

Stranger 111

Chapter 111: Wall Painting

“Hahaha... Why do you want to leave? Isn't it nice here?”

Ying Xiu, Plum, and a dozen other women appeared in the sky once more. It would be a wonderful sight if not for the fact that they were trying to trap them in this place.

“Look at them! Look how happy they are!”

Ying Xiu waved a hand and conjured an image. It showed everything that was happening inside the surrounding pavilions. The men they were spending the night with earlier were currently having the time of their life. There were delicious food, sweet wine, melodious music, and warm, succulent bodies that promised never-ending pleasure.

“Stay with us!”

“Stay with us!”

The women beseeched once more with their sweet lips and bewitching eyes that could steal the soul itself.

“Heh. They got their wish after all,” Ye Qing commented mockingly. The women were hoping to seduce him with the lustful scenes, but he could see what was really happening in the pavilions. Unbeknownst to themselves, the delicious food they were eating were really their own flesh, the sweet wine they were drinking were really their own blood, and the holes they were plowing were really their own body!

The pain alone should've jolted awake a long time ago, and yet they could not seem to feel it one bit. Worst of all, they were all wearing bloody, skeletal smiles that were absolutely horrifying to look at!

Boom!

Xiao Yang stomped his foot against the ground and conjured what looked like a dragon of debris. It flew straight toward the women and shredded them to nothing yet again. This time, the women reappeared with hideous snarls and vicious expressions on their faces.

“You have wronged us for the last time, wretches! Taste our wrath!”

Ying Xiu abruptly raised her head and screamed. The rest of the girls did the same thing as well. The soundwaves spread out like ripples and crushed the bridges, the streams, the pavilions and everything else into dust. Not even the ghastly women and the skeletal men inside the buildings were safe from the attack.

“Hmph!” Both Ye Qing and Xiao Yang stifled a groan as blood spurted out of their orifices. Their head pounded like someone was hitting it with a hammer as well.

“Bitch!” Xiao Yang roared, so furious that golden flames were spilling out of his eyes. He clenched his right hand and gradually lifted it into the air, the golden flames surrounding his fist growing thicker with every inch it rose.

When his fist was held high above his head, a piercing light abruptly illuminated the entire residence like the sun. Space shook, and everyone and everything within the light disintegrated into nothing. Naturally, the deadly sound attack was cut off as well.

However, a bunch of clouds joined together and reformed Ying Xiu and the ghastly women once more. Worse, their auras felt just as powerful as before.

“Are they actually unkillable?! How the hell are we going to survive this?” Xiao Yang burst out in anger and disbelief. Although the women themselves were pretty fragile, they had proven themselves to be unkillable no matter what they tried. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before they ran out of strength and died.

“Haha! You cannot escape!” Ying Xiu giggled. This time, the sound spread to every corner of the residence and manipulated the clouds into crashing toward them like a tidal wave.

Boom!

Xiao Yang threw another punch and unleashed his astral qi. A sea of golden flames immediately filled the sky and scattered the clouds. However, the clash was so violent that he couldn’t help but spit out a mouthful of blood.

Looking as pale as a sheet, Xiao Yang looked at Ye Qing and asked, “What do we do?”

The young man had been leaving the battle to Xiao Yang and observing his surroundings the whole time. Squinting a little and rubbing his nose, he said suddenly, “Follow me!”

Xiao Yang’s eyes lit up. “Do you have a plan?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s better than nothing!”

He then charged straight toward the spirit screen [1] at the center of the residence.

The women suddenly turned furious when they noticed Ye Qing’s intentions. They all flew toward the duo at the same time.

I was right! Ye Qing thought in relief as he took out all their pursuers yet again using the Blood Shadows he had hidden in the sky. By the time Ying Xiu and her girls had reformed once more, it was already too late.

“No!” Ying Xiu screeched in anger.

“What do we do?” Xiao Yang asked.

“Don’t stop!” Ye Qing replied simply and charged even faster toward the spirit screen.

“What are you doing, brother? It’s still too early to commit suicide!” Xiao Yang exclaimed in shock. His first thought was that Ye Qing was planning to brain himself

against the wall to preserve his honor or something. While the notion was absolutely ridiculous to him, there were some people out there who valued their honor over their life. Maybe Ye Qing was one of those people?

Ye Qing didn't explode into a shower of blood and gore, however. He simply passed right through the shadow screen and disappeared.

"It's the exit!?" Xiao Yang exclaimed in realization. He followed right behind Ye Qing and vanished into the wall as well. In the sky, Ying Xiu's furious screech echoed like it would never end.

"The temple? We're back!"

After Ye Qing and Xiao Yang had passed through the spirit screen, they discovered that they had reappeared in the rundown temple. Xiao Yang asked curiously, "How did you know that the spirit screen is the exit?"

Ye Qing explained, "While you were battling against the Strangers, I noticed that everything in the residence except the spirit screen was disintegrated by the shockwaves. That is why I figured that the spirit screen is the only real object in that world, and possibly the exit."

"Of course, I didn't actually know if it would work until I tried. Thankfully, I was right!"

"Thank goodness you're here, brother, or I most likely would've died to those terrible women!" Xiao Yang said gratefully while giving Ye Qing a friendly clap on the shoulder, but in reality he was wary of the young man more than ever before. They had encountered two deadly dangers so far—the Anomaly on the bridge and now the ghastly women—and both times Ye Qing had displayed exceptional intelligence and collectedness. In fact, he had outdone him, a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau. Of course, it was partly because he was hiding his strength, but there was no denying that Ye Qing was a formidable warrior.

And that was exactly why he could not allow him to live.

"What are you looking at, brother?" Xiao Yang asked when he noticed that Ye Qing wasn't paying attention to him. Instead, he walked up to the wall painting with a deep frown on his face.

"Don't you think it's strange? We were resting in this temple and minding our own business when suddenly, we all woke up in that residence. Not only that, we reappeared in this temple right after we passed through the exit. Finally, don't you think that this wall painting looks a little familiar? It looks pretty similar to the spirit screen we passed through earlier, don't you think?"

"Are you saying that that strange residence is connected to this wall?" Xiao Yang frowned as well.

He wasn't an idiot. He noticed that something was off with this abandoned temple from the start, and this wall was easily the most suspicious object of them all.

"That will be an understatement. I suspect that the world we were trapped in earlier *is* this painting," Ye Qing guessed while rubbing his chin.

"I agree. What is your plan?"

"In the painting, the Strangers are the absolute rulers of the world, unkillable and immortal. We were much weaker than we should be as well!" Ye Qing's eyes glimmered with intelligence. "But outside? Outside is a different story, won't you agree?"

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Xiao Yang's eyes lit up.

"Exactly!" Ye Qing raised his hand and turned his wrist slightly. An unbelievable amount of force and lightning immediately sprung into existence.

"Boundless Lightning Palm"

The wall painting had one last surprise for them, however. Before Ye Qing could unleash his attack, the silhouettes on the wall suddenly morphed into warped, ghastly faces and howled soundlessly at the duo. They swelled outward as if they were trying to push out of the wall. Not only that, an evil, distorted energy washed over the temple and attempted to restrain Ye Qing, though it was a far cry from the power that they experienced inside the painting.

In response, Ye Qing let out an imperious hmph and channeled his true qi. When the force gathering around his palm had reached a critical point, he pressed it against the wall painting with surprising gentleness almost as if he was caressing a fragile object.

The wall painting immediately distorted as if it was being disrupted by some sort of invisible force. Then, the residence, the pretty women, the background and everything started disappearing inch by inch as if wiped by an invisible eraser. In the end, all that was left was a grayish black wall.

Cracks started spreading across the wall until the whole chunk resembled a spider's web. A few breaths later, it abruptly crumbled into a pile of debris and dust. However, right as the wall fell apart, a brawny figure abruptly emerged into the open. It was none other than the leader of the bandit group. It would seem that the painting's destruction also allowed him to break free from its influence and escape back into the real world.

"Thank you for saving my life!" The brawny man immediately thanked Ye Qing and Xiao Yang after escaping the painting. "I am Zhao, and I swear I will repay your kindness one day! Goodbye!"

The brawny man dashed toward the exit as soon as he finished. He seemed to be in a great hurry for some reason. He had just reached the center of the temple when Ye Qing said,

"I'll give you a lift!"

"What?"

The brawny man did not understand what Ye Qing was saying and looked back instinctively. He immediately saw a flash of steel flying straight toward him.

“You—!”

His pupils contracted into pins as the premonition of death gripped his limbs. He immediately let out a growl, crouched down, and extended both hands toward the incoming attack. At the same time, thick, black hair started growing out of his arms and his face at an exponential rate. They glittered in the dark and looked just as tough as steel.

That wasn't all. His bones abruptly grew larger and thicker, and his fingernails elongated until they resembled claws. His human arms had transformed into wolf arms, and his human hands had transformed into wolf claws in just the blink of an eye. A pair of canine teeth had also grown out of his mouth, giving him the appearance of a wolf.

“Awoooooo!”

The leader crushed the incoming attack with his bare hands before crouching on the ground and bending his back. Muscles tensing, he abruptly kicked off the floor and shot toward the exit like a loose arrow.

His speed was incredible, and for a second it looked like he might just make it out of the temple alive. Then, the leader abruptly turned limp as if he suddenly lost all strength in his body, and his head rolled right off his neck. It looked like a ripe apple from a distance.

“What a fast blade!” Xiao Yang praised even as his pupils contracted into pins. The leader thought he had stopped Ye Qing's attack, but in reality it was just an afterimage. The real attack had sliced through his neck so fast that he never even realized he was dead until his body abruptly gave up on him.

“But why did you kill him, brother?” Xiao Yang asked in puzzlement.

Ye Qing replied indifferently, “He and his group are the Wolf Raiders.”

“The Wolf Raiders?” Xiao Yang walked up to the headless leader and kicked his body over. After a brief inspection, he nodded. “You're right! In that case, well done!”

A Wolf Raider was almost the same as a Grave Raider except that a Grave Raider fed on corpses, while a Wolf Raider fed on human flesh. It should not need to be said which was the worse between the two. Moreover, a Wolf Raider was a former human who gave up on humanity to survive. It was one thing if they repented and returned to being human, but if they did not, then they would gradually transform into a half-Stranger and lose their humanity permanently. They fed on humans, lived in the wilderness, and kept company with Strangers. They were ruthless, inhuman bastards to put it mildly.

A Wolf Raider wasn't fully human or Stranger. It was an amalgamation who possessed the worst qualities of both entities. It was decreed by Chu that all half-humans who harmed their fellow human beings were to be killed without mercy, so what Ye Qing did was an act of justice, not murder!

“Phew... the sun’s up, and the evils are all dead. Let’s resume our journey!” Ye Qing suggested while wiping the blood on his curved saber—he had gotten a new one after breaking his previous blade—and scanning the temple for loot. He was disappointed when he found nothing worthwhile, but the wall painting Stranger should give him some dragon-serpent runes, so it wasn’t a complete waste of effort. If he wasn’t mistaken, the wall painting Stranger was at least a Malice-class Stranger, so he should’ve gained a silver rune.

Xiao Yang looked at the faint light shining through the exit and nodded. “The rain’s let up as well, so why not? Assuming the sky stays clear, we should reach Jade Spring Village by noon!”

As if on cue, a ray of sunlight pierced through the dark clouds and filled the world with light.

Chapter 112: Lake Bogey

Ye Qing and Xiao Yang did not encounter any more danger after leaving the abandoned temple. They were able to make it to Jade Spring Village before noon.

Although Ye Qing already had an inkling of what he might discover after listening to Ling Jianqiu’s account, the reality was still much worse than he had anticipated. The farms were completely abandoned and overgrown with grass, the guards responsible for protecting the village from Strangers were nowhere to be seen, and garbage and feces were everywhere.

These were nothing compared to the horror he felt when he saw the villagers, however. Everyone, be it young or old, looked so thin and haggard he could’ve believed that they were going through a famine. However, all of them were wearing happy smiles on their faces and going about their business as if their minds were living in a completely separate entity.

What was a population of twelve hundred had dwindled to just three hundred, and they all said the same thing even after Ye Qing and Xiao Yang had interviewed each and everyone of them: they were perfectly healthy, no one was missing, and the village was just fine. It was exactly as Yu Hai had reported.

Speaking of which, no one knew where Yu Hai had gone to, or rather, they claimed that they had never even met the guy before, so of course they couldn’t provide his whereabouts. Later, they searched the whole village and even the outskirts for clues to no avail.

That said, it wasn’t like their efforts were completely useless. One, the reason the villagers of Jade Spring Village looked like they had one foot in the grave wasn’t because they were starved, but because they were missing most of their vigor. Two, they couldn’t find any Stranger near Jade Spring Village, not even the common Wind Children or Mud Dolls. As mentioned earlier, Jade Spring Village was completely defenseless right now. The one Patrolman who could have saved them was missing in action as well. A random Red-class or even Mundane-class Stranger could probably slaughter them to the last, and yet they were still safe and sound—relatively speaking, of course.

Ye Qing and Xiao Yang eventually arrived at two theories. One, an extremely powerful Stranger had appeared in Jade Spring Village and scared away all the other Strangers. Moreover, it was keeping the villagers alive to accomplish some sort of unknown objective. They had a couple of

guesses—it could be raising the villagers like livestock, it could be a choosy eater etc—but no evidence to support any guess.

Two, an Anomaly had struck Jade Spring Village, influencing the Strangers and scaring away the other Strangers. But after a brief argument, both men agreed that the first theory was likelier. It was because they noticed various cut marks on the villagers' chest. It was most likely the reason behind the villagers' missing vigor. If this was an Anomaly, it could probably absorb their vigor without leaving a scratch on their body!

Of course, this was just a theory. In the end, they needed to investigate more to find out the truth behind the incident.

In his head, Ye Qing was praying that this wasn't an Anomaly. If it was, he was going to run so fast that Xiao Yang could only breathe his dust, guilty conscience be damned.

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The sun set, and the moon rose. When darkness came, silence became the only theme in Jade Spring Village.

In fact, there was too much silence. Not a candle was lit, and not a sound could be heard throughout the whole village. If they didn't know better, they would've thought that Jade Spring Village was an abandoned village.

“Heavens above. It's like the whole place is dead!” Xiao Yang muttered under his breath. The two men had *not* slept inside Jade Spring Village as a matter of course. Instead, they were observing from a safe spot some distance away from the village.

Logically speaking, the best way to learn the truth about the village was to remain inside the village, but they still didn't know if it was a Stranger or an Anomaly that had turned it to this state. A Stranger would be the best. With their strength, they should be able to escape even if they were no match for it. But if it was an Anomaly, then their recklessness could easily be the death of them.

Had they died, they would not be able to find out the truth or report back to the Pacification Bureau. That was why they had chosen to observe Jade Spring Village from a distance. It definitely wasn't because they were scared for their life. Nuh uh!

“Yeah. If the village is barely alive during daytime, then it is as dead as a graveyard at night.”

Ye Qing jumped down from the branch he was hanging on and lay down on the ground. While staring at the black clouds in the sky, he said, “Something should happen tonight!”

Xiao Yang also lay down beside him and chuckled. “I'm not sure if I want something to happen, to be honest. If it turns out to be beyond our ability to handle...”

“Quit jinxing us!” Ye Qing rolled his eyes at Xiao Yang. “I believe in good karma. Even if the worst were to come by, I'm sure that you would be able to turn it around!”

“Now that, is what I call a compliment!” Xiao Yang laughed.

The two passed the time by making idle chit-chat and keeping an eye on Jade Spring Village. Eventually...

“Here it comes!”

It was past midnight when Ye Qing abruptly opened his eyes. Xiao Yang also jolted awake and climbed to his feet as well. They turned around and stared at the lake next to Jade Spring Village. An unnatural mist was spreading across its surface.

The lake was called Jade Spring Lake because it tasted as smooth as jade and as sweet as spring. It was also how Jade Spring Village got its name.

The two men couldn't help but exchange embarrassed looks with each other. They were one Vessel Augmentor and one Astral Refiner, and they had circled Jade Spring Lake at least three times during the day. However, neither of them had found a thing at the time.

Meanwhile, the mist above Jade Spring Lake was growing thicker and thicker. Then, snow white fishes with three red whiskers hanging beside their gills jumped out of the water and floated in the air. It wasn't long before hundreds of fat, white fishes were hanging in the sky like snow.

Tang! Tang! Tang!

Suddenly, a humanoid Stranger with two arms and legs slowly rose to the surface. It carried a turtle's shell on his back and a pair of horns on its head. Its face was as black as coal, and it was carrying a gong and hitting it with a mallet. The fishes responded to the gong beats and surged forward until they formed a white bridge. After a water pillar lifted the humanoid Stranger onto the bridge of fishes, it strode straight toward Jade Spring Village.

“Do you recognize that Stranger?” Ye Qing asked via sound transmission.

Xiao Yang stared at the Stranger for a bit before shaking his head. “I don't know, but it's probably some sort of lake bogey.”

“Lake bogey?” Just as the mountains were alive with spirits, it was the same with the waters as well. The humanoid was probably some sort of aquatic bogey that was similar to the Mountain God of Little August Hill. This one was clearly evil though!

Ye Qing watched on as the lake bogey walked until it was right above Jade Spring Village. Then, it smacked its gong so hard that he could see some sort of invisible energy rippling across the air. The villagers of Jade Spring Village started stepping out of their houses and walking toward the lake, each and every one of them carrying a blade in their hands. Their expressions were numb, and their eyes glassy. Ye Qing could've been convinced that they were dead.

When the villagers were gathered in front of the lake, the lake bogey walked back to Jade Spring Lake and hit its gong twice. But unlike the previous beats, this one was shrill and rapid. Even from this distance, Ye Qing and Xiao Yang felt as if something was trying to muddle their minds.

The villager standing closest to the lake immediately pulled open his shirt and revealed his bare chest. He then stabbed himself in the heart and sliced open a deep wound.

Blood poured profusely out of the wound and into the lake. The clear waters were immediately dyed in red. For a good few seconds, the villager simply stood there and let his heart's blood flow

out of his body as if he couldn't feel the pain. When he had bled almost a full bowl of blood, one of the fishes lowered its red whiskers and pressed against the wound. The bleeding stopped immediately.

The villager walked away, and the next villager came forward. He did the exact same thing as the first villager and bled his heart's blood into the lake. This would continue on and on until the lake had turned completely red and sticky like blood. The blood stench was so thick that even Ye Qing and Xiao Yang could smell it from where they were.

“What the hell is this lake bogey planning?” Ye Qing whispered.

Xiao Yang shook his head. “I'm not sure, but it can't be anything good. Let's wait and see.”

Tang! Tang!

About half a teatime later, the lake bogey hit its gong again. The center of the lake abruptly started spinning until it formed a whirlpool, and from the bottom rose a lotus that looked as white as jade.

The moment the lotus had risen to the water surface, the viscous blood in the lake abruptly surged into it as if pulled by a mysterious force and dyeing it blood red. It wasn't long before the lake became crystal clear once more.

The blood red lotus looked like something out of a nightmare as it floated innocently on the lake. In the sky, the lake bogey was staring at the blood red lotus like it was the love of its life.

Tang!

A few seconds later, the lake bogey jolted out of its reverie and hurriedly hit its gong. The dozen villagers standing quietly next to the lake abruptly cut open their chest, ripped out their hearts, and tossed it over to the lotus!

The mindless villagers had acted so quickly and abruptly that there was no chance Ye Qing or Xiao Yang could have stopped them. Naturally, the villagers fell to the ground and died after losing their hearts. The white fishes in the sky immediately wrapped their whiskers around the corpses and pulled them into their mouths. Every time they chewed, blood would spurt out of their mouths and spill into the clear waters below. It was unbelievably cruel.

Meanwhile, the blood red lotus was unfolding its thirteen petals like it was blooming. It pulled the hearts toward its stamen and ate the hearts one by one like a maw from hell. After it was done feeding, it grew even bigger and glowed brightly. It also emitted an unbelievably fragrant scent that spread all the way to Ye Qing and Xiao Yang's location.

“Holy shit! It smells incredible!” The two men felt incredibly invigorated after inhaling the scent.

“What is that thing?” Ye Qing whispered.

“I don't know, but it clearly deserves eradication!” Xiao Yang shook his head, but there was a greedy glint in his eyes that he took care not to reveal.

He mulled over the situation for a bit before saying, “We now know that this lake bogey is the true culprit behind the mass disappearance of Jade Spring Village. It's a Hatred-class Stranger, but it

doesn't look so strong that it's beyond our abilities, so why don't you go save the villagers and leave it to me, brother?"

Ye Qing thought for a few seconds before nodding. "Okay!"

"I'll go first!" Xiao Yang declared and soared into the sky. He then burst into flames not unlike a golden sun.

Chapter 113: Blood Jade Lotus

Rumble!

The bridge of fishes was smashed into pieces in the blink of an eye. Due to Xiao Yang's power, the rain of blood and gore had burned into dust by the time it landed in the lakewater.

The lake bogey standing on the bridge was furious, of course. It brought down its mallet on the golden sun immediately.

The mallet looked no different from your ordinary mallet, but it easily shattered the Purple Sun Gold Flame and hit Xiao Yang directly on his fist. As if struck by a lightning bolt, he shuddered and lost control of his true qi in an instant. Not only was his attack dispelled, he was smashed deep into the ground.

"Spit... It's stronger than he looks!"

The lake bogey thought it was over and got ready to leave, but Xiao Yang shot out of the pit and appeared behind it in the blink of an eye. He then unleashed another mighty punch that was hot enough to wither the surrounding plants and boil the air. However, the lake bogey hugged its head so that only its turtle shell was exposed. There was a loud bang and a terrific shockwave that spread across the entire lake and more, but the lake bogey itself was perfectly unharmed.

The lake bogey immediately raised its right leg not unlike a dog who was taking the piss and kicked Xiao Yang in the stomach. The Astral Refiner left a deep gorge on the ground as he was sent flying once more.

"Spit spit! Sonuvabitch! I'm a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau of Luo Shui! No bloody way I can't beat a mere lake bogey like you!"

Xiao Yang was extremely tough, however. He seemed almost unharmed despite taking two solid hits from the lake bogey. Without hesitation, he leaped into the air and battled the Stranger once more.

While this was going on, Ye Qing was sneakily escorting the mindless villagers back into the village. However, he had just finished escorting the last villager when suddenly, he sensed something that made his heart skip a beat. He immediately floated backward like a feather just in time to dodge a devastating mallet attack. It was the lake bogey!

Why is it here? Where is Xiao Yang? A million thoughts raced across Ye Qing's head.

The failure did not deter the lake bogey. It simply disappeared and reappeared behind Ye Qing almost like it had teleported and pressed the attack—or at least it tried to. Ye Qing had detected his intention before it even moved and dashed away, so by the time the lake bogey showed up he was already gone.

The lake bogey kept chasing, and Ye Qing kept escaping from its grasp. For a time, afterimages kept appearing and disappearing in the sky like a light show. If the river bogey was like a ghost that could teleport everywhere, then Ye Qing was like a colored smoke that could clearly be seen, but could not be grasped no matter what the river bogey tried. It was speed and unpredictability versus transience and mysticism.

A while later, after failed attempt after failed attempt, the lake bogey finally lost its cool and let out a terrifying screech. Then, it smacked the gong it was holding.

Tang!

The beat was loud and deafening a thunderclap, but it was also infused with a kind of strange, distorted energy that sounded like a million people whispering beside one's ears at the same time. It wasn't just irritating to the max, it wiped one's memory like a giant eraser as well.

Ye Qing's mind turned blank for an instant. For a moment, he could not tell where he was, what he was doing, or even who he was. His movements slowed. Clearly, the gong beat was an attack that targeted the mind.

Pleased that its tactic had worked, the lake bogey appeared behind Ye Qing once more and aimed its mallet at the back of Ye Qing's head. If it landed, it would shatter Ye Qing's spirit and extinguish his mind without fail. But right before the mallet would make contact, a smirk suddenly spread across the young man's lips. He spun around and caught the mallet firmly in his hands.

“Ggrrk!?”

The lake bogey was astonished. It could not understand why Ye Qing wasn't affected by its gong beat. Before it could react, Ye Qing grabbed the lake bogey with his left hand and unleashed the Netherflames!

“Graaah! Graaah!”

There was nothing the Netherflame could not burn. The lake bogey screamed in pain as the Netherflame spread throughout its body in an instant.

Tang! Tang! Tang!

This time though, the Netherflame had met its match. Every time the lake bogey smacked its gong, the bluish black flames would weaken considerably. Just three gong beats later, the Netherflame abruptly vanished like it never was.

Not done yet, the lake bogey abruptly withdrew its head into its turtle shell. Then, it actually flew out of its shell and leaped far, far away from Ye Qing. In the air, it sucked in a deep breath and struck its gong with all its might.

There was no sound, but the chunk of land Ye Qing was standing on abruptly rippled like a piece of cloth before shooting into the air. It spun like a dragon and threatened to tear Ye Qing into pieces.

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes and raised both hands. Every time they moved an inch upward, his sleeves would swell a little bigger and become much heavier. By the time his hands had moved a meter from its original position, it was like he was carrying an entire lake in his hands.

What better way to crush a dragon than to drop a lake on top of it?

The chunk of land exploded into smithereens as soon as Ye Qing brought down his sleeves, but he wasn't done yet. He turned toward the lake bogey, opened his mouth, and let out a mighty roar that was infused with an immense amount of spiritual power and true qi. It shook the earth and the sky like the wrath of the heavens themselves.

After using its mysterious powers to manipulate the people of Jade Spring Village for so long, the lake bogey had finally gotten a taste of its own medicine. The roar not only stunned it, blood spurted out of its eyes, ears, mouth and nostrils like a waterfall. Before it could recover, a lightning bolt cut through the darkness and pierced right through its forehead.

Boom!

The lake bogey's head exploded, the lightning burned it all before it could spread. A few seconds later, its headless body hit the ground with a soft thud.

"Finally. It sure is a formidable opponent!" Ye Qing pretended to wipe his forehead while sighing in relief. Not only was the lake bogey as quick as a phantom, and its gong could attack the mind and even affect one's memories directly. Even the mallet could disrupt the flow of one's qi. In a sense, it was the perfect assassin.

If he hadn't learned the "Blood Sea Fragrance", an excellent movement art that allowed him to stay ahead of the lake bogey's insane speed, or practiced the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method", which strengthened his mind and spirit so much that he was immune to the mental attack, he could've died even if he was stronger than the lake bogey in almost every aspect.

Xiao Yang was a perfect example. Twice the lake bogey had managed to bury him in dirt thanks to its treacherous abilities.

"Xiao Yang..." Ye Qing frowned the moment he recalled his companion. Earlier, they had agreed that Xiao Yang would keep the lake bogey busy while he rescued the villagers of Jade Spring Village, so why had the lake bogey turned on him?

There were three possibilities. One, the lake bogey noticed what he was doing and decided that it was more important to stop him than to take out Xiao Yang. However, Xiao Yang should've caught up to it almost instantly in this scenario, when in reality he hadn't shown his face the entire time.

The second possibility was that the lake bogey had killed Xiao Yang, but this didn't seem very likely either. While the lake bogey had proven to be a formidable and treacherous opponent, Xiao Yang was both an Astral Refiner and a Patrolman of Luo Shui. Even if the lake bogey managed to catch him off guard, Ye Qing refused to believe that he had nothing that might save him from a fatal attack. The Substitute Doll that saved his life from the Anomaly earlier was the proof of that.

Finally, if he, a Vessel Augmentor, managed to kill the lake bogey without too much trouble, how could an Astral Refiner like Xiao Yang fail to do the same?

The third possibility was that Xiao Yang had intentionally let the lake bogey escape. He wanted the lake bogey to kill him, if not injure him enough so that he would be easier to kill! This was most likely the truth of the matter!

“How curious.” Ye Qing’s eyes turned hard and unyielding. “I wonder why you want me dead, Xiao Yang?”

Ye Qing went over to the lake bogey’s corpse to pick up the gong and the mallet. Then, he vanished in the blink of an eye.

At Jade Spring Lake, Xiao Yang was floating above the blood red lotus and grinning like the devil himself. It was a very different look from the cool but somewhat foolish man he pretended to be.

“Hahaha! Who would’ve thought that a treasure like the Blood Jade Lotus would be found in a small village like this? This will surely propel to greater heights! Hahahaha!”

Xiao Yang cackled and killed a few fishes to feed the Blood Jade Lotus their blood. The strange plant immediately looked more crystalline and mystical than before.

“It’s going to mature any moment now!” Xiao Yang licked his lips greedily and shot a glance in Jade Spring Village’s direction. “Don’t let me down, brother! I’ll come get you as soon as this lotus is in full bloom!”

Forty-nine breaths later, mysterious runes appeared on the petals of the Blood Jade Lotus. It made the petals look even more solid and exquisite than before. At the same time, an inexplicable, dreamy aura spread across the whole lake. It felt as if the whole area had transformed into the Blood Jade Lotus’ domain.

“It’s ready!” Xiao Yang’s eyes lit up. He immediately dashed forward and made a grab for the Blood Jade Lotus. But at the last moment, a silhouette appeared out of nowhere and stole the plant right before he could take it!

“Who is it!?” Xiao Yang exclaimed in shock and fury. *Who’s the bastard who stole his treasure? And how did they get so close without me noticing?*

Xiao Yang glared at the mysterious silhouette landing on the other side of Jade Spring Lake. When they turned around, his pupils abruptly contracted like pins, and he slowly looked up until he was staring the person in the eye. He then broke into a smile and said, “It’s you, brother? You gave me a scare, man!”

The corners of Ye Qing’s lips turned up as he threw the Blood Jade Lotus up and down like it was a toy. “I thought you were dealing with that lake bogey, brother? Where did it go?”

Xiao Yang looked around and scratched his head. “Oh yeah. Where did it go? Maybe it ran away because I was too strong?”

“Is that so?” Ye Qing chuckled. “I must have been pretty unlucky then, because it ran straight to me!”

As soon as he finished, he threw the lake bogey’s corpse over to Xiao Yang’s feet.

“Wow! That is pretty unlucky!” Xiao Yang exclaimed in surprise, but not because he didn’t know the lake bogey would attack Ye Qing. Having fought the Stranger earlier,

he had believed that it was strong enough to injure Ye Qing or at least keep him busy until the Blood Jade Lotus was mature. But kill it? That was definitely not within Xiao Yang's expectations. The bastard didn't even look winded after the fight!

Was it because the lake bogey was really a pushover, or was Ye Qing too strong?!

Who was he kidding? It absolutely was because Ye Qing was too strong. If he wasn't, he would not have to resort to such roundabout tactics.

Chapter 114: That's What A Guilty Person Would Say

Xiao Yang had recognized the Blood Jade Lotus from the moment he set his eyes on it. He immediately came up with a plan to pit the lake bogey and Ye Qing against each other.

The plan was very simple. First, he pretended to die in a manner that would draw the lake bogey's attention to Ye Qing. The lake bogey should be able to keep Ye Qing busy or better, deal him a severe blow. While the fight was ongoing, he would accelerate the Blood Jade Lotus' growth and pocket it as soon as it reached full maturity. Finally, he would return to the battlefield and take out both the lake bogey and Ye Qing. He would be killing many birds with one stone so to speak.

Unfortunately, Ye Qing proved to be even stronger than he thought. Not only did he manage to kill the lake bogey without so much as a scratch, he had stolen the Blood Jade Lotus as well.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Ye Qing was clearly suspicious of him. He wouldn't have snatched the Blood Jade Lotus from under his nose. Now that he was wary, it would be much harder to kill him!

"Are you alright, brother? Did this lake bogey hurt you anywhere?" Xiao Yang asked with feigned concern. It was a small hope, but there was a chance he might be able to fool the young man still. After all, you never know until you try. If a PUA could fool their targets into parting with their chastity and money again and again, why not him?

Ye Qing did not say anything in response though. He simply stared at Xiao Yang with a half-smile on his face.

The silence felt incredibly awkward, but Xiao Yang did not stop trying, "Well, I guess you're fine. That's good. You're amazing, brother!"

Ye Qing continued to smile silently as if he hadn't said a word. *I'm just the audience, bro. Please continue! I'm going to stay perfectly quiet while you perform on stage!*

Eventually, the atmosphere grew so awkward that even Xiao Yang with his thick skin couldn't stand it anymore. So he let out a sigh and said, "Fine, fine, It's my fault. I admit that I haven't done right by you."

"The lotus you're holding is called the Blood Jade Lotus. It's an incredibly rare spirit material that can refine a warrior's astral qi and even imbue it with a shadow of the Blood Qi's power, effectively doubling its potency."

“You probably already know this, but natural astral qi is usually mixed with all kinds of impurities. For a warrior, the purity of the astral qi is directly proportional to its strength. In essence, the Astral Refinement stage is the stage where you refine the natural astral qi you’ve absorbed to absolute perfection.”

“Generally speaking, most warriors can only refine their astral qi one wisp at a time. It’s why any special art or spirit material that can hasten this process is invaluable to any Astral Refiner.”

Xiao Yang paused for a second and continued, “To give you an example, this one Blood Jade Lotus can save an Astral Refiner *thirty years* of hard work. You can imagine just how valuable it is. So, yeah. I got greedy. I wanted you to keep the lake bogey busy while I claim the Blood Jade Lotus for myself.”

Xiao Yang let out a bitter chuckle. “I was going to help you after I took the Blood Jade Lotus as a matter of course, but well, it turns out that you don’t need my help after all. Dammit, why did I have to get greedy? I’ve brought shame to myself and the Pacification Bureau!”

“You’re probably entering the Astral Refinement stage very soon, right? If you’ll allow me to make amends, I’ll surrender two-thirds of the lotus to you. One-third is fine with me.”

Ye Qing smirked and finally broke his silence, “And here I thought you’ll give me the whole lotus!”

“Haha...” Xiao Yang rubbed his nose in embarrassment. “I did fight the lake bogey for a bit and accelerated the Blood Jade Lotus’ growth. That’s gotta be worth something, right?”

“Fine. The lake bogey was slain, and I wasn’t hurt. Since you’ve confessed your mistake, I suppose I can forgive you this once!” Ye Qing laughed and tossed the Blood Jade Lotus into the air. “I don’t know how to use this lotus anyway, so I’ll leave it to you to split the goods, brother!”

“Hehe! Just leave it to me!” Xiao Yang was overjoyed. It would seem that he had managed to fool Ye Qing after all. He was just about to catch the Blood Jade Lotus when suddenly, a throwing knife appeared behind it and shot straight toward his throat!

The two of them were standing fairly close to each other to begin with, and Xiao Yang wasn’t on his guard because he believed that he had successfully fooled Ye Qing. It wasn’t until the throwing knife was an inch away from his throat that he finally realized what happened and reacted.

Xiao Yang’s reaction was mighty impressive. Not only did he manage to twist his neck out of the way in an instant, his right hand was still moving toward the Blood Jade Lotus. He was planning to catch the spirit material and avoid the throwing knife at the same time!

It was at this moment the throwing knife split into not two, not four, but eight throwing knives in total! They also split up and flew toward his eyes, his neck, his heart and other vital spots!

“Star Plucking Hand—Starfield”

Xiao Yang was astonished. He wasn't expecting such an incredible transformation from a single throwing knife. Left with no choice, he gave up on catching the Blood Jade Lotus and clenched his right fist. There was a soft pop as the surrounding space froze as if an invisible hand had caught it within its grasp, freezing the throwing knives in place. The weapons vibrated for a second and shattered into a million pieces.

Xiao Yang wasn't out of the woods yet, however. A saber energy was right behind the throwing knives and flying straight toward his head! The attack wasn't just as fast as the wind, his senses were telling him that its trajectory was impossible to predict. It was like the attack contained an infinite amount of variations, and at this range he simply couldn't identify the correct variation in time to parry it.

“Soulchasing Saber”

Xiao Yang growled and unleashed his astral qi. Like a sun, purple golden flames shot out in every direction and melted away the saber energy like snow. So what if he couldn't identify the variation in time? All he needed to do was to shield himself completely!

Now that he was safe, Xiao Yang immediately retaliated by throwing a mighty punch at Ye Qing. It was like the sun itself was crashing toward the earth and threatening to burn everything into dust.

Ye Qing did not panic though. Instead, he summoned a mallet into his hand and tapped Xiao Yang's fist with it. What was a solid, terrifying, and seemingly unstoppable power suddenly fell into complete disarray. The impetus was interrupted, and the intent vanished like it never existed.

The lake bogey's mallet!? Xiao Yang's eyes bulged as a deadly premonition struck him. *Not good!*

The thought had just crossed his mind when a bigger, brighter light erupted from the spot where saber energy had melted into nothing a while ago. Light shone brightest in the dark, and life in the shadow of death. As a result, this attack was far faster, cunning, and potent than all the attacks Ye Qing had unleashed until now. As if that wasn't enough, the saber energy was also wreathed in a layer of cold, demonic flames!

Allow me to send you to the King of Hell with the Netherflames and the Soulchasing Saber!

Boom!

The flame-wreathed attack cut Xiao Yang from the left waist all the way to the right shoulder, leaving a wound so deep that Ye Qing could practically see his internal organs. Not only that, cold, icy droplets that resembled beads of diamond seeped out of the wound and chilled Xiao Yang to the core. The droplets then popped and released a blast of icy force that withered flesh and blood and worsened his wounds.

Throughout all this, the Netherflames burned as brightly as ever. The icy force couldn't extinguish it, and blood actually seemed to strengthen it.

Rumble!

Ye Qing still wasn't done, however. He opened his mouth and spat a literal bolt of lightning straight at Xiao Yang's forehead!

“Lightning Bolt”

But before the Lightning Bolt could pierce Xiao Yang’s head and explode it like a watermelon, tendrils of light abruptly slithered down the hat he was wearing. They were thin, but they shone as bright as the sun itself. They covered his body and formed a retro-style robe carrying the sun and the moon on each shoulder, and the stars on the chest. What looked like an image of the universe also appeared beneath his feet.

Lightning Bolt was about an inch away from Xiao Yang’s forehead when it struck what looked like an invisible, rippling barrier. As a result, the Strange Artifact was deflected to the side instead.

A shame, Ye Qing sighed internally as he summoned Lightning Bolt back to his side. He knew that this was as far as his surprise attack could go.

Ye Qing had planned out every step of his surprise attack as meticulously as he could. He had tossed out the Blood Jade Lotus to distract Xiao Yang before catching him off guard with Starfield and the Soulchasing Saber. Then, he disrupted his attack with the lake bogey’s mallet and seized the opportunity to severely injure him with a Netherflame plus Soulchasing Saber combo. Finally, he unleashed Lightning Bolt to end Xiao Yang.

In fact, his surprise attack had gone without a hitch until the last moment. Caught completely off guard, the Astral Refiner didn’t even get the chance to use his Strange Artifact. Unfortunately, he was just a beat too slow when he unleashed Lightning Bolt, and Xiao Yang was ultimately able to deflect the fatal strike with his Strange Artifact. It was like jogging nine kilometers in a ten-kilometer marathon. In the end, he still failed to kill Xiao Yang.

But of course, his effort wasn’t completely futile. Xiao Yang asked, “What are you doing, brother? I know you’re upset because I tried to take advantage of you, but don’t you think killing me is a step too far?”

The Astral Refiner was trying to extinguish the insidious force and Netherflame wreaking havoc inside his body, but it was proving to be an extremely slow-going process even with his Strange Artifact. Physical technique wasn’t the only insidious thing about the “Soulchasing Saber”. If the practitioner managed to land a direct hit, its seemingly innocuous force could invade the victim’s meridians and even crush their internal organs. It was how he had spread his Blood Shadow true qi and his Netherflame throughout his whole body.

This meant that Xiao Yang didn’t just look horrible on the outside, his insides were bubbling like a pot of boiling oil as well. There was no way he would be able to extinguish the nefarious energies inside him without a considerable amount of time and effort, and certainly not before this battle was over. It was the perfect recipe for a masochist like him.

“I’ll be taking this Blood Jade Lotus. It’s what you owe me for trying to trick me earlier!”

The Blood Jade Lotus was still falling through the air when Ye Qing caught it and slipped it inside his Nature’s Shell. He then added, “You ask me why I’m trying to kill you? It’s because you tried to kill me first, of course!”

Xiao Yang’s pupils contracted into pins. “I think there’s a misunderstanding between us, brother.”

“Misunderstanding?” Ye Qing grinned. “I don’t think so. You were in cahoots with Qing Kui, weren’t you? Or should I say, you’re the junior brother he spoke of before I killed him!”

Xiao Yang replied innocently, “Who’s Qing Kui? I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Seriously, brother? That is exactly what a guilty person would say!” Ye Qing shook his head in mock disappointment. “It’s no use though. Your denial is pointless before the evidence!”

Chapter 115: I Hope You Won’t Regret This

“Evidence? What evidence?” A small, almost scornful smile crossed Xiao Yang’s lips. He did not mind Ye Qing monologuing for a bit because he needed time to recover, and because he was waiting for something.

“One, Qing Kui had called out to his junior brother moments before his death. Since he’s an Astral Refiner, his junior brother can’t be too far behind. Can you guess who’s the only other Astral Refiner in Anyang besides Qing Kui? Two, you showed up the day after Qing Kui was dead. Well ain’t that a coincidence? Three, you, a mighty Patrolman of Luo Shui, acted like I was your long lost lover during our first meeting even though I’m just a small fry. While I believe in love at first sight and the like, you were just a little too passionate in your attempt to buddy up with me. And what do we call people who buddy up to you for no apparent reason whatsoever? A person with an ulterior motive!”

Ye Qing raised his fourth finger and continued, “Four, Chief Ling is a careful and steadfast man. If he ordered you to accompany me on the investigation, he would definitely inform me about it before or after he spoke about the incident. Since he hadn’t, your decision to join me is clearly a personal one. But I’m here to conduct an investigation, not take a vacation, so why on earth would you willingly put yourself in danger? I wasn’t sure about your motive before, but now I know for certain that you came with me to kill me!”

“Five—”

There’s a five? Did I really screw up that badly? Xiao Yang pondered in astonishment. He admitted that he had acted a little too hastily and deliberately at the beginning, but he was certain he hadn’t given anything away during this trip.

“—you were forced to use a Strange Artifact to save your life when we encountered the Anomaly at Coiled Snake Ridge. You probably thought I didn’t recognize it, but I do, and I know all there is to know about the Substitute Doll.”

“The Substitute Doll can only be wielded by the forger themselves. It cannot be stolen or transferred to another person even after the owner is dead. Therefore, you have to be the forger of the Substitute Doll.”

“The method to forge the Substitute Doll is extraordinarily cruel and evil. It’s why it was banned by the imperial court. That is how I know that you aren’t nearly as kind as you pretend to be, and why my suspicions were fully aroused!”

“Finally, there is the matter with the Blood Jade Lotus. You claimed you were going to help me after you’ve claimed the Blood Jade Lotus, but that was a lie, wasn’t it? You were hoping that we would tire each other out so you could kill both of us easier!”

“You said you had evidence, but so far everything you’ve told me is guesses at best. What if it was just a string of unfortunate coincidences?” Xiao Yang argued, though on the inside he admitted that his “perfect” plan was far more flawed than he thought.

Ye Qing chuckled. “Are you even listening to yourself? Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, and three times is enemy action! This is doubly true in the *jianghu*!”

“Too many coincidences is the same as enemy action? Hahaha! I’ve never heard of this idiom, but it’s wonderful! Hahahaha!” Xiao Yang suddenly let out a loud, almost unhinged cackle. “But what if you were wrong? What if it really was just a coincidence?”

Ye Qing shrugged. “Then nothing. This is the *jianghu*, and we are both *jianghu* warriors. If you’re not prepared to die, then you should not have set foot in this shithole to begin with. Right or wrong has no place in this world.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re not innocent though. You’re a man who would damn a mother and her baby just to make a Substitute Doll to save your life. Even if I was wrong, killing you would only earn me good karma!”

“Well said, well said! You truly are a poet!” Xiao Yang let out another peal of mad cackle and dropped his act completely. “I’ll admit that I’ve underestimated you. I can hardly believe that you hail from a small place like Anyang. It’s too bad that your naivety will be the death of you!”

Ye Qing smiled. “Naivety? Ah, are you talking about me wasting my breath and giving you time to recover?”

Xiao Yang grinned devilishly. “Am I wrong?”

Ye Qing’s smile widened. “What makes you think that you’re the only one who’s buying time? You may have heard that I possess a Strange Artifact called the Blue Demon Hand. It’s the creator of the Netherflame that’s corroding your flesh and eating your insides. It must be quite an enjoyable experience for a masochist like you, isn’t it?”

“My main point is, the Blue Demon Hand has a second ability called the Hundred Poison. The Hundred Poison, as you may have guessed from its name, is an incredibly poisonous gas that’s also odorless, colorless, incorporeal and invisible. It

can weaken your vigor, corrode your organs, and destroy your blood vessels all without you noticing!"

"I don't think you've noticed, but I've been standing upwind this whole time. You think you're recovering, but you've really been dying at a slow and steady rate!"

Xiao Yang had looked internally as soon as Ye Qing said the word "Hundred Poison", and as the young man claimed an incredibly deadly poison was polluting his vigor, eating away at his internal organs, and killing his blood vessels bit by bit. Already, he was starting to lose control over his own qi.

The reason he hadn't noticed until now was because his senses were damaged by the Netherflame, and he was too focused on putting them out to notice the invisible poison that was killing him as well. He was also too absorbed in his own plan to realize that Ye Qing was buying time as well.

He called Ye Qing naive, but he was the truly naive one. Despite his youthful appearance, the young man was really as cunning as an old fox. He really should've known better than to underestimate him!

"Hahaha... you got me. You're definitely one of the most formidable foes I've ever faced!"

Xiao Yang coughed through his hand and caused black blood to seep through his fingers. He looked completely defeated, and yet his grin kept growing wider and wider for some reason. "But just because I lost the battle doesn't mean that I've lost the war!? I haven't only been buying time to regain my strength, you know? I was also waiting for reinforcements!"

"Reinforcements?" Ye Qing's heart skipped a beat. "Who?"

He was certain that Xiao Yang and Qing Kui had come to Anyang alone. He wouldn't have bothered going through all the deception and trickery otherwise. Was he wrong?

Suddenly, Ye Qing's forehead throbbed ominously. It was because he sensed dozens of people entering his range and surrounding him from all sides.

"Who else? People who want you dead, of course!" Xiao Yang sneered.

Xiao Yang's reinforcements reached them in just the blink of an eye. They were all wearing black shirts and cloaks that concealed their appearance completely. Clearly, they didn't want to be recognized.

Ye Qing spread his spirit far and wide and determined everyone's cultivation level in an instant. *Two peak Vessel Augmentors and thirty plus of initiate or adept Qi Invokers. No one here is a weakling either!*

There was no way these people were Xiao Yang's men. If they were, they would've been noticed as soon as they crossed Anyang's border. In fact, the day after he killed Qing Kui, he had asked Qiao Six to give him a name list of every unfamiliar face who had entered Anyang as of late. However, the information broker had found no one except Xiao Yang, Qing Kui, and a handful of others.

Qiao Six was a local snake and the greatest information broker in Anyang. Even if he presumed that Xiao Yang and his men had infiltrated the county in disguise, there was still no chance they could have escaped the man's notice. Therefore, these men must hail from Anyang.

There were only a handful of factions in Anyang, and they were the Pacification Bureau, Qiao Six, the Iron Shirt Gang, the Shen Clan and the Li Clan.

None of these factions—not even the Pacification Bureau—was powerful enough to field two peak Vessel Augmentors and over thirty Qi Invokers to assassinate a single person, so it was reasonable to assume that two or more factions were working together. It could not be the Pacification Bureau because they owed him big time for saving the county from annihilation, not to mention that Ling Jianqiu was a trustworthy character. Qiao Six was a close acquaintance who benefited much from their association, so it probably wasn't him either. The Iron Shirt Gang was just out of the question.

This left the Shen Clan and the Li Clan only, and it so happened that their patriarchs—Shen Xian and Li Yuankang—were both Vessel Augmentors. They also had very good reasons to want him dead.

“You lot are from the Shen Clan and the Li Clan, aren't you?” Ye Qing said suddenly.

The approaching men abruptly froze in their tracks, and their two leaders glared at him like they would swallow him alive.

It's definitely them! Ye Qing concluded and stared at the two Vessel Augmentors. “Shen Xian, Li Yuankang, I have no quarrel with either of you, so why have you come to kill me?”

The two patriarchs weren't going to admit this, of course. “You're mistaken. There is no Shen Xian or Li Yuankang in our group!”

“Deny all you want, it won't change the truth. I have just one question for you: are you sure you want to become enemies with me?” Ye Qing asked. There was so much gravitas in his voice that they felt like a mountain had sat on their shoulders.

Shen Xian and Li Yuankang exchanged a glance with each other. Then, they commanded their men forward with a firm wave.

“Got it. I hope you won't regret this!”

Ye Qing did not try to dissuade them a second time. Sometimes, no amount of words was enough to change a person's mind. Sometimes, the only way to convince them to see reason was to step over their cold, dead bodies!

“Kill!” All thirty plus assassins growled out and charged toward Ye Qing at the same time. In response, Ye Qing flipped his right hand and threw what looked like a couple of silver flowers straight at his enemies.

“Star Plucking Hand”

Pssh! Pssh! Pssh!

The “flowers” split into a hail of throwing knives and nailed the closest five Qi Invokers in the throat, killing them instantly. Behind Ye Qing, six Qi Invokers with the best movement arts readied their swords and attacked his major points as quickly and soundlessly as deadly vipers.

“Sword of the Six Boys” [1]

Ye Qing did not even look at his attackers though. He simply swung his sleeves and created a circle of force that diverted all the swords into his sleeves instead of his major points. Not only that, the move snapped the blades into multiple sections and twisted their arms round and round like ropes.

Chapter 116: The Uncertain Chain

Shocked and in pain, the six men abandoned their swords and tried to retreat.

“I’ll see you off!” Ye Qing chuckled and hardened his sleeve. It slammed into the six men’s chest like an avalanche and sent them flying through the air, blood streaming out of every orifice in their body. They were dead long before they hit the ground because the attack had shattered their internal organs into bits. Not only that, they were moving so fast that they slammed into a few assassins who were too slow to get out of the way and killed them as well.

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was croaking like a toad and releasing a bright red fog from his body. Once he was completely shrouded within the fog, he gradually faded into nothing like a mirage.

“Watch out!” Shen Xian recognized the danger and shouted on top of his lungs, but he was still too late. Ye Qing abruptly reappeared in the middle of the group and whispered, “Too slow!”

A crescent saber slid out of his sleeve and drew a crooked arc across the air. Then, more arcs appeared in the air until the space around Ye Qing resembled a chaotic but tight-knit web. The arcs disappeared a second later, but over a dozen men had holes in their throat, their foreheads, their hearts, their dantians and other vital spots. It was only after the fact that they panicked as if realizing what just happened, but it was too late. Their eyes turned glassy, and they collapsed and fell dead.

Before they hit the ground, their blood flew out of their bodies and circled around Ye Qing like ribbons. He then turned toward Shen Xian and Li Yuankang and smiled. “It’s your turn now!”

His smile was kind, but it was worse than a demon’s in Shen Xian and Li Yuankang’s opinions. Realizing that they had underestimated the young man, they wrestled down their shock and fear and roared, “R-Retreat!”

They had spent decades raising these men into who they were. They weren’t just elites, they were the foundational pillars of their two clans. If they all died, it would not be worth it even if they managed to kill Ye Qing in the end!

The two patriarchs charged Ye Qing to buy time for their men to escape. Scared shitless by the bizarre and horrific abilities Ye Qing had displayed, the assassins did not hesitate to follow the order. However, they had just taken a step when their blood suddenly bubbled out of control, and their energies fell into disorder. Before they could figure out what was happening to them, Ye Qing sneered,

“Taking your leave without asking for my permission? How rude!”

Ignoring Shen Xian and Li Yuankang, he clenched his fist and caused a sea of Blood Shadows to appear all around him. At the same time, one of the assassins suddenly let out a bloodcurdling scream that was cut short when he exploded into smithereens.

His death was like a signal. All the Qi Invokers started screaming at the same time as their bodies swelled like balloons, and blood poured profusely out of their bodies. A chain of explosions later, nothing was left except blood and gore. That was the end of the Shen Clan and the Li Clan’s cadre.

“Noooooooooooo!!!” Shen Xian and Li Yuankang screamed with bloodshot eyes. It wasn’t just their present that Ye Qing had ruined, but their future as well!

“It hurts, doesn’t it? I told you you would regret this!” Ye Qing cracked a grin at the maddened patriarchs.

“I’ll kill you!” Li Yuankang roared and summoned a spear into his hands. He thrust it so fast that it split into a flurry of fiery afterimages that seemed powerful enough to ignite an entire meadow. It was a technique from the Li Clan’s Vessel Augmentation stage spear art, the “Ignition Spear Art”!

“Hundred Strikes Ignition”

At the same time, Shen Xian threw out a chain from his sleeves. The chain was rusted, dark, and heavy. It looked like an ordinary chain, but it was floating in the air and slithering around like a snake. It was then Shen Clan’s Red-class Strange Artifact, the Uncertain Chain!

The chain circled the air several times before splitting into multiple chains and shooting toward Ye Qing without warning. They surrounded him from all sides and closed in on him from every direction.

Ye Qing executed a Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve technique that shattered the chains and seemingly kept them at bay, but suddenly, he lost his smile and dashed some thirty meters away from his original position.

It was futile though. A chain had appeared around his torso before he knew it, and it quickly extended to the rest of his body and caught him in a tight bind!

Ye Qing immediately channeled his true qi and tried to break out of the chains, but it was tougher than he expected. Shen Xian felt like his frustration and hatred were wiped clean in an instant as he let out a wild laugh, “Hahaha! This is the Uncertain Chain, and you cannot avoid it once it’s locked onto you, much less break free! Now die!”

The Uncertain Chain was a Red-class Strange Artifact with the ability to entrap both yin and yang. The reason it was called the “Uncertain Chain” was because it was simultaneously real and unreal at the same time when targeting an enemy, meaning that its state of existence was fluid and everchanging. It was a unique quality that made it nigh impossible to defend against.

Regarding its ability to entrap “yin and yang”, yin referred to yin entities with no physical body such as ghosts and yin soul, whereas yang referred to flesh-and-blood entities such as humans, animals, Strangers and the like.

In short, the Uncertain Chain could entrap both physical and non-physical objects. Unless the strength disparity was too huge, practically no one could break out of its bindings and must contend with a debilitating, most likely fatal handicap.

“Kill him now, Brother Li!”

“Kill!”

Li Yuankang arrived at just the right moment and thrust his spear straight at Ye Qing. If the young man didn't do something, it would skewer every part of his body and turn him into a pile of ash.

Rise! Ye Qing mentally commanded. His Blood Shadows immediately appeared in front of him and surged toward Li Yuankang not unlike a tsunami of blood.

Blood was, in part, water, so an unimaginable amount of steam was released when the two elements clashed. The wall of spear afterimages disappeared, but the red hot, flame-wreathed spear managed to cut through the blood and continue toward Ye Qing. In fact, Li Yuankang unleashed a dragon of pure fire straight at Ye Qing when he brought down his spear!

The spear was no ordinary spear. It was the Red-class Strange Artifact, the Ignition Fire Dragon Spear!

Ye Qing was as small as an insect compared to the fire dragon. His hair was curling up from the heat even though the fire dragon was still a fair distance away from him.

A meter before the fire dragon would consume him whole, Ye Qing suddenly opened his mouth and spat out a lightning bolt. It cut the roaring dragon in half and slammed into the Ignition Fire Dragon Spear's spear tip, temporarily keeping it at bay. It was, of course, Lightning Bolt.

For a time, the mini sword and the flame-wreathed spear struggled for dominance. Sparks flew everywhere, and the shockwaves kicked up a ton of dust and dug deep holes into solid earth. It almost looked like the site of an earthquake.

As both Lightning Bolt and the Ignition Fire Dragon Spear were Red-class Strange Artifacts, they shared more or less the same power. It would take a while before the stalemate was broken, but Ye Qing was pretty sure that Shen Xian was going to stay on the sidelines and do nothing like a good boy. He needed to win this, now.

Let's see, how do you win a tug of war again? That's right...

Ye Qing emitted a pulse of spiritual power from his forehead and into Lightning Bolt. The Strange Artifact rang softly and pulled back an inch as if it was faltering under the Ignition Fire Dragon Spear's power. Pleasantly surprised, Li Yuankang did not hesitate to spin his spear like a top and pressed forward.

It was at this moment Lightning Bolt shot forward and clashed against the fiery spear once more. Then, it discharged a terrifying amount of lightning that blinded both men.

Li Yuankang blanched. The renewed attack was so powerful and so unexpected that his grip slipped, and his spear skidded back an inch before he regained it. However, he had to exert far more strength to maintain his grip because his blood was drenching the handle, and lightning was creeping into his open wound and destabilizing his grip even more.

And you're done.

Lightning Bolt pushed even harder, and suddenly, Li Yuankang's finger bones snapped as if they could handle the pressure no longer. The Ignition Fire Dragon Spear flew right out of his grasp.

“NO!”

All the blood drained away from Li Yuankang's face as he screamed in horror. Before he could dodge out of the way, the mini sword shot through his forehead, and everything dissolved into darkness.

“Phew...” Ye Qing opened his mouth and inhaled Lightning Bolt back down his throat. His head was pounding like a bitch.

Lightning Bolt was said to be able to kill anyone and anything within a hundred steps from its wielder, but it must be nurtured with his blood essence and spiritual power. The more blood essence and spirit he fed into the sword, the stronger it became.

Thanks to the Annon Sutra, he possessed a powerful physique and a nigh infinite amount of blood essence. Thanks to the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”, his spirit was far stronger than even your average Astral Refiner. That was why Lightning Bolt was so much more powerful in his hands than Zheng Feng.

Just now, he had injected all of his spiritual power into Lightning Bolt and targeted the weakest point of his attack. That was why he was able to overwhelm his opponent, and why he was battling against a terrible headache and nausea right now.

Shunk!

Suddenly, Ye Qing tensed up and moved an inch to the left. As if on cue, a soft sword stabbed into his back and out of his chest. If he hadn't sensed the danger at the last moment, the attack absolutely would've stabbed him in the heart and killed him!

What was scary was that the sword was undetectable right until the second it was about to sink into his flesh. It blended so well with its surroundings that it was almost as if it didn't exist.

“The Thirteen Swords of Hidden Mist!”

Ye Qing made the connection immediately. The “Thirteen Swords of Hidden Mist” was the signature sword art of the Shen Clan. It originated from an assassin sect known as the “Gate of Hidden Mist” over a century ago. Their martial arts could be summed up in just a few words: silent, invisible, and lethal on the first strike. Of course, their movement arts were excellent as well.

This was why Ye Qing couldn't detect the “Thirteen Swords of Hidden Mist” even with his powerful spirit. Fast, accurate and ruthless, the sword art was an assassination art meant to kill the target with the first strike. That Ye Qing managed to avoid it at all was a testament to his skills.

“Correct. It is the ‘Thirteen Swords of Hidden Mist!’”

Shen Xian's voice came from behind him, but Ye Qing was unable to pinpoint his exact location. Sometimes it came from the left, and sometimes the right. Li Yuankang might be the most powerful warrior of the three clans, but Shen Xian was absolutely the best assassin and the most annoying to deal with.

Croak! Croak! Croak!

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and croaked in rapid succession. When he croaked nine times in a row, an unimaginable aura hiked all the way to the nine heavens, crushed the earth thirty meters around him, and kicked up a wave that was over thirty meters tall from the Jade Spring Lake!

Ye Qing acted so swiftly and decisively that Shen Xian never reacted until it was too late. By the time he figured out what the young man was doing, a terrific wave of blood had swept across the entire area and struck him squarely in the chest. His chest was completely caved in as he shot through the air like a ragged doll.

Chapter 117: Deadly Evergreen Ivy Flower

“His true qi is...! He’s achieved perfect Vessel Augmentation!”

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When Shen Xian finally managed to catch himself, he stared at the blood red true qi that had swatted him like a fly and engulfed everything within thirty meters of the young man. He was slack-jawed with shock when he fully perceived its power. The true qi was as heavy as a mountain and as spectacular as the sea. It was easily twice as immense as his own true qi. If this wasn’t perfect Vessel Augmentation, then nothing was.

Xiao Yang was just as astonished as Shen Xian was, but his reasons were far more profound. As an Astral Refiner and a disciple of Sunset Hill, he was much more worldly than Shen Xian was. Not only did he recognize that Ye Qing was a perfect Vessel Augmentor, he realized that Ye Qing was cultivating the Blood Shadow Castle's top-tier Vessel Augmentation cultivation art, the “Blood Shadow Divine Art”.

Xiao Yang was not unfamiliar with the Blood Shadow Castle. In fact, he had sparred with the disciples who had achieved perfect Vessel Augmentation. That was how he knew that Ye Qing’s true qi was way greater than even his peers. Heck, he had more true qi than even him, an Astral Refiner. Just how was this possible?

This guy isn’t normal. He mustn’t be allowed to live no matter what!

Xiao Yang grew even more determined to kill Ye Qing. The young man must die even if he didn’t have the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”!

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was sucking in another deep breath after repelling Shen Xian. He sucked in every ounce of true qi around him until his stomach was as big as a pregnant woman’s. The Uncertain Chain immediately rattled from the sudden increase in size.

“Fooo....” Ye Qing exhaled some murky air, and his stomach grew smaller. The Uncertain Chain immediately shrank to adjust to its captive’s size, but it was definitely looser than before. It was at this moment Ye Qing growled and fought against his bindings with all his might. His arm muscles strained against the chain, and his feet sank into the ground. The Uncertain Chain let out a metallic screech that lasted for a few seconds before it finally snapped in half.

“Pwack!”

Shen Xian threw up a mouthful of blood and turned as white as a sheet when the Uncertain Chain was destroyed. It was because the Strange Artifact was tied to his heart's blood. His shock triumphed over his pain, however. He never thought it was even possible to break the Uncertain Chain via brute force until Ye Qing.

The loss of his Strange Artifact was the final straw for the patriarch. Without hesitation, he turned tail and ran away like the mist. He knew that his departure would most likely cause the assassination attempt to end in failure, and that the young man was almost certainly going to take revenge against the Shen Clan if he survived, but so what? He was the heart and soul of the Shen Clan. If the Shen Clan was destroyed, he could always rebuild it another day. But if he died, then it was the end of the Shen Clan.

Also, what would be the point if he wouldn't live to savor the fruits of his labor?

Shen Xian wasn't stupid, and as the patriarch of a large clan it was practically his nature to figure out his priorities, weigh the pros and cons, and know what risks he could take and couldn't. And right now, every cell on his body was screaming that his first and only priority was to keep himself alive!

Shen Xian's instinct was correct. It was just too bad someone else had a different idea. He was literally a second away from removing himself from the battlefield when suddenly, two vines burst out of the shoreline and pierced his defenseless body faster than he could react. Then, it started growing white flowers on its stem. The patriarch tried to struggle, but it was useless. Every time a white flower grew out of the vine, Shen Xian's aura would weaken a little more. The vines were literally sucking the life out of him. When Shen Xian finally perished, all that was left behind was a pair of vines that were covered in bright, beautiful flowers.

"Those plants... are evergreen ivy!" Ye Qing suddenly had a very bad feeling about all this. "Is Evergreen Ivy the one behind all this?!"

"It all makes sense now. I was wondering how an outsider like Xiao Yang managed to figure out the lay of the land and even recruit the aid of the Shen Clan and the Li Clan so quickly. But it wasn't him. It was her!"

Ye Qing finally figured out everything. Last time, he had tricked Evergreen Ivy and ruined her grand plan. Tonight, it was her turn to ensnare him in a deadly assassination attempt. Karma really was a bitch.

Seriously, I'm just one person, and she mobilized over forty men to kill me. Am I really that scary?

"This is what you've been waiting for, isn't it? Come out and fight me, Evergreen Ivy! Come and kill me!" Ye Qing shouted. Unfortunately, the cunning Stranger did not fall for the bait. He was unable to detect her presence even after extending his spirit as far away as he could. She was definitely here though, and he wasn't just saying this because of the vines. Every plant in the area was swaying uniformly from side to side like a greeting.

There was a moment of silence when suddenly, countless vines burst out of the bushes, the trees, and the flowers all around Ye Qing. Some of them were as thick as a human's arm, and some were

as thin as a finger. Some were covered in thorns, and some were as smooth as glass. Regardless of their appearance, they all wanted Ye Qing dead.

“Not holding back, eh?!”

Having seen how Shen Xian was drained into a dry husk, Ye Qing didn't dare to treat the vines lightly. He slashed at the incoming vines like lightning and cut every single one of them.

The vines weren't very tough, and Ye Qing was able to make quick work of them, at least at the beginning. The problem was that the severed vines immediately dug into the ground and sprouted more vines, so their numbers were actually increasing instead of decreasing!

Thwack! Thud! Pssh!

There was no way Ye Qing could defend himself against so many vines, so he slowly but surely began to accumulate wounds. As if that wasn't bad enough, the white flowers on the vines weakened him and slowed his movements. Specifically, it was sapping away his vitality, his vigor, his true qi and even his spirit, or his essence, qi and spirit for short!

He wasn't afraid of losing his vigor or his true qi because he had the dragon-serpent runes. He could literally replenish them faster than Evergreen Ivy could absorb them. However, there was nothing he could do about his spirit. In fact, he would be long dead if his spirit wasn't far stronger than your average warrior.

“Yeah, there's no way I can win like this. Time to leave!” Ye Qing decided immediately. Although he had taken out Li Yuankang and Shen Xian, they had never been strong enough to constitute a real threat. From the start, the true threat had always been Xiao Yang and Evergreen Ivy.

Xiao Yang was severely injured, burned, and poisoned, but enough time had passed that he had probably removed the status conditions and recovered enough to fight again. Evergreen Ivy was in tip-top condition, and heavens only know how long she had been hiding and preparing for this fight. He had no intention to find out exactly how many traps she had laid for him.

No, it would be pure folly to fight this out even if he was at his best, which he wasn't. Revenge wasn't always best served cold, but he certainly didn't mind waiting until he was an Astral Refiner before making his comeback!

Ye Qing hacked open a path and immediately tried to make his escape. However, he had just taken a few steps when the sea of vines blocked his path once more. It was like trying to punch through a prison with heaven knows how many layers in it!

Boom!

Ye Qing decided to switch tactics and lashed out with his sleeves instead. The vines blocking his way were immediately crushed into smithereens. *Cutting the vines didn't work, but there's no way they can regrow after I've powdered—*

Unfortunately, he didn't even get to finish his thoughts before the powder landed on the earth and grew into more vines and white flowers.

Ye Qing: “...” *Phuck!*

The good news was that he wasn't out of ideas yet. He reached out with his left hand and unleashed a torrent of bluish black flames. An entire swath of vines burned into ash in an instant.

Surely it'll work this time!?

There were good news and bad news. The good news was that the ashes didn't regrow into more vines. The bad news was that the surviving vines grew thicker and stronger when they came into contact with the ashes!

It's because ash improves soil fertility and—now is not the time for a science class, brain!

The tactic wasn't perfect, but it was effective, so Ye Qing did not hesitate to burn all the vines into ash and escape into the distance. For a short while, it seemed like he was finally out of the woods, but a terrible itchy sensation suddenly assaulted the back of his neck. It was unlike any itch he had ever felt before.

“What the hell?” Ye Qin muttered while reaching behind him and ripping something out of his neck. When he looked, he saw that it was a white evergreen ivy flower.

Ye Qing's face immediately contorted into a grim snarl. It was because the roots of the flower were tied to a chunk of flesh and dripping with blood. It would've been okay if it was a one-time thing, but his hands, his elbows, his face, his stomach and other parts of his body suddenly started itching as well. It wasn't long before more flowers burst out of his flesh and danced to the wind!

“When did she...?”

Ye Qing ripped out a flower growing on the back of his right hand, but it also ripped out an entire chunk of flesh. Clearly, the flowers were deeply rooted in his flesh and maybe even his bones. He would be killing himself slowly and painfully if he tried to rip them out by force.

I need to find another way to remove these flowers! Ye Qing thought as a surge of vitality healed the horrifying wound back to normal.

But first, I need to know when and how I contracted these flowers in the first place. Did I catch it when the vines cut me? Ye Qing mulled over this for a few seconds before shaking his head. *No, it's not the vines.*

Although the vines did possess the ability to sap his essence, qi and spirit, he was sure he didn't feel anything out of the ordinary when they hurt him.

What could it be?

Ye Qing's gaze abruptly became transfixed to the flowers growing out of his body. *It's the flowers... or rather, the pollen they release!*

He could see wisps of nigh invisible powder flying out of the flowers' stamen and into the air. Every object that came into contact with it—the earth, the trees, the plants and more—would sprout into evergreen ivy flowers.

That was why the flowers had spread across all the farms surrounding Jade Spring Lake. It was a phantasmal sight he could've enjoyed if it wasn't killing him slowly. The reason he hadn't noticed until now was because the pollen were too tiny.

Now that he knew what the culprit was, it was easy to figure out how he might have contracted the pollen. He could've inhaled them into his body, or they could've invaded his body through his wounds.

Ye Qing dared not take Evergreen Ivy's trump card lightly. First, he summoned his Blood Shadow true qi and formed a shield around himself. It was to prevent more pollen from entering his body. Then, he focused inward and strummed his true qi like a musician might play a zither. It sounded like thunder was roaring inside his veins as true qi washed through his blood vessels and bodily points!

His plan was to destroy the roots embedded inside his flesh and eliminate the pollen that hadn't sprouted first. Removing the flowers would be easy then. But something unexpected happened. His flesh and blood suddenly exploded like a bomb had taken off inside his body. He went from a handsome young man to a bloody, barely intact skeleton in an instant!

Chapter 118: Knives Out

"My pollen grows on anything, Ye Qing. It can infest flesh and blood and even dissolve into energy. There is nothing you can do to remove it, so you can stop wasting your energy!"

Evergreen Ivy's voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. It was impossible to say if she was near or far away from him.

"But don't worry, I won't let you die quickly. You're the man who ruined the Nether Lord's descent to this plane after all."

"I will make sure you live until every part of your body is covered in flowers. You will pass on only after you've suffered the cruelest and longest punishment there is in this world!"

"I don't know if you noticed, Evergreen Ivy, but there is a long list of enemies who want me dead. You're gonna have to wait for your turn like a good girl!" Ye Qing cackled. He looked like an abomination of hell as he was almost a walking skeleton right now.

"Just give it up, brother. You make me sad with how you look right now."

This time, it was Xiao Yang who spoke up. "How about this: if you give me the painting you obtained from Zheng Feng, I promise to end your misery as soon as possible. Deal?"

"Thanks, but no thanks, brother! This bit of injury is nothing to me, so just save your good will for when you enter your grave!" Ye Qing shouted back. It was too bad his cheeks and throat were quite holey right now, so he sounded more like a duck than a human being.

He wasn't lying. For most others, this level of injury was crippling at best or fatal at worst. But to him, it was just a matter of popping a dragon-serpent rune and returning to normal, which he did.

Overwhelming vitality rushed out of his body and swiftly regrew his flesh. He was back to normal in practically the blink of an eye.

The root of the problem, however, wasn't solved. Not only did his body start itching and growing evergreen ivy flowers again, there were a lot more of them than before!

It's as Evergreen Ivy says. The pollen dissolves even in intangible things like energy, so trying to flush it out with true qi is only going to achieve the opposite effect. Heck, even using true qi is going to exacerbate the problem!

Ye Qing frowned deeply as he muttered under his breath, "How troublesome!"

True qi was the source of a warrior's power. A warrior without true qi was like a reservoir without a source or a tree without roots. He would be lucky to be able to unleash even one-tenth of his true strength. He would be in serious trouble if Evergreen Ivy and Xiao Yang were to attack him now. Should he use his true qi to defend himself and exacerbate his condition? Or should he not use his true qi but die under their combined attack?

Of course, Evergreen Ivy and Xiao Yang knew his predicament as well. Or rather, this was her plan from the very beginning.

I need to get away from them! Ye Qing arrived at a decision immediately. He pulled out a bronze mask and put it on his face. It was none other than the Bronze Tiger Head!

One of the reasons Ye Qing chose to use the Bronze Tiger Head was because it required blood to activate, not true qi. All he needed to do to awaken the wrath of a hundred heroic spirits was to offer it some blood.

Blood trickled down the eyes of the bronze mask as soon as he put them on. A deathly, bloodthirsty aura immediately sprang to existence.

Ye Qing didn't use the power immediately, however. He forced the terrible energy to stay inside the mask so as not to alarm his enemies.

Dew started forming on the plants all around Ye Qing, but they were an eerie reddish black that looked more like blood than water. What looked like a mountain of corpses and thousands upon thousands of vengeful souls started manifesting in his vision as well. Even his eyes had turned red with violence and bloodlust.

This was a sign that his mind was slowly being corroded by the mask, but still he waited for his enemies to show up. He would not act until the time was ripe!

It was at this moment Evergreen Ivy and Xiao Yang appeared behind Ye Qing at the same time. Evergreen Ivy was wearing a black hooded robe that covered her from head to toe. When she raised a hand, vines as thick as barrels burst out of the ground and spread open to reveal rows and rows of sharp, hooked spines. It almost looked like a venom dragon that was barring its venomous teeth at its enemy. The next moment, the vines swooped down on Ye Qing and threatened to swallow him whole!

Contrary to Evergreen Ivy's swift and ruthless attack, Xiao Yang slowly lifted his right fist into the air before punching down on Ye Qing. At first, his punch was extremely slow and feeble. But the more it fell, the stronger and faster it became. At the end, it was like the sun was setting down on Ye Qing, hopeless and forlorn.

“Sunset Punch”

This was the moment Ye Qing was waiting for. He abruptly wheeled around and released the fiendish energy he had been holding back this whole time. The next moment, a general wielding a Green Dragon Crescent Blade appeared behind Ye Qing and roared,

“KILL!!!”

The earth shook, and the sky trembled in fear. Dark clouds converged above the duo as the general unleashed his deadly attack.

“The Bronze Tiger Head!” Xiao Yang exclaimed in terror. As Qing Kui’s junior brother, he knew exactly how powerful the Malice-class Strange Artifact was. The soul fragment within the bronze mask was the amalgamation of countless dead on the battlefield, and their combined hatred and bloodlust were powerful enough to threaten even an Astral Refiner.

The general’s blade easily cut through Xiao Yang’s Sunset Punch like it was an illusion. Evergreen Ivy’s vines were disintegrated inch by inch until nothing was left. Then, the blade energy sent both of them flipping through the air like rag dolls.

Xiao Yang wasn’t in peak form to begin with, so the blade energy easily shattered his arteries and veins and worsened his existing wounds. Blood sprayed out of his lips like crazy.

Evergreen Ivy was throwing up blood as well, but it was green and sprouted evergreen ivy flowers when it splattered against the ground.

Boom!

Xiao Yang crashed into the ground so hard that he dug a huge pit. Evergreen Ivy was less miserable as she was able to summon her vines and catch herself with a net of vines.

“KILL!!!”

Ye Qing wasn’t done with them, however. The general roared once more and slammed his blade into the ground, causing cracks to form across the earth like a spider web. Then, he lifted the blade with one hand, turned his wrist, caught his weapon in a reverse grip, and executed a left-to-right horizontal sweep.

Murky energy sank into the earth, and clean energy rose into the air. This second attack flying toward Xiao Yang and Evergreen Ivy seemed capable of tearing apart the void and even creating a whole new universe!

Evergreen Ivy immediately summoned more vines and pulled herself away from the deadly attack. Xiao Yang turned tail and ran away.

Booooooom!

The crescent energy chased the duo for almost a hundred meters before slamming into the ground. The entire chunk of earth rose at least fifty meters into the air before crashing down on the duo like a tidal wave! It was insane!

“Move!”

Evergreen Ivy and Xiao Yang didn't fancy their chances of blocking a landslide head on, so they retreated some more. They had to run another sixty meters before they were finally out of danger.

"Phew... I can't believe I almost forgot about that mask. That mistake nearly cost me my life!" Xiao Yang wiped his forehead as he stared at the tidal wave of earth slowly crashing down to the ground from a safe distance.

He had just finished saying this when Evergreen Ivy suddenly dashed back into the dust clouds.

"What are you doing?" Xiao Yang scratched his head in confusion when realization struck him. "Oh shit!"

He dashed after Evergreen Ivy as well until they arrived at a deep, seemingly bottomless gorge. When he arrived next to Evergreen Ivy, he asked in a hurry, "Where is he?"

"He escaped!" The Stranger answered directly.

"I knew it!" Xiao Yang didn't sound surprised. "That cunning bastard. I was so sure that he was going for a do-or-die attack! By the way, why aren't you giving chase?"

"Because he can't escape." Evergreen Ivy replied coolly and calmly. "He can't use his true qi unless he wants my pollen to spread even faster, and without his true qi, what can he possibly do to save himself?"

"Also, don't you think it'd be far more satisfying to give him a bit of hope before extinguishing it? To make him suffer through the cycle of helplessness, fear and despair fully before killing him?"

"Damn." Xiao Yang clicked his tongue. "No wonder they say that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

All of a sudden, Xiao Yang leaped a few feet away from Evergreen Ivy. Not a moment too soon, a few vines shot out of the earth and skewered the space where he was standing. If not for his quick reaction, the vines would have pierced him and killed him the same way as Shen Xian!

"What are you doing?" Xiao Yang narrowed his eyes dangerously.

Evergreen Ivy said coldly, "I told you not to probe my identity in any way. If you can't keep to such a simple rule, then we might as well go our separate ways now!"

"You're too sensitive!" Xiao Yang shot her an uncaring smirk. "Ye Qing called you Evergreen Ivy, and it sounds like a woman's name. That's all there is to it!"

"Does that mean that our cooperation has come to an end?"

"Nah. If you don't like it, then I won't say it any longer!"

"You better." Evergreen Ivy sneered. "Anyway, we should start chasing the rabbit now. It is you who will suffer Ye Qing's wrath first if he somehow escapes!"

“True. The price of underestimating an opponent is very costly!” Xiao Yang said lazily. This was doubly true as he was aiming to kill Ye Qing and take the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” for himself!

And so the duo chased after Ye Qing. Fifteen minutes passed, and the young man was nowhere to be seen. That was fine though. The hunt had just begun.

One hour passed, and Ye Qing was still nowhere to be seen.

Two hours passed, and both man and Stranger were starting to feel a little impatient.

Two hours turned to four, and four hours turned to six. Eventually...

“Are you sure we’re heading in the right direction?” Xiao Yang shot Evergreen Ivy a glance. The Stranger was lazing on her vines and letting them do most of the hard work.

Evergreen Ivy replied coolly, “There’s no mistake!”

Ye Qing was infested with her pollen, and her pollen were leaving behind a clear trail to follow. Unless he eliminated the pollen in his body completely, she could track him even to the ends of the world.

She could understand Xiao Yang’s doubt though. She would be wondering the same thing if she couldn’t feel her pollen.

Xiao Yang continued to voice his puzzlement, “In that case, why haven’t we caught up to him yet? Aren’t you the one who said Ye Qing couldn’t move quickly because he couldn’t use his true qi?”

Her reply was as curt as it was direct. “I don’t know!”

“...”

.

Xiao Yang was unhappy with this answer to say the least. He would’ve turned on her already if he didn’t need her to track down Ye Qing!

“What should we do then?”

“We keep chasing. I can feel his location.”

“Fine, whatever!” Xiao Yang grunted.

The chase continued for another hour. By now, the sun had risen from the horizon and spilled its warm rays across the world. It was a wonderful morning that could set even the most restless minds at ease.

Xiao Yang could not settle down, however. In fact, his restlessness kept building the longer the chase continued. It was almost as if his intuition was warning him about something. A while later, he finally couldn’t hold it any longer and said,

“Don’t you think that Ye Qing is moving kinda strangely? Assuming he’s planning to shake us off, he should either escape to Anyang to call for help, or seek out terrains

that are dangerous, complex, and well-hidden. However, the land is growing increasingly flat, and the amount of plants in the area are decreasing over time. He can't possibly be thinking of hiding in this area, can he?"

"That's because he isn't planning to hide from us!" Evergreen Ivy answered, "Past this mountain is a valley called Firewind Valley. It is constantly beset by a fiery wind that is said to be capable of scorching heaven and earth. It is labeled a forbidden zone not just in Jade Spring Village, but also all of Anyang."

"What? Why is he heading there?" Xiao Yang's eyes widened in surprise and puzzlement when a possibility struck him. "Wait a second. He... he's not planning to make a last stand, is here?"

"It's possible!" Evergreen Ivy added, "He's definitely the type to drag his hated foes to the grave with him. I'm not worried though. If he couldn't kill me when he surprised me earlier, there's no way he will succeed when I'm ready for it."

"..."

You might not be worried, but I am! If he kills himself at the last moment and takes all of his possessions to the grave with him, and he's most definitely petty enough to do such a thing, then why am I even doing all this?

Xiao Yang's eyes suddenly turned gold like a pair of suns. Then, he sped up and raced toward Firewind Valley.

Evergreen Ivy sneered as she stared at Xiao Yang's back. The Astral Refiner thought he hid his intentions well, or maybe he didn't care if she found out. Regardless, she knew that there was only one way their cooperation would end, and she was fully prepared for that moment.

"You're the one who wanted to kill me first. Don't blame me when things don't go your way!"

Chapter 119: Astral Refinement

"Almost there, almost there!"

A glint flickered through Ye Qing's eyes as he stared at the dark red, barren valley in front of him. Right now, his eyes were cloudy, his face was rotting, and his body was shriveled up. A deathly aura clung to him like a cloud of pestilence. Add to the fact that he was wearing a grayish yellow burial shirt, and he looked like a zombie who had crawled out of the earth after being buried for decades.

Ye Qing was wearing the Burial Shirt of the Dead. While fighting against Evergreen Ivy earlier, he discovered that her pollen could grow on earth, wood, flesh and blood, but not lifeless objects such as rocks, metal, clothes and so on. It was what inspired him to use the Burial Shirt Of The Dead, a Strange Artifact that he had, frankly, almost forgotten existed.

The Burial Shirt of the Dead filled him with deathly energy. It was nothing like rock or metal, but it was still the antithesis of life, meaning that Evergreen Ivy's pollen could not absorb it to sprout its flowers. Not only that, the Burial Shirt Of The Dead functioned as an excellent replacement for his

true qi, at least until he got to his destination. This was how he was able to surpass Evergreen Ivy and Xiao Yang's expectations and stay ahead of them.

Of course, the cost of using the Burial Shirt of the Dead was significant. If his physique wasn't as powerful as it was, if he didn't have a rich stock of gray dragon-serpent runes, the Strange Artifact would have consumed all of his vitality and turned him into an actual corpse.

Evergreen Ivy was half-right and half-wrong. Ye Qing was heading toward Firewind Valley, but it wasn't because he was planning to commit triple suicide with his favorite pursuers. He knew from the start that running back to Anyang was impossible. As his true qi was basically sealed right now, the chances he might make it back even with the Burial Shirt of the Dead was less than zero.

He supposed he could escape to more advantageous terrain, but he was unfamiliar with the geography surrounding Jade Spring Village. If he chose the wrong location and ran into a deadly Stranger or something, then he would be stuck between a rock and a hard place. That was why Firewind Valley was the only place he could escape to.

One, the "Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind" was an astral refinement cultivation art that was specifically designed to refine Burning Wind. Therefore, he wasn't afraid of the astral qi.

Two, once he entered the Astral Refinement stage and successfully eliminated the pollen inside of him, it would be Evergreen Ivy and Xiao Yang's turn to run away like the bitches they were! It was the perfect plan!

"You're quite the runner, brother!"

Ye Qing couldn't help but break into a smile when he recognized that Firewind Valley was just ahead of him. Alas, he wasn't able to make it there before he heard a familiar voice. The voice meant to provoke him, but the traces of anger that slipped into it more or less ruined the taunt.

It's Xiao Yang. Evergreen Ivy cannot be far behind as well, Ye Qing thought.

"Heavens above! What happened to you, brother? You look like a rotten corpse!" Xiao Yang called out again. At first, his voice came from far, far away. However, it closed the distance in just the blink of an eye.

"Just give up already, brother. Why put yourself through all this torment if you're going to die either way?"

"How can I die after all the 'kindness' you've done unto me, brother? Don't worry! I swear I'll live until I can pay it all back!" Ye Qing retorted and ran even faster toward the Firewind Valley.

"But I'm an impatient man, brother. How about you repay me now with your life?"

When Xiao Yang was about ten meters away from Ye Qing, he threw a punch with the intent of crippling the young man. From his perspective, Ye Qing's aura was as weak as a candle most likely because he had expended too much energy, so the punch should be enough to end the chase. However, Ye Qing didn't even bother to turn around and block the attack. He let it hit him in the back—the Burial Shirt of the Dead unleashing a thick gust of deathly energy and the last moment to block the punch—and flew even faster toward Firewind Valley.

“Thanks for the assist, brother!”

Ye Qing was still in the air when he put away the Burial Shirt of the Dead and restored his vigor using two gray dragon-serpent runes. Then, he executed Blood Sea Fragrance and flew toward Firewind Valley at his top speed. He was almost at Firewind Valley anyway, so it shouldn't matter if he used his true qi for a bit.

“Fuck!”

It sounded complicated, but Ye Qing had really changed his tactics in just the span of one breath. By the time Xiao Yang realized he had screwed up, the young man was already a flower sprouting dot in the distance. Another second passed, and the young man was inside the valley.

“Dammit, dammit!” Xiao Yang's expression was beyond ugly, but before he could throw a tantrum a thought suddenly occurred to him. “Wait...”

By now, Ye Qing should have figured out that he was pursuing him to obtain the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”. However, the young man never used the painting to try and throw him off even when he was on his last legs. Sure, there was a small chance Ye Qing still didn't know what his goal was, but it just seemed very unlikely. So, why didn't Ye Qing use everything in his disposal to increase his chances of survival? Something wasn't right. Maybe...

... Maybe Ye Qing *knew* he could survive Firewind Valley? He didn't sound like a guy who was making his last stand either. In any case, there was no way he was giving up on the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”, so he must enter this Firewind Valley no matter how dangerous it was!

His mind made up, Xiao Yang gritted his teeth and dashed into Firewind Valley as well.

Xiao Yang had just disappeared when Evergreen Ivy finally arrived at the entrance on her vines. Underneath her cloak, a sneer crossed her lips as she stared at Xiao Yang's back.

“Birds die for food, and men die for greed. And mankind is so, so greedy!” Evergreen Ivy said in her true voice, “It's clear that none of you know that the so-called Fire Wind of Firewind Valley is the Burning Wind. It is said that the Burning Wind can scorch mountains, boil seas, and extinguish mind and spirit. No one below the Spirit Purification stage can possibly survive it!”

“Pathetic humans. Laughable humans!”

.....

No life existed inside Firewind Valley. There were no trees, no flowers, not even a single blade of grass. The earth and the rocks were red hot with heat, and the valley itself felt like one giant furnace.

From time to time, gusts of wind would blow through the area and summon blasts of fire. Everything the wind touched was scorched black.

“Holy crap this place is hot!” Ye Qing commented. He was currently hiding behind a giant rock looking as red as a lobster and steaming from every pore of his body. He was also staring at the “fire dragons” swirling inside the valley with deep wariness.

Just now, he accidentally allowed a gust of wind to brush against him and saw his flesh turning black in an instant. Not only that, the few strands that made it into his blood vessels literally boiled his blood and made him feel like he was being cooked alive. As if that wasn’t enough the wind ignited even his mind and set off a terrible headache.

If he hadn’t practiced the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” and strengthened his mind and spirit, if he hadn’t visualized the painting immediately after the fact, the wind would have extinguished his mind with insulting ease.

“The Burning Wind. It’s definitely the Burning Wind!”

“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.” ~ excerpt from the “Yellow Court Sutra”.

As far as he could tell, the fiery wind of the valley was almost identical to the Burning Wind described in the “Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind”!

“Now that I know for sure it’s the Burning Wind, it’s time I start entering the Astral Refinement stage!”

Ye Qing immediately sat down and started practicing the cultivation art. He couldn’t say he had memorized every last word in the manual, but he had memorized all the steps, key points and caveats so well that he could read them backward. Therefore, he encountered no problems whatsoever when practicing the cultivation art.

A single strand of Burning Wind were pulled through his blood vessels and into his dantian. It was only a strand, but it was still enough to boil every sliver of Blood Shadow true qi in his dantian like a drop of water added into a pot of oil. Steam rose from his dantian, and his true qi diminished rapidly like dry sticks that were beset by a blazing inferno. From the outside, his dantian probably looked just like a furnace.

Speaking of outside, his skin was cracked and bright red, and white steam was seeping out of his pores. One could vaguely see his boiling hot blood vessels through the cracks.

“Hmph!” The sensation was so uncomfortable that a muffled groan escaped Ye Qing’s lips. He could feel his consciousness flickering in and out like he was about to black out. He did not give up, however. After all, he had to start all over again if he did.

Ye Qing used the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” to prevent his mind from collapsing and preserve his clarity of mind. For a moment, he felt like his soul had been separated from his body. Neither physical nor mental pain could affect him no matter how bad it was.

This first step was easily the most critical step of his cultivation, the step where he combined his true qi and astral qi into one. To give an example, it was like building the foundation of a house. Without a solid base, the house would always be in danger of collapsing. That was why he couldn't give up or slip up even a little.

As he continued to cycle the "Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind", the feral wind in his dantian slowly but surely became tamer. The Blood Shadow true qi also stopped rejecting the Burning Wind wholly as it did before. Then, the two started merging.

The Blood Shadow true qi was originally bright red in color, but now there was a hue of dark red in it. It was like a dragon that was slumbering in the depths of a blood red sea. It was like every true qi in his dantian was protecting it and waiting for the day it would awaken and soar to the heavens.

"It's done! Phew..."

A dark red breath escaped Ye Qing's lips. It was surprisingly hot and seemingly unending until Ye Qing clamped his mouth shut.

Now that he had absorbed the strand of Burning wind, the temperature of the valley was much, much more manageable. It was still scorching hot, but he didn't feel like he might drop dead at any moment anymore!

Despite his success, he still wasn't an Astral Refiner yet. He had one foot over the threshold, but he wouldn't truly enter the Astral Refinement stage until every wisp of true qi had combined with the astral qi.

Bathump!

It was at this moment Ye Qing's heart suddenly skipped a beat, and every hair on his body stood on end. Someone's gaze was boring into him like a knife. He did not hesitate to jump forward. As if on cue, the giant rock he was hiding behind abruptly shattered into a million pieces. Some of the pieces flew past Ye Qing and cut his face.

"Xiao Yang? You actually came into Firewind Valley? Are you suicidal?" Ye Qing wiped away his blood and ridiculed the Astral Refiner.

Having learned that villain monologues usually ended poorly for said villain, Xiao Yang had attacked Ye Qing as soon as he found him. Unfortunately, Ye Qing still noticed him at the last second and escaped!

Chapter 120: Ding Ding Ding

"Suicidal? Hahaha! Don't you know that I cultivate the Purple Sun Gold Flame? Fire is the last thing I'm afraid of!"

Xiao Yang opened his mouth and sucked in a deep breath. His expression turned intoxicated as hot air flooded into his veins and caused him to grow as bright as the sun.

"If you surrender the painting you got from Zheng Feng, then I promise to give you a swift death! Otherwise, you'll wish that you were dead!" Xiao Yang threatened with an evil grin.

But to his surprise, Ye Qing laughed, “Hahaha! What a coincidence! I’m not afraid of this valley either! Come chase me if you dare!”

He immediately kicked off the ground and raced deeper into the valley.

Evergreen ivy flowers grew as soon as he used his true qi, but they withered practically the second they reached full bloom. In fact, Ye Qing had noticed this when he accidentally brushed against the Burning Wind earlier. Every flower on his body had withered and fallen off together with their roots. This meant he could use his true qi like normal inside Firewind Valley, which was of course most welcomed.

“Is that a challenge?” Xiao Yang uttered icily. He was done playing games with his “brother”. He kicked off the ground with a loud boom and charged toward Ye Qing like a loose arrow.

If Ye Qing’s movement art made him light as smoke, then Xiao Yang’s transformed him into a beast of brute force and speed.

Theoretically, Ye Qing should have the upper hand in this cat-and-mouse game, but he had only refined a strand of Burning Wind. He might have adapted to the valley’s high temperature, but he still couldn’t take a gust of the astral qi head on. That was why he had to run and avoid the Burning Wind at the same time.

On the other hand, Xiao Yang had no such problems. Not only was he a true Astral Refiner, his Purple Sun Gold Flame was powerful enough to block the Burning Wind completely. That was why he could chase after Ye Qing in a straight line. As a result, he was slowly but surely closing the distance between them.

The deeper the duo ventured into the valley, the hotter it became. The Burning Wind grew increasingly deadlier and bigger as well. Every time a patch of air suddenly caught on fire, it would transform into a towering inferno that seemed capable of devouring anything. It was as beautiful as it was dangerous!

“Got you!”

When Xiao Yang was mere meters away from Ye Qing, he finally let out a triumphant roar and made a grab for him. It was at this moment a deadly gust of Burning Wind rolled out from deeper within the valley and engulfed both men before they could react.

Whoosh!

His clothes were gone, and his flesh was charred in the blink of an eye. The Burning Wind had evaporated every drop of blood in his body and even caused sparks to fly out of his bones. None of these injuries could compare to his burning mind and spirit, however. The pain was so bad that Ye Qing immediately visualized the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” to steady his mind, circulated the “Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind” to absorb the Burning Wind ravaging his insides, and popped a gray dragon-serpent rune every time his body threatened to give out.

At first, his recovery speed was utterly incapable of keeping up the speed at which the Burning Wind was eating through his flesh. Thankfully, he had enough gray runes to replenish his vigor non-stop and keep himself alive.

For a time, his body died, came back to life, died, then came back to life again in a cycle that seemed like it would never end. It was said that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and that was definitely true in Ye Qing's case. Every time his body came back to life, it was a little tougher than before. Like a piece of iron that was slowly being refined into steel, his body gradually adapted to the Burning Wind. It was becoming less and less painful to maintain the "Nirvana Sutra of Burning Wind" as well. He was slowly but surely becoming highly resistant to the all-consuming wind.

Even better, visualizing the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" to fend off the Burning Wind actually improved his mind and spirit by leaps and bounds as well. In fact, his improvement in this area had slowed to a crawl after the initial growth spurt. He had never stopped practicing, but it turned out that being burned by the Burning Wind was worth an entire month of hard work.

Ye Qing managed to overcome his crisis, but Xiao Yang could not say the same. His Purple Sun Gold Flame had long been blown away by the Burning Wind. The only reason he was still alive was thanks to his hat and the ancient robe it conjured. Even so, holes were slowly but surely appearing all over the robe. His face and exposed flesh looked as red as a lobster, and steam was constantly rising from his pores. His consciousness was flickering in and out because the Burning Wind was attacking his mind and spirit as well. He kept hammering his own head in a desperate attempt to stay awake.

"Hehe. You got what you deserved!" Ye Qing mocked when a devious idea suddenly occurred to him. He immediately unleashed a Boundless Lightning Palm at Xiao Yang—or at least, he tried to. The attack had just left his hand when the Burning Wind melted it all away into nothing.

"You can save your energy! This Fire Wind is strong enough to blow apart even my Purple Sun Gold Flame, much less your true qi!" Xiao Yang mocked back when he noticed what Ye Qing was doing.

"You're right! Thanks for the advice!" Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. He had completely forgotten that he was now a half-baked Astral Refiner. This time, he channeled the Burning Wind inside his dantian before launching a second attack.

"You're an i—" Xiao Yang was going to mock Ye Qing again when suddenly, his chest exploded with pain. His flesh was charred, his internal organs felt like they were on fire, and the blood he spat out evaporated into white steam as soon as it left his mouth.

"Fire Wind? How did you—" Xiao Yang exclaimed in shock before realization hit him. "Is this why you came here? You were planning to refine the Fire Wind? No wonder you were able to resist it for so long!"

"Ding ding ding!" Ye Qing laughed. "As your reward, allow me to correct one thing. Fire Wind isn't the astral qi's true name. It's called the Burning Wind!"

Ye Qing launched a third palm strike at Xiao Yang, and the Astral Refiner tried to dodge out of the way to no avail. It was because the Burning Wind was still blowing and pinning him in place. The hit worsened his injuries and made him look even redder.

The good news was that Ye Qing's attack was still weakened by the blowing wind despite its new attribute. Otherwise, the second hit would've been enough to kill him.

The bad news was he was still going to die at this rate. Worse still, there was absolutely nothing he could do to save himself!

"What do I do? Am I actually going to die here? Impossible! I won't accept this!" Xiao Yang roared on top of his lungs, but there was no use. He could only watch as Ye Qing raised his hand a fourth time to attack him.

Whooooooooooooooooosh!

It was at this moment a powerful gust of Burning Wind slammed into the existing wind and joined into one. They spun round and round toward the sky until they formed a massive tornado. But unlike an ordinary tornado, this was one crooked and bent almost like a serpent. As it moved deeper into the valley, everything that stood in its path—giant rocks and even whole chunks of earth—were pulled into the tornado and melted into molten lava, which of course made it even deadlier than before. It was like a scene straight out of the apocalypse.

As Ye Qing and Xiao Yang were flying smack dab in the middle of the tornado, their situation was bad to say the least. The temperature rose to unprecedented levels, and it was a miracle both men were still alive. They looked like human torches who could burn out at any moment.

Whooooooooooooooooosh!

The molten tornado continued toward the heart of the Firewind Valley.

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Deep within Firewind Valley, there was a vast valley with a narrow entrance that led to a wide space. It almost looked like a calabash from above.

The walls of this valley were glassy, translucent, and colorful like gemstones. They were also brimming with an unimaginable amount of heat and energy.

The sky above the valley was dark red in color. From time to time, it would ripple like a heat wave was passing through and catch on fire.

There was a golden bagua brazier at the center of the valley. It was unusually huge and shaped like a round pagoda. Two-eared and three-footed, the brazier was engraved with images of the eight trigrams and taichi, it looked both ancient and shrouded in mystery.

There were a pair of circular openings to the left and right side of the brazier. If someone were to look through the openings, they would spot a roaring, dark red flame. The eight trigrams and taichi images on the brazier's surface were slowly spinning in a way that seemed to resonate with the world itself.

Suddenly, a terrific roar erupted from within the brazier. Bursts of flame spun wildly inside the brazier before flying out into the open. It was like a dragon was born as the river of flame and wind

circled around the sky. It was so hot that even the crystalline walls were partially melted into red hot lava. The entire valley resembled a natural furnace of some sort.

In the end, the fiery wind flew out of the narrow entrance and joined its many “brethren” outside.

Who would’ve thought that the Burning Wind of Firewind Valley was born from a single brazier?

“There is no longer any chance you can turn this around, girl! The item inside the Heaven Scorching Bagua Brazier is mine!”

The chuckle of an old man suddenly came from above. As it turned out, an old man and a young woman were floating in the sky and facing each other.

The old man was over sixty years old and completely white in both hair and beard. However, his complexion was healthy, and his skin looked as smooth as a babe’s. He wore a gaudy robe that gave him the appearance of a manchild.

The young woman was around twenty years old and wearing a long dress with black embroidered flowers. Her long, black hair cascaded down her back like a waterfall, and she possessed a devastatingly beautiful countenance that could topple kingdoms should she so desire.

Her eyes were bright and clear as a mountain that had just been cleansed by a refreshing rain. They seemed to represent all that was new, clean, good and beautiful in this world. Not only that, one could almost see the orbit of celestial objects and the birth and destruction of stars behind those eyes. It was like there existed an entire universe behind them.

There was a transparent go board floating in between the duo. Much of the go board had already been covered in black and white stones. For those who played the game, the go board resembled a battlefield where two sides were vying for control over the other. One could almost hear the drums of war, the cries of men, and the sounds of weapons clashing against one another.

At first glance, it looked like both sides were more or less on equal footing. However, a more experienced player would be able to tell that the white stones had dominated the center area and formed what looked like a dragon. On the other hand, the black stones were scattered all over the place like routed soldiers who were desperately trying to flee from the great dragon.

“The game isn’t over yet, and victory and defeat may yet change hands. You best not get careless, Old Tong!”

As it turned out, the woman’s voice was as sweet as her appearance. Colors seemed to fade from the world itself before returning to normal.

Speaking of which, the Burning Wind around them was hot enough to annihilate heaven and earth, and yet it wasn’t able to affect the duo at all for some reason.

“Still haven’t given up yet, girl? Fine. If a crushing defeat is what you desire, then it is what you will get!” Old Tong held up his hand and conjured a white stone between his fingers. Then, he gently placed it on a point.

A wind blew across the go board, and the shadow of the white dragon loomed over everything. Multiple black stones were crushed with this one move!

The young woman was already behind to begin with. Now, it looked like the crushing defeat Old Tong spoke of was going to come true!

Suddenly, Old Tong looked down and exclaimed in surprise, "Huh? How did a pair of kids make it into this place alive?"

A mighty tornado had forced its way through the narrow entrance and into the inner area. It continued to spin for a bit before scattering into many smaller gales.

Two men fell from the sky and hit the ground with a soft thud. One of them was Ye Qing, and the other Xiao Yang. However, they were pitch black and smoking not unlike a piece of charred wood. They also appeared to be dead as they showed no signs of life at all.