

Stranger 701

Chapter 701: Dead Sage

“Did you two find anything? Are there any clues as to where we are right now?”

At the village entrance, Ye Qing asked Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth directly after meeting up with them.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t find anything.” Pedant Earth shook his head.

“I didn’t find anything either,” Shangguan Hongjin replied. “But I’m sure it is tied to the Dark Overlord, Li Hentian.”

“And why do you say that, Miss Shangguan?” Ye Qing narrowed his eyes a little.

“Tsk. I think we’re past pretenses at this point, aren’t we? A bloodbath is taking place outside, and it’s all to obtain the Dark Overlord Tokens. You wouldn’t believe how much effort it took me to get one and slip into the Death Sea before anyone can stop me. In any case, this place must have something to do with the Dark Overlord. With luck, it might even be the place where the Dark Overlord’s inheritance is buried.”

Shangguan Hongjin crossed his arms and let out a cold chuckle. “Don’t tell me you came in without knowing anything. I won’t believe a word of it.”

“Haha... you’re right.” Pedant Earth coughed. He and Six Fingers too stole a Dark Overlord Token each during the chaos and entered this place.

“A bloodbath, huh?” Ye Qing raised an eyebrow, though he wasn’t surprised to hear this. Even before he entered the Death Sea, signs of chaos and disorder were already beginning to rear their ugly heads. If he wasn’t mistaken, the secret of the Dark Overlord Tokens and the Dark Overlord’s inheritance had already spread far and wide. With that in mind, it was no wonder that a bloodbath was taking place outside.

“So, you’re both here for the Dark Overlord’s inheritance?”

“Yes and no,” Shangguan Hongjin replied honestly. “I don’t need to tell you what a man the Dark Overlord Li Hentian was. Of course I would like to get my hands on his inheritance.”

“That said, I’m also well aware of my limits. The queue of people who are more qualified than me to receive the Dark Overlord’s inheritance is probably longer than a river, and I know better than to dream of the impossible. The reason I came here is one, to satisfy my curiosity, and two, to get lucky. The meat of this adventure will surely go to the bigshots, but even the soup that leaked through their fingers will be enough to satisfy me.”

“You’re a helluva woman, Miss Shangguan,” Ye Qing praised her from the bottom of his heart. He too had more or less the same idea.

“Hah! No need to lick my boots, warrior. I’d much rather you call me a small fry who’s self-aware.” Shangguan Hongjin snorted. “You though, you’re not here just for the soup, aren’t you?”

Ye Qing smiled. “It is as you say, Miss Shangguan. Everyone dreams of becoming the one to obtain the Dark Overlord’s inheritance. I would not mind it one bit if it fell into my lap, but if not, then I wouldn’t cry over it or risk my life for it either.”

“Haha! I like that we are of the same mind. Would you like to continue our cooperation? This place is quite dangerous, and one misstep may result in tragedy. If we work together, we can mitigate the risks considerably.”

Shangguan Hongjin was also smiling. “As for whether we can obtain or even catch a glimpse of the Dark Overlord’s inheritance, there’s no point thinking about it until we reach that point, am I right?”

Her decision to continue her cooperation with Ye Qing hadn’t been made on a whim. One, Ye Qing was incredibly strong; so strong that even she couldn’t quite fathom his depths. Two, his behavior and conduct so far suggested that he wasn’t a villain or a two-faced bastard. Of course, that could change in the future, but for now, she didn’t mind working together with him.

“Sure! I see no problems with that.” Ye Qing nodded. Two heads are better than one after all. He then turned to Pedant Earth and asked, “What about you, senior? What are your plans?”

“I’m well aware that my strength is lacking, but thankfully, my knowledge and experience should make up for it to a certain extent. If you don’t mind my meager contribution, then of course I’m willing to make your acquaintance,” Pedant Earth replied in a hurry.

“You are too humble, senior. It is our honor to have your aid,” Ye Qing said smilingly.

“Thank you, warrior. Thank you, Miss Shangguan.”

Pedant Earth said gratefully, “Also, please don’t address me as senior, warrior. I do not believe I am unworthy. Instead, just address me by my name or Mr. Earth for short. That is how all my dao friends address me.”

“Very well. I shall address you as Mr. Earth from now on,” Ye Qing readily accepted Pedant Earth’s suggestion.

“As you wish, warrior. Hahaha!” Pedant Earth laughed.

“Are we done with the pleasantries? Good. Now, where should we go next?” Shangguan Hongjin interrupted.

“I don’t know either.” Ye Qing shook his head before looking at Pedant Earth. “You’re a master in the arts of fengshui and the like, right Mr. Earth? Can you please show us the way?”

“I can’t promise results, but I will give it my one hundred percent,” Pedant Earth answered affirmatively.

Pedant Earth knew very well that he was lacking in the combat department compared to his two companions. The only value he possessed was his unique wealth of knowledge and fengshui arts. It wasn’t everyday he got the chance to prove his worth, so of course he was going to give it his all.

First, Pedant Earth sought out a high ground. Then, he produced a circular *luopan*[1] and pressed a finger to its center. The *luopan* immediately glowed blue and conjured a fengshui geomancy diagram of the five elements and eight trigrams.

The wind blew, and the clouds gathered. The diagram kept changing and producing all sorts of profound images. To put it simply, the diagram was identifying the good and bad directions based on the theory of fengshui.

After he identified a direction, Pedant Earth put away the *luopan* and purified his eyes with a spirit talisman. His left eyeball turned as black as ink, whereas his right eyeball turned as white as paper. He then gazed toward the distance.

This was a visual art Pedant Earth cultivated known as the Qi Identifying Art. It allowed him to see the “faces” of the mountains and rivers, recognize the way the winds and waters are flowing, and observe the currents of the six qi.

“Argh!”

Suddenly, Pedant Earth let out a bloodcurdling scream and staggered backward. Blood began pouring profusely out of his eye sockets.

“Are you alright?!”

Ye Qing and Shangguan Hongjin hurriedly stepped forward and supported the old man.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

It took a while before Pedant Earth finally managed to open his eyes. However, his eyes were red and swollen, and the blood vessels inside his pupils were damaged and bleeding.

Pedant Earth searched around his bag for a bit before pulling out a wooden basin. The wooden basin was empty, but when he placed it on the ground, a bowl of clear water brimming with spiritual qi suddenly manifested out of nowhere.

Pedant Earth did not hesitate to wash his eyes with the water. A few breaths later, he finally looked up from the bowl and heaved a sigh of relief.

His eyes were still swollen, and his eyeballs were covered in red blood vessels. They looked better than they were before though.

“Are you alright?” Ye Qing asked concernedly.

“I’m alright. Thanks for your concern, warrior.” Pedant Earth saluted him.

“What happened?” Shangguan Hongjin asked next.

Pedant Earth hesitated for a moment before answering, “I saw a cloud of purple qi to the northeast.”

“Purple qi? I thought that’s an auspicious sign? Why are your eyes bleeding if that is the case?” Shangguan Hongjin sounded puzzled.

“And you are right. Purple qi is a sign of auspiciousness and nobility. However, there lies grave danger within that purple qi. It was just a blurry image, but I saw... the silhouette of a great Sage.”

“A Sage?!” Both Ye Qing and Shangguan Hongjin’s eyes widened.

“Correct. It was definitely a Sage.”

A tremor entered Pedant Earth’s voice when he recalled something. “However, this Sage... does not have a head.”

“If I have to make a guess, I reckon that a Sage had died at that place.”

“A *dead* Sage?”

Ye Qing and Shangguan Hongjin exchanged glances with one another. They could both see the shock and disbelief in each other’s eyes.

A Sage was someone who had transcended mortality and entered sagehood. They were what people called a “celestial-on-earth” or “living celestials”. They represented the pinnacle of cultivation under the heavens, and they possessed the power to pluck stars out of the sky, move mountains, and fill seas with a mere gesture. It was why they were treated like gods and celestials.

Of course, as godlike as their power seemed, a Sage was ultimately no god or celestial. It was because a Sage could age and die, and suffer tribulations and accidents just like any other human. It was just that they were so hard to kill that the large majority of Sages died of natural causes.

However, Pedant Earth was telling them that a Sage had died in these lands. Not only that, the Sage had not died because of old age. They were murdered. Their missing head was proof of that.

Chapter 702: The Dance of Death Beneath a Moon of Blood

“Say, do you think that that Sage could be the Dark Overlord, Li Hentian?”

A few breaths later, Shangguan Hongjin licked her lips and voiced her thoughts.

“Impossible!”

However, Ye Qing shook his head decisively and declared without hesitation, “Don’t you know who the Dark Overlord is? There is no way he could’ve died in such a manner!”

Pedant Earth echoed in agreement. “I don’t believe that the dead Sage is the Dark Overlord either.”

“If that isn’t the Dark Overlord, then who?” Shangguan Hongjin asked doubtfully.

“And who beheaded them? Could it be the Dark Overlord’s handiwork?”

“That is a question none of us is capable of answering right now,” Ye Qing replied. “There is a simple solution though. We can just go there and find out the truth ourselves. So? Are you guys up for it?”

Shangguan Hongjin answered excitedly, “Of course I am! It’s a Sage, man! A dead Sage no less! This would be the first time I ever see one, and there’s no way I’m going to let this opportunity slip past me!”

Pedant Earth also nodded after a careful deliberation. “A land where a Sage has fallen is rife with unimaginable fortune and opportunities. Since we are lucky enough to stumble upon it, I see no reason to pass it by.”

“It seems we are all in agreement. However, I must still warn you both about something. Yes, the place of death of a Sage is rife with fortune and opportunities, but equally, it must be rife with dangers and tribulations as well. If we head there, we may not live to see another day.”

Ye Qing looked at the duo seriously and asked, “Are you sure about this decision?”

“Of course I’m sure. There is nothing to think about,” Shangguan Hongjin answered without hesitation.

“Thank you for the warning, warrior. This old man promises to act with caution,” Pedant Earth too replied with a salute.

“Alright then. Let’s go!” Ye Qing nodded and did not say anything else.

After they left the village, the trio departed toward the place of death of the Sage as per Pedant Earth’s advice.

“It’s getting dark. Are we approaching night already?”

It hadn’t been long after they left the village when the sky began to darken. It had only been five or six hours since they entered this place. If this was outside, it would still be pretty bright at this hour. This seemed to suggest that the time of this place was different from the outside world.

Darkness quickly overtook them. A moment ago, the sky was still bright and sunny. Just a teatime later, both heaven and earth had become as red as fire and losing light by the minute.

As the world submerged into darkness, the anomalies began surfacing one after another.

In the sky, the clouds were changing far more rapidly than a normal cloud would. There were also female celestials dancing in the sky.

On the ground, shadows shivered and squirmed unnaturally as if they were concealing deadly predators.

In the forest, the trees swayed back and forth like demons and monsters were having fun with one another.

Behind the fog, ghastly whistles that sounded like weeping Strangers pierced both the ears and the heart.

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The atmosphere grew anomalous, incomprehensible, oppressive and chaotic.

If daytime was the time where the demons fell aslumber, then night time was the time where they all awoke and came out to play.

“Be on your guard,” Ye Qing warned his companions as he stared intently at the changing sky. Somehow, he could sense a sliver of malice and hatred from the world around them.

Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth muttered affirmative responses. They wouldn’t have dared to lower their guard even if Ye Qing hadn’t said anything.

“Look. The moon’s out.”

Despite the increasingly anomalous environment, the trio were able to continue their journey without any accidents. Although there were still crimson streaks in the sky, the ground was already fully submerged in darkness. At the same time, a red crescent burst out of the clouds.

“A red moon? Its color looks like blood, and its shape a scythe. It’s an evil omen of the Nine Fiends and Evils,” Pedant Earth said darkly while staring at the red crescent in the sky.

The crescent was so red it looked as if it was covered in blood. Even its light felt thick and sticky as it dyed both heaven and earth blood red. Ye Qing did not need Pedant Earth’s expert opinion to know that it was an inauspicious sign.

The red clouds surrounding the crescent were especially terrifying. Usually, orange red clouds were quite beautiful and welcoming to look at. It was also treated as a sign of auspiciousness and jubilation. The fact that there were female celestials dancing in the sky only added to their beauty.

After the red crescent rose to the sky though, it was as if the clouds were drenched in blood. They became dark and oppressive to look at. The female celestials no longer looked as gentle and attractive as before either. Now wearing savage smiles on their faces and weeping blood, they now danced a different kind of dance under the blood moon. It was bewitching, seductive, and demonic.

Despite knowing full well how dangerous Anomalies could be, for whatever reason, Ye Qing could not stop himself from staring at the dancing celestials.

Before he knew it, he was so immersed in the dance that he began dancing under the moon as well.

It wasn’t just him. Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth were dancing as well. In fact, everyone who saw the blood moon or the dancing celestials was dancing to their heart’s content.

Sometimes, Ye Qing would bend his body like a drawn warbow. Sometimes, he would twist his body round and round like a dough twist. And sometimes, he would stretch himself as straight as a spear.

His movements were flamboyant, exaggerated, horrifying, twisted, and evil. And yet, there was no denying that there was an indescribable beauty to it.

Ye Qing had never learned how to dance before, but as a warrior—a body-tempering warrior no less—his physical flexibility and tenacity were hundreds, no, thousands of times greater than your average dancer. As he continued to dance though, his skin began to look unnaturally flush. It was because his muscles were damaged, his blood was flowing in reverse, and his bones were breaking here and there.

If even Ye Qing was suffering, Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth could only do worse. Pedant Earth's limbs were broken, bent, or twisted in ways it should never have. Blood was seeping out of his pores and dyeing his shirt red. He looked like he had just been scooped out of a pool of blood.

In comparison, Shangguan Hongjin was doing better than him. She was stronger and, as a woman, naturally more flexible than him.

Even so, there was a limit as a matter of course. Just like her two companions, she was suffering from varying degrees of injuries, and a good number of her bones had been twisted or crushed by her movements.

Despite this, none of them seemed to notice the situation they were. They couldn't even feel the horrible pain that had to be afflicting their whole body right now. They continued to dance to the moon like their life depended on it.

Pedant Earth and Shangguan Hongjin were Half-Step Grandmasters, and Ye Qing was stronger than your average Grandmaster. Therefore, their injuries weren't fatal just yet. The same could not be said for many others who were under the same spell.

Some people had twisted their own necks.

Some people had broken their heads.

So people had broken every bone in their body.

Some people were still alive.

And some people were already dead.

And yet, they were still dancing, both the living and the dead. Everyone was dancing under the bloody moonlight.

It was the embodiment of soundless horror.

An indefinite amount of time later, Ye Qing's eyes abruptly turned as black as ink. His movement came to a sudden stop as well.

The next moment, light burst out of his eyes, and a powerful, earth-shaking shockwave swept out of his body. Finally, Ye Qing snapped back to reality.

He immediately realized that he was in terrible pain. Like a piece of cloth that had been twisted to the limit again and again, there was no part of his body that wasn't hurting like hell. He could not even begin to count the number of bones, veins, muscles and blood vessels he had broken.

Here's the scary part: he couldn't remember how he got these injuries. Not even a little. Thankfully, just because he was missing memories didn't mean he didn't know what had happened to him. After all, there were two live examples right in front of him.

Ye Qing quickly figured out the truth when he saw Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth performing a strange dance and squirting blood with every movement. From time to time, he could even hear one or multiple bones breaking. He was certain that the same thing had happened to him. Every time I thought this world had ceased to surprise me, it rolls up its sleeves and kicks me in the balls.

Now was not the time to bemoan how this fucking world had stolen another first from him though. If he did not act quickly, Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth were going to dance themselves to death.

Chapter 703: Speculation

Ye Qing rapped a finger against the space in front of him like he was knocking on the gates of heaven.

Demonic thought washed out gently and without a trace like spring wind or fine rain. It invaded Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth's headspace and transformed into an infinitely majestic shadow.

The shadow waved his head, and a powerful gale blew away the invisible, anomalous power gripping his two companions.

Strangely, the powerful gale did not leave even a scratch on the duo's Yin God. It was as if the gale had transformed into a harmless drizzle right before it would make contact with them.

When Ye Qing withdrew his finger, Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth broke out of their trance.

"Gasp! What the... it hurts..."

The second Shangguan Hongjin woke up, she immediately let out a cute cry and stumbled on her feet.

Pedant Earth did not even make a sound. He just slumped toward the ground like every bone in his body was shattered.

"What happened? Why am I injured from head to toe?" Shangguan Hongjin voiced her puzzlement while Ye Qing appeared next to Pedant Earth and caught him in a gentle but firm embrace. At the same time, he fed a healing pill into his mouth.

"Is he alright?" Shangguan Hongjin also noticed Pedant Earth's horrific appearance and asked worriedly.

"He's seriously injured, but he's not going to die. He just fainted is all." Ye Qing laid Pedant Earth against a tree and sighed.

Shangguan Hongjin let out a sigh of relief when she heard this. She too produced a healing pill from her Nature's Shell and consumed it.

Shangguan Hongjin gradually regained a healthy complexion after consuming the pill. Her injuries began healing bit by bit as well.

"What happened, warrior Ye? How did Pedant Earth and I turn out like this?"

“Would you believe me if I told you that it was due to dancing?” Ye Qing asked.

“Dancing?”

Shangguan Hongjin’s first thought was that Ye Qing was joking. After all, she had never heard of anyone dancing themselves to the point where they were bleeding from all orifices and breaking bones.

Even if something like that had happened in the past, she was not the dancing type. Not even close. She was perfectly fine with drinking, eating, fighting and killing. But dancing? Come on!

Besides, what about Pedant Earth? The guy looked like he was in his seventies or even eighties. Dancing would only hurt him at his age, not to mention that it would be a blight upon anyone’s eyes!

She quickly noticed that Ye Qing was wearing a serious expression, however. It did not look like he was joking.

“You’re serious? How come I don’t remember it at all?”

“I’m serious.” Ye Qing said seriously, “The reason we were all hurt is because we danced ourselves to the point of injury. It was a twisted, evil, exaggerated, and terrifying dance that defied human limits. Anyone who performed the dance would suffer massive injuries and eventually die.”

“That sounds like the dance the celestial women in the sky are performing!”

Shangguan Hongjin subconsciously looked up at the female celestials still dancing under the blood moon. “Are they the reason we suddenly started dancing for no reason?”

“Don’t look!”

Ye Qing stopped her immediately. “I suspect that the reason we suddenly entered a trance without knowing and started dancing to the moon is because we looked at them for too long. However, we should be fine so long as we don’t look at them!”

He knew this because he did not look at the blood moon or the dancing celestials again after he woke up. The fact that he did not fall into a trance again proved that his preventive measure was working.

“Are you sure?” Shangguan Hongjin asked.

“Well, no. It’s just a guess. It could be the blood moon that’s causing this.” Ye Qing speculated, “Earlier, all of us were staring at the blood moon and the dancing celestials before we fell into a trance. Therefore, it makes sense to deduce that one of these two things were the cause behind it.”

“However, the dance we performed was the exact same as the dancing celestials, so I’m inclined to believe that it’s the dancing celestials that induced us into a trance.”

“You can give it a try if you don’t believe me. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to wake you up as soon as my hypothesis is confirmed.”

“You’re going to make a girl take such a serious risk, man? Where is your shame?” Shangguan Hongjin rolled her eyes at him.

“It’s simple. If something happens to you, I can still save you. But you might not be able to save me if something happens to me!” Ye Qing answered honestly.

The power that induced them into a trance and made them dance to the moon was formless, undetectable, and extremely powerful. The moment someone fell into a trance, it was highly unlikely they would ever awake again.

Luckily for him, his Heavenly Demon Yin God was no ordinary Yin God. On top of that, he had been practicing the “Dream Butterfly True Scripture” for the past couple days and drastically improved his demonic thought as a result. Otherwise, he could not have snapped out of the trance on his own.

Shangguan Hongjin instinctively wanted to refute his statement, but when she really thought about it, she had to admit that Ye Qing was right. The young man had proven that he was able to awaken on his own and snap them out of their trance. On the other hand, she had zero confidence that she would be able to do the same thing for him.

“Forget it. I’d rather not risk it at all.”

Shangguan Hongjin waved him off before an interesting idea occurred to her. “How about we make Pedant Earth try it after he awakens? I’ve never seen an old man dance before, much less a dance like this one!”

“I didn’t know you’re this type of person, Shangguan Hongjin.”

Ye Qing shot her a surprised look. Rather than verifying if his speculation was correct, he was sure she just wanted to see Pedant Earth dance.

“Why are you looking at me like that? I’m sure you’ve had the same idea as me!” Shangguan Hongjin scoffed.

“Not at all!” Ye Qing declared without hesitation before adding, “I’ve already seen it earlier.”

“Tsk!” Shangguan Hongjin clicked her tongue unhappily, but she quickly perked up and stared at Ye Qing with pleading eyes, “You know, you’re the one I want to see performing a dance. I’m sure it would be far more interesting than Pedant Earth’s.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think you’ll ever get that chance.” Ye Qing shrugged.

“Hmm?”

Suddenly, Ye Qing raised an eyebrow and grabbed Pedant Earth. Right after he pulled the old man toward him, the tree he was leaning against suddenly split open at the center like a maw. Literally, there were rows and rows of sharp teeth inside the gap.

If Ye Qing hadn't detected the unusual activity and acted quickly, the tree might have consumed Pedant Earth alive.

Shangguan Hongjin's reaction was slower, but she followed up perfectly with a slash that cut the tree in half. As the tree collapsed, it returned back to normal.

"What was that?"

She was sure that the tree was just an ordinary tree. It was neither a Stranger nor a Stranger disguised as a tree. In reality, it had suddenly transformed into a man-eater and nearly ate Pedant Earth. She was confused to say the least.

Ye Qing was just as puzzled as her. This entire world had become a little stranger after the blood moon appeared. "I'm not sure. It could be because of the blood moon as well. Just be ready for anything."

"What... what happened to me?"

It was at this moment Pedant Earth finally awoke. The old man was severely injured to begin with, but Ye Qing had fed him a powerful healing pill that he bought back when he was at the Hill of Services. It was especially adept at treating physical injuries, restoring vigor, growing flesh and mending bones.

Although the unusual dance could kill it was carried out for too long, the good news was that it was all physical and did nothing to the mind. Thanks to Ye Qing's pill, most of Pedant Earth's injuries were already gone.

Chapter 704: The Footsteps Behind Them

"You were dancing just now."

Shangguan Hongjin crossed her arms and teased Pedant Earth.

"Excuse me? That's impossible!" Pedant Earth glanced at her in confusion. *I don't even know how to dance in the first place!*

"Nothing's impossible. It's why you're covered in wounds right now."

Shangguan Hongjin told him everything Ye Qing told her before concluding, "Long story short, you might have danced yourself to death if it wasn't for warrior Ye."

"Heavens..."

Pedant Earth was as pale as a ghost when he heard everything. Death would have claimed him, and he wouldn't even know until after the fact. He hurriedly saluted Ye Qing and said, "Thank you for saving my life, warrior. Just say the word if you ever need my help. I promise a thousand deaths to repay the favor you've done unto me."

"You're welcome. We are cooperating right now. It's only natural that we help each other in times of need," Ye Qing said gently before adding, "Now, go catch

some rest and recover your wounds. We'll resume our journey after you're better."

"As you command, warrior."

Pedant Earth immediately sat down on the ground and began healing his injuries. With the aid of Ye Qing's pill, it only took him an incense stick or so to recover most of his injuries. After that, the trio continued to trek toward the Sage's place of death.

Not long after they resumed their journey, the trio saw a man dancing his heart out.

He was a huge, muscular, thick-bearded man with a face that only a mother could love. It should not need to be said how weird it was for someone like him to dance to the moon.

That wasn't the weirdest part though. No, the weirdest part was the fact that the man was already dead.

That's right. The man was as dead as a dodo. His limbs, his spine, his neck, and every other part of his body were completely broken by his own doing, and his flesh and blood had long been deprived of all of their vitality. Despite this, he was still dancing to the moon as if it was his life's purpose.

It was a horrifying sight to say the least.

Is this what happened to us just now?!

Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth felt their scalps numbing as they exchanged a glance with each other. Having heard Ye Qing's description, they were mentally prepared for this scene to a certain extent. However, seeing was believing, and what they had imagined in their heads wasn't even a hundredth as spine-chilling as the real thing.

They were plenty grateful toward Ye Qing to begin with, but now? They were well and truly in his favor. If it wasn't for the young man, they could very well have followed in the footsteps of this unfortunate warrior.

Ye Qing observed the big man for a moment. Then, he walked over to him.

"Warrior Ye?"

Both Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth were surprised by his action. None of them knew what Ye Qing was planning to do.

Ye Qing ignored them and stopped about two steps away from the big man. Then, he reached out and sucked his Nature's Shell into his palm. Once done, Ye Qing nodded in satisfaction and went back to his companions.

"What are you doing, Warrior Ye?" Pedant Earth asked.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm looting." Ye Qing put away the Nature's Shell and said matter-of-factly, "He's already dead, so he won't be needing his possessions any longer. There's no reason to leave them to rot in this hellhole, is there?"

"I get it, but aren't you worried that it might trigger some sort of danger?" Pedant Earth asked. He understood Ye Qing's sentiment perfectly, but he wasn't willing to risk his life over some loot.

It's not paranoia if they're really out to get you, and this place was crazier than most.

"Relax. Nothing happened even when I snapped you out of your trance and saved you two. Therefore, looting a body should be perfectly safe," Ye Qing declared.

Pedant Earth mulled over his explanation for a moment. *Huh, it makes sense.*

"Come on."

Ye Qing circled around the big man and continued forward. Shangguan Hongjin shrugged and followed right behind him.

The big man was the first dancer they encountered, but he would not be the last. The trio would encounter many more people who were dancing to the moon, and without exception, every single one of them was dead.

At first, Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth were still afraid of the dancing corpses. However, they soon grew desensitized to it.

Their adaptation process was hastened by the fact that Ye Qing had claimed every single Nature's Shell for himself. In the end, the two warriors finally couldn't withstand the temptation any longer and joined in on the looting as well.

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Thud thud...

Thud thud...

Right now, Ye Qing, Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth were trekking swiftly through a forest. Ye Qing was the strongest, so he took the lead. Pedant Earth was the weakest, so he stayed in the middle, Shangguan Hongjin the rear.

The world illuminated by the blood moon was so silent that one could hear the drop of a pin. Even the sound of a tree branch cracking underneath their feet could probably be heard from a hundred meters away.

As they walked, Shangguan Hongjin suddenly stopped in her tracks and looked behind her with a furrowed brow. However, she found nothing.

Frowning, Shangguan Hongjin shook her head and resumed her trek. However, she had only taken a few steps before she stopped and looked behind her a second time.

Still, she couldn't find anything.

"What's wrong, Miss Shangguan?"

Pedant Earth noticed Shangguan Hongjin's odd movements and voiced his puzzlement.

"I keep feeling like something is following us!" Shangguan Hongjin spoke up.

In fact, she had been feeling that something was off since a short while ago. At first, she dismissed it as paranoia caused by the forest's oppressive silence, but she soon came to the realization that it wasn't paranoia. When they walked, the unknown creature would follow behind them. When they stopped, it came to a stop as well.

It wasn't just one creature either. As they trekked through the forest, the number of creatures continuously grew in numbers.

Worst of all, she could not spot their stalkers no matter how many times she checked behind her. It was eerie and strange to say the least.

“Really? Are you sure it's not just your paranoia talking? I don't see anything besides a floor of stones. It could just be your eyes playing tricks on you.”

Pedant Earth followed Shangguan Hongjin's gaze while adding, “It's perfectly normal to see things in a strange place like this. Just now, I saw a human face on a tree!”

It was at this moment Ye Qing looked back and chimed in, “You weren't seeing things.”

“Wh... What did you say, Warrior Ye?” Pedant Earth blanched.

“Stones?”

Shangguan Hongjin wasn't paying attention to their conversation. She exclaimed loudly when realization struck her like a lightning bolt, “That's it! It's the stones that's following us!”

At the beginning, there weren't too many stones on the forest floor at all. But now, there was an entire floor behind them. Clearly, this wasn't normal. It wasn't until Pedant Earth brought it up that she noticed the oddity. After all, it was perfectly normal for there to be stones inside a forest.

Now that she recognized the anomaly, Shangguan Hongjin did not hesitate to unsheathe her saber and slash at the stones. However, a person appeared beside her and extended a finger.

Clang!

There was a soft clang, and her saber force dissipated into nothing. Her descending saber was stopped in its tracks as well.

“Why are you stopping me?”

Shangguan Hongjin shot Ye Qing a look of puzzlement. Yes, it was Ye Qing who stopped her attack.

“Look.”

Ye Qing pointed at the ground, and Shangguan Hongjin did as he asked. She immediately noticed the stones scattering in every direction on their tiny legs. It was almost as if frightened children. They were all gone in the blink of an eye.

“What... What the hell are these things?” Pedant Earth exclaimed in shock.

“They are exactly what they look like.”

Ye Qing said slowly, “They're just a bunch of stones that grew legs and came to life.”

“Excuse me? Are you even listening to yourself?” Pedant Earth blurted incredulously.

Shangguan Hongjin realized something, however. “You’re saying... that they’re just stones?”

“Yeah. They’re just stones.”

Ye Qing nodded. “They just came alive because of the blood moon or some other power.”

“It’s not just the stones either. Look closely. You might notice that the surrounding plants have come to life as well.”

“What?”

Shocked, Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth immediately examined their surroundings. Gradually, they realized that Ye Qing was right.

Chapter 705: A Forest That Came Alive

There were trees wearing kind, grandfatherly smiles on their tree trunks.

There were leaves that were dancing in the air, gathering or scattering as the wind dictated. They could be heard whispering to each other atop tree branches as well.

There were emerald green fruits hiding behind the leaves and peeping on them with bendy black eyes.

There were colorful flowers and grass playing games with one another in the distant trees.

There were dew drops dancing lithely on the pistils or leaves.

There were little mud people rolling on the ground and having fun.

There were ghastly silhouettes floating here and there and whispering softly in the wind.

.....

It was as if the entire forest, no, the entire world had come alive. The only reason Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth hadn’t noticed them until now was because the creatures did not emanate any anomalous or evil presence whatsoever, and their activities were relatively obscure and well hidden.

“Warrior Ye, are they... are they all Strangers?”

Pedant Earth asked carefully as he turned a little paler. He was afraid of being too loud and triggering the little creatures.

“No,” Ye Qing declared without hesitation. “As I said earlier, they’re just ordinary objects that had temporarily gained sentience and come to life. They’re fundamentally different from Strangers.”

“Ordinary objects that temporarily came to life?” Shangguan Hongjin muttered as she stared at the living fantasy in front of her. “Is it because of the blood moon?”

Ye Qing nodded. “Most likely.”

“Did you notice this from the beginning?” Shangguan Hongjin looked at Ye Qing.

“Not really. I noticed them a little earlier than you two.” Ye Qing shook his head.

“I just don’t see a need to warn you guys since I can’t sense any malice from them.”

“Are you sure?” Shangguan Hongjin frowned. “Why were the stones following us then?”

“Personally, I think they just want to play with us.” Ye Qing thought for a moment.

“The stones had been following us since we entered this forest. If they really meant us harm, they wouldn’t have waited until now.”

... I thought you said you hadn’t noticed them from the beginning?

Shangguan Hongjin was speechless. She knew Ye Qing was strong, but it wasn’t until now that she realized just how powerful he really was. Not only did he possess an extraordinary body, even his spirit was stronger than her and Pedant Earth’s. This was evident from the fact that she and Pedant Earth did not notice anything amiss until just now, whereas Ye Qing had noticed the oddities practically from the start.

Strangely, she had never heard of someone like Ye Qing in the *jianghu*. It caused her to grow more and more curious as to his true identity.

“Is this why you stopped me?”

“Correct.” Ye Qing nodded. “Currently, these creatures don’t harbor any malice toward us, nor have they tried to attack us in any way. But who knows what could happen if we attack them recklessly and cause them to turn hostile?”

It wasn’t just pure speculation either. When Shangguan Hongjin attacked the stones just now, he immediately sensed a strong wave of hostility coming from the entire forest.

Had he not stopped Shangguan Hongjin, it was very possible that that hostility would have transformed into full-blown killing intent. It did not take a genius to know that that would end poorly for them.

“Of course, I’m not telling you to relax and treat this like a stroll in the park. Be on your guard and ready for anything.”

“Makes sense.” Pedant Earth nodded and looked a bit better.

“Got it.” Shangguan Hongjin also nodded in acknowledgement.

“Let’s continue then. Oh, and watch your step. Wouldn’t want to accidentally step on these creatures.” Ye Qing turned around and continued forward after saying that.

The anomalies only got weirder as they ventured deeper into the forest.

They saw glowing blue mushrooms the size of houses with tiny mushrooms hopping merrily underneath the caps.

They saw women made from pure water swimming along a stream and dancing to their heart's content.

They saw blooming flowers with little people running circles around the petals.

They saw hills snoring with their mouths wide open, their breaths thankfully odorless and even refreshing.

So on and so forth.

Maybe it was because Ye Qing, Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth had shown themselves to be mild-mannered and peaceful, but some of the creatures actually got close to the trio after a while.

Some sort of tiny yet plump creatures rode a breeze to their side and flew circles around them, giggling.

Dandelions descended from above and landed on their shoulders, darting here and there.

Grass that were bearing round, fiery red fruits that resembled tiny lanterns walked in a line in front of them and illuminated the way ahead.

Catkins[1] floated here and there, up and down just above their heads.

Vines brushed gently and incessantly against their arms like playful children, and more.

At first, Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth were understandably nervous, especially since the tiny creatures did not seem to understand the concept of personal space. But over time, they relaxed when they confirmed that they really meant no harm.

Then, at some point during their track, the little creatures surrounding them abruptly took off in a certain direction. It was as if they were frightened by something.

The breeze in the trees took off with a whoosh.

The leaves and tree branches rustled like waves.

And the vines slithered rapidly across the ground like snakes.

“What’s happening?” Shangguan Hongjin asked in alarm.

Ye Qing shook his head. “I’m not sure. Maybe someone attacked one of the forest creatures?”

Ye Qing did not know what was going on, but he could sense the forest’s anger. That was how he was able to arrive at that deduction.

“Come. Let’s follow them.”

Ye Qing pushed off the ground and chased after the little creatures. A moment of hesitation, Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth fell in behind him.

Just a dozen or so breaths later, the trio figured out the reason behind the forest’s unusual reaction.

They saw six people being attacked by all sorts of flora. A group of four men and two women, they made a strong team with four late-stage Spirit Masters and two Half-Step Grandmasters. Out of all of them, a middle-aged man with fully white hair and goatee was the strongest of them all.

The middle-aged man looked to be in his forties or late-thirties, and he had pock marks all over his face and a goatee underneath his chin. He possessed a dark and ominous presence.

He wasn't old, but for whatever reason, his hair was completely white, and his head was balding here and there and covered in scabies. It did no favors to his appearance.

That said, he was anything but a weakling. He wielded a blood-soaked rope that was giving off a dark, bloody aura.

The rope was wrapped around his neck, and its two ends were floating in the air like two snakes. It swept, tapped, smashed, or threw any forest creature that got too close to it. Any plant it touched instantly withered and died.

Although the group of six was quite powerful, they were in a precarious situation. The reason was simple. Their opponents weren't a bunch of flora, but the entire forest itself.

The forest was angry, and it would have its due.

Chapter 706: The Unfortunate Pockface Bai

The gentle, naughty, and peaceful plants from before had all turned into terrifying monsters.

The green leaves had come together to form a sea of deadly green in the sky.

The branches were cutting and stabbing through the air like sharp swords.

The vines were jumping off the ground like vicious vipers.

The stones had come together to form tall, gnarly stone giants that possessed seemingly limitless strength.

The grass were dancing to the wind and coiling, cutting or stabbing their enemy like spirit snakes.

The flowers were shaking their petals and emitting clouds of colorful, poisonous pollen that turned their target's skin red upon contact.

The mushrooms were exploding into spores that sank into the ground and grew into many small, colorful mushrooms that exploded once more.

The dandelions were floating around the six warriors and sinking into their flesh to grow more dandelions.

.....

Right here and now, the entire forest had transformed into a deadly weapon.

Even if the six warriors were pretty strong, they were hardpressed to handle the relentless assault of an entire forest.

“Oh, it's Pockface Bai! Tsk tsk... the pitiful bastard!”

Shangguan Hongjin snickered when she recognized some of the warriors who were defending themselves against the forest.

“You know then?” Ye Qing asked.

“Oh, I don’t just know them. We’ve been ‘acquaintances’ for a very long time.”

Shangguan Hongjin let out a cold chuckle. “Pockface Bai is—you see that ugly buffoon with pockmarks all over his face? That’s him.”

“Pockface Bai is a barefoot bandit who operates in Bei Mo. He is an unprincipled animal who abused his strength as a Half-Step Grandmaster and committed every crime there is under the sun.”

“That woman over there is Pockface Bai’s lover. If I remember correctly, her name is Yao Mei’er, and they call her the Temptress. A fickle woman who willfully slaughters the innocent, she too is an irredeemable villain who’s better off dead and alive.”

“I don’t recognize their four underlings, but it doesn’t matter.”

“I see! I’ve heard of Pockface Bai as well. No wonder he managed to hold out for so long,” Pedant Earth exclaimed in realization.

Pockface Bai was the thirty-seventh named warrior on the Human Champions Ranking, so it was unsurprising that he would be able to hold out against the forest’s relentless assault.

They were running out of steam though. Even as they spoke, one underling was sliced and diced by the leaves into a pile of minced meat, a second was skewered by several vines from behind and sucked dry, a third was screaming in pain as flowers grew all over his body, and he died only after the flowers had reached full bloom, and the last underling kept growing more and more swollen because of the pollen until he eventually exploded in a shower of blood and gore.

In less than a minute, four of the group of six had died, and only Pockface Bai and Yao Mei’er were still struggling.

“We need to go now, Mei’er! Together!” Pockface Bai yelled urgently after all four of his underlings met a horrific end.

The man was currently riddled with regret right now. The reason the forest was attacking them was because he had accidentally stepped and killed a flower when he was passing through the forest just now. It was a stroke of terrible luck to put it mildly.

Yao Mei’er returned an utterance of acknowledgement before the two ribbons she was holding suddenly transformed into two oddly-shaped boas. The boa had a snake’s body but a cow’s head, and it was over thirty meters long and as thick as a barrel.

As soon as the transformation was complete, the boas let out a bullish roar that rocked the entire place like an earthquake. Countless plants and rocks were annihilated by the eruption of yin thunder.

Having bought themselves a moment of respite, Yao Mei’er and Pockface Bai immediately raced toward the outskirts behind the two boas.

The two ribbons were obviously a high-grade Strange Artifact that could transform into Kui Snakes. A Kui Snake was a Soulstealer-class Stranger with an ox's head but a snake's body. When it mooed, its moos could transform into yin thunder that damaged the mind.

Unfortunately, Pockface Bai and Yao Mei'er didn't manage to go too far before the ground abruptly split open like a maw. The insides of the earth were jam-packed in squirming roots that resembled sharp teeth.

Caught off guard, Pockface Bai, Yao Mei'er and her two Kui Snakes all fell inside. Not a moment too soon, the roots began pulling at the earth and closing the gap at a prodigious rate.

To Pockface Bai's credit, his reaction speed was impeccable. The instant he fell into the gap, his eyes flickered with ruthlessness, and he pushed Yao Mei'er on the shoulder and pushed himself back to safety.

"Pockface Bai, you!"

Yao Mei'er screamed as she plunged into the abyss. A second later, the chasm closed completely, and the woman was squashed like a bug.

Pockface Bai just barely returned to the surface before the gap could crush him just like Yao Mei'er. Heart beating like a drum, Pockface Bai muttered, "Sorry, Mei'er."

Despair was welling inside his heart though. He might have survived the near death encounter, but the outskirts were still far, far away, and his foddors were all dead. How on earth was he going to survive this?

"Tsk ts... you're in quite the predicament, aren't you?"

It was at this moment Pockface Bai heard a derisive snort. When he looked up, he saw three people standing not far away from him. One of them was very familiar.

"Shangguan Hongjin?!"

As soon as Pockface Bai saw Shangguan Hongjin, he immediately cried for help like a drowning man on his last breath, "Miss Shangguan, save me!"

"Save you? Heavens, why would I ever do that?"

Shangguan Hongjin was crossing her arms and enjoying the show. "I'm only here to witness your death."

"I'll give you anything if you save me, Miss Shangguan!"

Pockface Bai wasn't going to give up on his one chance to survive, of course. "I have a lot of money and treasures. If you save me—if any of you is willing to save me—I can give you everything! Everything!"

"Tsk ts... how generous of you." Shangguan Hongjin chuckled before asking a question, "What if you were lying?"

“I swear that I would die a horrible death if I’m lying to you!” Pockface Bai swore. While he was distracted, two vines leaped up from the ground like vipers and ripped a small chunk of flesh from his stomach.

“An oath? While an oath is usually a trustworthy gesture,” Shangguan Hongjin sneered, “but we literally just saw you sacrificing your decade-old lover to save yourself. Anyone who trusts your oath would have to be stupid or ignorant, don’t you think?”

“What do I need to do to convince you to save me, Miss Shangguan? Just give it to me straight?” Pockface Bai cried urgently.

“Oh, that’s a good question.” Shangguan Hongjin said leisurely, “Gimme some time to think, will ya?”

That was what she said, but it was clear that she wasn’t thinking at all. She just wanted to see him suffer for as long as possible before he died.

“Were Miss Shangguan and Pockface Bai enemies in the past?” Ye Qing asked while rubbing his nose. Anyone in their right mind would be able to tell that Shangguan Hongjin had no intentions of saving Pockface Bai at all. The only reason she even showed herself was to kick the man while he was down.

“I guess so. I think I heard Pockface Bai ignoring the code of outlaws and robbing from the Flying Red Scarfs before. He had even killed her men,” Pedant Earth said uncertainly. “Well, it doesn’t matter. Pockface Bai is the kind of bastard not even the most blackhearted man cares to rescue, so we should just stay at the sidelines and let Miss Shangguan have her fun.”

Ye Qing smirked and spectated the scene quietly as Pedant Earth suggested.

Meanwhile, Pockface Bai had gotten some new wounds on his body. Seeds were taking root and sprouting in the wounds.

Chapter 707: The Forest’s Good Will

“If you save my life, then I’m willing to serve you as your humble servant, Miss Shangguan. I will become your bull and horse, and I will brave any danger for your sake!”

By now, Pockface Bai was beginning to notice Shangguan Hongjin’s true intentions as well. But what could he do? He was in a life-or-death crisis. He had to give even the unlikeliest hope a try. “Are you done thinking about your terms, Miss Shangguan?”

“Oh, I have.” Shangguan Hongjin beamed at him. “After careful deliberation, I’ve decided that there is absolutely nothing you could give me that would be worth my aid. Therefore, I decline your request for aid.”

“Don’t worry, I doubt that even a single speck of you will be left when you’re dead, so don’t worry about vultures picking off your possessions from your cold, dead corpse and just rest in peace!”

“You dare play me for a fool, Shangguan Hongjin?!” Pockface Bai could not hold back his anger any longer and glared at her with hatred.

“Hahaha... you only just figured it out, fool? Yes, I’m playing you for a fool. What can you do about it?”

Shangguan Hongjin put her hands on her waist and let out a loud guffaw. Then, she pointed a finger at Pockface Bai and started yelling, “Three years ago, you broke the code of outlaws, robbed my stuff and killed many of my men. I have never gotten payback from you, and you want me to save your life? Dream on!”

“Do you know why I showed myself? It’s because I want to watch you die. I want to give you a sliver of hope before snuffing it out before your eyes so you may perish in despair!”

“So? How does it feel?”

“Shangguan Hongjin! I’m going to kill you! Ahhhhhhhhhh!!!”

That was the last straw that broke his sanity. Pockface Bai abruptly threw all caution to the wind and charged straight toward Shangguan Hongjin.

“Come get me if you can, bitch! If I move even a muscle, then you’re my grandson!” Shangguan Hongjin continued to taunt.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!”

Maybe it was because Pockface Bai only had eyes for Shangguan Hongjin now, but he started accruing injuries at an insane rate. Vines had penetrated his chest, leaves had cut his skin, wind and severed his arms, and mushrooms had blasted his legs into limbs.

Even worse, countless spores, seeds and pollens were sprouting, growing, blooming, and fruiting in his wounds, his orifices, and even his pores. Emerald green vines began extending out of his nostrils, colorful mushrooms began growing out of his ears, sweet-smelling flowers were blooming inside his eye sockets, and fresh grass was pushing out his hair until they covered his entire skull.

In just the matter of seconds, Pockface Bai had become a hotbed for all sorts of plants.

Naturally, Pockface Bai’s aura was decreasing at a prodigious rate. Although he was a Half-Step Grandmaster, and Shangguan Hongjin was less than ten meters away from him, he ultimately ran out of strength and came to a stop when he was just three inches away from the woman. That tiny bit of distance might as well be the difference between heaven and earth.

By now, Pockface Bai did not even look human anymore. His entire body was covered in grass, mushrooms, flowers, vines, and more plants. Such was the wild growth that one could not spot even a speck of blood on his body. It was a horrifying way to die to put it mildly.

“Shangguan... I will... haunt you... in the afterlife...”

Despite this, Pockface Bai still retained a sliver of consciousness. If he still had eyes, he would be staring straight at Shangguan Hongjin.

Unfortunately for him, he failed to finish his threat before a vine grew out of his mouth and silenced him forever. At the same time, a single white flower the size of a bowl grew out of the tip of the vine and gave off a sweet scent that quickly permeated the surroundings.

“Can you? You’ve lost even the chance to linger in the world as a ghost anymore.”

Shangguan Hongjin shook her head as she watched the white flower. Pockface Bai hadn’t just died in body, his yin god had failed to make an escape as well. Forget turning into a ghost, he didn’t even have the chance to join the cycle of reincarnation and be reborn anymore.

After Pockface Bai and his group perished, the leaves slowly returned to the ground, the tree branches returned to whence they came, the flowers and grass swayed to the wind, the wind blew a low, whispery song, and the waters returned to calm. What was once an angry, violent forest had returned to normal almost as if what happened just now was just a dream.

“Thank you for your earlier warning, warrior. Otherwise, we might have met the same fate as them.”

Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth couldn’t help but pat their chest with trepidation and relief when they saw this. Who would have thought that such a beautiful, peaceful-looking forest would be concealing such terrible danger?

If it wasn’t for Ye Qing’s earlier warning, they could very well have ended up as Pockface Bai and his group. That was why they did not hesitate to thank him wholeheartedly.

“You’re welcome.” Ye Qing smiled while shooting the rope Pockface Bai was using a regretful look.

The rope was obviously an excellent Strange Artifact, but it was currently entangled inside the plants. He would be crazy to try and retrieve it and risk angering the forest again.

The ribbon that could transform into Kui Snakes were excellent as well, but it too was buried in the underground.

“Let’s go.”

Ye Qing beckoned his companions and turned around to leave. It was at this moment the vines entangling the rope abruptly loosened and pushed it out into the open. Not only that, one of the vines actually handed the rope to him.

At the same time, the ground where Yao Mei’er was buried shook a little and threw up small clumps of earth. A short while later, the ribbons were spat out onto the surface.

“Is this... for me?”

Ye Qing was caught off guard. His senses were telling him that the forest was quite happy and friendly toward him.

The vine holding the rope bobbed up and down like it was nodding.

“Thank you kindly for the gift.”

Ye Qing responded with a salute and reached out to grab the rope. The vine even rubbed against his palm affectionately as he accepted the gift.

Ye Qing took a moment to wonder why the forest was acting like this and quickly arrived at a conclusion. It probably had something to do with his earlier action.

Just now, when Pockface Bai and Yao Mei’er had fallen into the bottomless gap the forest had prepared for them, he had purposely used his demonic thought to slow them down a little. Otherwise, there was no way the two Half-Step Grandmasters would have failed to get out of the gap in time.

It was precisely because of his influence that they missed the best timing to escape the gap. It was also why Pockface Bai had no choice but to sacrifice Yao Mei’er to save his own life.

He had done it on a whim, and his influence was so subtle that not even Shangguan Hongjin or Pedant Earth noticed anything despite standing right next to him. He did not expect the forest to notice it instead.

This was most likely the reason why the forest had become so friendly and affectionate toward him. From their point of view, he had helped them in killing their hated foes.

After picking up Yao Mei’er’s ribbon from the ground, Ye Qing called out to his companions again, “Come on.”

Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth exchanged a confused glance with each other, though they did not prod him about him. They obediently fell in behind him and resumed their journey.

Their puzzlement only grew as they continued forward though. When their path was blocked, the branches and vines would automatically move out of their way. When they ran into a mountain creek, the plants would automatically come together to form a bridge. When they encountered a river, the river bed was pushed up until there was solid ground on the surface so that they could cross over. When they encountered a hill, the hill would split at the center so that they could pass through.

Not only that, delicious fruits would fall in front of them from time to time, the leaves would carry sweet dew to their lips, the wind would blow away their excess heat and fatigue; so on and so forth.

Chapter 708: Have You Seen My Head

Earlier, the forest did not harbor any ill will toward them, but it wasn’t exactly friendly either.

But now, they were being treated like its most honored guests. It was affording them hospitality and convenience every step of the way.

“What on earth is going on here?”

Finally, Shangguan Hongjin could not hold back her puzzlement any longer and asked, “What did you do?”

She was asking Ye Qing, of course. She did not believe she or Pedant Earth deserved such special treatment from the forest.

“Would you believe me if I told you that I did nothing at all?” Ye Qing answered. “Maybe it was because the forest loves kind and good-hearted souls?”

“Are you shitting me right now? You must have done something behind our backs!” Shangguan Hongjin rolled her eyes at him.

“I haven’t though.”

Ye Qing tried to shrug it off, but seeing Shangguan Hongjin and even Pedant Earth’s dogged expression, he had no choice but to tell them how he screwed over Pockface Bai and Yao Mei’er earlier and his assumption.

“I see!”

Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth were surprised. They did not think that the forest’s attitude toward them would improve so drastically for such a small, unconscious gesture.

If someone offended the forest, then the forest would hound them until they died. If someone helped the forest, then the forest would repay the favor a hundredfold. It was ironic that the forest was more humane than most humans in this world.

Thanks to the forest the trio took only two hours or so to pass through the entire forest.

When they left, the flowers, the trees, the grass, the wind, the waters and more were even waving them goodbye with clear reluctance.

“Phew... I can’t believe how fast we made it out of the forest,” Pedant Earth commented with a wistful sigh. If it wasn’t for the forest’s help, it would have taken them at least seven to eight hours to make it through.

“Yeah. It was like a dream,” Shangguan Hongjin echoed in agreement.

Instead of commenting about the forest, Ye Qing stared at a distant basin and asked, “Look over there, Pedant Earth. Is that the place?”

The basin was located at the center of a cluster of mountains. It was incredibly conspicuous as it looked like the entire patch of ground was dug up by the hand of god or something. Even stranger was the fact that the mountains were more or less overgrown with plants, but the basin was devoid of even a speck of greenery.

On top of that, Ye Qing could sense a chaotic mixture of twisted energies within the basin. That would explain why nothing could grow there.

“Yes, that is the place.”

Pedant Earth took one look and nodded in acknowledgement.

“Hey, is it just me, or does this basin look like a human hand?” Shangguan Hongjin said suddenly.

“I agree,” Ye Qing echoed in agreement. The basin did look like the aftermath of a giant palm slamming into the earth. In fact, judging from the chaotic mixture of twisted energies entrenched within the basin, it was extremely likely that it wasn’t a natural occurrence.

In other words, it was the result of a champion stamping their palm into the ground.

“Say, do you think this is the site where that headless Sage had fought against his enemies? Could the one who left behind this basin be the one who ultimately killed the Sage?” Shangguan Hongjin asked.

This hand-shaped basin was also where Pedant Earth had spotted the headless Sage. It was impossible not to connect the two extraordinary events together.

“It’s impossible to say, but it’s definitely a possibility,” Ye Qing answered. In fact, he more or less agreed with Shangguan Hongjin’s assessment. “If you’re all ready, then let’s head over.”

Their destination was right before their eyes. The trio did not hesitate to hasten their way toward the basin.

“It’s huge!”

Just a moment later, the trio had arrived at the edge of the basin. From a distance, the basin didn’t look that impressive. But now that they were at the edge, they realized that their eyes and prejudices had blinded them to the truth. The basin was so massive that none of them could say a word for a time.

From where they were standing, they could neither see the other end of the basin nor its bottom. It was like the entrance to the abyss or a gulf that separated heaven and earth. All three of them felt like ants attempting to perceive the infinite space that was the heavens.

They were right about one thing though. Not a single greenery or even life lived within the basin. The dark red rocks were utterly barren, and a thin layer of mist permeated the air. It added to the desolation and mystery of the unknown land.

“Are we still going?”

Pedant Earth suddenly felt a surge of panic and timidity as he stared at the boundless, bottomless basin.

“We’re already here. What would be the point of this journey if we don’t check it out?”

Shangguan Hongjin did not hesitate. She was the first one to jump over the edge and vanished into the mist.

“Come on.”

Ye Qing also said before jumping after Shangguan Hongjin.

Pedant Earth hesitated a moment longer, but he ultimately gritted his teeth and produced a yellow talisman from his pockets. He then slapped it on his chest before jumping into the basin.

Unlike a normal basin, the walls of the basin were completely vertical. They were also perfectly smooth like a mirror. As a result, most warriors would find it difficult—if not outright impossible—to use the walls to slow their descent.

But of course, this wasn't a problem for Ye Qing, Shangguan Hongjin, or even Pedant Earth. Shangguan Hongjin relied on her sabers to slow her descent. Every time she hit a certain speed, she would stab her sabers into the wall to slow her descent.

Pedant Earth had an easier time than her. His yellow talisman gave off a bubble of green light that allowed him to fall into the basin at a slow, constant pace.

As for Ye Qing, he did not bother to slow down at all. The wind whipped around him like crazy as he fell toward the bottom at top speed. Despite being the second person to jump into the basin, he was by far the first to make it into the bottom.

His landing didn't cause any commotion whatsoever, however. In fact, it was perfectly silent. The second his feet touched the ground, he bent his knees a little and caused an invisible shockwave to ripple out to the surroundings. Just like that, he was able to neutralize his fall.

As it turned out, the bottom of the basin was just as smooth as the walls. In fact, it was crystalline as if it had been baked by an unimaginable temperature, tough and solid.

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath. He was just adapting to the twisted, chaotic energies of the basin and getting ready to observe his surroundings when suddenly, his pupils shrank into pins, and every hair on his body stood on end. At the same time, every alarm bell in his head screamed of danger.

Ye Qing did not move or run, however. He had a feeling that something very bad would happen if he moved carelessly.

Eventually, he felt something approaching him. It got closer and closer until he could feel their icy touch pressing against his back.

At that moment, nearly every cell in Ye Qing's body wanted to turn around and attack the unknown entity. However, his remaining rationality, calm and restraint kept him firmly rooted in place.

“Have you seen my head?”

The thing behind Ye Qing asked in a low, sorrowful, and icy voice.

Chapter 709: Do or Die

“Have you seen my head?”

Ye Qing's skull turned numb, and his back broke out in cold sweat when he heard this. He felt as if he had plummeted into an ice hole, cold and frozen. He did not dare to move even a muscle.

If before he only felt that something extremely bad would happen if he moved carelessly, now he knew for certain that he was in big trouble.

It was because the one question had made him feel like Sun Wukong trapped underneath the Five Fingers Mountain. His back felt like it was bearing the heavens themselves, his skin felt icy to

touch, his yin god and demonic thought were completely suppressed, his energies were tied up by invisible shackles, and his mind was trembling like a leaf.

Right here and now, he was no different from a lamb waiting to be slaughtered.

He was never a coward nor a man who gave up easily. However, he could do but quake in his boots right now. He just could not muster even the slightest courage to struggle or fight back.

Beads of sweat rolled profusely off his forehead. However, the reaction could not alleviate his shock and terror in the slightest. He had no idea how he was going to get out of this situation. None.

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When Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth finally reached the bottom of the basin, they were immediately treated to a terrifying sight. They saw a man leaning forward and clinging to Ye Qing's back with both hands. Ye Qing himself wasn't moving a muscle almost as if he was listening to the stranger. From a distance, they looked like a pair of old friends catching up with each other.

If that was all, then they might not have suspected a thing. The problem was that the man clinging to Ye Qing's back did not have a head. In other words, he was a headless corpse.

Why was a corpse clinging to Ye Qing? And how?

Worse still, the corpse felt like an infinitely tall mountain to their senses. They felt like ants attempting to perceive the infinite totality that was the sky.

The Sage. It has to be the fallen Sage.

Both warriors arrived at the exact same conclusion. The headless corpse before them could only be the fallen Sage.

"Have you seen my head?"

Then, something even scarier happened. The headless corpse asked Ye Qing a question.

This should not be possible since the Sage did not have a head. And yet, a voice had definitely come from its body, one that terrified and suffocated both Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth to their core. They began trembling like a leaf.

"Have you seen my head?"

A few seconds of silence later, the question came again. At the same time, a terrifying aura washed out of the headless Sage and shook both heaven and earth.

"Hmph!"

A muffled groan escaped Ye Qing's lips, and warm blood began bleeding from pouring out of every orifice. He felt as if he had just been struck by a clump of mountains and electrocuted by ten thousand lightning bolts. His headspace was shaking like a drum, his yin god was fading, and a series of disturbing pops came from inside his body. It was the sound of his muscles and bones being pushed beyond their limits.

Ye Qing was shocked to say the least. Like a celestial or a demon, the entity had dealt him a serious blow with its presence alone. Unless he was gravely mistaken, the entity was probably the fallen Sage.

He could feel the sheer power and danger the headless Sage was giving off with his bones. If he did not come up with a solution soon, he would most likely have to face the thunderous wrath of a Sage.

However, he couldn't think of anything. Or rather, whatever idea he came up to save his own life all ended in theoretical failure. The Sage was just too powerful. His aura alone was so scary that he could not even muster the slightest will to resist.

He wasn't willing to give up on his life without fighting though.

I must fight!

A hint of determination flashed in Ye Qing's eyes as the Sage's aura and energy grew closer and closer.

At this point, it was do or die. He knew full well that his final gambit was probably no less futile than trying to stop the wheels of time itself. If it failed, then he would mostly die.

He would *definitely* die if he did not fight, however. It did not take a genius to know which was the superior option.

He was just about to take action when suddenly, something unexpected happened. A small head crawled out of the Dragon Nursing Nest he had been carrying on his waist.

Giggle?!

The blood drained away from Ye Qing's blood. The second Giggle showed itself, the presence behind his back suddenly grew indescribably violent. If before the Sage's presence was just the desolate and oppressive calm before the storm, now the storm was upon him, rampaging and chaotic.

Originally, his plan was to find an opportunity to set Giggle free while he was fighting against the Sage. However, not only did Giggle surprise him by appearing on its own, it triggered an unexpected reaction from the Sage.

What's going on here?

There was no time to hesitate, however. Throwing all caution to the wind, Ye Qing swung his left elbow into the Sage's chest like a hammer.

Bang!

Ye Qing lifted an eyebrow. He knew it was a slim hope from the start, but not only did his full-powered elbow strike fail to budge the Sage even an inch, it was his arm that hurt from the impact.

It was both surprising and unsurprising. A dead Sage he might be, he was still a Sage. They said that a lean camel is still bigger than a horse, and a Sage was so, so much bigger than a Spirit Master like him.

Ye Qing did not panic though. He immediately ripped off the Dragon Nursing Nest and tossed it into the sky, shouting, “Run!”

While he was shouting, he raised his right arm and brought it down on the Sage like he would split the headless man in half.

Ye Qing had a plan when he attacked the Sage. If his elbow strike was strong enough to knock back the headless Sage and buy both him and Giggle a chance to survive, then all was well. If not, it was still fine. He simply needed to keep the Sage’s attention on himself and buy as much time for Giggle to run as possible, and what better way to do that than to attack him?

His plan was simple, but it worked. He could feel the Sage’s aura locking onto him before it came crashing down like an unstoppable tidal wave.

“Ahhhhhh!!!”

Ye Qing growled out as his right arm grew several times bigger than before, and sharp hair burst out of his flesh. He then punched the sage’s shoulder with everything he got.

THUMP!

It sounded like the drumbeat of the heavens. Such was the noise that a muffled groan escaped Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth’s lips, and blood began seeping out of their orifices. At the same time, the ground beneath Ye Qing and the Sage crumbled inch by inch.

However, the powerful punch failed to harm the Sage even a little, much less push him away. The Sage was still clinging to Ye Qing and grabbing his shoulders with both hands. Their position hadn’t changed one bit.

The Sage’s aura was still growing stronger though. Then, the Sage tightened his grip just a bit, and Ye Qing’s shoulders caved in and crumbled away like soft tofu.

A muffled groan of pain escaped Ye Qing’s lips, but he wasn’t done yet. His eyes abruptly turned as dark and bottomless as the night.

Their surroundings faded into an unknown world before they knew it. It seemed infinitely vast and filled with all sorts of Heavenly Demons, though their shapes and sizes were indistinct. There were incessant murmurs that sounded like weeping, laughing, sorrow, and joy all at the same time, and it seemed capable of bringing out the greed, anger, ignorance, delusion, Seven Emotions and Six Desires hidden in the deepest depths of one’s heart.

While the victim’s mind and soul were being attacked, a grand, tall, mysterious silhouette sitting on a throne emerged from the space higher than the nine heavens and looked down from above.

The silhouette lowered its palm, and the world crumbled.

Chapter 710: The People Are Foolish

“Boundless Heart Demon Tribulation”

What was the Boundless Heart Demon Tribulation? It was the power to transform the countless facades of red dust into a boundless demonic tribulation.

This was the first time Ye Qing pushed the “Boundless Heart Demon Tribulation” to its limits, but...

“Have you seen my head?”

The Sage’s voice rang again. It was neither loud nor soft, and it was overflowing with sorrow just like before. However, its power was such that Ye Qing’s Paranirmita Vasavartin Heaven, and his Heavenly Demon of Freedom crumbled into nothing. Blood jetted out of his lips and nostrils as he stifled a cry of pain.

There was no time to rest. Right after he returned to reality, Ye Qing felt a terrifying aura of death threatening to engulf him whole.

“Will you please give me your head?”

Ye Qing felt a pair of icy hands closing around his neck. At that moment, he felt as if he had one foot in hell. His body was stiff, and his mind was in chaos.

Am I... about to die?

Several thoughts flashed through his mind at the same time. There was regret, defiance, and sorrow, but also joy and relief.

He felt regret for choosing to enter this place.

He felt defiant because he was unwilling to die here.

He was sad because he was about to die.

He was happy because Giggle was safe.

And finally, he was relieved because death was the final end.

To his own surprise, he did not feel any fear or unbecoming emotions even though he was seconds away from death. If anything, he was growing calmer and more clear-headed than ever before.

He supposed it wasn’t a bad thing to be able to face death this way.

It was at this moment a silhouette suddenly shot toward him from a distance. It landed right on top of his shoulder.

“Why did you come back?!” Ye Qing cried out in shock and urgency.

The silhouette was Giggle, of course.

“Oo ooo...”

The little guy whined and gestured at him. It seemed incredibly sad that Ye Qing had abandoned it earlier.

“You... ai... forget it.”

The reason he tossed Giggle away earlier was to save its life, but the little Stranger did not seem to understand the sentiment. Or rather, it would rather die with him than to abandon another friend.

In any case, it was too late to change the outcome, and scolding Giggle would not change anything. Plus, Ye Qing honestly felt more warmth than anger at the little Stranger’s return.

In this world, there was no treasure more precious than a partner who chose to live and die with you.

“You and I aren’t born on the same day, but it seems that we will die on the same day. It is my honor to be able to die with you, Giggle. I would celebrate this with a drink, but well, maybe in the next life, eh?”

“Hahahahahaha!”

Ye Qing dropped all of his reservations and laughed to his heart’s content.

It had been a fun journey. There was nothing more he could ask for from this life.

He could feel the icy hands tightening around his neck. It felt like the headless Sage was planning to break his neck and rip off his head. The pain was slowly but surely spreading to every corner of his body.

“Ooo oooo!”

His consciousness was blurring when Ye Qing heard Giggle’s cry again. It was filled with a hint of urgency, pleasant surprise and joy.

What? Pleasant surprise? Joy?

Ye Qing was confused. Why was Giggle pleasantly surprised and happy?

Then, Giggle’s whines turned aggrieved and sorrowful. It might just be his imagination, but the iron grip on his neck was loosening, and his pain seemed to be decreasing as well.

No... it’s not my imagination.

He quickly learned that he wasn’t just imagining things. He hadn’t passed onto the afterlife either. It was because he was slowly but surely regaining his consciousness.

Behind him, the Sage’s terrifying aura felt confused and shaky as Giggle kept crying again and again.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Ye Qing saw Giggle grabbing a pale finger with both hands tightly. Its normally pure and limpid eyes were filled with sorrow and grief, but there were also hints of joy and desire in them.

Did Giggle... know this Sage?

A bold thought occurred to Ye Qing.

The next moment, something stunning happened. The headless Sage actually let go of Ye Qing’s throat, moved one hand to Giggle’s head, and gave it a few pets.

Although its movements were stiff and hesitant, there was no denying its gentleness and carefulness.

Giggle was also narrowing its eyes a little in comfort and giggling happily.

Suddenly, the pale hand pulled away from Giggle. Then, Ye Qing felt the terrifying presence behind his back abruptly disappearing into nothing.

Ye Qing immediately turned around, but he could not see anyone or anything.

The Sage was gone just like that.

He's gone? I... lived?

At first, Ye Qing couldn't quite process his emotions. When it did hit him though, he was so happy and relieved he nearly fell on his knees.

He survived. He actually survived an encounter with a Sage.

To say that he was experiencing a roller coaster of emotions would be an understatement. That said, it was worth it since he was alive. Ye Qing could literally feel his spirit and willpower undergoing a massive improvement.

Although there existed great terror between the gap that was life and death, it was also where the greatest growth lay.

"Ooo ooo..."

On his shoulder, Giggle was whining in confusion and sorrow after the Sage had abruptly pulled a disappearing act on him.

Then, the little Stranger leaped off Ye Qing's shoulder and took off into a run.

"Giggle!"

Its sudden action jolted Ye Qing back into reality. He immediately gave chase.

Ye Qing knew that Giggle was chasing after the Sage. He also knew that the only reason he was still alive was thanks to Giggle and luck.

The next time he ran into the Sage, he might not be as lucky again.

However, Giggle had come back for him even though it would have died assuming that the Sage didn't know it. How could he abandon it during its time of need?

A human who was lower than a Stranger did not deserve to be called a human.

So, he chased after Giggle without a second thought.

"What... what should we do?"

After Ye Qing left, Shangguan Hongjin and Pedant Earth finally snapped out of their shock and terror.

"I owe him my life."

Shangguan Hongjin uttered through gritted teeth before chasing after Ye Qing.

She was well aware that she might not survive a second encounter with that terrifying headless Sage. Still, she must go because she owed Ye Qing her life.

Worst case scenario, she would have repaid the favor she owed Ye Qing.

So, she must go.

"Foolish! Pure foolishness!"

Pedant Earth cursed loudly when he saw this. She had already gotten away with her life once, and now she was going to throw it away. If this wasn't foolish, then what was? Did she value her life so little?

As soon as he was done yelling, Pedant Earth broke into a run after Shangguan Hongjin as well.

Yes, he wasn't just cursing his companion's foolishness.

He too, was so very foolish.

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“Kekeke... a Sage's corpse. A Sage's corpse that hasn't been marred in any way. This is perfect!”

A stiff, eerie laugh broke out from the basin. At the same time, four women stepped out of the darkness.

The women were completely naked. The countenance was exquisite, and their figure invoked devilish thoughts. Small, invisible ripples appeared all across their body when the blood moon's light landed on their flawless skin, making it look like they were wearing a thin red chiffon.

The four women produced no sound whatsoever as they walked across the basin. Like fairies that had stepped out of the darkness, they were beautiful, flawless, and heart-throbbingly attractive.

However, their footsteps weren't the only thing that was silent. They didn't breathe or produce any heartbeat.

It was as if the four women were walking dead.

Even stranger was the fact that they were carrying a coffin on their shoulder. It was black-colored, ominous, and overflowing with inauspiciousness.