

Ancient 157

Chapter 157 - 78: The Painting in the Grocery Store

In the dimly lit basement, a sharp slap rang out.

Scholar was slapped hard, and the mask on his face shattered, revealing a face that could be considered decent-looking. His expression was blank, and he lowered his head without saying a word.

"You still have the audacity to return?"

The Pharmacist's furious voice resounded: "Do you even realize what you've done?"

Scholar was silent for a moment, then quietly clenched his fists: "I'm sorry, teacher."

"I've warned you countless times—why did you still go and collaborate with the Grave Digger Organization? We already have a Supreme backing us! What in the world could compare to the help of a Supreme?"

The Pharmacist's voice was icy: "Foolish! You come from the Association, how can you still think they're all a bunch of idiots? Do you know how many Captain-Level personnel showed up for just this one sweep? Even that woman, Lu Zijin, was there. If I'm not mistaken, they even mobilized Omega Sequence's coordinator, Chen Bojun! Unimaginable terror!"

If this were the former Scholar, hearing these names would probably leave him horrified.

But now, he truly felt indifferent.

Because during his unauthorized venture this time, he had encountered something ten thousand times more terrifying than any of them.

No matter how influential the Ether Association was, it no longer mattered.

"I just wanted to find out who's backing these Grave Diggers and gather more cards to play, so that in the Immortal Palace, when facing the Supreme, I'd have more leverage, that's all."

Scholar said softly, "It's not like anything happened."

"If something had gone wrong, you'd be a corpse right now!"

The Pharmacist scolded loudly: "I've stressed this countless times: as long as that Supreme remains locked away, he can't do anything to us! He could certainly kill us, but the cost would be having to stay imprisoned in the Immortal Palace! Either wait for the Candle Dragon Venerable to return and obliterate him completely or face the entire Association at his weakest point!"

He clasped his hands behind his back and said solemnly, "He can't break free; what can he do to us?"

Scholar: "Sure, sure."

The Pharmacist was silent for a moment before speaking: "But the thing you mention does indeed need more attention. If that person ended up escaping into the Immortal Palace afterward, then fine. But if he's originally one of those ghastly entities inside the Immortal Palace, and there's no record of him in 'Xu Fu's Record,' then this matter... is quite peculiar."

"I'll have the Sea Demon investigate. You go retrieve supplies from the other few strongholds."

He commanded, "Be cautious. Remember, we're not just wanted by the Association; even the Dusk Organization has blacklisted us. For those spiritual secret medicines, bring back as much as you can. The ones you can't transport, destroy them on-site—we don't exactly lack those things."

Scholar's eyes flickered with a strange light and said respectfully, "Understood, teacher."

"Alright, I have to go research the new generation of spiritual secret medicine now."

The Pharmacist turned his back and said coldly, "The one set to replace CMJ113, an ultimate spiritual secret medicine for the Extraordinary Stage—this will firmly establish my... masterful renown!"

Scholar said respectfully, "Teacher, may you be eternal and achieve immortal fame!"

Gu Jianlin lay in the hospital ward, staring blankly at the ceiling.

Knock, knock.

As the door was knocked on, Lu Zicheng pushed it open and entered, a bald parrot perched on his shoulder, his face stern and sullenly speechless.

Chen Qing carried a bag of breakfast, placed it on the bedside table, and said expressionlessly, "This scene feels familiar. I remember the last time I brought you breakfast in the hospital—it was the last time."

Gu Jianlin thought carefully for a second: "The last time I heard this conversation, it was also the last time."

Chen Qing, with her cold and stunning face, glared at him: "You've really grown bold, haven't you? You've been an Ascender for less than a week, and you've already been hospitalized twice. What is it you want to do?"

Although her tone was scolding, it was filled more with concern: "Acting so reckless for your age—while capable—it's downright arrogant. How dare you ignore our calls? If something happened to you, how would we ever face Professor Gu in the afterlife?"

"Don't say that, Chen Qing."

Lu Zicheng sneered with a sarcastic tone: "This guy is Peak City's Newcomer King, ranked first as a Supernova, a genius candidate in the Omega Sequence, and favored by the King of Qing. You and I should consider ourselves lucky to ride on his coattails. How dare he hang up on us? Oh wait, not even that; he smashed his phone instead."

The bald parrot chimed in with mockery: "Sure, you killed them, but let me ask—where's their teammates? If you can't answer that, I can only give your rampage a score of zero."

What kind of nonsense is this?

Gu Jianlin paused for a second: "Sorry."

Lu Zicheng slapped an unopened smartphone onto the bedside table, still accompanied by a new SIM card.

"Got you a new phone, also made sure your old number was reinstated."

He hesitated before suddenly saying, "Thank you."

Gu Jianlin raised an eyebrow: "Thank me?"

"Thank you for everything you did for Uncle Mu and his daughter."

Lu Zicheng instinctively reached for a cigarette pack but found nothing, scratching his head instead. "The people I owe the most in life are Uncle Mu and his daughter. But due to my limited strength and restrictions, I couldn't help them much. Even interacting with them might cause them harm."

He paused: "Thanks to you, they regained their dignity. Though there were still casualties, considering they weren't all massacred, it was the best outcome possible."

Gu Jianlin hesitated briefly: "What happened back then?"

Lu Zicheng seemed unwilling to delve into it and simply said, "Nothing, just things from the past. Originally, I only wanted you to visit Black Cloud City and get an initial feel for the good and evil found in the Extraordinary World, but I never expected things to escalate so far. You're quite reckless, making such a big stir."

Chen Qing said seriously, "Regardless of what your father left you that lets you challenge higher ranks, your body can't handle it anymore. You must use it sparingly in the future."

Gu Jianlin pondered deeply and slightly nodded.

He was all too aware of the state of his body.

This time, invoking the Ancient God Transformation and using that strange incantation had nearly cost him his life.

"By the way, about last night—there are two points to consider."

Lu Zicheng said cryptically: "Point one, you undeniably killed your superior and slaughtered your teammates. But since they were all Fallen, per Association rules, no one can fault you. Even if this matter reaches headquarters, you're technically justified. However, some people don't care about justification."

"Many in the Association talk a good game, claiming that anyone choosing to become an Ascender must uphold humanity's faith. Upon falling, they should end themselves immediately."

He emphasized, "But when it's their turn to fall, they can't bring themselves to do it."

Chen Qing said coldly, "Hypocrites like that treat faith as a tool for boasting."

Gu Jianlin nodded slightly: "I understand."

"So, right now, the Yan family truly despises you—couldn't wish harder to grind your bones into dust."

Lu Zicheng shrugged: "They not only lost two sons but were also expelled from Peak City's Extraordinary system. Meaning, they'll no longer receive Association support and have become a wild Ascender family. You don't understand the struggles of Extraordinary families, so let me be blunt... within ten years, the Yan family will likely collapse."

Gu Jianlin caught his implication: "So they're going to come after me in retaliation, right?"

"Correct. As for the second point, it's about Uncle Mu and his daughter."

Lu Zicheng glanced deeply at him: "You know, Uncle Mu and his people survived this time without being arrested, interrogated, or slaughtered, all thanks to one person."

Gu Jianlin nodded knowingly: "The King of Qing, Huai Yin."

"Exactly. Remember what I told you the first time we met? In this Extraordinary world, the biggest truth lies in raw power. If you're strong enough, people will change the rules for you. The Judgement Court wouldn't publicly offend the King of Qing for Uncle Mu and his group."

Lu Zicheng explained: "But behind the scenes, they'll still find ways to stir trouble."

Gu Jianlin asked calmly, "So what now?"

"Well, my sister's suggestion is since you've recovered, don't waste time."

Lu Zicheng snapped his fingers: "Chen Qing, act!"

Chen Qing expressionlessly stepped forward, pressing down the frail boy lying on the bed and beginning to undo his hospital gown.

Gu Jianlin's face changed for the first time: "Sister Chen Qing, let's talk calmly..."

"Shut up."

Chen Qing shot him a cold glare, then tossed a bag of new clothes onto the bed: "Time is tight; get dressed."

Gu Jianlin was weak and protested feebly: "I can do it myself..."

"It's not your first time; what's there to be shy about?"

Chen Qing said casually: "I bathed you while you were comatose."

Gu Jianlin: "..."

"Tsk tsk tsk."

Lu Zicheng turned his back, pretending he hadn't seen anything: "Oh, by the way, forgot to tell you. Your name in the Ether Association is skyrocketing. Not only have you surpassed Thunder to become the top of the Merit Ranking, but you've also acquired a new nickname... well, you'll find out later."

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After careful hospital confirmation, Gu Jianlin's body showed no major issues, and he was granted discharge approval.

He donned a white shirt and jeans, placed his newly bought phone in his pocket, and walked out of the hospital's doors in a daze. He passed shoulder-to-shoulder with bustling crowds as warm sunlight and choking exhaust fumes hit him.

Having battled in Black Cloud City and now returning to the modern urban landscape felt like stepping back into human civilization.

He took a bite out of half a fritter as he crossed the hospital's parking lot.

Today was Friday, and the midday temperature was warm with unusually scorching sunlight.

The streets weren't too crowded. An elderly man selling snacks pushed his cart nearby. Across the street, the ramen shop and Shaxian Snacks were packed, their hearty aromas wafting through the air carried on the breeze.

Then, he unexpectedly saw a small grocery store under the shade of the trees along the street.

He hesitated briefly and instinctively crossed the road to approach it.

At that moment, he understood why he'd been urged to leave the hospital early.

The grocery store, as always, lacked a signboard, its interior faintly fragrant with sandalwood.

A white-haired elderly man lay asleep on a redwood recliner inside.

"Discharged?"

Jing Ci emerged from the store, hanging a painting on the wall. He smiled warmly: "Master just had lunch and is still napping—one never knows how long he'll sleep. Feel free to sit."

Gu Jianlin hesitated for a second and nodded slightly: "Alright... thank you for last time."

"No need to thank me."

Jing Ci smiled faintly and turned back into the shop to tidy up.

It was Gu Jianlin's second visit to the quaint grocery store, and his gaze instantly fixed upon the newly hung painting on the wall, his pupils shrinking as he froze in place.

Rather than calling it a painting, it was more like a spontaneous splash of ink—a casual sketch. Black ink streaks crisscrossed white parchment, resembling a celestial dragon coiled and soaring.

Yet within its wild and unrestrained lines, there was a faint trace of a delicate and graceful curve.

At first glance, the painting hardly seemed to be the work of a master artist, but the longer one looked, the more enigmatic it became. The interplay of black and white seemed to pulse with vitality and deathly permanence—the ink-black dragon appeared to ascend to the heavens, while the gentle curve suggested a fleeting glimpse of a maiden, as if her gaze alone could shatter heaven and earth.

Gu Jianlin's pupils contracted sharply; his intuition told him that this painting was at least two hundred years old.