

## Stranger 101

### Chapter 101: When You Don't Study Hard

The moment they set foot on the first step, the mountain path abruptly became long and distant, and a wall of rainbow fog flooded the path behind them. Their destination was nowhere to be seen, and retreat was impossible.

*“One, you can only ever go forward once you’ve stepped on the Path of Riddles.”*

The rules the ink wash seal script had mentioned flashed through everyone’s mind. As the fog was corrosive, it really seemed that the only way they could go was forward. As if on cue, many winged seal scripts flew out of the fog and landed in front of the group. Then, they unfurled into rows and rows of text. They were riddles the people were expected to clear in order to progress further.

Ye Qing looked left and right and noticed that he could only see his own riddle. Obviously, this arrangement coincided with the rule that each person could only answer their own riddle. Brimming with confidence, Ye Qing rolled up his sleeves and concentrated on the riddle before him, “Give it to me, bebe! I will show you the power of a top... student...”

The riddle read: “One, two and three of me can form a symbol or a letter. What am I?”

“...”

Symbol? Letter? Letter symbol whaaaaaaat?

He did not think that he would be stumped at the very first riddle, but he was. As if that wasn’t bad enough, a countdown starting at 10 appeared beneath the riddle. 10... 9.... 8....

A time limit? Are you kidding me right now? Shit! I’m not going to fail on the very first riddle, am I?

Suddenly, Wawa’s disdainful voice entered his ears, “The answer is ‘I’, stupid!”

“I?” Ye Qing frowned as he muttered to himself, “I... ? Let’s see, one I can form the letter ‘I’ or the minus symbol (-), two Is can form the letter ‘X’ or the plus symbol (+), and three Is can form the letter ‘N’ or... or... the inequality symbol ( $\neq$ )! The answer really is ‘I!’”

“Why are you stating the obvious? You’re so stupid, friend! Wawa figured it out the moment she saw the riddle!” The Book Sprite declared cheekily.

Normally, Ye Qing would’ve flicked her forehead for daring to call him stupid to his face, but it was a fact that he was no match for her in the academic department. So, he could only rub his nose to hide his embarrassment. He was so distracted he nearly missed the countdown and called out in a hurry, “The answer is ‘I’!”

The floating words abruptly dissolved into a pool of light and slipped into the faint mist in front of him in the blink of an eye. The mist receded just enough to reveal the second step.

Knowing that he had successfully cleared the first hurdle, Ye Qing let out a sigh of relief and took a moment to check out how the others were doing. Judging from the deep frowns on their faces and their frantic hair pulling, it was not going well at all. They might become invincible if they turned

bald, but it would not improve their IQ one bit, not to mention that every single one of them except Xiao Yang was the brawny type who used their biceps far more than they ever used their brains. Forcing them to answer a riddle was like making a child the emperor—it was unreasonable to expect them to perform well in any capacity.

Speaking of which, Xiao Yang was the only one who looked completely confident when he gave his answer. But unlike Ye Qing, his riddle abruptly transformed into a floating chain and bound him to a wooden cross that had appeared behind him without warning. Xiao Yang looked completely stupefied when he realized what happened, “What? This is impossible! How can my answer be wrong?”

As if on cue, everyone’s timer hit zero at the same time. Everyone who answered wrong or failed to answer in time were bound to a wooden cross as well. It was quite the scene to put it mildly. Then, a scary-looking whip covered in hooked barbs appeared in front of each person.

“Bondage? Whip?” *This escalated quickly! Where are the candles?*

Crack!

The whips fell in unison and caused all of them to shudder in agony. If the whip was a normal whip, then this would be an unpleasant experience at worst. Most of them were Qi Invokers after all. However, the barbed whip literally tore a chunk of flesh off their body. To call it painful would be an understatement to say the least.

At first, there were a couple of badasses who bravely withstood the pain without uttering a sound. Over time though, even the toughest nuts eventually broke under the pressure especially since their torturer did not mention when their suffering was going to end.

Crack!

“Argh!” “Ah~”

Crack!

“Argh!” “Ah~”

“Wait WTF? I’m not hearing things, am I?”

It was a terrible thing to get rekt, but a completely different story to watch someone else get rekt. To watch dozens of people get rekt at the same time because they didn’t study hard enough? Even better! Ye Qing was just wishing he had some popcorn when he heard something strange mixed within the screams of pain. At first he thought he was hallucinating, but over time it was impossible to ignore the strange moan.

He immediately pushed his hearing to the limits to identify the source. Just a few seconds later, he found out that the moan... had come from Xiao Yang himself. Just like everyone else, the Patrolman was bloody and horribly mutilated. But while the others were screaming in abject pain, Xiao Yang was... moaning with pleasure.

“...”

Ye Qing’s expression at that moment was strange to put it mildly. *I didn't take him to be the masochist type! I should stay far, far away from him from now on.*

The good news was that the punishment didn't last forever. Twenty whips later, the chains, the wooden crosses and the whips all vanished into thin air. Not only that, the horrific wounds they suffered had vanished into thin air as well. It was almost as if they had never been whipped to begin with.

But of course, the wounds might have disappeared, but the memory remained. Everyone looked pale-faced and fearful. No one wanted to suffer that kind of pain another time—no one except Xiao Yang that was. Unlike the others, he wore a regretful look on his face. He actually looked like he wanted the whipping to continue longer.

When he noticed Ye Qing's strange expression, he stepped toward him and licked his lips, "You should have joined us, brother. It was an... unforgettable experience."

"..."

Ye Qing subconsciously took a few steps away from Xiao Yang and said seriously, "No thanks. I'm a scholar, and I'd rather keep my dignity intact." *Unlike you.* He then moved onto the second step before Xiao Yang could pollute his ears any further. Stay away from Xiao Yang to save your soul!

As soon as he stood still, another ancient seal script flew out of the fog and unfurled into a new riddle:

"What has roots as nobody sees,

Is taller than trees,

Up, up it goes

And yet never grows?"

This time, Ye Qing was able to figure out the riddle very quickly. "This one's simple! The answer is a 'mountain'!"

A mountain was rooted to the ground despite having no roots.? It was also taller than a tree, so much so that some looked like they could put a hole in the sky. Finally, a mountain could never "grow" taller, so it had to be the answer.

He was right. Once again, the words dissolved into rainbow light and pushed back the mist a little more.

"You got it already, brother?!" Xiao Yang had just planted a foot on the second step when he noticed that the mist before Ye Qing had receded once more. He was so shocked that his jaw was hanging wide open.

Ye Qing waved a sleeve and said casually, "I *am* a scholar, you know. I won't be barked by a simple riddle!"

*I thought he was just bragging to save face! Is he actually a scholar?* Xiao Yang thought in shock and jealousy. He thought he was the only truly studious person in the group, but clearly he was wrong. Not only that, the first person to reach the peak would surely obtain a better reward. This meant that it was time to get serious.

Gritting his teeth, Xiao Yang climbed onto the second step and waited for the seal script to turn into a riddle. When he was done reading, he gave his answer with just as much confidence as before.

Unfortunately for him, he was just as wrong as he was before. The seal script abruptly transformed into a pot of boiling oil, and an invisible force dunked Xiao Yang into the pot completely.

Xiao Yang burst out screaming as his flesh sizzled. He tried to escape as a matter of course, but it was as if he was shackled by a mysterious force. He was unable to leap fully out of the pot no matter what he tried. Eventually, Xiao Yang's struggle ceased as he floated atop the boiling oil like a piece of fried meat. Literally, his flesh looked golden brown and crispy, and a delicious scent spread throughout the area.

If Ye Qing didn't know better, he would've thought that it was the scent of fried chicken.

*Heavens above. This is the first time I've ever seen—or smelled—a deep-fried human!* Ye Qing thought with a suppressed chill. Everyone else looked green in the face as well.

Ten breaths later, the boiling pot vanished, and Xiao Yang hit the ground with a soft thump. However, the poor guy was still twitching here and there as if his senses hadn't caught up to reality yet. A long time later, he finally looked up at Ye Qing and said, "It's not as hot as it looks! Really!"

*"I believe you!" As far as a child can throw you, that is!*

It should not need to be said, but no one wanted to suffer Xiao Yang's fate. So, the Pacification Sentinels racked their brains and pulled their hair harder than ever before to answer their given riddle. Unfortunately, most of them literally weren't smart enough to save their own life, so they followed in Xiao Yang's footsteps and were deep fried into crispy yellow. Add in a sprinkle of cumin and some sauce, and they would be a ready dinner for a cannibal or two!

If there was one silver lining about all this, it was that they were all strong-willed people who were used to walking on a knife's edge. Once they were reset back to normal, they were ready to go for another round. Relatively speaking, of course. At least they weren't dead, right?

Ye Qing sighed. He would help out his mates if he could, but the rules forbade him from doing so. He wasn't nearly so virtuous that he would deep fry himself to save another person either, much less dozens of them. Lastly, there was no telling if they had infinite "lives". How ironic would it be if he died because he suicided one too many times?

*"In the end, it's all up to fate!"*

Ye Qing shook his head and looked away from the others. Then, he climbed onto the third step.

*"All about, but cannot be seen,*

*Can be captured, cannot be held,*

*No throat, but can be heard.*

*Who am I?"*

*"Another riddle poem. Let's see. All about, but cannot be seen. Can be captured, cannot be held. No throat, but can be heard... heard? I got it! The answer is 'wind'! Only the wind fits all the mentioned criterias!"*

“That is correct, friend. You’re a smart boy now!” Wawa praised him and clapped her hands encouragingly.

“...”

I’ve always been a smart boy, okay? Still, I don’t mind being praised by a top student!

Ye Qing’s answer was correct, and the fourth step was revealed. It was at this moment Xiao Yang rushed up the third step. When he saw that Ye Qing was getting ready to climb the fourth step—it was as if he had made no progress at all—he gritted his teeth and challenged the third riddle as quickly as he could.

Of course, he was wrong yet again.

This time, a single word transformed into a knife and flew past Xiao Yang. A slice of flesh so thin that it was comparable to a cicada’s wing fell off the Patrolman’s torso and hit the ground with a splat.

Xiao Yang shivered as the blood drained away from his face. As if remembering something, his eyes abruptly bulged with terror, and large beads of sweat started dripping off his head like a waterfall. It was at this moment the knife flew back and carved out another slice of flesh. Not only was it the exact same shape and size as the first, Xiao Yang’s wounds weren’t bleeding at all.

“Death by a thousand cuts?!” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise. Legend says that the true death by a thousand cuts could make the victim suffer thousands and thousands of cuts without dying, and since Xiao Yang was a warrior...

Poor kid. This is what happens when you don’t study hard enough!

Ye Qing sighed and resumed his climb.

Chapter 102: Exceptional

“I have forests but no trees.

I have lakes but no water.

I have roads but no travelers.

Who am I?”

With Wawa as his guide, Ye Qing easily made it all the way to the ninth step almost as if he was taking a slow walk. He answered immediately when he saw the riddle, “The answer is map!”

A map had images of forests but no actual trees, images of lakes but no water, and images of roads but no travelers. It was such an easy riddle that he didn’t even need to use Wawa this time.

In fact, he had barely used Wawa at all throughout his climb. As long as the seal scripts—or rather, the Riddler—didn’t cheat, he was fairly certain he could answer every riddle without relying on Wawa!

“Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh... Oooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhh...”

He had just finished answering the ninth riddle when he heard a long, disturbing groan from behind. He turned around just in time to see Xiao Yang crawling up to the ninth step.

“Brother... you haven’t answered a riddle correctly even once, have you?” Ye Qing sighed sympathetically as he stared at the man—no, the man-shaped *liquid* in front of him. Xiao Yang looked so spent it was a miracle he was even capable of crawling. One look was all Ye Qing needed to know the guy had screwed up every riddle presented to him and screamed the whole way.

“You have my respect if nothing else, brother!”

And how could he not? Xiao Yang was basically brute-forcing his way up the Mountain of Riddles by throwing himself into every pitfall like a suicide machine. While it allowed him to keep pace with Ye Qing, a lesser person would’ve lost their minds after their second or third punishment in a row, much less the ninth.

“You flatter me, brother!” Xiao Yang shot him a grin before flopping over like a fish. Then, he uttered without even bothering to look at the riddle in front of him, “Come get me!”

Xiao Yang had given up after the first few attempts to solve the riddles. It was because he realized that the riddles were specifically targeted at his weakness. No matter how hard he racked his brain—seriously, he was thinking harder than when he was plotting against his victims—he just could not get it right no matter what.

No wonder true scholars could climb up the ranks and earn heaps and heaps of silvers just by flapping their mouths and shaking their brush. No wonder people like *him* could only risk their lives on the battlefield to earn just enough money to survive until the next day. If smart people excelled at governing people, then dumb people excelled at being ordered around like the dumbass they were!

Xiao Yang made up his mind then to kill a couple of scholars for his people as soon as he got out of this Strange Realm—especially those who reminded him of Ye Qing!

“Come, bebe! I am the one who will endure all the punishments!” Xiao Yang shouted with great courage. As if sensing his determination, the floating words transformed into an inferno and trapped Xiao Yang in an instant.

“Last time it was deep frying, and now it’s BBQ? The Riddler really is plotting to turn him into a dish!” Ye Qing muttered to himself while looking sympathetically at Xiao Yang.

It was at this moment he noticed something. “Huh. I guess he isn’t all brawn and no brain after all.”

Xiao Yang looked like he was having an absolute heck of a time within the flames, but a closer look would reveal that the hat he was wearing was leaking something golden that clung tightly to his body. As a result, the flames failed to do any real damage to him at all.

Not only that, his senses were telling him that the hat was continuously absorbing the essence of the flames and weakening them. He would not have noticed it if his spiritual power hadn’t drastically increased thanks to the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”.

*That's definitely a Strange Artifact, a fire-type Strange Artifact no less!* A thought suddenly popped into Ye Qing's mind. *What if... no, forget it. I should just resume my climb.*

When Ye Qing climbed onto the tenth step, a loud and melodious chime suddenly came from the peak. The sound waves pushed away the rainbow fog above their heads to reveal the ink-wash seal script they had met at the beginning. It declared loudly and clearly while flapping its wings, "It's time for a couplet challenge!"

"Oh... did an incense stick pass already?" Ye Qing exclaimed in pleasant surprise. In his opinion, completing couplets was way easier than solving riddles!

"The first line is: grow long, grow long, continue to grow long—" Ink-wash words full of life and energy started aligning themselves in the sky. "—please complete the second line. You have one tea time!"

"Wait a second, I recognize this couplet! This is plagiarism!" Ye Qing blinked. In fact, it was a world-famous couplet in his previous world. [1]

What a scummy Stranger... is what I would say, if not for the fact that I know several answers thanks to it!

"Wawa, you don't need to help me this time. Allow me to show you the power of five thousand years of Chinese history!" Ye Qing winked at the Book Sprite sitting on his shoulder.

"Okay! Wawa loves it when you embarrass yourself, friend!" Wawa clapped her tiny hands excitedly.

*"... Just you wait, you'll be sorry but your tears will be too late!*

He was just about to mouth a retort when he heard a scholarly voice saying, "Allow me!"

He looked up. The rainbow fog in the sky abruptly joined together to form a large mirror. It showed an unfamiliar man clad in a moon white uniform.

"Damn. This challenge is going to be broadcasted live?" Clearly, the scholarly voice he heard earlier belonged to this person. "This guy isn't one of us though. He must be one of the people who went missing!"

It was at this moment the young man in the sky coughed twice and shuffled his feet a little before answering, "Grow long, grow long, continue to grow long; soar high, soar high, continue to soar high."

The moment he finished giving his answer, the line "soar high, soar high, continue to soar high." appeared in the sky. The text was gold in color, and there was a "1" floating above it.

"Well answered, well answered! It's my turn now!"

This time, it was a frivolous-sounding voice who spoke up. The scholarly man in the mirror disappeared and was replaced by a handsome middle-aged man who looked like he had bedded his fair share of women. While holding a folding fan and wearing a casual smile on his face, he

answered, “‘Grow long, grow long, continue to grow long’, is it? In that case, my answer is, ‘dive deep, dive deep, to dive ever deeper’.”

*Flap!* The middle-aged man opened his fan as soon as he finished and fanned himself twice. There was no mistake. He was definitely a heartbreaker.

The middle-aged man’s answer appeared underneath the scholarly man’s answer. The text was silver in color, and the number ‘2’ floated above it.

“My turn.”

A third voice answered the call, but this time it was bright, melodious, and feminine. It clearly belonged to a woman. The image in the sky changed again to reveal a shapely woman, though her face was concealed by a veil. Ye Qing could almost hear the middle-aged man sighing in dejection.

She breathed through vermillion lips, “Grow long, grow long, continue to grow long; always growing, always growing, continually growing.”

Her answer appeared in the sky just like the others, but this time it did not appear at the bottom. Instead, it appeared atop both answers and shone a golden color. The number ‘1’ also appeared above it. The former number 1 answer dropped to second place and turned to silver, whereas the former number 2 answer dropped to third place and turned to bronze.

“I see! It’s a ranking list!” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. Obviously, the higher one’s ranking, the more steps would be awarded for clearing the challenge. The woman definitely deserved first place though. Not only was it *the* answer to the couplet in his previous world, it was also structurally appropriate and more meaningful. He was going to claim it for himself, but now he was going to have to use an inferior answer instead.

“Is it really that easy? I have it then!” A boorish voice interrupted. The mirror shifted once more to reveal a brawny man with a square head carrying a crucible steel stick in his hand. With a proud grin on his face, he declared,

“Listen well, brothers and sisters! My answer is, ‘get hard, get hard, getting hard as fuck!’”

“.....”

For a moment, Ye Qing could not think of anything. “Grow long, grow long, continue to grow long; get hard, get hard, getting hard as fuck”? How sublime! It was simple yet illuminating, shocking yet unforgettable, uncouth yet oh-so-evocative... ahem.? Whoever said that the right answer must be the best answer? If he was the examiner, he would definitely award the guy first place!

Unfortunately, it would seem that the ink-wash seal script had a different opinion. As if enraged by the answer, it uttered, “Uncivilized boor!” before flapping its wings and somehow slapping the man across space and time. The poor man was slapped so hard that he literally spun a circle on his feet, leaving a dark red palm print on his cheek.

The boorish man clutched his face looking wronged and innocent. The ink-wash seal script called him an uncivilized boor, and it was right. He *was* an uncivilized boor, so how could he possibly provide a “civilized” answer? If it thought that he was unsuited for the Mountain of Riddle, then it shouldn’t have kidnapped him to begin with!

“Wow... uncivilized much?” Ye Qing blinked. Obviously, the ink-wash seal script was one of those types—a hypocrite hiding behind a veil of civility.? He knew the boorish man couldn’t see him, but he mentally offered him some sympathy and moral support anyway.

The challenge resumed, but every answer that came after the legendary answer felt so plain and boring that Ye Qing wished they could get on with it already. Not only that, the ink-wash seal script had placed the boorish man’s answer at the absolute last place of the ranking. The challengers continued to answer the couplet one after another, but no one’s answer was ever bad enough to “bottom” the ranking.

“Such a shame! Such a shame!” Ye Qing shook his head regretfully. *You do not understand love, Stranger!*

“My turn!”

It was at this moment a familiar voice jolted him back to reality. Xiao Yang’s image then appeared in the sky mirror.

“Xiao Yang? I don’t want to put you down, but are you sure you know how to complete a couplet?” Ye Qing looked at the Patrolman and rubbed his chin doubtfully. Xiao Yang’s spirit was commendable, but his intelligence? Tsk tsk.

“Ahem...” Xiao Yang coughed once before clasping his hands behind his back and looking forty degrees upward. He actually looked pretty handsome at that moment. After he was done posing, he began slowly, “So, the first line is ‘grow long, grow long, continue to grow long’, huh? It reminds me of a farmer’s hopefulness as they watch their crops grow. Not bad, not bad! It would only be right if I give my all to provide a fitting answer.”

He shuffled back and forth for a bit and touched his bangs. Then, he slowly raised an arm to the heavens as if confessing to a lover and said with a most narcissistic expression, “My answer is, ‘shit hard, shit often, do not stop shitting.’”

“Manure is key to growing strong, healthy crops. With periodic fertilizing, one can ensure that the crops will ‘grow long’ and ‘continue to grow long’. Is this not the perfect complement to the couplet?”

Ye Qing: “...”

Everyone: “...”

The ink-wash seal script: “...”

For a long time, Ye Qing could only gape at Xiao Yang. You know you have found a truly exceptional soul when their words or actions stupefied both humans and Strangers alike. When he finally came to, Ye Qing gave the exceptionally shitty answer a mental thumbs-up and thought: *Respect, brother!*

### Chapter 103: The Riddler

Xiao Yang continued to stroke his bangs as he declared proudly, “So? My answer is sublime, isn’t it? I wouldn’t say it deserves first place, but it has to be among the top three at least—”

“GET LOST!”

He did not get to finish his words because a shrill voice abruptly pierced through the air, deafening everyone’s eardrums and shaking the Mountain of Riddles itself. None suffered as much as Xiao Yang, however. He was bleeding out of every orifice and staring dazedly at the sky. His blank eyes seemed to say: *Where am I? What am I doing? What happened?*

“Poor thing! Why is he putting himself through all this suffering?” Ye Qing shook his head. He just could not understand where Xiao Yang was getting his confidence from. Maybe his brain was so tiny that he could not even weigh the pros and cons like a normal human being.

“Alright. The show’s over, and it’s almost time. Let’s get this over with!” Ye Qing muttered to himself and put on his Bronze Tiger Head. It wasn’t because he wanted to use the Strange Artifact, but because he wanted to hide his own face. Once he was ready, he called out, “Allow me!”

As soon as his image appeared in the sky, he said, “Grow long, grow long, continue to grow long; stand tall, stand tall, stand tall and never fall!”

Ink wash words immediately took shape in the sky and rose until all the way to second place. As expected, it failed to exceed the current first place, “Always growing, always growing, continually growing.” Ye Qing was more than okay with this result, however. Even if he wasn’t, he only needed to check out, “Get hard, get hard, getting hard as fuck” or “Shit hard, shit often, do not stop shitting” at rock bottom and let the schadenfreude wash away his displeasure. He was terrible like that, and he did not mind it one bit!

A tea time passed in the blink of an eye. When it was time, the ink wash seal script declared, “Time’s up!” The ranking list in the sky and the hundreds of couplets within it immediately flashed all sorts of colors as if it was alive. Then, the couplets abruptly transformed into various numbers—the couplet in the first place transformed into the number “10”, the couplet in the second place transformed into the number “8” and so on.

The two couplets sitting dead last on the ranking list were exceptions, however. Not only did the couplets join together to form a pair of big fat zeros, they were so black they looked purple from a distance. Obviously, it meant that the boorish man and Xiao Yang were awarded absolutely nothing at all. Life was like that sometimes.

*I’m assuming that 8 means I get to progress eight steps?* Ye Qing guessed while staring at his own number.

He waited for things to return to normal, but the ink-wash seal script remained floating in the sky. A bad feeling suddenly gripped Ye Qing, and it was proven true just a second later.

“All who didn’t answer the couplet challenge in time shall die!”

“Die?!” Ye Qing’s eyes bulged as if he could not believe his ears. “What the hell! You didn’t mention this in the rule earlier!”

The ink-wash seal script didn’t hear him, however. It simply flapped its wings and caused ink to rain from the sky. When the ink made contact with the rainbow fog, it melted away the fog and revealed a bunch of panicked-looking people. Some of them came from the Pacification Bureau, and some he did not recognize at all. They were those who hadn’t answered the couplet challenge earlier.

The victims did everything they could to avoid the falling ink. Some had even brought out their Strange Artifacts to buy more time for themselves. It was useless though. The ink passed right through their Strange Artifact as if it didn’t exist and hit them. Like ink being added into a glass of clear water, their bodies turned pitch black in just the blink of an eye. They also froze in their tracks as if someone had cast a petrification spell on them.

The victims weren’t dead yet, however. Their darting eyes and terrified expressions made it clear that they were still alive. However, there was nothing they could do except wait for death to claim them.

Plop! Plop!

The victims gradually melted into a puddle like blocks of ice under a hot sun. However, they were puddles of ink instead of water or blood. The ink then rose into the air and converged into a pool of ink. Finally, winged seal scripts flew out of the pool and disappeared into the fog. This would continue until not a drop of ink was left in the sky.

Heavens above! Is this how the ancient seal scripts are made? Is every seal script in this place a former human being?

Ye Qing rubbed his nose with an ice cold expression. The punishment was even scarier than he thought!

After the punishment was over, the ink wash seal script flew back to the peak, and the rainbow fog covered up the mountain path once more. Everything had finally returned to normal, but Ye Qing had utterly lost the mood to climb the mountain at his leisure. It was because people had died, of course.

Death was rarely a joyous thing, not to mention that some of the people who died just now were his acquaintances. This incident also made him realize that this Strange Realm really was a Strange Realm. It might not be as dangerous as most Strange Realms, but it was still dangerous enough that death was a very real possibility.

Ye Qing turned serious and started climbing the mountain at full speed. Thanks to Wawa, he didn’t encounter any difficulty no matter what riddle or couplet the Mountain of Riddles threw his way. The journey wasn’t a peaceful one, however. He had seen a man completely losing his sense of self in the middle of a punishment and perishing as a result. He had seen a woman going insane and diving into the rainbow fog after witnessing this very scene.

He had even seen a pair of father and son turning on each other because the father refused to help the son, and the son ultimately killed his father by his own hands. Then, the son committed suicide after withstanding a punishment that pushed him completely over the brink. It would not be the first or the last of its kind. Heavens only know how many more tragedies were happening on this mountain path, and to say that Ye Qing's heart was burdened by the things he saw would be an understatement.

When Ye Qing finally reached the peak, the rainbow fog abruptly vanished like it was never there. Green meadow, lush trees, beautiful flowers, cool streams and a perfectly clear sky greeted him cordially. It was like he had stepped into paradise.

An old man was sitting on the edge of a cliff. He was wearing a conical hat with his back facing toward him. When Ye Qing approached him, he discovered that he was holding a fishing rod with a fishing line that extended all the way into the sea of clouds below. His expression was concentrated and focused.

*This is the first time I see someone fishing in an ocean of clouds. It certainly looks cool, even though I don't think he's gonna catch anything!* Ye Qing thought to himself while rubbing his chin. He didn't call out to the old man not just because he didn't want to break his concentration, but also because he was curious if the old man could actually fish something out of the clouds.

A dozen or so breaths later, the old man broke the silence. "Aren't you curious what I'm fishing for, young man?"

"Well met, Riddler!" Ye Qing greeted in a respectful tone. He had no doubt that the old man before him was the "Riddler" that the ink wash seal script had mentioned. "Since you're holding a fishing rod, I'm assuming that you're trying to catch a fish!"

The Riddler smiled. "Just because a fishing rod is called a fishing rod doesn't mean that it can only be used to catch fishes. For example, it can be used to catch a treasured medicine—"

The Riddler reeled his fishing rod and caused a round pellet to fly out of the clouds. For a moment, the pellet shone like a golden sun before it fell out of view.

"A manual of the ages!"

The Riddler reeled his fishing rod again and pulled up an extraordinary-looking book with a golden cover and a terrifying aura.

"A Strange Artifact!"

A draconic cry rang from clouds, and a noble-looking, five-clawed golden dragon burst into the sky and stirred the clouds until they resembled a tide. In the end, the dragon transformed into a golden spear that looked both awe-inspiring and powerful.

"Or even mountains of gold, silver, and jewelry!"

The Riddler wasn't kidding when he said the word "mountains". He proceeded to reel in literal mountains of gold, silver, and precious stone all from the end of his fishing line.

The Riddler wasn't done yet. He would continue to reel in all kinds of tempting treasures such as a powerful Stranger that could be used like a servant, treasure maps marking the locations of

unimaginable treasures, precious herbs that could heal or strengthen the body like nothing he had ever seen and more. Hell, the old man had even reeled in a gorgeous lady once!

To this, Ye Qing could only think: *Man, you sure know how to enjoy life, old man!*

“Do you want them, young man?” The Riddler finally asked after he was done showing off.

Surprised, Ye Qing pointed a finger at himself and asked, “If I say yes, would you give them to me?”

The Riddler smiled. “Of course not!”

“...” Ye Qing’s expression crumbled. *Why do you even make the offer then!?*

As if he could hear Ye Qing’s thoughts, the Riddler corrected his misunderstanding with a friendly smile, “You can’t have it all, but you can pick one of them as a reward. Of course, you can also ask for something that I haven’t shown you, but be warned that you can only have one wish!”

*Now we’re talking.* “Can I make any wish?”

The Riddler shot him a look and countered, “What do you think?”

“Haha. It’s just a joke,” Ye Qing said with a shrug. The ink-wash seal script had stated at the beginning that the wish must be within reason.

“Haha. I can see that you’re a smart lad. You know when to push and when to concede!” The Riddler praised, but his next words chilled Ye Qing to the core. “Unlike some fools who dream so big they fail to recognize even the reality before them. Once, there was a guy who asked me to turn him into the strongest person in the world!”

“... What happened to him?”

“He died!”

“...”

What a simple yet bizarre tale it was.

“Mind you, I did fulfill his wish, but he was just an ordinary person with an ordinary body. The second my power entered his body, he immediately popped like a watermelon. Not one bit of him was left when all was said and done!”

“That reminds me, there was another guy who wished to become an emperor. Again I fulfilled his wish, but he turned into a retard because he was too weak to withstand the Will of the Empire; a burden that all emperors must bear.”

“Also, there was this fool who—”

For a time, the Riddler could not stop talking like a proper old man.

*Long story short, everyone who made an “unreasonable” wish died one way or another!* Ye Qing mentally shook his head. Whether or not the wishes were truly unreasonable remained to be seen—he was only hearing one side of the story after all—but one thing for certain, the Riddler wasn’t someone to be trifled with.

So, what constitutes a reasonable wish? According to Ye Qing’s own standards, it was something that met his needs and could be realized via his own capabilities given enough time and effort. It definitely wasn’t something unrealistic like, “Make me the strongest warrior in the world this instant!”

When the Riddler was finally done with his ramblings, he asked once again, “So, what do you want, young man?”

Ye Qing carefully mulled over his words before answering, “I would like an Astral Refinement-stage cultivation art that suits me and the release of everyone from the Mountain of Riddles.”

The Riddler tilted his head in puzzlement. “That’s two requests, no? I thought you were a smart lad. Are you going to make me eat my words so quickly?” His tone had taken on a tinge of displeasure as well.

.

Ye Qing rubbed his nose innocently. “I don’t understand. If you can fit it all in one sentence, then doesn’t that constitute a single wish?”

*“...” I’m pretty sure that belies the meaning of “one wish”.*

Ye Qing wrangled with his thoughts for a long time, but in the end he said seriously, “In that case, I wish... that you will release all the innocent people currently on the Mountain of Riddles right now.”

He wanted that Astral Refinement cultivation art like you wouldn’t believe, but he could not leave the Pacification Sentinels to their fates either. This was especially true since they had fought side by side just a few days ago. He could pretend that the strangers he encountered along the mountain path did not exist, but his comrades? He wouldn’t be able to face himself if he chose the Astral Refinement stage cultivation art over them.

Moreover, it wasn’t like he had no other alternatives. He could always find another Astral Refinement stage cultivation art using the Annon Sutra. However, you only have one life. That was why he ultimately chose to save their lives.

“As you wish!” The Riddler smiled and waved his sleeve. The next moment, every challenger in the mountain abruptly disappeared from the mountain.

There was one particular challenger that caught Ye Qing’s notice, however. Specifically, it was a familiar-looking man standing on the ninety-ninth step. Ye Qing couldn’t hear him, but he seemed to be laughing loudly with his arms around his waist. He was just about to step on the one-hundredth step when suddenly, poof! He was gone just like that.

Chapter 104: King of Couplets

“I was just seeing things... right?”

Ye Qing rubbed his nose and muttered in an uncertain voice, "Well, it doesn't matter. Even if I wasn't, what I did was a good thing. I'm sure that the heavens would forgive me!"

After everyone was gone, the Riddler looked at Ye Qing with a surprising amount of approval and said, "I didn't think you'd be such a kind soul, young man! I have spoken with countless challengers in my life, and most of them are completely selfish and cared only for themselves. I have seen husband and wife who turned on one another, best friends who stabbed each other in the back, and father and son pretending as if they were complete strangers all in the name of self-interest. However, I've never met someone who would give up his hard-earned fortune to help others!"

"Haha, you flatter me, Riddler. I'm not nearly as kind-hearted as you think," Ye Qing replied with a sigh. Seriously, his heart was aching so bad at the loss that he could hardly breathe. "I'm just doing the best that I can... or maybe I'm just an idiot."

"You're just doing the best that you can? You're just an idiot? Hahaha!" Riddler guffawed. "Then allow me to say this as well. Maybe it's because I've met too many selfish and treacherous people in my life, but I think that meeting an 'idiot' once in a while isn't too bad after all!"

"You know what? I feel like being 'stupid' today, so I'm going to make you this offer: if you can answer my riddle correctly, then I'll give you the Astral Refinement stage cultivation art you're searching for. What do you say, young man?"

"Sure... wait, what? Y-You're not kidding, are you?" Ye Qing stared wide-eyed at the Riddler in disbelief.

The old man smiled. "I'm serious. But ah, you mustn't ask for help from the Book Sprite hiding in your Nature's Shell. You must answer my riddle via your own capabilities."

"Ahaha, you found out?" Ye Qing rubbed his nose awkwardly. He thought the Riddler hadn't noticed since he hadn't been punished for cheating, but clearly he was mistaken. "Okay! I accept the challenge! Please ask me the riddle!"

The Riddler nodded and began, "I am round when drawn, squiggly when written, short during winter, and long during summer. What am I?"

As he spoke, the ocean of clouds beneath the cliff churned and turned into the Riddler's words.

For a moment, Ye Qing didn't say anything. Then, he blurted as if he couldn't believe his ears, "A-Are you sure you gave me the right riddle? Scratch that, you wouldn't happen to have Wang for your last name, would you?"

The Riddler looked utterly confused. "Excuse me? My surname is definitely not Wang. I am born from the Mountain of Riddles. I have no parents, name or surname. Even the 'Riddler' is just a moniker."

"R-Right. Forget what I said," stammered Ye Qing with an awkward chuckle. For a second there, he really thought he had encountered someone from his old world.

The reason Ye Qing had such a strange thought was because the Riddler's riddle was, in fact, identical to a well-known riddle from his old world. Not only was it crafted by the famous philosopher Wang Anshi, and it was accompanied by a famous tale. Legend says that Wang Anshi had a poet friend called Wang Jifu. Not only was his friend a great poet, he was also an expert in crafting riddles. When they were together, the two friends often passed the time by challenging each other to various riddles.

One evening, Wang Jifu visited Wang Anshi at his place like usual, and it so happened that Wang Anshi was thinking up a new riddle. As soon as Wang Jifu took his seat, Wang Anshi riddled him without even bothering to offer a greeting, "I am round when drawn, squiggly when written, short during winter, and long during summer. What am I?"

It didn't take long for Wang Jifu to figure out the answer, but instead of answering the riddle normally, Wang Jifu had a moment of inspiration and countered,

"Never resting, never still.

Moving silently from hill to hill.

It does not walk, run or trot.

All is cool where it is not.

What am I?

I am the answer to your riddle!" [1]

Naturally, Wang Anshi was extremely impressed. Not only had Wang Jifu answered his riddle correctly, he had done it by crafting a better riddle on the spot. The philosopher couldn't stop clapping his hands and praising his friend for a time, and their little bout would eventually go down in history as a famous folklore.

On a related note, the answer to both riddles was, of course, the "Sun."

"Er, how about you shoot me another riddle?" Ye Qing asked. As a bonafide Chinese, it would be an understatement to say that the riddle was easy. In fact, it was so easy that he felt like he would lose something important if he took the freebie.

The Riddler misunderstood his intentions, however. Stroking his beard with an extremely pleased look on his face, he said, "Is it too difficult for you, young man? How disappointing! It is a riddle that even a child could solve! In that case, you must be punished for failing to provide an answer! Don't look at me like that, the rules are the rules even up here!"

"..."

Ye Qing stared at the old man. *I'm trying to be fair here, and yet you would punish me for my virtue? Fine then! The gloves are off!*

Ye Qing cleared his throat and copied Wang Jifu's answer word to word,

"Never resting, never still.

Moving silently from hill to hill.

It does not walk, run or trot.

All is cool where it is not.

What am I?

I am the answer to your riddle!”

The Riddler was completely caught off guard by Ye Qing’s answer. For a long time, he couldn’t speak at all. Ye Qing was extremely pleased with the Riddler’s expression. *Hehe! How does it feel to get a taste of your own medicine?*

A long time later, the Riddler finally clapped his hands and praised out loud, “Brilliant! Most brilliant! I haven’t been impressed like this in a long time! In the future, I’m so setting up a challenge where the challengers must answer a riddle with a riddle of their own! Oh, I can’t wait!”

“...”

My deepest condolence to all the brothers and sisters who’ll be climbing the Mountain of Riddles in the future!

“I was going to give you an ordinary Astral Refinement stage cultivation art, but your answer is so brilliant and enlightening that I’ve decided to give you something slightly above average! Thanks again, young man!” The Riddler declared smilingly.

Ye Qing perked up when he heard this. *Wait a second. I can improve my reward? I can work with this!* He said tentatively, “Say, you’ve been doing the riddling this whole time, right? Why don’t I shoot you a couple of riddles, and you try to solve them? If you manage to get them all, then there will be no doubt that you’re truly the greatest Riddler in the whole world!”

“Hoh? Interesting!” An intrigued smile crossed the Riddler’s lips. For obvious reasons, no one had ever dared to riddle the Riddler. He doubted that the idea had even crossed anyone’s mind until now. But it sounded fun, so why not?

“What if I couldn’t answer them all?”

Grinning, Ye Qing rubbed his hands together and said, “If you fail, I wouldn’t mind receiving a better reward, if you get what I mean. You’re a rich man with an entire floating mountain to yourself anyway. I’m sure you wouldn’t mind giving up a possession or two!”

“Hahaha!” The Riddler guffawed at Ye Qing’s undisguised greed. “Cunning brat! If you lose, all I receive is a title I already know I deserve, but if I lose, I have to give up some of my possessions? This isn’t very fair, isn’t it?”

Ye Qing hurriedly buttered up the old man, “It can’t be helped! The best item I own is nothing compared to the worst item you have, so what’s the point of putting them on the betting table? Can’t you overlook this bit of unfairness just once?”

The Riddler chuckled. “Fine, fine. As your senior, I suppose I can surrender the advantage for once.” Of course, there was also the fact that the Riddler was fully confident in his abilities. He was called the Riddler, for heavens’ sake. Was there any riddle in the world that he couldn’t solve?

Ye Qing took a moment to recall a handful of famous riddles before starting, “What goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs in the evening?”

“A human!” The Riddler answered immediately.

“Not bad, not bad!” Ye Qing praised. The first riddle was just to gauge the Riddler’s knowledge; he wasn’t expecting it to actually confound him. A few seconds passed, and he fired his second riddle,

“There is a house. One enters it blind and comes out seeing. What is it?”

The Riddler stroked his beard and thought for a bit. Then, he answered, “A school!”

“As I was going to Anyang,

I met a man with seven wives,

Each wife had seven sacks,

Each sack had seven cats,

Each cat had seven kits:

Kits, cats, sacks, and wives,

How many were there going to Anyang?”

“One!”

.....

Things were *not*

going as expected. Ye Qing had asked a dozen more riddles after the first three, but the Riddler was able to answer them all without pause. It would seem he would have to crank up the difficulty some more. He pretended to wipe his forehead to show that he was impressed with the Riddler’s knowledge before shooting another riddle,

“You see a boat filled with people. It has not sunk, but when you look again you don’t see a single person on the boat. Why?”

“Huh...” This time, the Riddler did not answer immediately. His fishing rod twitched imperceptibly, and the ocean of clouds churned without a sound. It was as if the objects had a mind, and they were afraid to break the Riddler’s train of thought.

A dozen breaths later, the Riddler finally answered, “Because all the people are married! You almost got me talking about boats and sinking, but the keyword here is ‘single!’”

*Seriously? He got that? That stumped me so hard when I first saw it on the internet!*

Ye Qing took a moment to collect himself before firing the last bullet in his chamber, “What are the next three letters in this combination? O, T ,T, F, F, S, S!”

The Riddler fell into thought once more, but this time he took more time to think than any other riddler Ye Qing had asked previously. Feeling that he had finally stumped the old man, he rubbed his nose proudly and thought, *Finally. This riddle had stumped so many keyboard warriors that it was left unanswered on the internet for weeks before someone finally got it. You may be the Riddler, but not even you can—*

“The answer is E, N, T! Since each letter represents the first letter in the written numbers: one, two, three, four, five and so on, and the next three numbers in that combination are eight, nine and ten, the answer can only be E, N and T! Hahaha! That is a great one, young man!”

“...”

Ye Qing’s jaw lay somewhere on the floor. Somehow, the Riddler had figured out the answer before he even finished his inner monologue! How!?

“Your bag of riddles is quite impressive, young man. Not only are they completely new to me, some of them seriously stimulate the brain! Do you have more?” The Riddler urged with clear excitement.

“Hahaha, sorry, I don’t think I have anything else that can stump you, elder one. You truly are the greatest Riddler in the world!” Ye Qing threw in the towel. It was folly to challenge the Riddler to a riddle contest after all!

He hadn’t given up yet, however. “What about a couplet challenge? Dare you answer my couplets and become the greatest couplet master in the world as well, Riddler?”

“Couplets?” The Riddler smiled. “I’m definitely not as good with couplets than with riddles... but why not?”

“Okay then! Here I come!” *Eat this!* “The first line is: a mountain of books has a way and diligence is the path!” [2]

A shudder coursed through the Riddler’s body, and for the first time he lost his smile completely. A long, long time later, the Riddler finally answered, “The sea of learning has no end and hard work is the boat.”

Ye Qing thought that the couplet was enough to get the old man, but he was even better than he expected. Not wanting to waste time shooting a dozen more couplets until he finally stumped the Riddler, Ye Qing went straight for the kill,

“Next! The first line is: where smoke locked pond willow! In structure, the five words use the five elements, Earth, Fire, Metal, Water and Wood as radicals, and in terms of artistic conception, it depicts a quiet pond in front of the courtyard, and the light mist of cooking smoke lingers around the pond. Now, please give me the second line!”

“Where smoke locked pond willow?” The Riddler furrowed his brow so tightly that his wrinkles were all bunched up together. The ocean of clouds beneath the cliff churned harder than ever before, and countless ancient seal scripts and words took form from time to time as if reflecting his thoughts.

There were a few times the Riddler opened his mouth as if he was about to voice the answer, but he always stopped at the last moment and whispered, “No, that doesn’t work...”

“Hehehe! Is that too difficult? That’s fine. I can give you a second chance.” Ye Qing grinned in delight. “The first line is: A lonely widow rests against a cold empty window. Can you give me the second line?”

The Riddler: “...”

Ye Qing’s grin widened. “Is that too hard as well? That’s fine, how about something simpler? The first line is: In a painting, a monk paints on a lotus blossom. What is the second line?”

At this point, the Riddler’s eyes looked like they were about to bug out of their sockets. *Like hell it’s simpler! Every single one of these couplets could confound even the greatest scholars! Also, I’m the Riddler, not the Couplet Master!*

Then, he realized something. *Wait a second, where the hell did he even get these couplets? I’d bet my fortune that they don’t even exist in the Sea of Couplets!*

“Where did you get these couplets?” The Riddler asked in a raspy voice.

Ye Qing turned his nose all the way up to the sky and laughed. “Are you implying something, Riddler? I created all these couplets myself! To tell you the truth, my nickname is the King of Couplets, and everyone calls me the Couplet Coupler!”

“Anyway, let’s get back to our challenge, shall we? Don’t worry, I promise I’ll go easy on you this time. The first line is—”

Ye Qing was just about to kick the dog when it’s down when suddenly, the Riddler waved his sleeve at him. The next thing he knew, he was back on the edge of Redstone Forest.

“Not fair! Violence is not the answer! How is ousting me from your mountain just because I beat you civilized?!”

“Wait a second. Where’s my reward? My cultivation art?”

“Elder one, no, big brother, no, ancestor, please—!”

Chapter 105: Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind

“Couplet Coupler, eh? Let’s see if he can still call himself that after his innards are all coupled up from sheer regret!”

The Riddler let out a satisfied cackle after he tossed Ye Qing out of the Mountain of Riddles and listened to the young man’s frantic screams. It had been a while since he felt this gleeful.

Meanwhile, Ye Qing found himself standing at the edge of Redstone Forest with none of the rewards he was promised. He even went through his Nature’s Shells hoping against hope that the Riddler had somehow stuffed his rewards into the storage artifacts to no avail.

“I was wrong, elder one, big brother, ancestor! Please forgive me!” Ye Qing screamed as he stared at the fog-shrouded mountain. Heavens know he was moments away from breaking into tears. If he knew the Riddler was such a humorless person, he would never have dared to tease him until he quite literally blew his top. Now, he

hadn't just lost his additional rewards, he didn't even have his Astral Refinement stage cultivation art!

Ahhhh! Why did I do that? Ahhhhhhhhhh!

"Elder one, I can give up the additional rewards, but please, at least give me the Astral Refinement stage cultivation art you promised!"

"You're the bigger person here, elder one! Surely you can find it in yourself to forgive a petty little shit like me!"

"Elder one..."

For a time, Ye Qing kept launching spit attack after spit attack at the floating mountain in the sky. Maybe his sincerity finally reached the Riddler, or maybe the old man simply had had enough of Ye Qing screeching like a banshee and disturbing his peace, but a couple of items suddenly fell from the sky and hit Ye Qing squarely in the head.

"Heavens, just how vengeful can you be?" Ye Qing muttered while rubbing his head. He looked down and found two jade slips and a calabash.

"Jade slips? Are they the cultivation manual I was promised?" Ye Qing's eyes lit up as he hurriedly picked up the jade slips.

One of the jade slips was black in color, and the other white. Ye Qing pressed the white jade slip to his forehead first and probed it with his spirit. The contents of the jade slip immediately flooded into his brain.

"The 'Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind' is a cultivation art that delivers one's enemies to nirvana via the scorching winds of nature. The 'Yellow Court Sutra' states, 'There exists a strange wind in our world. It is vast and majestic, terrible and scorching, invisible and reclusive. It is capable of turning grass and wood into ash, blackening rock and earth, drying rivers and lakes, and extinguishing minds and souls. At its greatest, it can scorch mountains and boil oceans into wastelands. At its lowest, it can still extinguish minds and burn almost everything.'"

/p>

"The one who practices 'Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind' must subsume a Burning Wind into their true qi. They would then use it to hone their body to flawlessness and perfect their blood vessels. By doing this, they would be able to carry mountains and rivers in their chest, and take in the sky and the earth into their heart. Only by possessing a smaller world of your own could one exist harmoniously with the bigger world."

"The warrior who practices this cultivation art must meet the following requirements: One, they must augment all three hundred and sixty blood vessels to perfection. Two,

they must possess a strong and resilient physique. Three, they must have a tremendous reservoir of true qi. And four, they must possess an iron will.”

“When the practitioner has reached the adept level, they would gain the power to deliver anyone to nirvana with the Burning Wind!”

.....

“Hmm! This looks incredibly powerful!” Ye Qing muttered while massaging his forehead. He was very happy with what he found after he was finished digesting the contents of the white jade slip. However, his face quickly crumpled when he thought of its flaws.

The Burning Wind described in the cultivation art was obviously powerful. In essence, the Burning Wind was an incredibly potent astral qi. He could only imagine how strong he would become after he had subsumed it into his true qi and used it to temper his body.

The problem was that the requirements to cultivate the “Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind” were extremely stringent, so much so it excluded ninety-nine percent warriors right from the get go. For starters, the warrior must achieve perfect Vessel Augmentation, possess a tough body and strong will, so on and so on. Those who tried to practice the cultivation art without meeting the requirements would cripple their body or mind at best, or burn to death to the very wind they were trying to subsume at worst.

The rewards were incredible, but the risks were equally terrible. For this reason, few people could even begin to practice the “Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind”, much less reach the adept level.

Obviously, one must absorb and refine an astral qi before they could channel its power. Astral qi was a natural component of the world, so it could be found everywhere as a matter of course. However, the demand for astral qi was ever increasing, and not all astral qi were made equal or readily available. Some astral qis were extremely common and could be procured everywhere, whereas some were so rare one must venture to unknown lands and brave untold dangers just to have a chance at obtaining them.

This was why most Astral Refiners chose to subsume common astral qis. For example, Gui Water astral qi could be easily procured from places with lots of water such as rivers and lakes, Yi Wood astral qi could be procured from forests and jungles, and so on.

Rare astral qis were much more powerful than common astral qi, but they were rarer, harder to find, and considerably more dangerous. Generally speaking, there were two ways to refine a rare astral qi. One, the warrior could seek out the location where the astral qi was concentrated. Two, they could absorb the smidgens of rare qi in the air and refine them little by little.

The first method was highly risky because places where a rare astral qi was concentrated was usually very dangerous as well. The second method was so slow that one could practice their whole life and still not make it to the adept level.

A warrior who aimed low and refined a common astral qi would never become a powerful Astral Refiner, but a warrior who aimed high might never become an Astral Refiner in the first place either

because they couldn't gather enough rare qi, or because they were dead as a dodo. In short, both options had their pros and cons.

In Ye Qing's case, the first and biggest problem he faced if he wished to practice the "Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind" was, where could he obtain the Burning Wind? And no, he wasn't referring to the smidgens of Burning Wind mixed within the atmosphere. The slow and steady option was never an option to him not just because he had grown used to scaling the power level rapidly like a wealthy man who had grown used to living a luxurious life, but also because he had no time to waste. Qing Kui's junior brother was still out there watching him from the dark and waiting for an opportunity to end his life. The longer he took to enter the Astral Refinement stage, the bigger the likelihood that he wouldn't live to see another day. That was why he needed to find a location with the high concentrations of Burning Wind and refine it as soon as possible.

"I'll check the Pacification Bureau's archives first. If there is nothing, then I'll ask the Annon Sutra!"

His mind made up, Ye Qing picked up the second jade slip—the black one—and pressed it to his forehead. A long time later, he lowered the item and bubbled with excitement, "A fist martial art! This is even better than I expected!"

The black jade slip contained an Astral Refinement stage fist martial art named the "Cloud Vaporization Style". The name was inspired by the quote, "Vapor comes up from the lowland of clouds and dreams; surging waves strike against the city wall of Yueyang." By enlightening oneself upon the vastness of a river, and studying the forces that molded the clouds, a warrior could learn how to vaporize one's enemies. Supposedly, an adept could throw a punch that could scorch the earth, boil a river, and vaporize even the clouds in the sky. It would be like the sun itself had descended upon their enemies.

It was clear from the description alone that the "Cloud Vaporization Style" was an exceedingly vigorous and potent fist art that combined impetus, intent and power into one. It was a perfect fit with the "Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind" as it maximized the power of the Burning Wind.

"The Riddler is a good person!" Ye Qing said happily. The old man had given him a top-tier Astral Refinement stage cultivation art and a complementary martial art to boot. If he wasn't a good person, then who was?

What? Someone was cursing his good name earlier and wishing him the worst earlier? The gall! Whoever it was, it definitely wasn't a guy named Ye Qing!

Ye Qing carefully put the two jade slips into his Nature's Shell. Then, he looked at the third and final item the Riddler had awarded him, the calabash.

The ancient and mysterious-looking calabash was quite small. It was barely bigger than his palm and grayish black in color. It looked like it was made out of wood, but when Ye Qing grabbed it he found that it was as cold as jade. He had no idea what kind of material it was.

As soon as he grabbed the calabash, white air abruptly gushed out of its bore and formed lines and lines of words in the air. It was a description of the calabash's features.

*“The Head Turn Calabash’s rank and origin are unknown. It possesses the power to sprain anyone’s neck.”*

*“To use it, the wielder simply needs to stand behind their target and call out to them. If the target responds to the call and looks back at the wielder, then they would sprain their neck and feel abject pain. It does not matter if the target is a human, a ghost, a celestial, a demon or a god. So long as they have a neck, the calabash will work one hundred percent of the time. But beware! No matter how painful the sprain is, it will never be enough to kill the target!”*

*“P.S. Dare you respond if I call out to you?”*

“What an insi—I mean, strange calabash!” Ye Qing commented. He was going to say insidious—it was a perfect match with that treacherous old man who called himself the Riddler—but the Riddler did reward him handsomely despite that little joke he played on him earlier, so he changed his wording.

Seriously though, this was one of the most insidious Strange Artifacts he had ever seen. Imagine going to the streets and crying, “Ladies and gentlemen! I have something to say!” while holding the Head Turn Calabash. The mere thought of everyone spraining their necks with an audible crack at the same time was... *no, no, you’re one of the good guys, you mustn’t use this to play a prank on innocent people! You can’t!*

Jokes aside, the calabash was extremely powerful. It claimed that anyone with a neck be it human or Stranger, strong or weak, would sprain their necks so long as they responded to his call and looked around. A Strange Artifact that worked one hundred percent of the time was exceptional to say the least, not to mention that its effects, while seemingly situational, could be incredibly potent in the right situations.

Ye Qing toyed with the Head Turn Calabash a while longer before pulling out a rope and tying it to his waist. Now, it looked just like an ordinary drinking gourd.

“Perfect!” Ye Qing nodded in satisfaction. Who would ever suspect that the “drinking gourd” was the Strange Artifact that made them sprain their neck?

With that done, he looked up at the Mountain of Riddles and shouted one last time, “Thank you, Riddler! You’re a good person through and through!”

As if on cue, the floating mountain suddenly grew fainter and fainter. At the end, it vanished like it was never there.

“It’s time to leave!”

After the Mountain of Riddle was gone, Ye Qing turned around and left Redstone Forest, whistling a cheerful tune the whole way. This trip had turned out to be even more fruitful than he thought, so how could he be anything but happy?

It would seem that Lady Luck was smiling down on him today, because he ran into the Pacification Bureau group he came with as soon as he left the vicinity of Redstone Forest. Yun Yan was with them as well.

Yun Yan looked extremely glad to see him. She greeted him with a warm smile, "Joyless! Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, Sister Yun. Thanks for your concern!" Ye Qing shot her a smile before asking the others, "What about you guys? Is everyone alright?"

"We are. We're not sure why, but we were teleported out of the mountain all of a sudden. Not that we're complaining, of course!" A Pacification Sentinel replied to his question with clear relief. However, he quickly turned sad again and said, "Not all of us survived though. Young Ma and the others..."

"You have my sincerest condolences!" Ye Qing sighed. He had already done the best he could. There was a reason perfect endings only existed in fairytales.

Suddenly, Xiao Yang approached him and asked in an unfriendly tone, "Tell me the truth, brother. Was it you?"

Ye Qing looked confused. "Was it what?"

"Was it you the one who caused us to be teleported out of the Mountain of Riddles?" Xiao Yang narrowed his eyes as if trying to discern if Ye Qing was acting or not. "It happened after you made it to the peak. It's the only logical explanation, isn't it?"

"Nope! It wasn't me! I didn't do anything!" Ye Qing fired off a triple denial. He enjoyed bragging about his achievements like any other person, but today he felt like being humble.

"Really? Are you sure?" Xiao Yang remained doubtful despite his insistence.

Ye Qing shrugged. "Perhaps only one person can make it to the top, and everyone else would be teleported out of the mountain after a while!"

"I... can't say that isn't a possibility," Xiao Yang muttered but still looked very doubtful. "Speaking of which, what did you get from the Riddler?"

According to the rules, the challenger who made it to the top could ask the Riddler one reasonable wish. If Ye Qing had used his wish to send them away, then he would have nothing to show Xiao Yang. But if Ye Qing had obtained something from the Riddler, then he was most likely telling the truth.

"A bone!" Ye Qing didn't tell Xiao Yang the truth. Instead, he used the Chang Bone to support his lie. The Chang Bone came from Little August Hill, and anyone who knew about it was dead or beyond reach. Naturally, there was no way anyone could expose his lie.

But why did he lie in the first place? It was because the rewards he obtained from the Riddler were more than enough to garner unwanted greed and trouble. You could never be too careful, and this was doubly true when you were facing someone like Xiao Yang!

“Bone? What bone?” Xiao Yang asked suspiciously.

Ye Qing pulled out the Chang Bone and handed it to Xiao Yang. “This one. The Riddler told me it’s a great item, but he didn’t say what makes it great or even how I should use it. Would you happen to know what it is, brother?”

Xiao Yang accepted the Chang Bone and inspected it closely. A while later, he replied, “This is a Chang Bone; the Chang Bone of a Mountain Turning Tiger, a Hatred-class Stranger to be exact. It’s a natural Strange Artifact that can be used to command yin souls and other ghosts! The Riddler wasn’t lying to you when he said it’s a great item!”

“Well damn! And here I thought the old man had played me like a fiddle!” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise while taking the Chang Bone back from Xiao Yang. It wasn’t faked either. He had no idea that Uncle Fu’s gift was this powerful.

Xiao Yang couldn’t hear Ye Qing’s inner monologue, and he didn’t care. As soon as he had returned the Chang Bone, he abruptly threw his arms into the sky and screamed on top of his lungs, “Why? Why are you doing this to me? I had suffered ninety-nine punishments and was one step away from completing the climb, and you threw me out right before I was about to make it to the top?”

“How is this fair? How is this justice?”

“Give me back my Strange Artifacts, my manuals, my treasures; you swindler!”

“Damn it all!”

*It really was him?* Ye Qing recalled the unfortunate bastard he saw on the ninety-ninth step right before the Riddler had sent everyone away. He had thought he was mistaken, but he was right after all. Thank goodness he had chosen to keep a low profile, or Xiao Yang might have been angry enough to fight him here and now! *It doesn’t matter anyway. I did a good thing, even if it cost Xiao Yang a little bit of pain!*

“Let’s go, Sister Yun!”

The poor fuck could cry to death for all he cared. It might be a sin to make a woman cry, but not a man!

Chapter 106: Strange Incident

“Excuse me, Warrior Ye. Are you free right now? The chief would like to speak with you.”

After the group had returned to Anyang, Ye Qing bade his companions goodbye and returned to Endless Horizons first. Once he felt fairly rested, he went to the Pacification Bureau’s archives to search for clues regarding the Burning Wind.

A place containing high concentrations of Burning Wind must be incredibly dangerous, and since the Pacification Bureau was the department that handled all things related to Strangers and unusual

phenomenons, it was obviously the best place to begin his search. He had no doubt that a record would exist somewhere in the archives if such a location existed near Anyang.

Unfortunately, he went through all the files but could not find anything related to the Burning Wind. So, he got ready to return home and ask the Annon Sutra. However, someone caught up with him as soon as he stepped out of the door.

The man was a Swordbearer of the Pacification Bureau, Zhao Yunlong. He was an early-stage Vessel Augmentor, and he was responsible for all matters relating to the law. Subordinate only to Ling Jianqiu, he was the most powerful person in the headquarters both in terms of authority and strength.

“Well met, Lord Zhao!” Ye Qing saluted him and asked curiously, “Do you know why Chief Ling wishes to see me?”

It would seem that Zhao Yunlong was just as cold as Ling Jianqiu, however. His lips pressed into a firm, unyielding line, he answered, “I do not. The chief only told me to bring you to him after you left the archives!”

“I see.” Ye Qing rubbed his nose and decided that it would take far more effort to pry any useful information from Zhao Yunlong’s mouth than just meeting Ling Jianqiu right away. So, he said, “Very well. Please, lead the way!”

“This way, please!” Zhao Yunlong nodded and took Ye Qing to Ling Jianqiu’s study. Once there, Zhao Yunlong said, “The chief is inside. I will not be accompanying you!”

“Thank you, Lord Zhao!” Ye Qing said.

Zhao Yunlong shook his head. “You’re welcome.” Then, he turned around and left just like that.

Ye Qing stared at Zhao Yunlong’s back for a moment. “I can see why he’s Ling Jianqiu’s right-hand man. I would believe it if someone told me they were secretly brothers. They’re both as cold as ice!”

He walked up to the door and got ready to knock, but before he could do so Ling Jianqiu’s voice came from inside, “Come in!”

Ye Qing shrugged and pushed open the door. Inside, he saw Ling Jianqiu sitting at the table and doing some paperwork. When the Chief of Bureau saw Ye Qing, he pointed at a nearby chair and gestured for him to wait a little.

Ye Qing obediently went over to the chair and sat down. He then waited patiently for Ling Jianqiu to finish.

Ling Jianqiu looked like he was busy with work, but in reality he was observing Ye Qing. He wondered if the savior of Anyang would fidget like a youngster especially in the presence of higher authority. However, not only was Ye Qing calm, composed, and patient, he could not find even a trace of anxiety or dissatisfaction on the young man’s face. He could not help a mental sigh of approval. Few people at his age could maintain their cool so well.

It was too bad he couldn't read minds, because the youngster he thought to be most outstanding was complaining disdainfully inside his head, *Chief of Bureau my ass. He didn't even serve me a hot cup of tea like a proper host! So stingy!*

About half a teatime later, Ling Jianqiu finally set down his brush and looked at Ye Qing. "How is your investigation going, Joyless? Have you found anything regarding Evergreen Ivy yet?"

It had only been two days since the invasion. What could he possibly find in such a short time? Clearly, Ling Jianqiu hadn't called him to his study today for this matter. Ye Qing didn't point it out though. He feigned ignorance and replied, "No. I'm still looking into it!"

Ling Jianqiu nodded and ended that line of conversation with a moment of awkward silence. Clearly, he wasn't used to making small talk. A while later, he jumped straight to the point, "There is something I need your help with, Joyless."

"The Pacification Bureau needs my help?" Ye Qing frowned. *Is he trying to make me work for free again? No bloody way!*

Of course, he wasn't dumb enough to reject Ling Jianqiu outright, so he asked, "What's this about?"

His plan was to listen until the end before putting Ling Jianqiu down lightly. In his head, he was already preparing a thousand and one excuses to reject the request such as: something's happened to my home, my friend is sick, my wife is about to give birth, I'm on my period today, yada yada blah blah.

Of course, he could just say no without the excuses, but Ling Jianqiu was an acquaintance, and an outright rejection was liable to cause misunderstandings and sour their relationship.

"Three days ago, a Patrolman named Yu Hai sent me a report regarding a strange incident happening to one of the nine villages under Anyang's jurisdiction, the Jade Spring Village."

Ling Jianqiu said slowly, "According to Yu Hai, the village numbered five hundred and eighty two houses and over one thousand and two hundred villagers the last time he patrolled Jade Spring Village, which was several months ago. But when he visited the village four days ago, he discovered that their population had been cut in half, their livestock were all gone, and everyone was skinny and pale as if they were afflicted by some sort of terrible disease."

"What was strange was that the villagers thought Yu Hai was joking when he questioned them about the missing villagers. More accurately, they didn't seem to remember the missing people at all. It was as if those people had never existed. Not only that, when he asked them about their poor health, they once again denied his concerns and claimed that they were right as rain."

"A blind man could've seen that wasn't true. They were so thin and pale that they couldn't carry anything. They could barely take a step without wobbling like they were about to fall. However, not a single person seemed to notice their condition, and they continued to live their lives as if nothing was wrong."

"That is very strange!" Ye Qing's eyes flashed with interest.

Ling Jianqiu paused for a second before continuing, “Yu Hai launched an investigation right away, but he wasn’t able to find anything. Realizing that this was no simple incident, he sent me a message to inform me about the incident and promised me that he would report his progress at least once every day. He then resumed his investigation.”

“However, that very report would turn out to be the last time I hear from him. It has been three days since I’ve heard from him, and I suspect that he has fallen prey to whatever is happening to Jade Spring Village!”

*You don’t say?* Ye Qing thought. He could not imagine any other reason why the Patrolman wouldn’t report back to Ling Jianqiu.

“So, you want me to follow up on the investigation, Chief Ling?” Ye Qing figured out what Ling Jianqiu wanted him to do as soon as he finished listening to the story.

The Chief of Bureau nodded. “That’s right. It’s only been two days since the invasion, and neither Yunlong nor I could afford to step away from our post just yet. As for the others, I don’t believe they are strong enough to handle this incident. After all, Yu Hai was half a step away from entering the Vessel Augmentation stage, and there are only a handful of people in the bureau who are a match for him. If he couldn’t survive whatever’s plaguing Jade Spring Village, it would be pointless to send anyone who’s weaker than him.”

“After much consideration, I concluded that you are the only one who can do this. You’re a strong, intelligent, and cool-headed warrior. I’m sure you’ll be able to solve this incident!”

*Hehehe. That’s right, I’m super awesome... but do not think you can win me over with just honeyed words!* Ye Qing affirmed his resolve despite melting a little under the assault of praises. He was a man with principles. He would not work unless he was properly compensated for his efforts!

“About that... it is my natural responsibility to do right by the people, but—”

Ye Qing put on a troubled expression and tried to give his excuse, but Ling Jianqiu interrupted him unhurriedly, “Of course, I won’t make you work for free!”

Ye Qing swallowed whatever he was going to say and stared earnestly at Ling Jianqiu. Anything was negotiable as long as there was a reward!

“You’ve mastered the Vessel Augmentation stage, right Joyless?” Ling Jianqiu confirmed.

“That’s right.”

“You must be getting ready to enter the Astral Refinement stage, right Joyless?” Ling Jianqiu confirmed again.

“You are correct, chief.”

A rare smile spread across Ling Jianqiu’s face. “In that case, you must be looking for information regarding your desired astral qi when you were in the archives earlier.”

“How did you know that?” Ye Qing’s expression immediately turned cold and unfriendly.

Ling Jianqiu remained firm under Ye Qing’s glare. “You misunderstand me. I haven’t spied on you. When I was using the archives earlier, I overheard you asking someone to bring you all the files regarding an astral qi’s location and dangerous zones.”

“I see!” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization and relaxed. It was his own fault for being so careless.

Ling Jianqiu continued, “You probably already know that an astral qi is absolutely essential to cultivate any Astral Refinement stage art. Astral qis are generally split into three grades, namely inferior, average, and superior.”

“There are a total of one hundred and eight inferior astral qis, seventy-two average astral qis, and thirty six superior astral qis in this world.”

“Inferior astral qis can usually be found in ordinary elements, and they are fairly weak because they are rife with impurities.”

“Average astral qis are the essences of nature. They are extremely pure and very powerful.”

“Superior astral qis are the souls of nature and the hearts of the world itself. They are perfectly pure and immeasurably powerful.”

“Huh. I have no idea that all the astral qis in the world are already categorized!” Ye Qing commented with deep interest.

“The greater the astral qi, the greater the boons they bring to a warrior. Unfortunately, the heavens are perfectly fair, so a particularly powerful astral qi is quite rare.”

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Ling Jianqiu paused again before continuing, “To make a comparison, if an inferior astral qi is as plentiful as the fishes in a river, then an average astral qi is as rare as a sea dragon, and a superior astral qi is as unique as the sun itself. You would not find another like it.”

“Considering how strong you already are at your age, I am sure that your background is equally extraordinary. Naturally, the Astral Refinement cultivation art you wish to practice must require an average astral qi at least. However, you would not find the information you seek in that archive!”

“Do enlighten me, Chief Ling.” Ye Qing could hear Ling Jianqiu’s subtext.

Ling Jianqiu replied directly, “Every Pacification Bureau headquarters has two types of archives. One of them is your ordinary archive, and the other one is called the secret archive. There, you may find what you’re looking for!”

“The secret archive?” Ye Qing mused for a moment before asking, “What is the requirement to enter the secret archive?”

Ling Jianqiu smirked. “The secret archive is one of the most important rooms in the Pacification Bureau. Naturally, only the Chief of Bureau and a selected few Peacemakers are allowed entry!”

You old fox. I was wondering when you were going to spring your trap!

Ye Qing had been wondering why Ling Jianqiu seemed so confident that he would assist with the investigation. As it turned out, he never had a choice to begin with.

Once upon a time, he thought that only a two-faced guy like Qiao Six was capable of concocting a cunning plot. Clearly, he was mistaken. Is there no paradise in this world where humble, upright and honest citizens like him could live in peace!?

Ye Qing abruptly sprung to his feet and saluted Ling Jianqiu solemnly. “Chief, it is every warrior’s duty to slay evil, do right by the people, and save lives. I will happily travel to Jade Spring Village and investigate this incident!”

Ling Jianqiu nodded. “I knew you would agree, Joyless! In that case, I shall make an exception and let you into the secret archive one time!”

“Thank you, my lord!” Ye Qing declared, but on the inside he was grumbling like an old man. *Why am I thanking the guy who tricked me into an offer I can’t refuse? Grumble grumble...*

As if on cue, Ling Jianqiu added, “However, you only have two hours to find what you’re looking for!”

“...”

Is it too late to change my mind?

Chapter 107: Another Conspiracy

“Now this, is what I call a mighty coincidence.”

Ling Jianqiu had taken Ye Qing to the secret archive and left him to his own devices after wrangling a promise out of him. A bit of searching later, he actually found a file that spoke of a location that seemed to contain the Burning Wind. It was said that there was a valley to the south of a mountain called Seenorth Mountain in Anyang. Beset by a deadly wind all year long, the valley was like a red hot furnace where no life could possibly survive. It was practically a land of extinction by all accounts. It was because the wind was so hot it felt like fire. It was also why the wind was called the Fire Wind, and the valley was named the Firewind Valley.

From what he could tell, the Fire Wind shared many characteristics with the Burning Wind. The only thing that was truly different was the name. Therefore, he had good reason to believe that it was the astral qi he was looking for.

The real coincidence, however, was the fact that Jade Spring Village was also located in Seenorth Mountain. In fact, it was just a few kilometers away from Firewind Valley. This meant that the investigation and his objective were actually not in conflict with each other. In fact, he most likely could achieve both at the same time.

Sometimes, you could have the best of both worlds.

Ye Qing did not dilly-dally after obtaining the information he needed. He left after speaking with Ling Jianqiu and bidding him goodbye.

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It was a calm, peaceful night until a gust of wind broke the silence.

“Who goes there?”

In his bedroom, Xiao Yang suddenly opened his eyes and raised a finger. Lightning crackled inside the room as a beam of deadly heat and power shot toward the exit.

The beam looked small and unassuming, but the bedroom suddenly heated up like someone had ignited the air. Vapor filled the whole room in just the blink of an eye, but none of the fragile items such as the curtains, the furniture and more were affected in the slightest. It was clear that he possessed as much finesse as he had power.

The powerful attack did not cause even a ripple after it flew outside, however. It was almost as if it had disappeared into a sea of darkness.

“Please restrain yourself. I come in peace.”

A voice blew in with the wind. It was androgynous, so Xiao Yang could not tell if the uninvited stranger was male or female.

“Heh. Says the thief who tried to sneak into my house at midnight!” Xiao Yang sneered, but he did not follow up on his attack after sensing no retaliation from the unknown stranger.

“I came at midnight because it’s the best time to talk business,” The mysterious person outside his room replied, “and I haven’t come tonight to steal from you. I’ve come to help you.”

“Help me?” Xiao Yang smirked as if he had heard a joke. “And why would I need your help?”

The mysterious person didn’t take offense at Xiao Yang’s taunt. They replied, “I can help you kill Ye Qing!”

“How did you know that!?”

If Xiao Yang was wary but perfectly calm before, now he was like a man whose deepest secrets had been exposed under the sun. He abruptly sat up and emitted a golden light that illuminated the entire house [1] like the sun. However, the space just outside his bedroom remained shrouded in a fog of impenetrable darkness.

“Does it matter who I am? What matters is that we share the same goal. Just like you, I would love to see Ye Qing dead!” The mysterious voice declared.

Xiao Yang didn't respond immediately. Instead, he narrowed his eyes and continuously increased his power. His eyes burned like a pair of golden suns as a terrifying pressure enveloped the entire house.

A long time later, when his light still couldn't dispel the darkness outside, Xiao Yang abruptly smiled and withdrew his aura. "You're right. The enemy of my enemy is my friend! So tell me, how are you planning to kill Ye Qing? And before you say anything, I won't help you unless your plan is foolproof!"

"But of course!" The mysterious person replied as if they knew Xiao Yang would agree. "Ye Qing's background is unknown, but he is an exceptionally powerful warrior as unpredictable as he is alert. The only way to deal with him is to kill him in one strike, or he'll bring fire and brimstone upon all of his enemies."

"This might sound offensive, but not even an Astral Refiner like you has a one hundred percent chance to kill him!"

*You don't say!* Xiao Yang scoffed mentally. *Ye Qing would be long dead if I was sure I could kill him!*

"That said, even an elephant may fall to a horde of ants. If one man isn't enough, what about several others!" The mysterious person continued.

"Is this what you meant when you offered to help me?" Xiao Yang raised an eyebrow. He could tell from his earlier test that the mysterious person was quite powerful. If they joined hands, there was definitely a high chance they would be able to kill Ye Qing.

But to his surprise, the mysterious person said, "I will be joining you, but just the two of us are not enough to guarantee success! We need more people to ensure that there is no chance Ye Qing could turn the tables on us!"

"Who else do you intend to recruit?" Xiao Yang asked curiously.

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The mysterious person answered right away, "The Li Clan and the Shen Clan!"

"And why would they agree to help us?"

"Because they're not helping us. They're just helping themselves!"

"If the Li Clan and the Shen Clan are the local snakes, then Ye Qing is the outsider dragon no one asked for. Not only did he kill Yan Tieyi and take over the Iron Shirt Gang, he also killed Zheng Feng and devoured the Zheng Clan as well. The teeth feel cold without the lips, and Li Yuankang and Shen Xian have been wary of him for a while now."

“On top of that, the Iron Shirt Gang managed to earn the government’s favor and became far more powerful than they used to be, which only served to deepen their suspicions even more. They’re both afraid that Ye Qing would abuse the connection to devour both the Shen Clan and the Li Clan and become the top dog in Anyang.”

“To say that they want Ye Qing dead would be an understatement. They’re a pile of dry wood just waiting to be set on fire!”

The mysterious person paused for a second before continuing, “You would be the spark in my plan. All you need to do is to treat them to the carrot and the stick, and they should cooperate with us!”

“Heh. Why me and not you?” Xiao Yang knew the carrot and the stick entailed, of course. The carrot was the chance to take out their greatest rival and take over the Iron Shirt Gang. They didn’t need to worry about the repercussions either since he, a Patrolman of Luo Shui, would take care of that.

The stick was what would happen to them if they refused. He was a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau, a powerful Vessel Augmentor and a disciple of Sunset Hill. Anyone of these identities was enough to make them regret ever crossing him, much less all three of them together. To put it simply, their fates were sealed from the moment the mysterious person had mentioned their names.

The mysterious person answered matter-of-factly, “You’re a Patrolman and a disciple of Sunset Hill. You are easily the best person for this role!”

Xiao Yang shrugged. That was one point he couldn’t refute. He asked, “By the way, you wanted to invite the Shen Clan and the Li Clan not just because they’re useful and motivated, am I right?”

“Yes. Ye Qing is very close with the magistrate of Anyang, Yan Yufei and the Chief of Bureau, Ling Jianqiu. His background is unknown, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he hails from a powerful clan or something. Someone has to carry the blame, and there is no one better than Li Yuankang and Shen Xian!”

The mysterious person’s voice was gentle and kind, but Xiao Yang felt a chill when he heard this.

“Hahaha... that’s a great plan!” He let out a dry laugh. It wasn’t that he pitied the two patriarchs—he would’ve killed them himself because dead people were the only people that could keep a secret—but the way the mysterious person put it made him feel like they were like donkeys. The moment they were done pulling the mill, they would be slaughtered and cooked for dinner.

“I admit that your plan is viable, but even with the Li Clan and the Shen Clan’s help, it’s still going to be difficult to take out Ye Qing in Anyang!” Xiao Yang voiced another concern. Anyang was guarded by powerful warriors like Ling Jianqiu and Yan Yufei, and Ye Qing was good friends with them. If they made a mistake, the two men might be alerted to the assassination attempt and come to Ye Qing’s rescue. It would be all for naught then.

“It won’t be possible to assassinate Ye Qing in Anyang, and I wasn’t planning to. We’ll do it when he’s outside the county!” The mysterious person answered.

“Outside? But why would he go outside?” Xiao Yang looked confused.

The mysterious person chuckled. “Ye Qing will be heading to Jade Spring Village to carry out a mass disappearance investigation tomorrow. That will be our best opportunity to kill him!”

“What? I’m a Patrolman of Luo Shui, and even I wasn’t told about this incident. How on earth did you know that?” Xiao Yang’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Are you a member of the Pacification Bureau as well, or do you have a plant in the Anyang headquarters?”

The voice turned cold and dangerous. “You do not need to know my identity, and you definitely shouldn’t try to puzzle it out. I know about you far more than you know about me. If you work with me, then all is well. If not, then I promise you that you won’t like the outcome!”

“Hahaha. Don’t be mad, brother. I’m just speculating is all! I won’t bring it up again, so relax, will you!” Xiao Yang laughed. “You have a deal. I hope for a good cooperation between us.”

“Me too!”

The mysterious person had just finished speaking when Xiao Yang suddenly disappeared from his bed. He appeared outside his room in the blink of an eye, but he couldn’t see anyone or anything. All there was left in the room was the echoes of the mysterious voice.

“Not bad...” The corners of Xiao Yang’s lips curled into an sinister, ruthless smile.

“Ye Qing will die. Li Yuankang and Shen Xian will die. You will die by my hands as well...”

“Hehehe...”

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“What are you doing here, Brother Xiao Yang?”

The next morning, Ye Qing left the county as soon as the morning gongs rang. However, he ran into Xiao Yang as soon as he left the gates.

“I was waiting for you, duh!” Xiao Yang replied matter-of-factly.

“Okay. For what?”

“To help you with your investigation, of course!”

“What?” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise, “Are you accompanying me on my investigation of Jade Spring Village?”

“Got it in one!” Xiao Yang nodded with a wide grin on his face.

Ye Qing asked suspiciously, "But how did you know about this?"

Xiao Yang smiled. "Don't look down on me! I'm a Patrolman of Luo Shui, you know? As the overseer of all big or small matters happening in the nine counties under Luo Shui, of course I would know about such things."

"I was curious about the incident to begin with, and when I heard that Chief Ling had sent you to investigate this incident, I thought that I might as well come with you! Two heads are better than one, am I right?"

Ye Qing was suspicious of Xiao Yang's intentions at first, but his reply was so forthright that he couldn't help but wonder if he was just being paranoid. So, he replied, "You're right. I'll be counting on you then, Brother Xiao Yang!"

"You're welcome! Let's go!" Xiao Yang gave him a sunny smile and a pat on the shoulder. The duo then left Anyang together toward the east.

Jade Spring Village was about two days away from Anyang. Even with Xiao Yang and Ye Qing's speed, it would take them a day and a night to arrive at their destination. At least the Strangers near Anyang were almost extinct. The duo had not encountered any danger until they left the borders.

"We're at Coiled Snake Ridge now. Once we're through, we should arrive at Jade Spring Village in a couple of hours at most!" Ye Qing explained after taking a look at his map and the winding mountain ridge before them.

Xiao Yang stared at the uneven mountain roads and sighed. "Come on. Let's see if we can get through Coiled Snake Ridge and find a place to stay before it's dark."

"Yeah." Ye Qing nodded in agreement.

Unfortunately, their plan would be interrupted by a cry for help right before they were about to scale the mountains.

Chapter 108: Beauty Snake

"Someone's crying for help!" Ye Qing and Xiao Yang exchanged a glance with each other before racing into the woods where the voice was coming from. As they were both Vessel Augmentors, it only took them a few seconds to reach their target.

Xiao Yang whistled immediately. "What a beauty!"

The crier turned out to be an exceptionally beautiful woman lying on the ground. Most of her body was hidden behind a tree, her countenance alone was enough to cause both men to swoon on their feet. Her facial features were bewitching, soft, and loving all at the same time, and her brown eyes seemed to hold all that was good and beautiful in the world. To say that she was overflowing with charm would be an understatement, it was like she was pulling at their very soul.

"Save me, please save me..." The woman's voice grew increasingly gentle and pleading when she saw them.

“Don’t worry, lass! I’ll save you!” Xiao Yang replied even as his eyes grew increasingly out of focus for some reason. His feet were carrying him toward the young woman before he knew it.

Is this what they call love at first sight? I can’t help but be drawn to her...

The young woman’s voice was like magic. It muddled Ye Qing’s mind until the only thought that was left was: *Go to her, go to her, go to her—*

“No!”

Ye Qing had just taken a few steps when his mindspace suddenly shook, and the Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method surfaced in his mind. When he regained clarity of mind, he looked at the woman once more and broke out in cold sweat immediately.

The woman was still beautiful, but that was only if he looked at the top half of her body. The bottom half of her beauty was a long snake tail that was covered in colorful scales. They shimmered eerily and hypnotically under the sunlight. It felt both paradoxical and chilling to see her calling out to them like nothing was going on while her lower half was coiled around the tree trunk.

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and caught Xiao Yang’s shoulder. At the same time, he imbued his spirit into his voice and uttered, “Careful, brother.”

“What’s wrong?” Xiao Yang blinked and regained his own clarity of mind. When he saw the snake woman for what she was, he jumped, “Mother of heavens! What the hell is this creature?”

“She’s the beauty you speak of, duh!” Ye Qing joked. “It’s the Beauty Snake, a Malice-class Stranger!”

“Beauty Snake?” Xiao Yang goggled. “That name sounds familiar. Yeah, I’m pretty sure I’ve heard of it before!”

And by that you mean you have no idea what a Beauty Snake is, and you need me to explain it to you like you’re a three-year-old. Got it.

And so Ye Qing explained, “The Beauty Snake is a Stranger with a human’s upper body and a snake’s lower half. It excels at hiding itself in the darkness and luring travelers to their doom using its exquisite countenance and some sort of hypnosis power. If the traveler fails to break out of the hypnosis, then the Beauty Snake will devour them beginning from the feet.”

“The victim would not feel any pain whatsoever as they are completely bewitched by the Beauty Snake’s countenance and charm. They might awaken when they’re completely inside its stomach, but by then, it would already be too late.”

“Oh, now I remember!” Xiao Yang tapped his palm in realization. “Do you know that the Beauty snake is actually quite famous among the nobility? Some wealthy, lustful men enjoy breeding Beauty Snakes or turning their heads into specimens for

collection purposes. Now that I've seen it with my own eyes, I can understand why they want one!"

*Holy shit there are scalies in this world and one of them is right next to me*, Ye Qing thought in horror while stealthily stepping away from Xiao Yang. "Well, there's a live one right in front of you. If you want to catch it..."

Xiao Yang waved him off. "Nah, forget it. It's pretty to look at, but that's all. Not only that, it might eat me alive, which is... huh... anyway, I'm not strong enough to handle it!"

Ye Qing: "..."

Is it just me, or did he just admit to having a vore fetish?

"Save me... save me..."

Meanwhile, the Beauty Snake was trying even harder to hypnotize the two men after they stopped in their tracks. Its facial features grew even prettier, and its voice even more bewitching than before. But since the two men were prepared, of course they did not succumb to its power as a matter of course.

A short while later, when the Beauty Snake finally realized it wasn't going to work, her voice abruptly turned shrill and unholy. Its face became warped like that of a monster as well. A snake's tongue flickered out of its throat, and a disgusting stench began to permeate the air.

"Still think she's beautiful?" Ye Qing asked.

"..." Xiao Yang couldn't say anything. If its face was as beautiful as a goddess' before, now it was a kind of horror only a mother could love.

"Let's get on with this already!" Xiao Yang humphed and stepped forward.

The air shook, and the earth shuddered when he took his first step. It was as if he was drawing power from all around him. Sensing the danger, the Beauty Snake recoiled and spat out a cloud of rainbow-colored gas. The gas looked colorful and smelled sweet, but it withered every plant that came into contact with it. It was clearly very poisonous. However, the poison gas abruptly burst into flames before it could spread closer, and the Beauty Snake with it as well.

*"Craaaaaaah!"* The Beauty Snake shrieked in pain while dropping on the ground and rolling back and forth like a log. Its flailing tail was powerful enough to break trees and crush stones, and yet it just couldn't extinguish the flames on its body no matter what.

The flames were golden in color and exceedingly bright. It was also so hot that the surrounding air became distorted as if the forest had suddenly turned into a furnace. Naturally, the Beauty Snake was burned into ashes in just an instant.

*What an incredible astral qi!* Ye Qing thought as he observed the battle. As it turned out, Xiao Yang's astral qi was a fire element astral qi just like Qing Kui's, though there was of course a great difference between the two astral qis. If Qing Kui's astral qi was like a monster in the dark ready to

spill blood and gore at a moment's notice, then Xiao Yang's was like the midday sun; hot, bright and utterly fearless. It was no less powerful than Qing Kui's astral qi!

"Game over. Now, let's continue on our way!" Xiao Yang clapped his hands and looked like he hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Not yet. Give me a moment." Ye Qing stopped Xiao Yang before charging his sleeves with qi and sweeping away the unnatural dust and heat in the surroundings. Then, he walked up to the tree where the Beauty Snake was coiled around earlier.

Xiao Yang's golden flame was so hot that it could burn even a Malice-class Beauty Snake into ash. However, the tree was only scorched on the outside.

By now, Xiao Yang had noticed the oddity as well. "Huh? What is this tree? How did it withstand my Purple? Sun Gold Flame?"

*Purple? Sun Gold Flame? Is that the name of his astral qi? I wonder what grade it is?* Ye Qing thought but did not allow it to show on his face. He answered, "This tree is called the Beauty Tree. It is born when it is struck by lightning. Extremely tough and impervious to fire, water, wind and even the cold, it is an excellent material to make a Strange Artifact."

"Of course, there is a reason why it's called the Beauty Tree instead of the Lightning Tree or something. It's because the Beauty Snake is born from it. So long as the Beauty Tree is still alive, a new Beauty Snake will replace the one that was killed."

Ye Qing pressed a palm to the tree trunk and sucked in a deep breath. A toad-like croak erupted from his abdomen, and his palm crackled with lightning.

*"Toad Force"*

*"Boundless Lightning Palm"*

.

Rumble!

The tyrannical force poured into the Beauty Tree and easily exploded the tree trunk that withstood the Purple? Sun Gold Flame. The ghost of a Beauty Snake howled and flew out of the tree—it was obviously the Beauty Snake Xiao Yang had just killed—but it dissipated into nothing just as quickly.

*One silver rune, get!* Ye Qing thought happily when he confirmed that the Beauty Snake was truly dead. This was why he hadn't attacked the Stranger sooner. One, it was to check out Xiao Yang's abilities, and two, he knew that Xiao Yang would not be able to eliminate the Beauty Snake in one strike. Why would he exert himself when he could reap the rewards without?

"Most impressive, brother! You're surprisingly knowledgeable, aren't you?" Xiao Yang did not suspect a thing and sung his praises.

Ye Qing returned a humble smile and said, "You're welcome. I am a scholar!"

*"..."*

We can still be friends if you never use the word “scholar” again!

Ye Qing and Xiao Yang resumed their journey after taking out the Beauty Snake. Coiled Snake Ridge wasn't particularly tall, but it was winding, crooked, and circled back and forth like an actual snake. The path itself was extremely rugged and seemingly endless as well, not to mention the bountiful of sudden cliffs and scarps along the way. It was so infamous that someone had even made a short poem for it,

“Like an epic

the mountain twists and turns

Each step

Can be the step that leads to the heavens.”

A normal person would be hardpressed crossing Coiled Snake Ridge in a single day, but Ye Qing and Xiao Yang were powerful warriors with excellent movement skills and great stamina. It took them only a short time to cross over half of the terrain. When they arrived at a hanging bridge, Ye Qing said, “We’re making good progress. At this rate, we should make it out of the mountains before night falls.”

“Yeah!” Xiao Yang nodded in agreement. “I can’t wait to get off these mountains. My feet feel like they might fall off my ankles at any moment.”

The hanging bridge was about thirty meters long. It was a series of wooden planks chained together by iron. There were no handrails. The hanging bridge was the only thing that connected the two hills, and it was suspended above a gulf of clouds. The scenery looked like something straight out of a painting or a celestial realm.

The duo encountered no danger until they reached the center of the hanging bridge. It was then the surrounding clouds suddenly churned unnaturally.

“Careful. Something’s not right!” Xiao Yang warned immediately. Right after that, a plethora of ethereal figures abruptly appeared behind them and walked forward like they were in the middle of crossing the bridge as well. Their silhouettes grew increasingly solid with every step until Ye Qing and Xiao Yang saw them for what they were. They were soldiers wearing armor and carrying sickle spears, but something wasn’t right about them. Their armor looked outdated, and sickle spears were oddly-shaped. It didn’t match the standard military equipment of Chu, Yan, Yong or Wei.

The soldiers were marching in full military formation, and they looked ready to fight at any moment. They were walking straight toward Ye Qing and Xiao Yang, but strangely, their footsteps made not a single sound, and the soldiers were staring straight ahead as if they couldn’t see the two warriors.

“That’s... the standard equipment of the You Dynasty!” Xiao Yang blanched. “They’re You soldiers! But this cannot be possible!”

Ye Qing knew exactly what he meant. A thousand years ago, You was an almighty empire that had unified the lands and ruled over the world. However, they had long been destroyed and consumed

by Yan, Chu, Yong and Wei. Naturally, it was impossible for soldiers of the You Dynasty to still exist.

“No, they aren’t alive... this is an Anomaly!”

In this world, an Anomaly was a special kind of Strange Realm or energy. It could also be some sort of unknowable existence. No one knows where they came from, how they were formed, or even what kind of dangers they contained because some Anomaly were everchanging. They were also impossible to destroy. A powerful warrior could wipe every trace of an Anomaly from this world, and it would simply come back after a period of time. It was terribly strange to put it mildly.

Anomaly usually appeared in fixed locations, and it was usually impossible to predict how dangerous it was until it was too late. Some Anomaly were death traps with no possible escape, and some were completely harmless.

In other words, they were in deep shit.

“We need to go!” Xiao Yang uttered while looking like he had swollen something rotten, but Ye Qing shook his head and replied just as severely,

“It’s too late!”

He said this because the You soldiers were already right in front of them.

Ye Qing and Xiao Yang tensed up like drawn bows and channeled their energies. They were ready to react as soon as they perceived any danger. However, the You soldiers walked right past them as if they couldn’t see them. They kept going forward until suddenly, the foremost soldier looked over the bridge as if he saw something below. His look of surprise quickly morphed into abject terror as he opened his mouth and screamed something they couldn’t hear. It was as if they existed in a different spacetime.

Something more horrifying happened next. The screaming soldier’s head abruptly fell off his shoulders and spewed a fountain of blood! It almost looked like an overripe melon!

The soldiers fell into panic almost immediately. Everyone was looking down the hanging bridge to check what was going on, and whatever they saw had them so horrified that they were screaming like they had lost their minds. The next moment, one soldier exploded into several pieces as if he had been ripped apart by invisible hands, another lost his head as if he was hit by a giant hammer, a third soldier suffocated slowly like he was hanging from a rope, a fourth soldier abruptly went *splat* as if he had hit the ground at high velocity, a fifth soldier lost his flesh bit by bit like he was going through death by a thousand cuts until all that was left was a bloody skeleton, a sixth soldier burned into a pile of ashes and more.

It was a chilling sight to say the least.

Chapter 109: Anomaly

“What... What the hell is going on here?” Xiao Yang gulped. His lips were blue with fear.

“I don’t know, I’m not sure, don’t ask me!” Ye Qing shook his head and quipped a triple denial. It was the truth though. Just like Xiao Yang, all he saw was the You

soldiers looking over the bridge, recoiling in fear, and dying in all sorts of bizarre ways. He had instinctively glanced at the direction they were looking at, but he couldn't see anything that might have scared them to death, literally. All he saw was a bunch of clouds.

It wasn't long before all the soldiers were dead. Their dead bodies and the pools of blood turned what was a beautiful scenery into a horror show. Then, just as abruptly as they had appeared at the beginning, the clouds churned, and they all disappeared like they never were.

"They're... gone?!" Xiao Yang blinked a couple times in disbelief. "Is it finally over?"

But Ye Qing shook his head with a severe expression. "No. I think it has just begun!"

Xiao Yang followed Ye Qing's gaze and looked over the bridge. He immediately noticed that the clouds were no longer floating peacefully like they used to. Instead, they were twisted and turned restlessly as if something massive and terrifying was swimming underneath the clouds.

Both men tensed up for some sort of horror to emerge from the depths, but a few seconds later, they realized that nothing was happening. Ye Qing let out a sigh of relief before urging, "Let's get to the other side while it's still safe!"

"Yeah!" Xiao Yang nodded and took a single step. Ye Qing did the same thing as well. As soon as they did this, Ye Qing abruptly shuddered and stared down the bridge in horror. It was because a corpse had suddenly appeared on the clouds. Its face was contorted in terror, and its eyes were bulging out of its eye sockets. Its tongue extended all the way down to its stomach not unlike someone who had died by hanging. The corpse was none other than himself!

"Gulp..." Ye Qing swallowed audibly. Unless he was gravely mistaken, the You soldiers must have witnessed their own dead bodies as well. That was why they had lost their composure so badly. Anyone would be shocked and terrified after meeting their own doppelganger, much less one who had died in such a horrifying fashion.

"Ahhhh!? W-Why is my dead body down there?" It was at this moment Xiao Yang let out a cry of terror. Clearly, he had seen his own corpse beneath the bridge as well. Suddenly, the man stiffened as if an invisible force had trapped him in place. Then, his head slowly turned toward his back. Ye Qing could only watch in horror as Xiao Yang struggled with all his might to no avail. Eventually—

Crack!

Xiao Yang's neck broke with an audible snap, and his head spun two full revolutions before it finally came to a stop.

Ye Qing thought that this was the end of Xiao Yang, but the Astral Refiner abruptly vanished in a poof and left a mysterious doll behind. The mysterious doll was small enough to fit on a palm, but it had baby-like skin and flesh and a life-like expression. It almost looked like it was alive.

It was at this moment the mysterious doll's head spun around twice. The doll was still alive, however. Its face simply turned purple as if it couldn't breathe. The doll then grabbed its head with its fat little hands and twisted it back to normal. Then, it started running toward Xiao Yang, who had reappeared a short distance away from it.

That wasn't the end of the horror show, however. As it ran, the doll suddenly started bleeding out of its eyes, and an invisible force continued to twist its neck round and round. When it was just three inches away from Xiao Yang, the invisible force pulled its head right off its shoulders. The next moment, the mysterious doll exploded into smithereens, but instead of flesh and blood it spilled some sort of milky white worm that was about the length of a finger.

Substitute Worms... That's the Substitute Doll!

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes when he finally realized what the Strange Artifact was.

The milky white worm was a Malice-class Stranger called the Substitute Worm. It could be refined and used to block non-fatal damage on behalf of its user. On the other hand, the Substitute Doll was a Strange Artifact that could only be made via an extremely cruel method.

Two ingredients were necessary when making the Substitute Doll. The first one was, of course, the Substitute Worms, and the second one was an unborn fetus that was ten months old. The mother of the baby was continuously fed with Substitute Worms so that they would consume and replace the baby completely, forming the Substitute Doll. After the Substitute Doll was fully formed, it was simply a matter of cutting it out of the mother's stomach.

As the Substitute Doll was born like a human, it was semi-sentient and capable of blocking fatal damage for the owner.

Chen Cang's Scapedoll could only block one fatal damage for its owner, but the Scapedoll could be used repeatedly so long as it wasn't completely destroyed. It would recover naturally so long as the owner fed it Substitute Worms and cared for it for a time. Therefore, it was infinitely more valuable than the Scapedoll.

However, the method used to make the Substitute Doll was so cruel that the imperial count and many noble clans denounced it as heresy and put a ban on it. Only heretics and people who cared nothing for human lives would make a Substitute Doll.

"Pwack!"

The second the Substitute Doll was destroyed, Xiao Yang abruptly spat out a mouthful of blood and turned as pale as death. It was because the Strange Artifact was connected to him by his heart's blood.

It was at this moment Xiao Yang saw something else beneath the bridge and opened his mouth to scream again. But before he could do so, Ye Qing put a finger to his own lips and shook his head rapidly.

Xiao Yang was a Astral Refiner, so he wasn't so weak-willed that he couldn't even keep his mouth shut. He immediately clamped a hand over his mouth.

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and took another step. As soon as he did this, a new corpse surfaced from the clouds. Again it was his own body, but this time it looked like it had been torn from limb to limb.

*I was right!* Ye Qing was both relieved and glad that his guess was spot on. Earlier, he noticed that the You soldiers had all screamed in terror before the Anomaly took action. It was the same for Xiao Yang as well. On the other hand, he remained perfectly unharmed. That was why he guessed that only those who screamed after they saw their dead bodies would trigger the Anomaly.

But of course, he wouldn't know if his guess was true until he tested it out, so he forced himself to stay calm and performed an experiment. Thankfully, he was right. So long as he kept silent, the Anomaly could not harm him no matter how many bodies it generated.

Ye Qing took another step, and a new body appeared. This time, it was a drowned corpse that looked as inflated as a balloon. However, nothing happened to him because he remained silent. Now, he was absolutely certain of his theory.

By now, Xiao Yang had figured out the key to surviving this Anomaly as well. While keeping a tight grip over his mouth, he took a step forward and forced himself to stay silent when a new body rose from the depths of the clouds. Just like Ye Qing, nothing bad happened to him. The duo moved quickly after that, and it wasn't long before they crossed the bridge and reached the other side.

Both men heaved out a long sigh of relief once they were safe. When they looked back, they saw all kinds of corpses still floating above the clouds. It was like a gallery of the one thousand ways to die: drowning, burning, hanging, falling, dismemberment, torture... It was creepy to put it mildly.

It was at this moment the clouds churned once more, and eyeballs suddenly appeared beneath the bodies. Or rather, the bodies had been *inside the eyeballs* this whole time! Each eyeball held exactly one body and manner of death!

A few seconds later, the eyeballs slowly closed their eyes. Naturally, the bodies were gone as well. Then, what looked like a gigantic shadow sank deeper into the clouds and vanished completely.

"What... what was that thing?"

When the clouds had returned to normal, and neither man could sense any danger anymore, Xiao Yang finally mustered enough courage to ask a question. He looked more shaken than Ye Qing had ever seen him.

Ye Qing licked his dry lips and shrugged. "Do I look like I know what that is to you? That said, I remember reading a file stating that a surprising number of travelers had gone missing in Coiled Snake Ridge, but no one has ever found out why. It's most likely because of this Anomaly."

"We can mull over this after we get off this mountain ridge, yeah?" Xiao Yang said impatiently and gave him a slap on the shoulder. "I'm still feeling the creeps, and I do *not* want to find out if my intuition is correct!"

"Yeah. Let's leave." Ye Qing had no intention of staying either. Both men immediately took off at their fastest possible speed. It wasn't until Coiled Snake Ridge was completely behind them that they finally relaxed. It couldn't be helped. That Anomaly just now was beyond bizarre, and it was pure luck that they had survived. Hell, it was completely up to daddy heavens whether weaklings like them could survive an Anomaly at all.

Xiao Yang let out a long sigh of relief and smiled. "Thank the heavens that's behind us. Let's make haste and find a place to stay. The sky's almost dark, and I can use a drink to celebrate our survival!"

"I would agree, but we're still a good distance from Jade Spring Village, and it doesn't look like there's an inn nearby..." Ye Qing looked around once before looking up at the clouded sky. "Also, it looks like it might rain very soon. I think we'll have to sleep in a cave for the night!"

"Dammit, fine!" Xiao Yang nodded and started looking around. The good news was that they found an abandoned temple not long after they began their search. The bad news was that it looked like something straight out of a horror movie. The walls were cracked, the courtyard was overgrown with weed, the icon was tattered beyond recognition, and cobwebs were everywhere.

There was one thing that stood out compared to the rest of the building though. There was a wall that was covered in paintings of flying women. It was perfectly clean and unblemished as if someone had wiped it down everyday. Obviously suspicious, Ye Qing and Xiao Yang inspected it closely but could not find anything amiss. It probably was just a normal painting. So, they settled in the abandoned temple and tidied up the place a little.

They had just started a fire when a drizzle finally began to fall from the darkened sky.

"Have a drink, brother! It'll warm you right up!"

Xiao Yang tossed a wine jar in Ye Qing's direction and took a sip from his own wine. He looked so comfortable he could doze off this second.

Ye Qing caught the wine jar and produced the jerkies he had prepared beforehand. A sip here, a sweet jerky there, this is the life!

Bang!

Alas, the peace was shattered when the door to the temple abruptly exploded into smithereens like it was struck by a tremendous force. A cold, watery wind blew into the temple instantly.

"Motherfucker! This rain came out of fucking nowhere! I'm completely wet!" A coarse, uncouth voice came from outside.

"Yeah, it's pretty cold. Thank the heavens there's a temple here. Let's get inside and warm up with some wine already!"

A group of sixteen men filed into the room immediately. They didn't just look powerful, not even the rain was enough to dispel the blood stench clinging to their bodies. It was obvious they were no one to be trifled with.

One man stood out among them all, however. He had a thick beard on his face and looked as brawny as a tiny hill. He was also clad in a wolfskin that made him look like a man-shaped brute. His eyes were what really drew attention though. They were dark green unlike most humans, and they glowed in the dark like a pair of cold, eerie lanterns.

The big man spotted Ye Qing and Xiao Yang immediately after he entered the temple. When he squinted, a sharp glint flashed across his eyes not like the edge of a sharp blade.

“It’s not empty?” One subordinate following behind the big man exclaimed in surprise when he saw Ye Qing and Xiao Yang. He shuffled closer to his leader and whispered, “Boss, should we...”

He made a cutting motion in front of his neck. His meaning was obvious.

“They’re two men camping out in the middle of nowhere. Do you really think they’d be easy to deal with? Control yourself!” The big man whispered back.

“Yes, boss!” The subordinate replied with a tinge of disappointment.

#### Chapter 110: I Like Men

The temple entrance was at least a dozen meters away from where Ye Qing and Xiao Yang were resting, not to mention that it was raining outside. That was why the two men were certain that their whispers wouldn’t be overheard. Unfortunately, they were wrong. Ye Qing and Xiao Yang heard every word as clear as day.

The two warriors exchanged a cold smirk with each other. Out of the sixteen people, their leader was the only one who was a Vessel Augmentor. Everyone else was either a Qi Invoker or even a Reforged. The idea that these people could take them out was laughable at best and stupid at worst.

The temple felt a lot more crowded with the addition of sixteen men, but it was also a lot livelier than before. The drinkers drank, the gossipers gossiped, and the finger-guessers guessed fingers to their heart’s content!

At first, the men were fairly restrained probably because their leader had warned them about being too boisterous before. However, that restraint was quickly forgotten after they had downed a few bowls of yellow wine. Some of them started singing on top of their lungs or jumping all over the place like monkeys. Two men were even having a cursing contest with each other and greeting the other person’s family all the way to the eighteenth generation. Of course, their peers were more than happy to fan the flames and cheer them on. For a time, it was as if the laughter would never end.

Ye Qing and Xiao Yang did not bother them. They simply ate their food, drank their wine, and enjoyed the show like they were in a theater.

Suddenly, a man drunk out of his tits pointed at the painting of flying women and yelled, “Hot damn! Take a look at that wall! Those girls are to die for!”

A few men immediately rushed to his side and oohed and aahed at the painting. One of them let out a lustful cackle and said, “Damn, you’re right! Look at those sweet lips, those bountiful breasts, and those smooth, long legs! If only they’re real!”

“I know right? I would happily take ten years off my lifespan if I could marry a woman like this!”

“Ten years? I would happily give up my life if I could sleep with all these women for just a single night!”

“Someone’s feeling a little thirsty, I see! Don’t worry, Monkey! When we raid our next village, I’ll personally round up a couple women for ya to enjoy!”

“Hehe! Thanks, Brother Hound!”

“Watcha lookin’ at, pretty boy?” The guy named Hound suddenly wheeled around and glared fiercely at Ye Qing. “Look somewhere, or I’ll dig ya eyes out!”

Ye Qing sipped his wine and raised an eyebrow. “I’m looking at the painting, duh. Since when is it a crime to admire a painting? You’re not jealous over a couple of fake women, are you?”

“Women? Do you even have a bush down there, brat?” Hound taunted and received a round of applause and cheers from his fellow brothers.

The corner of Ye Qing’s lips turned up as he responded, “Of course I have. How else did you come to be in this world?”

At first, the crowd was speechless. Then, they burst into an uproarious laughter, “Hahahahahaha!”

Hound was either slower or drunker than the rest of his buddies, because he was unable to comprehend Ye Qing’s meaning until someone had whispered to him about it. Embarrassed and enraged, he uttered, “How dare you call me your son! I’ll kill you!”

As soon as he said this, he curled his fingers like they were claws and crouched lower, fingernails glittering in the dark as if they were covered in steel. At the same time, he swayed back and forth and his teeth for all to see. Eyes flickering with bestial madness, he moved his fists up and down like a pendulum and growled gutturally like a crazed dog.

The next second, Hound bounded forward as if he had found an opening and opened his mouth fully. He looked like he was planning to rip out Ye Qing’s throat with his bare teeth!

The young man barely reacted to the pouncing man though. He simply took another sip from his glass and smiled, “Doggie? I love doggies! I love doggie meat even more!”

Hound was less than one meter away from Ye Qing when his face suddenly morphed into absolute terror, and his head abruptly separated from his neck. He was dead just like that!

The men’s cruel smiles froze on their faces. Hound was one of the strongest warriors of their group, and he was infamous for his Mad Hound Fist. But not only did he die, they never even saw how he was killed!

The unknown led to fear, and fear led to outrage.

“How dare you kill one of our brothers! I’ll kill you!”

Six men who were too drunk to realize the danger immediately pulled out their blades and prepared to charge Ye Qing. However, they had just taken a single step when they suddenly froze in their tracks, and a red line appeared around their necks. The next second, their heads tumbled to the ground, and their bodies followed just a beat behind. Most of them didn’t even seem to realize that they were dead until their life had fully departed their bodies.

The remaining men turned as white as a sheet as they stared at the floor of heads and headless bodies on the floor. For a time, it felt like a mountain was sitting on everyone’s chest!

It was at this moment the leader saluted Ye Qing from a distance and spoke up, "My men should not have disturbed you. I sincerely apologize for the inconvenience they have caused." He then raised his voice and ordered, "Toss the bodies out of the temple. I'm sure our friends would rather not smell their filthy blood while enjoying their meal!"

"Y-Yes boss!" The men responded and threw out the bodies as quickly as they could. They even wiped away the bloodstains for fear that Ye Qing would use it as an excuse to kill them all!

*Unfortunate. The boss is smarter than he looks,* Ye Qing thought while sipping his wine. He was hoping that these people would get in over their heads and try to swarm them or something. It was obvious that none of them were good people. In fact, he was pretty sure from their earlier conversation and behavior that they were evil, vicious bandits who had tortured and killed many innocent people in the past. If it wasn't for the fact that he sense a hint of danger from their leader, every bandit in this room would be dead already.

Besides obvious self-defense, the other reason he killed Hound and the other attackers was to make an example out of them. It was almost guaranteed that these bandits would try something funny when they tucked in for the night. Killing some of them now would make sure that even the bravest man of the group would stay firmly in his corner.

As expected, the uninvited guests were much more subdued afterward. They even lowered their voice to a murmur so as not to disturb Ye Qing or Xiao Yang.

After dinner was done, everyone huddled around their campfires and caught some rest. The temple grew quieter and quieter until all that was left was the sound of rain, the howling wind, and the crackling flames.

"Young master? Young master?"

Ye Qing was half-asleep when he suddenly heard a gentle voice calling out to him. There was even a waft of something fragrant tickling his nostrils.

"Hmm?" Ye Qing jolted awake and opened his eyes. He was immediately greeted by one of the most beautiful faces he had ever seen. If the Beauty Snake's face was devilishly sensual and hypnotic, then this woman was an amalgamation of femininity, elegance, roses and lilies. Their strengths were different, but they were equally beautiful.

"You're..." Ye Qing felt slower than usual as he massaged his forehead. He looked around and discovered that he was lying inside an antique but well-decorated bedroom. Judging from its many feminine designs, it was clearly a woman's bedroom. "Where am I?"

He clearly remembered spending the night in a decrepit temple, so how on earth did he come here?

"My name is Ying Xiu!" The woman bowed elegantly as she answered in a crisp, gentle voice, "You're in my bedroom right now."

“That’s an answer, but not the one I seek.” Ye Qing narrowed his eyes and sat upright. “What I mean is, where is this place?”

“Does it really matter?” Ying Xiu smiled. The way her sweet lips slowly spread resembled a blooming lily. “The room is warm, and the night is young. Why don’t we focus on the present and leave the exploring for another time?”

“Focus on the present, you say?” Ye Qing smirked. “Okay! Tell, what did I, Ye Liangchen, do to deserve a beauty like you?”

Ying Xiu did not take offense despite Ye Qing’s implications. Smiling as bright as ever, she asked, “Is my looks not to your liking, young master? That’s okay. I have a lot of sisters. I can have all of them serve you if you like?”

She clapped her hands once, and four women opened the bedroom door and stepped in. Their appearances were distinctly different from each other. Some of them were plump, and some of them thin. Their heights ranged from incredibly tall to incredibly short as well. Even their character was completely different. The first woman was as cold and proud as a plum, and the second as elegant and intellectual as an orchid. The third woman was as sumptuous and noble as a peony, and the fourth as passionate and joyful as a fiery rose.

But no matter how different they looked, they were all gorgeous beyond imagination.

“My name is Plum. Pleased to meet you, young master!”

“My name is Lily. Pleased to meet you, young master!”

“My name is Peony. Pleased to meet you, young master!”

“My name is Rose. Pleased to meet you, young master!”

All four women bowed and greeted him sweetly. It was such an impressive performance that even the room seemed more vibrant and colorful than before.

“Wow, your looks are incredible, but your names are seriously... something. Ahem.” Ye Qing rubbed his nose and sighed. “It’s too bad there’s no such thing as a free lunch in this world though, much less one that is this incredible. It’s way overboard even for a dream, you get me?”

“More importantly... Do you really think that mere sex is enough to confound I, Ye Liangchen!?”

Ye Qing swung his sleeve and unleashed a mighty blast as soon as he finished. It easily pushed the five defenseless women into the air and shattered the bedroom door. However, the five women dissipated into smoke instead of bleeding like a normal person would.

“I knew they weren’t human!” Ye Qing dashed out of the room and landed in a garden. It was covered in beautiful flowers and lush trees. He also saw small bridges flying over cool streams and exquisite buildings littered around the garden. To put it simply, it looked like paradise on earth.

“Hahaha...”

“Oh, you...”

As if on cue, the five women reappeared in the sky while giggling like bells. “There is no such thing as a man without lust. Why did you hurt us, young master? Is it because we aren’t beautiful enough?”

“Not at all! You’re some of the most gorgeous women I’ve met!” Ye Qing replied honestly.

Ying Xiu smiled. “Then why do you spurn us?”

Ye Qing rubbed his nose and shrugged innocently. “It’s because I like men!”

Ying Xiu: “...”

Plum: “...”

Everyone else: “...”

It was at this moment another man flew out of a pavilion while laughing, “It was fun playing with you all, but I think I’ve had enough!”

When he looked down and saw Ye Qing standing in the garden, he landed beside him and greeted, “Hello again, brother!”

He was none other than Xiao Yang, of course!

“Say, you’re a well-traveled Patrolman, right? Do you happen to recognize these Strangers?” Ye Qing asked.

Unfortunately, Xiao Yang shook his head and said, “No. I’ve never encountered them before!”

Ye Qing rolled his eyes and said, “Let’s get out of this place first!”

Using his foot as the axle, Ye Qing did a half turn and threw a ton of throwing knives in every direction. They easily pierced through the women’s throats and turned them into mist. Xiao Yang too unleashed a palm strike that seemed to compress the air itself and crushed the women who were chasing after him. However, they too vanished like smoke and did not leave behind a body.

“I don’t think we can kill them here!” Ye Qing frowned and dashed toward the exit, but right before he was about to leave the residence, the space around him suddenly rippled like water. Before he knew it, he was back in the garden once more.

“Let me try!” Xiao Yang pushed off the ground and shot straight up into the sky, but just a few seconds later, he reappeared at the exact same spot as before.

“There’s no way out?”

Ye Qing and Xiao Yang exchanged a deep frown. It was impossible to leave the residence normally, and even the sky was off limits. What else could they do to escape? Dig underground?