

## Stranger 601

### Chapter 601: Celestial Spring

A long silence later, the brawny man finally said in a heavy, helpless voice, “People of our trade never know if we might live to see another day. One might even say that we’re trading our lives away for money. Old Zhou, Old Wang and Young Li knew that death was a possibility. Everyone here knows this as well, don’t we?”

The brawny man’s name was Wang Shengkui. He was a horse caravan leader. A horse caravan originally referred to a group of horse wranglers herding a train of mules. Over time, it referred to merchants who mainly used horses to carry and transport goods. He and his companions were in the latter category.

Theirs were no ordinary horse caravan either. They were merchants responsible for transporting goods across countries, and they mainly went between Chu and Yan.

They were Chu people who lived in Northern Xinjiang for generations. To the north Northern Xinjiang and bordering the Gobi Desert and the Bitter Snow Plain was Yan.

At the beginning after the fall of the You Dynasty, Yan and Chu shared good relations with each other because of the camaraderie they built during the time the four nations—Yan, Chu, Qi and Wei—came together to bring down You. Moreover, the war was long, and the people had suffered greatly because of it. Everyone needed to rest and recuperate. Therefore, they opened their borders and actively traded with each other.

Yan was famous for their horses and wide assortment of metals and ores, whereas Chu was famous for their silk and tea. Both countries had something that the other desperately needed. The network of trade routes between the two countries eventually became known as the famous “Tea and Horse Road”.

Here was a quote from the history books: “At the beginning of Yan and Chu, there were ancient roads that connected the north and the south. The bells of camels rang throughout night and day, the caravans streamed both ways like rivers, and the work was unending. It was the picture of prosperity.”

One could tell just how prosperous they were back then.

Groups such as the horse caravans, camel caravans and more were born during that time as well.

Unfortunately, “raised up by neighbor, cast down by neighbor[1]”. As time continued to march endlessly toward the future, both countries eventually recovered from the ravages of war. Several successions later, whatever bond the late emperors forged were long forgotten.

One bed only had enough room for one person, and this was doubly true for the ruler of men. Conflicts and friction began to arise at the borders, and their relationship slowly but surely grew tense. Eventually, both countries began restricting trade with each other until the “Tea and Horse Road” became a pale shadow of its former glory.

Their relations grew even more strained than before after the Heavenly Martial Emperor ascended to Yan’s throne. The Heavenly Martial Emperor possessed great skill, strategy, and more importantly, ambition. Internally, he groomed the people for war and eradicated both the nobility

and the border magnates to achieve centralization of power. Externally, he launched multiple campaigns that all ended in success. He had chased the Quanrong[2] to the Bitter Snow Plains, exiled the Baifang to Donglu, and destroyed the Qiushan at the Gobi Desert.

Having eliminated all the threats within Yan, the Heavenly Martial Emperor could now set his sights beyond his borders: Yan.

Chu was located in the Central Plain. Its environment was excellent, its land was fertile, and it was overflowing with natural resources. Wealth wasn't their middle name, but if it was, no one would be surprised by it. That was why Chu was currently experiencing a cultural boom. Things like literature and music became highly valued, customs and traditions were slowly overtaking practicality, and signs of decadence were everywhere starting from the imperial court all the way down to the *jianghu*.

Worse still, the country itself was shifting its focus away from martial might. Ever since Emperor Jin Run rose to power, he was absorbed in the arts of music, chess, calligraphy, painting and more. Caring more about indulging in the pleasures than ruling the country, he built a ton of gardens and pavilions but neglected both the court and the military.

Today, Chu's military was weak. In the eyes of their neighbors, they were a juicy lamb just waiting to be slaughtered. The Heavenly Martial Emperor of Yan, more than anyone else, wanted a piece of that meat. That was why he had been instigating conflicts at the borders non-stop.

The Heavenly Martial Emperor's intention was so blatant that not even Emperor Jin Run could fail to notice it. That was why he had been increasing the amount of troops in Northern Xinjiang and constructing military fortifications in preparation for war in recent years.

When a country prospered, the people suffered. When a country waned, the people suffered still. The one who suffered the most from the conflicts between the two countries wasn't the higher-ups who were behind it all, but the humble people like Wang Shengkui. As the border passes were guarded with great zeal due to the rising number of conflicts, merchants like them naturally couldn't pass through the borders as easily as before. Goods such as salt, metal, food and more were labeled as contrabands and couldn't be traded freely. Even the Horse and Tea Road was eventually overtaken by brigands and Strangers due to the severe drop in traffic. Naturally, their lives became harsher than ever before.

Many people changed careers and found a living elsewhere, but those who didn't know any other skill or trade didn't have that choice. Caravanning was the only trade they knew, and they had to stick to it no matter how risky things became.

After all, life must go on no matter what.

Half a year ago, their caravan had numbered over a hundred people. They had gathered entire caravans of silk, tea and more, marched out of Northern Xinjiang, and took off toward northern Yan along the abandoned Tea and Horse Road.

It had been a long and harsh journey. The good news was that they had made a killing thanks to the worsened relations between the two countries, and goods like silk and tea were in high demand in Yan. But the cost... the cost was high. The number of times they were attacked by brigands and Strangers were too numerous to count. There were high-risk locations where, despite their best

precautions, simply could not be prepared against. As if that wasn't enough, they had to go through all that a second time since they needed to make it back to Chu.

By the time their feet stepped on familiar soil, their caravan of one hundred or so people had dwindled to less than sixty. Almost half of their members were dead. It was a terrible cost to say the least.

Everyone who died was a comrade who they braved thick and thin together. They weren't family, but they were closer than family. They had set out on this journey together, but some of them would never come home—not even their corpses. The risks were simply too great.

Not even the most stone-hearted men in their group could claim that they weren't saddened by this. If they were, then they were lying.

But what could they do? Those who were alive must live.

Life, must go on.

This was their life and eternal sorrow.

“Uncle Qi, please make sure that the remunerations are ready. Oh, and please add a portion of my share to the remunerations. I will not have the families of my brothers and sisters unjustly compensated.”

Wang Shengkui said patiently while looking at a middle-aged man in his fifties, “Our brothers and sister may be gone, but we are still here. From now on, their parents are our parents, their siblings are our siblings, and their spouses and children are our in-laws and children. We must take good care of them so that our late brothers and sisters can rest in peace, understand?”

“You're right, boss. You know what, add a portion of my share to the pile as well, Old Qi.”

“Same here.”

“Don't forget me, Old Qi.”

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Determined voices rang here and there throughout the caravan. There was hope, belief, warmth, and humanity in this caravan.

“There's people up ahead, boss!”

Suddenly, Sun Bo pointed at the Celestial Spring still a ways away from them. Wang Shengkui looked. He saw a group of people sitting around the spring and chatting happily with one another. There was even a kid running here and there and giggling loudly. It added some joy and life to the desolate Gobi Desert.

“It might be a group of traveling merchants taking a break at Celestial Spring. Be on your guard though.”

Wang Shengkui instructed, but he didn't really believe that the strangers were a threat. Judging from their attire and the fact that they had a kid with them, he highly doubted that they were brigands. After all, who in their right mind would bring a kid out on a raid?

Celestial Spring was the only oasis and water source in this part of the Gobi Desert; all fifty kilometers of it. Not only that, it had a cool and mythical origin.

Legend said that this part of the Gobi Desert was originally a completely barren wasteland. Devoid of even a single drop of water, not even the toughest plants such as desert poplars or thistles could grow in this place. Over time, this part of the Gobi Desert became known as the Barren Sand.

Countless lives had been claimed in the Barren Sand. Even back when the Tea and Horse Road was prospering, the Barren Sand was labeled as a forbidden zone by merchants from both Yan and Chu. Countless traveling merchants had died because they tried to cross the Barren Sand, so much so that the saying, "A fresh body every three kilometers, and a skeleton every five" became the byline of the Barren Sand. The number of people who had died here was innumerable.

One day, a celestial rode a bull across the Barren Sand. He saw a body every three kilometers, and a skeleton every five. Realizing just how dangerous the desert was to the ordinary men and unable to ignore the tragedy, he mustered his power and created the Celestial Spring.

And so the Celestial Spring came to be.

Of course, this was just a legend. No one knew if it was true or not. It was one of the many stories that had passed down by word since the days when the Tea and Horse Road was still prospering.

There was no denying that something was special about the Celestial Spring though. Its waters were sweet and tasty. It never froze even during the coldest winter, nor dried during the hottest summer. Not only that, those who drank from the spring would experience good luck for a short time.

As a result, Celestial Spring became a popular resting place for all horse caravans and traveling merchants within fifty kilometers.

#### Chapter 602: Dragon Nursing Nest

When the Tea and Horse Road was prospering, a unique town had even taken form around the Celestial Spring. There were inns, restaurants, theaters and more whose services were tailored to traveling merchants. It was a good time.

Unfortunately, the town slowly became abandoned after the Tea and Horse Road declined. Today, all that was left was the remnants of the past.

Even so, the Celestial Spring remained the most important stop for all those who wished to use the Tea and Horse Road. Everyone—the traveling merchants, the horse caravans, the bandits, even the scout squads of Chu and Yan rested at the area.

The Celestial Spring was a magical place. Naturally, countless brigands and evildoers had plotted to occupy it for their own selfish purposes. No one had succeeded, however. It was because the scout squads of Chu and Yan who were passing through the area would wipe out the occupying brigands every once in a while. Over time, everyone learned that it was pointless to try and occupy the Celestial Spring.

It was also why the Celestial Spring was generally considered a safe spot.

When the horse caravan arrived at the Celestial Spring, the strangers gave them the occasional glance but paid them no attention.

Since they were strangers who got together by chance, and it didn't look like the other group was interested in interacting with them, Wang Shengkun's group too ignored them and focused on settling the horses and making cooking arrangements.

Forty or so meters away from their group, there was a young man who gave them a friendly nod. His appearance was average, and he wore a blue outfit. He was sitting alone under a tree, drinking from the spring, and eating his rations.

The young man looked very ordinary. He was the kind of person who could vanish into a crowd just like that. But when he smiled, he naturally elicited a good feeling in others. It almost felt like magic. It was why Wang Shengkun couldn't help but shoot him a couple more looks.

Of course, he was just curious. Again, they were just strangers who got together by chance, and he had no intention of prying into the young man's business. He quickly threw himself into work after he reined in his curiosity.

Unbeknownst to everyone, the girl had run up to the Celestial Spring and was currently playing with its water.

"Ah! Yan'er, watch out!"

It was then someone noticed her action and cried out in warning. Maybe it was because the cry scared her, or maybe she was simply too engrossed with her game. As if on cue, she fell head first into the spring water.

"Yan'er!"

"Little Yan!"

"My daughter!"

The traveling merchants immediately flew into a panic. Everyone rushed toward the spring with shock and fear.

The Celestial Spring might be called a spring, but it was easily over thirty meters wide in diameter. Logically speaking, a lake was a more fitting description.

Not only that, the Celestial Spring was extremely deep. No one knew exactly how deep it was. Forget a young girl, it could drown even a cow—assuming the cow didn't know how to swim, of course.

Wang Shengkun and the others remained calm though. In fact, some of them were smiling and watching the commotion with great interest. From a third person perspective, they looked stone-hearted and cruel.

"I don't know how to swim! Will anyone please save my Yan'er?!"

"Please! Save Yan'er! Please!"

A middle-aged man was searching frantically for help. He was looking at Wang Shengkun's group as well.

“Relax, brother. Your daughter will be fine,” Wang Shengkun said smilingly.

“You...! How could you smile at a time like this? Are you even human?!” The middle-aged man roared with bloodshot eyes.

“You misunderstand me, brother. I’m saying that someone will save your daughter. You don’t need to worry about anything.”

Wang Shengkun explained before pointing at the spring. “Look!”

The middle-aged man subconsciously followed his finger just in time to see bubbles rising from the bottom of the spring. The girl named Yan’er was wrapped around by a bubble and brought back to the surface.

Inside the bubble, the girl giggled with great interest as she waved her hands about and poked at the bubble surrounding her. She was having the time of her life.

Some people looked both stunned and amazed by the miraculous sight. Wang Shengkun, Sun Bo and the rest of the horse caravan looked desensitized, however.

“See? I told you your daughter is going to be fine!” Wang Shengkun smiled.

This was one of the miraculous things about the Celestial Spring that made it seem like a celestial really does live in Celestial Spring. If someone accidentally fell into the spring, they would be rescued by a strange power. Therefore, no one had ever died in Celestial Spring.

On top of that, a small portion of the rations they brought with them would disappear as well. It was very strange.

To date, no one knew why this was happening. Of course, there were curious souls who tried to dive into the spring in search for the truth, but no one had ever found the answer.

Everyone in the horse caravan was an experienced traveler. In a sense, they were extremely superstitious, not to mention that there were true displays of power at the Celestial Spring. Over time, everyone believed that a kind celestial lived at Celestial Spring, and that they would rescue them from danger and bless them with good luck.

In fact, it was the truth. Every time they passed through Celestial Spring and drank its spring water, they would experience great luck for the next two or three days or so. They would not encounter any Stranger or danger during their journey.

Of course, the blessing did not last forever. That was why they always visited the Celestial Spring even if it wasn’t always by the way.

It was also why no one panicked or tried to help the girl after she accidentally fell into the water.

Suddenly, someone among the crowd tossed out a fish basket.

The fish basket looked like an ordinary fish basket made from bamboo, but it wasn’t. For one, it was floating in the air. Two, it gave off a colorful, auspicious light that took the form of a true dragon. Head and tail wrapped around the fish basket, its roars could be heard throughout the spring.

There was a reason Wang Shengkun's group dared to work as a horse caravan between two hostile countries and brave the abandoned, bandit-and-stranger-infested Tea and Horse Road. No one in the caravan was lacking in courage, strength, insight and more.

Their caravan was guarded by over a dozen Spirit Purifiers, and even the weakest among them was an Astral Refiner. As for Wang Shengkun himself, he was a Half-Step Spirit Master. Given the right circumstances, he could enter the Spirit Master stage at any moment. Moreover, they were no imposter who only had the cultivation but none of the skill. Every single one of them had been blooded and tested in battles a hundred times over, which was why not even those brigands who specifically raided merchants for a living stayed well out of their way.

The draconic cry was nothing like anything they had ever heard before. For a moment, everyone was paralyzed with fear and shock.

"The Dragon Nursing Nest caught it! All of you, move!"

A woman shouted from the crowd, and a couple more people leaped into the open and occupied a corner each, forming a formation. At the same time, a couple of spells struck the fish basket.

The draconic roar booming from the fish basket immediately doubled in volume and intensity.

Inside the spring, something was being dragged out into the open together with the young girl. It charged left and right and tore gaps in between the stitches. However, the openings quickly resealed in no time.

The people's faces slowly turned white. Their breathing grew erratic as well.

Just when it looked like they couldn't hold their formation any longer, the girl in the sky suddenly lowered her palm. Countless invisible threads suddenly appeared in the sky, and each thread seemed to have a dragon attached to it. Countless tiny dragons swam across the threads and formed a massive net.

The next moment, the girl clenched her fingers into a fist, and the great net began shrinking rapidly while roaring. When it shrank to a certain point, the roars faded into nothing.

The girl was still floating in the sky when the net sat snugly between her fingers. She was still wearing a cute, innocent smile on her face.

Chapter 603: Little Stranger

"What..."

Wang Shengkui and his group were stunned by this sudden turn of events to say the least.

The ordinary traveling merchants suddenly transformed into skilled warriors, and the young girl he thought to be naive and guileless seemed to be the strongest of them all?

What on earth was going on here?!

"Yiyi..."

A whimper came from the golden net the girl was holding. It was only then Wang Shengkui noticed that there was a little man inside it.

Of course, it wasn't actually a human. It was just a Stranger with a humanoid shape.

The Stranger was only three or four inches tall. It had all the features a human might have including limbs, ears, eyes and more. In fact, it looked just like a child, but many times smaller.

It was wearing a lotus leaf like a hat and a green lotus petal around its body. It had green hair and a handsome face. Its round, black eyes were clear and innocent like the purest, most beautiful objects in the world.

Unfortunately, the Stranger was currently hurt right now. Light green blood was leaking out of its wounds and giving off the fresh scent of plants, potent and invigorating. Its clear eyes reflected puzzlement, innocence, loneliness and sorrow.

Wang Shengkui and his group suddenly felt deep sympathy for the little Stranger. However, its captors were only filled with joy and excitement.

“Hahaha! We finally caught the little bastard!”

“I know right? It was so annoying to catch. I couldn’t even remember how many traps we’ve laid in the attempt to capture it, and it all ended in failure, the cautious little bastard.”

“Well, you only need to succeed once!”

“Fly, you little bastard! You thought you’re so good at flying, didn’t you? Fly!”

After the girl landed on the waters like it was flat land and leisurely returned to the shore, the group of warriors immediately went up to her. They surrounded the struggling Stranger and discussed their catch excitedly.

“It looks pitiful, elder. Why don’t you release it from the net?”

One female disciple actually felt sympathy for the little Stranger and said quietly.

“You don’t understand, junior sister. This thing is slippery as hell. If it wasn’t for the elder’s Dragon Nursing Nest and Dragon Subjugating Net, we would never be able to catch it. And if it manages to escape after we release it, then all our efforts would be for naught.”

“Can... Can we stop its bleeding at least?” The female disciple bit her lips hesitatingly.

“You should never fall for a Stranger’s wiles, junior sister, and this little bastard has more practice than most.” Someone sneered as he stared at the struggling Stranger.

“Look at it. It’s still struggling even now.”

It was at this moment the young girl holding the Stranger giggled. “Haha... Little Hanxue, you’re just as naive as this little thing over here.”

The young girl was none other than the Elder Miao the warriors were speaking of. Although she looked like a child, her giggle sounded surprisingly amorous. “Too bad for you two, the world does not need naive people. This *jianghu* does not need merciful people either.”

The young woman named Hanxue bit her lips again and bowed her head. She didn’t say anything else.

“What are you waiting for, elder? If you don’t seal it now, it might escape and waste all our efforts,” Someone commented after noting that the little Stranger was still struggling.

“Don’t worry. There is no way it can break free while trapped by my Dragon Subjugating Net.” Elder Miao smiled. “Besides, the more it struggles, the tighter the Dragon Subjugating Net would become, and the more it will bleed.”

“This creature was probably a lotus before it became sentient and a type of plant fairy. Due to the magical powers of the Celestial Spring, it too gained a certain level of power. Not only is its blood overflowing with rich vitality that could restore one’s flesh and bones and extend one’s lifespan, it can even bless people with good luck. That is why its blood is priceless.”

“Oh my...”

The warriors’ eyes immediately glowed with greed when they heard this.

“What are you waiting for, Tong Chuan? Collect the blood now before they go to waste,” Elder Miao instructed.

“O-oh! As you command, elder.” A man excitedly produced a porcelain bottle from his Nature’s Shell and held it beneath the Dragon Subjugating Net.

Eventually, seemingly realizing that it could not escape, the injured and weary Stranger ceased struggling altogether. It curled into a ball and stared at the Celestial Spring with eyes full of loneliness, sorrow and despair; the refuge seemed so close yet so far.

“Why aren’t you moving? I know you’re not dead!”

The little Stranger’s wounds started healing after it stopped struggling, so the blood flow eventually came to a stop. Without hesitation, Tong Chuan shook the net hard so that the sharp threads would carve deep into its flesh and restart the bleeding. Then, he happily began collecting the blood once more.

The little Stranger neither struggled nor screamed in pain, however. It simply maintained its posture and stared at the Celestial Spring fixatedly.

A few breaths later, when Tong Chuan tried to shake the net again, Elder Miao stopped him and said, “Enough. The sect can use its blessing of fortune, and you are going to kill it if you push it any further.”

“Yes, elder,” Tong Chuan replied and put away the bottle reluctantly.

Elder Miao glanced at the injured, despairing Stranger in her Dragon Subjugating Net and giggled. “Don’t look like that, little guy. If you continue to stay here, it’s only a matter of time before someone finds you and kills you. If you come with me to the Dragonrider Mountain, at least you wouldn’t lose your life. You should be happy that a better fate has found you!”

“Alright. We’ve accomplished our objective, everyone. It’s time to go home,” Elder Miao instructed, and the group got ready to head back to their sect.

Meanwhile, Wang Shengkui was wearing a look of hesitation on his face. In the end, he gritted his teeth and stepped forward, “Wait!”

“Hmm? Do you have business with us, mister?”

Elder Miao turned around and stared at Wang Shengkun with a teasing expression.

Inexplicable fear suddenly exploded in Wang Shengkui’s heart when her seemingly young, innocent eyes stared into his own. His back broke out in cold sweat, but he forced himself to suppress his terror and said, “Can you... Can you release that Stranger, senior?”

For a moment, no one said anything. Sun Bo and his men looked confused, whereas Elder Miao’s men looked visibly unhappy.

“Boss...”

The oldest man in their caravan, Uncle Qi strode up to Wang Shengkui with an ugly expression.

They were horse caravanners and smugglers. One of the cardinal rules of their trade was sticking their nose in somebody else’s business. As the saying goes, keep your head down, and nothing will happen. The world was an endless fount of trouble, and it was hard enough trying to handle one’s own. In this trade, sticking one’s nose into another’s business was a quick way to get oneself killed.

It was why all horse caravanners, traveling merchants and more preached caution, thoughtfulness, and keeping out of trouble’s way.

Wang Shengkui was a longtime veteran of this trade. He was also fair, selfless, emphatic, careful, and highly experienced. It was why everyone in the caravan looked up to him. There was no way he wouldn’t know the cardinal rule of caravanning, so what the hell was he trying to do?

“Let me speak, Uncle Qi.”

Wang Shengkui shook his head before turning his attention back to Elder Miao.

“Do you want this little guy too?”

Smiling, Elder Miao watched Wang Shengkui with great interest as she shook the Dragon Subjugating Net lightly. “Or do you want a piece of the pie?”

Chapter 604: Less Than Strangers

“You misunderstood me, senior.”

Wang Shengkui saluted Elder Miao and said in a sincere tone, “This Stranger is no evil Stranger. Not only is it kind and gentle, it has done a lot of good for the people and especially for us traveling merchants. I hope you can release it—if only because the heavens don’t enjoy killing.”

It took Wang Shengkui little to no effort to piece the clues together. The little Stranger had to be the mythical celestial of the Celestial Spring.

He was a bit surprised that the celestial of the legends was really a Stranger, but then again, he wasn’t really.

Celestials were a rare breed after all.

From the moment he figured out the little Stranger's identity, he had been wrestling with indecision: Should he step forward and stop the group from kidnapping the little Stranger, or should he stick to a horse caravan's cardinal rule and minded his own business?

Normally, he could have hardened his heart and ignored the plight happening in front of him. But not this time.

Even if he could pretend that the little Stranger hadn't helped countless traveling merchants, soldiers and travelers across the years, he could not ignore the fact that he owed it his life.

Three years ago, his daughter caught a rare disease that required a certain main ingredient to be cured. Unfortunately, the main ingredient was equally rare and could only be found deep within the Gobi Desert.

To save his daughter, he valiantly ventured into the deepest depths of the Gobi Desert. It was a long and arduous journey, but he ultimately succeeded.

Unfortunately, reality was a cruel mistress. On his way back, he was ambushed by a powerful Stranger. He was able to slay the Stranger with all his might, but he also suffered grievous injuries as a result. He knew he didn't have much longer to live.

Wang Shengkui was reluctant to die in the Gobi Desert as his death would also mean the death of his daughter. Through sheer grit and determination, he was able to trek over fifty kilometers of distance and make it to the edge of the Celestial Spring.

Unfortunately, that was as far as he went before he finally collapsed to the ground and fainted. He thought it would be the last time he saw the world and his beloved daughter.

He was wrong. The next day, not only did he wake up from what he thought would be his final slumber, he discovered that his injuries were completely healed as well. Thanks to this, he was able to bring the main ingredient back to his home and treat his daughter's illness.

At the time, he thought that the celestial living in the Celestial Spring had sensed his fervent wish and decided to save his life. That was why he took his daughter to the Celestial Spring so that they could thank him in person.

While they were praying, his daughter whispered to him that a little friend was laughing and watching them from the waters. Of course, he saw nothing.

He thought his daughter was either blinded by a trick of the light or allowing her overactive imagination to run wild, but later, her daughter told him that she spent the day playing with the little friend and enjoyed a great time.

It was only then he thought that something was off, but he still didn't give it much attention because his daughter seemed fine.

But now that he saw the little Stranger with his own eyes and heard the group's conversation, he finally understood that the little friend his daughter saw and played with back then was the Stranger before his eyes.

It could only be the one who saved his life as well.

Therefore, he didn't just owe the little Stranger his life. His precious daughter owed it her life as well.

He just couldn't stay aloof and do nothing no matter what. That was why he spoke up.

He was well aware that his action was going to land his caravan in deep trouble. If things went poorly, it might result in death. But still, he spoke up.

He was a human. He could not be lesser than a Stranger.

"A human who's pleading for a Stranger? That's rare." Elder Miao chuckled.

"Not all Strangers are bad, just like not all humans are good."

Wang Shengkui kept an obsequious posture since he was the person asking for a favor here.

"Besides, this Stranger saved my life before, so I humbly request that you let it go."

"Interesting. But why should I agree to your demand? It cost us a lot to capture this little thing, you know?" Elder Miao smiled, though there was great terror hidden behind the smile. Wang Shengkun could almost see a dragon towering behind the little girl and looking down on him with cold, indifferent eyes. His breathing felt stifled, the blood drained away from his face, and his knees nearly buckled from the sudden pressure.

Sun Bo and the others couldn't feel what Wang Shengkun was feeling, but they could see that something was off. Everyone's expression turned unfriendly as they stepped forward and shouted expletives at the opposing group.

Although her group was outnumbered, Elder Miao paid Wang Shengkun's men no attention whatsoever. "Is that it? It looks like begging won't work, so you're going to take our prize by force?"

"Quiet."

Wang Shengkun forced down the unnatural terror gripping his body and called for Sun Bo and the others to stay silent. Then, he explained, "Don't understand, senior. That is not my intention, and this has nothing to do with them. This is my and my personal request only."

He already knew that Elder Miao was strong, but judging from her reaction, he still underestimated her strength. If she got her, they might all die here today.

He did not mind dying, but he was unwilling to drag his brothers and sisters down with him.

"Oh? And what makes you think you have the right to ask anything of me?" Elder Miao continued to smile sweetly.

"Nothing, of course. I am simply beseeching you." Wang Shengkui said humbly and sincerely, "In return, you may ask anything from me. If it is within my capabilities to perform, then I will do it."

"Oh really? Anything?" Elder Miao rubbed her chin curiously. "If I ask you to kneel in front of me?"

Wang Shengkui dropped to his knees without a second thought.

“And if I ask you to kowtow to me?”

Elder Miao’s smile grew increasingly sweet.

“Boss!”

“Boss!!!”

Sun Bo and the others looked absolutely furious. Wang Shengkui was a true man in every sense of the word. Before this, the only people he gave his knees to were the sky, the earth, and his parents. But today, not only did he kneel to a total stranger, that bitch was demanding that she kowtow to him as well! Just how far did she intend to humiliate him?!

“Hahaha... I thought you wanted to rescue this little thing? Is it not worth a few kowtows?” Tong Chuan and the rest of Elder Miao’s men burst out laughing.

“Fine. I’ll do it.” Wang Shengkui gritted his teeth and did as he was told. Every time his head hit the ground, it was so loud it was as if the kowtow was happening within everyone’s heart.

One could literally hear his pleading from his kowtows.

“Hahahaha!”

Tong Chuan and the others laughed yet again. Hanxue was the only one who looked disturbed.

“What an obedient boy you are. If our elder asks you to kill yourself, would you do it?” Someone taunted.

“If senior would let it go, why not?” Wang Shengkui declared without hesitation as he raised his head. His forehead was dirtied by bits of stone and soil, and it couldn’t be described as a good look. Despite this, his gaze was as firm and clear as water, ice, and jade.

You saved me and my daughter’s life back then. Why would I be afraid to give up my life to save yours?

How could I not?

This time, Tong Chuan and the others couldn’t quite laugh as loudly as they did before. The guy who taunted Wang Shengkui wore an ugly expression as he muttered, “What an ill bastard. I never heard of a guy who’s willing to die for a Stranger. What the hell is wrong with him?”

“Will you take my life in exchange for letting it go, senior?” Wang Shengkui asked while staring at Elder Miao. He might be kneeling, but he was still a full head taller than her.

“Yiyi...”

It was at this moment the little Stranger trapped within Elder Miao's Dragon Subjugating Net made a noise. When they looked, they noticed that it was standing on its feet.

When everyone's eyes were set on it, the little Stranger pointed at Wang Shengkui and itself and made these weird "Yiyi yaya" noises. It stared at Elder Miao with pleading eyes.

"Oh? You're saying that you would come with me if I allow him to live?" Elder Miao asked smilingly after listening to the Stranger until the end.

The little Stranger immediately nodded.

"Don't listen to it, senior! It doesn't understand anything!" Wang Shengkui raised his voice, but could not help but be warmed by the little Stranger's action. No matter what fate befell him today, it was worth it.

"Yiyi yaya..."

The little Stranger began making noises and gesturing again. It clearly disagreed with Wang Shengkui's words.

Chapter 605: Envyng Your Good With My Evil

"Interesting. How interesting. A human is pleading for a Stranger, and a Stranger is pleading for a human. I've definitely seen something new today."

Elder Miao chuckled, but her smile was growing increasingly scornful and ridiculing. "However... it seems you've both forgotten that the choice is not in either of your hands!"

Elder Miao looked at Wang Shengkui. "Your life is worth nothing to me. Hence, your promise is meaningless to me as well."

Elder Miao then looked down at the little Stranger. "As for you, little guy, you are already in my hands. You're coming back with me to Dragonrider Mountain whether you like it or not."

"I see..." Wang Shengkui's eyes darkened.

"You know what? This farce is getting boring," Elder Miao said suddenly as if she had lost all interest. "Kill them all."

Before Wang Shengkui and the horse caravanners could react, the fish basket from before appeared in the sky. Golden light descended from the golden dragon wrapped around the Strange Artifact and immobilized everyone in place. Not one person in the horse caravan could move a muscle.

"Okay! I've been wanting to do this from the start!" Tong Chuan smiled savagely as he walked toward Sun Bo and Uncle Qi. Almost everyone else looked eager and malicious as well.

"You... Why?" Wang Shengkui blanched as his eyes widened like saucers. One moment ago, Elder Miao was still talking to him like a civilized person. The next, she was going to kill them all, and for what?

At this point, it was clear that the girl was toying with him. The thought of releasing the little Stranger had never crossed his mind.

He did not understand why she wanted to kill his men though. He was the one who made the request, so why was she directing her ire at everyone?

“Why?” Elder Miao blinked cutely and innocently. “Because I loathe people like you, of course.”

“Don’t you get it? People like you make me feel ugly. The kinder and better you are, the more ugly and evil I feel, and the more ugly and evil I feel, the more I wish to destroy you.”

“If that’s true, then just kill me and be done with it. Why are you targeting my brothers as well?”

Wang Shengkui had never seen a more evil expression in his life than the innocent smile on Elder Miao’s face right now. “They haven’t offended you, have they?”

“They haven’t offended me, yes, but you have.”

Elder Miao giggled. “It costs to stick your nose in another’s business, you know?”

Wang Shengkui was speechless for a moment. Then, he started begging, “It’s all my fault, so please let them go! I beg you! Please!”

“Are you regretting your life choices?” Elder Miao asked smilingly.

Wang Shengkui did not answer her question. He simply continued to plead for mercy.

Did he regret his decision?

The answer was yes and no.

He did not regret breaking the cardinal rule of horse caravanning and pleading on behalf of the little Stranger. He would do it again if he had a choice to redo things.

But he did regret dragging his brothers and sisters down with him. He should’ve been smarter and sent them home first. After that, he could catch up to Elder Miao’s group alone and make his plea. If everything went perfectly, then all was well. If not, then only he would suffer the consequences of his actions.

Right now, he was begging and kowtowing not for himself, but for his brothers and sisters.

“Looks like you do. A shame it’s a little too late, isn’t it?”

Elder Miao slowly walked toward Wang Shengkui while giggling. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you. In fact, I’m going to make sure that you stay alive to remember that your brothers and sisters are dead because of your goodness. I want you to wallow in shame and guilt all day and night because of your goodness, I want you to live forever in darkness and pain, and I want you to think that your goodness is loathsome and disgusting.”

Every time Elder Miao said a sentence, Wang Shengkui would tremble, and the light in his eyes would dim just a little.

“How cruel can you be?!” Wang Shengkui roared with bloodshot eyes. He struggled with all his might, but he was unable to break free no matter what he tried.

The little Stranger inside the Dragon Subjugating Net was yelling and struggling as well. The threads dug deep into its flesh, but it could not seem to feel the pain it was causing to itself.

“You think so? I think I can be crueler though.”

Elder Miao waved her hand, and Wang Shengkui involuntarily turned around and faced toward his people.

“What if I make you watch your brothers and sisters die because of your goodness? Yes, I think that would be perfect. What do you think?”

“You! Graaaaagh!”

Wang Shengkui roared as he struggled to stand, but the Dragon Nursing Nest’s power was too strong. He could only watch as Elder Miao’s men continued to walk toward his men, raised their murderous weapons, and brought it down.

Wang Shengkui closed his eyes. Trickle of blood slid down his cheeks from how hard he squeezed them.

The screams did not happen though. In fact, he heard nothing despite waiting for a few breaths.

When Wang Shengkui opened his eyes again, he did not see the cruel massacre he thought he was going to see. Instead, he saw Elder Miao’s men standing perfectly still as if someone had cast a petrification spell on them. Even their cruel grins were still plastered on their faces.

“Who are you? Please show yourself!”

For the first time, Elder Miao’s easy expression turned serious. Despite her strength and cultivation level, she did not sense what had paralyzed her men from the start until the end.

There were only two possibilities. One, the unknown person was far, far stronger than her. Second, they cultivated an extremely special martial art.

“It’s one thing to be ugly, and another to make others as ugly as you. I can throw up at the sight of you, you loathsome wench!”

A ridiculing voice came from Elder Miao’s side, and the girl abruptly spun around to face the speaker.

“It’s you?!”

Wang Shengkui subconsciously glanced in the direction of the speaker as well. It was then he noticed the young, ordinary-looking man in a blue outfit he saw earlier. At the same time, he recalled that the young man had been with them this whole time. Somehow, he had completely forgotten about the young man. It was like he existed at the edge of his consciousness until just now.

“I am an elder of Dragonrider Mountain, Innocent Miao. May I know your name, warrior?”

Elder Miao a.k.a Innocent Miao asked. Her expression betrayed nothing, but her heart was overflowing with wariness.

She recognized the young man, of course. In fact, the young man had arrived even earlier than them. He was already here when they arrived at the Celestial Spring the day before yesterday.

Logically speaking, they should've been on the lookout for him. After all, they were here to capture the little Stranger, and any additional variable could potentially ruin their plan. It was only natural for them to be wary of him.

For some reason though, the thought had never crossed her mind even though he was right there. It wasn't like the young man had tried to keep a low profile either. More than once the young man had carried about his business right in front of her, and yet she had subconsciously overlooked his existence almost as if he was air.

If the young man hadn't chosen to speak up now, she wouldn't even remember that he was right there with them.

It was a terrifying realization to say the least.

"My name isn't important. You probably wouldn't recognize me even if I told you about it," the young man shook his head and answered casually.

"In that case, may I inquire as to your intentions for interfering with our business?" Innocent Miao asked with a frown.

"It's pretty simple. I don't like the way you do things, that's all," the young man replied indifferently.

"So, you plan to stick your nose in the Dragonrider Mountain's business as well?" A hint of cruelty and murder crept onto Innocent Miao's innocent face.

"No point trying to intimidate me with your sect's name. I've never heard of a Dragonrider Mountain."

The young man shrugged. "And yes, I'm crashing your party. Whatcha gonna do?"

Chapter 606: Punching Down A Dragon

"The arrogance!"

Innocent Miao hmphed at the same time her fish basket appeared above the young man. The golden dragon circling the Strange Artifact let out a mighty roar, and a terrible pressure pressed down on him like the fall of heaven itself.

"Arrogance? Since when is stating facts considered arrogance?"

Innocent Miao's eyes widened. The golden light had seemingly caught the young man off guard and buckled his knees slightly, but he easily and casually rose back to his feet. As he straightened himself, the golden light beams descending from the fish basket shattered bit by bit like glass, and the fish basket itself wobbled unsteadily. The golden dragon's roar also devolved into a pitiful whine as if it was afraid of the young man's power.

When the young man fully stood up, the golden dragon abruptly exploded into smithereens. The fish basket was also blasted far, far into the distance.

“Pwack!”

A mouthful of fresh blood gushed out of Innocent Miao’s lips. Her face also turned as white as a sheet.

She did not hesitate. She immediately turned around and broke off into a run.

The reason was simple. Her opponent was simply too powerful.

The fish basket was no ordinary object. A Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact, the Dragon Nursing Nest was one of the hidden treasures the founder of the Dragonrider Mountain, the Dragonrider Trueman had left behind for his disciples.

Legend said that the founder of the Dragonrider Mountain was a strange yet amazing warrior who specifically cultivated the ways of dragonslaying. He had slain many true and lesser dragons in his life and founded the sect known as Dragonrider Mountain.

The Dragon Nursing Nest was a Strange Artifact he forged using a dragon’s tendons and blood. A support-type Strange Artifact, the power of a true dragon resided within the Dragon Nursing Nest. If a Stranger was kept within its confines, they would eventually undergo a transformation and gain the bloodline of a true dragon, albeit a faint one. Hence the name.

Besides that, the Dragon Nursing Nest possessed the ability to shackle and intimidate. For example, its wielder could apply a true dragon’s pressure to lock down an entire space. That was how they were finally able to capture the little Stranger.

The Dragon Nursing Nest was undoubtedly a powerful Strange Artifact, and yet it had failed to contain the young man for even a single breath. What did that say about his strength?

That was why Innocent Miao did not hesitate to make her escape.

Unfortunately for her, she had barely moved when her instincts suddenly screamed of impending death. Without thinking, she summoned a beam of golden light that transformed into a golden dragon out of her body and wrapped herself in it.

Dragoncoil Protection was a defensive technique where the practitioner transformed their astral qi into a dragon and surrounded themselves in it. Normally, it could block most attacks without fail.

The young man though? Innocent Miao could only watch in horror as a single fist penetrated her golden dragon like it was paper.

Knowing that there was no time to lose, she curled into herself and somehow yanked herself free from her opponent’s fist intent and energies. Like a dragon diving into a river, she swam forward with great speed and slowed down only after she was ten or so meters away.

A blue dragon could navigate the void of the waters as easily as it soared through the skies. Hence, the technique was named “Blue Dragon Swim”.

“Are you sure you want to make Dragonrider Mountain your enemy?”

Innocent Miao looked back at the young man ten meters behind her with an ugly expression. He was currently withdrawing his fist with a relaxed expression on his face.

The Dragonrider Mountain mainly cultivated the spirit so as to tame a dragon with their mind or slay it with their intent. However, that also meant that they were weak in body.

Innocent Miao had no doubt that the punch would have wounded her grievously if she hadn't escaped in time.

"Are you regretting your life choices?"

The young man smiled brightly, but none of it reached the eye. It was exactly the same smile she had used on Wang Shengkui earlier.

"A shame it's a little too late, isn't it?"

Innocent Miao's expression grew uglier. It was the exact same phrases she had flung at Wang Shengkui earlier, and now the bastard was throwing her words right back at her.

"I'm not scared of you!"

Innocent Miao uttered wrathfully as she stomped the ground, hard. The earth churned, and a pair of earth dragons burst out of the earth to attack the young man's left and right flank. It almost looked like two dragons playing with a pearl.

The young man did not even look at them as he spread his arms wide. He caught the earth dragons by their heads, and they came to a dead halt just like that.

Not done yet, he clenched his fingers and caused cracks to spread across their whole body. Then, they shattered into pieces.

As soon as the earth dragons shattered, a single water bead appeared on Innocent Miao's fingertip. She flicked it at the young man.

The second the water bead left her fingertip, it transformed into a roaring river.

What better way to fell a dragon from the sky than a river?

The young man didn't dodge even though the river was rolling straight toward him. He simply walked toward Innocent Miao until the river was a second away from him. Then, he clenched his fist and thrust it forward.

The raging flood of water was split in half just like that.

So what if you have a river that fell dragons?

I have a fist that could divide a river.

When the river was split apart, Innocent Miao chanted something that sounded like a draconic roar capable of commanding all bodies of water. The river churned, and eight water dragons burst out of it.

A mountain was famous not because it was tall, but because a celestial lived within.

A body of water was famous not because it was deep, but because it was a dragon's den.

As soon as the eight dragons appeared, the disintegrating waters stabilized and gathered behind the eight water dragons. Then, they formed a wave that was over three hundred meters tall.

As the eight dragons circled the sky, the waters turned into a mirror in the sky and showed off the scene of a celestial slaying a true dragon.

Right after that, a finger pierced through the water mirror and descended from above.

The descending finger was accompanied by eight dragons and an ungodly tidal wave.

It was the ultimate killing technique of the “Dragonslayer Art”, “Slay True Dragon”.

Even before the finger descended, the roars of countless dragons resounded for hundreds and thousands of kilometers. Heaven and earth themselves cowered before their might.

If a celestial’s finger could slay a true dragon, what about a man?

How could it not squash a man like a bug?

Unfortunately for Innocent Miao, the young man didn’t even give her the chance to laugh before he raised his fist and punched again.

The punch shattered the descending finger,

Put a hole in the raging tides,

And shattered the mirror in the sky.

When a man’s fist was taller than the heavens, then it could kill even a celestial, no?

“All sauce, no substance.”

The young man commented casually as he withdrew his fist. He then resumed his walk toward Innocent Miao once more.

Innocent Miao completely lost the will to fight as a strange cry escaped her lips. She leaped into the air and soared into the sky like a true dragon. There were clouds shrouding her person like a veil.

The wind submitted to a tiger, and the clouds to a dragon. A dragon could hide itself in the clouds, grow bigger or smaller, or even turn invisible. Hence, the technique was named “Dragonrising”.

“Dragonrising” was invented after observing how a dragon leaped and soared through the sky. In short, it was a movement art in the “Dragonslayer Art”. It enabled the practitioner to conceal themselves in the clouds and fly across heaven and earth like lightning.

“Dragonrising” was the Dragonrider Mountain’s best escape art. It was also how Innocent Miao appeared over a hundred meters away in just a breath.

She did not believe that the young man could catch up to her. It was clear that he was a body-tempering warrior, and no one could deny his sheer physicality. However, a body-tempering warrior was also weak in mind and movement. She was certain he couldn’t spot her, much less chase her down.

“You’re pretty fast, but do you really think you can run?”

Unfortunately, a ridiculing voice entered her ears the next moment. It sounded so close it might have appeared right next to her.

Innocent Miao shivered as the breath of death brushed against her nape. She looked behind her back just in time to see a finger descending toward her.

The second she saw the finger, she knew that she could neither block nor avoid it. She could only watch helplessly as the finger touched her forehead.

*Bang!*

There was a crisp bang, and the sound resounded inside her headspace like a bell's ringing.

Every time the sound echoed, countless memories would surface from her headspace. It almost felt like someone was flipping through her memories like a book using his spirit.

Chapter 607: Dragon Scaffold

“How dare you spy on my memories! Die!”

Innocent Miao roared inside her heart as a monster with a dragon's body but a human's head appeared inside her headspace.

The monster's body was over three hundred meters long. It had glittering scales that produced halos when light reflected off its surface. At the center of its head was the youthful, innocent face of a young girl—Innocent Miao's face to be exact.

This was Innocent Miao's Yin God, the Guileless True Dragon.

Although Dragonrider Mountain was a waning, disreputable sect today, it was the complete opposite a couple centuries ago. They were once famous throughout the *jianghu* for their dragonslaying arts, a secret art that focused on cultivating qi and especially the mind and astral qi.

Innocent Miao was an elder of Dragonrider Mountain, so of course she was no weakling. She was a Spirit Master with an exceptionally potent mind.

She did not know how the young man was able to track her even after she used Dragonrising, but he was apparently foolish enough to tackle her greatest strength with his biggest weakness. He actually dared to go peek into her memories inside her own headspace. That was akin to lighting a lantern inside a toilet—suicide.

Overconfidence was the unmaking of many warriors. If he thought that she had no way to turn the tables, then he had another thing coming.

You only have your arrogance to blame for what happens next!

Innocent Miao sneered internally as the Guileless True Dragon manifested a scaffold from its scales. There were tall, massive stone pillars shrouded in lightning at each corner of the scaffold, and four burning chains descending from the skies. Sitting at the center of the scaffold was an executioner's blade which tip was facing upward. The blade was covered in rust and dried blood, and the aura of death rising off of it was so thick that it was almost tangible. The painful screams of dragons could be heard from the aura of death from time to time.

The second the scaffold appeared, draconic roars, fiendish aura and killing intent immediately permeated Innocent Miao's headspace.

### *“Dragonslayer Art: Dragon Scaffold”*

Legend had it that the ancient heavenly court used to own a dragon scaffold that was specifically used to punish vile dragons who abused their power. A dragon king had even been slain at the dragon scaffold in the past. The first swing of the executioner’s blade would rid them of their scales, the second swing would strip them of their skin, the third swing would sever all their tendons, the fourth swing would turn their body into mush, and the fifth swing would enfeeble their mind. It was said that any true dragon unfortunate enough to enter the dragon scaffold would suffer the cruelest punishments imaginable.

At best, the punished dragon would lose its scales and skin. At worst, it would lose its tendons, break many bones, and even lose its mind.

The Dragonrider Mountain’s “Dragon Scaffold” was an imitation of the ancient dragon scaffold. An offensive Magia that specifically targeted the mind, it could bind a true dragon’s mind to the dragon scaffold and put it through the five punishments at the adept level.

Of course, Innocent Miao had never subjected a dragon to the “Dragon Scaffold” since mastering the technique. It wasn’t because she didn’t want to, but because she had never even seen a dragon before, much less fought it.

Humans though? Oh, she had put many, many humans through the “Dragon Scaffold”.

Anyone whose mind was entrapped by Dragon Scaffold would suffer the cruelest of punishments. A mind was originally intangible, but it gained both form and substance once it entered the Dragon Scaffold. The Dragon Scaffold would then dice their membrane into bits, skin them alive, sever their tendons, pound their flesh into mince meat, and annihilate their mind as if they were a true dragon. The victim would die slowly in a world of pain and suffering.

Therefore, Dragon Scaffold wasn’t just Dragonrider Mountain’s strongest mind-attacking Magia, it was a brutal and inhuman method of torture as well. Anyone from Dragonrider Mountain would turn green the second they heard its name.

Right now, Innocent Miao wanted nothing more than to subject her tormentor to her Dragon Scaffold and teach him the pain of the mind. Only then could she vent her fury and hatred.

Clatter clatter clatter!

With a thought, she commanded the descending chains to wrap around the unknowable object in the void. But when the chains actually caught their target, they failed to drag it to the Dragon Scaffold. Not only that, they clattered restlessly almost as if they were trembling in fear.

Whatever they had caught, they instinctively knew that it wasn’t something that they could control.

“Roar!”

Inside Innocent Miao’s headspace, the Guileless True Dragon roared loudly. The Dragon Scaffold behind its back grew increasingly solid, and lightning flickered wildly above the four stone pillars. As the aura of death of the executioner’s blade rose to the heavens, the chains abruptly snapped straight and let loose a draconic roar.

“Quiet. I’m trying to work here!”

Suddenly, an impatient voice resounded throughout Innocent Miao's headspace. It wasn't particularly loud, but its authority and dominance would not be questioned. As if its words were the law itself, the draconic roar abruptly disappeared into nothing, and the taut chains broke into pieces without a sound.

Before Innocent Miao could react, an overwhelming, indescribable fear suddenly swelled inside her heart. Her consciousness fizzled for just an instant, and a gigantic foot smashed through the sky, shattered the sun and moon, and landed right on top of her "Dragon Scaffold".

BOOM!

A loud boom later, her prized "Dragon Scaffold" shattered into a million pieces. Even her three-hundred-meter-long Guileless True Dragon was utterly scattered in one stomp.

"Impossible..."

Before her consciousness blurred, Innocent Miao vaguely saw a tall, vast, mysterious silhouette sitting on a throne and looking down on her with scorn and disdain. They looked just like an untouchable god looking down on a puny ant crawling in the dirt below.

The silhouette tapped their throne lightly, and her headspace abruptly collapsed into nothing. With that, her consciousness sank into a sea of chaos.

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Innocent Miao and the young man's battle might feel long in words, but in reality, it lasted only a dozen or so breaths.

On one hand, Innocent Miao summoned twin dragons at the young man, transforming a water droplet into a roaring river, and manifested dragons from the very same river. On the other hand, the young man punched again, and again, and again. His technique was so basic one could barely call it a technique. Wang Shengkui and his men had seen street hooligans who put up a fight that was more visually appealing than this.

That was the thing though. As grand as Innocent Miao's technique seemed, it was utterly dismantled by the young man's simple techniques. Before they knew it, Innocent Miao was on the run.

A short while later, the young man returned with an unconscious girl in his arms. It was none other than Innocent Miao. He descended from the skies smoothly like a living celestial.

After he landed, the young man threw Innocent Miao beneath the feet of the Dragonrider Mountain female disciple, Hanxue.

"Did... did you kill Elder Miao?"

Hanxue trembled involuntarily as she stared at her unconscious elder, but she still mustered the courage to look up and ask the question.

"Relax. She's still alive."

The young man said indifferently before adding, "Whether she can wake up is a different story though."

Hanxue was just about to sigh in relief when she heard the strange remark. What did he mean by that?

“What did you do?”

“Not much. I just scoured her mind and accidentally damaged it a little,” the young man replied indifferently.

“You scoured her mind?! How... how could you...” Hanxue trembled with shock and disbelief.

Wang Shengkui and his people’s hearts skipped a beat as well. Soul scouring was considered a heretical technique, which was why the warriors of major clans and the orthodox factions rarely used them. A practitioner of the Dark Ways had no such qualms, however. Could the young man really be a heartless, blood-soaked murderer despite his clean appearance?

Had they just jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire?

“You didn’t try to slaughter those men, so you may leave.”

The young man paid Hanxue’s shock no heed whatsoever. “Take her with you. It’s up to her whether she wakes up again.”

Hanxue wanted to say something, but as soon as she met the young man’s eyes, a surge of indescribable terror suddenly paralyzed her mouth. In the end, she was unable to voice her doubt and anger.

A moment of silence later, Hanxue wrestled her fear back into the confines of her heart and glanced at her seniors. “What... What about my senior brothers and sisters?”

“Oh, them? They may leave too—if you don’t think they’re too heavy,” the young man chuckled.

“What... What do you mean by that?” A bad feeling punched right through the mental defenses she just constructed.

“What I mean... is that they’re already dead,” said the young man as he waved his hand. As if on cue, Tong Chuan and everyone else abruptly collapsed to the ground.

He had wiped out all of their consciousness in one gesture.

Chapter 608: A Warmth And Beauty Worth Striving For

“You...”

All the blood drained away from Hanxue’s face. She looked as pale as a ghost right now.

“What, you don’t want to leave? I mean, I certainly wouldn’t mind the company if you don’t.” The young man observed Hanxue curiously as the corners of his lips curled up into a devilish smirk. “So? How do you want to depart to the afterlife?”

“Ahhhhh!”

It was as if the young man’s smile was the scariest thing in the world. Unable to hold back her fear any longer, Hanxue screamed and fell right on top of her butt. Then, caring naught for her

embarrassing appearance or attire, she grabbed Innocent Miao and ran away faster than she ever had in her life.

The young man watched Hanxue a little before chuckling. "Oh right! Please inform your head that I may personally pay Dragonrider Mountain a visit in the next couple days."

Hanxue visibly trembled, but she did not say anything. She simply ran faster.

After Hanxue was completely gone, the young man finally turned around and looked at Wang Shengkui and the others. "Now, it's your turn."

"Th... Thank you for s-saving us, senior. We are infinitely grateful for your timely rescue." Wang Shengkui swallowed and asked carefully, "H-How would you like us to repay the favor? We will see it done even if it costs us a thousand deaths."

Wang Shengkui was being very, very cautious. The last thing he wanted was to trigger the young man into smiting them all in one punch.

Although the young man had saved their lives, who knows what the hell he was plotting? Everyone knows that a demonic warrior acted entirely based on their whims. They could speak with you like an old friend for one moment and kill you the next. Innocent Miao was the prime example of that.

"Oh? You will give me a thousand deaths? Well, I see no reason to turn down such a generous offer."

The young man smiled, and everyone broke out in cold sweat. For a few seconds, no one dared to say anything, and everyone was prepared to die.

Suddenly, the young man barked out a short laugh before waving his hand. "Haha! If only you could see the looks on your faces. I was just joking. You may leave as well."

"W-What?"

Wang Shengkui and the others couldn't quite process the young man's words. Just a moment ago, they were reading to fall on their knees and beg for mercy. Hell, some of them were just waiting for the young man to kill them. In any case, this was *not* the outcome they expected.

Did I hear wrong, or is he toying with us?

The same thought more or less crossed everyone's mind. It was also why no one dared to make a move for a time.

"What's wrong? Is the Celestial Spring so attractive to you, or do you want to keep those dead men company?" The young man glanced at the dead Dragonrider Mountain disciples in jest.

"No, of course not!"

"Thank you, senior. We shall take our leave immediately."

"Thank you for saving our lives, senior."

Sun Bo, Uncle Qi and more jolted back to reality and hurriedly gave their thanks. Then, they grabbed their stuff and horses as quickly as they could and prepared to leave.

When Uncle Qi looked back and saw that Wang Shengkui was still standing at the same spot, he urged, "C'mon, boss. We don't want to disturb senior any longer, do we?"

Wang Shengkui hesitated for a moment as he stared at the little Stranger currently held in the young man's hand. After a moment of hesitation, he ultimately gritted his teeth and clasped his hands together in salute. "Thank you for saving our lives, senior. We shan't disturb your peace any longer."

With that, Wang Shengkui turned away and did not look at the little Stranger again. If he did, he was afraid that he would lose control and beg the young man to release the little Stranger again.

He wasn't afraid of trouble. He didn't fear death either. However, he had already risked his brothers and sisters' lives once and nearly paid the ultimate price for it.

He simply couldn't repeat the same mistake again.

That was why he left swiftly and decisively. He was afraid that he would change his mind if he slowed down even a little.

Even so, Wang Shengkui had made up his mind to return to the Celestial Spring and speak to the young man after he escorted his brothers and sisters to safety.

He and his daughter owed the little Stranger their lives. That favor alone was worth a thousand deaths.

He just hoped he wouldn't be too late.

No. He would return in time.

.....

Inside the Dragon Subjugating Net, the little Stranger neither struggled nor kicked up a fuss. It simply stared at the departing group with happiness, yearning, reluctance, calm, peace, loneliness...

It was as if the little Stranger was an old man. It had seen almost everything there was to see in the red dust, and when it looked back, it was all alone.

The young man lifted the little Stranger to eye level and asked smilingly, "What's wrong? Do you miss him? Or are you disappointed that he didn't linger and beg for your release?"

The little Stranger did not answer him, of course. It continued to stare at the group's backs just like it had witnessed the departure of so, so many others.

Its eyes remained pure, however. They looked like purified pools that were fully cleansed of the world's taint. Just looking into its eyes was enough to set one at ease, though that very same purity also caused a painful twinge in one's heart.

"My name is Ye Qing, little one. What is your name?"

The young man was, naturally, Ye Qing. Five days ago, he departed Bei You on New Year's Day and journeyed north. He had no set path or plan in his mind. He allowed his heart to carry him

wherever it led him to. That was how he encountered the Celestial Spring and the little Stranger by accident.

He was washing his face by the Celestial Spring when he first saw the little Stranger. He was on the shore, and the little Stranger was in the waters. Its head poking out of the water surface, it had watched him with bright, clear eyes and a joyous expression.

The little Stranger was invisible at the time, and most people could not perceive him. Ye Qing could only because his spirit was much stronger than most. He couldn't feel any malice from the little Stranger, so he pretended that he hadn't seen it.

When he was washing his face, the little Stranger would float on the water and watch him in silence.

When he was drinking from the spring, it would shake its legs lightly and cause ripples on the water surface, giggling.

When he sat down underneath a tree and ate his rations, it would follow him to the shore and hop around him, laughing.

When he was cultivating, the little Stranger would sit beside him and copy his posture, meditating.

When he was sleeping, the little Stranger would climb to the tree on top of his head and swing its legs, chasing away the insects that might disturb his sleep.

When he got ready to leave the next day, the little Stranger looked crestfallen and sad.

And when he made a surprise return, the little Stranger grew so excited that it purposely rolled across the waters and caused even bigger ripples.

It was like he was its friend. It was pleasantly surprised when he appeared and saddened by his departure.

Yes, this friend couldn't see or even feel it.

Even so, just seeing him was enough to satisfy it.

Later, a group of traveling merchants arrived at Celestial Spring and stayed the night.

He discovered that the little Stranger enjoyed the noise and activity and loved listening to the interesting stories of the *jianghu* including its own.

When the people drank and fooled around, the little Stranger would watch them by the shore and laugh at their antics.

When someone brought up an interesting story, the little Stranger would hang by the shore and listen in silence.

And when they finally left, the little Stranger would watch their backs with a forlorn look in their eyes. When they were gone, it would float on the spring and allow it to carry it wherever, ripples spreading across the water surface.

This was probably its usual activity whenever the Celestial Spring was devoid of people. It would lie on the waters and watch the clouds until the next traveler or group arrived.

Day after day. Year after year.

It did not exist in the vicissitudes of life of a human, but still, it was touched by them.

For the past few days, Ye Qing had witnessed the little Stranger's joy, sorrow, and loneliness.

It was happy, but it was lonely.

It was free, but it was helpless.

It was beautiful, but it was sad.

One thing for certain, it was a kind of warmth and beauty that was worth striving for. Always.

#### Chapter 609: Unwilling To Wait

This was why he stayed at Celestial Spring for so long. It was to keep the little Stranger company if only for a little while.

Unfortunately for them, the little Stranger seemed to have noticed their malice as well. It rarely left the Celestial Spring, and even if it did, it took care to walk around them. As a result, Innocent Miao and her group wasted a whole day trying and failing miserably to capture it.

The only reason they succeeded in the end was because Innocent Miao exploited the little Stranger's kindness and used herself as bait.

Speaking of which, the reason Ye Qing did not stop Innocent Miao immediately was one, he wanted to know what they planned to do with the little Stranger, and two, to teach the little Stranger a small lesson.

After all, he could protect it for a time, but he could not protect it forever.

He had thought of taking the little Stranger with him, but he quickly gave up the idea. For one, the little Stranger might not be willing to go with him. Two, he was hardly going on an idyllic, relaxing adventure. He knew full well that there was a high chance he might die during this journey, and his act of kindness might very well doom the little Stranger as well.

Finally, the little Stranger was a kind, innocent soul. He did not think it would be the best idea to expose it to the cruelties and filthiness of the world.

Sure, the little Stranger would be lonely and sad at the Celestial Spring, but compared to the million other worse tragedies out there, it was almost a blessing and a kindness. Ye Qing resolved to spend some time with the little Stranger if he managed to come back alive.

In any case, this was why he didn't rescue it from Innocent Miao's clutches immediately. It would be terribly sad if it did not live long enough for him to return. As horrible as it might be, the lesson would teach the little Stranger to be wiser, and it would survive the guile of men long enough for him to return.

On a related note, he hadn't planned on killing Innocent Miao and her men at the beginning. Tempted he might be, he only wanted to teach them a harsh lesson in reality. It wasn't until they treated the little Stranger and Wang Shengkui the way they did that he actually indulged his impulse.

He had killed Tong Chuan and the others to take revenge for the little Stranger, but he had left the mastermind and cruelest villain of them all, Innocent Miao, alive. That was because he wanted to use her as a warning to Dragonrider Mountain.

As for why he scoured Innocent Miao's soul, that was to dig up information regarding Dragonrider Mountain and see if they were strong or not. If they weren't, then he didn't mind paying Dragonrider Mountain a visit. He would be able to hone his strength and take revenge for the little Stranger, effectively killing two birds with one stone.

As for Hanxue, he didn't kill her because one, he needed someone to bring the message back to Dragonrider Mountain, and two, she was the only person out of everyone in the group who harbored good will toward the little Stranger.

It was also why he let her leave without harming a hair on her person.

If Innocent Miao was a representative of the malice of humankind, then Wang Shengkui was the opposite.

Wang Shengkui was willing to throw away his pride and even his life for a Stranger. To say that he was impressed would be an understatement. He knew he would never be able to lower himself like Wang Shengkui had, and for that, he held only the utmost respect for the man.

But of course, he did not envy Wang Shengkui like Innocent Miao. One of the worst things one could do in life was to envy another's goodness with their malice.

Goodness and sincerity were some of the most beautiful qualities in this world. They should be cherished, not envied or destroyed.

Ye Qing knew deep down that he did not possess either quality, but he could at least strive toward it.

One should always face toward the light.

After Ye Qing surfaced from his thoughts, he looked at the little Stranger still trapped inside the Dragon Subjugating Net and teased, "I saved your life, you know. Shouldn't you at least offer me your thanks?"

When the little Stranger did not respond, Ye Qing shrugged and opened up the net. He gently placed it on the ground next to the net and patted its tiny head.

"You can go home now, little one. Make sure you don't fall for a ploy like that ever again."

It was only now the little Stranger seemingly jolted back to reality. It abruptly disappeared and reappeared inside the Celestial Spring.

Right now, it was completely hidden under the water. Only its single lotus leaf was floating on the water surface. No one would even notice the lotus leaf if they weren't paying attention, not to mention the pair of eyes hidden beneath it.

The pair of clear, pure eyes were currently examining Ye Qing with doubt and puzzlement. While harboring equally clean thoughts in his mind, Ye Qing slowly made his way to the shore and said to the little Stranger, "Don't worry. I won't capture you. Instead, do you want to be friends?"

The little Stranger's eyes lit up, and its submerged head slowly rose out of the water. Its cute, round eyes seemed to be shining with happiness.

"I'll take your silence as a yes. Since we're friends now, I have a gift for you. I hope you would enjoy it."

Ye Qing produced a small bottle of Nature's Water from his Nature's Shell. It was also his last bottle.

The Nature's Water was a priceless treasure for both humans and Strangers, so he thought it would be useful for the little Stranger as well.

"I'm leaving it here. Feel free to take it whenever you want."

Ye Qing placed the bottle at the lakeshore before rising to his feet. He then said with gentle eyes, "I'm leaving now, little one. Take care."

A hint of loneliness and sorrow flickered in the little Stranger's eyes when it heard this.

"Don't worry. I will return," Ye Qing assured it. "My name is Ye Qing. Ye for Leaf, and Qing for Green. I look forward to our reunion."

With that, Ye Qing waved his hand and took off toward the sunset.

Inside the Celestial Spring, after Ye Qing was completely out of sight, the little Stranger finally swam over to the bottle that was almost as large as its own head and hugged it tight against its chest. Then, a crisp, melodious giggle that warmed the soul broke the silence.

The little Stranger was very happy today. For the first time in a very, very long time, it finally met someone who could see it and was willing to speak with it.

It was also the first time in a long time that someone had given him a gift and asked to become friends with it.

That was why it was very, very happy.

However, its happiness soon devolved into sorrow. After all, the new friend it just made was leaving.

He said he would return, but it did not know if he would.

A long, long time ago, the man who created this spring and left him here also promised that he would return one day. He promised that he would take him on a journey, show him all the mountains and rivers the world had to offer, bask in the soothing rays of dawn and sunset, and even pluck the moon from the nine heavens.

That was why the little Stranger stayed at the Celestial Spring every day. It was because it hoped that one of the travelers who visited the spring would be the man he was waiting for so, so long, and it was unwilling to leave even for a moment for fear of missing the man.

But despite its long wait, the man never returned.

Was it because the man had forgotten about him? Was it because he had found a new friend? Or was it because he was delayed by something?

It did not know, but it knew it was very sad and lonely.

Still, it finally met someone who was willing to speak with him, give him gifts, and become its friend, so it wasn't all bad.

But now, its new friend was leaving as well.

Sure, its new friend promised that he would come back to see it, but would he really keep his promise? Or would he forget about him and their promise like the one before?

The little Stranger thought long and hard. In the end, it held the bottle tight, jumped out of the water, and chased after its new friend.

Many, many years ago, it had simply watched its friend leave, and its friend had never returned.

This time, it was going to leave with its new friend. This way, it wouldn't have to wait anymore.

It would travel together with its new friend and search for its old friend.

It had waited long enough.

This time, it wouldn't wait anymore.

Chapter 610: Both Man and Stranger, Walking Toward The Light

"Eh? Why did you come, little one? Oh, are you here to see me off?"

As before, Ye Qing had no particular destination in mind when he left the Celestial Spring. He simply picked a random direction and took off.

Just a short while later, he suddenly sensed something and looked behind him. He immediately saw the little Stranger standing beneath a tree and watching him, the bottle of Nature's Water pressed tightly against his chest.

Ye Qing's feelings improved immediately after he spotted the little Stranger. The little Stranger too giggled when it heard his words.

"Well, you've seen me off. You can go home now," said Ye Qing with a chuckle.

"Hahaha..."

Still giggling, the little Stranger shook its head and ignored the request.

"What's wrong? Do you miss me already? Don't worry, I promise I'll come back and visit you once I'm done with my business. It won't take long at all."

Ye Qing waved his hand. "You really should go home now. Goodbye!"

However, he had just taken a few steps when he realized that the little Stranger hadn't left. In fact, it was following right behind him.

This time, Ye Qing looked back with a frown and added some steel into his voice. "Be a good boy and go home, okay?"

"Hahaha..."

However, the little Stranger simply laughed happily in response.

Helpless, Ye Qing had no choice but to feign anger. “Seriously, don’t follow me any longer. If not, I’m going to get angry.”

As he said this, he pushed off the ground and disappeared like an illusion. When he reappeared the next moment, he was ten meters away from his original position. A couple of blinks later, he was completely gone.

However, Ye Qing had dashed just a hundred meters or so when he stopped again, a helpless expression on his face. He looked right and watched as the little Stranger crawled out from behind a rock while carrying the bottle of Nature’s Water on the lotus leaf on its head, giggling.

Ye Qing was starting to feel frustrated, but how could he vent against the cute little Stranger?

“What on earth do you want, little one?”

Ye Qing sighed. The little Stranger might look cute and harmless, but it was clear that it was no ordinary Stranger. For starters, it could turn invisible and become undetectable to most people. Second, it was apparently well-versed not just in the ways of the water, but also the earth. Earlier, he had pushed “Illusionist’s Grace” to its limits and even used his demonic thought to conceal his energies. Despite this, the little Stranger still caught up to him effortlessly.

As of now, it was unlikely he would be able to shake off the little Stranger.

Ye Qing slowly stepped toward the little Stranger, but it immediately ducked behind the rock. So, he stopped. A moment later, after confirming that Ye Qing hadn’t come any closer, he crawled up again and sat on top of the rock. It swayed left and right and giggled while still carrying the bottle on its head.

“Do you want to come with me?”

Ye Qing watched the little Stranger and said slowly, “Normally, I wouldn’t say no to such a fine companion, but the place I’m headed to this time is very, very dangerous. If you come with me, you would be in danger as well.”

The little Stranger seemed to understand his words. It shook its head—the bottle on its head wobbling unsteadily as well, but never falling—as if to say that it wasn’t afraid.

“No seriously, the place I’m headed to is extremely dangerous.” Ye Qing’s heart softened a little. “Be a good boy and stay at Celestial Spring for now, okay? If you still wish to follow me when I come back, then I’ll take you with me. What do you say?”

The little Stranger did not respond. It continued to sway left and right on the rock.

“I’ll take your silence as a yes,” Ye Qing said before trying to walk away again. But once again, the little Stranger stubbornly followed him after he had just taken a few steps.

If he moved slowly, then the little Stranger would move slowly. If he moved quickly, then it would move quickly as well. It always hovered about ten meters away from him, and it was always able to keep pace with him no matter what he tried.

Finally, Ye Qing looked back and said in a harsh tone, "If you can understand my words, then I'm going to say this one more time. Don't follow me, or we aren't friends anymore."

On a tree branch, the giggling Stranger suddenly stopped giggling altogether. Even its movements had frozen for a second. Then, its crescent-shaped eyes lost their brightness as if they were overcast by black clouds, leaving behind only loneliness and sorrow.

A cool breeze blew through the area. The sky was huge, the earth was vast, and the red dust was as infinite as it was complex. But right now, none of it had to do with the little Stranger.

All it had was loneliness, despair, and sorrow.

Ye Qing turned away and walked toward the distance, and this time the little Stranger did not follow him. It simply sat forlornly on the tree branch, silent and sad.

A few steps later, Ye Qing heaved out a deep sigh and stopped in his tracks once more. Then, he looked back at the little Stranger and said, "If you really want to come with me, then come. How can I say no to a friend?"

On the branch, the little Stranger's eyes lit up instantly. They slowly curved back into crescents, and its giggles were so loud that it resounded throughout the area.

Ye Qing couldn't help but smile brightly when he heard its smile as well.

"I can't always call you little one. Since you like giggling, I think I'll call you Giggle[1]."

Ye Qing smiled at the little Stranger giggling and swaying back and forth on the tree branch and declared, "C'mon! Let's explore this world together!"

The little Stranger jumped off the tree branch and followed him happily.

And so a pair of big and small men journeyed toward the horizon amidst a chorus of laughter.

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"Are you tired, Giggle? Do you want a drink?"

On top of a sand dune, Ye Qing was sitting crosslegged and wetting his throat with a sip of wine.

A few breaths later, Giggle crawled out of the sand next to Ye Qing and tried to copy Ye Qing's posture, the bottle of Nature's Water still sitting on its head. However, it fell sideways the moment it tried this because its legs were too short. The failure did not annoy it though. It simply laughed brightly and continued about its business.

A few seconds later, Giggle leaned over to Ye Qing's side and took a sniff. Then, it gave him a nod. So, Ye Qing poured it a cup of wine.

The wine he was currently drinking was a type of fruit wine with very little alcohol in it. It was sweet, fragrant, and was safe even for children to drink, much less a Stranger.

The wine cup was small, but for Giggle, it was practically the size of a basin.

Giggle took a tentative sip. When it decided that it liked the taste, its eyes curved into crescents, and it began guzzling down the wine earnestly.

Once done, it set down the cup and let out a huge burp. Its reddish face looked extremely cute to say the least.

“Alright. Let’s continue.”

Ye Qing climbed up to his feet and stepped into the vast, boundless desert in front of him. Giggie also got up and followed right behind him.

Originally, Ye Qing wanted to keep Giggie on his shoulder or inside his Dragon Nursing Nest.

Naturally, he had procured the Dragon Nursing Nest from Innocent Miao. It was a Phenomenon-class Strange Artifact, and he saw no reason to waste it.

The Dragon Nursing Nest was a Strange Artifact the Dragonrider Mountain used to nurture and strengthen a Stranger. Therefore, its internal space could be used to store living creatures such as Giggie.

Giggie did not like staying inside the Dragon Nursing Nest though. It preferred to walk with him.

At first, Ye Qing was sure that Giggie would grow tired after a while. After all, its legs were many, many times shorter than his despite its speed. He was wrong, however. Not only did Giggie manage to keep up with him, its stamina was greater as well. Like a human child, the trek that wore even him down did not seem to affect it in the slightest. In the end, Ye Qing decided to leave Giggie to its own devices.

The desert ahead of them was named the Blackwind Desert[2] It neither belonged to Chu nor Yan. It was a neutral, ownerless territory that both countries shared.

Blackwind Desert was quite the famous landscape. It was known to Yan and Chu when the Tea and Horse Road was still prospering.

It wasn’t because of anything good though. It was infamous because it was dangerous and haunted by many strange phenomena.

As its name implied, Blackwind Desert was often beset by black sandstorms. Whenever a storm appeared, yellow sand would cover the sky, and the world would darken to the point it almost felt like nighttime.

That wasn’t all. Whenever a black sandstorm appeared, there was a chance the Blackwind Army might appear, and they crushed everything that was unfortunate enough to stand in their way.