

Stranger 81

Chapter 81: Ye Qing's Plan

Ye Qing went back to Endless Horizons after he bid Yun Yan goodbye. He had just arrived at the entrance when Faceless stepped out of a dark corner.

“Why didn’t you wait for me inside?” Ye Qing asked confusedly.

The Stranger pointed a finger at the bookstore and replied sadly, “Your pet Strangers refused to let me in.”

Ye Qing slapped his head in realization. He had forgotten about Kung Fu Frog and Wawa after everything that had happened tonight. Considering Kung Fu Frog’s strength, he could definitely see how Faceless was unable to force his way through.

“Follow me!” Ye Qing ordered and entered the bookstore. The second he stepped through the door, Kung Fu Frog leaped down from the second floor and looked behind him warily. Wawa was also hiding inside a book and sneaking peeks at Faceless.

“Don’t worry, Brother Frog! Allow me to make the introductions. His name is Faceless, and he’s a friend from now on!” Ye Qing explained.

“Croak croak!” Kung Fu Frog swayed its head back and forth with a puzzled look. It was clearly still wary despite Ye Qing’s assurance.

Wawa suddenly appeared on Ye Qing’s shoulder and pulled his hair. She then whispered beside his ear, “Friend, friend, you need to be careful! This guy is the baddie who tried to kill a few days ago!”

“I didn’t think you’re the type to hold a grudge!” Ye Qing patted her little head smilingly and said, “Don’t worry. That fight back then was just a misunderstanding. From now on, he’ll never hurt me again.”

Wawa was more perceptive than he thought. He thought that no one would be able to recognize Faceless after he had taken on a new appearance, but the Book Sprite still recognized him immediately.

Ye Qing then looked at Faceless and said, “These are my friends, Brother Frog and Wawa. I’ll be counting on you to take good care of them while I’m absent!”

“As you command, young master!” Faceless responded before shooting Kung Fu Frog and Wawa a friendly smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Brother Frog, Wawa. I’ll be in your care from now on.”

Seeing that Kung Fu Frog and Wawa were still wary of him, Ye Qing suggested, “Brother Frog, you can ask Faceless to buy you any wine you want to drink. Wawa, you can also ask Faceless to get you any delicious food you want to eat!”

“Really?” Wawa immediately threw all caution into the wind and chirped excitedly, “I wanna eat sugar calabashes, marshmallows, chestnut cakes, osmanthus cakes and, and...”

“Don’t worry, Wawa. I’ll buy them all for you tomorrow!” Faceless declared with a bright smile. “On that note, I picked up some cooking skills in the past. I know how to make some pastries and delicacies such as squirrel cinnamon fish, sweet drunken prawn, emerald porridge, as-you-wish cake, plum blossom cookies and more. I’ll make them all for you if you want!”

“I want! I want! I want them all!” The little girl was beside herself with joy.

Faceless then turned to Kung Fu Frog and produced a jar of wine from his Nature’s Shell. “Brother Frog, this is a Sunset Wine that’s been stored in a cellar for over a century. It is brewed using a hundred-year-old Sunset Flower and a thousand-year-old Ice Spring Water, and flavored with a hundred other things to give it an unthinkable amount of flavors. It is sweet, mellow and rich and I guarantee that your memory of this wine will last for a lifetime. Consider this my meeting gift for you, Brother Frog.”

After handing over the jar of wine to Kung Fu Frog, he added, “Besides that, I know a little about wine brewing and delicious wine in general. If you don’t mind, I will happily share my knowledge with you.”

“Croak croak...” Kung Fu Frog’s wariness visibly decreased after it accepted the offering, though the only reason it let down its guard at all was because it couldn’t sense any malice from Faceless. If not, it would’ve attacked him no matter what he offered.

“Hehehe, as long as you are satisfied!” Faceless responded with a smile as if he could understand Kung Fu Frog’s words!

Ye Qing smiled. He had to admit that Faceless was an expert in reading people and navigating through a social situation. In just a few sentences, he was able to get both Kung Fu Frog and Wawa to drop their guard.

“Go catch some rest, Faceless. We will be going out on a trip tomorrow morning,” Ye Qing ordered before walking upstairs. Once he returned to his bedroom, he immediately closed his eyes and entered a meditative state. Now that he knew what Faceless’ group was planning, it was time to make some plans and preparations.

When the first morning bell rang, Ye Qing immediately packed his stuff and left the bookstore. Faceless was already waiting for him at the entrance.

“Let’s go!” Ye Qing beckoned him to follow and stepped onto the street.

Faceless asked while trailing a few steps behind Ye Qing like a humble servant, “Where are we headed to, young master?”

“The county hall!” Ye Qing replied honestly, “Your plan is too much for me to handle alone. I’m going to need to notify Lord Yan about this.”

“Are you trying to convince Lord Yan to capture Tang Yi’an and clear out the Strangers lurking within the county?”

Ye Qing smiled enigmatically and said, “You’ll find out the answer very soon.”

A few steps later, Ye Qing recalled something and added, “By the way, remember the common bailiffs you killed at the Shing Wong temple? You best avoid bringing up the matter at all when we meet Lord Yan later. It’ll be troublesome otherwise!”

“I will. Thank you for the reminder!” Faceless replied obediently.

Some time later, Ye Qing arrived at the county hall and requested a bailiff standing guard at the entrance to notify Yan Yufei of his arrival. The large majority of bailiffs in the administrative division recognized Ye Qing because he had accompanied Yan Yufei to the Shing Wong temple before. Even those who didn’t know him knew that he was extremely close with Yan Yufei and Yan Feng. That was why he was granted entry very quickly and easily.

Yan Yufei looked the same as ever. He wore a long, scholarly robe and sported a kind, genial appearance as usual. However, he had also added a couple of wrinkles to the corner of his eyes and a few strands of white hair to his beard. The changes were minute, but it made him look a few years older than he was the last time Ye Qing saw him.

Clearly, a magistrate’s job was anything but easy.

Yan Yufei was extremely happy to see Ye Qing. He said apologetically after they had exchanged their greetings, “I’m sorry, Joyless. I’ve been wanting to invite you over, but I kept forgetting about it every time I got busy. I hope you won’t take offense.”

Ye Qing replied with a polite smile, “Of course not! You work day and night because you care for the people of Anyang, and as a temporary resident of Anyang I’m only all too thankful for your diligence. There is no way I would ever blame you for this.”

“Hahaha! You praise me too much, Joyless. I’m just carrying out my responsibility!” Yan Yufei said while gesturing for Ye Qing to take a seat.

While Ye Qing was taking a seat, Yan Feng poured them both a cup of tea and asked in a friendly tone, “What’s been keeping you, Joyless? I’ve visited you a couple of times to invite you to a drink, but you were never available!”

After Ye Qing thanked Yan Feng for the tea, he replied, “Sorry, sorry, I’ve been absorbed in my cultivation for the past few days. If I knew you were going to treat me to a drink, I would not have gone into secluded training. Dammit!”

Yan Yufei laughed. “Hahaha! I know right? Yan Feng has the face of a generous man, but in reality he’s even stingier than some housewives. If something costs half a copper, he won’t think twice to split a copper coin into two. I can barely remember the last time he treated someone to lunch, much less a drink!”

“My lord! How can you say that? I treated you to a drink just three years ago!”

“Hahahaha...”

The trio exchanged pleasant conversation for a while longer before Ye Qing deemed that it was finally time to get serious. “To tell you the truth, I have come today to inform you about something terribly serious, my lord.”

Yan Yufei’s curiosity was immediately piqued. “I rarely see you looking so serious, Joyless. What is it?”

Ye Qing answered solemnly, “I found out that a group of Strangers are plotting to destroy Anyang three days later.”

“Destroy Anyang? Why, that does sound pretty serious!” Yan Yufei said with a chuckle. The magistrate must have thought that Ye Qing was joking, but when he noticed Ye Qing looked as solemn as ever, he finally said disbelievingly, “You... weren’t joking?”

Ye Qing shook his head. “I wouldn’t joke about something like this.”

Yan Yufei instinctively straightened his back and turned serious as well. “What happened? Please, tell me everything!”

“It’s like this...” Ye Qing proceeded to tell him about his encounter with Faceless and the conspiracy he had accidentally uncovered. The only thing he refrained from mentioning was the fact that Faceless was the one who killed the bailiffs at the Shing Wong temple.

“Are you serious?” Yan Feng exclaimed in horror and fury when Ye Qing finally finished his story. “How dare these Strangers hatch such a heinous plot! How dare they!”

Yan Yufei kept his cool and asked, “You said you caught that Stranger who called himself Faceless. Did you bring him with you?”

“I did!” Ye Qing nodded. “Faceless, tell them everything you know in detail.”

Faceless had been waiting for his turn to speak. He immediately bowed to Yan Yufei and greeted, “Faceless greets you, Lord Yan.”

Yan Yufei looked a little taken aback. “This old man’s Faceless?” The old man had accompanied Ye Qing into the hall, but he paid him no heed that he was the young man’s servant or subordinate. He never imagined that he was a Stranger until he revealed himself. This should not be possible because official buildings such as this one were centers of the Will of the Dragon and the Will of the People; an official’s homeground so to speak. Most Strangers would lose most of their power and be forced to reveal themselves if they even get close to such sites, but the old man before him looked perfectly fine.

Even now, Faceless had no presence whatsoever and felt no different from an ordinary human. It was no wonder that Yan Yufei was stunned. Yan Feng was already gripping his saber and getting ready to fight Faceless to the death if need be.

“Don’t worry. He has signed a master-servant contract with me. He is now absolutely loyal to me, and I can kill him with a single thought if he ever changes his mind, so you have nothing to worry about, Brother Yan,” Ye Qing assured before ordering Faceless again, “Faceless, tell them what you were planning to do to Anyang.”

“As you command,” Faceless nodded before telling Yan Yufei about his fellow Stranger’s plan.

Yan Yufei was silent for a long time after Faceless was finished. When he looked up again, he was barely holding back his anger as he said, “These Strangers’ gall knows no bounds. How dare they plot the destruction of Anyang!”

After taking a deep breath to calm himself, he looked at Ye Qing and said gratefully, “Thank goodness you managed to uncover this conspiracy, Joyless, or the consequences could only be described as unimaginable. On behalf of everyone in Anyang and Chu, I thank you for saving our lives!”

Ye Qing hurriedly said, “You flatter me, my lord. Anyone with even a smidgen of conscience would’ve done the same.”

“What do we do now, my lord?” Yan Feng asked, “Should we detain Tang Yi’an, put the whole county under lockdown and hunt for the Strangers lurking within Anyang right away?”

Yan Yufei nodded in agreement. “Sounds like a good plan. Tang Yi’an is the guard captain, and yet his dereliction of duty has nearly paved the way to an unthinkable disaster. There is no chance I’m letting him off this time. As for the Strangers, I see no reason to keep them around whatsoever, especially since we are so short on time. I hereby order you to round up the men and scour the whole county for Strangers! You may kill anyone you find!”

“At once!” Yan Feng accepted his order solemnly.

However, Ye Qing blocked the bailiff’s way and said, “Wait, Brother Yan!” He then turned back to Yan Yufei and said, “My lord, your plan isn’t bad, but it only treats the symptoms and not the cure. If you will heed my advice, I have a different plan that will solve this crisis once and for all.”

“Tell me!” Yan Yufei asked curiously.

Ye Qing took a sip of tea before starting, “Since we know exactly what these Strangers are planning, why don’t we use it to our advantage beforehand? My plan is this: let’s set up an ambush and wait for these Strangers to invade Anyang. This way, we may kill them all in one fell swoop!”

“That... sounds pretty risky,” Yan Yufei replied uncertainly. To say that Ye Qing’s plan was bold would be an understatement. If something went wrong, it could result in the end of Anyang.

“The path to the optimal outcome is often risky!” Ye Qing explained slowly, “Although your plan sounds safer, there is one big flaw with it. If one or more of the Strangers managed to escape detection, they may come up with a second, third or fourth plan

to topple Anyang. Even if you manage to defeat them this time, there is no telling if you'll be able to defeat them again and again."

"That is why the best course of action here is to take the fight to them. If my plan succeeds, we'll be able to eliminate not just the Strangers inside Anyang, but also the ones that have been harassing the people in the outskirts. The people will be safer than ever before, and the realm won't soon forget your achievements. So please, do not be too quick to dismiss my plan."

Chapter 82: Weeding

"Give me some time to think!" Yan Yufei said thoughtfully.

"My plan might sound crazy, but in truth it isn't risky at all!" Ye Qing declared with great confidence. "The reason the Strangers dared to invade Anyang at all is because both the Pacification Bureau and the Shenwu Defense Force are severely undermanned right now. Therefore, all we need to do is to bring them back in secret and set up the ambush, and their plot would be thwarted for sure."

"That is a good plan!" Yan Feng echoed in agreement. "What do you think, my lord?"

Yan Yufei did not make a decision immediately. A moment of consideration later, he finally said, "It is worth trying. However, this isn't something I can decide on my own. I'll have to speak with Chief Ling about this!"

"Naturally!" Ye Qing echoed in agreement. It was impossible to circumvent the Pacification Bureau or Ling Jianqiu for this matter to have any chance at success anyway.

"Also, we need to find a way to bring back the Shenwu Defense Force to the county without our enemies noticing," Yan Yufei said thoughtfully.

"Oh, that one's pretty simple actually," Ye Qing said with a smile, "Of the five key Strangers plotting the destruction of Anyang, Old Grass is the one responsible for collecting information for the group. He is the eyes of the group so to speak. As long as we take him out, slipping the Shenwu Defense Force back to the county should not be an issue anymore."

"That works!" Yan Yufei nodded immediately.

Ye Qing clapped his hands and said, "We are in agreement then. I'll handle Old Grass myself, so I trust you to handle Chief Ling and the Shenwu Defense Force, my lord."

"Do you need help, Joyless? I can lend you a hand if you need me," Yan Feng asked concernedly, but Ye Qing was very confident.

“Don’t worry. I managed to catch Faceless alive, didn’t I? If he’s any indicator, the rest of the group are going to be easy,” he declared.

“...”

Faceless’ pride felt a little wounded, but he responded in a flattering tone, “Old Grass is more or less on my level, so of course he is no match for the young master.”

Ye Qing added, “Also, you guys aren’t strong enough to help me. In fact, it’s only going to increase the chance of exposure.”

“...”

Now Yan Feng was the one who felt insulted. “Who are you calling me weak? What cultivation level are you at right now?”

“The Vessel Augmentation stage!” Ye Qing answered honestly.

“I’m sorry?” Yan Feng’s smile immediately froze on his face. It was quickly replaced by shock and disbelief. Beside him, Yan Yufei looked just as stunned.

“Yep. I’ve been a Vessel Augmentor for some time. A middle-stage Vessel Augmentor to be exact!” Ye Qing replied indifferently after enjoying a sip of tea.

Yan Yufei: “...”

Yan Feng: “...”

For a time, the two men could only exchange glances with each other. Although they had seen Ye Qing fight and knew that he was an outstanding warrior, the possibility that he might be a Vessel Augmentor—a middle-stage Vessel Augmentor no less—had never crossed his mind. It was because there were only a handful of Vessel Augmentors in the entire Anyang. One could even say that they were the county’s most powerful warriors since everyone else above that level had moved to greener pastures.

What truly stunned them, however, was the fact that Ye Qing wasn’t even twenty years old yet. A Vessel Augmentor like him would be considered a genius even in a commandery or a prefecture. His future was bright and limitless.

“You never fail to surprise me, Joyless!” Yan Yufei sighed emotionally. Before, Yan Yufei thought of Ye Qing as a junior with outstanding talent and character. But now, he was treating him like a true equal. “Very well. I trust you to take care of Old Grass!”

“Worry not, my lord. I promise I will live up to your expectations.” Ye Qing saluted the magistrate. “There isn’t much time left, so I’m going to head back and make the preparations now. I will take out Old Grass tonight.”

“Got it. Be careful!” Yan Yufei advised.

Ye Qin nodded before adding, “One more thing, my lord. If possible, I would like you to keep this between you, me, and Chief Ling only. After all, we do not know how many Strangers are lurking in

Anyang, nor do we know how many people have succumbed to their temptation. The less people know about this, the higher the chance the plan will succeed.”

Yan Yufei nodded seriously. “An ant colony may collapse a great dike. I understand.”

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath after he left the county hall. Then, he put on a smile and returned to his usual, relaxed self once more.

“Why did you do it, young master?” Faceless asked with a puzzled expression. He was referring to the fact that Ye Qing had chosen the riskiest plan to deal with the Strangers—one where he would stand at the center of the maelstrom—even though he could’ve just agreed to Yan Yufei’s original plan and stayed out of the whole thing. Not only that, Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu were the ones who stood to benefit the most out of this arrangement, not him.

“Heh. You won’t understand!” Ye Qing simply replied with a shake of his head. A man should be selfish, but they shouldn’t always be selfish. If everything went well, Anyang would be safe, and its people would enjoy a few years of peace and security at least, so why wouldn’t he go with the plan? Humans were humans because they possessed the capacity to go against their baser instincts and strive for goodness, right?

Of course, it wasn’t like he was totally selfless. If the plan succeeded, he would be killing a ton of Strangers and earning a lot of dragon-serpent runes, which would be greatly beneficial for his growth. All things considered, what was not to like about this plan?

“Where are we going now, young master?” Faceless did not press the matter after Ye Qing had refused to answer.

“The bookstore. I’d like to enter the next stage before we meet your old friend!”

Ye Qing looked up. The sun had just risen from the horizon, and it looked both bright and hopeful.

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When the moon had risen to the center of the sky, and the gongs were struck three times to signify the beginning of midnight, Ye Qing finally left his bedroom and went downstairs.

Faceless had been waiting for a while and walked up to his master immediately after he sensed his presence. He was about halfway there when suddenly, he paused in his tracks and exclaimed in astonishment, “You made a breakthrough, young master?”

He said this because he felt a little pressured by Ye Qing in a way he hadn’t felt during the day. This could only mean that Ye Qing had entered the late-stage of the Vessel Augmentation stage.

“Yeah? Didn’t I tell you I’m going to do that this morning?” Ye Qing replied matter-of-factly.

Practicing his martial arts, the “Boundless Lightning Palm” and the “Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve” and refining his new Strange Artifacts, the Blue Demon Hand and the Lightning Bolt weren’t the

only things Ye Qing had done during his previous training session. He had also spent two silver dragon-serpent runes to solidify his foundation and filled up his newly augmented blood vessels and bodily points with true qi. At that point, he was one step away from entering the late-stage of the Vessel Augmentation stage.

This was why he was able to achieve a breakthrough today. All he needed to do was to use up his remaining four dragon-serpent runes, augment his final four Standard Meridians and two Extraordinary Meridians to complete that final step.

Faceless looked taken aback. It was only now he remembered that Ye Qing had said that he was going to enter the next stage of his cultivation level. However, he hadn't taken it to heart at the time because he thought that his master was joking. Who would've thought that he would actually do it in a single day? Since when was breaking into the next stage so easy?

"Few people could improve their cultivation level so easily. You must be a chosen of the heavens, young master!" Faceless said. The Stranger was attempting to mask his shock with flattery, but Ye Qing paid him no heed.

"Enough with the bootlicking. It's time to meet Old Grass!" Ye Qing chided Faceless before calling out, "Please come with us, Brother Frog. I'm going to need your help this time."

He didn't really, but it was always better to be safe than sorry. With two Malice-class Strangers by his side, there should be no way Old Grass could escape his grasp.

At Yang's Tofu Shop, Old Grass had extinguished the lamps a long time ago. However, his eyes were wide open. He was currently sitting on a stool and staring blankly at the walls.

Everything was ready, and the plan would be set in motion in just a couple more days. However, strange restlessness had been bothering him for the past few days and especially tonight. For whatever reason, his mind just refused to rest, and his chest felt so tight it almost felt like he was suffocating. Why did he keep feeling like something bad was about to happen?

"Am I just old?" Old Grass sighed, his wrinkles creasing together and making him look even older than before. His hair kept changing back and forth between lush green and withered yellow, and the barren grass in the courtyard rustled to the wind as if sensing up his emotions.

Suddenly, Old Grass tensed up and stared at his door coldly. "Who is it?"

"It's me, Faceless!" Faceless called out from outside.

"Faceless?" Old Grass frowned but opened the door to let him in. He asked in a puzzled voice, "I wasn't expecting you at this time. Did something happen?"

"Nope! What, can't I visit you when I'm bored?" Faceless said with an uncaring smile.

Old Grass grew irritated. "Didn't you hear Evergreen Ivy? We shouldn't be seeing each other anymore until the plan is executed, or if you have something that can't wait!"

Faceless shrugged. "So what? It'll all be over in a couple of days anyway."

“Oh, you!” Old Grass shook his head helplessly. He was about to say something else when a series of unnatural rustling noises caught his attention. “You’re not alone, Faceless?”

“Oh, you found out?”

Faceless let out an eerie chuckle before his facial features abruptly vanished into nothing. Then, his forehead split open to unleash a pitch black beam that struck Old Grass squarely in the head.

Bang!

Old Grass didn’t manage to dodge the sudden attack as they were only a few steps away from each other. It easily shattered his head into pieces. However, instead of falling dead like a human would have, grass grew out of his stomach and shot toward Faceless like blades. They would absolutely skewer the Stranger if he didn’t get out of the way.

“Wow!” Faceless let out a strange cry and sped away immediately. His instincts were screaming for him to dodge, and it was the right call. As soon as he left the entrance, the entire building was skewered by countless blades of yellow grass.

“Why did you try to kill me, Faceless?” A furious, questioning voice boomed from Old Grass’ headless body. At the same time, a new head slowly grew out of his neck like a sprout.

“Hehe. Since when do I need a reason to kill you?” Faceless sneered. As soon as he finished, a small silhouette dashed out from beside him and launched a palm strike at Old Grass.

Old Grass swung his arms lightly and caused the surrounding grass to grow at a crazy rate. They then surged toward the silhouette from every direction. If the silhouette was caught, the grass would easily rip them apart from limb to limb.

“Croak!”

However, the small silhouette let out a mighty croak and thrust their palms forward. A tremendous amount of force crushed the walls of grass like nothing. It was none other than Kung Fu Frog.

Old Grass didn’t panic, however. Green vitality flashed from his body, and the broken grass started growing wildly once more. This time, Kung Fu Frog had no choice but to move out of the way.

Meanwhile, Faceless was also dodging a sea of yellow grass. They didn’t just come at him from different directions, it was like trying to dodge a million swords at the same time. He had to deal with thrusts, slashes, lashes, sweeps, and more, and it was near impossible to tell which attack was a feint and which wasn’t. Scratch that, it was like he was facing a million expert swordsmen at the same time!

For a time, it was all Faceless could do to dodge the attacks. The amount of wounds on his body was growing rapidly. Old Grass was just standing there with an imperious sneer as he said, “Is this it? What on earth made you think you could kill me?”

As if on cue, the alarm bells in Old Grass' head suddenly went off. Before he could react, a bolt of lightning flashed before his eyes.

Boom!

The next moment, half of Old Grass' body exploded just like that. There was a faint smell of burning as lightning crawled all over his body.

Chapter 83: May Humanity

"There's a third assassin? How?"

Old Grass didn't fall even though half of his body was annihilated by Lightning Bolt. He simply flashed bright green again and regrew the missing half of his body. In fact, he looked more stunned than he was concerned with his own wounds.

Old Grass possessed an innate magic that allowed him to control the surrounding plants and feel what they feel to a certain degree. It was how he noticed Kung Fu Frog's presence earlier and realized that something was amiss. Just now, his magic was still informing him that there were only two presences around him, and they were Faceless and the frog Stranger. Then, out of seemingly nowhere, a third presence had appeared and dealt him a serious blow. It was both extremely disturbing and worrying. More importantly...

"A human?!"

When Old Grass saw Ye Qing standing on a wall and looking down, he could not help but explode in outrage, "You colluded with a human, Faceless!?"

"Hehe. Collude? Oh no no, I'm on *his* side. It's what I determined to be the best course of action after reviewing the circumstances."

Still dodging Old Grass' attacks, Faceless persuaded with a smile, "Old Grass, you and I are old acquaintances, so I'm going to give you some advice. Surrender now, and you may yet live to see another day with my help. Otherwise, tonight will be the last night you live."

But Old Grass was relentless. He uttered in a dark, raspy voice, "You dare to collude with a human, Faceless? You deserve death!"

The withered grass in the courtyard grew even wilder. It looked like a tidal wave of grass was attempting to squash Faceless like a bug.

Of course, Ye Qing wasn't exempted from Old Grass' hatred. He shouted, "Die, human!" and stomped the ground. Every blade of grass in the courtyard abruptly snapped in half before floating toward the sky. Then, they fell down toward Ye Qing like a rain of swords.

"Pretty impressive!" Ye Qing raised his eyebrows and smiled. As he slowly raised his left hand, the air around him started shaking ominously. It almost looked like he was lifting a mountain. When the rain of grass swords was about one meter away from him, he thrust his left hand forward and conjured a sea of bluish black flames. It was mixed with the tyrannical force of the lightning as well.

"Blue Demon Hand"

“Boundless Lightning Palm”

The “Blood Shadow Divine Art” was one of the finest Vessel Augmentation Arts out there, allowing him to unlock all twelve Standard Meridians, eight Extraordinary Meridians, and three hundred and sixty points and achieving perfect augmentation. As a result, his true qi was far greater than the average late-stage Vessel Augmentor. Combined with the Boundless Lightning Palm, it was like he was unleashing a tsunami of pure power!

Boom!

The rain of grass swords crashed against the tsunami of fire, and as expected the bluish black flames easily burned them all into ashes. Ye Qing did not wait for the ashes to fall to the ground and appeared in front of Old Grass in just the blink of an eye. Before the Stranger could react, he slapped his sleeve right across his chest.

“Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve”

There was so much force behind the attack that his chest caved in, and his entire person sank into the ground, leaving a comically-shaped hole behind. However, Old Grass transformed into a bundle of withered grass just a second later.

“It’s a fake?”

Ye Qing frowned and mustered his energy. His spirit spread out in direction like a giant ripple, and his aura encompassed the entire area like a spider’s web. He was trying to find Old Grass by perceiving every minute change in his surroundings.

“Got you!”

Ye Qing’s eyes lit up, and he clenched his hand together. A Blood Shadow flickered toward a certain direction, and an empty spot in one corner of the ruined shop shivered unnaturally. Then, Old Grass abruptly popped into existence. As it turned out, the cunning Stranger had been hiding inside his ruined home this whole time.

As soon as Old Grass reappeared into view, countless Blood Shadows swooped down on him and lifted him into the air. His? body flashed green again and again as he attempted to break free to no avail.

“Surrender. You cannot escape.”

Ye Qing slowly approached the struggling Stranger and said, “I may allow you to live if you surrender now and tell me everything!”

“Surrender? Keep dreaming, human!” Old Grass growled. The green light immediately grew much brighter, and a terrible power began gushing out of his body.

“Watch out, young master! He’s about to detonate his own mind!” Faceless hurriedly warned.

“Hmph! Like that could happen on my watch!” Ye Qing sneered and grabbed Old Grass’ head with his left hand. He then squeezed until the Stranger’s head exploded and burned his body into ash with the Netherflame.

“What a shame!”

After Old Grass was dead, Ye Qing shot the ruin that was once a tofu shop a glance and shook his head. He said, “Old Grass is dead. Let’s go!” before dashing through the streets and disappearing into the night. Faceless and Kung Fu Frog followed closely behind him.

Silence and tranquility returned to the area after Ye Qing was gone. It was almost as if nothing had happened as a cool breeze blew across the courtyard of yellow grass.

About half an incense stick later, a patch of ground in the courtyard suddenly twitched once. Then, a clump of lush green grass burst into view. Unlike the ordinary grass around it, it looked like it was carved out of white jade and glowed an eerie green light. Then, a blurry, transparent silhouette appeared above the grass and whispered, “Since Faceless has betrayed us, there is a high chance our plot has been leaked to the enemy. I must inform Evergreen Ivy about this immediately.”

The silhouette was none other than Old Grass. Somehow, he was still alive even though his body was dust and ash at this point. He slowly floated into the air until he was fully detached from the unusual grass. As if on cue, the grass withered and died as if it had lost all of its vitality in an instant.

Like a ghost, Old Grass rode the wind and floated from Westward Alley. He flew straight toward the county center almost as if he had a specific destination in mind.

Eventually, he arrived at the county center and flew toward a certain building. His silhouette looked even blurrier and transparent than before, but the old Stranger was wearing a smile on his face. Once he got inside and informed Evergreen Ivy about what happened, he would be able to pass away without any regrets.

Alas, it wasn’t meant to be. Right before he was about to fly into the building, a bluish black hand blocked right in front of his face. Before he knew it, bluish black flames had surrounded his whole body.

“It’s you!? But how—” Old Grass could hardly believe it when he realized who had intercepted him at the last moment. His expression morphed into madness and struggle, “No! Impossible! You cannot—”

“I’m sorry, old man, but this is where your life ends!” said a young man’s voice. A second later, Old Grass’ final wails dissipated into nothing, and not a trace of him was left behind. Pale moonlight shone down from the sky and illuminated half of the killer’s face. He was, of course, Ye Qing.

After Ye Qing had killed Old Grass, he looked at the towering building not far away from him and muttered in a disbelieving voice, “The Pacification Bureau... to think that this is where she’s hiding!”

That's right. The place Old Grass tried so hard to reach before Ye Qing had intercepted him was the Anyang Pacification Bureau headquarters itself. A million thoughts raced across his mind as he stared at the towering building with dark eyes.

"Tsk tsk! Who would've thought that Evergreen Ivy is a member of the Pacification Bureau?"

It was at this moment Faceless poked his head out from behind Ye Qing. Although his tone was mocking and sarcastic, the way he was eyeing the Pacification Bureau betrayed the fact that he was terrified of the place. He quickly looked away before asking curiously, "How did you know that Old Grass knew where Evergreen Ivy is hiding, young master?"

"I guessed," Ye Qing answered. "Old Grass is both your information gatherer and your eyes and ears in Anyang. Naturally, he must know a way to pass on a message or contact your leader, Evergreen Ivy. After all, what's the point of gathering all this information if he couldn't inform her about it in time?"

"I see! That's why you purposely left Old Grass alive when you could've annihilated him utterly! Your wisdom knows no bounds, young master!" Faceless exclaimed in amazement.

Ye Qing ignored Faceless. Faceless had long since told him that Old Grass had a powerful survival technique that allowed him to sever a small portion of his mind and host it on a plant. In case of emergencies, he could abandon his body and be reborn from said plant.

Thanks to his powerful spirit, he had discovered the plant Old Grass had attached his mind to pretty much as soon as he destroyed his body. He chose not to eliminate him because he wanted to know if Old Grass would lead him to Evergreen Ivy's hideout, which he did.

The answer turned out to be more shocking than he expected, however. He never imagined that Evergreen Ivy would be hiding in the Pacification Bureau headquarters of all things. She was most likely a member of the Pacification Bureau as well. How was this even possible?

"You left Old Grass' mind alive because you want him to lead you to Evergreen Ivy's hideout. In that case, why didn't you take it a step further and let him lead you straight to Evergreen Ivy herself? Isn't it a bit of a waste?" Faceless asked another question.

"That would've been one step too much!" Ye Qing shook his head. "As undermanned as they are, the Pacification Bureau is still tightly guarded and helmed by Chief Ling himself. Neither you nor I have been here before, so it's more likely that we're only going to trip some sort of alarm and expose ourselves. That would immediately alert Evergreen Ivy that something is amiss."

"Also, did you actually think Old Grass was going to meet Evergreen Ivy in person? I can't deny that it is a possibility, but he doesn't need to see Evergreen Ivy to warn her that the plan has gone awry. All he needs to do is to cause a bit of commotion after

he enters the Pacification Bureau, and Evergreen Ivy would automatically know that something is wrong. That is why killing him here and now is the best course of action."

Ye Qing sighed quietly. "Knowing Evergreen Ivy is hiding in the Pacification Bureau is good enough. After that, it's just a matter of carrying out a secret investigation and eliminating the suspects one by one."

Ye Qing was extremely glad that he had warned Yan Yufei beforehand to tell no one but Ling Jianqiu about his plan. Otherwise, the Strangers might've found out about it and thrown everything into disarray. Just in case, he needed to head back and remind Yan Yufei one more time about the necessity for secrecy.

"Let's go!"

His mind made up, Ye Qing immediately went to the county hall to inform Yan Yufei about Old Grass' death and the possibility that Evergreen Ivy might be hiding in the Pacification Bureau headquarters itself. Naturally, the magistrate was both stunned and furious to hear this. Without hesitation, he took off to the Pacification Bureau to speak with Ling Jianqiu even though it was almost dawn at this point.

Although he already had a meeting with the Chief of Bureau this noon, the man hadn't yet given him a response. This meant that Ling Jianqiu probably hadn't done anything to alarm Evergreen Ivy just yet. Even so, he needed to inform the man about this as soon as possible and minimize the chances that something might go wrong.

Ye Qing did not linger in the county hall nor did he return to the bookstore after Yan Yufei was gone. Instead, he went to the Iron Shirt Gang's headquarters and summoned Tao Xian. He left the man with some instructions and took the materials he had requested the man to gather for him earlier.

After the duo had exited the Iron Shirt Gang's headquarters, Faceless feigned astonishment and exclaimed, "I had no idea that you're the gang boss of the Iron Shirt Gang, young master! Does that mean that you're the one who took out Yan Tieyi and Zheng Feng?"

Ye Qing shot him a look. "Quit pretending you haven't figured it out a while ago."

He had used the Lightning Bolt and the Blue Demon Hand in front of Faceless multiple times at this point. Only an idiot or a pretend-idiot would fail to put two and two together, and clearly Faceless belonged to the latter category.

"Hehehe, you are right. But every wise man needs a fool to portray their wisdom, and I am all too happy to play that role for you, young master!" Faceless replied without a shred of shame or embarrassment whatsoever. "So, where are we going now, young master?"

Ye Qing looked up. The morning bell rang, and a beam of light pierced through the sky like a holy sword that would cut through any darkness. As the world brightened, he said quietly, "We're going to leave the county for a bit and make an incense stick."

May humanity always triumph over hardships and welcome a good ending. May the light forever shine on us all.

Chapter 84: Pallbearer

“By the way, Faceless, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you for a while. How did you and your group manage to go in and out of Anyang without being discovered by the Heaven’s Eye?” Ye Qing asked curiously after they were out of the county.

Generally speaking, a Stranger who got within a certain range of a human settlement would be spotted by the Heaven’s Eye and forced to reveal their true form immediately, no amount of mundane or unnatural disguise would protect them from detection. However, Faceless could obviously enter and leave Anyang as he pleased.

“It’s because I have this,” Faceless passed a certain item to Ye Qing. It looked like a cicada, but it was glittery and translucent under the sunlight like a piece of white jade. It was also warm and smooth to touch.

“You have an Invisible Cicada? No wonder!” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization after examining it for a moment.

“Your wealth of knowledge is truly impressive, young master,” said Faceless, and unlike most of his praises he meant this from the bottom of his heart.

Ye Qing continued to examine the Invisible Cicada closely. The Invisible Cicada was a highly rare Stranger with the ability to conceal one’s presence and blood. Supposedly, anyone with an Invisible Cicada was nigh undetectable by conventional means. A long time ago, there was a Stranger called Chun Xia [1] who transformed into a human and used the Invisible Cicada to mask his presence. He then infiltrated the Jixia Academy of Chu and became their student for years. Exceedingly talented, he quickly rose to stardom and took first place in the imperial examination, and for a time there was no one in Shendu who didn’t know his name. He was also famous for always wandering the red-light districts on a white horse.

Alas, Chun Xia’s epic adventure would meet a tragic end. While drinking with a friend, Chu Xia grew so drunk that he accidentally revealed his true form. It was only then people realized that he was actually a Stranger. It was said that Chun Xia was still locked in a prison in Shendu known as the “Heavenly Prison” to this day.

Assuming that the stories were true, Chun Xia had managed to fool the people in Shendu for years thanks to the Invisible Cicada. It was no wonder that it could fool the Heaven’s Eye of Anyang as well.

So why didn’t more humans or Strangers procure the Invisible Cicada for their own use? It was because it was extraordinarily rare, of course. Born at the end of spring, an Invisible Cicada’s lifespan was so short then it usually died at the beginning of summer. In fact, assuming that it was born at the start of the day, it would die when the sun set, meaning that it had a lifespan of half a day at most. Moreover, an Invisible Cicada was transparent and incredibly difficult to spot with the

naked eye while it was still alive, and when it died it would immediately disappear into nothingness. It was why some people said that it was a ghost who was even more ephemeral than a ghost itself.

To say that it was incredibly difficult to capture an Invisible Cicada would be an understatement. A considerable amount of luck was involved in the process. Not only that, one must use a special method to wipe out its mind, but leave its form intact. Only then could it remain in the physical world indefinitely in the form Ye Qing was seeing right now. This was why the imperial court wasn't worried that malicious Strangers might infiltrate certain settlements en masse using an Invisible Cicada.

Ye Qing toyed with the Invisible Cicada while asking, "Do all five of you have an Invisible Cicada?"

"No. Evergreen Ivy only gave Rotten Crown, Dark Eye and me an Invisible Cicada as they need to leave the county to contact the other Strangers, while I need to approach the gates and communicate with Tang Yi'an from time to time."

"Incredible. I can't even begin to imagine how long your leader has been preparing for this," Ye Qing sighed before tossing the Invisible Cicada back to Faceless. The Stranger was priceless, but it was also useless to him. Hence, he saw no need to take it from Faceless.

The duo would continue to chat a while longer before they reached an area that was filled with dead plants and yin energy. Dry bones and rotting corpses could also be seen peeking out from the ground here and there. When they got close to a clump of dead trees, an insane amount of crows cawed and took off into the sky. Their cries sounded shrill and bleak.

"Why did we come to a burial mound, young master?" Faceless asked curiously. The so-called burial mound was really just a place where those who couldn't afford to bury their dead in an actual graveyard buried their dead

"I told you. I'm going to make an incense stick!" Ye Qing replied simply. Specifically, he was going to make an Incense of Misfortune in preparation for the upcoming crisis.

According to the "Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghosts and Gods", one must gather a bowl of Rootless Water, a clump of hair from a Poverty Ghost, three Misery Flowers, a pair of eyeballs from an Unlucky Cat, one soulfire from a Bleakwind Bandit, and one leaf from a Distress Tree. One must then seek out a location where the five elements are weak and wait for the moment where night passes into morning. Only then can one create the Incense of Misfortune.

He already had the soulfire of a Bleakwind Bandit, and he asked Qiao Six and Tao Xian to gather the rest of the items a few days ago. It took little effort for the two factions to procure what he needed, and he had received them from Tao Xian when he visited the Iron Shirt Gang earlier.

The reason Ye Qing came to this burial mound was because this was one of the few places he could create the Incense of Misfortune; a place where the "five elements were weak".

After wandering around the area for a bit, Ye Qing went to a clearing and cleared out the surrounding bushes with a swing of his sleeve. Then, he took out all the ingredients he needed to make the incense stick, lit a bonfire and said to Faceless, “Guard me while I work.”

“Yes, young master,” replied the Stranger dutifully.

First, he placed a cauldron on top of the fire. Once it was sufficiently warm, Ye Qing poured over half a bottle of Rootless Water into it. It didn’t take long for the water to become boiling hot. Then, Ye Qing put the rest of the ingredients—a clump of hair from a Poverty Ghost, three Misery Flowers, a pair of eyeballs from an Unlucky Cat and one leaf from a Distress Tree—into the cauldron in order.

The order in which the ingredients were dropped into the cauldron must be followed strictly. Otherwise, there was a high chance the cauldron would just explode, and all his effort would be for naught.

After the ingredients had melted in the Rootless Water one by one, the cauldron began emitting a cold, dark and inauspicious smoke into the surroundings and covering the surrounding grass in a sheen of gray. All the pests hiding in the underground immediately crawled out into the open and escaped as far away as they could.

Ye Qing did not panic though. Checking the cauldron one more time to make sure that the ingredients had fully melted, he grabbed the last and most important ingredient of them all—the soulfire of a Bleakwind Bandit—and dropped it into the cauldron.

The soulfire of a Bleakwind Bandit was yin in nature. It also possessed the ability to unify all the conflicting ingredients in the cauldron, which was why the boiling liquid cooled down the instant contact was made. The transparent silhouette of a Bleakwind Bandit abruptly appeared in the cauldron and let out a soundless howl, and the gray smoke covering the area immediately rolled back into the cauldron. Not only that, the yin energy across the entire burial mound were drawn into the cauldron as well. Then, a stormy cloud began gathering rapidly in the sky.

“This wasn’t mentioned in the book!” Ye Qing stared at the cauldron in alarm. It wasn’t supposed to suck the surrounding yin energy dry or summon a storm cloud!

As he was an astute man, he quickly deduced that it was probably because he used the soulfire of a Bleakwind Bandit Leader as the final ingredient. He thought that the soulfire of an ordinary Bleakwind Bandit didn’t count because it wasn’t a true soulfire, but clearly he was mistaken.

Ye Qing immediately plugged more wood under the cauldron and turned the fire into a blazing inferno, but by this point the cauldron had accumulated too much yin and filthy energies. Not even an inferno was strong enough to heat up the cauldron.

The final step to create the Incense of Misfortune was to evaporate the water inside the cauldron with a huge fire. The powder that was left behind could then be blended into the incense stick. However, since the fire wasn’t strong enough to heat up the cauldron, it couldn’t evaporate the water within as a matter of course. At this rate, he was going to fail for sure.

“Wait! I can use the Netherflame!” Ye Qing was wracking his brain for a solution when he suddenly recalled the Blue Demon Hand. The Netherflame should be more than enough to evaporate the water inside the cauldron.

Without hesitation, Ye Qing pressed his left hand to the cauldron's side and unleashed the Netherflame. He made sure to control it so that it wouldn't burn through the cauldron itself. It worked. The liquid inside the cauldron immediately started bubbling and releasing gray smoke like crazy once more. A long time later, all that was left inside the cauldron was a mound of black powder.

"It's done," Ye Qing said with clear relief. Thank goodness he had the Blue Demon Hand, or the creation would've failed at the last step.

Ye Qing wet the powder with his remaining Rootless Water slightly and stirred them for a moment. Then, he slowly kneaded them together into multiple Incense of Misfortunes.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much powder in the cauldron at all. It was only enough to make three Incense of Misfortunes in total. Still, Ye Qing was extremely satisfied with this outcome. According to the "Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghosts and Gods", he would be lucky to make enough powder to create two or even just one Incense of Misfortune. The fact that he had enough to make three meant that he was insanely lucky.

Ye Qing was ready to leave after he put away the incense sticks when suddenly, he spotted a humanoid silhouette walking toward him in the distance. His appearance was nothing special. He was a tall, muscular man with a blank expression, and people like him were a dime a dozen in Anyang. What was odd was the fact that he was carrying a massive coffin on his back.

The coffin was over ten meters long and made from something he couldn't identify. He could only tell that it was some sort of grayish black material. Multiple crows were circling just above the coffin and cawing again and again.

Despite the size of the coffin, the man's footsteps were perfectly silent. Not only that, he was moving so fast that he reached Ye Qing and Faceless in just a few steps.

"Who are you? Get lost! You're blocking my young master's way!" Faceless chided the strange man before throwing a palm strike at him. However, he didn't use much strength at all because he sensed no danger from the man, and because his master would be displeased if he accidentally killed a human. He was just trying to scare him.

"Caw! Caw!"

Right before the invisible force would strike the man, the crows circling above the coffin abruptly cawed in unison and created some sort of sound wave that actually canceled out Faceless' attack. Then, they flew straight toward Faceless.

Surprised, Faceless turned a little more serious and threw another palm strike at the crows. However, his force passed right through them and dealt no damage almost as if they didn't exist.

"Get back!"

Ye Qing realized the danger and blocked in front of Faceless immediately. Not a moment too soon, the crows hit his face—but he couldn't feel any impact whatsoever—and appeared inside his head. When they cawed again, his mind immediately shook as if he was under attack!

Ye Qing hurriedly visualized the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”. When Emperor Fuxi appeared and unleashed his light, the crows immediately melted away like ice under a blazing sun.

“Phew...”

After his mind had returned to normal, Ye Qing stared at the coffin bearer with increased wariness. This was especially true after the crows he supposedly wiped out reappeared above the coffin he was carrying and cawed like nothing had happened. If he wasn't mistaken, the crows weren't real crows at all. They were some sort of spiritual manifestation that the man used to attack an enemy's mind. His mind would've been crushed if he hadn't viewed the painting before.

It was at this moment Faceless remembered something and exclaimed in astonishment, “Pallbearer. He's the Pallbearer!”

Chapter 85: It Begins

“Pallbearer?” Ye Qing frowned.

“I've heard of it, but I've never seen one until now.” Faceless said seriously, “Legend says that the Pallbearer is a unique Stranger who possesses unfathomable strength, but he will not harm you unless you provoke him first. Generally speaking, the Pallbearer only shows up in places where a powerful warrior or Stranger has perished, or is expected to perish very soon. Once they're dead, he would store their corpse in the coffin he's carrying.”

“He sounds almost identical to Tubo!” Ye Qing wondered out loud. The two Strangers were identical in the sense that they usually showed up when one or many people had died or were expected to die. However, Tubo only wanted the souls of the dead, whereas the Pallbearer was interested in the bodies. Also, Tubo took any soul he could find, but the Pallbearer only claimed the bodies of the strong!

It was at this moment the Pallbearer stopped in his tracks and stared fixatedly at Ye Qing. At first glance, the Pallbearer looked no different from a normal human, but now Ye Qing realized that he had no pupils at all. His eyes were a pair of perfectly black swirls that seemed to contain nothing at all. Ye Qing could not help but break out in cold sweat as he wondered what the hell the Pallbearer wanted with him.

A few seconds later, the Pallbearer abruptly waved his hand and sent a crow flying toward him. Ye Qing tried to dodge out of the way, but he suddenly found himself unable to move when the Stranger's eyes flashed something dark. Forget taking a step, he was unable to move even a muscle.

The crow landed on Ye Qing's left arm and cawed once. Then, it transformed into a puff of black smoke and circled the back of his left hand before vanishing. It wasn't gone, however. It had simply transformed into a small motif on the back of his hand.

It was only then the Pallbearer looked away from Ye Qing and slowly walked past him. With his back against the sun, he stepped into the mountains and left behind a series of caws that seemed like it would never end.

Ye Qing did not dare to relax until he was sure that the Pallbearer was well and truly gone. Even now, his spine was tingling with lingering fear and trepidation.

“Are you okay, young master?” Faceless asked in concern. The Stranger had done his best to pretend he didn’t exist until the Pallbearer was completely out of sight.

“I’m fine.” Ye Qing shook his head before looking down on the crow motif at the back of his head. “Do you know what this is?”

He had already inspected himself internally just now but couldn’t find anything amiss. As far as he could tell, it was just a harmless picture.

Faceless answered, “Don’t worry, young master. It’s just the mark of the Pallbearer. It is, for all intents and purposes, harmless.”

“A mark? What is it for?”

“According to the legends, the Pallbearer grants a crow mark only to those whose strength he acknowledges. Unless the mark is removed, the Pallbearer would be able to sense the death of a marked one no matter where they are. He would then make haste to their location to pick up the body.”

“So, you’re saying that he acknowledges my strength?” Ye Qing rubbed his nose and let out a bitter chuckle. “But I’m just a Vessel Augmentor. What on earth made him think that I’m ‘worthy’ of his attention?”

“How can you denigrate yourself like this, young master!” Faceless exclaimed in a horrified tone, “You’re not just any Vessel Augmentor, you’re one who isn’t even twenty years old yet! If even you are not worthy of the Pallbearer’s attention, then who is?”

“In fact, I would’ve thought so much less of the Pallbearer if he thought that you weren’t worthy of its mark! Anyone can tell that you have a bright, unlimited future ahead of you, young master!”

“Hardy har har.” Ye Qing laughed sarcastically. He made it sound like it was a good thing that he was marked for death!

Faceless insisted, “Seriously, you don’t need to worry about this. There are many people out there who actually consider it a mark of honor and a status symbol; one that most of them would never get in a lifetime!”

“Heh. Let’s just say that I prefer the more traditional kind of honor and status symbol, okay?” Ye Qing shook his head disbelievingly before sighing, “Well, I suppose it’s not completely a bad thing. If one day this world proved too much for me to handle, at least there’s someone out there who’ll collect my body instead of leaving it to rot.”

Faceless chuckled. "No worries, young master. You will live a long life." And this time, he truly meant his words. After all, Ye Qing's life was his life. If Ye Qing died, then he would die as well.

"Alright. We should head back now!" Ye Qing smiled and looked in the directions of Anyang. "It won't be long before the show begins!"

.....

It was a moonless, windless night. Somewhere in the outskirts of Anyang, a massive Stranger with a human's body but a bear's head asked in a low voice, "You're not trying to trick me, are you Dark Eye? Will Anyang's gates really open tonight?"

"I wouldn't lie to you, Bear King. Just watch!" Dark Eye replied with a bright smile on his face.

"Good, good. It's been a long time since I tasted human flesh. I'm going to gorge myself on humans tonight!" The Bear King laughed, but it didn't sound like the laughter of a bear. It was gloomy and piercing like that of an owl.

"You're early, big guy!" A childish voice suddenly drew their attention. They immediately saw a child with a pair of twintails skipping out of the darkness. Every time he skipped, rainbow powder would fall out of his body almost like he was a cartoon character. It gave him a dreamlike and colorful appearance.

Dark Eye and Bear King took a few steps away from the child like he was the plague, however. Bear King asked, "What are you doing here, Rainbow Child? I thought you don't eat humans?"

Rainbow Child continued to skip rhythmically while responding in a childish voice, "To collect your body when you're dead, of course!"

"Hmph! Dream on! I will never die before you!" Bear King harrumphed, but it was just a reflex. He was clearly wary of the child Stranger.

Glug glug glug!

Suddenly, the solid ground before the three Strangers rapidly softened into a pool of mud. Then, it started bubbling incessantly. Faces of men, women; the old, the young; the joyful, the weeping and more could be seen within the bubbles. A long time later, an old woman's face finally rose to the surface and said in a kind, grandmotherly voice, "I'm not late, am I?"

Rainbow Child answered cheerfully, "Not at all! You're actually early, Granny Mud!"

"As long as I'm not late!" Granny Mud said before asking, "This isn't everyone, is it?"

"No, we're still waiting for—" Dark Eye was just about to answer when a series of strange cackles interrupted him. Everyone turned and saw a big tree with human legs slowly walking toward them. It had a massive trunk and a canopy that was full of black leaves, or so it seemed. It wasn't until the tree was almost upon them when they finally realized that the leaves weren't leaves at all. They were black butterflies, and they were the source of the strange cackling.

“This here is Grandpa Tree...” A young girl wearing a red dress jumped out from behind the tree. She was none other than Rotten Crown. The Strangers briefly greeted the tree before falling silent.

Thud... thud...

They didn't have to wait long before a silhouette covered in mist slowly appeared in the distance. It was a humanoid Stranger who was half-man and half-woman, literally. Half of his face was that of an extraordinarily handsome man, whereas the other half was that of an unbelievably gorgeous woman. Had the two faces been separate, they could have charmed any soul even with just half a face, but together the overall effect could only be described as bizarre.

Even stranger was the fact that their body was overflowing with disgusting warts and tentacles. As if that wasn't enough, each wart and tentacle was covered in eyeballs. The Strangers couldn't help but feel terrified when they saw the eyeballs.

“Servant of Fear...”

Everyone exchanged glances with one another and fell silent. Even Rainbow Child and Rotten Crown, the two chattier Strangers of the group were consciously restraining himself before the Stranger.

More and more Strangers arrived at the gathering location as time passed. There was a woman who looked every bit a human except the fact that her hair was covered in peach blossom, a mouse with a human's face, a yin spirit that was covered from head to toe in hair, an exceptionally disciplined group of one-eye bandits riding white horses, a floating shirt that was covered in bloodstains, a floating wedding carriage and more. They all seemed to be waiting for something. Then...

Creak...

When the night gong struck thrice to signal that it was midnight, the shut gates of Anyang abruptly flashed with mysterious runes. Then, the thick metal slowly swung inward.

“It's opening! It's actually opening!” Bear King couldn't help a mad cackle when he saw this. The rest of the Strangers, intelligent or not, were cackling strangely as well.

“You were telling the truth after all, Dark Eye, Rotten Crown!” Rainbow Child chirped excitedly, “I'm going in! See you all in a bit!”

A pair of rainbow wings appeared behind his back. He then flew straight toward the open gates.

“Hahaha! I'm going in as well! Don't fall behind, my children!” Bear King laughed savagely before letting out a mighty roar. The Strangers behind him cried out in unison and followed him into Anyang as well.

“Let's go!” Dark Eye and Rotten Crown exchanged a joyful glance with one another before trailing behind the horde.

Right now, Anyang was like a tiger without teeth and claws. It might look impassable from the outside, but they didn't need to overcome its sheer walls and vigilant guards as the gates were wide

open. The horde of Strangers quickly entered the county without encountering any resistance whatsoever.

“Hahaha! I’m in! Now, where are the humans? I’m not leaving until I’ve absolutely filled my tummy with human flesh today!”

“Kill... kill...”

The Strangers could hardly wait to start their bloody feast.

Suddenly, Dark Eye said in a puzzled voice, “Is it just me, or is something wrong, Rotten Crown?”

“What do you mean?” Rotten Crown asked confusedly.

He answered, “Anyang is severely undermanned right now, but we should’ve encountered at least one or two guards by now, right? There’s no way they’re *that* undermanned!”

Rotten Crown started looking left and right. “Now that you mention it...”

Slam!

Before the two Strangers could puzzle out the problem, the gate behind them abruptly slammed shut. Then, torches were lit on the walls and the buildings until the entire place looked as bright as the day. The soldiers who had been lying in wait all this time stepped out of their hiding spots and aimed their arrows at the horde of Strangers below, scale armor glinting brightly against the flames.

Dark Eye’s pupil contracted in shock before he shouted, “The Shenwu Defense Force? Shit! It’s an ambush!”

On the walls, a cold sneer crossed You Da’s lips as he waved his hand. “Loose!”

Bow twangs deafened the ears, and arrows rained down from the sky like a downpour.

The bow and arrows the soldiers were wielding were no ordinary weapons. The bow was called the Starbreaker Bow, and the arrows the Starbreaker Arrows. They were weapons researched and produced by the Divine Defense Department of Chu itself.

Powerful and deadly, they were the perfect weapons to use against the resilient Strangers. The horde immediately fell row by row like bundles of wheat.

“Quick! We need to get deeper into the county before it’s too late!” A wise Stranger roared and ran down the street. The rest followed right behind them.

Chapter 86: Rolling Heads

Thud thud thud thud...

The Stranger’s quick thinking was commendable. The only problem was that the humans had already anticipated it. Squad and squad of soldiers marched out in orderly footsteps and blocked off the intersections immediately. Even the rooftops were crawling with Shenwu Defense Force soldiers.

Slam! “Shenwu!”

Slam! “Shenwu!”

Slam! “Shenwu!”

Each soldier was armed with a saber and a shield. They would smack their shields with their sabers before roaring, “Shenwu!” When their fighting spirit and bloodthirst had reached its peak, they finally cried,

“KILL!”

Arrows rained down from above and turned the foremost Strangers into pincushions. It would be nice if they could annihilate the horde before they could get close, but just a few rounds later, the Strangers were almost upon them. Someone cried, “Raise shields!” and the front row immediately switched to their shields and held it firmly in front of them.

The Strangers hit the defense line and battered the soldiers with everything they got, but it was as futile as trying to punch through a solid wall bare-handed. They were unable to put even a dent on the defense line. Not a moment too soon, spears emerged from the gaps between the shields and nailed the nearest Strangers to the floor.

Not all Strangers were so easy to kill, however. Not far away, Rainbow Child stared at the floor of dead Strangers beneath his feet and giggled, “Hehehe! This is fun!” A squad of soldiers shot a hail of arrows at him, but a flash of rainbow disintegrated the projectiles instantly. He started shaking his head back and forth until his twintails grew as large as a whip. When he was ready, he whipped his head around and severed all the humans and Strangers around him into two.

“Hehehe! Kill kill kill~”

As Rainbow Child continued to shake its head, its twintails spun faster and faster. Eventually, they were fast enough to slice even the toughest human or Stranger in its range into itsy bitsy pieces.

Flutter flutter!

Near the walls, Grandpa Tree gave his body a shake and stirred all the butterflies resting on his branches awake. They took to the air and flew straight toward the Shenwu Defense Force soldiers on the walls.

Despite the torches, the sky was pitch black, and the butterflies made no noise whatsoever when they flew. By the time the soldiers took notice, some of them were already touched by the butterflies.

The black butterflies looked frail enough to be blown away by a stiff breeze, but their deadliness was no joke. Every soldier who was touched by the butterflies immediately collapsed to their feet and rolled back and forth on the floor, screaming. At the same time, tiny black balls that were shaped like fish eggs started growing out of their nose, mouth, eyes and more.

The black eggs only needed a few seconds to hatch into black butterflies. Over time, their numbers grew to the point where they resembled a cyclone instead of a swarm. Wherever the black cyclone traveled, soldiers collapsed and died in abject pain.

Thankfully, a captain realized the danger and ordered immediately, “Burn them with your fire talismans! Ready, release!” A massive ball of fire hit the cyclone of black butterflies, and they were gone just like that.

Not done yet, the captain barked out another order, “Archers! Ready! Loose!”

The soldiers immediately released a hail of Starbreaker Arrows at Grandpa Tree.

“I’ll help you, Grandpa Tree!”

It was at this moment the ground beside Grandpa Tree suddenly turned into a pool of bubbly mud. Every time a bubble was popped by an arrow, a Yin Spirit would emerge and fly straight toward the soldiers. As Yin Spirits do not have a physical body, the arrows and physical weapons in general were useless against them. They easily passed through the arrows and possessed the soldiers before they could react.

Every soldier in the Shenwu Defense Force was overflowing with vigor, yang energy and bloodthirst. Logically speaking, a Yin Spirit was the last thing they were afraid of. In reality, Granny Mud’s Yin Spirits easily extinguished their minds and puppeteered their bodies to attack the rest of the soldiers. That section of the wall was in absolute chaos for a time.

This was nothing compared to the battlefield where the Servant of Fear was rampaging, however. The Stranger was walking deeper toward the county with leisurely footsteps as if they couldn’t sense the soldiers lying in ambush all around it. The eyes on their squirming warts and tentacles kept opening and closing and releasing pulses of light at a steady pace. Every time the light washed over the soldiers, their expressions would grow increasingly dazed and horrified, and their bodies would grow warts and tentacles. Eventually, they all transformed into mindless creatures who knew nothing but death and destruction. So far, every soldier who was unfortunate enough to be stationed next to the Servant of Fear had transformed into a Stranger!

At the beginning, the battle was going completely in the favor of the Shenwu Defense Force. But after powerful Strangers such as the Servant of Fear, Grandpa Tree, Granny Mud, Rainbow Child and more had joined the battle, the tables were slowly but surely turning against the humans instead. Even the weaker Strangers who were struggling to survive earlier found various openings to batter the Shenwu Defense Force further.

“Hahaha! Puny humans!” The Bear King laughed savagely while shaking off some of the Starbreaker Arrows lodged in its fur. Although the projectiles were deadly against most Strangers, they were unable to pierce the bear Stranger’s thick hide at all. With a mighty roar, the Bear King stomped the limestone floor beneath it into pieces and charged straight toward the squad of soldiers blocking the intersection.

The Bear King was as huge as a small hill and just as strong. Every time it took a step, the ground shook like a major earthquake was going on. It was terrifying to put it mildly.

“Shield wall!”

The Shenwu Defense Force squad did not dare to treat it lightly. After the order was given, they immediately slammed their shields to the ground and formed an impenetrable shield wall.

Boom!

The shield wall held, but it wasn’t without a terrible cost. The impact was so terrible that the shields directly in the Bear King’s path crumpled like wet tissue, and the soldiers directly behind him literally exploded in a shower of gore. The soldiers behind the unfortunate souls were also knocked over and injured to a certain degree. The squad’s morale immediately deflated like a balloon.

“Hahaha! It’s feeding time!” The Bear King laughed before catching the closest soldier in a death grip and ripping them in half. Then, it shoved the dead man into its mouth and chewed vigorously.

“Oh... Tasty, so tasty! Human flesh just tastes so much better than everything else in the world! I need more!”

Absolutely soaked in blood that didn’t belong to itself, the Bear King looked beyond terrifying to put it mildly. No one was able to muster the courage to fight it even after the bloodthirsty Stranger had gobbled up their companion. The Bear King was just about to grab another soldier when a cold snort broke the spell,

“A puny Man Bear dares to invade Anyang? Die!”

A beam of sword energy bloomed from the darkness and struck the Bear King squarely in the chest. The Bear King’s laughter abruptly cut short, and it looked down to find a bloody hole where his heart should be.

“RRAAAAGGGHHH!”

However, the Bear King was even more vigorous than imagined. Not only was it still alive, it let out a full-throated roar that caused everyone to raise their weapons in alarm. Just when they were prepared for the worst, the Stranger abruptly turned tail and ran. The Bear King was vigorous, but not so vigorous that it could keep fighting without a heart!

For a moment, it looked like the Stranger would make its escape. Then, a young man ran up to its back much faster than expected and jumped onto its head. The Bear King noticed this and attempted to clap him with both hands. The size difference between the two could only be described as massive. If the attack succeeded, the young man was absolutely going to be flattened like a pancake.

The young man didn’t dodge out of the way, however. He waited until the last second before injecting a bit of strength into his right leg. The Bear King’s head abruptly exploded in a shower of blood and brains, and all strength left its body in an instant. Its hill-sized body then collapsed on the ground, kicked up a ton of dust, and finally jolted the stunned Shenwu Defense Force squad back to reality.

“This Man Bear is an exceptionally tenacious Stranger who can stay alive even if you cut off all of its limbs and crush its heart. The only way to kill it in one strike is to destroy its head,” said the young man as he leaped back down to the ground. It was only then the Shenwu Defense Force squad noticed that the young man was even younger than they expected, and he wore a charismatic smile that naturally made the heart fonder. He was, of course, Ye Qing.

The bear Stranger called itself the Bear King, but it was really just a Man Bear. A Man Bear was a Stranger with a human’s body but a bear’s face. It was cunning, capable of human speech, and loved nothing more than to hide in a mountainous forest and lure travelers to its maw by pretending to be a human. That said, it was a bonafide Malice-class Stranger despite its cowardly tactics. It sported a bear’s tremendous strength and a level of vitality that few could compare.

“Everyone already knows you’re a scholar, Joyless, so quit showing off and go help the others already!” A clear, bright voice came from above. It belonged to Yan Yufei.

After Ye Qing gave him a thumbs-up, Yan Yufei turned to Ling Jianqiu and said, “You too, Chief Ling!”

The Chief of Bureau, Ling Jianqiu shot Ye Qing a meaningful look but knew that it wasn’t time to indulge in his curiosity. After swinging his sword around and beheading all the Strangers that stood in his way, he charged straight toward the mysterious and terrifying Servant of Fear.

“Be careful, Joyless!” Yan Yufei said one last time before charging toward the battlefield where Grandpa Tree and Granny Mud were. His seal reached them first as he yelled, “You are in the realm of humans, Strangers! This is no place for you to rampage as you please!”

Just like the last time, nature bent itself to Yan Yufei’s will as he spoke. As the seal fell, the wind turned as sharp as sabers, and the sky started raining swords all of a sudden. All the Strangers close to Grandpa Tree and Granny Mud were immediately turned into pincushions or cut into many smaller pieces.

“The Seal of the Land?” Grandpa Tree exclaimed in alarm. He was clearly very wary of the seal. He waved his branches and sent his butterflies toward the seal in an attempt to stop it, but the seal responded immediately and turned golden bright like the sun, turning the black butterflies into dust before they even got close. Not only that, the pool of mud that was Granny Mud sizzled under the golden sun and caused her to screech in pain and panic. She clearly had little to no resistance against the seal’s power.

The Will of the Dragon and the Will of the People were the bane of all Strangers. It was why the upper hand was firmly in Yan Yufei’s grasp even Although Grandpa Tree and Granny Mud were Malice-class Strangers, and Yan Yufei’s strength was only equal to that of a middle-stage Vessel Augmentor.

Obviously, Ye Qing wasn’t going to sit idle while Ling Jianqiu and Yan Yufei were battling some of the strongest Strangers of the horde. He plowed head first into the area with the most Strangers and began swinging, sweeping, chopping, swiping, poking, cutting and slashing every enemy in his way. Although his technique was about as basic as it could get, it did not matter since he moved so fast it was like he was operating on a different time scale compared to the others. Moreover, he almost always took out a Stranger in one hit because he never failed to hit their weak spots from the most unpredictable angles.

His crescent saber went up and down again and again. It took him less than a minute to clear out an entire area and leaving dozens of Strangers dead beside his feet. Not even bothering to catch a breather since it was unnecessary, he rushed to the next area and repeated the massacre all over again. It was like he was the King of Hell himself appearing on this earth to lay judgment upon the Strangers. Absolutely no one was a match for him.

It wasn't long before every soldier on the battlefield noticed the young and incredibly strong youngster. He was like the wind, the shadow, and the lightning bolt all at the same time. Wherever he went, heads rolled, and blood flowed like a river. He had saved countless soldiers who were on the brink of defeat and thwarted many dangerous assaults that could've dealt a severe blow to their efforts. It was such incredible heroism that it was impossible not to feel impressed or grateful toward him. Their biggest regret was that they weren't able to shoot him a word of thanks because he was usually gone by the time they got the chance to do so.

Ye Qing had no idea what the others were thinking. It was because killing the Strangers and earning those sweet, sweet dragon-serpent runes was the only thought in his mind right now.

In the past, he had to look all over the place just to find one or two Strangers to kill. Now, they were trapped here with him with nowhere to run. This was the moment he had schemed and prepared so long for, so how could he not reap these walking bags of experience to his heart's content? Sometimes, he was even tempted to say, "Don't kill the Strangers! Let me do it!"

"Wow, you're incredible! I'll play with you!"

Ye Qing was in the zone when he heard a giggling voice. When his sides abruptly prickled with danger, he did not hesitate to execute Blood Sea Fragrance and dash out of the way like a phantom. The second he was gone, colorful rays of light struck the spot he was standing on and afflicted a couple of Strangers. They immediately grew colorful, aromatic mushrooms that drained them into a dry husk in just a matter of seconds.

Chapter 87: Ready Or Not

"Who the fuck stole my jungle camp [1]!" Ye Qing turned around and glared at Rainbow Child with deep displeasure.

"You look really strong, big brother. Come play with me!" Rainbow Child giggled before swinging his twintails at Ye Qing.

Ye Qing gently leaped into the air and darted all over the place like gravity had no hold over him. No matter how fast Rainbow Child swung his twintails, he was always able to dodge them by a hair's breadth.

"No fun! It's not fun if you dodge, big brother!" Rainbow Child complained with a pout. As if on cue, his twintails abruptly came loose and spread into a sea of black hair—or was it? When Ye Qing looked closer, he discovered that the "hair" wasn't hair at all. It was some sort of tendril that one could usually find beneath the cap of a mushroom or other seed plants. In any case, it was spine-chilling to see them flailing all over the place and towering over the place like a tidal wave.

Swoosh!

In response, Ye Qing flicked his wrist and swung his sleeve. His energy spiked to peak levels in an instant, and the clouds in the sky vibrated as if responding to the move.

"Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve"

Boom!

A long gap appeared in the sea of black tendrils and temporarily revealed the sky and the moon. The next moment, Ye Qing appeared in front of Rainbow Child and bashed his skull with a downward palm strike as swift as lightning. As the Stranger was slammed into the ground, the ground split asunder, and the resulting shockwave threw countless nearby Strangers into the air or killed them outright.

Exhaling, Ye Qing rose to his feet and got ready to leave. It was at this moment he heard Rainbow Child saying, “Oh, that hurts...”

“He’s still alive?” Ye Qing blinked in surprise. He had reached the adept level in the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” and unlocked all twelve Standard Meridians, eight Extraordinary Meridians, and three hundred and sixty bodily points, so his true qi was far greater than your average Vessel Augmentor. His physical body was also strong enough to shatter rocks or kill a fellow Vessel Augmentor in one strike. He hadn’t conserved his strength when he dealt what he thought was the killing blow earlier, so he was quite surprised to find that the frail-looking Malice-class Stranger was still alive and well.

“Hehehe, it’s been a while since I felt so much pain. You’re truly incredible, big brother!”

The dust cloud had finally settled enough to reveal Rainbow Child, but the Malice-class Stranger looked very different from before. For starters, his head had transformed into a mushroom covered in rainbow-colored dots that emitted rainbow-colored flashes. Countless hair-thin tendrils were floating above the dots as well. He had also grown a thick stalk beneath its feet. The Malice-class Stranger actually looked pretty cute in its current state, if one ignored the fact that it was a murderous, bloodthirsty monster.

“The Rainbow Mushroom...” Ye Qing frowned deeply when he finally recognized Rainbow Child’s true form. The Rainbow Mushroom was a Malice-class Stranger whose body was covered in rainbow dots. Born in dark, damp, and miasma-ridden places, it emitted colorful lights at night to lure unsuspecting Strangers into its range before releasing infectious spores to consume them. In other words, the Rainbow Mushroom wasn’t just a vicious Stranger, it was one that ate other vicious Strangers to sustain itself.

“Hehehe... I’m going to get serious now, big brother! Get ready!” Rainbow Child warned before shaking its massive cap and releasing a thick cloud of flashy dots at Ye Qing. They were his spores, of course.

Ye Qing had already seen what the spores did to its victims just now, so he didn’t dare to treat it lightly and leaped out of the way. The spores did not discriminate against the living or the dead, all flesh and blood beings grew colorful mushrooms as soon as they were infected by it.

“Hehehe...”

That wasn't all. The tiny mushrooms grew eyes and limbs before uprooting themselves from the bodies. While giggling, they hopped toward Ye Qing like miniature versions of Rainbow Child.

"Our name is Shroomie, and we fear nothing. Ready or not, here we come!"

"Our name is Shroomie, and we fear nothing. Ready or not, here we come!"

The little mushrooms waved their little hands, kicked their little legs, and chanted their little battle cry as they rushed toward Ye Qing. If a human or a Stranger happened to get in their way, some of them would explode and take out the obstacle while the rest continued to march their way toward Ye Qing.

"Interesting!" Ye Qing let out a chuckle and stopped in his tracks. When he slapped his hand on the ground, the long street in front of him shook once before spitting out a bunch of limestone bricks. Before they dropped back to the ground, Ye Qing swung his sleeves and caused them to spin wildly like he was conjuring a cyclone. Finally, he sent the cyclone crashing toward the army of small mushrooms.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

There was no way the little mushrooms could've dodged out of their way courtesy of their short feet. As a result, they turned into mini fireballs and blew up that entire section of the street.

"This is so much fun! Yippee!" Rainbow Child cheered and clapped his hands boisterously while staring at the fireworks. He looked like he was enjoying the time of his life.

It was at this moment Rainbow Child sensed something and let out a strange yelp. He tried jumping to the side, but his feet had just left the ground when a bolt of lightning pierced through the dust clouds and hit him squarely in the chest. He instantly exploded into a million pieces.

Ye Qing slowly stepped out of the dust and curled his finger, and a sword as thin as a leaf flew back into his head. It was Lightning Bolt, of course.

"Our name is Shroomie, and you are scary. We had enough fun, so see you never!"

Ye Qing thought that Rainbow Child was dead this time for sure, but the shattered pieces on the sundered ground abruptly bounced into the air, grew arms and legs, and took off in every direction.

"He's still not dead?" Ye Qing blinked and unleashed his Blood Shadows. The shapeless, formless entities immediately spread out and sliced through every Rainbow Child they came across practically without resistance. It was a mistake though. The sliced chunks simply transformed into more mini Rainbow Children before running toward the nearest crowds.

"What a pain in the ass!" Ye Qing rubbed his nose in annoyance. At this rate, Rainbow Child was going to grow into a horde of his own. That said, his senses were telling him the Stranger was steadily weakening with every attack. This meant that his attacks were working to a certain extent, and that he would hit a limit eventually.

“In that case...” A wicked grin sprung onto Ye Qing’s face as he struck out with his left hand. A terrifyingly potent force mixed with a jet of bluish black flame immediately engulfed the swarm of Rainbow Children.

“Boundless Lightning Palm”

“Blue Demon Hand”

This time, his attack was far more effective. The flame consumed the duplicates in just the blink of an eye and turned most of them into ash. His change of tactics came a tad too slow, however. One Rainbow Child ultimately managed to escape the all-consuming flame and disappeared into a crowd of Strangers.

“Damn, I should’ve used the Blue Demon Hand sooner. But did it really think it could escape me?” commented Ye Qing with a positively diabolical smile on his face. He hadn’t wasted all that time and energy just so that his precious dragon-serpent runes would elude him at the last moment.

He immediately gave chase, but he made sure to kill every Stranger he encountered along the way. They too were dragon-serpent runes, and he wasn’t going to leave any behind.

“Granny Mud! Grandpa Tree! Rainbow Child has come to help you!”

Rainbow Child had not been running aimlessly like a headless chicken. He had been making a beeline toward his fellow Strangers since the moment he lost the battle.

When Granny Mud turned and saw the mushroom Stranger, she exclaimed in astonishment, “What happened to you, Rainbow Child?”

Speaking of Granny Mud and Grandpa Tree, the two Strangers were still fighting against Yan Yufei. Although the Seal of the Land was the bane of all Strangers, the two Strangers were quite strong, and it was a one-versus-two battle. It was why the battle was temporarily locked in a stalemate.

At first, Granny Mud and Grandpa Tree were glad to see Rainbow Child. Yan Yufei might be able to force two of them into a stalemate, but there was no way he could fight three powerful Malice-class Strangers at once. That was when they saw the state Rainbow Child was reduced to and realized what he was really planning. He wasn’t trying to help them, he was using them to get away from his pursuer! The human who defeated Rainbow Child must be exceptionally strong, and they could only imagine what would happen if they decided to join forces with Yan Yufei!

Granny Mud immediately let out a cry of outrage, “You would do us harm, Rainbow Child?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I came to help you, Granny!” Rainbow Child giggled with feigned innocence.

“Nani? Buy one get two? Now this is a deal I can get behind!” It was at this moment Ye Qing arrived at the scene and saw the weakened Granny Mud, Grandpa Tree and Rainbow Child all in one place. His eyes immediately lit up with greed and glee.

Yan Yufei also exclaimed in pleasant surprise when he saw Ye Qing, "Perfect timing, Joyless! I need to help the others, so I'm leaving these animals to you! Goodbye!" He then withdrew his seal and left just like that.

Ye Qing: "... *You could at least pretend to give me a hand before you up and leave, you sonuvabitch. Where is your sense of camaraderie?*

Meanwhile, Granny Mud and Grandpa Tree could hardly believe their luck. They were so sure that Yan Yufei would team up with the newcomer and wipe them out once and for all, but for whatever reason, he had chosen to withdraw from the battlefield instead. The newcomer was only one person, and he was so young he couldn't possibly put up a good fight. How could they not be overjoyed with this sudden turn of events?

"Kill him!" Grandpa Tree shouted and shook his branches. A swarm of black butterflies immediately surged toward Ye Qing, though their numbers were far sparser than before. Clearly, the battle against Yan Yufei had consumed much of his energy.

"Egg Butterflies?" Ye Qing furrowed his brow. He had read about this Stranger from a book. The Egg Butterfly was a kind of Red-class Stranger that procreated by injecting its eggs into flesh and blood creatures, and the eggs hatched immediately when it made contact with blood. It was quite similar to the Bellyfish in some ways but far more dangerous. It was because the Bellyfish could only wait for a suitable host to stumble upon them, while the Egg Butterfly could fly up to its victims to lay its eggs.

Naturally, Ye Qing wasn't going to allow the Egg Butterflies to get close. When they swarm was around ten meters away from him, he immediately swung his sleeves and killed them all with a deadly gust of force. However, Grandpa Tree hadn't been idle while he was dealing with the Egg Butterflies. The tree Stranger had crossed the distance between them with surprising speed before attacking his flank with half a canopy of sharp, black branches. It looked very much like a spear wall.

Ye Qing immediately channeled his qi to jump away from Grandpa Tree. He didn't want to clash directly against Grandpa Tree, not because he couldn't, but because it was unnecessary. With Blood Sea Fragrance he could both dodge the attack and launch a decisive counterattack at once, so why would he opt for a suboptimal solution instead?

However, the earth underneath him abruptly softened into a pool of mud before he could jump away. The next thing he knew, he had sunk to knee level and was still sinking by the second.

"Grandma Mud..."

Ye Qing frowned and tried to lift his feet, but it felt like a pair of hands grabbing his ankles with a death grip and pulling him toward the bottom with all their might. This mud Stranger was most likely the "Granny Mud" Rainbow Child had mentioned earlier.

"Keke. Die, human!" The face on the tree trunk scrunched into an eerie cackle when Grandpa Tree noted that Ye Qing was unable to break free from Granny Mud's grasp. This was the plan they had come up with after Yan Yufei had left the scene. Grandpa

Tree would launch a direct attack to attract Ye Qing's attention, and Grandma Mud would immobilize him while he wasn't looking. While the young man was struggling, Grandpa Tree would deal the decisive, fatal blow.

Chapter 88: The Iron Shirt Gang, At Your Service

"Die? So sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not done with life yet," answered Ye Qing with a shrug. A moment before Grandpa's tree branches would skewer him, he channeled his true qi and swung his sleeves around like he was drawing a circle.

"Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve"

According to the Tao Te Ching, water was the softest and weakest thing in the world, but it could never be defeated by strong, firm things such as a punch for no amount of punches was going to change its form. Through this, it was understood that the soft could overcome the hard, and the weak the strong.

As far as his previous world was concerned, no one was able to carry it out in practice both physically or philosophically—but Ye Qing wasn't in his old world anymore. "Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve" was a martial art that could be hard or soft depending on the circumstances, and when it became as soft as water, there was no attack in the world it could not defend against.

As Ye Qing swung his sleeves round and round, the surrounding air grew thicker and thicker until Grandpa Tree felt as if he was wading through water. The closer the falling branches got to Ye Qing, the slower they became until finally, their momentum was completely spent. The second it happened, Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath and let out a powerful croak from his abdomen. Then, he hardened his sleeves into steel and threw his arms down like he was throwing a giant stele.

Grandpa Tree blanched when the surrounding air abruptly transformed into a raging, unstoppable torrent. Before he could react, it crashed against his canopy and snapped countless twigs and branches.

"Argh!"

Grandpa Tree let out a bloodcurdling scream and hurriedly pulled away from Ye Qing, but his canopy had been reduced to just the thickest, strongest branches. Even his trunk was barren like that of a man who shaved himself bald from head to toe.

The branches were part of Grandpa Tree's body. Naturally, losing them had greatly diminished his power. Despite this, he was too stunned to feel much pain. That was just how powerful the young man was. The young man should've been trivial to kill since Grandma Mud had immobilized his lower half, and yet he still managed to defeat him and deal him a severe blow in one hit. Grandpa Tree realized too late that the young man was actually stronger than even Yan Yufei.

I must escape! The tree Stranger turned around to run as soon as the thought had crossed his mind. There was literally no reason for him to stay unless he had a firewood wish. This meant that he was abandoning Granny Mud to the young man's mercy, sure, but she was an ally-of-convenience, not his wife. Like hell he was going to sacrifice his life for her!

Zap!

Alas, blinding light shot through his body practically the second he made a move. It was like he was struck by a lightning bolt from the Nine Heavens above. His trunk turned ashen, and fire and smoke rose from multiple parts of his body. When the blinding light finally faded, it was revealed that there was a scorched hole at the center of Grandpa Tree's forehead. Then, a beam of light shot through his head once and landed snugly in Ye Qing's palm. It was a sword. Clearly, it was the one that had given the tree Stranger the time of his life.

Thump!

With that, the great tree collapsed to the ground and ceased living forever.

The moment Grandpa Tree fell, Granny Mud was struck by a terrible sense of danger. She immediately released a ton of bubbles filled with yin spirits, and unlike with the Shenwu Defense Force these yin spirits did not wait for Ye Qing to break them out of their ephemeral prison. They circled around Ye Qing and cried, laughed, roared or screamed at him to confuse and damage his mind.

A weak-willed person might have collapsed to the unholy noise and lost their mind, but Ye Qing was completely unhurt not just because his mind and spirit were strong, but also because he had the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method". It prevented any and all evil energy from invading his head.

When Ye Qing felt the grip on his ankles disappearing without warning, he chuckled. "You think you can escape?"

First, he extended his left arm and clenched his fist. A ball of Netherflame immediately consumed the surrounding yin spirits and killed them before they could even scream. Then, he punched his left fist into the mud below so hard that the kilometer-long street shuddered a little. The pool of mud started burning intensely, and no matter how hard it struggled it was unable to extinguish the flames.

The Netherflame was said to be capable of burning anything and everything. Forget a pool of mud, it could've burned through solid stone with little difficulty.

The pool of mud grew shallower and shallower as the Netherflame burned. When it was almost completely dry, Ye Qing abruptly plunged his left hand into the ground and pulled out a strange creature that looked like a pitch black lizard. It had an old woman's face, and its body looked like it was made from mud. It stank to the high heavens as a matter of course.

The lizard wasn't dead yet, so it kept struggling and roaring on top of its lungs. It was, of course, Granny Mud.

"So ugly!"

Ye Qing shook his head in disgust before crushing the lizard between his hands. Obviously, he dashed away before the smelly mud could stain his clothes.

After Grandpa Tree and Granny Mud were dead, Ye Qing immediately unleashed his spirit and scanned his surroundings. Unfortunately, Rainbow Child was nowhere to be seen. He clicked his tongue in disappointment, "Tsk. That damn mushroom managed to escape in the end!"

Of course, that wasn't to say that he had wasted his energy. Buy one get two Strangers would always be a great deal especially since Grandpa Tree and Granny Mud were way easier to kill than

they should have been. It was because they had exhausted most of their energy against Yan Yufei, and they had underestimated him because of his age.

Ye Qing let out a little sigh before channeling the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” to restore his spent true qi immediately. Once he had returned to peak condition, he walked over to Grandpa Tree and stuffed his corpse into his Nature’s Shell.

Grandpa Tree was a tree, and trees were incredibly useful for a number of things, much less one who was a powerful Stranger. He could probably use his main body to create Strange Artifacts, or his branches to refine pills or something. Worst case scenario, he could use the body to make sturdy furniture or houses.

As for Granny Mud... he wouldn’t use her even if she did turn out to be a useful ingredient. To put it in a nutshell, ugliness is a sin!

“Kill!”

“This way, men!”

“Charge! Do not allow any one of these bitches to live!”

“Kill! Kill them all!”

The sounds of fighting, fire and blood weren’t just contained to the entrance. In fact, it had spread to the entire Anyang a long time ago. Ye Qing glanced at his surrounding once before letting out a long, long sigh in his head.

Their preparation was substantial, and their ambush had gone as well as it could be. Despite this, a lot of Strangers still managed to break through the defense line and enter the county. A good number of them were powerful and strange entities such as Grandpa Tree or Rainbow Child as well. As a result, the Shenwu Defense Force, the Sentinels, the bailiffs and more still incurred a horrific amount of casualties.

“It is time!” Ye Qing muttered to himself and pulled out a contact talisman from his sleeve. It exploded like fireworks when he tossed it into the air.

Not long after the contact talisman was activated, a cacophony of footsteps suddenly appeared from multiple directions. At the same time, loud, high-spirited cries boomed from the streets:

“Lord Yan, Tao Xian of the Iron Shirt Gang, at your service! Let’s defend Anyang together!”

“Ruan Hongluo of the Iron Shirt Gang, at your service!”

“Jie Chen of the Iron Shirt Gang, at your service!”

“Yi Jun of the Iron Shirt Gang, at your service!”

The cries were extremely loud and out of place all things considered, which was why they immediately drew countless attention. Yan Yufei had been fighting against the Servant of Fear until he heard someone calling out to him. When he looked, he saw the Hallmasters of the Iron Shirt

Gang—Tao Xian, Ruan Hongluo, Yi Jun and more—and a large group of Iron Shirt Gang disciples joining the battle and killing all the Strangers around them.

Why are they here? And why are they shouting their arrival? Yan Yufei looked confused, but regardless of the Iron Shirt Gang's intentions, it was a good thing that they had come to assist them.

It was at this moment another vigorous voice boomed, "Qiao Six, at your service, my lord!" The information broker showed up at the end of the street right after that with Zuo Yiyao and Hong Yu in tow.

Qiao Six came too? What's going on? Who gathered these people together? Yan Yufei's confusion was growing by the second. Qiao Six sensed his gaze and rubbed his nose in embarrassment. Honestly, he hadn't wanted to shout a battle cry like the Iron Shirt Gang because it was embarrassing, but for some reason it also felt wrong to show up without announcing himself. Plus, how would Yan Yufei know that he had come to help if he didn't say anything? Sometimes, being thick-skinned was a good thing! A great thing even!

Qiao Six saluted Yan Yufei from afar. Then, he ordered, "Let's go, Yiyao!" and charged toward the Strangers.

Yan Yufei was still confused, but the pressure on their forces had greatly lessened thanks to their presence. Naturally, he was thankful.

"On behalf of the people of Anyang and Chu, thank you all for coming to our assistance!"

The reinforcements responded, "No worries, Lord Yan! Slaying Strangers is our natural responsibility!"

The addition of the Iron Shirt Gang and Qiao Six's forces instantly bolstered the Shenwu Defense Force and the Sentinels' morale. For the first time in a long while, they launched an offensive that broke the stalemate and slowly shifted the tides of battle in the humans' favor.

"Perfect!" Ye Qing snapped his fingers in self-satisfaction as he observed the battlefield. Naturally, he was the one who had arranged for the Iron Shirt Gang to appear at this time, and also the one who told them to shout the battle cry. How else would the people know that the Iron Shirt Gang was the one who helped them during their time of need without it?

The reason he did this was simple. It was to make the government owe the Iron Shirt Gang a favor, and to give the Iron Shirt Gang the opportunity to ally themselves with the government.

He had been forced to reveal Lightning Bolt and the Blue Demon Hand in this battle, so there was no hiding the fact that he was the one who killed Yan Tieyi and annihilated the Zheng Clan. This meant that opportunistic hyenas and those whose interests had been hurt by those incidents would be tempted to attack him and disturb his peaceful everyday life. In that case, he might as well reveal himself on his own terms.

No matter how this battle turned out, the Iron Shirt Gang would be remembered as the faction who went above their obligation and helped Anyang during their time of need. Add to the fact that he was the one who revealed this whole conspiracy and came up with the plan to annihilate the

Strangers in the first place, and neither Yan Yufei nor Ling Jianqiu could punish him even though they knew that he was the one who murdered Yan Tieyi and Zheng Feng.

This merit also guaranteed that the government would help out the Iron Shirt Gang if—no, when the hyenas finally launched their assault. The government wouldn't favor them forever as a matter of course, but in the short term, they must step in unless they wanted to give off the impression they were ingrates. Also, it would leave a stain on their reputation if they chose not to repay the brave people of Anyang who came to their aid during their time of need.

The government's interference would definitely intimidate the other factions, and the Iron Shirt Gang would be safe in the short term. That should buy him enough time to grow so strong that any faction would realize the folly of attacking him or the Iron Shirt Gang. And if they were too stupid to realize that, well, he didn't mind destroying them and enriching himself through their dead bodies!

In short, he was killing multiple birds with one stone with this one act!

Boom!

It was at this moment a loud explosion sent both Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu flying. Their faces were covered in reddish warts and tentacles, but they were far enough from the root cause that the anomalous growth eventually subsided into nothing. They were obviously having trouble with one of the most powerful Strangers in the area, the Servant of Fear.

"Our lords are in danger! We need to protect them! Men, charge!"

A squad of a dozen Shenwu Defense Force soldiers cried in outrage when they saw that Yan Yufei and Ling Jianfei weren't just beaten back, but injured. They did not hesitate to charge the Servant of Fear.

"No! It's dangerous!"

"Stop right there!"

Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu blanched and cried out in warning, but it was too late. The soldiers had just gotten within ten meters of the Stranger when their faces, their arms and other body parts started growing reddish flesh buds that twisted around like worms. It should not need to be said just how disgusting they looked.

The closer they got to the Servant of Fear, the longer and thicker the reddish buds became. Eventually, they transformed into oily and disgusting tentacles.

Why didn't the soldiers get away from the Servant of Fear as soon as their bodies started changing? It was because their minds had long since extinguished under the Stranger's unnatural influence. Their husks quickly transformed into disgusting monsters that hovered protectively around the Servant of Fear.

"What a bizarre and terrifying Stranger!" Ye Qing watched the Servant of Fear warily. The abomination was easily the strongest Stranger he had encountered tonight, so without hesitation, he... turned around and walked away in the opposite direction.

It was the only logical conclusion. He should just leave the Servant of Fear to the professionals since he didn't know if he could defeat it without endangering his own life. There were still a lot of Strangers to kill anyway. He was sure that no one would begrudge him for focusing on the small fries!

Chapter 89: Servant of Fear

Unfortunately, Ye Qing had just taken a few steps when Yan Yufei called out to him from behind. “What are you doing, Joyless? Get over here and help us already!”

“...”

Ye Qing paused and felt a wave of exasperation. *Your talent is wasted being a magistrate, Lord Yan! With eyes like yours, you should've been a thief instead!*

Ye Qing wasn't going to give up without a fight though. While muttering, “Oh wow, the battlefield is so loud, I can't hear anything...” he resumed his footsteps and strode toward the nearest exit as quickly as he could. This time though, he had barely taken a step when Yan Yufei came again like a mother urging her son to do his housework, or else:

“I know you can hear me, Joyless! Get over here already!”

“Dammit! Who said that only the wicked get no rest?” Ye Qing had no choice but to turn around and shoot Yan Yufei a sulky look. *Just because we're bros doesn't mean I work for free!*

There was no escaping his fate though. Even if Yan Yufei wasn't staring at him like a hawk, Ling Jianqiu had turned around to look at him as well. He was literally being peer pressured to assist, and he was in no position to say no. No wonder people said that the reward for good work was more work!

“At your service, my lords!” Ye Qing replied reluctantly while turning around and walking back to the duo.

After Ye Qing had gotten close to them, Ling Jianqiu stared at him for a bit before saying in his usual cool voice, “We meet again, Ye Qing. You're a good man. You are the main reason we are able to wipe out these animals and save Anyang from destruction. We will never forget your contribution!”

“You flatter me, Chief Ling. It's my natural responsibility!” Ye Qing responded with a respectful salute.

Clearly, Yan Yufei had told Ling Jianqiu everything. It wasn't surprising though. There was no way the magistrate could have set up this ambush without going through Ling Jianqiu first.

“Leave the conversation for later, you two. We still have a difficult fight ahead of us!” Yan Yufei interrupted before waving his hand and causing the world to shudder. As the Seal of the Land fell toward the Servant of Fear with great speed, he chanted,

“The earth howls, and the mountains shake with fury!”

An ink wash painting of a meandering mountain range appeared in the sky and crashed down on the Servant of Fear. Everything within ten meters of the Servant of Fear—the floor and the transformed Strangers protecting them—immediately flattened like pancakes as if they had been crushed by a true mountain range.

The Servant of Fear themselves were perfectly fine, however. Their face kept alternating between male, female and both, and the eyes on their tentacles and warts opened and closed seemingly at random. In response to Yan Yufei's attack, they unleashed some sort of inexplicable influence that instantly filled the magistrate's mind with all kinds of terrifying and unspeakable images. Not only that, the mental pollution also caused his face to grow reddish flesh buds once more. It was horrifying to put it mildly.

Shing!

Ling Jianqiu's sword rang melodiously and severed the evil influence in one strike. Then, the Chief of Bureau pointed his sword at the Servant of Fear and channeled his true qi. The sky abruptly cleared up, and frigid autumn wind blew unrelentingly across the area. It was no winter, and yet it certainly felt like the beginning of one.

The sky looked empty, but that was only if you were looking for physical objects. In reality, the autumn wind was a sword, and the frigid air was a sword as well. This meant that there were really swords everywhere. This was the power of Ling Jianqiu's sword, Cold Autumn. "When Cold Autumn sings, the sky weeps, and the land speaks of coldness and desolation."

As if sensing true danger from Ling Jianqiu, Servant of Fear abruptly grew a lot more tentacles and flailed them everywhere like crazy. They were trying to prevent Ling Jianqiu from turning the air around it into swords and damaging them.

Shing shing shing!

Despite its best efforts, invisible swords continued to manifest into existence and cut into the slimy tentacles from every direction. Instead of blood, the Servant of Fear bled a kind filthy, smelly yellow liquid that resembled pus water.

The rain of swords was unending, and the tentacles took more and more damage as time passed. However, there were so many tentacles that most of the sword energies failed to hit the Servant of Fear's body. Not only that, the spilling pus left strange ripples in the air that washed over Ling Jianqiu and caused his face to grow fleshy buds as well. As a result, his attack grew weaker and weaker.

When the Servant of Fear noticed that Ling Jianqiu's attacks had weakened, they started withdrawing their tentacles as if to catch a breath. It was at this moment several Blood Shadows appeared seemingly out of nowhere and easily cut through their body like hot knives through butter.

"Is it dead?" Ye Qing wondered out loud. The Blood Shadows were his doing, of course. There was a lull between the Servant of Fear's movements after repelling Ling Jianqiu's powerful attack, and he did not hesitate to exploit the opening to deal them a fatal blow. But despite his comment, he did not think he succeeded. Most Strangers were incredibly hard to kill, and he did not think that a powerful one like the Servant of Fear would go down so easily. He was right.

“It’s still alive! Watch out!” Ling Jianqiu warned. As expected, the severed pieces of flesh on the ground abruptly grew scarlet buds and reconnected with one another before they could react. A second later, it was like the Servant of Fear had never taken a mortal blow.

As soon as the Servant of Fear had revived, they immediately wheeled around and stared at Ye Qing with every eye on their body. In that instant, the surrounding air turned as cold as ice, and Ye Qing felt a chill up his spine. At the same time, countless terrifying and bizarre images started playing in his head.

He saw mountains and mountains of corpses floating above a sea of blood...

He saw countless ghosts and other spectral entities screaming endlessly into the void...

He saw people fighting and killing each other in a war that never ends...

As the terrifying illusions polluted his mind and spirit, Ye Qing started growing fleshy buds from his body parts just like Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu.

“mental pollution? No wonder it’s so difficult to defend against!” he exclaimed in realization. Clearly, the Servant of Fear’s main method of attack was to corrupt its victims’ mind and spirit with unspeakable illusions.

Ye Qing immediately put his hand on his forehead and visualized the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”. The great emperor immediately manifested inside his head and unleashed his light, causing the illusions to melt away like snow. The fleshy buds on his face also disappeared in response.

“Lord Yan, Chief Ling, I think I can kill this Stranger, but I need you to draw its attention and buy me as much time as possible!”

“Got it!” Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu responded immediately. On the surface, it looked like the Servant of Fear’s methods were incredibly basic. They relied solely on mental pollution to kill its enemies, and their physical body—as the Blood Shadows had proven—was very frail. Theoretically, they only needed to get close to the Servant of Fear to kill them.

The problem was that they couldn’t get close. At a certain range, the mental pollution became so strong that it was simply impossible to bear. They would transform into monsters long before they killed the Stranger.

Neither Yan Yufei nor Ling Jianqiu knew how Ye Qing was going to defeat the Servant of Fear, but they saw no reason to disbelieve his words. Few people would gamble their life away on a whim after all. Without hesitation, both men renewed their attack on the Servant of Fear once more. Yan Yufei channeled the power of nature through the Seal of the Land, while Ling Jianqiu fired sword qi after sword qi at the Servant of Fear.

Ling Jianqiu’s attacks weren’t nearly as flashy as Yan Yufei’s. In fact, his techniques looked incredibly simplistic. A basic thrust here, a basic slash there. However, when someone had reached a certain level in their martial arts, one did not need complex moves to unleash tremendous power.

In Ling Jianqiu's case, he only needed a basic slash to fire thousands and thousands of sword qi at the Servant of Fear.

The two men worked well together even though they hadn't fought alongside each other for long. They were able to force the Servant of Fear to waste energy and occupy most of their attention.

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was running circles around the Servant of Fear at an insane speed. At first glance it looked like the young man was fooling around, but in reality every revolution brought just a little closer to the Servant of Fear. There were two reasons why he was approaching the Stranger in such a roundabout manner: One, the power of the mental pollution wasn't always consistent. Ye Qing had noticed that there were "gaps" in the all-encompassing influence that he could slip through. A couple of tests later, he determined that it was easier for him to approach the Servant of Fear by slipping through these gaps than it was to charge in a straight line and bear the full brunt of their mental pollution. And two, he didn't want to draw the Servant of Fear's attention unnecessarily.

Even so, the strength of the mental pollution was increasing steadily. At the beginning, the illusions entered his head at just the speed of a trickle. Now, it had grown to a raging river that even the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" could not stem completely. It continuously ate away at his consciousness and caused his body to grow fleshy buds once more. The closer he got, the longer the buds became until it looked like he was covered in red sea weeds.

"Why am I doing this to myself?" Ye Qing complained even as he pressed his hand to his forehead and visualized the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" with all he got. As the silhouette of Emperor Fuxi solidified until he looked almost tangible, most of the illusions in his head washed away like they never happened. The fleshy buds growing throughout his body had largely subsided as well. But as soon as he took a step closer, the fleshy buds grew again and forced him to focus on the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" once more.

This seesaw would repeat itself for an agonizingly long time as Ye Qing got closer and closer to the Servant of Fear. It was trying to kill grass without uprooting it from the soil. No matter how many times he repelled the illusions with the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method", it would reappear and eat away at his mind and spirit once more.

It was working though. Thanks to the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method", he could never fall unconscious or become overwhelmed by the mind-bending illusions. His footsteps might be agonizingly slow, but he was definitely getting closer and closer to the Stranger of Fear.

Fifteen meters...

Ten meters...

Six meters...

Greatly motivated by Ye Qing's progress, Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu exerted themselves even more to keep the Servant of Fear busy and create opportunities for him. Alas, their enemy wasn't stupid. When Ye Qing had got within three meters of the Stranger, they abruptly spun their neck around and trained their gaze on Ye Qing. The eyes on the tentacles and the warts were fully affixed on him as well. In that instant, all the alarm bells in Ye Qing's head went off at the same time.

Rumble!

The tide of terrifying and evil illusions abruptly swelled into a tsunami. Caught off guard, Ye Qing nearly blacked out there and then even as his mind wobbled like a rowboat attempting to wade through a thunderstorm, or a candle flame trying to survive a hurricane. He knew he had seconds at most before he completely succumbed to the Servant of Fear's influence.

“Scatter!”

Ye Qing bit down his tongue to regain just an instant of clarity before visualizing the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” with all his might. The silhouette of Emperor Fuxi abruptly solidified, and the light of the Nine Heavens illuminated every corner of his head.

Boom!

While the light was shining at full force, the strange vehicle Emperor Fuxi stood on abruptly vanished and cut a streak across the sky. His sea of consciousness—it was almost fully black at this point due to the mental pollution—shuddered violently before threads of light abruptly appeared on its surface and stretched all the way to the bottom. Like the moon pushing away the clouds that dared to block its light, the threads boiled away at the black sea just long enough for Ye Qing to pull off his ultimate move.

“Lightning Bolt”

A bolt of lightning shot right out of his mouth.

Rumble!

Infused with the power of the Nine Heavens, the terrific sword easily tore through the Servant of Fear's tentacles, warts and most of its body in one blow. The Stranger staggered away from him and looked up as if to let out a soundless scream.

Lightning was the bane of all spectral and evil entities, and the Servant of Fear most definitely fell under the category of evil. It was why Lightning Bolt dealt more damage to the Servant of Fear than any one of their attacks so far.

Ye Qing was a faithful believer of kicking an enemy when they were down. When the mental pollution pouring into his head abruptly slowed down due to the damage they took, he immediately stepped in front of the Servant of Fear and caught their skull with his left hand. He then said,

“Adios, friend!”

Netherflame surged out of the Blue Demon Hand and engulfed the Stranger in just the blink of an eye. The next second, the Servant of Fear was reduced to just a pile of ashes.

Bang!

Just in case, Ye Qing swung his sleeve and scattered the ash. As the saying went, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

“Lightning Bolt...”

“The Blue Demon Hand...”

Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu were distracted by the death of the Servant of Fear at first. The Stranger had given them a lot of trouble after all. However, they soon noticed Ye Qing's weapons and exchanged a quick look with each other. The dots were finally starting to connect in their head.

Chapter 90: Nether Lord

Ye Qing must be the one behind Yan Tieyi and Zheng Feng's death since the Blue Demon Hand and Lightning Bolt were in his possession. He must be the mysterious gang boss behind the Iron Shirt Gang and the reason why the Iron Shirt Gang had come to their aid as well.

"What a cunning lad!" Yan Yufei chuckled helplessly. The magistrate wasn't stupid, and the moment he put two and two together he was able to figure out the truth and Ye Qing's motives in just a matter of seconds. "He didn't just wash his hands off the murders, we're going to have to act as his shield for a bit!"

Yan Yufei didn't just think of Ye Qing as a close friend, he also valued his abilities highly. Had he learned of the truth behind Yan Tieyi and Zheng Feng's deaths earlier, he would not have bothered the young man too much, at least not in a way that would matter. This was before mentioning the fact that Ye Qing had uncovered a devastating conspiracy, come up with a plan to eliminate the threats once and for all, and even summoned the Iron Shirt Gang to help them during their time of need as well. Objectively speaking, his merits had more than made up for his wrongdoings, and even he could not help but be impressed by the young man's planning and execution.

That was why his earlier words weren't directed at himself. It was a subtle advice to Ling Jianqiu to overlook Ye Qing's past actions.

Speaking of Ling Jianqiu, the Chief of Bureau was staring at Ye Qing as if he hadn't heard Yan Yufei's words. His silence would last at least a dozen breaths before he finally said, "Ye Qing has played a crucial role in the defense of Anyang. I have no qualms trading away a couple of vermin for his services!"

That was all Ling Jianqiu said before departing for the next battlefield.

"..."

Yan Yufei could not help but glance at Ling Jianqiu with astonishment. Had he known that the Chief of Bureau would be so willing to overlook Ye Qing's crimes in favor of his merits, he would not have bothered to say anything at all.

When the magistrate turned back to Ye Qing, the young man just happened to be looking his way as well. The moment their eyes met, Ye Qing abruptly clutched his head and moaned, "I'm still hurt from the fight, my lord! You don't mind me catching a short break, right?"

His meaning was clear. *Hmph! No way I'm gonna work for you for free another time!*

"...." *Do I look like that type of person to you?* Yan Yufei's mouth opened and closed like a goldfish. The young man had a penchant for acting like he was an obedient, law-abiding citizen on the front, and then doing crazy shit like wiping out two of the biggest factions in Anyang behind one's back. Not only that, he was smart enough to keep the truth hidden from all parties and reveal it only when it would benefit the

most. Even now, Ye Qing had seen through his intentions instantly and shut him up before he could even begin to say, "Please." Sometimes, he really thought that the young man was too smart for his own good.

Some time later, Yan Yufei finally shook his head and said in a wry tone, "Sure. I'll see you in a bit!" Then, he turned around and left. He was a scholar. If a minister could hold a boat in his belly [1], then he could tolerate Ye Qing's occasional bullshit as well.

The moment Yan Yufei had left the scene, Ye Qing's complexion immediately returned to normal. He then let out a chuckle and pounced toward the nearest Strangers.

The Servant of Fear's final counterattack was pretty deadly. It had taken nearly all of his spiritual power to overcome it. Luckily, the attack ultimately wasn't strong enough to damage his foundation, and he was mostly fine besides a headache and some sores here. Not only that, he was brimming with true qi—the fight against the Servant of Fear had exhausted him mentally far more than it had physically. He might not be able to fight a powerful Stranger in his current state, but he could definitely handle a bunch of small fries.

Plus, bullying small fries was safe and profitable. In the time he took to kill the Servant of Fear, he could've killed maybe a hundred small fries and earned far more dragon-serpent runes. With that in mind, why on earth would he actively walk the thornier, less profitable path?

Finally, the Strangers had already lost. With the passing of powerful Strangers such as the Servant of Fear, Grandpa Tree, Granny Mud and more, and the addition of powerful reinforcements such as the Iron Shirt Gang and Qiao Six, it was only a matter of time before the Strangers were annihilated.

Meanwhile, in a dark, hidden corner of the streets, Dark Eye muttered with eyes full of despair and disbelief, "How did this happen? Why did the humans know we're coming?"

"I don't know. It shouldn't have turned out this way," Rotten Crown replied, causing smelly pus to leak out the holes on her face. She sounded just as lost as her companion was.

"We failed our mission. The Nether Lord will never forgive us," Dark Eye's tone abruptly grew panicked as he trembled in fear. Rotten Crown too started shaking uncontrollably.

Most of the Strangers had chosen to fight against the Shenwu Defense Force as soon as the ambush took place, but Dark Eye and Rotten Crown had hidden themselves instead. Judging from how the battle had turned out, it was the right move. The reprieve wouldn't last forever, however. They might be able to escape the Shenwu Defense Force, there was no way they could escape the Nether Lord's wrath. His punishment was so terrible that they might actually be better off dead than alive.

"No, our plan hasn't failed yet."

Suddenly, a gentle voice surprised them from behind.

"Who the—!?" Dark Eye and Rotten Crown wheeled around in panic and saw a figure wearing a black hood standing behind them. They had no idea when the person had appeared.

“You’re not so lost that you can’t even recognize my voice, are you?” The hooded figure continued in their soft voice.

Neither Dark Eye nor Rotten Crown could see the hooded figure’s face because it was completely hidden, but they eventually put two and two together and guessed, “Evergreen Ivy? Is that you?”

“It’s me.” Evergreen Ivy nodded. “Follow me.”

The Stranger jumped into a courtyard beside her like she weighed nothing at all. Then, she led Rotten Crown and Dark Eye to a secret room.

“Evergreen Ivy, you said that our plan hasn’t failed yet. What did you mean?” Dark Eye asked impatiently after the door had shut behind them. After all, the army of Strangers they brought were almost routed at this point.

“It’s simple. My plan has never hinged on whether the county is destroyed, or if the Strangers gain the upper hand. The only thing it ever needed was a mountain of corpses and a sea of blood; human or Stranger!” Evergreen Ivy answered with an unusual tremor in her voice. She was clearly very excited.

“I don’t understand, Evergreen Ivy. Can you explain things better?” Rotten Crown looked increasingly confused.

“Hehe. Take a look!” Instead of answering, Evergreen Ivy pointed at an altar located at the center of the secret room. Her eyes looked fervent and full of anticipation.

“An altar?” Dark Eye and Rotten Crown examined the altar closely. “Eight corners, four directions, a statue and bones...”

As they said, the altar was shaped like an octagon and pointed toward the four cardinal directions. Placed atop three layers of bones was the statue of the Nether Lord himself.

Realization struck Rotten Crown and Dark Eye at the same time. “This is the bone altar used to summon the Nether Lord! Are you trying to bring him to this plane, Evergreen Ivy?”

“That’s right!” Evergreen Ivy nodded under her hood. “It takes a vast amount of bodies, blood and slaughter to bring the Nether Lord to this plane. That is why I had tasked you to lure the Strangers into the county. It doesn’t matter if the Strangers ultimately defeated the humans, or the humans defeated the Strangers as both outcomes would still create the bodies, blood and slaughter necessary for the ritual to succeed. And when the Nether Lord descends upon this plane, we will still be the final victor!”

“That’s an incredible plan, Evergreen Ivy! Why didn’t you tell us about this sooner? You could’ve saved us so much worry!” complained the duo, though they were really overjoyed by this turn of events. After all, it meant that the plan was still on track, and they wouldn’t have to suffer the Nether Lord’s punishment.

“The more people know about a secret, the harder it is to keep it under wraps,” Evergreen Ivy said indifferently. “Take this failed invasion for example. How did the humans find out about our plan? It’s probably because there’s a traitor among us who leaked the plan to the humans!”

“What!? You must be joking! There’s no way any of us would betray our plan to the humans!” Rotten Crown could not believe her ears.

They couldn’t see Evergreen Ivy’s expression, but her voice was clearly bitter and scornful. “I thought so too, but if that’s true, then how did the humans find out about our plan? And how did we not know about this until it’s too late?”

Dark Eye and Rotten Crown exchanged a glance with each other before defending themselves in a hurry, “It wasn’t us!”

“I know you’re not traitors. I wouldn’t have brought you here otherwise,” Evergreen Ivy assured them before turning serious. “Anyway, I would rather finish this sooner than later, so I’m going to carry out the ritual now. Please protect me until the ritual is complete.”

“Got it!” Dark Eye and Rotten Crown responded obediently before moving into position.

Evergreen Ivy walked up to the altar and bowed three times toward the statue. Then, she slowly walked up the bone steps until she was at the top. Sitting crosslegged in front of the statue, she lit up all eight red candles in the eight corners of the altar before slicing open her wrist with a silver dagger. Finally, she held her hand above the statue and drenched it in her blood.

The yellow candle flames immediately turned as white as a ghost, and strange patterns suddenly appeared on the statue. Then, the statue absorbed all the blood that covered its surface.

Eyes closed and still dripping her blood over the statue, Evergreen Ivy muttered something under her breath for several minutes straight. It was as if she couldn’t feel the blood loss at all. Gradually, the dark statue turned red and smooth like a piece of red jade. It clearly looked evil and demonic.

“O’ mighty Nether Lord, in the name of Evergreen Ivy, I beseech you to descend upon this plane!”

Buzz!

As soon as Evergreen Ivy completed her chant, a dark shockwave rippled across the secret room. The statue’s eyes also turned as black as the night sky. Then, a noise that sounded like a million people whispering at the same time appeared inside the room. It sounded crazed, chaotic, and dark. The noise was so unbearable that Dark Eye and Rotten Crown instantly collapsed to their feet and rolled around in abject pain, but thankfully, it faded away after just a second.

Outside the secret room, the sky of Anyang suddenly shuddered like someone was knocking on its fabric of space and time. Then, all the bodies, blood, energy of resentment and more littered across the county started flying into the sky. They eventually merged together to form a door of flesh and blood that oozed an ominous pressure and unspeakable evil.

“What the...”

For a time, everyone stopped what they were doing and looked up. Even the Strangers had temporarily forgotten their rage to stare at the unholy door in the sky.

For the first time since the battle began, Ling Jianqiu’s eternally frozen face cracked and revealed a hint of shock and disbelief, “Oh no! Someone is trying to use the bodies and resentment accumulating on this land to summon a powerful Stranger!”

“A powerful Stranger? Do you know what this Stranger might be?” Yan Yufei asked.

“I don’t know!” Ling Jianqiu shook his head. “One thing for certain, it isn’t someone you, I, or anyone in this county could fight against!”

“What do we do?” Yan Yufei did not linger on the subject.

“We need to stop this Stranger from descending!” Ling Jianqiu kept his answer as short and succinct as possible. “There are two ways. One, we destroy the door before it fully forms. Two, we identify the location where the ritual is taking place and destroy the ritual!”

“Neither of those sound like good options,” Yan Yufei replied in a solemn voice. The first way was impossible because the door was extremely high up in the sky. Forget destroying it, they couldn’t reach high enough to hit it.

The second way sounded less impossible than the first option, but it was really the opposite. Anyang was anything but a small place. They would be long dead by the time they finally found the ritual’s location.

“Let’s awaken the Heavens’ Eye!” Ling Jianqiu decided to go with the first way after sucking in a deep breath. Considering that there was little chance they would find the ritual in time to destroy it, they could only pray that the Heavens’ Eye would be powerful enough to destroy the flesh-and-blood door.

If it worked, they would live, and if not, they would die. It was as simple as that.