

Stranger 41

Chapter 41: Until We Meet Again

“It’s that god-damned bull Stranger and his tail!” Ye Qing blanched when he recognized the voice. He did not hesitate to withdraw his presence as much as possible. The last thing he wanted was to play another cat-and-mouse game with them. The mere recollection of the memory filled him with dread and discomfort.

A gigantic bull began manifesting out of nowhere after the voice was finished. In fact, it kept growing bigger until it nearly took up half the sky.

“MOOOOO!!!”

The next moment, a terrible moo erupted from the bull Stranger and slammed into the void’s power like a tangible thing. The invisible energies clashed against one another so fiercely that the sky itself resembled something straight out of the apocalypse. Everything looked distorted and empty.

Ye Qing could clearly sense that the bull Stranger was losing, however. It steadily lost ground as the void kept corroding and assimilating its power. It wasn’t long before the mighty silhouette of the bull abruptly shattered into pieces, and two gigantic tentacles fell down on Little August Hill like they would wipe it from the face of the earth.

“Just how strong is this bastard? I guess this is it then!” Ye Qing chuckled bitterly. The incomprehensible entity was so strong that it had overwhelmed even the mountain god and the bull Stranger combined. Just what was it?

Just when Ye Qing had given up all hope, a crimson fog abruptly rose from the underbelly of Little August Hill. The fog of blood looked pitifully weak compared to the all-encompassing power threatening to erase Little August Hill from existence itself, but the second the invisible tentacles made contact with it, they reeled back like a child who accidentally touched a piece of red hot coal.

The formless entity had withdrawn the tentacles as quickly as they could, but that brief contact seemed to be all it took to infect it with the blood’s corruptive, destructive power. Red spots began spreading throughout the tentacles and, as if they had been forcefully dragged into reality, they started bleeding crimson, putrefied blood.

“ARGH!”

The painful scream of an evil, indescribable voice resounded throughout Little August Hill for a long time. The two infected tentacles abruptly shattered into a million pieces and rained all over the mountains. The formless entity had also vanished into thin air.

Unfortunately, the entity and the tentacles weren’t the only things that had vanished. Little August Hill and everything around it were gone, leaving behind only a pale white canvas of nothingness and void. There was no greenery, no cooking smoke, no living things, no color, nothing. There was only a strange, empty space that looked like someone had erased half of the canvas that was reality. It was as bizarre as it was unreal.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter, pitter-patter...

Fortunately or unfortunately, red blood rained over the unnatural space just a second later and dyed everything red. It wasn't long before it became the only color in the world. The blood rain would not stop until the puddles had turned into streams, and the massive hole where a village and an entire chunk of land used to be slowly filled up into a lake of blood. It was a lake that was very much like the Jade Dragon Lake, but not completely.

"That void entity looked like it could wipe out everything and anything, but even they could not resist the blood qi of Jade Dragon Lake... just who is the Stranger in the sarcophagus really?"

Ye Qing could not help but wonder out loud as he stared at the blood fog slowly receding into nothing. He was stunned and thankful that he had, against all odds, somehow survived this disaster, but his feelings were quickly replaced by inexplicable sorrow when he looked down and stared at the blood lake where a humble village used to be.

It was true he didn't care much for August Hill Village, but it was still his first "home" since he arrived in this world. Who would've thought that the curtains would fall over the village in such an inexplicable, tragic fashion? Worst of all, its people had done absolutely nothing to deserve this fate.

"Zheng Tianqi... the Zheng Clan of Anyang."

A flame of anger began to burn in Ye Qing's chest. August Hill Village would still be safe and sound if not for them. Lin Hu and countless other innocent souls would not have perished if not for them!

"Very well. I swear to take revenge for you all. Let this be the atonement for my own sins!"

The fault wasn't his, but he was part of the reason things had turned out this way. This was why he must bear this cross and atone for his sins. This was why he must take revenge not just for Lin Hu and all the innocent villagers who had died for this, but also for himself. He would not stop until everyone who was responsible for this tragedy was brought to justice!

Suddenly, a feminine voice snapped Ye Qing right out of his melancholy. "Oh my, is that my cutie I spy over there? I'm so happy! Come to me, quick! Your big sis would like to embrace you right now!"

Ye Qing visibly shuddered when the horrible memories began replaying in his head, and whatever sorrow he was feeling a moment ago was replaced by panic and fear. "Shit! I can't believe I forgot she was here!" He did not hesitate to execute "Blood Sea Fragrance" and sprint down Little August Hill.

"Running again, cutie? But why? Don't you want to be with a gorgeous lady like me forever?" The voice teased. At the same time, he heard the horribly familiar noise of countless trees and rocks being crushed to smithereens once more. Clearly, the bull Stranger was coming after him yet again.

Gorgeous! You're a goddamn tail! How shameless do you have to be to say such a patent lie? Ye Qing rolled his eyes and ran even faster.

“Enough!”

A cold hmph suddenly came from the peak of Little August Hill before the mountains began undulating like tidal waves. Ye Qing abruptly noticed that the earth beneath his feet was pushing him forward like a super high speed walkway. He was gone in just the blink of an eye.

“How dare you interfere with my business, mountain boy! Just watch me ruin your precious trees!”

Right before he was out of earshot, Ye Qing heard the tail-woman screaming in rage and thunderous rumbles that sounded like an earthquake. It was probably the bull Stranger wrecking the forest, again.

.....

“Phew... heavens forbid I ever run into that Stranger again...”

Some time later, the earth stopped undulating, and Ye Qing came to a stop some kilometers away from his original position. He could tell he was no longer in Little August Hill. While looking around and scratching his head in confusion, he wondered out loud, “Where is this? Where have you sent me, mountain god?”

After observing his surroundings for a bit, Ye Qing realized that he was standing on a marked road [1]. Both sides of the road led to mountain wilderness, and he could not find a village or a person anywhere. Thankfully, his confusion was resolved when he followed the road until he encountered a milestone with the words, “Monkey Ridge” etched on it.

“Monkey Ridge... it’s probably referring to that ridge over there, huh?” guessed Ye Qing while staring at a mountain ridge that looked very much like a monkey.

“Wait, I have a map. I can check roughly where I am right now!” Ye Qing tapped his hand with his fist. After pulling a map out of his Nature’s Shell and locating the name “Monkey Ridge”, he exclaimed in surprise, “Damn! I’m almost ten kilometers away from August Hill Village!”

Although Monkey Ridge was right next to Little August Hill, it was a fair distance away from August Hill Village. It would take him hours to return if he walked back from here.

“I’m pretty close to Anyang though. I just need to circle around the Monkey Ridge and pass through the Redstone Forest and Soundless Gorge to reach the border.”

Even if August Hill Village wasn’t gone, he had always planned to leave the place. The mountain god had done him a huge favor by sending him here.

Speaking of which, the map he was using had been retrieved from Zheng Tianqi’s Nature’s Shell. It was a local map encompassing Anyang and the surrounding villages. He must have prepared this when he was getting ready for his treasure hunt in Little August Hill.

As there was no hurry, Ye Qing decided to catch a short rest. Once his true qi had recovered, and his injuries had healed completely, he climbed to his feet and started in the direction of Anyang.

“Croak croak!”

He had only taken a few steps when suddenly, he heard a panicked series of croaks from the sky. He looked up just in time to see a frog falling from the sky. Judging from its wild flailing, it looked like it had been tossed over from somewhere!

“K-Kung Fu Frog?” The frog wore a bright red bandana, a green cloak, and a wooden saber around its waist. Who else could it be if not his buddy, Kung Fu Frog?

Pleasantly surprised, Ye Qing was going to catch it when the frog performed a flip to steady itself. In the end, it was able to land on its feet without his aid.

“Brother Frog!” Ye Qing greeted Kung Fu Frog with great delight. The frog Stranger croaked just as happily when it noticed Ye Qing as well.

“What happened to you, brother? Why did you fall from the sky?” Ye Qing asked.

Kung Fu Frog immediately croaked twice before spitting out two spirit fruits. It pointed back and forth between the fruits and Little August Hill while wearing a very human look of indignance on its face!

Somehow, Ye Qing was able to understand its gestures immediately. “You’re saying that you got tossed out by the mountain god because you sto—I mean, took these spirit fruits, is that it?” *Don’t ask me how I crossed the racial barrier so easily, just know that I know exactly what it’s trying to convey!*

“Croak croak...” Kung Fu Frog nodded while shaking its head disapprovingly. A pause later, it handed the spirit fruits to Ye Qing and puffed up its chest as if to say it wasn’t nearly as stingy as a certain deity!

“You’re giving this to me?” Ye Qing exclaimed in pleasant surprise. Kung Fu Frog nodded affirmatively before spitting another two spirit fruits to indicate that he had more inside its stomach.

The corners of Ye Qing’s lips turned up as he accepted the spirit fruits. The first fruit was emerald like an emerald jade and overflowing with vitality. It also gave off a rich and enticing aroma. The second fruit glowed red like it was on fire and felt a little hot to touch. It was about the size of an infant’s fist and could fit perfectly in his mouth.

“Say... how many such spirit fruits did you take, exactly?”

Ye Qing hadn’t been an ignorant fledgling for quite some time. He might not recognize the spirit fruits’ names or their effects, but he could tell from the immense energy they were emanating alone that they were far more valuable than the Crystal Grapes, Jadeite Fruits and whatchamacallit they had eaten during the wedding!

The two spirit fruits Kung Fu Frog was holding were nothing like his, but no less extraordinary in terms of power, and it had gobbled them down messily like they were some wild berries. The air became dyed with the spirit fruits’ sweet scent as juice flew everywhere.

Upon hearing Ye Qing’s question, Kung Fu Frog spat out another three spirit fruits and tossed them into his hands. It then patted its seemingly bottomless stomach to indicate that it still had a lot more spirit fruits in store!

“...”

Having completely understood the situation, Ye Qing could only roll his eyes at Kung Fu Frog. He reckoned the frog Stranger must have stolen a *lot* of spirit fruits from the mountain god, so much so that the deity finally lost it and tossed it out of Little Azure Hill, literally. It was incredibly benevolent of the mountain god because in his place, he absolutely would've annihilated Kung Fu Frog for robbing the shit out of his backyard!

But he was not the mountain god's servant, and whatever Kung Fu Frog did with its rightful spoils was its business. After putting all five spirit fruits into his Nature's Shell without a shred of shame, he asked, "Well, I don't think the mountain god will welcome you if you go back, so... where do you plan to go from here, Brother Frog?"

Kung Fu Frog froze for a second before looking back at Little August Hill. Ye Qing could see a hint of hesitation and uncertainty in its eyes.

A light bulb suddenly appeared on Ye Qing's head, and he blurted out his thoughts without thinking, "If you have nowhere to go... would you like to come and wander the *jianghu* with me?"

On one hand, he really did want to help Kung Fu Frog. On the other hand, he could use a powerful partner like it.

Unlike a human settlement, the untamed wilderness was rife with Strangers and untold dangers. Although he was now a Vessel Augmentor, and he wasn't completely helpless in this world anymore, he still didn't dare to say that he would make it to Anyang with all of his limbs intact. This world was just that strange and dangerous.

But if he could recruit Kung Fu Frog's aid, then it was a different story. In the past, he was unable to identify how powerful the Stranger was due to his weak cultivation. Now, he could vaguely tell that Kung Fu Frog was probably a Malice-class Stranger. That was incredible all things considered!

In conclusion, he would be much safer if he could travel together with Kung Fu Frog. The Malice-class Stranger alone could handle most threats. Together? They wouldn't be unstoppable, but their chances of survival would be much higher than if they were separated!

"Why hesitate, Brother Frog? It's not like you have anywhere else to go. If you come with me, I promise you we'll have good food to eat and fine wine to drink. We'll cross a thousand mountains and rivers, admire a thousand views, and claim whatever stars and moons we fancy for ourselves! That's the dream, don't you agree?"

Ye Qing's tone was gentle, and his gaze full of lust. Right now, he looked just like a suspicious uncle who was trying to tempt a kid into his van!

"Croak..."

As it turned out, Kung Fu Frog's desire was even simpler than he imagined. Its eyes lit up, and it licked its lips as soon as it heard the words "delicious wine".

Got you! Ye Qing smirked as he pulled out a jar of wine from his Nature's Shell. It belonged to Zheng Tianyuan, of course. Besides the wine, there were many delicacies in the Nature's Shell as well.

Kung Fu Frog literally jumped when it saw the jar. It looked back and forth between the jar and Ye Qing while licking its lips non-stop.

“So? What do you say? If you agree, then this wine is yours!” offered Ye Qing while giving the jar a little wave.

There was no contest. As soon as Kung Fu Frog nodded its head, and Ye Qing had nodded his assent, it immediately grabbed the jar of wine and started taking small sips. At that moment, it looked so happy it could die.

“Man, maybe I shouldn’t have named you Kung Fu Frog. You look every bit like an Alcoholic Frog right now!”? Ye Qing shook his head at the frog Stranger’s unbridled fondness for wine. Heavens only know how it came to enjoy alcohol in the first place.

“Until we meet again, o’ bittersweet home of mine! Farewell! Farewell!”

Having successfully “swindled” a powerful ally to join him, Ye Qing said his final farewell before turning his back on Little August Hill and doing a little wave. The duo then slowly walked into the distance beneath the falling sunset.

Chapter 42: Bleakwind Bandit

“The Incense of Misfortune holds the unique power of bad luck and decline. It is the amalgamation of poverty, inferiority, deterioration, hardship and sorrow. When it is lit, its target will suffer non-stop misfortune as if they had been possessed by the god of misfortune themselves. However, the Incense of Misfortune cannot kill someone directly no matter how unlucky they are!”

“The Incense of Misfortune, eh? How interesting!” Ye Qing commented to no one in particular.

The young man was currently riding a donkey and reading a book with great interest. Kung Fu Frog was sitting on the donkey’s head and sipping from its wine jar from time to time. It also looked a little drunk. The duo was still following the marked road and making their way toward Anyang, a county of Chu.

The donkey was a wild donkey Kung Fu Frog had beaten up and kidnapped from the nearby woods, a Red-class Stranger to be exact. Since it was no match for the Malice-class Stranger or Ye Qing, it had no choice but to be their mount.

The book Ye Qing was reading was called the “Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghosts and Gods”.? He had found it in Prayer’s Nature’s Shell. It didn’t seem like it, but it was his third greatest spoil after the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” and the “Blood Sea Fragrance”.

Twelve terrifying and bizarre divine incense sticks were noted in the book. They were, in no particular order, the Incense of Worship, the Incense of Malediction, the Incense of Sickness, the Incense of Pain, the Incense of Aging, the Incense of Dreams, the Incense of Ghost Summoning, the Incense of Exorcism, the Incense of Requiem, the Incense of Fortune, the Incense of Misfortune, and the Incense of Seven Emotions.

He could personally attest to the miraculous effects of the Incense of Worship, the Incense of Fortune and the Incense of Misfortune; the memory of the last one being especially vivid as he could still feel the phantom bumps on his head even though his injuries had long since healed. Naturally, he wanted to study them as deeply as possible. He could just imagine the applications if he could grasp the method to create these incense sticks.

“To create the Incense of Misfortune, one must gather a bowl of Rootless Water, a clump of hair from a Poverty Ghost, three Misery Flowers, a pair of eyeballs from an Unlucky Cat, one soulfire from a Bleakwind Bandit, and one leaf from a Distress Tree. One must then seek out a location where the five elements are weak and wait for the moment where night passes into morning. Only then can one create the Incense of Misfortune!”

“The Rootless Water is rainwater that hasn’t touched the ground. The Rootless Water, Dustless Water and Sourceless Water are known together as the three Lesser Waters. Do note that Rootless Water that is gathered during a yin month, day and hour is of the highest quality.”

“A Poverty Ghost is a scrawny, emaciated being with a head as big as a bucket, and a pair of eyes that resembled bells. They are the resentful ghost of a person who was poor for most of their life and died without even a single item to their name. Possessed by the power of poverty and decline, a Poverty Ghost’s victim is guaranteed to lose their family and succumb to destitution and homelessness. Every time a Poverty Ghost is successful in destroying the life of a person, a family, or a clan, their head would grow a proportional amount of hair.”

“A Poverty Ghost can usually be found in a wealthy family. They especially love to target kind-hearted and joyful souls. Do seek out people who fit this description if one wishes to capture a Poverty Ghost!”

“Beware! A Poverty Ghost is a yin soul of sorts, so they are shapeless, formless, and impervious to common weapons and attacks. However, their hair is the source of their power and their weakness. Just cut their hair, and the Poverty Ghost would cease to exist in this world!”

“The Misery Flower is a flower created from the tears of a person who has suffered much misery and hardships. It is...”

The more Ye Qing read, the brighter his eyes became. The “Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghosts and Gods” didn’t just explain the way and the materials necessary to create the twelve incense sticks, it also elaborated in great detail what those materials looked like, where they could be found, the best way to acquire them and more.

At least hundreds of materials and Strangers necessary in the creation of the twelve incense sticks were mentioned in the book, and every single one of them was described in great detail. Practically an encyclopedia on Strangers, it was an eye-opening experience for Ye Qing to put it mildly.

“This book... is priceless.”

If he ever encountered a Stranger that was recorded in the “Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghosts and Gods”, he would have an overwhelming advantage over them because he knew exactly how they functioned and what their weaknesses were. This was true even for Strangers who weren't mentioned in the book but had traits in common with those who were. He had no doubt that the knowledge he absorbed from this book would save his life and form the basis of his ability to survive in this world.

Some fools might think otherwise, but “knowledge is power” was most definitely not an empty saying!

“I’m going to focus on reading now, Brother Frog! Please alert me if you notice anything!” Ye Qing said before concentrating on the “Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghosts and Gods” completely.

Clop, clop, clop...

He was halfway through the book when suddenly, the sound of hoofbeats came from a side road that was connected to the marked road. Not long after, a medium-sized group made up of a dozen individuals or so came into view.

Leading at the forefront were four men wearing form-fitting outfits and standardized long sabers around their waist. Their eyes were emotionless, and their faces ice cold. They had clearly seen their fair share of battles.

At the center of the group was a horse-drawn carriage. Despite its dark, unassuming colors, the horse-drawn carriage traversed the uneven road stably and without making the slightest noise. Judging from its make, its passengers were either wealthy, noble, or both.

The horse-drawn carriage was flanked by many more stern-faced guards, but the man riding on the right side of the carriage was particularly noteworthy. He was a muscular middle-aged man riding a fine black horse. He had thick eyebrows, large eyes, and very recognizable facial features. He was also noticeably a lot more fearsome than the rest of the guards.

When the middle-aged man saw Ye Qing and Kung Fu Frog, he raised his eyebrows before waving a hand. The group immediately slowed down, and the guards slowly moved closer to the carriage in a defensive formation.

“What’s wrong, Yan Feng? Is there trouble?” A mellow, rich voice came from within the carriage.

The middle-aged man moved closer to the window before responding in a low voice, “There is a man—a very strange man up ahead, my lord.”

The young man looked to be eighteen or nineteen years old. He was holding a book and riding what was obviously a donkey Stranger. There was also a strange frog on top of the donkey’s head. It was probably the strongest of the three because he was unable to identify its strength, not to mention that

it was wearing a red bandanna around its head, carrying a wooden saber beside its waist, and sipping from a wine jar. To call them a strange combination would be an understatement.

“A strange man?” The man in the carriage hummed in thought for a second before replying, “He could just be an ordinary traveler. Let’s try staying out of each other’s way unless he’s clearly malicious.”

Yan Feng saluted. “As you command!”

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was studying the approaching group curiously. *These people are quite strong*, Ye Qing thought to himself. Most of the guards were early-stage to middle-stage Qi Invokers, and that Yan Feng was a late-stage Qi Invoker. They were also extremely well-trained considering that they were all carrying themselves in a disciplined and organized fashion.

When the group got close, Ye Qing slapped his donkey in the temple and retreated to the side. When the guards stared at him with naked wariness, he simply responded with a polite smile. Sensing no ill will from Ye Qing and caught off guard by his manners, Yan Feng subconsciously returned a nod before resuming his duties.

Are they heading to Anyang as well? Ye Qing thought when he noted that the group seemed to be heading in the same direction as him. Smiling, he cast his stray thoughts to the back of his mind and slapped his mount again. While the donkey slowly shifted behind the group, he picked up his book and resumed his reading.

Some time later, Yan Feng shot the young man following thirty or so meters behind a frown before calling out to the person inside the carriage, “My lord?”

“Yes?”

“That strange man is still following us. Should I give the order to chase him away, or...?”

The person in the carriage remained silent for a bit before replying, “Let’s not do that. He might just be headed in the same direction as us. As long as he isn’t malicious, I don’t mind him following us.”

“One more thing. If the traveler encounters any danger, do help him if it is within our ability to provide aid!”

“Yes, my lord!” Yan Feng answered affirmatively.

When Monkey Ridge was fully behind the group, their vision abruptly cleared up as if the mountain wilderness on both sides of the marked road had disappeared. Ahead of them was a flat valley with a single river passing through it, and a lush forest on both sides of the river.

Something wasn’t right about the woods, however. It felt dark, gloomy, and most uncomfortable.

Woooo... wooooo...

The group was passing through the forest when suddenly, a dark, chilly gale blew hard against them. The trees swayed violently, and the shadows on the ground looked like phantoms threatening to rip the life out of them. Everyone shivered and blanked out for a moment.

“Something’s not right about this wind!”

Not far behind the group, Ye Qing lowered his book as a red aura flashed around his body and shredded the powerful gale before it could get close. A bit of flint entered his eyes as he looked at the direction where the wind was coming from.

“Neeeeeigh!”

The next moment, loud horse neighs pierced through the air, and ghastly silhouettes suddenly emerged from the wind.

The unnatural silhouettes rode large horses made purely from yin energy. They wore armor and wielded large sabers. Their ghastly green eyes flickered in the wind like ghost fire, and their mouths were opened in a soundless cry as they charged toward Yan Feng’s group. They looked like bandits, but they were very obviously not human.

“The Bleakwind Bandits!” Ye Qing immediately matched the ghastly Strangers ahead of him to a record in the “Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghosts and Gods”.

The Bleakwind Bandits were Red-class Strangers. They were former bandits who were corrupted by winds of yin energy and transformed into monsters who knew nothing but slaughter. They were known as Bleakwind Bandits because their mounts were composed of yin energy, their bodies were made from the very wind that transformed them, and they traveled on the wind itself.

There was nothing more a Bleakwind Bandit loved than killing travelers. Once their victims were dead, a Bleakwind Bandit would consume their bodies, capture their souls, and corrupt them so that they would become their eternal slaves!

“Bleakwind Bandits! We are under attack by the Bleakwind Bandits! Form up and protect our lord!” Yang Feng shouted, having recognized the murderous Strangers instantly.

The guards did not hesitate to unsheathe their long sabers and maintain a tight ring around the carriage. When the Bleakwind Bandits were close, Yang Feng barked out another order,

“Empower your sabers with a flame talisman!”

Everyone did as he ordered and slapped a flame talisman to the blade of their saber. The blades immediately burst into flames.

“Now kill them all!”

The next moment, everyone attacked the Bleakwind Bandits directly in front of them.

Boom!

A chain of explosions occurred as the flames roared, and the yin wind howled. A dozen Bleakwind Bandits were torn to shreds just like that. Not planning to show their attackers any quarter, Yan Feng and the guards kept pressing forward until every single Bleakwind Bandit had been annihilated.

“He’s employing brute force to crush the Bleakwind Bandits’ frail bodies, and yang to counter ying. A most intelligent tactic!” Ye Qing nodded in approval but shook his head immediately after. “Unfortunately, it’s not enough!”

As if on cue, the shattered Bleakwind Bandits reformed their bodies in the wind, let out a soundless howl, and charged Yan Feng's group once more.

Yang Feng's group did not panic. Still maintaining their tight formation, they crushed the incoming Bleakwind Bandits once more. However, the Strangers reformed their bodies before they could catch their breaths and charged again as if nothing had ever happened. It was as if they were unkillable and undying.

Of course, that wasn't entirely true. The yin wind blowing in the air was weaker than before, and the ghastly flames burning in the Bleakwind Bandits' eye sockets were dimmer. Clearly, their efforts weren't futile.

"Stay strong, brothers! We just need to kill them a couple more times to end their sorry existence once and for all!" Yang Feng shouted to keep morale high.

Individually, the Bleakwind Bandits were fairly weak. However, they were ghosts whose existence had sprung from resentment, and their body from the yin wind. Shapeless and formless, they would never die until the yin wind that sustained them had died out completely. That was why they were extremely annoying to take down. Most people knew only one way to end them, and that was to kill them again and again until they had completely run out of energy. It was why many people would rather duke it out against a powerful Stranger than to outlast the Bleakwind Bandits.

Chapter 43: Bleakwind Bandit Leader

"The plan isn't the worst plan ever, but the cost is too high!" Ye Qing said while shaking his head. It was true that killing the Bleakwind Bandits repeatedly until they ran out of energy was a viable plan, but it was easily the worst one of them all. Not only was it exhausting, there was a real chance they might suffer casualties. At that point, it would be a pyrrhic victory even if they did manage to defeat the Bleakwind Bandits.

As predicted, Yan Feng's group started taking damage over time. A few guards were forced to withdraw from the battle after using too much true qi and taking injuries as a result. Although the Bleakwind Bandits were also weakening, their numbers hadn't decreased in the slightest. It wasn't long before the scales started tilting in the Strangers' favor!

"Oh well, I suppose I can lend them a hand!" Ye Qing smiled and vanished from view without warning.

In the middle of a forest, a cyclone made up of yin wind was spinning on a clearing. It almost looked like an eye in the sky from below. At the center of the cyclone was a silhouette that looked vaguely humanoid.

"Yep. This is the source!"

Ye Qing reappeared next to the cyclone and gave it a quick look. After his suspicion was confirmed, he calmly stepped into the cyclone. The howling wind tried to attack him as a matter of course, but it was easily shredded by the faint red aura surrounding his body. He looked so steady it was as if the cyclone didn't exist at all.

Wooooooooo...

As soon as he reached the eye of the cyclone, a bone spear suddenly appeared out of nowhere and stabbed at Ye Qing's head. The weapon hadn't made the slightest noise, and even if it had it would've been masked by the howling wind around it. However, Ye Qing still dodged it by millimeters as if he saw it coming. Not wasting a second, he stepped forward and struck the bone spear with a finger.

Bang!

The bone spear splintered inch by inch as if it was hit by lightning, not a finger. The next moment, a thousand spears made of yin wind appeared all around him and stabbed at him. Not afraid in the slightest, Ye Qing threw a punch that scattered his Blood Shadows and true qi in every direction and shattered the spears. After the spears were gone, and the yin wind had dissipated, a tall, brawny Bleakwind Bandit was revealed in front of Ye Qing.

Not only was this Bleakwind Bandit bigger and fiercer than the ones still attacking Yan Feng's group, his wind-made body looked dense enough to be solid. He was clad in armor and carrying a spear. A pair of fist-sized soulfires burning with ruthlessness and madness resided within his eye sockets.

"You're definitely the Bleakwind Bandit Leader. Good. Once you're dead, this matter will be resolved!" Ye Qing declared while recalling the way to kill the Bleakwind Bandits as stated in the "Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghost and Gods".

Killing the Bleakwind Bandits again and again and depleting their energy and soulfires was one way to end them once and for all. It was also the dumbest method. According to the book, all subjects were ruled by a king, and all bandits were ruled by a bandit leader. The Bleakwind Bandits were no exception. The Bleakwind Bandit Leader was both the leader and the strongest fighter of the Bleakwind Bandits. It was he who controlled them to attack the travelers with his soulfire. As the saying went, one should cut off the head to kill a snake. The Bleakwind Bandits would disintegrate on their own if the Bleakwind Bandit Leader was killed.

Of course, the Bleakwind Bandit Leader was the only one with a soulfire. While each Bleakwind Bandits seemed to carry a soulfire as well, it was really a piece of the Bleakwind Bandit Leader's soulfire and his method of controlling them. To put it simply, those soulfires didn't count any more than a person's skin counted as their heart.

It so happened that the soulfire of a Bleakwind Bandit was one of the main ingredients to create the Incense of Misfortune. Naturally, Ye Qing wasn't about to allow such an excellent opportunity to slip through his grasp.

The Bleakwind Bandit Leader roared and threw a punch at Ye Qing when he saw him. Innumerable streams of yin wind immediately gathered around his fist and converged into a river of pure power that seemed capable of crushing anything and everything.

"Croak!"

Instead of dodging, Ye Qing executed the Toad Force and waved at the Bleakwind Bandit Leader. A blood red, lifelike toad immediately manifested in front of him before letting out a loud, devastating

croak. It easily shredded the river of yin wind and slammed into the Bleakwind Bandit Leader's body, exploding his torso and dissolving it into wind.

"Looks like the combination of the Toad Force's explosive power and the Blood Shadow Divine Art's control over true qi is pretty great!" Ye Qing commented with a wide grin. As soon as the Bleakwind Bandit Leader had reformed its body, a web made of innumerable red threads appeared out of nowhere and caught the Stranger like a fish.

The Bleakwind Bandit Leader howled in fury, but he was unable to free itself from his bindings despite its fragile appearance. While it was held in place, Ye Qing produced a small porcelain bottle from his Nature's Shell and extended his hand toward the Bleakwind Bandit Leader's head. As if sensing his impending doom, the Stranger started struggling and howling with all his might. At the same time, the surrounding yin wind surged toward Ye Qing from every direction like a tidal wave.

Ye Qing paid them no heed, however. He simply sped up a little, grabbed the Bleakwind Bandit Leader's skull, and crushed it with just a sliver of force. After curling his fingers and binding the two soulfires with countless blood threads, he slowly pulled them away from the Stranger's body.

The farther the soulfires strayed from their original position, the weaker the Bleakwind Bandit Leader's struggles became. When the soulfires were fully removed from his body, the Bleakwind Bandit Leader abruptly ceased struggling and crumbled into nothing. The howling wind in the air had stopped as well.

Everything returned to stillness and tranquility in just the blink of an eye. It was almost as if nothing had happened.

Ye Qing wasn't surprised by the drastic change. The soulfire was the essence of the Bleakwind Bandit Leader. So long as its soulfire was still intact, the Bleakwind Bandit Leader would never die. On the other hand, destroying or removing its soulfire would destroy it instantly.

"What a strange energy!" commented Ye Qing while playing with the Bleakwind Bandit Leader's soulfires for a bit. Later, he stored them in his porcelain bottle and smiled in satisfaction.

"It's time to go back!"

.....

Back on the marked road, a wounded, tired Yan Feng watched incredulously as the Bleakwind Bandits attacking his men abruptly disappeared into nothingness. It took him a good few seconds to process that the battle was over.

"What just happened?" A guard voiced his confusion while wiping away the blood on his face. "Do you know anything, brother Yan?"

"Of course I don't!" Yan Feng rolled his eyes at his subordinate before muttering, "Maybe we were so strong that they decided to run and fight another day?"

That was what he said, but he highly doubted that was the case.

“What’s the situation, Yan? Feng?” a voice came behind him. The curtains on the window of the horse-drawn carriage were lifted to reveal a scholarly man in his fifties. Despite his thin appearance, his spirit was strong, and he carried himself with authoritative weight and dignity. He seemed calm and collected despite facing a life-and-death crisis just a moment ago.

“We’re safe now, my lord!” Yan Feng rushed over to his lord’s side and answered. He hesitated for a moment before adding, “We haven’t actually beaten the Bleakwind Bandits, but they suddenly disappeared all at once for some reason!”

The scholarly man thought for a moment before saying, “It doesn’t matter as long as we’re safe. This world is full of strange and inexplicable things after all. Let us be off before more danger besets us, Yan Feng. I would like to reach Anyang by the day after tomorrow at the latest!”

“As you command!” Yan Feng responded with a salute. Although everyone was injured to a certain degree, none of them were hurt so bad that they were incapacitated. They set off again after taking a short moment to rest and reorganize.

Before they took off, Yan Feng looked behind him but could not spot the young man or his donkey anywhere. The light in his eyes dimmed as he let out a mournful sigh. The situation just now was so critical that they simply could not afford to lend the young man a hand. He hadn’t actually seen him going down, but Yan Feng was almost certain that the young man was dead.

“Let’s go!” Yan Feng pushed his stray thoughts to the back of his mind before ordering his men to leave.

However, not long after they resumed their journey, Yan Feng suddenly heard the plodding clop of hooves not far behind them. He instinctively looked back and was shocked to find the young man and his donkey once more. The young man was reading his book, and the strange frog was sitting on the donkey’s head just like before!

“He’s still alive?!” Yan Feng was stunned to put it mildly. As if sensing his gaze, the young man looked up from his book and shot him a smile. Then, he returned to his book once more.

Could he be a hidden master? Yan Feng responded with a stiff nod while thinking, *No, it can’t be. There’s no way a master can be this young. He probably just got lucky and avoided the worst of the assault.*

.....

“We’ll camp here tonight!”

As the sunset fell, and night approached, Yan Feng’s group decided to set up camp at a clearing next to a stream. It wasn’t long before the tents were pitched, the campfires were lit, and the delicious smell of food permeated in the air.

It had been a long day, one that had ended in a harrowing skirmish no less. The group could not help but relax as they basked in the warmth and scents.

After the broth was ready, Yan Feng glanced at the young man who had set up camp just beyond their campsite. He was sitting on a rock and still reading his book by his fire. Yan Feng then turned to one of his subordinates—a young man in his twenties—and ordered, “Yang Guan, fill a bowl of broth and deliver it to that young man!”

“Whuh? Whai?” Yang Guan asked unclearly. He had snatched a piece of meat from his companion’s hands and stuffed it into his mouth.

“Because there is no harm in showing a traveler who’s headed in the same direction as us a bit of good will, and because I told you so! Just do as I say!” Yan Feng furrowed his brow into a stern frown nearing the end of his sentence.

Yang Guan was reluctant, and it showed in both his expression and his movements. When Yan Feng noticed that he was taking his time to fill the bowl with more meat, he chided Yang Guan with a wry shake of the head, “If you’re fast, you can still make it back in time and enjoy some meat! Otherwise, there won’t be anything left for you!”

“Oh yeah!” Yang Guan’s eyes lit up and got up to his feet immediately. Before he left, he shoved two more pieces of meat into his mouth and warned everyone, “I’m the one who cooked this broth, so you bastards better leave some for me, you hear? Don’t be an ingrate!”

“Of course—not! Now go fucking do your job already! Haha!”

“Cunt!”

Yang Guan finally ran off while his colleagues continued to battle each other to claim the most meat. Despite his incredible speed, his hand was as steady as a rock, and not a single drop of broth dripped out of the bowl. He reached Ye Qing in just a matter of seconds.

“Hey dude! Brother Yan told me to give you this!” Yang Guan handed Ye Qing the bowl of broth and said in a light tone, “It’s cold and humid tonight. A bowl of soup will keep you warm until the next day.”

“Thank you!” Ye Qing did not decline the offer. After blowing the soup once and taking a small sip, he replied smilingly, “Wow! It’s fresh and tasty. Thank you for your generosity!”

“You have a discerning tongue, my dude!” The praise blew away what little resentment Yang Guan felt toward Ye Qing for causing him to miss out on his precious meat as he puffed up his chest. “I’m the one who cooked it, you know? It’s a family recipe that no one besides those in my squad got to enjoy!”

“Oh, but where are my manners? My name is Yang Guan. What’s your name? Where are you going, and why are you out alone in the wilderness?”

Chapter 44: Rosemary Bird

“My name is Ye Qing. I’m going to Anyang to further my studies!” Ye Qing answered succinctly.

“Study? You’re a scholar?” Yang Guan exclaimed in surprise but quickly came to terms with the answer. “That makes sense. You’ve been holding that book of yours and reading all day. You’re obviously a bookworm, and there are only so many kinds of bookworms in this world.”

“But why are you, a helpless scholar, traveling to Anyang all by yourself? Aren’t you worried you might be killed by a Stranger in the middle of nowhere?”

“I never said I’m a helpless scholar,” Ye Qing said with a smirk, “and I’m not alone either. Brother Frog, will you please introduce yourself?”

“Croak!”

A frog’s croak interrupted the conversation as Kung Fu Frog leaped out of the darkness. It executed an expert-level flip in the air before landing on a rock, causing Yang Guan to flinch a little. It took him a few seconds to realize that the Stranger was none other than the strange frog sitting on the donkey’s head earlier.

The young guard hadn’t felt much when Kung Fu Frog was far away, but now he could clearly feel its aura. Fear and trepidation gripped him like a vice grip. The Stranger was small, but Yang Guan felt as if he was facing a monster so terrifying that its pressure alone was enough to ground his courage to dust. Forget resisting, he could barely summon the energy to continue breathing.

“B-b-b-brother, i-i-i-it’s...” Yang Guan stammered as his blood froze inside his veins. He was so scared he could not even say a complete sentence.

“Hahaha! Don’t be afraid, my friend. Its name is Kung Fu Frog, and I promise he won’t hurt you!” Ye Qing laughed while giving Yang Guan a comforting pat on the shoulder.

Taking comfort in the gesture and his laugh, Yang Guan gradually calmed down but couldn’t quite shake off his nervousness completely. He gulped audibly before asking, “You sure... you sure he won’t hurt a human?”

“Of course! I’m still alive, am I not? You’re alive, are you not?” Ye Qing smiled comfortingly at Yang Guan before looking at Kung Fu Frog. “Brother Frog, Brother Yang gave us a bowl of broth even though he didn’t have to. Do you think we should reciprocate his kindness?”

Kung Fu Frog thought for a second before slapping its tummy. A jar of wine appeared in its hands, and it handed it to Yang Guan.

The young guard subconsciously took a step away from Kung Fu Frog and glanced at Ye Qing for help. Ye Qing simply smiled and said, “You really don’t need to be so nervous, Brother Yang. Brother Frog is just reciprocating your kindness. I can tell you right now that there’s nothing Brother Frog loves more than wine, so you better not turn it down, you hear?”

“Really?” Yang Guan mustered his courage and accepted the jar of wine. When he waited for a few seconds and noted that he was still alive, he let out a small sigh of relief and said, “Thank you, Brother Frog!”

“Croak!” Kung Fu Frog croaked in response before going over to the bowl of broth and taking a small sip. When the sensations hit its tongue, its eyes lit up, and it croaked repeatedly as Yang Guan as if to say it was delicious. It proceeded to down the broth in large gulps.

“Haha...” Yang Guan relaxed completely when he saw just how much Kung Fu Frog loved his broth. He also felt a surge of pride knowing that his cooking was well received even by a Stranger. He said, “I’ll be taking my leave then. You two have a good night.”

“We will. See you later, Brother Yang!” Ye Qing said with a wave.

Yang Guan had just taken a few steps when he recalled something. He turned back and said, “Feel free to lie down closer to our camp when you rest later. It’ll be safer that way...”

As soon as he said this, Yang Guan recalled that Ye Qing was protected by Kung Fu Frog. Who would dare to attack the young man when he was protected by such a powerful Stranger? *No wonder he’s confident enough to travel to Anyang alone.* He trailed off and scratched his head in embarrassment.

He’s a good person, Ye Qing thought with a smile. He had a barbed tongue, but he was really a forthright and simple guy with a good heart. So, he saluted Yang Guan and said, “Thank you, Brother Yang. I will take you up on the offer!”

“Hehe...” Yang Guan scratched his head while chuckling. One last wave later, he finally returned to the camp.

When he sat down by the campfire, Yan Feng asked concernedly, “What took you so long, Yang Guan? Did something happen?”

Yang Guan slurped up his broth noisily before answering, “Nah, I was just having a chat with Ye Qing!”

“Ye Qing? Is that his name?” Yan Feng asked curiously, “Did you find out why he’s out on the road and where he’s going?”

Yang Guan answered, “Ye Qing is a scholar. He’s going to Anyang to further his studies.”

Yan Feng was very surprised. “A scholar? He, a helpless scholar, is traveling to Anyang all by himself? Is he bold or mad?”

“Hehe...” Yang Guan smirked when he noticed that Yan Feng’s reaction was more or less the same as his. “What makes you say that? There is no law that forbids a scholar from traveling alone, and even if there is, whoever said that Brother Ye is alone?”

The young guard then got up to his feet and left just like that.

Yan Feng: "..."

I bloody knew it! One day without the lash, and these rascals are already forgetting themselves!

.....

Midnight soon came, and the whole world was silent save for the chirps of insects. Yang Guan and four other guards were keeping watch next to a campfire, chatting idly and scanning their surroundings from time to time. No one noticed that a near odorless scent had drifted into their camp and filled up their lungs.

Suddenly, Yang Guan rose to his feet and walked away from the camp. However, his four companions did not react to his abrupt departure at all. Not only that, they continued speaking to the empty space where Yang Guan was as if he was still present. It was bizarre to say the least.

After Yang Guan had left the camp, he walked toward the forest and even waved his hand from time to time as if he was responding to a distant companion. The strange thing was that there was no one in the direction he was waving at all. There was only a faint mist and a strange bird perched high up on a tree.

The bird had pitched black feathers and was about as big as a crow. It also had a pair of dark green eyes that glittered darkly in the night. But unlike a crow, it had an unusually long tail that almost looked like a mouse's tail. The near odorless scent that permeated the camp had come from this tail.

The strange bird stared at Yang Guan as he came closer and closer to the tree it was perched on. Its dark green eyes flashed with human delight and cruelty as it continued to wave its tail. The scent grew thicker and thicker.

Yang Guan was about to walk right beneath the strange bird when suddenly, a hand caught his shoulder, and a voice called out to him from behind, "What are you doing here, Brother Yang?"

Yang Guan felt a warm energy entering his body and clearing up his muddled head in an instant. He looked back and saw Ye Qing smiling warmly at him.

"Ye Qing! You scared me!" Yang Guan said smilingly before answering, "My friend was calling me to follow him, so I—wait, where is he?"

Yang Guan stared into the empty woods in confusion. His friend was right there just a second ago, and now he was gone. How was that possible?

"A friend?" Ye Qing's smile widened as he pointed upward. "Are you sure *that's* your friend?"

Yang Guan looked up and spotted the strange bird immediately. The way its dark, unfathomable eyes seemed to be peering into the soul chilled him to the core.

"What is it?"

"The Rosemary Bird is a Red-class Stranger that looks like a crow, but is distinguishable by its long mouse tail. Its tail emanates a near odorless scent that is similar to a rosemary's, but with the additional effect of strong hallucinogenic properties. It is how it draws its victim away using illusions."

“When the victim has reached the Rosemary Bird, it would increase the amount of scent it’s giving off and slowly numb their nerves until they can’t feel anything. Then, the Rosemary Bird would land on their head, peck open their skull, and consume their brain. The good news is that the victim won’t feel any pain throughout the gruesome process. They won’t die until the Rosemary Bird has completely consumed the brain either. The bad news is... I don’t need to tell you what it is, do I?”

“So, to explain what happened to you earlier, you were entranced by the Rosemary Bird and a moment away from becoming its latest victim. The friend you saw? It was just an illusion!”

“Oh god, oh god, oh god...” Yang Guan broke out in cold sweat as he ran his hands over his head frantically to check that there wasn’t a hole in his head. He did not even want to think what would have happened to him if Ye Qing hadn’t saved him.

“So? Are we still following your ‘friend’, or?” Ye Qing joked.

“Come now! That isn’t funny at all!” Yang Guan smiled awkwardly before his anger caught up to him. He looked up at the damn bird that nearly killed him and drew his saber.

However, Ye Qing caught his arm and said, “It’s already dead, Brother Yang!”

As soon as he said this, something snapped the Rosemary Bird’s neck before pushing it down the tree branch. When Yang Guan’s eyes adjusted, he realized it was Kung Fu Frog.

“Brother Frog!” Yang Guan cheered. He should’ve known the powerful Stranger would be present.

“Croak!” Kung Fu Frog croaked in greeting before jumping to the forest floor.

As soon as the Rosemary Bird hit the ground, Ye Qing immediately pulled out a knife and cut off its tail. He then cut open its stomach from the tail, stuck his hand into its entrails, and pulled out something that looked like a gallbladder. It smelled surprisingly nice even though it should be the opposite.

“What is that, Ye Qing?” Yang Guan asked when he saw Ye Qing stuffing the gallbladder into his Nature’s Shell.

Ye Qing replied, “It’s the Rosemary Bird’s scent gland. Similar to the venom gland of a venomous snake, it contains the scent the Rosemary Bird uses to influence its victims.”

“Do you know what it’s used for?” The young guard asked curiously.

“Oh, it can be used for many things. The scent can be turned into incense, spice, pills and medicine. It can even be used to improve one’s cultivation and magic!” What Ye Qing did not say was that the Rosemary Bird’s scent gland was one of the key ingredients to create the Incense of Dreams.

“I see!” Yang Guan replied a little dizzily.

Ye Qing wasn’t done with the carcass, however. He produced a porcelain bottle next and began collecting the Rosemary Bird’s blood.

Yang Guan was puzzled. “Why are you collecting its blood? It stinks like hell, and I doubt it can be used to make medicine.”

After collecting a full bottle of blood, Ye Qing handed it to Yang Guan and explained smilingly, “It’s true that the blood of the Rosemary Bird can’t be used to make medicine, but it can be used to save lives, specifically you and your friends!”

“You’ve all inhaled the Rosemary Bird’s scent for some time, and the scent is toxic to a certain extent. If you do not remove the toxin in time, you will wake up tomorrow with a pounding headache and nausea, and fall ill for the next couple days.”

“Thankfully, the blood of the Rosemary Bird can cure this. When you return to your colleagues, feed them exactly one drop of blood. No more, no less. You should be fine after that!”

“Ah...” Yang Guan blanked out again after hearing Ye Qing’s advice. He wasn’t doubting the young man’s words—he would be dead already if it wasn’t for him—he was just having trouble processing everything that had happened tonight, so much so that he half-thought that he was still dreaming. However, what shocked him the most was the extent of Ye Qing’s knowledge. Even long-time hunters would have trouble identifying the exact characteristics and properties of a Stranger, and yet this young man—he wasn’t even in his twenties yet!—had said it all like it was nothing. Of course he was having trouble accepting this.

“What’s wrong?” Ye Qing asked when he noticed that Yang Guan was just staring at him blankly.

The young guard snapped out of his reverie and asked, “You said you’re a scholar, right? How do you know so much about Strangers?”

A tiny smirk crept onto Ye Qing’s face. “I don’t understand what you mean? It’s perfectly normal for a scholar, an icon of knowledge, to be aware of such things, is it not?”

Yang Guan: “...”

Normal?

A normal scholar is someone who uses unnecessary complex words to feel superior to others and mask their lack of knowledge about everything outside the books! They definitely shouldn’t know about Strangers like the back of their hand!

You’re not a fake, are you?

Chapter 45: Bellyfish Egg

“My lord! We have a problem!”

The night eventually faded, and sunlight not unlike the underbelly of a fish broke over the horizon. It spilled across the ground like ripples in clear water. It was a shame that moment of tranquility had to be shattered by a panicked cry.

“What happened?” A dignified-looking man asked while stepping out of his tent. Yan Feng was right behind him.

“My lord, Brother Yan. Two of our brothers were cleaning themselves by the stream when suddenly, they complained about a stomach ache. Then... then...” the guard’s eyes flashed with terror as he recalled what was clearly a horrifying memory.

“Go on!” Yan Feng urged.

The man jolted out of his reverie and continued, “Their bellies started growing bigger and bigger. They are still growing as we speak!”

“Follow me!” The dignified-looking man made up his mind immediately and strode toward the stream. Yan Feng and the others hurriedly followed behind him.

They had just gotten close to the stream when they heard the sound of muffled groans and moans. When they entered a clearing, they saw two men lying on the ground with stomachs as swollen as that of a woman who was ten months pregnant. Their faces were contorted with pain, and no one seemed to know what to do or how to help them.

“What happened? How did Luo Fang and Lin Shaobo become like this?” The dignified-looking man asked urgently while checking both men’s pulses. Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to identify their affliction.

“W-We don’t know either!” The surrounding guards looked at one another with varying looks of confusion and bewilderment.

“Yan Feng! See if you can find anything!” The dignified-looking man beckoned for Yan Feng to help him. Yan Feng obeyed the order and inspected the two men carefully, but he was unable to find any clue either. In the end, he tried putting his hands on the men’s swollen bellies. As soon as he did this, their bellies suddenly grew larger, and the two men let out a bloodcurdling scream. Yan Feng immediately withdrew his hands as a matter of course.

Although the two men were in terrible pain, they were neither unconscious nor delirious, at least not yet. Yan Feng asked urgently, “Luo Fang, Lin Shaobo, can you hear me? If you can, I need you to tell me exactly what happened to you?”

“B-Brother Yan, we’re not sure what happened either. We just drank a few mouthfuls of water when we were cleaning ourselves by the stream, and then... and then... argh!” Luo Fang did not manage to finish before his and Lin Shaobo’s stomachs grew yet again. Their bellies were so swollen that their clothes had been pushed away, and one could vaguely see the blood vessels and bulging veins.

“The water?” The dignified-looking man and Yan Feng exchanged a glance before striding toward the stream immediately. However, the stream looked crystal clear and untainted. The fishes darting here and there indicated that there shouldn't be anything wrong with the water either.

“What do we do, my lord?” Yan Feng requested his lord's guidance.

The dignified-looking man thought for a second before answering, “A Stranger is probably behind Luo Fang and Lin Shaobo's affliction, but we do not have a Stranger specialist or a doctor with us. The only thing we can do now is to make haste back to Anyang and request help from the Pacification Bureau!”

“At once!” Yan Feng replied before ordering, “Carry Luo Fang and Lin Shaobo into the carriage! We will depart for Anyang immediately.”

“Understood!” A few guards replied and tried to lift Luo Fang and Lin Shaobo to their feet. However, the two men screamed as soon as they touched them because their stomachs had grown yet again. In fact, their bellies were stretched so much that they looked almost transparent. Like a pair of balloons that had been stretched to their limits, it looked like they might explode at any moment.

The guards immediately let go as a matter of course. For a time, no one even dared to touch them!

“What do we do, my lord?” If they couldn't even touch the two men, forget making it to Anyang, their stomachs were probably going to burst and kill them in just a moment.

The dignified-looking man looked lost. Everyone looked lost. What could they possibly do to save the two men's lives?

It was at this moment a meek voice broke the grave silence. “M-my lord, Brother Yan, I-I might know a way to help them?”

Yan Feng identified the speaker immediately and frowned. “What do you know, Yang Guan? Tell us!”

Yang Guan answered a bit nervously, “There is one man who might be able to figure out what happened and save Brother Luo and Brother Lin's life.”

“And who might this man be?” Yan Feng urged.

“Ye Qing!”

“Ye Qing? You mean that young scholar who's hoping to further his studies?” Yan Feng said incredulously as the young man's youthful face flashed across his mind. He shook his head in disappointment before rebuking Yang Guan, “We don't have time for this, Yang Guan! Our brothers may die at any moment! What can a youngster like him possibly do to help?”

“So what if he’s young? He’s a scholar!” Yang Guan retorted.

“...”

What does that have to do with anything?

Yang Guan added when he saw the confusion on Yan Feng’s face, “A scholar is knowledgeable, right? So he might know how to save our brothers!”

“I agree on the point that a scholar is knowledgeable, but our lord is a scholar as well, one who has decades more knowledge and experience than the young man no less! If even he doesn’t know how to save our Lo Fang and Shaobo, then how could Ye Qing possibly do better than him?” Yan Feng rebuked Yang Guan while shooting his lord a subconscious glance.

The dignified-looking man’s expression grew a tad awkward. *Why do I feel like I’ve brought shame to my fellow scholars?*

There was no time to waste, however. The dignified-looking man quickly composed himself and coughed twice. “You must have a reason for saying this, right Yang Guan?”

Yang Guan nodded and quickly told a summary of what had happened to him last night. As expected, everyone including the four guards who were keeping watch together with Yang Guan looked stupefied when he reached the end of his story.

“I’m not doubting you, Yang Guan, but... you’re not joking, are you?” Yan Feng asked incredulously. He hadn’t sensed a thing last night.

“Of course not! I’m telling you the truth!” Yang Guan declared with absolute confidence. “You can check the forest if you want to! I’m willing to bet that the Rosemary Bird’s body is still there!”

The dignified-looking man raised a hand and declared, “I trust you, Yang Guan. Please invite Ye Qing to our camp immediately. And be polite!”

Did he really think that the young man was capable of saving his men’s lives? Not really. But they didn’t have the time to seek out a better solution either, so that was that.

“Yes, my lord!” Yang Guan responded before breaking into a run immediately.

Outside the camp, Ye Qing was just packing his stuff and getting ready to leave. The commotion hadn’t escaped his senses, and he was almost certain that the group had encountered some trouble. He did not stick his nose into their business though. Assuming the worst, the last thing he wanted was to be mistaken as the culprit.

Ye Qing was just about to leave when he saw Yang Guan running toward him while shouting on top of his lungs, “Ye Qing! We need your help! Please come with me!”

Ye Qing paused his footsteps and waited until Yang Guan had caught up to him. He then asked calmly, “What happened?”

"I'll explain as we go, so come on!" Yang Guan grabbed Ye Qing's hand and took off. By the time they returned to the camp, he had explained more or less the whole situation to Ye Qing.

"Their bellies kept getting bigger after they drank the water, huh?" Ye Qing hummed thoughtfully but did not say anything.

When they reached the camp, the dignified-looking man and Yan Feng walked over to him immediately. The dignified-looking man examined Ye Qing for a second before introducing himself, "Hail, fellow. My name is Yan Yufei. Thank you for agreeing to help us!"

"You're welcome, Lord Yan. My name is Ye Qing, Ye meaning 'leaf' and Qing meaning 'cyan'!" Ye Qing saluted him. "Before we do anything, I'd just like to say that I cannot guarantee that I'll be able to save your men. All I can say is that I'll do my best!"

"We completely understand. We're already grateful that you're willing to lend us a hand. Should the worst happen, you have my word that we will not fault you for it!" Yan Yufei replied civilly and respectfully. He did not underestimate Ye Qing just because he was young.

On the other hand, Yan Feng was examining Ye Qing with a critical eye. To be exact, he was watching Kung Fu Frog, who was standing behind the young man. He could feel his hair standing on end just looking at the frog Stranger.

Noticing this, Ye Qing assured him smilingly, "Don't worry, brother. Its name is Kung Fu Frog, and it is my friend. You have my word that it won't hurt anyone!"

"Right. My name is Yan Feng!" Yan Feng replied succinctly before returning his attention to the frog Stranger. He didn't doubt Ye Qing's words, and he couldn't sense any malice from Kung Fu Frog whatsoever. However, that was no reason to let down his guard at all.

"This way, my friend!" Yan Feng turned around and led him to Luo Fang and Lin Shaobo. Once they had arrived, he explained, "These are the two who drank the stream water and became like this. Also, we were originally planning to take them back to Anyang and find help, but physical contact immediately causes their bellies to grow bigger!"

"Got it!" Ye Qing nodded and shot the two guards a glance. Then, he walked over to the stream, crouched down and just stared at the waters.

"What is he doing?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's looking for clues?"

"I doubt it. The stream is so shallow you can see right to the bottom. If there really is a clue, we would've found it already, don't you think?"

“That’s true. I think he’s just a charlatan trying to put on a convincing show. Just look at him! Does he even have a bush down there? What can he possibly do that we cannot?”

“Quiet! You’re being too loud!”

It was inevitable that the guards would start gossiping as they watched Ye Qing. At some point, Yan Yufei had to let out a cough to shut them up. Personally, he didn’t think Ye Qing was going to find anything new either, but the young man had come to help them. It was unbecoming of a gentleman to reciprocate kindness with ill will!

It was at this moment Ye Qing rose to his feet and rubbed his sore neck.

“Did you find anything, friend?” Yan Yufei asked.

“Yes, I have!” Ye Qing nodded.

“That’s too bad. Maybe—wait, what did you just say?”

Yan Yufei had asked the question out of courtesy. He wasn’t expecting the young man to actually find something. Pleasantly surprised, he urged, “What did you find?”

“Come closer!” Ye Qing beckoned for everyone to come closer before pointing at a guard. “Can you give me your hand?”

“What for?” The guard was puzzled but still did as he asked.

Ye Qing grabbed his elbow and put his hand into the water. It was quite early in the morning, so the stream water was ice cold. The guard subconsciously tried to withdraw his hand, but he couldn’t because Ye Qing was keeping a firm grip on it. Ye Qing rebuked him, “I said, don’t move!”

The guard flushed red. He didn’t really want to obey a young lad who was at least a decade younger than him, but he quickly discovered that he was unable to move a muscle. Despite his scrawny and weak appearance, the young man possessed the strength of a titan. Just how was this possible?

The next moment, a white cobblestone on the stream bed suddenly shivered for a second before scattering like white powder. The white dust quickly filled the entire stream, although they were so tiny and white that it was incredibly difficult to spot them in the water. Not only that, they all started swimming toward the guard’s hand as if they had a life on their own.

Startled and afraid, the guard hurriedly withdrew his hand from the water. This time, Ye Qing did not stop him.

After the guard’s hand was removed from the water, the white dust floated aimlessly for a bit before sinking back to the stream bed. A couple more seconds later, they had transformed back into a cobblestone once more.

“What... what is that?” Yan Feng asked.

“They’re Bellyfish eggs!” Ye Qing replied.

“Bellyfish eggs? You’re telling me those tiny white dusts are eggs?” Yang Guan could scarcely believe his ears.

Chapter 46: I'm A Magnanimous Man

“The Bellyfish is a Mundane-class Stranger, but one that is extremely dangerous. Despite being obsessed with warmth, they can only survive in an ice cold stream. They are usually completely harmless barring certain circumstances.”

“The egg of a Bellyfish only appears during the day, and only grows when there's heat. Normally, they would clump up together like a rock in hibernation unless they sense the heat of a human, animal, or a Stranger who was drinking at the stream. They would then awaken and attempt to infiltrate the victim's stomach.”

“If the Bellyfish eggs successfully infiltrate the victim's stomach, they would hatch and grow into a fish in just a very short time. This is why the Stranger came to be known as the Bellyfish.”

Ye Qing's voice was clear and soothing, and his face was calm and collected. It did nothing to chase away the dark clouds hanging over everyone else's head.

“It should be clear now why a human, animal or Stranger who accidentally drank the Bellyfish eggs would find their bellies swelling rapidly until they resemble a woman who is ten months pregnant. On a related note, it is why the Bellyfish is also known as the Impregnation Fish.”

“If not treated in time, the Bellyfishes would continue to grow until they literally burst out of the victim's stomach. Should this happen next to the stream—and it should, as their growth rate is simply insane—they would return to it, lay new eggs, and restart the cycle all over again.”

When Ye Qing was finally finished, Yan Yufei said severely, “So, you're saying that Luo Fang and Lin Shaobo's stomachs will explode if they do not receive treatment in time?”

“That's correct!”

“That's terrifying!” The guard who was forced to stick his hand into the stream later exclaimed in horror.

Ye Qing nodded seriously. “I completely agree!”

The guard muttered under his breath, “If you agree, then why didn't you stick your own hand into the stream?”

A grin spread across Ye Qing's face. “It's exactly because it's scary that I used your hand to perform the experiment. Also, a demonstration is the only way I can prove that I am not a charlatan, isn't it?”

The serious atmosphere turned awkward in an instant. There were few things more embarrassing than backbiting someone and getting caught red-handed!

“Oh right! I should remind you all that a Bellyfish egg is incredibly resilient. Anyone who’s cleaned themselves or drunk from this stream should consider themselves infected by it. It’s true that the rest of you aren’t showing any symptoms right now, but the eggs might be attached to your hands, and they’re too small for you to see. When you dig your nose, or clean your teeth, or eat your food, they will enter your stomach and... hehe, let’s just say a bunch of pregnant men would be quite a sight to behold...”

That was an understatement. The mere imagination of it sent chills through everyone’s spine.

“Ahhh!” Countless guards turned as white as a sheet as they exclaimed, “W-What should we do? I don’t want to die like this!”

“Indeed! What should you do, I wonder?” Ye Qing rubbed his nose with a wicked smirk on his face.

Yan Yufei abruptly bowed toward Ye Qing and implored, “Fri—no, Teacher Ye. I apologize on behalf of my unruly subordinates, so would you please save our lives? We would be eternally grateful if you do!”

Ye Qing lifted him back to an upright position and declared, “Why are you apologizing? Do I look like such a petty-minded person to you? You are too courteous, Lord Yan!”

“Anyway, it’s actually quite simple to eliminate any and all Bellyfish eggs that might have gotten on your hands. It’s true that the Bellyfish eggs are resilient and warmth-loving, but there’s only so much heat they can withstand. All you need to do is to hold your hands over a fire like when you boil your water or cook your rice, and the eggs would die off completely!”

Ye Qing’s grin widened. “And remember! You gotta bake it nice and long!”

In fact, there was a simpler, much painless way to remove the Bellyfish eggs. One simply needed to boil a pot of water that was slightly higher than body temperature and submerged their hands in it. The Bellyfish eggs would automatically detach themselves from the skin and enter the water.

I’m not going to tell them though! It’s not right to talk behind people’s back, and the only way they’re gonna learn is to do it the hard way!

These people called me a charlatan, but I’m still saving their lives and doing my best to correct their crooked behavior. I’m such a magnanimous man!

“...”

The thought of baking one’s hands over a fire alone was enough to inflict imaginary pain. It wasn’t that they disbelieved Ye Qing, but the fact that the young man was grinning like a Cheshire cat made them really skeptical that it was the only way to disinfect their hands.

We suspect you’re plotting something, but we don’t have proof!

“Thank you, Teacher Ye!” Yan Yufei said gratefully before glancing at Luo Fang and Lin Shaobo. “If you can save them as well...”

“But of course!” Ye Qing declared confidently. He took a spin around the stream and picked up a couple of grass from the riverbank. He then said, “Please start a fire next to the patients. The reason their bellies grew every time they were touched is because of your body temperature. The Bellyfish reacts to heat, so an increase in temperature—even a minor one—is going to activate them even more!”

Yan Feng nodded. This explained why Luo Fang and Lin Shaobo’s bellies had grown when he was inspecting them, and when they were trying to carry them to the carriage. He ordered, “You four! Go gather some wood and start a fire as soon as possible!”

“At once!” The men received their order and acted quickly. It wasn’t long before a fire was burning right next to the two guards. Luo Fang and Lin Shaobo’s stomachs started moving about as if countless things were wriggling inside. Not only that, their stomachs were still growing in size and torturing the duo even more as a matter of course.

“What do we do now, Teacher Ye?” Yan Yufei asked hurriedly. The fire was increasing their body temperature and causing the Bellyfishes in their stomachs to grow faster than ever before. At this rate, they were going to die in a matter of minutes.

“Don’t worry!” Ye Qing said calmly while crushing the grass he had picked up earlier. He then fed it to the two guards and waited for the magic to happen. There was a tremble before the two men began cooling down at an unnatural rate. It wasn’t long before their lips were blue, and their faces were deathly white. Then, fist-sized bumps started appearing all over their stomachs almost as if the Bellyfishes in their stomachs were trying to get out!

“Aaaahhh! It hurts! It hurts!” Both men screamed on top of their lungs.

“Teacher Ye...” Yan Feng looked increasingly anxious as he looked back and forth between his men and Ye Qing.

“Don’t worry. The grass I just fed them is called the Frostgrass. Cold by nature and slightly toxic, they usually grow next to a river or a stream. Consuming large amounts of Frostgrass will freeze one’s blood and lower one’s body temperature, and the Bellyfishes cannot grow bigger at temperatures below body temperature.”

Ye Qing ignored the two screaming men and continued, “Now that their bodies are much colder, the Bellyfishes will want to seek out a new source of heat, namely the campfire burning right next to them. That is why the Bellyfishes are attempting to break out of the patients’ stomachs to get to it.”

“Knowing that, all we need to do is...”

Ye Qing crouched down and lifted Luo Fang's lower body into the air. While pressing one knee against Luo Fang's stomach, Ye Qing wrenched his mouth open and slapped him hard on the back.

"Blaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

The next moment, everyone's eyes widened like saucers as countless fishes about the size of two fingers poured out of Luo Fang's mouth and into the campfire. The Bellyfishes were utterly fearless even though entering the fire meant their doom. It wasn't long before a delicious scent began permeating throughout the whole camp!

Luo Fang's stomach shrank visibly as Ye Qing continued to slap his back. The pain that seemed to be a permanent fixture on his face gradually subsided as well. The crowd was breathing a sigh of relief when suddenly, Ye Qing said, "The Bellyfish is considered to be a rare delicacy because it has a lot of meat but few bones, and because it doesn't have a fishy scent at all. Does anyone want to give it a try?"

"... Why are you all looking at me like that? I'm telling the truth! There are tons of rich people out there who can't go a week without a delicious serving of Bellyfish. Don't question my knowledge with your ignorance!" Ye Qing shook his head in mock disappointment.

Everyone rolled their eyes at him in unison. *If it's that tasty, then why aren't you eating it yourself, huh? How stupid do you think we are?*

"Ahem..." It was at this moment Yan Yufei let out a quiet cough and ordered, "Yan Feng, you saw how it's done. Go help Shaobo!"

"Yes, my lord!" Yan Feng replied before mimicking Ye Qing's actions. It wasn't long before the Bellyfishes in Lin Shaobo's stomach were expelled as well.

A while later, when the two guards had stopped vomiting Bellyfishes, and their stomachs had returned to normal, Ye Qing gently put Luo Fang down and clapped his hands. "It's done! There should be no Bellyfishes left in their stomachs. On the off chance I'm wrong, one or two Bellyfishes won't be enough to kill them."

"In fact, I would highly recommend keeping a Bellyfish in your stomach. Anytime you feel like eating fish, you can simply spit it out and cook it into a delicious meal. Like any fish, it can be steamed, braised, fried and more. You won't find another Stranger as convenient as this!"

"..." No one responded to Ye Qing's joke as a matter of course. They were starting to realize that he was far more wicked and playful than he looked!

"Boring!" Ye Qing booed the surrounding guards but said, "Anyway, they're safe now. They should recover after just a day or two of rest."

"Yang Guan, Chao Fang, take Luo Fang and Shaobo somewhere where they can rest and cook them some porridge!" Yan Yufei ordered before looking at the rest of the

group. "Also, anyone who's used the stream this morning should bake their hands over the fire! You don't want to get 'pregnant', do you?"

Six guards immediately grimaced like they had eaten an entire plate of lemons, but they obediently walked over to the campfire and stuck their hands into the flames. It hurt like a bitch as a matter of course, but no one dared to remove their hands early. Pain was temporary, but the shame of getting "pregnant" and dying from an exploding belly was something that would be remembered for eternity. They could only endure the licking flames and pray that it would be enough.

From Ye Qing's perspective, it almost looked like the guards were cooking their hands like barbecued chicken. It was very entertaining to say the least. He watched them intently while smiling like the Cheshire's cat!

Yan Yufei and Yan Feng could only shake his heads at Ye Qing's undisguised schadenfreude. When Yan Yufei decided that enough was enough, he coughed to catch Ye Qing's attention and said in a grateful tone, "Thank you for helping us, Teacher Ye! This would've ended poorly if not for you!"

"You're welcome, but I was just doing what I can!" Ye Qing smiled back. "Also, it was a pretty fun experience for me!"

"..."

I knew you were toying with us! I even have a confession straight from your own mouth! I can't say anything about it though!

"Regardless, you still saved our lives, and such kindness is greater than the heavens themselves. We will never forget it!" Yan Yufei said solemnly before changing the subject. "By the way, my men told me you're a scholar, and that you're heading to Anyang to further your studies. Is that correct?"

Ye Qing nodded.

"That's good. It so happens that we are heading to Anyang as well. If you don't mind, would you like to travel with us? We can watch your back, and you ours!" Yan Yufei invited.

Ye Qing saw no reason to turn him down, so he nodded smilingly. "Sure. I'll be in your care then!"

He was about to run out of food no thanks to a certain frog Stranger anyway. Since someone was offering to feed them, why not?

"Haha! It is our honor to be able to travel with you, Teacher Ye!" Yan Yufei declared with obvious delight.

Ye Qing smiled back and said, "Speaking of which, can you please address me by another name? A teacher is someone whose knowledge and experience have reached the level where they are qualified to enlighten others, and I'm definitely not qualified, not to mention that everyone here is my senior!"

“My name is Ye Qing, but I prefer to go by another moniker. Please address me as Joyless!”

Ye Qing was a strong believer that a man of the *jianghu* should have a *jianghu* moniker, which was why he decided to go with Joyless. It was his online nickname in his previous life, and it was, in his opinion, a cool and poetic name!

“Very well. Well met, Joyless!” Yan Yufei said with a wide smile, “You seem to know a lot of things for someone so young, Joyless. I’m sure you have a bright future ahead of you!”

Ye Qing replied humbly, “Oh, it’s nothing. I just read more books than most, that’s all!”

“...”

I strongly suspect that this guy is gloating, but—oh who am I kidding, he’s one hundred percent gloating to our faces! We can’t say anything about it though!

Chapter 47: Strange Fog

“Heads up, everyone! We’re approaching Redstone Forest!”

Ye Qing looked up from the “Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghosts and Gods” when he heard Yan Feng crying out from the forefront. What greeted him was one of the most amazing sights he had seen in his life.

Standing in a massive formation, the tall rocks in front of him were shaped like tall spears that were pointed defiantly at the heavens. Not a trace of green could be seen anywhere. The exposed rocks were as red as blood, and at first glance it looked like the aftermath of a great battle, scary and gruesome. Half of the sky was dark gray, and the other half as red as fire. It was both vast and stunning.

“Croak croak...”

Kung Fu Frog was croaking in excitement with shiny eyes. It had probably never seen such a stunning sight in its life either.

“It is very impressive!” Ye Qing echoed in agreement before breaking off a small chunk from a tall rock next to him. Upon closer examination, he noticed that the unusual coloration wasn’t just limited to its surface. The insides of the rock were blood red as well. It was cool to touch and fairly heavy.

“The redness is probably some sort of mineral!” Ye Qing played with it a while longer before tossing it aside.

“Squeak squeak!”

Suddenly, a mouse with blood red fur let out a frightened squeak and scurried out from deeper within the stone forest. It ran far, far away from them.

“Oh, it’s just a Redstone Mouse. I was surprised for a second there!” Yang Guan looked at the escaping rodent and chuckled. “Your rock probably hit it by accident!”

Ye Qing shrugged. A Redstone Mouse was a Stranger that fed on insects, nuts, flowers and grasses. It was extremely cowardly and rarely a danger to anyone.

“Chirp chirp chirp...”

It was at this moment more Redstone Mice scurried out into the open. They ignored the group and ran right past them.

Ah, they’re probably the family of the Redstone Mouse! Ye Qing thought. However, his guess was quickly overturned when more chirps came from deeper within Redstone Forest—far, far more—and red dust clouds rose into the sky.

This was clearly unusual, but Ye Qing still thought, *Mice do breed like crazy. Maybe it’s the whole clan migrating somewhere?*

The noise grew louder, and the dust clouds kept swelling until it resembled a dust storm. It was coming straight for them.

The commotion did not escape Yan Feng, of course. He shouted, “Get ready!”

The guards immediately drew their long sabers with stern expressions. A short while later, someone cried, “It’s the Redstone Mice! A *lot* of Redstone Mice!”

When the dust storm got close, the group finally realized that the dust storm wasn’t a dust storm at all—at least not a natural one. It was the dust clouds kicked up by what looked like millions and millions of Redstone Mice!

The tsunami of Redstone Mice was kicking up what looked like the mother of all dust clouds. The blood red dust clouds that covered half the sky looked like it would bury them and the entire stone forest whole.

Blanching, Yan Feng roared, “Dismount and gather around the carriage now!” Everyone obeyed the order instantly and formed a tight circle around Yan Yufei’s carriage.

It was at this moment the group noticed that Ye Qing hadn’t joined them. He was standing on the road alone like he had no idea what was about to happen. Yan Feng shouted, “Joyless? What are you doing? Come quickly!”

“It’s fine!” Ye Qing shook his head and walked a few steps closer to the group. Then, he patted Kung Fu Frog on its shoulder and said, “We’re counting on you, Brother Frog!”

This time, it was Yan Yufei who shouted, “Joyless! Are you trying to kill yourself?! Get over here before it’s too late!”

The dignified-looking man was grim-faced when he pushed away the curtains and looked out of the window. He was even paler when he noticed that Ye Qing was standing in the middle of the road as if he would face down the tidal wave of Redstone Mice himself.

While the Redstone Mice were harmless in most circumstances, a stampede at this scale was just as life-threatening as a tsunami or an avalanche, if not more.

“Don’t worry! It will be fine!” Ye Qing replied without a trace of fear or worry whatsoever. When the Redstone Mice swarm was seconds away from hitting him, Kung Fu Frog finally took a few steps forward and slapped its belly almost imperiously. First, it put its hands together in a double palm strike pose and channeled an invisible ball of force between its palms. Then, it crouched a little and slowly rotated its body clockwise and moved its hands behind its waist. Every time its hands had crossed an inch of distance, his aura and the invisible force between its palms would swell in power. Finally—

“CROAAAAAAAAAAAAAK!”

Three inches later, Kung Fu Frog let out a mighty croak and threw its hands forward. There was a moment of complete silence before the world roared, and a pillar of pure power burst out of its palms and into the incoming swarm. It was utterly unstoppable. The beam of light did not just punch a hole in the swarm, it kept going as if its power was infinite and turned countless Redstone Mice into mincemeat. At the end of it, the red tsunami was cut in half just like Moses had split the Red Sea into two!

“What the...”

For a long time, the humans could only stare at a certain frog Stranger in utter disbelief. Even Ye Qing—although his face-fu was as impeccable as ever—wondered if he was in a dream.

Who am I? Where am I? Did that really just happen?

His plan was for Kung Fu Frog to act as a one-man frontliner and take out most of the Redstone Mice swarm headed their way. Anything it missed would be handled by Yan Feng’s group.

That was the plan, until Kung Fu Frog had surpassed his expectations and cut the entire swarm in half with a frog style Kamehameha! Seriously, it was practically identical to the signature attack of a certain world-famous manga!

Is there actually a Master Roshi in this world? Are you his student??

The Redstone Mice stampede would pass by the group harmlessly after Kung Fu Frog’s astounding attack. It was almost as if they were watching the tidal waves passing them by from atop a hill. The humans did not recover their senses until the swarm had completely vanished into the horizon.

“Joyless, your companion... is absolutely incredible!” Yan Feng praised from the bottom of his heart as he stared at Kung Fu Frog. The frog Stranger was currently putting its hands on its waist and letting the wind carry its bandanna and its cape in the air. Say what you want about the frog, but it was an absolute master at looking cool as fuck.

Before this Yang Feng was fairly certain that he could take down Kung Fu Frog even though he felt threatened by it. Now? He knew that Kung Fu Frog could kick three, no, five of him with no effort

whatsoever. The frog Stranger wasn't just a Malice-class Stranger, it was close to the ceiling of its power level!

I must be crazy to think I stood a chance against it!

"You're not wrong!" Ye Qing replied "humbly" to hide the fact that he was just as surprised as all of them.

"Joyless, Kung Fu Frog is a Malice-class Stranger, isn't he?" Yan Yufei asked from his carriage. Although he didn't know martial arts, his eye for them was as sharp as a razor.

Ye Qing nodded. "You have a discerning eye, Lord Yan!"

"That's incredible!" Yan Yufei praised before probing him a little, "If you don't mind me saying this, I doubt that an ordinary person can enjoy the protection of a Malice-class Stranger. Your background must be pretty extraordinary, am I right?"

Once again, Ye Qing replied "humbly", "You're not wrong!"

Technically, it wasn't a lie. He was a transmigrator after all. If that didn't count as an extraordinary background, then what possibly could?

Of course, Yan Feng completely misunderstood Ye Qing's response. He thought to himself, *I knew it. If Ye Qing was the scion of a major clan, that would explain why he's so knowledgeable and guarded by a powerful Stranger!*

Everyone else thought the same thing as Yan Yufei. For the first time, they weren't just looking at Ye Qing with curiosity. There was a healthy dose of fear and respect in their eyes as well. It was the kind of look people got when they confirmed that someone was not to be trifled with!

Suddenly, Ye Qing frowned and summoned Kung Fu Frog back to his side. "Wait. Something's not right about this!"

His words shook the humans out of their reverie and earned him quite a number of puzzled looks. Yan Yufei asked, "What do you mean, Joyless?" Ye Qing said, "The Redstone Mice are docile in nature and extraordinarily timid. They would normally veer out of harm's way at the mere sight of a human, much less a group like ours. However, the swarm we encountered earlier never stopped even though Brother Frog killed a ton of them and revealed his power. That is not normal behavior, is it?"

Yan Feng thought for a moment before agreeing, "You're right!"

Yan Yufei asked, "What do you think might have prompted such a behavior, Joyless?"

Ye Qing rubbed his nose and said slowly, "I think they're running from something!"

"Running?" Both men frowned in deep thought.

Ye Qing explained, "This is just a guess, but I bet that the Redstone Mice encountered something dangerous deeper within the Redstone Forest; something that was even more dangerous than our group and Kung Fu Frog. It is the only reason I can think of as to why they would charge us like mindless beasts!"

“You’re right!” Yan Yufei and Yan Feng exchanged a glance with each other before agreeing with Ye Qing’s deduction.

It was at this moment Kung Fu Frog suddenly broke away from its cool pose and leaped onto the donkey Stranger’s head. It then croaked and made a series of rapid gestures with an anxious expression.

“You sense the danger as well, Brother Frog? Alright! We’ll leave immediately!”

Ye Qing immediately climbed onto his beloved donkey. It immediately turned in the direction the Redstone Mice were heading to and broke into a gallop!

“Joyless, wait! Where are you going?” Yan Yufei called out to him from behind.

Ye Qing held back the donkey temporarily and looked back. “I’m running for my life, of course! It’s confirmed by the Redstone Mice and Kung Fu Frog that something terrifying and dangerous is about to happen real soon. I’m not about to wait here and die! Are you?”

“...”

Everyone in the group exchanges glances with each other. He was totally right, but at the same time, it was rare for someone to make a snap decision and act on it without so much a thought.

You must’ve had a lot of practice, haven’t you?

“Ahem. Everyone, mount up and follow Joyless! Quickly!”

Despite their strange feelings, Yan Feng did not hesitate to bark out the orders and follow behind Ye Qing. No one wanted to die after all.

As for why they were running in the direction of the Redstone Mice swarm, it was because their danger sense was extremely well-honed. There was a high chance they would be able to avoid the unknown danger if they followed them!

Also, it so happened that the direction the Redstone Mice were heading to wasn’t at odds with their destination, Anyang. They were basically killing two birds with one stone!

“Everyone, look! There’s a fog behind us!” Someone shouted suddenly. Everyone obeyed the voice and noticed that a thick fog had appeared behind them before they knew it. The strange thing was that it was blood red in color.

“I’ve never seen a blood red fog,” A guard said curiously before lifting a hand to touch it.

“Don’t!” Yan Feng tried to stop him, but it was too late. The second the bodyguard touched the red fog, his whole body abruptly turned blood red as if he had fallen into a dye vat.

“Chen Long, you—!”

He didn’t manage to finish before the fog abruptly changed colors from red to green. This would’ve been alarming enough, but Chen Long and even the tall rocks within the fog had turned green as

well! It wasn't the superficial kind of coloring either. They were green from the inside out almost as if they had been assimilated by the fog around them!

Three breaths later, the fog changed colors once more and turned as blue as the sea. Another three breaths passed, and they turned from blue to purple, cyan, orange, yellow...

Chapter 48: Heptachromatic Fog of Aging

The fog kept changing colors in regular intervals like it was a light show. Everything trapped within fog—the stone forest, the ground, the air and even the clouds—changed colors as well. It was colorful, dreamlike, and strange to put it mildly.

That wasn't the full extent of its strangeness, however. Every time it happened, entire sections of the stone forest would weaken as if it had aged hundreds of thousands of years in an instant. Eventually, they crumbled away into dust completely!

This in and of itself was absolutely terrifying, but Chen Long's transformation struck a deeper chord with the group because he was a fellow human. Every time the fog switched to another color, he would age decades in an instant. His face grew saggy and wrinkled, his hair whitened inch by inch, and his teeth grew looser and looser until they fell off his gums completely... It was like something was stealing Chen Long's lifespan little by little.

Seven changes later, Chen Long died of old age and decayed into a pile of bones instantly. Not only that, the bones were still withering at a visible rate!

"Heavens..."

An indescribable chill shot up everyone's spine and spread throughout their whole body!

A terrible cry escaped Yan Yufei's throat, "That's... that's the Heptachromatic Fog of Aging! Make haste, men! We must get as far away from it as possible!"

Most of the time, Yan Yufei had acted like nothing in the world could possibly unsettle him. This was the first time most people saw him losing his composure so utterly. Naturally, they hastened to obey his order. Frankly, no one was crazy enough to dilly-dally after witnessing Chen Long's bizarre demise with their own eyes.

Clop clop clop—"HEE HAW!"

They had just fled for a short distance when Ye Qing's donkey blew past them with extraordinary speed. It should not be possible for it to outrun the horses considering that it was shorter and smaller than them in every way, but it did, and it was hee-hawing the entire time as if its stamina was inexhaustible.

Clop clop clop—"HEE HAW!"—*clop clop clop*—"HEE HAW!"—*clop clop clop*—"HEE HAW!"

Not only that, the donkey was looking back at them from time to time and shooting them a toothy grin. It was almost as if it was deriding them for how slow they were! The worst part was, they couldn't prove it wrong! How frustrating was that?

Sigh. We're okay with Ye Qing being stronger than us—or at least, his bodyguard is. But his mount too? Sometimes, life is just unfair!

“The fog is spreading! We need to move faster!” Yan Feng shouted on top of his lungs as he glanced back and forth between Ye Qing—who had almost vanished into the horizon, damn that donkey—and the fog all around them. He then whipped his own mount harder.

.....

“Hah, hah, hah...”

A teatime later, the group was resting in the outskirts of Redstone Forest, panting like a dog and floored in every sense of the word. Some people were flushed like a tomato, and some looked as pale as death. They had done it though. They had successfully escaped the fog of death.

It was a close one though. Most of their horses had run out of steam about halfway to where they were, and the fog was still spreading in their direction. Left with no choice, they had to abandon their horses, dump everything they didn’t need, and run with their own two legs. It was a harrowing escape to put it mildly.

Well, it was a harrowing escape for all of them except one. A young man was standing by the road with a calm expression. He was the only one with perfectly tidy clothes and standing on his feet while everyone else had collapsed to the ground in exhaustion. There was no doubt that he was the smartest-looking human of the bunch right now. He was, of course, Ye Qing!

Ye Qing was currently observing the fog still spreading across the entire Redstone Forest with a deep frown on his face. He did not know what it was as the “Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghost and Gods” had not mentioned it. A long time later, he finally could hold his curiosity no longer and walked up to Yan Yufei, asking, “Lord Yan, I remember you addressing the fog as the Heptachromatic Fog of Aging, right? Can you tell me more about it?”

By now Yan Yufei had rested enough to regain some energy, so he joked, “There are things you don’t know, Joyless?”

Ye Qing rubbed his nose awkwardly. “Come now! Of course there are things I know nothing about! The pursuit for knowledge is endless, am I right?”

“Hahaha! You are!” Yan Yufei chuckled before launching into his explanation, “I happened to read a file about this fog before. The Heptachromatic Fog of Aging is a Phenomenon-class Stranger—”

Ye Qing was familiar with the term “Phenomenon-class Stranger” because he had read about it in the “Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghost and Gods”. Three of the incense sticks required a material that could only be procured from a Phenomenon-class Stranger.

Previously, Fang Nianshui had taught him that a Stranger could be classified as Mundane, Red, Malice or Hatred. They matched the four lowest cultivation levels of a warrior and were the most common kinds of Strangers out there. That said, Hatred wasn’t the end of the ladder. There were five more classes above Hatred, and they were Soulstealer, Phenomenon, Disaster, Ancient and Extinction.

A Phenomenon-class Stranger was exactly what it sounded like: a phenomenon. It was an observable event whose power, shape or form could not be measured by any quantifiable means.

Not limited to just animate objects, it could be a rock, a piece of paper, a statue, or even a fog like the one that damn near annihilated their group just now. Its threat level, power level, deadliness, area of activity, patterns and more were all fluid and unpredictable. Hence, it was impossible to properly appraise a Stranger like this.

A Disaster-class Stranger was, as its class might suggest, akin to a natural disaster such as hurricanes, floods, landslides, earthquakes and so on. Every time one showed up, it would cause massive, irreparable damage to both the environment and the unfortunate souls living in the area.

As for Ancient-class and Extinction-class, there were unfortunately—or fortunately—little to no description about them. Few humans had ever encountered Strangers at this level, and even fewer lived to tell the tale. Naturally, there were little to no meaningful records regarding such Strangers.

“—A strange fog that alternates between seven colors at regular intervals and possesses the mysterious power of time. No one knows how it came to be, where it comes from, or how to guard against. Once it appears, it would rapidly spread to its surrounding area. It can be as small as several kilometers in diameter, or as big as fifty kilometers or higher.”

“Its effect is as you've seen. Everything that the fog encompasses be it a mountain, a rock, a grass, a tree, a human, an animal, the wind or the clouds; everything and anything will be infected and assimilated by it. And every time it changes color, the affected things will age rapidly as if their time was stolen by the river of time itself. Things will crumble, animals will age, and humans will die. That is why the fog is called the Heptachromatic Fog of Aging!”

“The Heptachromatic Fog of Aging cannot be repelled, stopped, destroyed or exploited. Anyone and anything who is infected by it cannot be saved. It is why it is considered to be stronger and even more dangerous than some Disaster-class Strangers.”

Yan Yufei took a short break before continuing in a heavy tone, “Many years ago, there was an infamous incident revolving around the Heptachromatic Fog of Aging called the Longchuan Tragedy. The fog had manifested in the Longchuan commandery at *midnight*. You’ve seen how fast the fog spread, and since it was midnight few people noticed the fog, if at all. The next day, when someone finally realized what happened, the entire commandery had already crumbled away into bone and dust. Can you imagine? A sprawling city over fifty kilometers wide with tens of thousands of citizens in it, gone in a single night. How terrible.”

“Thankfully, the Heptachromatic Fog of Aging does not spread endlessly or exist for an indefinite amount of time. It’s not too damaging as long as it does not appear in a highly populated settlement. That is why it is classified as a Phenomenon-class Stranger and not a Disaster-class.”

“Heavens above! Now that’s a stay-the-fuck-away Stranger if I ever heard one!” Ye Qing was gaining an impression of the Heptachromatic Fog of Aging and

Phenomenon-class Strangers in general after listening to Yan Yufei. Long story short—such power, much strong, stay the fuck away from or else!

As they spoke, Redstone Forest was crumbling away at an unbelievable rate. What was once a gorgeous rock formation that seemed like it would last a lifetime was crumbling away like rotten wood in a sandstorm. It was only a matter of time—literally—before one of the best attractions of Anyang was gone forever.

“This—this looks bad. We need to get back to Anyang and inform the citizens to stay away from Redstone Forest as soon as possible!” Yan Yufei abruptly rose to his feet and ordered, “Rouse the men, Yan Feng. We must reach Anyang before the sun falls completely into the mountains!”

“Yes, my lord!” Yan Feng answered and climbed to his feet as well. He slapped away the dust on his armor and commanded the men to get ready. It wasn’t long before the group resumed their journey once more.

Ye Qing hung back at the rear of the group. He continued to read his book and acted the role of a scholar.

After they passed through Redstone Forest, they followed the marked road for about an incense stick before they arrived at a steep, narrow gorge. The gorge looked like one big mountain range that had been split in half. Its walls were perfectly smooth and angled steeply. Even an experienced climber would find it difficult to scale such steep walls.

What was truly bizarre however, was the fact that the gorge was perfectly silent. There was no animal cry, no insect chirp, and not even the sound of the wind inside the gorge. The phrase “the silence is deafening” was literal in this case!

“The Soundless Gorge...” Ye Qing muttered as he squinted at the gorge in front of him.

Yan Feng dismounted and said in an unusually soft voice, “Dismount. Bridle your horses and wrap their hooves in cloth. I don’t want to hear even a bit of noise, understand?”

It was forbidden to make noise in the Soundless Gorge because it would attract the attention of a Red-class Stranger called the Soundless Bug. Individually the Soundless Bug wasn’t much of a threat, but it usually lived in a swarm numbering tens or even hundreds of thousands. No one wanted to face down thousands and thousands of Strangers unless absolutely necessary.

That said, the Soundless Bugs would not attack if there was no sound. Hence their preparations.

After everyone had dismounted and done as Yan Feng ordered, the group officially entered the Soundless Gorge.

Everyone was keeping as quiet as possible. They even controlled their breathing to avoid drawing the Soundless Bugs’ attention.

There was one notable exception, however. Ye Qing was staring at the sea of Soundless Bugs crawling up and down the sheer cliffs with bright eyes and seriously considering drawing them over with some noise.

Although he still had plenty of gray dragon-serpent runes, his silver dragon-serpent runes had dwindled to just two. He had spent most of them cultivating the “Blood Shadow Divine Art”. In fact, he was saving these two runes when he was in an emergency, so one could say that he was broke right now.

Long story short, he was in dire need of cultivation resources, and he desperately wanted to murder these weak Strangers whose only virtue was their great numbers!

Not far away, Yan Feng noticed Ye Qing’s fervent stare and felt a sudden wave of panic. Why did he feel like something bad was about to happen? Specifically, why did he feel like someone was about to make his job much, much harder than it should be?

As if sensing Yan Feng’s wary gaze, Ye Qing turned around and shot him a smile. In the end, he decided to abandon his plan. He and Kung Fu Frog had nothing to fear from the Soundless Bugs, but the same could not be said for Yan Feng’s group. He would feel bad if someone got hurt or even killed because of his greed.

I’m just too good of a person! Ye Qing shrugged to himself before letting out a soundless sigh. *Well, it’s not like the Soundless Bugs are going to go anywhere, and from the looks of it they aren’t really that numerous—not as much as the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes at least... Yeah, I should wait until they increase their numbers. You don’t harvest wheat one block at a time after all. No, you reap them all in one go!*

In the end, the group was able to pass through the Soundless Gorge without any accident, and everyone let out an audible sigh of relief when the danger was fully behind them. They even talked louder than normal as if to make up for the forced silence from before.

“You look kinda disappointed just now, Joyless. What’s the matter?” A smiling Yang Guan walked over to Ye Qing and asked.

Ye Qing sighed. “I am. Say, why are these Soundless Bugs such cowards? Why didn’t they take the initiative to attack us?”

Yang Guan: “...” *Is it just me, or is there a screw loose in your head?*

“Also, what’s with their abysmal numbers? There’s not even enough to make up a quarter of a swarm of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes!” Ye Qing continued to rant.

Everyone: “...”

We would rather that there are no Soundless Bugs in the Soundless Gorge at all, but you want the opposite?

Are you a demon?

Chapter 49: No Need To Thank Me, Captain!

Anyang was one of the nine counties of Luoshui. Located in front of Bashan and north of Moshui, it was ridiculed as “The Last of The Nine” or “The County Backwater” because of its remote location. In reality, Ye Qing was quite impressed with the county’s tall buildings and sprawling walls. Whatever the others might say, it looked much grander than August Hill Village at the very least.

The group had just reached the gates when a platoon of soldiers stopped them.

“Halt! Do you have a travel pass?”

Yan Feng handed over the travel pass to a treacherous-looking soldier. He gave it a cursory glance before looking at the horse-drawn carriage behind Yan Feng with a cunning glint, saying, “What’s inside the carriage? Open it up! We’ll need to inspect it!”

Yang Guan was extremely displeased with the man’s rude and vulgar behavior. He muttered, “Is he serious? What else can be inside a carriage besides a person?”

The soldier heard that and flew into a rage, “How dare you! Who the fuck do you think you are to deride me? You know what, I think you lot are the bandits who robbed and killed the Qingfeng Merchants yesterday. Lock em’ up, boys!”

“Hehe! At once, captain!”

Every soldier in the vicinity started chuckling evilly. Their eyes were malicious, and naked greed was written all over their faces. They looked like a pack of wolves getting ready to slaughter a flock of sheeps. Some of them were even whispering to each other,

“Woohoo, that’s another lamb to the slaughter!”

“I can’t wait to find out what we’re going to get this time!”

“These merchants are oh-so-rich and yet oh-so-cowardly. It would be a sin not to milk them for all they’re worth!”

At the rear, a smirk crept across Ye Qing’s face. He could hardly wait to see what was going to happen next.

As expected, a booming voice erupted from inside the carriage, “No, how dare *you*. Do you even know who you’re speaking to?”

Yan Yufei lifted the curtains to reveal a cold, dark countenance. It was so unexpected and intimidating that the soldiers actually paused in their tracks!

The captain of the soldiers—the treacherous-looking one who took offense with Yang Guan’s retort and ordered them to be taken earlier—recovered his composure first and sneered, “What does it matter? I’m an official, and you’re a citizen! If I say you’re guilty, then you are! Now get them, boys! Kill anyone who dares to resist!”

“Bastard! I dare you to draw your weapons!” Yan Feng roared and took one step forward. He had subdued his presence before as a matter of politeness, but now he was unleashing it in full. Hand on his long saber and eyes wide with the promise of brutal violence, he glared at the soldiers around him like he would swallow them whole.

“He... he’s a Qi Invoker!” The soldiers paled and stopped in their tracks yet again. They had believed the group to be sheep, but now it would seem that they had awoken a tiger!

“Captain...” A soldier said hesitatingly. The captain himself looked bewildered as well. In the end, he decided call their bluff and threatened,

“Hmph! So what if you’re a Qi Invoker? My brother-in-law’s a Vessel Augmentor *and* the vice magistrate of Anyang! If you’re smart, you would put down your weapons and obey us! Otherwise, we will have to take drastic action!”

The captain wasn’t stupid, it seemed. He had brought out his patron immediately!

Yan Yufei wasn’t afraid, however. A cold smile cut across his face as he said, “Drastic action, you say? Should I take that as a threat against your very own magistrate?”

He produced a yellow silken cloth from his shirt and unfolded it. At that moment, the wind and clouds above Anyang surged, and a majestic, formidable power encompassed the world in an instant. It was stunning to put it mildly!

“You... you’re Anyang’s magistrate?” the captain couldn’t believe his eyes. He might refuse to believe Yan Yufei’s words, but he could never deny the silken cloth before his eyes. When the magnitude of his error finally dawned upon him, he actually collapsed to his feet and shook like a leaf.

“W-We greet you, Lord Magistrate!”

The rest of the soldiers had seen the contents of the silken cloth and felt the terrible power circulating above Anyang as well. Terrified for their lives, they immediately dropped to their knees and bowed as deeply as they could.

“Croak croak...” Kung Fu Frog was clearly uncomfortable with the majestic power in the sky. Their donkey straight up emptied its bowels out of fright.

“Is this what they call the ‘Will Of The Dragon’ and the ‘Will Of The People?’” Ye Qing patted Kung Fu Frog comfortingly while watching the sky curiously.

The “Will Of The Dragon” referred to the power of the Son of Heavens, the emperor himself, and the “Will Of The People” referred to the power of the people of a specific land or human settlement.

All Chu officials naturally bore a sliver of the Will Of The Dragon and commanded the authority to wield the Will Of The People. Blessed by the emperor and acknowledged by the land and people they governed, they were capable of commanding The Will Of The Dragon, the Will Of The People and the Human Way to attack their enemies. This was why a civil servant who had never touched a weapon their whole lives was still extremely deadly in their own right. It was a path of power that was completely different from that of martial arts and cultivation.

But of course, there were pros and cons. In their territory, a civil servant wielded power great enough to suppress most threats. But outside their territory or if they were expelled from their post, they were no different from an ordinary person.

Yan Yufei was clearly one such example. Earlier on the road, he had no power whatsoever. He had to rely on Yan Feng and his guards to protect him. But now, his power was easily the equal of a Vessel Augmentor, if not better.

I had no idea that Lord Yan is the magistrate of Anyang, Ye Qing thought to himself. Although he already guessed from Yan Yufei's dignified bearing and his entourage's cultivation level that they were no ordinary people, their true identity still surprised him.

Of course, this means that the show's going to be even better.

"Rise!" Yan Yufei ordered while withdrawing the silken cloth. The terrible power and unnatural phenomenon happening in the sky vanished like they never happened, and everyone felt a considerable weight lifted from their shoulders.

"Thank you, my lord!" The soldiers responded and rose to their feet.

The captain was climbing to his feet as well when Yan Yufei stared straight into his eyes and uttered coldly, "I did not give *you* permission to rise!"

"M-My lord, I..." So scared the captain was that his knees weakened, and he dropped to his knees once more.

Yan Yufei asked emotionlessly, "Tell me your name and post."

The captain answered with a tremor in his voice, "My name is Tang Yi'an [1]. I'm the current gate captain of Anyang!"

"Tang Yi'an? That name is wasted on someone like you!" Yan Yufei said scornfully, "I am not so naive that I would expect all officials of Chu to lead by example and solve the people's problems, but to actively use your status to exploit the people you're supposed to protect? How dare you."

"I'm sorry, my lord! I beg you to give me another chance!" A trembling Tang Yi'an admitted his guilt and kowtowed immediately. However, he immediately defended himself by saying, "Yesterday, after the Qingfeng Merchants were robbed outside of Anyang and suffered heavy losses, the assistant magistrate ordered me to investigate everyone who passes through Anyang thoroughly. I dare not neglect my duty, and I am deeply sorry that I have offended you as a result. So please..."

"Hmph!" Yan Yufei narrowed his eyes. This Tang Yi'an really was smart. Not only did he manage to excuse himself from his behavior, he had brought up his patron again to warn him. In theory, the assistant magistrate was subordinate to him. In reality, the assistant magistrate commanded Anyang's armed forces and wielded a lot of power. There was also the fact that he was a newly appointed magistrate, and this was technically his first day at the job. If he insisted on punishing the gate captain for his behavior, he was going to give off the impression that he was mean and petty-minded, and he would offend the assistant magistrate as well. It was a lose-lose situation in that case.

A short pause later, Yan Yufei said coldly, "Even so, you have clearly transgressed beyond your post and behaved unseemingly. If I find you doing this again, you will be punished severely!"

"I obey, my lord! Thank you for giving me a second chance, my lord!" Tang Yi'an replied in a hurry while hiding his delight. He knew the new magistrate wouldn't dare to punish him and risk his brother-in-law's ire!

Yan Yufei wasn't planning on letting him off with no punishment, however. Just when Tang Yi'an was about to rise a second time, he said suddenly, "Speaking of which, you seem to have a fondness for kneeling. In that case, you may kneel a while longer!"

Tang Yi'an grimaced visibly. *Since fucking when do I enjoy kneeling?* He did not dare to disobey Yan Yufei though, so he dropped to his knees for a third time!

"The rest of you may resume your duties now. Be warned that you will be punished severely if you dare to abuse your position and neglect your duties again!" Yan Yufei's voice was ice cold as he swept his gaze across the other soldiers.

"Yes, my lord..." They responded meekly. Unlike Tang Yi'an, they weren't lucky enough to be the assistant magistrate's brother-in-law. The only thing they could do was to obey.

"Now then. Let us enter Anyang!" Yan Yufei ordered before leaving his carriage. He then walked right through the gates.

Satisfied with the show he just watched, Ye Qing casually followed behind Yan Yufei and the others and passed through the gates as well. Since Yan Yufei was right there, no one had the guts to stop him and ask his name, much less put him through an inspection. He was happy with this outcome to say the least.

"Hee haw..." *Prrrrsssssh!*

There was to be one last encore before the show truly ended, however. Ye Qing was leading his donkey past Tang Yi'an when his donkey—after all the fright it had suffered earlier—decided now was the time to take a literal piss. The hot stream hit Tang Yi'an squarely in the face.

Tang Yi'an: "..."

Ye Qing: "..."

Ye Qing looked down, and Tang Yi'an looked up. Their eyes met, and for a while no one knew what to say to each other!

"You—!"

A few speechless seconds later, Tang Yi'an's emotions finally caught up to him, and he was ready to shout at the bastard. However, Ye Qing interrupted him with an apology, "Sorry, sorry! My donkey is a cowardly thing, and you are so intimidating that it just cannot help itself. I hope you won't take offense with a donkey?"

His words almost sounded polite, but the derision in his voice was as clear as day. Ashen-faced with anger, Tang Yi'an was about to unleash fire and brimstone when suddenly, Yan Yufei looked back and said, "What are you doing, Joyless? Get over here already!"

“Coming!” Ye Qing responded, and whatever Tang Yi’an was going to say was quickly swallowed back into his stomach. It sounded like the young man was quite close with the magistrate, and until he figured out their relationship he didn’t dare to attack him. For a time, he looked like he was about to explode from all the anger and frustration he had pent up!

“Oh right, I almost forgot!” Ye Qing suddenly turned around after a few steps. “It’s pretty hot today, and you look like you can use some water. It so happens that my donkey’s piss is good for the liver and the lungs, and is most effective at cooling heat. If you like you can even roll yourself in the puddle or drink from it. I guarantee you’ll never feel as hot or impulsive ever again! No need to thank me, captain!”

Ye Qing gave him one final wave and left just like that!

“Pff...” Some of the crowd could not stop themselves from bursting out in laughter.

Creak... Tang Yi’an was clenching his teeth so hard that he almost broke a molar. He could not remember the last time he had been humiliated like this. His eyes flashed with a hint of hatred as he glared at Ye Qing’s back.

As soon as they were inside the county, Yan Yufei saluted Ye Qing and said sincerely, “Joyless, I hadn’t told you my identity earlier because I wish to avoid unnecessary risks. It’s not that I want to hide it from you. I hope you won’t mind?”

At that moment, he didn’t look like a magistrate at all.

Ye Qing smiled. “I understand, Lord Yan. I don’t mind it one bit! Plus, I already figured that you guys were no ordinary people. I wasn’t expecting you to be the magistrate of Anyang though! Now that was a surprise!”

“Haha... I knew we wouldn’t be able to hide it from you!”

Yan Yufei was quite delighted by Ye Qing’s honesty. “Speaking of which, what do you plan to do now that you’re here?”

Chapter 50: Ghost In The Bookstore

Ye Qing pondered for a moment. “I’m not sure. For now, I’m going to find an inn!”

“Haha, sure. Do notify me after you’ve found a place to stay, okay? When I’m free, I would like to treat you to a drink and thank you for all the help you’ve given us during our trip!” Yan Yufei said with a smile. Personally, he would’ve treated Ye Qing to a drink this instant, but as the newly appointed magistrate of Anyang there were many things he had to busy himself with. He could only promise to repay Ye Qing at a later date.

Ye Qing replied, “Did I mention you are too courteous, my lord? Don’t worry! I promise I’ll visit you myself as soon as your schedule is open!”

“It’s a promise then!” Yan Yufei laughed heartily and saluted him one last time. “Then, until we meet again!”

“Until we meet again!” Ye Qing saluted back before walking over to Yan Feng, Yang Guan and the rest of the guards and bid them goodbye as well.

After everyone was gone, the young man looked at Kung Fu Frog and said, “It’s just the two of us now. Let us find a place to stay first, shall we?”

“Croak croak!” Kung Fu Frog responded affirmatively.

And so the one human and one frog slowly wandered through the streets, taking in the sights and finding an inn to stay. However, they quickly realized that the simple task wasn’t as simple as it seemed. Every inn they visited had refused to accept them not because they were full, or even because a stereotypical young master had bought out the place. No, it was because of Kung Fu Frog. No one wanted to take in a Stranger no matter how harmless it looked, and their excuses were virtually the same: a Stranger would frighten their guests, negatively impact their business, so on and so on. As a result, they were unable to find lodging despite having seen over half of Anyang already!

“Okay, this is a problem,” Ye Qing let out a little sigh. He and Kung Fu Frog were currently sitting underneath a stone bridge and staring gloomily at the clear waters.

In fact, there were plenty of people in the county who kept Strangers as pets. That didn’t mean that your ordinary citizen wasn’t afraid of Strangers, however. It wasn’t like he couldn’t sympathize with the innkeepers either. The problem was, he still didn’t have a fucking place to stay!

Am I, a Vessel Augmentor, actually going to have to sleep on the streets?

No! I won’t accept this!

Suddenly, a light bulb appeared on Ye Qing’s head. “Wait, I know! We can just buy a shop or a house!”

Both Prayer and Zheng Tianyuan carried a lot of silvers with them. This was especially true for Prayer, who might very well have kept his life’s savings in the storage artifact. As the inheritor of their wealth, Ye Qing could buy a house in Anyang and still have a lot to spare.

“Croak croak...” said Kung Fu Frog while nodding.

“Okay then. Let’s move!” Ye Qing wasted no time in putting his thoughts into action.

First things first, they needed to find a middleman. Just like in the other world, a middleman acted as a broker, go-between, or intermediary for requests and business opportunities in return for a commission or a fee. After asking a pedestrian about it and receiving an address, Ye Qing went straight to a shop named Yijun Brokerage.

As soon as Ye Qing stepped through the door, a silver-tongued assistant greeted him immediately, “Welcome to our shop, customer! Would you like to buy, mail, or sell? Yijun Brokerage offers all the relevant services at a fair and affordable price! We guarantee you’ll be satisfied with our services!”

Wow. Look at him go like a modern age advertisement! Ye Qing thought while answering, “I would like to buy a house or a cheap shop!”

The assistant’s eyes lit up immediately. Brokering a house sale was a big deal. Assuming everything went smoothly, he was guaranteed to earn a hefty commission. He asked with a wide smile on his face, “Before I go get you what you need, do you have any specific requirements? For example, what kind of house or shop are you looking for?”

Ye Qing thought for a moment before answering, “I want a quiet place with a good environment, and the price should be reasonable, of course!”

“Okay! Please wait a moment!”

The assistant poured Ye Qing a cup of tea before opening a notebook and going through the list carefully. A while later, he said, “I’ve found two houses and one shop that fit your criteria, dear customer!” He proceeded to describe the places in great detail.

Ye Qing frowned after the assistant was done talking. Frankly, none of the options really appealed to him.

The two houses were a courtyard house and a massive residence. The courtyard house was expanded four times and was owned by a destitute licentiate [1]. He wanted to travel to the capital to attend the imperial examination, so he was selling his ancestral home to cover his travel expenses. The problem was the house had been in a state of disrepair for years due to lack of maintenance. Overall, it was slightly below Ye Qing’s expectations.

The massive residence belonged to a wealthy family. It was huge, ornate, and beautiful. The owner wanted to sell the place because he was going into business elsewhere. The building was great and frankly above Ye Qing’s expectations, but there was a problem: the residence was too big and thus, too expensive. Even if he could afford it, it was ridiculously wasteful to buy a residence that could fit up to a hundred people just to accommodate himself!

As for the shop, he had struck it from his head as soon as the assistant said, “pork butcher’s shop”. Now why on *earth* would he want to stay in a bloody butcher’s shop, not to mention that a handsome man like him did not belong to such a place? This was a hundred percent a one-star option! Boo!

“Are there no other options?” Ye Qing asked.

.

The assistant scrunched up his face. “These are the only ones I can find, dear customer. Unless...”

His eyes suddenly lit up as he recalled something. “There *is* a bookstore with a beautiful environment that is on sale for an amazing price. However...”

“However, what? Spit it out, man!” Ye Qing sipped his tea and said.

The assistant answered, “It is rumored that the bookstore is haunted by something. Every night, the voice of someone reading aloud could be heard from the bookstore. Sometimes it was loud, sometimes it was soft, sometimes it was happy, and sometimes it was sad. However, the voice would stop as soon as someone enters the bookstore, and to this day no one is able to find the culprit behind the voices. It’s very strange!”

“The hauntings eventually became so infamous that almost everyone in Anyang had heard about it. Terrified for their lives, the shop assistants left one after another until the owner was the only one left in the bookstore. The bookstore was decades old and incredibly famous in Anyang until this happened. The owner was extremely reluctant to part with it as a matter of course, but he was old and weak, and he did not have any children he could pass the store to. Unable to run the business any longer, he had no choice but to put it on sale including all the books and orphan works.”

“But as I said, practically everyone has heard of the hauntings, and so no one was willing to buy the bookstore despite the owner lowering its price again and again. To this day, it is still waiting for a new owner. The bookstore owner came to us for help later, and truth be told, we would’ve rejected him if not for the fact that the hauntings had not claimed any lives to this day.”

“A haunted bookstore, you say?” Now this sounded perfect for Ye Qing. An ordinary person might be afraid of a haunting, but he hadn’t been an ordinary person for a long time, had he? “What is its name? Where is it located? And how much does it cost?”

“The bookstore is called Endless Horizons. It is taken from the proverb, ‘The sea of learning has no horizons’. Endless Horizons is located in the intersection between Anyang Street and Rainflower Alley, an extremely strategic location, and it is currently selling for just the cheap, cheap price of a hundred silvers. I would say that it is excellent value for money considering that shops located in this district usually sell for way more.”

The assistant, like all competent salespeople, was going to say more to build up the bookstore and encourage a sale. However, he shut his mouth when he recalled that the bookstore was, no matter how valuable it really was, haunted. He doubted that Ye Qing would be interested in buying it.

Of course, he was wrong. Ye Qing declared immediately, “I’ve made my decision! I’m going to buy this bookstore!”

“I thought so. In that case, pl—wait, what? You... you want to buy Endless Horizons?” The assistant was going to go back to his notebook when he realized what Ye Qing said and exclaimed in utter disbelief.

Ye Qing nodded. “You did a good job praising its good points to hell and back. I would be an idiot not to buy such an excellent place.”

The assistant was more than a little befuddled to put it mildly. His introduction was no different from all the introductions he had done for the bookstore previously, but none of his customers had fallen for his sales pitch so to speak. *What are the chances that everyone who has reviewed the bookstore until the young man before is an idiot?* He thought. He didn’t say his thoughts out loud, of course.

Out of good conscience, the assistant reminded Ye Qing, “I shouldn’t say this, customer, but you do remember that the place is haunted, do you?”

Ye Qing chuckled. “In that case, I just have to make it not haunted anymore! Anyway, get me started on the procedure already. I don’t want to wait any longer than I have to. You don’t want me to change my mind, do you?”

“Er, sure! Right away, customer!” The assistant nodded a couple of times in excitement and did as Ye Qing ordered. Then, he personally took Ye Qing to the original owner of Endless Horizons. Ye Qing paid everything he was due in one go, the owner handed him the keys, the deed and everything else. They both signed the contract, and the deal was done.

Ye Qing looked both happy and excited as he looked up at the wooden building in front of him. He declared, “From now on, this is our turf!”

Endless Horizons was a three-storey building with bronze bells hanging underneath flying eaves. It looked interesting, appealing, and very tasteful.

The first thing he saw after pushing open the door and stepping inside was a neat and tidy hall. The tables and chairs were all placed in neat rows next to the walls, and a ring of bookshelves filled with books of all kinds surrounded the place. There had to be thousands of books in this hall alone.

The tables and chairs were clearly prepared for the customers. They enabled both buyers and non-buyers to enjoy the books in relative comfort. It was a very customer-friendly setting to say the least.

The second floor was split into a number of small rooms, and most of the rooms contained all kinds of orphan works or rare books sorted based on their categories. Ye Qing could tell at first glance that some of the books were quite valuable. Besides that, there were a couple of ornately designed guest rooms that were meant to be used by important guests.

The third floor was the floor where the owner used to live. The outer room was the tea room used to serve very important guests, and the innermost room was the bedroom. There was a study to the left, and a kitchen to the right. The floor was fully furnished and equipped with everything a person might need to live comfortably. This was definitely something he very much appreciated.

“What an incredible place this is! That assistant had no idea how right he was when he said this place is excellent value for money!” Forget its strategic location, the installations and the books alone were absolutely worth more than a hundred silvers. No wonder the original owner looked so reluctant when he handed over the deed just now.

Ye Qing arranged the bedroom for a bit before going downstairs and wiping the place until it was more or less shiny. Ye Qing looked at the reborn bookstore and smiled in satisfaction.

“Now, all that’s left to do is to deal with the ghost who loves to read!”

One way or another, he was going to find out exactly who the mysterious reader was.

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It was a moonless, windless night. When the gongs rang thrice, and the fourth watch of the night began, the sound of reading abruptly broke the silence shrouding Endless Horizons.

The reading voice was crisp and melodious. Sometimes, it climbed up the notes as if to reflect the joy etched in a certain passage. Sometimes, it softened to reflect the sadness of the text. Like a Confucian sage reciting a sagely work, its cadence of speech was more or less perfect, and it sounded both rhythmic and beautiful.

There was just one tiny problem. Not a soul could be seen in the first two floors. This one variable transformed what was a soothing recital into a horror show!