

## Stranger 501

### Chapter 501: The Laughter In The Darkness

“Correct me if I’m wrong, brother, but is your plan really to take a stroll outside every once in a while and pretend to be a quiet beauty for the rest of the time?” Yi Pin asked with a doubtful look on his face.

Every four to six hours or so, Ye Qing would head out and linger in front of Sun Xuanzhen, Huo Linglong and Yue Juezhen’s door for a bit. Then, he would return to his room, sit in his corner, and do absolutely nada. It was puzzling to say the least.

I thought you said you want to use your brain to snatch some Profound Yellow Qi? So why aren’t you doing anything? Are you waiting for the Profound Yellow Qi to waltz into your room or something?

If this is what you call using your brain, then I could’ve done it myself. Like seriously, even a baby could do this so long as they didn’t trip and fall on the way!

Ye Qing opened his eyes and shot the old Taoist a mysterious smile. “It is time.”

He then rose to his feet.

Yi Pin rose to his feet as well and asked, “What is?”

“The time has come for me to take my Profound Yellow Qi,” Ye Qing replied enigmatically before heading out once more.

“Brother, wa—wow!” Yi Pin was just about to follow him when the door slammed shut and nearly hit him in the nose. Then, he heard Ye Qing’s voice beside his ears, saying, “Stay inside the room, brother.”

“Come on, brother! Don’t be so stingy. I wouldn’t make fun of you even if you were just pretending,” Yi Pin taunted. He really thought that Ye Qing was just putting on a show, and that he prevented him from following because he didn’t want his act to be exposed.

Ye Qing ignored the old Taoist’s taunt and went to Sun Xuanzhen, Huo Linglong and Yue Juejiang’s room as usual, planting a new Incense of Misfortune in front of their doors. Then, he transformed into Yue Juejiang and entered a room.

A few breaths later, he came out and entered a different room. Once again, he was able to procure the resident’s Profound Yellow Qi with this.

This would happen a few more times before he transformed into Sun Xuanzhen next. Then, he repeated the process all over again. It wasn’t long before he had visited every room in the Earthly Sovereign’s Coffin except the trio’s. In total, he had collected ten wisps of Profound Yellow Qi.

His plan was very simple. He used the Incense of Misfortune to plague Sun Xuanzhen, Huo Linglong and Yue Juejiang with a continuous string of ill fortunes. While they were busy fending for themselves, he would collect the Profound Yellow Qi at his leisure.

This was why he visited their rooms every once in a while. It was to plant a new Incense of Misfortune in front of their door after the previous one had run out. It would ensure that they had no choice but to stay inside their rooms.

Of course, he didn't know if the Incense of Misfortune was powerful enough to affect a Spirit Master, which was why he waited almost eighteen hours before he finally took action[1]. Since the trio hadn't set foot outside of their rooms even once throughout this time, it proved that the Incense of Misfortune could affect them.

The three Incense of Misfortune he just lit would last until the next trial began. They hadn't set foot out of their rooms before, so they definitely weren't going to do so now. He was free to claim his prize.

When all was said and done, they would only think that the other two people had taken the Profound Yellow Qi. They would never suspect that a fourth party was secretly screwing them over.

The plan wasn't foolproof, of course. If Sun Xuanzhen, Huo Linglong or Yue Juejiang conversed with each other and mentioned how unlucky they had been for the past day, then they would almost certainly notice that something was amiss. But knowing how prideful the trio were, he was fairly certain that they wouldn't bring up the matter of their own accord.

That might change when a sufficient amount of time had passed, but for now, his secret was safe.

Even if he was wrong, he wasn't worried. After all, he had already claimed his prize. Ten wisps of Profound Yellow Qi was enough to increase his strength drastically. When the time came, he was certain he could 1v3 them without issues.

"Wait a second, I have another idea..."

Ye Qing was just about to return to his room when he caught sight of the Incense of Misfortune out of the corner of his eyes.

What if he lit an Incense of Misfortune for the trio right before the trial began?

It would be a very entertaining experience, wouldn't it?

It was only a matter of time before he clashed against the trio anyway. If he could exploit the trial to weaken them, then why not?

If he could take them out in one fell swoop, then even better.

Of course, he knew that this was unlikely to happen. The Incense of Misfortune didn't kill no matter how unlucky it made its victims.

Even so, he was fairly certain that the combination was going to weaken them by a significant amount.

Assuming that everything went as planned, he didn't need to wait for them to pay him a visit any longer. He could pay them a visit himself.

"Alright, I've made up my mind," Ye Qing declared with a snap of the finger.

If his ploy succeeded, he could probably conserve his Incense of Misfortune tomorrow. If not, well, the night was still young.

In any case, there was no harm having extra insurance whatsoever.

After Ye Qing returned to his room and made idle chat with Yi Pin, he began refining the Profound Yellow Qi and practicing the “Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra”.

Now that he was no longer plagued by his injuries, and the Profound Yellow Qi was basically a miracle elixir for tempering one’s body, of course he was going to use it to boost his cultivation in the martial art. Hopefully, he could make significant progress with his Chaos Demon Ape Body.

After he was done refining a wisp of Profound Yellow Qi, Ye Qing calculated the time and set out. Then, he ignited a new Incense of Misfortune for Sun Xuanzhen, Huo Linglong and Yue Juejiang again. They should last until the end of the trial.

“I’m counting on you, Brother Incense.” Ye Qing bowed to the incense sticks as usual and got ready to return to his room. It was at this moment the silence outside was broken by a peal of laughter.

The laughter came from the darkness, and it sounded sweet and melodious. This was the Earthly Sovereign’s Coffin, however. All it elicited in him was fear and trepidation.

As soon as the laughter appeared, Ye Qing felt an indescribable, unstoppable chill spreading throughout the Earthly Sovereign’s Coffin. With his physique, he could stand naked in a frozen snowland and feel almost nothing. But right now, the chill was such that it seeped into his very bones. It was even worse than when he was fighting against the Black Sky Divine Palm force and Zhou Hengshan’s saber intent.

To be fair, there were some differences between this chill and those two energies. The Black Sky Divine Palm force and Zhou Hengshan’s saber intent were naturally cold because of their yin nature, but this chill was pure coldness without any other energy mixed within it. Like the incarnation of coldness itself, it chilled both his body and soul to the very core.

“Hahaha...”

Another peal of laughter came, and this time it sounded much, much closer. At the same time, Ye Qing felt someone tugging at his sleeve.

When he looked down, he saw a young girl standing behind him and tugging at his sleeve timidly. She looked around five or six years old, and she was barefooted. Cute, innocent and healthy, she looked as perfect as a doll.

The young girl was wearing an innocent smile on her face and looking up to Ye Qing with a giggle. When their eyes met, Ye Qing felt an indescribable chill spreading out of his core and threatening to encase his body and soul in eternal ice.

In fact, frost was growing on the floor, the walls, and his body at a visible rate. He was going to turn into an ice sculpture if he didn’t act soon.

Right before the frost would spread throughout his body, purple flame washed out of his body and enveloped him like a robe.

*“Purple Sun Trueflame”*

It was like the sun itself was crashing down on humanity. The temperature within the coffin instantly shot up and melted the ice into steam.

“Uwah!”

Behind him, the girl let out a wail and melted into a puddle in just the blink of an eye. Then, the puddle itself evaporated into steam.

Ye Qing’s expression only grew more severe, however. It was because a worse chill was pouring forth from the darkness.

The next moment, thick crusts of blue frost emerged from the walls, the floor, and the ceiling and transformed the entire Earthly Sovereign’s Coffin into a world of ice.

Then, a tiger-like Stranger elegantly stepped out of the darkness.

Chapter 502: Children of the Frost

The strange tiger was as big as a calf, and it had a deer’s horn, a tiger’s head, a goat’s body and an ox’s tail. It looked like it was carved from the prettiest indigo crystal, translucent and blue, and there were a couple of crystalline children running on top of its back and playing with each other. They looked incredibly happy.

“The Children of the Frost?!”

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes slightly. He turned around and raced straight toward his room without hesitation.

The Children of the Frost was a Disaster-class Stranger. Together with the Snow Maitreya, they were known as the Disastrous Frost and Snow. It shouldn’t need to be said, but they were terrifying existences. When the Snow Matreiya appeared, a terrible snowstorm lasting several months would descend upon the world. When the Children of the Frost appeared, hundreds of kilometers of land would transform into an icy hell.

Obviously, this wasn’t a Stranger he could handle at his current level. If he hadn’t refined the Purple Sun Trueflame yesterday, their very first clash would’ve resulted in some injuries. He wouldn’t die, but it wouldn’t be fun trying to purge the energy of a Disaster-class Stranger from his body.

That was also why he needed to run back to his room now. Although his Purple Sun Trueflame was a supreme flame of yang, its current quantity and quality were ultimately subpar. It could nullify a casual attack with ease, but it was nowhere strong enough to do battle against the Children of the Frost. His flame was nothing compared to the Fire God Moth’s.

The children playing on top of the tiger giggled when they saw Ye Qing run. Maybe it was because he triggered their predatory instincts, or maybe they loathed the fact that he possessed a power that was the complete opposite of theirs, but they abruptly charged him in unison. A terrible chill immediately spread toward him from every direction.

Ye Qing flicked a single wisp of Purple Sun Trueflame at the children, causing them to let out a strange cry and evaporate into nothing. The terrible chill also receded in an instant. However, they soon reappeared on top of the tiger’s back, giggling and playing like nothing had ever happened.

Although its name was Children of the Frost, its true body was the strange tiger. The frost children were just frost spirits the tiger Stranger conjured. So long as it was still alive, the frost children would never die.

Blocking the frost children with the Purple Sun Trueflame bought him about a breath's time. That was enough for him to escape back into his room.

As soon as he stepped inside, he saw Yi Pin hugging himself tightly and shivering like a leaf at a corner. The interior had already been coated in ice, though it melted as soon as it made contact with his red hot aura.

Yi Pin felt like crying. One moment it was a frozen hell, and next it was a molten purgatory. It was fire and ice at its worst.

Ye Qing too realized that he had screwed up and hurriedly dialed down the Purple Sun Trueflame emanating from his body. When only a single wisp of flame resided on his palm, the room temperature quickly decreased until it was just right.

Yi Pin let out a sigh of relief and asked, "Is it the Children of the Frost?"

"Yeah." Ye Qing nodded. Yi Pin's correct guess didn't surprise him considering the old Taoist's wealth of knowledge and experience.

"The Children of the Frost, huh. Yesterday it was the Fire God Moth, and today it's the Children of the Frost. The ice and fire treatment, eh? Earthly Sovereign's Coffin sure knows how to play with its victims!"

Yi Pin sneered audibly before letting out another sigh. "Thank goodness you refined the Purple Sun Trueflame last night, or today's going to be another hell."

"I guess," Ye Qing replied distractedly. He was worried that the Children of the Frost would try to force its way into their room because of him. That would be very bad.

Thankfully, the room ultimately proved itself reliable. The Children of the Frost lingered outside their door for a moment but eventually left the area.

After the Stranger was gone, Ye Qing finally let out a sigh of relief. Then, he sighed. "A shame."

"What about?" Yi Pin asked, puzzled.

Ye Qing shook his head. "It's nothing."

He was lamenting over his wasted Incense of Misfortune, of course. If the Stranger that was to be their trial was anyone but the Children of the Frost, then maybe it would've been fine. However, the Children of the Frost was notorious for freezing hundreds and hundreds of kilometers of land as soon as it made its appearance. There was no way his three Incense of Misfortune were still burning.

*I should start refining the Profound Yellow Qi*, Ye Qing thought to himself. With the Purple Sun Trueflame to protect him, the Children of the Frost couldn't threaten him with its frost powers. In that case, he might as well use this opportunity to refine the Profound Yellow Qi he collected and improve his strength.

Ye Qing flicked a wisp of Purple Sun Trueflame to the floor. It didn't disappear even though it was resting atop the stone floor. Then, he adopted a meditative stance and began cultivating.

Time passed little by little. When Ye Qing had absorbed and refined his third wisp of Profound Yellow Qi, the chill outside the room began fading slowly. It meant that the Children of the Frost was gone. So, Ye Qing opened his mouth and inhaled the wisp of Purple Sun Trueflame on the floor down his gullet.

As soon as he retrieved the Purple Sun Trueflame, Yi Pin stretched his back and let out a huge yawn, asking, "Is it done?"

"What do you think?" Ye Qing smirked. "Did you have a good night's sleep, brother?"

"I wasn't sleeping." Yi Pin sipped some wine to wet his throat. "I was just taking a nap."

... That's still sleeping, bro. Don't think you can fool me just because I don't read a lot of books.

"Anyway, I need to discuss something with you. Huo Linglong already suspected something last time. If she sees that we're unharmed again, then she will definitely know that something is amiss."

"That's simple." Yi Pin produced three silver needles out of thin air and pierced three major bodily points: Shenfu, Huangting and Yunhai. The blood immediately drained away from his face, his eyes glazed over, and his aura nosedived in the blink of an eye. Right now, he looked like a man on his deathbed.

"Not bad, brother." Ye Qing was impressed. Even with the strength of his spirit, he was unable to tell that Yi Pin was faking it. It really looked like the old man was on his deathbed.

Yi Pin lifted his head a little higher. "Heh. This is the Three Needles Soul Sealing Art. Do you want to give it a try?"

"Thanks, but no thanks. I have my own ways." Ye Qing morphed his body and aura to mimic that of a gravely ill man. Once his disguise was complete, he went to the door, opened a tiny gap, and waited patiently for Sun Xuanzhen, Huo Linglong and Yue Juejiang to show up.

This time, the trio took around half a teatime to show up, and they all looked a little weaker than normal. Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang looked as pale as a ghost, and Huo Linglong was wearing a dark red mask on her face.

"Haha, why do you both look like you've had your vitality sucked out of your body? Did you do something while I wasn't looking last night?"

Huo Linglong teased them when she noticed their pale complexions, "I can be your partner if you're that lonely."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Sun Xuanzhen replied in an emotionless voice.

Prod all you want, but I will never tell you that I'm pale because I was shitting all day yesterday.

Yue Juejiang too grunted with an annoyed look on his face. He didn't know why, but he was supremely unlucky last night. When he drank water, the liquid somehow got caught between his teeth. When he ate, he somehow choked on his food. When he meditated, he somehow dozed off and wasted his time, and even when he was cultivating, he somehow screwed up his qi circulation and wasted even more time and effort. The memory alone made him feel like punching a hole in the wall.

That wasn't even the worst thing that happened to him. He was in the middle of cultivating when suddenly, he thought of Huo Linglong and suddenly found himself drowning in uncontrollable lust. Unable to concentrate in the slightest, he had no choice but to produce a large jar and jump inside.

The large jar was a Strange Artifact filled with the Frost Spring of Far North. It was a kind of spring that could only be found in the far north, and it was extremely cold to put it mildly. He was hoping to cool down his body and his mind with its iciness. However, not long after he entered the jar, the Children of the Frost appeared and froze the Frost Spring of Far North faster than he could blink. As a result, he was trapped inside the block of ice and unable to move a single muscle. It was easily one of the most excruciating experiences of his life. If he wasn't as tough and vigorous as he was, he could've easily frozen to death.

Huo Linglong's teasing might have been harmless, but Yue Juejiang couldn't help but think that she was making fun of his misery.

"Why are you wearing a mask today, Fire Princess?" Sun Xuanzhen stared at her mask and asked curiously.

Huo Linglong giggled. "I feel like playing the mysterious woman today. If you're curious, we can... interact with each other tonight. What do you say?"

Huo Linglong walked up to him and drew circles on his chest.

Chapter 503: Thousand Hand Bodhisattva

Suddenly, Huo Linglong wrinkled her nose and asked, "Huh? What's that smell, Brother Sun? It smells kinda... weird."

Sun Xuanzhen grimaced immediately. *Never speak of this again, and we might still be friends!*

"I'm going to collect the Profound Yellow Qi now. Goodbye," declared the swordsman before departing toward a room immediately.

Yue Juejiang left without saying a word as well.

"Interesting!" Huo Linglong chuckled to herself before walking toward a room as well.

After collecting two wisps of Profound Yellow Qi, Huo Linglong suddenly recalled something and went straight for Ye Qing and Yi Pin's room. "I almost forgot. This room is a bag of curiosity as well."

The corners of Ye Qing's lips curled into a small smirk when he saw Huo Linglong walking straight toward them. He supposed it was too much to hope that she would forget all about them. Luckily for them, they had prepared for this exact scenario.

Without a word, Ye Qing closed the door completely and waited patiently for Huo Linglong to show up.

A few breaths later, Huo Linglong entered the room. When she saw that Ye Qing and Yi Pin had one foot in the grave, she couldn't help but sigh in disappointment. "Oh, dammit. This is boring."

She inhaled the two wisps of Profound Yellow Qi in the air and got ready to leave. She was at the entrance when suddenly, she curled a finger within her sleeve and flicked. An invisible wisp of spiritual power immediately shot toward Yi Pin.

Ah, shit.

A steely glint flickered in Ye Qing's eyes as he brought down a finger. A ripple of demonic thought immediately washed out.

### *"Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul"*

The ripple annihilated the spiritual power Huo Linglong fired at Yi Pin and temporarily detained her mind at the same time. Her eyes immediately glazed over.

At the same time, Ye Qing leaped into the air, produced a blade of dreamy crimson from his sleeve, and swung it straight at Huo Linglong's neck.

### *"Soulchasing"*

He didn't hold back. Since they were found out, he might as well eliminate one of the major threats to his well being right here and now.

Right before Huo Linglong would be decapitated, a pair of slender fingers suddenly blocked in front of the flash of crimson and pressed downward.

Ding!

The crisp ringing of metal resounded throughout the room, and the crimson flash disappeared into nothing. Huo Linglong had caught Ye Qing's Red Sleeve with just her fingers.

"Haha! You would kill me without even talking to me? How brutish."

A drop of blood slid down the blade of Red Sleeve, and it somehow burst into a wisp of pink flame. A strange power spread throughout the room immediately. Ye Qing immediately felt hot, restless, and brimming with lust. He felt as if some sort of invisible flame was flowing out of his heart and cooking him from the inside out.

Beside him, Yi Pin looked as red as a lobster. Wisps of pink flames were literally seeping out of his pores and proving that his feelings were no hallucination.

"Hahaha! You look fairly handsome, dearie. There's no one I love more than beautiful people."

Huo Linglong giggled and reached out to caress Ye Qing's cheek, but at the last possible moment, the alarm bells inside her head suddenly rang at full force, and every hair on her body stood on end. Pink flames immediately surged out of her body and took the form of a female Bodhisattva, except this one looked anything but prim and dignified. She oozed femininity, sexiness and lust, and she had an unbelievable number of arms. They were covered in pink flames as well.



The next moment, the Bodhisattva brought down its one thousand arms and filled the air with disruptive, mind-bending noises. The entire room was on fire.

### *“Magia: Thousand Hand Bodhisattva”*

When a warrior had successfully created their Yin God, their mind would form a direct connection with the world around them, and their will would respond to the tiniest changes in nature. This pathway between their being and the world around them was called “Magia”. That was how a Spirit Master was able to channel their surroundings, summon rain and storm, and even warp the reality around them.

Magia was something only a Spirit Master who had created their Yin God could learn. It was stronger than your average ultimate technique, killer move, spiritual secret art and more. Generally speaking, no one underneath the Spirit Master stage could survive a Magia without resorting to special methods.

The Thousand Hand Bodhisattva was a Magia technique stated in the “Flames of Desire”. When combined with her Yin God, the Fire Bodhisattva, it was like a Thousand Hand Bodhisattva had descended to the earth to spread her chaotic, lustful ways like a wildfire.

At the beginning Huo Linglong just wanted to play with Ye Qing. Even if he had hidden his strength, she didn’t believe Ye Qing could threaten her unless she actively tried to kill herself.

The Earthly Sovereign’s Coffin was a supremely boring place for someone like her, and it was rare to find someone who would dare to raise his hand against her. It was no wonder she couldn’t resist the urge to toy with Ye Qing a little.

However, the harmless sheep turned out to be a big, bad wolf in sheep’s clothing. Her senses warned her that Ye Qing could pose a serious threat against her, and she had no intention of dying here.

She loathed those who would defy her. So, she was going to kill Ye Qing for his transgression.

“Hahaha... what a disobedient boy you are,” giggled Huo Linglong as the Thousand Hand Bodhisattva bore down her arms on Ye Qing.

At the last moment, Ye Qing spat out a wisp of purple flame from his mouth. As soon as it appeared, the one thousand arms vanished, and the pink flames disintegrated bit by bit. A vacuum of unbearable, murderous heat immediately enveloped the whole room.

“Ah! The Purple Sun Trueflame?!”

Huo Linglong blanched. Her Yin God trembled, and her energies immediately plummeted like crazy.

There was nothing more a practitioner of the “Flames of Desire” feared more than a supreme flame of yang. In the presence of the Purple Sun Trueflame, she would be lucky to be able to unleash even half her original strength.

“Hahaha... It looks like I’ve miscalculated. can hardly believe that someone like you has been lurking under my nose this whole time.”

Huo Linglong looked dazed as she stared at Ye Qing and his flame blocking in front of the exit, but she quickly regained her calm and smiled brightly.

“Let us negotiate, shall we?”

“Okay. Let’s negotiate then.” Ye Qing smirked right back at her.

At first glance, it looked like the upper hand was his. After all, he was controlling the exit, and she clearly feared his Purple Sun Trueflame. In reality, they were on equal footing—no, he was the one who was at a slight disadvantage. He had been from the moment he failed to ambush and kill Huo Linglong.

Yes, his Purple Sun Trueflame seemed to be the bane of Huo Linglong’s existence, and yes, killing Huo Linglong wouldn’t take too much time and effort. The problem was he couldn’t do it without alerting those around him.

The rooms in the Earthly Sovereign’s Coffin could insulate one’s spirit perfectly, but not sound and energy. If they caused too big a commotion and drew Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang’s attention, then he would be in serious trouble.

Moreover, the room was only so big. Yi Pin was almost certainly going to get caught up in their fight. Although Yi Pin was a former champion of unknown heights, his past two days of observation told him that his glory days were far behind him. The old Taoist might be knowledgeable, experienced, and shameless, but he was also weak as shit. He was almost certainly going to die if he chose to fight Huo Linglong to the death. Considering the circumstances, negotiating with Huo Linglong was his only option.

It was the same for Huo Linglong as well. She could make Ye Qing pay, but he could certainly make her pay with the Purple Sun Trueflame as well. Unless she wanted to commit double suicide with him and let the spoils go to Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang, she had no choice but to negotiate with him.

“Hahaha! I love smart people.” Huo Linglong giggled and waved away the pink flames still burning here and there inside the room. Then, she looked Ye Qing up and down with deep interest and curiosity, “You’ve hidden yourself very well, dearie. You were this close from fooling us completely.”

“You are strong, and yet you’re willing to lie low and surrender your share of the Profound Yellow Qi to us. Either the Profound Yellow Qi is useless to you, or you’re plotting something.”

“However, the Profound Yellow Qi is useful to everyone. I cannot believe that someone would relinquish it willingly, especially one as strong as you. So, you must be plotting something. But what is it?”

Behind her mask, Huo Linglong rubbed her smooth chin and smiled wider. “Now that I think about it, Yue Juejiang lost his Profound Yellow Qi Calabash on the first day you showed up. It can’t be a coincidence. You must be the one who stole his Strange Artifact, am I right?”

“I’m seriously impressed by your audacity, dearie. Yue Juejiang is a member of the Earthly Sovereign Hall, you know?”

Ye Qing didn’t say anything, and his lack of response was no different from admission.

Chapter 504: Demon Planting Art of Mercury

“What else is amiss? Oh right. On your second day here, there were a lot of more dead people than normal. Some of them must’ve been killed by you, right?”

Some things couldn’t bear to fall under scrutiny. If they did, then their lies would be exposed instantly.

Huo Linglong continued to walk down the memory lane when suddenly, her smile stiffened.

“Wait... was it you who did that to me yesterday?!”

Yesterday was one of, if not the unluckiest days of her life. First, she had mistaken the Peach Blossom Smile for water and drank it. Then, when she was busy treating the blisters on her face, her back couldn’t stop aching, her concentration kept slipping here and there, and she couldn’t stop making one mistake after another. As a result, what should’ve been a one-hour task at most had taken up a whole day...

Then, she realized another thing. Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang had looked very odd today, and she wasn’t able to leave her room at all yesterday because of the string of ill fortunes. Assuming that Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang had experienced the same thing as her, assuming they hadn’t left their rooms as well because they didn’t have time to refine the Profound Yellow Qi they had already absorbed...

That would explain why they looked somewhat weak today, and why the aura of their Profound Yellow Qi wasn’t as thick as she expected.

This would also mean that yesterday’s stock of Profound Yellow Qi had all fallen into Ye Qing’s hands.

When she realized this, a kaleidoscope of emotions struck Huo Linglong. She felt shock, astonishment, suspicion, fear, trepidation and more.

Who would’ve thought that someone had been stealing their Profound Yellow Qi from right under their nose this whole time?

Who could’ve thought that none of them would notice it?

If she hadn’t acted on a whim today, heavens only know how much longer she would have been kept in the dark. Had Ye Qing’s plan gone perfectly, he could’ve killed all of them, and they might not even know who their killer was until the very end.

“Yes, it’s all me,” Ye Qing admitted without hesitation. “What else do you want to know?”

Huo Linglong was taken aback for a second. She wasn’t expecting Ye Qing to admit it so frankly, so for a moment she didn’t know what to say.

A short while later, Huo Linglong finally gathered herself and smiled like a succubus. “Hahaha... For now, I want to know your name. I’ve never met a man who could play me and my peers like a fiddle. I feel like swooning just being in your presence.”

“You’re not the first woman who fell in love with me, so let’s move on already, shall we?” Ye Qing said indifferently while sneering on the inside. *The last person to call me hubby betrayed me as soon as she was done with me. Women!*

His indifferent reaction was unexpected, but Huo Linglong quickly recovered and giggled again. “I love confident, manly men like you, dearie. It makes me feel very at ease... So, how do you want to do this?”

Ye Qing made his offer without any fanfare. “Let’s work together to eliminate Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang. Once they’re dead, we’ll split the Profound Yellow Qi between the two of us.”

“You truly are an audacious man, dearie. Sun Xuanzhen is the direct disciple of the leader of the Sword King City, and Yue Juejiang is a descendant of the Earthly Sovereign Hall. Aren’t you worried that these two factions will come after you?” Huo Linglong asked smilingly.

“Sure I am. But they won’t know who killed their precious junior, would they?” Ye Qing countered. Here in the Earthly Sovereign’s Coffin, they existed in an isolated space where they were completely hidden from the rivers of fate. There was no way they would ever find out the truth.

“You’re right. But even if you don’t fear their factions, you must know that Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang aren’t easy foes. Are you sure the two of us will be able to kill them?” Huo Linglong voiced her worries. “It would be most troublesome if we fail to end them in one strike.”

“Worry not. They have no idea that we’re coming for them. So long as we plan properly, there is no chance they will survive our ambush,” Ye Qing declared confidently.

“It sounds like a good idea, but how will this cooperation benefit me?” Huo Linglong asked.

Ye Qing shrugged. “You’ll only have to share the Profound Yellow Qi with me. Isn’t that good enough? Besides, cooperation is your only choice unless you wish to fight me to the death and give up all the spoils to Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang. Surely you don’t want that to happen?”

“Your argument makes a lot of sense.” Huo Linglong nodded seriously but changed her tune suddenly. “But I still think it’s too risky. You can make light of it all you want, but in the end, killing Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang is no easy feat. Not only that, no one knows who you are, so you can just pat your bum and walk away when all is

said and done. But me? They know exactly who I am. Assuming the ambush goes poorly, I'm the one who has to suffer all the consequences."

"What do you want then?"

Ye Qing wasn't surprised by this. It would be far more suspicious if Huo Linglong accepted his offer without arguing to better her position. This was a negotiation after all.

Huo Linglong pretended to think for a moment before saying, "You know, you don't actually need to kill them to get what you want. I have a plan that will allow grant us our wishes without having to take Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang's life."

"Tell me." Murder was just a tool to Ye Qing. If it was possible to obtain the Profound Yellow Qi without killing, then why not?

Huo Linglong explained, "I have a secret art that can make Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang submit per se. All I ask is that you help me in capturing them."

"This way, we can obtain more Profound Yellow Qi without risking the wrath of the Sword King City and Earthly Sovereign Hall, effectively killing two birds with one stone. Isn't that nice?"

"It's much harder to capture two people instead of killing them," Ye Qing said with a frown. He had a feeling that Huo Linglong was plotting something, though he couldn't say what.

Huo Linglong giggled. "Perhaps, but it's much safer than killing them outright, isn't it?"

Ye Qing fell silent for a moment before asking, "How reliable is this secret art of yours?"

Huo Linglong giggled. "Don't worry, dearie. I can swear on my soul that my secret art is perfect."

Suddenly, a new voice interjected, "Ahem. The Earthfire Palace of Demons has a secret art called the 'Demon Planting Art of Mercury'. It plants a demonic seed in its victims and transforms them into living incubators that are hopelessly in love with the person who implanted the seed. In other words, she would be gaining two subordinates who are eternally loyal to her."

"Besides that, the demonic seed could awaken the victims' potential and drastically improve their cultivation speed. Am I right, Fire Princess?"

Yi Pin was the speaker, of course. He had been playing dead until this moment.

"Who are you, Reverend? How do you know my sect's secret?" Huo Linglong looked at him in astonishment.

She knew that the old Taoist was awake from the beginning. She just didn't pay him any attention because he was clearly a small fry. Otherwise, he wouldn't have succumbed to her "Flames of Desire" at the first exchange.

She was clearly wrong. Not only did the old Taoist know about the "Demon Planting Art of Mercury", he was clearly well-versed with it. In fact, the secret art was a taboo and an absolute secret even within the faction itself, and only the head, the Fire Princess, and a handful of influential

figures of the Earthfire Palace of Demons knew about it. Most of them had never even heard of the name “Demon Planting Art of Mercury”, much less outsiders.

Naturally, she was stunned that this seemingly useless Taoist knew so much about her secret art.

“I’m just a small fry and a nobody. You have nothing to worry about.” Yi Pin stroked his beard to give himself airs. “I just happened to hear about the Demon Planting Art of Mercury from a friend, that’s all.”

Huo Linglong frowned. She was now taking Yi Pin much more seriously, so much so that she was weighing if the risk of silencing the old Taoist was worth the reward.

The way the old Taoist put it, the “Demon Planting Art of Mercury” wasn’t a heretical martial art. In fact, manipulative martial arts like this were a dime a dozen in the *jianghu*. Some people might even *want* to be an incubator since it would awaken their potential and drastically improve their cultivation speed. All it would cost was their love and loyalty, so why not?

However, that wasn’t all the “Demon Planting Art of Mercury” could do. When the demonic seed within the incubator had matured, the planter only needed to fuck the incubator once to obtain all of their cultivation and martial arts. Of course, the incubator would lose everything and turn into a powerless cripple.

This was why the “Demon Planting Art of Mercury” was considered a taboo. This was why it was kept a secret even within the faction itself. The reason the heads, Fire Princesses and other influential figures in the Earthfire Palace of Demons progressed unnaturally swift in their cultivation was because they harvested the genius warriors of the *jianghu*, and their own disciples for their selfish desires.

If this secret were to be made public, the Earthfire Palace of Demons would be in serious trouble to say the least. They might not be attacked by the entire *jianghu*, but their lives would certainly become a lot more difficult than before.

Chapter 505: Yi Pin Was Like Holy Mother Of

“Worry not, Miss Huo. If I really wanted to spread this news, I wouldn’t have waited until today. Do I look like someone who is foolish or strong enough to threaten the Earthfire Palace of Demons? I have no desire to be hunted all over the realm by your old monsters.”

As if he could guess Huo Linglong’s thoughts, Yi Pin continued with a calm smile on his face. “I’m just giving my brother a heads-up so he won’t overthink things and ruin what could be a safe and profitable partnership.”

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes slightly. It was clear that Yi Pin and Huo Linglong had hidden something regarding the “Demon Planting Art of Mercury”; something crucial. It was that secret that caused Huo Linglong to be nervous and awakened her desire to kill Yi Pin.

He didn’t ask about it though. He simply locked onto Huo Linglong and let his energies do all the talking.

Huo Linglong hesitated for a moment, but she said, “Haha... you’re a senior, Reverend. Why wouldn’t I believe your words?”

In the end, she decided against killing Yi Pin because one, he wasn't trying to cheat her. The fact that he hadn't revealed everything there was to know about the "Demon Planting Art of Mercury" was proof of his sincerity. Two, she could feel Ye Qing's gaze boring into her sides like daggers. She might not succeed even if she tried to kill Yi Pin.

"It is as the Reverend says, Taoist. The secret art I will be using is the "Demon Planting Art of Mercury", and I promise that it is perfect for its intended purpose."

"Very well. I agree with your plan." Ye Qing nodded but changed his tune suddenly, "However, I demand that we change our prior conditions."

Huo Linglong blinked as Ye Qing's silhouette became reflected in her pitch black pupils. "Oh? And what do you want to change, dearie?"

Ye Qing declared, "I can help you capture Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang, but in return, every wisp of Profound Yellow Qi will belong to me."

Huo Linglong's lips parted slightly. She couldn't believe how greedy Ye Qing was. The corners of her lips curled into a smile that didn't reach the eye as she spoke, "You're quite the greedy one, aren't you dearie?"

Ye Qing replied calmly, "Those two are far more valuable than a few wisps of Profound Yellow Qi, are they not?"

According to Yi Pin, the "Demon Planting Art of Mercury" could convert Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang into her undying supporters. In other words, she would be gaining two powerful subordinates who would die to serve her, not to mention that the "Demon Planting Art of Mercury" had other hidden uses.

If Huo Linglong walked away from the negotiation table with just Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang and nothing else, it would've been worth it for her. That was how valuable they were to her. Knowing this, Ye Qing would be a complete idiot to let her get away with half of the Profound Yellow Qi as well.

"How heartless of you. You already have the meat, but you will have the soup as well[1], dearie?" Huo Linglong complained with faux grievance. "Aren't you worried that I would betray you to my companions as soon as I exit this door?"

"First, this is a fair deal. It is true that I want the meat to myself, but I am throwing you a bone, am I not? To you, a few wisps of Profound Yellow Qi are not worth having Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang as your incubators."

Ye Qing continued indifferently, "Second, I'm sure you've figured out that I am your best chance to obtain Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang. Without me, chances are you won't be walking away with anyone or anything. But if you cooperate with me, then both of us will be happy with the outcome. I hope you'll make the right choice, Miss Huo."

The Earthly Sovereign's Coffin was cut off from the river of fate, so oaths such as the Oath of Burden or the Dao Oath of Heart Demon were useless here. He could only make the best offer he

could make, word his argument so it would seem that his way was the only way, and gamble that Huo Linglong would see it that way as well.

It was true that Huo Linglong could betray him and work together with Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang to kill him as soon as she left this room. However, she should know from their brief clash that killing him would prove to be a much harder task than anticipated than it was for the two of them to work together and ambush Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang.

Second, Yi Pin's timely interruption had made Huo Linglong second guessed his strength. Ye Qing knew with every fiber in his body that the old Taoist was a weakling right now, but Huo Linglong didn't. What if it wasn't a three versus one, but a three versus two? In any case, she had to admit that betrayal was a far less palatable option than cooperation.

"If you really wish to make an enemy out of me, then I can only say that I welcome it. It won't be an easy fight, I admit, but I am confident that I will emerge victorious in the end. But what about you? Are you confident that you can defeat me?"

"Are you threatening me, dearie?" Huo Linglong beamed.

"No, I am simply stating facts," Ye Qing replied calmly. "As you're aware, there can be no cooperation without some measure of honesty and forthrightness."

"You know, that is exactly what I want to complain about. You know everything about me, but I know nothing about you. How is that being honest and forthright?" Huo Linglong argued. "If you spread the news about what happened today, then I would be in serious trouble. Worse, I couldn't even seek you out and demand retribution. That isn't fair, don't you think?"

"So tell me who you are. You know exactly who I am on the inside, so allow me to discover the depth and breadth of your character as well. Only by baring ourselves to each other can we trust the other person completely, don't you think?"

*I think you're just jumping on the opportunity to make advances at me.* Ye Qing rolled his eyes internally and said, "I'll be honest with you, I'm not in a position to reveal my identity to anyone right now. That is why I'm donning a disguise. And even if I did tell you my identity, would you really believe me?"

"Let's do it this way. This guy here is my non-blood brother. His name is Yi Pin, and he is the head of the Temple of Divination. If today's matter is somehow exposed to the world, then you have my full permission to pay him a visit and take his life."

Huo Linglong: "..."

Yi Pin: "..."

At that moment, a million of galaxies exploded in Yi Pin's head. *Holy mother of heavens are you kidding me right now?! I did everything in my power to help you, and you betray me as soon as it costs you something? Is this what people call selling out your teammates, stabbing your brother in*



*the back, destroying the bridge after crossing the river, slaughtering the donkey after the grinding is done, better you die than I die???*

“Brother, you’re...”

Yi Pin had no words to describe what just happened or what he was feeling right now. No words.

Ye Qing patted him on the shoulder and consoled, “Brother, you realized that she already saw your face, right? If Miss Huo wants to, it’s only a matter of time before she discovers who you are. In that case, you might as well tell her the truth now and trust in her to protect your identity, and I’m sure she will considering that she has more to lose than you in this matter.”

“Your logic is so impeccable that I’m speechless,” blurted Yi Pin while staring at Ye Qing incredulously. He couldn’t believe that someone so shameless actually existed in this world. *The bastard’s almost as shameless as me—ptooey! What am I thinking? He is more shameless than I am!*

In fact, Yi Pin had considered and accepted the possibility that he might be exposed the moment he spoke about the “Demon Planting Art of Mercury”. However, it was one thing to let it happen naturally, and another for his brother to sell him out for his own fucking convenience!

Noticing that Yi Pin was on the verge of exploding, Ye Qing hurriedly whispered under his breath, “Do me this favor, and your debt—the Qi of Ultimate Purity—to me is canceled, okay?”

Yi Pin’s expression only grew uglier. *You’re going to bribe me with my own Qi of Ultimate Purity? Have some shame, you sonuvabitch! Also, I wasn’t going to give you shit in the first place, so screw you!*

“Oh! Are you the one they say could see life and death in one glance, and identify past and future in one divination, Reverend Yi Pin?” Huo Linglong suddenly interrupted their argument. “I have heard much of you, Reverend. It is an honor to meet you in person.”

“You know me?” Yi Pin exclaimed in surprise. Then, he recalled something and asked, “Yurong is the one who told you about me, didn’t she?”

Huo Linglong saluted him. “She is my master.”

Yurong was Huo Linglong’s master and the previous Fire Princess, Shangguan Yurong. Right now, she was the Great Elder of the Earthfire Palace of Demons and a Grandmaster.

“It’s been decades since we last saw each other. How is she?” Yi Pin reminisced.

Huo Linglong replied, “She is doing great, Reverend. She is the Great Elder of the Earthfire Palace of Demons right now. She often spoke to me about you, and that you were the one who divined her future and helped her to avoid a tragic fate.”

“Divination may reveal the future, but it is up to the person to decide their own fate.” Yi Pin sighed. “Yurong was the one who had the courage and determination to give up the seat of Sect Master at her highest moment. That is why she and she alone

survived that tragedy. If I was in her position, I couldn't have made the same choice as her!"

Huo Linglong said sincerely, "You are being humble, Reverend. Without your guidance, my master would never have known about the grave threat looming over her shoulders; that she had a life-changing decision to make before it was too late. It's why my master always said that you are her greatest benefactor."

She was telling the truth. Back then, Shangguan Yurong was competing against Luo Nanfeng, the current head of the Earthfire Palace of Demons, for the position of Sect Master. In fact, her master was the one who held the upper hand against her competitor the entire time with great power and numerous supporters. She had been one step away from becoming the Sect Master.

Shangguan Yurong and Yi Pin were good friends, and one day she decided to pay her old friend a visit. When the old Taoist saw Shangguan Yurong, he shook his head and said with a sigh, "The brightest radiance may end in a single moment, a small compromise may secure a boundless future."

"Take care, Yurong."

Chapter 506: Yo, Do You Feel Like Shit Today?

After Shangguan Yurong returned to her sect, she immediately resigned from her position (Fire Princess) and beat a hasty retreat. She gave up everything and stopped competing for the position of Sect Master altogether. At the time, everyone thought that Shangguan Yurong had gone insane and showered her with insults and ridicule.

On the day of the succession, Luo Nanfeng shocked everyone by suddenly turning the tables against his opponents and slaughtering them all. Shangguan Yurong was the only one who survived because of her decisive withdrawal, and Luo Nanfeng respected her decisiveness and prescience so much that he decided to make her his right hand. To this day, she remained one of the most influential figures of the Earthfire Palace of Demons.

"The brightest radiance may end in a single moment, a small compromise may secure a boundless future." Yi Pin's prophecy had been spot on. If Shangguan Yurong had chosen to ignore his words, she might not be alive today. It was why she viewed him as her benefactor, respected him as a senior, and cherished her memories of him to this day.

Some sects received the heretical label because their core philosophy or methodologies didn't align with the orthodoxy, but the Earthfire Palace of Demons was a demonic sect through and through. Everyone was constantly trying to deceive the other person, and everyone had a heart of stone. In their world, the concept of truth, kindness, good faith, sincerity and more were the lowest of lows, and that was a belief Shangguan Yurong shared as well.

There was an exception, however. The only time Shangguan Yurong acted wholly different from her beliefs was when she spoke of Yi Pin. When the old Taoist entered the conversation, her smile was bright, and her expression was sunny. No one else—not even Huo Linglong, her disciple—could elicit such a smile from her.

Huo Linglong returned from her memory lane and asked puzzledly, “But what happened to you, Reverend? Why are you...”

According to Shangguan Yurong, Yi Pin was a handsome, elegant and refined man whose cultivation was deeper than the sea itself. The old man before her was, well, old, but she supposed her master wasn’t exaggerating since could spot vestiges of his former looks here and there. His cultivation though? To say it was shallow would be an understatement.

“Let’s not talk about my cultivation,” Yi Pin cut her off curtly before changing the subject. “Please bring Yurong my greetings when you return to your sect.”

“Of course. I’m sure she will be very happy to hear about you.” Huo Linglong smiled.

“Oh right, I have a question, Linglong. How did you figure out that we were just pretending to be hurt just now? I thought our disguise was perfect,” Yi Pin asked.

Huo Linglong giggled at that. “And it is a pretty good disguise. The problem is that neither of you should be alive at all. There is no reason for a Vessel Augmentor and an early-stage Spirit Purifier to be able to survive the Fire God Moth and the Children of the Frost in a row, you know? That was the biggest hole in your facade.”

“Besides that, the Children of the Frost was the Stranger who showed up last night. Assuming you were hurt during the trial, you should be covered in frostbites or something, no? However, neither of you look frozen in the slightest. That is why I suspected that you were feigning weakness.”

“But of course, I couldn’t be sure that my deductions were true, which is why I chose to attack you. If I was wrong, then whatever. If I was right, then I was right. Speaking of which, I hope you won’t take offense with this junior’s actions.”

Realization struck both Ye Qing and Yi Pin. They had definitely gotten careless at the end there. “Of course not. Your master chose well, Linglong. You are as smart and accomplished as her when she was younger.”

“Ahem. Since you know Yi Pin, you can definitely rest easy now, can you not?” Ye Qing coughed. He had no idea that Yi Pin and Huo Linglong’s master were old acquaintances. In fact, it sounded like they were... very close. No wonder the old lecher dared to divulge the Earthfire Palace of Demons’ greatest secret like it was nothing.

This was a good thing, of course. There was now some actual trust in their cooperation.

As he spoke, Ye Qing blinked rapidly at Yi Pin. *The fuck you’re waiting for? Help me!*

Yi Pin blinked back. *You sold me just now, and you want me to be your spokesperson? Dream on!*

Ye Qing blinked again. *We’re brothers, aren’t we? There is no wrong that we can’t settle on the spot. What if I give you a bottle of Nature’s Water?*

Yi Pin arranged his features into dripping disdain. *You think you can heal my wounded heart with just a bottle of Nature's Water? Dream on!*

Ye Qing blinked. *Two bottles then!*

Yi Pin remained unmoved.

Blink blink. *Three bottles!*

Yi Pin pretended he couldn't see anything.

Ye Qing frowned deeply before gritting his teeth. *Four bottles, and that's my final offer!*

Yi Pin merely scoffed at him.

In the end, Ye Qing caved to the pressure. *Fine! I'll give you five! You better not push me any further!*

Finally, Yi Pin broke into a smile. *Deal.*

Ye Qing sighed in relief. It was the same feeling; the same formula. Thank goodness the bastard was still the same shitstain he knew.

Yi Pin took a moment to clear his throat before starting, "Ahem. Linglong? This boy may be insidious, vicious, shameless, brazen, greedy and insatiable, but he is a man of his word. I swear on my honor that he won't reveal what happened today, and if something did go wrong, then you have my permission to seek me out and receive your due, okay?"

Ye Qing: "..."

Ye Qing didn't feel angry when he heard this. In fact, he felt like laughing out loud. *That doesn't sound like me at all! That sounds like you, old man!*

Huo Linglong ignored their interaction and giggled. "You're my master's benefactor, Reverend. Of course I have faith in your promise. I look forward to work with you, dearie."

Ye Qing smirked. "Same here."

Huo Linglong asked, "So, are we going to act now, or...?"

Ye Qing shook his head. "No. We'll wait until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Why's that?" Huo Linglong looked puzzled.

Ye Qing's grin widened. "Because our chances of success will be higher, of course."

.....

Another day passed, and Sun Xuanzhen was really starting to wonder if his streak of bad luck was a sign of something... unnatural.

He thought his woes were over after he pooped all day the day before yesterday, but no, it was just the beginning. For starters, he was plagued by a terrible headache the whole day yesterday. As if that wasn't enough, yesterday's trial was none other than the infamous Smelly Wind.

As its name implied, the Smelly Wind was an extremely smelly wind. It was a kind of stench no one had ever known until they smelled it, and it couldn't be isolated even if one sealed their sense of smell completely.

Whenever the Smelly Wind appeared, nine out of ten households including the animals usually suffocated to death. The Smelly Wind wasn't a Stranger, but depending on the circumstances, it could be worse than even a Disaster-class Stranger.

Not only that, he felt like the Smelly Wind was specifically targeting him for some reason. It kept blowing into his room until he felt like committing suicide. Seriously.

As if that wasn't enough, the pills he knew could help him resist the Smelly Wind suddenly went missing, and his Strange Artifacts he brought out suddenly malfunctioned for whatever reason. After the Smelly Wind was gone, his pills reappeared, and his Strange Artifacts suddenly returned to normal. How annoying was that?

As a result, he felt both mentally and physically exhausted. He was barely aware of what was happening when he left his room to carry out his usual rounds.

He wasn't too distracted to notice that Yue Juejiang and Huo Linglong looked just as pale and tired as him, however. Schadenfreude immediately rejuvenated him a little. *Yo! Do you guys feel like shit as well?*

Suddenly, Sun Xuanzhen heard Huo Linglong muttering to herself, "What on earth is going on? It's been bad luck after bad luck recently."

"Hmm? What did you just say?" Sun Xuanzhen had thought that something was off since the first day his luck went to shit, but now it had evolved into full blown suspicion. "Did you just say you were incredibly unlucky as of late, Fire Princess?"

"Is that a problem?" Huo Linglong looked disgruntled. "Are you happy that I'm on an unlucky streak?"

"Not at all. I'm on an unlucky streak myself," Sun Xuanzhen said seriously.

Yue Juejiang was walking away because he was too tired for human interaction today, but he immediately returned upon hearing their conversation. "Wait a second. It's the same for me!"

"You too?" Sun Xuanzhen frowned deeply before divulging the truth. "The day before yesterday, I had a terrible stomach ache that kept me in my room the whole day. Yesterday, I had a terrible migraine and was forced to stay inside my room again."

Yue Juejiang exclaimed in astonishment, "I didn't have a stomach ache or a headache, but I too didn't leave my room for similar reasons!"

"Same here." Huo Linglong nodded simply before blanching. "No, no! Something's very wrong about this!"

"What is?" Sun Xuanzhen asked.

Huo Linglong answered, "Yesterday, when we left to collect the Profound Yellow Qi after the trial, did any of you sense the aura of the Profound Yellow Qi from the people?"

"... No, I don't think so."

"Me neither."

“The day before yesterday, all three of us left our rooms exactly once, right? After that, we were forced to stay inside our rooms because of our bad luck, right? This means that those we weren’t able to visit should’ve absorbed their Profound Yellow Qi. In reality, not a single one of them exude its aura. Don’t you think that’s strange?”

Sun Xuanzhen figured out Huo Linglong’s meaning immediately. “You’re saying that there’s a fourth person who stole our Profound Yellow Qi.”

It would also explain why all three of them had suddenly become insanely unlucky. Someone was forcing them to stay in their rooms so they could claim all the Profound Yellow Qi for themselves.

But Yue Juejiang said, “I don’t know. There’s a chance the worms allowed the Profound Yellow Qi to disappear on its own because they’re too afraid of us, isn’t there?”

Sun Xuanzhen: “...”

Huo Linglong: “...”

Anyone with even a single brain cell in their head wouldn’t make such a stupid statement. Or was he so damaged that he sincerely believed that everyone besides his kin was retarded?

Huo Linglong pretended that she hadn’t heard Yue Juejiang and declared, “All we need to do is to question someone that neither of us had visited the day before yesterday to find out the truth. If they claim that they refined the Profound Yellow Qi or allowed it to dissipate, then I suppose we’re just overthinking this. If not, then we will know that someone was stealing our Profound Yellow Qi.”

With that said, Huo Linglong strode toward a room, and both Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang were right behind her.

#### Chapter 507: Don’t Worry, He Can’t Escape

Huo Linglong immediately strode toward a room all three of them hadn’t visited the day before yesterday. After opening the door, she moved aside and motioned for Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang to head in first. The two men didn’t suspect a thing and stepped into the room immediately.

The room was extremely small and barely big enough to fit a handful of people. After they went inside, there was almost no room for a fourth person. That was probably why Huo Linglong chose to hang outside the door behind them.

The resident of the room was a somewhat boorish-looking man. Stunned to see Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang barging into his space, he hurriedly shot to his feet and asked in a nervous tone, “W-What do you need from me?”

Sun Xuanzhen asked directly, “What did you do with your Profound Yellow Qi yesterday?”

The man looked confused. “I... gave it to you?”

“Me? Are you sure it was me?” Sun Xuanzhen’s voice grew a tad harsher.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” the man looked even more confused.

“Just answer the question!” Yue Juejiang interrupted impatiently.

Seemingly intimidated by Yue Juejiang, the man answered fearfully, “Of... Of course it was Brother Sun. I saw it with my own eyes.”

Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang exchanged a glance with each other and thought, *there really is a thief among us.*

Neither man noticed the timid man suddenly bending his fingers and tapping the space in front of him. A wave of anomalous energy immediately washed out and robbed them of their consciousness. Thick fog surging out of his body and covering everything with sixty meters of him[1], the man stepped forward and unleashed a pair of punches at Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang’s chest.

The instant his fists made contact, powerful sword qi suddenly surged out and surrounded Sun Xuanzhen’s body like a barrier, and Yue Juejiang’s skin took on a shade of bronze. It sounded like he was striking a thick chunk of metal instead of flesh.

The man ignored it all, however. He just kept pressing forward until his right fist shattered Sun Xuanzhen’s sword qi barrier, and his left fist cracked Yue Juejiang’s bronze body. Once done, he withdrew his fist exactly half an inch.

Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang had already regained their consciousness while he was retracting his fists, and they looked shocked to say the least. The sword qi barrier protecting Sun Xuanzhen was an ultimate technique in the “Sword King Scripture” known as the “Sword Qi Protects The Golden Palace”. Capable of both offense and defense, the practitioner must hone the “Sword Qi Protects the Golden Palace” until their sword heart gained a sixth sense of its own before they could use the technique. In times of crisis, the sword qi would activate on its own and envelop its practitioner in a protective barrier. In times of aggression, it could also be used to attack the enemy.

The sword technique’s greatest strength lay in the fact that it didn’t require its practitioner’s will to activate. It would automatically protect its owner if it sensed a certain level of danger, and it was powerful enough to block the full-powered attack of a Half-Step Grandmaster and buy time for its practitioner to react.

Not this time though. Somehow, the unknown man had shattered his “Sword Qi Protects The Golden Palace” in one punch. Sun Xuanzhen was shocked to put it mildly.

Yue Juejiang was even more shocked than the swordsman, however. Although he wasn’t a pure body-tempering warrior, the warriors of the Earthly Sovereign Hall were famous for their powerful body. Yue Juejiang had cultivated its ultimate art, the “Profound Yellow Art of Heaven and Earth” since young, and he had long since reached the journeyman level and attained a Profound Yellow Bronze Body.

The three stages of the “Profound Yellow Art of Heaven and Earth” were distinguished by the type of body the practitioner achieved, namely the Iron Body, Bronze Body, and Golden Body. A practitioner with an Iron Body was immune to conventional weapons, a Bronze Body feared nothing from the elements, and a Golden Body was impervious to all tribulations because it had achieved sagehood.

The Profound Yellow Bronze Body was so strong that it allowed him, a Half-Step Spirit Master, to withstand the full-powered attack of Sun Xuanzhen and Huo Linglong without a scratch. It was strong enough to endure even the attacks of a late-stage Spirit Master or a Half-Step Grandmaster for a short time. That was why the two Spirit Masters had treated him as their equal.

But now, this unknown man had cracked his Profound Yellow Bronze Body in one punch. Such was his strength that his vigor was churning like a seastorm.

“Insolent cur! Die!”

As shocked as they were, neither Sun Xuanzhen nor Yue Juejiang were greenhorns who would allow their emotions to overcome them in the heat of a battle. As soon as they saw him withdrawing his fists as if he was spent, they immediately recognized it as an opportunity and attacked him together.

Sun Xuanzhen pressed his fingers together and swung down like he would split apart the gates of heaven themselves.

“*Sky Splitting Sword Qi*”

Yue Juejiang also unleashed a palm strike that looked and felt like the apoplectic rage of mountains and rivers.

“*Mountain River God Palm*” [2]

The man didn’t panic, however. He simply extended his fists half an inch forward.

A storm could blow inside a cup. Half an inch could topple the heavens. Sun Xuanzhen’s “Sky Splitting Sword Qi” or Yue Juejiang’s “Mountain River God Palm” had just taken form when the man punched them in the chest once more.

Bang!

A small shudder overcame the two men. Then, half of Sun Xuanzhen’s body exploded into bits, and Yue Juejiang’s chest caved inward. Bright red blood gushed out of every orifice.

“Ahhh!”

The two men let out a bloodcurdling, fearful scream. Death was breathing down their necks, and they couldn’t help but quake in fear.

It was at this moment Sun Xuanzhen’s ruthlessness and decisiveness shone. Before Yue Juejiang could recover his wits, he kicked the man and sent him flying toward their attacker. At the same time, he pounced for the exit.

“Sun Xuanzhen, you...!”

Yue Juejiang’s eyes bulged with shock and fury. He couldn’t believe that Sun Xuanzhen would sacrifice him to buy time for his own escape.

The young man had grown up sheltered in the Earthly Sovereign Hall. As accomplished as he was, he had never experienced the ruthless reality of the *jianghu*. This was the first time he learned of the dark side of humanity, and unfortunately for him, it might very well be the last.

Yue Juejiang was still gripped by rage and sorrow when the unknown man caught him by the neck. He was so strong that he was unable to move a muscle at all.

After Yue Juejiang forged his Profound Yellow Bronze Body, he became as strong as five dragon elephants. However, he was powerless to resist the unknown man like a baby was powerless to throw back the strength of an adult.



The realization made him afraid, angry, helpless, and hateful. He hated the man, and he hated his betrayer, Sun Xuanzhen, even more.

As if he could sense his emotions, the corners of the unknown man's lips curled into a devilish smirk. A small voice resounded inside his mind, "Don't worry. He won't escape."

Who was he? Yue Juejiang could think of one and only one man. So, he turned his head and stared at Sun Xuanzhen.

Meanwhile, Sun Xuanzhen was wearing a pleased smile on his face. The fact that the unknown man had caught Yue Juejiang only filled him with a sense of satisfaction instead of guilt or sorrow. It was because Yue Juejiang's "valiant" sacrifice had bought him a chance to survive.

Why would he care if Yue Juejiang lived or died? His life was more valuable than all other lives in this world. As for the Earthly Sovereign Hall, he could worry about them after he survived this crisis.

"Kill him now, Fire Princess! Otherwise, we're all gonna die!"

Sun Xuanzhen roared while grabbing a pill from his Nature's Shell. It was called the Sword King Pill, and its main function was to heal one's physical injuries and restore one's energies. If he ate it, a bit of time was all he needed to regenerate the exploded half of his body. He would have a shot at turning the tables against the unknown man then.

"Sure. I'll help you."

Sun Xuanzhen's back was facing toward Huo Linglong[3], so he didn't see the scornful smile spreading across her face. Yue Juejiang did though. At that moment, realization struck him like a lightning bolt.

They're on the same side!

Huo Linglong took a step forward and cut off Sun Xuanzhen's retreat, her upper body pressed snugly against his back. Realizing that something was horribly wrong, the swordsman shouted in shock and panic, "What are you doing, Huo Linglong?!"

"I'm helping you!"

He tried to react, but it was too late. A black nail appeared between her fingers, and Huo Linglong stabbed it into his neck with a giggle. *See? I'm ensuring that your inevitable downfall would be as painless as possible.*

"You..."

Sun Xuanzhen turned around and glared at Huo Linglong. He looked like he would swallow her alive if he could. "The two of you are on the same side?!"

## Chapter 508: This Is The Jianghu

"You're such a smart man, Brother Sun," Huo Linglong breathed into Sun Xuanzhen's ear while hugging his neck intimately. Somehow who didn't know anything about the circumstances would have thought they were lovers.

Despite the warmth and softness pressing against his back, Sun Xuanzhen felt like he was submerged in a pool of ice. "It was a setup from the beginning."

It wasn't just fear that turned his blood ice cold. The nail Huo Linglong had stabbed into his neck was sealing his astral qi and spirit and scattering his strength. He was growing weaker by the second until it became impossibly difficult to move even a finger.

Right now, the only parts of his body that were still moving were his mouth and his heart.

The unnatural coldness afflicted upon him by the nail was nothing compared to the coldness in his heart, however. By now, he realized that they had been set up.

From the moment they were beset by an unlucky streak, the unknown man had begun weaving a massive trap for them. At the same time, his cohort Huo Linglong slowly but deftly led them into this trap.

He had always thought himself to be a wise man, but now, he realized that he was nothing more but a foolish prey.

"But why? Why are you doing this?"

There was one thing he didn't understand, however. Why did Huo Linglong choose to cooperate with this unknown man and entrap them?

Was it for vengeance? No, that couldn't be right. They didn't even know each other until they entered the Earthly Sovereign's Coffin, and as far as he could tell they shared no conflicts of interest with each other.

Was it for faction power? That couldn't be right either. While the Earthfire Palace of Demons and the Sword King City were both major sects in the northern lands, they made sure to stay out of each other's way. He hadn't heard of any deaths or even conflicts between their people.

Was it for fame then? For self-interest?

He just couldn't figure it out no matter what he tried.

"I did it for you, of course." Huo Linglong giggled while caressing Sun Xuanzhen's cheeks. She then looked at Yue Juejiang and shot him a wink. "And you as well, Brother Yue."

A moment later, Sun Xuanzhen said, "I'm the sect leader's direct disciple, and he left a mental imprint in me. If you kill me, none of you will be able to escape."

"Y-Yes! I'm a descendant of the Earthly Sovereign Hall, and the Discipline Elder is my grandfather. Their bloodline secret art also runs in my veins. If you kill me, the Earthly Sovereign Hall will chase you to the ends of the earth!"

Yue Juejiang finally recalled his own patron and threatened, "You best release me now before it's too late!"

"Hahaha... don't be like this, dearies. You're scaring me." Huo Linglong said sweetly, "I never said I would kill you. I could never bear to part ways with cuties like you two."

“What on earth are you planning?” Sun Xuanzhen’s unease only grew.

Huo Linglong giggled. “He wants the Profound Yellow Qi. As for me, I already told you what I want. I want the two of you.”

The woman was about to say more, but the unknown man interrupted curtly, “Cut the bullcrap and finish what you’re doing already, will you?”

The unknown man was Ye Qing, of course. He got impatient when he noticed that Huo Linglong was going to divulge the entirety of their plan like a comic book villain. *Seriously, why do all villains have the bad habit of monologuing over their victims? Do they get a kick out of showing off to a bunch of defeated losers? Aren’t they afraid that the losers would exploit the information and turn the tables against her?*

As he said this, Ye Qing hit the back of Yue Juejiang’s neck with his palm and shook his body once. Every joint in the young man’s body came apart, and he collapsed to the floor like a boneless pile of meat.

“What’s the hurry, dearie?” Huo Linglong complained with displeasure.

“Haven’t you heard that villains die because they talk too much?” Ye Qing rolled his eyes.

Huo Linglong: “...” *No, I’ve never heard of that saying.*

“You—” Sun Xuanzhen’s eyes bulged with fear when he saw what Ye Qing did to Yue Juejiang, but before he could say anything else, Ye Qing let out a cold, unfeeling grunt and said, “Silence.”

Sun Xuanzhen’s consciousness abruptly blurred and sank into an infinite pool of darkness. At the same time, blood spilled freely out of his orifices like a fountain. The same thing had happened to Yue Juejiang as well.

Huo Linglong panicked a little when she saw this, but Ye Qing assured her, “Relax. They’re still alive.”

After Huo Linglong checked the two men’s condition and confirmed that Ye Qing was telling the truth, she finally let out a sigh of relief. Even so, Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang’s injuries were anything but insignificant. Sun Xuanzhen was missing half of his body, and Yue Juejiang had a caved chest and an innumerable number of broken joints. Both their minds had received varying degrees of damage as well.

Their physical injuries were easy to fix despite their horrid appearance. With the right medicine, it was only a matter of time before they completely recovered. Their mental damage was a different story. It would take at least a year for them to recover in full, if not longer.

“You went a little too far, dearie,” Huo Linglong complained.

“Sorry, but I can’t exactly hold back when my life is on the line. I hope you won’t mind,” said Ye Qing with a placating smile on his face.

“That’s fair.” Huo Linglong smiled back, though she didn’t really believe him.

Huo Linglong was willing to give Ye Qing the benefit of the doubt for not being able to hold back during the ambush, but what he did after the two men were already incapacitated could only be described as too much. Moreover, she had a feeling that he had a hand in Yue Juejiang and Sun Xuanzhen's unusually severe mental injuries, though she didn't have the proof to accuse him of foul play.

That said, she knew exactly why he had done this. He was afraid that she would betray him as soon as she took control of Yue Juejiang and Sun Xuanzhen.

In fact, the idea had crossed her mind. She had wondered if she could kill Ye Qing or turn him into her incubator after taking control of Yue Juejiang and Sun Xuanzhen. As for Yi Pin, she could just kill him and be done with it. He might be her master's benefactor, but he wasn't *her* benefactor, was he? Even if he was her benefactor, she still would've killed him if he proved to be an obstacle.

Some people might call her treacherous, cruel and heartless. All she had to say to those people was this:

This is the *jianghu*, dearie.

That was before she saw Ye Qing punching Sun Xuanzhen's sword qi barrier into shreds and cracking Yue Juejiang's Profound Yellow Bronze Body with his first attack, and annihilating half of Sun Xuanzhen's body and caving Yue Juejiang's chest with his second attack though.

The three of them had clashed briefly during their first meeting, so she knew exactly how strong Sun Xuanzhen's "Sword Qi Protects the Golden Palace" and Yue Juejiang's "Profound Yellow Bronze Body" was. Despite this, Ye Qing had managed to destroy one of their strongest trump cards in one punch. As if that wasn't enough, Ye Qing had defeated the two men with pure strength alone. He hadn't used his Strange Artifacts, his Purple Sun Trueflame and more. That was all she needed to see to extinguish the thought completely.

Sure, someone might argue that he had caught them by surprise, but if she was in his position, she didn't think she would've succeeded. Even if she did succeed, she would have been forced to reveal every trick in her book.

Power wasn't the only thing Ye Qing possessed either. He was smart, cunning, and ruthless as well. After all, he had been stealing their Profound Yellow Qi under their nose for days, and not a single one of them had noticed his actions until she ruined it by pure coincidence.

The plan that he crafted to entrap Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang proved that it wasn't a fluke as well. By now, she had learned that the item he used to give her, Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang bad luck was something called the Incense of Misfortune, and at the beginning, he was only using it to keep them in their rooms and steal their Profound Yellow Qi. But after he acquired her cooperation, he decided to turn it into a full-blown death trap.

How she should start the conversation, how she should make Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang notice that something was wrong without drawing their suspicion, how she should take control of the conversation so that the situation wouldn't slip out of their grasp, when and where to spring their trap and so on, nearly every part of the plan had been crafted by his truly.

Ye Qing had given her one and only one job, and that was to act exactly as he ordered. That was all. Frankly, anyone could've performed her role if she wasn't the only other person Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang trusted in this place.

The only way to kill someone so formidable was to catch him unawares and kill him in one fell swoop. If that was impossible, then it was better not to offend him in the first place. Otherwise, a world of misery and pain was sure to befall the attacker.

Forget that Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang were heavily injured right now, Huo Linglong wasn't sure she could threaten Ye Qing even when the duo were perfectly unharmed. That was why she gave up on the idea completely.

Why would she make a terrifying enemy she couldn't kill when she could choose not to?

Better yet, why would she not befriend such a formidable warrior when the option was available to her?

In fact, Huo Linglong was the one who should be worried that Ye Qing would turn on *her*. And she was. What were the chances she could make it out alive if Ye Qing really wanted to silence her?

She couldn't bear to make the calculation.

"Say, dearie... you wouldn't turn on your beloved partner, would you?" Huo Linglong asked after a moment of silence.

Chapter 509: Humanity Is Always Worth It

"Would you?" Ye Qing returned the question with a smirk.

He knew what Hong Linglong was worried about. After all, he was the one who engineered the situation to produce such an effect. The reason he didn't execute the plan immediately after their agreement was because one, to further weaken Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang using the Incense of Misfortune, two, to incite their suspicion naturally and led them into his trap, and three, to buy time so he could refine his Profound Yellow Qi and strengthen himself as much as possible.

Yesterday, he had refined nine wisps of Profound Yellow Qi in total. As a result, he was now nine dragon-elephants strong and one step away from reaching the adept level of the "Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra".

The increase from eight dragon elephants worth of strength to nine dragon elephants seemed insignificant, but his enemies would beg to differ. Even Chen Ah Sheng was only nine dragon elephants strong back then.

That didn't mean he was now as strong as Chen Ah Sheng though. On the contrary, the dead man would most likely kick his ass like nothing in a straight brawl. Chen Ah Sheng had tempered his body for many years and honed his strength to perfection. In fact, he was one step away from breaking through his physical limit and attaining ten dragon elephants worth of strength—also known as one sky dragon—which would make him a Trueman Grandmaster.

Besides that, Chen Ah Sheng had long since mastered his body, vigor and strength to perfection and forged a true Chaos Demon Ape Body. Compared to him, Ye Qing was no different from a fat man who hadn't converted his fat into muscles, or a raw gem that hadn't been refined into a diamond.

Thankfully, his opponents were no Chen Ah Sheng. His raw, unrefined strength alone was enough to take down Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang at the same time.

Finally, the show of strength was also meant to put Huo Linglong in her place. Considering how cunning and whimsical the woman was, the show of strength was absolutely necessary to keep her in check.

Technically, he could kill her and end the threat she represented cleanly and permanently, but it was unnecessary. For one, he couldn't anticipate what kind of secret art her seniors might have planted in her. If he killed her, he could be afflicted with an irremovable curse just like the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia had done back then, or it could be something else that allowed her sect to identify her murderer. In any case, the point of killing her was to remove the risk of discovery, so if that wasn't possible, then the risk just wasn't worth the reward.

Second, she didn't know who he was, so she couldn't seek him out and cause him trouble. Moreover, she was the one who stood to lose the most if this matter was exposed. Therefore, there was little harm in leaving her alive. He just needed to make sure that she remained intimidated until their eventual departure from the Earthly Sovereign's Coffin.

"Of course not," Huo Linglong replied smilingly.

Ye Qing let out an amiable chuckle. "The feeling is mutual. Once again, all I want is the Profound Yellow Qi, so you have nothing to worry about."

"I'm very glad to hear that," said Huo Linglong while patting her voluptuous chest and causing it to wobble outrageously.

"One more thing. Are you sure no one would find out what we did today?"

"My fog can prevent others from spying with their senses, and the owner of this room had already died last night. No one will find out about this."

Ye Qing looked away and said slowly, "Speaking of which, I will be pretending to be Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang and collecting the Profound Yellow Qi for the rest of my time here, so make sure to hide them properly after you return to your room. So as long as the genuine article remains hidden, no one will ever find out what happened today."

"I get it. I promise I will cherish my cute little treasures." Huo Linglong giggled.

"Alright. If there's nothing else, you may return to your room, Miss Huo," Ye Qing declared.

Huo Linglong said in an aggrieved tone, "Don't you want to stay with me a little longer, dearie?"

"Frankly, no," Ye Qing replied bluntly. *If you think you're more attractive than the Profound Yellow Qi, think again.*

"How heartless!" gasped Huo Linglong, though it was only in jest. After all, she needed to plant her demonic seeds in Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang as soon as possible. What if the two men were teleported out of the Earthly Sovereign's Coffin before she took control of them? The consequences would be unimaginable to put it mildly.

“Goodbye then, but do know that my door is always open to you, dearie!” Huo Linglong said one last time before leaving with Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang.

After the woman was gone, Ye Qing assumed Sun Xuanzhen’s appearance and walked toward a room.

Here I come, my Profound Yellow Qi!

.....

“Phew... it’s finally over. I can finally go home!”

Inside a room, Yi Pin let out a huge sigh of relief after the Plague Cloud harassing them many hours ago had finally departed. At the same time, a sense of pure joy filled his veins.

Today was the ninth day he entered the Earthly Sovereign’s Coffin. It was also his last day in this place. It wouldn’t be long before he could finally go home and enjoy his peaceful, carefree life once more.

The past few days had been absolute hell for Yi Pin. Every time he thought that the Earthly Sovereign’s Coffin couldn’t possibly surprise him anymore, it would produce a trial that was even scarier and more anomalous than before. For example, there was the Nightmare Skull that gave its victims endless nightmares and no way to awaken back to the real world, The Air Devourer that could rob an entire region of air and leave only vacuum behind, the Laughing Crying Spores that were smaller than dust and could enter a people’s body through the respiratory system and make them laugh or weep like they were crazy, and finally the Plague Cloud that could infect them with all kinds of diseases.

Although Ye Qing’s presence ensured that most of these trials ended in harmless fashion, there was no avoiding the suffering. Even a youngster in his prime could’ve crumbled under such torture, much less an old man like him!

Thankfully, he could finally leave this heavens-forsaken-place.

It wouldn’t be long before he could finally have happiness once more!

“Congratulations, brother!” Ye Qing congratulated Yi Pin while rising his feet. The simple motion somehow gave Yi Pin the impression that a tall, imposing and massive mountain was growing out of the ground and shaking the world around him.

Right now, Ye Qing’s skin color didn’t look human. It was a strange mixture of yellow and black that ended up looking like neither. His skin was covered in crisscrossing lines that gave it the appearance of a withered tree bark, except no tree bark could possibly exude this much vitality and strength. Despite its chaotic-looking patterns, a closer examination gave the impression of enigma, strength and beauty.

Not only that, the surrounding air hummed low and insistent almost as if they were cowering before his presence when he moved around, and some sort of profound, mysterious power quietly poured out of his pores according to the flow of his vigor and the movement of his muscles.

“Congratulations to you as well, brother!” Yi Pin sighed. These days, Ye Qing felt less like a human and more like a Stranger clad in human skin.

After he cooperated with Huo Linglong, and Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang were removed from the equation, there was no one left in this anomalous space that could threaten Ye Qing. So, he began training all day and night. Yes, training. Instead of rushing to refine all of the Profound Yellow Qi he had collected, he instead focused on familiarizing himself with his new strength.

The effects were quite profound. Technically speaking, his physical strength had barely grown since a few days ago. In reality, he was much, much stronger than before. He could now fight a late-stage Spirit Master head on and was practically on the same level as a late-stage body-tempering Spirit Master.

*There are countless body-tempering warriors out there who never reached his heights despite spending half their lifetimes in training, and yet he did it before he's even, what, twenty? Is he really human?* The old man thought to himself while clasping his hands together in salute. "Looks like this is goodbye, brother. Thank you for protecting me for the past few days. Not gonna lie, I think I'm actually going to miss our days together."

"No need to be sad. I'll be visiting you in Bei You in two days. You'll be able to see me all you want then." Ye Qing smirked.

The smile Yi Pin plastered to his face immediately disappeared. *I was just being courteous, you bastard! Can't you tell?!*

"Ahem... that might be a little too soon, brother. Maybe another day?"

By now, he knew exactly what had happened to Ye Qing. He didn't want to, but Ye Qing insisted on telling his story regardless of his will. When he listened until the end, he felt enough regret to strangle his past self.

Right now, Ye Qing was akin to a pile of dog shit. Anyone who happened on him was going to stink like hell. Naturally, Yi Pin wanted to stay as far away from Ye Qing as possible. *Get the hell away from me, man!*

"Nah, it's never too soon to visit a brother." Ye Qing mercilessly rejected Yi Pin's plea.

The question of what to do with Yi Pin had plagued Ye Qing for a long time. Considering that he was on the run, the simplest and best way to protect himself was to kill Yi Pin. In fact, he had had countless chances to do so by his own hands or someone else's.

In the end though, he chose not to. Yi Pin might be a little shameless, greedy and lazy, but he had never harbored any malicious intent toward him. They had briefly journeyed together in the Demon's Tomb, and the old Taoist had given him a lot of help during their time in the Earthly Sovereign's Coffin. No matter how he looked at it, he just couldn't think of a good reason to kill Yi Pin. He didn't want to.

He was a man, not an animal. He couldn't bring himself to bite the hand who helped him, couldn't bring himself to betray his conscience, couldn't bring himself to kill his own heart. Besides, he had interacted with Yi Pin long enough to know that the old Taoist wouldn't betray him.

That was why he chose to let Yi Pin live—but not without some insurance, of course. Believing in someone's character and letting down his guard were two different things after all. That was why he decided to seek out Yi Pin and stay at his place for a bit.



Yi Pin's Temple of Divination was located at Bei You, and Bei You was a border city seated between Chu and Yan. Although the commandery nominally belonged to Chu, in reality it was a no man's land. Overflowing with independent factions and endless strife, the imperial court's influence at that location was limited to say the least. That was why it was his best destination for the moment. He would be able to watch Yi Pin and hide from Chu at the same time, so why not?

The old Taoist entered the Earthly Sovereign's Coffin two days before Ye Qing, so of course he was going to leave two days earlier as well. Two days were a lot of time for Yi Pin to do a lot of things such as informing Chu about his whereabouts, going into hiding, and more.

Ye Qing was confident that Yi Pin wouldn't do that though.

The human heart was some of the most complex things in the world.

But sometimes, it was also the simplest.

It wasn't worth believing in, and yet it was always worth one's belief.

"Fine. If you must come, then come. Just don't expect me to hold a reception for you!" Yi Pin rolled his eyes and succumbed to his fate. From the moment Ye Qing told him about his story, he knew that the young man was going to haunt him like a ghost. That said, he didn't actually feel much annoyance or resentment toward the young man at all.

He knew that Ye Qing had had countless opportunities to silence him and end his worries once and for all, but in the end, the young man hadn't. Not only that, Ye Qing had saved him multiple times from crises that absolutely would've killed him if he were alone. Could he really turn his back on the man who had saved his life multiple times? No, he could not.

In making his decision, Ye Qing had basically placed his life in his hands. It was some of the stupidest decisions he had ever seen in his life.

And yet... wasn't a man like him deserving of the deepest respect?

That was why he wasn't planning on tattletaling to the Intelligence Department even though the promised rewards were great. That was why he was willing to help Ye Qing even though he knew that it would most likely land him in deep, potentially fatal trouble.

He had lived a long life and experienced more or less everything one might experience in this world.

Even still, he never thought that humanity wasn't worth it.

The world was anything but perfect, but some parts of it—some of its people—were always, always, worth it.

"Thank you, brother."

Ye Qing clasped his hands together and gave Yi Pin a deep bow.

"Take care, brother."

Yi Pin too smiled and returned the salute.

There is no end to the abyss, but be like a flower, and always face toward the light.

## Chapter 510: I Finally Found You

A crescent moon hung in the air while adorned by a sea of stars, bright and dreamlike.

The wind enveloped mountains and rivers and seeped through every crack, cold and biting.

Nighttime in Carefree Mountain Range was like a picture with the night as the canvas, the stars and moon as the backdrop, and the icy wind as the colors. Inside the picture were colorful, transparent mushrooms that glowed intermittently like fireflies, shrubberies that glittered like crystals, red butterflies that flapped idly through the night air, plant-shaped creatures that were playing about with each other...

Colorful and magical, it was a fantastical world that belonged to Strangers only.

Unfortunately, an unexpected guest suddenly barged into the picture and shattered its peace and tranquility. He was a man in his forties wearing a square crown and a red robe. Various auspicious patterns adorned the robe, and there was a big red “Fortune” sewn at the center of the fabric. His appearance was extremely jubilant and festive.

Right after the unexpected guest intruded upon their territory, the glowing mushroom began blooming like a flower and releasing a cloud of spores, barbed vines began snaking out of the crystalline shrubbery, the red butterflies flapped their wings and poured red powder from the sky, and the plant-shaped Strangers bared their fangs at him.

The man didn’t panic, however. He simply produced a bamboo flute from his sleeve, held it close to his mouth, and blew.

A gentle, mellifluous sound began resounding in the darkness, and the restless Strangers gradually calmed down. The spores flew back into the mushrooms, the barbed vines slithered back into the shrubbery, the butterflies landed back on the flowers, and the plant-shaped Strangers relaxed and went back to their games.

Everything had returned to normal. It was almost as if the man had never barged into the area in the first place.

His eyes narrowed into slits, and a smile stretched across his round, plump face as the man put away his flute. Then, he grabbed a shoot of grass from his shirt. Verdant and small, its roots functioned like legs as it stood on his palm.

The man caressed the grass gently. Some of its leaves immediately swayed and drooped.

“If its leaves droop, then its bond must be nearby. Ye Qing should be somewhere around here.”

The man looked left and right as doubt crept onto his plump face. “But why can’t I sense him anywhere?”

The man was none other than Fugong, the assassin who had traveled all the way from Tian Yong to kill Ye Qing, and the grass he was holding was none other than the Blood Bond Grass.

The Blood Bond Grass could always perceive the person it was connected to. If its bond wasn't nearby, then its leaves would always point in the direction of its bond. If not, then its leaves would point downward.

So... where was Ye Qing?

Slowly, the puzzlement on Fugong's face turned into anger and bloodthirst. His red robe looked like writhing blood as it flapped in the wind.

On the day Ye Qing escaped Tian Yong, Fang Muyin had ordered him to hunt down Ye Qing. At the time, he had believed it to be an easy task that he could complete in three to five days at most since Ye Qing was grievously injured, and he had the Blood Bond Grass to guide him.

But before he knew it, two weeks came and went in the blink of an eye. For the past two weeks, he had chased after Ye Qing with a kind of relentlessness that bordered on zealotry. He ate rations on the road, drank dew from the plants, and slept in the wilderness. By the time he made it to Carefree Pass, he was feeling fairly tired and frustrated to put it mildly.

Then, something unexpected happened. Instead of passing through Carefree Pass, Ye Qing actually chose to enter the Carefree Mountain Range instead.

If Ye Qing had died there, then all was well. He would have saved him the trouble of having to kill him himself. But not only was the rebel alive, it looked like he had chosen to stay in the mountains. He even had the strange feeling that the young man was having the time of his life—relatively speaking, of course.

What else could he do? He had no choice but to venture into the Carefree Mountain Range.

Luckily for him, he was a strong and lucky man. Not only that, he possessed a powerful Strange Artifact called Peace of Mind. It was the only reason he managed to make it into the inner belly of Carefree Mountain Range alive.

Peace of Mind was the bamboo flute he blew just now. Forged from the Soulstealer-class Stranger called the Calming Bamboo, its tune possessed the ability to inflict calm and tranquility upon its targets and reduce their hostility.

The Strange Artifact wasn't omnipotent, however. Even with the right equipment and power, his journey through the mountains was rarely peaceful.

As if that wasn't enough, when he finally reached the location the Blood Bond Grass was pointing to, the man he was searching for was nowhere to be found.

Where could he be? In these mountains, a human would stand out like a sore thumb. He has to be here somewhere!

This was why Fugong was feeling very angry and depressed right now. What would Fang Muyun say if he went back and told him that his mission was a failure?

Unwilling to give up just yet, Fugong began searching the area with the Blood Bond Grass in his hand. He looked and looked and looked until finally, he returned to the spot where the Blood Bond Grass was still pointing.

Still, he couldn't find Ye Qing anywhere.

Angry and resigned, Fugong told himself that he would search the area one more time. If he still couldn't find anything, then he would give up and return to Tian Yong.

It was at this moment the Blood Bond Grass suddenly shook violently. Then, all of its leaves pointed at something—or more accurately, *someone*—behind Fugong. The plump man gingerly turned around, and lo and behold, the man he spent days searching for tirelessly was there.

It was Ye Qing.

To be fair, Ye Qing didn't look like Ye Qing be it in shape or size. However, Fugong was one hundred and twenty percent that the unfamiliar man before him was who he was searching for.

He finally showed up! Thank goodness I didn't give up until the end.

Fugong was practically jumping with catharsis and joy.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Ye Qing asked while watching the grinning man warily.

Everyone who survived the trials of the Earthly Sovereign's Coffin would be transported back to their last location before they were kidnapped, and that worried Ye Qing deeply because there was a chance the Earthly Sovereign's Coffin could've teleported him to the Yin Yang Gap. Thankfully, he had returned to the yang world an instant before the sonuvabitch stole him into his coffin, or he would be in a world of hurt right now.

Unfortunately, he didn't even have the time to pat his chest in relief when he saw a plump man beaming at him excitedly like he was the love of his life. It was no wonder he was instantly on his guard.

"I finally found you, Ye Qing."

Fugong ignored his question. He simply stared at the young man like a big bad wolf coveting a plump, delicious sheep.

"Who on earth are you?" A steely glint flickered in Ye Qing's eyes. He knew practically from the second he set his eyes on Fugong that he wasn't a good person. It was midnight in the belly of the Carefree Mountain Range, and this strange man was staring at him like he would swallow him alive, not to mention that he had called out his name even though he was still in disguise. He couldn't imagine that his intentions were anything but good.

Some quick thinking later, Ye Qing guessed Fugong's identity immediately. "You're the one who set me up!"

It wasn't a question. He knew in his bones that Fugong was the one.

"Yes. We did it," Fugong admitted. And why not? From his perspective, Ye Qing was already a dead man. Besides, considering how much time and effort he had invested into finding Ye Qing, it would be criminal not to confess his achievements at least a little.

“Why did you do it?”

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes. *Us*, the plump man had said. This proved that it wasn’t the act of a single person, but a group. He had expected this as he didn’t think that any single person—and especially not a late-stage Spirit Master—would dare to manipulate the Pacification Bureau, the Harmony King and the Hengshan Army to achieve their goals. Therefore, this guy was just a pawn serving a mastermind.

“Do you even have to ask? Don’t you remember what you did and who you offended?” Fugong retorted with a wide grin on his face.

Ye Qing shrugged. “There are too many. You’ll have to narrow it down for me.”

Fugong chuckled. “I’ve always believed that dying with regrets is one of the worst ways to go in this world, and I’m a kind, benevolent man. So, I will tell you the truth.”

“Thank you so much for your generosity,” Ye Qing replied with dripping sarcasm.

“You’re welcome.” Fugong waved uncaringly. “So, the reason we set you up is because you killed—”

As soon as he said this, Fugong abruptly floated toward Ye Qing like a leaf and threw a punch at the young man’s face. Seemingly caught completely off guard, Ye Qing did nothing and allowed the punch to hit him squarely in the forehead. His head flew backward so hard that the back of his head nearly touched his back.