

Stranger 51

Chapter 51: The Book Sprite

“It’s here!”

Ye Qing was resting and waiting on the third floor until the commotion began. He opened his eyes, and Kung Fu Frog leaped to its feet. *Sounds like a kid*, he deduced after listening for a bit.

“Time to go downstairs and pay our mysterious ghost a visit, Brother Frog!” Ye Qing whispered as he gently opened the door. After Kung Fu Frog had leaped onto his shoulder, he slipped out without a sound and reached the first floor in just a matter of seconds.

Ye Qing thought he was stealthy enough, but the sound vanished as soon as he reached the main hall. All was silent as if nothing had happened.

“It’s pretty alert, isn’t it?” A small smile crept on Ye Qing’s face as he felt around with his senses. Strangely, he could not sense any discomfiting aura in the bookstore. The fact that the ghost sounded crisp, clear and bright also contradicted the claims that a ghost was haunting this bookstore.

“Croak croak!”

Suddenly, Kung Fu Frog leaped off his shoulder and made a grab for a book on the bookshelf to his right. It was then Ye Qing heard someone crying, “Wah!” before a palm-sized, shadowy silhouette vanished in a flash of light.

“Croak...”

The silhouette was fast, but Kung Fu Frog wasn’t slow either. As soon as the silhouette disappeared, it kicked off the bookshelf and launched itself toward a different book.

“Wah! Wah!” The shadowy silhouette cried out again before leaving the book and vanishing once more. It sounded just like a human.

The shadowy silhouette was formless, shapeless, and seemingly capable of teleportation. Forget sensing it, he couldn’t even identify the direction in which it had disappeared to. The same could not be said for Kung Fu Frog, however. Perhaps it was because a Stranger’s senses were different from a human’s, but no matter how many times the silhouette vanished seemingly into thin air, Kung Fu Frog could always perceive it and chase it down in the next instant.

What happened next felt nothing like a ghost hunt and everything like a cat-and-mouse game, though in this case it was a frog and a “ghost”. The frog kept croaking and jumping all over the bookstore to catch the silhouette, while the “ghost” kept crying in alarm and teleporting away from it. The atmosphere was honestly more cheerful than solemn, not least because Kung Fu Frog clearly wasn’t going all out. Ye Qing could tell that it was just toying with the silhouette.

A bookstore... a ‘ghost’ who recites books at midnight... it looks kinda humanoid, and it’s capable of teleportation... Ye Qing slowly pieced together the clues while rubbing his nose and observing the fleeing silhouette. It was at this moment the answer came to him.

"I know who you are!" Ye Qing's lips curled into a wicked smile. "You can come back now, Brother Frog!"

"Croak?" Kung Fu Frog skidded to a stop and shot him a look of confusion. The small delay was all the silhouette needed to disappear once more and let out a peal of childish laughter. "Stupid! Stupid! You can't catch me because you're *stupid!*"

"Heh..." Ye Qing chuckled and patted Kung Fu Frog comfortingly after his friend had returned to his shoulder. "It's true that I can't catch you, but I can kill you, you know?"

"Liar! Liar!" The childish voice taunted.

"Don't believe me?" Ye Qing's smile widened as he declared, "Tell me then, what happens if I burn every book in this bookstore?"

It was like someone had pressed the mute button. Dead silence abruptly filled the bookstore.

"Why so quiet? You were having so much fun calling me stupid, weren't you?" Ye Qing asked casually, "I know exactly what you are, I know your true body is probably somewhere in a room on the second floor! That should be enough for you to know that my threat is no idle threat!"

"Show yourself, and I may yet decide to let you live. Stay hidden, and I will burn every book in this bookstore!"

Again, there was naught but dead silence. A few seconds later, Ye Qing decided that a bigger push was necessary and threatened, "You're really not going to come out? I'm a man of my word, you know. I will burn the books if you don't come out. On the count of three... two..."

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

He didn't manage to say one before a wail broke out, and the air on a certain bookshelf abruptly twisted as if grabbed by an invisible hand. The next moment, a palm-sized young girl wearing a twintail and a dress with black-and-white sleeves popped into view. Right now, the girl was sitting atop a book and letting out a heartbroken cry.

"..."

Ye Qing was a bit speechless, to be honest. He was sure that his threat would work, but it would seem that it had worked a little *too* well. *You're a Stranger, dammit. Where is your pride? You're making me look like the bad guy!*

That's right. The "ghost" haunting the bookstore was none other than a Stranger, a "Book Sprite" to be exact. Born from the essence of the literary fate of a literary place, a Book Sprite was a pure-hearted, book-loving Stranger that was exceptionally knowledgeable in most areas of studies and capable of human speech.

Despite being Mundane-class and completely useless in combat, a Book Sprite was as rare as it was valuable, not least because the conditions necessary to bring about its birth were exceptionally stringent. For starters, it could only be born from a famous orphan work. Two, its place of birth

must possess rich cultural flavor and immense wealth of knowledge. They must possess a strong fate for the literary so to speak. Three, its place of birth must be free from taint and evil spirits, and the owner, their family and even their relatives must be good people. Four, it took decades or even centuries for a Book Sprite to be born. And five, it was a matter of luck whether a Book Sprite would be born even if all of the above conditions were met, which made it near impossible to nurture a Book Sprite on purpose. It was why only literary and/or virtuous families stood a chance of giving birth to a Book Sprite.

Although a Book Sprite was harmless and useless in combat, it was by no means a powerless creature. Born from the essence of the literary fate of a literary place, it was naturally blessed with unparalleled knowledge and exceptional literary fate. Even better, it could improve another person's fate and talent in the literary department. Listening to its recital could enhance one's memory, improve one's fate, clear one's mind, and enable one to focus absolutely on a certain task without being distracted. Invaluable to anyone and especially a scholar, there was no literary and/or virtuous family who didn't take pride in the fact that they owned a Book Sprite!

But of course, a Book Sprite also had its glaring weakness. For one, its true body was that of a book, so it was ludicrously fragile to put it mildly. It would die if its true body suffered extensive damage. Two, a Book Sprite could not travel too far away from its true body. This was how Ye Qing determined that the Book Sprite's true body was in a room on the second floor and used that information to threaten the female Book Sprite to show itself.

Frankly, Ye Qing wasn't expecting Endless Horizons to possess a Book Sprite. It was probably due to its long and storied literary history. As a bookstore that was easily over a hundred years old, it had naturally amassed an incredible amount of priceless orphan works. Not only that, it had never had a black-hearted owner. Finally, it was a famous location of literature and culture in Anyang. All these conditions had ultimately resulted in the birth of a Book Sprite.

Unfortunately for the previous owner, he must not read a lot of books in his time. He had mistaken it for a ghost-type Stranger and sold his heritage and the Book Sprite to Ye Qing.

Ye Qing didn't care for the Book Sprite's ability to improve one's literary fate. After all, he wasn't a licentiate trying to become the top scorer in the palace examination. What he desired was her unparalleled knowledge—even though it was a bit of an exaggeration on the author's part. A Book Sprite was naturally familiar with all the books within its birthplace as it was born from the essence of its literary fate, but that was it. She didn't know any book that Endless Horizons did not possess.

Ye Qing was completely fine with this though. "Just" all the books within Endless Horizons was good enough for him. After all, knowledge was power!

Back in the present, Ye Qing tried to calm down the girl after noticing that she wasn't going to stop crying anytime soon, "Alright, enough. If you keep this up, you're going to flood the bookstore with your tears!"

The young girl spread her fingers a little and took a peek. When she realized that her tears hadn't even wetted the book beneath her butt, she scrunched up her face and cried, "Liar! Liar!"

Then, she began bawling again.

Deeply amused, Ye Qing replied, "Fine, fine! I promise I won't burn you, so will you please stop crying already?"

“Really?” The young girl asked timidly while rubbing her reddened eyes.

Ye Qing chuckled. “I would never burn a cute little girl like you. It was just a lie to get you to show yourself!”

“Hmph! Liar!” she complained again. The Book Sprite had finally stopped crying, but she was still holding back a sob as evident from the occasional twitch of her shoulders.

Ye Qing continued, “Not only that, I give you my word that you are free to read your books whenever you want. You no longer have to sneak out during the night to read them. What do you say?”

Her eyes lit up immediately. “Really?”

“Really!”

“Yay! You’re a good human!” The young girl was so happy she forgot her sorrows and hopped on her feet. She had completely forgotten who was the bastard who made her cry in the first place.

“That said, I want you to do something for me in return. Is that okay?” said Ye Qing smilingly. His eyes narrowed like that of a fox who was observing its prey.

“What do you want?” The young girl asked innocently.

Ye Qing answered slowly, “I want you to read me a book for me every night. Additionally, I get to pick the genre. What do you say?”

The young girl tilted her head and thought for a moment. Since the arrangement did not sound disadvantageous to her, she nodded and said simply, “Okay!”

A smile spread across Ye Qing’s lips then. The reason he requested this was because he wanted to make use of her ability to enhance one’s memory and clear one’s mind, of course. For one, it would aid him in memorizing the contents of a book in the shortest amount of time possible. Two, it would save him from the need to read the book himself. And third, it would bring him and the Book Sprite closer.

Having gotten what he wanted, Ye Qing gave the Book Sprite a wave and said smilingly, “Alright, you can read your books now. I’m going to bed.”

“Hurray! That’s wonderful! You’re a very good human!” The young girl chirped happily while jumping up and down. She even started flying in and out of the books in excitement.

“Oh right, I almost forgot!” Ye Qing had already taken a few steps toward the stairs when he recalled something. “My name is Ye Qing. What is your name?”

“My name?” The young girl stopped flying and started biting her finger. She sounded surprisingly gloomy as she replied, “I don’t have a name!”

Ye Qing asked, “Do you want me to name you then? I swear I’m incredibly gifted at coming up with names!”

The young girl looked doubtful. “Really?”

Ye Qing thought carefully as he rubbed his nose habitually. A long time later, he said, “Since you’re born from a book, and your birthplace is Endless Horizons... let’s call you Wah Wah with a ‘h’ at the end!”

She was small and cute and had the tendency to cry “Wah!” whenever she was startled. Hence, Wah Wah was the perfect name for her!

However, Ye Qing changed his mind as soon as the words tumbled out of his mouth. “Actually, wait, Wah Wah is a little blatant... Let’s call you Wawa instead. In my prev—I mean, my hometown, Wawa means ‘little girl’ and ‘the return of spring’. It sounds poetic, doesn’t it?”

“Wawa?” The young girl bit her lip and mulled over the name. A short while later, she abruptly broke out in joyful laughter and chirped, “Wawa has a name! Wawa has a name now! I’m so happy!”

Suddenly, Ye Qing’s mouth curled into a foxy smile. “Since I’m such a good friend, how about I do you another favor, Wawa?”

“What favor?” Wawa asked puzzledly.

“I can take care of your true body for you.”

“No way!” Wawa replied without hesitation and watched Ye Qing warily.

Unaffected by her gaze, Ye Qing implored good-naturedly, “I’m doing this for your sake, Wawa. Just think. As a book, you’re so fragile that even a bug can hurt you, and if a rat decides that you look delicious, well, I wouldn’t be seeing you anymore. Do you really want that to happen?”

“Wah? Bugs? Rats?” Wawa abruptly turned deathly white as if recalling some terrible memory. She hesitated for a long time, but in the end, she acquiesced and said, “O-okay.”

After Wawa took Ye Qing to a room on the second floor, a book flew out of a bookshelf and landed in her hands. She reluctantly handed it to Ye Qing while instructing with a serious expression, “But you have to take *very* good care of Wawa, okay friend? You mustn’t let me be bitten by a bug, and definitely not by a rat!”

“I promise!” Ye Qing’s grin widened as he accepted the book. With Wawa’s true body in his possession, he could ensure her safety and more importantly, make certain that she would never be able to escape his grasp.

Muahahaha...

Chapter 52: Soulchasing Saber

“The Francolin is a pheasant-like Stranger with beautiful feathers and a dark brown crown. It loves to crow, and its crows have the strange power to plunge anyone who hears it into sorrow...”

“The Lying Rabbit is a rabbit with a human face. It excels at lying and enjoys feeding on the brains of its victims...”

“The Palm Leaf Celestial is a palm leaf that had transformed into a Stranger. Usually taking the form of a beautiful woman, it excels at seducing humans using its beauty and consuming their vital energies while they were distracted...”

“The Nameless Hair is...”

Rays of sunlight peered through the window lattice and filled the rooms on the third floor with bright, warm light. It felt as welcoming as the beginning of spring. Inside the bedroom, Ye Qing was meditating on a praying mat and listening to Wawa reading a book on Strangers.

The girl’s voice was crisp, soothing, and melodious. It felt like paradise combined with the beautiful morning.

Ye Qing’s head felt clearer and more focused than ever before. He had not only solved many martial arts conundrums that had previously stumped him, but also memorized every word Wawa was saying. The process seemed as effortless and natural as breathing.

When Wawa was done reciting the book, Ye Qing opened his eyes and thought, *Now that I’m settled in, it’s time to get to work!*

“Wawa is done reading, friend. Can I go and play now?” Wawa asked expectantly after shutting the book gently.

“But of course! Feel free to play as much as you want!” Ye Qing declared magnanimously and elicited an excited cry from the girl. She immediately teleported atop Kung Fu Frog’s head and started frolicking with it, giggling the whole time.

Ye Qing’s “work” consisted of three separate matters. First and foremost, he wanted to kill Strangers and collect dragon-serpent runes. It had been a while since he ran low on silver dragon-serpent runes, and without them he could not cultivate and grow stronger. It was why it was his first priority.

The second thing he needed to do was to train. Specifically, he needed to improve his martial arts. He was now a Vessel Augmentor, but his martial arts were, frankly speaking, a poor fit for his cultivation. The “Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber” was utterly beneath him at this point. His lightning fast saber style he developed on his own was fast, but lacking in strength. The Toad Force was powerful, but it took time to accumulate its power; far too much time in the middle of combat.

Everything besides his Blood Shadow Magic was flawed in a way he could not ignore.

These weaknesses might not matter against an opponent whose cultivation level was lower than his, but he was certain he would run into trouble if he went up against an equal. That was why expanding his repertoire of skills was also a top priority.

Thankfully, he did not have to go hunting for a martial arts manual on the streets. He had gotten a ton of good loot from Zheng Tianyuan's group, and among them were several cultivation and martial arts manuals. For example, he had received the Qi Invocation stage internal mental art, the "Red Dragon Art" from Chi Long, the "Esoteric Arts of Snake Manipulation" and "Thousand Snake Hand" from Granny Snake, the "Iron Hand" from Prayer, and so on.

Of all the manuals, there were two that he valued above all others. The first one was a concealed weapons manual he found in Prayer's Nature's Shell called the "Star Plucking Hand". Back then, Prayer had nearly managed to kill him using his throwing knives and the Incense of Misfortune, and he was pretty sure that the martial art he used to throw his knives was the "Star Plucking Hand". If he could combine it with his movement art "Blood Sea Fragrance", he was certain he could maximize the martial art's potential.

The second manual that caught his fancy was a Qi Invocation stage saber art manual he found in Zheng Tianyuan's Nature's Shell called the "Soulchasing Saber".

"Soulchasing Saber" featured a very different style of saber fighting compared to the "Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber". Where the "Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber" focused on brute force and ferocity, the "Soulchasing Saber" focused on speed, trickery, and deadliness. It taught its practitioners to always attack from an unexpected angle, and to execute them with such speed that one's opponent was dead before they even realized what just happened. As a saber style that emphasized on speed and trickery, it was a natural fit with his lightning fast saber style and an even better fit with his "Blood Magic Divine Art", which was anything but straightforward.

The "Star Plucking Hand" was a ranged offensive art, and the "Soulchasing Saber" a melee offensive art. They were just what he needed to expand his repertoire and something he would be focusing on for the foreseeable future.

As for the rest of the manuals, he might consider studying them if time allowed. At the current stage, there was no such thing as having too many skills after all. If not, then he could just push them to a later date.

Finally, the third thing he needed to do was to seek out the Zheng Clan and take revenge not just for August Hill Village, but also himself.

Zheng Clan! Zheng Feng! A steely glint flashed across his eyes as he recalled the ones he had sworn to kill.

Revenge wasn't always a dish best served cold, but in this case, he had no choice but to wait. According to Zheng Tianyuan, his father was a Vessel Augmentor who had spent many years mastering the Vessel Augmentation stage. Besides that, he was the patriarch of a powerful clan with many hanger-ons and even more guards. If he visited them now, chances were he was only going to make a fool out of himself, if not die.

That was why he needed to strengthen himself and gather more information on the Zheng Clan and Zheng Feng first. He could take his revenge after he had come up with a comprehensive plan.

Best case scenario, he would have reached the Astral Refinement stage and become utterly untouchable to Zheng Feng. When that happened, he could slap the bastard left, right, and center to his heart's content!

That's right! I'm not scared, I'm just being careful and tactical!

And so Ye Qing spent the next few days holed up in Endless Horizons. During the day, he would cultivate the "Soulchasing Saber" and the "Star Plucking Hand". When night arrived, he would meditate while listening to Wawa's recital. During his free time, he would pour himself a cup of tea, open the doors, and lie down on a recliner to bask in the warm sun. Sometimes, he would even pay his neighbors a visit, tell strange stories to the children running all over the streets, or sit down at a restaurant to enjoy their fine wine and music. If he was in a particularly good mood, he would even reward them with a small tip. It was a good life.

His actions were so out of the ordinary compared to the average plebeian that everyone living nearby soon learned that Endless Horizons had gained a new owner. Not only that, he was a young, friendly owner who loved to smile and enjoyed making other people smile even more. He called himself a scholar, and he often carried a strange frog with him.

Of course, that wasn't to say that the new owner wasn't without its flaws. He was lazy and seemed to have entirely too much free time in his hands. Besides that, he didn't seem bothered in the slightest that the bookstore was doing as poorly as ever under his management. Forget getting angry, sad, or even concerned for his future, he smiled everyday as if he was living the time of his life!

One day, Ye Qing entered a restaurant named "Coming Clouds" and was immediately greeted by a smiling waiter, "Come to hear our music again, Boss Ye? I assume you want the usual arrangements?"

"The same!" Ye Qing nodded. Coming Clouds was just next to Endless Horizons, and he had been visiting the place quite frequently for the past two days. As a result, every waiter and even the owner of the restaurant were familiar with him.

"Two jars of Pear Blossom wine, a platter of beef and a plate of peanuts~" The waiter sing-songed as he headed toward the kitchen.

The restaurant had a fair amount of customers at this hour. They were all enjoying their alcohol, listening to the music, and gossiping about everything.

"Have you heard about that incident?"

"You know I don't like to be kept on tenterhooks, Old Cui. Just spit it out already."

Three middle-aged men were gossiping at the table next to Ye Qing's. The guy called Old Cui answered, "I heard that several people had been found dead in Fortune Alley this morning!"

"What? Who?" His two companions were drawn in an instant.

Old Cui down a cup of wine before explaining, "I don't know, but I do know that four, if not five people were found dead on the streets. Not only that, I heard that it was an absolute bloodbath. One man had their limbs cut off, another had their eyes and tongue dug out of their bodies, and a third

had their ears and nose severed. For whatever reason, not a single body was left intact. It was terrifying!”

“Damn... that’s terrifying!” Both men gasped in horror. “What kind of person would do something like this?”

Old Cui shook his head. “Exactly. No person in their right mind would do such a thing, so either they’re actually cuckoo in the head, or more likely, a Stranger is the one responsible for those poor people’s deaths!”

“A Stranger? Heavens... wait, we shouldn’t be talking about this. What if the Stranger decides to kill us next?”

“Old Liu is absolutely right. Come, let us bask in the music and forget about this conversation already!”

Hmm. A murderer, possibly a Stranger with a fetish for mutilating bodies? Ye Qing shot the trio a thoughtful look.

It was at this moment the owner of Coming Clouds walked over and greeted Ye Qing with a gloomy, exhausted expression. “You came, Boss Ye?”

“Good day to you, Boss Zhou!” Ye Qing greeted him before asking curiously, “What’s happened to you? Did you fall ill, or did you sleep poorly last night?”

Boss Zhou stopped in his tracks and let out a long sigh. “It’s a long story, but I’ll try to keep it short. Yesterday, my son suddenly complained that he’s hungry and started eating non-stop. And I do mean non-stop. He’d stuffed himself until his stomach was bulging, but still he wouldn’t stop crying about how hungry he was and shoving food into his mouth. When we tried to stop him, he cried and struggled and even mutilated himself to get his way. It wasn’t until this morning that he finally tired enough to cease his tantrum, and I’ve been kept awake for just as long!”

“I’ve already hired five doctors to look at him, but none of them were able to determine a problem. I’m worried sick right now. Doctor Xue is the most famous doctor in Anyang, so I’m planning to pay him a visit later. I only have one son, Boss Ye. I cannot lose him no matter what!”

Boss Zhou’s full name was Zhou Fu, and Ye Qing had met his son before. He was around eight or nine years old with an honest face, a robust figure, and a mischievous personality. Zhou Fu had been trying for a son for years, and it wasn’t until nine years ago that he finally got his wish. It was why he pampered his son to death and loved him more than his own life. It was no wonder Zhou Fu was a bundle of nerves right now.

Suddenly, an urgent cry came from outside the restaurant. A second later, a servant rushed through the entrance, found Zhou Fu and said urgently, “The young master is awake and begging for food again, master! He’s shoving everything he can grab into his mouth! The mistress asks you to head home as soon as you’re able!”

“Oh heavens... I’m going right now!” Zhou Fu hurriedly got to his feet and ordered, “Zhou Gui, I want you to go to the Divine Needle Clinic and invite Doctor Xue to our place. Go!”

“At once, master!” Zhou Gui responded before running back out the entrance, Zhou Fu following right behind him. The owner had even forgotten to bid Ye Qing goodbye before taking his leave. It was just as well. He didn’t notice that Ye Qing had risen to his feet and trailed after him.

Zhou Fu’s residence was just a few steps away from his restaurant. As soon as he walked through the entrance, he heard a series of muffled groans and panicked noises from the backyard.

“What the hell has happened to my Hui’er?”

Zhou Gui ran all the way to a building in the backyard and stepped in. He immediately saw his son being bound to his bed with a silk handkerchief in his mouth. The young boy was screaming through the cloth with a terrifying expression on his face.

“What are you doing? Why did you tie up my son?”

Furious, Zhou Fu rushed forward to unbind his son, but his wife stopped him immediately. “You mustn’t! When Hui’er woke up, the first thing he did was cry for food. When we refused, he immediately started banging his head against the wall! That’s why I ordered the servants to bind him to his bed, and the handkerchief in his mouth is to stop him from biting off his own tongue!”

“I...” Zhou Fu visibly slowed down when he heard this.

“What do we do, Zhou Gui? We need to save Hui’er somehow!” cried his wife as she burst into tears. Her expression was wrought with sadness, worry, and bewilderment. Zhou Fu looked just as lost as she was.

It was at this moment a bright voice came from behind, “I can treat him!”

Chapter 53: Everhungry Worm, Rot Eating Cat

“Boss Ye! How did you...” Zhou Fu exclaimed in surprise when he turned around and saw Ye Qing standing behind them. The young man was wearing a serene, laid-back smile on his face.

“I followed you, of course!” Ye Qing replied.

“Boss Ye, did you just say you can treat my son?” Zhou Fu’s wife pushed past her husband and grabbed Ye Qing’s arms.

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He nodded. “Yes, I can!”

Overjoyed, she begged, “Please save my son, Boss Ye! I beg you!”

Zhou Fu was just as worried as his wife, but unlike her he was a little less trusting. “Are you sure, Boss Ye?” He asked suspiciously. It was understandable. Ye Qing was just too young.

Ye Qing paid his suspicion no heed and answered amiably, "Do not worry, Boss Zhou. As a scholar, I always put my money where my mouth is!"

Once again, his wife shoved Zhou Fu aside and pulled Ye Qing all the way to the bed. Like a drowning woman on her last straw, she begged, "There is no time! Please examine Hui'er already, Boss Ye!"

Ye Qing obediently sat down beside the bed and gave Zhou Hui's stomach a rub. The young boy's stomach was round and swollen. To say that he was full to the brim would be an understatement. And yet, the boy's eyes shone with such hunger it reminded him of a beggar who hadn't had a drop of water for days. Even now, he was trying to swallow the handkerchief in his mouth and succeeding.

Seeing that there was no time to waste, Ye Qing started untying the ropes keeping Zhou Hui in place while ordering, "Get me a bottle of vinegar right now. The sourer, the better!"

"Boss Ye, you can't—!" The wife hurriedly started. The reason they had bound Zhou Hui wasn't just because he was hurting himself, but also because he had become unnaturally strong after catching this strange illness. It had taken them an unbelievable amount of effort to secure him to the bed. Even with the addition of two men, she did not think it would be an easy task to bind him to the bed once more.

Unfortunately, she did not manage to finish before Zhou Hui's bindings became undone. As soon as the rope came loose, Zhou Hui immediately started shoving the handkerchief down his gullet like he had gone insane. Not only that, he jumped down the bed and sprinted for the exit so fast it was unthinkable that a nine-year-old boy was capable of such movements.

"No!" The wife exclaimed in horror, but her panic proved to be unnecessary just an instant later. Ye Qing stretched out a hand and, despite looking like he wasn't even trying, caught Zhou Hui while he was still in the air and pulled him down. A second later, the manic boy found himself lying on top of Ye Qing's legs.

Thud!

Ye Qing turned his wrist slightly and slapped Zhou Hui hard on the back. At the same time, he pushed up against the boy's stomach with his right knee.

"Blargh!"

An unimaginable amount of vomit burst out of Zhou Hui's mouth. A couple more pushes later, the boy's stomach looked a lot healthier. However, Zhou Hui was still struggling with all his might and moaning, "Eat... eat... eat..." again and again. His eye color was an unnatural shade of dark green as well.

"Boss Ye, what are you—"

"Where's the vinegar?"

Zhou Fu wanted to ask what the hell Ye Qing was doing, but he was interrupted before he could finish. It was at this moment a servant girl ran over and handed the young man a jar of vinegar,

declaring, “Here!” He took a sniff, nodded in satisfaction, and flipped Zhou Hui over. Then, he forced open the boy’s mouth and poured the vinegar straight down his gullet.

“What are you doing? Stop!”

Zhou Fu’s wife was furious when she saw Ye Qing handling her son so roughly. She ran over and tried to pull him away, but the young man raised his finger slightly and sent an invisible Blood Shadow in her direction. It tripped her and caused her to fall on top of a servant girl instead.

Ye Qing paid the looks of anger, puzzlement and shock around him no heed. Still maintaining a tight grip on Zhou Hui and pouring vinegar into his mouth, he looked up and smiled at the crowd. “Don’t worry. A bit of vinegar won’t kill him!”

Ye Qing had poured over half a jar of vinegar into Zhou Hui when suddenly, the boy ceased his struggles. Then, as little bumps started appearing all across his stomach as if something was writhing inside it. The crowd could only watch in shock and horror.

“Boss Ye, what is happening to Hui’er?” Zhou Fu exclaimed in fear as he pointed at Zhou Hui’s stomach.

Ye Qing replied casually, “It’s just a small worm. Don’t worry about it!”

When the time was right, Ye Qing slapped Zhou Hui’s back once more—this time a lot gentler than before—and shoved just a tiny bit of force into Zhou Hui’s stomach. The young boy immediately started throwing up small chunks of food and the old vinegar Ye Qing had forcefully poured down his throat a moment ago.

That wasn’t everything Zhou Hui threw up, however. Just a few seconds later, a worm about the size of a thumb fell out of Zhou Hui’s mouth and hit the ground with a disgusting squelch.

The worm was five segments long, white, and extremely fat. In another place and time, no one would’ve favored it a second glance. Right now though, the crowd was so scared that they instinctively took a few steps away from it.

Zhou Hui stopped struggling and begging for food almost immediately after he spat out the worm. His warped, maddened expression slowly faded back to normal as well. He whispered weakly, “Big bro Ye...”

“Don’t worry. You’re all fine now!” Ye Qing assured him gently before grabbing a new handkerchief from the bed and wiping away the filth on his mouth. Then, he gently laid the boy on the bed and looked at Zhou Fu, saying, “It’s done. Hui’er is cured!”

“My son! My son!” Zhou Fu’s wife half-sobbed and half-laughed as she rushed to the bed and hugged Zhou Hui tightly against her chest. Ye Qing naturally stepped out of the way before producing a pair of chopsticks and a porcelain bottle from his shirt. He picked up the strange worm and dropped it inside the bottle.

“What on earth is that worm, Boss Ye?” Zhou Fu was overjoyed that his son was cured as a matter of course, but he did not neglect his benefactor like his wife had.

Ye Qing put away the bottle safely before answering, “The worm is called the Everhungry Worm, a Mundane-class Stranger. It is normally harmless until someone accidentally inhales its egg into their nose or mouth. Once it enters the stomach, it would release a paralyzing toxin that induces a feeling of extreme hunger. It’s why the victim can never feel full no matter how much food they eat, and why they’re driven to eat like a starved man. Hence the name.”

“The unnatural hunger is purely mental and has nothing to do with one’s physical needs whatsoever. The toxin doesn’t improve one’s ability to digest food either. Therefore, it is entirely possible for a victim to die from overeating if they aren’t stopped in time.”

“Heavens...” Zhou Fu pressed a hand against his heart when he heard this. He could only imagine what would happen if they had not discovered Zhou Hui’s affliction in time. “Is that why you fed Hui’er vinegar just now? To force the Everhungry Worm out of his body?”

“That’s right!” Ye Qing nodded. “The Everhungry Worm isn’t afraid of sweet, bitter, salty or spicy flavors. It is only afraid of sourness. Your son has probably eaten everything in your kitchen at this point, but I’m willing to bet he hasn’t eaten much sour food, has he?”

Zhou Fu thought back for a moment and quickly arrived at the conclusion that he was right.

Suddenly, Ye Qing said, “I have a couple of questions I’d like to ask Hui’er, Boss Zhou. Is that okay?”

“But of course! Feel free!”

Ye Qing turned back to Zhou Hui—the young boy’s complexion had finally returned to a healthy color—and asked gently, “Excuse me, Hui’er, but do you remember where you went to play yesterday? Did you encounter anything you might consider strange or interesting?”

Zhou Hui tilted his head to one side and thought for a moment. Then, he raised his hands and replied animatedly, “Hui’er ran into a big cat yesterday! It’s real scary!”

“A big cat, you say?” Ye Qing’s eyes flashed with intelligence. “Do you remember where you ran into it?”

Zhou Hui answered, “At the back alley. It ran through our feet while Young Nan, Niu Niu and I were playing together. Young Nan and Niu Niu were scared, but I wasn’t! I even beat it to scare it away!”

“Haha. You’re a brave kid, Hui’er!” Ye Qing smiled. “I don’t have any more questions, so go catch some rest. Come find me when you’re healthy again, okay?”

“Okay!” Zhou Hui replied with an obedient nod.

Ye Qing turned back to Zhou Fu and warned, “Hui’er is fine now, but make sure you don’t feed him anything spicy or difficult to digest, okay? His stomach is hurt from all the food he swallowed and needs time to recover. Just feed him some porridge for the next couple days, and he should be fine.”

As the young man turned to leave, Zhou Fu hurriedly strode over to see him off. "Thank you so much, Boss Ye. If something were to happen to Hui'er, I don't think I'd have the courage to live another day. You're not just my son's savior, Boss Ye. You're my savior as well!"

Ye Qing shot him a smile. "You flatter me, Boss Zhou."

Zhou Fu shook his head vehemently. "Not in the slightest! In fact, I'm not quite sure how to thank you for saving our lives! I... I... Please accept my knees, Boss Ye!"

The middle-aged man's knees buckled, but Ye Qing caught him before he could fall to the ground. "Boss Zhou! If you really want to thank me, why don't you charge me a little less and stop mixing water into my Pear Blossom wine? That's all I ask!"

"Ahaha... got it." Boss Zhou let out an awkward chuckle before swearing, "Not only that, I hereby declare that you're my restaurant's most honored customer! From now on, you won't have to pay a single silver to dine at my restaurant!"

"Haha! That's very generous of you, Boss Zhou! I shall happily accept your offer!" Ye Qing let out a hearty laugh and saluted Zhou Fu. "You should go see your son now, and I still have a jar of wine to finish!"

Zhou Fu responded just as happily, "Feel free to drink to your heart's content, Boss Ye! Coming Clouds might be lacking in some ways, but our wine is not one of them! Hahaha! Goodbye, Boss Ye!"

"Yeah. See you later!"

Ye Qing bade Zhou Fu goodbye and left the Zhou residence, but instead of returning to the restaurant as he claimed he would, he went to the back alley Zhou Hui had mentioned. After that, he poured the Everhungry Worm on the ground, hid in a corner and waited for something to happen.

His patience was rewarded just a few minutes later when a big cat with shiny, black fur crawled out of a corner. It then ran straight toward the Everhungry Worm.

Zhou Hui wasn't kidding when he said that the cat is big, Ye Qing thought. It was the size of a smaller hound with a pair of eyes that shone like gemstones. Its ears were twice as large as a normal cat's, and it had a fluffy tail and an extremely round head. It looked funny, goofy and lovable, but Ye Qing knew better than to trust its inviting appearance.

"I knew it was you, Rot Eating Cat!"

The massive black cat was a Red-class Stranger called the Rot Eating Cat. It was a savage beast that feasts on rotten food and shared a symbiotic relationship with the Everhungry Worm.

The Everhungry Worm could usually be found on the Rot Eating Cat's fur in its egg form. The Rot Eating Cat would then lure an unsuspecting victim to touch them so it could infect them with the Everhungry Worm. Once the Everhungry Worm had crawled into the victim's stomach, it would poison them and drive them mad with unquenchable hunger.

When the victim had died from overeating, and the body was buried in the ground, the Rot Eating Cat would seek it out by following the Everhungry Worm's scent. It would then tear open the

victim's stomach with its sharp claws and tail and feast on the rotting food within. That was why it was named the Rot Eating Cat. It was a devious and evil Stranger through and through.

From the moment he determined that Zhou Hui was infected by an Everhungry Worm, he already guessed that there might be a Rot Eating Cat nearby. That was why he didn't kill the Everhungry Worm immediately and instead, used it to lure out the Rot Eating Cat. In short, he was catfishing—literally!

Chapter 54: A Passing Dragon

“Meow...” The Rot Eating Cat was about halfway to the Everhungry Worm when it suddenly straightened its ears and stared warily at Ye Qing's hiding place.

“You're quite perceptive for an animal!” Ye Qing sneered while stepping away from his hiding spot. “Too bad it's not going to help you survive!”

Unlike Kung Fu Frog or Wawa, there was nothing good about the Rot Eating Cat whatsoever. It was a disgusting and terrible creature that deserved to be exterminated on sight. It was one thing if it didn't show up, but since it did, he wasn't going to let it live long enough to see tomorrow's sun!

The Rot Eating Cat puffed up as if it could sense Ye Qing's bloodthirst. Its shiny black fur instantly puffed up like needles, its long tail gradually flattened and grew fish-like scales, and its canine teeth lengthened until it resembled that of a saber-toothed predator. Right here and now, it looked nothing like the dumb, cutesy cat it was a moment ago!

“So this is what you really look like!” Ye Qing's lips widened into a savage grin as he examined the cat with a critical eye. “And from the looks of it, you've killed a lot of people!”

Most Strangers possessed the ability to disguise themselves, and the Rot Eating Cat was no exception.

“Meow!”

The Rot Eating Cat abruptly let out a screech. The steely fur on its back immediately flew toward Ye Qing like a porcupine's spines.

Clap!

Ye Qing responded by swinging his hand and “slapping” the air, causing a soft yet unmistakable thunderclap. As if they had slammed into an impregnable wall, the rain of fur abruptly shattered into a million pieces.

The attack was just a distraction, however. Already, the Rot Eating Cat was jumping in front of Ye Qing and attempting to wrap his neck with its tail. If it succeeded, the tiniest ounce of strength was all that was needed to rip his throat into shreds!

“Not bad, not bad!” Ye Qing praised while putting his finger directly in the path of the incoming tail. The second contact was made, the tail abruptly broke into several segments and exploded in a shower of scales, blood and gore. It was like it was

struck by lightning. In fact, there was enough force left that the Rot Eating Cat was slammed into the wall behind its back.

“Mrreow...”

The Rot Eating Cat managed to land on its feet, but it was clear it could not fight any longer. Most of its tail had been blown clean off the stump. It was as bare as a human as it had launched most of its hair during the initial assault, and it was bleeding all over. It looked nothing like the imposing predator it was before.

Ye Qing clicked his tongue in disgust. “What an ugly creature you are!”

“Meow!” The Rot Eating Cat shot Ye Qing a hateful glare but did not fall for his taunt. It abruptly bounded toward the distance like a bolt of lightning. Unfortunately, it was futile.

“You can’t escape!” Ye Qing let out a derisive snort and flicked his wrist. A throwing knife shot right out of his hand and toward the fleeing Stranger.

The Rot Eating Cat sensed the danger and leaped to its right. However, the throwing knife abruptly split into multiple knives not unlike a kaleidoscope. The cat was able to dodge the throwing knife flying directly toward its back, but not the rest. One of the knives plunged into its neck, and that was the end of the Stranger.

“Not bad!” Ye Qing nodded in satisfaction. The “Star Plucking Hand” was just as powerful as he thought it would be!

Ye Qing walked up to the Rot Eating Cat and got ready to remove his throwing knife when something unexpected happened. Two men rushed into the back alley as if they were looking for something. When they saw Ye Qing, one of them abruptly cried out in surprise and outrage, “What the—how dare you kill Master Six’s pet! Do you have a death wish, boy!?”

“Excuse me?” Ye Qing lifted an eyebrow as he examined the newcomers. The two men looked to be in their thirties. They were burly, fierce, and glaring at Ye Qing like they would swallow him alive.

“Are you deaf? That cat over there is Master Six’s pet, and you just killed it! You are so dead!” One of them yelled.

“Really? There’s someone out there who would want to keep a Rot Eating Cat as a pet? Your ‘Master Six’ must be a wicked soul then,” Ye Qing said indifferently.

The two men stared at him for a second before bursting out in furious laughter. “You must be a newcomer! There aren’t many people in Anyang who have the balls to besmirch Master Six!”

Ye Qing nodded in agreement. “You are correct. I am new, and I’ve never heard of a ‘Master Six’ before. If I may be so bold, who is he?”

“Our master is the one who sees all, hears all, and knows all! He is the omniscient Master Qiao Six!” One of the men declared proudly.

The so-called “omniscient” Master Qiao Six was a famous information broker in Anyang who made a living by trading information. His information network was hundreds of informants strong and spanned across every strata in Anyang. It did not matter if his informant was a beggar, a hooligan, a trader, a footman; an official, a celebrity or a noble, he valued them equally so long as they could supply him with valuable information. There was nothing in Anyang, big or small, that he wasn’t aware of, so the man wasn’t exactly boasting when he called his master omniscient.

“Omniscient, huh? That is quite an impressive title!” Ye Qing replied almost distractedly. The two men did not notice it, but a plan was quickly taking form in his mind.

“Have you finally realized your folly? Unfortunately, it’s too late!” One of them let out a sinister laugh while cracking his knuckles. “You have killed Master Six’s favorite cat and even besmirched his good name. The only way you may atone for your sins is for us to break your limbs and cut out your tongue!”

The burly man threw a punch as soon as he finished. A tiny smirk crossed Ye Qing’s lips, but he did not try to dodge or defend himself against the attack. He allowed the punch to hit him squarely in the chest.

Crack!

There was a loud crack, and the burly man’s face morphed into incredulity and disbelief. An instant later, abject pain surged up from his hand and overwrote his expression.

The burly man was a warrior, an adept Reforged to be exact. His fist packed enough punch to break an ordinary person’s bones like twigs, which was why he thought for sure that his punch was going to cave in the “frail” youngster’s chest. In reality, he felt like he had punched a steel wall. Not only was Ye Qing perfectly unharmed, he was the one who broke his bones from the rebound.

Shit! I underestimated him! The man thought in shock as he hurriedly backed away from Ye Qing. The other man realized the same thing and tried to rush to his companion’s rescue, but he abruptly felt cold brushing against his neck. When he touched the spot and looked, he was chilled to the core to find that his fingers were covered in blood. He looked behind instinctively and found that a throwing knife was embedded in the wall, a tiny smear of blood dripping off the blade bit by bit.

“That’s... my blood!” The burly man gulped audibly, too afraid to move even a muscle. He knew full well he was still alive not because the young man had missed, but because he wasn’t planning on killing him just yet. He might very well change his mind if he continued to struggle futilely!

While the two men hadn’t learned how to become a proper information broker despite following Qiao Six for years, they had mastered his tactfulness and ability to take stock of a situation to perfection. It was why they did not commit the mistake of provoking Ye Qing further.

“I’m curious. What made you think you could fight against me, when I had killed the Rot Eating Cat, a Red-class Stranger all by myself?” Ye Qing asked carelessly. Two adept Reforgeds were nothing to him.

To his surprise, the two men exchanged confused glances with each other before answering, “Red-class Stranger? W-We don’t understand what you’re saying...?”

A Red-class Stranger was the equivalent of a Qi Invoker, and the two men were of course aware of this. However, they didn’t understand why Ye Qing was bringing this up now.

Ye Qing furrowed his brow but relaxed just a second later. Assuming the two men weren’t putting on a world class performance, it would appear that they had no idea that their master’s pet was really a Rot Eating Cat, a Red-class Stranger. They were just Reforgeds, so their ignorance was understandable. Add to the fact that the carcass was mostly bald and missing over half of its tail, and he could see why the two men had failed to recognize even the fact that the cat was a Stranger. They would not have dared to rush over and accuse him of pet murder otherwise.

That said, Ye Qing did not believe for a second that their master, Qiao Six wasn’t aware of the truth.

Ye Qing asked again, “Tell me your names.”

The two men exchanged another glance with each other before the one with a broken hand answered obediently, “I’m Qiao Shanhu [1], and he is Qiao Shanpao [2].”

Neither Qiao Shanhu nor Qiao Shanpao had any clue why a dragon-in-human-skin like Ye Qing had deigned to visit a backwater county like Anyang. The only reason they were even out today was to search for Master Six’s cat, and suddenly, their lives were in grave danger.

It’s all that stupid cat’s fault!

“Take me to this ‘Master Qiao Six’ of yours,” Ye Qing said directly.

“You... you want to meet Master Six?” Both men’s hearts skipped a beat as they exchanged a third glance with each other. *Is he serious? He must know the proverb, “A snake in its turf may yet wrestle a foreign dragon”, right? Is he too young and confident to recognize his folly, or...*

Ye Qing merely cocked his head and smiled. “Sure! I want to know if your master is really as ‘omniscient’ as you claim.”

“...”

A bitter smile crossed the two men’s lips. It did not matter if the young man was an overconfident lamb or a deadly wolf. The fact remained that he wasn’t someone they could trifle with. The only thing they could do until they met Master Six was to do as he demanded, or else.

The two men nodded and were about to move on when suddenly, Ye Qing said, “Oh right, one of you should carry the cat. This would be my first time visiting Master Qiao Six, so I should bring him a gift!”

“...”

You call this a gift? Are you a monster?

Despite their inner thoughts, neither Qiao Shanhu nor Qiao Shanpao dared to voice an objection. They could only pick up the Rot Eating Cat with a disgusted expression before leading Ye Qing back to Qiao Six’s residence.

To Ye Qing's surprise, Qiao Six's residence wasn't far away from Endless Horizons. It was just located on the next street, Rainflower Alley.

Rainflower Alley was one of the most flourishing streets in Anyang. Populated by highly profitable businesses such as restaurants, brothels, gambling dens and more, the only time Rainflower Alley wasn't jam-packed with people was midnight.

Ye Qing had expected Qiao Six's residence to be excessively glamorous just like most of the buildings he had seen on Rainflower Alley, but in reality it looked rather mundane. However, it was by no means an ordinary place. From the moment they stepped on Rainflower Alley, he immediately noticed a few sets of eyes gazing in their direction. The gazes never lingered on them for long, but that was fine, because there were always new observers to pick up the slack.

During the stretch between the street entrance and Qiao Six's residence, he noticed hawkers, waiters, customers, beggars, pedestrians, prostitutes and more examining him with a critical eye. He had no doubt that they were the information broker's informants and sentries. In fact, the closer they got to the residence, the stronger the feeling he was being observed became until finally, he even picked up several tinges of bloodthirst. They all pressed against his skin like sharp knives.

Of course, Ye Qing didn't pay them any heed. He simply smiled and continued toward Qiao Six's residence as if he couldn't feel the aggressive gazes at all!

"Qiao Residence—Longevity and... Prosperity?" Ye Qing squinted at the signboard hanging above the main entrance for a bit before shaking his head. "Who wrote this? It's barely legible!"

"Ahem, it's written by none other than Master Six!" Qiao Shanhu hurriedly said with a cough. To be honest, he thought that the writing was ugly as well, but of course he didn't dare to say a thing about it!

"That said, a doctor's writing is also barely legible, but we all hold it as gospel, do we not?" Ye Qing changed his tune smoothly.

"..." Silver-tongued bastard!

Chapter 55: Qiao Six

Creak...

The group of three had just arrived at the entrance when the doors of the Qiao residence suddenly opened without warning. It would seem that they were expected.

Ye Qing wasn't surprised by this. In fact, he wasn't surprised by what happened next. As soon as they crossed over the threshold, the doors slammed shut behind them, and Qiao Shanhu and Qiao Shanpao abruptly bolted away from him in different directions as if they knew this would happen. The next moment, dozens of men wearing form-fitting outfits and wielding swords and sabers surrounded him from all sides.

"Not bad, not bad! I love how you welcome your guests!" said Ye Qing with a knowing smirk on his face. In fact, he noticed that Qiao Shanhu and Qiao Shanpao had made a number of hand gestures to a few beggars who "happened" to cross their paths a

while ago. He had no doubt that those beggars had passed on a message to Qiao Six, which was why the information broker was able to prepare such a “nice” welcome for him.

The two men believed that Ye Qing hadn’t noticed their petty maneuver, but they were wrong. He hadn’t stopped them simply because he deemed it unnecessary.

Barring the unforeseen, he was certain that no one in this residence possessed the strength to stop him from escaping.

“Guest? You are no guest. Our doors only welcome friends, family, customers, and deities. You are just an outsider who trespassed into our master’s property uninvited; a thief. And there is only one way to treat a thief!”

The leader of the armed group abruptly charged toward Ye Qing and roared, “Kill!”

There are two middle-stage Qi Invokers and five early-stage Qi Invokers. The rest are journeyman or adept Reforgeds!

Ye Qing quickly got the measure of the group while responding to the threat. When the leader brought down his saber, he shifted his feet slightly so that it would pass just centimeters away from his face. Then, he took a step forward and came face to face with the man.

“Good day!”

The leader wasn’t expecting Ye Qing’s speed to put it mildly. The brief surprise was all the young man needed to bump his shoulder against his chest. The next second, the leader flew backward like he was struck by lightning and accidentally bowled over three other men.

Ye Qing wasn’t out of danger yet, however. While he was pushing the leader away from him, two swords thrust at his left arm and right shoulder, and a saber swung at his ankle from a super low angle. They were coming at him from different directions as well. An ordinary warrior would have been mutilated or killed.

But Ye Qing was anything but ordinary. He pushed off the ground gently and floated into the air like a feather, dodging the sword thrusts by a hair’s breadth. Of course, the saber had missed him as well. The three attackers could only watch in horror as Ye Qing flew around them in an unnatural arc and landed deftly on his feet. They hadn’t seen him move, but they all felt a sudden pain in their weapon hand that forced them to let go of their weapons. It was only then they realized that a throwing knife was embedded in their wrists!

After crippling three people in one go, Ye Qing abruptly slackened as if he had used up all of his energy. Sensing an opportunity, the closest attackers to Ye Qing hurriedly closed the distance and swung their weapons. It was a ruse. Ye Qing took one step into the air and abruptly split into multiple copies of himself.

It was near impossible to distinguish who was real and who wasn’t, and the Ye Qings seemed to be escaping in every conceivable direction. When all was said and done, their attacks had missed, and sudden pain had gripped their wrists. Just like the three attackers from before, a throwing knife was embedded in their wrists!

Curiously, the throwing knives were a hair's breadth from hitting an artery, which could've constituted a serious threat to the attackers' lives. The young man had also missed the bones and the tendons and avoided inflicting a wound that could've crippled their arms permanently.

Was it a coincidence?

Or was it intentional?

What happened next stunned everyone who was watching the battle. The copies disappeared, but Ye Qing started darting all over the place like a monkey. Sometimes, he would sprint forward in a straight line and suddenly dash backward as if the laws of physics were fake. Sometimes, the straight line would abruptly turn into an arc or even an S-shaped curve. And sometimes, he would descend from the air like he was planning to flatten an attacker like a pancake only to rise back into the sky.

His movements were so erratic and unpredictable that it was near impossible to react or guard against it, much less mount any sort of effective retaliation. Every time he dashed or flew past an attacker, a throwing knife would suddenly appear in their wrists. Even worse, they now knew it definitely wasn't a coincidence that their wounds were neither life-threatening nor crippling-for-life because all of the throwing knives had landed exactly one millimeter away from the artery and avoided the bones and tendons!

It wasn't long before every attacker in the front yard was neutralized. Clutching their wrists and covered in blood, they all looked as sorry as they could be. On the other hand, the young man who defeated them all was smiling and not even touched by the battle. At that moment, he resembled a mighty celestial of the heavens!

"Does anyone wish to continue this fight?" Ye Qing clasped his hands behind his back and asked with a playful smirk on his face.

"..."

How? With our heads?

Everyone stepped away from Ye Qing at the same time. It wasn't cowardice that drove them to back down. It was the simple, unadulterated fact that there was absolutely nothing they could do against him!

"Master Six would like to speak with you, young warrior."

It was at this moment a man wearing a black outfit and a cold expression stepped out of a building deeper within the residence. He said, "This way, please!"

The cold man didn't even look at his injured allies. After Ye Qing made to follow him, he immediately turned around and led him around the main building toward the back yard.

The man's facial control was excellent, but not his body language. His slightly stiff footsteps and the left hand he had hidden in his sleeve since showing up betrayed his true feelings. *He's probably hiding an elastic sword up his sleeve*, thought Ye Qing after shooting the man's left hand a glance, *a left-handed elastic sword user? I bet his fighting style is pretty backstabby and unorthodox!*

As if sensing Ye Qing's gaze, the cold man slowed down for just an instant and tensed up his muscles. If the young man displayed any abnormal behavior at all, the elastic sword in his sleeve would penetrate his throat in the blink of an eye...

... Or so he would like to tell himself. He was confident in his skills, but he wasn't confident they were enough to kill the young man next to him.

"Heh. My name is Ye Qing. What is yours, brother?" Ye Qing asked.

"Zuo Yiyan!" replied the cold man, but he did not lower his guard as a matter of course.

"A good name!" Ye Qing praised while admiring the exquisite scenery around them. "I'm surprised. Your master's residence looked pretty mundane from the outside, but the inside is a whole different world!"

He was speaking from the heart. Whoever designed the architecture must be a genius. On the outside, the residence paled in contrast to the flamboyant buildings around it to the point where it was almost inconspicuous. But on the inside, there were tall, lush trees and well-trimmed bushes that soothed the eyes, smooth grass and beautiful flowers that added life and vibrance to the surroundings, covered bridges that spanned across certain sections of the residence and enabling a scenic view of the gardens, rooftops with flying eaves that seemed to reach out to the heavens, tasteful corridors that seemed to wind into the unknown and entice its guests to childish exploration, and more. Together, they painted an elegant, poetic picture that seemed to sing at the very soul.

That wasn't all. There was an order in which the elements of the residence were arranged. At first glance, it seemed like there were a bit too many fake hills, bridges, gardens, trees, and winding paths. In reality, it was to create a giant maze. That's right, this whole section of the residence was a maze designed to confuse enemies and uninvited guests alike. Without a guide, most people would not even be able to find their way back to the exit, much less make it to whatever destination they had in mind.

As if that wasn't enough, Ye Qing sensed many guards stationed at both conspicuous and inconspicuous places. He wouldn't say that the defense was airtight—this was a world full of monsters after all—but it was quite impressive.

"Master Six is the architect!" Zuo Yiyan continued to respond tersely as if every word was worth an ounce of gold.

Ye Qing clicked his tongue and said, "Your master's writing is ass, but his designing skills are anything but. He must be a man of culture!"

"..."

Zuo Yiyan didn't know what to say. *Did this guy seriously just disparage Master Six to my face? Does he think I'm deaf, or is he that confident?*

Screw it, I'm just going to play deaf!

Zuo Yiyan also pretended that he was mute. Nothing could go wrong if he heard nothing and said nothing, right?

Many twists and turns later, the duo finally exited the maze and entered a huge clearing. The first thing Ye Qing saw was a massive, sky blue pond with countless lotuses floating on the surface. It was beautiful, but Ye Qing imagined that it would be even more beautiful when it was summer, and the lotuses were in full bloom.

“Please enter the boat, young warrior. Master Six is waiting for you in the pavilion up ahead!” said Zuo Yiyan. After Ye Qing had done as he said, the cold man personally steered the boat toward the pavilion.

Zuo Yiyan’s boat poling skills were excellent. They reached the pavilion quickly and smoothly in no time at all.

The pavilion was octagonal-shaped and tastefully ornamented. Bronze bells were hung beneath each corner so that melodious ringings filled the ears every time there was a breeze.

The pond was beautiful, the pavilion was aesthetic, and the ringings were sublime. Naturally, the pavilion’s name could not be far behind.

“Rainflower Rest, a resting place where the rain falls on a pond of lotuses, is it? Not bad at all!”

“And I am most glad that Boss Ye is a man of culture! This deserves a hearty drink!”

In the pavilion, a middle-aged man in his forties wearing a scholar’s robes rose to his feet. He also had a long, elegant beard that complemented his cultivated appearance perfectly.

Who would’ve thought that this cultured, gentle-looking man who almost looked like a teacher would be the greatest information broker in Anyang, the omniscient Master Qiao Six?

“You know me, Master Six?” Ye Qing hopped off the boat and stepped into the pavilion.

“Please take a seat, Boss Ye!” Qiao Six beckoned for Ye Qing to sit down on the chair on the opposite side of the table before saying, “And yes, of course I’ve heard about you. You are a self-proclaimed scholar who carries a strange frog with you and entered Anyang seven days ago. You bought Endless Horizons, a bookstore that was supposedly haunted for one hundred silvers with Zhao Mu as the broker on the very same day.”

“You spent most of your time indoors, but on the rare occasion you leave the building, you enjoy sunbathing, drinking wine and listening to music. You don’t care for your business, but you are kind and agreeable. You managed to win the affection of your neighbors in just a few days and earn yourself the nickname, ‘Boss Ye!’”

“Haha. I didn’t think that you would investigate a nobody like me so thoroughly. No wonder some people claim that you’re omniscient!” Ye Qing said smilingly. He wasn’t surprised though. The guy wouldn’t be known as the greatest information broker in Anyang if he wasn’t this good.

Qiao Six smiled and accepted a cup of hot tea from his servant girl. A small sip later, he said evenly and amiably, "You say that, but it's clear that I haven't found anything beneath the surface. For example, I never realized that you were a hidden dragon until you defeated my guards without a scratch!"

Ye Qing smirked. "It's not your fault. I'm just a world class actor is all!"

"I can see you're a humorous person, Boss Ye!" responded Qiao Six while barely suppressing a grimace. *This guy just does?not hesitate to use anything you throw him to compliment himself, doesn't he?*

Ye Qing leaned back against his chair and enjoyed a sip of tea. He then said lazily, "Speaking of which, you're not a very good host, are you? I've come to see you with a great gift, but you welcomed me with violence practically the second my foot left the threshold. That isn't very polite, is it?"

Qiao Six smiled calmly. "You heard what my guard said, didn't you? An invited guest is one thing, but an uninvited one, well, it's only natural I would want to gauge your intentions and check if they are good or evil, fortune or misfortune, commanding or imploring, am I right?"

Ye Qing raised an eyebrow. "So, you're saying that it was just a test?"

The middle-aged man replied immediately, "That is correct!"

Chapter 56: Ensnaring An Old Fox

"Okay! I believe you!" Ye Qing said with a smirk. It was true that the group who surrounded him earlier lacked bloodthirst despite the fact that they were brimming with violence. They probably really were just gauging his intentions and of course, his strength. If he wasn't strong enough to overcome the obstacle, then he wasn't qualified to meet Qiao Six.

Besides that, Qiao Six's decision was prompted by Ye Qing's unknown origin. If he could find out exactly when Ye Qing's had entered the county, then of course he knew about the incident at the gates and the fact that he seemed unusually close with Yan Yufei, the current magistrate of Anyang. This one connection alone guaranteed that Qiao Six would not dare to kill him even if he could, which was why he truly believed that the information broker was telling the truth.

"So, what did you find out, Master Six?"

"You haven't shown up at my doorsteps in good will, but you do not bear any malice either. Also, I believe that you require my services!" Qiao Six declared calmly, eyes glimmering with wisdom and experience. He looked like he was perfectly sure of his deduction.

One corner of Ye Qing's lips curled up a little. "You're half-right, but you're also half-wrong!"

"Oh? What did I guess wrong, pray tell?" Qiao Six exclaimed with a hint of surprise and curiosity.

Ye Qing did not keep him on tenterhooks. “You’re wrong about me not carrying good intentions. The main reason I’m here is to make sure that you’ll always be safe and healthy!”

Something flinty flashed in Qiao Six’s eyes, but his tone remained warm and amiable, “I don’t know about that, Boss Ye. A well-intentioned person would not pay someone a visit bearing their dead pet as a gift, would they? Much less a pet that they had murdered with their own two hands?”

A wicked smile spread across Ye Qing’s face. “I can see you’ve misunderstood me. Trust me when I say that what I carried wasn’t a dead pet, but a great gift that you will come to appreciate dearly once I’ve explained everything to you!”

“I am waiting,” Qiao Six responded calmly.

Ye Qing took another sip of tea and wet his throat. It was only then he gave his explanation. “Your cat is a Red-class Stranger called the Rot Eating Cat, and I am sure you know better than me what kind of creature it is. Cunning, vicious, and greedy, there is nothing it enjoys more than killing a human through the Everhungry Worm and cutting open their stomach to feast on both human flesh and rotting food alike!”

.

“Just a while ago, I saved an innocent boy who nearly died because of your cat’s actions, and I am certain he isn’t its first victim.”

“It’s one thing to keep a Stranger, but to raise one that is clearly a danger to humans and allow it to kill as it pleases... well, I shouldn’t need to tell you what would happen if the Pacification Bureau hears about this, do you?”

“Are you threatening me?” Qiao Six abruptly dropped his pleasant demeanor altogether. There was a dead silence as the atmosphere in the pavilion grew increasingly suffocating. “No one threatens me, Boss Ye. I’ve led a long, healthy life, and I can tell you now there is nothing that scares me less and angers me more than threats!”

“You do realize that I can bury you here right here and now if I give the order, right Boss Ye?”

The information broker’s bloodthirst kept growing until it encompassed the entire Rainflower Pavilion like a thick smog.

Ye Qing could not seem to feel his murderous intent, however. Still acting as casual and indifferent as ever, he shot Qiao Six a smile and said, “Nah, I think you’re delusional!”

Ye Qing raised his right foot half an inch before putting it back down on the floor. His movements were gentle, but the pavilion shuddered, and a breeze blew at the bronze bells and caused them to ring melodiously. The breeze would continue to sweep out until the blue waters of the pond rippled incessantly, and the lotuses swayed like tiny green boats atop a moving sea.

The sight was as scenic as it was poetic, but wait, that wasn't the end of the show yet. Soft pops suddenly erupted from the pond bottom, and it sounded like spring thunder welcoming the coming of a new spring. Then—

Glug glug glug!

Bubbles started rising and popping across the whole pond. Then, a plethora of men wearing tight, waterproof outfits burst through the pond surface! Clearly, they were the hidden guards Qiao Six had prepared just in case his negotiations turned sour. Something wasn't right about their condition, however. They didn't look injured, but their complexions were beet red, and they looked like they were having trouble catching their breaths. It was because a shockwave had impacted their internal organs and disrupted the circulation of their vigor. Of course, it was caused by none other than Ye Qing himself.

"You dare!" Zuo Yiyan erupted in anger and tensed up. His clothes billowed without wind, and something cold and sharp peeked out from within his left sleeve. It looked like a viper ready to deal Ye Qing a fatal blow at any moment. Besides that, inconspicuous servant girl who had been serving tea until just now abruptly raised her left arm and caused her water sleeve [1] to circle around her like it had a life of its own. Gone was the beautiful but ordinary woman who had no presence whatsoever, replaced by a murderous celestial ready to rip and kill at a moment's notice.

They were both late-stage Qi Invokers, and they were both experienced killers with a lot of blood on their hands. It was evident from the wash of their auras alone.

The two warriors did not make a move despite their intimidating posture, however. It was because a thread of blood so thin it was almost invisible had appeared around their necks before they knew it. The blood thread looked frail enough to break at the slightest touch, but both of them had a feeling that it would sever their neck like nothing if they dared to attack Ye Qing.

Even if they were successful in escaping decapitation, their senses were warning them that some sort of unknown, invisible danger was lurking around them. In this case, they were absolutely right. If they were at the Vessel Augmentation stage just like Ye Qing, they would notice that formless, shapeless Blood Shadows had been swimming throughout the Rainflower Pavilion this whole time!

"Relax. I noticed your men had been submerged in the waters for a bit, and I was worried that one of them might suffocate to death. That is why I encouraged them to catch their breaths so to speak!" Ye Qing explained with a bright smile while a wisp of red danced nimbly between his fingers like a piece of silken fabric.

For a time, the atmosphere was so suffocating one could barely breathe. Then, Qiao Six started laughing all of a sudden, "Haha! Hahaha! Impressive, Boss Ye! I dare say that I am most impressed by your skill!"

Qiao Six couldn't quite control the shock within his pupils, but his smile was firmly affixed to his face as he said, "You're a businessman just like me, so I'm sure you understand that violence is most undesirable when pursuing a long-lasting business relationship. Come, let's enjoy another cup of tea!"

“Heh. In fact, you are completely right about my motivations, but I noticed that you needed a little... encouragement to notice my sincerity. Do forgive me for resorting to such a crude method!”

Ye Qing accepted the teacup smilingly and blew at its surface. He continued after taking a small sip, “Your pet is an evil creature who loves to kill, Master Six. At this rate, it’s only a matter of time before it implicates its owner. With that in mind, killing it before the worst happens can only be a good thing, am I right? I personally think it’s one of the best gifts one can receive. What do you think?”

Qiao Six stretched his lips into a smile. “Now that you mentioned it, it is a great gift. I thank you for doing me such a huge favor.”

Ye Qing pshawed and waved him away. “You’re welcome, but it’s unnecessary. I’m just a kind-hearted soul who can’t help but do good upon others!”

“Hahaha!” Qiao Six let out a hearty laugh before sighing. “I should’ve been more vigilant. If not for you, I would not have realized that that damn monster would dare to harm innocents while I wasn’t looking. I would’ve found myself an unwitting murderer if not for you, so once again, thank you!”

Ye Qing smiled. He knew that Qiao Six would insist that he knew nothing about the Rot Eating Cat’s actions, but he did not expose the lie because it benefited no one. He was here to establish a business relationship with Qiao Six. He wasn’t going to earn any favors if he kept bashing the older man’s face with the truth, no matter how satisfying it might be.

“You flatter me, Master Six. Anyway, I believe we are pretty well acquainted with each other at this point. Would you like to be my friend?”

Qiao Six looked overjoyed at the offer. “But of course! Haha! Trust me, there is no way I’m passing on a friend like you! But oh, please don’t call me Master Six in that case. That is not an appellation that should be used between friends. How about you call me Brother Six, Boss Ye?”

Ye Qing went with the flow. “Sure! On that note, you may call me Joyless!”

“Joyless? What a poetic name!” Qiao Six praised. “Today is turning out to be a most pleasant day, Joyless. Why don’t we celebrate our new friendship with a drink?”

“I will hold you to that, brother, but not today!” Ye Qing said smilingly. “I said earlier you were half-wrong and half-right. In fact, I have come to request your services!”

Qiao Six didn’t look surprised. He seemed aware that the conversation was going to take this turn. “Do not use the word ‘request’, Joyless. We are friends, no, brothers now. I will do anything to help you... as long as it is within my ability to help, of course!”

Ye Qing’s smile widened. “Don’t worry, all I ask is for you to do what you do best: gather information.”

“Very good!”

Ye Qing glanced at Zuo Yiyan and the servant girl and said, “If we can have some privacy...”

Qiao Six immediately looked at his subordinates and commanded, “Yiyan, Hong Yu, wait at the boat for the moment!”

“As you command!” Zuo Yiyan and the servant girl, Hong Yu immediately retreated to the boat. Not only that, Zuo Yiyan had steered the boat until they were about six meters away from the pavilion. It was just far enough that they couldn’t eavesdrop on the conversation, but close enough that they could rush to their master’s rescue should it turn out to be necessary!

“My apologies, brother. I would prefer to keep my business between the two of us,” Ye Qing said apologetically.

Qiao Six was perfectly fine with the arrangement. “I understand. Some secrets must remain a secret for the sake of everyone!”

“I’m glad we have an accord.” Ye Qing went straight to the point. “I want you to tell me everything you know about the Zheng Clan!”

This was why he had gone through all this trouble and even overlooked the crimes committed by his murderous cat. It was because he wished to gather information on the Zheng Clan. As the greatest information broker in Anyang, Qiao Six had to know the Zheng Clan like the back of his hand. No one’s information was more reliable than his, not to mention that he did not have to spend a single silver for the information since they were “friends” now. It would also save him the trouble of having to spy on the Zheng Clan himself.

He could be hardworking if he wanted to, but he was generally a lazy person. Since the opportunity had fallen into his lap, he would be damned if he passed it by!

“Zheng Clan? *The* Zheng Clan of Anyang? The one that is commanded by Zheng Feng?” Qiao Six exclaimed in surprise.

Ye Qing countered, “Is there another Zheng Clan in Anyang?”

Qiao Six scrunched up his eyebrows in puzzlement. “But why are you looking into the Zheng Clan? They’re not a family to be trifled with, you know?”

Ye Qing raised his eyebrows as if surprised that Qiao Six would ask such a question. Then, his lips spread into a positively diabolical smile. “Why, it’s because I’m plotting to destroy them and kill their patriarch, Zheng Feng, of course! Would you like to hear more, brother?”

“...”

For a time, Qiao Six was utterly speechless. Then, he let out a bitter chuckle and said, “Since the day I started my business, I’ve always obeyed one and only one personal rule: I never ask my customers why they want their information. It’s because I know that it would bring me endless trouble. I’ve never broken this rule until now, and it is thanks to it that I managed to become the biggest information broker in Anyang, and survive to this age!”

“Today is the first day I ever indulged in my curiosity, and to think that it would be my undoing! Joyless, oh Joyless, how can you ensnare your brother so?”

Ye Qing let out a mirthful chuckle. “But brother, I didn’t ensnare you. You’re the one who wanted to know the answer!”

It was a lie, of course. From the moment he heard of Qiao Six’s existence, he had been plotting to bind the information broker to his ship somehow. If he bought information from Qiao Six normally, and something were to happen to the Zheng Clan, the information broker would figure that he was the one behind the incident instantly. If Qiao Six decided to expose the truth to protect himself or earn the Zheng Clan’s favor, then he would be put on the back foot and even met with a life-threatening crisis.

This was why he didn’t want them to be business partners. No, he wanted them to be accomplices. Qiao Six would be the insider supplying him with the information necessary to kick the Zheng Clan’s teeth in, and he would be doing the kicking.

It was too late for Qiao Six to change his mind already. From the moment he learned about Ye Qing’s motive, their fates were intertwined like two grasshoppers that were tied to the same rope. If Ye Qing went down, he was going down as well. He might still be able to survive—he was one of Anyang’s most valuable assets after all—but his status would plummet, his life would be ruined, and Ye Qing was going to kill him right here and now if he dared to say no.

Qiao Six was a wise man. He might have rejected Ye Qing if he hadn’t witnessed the young man’s prowess earlier, but he had, so he knew that the best he could hope for should conflict break out was a pyrrhic victory. And what kind of idiot would bet on a pyrrhic victory where his own life was on the line?

Plus, there *was* a way out for him, and that was cooperating with Ye Qing and giving him what he wanted. No one would know about his involvement if they both kept their mouths shut. He wasn’t going to say anything as a matter of course, and Ye Qing sure as hell wasn’t going to make things more difficult for himself. For better or worse, it was business as usual.

From Ye Qing’s point of view, this matter was settled from the moment he determined Qiao Six’s character. The information broker was a shrewd, self-serving man. He would give him everything he wanted *and* keep his secret.

Chapter 57: Yan Feng Visits

“Oh, so it’s my fault? I knew I should’ve kept my mouth shut.”

Qiao Six was a wise man. He figured out Ye Qing’s scheme as soon as he revealed his objective. What was done could not be undone, so the only thing he could do now was to see it through until the end.

Plus, it wasn’t like Ye Qing was asking him to do the impossible. The young man only wanted him to keep his secret, and a man of his trade naturally hoarded plenty of secrets. One more wouldn’t kill him.

Besides that, he stood to profit from the Zheng Clan’s demise as well. Assuming that Ye Qing succeeded in his endeavor, he would be first in line to partake in the cake that was the Zheng Clan’s businesses and connections. It would also earn him the trust—not this fake relationship they had now, but real trust—a young man with a promising future. All things considered, it was a win-win situation for both of them.

It wasn't hard for Qiao Six to come to a decision after he had sorted out his thoughts. "You've put me in hot enough waters already, so I won't ask why you want to kill Zheng Feng. Now then, about the information you requested. The patriarch of the Zheng Clan is Zheng Feng, and he is a middle-stage Vessel Augmentor. He is an expert in palm techniques, and he is most known for a forceful and potent palm art, the 'Boundless Lightning Palm'. Zheng Feng has two younger brothers, and they are both in the late-stage of the Qi Invocation stage. They are... He also has six keepers, and they are..."

Qiao Six truly was the greatest information broker in Anyang. It was impressive enough that he was able to recite all this information from memory, but Ye Qing was willing to bet that he knew the Zheng Clan better than the Zheng Clan themselves. He was able to tell him Zheng Feng and his keepers' cultivation level, martial arts, characteristics, and personality traits, where the guards were located and when they changed shifts and more.

"The Zheng Clan was one of the strongest forces in Anyang until they lost a dozen or so elites, five elders, and their two scions, Zheng Tianyuan and Zhen Tianqi half a month ago. The Zheng Clan might have collapsed already if Zheng Feng wasn't still around," Qiao Six said while shooting Ye Qing a meaningful glance.

Ye Qing answered smilingly, "That's right! I'm the one who killed those people!"

"..."

I didn't even ask anything this time! Are you a monster?

"Joyless... For heavens' sake..."

Ye Qing shrugged and said innocently, "What? I thought you wanted to know since you were giving me looks earlier!"

And he pins the blame on me, again.

A bitter, helpless smile crossed Qiao Six's lips. When was the last time he got screwed over by a youngster like Ye Qing? Both his mind and his strength were top-notch.

"That said, a lean camel is still bigger than a horse. The Zheng Clan might have suffered a massive decline as of late, but that doesn't mean they're an easy foe by any means. I would advise the greatest caution if you truly wish to take them out, Joyless!"

"Don't worry, brother. You just sit tight and wait for the good news!" Ye Qing nodded obediently.

What the hell? Now he makes it sound like I'm the one who ordered him to kill Zheng Feng and destroy the Zheng Clan!

Qiao Six was normally a steady man, but for a second there he felt seriously tempted to wring the young man by his neck.

Ye Qing rose to his feet and said, I think I've heard everything I need to hear, so I shall be taking my leave. I'll take you up on your offer when I'm free, Brother Six!"

“Anytime!” Qiao Six smiled and rose to his feet as well. “Allow me to see you off!”

“It’s fine, brother. I’m sure you have better things to do!”

Ye Qing darted out of the Rainflower Pavilion like a swift after he was finished. He planted one foot on a lotus and caused it to wobble a little, but there wasn’t enough movement to cause a ripple on the pond water. When he leaped again, his back rapidly shrank into a small dot in the distance. Before he disappeared, he gave Qiao Six a wave and said loudly, “Thank you for everything! Be sure to keep my secret, brother!”

“What incredible movement art!” Qiao Six could not help but praise out loud. At the same time, he grew even more certain that his decision to befriend Ye Qing was the right choice.

Zuo Yiyan and Hong Yu returned to the pavilion after Ye Qing was gone. Zuo Yiyan asked, “Master Six, Ye Qing is rude and provocative. Why didn’t you give us the order to kill him? If we all work together...”

Qiao Six replied indifferently, “It won’t work.”

Hong Yu giggled and smiled like a blooming flower. She had dropped her act completely since they were alone. “How many people in Anyang can handle the three of us at once? Ten? Five?”

Most people did not know this, but Qiao Six was a Vessel Augmentor and one of the strongest warriors in Anyang. It was why he was able to establish himself as the greatest information broker in the county. He would’ve been dethroned a long time ago if he didn’t have the strength to defend his status.

Qiao Six smiled. “You are right, but that young man... he’s probably among the handful you speak of.”

“Seriously?” Zuo Yiyan exclaimed in surprise.

Qiao Six shot both of his aides a look before sighing. “Not only that, I believe we are overestimating ourselves. Judging from everything he has showed us so far, I’m pretty sure that we’re the ones who would die had we attacked him.”

Zuo Yiyan and Hong Yu couldn’t see the Blood Shadows because their cultivation level was too low, but not him. To say that he was worried about the strange apparitions would be an understatement. Combined with a top-tier movement art that allowed him to come and go as he pleased, he just could not imagine them defeating Ye Qing even in the best case scenario.

“Master Six!” Hong Yu covered her mouth in surprise. “He’s just a brat! Are you sure you haven’t misjudged him?”

“Misjudge him? How do you misjudge someone who’s obviously a dragon?” Qiao Six looked at the sky and said slowly, “He might not have reached his full potential yet, and he’s currently holed up in this backwater county, but that doesn’t mean he is weak whatsoever. When the day comes where the dragon finally rises to the

heavens... Just watch. Anyang is probably going to be turned upside down in the near future!"

A long silence later, Qiao Six turned serious and ordered, "Ye Qing's origin is a mystery, but he's already a Vessel Augmentor at his age, and a shrewd and decisive man to boot. He is also acquainted with Yan Yufei. Assuming that he doesn't fall before he realizes his full potential, a man like him can only be destined for a bright future. All things considered, it is far wiser to have him as a friend than an enemy."

"Inform the men that they will strive to treat Ye Qing with the utmost respect. In fact, I want them to treat him as respectfully as they would treat me. Also, be sure to tell them everything that has happened in this residence today stays in this residence. If anyone dares to break the rule, you have my permission to break their limbs, sever the tendons, and cripple them permanently. There will be no leniency!"

Zuo Yiyan and Hong Yu exchanged a glance with each other before nodding solemnly. "As you command!"

"Oh right, what were you discussing with Boss Ye?" Hong Yu suddenly asked.

Qiao Six shot her a glance before answering, "It is best you do not know about this. It will be better if you never indulge in your curiosity again."

"Remember this, Hong Yu. Some secrets can and will kill you!"

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"Still nothing?"

Inside the county hall, Yan Yufei was looking up from his table and staring at his subordinates with a weary look on his face. He was also nursing a headache with one hand.

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Yan Feng and Yang Guan shook their heads. The two men were currently standing at the center of the room. They were wearing bailiff outfits and carrying Yanling sabers around their waist.

The atmosphere grew increasingly heavy as Yan Yufei questioned in a stern voice, "The serial murder has been happening for three days straight, and you're telling me you've found *nothing* at all? You haven't awakened your inner sloths, have you?"

Yan Feng replied with a bitter expression, "Of course not. It's just that this case is no ordinary case. None of the victims are related to one another, the locations are all over the place, there is no discernible pattern whatsoever, and not a clue could be found at the crime scenes. Forget finding a clue, we know absolutely nothing besides the fact that murders have been happening seemingly randomly throughout Anyang."

"In fact... I strongly suspect that these murders were committed not by a human, but a Stranger, my lord!"

"Tell me why," Yan Yufei commanded.

Yan Feng took a moment to organize his thoughts before answering, "All kinds of people have been killed so far. There were commoners, hooligans, traders, nobles and more. The way they died is ridiculously varied as well. Some people were missing their eyes, some people had their ears cut out, and some literally had their hearts dug out of their chests."

"Let us pretend that the murderer is a human for a moment. Is it realistic that there exists someone out there who has a beef with so many people across multiple stratas? Even if there is, why would they go through the trouble of mutilating the bodies in so many different ways? It's not only unnecessary, it drastically increases the chance that the murderer might leave something behind and expose themselves!"

"Speaking of which, we weren't able to find anything at the crime scenes at all. It's so clean that, assuming the murderer is a human, it can only be committed by a master of martial arts. However, what kind of master would suddenly murder a whole bunch of innocents without reason? No matter how I think about it, a Stranger is the most likely culprit behind this serial murder!"

"If a Stranger is behind this, then we should hand this case over to the Pacification Bureau!" Yang Guan suggested.

Although the Pacification Bureau and the administrative divisions were both government institutions of Chu, their functions were very different from each other. The Pacification Bureau was responsible for handling all Stranger-related and supernatural incidents within a certain territory. They were also responsible for large cases that were beyond the ability of the administrative division to handle. The administration division was responsible for collecting taxes, keeping the public order, and handling a number of social and livelihood issues such as apprehending mundane criminals and so on.

As a result, most cases went through the administrative division first before they were escalated to the Pacification Bureau. For example, if a theft had taken place at a person's residence, or if an armed brawl had broken out on a street, then the administrative division would handle it directly. But if they discovered that a Stranger was involved with the case, then they would escalate it to the Pacification Bureau.

"It's not that simple!" Yan Yufei grimaced and massaged his forehead harder. "We don't have any evidence that these murders are, in fact, committed by a Stranger. It's one thing if the culprit really is a Stranger, but if we're wrong, then our abilities will be brought into question!"

It had only been days since he became the magistrate of Anyang. If he screwed up, his peers would scorn him, his subordinates would look down on him, and the people would distrust him. The moment he gave off the impression that he was incompetent—never mind that the truth was the complete opposite—both his career and his future would be in extreme jeopardy.

“But there *is* a simple solution to this problem, my lord!” Yang Guan suddenly spoke up. Yan Feng stared at him as if he could not believe that his simple-minded subordinate had just contradicted the magistrate openly. He rebuked,

“Shut it, Yang Guan!”

Yang Guan shrugged. “I’m serious!”

Yan Yufei smiled a little before asking curiously, “Okay, I’ll bite. What is this solution, Yang Guan?”

The young guard declared, “We just need to ask Joyless! He’s an expert in Strangers, isn’t he? He’ll know if a Stranger has killed those people! Also, if the Stranger turned out to be easier than expected, we can take it out ourselves before reporting the incident to the Pacification Bureau. That’ll show those high-and-mighty bastards that we don’t always have to rely on them!”

“...”

Yan Yufei and Yan Feng exchanged a shocked glance with each other. Yang Guan... was right! How could they have forgotten about Joyless?

“Do you know where Joyless is right now, Yang Guan?” Yan Yufei asked. This serial murder had practically smacked him as soon as he became Anyang’s magistrate, so he was so busy he could barely afford the time to sleep, much less find out where Ye Qing was living right now.

Yang Guan nodded. “Yep! Joyless bought the Endless Horizons at Rainflower Alley a few days ago. He’s now the owner of a bookstore!”

“Endless Horizons? But I thought the place was haunted?” Yan Feng blurted instinctively before answering his own question with a bitter smile, “What am I saying? There is no way a mere ghost can threaten someone of Joyless’ abilities.”

“We have a plan then. Yan Feng, Yang Guan, you will visit Joyless and request his aid with this case immediately!” Yan Yufei instructed.

“At once!” Yan Feng and Yang Guan took off into a brisk run as soon as they left the county hall.

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was lying on his recliner and basking in the sun outside Endless Horizons as usual. He yawned while wondering what would be the best time to leave the county and reap some juicy, juicy Bloodsucking Mosquitoes.

“Joyless!” “Joyless!”

His daydream popped like a bubble when two familiar voices entered his ears. He opened his eyes and shot his acquaintances a bright smile. “Brother Yan, Yang Guan! I wasn’t expecting to see you two. Shouldn’t you be working on a serial murder right now?”

Chapter 58: General of Punishment

“You look like you have a lot of free time in your hands, Joyless!” Yang Guan voiced his envy before plopping down on the doorsteps of Endless Horizons. “By the way, how did you know that we’re investigating a serial murder?”

Ye Qing poured both men a cup of wine as he replied, “The entire county is talking about the serial murders right now, and the black circles around your eyes are so thick I wouldn’t be surprised if you told me that you haven’t slept at all. It’s elementary, my friends.”

“Well, you’re right. That is why we’ve come today!” Yang Feng said with a sigh.

Ye Qing joked, “You don’t think I’m the murderer, do you?”

“Of course not! We’re here to ask for your help!”

“What? But how?” Ye Qing cocked his head to one side. “I don’t have a clue how to solve a case.”

Yan Feng explained, “It’s like this. We’ve been investigating this serial murder for three days straight, but we weren’t able to find a single clue. Since you’re a scholar with extensive knowledge regarding Strangers, we’d like to ask your help to verify if these murders were committed by a human or a Stranger.”

“I see!” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. He also realized that Yan Feng and his men must’ve completely run out of ideas on how to continue the investigation or stop the murders, or they would not have come to a civilian like him. He nodded. “Very well, I shall lend you a hand. But please don’t be unhappy with me if I fail to produce any results, okay?”

A delighted Yan Feng shook his head firmly. “Of course not! We feel sorry enough that we have to trouble you to perform our duty!”

“Glad to hear that. Now, let’s move!”

Ye Qing rose to his feet, carried the recliner back into the bookstore and locked the doors. Then, he called out from beneath the stairs, “I need to leave for a bit, Brother Frog. Please watch over the bookstore while I’m gone!”

“Croak!” Kung Fu Frog responded from above. He could also hear a peal of childish laughter.

“Huh? Is that a child’s laughter I just heard? I thought you live alone, Joyless,” Yang Guan asked curiously while walking up to Ye Qing.

Ye Qing smiled. “She’s a friend. I’ll introduce her to you when you’re free!”

“Sure!” Yang Guan agreed with a chuckle.

The trio began walking back to the county hall. The county hall was just two streets away from Endless Horizons, so the trio arrived at their destination in just a short time. Yan Yufei was already waiting for them at the entrance with a wide smile on his face. The middle-aged man remained as

friendly and polite as ever even though he was now a magistrate. They exchanged pleasantries for a bit before heading straight for the mortuary.

There were at least ten bodies in the mortuary, and the sheer amount of yin energy they discharged made Ye Qing feel like he had stepped into a freezer. If this was anywhere else, the suffocating amount of yin energy in the building would have converted the bodies into Yin Puppets, Zombies or other yin-type Strangers in no time. The reason they hadn't was because the walls, beams and other key locations of the mortuary were engraved with golden runes meant to suppress the transformation.

This method of body preservation was excellent not just because it prevented the corpses from turning, but also halted the decaying process. Its only flaw was that it was cold as hell, which was hardly an issue for the warriors.

"Please take a look, Joyless!" said Yan Yufei after leading Ye Qing to a group of bodies.

Ye Qing counted six bodies in total. The first body was a middle-aged woman with a thin face that gave her a sharp, unkind appearance. Her mouth was wide open, and her face was clearly contorted into an expression of terror. Her tongue had been severed from the roots.

The second body was a portly woman clad in luxurious, well-tailored clothes. She could only come from a wealthy family. Her heart had been dug out of her chest.

The third body was a young man in his twenties. His muscular, well-proportioned body indicated that he was a martial arts practitioner of sort. He was missing both of his hands.

The fourth body was an old man with gray white hair and a face that seemed unusually lecherous for some reason. His eyes had been dug out of their sockets.

The fifth body was a beautiful woman in her late twenties. He could smell a faint waft of perfume from her body, and her clothes were rather disheveled and revealing. She was probably a prostitute. Her ears had been cut clean off the head.

The sixth and final body belonged to that of a huge man. He was tall, massive, and wearing a fierce scowl even in death. He was obviously a fierce, aggressive man when he was still alive. He was missing his legs.

"Can you give me a brief summary of their profiles?" Ye Qing examined them all closely before asking the question.

Yang Guan immediately responded, "The middle-aged woman is called Liu Xiaolian. She was a washerwoman who washed clothes for a living. She was a harsh, sharp-tongued woman who loved nothing more than to argue with her neighbors and sowed discord between people."

"The portly woman is called Chen Cuihong. She was a songstress in Swallow's Nest, a brothel until she was redeemed by a Landlord Zhou. She is an exceptionally jealous woman who has turned the Zhou family upside down since she was taken in as a concubine."

"The young man is called Feng Two. He was a known pickpocket."

“The old man is called Sun Suo. He was a picklock with no children to his name. He was lazy, addicted to alcohol, and had the vulgar habit of peeping on women.”

“The young woman was called Yan Hong. She was the jewel of Smoke and Rain, another brothel.”

“The last person is called Zhang Pao. He’s a hooligan who loves nothing more than the brawl!”

Ye Qing was deep in thought and rubbing his nose unconsciously as he processed the information. Yan Feng added, “The victims all came from different backgrounds, and they all suffered different forms of mutilation. We were unable to identify any pattern or even locate a single clue despite three days of non-stop investigation. We wouldn’t even classify this as a serial murder if they hadn’t all died in the same fashion!”

“No, I do think there is a pattern!” Ye Qing said all of a sudden.

“Really? Pray tell!” Everyone’s eyes lit up as Yan Yufei urged.

“There’s no rush. Have you compiled the victims’ profile and whereabouts prior to their murder? Can I take a look at the documents?”

“We do! It’s in the archives!” Yang Guan replied and looked to Yan Yufei for permission. He then ran to the archives, gathered everything Ye Qing had requested, and brought it back to the young man.

Ye Qing accepted the documents and skimmed through the pages quickly. It wasn’t long before he shut the document and declared, “It is as I thought!”

“So? What did you find, Joyless?” Yan Yufei asked again.

Ye Qing set down the document before answering Yan Yufei’s questions, “At first glance, these victims seem to share no commonalities with each other, and the way their bodies are mutilated are completely different as well. But if you look closer, you may discover why the murderer had killed them and mutilated their body in a specific way.”

“I’ll start from the beginning. Liu Xiaolian was a harsh, sharp-tongued person who enjoyed sowing discord between people. It was why the murderer cut off the tongue. According to the document, Chen Cuihong was such a jealous-ridden woman that she went so far as to murder a servant girl who was prettier than her. It was why the murderer dug out her heart.”

“Feng Two was a thief, and a thief relies on their hands to steal and feed themselves. That was why the murderer cut off his arms. Sun Suo had the vulgar habit of peeping on women, so the murderer dug out his eyes. Yan Hong was a habitual eavesdropper who enjoyed collecting dirty secrets and using them to blackmail or besmirch her victims’ reputation, so the murderer cut off her ears. Finally, Zhang Pao was a frequent brawler with a strong preference for kicking because he possessed a pair of

strong legs, and he especially enjoyed kicking his victims until they were crippled. That was why the murderer cut off his legs."

"In summary, the one who sowed discord lost her tongue, the jealous one lost her heart, the thief lost his hands, the peeping tom lost his eyes, the eavesdroppers lost her ears, and the leg brawler lost his legs... what is this if not a pattern?"

"You... you're right!" Everyone exclaimed in surprise and realization. It seemed so obvious now that Ye Qing had stated it out clearly.

Yan Yufei mulled over the revelation for a moment before asking, "Do you know who's the murderer then, Joyless? Is it a human, or a Stranger?"

"It's a Stranger!" Ye Qing declared.

"And how do you know that?"

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"Because my instincts said so!" Ye Qing declared matter-of-factly.

"..."

That doesn't sound like a particularly convincing argument...

Ye Qing ignored their dubious gazes and continued, "Of course, it's not all instinct. I have one piece of evidence to support my claim."

"Evidence? You have evidence, and you've been keeping us in suspense all this time?"

Yang Guan complained in an impatient tone. "Just tell us already, man!"

Ye Qing chuckled. "Fine, fine. I once read about a folk tale in a book. It said that Shing Wong, the City God commands two judges who were responsible for martial and civil duties, and four generals who were responsible for rewarding good, punishing evil, detaining souls, and suppressing ghosts respectively."

"Of the four generals, the General of Punishment, Gan Liu is especially embittered against evil. He has two heads, four eyes and six arms. One hand determines good, and the other judges evil. He wields an axe, a hatchet, a sword, a saber, a hook, and a fork with his four arms. If he encounters a sower of discord, he would rip out their tongues with his hook. If he encounters a malicious, jealous person, then he would pluck out their hearts with his fork. If he encounters a thief or a gambler, then he would cut off their hands with his sword. If he encounters a peeping tom or an eavesdropper, then he would sever their ears or their eyes with his saber. So on and so on..."

"Does that not sound very similar to the way the victims were mutilated?"

“It is!” Yan Yufei nodded but hesitated for a moment. “But still, it’s just a folk tale. We can’t possibly use it as evidence.”

“And I would agree. But how can you explain the fact that they’ve all visited the Shing Wong temple located to the east of the county recently?” Ye Qing declared with a flourish. “In any case, we simply need to visit the Shing Wong temple to know if I’m right!”

“Wait, what? They’ve all visited the Shing Wong temple prior to their deaths?” Yan Yufei exclaimed in shock. When he grabbed the document on the table and read it closely, he discovered that Ye Qing was right. They had missed it because the time the victims visited the Shing Wong temple were all different.

Yan Feng and Yang Guan looked over Yan Yufei’s shoulders for a moment before exchanging mortified looks with each other. They were both professional bailiffs, and yet a novice had outdone them in this department. How embarrassing!

Of course, it wasn’t completely their fault. Countless people visited the Shing Wong temple everyday, but only a handful of bad people were murdered for their crimes. It was why the two bailiffs had subconsciously overlooked this.

“Well, we know what to do now. Prepare to head to Shing Wong temple immediately,” Yan Yufei ordered after taking a moment to sort out his thoughts.

“At once!” Yan Feng and Yan Guan received their orders and left.

By preparations, Yan Yufei meant rounding up the bailiffs. There was strength in numbers after all. By the time Ye Qing and Yan Yufei arrived at the county hall entrance, at least thirty armed men in red-and-black uniforms were already standing in formation and waiting for orders. Once Yan Yufei had given the command, the sizable force immediately departed for Shing Wong temple.

The Shing Wong temple was located to the east of Anyang, the direction where the sun rose. It was also the only Shing Wong temple in the entire county, which was why it was packed with people almost everyday!

Unfortunately, the great nation of Chu did not worship deities, and it rarely appointed a deity to supervise a territory such as a mountain god to watch over a mountain, an agent of the underworld to govern the dead of a city, and so on. As a result, the Shing Wong temple was just that, a temple. Despite its numerous worshippers, a deity was never born in the temple.

Yan Yufei ordered the men to remove the worshippers after they had arrived at their destination. Once done, the group began their investigation while Ye Qing and Yan Yufei headed straight for the main hall.

Chapter 59: Shing Wong Statue

In ancient times, Shing Wong was a very popular faith. Depending on the territory, the people either worshiped the Civil Shing Wong or the Martial Shing Wong. The one in this temple was the Martial Shing Wong.

The Shing Wong statue set at the main hall was tall, huge, and fearsome. He carried a long saber.

Yan Yufei wasted no time in searching every nook and cranny of the main hall as soon as he entered the building. However, he couldn't even find a portrait of the General of Punishment, much less a statue of the deity. After returning to Ye Qing's side, he discovered that the young man was staring closely at the Shing Wong statue for some reason. Thinking that the young man had found something, he asked hurriedly, "How's it going, Joyless?"

"Hmm? Oh, this statue is pretty impressive!"

Yan Yufei: "... *That's not what I meant.*

"I mean, did you find anything, Joyless?"

"Oh. No, I haven't found anything yet, but no worries. Let's take this one step at a time!" said Ye Qing with a shake of his head. He then clasped his hands behind his back and walked leisurely around the main hall like he was a tourist.

"We found nothing, my lord!"

"We didn't find anything either, my lord!"

It wasn't long before the bailiffs Yan Yufei had sent off to scour the entire temple came to report that they did not find anything resembling the General of Punishment. There was no statue, no portrait, nothing.

"Was your deduction wrong after all, Joyless?" Yan Yufei said doubtfully after hearing his men's reports.

"Is that so?" Ye Qing frowned a little but gave the magistrate a careless shrug. "Don't worry. Just because we didn't find anything now doesn't mean we won't find something later. Please give me a moment!"

His response caught Yan Yufei off guard, but the young man was already leaving before he could ask what exactly he meant by that.

After Ye Qing went to a secluded corner, he took out the Annon Sutra and bit open his finger. He asked while dripping his blood on the vellum, "Where is the General of Punishment hiding?"

Ye Qing was certain that the culprit behind the serial murder was the General of Punishment, and that the deity was hiding somewhere within this temple. Just because they couldn't find him didn't mean he wasn't here!

The General of Punishment might prove to be too elusive to the bailiffs, but not him. After all, he was the man with the Annon Sutra! When in doubt, just ask the Annon Sutra!

"I've encountered a troublesome problem. I have identified the murderer behind the recent serial murder and even chased it to its lair, but the deity has proven to be more elusive than expected. Yan Yufei and the others are already beginning to doubt my judgment. Whatever shall I do to prove that I was right?"

The droplets of blood transformed into rows and rows of words. The Annon Sutra was the same as ever.

“Perhaps the Shing Wong statue would give me some clues. I feel that something is odd about it!”

“Something’s odd with the Shing Wong statue?” Ye Qing muttered with a frown. He had been staring at the statue since he entered the main hall, but he hadn’t noticed anything wrong with it at all.

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That said, the Annon Sutra was never wrong even though it refused to give him a straight answer. If it said that something was wrong with the Shing Wong statue, then it must be wrong!

Ye Qing put away the Annon Sutra and went back to the main hall. When he rounded a corner, he saw Yan Yufei pacing back and forth in front of the Shing Wong statue. His expression was calm, but his movements betrayed just how anxious he really felt.

Yan Yufei’s eyes lit up when he saw Ye Qing again. He immediately walked up to the young man and asked, “Did you find anything, Joyless?”

“In fact, I did!” Ye Qing replied honestly.

“Wonderful! Tell me now!” Yan Yufei exclaimed in pleasant surprise.

Ye Qing pretended to be suave and pointed his chin at the tall and imposing Shing Wong statue behind Yan Yufei. He then said in a serious tone, “There’s something wrong with this statue!”

“What’s wrong with it?” Yan Yufei asked while turning around and staring at the statue as well.

“I can’t say for sure, but it’s been triggering my sixth sense since I entered this place!” Ye Qing answered. The Annon Sutra was never wrong, so it was simply a matter of leaving it up to the professionals to find out exactly what was wrong with it.

Yan Yufei didn’t say anything. While he wasn’t too pleased with Ye Qing’s reply, he could not deny that a person’s sixth sense could be extremely accurate. This was especially true when investigating a case. It was folly to rely on one’s instincts to guide them, but it was equally folly to ignore it completely!

It was at this moment Yang Guan entered the main hall. When he noticed that Ye Qing and Yan Yufei were staring at the Shing Wong statue, he shot it a look and sighed admiringly, “Man, this statue is huge!”

Suddenly, Yan Yufei perked up and spun on Yang Guan. “What did you just say, Yang Guan?”

The magistrate’s outburst surprised Yang Guan, of course. His first instinct was that he had said something to displease his superior, it wasn’t like he could refuse to answer. So, he forced himself to respond, “I said, this statue is huge. W-What’s wrong?”

“That’s it!” Yan Yufei clapped his hands in delight. “Joyless mentioned that something is wrong with the Shing Wong statue just now, and when I took a closer look I too found myself agreeing with him, though the answer refused to leave the tip of my tongue until you showed me the light, Yang Guan!”

“What is it?” Yang Guan asked helpfully. Ye Qing was also leaning forward and waiting patiently for Yan Yufei to give his explanation.

“This Shing Wong statue is huge alright. In fact, it is far too big!” Yan Yufei began slowly. “When I left my home to broaden my horizons many years ago, I’d visited many Shing Wong temples and seen many Shing Wong statues. However, they were never built taller than 12.6 meters and wider than 11 meters.”

“And why’s that?” Ye Qing asked curiously. This was something he knew nothing about, and from his perspective the Shing Wong statue just looked like any other statue. If it wasn’t for the Annon Sutra, he would never guess that something was wrong with it.

Yan Yufei explained, “There is a passage in ‘Folklore’ that goes something like this. Shing Wong is a yin deity; a ghost god who was appointed to be a deity after his death. That is why he must not be built taller than 12.6 meters and wider than 11 meters. Barring certain exceptions, almost every Shing Wong statue in the realm obeys this rule.”

“But the build of this Shing Wong statue breaks this rule not just by a little, but a lot. You can also tell that its disproportionate appearance gives off an oppressive and disharmonious feeling. Something is obviously off about it!”

“I don’t get what you’re saying, but you’re probably right!” Ye Qing said with a nod. *As expected of a true scholar! He’s far more knowledgeable than a smatterer like me!*

“Okay, so the Shing Wong statue of this temple is weird, but... what does that have to do with our case?” Yang Guan asked while scratching his head.

“...” Yan Yufei’s momentum stuttered to a halt. Once again, Yang Guan was right. While the strange statue indicated not all was right in this temple, it didn’t seem to be related to the General of Punishment at all.

It was at this moment a flash of inspiration lit up in Ye Qing’s mind. He blurted, “No, there is a relation!”

Yan Yufei and Yang Guan immediately looked at him expectantly.

Ye Qing wet his lips and explained his theory, “I’m certain that the General of Punishment is hiding somewhere in this Shing Wong temple, but we’ve scoured every nook and cranny and found nothing at all. This can only mean that the Stranger is concealing himself somehow.”

“You mentioned that this Shing Wong statue is much bigger than an ordinary Shing Wong statue, right? Tell me, what are the chances that the General of Punishment might be hiding within this statue?”

“Huh...”

“Ahhhh!”

Both Yan Yufei and Yang Guan exclaimed in surprise and realization. The idea hadn’t occurred to them until Ye Qing had made the connection, but now, they were starting to think he was right!

When Ye Qing saw the hesitant look on Yan Yufei’s face, he said lightly, “You don’t have to think so hard about this. There’s a simple way to check if my deduction is correct!”

“Really? What is your plan, Joyless?” Yan Yufei asked.

Ye Qing grinned. “We just need to smash the statue and see what’s inside!”

“No! You cannot!” Shock rippled through Yan Yufei as he hurriedly stopped Ye Qing. The Shing Wong temple was one of the main attractions of Anyang, and the statue its landmark. It was one thing if the General of Punishment really was hiding in the statue, but he wasn’t, then they would be hardpressed to explain their actions to the people.

Ye Qing chuckled. “Don’t worry. I’ll pay for the damage!”

Yan Yufei laughed involuntarily. Money was hardly the problem here. Unfortunately, he didn’t manage to persuade Ye Qing further before the young man put a thumb on the hilt and unsheathed his saber with a crisp ring.

“Joyless, wai—”

Crash!

A blinding light shone from Ye Qing’s saber and slammed squarely against the Shing Wong statue. As it crumbled into smithereens, the glitter of gold shone from within.

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“This is bad!”

At the temple grounds, an old man with a slightly crooked back abruptly looked up with a sinister, vicious gleam in his eyes the second the Shing Wong statue was destroyed. He was an incense acolyte that Yan Yufei had questioned earlier.

“Stop! What are you doing?” A bailiff shouted and broke into a run when he noticed that he was striding toward the main hall. His colleagues were rushing over from multiple directions as well.

“Out of my way!” The incense acolyte yelled and unleashed a cold, terrible aura. Everyone shivered involuntarily when the aura washed over them.

The next moment, something terrifying froze them all in their tracks. The incense acolyte's nose, mouth, ears, and finally the eyes gradually disappeared one by one. When all was said and done, the incense acolyte had turned completely faceless!

"Mmm! Mmm!"

The temple acolyte wasn't the only one who turned faceless. Every bailiff in the area was losing their face as well. When their facial features were completely gone, they abruptly collapsed to the floor and died just like that.

The temple acolyte immediately started toward the main hall once more, but he paused just a couple of steps later and changed his mind. "No, it's already too late. I should escape before anyone finds me!"

He stomped his foot angrily and leaped onto a rooftop. Then, he disappeared into the distance.

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Back at the main hall, a brand new statue stood before the trio after the blinding light had faded. It was a literal gold statue with two heads, four heads and six arms. One head wore a kind and amiable smile, while the other a savage and vicious snarl. Their expressions looked so lifelike they could be real. The statue wielded an axe, a hatchet, a hook, a fork, a saber, and a sword.

The statue looked incredibly majestic. It was also brimming with the power of wishes. However, its majesty was mixed with some sort of unspeakable evil that elicited a horribly twisted, discordant feeling.

"The General of Punishment! It really is the General of Punishment!" Yang Guan exclaimed with bulging eyes.

Yan Yufei was far more furious than he was shocked, however. A sudden, terrible aura erupted from his body as he roared, "How dare you forge a golden body and steal the power of the people's wishes for yourself!"

Chapter 60: Punishment

"Golden body? Power of wishes?" Ye Qing muttered under his breath.

Yang Guan must have noticed his puzzlement because he helpfully explained in a low voice, "Chu does not worship celestials or deities, which is why there are so few mountain gods or river gods or other deities in the realm. It is also why such statues are usually molded from clay or stone. Only a deity who received an official appointment from the court is allowed to forge a golden statue with true gold and absorb the power of wishes of the people to create a golden body."

"Our law clearly states that any deity who dares to forge a golden statue and steal the power of wishes without the court's approval would be condemned as a false deity. Their temples would be dismantled, their icons would be destroyed, and their three souls would be wiped out without mercy. Any and all accomplices would be imprisoned, exiled, or exterminated to the nine generations depending on the severity of their crimes."

"I see!" Ye Qing nodded in realization. Now he understood why Yan Yufei was so furious.

Suddenly, a muscle twitched in Ye Qing's forehead, and he shouted, "Move!" while pulling Yang Guan all the way to the entrance. At the same time, the General of Punishment abruptly opened his eyes and shone like a golden sun; bright and hot. If there was any doubt that the General of Punishment was a Stranger, there wasn't now.

An awe-inspiring, imposing voice boomed throughout the main hall.

"And who are you to call yourself a god, filthy heretic and insignificant Stranger?"

An equally potent and awe-inspiring aura gushed furiously out of Yan Yufei, billowing his sleeves and pushing back against the deity's. It felt like a pair of mini hurricanes were taking place in the main hall as the building shook ominously.

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The General of Punishment roared angrily as the head with a kind expression abruptly spun toward Yan Yufei and wore a vicious snarl. Then, he shot hot golden fire out of his eyes and swung all six of his weapons at Yan Yufei like a punisher intending to enact divine judgment on behalf of the heavens!

"Hmph! The winds of Man rage against the sycophant; forceful, unyielding, and all-encompassing!"

Unafraid, Yan Yufei chanted what sounded like a mantra and summoned a storm of wind out of seemingly nowhere. It was so powerful that it actually kept both the sea of flames and the General of Punishment himself from reaching him. The next moment, a furious downpour crashed down from the ceiling and extinguished the golden flames in no time!

"Ah, he's using his authority to borrow strength from the land and the people to bring forth the power of nature itself! He's probably stronger than a warrior equivalent!" Ye Qing commented with bright eyes.

Yan Yufei was undeniably powerful, and the fact that he could summon a storm powerful enough to extinguish the flames of a deity with just a simple mantra was impressive to say the least. However, it ultimately wasn't his own strength. Logically, a true General of Punishment—one who was officially acknowledged by the imperial court of Chu—would be more than a match for Yan Yufei. However, the General of Punishment in front of them wasn't a conferred deity. He was at best a Stranger who sneakily became a false deity behind Chu's back. He might look imposing and all-powerful, but his strength was only equal to that of a late-stage Qi Invoker. It was why the battle was completely one-sided in favor of Yan Yufei.

"Can Lord Yan win, Joyless?" Yang Guan asked worriedly while watching the ensuing battle.

“Of course. That General of Punishment is just a Red-class Stranger and not much better than even the likes of you. There is no way he can threaten the magistrate!” Ye Qing replied leisurely.

“I see!” Yang Guan responded but immediately rolled his eyes at Ye Qing. *‘Not much better than the likes of you’? I’m plenty strong for a bailiff, okay!*

The General of Punishment roared again and swung all six of his weapons at the storm keeping him away from Yan Yufei. The living statue was huge, and the weapons he wielded were just as big. As a result, the attack actually managed to cut through the furious storm billowing inside the main hall.

“The law of Chu states: no false deity shall receive the power of wishes!” Yan Yufei declared powerfully while a square seal floated above his head. It was none other than the magistrate seal of Anyang.

The seal was shaped like a square block because its owner governs all four directions of a territory. The owner was also responsible for all the people within the territory, which was why pictures of farmers and livestock tilling the land were engraved to the horizontal sides of the seal. The seal was called the Seal of the Land or Seal of the People to signify that its owner bore the heavy responsibility of enriching the people and the land, and wielded absolute authority (within the post they were bestowed, of course) within their territory.

When Yan Yufei was finished speaking, the magistrate seal abruptly shone a brilliant golden light. It was an august, majestic light that was nothing like the superficial, impure amalgamation that the General of Punishment tried to intimidate them with earlier. It was as tall as the heavens, as thick as the earth, and as vast as the people themselves!

Like snow under a blazing hot sun, the General of Punishment started leaking black, smelly smoke when it was touched by the light. The warm, golden light that surrounded him also disappeared as if some unseen force was stripping it away bit by bit. Cracks began to appear all over its golden body as well.

The moment the General of Punishment was stripped of the power of wishes he stole, the strength of his aura began plummeting at a visible rate. His swings also became so weak that they failed to put even a dent on the golden light of the seal.

“The law of Chu states: a false deity who steals the power of wishes shall be crushed and exterminated!”

When Yan Yufei lowered his hand, the golden light morphed into countless chains and wrapped around the General of Punishment, immobilizing him. Then, a long sword abruptly appeared in the air. The sword had a blocky body and did not look like it was capable of cutting through anything at all, but the righteous power it gave off was a different story.

A gentleman was square [1], which was why the sword with a square blade was named the Gentleman’s Sword. It was a sword the Son of Heavens bestowed to each and every official before

they assumed a post. It was his wish that his servants would be a virtuous gentleman as square as the Gentleman's Sword!

"My lord, wait!"

Yan Yufei was about to behead the false deity when suddenly, Ye Qing shouted without warning. When he instinctively slowed down, Ye Qing seized the opportunity to leap over to the Stranger's head.

"Allow me!"

He landed a palm strike on the top of the Stranger's head and unleashed his power, shattering the General of Punishment into smithereens. Golden debris flew everywhere, and a thick dust cloud filled the main hall.

"Cough! Cough! Cough..."

For a time, everyone was covering their mouths and coughing violently. As a result, they did not notice Ye Qing swiping a dim golden heart from the floor and storing it in his Nature's Shell.

A long time later, when the golden dust cloud finally subsided, the main hall was in shambles, and everyone was covered in a sheen of literal gold. It was a golden day.

"Joyless, what were you...?"

Yan Yufei hadn't suffered as much as his subordinates thanks to his seal, but he was definitely confused by Ye Qing's final action.

Ye Qing wore an awkward smile as he scratched his head. "Sorry, sorry. This is the first time I met a General of Punishment, and I suddenly wanted to know how it feels to kill a deity—even if it's a fake. I guess I used a bit too much strength at the end though."

He wants to know how it feels to kill a deity? The fuck?

Almost everyone was wearing question marks on their faces, but Yang Guan was staring at Ye Qing with a half-smirk on his face. "You've been hiding this strength all this time, Joyless?"

Ye Qing replied humbly, "It's nothing. I'm just a lot stronger than you!"

Yang Guan: "... *Let's keep this civil, shall we?*"

Ye Qing ignored Yang Guan's reaction and turned to Yan Yufei. "Anyway, this isn't a simple murder case anymore, Lord Yan. Someone must be responsible for bringing the General of Punishment to life. You should investigate this thoroughly!"

Yan Yufei nodded. Honestly, Ye Qing's warning was unnecessary. There was no way a Stranger could hide within the Shing Wong statue and steal the people's power of wishes right under Anyang's nose without help. According to the law of Chu, cases like this must be investigated until every stone was turned, every culprit was apprehended or killed, and every loose end was tied. So, he ordered immediately, "Men! Round up everyone in the Shing Wong temple and other relevant people and bring them to the county hall for an interrogation immediately. Do not let anyone slip through your grasp!"

"At once!" Yan Feng and Yang Guan responded immediately.

It was at this moment a bailiff suddenly barged into the main hall and cried out in a panicked voice, “M-My lord! We have an incident!”

“What happened?” Yan Yufei asked.

“Chen Ling, Wei Gang, Yuanlang and the others! They... they’re all dead!”

“What?! Lead the way!”

The bailiff quickly led the group to one part of the temple grounds. Everyone gasped in horror when they rounded a corner and saw the bodies on the ground.

No one here was unfamiliar with the dead, but dead people whose faces were perfectly blank like unfinished dolls? That was a different story entirely.

Yan Feng sucked in a deep breath before walking over to inspect the bodies and removing their identity tags. After a thorough inspection, he looked behind him and reported, “My lord, there are six victims in total. They are Bailiff Chen Ling, Wei Gang, and Ma Yuanlang; Common Bailiff Zhuang An, Yang Zhen and Tang Yang.”

“I cannot find any wounds on their bodies whatsoever. The only thing they’re missing... is their face. The cause of death is unknown!”

Yan Yufei accepted the identity tags from Yan Feng before staring at the other bailiffs with an ice cold expression. “What the hell happened here? Who killed them?”

No one seemed to have a clue. They were all exchanging helpless looks with each other.

“Besides the victims, was there anyone else at this part of the temple grounds?” Ye Qing asked after staring at the corpses.

“Y-Yes! The incense acolyte of Shing Wong temple was here!” A bailiff answered.

“The incense acolyte?” Yan Yufei repeated with stormy eyes. “Since the temple acolyte’s body isn’t here, it can only mean two things. Either he was kidnapped by the murderer... or he was the one who killed them.”

Ye Qing’s eyes flashed as he explained slowly, “Lord Yan, the mastermind behind the General of Punishment must be an abbot or a senior monk of the Shing Wong temple at the very least. Not only that, they must be able to take charge of the maintenance of the Shing Wong statue, or there is no way they could’ve hidden a statue within a statue. In this Shing Wong temple, the incense acolyte is the only one who fits the criteria, not to mention he went missing without a word and left six bodies in his wake. He has to be a prime suspect!”

“You are absolutely right!” Yan Yufei echoed in agreement. “Yan Feng, take some men with you and spread posters of the incense acolyte immediately. Let the people know that anyone who can provide a lead regarding his whereabouts will be rewarded handsomely!”

“At once!”

“Zhu Nan, you and everyone else will carry our deceased brothers back to the county hall. Be sure to give them a proper burial!”

“At once!”

Yan Yufei had just finished giving his orders and left the Shing Wong temple when a group of men approached him. They were clearly no ordinary people.

“What happened, Lord Yan?” A rugged-looking and muscular military officer in armor walked up to Yan Yufei and asked.

“Perfect timing, Vice Magistrate You. I want you to rally your men and remove this Shing Wong temple immediately!”

Yan Yufei explained seriously, “Someone in Anyang has the gall to forge a golden statue of the General of Punishment and hide it inside the Shing Wong’s statue. Not only has the statue received enough power of wishes to become a false deity, it had already claimed more than a few innocent lives. It would’ve been a disaster if I hadn’t chased a lead all the way to this place and found it!”