

Void 171

Chapter 171 - Minor Delays [3]

“Please stop! Why must you do this to us?!” A little girl cried with tears streaking down her face.

In her arms, there was a boy around the same age as her with a seared wound across the entirety of his chest.

“Our village has lived in harmony with all of you for so many years! Why must you target us now?!” The little girl continued, her wails becoming even louder.

However, the beast in front of her showed no pity. Instead, a twisted smile crept up its face.

“Why, you ask? Well isn’t that simple? It’s because it’s fun, of course! It’s oh so very fun!”

The girl’s face contorted in anger, but her expression quickly crumpled. The situation was hopeless. She could only wait for death.

The others around her were the same. In fact, they didn’t even have the nerve to say anything in the first place. They stood in shock as their legs threatened to give up.

One of them even had a faint trickle of yellow liquid running down their leg, but none of the others would make fun of him for it. They were in the same situation.

“Yes! Yes! That’s the look I want to see! Despair, humans! This is the natural order!” The beast laughed maniacally.

“So what if that damn ruler of the forest says we must not harm you humans? You are nothing but livestock to us!!”

The pack of beasts slowly closed their encirclement, taking their sweet time to kill the children. Even if only their leader was talking, they all shared the same enjoyment as him.

“Ling’er, there’s no use holding me. Please get up and run away. Maybe I can use the last of my life to distract them for a bit.” The boy in her arms said weakly.

“No! When we were kids, I promised I would stay by your side forever! I won’t lose you, brother Cheng!” She cried, hugging him closer.

But the beasts cared not for their drama. As the leader decided it was time to start killing them off, two streaks of light, one black and one blue, exited the forest to their left.

BOOM!

The streaks of light charged into the pack of beasts and created thunderous explosions on impact, shocking not only the group of teens, but also the beasts themselves.

“Oi oi oi, isn’t it a little pathetic to be picking on kids like this?” A voice rang out from within the billowing cloud of dust.

“That’s right. these little beasts ought to be taught a lesson, don’t they?” A woman’s voice added from the second dust cloud.

“Of course. Arrogant little shits like them need to be put in their place. Though, I don’t think they’d have a chance to repent after they become mincemeat.” The man responded.

As the dust cleared up, two figures were revealed. Although their appearances were plain enough to pass over at a glance, the terrifying auras they radiated couldn’t be ignored.

“Now then,” the man continued, black lightning crackling through his surroundings, “how about we clean things up here?”

“With pleasure.”

The teens could only stand frozen in shock and watch as the crowd of beasts that had been terrorizing them was turned into corpses littering the ground.

The man used horrendous lightning, pummeling the beasts into the ground and crushing their bodies with his physical strength. His fighting style was so raw that he could almost be mistaken for a beast himself.

Meanwhile, the woman fought with unparalleled elegance. The blue fire emitting from her caused the atmospheric temperature to drop many degrees as the beasts around her were reduced to cinders.

It didn’t take long at all for the 40 or so beasts around the group to reduce in number, with only the leader left standing.

Although he should have helped his pack in getting rid of the newcomers, he wasn't in the correct mental state to do so.

"These two! Just where did they come from! That man said all the humans in this forest were weaklings!"

He was practically shivering in fear, his eyes trembling as he slowly backed away. He was trying his best to flee before the duo noticed he was gone.

His steps were as light as air, making no sound as he backtracked towards the bush behind him. But before he could enter it and run for his life...

"Where do you think you're going?"

The voice colder than ice was like a devil whispering in his ear.

'Just one more step!'

He was right there. If he was just able to move slightly further, he would be able to escape before they finished killing off his minions. He even ignored the man's piercing voice that indicated he was already discovered.

At that moment, a primal and horrifying killing intent locked onto him. It was so fierce that it was almost palpable.

‘T-this!’

The leader couldn’t move. Even if he had lived many tens of years, even he hadn’t accumulated a killing intent as strong as this one.

No matter how he tried to run, no matter how he tried to even move a single muscle, it was impossible.

‘W-what is this?’

It was like the aura of a beast. An aura even fiercer than any beast he had ever met and more horrendous than even the man who made him submit.

The pack leader raised his head with difficulty, trying to see what was going on in front of him, but he was met with only a pair of deep red eyes that made even his soul quake in fear.

“Didn’t you hear me the first time?” The man said once again. “Where. Do. You. Think. You’re. Going.”

It was no longer a question. He no longer felt he had a path to survival. The beast felt the command in those words.

‘Stay right here until I tell you to move.’

Based on pure aura alone, the beast knew he was stronger than the man who was trying to command him. Yet... Yet!

‘My body won’t listen to me!’

He was forced to wait patiently and watch as his brethren were slaughtered. Even if he didn’t care about them that much, he knew that it was his fate next.

And after the last one had died, the two who had caused this calamity to befall him looked in his direction.

“M-my lord, this is just a misunderstanding. Please spare me.”

Damien and Ruyue looked at each other and smirked.

“Oh really? This is just a misunderstanding huh?”

“Y-yes! You see, we were just playing a joke on those kids! There is actually a rule in this forest that we must not attack the humans residing in the village! I would never try to truly harm them!”

“Is that so? I guess it really was a misunderstanding then.”

The beast smiled slightly. ‘This is it! I might be able to live!’

“But isn’t this fun?”

“I-I’m sorry?”

“I said, isn’t this fun? Seeing a beast like you despair. Seeing you cower in front of me. Isn’t it fun?”

The beast slowly became drenched in a cold sweat as the man approached it.

“Isn’t this the natural order? You see, I’m similar to you. I just love seeing filthy and arrogant beasts like you tremble in front of me.”

The beast knew what was going to happen the second the man arrived in front of him. He knew, but he could do nothing about it. His aura, his flames, all of it seemed to be sealed in front of that bestial command that was uttered previously.

“Well,” the man continued, “there’s no reason for me to explain myself to you since you’ll be dead soon anyway.”

The beast was trembling. It could do nothing in front of the massive illusive pair of glowing red eyes that bore down upon him.

And suddenly...

Its field of vision flipped 180 degrees. The last thing it would ever see being the upside-down face of that terrifying man with a vicious smile plastered across his face.

Chapter 172 - Minor Delays [4]

“Phew...” Damien let out a light sigh as he wiped the sweat off his brow.

He might’ve made it seem easy killing the pack leader like that but to forcefully grab its head and twist its neck was a much harder task than he expected.

First of all, he was weaker than the pack leader to begin with. It would be a miracle if he suddenly had the strength to pull such a move, and secondly, he was forced to slightly distort space to pull off his prior actions.

The latter was a bit troublesome since he was hiding his spatial affinity in case someone decided to dive into their backgrounds when they reached the meeting ground. Still, he believed that he had disguised it well enough to be unnoticeable.

Not to mention, using his aura suppression in such a way was a bit mentally tiring. To be exact, it was using his killing intent alone.

Usually, his killing intent was naturally incorporated into his aura whenever he released it, so he never bothered to isolate it.

But for the purpose of suppressing the pack leader with his most bestial aura, he had done so today. It wasn’t a particularly strenuous process, but it took more effort than simply releasing his entire aura.

In the end, though, it was worth it. His level had jumped all the way to 125, leaving him 1/4th of the way through 3rd class.

“B-benefactors!”

A trembling voice snapped Damien out of his thoughts. His gaze refocused on the little girl from before.

“Hm?”

Noticing his gaze, the girl couldn’t help but feel fear. She had seen how he effortlessly killed a beast that was stronger than she could ever imagine, and she had heard the terrifyingly cold words he had uttered before he had done so.

How could she not be scared? To her who grew up in such an isolated environment where beasts and humans had a mutual agreement for peace, he was akin to a demon from hell.

“Did you have something to say?” A much gentler voice came from behind her. When she turned around, she saw the woman from before looking at her with encouraging eyes.

With most of the attention during the previous fight being on Damien due to his domineering actions, Ruyue’s visage was like an angel to them. And since the corpses around her had been reduced to ash rather than gruesomely pummeled, this image was further enhanced.

“M-my friend! Brother Cheng is dying! Please, I beg of you! Please save him!”

Ruyue looked at the boy in the girl's arms whose body had already gone limp before sighing lightly.

She took out a small pill from her spatial ring and threw it at the girl. "Just give him this. It should at least heal the worst of the damage. The rest can be healed naturally."

"Thank you! Thank you!" The girl cried as she caught the pill as gently as possible. She held onto it as if it was a divine treasure, afraid of harming it as she carefully placed it in the boy's mouth.

Her cries only became louder as she noticed the bloody scar on the boy's chest begin to close.

As the girl continued to watch over her friend, Ruyue approached Damien.

"Conceal your aura again, idiot. You're scaring the hell out of them."

Damien raised his brow before realizing that his killing intent was leaking. As he ended up in thought after killing the pack leader, he had totally forgotten about it.

"No wonder she was staring at me like some kind of monster." He said as he reeled it in.

"As if that's the reason. Look at how brutally you killed those beasts in front of them. Obviously, they'd be scared of a brute like you."

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Damien replied, feigning ignorance, “you should count yourself lucky they didn’t see how you were killing those things.”

Ruyue’s methods, while outwardly elegant, were just as ruthless as his own. The piercing cold of her iceflames would infect the beasts before the heat it also produced would melt them from the inside.

Damien shuddered just thinking about it. “These kids are lucky they’re too level to know they’re in the presence of a demoness.”

“Who are you calling a demoness, you damn fool!”

“You of course! Do you see anyone else around here so ruthless?” He replied while looking around in an exaggerated fashion.

“No, all I see around here is your ugly face. How sad that I have to spend so much time around it.”

“Hm? You’re staring at my face that much? I know I’m incredibly handsome but if you say it like that you’ll make me blush.”

As the two continued their normal squabbles, the boy who had just been fed a healing pill slowly opened his eyes.

Groggily looking around, his eyes widened in shock. “L-Ling’er?”

“Brother Cheng!” The girl yelled as she hugged the boy tightly. “I thought I’d never see you again!”

“M-me too. I’m...alive?”

“That’s right! Those esteemed cultivators over there saved you!”

Brother Cheng looked over at Damien and Ruyue who were still arguing before his gaze shifted to the beast corpses that littered the ground.

“T-they killed all of those beasts?!” He exclaimed.

“Shh! Don’t bother the esteemed cultivators! They are our benefactors!”

“R-right.” Brother Cheng nodded as he tried to stand up, although he still needed help from Ling’er to do so.

Noticing their movement, Damien and Ruyue also looked over.

“It looks like you guys are fine now,” Damien said as he looked at the other teens in the group.

“Right, then I guess it’s about time we take our leave.” Ruyue continued.

But before they could move, Ling'er spoke up. "W-wait! If you don't mind, could you accompany us to the village so we can properly thank you?"

Damien and Ruyue looked at each other questioningly. Truthfully, neither of them cared about any receiving thanks or pleasantries like that.

Noticing that they were planning to reject, Brother Cheng also spoke up. "Please, I haven't even had the chance to thank benefactors for saving my life. We would truly appreciate it if you came to our village."

With the main two speaking their opinions, the other 8 also regained their ability to talk, expressing the same intention.

And seeing the pleading look in their eyes, Ruyue slightly caved. "I guess we do need a place to rest tonight."

Damien was surprised by her willingness, but in the end, he just shrugged. Just like before when Ruyue chose to help the kids, he didn't really care what they did.

"Truly thank you." The girl said before her eyes widened. "That's right! We haven't even properly introduced ourselves yet! My name is Su Ling'er and this is Yan Cheng."

The others also proceeded to introduce themselves.

"Mm. You can call me Xiao Li and this is my D-Dao companion, Zhen Fang." Ruyue replied with a slight stutter.

And with introductions out of the way, the group began to walk back to the village they came from with Damien and Ruyue in tow, telling them about how they ended up in such a perilous situation.

Chapter 173 - Village Problems [1]

As it turns out, the group Damien and Ruyue were with at the moment was just one of many that had left the village today.

In fact, it was a normal thing for many groups to leave in search of herbs and plants to supply the village with their food source.

With them having a sort of non-aggression pact with the beasts in the forest, they had become accustomed to an entirely vegetarian diet.

This particular fact, although seemingly mundane, was one that piqued Damien's interest. After all, he had to eat beasts to evolve and grow stronger, so he didn't realize it was even possible to live on such a diet.

But his question was answered soon.

"The plants in the forest have also been affected by mana. They reproduce and grow using the ambient mana in the air in addition to the usual sunlight and water that they need. These plants are more than nutritious enough to sustain us."

That was right. With how little interaction he had with plant life forms, he had almost forgotten this fact.

Plants were also beings who could evolve and level up just like the rest of the being underneath the system. It was just that it usually took them hundreds of years to do what humans could do in a few decades.

For this reason, Damien hadn't seen that many hostile plant lifeforms. Although, he did have a faint memory of cutting a few down when he was in the disciple examination. It was just that he was in his Void Heart mode at that time, so he didn't pay them much mind.

As they continued to talk, the teens told Damien and Ruyue about how they were doing this job they did every day when suddenly they were surrounded by that pack of beasts.

It shocked them immensely, being something they had never encountered with all beasts around them being civil, and that led to their situation when the duo arrived.

'Not only that, but they also have an abysmal level of strength.'

It wasn't like they were talentless and growing slowly, rather it was like they didn't grow at all. These kids were still at the very beginning stages of 1st class, not even passing level 50 yet.

As for how they managed to survive until Damien and Ruyue arrived? That was simple. The beasts had never seriously tried to kill them, choosing to play with their food instead.

'It's actually a pretty common trend I've seen.' Damien mused. Whether he looked back to the sea dragon he had fought upon entry to the Cloud Plane, or even further back to the very first wolf that allowed him to evolve, they each had chosen to toy with him before actually taking the fight seriously.

And by that point, he was already at an advantage. He didn't understand exactly what it was within a beast that made it choose such a stupid action, but in the end, he could sort of relate.

'Don't I sometimes do the same?'

Perhaps it wasn't on the same scale since Damien didn't go around killing everything he saw, but even if he looked at the tournament back when he was still on Apeiron, didn't he have fun playing with his competitors?

If he wanted to, he could've ended the entire thing from the very beginning if he just activated his vector field. The only limit to that skill was its inability to be used on those at the same level or stronger than him, but none of those competitors reached such a level.

But he didn't get the chance to mull on it for too long. Ruyue pinched his side, bringing his attention back to reality where they had already reached the front of a small village.

Its size was nothing much, fitting 500-1000 people at most, and its structure was similar. There were only 4 dirt paths in a square shape with shacks and huts made primarily out of wood lining them.

In the center of the village, in the middle of the intersection of the 4 roads, there was a group of buildings that were built slightly larger than the rest. Though, the difference wasn't anything major.

The streets themselves were relatively empty, making it seem like a ghost town. Well, that was what it was like at first.

“Everyone! We’re home!” Ling’er yelled as they entered the small gate of the village. Her voice rang through the surroundings, bouncing off the walls of the houses. And immediately, a clamor rose up from within those seemingly empty houses.

“Did you hear?”

“Yeah, they’re back!”

“Was that little Ling’er?”

“It was! It was!”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go greet her!”

“That’s right!”

The doors to all the houses in the vicinity opened up and people began to flood out of them.

Whether old or young, sick or healthy, they all rushed towards the entrance to greet the group that had just returned.

“Ling’er! It’s really you!”

“How have you guys been? No problems this time?”

“Oh my! Little Cheng did you get hurt?!”

“What happened to Little Cheng??”

The crowd immediately barraged the group with questions, becoming even more frantic when they saw Yan Cheng’s bloodied robe.

Ling’er was a bit flustered, but not by much. This was a generally normal scene to see in the village. Even if they lived in harmony with the beasts, it was only due to the current Lord of this region’s command.

They could never help themselves from being concerned in case something truly happened.

“Guys! It’s okay! We are just fine! But we have something we urgently need to talk to the village elders about!” She yelled, grabbing everyone’s attention.

It was only once they calmed down that they finally noticed the two new faces in the back of the group.

“Ling’er! Who are they?”

“They are our benefactors. Everyone, please give us some space first. We will come and let you all know what happened afterwards.”

Seeing the serious expression on Ling'er's face, the villagers reluctantly made a path towards the shack in the middle of the village. All the while, their eyes were still focused on Damien and Ruyue.

However, the duo was no stranger to many gazes being focused on them. Ruyue was an important figure of one of the 4 great clans and Damien was...well he always tended to show off and gather attention on himself.

The duo simply smiled kindly towards the villagers they passed as they followed Ling'er.

Arriving at the foremost hut in the middle of the village, Ling'er knocked before asking in a much more polite tone than she used for the villagers.

"Head Elder, please allow us to come inside. We have very important matters to tell you of."

"Come."

The response was instant. The aged voice of a woman answered Ling'er's query as the door to the hut lightly swung open.

Entering inside, Damien noticed that there was something odd in the air. Rather, there was something off about the mana within this enclosed space.

The windows were all tightly sealed and even when the door opened it didn't seem like it had truly opened, as none of the mana trapped within this room was allowed out.

And in the center of this odd atmosphere sat a wrinkled old woman with a gentle smile on her face.

Chapter 174 - Village Problems [2]

“Welcome, travelers to our humble village. I hope we haven’t bothered you too much.” The elderly woman said softly, inviting them to sit across from her.

There was hardly any furniture in the room, with the small table in front of the woman being the centerpiece, but Damien had no problem with this. He went and sat on one of the cushions surrounding the table while Ruyue followed suit, sitting down next to him.

Ling’er and Yan Cheng did the same, sitting on the opposite side of them.

“Nice to meet you,” Damien said, “my name is Zhen Fang and this is my wife, Xiao Li.”

The old woman nodded without much thought. “No need for a reintroduction, as I have heard it the first time. As for me, you can simply call me Elder Baba.”

Damien raised his brow questioningly, wondering how she could have heard it when they had introduced themselves far from the village, but he suppressed his doubts. It was already evident that something strange was going on here.

“Oho, you seem to be a curious young man, aren’t you.” Elder Baba said with a smile, noticing his expression.

“Ah, it can’t be helped. After all, the mana in this room is too strange for me to not be curious.”

This time, it was the elder's turn to be surprised. "Your insights are much sharper than I'd expected."

"It's nothing much."

The elder looked at him deeply before turning to Ling'er once more. "You said you had something to discuss with me?"

"Ah, that's right!" She exclaimed.

"Elder! We were attacked by beasts on our gathering trip today! If it wasn't for esteemed cultivators, we would have surely died gruesome deaths!"

Elder Baba raised her brow before looking back towards Damien, who simply shrugged his shoulders in response.

"It's nothing much. We were just passing by."

Ruyue, who had been watching the whole interaction, was especially confused at this point. It was one thing to not want to receive thanks for their deeds, but it was another to adopt such an attitude.

Damien at the moment was acting much more indifferent than should be logical in such a situation. His responses were so curt that they left no room for questioning.

It was almost as if he was trying to draw a line that shouldn't be crossed, or he was trying to avoid staying here for too long.

And to be honest, that was exactly what he was doing. The more time he spent in this room, the more his eyes flashed danger signals in his mind.

The mana in the room continuously tried to invade his body even without his active pull, as if it was trying to scour him or read him.

It was the same strange feeling he had when he first entered the hut, but as time passed it became much more prevalent, allowing him to gain a slight understanding of what was happening to him.

During his time at the Celestial Star Palace, he mainly focused on training himself in the areas he already specialized in. But, he didn't stop there.

The sect had a specialty that was widely known throughout the world. It was a sect that raised Seers. Although he wasn't personally interested in embarking on that path, he didn't think it would hurt him to gain knowledge about it.

Whether he would be able to use that knowledge to his advantage later, or it would allow him to counteract anyone who tried to use such techniques on him, it would still be useful.

It was this research that he was remembering at this moment.

Seers need a medium to foretell the future or destiny of the ones they are trying to read. If it's on a larger scale, such as the fate of a world, such a medium would be the earth itself, but when it was related to a single person or group, something more personal was needed.

But if that person was sitting in front of you, and your mana could infiltrate their body, you'd be able to tell everything about that person.

Well, this wasn't an ability unique to seers, as anyone who could spread their awareness could achieve such a thing. But the results of such actions mean something entirely different to a seer.

With such an in-depth understanding of a person's body, the seer would be able to use their mana as a medium to foretell that person's fate.

And Damien was sure of it. He didn't understand why the mana in the room had such a foreign feeling, as if it was mixed with something it shouldn't, but he was sure about what this elder was trying to do.

The only thing that confused him was why he was the only one being targeted.

He could clearly see the movement of the murky mana in the room, and it was all centered around him. Even though Ruyue was sitting right next to him, it was as if the mana avoided her like the plague.

He didn't know this old woman's intentions, but he didn't care. There was no way he'd let some random stranger take a peek at even a single secret of his.

Especially now that they were taking on other identities for their mission.

“Damien! Damien!”

He was awoken from his thoughts by Ruyue shaking his shoulder. Apparently, the conversation had been continuing without him while he was ruminating over these things.

And at the same time he was brought back to attention, the mana in the room returned to its static state, unmoving.

“Thank you for the information,” Ruyue said as she gave a slight bow to the elder, “we will be leaving now, but we will make sure to take care of the problem before we continue our journey.”

Without another word, she grabbed Damien and dragged him out of the hut, and then proceeded to walk him out of the village entirely.

“What was that?!” She demanded after they had reached a far enough distance away.

“What was what?” He asked.

“Do you really not know? Or are you just pretending not to know?!”

“No, I seriously have no idea what’s going on.”

Ruyue sighed while massaging her forehead. “The whole time we were there, you were staring at the elder with murder in your eyes. It looked like if I didn’t take you out of there at that moment, you really would have killed her.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? I wasn’t planning to kill her at all.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I’m serious. That whole time, I was combatting that old hag’s mana that kept trying to invade my body. There’s no doubt about it.”

“What are you talking about? That woman didn’t even have a cultivation base!!”

“Huh? Then what was that murky mana that was encapsulating the entire hut? It was specifically targeting me, as well.”

Ruyue frowned as she thought about it. She didn’t sense anything like that while they were there, and the elderly woman didn’t give off any suspicious impressions.

Rather, it was Damien that seemed to make the mood in the room plummet.

But she had been with him for many months now and had a pretty good grasp on his personality. First of all, he wouldn’t lie about something so stupid, and second, he most definitely had something special that allowed him to perceive mana differently from others.

Her frown deepened as she tried to rationalize things, but it was to no avail.

“Whatever, we can figure it out later. For now, let’s get on with the task I accepted from the elder.”

“Apparently something is going on in the forest recently, and beasts are becoming wilder. I agreed to find the culprit and try to stop the problem for them.”

Damien sighed, feeling like he was getting roped into a bunch of business that he had no part in, but only a second later, his eyes lit up.

‘Wait a second...isn’t this basically a side quest?’

Chapter 175 - Side Quest [1]

Side Quests were always fun to do, especially when they had a boring few days of just traveling ahead of them, but Damien knew they couldn’t take too much time on this.

Even if they had time before the event began, they still had to get there as soon as possible so they could accurately blend in with the crowd and perhaps even gain some useful information.

At the moment, even if their identities allowed them entry into the event, they wouldn’t be able to gain anything substantial.

They were just average sect disciples at the end of the day.

For them to achieve something worthwhile during this mission, they needed to properly infiltrate and earn trust. They only had 9 months until the secret realm opening, and the conference was supposed to last 3 months at most.

Their schedule for the coming year or so was absolutely packed. Even a short excursion like this one would be problematic.

He was sure Ruyue knew this as well since she seemed better at the whole planning thing than he was, but she still decided to do something like this.

“Say, do you perhaps have a soft spot for kids?” He suddenly mentioned, trying to find a reason for her actions.

“No, not particularly. Why do you ask?”

“I mean, why are you going out of your way to help strangers like this when we have much more important tasks to fulfill?”

“Ah, that...”

“Besides, aren’t you the senior sister who’s always cold and lofty towards everyone else? Is there something about this situation that’s different?”

“...”

Ruyue's brow furrowed once more. Even if she was slightly offended by how he perceived her, she knew he was right. Even she found it odd that she was acting in such a way.

And it wasn't just the village situation. The first time her cold front had been derailed was by the man standing in front of her, though he didn't seem to realize it.

Since that first day they had a lesson together, her world had become more colorful. It almost made her forget about the problems she had before he arrived.

But every time she left his and her master's presence and went about her normal day, she was forced to remember it all by the people around her. She was forced back into that cold front that she always put up.

The way they looked at her like a chess piece to be moved as they pleased, the way people tried to fawn on her so they could gain connection to her clan, she hated it all.

She never liked the spotlight, and if there was one thing she was thankful for, it was that she was born a woman and wouldn't be forced to inherit rulership over the clan.

If she was placed in that sort of position as well, she would have long since fled to somewhere unknown, perhaps even leaving the world entirely.

That was just the kind of person she was. She despised the political schemes and society that she was born into.

But it was different now. She was no longer Xue Ruyue, she no longer had status. She was simply Xiao Li, a rogue cultivator that nobody knew or cared for.

Perhaps, her inner desires were taking precedence due to her change in identity. Maybe it was that she didn't want to be cold anymore.

Seeing the complicated look in Ruyue's eyes that was coupled with a hint of yearning, Damien sighed lightly. It wasn't like he didn't understand where she was coming from, especially after spending so much time with her, but he didn't see this change as something natural.

He didn't want to ruin her mood nor did he want to sour their relationship by being too blunt. And so, he decided that if things were truly the way he thought they were, he'd just let her find out for herself.

His only hope was that she didn't return to being an icy wall in the aftermath.

"Well, it doesn't really matter," Damien said, snapping Ruyue out of her thoughts. "In the end, we don't have much time to complete this little request you've taken, so we should split up and search the forest.

"I remember the leader of that beast pack muttering to himself about some man that forced him to submit, so make sure to keep your eyes out for humans or humanoid races."

"Yeah, the Elder also mentioned something similar," Ruyue added. "Not just a lone man, but a suspicious group has been lurking around this forest recently.

"She was only able to find out through the scouts of the village, but we should be fine; since our strengths far outweigh theirs."

“Don’t drop your guard either way.” Damien reminded her. “No matter what, you can’t just blindly trust the information you were given. Be sure to find something concrete before engaging in combat.

“Also, be sure to contact me when that happens so we can be safe.”

Ruyue nodded her head, albeit reluctant that they had to rush, and ran off eastward. Watching her back fade into the distance, Damien once again sighed.

“Let’s just get this over with.”

The forest they were currently in wasn’t actually that large. At most, it was the size of a small state. For those villagers who hadn’t taken the time to level up properly, perhaps this distance was immense, but to Damien, it was nothing.

The more he leveled up, the larger his scale of reach was. His destruction prowess had already reached the level where if he put all his mana into it, this whole forest could be razed to the ground.

But that was both inefficient and unnecessary. The only reason he thought about it was so he could get a true grasp of how big his range was now.

Still standing in the same spot he was before Ruyue left, Damien spread his awareness to its utmost.

The entire layout of the forest became clear to him. From the spread of vegetation to the location of every beast pack, it was all within his eyes. And in a particular secluded cave in the forest, he found the human he was looking for.

It was a man about 6 feet 5 inches in height with an incredibly burly build. He was like a tank in human skin. He sat within the cave and chewed on a stalk of grass with a wide grin on his face, seemingly celebrating something.

And while Damien was prepared to teleport over there and deal with the problem immediately, he noticed he did not need to. The man's aura clearly indicated that he was still within the mid-levels of 3rd class, probably at the Core Expansion realm.

And Damien wasn't the only one who had found his location.

Only a few kilometers away from the hidden cave, the lithe and graceful figure of Ruyue could be seen speeding in that direction.

'If she has that taken care of, I guess I can act on that hunch I've been having since we got here.'

Taking one last glance at the Ruyue and the burly man, Damien turned and ran in the opposite direction.

Chapter 176 - Side Quest [2]

Meanwhile, Ruyue was running at full speed towards a hidden cave she had spotted in the distance.

Although her range didn't match Damien's entirely, it wasn't that far behind. She was still ahead of him in terms of levels.

As she felt the wind brush past her face and heard the trees rustling around her, Ruyue felt oddly at peace. It was a feeling like she didn't truly want to leave this forest and return back to her responsibilities.

But she didn't allow such a feeling to break her mindset, regardless of what her emotions were telling her at the moment, she still had a duty to fulfill.

She had her master who had taken her in and trained her, protecting her from the outside world as much as she could. He was the one who sent her on this mission, and she had no plans of betraying his trust.

Not to mention...

Ruyue shook her head as a slight rosy color emerged on her cheeks.

'What am I even thinking at this kind of time?'

It didn't take her long at all to reach the cave, with a few kilometers distance being nothing to her. The problem was, the location where she sensed the cave wasn't anything special. It was just another part of the forest that looked the exact same as the rest.

But she wouldn't be fooled by something like this. Perhaps if her perception wasn't up to par, this kind of disguise would force her to doubt herself, but that wasn't the case.

As she was about to enter, Ruyue hesitated slightly.

‘Be sure to contact me when you find them just to be safe.’

Those were the words he said to her. Glancing at the messaging talisman that was sitting in her spatial ring, Ruyue paused.

She didn’t know whether she actually wanted to call him or not. While it warmed her heart that he cared about her safety, she also didn’t feel like it was necessary to have him here.

There was only one person within the cave and his level wasn’t that far apart from Hera, so she should be able to handle the situation without him.

There were also supposedly more people hiding in the forest, so she thought it might be best if he continued searching for them.

Spreading her awareness to cover the area of the forest she was in, Ruyue noticed that Damien wasn’t anywhere nearby.

‘It would take him too long to come, so there’s no point. Besides, I don’t need protection for something minor like this.’

She firmed her resolve, taking her attention away from the messaging talisman before walking forward without hesitation.

Although from an outsider’s perspective, it looked like she was simply walking through the forest like normal, it wasn’t that simple.

Every once in a while, she'd slightly alter her direction, almost as if she was drunkenly staggering. And by the time she took her 20th step in this manner, the surroundings started to change.

The forest was no more as she had already entered the cave. Her previous movements were to avoid the cues set up to misdirect people who happened to pass by.

Staring into the gnawing darkness in front of her, Ruyue's eyes turned cold.

"What's the point of hiding? You already know I'm aware of your position."

"Ahahaha. It seems like I've been caught. Though, I didn't expect it to be a beauty like you who did so." A rough voice responded.

Out of the darkness emerged the massive figure of the man Damien had seen previously, the stalk of grass still within his mouth.

"So? Did you come to play with me, or is there something else?" He continued, his gaze becoming lewd as he scanned Ruyue's body.

Even in her disguise, her proportions were still above average. It wasn't a surprise that a man like this, who was obviously in his barbaric tendencies, would immediately become lustful.

“Even a child would be smarter than you if you truly think that. I’ll make sure that you can’t speak such filthy words again once I’m finished here.” Ruyue responded in disgust. The tips of her fingers began to glow as blue flames appeared on top of them.

The man grinned widely, grabbing a massive battle axe strapped to his back. “Good! I haven’t had a proper battle in a while, so I hope you can entertain me.”

The man immediately charged, his footsteps thundering and causing cracks to appear on the cave floor. Ruyue didn’t follow suit, however, opting to keep her distance.

She swung her arms upward, causing arcs of flame to shoot in the man’s direction.

As if that wasn’t enough, ten swords made of the same fire materialized in the air around her before following the previous arcs.

The man halted his advance, his expression becoming more serious as he heavily swung his battle axe.

“Haaa!”

The blade impacted the ground, causing a fissure to form and a pressurized blade of wind to charge towards the arcs of flame trying to consume him.

When the two attacks collided, a small explosion rang out, causing dust to cloud Ruyue’s vision. Still, her swords moved unhindered.

They charged towards the man in a group, as Ruyue used her awareness to control them, surrounding the man and attempting to attack him from all sides.

A red aura surrounded his body and his veins began to bulge. He swung his axe wildly, trying to mitigate as much damage as possible.

But he wasn't entirely successful. 3 of the flaming swords managed to pierce the man's body, spreading iceflames across his skin. The red aura around him tried to combat it, but it wasn't totally effective.

While the man was distracted, Ruyue silently rushed along the edge of the dust cloud, concealing herself within the atmosphere.

She calmly approached the man and when she got within 10 feet of him, she made her move.

She put her wrists together and cupped her hands, allowing a beautiful flame to bloom within them.

The flame continued to bud, becoming a palm-sized lotus with 13 petals. But despite its small size, its power was immense enough to attract the man's attention.

He sensed immediate danger in his surroundings, turning to look at Ruyue while ignoring the flames that were still slowly spreading through his body.

The man once again attempted to charge, but Ruyue didn't allow him that opportunity. She lightly threw the flaming lotus in her palm, causing it to flutter through the air.

Its speed seemed as slow as a falling piece of paper, but it reached its target in an instant. And when it made contact...

Boom!

An explosion rocked the cave, causing the walls and ceiling to come crumbling down. Ruyue crossed her arms in front of her, creating a flame shield to protect her from any collateral damage.

The explosion continued for many seconds, and smaller consecutive explosions rang out from each petal she had made as part of the lotus. By the time it had all ended, Ruyue was sure the man was no more.

“What an idiot.” She muttered in scorn. That was barely even a battle, more like she just pummeled him into the ground without any effort.

‘Wait...How could someone that stupid manage to cause a ruckus within the forest?’

By the time it dawned on her, the dust from the explosion had already cleared up. Standing in front of her was half the body of the man she had just been fighting.

Yes, it was still standing even though it was only the upper half of the body. Rather, the body itself was slowly turning into particles of light.

‘He wasn’t real!’ She exclaimed inwardly as she realized her mistake.

She began to feel a sense of foreboding. Something was happening that she had been unaware of all this time.

She wanted to rush towards the village as fast as possible to make sure nothing had gone wrong, but at that time...

“You’re already too late.”

The grinning face of the burly man let out those final words before disappearing into particles.

Chapter 177 - Side Quest [4]

“You’re already too late”

The words rang out in her mind continuously, disallowing her to think of anything else. Too late? Too late for what?

The words made Ruyue painfully aware that she had screwed up at some point, but she couldn’t figure out when exactly that was.

‘What is happening to me?’

Ever since she arrived in this forest, she had felt like she wasn’t being herself. Still, she went along with it because she enjoyed the way it made her feel.

Free and unfettered.

But she realized she was wrong.

‘I have to get to the village.’

It was the only solution she could think of. That was the place she had chosen to protect in the first place, so if there was any place to be while trying to figure out what kind of trap she had fallen for, it was there.

She ran towards the cave entrance but found it blocked by rubble from her previous attack. Luckily, she hadn’t spent much energy during the previous fight and was able to blast it apart with a smaller variant of the flame lotus she used to kill the burly man.

Immediately after the cave entrance was unsealed, she rushed out and was greeted by a calm moonlight

‘What?’

She could have sworn that she was only in the cave for an hour at most, so how did it reach the point where the moon was so high in the sky? At most, the sun should have just recently set.

The discrepancies continued to pile up even though it had only been minutes since she felt that sinking feeling in her chest. She was already starting to panic.

‘Right, the messaging talisman.’

If the burly man was nothing but an illusion, the rest of the crew might be the same. Ruyue had to warn Damien, who was most likely chasing after them the same way she did with the man.

She rushed through the lush ecosystem of the forest once more, but her heart was no longer peaceful. She was burning in trepidation, injecting her mana into the talisman to contact Damien.

However...

‘Why won’t you pick up?’

Regardless of how many times she tried to call him, she received no response.

‘You were the one who told me to keep in contact in case of danger, so how can you be silent at such a critical time?’

She felt slightly betrayed but pushed the feeling down. There had to be a reason he wasn’t answering. He must be in trouble right now.

She continued running in a linear path, making her way back to the village, but the distance was too far to reach in a short period of time. She was many kilometers away.

But still, she wasn't a 3rd class existence for nothing. Let alone the power boost she received from the moon at nighttime due to her affinity, she also had the new flames she had just awakened.

Flames shot out of her feet like a jet engine and her speed increased manifold. She zoomed through the forest while leaving a trail of permafrost in her wake.

And after 10 minutes of fierce sprinting without care for mana consumption, she finally saw light in the distance.

'It's there!'

She sped up once again, reaching the village in half the time it would have taken her at her previous speed. But when she arrived, she noticed that it was oddly quiet.

It shouldn't have felt odd considering how it was late at night at the moment, but there was an eerie atmosphere hanging in the air that she couldn't ignore.

She slowed down her pace as she entered the wooden gates of the village, heightening her senses and maintaining her wariness towards the surroundings.

Looking side to side, she noticed that most of the houses were still filled with light, even though the silence indicated everywhere.

Ruyue frowned at the sight but continued moving forward. Since the village wasn't large at all, it didn't take her long to reach the center. But when she did, she almost regretted coming back in the first place.

The dirt ground surrounding the central huts where the village elder lived was stained in red. The pungent smell of blood invaded her nostrils as if wanting to force her to continue looking at the scene.

Strewn across the ground were various pieces of bloodied flesh, the largest pieces resembling human limbs. Although such violence wasn't new to Ruyue, this particular scene made her want to vomit.

However, she suppressed her feelings once again and continued forward. The chunks of flesh slowly got larger, before entire upper bodies and heads entered her vision.

'T-those are...!'

She was staring at a particular set of bodies. Their arms were intertwined as if they were hugging, but their heads were both missing. In fact, they were present only a slight distance away.

It was a young girl and boy, both with horror-stricken expressions. The tears that had streaked down their faces when they were still alive were still fresh.

It was Ling'er and Yan Chen that she and Damien had saved when they first arrived in the forest.

It wasn't just them. Various members of the village and even some of the other children that had been a part of that first group could be seen, lifelessly laying on the ground.

Ruyue's steps faltered, tears threatening to appear in her eyes. Even if she had only met them for a brief period, their innocence was something she admired. She felt like she had gained some sort of connection with them.

But she wasn't going to stop here. She had to figure out what it was that caused this tragedy. She felt a burning flame ignite in her to avenge these innocent people who died today.

"Grrrrr..."

Suddenly, she heard a muffled growl coming from the opposite side of the shack next to her. To her, who wasn't in the right state of mind at the moment, it sounded like the hungry growl of a beast.

Slowly but surely, she made her way around the shack, trying to keep her footsteps as light as possible.

She didn't want to alert whatever beast was lurking around the corner until she had verified its strength.

But when she finally made it to the other side of the shack...

Two figures could be seen. One standing tall while the other being only up to the other's waist. The strange thing was, they were both humans.

The tall figure had his hand wrapped around the smaller one's neck, evidently choking it.

“Grrr...”

Once again, the growl rang out, and it was clear it came from the taller figure. Ruyue concentrated her gaze on them, but she couldn't see them in this darkness.

And as if responding to her wish, the moonlight shifted gradually, shining light on the scene in front of her.

Copious amounts of blood covered the figures of both individuals, to the point where it was obvious it wasn't entirely their own.

The tall figure had elongated fingers that looked more like claws digging into the smaller one's neck. Even more blood was pouring out of wounds on both of their bodies, with the smaller one being more injured.

With this level of gore, Ruyue could barely tell the identity of the two figures. That is, until the moonlight fully illuminated the area.

In front of her eyes was a man with an unforgettable pair of amethyst-red eyes and cross-shaped pupils, in the process of killing the kind Elder Baba she had met only a day prior.

Chapter 178 - Running Away [1]

Ruyue stared in shock at the scene of her Junior brother strangling the kind Village Elder she had agreed to help before they left the village.

She couldn't understand what was happening. Her emotions were in such turmoil that she could barely think straight.

Blood everywhere, holding an innocent by her throat. The image that was painted in Ruyue's eyes was clear.

“Y-you...”

She looked at Damien in disbelief, trying to get the words out. ‘You killed them all?’

She wanted to say it, but the words got stuck in her throat. Rage began to bubble inside of her.

She knew that Damien had a beast inside of him, something he couldn't control. She had seen it herself when they were subjected to Tian Yang's aura suppression.

But, to think he would go so far.

“...!”

Her rage reached its peak and she couldn't take it anymore. Blueish white flames burst forth from her hands and encased her whole body.

“Let...LET GO OF HER!”

She screamed in fury, discharging a massive wave of flame towards Damien. But she didn't stop there. Flame swords like the one she used before and explosive lotuses with all 13 petals were thrown at his location.

But despite the flurry of attacks charging towards him, Damien didn't move. A strange power left his body, causing slight ripples in space.

And then, when the plethora of flaming attacks reached within 5 meters of his body...

They disappeared.

Well, not all of them. The massive wave of flames was gone entirely, but the rest of the attacks were still there.

Only, they weren't moving forward in the slightest. No matter how Ruyue urged them or tried to increase her output, her attacks seemed to be stuck in a deadlock.

Damien suddenly raised his arm that wasn't holding on to Elder Baba and flicked the air in front of him lightly. Following this movement, the barrage of flames shot forth once more.

Except, they were flying towards the sky, no longer on the path Ruyue had set them towards.

B-b-boom!

A massive explosion rang out in the night sky, resembling fireworks. When Ruyue looked back at Damien, she was met with a pair of incomparably cold eyes.

However, his gaze didn't stay on her for long. Despite the anguish that was present on her face, the pain of betrayal she was currently feeling, he ignored her.

Or at least, that's what it seemed like.

When those ice-cold eyes returned back to meet the eyes of the figure in his grasp, two emotionless words left his mouth.

"Release her."

Emotionless? No, that wasn't the right word. Those two words contained an unbridled fury that surpassed even the fury Ruyue was feeling at the moment.

Damien at the moment was like a volcano on the precipice of eruption.

"I-I have...no idea...what you're...talking about," Elder Baba replied between strained breaths. "P-please! Let go...of me!"

Ruyue's anguish only heightened at the desperate cries of the elder, but before she could attack Damien once more, she felt a restrictive force encase her body, limiting her movement.

“Stay there for now.” Damien’s words echoed in her ear. Unlike the biting cold that was contained in them when speaking to the elder, there was an untold gentleness when he addressed her.

“Stop playing mind games, bitch. Unless you want me to crush your skull right now, release her.”

Elder Baba’s eyes widened at his words before her panicked expression vanished as if it never existed. Instead, it was replaced by a sickening smile.

“Kek...I never expected there to be a young man like you involved in all this.”

The voice that left her mouth was no longer that of the kind elder Ruyue remembered meeting. The voice that was now being broadcasted was grating, like nails being scraped across a chalkboard.

But Damien didn’t care. He tightened his grip around her- no, the thing that was pretending to be her’s throat and repeated the same line over again.

“Release. Her.”

“Tch.” The thing pretending to be Elder Baba clicked its tongue in dissatisfaction before its eyes glowed slightly, releasing a dull grey light.

All of a sudden, Ruyue dropped to the ground as a splitting headache assaulted her.

‘W-what is happening?’

All her previous animosity and anguish vanished like smoke as a change began to take place in her mind.

Her thoughts flashed back to all the actions she had taken ever since visiting the village.

The way she volunteered to help, the way she charged forward without thinking, the way she disregarded help in a fit of arrogance, and the way she kept overreacting to every slight problem that had happened.

Not to mention, the odd peaceful feeling she felt from the forest, the feeling that made her not want to leave.

The second that dull grey light disappeared from Elder Baba's eyes, it was all gone. The splitting headache soon ended and Ruyue once again opened her eyes.

Looking at the scene around her once more, she felt nothing. Not the slightest hint of sympathy. At most, she felt a slight regret that those two teenagers had died.

She panned her gaze back towards Damien as a complicated light flashed across her eyes. She didn't understand yet what was happening, but she could no longer find it in her to doubt his actions.

"Kek...now that I've released your little lover, let me go! You said you would let me go!"

That thing, it valued its life above all else. Even if it was caught in the end, at least it could live and scheme once more to get what it wanted.

However...

“Who said you could live?”

Damien ruthlessly grabbed Elder Baba’s face and pulled as hard as he could. With the sound of fabric being torn from velcro, the entire face was ripped off.

Damien threw the skin to the side and looked at the creature whose features were now revealed.

It was a creature with a face ugly enough to scar children, causing legitimate trauma. Its eyes were hollow, with dull grey flames lighting up its sockets, its skin was a mix of green and brown like sewage water, and its nose and mouth were crooked as if someone had bent them out of position.

Staring into those dull grey flames, Damien felt a pull on his consciousness, but in the end, nothing happened.

“So even at this point, you are trying to fool me.” He said to the creature, who still didn’t show signs of fear.

“What else should I do? Bow down and beg for forgiveness? You’re going to kill me anyway, aren’t you?” It responded with disdain reeking from its tone.

Damien lightly closed his eyes. "I see." And without another word, he tightened his grip around its neck, distorting it with his spatial mana until the creature's head was upside down similar to the pack leader that had died before.

The flames in the creature's eye sockets dimmed before extinguishing completely and the small human body of Elder Baba faded into the grass beneath them.

Damien charged lightning into his hands and let it superheat before shooting it towards the already dead creature, incinerating its body. He wanted to be sure nothing else would come of it.

The coldness in Damien's gaze slowly faded as he turned to look at Ruyue, who had watched the entire ordeal take place. Seeing the lost look on her face, he sighed lightly.

"I'm sorry..."

Chapter 179 - Running Away [2]

Ruyue's gaze went back and forth between Damien and the corpse on the ground, the lost look in her eyes never disappearing.

"D-did you know?" She managed to force the words out of her mouth.

Damien looked at her with a complex gaze. But ultimately, he shook his head.

"I only had a hunch that something was wrong."

He was telling the truth. From the start, he had noticed something wrong with the whole situation, he just couldn't pinpoint it.

It was for this reason why, after Ruyue left his side, he traveled through the forest and observed all the larger beast packs within it, trying to gain some information.

During this observation, he realized something odd. There was a familiar feeling about the murky mana that encased the Elder's room in the village.

He couldn't figure out the source of this familiarity, but as he continued his stay around the beasts and observed them with utmost concentration, he realized it.

The familiarity was beast mana.

Not only was it something he had spent 2 years surrounded by, but it was also something that had become a part of him.

Although the beast mana was cleansed by his physique when it entered his system, it didn't change the fact that he absorbed it to grow. That familiar feeling stemmed from what he felt during his first evolution when rampant beast mana invaded his body for the first time.

The instant he realized this, he rushed back to the village. But he was already too late. By the time he arrived, the deed had already been done. The ground was already stained in blood.

But he could still stop anything further from happening. He initiated combat with the thing pretending to be Elder Baba and ultimately ended up winning.

He had made sure not to go easy. He tortured that thing for information and even without too much pain, it told him everything.

It seemed to revel in the feeling of being caught like this. It didn't seem the slightest bit afraid even when he tortured it.

It was at that time that he learned how things went down. The feeling he had during their first meeting, the one that made him assume the old lady was a seer, was just a front.

The beast, who somehow had knowledge of such occupations, used the situation to its advantage and distracted Damien with it since it judged him as the strongest one in the room.

And its strategy worked. Damien was too focused on the old lady's identity and warding off the foreign mana that was trying to invade his body that he lost track of everything else, not paying attention until Ruyue dragged him out of the village.

And in that time, it had the ability to do whatever it wanted to Ruyue. It manipulated her emotions and her perception with its strange ability, forcing her to act out of character.

But it felt natural to her.

It led her to act according to its plan, fighting against the illusion it set up far away from the village while Damien was dragged along as well.

The only thing it couldn't predict was Damien's movement after everything was over with. It had expected him to go along with Ruyue, or at least it didn't expect him to return to the village until it had left. But Damien was a variable it couldn't control.

If it wasn't for his familiarity with beast mana, if it wasn't for his evolver title, perhaps the beast's plan would have worked.

And once this exchange had ended, Ruyue showed up.

Damien was already furious after learning the prior information, and seeing how Ruyue attacked him without a second thought, he became enraged.

He didn't even continue questioning the beast before killing it, succumbing to his desire for its death instead.

Damien sighed once again as he finished recounting the series of events to Ruyue, whose eyes were no longer lost. Instead, they were colder than even his when he was looking at the beast.

'She closed herself off again.'

This was the outcome Damien wanted least. He knew that after learning how she was manipulated, she would be affected like this. He just didn't expect it to be so bad.

Even when she looked at him, her gaze was freezing. There was none of the familiarity she held previously.

And frankly, he couldn't bear to see her like that.

Damien's gaze became determined. He walked forward, ignoring the unapproachable aura surrounding Ruyue and even her dead eyes as she gazed at him.

Ruyue backed away as he approached, not wanting to speak to anyone at the moment. Her mind was tumultuous and her heart was in chaos.

'If it wasn't for my childish dreams. If it wasn't for my personality. If I had just listened to what he had told me...'

Inside her head, she kept blaming herself for what happened. She wouldn't let herself be happy anymore if it meant she might get sucked into a situation like this again.

She felt like she was willingly becoming a caged bird, but she didn't mind. If that's what it took to solve her problems, so be it. She would kill that childish version of herself that wished for freedom.

But as her thoughts reached an apex, she felt two strong hands grab her shoulders. Before she could even process what was happening, she was pulled forward.

Her head lightly landed on Damien's chest as his arms wrapped around her shoulders, embracing her.

"Don't think stupid things." He said in a soft voice. Even if his words were berating, his tone was too gentle for her to get angry.

Her body froze. It wasn't necessarily shock that she was feeling, but she couldn't bring herself to move.

She felt...comfort in his arms.

'No. I'm not allowed to be comfortable. This will only lead to another situation like the previous one.'

She tried to struggle free of his grasp, but he wouldn't let her go. She was forced to stay within the comfort that she was trying to run from with all her might.

'Stop. Please stop. If you don't...'

His soothing voice once again entered her ears. "It's okay. Everything will be okay. Running from those emotions won't solve anything, I promise. Just let it out. You have someone here who is willing to listen to it all."

'Why?! Why are you being like this?! Why can't you just be the annoying asshole that you always are?!' She cried inwardly. Yet, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't actually say the words.

It seemed like without even her own recognition, her arms had snaked around Damien's chest, hugging him tightly.

It seemed like without even her own recognition, tears were streaming down her face, staining his shirt.

And it seemed like without even her own recognition, Damien had teleported the two of them to a secluded spot away from the carnage of the village. A spot where nobody would bother them as she cried.

He moved one of his hands to her head, gently patting her head and brushing her hair.

Every action he took made her want to dive deeper into this warmth, but her brain kept screaming at her that this wasn't the right path.

She didn't know what to do. She couldn't fight her feelings, yet she wanted to do it so badly.

In the end, she ended up crying in his arms, unable to decide on her next course of action.

Chapter 180 - Running Away [3]

Xue Ruyue, first and only daughter of Xue Yebai, Patriarch of the Xue clan, the little princess of the Xue clan.

These were the identities that made up who Ruyue was in the eyes of others, and the traits that represented her.

It was the person she was forced to be from the second she was born.

Even at a young age, she wasn't shown the love a child should know. Be it her father, her mother, her older brother, or her extended family within the clan, none of them thought much of her.

The Xue Clan was once a matriarchy, being one of the very few within the cultivation world that could hold such a hierarchy successfully, but that all changed many decades ago.

The throne was usurped and the clan was changed, becoming patriarchal like almost every other power in the Cloud Plane.

But, the Xue clan used to be a matriarchy for a reason. The women of the clan were usually the ones who inherited the greatest talents, as the clan was centralized around elements that were primarily yin in nature.

Even Ruyue was the same. She was born with immense talents and rather than having a yin attributed element, she had an affinity to yin itself.

It was a threat to the patriarchy. If Ruyue ever grew up to be powerful enough, she could very well usurp the throne once again and nobody would dare object.

For this reason, she was always shunned. She was looked down upon and seen solely as a tool to further the goals of the Xue clan. They figured that as long as they continued like this, she would never become a danger to them.

She grew up never knowing love. She grew up without smiling. There were only two people she could truly show her smile towards, the guard and housemaid couple that took care of her as if she was their own daughter.

Even when her parents abandoned her, they were there, caring for her needs and raising her properly. For this, she could never be more grateful.

When she reached the age of 16, the visits started. From the other 4 great clans to people from the major sects, they all visited the Xue clan for a chance to gain her hand in marriage.

And with the way she was just a pawn to those higher-ups in her clan, they naturally accepted all these visits.

She was forced to entertain those young masters and elders who looked at her body with lewd thoughts evident in their gazes. The yin essence of someone with an affinity for yin would be much stronger than that of a normal maiden.

But even after all these years of her self-confidence being shattered by her clan, Ruyue had still developed a sense of identity. This was due to those two that raised her with proper morals.

She had no desire to be a tool for her clan's growth. She despised the clan itself.

And with all these years going by, seeing how nobody actually cared about her and only cared for her materialistic value, she developed an ice-cold exterior.

She pushed away everyone and everything and developed an unapproachable air. She became someone those young masters would fear trying to court.

Doing so would only lead to their misery.

She trained in secret and managed to reach 2nd class at the age of 18, allowing her to be somewhat free from the constant marriage proposals that were thrown at her.

But she ended up in a situation she couldn't control. Her parents had chosen to wed her off to an elder of the Jade Heavenly Palace. There was no way she could escape the situation the way she had been doing all these years.

So she took drastic measures. She fled the Xue clan and after many months, arrived at the Celestial Star Palace. She passed their disciple examination and climbed the ranks, catching the attention of Grand Elder Tian Yang in the process.

At first, she wanted to reject, thinking he was just like the rest of those creeps who wanted her body. But she realized she needed backing within the sect to protect her from her clan and the Jade Heavenly Palace.

In the end, she accepted his tutorship. And as time passed, she realized that he was nothing like what she had thought of him.

He would rarely actually teach her things, giving her pointers to lead her in the right direction and then leaving the rest to her. Whenever he looked at her, she could only see the gaze of a master towards his disciple.

She started warming up to him, seeing him as her true master. And with his guidance, she was able to achieve 3rd class by the time she turned 20. It was an unprecedented growth speed.

But trouble came seeking her. Her clan and the Elder she was supposed to be wed to demanded her presence. She believed that there was no hope for her, even if she had backing.

But within the next few months, all those demands and approaches died down. Why did that happen? At the time, she had no idea. But now, she knew that Tian Yang had acted.

With his strength and position, there weren't many who could oppose him. Especially not someone with less strength than the 2nd greatest sect on the entire Plane.

She continued her training under Tian Yang without worries, slowly opening up to him. And then, someone else appeared.

A new disciple that her master claimed would be her Junior Brother. At first, she hated the thought of him. Not only was he a man, but he was also going to break the peaceful daily life that she treasured so much.

But unexpectedly, she warmed up to him faster than she had with even Tian Yang. He was arrogant, he was occasionally shameless, and he got on her nerves whenever he got the opportunity, but she couldn't find it in herself to hate him.

Why was that? She couldn't figure it out at first. But slowly, she began to understand.

From the beginning, he disregarded her status. Whether it be as his Senior Sister or as the little princess of the Xue clan, he didn't care about it at all.

When she acted haughty towards him, he would immediately do the same to her. It was an attitude and approach she had never experienced before.

He...genuinely just saw her as another person.

This kind of attitude inadvertently melted the icy wall she had erected around herself. The way she got annoyed and argued with him forced her to become more social.

And she didn't hate the feeling at all. It made her feel like she was regaining the youth that was taken away from her.

But with the situation that had just occurred, she felt that such youth wasn't something she needed.

She had gone on many missions already and she had witnessed her fair share of violence and carnage, but she never felt anything of it. Perhaps because she was as cold and indifferent as she was.

But now, in this place, she felt the pain that such emotions could bring. She felt how terrible the lows could be in contrast to how exhilarating the highs were.

And she hated that. She didn't want to feel such emptiness and such sorrow. She liked it better when she could just ignore everything around her and be indifferent.

But as he embraced her and brushed his hands through her hair, she couldn't bring herself to do that.

"Why won't you let me do that?" She cried as she hugged him tightly. She thought that after hearing her story, he might allow her to do as she pleased.

But Damien just smiled in response. “You see, I tried the same thing, but in the end, it’ll only bring you greater pain.”

He thought about the guilt he felt for running away from his feelings for Rose. It was a terrible feeling.

Perhaps he could shut out his emotions like Ruyue was trying to do, but would that solve anything? No. It was just another form of running away.

“You could say that we are similar in that regard.”

He decided to share his experiences with her. He found that no matter how this senior sister of his liked to act high and mighty, at her core she was just as immature as he was.

Watching her try to take the same method of escapism that he did, he realized how silly he was being. Is this what he was trying to do this entire time with Rose? He berated himself endlessly.

Ruyue stood silently in his arms, listening to his story. It wasn’t the first time she heard him talk about his woman, but it was the first time she heard it in depth.

A strange suffocating feeling arose in her chest, but she didn’t let it affect her. Instead, she hugged him tighter as she listened to his story.

Under the silent moonlight, the duo relied on each other’s warmth, attempting to sort out the troubles that lay within their hearts.