

Stranger 171

Chapter 171: I Have A Sword

“One hundred silvers?” The stall owner exclaimed in surprise.

Ye Qing frowned and turned around. He immediately saw a man in a white cloak staring at his Warding Pendant with fervent eyes.

Ye Qing shook his head. “My apologies, but I’ve already bought this pendant.”

The cloaked man replied in an icy voice, “Sell it to me for a hundred silvers.”

Ye Qing had a feeling that this was going nowhere, so he rejected the man directly, “Sorry, but no.”

Unfortunately, the cloaked man ignored his response. “Two hundred silvers?”

Ye Qing kept his answer succinct. “No.”

The cloaked man doubled his offer immediately. “Five hundred then.” It was like five hundred silvers was nothing to him.

But what a coincidence! Five hundred silvers is nothing to me either!

Plus, this was the Warding Pendant they were talking about. Highly prized for its ability to “see evil” and “purge evil”, it was a natural treasure that was as rare as it was priceless.

Its ability to “see evil” referred to its extreme sensitivity toward evil energies, strange auras, curses and the like. If any such entities or objects were to enter its range, then the Warding Pendant would detect it and warn its user no matter how hidden, insignificant, or unusual it was.

Its ability to “purge evil” was exactly as it sounded, though it could protect others to a certain extent, repel misfortune and garner good luck as well.

Of course, as with all things in this world, its effects were exaggerated to a certain extent. If it really could “purge any evil”, then there would be no need for warriors. The Pacification Bureau could simply toss it at a Disaster-level Stranger and call it a day. In fact, the Warding Pendant was only effective against ordinary evil and Strangers. A Hatred-class Stranger or higher could most likely overcome it with a bit of effort.

What Ye Qing really valued was its ability to sense evil. As he had come to realize as of late, his spirit couldn’t detect everything. There were Strangers who could elude his senses and catch him off guard. However, the Warding Pendant was a potent detector that could supposedly detect any evil, strange or curses within its range. Of course, he wasn’t going to trust its abilities blindly, but the extra insurance it provided was almost as valuable as a life-saving Strange Artifact.

The Warding Pendant was considered to be priceless because it could make the difference between life and death, so the idea that this guy was trying to buy it for merely five hundred silvers was positively laughable.

Oh? He had bought the Warding Pendant for a mere ten silvers? That was different. He had scammed it from a scam artist. He’d more than earned the right to claim the pendant.

Seeing that silver wouldn't move Ye Qing, the cloaked man decided to change his condition. "So long as you don't ask for the moon, I can give you anything you want. Do you need a Strange Artifact? A martial arts manual? A medicine? Or something else?"

Ye Qing squinted. It was clear that this guy knew that the jade pendant was a Warding Pendant, and to be fair, his latest offer sounded pretty attractive. But after Ye Qing carefully mulled over his financial condition, he discovered that... he wasn't lacking in anything at all! He had all the money, martial arts, Strange Artifacts and even medicine he might want at this stage of his cultivation. In other words, there was literally nothing the man could give him!

In the end, Ye Qing had no choice but to say, "Sorry. I just want you to leave me alone."

The cloaked man: "... That's an answer I've never heard before.

The cloaked man finally ran out of patience after hearing Ye Qing's latest answer. He began emitting blood red energy and pressure as he said, "I must have the Warding Pendant. Please don't test my patience, fellow warrior."

I'm a simple man. I kill when I run out of patience.

Before Ye Qing could react, the stall owner suddenly shouted and tried to snatch the jade pendant off his hands, "That pendant is mine! I'm not selling it anymore!"

The stall owner hadn't planned on interfering with this matter, but the moment he heard the words "Warding Pendant", his greed immediately overtook his good sense.

One must be strong to set up a stall in the Strange Market. If not, anyone could just take what you have and not pay a coin. The stall owner was a late-stage Vessel Augmentor, so he definitely wasn't a weakling. However, he had only made it halfway to Ye Qing when a hand grabbed his throat and silenced him like a duck, leaving only deathly silence.

"What a coincidence. My patience is limited as well!"

His own thirst for violence stirred when he sensed the cloaked man's undisguised hostility.

"The Warding Pendant is very important to me. I'm sorry." The cloaked man was more stubborn than expected though. Although Ye Qing had captured the stall owner in a single move, he wasn't intimidated in the slightest. He assumed a stance and attacked Ye Qing with his palms.

"Impressive saber technique!" Ye Qing's eyes lit up with excitement. The cloaked man was using his palms and executing what seemed to be a basic horizontal cut, but in reality it was an exquisite saber technique that was as fast as it was variable.

It was too bad that the cloaked man had met his match. Speed was Ye Qing's forte!

Ye Qing lifted his own palms and used them like a saber as well. With casual ease, he executed a diagonal cut aimed at his opponent's wrist.

The cloaked man's hand shifted a little. It was just a tiny movement, but it would allow him to dodge Ye Qing's attack by millimeters—or at least, it should have. The moment he made a move,

Ye Qing changed his cut into a sweep almost as if he had anticipated his reaction. At this rate, Ye Qing's hand was still going to hit his wrist.

Was it a coincidence? Doubt flickered in the cloaked man's mind, though his reaction wasn't slow in the slightest. He made another change, but once again Ye Qing pre-empted his movement and neutralized his counter before it could come to fruition.

How is this possible? How can he predict my moves like he could read my mind? The cloaked man thought in shock. He tried switching up his attack a couple more times, but each time Ye Qing was there to cut off his attacks. Not only that, he proceeded to kill off any follow-up moves he might have come up with.

In the end, nothing came out of his attack, and his energies screeched inside his body like pent-up anger. He felt like his secrets were completely dragged out into the open. He felt like there was absolutely nothing he could do or think that the young man couldn't predict. It was one of the worst things he had ever felt in his life.

Realizing that Ye Qing was an insurmountable wall, he didn't hesitate to withdraw his hand and attempt to escape. However, he had just withdrawn his arm halfway when Ye Qing's hand abruptly sped up and reached his chest in an instant. There was just nothing he could possibly do to stop this.

Bang!

A muffled groan escaped the cloaked man's lips as he felt an unstoppable force pouring into his body. It easily broke his bones and caved his chest in. At the same time, an unbelievably hot astral qi invaded his internal organs, boiled his blood, and dimmed his mind.

Wisps of dark red flames began seeping out of his body, and not even the mist cloak could cover up its presence. In fact, the cloak was slowly crumbling as time passed.

While his opponent was groggy and unable to react, Ye Qing struck his chest again with a "Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve" technique.

"Get lost!"

The cloaked man groaned again as Ye Qing's sleeves sent him stumbling at least thirty meters across the street. The streets were hardly empty, so of course he bowled over many pedestrians who were unfortunate enough to be in his way.

Everyone looked angry, but no one dared to raise their voice against the culprit. Why? Because they couldn't beat him, of course.

After the cloaked man rose to his feet and spat out some fresh blood, he saluted Ye Qing and said, "Thank you for showing mercy, senior."

He knew he was still alive not because he was strong, but because his opponent had shown mercy.

Seeing that Ye Qing was silent, the cloaked man did not hesitate to turn around and leave. He was already lucky that his opponent was a merciful person, it would be beyond foolish to linger any longer.

After the cloaked man was gone, Ye Qing finally looked at the stall owner he was still gripping with one hand and sneered, "Still want your Warding Pendant, vendor?"

The one reason he didn't kill the cloaked man was because he couldn't sense any killing intent from him. If he had, he wouldn't mind delivering him to kingdom come for free. There was no rule forbidding people from causing a fuss or killing anyway.

"I... I..." The stall owner stammered. Before he could finish though, Ye Qing opened his mouth and unleashed a devastating lightning bolt. Three different stall owners in three different directions lost their heads instantly, but Lightning Bolt wasn't done yet. It raced toward another stall owner at the far end of the street.

The fourth stall owner was prepared, however. When Lightning Bolt annihilated his head, he slowly vanished and left behind a headless paper doll.

A few breaths later, a silhouette appeared on the street and whistled at Ye Qing, "It was just a joke, brother! Why so murderous?"

"A joke?" Ye Qing let out a cold, ridiculing chuckle. "Is that what my life is to you people? A joke?"

"If life is a joke, then that guy over there died because he played a joke on me using poison; that guy on the opposite side died because he played a joke using a gu insect[1], and the one to my left died because he played a joke using a yin spirit."

"As for you, you played a joke on me using a curse. I'm a fair and impartial man, so I gotta send you to the other side as well. The four of you can be mahjong buddies."
[2]

Lightning Bolt dashed toward the stall owner once more.

"Calm down, brother. Let's talk this out!"

The stall owner snapped his fingers, and dozens of masks at his stall suddenly floated into the air. They danced left and right and made this cackling noise that was positively eerie. Lightning Bolt easily destroyed them all with its lightning, but it was a trap. The masks were overflowing with tainted energy, and it greatly diminished Lightning Bolt's speed and strength.

"I'm sorry for my fellows on the other side, but I'm not done living yet. They'll just have to wait for another mahjong buddy."

The stall owner chuckled and made a grab for Lightning Bolt. "By the way, this mini sword of yours looks fantastic. I'll take it as compensation for my injuries."

Lightning Bolt was famed for its uncanny speed and devastating power. The tainted energies might have slowed it down considerably, but the idea that someone could just grab it out of the air was laughable.

And yet, the stall owner was no ordinary person. His hand had suddenly appeared on top of Lightning Bolt as if it could pass through spacetime and caught Lightning Bolt in a firm grip.

Bzz bzz!

Lightning Bolt shook violently and discharged a great amount of lightning, but it was unable to break free from the enemy's grasp.

"Heavens, this Strange Artifact is even better than I thought! Thank you so much, brother!" The stall owner exclaimed with undisguised glee as he stared at Lightning Bolt.

"I know it's awesome. You don't deserve it though!" Ye Qing responded with dripping scorn. As soon as he said the word "deserve", Lightning Bolt abruptly froze as if it was gathering its strength. The next moment, it unleashed with an unthinkable amount of lightning and sword qi.

Lightning blazes the nine heavens,

A sword freezes the Nether.

Dare you test my wrath,

When I have a sword that can pierce the moon and the sun?

"ARGH!" The stall owner let out a bloodcurdling scream as his right hand was turned into a pincushion. Naturally, it was impossible for him to hold onto Lightning Bolt. The mini sword immediately took aim at his forehead and shot forward.

Chapter 172: Pawn Shop No. 8

"This isn't funny anymore!"

Right before the stall owner would get a new brain piercing, he abruptly screamed and made a grab for a pedestrian a short distance away for him. The next moment, the pedestrian abruptly appeared at his location, and he at the pedestrian's location.

Somehow, the two men had switched places in the blink of an eye!

"Come back!"

When Lightning Bolt was an inch away from the pedestrian's forehead, Ye Qing realized what happened and stopped his mini sword just in time. While he was doing this, the stall owner whistled again at his stall. The tattered cloth on the ground abruptly folded unto itself and wrapped all of his possessions in a neat bundle. Once the knot was tied, it automatically flew toward the stall owner.

At first, the bundle was very huge, but as it flew toward the stall owner it shrank more and more until it was the size of a normal bag. After the stall owner caught the bundle and carried it behind his back, he saluted Ye Qing mockingly and said, "Hehe. Until next time, brother!"

His body started turning transparent. He was clearly planning to leave the Strange Market.

"Interesting," Ye Qing chuckled, but his tone was cold enough to freeze the Nether. He made a grasping motion, and a sea of Blood Shadows suddenly appeared in the sky. They then shot toward the stall owner from every direction.

“Holy mother of heavens!” The stall owner exclaimed in shock and turned transparent faster. Right before the Blood Shadows would hit him, he abruptly disappeared and left the Strange Market.

“Phew! That was too close!”

In a small alleyway of Luo Shui, a stout thirty plus years old man wiped the non-existent sweat on his forehead after returning to the real world.

The man had a stout body and an honest-looking face, but his voice was naturally flippant and deceitful. He could pretend to be simple and honest if he kept quiet, but as soon as he opened his mouth he automatically gave off a treacherous, untrustworthy impression not unlike a wolf in sheep’s skin.

“I went for wool and came back shorn. What horrendous luck!” The middle-aged man shook his head dejectedly but quickly regained his spirit. “Oh well! I can’t always have my way. Time to seek out Young Cui and discuss the meaning of life with her [1], hehehe...”

“A day’s work happens in the morning, and a day’s relaxation at night. Oh, I can hardly wait...”

The middle-aged man was skipping down the road and whistling when suddenly, he noticed something strange, “Huh? Why is my bundle so light?”

When he looked behind his back, his eyes widened like saucers as he let out a devastated scream, “NOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

As it turned out, there was a hole in his bundle, and most of his items had fallen out since heavens-know-when!

“Ahhhhhhh! My precious! My precious!”

“I’ll find you, thief... I, Tang Shi, will definitely find you!”

.....

“Why is he keeping such garbage? Trash, useless, trash, useless...”

After the fourth stall owner had left the Strange Market, Ye Qing finally found the time to have a “friendly” chat with the stall owner who sold him the Warding Pendant in the first place. It went without saying that the stall owner packed his stuff and ran as soon as the conversation was over. After that, Ye Qing happily went through the items the escaped stall owner had left behind.

He had done it on purpose, of course. Knowing that he wouldn’t be able to kill the stall owner in time, he instead directed his Blood Shadows to attack the bundle. To be honest, he didn’t really think it would work. If it was a-tenth of a second slower, then he might have ended up with nothing at all. But it did, so it was looting time.

Ye Qing felt zero guilt claiming these items as his own since the guy had tried to kill him. In fact, he never minded killing people who wished to kill him such as the three stall owners who tried to kill him just now. They had turned greedy when they learned that the jade pendant was none other than

the famous Warding Pendant, and admittedly their tactics and timing were pretty good. They had chosen to attack him using traceless methods while he was fighting against the cloaked man. If his spirit wasn't as strong as it was, there was a good chance he actually could've died here.

Unfortunately for his wannabe killers, he was not someone to be trifled with. It was why he lived and they died.

The last stall owner was pretty tricky though. His ability to keep himself alive in particular was downright exceptional. That said, he managed to steal most of the bastard's possession and make it hurt, so he counted it as a win.

He wasn't referring to physical pain, but psychological. Warriors healed quickly from their wounds, so physical pain was temporary at best. Psychological pain though, now that was something that could last a long time even if you were the strongest warrior in the world.

Thanks to Ye Qing's display of ruthlessness, no one dared to pick up the stall owner's items even if they were right next to their feet. Everyone was terrified that Ye Qing would just up and murder their asses. It was why Ye Qing could collect the items at his leisure and even rate how shitty they were from time to time.

The stall owner's items were mostly garbage, but there were some good stuff in it. For example, there was the cocoon of the Red-class Cocoon Tree, the eyeball of the Blue Pupil Cat, and spirit materials such as the Star Mushroom, the Snake Favored Grass, the Fire Lotus and so on. These items alone were worth the trouble.

"Wait this is... the Star Lotus! Hell yeah!" Ye Qing's eyes lit up when he picked up a nail-sized lotus that was shaped like a star and glowing silver.

The Star Lotus was an extremely rare spirit material that could accelerate the refinement of one's astral qi and the fusion between astral qi and true qi. It was a priceless treasure to any Astral Refiner because it could save them years or even decades depending on their innate talent.

Even for Ye Qing, the Star Lotus was extremely valuable because he was in the middle of tempering his astral qi and true qi right now. This Star Lotus was the last push he needed to fully merge his astral qi and true qi, and he could use the Blood Jade Lotus afterward to skyrocket to the late-stage of the Astral Refinement stage.

"Thank you once more for your blessing, daddy heavens!"

The Star Lotus was so good he just couldn't be bothered to check the rest of the items one by one anymore. He just glanced at them once and shoved it all into his Nature's Shell.

Of course, he didn't forget about the possessions of the three stall owners he killed. He put it all into his Nature's Shell when he passed by the area.

"Hmm? What's this? It looks like a badge of some sort."

Suddenly, Ye Qing noticed a shiny black object and picked it up from the ground.

"Pawn shop?"

The badge was mysterious-looking and expertly crafted. Ye Qing couldn't tell what kind of material it was made of, only that it was icy to touch and almost weightless. It almost felt like he was

holding a tree leaf. One side of the badge was engraved with the word “Pawn Shop”, and the other side “No. 8”.

“Pawn shop? Number eight? Pawn Shop No. 8?!” Ye Qing exclaimed in astonishment.

It can’t be the Pawn Shop No. 8 from my world, right? [2]

He had just said this when his surroundings suddenly took a drastic change. One second ago, he was still standing in the middle of a bustling market. The next second, he found himself in a pitch black space where massive, indiscernible shadows swam by from time to time. At the same time, countless hoarse, low, and cryptic murmurs rang beside his ears. A single winding limestone road stretched into the darkness.

“What on earth is this place?”

Ye Qing immediately tensed up with worry and confusion. But before he could make sense of this strange place, he heard a series of strange laughter,

“Hehehe...”

“Hahaha...”

“Kekeke...”

The laughter was eerie and unsettling. The Warding Pendant tied to his waist glowed like it was about to burst into flames.

“Hehehe, welcome to Pawn Shop No. 8, dear customer..”

“Hahaha, just follow the road...”

“Kekeke, and you will see our pawn shop...”

“Hehehe... we wish you... hahaha... a pleasant day... kekeke... customer..”

The three voices completed each other’s sentences while laughing from time to time. As they continued laughing, the surrounding shadows writhed and actually started reaching out to Ye Qing from both sides of the road. He subconsciously summoned the Burning Wind to burn the shadows away, but for the first time ever, the astral qi failed to elicit any response whatsoever. They disappeared as soon as they sank into the darkness not unlike a clay ox that had fallen into the sea.

Nothing happened when the shadows reached under his feet though—at least, not yet. When Ye Qing looked down, the shadows slowly spread out and transformed into countless faces. There were male, female, young and old; joy, sorrow, hatred, anger and malice...

The faces would continue to cycle through all sorts of expressions as if it was an expression of the facades of life. It chilled Ye Qing to the core just looking at them.

“What the hell are these things?” Ye Qing gulped. He made up his mind to follow the road then. He might not know exactly what was waiting ahead of him, but it seemed like a bad idea to hang around. Without further ado, he took off into a small jog and ventured into the darkness beyond.

As he continued along the road, the scenery on both sides of the road and underneath his feet kept changing like a light show. He saw Strangers of all shapes and sizes, fantastical sceneries unlike anything he had ever seen, existences that went beyond the ability of words to describe, treasures that were as priceless as they were rare...

To put it simply, it was a dizzying, terrifying, yet eye-opening experience.

Half a teatime later, a traditional building with flying eaves slowly rose from the horizon. Bronze bells were hung on all eight corners of the rooftop, and a sign board was hung at the top center of the building. It said, "Pawn Shop No. 8".

What was strange was that the four words were covered in black flames and giving off some sort of transparent smoke. The building itself looked like it was covered by a heat haze, and they combined to form a gigantic, all-encompassing black cloaked figure in the black sky.

"It really is the Pawn Shop No. 8!" Ye Qing's eyes widened in disbelief. The old memories surfaced, and he even felt a sense of kinship for this place even though it was anything but. Human emotions really were a strange thing!

"I wonder if it's just like the pawn shop in the TV show; a pawn shop where you can pawn off everything including your soul!"

Ye Qing was still hesitating when the doors of the pawn shop were suddenly flung open. A light shone out of the belly of the building, and numerous black cloaked figures who looked very much like the silhouette in the sky but way smaller filed out into two lines. They then greeted him cordially,

"Welcome to Pawn Shop No. 8, dear customer..."

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Chapter 173: Candle Spirit

"Repeating a greeting three times is a little excessive, don't you think?" Ye Qing commented while staring at the black cloaked figures. He could clearly tell that these people lacked any sort of aura. More accurately, they were empty shells with no soul in them.

"I'm already here, so I might as well get comfortable," Ye Qing muttered and walked toward the pawn shop without hesitation. It wasn't like he could leave even if he had second thoughts. Plus, he wanted to know if this Pawn Shop No. 8 really was the same as the pawn shop of legends; one where a person could even pawn off their soul.

The first thing he saw after stepping through the entrance was a humanoid figure with an ebony rack for a head. The rack was jam-packed with colorful candles of all kinds, and each and every one of them was a Stranger.

The humanoid figure stepped closer. The ebony rack had three levels and was shaped like a triangle. Most of the candles were sat at the bottom rack, and only a handful of them sat at the middle rack. The top rack was occupied by one candle only.

Every candle on the rack had a face and a pair of arms and legs just like a human. They were incredibly active and couldn't stop chit-chatting among themselves.

"Welcome to Pawn Shop No. 8, dear customer," greeted the white candle at the top rack. She was shaped like a beautiful woman and had a crisp and sonorous voice. He could even detect a hint of playfulness in her tone.

The child-like candles beneath her immediately hopped on their feet and cried, "Welcome!" as well.

The white candle asked, "Welcome to Pawn Shop No. 8, dear customer. I am Candle Spirit and the manager of this pawn shop. I shall do my best to serve you."

"Manager? Are you the boss then?" Ye Qing asked curiously.

"Of course not. Like I said, I am just a manager who manages things here and there."

Candle Spirit smiled and asked a question of her own, "This is your first time at our pawn shop, and you seem very familiar with it. In fact, you don't seem afraid at all. Why's that? Some of the customers I've served were so scared that they couldn't even stand straight."

"Yeah, yeah! I remember one guy whose hands and feet couldn't stop shaking!"

"I remember a girl who screamed for her parents!"

"And I remember a guy who peed his pants!"

The child-like candles immediately echoed in agreement.

Ye Qing shrugged and replied honestly, "Would you release me if I tell you I'm scared? In that case, I'm so scared I can burst into tears at any moment."

Candle Spirit burst into a giggle. "You really don't look like it though. Why don't you cry for me? Maybe then I'll believe you."

Ye Qing simply stared at her in silence. Would you release me if I do that? No? Then why on earth would I do that?

Candle Spirit shot him a cute smile. "There is no need to be afraid, customer. Pawn Shop No. 8 represents the opportunity of a lifetime, and trust me when I say that there are countless people who wish that they were in your position!"

"The opportunity of a lifetime, you say?" Ye Qing said in a doubtful tone, "Can you be a little more specific? Exactly what services does your pawn shop offer?"

Candle Spirit answered smilingly, "You might have figured out our main function from the name of our shop already, but we are a pawn shop where you may pawn off your valuables. However, unlike your ordinary pawn shop, our pawn shop accepts anything of value. Literally, anything. We accept money, Strange Artifacts, spirit materials, martial arts manual and other tangible objects. But we

also accept intangible objects such as five senses, love, familial love, friendship, natural gift, talent, and even—”

“Your ambition...” A red candle interrupted and burned as passionately as flames.

“Your future...” A green candle followed and flickered hypnotically.

“Your life...” A blue candle continued while sitting as cold as death.

“And your soul...” A black candle concluded while emanating off a most sinister vibe.

“You have already borne witness to our collection. Trust me when I say that our pawn shop has anything and everything you might desire,” Candle Spirit added.

“Those things are a part of your collection?” Ye Qing immediately recalled the strange, fantastical, and unspeakable things he saw while walking up to the pawn shop. Your pawn shop’s taste is a bit heavier than I expected, girl. In my world, Pawn Shop No. 8 only wants the soul.

“What can I obtain in exchange?” Ye Qing asked.

Candle Spirit replied, “Pawn Shop No. 8 has always adhered by the principles of fair trade. In other words, you will gain something of equal value. Obviously, the more you offer, the more you will get. For example...”

An orange candle took over and whispered seductively, “You may gain unlimited wealth...”

A yellow candle breathed bewitchingly, “You may rule over life and death...”

And a blue candle murmured bewilderingly, “You may become the greatest of all...”

“As I said, you can pawn anything and obtain anything. Whatever it is you desire, Pawn Shop No. 8 can fulfill it!”

Candle Spirit’s voice was unbelievably soft, intoxicating, and seductive. At the same time, innumerable whispers suddenly rang beside his ears and basked him in a cocoon of warmth, comfort, and dreams. Before Ye Qing knew it, he found himself basking in his base desires. Or rather, his desires had drowned out the voice of his mind and left nothing but pure want. He wanted wealth, he wanted power, he wanted strength, he wanted everything...

Ye Qing did not realize that the number 8 had appeared on his forehead as he succumbed little by little. As if responding to his unfettered desires, the number 8 the pawn shop’s sign board burned even brighter and leaked black, sinister qi. All the candles on the rack turned pitch black and began swaying in perfect unison. The innocence, liveliness and child-like cunning they had displayed earlier... all of it had been replaced by pure, unadulterated evil.

It was at this moment the Annon Sutra glowed a little and sent an icy sensation across his whole body. It immediately chased away the paralyzing thoughts and jolted Ye Qing back to wakefulness.

The moment he regained his clarity of mind, the murmurs and the number 8 on his forehead abruptly disappeared like it was never there. The oddities inside and outside the pawn shop all returned to normal as well. It was almost as if nothing had ever happened.

One thing was different though. All the candles on Candle Spirit's head had shrunk a little.

"Did something happen just now?" Ye Qing asked. He was back to normal, but he could not recall what just happened at all. If the Annon Sutra wasn't giving off a cold sensation, he wouldn't even realize that something was off.

"It's nothing. Please, take a seat."

Candle Spirit led Ye Qing to a table as if nothing had ever happened. She shot him a smile and asked, "Have you figured out what you want, dear customer?"

Ye Qing subconsciously touched his chest. Candle Spirit was acting just the same as before, and he couldn't spot any oddity in the shop whatsoever, and yet he just couldn't shake off the feeling that something wasn't right. He was, for better or worse, on his guard.

Ye Qing thought for a moment before asking, "Can I leave this place?"

It was the truth. From the moment he ended up in this place, his biggest desire was to get out of here.

"..."

Candle Spirit was speechless for a moment. This was the first time she encountered a human who was completely unmoved by an opportunity-of-a-lifetime.

In fact, Ye Qing was moved by the offer, but the strange feeling had caused him to change his mind. Golden opportunities were golden, but what did it matter if you couldn't live to enjoy it?

"I'm sorry, but one of our rules states that all visitors must pawn at least one item, dear customer. Also, this really is the opportunity-of-a-lifetime. Are you sure you don't want to reconsider?" Candle Spirit asked.

Wow, I can't leave until I pawn something? If you have a website, I absolutely would give you a one-star rating!

Ye Qing rubbed his nose in irritation. It was pretty obvious, but now he confirmed that Pawn Shop No. 8 wasn't a place one could come and go as they pleased.

Ye Qing thought for a little while longer before answering, "I'd like a bottle of Moon Seeing Stone agate!"

Since he couldn't leave, he might as well take the opportunity to find out more about Pawn Shop No. 8 and their business rules. Second, he did need the agate to accomplish his purpose.

Candle Spirit smiled, "The agate of the Moon Seeing Stone, is it? The Moon Seeing Stone is formed from the essence of the sun and moon and possesses many magical effects, and it so happens that we do have a stock of its agate."

One of the black cloaked figures immediately walked over up to them. They were carrying a tray with a small porcelain bottle.

"Please verify the goods, customer."

Ye Qing uncorked the bottle and looked inside. He saw a pool of shiny liquid with what looked like a million stars shining inside it.

"It's definitely the agate of the Moon Seeing Stone, and its quality is above average," Ye Qing replied.

Candle Spirit beamed at him. "As I said, our shop adheres closely to the principle of fair trade. We wouldn't try to cheat you by giving you an inferior product."

"You said that I can pawn anything, right?" Ye Qing confirmed.

Candle Spirit responded, "That is correct."

"Very well," Ye Qing mulled over his options carefully before answering, "In that case, I would like to pawn my laziness and greed."

Candle Spirit: "..."

An awkward silence stretched for a few seconds before Ye Qing asked, "Is that not enough? What if I chip in my excess anger and desire as well?"

Candle Spirit: "....."

"Still not enough? Fine. I can give you my clumsiness, my indecision, my impulsiveness, my carelessness and, oh! That's right. My sleep quality has been rather poor as of late, my stomach could stand to be a bit better, and I've been plagued by bad luck as of late. Please take all my ailments away from me. I don't mind even if it exceeds the value of this agate. You're welcome."

Candle Spirit: "....."

Seeing that there was no end to Ye Qing's rant, Candle Spirit finally let out a sigh, "I told you before that we only accept valuables, dear customer. What you just offered holds no value to us whatsoever."

Ye Qing abruptly cut himself off and complained, "You were the one who said I could pawn anything. Why didn't you interrupt me sooner if you're just going to turn it all down?"

Oh, so it's my fault now? Candle Spirit barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes as she apologized, "My apologies, dear customer. It's my fault for not clarifying things."

"Well, I forgive you," Ye Qing replied generously.

Like I need your forgiveness, you little shit!

Ye Qing sighed. He was hoping to exploit a loophole or ten, but he supposed that was asking for too much. A few seconds later, he said, "Fine then. I shall give you my handsome, unparalleled, world-shattering looks in exchange for this agate!"

Candle Spirit huffed, "Dear customer, you cannot pawn what you don't have. Or should I say, your narcissism holds no value to us!"

This time, it was Ye Qing's turn to fall silent. My looks are my most prized asset, and you're telling me it has no value whatsoever? Should I show you what gender equality me—wait, I think she's stronger than me. Oh well. It's bad form to hit a woman anyway!

“What about my humility, my refinement and my uprightness then? Surely these qualities hold some value to your shop?” Ye Qing challenged. He refused to believe that he was completely lacking in good qualities.

Candle Spirit's reply was like an arrow through his heart, “My deepest apologies, customer, but you don't have humility or refinement either. You do have uprightness though, so yes, you can pawn that if you want to!”

“...” You're lucky you're a woman. I would've punched your face in if you were a man.

Still, the fact that he could pawn his uprightness proved that he wasn't completely lacking in good qualities. At the very least he wasn't a total scumbag, right?

Hmm? Why do I feel like I've just insulted myself?

Chapter 174: Deer of Balance

“What will happen if I give up my uprightness?” Ye Qing asked. This was the real question he wanted to ask.

Candle Spirit answered, “If you give up your uprightness, you will lose the ability to discern right from wrong, and good from evil. You will act as you please, kill on a whim, so on and so forth.”

“Makes sense,” Ye Qing nodded before asking another question, “And what would happen if I give up my familial love?”

The corners of Candle Spirit's lips curled upward. If you give up your familial love, then you will lose all feelings toward your family. To put it simply, you will treat them just like you treat a stranger. Of course, this won't affect your daily life. Who knows, you might lead a freer life without the shackles of familial bonds to hold you down?”

Ye Qing pressed, “What if I'm an orphan who had to grow up all alone?”

Candle Spirit chuckled. “You might not have a family now, but you will have one eventually. Your wife and your children are your family, is it not? Of course, if you choose to never have a family, then we will take something else of equal value.”

In other words, the pawn shop would never come out of a deal as the loser.

Ye Qing nodded in understanding before launching into a deduction, “In other words, I will never love again if I give up my love, and I will never have friends if I give up my friendship. Is that correct?”

Candle Spirit nodded in affirmation.

Ye Qing fell into thought for a moment before asking another question, “How does pawning my dreams and future work?”

Candle Spirit answered succinctly, "If you pawn your ambitions, then you will lose all motivation to improve and be satisfied with your current status. If you give up your future, then you will always remain exactly where you're currently at in life. You will never change until you die."

Ye Qing frowned deeply when he heard this. He could tell that Candle Spirit was trying to downgrade the severity of the consequences without outright lying to his face. Losing a certain emotion already had a serious impact on one's life, but to lose one's dreams or future could only be described as life-changing.

Could you really call a human who was missing an entire aspect of their emotions a human?

Was there any difference between a human and a salted fish if he lost his ambition?

And why even live if you would never have a future?

Speaking of the future, suppose he was fine with pawning off his emotions or whatever and went on to live the life he dreamed of. However, life was full of obstacles, and it was only a matter of time before he encountered something that he couldn't solve. He would be tempted to visit the pawn shop again and pawn something else to obtain a solution to his problem.

It wouldn't end there though. A human's greed and desire was bottomless, and once they had something they would want more of it. Pawn Shop No. 8 could carry him all the way to the top if he was careful with their deals, or it could slowly lead him into the abyss and cost him everything. If there came a day where he truly lost everything, who could say that they would be strong enough not to pawn off their own soul to the devil?

Having understood the pitfalls and traps laid by Pawn Shop No. 8, Ye Qing visualized the Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method to keep his head clear and asked, "Can you tell me what I can pawn to obtain this agate then?"

Candle Spirit smiled. So what if Ye Qing knew that Pawn Shop No. 8 was dangerous and treacherous? He would still enter their trap because that was just how humans were: greedy, slothful and full of desires.

"There are many things you can pawn, dear customer. For example, you may pawn your uprightness, your friendship, your intelligence, your conscience, your lifespan, your martial talent, your emotions and more."

"Wow! I have a lot more stuff than I thought!" Ye Qing sounded a little excited, "I feel like I can exchange a lot of useful stuff with what I have!"

Candle Spirit's smile grew even warmer and coquettish, "In that case, what will you give in exchange for the agate of the Moon Seeing Stone, dear customer?"

Ye Qing replied, "I will give you... my money, of course."

"I-I'm sorry?" Candle Spirit was taken aback. "I thought you were going to give up something more... substantial?"

Ye Qing answered matter-of-factly, "You said it yourself they're quite substantial. Why would I give up my treasures when I can sit on them instead?"

Candle Spirit: "... So, you're saying that I wasted all that breath for nothing?"

Candle Spirit tried to change his mind, “The agate of the Moon Seeing Stone is quite valuable, dear customer. I’m afraid that you’ll have to pay through the roof if you wish to pay in mundane currency. In fact, intangible things like emotions are worth a lot more to our shop than tangible things like gold and silver. Why pay through the roof when there is a much cheaper option?”

“Exactly! That is why I cannot pawn off my intangible stuff!” Ye Qing answered matter-of-factly, “Also, I have a ton of cash!”

Given enough money, can money buy everything? Yes! Yes, it can!

Candle Spirit was feeling a little distraught. Why is he getting more obstinate the more I try to persuade him?

Ye Qing didn’t pull out his cash immediately though. He asked, “You claimed that Pawn Shop No. 8 adheres to the principles of fair trade, but why should I believe you? How can I be sure that you won’t intentionally raise the price of the agate or devalue my money?”

By now, Candle Spirit realized that Ye Qing couldn’t be persuaded, so she simply waved her hand and summoned a divine-looking, penta-colored deer into the shop. The Stranger was also carrying what seemed to be a scale on its back.

“Is that the Deer of Balance?” Ye Qing blurted in surprise.

“Correct! It is none other than the Deer of Balance!” Candle Spirit responded, “Do you trust me now?”

Ye Qing nodded. A Deer of Balance was a very special Stranger that was, in some ways, quite similar to the Oathbearer. Powerful but kind, it almost never attacked a human or Stranger unless it was attacked first. There was nothing it loved more than to evaluate items for humans and ensure fair trade.

If someone tried to cheat the other party or facilitate unfair trade though, the Deer of Balance would get angry, and the scale behind its back would be imbalanced. The Deer of Balance would carve up the wrongdoer bit by bit and place their body parts on the plate until the scale was balanced. Only then would it stop and cease its rage.

This was why the Deer of Balance was also known as the Deer of Fairness by merchants. It was also why its symbol was often inscribed on weighing scales as proof of fair transaction.

The Deer of Balance in front of Ye Qing had five-colored fur with starry spots that looked like stars in the sky. An auspicious cloud hung between its horns, and its eyes were brimming with life and intelligence. The mysterious scale on its back was glowing with hypnotic, auspicious colors as well.

There was no mistake. The Deer of Balance in front of him was the genuine article. There was no way this was a fake conjured by Candle Spirit.

“Shall we begin the exchange then, dear customer?” Candle Spirit said and placed the bottle of agate on one of the weighing plates. The scale slowly tilted in that direction.

In response, Ye Qing pulled out fifty thousand silver certificates [1] from his Nature’s Shell and placed it on the opposite plate. However, he nearly suffered a heart attack when he discovered the scale had barely moved at all.

The scale was only slightly tilted on one side, so he initially thought that the agate was cheaper than he thought. He wasn't expecting fifty thousand silver, which was almost half of all the money he had, to be worth so little.

It would seem that money really was near worthless to Pawn Shop No. 8.

Ye Qing stopped wasting his silver and added the goods he just got from the four stall owners to the plate instead. He didn't recognize the large majority of the items, but who knows, maybe some of them might turn out to be valuable? They were wasting space in his Nature's Shell and meant little to him anyway, so he might as well pawn them off to Pawn Shop No. 8.

Ye Qing didn't deposit his items one by one on the plate. He was the one who decided to show off his wealth. If he acted like a miser now, it would utterly ruin his heroic image. Therefore, he unloaded every item he thought had no value to him on the plate in one go.

The plate was average-sized at best and could not seem to accommodate a large number of items, but in reality not a single one of his items—hundreds of them—had fallen to the ground. It was as if the plate contained infinite space.

It wasn't too surprising. A seed could hold a mountain after all. [2]

After Ye Qing was done depositing his items, the horn of the Deer of Balance slowly brightened with colorful, divine light. It was a soft, gentle glow that set him at ease. A short while later, a small pile of the items were thrown out of the plate and in front of Ye Qing. When Candle Spirit saw Ye Qing's confused expression, she giggled, "Dear customer, the Deer of Balance threw those items out because they're completely worthless."

After the worthless items were discarded, the plates slowly tilted toward the center. When they came to a stop though, Ye Qing discovered that the scale needed one last push to be truly balanced.

"It looks like your items still aren't enough, dear customer," Candle Spirit commented with a smirk.

Ye Qing didn't panic. He thought for a moment and placed the Strange Artifacts and martial arts manuals he didn't need onto the weighing plate such as the Skinner, the Burial Shirt of the Dead, the Chang Bone, the "Iron Hand", the "Floating On Water" and more. The scale slowly evened out with every addition.

However, Ye Qing did not notice Candle Spirit smiling eerily as he was adding his Strange Artifacts onto the plate. The candles on the ebony rack abruptly turned black and swayed in eerie harmony.

Keke, you're dead.

Candle Spirit's smile grew wider and wider as the scale slowly evened out. She had used a special ability to mask the true value of Ye Qing's Strange Artifacts. As soon as the Stranger noticed that something was wrong with the Stranger, it would definitely think that Ye Qing was trying to trick it and attack him. It did not matter if the Deer of Balance killed him or maimed him. Either outcome would be favorable to Pawn Shop No. 8.

If Ye Qing was grievously injured, he would need to heal himself before he returned to the Strange Market. Otherwise, he might as well be committing suicide. His only choice would be to negotiate a

new deal with Pawn Shop No. 8 and treat his injuries. When that happened, she would get exactly what she wanted.

It was even better if the Deer of Balance killed him outright. His soul would go directly to Pawn Shop No. 8.

My plan is flawless!

Candle Spirit nearly burst out in laughter as she marveled at the ingenuity of her own plan. In fact, she had tricked many customers using this exact tactic, and so far no one had managed to escape her trap.

Ye Qing had no idea that a grave danger was right on top of him. He even let out a mental sigh of relief when he saw that the scale was about to even out.

It was at this moment the Annon Sutra suddenly flashed black. Then, a single silver dragon-serpent rune slowly vanished from its surface.

The second the dragon-serpent rune was gone, words slowly appeared on its surface,

“Ye Qing had played Candle Spirit like a fiddle, and the resentful Stranger was unwilling to take the humiliation lying down. So, she used her innate ability to conceal the true value of Ye Qing’s items and provoke the Deer of Balance into killing Ye Qing. This way, she would be able to lay claim to Ye Qing’s soul.”

“Unfortunately, she was so pleased with herself that she accidentally let slip a hint of energy. As a result, the Deer of Balance found out her ploy. Enraged beyond reason, the Deer of Balance killed Candle Spirit on the spot.”

When the words “killed Candle Spirit on the spot” manifested, it started fading immediately almost as if it couldn’t bear the power of fate it was imbued with. But right before they would disappear, all sixteen silver dragon-serpent runes on the Annon Sutra suddenly shone a bright silver light. Six of them disintegrated into nothing, and the six words abruptly regained its form:

“KILL CANDLE SPIRIT”

Chapter 175: I Ain’t Doing This Shit No More

At Pawn Shop No. 8, Candle Spirit was smiling bright enough to illuminate the dim interior. Too bright, in fact. Maybe she was so pleased with herself that she lost her sense of measure, or maybe she was just reaping what she sowed, but she accidentally let slip a cackle and a hint of aura.

Ye Qing didn’t notice anything because Candle Spirit was way stronger than him, but the Deer of Balance was a different story. It immediately turned to look at Candle Spirit, and Candle Spirit subconsciously met its gaze. Her wide-eyed look was all it needed to see to know that yes, the bitch was in fact trying to trick him.

The Deer of Balance was an intelligent Stranger, and it figured out her ploy in just the blink of an eye. Enraged, it immediately fired the divine light between its horns at the Stranger.

“What are you doing, Deer of Balance? We’re in Pawn Shop No. 8 right now!”

Candle Spirit was shocked to say the least. It was one thing if she was a human, but she was an intelligent Stranger just like it. How could it attack a fellow Stranger willy-nilly? Also, they were in Pawn Shop No. 8 right now. Even if it was furious with her, shouldn't it overlook the offense because they were in her master's place?

Of course, Candle Spirit wasn't going to take her punishment lying down. The woman and all the children on the ebony rask sucked in a deep breath. When they exhaled, the candles burned at an accelerated rate, and a terrific blast of fire shot toward the Deer of Balance.

The Deer of Balance paid the attack no heed though. Its divine light swept across the area and easily melted the deadly flames like snow. Forget hurting the Stranger, Candle Spirit's flames couldn't even get past the divine light.

"A-Are you really going to make an enemy out of Pawn Shop No. 8, Deer of Balance?" Candle Spirit stammered in a panicked voice. The Deer of Balance's divine light was incredibly potent and immune to all elements and power. It was why Candle Spirit's flames did nothing to it.

The Deer of Balance still didn't say anything. It preferred to converse with its horns far more than its mouth. The divine light swept across Candle Spirit's body like a scythe, and every candle on the ebony rack started melting at the same time. She screamed. The beautiful candle woman and children turned into snarling monsters with unholy auras, and pale hands reached out from the melted candle wax as if they would strangle the Deer of Balance. However, the Deer of Balance merely snorted through its nostrils—as it turned out, its breath was penta-colored as well—and melted all the hands into nothing with its snort. The fight was so lopsided it couldn't even be called a fight.

"My master will kill you for this, Deer of Balance—Ahhhhh!"

That was all Candle Spirit could say before the divine light melted all of her candles into nothing. Even her humanoid body had disintegrated into dust.

"Phew..."

The bloodthirst in the Deer of Balance's eyes subsided only after Candle Spirit was dead. As it snorted again, it felt rather confused with its own behavior. It was true that Candle Spirit had tried to trick him and commit trade fraud from right under its nose, but it normally wasn't so hot-headed. For better or worse, it shared a long-standing relationship with Pawn Shop No. 8. It would punish her greatly for her transgressions, but it would never kill her—and yet it had.

What on earth had come over it? How did it fall prey to the sudden, destructive impulse?

The Deer of Balance turned to the only other person in the pawn shop. Did the human do something to it?

Ye Qing blinked stupidly when the Deer of Balance looked into his eyes. Out of everyone present, he was easily the most confused of them all. Why had the two Strangers suddenly battled each other to the death? Or rather, why had the Deer of Balance suddenly flown into a flying rage and slaughtered the shit out of Candle Spirit? Should he worry for his own life as well?

The Deer of Balance knew it wasn't Ye Qing the second it saw its face. The idiot didn't even realize that he was seconds away from dying from Candle Spirit's trap, so there was no way he was the one who had influenced its thoughts.

"Idiot!"

Ye Qing's expression was so stupid that the Deer of Balance couldn't help but deride him a little. Then, it shook its body once and threw the bottle of agate into Ye Qing's hands.

Ye Qing glanced back and forth between the agate and the Deer of Balance while feeling more confused than ever. Why did it call me an idiot? Did I piss it off or something? But when?

Buzz...

He was still confused when the pawn shop started shaking like it was in an earthquake, and the soulless puppets working in the store suddenly dropped to their knees and quivered like leaves. It looked like something bad was about to happen.

"Deer of Balance, you have a deal with my Pawn Shop No. 8, and I do not believe that deal entails you killing my Candle Spirit. Why did you do it?" A terrifying voice boomed from above, and a pair of fiery orbs suddenly lit up under the hood of a gigantic silhouette in the sky. It looked both demonic and terrifying.

The Deer of Balance flashed once and came face to face with the giant silhouette. Then, it replied in a disdainful tone, "So what if I killed that bitch? She tried to commit fraud from right under my nose. As far as I'm concerned, her death is well deserved!"

Oh, it's a hot-headed deer. It all makes sense.

Ye Qing felt much better after hearing the Deer of Balance's hot-headed response. If the Deer of Balance dared to insult even the owner of Pawn Shop No. 8 to their face, then why wouldn't it call a puny human an idiot?

Wait a second. Did the Deer of Balance just say that Candle Spirit tried to commit fraud under its nose? Could it be...?

Ye Qing figured out the gist of the truth immediately. Candle Spirit must have tried to trick the Deer of Balance, though he had no idea what she did and how she was discovered. It didn't matter though. The Deer of Balance had already taken revenge for him, so all was well.

"What a righteous man—I mean, a righteous deer!" Ye Qing sighed in admiration. The Deer of Balance was literally going up against the master of Pawn Shop No. 8 for his sake right now. If it wasn't a righteous deer, then who was?

"Candle Spirit is my subordinate, Deer of Balance. Even if she made a mistake, it is up to me to punish her, not you!" The shadowy figure replied calmly, though there was an unmistakable tinge of anger and bloodthirst behind their voice. "You must pay for what you've done, Deer of Balance!"

"Pay? Sure, you can have deez nuts on your face, you fucker!"

The Deer of Balance let out a loud snort and launched into an epic rant, “Your pawn shop has screwed over countless people using this tactic, but I’ve always turned a blind eye because you didn’t do it overtly, and because we share a business relationship. But today, your bitch of an assistant openly used me to cheat another person! Openly! Do you think I’m a tool that you may use as you please? Scratch that, even a tool would be furious if their owner treats them like trash!”

“You and your subordinates may be shameless bastards, but you can’t expect everyone else in the world to be shameless bastards too! At the very least, I ain’t sullying my reputation for the likes of you, get it?”

“Anyway, your bitch of an assistant was the last straw, which is why I decided to send her ass to the Nether. Whatcha gonna do about it, fucker?”

The Deer of Balance’s outburst was so loud, so fearless, so gangster, that Umbra found no space to interrupt from start until the end.

“You...” Umbra said in a cold, unfeeling voice, but the seething darkness behind its back showed just how angry it was.

The Deer of Balance snorted again and said mockingly, “I, what? Are you gonna attack me? Come on then! Like I’m scared of your coal black ass!”

“You’ve gone too far this time, Deer of Balance. No one may challenge Pawn Shop No. 8 without repercussions!”

“I’m not ‘no one’ though. I’m the motherfucking Deer of Balance!”

The Deer of Balance stomped the air underneath its feet and caused a shockwave that shattered the darkness around it. “By the way, how many times do I need to tell you that I hate darkness?”

“Impudence!” Umbra roared. Unspeakable murmurs suddenly erupted from the surrounding darkness, and Ye Qing immediately felt like his mind flickering like a candle flame in the wind. He could feel some sort of invisible power polluting his soul bit by bit.

“Seriously? You think you can talk me to death? Pathetic!” The Deer of Balance let out a cold snort and unleashed its divine light. Like a five-colored sun, the light cleared out an entire patch of the darkness and killed the murmurs.

This was just the appetizer though. The darkness stirred and formed three gigantic faces. Their expressions kept flitting from one expression to another, and a closer look would reveal that the three faces were really made up of countless souls. Every time they shifted, the faces’ expressions would shift as well.

“Hehehe...”

“Hahaha...”

“Kekeke...”

The three faces laughed crazily as they slowly descended toward the Deer of Balance. It was like the sky itself was falling toward it. their auras were unbelievably powerful.

It felt like the three faces were much stronger than the Deer of Balance, but a hint of disdain flickered across the Stranger's eyes as a strange light flowed out of the scale behind its back. At first, the scale was tilted toward the right side, but it slowly evened out over time.

As the scale evened out, the aura of the three faces plummeted. It eventually got to the point where it was almost at the same level as the Deer of Balance's.

The next moment, the Deer of Balance leaped into the air and launched a series of kicks with its forelimbs,

“Eat my Serial Shadowless Kick, you gnat!”

Boom!

Divine light erupted from the Stranger's legs every time it kicked out at the giant faces. They spread out like explosions and melted large chunks of the faces with ease.

The souls swimming across the giant faces wailed in pain. As evil energy permeated the sky, transparent tentacles stretched out of the void and slithered toward the Deer of Balance.

“Not good!”

Ye Qing was observing the battle with his spirit when suddenly, the tentacles appeared inside his head and began corrupting his mind with its tainted powers. Sucking in a deep breath, Ye Qing hurriedly visualized the Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method and purified the tentacles' tainted power. However, not only was he unable to dispel the transparent tentacles, they were actually growing stronger as if they were feeding off something.

“Dammit! I didn't do anything this time!” Ye Qing swore and withdrew his spirit immediately. The tentacles had appeared in his head because he was observing the battle with his spirit, so withdrawing it should alleviate his symptoms.

Meanwhile, the mysterious lines on the Deer of Balance's body glowed brightly, and a colorful ball of energy gathered between its horns. When so much power was gathered that the energy looked like a colorful inferno, it swept out and burned every transparent tentacle in the sky. Sensing grave danger, the three giant faces tried to retreat back into the darkness but were just a step too slow. Countless souls screamed and died as the three faces disintegrated into dust.

As it turned out, the darkness wasn't infinite after all. The divine light punched a massive hole through the darkness and revealed a sea of stars.

The transparent tentacles in Ye Qing's head disappeared when both the transparent tentacles and the giant faces were destroyed. It was only then he let out a sigh of relief and muttered, “What a deer! Its innate magic is just insane!”

At the beginning, the three faces were clearly stronger than the Deer of Balance. However, the Stranger managed to overcome the power imbalance and even crushed the three faces with impunity all thanks to its innate magic.

The Deer of Balance possessed two potent magic. The first one was called the Scale of Balance. Not only could it measure the true value of items and check if someone was trying to commit fraud, it could forcefully balance out the power disparity between itself and its enemies.

It wasn't omnipotent, of course. If the enemy's strength far, far exceeded the Deer of Balance's, then not even the Scale of Balance would be able to lower the enemy's power to its level. But barring that one scenario, there was nothing and no one that could resist the effects of the Scale of Balance. It was a kind of power that superseded even the laws of reality.

Its second innate magic was the Pentacolor Divine Light. Just like the Scale of Balance, it superseded the laws of reality to a certain extent and was immune to the five elements, all things evil and dark, and most arts. Assuming that the Deer of Balance and its enemies were on the same level, the Pentacolor Divine Light wasn't insurmountable, but it was close enough that anyone who went up against the Deer of Balance would have a field day trying to defeat it.

It was why no one wanted to provoke the Deer of Balance if they could help it, and how it was able to overcome an opponent it should not have been able to defeat.

Chapter 176: Dragon Bleeds Gold

"I've been displeased with you for a long time, Umbra. Since the opportunity is ripe, I'm gonna kick your ass so hard you'll remember it for ages to come!"

The Deer of Balance turned to face the giant silhouette after destroying the three giant faces. Then, it conjured a penta-colored sword of light between horns and launched it at Umbra. As the sword flew, it split into two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty two and more. The sky was filled with swords in the blink of an eye.

"Storm of swords

Evil die"

"Hmph! How futile!" Umbra scoffed and brought down his palm. Darkness surged, and the curtain of darkness itself transformed into a palm as big as the sky itself. It easily encompassed the rain of swords.

Boom!

The gigantic palm clenched its fingers, and the colorful swords abruptly froze in mid-air. Then, they shattered into a million pieces.

The fragments did not disappear even though the swords were crushed though. In fact, they exploded like tiny bombs and put a million holes in the giant palm.

"Is that all? I guess you're not much better than your minion, Umbra!" The Deer of Balance snorted in disdain.

As soon as it said this, Umbra suddenly appeared behind the deer and struck it with his sleeve. Caught completely off guard, the deer Stranger was sent flying into the darkness.

A few breaths passed, and rays of divine light pierced through the pitch black darkness. The Deer of Balance's voice boomed, "More trickery, Umbra!?"

It was like the moon piercing through the dark clouds and illuminating the world with its gentle light. The next moment, a beam of light shot out of the darkness and slammed into Umbra faster than he could react.

Umbra staggered back in pain as the divine light melted his black qi. Enraged, it sent the Deer of Balance flying with another slap. This time though, it didn't just stand around and do nothing like an idiot. It flew after the deer Stranger to kick the do—deer while it was down.

The Deer of Balance was not going to take it lying down, of course. And so the two Strangers fought an outrageous battle in the sky.

In reality, the Deer of Balance was no match for Umbra. But thanks to the Scale of Balance and the Pentacolor Divine Light, it managed to fight Umbra to a standstill.

Rumble!

Darkness churned, and space shook. Ye Qing felt like he was trapped in the middle of an apocalypse. It was so terrifying that he hid inside Pawn Shop No. 8 and stayed as still as a salted fish.

.....

"Xiaoman, Xiaoman, I just sensed the presence of Pawn Shop No. 8."

On a hilltop, a man in his forties was crouching on the ground and holding a steaming bowl of oil spill noodles. His clothes looked worn out, and he had a down-to-earth face that gave him the appearance of an old farmer. A delicious aroma permeated the air as he slurped the noodles greedily.

The middle-aged man wasn't the speaker, however. It was a longbow leaning against a tree. The bow was golden in color and covered in mysterious patterns. A gold dragon with shiny scales and sharp claws were encircling the grip. From time to time, small jets of golden flames would shoot out of its nostrils and circulate around the bow, giving it a mysterious yet dignified appearance.

The dragon was the one who spoke up earlier.

"Mm. I felt it as well," the middle-aged man responded affirmatively but didn't move away from his noodles.

"Strange. I also sense two Strangers battling each other above Pawn Shop No. 8. One of them is Umbra, and the other one... I'm not sure who it is."

Sparks flew off the gold dragon's teeth as it closed its jaws gently. Whiskers floating beside its nostrils, it asked, "Didn't you say you send only two kids into the Strange Market? Did you arrange some additional help after all?"

The middle-aged man shook his head. "No. Whatever it is, it's not me."

"If it's not you, then who was it?" The dragon—or rather, the longbow voiced its doubts, "Perhaps Umbra discovered that your kids were looking for Pawn Shop No. 8 and decided to make his move first?"

The longbow waited for a few seconds but didn't get a response from its owner. When it turned around and saw that the middle-aged man was fully focused on its noodles, it flew into a rage,

“Didn’t you hear my question, Fang Xiaoman? Eat eat eat! Were you a hungry ghost in your previous life? You’re easily one of the biggest gluttons I’ve ever seen in my life!”

“You don’t get it. Food is the most precious thing in this world, and there is nothing more satisfying than eating your fill!”

Fang Xiaoman said with a humble smile on his face, “Aunt Hua made the noodles herself, and this pork is cut from the finest tenderloin. Not only are they plentiful and chunky, they are mixed with Aunt Hua’s beef tallow as well. With that in mind, how can I waste such a fine delicacy on trivial questions?”

He immediately went back to his noodles after answering his bow.

“You—!”

The longbow quivered in rage and flashed golden. At that moment, the entire hilltop suddenly shone as bright as a second sun. When the light faded, the plants had burned into dust, and the rocks and soil were scorched black. However, the area around Fang Xiaoman was perfectly untouched.

“You’re the Chief of Bureau of Luo Shui, Fang Xiaoman! Don’t you care about your underlings’ safety at all? You’re a cruel, heartless and cold-blooded monster!”

“Have you no shame or dignity, Fang Xiaoman? If I was you, I would’ve jumped off the walls of Luo Shui and killed myself a long time ago! Despicable!”

No matter how the longbow goaded Fang Xiaoman, the Chief of Bureau didn’t respond to its insults. In the end, the longbow lost its drive and said disgruntledly, “Hey... say something, you bastard!”

Fang Xiaoman sucked the last noodle in the bowl down his throat and slurped up some of the onion oil at the bottom of the bowl as well. It was only then he finally answered the bow, “Don’t worry, it’s most likely not them. If it was them, it would’ve been over in an instant. Umbra would have squished them like a bug.”

The longbow’s anger was doused like a fire. It thought for a second before agreeing, “You’re right! I’m still annoyed that you didn’t answer me immediately, but I, Lord Xuanhuang, am a generous dragon. I shan’t take offense at your slowness!”

“Haha...” Fang Xiaoman chuckled while wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

Unfortunately, just because he kept quiet didn’t mean that the bow named Xuanhuang would. It immediately launched into a new conversation, “By the way, didn’t you say you were going to attack Umbra? Now is the time to do so! With Lord Xuanhuang by your side, there is no way you can’t blow his ugly face into smithereens! Use me now!”

Fang Xiaoman slowly got to his feet and massaged his tingling legs a little. “There’s no hurry. A better opportunity will present itself.”

Xuanhuang grunted, “At what cost? You’re going to lose the golden opportunity you have right now! Don’t say I didn’t warn you if Umbra escapes! Dammit, what did I do in my previous life to deserve a slow master like you? I would have died of frustration if I was a human!”

Fang Xiaoman still didn't take offense. He replied lazily, "What can I do? My name is Fang Xiaoman (Slow). Besides, some things can only be done slowly. For example, you can't eat hot tofu quickly, can you?"

"Slow is smooth, smooth is fast."

As he said this, Fang Xiaoman slowly picked up the Xuanhuang Bow and weighed it in his hand. Then, he spread out his legs, lowered his center of gravity, and slowly pulled the string backward.

As the bow curved more and more, the golden dragon encircling the grip shone golden and made this rattling noise that was really its scales clashing against one another. At the same time, whispers of a draconic roar spread out from the bow and cowed all Strangers within tens of kilometers of Fang Xiaoman into submission. Soft as it was, not a single one of them even dared to make a peep while the dragon was still roaring.

A golden arrow of light manifested on the longbow. The silhouette of a tiny dragon could be encircling the shaft. When the bow had reached its full draw, the dragon almost looked like the real thing.

"Drawn like a full moon

Xuanhuang looked to the northwest

To kill a god."

ROAR!

Fang Xiaoman let go of the bowstring as soon as he achieved a full draw. The arrow flew, but instead of an arrow, it was a three hundred meter long dragon whose passionate roar pierced both heaven and earth. The next second, it slipped into the void and disappeared.

After the golden dragon was gone, Fang Xiaoman allowed his tattered arm to fall to his side. His aura was faint, and blood was dripping from the bottom of the bow's limb. Strangely, the blood was gold in color, not red.

Then again, why would a gold dragon bleed anything but gold?

"It's time to go. I can use a good rest after this."

Fang Xiaoman gently caressed the dragon before making his way down the hill.

Xuanhuang complained, "Come on! We're not even going to watch the outcome?"

Fang Xiaoman answered, "Nah. I trust you and myself. Even if Umbra survives this attack, it will leave a lasting memory. He will learn that the world isn't his to toy with as he pleases so long as the Pacification Bureau still exists to protect humanity!"

"Impressive speech, but that doesn't change the fact that you're leaving because you're too weak to use me more than once. Otherwise, you would've shot the bastard as many times as it takes to kill him dead. And then we'll never have to worry about fucking Umbra and his fucking Pawn Shop No. 8!"

"Yes, yes, I'm just too weak."

“You are weak. By the way, we should’ve heard the explosion by now. What’s going on?”

“What did I tell you about being slow? The arrow will hit when it’s time to hit its target.”

Fang Xiaoman looked like he was walking slowly, but he had disappeared from the forest in the blink of an eye. A second after that, the hill abruptly crumbled into rubble.

.....

Meanwhile, Umbra and the Deer of Balance were still having a mano-o-mano above Pawn Shop No. 8. They were evenly-matched, and it looked like they could go for another three hundred rounds without end.

Suddenly, the Deer of Balance declared in an arrogant voice, “This game is getting boring. Goodbye, my grandson!”

A streak of divine light cut through the darkness, and the Deer of Balance was gone just like that.

After the Deer of Balance was gone, Umbra floated motionlessly above his pawn shop as if he was catching his breath. His fiery eyes were swaying unsteadily, and his aura was flickering erratically as well. The Deer of Balance hadn’t won, but it was clear he wasn’t the winner either.

Suddenly, Umbra peered down and glared at Ye Qing. The young man was hoping to escape the pawn shop undetected, but of course his movement hadn’t escaped the powerful Stranger’s notice. He uttered with infinite malice and anger, “You deserve death, ant!”

Ye Qing: “...” The fuck does this have to do with me? It’s not my fault you lost the fight! Also, I was just gonna explore the Strange Market, get my stuff, and teach the occasional lesson via superior firepower until you kidnapped li’l ol’ me to your pawn shop!

Just the same, it was you who had tried to cheat me out of a fair deal until Deer-I’m-a-fucking-boss-Balance saw through your ploy and kicked your sorry ass. Literally everything was your fault from start until the end, and now you’re going to take it out on me because, what, I’m the only one left? Where is your shame, man? Your dignity?

Sensing that Umbra could kill him at any moment, Ye Qing hurriedly yelled, “I’m a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau. Kill me, and the Pacification Bureau will chase you to the ends of the earth!”

It was the truth. He was a Patrolman, and the Pacification Bureau would never take the loss of a Patrolman lying down. However, there was no telling if this was enough to scare Umbra away. If it worked, then all was well. If not, he could only pray that daddy heaven still had more plans for him!

“You’re a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau?”

The flame orbs in his eyes suddenly burned brighter as he cackled in delight, “Good, good! Your bureau, impotent they may be, has been a thorn in my side as of late. Killing you would be the perfect balm to my soul! Kekeke...”

Chapter 177: I’m A Jinx

“Why do you villains always laugh like this? Is there really no better way?”

Ye Qing rubbed his nose as Umbra let out a villainous laugh. “That said, I’m glad you’re one of the more predictable villains. Most villains do not have a good ending, and this is usually the part where *deus ex machina* happens to save the protagonist. For example, an arrow might fall from the sky and blow your ugly head to bits.”

Ye Qing sighed after his otherworldly rant and gathered his power. This was real life, and *deus ex machina* just doesn’t happen. The only one who could save himself was him—

It was at this moment a draconic roar shook the world. The black sky suddenly turned golden yellow, and a warm light melted away the all-encompassing darkness melted like snow. Before he knew it, Ye Qing realized that he could see the sky once more.

“What the—”

Umbra’s orbs suddenly flickered wildly, and his entire body started smoking like he was on fire. It would seem that the darkness was a part of him, and losing it had dealt him a severe blow. The Stranger had no idea what was happening, but he didn’t dare to take it lightly. He thrust his palm above his head and revealed a withered, pitch black arm that was covered in countless twisted and evil-looking tattoos.

Every time his palm moved upward, it would grow much bigger just like the Nether Lord’s when it was blocking Heavens’ Eye’s attack. It would seem that the evils of this world shared similar tricks. By the time the palm had moved three inches, it had become as vast as the sky itself. The golden light looked positively puny compared to it.

Rumble!

However, a needle could take a person’s life if it hit the right spot, not to mention that the golden light was no puny needle. No, it was a three hundred meters long gold dragon. When the two clashed, the entire palm shattered like it was made of glass. The surrounding clouds were shredded into nothingness as well. Roaring with triumph, the gold dragon glared down on Umbra and swooped toward him as if it had a mind of its own.

“A gold dragon? Xuanhuang?! The Pacification Bureau!”

Umbra clearly recognized the gold dragon swooping toward him. His voice was filled with undisguised anger, but there was even more fear and panic.

Umbra let out an angry roar and inhaled deeply. Every door and window in Pawn Shop No. 8 flung open, and countless souls flew out of the store and into Umbra’s mouth and nose. His aura began climbing rapidly until he resembled a demon or a god. Then, he threw a mighty punch at the golden dragon.

The punch shattered the gold dragon from head to toe, and for a moment, it looked like Umbra had emerged victorious. Then, a shining arrow emerged from the shattered remains of the dragon and slammed into Umbra’s fist! Like a hot knife through butter, it sliced the gigantic Stranger in half and even punched through Pawn Shop No. 8’s rooftop! It was only then it deleted all of its energy and disappeared!

“Am... Am I a jinx?” Ye Qing blinked stupidly as he stared at the vanished arrow right next to his feet. When he stood on his tiptoes and looked through the hole created by the arrow, he could vaguely see the sky still covered in a sheen of golden light.

While cocking his head at a strange angle, Ye Qing muttered, “This isn’t enough. If this ‘Umbra’ survived, he’s still going to squish me like a bug.”

Rumble!

As if on cue, Umbra’s split body abruptly exploded into a million pieces. Pawn Shop No. 8 too exploded as if its life was connected to Umbra. Lucky for Ye Qing, he noticed the signs a fraction of a second before it happened and raced through the exit like the wind. Only then he managed to avoid being buried under the rubble.

“I am a jinx! Look at me, killing giants and destroying buildings with my mouth,” Ye Qing let out a long, long sigh of relief when he stared at the remains of Umbra and the Pawn Shop No. 8.

It was at this moment countless souls suddenly floated out of the remains, but unlike before they weren’t overflowing with malice and hatred anymore. In fact, they looked perfectly docile and at peace.

The number of souls just kept growing and growing. In just a few breaths, the sky was filled with at least thousands of souls.

There were male, female, old and young among the souls, but every single one of them wore a look of pure relief on their faces. When the last soul had floated into the air, they smiled down on Ye Qing and gave him a deep bow. They were clearly grateful toward him.

Clearly, they were the human souls Umbra and Pawn Shop No. 8 had ensnared. For years they had toiled under the monster’s tyranny, but they were finally released after the two entities were destroyed. They were thanking Ye Qing because they believed that he was their savior.

It wasn’t just empty thanks either. Ye Qing could vaguely sense some sort of invisible power pouring into his head. If he had to describe it somehow, it was like the morning dawn or the silver moonlight. Pure, immaculate, gentle and warm, they soothed him like a warm bath after the apocalypse. His spirit had hit a wall some time ago, but now it was growing at a visible rate. His mind was also stronger and purer than ever before.

“The soul...”

Ye Qing immediately understood what he was receiving. He was receiving their soul power.

The soul was the purest energy in the world bar none. Not only could it increase one’s spiritual power, it was incredibly effective at enhancing the mind as well. To be more specific, the soul was the most effective method to increase one’s spiritual power since the mind, soul and spirit all originated from the same roots.

This was why heretics and Strangers such as Umbra went after human souls. It was one of the fastest ways to increase one’s power.

Of course, the souls weren't giving up all of their power to Ye Qing. It was just a sliver that even an ordinary warrior would've considered insignificant, much less one as strong as Ye Qing. However, there were tens of thousands of souls in the sky. A fraction of a soul's power might not amount to much, but tens of thousands? That was a completely different story.

"I'm not the one who saved you. Seriously, I didn't do anything from the start until the end. But it would be remiss of me to turn down such a great gift, so... hopefully, the champion who destroyed Shadow and Pawn Shop No. 8 wouldn't mind that I took their reward."

Overall, Ye Qing was very satisfied with this outcome. How could he complain? He literally did nothing, and he got one of the best rewards he could ask for.

As more soul power poured into his head, his mind grew purer, and his spirit actually started condensing into solid mist. However, he quickly noticed that much of the soul power was wasted because he couldn't refine them fast enough. Unwilling to waste such a golden opportunity, he hurriedly visualized the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" to increase his refinement speed.

Buzz...

An indefinite amount of time later, a dharma [1] of Emperor Fuxi appeared in the sky. Literally, in the real world. Created from Ye Qing's spiritual power, it looked as if the real Emperor Fuxi had appeared in the real world.

The dharma shone like the sun just like the image normally did inside Ye Qing's head. Images of yin and yang, the Four Symbols, the Bagua and more appeared one by one and as his power reached every corner of the world. Not even the shadows hiding underneath the rubble were exempt from its cleansing light, and one could almost hear their pathetic screams as they evaporated into nothing.

Ye Qing had been sitting on the ground with his eyes closed, meditating. An evil smirk crossed his lips when he heard the shadows' screams. The shadows were none other than the remnants of Umbra, and they had tried to corrupt him while he was receiving the souls' power.

Umbra was ultimately a powerful entity. Not even the arrow was able to completely destroy it. Weak as these remnants were, past Ye Qing might have failed to notice their existence. But now, he could detect everything tangible or intangible within fifty meters of him. Should he desire it, he could inspect even the smallest speck of dust within his range. At this level, nothing and no one could elude him anymore.

Thanks to his enhanced spirit, he was able to deal the shadows a fatal blow as soon as they entered his range.

"Come. I'll make sure you're completely and utterly dead this time."

Ye Qing rose to his feet, and every rune on Emperor Fuxi's chariot lit up at the same time. It shot into the sky and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Rumble...

When Emperor Fuxi rides his chariot, all demons must get out of his path or be destroyed. There was a dull rumble that sounded like the heavens were groaning, and the sky split into two to pour golden bright light. Countless shadows started screaming and disintegrating into dust.

“Still not dead yet? Just die already.”

What do you do when you make an enemy out of someone? Nine out of ten times, you kill the shit out of them so they wouldn't trouble you down the line.

Plus, Umbra was a powerful Stranger who could have squished him like a bug at his full strength. Now, he was so weak that even Ye Qing could kill him without too much trouble. Why on earth would he allow an opportunity like this slip through his grasp?

More importantly, he wanted to know how many silver dragon-serpent runes the Annon Sutra would give him if he managed to kill Umbra. Would it be one thousand or ten thousand? The thought alone was enough to spark an ember in his loins.

Ye Qing assumed a stance and executed a full-powered “Cloud Vaporization Style”. He saw no reason to save his strength whatsoever. As the Burning Wind surged in every direction like a tidal wave, the shadows suddenly crawled out of all kinds of hiding spots—the space underneath the rubble, the gaps between the rocks, the cracks on the ground and more—and converged into a human-sized Umbra.

When the Stranger glared daggers at Ye Qing, he thought for sure that this was going to end with a climactic final battle. Instead, Umbra turned his back on Ye Qing and shot into the sky. He was unbelievably fast for someone so injured he couldn't even deal with a small insect. He was gone in just the blink of an eye.

“He... ran?!”

Umbra escaped so quickly that Ye Qing reacted only after the Stranger was gone. He could not believe that the master of the legendary Pawn Shop No. 8 would be such a coward. Where the hell was his pride as a Stranger, and more importantly...

“MY DRAGON SERPENT RUNES!” Ye Qing wailed on top of his lungs. He had thousands and thousands of them within his grasp, and now... there was none!

Damn it all!

A formidable foe had escaped from under his nose, and there was a one thousand percent chance he would seek Ye Qing out for revenge in the future. But frankly, Ye Qing wasn't very worried. Umbra was wounded pretty badly, and Ye Qing reckoned that it would take the Stranger at least three years to recover. By then, he would've become so strong that it was his turn to squish Umbra like a bug!

After Umbra was gone, Ye Qing suddenly felt a tremendous rejection from the very space he was occupying. His eyes blurred, and an intense wave of dizziness assaulted his mind. By the time he recovered, Ye Qing realized that he had returned to the Strange Market exactly where he had disappeared into thin air. No one seemed to notice his sudden appearance just like they hadn't noticed his sudden disappearance.

“I'm back?!” Ye Qing exclaimed in pleasant surprise. One of his worst fears was being permanently trapped in the space where Pawn Shop No. 8 was, never to return. He was thankful that that wasn't the case.

“Phew! I was worried for a moment there. Now that I’m back, what should I do?” Ye Qing looked at the bustling market for a bit when an idea occurred to him. Just now, he had used up nearly everything he had to purchase the agate of the Moon Seeing Stone. Now was the time to replenish his wealth!

Unfortunately, the thought had just crossed his mind when a white paper lantern suddenly appeared in front of him. Then, thick fog rolled in from every direction until all he could see was the lantern’s weak candle flame. It illuminated a seemingly endless path ahead of him.

Ye Qing subconsciously followed the road, and the more he walked the thinner the fog became. He started seeing the silhouettes of restaurants and buildings on both sides of the road.

Nine steps later, the mist faded completely, and Ye Qing found himself back in the real world; the crossroads that was the starting point of a bizarre adventure. Lin Yuhuai and Chu Nianjiu were beside him as well.

Chapter 178: Fang Xiaoman

“I’m back already?!” Ye Qing blinked and let out an audible sigh of disappointment. He must have wasted too much time in Pawn Shop No. 8. By the time he returned to the Strange Market, he had seconds left before he was automatically booted back to the real world. His plan to recoup his wealth was dead before he even got to execute it.

Woe is me!

“Why do you sound so surprised, Joyless? We told you how long the living could stay in the Strange Market.” Lin Yuhuai sounded curious. “Also, why do you feel different from before? It’s like... you’re harder to see through now.”

“Am I?” Ye Qing smirked. “Well, you’re completely correct.”

“What happened? Tell us,” Lin Yuhuai asked curiously.

Ye Qing didn’t hide his experience from his colleagues. He gave them a summary of how he came to enter Pawn Shop No. 8 and what happened there. Of course, he glossed over the fact that he had absorbed the soul power of tens of thousands of souls and focused mostly on the golden arrow that destroyed Umbra and the pawn shop.

“Pawn Shop No. 8 is destroyed? That’s wonderful!” Lin Yuhuai and Chu Nianjiu exclaimed in pleasant surprise before exchanging an odd look with one another. “Talk about a coincidence!”

“A coincidence? What do you mean?” Ye Qing asked when something caught his attention. “Wait a second. You guys know about Pawn Shop No. 8 too?”

“Tell him, Nianjiu,” Lin Yuhuai said.

Chu Nianjiu cleared his throat and did just that with undisguised delight, “We told you that we have something to do at the Strange Market, right? In fact, we were on a mission to locate Pawn Shop No. 8.”

“Really? But why?” The way Chu Nianjiu said it, they had had their eyes on Pawn Shop No. 8 for a very long time.

Chu Nianjiu sipped his wine gourd before launching into a lengthy explanation, “Three months ago, a series of strange events started happening all over Luo Shui. One man suddenly became unbelievably strong overnight, but he also became cruel, heartless, and bloodthirsty. In the end, he suffered a mental breakdown. Another became rich overnight, but he too lost his compassion and would do anything for money. However, not even his ruthlessness in making money could make up for his gambling addiction, and he eventually lost everything and committed suicide.”

“A gravely ill patient had suddenly healed from his sickness, but he aged rapidly in just a few days and passed of old age. A muddle-headed and incompetent official suddenly became unbelievably intelligent, solving many cases and shooting through the ranks rapidly. However, his personality also became increasingly bizarre until he suddenly went missing one day. There were also people who lost their sense of taste, touch, familial love and more.”

“Incidents like these were happening throughout Luo Shui, and I eventually found out that the victims had all come into contact with a mysterious badge and went to a mysterious place known as Pawn Shop No. 8. Supposedly, you could pawn anything on your person including intangible things such as your emotions, your gift, your soul and more to exchange for anything.”

Chu Nianjiu continued, “We decided to eliminate Pawn Shop No. 8, but we were unable to locate this pawn shop despite searching for it for a long time. In the end, we have no choice but to use the Earth-grade Strange Artifact No. 13, the Mask of Prophecy to divine its location. It’s how we figured out that it would appear in Pawn Shop No. 8 tonight.”

“Earth-grade Strange Artifact No. 13, the Mask of Prophecy? Sounds impressive. What does it do?” Ye Qing asked curiously.

“It is a Strange Artifact that can divine the location of anything so long as it actually exists in the world a day before. That’s not the main point though.”

Chu Nianjiu glossed over the subject, “After identifying Pawn Shop No. 8’s location, Chief Fang and us came up with a plan. Yuhuai and I would enter the Strange Market with the Star Locating Disc and locate Pawn Shop No. 8. Chief Fang would shoot his arrow and destroy the pawn shop and the Stranger behind it.”

“Unfortunately, the Strange Market turned out to be stranger than we thought. For whatever reason, all powerful artifacts are suppressed and misled in that place, so the Star Locating Disc wasn’t able to lead us to Pawn Shop No. 8 as we hoped. Just when we thought the mission would end in failure, you accidentally made your way

into Pawn Shop No. 8 and even induced the Deer of Balance and the mastermind to wage war against one another. Chief Fang must have sensed the shockwaves of the battle and seized the opportunity to severely injure Umbra and Pawn Shop No. 8 in one strike.”

Lin Yuhuai smiled, “It’s a shame Umbra ultimately managed to escape, but we would not be seeing him for a while. Good job, Joyless. Your contribution in this mission is indispensable.”

“Like I said, it was a series of coincidences and misunderstandings, but I’m certainly not going to turn down your praise.” Ye Qing rubbed his nose before asking, “By the way, Chief Fang is the one who shot that arrow, right? What on earth is the Strange Artifact he used? It’s unbelievably powerful.”

He had joined the Pacification Bureau for some time now, but he had never met the true boss of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau, Fang Xiaoman.

Although Fang Xiaoman was the Chief of Bureau, he was elusive, relatively anonymous, and difficult to track down. Even the veterans who had worked for the Pacification Bureau for years could count the number of times they met their boss on one hand. Normally, it was the Vice Chief of Bureau, Gu Suitang who handled everything.

Fang Xiaoman was a low-profile individual, so much so that most bureau members had never met him in their lives. However, no one would deny that Fang Xiaoman was strong. After all, he was one of the two only Spirit Masters in the bureau. How could he possibly be a weakling?

That said, no one knows exactly how strong Fang Xiaoman was. Fang Xiaoman wouldn’t go all out against a colleague, and those who deserved his full power were all dead!

Naturally, Ye Qing was very curious about his boss.

Chu Nianjiu answered, “The arrow was shot by Chief Fang, yes, and the Strange Artifact he used is probably the Xuanhuang Bow. It’s the only Strange Artifact we have that could grievously injure the master of Pawn Shop No. 8 in one hit.”

“Tell me more about the Xuanhuang Bow,” Ye Qing prodded.

Chu Nianjiu shrugged. “I don’t know how strong or even what class the Xuanhuang Bow is, only that it is an incredibly powerful Strange Artifact. The only ones who can give you a proper answer are the chief and the vice chief.”

Lin Yuhuai added, “This is just a guess, but Xuanhuang is at least a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact, if not higher. That’s right, it could be a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact. The reason I say this is because Xuanhuang is an intelligent, sentient Strange Artifact.”

“A sentient Strange Artifact? That’s incredible!” Ye Qing’s eyes lit up. In essence, a strange Artifact was a unique Stranger, and most Strangers didn’t possess one whit of intelligence. They could only act as their instincts dictated. The small portion of Strangers who possessed both intelligence and sentience were, in a sense, humans with a different form. A sentient Strange Artifact fell under this category as well because they also possessed a human’s sentience and intelligence.

Generally, all sentient Strange Artifacts were one-of-a-kind. It was because they were stronger than their non-sentient counterparts and more importantly, possessed the ability to grow just like humans.

That was why a sentient Strange Artifact was easily a hundred times more valuable than a generic Strange Artifact. Literally, there was a saying that one sentient Strange Artifact was worth a hundred Strange Artifacts.

“Where is Chief Fang right now?” Ye Qing asked, though he was really curious about the Xuanhuang Bow. He very much wanted to meet a sentient Strange Artifact.

Chu Nianjiu shrugged, “We don’t know. Chief Fang is extremely elusive, so heavens only know where he is right now. He could be eating roast meat at Drum Street, or wonton at Xiaoqing Market, or oil spill noodles at Aunt Hua’s place... he could be anywhere!”

“Roast meat? Wonton? Oil spill noodles?” Ye Qing rubbed his nose and quipped instinctively, “Is Chief Fang actually a glutton?”

“Hahaha! A glutton? That’s exactly what he is! You’ve pinpointed his true nature in a single word, boy! Xiaoman the Glutton, Xiaoman the Glutton! Yes, it fits him well!”

A ridiculing voice came from the entrance of the Pacification Bureau. When they turned around, they saw a down-to-earth, middle-aged man sitting at the entrance and eating a roujiamo [1]. When did he get there, and how did they not notice his presence until now?

“For heavens’ sake, Xiaoman! Can you stop eating already? You’re in the presence of your juniors right now, you glutton! I can feel their respect for me dropping by the second!”

“Om nom nom...”

“Did you hear me, you bastard! Eat, eat, eat! Is that the only thing you know? Argh, I would blow your head off if I could!”

The scathing remarks were coming from a golden bow propped against the door frame. The middle-aged man took another delicious, juicy bite from his roujiamo before garbling, “I fail to see how eating is shameful. Also, you’ve missed your last chance to blow my head off a long time ago for one very simple reason: I’m stronger than you now.”

Fuming as it was, the golden bow couldn’t mouth a retort. It was because he was telling the truth.

The middle-aged man and the golden bow were, of course, Fang Xiaoman and the Xuanhuang Bow.

That said, the golden bow was the type who couldn’t take things lying down for long, so it started running its mouth like a machine gun [2]. It might not be able to kick Xiaoman’s ass, but it could definitely drown him in spit. Xiaoman was so slow it could fire off ten sentences before Xiaoman could finish one.

“Strong? Strong my butt! You were so weak that you couldn’t even beat an old granny who’s missing her front tooth! If you hadn’t run into me, you’d never have become a

strong warrior, much less the Chief of Bureau of the Luo Shui Pacification Bureau! Nay, you would still be looking for scraps on the streets, you shameless fuck!"

Xuanhuang had exposed Fang Xiaoman's dark past, but the Chief of Bureau didn't get angry. He said slowly, "That is the truth, but it is also the truth that you can't defeat me anymore."

Xuanhuang: "... Ah, I'm having a bad feeling about this conversation.

"That's only temporary, Fang Xiaoman! I'll ascend to a new level very soon! When the time comes, it'll be my turn to beat the crap out of you!" Xuanhuang threatened.

Fang Xiaoman put the last piece of roujiamo into his mouth and chewed it slowly. When he was done swallowing, he replied, "Perhaps. But until then, you cannot defeat me."

Xuanhuang: "... Damn it all!

After Xuanhuang fell silent, Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai finally found the opportunity to greet the Chief of Bureau. Ye Qing followed suit as well. It was clear that the middle-aged man was Fang Xiaoman, and the golden bow was the sentient Strange Artifact, the Xuanhuang Bow.

Of course, his imagination of the legendary duo didn't quite match the reality in front of him. In his head, the man who shot that arrow should have an impressive stature and a dignified appearance. In reality, he looked no different from a farmer who toiled the lands [3].

He also imagined that the sentient Xuanhuang was a cool, strong, arrogant bow who found it beneath him to speak to puny mortals. In reality, it probably couldn't keep its mouth shut even if it tried.

As if to add insult to injury, the bow was a bronze-rank carper at best. It was nowhere close to becoming a challenger.

That said, the human and bow seemed to fit each other surprisingly well despite their drastically different personalities.

Chapter 179: Fuck My Life

"No need for formalities," Fang Xiaoman rose to his feet and smiled. "Thank you all for your hard work tonight."

Chu Nianjiu rubbed his nose in embarrassment. "We didn't do anything. Joyless is the one who did our job."

Ye Qing waved him off, "I just got lucky—or unlucky if you look at it from another perspective."

Fang Xiaoman smiled. "You're all deserving of credit. You are Joyless from Anyang, aren't you? What a promising young lad you are!"

Ye Qing replied humbly, "You flatter me, Chief Fang."

"Just accept his praise, lad! He's telling the truth, and you're way better than this glutton when he was your age!" Xuanhuang interrupted.

Ye Qing laughed. “Thank you for your praise, Lord Xuanhuang. You’re pretty amazing yourself. That literal dragon you shot today is something I doubt I’ll see again in a hundred years or even a thousand. I am most impressed.”

“Hahaha! I know right? I knew you’d appreciate my power! Unlike some people!” Xuanhuang looked so happy it could fly. “Let me tell you something. I’ve only used one percent of my power back then. If I were to unleash my full power, I could pierce even the sky above our heads! Do you believe me?”

Ye Qing put on a sincere expression and answered, “Of course I do. Doesn’t matter if everyone tells me otherwise. I’ll still believe you.”

“Hahahaha! You really are a good lad!” Xuanhuang grew more and more excited. “Very well! From now on, you’re my little brother! If someone dares to bully you in Luo Shui, just call out my name, and I will blow their heads for you!”

The golden dragon encircled around the grip abruptly shook its head as if it had come alive. A scale fell off its body and flew into Ye Qing’s palm.

“This is my scale. It contains the power of a single arrow. It’s now yours.”

Ye Qing hurriedly put it away and thanked Xuanhuang from the bottom of his heart, “Thank you, Brother Xuanhuang!”

“Hahaha! You’re welcome!” guffawed Xuanhuang.

Xuanhuang was basically giving away a piece of its power, but Fang Xiaoman simply smiled and said nothing. After their conversation was over, the Chief of Bureau finally said, “Keep it well. It may save your life at a moment of crisis. Suitang told me that you have a lot of enemies.”

Ye Qing rubbed his nose and responded in a helpless tone, “What can I do? I don’t want to make enemies either, but they just won’t stop coming!”

“Speaking of which,” Fang Xiaoman took a moment to organize his words before continuing, “I have heard about the zombie outbreak incident from Suitang. You handled it well and in a timely manner.”

“Thank you for your kind words, chief, but I was just doing my job.” Ye Qing accepted the thanks with a salute. “Plus, I haven’t found the culprit yet, so the case isn’t truly wrapped up until then.”

Fang Xiaoman chuckled. “Slow is smooth, smooth is fast, so take it at your own pace. Strangers cannot be caught in haste just like hot tofu cannot be eaten in one gulp. And above all else, you must keep yourself alive.”

“I will remember your advice, chief,” Ye Qing replied respectfully.

It was a good moment, but Xuanhuang broke it with a disgruntled voice, “Don’t listen to his nonsense, brother. ‘Hot tofu cannot be eaten in one gulp’ my ass. Ever heard the saying that ‘speed is the greatest martial art’ [1] in the world? If you wanna catch a Stranger, you gotta be fast. If you

wanna get famous, you gotta do it young. And if you wanna catch a babe, you gotta do it before it's too late!"

Ye Qing rubbed his nose awkwardly. How should he respond to that?

Thankfully, Fang Xiaoman retook the reins of the conversation. "Since you've all come home safely, I'm going to bed now. I want to wake up early and enjoy the tofu brains [2] at Aroma Street."

It was only then the trio realized that it wasn't a coincidence that Fang Xiaoman was here. He had been waiting for them. Everyone felt warmed by the Chief of Bureau's concern.

Fang Xiaoman was about to take his leave when suddenly, Ye Qing called out to him, "Wait!"

Fang Xiaoman turned around and asked curiously, "Do you have something else to share, Joyless?"

Ye Qing rubbed his palms together and asked carefully, "There is something I'd like to ask, chief."

Before Fang Xiaoman could say anything, Xuanhuang interrupted, "Shoot away, brother. Xiaoman will tell you everything he knows!"

Again, Fang Xiaoman did not take offense with Xuanhuang's behavior. He simply nodded and waited patiently for Ye Qing to speak. So he did. "Is there any place around Luo Shui that contains high concentrations of Burning Wind?"

"Burning Wind?" Fang Xiaoman examined Ye Qing for a bit, and for a moment Ye Qing felt like all of his secrets were laid bare before the Chief of Bureau. Then, Fang Xiaoman chuckled and said, "In fact, I do know a place like that near Luo Shui. It is a very dangerous place though."

"Where is it?" Ye Qing exclaimed excitedly. With the Star Lotus and the Blood Jade Lotus, he could enter the late stage of the Astral Refinement stage in one go. He just needed the Burning Wind now.

Truth be told, he didn't need the Burning Wind. He could use the Star Lotus and Blood Jade Lotus right now and temper the astral qi inside his body. However, the Astral Refinement stage was the stage where one continuously absorbed, refined, and tempered one's astral qi. As he was far from reaching his limit, it would be a waste to use the Star Lotus and the Blood Jade Lotus now.

To give an example, you were trying to retrieve some water from the well. You could've carried a full bucket, but instead you only carried half. While you had technically fulfilled your objective, you hadn't done the best you could. Moreover, half a bucket of water might only be enough to sate your thirst for the day, but a full bucket could sate your thirst, cook a meal, water some crops and more.

In martial arts, one of the worst things you could do was to do things half-assed. Entering the late-stage the way he was would only give him a small boost in power and destabilize his foundation. He would have a much harder time ascending the cultivation levels as well.

This was why Ye Qing wished to seek out a location with high concentrations of Burning Wind. This way, he could fill his "bucket" to the brim—even overflowing it until his body had reached its absolute limits—and enter the late stage of the Astral Refinement stage in the optimal state.

In the short term, this endeavor would undoubtedly consume a lot of energy and time, but in the long term, it was purely beneficial. The hardships he endured now would significantly improve his strength and make it so much easier for him to scale the cultivation levels. It was worth the effort, and he must do it if he wished to survive the dangers ahead.

Not only that, his goal since he arrived at this world had always been to climb the mountain that was martial arts to the absolute top, not mingle with the countless hills at the bottom. When he looked up he wanted to see the sky and nothing but the sky. When he looked down, he would see the millions others who were trying to reach him. To that end, he couldn't let up for even a moment.

Firewind Valley was an excellent choice, and he didn't mind traveling a few days to improve his cultivation at all. However, the source of the Burning Wind—the Heaven Scorching Bagua Brazier—had been snatched away by an old fucker, so the valley was just a scorched valley now. He would have to hunt for his astral wind elsewhere.

As the Chief of Bureau, Fang Xiaoman must be intimately aware of Luo Shui's surroundings. That was why Ye Qing decided to try his luck. He was right. Fang Xiaoman did know where he might find his Burning Wind.

Sometimes, you make your own luck. And sometimes, luck just hits you in the face!

Fang Xiaoman answered, "Sixty five kilometers to the south of Luo Shui, there is an underground grotto called the Thousand Buddhas Grotto. It is also a Strange Realm. Deep within the grotto is a Thousand Buddhas Temple where three kinds of divine winds blew constantly."

"The three divine winds are the Wind of Five Poisons, Wind of Six Desires, and Wind of Seven Emotions respectively. According to Buddhists, the Five Poisons that plague humankind—attachment, aversion, ignorance, pride, and jealousy—originate from their thoughts, which is why the Wind of Five Poisons exists to cleanse it all and purify one's mind."

"The Six Desires—the desires associated with the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—originate from the body, which is why the Wind of Six Desires exists to cleanse it and purify one's body."

"And finally, the Seven Emotions—happiness, anger, sadness, fear, love, hatred, and desire—originate from the heart, which is why the Wind of Seven Emotions exists to cleanse it and purify one's heart."

"The Buddhists make it sound very fanciful and profound, but it's really not that complicated. To put it simply, the Wind of Six Desires is the Corrosive Wind, an astral qi that can corrode flesh and bone, the Wind of Seven Emotions is the Icy Wind, an astral qi that can chill one's core, and the Wind of Five Poisons is the Burning Wind, an astral qi that can burn even the mind."

"Therefore, the Burning Wind you seek lies in the Thousand Buddha Grotto."

“Thank you so much for sharing this information, Chief Fang,” Ye Qing saluted him gratefully.

“You’re welcome. The Thousand Buddhas Grotto is incredibly dangerous not just because it’s haunted by the three divine winds, but also because it’s a spawning ground for all kinds of Strangers and Anomalies. You must be careful,” Fang Xiaoman warned.

“I will, Chief Fang.”

“Good. Do you have any more questions? If not, then I shall be taking my leave.”

“That’s all. Thanks again, Chief Fang.”

“I’m going then. Good night, everyone.”

Fang Xiaoman rubbed his hand on his sleeves and picked up the Xuanhuang Bow. Then, he stepped inside the Pacification Bureau.

“Good night, Chief Fang!”

After Fang Xiaoman was gone, Ye Qing bade Chu Nianjiu and Lin Yuhuai goodbye and returned to his room. Then, he started tallying his haul for the day.

Tonight’s adventure had turned out to be far more fruitful than he expected. Not only did he manage to fulfill his objective, he also obtained the Star Lotus.

It was nothing compared to tens of thousands of soul power he received from the souls though, not to mention the scale Xuanhuang had gifted him.

He daresaid that his spirit was now stronger than the vast majority of peak Spirit Purifiers thanks to the soul power the souls had bestowed upon him. But of course, it was only in terms of quantity. His ability to use spirit and control was still inferior to a Spirit Purifier because, you know, he wasn’t a Spirit Purifier yet.

Still, this amount of spirit guaranteed that he would encounter no obstacles when he ascended to the Spirit Purification Realm. When the time was right, he could probably cross over to the next level with a single thought.

As for the scale, Xuanhuang claimed that it contained the power of a single arrow, and Ye Qing had witnessed first hand just how powerful it was. He didn’t doubt that it could save his life at a critical moment.

This trip hadn’t just paved his way to the Spirit Purification Realm, he also gained a potent life-saving item.

All he needed to do now was to stick to the plan and ascend the cultivation levels methodically. How great was that?

“Oh right, I should ask the Annon Sutra what the hell happened today. Why did the Deer of Balance suddenly crush the Candle Spirit out of nowhere?” Ye Qing muttered and pulled out the vellum. When his eyes subconsciously flickered to the dragon-

serpent runes though, he noticed something that caused his eyes to widen like saucers.

“What the heck? Why are there only ten silver runes? Where did the other six go?”

For the past few days, he had killed a ton of Hatred-class Strangers such as the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia, Black Pot, Shadow, Yin Woman, Old Mud, Writer and more. In total, he had accumulated sixteen silver dragon-serpent runes. He didn’t remember using them, so he couldn’t understand why six of them were suddenly gone after he went to the Strange Market.

“Wait... Could it be...”

It was at this moment Ye Qing recalled the Annon Sutra’s new ability, the Orbit of Fate. The vellum must have used its new ability to somehow reveal the Candle Spirit’s ploy to the Deer of Balance. It would also explain why the Deer of Balance had gone so far as to kill the Candle Spirit for its transgressions, which didn’t really fit its nature.

This was a good thing, of course. If the Annon Sutra hadn’t taken action, heavens only know what might have happened to him. Even so...

“Goddammit, Annon Sutra... fuck my life...”

Chapter 180: A Mysterious Cook

“It’s time. I’m counting on you, Brother Incense.”

It was night. Ye Qing shot the round, bright moon in the sky a glance before lighting a bright yellow incense stick. While holding it reverently with both hands, he bowed three times in a row toward the sky, the earth, and humanity. [1]

“Please help me find that mysterious cook, Brother Incense!”

As soon as he said this, the incense stick suddenly burned at an accelerated rate and emitted a thick blue smoke. There was no wind, but the smoke floated down a certain direction of its own accord.

“Thank you, Brother Incense!”

The incense stick Ye Qing was holding was of course, the Incense of Fortune. He had created it just yesterday.

Technically speaking, it was much easier to create the Incense of Fortune than Incense of Misfortune’s. For starters, it could be created on any hour that was considered lucky on any day. The true difficulty lay in collecting the ingredients necessary to make the incense in the first place. Both the Lucky Flower and the agate of the Moon Seeing Stone were extremely precious spirit materials that were rarer and more valuable than any single ingredient that was needed to make the Incense of Misfortune. This was why it was easier to create the Incense of Fortune.

Of course, the success rate of creating the Incense of Fortune was a different story. Take an MMORPG for example. So what if you spent months hunting for the ingredients necessary to craft a legendary item? If the heavens willed it so, you could still fail with a 99% success rate.

Ye Qing had two things going for him though. The two key ingredients—the agate of the Moon Seeing Stone and the Lucky Flower—needed to create the Incense of Fortune were of exceptional

quality. The Lucky Flower was over a century old, and the agate was pure and flawless. As a result, Ye Qing didn't just create one Incense of Fortune, he managed to create six with one set of ingredients, a lucky number according to Chinese superstition. Their quality was superb as well.

That said, Ye Qing wasn't sure that it would work. He didn't even know if the story the Annon Sutra told him was real, and the Incense of Fortune could hardly locate someone that didn't exist.

Thankfully, it would seem that his worries were unfounded. The Incense of Fortune was clearly responsive. Not only that, this mysterious cook seemed to be quite formidable. He said this because the incense stick was burning at a prodigious rate. It would last fifteen minutes at most at this rate.

Ye Qing didn't dare to waste the Incense of Fortune's literal sacrifice. He immediately chased after the smoke like the wind.

The hunt for the mysterious cook continued for over half a teatime. He went from Pacification Street, to Qingshi Alley, to over half of the commandery. It wasn't until the Incense of Fortune was about to run out that the smoke finally stopped next to a small alley and faded into nothing.

"The mysterious cook is here? That can't be right! You're not toying with me, are you?" Ye Qing scanned the area with his spirit but couldn't find anything out of the ordinary.

As if offended that Ye Qing would question its efficacy, the Incense of Fortune suddenly emitted a new puff of smoke. It slipped into Ye Qing's nostrils before he could react and choked him so hard that tears and snot poured profusely down his face. It took a while before he finally managed to stop coughing.

"Cough! Cough... for someone who failed its job, you're quite the feisty little fella, aren't you?" Ye Qing muttered while glaring at the used Incense of Fortune. After he put it away, he shot the empty alley another look, sighed, and stepped inside.

As soon as he entered the alley, the space around him suddenly rippled like he was entering another space. The next thing he knew, he saw a faint flicker of light at the distance and heard the sounds of eating.

Ye Qing looked. He saw three people—two men and one woman—sitting at a low wooden table and holding a bowl of food each. Judging from the way they were guzzling down their food, it must be very delicious.

The guy sitting on the left side of the table had a down-to-earth appearance and wore shabby clothes. He was probably a real farmer. He was smiling widely and enjoying a massive bowl of oil spill noodles.

The thin guy at the center looked like a scholar. He was eating a bowl of rice with a generous topping of roast meat slowly and elegantly. That said, his face was overflowing with happiness as well.

The woman on the right side of the table looked like a gentlewoman who came from a wealthy family. She was pecking at a bowl of beef bone noodles with an intoxicated expression.

All three diners came from different strata of society, and normally they would never run into each other, much less enjoy a meal together at the same table. Right here and now though, they were all enjoying a delicious meal, and they were all brimming with happiness and satisfaction.

There was a food stall right behind the trio. The stall's cooking equipment—a simple kitchen stove, iron pot and the like—were set on the left, and the food ingredients such as flour and vegetables were on the right. A table was set at the center of the stall, and behind it was a kind old man dressed in simple rags. He looked to be in his seventies, and he was currently rolling some noodles. A huge pot was placed on top of a stove, and the pot was bubbling with hot air and a rich, delicious scent.

Warm, red flames were dancing wildly in the night, a fragrant scent was permeating the air, a kind, hard-working old man was making some noodles, and the customers all looked happy and satisfied. If nothing else, it certainly chased away the cold and darkness of the long night.

The world invented humanity, and humanity invented fire. Together, they painted a warm and picturesque scene. However, this scene only sent a chill up Ye Qing's spine. It was because he couldn't sense anything at all when he was standing outside the alley. The light, the sound, the aura, nothing. It was as if this part of the alley existed in a completely different world.

Is that... the mysterious cook? Ye Qing thought to himself. The old man before him could very well be the mysterious cook mentioned in the Annon Sutra's story.

The story had mentioned that every full moon, a mysterious cook would appear in the streets of Luo Shui. Only those who were kind, noble-hearted, or lucky would have a chance to meet him. Besides that, the cook's food was so delicious that it could make his customers forget all of their sorrow and worries, and feel the beauty and joy of this world. As far as he could tell, the scene in front of him fit with the description very well.

"Another customer? Come, come! Take a seat!"

When the old man noticed Ye Qing, he immediately set down his rolling pin and welcomed him warmly. Ye Qing narrowed his eyes slightly before chuckling, "Hahaha! I wasn't expecting there to be a food stall here, and right as I was feeling hungry too!"

While walking toward the dining table, Ye Qing asked, "What do you have, mister?"

"Hehe. I can cook you anything you want, customer. Veges, meat, stir-fry, deep-fry, dry, soup... anything. Just say the name, and I shall make it for you," The old man replied smilingly.

"That's a bold claim. Do you even have the ingredients to make, well, everything?" Ye Qing raised an eyebrow doubtfully while sitting in front of an empty table.

The old man chuckled, "I wouldn't dare to lie about such a thing, customer. Just give me the order. If I fail to cook you the meal you desire, then feel free to trash my stall later!"

"Haha! I shall take you up on your challenge then."

Ye Qing chuckled, grabbed a pair of chopsticks off the table and twirled it. "If you really can make anything, then I'd like some time to consider my dish carefully. Is that okay?"

"Take your time, customer. Just tell me when you're ready," the old man replied unhurriedly.

“Hmm... what do I really want to eat?” Ye Qing set down his chopsticks and put his hand on his chin. He looked like he was considering his options, but he was really sensing his surroundings with his spirit.

He didn't scan the area earlier because he was afraid of alerting the enemy. Now that he was up close, he carefully spread out his spirit until he could sense everything around him. He could sense the down-to-earth man's contentment, the scholar's joyful eyes, the gentlewoman's satisfied expression, and the old man's busy figure. It looked like everything was normal, but in reality it was not.

For example, the three customers had not so much as glanced at him since he walked in. It was like they were so absorbed in the food that they were physically incapable of comprehending their surroundings.

For example, the world within his spirit was completely dead besides the cook, the three customers, and himself. There were no birds, no cats, no dogs, not even a single insect.

For example, the old man had been working non-stop even before he showed up, but he was one customer, and he hadn't even ordered his dish yet. And yet the old man would roll his noodles for a bit, then cut up some vegetables, then wash his rice and more. It was as if he was preparing to serve at least a dozen customers.

Suddenly, Ye Qing felt the iron pat shaking without warning. Then, it said, “Another idiot has come to our stall. What do you think he would order?”

“Noodles. Noodles are the tastiest of them all, and the noodles I make are especially chewy!” The rolling pin declared arrogantly with a little jump.

“Hmph! What's so tasty about noodles? It's dry, insipid, and only fit for a farmer! It's nowhere as sweet, soft and delicious as rice!” A rice jar on the ground replied disdainfully while wobbling on its bottom, causing some rice to jump in the air.

“Since when are noodles only 'fit for a farmer'? Are you looking down on noodles!? You better give me an explanation now, or I'll destroy you!” The rolling pin was so angry that it lifted itself up on the table and looked like it might take a swing at the rice jar at any moment.

The rice jar said disdainfully, “So what if I look down on noodles? It is a fact that only farmers, blacksmiths, dog killers and other lowly, disgusting people would enjoy noodles,”

“Now look at those who eat rice. They are either well learned scholars who carry boat loads of knowledge in their heads, gentle beauties who are experts in drawing and calligraphy, wealthy merchants or powerful authorities. They are all elegant and influential people.”

“Yeah, yeah!” The rice in the rice jar echoed in agreement.

“Hmph! You understand nothing! My eaters are manly, and your eaters are either women or sissies!” The rolling pin retorted.

“You... you barbaric brute!” The rice jar shot back.

“Sissy!”

“Barbaric brute!”

The rolling pin and the rice jar started arguing—actually, it wasn’t even an argument, it was just pure vitriol and shouting—back and forth like housewives on behalf of their factions.

“...”

What kind of world is this? Even the food is practicing class discrimination! And why is meat not part of this ‘conversation’?

Ye Qing barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes. But jokes aside, it would seem that the situation was more serious than he thought. He had no idea that the kitchen equipment were all Strangers until they started talking among themselves.

“I cannot believe the gall of you people. How dare you argue that rice or noodles are the most delicious food of them all when there is not a sliver of oil between the two. Hell, the two of you combined are still not a hundredth as delicious as me, lamb meat! I can be used as the ingredient of a soup, stir-fried or deep fried! I can be the main course or the second course. I can sate one’s hunger and nourish the body!”

A massive lamb rib floated out of a pot, bubbling with rich aroma. It was none other than the one who had been disparaging the duo. “You bunch of garbage are nothing compared to me, lamb meat!”

Ye Qing: “...” Speak of the meat.