of sunlight. In a luxurious house, Tang Yi’an had just risen from bed when a soldier entered his bedroom and gave his report.

“Is it Ye Qing?!” Whatever sleepiness still clinging to Tang Yi’an’s consciousness was blown away immediately.

“That’s right!” The soldier answered.

“Good, good!” Tang Yi’an’s eyes shone brightly as he waved the soldiers away. His expression was riddled with anger and hatred as he uttered, “I may not be able to do anything to you inside the county, but outside? You only have yourself to blame, Ye Qing!”

Tang Yi’an summoned an aide to his side and handed him a letter. He said, “Take this to Yan Tieyi. He’ll know what to do!”

“At once!” His aide nodded and left the room.

Tang Yi’an turned to look at the increasingly blue sky outside the window as a sinister smile flitted across his features. “Looks like it’s going to be a sunny day today. It’s the perfect time to take a life, hahaha...”

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“Looks like it’s going to be a sunny day today. It’s the perfect time to farm some free experience, hahaha!”

Ye Qing was currently riding his donkey down a marked road in the outskirts of Anyang. He was sipping some wine and looking very pleased with today’s activities.

While the Stranger conspiracy was still sitting in his chest like a mountain, a man needed to know when to stop brooding over things they couldn’t change and focus on living the present. And if the matter proved to be more disturbing than expected, there was always alcohol to drink away one’s worries!

Plus, harvesting dragon-serpent runes and improving his strength would make his inevitable battle against Faceless and the other Strangers a lot easier. Should the worst happen, and he failed to stop the Strangers from destroying Anyang, he would be strong enough to keep himself alive at least.

In this world, the only way to live was to become strong, and the only way to become strong was to farm experience!

On a related note, Ye Qing had visited Qiao Six before leaving the county. He wanted to know if there were Bloodsucking Mosquitoes near Anyang. Unfortunately, the answer was no. There used to be a lot of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes around Anyang, but the Pacification Bureau had cleared them out due to how harmful they were. Therefore, Ye Qing had no choice but to set his sights on the Soundless Bugs of Soundless Gorge. They might not be his first choice, but lean meat was still meat. It wouldn't satisfy him, but it would at least sate his urges!

Over two hours later, Ye Qing finally arrived at the Soundless Gorge. Just like the first time he was here, the narrow gap that looked like a line reaching toward the heavens was completely silent. He did not hesitate. He leaped off the donkey's back and landed right in the middle of the gorge.

Thud!

He could've landed without a sound, but the point was to draw the Soundless Bugs toward him. It worked wonderfully. Not a second too soon, countless bugs crawled out from the rocks, the soil, the cracks and more and swarmed him from every direction.

"Come to daddy, my experience!"

Ye Qing grinned widely and charged toward them. Most warriors would've fled at the sight of the sea of Soundless Bugs, but Ye Qing cheerfully greeted them by stomping his right foot.

Rumble!

A white shockwave spread out from Ye Qing and washed over an entire area. Every Soundless Bug that was hit by the shockwave immediately exploded into a shower of blood and gore.

The shockwave took out over half of the tide just like that, but the noise and the blood only angered the Soundless Bugs even more. More Soundless Bugs crawled out from the sides and met up with their fellow Strangers before charging Ye Qing again.

"There were so many of you? Fantastic!" exclaimed Ye Qing in pleasant surprise. It would seem that his initial assumption was wrong. He thought that there were only a couple thousand Soundless Bugs in Soundless Gorge, but now, he realized that the main bulk was simply hiding somewhere out of view.

Pop!

He closed his right fist lightly and caused a small pop in the air, conjuring wisps of dark red Blood Shadows from his hand. The bug tide closest to him immediately exploded into blood and gore. The blood did not seep into the ground, however. Instead, they floated into the air and formed a literal river of blood.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to Ye Qing. *Since my Blood Shadow Magic inherited my blood's power to consume, absorb, and attract blood, it makes sense that I should be able to control these blood as well, right?*

He decided to put his theory to the test immediately. He closed his fist again and caused the river of blood to writhe unnaturally. A few seconds later, it abruptly transformed into a giant blood hand that

smashed down on the Soundless Bugs below and flattened them like pancakes. That wasn't all. Ye Qing proceeded to extract some blood from the giant blood hand and conjured other things such as blood animals, blood weapons, blood mists and more. Regardless of the shape, the outcome was always the same: a massive amount of Soundless Bugs was crushed into bits, and their blood was subsumed by the blood he was controlling.

"It does work!"

Of course, he was really just controlling the blood using Blood Shadow Magic. In essence, it *was* Blood Shadow Magic. It looked intimidating, but it wasn't all that useful in combat.

"What if I do it like this?"

He concentrated his mind, and countless Soundless Bugs suddenly exploded without warning, but this time it wasn't because the Blood Shadows had infiltrated their bodies. He had simply infected the Soundless Bugs with his true qi, took control of their blood and exploded their bodies from within!

"Good, good!" Ye Qing said with deep satisfaction. The idea had occurred to him after combining his Blood Shadow Magic and his blood's ability to devour. Now, he had a new way to handle his enemies.

A warrior's body and vigor was the foundation of their martial arts. If either one of the two elements were affected, their ability to fight would be greatly impacted. Ideally, they wouldn't be able to output even one-tenth of their usual strength.

This was why his newfound method of applying his Blood Shadow was fantastic. If he was fighting against a formidable foe, he could infect them with Blood Shadow Magic and disrupt their body and vigor, destabilizing their internal balance or even forcing a deadly rebound. It might only last a few seconds at best—a powerful warrior or Stranger could probably contain, expel or crush the Blood Shadows inside them very quickly—but that lull between their movements was something he could use to deal a severe blow to his enemy or kill them outright.

As for those who were weaker than him, he could cause a rebound with a single thought. He might even be able to destroy their blood vessels, points and even their bodies from within.

"This is wonderful!" Ye Qing declared with bright eyes before dispersing the Blood Shadows in the air. Without the invisible entities to hold them in place, the river of blood fell from the sky and splashed loudly on the ground. The reason he hadn't just absorbed the Soundless Bugs' blood was because he wasn't sure if it was poisonous. Yesterday, it had taken him the whole night to subsume Faceless' blood fully. While the benefits were considerable—both his vigor and his cultivation level had advanced tremendously after he was done—he wasn't so conceited as to attempt this in the middle of a fight.

Ultimately, Stranger blood was very different from human blood. It would be folly to absorb them willy-nilly!

"It's time to practice!"

Ye Qing immediately commanded Blood Shadows to infect the Soundless Bugs. Then, he closed his eyes a little. At that moment, he could clearly feel the blood flowing inside the Soundless Bugs' bodies like his own. He could even manipulate them however he pleased with a single thought.

“Boom!” He said with a grin. An entire swathe of Soundless Bugs froze in their tracks and exploded just like that. It was like a firework of blood and gore!

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“Phew...”

Half an incense stick later, Ye Qing stood alone in the middle of the meat grinder that was Soundless Gorge. Not one drop of blood had managed to stain his clothes despite the gruesome battle—no, massacre he just wrought. He let out a refreshing sigh while taking out the Annon Sutra to check his rewards.

“So, I’ve gotten six silver dragon-serpent runes and ten gray dragon-serpent runes from these bugs. Not bad at all!” He would save one or two silver dragon-serpent runes for emergencies, but the remainder was still enough to improve his strength considerably.

By now, he had figured out that one silver rune was worth a little over one thousand plus gray runes. Moreover, the stronger the Stranger he killed, the greater the quality and quantity of the runes he received.

Generally speaking, Mundane and Red-class Strangers only gave him gray dragon-serpent runes. However, Malice-class Strangers or higher might give him silver dragon-serpent runes. If the Stranger he killed was both rare and powerful, then he would receive even more dragon-serpent runes. The General of Punishment was one such example. The Annon Sutra had generously paid him three silver dragon-serpent runes for his efforts.

That said, he needed to kill more powerful Strangers to verify if his theory was true. After all, the General of Punishment was the only Malice-class Stranger he had ever killed. It was possible he was wrong even though he personally believed it to be very unlikely.

“It’s time to head back to the bookstore.”

He was done farming experience, but he still needed to convert those experience to actual power. There would be no point otherwise. And so Ye Qing left the Soundless Gorge and whistled. It wasn’t long before a gray donkey galloped over from a distance.

Something was off, however. His donkey was hee-hawing loudly and frantically as if it was in danger. It also carried some deep wounds on its torso.

“I told you we would find the boy as long as we follow the donkey!” An arrogant voice resounded.

“Good job, Scholar. You really are a clever man!”

Three men slowly emerged from the distance. The first person of the group carried a folding fan and looked to be in his thirties. However, his complexion was haggard, his body was thin and bones, and he looked so ill a gentle breeze might be enough to topple him over.

The second person of the group was tall, huge and muscular. His hands were as big as a dustpan, his face was as black as coal, and a thick, fiendish aura could be seen circling around his person. He also wore a vicious grin on his face.

The third and last person of the group was a short but muscular monk. He had three dots on his head, and he wore a monastic robe that covered only half of his body. His bronze skin looked healthy and extremely tough to penetrate. His vigor was strong, and the earth shook every time he took a step. He felt more like a brutish beast than a man.

Once the trio had reached Ye Qing, the one with a coal-like complexion barked harshly, "Are you Ye Qing?"

"It is I. What business do you have with me?" Ye Qing asked with a small frown. It was obvious that these men weren't here for a friendly chat, but he was certain that he didn't know them, much less antagonized them in the past. So why had they come all the way to kill him?

"It's him alright!" The coal-faced man let out a sinister laugh. "My name is Shi Jiang, and people call me the Blackfaced God. His name is Tao Xian, and people call him the Sick Scholar. The monk's Dharma name is Jie Chen [1], but he is known as the Rash Vajrapani in the jianghu!"

"As for why we're here, we've come to kill you, of course!"

"You guys sure know how to choose a moniker. Anyone can tell that you are bad, bad people!" Ye Qing shrugged before voicing his doubts, "I don't doubt that you've come to kill me, but why? I'm pretty sure I don't know you people."

"He's got a silver tongue, doesn't he? There's nothing more I love than breaking mouthy idiots like you!" Shi Jiang cracked his knuckles and sneered.

"Why are you wasting words with a dead man? Let's kill him and be done with it already. I have a jar of wine waiting for me back home!" Jie Chen said impatiently before throwing a punch straight at Ye Qing's head!

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes and took a step forward. Tilting his body so the punch would miss him by mere millimeters, he brought his shoulder forward and slammed into the monk's chest like a hammer.

Thunk!

There was a loud thunk that sounded like clashing metals. Right before Ye Qing's shoulder would make contact with Jie Chen's chest, a sheen of golden light abruptly appeared and blocked the attack. It was shaped like a golden bell!



## Chapter 66: Soulchasing

Ye Qing remained unmoving after the collision. It was Jie Chen who staggered a few steps away despite his protection.

“Damn, this lad is stronger than he looks!” The Rash Vajrapani exclaimed in astonishment while rubbing his slightly sore chest.

“Do you seriously think we’d believe that, Vajrapani? I bet you must’ve spent all your energy in Le Smoke Brothel last night!” Shi Jiang cackled loudly.

“Screw you! I was just careless!” Jie Chen yelled back in embarrassment before manifesting the golden light surrounding him in full. It took the form of a golden bell.

“The Golden Bell Shield?” Ye Qing exclaimed with a strange look.

“Guess you’re not clueless after all!” Jie Chen sneered and rushed straight toward Ye Qing. Every time he planted his foot on the ground, he would kick up a shower of dirt and leave a deep hole behind him. Not only that, his muscles would grow a tad thicker. By the time he was right in front of Ye Qing, his arms had become as thick as a tree trunk.

Next, Jie Chen hurled his arms over his shoulders before bring it back like he was trying to flatten Ye Qing between his palms. The air exploded from the sheer amount of force behind the move, and for a second he looked like a true Vajrapani crushing a demon mercilessly.

*“Big Crush Tomb Hand”*

“What incredible strength!” Ye Qing squinted and channeled the Toad Force. A series of rapid croaks later, he landed a punch directly at the center of Jie Chen’s palms.

Rumble!

Fist met palms, and a shockwave washed out from both men. The earth churned away from Ye Qing like a tidal wave, but he did not move an inch from his location. On the other hand, Jie Chan stumbled back and grew paler each time he took a step. By the time he took his fifth and final steps, his Golden Bell Shield shattered into pieces just like that.

“The Toad Force? But how?” Jie Chen’s eyes widened like saucers as he tried to quell his raging vigor. He just couldn’t believe it. His Golden Bell Shield was a Qi Invocation stage body art, and “Big Crush Tomb Hand” was a technique famed for its forcefulness and strength. On the other hand, the Toad Force was the most common qi mental art. This outcome should not have happened!

“The target’s stronger than expected! Get him!”

Originally, Shi Jiang and Tao Xian weren’t going to get involved. When they sense the presence Ye Qing had exuded for an instant when clashing against Jie Chen though, they blanched and rushed Ye Qing together.

Shi Jiang's stomps weren't as loud or potent as Jie Chen's, but a layer of black qi slowly covered his face and turned his coal black complexion even darker than it already was. His hands also turned pitch black with a fiendish aura.

### *"Black Fiend Palm"*

Black Fiend Palm, as its name suggested, infused the practitioner's palms with fiendish energy. If the attack landed, it would leave a black palm print on the victim's skin. The victim might look perfectly fine on the surface, but in reality the palm energy had shattered their insides. It was a dirty technique that was a lot deadlier than it seemed.

The reason people called Shi Jiang the Blackfaced God wasn't just because he was born with a black complexion, but also because his face was covered by a layer of black qi every time he channeled the Black Fiend Palm. Black aura would also pour out of his body and give him the appearance of a fiendish god, hence the name.

The Black Fiend Palm was his signature move. Like a fiend, one strike was all he needed to turn his victims' innards into goo.

Ye Qing's expression turned serious, but a folding fan attacked his major points before he could take evasive action. It came from none other than Tao Xian, of course. The folding fan kept opening and closing like a flower going through the seasons rapidly, making it difficult to predict exactly which point of the fan he intended to tap Ye Qing's major points with. Even trickier was the fact that green needles shot out of his fan every time it opened and shut exactly once. The color of the needles made it clear that they were coated in poison. They were also aimed at his eyes, throat, mouth, solar plexus and other vital spots.

The technique was Tao Xian's signature technique. Its name was "Blooming Fan, Flying Needles", and the Sick Scholar had even composed a short poem for it:

"Farewell! Farewell!

A folding fan blooms,  
leaves and petals falling scattered on the street,  
Into garden, Heavens' garden,  
Where she could bloom again..."

[1]

That wasn't all. Jie Chen was stomping toward Ye Qing again and using the same technique as last time, the "Big Crush Tomb Hand"!

The trio's teamwork was better than expected, attacking Ye Qing at the same time from three different directions. There was nowhere the young man could hide or dodge!

"Die!" Shi Jiang declared with a vicious grin when he saw that Ye Qing was trapped. He thought for sure that this was the end for the young man.

He was wrong. A steely flash appeared out of nowhere and surrounded Ye Qing. It wasn't until they heard a series of metallic clinks, and the blinding light had faded that they realized the young man had deflected every needle Tao Xian had shot at him. Not only that, a series of whistling sounds

followed, and they felt a jolt of pain from their weapon hand. When the trio looked down, they discovered that a two-inch deep wound had magically appeared on their wrist. It was just deep enough to sever the wrist tendon, no more and no less.

Somehow, the young man had managed to deflect all the needles flying toward him *and* sever their wrist tendons with one saber!

Was it really one saber? Or was it three? Maybe more than that?

The trio didn't know. Their eyes were too slow to keep track of the young man's movements. One thing was certain, however. He was too fast for them to even react!

The trio exchanged glances and saw the exact same thought in each other's eyes: Retreat. After all, if they couldn't defeat their target in their best condition, what chance did they have when both of their arms were useless? The trio immediately backed away from Ye Qing. Unfortunately, they were too late.

"Did I say you can leave?"

Ye Qing frowned at the fleeing trio and summoned a new saber into his hand. Unlike the saber he normally used, this one was curved like a crescent. Then, he took off into a sprint. He closed their distance faster than the trio thought was possible and conjured what looked like a storm of blades. The trio could clearly see that Ye Qing had swung his saber only one time, but for whatever reason, they saw countless blades flying toward them instead of one. The blades were swift, bizarre, and bone-chilling like a phantom. Their hair stood on end long before the blades even reached them, and they felt like their souls were being pulled toward the deadly storm.

Their hearts sank like rocks as they prepared for the worst. Shi Jiang roared and covered himself in layer upon layer of fiendish aura. He also raised his left arm and moved it rapidly in front of him to form a protective shield.

Tao Xian tapped the air with his folding fan multiple times to create ripples of invisible force in front of him. At the same time, he flew backward like a flower that was flying in the wind.

Jie Chen's choice of defense was the most straightforward. He simply let out a mighty roar and summoned a lifelike bell around him. The golden bell was also covered in Sanskrit and mysterious runes. The monk must have cultivated the defensive art to the adept level.

It was futile though. The next second, all three men let out a muffled groan and suddenly collapsed to their feet. It was because a wound had split open on their ankles. At the same time, the blades flying toward them disappeared like they never were.

"It's fake?"

The trio could not believe it. It was only now they realized that the storm of blades they saw was just an illusion, and the real attack cut their ankles a long time ago. The attack was just so fast they couldn't even feel the pain until several seconds later, much less see it and react to it in time.

"I've never seen such a fast blade before. What is this art?" A pale-looking Tao Xian asked dazedly while coughing a couple of times.

“The Soulchasing Saber!” Ye Qing answered simply and tapped a finger against his blade to shake off the blood.

The “Soulchasing Saber” was a tricky saber art that relied on speed, illusion and intimidation to catch its victims off guard, but that it was also quite powerful in its own right. The reason Ye Qing executed it with a curved saber instead of his usual weapon was because that was what the saber art demanded. According to the manual, only a curved saber could unleash the unusual qualities of the “Soulchasing Saber”.

“Can we talk now?” Ye Qing tilted his head to one side and smiled wickedly at the trio.

Shi Jiang, the Blackfaced God simply spat on the ground and began, “Fuck you, you sonuva—”

He stopped short when the blood in his body suddenly churned unnaturally. Before he could figure out what the hell was going on, his face turned beet red, and blood started pouring from every pore on his body. He looked like a blood popsicle in just the blink of an eye.

“Wait—”

Shi Jiang screamed in pain, but whatever he was going to say was lost forever when he exploded with a loud bang, showering the area with blood and gore. His blood did not fall back to the ground, however. Instead, they formed a ball in the sky and flew toward Ye Qing. His aura visibly grew after he swallowed it all in one gulp.

“There’s nothing more I hate than people who swear!” Ye Qing licked his lips with an intoxicated expression before looking down at the remaining duo. “Can we talk like proper adults now, or do I have to make another example?”

Tao Xian and Jie Zhen gulped. For a time, they could only shiver like a leaf and stare at Ye Qing in terror. They didn’t dare to keep him waiting for long though. Clutching his folding fan with a death grip, Tao Xian stuttered, “Are... are y-you a Vessel Augmentor?”

Only a Vessel Augmentor could separate their true qi from their body, manipulate them remotely, and defeat three famous late-stage Qi Invokers with the kind of ease Ye Qing had displayed earlier.

“What do you think?” Ye Qing countered with his own question, but the absence of denial was itself an implicit admission!

Tao Xian and Jie Chen drooped their heads and lost all will to resist. If Ye Qing was a Qi Invoker, then there was still a chance they might be able to turn things around. But a Vessel Augmentor? The only thing resisting would get them was a quicker death.

It wasn’t their fault for misjudging Ye Qing’s strength. His blood could already camouflage his strength, but the Annon Sutra also possessed camouflaging properties. As long as Ye Qing didn’t show off his aura on purpose, there were very few humans or Strangers who could perceive his true strength. There was also the fact that he hadn’t gone all out because he wanted to test his newfound skills against actual warriors. It wasn’t until Shi Jiang died the way he did that the duo finally figured out his true cultivation level.

“So? Who sent you to kill me?” Ye Qing asked.

Tao Xian kept quiet for a moment before letting out a cough. "We were sent by Boss Yan, the leader of the Iron Shirt Gang."

"Boss Yan? You mean Yan Tieyi?" Ye Qing frowned. The Iron Shirt Gang was a major gang in Anyang and stood on equal footing as Qiao Six's faction. But unlike Qiao Six, the Iron Shirt Gang's business was far more heinous including such as smuggling, protection, assassination and so on.

"I have no grudge with Yan Tieyi. Why would he send the three of you to kill me?"

"I don't know. We were just following orders. That said, I saw Boss Yan reading a letter before he ordered us to take you out, so perhaps it was an assassination request," Tao Xian answered with clear regret. All three of them had thought that Boss Yan was being too cautious when he ordered them to take out some nobody they had never heard before. Now, it wasn't just too late for regrets, it looked like their "prey" was planning to take it out on their gang.

*An assassination request? But I've only arrived in Anyang for a week or two. Who would want to kill me? Ye Qing thought. Could it be Faceless and Co.? No, it can't be. Faceless knows that I'm a Vessel Augmentor, and not an ordinary one at that. He'll never send three late-stage Qi Invokers to commit suicide! Who else holds a grudge against me?*

A face slowly appeared in his head.

"Take me to your boss!" A cold glint entered Ye Qing's eyes as he stared at the duo. "I shouldn't need to say this, but don't try anything unless you want to end up like Blackfaced God."

"We wouldn't dare!" The duo hurriedly nodded like woodpeckers. They were already beyond thankful that Ye Qing was willing to let them live. Only a total idiot would choose to defy the young man after witnessing his unnatural and unpredictable arts, and that person had already exploded into itsy bitsy pieces.

"You better!" Ye Qing said slowly, "Now take a moment to treat your wounds and tell me more about Yan Tieyi. I want to know what martial arts he practices, how many elites there are in the Iron Shirt Gang and so on. You can lie of course, but know that I'm an acquaintance of Qiao Six. All I need to do to verify the truth is to pay him a visit. If I learned that you've lied to me, hehe..."

"We wouldn't dare!" Tao Xian hurriedly repeated and launched into an explanation, "Boss Yan is a Vessel Augmentor just like you, and his signature art is called the Iron Sleeve Art. He is known as 'Iron Shirt Yan' in the jianghu..."

.....

Ye Qing was riding his donkey while Tao Xian and Jie Chen limped behind him. Tao Xian was still explaining everything he knew about Yan Tieyi and the Iron Shirt Gang when suddenly, he glanced

at the duo with a steely glint in his eyes. “Wait a second. Did you just say he’s sworn brothers with Zheng Feng?”

“Y-Yes? What’s wrong?” Tao Xian visibly shuddered when Ye Qing’s gaze drilled into his skull.

“They’re sworn brothers, huh?” Ye Qing muttered to himself before ordering, “Tell me everything you know about their relationship.”

When Tao Xian was done talking, Ye Qing stared at them for a couple of seconds and said, “You’re my prisoners now. One thought is all I need to send you to the afterlife like Shi Jiang.”

A smile cracked on Ye Qing’s face when the blood drained away from both their faces. “But since I’m a good person, I’m going to give you one chance to redeem yourself. Are you interested?”

Before they could answer, Ye Qing shook his head and said, “What am I saying? Unless you’ve changed your mind about living, you’ll do what I say no matter how much you loathe the idea! Hahaha!”

“...”

“Anyway, this is my plan...”

Chapter 67: Iron Shirt Yan

“Boss, don’t you think sending someone after Ye Qing as per Tang Yi’an’s request is a little risky?”

The speaker was a thin middle-aged man sporting a pair of mustache and a refined appearance. He was currently standing next to a lotus lake in the Iron Gang’s headquarters.

The person he was speaking to was fishing in the lake seemingly without a care for the world. He was none other than the gang boss of the Iron Shirt Gang, Yan Tieyi.

Yan Tieyi’s moniker was Iron Shirt Yan. He had a tall, slender physique and a long, white beard beneath his chin. His face was thin but energetic, and he was wearing a long robe with huge sleeves, a loose belt, and a huge crown [1]. Right now, he gave off the impression of a quaint, unfettered scholar whose focus was completely set on his silver fishing rod and the calm waters in front of him. He did not look like he had heard the middle-aged man’s question at all.

Suddenly, the fishing line swayed a little and caused a tiny ripple. He immediately twisted his wrists and bent the fishing rod so much that it looked like a crescent. The line snapped taut, and a massive fish flew out of the lake water and drew an elegant arc in the air. It landed perfectly in the creel next to him.

It was only then Yan Tieyi asked slowly, “You’re worried that we would anger Yan Yufei, right Yongzhi?”

The full name of the middle-aged man he called Yongzhi was Lu Yongzhi. On the surface, he was a steward responsible for the finance and general affairs of the Iron Shirt Gang. In reality, he was their tactician and Yan Tieyi’s right-hand man. He was known by the moniker, the Humble Scholar.

"I am!" Lu Yongzhi nodded. "Ye Qing himself may be a nobody, but he is a close acquaintance of Yan Yufei. If the magistrate learns about this, he will surely put a lot of pressure on us. Objectively speaking, Tang Yi'an is nothing compared to Yan Yufei, so why are we giving up the forest for the tree?"

Yan Tieyi chuckled and shook his head. "Your words make sense, but you're not looking at the long-term picture. Yan Yufei is an impressive man, but he is a newcomer with a weak base of power. Not only that, he is too impressive a man to stay in Anyang for long. To befriend him is like trying to scoop the moon's reflection from a lake; a useful but ultimately meaningless gesture."

"On the other hand, Tang Yi'an and his uncle, You Da had been entrenched in Anyang for years. Their base of power is strong, and they're not looking to leave Anyang anytime soon. With that in mind, who do you think will benefit us more; a magistrate who will soon leave for greener pastures, or a vice magistrate who is looking to stay until he dies? To befriend Tang Yi'an is to befriend You Da, and befriend You Da is greatly beneficial to our businesses in Anyang."

"Finally, how would Yan Yufei know that we are the ones behind Ye Qing's untimely demise if the job is carried out cleanly?"

"That's why you sent Tao Xian, Shi Jiang and Jie Chen to kill him! It's to make sure that the assassination will be carried out without a hitch, and to ensure that no clues will be left behind at the crime scene!" Lu Yong exclaimed in realization. "I stand corrected, boss. Your foresight is most impressive!"

"Oh? When did you learn how to flatter people, Yongzhi? I almost thought you were someone else!" Yan Tieyi let out a fond chuckle. "I just like to prepare for any eventualities, is all. Tang Yi'an claimed that Ye Qing is at most an early-stage Qi Invoker, but you know me; I never liked sending exactly the right quantity and quality of people to do a job. It's an invitation for an unexpected variable to ruin everything, and in our line of work, it's always better to be safe than sorry."

"Speaking of which, Tao Xian and the others should be back any moment now."

As if on cue, a warrior strode over the duo and reported, "Report! Hallmaster Tao, Hallmaster Shi, and Master Jie Chen are requesting to meet you, boss!"

"Perfect timing. Show them in!" Yan Tieyi ordered.

"At once!"

A short while later, Tao Xian, Jie Chen and Shi Jiang entered the backyard. They stopped a short distance away from Yan Tieyi and saluted respectfully, saying, "We're back, boss."

"How did it go?" asked Yan Tieyi while throwing his fishing rod back into the lotus lake. He didn't look at the trio.

Tao Xian shook his head. “We managed to kill Ye Qing, but we were all injured in the process.”

“Is that so? That would explain why your presence felt unstable.”

Curious, Yan Tieyi beckoned them closer and asked, “Tell me exactly what happened.”

Jie Chen replied in a disgruntled tone, “What else? We thought the lad was an early-stage Qi Invoker, but no, he was a late-stage Qi Invoker. Not only that, his skills were even more incredible than we thought. As a result, he managed to drag out the fight far longer than expected and even hurt us in the process.”

“I see! Still, you managed to kill him in the end, so all is well!” Yan Tieyi nodded and asked another question, “Speaking of which, did you run into anyone along the way? And did you clean up the scene properly?”

“*Cough cough!* Don’t worry, boss. No one saw us, and we tossed Ye Qing’s body into the Soundless Gorge. We didn’t leave until the Soundless Bugs had completely consumed his body!” Tao Xian replied.

“Good job! You’ve all done well!” Yan Tieyi praised them before looking at Shi Jiang suddenly. “Say, why are you so quiet today, Hallmaster Shi? You’re usually the chattiest of us all.”

“No, I...” Shi Jiang finally broke his silence. “Can I ask you something, boss?”

“Sure! What is it?” Yan Tieyi asked.

Shi Jiang looked unusually hesitant as shot his companions a glance. Then, he slowly walked toward Yan Tieyi.

The gang boss thought that Shi Jiang wanted to make a private, possibly embarrassing request—one that he didn’t want his fellow colleagues to hear—so he joked, “You can be frank with me, Hallmaster Shi. This awkwardness doesn’t suit you at all. Did a girl catch your fancy again? Is it a married woman? Do you need me to act as your go-between?”

“No, no, it’s not that!” Shi Jiang replied.

“Then what is it?” Yan Tieyi asked curiously.

Instead of answering, Shi Jiang continued to approach Yan Tieyi. He was two steps away when Yan Tieyi finally felt a tinge of inexplicable unease.

It was at this moment a cold, white light blinded Yan Tieyi. The next thing he knew, blood was flying everywhere.

Boom!

A terrific energy exploded out of the gang boss. Everything around him—the stone table, the grass, the flowers, and even the trees—turned into dust, and the ground looked like a giant monster had dug it with its claws.



Tao Xian and Jie Chen did not take any damage from the shockwave because they had jumped away as soon as it was discharged. It was almost as if they knew it was coming. Even so, the powerful gale blowing past their cheeks was enough to cause every hair on their body to stand on end.

Lu Yongzhi wasn't as lucky. Having received no warning whatsoever, the shockwave had sent him flying through the air like a rag doll. He looked greatly weakened as he spat out a mouthful of blood.

The greatest surprise came in the form of Shi Jiang. He was standing right in front of Yan Tieyi and the gang boss' main target, so the shockwave should've annihilated him into smithereens. However, he remained rooted to the ground as if the shockwave was nothing more but a gentle breeze.

"You're not Shi Jiang. Who are you?" Yan Tieyi asked in a harsh voice. Right now, his aura was circulating rapidly and unpredictably around his body, and his clothes were billowing out around him like a banner swaying wildly to the wind. He looked incredibly intimidating, or he would have if not for the fact that a trickle of blood was seeping out from between his sleeves and dyeing his white robe red in just the blink of an eye.

Yan Tieyi was both shocked and furious as he perceived his injury. If his instinct hadn't warned him in time, the surprise attack would've cut right through his throat like a hot knife through butter. Despite this, he wasn't able to dodge the attack completely. There was a horizontal line stretching from his left breast to the right.

"Answer me! Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Ye Qing. Ye for leaf, and Qing for cyan!" Shi Jiang, or rather, Ye Qing declared loudly. His bones cracked ominously under his skin until he returned to his normal size, and he removed his mask to reveal a handsome grin.

When a warrior had entered the Body Tempering stage, they could easily move their bones and muscles around and alter their physique. Theoretically, there was no physique he could not imitate unless the person was overwhelmingly bigger or smaller than him. As for his face, it so happened Tao Xian was a master of disguise and owned a useful item that allowed him to change his face as he pleased, so he happily confiscated it for his own use.

Ye Qing's plan was very simple. First, he altered his physique and wore the mask to pretend to be Shi Jiang. Then, he slipped into the Iron Shirt Gang's headquarters together with Tao Xian and Jie Chen. Ye Qing learned from Tao Xian that Yan Tieyi was a middle-stage Vessel Augmentor with incredible skill and even greater alertness. In fact, he was so cautious that he normally did not allow anyone to get within three meters of him. Therefore, the only way to assassinate him within his own headquarters and without alerting the other gang members was to kill him in one strike.

Ye Qing had planned to improvise on the fly and approach Yan Tieyi somehow while they were giving their reports. When he was close enough, he would unleash his fastest attack and kill the gang boss.

Unfortunately, Yan Tieyi proved to be more formidable than expected. His plan had gone perfectly, but the gang boss still managed to dodge the fatal blow at the last moment.

“Ye Qing? You’re still alive?” Yan Tieyi exclaimed in realization and disbelief.

“Of course I’m alive. How am I supposed to kill you if I’m dead?” Ye Qing chuckled before looking at Tao Xian and Jie Chen. “Hold back the others while I send your former boss to the afterlife.”

Tao Xian and Jie Chen nodded and suppressed the grievously injured Lu Yongzhi in just a short time. Then, they left to keep the others from approaching this area.

“You think you can kill me all by yourself?” Yan Tieyi scoffed. Ye Qing was just a Qi Invoker. He could never have injured him if he hadn’t caught him by surprise!

“That’s right!” Ye Qing answered while charging toward Yan Tieyi, his curved saber drawing a fine arc across the air. A moon suddenly appeared above their heads, and bleak moonlight shone down from the sky. It looked gorgeous, but it was the kind of beauty that could end one’s life in an instant. Each and every ray of “moonlight” in the sky was a curved saber flying straight toward Yan Tieyi!

Yan Tieyi felt chilled to the bone as he stared at the grand illusion above his head. Not daring to treat the technique lightly, he immediately waved his sleeves and froze the air in front of him until it resembled cold iron. Then, he struck the frozen space and launched the frozen air into the sky like he was firing an air cannon. The earth shook, and the air trembled as the terrific force washed over the storm of sabers like a tidal wave. When all was said and done, nothing was left in the sky.

The martial art Yan Tieyi just used was, of course, the Iron Sleeve Art!

“The Iron Sleeve Art, huh? It deserves its reputation!”

Ye Qing’s chuckle came from the sky, but the young man himself was nowhere to be seen. Or rather, Ye Qing had suddenly split into innumerable copies of himself and his saber had covered the sky once more!

*“A shadow without a shadow, a saber without a saber”* was a quote from “Soulchasing Saber”. It perfectly described what Yan Tieyi was facing right now. The gang boss knew that there was no way the Ye Qings in the sky were real—this fight would be over already if that was true—but the hail of killing intent battering his skin felt was all too real.

Yan Tieyi was a nobody who clawed tooth and nail to get to where he was now. He had fought countless people in his life, and many of them were a lot stronger, trickier, and more resilient than he was. However, his experience and knowledge were completely useless because Ye Qing was like no one he had ever fought. His eyes couldn’t differentiate the real from the fake, his senses could not lock onto a specific aura, and it was downright impossible to guess where the saber—the one that would take his life—would come from. It was beyond frustrating because he could not go on the offensive without knowing where his enemy was.

Suddenly, Yan Tieyi waved his sleeves around like he was dancing. Paradoxically, the dancing sleeves looked tough as steel, soft as fabric, straight as an arrow and winding like a river all at the same time. It was a perfect harmony of soft and hard power, activity and inactivity, the real and the unreal that protected the gang boss from all sides like a perfect, impenetrable globe.

It was a titanic clash between the unbreakable iron sleeves that had locked down space itself, and the omnipresent sabers that sought to squeeze through the tiniest of gaps and steal their target's soul. Who would come out on top?

Chapter 68: Fight

Crash! Boom! Bang!

Jie Chen was a warlike monk. The distant explosions kept tickling at his fighting spirit like the demon on his shoulder. But at the same time, he knew it was suicide to indulge in his urges because the shockwaves of that battle could be felt even through the walls from over forty meters away. It was a stunning and fearful revelation to know that he could get hurt if he was standing half that distance away from the battlefield.

He turned to look at Tao Xian. "Do you think Ye Qing can kill the boss?"

"I don't know." Tao Xian shook his head with the same tinge of trepidation on his face. "It's too late for regrets anyway. We are grasshoppers tied to the same rope as Ye Qing. He must win, and we must do everything we can to ensure he succeeds."

"Yeah."

He was right. They were set on this path from the moment they agreed to Ye Qing's plan. It was either Iron Shirt Yan or them!

"Quick! There's no time to waste!"

Suddenly, the two warriors heard a commotion. It wasn't long before a group of Iron Shirt Gang warriors rounded a corner and made a beeline straight toward them. They had clearly heard the loud clash happening in the backyard.

"Hold it right there! Who gave you permission to enter this place?" Tao Xian immediately took a step forward and blocked their way.

"Hallmaster Tao! D-Do you know what's going on back there?" One of the gang members asked in a meek voice.

He replied, "A friend has come to visit the boss, and they're having a friendly spar at the back. No one is allowed to disturb them until the spar is finished?"

"A friend?" The guy looked puzzled, but he saw no reason to question Tao Xian or Jie Chen. He asked curiously, "Who is this friend? We could hear the explosions all the way from the front."

"It's none of your business. Now get back to your posts already! What if someone infiltrates the place while you were absent?" Tao Xian barked harshly.

Jie Chen also joined in with an impatient shout, “Get lost!”

“At once, Hallmasters!” The group replied and backed down immediately. Tao Xian was one thing, but Jie Chen was infamous for his impatience and bloodthirst. He really would kill them if they pissed him off.

After the group was gone, Jie Chen wiped some non-existent sweat from his forehead and asked, “If you have a plan, now’s the time to say it. We can only stall this out for so long!”

The small fries were one thing, but it was only a matter of time before some Hallmasters decided to check out the commotion. And their fellow colleagues weren’t so easy to fool!

“I don’t. We’ll just have to improvise on the fly and pray that Ye Qing finishes off the boss as soon as possible!” Tao Xian sighed.

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“What a pain!” Ye Qing complained under his breath while bringing his curved saber down toward Yan Tieyi’s right shoulder. Then, his arm abruptly took a ninety-degree turn and shot toward the gang boss’ neck swiftly and without warning. However, Yan Tieyi was able to slap the blade away at the last moment and even respond with a counterattack, wrapping his sleeves around Ye Qing like he would catch the young man in a tight embrace. Thankfully, Ye Qing was just fast enough to jump away before the entrapment was complete.

The problem with Yan Tieyi’s martial arts was that his force was perfectly fluid and unpredictable. Like a cloud, it could pause in one place or move like the wind, deceive or strike true as Yan Tieyi wished, and unleash both hard and soft techniques seamlessly. It was why Ye Qing was unable to break through his defense.

“Hahaha! Did you actually believe you could kill me with just this level of skill?” Yan Tieyi laughed. When he sensed a lull in the young man’s aura, he immediately spread his arms wide and cleared out all the air in his vicinity in an instant. For a moment, all was still except his billowing sleeves. Then, he thrust his arms forward and launched a terrific blast of force that seemed to split both the sky and the earth in half.

Rumble!

A gigantic splash at least ten meters tall rose from the lake. A floating gazebo in the middle of the lake abruptly exploded and collapsed into the waters.

“Croak—croak—croak—”

The giant splash was still suspended in the air when five croaks resounded in rapid succession. Ye Qing’s aura skyrocketed, and three inches of pure, visible energy covered his saber. He then brought down his saber in a mighty overhead swing.

*“Toad Force x5”*

The suspended water was cut in half as a beam of pure energy punched through its center and flew toward Yan Tieyi in a straight line. It was so powerful that it cut through the earth like a hot knife through butter and left behind a deep scar that was at least one meter deep in its wake.

Yan Tieyi did not dare to treat it lightly. He struck the ground with enough energy to lift an entire chunk of earth into the air to block the attack. The beam of energy was strong, but not strong enough to punch through several meters of earth before it crumbled away into nothing.

“Haha! You can’t hurt me with your petty tricks, boy!”

Despite what he said, Yan Tieyi had to take a few seconds to catch his breath. He was feeling rather weak after expending a prodigious amount of true qi. It was fine though. His enemy was a middle-stage Vessel Augmentor just like him, so theoretically they should share more or less the same amount of energy reserves. No matter how uncanny his martial arts were, there was no way Ye Qing could defeat him in a short time, meaning that he only needed to hold out until reinforcements showed up. When that happened, both Ye Qing and those two traitors would die like the dogs they were!

“Is that so?” Ye Qing said with a light chuckle. “Let’s see you can keep laughing after you catch *this*.”

The alarm bells in Yan Tieyi’s head rang like crazy immediately after Ye Qing was done speaking. Without thinking, Yan Tieyi channeled his true qi through his sleeves and surrounded his whole body in a protective circle.

“What the—?”

It was at this moment Yan Tieyi suddenly noticed countless shapeless, floating things floating just an inch away from him. They were nigh invisible save for a dark red tinge at the core. The gang boss’ scalp immediately turned numb. How did these things manage to get so close without him noticing? They were anything but harmless too. His instincts were screaming that something terrible would happen if he allowed them to touch him.

“*Blue Demon*”

Yan Tieyi extended his hand out of his left sleeve to reveal a bluish black glove. The painfully thin fabric was covered in bizarre patterns and emitting a bluish black glow in intervals. What looked like a demon’s head was sewn to the center of the glove.

To Ye Qing’s surprise, the demon’s head slowly opened its eyes—or was it just a trick of the light?—at the same time an irritating voice suddenly mumbled incessantly in his head. Then, a bluish black flame erupted from the glove and released a disgustingly sweet scent into the air.

As soon as the scent entered Ye Qing’s nostrils, a powerful wave of dizziness and weakness immediately gripped him. His complexion immediately turned bluish black as well.

*That’s his Strange Artifact! It’s as deadly as Tao Xian says!* Ye Qing thought in shock. Before he could mount a response though, a refreshing sensation suddenly rose from his dantian and spread across his whole body. The next thing he knew, he was back to normal.

The Fruit of Life protected me from the poison!

The answer came to Ye Qing immediately. He had consumed the Fruit of Life back at the Jade Dragon Lake, and it was said to be capable of bringing someone back from the brink of death, extending one's lifespan, and protecting someone from all kinds of poisons. That said, he wasn't willing to bet his life on the author's integrity, so Ye Qing hurriedly popped an antidote and held his breath just in case.

Earlier, he had prepared some antidotes after Tao Xian told him that Yan Tieyi owned an extremely poisonous Strange Artifact that killed anyone who touched it or smelled its gas. Although it turned out to be unnecessary, he had to admit that the Strange Artifact was even deadlier than he imagined. If he hadn't consumed the Fruit of Life before, there was a good chance this fight would've ended poorly for him.

Crackle crackle!

Meanwhile, Yan Tieyi was able to clear all the Blood Shadows surrounding him with just a wave of his burning glove. Even scarier was the fact that the bluish black flames were deadly enough to burn holes in the ground.

Ye Qing clenched his fist and resummoned his Blood Shadows. Then, he sent them toward Yan Tieyi once more.

The Blood Shadows was the coalescence of his true qi and vigor. So long as he didn't run out of either element, he could theoretically summon an endless number of Blood Shadows. And that was exactly what he was going to do. The "Blood Shadow Divine Art" was a top-tier Vessel Augmentation cultivation art, and his reservoir of true qi and vigor far exceeded a warrior in the Vessel Augmentation stage. To put it simply, he could afford to piss away the power.

Sizzle sizzle!

The Blood Shadows tried to catch Yan Tieyi a second time, but once again the bluish black flames burned them into nothing. The gang boss let out an arrogant laugh and said, "What else do you have, boy? It will not be enough!"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Yan Tieyi didn't even manage to wipe the smile off his face when Ye Qing waved his hand and summoned an unbelievable amount of Blood Shadows once more. This time though, he merged them together into a gigantic hand before bringing it down like he would squash the gang boss like a fly.

Yan Tieyi swore and spat out a tremendous amount of internal energy. His left hand curled into an arc, he swiped at the giant hand falling toward him and successfully shredded it into pieces.

But it wasn't enough. The shredded hand abruptly scattered into individual wisps of Blood Shadows and slipped through his guard before he could react. As soon as they made contact with his legs, his chest, and more body parts, blood immediately started seeping out of his skin. For a moment, Yan Tieyi could only watch in horror as the Blood Shadows greedily devoured his blood and weakened him even more than he already was.

*What the hell is this martial art? And how does he have so much internal energy?* [1] Yan Tieyi thought in panic while burning the Blood Shadows in his body into nothing once more.

At this point, Yan Tieyi finally realized that Ye Qing was, for whatever reason, far more energetic than he was even though they were both middle-stage Vessel Augmentors. Not only that, he could use his uncanny techniques in rapid succession as if they didn't cost anything. He, on the other hand, was on the verge of triggering a rebound because he was almost out of internal energy. At this rate, he was going to die for sure.

"It's do or die!"

A flinty glint entered Yan Tieyi's eyes, and he abruptly stopped defending himself. Instead, he leaped into the sky and swooped toward Ye Qing like a goshawk. Arms spread, Yan Tieyi flew erratically and unpredictably while rapidly closing the distance between himself and Ye Qing. Every time he changed positions, a goshawk's cry would pierce through the air, and his aura would grow a little stronger.

Nine cries later, Yan Tieyi abruptly vanished from view and reappeared behind Ye Qing. Then, what looked like a thousand arched, flame-wreathed hands swiped toward his major points at the same time.

*"Nine Changes of the Goshawk"*

*"Shadowless Hand"*

Everyone and their mothers knew that Iron Shirt Yan was a practitioner of the Iron Sleeve Art and the Flowing Cloud Force, but no one knew that he also practiced a powerful movement art and a claw art to complement his Blue Demon Hand. Why? It was because everyone who forced him to reveal his trump cards were dead!

"Die!"

Ye Qing broke out in a cold sweat as he spun around and faced down the gang boss' ultimate technique. He never realized that Yan Tieyi was hiding a powerful movement art and a claw art up his sleeves until it was too late. While neither art was particularly threatening per se, they were complemented by a powerful Strange Artifact that could burn a hole in the ground like nothing, and he did not think that his body was tougher than the earth.

There was no time to think. Right before the claw technique would rip him to shreds, Ye Qing executed a Soulchasing Saber technique and wreathed his saber in a sheen of energy. When he lightly cut the air in front of him, it created ripples of light—they were really ripples of blade energy—that spread out into a protective globe around him. It looked like a moon hanging in the sky.

The saber technique temporarily was good enough to Yan Tieyi's claw technique at bay, but the same could not be said for the all-consuming flames. Not only that, Ye Qing noticed that the bluish black flames were steadily eating away at the blade of his saber and spreading toward his hand!

Ye Qing pushed Blood Sea Fragrance to the max and appeared above the lotus lake in an instant. He managed to get away from the bluish black flames for a moment, but—

"You won't escape!"

Yan Tieyi appeared right behind him and executed Shadowless Hand once more. From Ye Qing's point of view, it looked like the gang boss was swiping, tearing, slapping, hooking and pointing at

him from every direction all at the same time. Even worse, the fire was everywhere. Everything within ten meters of the eye of the storm were covered in bluish black flames. There was no escape.

## Chapter 69: Blue Demon Hand

Yan Tieyi was certain that he had finally gotten Ye Qing, but to his surprise, the young man shot him a wicked grin and said, "Sorry to disappoint you, but the plan was never to escape from you!"

Before Yan Tieyi could make sense of his words, he shouted, "Now is the time, Brother Frog!"

A splash erupted from the lake, and Kung Fu Frog shot into the sky like a star. Hands put together in a double palm strike pose and a ball of deadly force spinning wildly between its palms, it threw its hands forward and said,

"CROAAAAAAAAAAAAAK!"

A pure white pillar streaked toward Yan Tieyi's back. The gang boss had not anticipated the Malice-class Stranger, but he did not panic. He charged his right sleeve with true qi to protect himself from Kung Fu Frog's attack and continued attacking Ye Qing with his left hand!

For a moment, it looked like Ye Qing was going to take a direct hit even if Kung Fu Frog's surprise attack was successful. Then, Yan Tieyi's vigor suddenly churned as if some sort of invisible force was wrestling for control. Although he was able to suppress the strange occurrence immediately, his movements and techniques slowed down just a fraction of a second, and in a battle like this, a fraction of a second could mean the difference between life and death.

Crack!

Kung Fu Frog's energy blast struck Yan Tielu squarely in the back. Although he was protected by a layer of true qi, Kung Fu Frog was a Malice-class Stranger and equal to a human Vessel Augmentor in terms of cultivation level. As a result, the energy blast snapped Yan Tieyi's back like a twig and sent him sailing through the air like a ragged doll, a trail of blood spewing out of his mouth.

Pop!

Ye Qing did not allow the golden opportunity to pass him by. He immediately kicked off the air and caught up to Yan Tieyi in just the blink of an eye. At this point, it was clear that the gang boss was as good as dead, but he wasn't dead just yet. Fear flashing in his eyes when Ye Qing appeared right in front of him, he attempted to channel his remaining true qi for one last gambit.

Unfortunately, he failed. Once again, his vigor churned unnaturally and interrupted his final move for just a fraction of a second. Then, a blinding light sent his vision spiraling all over the place.

It took Yan Tieyi a few seconds to realize what just happened. *Oh, he cut off my head*, he thought numbly. The second last thing he saw was his headless body exploding into a brilliant shower of light and fire, and the last thing he saw was Ye Qing gathering his blood into a condensed ball that looked like red amber on one hand and catching his head with the other.

Yan Tieyi, Iron Shirt Yan of Anyang and leader of the Iron Shirt Gang, did not pass away peacefully. He never figured out why a Stranger was hiding in his lotus lake, and he never figured out why his vigor had suddenly spiraled out of control twice during the last moment. Perhaps Ye Qing might have enlightened him if he was able to maintain his consciousness a few seconds



longer, but alas, it was not meant to be. And so he went to the afterlife without ever getting his answers.

“Finally!” Ye Qing placed Yan Tieyi’s head on the ground and let out a sigh of relief after he finally landed on his feet.

The gang boss had turned out to be a far more formidable opponent than expected, and he had to use everything he had to barely defeat him at the last moment. His current repertoire of skills had proven inadequate to kill Yan Tieyi in short order, so he had no choice but to win by endurance and deplete his foe’s reserves little by little. Even then, the gang boss had nearly turned it around with his Strange Artifact. It just goes to show that he still had a long way to go.

Fortunately, he had prepared sufficiently for the battle and even brought Kung Fu Frog with him just in case. While he was fighting against Yan Tieyi, the Malice-class Stranger had snuck its way to the lotus lake and hid at the bottom. After that, it waited until Ye Qing gave it the signal before springing a surprise Kamehameha at Yan Tieyi.

Of course, even that might have proven to be insufficient if he hadn’t figured out how to affect his opponent’s vigor through his Blood Shadow Magic. But all’s well that ends well, so that was that.

“No time to waste,” Ye Qing muttered before swallowing the blood he had ripped out of Yan Tieyi’s body just now. This wasn’t over until he had taken full control of the Iron Shirt Gang. As soon as the blood went down his throat, an unbelievable amount of energy immediately spread to every corner of his body.

It was like a sun was burning inside his stomach. Hot air began flushing out of his pores, and his skin turned as red as a furnace. He heated up so much that the air around him became heavily distorted.

“Damn! That’s a lot of vigor!” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise. Not only that the vigor was as refined as it was potent. Then again, this was the essence of a middle-stage Vessel Augmentor he was absorbing. It made sense that it was worth at least one silver dragon-serpent rune.

Slosh...

He could hear his own blood running rapidly inside his veins, and his bones cracking and popping like they were filled with thunder. His sweat turned into steam as soon as they left his body and temporarily shrouded him from view.

Boom!

The next moment, he discharged a shockwave that was so powerful that it threw entire chunks of earth into the air. Everything within ten meters of him was wiped clean like the ground zero of a terrible explosion.

When the shockwave finally subsided, Ye Qing was standing at the center of a massive pit. His eyelids fluttered open to reveal a pair of shining eyes that resembled the sun and the moon. His aura was spinning wildly around his person, and every inhale and exhale seemed to trigger a mini typhoon. It was like he wasn’t a human, but a gigantic dragon.

It didn't last forever, however. Ye Qing continued to breathe in and out until his aura had become fully stabilized. A couple more breaths later, and his presence became as peaceful and warm as before.

"Good, good! I've gotten a little stronger than before!" Ye Qing declared with satisfaction. Yan Tieyi's vigor hadn't just healed him completely, he was a step closer to the next level as well.

"Croak!"

It was at this moment Kung Fu Frog called out to Ye Qing and leaped out of the lake. It then spat out two items in front of him. The first item was a shell-like item. It was of course Yan Tieyi's Nature's Shell. The second item was none other than the bluish black glove that had come so very close to driving him into a dead end.

The two items had fallen into the lake when he shattered Yan Tieyi's body earlier. As his first priority after killing the gang boss was to recover his strength, he thought he could grab them after he was ready. Kung Fu Frog had saved him some time and energy by grabbing them for him.

"Thanks, Brother Frog! This is your reward!" Ye Qing grinned at his friend and tossed it a jar of Pear Blossom wine. The Malice-class Stranger immediately caught the jar, croaked twice in thanks and started chugging down the delicious wine like no tomorrow. It really was a hopeless drunkard.

"Hehe..." Ye Qing chuckled fondly and put away Yan Tieyi's Nature's Shell. Then, his gaze landed on the bluish black glove.

The bluish black glove looked almost like an ordinary glove as it was no longer shining ominously or on fire. However, the mysterious patterns across its fabric and a dim but still discernible glow proved that it was anything but that. In fact, Ye Qing could tell that it was way, way better than the Skinner or the Burial Shirt Of The Dead, so much so that they did not even belong in the same league.

"What is this Strange Artifact called? What does it do?" Ye Qing asked in a soft voice after taking out the Annon Sutra and cutting his finger over the vellum.

The Annon Sutra glowed darkly for over ten breaths before it finally manifested the familiar text. Ye Qing was happy to see this because it meant that the Strange Artifact was very valuable.

*"The Blue Demon Hand is a Red-class Strange Artifact made from the scalp of the Hatred-class Stranger, the Blue Demon. It took ten years to sear a Hundred Poison into the scalp using the Netherflame. The day it was complete, the sky rained blood, the Netherflame spread, and its one Hundred Poison turned everything within five kilometers of the Strange Artifact into an empty wasteland. So deadly were its flame and poisons that not even the remains of its victims were left behind."*

*“Unfortunately, the Blue Demon Hand is such an evil and unholy Strange Artifact that the heavens cast lightning upon it and damaged its roots. As a result, it degraded into a Red-class Strange Artifact.”*

*“The wielder of the Blue Demon Hand gains extreme resistance to conventional weapons, water and fire. It can also unleash the Netherflame and the Hundred Poison. The Netherflame can ignite anything, rot flesh and blood, corrode energy, and scorch a person’s innards. The Hundred Poison is a shapeless, formless poison that can diminish one’s vigor, damage the blood vessels, and destroy one’s bodily points.”*

*“Every month, the wielder of the Blue Demon Hand must offer up their heart’s blood one time. Otherwise, it would burn its wielder with the Netherflame. Moreover, the wielder must not use it for over thirty breaths, or they would be poisoned by the Hundred Poison!”*

“This is incredible!” Ye Qing’s eyes lit up with barely controlled excitement. The Red-class Strange Artifact was already incredibly powerful, but it had the potential to become even stronger than it currently was! According to the Annon Sutra, the original Blue Demon Hand was so powerful and unholy that the heavens decided it was too much and damaged its roots, downgrading it to a Red-class Strange Artifact. Assuming it could be restored to its original form, would it become a Malice-class Strange Artifact? Maybe even a Hatred-class? How much stronger would it become if it was a Hatred-class Strange Artifact? He could hardly imagine!

Even better, the Strange Artifact’s side effects and limitations were practically non-existent to him. For most warriors, having to offer their heart’s blood at least once a month was a massive loss. After all, the heart’s blood was the culmination of a warrior’s essence, qi and spirit. To sacrifice even one drop of it would damage their foundation and mandate a long period of recovery. However, this side effect did not apply to him because he was overflowing with vigor and true qi, and he could replenish himself with the dragon-serpent runes whenever necessary. He could literally drown the Strange Artifact in heart’s blood if he wanted to.

Hell, if he could satisfy a bonafide bloodsucker like the Annon Sutra, why would he fear a mere Blue Demon Hand?

Onto its limitation, the Blue Demon Hand would poison its wielder with the Hundred Poison if it was used over thirty breaths. However, the Hundred Poison was useless against him because he had consumed the Fruit of Life. This was already proven when Yan Tieyi tried to poison him earlier to no avail, meaning that this limitation might as well not exist to him!

The Blue Demon Hand was unquestionably a deadly Strange Artifact. Most people would hesitate to use it even if its power was substantial. But to him? The Blue Demon Hand was a purely beneficial Strange Artifact that drastically elevated his combat power. One might even say that the Strange Artifact was tailor-made for him!

“Hehehe! I really am the heavens’ favored son! Thanks dad!”

Ye Qing let out a silly laugh and wore the Blue Demon Hand over his left hand immediately. Once he was done injecting his heart's blood into the Strange Artifact, he proceeded to replace Yan Tieyi's imprint in the glove with his own. And just like that, the Blue Demon Hand was well and truly his!

Ye Qing tried moving his left hand around after putting on the Blue Demon Hand. It felt as if the glove didn't even exist. His fingers moved as smoothly as ever, and there was a firm connection between himself and his mind. A single thought was all he needed to channel its Netherflame or its Hundred Poison.

Suddenly, Ye Qing paused his experiment and hid his left hand within his sleeve. He then said, "Come out!"

"M... Master Ye?" Jie Chen walked out of the shadows and stared at the backyard that had been ravaged so thoroughly he could scarcely recognize it. He swallowed audibly before asking in a fearful tone, "Where... Where is Boss Yan?"

He had rushed over as soon as he heard no noise coming from the battlefield. He wanted to know who had emerged victorious. If Yan Tieyi had won, then an early warning could be the difference between life and death. And if Ye Qing had won, then all's well that ends well, of course!

He wasn't expecting Ye Qing to discover him before he even showed himself though.

Ye Qing stepped aside to reveal the head hidden behind his back. "Oh him? He's over here!"

"He's dead... he's actually dead..." Jie Chen exclaimed in shock and disbelief. He was a man of few fears, but even he could not help but stagger backward at the sight of Yan Tieyi's head, trembling.

The corners around Ye Qing's lips turned up a little. "What? Were you hoping that he'd live? Or should I say, were you hoping that I'd die?"

"A-Absolutely not! That is definitely not what I meant!" Jie Chen denied immediately even as he turned to stare at Ye Qing in disbelief. He wasn't just surprised that Ye Qing had killed Iron Shirt Yan, he could clearly sense that the young man was stronger than before. That made no sense since he had just fought a great battle against Yan Tieyi, and yet his senses clearly stated otherwise.

It was at this moment Jie Chen finally remembered the second reason he came here and said, "Oh right, the rest of the Hallmasters are already here. Tao Xian won't be able to hold them back for much longer!"

"Perfect timing!"

Ye Qing's grin widened. "Tell them that the boss will see them at the main hall!"

"At once!" Jie Chen left immediately.

Chapter 70: Are There Any Objections?

The Iron Shirt Gang headquarter's main hall was called the Flowing Cloud Hall. It was where the Iron Shirt Gang usually held their meetings. Right now, the Flowing Cloud Hall was jam-packed with people including the six Hallmasters and the three Keepers.

“Where is the boss, Tao Xian?” An old man whose hair and beard had gone completely white asked. Despite his age, his complexion was a healthy red, his skin was as smooth as a babe’s, and his presence was as indomitable as a mountain. He was one of the three Keepers of the Iron Shirt Gang and a late-stage Qi Invoker. His name was Xu Yuan, the Light Vented Bulbul.

“Please be patient, Keeper Xu. The boss will arrive shortly!” Tao Xian replied calmly while fanning himself.

“‘Please be patient, please be patient.’ You’ve said that half a teatime ago, Tao Xian! When on earth is the boss showing up?” A brawny man with a scar-ridden face yelled impatiently. He was the Hallmaster of the Hundred Wars Hall, Yao Xingjun, the “Ghostface”.

“Hallmaster Tao, you mentioned that an old friend of the boss is visiting today. Can you indulge in my curiosity and tell me who it is?” A seductive woman with an hourglass figure and a beautiful countenance giggled while straightening her bangs. She looked to be around twenty five or twenty six years old, and she was wearing a flowery, form-fitting petticoat. In fact, the petticoat fit her so well that everyone could see her wholesome breasts jiggling to the slightest movements.

Many men in the hall swallowed audibly, but no one was stupid enough to act on their lustful thoughts as a matter of course. It was because the woman was the Hallmaster of the Hundred Flowers Hall and the manager of all the brothels, theaters and entertainment centers owned by the Iron Shirt Gang. She wasn’t just a competent businesswoman, but also an extremely accomplished warrior. She was a middle-stage Qi Invoker, and her name was Ruan Hongluo, the Hundred Flowers Celestial.

“You’ll find out in a moment, Hongluo!” Tao Xian replied in the same tone he used against Yao Xingjun earlier.

“Are you hiding something from us, Tao Xian? The noise and shockwaves did not feel like a mere spar!” A cold voice spoke up next. He was a middle-aged man wearing an ice cold expression and black clothes. His whole body oozed a dark, cold presence that chilled everyone around him to the core. It was also why no one was sitting next to him. He was none other than the Hallmaster of the Punishment Hall, Yin Ju the “Living King of Hell”. He was a late-stage Qi Invoker, and he was responsible for keeping the law and dishing out punishment to those who broke them.

“Please be patient, Hallmaster Yi. The boss will—” Tao Xian began. Yi Jun was even sharper than he imagined. He had probably figured out that something was amiss. Unfortunately, it was already too late!

Before Tao Xian could finish his sentence, a refreshing voice resounded from the entrance, “Everyone’s here? Good! Let’s jump right into it then!”

Then, a young man who wasn't even twenty yet stepped into the main hall. He was, of course, Ye Qing.

"Who are you? Why are you here?" An old, fat woman with pimples all over her face demanded. She was clutching her walking staff and staring at Ye Qing with an expression that was anything but friendly.

Ye Qing paid her lack of warmth no heed, however. He shot her a sunny smile and said, "Good day to you, Lady Poison. My name is Ye Qing, and my moniker is Joyless! As for why I'm here, I have come to make an announcement!"

Ye Qing swept his gaze across the room as he walked around the center hall. Then, to everyone's shock except Tao Xian and Jie Chen, he sat down at the main seat and curled his lips into a wicked smile. "Starting today, I'm the new leader of the Iron Shirt Gang! Are there any objections?"

"Are you kidding me? Who the hell do you think—" Yao Xingjun slammed the table and shot to his feet. As the Hallmaster of the Hundred Wars Hall, he was rash and unafraid to voice his opinion to anyone's face. Unfortunately, that was his first and last mistake of the day. The brawny man abruptly cut himself off and turned beet red in the face. Then, he started shuddering uncontrollably as blood seeped out of every pore of his body.

Bang!

Before anyone could even react, Yao Xingjun abruptly exploded and showered the main hall with bits and pieces of flesh. His blood though, they paused in mid-air as soon as they left his body and condensed into a ball above Ye Qing. It then landed snugly in his palm almost like it was a tangible object.

Clatter clatter clatter!

Obviously, everyone in the hall shot to their feet faster than Ye Qing could say, "Boo!" They instinctively channeled their powers and stared at Ye Qing with varying expressions. Some people looked stunned like their minds couldn't process what just happened. Some people looked shocked, some people looked terrified, some were puzzled, and some were furious. But no one—not a single one of them—dared to attack Ye Qing for killing one of their own.

Yao Xingjun wasn't just a late-stage Qi Invoker. As the Hallmaster responsible for all big and small conflicts inside and outside the gang, he was naturally not to be underestimated. His Hundred Wars Saber Art was famed for its deadliness, and he was at least a top four warrior in the Iron Shirt Gang. But forget putting up a fight, he had died before he could so much as draw his weapon. Worse still, no one saw how Ye Qing had done it, and without knowing exactly what kind of martial art the young man had used to kill Yao Xingjun, it was pure folly to act against him!

"Are there any objections?" Ye Qing asked again while tossing the ball of blood in his palm up and down, a playful smile dancing on his lips.

"Gulp..." Everyone swallowed with eerie unison.

For a time, the attendees could only exchange stunned looks with one another until one of the three Keepers of the Iron Shirt Gang, Yan Yuming the “Willow Leaf Sword” let out an angry shout, “You’re dead when my brother comes back!”

A long, willow-thin sword glided out of his right sleeve. Then, he leaped toward Ye Qing and executed a thrust. Textbook his movements might be, the rain of swords that suddenly appeared all around the main hall was anything but. Beautiful yet deadly, they danced all over the place like swaying willow leaves.

*“Spring is warm*

Until the air shifts

And willow leaves dance in the wind”

Yan Yuming was one of the three Keepers of the Iron Shirt Gang and Yan Tieyi’s younger brother. Naturally, his kung fu was very good. Yan Tieyi often gave him personal lessons and helped him hone his Willow Leaf Sword Art to near perfection. Fast, accurate, ruthless and deadly, there were few people in the Iron Shirt Gang who could best him in a fight.

That was why everyone was surprised when they saw the rain of swords suddenly vanishing into nothing, and Ye Qing catching Yan Yuming’s sword with just a pair of fingers. If they didn’t know better, they would’ve thought that Yan Yuming was putting on an act with the young man. Just how was he able to beat Yan Yuming’s signature attack so easily? He hadn’t moved away from his chair!

They knew the answer. The young man had to be a Vessel Augmentor!

“I’m a good person. Since you wish to see Yan Tieyi that badly, I’ll reunite the two of you right now!” Ye Qing chuckled goodnaturedly and flicked his finger against the sword’s edge. The blade twanged loudly as Yan Yuming’s purlicue abruptly split in half and bled profusely. At the same time, a wisp of force slipped into his body, shook his innards, and disrupted his blood vessels. A pool of blood immediately surged up his throat and burst right out of Yan Yuming’s lips uncontrollably.

Shocked, Yan Yuming instinctively tried to put some distance between himself and Ye Qing. But as soon as he kicked off with his feet, a dark red Blood Shadow appeared behind him and wrapped tightly around his neck. His head tumbled across the air, and another Qi Invoker had died just like that!

When Ye Qing made a grabbing motion, the tumbling head abruptly curved toward him and landed on a nearby table. Then, he called out, “Family should not be separated from one another. Bring it in, Jie Chen!”

Jie Chen immediately walked out of the back room while carrying a wooden box between his arms. When he placed it on the table and removed its cover, the attendees immediately cried out in shock and disbelief.

“Boss!”

“Boss...”

“How...”

Yan Tieyi's severed head was inside the box. Iron Shirt Yan was a middle-stage Vessel Augmentor and an expert in the Iron Sleeve Art and the Flowing Cloud Force. He was famous throughout Anyang and one of its strongest warriors as a matter of course. But now he was dead, and his bulging eyes were all they needed to see to know that he had not passed away in peace!

"Yan Tieyi wanted me dead, so I killed him first!" Ye Qing said with a smile and rose to his feet. An unbelievably powerful aura immediately washed over the main hall. For a moment, everyone felt suffocated like a rock was sitting atop their chest. In fact, the aura eventually grew so heavy that not even the strongest of them could lift their heads, and the circulation of their true qi turned sluggish. No one could muster even the tiniest will to resist.

He's not just any Vessel Augmentor, he's probably in the middle-stage or even... the late-stage! The thought crossed everyone's mind at the same time.

"Everyone should pay for their mistakes. Sometimes more, sometimes less!"

Still keeping his aura in the open, Ye Qing said lazily. "I don't really care about this gang, but I suppose I should take over since I've unceremoniously removed your boss. It wouldn't be fair to the rest of you after all. Are there any objections?"

Tao Xian sensed that it was his time to shine and did not hesitate to butter up his new boss. He bowed deeply and declared, "I agree! Yan Tieyi's the one who tried to kill you first, so he only has himself to blame for his untimely death! Not only that, you are kind enough to punish only those who would do you harm, while a weaker man would've succumbed to his baser fears and taken out our whole gang! Who else deserves our loyalty if not you, Young M—I mean, boss?"

Jie Chen also took a step forward and voiced his support, "I agree. Boss Ye isn't even in his twenties yet, but he's already a Vessel Augmentor. His future is bright and limitless. It is our fortune to be able to become his subordinate."

The monk was speaking from his heart. He had been obsessed with martial arts since he was young, and there was no one he respected more than a champion. In the past, that person was Yan Tieyi, and now it was Ye Qing.

"Haha. I agree. I don't care who becomes the gang boss as long as the silver keeps flowing into the coffers!" Ruan Hongluo let out a giggle before staring at Ye Qing with deep interest. She didn't seem afraid of him whatsoever!

"I agree..."

"I agree..."

"I agree..."

Since Tao Xian, Jie Chen and Ruan Hongluo had set an example, the rest of the attendees followed suit as well. It did not matter if they meant their declaration. It was that, or suffer the same fate as Yao Xingjun and Yan Yuming.



“Good. I’m glad that most of you are intelligent people!” Ye Qing nodded in satisfaction and finally withdrew his aura, causing everyone to sigh in relief. “From today onward, we are one big family. Please, take your seats!”

When everyone had returned to their seats, he continued, “Since Yao Xingjun and Yan Yuming are dead—oh, I almost forgot. Shi Jiang is dead as well, and their positions need to be filled as soon as possible. In my opinion, Jie Chen should become the new Hallmaster of the Hundred Wars Hall and a Keeper, and Tao Xian should replace Shi Jiang as the Hallmaster of the External Affairs Hall. Yes, I’m aware he’s already managing the gang’s intelligence gathering and relations as the Hallmaster of the Hall of Secrets, but I’m sure he can handle two responsibilities at the same time. Are there any objections?”

Everyone: “...”

If we object, will you kill us?

Meanwhile, Tao Xian and Jie Chen could hardly control their excitement. Their gamble had been extremely risky, but in the end it was the right call. Now that Tao Xian was managing two halls at once, there were few people in the gang who could match his new status and power. Besides that, the Hall of External Affairs was one of the gang’s most profitable halls. So his pockets were going to be heavier than ever before.

As for Jie Chen, he really should’ve been made the Hallmaster of the Hall of Hundred Wars a long time ago. However, he could never go higher beyond the vice Hallmaster position because there were people who were jealous of his talent. Now, he was both a Hallmaster and a Keeper. One might say that he had finally gotten what he deserved.

“Thank you, boss!” The duo saluted him deeply. Ye Qing waved them away before adding,

“As for the rest of you, there will be no changes. You will carry out your tasks and responsibilities as normal.”

“As you command, boss!” The others also saluted Ye Qing. They were relieved. It was pretty common for a new boss to shuffle things around and make them cough up some sort of tribute to prove their loyalty, but Ye Qing hadn’t asked anything of the like at all, and he could’ve since he could probably kill them all singlehandedly. Assuming he wasn’t playing the long game, this was actually... an okay turn of events?

Many people started looking at their new boss in a new light. Noticing that his carrot-and-stick tactic had worked, Ye Qing smiled and said, “We’re one big family now. So long as you do your job well and remain loyal to me, I promise I will treat you just as fairly!”

“We appreciate your benevolence, boss!” Everyone said in unison.

“One more thing. I want all of you to keep quiet about the fact that Yan Tieyi is dead, and the gang has gotten a new boss. What happened today stays within these four walls.”

“Understood!” No one understood why he wanted this, but they agreed to his request all the same.

With that done, Ye Qing rose to his feet and got ready to leave. When he was passing by Lady Poison though, he suddenly said, “Lady Poison, you know it’s a bad habit to poison people willy-nilly, right?”

The woman turned deathly pale and jumped away from him.