

Stranger Danger

Chapter 26: The Perfect Scapegoat

Swoosh swoosh!

Countless strands of bull fur were flying toward Ye Qing, and each strand was as thick as a bucket. They easily smashed every tree standing in their path into smithereens. Ye Qing had no doubt that he was a goner if he allowed them to catch him.

There was no time to think. After rolling on the ground and dodging a deadly swipe that was aimed at his back, Ye Qing leaped back to his feet and accelerated toward the Jade Dragon Lake with everything he got.

Honestly, there was no good option here. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place, though one threat was more immediate than the other. It was why Ye Qing ultimately decided to risk the Jade Dragon Lake. One way or another, he wasn't going to give up until the last moment.

When the bull fur got within ten meters of the Jade Dragon Lake, it suddenly began to take on a blood red hue. The next moment, it began bleeding bright red blood like it was flesh, not fur.

"Ahhhhh!"

The clump of bull fur writhed violently like it was alive. At the same time, countless warped and tormented faces began appearing on each individual strand. It looked horrifying in every sense of the word.

The faces weren't doing well, however. Like candle wax melting under a hot flame, they were slowly but surely dissolving into blood. They struggled and screamed as an unnatural, irresistible power strove to unmake their very existence.

The clump of bull fur immediately stopped pursuing Ye Qing and pulled back, but it was too late. Before it could withdraw out of range, it melted completely into blood and dyed the ground red.

"Argh! You abominable bitch! How dare you damage my beautiful hair! One day, I swear I will..."

In the forest, the tail-woman was screeching angrily like a banshee. The blood had essentially destroyed a good portion of her hair and made her partially bald, so she looked incredibly ugly right now.

When she was finally done with her swearing, she looked at Ye Qing and let out a bone-chilling cackle. "I will remember this, cutie, and I will find you even if you run to the ends of the earth!"

She then looked away and said, "Let's go find some flesh food, Bull. The sooner I can regrow my beautiful hair, the better!"

With that, the bull Stranger turned around and trotted back into the forest, wantonly carving yet another path of destruction.

"Phew... it's finally gone!"

When he confirmed that the bull Stranger was truly gone, Ye Qing let out a huge sigh of relief and collapsed to the ground. He shot back to his feet almost immediately, however. It was because he remembered that he wasn't out of the woods yet. The memory of the sarcophagus nearly annihilating the August Hill Village and the bull fur rotting into a pool of blood were still fresh in his mind.

According to Granny Xia, there existed three forbidden regions around August Hill Village. They were the underbelly of Little August Hill, the Haunted Wail Gorge, and the Jade Dragon Lake respectively. Of the three, the Jade Dragon Lake was easily the most dangerous because any living being who got too close to the lake would be corrupted by its blood qi and suffer either one of two different fates: One, they would turn into a Red Walker who fed on all things with even a sliver of blood in them. Or two, they would be melted down into a pool of blood.

Even if there was a way to shield themselves from the blood qi, they still had to contend with the lake of literal blood and the sarcophagus at the center of it. It was why no villager was allowed to get close to the Jade Dragon Lake under any circumstances.

"So like... why am I still alive?" Ye Qing asked no one in particular while rubbing his nose. Not only did he feel perfectly fine, he felt an inexplicable sense of closeness to this place. To be specific, his blood was unusually lively, and it was constantly consuming the blood qi in the air to strengthen itself.

"Is it the Annon Sutra or the mysterious blood? It's probably the blood!"

He had refined the mysterious blood from the Stranger in the sarcophagus, and the Stranger was probably the source of all the oddities surrounding Jade Dragon Lake. That was why he was safe. The Annon Sutra might be able to shield him from the blood qi, but it would not be able to trigger a resonance between his blood and the blood qi!

Ye Qing reached out and made a grabbing motion. Wisps of blood qi immediately entered his body almost as if they couldn't wait to become one with his blood. The effects were immediate. He began healing at an accelerated rate.

“Looks like I’m right. This is a safe zone for me!” Ye Qing was delighted, of course. The Jade Dragon Lake was the bane of all things alive, and not even the bull Stranger was an exception. Logically speaking, no Stranger should exist in the area besides the one lying in the sarcophagus at the center of the lake. It should be safe for him to catch some rest.

And so he dropped back to the ground and rested. It wasn’t until he was more or less back to peak form that he finally climbed back to his feet and examined his surroundings.

The Jade Dragon Lake was around thirty meters in diameter and blood red in color. Its waters were perfectly still, and everything around it—the grass, the trees, the rocks, the soil, and even the sky were dark red in color. It was like an independent domain that existed separately from the outside world.

Floating in the middle of the lake was a sarcophagus, and blood qi was constantly seeping into it. It was as if the mysterious Stranger inside the sarcophagus was also absorbing the surrounding blood qi to restore itself...

Thump!

Suddenly, the sarcophagus shuddered once and scared the shit out of Ye Qing. He would have turned tail and run if the sarcophagus hadn’t fallen completely silent after that. He sighed in relief when he confirmed that it was just a false alarm.

Afraid that staring at the sarcophagus for too long would trigger it somehow, Ye Qing looked away and muttered, “That sarcophagus is weird as hell. Best not look at it any longer!”

Ye Qing spent the next period of time examining every nook and cranny for cultivation manuals, medicine or anything that could be valuable to him. There had to be some treasures lying around this strange land, right? Unfortunately, he was wrong. The only thing he found was trees, grasses, and rocks. He sighed. “Oh well. I guess it’s time to leave!”

Chu Nianjiu and the others should be pretty close by now, and it would be troublesome if they found out that he was immune to the deadly phenomenon of the Jade Dragon Lake. In fact, he would have left way sooner if he wasn’t worried that the bull Stranger could be lying in wait for him somewhere. He wouldn’t count out the possibility considering how intelligent the tail-woman was.

As expected, he had just returned to the forest when he heard a bunch of rustling noises not far ahead from him; the sound of footsteps to be exact. Ye Qing immediately hid behind a large tree and pretended to be nervous.

Not a moment too soon, Chu Nianjiu came into view and called out warily, "Who's there?" At the same time, the Wine Gentleman stared intently at Ye Qing's hiding spot.

"It's you, my lord? Thank goodness!" Ye Qing exclaimed in pleasant surprise as he ran out of his hiding spot. He was so happy, so excited that he even tripped and ate a faceful of dirt.

"You're... Ye Qing, right?" Chu Nianjiu asked.

Still brimming with excitement and relief, Ye Qing scrambled to his feet and nodded. "That's my name, my lord!"

"Where's Chen Zheng?" Chu Nianjiu asked another question while looking left and right for Chen Cang's younger brother. He was getting a bad feeling about this.

"Chen Zheng?" Unconscious fear and horror crept over Ye Qing's face as he stuttered, "Captain Chen, he... he was eaten by a bull Stranger!"

"He what?" Chu Nianjiu urged. "What the hell happened? Please tell me everything from the start!"

Ye Qing took a couple of seconds to rein in his emotions before he began, "From the beginning... Not long after we parted ways with you, we ran into a swarm of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. Captain Chen and I fought them off as best we could while trying to make it back up the hill."

"However, a dozen or so giant birds with snake heads suddenly descended from the sky and began attacking the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. When they opened their mouths, they spat out this disgusting wind that's incredibly deadly. I... I only touched the wind for a second, but it was enough to rot my skin..."

"That's the Malice-class Stranger, the Gale Bird!" Chu Nianjiu clarified. "Continue!"

"Since the Gale Birds' attention was wholly on the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes, we thought that we were safe. We were just about to make a run for it when... when..."

All the blood suddenly drained away from Ye Qing's face as if the memory was too much to bear. "The ground suddenly split apart, and clumps of fur the size of buckets suddenly burst out into the open. It caught most of the Gale Birds and... and Captain Chen. He was just too close to the scene when it happened. Then, they were all pulled into the underground."

"After that, the ground shook like an earthquake, and a gigantic bull the size of a small hill burst out into the open. It had a horse's face and a long tail with a woman's face on it. The fur that caught the Gale Birds and Captain Chen originated from that tail, and that woman, she... she pulled Captain Chen close and ate him in one gulp!"

Ye Qing continued while looking as pale as a sheet, “Not only that, that tail-woman... She can talk! She said she wanted to eat me! I could hardly believe my ears!”

Chu Nianjiu’s expression was inscrutable. He took a sip of alcohol before asking, “If what you said about that bull is true, then how did you survive?”

Ye Qing swallowed audibly before answering, “Well, I ran like hell as soon as I saw her taking a bite out of Captain Chen. It was while I was running that she said she was going to eat me. Thanks to the early start, I was able to escape into the forest before she could reach me, and after that... well... I’ve just been running non-stop and praying to all the gods and demons in the world to save me.”

“I should’ve died, really. I was about to run out of energy when I reached this place. For whatever reason, the bull Stranger just suddenly gave up and left without a word. Worried that there might be some grave danger lying ahead of me—danger that even the bull Stranger is wary of—I decided to hide here and wait for rescue. And... and you did!”

Chu Nianjiu asked another question, “Did you encounter anything strange on your way over?”

“Like what, exactly? Nothing about this place is...” Ye Qing frowned in confusion before exclaiming in realization, “Oh right, I did! There’s a black forest not far away from here that’s filled to the brim with the human skin Strangers! There’s even a giant that’s cobbled together from human skins. They tried to chase after me after I intruded their territory, but then the bull Stranger showed up, and they decided to deal with the greater threat first.”

“It was useless though. That bull Stranger, it... it just let out a sneeze, and the human skin Strangers, every single one of them.... They were gone just like that!”

“A sneeze? Are you sure?” Chu Nianjiu pressed.

“Absolutely. That sneeze was louder and more powerful than anything I’ve ever seen before. It was like the sky itself was sundered in half. It’s impossible!” Ye Qing said while wiping away beads of cold sweat from his forehead.

I see. That pit we saw must’ve been a result of that sneeze! Chu Nianjiu thought to himself.

Chu Nianjiu hid a sigh when Ye Qing’s story finally came to an end. He was unable to identify any inconsistencies or suspicion points from the young man’s words or expression.

In fact, he had encountered the bull Stranger just a moment ago. It was exactly as Ye Qing had described. He didn’t know why, but the bull Stranger had been trampling over

the forest, catching every flesh-and-blood creature and Stranger it could find with its bucket-sized fur, and feeding them into the woman on its tail. It was bloody and horrifying to the extreme to put it mildly.

Well, this is bad. If Chen Cang learns that his younger brother had been eaten by a bull Stranger under my watch, and worse, that I had allowed its killer to escape right before my eyes, it's gonna be soooo embarrassing! Chu Nianjiu thought gloomily while sipping his wine.

Bah. What was I saying? It's better to be embarrassed than to be dead! Chu Nianjiu scratched his nose irritably. *There's no way I could've predicted that this would happen, and frankly it's not my fault he's so unlucky!*

Ye Qing was way weaker than Chen Zheng, but he had survived the encounter with the bull Stranger, but Chen Zheng did not. Sometimes, life just rolled that way.

"My lord, do you know why the Stranger stopped chasing me all of a sudden?" Ye Qing asked. He had been examining Chu Nianjiu's expression this whole time, and he finally allowed himself to relax after confirming that he had successfully fooled the Wine Gentleman. No one could contradict his story because there was no body, and since there was no body, no one could investigate it and find out that Chen Zheng had, in fact, had his crap beaten out of him before he died. He even had a perfect scapegoat to pin the blame on. It was the perfect crime!

"It's probably because of the sarcophagus in Jade Dragon Lake!" Chu Nianjiu guessed. The sarcophagus was the reason he came to Little August Hill in the first place, though he wasn't able to find anything despite circling the periphery for the past two days. Despite his powerful Strange Artifacts, he was unable to get within six meters of the Jade Dragon Lake without being corrupted by the blood qi. It was why he still couldn't find out the true identity of the stranger in the Sarcophagus.

"The Jade Dragon Lake? You're saying that the lake up ahead is *the* Jade Dragon Lake? No wonder!" Ye Cheng exclaimed with feigned surprise.

Chapter 27: The Wilful Annon Sutra

"Do you know what Stranger resides within that sarcophagus, my lord?" Ye Qing asked with genuine curiosity.

Chu Nianjiu took a deep gulp from his drinking gourd before declaring proudly, "I've got no idea!"

"..." I don't think that's the right tone for such an answer.

As if he could hear Ye Qing's thoughts, Chu Nianjiu said indifferently, "The Jade Dragon Lake is so dangerous that even that bull Stranger is afraid to get close. Is it really that strange that I couldn't find out what's hiding inside the sarcophagus?"

"No, you're totally right!" Ye Qing raised his eyebrows before nodding seriously.

This time though, it was Chu Nianjiu's turn to shoot Ye Qing a meaningful look. His eyes were mirthful almost as if he had figured out something.

"My lord, my lord!" It was at this moment Zheng Tao and Wu Biao stepped out of the forest. They reported, "Our deepest apologies, my lord, but we couldn't find the Strange Artifact you asked us to find anywhere!"

Chu Nianjiu shook his head. "It's fine. Who knows where it might have gone after that bull Stranger blasted it into the air?"

It was at this moment Zheng Tao noticed Ye Qing. "Ye Qing! You're still alive! Where is Captain Chen?"

Chu Nianjiu said before Ye Qing could answer, "He's dead. He was eaten by that bull Stranger we ran into earlier!"

"What!?" The two watchmen immediately turned as pale as a sheet. It wasn't until a long time later that they finally recovered and stuttered, "W-what should we do then, my lord?"

"What else? We go home and drink our woes away!" Chu Nianjiu declared.

The Strange Artifact that was creating the human skin Strangers had been taken out by the bull Stranger, and he couldn't get close enough to the Jade Dragon Lake to perform any sort of investigation. What was the point of staying then?

"Come on!" Chu Nianjiu beckoned them to follow him before turning to leave. The three watchmen exchanged glances with each other before following him in a hurry.

Thump... thump...

Just a minute after the group of four left, the sarcophagus at the center of the Jade Dragon Lake suddenly rang twice like someone was knocking on its stone lid. Then, it abruptly creaked an inch to the side. A pale, unblemished hand slowly reached out of the sarcophagus.

At that moment, the Jade Dragon Lake turned as dark as the night!

.....

Pitter patter...

Inside Ye Qing's dantian, a black cloud so thick it was practically solid hung heavily in the air. It looked like it unleashed a downpour, no, a world-ending flood at any moment!

Suddenly, a breeze appeared out of nowhere and blew against the cloud. The cloud wobbled once before it began to drizzle. The rain kept growing stronger and stronger as if someone had cut a hole in its underbelly. Eventually, what looked like an entire river fell to the ground below and filled it with water.

As the downpour continued, the water on the ground grew from puddles into a stream, then from a stream into a river, and finally from a river to a lake.

The dark cloud in the air would continue raining until it had shed the last drop of water. When the deed was done, the "sky" looked as blue as the sea, and his dantian glowed as bright and vibrant as spring!

On the floor, Ye Qing abruptly opened his eyes and muttered happily, "My true qi had finally turned into 'rain'. I'm finally at the late-stage of the Qi Invocation stage!"

It had been three days since he returned from Little August Hill. After applying for a three-day sick leave from Lin Hu, he had locked himself in his house and cultivated for three days straight. Thanks to this, he was able to advance from the middle-stage to the late-stage of the Qi Invocation stage.

Chu Nianjiu had left on the second day after he returned to the August Hill Village. Chen Zheng's death had everyone—especially Granny Xia and Lin Hu—worried because it was entirely possible for Chen Cang to blame Chen Zheng's death on August Hill Village. Thankfully, Chu Nianjiu had promised them that he would take full responsibility for Chen Zheng's death, and that he would make sure that Chen Cang would not lay a hand on August Hill Village no matter how angry he was. It was only then they were able to breathe a sigh of relief.

There was no denying that everyone was feeling a little disappointed though. For a moment, they had believed that August Hill Village would be elevated to greater heights through Cheng Zheng and Chen Cang. Now, they were back to square one. It was only natural that they were disappointed with this outcome.

Ye Qing did not care about any of this though. Right now, the one thing that concerned him was Chen Cang's revenge!

The day they had returned to August Hill Village, he had subtly pried some information out of Chu Nianjiu's mouth. According to the Wine Gentleman, Chen Cang was an obsessed man who cared for nothing but the sword. He was also exceptionally narrow-minded and stubborn. However, these were all good traits for a swordsman. Only by

being obsessed with the sword could they become a sword that could cut through anything.

Unfortunately, this was bad news for Ye Qing because it meant that Chen Cang wasn't going to let this go. Once a stubborn, obsessed man like him had set his mind to something, he would not relent until they had achieved his goal.

Although his crime was perfect, and no one could possibly pin anything on him, it was a coin toss whether Chen Cang would decide to come after him. After all, he was the last person to see Chen Zheng alive, and it was well known that he and Chen Zheng were at odds with one another. Today, Chen Zheng was dead, and he was alive. Even he had to admit that he was a prime suspect.

If Chen Cang really did come after him, and if he, through certain means, was able to uncover his secrets, then he was going to be in big trouble!

He had witnessed Chu Nianjiu's strength with his own eyes, and Chen Cang was his equal. He could only imagine that Chen Cang was as strong as Chu Nianjiu, if not stronger!

That was why he needed to increase his own power as soon as possible. He was certain he would be glad when the time came that he needed it.

"Now that I'm in the late-stage of the Qi Invocation stage, it's time to consider the next level!"

The next level after the Qi Invocation stage was the Vessel Augmentation stage. The warrior would use his true qi to augment his blood vessels and transform it into a furnace that could support even more true qi and enhance his qi circulation. Finally, he would be able to extend his true qi beyond his body.

The biggest difference between the Qi Invocation stage and the Vessel Augmentation stage was the ability to extend one's true qi beyond the body. A Qi Invoker could only imbue their body or their weapons with true qi, while a Vessel Augmentor could maintain their true qi even after it was cut off from the body.

It was here Ye Qing encountered another problem. He had absolutely no idea what to do to enter the Vessel Augmentation stage.

Okay, maybe claiming that he was clueless was a bit of an exaggeration. He did have an inkling on how he could get there, but there were certainly a lot of uncertainties!

"Screw it, I'm just gonna ask the Annon Sutra!" *When in doubt, just ask the Annon Sutra!*

“How can I ascend to the Vessel Augmentation stage?” Ye Qing asked while cutting open his palm and pouring his blood on the vellum. It took a long time before the familiar red text finally came into view.

“I feel like a bull in a china shop trying to navigate through the unknown dangers ahead of me. The only thing I can do is to grow my strength as much as possible and prepare for the worst.”

“I have reached a bottleneck, however. How can I continue growing my strength? Perhaps I should try ascending to the Vessel Augmentation stage!”

“To ascend to the Vessel Augmentation stage, I would need a Vessel Augmentation stage cultivation art. It can’t just be any cultivation art either. The better cultivation art is, the more vessels I’d be able to augment, and the stronger I would become. This is something that directly affects my future potential. I must treat this with the utmost care!”

“A Vessel Augmentation cultivation art, eh? I knew that would be the case.” It had taken a Qi Invocation mental art to enter the Qi Invocation stage. Naturally, he would need a Vessel Augmentation cultivation art to enter the Vessel Augmentation stage.

Moreover, the Annon Sutra was saying that the better the quality of the Vessel Augmentation cultivation art he chose, the greater the amount of blood vessels he would be able to augment, and the better his future potential would become. That was why he couldn’t just cultivate the most available Vessel Augmentation cultivation art he could find. He must treat this with the utmost care!

“What are some of the best Vessel Augmentation cultivation arts out there?”

Ye Qing hovered his palm over the vellum once more, but this time the Annon Sutra did not manifest his answer as quickly as it usually did. Eight whole minutes later, when his face was deathly pale, and he had bled nearly every drop of blood in his body, the Annon Sutra finally answered his question:

“The quality of a Vessel Augmentation cultivation art directly affects my future potential, so I ask the Annon Sutra: what are some of the best Vessel Augmentation cultivation arts out there?”

“Well, there’s the ‘Orthodox Method of Heavenly Astral Five Thunders’ by the Dragon Tiger Mountain, the ‘Eighteen Impetus of Taichi’ by the True Martial Sect, the ‘Flowerfall Sword Sutra’ by the Swordsgrave, the ‘Flying Clouds and Flowers Order’ by the Unique Villa, the ‘Imperishable True Arts’ by the Demon Mountain, the ‘Nine Song Riddles of the Innocent’ by the Academy of the Gate of Chi, the ‘Autumn Book of the Son of Heaven’ by the Chu Dynasty, the ‘Nine Cauldrons Dragonfall Art’ by the Wei Dynasty, the ‘Heavenly Tablet of the Seven Slaughters’ by the Yan Dynasty and so on...”

“Unfortunately, these first-class Vessel Augmentation cultivation arts are never taught beyond their inner circles, and I may never get the chance to obtain them. I should cease my wishful thinking and consider more realistic options instead!”

Ye Qing let out a couple of weak coughs and nearly slumped to the ground when the red text finally reached the end. There was a moment there where he was truly terrified for his life. He had wanted to interrupt the ritual as soon as he realized that the question was going to cost him far more blood than he was ready for, but he was unable to do so. A mysterious force had trapped him in place and forced him to continuously pour his blood onto the Annon Sutra! There was absolutely nothing he could’ve done to resist it!

It’s probably because my question is far beyond the reach of someone at my current level! I must be much more careful in the future! Ye Qing chided himself.

In fact, he already had a feeling that this was the case not long after he obtained the Annon Sutra. The harder and trickier the question, the more blood he had to spill to get his answer. He just wasn’t sure until this latest question.

When he had asked the Annon Sutra for a list of some of the best Vessel Augmentation cultivation arts out there, he had intended to follow it up with a question on how to obtain them. Of course, that was no longer an option. It was very possible that the question would literally suck him dry, not to mention that the Annon Sutra itself had warned him to cease his wishful thinking. It would be a bad idea to ignore its advice.

That said, the question hadn’t been a complete waste of blood. For one, he had discovered one of the Annon Sutra’s limitations. Two, he had uncovered some very important names. The Dragon Tiger Mountain, the True Martial Sect, the Chu Dynasty, the Wei Dynasty—it was clear that they were some of the major forces in this world. The question had shown him a glimpse of this vast, mysterious world and the forces who stood at its peak!

After recovering his blood using a gray dragon-serpent rune, Ye Qing asked his next question, “How can I obtain the most suitable Vessel Augmentation cultivation art for me?”

He believed that this was a much better question than the previous one because the scope was a lot narrower, and it took his circumstances into consideration. He was right. This time, it only cost him two bowls of blood before the Annon Sutra gave him an answer:

“Having nearly lost my life to unrealistic fantasies, I decided to take a more pragmatic approach.”

“I should travel to the Jade Dragon Lake. The opportunity I’m looking for may be there!”

“The Jade Dragon Lake?” This wasn’t what he expected at all. He had just returned from that forbidden area, and he hadn’t found anything besides the mysterious sarcophagus while he was there. So where could this “opportunity” be?

It couldn’t possibly be referring to the mysterious Stranger in the sarcophagus, right?

“No... no, that can’t be it!” Cold sweat broke out of his forehead as soon as he recalled the terrifying existence. “The Annon Sutra won’t send me to my death... I hope!”

He did not try to sacrifice more blood to obtain more details because he already knew that it was futile. For questions like this, the most the Annon Sutra would provide was a general direction. It would never give him a clear, detailed answer. It was wilful like that.

For example, he once asked the Annon Sutra when Chen Zheng would try to kill him. It had not deigned to give him an answer. Before taking off to Little August Hill, he also asked if the expedition would be a dangerous one. Again, the Annon Sutra did not tell him anything.

In conclusion, the Annon Sutra was potent, but not omnipotent. He could utilize it to his advantage, but he must never become reliant on it!

Chapter 28: Weaklings Do Not Deserve To Live In This World

What excuse should I use to leave the village? Ye Qing frowned. It was likely that the trip to Jade Dragon Lake would take days, so he couldn’t just sneak away during a routine patrol. He couldn’t just up and leave either. His fellow villagers would definitely suspect something.

Knock knock!

It was at this moment someone double-tapped on his door. He called out, “Who is it?”

Sun Er’s voice came from outside. “Captain Lin is looking for you, Ye Qing!”

Ye Qing opened the door and greeted his fellow villager. “Good afternoon, Sun! Why is the captain looking for me?”

Sun Er shook his head. “I’m not sure, but I reckon it has something to do with the group of outsiders who just came into our village!”

“Outsiders? Do you know who they are?” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise.

“Sorry, no. What I can tell you is that they’re well-dressed, pompous, and not someone you wish to trifle with. Make sure you don’t offend them when you see them, okay?”

Ye Qing smiled. “Sure! Why would I do that?”

The two men chatted until they arrived at Granny Xia's residence. As soon as they arrived at her doorsteps, they immediately heard a cold, unfamiliar voice coming from inside, "Hmph! The favor we're asking from you is trivial at best, but all I hear are excuses and more excuses! Is that it? Does August Hill Village think they are superior to the Zheng Clan of Anyang?"

"Of course not! Why on earth would we denigrate our guests? It's just that Huhu and I are still recovering from a major battle, and we are not fit for any sort of long trip. Please understand..." Granny Xia's voice followed meekly.

"Understand? Understand my ass! I think you just don't want to obey us! You realize that the entire August Hill Village is going to suffer if my young master's plans are disrupted in any way?" A stout middle-aged man with a ferocious aura threatened.

"Be polite, Pao. We are here to ask for help, not to fight and kill," said a youngster sitting at the head chair of the house. He was wearing expensive clothes and enjoying a sip of tea. Although it sounded like he was reining in his servant, his arrogant expression and his next words were anything but. "We can always threaten them after they refuse to help us, right?"

"As you command, young master!" The man named Pao grinned savagely while staring at Granny Xia and Lin Hu like a butcher would examine his meat.

Granny Xia and Lin Hu were fuming, but they didn't dare to let their emotions show. Forget the Zheng Clan, the group of five in her house alone was no one they could trifle with.

The youngster in expensive clothes was Zheng Tianyuan. He was the leader of the group and the scion of the Zheng Clan. His aura marked him as a middle-stage Qi Invoker.

Pao was Zheng Tianyuan's bodyguard and a late-stage Qi Invoker.

The old man with white hair and a goatee called himself Prayer. He looked to be in his late fifties, but his aura was tough and unfathomable.

The other middle-aged man was called Chi Long [1]. Living up to his namesake, he had red hair, red beard, and reddened skin that gave him the appearance of a walking furnace. His aura felt incredibly powerful and hot to touch as well. He was a keeper of the Zheng Clan.

The last person in the group was an old woman named Granny Snake. She carried a walking stick with a handle that was shaped like a turtle dove. Her pupils were an eerie dark green, and she carried a dark green snake that constantly slithered in and out of her sleeves. It was possible there were more snakes inside her clothes. Her aura was as gloomy as she was creepy, and she too was a keeper of the Zheng Clan.

The two men and one woman were all late-stage Qi Invokers. In fact, their auras clearly marked them as Pao's superior in cultivation. Without exaggeration, the three of them were enough to slaughter every man, woman and child in August Hill Village!

"Granny Xia, right? Maybe you or your watchmen captain are unable to accompany us, but surely there's someone else you can send?" The old man named Prayer spoke up in an unhurried tone before sipping his tea. "We will take anyone you have as long as they're suitable. We desperately need this medicine to save a life, and we cannot afford any more delays. We will be most grateful if you will lend us your aid!"

Granny Xia relaxed a bit when she heard this. "Well, there is someone. A few days ago, a Windcatcher of the Pacification Bureau, Chu Nianjiu, was conducting business in Little August Hill. He had taken one of our watchmen with him while investigating the Jade Dragon Lake. If you don't mind his cultivation, I am sure he can be of help to you!"

"You're talking about the lad standing just outside the door, aren't you? Let him in!" Prayer said amiably.

Granny Xia nodded and called out, "Ye Qing! You can come in now!"

After Ye Qing stepped into the house, he saluted Granny Xia and Lin Hu before asking, "Were you looking for me, Granny Xia?"

The old woman answered, "Ye Qing, these people are guests from Anyang. They would like your help with something."

"Help? What can I possibly do for these people?" The voices were muffled, but he had vaguely heard Granny Xia talking about the Jade Dragon Lake before he was invited in. Could these people be looking to visit the Jade Dragon Lake?

"Have you been to Jade Dragon Lake?" Zheng Tianyuan interrupted arrogantly and stiffly before Granny Xia could say anything.

Ye Qing looked to Granny Xia for instructions. It wasn't until she said, "Please answer his question," that he saluted the youngster and responded, "That is correct. Three days ago, I accompanied Lord Chu Nianjiu to the Jade Dragon Lake to investigate a Strange Artifact that had gone out of control. However, we never went deeper than the periphery because he claimed that the Jade Dragon Lake is too dangerous!"

On the inside, Ye Qing was celebrating his good luck. He was just wondering how he could convince Lin Hu to let him go to the Jade Dragon Lake.

"Good. You will be accompanying us!" Zheng Tianyuan declared, sealing Ye Qing's fate without even bothering to ask for his consent.

Ye Qing pretended to look confused as he, a measly journeyman Reforged, shouldn't have been able to eavesdrop on their conversation. Prayer noticed this and let out a chuckle. "It's like this. We desperately need a herb named the Red Buddha Lotus to save a life. As the herb could only be found in the Jade Dragon Lake, we would need someone to take us there. Since you've visited the Jade Dragon Lake before, would you be so kind as to act as our guide?"

"I..." Ye Qing pretended to hesitate. He wanted to go there of course, but it would be highly suspicious if he raised his hands and whooped, "Let's go, let's go!" It was a forbidden area that nobody wanted to visit after all.

Also, these people might be able to fool his fellow villagers, but as someone who made it all the way to the underbelly of the Jade Dragon Lake, he knew that it was a total lie. Forget the Red Buddha Lotus, it didn't even have a lotus-shaped plant in the area. The only plant that could be found close to the lake was weeds and more weeds. Therefore, these people had to be visiting the Jade Dragon Lake for a whole nother reason!

Prayer continued, "Don't worry, lad. We don't need you to accompany us to the lake. Just take us to the outskirts, and we'll handle the rest. We promise you that you won't be in any danger, and we'll reward you handsomely for your efforts!"

Suddenly, a sweet, young voice interrupted the conversation, "Why don't you let my baby play with him, Prayer? It might just be the incentive he needs to change his mind, haha!"

It was Granny Snake who had said those words. She was clearly an old woman, and yet her voice sounded just like a young woman in her twenties. It was eerie to say the least.

Everyone turned to look at Granny Snake, then back at Ye Qing. It was because a green snake about the width of a thumb had circled around his neck before they realized it. Ye Qing visibly gulped as it tickled his skin with its tongue. His lips were pale, and his body was shivering as if he was doing everything he could not to move and startle the snake. He looked so afraid he might faint at any moment!

Of course, it was all an act. Ye Qing had sensed Granny Snake's movements the second she set her snake on him. He simply chose not to react was to avoid suspicion.

He wasn't worried that Granny Snake would kill him. They needed him to take them to the Jade Dragon Lake, so there was no way they would kill him until then.

"What are you doing, elder one?" Lin Hu exclaimed in shock and instinctively took a step toward Ye Qing. He quickly stopped when he realized there was no way he could rescue the young man before the snake bit him though.

Granny Snake chuckled darkly. "Relax. Like I said, it's just a little incentive. If the lad agrees to be our guide, then all is well. But if he does not, haha..."

He would be fucked up, of course.

"I'll do it! I'll be your guide!" Ye Qing nodded in a hurry.

"Good boy!" Granny Snake reached out, and the green snake leaped back to her arm. It circled around her wrist and returned to being a cute, "harmless" pet.

"If you're worried that we might mistreat you, don't. Take this." Prayer tossed a pellet into Ye Qing's hands. "This is a Tiger Bone Power Pill. It can strengthen your body and improve your vigor. You're currently in the journeyman level of the Body Tempering stage, right? If you consume this, you'll enter the adept level immediately! Consider this our down payment for your service. We'll give you a second pill when we're done with our business!"

"Thank you so much, elder one! Thank you!" Ye Qing hurriedly tucked the pill under his shirt while wearing an ecstatic expression on his face. On the inside though, he was rolling his eyes so hard his imaginary eyes had fallen out of their sockets. *You couldn't be anymore obvious with your carrot and stick approach if you want to. Also, Tiger Bone Power Pill is such a lame ass name. I'm willing to bet a million silvers it's nowhere as good as my dragon-serpent rune. This is the problem with society these days, they keep overestimating their worth even though they're really just a small fish in a big pond that blah blah blah...*

"Now that we have our guide, let's not waste anymore time!" Zheng Tianyuan declared before making his way to the exit. Even now, he still hadn't looked Ye Qing in the eye. Chi Long and Granny Snake followed right behind him.

"We shall be taking our leave then. Thank you for the tea," Prayer said politely while getting up. "And don't worry, we'll take good care of your lad. I promise that no harm will come to him."

"Of course, of course. Thank you!" Granny Xia and Lin Hu hurriedly got up to see their guests out. After they were gone, Granny Xia beckoned Ye Qing to her side before saying seriously, "Boy, those are bad, bad people. You must watch yourself when you're in Little August Hill. If you find anything that doesn't sit right with you, anything at all, do not hesitate to run like hell, okay?"

"I understand, Granny. Thank you for your concern!" Ye Qing nodded obediently and gave her and Lin Hu a bow. Then, he left the house.

After Ye Qing was gone, Lin Hu slammed the table hard and growled, "God dammit! If we were any stronger, Ye Qing wouldn't need to risk his life on our behalf! He's just a boy!"

“It can’t be helped. We live in a world where weaklings do not deserve to live.” Granny Xia sighed weakly. “And you and I are both weaklings!”

“I have a question, Granny. Why did you summon Ye Qing instead of Zheng Tao or Wu Biao to accompany those people? Aren’t they stronger and a better fit for the job?” Lin Hu asked.

She replied, “The trip to Jade Dragon Lake is most likely going to end in tragedy. While Zheng Tao and Wu Biao are stronger and more suitable, we have lost too many warriors to the human skin Strangers already, not to mention that Chen Zheng just died three days ago. Even our surviving warriors are injured or outright crippled. Frankly, we cannot afford to lose anymore men.”

“Right now, Zheng Tao and Wu Biao are our village’s strongest warriors besides you and me. They’re also the ones with the highest potential for growth. It’s a shame we have to sacrifice Ye Qing, but they must be protected at all costs.”

“Granny, you... you knowingly sent Ye Qing to his death?!” Lin Hu cried in horror. “How can you do this? Granny, you... argh! I’m going to stop him!”

Granny Xia caught Lin Hu as soon as he tried to move. “What do you think you’re doing? Your life is your own, I can’t stop you if you insist on throwing it away, but consider this: what will happen to the village if we lose you?”

“I... I...” Lin Hu stopped struggling. He looked like he wanted to rip something in half.

Granny Xia slowly let go of Lin Hu and let out a sigh. At that moment, it looked like she had aged another dozen years. “I told you, didn’t I? Weaklings do not deserve to live in this world!”

Lin Hu closed his eyes, complexion turning as gray as death.

She was right. In this world, weakness is a sin!

1. meaning Red Dragon ➡

Chapter 29: Prayer’s Prayers

“It’s already quite late, elder one. It’ll probably be completely dark by the time we finally make it to the Jade Dragon Lake.”

After catching up to the group, Ye Qing immediately implored Prayer, “Little August Hill is already a dangerous place, but it’s even more dangerous during the night. Why don’t we leave on the crack of dawn instead?”

“No need to be so formal, lad. Just call me Prayer!” Prayer smiled warmly. “And don’t worry. Everything will be alright with me around.”

Behind them, Granny Snake suddenly let out a creepy giggle and said, “You have nothing to be worried about, lad. Prayer’s abilities are far beyond your imagination. You just guide us there and leave the rest to us!”

You’re not helping! Ye Qing complained in his head, but he wisely stopped pressing the issue.

The group came to a sudden stop when they reached the foot of Little August Hill. While stroking his goatee, Prayer stepped out and started walking circles around the area. First, he closed his eyes as if taking a small break. Then, he looked to the distance as if admiring the view. Later, he lowered his head as if absorbed in thought, and finally, he started mumbling something they couldn’t hear under his breath.

“What is Prayer doing?” Ye Qing asked curiously.

The red-haired and bearded Chi Long answered, “He’s checking the fengshui of this place!”

“Fengshui?” That surprised Ye Qing. Was fengshui a thing in this world as well?

It was at this moment Prayer stopped mumbling and opened his eyes. Then, he took three steps forward. As if a mysterious force was empowering his steps, each step seemed to strike a chord with everyone’s heart. On the third step, his surroundings trembled as if he had stepped on some sort of confluence, and a cool breeze started circling around Prayer. He looked every bit like a fengshui master right now.

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Next, Prayer produced a palm-sized censer that looked to be carved from some sort of jet black wood out of seemingly nowhere. It gave off a cold, eerie presence. Then, he produced three vibrant-colored incense sticks in the exact same way and lit them all up. When the scent of the incense sticks entered Ye Qing’s nostrils, he immediately felt refreshed as if he had just taken a cold bath. Even his head felt clearer and sharper than normal.

After lighting the three incense sticks, Prayer raised them over his head and bowed to the heavens. He said, “My first prayer goes to the celestials and Buddhas above! Bless me with auspicious luck!”

Then, he bowed toward the earth and said, “My second prayer goes to the ghosts and deities of Fengdu [1]! Rid me of all evil spirits and monsters!”

Finally, he bowed toward Little August Hill. “My third prayer goes to the untold creatures of the mountains! Protect me from all illness and ill fortune!”

Prayer carefully planted the three incense sticks in the censer. Then, he just stood there as if he was waiting for something. When nothing did, he sucked in a deep breath and cracked a smile on his face. While picking up the censer, he beckoned, “It’s done. Let us continue!”

Everyone in the group except Ye Qing seemed to know what just happened. They also seemed to have complete trust in Prayer’s ritual, whatever it was. There was clear ease and confidence on their faces.

“Er...” Ye Qing looked left and right like he was hoping that someone would step up and explain things to him.

Noticing his confusion, Chi Long cracked a derisive smirk before asking, “Are you confused, boy?”

When Ye Qing gave him an obedient nod, Chi Long answered, “It’s no secret, but the incense sticks Prayer just used are no ordinary incense sticks. They are called the Incense of Worship. The first prayer to the heavens blesses us good luck, the second prayer to the earth wards us from evil, and the third prayer to the spirits protects us from any accident. If the Incense of Worship does not go out at the end of the ritual, it means that our prayers are accepted, and that the gods and spirits would ensure that our journey will be smooth and successful.”

“... You’re not kidding me, are you?” Ye Qing was a bit skeptical, to be honest. Why even cultivate and practice martial arts if prayers were enough to protect one from everything?

Chi Long sneered. “How do you think Prayer got his moniker? It’s because he owns all kinds of miraculous incense sticks that can bless someone with good fortune, ward them from evil, uncover hidden secrets and more. Just wait and see if you don’t believe me.”

Suddenly, Prayer chuckled from the front. “You seem to know a lot about me, Chi Long.”

Chi Long’s smirk visibly stiffened on his face before he apologized profusely, “They’re just rumors I picked up here and there, Prayer! I swear I don’t mean anything by it!”

He then glared daggers at Ye Qing as if he was the reason behind his embarrassment.

Of course, Ye Qing was having none of it. *Why are you glaring at me? You’re the one who wanted to answer my question!*

"If you're really curious about my incense sticks, we can talk about it after business is over!" Prayer ignored Chi Long and said to Ye Qing in a friendly tone.

"Sure. Thanks, Prayer!" Ye Qing saluted the old man.

Suddenly, Granny Snake interrupted without warning, "I wouldn't be so sure about that, lad. As far as I know, everyone who has spoken to Prayer about his incense sticks have turned into incense sticks themselves!"

Ye Qing shuddered immediately. He didn't even have to fake it.

Prayer did not take offense though. He turned to look at Granny Snake and smiled. "Why are you making up stories, sister? You're scaring our lad for no reason here! Lad, don't listen to her nonsense, you hear? I promise you I'm the most humble, cultured, and honorable old man you'll ever meet in your life!"

Yeah, like hell I'm going to believe that!

Ye Qing kept a tight lid on his real thoughts and forced out a grin. "R-right!"

He already had a feeling, but there really wasn't a single good person in this group. Even the friendliest of them all—assuming that Granny Snake was telling the truth—hid a dark side as well.

Suddenly, Zheng Tianyuan declared from the center of the group, "Enough. We're entering the mountains now. I want everyone to keep your wits about you!" No one objected to his order.

The first part of their journey was mostly peaceful until a bunch of catkins suddenly appeared in front of them. Ye Qing immediately cried out in warning, "Watch out! That's the Catkin's Lie! You mustn't touch it no matter what!" Liu Jinshui's horrifying death three days ago was still fresh in his mind.

Prayer did not seem perturbed in the slightest, however. He simply said, "It will be fine!" before raising his censer and continuing forward, giving Ye Qing no choice but to follow. Right before they would make contact with the Catkin's Lie, a gust of wind suddenly appeared out of nowhere and blew them out of the way. Just like that, they were safe.

"Stop jumping at every shadow, boy! Nothing would happen with Prayer around!" rebuked Pao with a dissatisfied expression.

What else could Ye Qing say? He simply let out an awkward chuckle and moved on. Ye Qing would soon learn that the effects of the Incense of Worship. One time, they encountered a horde of Bone Rats. Bone Rats were gregarious, carnivorous Strangers that feasted on any flesh-and-blood creature until nothing but bones were left, which was how they had earned their name. In fact, the Bone Rats had eaten a Red-class

Winnowing Leopard into a skeleton right before their eyes. But for some reason, the Bone Rats just ran past them even though they were right in front of them.

Later, they stumbled upon a massive horde of Red-class Headless Lanterns. It was a Stranger that hunted and killed any living being that was illuminated by its candlelight. Specifically, they would descend on the target's head and remove it. Unlike the Bone Rats, the Headless Lanterns actually responded to their presence and tried to kill them, but a rain suddenly appeared out of nowhere and extinguished the candle flames inside the lanterns. Without the candlelight, the Headless Lanterns seemed as blind as a blind man. They soon flew away and were out of sight and mind in no time.

The fourth Stranger they encountered was a little more dangerous than the previous three. It was a Smilodon, a Malice-class Stranger who charged them immediately after it saw them. However, another Malice-class Stranger—an Armored Armadillo—just happened to crawl out of the ground at the wrong place and the wrong time and accidentally struck the Smilodon's belly. Naturally, the two Strangers started beating the shit out of each other and forgot about the humans entirely.

These incidents would continue to happen as they trekked through Little Azure Hill. It was easily one of the most amazing things Ye Qing had witnessed.

Some time later, Prayer snapped Ye Qing out of his amazement with a question, "How much longer until we get to the Jade Dragon Lake, lad?"

Ye Qing came back down to earth and examined his surroundings. "We're close. Once we get past this hill, we'll be there in two or three hours at most!"

"Good. For your own sake, I hope you aren't lying to us!" The arrogant Zheng Tianyuan said indifferently before ordering, "Let's take a break here, everyone!"

Pao immediately pulled out an animal-skin blanket from what looked like a shell-like object and spread it across the ground. He then placed some jerkies, candied fruit and delicious wine on the blanket before apologizing, "My deepest apologies, young master. This is the best I can do given the circumstances."

"It's no problem!" Zheng Tianyuan answered before sitting down on the blanket and enjoying his meal. If Ye Qing didn't know better, he would have thought that they were out for a night picnic.

Noticing that Ye Qing was extremely interested in the shell-shaped object Pao was holding, Prayer explained while walking to his side, "That is what we call a Nature's Shell. The Nature's Shell is a unique Stranger with a pocket dimension in its body. It can be used to store any non-living thing. With proper refinement, it can easily be made into a high quality storage artifact!"

“Nature’s Shell, you say?” *This old man thinks I don’t know what a spatial artifact is? Pshaw!* When Ye Qing recalled that Prayer had seemingly conjured his censer and incense sticks out of nothing as well, he asked, “Do you have one too, Prayer?”

“I sure do!” A shell about the size of a baby’s hand fell out of his sleeves and into Prayer’s palm. Seeing as it was an entire size smaller than Pao’s, Ye Qing reckoned that its quality was slightly inferior as well. “My Nature’s Shell is made using an undersized Nature’s Shell, which is why it can only hold so many items. In the markets, it would be rated as an inferior quality item. On the other hand, Scion Zheng’s Nature’s Shell is both mature and very well-bred. You can tell it’s a superior quality Nature’s Shell at first glance.”

“It’s just a Nature’s Shell!” Despite his humble words, Zheng Tianyuan’s expression was anything but humble. He said, “Just tell me if you wish to upgrade your Nature’s Shell, Prayer! I’ll give you a better one as soon as we return home!”

“Haha! Thank you for your generosity, Scion Zheng!” Prayer said with a chuckle.

Suddenly, Granny Snake interrupted, “Quiet, all of you! Do you hear that?” The old woman had been meditating in silence until something caught her attention.

Ye Qing listened closely. He quickly heard what sounded like festive noises coming from deep within the forest.

Are those... suonas and drums? Ye Qing thought before declaring, “It sounds like someone is celebrating something!”

“It’s a wedding procession song!” Prayer added with sudden gravity.

“A wedding procession song? You must be joking, Prayer! We’re in the middle of nowhere! It must be the wind you’re hearing!” Pao taunted instinctively, but as soon as he fell silent he heard the suonas and drums as well. The blood immediately drained away from his face.

Prayer grabbed his censer tightly. “Be on your guard, everyone. We’re probably dealing with multiple Strangers!”

Granny Snake suggested, “It sounds like it’s still some distance away. Why don’t we hide until whatever’s causing those noises are gone?”

Unfortunately, as soon as she finished her sentence, the festive noises suddenly increased in volume until it felt like whoever was creating it was right there with them. And they were. The next moment, a bunch of people wearing red clothes and carrying a wedding carriage suddenly appeared in front of the group.

As it turned out, the people weren't humans at all. They were a bunch of oddly-shaped Strangers. A quartet of stout toads with pimple-like warts all over their faces and extraordinarily large mouths were standing in front of the wedding carriage and blowing the suona. Their large mouths were probably why it sounded like an entire band of minstrels were supporting the procession. Right behind them were six tall, slender Strangers with six arms attached to their bodies. They were probably some sort of insect Strangers. Each insect Stranger was holding a gong in one hand and a mallet in every other hand. Their tight and rhythmic gong beats were something no human could possibly replicate without sufficient numbers!

1. famous necropolis of the underworld 🗨️

Chapter 30: The Mountain God Takes A Wife

Following behind the gong beaters were many gorgeous women, but just like the Strangers before them, these women were no humans. For starters, they had root-like legs. Every time they took a step, petals would scatter, and a refreshing scent would permeate in the air. They were obviously some sort of plant Strangers.

The wedding carriage was at the center of the procession, and it was quite something to look at. Carried by four stone giants, the carriage constantly changed in shape and color like an unfinished painting that was constantly being worked on. Sometimes it was red, sometimes it was light blue, and sometimes it was dark green. Circling above the carriage were colorful birds wearing wreaths of grass and flowers and chirping a melodious tune.

Behind the carriage were many kids who were barely old enough to be children instead of babies. Cute and round, they had root-like arms and various leaves and flowers growing out of their unnaturally shiny bodies. They were also wearing red dudous. Judging from their appearance, they were probably ginsengs, lingzhi and mushroom Strangers.

Finally, the children were followed by a bunch of humanoid Strangers riding all sorts of ferocious beasts such as bears, tigers, leopards and even lions. They were all wearing armor and carrying a massive saber. In stark contrast to the cheerful procession ahead of them, these humanoid Strangers were as quiet and expressionless as death itself.

Wherever the wedding procession went, Strangers bowed their heads in reverence, and plants went out of their way to give passage. Literally, the grass, the flowers and even the trees were bending out of its way as if they had a mind of their own. Even the wind felt especially lively and refreshing tonight, blowing in a manner that could only be described as cheerful.

"P-prayer, what the hell is going on here?" Pao stuttered out in fear.

Beside him, Zheng Tianyuan was keeping quiet and doing his best to keep up a dignified appearance, but his pale complexion betrayed just how scared he really was.

"I think... we've stumbled upon an ancient custom. The mountain god is taking a wife tonight!" Prayer answered with an audible gulp, but his voice still sounded raspy because his throat was completely dry.

"Can you please explain in more detail?" Granny Snake prodded in a meek voice while doing her best not to draw any attention from the procession.

Prayer shook and nodded his head as if he wasn't quite sure how to react either. "To tell you the truth, I don't know that much about this custom either. It's something I read in a travel journal, and it's only a few sentences long. I quote, 'When the mountain god takes a wife, the birds start singing, the music starts playing, the plants start dancing, and fearsome beasts protect a carriage made of clouds. Wherever they go, all creatures bow their heads in awe, the grass and trees move away to open up a path, the wind dances in celebration, and the water drinks in joy!'"

"But I've always thought that it was just a myth; a fairytale. I-I never knew it was real!"

"What should we do then, Prayer?" Chi Long asked while licking his dry, cracked lips.

"I don't know. But it's best if we stay where we are and see what happens!"

Prayer shook his head before raising his censer high above his head. The Incense of Worship that had been burning very, very slowly in the censer up till this point suddenly began to burn up rapidly until they formed a large cloud of smoke. The smoke then slowly floated toward the wedding procession.

As soon as the smoke made contact with the wedding procession, everyone stopped what they were doing all of a sudden. The next moment, a short, portly, decrepit old man whose hair had turned completely white slowly started walking toward the group. He carried a walking stick that was much taller than him.

At that moment, all six humans felt their hearts leaping to their throats. They subconsciously stopped breathing as well.

The old man walked so slowly and shakily that it looked like it would take him forever just to shamble to their side. In reality, it took him only one step to appear in front of the group. Smiling, the old man gave them a small bow before saying, "Our Master is taking a wife today. Seeing as we are fortunate enough to run into each other during this wonderful night, the Mistress has requested me to invite you to our wedding banquet. Would you please accept our offer and bless the banquet with your presence?"

“You... want us to attend your mountain god’s wedding banquet?” The humans all exchanged panicked and uncertain looks with each other. Would they be leaving the banquet alive if they said yes? And would they live if they turned the old man down? The questions were simple, but no one had an answer to either of them.

“The Mistress insists that you bless us with your presence!” The old man pressed unhurriedly. Chuckling, he slowly swept his gaze across everyone’s face until he stopped... on Ye Qing.

Everyone turned to look at him, surprise and suspicion flitting across their faces. Unfortunately, Ye Qing was just as clueless as they were.

Why the heck is he looking at me!? Does he want me to make the decision?

In the end, Ye Qing could only see one way out of this. He forced out a smile and answered, “If it’s not too much of a bother, then... sure! W-why not?”

“Haha! It’s no bother at all! We are most honored to have you, young master!” The old man laughed heartily before doing a little wave. The earth surged, and six smaller carriages suddenly appeared before the group. He beckoned, “Come, come! Please enter your carriages!”

At this point, it was far too late to reject the old man’s request. They could only enter the carriages whether they liked it or not. As soon as they had taken a seat, the music resumed, and the carriages immediately started moving toward somewhere. Ye Qing couldn’t quite tell where they were, not just because it was dark outside, but also because the windows were covered up by semi-transparent curtains. He could only tell that they were moving very quickly judging from the sound of the wind. Strangely, Ye Qing could not feel the slightest bump even though they were traveling across the mountains. If he didn’t know better, he would’ve thought that they were traveling on flat ground.

An unknown amount of time later—Ye Qing literally couldn’t tell, for it felt like they had traveled for a breath and a few hours at the same time—the old man’s voice suddenly came from outside, “We are here, dear guests!”

Ye Qing obediently stepped out of the carriage and found himself standing inside a massive hall. Not only was the hall richly ornamented and overflowing with riches, the ceiling was embedded with countless night pearls that glittered like stars. They brightened the hall so much that it felt like daytime.

“If I may be so bold, elder one—where are we?” Ye Qing asked.

“Oh my, please do not call me that, dear guest! I am not worthy to be your elder one! If you don’t mind, please address me as Uncle Fu!” The old man saluted Ye Qing brightly before answering his question, “We’re currently in one of the Master’s imperial palaces.

The wedding will begin shortly, so feel free to rest your legs and partake in our hospitality until then. I have to get busy now, so please, enjoy your stay!”

Before anyone could say anything, Uncle Fu bowed and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

“What’s the plan, Prayer?” Zheng Tianyuan looked to Prayer for instructions as soon as Uncle Fu was gone.

Prayer performed some finger calculations and observed his surroundings for a moment. Then, he shook his head and said, “The threads of fate here are completely hidden, so I cannot determine our exact location. In other words, we are trapped.”

“We’re trapped? You might as well say that we’re dead!” Pao visibly blanched before turning on Ye Qing and growling, “It’s all your fault, boy! We would not be in this situation if you haven’t guided us down the wrong path! I’ll kill you!”

Chi Long, Granny Snake and Zheng Tianyuan were wearing ugly expressions as well.

Pao was halfway to Ye Qing when Prayer stopped him. “Calm down, Pao! Now is not the time to be blaming others!”

To their surprise, Ye Qing seemed completely unperturbed by Pao’s threats. He crossed his arms and said calmly, “It is as Prayer says. In my opinion, these Strangers don’t hold ill will toward us. I’m not saying it’s not dangerous, but I don’t think we will die if we play this out properly!”

Prayer shot Ye Qing a surprised look. He wasn’t expecting Ye Qing to be so calm considering their circumstances. Regardless, he nodded in agreement and said, “The lad is absolutely right. These Strangers are many times stronger than we are. If they were planning to kill us, they would not have waited until now. They would’ve killed us as soon as we ran into them.”

“Okay... what do we do then?” Chi Long asked.

Prayer thought for a moment before answering, “We are guests, aren’t we? We may as well act our role and get comfortable!”

Crunch!

Suddenly, a crisp crunch drew everyone’s attention. Everyone turned and saw Ye Qing leaning against a table and eating a fresh, emerald green fruit without a care.

“What the hell are you doing?” Zheng Tianyuan blurted in shock even as anger flooded his veins. He could not believe that Ye Qing would be so bold as to touch anything in

this hall, much less enjoy the food. All of them would die if the Stranges decided to take offense with his impudent behavior!

As if he couldn't sense the group's rising anger, Ye Qing waved the fruit in his hand and replied casually, "I'm eating a fruit, duh! What's the matter? Uncle Fu said that we are free to partake in their hospitality. Surely it would be impolite *not* to enjoy the sweet fruits and delicious wine they had purposely laid out for guests like us?"

"Also, these fruits are seriously tasty. Are you sure you don't want to take a bite?"

Granny Snake was examining the fruit in Ye Qing's hand when she suddenly exclaimed, "That's the Emerald Fruit, a fruit that refines one's true qi and strengthens the body!"

"What? Are you sure?" Prayer appeared in front of Ye Qing and snatched the half-eaten fruit from his hand. He inspected it closely for a moment before breaking into a wide smile. "It really is the Emerald Fruit! And those are..."

Prayer's mouth fell open when his eyes shifted to a bunch of crystalline grapes on a fruit tray. "Crystal Grapes! They're fruits that can increase the amount of one's true qi!"

His eyes continued to widen as he looked at the fruit next to the Crystal Grapes. It was as big as a longan and as red as blood. "That's the Blood Bodhi, a fruit that can supposedly create flesh out of nothing and increase one's lifespan. A priceless restorative, it is said to be capable of rescuing anyone from the brink of death so long as they are still alive!"

"That... that tea is the Purple Haze Tea, a drink that can improve the mind and eyesight. The Flowerless Fruit... The Passion Lotus... The Gem Flower... these are all top-grade spirit fruits that are sold for thousands and thousands of silvers in the market!"

"Om nom nom nom nom nom nom..."

Prayer was still ranting about the value of the spirit fruits on the table when the sound of eating abruptly disrupted his train of thoughts. He turned around and saw that everyone was sitting around a table each and busy stuffing their mouths with food.

"..."

Prayer was speechless for a moment. Just a moment ago, these people were so frightened that they didn't even dare to touch a single object in the hall. Now? They probably wouldn't stop even if he told them that the food was poisoned!

Disgruntled as he was, Prayer did not hesitate to grab a seat and start shoving food into his mouth as well. He might still die when the wedding banquet was over, but he certainly wasn't going to go to the other side on an empty stomach!

Whoosh whoosh whoosh!

Suddenly, the hall darkened for a second before the candles strategically placed throughout the place all lit up at the same time, dyeing everything dark red and chasing away the cold. The atmosphere felt warm and festive.

Two people suddenly appeared at the center table. The person to the left was tall and fierce, while the one to the right was dainty and delicate. They were both wearing red wedding outfits. As warriors, the humans should be able to see the two people clearly despite the dim lighting. In reality, some sort of mysterious force had blurred out the bride and the groom's appearance so that the most that they could make out was their gender.

Suddenly, bamboo flutes and string instruments started playing in the hall. Before the humans could react, Uncle Fu's voice came from outside the hall,

"The wedding begins! You may now enter the hall, dear guests..."

A young man wearing a blue robe sauntered into the hall. He had long, blue hair and carried a jade folding fan. He looked to be in his twenties, and he was so handsome he didn't look like he belonged in this world.

Uncle Fu introduced, "First, we welcome Scion Sea. Scion Sea brings the bride and groom not one, but two thousand-year-old Dew Water Jade Lotus Flowers! He sincerely wishes that they will love and cherish each other till death do them part!"

"Huh. Someone managed to get ahead of me?" Scion Sea commented as soon as he saw Ye Qing's group. He shot them a dashing smile and saluted them before walking all the way to the table at the end of the hall; table number one.

"Next, we welcome Old Man of the Mountain. Old Man of the Mountain brings the bride and groom a long-life statue, and he wishes that they will love each other as equals for one hundred years, then another one hundred years to come!"

A benign-faced old man wearing a yellow robe walked into the hall—or rather, the earth beneath his feet carried him forward like the tides. When he passed by the center table, he bowed to the bride and groom before moving onto his seat.

"Thirdly, we welcome Tiger General! Tiger General brings the bride and groom a ten-thousand-year-old Rindo Grass! He too wishes that they will love and cherish each other till death do them part!"

A tall, massive humanoid Stranger with a tiger's head stepped into the hall. Clad in war armor, he gave off a brutal and tyrannical aura that was very much at odds with the festive atmosphere around him. As soon as he stepped through the entrance, he

glanced at Ye Qing's group and laughed maliciously. "Why are humans attending the Master's wedding day? Should I eat them and save us all some eyesore?"

He then made a grab for Ye Qing before anyone could react.