

## Stranger 611

### Chapter 611: Going Against The Wind, Punching Like A Mountain

Legend had it that the You Dynasty had four major armies known as Blackwind, Rainstorm, Roaring Thunder and Lightning Bolt. Of the four, the Blackwind Army was the strongest and first in rank, which was why they were stationed at the borders to guard the gates to the empire.

One day, the Blackwind Army received the order to reinforce a certain region. They were passing through the Blackwind Desert when suddenly, they were struck by a once-in-a-century black windstorm. Such was its power that the sky was blotted out, and the sand was turned upside down. It was as if the apocalypse was upon them. As a result, the entire army was annihilated. Not a single soldier managed to survive that calamitous disaster.

Maybe it was because they resented the way they died, or maybe it was because the black wind or the Blackwind Desert itself was special, but the deceased Blackwind Army was somehow reborn as an Anomaly. Whenever the black wind blew in the Blackwind Desert, the Blackwind Army would awaken and march together with the elements. Any living being foolish or unfortunate enough to stand in its way would be destroyed.

Worse still, the Blackwind Army was unkillable and immortal. Even if someone vanquished it, it was only a matter of time before they resurrected once more.

“The neverending black wind shrouds the realm in darkness.” That was how the travelers described the Blackwind Desert and the Blackwind Army.

As a result of this, the Blackwind Desert was designated as a forbidden zone between Yan and Chu. Any and all merchants who happened to be passing through the area feared it like a Stranger and stayed far, far away from it.

So, why had Ye Qing come here? It was because he planned to pass through the Blackwind Desert, experience the so-called black windstorm, and check if it truly deserved its fame. It would also be a great opportunity to temper himself.

As for the notorious Blackwind Army, he didn't get his hopes up. Despite the legend, the Blackwind Army didn't always march every time there was a black windstorm, and even if it did, it was completely up to luck whether he would encounter them in this vast, seemingly boundless desert.

The reason he embarked on this journey was to improve his strength before he arrived at the Death Sea. If he only traversed the safe routes, then he wouldn't be able to achieve the intended effect.

A person only knew who they really were when their life was on the line. Just the same, one could not unleash their hidden potential or temper themselves unless they were in a crisis.

Of course, he just wanted to temper himself, not commit suicide. The black windstorm and Blackwind Army were scary, but Ye Qing was fairly sure he was currently strong enough to survive anything they could throw at him.

Ye Qing's first impression of the Blackwind Desert was that it was stunningly beautiful. Vast and boundless, it was filled with rolling sand dunes and a seemingly endless stretch of sand.

The sky was completely devoid of clouds, and it almost looked like it was one with the desert. The sun hanging high up in the sky seemed larger, rounder, and brighter than it was anywhere else. The

combination of light and landscape painted a most grandiose and stunning sight. As he trekked through the desert, he felt as if he was a speck of sand navigating the endless expanse of space, small and lonely.

But of course, the novelty wore off quickly. After all, there was only sand and more sand in the Blackwind Desert. It was the same colors no matter which direction he looked.

Not only that, the feeling that he was stranded and alone gradually grew over time. The monotonous, unchanging landscape was a blight upon the body and the soul.

Speaking of which, the sand beneath his feet was soft and slack. It was difficult to borrow strength from it, which made it difficult and time-consuming to walk. Not only that, the lack of clouds in the sky and vegetation on the ground meant that the sun rays were blasting down on any and all objects directly.

For a person, this meant that they were losing water much faster than usual and suffering skin damage every second they were exposed to the sun. The desert tortured both the body and the spirit and made the act of existing alone a living nightmare for anyone who trekked it.

It was nothing to Ye Qing though. Not only that, he had the leisure to practice his fists as he walked. His feet were as steady as a mountain, his body was as nimble as an ape, and his fists were as fluid as a river.

Every time his foot touched the ground, the desert would shake a little. The sand might be soft and loose, but his footing was as steady as a rock.

Every time he stepped forward, his body would move as agilely as a dragon and as vigorously as a demonic ape.

Every time he thrust his fist forward, it would flow as smoothly as a river. There existed great power despite his small, slow movements.

In the past, Ye Qing only practiced inside a room or a confined space. Although such places afforded him a sliver of solitude and privacy, it also made his fists less free than they could've been.

But now that he had stepped out of Bei You and the safety of civilization, now that he was experiencing a different life and witnessing the grandness of mother nature, he realized that he was sorely lacking in many ways such as ken, horizon, skill and breadth of mind.

Now was a good time to change that.

As he continued to practice his fists in the desert—challenging the wind and sky with every swing of his arm—all he saw, heard, and felt was the wind and the clouds, and all he thought was punching without any reservation with the goal of surpassing the heavens themselves.

A caged bird who finally returned to nature, Ye Qing slowly but surely became one with the world around them. He gradually stepped out of his cage and nest and began punching freely and without thought. Form and technique? It did not matter. Intent and will? He would do whatever he wanted.

Sometimes, he punched like he was a mountain intending to crush the puny ants in its shadow into nothing. Sometimes, he flowed like an unstoppable river that surged ever forward. Sometimes, his fists were as soft and intangible as the wind. Sometimes, his form was so pure it resembled the

clean, unblemished light of the moon. Sometimes, his movements were so flashy and forceful it was like he was the sun itself, shining ever so bright...

When one's mind was not constrained by the invisible rules they drew for themselves, they would discover that the earth was vast, the sky was infinite, and their body responded exactly as their mind intended it to be.

Ye Qing moved faster and faster, his fist intent grew stronger and stronger, and his fist force grew more and more rounded and ideal. Although his form and technique were, contrastingly, diminishing by the minute, it still felt like this was what he meant to do; this was how he achieved perfect unity with the world.

And he did. At that moment, there existed a young man in the world, and a world in that young man's fists.

Whoooooosh!

Suddenly, a ghastly, high-pitched howl caught Ye Qing's attention. When he looked, he saw that the horizon had turned black before he knew it, and a black wind accompanied by a sea of sand was blotting out the sky itself. It was rolling toward him like a tsunami of epic proportions.

This was definitely the infamous black windstorm of the Blackwind Desert.

At the beginning, it looked like the black windstorm was tens of kilometers away. However, it was right in front of Ye Qing in just the blink of an eye. He could hear the roar of the black wind and the wails of the yellow sand as clear as day. He could see the darkness consuming anything and everything like a gluttonous maw.

The other major problem with the black windstorm besides its terrifying dangers was its equally terrifying speed. By the time you saw or heard its approach, it was already too late. Only those who possessed exceptional movement arts or powerful Strange Artifacts might escape the black windstorm. Otherwise, they must weather it until the end.

With Ye Qing's speed and stamina, it wouldn't take him too much effort to escape the black windstorm. He didn't do that, however. He continued to practice his fists as if a sandstorm hadn't just suddenly descended on him. Though, right before the black windstorm would hit, Ye Qing waved for Giggie to duck into the Dragon Nursing Nest. This time, the little Stranger obliged.

The second the little Stranger was gone, the black windstorm engulfed Ye Qing whole. He was like a stone that had fallen into the great sea. His entrance failed to elicit even a single splash.

Humans were as puny as ants before a natural disaster like this—but if an ant could perceive the heavens, why couldn't a human overcome it?

Ye Qing stood tall and proud in the sandstorm. The violent force of nature was almost strong enough to flip the ground upside down, and the sky was dyed black due to how much sand was coursing through it.

It failed to budge the young man even a little though. After standing still for a moment, Ye Qing assumed a stance and began walking against the wind. He began practicing his fists once more.

So what if the world was his enemy? He would overcome it all the same.

At first, Ye Qing punched and walked very, very slowly. Every time he thrust his fist forward, it was like he was pushing back against a thousand warriors. And every time he took a step, it was like he was carrying a massive mountain on his back.

Despite this, his fists were heavy and loud, and his footsteps were as steady as a rock. He progressed slowly and steadily like a military squad slowly making their way through enemy territory.

Gradually, as if Ye Qing had gotten accustomed to the black wind's power and the sandstorm's violent rhythm, he began to move and punch smoother.

When a punch was smooth, its force naturally rose. When a force rose, the intent grew lofty. And when the intent was higher than everything, everything could be dismantled with one punch.

Gradually, the black wind moved further and further away from Ye Qing until it formed some sort of vacuum. The black wind couldn't push into the clearing, and even the sea of sand found it difficult to penetrate its defenses.

That was just the beginning. As Ye Qing's fist force and fist intent grew stronger and stronger, so did the clearing.

#### Chapter 612: One Man Versus A Thousand

The "Martial Scripture" stated this, "Inches matter when it comes to fist art, and there exists heaven and earth within the inches."

To put it in simpler terms, it was saying that the essence of fist art lay in mastering the inches. For a practitioner of the fist arts, a couple inches could mean the difference between victory and defeat, life and death. Hence, there existed a world of difference between those who mastered them, and those who did not.

When it came to fist arts, Ye Qing had never studied under a reputable master. Gu Suitang had corrected some of his mistakes and saved him some pain, but he more or less had to figure it out all by himself. As a result, his fists were less profound than they could have been, but also more compatible with nature and free. Incomplete it might be, his fists were slowly beginning to grasp the inches and return to its primal state.

Throughout his training, Ye Qing had not employed a sliver of astral qi. It was all strength and body, fist force and fist intent alone.

Clop clop clop!

It was at this moment Ye Qing heard a uniform chorus of footsteps from the depths of the black windstorm. Specifically, it sounded like countless horse hooves cantering across the yellow sand.

When he instinctively turned to look, he saw a massive group of cavalymen riding out of the black windstorm. They were all wearing a black armor and a ghost-faced mask and riding a black horse.

He counted only a thousand or so cavalymen, but they looked scarier than even the black windstorm. It was a kind of darkness that was blacker and deeper than even the darkest night.

"The Blackwind Army?!" Ye Qing murmured. He had no doubt that the one thousand cavalymen before him was none other than the legendary Anomaly, the Blackwind Army.

When he discovered the Blackwind Army, the Blackwind Army also discovered him. Without hesitation, they immediately kicked their horses into a gallop and charged toward him.

Their formation looked flawless and uniform in movement. It was as if they were a single entity.

Neither man nor horse made a single sound as they charged. The only sound that could be heard was the rumbling horse hooves that reminded Ye Qing of a roaring river.

They looked both formidable and unstoppable. Despite numbering only a thousand, Ye Qing sensed greater destructive power and shock from them than a charge from ten thousand ordinary cavalymen, maybe even tens of thousands.

Like an avalanche or a tsunami, the charge could not be stopped, only weathered. But was that really possible? Could anyone really survive a black storm that looked like it could crush anything and everything in its path?

“When the black wind emerges, heaven and earth plunge into darkness.” This was the description the ancient states had used to describe the Blackwind Army, and it was definitely not an exaggeration.

The Blackwind Army had built their reputation atop a tall, tall mountain of corpses. Back then, the ancient states, the powerful clans and the aristocratic families and more—no one could speak of the Blackwind Army without flinching. Today, the Blackwind Army was dead and transformed into a mindless Anomaly, but the unnatural bloodthirst and desire for destruction imprinted within every soldier’s heart still burned as brightly as before. If anything, it was madder and scarier than it was before.

When the one thousand cavalymen were about sixty meters away from Ye Qing, a banner slowly unfurled above their heads.

The banner was square-shaped and pitch black in color. A black dragon surrounded by wisps of black wind were sewn to its fabric. Together, they formed the word “Wind”.

This was the Blackwind Army’s banner, the Blackwind Banner.

The moment the Blackwind Banner appeared, the black wind and yellow sand gathered behind their backs and transformed into a sand wave that was easily over a hundred meters tall, maybe even two hundred[1].

Moreover, the sand wave grew fiercer, louder, and scarier for every three meters the Blackwind Army moved.

“None can harm me while the black wind watches over me’. I can see how you earned your reputation, Blackwind Army. Come then! Let’s see if the so-called untouchable Blackwind Army can take a punch from me!”

Despite the threat he was facing, Ye Qing did not try to swerve out of the way or run. Overflowing with fighting spirit and his right arm hanging loosely beside his ribs, he actually countercharged the Blackwind Army!

As he ran, Ye Qing slowly raised his right arm. Every time it moved an inch, his aura would grow thicker, and his fist intent would grow stronger.

When his fist was parallel to the ground, his fist intent towered higher than even the nine heavens.

Ye Qing opened his mouth and let out a mighty shout. At the same time, he thrust his fist forward and vented all of his fist intent at the incoming cavalrymen.

BOOM!

What happened next could only be described as the heavenly lightning flirting with the earthly fire—explosive. The ground within a hundred meter radius of Ye Qing abruptly exploded and flung sand everywhere, and the sand wave behind the Blackwind Army scattered in an instant.

The one thousand cavalrymen themselves were flung all over the place. The unstoppable charge... had been stopped.

Ye Qing stood tall and proud. His fist was bleeding, and his breathing was short and rapid.

“Hahaha... now this is what I call a clash!”

He was laughing though. How could he not, when he had stopped a one-thousand-man-strong charge in one punch?

As he laughed, his breathing quickly returned to normal. He then backhanded a Blackwind cavalryman who tried to sneak up on him and flung both man and horse into the sky. A couple of Blackwind cavalrymen who were unlucky enough to exist in the way of his force also crumbled into a pile of sand.

After that, Ye Qing began slaughtering the remaining Blackwind cavalrymen like weeds. Trusting in his powerful body to protect him, he charged, smashed, hammered, blocked or split any and all enemies in his way quickly, slowly, rapidly or evenly. It looked like there was no rhyme or reason behind his movement whatsoever, and yet it was profound in a way that could not be properly described with words. His punches were rough, basic, and outright barbaric at times, and yet they also felt perfectly natural. Wherever he went, the so-called unstoppable Blackwind cavalrymen were slaughtered as easily as children. No one was a match for him.

Just a few breaths later, the one thousand cavalrymen had all dissolved into sand.

Ye Qing did not stop despite having annihilated the Blackwind Army. He continued to run and punch as he pleased.

As he moved, his hands matched perfectly with his legs, his elbows with his knees, and his shoulders with his hips.

As he thought, his qi matched perfectly with his strength, his intent with his qi, and his heart with his intent.

On the outside, his movement was so smooth and natural that it resembled nature itself. On the inside, he too achieved flawless harmony in mind and spirit.

There was a quote in “Martial Scripture” that went something like this: “When one’s inside and outside are compatible, and when their art and self are as one, then their fists may reach even the gods.”

When a warrior’s fists had “reached the gods”, and their techniques had become a Dao, they were considered to have mastered the fists. All who mastered the fists were known as “great experts” or “grandmasters”, a.k.a master warriors who were now qualified to start a sect of their own.

Of course, the average fist master or great martial expert had usually studied and honed their art tirelessly for decades. After all, it was no easy feat to “mold ten thousand minor arts into one major art, transform the effort of a thousand autumns into one magnum opus, regain their natural state, and evolve their techniques into Dao”, and it definitely wasn’t something that could be achieved in a short time.

Ye Qing might be extraordinarily gifted in the ways of the fist, but even he could not “reach god” or “evolve his techniques into Dao” in such a short time. In order to reach that level, one must be knowledgeable, experienced and talented in all the ways that mattered. If the warrior was lacking in even one of these qualities, then he would not be able to reach that level.

Ye Qing still had a long way to go.

The perfection that possessed Ye Qing earlier was but a moment of inspiration; a eureka moment. Thanks to it, he was able to combine the two techniques he learned from Gu Suitang, “Divide” and “Break Through”; the “Chaos Demon Ape Fist” from the “Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra”, and everything else into one. In other words, he was no longer bound to the conventions of the technique. For example, he could throw a straight punch and swing an elbow at the enemy, and it could be “Break Through”, the “Chaos Demon Ape Fist”, or anything else he felt like at the time.

While he still had a long way to go before he could call himself a master of the fists, the moment of inspiration had opened a door for him. So long as he continued to work tirelessly toward his goal, it was only a matter of time before he reached it.

Bang bang bang bang...

Slowly, Ye Qing’s fists grew faster, and his techniques simpler. There were no complex techniques or profound intent. There was only the simple and unadorned, the natural, and the heart. Despite not conforming to the conventions he was taught, every move he executed was perfect, smooth, flawless, and coming from the heart.

“PHew...”

Suddenly, the young man withdrew his fists and stood still. The storm had finally reached its end, and rays of sunlight were shining down on the young man. It reflected off of him and gave him the appearance of a sun.

A hot, white sun hung high in the nine heavens.

And a young man shone as bright as the sun on the ground.

“‘Walk a hundred roads, witness a thousand red dust, and hold mountains and river in your heart. Only then may you attain martial perfection’. Looks like the ancients were true after all.”

Ye Qing stretched his arms wide and stared directly at the sun[2], a clear, bright smile spread across his face. It looked like he was giving the world a hug.

Giggle had emerged from the Dragon Nursing Nest as well. Still carrying the bottle on its head, it emulated Ye Qing and opened its arms wide to hug the world.

Now more than ever, Ye Qing was certain that his decision to travel was right. In less than three weeks, he had run into a pure-hearted Stranger and advanced another small step in the way of the fist. Now that his understanding and grasp of fist arts was measurably greater than before, his future had also become brighter and wider. This alone was worth the journey, and he hadn't even set foot in the Death Sea yet!

"Don't you think so, Giggle?" Ye Qing asked while turning to glance at the little fellow. In response, it giggled so loudly that the porcelain bottle on its head wobbled unsteadily.

Feeling even better after listening to Giggle's giggle, Ye Qing lay down on his back, closed his eyes, and rested.

#### Chapter 613: Sandfyre

There was no denying how cool he looked when he practiced his fists against the black windstorm and defeated the Blackwind Army singlehandedly—and anyone who did should ask if they could measure up to his fists—but the feats also tired him greatly. Just because he was a Half-Step Grandmaster in body did not mean that he could not be worn down, not to mention that his spirit was fatigued as well. Naturally, he wanted to rest as soon as the danger was over.

Giggle also turned quiet when it saw that Ye Qing was resting. It walked up to Ye Qing, sat down beside him, propped its chin against its hands, and stared at the clear, blue sky above its head, quiet and obedient.

Several hours later, after Ye Qing had recovered most of his strength, the duo resumed their journey once more.

The winter of the northern regions had short days but long nights. This was doubly true during late winter. It felt like the sun had just appeared in the sky for just a couple of hours before it began its descent toward the west once more, dyeing both the sky and the ground crimson.

The sight was dreamy and fantastical, but a veteran desert traveler would not be wasting their time admiring the view. It was because the sunset meant that night was approaching, and when it was night, it was *cold*.

The night and day of Blackwind Desert felt like two different worlds. During the day, Blackwind Desert was scorching hot even though it was late winter, the white hot sun boiling the sand with its heat and stabbing into one's skin like needles.

But when the sun had set, it was as if it had left with all the warmth and hope in the world as well. Without the sun to warm the ground with its ceaseless rays, Blackwind Desert transformed into a cold, frigid land that was several times colder than even the coldest nights of Bei You. To give an example, the water in a puff of breath could turn into ice as soon as it left someone's mouth.



If a normal human were to attempt a trek at this time, they wouldn't last long at all. Their blood would literally freeze inside their body and kill them in no time.

But of course, Ye Qing was no ordinary person. What was a fatal threat to the ordinary person was nothing to the vigorous warrior or his magical companion, so the duo continued their journey like nothing had changed.

The sky quickly darkened, and Blackwind Desert soon turned as black as tar. Neither a ray of light nor a trace of life could be seen no matter where one looked. It was oppressive and deathly still to say the least.

The desert was torturous enough during the day, but the transformation made it twice as torturous during the night. Generally speaking, few people would wish to continue their journey at this time.

For Ye Qing though, this was yet another opportunity to temper himself.

Everything in the world was an opportunity to temper oneself.

Despite the absolute darkness he was trapped in, Ye Qing continued to step forward with a steady heart.

“Light...”

Suddenly, a bit of light pressed against Ye Qing's eyeballs. He could tell it was some sort of flame. A torch, maybe?

To a human, fire represented warmth and hope. Most people would be overjoyed to find fire in a cold, dark desert like this.

But not Ye Qing. Not only did the fire fail to elicit any positive feelings from him, his consciousness actually rose to full alertness.

After all, why would there be fire in the Blackwind Desert?

When Ye Qing was about ten meters away from the fire, the sand beneath his feet abruptly gave way. He fell.

“Quicksand?”

Ye Qing's eyes glinted. He tried to jump away to safety, but it was as if there were countless hands hidden within the quicksand. It clung tightly to his legs and dragged him deeper into the quicksand.

He was up to his chest in just the blink of an eye.

“Hmm? A Stranger?”

Ye Qing raised an eyebrow and clenched his right fist. Then, he punched the surface of the quicksand.

The entire quicksand depressed several inches like it was made of fabric, and a dull rumble that sounded like thunder came from the bottom. Thanks to this, Ye Qing was able to extricate himself and land on the edge of the quicksand.

At the same time, countless rotten arms suddenly reached out of the quicksand, flailing as if they were trying to catch something. There was nothing though. A few seconds later, the arms reluctantly sank back into the quicksand. After that, the quicksand stilled, and it was as if nothing had ever happened.

No, there was one change. The flame at the center of the quicksand was burning brighter and giving off increasingly tempting waves of warmth and light.

“A Sandfyre! I see.”

The temperature in Ye Qing’s eyes cooled as he watched the warm, bright flame. The Sandfyre was a Soulstealer-class Stranger that was usually spotted at a desert or a barren land. It used fire as a bait to tempt cold, lonely, and fearful travelers into its quicksand trap. Most people wouldn’t be able to resist the promise of light and warmth, and even fewer could remain calm and collected due to the oppressive environment. Once they fell into the quicksand, that was it. They would be consumed by the Sandfyre.

“Fire to tempt the living, sand to consume their life.” That was how a passage had described the Stranger. Hence, the Sandfyre was also called the Slayfyre. It was a deceptive flame that inevitably slew all those who dared to approach it.

The more living beings or humans the Sandfyre consumed, the brighter and warmer its flames would become, and the greater the range of its quicksand.

In the Pacification Bureau’s records, there was once a gargantuan Sandfyre that easily spanned over fifty kilometers. Every living creature within its range had been consumed, leaving behind naught but an empty wasteland and a bright flame.

Of course, a Sandfyre of that size and power was no longer a Soulstealer-class Stranger. It was a Disaster-class Stranger[1]. Every day, it was expanding and consuming more lives. It wasn’t until the Pacification Bureau mobilized over a dozen Grandmasters that they finally slew it.

Luckily for Ye Qing, the Sandfyre before him was the lowest level Sandfyre. It was probably due to its environment. The Blackwind Desert was infamous for its dangers in two countries, and no one barring the desperate or extremely powerful dared to brave it. Naturally, the lack of victims greatly hindered the Sandfyre’s growth.

Ye Qing leaped into the air like a hawk and turned upside down as he was passing over the flame. Then, he reached into the flame.

As if sensing a threat, the flame shot a couple inches taller, and its bright, warm, orange yellow glow abruptly turned cold, dark, and tainted. The quicksand itself was stirring like boiling water before countless rotten hands burst out into the open to catch Ye Qing.

Ye Qing ignored the counterattack and tightened his grip. Then, he pulled strongly.

He had no ground to borrow strength from as he was floating in the air, but it did not matter, for his arm alone possessed the strength to lift a mountain.

BOOM!

The entire quicksand exploded as Ye Qing ripped the flame out of the ground, the swarm of rotten hands included. From Ye Qing's perspective, it looked like the arms were the flame's roots. They were innumerable and spanned at least ten meters in diameter. It should not need to be said, but they looked absolutely disgusting to say the least.

The rotten arms belonged to the Sandfyre's victims. After they died, their bodies were consumed by the Stranger, and their arms were turned into its roots.

After the flame was ripped out of quicksand, it gradually faded as if it was cut off from its energy source. The rotten arms also slackened and ceased struggling.

The quicksand grew still after the flame disappeared. At the same time, a rotten stench seeped into the open air.

A Sandfyre's body was composed of the quicksand and the flame. If the flame extinguished, then the quicksand would perish as well. Ye Qing's act of ripping the flame from the quicksand was akin to removing someone's head from their shoulders. Naturally, it could not survive after sustaining such an injury.

After that, Ye Qing burned the rotten arms with his Netherflame. Seeing this, Giggle too approached the quicksand, puffed up its cheeks and spat some saliva at it.

Amazingly, Giggle's saliva was slowly returning the rotten, smelly quicksand to normal. As the water of the quicksand gradually turned pure, Ye Qing could even smell a whiff of fresh air.

Clearly, Giggle's saliva had somehow purified the taint within the quicksand.

"You're incredible, Giggle."

Ye Qing couldn't help but give Giggle a thumbs-up.

"Hahaha..."

Giggle hugged its tummy and laughed happily after hearing Ye Qing's praise, the bottle of Nature's Water swaying left and right on its head.

Chapter 614: Hill Carrier

"Alright. Let's resume our journey, shall we?"

The Sandfyre was just a brief interlude in his journey and posed no threat to Ye Qing whatsoever. Even in terms of rewards, it was worth just a single dragon serpent rune. So, he and Giggle resumed their journey as soon as they were done with it.

The biggest dangers in the Blackwind Desert were the black windstorm and the Blackwind Army. Since Ye Qing had defeated both, there was nothing left that could threaten him.

For the next two days, Ye Qing would trek northward non-stop. Two days later, he finally put the desert behind him.

"Phew... I'm finally out."

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath of fresh air while admiring the patches of green at the distant hills. He felt as if he had just shedded a huge burden.

Although the Blackwind Desert posed no threat to him, its never-changing yellow sand and blue sky were slowly but surely grating on his nerves. It was why the distant hills looked very inviting even though it was nothing special.

Suddenly, Ye Qing's eyes widened like saucers. It was because he noticed that one of the hills was slowly moving in his direction.

Giggle was also standing on his shoulder and observing the moving hill curiously.

When the hill got close, Ye Qing finally noticed the man underneath the hill. He was running toward them while carrying the hill on his back.

The man was plump and fair-skinned. He had a mustache and wore a flowery shirt with the word "Hill" imprinted at the center. It looked both comedic and jovial.

The hill wasn't a real hill per se. It was a hill, but its belly had been emptied and replaced by various buildings. Ye Qing could smell the delicious aroma of food and hear the sweet sound of bamboo instruments from them.

The hill might not be a real hill, but it was anything but light. Despite this, the man ran swiftly and without a sound. Even when he was jumping over rocks or rivers, his movements were so smooth it was like he was running across flat ground. He arrived in front of Ye Qing in just the blink of an eye.

The plump man stopped about ten meters away from Ye Qing and shot him a friendly smile. He said, "Hail, young warrior. You've had an onerous journey, haven't you? Would you like to enjoy a good meal, a sweet tune, and a warm bed at my fine premises?"

"Is that an... inn on your back?" Ye Qing asked curiously.

"It's an inn, a restaurant, a tavern, a theater, a gambling house and more. My premises offers any and every form of service there is to offer," the plump man replied smilingly.

"Wait a second, I think I know this from somewhere..." Ye Qing raised his eyebrows as he racked his brain to recall a certain memory. When it finally hit him, he blurted, "Are you the Hill Carrier?!"

"You're quite well-read, aren't you young warrior? It is I," the plump man confirmed.

"I forgot my manners. Well met, senior." Ye Qing hurriedly saluted the plump man respectfully.

"You're welcome, but please, I'm just a humble businessman. You do not need to treat me with such courtesy." The plump man smiled.

"You jest, senior." Ye Qing smiled back, but did not relax in the slightest. The plump man might look affable and kind, but only a fool would underestimate him.

The Hill Carrier or Hiller was a famous person in the *jianghu*. However, a Hiller wasn't a name or title. It was a unique occupation.

A Hill Carrier carried a hill with many buildings on their back. That was why they were called a Hill Carrier, and the hill they carried were called Hill of Services.

There were all sorts of establishments inside the Hill of Services such as shops, eateries, restaurants, taverns, inns, theaters, brothels, gambling houses and more. They provided any and all kinds of services such as lodging, dining, leisure, entertainment, supply, rescue, intel and more.

However, a Hill Carrier's target market wasn't the common populace living in the settlements. No, it was the travelers, wanderers, traveling merchants, hunters and more who roamed the wilderness and slept outdoors.

This was why a Hill Carrier never stayed at the same place for too long. Constantly on the move from wilderness to wilderness, they even visited certain Anomalies and Strange Realms provided that there was profit to be made.

Strictly speaking, a Hill Carrier was a businessman, and a businessman valued profit above everything. Naturally, a Hill Carrier did not count as a good person.

The products and services a Hill Carrier offered were much, much more expensive than normal. For example, a single cup of tea could cost between three to five silver, which was enough money to buy an ordinary tea house!

To say that the prices in the Hill of Services were astronomically high would be an understatement, so much so that one would be forgiven if they thought that no one in their right mind would ever use a Hill Carrier's services.

In reality, it was the opposite. Those who traveled often would know that it was no easy feat to survive in the wilderness. Away from the safety and comfort of civilization, even the simplest things such as sleeping and eating became a problem, and that was before mentioning all the difficulties and dangers one might encounter in the wilderness.

Out there, taut nerves, dwindling supplies, worrying injuries and deadly threats were the norm. It was one thing if they were just starting out their journey, but at some point, most people would be weary and desperate to find a safe place to catch their breaths.

A Hill Carrier offered not just safety, but also a place to resupply, fill their bellies, treat their wounds, and even entertain themselves. Without exaggeration, they were the hope and dream of every traveler. Who in their right mind would spurn them just to save a bit of money?

After all, the reason anyone worked hard to earn money was to spend it. Besides, what was a bit of expenditure before a life-or-death crisis?

Even if the traveler was completely broke, the Hill Carrier accepted barter as a method of trade as well. People who dealt with the wilderness on a frequent basis must possess at least one valuable treasure. It could be valuable natural resources, powerful weapons, Strange Artifacts, martial arts manual and more. Anything and everything could be traded for a certain product or service.

Sure, one might argue that the Hill Carrier was taking advantage of their customers' plight, but since no one—not even the victims who were being scammed—was complaining... Who cares?

Of course, no one who made a living by dealing with the wilderness was a weakling. In fact, most of them were ruthless, bloodthirsty killers who could kill without batting an eyelid. That was why each and every Hill Carrier was an extremely powerful warrior with a massive bag of tricks. Not only that, they were backed by a mysterious, powerful organization as well. Anyone who dared to disobey a Hill Carrier's rules or kill a Hill Carrier without good reason would face the wrath of *all* Hill Carriers.

Once a person had entered one Hill Carrier's black list, no Hill Carrier would ever provide them their services again. That was the best case scenario. In the worst case scenario, the entire *jianghu* would come together to hunt down the person.

That's right. The Hill Carriers were busy people, and they couldn't always spare the time or effort to chase down the bastard. Luckily for them, their pockets were also loaded with money. If, for example, their target proved to be too elusive or strong, they could simply issue a massive bounty for their heads.

Money makes the world go round, and in the *jianghu*, insane people who would throw their lives away for money were the majority. Here in the *jianghu*, there would always be crazies who would stake their lives for a bag of silvers; maniacs who would do anything under the sun for a crate of gold. So what if you were the strongest warrior in the entire world? There was no such thing as a man or woman who could not be worn down given enough time.

Once upon a time, there was a powerful warrior named Wu Shentong, the "Undying Urchin". Famous throughout the underworld and the surface world for his martial art, the "Art of Invincibility", he was impervious to weapons, resistant to the elements, immune to all poison, and impossibly strong. He dominated the *jianghu* so much that he earned the saying, "Shentong is invincible under the Sage stage."

However, Wu Shentong made the fatal mistake of killing a Hill Carrier out of impulse. Furious, the Hill Carriers issued a ten million silver bounty for his head.

And so Wu Shentong's fate was sealed. Invincible he might be, no one could fight forever. In the end, he was unable to outlast the endless assault of the insane, suicidal *jianghu* people and died of exhaustion. Exhaustion! It was a lamentable and ironic death to say the least.

Wu Shentong wasn't the first person to commit such a mistake, and he would not be the last. Over time, no one dared to offend the Hill Carriers anymore.

Ye Qing was not liable to make the same mistake as those people.

"So, would you like to visit my premises, young warrior?" The Hill Carrier asked again.

"Why not? Thank you for your hospitality," Ye Qing replied with a salute.

He had always been curious about the Hill Carriers and their so-called Hill of Services. Now that he had run into them, of course he wasn't going to allow this opportunity to slip by. Besides, he was famished for a warm meal and a good night's rest after eating and sleeping in the open for a few weeks.

## Chapter 615: Treasure Appreciation Auction

“Very well! Please give me a moment.”

The Hill Carrier’s eyes narrowed into slits as he tapped the bottom of his hill twice. Several breaths later, a beautiful attendant appeared at the entrance to the Hill of Services, and a row of stairs slid all the way to the ground.

The female attendant walked down the stairs and saluted the Hill Carrier first. Then, she looked at Ye Qing and said smilingly, “This way please, customer.”

“Thank you.”

Ye Qing gave the Hill Carrier a nod before climbing up the stairs.

“Would you like an introduction to the Hill of Services, customer?” The female attendant asked while staying half a step behind Ye Qing. Her tone was respectful and polite, but with a tinge of flattery.

“Sure.” Ye Qing nodded.

The female attendant began, “Our Hill of Services has Four Towers and Eight Pavilions. The Four Towers are called Wine, Sex, Wealth and Popularity[1], whereas the Eight Pavilions are called Sun, Moon, Star, Time, Wind, Rain, Thunder and Lightning.”

“But back to the Four Towers for a moment. Wine here refers to the restaurants and eateries, Sex is...”

As he listened to the female attendant’s explanation, Ye Qing gradually figured out each building’s intended functions and services. The Four Towers—Wine, Sex, Wealthy and Popularity—mainly offered leisure and entertainment, whereas the Eight Pavilions—Sun, Moon, Star, Time, Wind, Rain, Thunder and Lightning—mainly offered supply services, information exchange, medical treatment and more.

To put it simply, a Hill of Services was a mobile settlement. It was a place where one could find food, entertainment, supplies, trade, medical treatment and more.

Generally speaking, the stronger the Hill Carrier, the bigger and grander the Hill of Services they carried, and the more complete their facilities became. Since the hill carried by this Hill Carrier was about sixty meters tall, and it had every facility one might expect from a city, it meant that this Hill Carrier was extremely powerful.

“Oh right. In exchange for using our services, we would like you to obey several rules, customer,” the female attendant said.

“What are they?” Ye Qing asked.

The female attendant answered, “One, you must set aside your personal grudges and grievances once you set foot inside the Hill of Services. In other words, you are not allowed to cause trouble or start a brawl while you’re still within our premises. Two, we don’t accept credit. If you lack the money to purchase our product or services, then you will have to offer up a collateral. And three, the Hill of Services do not take responsibility for any grudges and grievances you may incur within our premises.”

“Understood.” Ye Qing nodded in understanding.

He had heard of these rules before. It was why the Hill of Services was considered a safe zone where everyone could rest in peace and safety. Some desperate people also used it as a refuge to hide from their enemies—but only if they had the money to afford the lodging, of course. If someone ran out of money, then the Hill Carrier would throw them out of the Hill of Services no matter who they were.

The first thing Ye Qing saw upon entering the Hill of Services was a wide plaza. Covered in wooden tiles, three sides of the plaza were filled with countless crisscrossing stairs that led toward different pavilions, towers and rooms.

“Where would you like to go first, customer?” The female attendant asked.

“I would like to fill my belly. Please take me to the Wine Tower,” Ye Qing said after a quick glance.

One of the Four Towers, the Wine Tower was the place where all the restaurants, eateries and more were concentrated. It was located at the center of the Hill of Services.

The moment he entered the Wine Tower, Ye Qing was immediately stunned by its luxurious, exquisite decor. Zhennan wood adorned the floors, gem flowers embedded the ceilings, carved balustrades and marble steps marked the paths, and masterful calligraphy and paintings adorned the walls. The furniture were made of pear wood, the cups and plates from white jade, and the chopsticks from ivory, and witty symbols and messages from hundreds of flowers.

Here, there was golden luxury and elegant literary culture, down-to-earth folksongs and high-sounding classics and more. The Wine Tower wasn’t just on par with so-called best restaurants of the region such as Number One of Bei You or Beauty Pageant Palace. It was, in some ways, better.

Right now, the Wine Tower was almost completely full, and most of them were *jianghu* warriors. They were mostly seated in groups, and they were eating, drinking and playing games to their heart’s content.

Ye Qing couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow at the bustling scene. Noticing his expression, the female attendant asked, “We are at the first floor and the main dining hall, customer. There are private rooms on the second and third floor for those who prefer silence and privacy. Would you like to go there?”

“Sure. Let’s head to the second floor,” Ye Qing replied. He didn’t actually mind the rambunctious atmosphere himself, but he wasn’t sure if it was safe for Giggie to appear in public. Besides, he wasn’t lacking in wealth, so why not?

“Can I ask you something, Miss?”

After they entered a private room on the second floor, Ye Qing looked at the female attendant and asked a question.

“But of course, customer,” the female attendant replied.



Ye Qing peered through the window slits at the crowd below while asking curiously, “Is something happening in the Hill of Services or something? Why are there so many people?”

Although the Hill Carrier was beloved by traveling merchants and wanderers alike, they were currently in the middle of nowhere and far, far away from civilization. So, how was it possible for this Hill of Services to gather this many customers? Some restaurants wished their business was this good.

You don’t know?” The female attendant looked surprised and puzzled.

“Should I know something?” Ye Qing shrugged.

“My deepest apologies, customer. I should’ve known better than to assume.” The female attendant apologized before explaining, “You see, tomorrow is our triennially held Treasure Appreciation Auction, and it is quite popular with our customers. Every time it is held, our Hill of Services would be packed with people.”

“Treasure Appreciation Auction?” Ye Qing raised a curious eyebrow.

The female attendant explained patiently, “The Hill Carrier travels to many places, so he often stumbles upon all sorts of rare, precious treasures. Besides that, some of our customers put up collateral such as natural treasures, martial arts manuals and more to purchase our products and services, but are unable to redeem them before their time runs out. In that case, we would claim those possessions as our own permanently.”

“That is why we held a triennial Treasure Appreciation Auction. We don’t need an ever-growing hoard of items that we don’t really need, you see.”

“I see. Thank you for the explanation.” Ye Qing nodded. Long story short, they were holding an auction.

As the female attendant said, the Hill Carrier must possess a lot of valuable treasures since he often journeyed to many places and traded with various travelers and Stranger Hunters. It was definitely worth checking out.

“You’re too kind, customer,” the female attendant replied politely. “The auction will be taking place at the Si Hour[2] tomorrow at Popularity Tower. If you wish to participate in the Treasure Appreciation Auction, I can take you there when the time comes.”

“Thank you. I am in your hands.” Ye Qing smiled.

“It is my responsibility.”

The face Ye Qing was currently using was perfectly ordinary, and yet his smile was positively infectious. Try as she might, the female attendant could not help but feel some affection for him. “Speaking of which, what would you like to eat, customer?”

Ye Qing asked, “What are your recommendations?”

The female attendant smiled. “Our signature dishes are called ‘Nine Suns Scorching Heaven’ and ‘Wind Flower Snow Moon’. Would you like to give them a taste?”

“Can you tell me more?” Ye Qing blinked curiously.

The female attendant launched into an explanation, “‘Nine Suns Scorching Heaven’ is a wine our brewer created using nine fire-attribute spirit fruits such as Fire Date, Yang Pear, Sun Fruit and more. The ingredients are brewed together with a century-old Cold Spring for eighty-one days to create a most delicious and potent spirit wine. It is cool, sweet and refreshing when it initially enters your mouth, but once it enters your stomach, it would burn like nine suns scorching the heavens.”

Besides its unique, fiery taste, it could strengthen one’s body and assist those who cultivate yang or fire.”

“The ‘Wind Flower Snow Moon’ refers to four strange dishes, and all of them are made from a Phenomenon-class Stranger. ‘Wind’ is a roasted Wind Caller, ‘Flower’ is a Flowering Fish that we cooked using a special, secret method, ‘Snow’ is a fried Snow Velvet Rabbit, and ‘Moon’ is a boiled Moon Lotus Seed.”

“Each and every strange dish is perfect in terms of appearance, taste and smell. Not only that, they can assist your cultivation in various ways as well.”

“So, spirit wine and spirit dishes, huh? They sound fantastic,” Ye Qing complimented while scratching his nose. “That said, they can’t be cheap, right?”

The female attendant smiled. “Each individual dish and wine cost five hundred silvers each.”

Chapter 616: Impending Danger

“Five hundred silver?”

Ye Qing gasped a little. That was two thousand and five hundred silver in total. Simply insane!

With that much money, he could eat abalone, shark fin soup and all the expensive food every day, and it would still take him three to five *years* before he used them all.

“But! If you order ‘Nine Suns Scorching Heaven’ and ‘Wind Flower Snow Moon’ together, then it will cost only one thousand and five hundred silver. It’s a massive discount!” The female attendant added.

“Haha...” What else could he do but laugh? It was admittedly a massive discount, but it was still a meal that cost one thousand and five hundred silvers! Eating food? No, he was eating money!

In his estimation, he was only going to spend three to five hundred silver at this place. But now, a single meal was going to cost him one thousand and five hundred silver. This was before lodging and the money he might spend at tomorrow’s auction too!

They all said that it was easier to make a living as a Hill Carrier than a robber. He finally understood why.

“So? What is your decision, customer?” The female attendant asked.

*How about no?* Ye Qing thought in his head. *I may be rich, but being rich and being wasteful are two completely different things!*

“Ahem... I think I’m just going to order a couple of ordinary dishes and a jar of fine wine.” Ye Qing replied a little meekly before explaining himself in a hurry, “I need to save the rest for tomorrow’s Treasure Appreciation Auction, you know?”

“Sure. Please give me a moment,” The female attendant replied smilingly. Although Ye Qing did not take her up on her offer, she did not disrespect him or act disdainful in any way.

“Oh right, do you have a sweet-tasting wine that is also low alcohol? If you do, then please bring me a jar as well,” Ye Qing added. He had almost forgotten about Giggle.

“Yes, we do. Your order will be served very quickly.”

After the female attendant was gone, Ye Qing released Giggle from the Dragon Nursing Net.

As soon as the little guy appeared, it immediately circled around the room while stretching its arm wide like a bird. Its laughter resounded throughout the room.

After it was done satisfying its curiosity, it sat at the window sill and examined the crowd below quietly. It seemed to be listening to the customers’ conversation and searching for someone.

As promised, the meal was served just a short while later. There were three dishes, one soup and two jars of wine. Both the food and the wine were perfectly ordinary, but it still cost Ye Qing over eighty silver. It was an expensive meal to say the least.

At least the food was delicious, and the wine was rich and sweet. For a traveler who was weary from their journey and had to eat and sleep in the open for heavens-know-how-long, this was practically divine.

“Let’s drink, Giggle.”

After the female attendant left, Ye Qing poured Giggle a cup of Honey Flower Brew.

Honey Flower Brew was brewed using a very special spirit flower known as the Honey Flower. Its pollen was sweet like honey, and the wine brewed from its flower shared the same taste and floral scent. It was why it was an excellent wine for children and old people.

A hint of sorrow flickered in Giggle’s eyes as it looked away from the dining hall. But when it saw the Honey Flower Brew, it perked up immediately and jumped onto the table. When it gave the Honey Flower Brew a sniff and a tentative lick, its eyes immediately curled into happy crescents. Without hesitation, it hugged the wine cup and lapped up the wine to its heart’s content.

Giggle’s happiness was infectious, and Ye Qing felt happy as well. His hunger caught up to him, and he began engorging himself on the food and wine.

.....

“Are you sure they’re in there, Dream Master?”

The speaker was a thin, short, wizened man with a bluish black complexion and a head so sharp that it looked like a pencil.

The man had a weak appearance, but that couldn't be further away from reality. Every inch of his skin and muscle was hard and tough like it was forged from pure metal. The way it glimmered dark in the light also looked quite intimidating.

“Yes, the thief is there. I can sense Nanke's aura from it.”

Next to the thin man, another man dressed in white robes answered. He had a sweet, melodious voice that made it sound like he was singing. Just the few words he spoke was enough to elicit a positive reaction from anyone.

He wasn't exactly male either. To be accurate, he possessed both the handsomeness of a man and the attractiveness of a woman. His face was so extraordinarily beautiful that he almost looked divine. His beauty was such that it almost transcended the concept of gender itself.

“Wonderful. We will finally have his head and the item he stole from us!”

An exceptionally tall and muscular man uttered savagely. He was half a body taller than most, and he was wearing a bloodthirsty grin on his face. “For the crime of robbing The People of the Divine[1], the thief shall pay in blood!”

As he said this, a crimson hue covered up his eyes, and killing intent thick enough to be tangible rolled out of his body. He got ready himself to charge the Hill of Services.

“Calm down, Slaughterer,” said a young woman as she blocked in front of Slaughterer. She had a wholesome figure, and she was wearing a dress with ribbons flying all around her. She was quite beautiful.

“Why are you stopping me, Dancer[2]?” The brawny man immediately glared at the woman. The way the crimson hue in his eyes churned resembled that of a sea of blood.

“Why don't you look at the place in front of you—like, really give it a look—before you rush forward like a bull?” Dancer said softly.

“And why should I? Are you suggesting that a couple of puny ants could lay a hand against me?!” Slaughterer scoffed with dripping disdain.

“Idiot.” The thin man snorted.

“You got something to say to me, Earth Walker?” Slaughterer took one step toward the thin man and glared down on him from above. Blood was starting to slide down his cheeks, and it gave him the appearance of a ghoul.

The thin man didn't look intimidated in the slightest, however. “Yes. You're an absolute buffoon, you know that?”

Before the two could clash, Dream Master spoke up, “Enough. We have business to do.”

His melodious voice was like magic. As soon as he spoke up, the savagery and impatience in Slaughterer's eyes immediately started receding until they looked normal once more. At the same time, his rationality returned to him.

"That is the Hill Carrier, and the Hill Carrier is no weakling. We do not need to fear him, but there is no reason for us to offend him either."

Dream Master analyzed, "Also, I believe that tomorrow is the Hill Carrier's triennial Treasure Appreciation Auction, so the Hill of Services must be full with *jianghu* warriors right now. At least some of them have to be capable warriors, and if we cause too much of a commotion, we may bring unnecessary trouble upon ourselves. Worst case scenario, we might even alert our quarry and allow him to escape."

"What the hell should we do then?" Slaughterer seemed to be afraid of Dream Master because he dared not throw his tantrum in front of the man. Instead, he vented his impatience and frustration by walking in circles.

"For now, inaction seems to be the best course of action," Dream Master said slowly.

"... You're saying we should hide outside the entrance and catch the thief when he reappears?" Slaughterer guessed.

"No, I'm saying we should enter the Hill of Services."

Dream Master said gently, "One, we need to confirm the thief's identity and figure them out as much as possible. Only by knowing our enemy can we guarantee victory."

"Second, the Treasure Appreciation Auction is held only once every three years. I'm sure that we will find many valuable treasures. It is not an opportunity we should miss."

"Last I remembered, neither of us have brought much money with us." Dancer frowned.

"And since when do we have need for money?" Earth Walker said in a low, raspy voice as a sneer spread across his face.

"Earth Walker is right. Someone will pay for us." Dream Master smiled, and it was as if he was standing on a bed of flowers.

"Hahaha! Now that's what I like to hear!" Slaughterer too cracked his fists and laughed savagely.

Earth Walker, Dancer and Dream Master exchanged a glance with each other before they began laughing as well. It sounded like a chorus that resounded throughout the plains.

Chapter 617: I Knew At First Glance

*Knock knock knock!*

The room was silent until a series of knocks shattered it. On the bed, Ye Qing abruptly opened his eyes.

“Are you awake, customer? The Treasure Appreciation Auction will begin soon.”

Still lying on the bed, Ye Qing answered, “I am. Thank you for reminding me, miss.”

The person who knocked on his door was none other than the female attendant from yesterday.

“Okay. Please wash yourself while I prepare your breakfast,” the female attendant said.

“Thank you again,” Ye Qing replied.

Ye Qing did not get out of bed immediately after the female attendant was gone. Instead, he put his hands behind his head and stared at the roof, muttering, “Strange. Why did I sleep so deeply last night? Was I that tired?”

With his power, he should have noticed and awoken the second the female attendant appeared outside his door. In reality, he didn’t. He didn’t awake until she knocked on his door. It was strange to say the least.

Besides that, he had two very strange dreams last night.

The first dream was about him killing Huo Hao, Gu Lady, Slave of Fire and Fifteen Saber. The dream was so detailed and realistic it felt as if he was reliving those moments.

The second dream was even stranger and ludicrous. He had dreamed of a woman dressed like a bride appearing outside his room.

If that was all, he would have chalked it up as a wet dream or something. However, the bride’s appearance was accompanied by the sounds of gongs, drums and suona, but it wasn’t the kind of happy tune that was played during a wedding ceremony. No, the music was slow, dark, and ominous. It was something one might expect to hear at a funeral, not a wedding ceremony.

For the life of him, Ye Qing could not understand why he was having such an unholy dream. He couldn’t sense anything wrong with himself, nor was his danger senses tingling. It was unusual to say the least.

“Screw it. I’ll think about it later.”

A short while later, Ye Qing decided to push it all to the back of his mind, get out of his bed, and go through his morning routine.

By the time he was ready, the female attendant was already waiting outside his door with his breakfast.

The breakfast was just a simple porridge, salted vegetables and a couple of steamed buns. Objectively speaking, it was neither tasty nor appetizing. That said, it was a fulfilling breakfast that would satiate him for a long time.

After Ye Qing had finished breakfast, the female attendant handed him a black cloak and a ghost mask.

“This is a mask and cloak we prepare for all our customers. The cloak can hide your presence, and the mask can hide your appearance. You may wear it if you think it’s necessary.”

“I appreciate the thoughtfulness,” Ye Qing said smilingly. The purpose of the cloak and mask was of course to safeguard one’s identity during the Treasure Appreciation Auction. Without them, it was highly likely that a bidder might be remembered and attacked after they left the premises.

But of course, the actual effectiveness of the items left much to be desired. If someone really wanted to rob a bidder, they could hardly be stopped by a mere cloak and mask.

They were in the middle of nowhere where the only law that applied was the law of the jungle. It was inevitable that carnage would happen once the guests left the Hill of Services.

That said, the jianghu warriors must have already known the risks and had prepared accordingly.

After all, no one would fool around with their lives.

Ye Qing was aware of the effectiveness—or rather lack thereof—of the cloak and mask, but he still put them on and followed the female attendant toward the Popularity Tower. It was where the Treasure Appreciation Auction would be held.

The structures of Hill of Services were ordered from low to high. For example, Wine of the Four Towers was located at the lowest point of the hill, whereas Popularity was located at the highest.

In fact, the Popularity Tower was the highest structure out of everything in the hill. It was because the Eight Pavilions were located on the edges of the hill, circling the Four Towers.

Popularity was the state or condition of being liked, admired, or supported by many people. Therefore, the Popularity Tower was designed to be compatible with most people’s preferences: dazzling, exquisite and luxurious.

By the time they arrived at the Popularity Tower, a lot of people were already waiting at the venue. At the same time, more guests were filing into the tower behind female attendants, and most of them were wearing a cloak and a ghost mask like Ye Qing as well.

The small minority that didn’t must be supremely confident in their own strength.

After entering the Popularity Tower, Ye Qing randomly picked a seat and sat down. Next to the seat was a jade bowl with nail-sized pearls in them.

As soon as he sat down, a small pond suddenly appeared on the ground in front of him. It had lotus flowers floating on the water surface and a single golden koi swimming in the waters.

“Er, what is this for?” Ye Qing asked in confusion. The Popularity Tower isn’t an aquarium too, is it?

The female attendant explained smilingly, “It’s like this. This fish is a Psychic Gold Koi our Hill Carrier raised. It feeds on pearls and is a sentient creature. If an item catches your fancy, and you wish to bid for it, you may simply toss the pearl into the Psychic Gold Koi’s mouth instead of calling out a number. Our host for this auction will automatically register your bid.”

“If you win the bid, you don’t need to pay for it immediately. Our people will meet you and conduct the trade in private after the Treasure Appreciation Auction is over. Just a reminder, but we accept both money and goods for our auction as well.”

“Oh, I see! That explains why so many people are participating in your Treasure Appreciation Auction.”

Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. The bidding would be conducted through the Psychic Gold Koi, so the bidder needed not reveal themselves in any way. The trade would happen in private after the auction was over, so it was impossible to find out who was the receiver of a certain item either.

Thanks to this arrangement, the hopeful orioles and fishermen would not be able to identify their cicadas or clams, much less rob them. It was a much better protection than the cloak and mask they offered.

This was probably one of the reasons why the Hill Carrier’s Treasure Appreciation Auction was so popular.

“You flatter us, customer.” The female attendant shot him a sweet smile.

“We’re competing using these pearls, right? So, how much money does a single pearl represent?” Ye Qing asked while picking up a pearl and examining it closely.

The pearl was round, smooth, and flawless. It was clearly a top grade pearl. If it was sold elsewhere, it would be worth one or two hundred silvers at least. Instead, the Hill Carrier kept it for his auction. He truly was filthy rich.

“A pearl is equal to five hundred silvers,” the female attendant answered.

*Five hundred? That means that the starting bid is five hundred silvers, and each bid must be five hundred or higher. Simply insane.*

Ye Qing was surprised, but he maintained a perfect poker face and replied, “Got it. Thank you, miss.”

“It is only my duty.” The female attendant saluted him. “If there is nothing else, then I shall take my leave. If you need me, then simply shake the bell to your left, and I will know.”

“Got it. Thank you for your trouble.” Ye Qing nodded. The Hill of Services was a money sink, but their quality of service was also top-tier. He literally couldn’t find any fault with it whatsoever.

.....

“What’s that smell?”



After the female attendant was gone, Ye Qing bent down and played with the Psychic Gold Koi a little. It was at this moment a fragrant scent came from the entrance.

The scent was thick, rich, and tempting. Some of the crowd actually succumbed to temptation and began gulping in the scent deeply.

Ye Qing was frowning, however. Unlike most others, he could also smell the choking stench of rot and death in the scent.

The scent grew thicker and thicker. As if on cue, the clinging of jade pendants pierced through the noise, and a gorgeous woman wearing extremely revealing clothes stepped through the entrance.

The woman was accompanied by five children. There were both boys and girls. They were all hopping around the woman jauntily.

“Amorous Mother?!”

“Why is she here?”

There was a moment of silence when the guests saw the woman. Then, cries of shock, loathing, fear and more broke out.

Ye Qing knew nothing about the “Amorous Mother”, but he could tell at first glance that, despite her perfectly human features, she was no human.

Chapter 618: Ancestor Greenwood

To be specific, the woman in front of him wasn’t a living, breathing human. She was a corpse.

Ye Qing knew this because he couldn’t sense a sliver of vitality or vigor from her whatsoever. Moreover, unlike most other people around him, the “fragrant” scent she was giving off smelled rotten and disgusting, dark and desolate to his senses.

Those who inhaled too much of the scent would most likely be possessed by death qi and transformed into a half-corpse.

Amorous Mother was no human. Naturally, her five children weren’t human either.

“Slurp...”

Seemingly afraid of all the attention they were receiving, the five children had hidden behind Amorous Mother. They were currently peeking out from her back and examining the crowd.

Ye Qing heard the sound of someone sucking in their saliva though. The kids weren’t afraid at all. No, they were hungry.

He knew this because he could see the bloodthirst and madness swirling in their eyes. Like ferocious tigers that had been starved for days, they were just barely holding themselves back from drinking the blood and devouring the flesh of the sweet, tender lambs before them.

The children weren’t the only ones who harbored such desires. Amorous Mother herself was licking her lips constantly. Her appearance might look gentle and inviting, but her heart harbored even greater madness, bloodthirst and desire than her children.

“Don’t stare at me like that! You’re scaring my kids! To me, children!”

Amorous Mother scolded the crowd before her stomach slowly split open to reveal her womb. Not a moment too soon, the five children rushed to enter her belly or more accurately, her womb.

A few breaths later, all five children had crawled into Amorous Mother's womb. It was a stunning, unbelievable moment to put it mildly. Her stomach slowly healed back to normal after the children were inside, though now she looked like she was ten months pregnant.

Amorous Mother rubbed her belly and shot the stunned crowd a seductive wink. "If you like me that much, why don't you come visit me at my house after the Treasure Appreciation Auction is over? I promise you'll be able to see everything."

"Ahem..."

Everyone who knew about Amorous Mother coughed twice and looked away from the woman.

*Sorry, but I don't think I want to visit any woman at a grave.*

That's right. Amorous Mother lived at a grave. Legend had it that Amorous Mother was originally a dead woman buried at a grave. She was gorgeous beyond imagination when she was alive, and she was buried at a place of supreme yin, which prevented her corpse from rotting. Over time, she actually looked better and almost lifelike thanks to the nurturing effects of the yin qi.

Later, a cultist accidentally stumbled upon the female corpse and found her to be irresistible. So, he copulated with her.

Absolute yin gave birth to yang, and absolute yang gave birth to yin. The miraculous balance and co-existence between yin and yang was how all living things came to be. The female corpse was an object of absolute yin. After it received an injection of yang qi, it actually gained sentience and became aware for the first time. Not only that, it—no, she—even became pregnant.

Although the female corpse was now sentient, her body was still dead. Therefore, her infant was born dead as well.

At first, the female corpse was so weak that she could only tempt weak humans such as travelers and scholars to her grave before killing them to consume their blood and essence. Later, she grew strong enough to kill the cultist who raped her, dug out his heart and ate it raw. Since then, she called herself Amorous Mother and roamed Bei Mo as a vile monster whose very name could turn one's blood into ice.

That was why no one who knew about Amorous Mother's background wanted to catch her attention. They didn't have a death wish after all.

"Ahem... they may be unwilling, but I am, beauty. I'll pay you a visit at your house—or maybe you can pay me a visit at my house. I promise you that my bed is huge and comfortable."

The dead silence was just starting to grow uncomfortable when a weak, ancient voice came from a corner of the hall. When Ye Qing turned to look, he saw that the speaker was a listless old man with a face full of wrinkles.

The old man looked like he had one, no, one and a half feet in the grave. He had barely spoken a few sentences, but that was enough to make him pant and send him into a coughing fit.

Bro, I think you should worry about your health more than your lower brother. Can you even get on top of your bed, much less use it for more vigorous activities? Ye Qing mentally ranted.

Despite his thoughts, he knew that the old man was no ordinary person. It was because not a single person dared to sit or stand within twenty meters of him. When the crowd saw that he was the speaker, they even blanched and soundlessly shuffled further away from him. If he wasn't mistaken, the crowd feared him more than they feared even Amorous Mother.

Before Amorous Mother could react, a somewhat frivolous, teasing voice came from the entrance. "Can you even get it up, Weak Old Man? You look like you might die any moment."

The speaker was a man in his thirties. He was handsome and holding a white paper fan. He looked a little like a young noble, except his hands, feet and neck and other parts of his body were exposed. The exposed skin were verdant green in color, spotty, and cracked like the bark of an old tree. It was an odd appearance to say the least.

"Ancestor Greenwood? I didn't think he would come."

"This year's Treasure Appreciation Auction must be really special. I can't believe that powerhouses like Amorous Mother, Weak Old Man and Ancestor Greenwood have all shown up."

"It's not just them. I saw Red Calabash Celestial, Defeated and Actor at the scene as well."

"Really? Heh! It looks like this Treasure Appreciation Auction is gonna be a real interesting one."

Everywhere in the hall, the people were murmuring in small voices. Thanks to Ye Qing's powerful demonic thought, he was able to keep up with all of them.

Out of everyone the crowd was discussing, Ye Qing had only heard of Ancestor Greenwood and Defeated.

Ancestor Greenwood was a Half-Step Grandmaster and the eighty-third warrior on the Black List. Despite his youthful appearance, he was actually over a hundred years old already. He just happened to cultivate a special martial art that allowed him to preserve his youthful appearance using plant energy. It was how he earned his moniker.

The reason Ancestor Greenwood was named on the Black List was because he was an exceptionally lecherous man. He especially adored another man's wife<sup>[1]</sup> and would stoop to any low to obtain the women of his desires. Hence, he was loathed by all men righteous and orthodox.

Defeated was the one they called "the man who never wins" in the jianghu. He too was named on the Black List and ranked at ninety-fifth.

In fact, Defeated wasn't weaker than Ancestor Greenwood. He was ranked behind the old man not because he was weak, but because he wasn't as notorious.

Defeated was a neutral man who did whatever he felt like. He was obsessed with martial arts and especially fond of challenging others into a duel. Unfortunately for him, he lost most of his fights.

It wasn't because he was weak, however. It was simply because he only challenged those who were stronger or more experienced than him. As he never challenged a warrior who was weaker than him, he naturally lost more fights than he won. That was how he gained his moniker, and why people called him "the man who never wins".

Despite his moniker, few people dared to make an enemy out of Defeated. After all, he was a man who constantly challenged those who were stronger than him... and survived. That in itself was the proof of his strength. Even those who only believed in black-and-white qualifications could not underestimate him as he was ranked seventh on the Human Champions Ranking. Cultivation wise, he was a step away from entering the Grandmaster stage.

Ye Qing was stronger than most of the people at the scene. Naturally, he could sense that there were plenty of strong warriors—all of them on par with Ancestor Greenwood and Amorous Mother at least—in the hall as well. He too wanted to know the Treasure Appreciation Auction was offering that elites from both sides of the jianghu decided to show their faces.

"Cough! Cough. I may be frail, but I'm still younger than you. Therefore, I must be stronger than you in that department," Weak Old Man answered slowly.

"So what if I'm old? I'm hale and hearty despite my ears, alright?" Ancestor Greenwood chuckled. "I'll prove it to you another day if you don't believe me."

Weak Old Man did not say anything else after that. He simply looked away and coughed softly into his hand.

"Hahaha... come, my beautiful Amorous Mother. Allow me to bask in your company." Ancestor Greenwood laughed loudly when he received no answer from Weak Old Man. He then grabbed Amorous Mother's hand and led her to the side of the hall.

"Sure. I've been looking forward to witnessing your strength myself."

Amorous Mother did not reject him. She put on a bit of false resistance before taking a seat beside Ancestor Greenwood.

#### Chapter 619: Cock Bowl

The appearance of Amorous Mother, Weak Old Man and Ancestor Greenwood added some tension to the Popularity Tower. At the very least, it was no longer as lively and excited as before.

As time passed, more and more people gathered in the Popularity Tower. A good number of them were powerful warriors such as Amorous Mother.

Naturally, Ye Qing got to see the Calabash Celestial and Defeated as well.

Calabash Celestial was a sloven old man in his fifties or sixties. He had a red brandy nose and reeked of alcohol. The man looked like he had just crawled out of the bottom of the table and was nothing like a celestial.

Defeated was a wooden-looking middle-aged man with an ordinary appearance. Seemingly living in his own world, he sat quietly at a corner as soon as he entered the Popularity Tower. He did not fit in with the people around him at all.

*Dang!*

A bell was struck when every seat in the Popularity Table was filled. Then, the doors slammed shut with a loud bang.

A rotund, jubilant-looking man appeared at the center of the stage. He was none other than the Hill Carrier himself.

“Hahaha! Good day, everyone! I am Xi Duoduo, the host of this Treasure Appreciation Auction.”

“First, I would like to thank everyone for showing up at my humble hill despite your day-to-day. I am most honored to be graced by the presence of so many.”

Xi Duoduo was all smiles, and his eyes were narrowed into slits as he continued, “I’m sure you already know our rules and bidding method, so I shan’t repeat them and waste everyone’s time. I’ll just emphasize three points succinctly. One, you will not fight or disrupt the Treasure Appreciation Auction in any way. Amiability makes you rich, not violence. Two, please don’t bid over your ability to pay. We don’t accept takebacks, so please don’t do something that both of us are going to regret.”

“Finally, we accept both money and goods as payment, but not credit payment. My humble apologies, but my humble hill simply doesn’t make enough money to afford such a service.”

“That is all. Are there any questions?”

“Cut the bullshit and get started already!” Someone yelled impatiently.

“Haha... it looks like everyone’s eager for the Treasure Appreciation Auction to begin. Very well! I hereby declare that the auction is officially open!”

After Xi Duoduo was done, a lotus flower slowly grew out of the stage. It bloomed and swayed lightly to the wind.

A white, porcelain bowl appeared from the center of the lotus, and a huge, red cock was painted on its surface. It looked so lifelike and jubilant that it felt alive.

“This is the first item we’ll be auctioning today. It’s a Hatred-class Strange Artifact called the Cock Bowl.”

Xi Duoduo pointed at the bowl and began his introduction. “I’ll be the first to admit that this Strange Artifact has a lousy name, but as the saying goes, one should not judge a book by its cover. Any object you deposit in this bowl will become as crunchy and tasty as chicken.”

“You are all seasoned travelers, so I shouldn’t need to tell you about the harshness of the wilderness. Imagine spending months in the wild with only hard rations to eat, and cold water to drink. Your mouth feels so bland you almost feel like eating dirt sometimes. But if you have this Strange Artifact, then you can imbue even the blended ration with the delicious taste of chicken. What’s not to like?”

How about everything? Countless people thought and rolled their eyes at the same time.

It was one thing if the Cock Bowl could transform any object into chicken meat, but no, it simply gave it the taste of chicken. This might be useful for those with a special fondness of chicken or gluttonous people in general, but for a warrior, it was completely useless.

“The Cock Bowl is a must-have for any traveler. Why suffer the blandness in your mouth when you can have chicken?” Xi Duoduo ignored the crowd’s disdainful gazes and declared loudly, “The starting bid is one pearl. Begin!”

In the end, someone bought the Cock Bowl for two pearls. It was a lousy opener to say the least.

“Alright. The next item is quite the extraordinary object. It gets cold when it is scorched by fire, and it gets hot when it is chilled by ice. Warm during winter but cold during summer, it is rare even considering all the extraordinary treasures in this world.” Xi Duoduo kept the crowd in suspense. “Why don’t you try guessing what it is, dear customers? If you get it right, I have a mystery reward for you!”

“Mystery reward? What is it?” That piqued the crowd’s interest.

“Well, it’s called a mystery reward. I can’t reveal it until the time is right, can I?” Xi Duoduo smiled. “I can tell you that it is worth at least a thousand silver though!”

“Ah…”

If the offer simply piqued their interest, now it had their full attention. One thousand silver wasn’t a lot, but it was by no means a small number either; not for the majority of the crowd at least.

The early bird gets the worm, so the people did not hesitate to throw their best guesses at Xi Duoduo.

“It’s the Ice Soul Flower!”

“The Fire Rock Fish!”

“It’s gotta be the Winter Cicada, right?”

“The Sunset Bird!”

“The Burning Ice!”

“The Heatless Water!”

.....

“Hahaha... unfortunately, none of you got it right so far. Keep guessing, everyone!” Xi Duoduo beamed.

“It gets cold when it is scorched by fire, hot when it is chilled by ice. It is also warm during winter and cold during summer...”

Ye Qing thought quietly as he rubbed his chin. “Could it be the legendary Reverse Cat?”

The Reverse Cat was a very unique Disaster-class Stranger that exuded the opposite qualities when it was subjected to a certain environment. For example, the Reverse Cat would burst into flames in a winter snowland, become encased in ice when it was exposed to the hot sun, turn pitch black at a bright place, and turn as bright as a torchfire in darkness.

Ye Qing didn’t think that was it though. The Reverse Cat fit the description of the mysterious tem fit to a certain extent, but it was hardly perfect.

Ye Qing wasn’t the only knowledgeable person in the room, and Ancestor Greenwood proved that by voicing out the exact same answer, “Is it the Reverse Cat?”

“Hahaha, no.” Xi Duoduo clarified, “The Reverse Cat does share similar characteristics to the object I just described, but as I said before, it is an item, not a Stranger. Please, try again.”

“Unfortunately, I can think of nothing else.” Ancestor Greenwood shook his head.

“Hehehe. How about I give y’all another hint? This item isn’t just rare, there is no one in the jianghu who hasn’t heard of it,” Xi Duoduo continued.

.....

The guessing continued for a bit, but no one managed to get it right. In the end, someone finally lost their patience and yelled,

“How does that even make sense? Are you toying with us, Xi Duoduo?”

“Yeah! What the hell turns cold when it’s hot, and turns hot when it’s cold, and is known to everyone in the jianghu? It can’t possibly be the Wenliang Pearl, can it?”

“Hahaha! Congratulations, customer! It is the Wenliang Pearl!”

As soon as the guy finished talking, Xi Duoduo barked out a laugh and pointed a finger at him.

“W-What?”

For a second, the guesser looked completely baffled. I was just making a joke! It was actually the answer?!

“The Wenliang Pearl? Are you for real?” Everyone else was staring at Xi Duoduo with stunned faces, however. Some had even risen to their feet.

Even the disinterested Ancestor Greenwood, Weak Old Man and more subconsciously turned back at the stage with a hint of astonishment.

Chapter 620: The Wenliang Pearl

“Of course it’s real. I never practice fraud.”

Very pleased with the crowd’s reactions, Xi Duoduo waved his hands and summoned a pearl into existence. It floated on the stage so that everyone could see it.

The pearl was about the size of a cat’s eye and sky blue in color. Round, smooth and flawless, it looked as if an infinite universe was held within its tiny confines, mysterious and profound.

Anyone could tell that the pearl was no ordinary object.

“There may be some who aren’t familiar with the Wenliang Pearl’s background, so allow me to give a brief introduction.”

Xi Duoduo began, “It was said that three thousand years ago, there existed a country named Xiliang to the southwest of the continent. Its founder and ruler was an extraordinary woman named Wenliang.”

“Wenliang was a gentlewoman of a literary family until a great tragedy destroyed it all in a single night. Wenliang was able to escape her family’s destruction, but as a gentlewoman, she simply wasn’t equipped with the tools to survive the harshness of the world. As a result, she fell into the jianghu and had to suffer all forms of humiliations just to survive another day.”

“By coincidence, Wenliang obtained a mysterious pearl that, as if by the hands of a god, transformed her into a wealthy businesswoman in just a matter of years. Not only that, she became quite the powerful warriorress as well.”

“It was a chaotic period, so countless people were destitute, homeless, and with no way to make a living. Wenliang may be a woman, but her breasts are bigger than any man’s in more ways than one. Armed with her wealth and status, she rescued the poor and downtrodden, made friends with the brave and good, and slowly built up her strength over time.”

“When she realized that the imperial court she served was rotten to its core, and the corrupted held all the power, she rose up in arms, gathered the strength of the people, and overturned the existing regime in just three days. She then named it Xiliang and called herself the Xiliang King.”

“During the first decade or two after she claimed the throne, Wenliang worked hard to govern her country and strengthen the people’s livelihood. She also opened her borders to all four seas to bolster the economy. As a result, Xiliang enjoyed a prosperous period, and the people were happy.”



“Unfortunately, Wenliang’s personality underwent a drastic change after she entered old age. She became moody, paranoid, and prone to jealousy. She constantly suspected that someone was aiming for her throne and pearl and killed countless innocents because of it. If the people held a gathering, she would suspect that a rebellion was brewing and order an execution. If her court subjects held a feast, she also suspected that they were plotting against her and killed them all. Even her own children weren’t free from her suspicion and were either disposed of or imprisoned.”

“For a time, there was no trust between king and subject, and no peace to be found among the people. They were so scared they didn’t even dare to talk to each other in the open.

Xi Duoduo paused for a moment before asking, “What do you think happened after that?”

No one answered him, so Xi Duoduo continued the story without a shred of embarrassment whatsoever, “Eventually, both Wenliang’s court subjects and her people reached a boiling point and rebelled against her. They broke into the palace and slew Wenliang.”

“However, that was not the end of the story. In three days after Wenliang’s death, three strange incidents occurred in Xiliang. On the first day, the rebels dug six feet into the ground in search of the mysterious pearl that won Wenliang her throne but was unable to find it anywhere. On the next day, Wenliang’s corpse suddenly vanished into thin air. On the third day, a rain of blood suddenly fell from the sky, and every man and woman in Xiliang transformed into a monster who only knew slaughter.”

“Xiliang had both come into existence and collapsed into ruins in three days, and it was all thanks to Wenliang. Wenliang herself had turned over a new leaf and died a horrible death because of her pearl. That is why those who came after decided to name it the Wenliang Pearl.”

“Despite its mysterious disappearance, the Wenliang Pearl continued to make an appearance here and there for the past three thousand years. Two thousand years ago, it fell into the possession of ‘Humanity’s Grace’ Wen Qianqiu two thousand years ago. A thousand years ago, ‘The Loathed and Praised’ Tang Jingcai became its new owner. Eight hundred years ago, it was owned by the so-called number one champion of Spring and Autumn, the ‘Dark Overlord’ Li Hentian. And three hundred years ago, it was owned by the ludicrously wealthy businessman ‘Millionaire’ Shen Wanjin...”

*Li Hentian? The “Dark Overlord” Li Hentian?*

Ye Qing was just enjoying the story when the name suddenly jolted him out of his daydream. He did not realize that the Wenliang Pearl was connected to the Dark Overlord.

Besides Li Hentian, everyone Xi Duoduo mentioned was an incredibly famous person in history as well.

For example, “Humanity’s Grace” Wen Qianqiu was also known as the Gentleman of Three. The three in his nickname referred to his appearance, his talent, and his martial arts.

It was said that Wen Qianqiu was gorgeous unlike anything the world had ever seen despite being a man. Words of compliments that were usually reserved for women were lavished on his person, and it was no exaggeration to say that countless men and women had fallen for him at first sight.

Besides that, Wen Qianqiu was exceedingly talented in all things civil. His talent in literature was unmatched, capable of composing poems at a whim and writing entire books and documents without pause. As if that wasn’t enough, he was well-versed in economics and medicine as well.

He was also a pinnacle warrior. It was said that his sword qi stretched as long as fifteen thousand kilometers, and the light of his sword could chill nineteen provinces. The number of people who could match him in the entire world could be counted on one hand.

Most people could not hope to become the pinnacle of even one way, but Wen Qianqiu had three to his name. That was why the people called him “Humanity’s Grace”.

“The Loathed and Praised” Tang Jingcai was the prime minister of the You Empire of the Mingshi Era. Tang Jingcai possessed a weak background but a talent few others possessed, but he was unable to score well in the imperial examination no matter how hard he worked. Later, he entered the service of the prince with the weakest position, Prince Mingshi as his advisor.

Acting as Prince Mingshi’s strategist, he employed all sorts of dark and cruel ways to pave the way for Prince Mingshi to claim the throne. Grateful for everything Tang Jingcai had done for him, Prince Mingshi made him his prime minister and a ruler of all except the emperor himself.

After becoming the prime minister, Tang Jingcai reformed the government and promoted methods to enrich the people and strengthen their military. In just a matter of years, the once weak and poor You Empire had become powerful and strong.

On the other hand, Tang Jingcai was a selfish, power hungry bastard. Not only did he form cliques for his personal interest, eliminated anyone who dared to defy him, and monopolized all the power for himself, he even killed Emperor Mingshi via poison and made the three-year-old prince the emperor. This allowed him to appoint himself the Emperor’s Mentor. By holding the stupidly young emperor hostage, he was able to yank the Dukes around like dogs and rule the realm as he pleased.

Tang Jingcai’s merits were undeniable, but his sins were just as great. That was why he came to be known as “The Loathed and Praised”.

As for ‘Millionaire’ Shen Wanjin[1], now that was a name even the ordinary people were aware of. A legend in Chu, it was said that he had started from the very bottom and grinded his way up until he became the number one imperial merchant of Chu. He was so wealthy that he was also called the ‘Wealthiest of the Four’. Out of the four major countries, the wealthiest country in the world was Chu, and the wealthiest family in Chu was the Shen Clan. It should not need to be said how wealthy he was.

Wenliang, Wen Qianqiu, Tang Jingcai, Li Hentian, and Shen Wanjin were all one of a kind and a defining symbol of their era. Assuming that Xi Diudiu wasn't lying, and they really all owned the Wenliang Pearl once upon a time, one could not help but wonder if their successes were connected to it.

“Are... Are you for real?”

Everyone's breathing quickened when the realization struck them. Suddenly, the floating pearl on the stage seemed much, much more attractive than before.

“To tell you all the truth, we aren't too sure if there is a connection between the Wenliang Pearl and those famous persons. After all, they are no longer in this world, and there is no concrete evidence to prove such a connection. It is simply something we deduced judging from existing historical records, official documents, and jianghu rumors.”

Xi Duoduo smiled. “It is up to you to decide whether it is the truth or not.”

“One more thing. The Wenliang Pearl was mentioned in ‘Identifying Truths’, and it is stated that the pearl possesses the power to transform one into a man among men, dragon among dragons... but at the price of a horrible end.”

“Identifying Truths” was a book authored by a jianghu warrior named Tian Xingzi, and Tian Xingzi was an exceptionally erudite man who specialized in identifying objects. The book described all sorts of ways to identify a certain object or treasure, and it was treated as a guiding principle by all appraisers who came after.

There were tons of existing copies of “Identifying Truths” all across the world, so Xi Duoduo couldn't be lying about this part. There was no way he would sully his own reputation as a Hill Carrier for a joke either. This meant that Tian Xingzi must have seen the Wenliang Pearl and made such a remark.

Assuming that what Tian Xingzi said was true, then it would certainly explain the ups and downs of Wenliang, Wen Qianqiu, Tang Jingcai, Li Hentian and Shen Wanjin's life.

At the beginning, they were all nobodies that no one gave a damn about. Later, they experienced a meteoric rise and became one of, if not the greatest person of their era. Unfortunately, none of them had met a good end.