

Stranger 571

Chapter 571: Cutting A Paper Doll

The Vermillion Bird Heaven Burning Art was one of the Earthfire Palace of Demons' secret arts. Activated using one's mind, it used the ground itself as an array to manifest the Vermillion Bird of the South. It possessed immeasurable power and could scorch both heaven and earth.

Xiong Kuohai did not dare to hesitate. He immediately kicked off the ground and shot into the air like an arrow.

The second Xiong Kuohai took off, the crisp, melodious sound of a bird resounded throughout the area. The ground crumbled like it was a volcanic eruption, and massive pillars of flames shot into the air.

Flying amidst the seemingly endless flames was a vermilion bird with long tail feathers, a fiery form, and a magnificent crown. For a time, everyone and everything was dyed orange red.

Xiong Kuohai wasn't slow, but he wasn't faster than the vermilion bird either. It appeared in front of the Grandmaster in just the blink of an eye and spat out a jet of flames.

The flame was pure white and completely devoid of impurities. It looked like the purest, cleanest, and flawless object in the world. But as soon as it appeared, the space around it began warping and breaking into the void, and the sea of flames surrounding the vermilion bird dimmed until it was near unnoticeable. It was as if the jet of pure white flame was the only true object in the world.

Even before the pure white flame got close, Xiong Kuohai could already feel his skin drying up and cracking in earnest, his blood boiling—no, *burning* in his veins, and his mind shaking and warping and burning under its all-consuming power.

His face looked as white as a sheet. He might not know what the white flame was, but he had no doubt that he would die if he made contact with it. And no, he wasn't just imagining this. Just now, he was severely injured by Ji Donglei's ultimate attack, and the old man's sword qi was spread out across his whole body. Until he expelled the sword qi, he would not be able to muster even a-tenth of his usual strength.

Worse still, he could tell that the pure white flame was at least as powerful as Ji Donglei's "Opening A Blue Sky". There was no chance he would survive if he was hit.

Xiong Kuohai didn't want to die, so he mustn't allow the flame to hit him no matter what. So, he did something no one expected: he cried for help.

"Save me, Sakyamuni!"

A patch of shadow behind Xiong Kuohai's back abruptly stood up after he said this. It looked like black, insoluble ink.

"Useless."

The shadow let out a cold, unfeeling hmph. It seemed to be incredibly displeased with Xiong Kuohai's performance. The next moment, a hand reached out of the shadows and grabbed the pure white flame.

Sizzle sizzle sizzle!

After the hand caught the pure white flame, the shadow began boiling and bubbling violently like boiled water.

“The Nan Ming Li Fire?!” the shadow exclaimed with surprise and a bit of severity.

Xiong Kuohai was just as surprised as the shadow was. He had no idea that the pure white flame would be the legendary Nan Ming Li Fire.

The Vermillion Bird was one of the Four Spirits of the South, and the Nan Ming Li Fire was its personal divine flame. Specifically, it was the fire surrounding the Vermillion Bird after it reached its peak intensity. Sitting on the deep end of the yang spectrum and unbelievably potent, it boasted the power to burn anything and everything to dust. It was easily one of the scariest flames in the world.

Once, Xiong Kuohai heard that those who cultivated the “Vermillion Bird Heaven Burning Art” to perfection could generate the Vermillion Bird’s personal divine flame, the Nan Ming Li Fire. However, he had never seen nor heard of a member of the Earthfire Palace of Demons who managed to cultivate the “Vermillion Bird Heaven Burning Art” to the adept level.

Today, he learned that the rumors were true after all. Not only that, he had been a hair’s breadth away from being burned into ash by the legendary Nan Ming Li Fire. Should he count himself lucky or unlucky?

Meanwhile, the shadow was still fighting against the Nan Ming Li Fire. The shadow was boiling and warping under the pure white flame’s extreme heat, but the Nan Ming Li Fire was also shrinking constantly under its pressure.

The clash was so terrifying that Xiong Kuohai felt his scalp numbing with fear and subconsciously took a few steps backward. He knew just how strong the man hiding in his shadow was, but even so, he wasn’t able to suppress the Nan Ming Li Fire immediately. It showed just how powerful the flame was.

Xiong Kuohai’s chest sagged a little with relief. If he hadn’t made the right call and cried for help immediately, he would be dust in the wind right now. After taking a moment to recollect himself, he then directed his gaze at the unconscious Huo Ruyu—the ultimate attack must have taken everything she had to unleash—and the shaking Ji Donglei clinging to his sword for support with indescribable anger and bloodthirst.

Oh, and he mustn’t forget Mistress Ruyi. If it wasn’t for him, he would have come so close to losing everything even though victory was right in his grasp. At this point, it was clear that this was a setup from the beginning. The Five Qi Auspicious Cloud Altar was the bait to lure him toward their trap. The Five Lifetimes Calamitous Qi was to knock him out for a brief moment and give Ji Donglei and Huo Ruyu the chance to execute their ultimate attacks.

He had to admit that the plan was sublime. Each and every step was planned out and executed perfectly. He would definitely be dead if he did not have a backup.

Unfortunately for them, a failure was a failure. Strength and luck were both on his side. Since they had failed to kill him with their ultimate counterattack, it was their turn to perish.

The time for games was over. It was time to repay the blood debt with a blood debt, and the sooner this was over, the sooner he could rest easy.

Why was he in such a hurry to end this even though it looked like his enemies had lost their last chance to turn this around?

It was because the bad premonition that had been gripping him since a while ago hadn't faded even now. He wondered why.

Hmm? Did I forget someone?

Right before Xiong Kuohai was about to kill Ji Donglei and Huo Ruyu, he suddenly felt like something was amiss. To be specific, he felt like someone was missing.

Who was it?

Wait. Where's Joy Bodhisattva?!

Xiong Kuohai shivered when he finally realized the reason behind his discomfort. Joy Bodhisattva had not taken part in the counterattack even though both Ji Donglei and Huo Ruyu had acted. Knowing that shrewd woman, there was no way she would let go of such a perfect opportunity.

Joy Bodhisattva was grievously injured, sure, but that didn't mean she had lost the ability to muster one last counterattack. So why didn't she?

Where is she?

Did she escape?

Or is she plotting something?

The bit of color Xiong Kuohai regained drained away from his face once more.

The entire Blissful Mountain was currently locked down by the Taiping Heaven Sealing Banner, so there was no way she could escape from here. Therefore, the woman could only be plotting something.

Snip!

As if on cue, Xiong Kuohai heard a snipping sound. It reminded him of a pair of scissors. The sound was so loud, clear and crisp that it was impossible for Xiong Kuohai to miss it, but for some reason, he was unable to find the origin of the noise at all. It was almost as if the sound had come from inside his head.

Snip!

The sound appeared again, and this time, he saw an image inside his head. He saw Joy Bodhisattva holding up a rusted, chipped pair of scissors that was covered in some sort of reddish brown crust. It looked a lot like dried blood. The scissors were oozing ominousness and inauspiciousness.

In her left hand was a perfectly ordinary paper doll. His name and birth date were written on it. Right now, Joy Bodhisattva was slowly cutting the mouth of the paper doll.

Strangely, strands of blood dripped down the corner of the paper doll's mouth after the scissors cut through it. It was almost as if it was cutting a real person, not a paper doll!

Indescribable fear and panic exploded inside Xiong Kuohai's heart then. It was because he could tell that the paper doll was himself.

Xiong Kuohai tried to say something, but he abruptly realized that he was incapable of saying anything. He could only watch as Joy Bodhisattva proceeded to cut the paper doll's eyes, ears, nose, mouth and tongue.

Every time she cut off an organ, it felt as if a thread of karma was severed. His eyes suddenly turned blind, his ears went deaf, his nose could not smell anything, his tongue tasted perfectly bland, his body lost all sense of touch, and even his spirit could no longer perceive beyond itself.

At that moment, he lost all sensation of the outside world. He couldn't even control his own body. It was as if someone had cut off all of his senses and control.

Paradoxically, he could still see Joy Bodhisattva inside his head. In fact, her image was growing clearer and clearer. It was as if the woman was living inside his head.

Finally, Joy Bodhisattva moved her scissors to the paper doll's neck and squeezed.

Chapter 572: Snip

I'm going to die! I'm going to die!!!

Terrible fear welled inside Xiong Kuohai's heart. He had a feeling that he would die if Joy Bodhisattva was allowed to cut off the paper doll's head. One hundred percent.

But... there was nothing he could do about it. His senses were completely cut off, he had no control over his own body, and even his spirit was completely isolated. Right now, he was no different from a puppet that anyone could manipulate as they pleased.

Snip!

Joy Bodhisattva was cutting through the paper doll very, very slowly. Maybe it was because the blade was too dull, but every time she made a small snip, she would shake almost as if the act took every bit of strength she had in her.

She was doing it though. As she made progress, bright red blood began to drip down the paper doll's neck profusely.

No! No! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!

Defiance and the desire to live swelled inside Xiong Kuohai's heart. He didn't want to die. His plan was so close to succeeding. He was so close to becoming a ruler of a corner of the world.

Thousands and thousands would answer to his beck and call, and his success would be recognized and rewarded appropriately by the Way Lord, master of the Way of Taiping. He had a bright future ahead of him.

In fact, conquering Bei You might not even be his absolute limit. Who was to say he couldn't become a Sage in the future? Who was to say he couldn't become a god-on-earth and reach never-before-seen heights?

He couldn't die here. He just couldn't.

He was the predator, and everyone else the prey. Metaphorically speaking, he had Joy Bodhisattva and the others inside his gullet. He couldn't possibly choke to death now!

I refuse! I won't accept this!

Defiance and fury burst out of his heart like a dam, and to his surprise... It actually worked. The paper doll in Joy Bodhisattva's hand began struggling violently, and the hand Joy Bodhisattva used to hold the scissors began shaking as well. She was unable to make another snip for a time. Hope welled inside Xiong Kuohai's heart when he saw this.

Alas, it was not meant to be. Countless flesh buds abruptly grew out of the scissors and sank into Joy Bodhisattva's flesh, causing a pained look to appear on her face. Then, Joy Bodhisattva began squeezing the scissors with all her might.

As the blades slowly clamped around the paper doll's neck, Joy Bodhisattva's smooth, jade-like skin began to lose its luster. Her pitch black hair began turning white almost as if she had aged decades in a single motion as well.

No! NO!

Xiong Kuohai roared again and again inside his head, but it was futile. He could only watch as the scissors completed its final sequence and cut off the paper doll's head completely.

Snip!

When the paper doll lost its head, it ceased struggling immediately. Xiong Kuohai's consciousness was also extinguished at that exact moment.

"Not... like... this..."

Back in the real world, Xiong Kuohai abruptly trembled and muttered what sounded like gibberish at the beginning. Then, a red thread abruptly appeared on his neck, and his head rolled off his neck and hit the floor with a sick thud. He was dead.

"Who am I? Where am I? What just happened?"

The combatants abruptly froze in place and stared into the dead Grandmaster's wide, lifeless eyes. They were speechless with shock to say the least.

How did Xiong Kuohai suddenly lose his head?

He just died without any warning at all!

"Useless. *Worthless.*"

It was at this moment a cold hmph interrupted the moment. The shadow in the air abruptly wrapped around the Nan Ming Li Fire and devoured it before transforming into a faceless, humanoid silhouette. Then, it turned its head and looked in a certain direction.

Countless shadows enveloped the area the shadow was looking at, and a person fell down from the sky. It was none other than Joy Bodhisattva.

It took the crowd a second to recognize the Bodhisattva. It was because her skin was coarse and wrinkly, her hair was grayish white like an old woman's, and her vitality was practically a dying candle compared to the inferno she was before. It was as if she had aged decades during the short period she went missing.

The shadow paid little attention to her appearance, however. Its attention was drawn to the scissors she was holding.

“The Beheading Scissors?!” The shadow sounded slightly astonished. “I did not know that the Beheading Scissors was in your hands. No wonder you were able to extinguish Xiong Kuohai’s life and soul in an instant without me noticing.”

Some people had heard of the Beheading Scissors, but some hadn’t. Luckily for Ye Qing, he was one of the people in the know.

The Beheading Scissors? Heavens above!

Ye Qing gulped nervously when he heard the name. Now he understood how Xiong Kuohai had died so suddenly and incomprehensibly.

The Beheading Scissors was a Disaster-class Strange Artifact. It was ranked sixty-ninth[1] on the Strange Artifact Register. An offensive-type strange artifact, it could assassinate a target without leaving any traces behind thanks to its ability to behead its target and extinguish their soul. All the wielder needed to do was to write their opponent’s name and birth date on a paper doll and cut off its head with the scissors.

But of course, the Beheading Scissors’ incredible power came at a hefty price. Its usage conditions were extremely stringent as well. First, the wielder must find out their target’s name and birth date. Then, they must write it down on a paper doll using their heart’s blood.

Second, they must curse the paper doll and pray to the Beheading Scissors so that the two items would be linked in karma. The way to curse the paper doll was to slap it with the sole of a shoe and chanting, “Behead” repeatedly. When it was time to pray to the Beheading Scissors, they must kneel and chant their enemy’s name.

The longer the wielder cursed the paper doll and prayed to the Beheading Scissors, the stronger its ability to sever the soul would become. The wielder’s sincerity also factored into the Strange Artifact’s power.

Third, the wielder must follow a specific order when it was finally time to cut the paper doll. They must first cut off the paper doll’s eyes, ears, mouth, nose, tongue, body and spirit so as to completely sever the victim’s senses. Only then could they cut off the head.

During this process, the victim would be completely immobile and incapable of perceiving their surroundings. However, if another person noticed their state and jolted them awake, then the ritual would end in failure. The wielder themselves would suffer a terrible rebound as a result.

That was why the best time to use the Beheading Scissors was when the enemy was alone. Only then could it unleash its full potential.

Finally, the price of using the Beheading Scissors was the wielder’s own lifespan. The stronger the opponent, the greater the amount of lifespan they must sacrifice to kill them.

This was why Joy Bodhisattva looked like she had aged decades.

The Beheading Scissors were a deadly Strange Artifact that took its price from both its wielder and its victim. The remark on the Strange Register was:

“One snip to behead the body and extinguish the soul; one snip to slay one’s youth and grow white hair.”

It described the essence of the Beheading Scissors perfectly.

Ye Qing wasn't just astonished by the Beheading Scissors' power ability. He was deeply impressed with Joy Bodhisattva's scheme as well.

The Beheading Scissors were powerful, but it was no easy feat to use it to kill Xiong Kuohai while everyone was watching, not to mention that he was normally guarded by a mysterious, powerful Sakyamuni.

But Joy Bodhisattva did it. The Five Qi Auspicious Cloud Altar wasn't the only bait present. Ji Donglei and Huo Ruyu were baits. Even the mysterious Sayakmuni was a bait. The fishing hook was Joy Bodhisattva and the Beheading Scissors all along.

The Five Qi Auspicious Cloud Altar was the bait to put Xiong Kuohai in a difficult predicament. Ji Donglei and Huo Ruyu were the baits to lure out the mysterious Sakyamuni and keep him away from Xiong Kuohai.

It was the only way she could have used the Beheading Scissors on Xiong Kuohai without the Sakyamuni noticing.

Finally, the mysterious Sakyamuni himself was a bait to keep all attention from Xiong Kuohai. After all, who would anyone look at the Grandmaster when a greater threat was right in front of them? This eliminated the possibility of another warrior noticing something wrong with Xiong Kuohai and jolting him awake while she was conducting the ritual.

With three baits, a wonderful plan and a flawless execution of said him, Joy Bodhisattva finally managed to catch the big fish that was Xiong Kuohai.

No matter how you looked at it, Joy Bodhisattva deserved her victory, and Xiong Kuohai his demise.

This wasn't the end of the incident though. No, it was just the beginning.

The Sakyamuni was no small fry. He might even prove to be more formidable than Xiong Kuohai.

Ye Qing mentally smacked himself in the head. *What am I thinking? Of course the Sakyamuni is a greater threat than Xiong Kuohai. He's the real mastermind behind all this!*

He was sure that Joy Bodhisattva had a plan though. She might be grievously injured and seemingly at her wit's end, but he knew she hadn't used up all of her trump cards yet.

1. It's a perfect fit with Joy Bodhisattva... 🤔

"To think you managed to kill Xiong Kuohai right under my nose. Not bad, Bodhisattva," said the mysterious Sakyamuni with a smile that didn't reach the eye. He had already figured out how Joy Bodhisattva managed to kill Xiong Kuohai.

Joy Bodhisattva replied indifferently, "You flatter me, Sakyamuni Myriad Shadows." She looked terrible, but her expression was calm, and her tone was as indifferent as ever.

"Sakyamuni Myriad Shadows?!"

Everyone was astonished to hear this. The Way Lord was the master of the Way of Taiping, and he was served by four Sakyamunis. They were Heavenly Soul Breaker, Earthly Soul Destroyer, Myriad

Shadows and Thousand Faces. Each Sakyamuni was immeasurably powerful and a named warrior on the Earth Champions Ranking.

Of the four, Heavenly Soul Breaker was the strongest, Earthly Soul Destroyer was the strangest, Myriad Shadows was the most enigmatic, and Thousand Faces was the most unknowable.

Heavenly Soul Breaker was said to be a half step away from becoming a Sage and becoming a god-on-earth. Hence, he was the strongest. Earthly Soul Destroyer cultivated the Way of Taiping's Deity Possession Art and could summon gods to possess his body. Therefore, his power was as incredible as it was unpredictable. Myriad Shadows was a shadowy, indiscernible entity that no light could illuminate, which was why it was the most enigmatic. And finally, Thousand Faces could change their appearance however they liked. They could be male, female, old or young. No one knew their appearance, their age, or even their gender.

Although Ji Donglei knew that the Way of Taiping was behind Xiong Kuohai and said as much, he did not think that it would be Myriad Shadows, one of the four Sakyamunis of the Way of Taiping.

The likes of Wei Changhe and Gold Ingot were lost and terrified after Xiong Kuohai perished, but the appearance of the Sakyamuni injected a new burst of strength into their bodies.

As for the survivors who were celebrating the death of Xiong Kuohai, they felt like someone had poured a bucket of ice over their heads. They felt cold all the way to the core.

"You did recognize me. I was right after all. Someone was following me that night."

Myriad Shadows looked at Joy Bodhisattva and asked, "I'm curious. Since you knew about Xiong Kuohai's plan and even my presence from the start, why didn't you run away or expose me in front of everyone? Why did you cooperate with me and play this farce all the way to its climax? Are you so arrogant as to think that you can defeat me with these remnants who are poisoned by the Burning Heart?"

"Of course not." Joy Bodhisattva clasped her hands in salute.

"Huh? You admit it?" Even Myriad Shadows sounded a little surprised. He wondered what the woman was cooking.

"Why would I fear admitting something I did?" Joy Bodhisattva replied indifferently.

“You... You used us?” Ji Donglei was so angry that his eyes were bloodshot, and his entire body was shaking.

“I’ll kill you!”

Huo Ruyu let out a guttural roar and charged toward Joy Bodhisattva with reckless abandon. She had woken up a while ago, but the Five Qi Auspicious Cloud Altar was no longer present. Unable to suppress the Burning Heart any longer, especially hearing that Joy Bodhisattva had tricked and manipulated her from the very beginning, dark flames began pouring out of her nostrils, her mouth, her eyes and other orifices profusely.

Her flesh began withering and dissolving into ash, but Huo Ruyu paid it no heed. Whatever rationality remained in her heart had been completely replaced by anger and hatred. Right now, all she wanted to do was to kill Joy Bodhisattva.

Joy Bodhisattva didn’t even look at her, however. When Huo Ruyu got close, she lifted a finger and tapped the woman on her forehead.

Huo Ruyu was already on her last legs, not to mention that she was just a mindless beast right now. A hole appeared on her forehead, and both the breath in her mouth and the light in her eyes abruptly extinguished. Her mind was destroyed just like that.

“You... you...”

Ji Donglei and the rest of the warriors stared at her in wide-eyed disbelief. They could not believe that Joy Bodhisattva actually killed Huo Ruyu. At least a dozen people lost control of their emotions and combusted into ash on the spot.

“Why are you doing this, Joy Bodhisattva? Just why?!”

Huo Ruyu’s death and Joy Bodhisattva’s betrayal finally punched through Ji Donglei’s formidable mental defenses. He abruptly screamed on top of his lungs while flames leaked out of his body.

It was only now he realized that they were pawns from the beginning until the end. Both Xiong Kuohai’s and Joy Bodhisattva’s.

How lamentable!

How pitiful!

At that moment, his hatred for Joy Bodhisattva far exceeded even his hatred for Xiong Kuohai.

It wasn’t just him, of course. It was everyone.

“Interesting. How interesting!”

Myriad Shadows’ smile grew a little more genuine as he watched Joy Bodhisattva with great interest. “I want to hear your answer as well. Why are you doing this? Without their aid, your chances of killing me are exactly nil... not that there was any chance you rabble could have killed me.”

Despite Ji Donglei’s roar, Joy Bodhisattva did not so much as glance at his direction. She said indifferently, “I had never planned on killing you, Sakyamuni. All I was aiming for from the start was Xiong Kuohai.”

“Hmm? Xiong Kuohai?” Myriad Shadows looked confused. “But why?”

Joy Bodhisattva answered simply, “I wish to cooperate with you.”

“Cooperate?” Myriad Shadows hesitated for a moment before exclaiming in realization. “Oh! You wish to replace him?”

“That is correct,” Joy Bodhisattva admitted.

“Interesting.” Myriad Shadows smiled when suddenly, his tone grew utterly scornful and disdainful. “But why should I cooperate with you? What makes you think that an ant like you deserves to cooperate with me? I can literally crush you with one finger right now. What makes you think that I would cooperate with a useless, worthless ant?”

Joy Bodhisattva did not get angry despite Myriad Shadows’ insult. “You are wrong, Sakyamuni. You may be strong, but you won’t be able to defeat me easily. Besides, I know you don’t really want to kill me.”

As soon as she finished, vitality suddenly flowed out from inside Joy Bodhisattva and mended her wounds at a visible rate. In just the blink of an eye, her aura had climbed back to its peak almost as if she had never been injured in the first place.

“The Nature’s Water?!” Myriad Shadows was surprised yet again. “I did not know that you possessed such a treasure! Still, you didn’t think that you could beat me just because you have regained your strength, did you?”

“Of course not.” Joy Bodhisattva replied indifferently, “But do not forget that this is Blissful Mountain, Sakyamuni. This is my domain.”

“And?” Sakyamuni Myriad Shadows taunted.

“Observe, Sakyamuni!” Joy Bodhisattva made a hand seal, and the Buddhist, Bodhisattva and celestial statues spread across Blissful Mountain began shaking slightly. As golden light filled the entire place, countless array lines and restrictions spread out from the statues and formed a massive, mysterious array that encompassed the entire Blissful Mountain.

When the array took form, the golden light grew even brighter and shot into the air. It scattered in eight different directions—east, west, north, south, up, down, left, right[1] and took the form of eight Bodhisattvas.

Each Bodhisattva had a different appearance and gender. One female Bodhisattva was holding a kalasa and a prithvi mudra with a smile on her face; a male Bodhisattva was holding a wisdom spellsword and wearing a wrathful expression; another female Bodhisattva was making a boundless mudra with a kind, benevolent expression; another male Bodhisattva was carrying a vajra on his shoulder with a cold, indifferent expression...

The eight Bodhisattvas looked down on the crowd while a terrible pressure encompassed everyone. They looked like gods who were pending orders to lay down divine judgment upon the insignificant masses below.

“This is the Buddhist Hall of Joy’s defense array, the Eight Realms Bodhisattva Evil Suppressing Array. At full strength, it is equal to one strike from a half-step Sage.”

“Therefore, you cannot crush me like an ant.”

Myriad Shadows did not say anything. He simply glanced at the eight Bodhisattvas in the sky with a hint of disdain.

Joy Bodhisattva noticed his reaction and added, “Of course, this does not mean that you lack the power to kill me.”

1. Don’t ask me how left and right even works in this scenario. 🙄

“At least you’re self-aware.”

Myriad Shadows grunted, though he did not underestimate the eight Bodhisattvas in the sky. The array was powerful enough to kill even him should he allow arrogance and disdain to override his better senses.

“I don’t believe you will kill me though.”

Myriad Shadows did not reply, though the trembling shadow beneath his foot seemed to be hinting something.

“The reason you raised Xiong Kuohai is to use him to bring Bei You under the Way of Taiping’s control. However, the northern lands are controlled by the Sword King City, Earthfire Palace of Demons and the Northern Xinjiang Army. If the Way of Taiping tries to enter Northern Xinjiang overtly, they will not stand by and do nothing. That is why you raised a local faction in an attempt to take control of Bei You without anyone noticing.”

Joy Bodhisattva pretended not to notice Myriad Shadows’ odd movements and continued, “If I leak what happened today, your grand plan will end in abject failure. Once Sword King City, Earthfire Palace of Demons and the imperial court of Chu are alerted to your presence, the Way of Taiping will never be able to set foot in Northern Xinjiang again.”

“Am I right, Sakyamuni?”

“Are you threatening me?”

Myriad Shadows hmped, and what looked like an infinite amount of shadow and darkness suddenly poured in from every direction. Even the shadows on the floor suddenly writhed as if they were alive. It was as evil-looking as it was disturbing.

As the shadows and darkness merged into one, all light, color and even sound disappeared from the world. Trapped within the anomalous power's embrace, the warriors felt like they were sinking into the thickest ink. They were unable to breathe or move a muscle. All that was left was darkness, silence, pain and despair.

An indefinite amount of time later, Joy Bodhisattva's voice suddenly pierced through the absolute darkness. "I do not intend to threaten you, Sakyamuni. I am simply asserting the pros and cons."

Several breaths later, Myriad Shadows' voice rang. "Aren't you afraid that I would kill you?"

The infinite darkness receded, revealing Myriad Shadows, Joy Bodhisattva and everyone else.

"Hah! Hah! Hah!"

Almost everyone was panting heavily in fear and trepidation. For a moment there, they really thought they were going to suffocate to death.

This one move showed that Myriad Shadows was beyond terrifying. He was far stronger than Xiong Kuohai, Joy Bodhisattva, and every other Grandmaster attending the Trueman feast.

"You are a wise man, Sakyamuni. Killing me will ruin everything you've worked toward, but using me will gain you everything. I am certain you can tell which path is more advantageous for you."

Despite this, Joy Bodhisattva remained as calm as ever. It was as if the word "fear" did not exist in her dictionary.

"Your goal is to control Bei You for the Way of Taiping. In that case, it doesn't matter who your puppet is, does it? As long as they are obedient and useful to the Way of Taiping, does it really matter if your puppet's name is Xiong Kuohai or Joy Bodhisattva?"

"I am willing to join the Way of Taiping, Sakyamuni. Grant me the opportunity, and I shall serve you and the Way of Taiping faithfully."

"Please believe that I can do what Xiong Kuohai can and cannot do, Sakyamuni. You will not be disappointed."

When Joy Bodhisattva was done speaking, everyone on Blissful Peak realized what the woman was planning. Ye Qing himself was sighing with mixed emotions.

He had guessed the beginning, but not the end. He had believed that Joy Bodhisattva was planning to manipulate Ji Donglei, Huo Ruyu and everyone else into killing Xiong Kuohai and Myriad Shadows. This way, the Buddhist Hall of Joy would be saved.

To this end, he had even supplied Joy Bodhisattva with some Nature's Water and Qi of Ultimate Purity. His aim was so that the Grandmasters would be able to regain their strength and win a battle of attrition.

However, Joy Bodhisattva had never planned on killing Myriad Shadows. Her one target was Xiong Kuohai and Xiong Kuohai only. She wanted to kill him and replace him as the Way of Taiping's puppet in Bei You.

Joy Bodhisattva must have known that the Sakyamuni behind Xiong Kuohai was Myriad Shadows from the beginning. There was no way she could have come up with such an intricate plan otherwise.

By doing this, Joy Bodhisattva was essentially surrendering her own freedom and fate to the Way of Taiping. But now that he had the full picture, he could not deny that she had chosen the best option that was available to her. At the very least, it was safer, wiser, and more reliable than the original plan.

First, Myriad Shadows had turned out to be stronger than Ye Qing had originally estimated. Even if Joy Bodhisattva, Ji Donglei and Huo Ruyu worked together and used all of their trump cards, there was no chance they could've defeated the man.

Second, Myriad Shadows was one of the Four Sakyamunis of the Way of Taiping. He was no small fry that one could kill as they pleased. Even if everything went perfectly, and Joy Bodhisattva successfully killed Myriad Shadows, would the Way of Taiping really allow this transgression to go unanswered?

Of course not. The Way of Taiping was infamous for how petty and retaliatory they were. Although their main headquarters wasn't in Northern Xinjiang, it was no problem for them to dispatch a handful of champions and annihilate the Buddhist Hall of Joy.

Joining Sword King City or Earthfire Palace of Demons was an option, but could they really protect her? It was difficult to say. And even then, she would have lost everything.

All things considered, it was clear that joining Myriad Shadows and the Way of Taiping was the safer and more superior option. For starters, she would gain a powerful patron. It would enable her to gain control of Bei You easier.

She did not need to worry about retaliation from Sword King City or Earthfire Palace of Demons either. She could simply blame Ji Donglei and Huo Ruyu's deaths on Xiong Kuohai.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Therefore, Joy Bodhisattva's ploy was absolutely brilliant. With just a bit of sacrifice, she was going to save the Buddhist Hall of Joy from the threat of annihilation, steal Xiong Kuohai's fruit for himself, and become the ruler of Bei You. She was killing multiple birds with one stone.

But of course, it all depended on Myriad Shadows in the end. If he rejected Joy Bodhisattva's offer, then it was the end for the woman.

Ye Qing didn't believe he would reject Joy Bodhisattva though. In fact, he would have to be crazy or brain damaged to do so. As Joy Bodhisattva had stated, Myriad Shadows' aim was to control Bei You from behind the curtains. In essence, he wanted a puppet ruler on the throne. In that case, who cared if the puppet's name was Xiong Kuohai, Joy Bodhisattva, Zhang Three, Li Four of Pockfaced Wang? As long as they gave him his obedience, it was enough.

But of course, not everyone was qualified for this position. At the very least, they must possess a certain level of strength and prestige. They must also be strong enough to keep a tight rein over the myriad forces of Bei You.

Now that Xiong Kuohai was dead, it was clear that Joy Bodhisattva was the next best option.

Second, Joy Bodhisattva had shown off her strength and proven that she was no pushover. If Myriad Shadows really rejected her offer, she did not mind fighting the man to the death. Joy Bodhisattva would die, but Myriad Shadows would suffer, and the Way of Taiping's plan to control Bei You would be in tatters. It would be a lose-lose situation for both of them.

Realistically speaking, there was only one option for Myriad Shadows.

Suddenly, Ji Donglei interrupted the conversation, "What you're doing is no different from asking a tiger for its hide, Joy Bodhisattva! Everyone knows that the Taiping cultists are as faithless as they are dangerous. If the Way of Taiping manages to create a foothold in Bei You, this land and even Northern Xinjiang itself will be plunged into chaos! When the time comes, you will become the sinner who damns us all!"

"Better to ask a tiger for its hide than to be devoured by it," Joy Bodhisattva responded. "Also, have you forgotten that the Buddhist Hall of Joy is a demonic sect? What does the peace and prosperity of Northern Xinjiang have anything to do with me?"

"You... You...!"

Ji Donglei staggered backward and spat out a mouthful of blood.

"Hahaha! Well said, well said!"

Myriad Shadows burst out laughing when he heard this.

Chapter 575: Primordial Spirit Flying Sword

"You will die in the hands of your co-conspirator, Joy Bodhisattva! And you bastards will meet a miserable end eventually, Taiping cultist!"

Ji Donglei let out a maddened roar, "I will take you to the grave with me if it's the last thing I do!"

As he spoke, Ji Donglei charged toward Joy Bodhisattva. Veins were popping across his skin as if he was clenching his entire body, and a terrible, destructive aura was washing out of him.

"Is he going to detonate his primordial spirit?!"

Ye Qing was stunned. A Grandmaster was someone who had forged a bridge between the inner world within them and the outer world beyond them, and a primordial spirit was a Yin God that had been baptized by origin energy. To detonate one's primordial spirit was no different from detonating

one's cultivation, martial intent, insight into the world and everything, and usually, the resulting explosion was potent enough to kill everything within a certain range. It was terrifying to say the least.

Rumble!

The next moment, a terrific explosion deafened everyone's ears. Blissful Peak was already tethering on the brink of collapse to begin with, and this explosion outright blew up its top. Those who were too slow to dodge out of the way were either torn to shreds by the explosion or buried in rock and soil.

No one noticed that a transparent short sword was flying through the dust clouds and toward the distance without a sound.

"Primordial Spirit Flying Sword"

The "Primordial Spirit Flying Sword" was a secret art in the "Sword King Scripture". By nurturing a flying sword in one's primordial spirit, one could use it for offense, defense, and most importantly, escaping and saving oneself.

The "Primordial Spirit Flying Sword" was created from a warrior's spirit and martial intent. Formless and insubstantial, it could be as still as a maiden[1] or as swift as lightning. It could travel a great distance in a single breath and passed through both heaven and earth with ease.

Considering the circumstances, Ji Donglei knew it was impossible for him to escape Joy Bodhisattva and Myriad Shadows—at least not normally. Therefore, he had no choice but to pretend that he was going to die together with his enemies and detonate most of his primordial spirit. While everything was in chaos, he attached a wisp of his primordial spirit into his "Primordial Spirit Flying Sword" and flew away from Blissful Mountain.

Although detonating most of his primordial spirit was the same as committing suicide, and the wisp currently attached to the Primordial Spirit Flying Sword wasn't enough for him to begin a new life as a ghost warrior or soul warrior, Ji Donglei still did it.

It wasn't because he didn't want to live, of course. It just wasn't an option for him.

For one, he could not trick Joy Bodhisattva or Myriad Shadows if he didn't detonate enough primordial spirit, and the resulting explosion was too weak.

Two, Burning Heart had influenced every aspect of his being, and not even his primordial spirit was an exception. Even if he managed to escape in the end, he was still probably going to die.

That was why he committed suicide.

This was fine though. He could die with a smile on his face if he could report what happened today back to Sword King City. His sect would do everything in their power to see Joy Bodhisattva and Myriad Shadows dead, and the Way of Taiping's conspiracy would be snuffed out in its nascency, essentially killing two birds with one stone.

It was worth his death.

"You will regret this, Joy Bodhisattva!"

Inside the “Primordial Spirit Flying Sword”, Ji Donglei’s broken primordial spirit howled with indescribable rage and hatred. He was going to make the woman who cost him everything pay if it was the last thing he did.

Suddenly, a gigantic hand appeared in the sky and caught Ji Donglei’s “Primordial Spirit Flying Sword” firmly.

The next moment, the hand shrank down to a normal size, and Joy Bodhisattva appeared behind it.

“Joy Bodhisattva! Ahhhhhhhhhh!!!”

The “Primordial Spirit Flying Sword” containing Ji Donglei’s broken primordial spirit writhed and struggled with all its might, but it was futile. Then, his face appeared on the blade’s surface and glared at Joy Bodhisattva with infinite hatred and defiance.

He knew it was over.

His last hope had just been snuffed out by none other than the damned woman herself.

“The Primordial Spirit Flying Sword?!”

Myriad Shadows clenched his hand and gathered the dust clouds covering the entire peak into a ball. Then sky cleared up in an instant. It was then he saw the transparent sword in Joy Bodhisattva’s hand and exclaimed in astonishment and anger.

He hadn’t noticed Ji Donglei’s ‘Primordial Spirit Flying Sword’. Had the Sword Executor Elder succeeded in escaping and reporting what happened here back to Sword King City, then his grand plan would have collapsed like a sand castle.

Luckily for him, Joy Bodhisattva proved even more competent than he expected. He was curious though. How did the woman notice the Primordial Spirit Flying Sword where he did not?

“How did you sense Ji Donglei’s ‘Primordial Spirit Flying Sword’, Joy Bodhisattva?”

She answered, “You probably don’t know Sword King City very well because your main base of operation is in the south, Sakyamuni, but Ji Donglei is a shrewd man despite his upright appearance. I knew he would pull something like this and was on my guard from the start.”

“Good. Good!” Myriad Shadows hummed in thought for a moment before breaking into a smile. “You’re as strong as you are shrewd, and you are definitely more competent than Xiong Kuohai. You are exactly the kind of talent my sect needs to rebuild ourselves and resume our great work to bless all of mankind.”

“Thank you, Sakyamuni. I offer my undying loyalty to you and the sect,” Joy Bodhisattva replied after clenching her fingers and crushing Ji Donglei’s “Primordial Spirit Flying Sword” into bits.

It was clear that Myriad Shadows had accepted her terms.

“Yes. To reward your undying loyalty and outstanding devotion toward our sect, I hereby appoint you as Venerable Joy.”

Myriad Shadows looked at Joy Bodhisattva and declared, "I bestow upon you the White Lotus Spellcrown..."

As soon as he said this, a bell ringing resounded throughout the world, and a crown shaped like a white lotus with nine petals appeared on top of Joy Bodhisattva's head.

"The Taiping Spell Robe..."

The bell rang a second time, and a spell robe with yin yang patterns suddenly appeared around her body.

"The Yellow Sky Horsetail Whisk..."

A yellow horsetail whisk appeared in her right hand.

"... and finally, the All Is Well Tablet!"

A square-shaped tablet the size of a palm flew toward Joy Bodhisattva and hung itself on her waist.

"Thank you for your bestowal, Sakyamuni."

Joy Bodhisattva daintily dropped to one knee and hung her horsetail whisk across her arm.

"Hahaha! Rise, Venerable One!" Myriad Shadows made a lifting gesture with a wide smile on his face. "From now on, you and I are compatriots. Instead of getting hung up with formalities, we should support each other and work toward reviving our sect and spreading happiness across the world."

"As you command, Sakyamuni." Joy Bodhisattva rose to her feet and thanked him.

"With that done, let's get down to business." Myriad Shadows swept his gaze across the remaining survivors and asked, "What do you want to do with them?"

Joy Bodhisattva answered, "Kill those who deserved to die and leave the rest alive."

"Oh? And how do you differentiate between the two?" Myriad Shadows asked with great interest.

"Those who defy the sect should die, and those who do not should live."

As soon as she finished, the eight Bodhisattvas still in the sky abruptly lowered their palms and attacked Gold Ingot, Wei Changhe, and the Endless Sand elites Xiong Kuohai had brought with him.

At this point, everyone was fatigued and injured to a certain extent, and Xiong Kuohai's men were no exception. Combined with the element of surprise, most of them were squashed like pancakes before they even realized what was happening. Only Gold Ingot, Wei Changhe, and a handful of people managed to escape one way or another.

"What is the meaning of this, Joy Bodhisattva?! We are members of the Way of Taiping as well!" A pale-faced Gold Ingot shouted.

“No, you are not.” Joy Bodhisattva said indifferently, “You are simply Xiong Kuohai’s men.”

“We... we’re willing to join the Way of Taiping! We’re willing to submit to you, Sakyamuni, so please, save us!” Gold Ingot shouted even as regret gripped him. He knew that Joy Bodhisattva was taking advantage of her new power to punish them for their betrayal, but what could they do?

“You’re too noisy!” Myriad Shadows grunted, and Gold Ingot’s shadow abruptly stood up and grabbed his neck. No matter how much the man struggled, he was unable to break free until the final end claimed him.

“Do you wish to end up like him?” Joy Bodhisattva glanced indifferently at the others.

“Kill the traitors and evildoers who defy the Way of Taiping!” Mistress Ruyi suddenly let out a shout before taking the lead and charging Wei Changhe first. Woriless, Wisdom Queen and all remaining Buddhist Hall of Joy disciples followed right behind her.

The rest of the survivors exchanged a glance with each other before charging toward Xiong Kuohai’s men as well. A wise man submits to the circumstances he was presented with. If they did not obey the command, then the only fate that awaited them was death.

Ye Qing was no exception. Earlier, he had to stop roleplaying a corpse and escape due to the massive explosion caused by the detonation of Ji Donglei’s primordial spirit. Luckily, no one noticed anything strange. Now, he had to join in on the attack on Xiong Kuohai’s men to avoid standing out.

He did not fight like he usually did, of course. He made sure to perform on the level of an ordinary warrior. He was the one who ruined the Way of Taiping’s conspiracy at Luo Shui, and he was pretty sure that the cult had not withdrawn the bounty on his head. The last thing he wanted to do was to stand out in front of one of the Four Sakyamunis.

Chapter 576: What a Mighty Coincidence

Joy Bodhisattva was back to full strength thanks to the Nature’s Water, and the survivors still outnumbered Xiong Kuohai’s men despite everything. There was never any doubt how this final, if not somewhat anti-climatic battle would go. Just a moment later, Joy Bodhisattva had successfully annihilated all of Xiong Kuohai’s men including the likes of Wei Changhe.

“If you’re going to kill half of them, why didn’t you kill all of them? You’re aware that our plans are ruined if even one person breathes the truth to anyone, right?” Myriad Shadows asked casually. He never even batted an eyelid even though Xiong Kuohai’s men were technically his men.

Everyone except Joy Bodhisattva tensed up and broke out in cold sweat when they heard this.

“Do not worry, Sakyamuni. I am sure they will not betray the sect or reveal today’s matter to anyone. You may not trust in their behavior, but you may trust in me and my methods.”

Joy Bodhisattva looked at the group and asked, “What do you say, people?”

There was a moment of silence before everyone dropped to their knees. “We dedicate ourselves to the Way of Taiping, to the Sakyamuni, and to the Venerable One. We swear that no one will hear a word about today’s matter from our mouths.”

Joy Bodhisattva continued after the group was done swearing their fealty, “Besides, we need them to ensure the success of our plan.”

“What do you mean?” Myriad Shadows asked.

Joy Bodhisattva answered, “First, we need them to act as our witnesses. If I am the lone survivor of this incident, Sword King City and Earthfire Palace of Demons may suspect foul play. But if there is a group of survivors to support the claim that Xiong Kuohai and only Xiong Kuohai is behind it all, then they would be far more inclined to believe that that is the truth.”

“Second, their help is necessary if we are to take control of Bei You. Although Xiong Kuohai is dead, and Endless Sand is no longer a threat to our plans, Bei You is a massive place riddled with countless factions of varying strengths. I am not so arrogant as to think I can manage it all by myself, not to mention that the stronger factions of Northern Xinjiang such as Sword King City and Earthfire Palace of Demons would not allow me to claim the spoils unchallenged. If they interfere, it is inevitable that the sect’s plans would be impacted.”

“That is why we should keep them around as both a decoy and a smokescreen. Everyone here is a famous wanderer, despot, or gang leader of sorts. When the time is right, they can divvy up the cake that is Endless Sand on our behalf. We can even make them fight each other so that everyone thinks that Bei You is still an independent, divided region. Naturally, the major factions such as Sword King City or Earthfire Palace of Demons would have no cause to interfere.”

“Given enough time, we would have taken over Bei You without having to lift a single finger. They would be at our beck and call even if they did not know it themselves. What do you think, Sakyamuni?”

Myriad Shadows mulled over her plan for a moment before laughing out loud. “I knew I chose the right person. Very well! We shall do as you say.”

He then looked down at the anxious crowd and said in a much colder voice, “Thank your lucky stars that you are still useful to us. Take this.”

He dropped a few bottles of pills on the floor and said, “This is the cure to your poison.”

“Thank you, Sakyamuni!” exclaimed the crowd with pleasant surprise and caught the pills happily.

However, what he said next poured an ice bucket over their heads and chilled them to the core.

“Don’t be too happy just yet. I’m not afraid to tell you that the poison afflicting you is one of the nine ancient poisons, the Burning Heart. It is a deadly poison that only my Way of Taiping can cure. The antidote I just gave you will only work for a month. If you don’t receive a new antidote when the month is up, you’re still going to die.”

The entire peak was deathly silent for a moment.

After examining the crowd’s despairing expression and judging that the time was right, Myriad Shadows finally offered them the carrot. “But don’t worry. I’m a fair man when it comes to reward and punishment. So long as you prove yourself to be a loyal and useful subordinate of the sect, I promise to treat you all just as well.”

“When the time is right, I will cure the poison afflicting you for real.”

“Thank you, Sakyamuni. We swear to serve the sect loyally and without reservation!” The crowd voiced their thanks and swallowed the pill. As soon as the pill entered their mouths, they felt a clear, refreshing sensation spreading throughout their body. The anomalous energy and negative emotions tearing at their fraying nerves immediately receded like a tidal wave.

Sensing just how quickly the antidote was bottling up the anomalous energy, the crowd could not help but look at Myriad Shadows with new respect and fear.

All, except one person. Ye Qing sighed mentally when he saw the grateful expressions on their faces. They still had no idea that the Burning Heart was incurable; no idea that they probably had to work for Myriad Shadows until the day they died.

It was clear that Myriad Shadows was exploiting the fact that few people knew about the mysterious Burning Heart. He would have come up with a more intelligent lie otherwise.

It didn’t matter anyway. Even if they found out the truth in the future, there was nothing they could do to change their fate. They would call Myriad Shadows everything under the sun for the lie, but in the end, they would still have to toil their lives away for him.

It was always easier to board a pirate ship than to leave it.

It was impressive that the Way of Taiping managed to create something that could suppress the Burning Heart for such a whole month though.

Ye Qing swallowed the pill just like the others, but he wrapped it within a layer of true qi and hid it inside his abdomen. He had been pretending to be infected by the Burning Heart this whole time, and his disguise was more or less perfect since the “Paranirmitava?avartin Heavenly Demon Sutra” fed on negative emotions. His demonic thought was already imbued with all kinds of negative emotions, so it took him little effort to fake the symptoms.

The end was close now. He just needed to keep his act together until then.

The reason Ye Qing did not simply swallow the pill was because he had no idea if the antidote was tampered with. Although it seemed redundant for Myriad Shadows to poison his victims a second time when they were already afflicted with an incurable poison, he would rather be safe than sorry.

Suddenly, Myriad Shadows turned to Joy Bodhisattva and asked, "Oh right, who was the one who tracked me that night? I didn't think it was possible for someone to hide themselves from my senses."

Ye Qing's heart skipped a beat. This was the part he had been dreading the most. After all, Joy Bodhisattva was now a subordinate of Myriad Shadows and a member of the Way of Taiping. If she chose to betray him to further increase her profits, now would be the time to do it.

He didn't know Myriad Shadows nearly long enough to figure out his personality. It was entirely possible for the Sakyamuni to be a petty little shit who would punish someone over the slightest slights. Although that didn't seem to be the case—he did forgive Joy Bodhisattva after all—he was *the* reason the Sakyamuni nearly lost everything and got tricked by Joy Bodhisattva.

Myriad Shadows might not be able to kill Joy Bodhisattva because she was the key to his plans, but no harm was done if he killed him.

Even if Myriad Shadows was magnanimous enough to leave him alone, he would definitely fall under heavy scrutiny. If his true identity was exposed, then the Way of Taiping would hunt him down like a dog anyway. After all, he had ruined their grand plans before.

That was why Ye Qing's heart leaped to his throat as soon as he heard the Sakyamuni's words. If he knew that the Way of Taiping and Myriad Shadows were behind Xiong Kuohai, he would never have gotten involved in this mess.

Now, he could only pray that Joy Bodhisattva's sense of honor was mostly intact.

"It was an attendant of mine, Sakyamuni. Her name is Cai Le." Joy Bodhisattva explained, "Last night, I ordered her to inspect the Blissful Spring and ensure that everything is okay. On her way, she just happened to run into Xiong Kuohai."

"Cai Le hailed from the Hidden Sect, and she is a descendant of the Night King. Not only that, she possessed the bloodline of the Phenomenon-class Stranger, Night Owl. In my sect, no one is as good at concealing their presence as her. I believe that is how she managed to escape your senses."

"The Night King, is it? You sure have a knack for picking up talent," Myriad Shadows replied noncommittally. "Where is she right now? I would like to meet her."

Joy Bodhisattva dropped to one knee. "I beg your pardon, Sakyamuni, but Cai Le is a spy planted at my side by the Earthfire Palace of Demons. I executed her because I was afraid that she would reveal my secrets and plans to her true masters."

"Oh. That's a mighty coincidence, isn't it?" Myriad Shadows mused.

Chapter 577: Wind And Snow Overtakes Bei You

"I would not dare to hide this from you, Sakyamuni."

Joy Bodhisattva bowed and said calmly, "I trust in your acuity!"

"So, you guessed my plan?" Again, Myriad Shadows did not give her a straight answer.

"I have. After I heard everything from Cai Le and experimented a little with the Blissful Spring, I more or less figured out that the poison is the Burning Heart. From that point onward, I realized what plans you have for my Buddhist Hall of Joy and planned accordingly," Joy Bodhisattva answered.

"The Burning Heart is an ancient poison that few people know about. How did you know about it?" Myriad Shadows pressed.

Joy Bodhisattva gave him a half-truth. "I once heard it from my master, Sakyamuni. However, he only told me what it was and how to suppress it. He did not know how to cure it either."

She knew that the Burning Heart was incurable, of course. The reason she said this was to trick Myriad Shadows into thinking that her knowledge was cursory and believing that she wouldn't expose him.

Besides that, half-truths were generally more convincing than whole truths or lies.

Myriad Shadows nodded. "I see. And who might your master be?"

"My master is Zen Master Miao Xiang," Joy Bodhisattva answered.

"Miao Xiang? The one they call the 'No I, No Buddha', Zen Master Miao Xiang?!" Myriad Shadows exclaimed in surprise.

"You are correct, Sakyamuni," Joy Bodhisattva answered.

"I had no idea that you are Miao Xiang's disciple. He and I met once back in the day, and that meeting had left an impression on me to this day. I heard that he was grievously injured during a debate of dao against the head of Little Western Paradise, Dao Fu[1]. Has he recovered?" Myriad Shadows asked.

"My master took a terrible blow to his mind after the debate and turned delirious. He died not long after that," Joy Bodhisattva answered.

"That is a shame. I was hoping to talk about old times with him." Myriad Shadows sighed. "You have my condolences, Venerable One."

"Thank you, Sakyamuni." Joy Bodhisattva saluted him before changing the subject. "I have offended you a lot by using your plot to my advantage, Sakyamuni. I hope you will forgive this audacious subordinate."

"What are you talking about? You're one of us now, and there is no such thing as a grudge between comrades. Please don't ever bring this up again."

Myriad Shadows smiled. “Anyway, I shan’t delay you any longer. Please handle this and make sure that everything will go flawlessly.”

“As you command, Sakyamuni.” Joy Bodhisattva saluted him. “On that note, can you please maintain the Taiping Heaven Sealing Banner until I’ve searched every nook and cranny of Blissful Mountain?”

“Of course.” Myriad Shadows nodded.

Joy Bodhisattva then turned back to the crowd and said, “You will join me in eliminating the remnant forces of Sword King City, Earthfire Palace of Demons, Endless Sand and all others who would defy our holy sect. If they refuse to accept our terms of surrender, kill them.”

“After that, we will discuss what we’re going to do in the future and prepare our statements accordingly. Sword King City and Earthfire Palace of Demons will surely make a lot of inquiries into this, and you don’t want them to find out what happened today, do you?”

.....

“Phew...”

Joy Bodhisattva did not so much as look in Ye Qing’s direction as she gave one instruction after another. Knowing that the danger had truly passed, Ye Qing finally relaxed completely.

He was beyond glad that Joy Bodhisattva had pinned all the blame on two dead people instead of exposing him. Otherwise, he would be in serious trouble.

It did not matter if the Sakyamuni believed her or not. As far as he knew, anyone who could tell him the truth was dead. Even if he suspected something, he most likely wouldn’t bring it up in public. Therefore, he no longer had to worry about anything.

And so the group began turning Blissful Mountain upside down and hunting down the stragglers. Those who submitted to the Way of Taiping were allowed to live, and those who did not were killed without question. After that, they discussed how best to deal with Sword King City and Earthfire Palace of Demons’ inquiries, practiced certain details and so on. It wasn’t until the plan was perfect that Myriad Shadows finally dispelled the Taiping Heaven Sealing Banner.

Not long after that, the news came tumbling down Blissful Mountain like a snowball and spread to every corner of Bei You—no, Northern Xinjiang itself. They said that the ambitious, rapacious Xiong Kuohai had colluded with Gold Ingot, Wei Changhe and more to poison every guest participating in the Trueman feast and instigate them into killing each other. His goal was to kill most of the major players and conquer Bei You in one fell swoop.

Ji Donglei, Sword Executor Elder of Sword King City and Huo Ruyu, Vermillion Bird Envoy of Earthfire Palace of Demons refused to submit and fought Xiong Kuohai to the death. Joy Bodhisattva herself had one foot in the grave, and the Buddhist Hall of Joy suffered an unimaginable amount of damage and casualties as a result of this conspiracy. Most of the guests were seriously injured or killed, and enough blood was shed to form multiple rivers.

It was like a volcano had erupted after the news had spread. All kinds of emotions such as shock, puzzlement, anger, *schadenfreude*, restlessness and more bubbled within the pot that was the *jianghu* of Northern Xinjiang.

Just one night later, the number of *jianghu* warriors gathered around Blissful Mountain had increased by more than tenfold. Some of them came to partake in the “festivities”, some believed this to be an opportunity to make a profit, some came to find out more about the incident, and more.

Of course, Sword King City and Earthfire Palace of Demons also dispatched their representatives post-haste to investigate the truth. They arrived at Blissful Mountain first thing in the morning.

Sword King City had dispatched their vice head, the fifty-ninth warrior on the Earth Champions Ranking, Ding Chong. They called him the “Clumsy Sword”.

Earthfire Palace of Demons dispatched their Azure Dragon Envoy, Yang Tianming. He was ranked seventy-third on the Earth Champions Ranking, and they called him “The Palm That Unleashes The Azure Dragon”.

The fact that both Sword King City and Earthfire Palace of Demons dispatched an Earth Champions Ranking warrior to handle this showed just how seriously they treated this matter. Upon arriving at the Buddhist Hall of Joy, they interrogated the witnesses and obtained more or less the same answer.

Huo Ruyu fought valiantly against Xiong Kuohai, but the poison ultimately overcame her and burned to death. Desperate, Ji Donglei detonated his primordial spirit and took Xiong Kuohai down with him.

All evidence be it the Burning Heart afflicting the witnesses or the traces of Ji Donglei’s suicide attack suggested they were telling the truth. Given no reason whatsoever to think otherwise, Ding Chong and Yang Tianming quickly believed their story.

Overflowing with righteous wrath, Ding Chong and Yang Tianming took off to Endless Sand immediately to enact bloody vengeance. Ding Chong had cut Endless Sand’s Endless City open in one slash, and Yang Tianming had fired an Azure Dragon from his palm that erased the city from the surface of the earth. Tens of thousands of Endless Sand disciples and even more innocents were killed.

Not done yet, Sword King City and Earthfire Palace of Demons set up a bounty to hunt down all Endless Sand members and supporters within five thousand kilometers of their sect. Those foolish enough to hide them would be killed as well.

In just a matter of days, dozens of sects and clans scattered across Northern Xinjiang were razed to the ground. The Tower of Cornucopia, Nether Villa, Wind and Snow Sword Sect, Vile Dragon Villa and more were annihilated as well.

Of course, only Sword King City and Earthfire Palace of Demons knew if these sects, clans, gangs and more were really hiding the remnants of Endless Sand, or if they were simply seizing the opportunity to take out their competitors.

In any case, no one was stupid or brave enough to speculate about it.

Besides that, the Buddhist Hall of Joy and other factions and warriors who suffered greatly in Xiong Kuohai’s hands also began operating en masse within the borders of Bei You. For a time, nearly every faction in Bei You and even Northern Xinjiang feared for their lives. They were all shocked

by Ding Chong and Yang Tianming's strength, angered by Sword King City and Earthfire Palace of Demons' audacity, and afraid that they might suffer the same fate as Endless Sand.

When the quakes finally subsided, and some of the factions in Bei You finally dared to poke their heads into the former territories of Endless Sand and Tower of Cornucopia in hopes of claiming it for themselves, they discovered that everything was already gone. Not even a single drop of profit was left behind for them.

They had no choice but to leave it as it was.

This was easily one of the biggest happenings in Bei You in years, but as usual, nothing in the world could stand the test of time. As December and a frigid winter overtook Northern Xinjiang, the bloodshed caused by Xiong Kuohai and Endless Sand was slowly forgotten. The people slowly but surely turned their attention to the new factions that had replaced the old powers. After all, the new always replaced the old.

Speaking of which, some of the new powers that replaced Endless Sand, Tower of Cornucopia and more turned out to be rising stars. Not only did they come into their power quickly, they even reached the heights of Tower of Cornucopia and Shade of Scents back then in just a short time. For a time, no one could stop talking about them.

The same could not be said for the biggest victim of the incident, the Buddhist Hall of Joy. Maybe it was because Joy Bodhisattva was grievously injured, or maybe it was because they lost too many people, but they kept an extremely low profile and closed their doors to everyone. Eventually, they faded out of everyone's notice.

To an outsider, it seemed like nothing had changed with Bei You. It was just as free, chaotic, flourishing and noisy as ever.

But for those in the know, they knew that that opinion could not be anymore wrong.

After all, Bei You now had a master.

Her name, was Joy Bodhisattva.

Chapter 578: Skin Painting Gentleman, Tiger Sovereign, Limp Celestial

"Enter the Peach Blossom Mountain to find the Peach Blossom Nunnery,

Enter the Peach Blossom Nunnery to find the Peach Blossom Celestials.

The peach blossom trees planted by the Peach Blossom Celestials fill the world with hope."

"That is what they said, but—*cough! Cough!*—what the hell is this? How did every peach blossom in Peach Blossom Mountain wither in a single night?!"

At the foot of Peach Blossom Mountain, a handsome young man dressed in white was staring at the withered peach blossom flowers with a disappointed look on his face.

It looked like he had a frail body because his face was so white it resembled chalk, and he was sitting inside a soft litter. He was also covering his mouth with a silk handkerchief and coughing lightly into it. Surrounding the litter were four exceedingly beautiful female attendants.

“It sounds like you’re coughing your lungs out, Skin Painting Gentleman. Rather than weeping over the course of nature, shouldn’t you focus on surviving this winter first?”

As soon as he finished, a silhouette descended from the sky and hit the ground so hard that a giant footprint was left on the ground.

It was an old man with disheveled white hair. He probably had a lame right foot since he was using a walking stick and keeping his right foot suspended in the air.

“Cough! Cough!... Unlike you, old man, I’m still very young. I may die sooner than expected, but there is no way you’re going to outlive me.” Skin Painting Gentleman coughed again before continuing, “Speaking of which, what are you doing here when you can be resting in your home? I can tell that your right leg would have really appreciated the rest.”

Before Limp Celestial could respond, a tiger’s roar resounded throughout the forest. Then, a massive, ferocious-looking tiger rode the wind and snow and galloped straight toward the duo.

The roar had begun from far, far away, but by the time it faded into nothing, the tiger was less than five meters away from the duo. Another loud roar later, it transformed into a huge man wearing a tiger’s skin.

The man was tall, big, and muscular. Thin yellow hair covered his arms, legs and face like that of a tiger’s fur. The hair on his forehead was white, however. It was also shaped like a 王 symbol, meaning “King”[1].

“You guys are early today, sick boy, lame geezer!” the brawny man teased Skin Painting Gentleman and Limp Celestial while cracking his neck.

“You’re quite early yourself!” Skin Painting Gentleman chuckled.

“Well, he does have four legs. Of course he’s going to be faster than us,” Limp Celestial said sarcastically.

“Hehe! Say whatever you want, but I’d rather have four legs than just one like you.” Tiger Sovereign looked Limp Celestial up and down a couple of times before frowning. “I don’t want to say this, old man, but you look like you have one foot in the grave. Considering that you only have one foot, that’s pretty bad, eh? You sure you want to risk slipping on your foot and burying yourself in a snowy ravine?”

“And you, sick boy. It’s pretty cold right now, and you’re weaker than even a woman. Are you sure you won’t die of coughing before we even make it to our destination?”

“No need to worry about me, Tiger Sovereign.” Skin Painting Gentleman replied smilingly. “Smart people naturally have a weak body. I’ve gotten used to it.”

Tiger Sovereign did not miss the subtle jab at his intelligence and harrumphed. “Bullshit! You’re weak because you’ve committed too many sins! Your negative karma is catching up to you!”

Suddenly, a strange shockwave rippled out from the peak of Blissful Mountain. Then, the image of a black lotus appeared in the sky.

The black lotus was massive and semi-transparent. Three of its petals were swaying lightly and giving off layers upon layers of magnificent, phantasmal light.

“It’s here!”

The trio immediately dropped their banter and stared at the black lotus intently.

“Did anyone of you figure out anything?” Tiger Sovereign asked while wearing a severe expression on his face. They were about nine kilometers away from the black lotus, and still the image of the black lotus managed to terrify him in an inexplicable way.

But at the same time, the black lotus represented an opportunity. The opportunity of a lifetime.

“Not at all. But it can’t be normal.” Skin Painting Gentleman replied with an evil smile on his face.

“It has to be some sort of natural treasure,” Limp Celestial declared. “It’s mine. The two of you better not try to take it from me.”

“What did I say earlier, limp geezer? Just pass onto the afterlife and leave this natural treasure to us youngsters already!” Tiger Sovereign scoffed.

“Those who are virtuous will be rewarded by the heavens,” Skin Painting Gentleman said indifferently.

Limp Celestial hmphed. “I won’t bear any responsibility for what comes next!”

“Bring it on! Like we’re afraid of you!” Tiger Sovereign scoffed harder.

It was at this moment the image of the black lotus slowly disappeared. At the same time, black clouds rolled in from every direction and hovered above the peak of Peach Blossom Mountain. They looked heavy and suffocating enough to crush the entire mountain into bits.

“So? Do we enter the mountain now, or...?” Skin Painting Gentleman asked.

“We’re already here. Of course we’re going in. You’re not scared, are you?” Tiger Sovereign taunted.

Skin Painting Gentleman responded seriously, “I never said that, but I do believe that some caution is warranted. Remember that a lot of people had entered the mountain ahead of us, but not a single one managed to make it out.”

The reason the trio had come here was for the mysterious treasure that had suddenly appeared at Peach Blossom Mountain about five to six days ago. Peach Blossom Mountain was a famous mountain in Bei You because it was warm as spring and filled with blooming peach blossoms no matter the season. Such was its fragrance that one could smell even from five kilometers away. That was why it was named Peach Blossom Mountain.

Despite its beauty, few people dared to set foot in Peach Blossom Mountain. It was because every single peach blossom in Peach Blossom Mountain was a type of Hatred-class Stranger called the Human-faced Peach Blossom[2]. They earned their name because their flowers were shaped like a human's face, and their fragrance contained an exotic poison that could bewitch the mind.

If a weak-willed person caught a whiff of its scent, they would fall into a semi-conscious state and be drawn into the forest of Human-faced Peach Blossom. They would be devoured and turned into fertilizer.

This was why not a single human soul resided within five kilometers of Peach Blossom Mountain despite its supernatural beauty. Depending on how you looked at it, you might even call it a wasteland, just one that was created from peach blossoms.

About five to six days ago, something happened to Peach Blossom Mountain. First, the weather had suddenly taken a drastic turn for the worse, and black clouds loomed over the mountain like the grim reaper himself. Then, its eternal peach blossoms had, for whatever reason, withered in a single night. A few days later, the image of a black lotus began appearing on the peak of Peach Blossom Mountain and triggering all sorts of unusual phenomena.

A lot of people believed that a natural treasure or something incredible had appeared on Peach Blossom Mountain. Even more *jianghu* warriors wanted to claim it for themselves. That was why dozens of people had already succumbed to the temptation and ventured into Peach Blossom Mountain in search of fame and fortune.

Not a single person came back out, however. No one even knew if they were alive or dead. It was unusual to put it mildly.

Tiger Sovereign waved off his concerns, however. "Heh! Are you seriously putting us on the same pedestal as those small fries? If not, then what on earth are you worried about?"

To be fair, he was right. All three of them were famous warriors not just in Bei You, but also the entire Northern Xinjiang. Sure, it was a reputation of the worst kind, but hey, it was still reputation, right?

The Skin Painting Gentleman was a middle-stage Spirit Master who cultivated a martial art called the "Art of Skin Painting", and it was one hundred percent a demonic art. In essence, it was a martial art that stripped its victims of their skin and transformed them into puppets.

Take the Skin Painting Gentleman speaking to them for example. He looked real, but it was entirely possible that he was just one of the Spirit Master's puppets. No one except Skin Painting Gentleman himself knew where his true body was, and that advantage alone made him a most dangerous opponent.

The Limp Celestial was a late-stage Spirit Master and a former member of the Cripple Sect. The Cripple Sect only accepted cripples into their midst, which was why all Cripple Sect disciples were cripples.

For example, Limp Celestial was born with a limp right leg. After he joined the Cripple Sect, he was taught the Cripple's Leg, which allowed him to transform his biggest weakness into his greatest strength. Today, his right leg was impervious to most weapons and capable of exerting an unbelievable amount of strength. Over time, he came to be known as the Limp Celestial.

Tiger Sovereign was a middle-stage Spirit Master. Born with the blood of the Phenomenon-class Stranger, the Hanging White-fronted Tiger and raised to adulthood by an actual tiger, his main cultivation art was called the “Tiger King Art”. Vicious and brutal, it gave him unparalleled strength and a fondness for raw meat. Human flesh especially.

Tiger Sovereign spent most of his time living in Tiger King Mountain and protecting the surrounding villages from bandits and Strangers. But in exchange, the villages must give him a boy and a girl every year to satisfy his hunger.

As someone who had lived on a mountain for most of his life, Tiger Sovereign didn’t think much of Peach Blossom Mountain at all.

Chapter 579: Art of Skin Painting

“I personally agree with Skin Painting Gentleman. There is no harm in being cautious.”

Limp Celestial hummed for a moment before adding, “It is said that Night Cat entered Peach Blossom Mountain two days ago. He hasn’t been seen since.”

“Night Cat? Are you sure about this, limp geezer?” Tiger Sovereign exclaimed in surprise.

Night Cat was no ordinary warrior. An infamous thief in Northern Xinjiang, he was most proficient in sneaking into houses, lock-picking, thieving and robbing. He also boasted an outstanding movement art and a wide repertoire of survival tools. Due to the numerous crimes he committed in Northern Xinjiang, he was hunted by both orthodox and unorthodox warriors. However, he remained at large to this day. His character notwithstanding, it was clear that he was no one to be trifled with.

“It’s something I heard on the streets. I have no idea if it’s real or not,” Limp Celestial said.

Tiger Sovereign made his doubt plain. “Then it’s probably just a rumor. Night Cat is one of the most slippery bastards I know. They even call him ‘Nine Lives’ because of his skills. There is no way he could die at such a place.”

“Regardless of the authenticity of the rumor, it’s always better to be safe than sorry, my friend!” Skin Painting Gentleman chimed in.

“What should we do then?” Tiger Sovereign asked impatiently.

Skin Painting Gentleman thought for a moment before answering, “How about this? Let’s ascend the mountain together. The three of us combined should be enough to handle any danger.”

“How will we split the treasure then?” A glint appeared in Tiger Sovereign’s eyes.

“Assuming there is a treasure, then we can split it evenly among us. If not, then any further discussion is wholly pointless,” Skin Painting Gentleman said. “Let’s not count our chickens before they hatch, yeah?”

“Very well. Let’s work together.” Limp Celestial nodded after a moment of consideration.

“I don’t have a problem with this arrangement either,” Tiger Sovereign also said.

“Good. Let us enter the mountain then.”

Skin Painting Gentleman smiled, and his four female attendants lifted the soft litter and walked toward Peach Blossom Mountain.

Limp Celestial and Tiger Sovereign exchanged a glance with each other before following behind him.

Peach Blossom Mountain looked exactly the same on the inside as it did from the outside. It was death and decay wherever they looked. When the Human-faced Peach Blossoms were blooming, their fragrance could be smelled from far, far away. Now, there was only the rotten stench of decay.

This was good news, of course. The dead Human-faced Peach Blossoms could not pose a threat against them. Still, the trio did not let down their guard and proceeded cautiously.

Suddenly, Skin Painting Gentleman pointed in a certain direction and declared, “There’s someone over there!”

Limp Celestial and Tiger Sovereign looked. They immediately saw six *jianghu* warriors lying on the ground ahead of them. They were all dead.

Limp Celestial disappeared and reappeared in front of the corpses. A quick examination later, he declared, “It... looks like they fought each other to the death.”

“I’m certain that is the case. You can tell just from the battle traces and their wounds,” Skin Painting Gentleman echoed in agreement.

“Doesn’t seem out of the ordinary. Everyone wants the treasure for themselves after all!” Tiger Sovereign shrugged and walked up to a dead woman. He then cut her chest open and ripped a bright red heart out of her chest cavity.

Limp Celestial frowned. “What are you doing, Tiger Sovereign?”

“I’m grabbing a snack, duh!” Tiger Sovereign licked the blood dripping out of the heart with an intoxicated expression. “It’s still fresh. It should taste pretty good.”

“They’re already dead. Must you desecrate their bodies as well?” Limp Celestial argued.

“Exactly! They’re already dead, and they’re going to waste away eventually. In that case, I might as well recycle some of their body parts!” Tiger Sovereign said before consuming the heart greedily. As he chewed, crimson blood streamed down the corners of his mouth and the gaps between his teeth. He looked terrifying to put it mildly.

“He’s right, you know. They’re already dead, so they wouldn’t care if we make good use of their shell!” Skin Painting Gentleman agreed with Tiger Sovereign’s logic.

Limp Celestial raised an eyebrow. “And what are *you* planning to do?”

“Didn’t you hear Tiger Sovereign? I’m going to recycle some of their body parts, of course!”

Skin Painting Gentleman chuckled as he lifted a slender finger from his sleeves. Countless invisible strings immediately flew out of his fingertip and sank into the corpses. As he twisted his wrist round and round, the corpses’ skins were stripped right off their flesh. Then, they slowly stood up as if they had a mind of their own.

After that, Skin Painting Gentleman waved his hand again and manipulated the strings to sew up the rips and tears on the skin. When the restoration process was complete, the skins looked almost exactly like a living person save for their stiff expression, movement, and near invisible tears on certain parts of the skin.

If Skin Painting Gentleman had enough time, he could’ve made it so that the skins looked exactly like a living human being. As it was, he had had to cut corners to create his skin puppets post-haste.

The “Art of Skin Painting” was a complex and intricate process. First, the practitioner must choose a suitable human skin. Any human skin was fine, but a living person’s skin made for the best material. It was because a living person’s skin was flexible, supple, and full of vitality. Besides that, the stronger the victim’s cultivation, the better the quality of their skin.

Next, the skin must be stripped perfectly. If there was even the slightest flaw in the skin, then the final quality of the skin puppet would be impacted.

The third step of the process was sewing. Again, it must be done perfectly.

The fourth step was the name of the martial art, skin painting. Both the living and the dead had their unique appearance, and skin painting was the art of transforming a dead person’s appearance into the living using the technique as the ink, and the spirit and intent as the brush.

The fifth and final step was imbuing the mind. The practitioner would detach a portion of their soul and inject it into the skin. This would transform it into a true puppet that was, on the surface, no different from a person.

The “Art of Skin Painting” was normally a long, difficult and complicated process, but Skin Painting Gentleman wasn’t trying to create perfect puppets out of these bodies. He just wanted to create a couple of fodders to scout the road ahead. Hence, he could afford to cut corners.

Tiger Sovereign clicked his tongue enviously. “Tsk tsk, your ‘Art of Skin Painting’ sure is convenient, sick boy. As long as you have the materials, you can fashion a bunch of puppets for your own use anytime, anywhere.”

“It’s just a heretical art. It does not deserve your praise,” said Skin Painting Gentleman humbly before commanding the six puppets to walk up the mountain. “Let’s continue on our way, shall we?”

The trio fell behind the puppets and continued their ascent up the mountain. Not long after, they encountered another two bodies.

“Huh? It’s the Bandit and the Whore!” Limp Celestial recognized their faces and exclaimed in surprise.

The Bandit and the Whore were a pair of somewhat famous villains in Northern Xinjiang. They were both Half-Step Spirit Masters. The man was a barefoot bandit who killed people, robbed caravans, plundered villages and more to enrich himself. The woman was a prostitute who especially enjoyed killing their customers in the middle of sex and robbing them afterward. Later, they were known together as the Bandit and the Whore.

“Do you know how they died?” Tiger Sovereign asked.

“I can’t see any clear marks on their body, but judging from their terrified expression...” Limp Celestial said slowly after inspecting the bodies, “I believe they were scared to death.”

“Scared to death?” Skin Painting Gentleman coughed twice before voicing his puzzlement. “The Bandit and the Whore aren’t exactly weaklings. What on earth could scare them to death?”

“I can’t say.” Limp Celestial shook his head.

After a brief discussion that led to nowhere, the trio abandoned their investigation and resumed their journey.

The Bandit and the Whore wouldn’t be the last bodies they found. Not even close. The higher they climbed, the bigger the number of bodies they found. The manner of death grew increasingly varied as well.

Some warriors had died killing each other, some had died out of sheer fright, some had gone crazy and killed themselves, some had died with a laugh permanently frozen on their face, and some had died out of sadness of all things.

Perhaps the most worrying discovery of them all was that some of the deceased were pretty powerful warriors. The trio recognized this and grew increasingly wary over time.

It was at this moment Peach Blossom Mountain shook once, and the black lotus appeared in the sky once more, radiating dreamy, phantasmal light in every direction.

Skin Painting Gentleman, Limp Celestial and Tiger Sovereign subconsciously looked up, and their eyes lost their focus just like that.

No one moved a single muscle.

Chapter 580: Strange Actions

“Why did you abandon me? Why?”

A moment later, Tiger Sovereign's eyes suddenly turned bloodshot, and a furious snarl contorted his expression. He roared at the air in front of him again and again, "I'm going to rip you both into pieces! Ahhhhhhhh!"

The next moment, Tiger Sovereign let out a howl of fury and thrust his hands into a withered tree in front of him. His arms easily penetrated the tree trunk like it was paper.

The way he was acting, you would think that he wasn't attacking a tree, but his sworn enemy.

Tiger Sovereign wasn't done, however. He strained his muscles and tore the tree in half. Then, he swiped his hands through the air repeatedly and hacked the tree trunk into itsy bitsy pieces.

As he ripped and tore at the pieces of wood, he roared on top of his lungs, "I'll kill you! I'll tear you apart! It's your fault for abandoning me! You deserve this for throwing me away! Hahahahaha!"

After there was nothing left of the tree, Tiger Sovereign looked up at the sky and laughed like a madman. However, his laughter gradually turned into a sob, and he hugged his head and crouched on the floor, weeping.

He looked like an animal who had been abandoned by his parents, lonely, helpless, and in despair.

Despite Tiger Sovereign's abnormal behavior, neither Skin Painting Gentleman nor Limp Celestial were paying him any attention. They were still staring at the black lotus blankly.

The situation didn't last. Skin Painting Gentleman began trembling, and his already pale complexion turned so pale that he looked no different from a white paper.

"Don't... Don't come closer! I'm not afraid of you all!"

A terrified scream escaped his lips, and his skin puppets abruptly scattered in every direction. They tore down every tree, plant and rock in his vicinity. However, a few breaths later, the skin puppets suddenly pulled apart almost as if an invisible hand had shredded them into pieces.

"No... don't come closer! I didn't want to kill you either... If you must demand retribution, then I'll give you back your skin!"

At the same time, Skin Painting Gentleman let out another terrified scream and scrambled toward the distance on all fours. Right now, he looked like a cornered animal far more than a refined gentleman.

As he ran, Skin Painting Gentleman ripped and tore away at his own face. Every time he pulled, a piece of human skin would slide down his person almost like they were clothes. He then threw it behind him as if it was an offering to an angry spirit.

The skin he ripped off his person and tore away writhed for a moment as if it was alive. Then, it began chasing after Skin Painting Gentleman.

It was a bizarre sight to say the least.

As for Limp Celestial, he was sitting crosslegged on the ground and staring at the empty space in front of him with bright eyes and a wide smile.

The next moment, he grabbed a rotten Human-faced Peach Blossom from the ground and shoved it into his mouth. A look of satisfaction spread across his face as he chewed slowly.

Limp Celestial was just beginning, however. After he was done chewing the Human-faced Peach Blossom, he picked up a dead branch from the ground and began ripping into it as if it wasn't a branch, but a drumstick. He would continue to consume the dead branches, leaves, soil, stones and more as if they were the most delicious food in the entire world. Despite the alarming rate at which his stomach was inflating, he did not slow down in the slightest.

Tok tok tok!

A dozen or so breaths later, a crisp tapping sound suddenly came from somewhere within the forest. It was rapid and rhythmic like it contained some sort of magic.

Almost as soon as the sound appeared, the weeping Tiger Sovereign, the running Skin Painting Gentleman, and the feeding Limp Celestial stopped doing what they were doing at the exact same time. Then, light reentered their unfocused eyes, and they looked left and right as if trying to rediscover their bearings. When they recalled what they were doing just now, their expressions immediately turned as ugly as sin.

Skin Painting Gentleman waved his hand and halted the pouncing skin puppets dead in their tracks. Then, they flew back to his person like clothes.

Limp Celestial was digging his fingers into his mouth and throwing up the dead branches, leaves, soil and stones he consumed as best he could. Tears and snot streamed down his face as his complexion turned a shade of purple.

Tiger Sovereign wiped his tears without batting an eyelid before observing his surroundings warily. Then, he barked harshly, "Who are you? Show yourself!"

A lazy, uncaring voice came from deeper within the forest. "Wow. I saved your lives, and you couldn't even be bothered to thank me?"

"I'm not going to repeat myself a third time. Show yourself, or suffer the consequences!" Tiger Sovereign grunted with impatience.

Skin Painting Gentleman and Limp Celestial were staring coldly at the origin of the voice as well.

"Fine, fine. Man, it's so hard to be a good person these days."

A young man slowly stepped out from behind a peach blossom tree. He was pretty almost to the point where he looked more like a woman than a man. He was also wearing a pink robe and a peach blossom flower on his head; his attire made him look even more feminine and attractive.

If it wasn't for his masculine voice and the obvious bulge rolling up and down his throat, anyone would think that he was a woman, not a man.

A wooden fish was floating next to the man, and seated above the wooden fish was a cute little girl. She was hugging a hammer slightly bigger than her with both hands and sticking out her tongue, panting.

Clearly, the tapping noise had come from this wooden fish.

"Who are you... scion[1]?"

Skin Painting Gentleman frowned a little. He thought that the speaker was hiding far, far away in the forest, when in reality they were right under their nose. He could not believe that he hadn't sense him until he revealed himself.

More importantly, he could not sense his strength. He didn't recognize him either.

"My name is Xie Taohua (Withering Peach Blossom). I was passing through the area when I noticed the oddities of this mountain. So, I decided to check it out."

Xie Taohua blinked coyly at the trio, his peach blossom eyes looking moist and attractive. "It was then I saw him laughing and weeping," he pointed at Tiger Sovereign, "You running away like your life depends on it," he pointed at Skin Painting Gentleman, "And him eating stones and branches for some reason," he pointed at Limp Celestial at the end. "So, I came."

"It didn't look like any of you was going to regain your senses, so I decided to intervene. No need to thank me. I love helping those in need, you see."

Skin Painting Gentleman, Limp Celestial and Tiger Sovereign exchanged a glance with each other. Their wariness of Xie Taohua was only growing by the second.

As if he could read their minds, Xie Taohua said lazily, "Relax. If I really wanted to kill you, I would've done so while you were still trapped in an illusion, right?"

"Haha... Thank you for your help, Brother Xie." Skin Painting Gentleman saluted him.

"You're welcome." Xie Taohua shook his head. Then, he licked his lips and asked curiously, "But if you really want to thank me, why don't you answer my question? I really want to know what the three of you saw in your illusions."

"The big guy over there wept like a baby even though he's a walking slab of muscles. You ran all over the place like you're being chased by ghosts. As for him, boy, I'm really curious as to why he's chowing down those rotten leaves, stones and branches like it's the most delicious food in the world. Are they really that tasty?"

"Are you making fun of us, boy?" Tiger Sovereign spoke up with an unfriendly glint in his eyes. A displeased frown flashed through Skin Painting Gentleman and Limp Celestial's faces as well. None of them were happy with what happened to them just now.

The illusion they saw wasn't just any ordinary illusion. It was also a reflection of their deepest secrets.

Tiger Sovereign was an orphan who was abandoned by his parents at a young age. He only survived to adulthood because he was raised by a tiger. It was why he was overflowing with loathing toward his parents.

His parents had appeared in his illusion. That was why he lost his mind and tore them to pieces.