

Stranger 31

Chapter 31: Chang Bone

Are you kidding me right now? There are at least two other humans at this table who are thicker and juicier than me! Why me?

Ye Qing was miffed, of course. The bastard was clearly targeting him because he was the “weakest” link of the group. He was just about to resist when suddenly, Tiger General’s arm stilled, and his malicious grin morphed into abject terror. It was as if he was seeing something horrifying that none of them could.

The next moment, Tiger General’s chest cracked and slowly slid open to the left and the right. Strangely, not a single drop of blood spilled out of his body. Then, something cracked inside Tiger General’s body, and all the blood drained away from his face. It was clear that he was in a lot of pain.

A black bone that looked like it had been snapped from the joint floated out of his body and landed in front of Ye Qing. After that, the wound on Tiger General’s chest slowly disappeared like nothing had ever happened.

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“These people are the distinguished guests of the Mistress, Tiger General. You best not act out of line and disrupt the Master’s wedding banquet. No one can bear the responsibility otherwise.”

“Your Chang [1] Bone shall be given to our guest as his rightful compensation!” Uncle Fu’s voice resounded throughout the hall, but he never showed himself.

“How dare you! I won’t forget this!” Tiger General glared venomously at Ye Qing as he staggered on his feet, but in the end he didn’t dare to test the mountain god’s patience. He went over to a random seat and sat down.

Ye Qing examined the Chang bone on the table curiously. It was about the length of an infant’s arm and as black as ink. It gave off a gloomy aura and some sort of mysterious energy.

Although he had no idea how he might use it to his advantage, it had to be valuable considering that it had been ripped right out of Tiger General’s torso. So, he tucked it safely under his shirt and returned his attention to the wedding banquet.

After that little intermission was over, Uncle Fu resumed his duties, and more and more Strangers entered the hall. They saw a gorgeous Stranger who wore a crown of flowers and looked as beautiful as a celestial, an ugly Stranger who was the antithesis of beauty itself and stank like a garbage dump, a hulk of a Stranger who looked like a walking mountain, a skinny, frail Stranger who looked like a wind could blow them over; faceless things that looked like a shadow, scaly, lizard-like creatures with vertical slit pupils, and even objects such as a bloody shirt, a pair of red shoes, a shoulder pole, an urn, a hat and many, many more Strangers of all shapes and sizes. It truly was an eye-opening experience.

More importantly, every Stranger attending the wedding banquet was powerful beyond imagination. Even a wisp of their aura was enough to cow the humans into shrinking their presence as much as possible. Thank goodness Uncle Fu had taught Tiger General a lesson earlier, or they couldn't even imagine what might have happened to them!

Suddenly, someone slammed the table and roared, "Hey boy! How dare you sit on our [2] chair! Do you have a death wish or something?"

Ye Qing and the others looked. They saw a humanoid Stranger with a bear's head and black fur glaring at Zheng Tianyuan like he would swallow him alive.

Zheng Tianyuan's face was ugly as a matter of course, but when he recalled what happened to Tiger General earlier, he regained his courage and threatened, "How dare you threaten me! I am a distinguished guest invited to this banquet by the Mistress herself!"

The bearman scoffed before speaking in a low, muffled voice, "Yeah, we don't believe you. There is no way the Mistress would invite a filth like you."

"Oh yeah? I dare you to lay a hand on me then!" Zheng Tianyuan declared with an arrogant sneer.

"Hah! Why not?" The bearman laughed and, to everyone's surprise, lifted Zheng Tianyuan into the air without any trouble.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

The young master struggled with all his might, but like a cat who was scruffed he was unable to break free no matter how hard he struggled.

"It's the Master's wedding today, so we won't eat you for your transgression. Begone!" The bearman proceeded to toss Zheng Tianyuan right out of the door like he weighed nothing.

"Young master!" Pao cried out in alarm.

"What? There's another filth here! You can get lost as well!" The bearman let out a bark of laughter before catching the panicking Pao with his massive hands. Then, he tossed him out just as easily as he had tossed Zheng Tianyuan.

The rest of the humans blanched, but before they could do anything another pair of Strangers entered the hall. This time, they were walking straight toward Granny Snake and Chi Long.

Unwilling to suffer Zheng Tianyuan and Pao's fate, Granny Snake and Chi Long immediately jumped to their feet and scurried away. It was the right thing to do, because the Strangers merely took their seats without bothering them!

Granny Snake and Chi Long both wiped a bead of sweat from their brow. Then, they stared at Ye Qing and Prayer with obvious anticipation on their faces. They were clearly waiting to indulge in some schadenfreude.

But to their surprise, nothing happened. Not only did the Strangers that came after ignore Ye Qing and Prayer, some even nodded at them as if acknowledging that they belonged here. Having no idea

why this was happening, Granny Snake and Chi Long could only exchange confused glances with each other. Prayer shot Ye Qing a meaningful look but said nothing.

“Next, we welcome Hero Frog... Hero Frog brings the bride and groom one Five Poison Pearl, and he wishes them a long and prosperous life!”

A familiar figure entered the hall, and Ye Qing’s eyes lit up. “Brother Frog! You came as well?”

The Stranger was none other than Kung Fu Frog. He was dressed exactly the same as Ye Qing remembered it—a bandanna on its head and a cloak behind its back—except that there was now an additional accessory on its waist. It was none other than the wooden saber Ye Qing had carved and given it that day.

“Croak croak!” Kung Fu Frog’s eyes also lit up in recognition and delight as it leaped into the air and landed on the chair right beside Ye Qing.

“Are you here for the mou—I mean, the Master’s wedding as well?” Ye Qing was overjoyed to see Kung Fu Frog. He might be a Stranger, but in a room full of deadly, unknown Strangers and fellow humans who would rather see him dead, to say that a familiar face brought him joy and hope would be an understatement.

Kung Fu Frog croaked again before grabbing a wine pot from the table and pouring one for Ye Qing, and another for itself. It then started downing glass after glass until the entire pot of wine had vanished into its stomach.

“...”

Ye Qing had tried the wine earlier. Despite its sweet and purifying taste, it had a massive kick that left him dizzy after just one glass. It was why he didn’t dare to drink anymore wine. On the other hand, Kung Fu Frog looked perfectly fine despite having gulped down a whole pot. Truly, the frog was better than the man!

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Suddenly, someone beat the drum three times in a row. Backs were straightened, heads were turned, and all noise departed the hall so completely that a pin could be heard.

“We are most honored that you would show up for our humble wedding! A toast to all of you, my dear guests!”

A powerful, grandiose-sounding voice erupted from the center table.

“You flatter us, Master! May you and the Mistress live happily ever after!”

Every Stranger in the hall rose to their feet and toasted the Master. Naturally, Ye Qing and Prayer followed suit.

“Please return to your seats. The food and wine will be served shortly. Please enjoy to your heart’s content, and remember: we drink until we drop!”

“We drink until we drop!”

After the toast was over, and the mountain god had permitted everyone to return to their seats, a troupe of gorgeous women entered the hall and began dancing to the melodious tune of flutes and string instruments. They wore long robes with long sleeves, and they had translucent wings on their backs. Their dance was out of this world, and they were as dreamlike as fairies.

As the hall returned to its boisterous self, the drinkers started drinking, the gossipers started gossiping, and the cheers sounded like it would never end. It was a riot!

The humans too basked in the celebration until the wine eventually got all of them. They fainted and fell into a deep, intoxicated slumber.

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“Huh... where am I?” Ye Qing muttered as he opened his eyes in a daze. The clean sunlight spilling through the leaves was warm but not uncomfortable.

A second later, he jumped to his feet as his memories caught up to him. When he scanned his surroundings, he was immensely relieved to find that he was no longer in the mountain god’s imperial palace or surrounded by powerful Strangers.

He was currently standing on a wide meadow. Prayer, Granny Snake, Chi Long, Zheng Tianyuan and Pao were all present as well.

Prayer, Granny Snake and Chi Long looked no different from yesterday, but the same could not be said for Zheng Tianyuan and Pao. For some reason, they were covered in stinking mud as if they had just crawled out of a quagmire.

“Zheng Tianyuan and Pao were tossed out of the hall by a bearman yesterday, weren’t they? Is that why they’re covered in mud?” A smirk crossed Ye Qing’s lips as he scratched his chin thoughtfully.

Yesterday’s events were so fantastical that he almost couldn’t believe that it actually happened.

It was at this moment Prayer, Granny Snake and Chi Long awoke one after another.

As soon as Chi Long looked up, he blurted, “Prayer! What happened yesterday... it wasn’t a dream, was it?” His tone grew uncertain when he looked around and found himself at an unfamiliar place.

Prayer thought for a moment before answering, “I don’t think so. Try feeling your body.”

Granny Snake and Chi Long did as he said and discovered that they were overflowing with true qi and a mysterious power. They exclaimed in pleasant surprise, “The food we ate yesterday... they’re all real!”

It was at this moment Zheng Tianyuan and Pao awoke as well. The young master asked, “Where are we, Prayer?”

As soon as he opened his mouth, a horrible stench immediately flooded into his nose and mouth. The young master was completely confused until he looked down and noticed that he was covered in mud.

Prayer and the others had long noticed Zheng Tianyuan and Pao’s condition, of course. They were just wise enough not to make a comment about it.

Unfortunately, not everyone had a good head on their shoulders. Pao began, “Young master, it’s probably because that bear—”

“Silence!” The young master cut him off before he could finish. His face flushed with humiliation as he recalled being tossed out of the wedding hall and into a quagmire by a bearman. Not only that, the quagmire possessed some sort of mysterious force that prevented him from climbing out no matter what he tried. In the end, he had no choice but to spend the whole night in the cold and stinking quagmire.

He was Zheng Tianyuan, scion of the Zheng Clan of Anyang. He could positively declare that he had never suffered such humiliation in his life!

Since Pao was stupid enough to draw Zheng Tianyuan’s attention, the young master did not hesitate to turn him into his punching bag, “You fool! What are you waiting for? Get me some new clothes already!”

“Y-yes, young master!” Pao blanched and hurriedly did as Zheng Tianyuan ordered. Despite his anger and humiliation, he didn’t say a word as he handed Zheng Tianyuan his clothes and changed into a new set of clothes himself.

“Ahem. Prayer, do you think that mountain gods are real?” Granny Snake purposely looked away and asked a question so as to avoid making Zheng Tianyuan feel even more humiliated than he already was.

Ye Qing’s face was turned away, but his ears were wide open. He too was curious about the answer.

Prayer shook his head firmly. “If you’re asking if there is a God Almighty who rules over all the mountains in the world, then no. A mountain god is really just a Stranger who is literally born to rule a mountain. Just the same, there are Strangers who are born to rule over certain lands, mountains, and waters as well. They are immensely powerful, but in the end, they are still Strangers.”

He added after a pause, “The gods and spirits I pray to using the Prayersticks are also Strangers!”

Chi Long snorted in disdain. “Heh! And here I thought there are actual gods and spirits in this world. Damn fakes.”

“Silence!” Prayer blanched as he rebuked Chi Long harshly, “How dare you rebuke the god of these mountains! Do you have a death wish?”

A startled Chi Long slapped a hand over his mouth when he realized what he just did as well. Although the mountain god had not shown his face from the start until the end, he could only be powerful beyond imagination considering the quality of his guests and Uncle Fu.

“Please don’t take offense, Master, I can’t help that I’m born this way, please!” Chi Long implored while bowing again and again in every direction. When nothing happened, everyone let out a sigh of relief.

“Oh right. Boy, hand over that bone you got last night.” Having finished changing his clothes, an unhappy-looking Pao abruptly turned on Ye Qing without warning.

Chapter 32: Sarira Bone

“What bone?” Ye Qing frowned.

“Do you really think feigning ignorance is going to work, boy? I’m talking about the Chang bone that old man gave you yesterday. Give it to me, now!” Pao ordered with a threatening sneer on his face.

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes a bit. “That’s Uncle Fu’s gift to me!”

“Hah!” Pao snorted in disdain. “So what? You’re just some backwater trash. A treasure like that is not a good fit with you. Give it to me now, or else!”

Prayer, Granny Snake, and Chi Long were simply watching this unfold with uncaring smiles on their faces. Zheng Tianyuan was looking down on Ye Qing with clear scorn as well. No one said anything, but they clearly agreed with Pao’s actions.

The corners of Ye Qing’s lips turned up a little. When he received the Chang bone yesterday, he could already sense the group eying him with greed and jealousy. He thought they would at least pretend to be polite and tactful, but clearly, he had overestimated these people.

Then again, everyone here was an adult. What kind of adult would balk at something as trivial as shame?

“Just to be clear, I’m not robbing you. If it wasn’t for my young master’s benevolence, you’d never have been able to enter the mountains, stumble upon the mountain god’s wedding, and enjoy that grand feast last night. That was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that someone like you should never be able to experience, so you should already be satisfied with what you’ve got!”

Pao rebuked Ye Qing harshly before threatening again, “Now stop dilly-dallying and give it to me already! Otherwise, I’ll break your limbs!”

“You best listen to Pao, boy. That Chang bone doesn’t belong to you!” Chi Long also added with a sinister chuckle.

“Heh! Since you all seem to think that I should surrender the bone... alright then! Here you go!” Ye Qing shook his head and tossed the Chang bone to Pao. For some reason, he did not look angry or dissatisfied with this “arrangement” at all.

“Guess you’re not so stupid after all!” Pao was a bit disappointed, to be honest. He was hoping that Ye Qing would resist so he would be justified in beating the shit out of him and venting his frustration. Unfortunately, the boy was even more spineless than he imagined.

After snatching the bone out of the air and shooting Ye Qing a murderous glare, he presented it to Zheng Tianyuan with an obsequious smile. “Here’s your Chang bone, young master!”

Zheng Tianyuan accepted the bone and caressed it, sensing the mysterious power within it. He smiled. Although he didn't know what the Chang bone was used for, he was sure it was extraordinary since it had been plucked out of Tiger General's body. When they returned home, he would show it to an artificer and check if it could be refined into a Strange Artifact.

"Put it away, Pao," Zheng Tianyuan ordered while tossing the bone back to Pao. It was at this moment he noticed that Ye Qing was smiling like he wasn't angry in the slightest. He raised an eyebrow and felt a tinge of worry, it only lasted a second before he shook it off. The young fool was just an ant. What could he possibly do against them?

I don't like his smile though. Yes, I'll see him dead as soon as we reach the Jade Dragon Lake! Zheng Tianyuan had lived his whole life like this. He killed anyone he disliked and wasn't strong enough to resist him.

"What are you looking at, boy? Do you want me to dig out your eyeballs?" Pao was extremely displeased with Ye Qing's lack of reaction as well.

Ye Qing shrugged. "I'm just looking, that's all. If you don't like it, I can just turn away!"

It was at this moment Prayer stepped in as the mediator. "Lad, the Chang bone is clearly no ordinary item. Greed is a powerful motivator, and you, if you'll forgive me for saying this, aren't strong enough to keep it from prying eyes. That is why handing it over to Scion Zheng is the best thing you can do, and it's not like we're taking it for free. When our business is concluded, we'll give you a couple more Tiger Bone Power Pills as compensation."

"As you wish, Prayer!" Zheng Tianyuan affirmed. From his perspective, Ye Qing was already dead. Any promise he made to him was automatically null and void.

"Haha. Thank you in advance!" Ye Qing said with a chuckle that did not reach the eyes. *I thank your mom for giving birth to a whoreson like you, more like. Does he really think I'm that stupid? A child could've told you that the Chang bone is a hundred times more valuable than some shitty ass Tiger Bone Power Pills!*

Seemingly placated by Ye Qing's acceptance, Prayer stroked his goatee and asked, "Speaking of which, do you know where we are right now? And do you know how much longer we need to travel to get to the Jade Dragon Lake?"

Ye Qing smiled. "In fact, we're already here. If you'd take a look at those plants over there, you'd notice that they're tinged with a bit of red. They're like this because they're constantly exposed to blood qi. The Jade Dragon Lake should be just behind the forest."

"That's wonderful news!" Prayer clapped his hands in excitement. Last night, before they were forced to attend the mountain god's wedding, they had been a fair distance away from the Jade Dragon Lake. Who would've thought that they would wake up right next to their destination? Clearly, this was the mountain god's work. It was a pleasant surprise no one could possibly begrudge.

As usual, Ye Qing took the lead and led the group through the forest. It wasn't long before they arrived at the infamous blood red lake.

"This is the Jade Dragon Lake?" Someone exclaimed in a hushed voice while staring at the ominous lake in front of them.

"Look over there! Is that... *the* sarcophagus?" Pao gulped while pointing a finger at the one and only object floating at the center of the lake of blood. It was as eerie as it was mysterious.

Zheng Tianyuan asked curiously, "I've heard that the Jade Dragon Lake holds a mysterious sarcophagus for as long as I can remember, and it seems that the rumors are true. But does anyone know what lies inside the sarcophagus?"

Prayer replied in a solemn voice, "Whatever it is, it is no one we wish to meet. Young Master Zheng, please remember that we are here for Old Man Xueying's (Blood Shadow) treasure. I implore you not to stray away from our main objective."

"I know!"

Even without Prayer's advice, Zheng Tianyuan had no intentions of provoking the sarcophagus in any way. It was because one look at it was enough to inflict his mind with terror and stir his vigor to the point of instability. He would have to have a death wish to get anywhere close to it.

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was thinking to himself, *I knew these people weren't here to forage herbs. They're here for that so-called Old Man Xueying's treasure!*

There was a problem though. The Jade Dragon Lake looked just as barren as the last time he was here. It did not look like there was a treasure anywhere.

I sure hope their treasure isn't at the bottom of the Jade Dragon Lake, because that is one attempt that's doomed to end in failure and death.

Pao was trembling slightly as he stared at the ominously blood qi surrounding the Jade Dragon Lake. "Young master, Old Man Xueying's treasure can't possibly be at the bottom of the Jade Dragon Lake, right?"

"Are you stupid?" Zheng Tianyuan could not help but criticize his servant. "You've seen the map just like me! Old Man Xueying's treasure lies somewhere around the Jade Dragon Lake, not the bottom!"

"But this place is completely barren, young master. It doesn't look like there could be a treasure anywhere. We... aren't mistaken, are we?" Chi Long voiced his doubts as well.

Zheng Tianyuan frowned but insisted, "It has to be here somewhere!"

"Allow me!" Prayer said before producing an incense stick from his Nature's Shell. Unlike the Incense of Worship, this incense stick had a darker color and looked no

different from a normal incense stick. When Prayer lit it up, it gave off a thick smoke that quickly spread to the surroundings.

“Gods and spirits that lie within the stick, please bless me with unparalleled luck!” Prayer prayed as he planted the incense stick in the censer and bowed twice.

“Will this work, Prayer?” Zheng Tianyuan asked uncertainly.

The old man returned a confident smile. “I’m sure. This incense stick is called the Incense of Fortune. As I mentioned earlier, it will bless us with unparalleled luck. Barring unforeseen circumstances, it should lead us to Old Man Xueying’s treasure very quickly!”

As soon as he said this, the black smoke rising from the censer abruptly started floating toward a hill next to Jade Dragon Lake. This was strange because it was moving directly against the wind.

“See?” Prayer declared with a pleased look. “Follow the smoke!”

“Wait. What do we do with the boy, young master?” Pao suddenly looked at Ye Qing with a sinister glint in his eyes.

Remembering that Ye Qing was there with them, he said without hesitation, “Since his duty is finished, it’s time to send him on his way!”

By that, he meant sending Ye Qing to the afterlife, of course.

“At once! This is my forte!” Pao let out a vicious cackle before striding toward Ye Qing.

Ye Qing feigned surprise and backed two steps away from the group. “What are you doing?”

“What else? I’m going to kill you, of course! Don’t worry, I’m a fast worker. I promise you won’t feel any pain when you go!” Pao clenched his fists as bloodthirst and tyranny flashed in his eyes.

Just when it looked like a clash was inevitable, Prayer suddenly raised a hand to stop Pao. “Scion Zheng, we haven’t located Old Man Xueying’s treasure yet. It’s a little hasty to kill the lad before we know what lies ahead of us, don’t you think?”

Zheng Tianyuan mulled over Prayer’s advice. He really wanted to kill Ye Qing now, but not at the cost of offending the old man. After all, they still needed him to find the treasure. So, he nodded.

“Very well. I trust your judgment, Prayer. Pao! Stay your hand.”

“Pah! Lucky sonuvabitch. I suppose you get to live a while longer!” Pao cursed angrily before stomping away.

“Thank you for saving my life!” thanked Ye Qing as he saluted Prayer. Although he wasn’t afraid of the group, he didn’t want to clash against them yet. If he wasn’t mistaken, the treasure they were looking for was probably the opportunity mentioned on the Annon Sutra.

"I promise you'll be safe if you stay close to me. You have nothing to be afraid of!" Prayer shot him a friendly smile before turning his attention back to the black smoke. The group began following the smoke trail.

They had just taken a few steps when Pao—he was taking point together with Prayer—suddenly let out a cry of pain. At the same time, blood began seeping out of his pores.

"Save me, young master!"

"Scion Zheng! If you will!" Everyone else in the group was alarmed as well. Every breath they inhaled contained a sliver of blood qi in them, and it seemed to be taking control of their blood and pulling it out of their body.

"Got it!" Zheng Tianyuan didn't dare to treat his life lightly, of course. He immediately produced a clean, smooth skeleton hand from his shirt. The moment the skeleton hand appeared, it immediately emitted a warm light that chased away the surrounding blood stench in an instant. They could vaguely hear the sound of Buddhist chants as well. It stopped the unnatural bleeding immediately.

"It is as we postulated! The Sarira Bone really does work on the evils of this place!" Prayer declared in relief before urging, "Now move!"

And so the group hurriedly followed the black smoke to heavens-know-where. But the closer they got to the Jade Dragon Lake, the narrower and dimmer the light became. Cracks were beginning to appear on the skeleton hand as well.

"The Sarira Bone isn't going to hold much longer, Prayer! Can we find the treasure in time? If not, can we get *out* in time?"

Prayer was normally a cautious man, but right now he looked anything but. His face was warped by a tinge of desperation and madness as he uttered, "We're close! We're close! Just hang on!"

The group would continue to run behind the black smoke for a while longer until they arrived at a small valley. They saw the smoke flying straight into it.

The valley wasn't really a valley. It was a gully running through two small hills and ending with a rocky wall. Strangely, the smoke flew all the way to the wall before vanishing behind it.

"That's it!" Prayer roared in triumph.

The rest of the group looked relieved as well. They began running down the gully with all their might. They did not stop even after they had reached the dead end.

The wall shivered when Prayer made contact with it, but it did not stop him dead in his tracks. It was an illusion. The rest of the group quickly vanished into the wall as well.

Chapter 33: I Warned You

"I see! This place is warded by a minor illusion array!"

The group was greeted by an actual valley after they passed through the fake wall. Strangely, the valley and the gully outside looked like two separate worlds even though they were only separated by a single wall, and not even a real one at that. For starters, the valley was overgrown with green grass and clearly not polluted by the blood qi. Even more conspicuous was a tree about two humans tall at the center of the valley and what looked like a man underneath it.

“Is that Old Man Xueying?” Zheng Tianyuan’s eyes lit up. As if on cue, the Sarira Bone he was holding abruptly disintegrated into fine powder. Clearly, it had used up all of its power.

This startled the group and caused them to tense up a little. When they felt no discomfort, they all let out a sigh of relief.

“I’m guessing that a minor illusion array isn’t the only thing in effect here. Old Man Xueying must have set up some other array to keep out the blood qi,” Prayer speculated.

Still staring at the mysterious figure beneath the tree, Zheng Tianyuan repeated again in a trembling voice, “Is that Old Man Xueying?”

Prayer nodded. “I believe so!”

The young master looked confused, “I thought this is just one of many treasure spots Old Man Xueying has hidden throughout the world. Why would he die at such a place?”

“Let’s head over and see, shall we?” Prayer deflected the question before warning, “There might be some traps or unexpected dangers, so be careful!”

As soon as Pao heard this, he immediately withdrew his foot and ordered Ye Qing loudly, “Take point, boy!”

Ye Qing did not resist. The exit was just a few meters away, so he could always escape if there was any danger, and unlike the others he wasn’t afraid of the blood qi at all. The Jade Dragon Lake was his homeground, and he was its lord and master!

To everyone’s surprise including himself, Ye Qing reached the tree without encountering any danger. It wasn’t until they arrived beneath the tree that they realized that the man they thought was Old Man Xueying had already decomposed into a skeleton. However, his clothes were still intact, and his skeleton hadn’t yet become so weakened that it would crumple into a pile of bones. That was why it looked like he was meditating from afar.

“He really is dead. You sure gave me a scare, you bag of bones!” Pao sneered and kicked the skeleton before anyone could react, scattering bones everywhere.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Prayer startled before rebuking the man.

“I don’t know what you people are afraid of. It’s just a bag of bones!” replied Pao with an uncaring shrug.

“Look! There’s a gravestone over here!” Granny Snake suddenly shouted and drew everyone’s attention.

After walking over to the gravestone and pulling away the overgrown grass, they noticed that a few passages were engraved to the stone. It read: “My name is Fu Xueying, and my title Old Man Xueying. I have been forced to hide here after suffering a terrible betrayal. I am gravely wounded, and I know I do not have long to live. That is why I’m leaving behind my life’s work—the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” and the “Blood Sea Fragrance”, and the Blood Shadow Divine Pill necessary to cultivate the arts—to my fateful one.”

“Should you choose to cultivate my martial arts, you will carry on my will and swear to avenge my death. My betrayer is none other than my disciple, Fu Qianqiu. Remember this well!”

“Last will of Old Man Xueying, Fu Xueying!”

“That body really was Old Man Xueying!” Prayer said with a wistful sigh. To think that the master of Blood Shadow Castle, a powerful faction that used to be famous thirty years ago, would perish at such a place. What was even sadder was the fact that he had been murdered by none other than his own disciple. It truly was a pitiable and lamentable death.

Then again, Blood Shadow Castle was an infamous demonic sect in Luoshui back in the day. They were ruthless, wanton, and self-seeking. It was perfectly normal for master and disciple to turn against one another, and even father and son to plot each other’s death. Old Man Xueying’s death—as lamentable as it was—was hardly surprising, all things considered.

Ye Qing didn’t share the same sentiment because he had never heard of an “Old Man Xueying” or a “Blood Shadow Castle”. In fact, the only thing that concerned him right now was the two cultivation arts mentioned on the gravestone, the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” and the “Blood Sea Fragrance”.

That’s right, he didn’t even care for the Blood Shadow Divine Pill that Old Man Xueying claimed was a must-have to cultivate his martial arts. It was clear it was a cultivation medicine of sorts, and cultivation medicine was nothing to him since he had the Annon Sutra!

Ye Qing scanned the surroundings but could not find anything that looked like a book around the area. Judging from the state of the earth, he highly doubted that the old man had buried his cultivation manuals either. It was then he recalled the body and the tree. If the books weren’t next to the gravestone, then it had to be on the body or the tree. Since Pao had so kindly kicked the body into a million pieces, the only place left to check was the tree.

Ye Qing walked beneath the tree and looked up. He was right. He saw three wooden boxes sitting on a tree branch in the canopy.

The boxes must contain the cultivation arts and the pill mentioned on the gravestone!

“Heh! Your eyes are surprisingly sharp, aren’t you boy? It’s too bad there’s nothing here for you!” Pao said derisively. Intelligence wasn’t a trait that was unique to Ye Qing. Naturally, everyone else in the group had figured out the truth and spotted the wooden boxes as well.

“What are you waiting for, Pao? Go grab the boxes already!” Prayer urged.

Ye Qing abruptly shot Prayer a strange look as if he was surprised. He didn’t say anything though.

“Sure!” replied an unsuspecting Pao. He then leaped into the air and made a grab for the boxes.

It was at this moment something unexpected happened. The instant Pao’s hand made contact with one of the boxes, he abruptly tensed up as if he had been electrocuted. His body turned limp as he fell down and landed with a loud thud.

“Pao! Are you alright?” Zheng Tianyuan blanched and called out to Pao, but the middle-aged man did not respond to his cry at all. It was almost as if he was... dead.

Their fears were proven just a second later. All of a sudden, Pao’s body started shriveling up like something was draining his vigor. It took only a few seconds before he turned into a dry corpse.

“What happened?” Zheng Tianyuan backed away from the corpse with shock and terror written all over his face.

Chi Long stepped in front of Zheng Tianyuan and watched the tree warily. “Be careful, young master. Something’s not right about this tree.”

He wasn’t just saying this because Pao was dead. As if the middle-aged man’s death had awoken something in the tree, its tree trunk began changing from dark brown to vibrant green, and new leaves began growing on its branches. At the same time, a flower bud grew out of a tree branch.

The flower bud was swaying even though it was completely windless inside the valley. It was also changing color constantly. Sometimes it was emerald green, sometimes it was yellow gold, and sometimes it was as red as blood. A sweet, aromatic, intoxicating scent permeated the air.

“What is that?” someone whispered. Everyone was staring at the flower bud with a mixture of curiosity and fear. No one dared to get close to it because it was definitely the culprit behind Pao’s death. The middle-aged man was a late-stage Qi Invoker, and yet he had died in an instant and without any resistance whatsoever. Of course they weren’t going to approach it carelessly.

There was one person whose reaction was noticeably different from the others, however. No one saw that Prayer was clenching his fists and visibly shaking with excitement behind them.

After observing the flower bud for a moment and sensing no danger from it, Granny Snake stepped up and said, “Let me try!” She blew a whistle, and something green shot out of her sleeves and landed on the tree. It was none other than the little green snake she used to threaten Ye Qing a while ago.

At first, the snake seemed perfectly fine. It was when it got within a certain range of the boxes when it came to a sudden stop.

“Return!”

The blood drained away from Granny Snake’s face as she blew another whistle, but her snake did not respond to it. The next second, it fell off the tree and shriveled up just like Pao had.

“My baby!” Granny Snake screeched on top of her lungs. The snake was a Stranger she had tamed and raised using countless medicines and poisons. It was so venomous that it could threaten some Vessel Augmentors. Without exaggeration, it was the apple of her eye and a treasure she cherished second only to her own life. Of course she was heartbroken by its demise.

Speaking of which, the flower bud on the tree grew again after the snake was dead. Its scent was also much sweeter than before.

It was at this moment Chi Long had been crossing his arms and watching the show from the sidelines. He immediately yelled at him, “Go get the boxes, boy!”

Ye Qing raised his eyebrows at the red-haired man. Then, he barked out a laughter and said, “Fuck no!”

“What did you say? I dare you to say that again!” Surprise flitted across Chi Long’s features before it morphed into anger. He wasn’t expecting Ye Qing to dare to refuse him.

“Are you deaf? I said I’m not going! A blind man can see that getting up that tree is to commit suicide! How stupid do you think I am?” Ye Qing shrugged before saying something incomprehensible, “Also, I’m warning you, but you better think twice before you attack me!”

As if he was unable to comprehend Ye Qing’s defiance, Chi Long barked out a furious laugh before saying, “You’re not going? Okay then! You can die in my hands instead!”

The red-haired man took one step toward Ye Qing and appeared in front of him like magic. Then, he made a grab for the young man’s head. Chi Long wasn’t just tall and muscular, his hands were the size of a leaf fan. It was quite intimidating to stand beneath it as it came closer. From another’s perspective, Ye Qing looked like a defenseless child who could do nothing but be crushed beneath his palm, not to mention that it was giving off a massive wave of heat like it was on fire. It warmed up even those who were standing a good few meters away from Chi Long.

The red-haired man cultivated a martial art called the “Red Dragon Force”. It was a hegemonic and brutal martial art that imbued its wielder with the power of the scorching sun. Those who failed to defend against the force would find their blood vessels crushed and their internal organs burned into a crisp. If they failed to expel the force in time, then they would literally burn down into a charred corpse.

“Die, boy!” Chi Long said with a vicious laugh. His complexion was beet red due to the “Red Dragon Force”, so he looked just like a story book demon when he laughed.

Swoosh!

Suddenly, Ye Qing turned his body sideways and took one step away from Chi Long. Then, a bright flash cut through the air and halted the red-haired man dead in his tracks.

“What... how did... you...” Chi Long exclaimed in disbelief as shock spread across his face. As if on cue, blood burst out of his cut throat before he collapsed to the ground with a thud.

It was only then a bead of blood fell off Ye Qing’s blade.

“I warned you not to attack me, but you just can’t help yourself, can you?” Ye Qing said with a smirk. He looked so calm and uncaring it was as if he had just slaughtered a chicken, not a late-stage Qi Invoker.

“You’re... not...” Zheng Tianyuan and Granny Snake were stunned, of course. Chi Long wasn’t just any late-stage Qi Invoker, he was pretty well-reputed in Anyang. Who would’ve thought that he would die like a wimp to a mere “journeyman Reforged”? It was like a dream, but the dead body on the ground told them it was anything but!

Bang!

It was at this moment Prayer launched into action. While Zheng Tianyuan and Granny Snake were distracted, the old man suddenly raced forward and... hit Granny Snake squarely in the chest.

Completely caught off guard, Granny Snake could do nothing but slam into the tree.

“Argh! Prayer, what are you—” Granny Snake cried out in pain before shooting Prayer a confused and furious glare. Unfortunately, that was all she managed before she shriveled up and died right next to her snake. She remained stunned and confused until the very end.

Prayer wasn’t looking at her or Zheng Tianyuan, however. He dashed over to Chi Long and kicked him over to the tree. The vigor flowed out, and the flesh rotted. Just like that, the dead man shriveled up to a dry corpse!

Chapter 34: Dead Man’s Tree

“What did you do, Prayer? Have you gone mad?”

Everything had happened in the blink of an eye. By the time Zheng Tianyuan’s brain finally processed what just happened, Granny Snake and Chi Long had already been sucked dry, and Prayer was staring excitedly at the flower bud on the tree.

“Mad? Hahaha! I’m not mad. I can’t be mad until I’ve achieved my goal,” Prayer answered, but his eyes never left the flower bud. Despite his claims he certainly looked the picture of madness.

Once again, the flower bud on the tree was reacting after absorbing Granny Snake and Chi Long’s vigor. It was slowly but surely blooming into a beautiful yet eerie flower.

The flower had five petals in total, and each petal was in a different color: Red, yellow, blue, black and white. It was beautiful, but that beauty was marred by something horrifying. Each petal carried a human face, and one could vaguely identify those faces as belonging to Pao, Granny Snake and Chi Long. When a breeze brushed against the flower, its petals opened and closed almost as if it was

breathing. The way the human faces on the petals swayed to its movements, it almost looked like they were smiling. The sight was unsettling to put it mildly.

Zheng Tianyuan visibly shuddered before stuttering, “W-what is that thing?”

“That is what they call the Dead Man’s Flower! ‘The Dead Man’s Tree grows the Dead Man’s Flower, The Dead Man’s Flower fruits the Fruit of Life, the Fruit of Life revives a dead man from the dead, and the Dead Man Tree grows its hoard of bones beneath its roots. And so the cycle continues forever and ever!’”

Prayer was staring at the flower with fervent eyes and whispering as if he was afraid too loud a volume would disturb its growth or something, “The Dead Man’s Tree got its name because it can only bear fruit by consuming a living being’s vigor and vitality. When the Dead Man Flower falls, it will bear a fruit called the Fruit of Life. As the name implies, the Fruit of Life can extend one’s lifespan, strengthen one’s body, and even protect one from all kinds of poison.”

“Besides that, it can bring anyone from the brink of death and restore them to full health so long as they’re still alive. It is one of the top ten miraculous fruits in the world!”

“A Dead Man’s Tree that flowers the Dead Man’s Flower and fruits the Fruit of Life? How ironic!” Ye Qing sneered. “Your words sound pretty, but in the end, it’s really just a tool to steal another person’s life, isn’t it?”

“Haha! You’re right on the money!” Prayer echoed in agreement, but he still didn’t look away from the Dead Man’s Flower.

“That’s why you attacked Granny Snake and the others! You’re trying to make the Dead Man’s Tree bear the Fruit of Life!” Zheng Tianyuan exclaimed in realization.

“That’s right!” Prayer nodded.

“The Fruit of Life, huh? How wonderful! If you give me the Fruit of Life, I promise I’ll overlook what you’ve done, Prayer!” Zheng Tianyuan ordered while staring passionately at the Dead Man’s Flower.

“Huh?” The old man finally looked away from the Dead Man’s Flower to stare at Zheng Tianyuan. His expression was both surprised and amused.

“Oh my god, I’ve never seen such a dumdummy in my life!” exclaimed Ye Qing with a facepalm. If Pao was a fool, then his young master was a complete imbecile. Heavens know how he managed to live this long without dying.

“What did you say!?”

Zheng Tianyuan glared at him, but Ye Qing merely shrugged innocently before explaining, “Don’t you realize it yet, Scion Zheng? Prayer has been plotting our deaths since the start!”

Prayer shot Ye Qing a curious look. “When did you find out?”

“Just now. You must’ve known that there’s a Dead Man’s Tree in this place from the beginning, or you wouldn’t be able to describe its characteristics down to the letter. Also, you’ve been watching the tree since we entered this valley, which is strange as the dead man beneath it is far more conspicuous no matter how you looked at it. Third, you ordered Pao to grab the wooden box without checking or even suggesting that there might be any traps, which is completely at odds with the level of caution you’ve displayed until now. How are you going to explain that?”

“All things considered, there is only one answer. You wanted the Dead Man’s Tree to absorb Pao’s vitality and vigor. That is also why you ambushed Granny Snake. In fact, you were never here for Old Man Xueying’s treasure. You were targeting the Fruit of Life from the start, and Scion Zheng and his men were the food you’ve prepared for the Dead Man’s Tree!”

“Hahaha! No wonder the ancients say to fear the young! I can’t say that’s true for everyone, but you have certainly earned my respect, lad!” Prayer laughed. “That’s right. My ultimate objective has always been the Fruit of Life.”

“What are you two talking about?” Zheng Tianyuan was still confused.

“What am I saying? I’m saying that I’ve plotted this ‘grand adventure’ from the start until the end, you idiot!” Prayer’s laughter grew increasingly triumphant as he continued, “For starters, where do you think you got the treasure map that leads to Old Man Xueying’s hoard, Scion Zheng? I’m the one who asked Granny Snake to give it to you!”

“Granny Snake was your friend?” Zheng Tianyuan blurted.

The old man stroked his goatee while answering, “But of course! Why else would she ask you to seek me out and partner up with me? That’s because I’m the one who set up everything, hehehe. If not for me, would you have brought your cohort all the way to these mountains to die?”

“Sure, I neglected to mention the bit about the Dead Man’s Tree and the Fruit of Life, but I’m sure you wouldn’t mind such a *minor* omission, would you? Hahaha!”

“Granny Snake was one of yours... and you killed her? How could you?” Zheng Tianyuan could not believe his ears.

A vicious grin crossed Prayer’s lips then. “Well, there is only one Fruit of Life, and we can’t possibly share something so valuable, right?”

“You’re a monster!” Zheng Tianyuan uttered even as ice coursed through his veins, and the world seemed to be spinning around him. He felt like the sky itself had fallen and smacked him silly. He had wholeheartedly believed that the treasure map was a

once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He never thought it would be a carefully laid trap meant to sacrifice him and his cohort for another's benefit.

"Say, it's true that the Dead Man's Tree needs fresh vigor and vitality to fruit, but you could've just grabbed some nobodies off the streets and fed them to the tree, couldn't you? Why take the risk of angering the Zheng Clan?" Ye Qing asked curiously.

"Your words make perfect sense, and trust me, I know," Prayer said with a helpless sigh. "The problem is that the Dead Man's Tree is located next to the Jade Dragon Lake, and who doesn't know that the blood qi permeating this place is deadly and bizarre? Without the right skill set or Strange Artifact, it's practically suicide to even get close to this place."

"Unfortunately, there are very, very few people in Anyang who possess the skill set or Strange Artifact I need. It took me a long time just to find out that the Zheng Clan possessed a Sarira Bone that can suppress the blood qi of Jade Dragon Lake. After that, well, you know the rest!"

"Finally, the quality of the sacrifice *does* affect the quality of the Fruit of Life. The more vigor and vitality the Dead Man's Tree absorbs, the better the Fruit of Life it bears. With that in mind, what better sacrifice is there than a warrior, and what better warrior is there than Scion Zheng's cohort? I've always been a perfectionist and an overachiever, you see. If I can make the best Fruit of Life there is, why not?"

Ye Qing nodded. "I see! I must admit that you're as devious as you're meticulous!"

"I admit defeat, Prayer." Some time later, Zheng Tianyuan finally recovered from his stupefied state somewhat and said, "I won't ask you to give me the Fruit of Life. I can pretend that you've never plotted against me and killed Pao, Chi Long and Granny Snake. I will also swear that the Zheng Clan will not come after you. All I ask is that you let me leave this place alive. What do you say?"

"Really? I'm happy to hear that!" A wide smile spread across Prayer's face as he slowly walked toward Zheng Tianyuan. "It should not need to be said, but I do not want to fight against the Zheng Clan either."

Relief seeped into Zheng Tianyuan's face. He was just a middle-stage Qi Invoker, and Pao, Chi Long and Granny Snake were all dead. There was no way he could defeat Prayer, so he could only beg for his life. If Prayer let him live, and if he could make back to his home safe and sound, it would be the old man's turn to beg for his mercy. The bastard had dared to plot against him and kill his men. He was going to make him regret he ever—!

The young master did not manage to finish his thoughts before Prayer suddenly launched a palm strike at his head. Zheng Tianyuan clearly wasn't expecting this because he just stood there and stared as death approached. He just couldn't believe that Prayer would dare to kill him.

It was at this moment a flash of light cut toward Prayer's neck so fast and suddenly it was as if it had teleported through space. Unfortunately, the old man was able to react in time and floated away from the attack like a leaf being blown away by the wind. He dodged the attack with just a few centimeters to spare.

"Your saber is swift, lad!" Prayer praised.

Ye Qing withdrew his saber and smiled. "You're welcome!"

Prayer did not take offense even though Ye Qing had nearly killed him. He wore a kind smile on his face as he asked, "How did you know I was going to kill him?"

Ye Qing chuckled. "You should know Scion Zheng better than I do. Does he look like the type who will keep his promises? Even if he is, why would you let him live when silencing him was by far the superior solution?"

"Also, I'm pretty sure that Dead Man's Flower hasn't fully bloomed yet. It has five petals, but only three people have died so far. If I'm not mistaken, two more people need to die before it bears fruit, and there are only three of us left. Who else are you going to sacrifice if not Zheng Tianyuan and I? And why else would you bring me here if not to sacrifice me to the Dead Man's Tree?"

"As for why you targeted Zheng Tianyuan first, that's obviously because Zheng Tianyuan is the bigger threat between the two of us."

"Incredible! Truly incredible! I honestly would loath to kill you if the Dead Man's Tree didn't need five people's worth of vigor and vitality to bear fruit!" Prayer slow-clapped with a regretful look on his face.

It was at this moment Zheng Tianyuan finally snapped out of his shock and screamed, "You... you tried to kill me. You actually tried to kill me! My dad is Zheng Feng, the patriarch of the Zheng Clan and a Vessel Augmentor! He'll chase you to the ends of the earth if you kill me!"

Prayer merely scoffed at his threat. "It's true that the Zheng Clan is bigger than me, but who will know that I'm the one who killed you? You do remember that this is the Jade Dragon Lake and not your home, do you? Also, I would be a Vessel Augmentor myself once I've eaten the Fruit of Life and cultivated the 'Blood Shadow Divine Art'. Why would I fear the Zheng Clan then?"

"This is why the two of you must die today."

Zheng Tianyuan was both enraged and terrified. "You—!"

"Save your breath, Scion Zheng. You heard him. He isn't going to let us live," Ye Qing interrupted Zheng Tianyuan before saying, "The only way we might live now is if we work together to kill him."

This was why Ye Qing had saved Zheng Tianyuan earlier. It was so that he wouldn't have to fight Prayer alone.

Ye Qing had no illusions that Zheng Tianyuan would feel even a shred of gratitude toward him should they succeed, but he was by far the easier opponent compared to Prayer. If they could kill Prayer, then his victory was as good as sealed.

“You think the two of you are enough to kill me? Think again,” Prayer sneered before twisting his wrists and launching a throwing knife at Ye Qing and Zheng Tianyuan each.

Ye Qing rolled on the ground and dodged the throwing knife unceremoniously. On the other hand, Zheng Tianyuan let out a roar and took three steps into the air. Then, he unleashed a powerful palm strike that was clearly infused with lightning. It was none other than the Zheng Clan’s exclusive technique, the Boundless Lightning Palm.

However, right before his palm would make contact with the throwing knife, the throwing knife abruptly split into three and sped up. Not only that, they abruptly changed directions in mid-air and flew toward three separate vital spots!

As it turned out, Prayer hadn’t tossed just one throwing knife at Zheng Tianyuan at all. They were three throwing knives meshed together using some sort of special force to create the deception.

Zheng Tianyuan managed to block the first throwing knife, but not the second and the third. Before he could even react, the second throwing knife pierced his heart, and the third his forehead. He was dead just like that.

The leaf scatters,

To bloom three flowers.

The knife chases,

To doom the soul!

Chapter 35: The Incense of Misfortune

“Are you kidding me? Just how useless can he be?”

The entire reason Ye Qing saved Zheng Tianyuan earlier was to pit him against Prayer. The young master was a middle-stage Qi Invoker and the scion of the Zheng Clan. He might be a bonafide imbecile, but he should be able to give Prayer a run for his money. He was going to kill them both once they had sufficiently worn each other out.

In reality, Zheng Tianyuan’s combat experience was so lacking that not even the best martial arts in the world could’ve saved his life. He was so useless that Prayer had taken him out in a matter of seconds.

That said, it wasn’t completely Zheng Tianyuan’s fault. Prayer’s throwing knives had turned out to be trickier than expected. They were already fast enough to give Ye Qing a run for his money, but they could also speed up and change directions without warning. Had Prayer chosen to attack him first, he might have fallen for the trick as well, though he would survive of course.

Ye Qing didn’t slow down despite his disappointment. He immediately tossed a fire talisman at Zheng Tianyuan’s corpse.

“You dare!?” roared Prayer when he noticed what the talisman was. He crossed ten meters in an instant and made a grab for the fire talisman.

It had taken an insane amount of planning and waiting on his part to come this far. If Zheng Tianyuan’s corpse was destroyed, then all of his efforts and scheming would be for naught. Of course he wasn’t going to allow it to happen. He let out an audible sigh of relief when he caught the fire talisman and crushed it between his fingers.

Of course, Ye Qing wasn’t going to allow this golden opportunity to slip through his grasp. A blade as bright as the snow cut toward his neck like lightning.

“Petty tricks aren't going to work on me, lad!” Prayer sneered. His hand slowly turned steely gray as he curled his fingers until they resembled a claw. Then, he made a grab for the shining blade in the air.

“Iron Hand” was a martial art that hardened one’s hand until they were as tough as steel. The practitioner was required to temper and refine their hands using ironsand as often as possible. Prayer had reached the adept level of this martial art as he had been practicing for a very, very long time. His hands were as tough as an ordinary weapon, and he could easily catch a sharp blade with his bare hands. It was a potent counter against any blade wielder.

In Prayer’s opinion, Ye Qing was a low level warrior whose one niche was his extraordinarily swift blade. The only reason he managed to kill Chi Long was because the guy had completely let down his guard. A fast blade was already lacking in power, but Ye Qing was also just a journeyman Reforged. The chances that he might cut through his Iron Hand was exactly zero, which was why Prayer wanted to snatch his saber. Without it, Ye Qing was as powerless as a tiger without teeth and claws. His victory was as good as sealed then.

“Croak... croak... croak!”

It was at this moment three croaks boomed from Ye Qing’s stomach in rapid succession. They were so loud that they resounded throughout the valley.

Prayer blanched as alarm bells suddenly rang in his head. Without hesitation, he canceled his attack and tried to pull back.

Unfortunately for him, Ye Qing’s saber sang and suddenly grew a tad faster. It struck his hand right before he could move it out of the way.

“Argh!” Prayer let out a bloodcurdling scream as a metallic shriek cut through the air. Ye Qing’s saber had cut through his prized Iron Hand—severing all five fingers like a hot knife through butter—and split his arm into two, baring muscles and bones!

“You’re not a journeyman Reforged! You’re... a late-stage Qi Invoker!” Prayer cried out even as he clutched his broken arm. Every time he said a word, blood mixed with tiny chunks of flesh would spill out of his mouth.

Ye Qing's attack hadn't just rendered Prayer's arm useless, its potent force had severely damaged Prayer internal organs as well. The pain was excruciating, but it was nothing compared to the shock and disbelief the oldman was feeling right now!

In fact, Prayer had long since realized that Ye Qing was no ordinary warrior. It was because Uncle Fu had given him a Chang bone, a special favor that not even he, the owner of the Incense of Worship, enjoyed. Since then, he was sure that Ye Qing was hiding some sort of powerful secret.

It was one of the reasons he made sure that no harm would come to Ye Qing until they entered the valley. Sure, he needed Ye Qing to stay alive until he could sacrifice him to the Dead Man's Tree, but he also wanted to claim whatever it was that made Ye Qing so special in the eyes of Uncle Fu for himself.

Until just now, he was certain that Ye Qing's blade was that secret. It was the only explanation as to how he managed to kill Chi Long earlier. It took more than just surprise to overcome the tyranny of cultivation levels after all. But now, he realized it was because Ye Qing was also a late-stage Qi Invoker. Not only that, he had the skill, the experience, and even the cultivation art to match his cultivation level!

But how was that possible? He had briefly looked into Ye Qing's background when Granny Xia had mentioned him. He would need to tweak his plans a little if the young man turned out to be stronger than expected after all. However, his investigation revealed that Ye Qing was just an unassuming watchman with an equally unassuming background. His parents had died not too long ago, and he had only begun cultivating and practicing martial arts for less than a month. It was literally impossible for him to be a late-stage Qi Invoker, and yet...

Ye Qing admitted, "You're definitely a lot more perceptive than the others, Prayer. That's right. I'm not a journeyman Reforged!"

Ye Qing was a little disappointed, to be honest. He thought for sure he would be able to kill Prayer with the element of surprise and a triple Toad Force, but the old man still managed to dodge it in the end.

His effort wasn't useless though. The surprise attack had severely wounded the old man. It shouldn't take much more time and energy to kill him!

"This isn't possible... this isn't possible... this isn't..." Prayer muttered again and again as if he had dropped his soul somewhere.

Ye Qing countered, "Why not? Luck and opportunity aren't exclusive to any one person. If you can find the Fruit of Life, then why can't I be a late-stage Qi Invoker?"

"Of course, your Fruit of Life isn't going to be yours for much longer!"

"The Fruit of Life... you want to take *my* Fruit of Life?" Prayer abruptly snapped back to reality and grinned savagely at Ye Qing. "You seem to think you've already won. Allow me to correct that delusion!"

Before he even finished, Prayer abruptly launched three throwing knives at him in rapid succession. All three knives traveled along a straight line until the two at the back abruptly sped up and slammed into the one at the front, accelerating it several times faster than before. While the first

throwing knife was speeding straight toward Ye Qing's heart, the second throwing knife suddenly curved toward his lower abdomen, while the third shot right past Ye Qing before curving around to hit his scruff.

"Shooting Stars Chase The Moon"

Prayer's throwing knives still caught Ye Qing by surprise even though he had been watching out for them since the moment he revealed them. Thankfully, they weren't so tricky that he couldn't block them in time. After throwing up a bladestorm that protected every inch of his body and parrying all the throwing knives, he pushed off the ground and charged straight toward Prayer.

Always strike an enemy when they're at their weakest!

To Ye Qing's surprise, Prayer didn't seem flustered in the slightest. Instead, he produced a grayish black, ominous-looking incense stick from his shirt, planted it on his censer, and lit it up.

"Really, Prayer? I highly doubt the gods and spirits are going to save you from me!" Ye Qing scoffed. He had never learned a movement art, but his powerful vigor still allowed him to reach Prayer in just the blink of an eye. He immediately executed a Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber technique and targeted five vital spots at the same time.

"Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber—Five Tigers Sever The Soul"

Something unexpected happened then. Right before his saber would carve into Prayer's flesh, a thick smoke suddenly blasted into his face, choking him and watering his eyes. That unexpected distraction was enough to cause him to lose track of his target.

Swoosh swoosh!

When Ye Qing heard a series of swooshes, he did not hesitate to drop to his feet and rolled to the back. Not a moment too soon, a couple of throwing knives shot past his scalp and cut a few strands of hair.

"Heavens!"

Cold sweat covered Ye Qing's forehead in an instant. If he was even a second slower, those throwing knives would've been embedded in his brain!

As soon as Ye Qing's eyes cleared up, he immediately stopped his roll and pushed himself off the ground once more. The ground exploded with a bang as he shot toward Prayer like an arrow once more.

Ye Qing was fast, but his saber was even faster. He reached Prayer almost faster than the eyes could blink and swung his weapon once more. However, the old man jumped backward and floated away from Ye Qing like a leaf. He was able to dodge the attack by a hair's breadth and shoot a throwing knife at Ye Qing's throat at the same time.

Ye Qing decided to emulate his enemy's example and twist his head to one side. He put so much force into the motion that his neck bone let out a soft crack. While the throwing knife passed by his neck with millimeters to spare, he executed a wide sweep like he would cut an entire river in half. His transitions were so smooth it was as if he had thought out his moves beforehand.

It was at this moment a wisp of smoke entered his nostrils. It was so itchy that Ye Qing couldn't help but let out a sneeze. The sneeze slowed his movements just a tad, but it was just enough for Prayer to launch his attack first. As if his body was weightless, the old man sailed past Ye Qing in an arc and took his back, his feet never even touching the ground. Then, he launched a hail of throwing knives almost point blank at the young man! At this range, it was near impossible for Ye Qing to defend himself against it!

Ye Qing was shocked, but he didn't succumb to panic. In fact, he realized the danger as soon as that sneeze overtook him. He imagined that his legs were the axis and forcefully twisted his waist halfway toward Prayer. At the same time, he brought his saber around and conjured a mighty wind with his impressive strength. Since he was using the flat side of the saber, he was able to block the deadliest throwing knives and blow the rest out of his way.

His woes weren't over, however. He suddenly heard a loud crack and felt a burst of pain from his waist.

Did I just twist my back?! Ye Qing thought in disbelief. He was a late-stage Qi Invoker with an equally powerful physique. It should be damn near impossible for him to twist anything, and yet he did.

That brief distraction was enough to add a couple more wounds to his body. Thankfully, they were superficial since he had blown the worst of the throwing knives out of the way.

Is it because of that incense stick? Ye Qing glared daggers at the gray incense stick on the censer even as he channeled his vigor to heal himself.

First, the smoke had blinded him and caused him to lose track of his target. Then, it had caused him to sneeze and lose the initiative of the fight. Just now, he had suffered an unbelievable stroke of bad luck and twisted his back. If these incidents had happened on separate occasions, he would've chalked it off as sheer bad luck. But for it to happen three times in a row? Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action!

Every time he committed a "mistake", it was when he was holding the upper hand and about to severely wound Prayer. Worse, his mistake always put him in a dangerous spot that could've cost him his life!

It has to be that incense stick! Ye Qing thought with his eyes narrowed before charging toward the censer. It would be incredibly hard for him to kill Prayer if he did not extinguish that incense stick. However, he just happened to kick a round rock as soon as he raised a leg and nearly tripped on his feet. He had just regained his balance when a blade of grass tripped him and caused him to fall flat on his back.

Of course, Prayer wasn't just going to stand around and watch while Ye Qing was stunned. He launched dozens more throwing knives toward Ye Qing and forced him into an emergency roll. The good news was that he managed to dodge the worst of it, taking wounds only on his arms and legs. The bad news was that he kept slamming his head against not one, not two, but *dozens* of rocks as he rolled. By the time he finally got back to his feet, his head was full of bumps, and stars were spinning around his head.

"Hahaha! How do you like my Incense of Misfortune, lad?" Prayer could not help but guffaw in schadenfreude at the sorry sight.

“Incense of Misfortune?” Ye Qing frowned deeply.

Prayer let out another bark of laughter before answering, “That’s right! I don’t just have a bunch of Incense of Fortune, you know! I also have its antithesis! Whoever is cursed by the Incense of Misfortune will trip over their own feet, suffer nightmares in their sleep, choke on nothing and generally suffer all kinds of accidents until the Incense of Misfortune runs out, or they’re dead!”

“So? How do you like my Incense of Misfortune?”

Chapter 36: The Fruit of Life

I knew I couldn’t be that unlucky! Ye Qing thought to himself. The Incense of Misfortune was definitely a devious item. Prayer would already be dead if it wasn’t for its interference!

“You’ll never be able to kill me before the Incense of Misfortune runs out,? so why don’t you just give up and fulfill an old man’s wish, hmm? I assure you it’s less miserable this way,” Prayer asked with a gruesome smile.

“Haha! Sorry, but I don’t give up easily!” Ye Qing massaged his spinning head while channeling his vigor to heal his injuries. “And did I tell you that I’m something like a cockroach? Minor injuries are nothing to me!”

However, the second he channeled his vigor, a wave of weakness washed over his body, and his stomach hurt like someone was twisting a knife inside his intestines. When he looked down, he immediately noticed that his wounds weren’t healing. They were oozing greenish black blood and giving off a disgusting stench. This was definitely not supposed to happen.

“Poison? Your throwing knives are poisoned?” Ye Qing looked up at Prayer in astonishment.

“But of course! All’s fair in war, don’t you agree?” Prayer cackled with sadistic pleasure. “Here’s a lesson for you in your next life, lad: the end *always* justifies the means!”

“The poison you’re suffering from is called the Bowel Necrosis. It is a poison that flows into your intestines through your blood and rots them from the inside out. Most people die from the pain long before the loss of their bowels actually kills them!”

Prayer was smiling, but it was a sinister and cruel smile. “And don’t think you can kill me before it happens. The poison only takes a short time to reach its full effect. I eagerly await the moment I can feed your corpse to the Dead Man’s Tree!”

“Grr...” Anything Ye Qing did triggered a terrible burst of pain from his stomach. He could clearly feel his intestines rotting little by little. The only silver lining here was his vigor was repairing the damage non-stop, or he absolutely could’ve died from pain overload.

I need a plan B! Ye Qing thought. A tremendous amount of vigor and vitality might buy him a lot of time, but the poison was still going to kill him in the end if he could not remove it in time. The

problem was that the Incense of Misfortune was keeping him from taking down Prayer in the shortest amount of time possible. There was also a huge gap in their mobility as well—Prayer had a movement art that he must have mastered for years, while he was relying purely on brute strength and speed to get around. It was extremely unlikely he would be able to kill Prayer before his time ran out.

If brute force won't win me the day, then... A light bulb suddenly appeared on Ye Qing's head as an idea came to him. The next second, he turned around and ran toward the exit with all his might. He shouted, "You want the Fruit of Life, Prayer? Dream on! If I can't win, then I would rather both of us lose!"

Prayer blanched and figured out Ye Qing's plan immediately. Clearly, the young man was planning to die to the blood qi outside so he would not be able to feed the Dead Man's Tree the last bit of vigor and vitality it needed to bear the Fruit of Life. All of his hopes and efforts would come to nothing if Ye Qing succeeded!

"Bastard!" Prayer screamed in rage. The young man was obviously determined to be annoying until the very end. The old man immediately broke into a run while launching three throwing knives aimed at Ye Qing's neck and his legs. He was so fast he was running parallel to his throwing knives.

Ye Qing ignored it. Legs bending, he let out an earthshaking croak before kicking off the ground and launching himself into the air. It was very close—Prayer's throwing knives and palm strike had just missed him by millimeters—but the young man was ultimately able to make it out of the valley.

"Fuck! Fuck!" Prayer skidded to a stop before the fake wall and hesitated for a moment, his mind racing with a million thoughts. In the end, he gritted his teeth, stomped his foot, and rushed out after Ye Qing.

He had invested far too much time and effort to obtain the Fruit of Life. He had even gone so far as to murder the Zheng Clan's scion and his cohort. He was but one step away from obtaining his heart's desire, so of course he wasn't willing to give up and start all over again. He didn't have the *time* to start over again even if he wanted to. He was already at the end of his lifespan. Without the Fruit of Life, he probably had less than a year to live at best. That was he couldn't give up here no matter what!

It was true that the Jade Dragon Lake's blood qi was a serious risk—it corrupted not just their vigor, but also their spirit—but the corruption wasn't immediate. Since Ye Qing's injuries were worse than his, he shouldn't be able to withstand the blood qi's effects for long. If he died close by, there should be enough time to drag his corpse back to the valley before it was too late.

He couldn't afford to dilly dally though. If he took too long, Ye Qing would transform into a lifeless and soulless Red Walker. The young man would be completely useless in that state.

As soon as Prayer rushed out of the valley, he immediately felt the blood qi—one that was filled with indescribable filth and wickedness—drilling all the way into his marrows and corrupting both body and mind. His skin immediately started festering and oozing blood.

Prayer hurriedly channeled his true qi to ward off the unnatural blood qi. Then, he searched around for Ye Qing.

It would seem that luck was on his side today. He had just taken two steps forward when he found Ye Qing lying on top of a red, withered bush. He looked nothing like the dashing young man he was before, however. It couldn't have been more than thirty seconds since he left the valley, but he was already rotting at a visible rate and oozing blood everywhere. His bloody appearance could only be described as horrifying.

"Thank goodness I didn't hesitate for long! The body would be useless if I waited even a minute longer!" A wide grin spread across Prayer's face after he inspected Ye Qing's body. He then grabbed the young man's leg and started dragging him back to the valley.

"Phew... I'm finally back. The Jade Dragon Lake's blood qi is just ridiculous!" The journey was extremely short, but Prayer felt like he had endured the blood qi for a lifetime. Not only was he completely drenched in blood, large chunks of flesh actually slid off his face and revealed pale white cheek bones as he talked.

"It's all this little bastard's fault!" Prayer tried to wipe the blood on his face only to claw off even more flesh by accident. It hurt so much he couldn't help but gasp in pain.

His plan had been perfect. He should've been able to obtain the Fruit of Life and enjoy an extended lifespan with nary a scratch. Instead, Ye Qing had destroyed his hand and made him work for it. Without the Incense of Misfortune, he certainly would've died already!

As if that wasn't bad enough, the little shit decided to commit suicide by throwing himself into the blood qi. If his injuries were less severe, if he had died far enough from the valley entrance, he would've successfully contaminated his body and ruined Prayer's years-long scheme or worse, take him to the grave with him!

Even now on the brink of success, Prayer scarcely felt like a victor. How could he, when he was bleeding like a pig, and his flesh was so weak that he could literally claw them off his bones?

The more he thought about it, the more frustrated and angrier he became. After cursing Ye Qing's entire lineage and still feeling dissatisfied at the end of his rant, he decided to vent his feelings in a more physical fashion and kick Ye Qing's body.

Crack!

However, Ye Qing did not sail across the air as expected. Instead, he had broken his own leg!

"Argh!" Prayer screamed in pain even as alarm bells rang in his head in full force. He tried to move away from the body, but Ye Qing abruptly opened his eyes, shot him a triumphant grin, and jumped to his feet. He then caved in Prayer's chest with a double punch to the torso.

"No! How are you still—!" Prayer cried out in shock and terror even as blood sprayed between his lips.

Ye Qing did not wait for Prayer to finish. He took one step forward and plunged a dagger into his chest, piercing the heart.

“No... no... this can't be happening... I...”

Prayer reached out as if trying to grab something, but in the end, his arms fell limply to the ground. His face was etched with confusion and disbelief.

“Hehe. Did I mention that my biggest trump card isn't my cultivation level? No, it's my immunity to the blood qi around Jade Dragon Lake!” Ye Qing said while smiling down on Prayer.

The blood and rot covering his body was fake, of course. Or rather, he purposely allowed the blood qi to damage him to create a convincing illusion. Prayer never realized that he wasn't dead until he was too late.

As for why he didn't ambush Prayer while they were still outside the valley, it was to deplete the old man's stamina and to feed his body to the Dead Man's Tree later.

He was still suffering from Prayer's Bowel Necrosis. Although he could expel it from his body eventually, it was going to take him a long, long time to do so. He wasn't sure if it would leave behind some sort of long-term sequelae either. On the other hand, Prayer claimed that the Fruit of Life could extend one's lifespan, pull one back from the brink of death, and more importantly, protect one from all kinds of poison. It was exactly what he needed to cure himself.

Shred!

Ye Qing was about to toss Prayer's corpse over to the Dead Man's Tree when suddenly, a tear appeared on the old man's head. Then, his skin was stripped clean off his flesh like it was some sort of suit.

“Oh. I didn't realize I was using the Skinner!” It was only now Ye Qing noticed that the dagger he used to kill Prayer was none other than the culprit behind the near annihilation of August Hill Village, the Skinner.

The Skinner wasn't a name Ye Qing had come up himself. It was what the Annon Sutra had called it when he asked about its information.

According to the Annon Sutra, the Skinner was a Mundane-class Strange Artifact. It was rumored to be a torture instrument used to strip convicts of their skin and damage the bones. Over time, it accumulated so much resentment, hatred and misery from the convicts that it gained a minor power. When someone discovered this, they had it forged into a Mundane-class Strange Artifact and named it the Skinner.

The Skinner was, as its name would suggest, capable of stripping someone of their skin and controlling it like a puppet. The skin's strength was directly proportional to the victim's.

Of course, the Skinner was hardly omnipotent. The stronger the target, the less likely it would be able to strip them of their skin. For example, the Skinner would never have worked on Prayer while he was still alive.

In essence, a Strange Artifact was a Stranger that could be reliably wielded by its wielder. Naturally, every usage was accompanied by a negative side effect. In the Skinner's case, it was very simple: every time its wielder stripped someone of their skin, they must remove a palm-sized patch of skin from their body as well. If not, the Stranger would attack the wielder or go out of control. The consequences were unimaginable to put it mildly.

But of course, if the wielder was far stronger than the Strange Artifact, then they could just ignore the side effects or wrestle the Strange Artifact back under control.

In conclusion, Strange Artifacts were as powerful as they were dangerous. This was true even for the Skinner, which the Annon Sutra had deemed as a lesser Strange Artifact!

After Prayer's skin was stripped, the Skinner started struggling almost as if it had a life of its own. He could also see wisps of black smoke pouring out of the dagger and seeping into his arm. It was bizarre to say the least.

"This is probably the infamous side effect I heard about!" Ye Qing muttered as he channeled his blood. Like hungry beasts that had awoken from hibernation, they devoured the black smoke in just the blink of an eye.

"You are a million years too young to be facing me, you lump of metal!" Ye Qing sneered while grabbing the Annon Sutra and wrapping it around the dagger. Like a mouse facing down a cat, the Skinner immediately stopped struggling and withdrew its black smoke. It became as plain as a normal dagger in no time.

After tucking the Annon Sutra and the Skinner back under his shirt, Ye Qing stared at the human skin for a moment. *I wonder if I can control this telepathically. Let's see...*

Prayer's skin shuddered once before floating into an upright position. Then, it wrapped its arms around Prayer's body like a pair of ropes and tossed it to the Dead Man's Tree.

As the Skinner's wielder, Ye Qing could control any human skin that was stripped by it. However, the human skin itself possessed no intelligence. He would have to control it like a puppet on strings.

As soon as Prayer's body made contact with the Dead Man's Tree, it immediately shriveled up and lost all the vigor in its body. A second later, the old man's face appeared on one of the blank petals of the Dead Man's Flower.

The petals spread a little wider, and the sweet scent became so strong that it permeated the entire valley. At the same time, a green, unripe fruit grew from the center of the flower.

"Is that the Fruit of Life? It needs one more body to fully ripen though!" exclaimed Ye Qing as he stared at the fruit unblinkingly. He immediately commanded the human skin to toss Zheng Tianyuan's body over to the tree.

After Zheng Tianyuan's body had been sucked dry, the Dead Man's Flower immediately shone with penta-colored radiance. Red, black and white intermingled with one another to create a fantastic, rainbow-like glow.

The Fruit of Life at the center of the petals began growing and maturing. Every time it grew bigger, one of the petals would wither away. When all five petals had fully withered, the Fruit of Life had

become as big as an infant's fist and so red it looked like it might drip blood at any moment. Its wonderful scent had also reached a new crescendo.

Chapter 37: Vessel Augmentation

"It's finally mature!"

Ye Qing's eyes lit up as he instinctively took two steps toward the Dead Man's Tree. However, he had a problem. "The Fruit of Life is mature, but how am I going to pluck it from the tree?"

After all, anyone who got too close to the tree would have their vigor and vitality sucked dry. How would he enjoy the fruits of his labor then?

"Oh right. I just need to use something that can't be drained by the Dead Man's Tree!" Ye Qing glanced at Prayer's skin and sent it a command. The human skin immediately flew up to the canopy. As expected, it encountered no problems plucking the Fruit of Life from the withered flower.

As soon as the Fruit of Life was plucked, the Dead Man's Tree abruptly withered at a visible rate. Its tree leaves yellowed and fell off the branches, and the wood turned dry and brittle. What was a vibrant tree that was full of life and died in practically the blink of an eye.

"Everything the tree has is used to grow the fruit and the fruit alone, huh. This Dead Man's Tree is definitely an evil thing!" Ye Qing sighed as he took the Fruit of Life from Prayer's skin. He did not consume it immediately, however. Instead, he took out the Annon Sutra and poured some blood on its surface, asking, "Is the Fruit of Life safe to consume?"

He was being paranoid, but everything about the Fruit of Life except its supposed effects screamed "evil", "strange", and "deadly". He just didn't dare to consume it until he was one hundred percent sure it was safe. Plus, what if Prayer's knowledge regarding the Fruit of Life was wrong? It was just safer to ask the Annon Sutra before he committed to anything.

His blood wriggled, and a single word appeared on the vellum. "Yes."

Short, simple and direct! I like it!

Ye Qing devoured the Fruit of Life as soon as he saw the answer. It was because the poison had progressed to a point where he couldn't wait any longer.

The Fruit of Life melted like liquid as soon as it entered his mouth. As its golden juice slid down his throat, he felt a tremendous amount of vitality spreading throughout his body. But unlike the dragon-serpent runes, the Fruit of Life did not threaten to tear him from the inside out the first time he used it. It was smooth and healing, calm and gentle, warm and comfortable. His injuries were healed, and the toxin was removed like magic. Even the invisible damage he had been accumulating over time had vanished entirely.

"What pure power!" Ye Qing exclaimed in pleasant surprise. Although the way the Fruit of Life expressed its power was far tamer than the dragon-serpent runes, its purity was in no way inferior to the dragon-serpent runes. In fact, the energy

contained in one Fruit of Life was equal to three or four silver dragon-serpent runes in total. It was incredible to say the least.

Unwilling to waste such an incredible boon, Ye Qing immediately dropped to his feet and started cultivating. While this was happening, the gentle power continued to circulate inside his body and expel the Bowel Necrosis's toxin at a slow but steady pace.

Six whole hours later, Ye Qing opened his eyes once more. His eyes looked like stars, and his aura was a full magnitude greater than what it was before.

"Prayer wasn't kidding about the Fruit of Life's effects. It didn't just remove the Bowel Necrosis, it gave me so much true qi that I've more or less reached the absolute ceiling of the Qi Invocation stage. What a time saver!" Ye Qing said cheerfully while sensing his newfound power.

Before he joined the group on this expedition, he had just entered the late-stage of the Qi Invocation stage. Even if he had Old Man Xueying's cultivation arts, he would have needed to cultivate for months before he could finally take that first step to enter the Vessel Augmentation stage. Now, he could start right away.

"Speaking of which, let's grab those boxes and check out Old Man Xueying's cultivation arts!"

Ye Qing rose to his feet and commanded Prayer's skin to remove the three boxes still sitting on the tree branch. Just in case they were booby-trapped, he backed a few steps from the human skin before ordering it to open the boxes one by one. Once he confirmed that there was no danger, he finally went over and checked out its contents.

The first two boxes contained a jade slip each, while the third held a red pill covered in twisted and sinister-looking patterns. It also reeked of blood stench. It sent chills up Ye Qing's spine just looking at it.

"The jade slips probably contain the 'Blood Shadow Divine Art' and the 'Blood Sea Fragrance', and the pill is most likely the so-called Blood Shadow Divine Pill!" Ye Qing mumbled. He picked up the first jade slip and pressed it against his forehead. A tremendous amount of information immediately flooded into his mind. It took him a long time before he recovered from the dizziness.

"You wouldn't think that Blood Sea Fragrance is a movement art from its name!" Ye Qing muttered in delight. Blood Sea Fragrance was a powerful movement art that enabled its practitioner to move like the wind while remaining as silent as a shadow. Not only that, the practitioner would be able to perform mid-air dodges, maneuvers and turns, and float like they were weightless. It was such a graceful and elegant movement art that the author even wrote a poem to praise it:

"The sky may be infinite,

But not infinite enough to hide the stars and moons from me.

The sea may be vast,
But not vast enough to stump a blood celestial like me.
Wherever I go, the scent of blood follows.”

The Blood Sea Fragrance was exactly what Ye Qing needed right now. If he had learned a movement art before he fought Prayer, he might not have been pushed to the extent he had.

“Time to check out the other jade slip!” Ye Qing took a moment to calm down before picking up the second jade slip and pressing it to his forehead. Since he knew what was coming, he did not get nearly as dizzy as he had with the first jade slip. Unfortunately, there was no avoiding some measure of headache and nausea.

After Ye Qing was done processing what felt like an ocean of information, his lips widened into an excited grin. “The ‘Blood Shadow Divine Art’ really does fit me to a T!”

The “Blood Shadow Divine Art” was a top-notch Vessel Augmentation cultivation art. Generally speaking, a human possessed twelve standard meridians, eight extraordinary meridians, and three hundred and sixty points (also the total number of cycles in the human body). The Vessel Augmentation stage was the stage where the warrior unlocked, expanded, and strengthened these blood vessels to form a network that was far more powerful and self-sustaining than the one they were born with. In summary, augmenting one’s blood vessels dramatically increased the amount of true qi a warrior could hold in their body, accelerated its flow speed, improved its flexibility to the point where one could command it like an arm or a finger, and—depending on what kind of cultivation art they were using—imbued it with all kinds of incredible attributes and abilities.

There was a well-known poem regarding the Vessel Augmentation stage that went like this:

“Draw a thousand flowers

To hide a true dragon in your chest.

When the storm passes,

The dragon shall rise to the Nine Heavens.”

It was essentially a laudatory statement about how amazing the Vessel Augmentation stage was.

Generally speaking, the more meridians and points were unlocked, and the higher the degree of augmentation, the greater the amount of true qi one could hold in their body. One’s true qi would become more flexible, and one’s future potential would increase by leaps and bounds.

At the adept level, the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” was said to unlock every meridian and point in the practitioner’s body and achieve perfect augmentation.

Besides augmenting one’s blood vessels to perfection, the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” also claimed to combine one’s true qi and vigor to cast Blood Shadow Magic, a magic art [1] that summons one or multiple blood entities, a.k.a Blood Shadows. A Blood Shadow was invisible, untraceable, shapeless and formless. It could split into countless bodies and slay enemies without a trace.

This was easily the most powerful aspect of the cultivation art!

The reason Ye Qing thought that the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” was perfect for him was because it took an immense amount of vigor to cast Blood Shadow Magic. The magic art could still be cast without sufficient vigor, but the entities one summoned would be far weaker than they should be. But since vigor was the one thing he did not lack, the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” was easily the best cultivation art he could ask for.

On a related note, Old Man Xueying had left behind the Blood Shadow Divine Pill because it improved one’s vigor. It was so that his successor would have enough vigor to cultivate the Blood Shadow.

“I’ve reached the ceiling of the Qi Invocation stage, and no one can hurt me or disturb me while I’m here. Now is the time to cultivate the ‘Blood Shadow Divine Art!’”

Unable to wait even a second longer, Ye Qing dove head first into cultivation.

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“Tianyuan’s Lifetag is broken! Who killed my son?”

Inside an opulent hall, a striking middle-aged man dressed in luxurious clothes let out a scream of rage when he discovered that his son had been killed. His expression was as warped as it was mournful. There were several other people in the hall, and they were all bowing their heads and staying completely silent.

The middle-aged man was none other than the patriarch of the Zheng Clan and the father of Zheng Tianyuan, Zheng Feng!

“Zheng Shou, you’re the steward of the clan. You should know why Tianyuan left the residence!” Zheng Feng spun on a portly middle-aged man. His eyes were bloodshot like that of a man-eating beast.

Zheng Shou wiped away the sweat on his forehead before stammering, “Y-yes, my lord! Before the young master left, he told me that he was going on a treasure hunt!”

“Treasure hunt? What treasure? Where to? With whom?” Zheng Feng asked harshly.

Zheng Shou answered, “The young master didn’t tell me what he was searching for, but he did say that he was going to er, August Hill Village. He is accompanied by his personal bodyguard, Pao, and our two keepers, Granny Snake and Chi Long.”

“Pao, Granny Snake and Chi Long! How did he die with three Qi Invokers protecting him?” Confusion overcame Zheng Feng for a second before he asked, “What do you know about this August Hill Village?”

Zheng Shou answered again, “There’s nothing special about August Hill Village, my lord. It’s just a small, secluded village about one or two days away from Anyang.”

“A small village, you say?” A murderous sneer crossed Zheng Feng’s lips. “Then how did my Tianyuan die, pray tell?”

It was at this moment a young man with sharp features and a dark aura spoke up, "Send me to investigate this August Hill Village, stepfather. I shall make whoever killed Tianyuan pay the price of blood!"

A couple of keepers also responded, "We are willing to accompany Young Master Qi to August Hill Village and investigate Young Master Tianyuan's death as well!"

Zheng Feng swept his gaze around the hall once before uttering in a brooding tone, "Very well. I trust you will find your brother's murderer at all costs, Tianqi, and when you do, make sure you kill anyone and everyone who has something to do with his death. Leave no one alive!"

"As you command!" Zheng Tianqi saluted his father before turning away, eyes turning as cold as ice.

"Ahhhh... Tianyuan... Tianyuan..."

Zheng Feng did not stop mourning after his dead son even after everyone was gone.

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"I'm finally back. I was a little worried I might run into that damn bull, but thankfully it's just groundless fears."

Ye Qing was currently standing at the foot of Little August Hill, and August Hill Village was just a short distance away from his location. He was looking at the familiar settlement with a small yet complicated smile on his face.

"It's time I say goodbye to this place."

From the moment he learned that Granny Xia had sent him to follow Zheng Tianyuan's group into Little August Hill instead of his more "qualified" seniors, he knew that the old woman had abandoned him.

From Granny Xia's perspective, it was the right thing to do. It was all for the sake for August Hill Village. But from his perspective, Granny Xia had abandoned him for her so-called greater good. As a transmigrator, he had almost no emotional attachment to August Hill Village whatsoever, but there was no denying that he felt a pang of abandonment.

It was for the best though. It canceled out the debt he owed August Hill Village, however insignificant it might be. Since there was nothing left for him here, it was time to say goodbye.

Of course, the biggest reason he had to leave was because he was the sole survivor of Zheng Tianyuan's doomed expedition. If the Zheng Clan learned about his survival, they would come after him with everything they got, and there was a not insignificant chance the villagers of August Hill Village might be affected as well. That was why the best way to handle this was to leave in silence. If everyone believed that he had died in Little August Hill, then the only thing the Zheng Clan could do was to drop it.

Besides that, he was now a Vessel Augmentor. He was finally strong enough to survive in this world. Wherever he went after this, he should not have to tip toe like every step might be his last.

"That's it then. Goodbye, August Hill Village!"

Ye Qing stared at August Hill Village for a moment longer before getting ready to leave. Alas, fate had something else in store for him today. Right before he would turn away, he saw out of the corner of his eyes a group of people coming straight for Little August Hill.

Chapter 38: Blood Shadow Magic

“Is that... Captain Lin and Granny Xia?”

After he entered the Vessel Augmentation stage, his eyesight, perception and other bodily functions were much better than before. It was why he saw the two seniors long before they saw him.

Something was wrong, however. Both Lin Hu and Granny Xia looked terribly unwell, and he wasn't just referring to their deathly complexions. Lin Hu's arms were dangling unnaturally by his sides, and the upper front of his shirt was covered in bloodstains. Granny Xia was in the exact same state, except her eyes were cloudier than ever, and her back was bent almost ninety degrees as she walked. She looked like she had one foot in the grave.

The two villagers were accompanied by nine strangers, and the young man at the center of the group was clearly their leader. He wore a moon-white colored robe and a faint smile on his face. He was flanked by a pair of middle-aged men, one stout and one skinny. The other six wore identical, form-fitting black outfits and carried long sabers around their waists. Their body language was rigid and austere.

“Who are these people? Do they belong to the Zheng Clan?” Ye Qing whispered to himself while furrowing his brow. It wasn't uncommon for Lin Hu and Granny Xia to play the role of a guide for certain VIPs every once in a while, but no matter how he looked at it, these strangers were treating his fellow villagers like prisoners.

“They couldn't have found out that Zheng Tianyuan was dead and came to investigate his death, could they? But how did they know?” Ye Qing scratched his nose in puzzlement.

He did not go into hiding not because he couldn't, but because Lin Hu and Granny Xia were most likely going to die if he did. Granny Xia could die for all he cared, but he could not abandon Lin Hu during his time of need. If the watchmen captain hadn't allowed him to join the watchmen, he would be dead already. If the watchmen captain hadn't promised him temporary protection Chen Zheng, he would be dead twice over.

Perhaps he had an ulterior motive, or perhaps he really was that noble of a person. Regardless, he owed Lin Hu a huge favor, and so he must repay in one way or another!

He was no saint, but the concept of reciprocity wasn't unfamiliar to him. If you owe someone a favor, then you must repay it. If someone treats you with kindness, then you should reciprocate that kindness. It was that simple.

“Eh? Who's that?” It was at this moment the young man spotted Ye Qing waiting for them at the foot of Little August Hill. He looked to Lin Hu and Granny Xia for answers.

“What?” Lin Hu and Granny Xia looked up and saw Ye Qing as well. At first, they looked like they couldn’t believe what they were seeing. Then, realization struck them like a lightning bolt.

Suddenly, Lin Hu broke away from his captors and ran forward. He roared at Ye Qing with all his might, “Run! Run!”

“How dare you!” The skinny middle-aged man beside the young man uttered with contempt. Like a tiger, he stretched a little before catching up to Lin Hu in an instant and landing a palm strike on the watchmen captain’s head.

Bang!

The middle-aged man had surprisingly huge hands despite his physique. He shattered Lin Hu’s head like a watermelon.

“*Huhu!*” Granny Xia let out a mournful, bloodcurdling scream.

Ye Qing’s eyes also turned red in an instant. Literally. Like a pair of glittery rubies, they were as bright as they were ice cold.

Of course he understood that Lin Hu was trying to save him, and of course he wanted to save Lin Hu. However, the skinny man had gone for the kill right from the get go, and he was just too far away from the group to reach Lin Hu even with his new power. He could do nothing but watch his benefactor die in front of him.

For the first time in his life, he felt the impulse to commit mass slaughter. The Zheng Clan behind this was also a part of his wrath!

“They all deserve to die!” Ye Qing muttered with cold fury under his breath.

Meanwhile, the skinny man returned to his young master’s side and apologized, “My apologies, young master. I was so angry that I forgot to control my strength!”

It was clear from his vicious, bloody grin that he didn’t mean it at all.

The young man he called his young master grinned just as wickedly. “It’s fine. We still have a spare. Speaking of which, that young man ahead of us is probably the guide who accompanied my younger brother on his treasure hunt. The idiot wouldn’t have suddenly lost his mind otherwise. Let’s see what he has to say, shall we?”

It wasn’t take long before the group reached Ye Qing. The young master spoke first, “You’re Ye Qing, right? My name is Zheng Tianqi. I am Zheng Tianyuan’s older brother.”

“...”

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“You’re a much smarter man than that idiot back there. If you had tried to run away just like him, you would be a corpse already.”

Ye Qing's expression was unnaturally calm as he replied, "His name is Lin Hu, and he's the watchmen captain of our village. Aren't you worried that the Pacification Bureau would punish you for wanton murder?"

The skinny man who killed Lin Hu sneered before Zheng Tianqi could answer. "Oh yeah? And what would they do, pray tell? All I killed is a nobody, an *ant* no one gives a damn about!"

"Is that really how you see us? Ants that you may shame and kill as you please?" Ye Qing asked again, voice still utterly devoid of anger and defiance. It was like a dead zone that held nothing but the promise of death.

"Sure! And what are you gonna do about it?" The skinny man continued with the same contemptuous tone he displayed since the beginning, "We live in a world where the strong are honored, and the weak are no different than ants. And ants do not deserve to live!"

"Is that so?" Ye Qing nodded. "Thank you for the lesson!"

He then turned back to Zheng Tianqi and asked, "You're here to investigate Zheng Tianyuan's death, aren't you?"

Interesting. Zheng Tianqi didn't understand why Ye Qing was so calm. His confusion was mixed with a bit of worry, anger, and curiosity. That was why he decided to answer the young man's question even though he could've ignored it outright, "Oh no, you got it all wrong. I do not care one whit how Zheng Tianyuan died. The only thing I care about is pleasing the old man! That is why I came all the way here to find the answers he seeks, and to kill a couple of people to cure some of my boredom, of course!"

"You're killing people... to cure your boredom?" Ye Qing squinted at Zheng Tianqi and felt like laughing, but on second thought, there was nothing funny about this at all.

"My apologies, young master, but you might want to tone down your wording a little? This is the patriarch we're talking about. It would damage our reputation if someone hears us!" The stout middle-aged man with an honest face said with a chuckle.

Zheng Tianqi shrugged. "And who is this someone, pray tell? There's no one here except us and some ants! Also, I'm the sole heir of the Zheng Clan now. He wouldn't really hurt me even if I said it to his face!"

He then started laughing like a madman, "Ah, I'm so glad you're dead, brother! So glad! Haha! Hahaha! Hahahahahahaha!"

A long time later, he finally recovered enough to ask, "Where was I? Oh right. You can tell me what happened to Zheng Tianyuan now."

"Eh, I changed my mind. I don't think I'm going to tell you anything," Ye Qing said with a shrug and a smirk.

Zheng Tianqi stared at Ye Qing as if he couldn't believe his ears. A steely glint entered his eyes as he asked, "What did you just say?"

The rest of the group were glaring daggers at Ye Qing as well. No one thought that an ant would dare to speak to Zheng Tianqi this way.

Ye Qing couldn't seem to feel their threatening gazes. He simply smirked and answered, "I was planning to let you rest in peace, but now that I think about it, that is too good for the likes of you people. It'll also be *boring*, don't you agree?"

"Hahaha! What on earth are you talking about, boy? Have you gone mad?" The skinny guy let out a vicious cackle before making a grab for Ye Qing's head, his fingers glowing unnaturally just like when he killed Lin Hu earlier.

"Don't kill him, Elder Chen. We need him to appease the old man, remember?" Zheng Tianqi reminded with a smile.

"Don't worry, young master. I know what I'm—" Elder Chen was still grinning viciously when suddenly, he trailed off like someone had grabbed him by the throat. The next moment, a red line appeared on his neck before his entire head fell off. Not only that, his body started shriveling rapidly until he was nothing more but a dry husk.

Everyone's smile froze on their face. It had happened so fast that they didn't even realize what was happening until it was too late.

When a wisp of red flowed out of the corpse and into Ye Qing's body, he squinted a little and let out a sigh of pleasure, "Phew... that felt good!" At the same time, his presence suddenly grew a tad stronger.

Ye Qing was smiling, but it failed to induce any semblance of friendliness or warmth at all. Zheng Tianqi and his group were all staring at him like he was a Stranger clad in human skin.

Zheng Tianqi visibly shuddered before he regained his composure and shouted angrily, "G-get him!"

The six bodyguards in form-fitting outfits immediately unsheathed their long sabers and split up into two-man teams. Then, they let out a battle cry and charged Ye Qing from multiple directions. It was clear from their movements and coordination that they were extremely well-trained. Their lack of hesitation betrayed the fact that their hands were coated in blood as well.

"Well met. I was hoping to test out my 'Blood Shadow Divine Art' in a real fight!" Ye Qing said smilingly as he ran his arm through the air like he was caressing a lyre. Out of nowhere, six Blood Shadows sprang into existence and rushed toward the six men like they had a life on their own.

Appearance wise, the Blood Shadows looked almost faint enough to be formless. They would be invisible if not for the wisp of dark red sitting at the center of their bodies.

To the bodyguards' credit, they reacted to the surprise attack swiftly and decisively. All six of them were able to cut the Blood Shadows in half before they could reach them. The problem was that their effort was completely useless. The Blood Shadows reconnected with their severed halves almost instantly and entered the humans' bodies before they could react.

All six men shuddered as their expressions morphed into horror. They would've screamed, but their bodies started shriveling as if something was sucking them dry from the inside out. They were dead in just the blink of an eye.

After that, the six Blood Shadows left the corpses and entered Ye Qing's. His presence became much stronger after he reabsorbed the Blood Shadows.

"What the hell..."

Not including Granny Xia, the group of nine had dwindled to two in just a matter of seconds. Zheng Tianqi and the stout middle-aged man could only stare at Ye Qing in horror and disbelief.

"Not bad, not bad!" Ye Qing ignored their looks and praised his new power. The Blood Shadows were, of course, the result of his Blood Shadow Magic.

Ye Qing had spent three whole days cultivating in the Jade Dragon Lake. On the first day, he managed to unlock four Standard Meridians, two Extraordinary Meridians, and thirty-six points and enter the early-stage of the Vessel Augmentation stage. After his cultivation level had stabilized, he spent the next two days cultivating the Blood Shadow Magic and the movement art, "Blood Sea Fragrance". Since his vigor was immense, and he was assisted by the silver dragon-serpent runes, it took him little time to master the basics in both arts.

Of the two, his progress in the Blood Shadow Magic and the power it displayed were especially heartening. He would even go so far as to say that it had surpassed his expectations.

The Blood Shadow Magic was a magic art that summoned the shapeless, formless Blood Shadows through the fusion of true qi and vigor. These blood entities could split into countless bodies and slay enemies without a trace.

Generally speaking, the greater the amount of true qi and vigor of the practitioner, the greater the quantity and quality of the Blood Shadows they summoned.

Since Ye Qing possessed both an overwhelming of vigor and a hefty amount of reserves in the shape of the silver dragon-serpent runes, the biggest requirements of the magic art was never a problem to him. As a result, it took him just two days to create thirty six Blood Shadows—which happened to be the number of Heavenly Astron stars [1]—and reached the journeyman level of the Blood Shadow Magic.

Even better, he discovered that his Blood Shadows possessed the same unique quality of his blood, namely the ability to devour vigor and vitality. It was what had happened to Elder Chen and the six bodyguards. This one ability made the Blood Shadows so much better than the original version.

Blood Shadow Magic, the magic art that kills without a trace!

Chapter 39: Cursed Doll

"So, how do you like my performance, Scion Zheng? Has it cured you of your boredom yet? If not, I can claim a couple more souls for your entertainment?"

Ye Qing held out his arm as if to show off the Blood Shadows swimming between his fingers. His eyes shone like red ambers, and he was shrouded by a veil of bloody radiance. When he smiled, it looked like they were staring into the face of a demon of hell.

“You’re a Vessel Augmentor...? You’re a Vessel Augmentor! But how is this possible?” Zheng Tianqi exclaimed in shock as he looked Ye Qing up and down. Terror was written all over his face.

“Run while I hold him back, young master!” the stout middle-aged man shouted while summoning a hand crossbow into one hand. He pulled the trigger and shot a bolt straight at Ye Qing.

Ye Qing flicked his fingers and sent a Blood Shadow straight into the crossbow bolt, shattering it into pieces. The impact had also scattered the Blood Shadow, but instead of fading into nothing it descended upon the stout man like a giant curtain.

Unwilling to get anywhere close to the Blood Shadow, the stout man dashed ten meters backward with supernatural grace—dodging the Blood Shadow’s attack as a result—and launched even more crossbow bolts at Ye Qing.

Each and every bolt was covered in some sort of strange, twisted pattern. Halfway toward Ye Qing, they actually caught on fire and became twice as deadly as before! This was no ordinary rain of bolts he was facing, this was a storm of fire!

Boom!

In response, Ye Qing punched the air and unleashed a dark red shockwave. Not only did the crossbow bolts shatter into a million pieces, the hand crossbow the stout man was holding had cracked in half as well!

The stout man’s eyes flashed with shock as he pushed off the ground with his right leg and spread his arms slightly. He looked like a swallow as he shot backward with the same supernatural speed from before. As if on cue, a bloody cloud gushed out of the ground and enveloped the space he was at just a second ago.

That was too close, thought the stout man while sailing through the air. If he hadn’t sensed something amiss and dashed away in time, he might have followed in the footsteps of Elder Chen and the bodyguards already!

The stout man wiped away the thick sheen of his forehead as he continued to run away. Every time he was about to hit the ground, he would tap the ground twice in rapid succession and jump into the air once more. His movement was so light that it didn’t even kick up the slightest dust. Fast as lightning, he resembled a swallow flying close to the water without causing a ripple.

Three short bursts later, he crossed nearly forty meters of distance and arrived next to Zheng Tianqi. He took a deep breath and voiced his shock, “We need to go fast, young master. We are no match for this guy!”

“You don’t say?” Zheng Tianqi replied contemptuously before sneering. “Don’t worry, I can deal with him once we reach August Hill Village!”

“That’s good to hear!” The stout man sighed in relief.

It was at this moment a mocking voice turned their blood into ice, “Why are you running? I’m not done playing with you yet!”

The two men subconsciously looked behind them and saw Ye Qing floating toward them like he was a celestial riding the wind. He looked like he should be moving slowly, but in reality he had crossed ten meters of distance and reached them in just the blink of an eye.

“Impossible!” The stout man cried out in shock and terror. Not only was his “Triple Flit Of The Swallow” among the best Qi Invocation stage movement arts out there, it was famed for its amazing speed. Like a swallow flitting across the waters, his speed was comparable to that of a loosed arrow. He rarely found someone who could match his speed, much less outdo him in this department.

Ye Qing did not wait for them to recover from their shock. He dropped his hand and sent a couple of Blood Shadows toward the duo.

Both Zheng Tianqi and the stout man reacted immediately. Zheng Tianqi summoned a doll that looked like it was sewn together using all sorts of rags. It was colorful, but the color combination was just off enough that it elicited a wrong, unsettling feeling instead.

Speaking of unsettling, the doll’s face looked like an amalgamation of everything that was wrong and twisted in this world. Neither a smile nor a cry, its expression was disgusting, dizzying, and chilling to look at.

Zheng Tianqi grabbed a silver needle out of nowhere and poked it into his own flesh. His face immediately warped as if he was enduring a tremendous amount of terrible pain.

The twisted doll’s lips abruptly curved into an odd smile as if it had come alive. Its mouth parted slightly, and—

Screech!

An impossibly loud and high-pitched shriek cut through the air, shredding both the air and the Blood Shadows approaching Zheng Tianqi in an instant.

On the other side, the stout man pulled out a shirt from his storage artifact. It took Ye Qing a second to realize that it was a burial shirt. As soon as he put it on, his complexion started withering at a visible rate, and his vitality vanished as if it did not exist. It was replaced by the thick aura of death instead.

Boom!

The stout man punched out and unleashed a shockwave of death energy, shattering the shapeless, formless Blood Shadows heading for him as well.

“Strange Artifact?” Ye Qing frowned and gathered his energy. The bloody aura surrounding his body shone brighter as a red ripple surged toward the duo with seemingly unstoppable power.

Both Zheng Tianqi and the stout man blanched when they sensed the terrifying power surging toward them. Gritting his teeth, he summoned three silver needles into his hand and poked himself in three different points. A wave of pain so excruciating that he nearly tripped over his feet immediately came over him.

The effects were immediate, however. The doll he was holding shivered, and the lines on its face grew increasingly twisted and evil. At the same time, it let out an evil cackle that formed invisible ripples and filled the air with an evil aura. It clashed against the red ripple and held it at bay.

The stout man simply threw another punch at the red ripple spreading in his direction. The explosion of death energy was just enough to tear it apart.

“Feng Xuan, kill him while I suppress him! It’s either him or us!” Zheng Tianqi shouted while grabbing another five needles and poking himself in five points. The young master immediately felt as if a giant hammer was pounding his body to bits again and again. Perhaps the worst part was that his body was actually fine, so each wave of pain felt just as excruciating as the last. This time, he couldn’t stop spasming even as he continued to run for his life.

“Die! Die! I curse you! DIE!” cursed Zheng Tianqi again and again. It wasn’t just excruciating pain that contorted his face into a horrifying visage. His eyes were filled with wrath and hatred.

“Kekekeke...”

The evil cackle filled Ye Qing with nausea and dizziness. He felt as if a million women were howling in rage, hatred and sorrow in his head at the same time. Not only, a cold, evil aura had spread throughout his body before he knew it and held him in place.

“Now, Feng Xuan! My curse won’t last for long, so do it now!” Zheng Tianqi shouted. He was relieved to see that his curse was successful in paralyzing Ye Qing.

The doll Zheng Tianqi was holding was called the Cursed Doll, a very special Strange Artifact. It was said that a shaman had sewn the doll using the skin of countless snakes, insects, mice, ants and more poisonous creatures and filled it to the brim with their innards. Then, it was submerged in the heart’s blood of forty-nine teenage girls for a total of forty-nine days.

According to the rumors, the shaman loved torturing women. He would torture them to death first using all kinds of unspeakable means before procuring their heart’s blood. It was why the blood-soaked Cursed Doll was possessed by a powerful curse, a curse that embodied the infinite hatred of these innocent, tortured women.

The Cursed Doll could be used to curse others in a wide variety of ways, but only if it was fueled by the wielder’s pain. The more terrible the pain, the greater the curse that was unleashed. That was why Zheng Tianqi had stabbed himself in his bodily points using another Strange Artifact known simply as the Torture Needle. The Torture Needle was a torture instrument used to interrogate and/or torture criminals. Stabbing someone in their points would enlarge their pain to the maximum capacity and prevent them from fainting, meaning that the victim could only endure the pain until the needles were removed.

This was why there was an infamous saying regarding the Torture Needle: “One needle to feel like death, three to feel worse than death, and five to meet Death Himself.” The ordinary person could only take one needle before breaking down completely, while a particularly stubborn one might be able to withstand three. But five needles was the point where anyone who wasn’t immune to pain

would wish they were dead. If the torturer did not remove the needles, the person would literally die from sheer pain.

In the past, Zheng Tianqi only needed three Torture Needles to create a curse potent enough to kill his enemies. However, Ye Qing was so strong that the Cursed Doll emanated an unbelievable amount of fear and reluctance even after he used five Torture Needles on himself. This meant it was highly unlikely he would be able to curse Ye Qing to death. The best he could hope for was to suppress Ye Qing for a short time or deal him a serious blow. That was why he needed Feng Xuan to deal the finishing blow.

“O-oh. Sure!” Seemingly half a beat slower after putting on the burial shirt, he responded to Zheng Tianqi’s order only after the young master had finished his sentence. His voice was hoarse and dragged out as well.

Despite his slow reaction, his movements weren’t slow in the slightest. He took one step toward Ye Qing and unleashed a devastating, death-infused punch.

The punch was aimed at Ye Qing’s chest, but the young man was surrounded by a thin film of red light. The punch was strong enough to put a dent in the film, but not enough to shatter it completely.

“Aaaaahhh!” Feng Xuan let out a full-throated howl. Even more death energy gushed out of his body as the burial shirt glimmered ominously, and his body slowly shriveled over time.

Sizzle sizzle sizzle!

Sizzling noises rang in everyone’s ears as the death energy washed over the bloody film and tried to extinguish it. However, a closer look would reveal that the bloody film was consuming the grayish death energy like prey. It was clear the death energy was going to lose if the situation continued.

Seeing that his plan wasn’t working, Feng Xuan howled, “Kill!” before battering his fists against the film surrounding Ye Qing. He looked like he was going to shatter the young man and his protection via sheer brute force.

But although the bloody film flickered like a dying candle in the wind, it never yielded to the storm attempting to batter it into nothingness. It continued to burn with a kind of warmth and light that was unique to itself.

“Are you done?”

A dozen or so punches later, bloody light as bright as the sun itself abruptly exploded from his amber red pupils. The corner of his lips were slightly curled into a wicked smile.

Boom!

When his smile widened, the Cursed Doll suspended in the air abruptly shuddered and let out a bloodcurdling scream. The next thing Zheng Tianqi knew, his Strange Artifact had burst into flames.

In the flames, the souls of dozens of young women could be seen fading soundlessly into nothing. They were all smiling tearfully and gratefully at Ye Qing.

“No! My Cursed Doll!” Zheng Tianqi screamed at the sight of his destroyed Strange Artifact. He spat out a mouthful of blood even as his face became warped in horror and disbelief.

The next moment, a brilliant light exploded from Ye Qing’s body. Thick as a river of blood, the bloody radiance easily swept Feng Xuan into the sky, helpless and unable to get away. Then, thirty-six Blood Shadows emerged from the light and enveloped him entirely.

Chapter 40: Void

The shapeless Blood Shadows swarmed Feng Xuan from every direction and caught him in their grasp, but unlike their previous kills they were unable to invade his body and sap his vigor and vitality. In fact, they shattered into mists of blood as if something was resisting them.

“That burial shirt he’s wearing is blocking my magic.”

Ye Qing could clearly see the dark gray burial shirt glimmering darkly and shielding Feng Xuan from the Blood Shadows’ advances, but not without a cost. Not only did Feng Xuan look increasingly dead with every passing second, he had become so skinny that he was just skin and bones. The stout man wasn’t anything but stout anymore.

Ye Qing grinned wickedly. “Now I’m curious. How much longer can you hold on before your own Strange Artifact kills you?”

Ye Qing curled his fingers slightly, and the mist of blood abruptly tightened around Feng Xuan. At the center, the formerly stout man could hardly breathe. He felt as if a mountain was threatening to crush him as flat as a pancake. Although the burial shirt was temporarily keeping the crushing pressure at bay with a thick, deathly mist of its own, it came at the cost of his own health. His hair started wilting and snapping at the roots, his teeth started falling off his gums, and an eyeball literally fell off his eye sockets because the surrounding flesh had withered away completely. He looked like he was a hundred years old with one foot in the grave.

Crack crack crack!

Feng Xuan looked absolutely terrified right now. It was because he knew exactly what was happening to him. The burial shirt he was wearing was called the Burial Shirt of the Dead, and it was a Mundane-class Strange Artifact. Its wearer would gain access to its death energy and a temporary but massive boost in strength and speed. It also doubled as a powerful protection that shielded its wearer from all harm.

There was a reason the Strange Artifact was named the Burial Shirt of the Dead, however. Although a living person wearing the shirt would temporarily gain a massive amount of power, it was fueled by their own vigor and vitality. The wearer would die if they did not remove the Strange Artifact before they ran out of time.

Right now, Feng Xuan was facing this exact problem. He wanted to take off the Strange Artifact and beg for mercy, but the surrounding blood mist was like a mountain that was crushing him from all sides. Forget moving, he could not even squeeze out a sentence from his lungs.

Crack crack crack crack... crack.

Just a few breaths later, the last bit of light disappeared from Feng Xuan's eyes. He did not collapse, however. Death energy so thick it almost looked tangible started flowing out of his corpse while a new light settled in his empty eye sockets—light that was deathly green in color.

“Is this how a Strange Artifact awakens after losing its wielder? Interesting!” Curiosity twinkled in Ye Qing's eyes, but he did not allow it to affect his judgment. He curled his fingers a little more, and Feng Xuan's corpse abruptly exploded into dust. Without a vessel to express its power, the Burial Shirt of the Dead had no choice but to withdraw back unto itself and turn back to normal. It then slowly floated to the ground.

Ye Qing appeared underneath the Strange Artifact and caught it in one hand. Smiling, he shoved it into his Nature's Shell.

Ye Qing didn't know what the burial shirt was, but it was clearly a Strange Artifact. Its performance during the battle was subpar, but that was only because its opponent was him. Feng Xuan was a late-stage Qi Invoker, but he was a Vessel Augmentor, one who had cultivated the “Blood Shadow Divine Art”, a top tier Vessel Augmentation cultivation art no less. Not only did the cultivation art more than quadruple the amount of true qi he had, the Blood Shadow Magic was infinitely more powerful and flexible than the original thanks to his overwhelming vigor and unique blood. It was why Feng Xuan had seemed so powerless against him.

Had Ye Qing still been a late-stage Qi Invoker, Feng Xuan would've been a most formidable opponent for him. The stout man didn't just have formidable strength, speed and defense, the death energy of Burial Shirt of the Dead was a direct counter to his greatest strengths. Evil, anti-life, and foul, the death energy could contaminate not just a person's vitality, but also their spirit and consciousness. The combination would have been potent enough to severely injure him and force him to reconsider his revenge.

The Burial Shirt of the Dead was undeniably a powerful Strange Artifact. It was just that its opponent this time was too strong.

On a related note, the Nature's Shell he used to store the burial shirt was of course the spoils he had gotten from Zheng Tianyuan and Prayer.

Ye Qing looked up at Zheng Tianqi after putting away his loot. The young master had not hesitated to make a run for August Hill Village while he was ending Feng Xuan's life. Eyes growing cold, he took one step forward and suddenly froze in place. It wasn't until a breeze blew past the “body” and disintegrated it that it was revealed that it was just an afterimage.

Meanwhile, the real Ye Qing appeared behind Zheng Tianqi and brought down his palm. The surrounding air abruptly turned red and drastically slowed the young master like he was stuck in a quagmire. No matter how he struggled, he could only watch as Ye Qing slowly walked toward him.

“Don't come closer. I will kill everyone in August Hill Village if you do,” Zheng Tianqi threatened. The young master had stopped his futile struggle, but for some reason he didn't look panicked anymore. Apparently, something had filled him with infinite confidence.

Ye Qing was confident he could handle anything Zheng Tianqi could throw at him, however. He snorted in disdain and said, “You think you can threaten me? And whatever makes you think I care about their lives?”

“Right back at you, trash. What makes you think you have the right to threaten *me*?”

In response, Ye Qing commanded a Blood Shadow to appear beneath Zheng Tianqi’s feet and slip into his body. The next second, the young master began shriveling at a visible rate.

Zheng Tianqi was stunned at first. Then, a crazed expression flitted across his face as he screamed, “You forced me to do this, you forced me to do this! LET’S DIE TOGETHER!”

An odd-looking sculpture appeared in Zheng Tianqi’s hand. It was pure white like it was carved from white jade, and it was glowing with some sort of illusory, invisible, and mysterious pattern. The sculpture clearly had a face and an appearance, but for some reason all Ye Qing could see was pale, hollow void. It was indescribable.

Shit. Realizing he might have screwed up, Ye Qing immediately detonated the Blood Shadow in Zheng Tianqi’s body and shattered his heart. He was hoping it would end the young master’s life immediately.

Zheng Tianqi did not react to his injury at all, however. Still laughing like a madman and contorting his face into a warped and evil visage, he abruptly crushed the white sculpture he was holding.

Buzz!

The second the sculpture was crushed, Zheng Tianqi’s body started disappearing little by little. He wasn’t falling apart or disintegrating, he was literally turning into nothing as some sort of unimaginable power was slowly erasing his very existence from this world and returning it to the void. The next moment, an indescribable, terrible power descended from above, and everything—the grass, the trees, the farms, the clouds, the wind and more—started distorting and fading away. It did not matter if the objects were animate or inanimate. They were all slowly but surely turning into nothing.

Run!!!

Terror like nothing Ye Qing had ever felt before seized control of his limbs and took him far, far away before his brain could even process what was happening. Pushing “Blood Sea Fragrance” to the absolute limits, he cut across the meadow like lightning and made a beeline for Little August Hill.

Ye Qing wasn’t the only one who was seized by primordial terror. Countless other Strangers such as the Mud Dolls, the Wind Children, the Lantern Grass, the Human Head Flower, the Two-headed Leopard; the harmful, the harmless, the strong and the weak were all running away from the power and toward Little August Hill with all their might.

Not all of them made it. Countless Strangers were caught by the power of the void and slowly erased from existence itself.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Ye Qing could see that Little August Hill was not exempt from the power. The entire village grew increasingly faint and distorted until it looked more like a mirage than a real thing. He even saw a couple of watchmen on the walls going about their daily routines

when suddenly, an unnatural shudder seized them all at the same time. He could see the terror and confusion on their faces before they vanished into nothing.

This wasn't even the worst part. The worst part was that the unnatural void was rapidly spreading toward its surroundings as if it would wipe out this entire corner of the world.

"What the bloody hell is this thing!?" Ye Qing swore in horror and disbelief. He had thought that Zheng Tianqi was bluffing and trying to buy time to save his sorry ass. That was why he had attacked him with the Blood Shadow. He never thought that the bastard actually had something that was capable of killing him, much less a weapon of mass destruction that seemed capable of erasing an entire corner of the fucking world itself from existence! If he knew this would happen, he would never have pushed him like this!

Impulse really is the devil!

"What do I do?" Ye Qing's eyes darted all over the place as he tried to think of a way out. He looked like a cloud of blood as his true qi surged, and his Blood Shadows were killing every Stranger who was stupid or panicked enough to get between him and Little August Hill.

Right now, the only solution he could think of was to pray that the mysterious, powerful Strangers residing in Little August Hill could stop the spread of the void. If even they couldn't stop it, then he and every unfortunate fuck around him was going to pay the price of his arrogance!

Buzz!

The second he entered Little August Hill, the mountains abruptly shook as if it had awoken from its slumber. A cool breeze blew past the hillocks, rainbow clouds soared through the sky, flocks of birds flew over the forest... every living creature in Little August Hill had mobilized to action at the same time.

Appearance wise Little August Hill looked the same as ever, but Ye Qing's senses told a completely different story. He could feel layers of astonishing power pouring down its peak like tidal waves and crashing against the unnatural void before it could get close. At that moment, space itself vibrated as if destabilizing from the inside out, and formless storms erupted across the entire perimeter and transformed into terrifying vortices of nothingness, void and chaos.

It was amidst this utter chaos that an illusory yet imposing figure appeared into view. The entity was transparent, formless and seemingly did not exist in this world. Ye Qing also saw countless equally transparent and formless tentacles occupying the space that was August Hill Village and everything around it. It would seem that these tentacles were the true culprit behind the very world slowly fading into non-existence.

The gigantic tentacles were stretching toward Little August Hill and attempting to turn the mountains into nothing as well, but they were unable to make any progress as if some sort of mysterious power was keeping them at bay.

"Get lost!"

Suddenly, a great will overflowing with an unimaginable amount of power crashed down from the peak of Little August Hill. The formless tentacles proving the air instantly vanished into nothing.

“That sounded like the mountain god’s voice?” Ye Qing was trying to observe the battle, but when the invisible energy in the sky scattered his eyes started bleeding as if it could not withstand the pressure. He hurriedly looked down like a frightened chick. However, he was almost certain that the voice just now was very similar to the mountain god’s voice during his wedding.

“Void...”

It wasn’t over, however. As if responding to the mountain god’s challenge, the illusory yet definitely terrifying entity in the sky trembled once before waves of unimaginable power crashed down like a ring of waterfalls. It was so terrible that the entire Little August Hill shook for a second, and every living being in the mountains felt a primordial terror that came from their very soul.

“He’s looking at us!” Ye Qing couldn’t see the entity clearly, but he could still feel their gaze focusing on him—or rather, the entire Little August Hill.

It was at this moment a sweet, charming voice broke the silence, “It looks like you’re having performance issues, mountain boy! Haha! I suppose your big sis will lend you a hand!”

The voice was soft and gentle, but it swept across the entire Little Azure Hill like a refreshing breeze. It gradually suppressed the uncontrollable fear that was afflicting its refugees and residents.