

Carefree Path of Dreams

Chapter 4: Questioning the Heart

"This Questioning Heart Tea, when brewed and consumed directly, already work wonders. But when complemented with the Meditative Tea Ceremony, it will boost your magical abilities!"

Fang Yuan sat up straight in front of the table, gazing at the tiny clump of tea leaves on it as he pondered.

After he considered all that he had learnt, he experimented with the tea leaves as per what he did in his dreams.

One ought to know that when brewed directly, without the sincerity and reservedness of the Tea Ceremony, the Questioning Heart Tea retains its taste and will still have a purifying effect on the soul, but its effect on boosting one's magical capabilities is lost.

This revelation further convinced Fang Yuan that Master Wenxin was a miracle worker.

The second point to consider was an even greater source of regret for Fang Yuan.

"This Questioning Heart Tea is most effective when consumed the first time, and its efficacy diminishes beyond that...there should be a limit. Could this be an issue with tolerance?"

Out of habit, Fang Yuan recorded these thoughts on paper.

Experimenting, standardising, recording, will create solid foundations that future experiments can be based on. This too, Fang Yuan learnt from one of the lives he led in his dreams.

Even though he was only 18, he lived a whole life in that dream.

It was a pity that ever since he entered adulthood, the dreams went away.

"Acquiring this extraordinary item was a matter of great luck. I should be happy."

Fang Yuan comforted himself and began his daily work on patrolling the valley grounds.

"Hm, what should I do with the Questioning Tea Plant? Transplant it?"

As he walked on, creases lined his brows.

Although the botanic garden behind the Spirit Valley was hidden, it was not impregnable. Through his relations with Minister Lin, Fang Yuan obtained the title deed for Spirit Valley and ten miles of the surrounding land. The spiritual plants had their temptations, and Fang Yuan was not about to trust anyone to go near them.

The mutated Questioning Heart tea plant was too conspicuous, and if it were to be discovered, it would be coveted by many. Transplanting it would be for the best.

On the other hand, Fang Yuan had no need to worry about the Vermilion Jade Rice crops, for they were the least spiritual among the plants and had explainable origins.

"I wonder what the spiritual rice tastes like."

Fang Yuan rubbed his chin and felt a rising sense of excitement. He was pleasantly surprised when he arrived at the Vermilion Jade Rice field.

In front of his eyes, fiery red shoots were springing out of the earth, and they reminded him of the lotus plant's sharp corners. This was a place full of life.

"It's really budding?"

Fang Yuan was elated.

After all, Master Wenxin taught him that the spiritual plants relied very much on blessed soil to flourish.

In other places, even the most fertile soil and idyllic landscapes would only support the growth of low-level spiritual crops.

The Spiritual Red Corn crop might be unsightly, but they were spiritual after all!

To think that Fang Yuan himself could grow these crops on normal land. If he could grow the Vermilion Jade Rice crops on more land, not even the Spirit Returning Sect would be as rich as he.

"The Spirit Returning Sect thinks very highly of themselves, but can they eat Spiritual Rice every day? Well, I can!"

Fang Yuan's lips curled up into a slight smile. His eyes gleamed. Suddenly, he let out an exclamation and ran to the edge of the field.

"This..."

What he saw before his eyes made him slack-jawed.

The blue-eyed grass patch on the borderlands of the blooming field was yellowing at the edges. Some of the greenery was clearly withering away. It was as if they had been robbed of their vitality.

And the Yellow Fruit Tree, the Grapefruit Rattan...all the plants that were close to the Vermilion field shared the same fate.

"No way...I grew these low maintenance plants to supplement the Red Corn crops. I thought they'd even make the soil more fertile..."

Fang Yuan took in the sight before him and had a sudden realisation.

"The spiritual plants are so overbearing. They actually sucked the essence out of the neighbouring plants. Well, this was bound to happen anyway. This piece of land is too common to sustain the spiritual crops with its own power."

At this thought, Fang Yuan promptly sped towards the tea garden and carefully examined the immediate surroundings of the Questioning Heart tea plant.

As expected, the Questioning Heart tea plant was blooming fervently, but at the expense of the tea plants around it, which displayed signs of lifelessness.

"I guess the next time I grow the Spiritual crops, I have to grow them separately. Either that or I've got to make sure that the land is fertile enough to support their growth. Otherwise, they would exert a dire impact on their surroundings."

Fang Yuan bit his lip.

"There must be a way around this. Isn't it just because the land is not high-yielding enough? I could dump more fertile soil on the crops, spray Fire liquid on them thrice a day, add some Fire fertiliser around them...I'm lacking in some of these materials though. Aha! Old Tian is the man to look for!"

Old Tian was an employee of a medical hall in the outside world and was in charge of buying and collecting herbs. Sometimes, he would go to the mountains personally to pick these herbs.

Once, he was bitten by a poisonous snake and was coincidentally rescued by Master Wenxin. Thus, a friendship was formed, and Old Tian regularly brought essential items to the master-disciple duo in exchange for herbs.

According to Master Wenxin, Old Tian gave reasonable prices for his goods and was a down-to-earth fellow. Fang Yuan had listened and therefore kept up a regular correspondence with Old Tian.

In any case, Fang Yuan had supplied premium herbs with very potent medicinal properties to Old Tian in their past few interactions. Old Tian must have made a tidy profit from them.

"Young Master! Young Master!"

Old Tian's voice broke into Fang Yuan's stream of thought.

"Ah, Old Tian, it's you. Come in!"

Fang Yuan greeted Old Tian at the valley entrance with a grin and invited him in.

Old Tian was a funny-looking specimen of a man. He had long limbs, protruding lips and sunken cheeks. He reminded Fang Yuan very much of a big ape, and he had a sly gaze that was typical of the mountain folk. He was carrying a bamboo basket on his back and placed it down breathlessly. Old Tian rubbed his hands and smiled apologetically.

"Look, Young Master. The items that you asked for the last time, I have them here."

"Well done. It's been hard on you, Old Tian!"

The mountain roads went a long way, and any normal person would have found them difficult to navigate, much less travel on them with such a heavy load.

"The Yellow Fruits have ripened. Wait here. I'll go fetch them."

Fang Yuan beamed.

"Sigh..."

What should have been elation on Old Tian's features was instead a look of hesitation. Old Tian then began grinding his teeth.

"Err...there is something you must know, Young Master. I don't think we can trade anymore."

"Oh?"

Fang Yuan raised his eyebrows slightly.

"But Old Tian, were you not pleased with the herbs you received the last time? Or did you find my prices too extortionate? These matters are all up for discussion."

"No no no! The herbs and spices cultivated by Master Wenxin are undeniably top grade. As for you, Young Master, even the herbs on the highest mountains or in thickest forests cannot compare to the ones you gave me in terms of their richness in quality. It's just that..."

Old Tian flailed his arms.

"In any case, it won't work out anymore!"

"Alright then!"

Having tested Old Tian, Fang Yuan had gained a rough idea of what was going on.

He let out a grin.

"If that's the case, then let us at least clear our inventory this time round. Have a seat Old Tian. It's getting late. Why not stay for a meal and some tea before you leave?"

"A meal?!"

Old Tian gulped. He could almost smell the fragrance of the Crystal Rice he had dug into the last time he visited. The uncertainty he had felt previously was overcome by his inner glutton.

"If Young Master would kindly spare two rice buns, this old man would be ever so grateful..."

Old Tian showed no more signs of leaving. It was as if his legs were rooted into the ground. Fang Yuan suppressed a giggle.

In the world beyond the valley, Crystal Rice was a superior grain that only affluent families could afford. The Crystal Rice crop cultivated by Fang Yuan was even better in quality. Old Tian only had one serving the last time and was already spellbound. He had even requested for some seeds, but it did not take a genius to figure out what happened to his crop.

"You are too courteous, Old Tian. Your visits to the valley are rare occasions, and I like to think that I am a decent host."

Fang Yuan smiled as he entered his hut, and before long, a rich aroma filled the air.

Old Tian craned his neck and sniffed with all his might. His look of intense eagerness made him look even more monkeyish. It was a hilarious sight.

"Do put up with this simple meal!"

Fang Yuan reappeared from the hut with a wooden tray laden with two bowls of Crystal Rice and two more food dishes.

One of the dishes was a freshly picked cucumber, rinsed in spring water and served in slices. They looked like exquisitely carved pieces of jade.

The other dish was pickled beans. The fragrance of the dish wafted into Old Tian's nose and made his stomach grumble in response.

"Excellent! Marvellous!"

Of course, the star of the show was the pearl-like granules of Crystal Rice in the wooden bowls. Their aroma, mixed in with the fragrance of the pickled beans, had Old Tian enthralled.

Old Tian decided to help himself and descended into the rice bowls with relish, letting out grunts of satisfaction at intervals.

Like a raging storm, Old Tian had polished off three large bowls of Crystal Rice and the two dishes. He then seemed to realise that his behaviour was unseemly, and gave a rueful grin.

"Young Master, your culinary skills are legendary. None of the dishes served at the most expensive banquets in the city can compare to the ones you cook!"

"Come come, have some tea!"

Fang Yuan calmly served Old Tian a cup of tea with a look of indifference.

This was a cup of Questioning Heart Tea, but it was not prepared via the Meditative Tea Ceremony. Fang Yuan had long planned to use it on someone so that he could observe its effects for himself. It was just as well that Old Tian had turned up.

"Smells good!"

Although not brewed according to the proper procedures, but the tea was clear and had a pleasant scent. It was the perfect post-meal beverage. Old Tian's hands were trembling as he fetched the cup over.

"I've never seen a finer breed of tea in my life. Is this a new variety cultivated by Young Master?"

Fang Yuan merely smiled in reply and said nothing. Old Tian dared not ask further and without further ado, emptied the cup in one fell swoop.

Kaboom!

As the tea flowed down his throat, Old Tian felt as though a great waterfall had descended into his body and purified his heart and soul. There was also a rush into his brain that triggered vivid images of his life thus far - his childhood poverty, the struggle of his youth, the hardships of his current days. Old Tian could not help but feel a wave of immense sadness, and tears flowed down his cheeks in steady streams.

Fang Yuan observed the interesting changes of expression taking place on Old Tian's face with glee.

"Young Master, I am guilty!!"

Old Tian suddenly began to bawl unrestrainedly and fell to his knees.

"Master Wenxin saved my life, and yet I let myself be bribed into destroying your source of income. I deserve death!"

"Ahh..."

Fang Yuan was taken aback at the potency of the Questioning Heart Tea.

He peered carefully at Old Tian and shook his head.

"That's right. Without the Meditative Tea Ceremony, the Tea cannot boost one's magical ability...Otherwise, Old Tian would not be in this state!"