

Stranger 91

Chapter 91: I'll Sacrifice You

"Lord Yan, Chief Ling, I can find the rats who're casting this ritual!"

Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu's mood had just reached a new low when Ye Qing's voice suddenly cut through the haze like a beam of sunshine.

"I'm sorry? What did you just say, Joyless?" Yan Yufei looked up at the young man who had somehow appeared next to him without him noticing. He knew that his ears were functioning perfectly, but he still couldn't quite believe what he just heard.

"You're not hearing things, Lord Yan!" Ye Qing said smilingly, "I said, I can find the rats who're casting this ritual!"

"Really? Are you sure?" Yan Yufei stared at him both suspiciously and hopefully. Ling Jianqiu wasn't speaking, but his gaze bespoke the same emotions as the magistrate. Despite their decision, they knew it was incredibly unlikely that the enemy had not factored in the possibility that they would attempt to destroy the flesh-and-blood door with the Heavens' Eye, meaning that their last-ditch effort was most likely going to end in failure. If Ye Qing really could do what he claimed, then it was certainly a more realistic and hopeful plan than theirs.

"Of course! Have I ever lied to you, Lord Yan?" Ye Qing declared confidently, "I just need you and Chief Ling to buy me some time."

"Okay then. We'll carry out both plans at the same time!" Ling Jianqiu wasted no time in arriving at a decision. "Lord Yan and I will do our best to delay the Stranger's arrival, while you will find the rats and disrupt the ritual!"

"If the Heavens' Eye succeeds in destroying the door, then all is well. If not, then we need to find those rats anyway!"

"I understand!" Ye Qing nodded and saluted the two men solemnly. "I'm counting on you, my lords!"

"And we you, Joyless!" Ling Jianqiu and Yan Yufei saluted him as well.

Their final words weren't just a prayer for success. It was a solemn promise to see through their duties to the very end if only for the people of Anyang!

Creak!

Ye Qing was just turning around to leave when the flesh-and-blood door in the sky suddenly creaked loudly as if it was about to open. The surrounding space shuddered violently, and the flesh-and-blood door suddenly came alive with countless vengeful souls and crying spirits screaming endlessly on its surface. Their unholy wails were so terrible that eardrums were deafened, and nosebleeds were triggered even from such a great distance.

“Looks like we have even less time than we thought. Let’s awaken the Heavens’ Eye immediately!” Ling Jianqiu said and tapped his sword with the back of his finger. It immediately let out a melodious ringing that temporarily kept the disturbing wails at bay.

“Got it!” Yan Yufei nodded and pointed at his Seal of the Land. Ling Jianqiu then threw a badge into the air and made a hand seal. The badge was immediately charged with some sort of energy.

The badge was none other than the symbol of the Chief of Bureau, the Pacification Badge. In a county, the Heavens’ Eye could only be used by the county magistrate and the local Chief of Bureau, and only if they both activated it at the same time. It would not awaken if even one of them was missing!

“Please answer our call, Heavens’ Eye!”

The two men chanted, and both the Seal of the Land and the Pacification Badge shone at the same time. They then fired a beam of light at the Heavens’ Eye hung in front of the entrance.

Runes shaped like flowers, birds, fishes and insects suddenly came alive and swam all over the ordinary-looking bronze mirror. A dragon’s head and a phoenix’s tail feather washed away the stains on its surface instantly and created gentle ripples of light.

Creak!

It was at this moment the door in the sky widened just enough to reveal a crack. Behind the crack was an infinite sea of darkness. Everyone who saw it immediately felt dizzy as if they could faint at any moment, and the weak-willed ones instantly lost their souls and became possessed by evil energy. Their bodies then mutated into mindless monsters who knew nothing but slaughter.

That wasn’t all. A pitch black hand abruptly poked out of the flesh-and-blood door. Size wise, it looked no different from a human’s arm, but as black as ink and as ominous as the night. The appendage looked thin and frail, but it emanated so much power that it gave off the impression of beauty instead.

The moment the arm appeared, they all felt like a mountain was sitting above their chest. An unbelievable amount of pressure poured down from above, and the heads of those who were heavily injured or weak in mind abruptly exploded like watermelons.

“PLEASE ANSWER OUR CALL, HEAVENS’ EYE!”

Ling Jianqiu and Yan Yufei roared in unison as the Seal of the Land and the Pacification Badge shone even brighter. When the Heavens’ Eye grew so bright that it was like a second sun, it discharged a massive pillar that illuminated the entire county as bright as day.

The flesh-and-blood door shook violently long before the pillar of light even got close. It started melting rapidly like snow, and black smoke was rising from the pitch black arm as well.

The Heavens’ Eye’s light seemed to anger the owner of the arm. It opened its hand and made a grab for the incoming attack like it would crush it between its fingers.

Every time the hand moved an inch, it would grow a lot larger. It seemed physically impossible, but by the time the hand had moved about three inches, it had become large enough to blot out a sun.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Light clashed against the darkness, and white mixed haphazardly with black. The resulting shockwave was so epic that houses collapsed, the earth was torn asunder, and the entire world seemed to be engulfed in dust.

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They used the Heavens' Eye already. We need to move faster! Ye Qing thought while feeling the epic clash happening far, far above his head. This wasn't the first time he had experienced this, but his heart was beating just as fast as the first time.

He looked at Faceless beside him and asked, "Where are they?"

"Hehe! You seem extremely confident that I'd be able to find them, young master. What if you were wrong?" Faceless laughed instead of answering.

Ye Qing looked back to the horrifying mixture of black, white, and pure chaos happening in the sky and said indifferently, "I'll sacrifice you to your god, of course! It was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"And what will you do after I'm dead, young master?" Faceless asked with morbid curiosity.

"I'm going to run, duh. You don't actually think I'm going to commit double suicide with you, do you?"

Not only did Faceless take no offense from his sarcastic remark, he exclaimed, "As expected of my young master! You are a dragon compared to the rest of us puny mortals!"

"Cut it out. You'll have all the time in the world to butter me up after we've ended the ritual and survived this crisis!" Ye Qing slapped Faceless on the shoulder once. "So take me to them already!"

Faceless had made himself scarce ever since the Strangers had invaded the county. It was because Ye Qing had tasked him with keeping an eye on Dark Eye and Rotten Crown. It was because he knew that Evergreen Ivy would contact them eventually, and he wanted to take out the most elusive and well-hidden Stranger of them all. In the off chance that Evergreen Ivy decided to abandon her allies and never show up, he would at least know where Dark Eye and Rotten Crown were hiding. He would kill them when the crisis was over.

As it turned out, his plan was even wiser than he thought, though Ye Qing sincerely wished that things hadn't turned out this way. He was certain that Evergreen Ivy was behind the ritual, but there was no guarantee that she would be together with Dark Eye and Rotten Crown. It was a gamble he had to take though; their only chance at taking out the rat behind everything. If it worked, then all was well. If not, then he had no choice but to abandon Anyang to its fate and escape.

In that sense, he supposed he hadn't been wholly truthful with Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu. He had made it sound like he could locate the ritual for sure, which wouldn't be a lie if not for the timer that was breathing down all of their necks. If this location turned out to be farther than expected, then he

could only apologize to the people of Anyang and do what he must. After all, a dead person would not be able to take revenge for Anyang!

In life, the best a person could do was to ensure that they had no regrets. Whether or not their efforts would bear fruit... was completely up to fate!

“Hehe. Don’t worry, young master. You’re a lucky man, and I’m not too far behind you. None of us are dying today!” Faceless declared.

“Oh?” Ye Qing’s eyes lit up at the subtext. “So Dark Eye and Rotten Crown are involved in the ritual after all?”

“Not at the beginning, but afterward? Yes!”

“Speak human!” Ye Qing quipped impatiently only to remember that Faceless wasn’t human.

Faceless stopped keeping him on tenterhooks and replied, “This whole thing was planned by Evergreen Ivy, probably. Just now, she suddenly revealed herself to Dark Eye and Rotten Crown and led them into a nearby residence.”

“Evergreen Ivy? Residence?” Ye Qing figured out his meaning immediately. “They must be holding that ritual in that residence then! Take me there now!”

As it turned out, the residence wasn’t far away at all. They had arrived at their destination after just a dozen breaths or so of running. Faceless said, “This is it, young master. I saw them entering this courtyard with my own two eyes. But as you know, my former allies are no ordinary Strangers, so I dare not follow them inside and risk being discovered.”

“Got it.”

The duo leaped up to the rooftop and looked around for a bit, but there was no one in the courtyard. Eyes half-lidded, Ye Qing abruptly dropped back to ground level directly in front of the house.

“Young master, this isn’t very... stealthy, is it?” Faceless commented in a dumbfounded tone. If there was anyone inside the house right now, they would’ve spotted Ye Qing instantly.

Ye Qing smirked. “Relax. There’s no one in the courtyard or the house.”

He knew this because he had scanned the whole place with his spirit earlier.

“What?” Faceless looked left and right frantically but could not find anyone as Ye Qing said. Afraid that Ye Qing would accuse him of lying, he hurriedly defended himself, “I’m telling you the truth, young master! I really saw them entering this courtyard!”

“Why are you panicking? I never said you were lying to me!” Ye Qing entered the house and circled the living hall once.

“Where are they? They couldn’t have left while I was gone, could they?” Faceless muttered. He was pale with fright because he knew that there was a non-zero chance

Ye Qing would actually “sacrifice him to his god” if he screwed up something this important.

Luckily for him, Ye Qing replied confidently, “They’re still here. You don’t see them because they’re underground!”

As soon as he said this, Ye Qing walked up to a certain spot and brought down his right foot on the floor. It immediately gave way to an underground passage.

Faceless: “...” *I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: Wouldn’t it be stealthier to find the hidden level to open the passage?*

“This is faster!” Ye Qing explained as if he could hear the Stranger’s thoughts before jumping into the hole. A number of twists and turns later, they arrived at a stone door leading into a secret room.

“This is it!” Ye Qing said while staring at the door. He took a step backward and waved. “Strangers first!”

“...”

Fuck, I suddenly feel like swearing. Evergreen Ivy and the others must be ready after that loud commotion earlier. That’s why he’s sending me through the door first to spring their trap. How could he do this to his humble, loyal servant?

Despite his thoughts, Faceless sucked in a deep breath and slowly went over to the door. There was a high chance whatever was waiting for him behind the door would kill him, but he would *definitely* die if he dared to disobey Ye Qing’s order. Between the bad and the worse option, it was obvious what he should pick.

Faceless took a moment to heighten his concentration to the max. Then, he gave the stone door a mighty push. As soon as the door creaked open, A pair of beams attacked his head and his abdomen at the same time!

Faceless let out a strange cry as his forehead split apart, and he unleashed his own beam of light to save his own life. Despite this, he was unable to block the full-powered attacks completely. A good chunk of his head was cut off, and his waist was just barely hanging by a thread.

As Faceless staggered backward, Ye Qing dashed into the secret room so fast that he was almost pressing against the floor. Quick as a phantom, he unleashed an attack that Faceless couldn’t see because of the partially open door and elicited a pair of muffled groans. When he finally recovered enough to enter the secret room, he saw Ye Qing standing at the entrance with his saber out, and Dark Eye and Rotten Crown clutching a bloody stump each deeper within the secret room. Their severed arms were strewn across the floor.

“Faceless? You’re the one who betrayed us!?” Dark Eye screamed with outrage and hatred when he saw the Stranger.

Faceless shrugged. “There never was any camaraderie between us, was there? You want to survive, and so do I. That’s all there is to it.”

Rotten Crown was glaring daggers at him as well. “The Nether Lord won’t forgive you for this betrayal, Faceless! He will kill you when he descends on this plane!”

“I know. That’s why I came to stop you.” Blood poured down Faceless’ face as he grinned widely. “I’ll probably live if he fails to descend upon this plane, am I right?”

“You think you can stop us?” An insane amount of eyeballs suddenly appeared all across Dark Eye’s body. They glowed ominously in the dim room and looked incredibly intimidating.

“Hehehe, of course—”

Faceless knew that he was no match against Rotten Crown and Dark Eye together, so he instinctively wanted to postpone the inevitable fight as long as possible, but when he glimpsed Ye Qing out of the corner of his eyes, he suddenly changed his mind. What could the two Strangers possibly do to him with Ye Qing around? So, he said, “—I can. I alone am enough to turn you both into ash.”

Chapter 92: Shenwu

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“Young master?” Dark Eye and Rotten Crown automatically filtered most of Faceless’ boasting out of their mind except the important bit. Both Strangers wore a severe expression when they turned to look at Ye Qing.

Faceless might be beneath their notice, but the young man was a different story. He looked incredibly young, and his cultivation level seemed so-so at best. And yet, every cell in their body was screaming that he wasn’t someone to be trifled with. The fact that they lost their arms in the earlier exchange was proof of that.

Ye Qing wasn’t looking at them, however. Since the moment he entered the secret room, he only had eyes for the altar and the silhouette on top of it. He said, “Damn, Faceless! Were you hiding your strength this whole time? Now I feel sorry for stealing your limelight! Okay, you can play with the small fries. I’m going to focus on the altar!”

There was no time, and Dark Eye and Rotten Crown weren’t worth his attention. Since Faceless wanted to prove himself so badly, it was only right that he, the master, gave him the opportunity to do so, right?

Small Fry D and R: “...”

Small Fry F: “.....”

Faceless was more shameless than most since he had no face, but this face-slapping onslaught? still felt as hard as a hurricane. If he knew this was going to happen, he would never have succumbed to the temptation. It was too late for regrets though. Even if he took back his words now, Ye Qing would not change his mind, and Rotten Crown and Dark Eye definitely wouldn’t overlook him!

“You won’t damage the altar, human!” Rotten Crown pounced toward Ye Qing when he took off toward the altar. As she ran, large clumps of rotten flesh fell off her head

and exposed her bony white skull. They splattered on the ground with a disgusting squelch and spilled pools of yellowish liquid. Then, rotten arms, heads, tongue, teeth, hair and other unholy creatures crawled out of the pools and pounced toward Ye Qing as well.

“Get lost!”

Ye Qing didn’t even look at Rotten Crown, however. He simply swung his sleeve and sent a raging torrent of force in her direction. The force blast annihilated all the strange creatures she had created instantly, and his sleeve struck her squarely in the face. If Rotten Crown’s height was average, the sleeve would have put a hole in her stomach at most. However, she was an exceptionally short Stranger, so...

Bang!

Not only had Rotten Crown’s head exploded like a watermelon, she crashed into the wall at the far end so hard that the entire room shook, and a bit of dust fell down from the ceiling. The Stranger still wasn’t dead, however. Her empty shoulders wriggled a little before a pair of smaller heads about half the size of the original head grew out of them. The head on the left asked, “Are we still fighting, or?”

The head on the right yelled, “Are you stupid? He just beat us like it was nothing! We’d die for sure if we attacked him again!”

Enraged at being called stupid, the head on the left yelled back, “You’re stupid! Your whole family is born stupid!”

The head on the right screeched in outrage, “Who are you calling stupid! I dare you to say that again!”

Spittle flew everywhere as the head on the left taunted, “Stupid, stupid, you’re so stupid~”

As expected, the argument quickly devolved into a shouting match where absolutely no one was the winner. Neither head could get at each other physically because their heads were just a little too far apart, and their hands had fallen off during the crash earlier. Once words had proven insufficient to express their outrage and disdain, they even started spitting at each other’s faces like children. It would’ve been beyond hilarious if Anyang’s existence wasn’t on the line right now.

Meanwhile, Ye Qing had broken off into a run as soon as he incapacitated Rotten Crown, his aura growing increasingly powerful with every step he took. When he was about three meters away from the altar, he leaped into the air and brought down his crescent saber with all his might to unleash a powerful blast of energy at the altar.

Ye Qing had gone all out with the attack. Only a total idiot would try to save his strength at this time. Of course, he could’ve unleashed an even greater attack had he chosen to destroy the altar at melee range, but he was afraid that stepping on the evil structure would have dire consequences. The outcome was the same anyway. As long as the altar was destroyed, the summoning ritual would be disrupted, and the Nether Lord would not be able to descend on this plane.

As for the black hooded figure on the altar, he was pretty sure that she was Evergreen Ivy. If he could kill her with the same strike, then even better.

However, pale white flame surged out of the candles placed in the eight corners of the altar and formed a semicircular shield. Ye Qing's attack crashed into the shield, and—

Boom!

The resulting explosion was so huge that the room wouldn't stop shaking, and everyone would be breathing dust until they got out of the room. However, the attack had failed to shatter the seemingly fragile altar. The fiery shield protecting it looked untouched as well. Ye Qing was the one who was sent flying like a ragged doll, and even after he landed on the ground he was unable to catch himself until he was almost back at the entrance. There were multiple deep cracks on the ground where his feet had dug into it, and his saber broke off inch by inch like it was made of dust.

Ye Qing wasn't done, however. As soon as he managed to arrest his momentum, he shot forward even faster than before and cracked the limestone floor beneath his feet like a spider web. An unbelievable amount of true qi poured out of his body as he swung his sleeves at the altar.

“Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve”

Rumble!

An even bigger explosion rocked the secret room like an earthquake, and this time the fiery shield wobbled like it had taken a solid blow. However, the bone altar within the shield was still untouched, much less Evergreen Ivy.

Thud thud thud!

Ye Qing was thrown back yet again, his sleeves scattering into countless pieces of fabric with every step he took.

After Ye Qing had caught himself for a second time, he wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his lips and muttered, “It's seriously tough!”

He had literally given his 120% to unleash the saber attack and the sleeve attack. He dared to say that no one in the Vessel Augmentation stage would dare to take either one of his attacks head on. However, it still wasn't enough to break through the fiery shield, and now, he had lost both of his weapons.

“Hahaha! It's useless!” A ridiculing voice came from atop the altar. Ye Qing looked up and saw Evergreen Ivy shaking her head a little under her hood.

This shield can only be destroyed by an Astral Refiner. You are strong, but not even you can breach it! No one in Anyang can! So stop wasting your energy and submit to fate! No one can stop our lord from descending!”

At the far end of the wall, Rotten Crown's two heads suddenly stopped arguing and started taunting at Ye Qing with surprising coordination,

“Hahaha... you're out of ideas, aren't you!”

“Hahaha! Hit the shield some more, stupid! What's wrong? Are you out of stamina already?”

“Hehehe. He should’ve known he couldn’t break the shield, but he still wasted his energy anyway. What an idiot!”

“That’s right! He’s an idiot through and through!”

“Can’t I?” Ye Qing suddenly glanced at the two heads. They instantly shivered like they were licked by death and snapped their mouths shut.

Dark Eye had no such qualms, however. He suddenly burst into a fit of mad, uncontrollable laughter while saying, “Hahaha! You’ve failed, Faceless, human! You’ve failed! So what if you managed to find this place? You’re still going to die! Hahaha! Tremble in fear! Despair! DIE! AHAHAHAHAHA!”

Faceless looked deathly pale. Ye Qing looked like he was contemplating something.

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Crack!

Meanwhile, light and darkness, hope and death, good and evil were still clashing in the skies of Anyang. For a time, they were the only colors of the entire world. Then, a crack caused everyone’s head to swivel in the same direction, and they realized in horror that it had come from the Heavens’ Eye itself. Cracks were forming on its surface, and it didn’t look like it was going to stop.

“Not good. The Heavens’ Eye is about to run out of power!” Ling Jianqiu and Yan Yufei exchanged grim looks with each other. Worse still, the arm was still as powerful as ever.

Rumble!

As if on cue, the darkness encompassing the sky pressed an inch closer toward the ground, and the light of the Heavens’ Eye dimmed even further. Everyone knew it was coming, but their hearts still sank to the bottom when the relic finally shattered into a million pieces.

The second the Heavens’ Eye vanished, the light resisting the darkness immediately started fading like water without a source; a plant without roots. In the end, all that was left was infinite darkness.

It wasn’t like their efforts were completely futile, however. Half of the flesh-and-blood door had been seared away by the light. It was also covered in holes and nowhere as pristine and ominous as it was at the beginning.

The arm was also missing everything beneath its elbow. The stump was dripping not blood, but a kind of dark energy that could only be described as evil, twisted, and strange.

Still, it wasn’t enough.

Buzz...

The half-a-door started shaking violently. It looked like someone was trying to force their way through. First, it was a shoulder. Then, it was half a head. A couple wriggles after that, the entity managed to squeeze through half of his body. When it finally managed to put a leg through the door, the air shook, space rippled, and a terrifying, seemingly omnipotent presence bore down from above.

At that moment, every human felt like an ant that was moments away from being crushed by the heavens. What could a mortal do against a god or a demon? Nothing. Nothing at all. Forget resisting, they couldn't even muster the courage to look at the entity directly.

All hope was lost from the moment the Heavens' Eye was destroyed. As fear and despair started spreading throughout Anyang like a plague, some people even curled up on the ground and started crying like a baby. At this rate, Anyang's demise was all but set in stone.

"Did Joyless fail?" Yan Yufei muttered. His hair was loose and messy, and his clothes were disheveled. His eyes were calm and fearless unlike many others, but it wasn't because his character was that indomitable. Some people calmed down instead of panicking when faced with absolute despair, and he was one of them.

"It looks like today is the day I die fighting demons and protecting the people of Anyang. I have no regrets." Ling Jianqiu replied just as coolly as ever. "I only loathe the fact that I will not live long enough to slay every demon in this world!"

"Me too, Chief Ling, but the people of Anyang... they did not deserve this fate!" Yan Yufei sighed. No one else said a thing after that.

Right now, there were many people who regretted not doing better in life. There were even more people who were ridden with grief and unwillingness to succumb to their fate.

The entity in the sky seemed to deeply enjoy their despair, sorrow, fear and struggle. Its presence grew even more oppressive than before.

For a time, silence and despair hung over Anyang like a suffocating blanket when suddenly, a voice spoke up,

"Shenwu..."

The voice belonged to a Shenwu Defense Force soldier. He was covered in blood, and he looked so weak it was a miracle he managed to make a sound at all. But not only had he shattered the silence with his cry of defiance, he stood as tall and straight as the spear in his hand.

"Shenwu..."

A second voice spoke up. It belonged to another soldier who had lost his left foot. His disability did not stop him from propping himself up with his spear and standing just as straight as his comrade.

"Shenwu..."

A third voice responded. The soldier who said it had lost an arm, but it didn't stop him from lifting a banner with a tiger-and-leopard symbol into the air with the other. His expression too was firm and unyielding.

"Shenwu..."

"Shenwu..."

Shenwu..."

More and more soldiers rose to their feet and chanted the word “Shenwu” like a mantra no matter what state they were in. At first, it was just a trickle that could barely be heard, but over time it grew louder and louder, until finally the entire Anyang was shaking with the battle cry!

They were soldiers who had sworn themselves to defend their people to the last. They were warriors who flirted with danger and death every day. So what if the battle was lost? So what if they were all going to die? They would still uphold their duty faithfully. They would never give in to fear or despair, and they most certainly weren’t going to pass to the other side like sniveling cowards!

Shenwu, Shenwu, Shenwu!

“Hahaha! Good! Good! Let it be known that there are no cowards in Chu!” Yan Yufei laughed energetically as the despair in his eyes vanished without a trace. “Let it be known that the people of Chu would rather die than submit to fate!”

“Death before dishonor!” Ling Jianqiu echoed in agreement before lifting his head high and staring at the entity without fear. “Death before dishonor!”

In the sky, the dark silhouette humphed as if annoyed by the puny humans’ show of defiance. Black energy poured out of its body faster than ever before and fell toward Anyang like a world-ending downpour.

The pressure bearing down on the humans suddenly increased many fold. Their bones started cracking ominously like they were carrying a mountain on their shoulders. But no one knelt, and no one was afraid. The next second might very well be their last, but they would at least die with their honor intact!

Death, before dishonor!

Buzz!

The flesh-and-blood door shook again, and more of the entity emerged into the world. Now, it was just one step away from descending upon this plane; one moment away from turning Anyang into a hellscape!

Chapter 93: Cheers to Humanity

On the bone altar, Evergreen Ivy sneered from within her hood, “The Nether Lord would descend any second now. Anyang is finished, and so are you!”

Faceless looked deathly pale, but Ye Qing asked a sudden question, “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Evergreen Ivy said in a mocking tone, “Oh, you mean your fellow humans’ final cries of sorrow and despair? I’ll admit, they sound pretty melodious!”

Ye Qing shook his head firmly. “Despair? You couldn’t have gotten it more wrong. It’s the sound of defiance, resolve, and hope!”

“Hope? Is this a joke?” Evergreen Ivy snorted. “Who can possibly turn this around, pray tell? You? Ling Jianqiu? Yan Yufei?”

“No wonder you’re the leader of this little group! That’s right! I am the one who will turn this around!” Ye Qing declared confidently before producing an incense stick out of seemingly nowhere. He then ignited it and prayed solemnly to the heavens.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Don’t you think it’s a little too late for prayers?” Dark Eye said mockingly when he saw this.

Ye Qing ignored him until he had bowed three times in a row. Only then did he look at the Stranger and said, “I remember someone saying something very similar to me in the past.”

“And?” Dark Eye didn’t understand where he was going with this.

“And he died.”

“...” Dark Eye thought that Ye Qing was spewing nonsense, but he wisely kept his mouth shut to avoid provoking the young man and losing his head as a result.

Meanwhile, Evergreen Ivy was suddenly struck by an inexplicable sense of unease as she watched Ye Qing. “What on earth are you planning?”

Ye Qing shot her a look before sighing. “Fine, I suppose it doesn’t matter. Your Nether Lord will be showing up very soon, right? That’s why I’m praying to the heavens and wishing him a safe journey!”

“What?” If Evergreen Ivy’s face could transform into a question mark, it would. She just could not figure out what was going on in the young man’s mind.

Logically speaking, she had absolutely nothing to worry about. The Nether Lord was literally seconds away from fully manifesting in this plane, and there should be nothing Ye Qing could do to change this at all. Therefore, all she needed to do was to wait for the Nether Lord to appear and squash the annoying gnat in front of her like a bug.

However, Evergreen Ivy just could not feel at ease for some reason. Her restlessness just kept growing and growing until finally, she lost her cool and shouted, “Dark Eye, extinguish that goddamn incense stick right now!”

Maybe it was because she shouted a little too loudly, or but the puff of air was just enough to blow out a candle in one corner of the altar.

Evergreen Ivy: “...”

Dark Eye: “...” Faceless: “...”

For a moment, the secret room was engulfed in awkward silence. The candle flames were the shield’s sole source of power, so blowing out even one of them was enough to weaken it considerably. This was proven when the fiery shield abruptly dimmed in brightness.

“Dammit!” It took Evergreen Ivy a couple of seconds to recover from her shock, but when she did she immediately summoned a wisp of flame and flicked it toward the extinguished candle—or at last, she tried to. Right before the flame would escape her fingertip, her nose was suddenly assaulted by an itchy sensation. It was so

uncomfortable that she let out a powerful sneeze and discharged a smear of something straight at the wick of another candle. Outraged, the red candle extinguished itself in an instant.

It was an understandable reaction. The red candle might just be a candle, but it wasn't without its pride. No way it would stand for this humiliation!

That wasn't all. Because of the sneeze, Evergreen Ivy's flame went flying toward an evil-looking talisman instead of the candle she intended to reignite. It was a tiny flame, but the talisman generously burst into flames anyway. If she wanted it to burn, then it shall burn!

The problem was that the talisman was one of the keys to summon the Nether Lord. If it was burned into a crisp, then the summoning ritual would fail immediately. Horrified, Evergreen Ivy immediately rushed over to the talisman and slapped her hand over the fire.

The good news was that the fire had extinguished instantly. The bad news was that she had accidentally slapped the statue behind the talisman and sent it flying through the air. Her eyes bugged out as she tried to catch the statue, but it was far too late. It drew a beautiful arc across the air and landed right in front of Ye Qing's foot.

“...”

Ye Qing subconsciously looked up and met Evergreen Ivy's stunned, dazed, and disbelieving eyes. He could practically hear her thinking: *What the fuck just happened? All I did was bark an order and sneeze, so how...*

Ironically, this was beyond even Ye Qing's expectations. When he ignited the Incense of Misfortune, his plan had been to induce Evergreen Ivy into making an “unfortunate” mistake and exploit the opening to destroy the altar. Instead, the poor girl had dismantled her own altar like she was possessed by the god of misfortune himself! He would shed a tear for her if she wasn't trying to destroy Anyang and everyone in it!

A wicked smirk slowly spread across Ye Qing's face as he gave Evergreen Ivy a wink. Then, he planted his foot on the statue.

“You dare!” Evergreen Ivy let out a maniacal screech and raised her hand as if she could somehow command him to stop. The next moment, Ye Qing shuddered and crushed the statue beneath his foot.

While everyone was staring at him in shock, Ye Qing looked up at Evergreen Ivy again and shrugged innocently. “Sorry. I startle easily!”

Back on the surface, the entity was literally one foot away from manifesting in Anyang when suddenly, the flesh-and-blood door abruptly slammed shut and trapped his foot. Like a man whose foot was caught in a mass of metals after a major car accident, he was unable to pull free no matter how hard he pulled. The turn of events was so sudden and unexpected that even the soldiers abruptly stopped chanting and stared as the Nether Lord performed a one-footed dance for them in the sky.

As it turned out, it wasn't a good idea to force your way through an already half-broken door via brute force. One particularly forceful pull later, the flesh-and-blood door abruptly shattered into

pieces and engulfed that corner of the sky in a massive cloud of black qi. Then, the entity started dissipating bit by bit as it was consumed by the black qi.

“Noooooooooooooooooooooo...”

The Nether Lord struggled with all his might, but the ritual had failed, and he could not remain in this plane no matter how much he wanted to. He ended his performance with a magnificent, full-throated, anger-charged roar that would reverberate throughout Anyang for at least a few minutes before finally disappearing into nothing. When he was gone, the black energy in the air too dissipated into nothing it never was.

“This... It has to be Joyless! Joyless found those rats after all!” Yan Yufei exclaimed with mixed emotions. It wasn’t that he wasn’t happy, but just a moment ago he was fully prepared to prove his manhood and die a patriotic death. Then, the Nether Lord had disappeared in a positively comical fashion. It was no wonder that a somewhat traditional man like him was having trouble processing his emotions.

“It would seem that that is the case.” Ling Jianqiu nodded with a rare look of surprise and delight on his face as well. “He actually did it.”

“Ha, haha, hahahahaha! I knew Joyless could do it! I knew it!” Yan Yufei suddenly guffawed on top of his lungs. It was an utterly undignified laugh that did not befit a magistrate in the slightest, but no one cared. It was because the others were all absorbed in their own shock and elation.

“We won!”

“We won!”

“Shenwu!”

“Shenwu!”

“SHENWU!”

The chant erupted throughout Anyang once more, but this time it wasn’t filled with solemnity or grave determination. Instead, it was filled with joy and excitement. It was a cheer to the living, Anyang, and humanity!

.....

“Noooooooooooooooooooooo...”

In stark contrast to the joyous cheers happening on the surface, a Stranger was howling in sorrow and despair as if he had lost both of his parents at the same time. It was, of course, Dark Eye.

“Bloody hell, shut up! If you miss your daddy that much, then I’ll send you over to him right now!” Ye Qing rubbed his ear annoyedly while extinguishing the Incense of Misfortune.

Evergreen Ivy didn't lose her cool like Dark Eye did, however. In fact, she said in a surprisingly calm voice, "You may have won this time, Ye Qing, but the last laugh will belong to me. One day, I will kill you with my own hands!"

Ye Qing did not like the fact that she was acting so calm. He immediately dashed toward the altar and attempted to hit her with a palm strike, but—

Boom!

The altar abruptly exploded and forced him to dodge out of the way. As Evergreen Ivy slowly disappeared like a mirage, she left him one final message:

"See you soon, Ye Qing! Remember to watch your back!"

"Dammit!" Ye Qing's forehead pulsed as he unleashed his spirit and scanned the entire area. However, he was unable to sense Evergreen Ivy anywhere. She must've prepared an escape route for herself even though she was fully confident that the ritual would succeed. It was a good habit, but he hated it when it belonged to his enemies.

Not about to make the same mistake twice, he turned around and stared at Dark Eye and Rotten Crown. "Oh? Are we saying goodbye already? Okay! Allow me to send you on your way!"

The two Strangers had been tiptoeing toward the entrance since Evergreen Ivy made her escape, but Ye Qing had noticed their movements as a matter of course. Evergreen Ivy managed to elude him because she was both lucky and prepared, but these two? He felt insulted that they even thought that they could escape from right under his nose!

Ye Qing disappeared and reappeared right behind Dark Eye. Then, he made a grab for the Stranger's skull with his left hand. Sensing that he was in grave danger, Dark Eye immediately grew pitch black eyeballs all over the back of his head and shot a myriad of invisible beams at Ye Qing. At the same time, countless eyeballs appeared above Dark Eye and stared down on him as well.

As it turned out, the eyeballs exuded the exact same qualities as the Servant of Fear's corrupting influence. It attacked the mind and spirit and attempted to transform him into something he wasn't.

"This again? Too bad you don't have enough eyeballs though! Your appearance is also way too human for this tactic!" Ye Qing said mockingly. Frankly, the Servant of Fear would've found it insulting to be compared to Dark Eye if they were still alive!

Ye Qing sped up and caught Dark Eye's skull before the Stranger could try anything else. A whoosh of bluish black flames later, Dark Eye managed another two steps due to momentum before disintegrating into a pile of gray ash.

"So scary! We must run!"

"So brutal! We must flee!"

Rotten Crown paled and tried to flee after Dark Eye had died in front of them, but it turned out that two heads sharing one body was a terrible idea. At first, Rotten Crown ran in circles three times in a

clockwise direction. Then, she turned around and ran in circles three times in an anti-clockwise direction. This kept going on and on as the two heads argued with each other incessantly,

“To the left, idiot!”

“No! We should go to the right!”

It was impossible to tell if they were really trying to flee or just fooling around. The Stranger had turned into pure comedy relief since they lost their main head.

“I almost feel bad for them, but eh, there’s no future for them anyway!” Ye Qing shrugged before dashing over and landing a “Boundless Lightning Palm”. One thunderous boom later, Rotten Crown’s body exploded into smithereens.

“Idiot! You just killed yourself!”

“Stupid! You’re going to die as well!”

“Ptooeey! You’re the stupid, your whole family’s stupid!”

“Ptooeey ptooeey! You’re the stupid, your whole lineage is stupid!”

“Ptooeey ptooeey ptooeey!”

“Ptooeey ptooeey ptooeey ptooeey!”

The two heads would not stop yelling and spitting at each other’s faces even as their voices faded over time. Eventually, they fell completely still.

“Why didn’t you keep them alive for interrogation, young master? They might know a thing or two about Evergreen Ivy’s identity,” Faceless asked after Ye Qing had slain Dark Eye and Rotten Crown. It wasn’t because he felt sympathy for his fellow Strangers though. In fact, he wanted Evergreen Ivy dead as soon as possible. After all, the woman knew that he was the traitor, and his life was in danger so long as she was still alive.

“There’s no point!” Ye Qing replied while looking around the secret room for a bit. He felt disappointed when he found nothing valuable. “Evergreen is an incredibly careful Stranger. There is little chance she would have leaked her identity to Dark Eye or Rotten Crown, so it would’ve just been a waste of time!”

“Wise words, young master!” Faceless nodded in agreement. He was of the same opinion, frankly.

“Oh right, what is that incense stick you used just now, young master? Is it the one you made outside the county the other day?” Faceless asked another question.

“Yep. It’s called the Incense of Misfortune!”

“The Incense of Misfortune? No wonder!” Faceless nodded with trepidation when he recalled just how unlucky Evergreen Ivy had been during those final moments. “Does this mean you can literally pray your enemies to death now, young master? That’s incredible! It’s a million times more effective than sticking nails in a voodoo doll!”

“...”

Chapter 94: Screw Ups Never Die

Ye Qing went back to the gates after he left the secret room. There, he saw Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu celebrating their triumph with the masses. The magistrate called out to him as soon as he spotted him from afar, “Over here, Joyless!”

Ye Qing walked over to him and saluted both men. “Lord Yan, Chief Ling, I have completed my mission!” It was never too early to inform your superiors of your magnificent achievement.

“Yes you did, yes you did! On behalf of all of Anyang, I thank you for saving our lives!” Yan Yufei laughed happily and tried to bow to the young man, but Ye Qing hurriedly caught him before he could do so.

“You flatter me, my lord. I’m just doing my duty. Plus, I’m the one who suggested this plan, and because I underestimated the Strangers it nearly ended in an unthinkable tragedy. If anything, I should be begging for forgiveness from you two!”

Yan Yufei guffawed. “Hahaha! You’re forgiven then! It is thanks to your plan that we are able to wipe out all the Strangers near Anyang, and barring the unforeseeable the county will be a far safer place for at least a hundred generations to come! If that isn’t worth praising, then what is?”

He then put a hand on Ye Qing’s shoulder and added in a meaningful tone, “Sometimes, the result is the only thing that matters. Do you get what I’m saying?”

“Wise words, my lord!” Ye Qing smiled back.

At the side, Ling Jianqiu patiently waited for them to finish exchanging pleasantries before asking, “So, who are the bastards behind the ritual, Joyless? And how did you find them?”

Ye Qing saluted him and said, “I was just about to give you a report, Chief Ling. The long story short is that Evergreen Ivy is the one behind this. As it turns out, her plan from the start wasn’t to destroy the county with the Strangers, but to use the death, blood, and slaughter created by our battle to summon the Nether Lord.”

“The Nether Lord?” Ling Jianqiu furrowed his brow sternly.

Noticing that Ling Jianqiu recognized the name, Ye Qing asked curiously, “Do you know who the Nether Lord is, Chief Ling?”

Ling Jianqiu shook his head. “He’s a powerful and evil intelligent-type Stranger, but that is none of your concern at the moment. Please, continue!”

And so Ye Qing continued, “As to how I managed to find the location Evergreen Ivy is holding the ritual, it’s a bit of a happy coincidence. Earlier, I tasked Faceless to follow Rotten Crown and Dark Eye because—”

He told them exactly how he had found the secret room, though he didn't mention the fact that he didn't actually think well of his chances of success, and he was totally ready to make a run for it if Faceless had failed.

Yan Yufei fell silent for a bit after listening to Ye Qing's story until the end. "He then said with lingering trepidation, "Thank the heavens that you're a lucky man, Joyless. We would've all died if not for you."

"I'm not going to deny that. My luck has always been pretty good," Ye Qing said smilingly, "but Anyang is pretty lucky too, don't you agree?"

"Hahaha! You're right! The heavens' grace is on Anyang and Chu today!" Yan Yufei launched into another guffaw.

Ling Jianqiu snapped out of his thoughts and asked, "Where are Evergreen Ivy, Dark Eye and Rotten Crown right now?"

"I killed Dark Eye and Rotten Crown, but Evergreen Ivy managed to escape. She was prepared."

Ling Jianqiu furrowed his brow again. "So our positions are reversed yet again. She is a threat so long as she continues to exist. We must uncover her and eliminate her as soon as possible!"

Ye Qing nodded. "I completely agree!" Considering Evergreen Ivy's skill and intelligence, she could definitely create a disaster like this again if she was left to her devices. It might take her another decade or two, but they could not rest until she was truly eliminated from this world.

More importantly, Evergreen Ivy now remembered him as the man who thwarted her whole plan and had vowed to enact bloody vengeance upon him. While he was now strong enough to protect himself, he did not fancy the idea of having to watch out for her for god knows how long, and heavens forbid if she summoned the Nether Lord to come after him or something. The sooner she was dead, the sooner he could rest easy.

"I'm glad to hear that. In that case, I leave her to you, Joyless!"

".....!?"

Sure, he too wanted to find Evergreen Ivy as soon as possible, but it was one thing to act on his own volition and another to be carrying orders, especially if he didn't get a reward for it!

As if he could read his mind, Ling Jianqiu tossed a badge into his hands and said, "This is the Pacification Badge. Think of it as a symbol of the Chief of Bureau position. From now on, you may command any Sentinel, enter any Pacification Bureau branch, and look through any file in our archives as you please."

"..."

Ye Qing caught the badge, but he did not understand what Ling Jianqiu's gesture meant. The Chief of Bureau turned to Yan Yufei without giving him an answer. "It's time for us to perform our duty, Lord Yan. Let's go."

Yan Yufei hmphed. "You did not just steal one of mine and pretend that nothing had happened, Chief Ling."

Ling Jianqiu's expression remained unchanged. "What distinction does it make? We are all people of Chu, and we are all doing this for the good of the people, are we not?"

Yan Yufei looked taken aback for a second. Then, he clicked his tongue in astonishment and said, "You really had me fooled during our first meeting. Who would've thought that a straight-laced man like you could spout such nonsense with a straight face?"

"You flatter me, Lord Yan. I still have a long way to go before I can reach your level!" Ling Jianqiu replied with a salute.

"Not at all! Now I'm certain that you are who we should strive to be, Chief Ling!" Yan Yufei hmphed again before walking up to the Chief Ling and facing forward where You Da was walking toward them.

Oh. Ling Jianqiu was... inviting me to join the Pacification Bureau?

Meanwhile, Ye Qing had finally figured out what Ling Jianqiu meant from his interaction with Yan Yufei. It would seem that both Yan Yufei and Ling Jianqiu thought very highly of him. Who would've thought that he would become so popular one day? It would be even better if they were two women instead of two men, but hey, he wasn't complaining!

Smiling, Ye Qing toyed with the Pacification Badge for a bit before putting it away. Regardless of his intentions to join the Pacification Bureau or not, obtaining the badge was definitely a good thing. It would have been so much more difficult to suss Evergreen Ivy out of the Pacification Bureau otherwise.

Meanwhile, the vice magistrate, You Da, had reached Ling Jianqiu and Yan Yufei to give his report. His armor was coated in dry blood, and his expression was ridden with deep sorrow. He saluted both men before facing Lord Yan. "My lord. We managed to kill over ten thousand Mundane-class Strangers, a thousand Red-class Strangers, and eight Malice-class Strangers. However, the Shenwu Defense Force has also suffered three hundred fatalities and eight hundred injuries!"

The Pacification Bureau member standing next to You Da was also reporting to Ling Jianqiu in a solemn voice, "My lord. The Sentinels have taken one hundred fatalities and three hundred injuries. Of the hundred fatalities, two of them are Lieutenants, and five are Guardians."

Generally speaking, a county had a garrison of one thousand Shenwu Defense Force soldiers and five hundred Sentinels. This meant that both defense forces had lost over half their numbers in a single night. They might have secured Anyang for at least decades to come, but the price they had to pay was terrible to put it mildly.

A pyrrhic victory was almost as bad as a defeat, so it was no wonder that no one was happy.

“Thank you all for your hard work!” Yan Yufei nodded at them before shooting his right-hand-man, Yan Feng a look. The bailiff understood his meaning instantly and placed his saber on You Da’s neck.

You Da wasn’t expecting this as a matter of course, not to mention that he was terribly exhausted after the grueling battle. It wasn’t until the cold metal was pricking his skin that he realized what just happened and exclaimed in shock, “What is the meaning of this, my lord!?”

His voice drew everyone’s attention as a matter of course.

“You will see very soon. Bring him over, Yang Guan!” Yan Yufei ordered. A while later, the young bailiff returned with a prisoner in tow. His cultivation was sealed away by two metallic chains passing through his shoulder blades, and he looked like he had gone through hell. He was none other than Tang Yi’an. The gate captain wailed as soon as he saw You Da, “Save me, brother-in-law! Save me!”

You Da’s eyes turned bloodshot and murderous when he saw this. “My lord! What on earth did Yi’an do to deserve such treatment?”

“Hah! What did he do, you ask?” Yan Yufei sneered. “Who did you think opened the gates to the Strangers, You Da? It was your brother-in-law. He was the reason Anyang was almost destroyed tonight!”

You Da’s voice rose to a new octave. “WHAT? Impossible! Yi’an would never do such a thing! You must’ve been mistaken!”

He wasn’t lying to save his brother-in-law. Forget the fact that Yi’an was the one who opened the gates, he didn’t even know an invasion was coming until everyone was in position, and Yan Yufei had told him about it at the last minute.

“I didn’t do it, brother-in-law! I’m innocent!” Tang Yi’an shouted even louder when he heard this, “Save me, brother-in-law!”

In response, Yan Yufei said disdainfully, “Innocent? Answer this then. Three days ago, did you not accept a bribe from a merchant and promised him that you would open the gates for him tonight?”

Tang Yi’an’s jaw slackened. He wasn’t able to answer the question, not that Yan Yufei wasn’t expecting him to. He continued, “I can tell you right now that that ‘merchant’ who bribed you is really a Stranger. His plan was to convince you to open the gates so that he can lead an army of Strangers into the county, slaughter our people, destroy our home, and wipe Anyang from the surface of the earth. It is only by the grace of the heavens that we are still standing right now, so tell me, do you still think you’re innocent?”

Tang Yi’an collapsed to his knees then. His eyes both looked horrified and hopeless.

You Da’s heart sank when he saw Tang Yi’an’s reaction. It was practically an admission of guilt.

He had always known that Tang Yi’an was a greedy and licentious man, but he still treated him like a son because he and his wife weren’t able to conceive a child. He thought that Tang Yi’an was

smart enough to not go overboard, and even if he did his offense should not be so severe that he, the vice magistrate of Anyang, could not protect him.

But this? This was beyond his wildest imagination. Forget protecting Yi'an, even he wasn't exempt from blame as he was guilty by association!

"Tang Yi'an, it is bad enough that you, the guard captain of Anyang, was derelict in your duty, but your treacherous greed had nearly led to its destruction. If we hadn't discovered the Stranger's ploy in time, tens of thousands of people would've died because of you. The destruction of Anyang would've had unimaginable consequences to Chu as well."

"You, Tang Yi'an, deserve death!"

Yan Yufei's voice was harsh and unrelenting. Everyone in the area was glaring at Tang Yi'an with anger and bloodthirst as well.

"You Da, I know that you have no clue of Tang Yi'an's treachery, but the law of Chu states that all colluders of Strangers are to be exterminated to the three generations! Do you submit?"

It was the only answer he could give. Had he tried to resist in any shape or form, Yan Yufei would've had cause to execute him on the spot. And even if he miraculously managed to escape, there was no place in the entire realm that would accommodate him. Heck, there was no human nation in the entire world who would accept a colluder of Strangers!

"Good!" Yan Yufei said before changing his tune suddenly, "That said, the crime was committed by Tang Yi'an and Tang Yi'an only, and you have no knowledge of his wrongdoing. Moreover, you have fought valiantly to defend the people of Anyang, so I shan't execute you as per our law."

"That said, you still must answer to your crime if only for all the lives that were lost today. Your post will be stripped, your possessions will be confiscated, and you will be temporarily demoted to a sinner [1]. You may not leave Anyang until you have served your sentence and regained your citizenship!"

"I... thank you for not killing me, my lord!" You Da pressed his head to the ground and started weeping openly.

It was at this moment Tang Yi'an broke out of his stupor and pounced toward You Da. He screamed on top of his lungs, "B-brother-in-law! Don't leave me behind! Please save me as well! Please!"

Yan Yufei looked at the man with disgust as he ordered, "Take him away! I want him beheaded in front of the gates three days later so that the heroic souls who have died defending Chu today may rest in peace!"

“At once!”

Yang Guan accepted the order and dragged Tang Yi'an away.

Ye Qing let out a small sigh as he stared at the hysterical Tang Yi'an and the dazed You Da. He had no sympathy for Tang Yi'an, but You Da's fate could only be described as tragic. Unfortunately, there would always be screw-ups so long as life continued to exist in this world. You Da was just one unfortunate soul in an endless line of victims.

“Yan Feng, make the arrangements to give our warriors a dignified burial and compensate their families handsomely.”

“At once!”

“Chen Hou, take some men with you and sort out the bodies of the Strangers. Put those that can be used in our treasury and burn the rest. We don't need a plague right now!”

“At once!”

“Yu Yuan, take the rest of the men with you and scour Anyang for stragglers. The sooner we rid the streets of Strangers, the sooner our people will be safe!”

“At once!”

Chapter 95: Another Day, Another Killing

“One, two, three... ten. I got ten silver dragon-serpent runes and fifteen gray dragon-serpent runes from this battle!”

At Endless Horizons, Ye Qing was sitting on his bed and counting the dragon-serpent runes on the Annon Sutra like a dragon counting his hoard. He was red-faced with excitement and delight at the end of it.

“But why do I have ten silver dragon-serpent runes?” Ye Qing tilted his head in confusion. It wasn't because he had gotten less silver runes than expected, but more. He had killed five Malice-class Strangers last night, and they were Grandpa Tree, Granny Mud, the Servant of Fear, Dark Eye and Rotten Crown. That should net him five silver dragon-serpent runes give or take. All the Red-class and Mundane-class Strangers he killed last night probably added up to one silver dragon-serpent rune as well. But where did the extra four come from?

“Could it be...?” A possibility entered his mind. What if the Nether Lord's avatar counted as his kill as well? Although he hadn't killed the avatar with his own two hands, he was indirectly the cause of his death. Perhaps that was why the Annon Sutra had given him a consolation prize of four silver dragon-serpent runes.

Marvelous!

“Hahaha, haha, ahahahaha! This excursion has been well worth the reward!” Ye Qing said while laughing himself silly. He could not remember the last time he was this wealthy. With ten silver dragon-serpent runes in stock, he would not have to worry about running out of cultivation resources for a very long time to come. It was worth the risk he had taken.

Ye Qing’s deranged laughter would continue a while longer before he finally snapped out of it and threw him into cultivation. Currently, he was a late-stage Vessel Augmentor who had augmented all twelve Standard Meridians, eight Extraordinary Meridians, and three hundred and sixty points of his body. However, he hadn’t reached the absolute limits of the Vessel Augmentation stage just yet. He still needed to fill his meridians and points to the brim with true qi and ensure that it would form a self-sustaining cycle before he truly mastered the Vessel Augmentation stage.

The “Blood Shadow Divine Art” stated, *“The meridians are the passage in which the qi travels, and the points are the vaults in which they are stored. Only by filling the points with true qi could they come alive and form a tiny world in one’s body.”*

Augmenting one’s meridians and points were like digging holes on the ground so they could be transformed into ponds. One could not have a pond without a hole, but if the hole wasn’t filled with water then it still wouldn’t be a pond. It would be like having an irrigation system without the water to nurture the fields.

This was why it was critical for the points to be filled with true qi. Only then could true qi cycle along the meridians from point to point and form a self-sustaining system in one’s body.

Earlier, Ye Qing had fully augmented his blood vessels but did not have the time to fill them with true qi. That was why he wasn’t really a late-stage Vessel Augmentor even though he met the requirements to become one. Now that the crisis was behind him, it was time to pop a silver rune or two, fill up those “ponds”, and create this tiny world in his body!

Although the county wasn’t completely rid of Strangers yet, it was only a matter of time before the stragglers were hunted down, and even if they weren’t, they did not have the strength to change anything. As for the aftermath, there were people far more qualified than him to handle it. Hence, there was no better time to cultivate than now. In fact, one of the main reasons he went through the trouble of uncovering the conspiracy and coming up with the plan to end it all was to grow stronger. And he would keep growing stronger until one day, there was nothing left in this world who could threaten his life!

.....

“Are you sure the traitor is hiding in Anyang, Xiao Yang?”

In the middle of nowhere, a white deer as white as snow was galloping across a mountain while carrying a house on its back. The house was beautifully decorated, and there was a jade table at the center of the house.

The table was covered in delicious food and wine, but it was perfectly stable even though the white deer was galloping like the wind across mountains, rivers, uneven ground, winding paths and more. Not even a drop of wine had spilled from the ornate container that was holding it.

Two men were sitting across from each other at the table. The man to the left wore a black attire and looked to be in his thirties. He had red hair, a large forehead, and a strange, bony protrusion between his eyebrows. At first glance, he looked like an amiable person with little regard for trivialities. In reality, his bearing was that of an arrogant predator that looked down on all others like they were ants.

The man to the right wore a white attire and looked to be twenty-five or twenty-six years old at most. He had a handsome face, messy hair that gave him the appearance of someone who had just gotten out of bed, and a wide open collar. He was also leaning lazily against a wall and slowly swirling a cup of wine. Women would probably swoon over him if they could see him like this.

“I’m talking to you, Xiao Yang,” said the man in black after taking a sip of wine.

The man in white drank from his cup before curling his lips into a wicked, reckless smile. “Don’t you trust in my abilities, senior brother?”

“According to my investigation, Wu Chun had escaped to Anyang after stealing that item. He then started over as someone called Zheng Feng. Not only did he manage to step back into the light with his new identity, he actually flourished and founded a massive clan for himself!”

“Wu Chun, Wu Chun [1]. His name is stupid, but he isn’t stupid at all. It takes a good head and a seriously huge pair of balls to put oneself in public after what he did, and to do it right under our nose? Shit! I would almost admire him if he hadn’t stolen from us!”

“Speaking of which, those idiots from the Dark Sun Hall seriously need to go some day. They brag day in and day out about how well-informed they are, but they couldn’t locate Wu Chun even though he was right under their nose, winking at them and spitting in their faces for years. Heck, a blind man could’ve felt the spit on his face, but them? It’s like they’re dead to the world!”

“If you ask me, someone should dig out their eyeballs and feed it to the dogs. They’re not using their eyes anyway, so why have them taking up space on their faces?”

“Hmph!” The man in black—Qing Kui was his name—hmphe in disgruntlement.

“Ohh, I totally forgot that you’re from the Dark Sun Hall. Sorry, sorry!” Xiao Yang apologized with not a shred of sorry on his face whatsoever. “I’m really thankful that those idiots are such a bunch of fuck-ups though, seriously. This opportunity wouldn’t have fallen into our laps if not for them!”

A vein bulged on Qing Kui’s forehead as he glared daggers at Xiao Yang. “Watch your mouth, Xiao Yang. I wouldn’t mind teaching you a lesson in etiquette if that is your wish!”

Xiao Yang cared naught for his threat, however. He took another sip of wine and replied in an uncaring tone, “Thanks, but no thanks. I’m born this way, and I’m quite happy with the way I am. If

you have time to teach me a lesson, why don't you enlighten me on what you're going to do when we meet Wu Chun?"

"What am I going to do?" Qing Kui let out a disdainful snort. "That traitor was just an early-stage Vessel Augmentor when he ran away. Considering how mediocre his talent is, I'll be shocked if he manages to get any higher than the late-stage of the Vessel Augmentation stage. In short, I'm just going to kick his door down!"

"Haha, you're a wise man, senior brother. According to my investigation, Wu Chun is indeed just a late-stage Vessel Augmentor," Xiao Yang said in a lazy voice. "That said, he might have something up his sleeve that isn't stated in the records, so it's best if we proceed with caution."

Qing Kui sneered. "So what if he does have something up his sleeve? It won't change the fact that I'm going to crush him like an ant!"

Xiao Yang shrugged. "Whatever you say, senior brother!"

Qing Kui abruptly grabbed the wine jar on the table and gulped down a few mouthfuls of wine as if to quell his impatience. "How much longer until we reach Anyang?"

"Soon!" Xiao Yang took a moment to calculate the time before adding, "We should be there by tomorrow night at the latest!"

"Haha! Now that's what I call music to my ears!"

.....

At the entrance to the Zheng residence, Qing Kui stared at the abandoned, dilapidated and overgrown mansion in front of him with his mouth agape. "Xiao Yang, are you sure that this is where the traitor is hiding?"

Xiao Yang blinked. "It should be. Look at the signboard. It says 'Zheng Residence', doesn't it?"

"What the hell happened to the Zheng Clan then? And where did Wu Chun run off too?" Qing Kui complained when a possibility suddenly entered his mind. "That traitor couldn't have noticed something and escaped, could he?"

Xiao Yang rubbed his nose. "I highly doubt it. Give me a moment to ask around."

Xiao Yang searched around for a bit before calling out to a young woman. He managed to make her laugh in just a few short sentences, and coupled with the fact that he was a handsome man in the first place, he was able to find out the answer very quickly.

"So? Did you find out anything useful?" Qing Kui asked after Xiao Yang had returned to his side.

"But of course! Who do you think I am?" Xiao Yang declared proudly before explaining, "The girl told me that Zheng Feng, or rather, Wu Chun was killed some days ago. The reason is unclear, but the most popular theory is that he offended

someone he shouldn't have. Without Wu Chun to keep things together, the Zheng Clan naturally fell apart and turned into this."

"Are you kidding me? He was killed right before we were about to find him? This can't be a coincidence!" Qing Kui frowned. "Does the girl know who's the one who killed him?"

Xiao Yang shook his head this time. "She's just a common folk. I wouldn't trust her answer even if she does know who did it."

Qing Kui slapped his hand on a stone lion in front of the Zheng residence so hard that web-like cracks appeared on his surface. "If Wu Chun is dead, then the item must have fallen into the murderer's hands. If we can't locate the murderer, then this trip would be a complete waste of time and energy. God dammit!"

Xiao Yang didn't panic, however. He said in a confident tone, "Calm down, senior brother. I have a plan?"

"What plan?" Qing Kui looked at him immediately.

Xiao Yang smiled. "Did you forget that I'm also a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau of Luo Shui? I have the right to supervise and inspect all matters relating to the Pacification Bureau under the jurisdiction of Luoshui. Zheng Feng's death might be a mystery to most people, but the Pacification Bureau must have looked into this matter. I can simply check the files and find our next lead!"

"That's a great idea!" Qing Kui clapped his hands in excitement. "Let's get right into it then!"

But Xiao Yang said lazily, "What's the rush? We've been on the road for days, and my bones are stiff from all the sitting and nothing we've done. I heard that 'Red Sleeved Beauty' is a great place to catch a drink, indulge in beautiful bamboo flute music, and relax one's weary bones. Why don't we relax for the day and resume our mission tomorrow?"

"Relax one's weary bones, my ass! I'd bet a silver that the first thing you do after entering the place is to work your bones over some woman!" Qing Kui sneered in disdain. "When our mission is complete, you may indulge yourself in your vices as much as you want! Now let's go!"

"Sigh. You're truly a stiff man, senior brother!"

Xiao Yang shook his head in disappointment, but he obeyed Qing Kui's order and made a beeline for the Pacification Bureau headquarters. After they had arrived at their destination, Xiao Yang said, "Senior brother, you're not a member of the Pacification Bureau, so it's best if you wait here for me!"

Qing Kui frowned, but he understood that his presence would only complicate things unnecessarily. So, he swallowed his displeasure and said, "Be quick."

"Sure!" Xiao Yang replied smilingly before sauntering into the headquarters.

Qing Kui thought that Xiao Yang would actually be quick, but before he knew it, seven hours came and went in the blink of an eye. It wasn't until the restaurants on the streets were in the middle of closing that Xiao Yang finally appeared once more. Not only was the bastard chit-chatting with a couple of acquaintances, it was clear from his occasional burps and alcohol stink that he had enjoyed a wonderful dinner!

Qing Kui's voice was filled with barbs when Xiao Yang finally bade his company goodbye and went to his side. "Hmph! You sure know how to take it easy, junior brother. Not only did you take seven hours to look into one simple matter, you even had dinner before you deigned to meet me!"

He would've throttled the guy already if they weren't on a mission. What kind of person leaves their colleague out in the cold for *seven hours* without so much a peep? As if that wasn't bad enough, he had the gall to eat dinner while he was starving in the cold!

Xiao Yang clasped his hands together and apologized in a hurry, "Sorry—*burp!*—sorry! It's honestly out of my control though. I'm an important man, and it's inevitable that someone would try to curry favor with me. I've never been good at turning down invitations, and before I knew it, it was already late at night."

"Also, asking for permission to look into a file and checking said file takes longer than you think. Surely you can find it in yourself to forgive me? *Burp!*"

One of the unfortunate things about being a warrior was that you could smell exactly what the other party ate. Qing Kui scrunched up his nose at the smell of leek and egg and decided to cut to the chase before Xiao Yang could go off on another tangent, "Cut the bullcrap and tell me what you found already."

Xiao Yang nodded. "Kay. By the way, you wouldn't believe what happened yesterday. Last night, Ling Jianqiu and Yan Yufei lured over ten thousand Strangers into the county and killed them all with an ambush. There were a good number of Malice-class Strangers in the mix, and the Nether Lord's avatar showed up near the end as well! Crazy, right? Had we arrived a day sooner, we might've been able to join in on the excitement!"

"The Nether Lord's avatar?" Qing Kui's impatience morphed into a hint of shock. "How is this county still standing then? You're not bullshitting me again, are you?"

Xiao Yang shook his head. "Not this time, senior brother! It's one hundred percent real! From what I heard, a young man managed to locate the place where the summoning ritual was taking place and disrupt it. That was why they were able to kill the Nether Lord's avatar. If I remember correctly, the young man is called Ye Qing. It turns out that there's some truth to the old saying, 'boys make heroes' after all!"

"I see!" Qing Kui exclaimed in realization before turning disdainful. "I was wondering how for a bunch of trash who aren't even in the Astral Refinement stage yet managed to defeat the avatar of the Nether Lord. Turns out they're just lucky!"

Xiao Yang chuckled. "Luck is a component of power, no?"

Qing Kui did not deny this because it was true. Then, he realized that Xiao Yang had gone off on a tangent again and got angry. “Can you stop trying to change the subject? Did you find out who killed Wu Chun?”

Xiao Yang answered in a leisurely tone, “Yep. They’re the gang boss of the Iron Shirt Gang! They’re extremely mysterious though. Not even the Pacification Bureau knows who they are!”

“The Iron Shirt what?” Qing Kui frowned.

“It’s a small gang in Anyang. The former boss was an old guy named Yan Tieyi, but he was taken out by the current boss. Then, the same person tricked Wu Chun into the Iron Shirt Gang’s headquarters using their friend—apparently Wu Chun and Yan Tieyi were fast friends—and ambushed him. In short, this gang boss is the one we’re looking for.”

Qing Kui said impatiently, “Why are you telling me all this useless information? All I needed to hear was ‘the killer is the Iron Shirt Gang’s boss’! Anyway, I’m heading over to annihilate them now! Unless this boss is a total coward, there’s no way they wouldn’t give us what we want!”

“Calm down, senior brother!” Xiao Yang hurriedly grabbed Qing Kui before he could walk away. “The Iron Shirt Gang was a major help in the massive ambush last night. You may offend Ling Jianqiu and Yan Yufei if you destroy them!”

“So what? We’ll just remove them if they dare to stand in our way!” Qing Kui snorted in disdain.

“Killing them is easy, but behind them stands the Pacification Bureau and Chu! Are you seriously going to risk Chu’s wrath just because you want to finish this mission faster?”

Qing Kui grumbled with displeasure. “What the fuck should we do then?”

A wicked smile crossed Xiao Yang’s face. “It’s simple. Tonight, we’ll infiltrate the Iron Shirt Gang and find that gang boss. Then, we’ll convince them to surrender the item!”

“Are you fucking serious? That’s exactly the same as my idea!”

“Not even remotely. You were planning to wipe out the whole gang, and I just want to have a good chat with the guy! Or girl!”

Qing Kui laughed scornfully. “Good chat my ass! Don’t tell me you’re going to let the gang boss live if they do hand over the item! You’re acting like a prostitute who pretends she isn’t a slut!”

“Seriously, what happened in your life that you think that killing one person is the same as wiping out a whole gang?” Xiao Yang threw his hands up and happened to notice that the moon was high. “Oh good, it’s midnight already. I know you’re dying to bloody your hands, so let’s go, senior brother. Another day, another killing!”

Chapter 96: It's Just A Joke, Bro!

“Have you memorized everything, Tao Xian?”

In the rebuilt Flowing Cloud Hall, Ye Qing was sipping wine and instructing Tao Xian on his new task. After he was done, his aide bowed his head and said, “I have!”

Ye Qing wasn't a nagging person, but he could not help but remind Tao Xian again, “Remember, the investigation must be carried out with the utmost caution. It would end terribly for everyone if we were discovered!”

Tao Xian smiled and nodded again. “No worries, boss. I promise to proceed with the utmost caution.”

“Good. You may take your leave now.”

“Have a good night, boss!” Tao Xian saluted Ye Qing respectfully before leaving the room.

After Tao Xian was gone, Ye Qing left the Flowing Cloud Hall with his wine jar in tow. He then went to the garden to enjoy a relaxing night stroll, all the while taking sips from his wine.

There were two reasons he visited the Iron Shirt Gang tonight. One, he had something to entrust Tao Xian with. Two, he thought he deserved a break after that major battle last night, not to mention that he had jumped right back into cultivation and cultivated for almost twenty hours after that. His legs were literally numb when he finally stopped and tried to stand up.

Hard work was important, but relaxation was just as important be it in literary arts or martial arts. Even if it wasn't, he had no intentions of cooping himself up in his room all day every day. It was bad for his mental health and his charisma so to speak!

“Up in the sky, there is a moon, a bed of stars, and an entire universe, and in my hand, there is a jar of wine, a garden of flowers, and an endless future. Now this is what I call poetic!” Ye Qing hummed happily to himself while strolling along a winding path through the garden. It was an elegant and beautiful place with melodious streams, quaint bridges, well-trimmed bushes, and gorgeous flowers that seemed to glow in the night. Every step he took introduced a sight to behold for the rest of time, and every ten steps felt as if he had crossed into a new world. This really was a fantastic place to enjoy the moon and drink delicious wine.

Alas, the moment couldn't last. He was just rounding a corner when he suddenly came face to face with an unfamiliar man. A few seconds later, he became certain that the man wasn't a member of the Iron Shirt Gang. One, a night guard would have asked him who he was and what the hell he was doing in the garden already. Second, they wouldn't be wearing a bronze mask that covered up their face.

“Who are— Ye Qing began, but the man did not wait for him to finish. He took a step forward, released his aura, and threatened in a cold, harsh voice, “Quiet! You're dead if you say another word! Where is your boss right now?”

The man's eyes glowed a terrifying red in the darkness. If Ye Qing didn't know better, he would think that the man was a Stranger ready to consume him at a moment's notice.

Ye Qing blinked. This guy was a masked man who infiltrated the Iron Shirt Gang's headquarters in the dead of the night, and the first question he asked upon encountering someone was the location of their boss... yeah, this guy was totally here to kill him.

"Say something! If not, I'll kill you!"

The man's eyes grew even redder. In fact, his aura was turning red and distorting the air around him.

In response, Ye Qing shrugged and said, "You were the one who said I'm dead if I say another word, and now you're threatening to kill me if I stay silent? Make up your mind, man!"

"You..." The masked man lost his train of thought for a moment. If he wasn't as desperate as he was, he would've murdered the damn brat for mouthing off to him already.

The masked man was none other than Qing Kui. After arriving at the Iron Shirt Gang's headquarters, they had put on their masks, infiltrated the headquarters, and captured a couple of people. Their plan was pretty simple. They would interrogate their captives and find out where their gang boss was. Then, they would go to the gang boss and capture them. Once the gang boss had given them what they wanted, they would kill them to tie up loose ends and leave the place. Mission complete!

Unfortunately, reality was a harsh mistress. After infiltrating the gang and interrogating a good number of people, they quickly realized that the gang members were just as ignorant as they were. Forget their boss' location, they didn't even know if their boss was a male or female, old or young! If it wasn't for the fact that Zheng Feng and Yan Tieyi were dead, they would've believed that this boss didn't exist at all!

Not wanting to stay here all night, he and Xiao Yang split up so they could interrogate the men faster. Someone had to know who their boss was and where they were hiding, right? For a long time, Qing Kui was met with failure after failure until finally, he discovered Ye Qing in the garden.

Ye Qing wasn't just taking a night stroll in the garden, he was drinking wine, enjoying the moon, and composing poems that positively made Qing Kui's skin crawl. He had to be a prominent figure in the Iron Shirt Gang, meaning that he just might be able to tell him where the mysterious boss of the Iron Shirt Gang was.

"Don't test my patience. Tell me where your boss is, or I will shatter every tooth in your mouth!" Qing Kui uttered harshly and murderously.

Ye Qing flinched back and protested innocently, "Calm, man, calm! You should've just said that sooner! I'll take you to him right now!"

But I did tell you to tell me where your boss is, you sonuvabitch! Grr!

Most warriors were immune to mortal diseases, but Qing Kui felt he was dangerously close to catching a stroke. He swore he would suck the young man's blood dry as soon as he had led him to his boss.

“Move! Don’t try anything stupid, or I swear I will make you wish you were dead!” Qing Kui ordered and pointed a finger at Ye Qing. A snake that seemed to be made out of blood immediately appeared out of nowhere and wrapped around his neck like a collar. It was so cold that frost was literally forming on his skin.

He’s strong!

Although the blood snake looked incredibly real—it was even flicking its tongue at him like a real snake—Ye Qing’s senses told him that it was really a manifestation of true qi. Not only that, his senses were telling him that this masked man was extremely dangerous.

Is he a peak late-stage Vessel Augmentor? Maybe even an Astral Refiner?

Ye Qing’s pupils contracted a little. This guy clearly wasn’t here to enjoy a drink with him, but what did he want exactly? Was it revenge for what had happened to Zheng Feng or Yan Tieyi?? Was it an attack by those who felt like they didn’t get what they deserved during the Zheng Clan’s downfall? Or was it something else?

“What are you doing? I said move!” Qing Kui urged when he saw Ye Qing blanking out of it for some reason.

“Okay, okay! Don’t hurt me! I’ll take you to the boss right now!” Ye Qing pretended to flinch again and put on an obsequious smile.

For now, I should play along and see where this goes!

Ye Qing led Qing Kui out of the garden and straight toward Tao Xian’s residence. When they had arrived, he pointed toward the main entrance and said, “Our boss is inside!”

“You think you’re very funny, don’t you?” Qing Kui’s eyes boiled with killing intent as he stared at the brightly lit room. The bastard might as well have pointed him to the entrance!

“This isn’t a trick! I wouldn’t dare lie to you with my life on the line!” Ye Qing explained in a hurry, “Our boss is a good man and a workaholic. That is why he’s still working even though it’s past midnight!”

It’s a logical explanation. I’m sure that Yan Yufei, for example, is still working at this time!

Unfortunately, the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry. Before Qing Kui could decide if Ye Qing was trying to lead him into a trap or not, the door abruptly creaked open to reveal Tao Xian. The Hallmaster glanced back and forth between the two of them before saluting, “Good night, boss. Did you have something else to add?”

Qing Kui: “...”

Ye Qing: “...”

If reality was a harsh mistress, then coincidence was a real bitch. Ye Qing had led Qing Kui to Tao Xian’s room precisely because he knew that the Hallmaster wasn’t asleep yet. While Tao Xian was

distracting the assassin, he would catch him by surprise and hopefully kill him in one strike. Even if he failed, he was confident he would be able to land a solid blow and earn himself the upper hand.

However, Tao Xian had stepped out of his room at the worst possible timing and said the worst possible things. After that, well, there was no after that because the game was up.

“So. You’re the boss,” Qing Kui said in a mocking tone while squinting his eyes at Ye Qing.

“Ahem...” Ye Qing coughed drily before shooting Qing Kui an apologetic smile. “The weather is pretty good today, so I thought I should welcome you in with a joke. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I do mind.” Qing Kui’s eyes flashed red, and the blood snake entangled around his neck immediately squeezed with all its might. Ye Qing’s face instantly flushed red as his breath became caught in his throat.

“Boss!?” By now, Tao Xian noticed that something was amiss. He did not hesitate to rush to Ye Qing’s rescue, but Qing Kui merely sneered and thrust his palm toward the Hallmaster. A crimson, hand-shaped silhouette immediately flew straight toward Tao Xian with deadly, all-consuming power. Everything in its way including the air was being consumed by the bloody hand.

Tao Xian skidded to a stop and turned as pale as a sheet. He wanted to dodge out of the way, but it felt as if the surrounding air was pinning him in place. He could only watch as the bloody hand sailed toward his chest.

Right when Tao Xian was resigned to his fate, a young man appeared in front of him and spun his sleeves in a circle, trapping the bloody hand at the center and dissolving it into nothing. He was Ye Qing, of course.

“Boss!” Tao Xian cried out while breathing an audible sigh of relief.

“Huh. It seems I’ve underestimated you!” Qing Kui looked surprised as well. He didn’t think that there was anyone in this county who could block his attack so easily.

If Ye Qing’s Boundless Lightning Palm was composed of forceful, yang force, then the bloody hand was the complete opposite. Vicious and unforgiving, the bloody hand shattered the bones and melted the flesh and blood of anyone who was struck by it. It should not need to be said that it was extremely dangerous, and yet Ye Qing had neutralized it without any effort at all. Clearly, he was an outstanding warrior.

But of course, surprise was all he felt from Ye Qing’s performance. He still did not consider him to be a threat at all.

“Nah! I’m just a little talented is all!” Ye Qing waved away the praise casually.

“Everyone here are civilized people, so let’s act like it, okay? What do you want? If it’s within my ability to give, then I will give it to you!”

“But before you start, don’t ask me for my money or my life, okay? I don’t have money, and I’m not handing over my life!”

“...” Qing Kui ignored his joke and asked, “Are you the one who killed Zheng Feng?”

“Yep! That’s me!” Ye Qing did not deny this because there was no point. The guy wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t investigated the truth behind the incident thoroughly. “Are you here to take revenge for Zheng Feng?”

Instead of answering, Qing Kui asked another question, “If you’re the one who killed Zheng Feng, then you must have obtained his possessions. Did you find a painting among them?”

“A painting?” Ye Qing furrowed his brow for a second before relaxing. *Are they here for the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method”?*

The slight change in Ye Qing’s expression did not elude Qing Kui. A smile spread across his face as he said, “You have seen the painting! Give it to me, and I promise I won’t desecrate your corpse!”

“The painting is with me, yes, but if you’re going to kill me either way then why the bloody hell would I give it to you?” Ye Qing asked with a raised eyebrow. *Is the guy stupid? Did no one teach him how to negotiate terms like a human being?*

“The hard way it is!” Qing Kui let out an ominous chuckle. “I was hoping you would turn me down anyway!”

As soon as he finished, his bloody aura grew much stronger than before. It looked as red as fire, and yet it felt so cold it was like they were standing next to the source of winter. At the same time, frozen blood rippled out of the man like shockwaves.

“He’s... an Astral Refiner!” Ye Qing’s pupils contracted a little. He had his suspicions, but now he was certain that the assassin was in the Astral Refinement stage. It was because the bloody aura surrounding Qing Kui wasn’t made of true qi, but astral qi.

True qi was the intangible, insubstantial essence of the world. It could be molded into anything and everything, but it did not have a defining attribute. On the other hand, astral qi was known as the Qi of Perpetual Motion. Generally speaking, it referred to natural true qi that had taken on a distinct shape and attribute due to their environment or other factors. Some of the most astral qi in the world were Bing Fire, Yi Wood, Gui Water and so on.

An Astral Refiner was a warrior who had absorbed astral qi into their body and refined it into their true qi to give it characteristics of fire, water, lightning, earth, sound and other forces of nature. This was why astral qi was infinitely more varied and powerful than pure true qi.

Take Ye Qing’s “Boundless Lightning Palm” for example. The martial art molded his true qi to simulate the force of lightning, but it was ultimately just a simulation. It was nowhere as realistic or potent as the real thing.

Besides that, there was a reason astral qi was known as the Qi of Perpetual Motion. A body that was tempered by astral qi would not leak vigor, strength, or vitality into the environment, meaning that it

could theoretically function indefinitely without an external energy source. It was why the ancients called this body the “Innate Flawless Body”.

To give a metaphor, if the Vessel Augmentation stage was the stage where the warrior dug “ponds” and “channels” in their body to fill them with “water”, then the Astral Refinement stage was the stage where they planted the seeds of life in their body and transformed it into a true ecosystem, mimicking nature in every sense of the word.

Ye Qing was now a bonafide late-stage Vessel Augmentor, so he had begun looking into the Astral Refinement stage as a matter of course. However, he absolutely wasn’t expecting to meet an Astral Refiner in the flesh, much less one who meant to do him harm.

“A-An Astral Refiner?!” Tao Xian stammered out in fright, and not just because the creeping frost was cold enough to constrict his blood vessels and turn his blood was ice. He could barely move an inch with how stiff he felt.

Chapter 97: Yin Blood Qi

“You’re also smarter than you look. It’s too bad the answer isn’t going to help you one bit!” Qing Kui sneered, and the frosty blood on the ground abruptly lifted into the air and transformed into a swarm of hissing snakes. Ye Qing had no doubt they would rip him and Tao Xian into pieces if given the chance to do so.

“You should go!” Ye Qing slapped Tao Xian on the chest. The gentle force didn’t just push him out of the frosty blood’s range, it also dissolved the yin energy stifling his limbs and restoring control to his body.

After Tao Xian was out of danger, he immediately turned tail and ran like the wind. “Hang on, boss! I’ll call for help immediately!”

“...”

You know, I thought the underlings should be the ones throwing themselves against formidable enemies while I, the boss, shoot orders from the backline. So why is the opposite happening here?

“Your underling has abandoned you, brat. If you surrender now, I might yet change my mind about torturing you and making you wish you were dead!” Qing Kui couldn’t care less about Tao Xian escaping because there was no one he could call that could pose a real threat against him, and by the time he mustered enough men he would’ve killed Ye Qing and left the place a long time ago.

“Thanks, but no thanks!” Ye Qing jolted back to reality and replied. He could daydream after he had beaten the assassin. Staring at the snake swarm in front of him, he curled his fingers and somehow caused the blood to drain away from their bodies, leaving behind only icy frost. When the snakes were about three inches away

from him, they abruptly shattered into pieces as if they had completely expended their energy and could not maintain their form any longer.

“How did you...?” Qing Kui’s smile morphed into shock and confusion when he saw this. He had no idea how Ye Qing had done it, but he had suddenly lost control of his bloody snakes when they were less than a second away from skewering the young man.

The battle was just starting though. Qing Kui’s palm and the surrounding air abruptly turned blood red like an inferno. Then, he unleashed a palm strike that was far, far more powerful than the one he attempted to kill Tao Xian with earlier.

The bloody palm flying toward Ye Qing looked as picturesque as a painting, but it came at the cost of everything around it. The ground, the plants, and even the fake mountains some thirty meters away from the attack were covered in sheen of red frost. It slowly ate away at their form until nothing was left behind.

“Yin Blood Hand”

The “Yin Blood Hand” was Qing Kui’s signature move. He cultivated a cultivation art called the “Yin Blood Qi Scripture”, and it transformed his true qi into an insidious, brutal astral qi called the Yin Blood Qi.

It bore repeating that Yin Blood Qi was an exceptionally insidious and brutal astral qi. Not only was it cold enough to freeze a person’s blood and inflict frostbite damage, it could invade a person’s body to corrupt their vigor and melt their innards without a trace. At a certain level, the astral qi could even influence a person’s mind without them noticing.

The “Yin Blood Qi Scripture” came together with a palm art known as the “Yin Blood Hand”. It was a martial art made to maximize the Yin Blood Qi’s potential. Ideally, the “Yin Blood Hand” could freeze everything and melt all flesh and blood into goo in one palm strike. It was incredibly deadly to put it mildly.

Of course, Qing Kui hadn’t gone all out. He didn’t want to kill Ye Qing until he had obtained the painting after all. Even so, he was confident that the palm strike would hurt Ye Qing enough to incapacitate him.

On the other side, Ye Qing stood frozen in place like someone who had lost all will to resist. However, right before the bloody palm would land, Qing Kui’s hair abruptly stood on end not unlike a mouse who was cornered by a cat. It was at this moment Ye Qing opened his mouth and sucked the bloody palm and the bloody air around it into his stomach!

“Not bad, not bad! It’s kinda like eating a super hot pepper, but cold!” Ye Qing smirked while licking his lips.

Qing Kui wasn’t expecting this at all, but he did not hesitate to rush forward and point his finger at Ye Qing. Bloody energy streamed out of his fingertip like light beams and threatened to turn the body part he was aiming at into goo. He was aiming at Ye Qing’s major points too, meaning that the young man would be crippled if even one of the attacks hit.

“Melting Finger”

However, Ye Qing was able to duck and weave through the assault like a cloud dancing in the wind. No matter how close the Melting Finger came to hitting him, it was never actually close enough to deal any sort of damage. When he had dodged the final attack, Ye Qing abruptly disappeared and reappeared behind Qing Kui.

“Flowing Cloud, Flying Sleeve”

Qing Kui was both shocked and furious when he sensed the attack. His senses told him that Ye Qing was just a late-stage Vessel Augmentor, and yet the tidal wave of force rushing toward his back was on par—no, greater than what he could muster, an Astral Refiner! This wasn’t possible unless...

Did he achieve perfect augmentation!? The possibility entered Qing Kui’s mind. Only a Vessel Augmentor who had augmented all twelve Standard Meridians, eight Extraordinary Meridians, and three hundred and sixty points could possess such a tremendous amount of true qi!

But this is Anyang! What is a perfect Vessel Augmentor doing in a backwater county like this?

It was no wonder that Qing Kui was confused. He was a member of a powerful faction, but even he had only augmented twelve Standard Meridians, six Extraordinary Meridians, and three hundred points in his body.

There’s no way this can be true. I have to be mistaken... right?

By now, Ye Qing’s attack was less than a second away from hitting his back. Not daring to treat it lightly or conserve his strength, he channeled his Yin Blood Qi to the max and manifested what looked like a blood red moon from his body.

Boom!

The red globe of astral qi was so thick it was almost tangible, but Ye Qing’s attack had smashed through it like a tsunami crashing through a building. If Qing Kui wasn’t sure before, he now knew with absolute certainty that Ye Qing’s reservoir of true qi was much bigger than him.

Qing Kui staggered forward uncontrollably and had to catch himself. Although his makeshift shield managed to block off most of the attack, he still felt like cracks were forming across his innards. However, his pain was quickly overwhelmed by a greater shock when he saw Ye Qing clenching his hand and pulling all the blood in the air toward him. They converged just above his palm and formed a small globe of blood.

“Impossible... How are you controlling my Yin Blood Qi?” Qing Kui couldn’t help but blurt out in shock.

He could accept Ye Qing having a greater reservoir of true qi than him, an Astral Refiner. The guy was a perfect Vessel Augmentor after all. He could even accept that Ye Qing was resistant or immune to his Yin Blood Qi. He had fought against warriors whose martial art was the antithesis of his Yin Blood Qi and witnessed martial arts that were far stranger than his.

But how in the flying fuck was the young man controlling his Yin Blood Qi like he was the true Astral Refiner here, not him? He had never seen anything like this despite his myriad life experiences, and he did not like it one bit because it meant that there was at least one factor in this battle that was completely out of his control.

Ye Qing squeezed the globe of blood in his hand a little. It was only as big as a walnut, but he could feel an unbelievable amount of energy in it. If he tossed it on the ground, he had no doubt that the resulting explosion would destroy at least half of the headquarters. It was a terrifying amount of power to say the least.

Astral qi was just so much more powerful than natural true qi, and this was especially true in Qing Kui's case. Qing Kui had not ascended to the Astral Refinement stage by refining common astral qi such as Bing Fire or Gui Water. It was the strange and deadly Yin Blood Qi. If Ye Qing had been an ordinary late-stage Vessel Augmentor, he could've defeated him and killed him in just a matter of seconds.

Unfortunately for Qing Kui, the Yin Blood Qi was mainly a blood astral qi with a bit of yin element in it, and it just so happened that Ye Qing's blood was the bane of all blood thanks to its devouring ability! In fact, his blood had been growing restless since Qing Kui had launched his first attack. He could tell that it wanted to devour the blood in the air to enrich itself.

This was why Ye Qing had chosen to stay behind and fight despite knowing that his enemy was an Astral Refiner. It was because he had a real shot at overcoming the gap between their cultivation level and killing Qing Kui. Otherwise, he would've run away a long time ago!

"I don't know. Maybe your astral qi likes me more than it likes you?" Ye Qing joked while continuing to toy with the globe of blood.

"Is there no end to your shitty jokes, you bastard?" Qing Kui narrowed his eyes. Of course he didn't believe Ye Qing's nonsense, but until he figured out exactly why his opponent could steal away his Yin Blood Qi, he would be fighting at a disadvantage, and the thought that a *Vessel Augmentor* had any advantage over him at all irked him to no end.

Still, he needed to end this as soon as possible. If Ye Qing managed to drag out the fight long enough for reinforcements to show up, he would be in a lot of trouble not because they could threaten him, but because it would lead to the kind of consequences Xiao Yang had warned him about.

Also, he refused to believe that he, an Astral Refiner, could not squash a mere Vessel Augmentor.

"Don't think you've won yet, brat. I'll show you the true power of an Astral Refiner starting now!" Qing Kui declared when blood suddenly poured out of his eyes and trickled down his bronze mask. Then, strange patterns lit up across the surface of the mask and formed the lifelike image of a tiger as it absorbed the blood.

Rumble!

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A terrific amount of fiendish energy gushed out of the bronze mask then. It was so thick that it shrouded the assassin like a fog.

"Kill! Kill! KILL!"

Ye Qing could vaguely hear the sound of hoofbeats, the clanging of metals, and battle cries from the fog-like energy. There were the sound of war drums and blowing horns as well. It was as if the two of them had been transported into a battlefield.

At the same time, a silhouette wearing a draconic armor and a bronze mask appeared behind Qing Kui. The mask looked exactly the same as the one Qing Kui was wearing. The silhouette also wielded a Green Dragon Crescent Blade.

“GRAH!”

The silhouette abruptly looked up and roared on top of his lungs, and the fiendish energy surrounding Qing Kui immediately flooded into the silhouette. His body kept growing more and more tangible until he almost looked like a real person; a real war general.

The general abruptly slammed the butt of his crescent blade against the ground, shattering it. He glared daggers at Ye Qing and roared again, “KILL!”

An unspeakable aura full of bloodthirst and violence washed out of the war general then. At that moment, Ye Qing had no doubt that whoever the war general in life was a mighty warrior who had fought a thousand battles, waded through mountains of corpses, and swam across seas of blood to become who he was. It was such a show of intimidation that even Ye Qing could barely keep his cool and stabilize his mind. A weaker man would’ve lost all will to fight after hearing that battle cry alone.

“KILL!”

Finally, the general grabbed his crescent blade with both hands and began his attack.

Rumble!

The general was a good distance away from Ye Qing, but when he swung his crescent blade diagonally across the air, a terrific crescent of death flew toward the young man with seemingly enough force to cut the heaven and the earth itself in half. At that moment, the world trembled, and all colors seemed to fade into nothing!

“Oh shit shit SHIT! I knew I shouldn’t have fooled around!” Ye Qing cried out in alarm while dashing sideways as quickly as he could. Every cell in his body was screaming that there was no chance in hell he could block the attack. The crescent blade was a true blade of war whose sole purpose in existence was to slay its enemies. The technique might seem insultingly basic—anyone who had reached the Vessel Augmentation stage could swing a weapon and shoot their true qi—but why would you need complexity when your attack was backed by overwhelming power?

It was as if the general’s violence, bloodthirst, aura and more had been molded together to create a pure instrument of murder. This one attack was worth thousands and thousands of attacks. Forget one Ye Qing, not even two Ye Qings might be enough to block the attack!

Ye Qing had launched into evasive maneuvers as soon as he saw the crescent of death flying toward him, but it chased after him like a homing missile and could not be shaken off no matter what he tried. Not only that, there was so much power behind the attack that it was crushing everything

ahead of it before it even reached them. It cut through walls, structures and the earth beneath it like they didn't even exist.

I can't dodge this, the thought entered Ye Qing's mind. But he had to, because every other option led to certain death. So, he pushed Blood Sea Fragrance to the utmost limit and danced all over the place as light as a feather and as quick as a lightning bolt. Not only that, he unleashed his spirit so he could locate the weakest spot in the air and minimize the air resistance he was enduring. Any speed he could squeeze out might just make the difference between life and death!

In Qing Kui's eyes, Ye Qing was like a candle flame struggling to survive a raging storm. The wind was strong, and the downpour was so potent that it could have extinguished even a raging inferno, much less a pathetic candle flame. But no matter how fierce the storm raged, the candle refused to submit to fate and kept on burning. It never stopped emitting a warm light that valiantly pushed back against the darkness and despair closing in around it; a light that looked like hope itself!

Chapter 98: On Second Thought

"Hope, huh? If hope is all it takes to change fate, then the world would've been a much better place!" Qing Kui said mockingly.

The mask he was wearing was called the "Bronze Tiger Head", a bonafide Malice-class Strange Artifact. Legends said that it belonged to a fearsome war general whose name was lost to time. Imbued with a terrible amount of power, it could summon the general's soul fragment and have him fight on behalf of its wielder.

The crescent of death was the general's ultimate attack, and it was about as potent as a late-stage Astral Refiner's attack. It was why Qing Kui's ridiculing comment wasn't unreasonable. The fact was that Ye Qing was slowing down and growing pale over time. The crescent of death was slowly but surely shrinking his room for maneuver as well.

"Die!"

Qing Kui sneered coldly. From the moment he used the Bronze Tiger Head, he had given up on the idea of capturing Ye Qing alive. After all, the painting had to be on Ye Qing's person or somewhere in the headquarters. It would take a while, but he would find the painting eventually.

Qing Kui failed to notice something critical, however. It was true that Ye Qing was losing room for maneuver, but he was also getting closer and closer to Qing Kui. When he was mere meters away from the Astral Refiner, he abruptly jabbed a finger at him.

It looked like the act of a petulant child who was moments away from losing their game, but Qing Kui felt a chill running down his spine for some reason. The next moment, he felt his blood suddenly going out of control like someone had added a drop of water into a pot of boiling oil. It slammed against the walls of his blood vessels repeatedly as if it was trying to escape.

Qi and blood were key components of one's vigor. If either one of them was disrupted, it would be impossible for the person to function normally. Naturally, Qing Kui was immediately assaulted by a wave of dizziness, and his vital signs were going haywire as well.

"What's happening?" Qing Kui pressed a hand to his chest and looked inward. To his shock, he noticed invisible, dust-sized tendrils that almost looked like shadows of

blood swimming inside his body. He would never have noticed them if not for the sudden deterioration of his health. They were Ye Qing's Blood Shadows and the reason for sudden disruption of his vigor, of course.

"When did this...?" Qing Kui muttered in confusion and disbelief even as he mustered his true qi and attempted to expel the Blood Shadows. However, they were unusually difficult to remove even for an Astral Refiner like him.

Suddenly, Qing Kui felt a tiny burst of pain behind his neck. A thin wound then appeared out of seemingly nowhere. When he focused his eyes and stared at his surroundings, he finally noticed the nigh invisible Blood Shadows swimming all around him like ghosts.

"This is... the Blood Shadow Magic?" Qing Kui's eyes bulged when he realized what he was seeing. "How did you know the Blood Shadow Castle's magic art? Are you a disciple of Blood Shadow Castle?"

However, he quickly refuted his own assumption, "No, no, I must be mistaken. The real Blood Shadow Magic could never affect my vigor! Who are you?"

More wounds appeared on Qing Kui's body as he was speaking. They were so tiny that they couldn't even threaten an ordinary person's life, but for some reason Qing Kui had a bad, bad feeling about this.

"Haha! You came to kill me, and you don't even know who I am?" Ye Qing replied while still darting about in the sky. Thanks to the Blood Shadows affecting the flow of Qing Kui's vigor, the crescent of death chasing after him had become a lot weaker than before. It still wasn't enough though. He had snuck the Blood Shadows into Qing Kui's body almost as soon as they started fighting, but the assassin was an Astral Refiner. He quickly found out that he was unable to control the Blood Shadows enough to affect Qing Kui's vigor unless he was within a few meters of him. As for killing him outright with the Blood Shadows like he had done with the Soundless Bugs, that was downright impossible without sufficient preparation.

So he prepared. While Qing Kui was still struggling to control his vigor or his astral qi, he landed hit after hit with his Blood Shadows until the guy was bleeding all over the place. Eventually, Qing Kui grew frustrated enough to shout, "I don't care who the fuck you are, but you'll never kill me with such petty tricks!"

As soon as he finished, the Astral Refiner forcefully mustered a ball of astral qi in his dantian and discharged it across his whole body. This time, he was able to destroy the Blood Shadows lurking within his vigor.

"Well done, friend. Unfortunately, you're just a little too late!" Ye Qing said suddenly. Before Qing Kui could make sense of his words, blood abruptly squirted out of his wounds like water out of an open valve!

It happened so fast. One second ago, Qing Kui was still rejoicing over the annihilation of the Blood Shadows and getting ready to end Ye Qing once and for all. The next, fountains of blood shot out of his wounds like fireworks, and then all that was left was a pile of skins and bones. Qing Kui never even reacted to it until it was too late.

This was what Ye Qing had been planning from the beginning. Although his Blood Shadow Magic could absorb and affect another person's blood, there was only so much he could do against people whose cultivation level was higher than him. To give an example, a weaker cultivator was like a small, inferior quality water bag. One tiny hole was all he needed to drain them of their blood. However, a stronger cultivator was a bigger, tougher water bag. Not only did it take much more effort to put a hole in their body, he needed multiple holes to drain their blood completely.

So that was what he did. He put as many holes in Qing Kui's body as possible before draining him. Not even an Astral Refiner could withstand losing most of their blood in one go!

How does it feel to be sucked dry, bitch?

However, Qing Kui still wasn't dead despite losing the heavy injury. He shouted, "Save me, junior brother!" before jumping to his feet and running toward the exit. Of course, he could no longer use the Bronze Tiger Head in this state, so the war general behind his back and the crescent of death chasing after Ye Qing abruptly shattered into a million pieces and vanished.

He's still alive? Ye Qing squinted at the escaping Astral Refiner. Then, he reappeared behind Qing Kui and beheaded him in one smooth motion.

Qing Kui's head drew a long arc across the air. While it was passing by a rooftop, a silhouette just so happened to appear on the rooftop and caught sight of the head. Its cheeks were sunken, and its eyes were bulging like the eyeballs might fall off their sockets at any moment. It looked like a skull wearing human skin, and it was beyond ugly to put it mildly.

"Heavens, that's the ugliest head I've ever seen in my life," the silhouette commented. Then, he realized something and exclaimed in shock, "Wait... is that Qing Kui's head?"

After the head fell out of sight, he shrugged. "He's still ugly though."

The silhouette was Xiao Yang, of course. While looking down on Ye Qing from the rooftop, he whispered seemingly to himself, "My senior brother may be a little arrogant, violent, loathsome and ugly, and although I totally would've killed him myself because I didn't want to share the painting with anyone, he was my senior brother and a member of my Sunset Hill. As the saying goes, blood is thicker than water—wait that's not right, he's my senior brother, not my actual brother. Er..."

Xiao Yang thought for a long time but could not come up with a proper idiom, so he resumed his monologue, "Anyway, because something something and yada yada, it is only right that I take revenge for him."

Xiao Yang got ready to meet Ye Qing in battle after he finally finished his inane mumbling, but right before he could do so Ye Qing abruptly raised his hand and made a fist. All the blood in the area immediately floated into the air and converged into a globe in front of him. Then, he swallowed the globe and returned to full strength in an instant!

"... On second thought, never mind..."

Xiao Yang was going to attack the young man just now because he looked tired, but now? The young man looked like he was up for another showdown, and heavens know that Xiao Yang never fought fairly if he could help it. Qing Kui wasn't just any disciple, he was a genius disciple who had a good chance of becoming a pillar of Sunset Hill in the future. Sure, his senior brother was no match for him, but even he couldn't have killed the Astral Refiner and walked away unscathed. In fact, the best outcome he could hope for was a close victory.

On the other hand, the young man had killed Qing Kui with seemingly no effort whatsoever. He couldn't spot a scratch on his body even after his senior brother had used his trump card, the Bronze Tiger Head, meaning that he was definitely more formidable than Qing Kui. As if that wasn't enough, the guy had seemingly recovered his strength in just the blink of an eye! What the hell was even that technique? Was that why Qing Kui had died looking like the victim of a forbidden voodoo ritual? Who in their right mind would engage such a powerful and unpredictable opponent if they could help it?

He wasn't just any man, he was an extraordinarily handsome man [1]. He had no intentions of fighting a battle he could have avoided, losing, and being sucked in a dry, ugly husk. The thought that he might deprive every woman in the world of a national treasure like himself was enough to douse his fighting spirit like an ice bucket.

So no, he wasn't going to fight the young man, at least not now. Revenge was a dish best served cold, and the painting could afford to wait a bit before returning to its rightful owner.

His mind made up, Xiao Yang turned around and suddenly started fading as if his body was made of mist. It wasn't long before he was completely gone.

It was at this moment Tao Xian, Jie Chen and the others finally showed up in typical late cavalry fashion. "Boss! We're here, boss! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. It's just a small fry. It's nothing to worry about," Ye Qing replied casually while waving his hand.

Tao Xian and Jie Chen stared at the collapsed walls, ruined buildings, and tattered courtyard around them. Then, they felt the terrifying aura still permeating the air. Finally, they exchanged a quick glance with each other before looking away.

If this is what the boss considers a small fry, then what are we? The dirt on the ground?

Tao Xian stared at the beheaded "small fry" on the ground and praised from the bottom of his heart, "Long live the boss!"

"Long live the boss!" Everyone else dropped to one knee and echoed in heartfelt agreement.

"Mm. Everything's fine now, so you may take your leave!" Ye Qing waved for the others to leave before adding, "Tao Xian, stay with me."

After the others were gone, Tao Xian saluted him respectfully and asked, "What are your orders, boss?"

Ye Qing answered, "I want you to find out everything about this assassin. Who is he? Where did he come from? What did he—"

He abruptly cut himself off. It was only now he noticed that the assassin had been sucked into a dry husk, so whatever defining features it had before was either unrecognizable or distorted. His shrunken head also resembled a Stranger more than a human being. How was Tao Xian supposed to find anything like this?

“Never mind. Just clean up the place when tomorrow comes.”

“As you command!” Tao Xian saluted before leaving his boss to his devices.

After Tao Xian was gone, Ye Qing searched Qing Kui’s corpse for loot but could not find anything.

“Penniless bastard. How is he so poor that he doesn’t have a Nature’s Shell?” Ye Qing muttered irritably but relaxed when he glanced at the bronze mask lying not far away from Qing Kui’s head. “At least there’s still the mask. This Strange Artifact alone is worth ruining a night or two!”

Ye Qing could still remember the fear he felt when the terrifying war general unleashed that devastating attack that almost killed him. He also felt a little excited.

The bronze mask was obviously an incredibly powerful Strange Artifact. It wasn’t just a match for his Blue Demon Hand. It had exceeded it.

After he put the bronze mask safely into his Nature’s Shell, Ye Qing unleashed the Netherflame and burned Qing Kui into a pile of ashes. While doing so, he said,

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. You may have tried to kill me, brother, but I won’t hold a grudge against you and feed your body to the Strangers since I’m a broad-minded man. That said, I’m too busy a man to dig a grave for you, so cremation is the way to go. It’s environmentally friendly, saves space, and beneficial to the realm. What’s not to like, am I right?”

After that, he turned around and walked toward the Flowing Cloud Hall.

Just a few seconds after Ye Qing took off, a silhouette abruptly appeared on another rooftop and stared at Ye Qing’s departing back. A short while later, he rubbed his chin and mumbled regretfully, “My word, he really took no damage from that fight? Oh well. There is always another chance!”

The silhouette was none other than Xiao Yang!

“This brat has a lot of good stuff on him. What’s yours is mine, and what’s mine is still mine. Keep them safe for me, kiddo. One day, I will return and take back what’s mine!”

Xiao Yang disappeared once more, and this time, he did not come back.

“Fuck... they finally left!”

At the door, Ye Qing let out a huge sigh of relief after the deadly aura his spirit had been sensing was finally gone. As if on cue, he abruptly covered his mouth and started coughing like he was coughing up a lung, blood trickling from between his fingers even as he tried to control his reaction.

Chapter 99: Acrostic

That was too close!

Ye Qing wasn't just hurt, he was hurt pretty badly. Although he managed to avoid getting hit by the crescent of death—he would've died otherwise—it had come close enough to wound him with its force and destructive will. The reason he hadn't allowed himself to show any sign of weakness until now was because of the assassin's last words:

“Save me, junior brother!”

His last words were proof that the assassin hadn't come alone. Considering how powerful he had been, his junior brother could not be too far behind. The only reason he managed to kill the assassin was because the Blood Shadow Divine Art just happened to counter his cultivation art perfectly. Another Vessel Augmentor, even a weaker one might have proven to be more than a match for him, not to mention that he was in no condition to fight a consecutive battle.

Had Ye Qing showed any weakness at all, he was certain that he would not live to see tomorrow's sun. That was why he had pretended to be fine, no, more than fine. There was no telling if the assassin's junior brother had watched the battle, but at the very least Ye Qing wanted him to think that he was almost or fully healthy after the battle. He wanted to sow so much doubt and uncertainty in the junior brother that he was disinclined to fight him.

Of course, his tactic only worked against smart people. If the junior brother turned out to be an idiot or a one-track minded person who couldn't read a clue to save his life, then he was dead as a dodo. It was as simple as that.

Luckily, his acting skill was up to par, and his spirit was just strong enough that he noticed the junior brother spying on him from the darkness. That was why he did not slip up until the end and somehow lived to see another day.

“That was *way* too close! Thank god I'm a lucky man, and thanks for watching over me, dad [1]!” Ye Qing breathed an audible sigh of relief after he finally managed to stop his cough. “But who are these people? Why did they show up now to take the ‘Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method’?”

He could see why the assassin—or anyone for the matter—would want to steal the “Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method” for themselves. After all, it was an incredible visualization method that could increase one's mental strength and fortitude. However, Zheng Feng had owned it for years without ever finding a murderous Astral Refiner standing in his backyard, while he had barely owned it for a week or two before trouble found its way to its doorsteps. Was he mistaken about his luck, or was Zheng Feng just that lucky?

In the end, Ye Qing could only comfort himself by thinking, *it must be because I'm too handsome and talented. Even the heavens deem that I must face a tribulation or two to balance out the scales.*

Ye Qing went into the room, assumed a meditative pose and closed his eyes. He then channeled the “Blood Shadow Divine Art” with all he got. His heart beat loudly like drums, and he could hear his blood rushing like a river in his ears. Soon, he emanated a red light and turned boiling hot like the sun. The entire room was dyed in red for a long time.

Over four hours later, when the horizon started to turn white like the belly of a fish, Ye Qing suddenly opened his eyes and exhaled a mouthful of murky qi. Lightning suddenly crept across the furniture, and the room was filled with a terrifying, murderous aura in an instant.

Buzz—

The entire room shook as the unusual aura swam restlessly throughout the space. Invisible blade energies instantly diced the table, the chairs, the cups and every item in the room into fine powder. It was terrifying to say the least.

Ye Qing reached out and pulled seemingly all the air in the room into his palm. Then, he clenched his hand until there was a devastating pop and a terrific gale. A long time later, the wind finally subsided together with the murderous aura and the blade energies.

“Phew! It’s done!” what he spat out of his mouth just now was of course, the blade force that had invaded his body. Technically speaking, his internal injuries weren’t that severe. The problem was that the blade energies would not stop attacking his insides until he had expelled it from his body. Without it, it only took him seconds to return back to full health.

On a related note, he had fully refined the blood he absorbed from Qing Kui as well. As expected of an Astral Refiner, his vigor was extremely powerful. It wasn’t just enough to heal up his injuries, it had pushed his physique to a whole new level as well. Right now, not even three Qing Kuis combined had more vigor than him. With high HP and high defense, he was what the netizens would call a tank [2].

“Now that I’m back to peak form, I should check out that bronze mask.” Ye Qing recalled the bronze mask he picked up last night and retrieved it from his Nature’s Shell. He then examined its appearance for a bit. The bronze mask was rusty and covered in blackened bloodstains. It also oozed an air of antiquity and hardship. Besides that, it didn’t look any different from an ordinary mask.

“It doesn’t look like much. I should ask the Annon Sutra about it.” When in doubt, ask the Annon Sutra!

So, he took out his vellum and fed it his blood as usual. “What kind of Strange Artifact is this bronze mask?”

A short while later, the Annon Sutra glowed darkly and manifested its answer:

“The Bronze Tiger Head is a Malice-class Strange Artifact and a mask belonging to Wei Rou, a great general from the previous dynasty. Wei Rou was already quite famous at a young age because he was a master of all things military, but he had the unfortunate luck of being born with a woman’s face. Too pretty to intimidate an enemy or ally, he eventually decided to wear a tiger mask every time he entered the battlefield. It quickly proved a simply but brilliant solution to his problem.”

“However, because the tiger mask was exposed to the battlefield for too long, it eventually became tainted with bloodthirst, violence and vengeful spirits who had died on the battlefield. On the one hand, it gained special abilities and transformed into a Strange Artifact. On the other hand, Wei Rou’s personality was slowly warped by the tiger mask until he finally transformed into a vicious, bloodthirsty and murderous beast who only knew murder. After he lost a battle and was caught by the enemy, he was executed by chariot-splitting. [3]”

“Wei Rou was unresigned to his fate, however. Such was his grudge that a fragment of his soul became attached to the mask. As a result, the tiger mask became even stranger than before.”

“The wearer of the Bronze Tiger Head can soak the mask in blood to summon Wei Rou’s soul fragment into existence. The violence and bloodthirst of the myriad battlefields he had fought and the power of hundreds of heroic souls would come together to grant the wearer immense power.”

“In exchange, the wearer must withstand the Bronze Tiger Head’s unrelenting corruption. If their mind and spirit proved insufficient to fend off the mask’s thirst for violence and blood, they would eventually succumb to the same fate as Wei Rou and transform into a mindless beast.”

“Besides that, the bearer of the Bronze Tiger Head may be harassed by Wei Rou’s soul fragment from time to time.”

When the Annon Sutra was finally done explaining the Bronze Tiger Head, Ye Qing exclaimed in amazement, “A Malice-class Strange Artifact! No wonder it’s so powerful!”

As someone who had barely survived its attack, he could personally attest to its strength. Unfortunately, its side effects were just as dangerous. Judging from the aura he felt last night, he wouldn’t be surprised if a weak-willed person activated it and immediately lost their minds the second after.

“It’s a crying shame that the side effects are so terrible. I can only use it as a trump card!” Ye Qing sighed. Frankly, it was lousier than the Blue Demon Hand and Lightning Bolt in terms of practicality.

“What did it mean that ‘the bearer of the Bronze Tiger Head may be harassed by Wei Rou’s soul fragment from time to time though’? Like, is the guy going to appear randomly and stalk me like a ghost, or is he going to haunt my dreams or something?”

Unfortunately the Annon Sutra did not give him a straight answer, so he could only wait and see what happens next. He consoled himself, “It should be fine. We’re both men, and the Annon Sutra said he’s only going to ‘harass’ me, not ‘attack’ or ‘kill’ me, so who cares?”

With that done, Ye Qing decided to look into Astral Refinement stage cultivation art next. Now that he was a bonafide late-stage Vessel Augmentor, one could say that he had reached the absolute ceiling of the Vessel Augmentation stage. The only way he could progress further was to enter the Astral Refinement stage, and to do that he would have to refine astral qi. He didn't actually know if that was the case, but a Reforged needed to invoke qi to enter the Qi Invocation stage, and a Qi Invoker needed to augment their blood vessels to enter the Vessel Augmentation stage. Going by that logic, it made perfect sense that a Vessel Augmentor would need to refine astral qi to enter the Astral Refinement stage.

Just like last time, he planned to consult the Annon Sutra to determine the best Astral Refinement stage cultivation art for him and where he could get it. If the cultivation art turned out to be out of reach, then he would seek out Ling Jianqiu and request a suitable Astral Refinement stage cultivation art as a reward. Considering his contributions to the county, he was sure the Chief of Bureau wouldn't reject him.

However, he would prefer not to do this because the exchange would most likely bind him to the ship that was the Pacification Bureau. Sure, it was one of the biggest, stablest, and safest ships in the realm, but he would have to surrender his independence and freedom as the price. Independence was the only reason his secrets were still under wraps. He seriously didn't want to join the Pacification Bureau unless he had no other choice.

Without further ado, he cut open his finger again and asked, "Where can I find an Astral Refinement stage cultivation art that suits me best?"

This time, it took half a teatime before the Annon Sutra was finally satisfied. Then, it manifested these words:

"Redstone grasps for the heavens like swords

Forest awash, a world forever transformed

Books are tasty, yums an early worm until a

Sprite kicks it over for knowledge lost."

"I-Is this a poem? Why did you suddenly change your style, brother?" Ye Qing blurted. It wasn't a bad poem, but it was a massive departure from its usual first-person perspective, suspenseful and thriller-style response. In fact, it was so unexpected that Ye Qing didn't even know what to make of it.

"I guess I'm supposed to decipher its meaning or something?" Ye Qing muttered before pouring through the poem a second time. It was, on the surface, a very simple poem. The first two lines described scenery, whereas the last two lines seemed to imply a moral lesson. It was very easy to understand since it was written vernacularly. There was just one problem.

What the fuck does this have to do with my question? This... this isn't a scam, is it?

That seemed unlikely since the Annon Sutra had never failed him before, so Ye Qing crossed his arms and racked his brain once more. Unfortunately, the answer still eluded him like a mirage.

Bro! I seriously don't get what you're saying! Can you go back to your previous style, please?

Ye Qing felt like crying. He hadn't transmigrated to another world to learn how to decipher a poem, dammit!

"Redstone reaches toward the sky like a sword, forest leaves wobble atop meandering... wait a second. Redstone... Forest? Is that how it is?"

Ye Qing was reciting the poem for the umpteenth time when suddenly, it hit him. Was this an acrostic? The first word of the first line of the poem was "Redstone", whereas the first word of the second line was "Forest". Together, they made the word "Redstone Forest"!

Besides that, the description seemed to match what he had seen the first time he traveled to Redstone Forest. The stone forest did look like swords pointing toward the sky, and it was forever changed after the Heptachromatic Fog of Aging had washed over a good portion of it.

"Yes! It has to be referring to the Redstone Forest!" Ye Qing slapped his thigh in excitement.

"What about the last two lines? 'Books' and 'Sprite'... Book Sprite? Is it referring to Wawa?"

Although he didn't know how Wawa could help him find the Astral Refinement stage cultivation art he was looking for, the Annon Sutra never gave him a useless answer. Even if he was wrong, there was no harm in bringing Wawa on one of his adventures.

"There is no better time to start than now, so let's go!"

.....

It was morning by the time he returned to Endless Horizons. Wawa was playing with Kung Fu Frog as usual. He called out to her with a beaming smile on his face, "Can I ask your help with something, Wawa?"

Wawa patted her tiny chest and declared, "Wawa loves helping people. How can I help you, friend?"

Ye Qing replied, "I'd like to head out to Redstone Forest and search for something. Would you like to help me with it?"

"Redstone Forest? Are we going out to play, friend?"

Wawa looked so excited she bounced up and down on his shoulders. She had automatically translated what was most likely going to be a boring search in the middle of nowhere into an fun adventure. "Of course I'll come with you! Wawa loves to go out and play! You're a good friend, friend!"

As long as she's happy, I suppose!

Ye Qing went up and stored Wawa's true body in his Nature's Shell. He then left Endless Horizons with Wawa, Kung Fu Frog, and Faceless in tow. Although Wawa was the only one the Annon Sutra had asked him to bring, it didn't say that it couldn't bring additional help with him. If his previous

experience was anything to go by, it was practically guaranteed that they would definitely encounter some sort of unpredictable danger. They were safer as a team of four than a team of two.

Ye Qing had just left the gates when he ran into a couple of familiar faces. “Sister Yun! Hu Nu! What brings you to the gates?”

“Warrior Ye!”

Yun Yan was accompanied by Hu Nu and dozens of Sentinels, and they all greeted him warmly and with deep respect. Everyone here had witnessed his prowess last night and knew just how strong he was. Not only had he killed plenty of powerful Strangers, he was the one who interrupted the summoning ritual and ultimately prevented the Nether Lord from descending upon Anyang. He was, by all means, the savior of Anyang, so how could not treat him with respect?

“Are you heading out as well, Joyless?” Yun Yan looked surprised to see Ye Qing at the gates as well.

Ye Qing gave her the excuse he had prepared earlier, “Yeah! There’s something I need to do. What about you guys? Where are you going?”

Ye Qing was puzzled because the Sentinel squad accompanying Yun Yan was armed to the teeth. It looked like they were out on an expedition, but that didn’t seem right because nearly all of the Strangers around Anyang had perished in that battle.

A Sentinel answered his question, “Something strange has happened at Redstone Forest, and we’re heading over to investigate it.”

“Redstone Forest?” Ye Qing blinked. Was it a coincidence? He didn’t think so!

Chapter 100: Mountain of Riddles

“What happened? Did the Heptachromatic Fog of Aging come back?”

Last he heard, the Heptachromatic Fog of Aging had vanished a few days ago. Otherwise, he would have abandoned the idea of entering the Redstone Forest in a heartbeat!

“No, it’s not that.” Yun Yan shook her head. “It’s a floating mountain!”

“A floating mountain? What kind of mountain is it?” Ye Qing asked curiously.

“We’re not sure yet, but our scouts reported a mountain suddenly appearing above Redstone forest this morning. Everyone who got too close to the mountain would disappear without a trace!”

“That’s... not good.” Ye Qing frowned. The morning had just begun, and things were already escalating to unpalatable levels. “Can I come with you?”

Still, he must go. His Astral Refinement stage cultivation art almost certainly had something to do with this mountain.

Yun Yan smiled. “It would be an honor!”

Suddenly, a handsome man in white clothes walked over and asked, "Care to make the introductions, Sister Yun?" He carried himself casually, but not so casual that he would inflict disgust upon others.

Yun Yan said obediently, "Of course, Lord Xiao. This is my friend, Ye Qing. Ye Qing, this is Lord Xiao Yang, a Patrolman of Luo Shui!"

"Didn't I tell you to address me by name, Sister Yun? Lord Xiao sounds so distant!" Xiao Yang pretended to be sad for a second before breaking into a cheerful grin. "Of course, you may address me as 'Brother Xiao' or 'Brother Yang' as well if 'Xiao Yang' is too direct for you!"

Yun Yan smiled again but did not give him an answer.

Xiao Yang looked at Ye Qing and clasped his hands together in a respectful salute. "Hail, Brother Ye! I am Xiao Yang, and it's nice to meet you!"

Ye Qing returned the gesture, "Well met, Brother Xiao Yang. It's nice to meet you as well."

Xiao Yang moved closer to Ye Qing and patted him on the shoulder happily. "Hahaha! That's what I'm talking about! I've heard of your achievements, brother. Not only did you uncover a terrible conspiracy that would've destroyed Anyang, you're the one who came up with the plan to rout the invading Strangers and even slayed the Nether Lord himself! I only wish that I'm half the shit-bomb you are!"

What was left unsaid was that Ye Qing was the last person he wanted to face in all of Anyang. When he saw Ye Qing last night and realized who he was, he knew that it was going to be even harder to carry out his planned assassination than expected. Who would have thought that the gang boss of the Iron Shirt Gang was also the famous savior of Anyang and a rising star in the eyes of the Pacification Bureau? Killing him was hard enough, but he also had to find the right time and place to do it unless he wanted to deal with the aftermath. *Troublesome! So troublesome!*

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was trying to figure out if Xiao Yang was praising or insulting him. It didn't look like he was insulting him, but what kind of person would call someone a "shit-bomb" and mean it as a praise? Why couldn't he use something conventional like "star" or "warrior"?

In the end, he decided to go with a humble reply, "You flatter me!" *I'm just a bit better than most people! That bit being the distance in which I can throw you!*

"Hahaha! You're too humble, brother!" Xiao Yang continued to hug Ye Qing. "It is my honor to be able to make the acquaintance of a young hero like you!"

Ye Qing's eyes twinkled. "And I you, Brother Xiao Yang! You are one of the most interesting people I've ever met!"

He wasn't kidding. Very few people would treat a complete stranger in such a warm, friendly fashion on their first meeting, and such people could usually be broken down into two types. One, they possessed a heart of gold that could befriend even the surliest of people. Or two...

They were plotting something.

“I’m glad to hear that! You must let me treat you to a drink when we return from this trip, brother. When the time comes, we will not stop until we drop!” Xiao Yang guffawed. “Now, let us be on our way!”

.....

“There’s the mountain!”

Some mountains in the world were special, but not because they were particularly tall or big. It was because they possessed something unique that few other mountains possessed. The group passed through the Soundless Gorge—which wasn’t silent anymore because the Soundless Bugs had been exterminated by an unknown do-gooder some days ago—and saw the mountain they were looking for immediately.

The mountain was neither tall nor big, but it floated quietly above Redstone Forest as if gravity wasn’t a thing. Shrouded in thick, white clouds, it looked just like a celestial mountain of the legends.

They were still thirty meters away from Redstone Forest when Yun Yan raised her hand and halted their march. She said with a serious expression, “We must stop here. We will vanish like all the others if we continue further!”

The group observed the mountain for a bit before Xiao Yang asked Ye Qing quietly, “Did you notice anything, brother?”

“Yeah.” Ye Qing nodded and rubbed his chin sagely. “It’s definitely a mountain alright!”

“...” Anyone who isn’t blind can see that!

Ye Qing ignored Xiao Yang and turned to Yun Yan. “Has any one of the missing people been spotted yet, Sister Yun?”

She shook her head. “No. We’ve searched every nook and cranny within ten kilometers of Redstone Forest, but nothing. We don’t even know if they’re still alive or not!”

“Say, do you think those missing people could be found on the mountain?” Xiao Yang ventured while rubbing his chin.

Ye Qing nodded in agreement. “Most likely!” If they couldn’t be found anywhere in the area, then they must be on the mountain. His Astral Refinement stage cultivation art was most likely there as well.

Suddenly, the mysterious mountain shook, and the clouds stirred. Then, what looked like an invisible shockwave erupted from the mountain and traveled straight toward them!

“Watch out! Everybody spread out!” Ye Qing yelled after realizing that they were in trouble. He immediately grabbed Yun Yan and dashed away from the shockwave. Xiao Yang also let out a yelp and dissolved into a cloud of fog. He was moving even faster than Ye Qing was.

However, the shockwave was way faster than it had any right to be. It was almost like it was crossing through space and time itself. Before they knew it, the shockwave had washed over them, and everyone abruptly vanished like they never were.

“Where am I?”

When Ye Qing came to, he realized that he was at an unfamiliar place. He looked up and saw a mountain path made of white jade and glazed tiles leading all the way up to the peak. The path was surrounded by thick, rainbow fog that looked both mysterious and dangerous. From time to time, ancient seal scripts with wings would fly out of the fog and over the mountain path. He himself was standing at the base of the mountain.

He had a strong feeling he knew where he was.

He wasn't alone. Xiao Yang and the Sentinels were right beside him. However, Yun Yan, Kung Fu Frog and Faceless were nowhere to be seen.

“What is this place?” Xiao Yang asked.

Ye Qing replied slowly, “We’re most likely on the floating mountain above Redstone Forest.”

“What?” Everyone exchanged glances with each other. He could see a hint of panic in some of their eyes.

Suddenly, an urgent voice broke out, “Miss? Miss! Where did you go, miss?”

Ye Qing looked and saw Hu Nu walking around in the crowd and searching for Yun Yan frantically.

“Calm down, Hu Nu. Sister Yun isn't here, and that's probably a good thing!” Ye Qing went over to give him a comforting pat on his shoulder.

“Are you sure? Warrior Ye... The miss is going to be fine, right?” Hu Nu's eyes were bloodshot with worry and panic.

“It will be fine!” Ye Qing comforted him a while longer before looking around. “Right now, our first priority is to get out of this place!”

“Argh!”

Suddenly, a bloodcurdling scream interrupted his momentum. Ye Qing turned around and saw a Sentinel clutching his arm and rolling on the ground in abject pain. Everything beneath his elbow was completely gone, but not a drop of blood could be found on the ground.

Xiao Yang immediately went over and tapped a few points on the Sentinel's body to stop the pain. He then asked, “What happened?”

The Sentinel replied while looking as white as a sheet, “I... I was just trying to touch the fog beside the path, and then... and then my arm is just gone!”

Everyone subconsciously stepped away from the rainbow fog the second they heard this.

“You heard him, people! Do not touch the fog!” Xiao Yang ordered but realized that it was useless advice, so he added, “From now on, no one is to touch anything on this mountain without my express permission!”

“As you command!” The Sentinels responded.

It was at this moment an ancient seal script flew down from the mountain peak. Unlike the ones flying back and forth across the mountain path, this one was incredibly good-looking and agile. It also had a pair of ink-wash wings. Every time it flapped its wings, watery ripples and the scent of ink would permeate across the air.

“Watch out!” Ye Qing raised an arm and watched the unusual seal script warily. When it was about one meter away from them, it finally stopped in its tracks and said in a surprisingly childish voice, “Welcome to the Mountain of Riddles, challengers. All who enter the Mountain of Riddles must challenge the Path of Riddles, and only those who reached the top may leave this place.”

“All challengers are required to know these rules. One, you can only ever go forward once you’ve stepped on the Path of Riddles. Two, the Path of Riddles is made of a hundred steps, and you can move forward a step only if you answer a riddle correctly. You will be punished if you answer incorrectly or refuse to answer, but you may also take a step after the punishment is complete.”

“Three, the first line of a couplet will be announced once every incense stick. Everyone will have the opportunity to complete this couplet. Depending on the intent, rhyme, and structure of the complete couplet, additional steps may be awarded to the challenger.”

“Four, challengers may not assist one another, or they will be punished. Five, all challengers who successfully reached the peak may request something reasonable from the Riddler. And six, Strangers and idiots are not welcomed in the Mountain of Riddles!”

Strangers and idiots aren’t welcomed in the Mountain of Riddles?! Isn’t that kinda racist? A strange expression flitted across Ye Qing’s face when he heard this. Now I get why Faceless and Kung Fu Frog are missing!

“But wait, what about Wawa?” Ye Qing suddenly recalled the third Stranger he had brought with him on this expedition.

As if on cue, a cute, childish voice entered his ears. “I’m over here, friend. Oh wow! There’s so many flying friends in this place! They’re just like Wawa!” A small figure then crawled out of his hair and looked around curiously and happily. She was none other than Wawa, of course.

Something’s not right. Wawa’s a Stranger as well, but why isn’t she kicked out of the Mountain of Riddles? Ye Qing frowned. Could it be...?

Wawa was a Book Sprite; a Stranger that was born from a book. Her true body was a book, and the book was inside his Nature's Shell right now. Perhaps that was why she was able to enter the Mountain of Riddles despite its rules.

This was great news because Wawa was a Book Sprite. As the essence of a land's literary fate and the master of countless books, she was exactly who you wanted to consult with when solving riddles. In fact, it was probably an insult to use Wawa on something as childish as this, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Now he understood why the Annon Sutra had asked him to bring Wawa with him. With a living answer sheet like her, it was practically impossible for him to fail this test!

"Mountain of Riddles? We're in the Mountain of Riddles? No wonder!" Xiao Yang suddenly exclaimed. He looked like he could barely control his excitement.

"You've heard of the Mountain of Riddles, brother?" Ye Qing asked.

"Hahaha! It looks like today's our lucky day, brother!" Xiao Yang chirped, "The Mountain of Riddles is a famous Strange Realm that is usually mentioned in the same sentence as the Sea of Poems, Bridge of Art, Plains of Chess, Tower of Music, Sea of Couplets, City of Books and so on. Since the seven Strange Realms encompass the seven fields of art and literature, they're also unanimously known as the Seven Strange Realms of Literary Arts."

"Generally less dangerous than most other Strange Realms, the Seven Strange Realms of Literary Arts were considered the dream destinations of every scholar in the entire world. It's because the Strange Realms allow them to show off their skills and be rewarded for their accomplishments. It is also why they're regarded as the sanctuaries of all scholars."

A Strange Realm referred to any place or domain that possessed mysterious, supernatural qualities. They were similar to pocket worlds or blessed lands in that they were ripe with boons and opportunities, but also filled with untold anomalies and dangers.

"If this is a sanctuary for scholars, then why do you look so happy? Are you a scholar as well?" Ye Qing asked curiously.

Xiao Yang shook his head in disbelief. "That's not the point! The point is that this Strange Realm is safe! Do you understand what I'm saying? It's safe! Short of committing suicide, we're most likely going to leave this place alive!"

He was so agitated he went so far as to define the obvious.

"Say, this is the first time you enter a Strange Realm, right? Aren't you nervous at all?" Xiao Yang asked puzzledly after noticing that Ye Qing was completely relaxed. Most people would be shivering in fright when they entered a Strange Realm for the first time in their life, not to mention that they had been dragged into this against their

will. Ye Qing, on the other hand, looked like an old hand who had been through all this.

“That’s a strange question. You’re the one who said this Strange Realm isn’t dangerous!” Ye Qing raised an eyebrow and shrugged. “I’m also a scholar, so solving riddles and completing couplets are easy peasy for me. Just watch if you don’t believe me!”