

Stranger 511

Chapter 511: Come And Kill Me

“Hehe...” Fugong chuckled at his own punch with great satisfaction. He was planning to tell Ye Qing some portions of the truth so he might rest in peace, but he also thought that he shouldn’t underestimate his opponent. That was why he decided to incapacitate the young man first. After that, well, they could talk for as long as they wanted, couldn’t they? One way or another, it was going to end with Ye Qing’s death.

What can you do? He was a better-safe-than-sorry kind of guy.

“That’s a low blow, my friend!”

Fugong’s smile stiffened. He watched as Ye Qing slowly lifted his head back into view and gently shook his head left and right, causing the bones to crack a little. His forehead was slightly reddened, but besides that, the young man looked perfectly... fine?

Impossible!

The Spirit Master had a bad feeling about this. He immediately curled his toes and jumped away even faster than when he charged Ye Qing.

Ye Qing lifted his arm and threw a punch at Fugong, and the middle-aged man’s eyes immediately widened. At first, there was no sound at all. Then, it grew into a terrible rumble that enveloped both heaven and earth. The space around him was cracking and falling apart like a mirror, and he was right at the center of it.

Fugong scrunched his face in abject pain as it felt like his body was being torn apart. He slapped his forehead and summoned a humanoid figure above his head.

The humanoid figure was round, plump, and wearing a fiery red robe. It was also surrounded by an auspicious cloud. It almost looked like Fugong except that it was holding the word “Fortune” in its hand instead of wearing it on his torso. Besides that, the word was glowing with a profound spiritual light.

The humanoid figure was Fugong’s Yin God, the God of Fortune.

“The Heavenly Palace Bestows Fortune”

Fugong muttered something under his breath, and the Yin God tossed the word over his head. The word immediately burst into a shower of light, stuck itself onto his back, and enveloped him in its spiritual light.

All this time, Fugong was trying to get away from Ye Qing’s attack, but as soon as the spiritual light surrounded him, it was like the heavens themselves were watching over him. Whenever the space around him broke into fragments, he would somehow avoid them by a hair’s breadth. Every time he was caught between a rock and a hard place, he would always find a solution and escape somehow. Thanks to this, he was able to leave the affected area just a few breaths later.

Fugong let out a sigh of relief. His cultivation art was a martial art passed down from the ancient Heavens called the “Lucky Star”. Once upon a time, there existed three gods who were collectively

known as the Three Stars—Fortune, Prosperity, and Longevity—and “Lucky Star” was said to be Fortune’s main cultivation art. As the god who was responsible for managing the flow of fortune of a world, Fortune could bless anyone with a prodigious amount of good luck. If a blessed one tried to do something, it would be done with little to no problem. If they ran into trouble, then they would somehow overcome it no matter how impossible the situation looked.

It was why he came to be known as Fugong (a Duke of Fortune).

Of course, the cultivation art Fugong received was incomplete and difficult to decipher. The heavens could bless him with another century of lifespan, and he would never be able to reach the heights of Fortune.

Despite this, what he currently had was quite incredible. The technique he used just now, “The Heavenly Palace Bestows Fortune” was a Magia that could bestow him with unparalleled luck for a short time. It was how he was able to avoid the worst of Ye Qing’s punch and escape.

But how did Ye Qing become so powerful? The young man hadn’t employed any astral qi or spiritual power just now. He had punched him with pure physical strength, and yet the attack was deadlier than even the full-powered attack of a late-stage Spirit Master.

Also, wasn’t Ye Qing seriously injured? He certainly didn’t look like it right now, and he was so powerful that he wondered if he was dreaming. Maybe the real Ye Qing was dead, and the one currently standing in front of him was a Stranger wearing his skin?

Fugong’s doubt was such that he couldn’t help but ask, “Are you Ye Qing?”

“What do you think?” Ye Qing withdrew his fist and looked down on Fugong scornfully.

“You weren’t hurt?” Fugong himself thought that his question was a bit silly. If a Stranger really had consumed the real Ye Qing, then the Blood Bond Grass would have withered long ago.

“What does it look like? Like that fatty can ever hurt a hair on my person,” Ye Qing replied indifferently.

Liar. Fugong might not have witnessed Ye Qing and Zhou Hengshan’s battle with his own eyes, but he knew that Ye Qing had taken a solid punch from Zhou Hengshan, and that the general had even employed the Slaughterer of Ten Thousand. No matter how monstrous Ye Qing was, it was simply impossible for a late-stage Spirit Purifier could go through all that without a scratch.

Ye Qing shrugged and admitted a second later, “Fine, I was lying. I was hurt, but I recovered and even became much stronger than before. So if you know what’s good for you, you would tell me who your master is and why they set me up. Otherwise, I will kill you.”

Ye Qing was telling the truth, but Fugong narrowed his eyes with uncertainty. It was because his senses told him that Ye Qing was still a late-stage Spirit Purifier.

There is no way a late-stage Spirit Purifier can push me back, much less kill me. He must have used some sort of secret art or even forbidden art just now, which means that he’s just trying to bluff me into retreating.

Despite his suspicions, Fugong didn't rush Ye Qing again. He had always been a cautious man, and he wasn't able to break the habit now.

"Is that so? Come and kill me then! I dare you!"

Fugong chose to taunt Ye Qing into attacking him. If Ye Qing dared to approach him, then it would prove that the youngster really did possess the power to challenge him. Otherwise, it would prove that he was just bluffing.

"I have never heard such a masochistic request in my life."

Ye Qing smirked ridiculingly and stomped the ground. Mountains shook, and the clouds scattered as if struck by an invisible force. Despite standing tens of meters away from Ye Qing, Fugong immediately lost his footing, and his circulation of energy was disrupted.

At the same time, Ye Qing leaped into the air and moved his arm backward with his hand stretched wide open. As he descended, he slowly clenched his fist until it felt like he was holding a hurricane between his fingers.

The moment the fist descended was the moment heaven and earth swapped places.

The blood drained away from Fugong's face as he hurriedly made a hand seal and muttered, "Lucky star above me, sunshine on my way!"

The Yin God above his head quickly swelled in size, and the auspicious clouds came together to form a massive "Fortune". Shining brightly and spinning round and round, the word flew up and took Ye Qing's punch head on.

The next moment, the word shattered, and the auspicious clouds scattered into nothing. Fugong was nowhere to be seen, but Ye Qing ignored this and smashed his fist into the ground.

Rumble!

The ground within tens of meters of him abruptly split into multiple chunks like tofu. Fugong reappeared tens of meters away from the center of impact and spat out a mouthful of blood.

"How is this possible?" Fugong muttered while staring at the ruined earth with shock and horror. Not only was Ye Qing's second punch stronger than his first, he had damaged his Yin God as well.

It was at this moment Fugong felt something and instinctively sidestepped to his right. As if on cue, a silhouette burst out of the dust clouds and struck a massive tree behind him.

BOOM!

The tree was so thick that it would've taken several people to wrap their arms around it. However, the punch easily went through the tree trunk like it was paper.

Ye Qing didn't slow down despite missing his target. He pushed through the wood fibre—ripping the tree in half in the process—and launched an elbow strike at Fugong.

Once again, the auspicious clouds surrounding Fugong flashed, causing the middle-aged man to "slip" and turn a few centimeters to the side. That was enough for him to dodge the devastating blow without a scratch.

As the elbow strike sailed harmlessly past him, Fugong exhaled a puff of spiritual light that took the form of an auspicious cloud from his nostrils. The next moment, the words “Fortune” descended from the cloud, but they were standing upright instead of upside down, and they looked as black as ink. They also reeked of misfortune, decline and other inauspicious aura. They were all flying toward Ye Qing.

The word “Fortune” was commonly plastered or hung on one’s walls during the New Year, and it was commonly believed that it should be upside down so that fortune would fall from the heavens toward the household. Otherwise, the household’s fortune would be robbed by the heavens instead.

Fortune was the god of fortune. Naturally, he could rob one’s fortune as easily as he bestowed them. Hence, the technique Fugong was currently using was another Magia named, “Robbing Fortune”.

If Ye Qing was struck by the black words, then his good fortune would be robbed by Fugong. He would become so unlucky that even breathing would present a problem to him, much less fighting.

But once again, Ye Qing defied Fugong’s expectations. When the black words struck his body, a dark yellow light washed out and melted it all like snow.

Chapter 512: A Sword On Paper May Flood The World

“Wh... wh... wh...”

Fugong was so shocked he couldn’t even get a word out. He could accept that Ye Qing had fully recovered from his injuries. His pride hurt at the thought that Ye Qing had become so strong that he could challenge him, but he could accept that as well. But how the *hell* did he brush off his Magia like it didn’t even exist?

You can’t be human. You just can’t!

His Magia had never failed him. Such was its power that even a Grandmaster would choose to avoid it. But now, it had failed to take effect on a *Spirit Purifier*. What the fuck was going on?!

This time, Ye Qing couldn’t hold back a chuckle. *Look at his stupid face. He has no idea that my luck is protected by the Profound Yellow Qi!*

As the owner of the Incense of Misfortune, he realized how the black “Fortune” words functioned as soon as they appeared. In fact, he could tell that they were even more potent than the Incense of Misfortune.

If this was before he entered the Earthly Sovereign’s Coffin, then he would have taken off faster than Fugong could say, “What?” But now? He could tank the debuff with his face, and nothing would happen to him!

The Profound Yellow Qi was a derivative of the Profound Yellow Mother Qi. A type of karmic qi, it possessed the ability to protect one’s luck.

Of course, the Profound Yellow Qi wasn’t the Profound Yellow Mother Qi, so if the warrior had only refined, say, five or six wisps of Profound Yellow Qi, then its protective effect would be much weaker. This was why the Incense of Misfortune was able to work its magic on Sun Xuanzhen, Yue Juejiang and Huo Linglong. Had he waited a few more days before enacting his plan, then it might have been a complete waste of time and effort.

He was different from them though. After cooperating with Huo Linglong and taking Sun Xuanzhen and Yue Juejiang out of the equation, every wisp of Profound Yellow Qi in the Earthly Sovereign's Coffin went to him. Naturally, his luck protection was so much better than the others.

For the past nine days, he had refined over twenty wisps of Profound Yellow Qi. Of course, that wasn't even close to the full number of Profound Yellow Qi he collected, but it took hours to refine just a single wisp, not to mention that he spent a good chunk of time mastering his new strength as well. The large majority of them were stored inside his Profound Yellow Qi Calabash, and he was planning to refine them in the future when his life was less hectic than it was now.

Even so, twenty plus wisps of Profound Yellow Qi was almost enough to push him to the adept level of the "Chaos Demon Ape Body Tempering Sutra" and attain the strength of nine dragon elephants. At this level, he was strong enough to butt heads against a late-stage Spirit Master and, in this particular situation, become impervious to most evils and misfortune.

This was why Fugong's Magia had failed to work on him.

Bang!

The mountains shook, and Ye Qing shot toward Fugong like a phantom. He was hoping to catch the middle-aged man while he was distracted.

A cunning glint flashed in Fugong's eyes as Ye Qing's hand reached out for his face. *No one is immune to everything. How about this?*

A white paper flew out of Fugong's sleeve, and a man holding a sword was drawn on it. The quality of the drawing was frankly, abysmal. The man's figure was completely out of proportion, it was missing a lot of details, and the lines were coarse and unsteady. It looked just like the drawing of a three-year-old.

However, as if the misshapen man had a life of its own, it abruptly stood up from the paper and twirled its ink sword in a ceremonial fashion. Then, it looked up at Ye Qing, held its sword parallel to its body, and thrust upward like it would split the sky in half.

At that moment, a pitch black sword beam cut through the air and enveloped heaven and earth. Everything within a hundred meters abruptly transformed into a sea of sword qi.

A sword on paper might flood the world. That was the sentence used to describe the Strange Artifact known as the Man On Paper.

The Man on Paper was a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact and a random drawing scrawled by one of the strongest existing swordsmen in the world, Mo Jianseng. The drawing contained a wisp of his sword intent, and it eventually gained sentience and transformed into a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact.

Although Mo Jianseng had the word "seng" (Monk) in it, he was anything but merciful. A man with a decidedly gray moral compass, he could be good or evil depending on the circumstances. Since his sword arts overflowed with killing intent and bloodthirst, it was only natural that Man On Paper was a highly destructive Strange Artifact in possession of a great deal of offensive power, and one of the most powerful Phenomenon-class Strange Artifacts out there.

The Man On Paper could unleash a sword strike that was as strong as a Half-Step Grandmaster's full-powered attack. Its biggest flaw was that it could only be used once per month.

Fugong rarely used the Man On Paper, but when he did use it, no enemy had ever survived its attack. Therefore, he had no reason to believe that Ye Qing would become the exception.

Of course, he was mistaken. A pair of black, hairy fists abruptly manifested in the sky, and Ye Qing began punching the air rapidly like he was playing the drum. His first punch shattered the black sword light that split the sky, and his second punch shattered the sea of sword qi.

There was no third punch because it was unnecessary. For the first time ever, Man On Paper had failed to kill its opponent.

Shellshocked, Fugong could only watch as a demonic ape descended from the sky and slapped its gigantic hand over his head. There was a soft thud, and half of the middle-aged man's body sank into the ground just like that.

Fugong wasn't going to give in, of course. The instant his feet began to sink into the earth, he snapped back to reality and got ready to unleash his final resistance. Unfortunately, he had just moved a muscle when a terrible pain suddenly gripped his whole body, and blood spewed out of his mouth before he knew what was happening.

"You crippled me?!" Fugong exclaimed in a daze as he looked inward and found his headspace in tatters, his Yin God injured, his muscles and bones broken, and his astral qi in chaos. He was now just an ordinary person with no power.

"You don't say?" Ye Qing smiled at Fugong, but it looked anything but comforting as he was in his ape form right now. Even scarier was the fact that the bone-deep sword wounds covering his entire body—injuries that, in Fugong's opinion, should absolutely be fatal—began wriggling and healing at a visible rate. By the time Ye Qing shrank back down to a human, his injuries were completely gone.

"Now then. Do you still think I can't kill you?"

Fugong didn't know what to say. What should've been an insultingly simple matter had somehow spiraled beyond his wildest imaginations.

Did he underestimate his enemy? No, he didn't. He had used every trick in his book to defeat him.

Did he lose himself to carelessness? That wasn't it either. He was a cautious man, and he had acted with the appropriate level of cautiousness from the start.

In conclusion, it wasn't his fault. His opponent was just too monstrous.

"Now then, can you tell me who's the one who ordered you to kill me?" Ye Qing crouched on the ground and stared into Fugong's eyes.

A moment of silence later, Fugong suddenly broke into a smile and said, "You don't know who you're dealing with, Ye Qing. I may die here, but it won't be long before you follow me to the underworld. He will take revenge for me!"

A terrifying aura suddenly washed out of Fugong's body, and Ye Qing snorted. "Planning to detonate your Yin God? What a loyal dog you are."

"Heavenly Demon Captures The Soul"

One by one, Ye Qing bent his fingers and slowly robbed Fugong of his consciousness and will. The terrifying power washing out of his body slowly subsided until it was completely gone.

Fugong was a late-stage Spirit Master who had created his Yin God. At his current level, it should have been quite difficult for him to capture the man's Yin God. However, his earlier strike had dealt a severe blow to Fugong's Yin God, so the task was made so much easier.

Of course, this was the plan from the very beginning.

"Fog Demon, control him and make him submit to me," said Ye Qing while summoning the Fog Demon. Previously, the Stranger had blocked Zhou Hengshan's attack for him and suffered a tremendous amount of damage as a result, but luckily for it, the Profound Yellow Qi could accelerate its recovery to a certain extent. Since Ye Qing had plenty of Profound Yellow Qi right now, he decided to share some of it with the Fog Demon. Today, not only was the Fog Demon fully recovered, it was even stronger than it was before.

"Why didn't you kill him?" The Fog Demon asked.

"He can't die." Ye Qing shook his head. "For starters, he knows the identity of the bastard who set me up."

"Second, the mastermind will find out that I'm still alive if I kill him. When that happens, they would come after me with everything they got, and I don't think I'm strong enough to defend against that."

"Rather than killing him, I would rather keep him alive and make him my pawn. I want him to return home and tell the mastermind that I'm already dead. This way, I would have one less thing to worry about. Second, I want to use him as my plant and spy on my opponent. Only by knowing my enemy could I secure victory!"

Ye Qing never wanted to kill Fugong in the first place. It would certainly give him a moment of satisfaction, but a moment of satisfaction wasn't what he sought after.

No, he sought to repay blood with blood.

He promised his enemy that he would have vengeance.

He was Ye Qing, and he always kept his promises.

Chapter 513: Light and Dark

"Kekeke, what a devious idea. I like it." The Fog Demon let out an eerie cackle before enveloping Fugong in its fog. An incense stick later, the fog suddenly dissipated, and the Fog Demon said in a slight weary voice, "It's done. He is now your humble servant. You may ask him anything you wish to know."

A few breaths later, Fugong opened his eyes and looked at Ye Qing with a reverent look on his face. "Master!"

Ye Qing nodded in acknowledgement and said, “Young master is fine.”

“Yes, young master,” Fugong replied carefully.

Ye Qing began his questioning, “What is your name?”

The middle-aged man answered without hesitation, “My name is Fugong.”

“Huh. You certainly look the part.” Ye Qing nodded again before asking, “Who sent you to kill me?”

Fugong answered without hesitation, “Fang Muyun, young master.”

“You mean Fang Muyun, the one they call Mister Farseeing?” Ye Qing was taken aback. “He’s the one who set me up?”

“Yes, young master. You killed his younger brother, so he desires your death. However, he does not want to make an enemy out of the Pacification Bureau. Therefore, he came up with a series of schemes to kill you without dirtying his own hands.”

“I killed Fang Muyun’s younger brother? Who even is his younger brother?” Ye Qing blinked in puzzlement. “Who is Fang Muyun’s younger brother?”

Fugong answered, “Fang Muyun’s younger brother is called Fang Sixue, and he was Chu Wangsun’s student. Fang Muyun and Chu Wangsun are good friends, and he entrusted Fang Sixue to Chu Wangsun to correct his stubborn and obstreperous behavior.”

“Although Fang Sixue’s death is his own fault, Fang Muyun believes that your role in his death is pivotal. That is why he desires to bury you with his younger brother’s ashes.”

“It was him?!” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. Chu Wangsun must have recognized him during the Hidden Dragon Meet and told Fang Muyun about him. That was how everything began.

Ye Qing knew that the mastermind could not be a nobody considering that they noticed the Corpse Ship’s presence at Yonghe Lake even before the Pacification Bureau, and they could afford to give Zhao Lan a few drops of the Hanba’s blood essence to assassinate him. It was also why Chu Wangsun was his prime suspect. He and Chu Wangsun had a score to settle with, and the man did not probe him further despite his obvious suspicion during their first encounter at the Hidden Dragon Meet. Chu Wangsun wasn’t the type of person to give up so easily, which was why he suspected that he was the one behind it all.

Later, his suspicion had spread to Lei Xiaodan, Chu Renhe, the Way of Taiping and even Evergreen Ivy. Basically, he suspected every enemy he had ever made since arriving in this world. However, Fang Muyun was never on his suspect list because the scholar was practically a stranger to him. He knew the guy about as well as one of the bigshots who oversaw the tournament, which was to say, not at all. It was why the revelation came as a massive shock to him.

Who could've thought that Chu Wangsun's student was Fang Muyun's younger brother? What an ill-fated relationship this was.

If the mastermind really was Fang Muyun, then he was going to have to consider his revenge at length. Fang Muyun was the eldest son of the current Grand Mentor and one of the Three Dukes of Chu, Fang Zhiyong. He himself was famous for his wisdom and benevolence to the point where he was known as Mister Farseeing. In either case, the scholar wasn't someone he could topple in terms of status or power right now. To clash against him head on was to bash an egg against a rock—suicide.

Yes, he would have to take this slow and steady.

“You must be one of Fang Muyun's aides considering he trusted you enough to send you after me,” Ye Qing said.

Fugong replied, “Yes, young master. I am Fugong of the Three Stars, and I served him together with Lugong (Duke of Prosperity) and Shougong (Duke of Longevity). Our job is to safeguard him and perform the dirty work he cannot perform himself.”

“Dirty work, eh? It looks like Mister Farseeing isn't as noble or benevolent as his reputation might suggest!” Ye Qing sneered. Even in his world, anyone with a benevolent reputation was usually a scumbag on the inside. It shouldn't have come as a surprise to him that Mister Farseeing was really a piece of shit who tried to kill him multiple times and treated innocent lives such as Chu Qingli like grass.

Fugong himself was sneering. “Of course he isn't. He was born in the capital, the place where the greatest powers of Chu are concentrated. How many people could live at that place and still maintain the purity of their heart? I'm not saying that such a person does not exist in the capital, but most of them are just two-faced scumbags who are only spotless on the outside.”

“Fang Muyun may call himself the disciple of the wise sages and enjoy a spotless reputation, but the blood on his hands is as thick as any infamous monster in the *jianghu*, if not thicker.”

“It really does look like you know a lot about him. Tell me everything you know about Fang Muyun's personality, strength, hobbies, deeds, relationships and more. Do not miss a single thing,” instructed Ye Qing. The first step to defeating any opponent was to know them like the back of your hand. Only then could one ensure victory.

“As you command,” replied Fugong before launching into a long and detailed explanation. When the middle-aged man was finally done, Ye Qing thought to himself: *Fang Muyun is as ruthless as he is formidable.*

When he was a child, Fang Muyun had already learned how to handle political affairs, manage relationships, and stand his ground in the imperial court, a place where the slightest weakness could see you killed, under his father, Fang Zhiyong. When he was an adolescent, he became his father's left and right arm and eliminated many of his political enemies through methods such as invitation,

bribery, entrapment and more. Without exaggeration, he was one of the key reasons Fang Zhiyong was able to hold an obscene amount of power in the imperial court for so many years.

Despite the river of blood he coated his hands with, Fang Muyun appeared to be a noble, generous, materially indifferent, and farsighted disciple of the wise sages to all outsiders. Well respected and loved especially by examination candidates and Confucian scholars, his reputation was such that even Ye Qing was completely blinded to his true nature.

Besides that, Fang Muyun was very accomplished in the martial way despite his young age. He was a late-stage Spirit Master who walked the way of Confucianism and cultivated the Air of Greatness in his abdomen.

That said, Fang Muyun was an exceptionally shrewd and tricky man. It was entirely possible that what he told his aide was but the tip of the iceberg. Therefore, Ye Qing did not take Fugong's words—at least not in regards to Fang Muyun's cultivation level—as gospel.

Long story short, Fang Muyun was an exceptionally dangerous man. No amount of caution was too much when he was the enemy. He would have to plot his revenge very, very carefully.

What? No this isn't cowardice! This is called caution, understand?

"What other instructions do you have for me, young master? I shall fulfill it even if it costs me a thousand deaths!" Fugong asked while clapping his hands together, but the movement jolted his injuries and triggered a series of violent, bloody coughs.

"This is the Nature's Water. Use it to recover your injuries," said Ye Qing while throwing a porcelain bottle into Fugong's hands.

Just now, he had shattered the middle-aged man's bones, muscles, meridians and more. He had also broken his dantian. Without proper treatment, Fugong would be crippled permanently.

This wasn't a problem for Ye Qing though. After all, the Nature's Water could heal even a cripple back to full health. The reason he hadn't given Fugong the elixir immediately was because he wasn't sure if the Fog Demon had fully controlled him.

"I humbly accept your gift, young master." Fugong accepted the bottle gratefully and drank it without any hesitation. Just a dozen or so breaths later, the Nature's Water had restored him to full health. Fugong thanked Ye Qing again with heartfelt gratitude, "Thank you, young master!"

Ye Qing nodded and gave him a new order, "Now that you're healed, you will head back and continue to act as Fang Muyun's aide. Observe his every move and report back to me if you find anything important—but only if it's urgent. It would be bad if he discovers that you are acting strangely."

"As you command, young master," Fugong replied.

"What will you say when you get back to him?" Ye Qing asked.

Fugong thought for a moment before answering, "I will tell him that I have killed you with my own two hands. I will also make sure that no one knows that you are still alive."

“Good.” Ye Qing nodded in satisfaction and looked up at the dark, starry sky.

Once upon a time, I was the prey, and you the hunter.

But now, our roles are reversed.

You better watch your back, Fang Muyun.

Chapter 514: Bei You

Six days later[1]

“I’m leaving now, young master. Please, take care,” said Fugong while giving Ye Qing a deep bow.

“You too,” Ye Qing replied before adding, “Remember, your safety is of paramount importance. Never take risks unless I give you the order to do so.”

“As you command,” Fugong responded and bowed to Ye Qing again. It was only then he finally turned around and left.

After the middle-aged man was gone, Ye Qing said with a smile, “Good work.”

The Fog Demon appeared next to him and taunted him, “Don’t you think you’re acting a little too timid, boy?”

“Timid? No, I’m just being cautious. Fugong is a critical part of my plan. As I told him, his safety is of paramount importance,” Ye Qing replied indifferently.

Today was the sixth day since he encountered Fugong. He could have sent the old man away immediately, but instead, he ordered the Fog Demon to modify Fugong’s consciousness and deepen his loyalty toward him. Six days later, when the chance that Fugong would somehow regain his former personality and ruin everything was less than zero, Ye Qing finally allowed the middle-aged man to leave.

As he told the Fog Demon, Fugong was a critical part of his plan. In fact, one might say that his life was, at least partially, in Fugong’s hands. He had to be careful no matter what.

The Fog Demon scoffed, “Keh! You worry too much. My spell is perfect.”

Ye Qing replied, “It’s precisely because it’s you that I have to be extra careful.”

“The hell do you mean by that, boy?!” The Fog Demon growled.

“Nothing. I was just praising you,” Ye Qing replied indifferently.

“Praising me my ass! How stupid do you think I am? It’s obvious that you were insulting me!” The Fog Demon raged. “Have you fed your conscience to the dogs, boy?!”

“No really, I was praising you. Look into my eyes, and you will know the depths of my honesty.” Ye Qing smirked.

The Fog Demon harrumphed, but it didn't complain any longer. A while later, it asked, "So, what are we going to do now, boy? Where are we going?"

"We will pass through Careless Mountain Range," Ye Qing squinted and basked in the spotty sunlight peeking through the tree leaves, "and we will seek out Brother Yi Pin at Bei You."

The sunlight was warm, and the wind was soothing.

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Located at the border of Chu and Yan, Bei You nominally belonged to Chu but was really a lawless land no one cared about. It was because it was sandwiched between the Gobi Desert and countless mountains and beset by wind and sand all year long. It was a cold, harsh place where the weather conditions were terrible, the resources were scarce, and the people lived in destitution. It was neither a strategic location nor a fertile land either, which was why it received little to no attention from the imperial court.

Bei You's unique set of circumstances made it highly attractive to fugitives and criminals. It was hardly paradise, but it was still better than being dead. Over time, countless factions were born, and their roots became deeply entrenched in the soil of Bei You.

By the time the imperial court realized they had screwed up and tried to bring order to the commandery, it was too late. The forces in Bei You had become so strong that it would take a great sacrifice to purge the place and start anew. Lawless, chaotic and neutral, the people of Bei You answered to no one but themselves. As a result, the imperial court had no choice but to ignore it barring truly dire circumstances.

Ye Qing could tell that Bei You was nothing like Tian Yong, Luo Shui, or any other commandery he had visited until now. Strong wind, yellow sand and desolation seemed to be the main theme of this place, and he couldn't spot a single speck of green as far as the eyes could see. Everywhere he looked, there was only lifelessness and desolation.

The cold, sand-riddled wind felt uncomfortable even to him. He imagined that a weaker person would feel like their exposed skin was being cut open by a blade. Most of the houses were made from limestone, yellow earth and dead grass, so they were naturally low and simplistic. The delicate structure and refinement so loved by the people of Chu were nowhere to be found.

The people of Bei You looked very different as well. They looked tall, brawny, and intimidating, and their skin was coarse and dark due to constant exposure to the harsh sunlight. The women were one thing, but every man carried at least one blade with them. If the people of Tian Yong and Luo Shui were educated and cultivated gentlemen or ladies of a noble family, then the people of Bei You were rugged, brutish, and unfettered wanderers or ruffians.

In fact, Bei You were filled with unfettered wanderers who followed only the voice of their own hearts, and cruel bandits who wouldn't hesitate to kill a child to rob them of their food. Chaotic and lawless described this place perfectly.

Ye Qing knew in his head that Bei You was such a place, but as the saying went, seeing was believing. It hadn't been long since he set foot in this place, and already he encountered not one, but several violent incidents. He saw several people pulling their weapons over a minor altercation, and

that conflict somehow escalated into a full-blown brawl involving dozens of people. The blood ran like a river, and there was no one to collect their cold, dead bodies when all was said and done. Their final fate was to be eaten by vultures, hyenas and Strangers.

He also saw a sword-wielding wanderer decapitating three bandits who were trying to rob him. Once done, he grabbed their heads by the hair, drank his wine, and sang a brave song as he walked to heavens-no-where.

He also followed a crowd to a stage where a pair of famous swordsmen were about to duel to the death over a beautiful woman. The winner cut off his opponent's head, claimed his sword as a trophy, and left happily with a beautiful woman in his arms.

Here in Bei You, every corner could be hiding a deadly blade, people settled their scores with violence as easily as they breathed, most women were as beautiful as they were deadly, and men wandered the streets with nothing but a blade and a jar of wine. In Ye Qing's opinion, Bei You's *jianghu* was more *jianghu*-like than either Tian Yong or Luo Shui.

"What an interesting place this is."

After the duel had ended, and the crowd had dispersed, Ye Qing finally followed them into the city. Bei You City was the main city of Bei You, and Yi Pin's Temple of Divination was somewhere inside the city.

To be honest, he was late for their appointment. Right after he sent Fugong away, Ye Qing immediately began his trek across Carefree Mountain Range in hopes of reaching Bei You as soon as possible. However, he soon discovered that the mountains were overflowing with Strangers, and a good number of them were powerful enough to temper his strength and improve his mastery over his enhanced body. Not only that, they provided him with a hefty number of dragon-serpent runes.

Ever since he was seriously injured by Zhou Hengshan, he had been consuming the Nature's Water and the golden dragon-serpent runes non-stop to keep himself alive. As a result, he had nearly used up every golden dragon-serpent rune in his possession. The golden dragon-serpent runes weren't just powerful healing items that could keep him alive at a critical time, but also useful resources that could improve his spiritual power and accelerate the creation of his Yin God. That was why he changed his mind and began his first proper grind in a long, long time.

For over a month, he explored nearly every nook and cranny of Carefree Mountain Range and slaughtered every Stranger he could find. He didn't really try to keep count, but he reckoned that he had killed around seventy to eighty Strangers in total. A good number of them were Soulstealer-class and Phenomenon-class Strangers too.

Maybe it was because he killed too many Strangers and caused too big a commotion, but a Disaster-class Stranger called the Old Man of the Mountain actually emerged from its hidey-hole to search for him. He was lucky to escape the Stranger's attention.

Realizing that he had overstayed his welcome, he ran away with his tail tucked between his legs and was out of Carefree Mountain Range on the same day.

Despite the unexpected interruption, his gains were something to write home about. After over a month of hard work, he had collected a total of ten golden runes, thirty plus silver runes, and countless gray runes. Finally, he could call himself a "wealthy" man.

Fighting so many Strangers of all shapes of sizes had definitely improved his control over his newfound strength. On top of that, he never stopped refining his stock of Profound Yellow Qi and growing his experience using Nanke. As a result, he was stronger in every way than who he was back at the Earthly Sovereign's Coffin.

In terms of physical strength and toughness alone, he was now more or less on par with a body-tempering late-stage Spirit Master. However, a body-tempering warrior abandoned the mind and only focused on building up the body. They didn't have a Yin God either as their way was to combine the essence, qi and spirit all into one perfect body.

He, on the other hand, wasn't a pure body-tempering warrior. His demonic thought had become so powerful that he could create a Yin God right now if he wanted to. Although he was still a late-stage Spirit Purifier, he was absolutely stronger than a body-tempering late-stage Spirit Master.

In short, he was a late-stage Spirit Master wearing the skin of a late-stage Spirit Purifier. *Worship me, mortals!*

Anyway, he was delayed for over a month at Carefree Mountain Range, and it had taken him another month to journey to Bei You. All in all, more than two months had passed when he finally arrived at Bei You.

Yi Pin had given him an address, so it took him little to no effort to reach the Temple of Divination.

Chapter 515: Longevity Village

The Temple of Divination was a very small temple. A small, shabby, and remote temple. Yi Pin was a senior and a champion before his fall from grace, so he thought for sure that his temple would be overflowing with riches and worship. Even if it wasn't, it should be massive and located on a flourishing street or something.

As usual, reality slapped him in the face. If the ugly scrawl on a wooden board at the entrance of the temple didn't say "Temple of Divination", he could walk past it a hundred times and never realize that it was the place he was searching for.

"He was actually telling the truth?" muttered Ye Qing as he examined the temple critically.

Back at the Earthly Sovereign's Coffin, when he said that he was going to pay Temple of Divination a visit, the old Taoist had tried to reject him with all his might. One of the main excuses he gave was that the Temple of Divination was shabby and had bad fengshui. At the time, he thought that the old Taoist was desperate to keep him away from his precious home, but now he realized that he was telling the truth. The temple was anything but presentable.

So, why did Yi Pin say that his temple had bad fengshui? Why, that was because it was located on the opposite side of a coffin shop. Imagine this: a customer had just finished praying to their deity and receiving a peek into their future, and the first thing they saw after they exited the building was a coffin shop. Was the Taoist implying that they should plan their funeral in the near future?

Seriously, the only way the temple's fengshui could be worse was if it was set opposite a graveyard.

Luckily, Ye Qing didn't mind the shabby conditions or bad fengshui. He was a fugitive looking to hide from his captors. As long as he had a roof over his head, he had no complaints to offer.

The door into the temple was shut, so Ye Qing stepped forward and rapped his knuckles on the door. He waited for a moment, but no one responded to his knocks.

Ye Qing frowned and released his demonic thought. He quickly discovered that no one was inside the temple.

I don't see Yi Pin or Longxiang[1] anywhere. They haven't actually run away, have they? Ye Qing thought to himself, though it was just a joke to himself. He could see that the temple was littered with daily necessities, and the food inside the kitchen looked fairly fresh. They must have bought it just a while ago. The courtyard looked pretty clean, and there were only a handful of leaves and dust piles here and there. This meant that someone had swept it recently.

All signs said that someone was living in the Temple of Divination in the past three or four days or so. It had to be Yi Pin and Li Longxiang. If they really wanted to run away, the place would have been abandoned months ago.

They're probably out on a shopping trip or something. I'll head inside first and wait for them to come back.

Ye Qing was about to push the door open when suddenly, he lowered his arm and turned around to face the coffin shop. An old man was standing at the entrance and examining him closely.

Time hadn't been kind to the old man. His face was covered in wrinkles and age spots, and his figure could only be described as skin and bones. He wore a ragged sheepskin shirt and hid both his hands in his sleeves as if he was cold.

Despite this, the old man stood with a straighter back than most. He reminded Ye Qing of a sword who would rather break than bend.

Before Ye Qing could say anything, the old man broke the silence first, "Are you looking for the old Taoist?"

"Yes, I'm looking for Reverend Yi Pin." Ye Qing nodded affirmatively before asking, "Do you know where he went, mister?"

The old man ignored him and asked another question, "Is your surname Ye?"

Ye Qing noticed that the old man had a very odd way of talking. The intonation of each word and the interval between each word spoken were exactly the same. It was almost like he was speaking to a robot.

Ye Qing squinted a little and asked, "Did Reverend Yi Pin tell you that?"

"It is you," the old man continued in his stiff, conservative, unhurried tone. "The old Taoist asked me to give you a message."

"He knew I was coming today?" Ye Qing frowned. The old man simply stared at him quietly.

You don't want to answer my questions. Fine. Ye Qing ranted mentally before asking, "What is the message?"

The old man answered, "'If I do not return in three days, come save me at Longevity Village.'"

“Longevity Village?” Ye Qing voiced his doubt. “What kind of place is Longevity Village? Why did he go there?”

A short silence later, the old man said, “I’m busy. Wen Shu will tell you everything you need to know.” Then, he turned around and went inside his coffin shop.

“Mister? Mister?!” Ye Qing hurriedly called out. *I get that you don’t want to talk with me, but you should at least tell me who Wen Shu is and where to find him, don’t you think?!*

Before he could give chase, he heard a youthful, lazy voice coming from inside the coffin shop.

“What is it, old man? Can’t you see that I’m practicing the sword?”

“Ow! Oof! S-Stop hitting me, old man! I’m gonna get angry if you hit me one more time—argh!”

“The hell’s gotten into you? I swear I would kick your ass if you aren’t so old!”

A bunch of yelling later, a young man hugging his head ran out of the coffin shop. He looked to be fifteen or sixteen years old, and he wore coarse linen clothes that were little better than rags. He cut a thin, short figure and had coarse, black skin as if he was malnourished. He carried a wooden sword on his waist.

“Ahem...”

Outside the coffin shop, the young man continued to yell at the old man when he caught Ye Qing out of the corner of his eyes. He immediately ceased his yelling, coughed, and said without a shred of shame, “I could’ve beaten that old man with a finger. The only reason I didn’t is because I’m a kind, merciful man who respects the old and cherishes the young. You believe me, right?”

Ye Qing smirked. “Sure I do. The whole world can tell me that I’m wrong, and I’ll still believe in you.”

The young man was only a Vessel Augmentor, and that old man felt like an ordinary person, so technically speaking, it wasn’t a lie. Assuming that the old man really was an ordinary person, of course.

The old man had poor vigor and terrible footing. On the surface, he really looked like an ordinary old man with one foot in the grave. However, his behavior and way of speech seemed to suggest otherwise.

“Hahaha! You’re a discerning man, friend!” The young man was delighted to hear Ye Qing’s reply. He looked like a kid trying to act like an adult as he took two steps forward and saluted Ye Qing. “My name is Wen Shu, and I’m happy to meet you, brother. I am fifteen years old, unmarried, and my dream is to become the greatest swordsman in the world.”

Ye Qing returned the salute. “Well met, Brother Wen. I am Joyless Ye, and I have no big ambitions. My only dream is to become the number one warrior in the world.”

They matched eyes for a moment before bursting into an uproarious laugh at the same time. At that moment, both men knew that they had encountered an interesting character.

A short while later, when they had both calmed down somewhat, Ye Qing asked, “So, what’s up with Reverend Yi Pin, Brother Wen? And what kind of place is this Longevity Village?”

“I’ll tell you about Longevity Village first.” Wen Shu began, “Longevity Village is a legend in Bei You. A few dozen kilometers to the west from here, it is said that a mysterious village named Longevity Village exists in Longevity Mountain. The village cannot be seen or entered via normal means unless specific conditions were met, but those who were successful would find their lifespans increased by several times that of an ordinary person’s. That is why the village came to be known as Longevity Village.”

Ye Qing’s eyes widened. “That sounds too good to be true.”

“It *is* too good to be true.” Wen Shu sneered. “There is no such thing as a free lunch. You cannot gain something without losing something.”

“It is true that those who entered Longevity Village would have their lifespan increased, but their friends and family will age ten times faster than a normal person. Can you imagine a boy turning into a hunchbacked old man in just a couple of years? Can you imagine a teenage girl turning wrinkly and ugly before she even got to enjoy her maiden years? It’s like they’re fueling their own lifespan with their friends and family’s.”

This is more like it, Ye Qing thought as he nodded. There was no such thing as free lunch even in his world, much less this one. “Is there no way to solve this?”

“No. If there was, I’ve never heard of it. It is said that those who entered Longevity Village do not remember how they got inside the village, what they experienced inside the village, and how they got out. How can you solve something that you know nothing about?”

Wen Shu shook his head. “There were people who committed suicide to save their friends and family from damnation, but it didn’t work. Some also tried to wait out the curse—as in they waited until all their friends and family were dead before making a new family—but their descendants still suffered from it.”

“Make no mistake, this so-called ‘blessing’ is one hundred percent a curse. The person would enjoy a long lifespan, but they can only watch their friends and family wither away like grass. They will never have someone in their life for as long as they live.”

Chapter 516: White Sand Fort

A moment of silence later, Ye Qing asked suddenly, “What would happen if someone who’s completely alone enters Longevity Village?”

Wen Shu looked surprised for a moment before lighting up. “That’s a bold idea. If you have no friends or family, then the curse can’t take place, but you will still enjoy an extended lifespan. You’d be killing two birds with one stone! You know, I almost feel like this Longevity Village is made for me.”

Wen Shu was saying this because he was an orphan.

Ye Qing smiled but didn’t give him a response. Personally, he didn’t think that things would be so simple. If he could come up with the idea, why not others?

Ye Qing pulled the conversation back on track. “So, how did Reverend Yi Pin get involved with the Longevity Village?”

Wen Shu slapped his head as if he couldn’t believe he almost forgot about his original objective. “I’m not too sure about the details myself, but three days ago, a group sought out the Reverend and said he wishes to visit the Longevity Village or something. Everyone here in Bei You knows that Longevity Village is *not* a place you want to get anywhere near to, and the Reverend was no exception. But for some reason, he changed his mind later on and agreed to guide them.”

“Before he left, he secretly spoke to the old man and asked him to call for help from a friend named Ye if he doesn’t return in three days. He was probably talking about you.”

Ye Qing thought for a moment before shooting another question, “What about Yi Pin’s disciple, Li Longxiang? Where is he, and how is he doing?”

“Longxiang?” Wen Shu scratched his head a little. “Now that you mentioned it, I haven’t seen the dunce in a long time. Where *is* he? Oh! I get it! They must have captured the dunce and used him to force the Reverend into submission! No wonder he changed his mind later on!”

Wen Shu might be young, but he was without a doubt a shrewd boy. He figured out the truth as soon as the words had passed his mouth.

“That is definitely one possibility,” Ye Qing echoed in agreement.

“Hmph! Those shameless bastards! One day, I will cut them all with my sword and cleanse this *jianghu*

of their filth!” Wen Shu unsheathed his wooden sword and swung it a couple of times in anger.

“Let’s go, bud! I’ll take you to Longevity Mountain and rescue the Reverend and his dunce!”

“Wait. Give me a moment.” Ye Qing caught Wen Shu before the young man could do anything rash and stepped toward the Temple of Divination.

“Where are you going?” Confused, Wen Shu tried to follow only for Ye Qing to shut the door in his face.

“Hmph! What’s he trying to hide?” Wen Shu sat his butt on the stairs and poked some unfortunate ants who happened to catch his eyes with his wooden sword. “Whatever. It’s not like I care about it.”

A dozen or so breaths later, the door opened, and Ye Qing stepped out into the open once more. Wen Shu rose to his feet, patted away the sand on his butt and asked, “Can we go now?”

“Not yet. There is one other thing that we need to do,” Ye Qing replied with intentional suspense.

“What is it now?” Wen Shu sounded displeased.

“You’ll find out in a bit.” Ye Qing gave him a pat on the head before asking, “Do you know where White Sand Fort is?”

“White Sand Fort?”

Wen Shu was trying futilely to stop Ye Qing from ruining his hairstyle, but the name “White Sand Fort” surprised him so much that he froze for a moment. He wrinkled his brows and asked with puzzlement, “Why do you want to know?”

“Because I have something to do, of course,” Ye Qing replied. “Just answer my question.”

“Of course I do, but...” Wen Shu’s eyes slowly widened in shock and horror. “You’re not planning to go there, are you?”

The second Ye Qing nodded his head, Wen Shu immediately cried, “You must be crazy! White Sand Fort is filled with bloodthirsty desert bandits! You’re going to get yourself killed!”

“Quit it with the theatrics and just tell me where it is already!” Ye Qing got impatient and flicked him in the forehead.

Wen Shu yelped in pain and wanted to rebuke Ye Qing for the unwarranted violence, but he immediately covered his forehead with both hands when he saw Ye Qing curled his fingers again. He answered obediently, “White Sand Fort is located at the White Desert to the north. Just travel five kilometers after leaving the city gates, and you will find a desert with sand that looks as white as snow. White Sand Fort is just up ahead.”

“The owner of White Sand Fort is a man named Sha Tongtian. They call him the Lord of White Sand. An early-stage Spirit Master, he...”

“You’re pretty well-informed, aren’t you?” Ye Qing exclaimed with surprise when Wen Shu was done with his detailed explanation. He only wanted to know where White Sand Fort was, but Wen Shu had told him their head’s identity, his strength, his martial arts, the amount of manpower he commanded, the things he had done and so on. It was definitely a pleasant and welcome surprise.

So, why did he want to know about White Sand Fort? It was because he asked the Annon Sutra about Li Longxiang and Yi Pin's whereabouts, and the vellum told him that Li Longxiang was at White Sand Fort, and Yi Pin was at Longevity Village, of course. His plan was to save Li Longxiang first before going after Yi Pin. If White Sand Fort really had captured Li Longxiang to coerce Yi Pin into guiding them to the Longevity Village, then he didn't mind making them pay the price of blood as well.

"Of course I know! There is nothing in Bei you that I, the greatest swordsman in the world, don't know about!" Wen Shu declared proudly when he heard Ye Qing's praise.

"Yeah, you did a great job. Thank you." Ye Qing gave him another head pat before getting ready to leave.

"Wait! You're not bringing me with you?" Wen Shu blurted in a hurry when he realized that Ye Qing was going to leave without him.

"Why would I?" Ye Qing turned back and shot him a smirk.

"Are you looking down on me?!" Wen Shu glared at him.

"What do you think?" Ye Qing snorted. *You're a Vessel Augmentor, for heavens sake.*

Wen Shu pointed his wooden sword at Ye Qing and declared loudly, "Hmph! How dare you look down on the greatest swordsman in the world! Come! We shall exchange three hundred blows with each other!"

"You can challenge me after you've actually become the greatest swordsman in the world." Ye Qing gave him one last head pat before leaving for real.

Wen Shu tried to give chase, but the distance between them kept growing by leaps and bounds. In just a few steps, the young man had lost track of Ye Qing completely. Left with no choice, he could only shout his displeasure, "Hmph! Just you wait! I will defeat you one day!"

A second later, he added, "You better come back, you bastard! I'll be waiting for you!"

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"So this is the White Desert. It definitely looks impressive."

Astonished, Ye Qing took a moment to admire the borderless white desert before his eyes. Pure and white, it almost felt like he was staring at a blank piece of paper. Even the sky was dyed white to the point where he could barely tell where the ends met. It made for one hell of a sight for sure.

Ye Qing grabbed a handful of sand and let it fall through his fingers. They were fine, soft, and felt no different from normal sand. The only thing that differentiated it from normal sand was its color.

After he was done admiring the view, Ye Qing took his first step into the desert. To say that he stood out like a sore thumb would be an understatement. Like a drop of ink dripping onto a blank piece of canvas, it was impossible to miss him even from dozens of kilometers away.

He had just taken a few steps when suddenly, a pair of white silhouettes burst out of the sand and swung their blades at his legs. In response, Ye Qing stared straight ahead and lightly stomped his foot.

The footprint on the sand looked shallow and, frankly, pathetic. A child could probably have left a deeper footprint than him. However, the attackers' blades abruptly shattered into pieces, and they themselves abruptly collapsed on the floor, unable to move even a muscle. Both men were looking up at Ye Qing in shock.

The white silhouettes were human. To be specific, they were desert bandits. The reason they looked indistinguishable from their surroundings until just now was because they wore white outfits, their skin was pale, and even their hair, eyebrows and pupils were white-colored.

Chapter 517: To Crush A Sand Castle

The two men were scouts from White Sand Fort, and they were responsible for monitoring the outskirts of White Desert.

Due to the uniqueness of White Desert, they could detect any intruder and report back to White Sand Fort at first notice.

Practically everyone knows that a sand bandit of White Sand Fort wore a white outfit and had white skin, white hair, white eyebrows, white pupils and more.

They wore a white outfit to make themselves indistinguishable from the white sand around them, and their physical features were white because they had stayed at White Desert for too long.

The reason White Desert earned its name was because everything within the desert was white. The sand, the rocks, the plants, the Strangers and more; everything in this desert was pure white in color. If an outsider were to linger in the sand for too long, they too would begin to turn white starting from their hair, their eyebrows, their skin, their pupils, and even the blood in their veins.

No one knew why this was happening, but the change in color was perfectly harmless. As a result, the desert bandits living in this place could easily conceal themselves or move about the White Desert without being detected. It was a powerful advantage that few could counter and one of the main reasons White Sand Fort was free to do whatever they wanted in Bei You.

One of the desert bandits finally recovered from their shock and threatened impotently, "Who are you? How dare you enter the White Desert without permission!"

In response, Ye Qing merely said, "Take me to White Sand Fort."

"Who are you? Do you know who we—" The first sand bandit was about to shoot another threat when his voice abruptly ceased to exist. The second sand bandit watched in shock and horror as Ye Qing rapped a finger against his colleagues' head and exploded it like an overripe watermelon.

"Looks like he doesn't want to comply with my demand. What about you?" Ye Qing withdrew his finger and looked at the remaining desert bandit.

"I will do as you say!" The desert bandit nodded immediately. He was terrified that he would follow in his colleague's footsteps if he was too slow.

“Good. You’ve already proven yourself to be smarter than the idiot.” Ye Qing asked, “What is your name?”

“My name is Wei Sanshi, warrior,” the desert bandit answered.

Ye Qing nodded and motioned for Wei Sanshi to lead the way. “Let’s go.”

Wei Sanshi obeyed without any objection. His colleague had lost his head because he couldn’t keep his mouth shut. He was hardly going to repeat his mistake.

At first, Wei Sanshi was perfectly obedient and didn’t dare to cause any trouble whatsoever. Over time, when he noticed that Ye Qing looked relaxed it was almost like he was taking a stroll in the park, he began harboring certain ideas.

He began leading Ye Qing across tightly guarded, booby-trapped routes. He was hoping that Ye Qing would be caught in one of the traps, and his colleagues would exploit the opportunity to save him.

At first, he was quite pleased with himself, and he was sure that it wouldn’t be long before Ye Qing would pay for his arrogance. However, he soon realized that something was amiss.

For one, his colleagues didn’t appear to rescue him. The traps were, for whatever reason, not working as well. There were times he saw his colleagues with his own eyes and did everything in his power to catch their attention, but they just ignored him almost as if they had fallen asleep.

Wen Sanshi wasn’t stupid. A couple encounters later, he realized that his captor must have something to do with it. He also realized that his captor was far, far stronger than he could fathom with his mind, so he dropped his petty little schemes completely and led Ye Qing to White Sand Fort.

White Sand Fort was a small fort; a defensible town to be exact. Back in the days, White Sand Fort was just a small village until a bunch of bandits occupied it, built the barbicans and watch towers, and transformed it into a fort with offensive and defensive capabilities. They then named it White Sand Fort and used it as their main headquarters.

By the time they finally reached White Sand Fort, the gates and walls were already filled with people. They were armed and ready to turn to violence at a moment’s notice.

Standing at the center of the group was a woman in her thirties. She had white features and wore a set of white clothes just like everyone else living in this place, and despite her aging features it was clear that she was a beautiful woman.

She didn’t look completely human though. She had a pair of vertical slit pupils, and her face and her arms were covered in tiny serpent scales. A white snake the size of a human arm was coiled around her neck as well.

While supporting the snake’s chin with one hand and caressing its head with the other, she looked down on Ye Qing and asked, “Hiss... If I may dare ask, who are you, and what business do you have with White Sand Fort?”

The woman’s voice sounded unnaturally cold and stiff. It almost felt like he was speaking to an icy stone, not a human. Not only that, a scarlet, forked tongue would flick out of her mouth from time to time.

“I’m looking for Sha Tongtian,” Ye Qing replied indifferently.

A hairless, browless man with fierce, hardened features standing next to the woman laughed loudly. “You want to meet our boss? Then you better tell us your name first. Our boss does not deign to speak with small fries, you see.”

His laugh abruptly ceased when Ye Qing abruptly disappeared from the ground and reappeared next to him. To say that everyone was caught off guard would be an understatement. They didn’t hesitate to attack Ye Qing, and the woman and the hairless man were the fastest of them all.

The white snake coiled around the woman’s neck shot toward Ye Qing’s neck like a lightning bolt, and the man aimed a powerful punch at his skull. As his arm stretched forward, white, needle-like hair grew out of his skin and threatened to skewer the young man.

Ye Qing paid them no attention, however. He simply raised his foot and stomped the floor.

Thunder roared, and the world shook like an earthquake. An enormous, invisible wave washed over the crowd, and they all collapsed on the floor as if someone had cut their strings, groaning. The man’s punch failed to hit anything, and the white snake withdrew back to the woman’s neck even faster than when it pounced toward Ye Qing.

That wasn’t the end, however. A series of ominous, creaking noises drew their attention, and when they looked down to see what it was, they saw cracks spreading out in every direction like a spider’s web. It wasn’t long before the entire section of the wall was covered in thin, densely-packed cracks, and it looked like the slightest shift of weight would collapse it all.

An unconscious gulp overcame everyone. Their skin color was already pale to begin with, but now it was completely white. To a certain extent, everyone was wondering if they were dreaming because their walls were made from the strongest cobblestone of the Gobi Desert and a mix of soil and the fresh blood of Hatred-class Strangers.

Not only were their walls supernaturally tough and impervious to the harsh elements of the desert, it could also conceal their vitality and prevent them from being attacked by Strangers. On top of that, Sha Tongtian hired many capable craftsmen to carve runes and restrictions into the walls and the fort.

White Sand Fort was nigh impenetrable when their defenses were active. In fact, one of the main reasons they were a powerful, unstoppable force in Bei You was thanks to the impregnability of their main headquarters.

Now, an unknown man had cracked their love and pride with his foot. Literally. If this wasn’t a dream, then what was?

“My apologies. I accidentally used a bit too much force there,” Ye Qing said smilingly. He meant to placate these people, but his smile only made them even more nervous than before.

“Calm down. I’m not here to make trouble for you. I’m just looking for someone,” Ye Qing added before looking down at the empty street and called out, “Can I speak with you now, Boss Sha?”

A few breaths later, a man emerged from a street corner. He was none other than Sha Tongtian.

Sha Tongtian was a notorious crime boss in Bei You, but he was only in his forties. For a warrior, one might even say that he was in the prime of his life. He had strong, hardened features and silvery hair. In this desert, it actually made him look rather attractive instead of old.

“I am here. Will you come down and speak with me?” Sha Tongtian said calmly while looking up at Ye Qing.

“Why not?”

Ye Qing jumped down to the street. As soon as he landed, the white sand across the entire street abruptly stirred unnaturally like the surface of boiling oil. Then, they took the shape of several hundred men and assumed an orderly formation. It was scary to say the least.

Chapter 518: Wine and Friend

“Is this how White Sand Fort treats its guests?” Ye Qing asked calmly.

“You show up uninvited and barge into our home without permission. Is this how you treat your hosts?” Sha Tongtian waved his arm, and the hundreds of sandmen charged toward Ye Qing at once.

“Hahaha! Fair enough.”

Ye Qing was chuckling, but the cold glint in his eyes told a different story. There was a soft noise underneath his foot, and he shot toward the formation like an arrow.

He would challenge an army by himself.

Bang bang bang!

Ye Qing and the hundreds of sandmen slammed into each other. When the dust settled, it was Ye Qing who came out on top.

In just the blink of an eye, Ye Qing had traveled from one end of the street to another. He then grabbed Sha Tongtian by the throat and slammed him into the wall behind him, forming a deep pit and a spider web of cracks.

Sha Tongtian wasn't done, however. A sea of sand was soaring in the sky behind him and howling like the end of the world itself. The ground itself was moving rapidly like a tsunami, threatening to swallow him whole.

Ye Qing ignored it all. Still grabbing Sha Tongtian's neck, he took one step forward and smashed that section of the wall into bits. Then, he continued forward and smashed through every wall who was unfortunate enough to stand in his way.

It wasn't long before he crossed over half of White Sand Fort and arrived at a massive, imposing-looking residence. He stomped the ground again, and suddenly the sandstorm behind him collapsed limply as if their invisible strings were cut.

Ye Qing then tossed Sha Tongtian aside, clapped his hands clean of sand, and raised his voice, “I know you don't want to see me, but I must speak with you, Boss Sha. Will you finally show yourself?”

The Sha Tongtian he just tossed aside crumbled into sand, and the gates creaked open several breaths later. Dozens of desert bandits in uniforms rushed out of the residence and surrounded him. The rooftops, the windows, the entrances and more were surrounded by desert bandits wielding blades or bows as well. They were all watching him nervously.

Ye Qing didn't do anything. He simply stood there with a calm, confident smile on his face.

It was at this moment a low, raspy voice cut through the tension. "Stand down. Brother Ye, please come in." It came from inside the residence.

The desert bandits immediately opened up a way and motioned for Ye Qing to head in.

There was no reason for Ye Qing to hesitate. He walked through the gates confidently like he owned the place.

The first thing he saw after he stepped inside was a massive tree. It was snow white in color and leafless. However, translucent fruits hung on its branches and gave off a faint, delicious scent.

A middle-aged man was sitting underneath the tree. He looked exactly the same as the fake Sha Tongtian from before. The genuine article.

From the start, Ye Qing knew that the Sha Tongtian who appeared before his eyes wasn't real. Not only that, he figured out that Sha Tongtian was not an early-stage Spirit Master like people thought him to be, but a late-stage Spirit Master. He also possessed a sublime martial art and a prodigious amount of spiritual power that allowed him to manipulate sand, summon hundreds of sand soldiers, and even create a near perfect copy of himself from several kilometers away. He was a formidable warrior to put it mildly. The rumors regarding the strength of Bei You definitely wasn't exaggerated.

This was why Ye Qing hadn't gone on a killing spree. He was here to rescue Li Longxiang, not make new enemies. He had to reveal some of his skills so that his foes wouldn't look down on him, but he made sure to avoid taking a life besides the first. If he killed too many people, then this could easily escalate into a full-blown war where neither side stood to gain anything.

"Please have a seat, Brother Ye."

Sha Tongtian poured Ye Qing a cup of tea and watched him. Ye Qing calmly took his seat, sniffed the tea once and joked, "I'm a guest from distant lands, and you couldn't even offer me a cup of wine, Boss Sha?"

Sha Tongtian elegantly sipped his own tea and replied, "I just have a habit of treating my friends and family with wine, and my important guests with tea. That's all."

Ye Qing drained his tea in one gulp and produced a jar of wine from Nine Heavens. He placed it on the table and declared, "Since you offered me tea, it's only right that I reciprocate with some wine. I hope you won't turn me down, Boss Sha?"

You said that you only treat your friends and family with wine, so if you accept my offering, then we will become friends.

"Why don't you state your business first?" Sha Tongtian set down his cup and asked, "What is your name, and why have you come to White Sand Fort, Brother Ye?"

Tell me your business first so I may know if it's serious or trivial, friendly or hostile. Only then I'll tell you if I accept your friendship.

"Straight to business, eh? Very well." Ye Qing smiled. "My name is Joyless, and I am a friend of Yi Pin."

Sha Tongtian responded slowly, "So?"

He knew Yi Pin of course. The old Taoist was the head of the Temple of Divination. He was just a small fry though.

"Yi Pin has a disciple named Li Longxiang, and he is my junior, I suppose." Ye Qing continued, "Your men captured him, and I would kindly request that you release him."

"Hmm? We did?" Sha Tongtian furrowed his brows slightly before waving someone over. "Go summon White Snake."

Ye Qing could tell that Sha Tongtian wasn't lying. He really didn't know about Li Longxiang's capture.

A short while later, the woman with the white snake coiled around her neck stepped in. She saluted Sha Tongtian and greeted him, "Boss!"

Sha Tongtian asked directly, "Did you capture a man named Li Longxiang recently? He's the disciple of Yi Pin, head of the Temple of Divination."

White Snake thought for a second before answering, "We have."

"Why?"

"Hiss... a few days ago, a client offered us one thousand silver to capture Li Longxiang. We do not know why."

"Do you know who the client is?" Sha Tongtian asked.

White Snake shook her head. "No. They never revealed their identity to us."

Sha Tongtian was silent for a moment. Then, he declared, "Bring Li Longxiang over."

"As you command!" White Snake received her order and left immediately.

After White Snake was gone, Sha Tongtian grabbed the jar of wine and poured himself a cup. After draining its contents in one gulp, he praised, "A superior quality Snowfire? What an excellent wine you have here."

"I'm glad that you enjoy it," Ye Qing replied smilingly.

A moment later, White Snake returned with four brawny men and Li Longxiang. Thick chains were wrapped around the young man's body, and his shoulder blades were pierced by metal. He was also covered in wounds from head to toe.

Despite his horrible appearance, Li Longxiang himself appeared quite vigorous. In fact, he kept struggling as he walked and caused the four brawny men to stagger from time to time. They probably wouldn't be able to control him if even one of them was missing.

Moreover, Li Longxiang's vigor roared like a flood trapped inside a furnace, and his steps felt as firm and heavy as a dragon. One might say that he was a dragon elephant in human skin. His physical strength was so, so much stronger than what it was back then, and he was now an Astral Refiner.

This was just his apparent strength. If he activated his Crimson Dragon Demon Ox bloodline, then his strength would become several times greater.

"Why are you tying him up?" Sha Tongtian asked on purpose even though he knew the answer.

White Snake replied, "This man is incredibly strong, boss. It'll be incredibly difficult to control him without restraints."

It was at this moment Li Longxiang spotted Ye Qing and exploded with shock and joy. He immediately rushed toward him while yelling, "Senior uncle! Senior uncle!"

The four men who were restraining him actually lost their footing. They were dragged helplessly behind his back until Li Longxiang finally reached Ye Qing.

"It looks like you're having a good time, bud!" Ye Qing placed a hand on Li Longxiang's shoulder, and the young man that not even four men could control abruptly came to a dead stop.

"My apologies for my men's poor treatment of your junior, Brother Ye. I hope you won't mind."

Sha Tongtian was surprised by Li Longxiang's strength, but only a little. After all, he was nothing compared to Ye Qing.

Li Longxiang's outburst seemed to confirm that Ye Qing wasn't lying about their relationship though.

"You exaggerate, Boss Sha. This boy is as tenacious as he is strong. He will recover in no time," Ye Qing replied while swiping his hand across Li Longxiang's chains and snapping them all in half.

"You are a forgiving man, Brother Ye."

Sha Tongtian felt his eyelids twitching a little. The chains were forged using Nine Refined Metal, and Ye Qing had snapped it as easily as tofu. What a monster.

Chapter 519: Water In The Sky, Moon On The Ground

"They're bad people, senior uncle!" Li Longxiang complained to Ye Qing, his "senior uncle's" appearance giving him the courage to voice his displeasure. In his head, his master and his senior uncle were powerful and invincible.

“Longxiang! Control yourself!” Ye Qing rebuked the young man before clasping his hands in apology. “He’s still a child. He didn’t really mean his words. I hope you won’t take offense, Boss Sha.”

There was no need to offend Sha Tongtian since White Sand Fort wasn’t the true mastermind behind Li Longxiang’s capture, and the man himself was a powerful warrior.

Sha Tongtian replied indifferently, “Your junior isn’t wrong. We are bad people. Then again, how many people in Bei You are truly good?”

Ye Qing ignored Sha Tongtian’s musing and said, “Thank you for your benevolence, Boss Sha.” He then rose to his feet and bade him goodbye, “My business is done here. If there is nothing else, then we shall take our leave immediately, Boss Sha.”

Sha Tongtian asked, “Are you really in such a hurry, Brother Ye? I’ve already ordered the men to whip us a delicious meal. You might as well stay for a moment and enjoy lunch with me.”

Ye Qing turned him down. “Unfortunately, my next order of business is quite urgent. Perhaps next time, Boss Sha.”

Sha Tongtian sighed regretfully. “It’s a shame.”

Ye Qing smiled. “We are friends already, aren’t we? I might not be able to drink with you this time, but there is always the next time.”

“That is true. In that case, I bid you good luck in your ventures.” Sha Tongtian nodded.

“Thank you for your understanding. Until another time.” Ye Qing laughed. “Let’s go, Longxiang!”

“Yes, senior uncle,” Li Longxiang replied obediently and fell behind Ye Qing. The duo began walking toward the exit when suddenly, Ye Qing looked back as if he just recalled something, “Oh right, I almost forgot to ask. Do you know who’s the one who requested the capture of Longxiang, Miss White?”

White Snake shook her head without hesitation. “I don’t know. They never revealed themselves from the start until the end. They paid us to do a job, so we did the job for them. That is all.”

“Understood. Thank you for clarifying, Miss White.” Ye Qing smiled and added, “No need to see us off, Boss Sha. Until another day!”

After Ye Qing and Li Longxiang were gone, White Snake began, “Boss...”

Before she could say anything else, Sha Tongtian raised a hand to stop her. Then, he waved his hand once. The surrounding desert bandits picked up on his meaning, saluted him and took their leave immediately.

After everyone was gone, Sha Tongtian wobbled a little and clutched the tree next to him. His skin began to turn coarse and wrinkly, and sand seemed to be slipping off his face. In just a few breaths, his eyes, ears, nose and mouth disappeared and left behind gaping orifices.

“Are you okay, boss?” White Snake blanched and asked worriedly.

“Don’t worry. I’m fine.” Sha Tongtian waved off her concern. A dozen or so breaths later, he sucked in a deep breath, and the sand on the ground flew up and poured into his orifices. It wasn’t long before his face looked normal once more.

“You wanted to know why I let them go, didn’t you? This is why.”

White Snake was silent for a moment. “Is he really that strong?”

“If we fight to the death, it’s a coin toss whether I win or lose, live or die,” Sha Tongtian replied in an indifferent tone. “Why make an enemy out of someone like that when we can be friends instead? Besides, we are trading a useless person for a useful person’s favor. It’s a win no matter how you look at it.”

White Snake said nothing for a moment. “Perhaps, but we have broken the rules of our trade with this act. How are we going to explain this to our client?”

“Rules?” Sha Tongtian let out a cold, mirthless chuckle. “The strong make the rules, and the weaklings obey them. I’m the one who made the rules, so of course I can change them whenever I like. If our ‘client’ is foolish enough to ask us for compensation after they return from their business, then we’ll have the perfect opportunity to kill them all. It’s their fault for being weak, don’t you agree?”

White Snake licked her lips and hissed. “You are right, boss. So, what do we do about him?”

Sha Tongtian ordered, “Look into his background, but do it discreetly. I don’t want him to catch a whiff of our operations.”

“Understood, boss.”

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“Why have you come to Bei You, senior uncle?”

Li Longxiang had mostly recovered by the time they left the White Desert. He was currently eyeing his senior uncle with a look of excitement in his eyes.

“To pay you and your master a visit, of course.” Ye Qing smiled. “How did they capture you, Longxiang?”

Li Longxiang scratched his head and answered, “I was buying food at the market when suddenly, a couple of passersby ambushed me and captured me. Then, they took me to White Sand Fort.”

“Did they mention why they captured you?” Ye Qing asked.

“No.” Li Longxiang shook his head.

Ye Qing didn’t feel disappointed since he had anticipated this answer. “This is where we part ways, Longxiang. I’ll see you another day.”

“Won’t you come back with me, senior uncle?” Li Longxiang asked. “I’m sure master will be very happy to see you!”

“I have something I need to take care of. I’ll visit the two of you in a couple days,” replied Ye Qing. Clearly, Li Longxiang had no idea that Yi Pin had left for Longevity Village with his captors.

Ye Qing added, “Speaking of which, your master is not at the temple right now. He’s left for some sort of business, so don’t worry about him, alright?”

He told Li Longxiang a white lie because he didn’t want the young man to run off on his own. That would only make it harder to rescue Yi Pin.

“Okay,” Li Longxiang replied without suspecting a thing. Yi Pin must be absent pretty often if this was the young man’s response.

There was a chance Wen Shu might slip up and tell Li Longxiang the truth, but Ye Qing wasn’t worried. Wen Shu was a cunning brat. Even if he hadn’t informed him about this, there should be no chance he would commit such a mistake.

“I’m leaving now. Take care, senior uncle,” Li Longxiang said.

“Yeah.” Ye Qing nodded and gave him one last instruction, “Stay inside the temple and don’t go anywhere unless absolutely necessary, understand?”

“Oh. Got it.” Li Longxiang didn’t question the instruction and nodded obediently. He bowed to Ye Qing again before he finally took off toward the city.

After Li Longxiang was gone, Ye Qing immediately took off toward Longevity Mountain. Every second he delayed was a second Yi Pin might fall into greater danger.

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Despite its name, Longevity Mountain was really a series of barren, interconnected hills. Vegetations were sparse, and desolation was everywhere.

No one knew how the mountain came to earn its name. Maybe it was because Longevity Village came first, and people eventually associated it with the village. Maybe it was the other way around, or maybe it had originated from something else completely. As far as the people and records were concerned, there was a mysterious village called Longevity Village in the mountains named Longevity Mountain.

To reach Longevity Village, one must first enter the Longevity Mountain. However, not everyone who entered the Longevity Mountain could reach the Longevity Village. To this day, no one knew an exact way to find and enter Longevity Village, not even those who had entered the place before.

Most people claimed that entering Longevity Mountains during the night was the key to finding Longevity Village, but there were plenty of people who tried that and turned up with nothing. From this, one could deduce that there were some other conditions one must meet before they could enter Longevity Village, but no one could say for certain what it was.

Thankfully, Ye Qing knew a way. When in doubt, ask the Annon Sutra!

Ye Qing pulled out the Annon Sutra and asked, “How do I enter Longevity Village?”

He then channeled his internal force and spat out multiple globs of blood onto the piece of vellum.

A short while later, the blood came together and formed a single line: “Water in the sky, moon on the ground.”

Ye Qing frowned deeply. He recognized each and every word on the vellum, but he couldn’t make heads or tails of them when they were put together in a sentence.

How could water exist in the sky?

How could the moon appear on the ground?

It was one thing if it was the other way around—water on the ground, moon in the sky—but this? This made no sense at all.

“Why must you riddle me so? I know you can give me a straight answer,” Ye Qing muttered under his breath as he put the Annon Sutra away. Once done, he began racking his brain for an answer.

Chapter 520: Longevity In Water

“Water in the sky, water in the sky...”

Ye Qing thought long and hard while staring blankly at the dark skies above his head and tapping the ground with his fingers.

Rumble!

It was at this moment he heard a distant thunder. The sky was absolutely jam-packed with black clouds, and the wind howled like a furious god.

“It’s going to rain soon,” Ye Qing sensed the humidity in the clouds when suddenly, his eyes lit up. “The rain? That’s the ‘water in the sky’, isn’t it? It has to be!”

He looked down on the ground. “If the first line of the riddle refers to the rain, then the second line must mean the moon’s reflection!”

Sometimes, the answer came very easily once you had gotten your first breakthrough. A new question quickly confounded Ye Qing though. “But what does it *mean*, really? So, the water in the sky refers to the rain, and the moon on the ground refers to the moon’s reflection in a pool of water. But... how can the moon appear in a clouded sky like this?”

Ye Qing scratched his nose for a moment before snapping his fingers in realization. “I get it! When the rain ends, and the sky clears up, the moon’s reflection will appear in the puddles on the ground. Only then can both conditions be met.”

So, he waited. Rain droplets soon fell from the sky, but unlike the soft, comfortable drizzle of Luo Shui, the rain of Northern Xinjiang was violent, wild, and reeked of the earth due to its powerful winds. Unfortunately...

“The rain’s too small, and this is the peak of the mountain. I won’t find a puddle in this place.”

Longevity Mountain was a series of barren hills with little vegetation and extremely dry soil, so it was difficult for puddles to accumulate in the first place. This was doubly true in tall places where the rain was at its weakest.

That was why he needed to travel to the lowlands where the rain was at its strongest. Only then there was a chance he might find the puddle he was searching for.

Ye Qing kicked off the ground with his movement art and began speeding toward the center of the black clouds.

Luckily for him, he found a suitable spot where the rain was stronger, and the ground was low-lying just a teatime later. Despite standing in the middle of a raging downpour, his astral qi kept the rain from wetting a single hair on his body. The patch of ground he was standing on was perfectly dry as well.

The rain of Northern Xinjiang left as quickly as it came. It wasn't long before the raging downpour came to a complete halt, though the sky remained as clouded as ever.

"Let's hope there's going to be a moon tonight!" Ye Qing shrugged helplessly as he stared at the thick clouds above his head. He wanted to locate the Longevity Village and rescue Yi Pin as soon as possible as well, but what could he do if the weather refused to cooperate with him[1]?

Luckily for Yi Pin, the heavens decided to be less cruel to him today. The dark clouds dispersed just four hours later, and a beautiful moon burst out into the open. The puddles immediately started glittering with light as well, phantasmal and beautiful.

A few seconds later, what looked like a village appeared in the wobbling puddles. It was well-lit and seemingly peaceful.

"Is that... Longevity Village?!"

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes. *Longevity Village exists inside the water?! I thought the rumors said that it's somewhere in the mountains?*

When Ye Qing carefully probed the puddle with his demonic thought, the wobbling abruptly grew much more intense. However, the image of Longevity Village only grew bigger and clearer as if it was crossing over from a world of illusion into reality. Words couldn't describe how strange and unusual the process was. It kept growing and growing and growing and finally, a few breaths later, a small village appeared at the center of the hills as if it had always been there.

"So that's Longevity Village!"

Ye Qing watched the village for a moment. It looked well-lit and very peaceful. Like a light of hope amidst the overwhelming darkness of the night, it was overflowing with vitality, warmth, and the promise of comfort. His demonic thought couldn't sense a shred of anomalous or evil energy from the village either. As far as he could tell, it was a perfectly ordinary village.

A moment of observation later, Ye Qing decided that he couldn't glean anything from where he was standing and began walking toward the village. It looked like the only way he could rescue Yi Pin was to enter the village as well.

As soon as he stepped through the entrance, he felt as if he had entered a different space. The winding hills behind his back suddenly vanished into nothing, and his demonic thought failed to sense the exit that was right behind him until a moment ago.

It was too late for regrets though, and frankly, Ye Qing wasn't too worried about his safety. He continued to venture deeper into the village.

"Huh? Where are you from, boy? The hell are you doing at our humble village?"

Suddenly, a childish but strangely mature voice rang beside him. When Ye Qing looked, he saw a boy about twelve to thirteen years old smoking from a pipe and watching him on a stone bench in front of a house.

"You should speak to your elders politely, boy," Ye Qing chided him while wondering how precocious the children of this region were. It wasn't every day he met a young boy smoking a pipe like no tomorrow after all.

"Who are you calling a boy?! I'm old enough to be your dad, *boy!* How rude can you be?!" The boy flew into a rage and pointed his smoking pipe at Ye Qing's face. He looked like he might smack Ye Qing in the knee at any moment.

"It sounds like he's swearing at me, but nah, that can't be!" Ye Qing muttered under his breath before continuing in a kind tone, "Someone as young as you shouldn't boast, boy. It's going to be a bad habit in the future." *And it's going to get you an ass-kicking if you're not careful.*

"Boasting? You think I'm *boasting?!!*" The boy turned beet red with anger. "Wait right there!"

He then turned toward the entrance and yelled, "Woman! Will you round up our son and daughter-in-law and come out right now?!"

"I'm busy! What's the problem?" An impatient voice came from inside the house.

"Just do as I say, woman! Less words, more action!" The boy yelled louder.

"Fine, fine. Seriously, what's the hurry?" The second voice replied with growing impatience. Then, a girl about twelve to thirteen years old stepped out of the door. She was followed by a younger boy and a girl who looked to be around seven or eight years old.

"What's gotten into you, old man? Don't you know that I'm cooking?" The older girl spat while glaring at the boy.

The younger boy and girl behind her also asked, "Yeah, dad. What's the matter?"

The boy took a puff of smoke and side-eyed Ye Qing with disdain. "It's nothing big. I just wanna introduce our *family* to a guest, that's all."

“Are they your wife, your son and his wife?” Ye Qing blinked in disbelief. *Surely they’re just playing house!*

“Who else can they be? I’m sixty-nine this year! Of course I have a wife, a son and a daughter-in-law! It’s perfectly normal, isn’t it?” The boy watched Ye Qing calmly.

Ye Qing: “...”

Normal?

I’m an adult, and I don’t even have a girlfriend, and you, a kid, are telling me that you have a wife, a son and even a daughter-in-law? Does that make sense to you?

Wait—sixty-nine?

Ye Qing’s brain started up again. “Did you just say you’re sixty-nine years old?”

“But of course!” The boy took another puff of smoke. “I’ll be seventy in a couple more days. It’s also me and my beloved wife’s anniversary!”

“Why are you telling an outsider about this?” The girl standing next to him turned a little red and punched him lightly.

“Why not? It’s not like it’s a secret!” The boy chuckled and held her hand gently. “By the way, you’re free to attend our anniversary if you want to, boy!”

Ye Qing: “...”

This feeling of being one-upped by kids is...

“You don’t think I look sixty-nine, do you?” The boy suddenly let out a chuckle. “Do you know where you are right now?”

“The Longevity Village!” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. This was the Longevity Village, and anyone who entered this place would enjoy a lifespan that was several longer than their ordinary counterparts. It made sense that the villagers were just as long-lived, if not more so.

A sixty-nine years old man who looks like twelve is insane though. Like wow.

“Ahem... sorry for my poor attitude. I hope you’ll accept my apology,” Ye Qing bowed and apologized to the “children”.

Right now, he had no idea what kind of place Longevity Village was. Naturally, he wasn’t going to leap into a hissy fit or something, not to mention the children—the *old* children—didn’t seem to harbor any malice toward him. He should lie low and try and squeeze as much information as possible from them.