

Stranger 121

Chapter 121: Bet

“An Astral Refiner... and a Vessel Augmentor even?”

Old Tong looked very surprised. “How on earth did they make it in? Interesting. How interesting!”

Old Tong clapped his hands like a kid and said excitedly, “Say girl, do you want to make a bet with me? Who do you think will survive?”

The young woman calmly placed another black stone on the board. It slowed down the dragon’s offense a little, but in terms of the big picture it was like trying to extinguish a house fire with a glass of water.

“Are you sure, Old Tong? Distracting yourself whilst playing a game seems like a bad idea.”

Old Tong skipped over to the young woman’s side with a cheeky smile. “But you’ve already lost, girl! You cannot win even if I give you a move for free! Since you already lost, you might as well make a bet with me! Come on!”

The girl shot him a smile and declared with surprising confidence, “Very well. If this is your wish!”

“Wonderful! Wonderful! You’re a nice person, girl! I, Everyyoung Tong, love friends like you!” The old man did a little dance of joy before asking, “You may make your pick first, girl!”

That was what he said, but Everyyoung Tong kept sneaking glances at Xiao Yang. They were betting on who between the two would survive, and he was afraid that the young woman would pick Xiao Yang.

The young woman chuckled. “I’m a junior. Of course I should go second.”

Delighted by her generosity, Everyyoung Tong said immediately, “Okay! I bet that the Astral Refiner would survive!”

His choice was perfectly within expectations. The young woman smiled as brightly as ever as she declared, “Then I’ll bet on the Vessel Augmentor.”

“Hahaha! You’re going to lose, girl! There’s no way you can win this!” Everyyoung Tong taunted while performing a series of backflips. The Burning Wind in the sky stayed well away from him.

“Look, girl! The Astral Refiner’s fingers are twitching!”

“Look! His mouth is twitching as well!”

“His eyelids are twitching as well. He’s about to wake up, girl!”

“Hahaha! Any moment now! Any moment until your defeat, girl!”

Everyyoung Tong would not stop yelling and rolling in the sky as he observed Xiao Yang. He was just about to declare his victory when suddenly, he fell silent like a duck that was grabbed by the neck. Ye Qing, who had been unmoving this whole time like a corpse, suddenly opened his eyes and climbed to his feet. Then, he shook off the charred black substance clinging to his body to reveal smooth, unblemished skin. His physique was so flawless and perfect it was like a work of art.

“Phew... that was too close!” Ye Qing let out a long sigh of relief. His breath was hot, twisting, unfading and dark red in color just like the Burning Wind around him. When he stomped his foot, the ground within fifty meters of him caved in like it was struck by a giant hammer, kicking soil and dust everywhere.

This should not be possible as the ground of this valley was constantly beset by the Burning Wind. It had long since become as hard as refined steel. Forget a foot, an actual hammer or a sharp blade would be hardpressed to leave a mark on the soil. And yet, Ye Qing had made it seem as weak as tofu.

“Hahaha. Fortune and misfortune really are two sides of the same coin!”

Earlier, his body had burned, reformed, burned, and reformed again over and over in the deadly hurricane, tempering his flesh, blood, bones, and even his soul to unimaginable heights. He was now resilient enough to withstand even the hottest temperatures.

Not only that, every inch of his flesh, blood, bone and true qi was infused with Burning Wind. That’s right, he was now a full-fledged Astral Refiner. Normally, it would’ve taken years to infuse every wisp of true qi in one’s body with astral qi, and most never made it past this first step despite decades of hard work. He couldn’t say he was keen to relive such an experience again, but thanks to this unexpected boon, he had entered the Astral Refinement stage in one fell swoop.

“Now that I’m an Astral Refiner, it’s time to get my revenge!” A diabolical smirk crossed Ye Qing’s lips when he spotted Xiao Yang lying not far away from him.

Honestly, he would’ve thought that Xiao Yang was dead if his spirit hadn’t ascended to greater heights. That was how close to death the Astral Refiner was. He was going to make sure that the two-faced man would never menace him again.

“He’s entered the Astral Refinement stage? But how?” Everyyoung Tong blinked in disbelief.

Contrary to the old man’s reaction, the young woman didn’t seem surprised at all. While stroking her hair and looking down at Ye Qing, she said, “You’ve lost, Old Tong!”

“I lost?” Her words jolted Everyyoung Tong back to reality. Judging from the way his face scrunched up, and his eyes were darting all over the place, it was clear he was unwilling to admit defeat.

“You’re the one who made the bet, and you’re the one who picked first. You’re not going to renege on your own bet, are you?” The woman pressured Everyyoung Tong without missing a beat.

"I... er... I..." Everyoung Tong was scratching his head profusely and looking all over the place for a way to get out of the bet when suddenly, an idea occurred to him. He immediately tossed something that shot through the Burning Wind and landed on Xiao Yang before he declared, "Say girl! The bet is who will *survive*, not who will wake up first, right? In that case, I haven't lost yet!"

Everyoung Tong had noticed that Ye Qing was brimming with bloodthirst. It was clear that the two were sworn enemies, which gave him an idea.

Everyoung Tong believed himself to be an exceptionally smart man, and his smarts were telling him that there was no way a new Astral Refiner could possibly defeat one who had already begun to create his Expression.

Of course, Xiao Yang looked like he could barely draw breath right now, which was why he had prepared a backup plan. It was what would guarantee him victory!

"Very well. If that is what you wish."

The young woman didn't get angry even though Everyoung Tong was clearly bending the rules a bit. Her smile remained as tranquil and clean as a lake.

"I am surprised you would go so far as to spend a Poplar Branch Nectar, however. Even a single drop can renew the flesh, strengthen the vigor, and restore the energies, no?"

"You have sharp eyes, girl!"

Everyoung Tong let out a chuckle. Not at all annoyed that his little maneuver was seen through, he declared triumphantly, "But I'm not cheating, okay? I'm just ensuring fairness is all. Your kid is fully recovered, but my kid is still half-dead. A one-sided massacre wouldn't make for an interesting bet, no?"

The young woman nodded seriously. "That's reasonable. We shall see what happens then!"

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was just about to land the last hit and collect that juicy, juicy experience when suddenly, new flesh grew out of Xiao Yang's body, and blood began rushing in his veins once more. His aura was growing stronger and stronger as well.

"The hell? What's going on?" Ye Qing blanched. He didn't know what was going on, but he wasn't stupid enough to wait until Xiao Yang was fully recovered. He immediately tossed three throwing knives at the Astral Refiner's forehead, throat and heart before following right behind the projectiles. His hand was also crackling with energy and raised in a ready position.

Unfortunately, Xiao Yang managed to leap away from his original position and dodge the throwing knives at the last moment. He then started laughing like a madman, "Hahaha! I live! I live! Even my wounds are completely healed! Hahahahahaha!"

He then turned toward Ye Qing and shot him a vicious glare, “You’re the first person ever to push me this far. Since the heavens are kind enough to save my life today, I will make sure to repay their favor with your blood!”

He might not know how he survived and even healed back to full health, but that was no reason to get distracted by the real matter at hand. One way or another, today would be the day Ye Qing dies!

“Hahaha! You’re going to lose, girl!” Everyyoung Tong exclaimed in delight when he saw that Xiao Yang was awake.

The young woman wasn’t paying attention to the ensuing battle, however. Her eyes were wholly focused on the Go board. “You already said that once, Old Tong, but I haven’t lost yet, have I?”

“...”

Everyyoung Tong couldn’t say anything for a second and grumbled like a child, “It’s different this time. There’s no way a new Astral Refiner could possibly go up against a veteran who’s already starting to manifest his Expression. I can tell that his astral qi is a superior grade astral qi as well. There’s no way he would lose!”

When he was done, he turned his back on her and hmped loudly.

The young woman smiled but paid him no heed. She continued to stare at the go board.

In the valley, Ye Qing was smiling wryly at Xiao Yang. “I’ve heard something like that many times already, but I’m still alive, and my enemies are all dead!”

He launched a palm strike as soon as he finished his sentence.

“You must be joking! If you haven’t caught me by surprise earlier, you really think that a—” Xiao Yang retorted disdainfully while throwing a punch to meet Ye Qing’s palm strike midway.

“Sunset Punch, Rising Sun”

However, he lost his train of thought when Ye Qing’s palm strike punched right through his energy and astral qi. The next thing he knew, the unstoppable attack had struck him squarely on the right shoulder and flooded his veins with destructive force.

Xiao Yang was sent flying through the air like a rag doll. His right shoulder exploded, and he crashed into the wall so hard that he was embedded in it.

Boom!

The sound of crumbling walls reverberated within the valley for a long time.

“You—Pwack!”

Xiao Yang looked utterly dazed. He was going to say something when a mouthful of blood sprayed through his lips without warning. He felt like his internal organs were cooked, his qi and blood were boiling, and his mind was on fire. His skin looked dry and withered as well.

“Impossible. Impossible. How do you have so much strength? Impossible. Impossible...”

Xiao Yang couldn't stop repeating the word "impossible". It was as if the palm strike had physically ripped his confidence and willpower to shreds.

"How the... How is this kid so strong?" In the sky, Everyyoung Tong was just as flabbergasted as Xiao Yang. "His physique is comparable to the bald donkeys [1] who cultivate the 'Bhaisajyaguru Sutra' from Lanke Temple!"

Lanke Temple was a physique-focused Buddhist temple. All disciples who cultivated the "Bhaisajyaguru Sutra" must temper their body with medicine from a young age. Once they were ready, they would further refine their body with the Five Poisons (snakes, scorpions, centipedes, toads and spiders) so that their energies and astral qi would be molded into their flesh. Although they would lose the ability to release their true qi like a normal warrior, they would become as strong and tough as a dragon elephant [2], and gain immunity to most poisons and attacks. They would be able to overwhelm skill with pure power and defeat ten thousand arts with a single punch!

The young man was clearly no monk, but his physical resilience and strength was comparable to the Lanke Temple monks who cultivated the "Bhaisajyaguru Sutra". But unlike the monks, he could release his true qi as well. Most warriors could only choose one path and give up all others, but this guy was powerful both in his body and his arts. Where on earth did he come from?

Chapter 122: One Punch

"It would seem you're wrong again, Old Tong!" The young woman said with a smile.

"..."

Imagine a veteran hunter losing an eye to a bird that he hunted for a living. That was how embarrassed Everyyoung Tong was feeling right now. Worse still, this was the outcome after he had already cheated once, and not even he was shameless enough to cheat a second time. He had no choice but to feign deafness and return his attention to the battle, praying for a miracle.

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was stunned that he had sent Xiao Yang flying in a single strike. When he clenched his fist, space crackled as if it couldn't withstand his strength. He couldn't help but let out a silly laugh when he confirmed that he wasn't dreaming.

It was well known that attaining dragon elephant-like strength and resilience was a major milestone in body tempering. It would seem that the young man was even luckier than he thought!

A body-tempering Astral Refiner would infuse their desired astral qi instead of true qi into their flesh, blood and bones to reforge their body, qi, and mind into a weapon that could conquer any foe and obstacle. It was why a body-tempering Astral Refiner could go toe-to-toe against a normal Astral Refiner despite losing the ability to release their qi.

When Ye Qing was trapped inside the hurricane, his flesh, blood and bones had been filled to the brim with Burning Wind. Obviously, this was not how anyone would temper their body in the norm, but the outcome was the same, if not better.

"No wonder there are so many warriors who practice at least one fist art. It feels incredible to defeat a foe with one punch!" Ye Qing exclaimed in delight.

It doesn't matter how strong you are, I'm gonna end it all in one punch! And if one punch isn't enough, then two punches would do it! Simple and effective!

“No no no no no! This isn’t happening! I won’t accept this!” Inside the wall, Xiao Yang suddenly let out a maddened howl and jumped back into the open. His eyes were bloodshot, and his aura was climbing like crazy. It was like a cornered animal’s last stand.

When he threw a punch at Ye Qing, red light filled the sky in an instant like sunset. There was no sun, but sunlight was everywhere. The intent was invisible, but it was everywhere as well.

“Sunset”

“What a powerful move!”

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes and turned serious. The red hue in the sky was the Expression of the Purple Sun Gold Flame after it was condensed to the limit. If it hit, it could turn hundreds and hundreds of meters of ground into a wasteland, boil lakes, and sever rivers.

Ye Qing clenched his own fist and gathered his strength. He didn’t infuse any astral qi into his fist. When all of his strength was focused on a single point, he met Xiao Yang’s punch with a punch of pure power.

Boom!

The punch was simple, but the air within tens of meters of Ye Qing crumpled like a physical object. The noise it made was unspeakable. The red sky disappeared inch by inch starting from the point of impact, but the Purple Sun Gold Flame couldn’t even leave a single mark on Ye Qing.

Bang!

Ye Qing’s fist clashed directly with Xiao Yang’s fist when the red sky disappeared completely. The Astral Refiner immediately exploded into smithereens, and the Burning Wind turned his remnants into ash before they even hit the ground. That was the end of Xiao Yang.

“My precious!”

Unfortunately, Ye Qing wasn’t very happy with this outcome because his punch had also blasted Xiao Yang’s Nature’s Shell far, far away from him. He would’ve held back a little if he knew his punch was this powerful! He was gone like the wind long before the echoes of his pained scream had faded from the valley.

In the sky, the young woman said smilingly, “You’ve lost, Old Tong!”

“I did!” Everyong Tong collapsed on his butt with a frustrated expression. However, he quickly picked himself up when he recalled the game. “It’s fine though. You’re still going to lose the game!”

The woman grabbed a black stone out of thin air just like Everyong Tong had earlier. Then, she slowly placed it at the center point of the go board and said, “I’m sorry, Old Tong, but you’re about to lose this game as well!”

“Impossible! My dragon has taken form, and your pawns are scattered all over the place. How can you possibly defeat me?” Everyong Tong shook his head in clear disbelief.

When he saw the board state however, he felt like a mortal who was struck by lightning. “What! How... How...”

Everyyoung Tong had scattered the young woman’s pieces to the point where they resembled routed soldiers who were fleeing and fighting purely for their own survival. But when she placed her final stone at the center of the go board, her scattered troops abruptly joined together to form a massive web that trapped his white dragon at a corner! No matter how much the white dragon struggled, it was unable to break through the web. It was like a cornered animal with no way out.

The next moment, the dragon disappeared, and most of the white stones on the go board vanished just like that!

She had slain, in effect, the dragon with a single stone!

“I... you...”

Everyyoung Tong’s eyes were widened like saucers. He couldn’t not believe this was happening.

“You play, you pay. The item inside the Heaven Scorching Bagua Brazier is mine, Old Tong!” The woman saluted him in thanks.

Everyyoung Tong was pulling out his own hair and muttering in a daze, “How did I lose? I had the overwhelming advantage. How did I lose? Tell me, girl. How did I lose?”

The young woman plucked another stone out of the air and explained, “If the world is a board, then its denizens are the stones. Each space represents a person’s life journey. Whenever you want to do something, you must first weigh the pros and cons. Only then can you begin to master the world around you. Just the same, it is imperative to observe the cause and effect before taking an action in life. Only then can one ensure that every step they take is smooth and satisfactory.”

“Go is, in a sense, a representation of life. Before a player makes a move, they must first view the whole board. Only then could one know their plan after placing the first stone, and win the game after placing three stones!”

“You have perfected your go skills, Old Tong. Like a gold ingot that had been refined over a hundred times, every step you make is perfect and flawless. Unfortunately, you are so focused about perfection—so concerned about losing a single stone—that you’ve lost sight of the big picture. You have even forgotten that you are playing to win, not to be perfect.”

“A player who loses sight of the big picture cannot move with purpose. A player who has forgotten to win cannot win!”

“That is why you’ve lost from the beginning, Old Tong!”

“A player who loses sight of the big picture cannot move with purpose, and a player who has forgotten to win cannot win...” Everyyoung Tong muttered these two lines over and over until he finally let out a long sigh. “I lost!”

“My senior brother and I used to play a lot of go, and he always told me that I care too much about artistry. He said that I only look at what’s in front of me and not what comes after, which is why I could never master the essence of my ‘Cloudside Record’.”

“I used to think that he was just trying to put me off balance and paid me no heed, but now, I can see that he was right!”

The young woman replied, “‘Cloudside Record’ of Cloudside Mountain places emphasis on unpredictability. It expects its players to play their stones like a cloud; free, formless, and everchanging. It is a poor fit for you, someone who strives to build something up to a desired shape in your mind.”

“However, playing go is like trying to become the person you want to be. As long as every stone you place comes from the heart, there is no such thing as a bad move. If you try to conform yourself to a style you dislike, you’ll be a poor player of that style at best, or ruin yourself at worst!”

“As I mentioned earlier, your go skill is already perfect. So long as you set aside your design and pursuit for flawlessness, so long as the move you make comes from the heart, you have what it takes to turn even the worst board state around. You do not need to obsess over the ‘Cloudside Record’.”

Every young Tong was silent for a long time after hearing this. In the end, he let out a long, regretful sigh. “I lost, girl, and it’s a well-deserved loss! The item inside the Heaven Scorching Bagua Brazier is yours!”

“Thank you, Old Tong!” The woman smiled like spring.

.....

“A pill brazier? Why is there a pill brazier at this place?” Ye Qing furrowed his brow while staring at the huge and mysterious golden brazier in front of him.

He was chasing after Xiao Yang’s Nature’s Shell just now, and he was just about to catch up to it when it fell into one of the brazier’s openings and burned to ashes.

“That’s... the Burning Wind!” Ye Qing recognized the dark red flames shooting out of the golden brazier instantly.

“What kind of pill needs the Burning Wind as the fire?” Ye Qing rubbed his nose curiously.

Whoosh whoosh!

It was at this moment the dark red flame in the pill brazier roared out of the opening and turned into Burning Wind. Instead of dodging, Ye Qing scattered the incoming wind with a single punch. It failed to do any damage to him whatsoever.

Ye Qing was too shocked and distracted to be delighted by his growth, however. “It can’t be... is this the source of the Burning Wind that created Firewind Valley? That’s not possible... right?”

As much as he wanted to deny it, he couldn't deny the reality before his eyes.

Should I check out what's inside the brazier? A thought suddenly occurred in Ye Qing's mind. The Burning Wind was the greatest threat in this place, but it so happened that he was almost immune to it. So why not?

Ye Qing licked his lips unconsciously as his caution warred against his greed. In the end, greed won out, and he jumped into the air and punched the cover. Why suffer temptation when he could afford to indulge in it?

Tang!

His full-powered punch was powerful enough to shatter Xiao Yang like a vase, but the brazier cover didn't budge an inch. In fact, he was the one who was sent stumbling.

"What the hell? Just how hard is this thing?" Ye Qing shook his hand and exclaimed in astonishment after catching himself.

The golden brazier seemed angered by the punch, however. It shook once and fell still as if it was gathering its power. The next moment, it unleashed a pair of Burning Winds that were far, far hotter than anything it had released from its two openings. In fact, it was so hot that their color had turned from dark red to black. Like a pair of black dragons, they engulfed Ye Qing before he could react.

"Hahaha! Look at the kid! He actually thought he could steal what's inside the Heaven Scorching Bagua Brazier!" Everyong Tong laughed boisterously when he saw Ye Qing being engulfed by the Burning Winds.

The woman smiled but paid no attention to Ye Qing's plight. Instead, she made a hand gesture and pointed at the brazier, causing its cover to rise slowly into the air.

A dark light shone out of the brazier the moment it was opened. It moved slowly, but everything the light touched turned dark as well.

Strange, rainbow colors swam within the unnatural light, and the Burning Wind was everywhere. The dark light seemed to exist between the line of real and unreal, and the longer it persisted, the more the surroundings seemed to fade into reality.

"What a beautiful yaoqin you are. When you play, the world itself seems to descend into a dark dream. I shall name you Dark Dream!"

Like a cool breeze brushing against a tranquil pond, the young woman's voice caused ripples to appear across the dark light. The dark light was about to slip into the void when it suddenly flew into the young woman's palm and transformed into a yaoqin. It was almost like it was responding to its master's call. When she stroked its strings, clear notes resonated throughout the unnatural space and folded it up like a painting. When all was said and done, the valley had returned to normal.

After the young woman had put away the yaoqin, Everyong Tong hurriedly made a grab for the Heaven Scorching Bagua Brazier. His palm kept growing bigger and bigger until it became as big as a mountain. He then lifted the brazier into the air with his impossibly huge hand.

The Heaven Scorching Bagua Brazier struggled with all its might, but in the end it was unable to break free. It was about halfway through the air when it abruptly stopped shaking as it had been tamed.

Suddenly, a tiny smirk crossed Everyyoung Tong's face when he recalled something. He then "accidentally" tipped the brazier over and poured the Burning Wind—the astral qi was compressed so much that it resembled molten lava—into the valley. Specifically, he was pouring the Burning Wind right on top of Ye Qing.

At that moment, the world turned to fire, and the Burning Wind roared louder than ever before. Everything in the valley—the earth, the rocks, even the mountains—melted into molten lava. It was like the end of the world.

"Hehehe..." Everyyoung Tong chuckled deviously. As soon as he grabbed the Heaven Scorching Bagua Brazier, he vanished into thin air and left behind only his voice,

"I promised you I would give you what's inside the Heaven Scorching Bagua Brazier, girl, but I never said anything about the brazier. Surely you won't blame me for taking it, right? With this, my senior brother shouldn't be too mad about returning empty-handed!"

"Also, feel free to visit Cloudside Mountain if you like!"

"Old bastard!" The young woman chuckled while staring at the sky, but she wasn't angry. She then turned back to the valley and observed Ye Qing as he struggled.

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was seriously regretting his earlier decision. Although the two black dragons weren't powerful enough to hurt him, a giant hand had appeared out of nowhere and taken the golden brazier with it.

By now, he realized that he was in the presence of a terrifying power. He immediately played dead and prayed that the owner of the giant hand wouldn't notice him. However, the fucker "accidentally" slipped and poured the hottest substance inside the brazier right on top of him. It was easily tens of times hotter than the black dragons that had engulfed him earlier.

Naturally, he was in deep trouble. His body might be strong enough to resist the Burning Wind, but his mind wasn't. Like a candle flame, it flickered violently and threatened to disappear at any moment. The only reason he was still alive was thanks to the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method". It was completely up to fate whether he could outlast until the downpour of Burning Wind!

"You sonuvabitch! You're going to kill me just because I touched your stupid brazier one time? You old bastard!"

Ye Qing knew he wouldn't last when the creeping blackness grew closer and closer to the center of his vision. That was why he decided to say screw it and started cursing the old man to hell and back. He was going to die anyway, so who cares?

During his final moments, he let out a bitter chuckle and started singing,

"Goddess, I know that you are good

You came to rescue me

So please, hear my humble plea

Save me, goddess, save me

I have nowhere else to go~”

In the sky, the young woman smiled as she listened to Ye Qing’s curses. “Old bastard, he says. I completely agree.”

When he started singing out of nowhere, she tilted her head a little and smirked. “I’m pretty sure he tweaked the lyrics a little, and his tone is all off. That said, it is a good song, and it reminds me of some tunes from the previous dynasty...”

“Fine. I’ll be your goddess one time.”

The young woman started playing her new yaoqin. Like a spring hidden in the depths of a dark valley, the music was pleasing to the ear despite its dark, silent tone. As she played, a whinny noise broke out from afar, and a clapping sound drew nearer and nearer. Soon, a horse-drawn carriage appeared and stopped in front of the young woman.

The carriage was indigo in color and covered in mysterious runes and patterns. The driver was an old man wearing a conical hat. The fine horses pulling the carriage had blue skin. Every time it snorted through its nose or shifted its feet, invisible ripples would spread across the air.

“Please get in, Miss!” The old man asked. His voice was heavy and creaky. It didn’t sound like the voice of a human at all. In fact, he wasn’t. His eyes were lifeless and metallic, and his expression seemed permanently affixed. In fact, the horses weren’t alive either. They looked and acted like living creatures, but their bodies were really made of bronze.

“Uncle Bronze,” she responded affirmatively and climbed into the carriage. She then said, “Let’s go. Please take the young man trapped within the Burning Wind with us.”

“As you command, Miss!” The old man she called Uncle Bronze bowed and rolled down the curtains. He then whipped the horses and drove the carriage into the Burning Wind.

The horse-drawn carriage seemed to be protected by a mysterious power. When it got close, the Burning Wind immediately parted ways like the Red Sea.

Ye Qing had already fainted at this point, so Uncle Bronze easily caught him with his whip and pulled him into the carriage. He then laid the young man on a soft cushion.

“Neeeeeeeeeeigh!”

The horses neighed and broke through the Burning Wind. Just a second later, the valley was already behind them.

Inside the carriage, the young woman shot Ye Qing a glance. He was completely red and naked right now, but she didn’t seem embarrassed in the slightest. With the wave of a hand, she covered

him up with a blanket and grabbed a book from the carriage's hidden compartment. Then, she began reading in silence.

Chapter 123: The Curtain Rises

Warm sunlight was pouring down a clear, blue sky. A nearby lake was shimmering with serene beauty.

“Oooh... this headache is killing me!”

There was a man lying on a meadow next to the lake. He was motionless until he suddenly sat up, slapped a hand to his forehead, and shook his head violently. He was none other than Ye Qing.

“I’m at... Jade Spring Lake?” Ye Qing was taken aback when he saw the familiar lake. “How did I get here? I’m pretty sure I was at Firewind Valley.”

Ye Qing massaged his forehead some more and tried to remember what happened. He had tried to resist the downpour of Burning Wind but blacked out eventually. He didn’t know how long he was unconscious, but he remembered waking up in a half-lucid state and finding himself lying inside a carriage. There was also a young woman.

He remembered asking, “Who... who are you?”

And she had answered, “I’m your goddess!”

“What?”

The woman shot him a smile before singing,

“Goddess, I know that you are good

You came to rescue me

So please, hear my humble plea

Save me, goddess, save me

I have nowhere else to go...”

When she was done, she said, “I saved your life, so I’m your goddess, right?”

Her voice was melodious and heavenly. Even the afterglow was a dreamlike experience!

The young woman set down her book and shot him another smile. “This is how you should’ve sung the song! You’re a terrible singer.”

That was where his memory cut off. He might have said something, he might not have. He wouldn’t know. One thing for certain though, it was that woman who saved his life and left him here.

“A goddess, huh?”

Ye Qing rested his head on his hands and basked in the warm sunshine. He let out a silly giggle and sang again, “Save me, goddess, save me, I have nowhere else to go...”

“Bah! It really does sound pretty bad... hehehe...”

.....

“The practitioner shall walk like a raging stream, smooth yet soundless. They shall punch like they would topple the heavens themselves, terrible yet without a trace. The practitioner would become invisible to the world when they had attained the highest strength!”

Ye Qing was currently walking back to Anyang following the official route, but that wasn't the only thing he was doing. He was also practicing his stance. His footsteps were as torrential like a river, and yet they were also perfectly soundless. Every punch he threw threatened to punch a hole in the sky, and yet its power was perfectly unrecognizable until the last moment.

The stance he was practicing was called the Cloud Vaporization Stance. It was, of course, a part of the Cloud Vaporization Style.

The Cloud Vaporization Style was an Astral Refinement stage fist art, so it was a lot more detailed than your ordinary fist art. Not only did it teach the techniques, it also taught the breathing method and various know-hows.

The foundation of the Cloud Vaporization Style was the Cloud Vaporization Stance. In martial arts, power came from the earth, force from the body, and intent from the mind, and they could all be learned through the Cloud Vaporization Stance. Only by building a solid foundation could one build a house that wouldn't topple over at the slightest breeze. Just the same, only by mastering the stance could one master a fist style.

When practicing a stance, one must pay attention to their breathing, their step, the way they channeled their force and so on when practicing a stance. It was why it took him three days to return to Anyang instead of one.

It was worth it though. He had practiced the stance for over fifty kilometers straight, and his punches over three thousand times. As a result, he was now more or less familiar with the Cloud Vaporization Style's breathing method, force circulation, and technique. He could now say that he was an initiate of the Cloud Vaporization Style.

“I'm finally back!” Ye Qing stopped practicing when Anyang's tall, wide gates were finally in sight. He let out a sigh of relief, smiled, and started toward the entrance with a smile on his face.

Ye Qing did not head to the Pacification Bureau directly after entering the county. Instead, he went to the Iron Shirt Gang and checked in with Tao Xian about a certain investigation. Then, he went to Endless Horizons and spoke with Faceless for two hours. It was only then he went to the Pacification Bureau and visited Ling Jianqiu.

“You're finally back, Joyless!”

Ling Jianqiu was dressed in white and wearing an icy expression as usual. The expressionless man was expressionless even after learning about the plight of Jade Spring Village and the death of Xiao Yang. The villagers were one thing, but Xiao Yang was a Patrolman of Luo Shui. And yet, the Chief of Bureau didn't seem to care about it at all.

“Thank you for your service, Ye Qing. And I'm sorry for all that I've put you through!”

“It’s all for the good of the people!” Ye Qing replied humbly.

Ling Jianqiu set down the document he was reading and asked, “There is one thing that puzzles me, Joyless. You mentioned in your secret letter that Xiao Yang is dead, but how did Xiao Yang come to be with you in the first place? What is the chain of events that had brought the two of you together? Please, tell me everything!”

Ye Qing raised an eyebrow. “The day I left the county, Xiao Yang was waiting for me at the entrance. He told me that it was you who sent him to accompany me on the investigation. Was he telling the truth?”

Ling Jianqiu shook his head immediately. “Absolutely not. Xiao Yang did tell me that he was heading out for a bit, but he never told me where he was going or what he was doing. I definitely hadn’t asked him to accompany you to Jade Spring Village either. I would definitely notify you if that was the case!”

“I knew it!” Ye Qing shook his head. He had suspected that Ling Jianqiu had no idea about Xiao Yang’s visit to Jade Spring Village, but it wasn’t until now that he knew for certain that the Astral Refiner was lying. “I trust you, Chief Ling!”

Ye Qing had never suspected that Ling Jianqiu might have something to do with his ambush because there was just no reason for him to do something like this. He took a moment to organize his thoughts before informing everything that had happened during his journey except the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”.

Ling Jianqiu’s lips were pressed into a firm line when he listened until the end. “Xiao Yang is a Patrolman of Luo Shui, and yet he colluded with a Stranger to murder his own kind. He deserves to die. Shen Xian and Li Yuankang also took the side of a monster to further their own self-interest. They too deserve death for their crimes. You’ve done well to rid them from our world!”

“However, I can’t help but notice that you not only survived the ambush of Xiao Yang, Evergreen Ivy, Shen Xian and Li Yuankang, but also slayed Xiao Yang, a mid-stage Astral Refiner. You must have entered the Astral Refinement stage already, am I right?”

Ye Qing nodded. “I just got lucky!”

A rare sigh escaped Ling Jianqiu’s lips. “You’re a promising youngster.”

“You flatter me, Chief Ling!”

Ling Jianqiu fell silent for a moment before he resumed the conversation, “You have nothing to worry about Xiao Yang’s death. As a cardinal rule, all members of the Pacification Bureau are prohibited from colluding with Strangers to commit acts of violence against other humans. Barring exceptional circumstances, anyone who breaks this rule will be handed the capital punishment. No one would defend Xiao Yang for what he did even if he is a Patrolman of Luo Shui, so you may rest easy on that account!”

“As for the Shen Clan and the Li Clan, the situation is even simpler. Without their leaders, the two clans are no more than annoying pests. Feel free to deal with them as you please!”

“The real problem is locating Evergreen Ivy and killing her. If a colony of termites is left alone, it may chew through a foundation and bring down an entire structure. Evergreen Ivy is that colony of termites, except she’s far more dangerous and cunning. First it was Anyang, and now you. If we don’t eliminate her soon, it’s only a matter of time before she causes another disaster that we may not recover from!”

“My sentiments exactly!” Ye Qing nodded. “Besides giving you a report of what happened at Jade Spring Village, it’s also the main reason I’ve come to you today!”

As the man who ruined her plan to bring the Nether Lord to this world, Ye Qing knew full well just how much Evergreen Ivy hated him. He might have survived her ambush this time, but she would surely attack him a second time, a third, a fourth and more. So long as she was still alive, she would never stop coming after him, and there was no guarantee he would be able to survive all of her ambushes.

He did not want to have to watch out for her for eternity. The only way to solve the problem once and for all was to kill her.

Ling Jianqiu was pleasantly surprised to hear this. “Did you find out who she is, Joyless?”

Ye Qing replied firmly, “I think so!”

“Who is she?”

“Now, now, Chief Ling! No spoilers!” Ye Qing chided him jokingly. “Speaking of which, can you round up everyone in the Pacification Bureau, Chief Ling? I have something important to announce.”

Ling Jianqiu was a wise man. He immediately figured out Ye Qing’s subtext and frowned. “Are you suggesting that Evergreen Ivy is hiding in the Pacification Bureau?”

Ye Qing did not give him a yes or no. He simply urged, “Just do as I say.”

“Very well!” Ling Jianqiu agreed after a moment of thought. “Are you sure though, Joyless?”

Ye Qing smirked. “Just sit tight and enjoy the show!”

.....

“Say, does anyone know why the chief has summoned us today?”

“Not me. Everyone’s here though. It’s gotta be something big!”

“You don’t say? I just hope that it’s not another big incident like that attack a week ago. Sigh...”

“Me too, man. Me too.”

Every member in the Pacification Bureau—the Pacification Sentinels, the officers and more—were gathered in the main hall of the headquarters, and no one had any idea what was happening.

“Why have you gathered us today, Chief Ling?” Zhao Yunlong glanced at his superior and asked. Ling Jianqiu hadn’t just summoned his subordinates, he had gathered all the higher-ups as well.

Ling Jianqiu slowly swept his gaze across his surroundings. Everyone fell silent as if his pressure was a tangible thing. Satisfied, he began,

“I’m sure everyone here still remembers the invasion from a week ago. You should also know that the masterminds behind that invasion are five intelligent Strangers, namely Rotten Crown, Dark Eye, Old Grass, Faceless and Evergreen Ivy. Four of the Strangers had been executed on the day of the invasion, but the last Stranger, Evergreen Ivy, is still on the prowl.”

He knew the truth about Faceless, but he lied since there was no point in revealing it now.

“Five intelligent Strangers...”

“One of the Strangers hasn't been caught yet? That’s terrible!”

“Evergreen Ivy...”

Everyone was shocked to hear this. They knew the rough outline of the incident, but not the specifics. It was a given that his statement would spark a massive discussion.

“Foster father, have you found Evergreen Ivy’s trail? Have you summoned us to catch the Stranger?” Yun Yan asked.

The crowd immediately turned to look at Ling Jianqiu expectantly. “Is Yun Yan speaking the truth, Chief Ling?”

Everyone here wanted to catch Evergreen Ivy be it for selfish or selfless reasons.

“Yes, and no!” Ling Jianqiu swept his gaze across the crowd once more and said, “I shall leave the specifics to Joyless!”

“Joyless?”

“Warrior Ye?”

“What does this have to do with Warrior Ye?”

As the main hall fell into a commotion once more, Ye Qing stepped out from the backrooms and saluted everyone. “A good day to you all, ladies and gentlemen!”

“A good day to you as well, Warrior Ye!” The group replied just as respectfully.

Yun Yan was the first one to speak up, “Why have you come today, Joyless?”

Ye Qing did not respond to her question. Or rather, he was planning to address everyone at the same time, “I’m sure you’re all curious why I’m here when I’m not a member of the Pacification Bureau. It’s very simple. Because I’m not bound to as many rules and duties as you all, Chief Ling had charged me with the mission of investigating Evergreen Ivy after the investigation was over. And I am happy to announce that my investigation has finally borne fruit!”

“Really?” A fearsome, hot-blooded man abruptly sprung to his feet and yelled loudly, “Where is that bastard right now? I’ll personally lead the charge to cut off their head and avenge our fallen brothers and sisters!”

The speaker was Shi Chong, an Investigator of the Anyang Pacification Bureau. He was mainly responsible for apprehending and exterminating Strangers, and he was a simple and explosive person.

“Do not worry, Lord Shi. You have my word that they won’t escape!” Ye Qing assured him.

Shi Chong tried to curb his impatience by scratching his head. “Sure, but where is that Ever... Ever-something hiding, exactly?”

“Yeah, Joyless. Stop keeping us in suspense and tell us already!”

The others obviously shared his sentiment, so Ye Qing smiled and complied with their request. He said directly, “To tell you the truth, Evergreen Ivy is hiding in this building!”

Chapter 124: Coincidence?

“Evergreen Ivy is... hiding in this building? What are you...”

Shi Chong was confused, but the others figured out Ye Qing’s meaning immediately. “Joyless, are you saying that our very *headquarters* is that Stranger’s hideout?”

Ye Qing nodded. “Not only that, they’re right here with us! That’s right. One of us... is Evergreen Ivy!”

It was like he had lobbed a bomb at the center of the main hall. Everyone was shouting and exchanging incredulous glances with each other.

“Impossible!” An old man’s voice boomed over the commotion, “Every single person in this building, no, this hall is a respectable and meritorious member of the Pacification Bureau. There is no way they would collude with a Stranger! You may be the savior of Anyang, but even you do not have the right to speak off the cuff!”

The others had fallen silent during the old man’s cry of outrage, but their expressions made their feelings as plain as day.

Ye Qing didn’t allow his audience’s reaction to affect him, however. Smiling as calmly as ever, he said, “I understand your disbelief, but I would implore you to wait until I’ve said my piece before you make your decision!”

“As Chief Ling had mentioned earlier, the five intelligent Strangers are the ones who plotted the Nether Lord’s descent and the destruction of Anyang. But did you know

that Evergreen Ivy is the leader of the group? Not only that, they're the one who plotted everything! The other four Strangers are just the executors of their will!"

"Evergreen Ivy is a cautious Stranger. So cautious, in fact, that Old Grass was the only one of the four Strangers who knows where they're hiding. It's because he's responsible for spying on Anyang and collecting the necessary information to carry out the plan!"

"When the invasion happened, why didn't the Strangers notice our preparations until it was too late? It's because I found out about Old Grass and took him out first. However, I didn't kill him immediately. Suspecting that he might have a clue as to where Evergreen Ivy was hiding, I pretended not to notice his fake death and went away. As expected, Old Grass immediately raced to warn Evergreen Ivy about the situation, and can you guess where I tracked him down to? That's right! He went straight to the Pacification Bureau!"

"Are you serious?"

"How is this possible?"

The commotion restarted, but this time Ling Jianqiu silenced them with a cold rebuke, "Silence! Let Joyless speak!"

Ye Qing smiled politely and continued, "I could have allowed him to lead me straight to Evergreen Ivy, but I'm an outsider, and if you think about it, he didn't need to meet Evergreen Ivy to warn her. So, I killed Old Grass outside the Pacification Bureau."

Ling Jianqiu nodded approvingly. "Your concerns are well-founded!"

"Okay, so Evergreen Ivy was hiding in the headquarters, but that doesn't mean that they must be a member of the Pacification Bureau," someone argued.

Ye Qing assured him, "I'm getting to it. To explain how I narrowed down the suspect and eventually identified Evergreen Ivy, I must first speak of the altar."

"The altar? You mean the altar the Strangers used to summon the Nether Lord?" Shi Chong asked.

"That's right!" Ye Qing answered. "The altar is one of the key factors in summoning the Nether Lord. The materials used to make it are extraordinary to put it mildly, and it could not have been completed in a short time. That is why the owner of the house must've been involved in the construction, and why I decided to start my investigation with him—or at least, I planned to."

"When I tried looking into the owner, I discovered that he had met an unfortunate end the day prior while carrying out some business outside the county. It was clearly a certain Stranger's effort to tie up loose ends."

“Since I already knew that Evergreen Ivy was hiding inside the Pacification Bureau, I had ordered my men to keep an eye on the building. It was how I learned that exactly eight Pacification Bureau members had left the county on the same day the owner was killed! They are Sun Xingguo, Fang Ziwu, Liu Hailong, Wang Pan, Lei Gang, Feng Tang, Zhou Li and Hu Nu!”

Ye Qing purposely stopped here and swept his gaze across the crowd, his spirit enveloping every person in the hall and tracking their every activity. Of the eight he mentioned, only one of them started breathing faster and experienced an increase in heart rate even though his face was perfect, and he was...

“Seven of the eight people had left the county on official business, and I have the records to prove it. Only one of them did not have a record. Can you guess who this person is?”

Before anyone could react, Hu Nu suddenly shouted, “This is baseless accusation, Ye Qing! I left the county that day to procure a herb for the Miss! I didn’t kill anyone!”

A wicked grin spread across Ye Qing’s lips. “That’s strange. I haven’t said who that person is. I never said that this person is the killer either, so why are you in such a hurry to defend yourself, Hu Nu? How very suspicious!”

“By the way, I was totally lying about the records. I was just fishing a little and checking if someone would take the bait. To think you would actually fall for it! Hohoho...”

“S-Stop spouting nonsense. You can’t accuse me of murdering Chang Lezhou just because I happened to be leaving the county that day. Plus, how can you be sure that your surveillance was perfect? Maybe there was a ninth member who left the Pacification Bureau that day, and your men just happened to miss them! Evidence matters, Ye Qing, and this is the Pacification Bureau!” Hu Nu argued passionately.

“So, you’re claiming it’s a coincidence?” Ye Qing chuckled. “In that case, how did you name the victim even though I’ve never mentioned his name?”

Cold sweat broke out of Hu Nu’s forehead when he realized what he just said. He argued, “I... I just happened to know Chang Lezhou. T-There’s nothing strange about this!”

“So, you plead that it’s a coincidence again?” Ye Qing teased him. “Okay! Let’s hear about this then!”

“As I’ve mentioned before, the materials necessary to build the altar are extraordinary. It cannot have been built in a matter of days either. When Chang Lezhou was still alive, he once procured various materials from a total of eight traders. However, every single one of these traders were now dead because they had encountered one unfortunate ‘accident’ or another. Some were killed by Strangers,

some had run into bandits, and some straight up vanished and were never seen again. They left no bodies for the Pacification Bureau to conduct an investigation either!”

“I tried digging a little into these incidents, and can you guess what I discovered? You were almost never in the county when these traders had met their unfortunate end! Now tell me, what were you doing during those times? You’re not going to claim that it’s a coincidence again, are you?”

Hu Nu looked like he was about to tear his hair out. “You... I... It’s been several months since those people had died! How could I possibly remember what I was doing at the time? Anyway, their deaths have nothing to do with me!”

Ye Qing chuckled again and pointed out, “You’re a pretty bad liar, aren’t you? I’ve never told you that these traders had died several months ago. In fact, their deaths had never been reported to the Pacification Bureau because they appeared to be *mundane* deaths, meaning that their cases were handled by the county hall. So, how did you know that they had died several months ago? Answer me!”

Hu Nu wiped away the sweat on his forehead and swallowed audibly. “I... I happened to hear about the murders from... somewhere. What? Is that a crime?”

“Once again, he pleads that it’s a coincidence! A lot of ‘coincidences’ seem to happen around you, doesn’t it?” Ye Qing taunted, but his voice was growing colder and colder over time. “Tell me then. Who did you hear these murders from, and where?”

“I... I don’t remember!” Hu Nu argued again, but to say that his argument was weak would be an understatement. Everyone in the main hall was staring at Hu Nu with unfriendly expressions at this point.

Contrary to Hu Nu’s words, evidence definitely did *not* matter when it came to the Pacification Bureau. This was doubly true in the case of Strangers. To put it simply, the Pacification Bureau would rather kill an innocent than unleash a malicious Stranger into the world. If not for the fact that Ling Jianqiu and Ye Qing hadn’t given a command yet, they would have hauled Hu Nu into the prison and interrogated him already.

The group did not seem to realize that they had put Ye Qing on the same pedestal as Ling Jianqiu.

“You don’t remember? What a shame. I suppose I have no choice but to overlook this as well!” Ye Qing clapped his hands as he mocked Hu Nu in a tone that was full of ridicule. “That’s fine. I have one last thing to share with you all.”

“According to my investigation, Chang Lezhou once hired fifteen artisans to build something secret. I shouldn’t need to tell you all that it’s the altar. Once the altar was complete, all fifteen artisans had died or disappeared outside the county just like the traders.”

“Now, is there any brave soul in this room who would like to bet me that our friend here was in the county during those times? Anyone? No?”

“Hu Nu, oh, Hu Nu. You’re not going to say that you just ‘happened’ to be out of the county again, are you?”

Hu Nu hung his head low and kept quiet. It was as if he had given up on defending himself!

“Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action. What else do you have to say for yourself, Hu Nu?”

Ling Jianqiu barked from his seat as well, “Answer him, Hu Nu! Are you Evergreen Ivy or not?”

“Keke... that’s right. I am Evergreen Ivy!” Hu Nu suddenly let out a crazed cackle. “You idiots, I’ve been hiding right under your nose for ages, and not a single one of you noticed anything amiss. Even better, it was an outsider who discovered me in the end, not you. Fucking idiots!”

Shi Chong was an impatient man to begin with, and the fact that Hu Nu dared to taunt them all in this sacred hall pushed his anger way over the edge. He immediately made a grab for Hu Nu.

Shi Chong’s signature martial art was called the Stone Breaking Hand. Since he was angry, he wasn’t exactly holding back his strength either. If he managed to get his hands on Hu Nu, the traitor would be lucky to break just a couple of bones.

“RAAAAAGH!”

It was at this moment Hu Nu let out a roar so loud that most people clutched their heads in pain. At the same time, Hu Nu turned toward Shi Chong and met his grab with a ferocious punch. To everyone’s shock, he actually broke the Investigator’s arm and elicited a painful scream from the man. He slammed into the wall behind him and spat out a mouthful of blood.

“What the—!”

Shi Chong apprehended and slayed Strangers for a living. Naturally, he could not be a weak warrior. Although he wasn’t a Vessel Augmentor yet, he was very close to making a breakthrough. He was also one of the strongest warriors in the Pacification Bureau.

On the other hand, Hu Nu was just a Qi Invoker. Although he was born with incredible strength, it should’ve been impossible for him to go up against Shi Chong, much less best him. And yet, reality begged to differ.

“RAAAAAGH!” Hu Nu let out another mighty roar after defeating Shi Chong. It was so strong that it sounded like a thunderclap had gone off at the center of the main hall, and a gust of wind started blowing out of nowhere. It was coming from Hu Nu.

Speaking of Hu Nu, the man had undergone a massive transformation. Three yellow horizontal lines had appeared on his forehead, and his face was covered in yellow fur. Long, deadly fangs were protruding from his mouth, and his fingernails had transformed into sharp claws. He looked almost like a tiger right now.

“A Strangerkin?!” Ye Qing narrowed his eyes. It was important to note that a Strangerkin was not the same as a human who transformed into a Stranger. A Strangerkin might possess the characteristics and abilities of a Stranger, but they were essentially human in every other way. They identified themselves as human and were usually in control of their nature.

On the other hand, a human who had transformed into a Stranger was the complete opposite. The transformation would twist their nature and obliterate their human mind, leaving nothing behind except a monstrous husk who only desired the death and destruction of humanity. They might possess a human’s features and even a human’s intelligence, but they were a Stranger through and through.

That said, Stranger blood was inherently dangerous. All Strangerkins were one-in-a-million geniuses whose talent and ability usually outstripped their human counterpart by leaps and bounds. But if they lost control of their Stranger blood, or if they were overtaken by their Stranger Blood for some reason, their human mind would be obliterated, and they would transform into a Stranger as well. There was no such thing as power without a price.

But of course, being a Strangerkin was almost always a good thing. This was especially true for a warrior.

Chapter 125: The End - Or Is It?

Boom!

Hu Nu’s cultivation level didn’t change after he awakened his Stranger blood, but his aura and the power he displayed were almost on par with a Vessel Augmentor.

The only true Vessel Augmentors in the Pacification Bureau were Ling Jianqiu and Zhao Yunlong.

“How dare you!” Zhao Yunlong roared in anger and tossed a red cape straight at Hu Nu. It threatened to envelop him whole like a red cloud. At the same time, Zhao Yunlong rose from his chair and flew over to Hu Nu like a bird, fast and difficult to catch. His palm drew many afterimages in the air and roared like a dragon.

“Palm of Dragon’s Roar”

There was no way Hu Nu could defeat a Vessel Augmentor, but he refused to submit. Roaring, he clenched his fists and launched a flurry of punches at Zhao Yunlong. His punches were simple and direct, but they were also incredibly powerful. His force howled not unlike a tiger leaping over a mountain stream. The palm afterimages were easily scattered into nothing by his attacks.

But what was the point if he could not land a hit on Zhao Yunlong? It was the same for the Swordbearer, but as a Vessel Augmentor he could afford to drag out the fight. For a time, the duo traded “useless” blows with each other seemingly without end. It was a battle between the tiger and the dragon!

“Take this!”

The stalemate continued for a moment when suddenly, Hu Nu let out a mighty roar and manifested what looked like a crouching tiger behind him. It was both massive and full of bloodthirst. He threw

another punch, but it was far more powerful than any one of the punches he had thrown before. Both the red cape and the palm afterimages were blown away in an instant.

Zhao Yunlong let out a pained grunt as he reappeared into view. The blood drained away from his face as he pulled away from Hu Nu. Despite the disparity between their cultivation level, Hu Nu was the one who had come out on top!

After he had successfully beaten back Zhao Yunlong, Hu Nu turned toward Ye Qing and glared at him like he would shoot flames from his eyes. He roared, "I'll kill you!"

Hu Nu dropped on all fours and pounced toward Ye Qing. The ferocious tiger behind his back grew more and more solid until it finally merged with Hu Nu into one. His fingers bent slightly like claws, he fell down on Ye Qing like a real tiger.

It was said that the clouds obeyed a dragon, and the wind a tiger. It would seem that it wasn't just a saying. A gale was blowing out of Hu Nu's body, and it was so strong that it broke all the tables and chairs in the main hall into pieces. More importantly, it was pushing away the others and keeping them from being able to assist Ye Qing.

"Watch out!" Someone cried out in warning.

Out of everyone present, Ye Qing was the only one who was completely unperturbed by Hu Nu's surprise attack. He waved his sleeve casually like he was batting away a fly, and like an actual fly Hu Nu was sent flying until he crashed into the ground so hard that he formed a small pit.

Just like that, the threat was neutralized. It was impossible to tell if the guy was still alive.

"Holy..."

Ling Jianqiu was the only person in the hall who wasn't surprised by this outcome. Hu Nu had managed to push back even Zhao Yunlong, a Vessel Augmentor, and yet Ye Qing had knocked him out with a wave of the hand! Was Hu Nu that weak, or was Ye Qing too strong? Clearly, it was the latter. What a monster!

Shi Chong was still recovering from his injury, but he was so excited that he blurted out between his coughs, "*Cough! Cough!* Well done, Joyless! You've exposed Hu Nu's true face and captured the true culprit behind the attack on Anyang. Your service to Anyang and the Pacification Bureau will never be forgotten!"

"Yeah. If not for you, heavens only know how much longer he would have worked against us from within!" Zhao Yunlong rebuttoned his cape and thanked Ye Qing from the bottom of his heart as well.

Yun Yan, who had been silent as a mouse since Ye Qing began expounding his suspicion of Hu Nu, also broke into a smile and said, "To think that Hu Nu would be Evergreen Ivy. Thank goodness you're here, Joyless, or it is only a matter of time before Anyang encounters another great disaster. If that happens, we, the Pacification Bureau, would be responsible for it."

"On behalf of the Pacification Bureau and the people of Anyang, I thank you for your service, Joyless!"

Yun Yan rose to her feet and saluted him respectfully after saying that.

“Thank you for your service, Joyless!”

Everyone else did the same thing as well.

“Hahaha! You’re welcome, everyone!” Ye Qing accepted the praise calmly, but a hint of ridicule crossed his lips as he continued, “However, it seems there’s a misunderstanding here. Did you guys actually think that Evergreen Ivy is Hu Nu?”

“What!? Hu Nu isn’t Evergreen Ivy? But didn’t you say—” Stunned, Zhao Yunlong tried to say something only to be interrupted by Ye Qing.

“Please recall what I *really* said earlier. Have I ever said that Hu Nu is Evergreen Ivy? Yes, I presented evidence that proves that Hu Nu is working for Evergreen Ivy, but does it really prove that Hu Nu is Evergreen Ivy? It does not, and the reason is very simple. It’s because Hu Nu isn’t Evergreen Ivy!”

“Are you sure?” Ling Jianqiu narrowed his eyes a bit when suddenly, he flinched as if he realized something. His expression turned dark as he asked, “Who is the real Evergreen Ivy then?”

Ye Qing smiled, but it didn’t reach the eyes. “Evergreen Ivy. It’s not a conventional name, but it’s easy to tell that it’s a feminine one. Also, Evergreen Ivy tried to hide her identity behind a cloak, but I could tell she’s small and delicate when I fought against her. She’s nothing like Hu Nu.”

He had been referring to Evergreen ivy as “they” and “them” this whole time, but now he was calling her by female pronouns. Combined with the obvious hints, every single person in the room subconsciously looked at the one and only woman in the main hall, Yun Yan!

Yun Yan smiled calmly and gently. “Surely you’re not suspecting me, Joyless?”

Ling Jianqiu’s gaze was icy as well. “Joyless, I would ask you to choose your words carefully. As you know, most Strangers possess the ability to assume whatever shape they like. They could be male, female, young or old. If this is your basis for accusing Yun Yan, then I am sorry to say that I am disappointed in you.”

He had adopted Yun Yan since she was a child, and she had been a kind and understanding soul for as long as he knew her. He loved her like his own daughter, and he would not allow anyone to slander her without good reason.

Even Shi Chong was shaking his head in disbelief. “Yeah, you must be mistaken, Ye Qing. Yun Yan has been sick and frail since she was a kid. She could barely carry something that’s heavier than a chair, much less fight and kill humans. There’s no way she is Evergreen Ivy!”

His sentiment was shared by most people in the main hall. Although Yun Yan was a sick and frail woman, she was wise, intelligent, and a warm soul. She was the one responsible for taking care of their miscellaneous affairs and ensuring that even dumb brutes like that would be well cared for. There wasn’t a single person in the Pacification Bureau who didn’t respect her from the bottom of their hearts.

“Hahaha! Calm down, people! You will understand why I’m saying this after I’ve clarified myself!” Ye Qing shrugged. “First, I had fought against Evergreen Ivy not long ago, and I can confirm that she is a Hatred-class Stranger. Hu Nu is pretty strong after he awakens his Stranger blood, but he’s at best on the same level as a Vessel Augmentor or a Malice-class Stranger. He is nowhere as strong as Evergreen Ivy is.”

“Second, Hu Nu was one of many who fought in the frontlines the whole time when the Strangers invaded. I’m pretty sure that there are many people in this room who can testify to this. There is no way he could’ve slipped away and conducted the ritual to summon the Nether Lord, so he cannot be Evergreen Ivy. Am I right?”

No one said a word because it was the truth.

Ye Qing clapped and brought everyone’s attention back to him. “As I’ve established earlier, Evergreen Ivy must be a member of the Pacification Bureau. She must also be able to slip away during the day of the invasion to carry out the ritual. With that in mind, who was the one person who wasn’t on the battlefield that day?”

“Also, the timing to conduct the ritual is very important. If it was held too soon, then the Pacification Bureau would have a shot at stopping it before it could be completed. It was the same thing if it was held too late. This means that Evergreen Ivy must be privy to the Pacification Bureau’s movement. She might not know what they were planning exactly, but it couldn’t have been difficult to guess considering that she was the mastermind.”

“With that in mind, it would be reasonable to say that only a handful of people would fit into this criteria, am I right?”

Again the crowd was silent and thoughtful. The Pacification Bureau had mobilized literally everyone who could fight the night the Strangers invaded Anyang. The only ones who were left behind were the old, the sick, the crippled and the servants. Out of all those people, the only one who knew that they had a covert operation that night was...

“But of course, this is just speculation; something to keep in mind while I bring up another matter!” Ye Qing chuckled. “Most of you wouldn’t know this, but I was attacked by Evergreen Ivy a few days ago while I was out of the county and carrying out a mission for Chief Ling. I was lucky to have survived the ambush.”

“But before I left the county, I specifically ordered my men to keep a close eye on the Pacification Bureau. It’s not difficult considering that every single one of you had remained in the county to flush out and kill the remnants of that invasion. In other words, anyone who left the county or was absent for whatever reason during my absence was most likely Evergreen Ivy.”

“Thanks to this, I found out that exactly one person had taken a few days off because she was ‘unwell’ while I was gone. What a coincidence, am I right?”

“One more thing. My mission was a covert mission that only Chief Ling and I should know. However, Evergreen Ivy somehow found out about it and was able to set up a well-planned ambush that almost killed me. Chief Ling could corroborate with me on this, but let’s just say that there was no way she could’ve done what she did if she hadn’t known about my mission beforehand.”

“Chief Ling is a cautious man. He would never leak a secret intentionally. As for me, why on earth would I leak my own activities, especially since I know that Evergreen Ivy was out for my blood? So, how did she find out about it?”

“I had thought long and hard over this, and in the end, I can only think of one possibility. Chief Ling must have brought up my mission by accident while he was chatting with someone; a close family member who could get him to lower his guard even for someone as cautious as him. She might even have prodded him about it since she knew he wouldn’t suspect a thing.”

“So, who do you think this person is, Chief Ling?”

Ling Jianqiu’s face darkened like never before as everyone turned to look at him. The Chief of Bureau was silent for a few seconds before he slowly turned to Yun Yan and asked, “Is it really you, Yun Yan?”

Ye Qing’s speculation was spot on, though it didn’t exactly turn out the way he thought it did. Ling Jianqiu was having dinner with Yun Yan when he talked about the mass disappearance happening at Jade Spring Village. He was wondering who he could send that wouldn’t be fodder for whatever Stranger was wreaking havoc at that place, and it was none other than Yun Yan who recommended that he sent Ye Qing!

So yes, Yun Yan did know that Ye Qing was leaving to investigate the mass disappearance at Jade Spring Village. More accurately, she was the one who had arranged everything! He was just a pawn in her scheme from the start until the end!

“Do you suspect me as well, foster father?” Yun Yan’s eyes watered.

“I...” Ling Jianqiu hesitated. If she was anyone else, he would not have fallen for such a simple trick. But Yun Yan was the daughter he had adopted and raised since she was young. How could she possibly be Evergreen Ivy?

Not only that, Yun Yan was weak and prone to illness from a young age, so much so that she couldn’t even practice martial arts. No matter how he tried, he just could not imagine her as the cruel, devious Evergreen Ivy!

And yet, he could not deny the truth behind Ye Qing’s words...

“Just give me an answer! Yes, or no?” Ling Jianqiu furrowed his brow until it was as wrinkled as the veins of a mountain. He looked like he was carrying a mountain in his chest as well.

Even Zhao Yunlong, a man who was normally as ice-veined as Ling Jianqiu was, couldn't help but ask, “Are you sure you're not mistaken, Ye Qing?”

For the first time, the young man dropped his smile and sighed. “I don't want it to be Sister Yun either. Alas, it was not meant to be!”

When he figured out the truth, he finally understood how Yun Yan, a mere mortal, had survived the knocking of the Soul Eater. He had thought it was because Ling Jianqiu had given her a talisman or something that shielded her from harm, but now he realized it was because she was hiding her strength. It was also why Yun Yan had not been teleported into the Mountain of Riddles during their last adventure together. It was because the Mountain of Riddles did not accept Strangers and idiots into its belly, and Yun Yan was anything but an idiot.

When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Yun Yan might have been a human at the beginning, but she had ceased being human at some point in her life. Now, only the Stranger was left.

However, Yun Yan had built up so much reputation in the Pacification Bureau that even now, when all evidence pointed toward her being Evergreen Ivy, there were still many people who doubted his words. So, Ye Qing broke into a grin and said, “There is one simple way to check if Sister Yun is Evergreen Ivy.”

“What is it?” Everyone turned to look at him.

Chapter 126: The Simple Way

Ye Qing shook his wrists and smiled evilly. “All it takes is one punch. If she dies, she's Yun Yan. If she doesn't, she's Evergreen Ivy!”

“...”

The idea was simple, direct, and effective. Human or Stranger, anyone would reveal their truest self in a life-or-death crisis. It was a matter of survival, not morality or character.

There was just one problem. If Ye Qing was right, then everything was well. But if he was wrong, then Yun Yan would be dead!

The Pacification Bureau was ruthless, but not heartless, not to mention that Yun Yan was no ordinary person. How could Ye Qing even think to risk her life like this? Was he a demon?

As it turned out, he was. Before anyone could react, he threw a punch straight at Yun Yan!

“Joyless, no!”

“Stop!”

Shocked but not stunned, the group tried to stop Ye Qing. However, a strange heat suddenly rose from their chest, boiled their vigor, and robbed them of their strength. They had no idea how the

young man had done it, but their pores started leaking dark red flames and steam. At the same time, their minds started burning up with unimaginable pain.

In just an instant, Ye Qing had incapacitated almost everyone in the room. They were all clutching their heads and staring blankly into the air. Ling Jianqiu was the only one who somehow withstood the pain, wrestled his vigor back under control, and attacked Ye Qing. Like cold autumn, ice cold light and sword qi filled the room in an instant.

“One Sword Autumn—Fall Silent to the Skies and Waters of Autumn”

Ling Jianqiu used his strongest move from the get go. He knew there was no chance he could stop Ye Qing otherwise. Despite this, his icy sword energy and even his sword slowly turned dark red in color. The cold temperature dominating the room also melted into a terrible heat in just a matter of seconds.

The attack could not maintain itself because its intent had been overridden. It vanished in the wave of heat.

Ling Jianqiu turned as red as a lobster and spat out a mouthful of boiling hot blood. To say that this outcome was shocking would be an understatement. Ye Qing wasn't even attacking him, but the residual force alone was enough to destroy his strongest move. He knew that the young man was now an Astral Refiner, but the gap between their strength was even greater than he had imagined. If Ye Qing really wanted him dead, he most likely could've killed him in a single punch.

More importantly, if even he could not endure a single punch from Ye Qing, then how could the sick, frail Yun Yan possibly survive this?

It was clear Ye Qing really wanted to kill her!

“Joyless, stop!” Ling Jianqiu shouted, but that was all he could do. He could only watch in helplessness as Ye Qing's fist moved closer and closer to Yun Yan. He closed his eyes. He didn't want to see Yun Yan turning into ash and scattering into the wind.

“Hahaha! To think you would actually try to kill your Sister Yun, Joyless!”

But right before Ye Qing's fist would land on Yun Yan, a pair of green vines suddenly burst out of the floor and pulled her to safety. The woman was giggling, but her voice no longer sounded kind or gentle. Instead, it was seductive, slothful, and evil.

Ye Qing shrugged as if he knew this would happen. His smile grew as he replied, “I would never do this against Sister Yun, but Evergreen Ivy? Now, that's a different story!”

“What are you talking about? I am both Yun Yan and Evergreen Ivy!” She continued to giggle as more vines grew out of the floor, the walls, the roof and other places. Pure white evergreen ivy flowers were growing out of the vines as well. The entire Pacification Bureau headquarters was transformed into a kingdom of ivies in just the blink of an eye!

“Yun Yan is Yun Yan, and Evergreen Ivy is Evergreen Ivy. But Evergreen Ivy can never be Yun Yan because Yun Yan is lost from the moment she transforms into Evergreen

Ivy!" Ye Qing declared while taking two steps to the side. It was only two steps, but it felt like the rush of a heavenly river. He threw a punch.

Whoosh!

The Burning Wind howled and surged toward Evergreen Ivy from multiple directions. The space simmered like it was cooked, and the air was positively scorching and unlivable. The punch felt hot enough to boil an entire marsh.

"Cloud Vaporization Style"

Everyone in the headquarters felt the unbearable heat and backed further away from Ye Qing. They felt like their bodies had caught on fire. Evergreen Ivy's vines and flowers were not so lucky. Not only were they burning, the fire had begun from the inside. It spread unhindered to every vine and flower in the headquarters and burned it all to dust in just the blink of an eye.

Ye Qing could personally attest to the potency of Evergreen Ivy's vines and flowers. To this day, the fear was still fresh in his mind. But of course, it was a past tense kind of fear. Even if he hadn't grasped the Burning Wind, which was the antithesis of Evergreen Ivy's plants and pollen, his body had become so tough that he doubted that the stranger could put even a single scratch on his person. Thick skin for the win!

The members of the Pacification Bureau and the civilians close by could not say the same thing, however. Everyone would have died if he allowed the vines and the flowers to grow unhindered. That was why he had used the "Cloud Vaporization Style" to destroy it all in one go.

Of course, part of the reason he did it was to test out the power of the fist style in real combat. The result was satisfying to say the least.

"The Burning Wind? You actually subsumed the Burning Wind into your true qi? No wonder you managed to come out alive from Firewind Valley!" Evergreen Ivy exclaimed in surprise, realization, and even a bit of worry. If she wasn't sure before, she now knew that Ye Qing definitely had the power to kill her.

"Yun Yan! You're really Evergreen Ivy?!" someone shouted. It was only now the realization hit everyone, and none of them looked like they could believe it.

"That is correct. So sorry to disappoint you all!" said the Stranger, though it was clear from her smile and her tone that she wasn't apologetic in the slightest.

"Why?" Ling Jianqiu broke his silence. His tone was calm, but everyone could tell that he was anything but. Hidden behind the mask of calmness was pain, incomprehension, and anger.

Evergreen Ivy looked at him with the same smile as before. "Why? Isn't this what you wanted, foster father? Since I was young, you've always wanted me to practice martial arts and grow stronger. You've always wanted me to make a name for myself like a man, haven't you?"

"And I did, foster father! Not only that, I've surpassed your expectations! You should be happy for me!"

Ling Jianqiu's eyes were full of sorrow. "What I wanted? Yes, I did want you to practice martial arts and grow strong. I did want you to become famous throughout the realm. But that is because I want you to become someone who would protect the weak and defenseless and raise justice for those who could not. I want you to become someone who could protect tens of thousands with your sword!"

"When I found out that your body is too frail to practice martial arts, I had immediately withdrawn those expectations. I searched high and low to find a cure for you, but I have never heaped my personal expectations on you. All I ask is that you be good to yourself and others, stay safe, and be happy!"

"But what did you do? Who did you become? You became a Stranger who wanted to destroy Anyang! You tried to kill tens of thousands of innocent people!"

"I, Ling Jianqiu, am not the best father, but I dare say that I have taught my daughter right at the very least. Ask yourself this. Did you really do this for me? Or did you do it for yourself?"

"Aw. You found out?" Evergreen Ivy cupped her cheeks in mock embarrassment. "I still remember the day you found me in the snow, foster father. It was eighteen years ago. My parents were killed by a group of Stranger hunters who were passing through the area, and the only reason I didn't die with them was because they didn't see me."

"I remember hiding behind my mother's corpse for a whole day and night. I didn't dare to cry, scream, call for help, move or anything because I was afraid of making noise. I felt like a cattle that might be slaughtered for meat if I so much as twitched the wrong way. The only things that kept me company were the snow, the wind, and my dead parents' bodies."

"At the time, I couldn't help but ask myself the same question over and over again: How could human beings be so cruel to their own kind? How are they worse than even the Strangers who haunt the lands? Since then, I swore that I would become so strong that no one could ever prey on me again. I would rather be a monster of chaos than a woman among pigs and dogs."

"Unfortunately, I had stayed in the snow for so long that my body was permanently damaged. I had become so weak that I couldn't even practice the mildest martial art to begin my dream. You have no idea how disappointed I was."

"Thankfully, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. I happened to stumble upon a book that taught me how to summon the Nether Lord and fulfill any wish. I didn't actually think it would work of course, but despair can be a powerful motivator. And what do you know? It actually worked!"

“The Nether Lord turned me into a Strangerkin and taught me how to cultivate. Thanks to it, I became stronger than I could possibly imagine. It’s a great feeling, an intoxicating feeling, a feeling I can never, never, let go.”

“I know you don’t agree, but humans and Strangers are the same to me. Sometimes, humans can be worse than Strangers. I would know. There is only the strong and the weak, high and low, life and death!”

“Is that so?” Ling Jianqiu eyed his daughter coldly as he raised his sword and took one step toward her. As he gathered a devastating torrent of sword qi, he uttered, “In that case, you won’t mind if I abuse my strength and end your tyranny once and for all, right?!”

Unfortunately, he failed to bring his sword down before Evergreen smiled and did a little wave. A pair of vines suddenly burst out of the ground, slammed into his sword qi, and shattered it with ease. Not done yet, they whipped Ling Jianqiu and sent him flying through the air like a rag doll.

Right before he would crash into a wall, Ye Qing took one step and appeared behind Ling Jianqiu in the blink of an eye. He caught the Chief of Bureau, rotated him to exhaust his momentum, and gently laid him on the floor.

“You’re too good a man to abuse others, Chief Ling. Leave this kind of work to me!” Ye Qing rose to his feet and slowly turned toward Evergreen Ivy. “If nothing else, I have a score to settle with her!”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Evergreen Ivy crossed her legs and caressed her bangs lazily. “Now, please get out of the way, my dear seniors. I would be very sad if you were accidentally hurt during our fight!”

“Eat this!”

Ye Qing had talked a lot just now, and he didn’t feel like wasting his breath on Evergreen Ivy any longer. His spine curved like a dragon, he unleashed a devastating punch using the “Cloud Vaporization Style” once more. The Burning Wind howled, and dark red flames spread toward the Stranger like a fog!

“Is that an Astral Refinement stage fist art? You truly are full of surprises!” Evergreen Ivy giggled as she sensed the incoming heat wave. After commanding a vine to pull her out of the way, a wall of vines burst out of the ground and blocked in front of the punch like a wall.

Unfortunately, fire was highly effective against plants, and Ye Qing’s Burning Wind was the bane of Evergreen Ivy’s vines. The Burning Wind easily burned the wall of vines into dust before continuing toward the Stranger like a fiery dragon.

“How does it feel to be the hunted, Evergreen Ivy?” Ye Qing taunted. So long as he was still alive, the punch would not fade on its own. In fact, it grew stronger the longer it traveled. It wasn’t named the “Cloud Vaporization Style” for nothing.

Chapter 127: The Worst Good Wishes

“Not very good, to be honest!” Evergreen Ivy replied smilingly even though she was at a severe disadvantage right now. She looked like she had a trump card up her sleeves. “It’s why I enjoy being a hunter more!”

An unusually large finger appeared in her hand. It was as big as a baby’s arm and pitch black in color. Covered in twisted and mystifying runes, it gave off a dark and oppressive feeling.

“This is a finger bone the Nether Lord had graciously bestowed me, and it possesses a sliver of His Majesty’s strength. I hope you’ll enjoy it!”

She tossed the finger bone at Ye Qing, and it floated in the air as if suspended by a mysterious power. A black, unspeakable silhouette suddenly manifested into existence, and the finger bone slowly melded into its palm.

A terrifying power erupted from the figure as soon as the fusion was complete. Then, it pointed a finger at Ye Qing.

Rumble!

Space itself began collapsing as a cold, deathly aura spread to the surroundings. Everything—the rocks, the ground, the plants, the buildings and more—was immediately encased in ice.

Some Pacification Sentinels failed to get out of the way in time and turned into ice statues as well. They were dead in just the blink of an eye.

The ice was pitch black like the aura it permeated. It wasn’t just the humans, everything that was alive died the moment it came into contact with it. Even powerful warriors such as Zhao Yunlong and Shi Chong felt like their blood had turned into ice. The Burning Wind was the one thing that was keeping the ice at bay and neutralizing its murderous power.

As if angered by Ye Qing’s resistance, the silhouette let out an audible grunt and thrust its finger an inch forward. The stalemate was immediately broken as the black ice pushed back the Burning Wind at a rapid pace.

“Goodbye, Joyless!” Evergreen Ivy waved Ye Qing goodbye smilingly. Although the finger only contained a sliver of the Nether Lord’s strength, it was still beyond the ability of an Astral Refiner to withstand. She was absolutely certain that Ye Qing would not survive this.

The Stranger had even sighed in dejection, “It’s going to be difficult to replace such a fun toy. I’m going to miss you!”

In the sky, the silhouette leaned forward to tap Ye Qing in the forehead. In response, Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and channeled the Burning Wind until his body became as hot as a furnace. Evergreen Ivy seemed to think it was over, but in reality the deathly cold could not affect him one

bit. His Burning Wind had dispelled it as soon as it seeped into his body. Even the approaching finger only made him feel a sliver of pressure. He could do this.

He assumed his stance and tensed up his muscles. Normally, he would unleash his astral qi like he was throwing a fireball, but this time he locked his energy firmly within his flesh and blood. His legs were the base, his backbone the support, his arm the cannon that would unleash hell upon his enemies, and his body the reactor that gave him the power to do so. He gathered all of his essence, qi and spirit into his fist.

When he drew back his fist, the sky changed, and the earth trembled as if bending to Ye Qing's will. When he threw his punch, the world turned white, and all sound ceased to exist for an instant. It looked like a punch that could annihilate all evil and cement peace for untold ages.

Buzz...

The world grew silent when Ye Qing's fist finally clashed against the Nether Lord's finger. The next second, every building within thirty meters of the site was smashed into smithereens before they even hit the ground. It was because an unbelievable amount of force and wind that was simultaneously hot and cold was gushing from the point of impact and destroyed everything in its path. There was no sound, but the ground zero looked like a painting that was in the middle of being ripped piece by piece by an invisible hand.

Rumble rumble rumble...

The earthquake was fairly mild at the beginning, so much so that it almost felt like a delayed reaction. The stones were jumping slightly as if an underground Stranger was about to jump out into the open. Then, it grew louder and louder until it sounded like a continuous barrage of thunder that would never end, or a drumbeat by a god who was using the earth itself as the drum. When the unholy sound had risen a certain pitch, the earth abruptly warped, churned, and tore itself apart. The ground around Ye Qing's feet were literally rippling like the sea surface during a thunderstorm.

But Ye Qing remained as firm as a mountain. No matter how hard the finger tried to push past his fist and drill into his skull, his resistance was ceaseless and unyielding.

Eventually, the rumblings came to a stop. Most of the ground around Ye Qing besides the one he was standing on had fallen away into a bottomless chasm. Then—

Crack!

There was a sound like breaking glass when cracks suddenly appeared on the Nether Lord's finger bone. It quickly spread throughout its body until it started wavering like an exquisite vase that was on the verge of falling apart.

"No... This is impossible!" Evergreen Ivy exclaimed in utter shock and disbelief. She just could not believe that an Astral Refiner—one who had just entered the Astral Refinement stage no less—could break the Nether Lord's finger.

"It's a little too early to be surprised, girl!"

Ye Qing shot Evergreen Ivy a wide grin and pushed his fist an inch forward. The ground directly underneath him immediately sank a meter below as if it couldn't withstand the pressure, and the

cracked finger pulled back as if it was trying to escape. The dark silhouette it was imbuing had disappeared in a flash of distortion as well.

Unfortunately, it was too late. It only flew a short distance when it froze suddenly as if it had crossed a certain threshold. Then, it exploded into smithereens.

“And game! It’s your turn to become the hunted again, Evergreen Ivy!”

Ye Qing withdrew his fist and shook his wrist casually. His bones immediately let out a disturbingly long series of pops and cracks as if he was undergoing a metamorphosis or something. When it finally ceased, the foreign force attacking his body—the one the finger had injected into him during the clash—had been completely dispelled.

Despite the stunning failure, Evergreen Ivy did not seem worried about her own safety in the slightest. “How impressive! I’m starting to like you more and more, dear!”

“Hehe! Me too, *sister*!” Ye Qing raised his right foot half an inch before stomping the ground. He shot into the sky like an arrow and straight at Evergreen Ivy. “I like you so much I can’t wait to kill you with my own two hands!”

“Here’s a free lesson to you from one scholar to another. The reason a human is a human isn’t because they are capable of benevolence. It’s also because they know right from wrong, good from evil, and justice from injustice. A human who only obeys the law of the jungle is just an animal!”

While saying this, Ye Qing pulled back until his spine resembled a drawn bow. Then, he punched forward and unleashed a massive column of Burning Wind.

“Haha, I will remember your lesson, Joyless. I shall put it to the test the next time we meet!” Evergreen Ivy gave him a little wave. At the same time, she started turning transparent at a rapid pace. She looked like she might disappear at any moment.

“Shit!” Ye Qing cursed. Just like last time, Evergreen Ivy was teleporting herself away to safety through an unknown method. He quickened his fist in hopes that it would hit her before she disappeared.

Evergreen Ivy slapped her head as if she just remembered something. “Oh right, I almost forgot. When you came back, I sent word to Sunset Hill informing the Hill Lord, Wang Luori, that you are the one who killed his direct disciple, Xiao Yang. Wang Luori is a petty, vengeful man who would do anything to take revenge for those he cared about, so you better watch out!”

“...”

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, indeed.

He protested, “Screw you! I didn’t kill Xiao Yang! The idiot’s the one who chased me into Firewind Valley and got himself killed! It has nothing to do with me!”

“Hahaha. You should save those words for Wang Luori. Who knows, maybe he’ll believe you?”

Evergreen Ivy disappeared into thin air after saying that. She left behind only one final message, "Take care, Joyless. You better stay alive until our next meeting!"

If one of the best good wishes in the world was, "I hope to see you soon!" then the worst one was easily, "You better stay alive until our next meeting!"

Ye Qing's fist scattered the clouds and returned the sky to blue, but Evergreen Ivy was long gone by then. Not only that, she had left behind the vilest curse. *It's bad enough I failed to kill her, but she made me a powerful enemy as well! What the fuck!*

Ye Qing landed back on the ground looking sad and dejected. When he noticed that Ling Jianqiu, Zhao Yunlong, Shi Chong and everyone else was shooting him strange looks, he thought they were suspecting him and clarified in a hurry, "Why are you looking at me like that? I swear I didn't kill Xiao Yang!"

When the group exchanged strange glances with each other, he thought they didn't believe him and panicked even more, "Seriously, it's not me! Evergreen Ivy is lying through her teeth! You gotta believe me!"

"Ahem. I believe you, Joyless. We all believe you!" Ling Jianqiu replied with a cough. He suppressed his disappointment and sorrow as best he could and added, "Thank you for everything, Joyless!"

Ling Jianqiu was wracked with grief to put it mildly, but he was still the Chief of Bureau with many duties to attend to. His grieving must wait until later.

"Ah... you're welcome. I'm doing it for myself as well!" Ye Qing hurriedly waved his hands and glanced at the ruin that was once the Pacification Bureau headquarters. He let out a sigh as he rubbed his nose, "I can't believe she managed to get away a second time though. This was our best chance to get her, but she still managed to escape in the end. It'll be so much harder to capture her in the future!"

Ling Jianqiu replied, "That may be so, but the fact that she can no longer work against the Pacification Bureau from the inside is a good thing."

"I'm sure the Pacification Bureau is happy, but what about me? Dammit!" Ye Qing felt another wave of headache when he recalled what Evergreen Ivy said about Sunset Hill and Wang Luori. "What can you tell me about Wang Luori, Chief Ling?"

Ling Jianqiu furrowed his brow. "Sunset Hill, Blood Shadow Palace and White Horse Academy are the three most influential sects in Luo Shui. Sunset Hill in particular has one thousand Qi Invokers, three hundred Vessel Augmentors, and one hundred Astral Refiners, and I'm only talking about its disciples."

"The Hill Lord, Wang Luori, is a half-step Spirit Master. An expert in fist arts, his fighting style is as violent and fiery as his temper. He is also irritable, arrogant, and vengeful. He perceives any slight toward Sunset Hill as a slight to himself. He is not a man you want to trifle with."

“A half-step Spirit Master?” Ye Qing frowned deeply. A warrior’s cultivation was a step-by-step process. If the Body Tempering stage and the Qi Invocation stage focused on honing the body, and the Vessel Augmentation stage and Astral Refinement stage focused on refining the qi, then the Spirit Purification stage and the Spirit Master stage focused on cultivating the spirit.

The Spirit Purification stage was the stage where a warrior unlocked the primordial points located at the center of their head and honed their spirit. The goal was to build a Mind Altar in their head to strengthen their mind. Given a powerful enough spirit, a Spirit Purifier could cultivate all kinds of mental arts, perceive enemies before they even came into view, and even attack them via mental attacks. More often than not, they could kill without leaving a trace in the physical world. Barring anomalies like Ye Qing, a Spirit Purifier could extinguish the mind of any warrior below the Spirit Purification stage like a candle.

The Spirit Master stage was also known as the Yin God stage. It was the stage where a warrior created a spiritual entity called the Yin God. Despite being the embodiment of the warrior’s spirit, the Yin God usually looked different from their physical self. It could also leave its physical body behind and roam the world without being fettered by its physical laws.

More importantly, the warrior could not be killed unless their Yin God was destroyed. The Spirit Master stage was the stage where a warrior truly broke free from the confines of their mortal shell and returned to their truest, most natural self.

In other words, Wang Luori was someone Ye Qing wanted to avoid at all costs.

Ling Jianqiu glanced at Ye Qing and said slowly, “If what Evergreen Ivy said is true, then you are in deep trouble, Joyless.”

“...”

Stating the obvious much? Ye Qing rolled his eyes at Ling Jianqiu. *Sigh. It’s so hard to be a good guy these days!*

Chapter 128: Humanity Is Worth It

“Do you have a plan, Chief Ling?” Ye Qing asked.

It was true he killed Xiao Yang, but he wouldn’t be in this situation if Ling Jianqiu hadn’t sent him on a mission. Therefore, the man must take some responsibility!

Ling Jianqiu chuckled. “I do, but I’m not sure you would like it.”

“Tell me. I’ll decide if I like it after I hear it,” Ye Qing said quickly. To be honest, he wasn’t expecting the Chief of Bureau to say yes when he asked him for a solution. Of course he wasn’t going to pass it over until he had heard about it.

“You can join the Pacification Bureau!” Ling Jianqiu declared.

“You... want me to join the Pacification Bureau?” Ye Qing stared at Ling Jianqiu incredulously. *You couldn’t even handle one Evergreen Ivy, and you’re asking me to join you? Do I look stupid to you?*

“Ahem...” Ling Jianqiu coughed in embarrassment. He couldn’t hear Ye Qing’s thoughts, but the doubt in his eyes was as plain as day. “I’m not asking you to join my Pacification Bureau. We obviously do not have the strength to protect you from the likes of Sunset Hill. But Luo Shui’s Pacification Bureau is a different story.”

“Luo Shui?” Ye Qing’s confusion only increased. Sunset Hill was located in Luo Shui, so to go there was like entering the tiger’s den of his own volition. *He’s not trying to kill me, is he?*

Ling Jianqiu explained, “You probably don’t know this, but Luo Shui’s Pacification Bureau is stronger than Sunset Hill, Blood Shadow Castle and White Horse Academy combined.”

“As the overseer of eighty-one villages, Pacification Bureau of Luo Shui commands fifteen thousand Qi Invokers, eight thousand Vessel Augmentors, one thousand Astral Refiners, three hundred Spirit Purifiers, ten half-step Spirit Masters, and two Spirit Masters in total. This does not include partial members such as guest warriors, hanger-ons, or covert agents.”

“If they wanted to, the Pacification Bureau of Luo Shui absolutely possesses the power to topple the three sects and make themselves king of the hill that is Luo Shui. They didn’t because our responsibility is to slay Strangers, preserve the peace, and protect the territory we’re assigned to from all dangers, not getting involved in petty affairs so to speak.”

“Are you for real?” Ye Qing blurted in shock. He had no idea that Luo Shui’s Pacification Bureau was so powerful, though in hindsight he probably should’ve realized this sooner. In Anyang, the Pacification Bureau was also stronger than all the other factions such as the three clans, the Iron Shirt Gang and Qiao Six.

Ling Jianqiu continued, “Besides that, Luo Shui is defended by ten thousand Black Feather Guards, and they answer to the Pacification Bureau and the commandery administration. Sunset Hill would be crazy to go up against them.”

Ling Jianqiu sounded quite proud of his brethren’s strength. “Finally, the Pacification Bureau is the central pillar of Chu itself. If Sunset Hill is stupid enough to challenge and bring shame to the empire, the ten thousand Black Feathers would step in and flatten them overnight.”

“In conclusion, your safety should be guaranteed if you join Luo Shui’s Pacification Bureau.”

“That sounds awesome!” Ye Qing did not try to hide his admiration. “But how can I join them?”

His question sounded simple, but it wasn’t. It was notoriously difficult to join the Pacification Bureau, not to mention that this one was the overseer of an entire commandery. Sure, he could join them as a Pacification Sentinel—it would be simply since he was an Astral Refiner—but neither the Pacification Bureau nor Wang Luori were idiots. The Pacification Bureau would not go to war

against Wang Luori over a small fry, and Wang Luori knew this as well. This meant that he must join the Pacification Bureau of Luo Shui as a person of power. Only then would their protection matter.

Ling Jianqiu assured him, "Don't worry. Every year, I am allowed to recommend one person to join the Pacification Bureau of Luo Shui. If the person succeeds, they would be promoted to Guardian or Lieutenant immediately. I will give you the slot."

"Are you sure? That's not very proper, is it?" Ye Qing said hesitantly, but he was just being polite. On one hand, he was robbing the actual members of the Pacification Bureau a shot at promotion. On the other hand, this was his life they were talking about.

Ling Jianqiu smiled. "Considering what you've done for Anyang, giving you the slot is the least we could do. In fact, you deserve it more than anyone in this entire county. I can only imagine your future considering how strong you already are."

"In that case, I shall gladly accept your offer!" Ye Qing saluted the Chief of Bureau respectfully.

It was a sound plan. With Ling Jianqiu's recommendation, he could skip most of the hassle and be promoted to a Lieutenant right away. That was high enough on the totem pole that Wang Luori would have to think twice before attacking him.

The idea of shooting for Guardian never crossed his mind. At his level, it would be a mark of shame to become a Guardian.

Ling Jianqiu nodded when Ye Qing agreed to the plan. "One more thing. My teacher is the Deputy Chief of Bureau. I will write him a letter and ask him to look after you!"

"Thank you, Chief Ling!" *Now this is what I call proper nepotism!*

"I'll get started on the procedures then. No reason to drag this out longer than it needs to be, right?" Ling Jianqiu said. When he turned around, his lips curled into a triumphant smirk.

From the day he learned about Ye Qing and his deeds, he had wanted to recruit Ye Qing into the Pacification Bureau. Although the young man proved to be too big for Anyang, where he was going would give him the opportunity to benefit far more people and uplift Chu to greater heights. It was a dream come true so to speak.

Behind Ling Jianqiu, Ye Qing saluted the man again and declared, "Thanks for everything, Chief Ling. I will never forget what you've done for me today!"

He didn't know that Ling Jianqiu had been plotting to recruit him into the Pacification Bureau since ages ago, but he could see that the arrangement was purely to his benefit. Offering the Chief of Bureau his wholehearted thanks was the least he could do.

Sure, Ye Qing didn't really want to be affiliated with the Pacification Bureau, but you couldn't always get what you wanted in life. He would just have to improvise as the situation demanded.

“With your permission, I’ll be taking my leave, Chief Ling. There are a few things I need to attend to.”

“Yes, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Ye Qing turned around and left after that. His smile was warm and bright.

Humans were humans not just because they knew right from wrong, good from evil, and justice from injustice. It was also because they knew gratitude, reciprocation, self-sacrifice, altruism, love and more.

This, was why humanity was worth it.

.....

As usual, the morning gongs awoke the sleeping men and women. The sky took a shade of white, the streets became filled with hustle and bustle, and merry voices and laughter filled the world with joy once more.

Everyone seemed to be gossiping about three major incidents today. The first incident was the demise of the two remaining clans of Anyang, the Shen Clan and the Li Clan. Their people were slaughtered, their assets were robbed, and their bases were reduced to ruins in just a single night. Who would’ve thought that they would follow in the footsteps of the Zheng Clan, and in such a short time no less? In any case, this marked the moment the three major clans became the laughingstock of the entire county and a mere footnote in Anyang’s history.

The second incident was the destruction of the headquarters of the most mysterious department in Anyang, the Pacification Bureau. Despite suffering heavy casualties and damage, the members of the Pacification Bureau were unusually cheerful for some reason. It was almost as if they were celebrating the New Year.

The third major incident was some of the most prominent figures of Anyang standing on gates when the first morning gong was sounded. There were Ling Jianqiu, Chief of the Pacification Bureau; Yan Yufei, the county magistrate of Anyang; Yan Feng the bailiff and the omniscient Master Qiao Six. For some reason, they were all gazing to the horizon as if welcoming the first ray of dawn or bidding goodbye to someone!

As usual, no one knew exactly what had led up to the incidents. For a time, it was all they could talk about for an entire month and more.

No one noticed that Endless Horizons had gotten a new owner, however. The young man who always wore a warm smile on his face; who enjoyed drinking and basking in the sun in front of his bookstore, who always joked with the children and put a smile on their faces, was gone.

Like a grain of sand he had flown into the hub of humanity with the wind, and like a grain of sand he had flown away without anyone noticing.

.....

“Life comes and goes like the wind and the rain, but a jar of rice wine? Man! Who said that there is no medicine to cure my sorrows, right Brother Frog?”

“Croak croak!”

“Brother Frog, I don’t mind you staring at me with your large, innocent eyes all day, but just in case you’re harboring any misguided hope, I must tell you that I am not sharing this jar of wine with you. This is mine!”

Ye Qing gave his wine a shake and took a long sniff that left him feeling heady in a very, very good way. “We agreed that we’d enjoy a jar each everyday. It’s not my fault you finished it as quickly as you did. As a frog, a kungfu frog no less, your word is your bond!”

Even Wawa appeared on Ye Qing’s shoulder and chided Kung Fu Frog seriously, “He’s right. You should always keep your promises!”

“Croak croak...” Kung Fu Frog croaked glumly. Who was the one who told it that it would never run out of good food and fine wine? Lies, all of it!

“Do we really need to leave so soon, young master?” Faceless asked. The Stranger was currently holding the donkey and leading the way.

Ye Qing sipped his wine before answering in a helpless tone, “What can I do? Wang Luori could show up a month later, or he could show up this very evening. The sooner we leave, the sooner we can get to Luo Shui and safety!”

Their departure was, admittedly, a little hasty, but at least he had wrapped all of his important business in Anyang. First, he had paid the Shen Clan and the Li Clan a visit and plundered them for all their worth. Everyone who resisted was killed, and no one still living was stupid enough to plot revenge against him. Second, he had made Tao Xian the new boss of the Iron Shirt Gang and a subordinate of Yan Yufei. With the Pacification Bureau to back them up, Wang Luori should be less tempted to take it out on them.

Last but not least, he visited all of his friends and acquaintances and bade them goodbye. Yan Yufei, Yan Feng, Yang Guan, Ling Jianqiu, Qiao Six, even the Zhou Family whose son he saved a while ago and more, he made sure that his departure was one that would not leave any regrets behind.

The next day, before the sun was even up he visited the Pacification Bureau, received the recommendation letter and stamp from Ling Jianqiu, and left on the first morning gongs toward the light. If Ye Qing were to be honest with himself, he did not want to leave Anyang either. But life was everchanging, and reality was its harsh mistress. All he could do was to walk the path without losing himself!

There were two ways to travel to Luo Shui, the land route or the river route. The land route—also the official route—was longer, but it was safe because it was populated by villages and counties. The river route would take them to Luo Shui in three days at most, but the chances they might run into Strangers or other danger was almost one hundred percent.

After weighing the pros and cons, Ye Qing decided to stick with the river route. The sooner he reached the Pacification Bureau, the lesser the chance that something might go wrong.

The closest ferry point to Anyang was Maple Leaf Point. Ideally, it would take them about one day to make it there. Realistically, it was impossible to say.

A party of one man and three Strangers was unusual even in this world, but it certainly wasn't boring. They passed the time by making conversation with one another and teasing Wawa. It was a pretty lively experience overall.

Ye Qing was teasing Wawa again when suddenly, they heard a childish voice singing,

“Dig a little hole,

Plant a little seed,

One two three four five...”

Ye Qing followed the voice. He quickly saw a small, childlike figure digging a hole on the ground with a little spade.

Chapter 129: Infant Rabbit

“Careful, young master!” Faceless warned while staring at the childlike figure in the woods warily. It was because he sensed a hint of danger from them, whoever they were.

“You worry too much. Come on! Perhaps it's a kid from a neighborhood nearby?” Ye Qing said with a smile. Besides the childlike figure, he had also picked up the vital signs of multiple people in the forest. Specifically, they were humans.

Let's see. One, two, three, four, five, six! There are six people in the forest! Ye Qing calculated in his head.

As they got closer, Ye Qing finally saw the childlike figure for what it was. It was a Stranger with a rabbit's head but a human's body. It was only as big as an infant, but it was standing on two legs and digging a hole using a spade that was shaped like a carrot. While digging, it sang what sounded like a nursery rhyme,

“Dig a little hole,

Plant a little seed,

One two three four five...”

There were six humans in the ground next to it. Literally, they were buried in the ground all the way up to their necks. They looked listless as if they had just received a good thrashing.

Their eyes lit up when they saw Ye Qing. Like a drowning man who had found a straw, they cried out, “Help! Please help us!”

“Please help us, warrior! This Stranger is planning to kill us!”

The rabbit Stranger paid neither Ye Qing nor them any attention, however. It was fully focused on the hole in front of it.

“It's like it's planting carrots,” Ye Qing watched the rabbit with a strange, indecipherable expression.

“Croak croak!”

Kung Fu Frog was a righteous Stranger who was always eager to enact justice and save lives. When it saw that the humans were trapped, it immediately leaped over to save them. But right before it was about to land, a hole appeared right beneath its feet. At the same time, the rabbit sang again,

“Dig a little hole,

Plant a little seed,

One two three four five...”

The next moment, Kung Fu Frog was pulled straight into the hole and buried, leaving only its head out in the open. It couldn’t break free no matter how hard it struggled.

“Young master!” Faceless cried. Unlike Kung Fu Frog, Faceless’ plan was to take out the rabbit Stranger first. Everyone would be free if it died, right? Unfortunately, the rabbit suddenly let out a shriek in Faceless’ direction and opened a hole beneath his feet as well. Before he could jump out of the way, the strange rhyme rang again and froze him in his tracks. He immediately followed in Kung Fu Frog’s footsteps.

Wow! It overwhelmed two Malice-class Strangers in an instant! Not bad! Ye Qing thought as he observed the rabbit Stranger. As he tilted his head as if remembering something, the rabbit sang again,

“Dig a little hole,

Plant a little seed,

One two three four five...”

A hole appeared beneath Ye Qing’s feet, and he felt an unnatural power shackling him and pulling him toward the hole.

“Interesting!”

Ye Qing channeled his vigor and pushed back against it. The invisible power vanished, and the spade the rabbit was holding abruptly snapped into two.

“Dig a little—” The rabbit’s face morphed into human-like shock when the spade broke. Shivering, it slowly turned its ruby-like eyes on Ye Qing and stared.

“Chirrup!”

The rabbit apparently didn’t like what it saw because it let out a frightened whimper, hugged its head, and dug a pit in the ground in just the blink of an eye with its bare hands. After leaping into the pit and burying itself completely, the swollen mound sank into the hole as if it was going somewhere.

“Haha! You think you can run from me?” Ye Qing chuckled. He could tell that the rabbit was underground and escaping to somewhere at incredible speed. In response, he raised his right foot half an inch and stomped the ground.

The ground undulated up and down like a ripple in a piece of fabric, but for some reason it made no noise whatsoever. However, the rabbit, the six humans, Kung Fu Frog and Faceless were all expelled from the earth in an instant. They flailed for a bit before hitting the ground in a series of thuds.

The rabbit Stranger was the fastest to recover. It tried to escape, but it couldn't even manage a step before it collapsed back to the ground. For some reason, it just could not gather any strength. It was the same for Kung Fu Frog and the others as well.

"Sorry. I can't quite control my strength yet!" Ye Qing rubbed his nose apologetically. After his experience in Firewind Canyon, he was stronger than ever before. However, his precision and control had also become a lot worse as a result. For now, he was like a cannon who couldn't help but shoot a cannonball even if the target was a mosquito.

Ye Qing took one step and appeared in front of the rabbit. He grabbed it by its nape and returned just as quickly. It took his companions and the six humans at least a dozen breaths before they finally recovered enough to move.

].

The six humans were a surprise. They had looked completely spent when he saw them, but after regaining their freedom and popping a fiery red pill, they were almost back to normal in just a dozen breaths or so.

It was worth noting that they were a group of three middle-stage Vessel Augmentors and three early-stage Vessel Augmentors. It was a fairly strong party all things considered.

"My name is Tian Hang. Thank you for saving our lives, warrior!" thanked a middle-aged man in his forties after he regained his strength. He had a loyal, honest appearance that made it difficult to think that he was capable of deception or trickery.

Ye Qing waved it off. "You're welcome, but I was just passing by."

A cold, vicious-looking man standing behind Tian Hang uttered hatefully, "Damned rabbit! I'm gonna skin it alive, eat its flesh and drink its blood!" He then rushed over and brought his saber down in one smooth motion. However, Ye Qing raised his hand and caught the blade between two fingers. No matter how hard the man tried to pull or push, he was unable to move his blade even an inch.

The vicious man glared at Ye Qing. "What are you doing, warrior?"

Ye Qing shrugged. "It's just a rabbit, a cute one no less. Why don't you let it go?"

"..."

To say that the group was flabbergasted would be an understatement. Was he joking? How was a rabbit capable of "planting" a human being into the ground like an actual carrot "cute"?

The vicious man was still trying to pull his saber free as he uttered, "Let it go? This Stranger nearly killed us all! There's no way we can pretend like nothing had ever happened! Now let go!"

Ye Qing's smile grew kinder. Fingers twisting, he easily snapped the saber—a thick blade that was forged from cold steel—in half and sent the man stumbling. He looked like he couldn't believe what just happened.

"I tried giving you a hint, but you just wouldn't listen, would you? This rabbit is called the Infant Rabbit. It's a Hatred-class Stranger who loves digging holes and nothing else. Gentle, timid and harmless, it would only attack if it felt threatened."

"Moreover, its retaliation is incredibly mild. The worst it would do to its attackers was digging a hole and keeping them in the ground for a bit. It would never try to kill its attackers."

"If it encounters a powerful foe it couldn't possibly defeat, it would immediately escape or cower in fear. It's probably one of the most cowardly Strangers you could encounter."

Ye Qing gave the shivering Infant Rabbit beside his feet a reassuring pat before continuing as if he hadn't noticed the group's rapidly changing expressions, "As the Infant Rabbit is harmless and mild-natured, they are well-received by nobles, wealthy people, and especially wealthy women. There are a lot of people who would pay a lot of money to buy an Infant Rabbit. Besides that, an Infant Rabbit's body is a veritable treasure trove. Its brain and flesh are delicious to eat, its fur is excellent for making clothes, and even its bones are a rare medicinal ingredient."

"In other words, there are few prey a Stranger Hunter loves more than a Infant Rabbit!"

Ye Qing shot the humans a smile that didn't quite reach the eye. "Am I right, my dear hunters?"

As the name might suggest, a Stranger Hunter was a hunter of Strangers. They usually killed Strangers to sell their body parts for a living.

The group's faces turned dark and grim. Ye Qing's subtext was clear: he was saying they deserved what they got, and if they were to be honest with themselves, they did.

When they stumbled upon the Infant Rabbit a while ago, they immediately got greedy and tried to capture it. However, the Infant Rabbit turned out to be warier and stronger than they had anticipated. It saw them coming and buried them in retaliation.

Later, Ye Qing saved them and caught the Infant Rabbit, but they thought Ye Qing was too young to recognize the Infant Rabbit and tried to kill it in the name of revenge. It was so that they would have the excuse to claim its body parts. Although a dead Infant Rabbit wasn't worth as much as a live one, it was still a lot of money.

Unfortunately, they were dead wrong. Not only did the youngster recognize the Infant Rabbit, he even exposed their little scheme straight to their faces.

Embarrassment, resentment, anger and more sprouted in the hearts of the six men in an instant. The vicious man even looked like he wanted to murder Ye Qing there and then. But before anyone could make a move, Tian Hang stepped forward with an obsequious smile and said, "Sorry, sorry. My

brother didn't mean to offend you, he was just too eager to take revenge against the Stranger. I hope you won't mind!"

"Since you were the one who captured the Infant Rabbit, it's only right that you get to decide what to do with it. We shall take our leave immediately!"

With that said, Tian Hang saluted Ye Qing one last time, gave the vicious man's sleeve a strong pull, and left.

The vicious man was clearly displeased, but he obeyed his leader and turned around. He glared resentfully at Ye Qing before he left though.

"Heh. He's lucky not everyone in his group is an idiot!" Ye Qing muttered. The vicious man's gesture and thoughts didn't escape him, of course. If Tian Hang hadn't been smart enough to recognize the threat, well, let's just say that today next year would be the anniversary of their deaths.

There was no helping these people though. Maybe it was because they interacted with Strangers for too long, but most Stranger Hunters were cruel, bloodthirsty, and greedy bullies who would not hesitate to commit atrocities to further their self-interests. Sometimes, they would even commit a murder, rob a caravan, raid a village and more if they thought they could get away with it.

If Tian Hang and his group had chosen to attack him, he absolutely wouldn't have minded sending them to kingdom come. It would be good karma as far as he was concerned. It was too bad Tian Hang had more sense than courage.

"Shame, shame!" Ye Qing shook his head in the group's direction before looking down on the Infant Rabbit. The poor thing was still trembling like a leaf. He let out a sigh and gave it a little kick, "You are definitely the most cowardly Stranger I've ever met yet. You bring shame to your race, you know that?"

He then flicked the Stranger into his hand and tossed it far, far away. "You can go now. Try not to get caught again, alright? Not everyone is as kind-hearted as I am!"

The Infant Rabbit hit the ground surprisingly soft and rolled twice. When it caught itself and looked around, it discovered that it was both safe and completely unhurt. After pressing its fat paws together and giving Ye Qing a bow, it dug the ground and buried itself in another pit. It was gone just like that.

Chapter 130: A Ghost Story

"Come. Let us continue on our way!" Ye Qing beckoned the others after the Infant Rabbit was gone.

From the start, he had never planned to kill the Infant Rabbit. The reason he bothered catching it at all was to obtain a small clump of fur; a key ingredient to make the Incense of Fortune.

After Ye Qing was gone, Tian Hang and his group emerged back out of the forest and glared at the departing Ye Qing. The vicious man asked resentfully, "Why didn't you order us to take out that boy, Brother Tian? Without his interference, we would've caught the Infant Rabbit a second time and killed two birds with one stone!"

“He’s right, Brother Tian! We missed a golden opportunity there!” The rest of the group echoed in agreement.

“Shut up, you fools. Do you only think about women and wine? How could you be so dim that you can’t even see what is obvious?”

Tian Hang rebuked them harshly, his honest-looking face warped into a visage of viciousness and cruelty. “The boy had captured the Infant Rabbit without even breaking a sweat, so he must be a late-stage Vessel Augmentor at least, if not higher. Forget you, he could’ve killed all of us if he wanted to!”

“Besides, his servant and his Stranger are obviously extraordinary as well. Why on earth would I commit suicide?”

“Oh... er...” The group turned red with embarrassment.

“Is that it? Are we going to pretend like nothing happened?” The vicious man clenched his fists indignantly.

Tian Hang gave his shoulder a slap and let out a cold chuckle. “I never said that!”

“I’m pretty sure that the boy is heading toward Maple Leaf Point, and to get to Maple Leaf Point one must pass through the gravesite. That will be our chance!”

“You mean that place!” Fear flashed across the vicious man’s face before it was replaced by excitement. “I knew you had everything planned from the start, Brother Tian!”

Tian Hang said seriously, “Mu, there are two qualities all Stranger Hunters must learn in this trade, and they are called caution and patience. Caution is what keeps us alive and prevents us from making mistakes that we cannot recover from, and patience is how you come by opportunities to thrive!”

.....

“I spot candlelights ahead of us, young master. I think it belongs to a small village!”

The world felt a lot quieter and lonelier after the sun set, and the shade of black in the sky deepened. It was why the glimmers of light looked especially welcoming. Ye Qing and Faceless had spotted them long before they had gotten close.

“A village? I don’t remember there being a village between Anyang and Maple Point,” Ye Qing scratched his forehead in confusion. Was it a new village?

“Well, let’s check it out. I would prefer not to sleep out in the wilderness.”

Despite his doubts, the allure of the candlelight ultimately won over his caution. Of course, his decision was founded on the fact that he could kill any Stranger below Hatred-class in one punch. And if one punch wasn’t enough, then two would do it!

“Young master, something doesn’t feel right about this village.”

As it turned out, something was wrong with this village. Everything had looked normal from afar, but as soon as they entered the village, the air had suddenly become unbearably cold.

“Croak croak...” Kung Fu Frog echoed in agreement while observing its surroundings warily.

Even Wawa had crawled out of Ye Qing’s hair and cautioned, “Friend, this place is very dangerous. We should leave!”

“I would agree, but it’s already too late!” Ye Qing shook his head and motioned at the exit. The entrance they passed through earlier had disappeared without them noticing. Instead, there was only a thick, impenetrable fog. Not only that, everything beyond the village was pitch black, and something seemed to be wriggling behind the curtain of darkness. He would not be surprised if there actually was a horde of Strangers waiting behind it.

The village was very small. Ye Qing counted only a dozen houses or so, and the architecture was your classic red bricks and black tiles. He would almost feel at home if it wasn’t for the obvious strangeness around him.

At the center of the village was a gigantic locust tree. It was so big that it would take multiple people to hug its trunk completely. Its massive canopy also stretched over half of the village. When the wind blew past the leaves, they made this ominous rustling noise that sounded like wailing.

Faceless asked with a deep frown, “What should we do, young master?”

Ye Qing smiled. “Don’t know. We’ll see when we cross that bridge.”

Faceless immediately seized the opportunity to lick his boots, “Well, young master is as lucky as he is powerful. I’m sure that everything will turn out fine!”

“I think so too.” *Because I’m totally going to use you to sweep the mines later.*

“Hey look, there are three people over there. Let’s see if they can illuminate us on the situation, shall we?”

Ye Qing took the lead and walked toward the strangers. They were three men sitting around a campfire and seemingly chatting about something.

The campfire was pretty big, but Ye Qing could not feel the slightest bit of warmth from it even after he had gotten close. The three men seemed to be engrossed in some sort of argument to notice or care about his arrival either. What were they talking about?

Ye Qing listened patiently until he finally understood what was going on. Long story short, the trio were arguing whose ghost story was scarier. However, their argument was heading nowhere because no one could convince the other person to concede defeat.

“Good evening, brothers!” Ye Qing clasped his hand and greeted the trio.

Immediately, all three men turned their heads to stare at Ye Qing with blank, lifeless eyes. It was incredibly eerie to say the least. Not only that, red blood started trickling down their cheeks just a few seconds later. It was terrifying to put it mildly.

Ye Qing continued as if he didn't notice the ghastly sight, however. "Why are you tearing up, brothers? I'll listen to your stories if you want to. The night's pretty dreary, and I could use a laugh!"

Faceless: "..."

Kung Fu Frog: "..."

"Well? What are you waiting for? Seriously, there's nothing to be ashamed of!" Ye Qing encouraged when he saw that they weren't saying anything.

The three men: "..."

A few breaths later, one of them finally said in a shrill, ghastly voice, "Tell us! Whose ghost story do you think is the scariest?"

"Excuse me?" Ye Qing blinked once before asking sincerely, "Can you please repeat your stories? I haven't heard them yet."

But another man repeated, "Tell us! Whose ghost story do you think is the scariest?"

Ye Qing: "... *I would tell you, if you would actually tell me your heavens damned story! How the hell am I supposed to decide if I haven't even heard them? And what if it's actually a love story? Why else would all three of you cry literal tears of blood?*

"Tell us..."

"Tell us..."

"Tell us..."

The trio's eyes started bleeding much faster when they saw that Ye Qing was silent. Their complexion turned deathly white, and black smoke started rising from their bodies.

"Holy shit! I've seen cartoon characters smoking out of their ears because they're angry, but frustration?" Ye Qing rolled his eyes and raised his hands in a placating manner. "Calm down, my bros! Violence is not the answer! If you don't mind me asking, how long have you been arguing about this?"

One man thought for a moment before answering, "A thousand years!"

"A *thousand* years?" Ye Qing exclaimed in realization, "No wonder you're frustrated. I would be frustrated too if I were you."

He knew they might burst into flames if he dilly-dallied any longer, so he let out a cough and said seriously, "Alright, I'll tell you my answer. My answer is..."

"Tell us!"

"Tell us!"

"Tell us!"

"... My answer is, none of your ghost stories are as scary as mine!"

Boom!

The black smoke rising from the men's bodies weren't really smoke, but yin energy. And right now, the trio were leaking so much yin energy it was like a forest fire. Besides that, their eyeballs had fallen off their eye sockets, and their faces were beginning to rot as well.

Ye Qing looked behind him and shot Faceless a wink. "You see this? I haven't even begun to tell them my ghost story yet, and they're already so scared that their eyeballs literally popped out of their eye sockets!"

Faceless could only smile helplessly at his young master. The three men, or rather, the three Strangers were clearly dangerous judging from the concentration of their yin energy, and yet Ye Qing was teasing them like the children back at Anyang. Just how confident was he?

"If you don't believe me, brothers, then listen to my ghost story!" Ye Qing looked back at the men and turned serious. "Once upon a time, there were three Strangers who wanted to listen to a ghost story. Then, they died!"

Faceless: "..."

The trio: "..."

The three Strangers finally couldn't stand the insult any longer and unleashed their full power. Their yin energy was like a tidal wave as they rose to their feet and got ready to jump Ye Qing. But when a scorching wind suddenly blew through the area, they discovered in horror that dark red flames had suddenly ignited inside their bodies. They howled in rage as they tried to fight against it, but it was futile. It wasn't long before they dissolved into a pile of ashes.

"What did I tell you? There is no greater fear in this world than death!"

Ye Qing patted away the dust on his pants and climbed to his feet. Smiling, he said, "This village is more interesting than I thought. Let's walk around some more and see what else this village has in store for us. We're stuck until whatever abnormality is keeping us here is gone anyway."

Faceless could only shoot Ye Qing an awkward and obsequious smile. *I have a feeling that someone is showing off, but I dare not say anything about it!*

The good news was that the trio's deaths did not make any waves in the village. It seemed as empty as ever. The group would continue deeper into the village until they entered a clearing and saw six people gathered under a locust tree for some reason.

Ye Qing beelined over to the group. He immediately saw a huge cooking pot at the center of the crowd and a huge fire underneath. The boiling oil looked hot enough to burn the flesh off a person's bones in a matter of seconds.

A middle-aged man with withered hair, unusually thin body, and beady eyes poured out a bunch of coins from his pouch and tossed them into the pot. Then, he stuck his bare hand into the cooking pot, fished out a single coin, and showed it off proudly to the crowd while asking, "Is there anyone here who would dare to copy me? You'll get a reward if you succeed!"

"I'll do it!" A young man declared and stepped forward. He rolled up his sleeves, stuck his arm into the cooking pot, and tried to search for a coin as quickly as possible.

However, he cried out in pain in just a matter of seconds and tried to withdraw his arm. The boiling oil seemed to possess some sort of mysterious power, however. No matter how hard he struggled, he was unable to pull away from the pot.

Eventually, the young man ran out of strength and tried to catch a breather. It was at this moment the oil suddenly pulled him into the pot in one fell swoop! He screamed in pain and tried to escape, but what chance did he have when he couldn't even pull his arm free at the beginning? Inevitably, he burned to death and turned as black as charcoal.

"Man, that is surely one of the worst ways to die!" Ye Qing shook his head sympathetically. Not even Xiao Yang had it this bad when he boiled to death on the Mountain of Riddles.

The gambler swept his gaze across the crowd and let out a daring chuckle. Then, he dug out an eyeball and tossed it into the pot. Blood streamed down his face profusely, but it was like he couldn't feel the pain at all. Ten breaths later, he stuck his hand back into the cooking pot and fished out his eyeball. After showing it to the crowd to prove that it was real, he plugged it right back into his eye socket. Ye Qing could tell that he was perfectly fine.