

Stranger 551

Chapter 551: Is That You, Captain Gui?

Of course, using the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma came at a huge cost.

First, the user must sacrifice their fingers to use it. The more fingers they sacrificed, the more potent the effects.

Second, the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma was a living object. Naturally, it was filled with stomach acid and half-digested food. The user must withstand not just its horrible stench, but also the corrosive stomach acid. If they stayed inside the stomach for too long, there was a huge chance they might join the pool of digestive juice themselves.

That said, the bigger the price paid, the more potent a Strange Artifact became. That was the case for the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma. Not only could it temporarily disappear from the real world, it could even depart the space it had disappeared from without being detected.

Sixth Mouse had a lot of enemies as a matter of course, and he never failed to escape them using the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma... until now. He had no idea what the young man did, but he somehow forced him out of his pocket space and even dealt him a serious blow.

Regret like never before gripped Sixth Mouse. He knew the folly of overstaying his welcome, didn't he? He was going to call it a day and go about his merry business, didn't he? So why oh why did he get greedy and succumb to the temptation of one last heist?

It sure looked like it was going to be the last heist of his life alright. The dangerous presence behind him was getting closer and closer despite his best efforts to escape, and his face grew whiter and whiter as a result. Despair was slowly but surely overcoming Sixth Mouse.

It was at this moment a group of people approached from a distance. The leader of the group was a huge, muscular man that looked more bear than human. He was carrying a massive, blood red axe behind his back. His followers were massive as well. Nearly all of them stood half a body taller than the surrounding crowd, and they were all carrying a massive axe on their shoulders. They reeked of blood and roguishness.

It didn't take a genius to know that they were a group of violent murderers who had killed more than they could count.

Unlike most others, this group did not care if they offended the people around them. Every time someone stood in their way, they would violently shove them out of the way while yelling expletives the entire time. Their attitude was as flagrant as their actions.

Furious as they were, their victims took one look at them before choosing to stay silent. Those standing in front of the group also chose to move out of their way before they were moved out of the way.

Sixth Mouse had a different idea, however. When he saw the group, he immediately pounced toward them like he had found his saviors.

"Boss Xiong, help! Someone is trying to rob me!"

"What the fuck?!"

Try putting yourself in the leader's shoes. You were strolling down a street with your head held high when suddenly, a wet, extremely smelly thing suddenly ran toward you at top speed. What would you do in this situation?

The big man did not even think. He immediately grabbed his axe and swung it at the incoming object.

Boom!

A red light severed heaven and earth. Sixth Mouse never expected his would-be savior to attack him, not to mention that the attack was beyond powerful. The axe force split him in half and killed him before he could react[1].

The axe force didn't just split Sixth Mouse in half, or rather, Sixth Mouse was nowhere tough enough to diminish its power in the slightest. It continued forward and severed a couple of unfortunate passersby in half as well.

Seeing this, Ye Qing dashed forward and blocked in front of the axe force before it could cause any more harm. He then grabbed it with his bare hand, squeezed, and shattered it into smithereens.

Meanwhile, the big man was glancing left and right with a ferocious look on his face. "What the fuck! Who's the bastard who tried to ambush me with shit? I swear I'll tear them a new asshole with my axe!"

"Ahem... I don't think that's shit, brother. I think that's a person," one guy next to the big man spoke up.

"A person? Are you sure? What kind of person looks and smells like pure shit?" The big man did not believe him.

"No really, look. It has a head, a body, a pair of arms and legs, and even a bunch of intestines!" Another guy joined in.

"Huh. It does look like a person." The big man bent down and looked the body up and down while pinching his nose tightly. "Wait a second. Is it just me, or does he look familiar for some reason?"

"Senior Mouse... I think he's Senior Mouse!" Someone exclaimed in surprise.

"It's him alright. Look at the bag behind his back. You never see him without his precious Strange Artifact!" A guy echoed in agreement.

"Sixth Mouse?" The big man squinted a little harder. "Huh. It really is that mouse. Who's the bastard who killed my brother? I'm gonna kill him if it's the last thing I do!"

Someone coughed. "Ahem... boss. You're the one who killed him."

"Oh right, I did, didn't I? Never mind then." The big man scratched his head before voicing his confusion. "But why did Sixth Mouse run into my axe of his own choice? Is he crazy, suicidal, or both?"

“Er, I wasn’t really paying attention, but I think he was crying for help before you killed him, boss,” someone answered.

“Crying for help? Are you sure?” The big man continued to scratch his head in puzzlement.

“I think so, boss.” The underling standing next to him nodded.

“If he’s crying for help, then someone must be trying to kill him.”

The big man’s eyes grew as wide as bronze bells as he slammed the butt of his axe on the ground, causing a huge pit as a result. As he scanned his surroundings with his hawk eyes, he roared, “Who is the bastard who tried to kill my brother? Show yourself so I can send you to his grave!”

A tidal wave of killing intent washed out of him, and it was so thick it was almost tangible. Scalp crawling, the surrounding people immediately backed away from the big man until a clearing appeared. The only one still standing in the clearing was the group... and Ye Qing.

“Are you the bastard who tried to kill my brother, boy?” The big man affixed his gaze on Ye Qing and snarled.

The big man was three meters tall and as wide as the broad side of a barn[2]. If he was a bear, then Ye Qing was like a little lamb who accidentally stumbled into the territory of a pack of bears.

Ye Qing did not react to the big man’s intimidation, however. He simply said slowly, “I was chasing him, yes, but I wasn’t going to kill him. I was just going to take back the item he stole.”

“He stole from you? What did he steal?” the big man asked.

“An invitation letter. You can check his Nature’s Shell if you don’t believe me,” Ye Qing answered.

“You, go check out Sixth Mouse’s Nature’s Shell.” The big man gestured at one of his followers. His follower obeyed and dug through the goo of blood and vomit without complaint.

A short while later, his follower found what he was looking for and checked its content. He confirmed, “Boss, it’s as he said. There really are a bunch of invitation letters inside the Nature’s Shell.”

“No, wait. These are all invitation letters to the Trueman feast!” Someone exclaimed in excitement.

The big man’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that’s awesome! With these invitation letters, we can bring a couple more brothers with us to the Bodhisattva’s sermon!”

“Ahem...”

Ye Qing wasn’t expecting Sixth Mouse to carry this many invitation letters with him either. At a glance, there were at least seven or eight invitation letters in the Nature’s Shell. The problem was

that the group was obviously plotting to claim the invitation letters for himself, so he coughed and said politely, "Excuse me, can I please have my invitation letter back?"

"Your invitation letter?" The big man stared at him with his big eyes. "And what proof do you have that the invitation letter is yours? Will it fly back to your hand if you call its name?"

Ye Qing: "... *Do you think I'm Sun Wukong or something?*

"My name is Joyless Ye. One of the invitation letters has my name on it," Ye Qing explained patiently. He seriously did not want to get into more trouble if he could help it. He would leave as soon as he reclaimed his invitation letter.

"Boss, it's as he said. His name is on the invitation letter," someone pulled out an invitation letter and said.

"Huh?" The big man began furrowing his eyebrows in displeasure. "Who gave you the right to write your name on my invitation letter?"

Ye Qing: "... *Is that you, Captain Gui?* [3]

Ye Qing sighed. "I have other proof that will prove that the invitation letter is mine."

"Oh yeah? What is it?" The big man asked.

"Give me the invitation letter, and I'll show you the proof," Ye Qing answered.

"Hah! Do you think I'm stupid? What if I gave you the invitation letter, but you refuse to return it to me?" The big man sneered. "Plus, this is *my* stuff. Why should I give it to you?"

"You leave me no choice then." Ye Qing sighed again. The big man didn't look like the brightest bulb, so he was hoping that he could trick him into giving up the invitation letter. But now, he had no choice but to take it by force.

As soon as he finished, Ye Qing blurred and appeared in front of the big man.

Despite his size, the big man wasn't slow in the slightest. He immediately swung his axe at Ye Qing. Judging from the sheer power behind the attack, it could split even a boulder in half, much less a flesh-and-blood person.

Some of the bystanders even looked away because they didn't want to taint their eyes with the gruesome sight.

Chapter 552: My Name Is Big Bear, and I Am Not Embarrassed

The next moment, shock rippled across the crowd like a tidal wave, but it was a different kind of shock.

There were neither flying limbs nor spraying blood. The cruel murder they had envisioned did not happen at all.

Instead, they saw two fingers catching the falling blade like it was a feather.

Have you ever seen a child holding up a mountain with two hands?

It was like that. As stunning as it was ludicrous.

The big man was no ordinary person. He was the gang boss of the Blood Axe Gang and an early-stage Spirit Master, Big Bear. And no, he did not have a younger brother called Little Bear. What kind of family would that be?

If cultivation was all Big Bear had, then he wouldn't be as feared as he was. He was also a Strangerkin with the bloodline of the Mountain Flipping Bear. A Phenomenon-class Stranger famed for its physical strength and tenacity, it was said to be capable of flipping over a mountain like it was a toy. In fact, the feat was how it got its name in the first place.

Since Big Bear possessed the Mountain Flipping Bear's bloodline, he naturally inherited its abilities as well. He was tall and muscular, tough and strong. His strength in particular completely exceeded what a normal human warrior should be able to achieve. Once upon a time, he had physically torn a middle-stage Spirit Master in half with his bare hands. To call him monstrously strong would be an understatement.

But now, a young man had caught his full-powered strike with two fingers. Two. Fingers.

Was this not shocking?

Was this not ludicrous?

Something even more shocking and ludicrous happened then. As Big Bear let out an angry roar, black fur grew out of its arms, and a pair of fangs from the corners of his mouth. His muscles swelled, and his clothes were ripped apart as he grew an entire size bigger. A violent, terrifying aura washed out into the surroundings, and the ground beneath his feet split into cracks. Right now, he looked just like a demonic, man-eating bear.

“RAAAAAHHH!!!”

Big Bear roared again and pushed down again with a savage snarl. A ring appeared around their feet before the earth abruptly exploded and formed a deep pit.

Still, the fingers holding the massive axe did not so much as tremble.

Still, Big Bear's axe could not push an inch closer toward Ye Qing.

“This cannot be happening!”

Big Bear's eyes turned bloodshot as his right hand released its grip on the axe. Then, he raised a fist high into the air before punching the butt of the axe with all he got.

Boom!

A powerful shockwave kicked up a ton of dust and knocked countless people off their feet. For a time, chaos reigned across the entire street.

When the chaos finally settled down a little, and the dust clouds had subsided completely, the people saw a massive pit at the center of the street.

Big Bear was the only one in the pit, however. Ye Qing was nowhere to be seen.

Right now, Big Bear was panting heavily and looking as white as a sheet. The axe was now just a stick since the blade had been completely obliterated by the punch.

Is he dead?

Did Big Bear punch that poor man into oblivion after all?

Similar thoughts were crossing everyone's mind, but they immediately wondered why they couldn't find a sign of the young man anywhere. Even if they assumed that the attack had obliterated the young man completely, surely he would have left behind at least a drop of blood, right?

Big Bear's ugly expression did not resemble an expression of victory either.

Suddenly, one of Big Bear's subordinates cried out, "Huh? Where's the invitation letter? How did it vanish all of a sudden?"

He was the guy holding Ye Qing's invitation letter. The item had suddenly gone missing after that big attack. How was that possible?

"Where's that boy, boss? Did you evaporate him with your punch or something?"
Someone asked.

"Shut up!"

Big Bear wheeled around and glared at his subordinate furiously like a wounded beast.

Had he won?

Of course not. Not even close.

He had thrown every ounce of strength he possessed into that punch. It was as strong as the full-powered attack of a body-tempering middle-stage Spirit Master. However, the axe was unmoved, and the young man's fingers remained as stable as a mountain when his fist smashed into the back of the blade. For a moment, he felt as powerless as an ant trying to topple a mountain.

The next moment, his eyes widened in horror. The young man tightened his grip just a bit, and the giant axe—a Strange Artifact he had forged using Blood Copper—shattered into pieces almost as if it was made of rust.

The young man disappeared after that. He had no idea where he went.

From the start until the end, he wasn't able to gain any sort of advantage over the young man whatsoever. No, it was worse. It was like the battle between a child and a full-grown adult. It wasn't even a fight. It was a one-sided beating, and he was the child on the receiving end of the whip.

He had never lost so horribly since he awoke his Mountain Flipping Bear bloodline; had never been humiliated this badly until now. But more than his rage and shame, it was overwhelming despair that dominated his thoughts.

The young man was like an insurmountable mountain. He would never be able to reach its peak, much less overcome it for as long as he lived. There was just no hope for him to defeat the young man whatsoever.

So, what was he going to do now?

He wasn't going to do shit, of course. The young man had already shown him mercy by letting him live. He would have to be crazy to harass him further.

He might be simple-minded, but he wasn't stupid!

After waiting for a while and receiving no further comments from Big Bear, one of his subordinates asked carefully, "What do we do now, boss?"

"What else? We find a place and drink some wine to celebrate all the invitation letters we got! C'mon!" Big Bear slapped his chest and took off in a random direction.

Did something happen just now? No, not at all.

He didn't feel embarrassed either. Embarrassment could only infect you if you allowed it.

"What are you looking at? Get lost!"

Big Bear waved for the crowd to get out of his way and left with his men just like that.

As for what happened to Sixth Mouse, again, he did not know who that guy was. If someone wanted to take a gander at that disgusting pool of gore, then that was their prerogative. He wanted nothing to do with it.

After Big Bear's group was gone, the crowd suddenly exploded into loud murmurs like a pot of boiling kettle. Everyone was discussing the short battle, taking guesses at Ye Qing's background and more. It would be a long, long time before the gossiping finally subsided.

The main character of the incident had no idea about this though. He was already on the way up to the peak of Blissful Mountain.

Ye Qing did not want to blow up the matter. That was why he left immediately after teaching Big Bear a lesson and reclaiming his invitation letter.

Besides that, he had also stolen the Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact known as the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma. He couldn't possibly walk away from a fight without claiming some loot, right?

He wanted it because of its ability to traverse space and conceal both itself and its user. Sure, it was a little disgusting to use, but it was absolutely one of, if not the best escape-type Strange Artifacts he had seen so far.

Earlier, he had lost track of Sixth Mouse completely after he used the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma. He had no choice but to employ his full strength and force him back into the open.

If Sixth Mouse had used this Strange Artifact while he was still a distance away from him, if he hadn't activated it right in front of his face, he might actually have succeeded in running away.

Unfortunately for Sixth Mouse, what ifs only existed in fiction.

Since Sixth Mouse was dead in reality, it seemed only right that he, his killer, claimed his legacy.

Back in the present, Ye Qing was pondering how best to utilize the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma while admiring the scenery of Blissful Mountain.

Blissful Mountain was both massive and beautiful. Clear streams were flowing down the mountain behind the cover of a lush, green forest, and Buddhist temples, towers, pavilions and more were everywhere. It possessed both the solemn dignity of Buddhism and the natural wonders of nature. Picturesque was the perfect adjective to describe it.

He was about halfway up the mountain when he arrived at a spot where both sides of the road were filled with statues of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and celestial women. A giant gate with the words “Buddhist Hall of Joy” hanging at the top loomed over him, and he could tell that the calligraphy was imbued with the air of Buddhism. Profound and potent, one glance was enough to strike him with illusions flying celestials, the endless desires of the red dust, and whispers of joining the Buddhist Hall of Joy to attain ultimate bliss.

A weak-willed person could have lost themselves to this illusion and convert into a worshiper of the Buddhist Hall of Joy. *Advertisement with a dose of mind control? They’re a demonic sect alright.*

If the area before the gate counted as the border between Joy Town and the Buddhist Hall of Joy, then the area past the gate definitely counted as the sect’s territory. There were even more pavilions, halls, towers and temples in this area, and the smoke rising from the buildings and the natural mist shrouding the place gave it the appearance of Kingdom of Buddha on earth.

That said, there were noticeably more people past the gate than before as well. Wherever he looked, he saw disciples welcoming the guests and *jianghu* warriors greeting their hosts and their fellow people. The noise of humanity greatly diminished the divinity of the place, but also made it feel a lot more comely and warm.

Chapter 553: Easy To Enter, Difficult To Leave

“Do you need help, warrior?”

As soon as Ye Qing crossed over the threshold, a female disciple immediately came over to welcome him.

Ye Qing asked, “Can you guide me to the Blissful Hall, please?”

“The Blissful Hall?” The female disciple looked surprised, but she quickly arranged her expression into something deferential and respectful and asked, “May I take a look at your invitation letter, warrior?”

“Sure. Here you go,” Ye Qing replied and handed the invitation letter to the female disciple. After she took a look at its contents, she looked even more respectful as she handed the invitation letter back to Ye Qing and bowed. “My deepest apologies for not anticipating your arrival beforehand, warrior. Miaoyin begs for your forgiveness.”

“Huh?” Ye Qing was confused by her reaction and rubbed his nose. “It’s fine. Just take me to Blissful Hall, will you?”

“Of course.” Miaoyin rose back to full height and gestured for him to follow. “This way please, warrior.”

Miaoyin replied respectfully, "This is where the ordinary guests stay, but you are no ordinary guest. That is why you will be staying in the Blissful Hall, the place where we host our most esteemed guests, and it is located at the peak of Blissful Mountain."

"Oh, I see," Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. Now he understood why Miaoyin's attitude had changed so suddenly and drastically. "Got it. Let's go then."

"As you wish." Miaoyin nodded and led the way.

The higher they climbed, the bigger and more luxurious the buildings became, and the more beautiful the scenery was. It was also a lot more quiet and peaceful since the number of guests had declined drastically.

"This is the first time you're visiting our Buddhist Hall of Joy, am I right?" Miaoyin said after noting Ye Qing's behavior.

He stopped looking left and right and said, "Yeah. It's my first time here."

Miaoyin nodded. "In that case, please allow me to act as your tour guide. There are plenty of scenic spots in the Buddhist Hall of Joy and Blissful Mountain, and there are some that you may never find an equal in a lifetime."

Ye Qing's curiosity was piqued. "Sure. Tell me."

Miaoyin began, "Blissful Mountain is known to have Five Sceneries and Three Wonders. The Five Sceneries refer to Joy Forest, Buddhist Voice Cave, Fallen Moon Pond, Lotus Lake and Cloud Cliff."

"The Joy Forest is a forest with three thousand Buddha and Bodhisattva sculptures in it. They come in all shapes and sizes, and one may study to be enlightened in the wonderful ways of the Buddha."

"The Buddhist Voice Cave is a unique cave where Buddhist chants could be heard when the wind blows into it. It is quite the calming and meditative experience."

"The Fallen Moon Pond is even more special. Every day during midnight, the moon in the sky would disappear and reappear inside the pond. It is almost as if the moon itself had fallen into the pond. That is why we call it the Fallen Moon Pond."

"The Lotus Lake is a lake where rainbow lotuses are blooming across all seasons. You will never find a wilted flower in this lake."

“Finally, the Cloud Cliff is a massive cliff that is shrouded by clouds all year long. When you stand on top of the cliff and look down, you will witness a sea of clouds rolling by like an actual sea.”

“Sounds amazing. What about the Three Wonders?” Ye Qing asked curiously.

“The first Wonder is the Blissful Kingdom of Buddha. Every time it is a special day, a blissful miracle would take form at the peak of Blissful Mountain. The Buddhas would manifest into existence, the Bodhisattvas would show themselves, the Arhats would align in formation, and the Vajrapanis would descend to the earth. It is like a reflection of the Kingdom of Buddha.”

“Our second Wonder is the Blissful Spring. A single drop of spring water will make you feel like you’re in the heavens and enlighten you on the essence of our blissful ways.”

“Finally, our third Wonder is the Myriad Red Dust. As you know, we cultivate the Joyful Way of the Buddha, but you may not know that we have a pavilion named the Joyful Pavilion. In there, you may enjoy our gifted sons and daughters of heavens and cultivate the Joy Way of the Buddha as well. If you wish, you are more than welcome to experience our Myriad Red Dust.”

“Cough! Cough!” Ye Qing coughed violently before he managed to rein in his reaction. “Ahem... it’s fine. I would rather attend the Bodhisattva’s Trueman feast first. Business before pleasure, am I right? Right!”

“As you wish, warrior.” Miaoyin covered her mouth and giggled.

Not wanting to dwell on the subject, Ye Qing immediately began inquiring into other things. The two would continue to chat with each other until they arrived at the Blissful Hall.

Ye Qing realized immediately why the Blissful Hall was the place where the Buddhist Hall of Joy hosted their most esteemed guests. The buildings were luxurious and exquisitely built, the environment was quiet and tranquil, and each “room” was its own house. Hell, they even came equipped with a courtyard. This made sure that the guests would not be bothering each other unless they went out of their way to do so.

Not only that, each house was attended to by a household of servants and attendants. They would handle all trivial matters for the guest and even carry certain instructions.

After they arrived at a residence, Miaoyin said, “This is the Flying Snow Garden. It is not appropriate for someone of your stature, but give me some time, and I will arrange a better accommodation for you.”

“There’s no need. This is good enough,” Ye Qing rejected her offer.

Flying Snow Garden was a snow-themed residence. It had plants named Edelweiss planted in the courtyard, though it only bloomed during cold weather. Its flower was shaped like a snowflake, and when a gust of wind carried an entire bundle of it into the sky, they looked just like falling snow. Not only that, they gave off a quiet, soothing scent that made them feel like a better version of actual snow. So yes, Ye Qing liked this place a lot.

"I'm glad you're satisfied with this place," Miaoyin said smilingly before looking at the two female attendants standing at the gate entrance. "If you need anything, simply give them an order. They will carry it out to their fullest capabilities."

"I guess this is it then. Thank you for acting as my guide, Miss Miaoyin." Ye Qing thanked her.

"It is no trouble at all. I assume you've had a long journey, so I shan't disturb you any longer." Miaoyin gave him a bow before ordering the attendants, "Make sure you take good care of our guest. Do not disappoint me."

"As you command," the two female attendants responded deferentially.

"Until next time, warrior." Miaoyin bowed to Ye Qing again.

"Until next time," Ye Qing replied cordially.

After Miaoyin was gone, the two female attendants led Ye Qing into the house and asked, "Would you like to rest now, or would you like to enjoy a meal first, warrior?"

"I'll rest. I am a little tired," Ye Qing answered. It was the truth. He had been on the road the whole day, and he could definitely use a quick rest.

"In that case, would you like to take a bath? Our bathrooms draw water from a mountain hot spring, and the water can soothe the muscles and invigorate your blood. There is nothing better to eliminate your fatigue," a female attendant suggested.

"You have a hot spring? That's awesome! Please take me to the bathroom!" Ye Qing's eyes lit up.

"This way please."

The two attendants quickly led Ye Qing to a separate building located next to the main house. Then, they began disrobing.

"What are you two doing?" Ye Qing was not expecting this.

The attendants answered, "We wish to help you disrobe and give you the best bathing experience, warrior."

Ye Qing ranted inside his head while stopping the duo in a hurry, "It's fine. Please leave me alone."

“Are you not satisfied with our service, warrior?” The two female attendants hurriedly dropped to their knees and asked pitifully. They weren’t the most beautiful women Ye Qing had ever seen in his life, but they definitely fell under the cute and comely category. This was especially true since they were acting like they had been wronged. Anyone would naturally want to comfort them.

If he was a weak-willed man, he might have succumbed to the temptation. Thankfully, he wasn’t. “Of course not. I’m just not used to being... serviced. So please, leave me to my devices. I will call for you if I need anything.”

“Very well. We’ll just be outside. If you need anything, please do not hesitate to call for us immediately.” The two female attendants weren’t stupid or bold enough to insist, so they rose to their feet and left the premises.

He had heard rumors that it was easy to walk into the Buddhist Hall of Joy, but difficult to leave. They also said that most guests who left the premises were usually weak-kneed and sloppily-dressed. At the time, he thought it was simply because the Buddhist Hall of Joy was one of the most powerful sects in Bei You and, you know, a demonic sect? But now, he knew it was a different kind of danger. If he dropped his pants every time one or more beautiful women offered to “service” him, he would be walking out of their gate with shaky knees and loose clothings as well.

Ye Qing had a feeling that a lot of boys would be turning into men after this Trueman feast. Heck, a lot of girlswere going to turn into women after this.

But of course, this didn’t happen everyday. It was mainly because the Trueman feast was happening. By the time the event was over, a good number of guests were going to turn into guests of honor in various positions. This was also one of the Buddhist Hall of Joy’s main methods of increasing their recruits and guest warriors.

This all had nothing to do with him though. A fine woman was fine, but he did not have the luxury to enjoy them.

A moment of lamentation later, Ye Qing focused on washing the day’s fatigue away and relaxing in the bath. After he was done, he rejected the two female attendants’ request to sleep with him, sat on the bed, and entered a meditative state.

Chapter 554: Congratulate The Trueman

Night came and went. When the first light of dawn broke, the melodious sound of a bell rang throughout the entire Blissful Mountain.

The bell sound was loud, but it wasn't deafening or noisy. In fact, it induced a feeling of peace and auspiciousness in its listeners. The minds of those who were blurry from sleep became clear instantly.

This was the effect of the Mind Waking Bell. It heralded the beginning of a new day and the Trueman feast.

As expected, two female attendants knocked on Ye Qing's door a short while later. After he was done washing up while they attended to his needs, they led him to the venue of the Trueman feast—the Blissful Peak.

The Blissful Peak was located at the peak of Blissful Mountain. Constantly shrouded by mist and clouds, traversing the Blissful Peak was akin to walking on a sea of clouds or exploring the celestial realm, blissful and divine.

The Blissful Peak was also the venue the Buddhist Hall of Joy often used to hold their important events and celebrations. Specifically, they were held in a six-storey Buddhist pagoda with a vast road leading up to it.

Countless people were already gathered at the Blissful Peak when Ye Qing showed up. However, most of them could only linger at the lower floors as the higher floors were reserved for esteemed guests such as Ye Qing himself.

Height was the theme of the Blissful Peak. The higher up you were, the greater your status.

Usually, when the Buddhist Hall of Joy held an in-house event, the first floor would host the slaves, servants and attendants, the second floor would host the ordinary disciples, the third floor would host the inner disciples, the fourth floor would host the direct disciples and the middle management, the fifth floor would host the deans, guest warriors, Arhats, protectors and more, and the sixth floor would host the Wisdom Kings, Wisdom Queens, and Joy Bodhisattva herself.

Ye Qing could feel countless envious gazes settling on his person as the two female attendants led him to the upper floors. Thankfully, Joy Bodhisattva did not screw him over. Instead of putting him on the sixth floor and effectively painting a bullseye on his back, she instead placing him on the fifth floor.

Of course, some of the guests on the fifth floor were famous people in Northern Xinjiang, but they were incomparable to those residing on the sixth floor. Therefore, he didn't stand out too much.

Ye Qing had just taken his seat when a couple of female disciples came over and served him wine, fruits, snacks and more. All around him, people were greeting each other and making small talk. Judging from their conversation, Ye Qing had a sense that they were all prestigious figures from all across Northern Xinjiang. There were sect masters who ruled over a corner of the region, wandering warriors who drifted from place to place according to their whims, orthodox warriors whose sect or behavior was famed for their righteousness, vile heretics whose notoriety preceded them, cultured people whose every word and action was measured with a ruler, thieves and assassins who usually clung to the shadows like their life depended on it, and more.

In a sense, it was a miracle.

This would have been a great opportunity for Ye Qing to make connections and build up relationships, but alas, he did not recognize a single face in this place. There was no way for him to insert himself into any conversation even if he wanted to.

Time passed slowly as more and more people gathered at Blissful Peak. When the first ray of sunlight pierced through the thick clouds, dreamy, rainbow-colored halos abruptly manifested into existence.

All sorts of strange yet fascinating things slowly began to take form amidst the halo. They saw Buddhas holding a mudra and smiling gently at the masses. They saw Bodhisattvas flying across the heavens on a magnificent lotus. They saw Arhats sitting in a lotus position, auspicious beasts and rare birds running or flying across the heavens, jewels and golden light flowing through the clouds like a stream and more.

It was an illusion of the Kingdom of Buddha, and everyone was entranced by it.

Clearly, this was one of the Three Wonders Miaoyin had told him yesterday, the Blissful Kingdom of Buddha.

According to Miaoyin, the Blissful Kingdom of Buddha only appeared during a special day, but it was up to debate exactly what counted as a special day. Generally speaking, it was rare for the Blissful Kingdom of Buddha to manifest, so he did not think that he would be lucky enough to witness this phenomenon.

While the Kingdom of Buddha continued to illuminate its radiance upon everyone, Joy Bodhisattva flew into the sky. A dozen or so breaths later, the golden light shining down from the sky suddenly doubled in intensity, and a massive golden lotus suddenly descended from the heavens. Sitting on top of the lotus was none other than Joy Bodhisattva herself.

The light of the Buddha shone brightly above her head as she held a mutton fat kalasa in her left hand and an equality mudra in her right. Her eyes were shut lightly, her expression was solemn and dignified.

When the golden lotus landed on Blissful Peak, Joy Bodhisattva slowly opened her eyes. The Kingdom of Buddha in the sky suddenly froze for an instant, and its deities abruptly grew so solid they might as well be real. Then, something shocking happened. The Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Arhats, Vajrapanis and more stepped off the Kingdom of Buddha and walked up to Joy Bodhisattva. Then, they dropped to their knees and prostrated themselves before her.

The Buddhas were descending from the sky to prostrate themselves before a Bodhisattva on the earth. To say that everyone was stunned would be an understatement. The phenomenon was grand, but not nearly as grand as Joy Bodhisattva's audacity. It was one thing to manifest the Kingdom of Buddha to entertain their guests, and another to make the Buddhas prostrate before her as if she was the founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama himself!

There was one and only one Buddha in the entire religion who could compel all Buddhas to his side and listen to his teachings, and he was Siddhartha Gautama. However, Joy Bodhisattva was clearly alluding that she was his equal, no, his better! After all, Siddhartha Gautama had never compelled his fellow Buddhas to kneel before him, but Joy Bodhisattva took it a step further and made them prostrate before her! This was blasphemy of the highest order!

If the orthodox Buddhist sects learned about this, they might very well blow their top and ascend to the heavens prematurely!

In any case, it was clear that Joy Bodhisattva cared little for their opinion. After the humble ritual was complete, Joy Bodhisattva opened her palm and waited for the Buddhas to rise to their feet. They slowly shrank to the size of a grain before flying into Joy Bodhisattva's palm.

Joy Bodhisattva closed her palm. It felt like a declaration that all Buddhas in the world were in her grasp.

Dang! Dang! Dang!

As if on cue, the bell rang three times in a row, and the phenomenon abruptly disappeared all at once. At the same time, a man and a woman appeared next to her.

Ye Qing did not recognize the man, but he recognized the woman. She was Woriless.

Woriless spoke up, "The Buddhist Hall of Joy is honored to welcome all of you and congratulate our Bodhisattva in becoming a Trueman. Let the Trueman feast begin."

Her voice wasn't loud, but everyone could hear her as clear as day.

"Congratulate the Trueman..."

As soon as the three words were said, divine music filled the entire Blissful Mountain. It truly felt blissful and dreamlike.

The first event of the Trueman feast was "Congratulate the Trueman". To put it simply, it was a congratulatory ceremony where the guests announced their background and congratulated Joy Bodhisattva.

This was an opportunity for both sides to flaunt their status. Joy Bodhisattva would get the honor of being congratulated by all these powerful and famous people. The more, the better.

The guests would get to show their face and announce their sect to the world. They had come a long way to participate in her celebration. It was only natural that she gave them a chance to announce themselves to the world.

The congratulatory ceremony might be extremely boring, but it was also necessary.

An old man in his fifties with a thin but spirited face immediately rose to his feet. He declared, "I am the Sword Executor Elder of Sword King City, and I come bearing a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact named the Falling Snow Sword, a block of All Solving Spirit Jade, and a sarira. May auspiciousness always be with you, Bodhisattva."

"Thank you," Joy Bodhisattva replied. "Please, take your seat."

Sword King City was considered to be the strongest sect in the northern lands, and the Buddhist Hall of Joy was just a second-rate sect. Although they had only sent a Sword Executor Elder to deliver a gift, it was still a favor to the Buddhist Hall of Joy.

The gifts were pretty impressive as well. The Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact was one thing, but the All Solving Spirit Jade was a rare natural treasure. It could be used to set up arrays, improve one's cultivation, forge artifacts and more. As for the sarira, it was the remnant of an enlightened Buddhist monk. Naturally, it was even more valuable and had many applications as well.

After Sword King City was done, a sexy woman wearing a fiery red dress rose to her feet. She looked to be in her thirties.

"I am the Vermillion Bird Envoy of Earthfire Palace of Demons, and I come bearing a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact named the Earthfire Fan, a Spirit Crystal of Crimson Flame, and a bottle of Infinite Water of Supreme Radiance. May auspiciousness always be with you, Bodhisattva."

The Earthfire Palace of Demons was the number one demonic sect of the northern lands and no less inferior to the Sword King City. Just like them, they had sent a single envoy to congratulate the Buddhist Hall of Joy.

Of course, the Vermillion Bird Envoy was pretty high-ranked in the Earthfire Palace of Demons as well. She was inferior only to the head and the deputy head.

The value of their gift was more or less the same as Sword King City as well.

"Thank you," Joy Bodhisattva repeated. "Please, take your seat."

The third person to rise to their feet after the Vermillion Bird Envoy sat down was a tall, muscular man with a powerful aura.

He was none other than Xiong Kuohai.

Chapter 555: Sutra of the Vows of the Medicine Buddha of Lapis Lazuli Crystal Radiance

[1]

"I am Xiong Kuohai of Endless Sand, and I come bearing one 'Sutra of the Vows of the Medicine Buddha of Lapis Lazuli Crystal Radiance' and a Medicine Guru Pill. On behalf of Endless Sand, I wish you many auspicious days, Bodhisattva," Xiong Kuohai declared.

"What? The 'Sutra of the Vows of the Medicine Buddha of Lapis Lazuli Crystal Radiance' and a Medicine Guru Pill?"

"What generous gifts! Too generous, in fact!"

"I thought they said that Endless Sand and the Buddhist Hall of Joy are at odds with each other. If that's true, then why on earth would Xiong Kuohai give Joy Bodhisattva such valuable items?"

“Because the rumors are bullshit, duh! Who on earth would give an enemy not one, but two such gifts?”

The crowd immediately burst into loud murmurs as soon as they heard Xiong Kuohai’s declaration, and it wasn’t because his gift was too paltry. On the contrary, it was more valuable than even the Sword King City and the Earthfire Palace of Demons’ gifts combined.

The “Sutra of the Vows of the Medicine Buddha of Lapis Lazuli Crystal Radiance” was the foundational sutra that transformed the ancient Medicine Buddha into a Buddha. The Medicine Buddha—also known as the Medicine Guru, the King of Lapis Lazuli Light and more—was the lord of the Eastern Pure Land of Azure Radiance. He once swore twelve vows upon attaining Enlightenment, and he fulfilled everyone’s wishes, made the imperfect perfect, eliminated diseases and rescued them from disasters. He had worshipers all across the world, and his teachings were known to everyone.

The “Sutra of the Vows of the Medicine Buddha of Lapis Lazuli Crystal Radiance” contained the twelve vows the Medicine Buddha Sutra swore upon attaining Enlightenment and his boundless understanding of the Buddha. Those who study it would reach the sagehood of Buddhism, or to put it in simpler terms, become a Sage.

That’s right. The “Sutra of the Vows of the Medicine Buddha of Lapis Lazuli Crystal Radiance” was a Sage-stage cultivation art. It could guide a warrior all the way to sagehood, and it was especially valuable to a Buddhist disciple.

The Medicine Guru Pill was extremely valuable as well. A pill created by the Medicine Buddha himself, it could purify one’s body, and grant them the Foundation of the Medicine Buddha King of Lapis Lazuli Light and his boundless insight.

To put it in simpler terms, the Medicine Guru Pill was a pill that could purify one’s body and improve one’s martial talent. Even the most talentless person could undergo a complete transformation after consuming the Medicine Guru Pill. Not only that, they would gain the Foundation of the Medicine Buddha King of Lapis Lazuli Light and obtain a portion of his inheritance.

Given enough time and effort, they might even be able to become a Buddha themselves.

Centuries ago, a Buddhist land had, for whatever reason, burst into the world together with the “Sutra of the Vows of the Medicine Buddha of Lapis Lazuli Crystal Radiance” and eight Medicine Guru Pills. Its lapis lazuli light had illuminated at least hundreds and hundreds of kilometers of land, and everyone who was touched by its light was cured from all pain and diseases. It was like a living Kingdom of Buddha.

Countless *jianghu* warriors had fought to obtain his inheritance, but no one was able to obtain anything—or so they thought. As it turned out, the “Sutra of the Vows of the Medicine Buddha of Lapis Lazuli Crystal Radiance” and at least one Medicine Guru Pill had fallen into Xiong Kuohai’s hands, and now, he was giving it all to Joy Bodhisattva. It was insane. It was so insane that Xiong Kuohai temporarily stole the limelight from both Sword King City and Earthfire Palace of Demons.

Forget the others, Joy Bodhisattva herself was in disbelief. Just a month ago, they were sworn enemies who would sooner cut off an arm than let the other person leave. Now, Xiong Kuohai was

giving her not one, but two of the most valuable gifts a Buddhist could dream of? What was the meaning of this? What on earth was he planning?

The gift was so valuable that she was actually worried if she could accept it without burning her own hands!

“Bodhisattva... Bodhisattva!”

When the silence stretched, Worriless called out to Joy Bodhisattva and jolted her out of her reverie. She replied, “Thank you. Please, take your seat.”

After Xiong Kuohai was done, many more factions or champions stood up to present their gifts including the head of the Tower of Cornucopia, Gold Ingot[2]; the head of Shade of Scents, Mistress Ruyi; Five Poison Boy, Sunset Swordsman, One-eyed Master, Plum Thief[3] and more.

No one’s gift was in any way poor or unbecoming of Joy Bodhisattva’s stature, but after the “pleasant surprise” Xiong Kuohai had sprung on all of them, they felt quite inferior regardless.

The congratulatory ceremony was the first agenda of the event. It was also an agenda that would last the entire day because, well, there were still a *lot* of people to go through, weren’t there? Even Ye Qing decided to join in and gave Joy Bodhisattva a wisp of Qi of Ultimate Purity.

He was a guest. It would be quite embarrassing and potentially insulting if he did not prepare a gift for Joy Bodhisattva.

By the time “Congratulate the Trueman” was finally over, it was already late evening. By the time Ye Qing returned to Flying Snow Garden and ate dinner, the sky had darkened completely.

Ye Qing did not feel sleepy, however. On the contrary, he was feeling quite invigorated. He decided to explore Blissful Mountain a bit and check out the Five Sceneries and Three Wonders Miaoyin had told him earlier.

He didn’t know if he would ever visit this place again, so of course he couldn’t allow such an opportunity to slip by.

Once again, he rejected Flower and Snow’s—it was the name of the two female attendants of Flying Snow Garden—request to accompany him and set out on his own. Then, he began his leisurely, one-man tour of Blissful Mountain.

There were a lot of people who shared the same idea as him. They were enjoying the night and admiring the moon in groups or two or three. It was a relaxing and peaceful time for everyone.

A snowstorm had taken place just a few days ago, and the weather was frigid to say the least. This was doubly true during the night where the wind felt like knives crawling across one’s bones.

That was not the case for Blissful Mountain, however. Here, it felt as warm as spring, and there were beautiful flora and fauna everywhere. The wind was calm, and the sky was bright.

There were many scenic spots in Blissful Mountain that could only be enjoyed during the day. For example, Joy Forest was basked in golden light when it was midday, and it looked as if the light of the Buddha was protecting the forest and wrapping everyone in its warm, soothing embrace. Its three thousand Buddhist statues looked absolutely divine under the sunlight as well. Sure, the scenic spot was no less different during the night, but it certainly felt less impressive without the accentuating sunlight.

It was the same for the Cloud Cliff. The best time to enjoy it was during dawn. When the sun slowly peeked out of the clouds and dyed both heaven and earth red, it almost felt like you were living inside a dream.

That said, some scenery such as the Lotus Lake was best enjoyed during the night. The Fallen Moon Pond in particular could only be enjoyed during midnight.

There was still some time before midnight, so Ye Qing went to Lotus Lake first. There were two sides to Lotus Lake: one during the day, and another during nighttime. In the morning, they shone like rainbows in physical form and exuded nobility and radiance. But during the night, they were tiny, glowing bulbs that radiated calmness and tranquility.

By the time Ye Qing was done with Lotus Lake, the moon was hanging high up in the sky. This was the perfect hour to visit Fallen Moon Pond. By the time he arrived at the scenic spot, a lot of people were already gathered around the pond.

The crowd watched as the moon in the sky slowly disappeared as if some invisible force was erasing it from existence. When the moon had disappeared completely from the sky, another moon slowly rose from the edge of the pond instead. It eventually came to a stop at the center of the moon.

A small breeze blew across the pond and stirred its waters a little. Then, the moon suddenly spread out until it encompassed the entire pond. From a distance, it looked like the moon itself had been embedded on the ground, silvery and large. It was as gorgeous as it was grand.

The illusion lasted an entire incense stick before it finally ended. When the moon in the pond vanished, so did the moon in the sky reappeared. It was really quite fantastical.

Everyone wanted to experience the phenomenon again, but it only occurred once per night. So, they had no choice but to leave and hope to come back tomorrow.

Ye Qing lingered at a kiosk set next to the pond and drank to the moon for a bit. It was only then he slowly made his way back to Flying Snow.

It was between 1 to 3 am now, and most people had already returned to their lodgings and called it a day. As a result, Blissful Mountain was almost devoid of human presence. All that was left was the occasional breeze and dreamy night sky.

Ye Qing was passing through a small forest when suddenly, he noticed a black silhouette dashing past him at the distance.

At first, he paid little attention to the silhouette. Everyone on this mountain was a warrior after all. It was perfectly normal for them to be running about and doing whatever it was they were doing even though it was a late hour.

It was then Ye Qing noticed that the shadow's movement art was highly extraordinary, so much so they were almost one with their surroundings. If he didn't happen to be standing on a patch of high ground with a wide field of vision, even he wouldn't have noticed them.

What was strange was that they were dressed from head to toe in black, and their faces were concealed behind a hood. They were also running through hidden and secluded areas only. They weren't headed for the lodgings or the scenic spots either.

It was normal to go for a night stroll, and it was understandable that some people might not like to walk a well-trodden path. But if that person was a powerful warrior with an extraordinary movement art, and they were wearing a black outfit that was perfect for night skulduggery, and they were up at this time but not traveling back to their lodgings to sleep or visiting a scenic spot... that was a little suspicious, don't you think?

Ye Qing did not know what possessed him, but before he knew it, he had fallen behind the silhouette like a ghost.

Chapter 556: You Were On The Path To Heaven

The person in black was moving very quickly, but Ye Qing wasn't slow himself since he had mastered the "Illusionist's Grace". But of course, he did not follow his quarry too closely. He did not dare to push his movement art to its fullest potential either. He made sure to withdraw his aura as best he could and keep a good distance away from his quarry. This way, he could make his escape even if his quarry somehow discovered that something was amiss.

The pursuit continued for a bit when suddenly, the person in black paused for a moment and turned his head sideways. Then, he continued to dash forward as if nothing was amiss.

Ye Qing took two steps forward when his instincts suddenly screamed at him to stop. It was like someone was pressing a blade against his back, or he had entered the sight of some ancient monster.

Once you had reached a certain level in martial arts, sixth sense was no longer just a superstition. Ye Qing narrowed his eyes a little as he recalled the person in black's sudden pause and head turn. In and of itself, the movement was perfectly ordinary. But considering the circumstances...

Did he notice me?!

As soon as the thought flashed through Ye Qing's mind, three of his left fingers immediately exploded without a sound. His flesh and blood then transformed into a giant maw that swallowed him whole.

Three breaths after Ye Qing was gone, waves of shadows abruptly crashed into the spot he was a moment before from every direction. For a moment, the darkened forest turned pitch black, the peace and tranquility of the night disappeared in the blink of an eye, and all light disappeared from the world.

For a moment, the all-encompassing shadow writhed like it was a living being. Then, it abruptly evaporated into thin air. Moonlight shone through the gaps between the leaves and branches, and it was almost as if nothing had ever happened.

Inside the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma, a pale-faced Ye Qing let out a huge sigh of relief. Despite the Strange Artifact's disgusting gastric juice and vomit, he was smiling to himself and patting his chest to calm down his racing heart.

The shadow had felt as deep and unfathomable as the abyss itself. He had no doubt that it would devour and put him in grave danger if he had leaked even a hint of aura.

He was glad he hadn't hesitated to use the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma or made the wrong choice of running away either. The consequences would have been unimaginable.

Assuming he chose to run, he was sure he would have run into the shadow no matter which direction he tried to escape to. Its range had completely exceeded his expectations. However, not running wasn't an option either. He would have just died on the spot.

Luckily for him, he obtained the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma yesterday and did not hesitate to use it when the time was right. Thanks to a combination of luck and decisiveness, he was able to survive this potentially fatal crisis.

Besides that, the shadow attack confirmed one thing for him. The person in black probably noticed that something was amiss, but he wasn't sure if someone was following him. That was why he used a massive, wide-ranged attack in an attempt to catch him out.

The fact that it only remained at the spot for a few breaths proved that it was just a cursory search; an effort to confirm or deny his suspicion. If they knew where he was or even just a rough idea of his location, then it would have lingered in the area for much longer. The person in black might even show up themselves. Had that happened, he wasn't sure that the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma could continue concealing him at all.

Should I continue following them?

After he had calmed down completely, Ye Qing reconsidered his decision to follow the person in black. At this point, he was certain that they were plotting something malicious. They would not have gone so far over a sliver of suspicion otherwise. Moreover, judging from the scope and depth of their power, there was an extremely high chance that they were a Grandmaster.

He had just survived one fatal crisis. Logically speaking, now was the time he gave up on his impulsive venture, returned to his lodging, and pretended that nothing had ever happened. He was just a partygoer after all. Once the Trueman feast was over, he could just pat his bum and put this all behind him. Whatever happened to the Buddhist Hall of Joy afterward had nothing to do with him.

But you see, humans were irrational by nature. God could personally lay down a path to heaven for them, and a good number of them would spurn it and challenge the gates of hell instead. That was just how humans were.

Of course, Ye Qing wasn't hesitating just because of a moment of irrationality. He had the feeling that whatever the person in black was plotting would involve him as well. And how did he know that? It was because the person in black was heading for the Blissful Spring.

The Blissful Spring was one of the Three Wonders Miaoyin had mentioned to him earlier. It was said that a single drop could induce a feeling of extreme bliss within the drinker.

Although the Blissful Spring was useless to a warrior's cultivation, life was about all seeking out new colors and sensations. An item that could produce such an effect was rare and thus valued by many. Luckily for the Buddhist Hall of Joy—or perhaps that had founded their sect at Blissful Mountain precisely because they knew that it possessed such a natural resource—the Blissful Spring was an endless source of bliss-inducing water. They utilized it well and often served it to their guests.

Ye Qing knew that the person in black hadn't gone to the Blissful Spring to sneak a drink. After all, the Buddhist Hall of Joy would be serving every guest a jar of Blissful Spring tomorrow. If the first day of the Trueman feast was all about the guests congratulating the host on their success and

giving her gifts, then the second day was about the host repaying the favors she received. Reciprocity was a key part of any and all relationships after all.

Tomorrow, the Buddhist Hall of Joy would serve their guests all sorts of delicious food and drinks and entertain them with all sorts of events. Of them all, the tasting of the Blissful Spring was one of the most important events. Every guest participating in the Trueman feast would get to enjoy the highest quality of Blissful Spring and experience what ultimate bliss felt like.

Everyone knew this, and so did the person in black. There was absolutely no need for them to head over to the Blissful Spring and sneak a drink, which meant that they were plotting something else.

Every guest would be supping on the Blissful Spring tomorrow, and he was no exception. Assuming that the person in black was plotting to tamper with the spring water, then he would certainly suffer the consequences as well.

For his own sake, he had to follow the person in black and find out what the hell they planned to do with the Blissful Spring.

Finally, if this really turned out to be a massive conspiracy, he could inform Joy Bodhisattva about this. He would be improving his relationship with her, and she would owe him a huge favor. It would not be anything like the artificial favor she had forced upon him either. It would be a real favor.

Favor was a timeless currency. It was valuable and applicable across all places and times. Ye Qing wished to build a faction of his own in Northern Xinjiang, and that journey was guaranteed to be long and thorny. Therefore, every faction he could befriend, every good karma he could create, and every favor he could call upon would ensure that he was one step closer to his goals.

The reward was massive, but was it really worth the risk? After a moment of careful consideration, Ye Qing believed that the answer was yes.

For one, he had the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma. He could hide himself and even escape from the area at a moment's notice, so his chances of being discovered were pretty low.

Two, the person in black had already acted upon his suspicion once and found nothing. Even if they were the paranoid type, they would be less paranoid for the moment.

In summary, he should be safe as long as he didn't grow careless and screw himself over.

He thought for a moment longer before sacrificing another two fingers to the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma. Then, he moved the Strange Artifact toward the Blissful Spring without popping back into reality.

There was no chance he was getting out right now. The stench alone would alert every living creature within five kilometers of his vicinity, much less a Grandmaster. For now, he had no choice but to stay inside the Strange Artifact.

Luckily for him, the Strange Artifact could theoretically function forever so long as the user provided it with enough fingers, and this drawback wasn't a drawback for him at all. With his vigor and tenacity, he could regrow even limbs instantaneously, much less a couple of fingers. He could remain inside the Strange Artifact for weeks if he wanted to.

Although he had lost sight of his quarry due to the delay, it didn't matter because he already guessed their destination. It took him only a moment to arrive at the valley where Blissful Spring was located.

The valley pass leading to the Blissful Spring was guarded since it was a precious resource, but the disciples guarding the place all looked listless, sleepy, and inattentive. It was because what was a rare and invaluable resource to outsiders was nothing to them. After all, they lived here and got to enjoy the spring water every day.

Besides, they were all exhausted after working non-stop for almost the entire day, so it took Ye Qing almost no effort whatsoever to slip past them. He continued along the path leading to the Blissful Spring until he arrived at a cave entrance. There were no guards inside or outside the cave.

The cave wasn't deep. A handful of night pearls and glowstones were embedded into the walls and the ceiling so that it would be fully illuminated even during nighttime.

It was exactly as Ye Qing had predicted. He saw the person in black as soon as he entered the cave. They were currently standing in front of the clear, bluish pool and thinking about something.

Chapter 557: A Strange Heart

"We may begin, Sakyamuni."

A few breaths later, the person in black broke the silence. It sounded like he was speaking to someone, but there wasn't anyone else in the cave, was there?

It was at this moment Ye Qing's eyes widened. The person in black's shadow suddenly started growing darker and darker, writhing as if it was alive. Then, it slowly stood up like a living, breathing person.

"Sakyamuni..."

The person in black bowed his head respectfully.

"This isn't the time. Guard me," the shadow ordered.

"As you command," the person in black saluted him and retreated to the cave entrance.

The shadow stretched its arms wide for a moment before plunging them into its chest. Then, it pulled at its rib cages until a bright red heart was exposed.

The heart was covered in tentacles, and Ye Qing could see that they were connected to every part of the shadow's body. It was almost as if they were the shadow's blood vessels, though of course blood vessels weren't nearly this big or disturbing-looking. The heart itself was beating rhythmically almost as if it was alive.

The next moment, the shadow reached into its chest and grabbed the heart tightly. Then, it started pulling with all its might.

The shadow began shaking violently. It looked like it was enduring some sort of terrible, body-racking pain. The heart's tentacles were flailing about as if it was extremely unwilling to leave its host.

It took over a dozen breaths before the shadow finally ripped the heart out of its chest completely. The moment it succeeded, the tentacles shrank back into the heart, and the heart stopped beating almost as if it was dead.

The shadow turned toward the Blissful Spring and tossed the heart into its waters. The heart looked like it was flesh and blood, but the moment it entered the Blissful Spring, it slowly melted like it was snow. It did not dye the waters in gory red either. When all was said and done, not a trace of the heart could be seen everywhere.

“It is done.”

The shadow said a little tiredly after it was finished with the bizarre ritual.

“Good work, Sakyamuni.” The person in black stepped back into the cave and flattered the shadow, “With this, our plan is guaranteed to succeed.”

“Just because we successfully poisoned the spring with the Burning Heart doesn’t mean that the plan is guaranteed to succeed. Remember what happened last time? You thought that your plan cannot fail, and yet it did,” the shadow chided the person in black.

The person in black promised, “Don’t worry, Sakyamuni. I’m willing to swear on my life that everything will go perfectly this time.”

The shadow nodded. “Good. If this plan succeeds, then you will be rewarded handsomely.”

“Thank you, Sakyamuni! I promise I won’t disappoint you!” the person in black sounded visibly excited at the shadow’s promise.

“Good. Now let’s go.”

The shadow abruptly dissolved into a pool of blackness on the ground before entering the person in black’s shadow. Then, the person in black leaped out of the cave and disappeared into the darkness.

It’s him?!

Inside the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma, Ye Qing was staring at the spot where the person in black had disappeared to in utter shock.

The person in black was none other than Xiong Kuohai.

Previously, he wasn’t able to identify Xiong Kuohai because it was too dark, and he had to stay a safe distance away from him. But it was as bright as day inside the cave, and Xiong Kuohai had unknowingly walked right up to Ye Qing when the shadow—or more accurately, the Sakyamuni masquerading as a shadow—ordered him to guard the entrance. Thanks to this, Ye Qing had a 4k view of the man’s face.

When Xiong Kuohai gifted Joy Bodhisattva what was probably one of, if not the most valuable gifts of her life, even he wondered that the sect leader was looking to make amends with her, much less the outsiders. They thought that Endless Sand and the Buddhist Hall of Joy had somehow gotten in bed before they knew it. Then, Xiong Kuohai did something like this.

It did not take a genius to figure out that the heart wasn't a normal heart, that the mysterious Sakyamuni was no ordinary person, and that Xiong Kuohai and the Sakyamuni were plotting something big. Something bad. They wouldn't be sneaking about in this ungodly hour otherwise.

One should not judge a book by its cover, and they should definitely not judge a human by their appearance. If someone had an honest face, then they probably had a dirty, dirty heart inside their rib cages.

On second thought, he should've known that Xiong Kuohai was up to something. Just a month ago, Xiong Kuohai had schemed to assassinate Joy Bodhisattva and take control of the Buddhist Hall of Joy. Although Joy Bodhisattva ultimately proved to be the better schemer, and they both agreed to put this matter behind them as quietly as possible, that didn't mean that the matter was actually over.

If you fail, try again. That was something even a kid knew, much less a full-grown adult like Xiong Kuohai.

Although Xiong Kuohai had left, Ye Qing did not relax his guard or show himself. He continued to hide inside the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma and observe his surroundings carefully.

Two hours came and went in the blink of an eye. Slowly, the silence of the night was broken by a clamor of growing noises. The disciples of the Buddhist Hall of Joy must be getting ready to procure the spring water necessary for the feast that was to come.

Some people might wonder why the disciples hadn't prepared the spring water beforehand. That was because the Blissful Spring would slowly lose its efficacy over a period of six to eight hours after it was removed from its source. When that happened, the spring water would be no different from an ordinary mountain spring water.

Joy Bodhisattva's Trueman feast was a matter of great importance. Naturally, they could not serve "stale" Blissful Spring to their guests. That was why they had to wait until two to four hours before the feast before they could begin the preparations.

It was now between 5 to 7 am. It wouldn't be long before the feast began. If they started now, they would be right on time to serve the freshest possible Blissful Spring to their guests.

Still, Ye Qing remained hidden. It was as if he was waiting for something to happen. Then...

A shadow slowly stretched out of a dark corner beside the Blissful Spring. Its muttered under its breath, "I guess I was overthinking it after all," before disappearing from the cave. The shadow on the ground was gone as well.

"Phew... I knew it. I bloody knew it."

After the shadow was gone, Ye Qing finally let out a sigh of relief. His face was as white as a sheet, but his smile was as bright as the sun itself.

It was now clear that the shadow—the mysterious Sakyamuni that Xiong Kuohai spoke of—hadn't left together with Xiong Kuohai. It had been hiding in the darkness this whole time. In fact, Xiong Kuohai must be hiding somewhere in the valley as well.

Ye Qing had to admit that both Xiong Kuohai and the Sakyamuni were extremely cautious and cunning.

If Ye Qing was the careless, honest type, he would have thought that Xiong Kuohai and the Sakyamuni had left. He would have revealed himself and tried to investigate the strange heart they had dropped into the Blissful Spring. After that...

Well, there wouldn't be an after that.

He didn't know that the Sakyamuni was hiding inside the patch of shadow, of course. He was just putting himself in Xiong Kuohai and the Sakyamuni's shoes and predicting their behavior.

If he were them, would he be so careless as to enact a scheme without securing the area at least?

If he were them, what would he do to make sure that someone wasn't spying on them in secret? That his feeling earlier wasn't just a feeling?

He suddenly recalled the Life Leech that Yi Pin had tricked using a faux suicide pill. If even a Stranger with the mind of a five year old knew how to play pretend and double check if Yi Pin was really dead, could a schemer like Xiong Kuohai and the mysterious Sakyamuni really be stupider than them?

Finally, he had felt that their brief conversation earlier was completely unnecessary. Which was safer, leaving right after they poisoned the Blissful Spring or lingering in the area and spouting bullshit, achieving nothing except increasing the chances that they might be exposed?

Their behavior was obviously abnormal, and such abnormal behavior could only mean that they were plotting something. If he was someone else, he might have been shaken by the tidbits of information they revealed. He would have been driven by an urgency to check the Blissful Spring as quickly as possible after they left the place.

Of course, his guesses were ultimately just guesses. Maybe Xiong Kuohai and the mysterious Sakyamuni just had the bad habit of acting like cheap, pretentious villains.

That said, it was better to be safe than sorry, wasn't it? His life was on the line after all. That was why Ye Qing ultimately chose to remain hidden inside the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma and not move a muscle.

Admittedly, there were multiple times where he thought that he was being overly paranoid and was tempted to take his leave, but in the end, his caution won out against his impatience. If he was wrong, then all he lost was a bit of time. But if he was right, then his life could very well be on the line.

It was obvious what was the right decision to make. So, he chose to tough it out and play the game of patience.

He was right. The mysterious Sakyamuni really was hiding in the shadows. It really had been laying a trap for any would-be spies to step on. He was right.

Of course, Ye Qing still didn't take action immediately. He waited a while longer until he was sure that the cunning bastard wouldn't pull a double back like the Life Leech before he piloted the Stomach of the Finger Eating Grandma out of the valley.

Ye Qing did not return to Flying Snow Park after leaving the valley. Instead, he sought out a stream, washed his body until he was completely clean, and sat down at the rivershore. Then, he looked up

at the bright moon in the sky and pondered about Xiong Kuohai and the mysterious Sakyamuni's plans.

What on earth were they plotting?

What was their aim?

He could not come up with a good plan unless he figured out his enemies' plans first.

Should he leave, or should he stay?

Should he stay out of the conflict, or should he help out the needy?

Chapter 558: Ancient Poison, Burning Heart

Xiong Kuohai, the mysterious Sakyamuni, the anomalous heart. Everything suggested that Xiong Kuohai and the mysterious Sakyamuni were plotting something big and scary, though he wasn't able to say what at this point of time. It was because he was still lacking quite a lot of critical information.

For starters, who was that mysterious Sakyamuni?

Second, what on earth was that heart? What kind of role did it play in this conspiracy?

So on and so on. Until he gathered all the clues, not even the smartest man in the world could piece together the truth.

Luckily for him, gathering the clues was no trouble for him. In fact, he didn't even need to gather the clues at all. He could unearth Xiong Kuohai's conspiracy right here and now.

And how was he going to do that? With the Annon Sutra, of course!

Ye Qing produced the Annon Sutra and asked his first question, "Who is the Sakyamuni Xiong Kuohai spoke of? What is his background?"

Then, he spat a mouthful of blood on the vellum.

Unfortunately for him, the blood slid off the piece of vellum without being absorbed. This meant that the Annon Sutra refused to answer the question.

Ye Qing frowned. The Annon Sutra's reaction could only mean that the Sakyamuni was extremely powerful. So powerful that it refused to look into their identity for fear of incurring consequences he couldn't withstand.

A moment of consideration later, Ye Qing changed the question. "What is Xiong Kuohai plotting?"

He spat another mouthful of blood on the Annon Sutra, and this time, it absorbed his blood.

"It's working!"

Ye Qing's eyes lit up as he repeated the gesture. A dozen or so mouthfuls of blood later, a few lines of bloody text appeared on its surface:

"I discovered a conspiracy. A massive conspiracy."

"Xiong Kuohai and a mysterious person have poisoned the Blissful Spring with the Burning Heart. They are planning to frame Joy Bodhisattva!"

"I feel so depressed right now. What should I do?"

"Should I expose their conspiracy and play the role of an agent of justice?"

"Or should I just sneak away and watch the inferno from the sidelines?"

"Or maybe I can do both and send Joy Bodhisattva a message before sneaking away?"

"Well, I'm a mature warrior of the jianghu now. I should learn how to handle my own problems instead of relying on a certain cheat to do it for me!"

Ye Qing: "..."

What a useless piece of advice! It said so many words and cost me so much blood, and yet it might as well have said nothing at all!

Also, what do you mean I should learn to handle my own problems now that I'm a mature warrior of the jianghu? If you didn't want to help me, then a simple no would have sufficed! You didn't need to take a jab at me!

After Ye Qing wrestled down the urge to punch the vellum and calmed down, he decided that the Annon Sutra's answer wasn't completely useless. There were some useful information in it.

The first clue was about the object known as the Burning Heart, and the second clue was that they were planning to frame Joy Bodhisattva.

The Burning Heart was most likely the anomalous heart the duo had dropped into the Blissful Spring, and they were planning to use it to frame Joy Bodhisattva somehow. There should be no fault in his logic here.

With that in mind, the first thing he should figure out was the Burning Heart's exact properties and function. Only then could he figure out exactly how the duo were planning to entrap Joy Bodhisattva.

Ye Qing glanced at the Annon Sutra after sorting out his thoughts. The occasional jabs aside, he must admit that the Annon Sutra was ever the reliable ally during important moments of his life.

"What are the effects of the Burning Heart?"

Third time turned out to be the charm as the Annon Sutra neither rejected his question nor gave him an ambiguous answer this time. In fact, its answer was a lot more detailed than usual.

"The Burning Heart is one of the nine ancient poisons[1]. Triggered by suspicion, fear or anger, it draws out the myriad darkness hidden in a person's heart until it becomes the poison that kills them."

"The Burning Heart is colorless and odorless. Touching or ingesting it would not elicit any sort of reaction either. This characteristic makes it nigh impossible to detect without foreknowledge."

“When the victim is angry, afraid, or suspicious about something, the Burning Heart would activate and amplify said emotions infinitely. It would also draw out the darkness inside their heart and drive them to the brink of insanity. It cannot be cured.”

“The greater the negative emotions afflicting the person, the worse the Burning Heart would become. In the end, it would turn into a literal inferno that burns both the victim’s body and their mind into ash.”

[2]

“Heavens...”

Ye Qing’s back felt as cold as ice as he sucked in a deep breath. This Burning Heart was easily one of the most insidious and terrifying poisons he had ever seen.

“The Burning Heart cannot be treated or cured. The one and only way the victim can be free from its influence is to be perfectly calm and desireless.”

“What a monstrous poison this is,” Ye Qing sighed after he finished reading the final sentence. He wasn’t able to calm himself even after a long time.

He understood why the Burning Heart was famed as one of the nine ancient poisons. Its effects were scary for sure, but the scariest part about it was that it was incurable and untreatable. Sure, one could technically avoid triggering the Burning Heart by staying perfectly calm and having zero desire whatsoever all the time, but at that point, could you even say that you were still alive? A human without emotions or desires might as well be a rock.

Where the hell did Xiong Kuohai and that Sakyamuni get their hands on something like this? So scary!

Some time later, Ye Qing finally put away the Annon Sutra and began piecing the clues together. It was time to figure out Xiong Kuohai’s plan.

“The Burning Heart...”

“Suspicion, fear and anger...”

“The Blissful Spring...”

“Frame... they’re planning to frame Joy Bodhisattva...”

A cool breeze and waning moonlight were his only companions as Ye Qing leaned against a rock and tapped a finger against the ground repeatedly, thinking. From time to time, a word or two would pass through his lips as a quiet, incomprehensible murmur. The way his face was facing upward suggested that he was looking at the moon, but his eyes were dilated and unfocused. His pupils were pools of darkness with unfathomable depths.

Some time later, Ye Qing’s finger abruptly stopped tapping the ground. The reflection of the round moon in his pupils were shattered by a ripple of movement as well.

“I got it. The sandpiper and the clam go to war, and the fisherman catches both. So that’s what Xiong Kuohai and the Sakyamuni are planning.”

It took him some time, but Ye Qing was finally able to piece the clues together.

In and of itself, the plan was basic and nothing to write home about. To put it simply, they were going to make the guests think that Joy Bodhisattva had poisoned them and pit them against each other. Then, they would swoop in and claim all the spoils.

The plan was extremely simple, but its effects were devastating to say the least. If it succeeded, then Joy Bodhisattva would die, and the Buddhist Hall of Joy would be annihilated as a result.

That said, the plan wasn’t simple to execute. One mistake, and they would have to go back to the drawing board.

First, nearly everyone participating in the Trueman feast was a noteworthy person. A good number of them were powerful champions, famous doctors, or even expert poisoners themselves. If even one of them prematurely discovered that something was wrong with the Blissful Spring, then the whole plan would fall into shambles. After all, even if they suspected that Joy Bodhisattva was trying to poison them, they would ask questions first and kill her later.

Besides that, no one participating in the Trueman feast was a true idiot. No matter what happened, it was only a matter of time before they found out that someone was trying to frame Joy Bodhisattva. Joy Bodhisattva would lose face because her security was apparently lax enough for someone to pull something like this, but ultimately, it wouldn’t cause too big a splash.

This meant that the plan had two prerequisites: one, the poison must be undetectable even to an expert in this area. Two, the poison must remain undetectable until it was too late.

The Burning Heart was colorless and odorless. Touching or ingesting it would not elicit any sort of reaction either. It was only when the victim was suspicious, fearful or angry that it would reveal its true colors. It was almost impossible to detect the poison without foreknowledge, meaning that it was the perfect poison for the job.

So, they had their poison. But how could they make everyone think that Joy Bodhisattva was the poisoner? And how could they pit them against each other?

The Blissful Spring was the answer. From the beginning, Ye Qing had been wondering why Xiong Kuohai had chosen to poison the Blissful Spring instead of the wells the Buddhist Hall of Joy drew water from. After all, water was food, water was life. Poisoning the wells would ensure that everyone participating in the Trueman feast would be poisoned. Besides that, the wells weren’t guarded like the Blissful Spring was, and they were closer to the lodgings as well.

It was definitely easier to poison the wells than the Blissful Spring, so why would Xiong Kuohai purposely make things more difficult for himself? The answer was simple. It was to make everyone think that Joy Bodhisattva was the poisoner.

According to Ye Qing’s observation, the Blissful Spring was only twenty or so meters wide and not really that deep. Normally, it was more than enough to feed everyone in the sect, but they were planning to treat thousands and thousands of people this time. Not only that, every guest would receive at least one jar of Blissful Spring since it was Joy Bodhisattva’s Trueman feast. Assuming his estimation was correct, there was barely enough spring water in the pool to treat the guests.

What this meant was that the disciples of the Buddhist Hall of Joy would refrain from drinking the Blissful Spring to avoid depleting its reserve. After all, the guests came first, and they second.

There were two advantages to poisoning the Blissful Spring. One, the poison would not be discovered prematurely. The disciples of the Buddhist Hall of Joy would wake earlier than anyone to prepare for the day's event, so if they poisoned the well water, then it was almost guaranteed that they would display the symptoms first.

Although the conditions to trigger the Burning Heart were somewhat stringent, it wasn't that stringent. As soon as the first victim appeared, Joy Bodhisattva would know that something was amiss.

Chapter 559: A Nightly Visit

Two, it would be quite difficult to frame Joy Bodhisattva for poisoning if her own people were poisoned. It just didn't make logical sense, right?

All in all, the Blissful Spring was the best option. If they poisoned the Blissful Spring, the guests would be poisoned, but the disciples of the Buddhist hall of Joy and Joy Bodhisattva themselves would not be poisoned. It would appear as if Joy Bodhisattva was the poisoner.

Moreover, the Burning Heart amplified a victim's suspicion, fear and anger infinitely. Unable to remain rational and constantly drawn toward their darker instincts, they would go to war against Joy Bodhisattva and the Buddhist Hall of Joy for sure. If that happened, Xiong Kuohai's conspiracy would end in resounding success.

That was assuming the best case scenario, of course. In reality, the plans of mice and men often went awry. But even if Joy Bodhisattva and the disciples were poisoned by the Burning Heart as well, there were countless ways Xiong Kuohai could convince the irrational guests into suspecting their hosts.

For example, he could claim that they were faking their symptoms. The Blissful Spring was one of their prized possessions of the Buddhist Hall of Joy, so there were guards posted in the vicinity. Naturally, Joy Bodhisattva was still the prime suspect. With the Burning Heart in play, all he needed to do was to incite the crowd a bit to make it impossible for Joy Bodhisattva to prove her own innocence.

It never hurts to be well prepared. It was especially important to have a Plan B, C, D and Z when Plan A failed.

In any case, the outcome was always the same: Joy Bodhisattva would die, the Buddhist Hall of Joy would be annihilated, and all it cost Xiong Kuohai was the Burning Heart and his breath. What a mastermind!

But as the saying went, there was always a bigger mountain out there, and unfortunately for Xiong Kuohai, he was that mountain this time.

I saw through your plan effortlessly, criminal!

"Heh! When it comes to intelligence, I dare not say that I'm number one, but no one would dare to call themselves number two either! Hehehehe!"

After indulging in a bit of narcissism, Ye Qing calmed down and began pondering his next move.

Now that he knew what Xiong Kuohai was planning, what should he do?

Should he pat his bum and leave?

Should he inform Joy Bodhisattva about this?

Or should he inform Joy Bodhisattva about this *and*

leave afterward?

If he didn't have the Annon Sutra, then he would have chosen to leave for sure. After all, he neither knew who the person in black was nor what Xiong Kuohai was planning. If he was feeling particularly generous, then he would inform Joy Bodhisattva and leave. Whatever happened next was none of his business.

Better safe than sorry, always.

But things were different now. He knew who the suspect was and what they were planning. Naturally, the best option here was to speak with Joy Bodhisattva.

This was his chance to earn her favor. He would be remiss to miss it. Having made up his mind, Ye Qing immediately made for the peak.

Joy Bodhisattva lived in a pavilion called the Bodhisattva Pavilion. Despite being the place where the Bodhisattva lived, it had few guards and even fewer people. There were two reasons. One, Joy Bodhisattva preferred peace and tranquility and so kept her number of attendants to a minimum. Two, she was a Grandmaster. She was the one her people were counting on to protect them, not the other way around. As a result, it took Ye Qing little effort to infiltrate the place.

He could have requested an attendant to send her a message, but he didn't. First, he didn't want anyone to know that he had communicated with Joy Bodhisattva. If Xiong Kuohai somehow caught wind of the message, or if he had a spy or two in the Buddhist Hall of Joy, then he would be in huge trouble. Second, it was simply faster to notify Joy Bodhisattva himself. There were only four to six hours left before the day began. Every minute counted if they were to prepare against this conspiracy.

After slipping into the pavilion and probing his surroundings for a bit, Ye Qing entered a small building and let slip a hint of aura. The second he did this, a powerful aura immediately locked onto him. Clearly, Joy Bodhisattva had discovered his presence.

In reality, the entire pavilion was enveloped in Joy Bodhisattva's aura. If he was anyone else, she would have discovered them at first notice. The only reason she hadn't discovered him immediately was because the "Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra" was extremely proficient at concealing energies. In fact, he was confident that he could've snuck all the way to her doorsteps without being discovered.

Of course, he didn't do that because it was both rude and dangerous. It was very possible that Joy Bodhisattva might misunderstand his intentions and attack him out of instinct. Giving Joy Bodhisattva a small scare wasn't worth losing his life.

That was why he leaked a wisp of aura after entering the building. It was his greeting so to speak.

Creak...

The door where Joy Bodhisattva was at opened on its own, and Ye Qing dashed into the room in one step.

Despite being the head of the Buddhist Hall of Joy, it would seem that Joy Bodhisattva was a minimalist. There were a bamboo bed, a table, a couple of chairs, a teapot and a few cups inside the room. That was all.

Right now, Joy Bodhisattva was wearing a thin gown and sitting cross-legged on her bed with her hair draped loosely over her shoulders. A white glow amidst the darkness, she looked so attuned with her surroundings that Ye Qing blanked out for a moment. Then, he recovered and began with an apology,

“My deepest apologies for disturbing you at this hour, Bodhisattva.”

“It is fine. I told you that you are always welcome.”

Joy Bodhisattva watched Ye Qing with eyes that resembled the infinite night sky. “Have you changed your mind? Are you going to become my husband after all?”

“Cough! Cough!” Ye Qing wasn’t expecting that old topic to be brought up again. “You misunderstand, Bodhisattva. I have a most important matter to discuss with you.”

“In my opinion, nothing is more important than being able to experience the red dust and the love of all that lives right now,” Joy Bodhisattva replied calmly.

“Not even if it’s a matter concerning your life and death, Bodhisattva? A matter that may very well result in the destruction of the Buddhist Hall of Joy?” Ye Qing countered.

“What did you say?” For the first time, puzzlement seeped into Joy Bodhisattva’s usually emotionless features.

Ye Qing did not keep her in suspense and jumped straight to his point. “Xiong Kuohai of Endless Sand is conspiring against you, Bodhisattva.”

Joy Bodhisattva fell silent for a moment. “And it has been so for the longest time. I am not surprised.”

The subtext was: *This better not be everything you have to say.*

Ye Qing stared at her. “Sure, but did you know that he is plotting to kill you during your own Trueman feast?”

Joy Bodhisattva’s pupils contracted a little. “You should understand the consequences of spouting nonsense and playing me for a fool.”

Joy Bodhisattva wasn’t angry, but the room was suddenly trembling for seemingly no reason whatsoever.

Ye Qing paid it no attention, however. He continued calmly, “I wouldn’t dare to trick you, Bodhisattva. I swear that every word I said is the truth.”

Joy Bodhisattva watched him for a couple more breaths before withdrawing her aura. “Tell me everything.”

“It’s like this...” Ye Qing proceeded to tell her how he discovered Xiong Kuohai by accident, how he followed him all the way to the Blissful Spring, and what he did to it. Then, he recited everything he read about the Burning Heart—without mentioning the Annon Sutra, of course.

“It so happens that I know what that strange heart is because I once read about it in an ancient book. It is called the Burning Heart, and it is one of the nine ancient poisons. Triggered by suspicion, fear or anger, it draws out the myriad darkness hidden in a person’s heart until it becomes the poison that kills them.”

“The Burning Heart is colorless and odorless. Touching or ingesting it would not elicit any sort of reaction either. This characteristic makes it nigh impossible to detect without foreknowledge.”

“When the victim is angry, afraid, or suspicious about something, the Burning Heart would activate and amplify said emotions infinitely. It would also draw out the darkness inside their heart and drive them to the brink of insanity. It cannot be cured.”

“The greater the negative emotions afflicting the person, the worse the Burning Heart would become. In the end, it would turn into a literal inferno that burns both the victim’s body and their mind into ash.”

“The Burning Heart?” Joy Bodhisattva muttered under her breath while watching Ye Qing with a small frown. Despite her vast knowledge and experience, she had never heard of the Burning Heart before.

That wasn’t a problem though. There were ways to check if what Ye Qing said was the truth. She was fairly certain that Ye Qing was telling the truth anyway. His eyes looked clear and calm.

Joy Bodhisattva rose to her feet and walked over to a small container. The small container was filled with clear water, and a single pygmy water-lily floated on its surface. Hanging on the wall above the container was a tiny bamboo that somewhat resembled a little finger. Around three inches long, it was emerald green in color and covered in vibrant-looking leaves.

Beads of water could be seen dripping down its leaves and into the small container. It caused ripples when it hit the lotus leaves and scattered in every direction.

Chapter 560: Who Is The Butcher’s Knife

“Come in, Cai Le,” said Joy Bodhisattva quietly after arriving at the small container. At the same time, she waved her hand and summoned a teacup from the table. She scooped a glass of water from the container.

A voice came from outside at this moment. “Bodhisattva!”

“Enter,” Joy Bodhisattva replied.

A female disciple of the Buddhist Hall of Joy stepped into the room. She was none other than Cai Le.

A hint of surprise flashed across Cai Le’s face when she saw Ye Qing, but she did not say anything. She simply stared at Joy Bodhisattva and awaited her orders quietly.

“Drink this,” said Joy Bodhisattva while handing tea cup to Cai Le. The woman looked confused, but she still did as Joy Bodhisattva said and drank the water in one gulp. At the side, Ye Qing was frowning while a thought flashed through his mind.

After Cai Le drank the water, her eyes gradually grew unfocused, and ecstasy slowly crept onto her features. She looked like she might float into the air at any moment.

A dozen or so breaths later, Cai Le finally snapped back to reality and bowed deeply to Joy Bodhisattva. “Thank you for the gift, Bodhisattva.”

“Do you know why I gifted you a cup of Blissful Spring, Cai Le?” Joy Bodhisattva asked.

I knew it, Ye Qing thought to himself. The water inside the small container was the Blissful Spring. Joy Bodhisattva must have done something to draw the spring water over to her room.

Cai Le’s role in this was clear. She was to be the poison tester.

“I do not know, Bodhisattva. Will you please tell me?” Cai Le asked.

“Because I have poisoned it!” Joy Bodhisattva answered.

“W-What?!” Cai Le’s eyes widened a little. She looked astonished, suspicious and afraid all at the same time.

“Do you know what sin you’ve committed, Cai Le?” Joy Bodhisattva’s voice suddenly turned harsh and cold.

“I-I don’t... What did I do, Bodhisattva?” Startled, Cai Le hurriedly dropped to her knees and asked fearfully. Her face was white, and she was shaking all over like a leaf.

As Cai Le’s fear, doubt and worry grew, Ye Qing could clearly sense an anomalous energy feeding off of her emotions and growing swiftly. It was dark and evil like the representation of the darkest, filthiest corner of a person’s heart. Goosebumps broke out of his skin despite himself.

Joy Bodhisattva was a Grandmaster, so of course she picked up what Ye Qing had picked up herself. However, she remained firm and continued in a stone cold voice, “What sin did you commit, you ask? Do you really think I don’t know that you are the spy Xiong Kuohai had planted in my midst?”

“No! I am not a spy! I am not a spy! I am completely loyal to you, Bodhisattva! I would never dare to betray you!”

By now, Cai Le's fear had grown to the point where it was almost tangible. She kept kowtowing to Joy Bodhisattva and begging for mercy, "Mercy, Bodhisattva! Mercy!"

Ye Qing did not know if Joy Bodhisattva was just scaring Cai Le to trigger the Burning Heart, or if the disciple really was a spy Xiong Kuohai had planted at her side. Regardless, her growing fear continued to fuel the anomalous energy inside her body and fueling its growth at a rapid pace. It wasn't long before it flooded every inch of her body like a broken dam.

Cai Le herself was growing increasingly incoherent as time passed. Just a few breaths later, Cai Le abruptly looked up and fixed a glare at Joy Bodhisattva. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her face was contorted into a visage of hatred, violence, and madness.

"You wronged me! You're accusing me of something I didn't do! I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you both!"

The next moment, Cai Le roared and pounced toward Joy Bodhisattva like an animal. In response, Joy Bodhisattva lowered her hand and unleashed her tremendous power, freezing Cai Le in place. Despite this, Cai Le continued to struggle with all her might with her teeth bared, and her face contorted like a ghoul from hell.

Joy Bodhisattva stepped forward and pressed a hand against her head. Then, she poured a rich amount of energy and spirit into her body and attempted to rip out the anomalous energy.

Just a few seconds later, Joy Bodhisattva furrowed her brows a little. She discovered that, despite her vast power, she was unable to uproot the anomalous energy at all. Scratch that, she couldn't even manipulate it. And all this time, the anomalous energy continued to grow at an insane rate.

"Ahhh! Kill you! Must kill you!"

A couple more breaths passed, and Cai Le suddenly let out a mournful, angry roar. With a burst of abnormal strength, she actually broke out of Joy Bodhisattva's shackles and swung her arms wildly in front of her. At the same time, wisps of dark flames began seeping out of her pores. Joy Bodhisattva's face gradually darkened when she saw this.

It was at this moment Ye Qing appeared in front of Cai Le and pushed her down to the floor. While the woman was pinned, he produced a wine cup with a wisp of clear qi seeping out of it and held it in front of Cai Le's nose. She inhaled.

Astoundingly, the redness in Cai Le's eyes began receding at a visible rate after she inhaled the clear qi. Like a mouse who saw a cat, the anomalous energy swiftly hid itself inside Cai Le's heart. The woman's breathing was calming bit by bit as well.

"The Qi of Ultimate Purity?" Joy Bodhisattva asked while staring at the wine cup.

"Yeah." Ye Qing explained, "I forgot to tell you this, but the Burning Heart is incurable and untreatable. The only way one could resist its influence and avoid its torment is to remain perfectly calm and desireless."

"My Qi of Ultimate Purity can suppress it, but it only treats the symptoms and not the roots. Once its effects have passed, the Burning Heart may restart anew."

"I see. The Burning Heart truly is something."

Joy Bodhisattva narrowed her eyes a little. Even for someone like her, she could not help but feel a sliver of fear toward the Burning Heart.

“Ugh... What happened to me?” It was at this moment Cai Le regained her consciousness. Before she could say anything else, Joy Bodhisattva tapped a finger on her forehead and caused the light in her eyes to wink out like a candle. She abruptly collapsed on the ground and died just like that.

“Bodhisattva...”

Ye Qing frowned. He wasn’t sure why she did this.

“This secret cannot be known to anyone else but you and me, and you said it yourself that the Burning Heart is incurable, didn’t you? In that case, she no longer has any use for me,” Joy Bodhisattva replied indifferently. She had recollected herself during the short time she killed Cai Le.

Ye Qing did not say anything. Once again, he had forgotten that the so-called Bodhisattva before him was a true heretic of the Dark Ways. She might have a holy appearance, but she was really a tyrannical, ruthless ruler on the inside.

Joy Bodhisattva did not feel anything for her actions whatsoever. In her eyes, Cai Le was probably no more important than an ant. If she dies, she dies. There was no need to feel anything for the servant whatsoever!

Frowning, Joy Bodhisattva walked around her room twice before bowing to Ye Qing suddenly. “Thank you for telling me this, scion. If it wasn’t for you, both the Buddhist Hall of Joy and I would have met our demise. You have singlehandedly pulled us out of the abyss, and for that, I am deeply grateful.”

“You flatter me, Bodhisattva. It is simply the right thing to do.” Ye Qing hurriedly lifted his hands as if to stop her, but of course he didn’t touch her.

After Joy Bodhisattva had voiced her thanks, she said, “What do you think Xiong Kuohai is plotting by poisoning the Blissful Spring, scion?”

I’ve been waiting for you to ask this exact question! Ye Qing thought to himself but did not show it on his face. He pretended to mull over the question for a moment before answering, “I believe that Xiong Kuohai is planning to frame you. He is planning to use the *jianghu* warriors to kill you and destroy the Buddhist Hall of Joy.”

He proceeded to tell Joy Bodhisattva about his assumptions.

“Of course, these are just my assumptions. Do forgive me if they prove to be incorrect.”

“You are a wise man, scion. I find no fault in your assumption.” Joy Bodhisattva nodded. She was no longer looking at Ye Qing like a junior or a younger relative. Ye Qing could tell that she was, for the first time, speaking to him as if they were equals.

Joy Bodhisattva added, "That said, there is one thing I'd like to nitpick about."

"Oh?" Ye Qing lifted an eyebrow. He was sure that his assumptions were near perfect.

"Please enlighten me, Bodhisattva."

Joy Bodhisattva answered, "You are right that Xiong Kuohai plans to destroy me and the Buddhist Hall of Joy using the butcher's knife that is my guest. But that isn't all he is plotting."

"The guests participating in my Trueman's feast are the butcher's knife, but I am a butcher's knife myself."