

Stranger 71

Chapter 71: Plot Within Plot

Lady Poison's true name was Cheng Mei. She was a master in the art of poisoning, and the deadliest and most subtle poison was called the Bone Melter. As its name would suggest, it was a colorless, odorless, and airborne poison that liquefied the bones and rotted the flesh if it was breathed in. It only took a short time for her victim to melt into a fleshy puddle. Her ability to kill invisibly was why she came to be known as Lady Poison.

Lady Poison had poisoned Ye Qing with the Bone Melter while he was killing Yan Yuming. She believed that there was no way he would notice as he was distracted. Once he was dead, she would speak with the patriarch of the Zheng Clan, Zheng Feng and request that he rewarded her for taking revenge for Yan Tieyi.

Zheng Feng and Yan Tieyi were sworn brothers and incredibly close. It was natural that he would want to take revenge for Yan Tieyi. He would surely reward her handsomely once he had taken over the Iron Shirt Gang. With luck, he might even make her a Hallmaster.

Of course, the plan hinged on the fact that Ye Qing did not notice the poisoning... and he did.

I need to run!

That was the only thought in Lady Poison's mind even as she frantically backed away from Ye Qing. However, she hadn't even moved three meters away from her original location when the air around her abruptly hardened like it was a solid object. She could still move, but she might as well be immobile at the pace she was going.

"Ahhhh! I will kill you even if it's the last thing I do!" Lady Poison screamed, knowing that it was do or die. Without hesitation, she discharged a cold, dark green true qi that spread to the surroundings in just an instant. Greenish flames crackled within the true qi, and the plants within the main hall withered in the blink of an eye.

Everyone except Ye Qing backed away from the true qi in an instant. Those who had seen the art in action before immediately recognized it as the Green Phosphorus Art. In essence, the Green Phosphorus Art was a poisonous gas made of dozens of deadly poisons. When mixed with true qi, it would create a phosphorus flame that was highly toxic. Anyone who touched the sparks would immediately catch the poison and fall dead in a very short time, and as the practitioner of the art, Lady Poison could spread the poison gas with her true qi and poison everyone and everything within a certain range.

"Oooh, a fellow flame practitioner?"

Ye Qing paid the phosphorus flames no heed, however. He simply raised his left hand and unleashed the Netherflame. Not only did Lady Poison's true qi caught on fire as soon as the Netherflame made contact with it, the Netherflame easily overwhelmed—no, *devoured* the phosphorus flame and advanced quickly toward Lady Poison.

Bang bang bang!

Knowing that her life was in grave danger, Lady Poison immediately detonated the pimples and warts covering her whole body. As it turned out, the pimples were hiding many insects that looked like winged centipedes, and they all flew toward Ye Qing from multiple directions.

“You were raising these bugs with your own flesh? Isn’t that a little too much?”

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes a little and clenched his left fist. The Netherflame descended on top of the centipede swarm and turned them to ash without a sound.

“Ahhh... my Phosphorus Centipedes!” Lady Poison screeched in pain and sorrow, but she didn’t dare to linger for even a second longer. She immediately made a run for the exit. However, she stiffened yet again after she took her first step, and it was a different sensation from last time. If it felt like she was wading through extremely hard water before, now her entire body was stiff to the point it felt like full-body paralysis. She couldn’t see her own face, but her complexion had turned bluish black.

Poison? Am I poisoned?

The thought flitted across Lady Poison’s mind. Then, her consciousness blurred, and she abruptly collapsed on the floor.

It’s too—

She couldn’t even form a full thought before she died.

Lady Poison had poisoned countless people her entire life, and in the end, it was a poison that took her life. It was terribly ironic to put it mildly.

“I gave you an out, and you still chose this path. Some people just can’t be helped.” Ye Qing let out a soft sigh before snapping his fingers. A wisp of Netherflame landed on Lady Poison’s corpse and turned it into ash in an instant. With that done, he clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention and said,

“Well, it’s unfortunate we have to lose another one of our members, but I am glad that the rest of you are intelligent people!”

He smiled, but it only left the attendees feeling chilled to the core.

“Hallmaster Ruan, you’re one of the three Keepers now. Congratulations!”

“R-Right! Thanks, boss!” Ruan Hongluo was caught off guard at first, but happiness quickly took over when she realized she had been promoted.

Before Ye Qing left, he swept his gaze across the hall one last time and said, “I said this before, and I’m going to say it one more time. What happened within these walls stays within these walls, understand?”

“As you command!”

Behind him, everyone bowed toward him and answered as respectfully as they could!

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Qiao Residence, Rainflower Rest.

“How unexpected. I thought you didn’t have time for my humble abode?”

Qiao Six was sitting at his usual seat and cooking a pot of tea. He looked a lot more relaxed and carefree compared to the last time he saw him.

“Well, I can’t leave my brother alone for long, can I?” Ye Qing answered smilingly while sitting opposite of the information broker.

“And you are... Tao Xian, the Sick Scholar?!” Qiao Six looked at the sick-looking man standing behind Ye Qing with a look of obvious puzzlement. “It’s only been a few days. When did you join the Iron Shirt Gang, Joyless?”

Ye Qing shook and nodded his head in succession. “I didn’t join the Iron Shirt Gang, but the Iron Shirt Gang belongs to me.”

“Okay, my age must be catching up to me, because that sentence makes no sense to me at all!” Qiao Six shook his head wistfully while rubbing his fingers across a tea cup.

Tao Xian chose this moment to speak up, “Don’t you get it yet, Master Six? Boss Ye has become the leader of our Iron Shirt Gang!”

“What?” Qiao Six exclaimed in disbelief. Beside him, Hong Yu was so stunned that her hands shook, and she accidentally spilled some tea across the table. A refreshing scent filled the pavilion quickly.

“If you’re the boss, then what happened to Yan Tieyi?” Zuo Yiyan blurted.

Ye Qing sipped his tea and closed his eyes in satisfaction. “What else? I killed him, of course!”

Qiao Six took a moment to steady himself before asking seriously, “You’re not kidding me, are you? What the hell happened in the past few days?”

Ye Qing shrugged. “I’m serious! Yan Tieyi tried to kill me, so I killed him in return. After that, I procured his gang as compensation!”

“That... that’s it?” Qiao Six just could not believe it. Iron Shirt Yan was one of the most prominent warriors in Anyang, and not even he was a match for that old man. Now, Ye Qing was telling him that he was dead, and he was the one who did it.

Even knowing what he did, Qiao Six could scarcely believe his own ears.

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Ye Qing pulled back his left sleeve to reveal the Blue Demon Hand. He said casually, “I don’t know what you were expecting, but it really is that simple.”

“That’s Yan Tieyi’s Blue Demon Hand!” Qiao Six blurted. As the greatest information broker in Anyang, of course he knew a thing or two about Iron Shirt Yan’s Strange Artifact. He fell silent for a long time before sighing, “If the Blue Demon Hand fell into

your hands, then Yan Tieyi must be dead! Joyless, you... you are the living proof that the young always surpasses the old!"

Qiao Six already knew that Ye Qing was extremely strong, but to be so strong as to kill Yan Tieyi with the Blue Demon Hand equipped? Right now, the young man could probably crush him like a bug if he wanted to.

The information broker could not help but praise himself for making the right choice a few days ago. Had he chosen to fight Ye Qing to the death, the grass before his tombstone would nearly be a meter tall by now.

"You flatter me!" Ye Qing replied lazily while crossing his legs.

"That said, this business isn't over yet, Joyless. You might have killed Yan Tieyi and controlled the Iron Shirt Gang, but you still have to watch out for—"

"Zheng Feng, right?"

"That's right!"

By now Qiao Six had regained his calm, and he did not hesitate to warn Ye Qing, "Yan Tieyi once saved Zheng Feng's life, so they are closer than many blood brothers are! Zheng Feng will come after you for killing his sworn brother!"

Ye Qing did not panic, however. He said, "I know. That's why I came to visit you today, Brother Six!"

"I'm sorry?" Qiao Six's expression immediately turned wary. "What are you scheming? I'm just a businessman, you bastard! I can't possibly help you with this matter!"

Ye Qing rolled his eyes at him. "You wound my soul, brother. But don't worry, I'm not asking you to shield me from the Zheng Clan or something. I'm here to make a deal with you!"

"Okay. Tell me!"

Ye Qing sat up straight and turned serious. "Before I get to that, I want you to know that Zheng Feng is going to die no matter what. There is nothing in the world that will change that fact. Of course, I'm aware of your position, so I won't ask you to help me kill Zheng Feng. I'd rather do this myself anyway."

"I came here today because I have one, and only one question to ask you: are you interested in the Zheng Clan's assets and businesses? Of course, I mean after the guy's dead."

"What difference does my answer make?" Qiao Six replied unhurriedly.

"If you're interested, I'll take seventy percent of the cake and share the rest with you. If not, then this meeting has never happened!" Ye Qing proposed. "There are no free lunches in this world, but this is as free as it gets, brother. You best think carefully before you give me your answer."

“Free lunch? More like a high rank cultivation art that’s missing a few key pages!” Qiao Six retorted while shaking his head.

“Is that so? Should I take that as a no then, brother?” Ye Qing asked with a half-smirk. He did not seem to be worried in the slightest.

“I never said that!” Qiao Six quickly changed his tune and said, “I think the profits could be distributed a little more evenly though. What if I claim seventy percent of the cake, and the rest goes to you?”

“Do you have no shame? Fine, I suppose I can make a compromise and give you forty percent of the cake.”

“One must keep clear accounts even with their own brother, am I right? But since you’re willing to compromise, I suppose I can take a step back as well. How does fifty-fifty sound?”

“It sounds fantastic. Are we in agreement?”

“We are. A pleasure to work with you!”

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“You look puzzled, Tao Xian. Are you wondering why I gave up half of our cake for free?”

Tao Xian had been looking weird since they left the Qiao residence. He clearly wanted to ask a question but was afraid he would earn Ye Qing’s wrath, so Ye Qing did the asking for him.

“That’s right!” Tao Xian said immediately. “He doesn’t even need to lift a finger to get half of the profits! How is this fair?”

“Heh. It only looks unfair because you aren’t looking at the bigger picture, and you’re wrong when you say that Qiao Six wouldn’t need to work for it,” Ye Qing replied calmly. “The thing is, the Iron Shirt Gang cannot eat up the Zheng Clan by ourselves. The Zheng Clan is a powerful clan that has rooted itself in Anyang for years. Their wellbeing is tied to many other forces and people’s wellbeing.”

“If I kill Zheng Feng, and the Iron Shirt Gang lays claim to all the wealth they possess, it is inevitable that we will damage some people’s interests and earn their hatred. We will also give off the impression that we are excessively greedy. Once the Iron Shirt Gang has become the target of everyone’s ire, we will be hindered every step of the way.”

Tao Xian dipped his head and mulled over Ye Qing’s words. A long time later, he slowly nodded in understanding.

“That is why Qiao Six said that my offer is like a high rank cultivation art that’s missing a few key pages. Everyone wants a high rank cultivation art, but the fact that it’s missing key pages means that it’s highly risky to practice. If you’re skilled and knowledgeable enough to figure out those pages by yourself, then good for you. But what if you’re not? You’re going to suffer a deviation at best or die at worst, and your enemies are only all too happy to take advantage of your downfall.”

“If you can’t have something all by yourself, then you might as well share it. In this case, I decided that Qiao Six is an excellent partner to share this pie with. In terms of connections, there’s no one who is more connected than our so-called ‘omniscient’ information broker. Qiao Six’s connections will make our wrongdoers at least think twice before they decide to target us. and we would not have to bear everyone’s ire by ourselves.”

“In fact, I would ‘accidentally’ miss out between ten to fifteen percent of our share when it is time to bribe the hyenas to look the other way. I guarantee you that Qiao Six will be plotting the same thing. This way, we will still get the lion’s share of the cake, but no one will hate us for it.”

“You are as wise as you are strong, boss!” Tao Xian praised him from the bottom of his heart.

“It’s not that complicated, really. Greed is good, but too much greed

Chapter 72: Godspeed!

That night, in the Flowing Cloud Hall of the Iron Shirt Gang.

“Hail, brother!” Yan Tieyi greeted as soon as Zheng Feng stepped into the Flowing Cloud Hall behind Tao Xian. He was Ye Qing in disguise, of course.

“Well met, Tieyi. Did something urgent happen for you to seek me out at this hour?” Zheng Feng asked.

Zheng Feng was a tall, muscular man with graceful features and a dignified bearing that naturally came with being in a position of power for decades. Right now though, he just looked like a tired fifty year old man who was saddened by something. It was clear that Zheng Tianyuan and Zheng Tianqi’s death had dealt a huge blow to the man. Objectively speaking, it was never a happy thing for the young to pass away before the old.

“Please take a seat, brother!” Ye Qing waved Zheng Feng to a chair and poured him a cup of wine. He purposely revealed the Blue Demon Hand in the process so that the patriarch would not suspect his identity. And he didn’t. The Blue Demon Hand was Yan Tieyi’s most cherished Strange Artifact, and he never allowed it to leave his sight even when he was taking a bath. Naturally, there was no reason for Zheng Feng to

suspect that the familiar man before him was an imposter. He accepted the drink and downed it in one gulp.

Ye Qing sat opposite Zheng Feng and said with a smile, "I invited you today because I want to share some good news with you, brother."

"Since you've invited me all the way to your headquarters, I'm assuming it must be very good news." Zheng Feng replied wearily while nursing a headache. "You know I've been out of sorts ever since Tianyuan and Tianqi are... gone. The fact that I don't even know who the killer is troubles me even more. I can really use some great news."

Ye Qing's lips curled into a mysterious smile. "That is exactly why I invited you here, brother. I've found the answers you seek."

"Y-You found out who the killer is?" Zheng Feng was so delighted he reached over the table and grabbed Ye Qing's arm. "Who is it? What did you know? Tell me everything!"

"Calm down, brother. There is no rush!" Ye Qing grinned as he gently clasped Zheng Feng's left arm with his left hand. "I have two pieces of good news to share with you. Listen well."

"One, it is as you guessed. I know exactly who your killer is. In fact, that person might be closer than you think!"

"Two, you're going to be reunited with your sons very soon. Aren't you glad?"

At first, Zheng Feng thought that Yan Tieyi was making a tasteless joke and felt furious at him. But when he listened until the end, he realized that something was terribly wrong.

"You're not Tieyi!"

The patriarch subconsciously tried to pull away, but Ye Qing's grip on his left arm abruptly tightened into a death grip. The next moment, he felt a blinding pain and saw a dark flame slowly creeping up his left arm.

"Argh!" Zheng let out a bloodcurdling scream. His right hand abruptly turned as white as jade, and purple lightning crawled all over his skin. There was even a furious thunderclap as he raised his hand. However, the second he thrust his palm toward Ye Qing's chest, the tendrils of lightning abruptly condensed into purple, watery beads and gathered at the center of his palm. It looked like he was holding a tiny pool of water in his right hand.

"Boundless Lightning Palm"

As they were literally face to face with each other, Ye Qing felt as if a lightning bolt was detonating right in front of him. It was vast, unbounded, and powerful.

Still keeping Zheng Feng's left arm in a death grip, the young man narrowed his eyes and clenched his right fist. His abdomen swelled and depressed repeatedly as he met the palm strike with a silent punch.

Crack!

Palm met fist, and both men shuddered. There was no sound, and yet the entire Flowing Cloud Hall suddenly collapsed into a ruin without warning. The ground beneath the duo shuddered violently and split into fissures like it was the site of a terrible earthquake.

Right now, Zheng Feng's left arm resembled the arm of a charred corpse; blackened and completely devoid of flesh. Even his right arm had been twisted round and round until it resembled a fleshy rope.

That said, Ye Qing wasn't doing so hot either. His complexion kept alternating between purple and red, and tiny tendrils of lightning could be seen slithering in and out of every pore of his body.

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"They say that no martial art could match the Boundless Lightning Palm in terms of brute force because it is a martial art that is meant to smite the heavens' enemies. It definitely deserves its reputation!"

Ye Qing commented in a casual tone even as the deadly lightning force ravaged his insides. Every time he opened his mouth, lightning literally shot out of his throat, and blood trickled down the corner of his lips. The Zheng Clan's "Boundless Lightning Palm" was a martial art where a warrior tempered themselves with true lightning to create Lightning true qi within their body. They should aim to, "Smite your enemies with seemingly boundless strength, and annihilate all life beneath your lightning." Naturally, a martial art like this was violent to the extreme. "Boundless Lightning Palm" was even said to be unparalleled in terms of brute force, and considering the state he was in, Ye Qing had to admit that it wasn't an exaggeration.

"Toad Force? Who on earth are you?" Zheng Feng roared and spat out a purple sword from his mouth, literally. It flew toward Ye Qing's forehead as swiftly as the wind!

Ye Qing finally let go of Zheng Feng's left arm and caught the sword with his left hand, but his body shook, and the blood drained away from his face as if he was struck by a huge rock. It was because a tremendous strength and an unbelievably refined lightning force had poured into his body as soon as he touched the blade. His left hand shifted back an inch uncontrollably, and a trickle of blood spurted from his forehead. Then, he flew backward uncontrollably as if he had been struck by a giant hammer.

Crash crash crash!

Like a cannonball, Ye Qing crashed through the wall, a fake mountain, a building and more until finally, the ground. He was embedded so deep within the earth that it was impossible to tell if he was alive or dead.

"Hahaha! No one can survive my Lightning Bolt!" Zheng Feng laughed like a madman. Despite his weakened state, his excitement and joy was bare for all to see.

The lightning sword was called Lightning Bolt. It was a Red-class Strange Artifact and not nearly as magical as the Blue Demon Hand was. However, its explosive power and speed were unmatched.

Moreover, Lightning Bolt was an offensive Strange Artifact he nurtured inside his body most of the time unless he needed it. After spending decades tempering its shape with his true qi and nurturing its mind with his blood essence, it had long since gained a hint of sentience and become even more powerful than it already was. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Zheng Feng could literally spit any enemy within a hundred steps of him to their death.

In fact, Lightning Bolt was what made Zheng Feng who he was today. It was thanks to Lightning Bolt that he was able to entrench himself in Anyang. It was thanks to Lightning Bolt that he was able to turn several crises around and transformed his family into a massive, powerful clan. So far, no one had ever been able to survive his lightning sword, and he did not think that Ye Qing would be an exception.

“Hehe, heh... Pwack!”

Unfortunately, he wasn’t out of the woods yet. Zheng Feng’s laughter abruptly devolved into a hacking cough, and when he spat out a glob of bluish black blood that was mixed with bits and pieces of innards, he knew he was in deep trouble.

“Poison?!” He blanched as a wave of dizziness assaulted his head. His innards were also twisting like someone was pressing them against a grinder.

“The Blue Demon Hand! Dammit!” Zheng Feng bit his tongue as hard as he could in order to keep himself awake. He had clearly been poisoned by the Blue Poison Hand, and as Yan Tieyi’s sworn brother he knew full well just how deadly Hundred Poison was. If he was healthy, he could have held back the poison for a short time with his true qi, but obviously he was anything but healthy right now. The bastard had burned his left arm to a crisp and even punched him with the Toad Force, shattering his internal organs in the process. As a result, he was so seriously injured it would not be surprising if he died within a couple of hours, not to mention that Lightning Bolt had used up most of his true qi. There was practically nothing he could do to suppress the poison right now.

“There’s no time! I need to leave immediately!” he muttered. The fact that the men he brought hadn’t come to his aid despite the commotion could only mean that they were occupied. The bastard must have taken control of the entire Iron Shirt Gang after killing Yan Tieyi. Considering his condition, even a Reforged would stand a good chance at killing him, much less a Qi Invoker.

Right now, his only option was to escape this place and cure the poison. Only after he had recovered his strength could he deal with these traitors.

“Return, Lightning Bolt!” Zheng Feng commanded and made a hand gesture. He was commanding his Strange Artifact to return to him with his energy.

Lightning Bolt had long since gained a hint of sentience after decades of nurturing. It would automatically return to his side after he channeled his energy. However...

"Hmm? What's going on?" Lightning Bolt did not return to him despite his command. When he tried again, the energy he had imbued onto Lightning Bolt actually vanished into nothing!

"What's going on?" Every hair on Zheng Feng's body stood on end as a terrible premonition gripped him.

"This sword is pretty good! I'm taking it!" A voice suddenly called out from the distant ruins. Then, a young man slowly stepped out of the dust clouds and into the open. He was, of course, Ye Qing.

Right now, the young man was covered in dust, and his clothes were mostly torn up. His aura was fluctuating erratically, and the bloody hole on his forehead was particularly conspicuous.

Zheng Feng wasn't staring at his wounds, however. He was staring at his left hand. Ye Qing was holding a small sword with a blade as thin as a leaf. It was covered in purple lightning and vibrating incessantly as if it had a mind of its own, but it was unable to break free no matter how hard it struggled.

"You... you're still alive? But how?" Zheng Feng actually staggered away from Ye Qing in disbelief. He just could not believe that the bastard had actually survived his greatest trump card!

"Sorry to disappoint you. It was pretty close though!" Ye Qing smirked. He was telling the truth. Qiao Six had told him that Zheng Feng owned a lightning sword that could, theoretically, annihilate any foe within a hundred steps from him, so he was prepared for it from the beginning. Despite this, the lightning sword's power still exceeded his expectations and nearly penetrated his brain.

While speaking, Ye Qing sucked in a very, very deep breath, as his stomach had grown until he resembled a woman who was ten months pregnant. When he finally exhaled, the air boomed like a thunderclap, and a purple dragon that looked like it was made of pure lightning shot out of his mouth and into the sky. It roared and circled the sky for a bit before finally disappearing.

Ye Qing's erratic aura immediately started stabilizing after he spat out the purple dragon. Even the bloody hole on his forehead started closing little by little.

"This is impossible..." Zheng Feng looked even more lost and shaken than he already was after witnessing that scene. Just now, the young man had inhaled new energy from his surroundings until he had enough to force out all the lightning force in his body in one go. Now that lightning was no longer ripping his innards to shreds, it was only a matter of time before he fully recovered.

He, on the other hand, had lost both arms and broken most of his internal organs. Even if he somehow recovered from this, he would be much weaker than he used to be. It was highly unlikely that his cultivation would grow either.

But how did he cultivate so much true qi at his age?

Just how?

I need to run!

Finally, Zheng Feng snapped out of reverie and wheeled around. He did not try to snatch Lightning Bolt back from Ye Qing because the effort could only end in failure. He immediately channeled his last vestiges of true qi and made a run for the walls.

But it was futile. The second he made a move, Ye Qing abruptly vanished from his location and reappeared beside him. Then, a Blood Shadow severed Zheng Feng's legs right through the knees.

"Argh!" Zheng Feng let out another bloodcurdling scream and collapsed to the floor. He broke down completely and screamed on top of his lungs, "Who are you? Why are you trying to kill me? I don't even know you! Just why?!"

"You don't know me?" Ye Qing slowly crouched beside the broken man with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "That may be true, but what about August Hill Village?"

"August Hill Village?" Zheng Feng was caught off guard for a second before his eyes bulged with shock. "You're from August Hill Village? Then Tianyuan..."

"I told you, didn't I? That's right. I'm the one who killed Zheng Tianyuan and Zheng Tianqi!" Ye Qing let out a mirthless chuckle. "As for why I killed them and why I'm going to kill you now, you can ask them after you see them in hell!"

"No!" A horrified Zheng Feng struggled with all his might, but it was futile. The next moment, his entire body exploded in a shower of blood and gore.

"Godspeed! I won't be seeing you off!"

Chapter 73: Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve

"Phew... Captain, Lin, Granny Xia, everyone in August Hill Village, I've taken revenge for you. May you rest in peace!"

Ye Qing swept away the cloud of blood with a flick of the arm before staring at the rising moon at the distance. His voice was cool and indifferent, and yet there was also a hint of loneliness.

The moon never changes, but the people who once were were no longer.

In the end, revenge was just something people did when it was already too late.

"Are you... okay, boss?" Tao Xian asked softly when he came over and found Ye Qing's back looking a little forlorn for some reason.

"I'm fine." Ye Qing snapped out of his reverie. The dead were dead, and the living must continue living. If nothing else, he felt much better after finishing his revenge and fulfilling his promise. He asked, "How did it go?"

"It went well. Zheng Feng's two guest warriors and his ten guards are all dead!" Tao Xian reported before looking at the tattered ruins around him. "And how is Zheng Feng? Is he..."

"He's dead." Ye Qing replied indifferently. "You might still find a piece of him if you search around the area."

"..."

Tao Xian turned a little white. He immediately recalled how Ye Qing had exploded Shi Jiang and Yao Xingjun. It seemed that his new boss loved killing his enemies by turning them into fireworks.

I must never piss him off!

Tao Xian took two steps away from Ye Qing and coughed, "Ahem. Since Zheng Feng is dead, should we begin our takeover now, boss?"

"Sure." Ye Qing massaged his forehead a bit before continuing in a tired voice, "I leave this matter to you, Tao Xian. I'm not going to get involved with what happens next. It's up to you and the others to eat as much as you can without debilitating the gang!"

"Also, I don't want the public to know about my identity. If someone asks you about me, just tell them that I do not enjoy the limelight and would prefer to keep a low profile. Understand?"

"I understand, boss!"

"Now go. You may find me at Endless Horizons if you need me!" Ye Qing gave him a wave before leaping into the air. It wasn't long before he disappeared into the night.

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Jingrui 3 [1], March 3rd would be remembered in the history of Anyang as a tumultuous day. It was the day where one of the three major clans of Anyang, the Zheng Clan, had crumbled in a single night.

Not long after their one and only Vessel Augmentation stage warrior, Zheng Feng, had fallen in battle, an army of warriors had suddenly launched an all-out assault against the Zheng Clan. Most of their elders and guest warriors were ambushed and killed, and only a handful managed to surrender or escape with varying degrees of injuries.

In just one night, the Zheng residence had been reduced to rubble, their warriors had been annihilated, and the Zheng Clan was no more. In fact, the dust had settled by the time the officials finally realized what had happened and took action.

There was something strange about the incident, however. It was unclear how Zheng Feng had died and who was behind the destruction of the Zheng Clan. Some people claimed that Zheng Feng was killed because he had offended a powerful warrior of the Dark Ways, some people claimed it was the joint effort of several Anyang masters after Zheng Feng was discovered to be a Stranger sympathizer, and some people claimed it was the chivalrous act of a hero who decided to do right by the people by ending his sinful life...

Countless people came up with countless theories, but no one seemed to notice that the Iron Shirt Gang had gotten a new boss.

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Pacification Bureau headquarters, the Demonslaying Hall.

Ling Jianqiu was holding a long sword and examining the blade when he asked in a cold voice, "Did you find out who killed Zheng Feng, Yan'er?"

His adopted daughter replied, "It was the new boss of the Iron Shirt Gang. From what I heard, they are the ones who killed Yan Tieyi as well!"

"A warrior who can kill both Yan Tieyi and Zheng Feng is no joke. They must be a middle-stage or a late-stage Vessel Augmentor at least," Ling Jianqiu said calmly. "Since you haven't given me a name, I'm assuming you don't know who this new boss is?"

Yun Yan said in an apologetic tone, "Unfortunately, no. The only ones who seem to know the truth are the Hallmasters, but they're surprisingly tight-lipped about their own boss' identity. Not even our spies in the Iron Shirt Gang had seen this mysterious boss before."

"Look into this discreetly!" Ling Jianqiu ordered, "I want to know who this person is and why they had killed Yan Tieyi and Zheng Feng. I also want to know if they're tied to any dark sects and Strangers!"

"As you command!"

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Shen residence, the Idle Sanctum.

"Tell me your thoughts, Brother Li," said the patriarch of the Shen Clan, Shen Xian. Sitting opposite him was the patriarch of the Li Clan, Li Yuankang. The Zheng Clan, the Shen Clan and the Li Clan used to be the three strongest clans in Anyang. Now, only two of them were left.

Li Yuankang took his time to think while stroking his beard. A while later, he said, "It's hard to say. Zheng Feng could've offended someone he couldn't afford to offend. Or maybe it was Yan Tieyi who did the offending, and Zheng Feng was just the collateral damage."

Shen Xian asked after a moment of consideration, "What are the chances it might be a conspiracy against our clans?"

Li Yuankang immediately shook his head. "It is very unlikely. Looking at the clues, the attacker was only targeting the Zheng Clan. I don't think they will set their sights on our clans."

"Perhaps, but you and I must keep our guards up regardless," Shen Xian said seriously before a glint flickered in his eyes. "The three of us have always looked out for each other. Like the lip and the teeth, our survival is closely dependent on one another. With that in mind, would you like to join forces with me and make the Iron Shirt Gang explain why they hadn't helped the Zheng Clan in their time of need?"

That was what he said, but Li Yuankang knew what he really meant. The large majority of the Zheng Clan's wealth, assets, businesses and more had fallen into the hands of the Iron Shirt Gang. As the news had arrived at their doorsteps a little too late, they had only managed to claim a small portion of that loot so to speak. Naturally, Shen Xian was extremely displeased with this state of affairs.

Li Yuankang himself was a little miffed, but he was a little more level-headed than his fellow patriarch. "That won't be easy. Qiao Six has gotten a large portion of the cake as well, so it's safe to say that they were in cahoots with one another. What if we pay them a visit, and Qiao Six chooses to help the Iron Shirt Gang? It would be extremely troublesome. That old coot is not someone to be trifled with!"

"Besides, we still haven't found out who the new boss of the Iron Shirt Gang is. You don't want to act on incomplete information, do you?"

"I know, but..." Shen Xian let out a deep sigh. He knew what Li Yuankang was saying all too well, but he just could not bring himself to let it go. "Is there really nothing we can do?"

Li Yuankang chuckled. "For now, that seems to be the case. We cannot move until we know exactly who's behind the Iron Shirt Gang."

Shen Xian nodded in agreement. "You're right. Our first order of priority is to find out everything we can regarding this new gang boss! In fact... Why don't we pick an auspicious date and pay this mysterious warrior a visit together? Don't you want to meet the person who took out both Zheng Feng and Yan Tieyi with your own eyes?"

"That's a good idea. If they refuse to show up, then we'll force them to show up!"

.....

Anyang county hall, the back hall.

"The investigation is finished, my lord. The new boss of the Iron Shirt Gang is the one who killed Zheng Feng!" Yan Feng saluted Yan Yufei and reported.

"The new boss of the Iron Shirt Gang?" The magistrate looked up from his book with a deep frown. "What happened to their old boss, Yan Tieyi?"

"He's dead. The new boss was the one who killed him!"

“Huh.” Yan Yufei put down his book and asked in a serious tone, “Well, stop keeping me hanging and tell me about this new boss already. Who are they? Where do they come from? Why did they kill Yan Tieyi and Zheng Feng?”

Yan Feng dropped his head immediately. “My apologies, but... I haven’t found anything on the new boss just yet!”

“And why’s that?” A hint of dissatisfaction crept into Yan Yufei’s voice.

Yan Feng explained, “This new gang boss is extremely reclusive, my lord. Not only have they not shown themselves in public, most of the members of the Iron Shirt Gang themselves have never seen them. In fact, they didn’t even know they had a new boss until today!”

Yan Yufei’s expression relaxed slightly when he heard this. “Keep looking into this boss, and warn the Iron Shirt Gang and all other forces to keep their conflicts among themselves. If even one civilian’s life is disturbed because of them, I will see to it myself that they are in chains!”

“As you command!” Yan Yufei replied with a respectful salute.

“By the way, how goes the investigation regarding the General of Punishment?” Yan Yufei asked next.

Yan Feng answered in a helpless tone, “We couldn’t find anything. It’s like that incense acolyte had vanished into thin air. We couldn’t find a trace of him even though we’ve been scouring the county for days!”

“But he’s still our one and only clue. You must find him even if you have to turn Anyang upside down to do it!” Yan Yufei ordered in a tone that would accept no rebuke.

“As you command, my lord!”

It was at this moment a bailiff barged into the back hall while crying, “We have an incident, my lord!”

Yan Yufei asked immediately, “What happened?”

“A body’s been found in the northern reservoir, my lord!”

.....

Endless Horizons.

Ye Qing opened his eyes and exhaled a mouthful of turbid qi. It was quite early in the morning, but he felt stronger and clear-headed than ever before. Not only had he recovered fully from his injuries last night, he had fully refined Zheng Feng’s blood and improved his cultivation level once more.

“Oh right, I almost forgot to check Yan Tieyi and Zheng Feng’s Nature’s Shell!” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization before producing two Nature’s Shell. His eyes were wide and sparkling with anticipation. After all, who doesn’t enjoy opening loot boxes? He

started with Yan Tieyi's Nature's Shell and broke through its restriction. A pile of items immediately appeared on the floor.

"Silvers, land deeds, letters, talismans, pills... jackpot!" Ye Qing could barely suppress his glee as he went through each and every one of Yan Tieyi's possessions.

"So, he has around ten thousand silver and ten shop and house deeds, and... they're all located in the prime locations of Anyang! Just how rich is this guy?"

"As for the pills, there are Tiger Bone Pills, Yellow Sprout Pills, antidotes and... wow, they're all trash!"

"And these books are... martial arts manuals! The 'Eight Directions Vessel Augmentation Art', 'Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve', 'Shadowless Hand'... they're Yan Tieyi's martial arts!"

Ye Qing's eyes had glossed over many valuables to save time, but the manuals? He could not look away as soon as he landed his eyes on it.

"The 'Eight Directions Vessel Augmentation Art' is a Vessel Augmentation cultivation art with eight chapters. At the adept level, the practitioner would unlock eight Standard Meridians, eight Extraordinary Meridians, and one hundred and eighty points..."

"It's nothing special." Ye Qing put down the cultivation manual and shook his head. The "Eight Directions Vessel Augmentation Art" might be an incredible cultivation art for an ordinary warrior, but he was not an ordinary warrior, and it was practically trash compared to the "Blood Shadow Divine Art".

At the adept level, the "Blood Shadow Divine Art" unlocked all twelve Standard Meridians, eight Extraordinary Meridians, three hundred and sixty points, fully augmenting the practitioner's vessels. Not only that, it also taught a powerful magic art that Ye Qing just could not get enough of, the Blood Shadow Magic.

Naturally, he had no use for the "Eight Directions Vessel Augmentation Art".

"'Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve' is a Vessel Augmentation stage martial art. It teaches the practitioner how to concentrate their qi on their sleeves to achieve various effects. If successful, the practitioner can summon clouds, fly through the air, and conjure cloudy illusions with a wave of the sleeve. They can also harden it so that it can crush rocks with ease, soften it so that it can wind like a stream; move as powerfully as lightning, or stand as still as a virgin in peril. At full manifestation, it can be as relentless as a river, and as transient as a cloud. When the practitioner has reached the adept level, they would attain balance in both hardness and softness, activity and inactivity, and the real and the unreal. Its potential would become limitless."

Ye Qing clicked his tongue in amazement. “Yan Tieyi, that sly fox. Everyone thought his primary martial art is the ‘Iron Sleeve Art’, when it really is ‘Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve’!”

This was a good thing though. As the man who killed Yan Tieyi, he could personally attest to the martial art’s potential. Not only was it equally capable in both offense and defense, it possessed endless variations. If he hadn’t cultivated a top-tier Vessel Augmentation art and possessed far more true qi than Yan Tieyi, he would’ve been hardpressed to punch through his ‘Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve’ with brute force. In short, this martial art was extremely powerful.

I’m definitely going to learn this!

Chapter 74: Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method

“The ‘Shadowless Hand’ is a Qi Invocation stage palm art that combines various palm techniques, finger techniques and claw techniques into one whole package. Speed is its essence, and flexibility is its lifeblood. Everchanging and shadowless, the ‘Shadowless Hand’ is best used to dismantle straightforward moves...”

“It’s okay!” determined Ye Qing. The ‘Shadowless Hand’ was clearly a palm art that focused on agility and flexibility. It was definitely not weak compared to the sea of Qi Invocation stage martial arts out there, and more importantly, combining it with the Blue Demon Hand would serve to maximize the Strange Artifact’s potential.

In the past, he would be practicing these martial arts already. Now though, he had a better idea.

“But before that, I should check out Zheng Feng’s Nature’s Shell!” said Ye Qing as he put down the martial art manual. A short while later, another pile of valuables appeared on the floor.

The contents of Zheng Feng’s Nature’s Shell was more or less the same as Yan Tieyi’s. It also contained a vast amount of silver, land deeds, manuals and more. There were three things that caught Ye Qing’s eye, however. The first was three fist-sized spirit fruits. They were purplish black in color and covered in mysterious, dark purple runes. They were glowing faintly and emanating a tremendous amount of energy.

Ye Qing had no idea what the fruits were, but he was certain that they were extraordinary.

The second thing that caught his eye was three manuals. The first manual was a Vessel Augmentation cultivation art called the “Thirty Six Impetus of Lightning”. A warrior who mastered the cultivation art could augment nine Standard Meridians, eight Extraordinary Meridians, and two hundred and sixty points. In addition, the cultivation art strove to blaze a new trail by teaching its practitioners how to “infect” one’s true qi with the power of lightning using natural lightning or lightning-attribute fruits.

The cultivation process was extremely dangerous, and the slightest mistake could cause a potentially fatal deviation. But if the warrior was successful, then their true qi would become as vast, potent, and forceful as lightning. The risks were great, but the reward was a match for it.

The second manual was a martial art manual titled the “Boundless Lightning Palm”. It was a Vessel Augmentation stage palm art. Unlike the ‘Shadowless Hand’, the ‘Boundless Lightning Palm’ was a

straightforward martial art that relied on sheer power and indomitable spirit to overwhelm one's enemies. Practitioners of this art were required to move as fast as lightning, as loud as thunder, and as forceful as a raging torrent. At the adept level, one could supposedly "summon forth the thunderous might of the heavens" with a single palm strike. It was quite the powerful martial art to say the least.

Obviously, the "Thirty Six Impetus of Lightning" and the "Boundless Lightning Palm" were a two-in-one package. Only by combining the two could one unleash the full potential of the "Boundless Lightning Palm".

That said, the "Boundless Lightning Palm" was still powerful individually. It was also why Ye Qing wanted to practice the "Boundless Lightning Palm" instead of the "Shadowless Hand". While the "Shadowless Hand" had its own advantages, the "Boundless Lightning Palm" had greater potential and power because it was a Vessel Augmentation stage martial art. On top of poisoning and burning his enemies, he would be electrocuting them with lightning as well!

The third and final thing that caught Ye Qing's attention was a tattered painting. It was pitch black as if shrouded by dark clouds or black ink. It was also covered in mysterious, profound-looking runes that seemed to outline a pair of eyes. It was as enigmatic as it was ancient.

"It's just a shitty painting. Why did he go through all the effort to keep it hidden?" Ye Qing wondered out loud while examining it closely.

The painting had been hidden in a box forged from Kunshan White Jade. Kunshan White Jade was a special material that could insulate aura and prevent spiritual detection. It could be used to conceal powerful treasures from prying eyes or preserve certain natural treasures. Naturally, it was incredibly valuable.

The fact that Zheng Feng had stored this painting inside a box made of Kunshan White Jade could only mean that it was exceedingly valuable. He just hadn't figured out the painting's secrets just yet.

It was at this moment Ye Qing's eyes landed on the eyes outlined on the surface of the painting. He heard a boom inside his head, and the eyes abruptly shone a pitch black light that melted away the inky blackness of the painting. Then, a silhouette whose stature seemed great enough to support both heaven and earth appeared inside his head.

The silhouette was tall and massive. He was a man wearing a gilt crown and a robe that seemed to encompass millions and millions of kilometers of land. He carried the sun and the moon on his shoulders, and his feet stretched all the way to the Nine Nethers. He was great, majestic, honorable and graceful beyond compare.

Rumble!

/p>

The next moment, the Nine Nethers shattered into pieces, and an extraordinary vehicle drawn by thousands and thousands of beasts appeared beneath the man's feet. The sun and the moon were the vehicle's shafts, the wind and the clouds were its wheels, and the water and the fire were the ornaments.

The next moment, the vehicle took off and soared across the world. It shone like a million suns and sundered the Nine Nethers and the Nine Heavens in half.

“ARGH!”

The moment the heavens shattered, Ye Qing’s mind and spirit were suddenly assaulted by a terrible storm. The storm was dark and relentless, and the strange vehicle was grinding down every inch of his mind and spirit into bits. There was a frightful second where he thought that his head had literally exploded, and his entire body was gripped by an unbelievable amount of pain. At the same time, bright red blood jetted out of his eyes, ears, nose and mouth.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Every time a wheel turned, Ye Qing’s mind would crumble a little more. The pain was so unbearable that he spasmed uncontrollably like he was experiencing a seizure, and he slammed his head against the floor repeatedly in hopes of finding sweet release in the void. Unfortunately, even that was impossible. It was a fate worse than death itself.

Eventually, the vehicle reached the last corners of his mind and crushed the final vestiges of his consciousness. His last thoughts were,

Is this it? Is this where I die...?

It was at this moment the Annon Sutra glowed within his shirt. Then, several dragon-serpent runes slowly swam away from the vellum and into Ye Qing’s mind.

The Annon Sutra’s light was as weak as a candle flame, but it never faded no matter how hard the storm raging in Ye Qing’s head tried to blow it away. It preserved Ye Qing’s mind and kept it from scattering into the void.

A teatime later—though it certainly felt like a lifetime to Ye Qing—the young man finally opened his eyes.

“I... I’m still alive? Ssss! Oh, it hurts so bad...”

His head throbbed painfully the second he tried to move. It wasn’t as bad as when the vehicle was grinding his mind into bits, but he still felt like someone bashing his head with a hammer from the inside again and again.

Ye Qing remained where he was until his headache had subsided a little. Then, he slowly sat up and glanced at the painting on the table with trepidation. “Cough! Cough... urgh. What the hell is this painting? Wait... it looks different!”

To Ye Qing’s surprise, the painting looked completely different from before. Previously, it was covered in dark clouds and black ink. Now, it was replaced by a man wearing a gilt crown and a robe of endless earth. He rode an unspeakable vehicle that was made of natural elements and celestial objects, and he was so tall that his stature spanned across the heavens, the mundane world, and the nethers. His appearance was grand, majestic, honorable and graceful. He was none other than the man who had appeared in his head earlier. He was—

“Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”

Emperor Fuxi appeared in Ye Qing’s mind at the same time Ye Qing saw the painting, but unlike before he wasn’t violent or attempting to crush his mind into bits. Instead, he hovered in the nine heavens like the sun and filled the world with light. Warm, life-giving light.

Like a miracle, Ye Qing's damaged mind and spirit started rooting, sprouting, and flourishing like a plant that had just endured winter and welcomed spring. It felt so healing that Ye Qing instinctively closed his eyes and mumbled,

"It feels good!"

An untold period of time later, Ye Qing opened his eyes once more. The room literally brightened up as his eyes shone like a pair of morning stars.

"My spirit is much stronger than before! This is unbelievable. To think that the 'Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method' could strengthen the spirit and the mind!"

He hadn't just recovered fully in both mind and spirit, his spiritual power reserves were twice compared to before. All humans carried three vital energies in their body. They were the essence, qi and spirit. Those who were weak in essence would have little strength, but those who were strong in essence would be as strong as an ox. Those who were weak in qi would have a feeble body, but those who were strong in qi would be as resilient as a diamond. Finally, those who were weak in spirit were inclined to enter an early grave, but those who were strong in spirit would lead a long, healthy life!

Fundamentally, all humans be it ordinary people and warriors should always strive to improve their essence, qi and spirit, though the direction they were headed to were different. Ordinary people should strive for stability and balance, while warriors should strive for power. After all, power leads to prosperity, and prosperity leads to longevity!

Ye Qing had arrived in this strange world for some time, but he had never encountered an art that tempered the mind and strengthened the spirit until now. Since every warrior he encountered so far only focused only tempering their body or building up their qi, he didn't know this was a thing until the near death experience.

The benefits of growing his mind and increasing his spiritual power reserves were obvious. Already, he could tell that his perception of the surrounding environment, the energies, the minute changes of the air and more were sharper than before. He wasn't using his eyes, but he could sense the moth flapping its wings near the lamp, the ants crawling up the walls, the leaves falling off a tree outside Endless Horizons, and the plants twisting their bodies ever so subtly to face toward the sun. He could even perceive extremely minute details such as the air currents, the weather, the flow of his true qi, the expansion and contraction of his muscles, the wriggling of his innards and more. They all seemed so clear in his head.

Externally, he could perceive every activity and inactivity around him, and internally, he was like a god looking down on a mini universe of his creation.

He could control his body, vigor and true qi better than ever before. He could ensure that he was always in the most optimal condition and even fine-tune his body on the fly to handle specific circumstances. Speaking of which, he could now perceive his enemies' movements, aura and energies like the worm in their belly. If his opponent wanted to take a step to the right, he would know the second they flexed their toes. If his opponent wanted to execute a new move, their energies and aura would inform him before they so much as twitched a muscle. He would be able to suppress them almost like he could see a second or two into the future.

The “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” might not be an offensive art, but it was an art that allowed him to unleash his full potential. It was at least as valuable as the “Blood Shadow Divine Art”, if not more!

“This is crazy! Why didn’t Zheng Feng pick up this method as soon as he got it? If he had, I could’ve died even considering all the preparations I’ve made!” Ye Qing exclaimed in amazement. During their duel, Zheng Feng had displayed a lot of brute force but poor fine control. That could never be the case if he had studied the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”.

The answer came to him almost as soon as he thought about it. He had nearly died after accidentally looking at the eyes on the painting. It was only thanks to the Annon Sutra that he was still alive. Zheng Feng must have known how dangerous it was and didn’t want to put his life at risk until he was stronger.

“Now that my spirit is stronger, I should be able to refine Lightning Bolt with my spirit and make it even stronger than before.”

Every time Ye Qing recalled the lightning sword that had nearly given him a brain piercing, he would feel a bit of lingering trepidation. Just like the Blue Demon Hand, it was a Red-class Strange Artifact.

“Let’s see... Lightning Bolt is a Red-class Strange Artifact forged using a Lightning Meteorite and the blood of a Malice-class Stranger, the Roaring Thunder Beast. It can be nurtured in one’s body and used to annihilate anyone within a hundred steps of the wielder instantly.”

“The Roaring Thunder Beast is a Stranger with a roar as loud as a thunderclap, a cry as booming as a drum beat, and a screech that can split the heavens. Since Lightning Bolt is forged using its blood, the user must withstand these noises every time they use it.”

Zheng Feng had only nurtured Lightning Bolt with his blood essence and true qi, but the Strange Artifact had still exceeded his expectations and nearly killed him. Now that he had the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”, he could refine it with his spirit and nurture it with his mind as well. It should greatly enhance his ability to control the weapon and its power.

“I think there’s nothing else? Alright then! It’s cultivation time!” Ye Qing declared. He had everything he might need to strengthen himself—the dragon-serpent runes, the martial arts and a Strange Artifact—so it was time to put in the work!

Chapter 75: Knock Knock

Knock—knock knock!

Knock—knock knock!

Ye Qing had just finished visualizing the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” one time when he suddenly heard a series of rhythmic knocks. It was extremely distinct not just because it was very rhythmic, but also because there weren’t many people in Anyang who would knock this way.

“Coming Clouds?” Ye Qing immediately identified where the knocking sound was coming from thanks to his reborn spirit.

“It’s past midnight already. Did a drunk come back for another round or something?”

Knock—knock knock!

The knocking continued unhurriedly and rhythmically. It sounded especially loud and clear in the dead of the night.

“No wait, something’s not right!”

Suddenly, Ye Qing raised an eyebrow. It had been a while since the knocking began, and yet the employees of Coming Clouds hadn’t responded to it at all. Besides that, the knocking sound carried a strange rhythm that was almost eerie. Scratch that, it was eerie as fuck to hear at this hour.

“What’s going on over there?” Ye Qing scratched his chin and wondered if he should go check it out.

Suddenly, the knocking sound ceased without a warning. Ye Qing’s eyes flickered like a dying candle in the darkness. *Is it gone?*

Knock—knock knock!

It wasn’t, and this time, it was happening at Endless Horizons’ doorsteps!

As the knocking continued, an ominous, ice cold air started spreading inside the bookstore. Kung Fu Frog jolted awake from his deep slumber and croaked anxiously, while Wawa flew into her book and stuck her head out a little, watching the main entrance nervously.

Knock—knock knock!

The ominous air seemed to thicken with every knock. In fact, the thick stench of death started permeating throughout the bookstore as well. On the second floor, Ye Qing felt as if his mind was being corroded by deathly energy, and his consciousness was definitely deteriorating little by little.

“Hmm?”

Ye Qing scrunched his eyebrows and visualized the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”. The emperor appeared inside his head and rode a gorgeous vehicle through the sky. His light wiped clean every tinge of deathly energy in Ye Qing’s head in an instant.

“Who dares to play the demon in my bookstore? Get lost!”

Ye Qing’s eyes shone brightly as he rose to his feet. Lightning suddenly crackled inside his room, and his words sounded as loud as thunder. At the same time, a terrific gust of wind suddenly appeared inside the bookstore and shook the windows, the doors, the tables, the chairs and more like an actual storm was brewing. It immediately blew away the ominous air and stopped the knocks!

Ye Qing blurred and reappeared outside the bookstore, but to his surprise, he couldn't see anyone. Rubbing his forehead and wondering what the hell just happened, he looked at Coming Clouds and jumped. He broke through a window and landed inside the restaurant.

"They're all dead!"

Ye Qing scanned his surroundings once before disappearing from view. Three breaths later, he reappeared in the dining hall and sighed.

Everyone inside the restaurant was dead. The waiter, the cooks, even the guests who were sleeping upstairs in the guest rooms. At least ten souls were gone just like that, and everyone of them had died in the exact same manner. He couldn't find any wounds on their bodies, but they were all lifeless, pale, and glassy-eyed. It was like someone or something had sucked their soul, leaving only the shell behind.

"Is it a Stranger? Or a human?" Ye Qing rubbed his nose and murmured to himself.

Swoosh!

Suddenly, Ye Qing heard a whistling noise from the window. He immediately raised his hand and caught a pitch black arrow between his fingers. However, there was so much force behind the arrow that his hand was pushed back half an inch.

Did a Qi Invoker shoot this? Ye Qing thought to himself while snapping the arrow in half.

This was just the beginning though. As if the first arrow was just the signal, countless more arrows shot through the windows like a sudden downpour.

"Hmph!" Ye Qing hmphed imperiously and swung his arms. Gentle as water and smooth as the clouds, he was able to catch all the arrows with his sleeves no matter how many flew in his direction.

"Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve"

"It is against etiquette to not reciprocate!" Ye Qing declared as he threw the arrows back where they came from even faster than before.

Clang clang clang!

Some of the arrows were parried, but some weren't. He could hear people grunting in pain as the arrows sank into flesh and bone.

"How dare you massacre innocents, fiend! Succumb to your fate!"

It was at this moment an angry roar erupted from outside the building. It was so loud that it actually blew apart the main entrance and scattered debris everywhere. Then, a tall, muscular man rushed in like a tiger on the hunt. Every time he took a step, several bricks would shatter into pieces.

"Die!"

The man reached Ye Qing in just the blink of an eye and threw a punch. It was just a simple punch, but it felt like the sky itself was collapsing on top of him. Its will was unstoppable, unbreakable.

The violent, ferocious fist would sooner break itself than submit. Ye Qing could almost hear it saying: *Nothing will stand before me!*

/p>

“Well met!” Ye Qing’s eyes lit up as he spun his feet about half an inch and ground the bricks he was standing on to dust. When his sleeves had become as hard as steel, he swung them straight at the man’s fist.

Boom!

There was a terrific noise of impact as the shockwave shattered most of the tables and chairs in the dining hall. His right arm dangling limply by his side, the ferocious man staggered all the way to the entrance before he finally managed to catch himself. Clearly, it was Ye Qing who had won the clash. Eyes bloodshot and face contorted in a wrathful expression not unlike an enraged beast, he charged toward Ye Qing once more.

“Graaaaaagh! Die!”

“Hu Nu, stop!”

Suddenly, a gentle voice called out from behind him. The ferocious man immediately stopped in his tracks and turned around.

A beautiful, mild-mannered woman wearing a green dress slowly stepped out from the darkness. She was followed by a bunch of warriors wearing black armor and carrying bows.

“Yun Yan? The Pacification Bureau?” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise. She was none other than Yun Yan, the woman he had seen at the entrance of the Shing Wong temple a few days ago. As for the bow-carrying warriors, they were obviously the central force of the Pacification Bureau, the Sentinels.

“I’ve seen you before. You’re that young man who was following behind Lord Yan at the Shing Wong Temple, aren’t you?” Yun Yan asked as she slowly walked toward Ye Qing.

“Be careful, miss!” The guy named Hu Nu took a step forward and stood protectively in front of her.

“It’s okay. I’m pretty sure he’s not the killer!” Yun Yan replied smilingly, “He’s one of the magistrate’s men after all. It’s highly unlikely that he’s a bad person.”

Ye Qing saluted her respectfully and said, “You are a discerning woman, Miss Yun. I am Ye Qing, owner of Endless Horizons!”

Her smile widened. “I had heard that Endless Horizons had gotten a new owner, but I didn’t think it would be you. And to think that you’re a hidden master as well!”

“You flatter me, Miss Yun Yan. I still have a long way to go before I deserve such a lofty title!” Ye Qing replied humbly.

"I doubt that, but if you say so, then so it shall be," Yun Yan said in a gentle voice before looking at the dead people around the restaurant. "If you don't mind me asking, Mister Ye, do you know what happened here?"

Ye Qing responded, "To tell you the truth, Miss Yun, I'm not sure myself. Earlier, I had heard a strange knocking noise coming from Coming Clouds. I paid it no heed at the time because it stopped after three times. Then, someone or something knocked on my door the exact same way and filled the bookstore with an ominous air. When I dispelled the unnatural air and chased out of the building, I found no human or Stranger about."

"Realizing that the people in the restaurant might be in grave danger, I rushed into Coming Clouds and tried to search for survivors. Unfortunately, it was already too late."

"Hmph! That's what you said, but is it the truth?" said Hu Nu while glaring daggers at Ye Qing. "You could be the one who killed them as well!"

"Haha. I don't even recognize most of these people, and those I do know are my acquaintances. Why on earth would I kill them?" Ye Qing chuckled. "Suppose I'm the killer, why would I linger and wait for you to catch me red-handed? Anyone with half a brain would have run as far away from the crime scene as possible. What do you say, Miss Yun?"

"I believe you of course, Mister Ye," Yun Yan said smilingly while walking around the dining hall. She took a look at some of the bodies before asking, "Who do you think is the killer? Human, or Stranger?"

Ye Qing answered with surprising conviction, "It's a Stranger!"

"Oh? And how do you know?" Yun Yan stared at him curiously.

"I'm sure you noticed that none of the bodies have any wounds on their person. Moreover, you can tell from their posture and condition that they had passed away at the exact same time. There are very few humans who can do this, at least not me! Also, the ominous air I felt earlier had a tinge of deathly energy mixed in it, which is why I don't think it's human."

"Your word makes sense!" Yun Yan nodded. "But just in case, I still need to ask you to come with us to our headquarters. I hope you won't mind?"

To her surprise, Ye Qing said with a chuckle, "Actually, there's no need. I think I know where the Stranger who did this is?"

"Y-You know where the murderer is?" Hu Nu's eyes bulged in disbelief.

"I think so!" Ye Qing repeated with a nod before turning back to Yun Yan. "I need to head home and pick something up, Miss Yun. I'll be right back!"

“Who gave you permission to leave!?” Hu Nu erupted while making a grab for Ye Qing’s shoulder. When his finger passed right through the young man’s body like it was air though, he realized that it was just an afterimage. The real Ye Qing had disappeared a moment ago.

“You dare to escape!?” Hu Nu roared and attempted to give chase, but Yun Yan stopped him again and said,

“It’s pointless. If he really wants to run away, we’ll never catch up to him. And if by some miracle we managed to catch up to him, we’re not strong enough to apprehend him anyway.”

Hu Nu: “...” *That may be true, but don’t you think you’re being a little too honest, miss?*

“Besides, I’m sure he won’t run away,” Yun Yan added. She sounded so calm and collected it was as if everything was under her control.

About half a teatime later, Ye Qing reappeared at the entrance and said, “Follow me!”

He then started walking toward somewhere.

Yun Yan exchanged glances with her subordinates for a moment. Then, she ordered, “Follow him!” and followed him into the night.

Chapter 76: Incense of Fortune

“Where is the Stranger? You’re not leading us on a wild goose chase, are you?”

The group had followed Ye Qing through countless twists and turns for about half an incense stick. Yun Yan and the rest of the Sentinels were still patient, but Hu Nu just could hold it in any longer and exploded.

“We’re here! It’s right over there!” Ye Qing stopped in his tracks and pointed toward an alley.

Hu Nu stared at the alley with a frown. “That’s... Longevity Alley. Why did you bring us here?”

Right now, every shop in Longevity Alley had a white lantern hung on the entrance. They swayed to the wind and cast orange candle light and eerie shadows on the limestone floor. It looked both hypnotic and eerie.

Longevity Alley was the place to purchase candles, mock ingots, coffins, burial clothes, paper objects and all other funeral or ceremonial items. The reason every shop in Longevity Alley had a white lantern hung on the entrance was because it was a traditional custom in Chu. Nighttime was the time where yin energy was strong, and yang energy was weak. Naturally, shops that sold funeral or ceremonial items like theirs were bound to attract ghosts and other inhuman things.

This was why it was customary to hang a white lantern on the entrance and use a candle that would last throughout the night. The lantern was a guidepost that led the ghosts away from one’s home. It was also a warning to all living to stay away from this particular street because it was meant to be

used by ghosts only. This was how the saying, “When yin things walk, the white lanterns show the way” came to be.

“Mister Ye, are you saying that the Stranger is hiding in this area?” Yun Yan asked slowly while staring at the dark and desolate Longevity Alley.

“That’s right!” Ye Qing nodded. It was what the Annon Sutra had told him, and the Annon Sutra was never wrong. He had lied about heading back to the bookstore to pick something up, of course. He was really using the time to ask the vellum where the Stranger who massacred the people in Coming Clouds had disappeared to.

But of course, the Annon Sutra did not specify the exact hiding location of the Stranger. It was willful like that.

“Do you know where it is exactly?” Yun Yan asked.

Ye Qing shook his head and lied, “I managed to follow it all the way to Longevity Alley, but you know how this place is. The yin energy here is thick enough that I can’t identify its exact location.”

“This won’t be easy!” Yun Yan said with a deep frown. “Longevity Alley is a crossroad with fifty-six shops in it. It is seventy-six meters long from east to west, and sixty-three meters long from south to north. The Stranger will know we’re coming very easily if we search through the shops one by one.”

“You’re not toying with us, are you?” Hu Nu grumbled in dissatisfaction.

Ye Qing ignored his rude accusation and said casually, “It’s true I don’t know where the Stranger is hiding, but I know a way to find it.”

“Oh? Do you have a plan, Mister Ye?” Yun Yan stared with Ye Qing with bright eyes.

Ye Qing turned his palm upward to reveal a half-burned incense stick. A fragrant scent quickly permeated the air after he ignited it with a flame stick.

“We’re praying to gods now, aren’t we? If prayers are useful, then why do the Pacification Bureau even exist?” Hu Nu couldn’t help but ridicule Ye Qing when he saw this.

This time, Ye Qing quipped back, “Haha. If you think you’re so hot, why don’t you catch the Stranger yourself?”

Yun Yan cut off Hu Nu before he could say anything else, “Quiet, Hu Nu. Do not bother Mister Ye!”

After Hu Nu had fallen silent, Ye Qing bowed twice to the incense stick and said, “I know you have a mind, brother. I ask you to lend me a hand!”

The incense stick was none other than the Incense of Fortune Prayer had left behind. The bad news was that it was already half-used, and it was the only one he had until he could gather the ingredients to make another. The good news was that the Incense of Fortune should be able to locate the Stranger they were looking for. After all, sometimes you have to be lucky to find someone, right?

As soon as he finished his prayer, the Incense of Fortune started burning much, much faster than before. The smoke it created started floating down a certain direction even though there was no wind right now.

“Follow it!” Ye Qing instructed and chased after the smoke immediately. His heart ached when he saw the Incense of Fortune shortening at a visible rate, and he knew it wouldn’t be long before it burned out completely. It would be bad if it burned out before they could find the Stranger.

Suddenly, Ye Qing felt like he had stepped on something and looked down. “Hmm? It’s a silver ingot!”

As if on cue, the smoke floated toward a shop that sold joss papers. It was called the “Source of Happiness”. Realizing what this meant, Ye Qing hurriedly extinguished the Incense of Fortune before pointing at the shop, “This is where the Stranger is hiding!”

“Are... are you sure, Mister Ye?” Yun Yan looked a little hesitant. She had seen various methods to track down Strangers, but this was the first time she had come across this one. It was no wonder she was feeling a little skeptical.

/p>

“We would know once you give it a try, wouldn’t we?” Ye Qing smirked and swung his sleeves at the joss paper shop.

“Don’t—” It was too late. His force was already crashing toward the shop like an avalanche. At times like this, action was far more useful than words. They would know he was right when the Stranger was forced out of its hidey-hole!

Ye Qing hadn’t tried to preserve his strength. The attack was powerful enough to destroy the entire joss paper shop. However, right before the attack would hit its target, a dense cloud of yin energy suddenly poured out of “Source of Happiness” like a tidal wave and blocked Ye Qing’s force!

This time, Ye Qing didn’t need to explain himself. Everyone noticed that something was amiss and took action immediately. Hu Nu roared loudly and threw out a mighty punch, whereas the rest of the Sentinels moved closer toward Yun Yan and formed a tight circle. They kept a firm grip on their bows and watched their surroundings carefully.

Boom!

Hu Nu’s punch force rolled toward the joss paper shop like a raging river. It easily blew away the yin energy surrounding it and crashed into the door.

Bang!

To everyone’s surprise, the door didn’t budge an inch. Hu Nu was the one who was pushed back a few steps by the rebound. A flinty glint entered Ye Qing’s eyes immediately. He knew first hand just how brutal and powerful Hu Nu’s punch was, and yet it still wasn’t enough to threaten the Stranger within. It was proof that the Stranger was quite powerful, so powerful that it had to be a Malice-class Stranger!

Knock—knock knock!

It was at this moment a series of crisp and rhythmic knocks came from the door. The Sentinels didn't recognize the noise because they hadn't experienced it before, but not Ye Qing. He immediately cried, "Watch out!" and tightened his own mental defenses. Before he even finished speaking, an ominous air suddenly flooded the alley and chilled the humans to their core. Ye Qing was fine, but some of the Sentinels suddenly looked dazed and almost sleepy.

Knock—knock knock!

Knock—knock knock!

As if on cue, the Stranger inside "Source of Happiness" knocked twice more and thickened the ominous air rapidly.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The dozen or so Sentinels collapsed to the ground and died one after another. Hu Nu and Yun Yan were the only ones who were still hanging on to life.

Hu Nu was an early-stage Vessel Augmentor, so it made sense that he would be able to withstand the fatal knocks. But Yun Yan, if he remembered the rumors correctly, was born with a frail body and incapable of practicing martial arts. It was why Ye Qing was very surprised to find she was still alive.

That said, the light in their eyes were dimming and weakening at a visible rate. They clearly could not hold on for much longer!

Thankfully, Ye Qing had already come up with a plan based on his previous encounter with the Stranger. The moment he heard the knocks, he immediately visualized the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" and dispelled the ominous air that had invaded his mind immediately. That was why he wasn't affected like the others. Then, he united his essence, qi and spirit into one and let out an imperious, "Hmph!"

His voice was so loud that it reverberated throughout the alley like a huge bell. Strange ripples started appearing in the air as the invisible energies clashed against one another. The ominous, deathly air hanging around them was immediately disrupted, and the knocking in the joss paper shop ceased in an instant.

"Hooo... KILL!"

Not done yet, Ye Qing sucked in a huge breath and gathered his energy within his chest. When his sleeves started billowing wildly like they were being blown by a powerful storm, he unleashed a tidal wave of force at the joss paper shop!

"Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve"

It was at this moment a pale, wrinkly hand shot out of the pitch black shop and grabbed Ye Qing's sleeve. If the sleeve resembled a tidal wave, then the hand was a reef that parted it right at the center. The two forces clashed, and Ye Qing was thrown into the air. His sleeve was shredded into bits as well. However, the hand wasn't doing so hot either. It turned almost transparent as it slunk back into the darkness.

Thump!

Suddenly, a heavy thump that sounded like a massive rock crashing against the ground came from inside the joss paper shop. The darkness churned, and a bunch of humanoid silhouettes rushed out of the shop and straight toward Ye Qing. Their limbs were stiff, and their movements were eerie. It was because they were paper dolls!

Ye Qing drummed his fingers like he was strumming a pipa. A dozen or so throwing knives immediately shot toward the paper dolls like lightning bolts. They were useless though. The throwing knives drilled through their paper bodies without resistance but failed to slow them down in the slightest.

Ye Qing raised an eyebrow and changed tactics. This time, he brought down his left hand and unleashed a jet of bluish black flames at the paper dolls. It worked. Every paper doll that so much as brushed against the bluish black flames were burned into ashes in an instant.

It was at this moment a crooked old man with a face that looked as pale as a sheet appeared behind Ye Qing like a ghost. His index and middle finger curled slightly, he lowered his right hand like he would knock on Ye Qing's head!

"I was waiting for you!"

Ye Qing was anticipating this, however. He had sensed the old man hiding in the darkness since the beginning. Right before the old man's fingers would land on his head, he wheeled around and opened his mouth. A brilliant light appeared from behind his throat, and Lightning Bolt pierced through his head without resistance.

"Ahhhhhh!"

Half of the old man's head was blown away just like that. He let out a bloodcurdling scream before vanishing into thin air. When the old man disappeared, the ominous air permeating the area vanished as well.

"Where's the Stranger?" Hu Nu woke up and asked weakly after his mind was freed. Right now, he looked nothing like the fearsome man he was earlier. His eyes were dazed, his face was deathly pale, and his body language exuded death and weakness.

"He escaped. But don't worry. I have him in my sights!" Ye Qing glanced at him and Yun Yan. "Just take care of Miss Yun and leave it to me!"

"Be... careful!"

Ye Qing was already gone by the time the words tumbled out of Hu Nu's mouth.

Chapter 77: Did I Give You Permission To Leave?

"This way!"

If someone was watching Ye Qing right now, they would have mistaken him for a ghost. His feet never touched the ground, and he did not make a sound as he dashed through the darkness.

His spiritual power had grown by leaps and bounds ever since he practiced the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method". Although the old man was almost as untraceable as an actual ghost, he could still pick up a faint trail of yin energy. It was how he managed to stay on the Stranger's trail.

The old man was pretty cautious. They must have traversed at least one quarter of the entire county before he finally entered a house.

Ye Qing jumped over the wall and skulked through the courtyard without a sound. It wasn't long before he found the old man sitting opposite a scholarly man holding a folding fan in the living room.

Faceless?

Ye Qing's heart skipped a beat when he saw the scholar. He did not recognize his appearance, but his aura was unmistakable.

The old man and Faceless are acquaintances? Is Faceless behind today's incident? Ye Qing thought. He was going to kill the Stranger immediately, but now he decided to wait just a bit longer. They might give him some interesting information.

In the living room, Faceless asked in a puzzled voice, "What happened, Ghastly? Who did you run into to be injured this badly?"

The old man named Ghastly looked terrible. Half of his head was completely gone, and black smoke was rising from the gaping wound. The other half was contorted in an expression of fury and hatred as Ghastly stared at Faceless unblinkingly. It was like he was staring at a dead man.

His chilling stare rolled off Faceless like water off a duck's back, however. Faceless chuckled while fanning himself, "Don't look at me like that. I might just dig out your remaining eye if you keep this up."

Ghastly finally squeezed out a dark, raspy reply, "Why didn't you tell me that man possesses an outstanding mind and spirit, Faceless? He even has two potent Strange Artifacts!"

"You were hurt by Ye Qing?!" Faceless exclaimed in shock. His dark eyes flickered with uncertainty as he muttered to himself, "That can't be right. I'll grant him that he displayed a prodigious amount of true qi, incredible movement art, and unpredictable saber techniques, but his mind was so-so at best! There should be no way he could withstand your knocks!"

"And yet he had!" Ghastly rasped angrily.

Faceless tapped his table twice before realizing something, "Wait a second, didn't I tell you to leave immediately if Ye Qing somehow survives your ability? I told you I had other tricks up my sleeves in case it fails. Did you ignore my advice, or did something unexpected happen? Tell me everything, Ghastly!"

The old man kept quiet for a moment but did as he said. When he was finished reciting his tale, Faceless' expression turned cold and brooding. "What a lucky bastard! My original plan was for you to eliminate his mind with your ability and take revenge on my behalf. On the off chance you failed, I even notified the Pacification Bureau that a massacre had taken place at Coming Clouds so that their deaths would be pinned on him."

"If Ye Qing decided to resist capture and fight against the Pacification Bureau, he would have signed off his own death sentence. If he followed them back to their

headquarters, then even better. I have a million ways to kill him without a trace once he entered the Pacification Bureau and had his true qi suppressed!”

I knew that something was off! Ye Qing thought in realization outside the building. He had been thinking what were the chances that the Pacification Bureau showed up within the same minute he entered Coming Clouds. As it turned out, it was a trap Faceless had laid down to catch him.

He had to admit that Faceless’ plan this time was pretty tight. It wasn’t perfect, but it was good enough that he would’ve fallen for it if a number of good fortunes hadn’t happened to him in the nick of time.

If he hadn’t accidentally triggered the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” and discovered its secrets, he might not have survived Ghastly’s deadly knocks. Besides that, the Pacification Bureau was very different from the administrative division. In case of a murder, the administrative division did not have the authority to detain a suspect without evidence. However, the Pacification Bureau could detain anyone and everyone with or without any evidence especially when a Stranger was involved. They even had the right to execute anyone on the spot if they dared to resist arrest.

If he was anyone else, Faceless’ trap would have succeeded. He would have been hunted down and killed by the Pacification Bureau or die to Faceless’ tricks while he was being interrogated at the Pacification Bureau’s headquarters. It was only thanks to the Annon Sutra that he unknowingly broke out of the Stranger’s trap, which led to him defeating Ghastly and even discovering their hidden relationship!

“My plan is so perfect that even I was impressed with my bout of inspiration, so how did that bastard manage to see through it? It should’ve worked!” Faceless lamented in a wistful tone. Only his eyes revealed the fact that he was really burning with hatred and bloodthirst.

Faceless then asked curiously, “By the way, how on earth did the bastard and the Sentinels manage to find your old haunt? I know full well just how elusive you are!”

For the first time, a trickle of uncertainty entered Ghastly’s eye. He shook his head as he replied, “I’m not sure. I’m certain I haven’t left any trace behind, so it shouldn’t have been possible for them to track me, much less my hideout!”

Suddenly, Faceless exclaimed in realization, “Wait a second. If they can find your hideout, they might be able to find *my* hideout as well! You’re the most careful of us, Ghastly! How could you have committed such a rookie mistake?”

Ghastly’s expression darkened. “Watch your mouth, Faceless. The reason I’m like this in the first place is because of you. I don’t expect gratitude, but I would greatly appreciate it if you don’t accuse me of failure!”

“In any case, you’re worrying over nothing. I left most of the Sentinels hurt or dead before I escaped. They were in no condition to chase me, much less track me to your hideout!”

Faceless let out a strange cackle. "I'm worrying over nothing? No, I'm just being cautious. Our plan has just reached a critical stage. From now on, everything must go perfectly until we are ready to execute the plan!"

"Also, you're the one who should watch your mouth. You're not doing me a favor, you're paying me back for the favor *I* have done unto you. If you think you can twist things around just because you're older than me, think again!"

Ghastly did not take offense despite Faceless' tone. He asked curiously, "Speaking of which, what on earth are you plotting with Rotten Crown and Dark Eye? Is it still not safe to tell me?"

A mesmerized look came over Faceless. "You'll know in two days. Hehehe! When the day comes, I will be able to eat all the flesh I want, and you all the souls you ever dreamed! It'll be a feast of epic proportions!"

"I look forward to your group's success!" Ghastly did not press the matter. There was even a hint of anticipation and excitement in his tone.

"Trust me, we will succeed!" Faceless chuckled. "Speaking of which, it's time we go our separate ways. Like I said, it's just a precaution. Let's drink together when this is all over!"

"It's a promise!" Ghastly replied. "One last thing. With this, my debt is settled. I will not be responsible for what happens if you 'forget' and try to coerce me to do your bidding again, understand?"

"Relax, Ghastly. I will remember. After all, I'm not a brainless old fart like you, haha!" Faceless laughed and headed toward the front door.

"Sigh. I'm going to have to get a new face after this. How trouble—"

Faceless was opening the door in mid-grumble when suddenly, he felt like something was off. Not one to disregard his intuition, he immediately tried to back away only to find a hand flying out of the darkness like lightning. It hit him right in the solar plexus with a thunderclap-like boom and fried him until he looked like a lump of red hot iron. Not only that, he felt like something was hitting his insides again and again not unlike a blacksmith who was tempering a piece of molten iron with his hammer. His limbs felt weak, his aura was a mess, and there wasn't a part of his body that didn't hurt like a bitch.

That moment of distraction was enough for the hand to move above his head and burst into bluish black flames. Although the hand was simply hanging above his head like a thundercloud, Faceless knew with terror-stricken certainty that it would burn both his body and his soul into ashes if he dared to make a move. Thick walls of aura had also surrounded him from all sides and prevented him from escaping.

The surprise attack had happened in just the blink of an eye. By the time Ghastly realized what happened, the mysterious attacker had already rendered Faceless immobile. The old man did not hesitate to abandon his companion and escape through the window—or at least, he tried to.

“Did I give you permission to leave?” taunted Ye Qing as the dark cloud covering the moon abruptly parted in half. It wasn’t a coincidence. A bolt of lightning abruptly zapped across the sky and struck Ghastly squarely in the chest. It was none other than his new Strange Artifact, Lightning Bolt.

Ghastly’s body abruptly exploded to reveal a strange creature. It had a massive mouth and a head as big as a bucket, but its limbs were shockingly thin and short. It almost looked like a ghost baby with a giant head. As soon as it appeared, yin wind suddenly filled the house, and ghastly wails resounded everywhere as if they had been transported to the Nether in an instant. It was a bone-chilling phenomenon to put it mildly.

“You’re a Soul Eater? Hmph! No wonder you can kill without a trace!” Ye Qing remarked curiously while still keeping his left hand above Faceless.

A Soul Eater was a Malice-class Stranger and a type of yin soul. It had a head as big as a bucket, but a body as small as a baby. It was usually found in a hollow of a yin-infested mountain. Intelligent and cunning, this Stranger usually lured its victims with sound so it could consume their souls. Although it was only classified as a Malice-class Stranger, it was extremely dangerous and could threaten Vessel Augmentors or even Astral Refiners. It was weak to lightning, fire, heat, and yang.

A Soul Eater was a highly dangerous and intelligent Stranger. Forget the average Vessel Augmentor, even Ye Qing would have perished to Ghastly’s fatal knocks if he hadn’t accidentally uncovered a visualization method and greatly bolstered his mind and his spirit as a result.

“Kekeke...” The Soul Eater let out a dark, evil cackle after manifesting its true form. The yin energy in the house immediately churned like a tidal wave, and the countless wandering souls in the area started cackling as well. The sound was twisted and impossible, shrill and painful. Despite knowing it was coming, Ye Qing still felt dizzy and destabilized by the sound attack.

“Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”

Ye Qing did not dare to treat the attack lightly. He immediately visualized the painting and dispelled the evil energies that had intruded his head in an instant. Then, he grabbed Faceless’ skull with his right hand so he could free his left and launched a palm strike.

“Boundless Lightning Palm”

“Blue Demon Hand”

The Netherflame was deadly, but it was even deadlier when combined with the Boundless Lightning Palm. Like a raging inferno, it spread to every corner of the house in just the blink of an eye.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Countless souls screamed as the Netherflame burned them all into ash. The Soul Eater itself was writhing in pain and flying all over the place in search for a way out. However, it was neither able to extinguish the flames consuming its body or break out of the ring of flames. As if that wasn’t bad

enough, yin energy seemed to accelerate the spread of the dark flame. It grew hotter and hotter until finally, the struggling Soul Eater melted away completely like a candle and disappeared.

Ye Qing clenched his left hand after the Soul Eater was dead. The unholy flames immediately surged back into the Blue Demon Hand and vanished.

Meanwhile, Faceless had just recovered from Soul Eater's cackle. Just because he was a Stranger didn't mean he was immune to the other Stranger's sound attack. He looked around the empty house once before stammering in fear, "Is... is he dead? Did you kill Ghastly?"

"Obviously." Ye Qing's lips widened into a diabolical smile. "Now, it's your turn to pay the price!"

Chapter 78: Conspiracy

"I... I... I..."

Faceless couldn't stop stammering as he stared at Ye Qing. The way he was looking at the young man, it was like he was staring at a fellow Stranger instead of a human. Just a few days ago, he was still able to put up a fight against the young man. Although he had lost in the end, he was ultimately able to escape with his life. If his skin was a bit thicker, he would even call it a narrow defeat.

But now? Ye Qing hadn't just trounced him in one move, he also took out Ghastly with one hand and without moving from his spot. The gap between their strength was so huge it was like a fight between a child and an adult; a son and his dad. They were trounced so hard he was almost surprised he was still breathing.

It's only been a few days since I last saw him. How did he get so strong in so short a time? Is his growth really that ridiculous, or was he hiding his strength the first time we fought?

It did not matter what the answer was. Both possibilities terrified him to the core.

"Mercy, warrior, mercy! I shouldn't have tried to kill you! I will do anything! All I ask is that you spare my life!"

Ye Qing had been patiently waiting for Faceless to make a move. Just when he thought that the Stranger would fight to the bitter end—his face had been contorting non-stop since a while ago—Faceless surprised him by dropping to his knees, pummeling the floor with his head and begging for his life.

"..."

Ye Qing rubbed his nose a little. When Faceless had talked down on Ghastly like he was a gang boss a while ago, he thought for sure that the Stranger had a diamond spine that would rather break than bend. However, the guy had caved before he even began and killed the vibe with sheer cowardliness.

Where's your backbone as a Stranger? Where's your dignity?

... Was what he would've said if not for the fact that Faceless' cowardice saved him a ton of time and energy, so he just kept his mouth shut and walked into the living

room. A few seconds later, he dragged over a chair, sat down, and just stared at the squirming Stranger for a bit. A long, long time later, he finally said,

“Let’s set aside the time you tried to kill me for the moment—I’m still alive after all—and talk about something else. If you tell me what I want to know truthfully, I may yet choose to stay my hand. If not, then I have no choice but to send you on your way. Are we agreed?”

“Of course, warrior!” Faceless immediately put on an obsequious smile on his face. “Ask away, warrior! I swear on every god, demon, celestial, buddha and whatever the hell is up and down there that I shall tell you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!”

How eloquent, Ye Qing thought amusedly to himself before going straight to the point, “Tell me what you and your group are plotting.”

This was the reason he did not kill Faceless. It was because he wanted to know what he and his fellow Strangers were plotting. Originally, his plan was to investigate them slowly and carefully so as not to trigger any alarms, but from what he heard earlier their plan was already on the verge of success. In that case, he had no choice but to find out the answer using the simplest and most direct method instead: forceful interrogation!

Was there a chance this would alert the other Strangers that something was wrong? Of course there was. But it was still better than the alternative of doing nothing and allowing Anyang to turn into hell.

Faceless pretended to be confused. “I’m sorry? What are you talking about? Do you mean me and Ghastly plotting together to kill you. It’s all my fault, I know I deserve death for my actions, but I’m just a small fry who’s so blind I failed to recognize your prodigious power. Surely a magnanimous hero like you wouldn’t take too much offense...?”

“You really are quite the eloquent flatterer!” Ye Qing’s smile widened. “As a reward, I promise to grant you a swift, less painful death!”

“Wait wait wait! What did I do wrong? I thought we were talking about my plot to kill you?” Faceless protested innocently. “I don’t understand. Can you please enlighten me, warrior?”

“Sure thing. What were you saying earlier? Right. Dark Eye, Rotten Crown, all the flesh and soul you and Soul Eater can consume... need I say more?” Ye Qing said with a smile that didn’t reach the eye.

Faceless was still pretending, however. “Oh, you’re talking about that! I was just boasting with Ghastly, warrior! There is no plan. You know how it is, a superficial man like me can’t help but want to feel superior to my peers. Surely a wise, sagacious warrior like you can understand my petty desires?”

“Hah! ‘The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’ my ass! I haven’t even truly started yet, and already you’re trying to bullshit your way out!” Ye Qing shook his head disappointedly. “No wonder they say not to trust a man’s words, though you’re not even a man, are you? Do Strangers even have genders? Anyway, my patience is limited, Faceless. At this rate, you’re going to be dead real soon!”

“Also, I know a lot more than you think. For example, I don’t just know Dark Eye and Rotten Crown are in your group. I also know an Old Grass and an Evergreen Ivy. Not only that, I know your plan is to destroy Anyang, isn’t it?”

“I’m a benevolent man, so I’m going to give you one more chance to tell me the truth. Remember, this is your one and only chance; your one and only life. Don’t. Squander. It.”

For the first time, Faceless’ obsequious smile froze on his face. His eyes betrayed a hint of shock as well. However, they were quickly replaced by an expression of confusion and self-ridicule as he chuckled. “Hehe, I really have no idea what you’re talking about, warrior. Old Grass? Evergreen Ivy? I don’t know those people. Destroy Anyang? Forgive me for saying this but I can’t even kill you! How can I possibly be capable of such a thing?”

“Is that so? Do you really know nothing at all?” Ye Qing said unhurriedly and smilingly. “Okay then! I’ll see you on the other side!”

His left hand abruptly burst into flames, and he slowly extended his palm toward Faceless. Primordial terror gripped Faceless as the blood drained away from his face, every hair on his body stood on end. *He’s going to kill me! But why? Doesn’t he know what will happen if he kills me?*

In fact, Faceless knew that their plan was exposed from the moment Ye Qing mentioned Old Grass and Evergreen Ivy’s names. Although he didn’t know how it was exposed or who was the one who exposed it, the revelation actually made him sigh in relief. The fact that Ye Qing wanted him to divulge the details of the plan meant that he didn’t actually know about them. This meant that Ye Qing wouldn’t dare to kill him until he had revealed everything. That was why he dared to bullshit Ye Qing to his face.

However, Ye Qing had chosen the unthinkable. He was going to kill him right now. That was not how the script was written!

A second before Ye Qing’s palm would land on his head, Faceless finally lost his composure and growled, “Are you actually going to kill me?! Don’t you want to know about our plan?”

“Huh? But I thought you said you didn’t know anything?” Ye Qing said with a sarcastic, ridiculing smirk.

Faceless hid a sigh of relief when Ye Qing stopped moving his hand. Then, he let out a chuckle and said, “Heh. You really are wise and sagacious. My act didn’t faze you at all. That’s right! We’re plotting something big that will destroy the entire Anyang and kill all the humans in it! When the time comes, the entire county will turn into a living hell, and it so happens that I know exactly

when, where, and how the plan will unfold! So? Are you still going to kill me knowing that I hold all the information you need?”

Faceless’ tone grew increasingly arrogant until he was practically daring Ye Qing to kill him. He did it because he was certain that the young man wouldn’t do so, but...

“Sure. Why not?” Ye Qing tilted his head and stared at Faceless puzzledly like he was looking at his neighbor’s stunted son. He truly looked like he couldn’t comprehend why Faceless would arrive at such a stupid conclusion.

“...” This guy seriously isn’t following the script!

Faceless was speechless for a moment before he blurted, “Aren’t you afraid that Anyang would fall into ruins and turn into a living hell?”

“To tell you the truth? Not at all.” Ye Qing leaned back a little and kicked off the ground. He then started swaying back and forth as if he was sitting on a recliner, not a chair. “First, I know for a fact that you have some sort of plan to destroy Anyang. I can just inform the Pacification Bureau about this, sit back, and relax. We both know how capable they are. Do you really think your plan will go smoothly when the Pacification Bureau is actively hampering your efforts?”

“On the off chance the Pacification Bureau fails to stop you, I can just get out of Anyang and hide in the woods for a bit. Sure, Anyang will fall, and the people will be massacred to the last, but... what does that have to do with me? This is a harsh world. I’m satisfied with just keeping myself safe. If the others couldn’t protect themselves, it’s their fault for being weak, no?”

Faceless: *“...” Motherfucker, I can’t refute him because he’s absolutely right! I can’t even appeal to his guilty conscience because our group is the one plotting the downfall of Anyang!*

Before Faceless could react, Ye Qing continued, “also, I don’t necessarily have to pry the information I need from your mouth. There are other sources who may prove just as valuable as you, if not more.”

“Impossible! You’re lying!” Faceless blurted out before he could stop himself.

Ye Qing shot him a casual smile and said, “I’m not though. Let’s see. I remember that Old Grass is a tall, thin man with a friendly demeanor. He also has a head of grass. I’m sure we’ll have a fantastic conversation with each other. Last I remember, he lives at Yang’s Tofu Shop in Westward Alley on the west side of the city. Am I right?”

“Impossible! How did you know where Old Grass lives?” Faceless blurted in shock again when he remembered something: *No! Did he follow me when I ran away?*

Was I the one who leaked our plan?

He started recalling what he and Old Grass had discussed during their last meeting, and the more he remembered, the uglier his expression became. There was a tinge of regret and fear as well.

“Of course, even if Old Grass’ spine turned out to be made of sterner stuff, I still have Dark Eye, Rotten Crown, and Evergreen Ivy to question! Surely one of them will give me what I want?” Ye Qing leaned forward a little to create even more pressure. “Don’t doubt my ability. I followed you when you thought it was impossible, which led to me finding Old Grass. I also found Ghastly when he thought it was impossible. So long as your companions are still alive, I can and will find them no matter where they hide!”

“Now, let me ask you one more time... do you really think I won’t kill you?”

Faceless’ smile had vanished completely at this point. He didn’t know about other Strangers, but he knew with every fiber of his being that his group only looked friendly on the surface. In reality, every single one of them was cold-blooded, heartless, and selfish. There was no chance those bastards would keep the plan a secret if it meant saving their own skin.

So yes, he believed Ye Qing. He truly believed that Ye Qing would kill him and pry the truth from those bastards’ mouths if necessary!

“Ehehe, I was just joking with you and testing your mettle, warrior. I should’ve known better than to doubt your resolve, but now I know for sure that you are definitely a man who’s destined for great things! I am most impressed!”

Faceless abruptly put on an obsequious smile and flattered Ye Qing to the high heavens. Once done, he said, “In fact, I’ve been wanting to tell you the plan from the start, so you definitely shouldn’t seek out Old Grass and the others. Every single one of them is a sneaky, cunning, heartless, and cold-blooded sonuvabitch. As the only pure, kind, honest soul in their group, it honestly hurts me to be lumped together with them, really!”

“Anyway, just ask me a question, and I swear I will answer it to my fullest ability!” The Stranger ended with a loud chest thump.

“Pure, kind, honest soul?” Ye Qing squinted in an attempt to locate some hint of shame from Faceless’ face. There was none. No wonder the ones at the top were usually shameless people. With a skin this thick, was there anywhere you couldn’t go?

Ye Qing sighed. “Fiiiiiine. I suppose I can give you one more chance. Tell me, what is your plan?”

Faceless did not try to bullshit him this time. He said directly, “Three days later during the night, we plan to open the gates so that the Strangers hiding outside the county can get in. Then, we’ll massacre all the humans and destroy Anyang from the inside out!”

Chapter 79: Why Should I Keep You Alive

“You’re going to open the gates for your fellow Strangers lurking outside the county? Are you serious?”

Ye Qing shook his head. “The gates of Anyang are imbued with powerful restrictions courtesy of the Heaven’s Eye, and I should not need to tell you how deadly it is. Forget opening the gates, you can’t even get close without feeling like you’re about to suffocate, so how... unless...”

Ye Qing abruptly slowed down when he was nearing the end of the sentence. It was because one possibility had occurred to him.

“I knew you would figure it out! It is as you imagined!” Faceless said with an obsequious smile. “It’s true that we Strangers cannot open the gates, but you humans can!”

“I thought so,” Ye Qing rubbed his chin and mumbled seemingly to himself, “To open the gate and lower the gate restrictions, you need a gate token. And a gate token is something only the gate captain possesses... Tang Yi’an is one of yours?”

“You’re incredible, warrior! You’ve guessed it in one try!” Faceless buttered up Ye Qing again, though it wasn’t all flattery. The fact that Ye Qing had managed to deduce so many things accurately and in such a short time was proof that his mind operated on a different level compared to most people.

Ye Qing asked another question while rubbing the spot between his eyebrows, “I’m curious. Why would Tang Yi’an make such a deal with you? Not only is he digging his own grave, he’ll even implicate his own family when all is said and done. What’s the point?”

“What else does a human want from this world besides fame and fortune?” Faceless let out a sinister chuckle. “Offer them one or the other, and they will willingly enter your trap regardless of the consequences!”

“You’re saying you offered him fame or fortune to open the gates?” Ye Qing tapped his armrest slowly. “Tang Yi’an is Anyang’s guard captain and the brother-in-law of a vice magistrate. He already has a highway to the top rung of the ladder—or what he perceived as the top at least, so I doubt you can lure him with promises of fame. So fortune it is.”

“Yes, I can see how you did it. I’ve long heard that Tang Yi’an is a greedy man, and practically everyone knows that he abuses his position to pin make-believe crimes on traveling merchants to strip them of their wealth. All you need to do is to bribe him, and he should do as you wish.”

In fact, the dumbass had tried to pull this on Yan Yufei when they first arrived in the county. While it had been quite entertaining to watch him crash and burn at the time, it no longer seemed so funny anymore.

“However, one must live to be able to spend their wealth, and there are few things more painful in this world than to die while money is left unspent!” Ye Qing said indifferently. “Tang Yi’an may be greedy, but I doubt he’s stupid. He should understand something this simple at least, which means you never told him about your plan, did you?”

“You’re beyond insightful, warrior! You never fail to hit the nail on the head in just a few sentences!” Faceless praised with a beaming smile on his face.

“Slow down. Flattery no matter how sweet is loathsome in excess,” said Ye Qing while shooting a glance at Faceless. How did he not notice that this guy was a professional bootlicker before?

“More words of wisdom! Not an hour had passed since I was graced by your presence, and already I feel a decade wiser!” Faceless exclaimed in false wonder. That said, he did understand that anything could be loathsome in excess, not to mention that Ye Qing had already warned him to cool it, so he had no choice but to stop his bootlicking for the moment and return to the main subject.

“You are correct. Tang Yi’an doesn’t know that we’re planning to destroy Anyang. We lied to him saying that we’re a bunch of spirit material merchants, and that we have a number of goods that need to be shipped into the county in three days at most, or they would lose their value. At first, Tang Yi’an refused to budge no matter how hard we begged him, but he caved immediately after we gave him a thousand silver!”

“A thousand silver? Damn! That’s a lot of money!” Ye Qing sighed before launching into a counterpoint, “But even if you managed to slip in an army of Strangers through the gates undetected, Anyang is still protected by the Shenwu Defense Force and the Sentinels. Of course they wouldn’t be able to react to your attack in time, but when they do show up, I highly doubt you’ll be able to defeat them and destroy Anyang!”

Faceless smiled. “That would be true, but a village called... something Hill Village recently vanished into thin air, prompting the Pacification Bureau to dispatch most of their men to investigate this matter. They aren’t expected to return any time soon either, so their headquarters is severely undermanned right now.”

“Ahem. What about the Shenwu Defense Force?” Ye Qing coughed. He was pretty sure that that “something Hill Village” Faceless was talking about was August Hill Village, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to admit it.

“The Shenwu Defense Force just left the county to hunt down some raiders, and they’re not expected to return in three to five days!” Faceless noticed Ye Qing’s odd expression as well, but he wisely chose not to say anything about it.

“Raiders?” Ye Qing frowned.

Faceless chuckled. “A few days ago, a group of Grave Raiders appeared outside Anyang and ambushed countless traveling caravans that were passing through Anyang. They also dug out every grave they could find in the area in search of loot. That is why the magistrate ordered You Da to take a thousand Shenwu Defense Force with him and eliminate the Strangers just yesterday. They must be enjoying that sweet, sweet mountain wind right now!”

The Grave Raiders weren't just humanoid-shaped Strangers, they were humans who had transformed into a Stranger. Despite possessing a human's memories and intelligence, they willingly allied themselves with Strangers and loved nothing more than to dig up grave sites and plunder the treasures within. They also consumed the corpses for sustenance.

It should not need to be said, but they were easily one of the most hated Strangers in the realm, so much so that Chu itself decreed that all Grave Raiders would be killed on sight!

"It can't be a coincidence. Your group must have contacted the Grave Raiders and told them to attack at this time, am I right?" Ye Qing asked.

"An astute deduction, warrior!" Faceless replied simply.

"With this, you hold the absolute advantage while Anyang holds none. I must admit that I'm impressed!" Ye Qing sighed. No wonder Faceless was so confident. With little to no men left to protect Anyang, the invading Strangers would be able to slaughter the people to their heart's content. Forget the Sentinels at August Hill Village, not even the Shenwu Defense Force would be able to make it back in time. The county would have long turned into a living hell by then.

Ye Qing fell silent for a moment before asking, "You've given me the general outline of your plan, but what about the specifics? What role does each of you play in this plan?"

Faceless answered honestly, "My mission was to bribe Tang Yi'an, Old Grass' mission was to collect information throughout the county just in case, and Rotten Crown and Dark Eye's mission was to contact the Strangers outside the county and make the necessary arrangements."

"Your roles are very clear cut, huh?" Ye Qing shot a thoughtful glance at Faceless before asking another question, "What else are you expected to do? Don't you have a mission to cause a commotion or sabotage a key location or something?"

Faceless shook his head. "And why would we do that? Evergreen Ivy told us that the plan has reached a critical stage, and that it would be unwise to complicate things unnecessarily. If the plan goes smoothly, then all is well. If not, we can lie low and wait for another chance."

"Evergreen Ivy? From the sounds of it, she's the leader of your little group, isn't she?"

When Faceless nodded, Ye Qing fired another question, "Besides Old Grass, do you know where Dark Eye, Rotten Crown and Evergreen Ivy are hiding?"

Faceless shook his head.

"Really?" Ye Qing's tone darkened.

"With heaven and earth as my witness, I swear that I haven't told a single lie since you won my heart with your boundless grace!" lamented Faceless with a hurt look. He even squeezed out a few drops of fake tears to make his act look more convincing.

"Of the five of us, Evergreen Ivy is probably the only one who knows about our true identities and hideouts. In fact, we usually rely on her to contact us every time we

hold a meeting. Also, we always meet each other using our true forms, so I truly do not know who they are and where they're living!"

But Ye Qing did not let up the pressure. "You say that, but what about Old Grass?"

Faceless shuddered a little at the flinty glint in his eyes and said, "Old Grass is an exception to the rule because we already knew each other before we infiltrated Anyang. You can even say that we are old acquaintances. But I seriously know nothing about the others!"

"When is your next meeting?"

"I don't know. Like I told you, we usually wait for Evergreen Ivy to notify us when and where the next meeting will take place," Faceless answered in a helpless voice.

"If you know nothing useful, then... why should I keep you alive?" Ye Qing said lightly.

Faceless visibly shuddered before dropping to his knees. He then shuffled closer to Ye Qing and begged in a weeping voice, "Warrior, you promised me you will let me live if I told you our plan! Surely a man of integrity such as yourself wouldn't go back on your promise!"

Ye Qing chuckled. "Is that so? I'm pretty sure I said I 'might' consider letting you live."

"That cannot be right! You must've misremembered!" Faceless then raised his right hand as if he was preparing to swear an oath and said, "I may not know where they live, but I do know their scents like the back of my hand! I swear I'll locate every last one of them if you would just give me some time!"

"Besides that, I'm a man of many uses. I can make tea, do the laundry, cook, run errands, and perform manual labor. I can even be a *woman* of many uses and tidy your bed, act as your escort, warm your bed and more..."

When Faceless said he was a man of many uses, his face started changing in rapid succession. When he said he could make tea, his face changed to that of a male servant. When he said he could do the laundry and cook, he actually transformed into a cook with a round head and a broad neck. When he said he could tidy his bed and act as his escort, he actually transformed into a young woman with an hourglass figure and a shy look on her face, and when he said he could warm his bed, he transformed into a cool beauty whose elegant appearance, warm eyes and sweet voice could've melted even the hardest soul.

Finally, Faceless ended his appeal with a melodious voice, "I can be whatever you wish, young master. All I ask is that you don't abandon me!"

"..."

His performance was sublime, but Ye Qing only felt goosebumps all over his body. After all, just because *he* took the face of a woman did not change the fact that *he* was a man through and through! *I'm a perfectly straight male, thank you!*

"I can let you live, but how can I be certain that you wouldn't betray me?" Ye Qing ignored Faceless' antics and asked in a cold voice.

In fact, Ye Qing did not want to kill Faceless. For one, taking out the Stranger might be to chuck a very large rock into a pond. Two, he was hoping to use Faceless as a mole and capture his whole group in one fell swoop.

While he could use the Annon Sutra and the Incense of Fortune to locate these Strangers—the Annon Sutra would give him a rough location, and the Incense of Fortune would lead him straight to their doorsteps—but the incense stick was almost used up completely. It would only last one more use at most, which was a couple of uses shy of tracking down all of the Strangers, not to mention that he would rather save it for emergencies.

So yes, Faceless' beseechment did appeal to him somewhat. There was just one simple problem: Strangers were naturally cunning and treacherous. How could he make sure that Faceless would not betray him the second he left his sight?

"How could you say that? I've long since repented and resolved to serve you as your loyal servant since you've bested me with your awe-inspiring charisma. I could never hurt you, warrior!" Faceless implored coquettishly. He still hadn't turned back to a male human.

Ye Qing merely curled his lips upward and asked, "You don't actually think I'm that stupid, do you? You know what? I changed my mind. It's far easier and safer to just kill you and be done with this farce!"

"Wait wait wait! I can sign a Heavenly Ghost Contract with you and become your eternal servant! This way, you'll know that my loyalty is true!" Faceless instantly broke character when he saw the growing bloodthirst in Ye Qing's eyes.

"Heavenly Ghost Contract?" Ye Qing actually sneered when he heard this. His smile was so chilling that Faceless realized instantly that he had made an error.

"You *do* think that I'm a young and inexperienced warrior you can toy as you please! The Heavenly Ghost is *the* trickster Stranger who loves nothing more than to sow discord and mischief. Any contract that is signed with or through it will be flawed in a certain way no matter how carefully the parties had worded it. After the contract is complete, the Heavenly Ghost would actively encourage both sides to break the contract so that it could devour their souls."

"I-Is that so? You're such an erudite and multi-talented scholar, warrior! I have no idea about this, and I'm so sorry I nearly steered you wrong! I deserve to die for my mistake, I truly do!" Faceless feigned innocence and berated himself with all his might.

Ye Qing cared little for Faceless' petty tricks, however. He said with a smile, "That said, your suggestion isn't totally useless. There *is* a way to keep you on the straight and narrow. We can't sign a Heavenly Ghost Contract, but we *can* sign an Oath of Burden!"

Chapter 80: Oath of Burden

“Oath of Burden?” Faceless blanched a little when he heard this.

The Oathbearer was the name of an exceptionally powerful and rare Stranger with a tortoise-like body, but a head that was shaped like a dragon or a snake. It was also called the Oath Tortoise. It was as huge as a mountain and carried an innumerable amount of monuments on its back. Mild-mannered and adventurous, it loved nothing more than to explore the world and bearing witness to oaths.

The Oathbearer was a fair and impartial witness. Anyone who broke an oath they swore on its name would earn the Oathbearer’s wrath and have their soul ripped out of their body and chained to the monument they swore their oath to. They would be tortured by Heavenly Astral winds and suffer for eternity. This was why the monuments were known as the Monuments of Oath!

If Faceless signed a contract with Ye Qing with the Oathbearer as the witness, he would never be able to renege on his promise. He would actually have to serve Ye Qing for all of eternity. When he offered to sign a Heavenly Ghost Contract with Ye Qing just now, it was because he thought that the young man was too young and ignorant to know about it. If Ye Qing actually signed a Heavenly Ghost Contract with him, he could exploit the flaw in the contract and break free eventually. However, not only did Ye Qing prove him wrong, he even knew about the Oath of Burden.

“What’s wrong? Having second thoughts?” A wicked smile sprung onto Ye Qing’s face.

“Hehehe, of course not! Why would I have second thoughts when I couldn’t be happier with this arrangement?” Faceless said half-heartedly before hesitating.

“However, the mantra to invoke the Oath of Burden is so ancient that even I know nothing about it. If you say a single word wrong, you might summon some other Stranger or unknown danger instead, so...”

So I would advise you against this course of action!

“That’s for me to worry about, not you. You only need to tell me if you’re willing to sign an Oath of Burden with me or not. Yes or no?” Ye Qing pressed unhurriedly.

“But of course!” Faceless declared with a beaming smile. It was as if he truly wanted to bind himself to eternal servitude.

“Good!” Ye Qing nodded and produced the Incense of Fortune from his Nature’s Shell once more. First, he ignited the incense stick and planted it on the floor. After two solemn bows, he lifted his head and pressed one hand to his chest and another against his back. Then, he stood up tall and took a step forward in a surprisingly elegant and dignified fashion.

The strange ritual was an ancient ritual called the Gentleman’s Etiquette. It was the first step to invoke the Oathbearer.

Once done, Ye Qing raised his head slightly and chanted, “Heed my call, the void sky above and the dark earth below! I am Ye Qing. In the name of the undying oath, I summon the Oathbearer, Spirit of the Void Sky and Witness of Oaths, to witness my oath!”

His voice was heavy, slow and solemn, and his intonations sounded like it came from a far gone era. Invisible ripples actually started appearing out of nowhere as if his utterance somehow resonated with the world itself.

Shock flitted across Faceless' features when Ye Qing actually succeeded. *He actually knows the mantra to summon the Oathbearer? How is this possible?*

The next moment, both Ye Qing and Faceless suddenly felt incredibly light as if they had been freed from their physical bodies. In fact, they were. Their minds shot right through the nine heavens before they finally arrived and saw the biggest tortoise they had ever seen in their life.

Starlights orbited around the giant tortoise's body, and astral wind blew across its back from time to time. Its humongous back was jam-packed with countless tall, ancient, and weathered monuments inscribed with various oaths. They were obviously the legendary Monuments of Oath.

Besides that, Ye Qing noticed that some monuments had souls bound to their bodies. They were all screaming and wailing in the endless astral wind. They must be the damned souls who broke their oaths and were doomed to be cut by the astral wind for eternity.

"This... is the Oathbearer?!" Faceless thought as he perceived the power rolling off the giant tortoise and trembled from the bottom of his heart. He didn't even have the courage to raise his head and look at his fellow Stranger.

"I don't know, but most likely!" Ye Qing responded. The young man also felt a little intimidated—who wouldn't after witnessing such a grand sight?—but he was able to maintain his composure far better than Faceless thanks to the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method".

"Hail, oathmakers. Why have you summoned me?" It was at this moment a grand voice entered their ears. Both men blinked, and an old man wearing a clean robe and carrying a walking staff suddenly appeared in front of them. His smile was kind, and his demeanor was friendly. However, his eyes swirled like there was an entire universe behind them. They could see a vast, empty space, orbiting suns and moons, dying galaxies and more.

"Well met, Oathbearer, Spirit of the Void Sky and Witness of Oaths!"

Ye Qing did not allow himself to be distracted by the magnificent sight happening within the old man's eyes, however. He did not doubt that the old man was an avatar or manifestation of the Oathbearer, and to treat him with anything less but the utmost respect was pure folly. "The two of us would like to sign a master-servant contract, and we would dare to ask you to act as our witness!"

"At your service!" the Oathbearer replied with a kind smile.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" Ye Qing shot a glance at Faceless. The Stranger had been trying to minimize his presence in hopes that Ye Qing would somehow miss him to no avail.

“R-Right!” Faceless replied despondently. Short of committing suicide, the only thing he could do was to swear the oath, so he did. “In the name of the Oathbearer, I, Faceless, swear that I will serve Ye Qing as his eternal servant. His wish is my command, his word is my law, and my life belongs to him and him alone. Should I ever waver in my loyalty, may my mind cease to exist from this world!”

Ye Qing did not rush to accept Faceless’ oath. After mulling over his words carefully and finding no loopholes, he raised his head and swore solemnly, “In the name of the Oathbearer, Ye Qing, solemnly accept Faceless’ oath of servitude!”

“And so it shall be!” the Oathbearer declared with a smile and raised his hand a little. Ye Qing and Faceless immediately heard an indescribable sound that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. Then, their oaths manifested into reality in the form of an ancient yet profound language before landing on a monument. And just like that, it was done.

As soon as the oath was complete, Ye Qing suddenly felt an indescribable, invisible connection to Faceless. If he wanted to, he could literally kill the Stranger with a single thought. Faceless felt the same thing as well, except that he was the one who might perish at any moment.

This was what a master-servant contract was. In this contract, the master bore no limitations or consequences whatsoever, but the servant must obey his master absolutely. Not only that, his death would not impact Ye Qing whatsoever, but Ye Qing’s death would result in his death as well. From now on, he could only serve Ye Qing like a dog and obey his every whim. He would also protect him with all his power because his life literally depended on it.

This is going to suuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck, thought a certain unfortunate Stranger.

“Thank you for your help, the Oathbearer!” Ye Qing smiled and saluted the old man respectfully after the oath was complete.

“Haha, don’t mention it. It is my honor to be able to help you!” the Oathbearer responded while swinging his arm a little. The monument floating in the air immediately flew toward the giant tortoise’s back and landed in the middle of the forest of monuments.

“Most people know me as the Oathbearer, but you may call me Fu Tian [1], young one. If you need my services in the future, simply say my name, and I will respond.”

“Thank you, the Oathbearer!” Ye Qing exclaimed in astonishment. He was surprised that the Oathbearer would share his true name with him.

“If there is nothing else, then allow me to send you back to your bodies. Please, have a nice day!”

When Fu Tian waved his hand, Ye Qing found himself falling through the sky at an unimaginable speed. When his mind returned to his body, and he opened his eyes in a hurry, he discovered that he

was back at the house again. Beside him, Faceless had jolted “awake” as well. It was almost like they had never left in the first place.

The first thing Ye Qing did after returning to the earth—literally—was to extinguish the Incense of Fortune. During the short span they were gone, the poor thing had burned down to just the length of a thumb. He reckoned that it was only good for one more use, and perhaps not even that.

After Ye Qing had put away the Incense of Fortune, Faceless suddenly interrupted him with a surprising question, “Master, are... are you really human?” He turned around and saw the Stranger staring at him with a most thoughtful expression.

“Duh? If I’m not human, then who is?” Ye Qing looked confused. “What’s troubling you?”

Faceless answered obediently, “From what I heard, most people who signed an Oath of Burden with the Oathbearer had never seen his true body, much less his avatar. The only thing they saw was the blank monument where their oaths would be inscribed.”

“But the Oathbearer didn’t just manifest his avatar to meet you, he even told you his true name. The Oathbearers are an ancient, honorable race who respects ancient customs above all else, and they never divulge their true name to anyone except those whom they acknowledge. Don’t you find it strange that the Oathbearer is so courteous with you?”

“Not at all! I’m a good man, and a good man is popular no matter where he goes!” Ye Qing replied cheekily.

Faceless immediately gave him a thumbs-up and echoed in agreement, “You’re right! It’s why people say that one good turn deserves another. Once again, you’ve hit the nail on the head, master!”

Of course Faceless knew that he was lying through his teeth, but he wasn’t stupid enough to press him about it. From the moment he signed a master-servant contract with Ye Qing, he was no longer Faceless, the Stranger. He was simply Faceless, Ye Qing’s eternally loyal servant, and thanks to his myriad experiences, he knew exactly what a servant should think, say and do.

“I still have a couple of things I need to settle, so head to Endless Horizons and wait for my return!” Ye Qing ordered and stepped out of the house. The moonlight shining down from the dark yet clear sky felt incredibly soothing.

“As you command, master!” Faceless answered with a deep bow.

Ye Qing was about to take his leave when he suddenly added, “By the way, don’t call me master from now on. Young master is fine. Also, change your face to someone your companions have never seen. You don’t want your companions to see you walking into my bookstore, do you? And no, you’re not allowed to take a woman’s appearance!”

“You truly are a gentleman, young master!” Faceless joked while making a face that caused goosebumps to creep all over Ye Qing’s skin once more. Then, the Stranger

turned into an old man in his fifties and saluted him again. "See you in a moment, young master!"

"Mm!" Ye Qing responded, but his body grew increasingly transparent over time. As it turned out, he had long since vanished into the night.

Faceless waited respectfully until Ye Qing's afterimage was completely gone. Only then did he disappear into the night as well.

It didn't take long for Ye Qing to return to Longevity Alley. He wasn't worried that Faceless would try something while he was gone because they had signed a master-servant contract. He could literally kill the Stranger with a thought if he wanted, and for better or worse, Faceless wasn't the type to die for a cause!

"Wa... Warrior Ye. How did it go?" Hu Nu walked up to Ye Qing as soon as he saw him. Yun Yan had awoken as well, though she still looked a little pale and unhealthy.

"It's dead!" Ye Qing gave him a nod before inspecting Yun Yan's condition. "Are you okay, Miss Yun?"

The young woman slowly saluted him. "I'm fine. Thanks for your concern, warrior. By the way, that Stranger looks like a mythical Soul Eater, and its abilities are strange to put it mildly. Did you really kill it?"

"Your knowledge is most impressive, Miss Yun. You are correct. That Stranger is a Soul Eater!" Ye Qing said smilingly.

A bit of admiration trickled into Yun Yan's eyes. "That may be true, but I am nothing compared to you. To think you're strong enough to kill a Soul Eater! Most impressive, warrior!"

"I was just lucky!" Ye Qing replied humbly. "Anyway, now that the Stranger is gone, you should head home and get yourself treated as soon as possible."

"Thank you for your understanding, warrior," Yun Yan smiled politely but asked another question, "Warrior, you are incredibly strong and skilled considering your age. I am certain that you have a bright future ahead of you. If you don't mind, would you like to join the Pacification Bureau and help us eliminate Strangers and protect the people?"

Ye Qing was honestly surprised by the offer. As the only department in Chu that was responsible for both the security of the people and the elimination of Strangers, the Pacification Bureau answered to the emperor and the emperor only. This was to prevent petty politics from diminishing their effectiveness and efficiency. To this end, they were even granted the right to kill first and ask questions later, so one might say that they were the most eminent and powerful department in the realm!

Countless people fought to enter the Pacification Bureau for fame and fortune, but of course its selection process was extremely stringent. For starters, the candidate's background must be

perfectly clean. Second, they must possess outstanding talent. But the way Yun Yan put it, he could probably skip this selection process and join the Pacification Bureau immediately if he so wished!

Seeing that Ye Qing was silent, Yun Yan continued, "Considering your talent and your achievement tonight, I promise that you will be granted the rank of Lieutenant at the very least."

"Lieutenant?" Ye Qing raised his eyebrows. He did not think that Yun Yan would make such a generous offer.

The Pacification Bureau was split into five ranks in total. From top to bottom, they were the Chief of Bureau, Peacemaker, Lieutenant, Guardian, and Sentinel. Chief of Bureau should be self-evident. Peacemaker was the rank for people bearing titles such as Windcatcher, Investigator, Patrolman and so on. Since Chu Nianjiu was a Windcatcher, this meant that he was a Peacemaker-rank official of the Pacification Bureau.

On a related note, just because two people shared the same title did not mean that their status was the same. For example, Chu Nianjiu was a Windcatcher of Luo Shui; an entire commandery. It should be obvious that a Windcatcher of Luo Shui was far more illustrious than, say, a Windcatcher of Anyang.

Although Lieutenant was technically the middle rank between the five ranks, it counted as the upper echelon of the Pacification Bureau. For someone like Ye Qing, it was absolutely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Ye Qing couldn't deny that the offer was a tempting one, but in the end he shook his head and said, "Thank you very much for the most generous offer, but I'm just a young, inexperienced man who still has a long, long way to go before he can assume a post, much less one as important as Lieutenant. Also, the reason I visited Anyang is purely to explore the world and broaden my horizons. I may leave at any moment, which is why I have no choice but to let you down."

He carried too many secrets that must not be exposed already. It would be folly to be involved with the Pacification Bureau directly.

"That is a terrible shame!" Yun Yan sighed in disappointment but quickly schooled her comely features into a soft, gentle smile. "Although it is a terrible shame I will not be able to work with you, it is still my honor to make your acquaintance today, warrior!"

"And I you, Miss Yun!" Ye Qing replied smilingly, "By the way, you need not address me as 'warrior' or 'Mister Ye'. I am not that vain, and both appellations feel incredibly distant. Just address me by my name or my moniker, Joyless!"

"Okay. Since I'm a few years older than you, I shall call you Joyless." Yun Yan turned a little red but said, "In that case, I want you to stop addressing as Miss Yun as well. Just call me big sis."

"B-Big sis?" *This is only our second meeting, and she wants me to call her big sis already? This relationship is moving a little too fast, isn't it?*

Ye Qing rubbed his nose and coughed. "Big... Big... Sister Yun! How does Sister Yun sound?"

In the end, his face-fu [2]wasn't up to snuff, and he just could not bring himself to use such an embarrassing appellation no matter what, so he offered a compromise.

“Okay!” Yun Yan agreed easily.