

Walker 161

Chapter 161 - The Weakening Beast

Lin Mu kept his eyes trained on the black smoke and unsheathed the short sword from his back. He had seen the black smoke before and had a guess of what it was. The last time he had seen black smoke such as this was when it rose from Dongfeng Zhao's dead body.

Lin Mu's guess turned out to be true as the black smoke accumulated into a black mass that then turned into a figure that had bone spurs coming out of its body and had skulls present on it.

"Invader!" Lin Mu muttered and entered an attack stance.

Lin Mu did not know if this black figure of the invader was dangerous or not. The last time it had just disappeared and had not attacked him, but that could have only been because it was much weaker than this one.

Looking at the black figure of the invader, Lin Mu could feel the same repulsive feeling that he had felt before, except this time it was much stronger. It was as if there was something deep within his soul that was commanding him to erase the presence that was in front of him.

But Lin Mu did not act of this command, he knew better than that. If by some chance he were to wake up the Great slumber bear, then it could spell his doom. Thus he wanted to wait and would only attack if the invader were to attack him first.

Lin Mu kept on looking at the invader and was bracing for it to do something, but strangely nothing happened. Although this time the invader seemed to be much more stronger than before, it did not do anything. It did not even screech and made no sound.

The invader simply disappeared and left behind a small black dot that only Lin Mu could see. It was the spatial point that was left behind. Lin Mu knew that even if he used the ring to open a spatial gate at that spatial point, it would not lead to the location of the invader.

Senior Xukong had already told him that the invader's main body was most likely in a different world and even if he used the ring to open a gate, it would only lead to a location in the lesser void. The black smoke that was released by the Great slumber bear was but a part of the invader's avatar in this world.

But now a big question presented in Lin Mu's mind.

'Why did the avatar of the invader leave the body of the great slumber Bear?'

Lin Mu could understand why it had happened in the case of Dongfeng Zhao since it was a dead body and the avatar of the invader could do nothing but leave it due to being forced by Lin Mu. But in this case, the great slumber bear was still alive and was also weakened enough. And from what Lin Mu could tell, the invader had become a parasite and had taken over a part of the beast's body.

Lin Mu's gaze returned to the Great slumber bear and then he saw a change happening to it. The black patches it had on its fur were starting to fade away. A minute later they were completely gone, and the raw and injured flesh beneath it was revealed.

Evidently, the invaders' hostile takeover had injured the beast plenty. But Lin Mu could notice another thing. The injuries were actually not bleeding and seemed to be slowly healing.

"What is happening?" Lin Mu muttered to himself.

"The great slumber bear, it's expelling the invader from its body. I should have expected this before, the bloodline of a great slumber bear is not something that can be easily challenged." Xukong suddenly spoke up.

Lin Mu observed with his spirit sense and discovered that the aura of the great slumber bear was actually getting weaker. The minuscule waves of spirit qi that were emitted from its body had gotten even more weak than before.

"It's cultivation... it's regressing?" Lin Mu questioned.

"Indeed, in order to expel the invader from its body, the great slumber bear is sacrificing its cultivation base," Xukong answered.

"But isn't this dangerous for it? I mean if it gets too weak won't other beasts attack it and kill it." Lin Mu presented his doubts.

"That is true, but just the innate strength of the great slumber Bear's body is enough to defend against Core condensation beasts. Although it is sacrificing its cultivation, it is also saving itself, because if the invader takes over its body it will die, anyway.

Besides, the Great slumber bear can easily recover its cultivation base back by using its bloodline ability. It is just a matter of decades and the beast will return to the peak of its strength back again." Xukong explained.

Lin Mu heard senior Xukong's words and kept on staring at the changes that were happening in the beast. Its wounds had healed after a few minutes and it had stopped twitching. Even while all this was happening, the great slumber bear had not woken up.

"The beast does live up to its name, its slumber is indeed 'great'." Lin Mu spoke internally.

Though the number of black patches on the great slumber bear had reduced for now, there were still many bone spurs and black fur left on the torso of the beast.

"This does present an opportunity for you. Now, you just have to wait for the beast to expel the entirety of the invader from its body. Once that is done, it should become weak enough that you will be able to kill it." Xukong stated.

Lin Mu heard senior Xukong's words and indeed found them to be accurate. Now all he had to do was to wait and watch. Once the beast became weak enough, that would be the opportunity to strike. Still, there was another question, and that was how long would this take.

"How long would I need to wait senior Xukong?" Lin Mu questioned.

"From the speed, it's expelling it and its current cultivation base, I would say at least a year," Xukong answered.

Chapter 162 - Goals

Upon hearing Senior Xukong's words, Lin Mu did not feel disappointed. If anything, he felt calm as this only meant that he had more time to prepare for it. Not to mention even if he killed the great slumber bear, he still did not know how he would obtain its bloodline.

Lin Mu's guess turned out to be true as Senior Xukong soon continued his explanation.

"The bloodline of the Great slumber bear is very strong; thus you will need to prepare beforehand. Usually, when a beast is killed for the purpose of obtaining its bloodline, it is stored in a special container. But you don't have that luxury, thus when you kill the Great slumber bear, you will have to assimilate the bloodline right away.

But the next problem that you will face after assimilating the bloodline would be the activation of the ability 'Well of slumber'. If you do not prepare well and fall asleep, you will simply starve to death, thus during this time period you need to learn the technique of the lost immortal.

But simply having the technique won't be enough. Assimilating a bloodline is a tough task. You need a strong will and body to be able to successfully do it. Especially in the case of an immensely strong bloodline of the great slumber bear, your body will need to be very strong.

Thus for that, you will need to reach the completion of the body tempering realm and saturate your body with the maximum amount of vital energy that you can." Xukong explained in detail.

After hearing and comprehend senior Xukong's words, Lin Mu started to formulate his plans for the upcoming year.

He now had a goal, which was to obtain the bloodline of the great slumber bear. In addition to this, there were some other goals he needed to complete. The first of which was to investigate the culprits, and the next was to increase his own cultivation.

~Sigh~

Lin Mu sighed at the multitude of tasks that he needed to do, but his eyes seemed to be glowing with determination. He was not appalled at this, but was rather looking forward to it. Lin Mu was also feeling that they were making little waste after coming all this way.

"Seems like we will have to find the great slumber beast once again next time." Lin Mu spoke.

"That won't be much of a problem. A great slumber bear, once it enters its sleeping phase, won't move from its location unless it is disturbed. This cave seems to be rather isolated, and just the mere presence of the great slumber bear will repel most beasts.

Also, considering its current condition and its recovery period, it's likely that it won't wake up for more than a year at least." Xukong replied.

"That should make it easy for us. I'll have plenty of time too and should be able to prepare everything till then." Lin Mu said while nodding his head.

Now that Lin Mu knew what to do next, he wanted to check out the rest of the cave. He continued on forward and entered the wall. Only when he was a sufficient distance away from the Great slumber Bear did he come out of the wall and deactivate the skill phase.

Lin Mu kept his spirit sense alert and would scan the area that was in front of him every few seconds, ensuring that nothing dangerous was there. The way floor that he was walking on once again became sloping and he started ascending again.

Lin Mu must have walked for at least eight hundred meters more along the winding and curving cave until finally, he reached its exit. The exit of the cave was rather large, being about six meters tall and ten meters wide.

Lin Mu was rather surprised that such a big cave was unknown. The hunters should have known of it most likely, but somehow it had still stayed hidden. Only when he walked a short distance away did he realize why; the mouth of the cave was at a slanting angle such that the trees and the face of the mountain would hide it.

From far away, the mouth of the cave was completely hidden, and no hunter would spot it easily. The snow only made it easy to hide as well. Lin Mu looked around but did not see anything peculiar.

"I should climb a tree and get a gauge of the area. Perhaps I'll find something nearby." Lin Mu muttered to himself.

Lin Mu found a relatively short tree and used blink to appear at a branch that was at its top. From there he blinked to another tree and kept on going upwards until he finally reached the highest point he could for now.

Lin Mu took a look around and saw the white and green spread of land that was the northern forest. Behind him was the mountain out of which he had walked out of, and in front of him was the rest of the northern forest.

Far in the distance, he could see the Northern mountain ranges as well. Those mountains were perhaps the farthest any hunter had ever gone, as the area beyond them was considered to be a forbidden area due to the high amount of danger.

Lin Mu remembered the scary stories he heard from his parents about how there were monsters living beyond the northern mountains, and that's why it was called as a forbidden area. But now that he looked at the snowy white mountains, they looked anything but scary.

They simply looked...

"Beautiful..." Lin Mu muttered.

The clouds in the sky had flown away and the snow had stopped. The half-moon could be seen hog up in the sky and stars could be seen twinkling in the blanket of night. Gently flowing wind passed through Lin Mu's hair as he stood on the top of the tallest tree.

Having taken his fill of the picturesque scene, Lin Mu had decided to get down when he spotted some broken trees.

Because he was at the very top and the snow had covered the land, these trees were hard to spot. Lin Mu descended to some lower trees and went towards the location where he had seen the broken trees. He then discovered that a long trail of broken trees could be seen heading towards a particular direction.

Lin Mu immediately recognized what it was, and an idea appeared in his mind. He got down onto the ground and checked the broken trees. All of them were knocked down with some of them being splintered because of a great force.

Lin Mu looked at the leaves of the broken trees and judged that they were broken down not too long ago, most likely a week ago. The trail of broken trees came from the center of the forest and went all the way to the entrance of the cave.

"Was this done by the Great slumber bear?" Lin Mu questioned himself.

"Hmm, it does seem like it." Xukong acknowledged.

Suddenly Lin Mu remembered something.

"Wait, Zhou Ye told us that when he was attacked, the beast later ran away and while running away the beast had knocked down the trees. If we follow this, we can find the site of the attack!"

Chapter 163 - The Abandoned Cave

Now that Lin Mu had an idea of how to proceed, he acted on it. He followed the trail of the broken and knocked down trees and tried to find the site of the attack. He walked for quite a long distance and reached a relatively wide and open area that seemed to be natural.

There were no more broken trees here, so Lin Mu concluded that the site of the attack should have been nearby.

"Now I just need to look for a broken carriage," Lin Mu muttered to himself as his eyes looked around.

Since it was dark, Lin Mu was also using his spirit sense to scan the area. Still, even after searching for over fifteen minutes, Lin Mu did not find anything. It was as if the carriage had disappeared into the thin air.

"The carriage cannot be taken away by a beast, then that means... The culprits! They must have removed their traces later on." Lin Mu guessed.

"You should use your spirit sense to look under the snow, it's likely that the traces of the carriage and the tracks may be buried below the snow," Xukong suggested.

Lin Mu nodded his head as he looked below the snow. But his search seemed to have been for naught, as there did not seem to be any traces here either. Whoever the culprits were, they were smart enough to erase all traces.

At least that's what Lin Mu thought until he found something that was stuck in the trunk of a tree. What Lin Mu had found was a broken part of a wooden plan. It had broken off in a diagonal manner, and the sharp part was embedded in the trunk of a tree.

Lin Mu only found hits by chance as he was looking around. And he actually did not find this because of his spirit sense, but rather because of his own eyesight. The thing that had pulled Lin Mu's attention was actually the glint of the moonlight that had shined off of a small nail.

This nail was stuck into the broken plank that was then stuck in the trunk of a tree. Lin Mu thanked his luck as he pulled out the broken piece of the plank. He looked at the broken plan and saw its finish and size.

It was a properly cut and trimmed piece of wood, thus there was no doubt that it was a part of the carriage.

"Seems like they missed this piece. Now you just need to figure out which direction you're supposed to go." Xukong chimed in.

Lin Mu nodded in response and looked around for more clues, but he still could not find any.

'Hmm, we were supposed to meet up with the other team a distance away from here in the south, so that means the culprit's cave must be in the other direction. It could be something else, but I just have to take a chance.' Lin Mu thought to himself.

Having decided, Lin Mu turned to the northern direction and walked along the broad pathway. The pathway was a natural one and was basically a clearing. Lin Mu could tell that in other times of the year, animals probably passed through here, large animals.

There was no other reason why such a large path was present here in the forest. Another surprising thing that Lin Mu realized was that he had not seen nor heard any beast in the surroundings. He didn't know if it was because of the weather or if it was because of the Great slumber Bear.

"It's definitely the Great slumber bear. The bloodline aura of it should keep away even beasts that are many cultivation realms above it, away from it. The innate fear that's present in the bloodlines of these beasts will force them to stay away." Xukong explained.

"This is good. Now we know that the beast won't be disturbed from its sleep and we won't have to find it later." Lin Mu replied as he nodded in acknowledgment.

Lin Mu had walked for about an hour now and finally got a small clue. Buried in the snow, he found a track mark that was no doubt from the wheels of a carriage. The track mark was very faint and would have been invisible if not for his spirit sense.

Lin Mu carefully brushed away the snow from the place that the track was at and revealed it. He looked at it and saw that the track slightly curved to the left. This prompted him to turn his head up and look to the left.

Lin Mu saw that another small clearing was present in between the trees. It was camouflaged by the snow and he would have missed it if not for the track marks. He thus turned left and continued on. This time, Lin Mu was able to find more clues.

There were faint footsteps that were buried under the snow and seemed to be coming from a single direction.

"Hmm, the footsteps are very shallow. Whoever the culprits are, they are definitely trained in movement techniques." Xukong spoke.

"Movement techniques?" Lin Mu questioned as his brow raised in response.

"A movement technique is a special skill that can be used by a cultivator to improve their speed and agility. Some techniques are also specialized for assassination, sneaking, battle, speed, and more things. Though the one in this case is but just a minor foot technique used to lighten steps." Xukong explained.

"That's interesting, perhaps I'll get to learn one sometime in the future." Lin Mu responded and continued following in the footsteps.

The footsteps led him all the way to a mountain that was covered with tall pine trees. The entirety of it was covered with snow and looked beautiful. Lin Mu finally reached the side of the mountain and came to stand in front of a large boulder.

"Huh? This is it? There's nothing here." Lin Mu muttered.

He looked around, but this was where the footsteps had ended at. He used his spirit sense to observe the surroundings and detected a hollow space behind the large boulder. The boulder was placed in such a way that it leaned against the wall of the mountain.

If one looked at it from far, they would think that the boulder had naturally rolled off of the mountain and had come to settle here. Lin Mu moved the snow from the ground around the boulder away and saw the dragging marks.

"Oh, so this boulder was moved here from the side to block the path to the cave." Lin Mu spoke.

'Seems like I need to make way for myself now.' Lin Mu thought and tried to push the boulder.

He knew that he wouldn't be able to push it with his current strength, but he still wanted to try it, hoping for a miracle. His hopes were dashed quickly, as he wasn't even able to make it budge. Even when he used the entirety of his body's strength and stretched it with spirit qi, there was no effect.

The boulder was about three meters tall and four meters wide. There was no way Lin Mu could move it.

"Don't waste your efforts, just use your skill and walk through it directly," Xukong spoke in a chiding tone.

"Yes, senior." Lin Mu replied while feeling a little embarrassed.

He activated the third skill Phase and walked through the boulder. A second later he appeared in a pitch-black cave. Lin Mu stayed alert and scanned the cave with his spirit sense first and did not deactivate the skill yet.

He was fully expecting for there to be people here, but surprisingly there was nobody. Having confirmed that the cave was abandoned, Lin Mu deactivated the skill and lit up an old half-burned torch that was attached to one of the walls nearby.

With the flame blazing, the abandoned cave was illuminated and Lin Mu was finally able to see it. The first thing he noticed was the large number of cages that were present in the cave, along with chains and other types of restraints.

There were also some pieces of furniture scattered all around, along with a few random articles. Lin Mu checked out the cages and discovered small amounts of blood in some of them. In another corner, he also found some old food.

Some parts of the food had gone moldy, while the rest still seemed to be fine.

"Looks like they left in a hurry." Xukong spoke.

"Yes, but why? Did they know we were coming here or was it something else?" Lin Mu questioned in response.

Lin Mu looked around and saw the rooms that were located in the different corners of the cave. Most of them were empty, and the others only had some random items left in them. All Lin Mu could understand right now was that this cave was used to temporarily hold the mercenaries here.

"Looks like I'll need to guide the Hei corps here. They have better investigational skills than me, they should know what clues I missed."

Chapter 164 - Returning To The Camp

Now that he knew a bit more about the place Lin Mu decided to return for now. He reckoned that spending any more time here would be just wasting it and thought it would be better to leave it to the Hei Corps.

But there was another problem that presented to him. He couldn't justify to them how he got into the cave in the first place. Neither could he tell them how he got there in the first place. After all, he could not tell them that he walked through the territory of a terrifyingly strong beast, could he?

Not to mention that even if he did show them the path, they wouldn't be able to take it, anyway. He was the only one who could walk through solid objects like that.

"You'll have to find an alternative path for them," Xukong spoke.

"Yes, Senior. Seems like I'll need to go around the mountain once I bring them here. This mountain is visible from far, so it shouldn't be hard to guide them here. Though I'll need to do something about that boulder at the entrance." Lin Mu replied.

He then walked up to the boulder and thought for a minute before finding a solution that was rather simple and straightforward.

Lin Mu unsheathed his short sword and amplified it with his spirit qi. Once it had a sufficient amount of spirit qi in it, he slashed it at the edge of the large boulder where it was the thinnest.

~Swish~

~Thang~

The corner of the boulder was cut cleanly and fell down to the side making some noise. If one looked at the surface of the cut boulder, they would see that it was smooth and completely uniform. Lin Mu's sword had sliced through it effortlessly.

"If I can't get through, I'll just cut it apart." Lin Mu thought out loud.

He then pushed the piece of rock that he had cut to the side and walked out of the cave. He then turned back and looked at his handiwork.

"Now they shouldn't mind it." Lin Mu muttered and started walking towards the cave of the Great slumber bear.

An hour later, he reached the cave and walked all the way over to the beast's location. He checked to ensure that it was still sleeping and then entered the wall by using Phase and appeared on the other side of the mountain.

The fire that he had lit was still burning albeit it had grown smaller because no extra fuel had been added to it. Lin Mu looked up at the moon in the sky and estimated that there was still quite a long time till the morning.

"I'll eat some food and then cultivate. I should be able to return to the camp by tomorrow afternoon if I'm fast enough." Lin Mu spoke to himself.

He then withdrew some of the meat and started cooking it. The meat he had taken out was the meat of the core formation alpha steel back wolf. Lin Mu generously dressed the meat in spices and prepared it well before cooking it.

A tantalizing aroma spread in the cave, which made his mouth water and taste buds tingle. He sliced a piece of the meat and put it in his mouth. The roasted meat was juicy and flavorful. His taste buds jumped in joy and he felt amazed.

"Delicious! Seems like the stronger the beast, the better the taste." Lin Mu exclaimed.

As soon as the first piece of meat was swallowed down into his stomach, a familiar warmth spread from his stomach. The vital energy and spirit qi that was stored in the meat started being absorbed by his body. It took Lin Mu a few seconds to snap out of the strange sense of euphoria.

He quickly ate the rest of the meat and soon got full. The meat of a core condensation beast was rather filling for him and had satisfied his appetite for the first time after quite a bit. Lin Mu then sat cross-legged and started chanting the calming heart sutra to quickly assimilate the vital energy.

Half an hour passed by and Lin Mu felt a wave of energy spread from his body. It was as if a stream of energy was drilling into his bones. Lin Mu understood what was happening and quickly focused on it. He channeled more energy and intensified the process.

Soon the small stream of energy turned into a raging river and Lin Mu directed it into his bones. The energy reached his marrows and started dousing them in it. A strange sense of pressure appeared in his body and he felt as if a weight was placed on him.

The pressure intensified until when...

~Pop~

It was as if a dam had broken and a tremor passed through Lin Mu's body. The waves of energy stopped being emanated from his body and he opened his eyes. His eyes glimmered in under the flames of the fire in front of him.

~Huu~

Lin Mu let out a breath and a streak of black gas came out. The gas traveled forward and met the wall of the cave.

~Sizzle~

As soon as the gas touched the wall, it started sizzling and corroded. A hole that was about an inch deep and three inches in diameter was formed after the black gas was dissipated.

~Gulp~

Lin Mu swelled his saliva in slight fear after seeing this sight. He had seen this happen before back in his house, but that was a wooden wall. Now it was a solid stone wall that was affected.

"That looks very dangerous." Lin Mu spoke in a nervous tone.

"Indeed, this is quite strange," Xukong spoke in an equally nervous tone.

Lin Mu wiped the sweat off his forehead and took a deep breath.

"I guess I just need to be more careful. Though it seems like I progressed in progressing my body tempering realm by a little." Lin Mu spoke, feeling a little happy now.

"Yes, that's good. This is the effect of the core condensation beast meat. Though this will only be a one-time effect I think, since it's the first time you've eaten it. The next time should be rather mild." Xukong replied.

Lin Mu nodded and scanned his body with his spirit sense. He could feel the vital energy that was saturated within his skin, muscles, blood and now his bones. He tried to go deeper and was able to feel his marrows, which did not have as much concentration of vital energy as the rest of his body.

Xukong could guess Lin Mu's thoughts and understood what he was thinking.

"When you reach the thirteenth stage of the body tempering realm, your bone marrow should be saturated with the vital energy as well. Once you reach the peak of the Body tempering realm, you should be ready to assimilate the bloodline of the Great slumber bear." Xukong explained.

'Though you will need a little extra help before that. Hopefully, you reach it before the deadline and I'm able to give it to you.' Xukong internally spoke.

Lin Mu nodded and responded, "I understand, senior."

He then sat back down and chanted the severing heart sutra to continue his cultivation. An hour later the clouds covered the sky again and winds started to get stronger. Snow soon started falling, and the forest became shrouded in it.

Lin Mu peacefully cultivated until the morning and only stopped when the sunlight illuminated the cave. Faint beams of sunlight would enter the cave and get dissipated in the darkness. Since the cave was at a diagonal angle and was blocked by the trees, sunlight barely got through.

Still, it was enough for Lin Mu to sense it and he opened his eyes. The sunlight that diffused through the branches of the trees dappled the floor of the cave. He stood up and looked up at the sun that was hiding behind the horizon.

~Sigh~

"Time to return." Lin Mu muttered as he looked back at the cave one last time.

The fire had gone out a long time ago and the embers had cooled down, leaving behind a pile of ash and unburnt charcoal. Lin Mu lightly stretched his body before he started out in a jog. The light jog soon turned into a sprint and he burst forward.

Chapter 165 - Revealing The Findings

Lin Mu was passing through the trees with ease. He would wade and flicker through them, dodging each and every obstacle. His spirit sense was spread forward and helped him sense the upcoming path. With the help of his spirit sense, he would know everything that was there.

A couple of hours passed by and Lin Mu was still running. He would slow down once he felt the fatigue building up, but would never stop. His progress in his body tempering realm had also helped in increasing his stamina by a notch.

After he slowed down, he would soon feel better and then he would continue on and increase his speed again. Three hours passed like this, and even now Lin Mu could not see any spirit beasts.

"Where did they go? Even if they hide, they should at least have nests nearby." Lin Mu spoke while running.

"The spirit beasts are smarter than normal beasts, so they should have retreated to the edge of the forest instead. But for the normal beasts, they probably stuck where they are because of the fear or they too filled the spirit beasts. Either way, you should probably see them soon." Xukong replied.

Lin Mu simply nodded his head in response and kept on running. Another hour passed and Lin Mu finally saw his first beast. It wasn't a spirit beast, but rather just a common bird beast that could be seen anywhere in the forest.

"Seems like they ran pretty far." Lin Mu muttered.

He then spread his spirit sense around in all directions and observed if there were more beasts nearby. His search showed him that there were plenty of beasts here, and they all seemed to be a bit startled. When he passed by the beasts, they ignored him and let him pass by without bothering him.

The number of beasts was now much larger than before, and it became impossible for Lin Mu to avoid them anymore. Eventually, he had his first encounter with a spirit beast. The spirit beast looked like a mongoose and was the same size as that of a normal one.

If it were not for the faint spirit qi waves coming from the beast, Lin Mu would have not been able to tell that it was one.

'Oh, it should have been obvious. No normal mongoose would live this deep in the forest, that too in a cold place like this.' Lin Mu thought to himself.

The mongoose beast looked at Lin Mu with sharp eyes and watched his every move. With every step that Lin Mu moved, the beast would move to. The beast was wary of Lin Mu and seemed to be a little afraid.

Lin Mu watched the beast as well but did not attack it as he didn't want to be needlessly involved right now. Seeing that the beast had no desire to fight, Lin Mu moved a little distance away and walked away. The beast did the same and just watched him go away.

"Well, that was strange." Lin Mu said to himself.

"Most intelligent spirit beasts won't attack straight away, especially in tense situations such as the one right now when most of them have been scared by the great slumber bear. They will avoid getting into a conflict as the other beasts may take advantage of this fact and catch them off guard." Xukong replied.

Lin Mu nodded and then continued on his journey. He had more encounters with spirit beasts, but all of them acted the same way the mongoose beast had. They watched him but did not attack, and when he moved away, they let him go.

Lin Mu was rather intrigued by this behavior. In the past, he had thought of all beasts as having zero to no intelligence and only having basic instincts that an animal has. He of course knew that senior Xukong was a beast as well, but he was way beyond his comprehension. Thus did not include him in his list.

Lin Mu felt fascinated by the intelligence of the spirit beasts and wondered if he would get to see any beasts that had the same intelligence as humans here. He also wondered if the great slumber bear would be smarter than this or not.

Lin Mu had seen how the core condensation realm Alpha steel back wolf had acted and led his pack of wolves. Common of that kind needed a certain level of intelligence, which perhaps only beasts above that of the qi refining realm have.

Lin Mu had traveled even more far and guessed that he was rather close to the camp now. His guess turned out to be true as he could soon see clouds of smoke rising from the front, a few hundred meters away from him. Lin Mu approached the camp with a little apprehension and stayed alert.

While Lin Mu knew that the camp would be safe because of the scent of the alpha steel back wolf, he was still a little worried in the back of his head. He wondered if the roar of the great slumber Bear had scared the spirit beasts so much so that they would ignore the scent of another core condensation realm beast.

Lin Mu's hidden worry turned out to be for naught as he saw the camp was safe and calm. There were two men standing guard at the border of the camp, while four tents were set up in a circle with a Bonfire in the center.

Seeing that the others were not here, Lin Mu guessed that they were most likely resting in the tents.

~tap~ ~tap~ ~tap~

Lin Mu walked into the camp and made sure to make some noise of footsteps so as to alert the guard. He didn't want to surprise them too much by directly turning up behind them and wanted to announce his arrival. He could tell from their expressions that the guards had been a little stressed, as the fatigue could be seen on their faces.

The two guards turned to look at the source of the sound and saw Lin Mu enter.

"It's senior Lin Mu!" One of them spoke.

"Senior Lin Mu has returned!" The second one announced to the camp.

Upon hearing the shout, four people walked out of the tents. Xie Bohai was one of them and looked at Lin Mu, who had just walked in. Lin Mu approached them and came to stand in front of them. All six of them cupped their hands in greeting and spoke.

"Greetings senior."

"I hope Senior had a breakthrough in his cultivation." Xie Bohai spoke.

Lin Mu nodded in response and spoke, "Ah yes, I did indeed."

Lin Mu then looked at the last remaining tent and the others followed his gaze. Xie Bohai instantly guessed what Lin Mu was thinking.

"Senior Hei Yingjie is better than yesterday and has improved. His condition has been stable now." Xie Bohai reported.

Lin Mu simply nodded and walked into the tent. Upon entering, he saw the unconscious Hei Yingjie that was calmly sleeping. Lin Mu extended his spirit sense and checked the internal condition of him. The number of Small clots and internal bleeding had reduced by a lot.

Though it still seemed like it would take a long time for Hei Yingjie to recover his cultivation base, which had regressed. Lin Mu observed the man's dantian and saw the pale White core floating in the center. It would let out faint wisps of spirit qi at regular intervals and would similarly absorb spirit qi that appeared in the dantian.

"Hmm, at least his spirit qi circulation is still working normally now. He just needs to rest more and recover his cultivation on his own." Xukong explained.

"I guess it's good that there were no culprits in the cave there. At least we won't have to clash with them now that we don't have a core condensation realm expert of our own." Lin Mu spoke in a slightly relieved tone.

He then turned around and left the tent. He saw Xie Bohai waiting for him outside, and he looked to be calm.

"Senior, there has been some strange activity with the beasts since last night. We also heard a faint roar coming from the northwestern mountains." Xie Bohai reported.

"I know, it was caused by another core condensation realm beast." Lin Mu replied.

Xie Bohai seemed to be a bit more nervous after hearing Lin Mu's response.

"You know about it senior, but how? Weren't you cultivating?" Xie Bohai questioned.

"My cultivation went smoothly, and I had a breakthrough rather early. After I was done with my cultivation session, I heard some noises, so I went to check. I ended up finding what we came for here." Lin Mu answered.

Xie Bohai became surprised after hearing Lin Mu mention about his findings.

"Senior, you don't mean, you..." Xie Bohai spoke but was then interrupted.

"Yes, I did indeed. I found the hideout of the culprits."

Chapter 166 - The Other Team Arrives

Lin Mu then went on to make up a series of events on how he found the cave where the culprits were supposed to have been using before. He told them that he discovered some broken trees and found the broken piece of the carriage and how he related it to the story that Zhou Ye had told them.

The Hei corps had known about Zhou Ye and the situation behind him, thus when Lin Mu correlated the events with Zhou Ye's story they did not doubt him.

"So the cave has been abandoned, Senior?" One of the members asked.

"Yes, it did look like that to me, but there may be clues that I couldn't find there. I hope that you people would be able to find something, I reckon you all are better in that aspect." Lin Mu answered.

Xie Bohai hit his chest with his fist in a show of confidence before speaking.

"We shall not disappoint you, senior. Whatever clues that are left in the cave, we will find them."

"Yes senior, we will do our best and will not disgrace our lord's trust." Others chimed in.

Lin Mu nodded in acknowledgment and felt a little better. His thoughts then went towards the other teams of the Hei Corps. He wondered if they had been contacted yet or not. The total people here were currently eight, including Hei Yingjie and him, which meant that the last two members had not returned yet.

"Have they not returned yet from informing the other teams?" Lin Mu questioned.

"They should be here by tonight or tomorrow morning at the latest senior. I think the increase in the number of beasts probably delayed their progress." Xie Bohai answered.

"Ah yes, that is true. They will probably have to fight some beasts in order to reach here." Lin Mu replied.

"For now, all we can do is wait. Senior can also resume his cultivation in the tent. We'll inform you at the first sign of the other team." Xie Bohai added.

Lin Mu nodded in acceptance and then picked a tent at random and walked in after lifting its flap. He had depleted nearly two-thirds of his spirit qi in returning to the camp as fast as possible, thus wanted to take this chance to replenish it.

Lin Mu thus sat down onto the bedroll and started chanting the severing heart sutra. Hours passed by in the blink of an eye and it was finally night time. Lin Mu opened his eyes upon hearing the sounds of people moving around outside.

He had thought that the other teams had reached them at first, but then upon using his spirit sense he realized that it was just the members of the Hei Corps setting up for some dinner.

'I should eat as well, I guess.' Lin Mu thought.

He walked out of the tent and looked at the men that were skewing a haunch onto a large skewer for roasting. They had set up a smaller campfire for ease of cooking. The larger bonfire in the center of the camp was better for heating and illumination, and rather impractical for cooking.

Lin Mu too set up another fire and started cooking the meat of the Alpha steel back wolf. Half an hour later he was done with his meal and so were the other people. They had finished up and had switched for the guard duty.

It was now Xie Bohai and another member's turn for the guard duty. Xie Bohai talked with Lin Mu for a bit before starting his guard duty, while Lin Mu himself returned to the tent. He wanted to assimilate the vital energy and spirit qi from the meat quickly.

Lin Mu wanted to see what kind of effect it would have this time. The effect yesterday was rather strong, and Senior Xukong had told him that the effect would be lessened than the first time.

It turned out to be as what senior Xukong had told Lin Mu. While he did experience a slight increase in his vital energy; it was not as great as before and neither did he expel the black corrosive gas from his mouth again.

"Well, that was a little disappointing." Lin Mu muttered to himself.

Pushing this to the back of his mind, Lin Mu wondered if he should sleep or cultivate for now. He reckoned that the other team may return at any time, thus it would be better to just cultivate. The main reason for him wanting to sleep was that he could learn the legacy technique of the lost immortal.

Lin Mu could still learn it right now, but he preferred to stay undisturbed for a long time and the current situation was not worth it. Thus Lin Mu simply decided to continue cultivating till the morning and that's what he did.

His cultivation had stabilized and Lin Mu was now attempting to refine another drop of liquid spirit qi. He had heard from Senior Xukong about the use of liquid spirit qi, thus wanted to quickly start refining it. He channeled spirit qi into his meridians and started refining it like before.

Lin Mu had to attempt it five times and lost quite a bit of spirit qi before he succeeded. Another drop of liquid spirit flowed down his meridians and settled down at the bottom of his dantian.

~Huu~

Lin Mu let out a breath of tiredness and focused his attention again. He observed his dantian and discovered that he had spent nearly five hundred whips of spirit qi in order to refine that one drop of liquid spirit qi. The drop itself was condensed from less than a hundred wisps of spirit qi, but the failed attempts had caused him a small loss.

Now that he had refined the second drop of liquid spirit qi, Lin Mu had to replenish the depleted spirit qi first before he could even refine the next. Seeing the rate at which he was refining the spirit qi was a little disappointing to Lin Mu but he soon picked himself up after Xukong's reminder.

It had taken him nearly two hours to refine one drop of liquid spirit qi, thus Lin Mu could only guess how long it would take him to reach the next stage of the qi refining realm. For in order to break through to the peak stage of the qi refining realm, a cultivator had to have at least half of his dantian filled with liquid spirit qi.

~Sigh~

"Don't worry, the more experienced you get, the easier it will get for you to refine the liquid spirit qi. It is usually difficult for most people at the start." Xukong advised.

"Yes senior." Lin Mu responded and returned to his cultivation.

Lin Mu could only hope that his speed would soon increase in the future.

More time passed by and now it was the time for the sunrise. But still, the sun could not be seen and was hidden behind the dark clouds. The snow from last night had not stopped yet and was still ongoing. A little more time passed by and finally, the sounds of footsteps came from far.

It seemed as if there were tens of people walking together, thus the sound was rather easy to hear. The members of the Hei corps that were on guard duty immediately became alert. Xie Bohai went to the side that the sound was originating from while holding his weapons.

The other guards had woken up by now as well and walked out of the tents and notice the sound as well. They saw Xie Bohai standing at the edge while holding his sword. They instantly understood what was happening and got ready as well.

A minute later the sound increased more and the people could finally be seen.

~Phew~

Everyone took a collective breath of relief once they confirm that the people who had just reached them were the other teams of the Hei Corps. They were being led by the two members Xie Bohai had selected for sending the message.

Along with the two, there were additional three people standing alongside them. These three people were none other than Hei Bao the captain of the Hei corps, Hong Luo and Teng Xiaolian, the current leader of the mercenaries.

"You all are finally here, that good." Xie Bohai spoke in a relieved tone.

The two members of his team came forward and whispered some things in his ear before going behind him. The two of them had gone to call Lin Mu while the three men, Hei Bao, Hong Luo, and Teng Xiaolian came forward to talk with Xie Bohai.

"How is Hei Yingjie now?" Hei Bao questioned first.

"Senior Hei Yingjie is stable for now. Because of senior Lin Mu's help, he was saved from qi deviation." Xie Bohai answered.

~pew~

Hei Bao too took a breath of relief and calmed won. He hadn't show it to others, but he was rather stressed because of this. They only had three members of their higher corps left right now and they couldn't afford to lose another core condensation realm expert.

They didn't know what kind of conflict they would be having in the future, and they would be needing every bit of their strength. From what his lord and Hei Wan had guessed, Hei Bao felt that the future seemed to be bleak.

They had only come halfway and one of their top experts was already out of commission, Hei Bao was sure that they would be failing their mission now. But when he heard Xie Bohai's next words, his hopes rose again.

"There's an important thing I need to tell you, captain. Senior Lin Mu found the hideout of the culprits."

Chapter 167 - Embarking...

Hei Bao was astounded, to say the least upon hearing Xie Bohai's words, but then soon became elated. For this meant that they would not be failing this mission and would not have wasted their time.

"Good, good, good..." Hei Bao spoke while nodding his head.

He was truly relieved more than what others could see from his face. Hei Bao had always been a perfectionist and wanted to do the best for his lord, thus even the thought of failure was dreadful for him.

"Well then, where is Lin Mu?" Hei Bao asked.

"Senior Lin Mu is resting in the tent. The others have gone to call him so you need not worry." Xie Bohai replied.

Just as Xie Bohai said this, another sound came from behind him.

"I'm here." Spoke the approaching voice.

Xie Bohai and Hei Bao looked at the person approaching who was none other than Lin Mu. Lin Mu was looking at them as well, and in turn also at the large group of people that were coming from the forest one by one. The entire team had gathered there by now, and the border of the camp was now rather crowded.

Lin Mu did a quick sweep with his spirit sense and estimated that there were at least seventy people there now. He also noticed that some of them looked a little haggard, as if they had been in a battle of some kind.

'Seems like they did encounter some beasts.' Lin Mu thought to himself.

"We should move to the camp, I think. It's getting a little crowded here and the others can rest for a bit as well." Lin Mu suggested.

"Alright." Hei Bao replied.

"That would be good. My companions are tired from the battle before." Teng Xiaolian said in acknowledgment.

All of them thus entered the camp and were shocked by the sheer number of steel back wolf carcasses that were stacked in the corner. Even Hei Bao, Hong Luo, and Teng Xiaolian were shocked by this. Even though they had heard about the ambush that happened before, seeing something and hearing about it was different.

~Gulp~

Teng Xiaolian and Hong Luo gulped in shock, for they could not even begin to imagine what kind of battle that must have been. Teng Xiaolian then turned to look at Lin Mu.

'Indeed, we were not wrong. There is no chance that this could be accomplished by anyone other than the disciples of the top sects.' Teng Xiaolian thought to himself.

The crowd then moved into the camp and sat down wherever they could. The camp that was once rather empty was now bustling with people. Some of the team members started butchering the beast carcasses to prepare a meal for the people.

They all seemed to be tired, thus this seemed to be the best way to utilize the beast corpses. The mercenaries and the remaining members of the Hei corps also seemed to be rather grateful and went along to help them set it up.

Multiple smaller bonfires popped up in the camp, and the people were now sitting around them. With the main members sitting at the very center of the camp between the four tents. This included Lin Mu, Xie Bohai, Teng Xiaolian, Hong Luo, and Hei Bao.

"So then, what did you exactly discover?" Hei Bao questioned Lin Mu.

Lin Mu then repeated the same story that he had told Xie Bohai and others. Hei Bao had a serious expression the entire time and listened to each word intently. Fifteen minutes passed and Lin Mu had finally finished speaking.

Hei Bao thought for a minute before speaking.

"I think we should take some of our stronger members to the cave and investigate it. The rest should wait here at the camp and wait for us."

"Yes, that would be good. We will be faster to reach there with fewer people and the camp will also be safe with some people looking after senior Hei Yingjie." Xie Bohai spoke in acknowledgment.

"I'm fine with it as well." Lin Mu replied.

He then turned to look at the only people who had not spoken yet, Teng Xiaolian and Hong Luo.

"I'm fine with it as long as I get to come. I want to confirm it with my own eyes." Teng Xiaolian spoke.

"I'll do whatever that leader Teng says." Hong Luo added.

"It'll be no problem. You can pick some of your men to come with us." Hei Bao replied.

"Well then, it's decided. It will take about twelve hours to reach the cave, so they all should get ready as soon as possible." Lin Mu spoke in an affirming tone.

No one objected to his words and nodded.

Lin Mu then remembered the injuries that some of the people that had come to the camp had. He could guess that they must have had happened end due to the battle but wanted to know more. Because if they were to head to the cave, they would have to go through an area heavily populated with beasts.

"Seems like you people had a hard time getting here." Lin Mu spoke with a questioning tone.

~Sigh~

"We did indeed. The beast suddenly went crazy and started rushing in towards our direction, as if they were scared by something. Only a little while later did we hear the faint roar that followed their arrival, and we understood that they were forced by another beast to escape." Teng Xiaolian spoke.

"We were able to avoid fighting a majority of them, but some spirit beasts directly chose to attack us, but we were able to either kill or scare them away in the end." Hei Bao added.

"Still, it's not even close to what your team went through." Hong Luo said while looking at the tent where Hei Yingjie was resting.

The five people became silent after that and simply ate their meal when it arrived. Teng Xiaolian stood up and went to talk to his men while Hei Bao did the same. They both returned five minutes later with their respective companions.

Hei Bao had ten people with him, and all of them were the members of the Hei Corps while Teng Xiaolian returned with five people which included his personal team and Hong Luo. Xie Bohai had also decided to come with them and had brought along two men with him too.

Lin Mu looked at the new twenty-person team that had just been formed.

"So is everyone ready?" Lin Mu asked.

"Yes, Senior." Xie Bohai and his companions spoke.

"We are ready brother Lin Mu." Teng Xiaolian and his teammates replied.

Hei Bao nodded and spoke, "we can leave now, please show us the way."

Out of the nearly ninety people, twenty would be going further while the rest will be staying at the camp. They understood that with the increased amount of beasts right now, it would be better to stay where they are. Otherwise, they would have taken Hei Yingjie and left for the town.

Lin Mu then led the team out of the camp and into the forest. They were going towards the northwestern direction, the same way that Lin Mu had gone before. It didn't take them long for them to encounter the first beasts.

Because of their large numbers, the beasts were startled and attacked them straight away. It was not like when Lin Mu was alone and had walked away from the beasts without a problem. To the beast's, their large numbers meant a threat and that's how they acted.

But their attack was for naught as this was a team made of cultivators and even if they encountered spirit beasts, they would be able to deal with them. The beasts were quickly killed, and the team continued on forward, though Lin Mu did store them in his ring.

The snow was still falling and cold winds were blowing, making their journey tougher. Although all of them were cultivators, not all of them were at the same stage and were thus susceptible to cold. Another thing that made a difference that Lin Mu noticed was the Body tempering realm cultivation of others.

While traveling, he had asked Hei Bao and some others about their body tempering realm cultivation and received some surprising answers. Nearly all of them had only reached the ninth stage of the body tempering realm before becoming a cultivator.

None of them had actually progressed their body tempering realm cultivation after that, and neither had they tried. According to Teng Xiaolian, the only people who would even attempt to go beyond the ninth level would be the ones that had no chance of becoming a cultivator or the ones who had used some unique alchemical pills.

Lin Mu had witnessed two such people back at the mercenaries camp at the Northern town. They were the two guards who were guarding the tent of Hong Luo. He had heard from Hong Luo that they had taken a pill called as the Vital spring pill.

Lin Mu had asked senior Xukong about them whether he could take pills such as those, but he had denied him. Senior Xukong had told him that unless it was an alchemical pill that was made especially for body refining experts, it would only harm him and burn his potential.

From what information Lin Mu had collected, most people would become cultivators when they reached the eighth stage of the body tempering realm, and very rarely would there be anyone that did it at the tenth stage.

Lin Mu was a little surprised by this, and so was Xukong.

"This world is strange... it's almost as if someone intentionally skewed their understanding of cultivation."

Chapter 168 - Clues

Lin Mu heard senior Xukong's mutterings in his mind but did not react. Although they were a little shocking to him, there were far too many people around him, thus he did not want to arouse unnecessary attention.

"What do you mean, Senior? How can someone do that?" Lin Mu questioned.

"I am not a hundred percent sure, it could be something else. But there are far too many flaws in the understanding of the people in this world. Even if it is a low level world, they should have at least figured out the basics such as these. This world most likely has a history of at least ten thousand years or more."

This much time is enough for many generations of cultivators to be born such that they would know most things about the body tempering realm at least." Xukong answered.

Lin Mu thought over Senior Xukong's words and found them to be correct. Now even he started to think that there was something wrong with this world of his. Suddenly a thought came to his mind, it was something that he had heard about a long time ago.

"Senior, could it be because of the sects? When I was younger, I had heard of stories from people about the top sects and how they were the most powerful and had a great amount of knowledge." Lin Mu asked.

"Top sects, huh?... We'll see, for now, you should focus on the current task. We can think of this later at a more opportune time." Xukong replied.

Lin Mu nodded and returned his focus on to the path. Within the time that Lin Mu and senior Xukong had their conversation, another hour had passed by. He could now see the first mountain within which the great slumber bear was sleeping.

Lin Mu estimated the distance and guessed that it would take them another hour to get close to it. They would have to go around the mountain as they could definitely not take the same path that Lin Mu had taken before.

Once they got even more close, Lin Mu could finally see the rest of the northern mountains in the distance. They came to a halt in front of the cave that Lin Mu had previously rested. They took a short rest there before deciding to discuss a little before continuing their journey.

"How much farther is it, brother Lin Mu?" Hei Bao questioned.

"You can see the mountain behind this one, actually. We only have to go around this mountain first and then the route is rather straightforward from there." Lin Mu answered.

Everyone had seen the mountains before, thus they felt a little relieved with how close their target was from here. Some of them were looking around in the cave, and they had not failed to notice the ashes and charcoal that was left behind by Lin Mu.

"Did you stay here as well before?" Teng Xiaolian questioned.

"Ah yes. I took a rest here the night before when I heard the loud roar. I then went to investigate from here." Lin Mu answered.

"I see..." Teng Xiaolian replied before looking around the cave.

He eventually reached the back of the cave and noticed the deep fissure that existed at the end of the cave. Teng Xiaolian seemed a bit interested in this part of the cave but then noticed the water at the bottom of the fissure.

The water was staining his shoes, but he did not mind and bent down to take a closer look at it. He even went so far as to smell and taste the water. He did not find anything peculiar about the smell of the water, but the taste of the water was a little unique.

Teng Xiaolian had been a mercenary for about twenty years now and had seen many caves. Thus he was able to tell instantly that it was fresh water that had flown down from the mountains.

"This cave would have been the perfect abode for some beasts, if not for the size of it. Perhaps some smaller beasts would live here, but it is surprisingly empty for some reason." Teng Xiaolian spoke.

Lin Mu felt a little surprised at Teng Xiaolian's judgment as he was actually right about it. Except the beast in question was on the other end of the cave, and this was just a small external part of it.

"Where did you see the broken trees senior? Where they somewhere nearby?" Xie Bohai questioned.

Lin Mu who had been focused on Teng Xiaolian all this while turned to look at the person who had just called him.

"Ah yes. The trees are right behind this mountain, we should see them as soon as we cross this." Lin Mu answered.

Xie Bohai nodded while Hei Bao stood up.

"We should continue now. Is everyone ready now?" Hei Bao spoke.

"Yes, captain." The Hei corps replied.

"We are ready." The mercenaries replied

"Let's go then." Lin Mu spoke before standing up as well.

Under the guidance of Lin Mu, everyone left the cave and soon crossed the mountain. It took them a little over an hour before they reached the site of the broken trees. The trees were broken rather randomly in this area, and if one did not know the location of the Great Slumber Bear's cave, they would not be able to find it.

Upon seeing the broken trees, the people could tell that the beast must have been incredibly strong to do something like this.

"Will we even be able to fight against a beast like this if we encounter it?" One of the mercenaries questioned in a shocked tone.

"We have the advantage in numbers, even if it is a core condensation realm beast, I'm sure we would be able to restrain it." Another one commented.

While their people were discussing about the beast. Lin Mu knew how far from the truth they were. It was in fact their fortune that the great slumber bear was currently sleeping and would most likely not be awakening for at least another year.

Lin Mu could not even begin to imagine what kind of a disaster it would become if they were to encounter the beast right now. Even Hei Yingjie had a tough time against the Alpha steel back wolf and the beast in question right now was definitely many times stronger than that.

Lin Mu hurriedly led them towards their mission target and brought them to the hidden cave which was used by the culprits before.

"This is a rather unique location. If it were not for brother Lin Mu's luck, perhaps we would have had an incredibly hard time finding this place." One of Teng Xiaolian's teammates spoke.

Some of them then went closer and looked at the cut that had been made to the edge of the large boulder. They could see the size of the boulder and knew that it would have been impossible to get in without doing that.

They thus placed their hands against the boulder and built up their strength. They strengthened their muscles with qi and focused on it.

"Now, PUSH!" One of the men shouted and the people then started moving the large boulder.

~Grrr~

The sound of small rocks and stones grating against each other appeared, as the large boulder blocking the entrance was moved.

~Phew~

Everyone took a collective gasp of relief and looked inside the cave, which was partially being illuminated by the fading sunlight. It was the time for sunset and the bare minimum of sunlight was still present in the sky.

But the others were already prepared for something like this, as they all brought out the torches they had prepared beforehand.

"We can go inside now. I've already checked the entire cave before and we can go in safely." Lin Mu spoke, trying to assure the people a little bit.

They all walked in and could finally see the cages that were placed everywhere and also the other stuff that seemed to have been abandoned here. While the mercenaries had more free expressions compared to the Hei corps, they were still a little shocked by this.

They also noticed the moldy and rotten food that was left behind in the cave.

"How many cages are here?" Xie Bohai asked, feeling a little amazed and unsure at the same time.

"I didn't check them all clearly, but there should be at least a hundred cages here." Lin Mu answered.

~Sigh~

"Seems like we got a ton of clues to look forward to." Xiong An spoke feeling a bit tired.

The members soon notice that some of the cages were bloody and had bald spots on them.

"Huh? This is rather peculiar. Only the shackles and the restraints have blood on them." Hong Luo suddenly spoke up.

"Hmm, there are no signs of torture here. Rather it seems like the prisoners that were the mercenaries tried to escape on their own but could not." Hei Bao spoke in a grim tone.

Chapter 169 - Piece Of Cloth

The others were a little confused after hearing Hei Bao's words and wanted a better explanation. Hei Bao too noticed their expression and knew what they were thinking.

"The blood splatter here is only concentrated around the shackles. Look around, there is none outside and neither is in any other rooms. It seems like the prisoners were treated rather well and were not unnecessarily harmed." Hei Bao explained.

The people looked around and indeed found Hei Bao's assumption to be correct. There was no blood in any other rooms either. Even in the cages, only ten out of the nearly hundred cages even had any blood in them. And it did not look like it had been cleaned either.

"There is another thing." Hei Bao spoke and pointed at the furniture and items in the hall.

"These seem like they have been moved around in a rush. Some of these things are randomly strewn about, and even the food was left unattended." Hei Bao stated.

"That means..." A member of Hei corps spoke.

"Yes, they were taken away in a rush. My guess is that the beast attack probably made them scared. From what we saw before and what brother Lin Mu showed us, they even cleaned the traces of the attack and removed the wreckage of the broken carriage. They were trying to hide their tracks because they realized they were discovered." Hei Bao explained.

"Hmm, but this should be good for us." Teng Xiaolian added.

"How so leader?" One of his subordinates asked.

"Teng Xiaolian is right. Since the culprits left in a hurry, they should have definitely left some clues behind. From what we know, there were at least fifty or more mercenaries captured here. It would be a herculean task to transport them all to a different location in a short period of time and also erase all their traces." Hei Bao answered while looking closer at the blood splatter.

Hei Bao also felt a little impressed but Teng Xiaolian's intellect and was now feeling good that he had allowed him to come with them.

"Alright, everyone spread around and look carefully. This is extremely important for us." Hei Bao ordered.

"Yes, captain." His subordinates replied.

The others also went to look for any clues. Lin Mu did the same and extended his spirit sense in the cave. He was a little intrigued by the design of the cave. While it looked natural mostly, he could tell that the rooms that were in the cave were specifically made by carving in the rocks of the mountain.

Lin Mu's spirit sense probed the surroundings while he walked and looked around. Even though he had come here yesterday, he had not spent much time here and didn't get to see it clearly, thus he wanted to see what he could find.

Their search turned out to be successful as soon, one of the members of the Hei corps shouted.

"I found something!" The man shouted.

Lin Mu and the others soon gathered around the man after hearing him call everyone. Hei Bao was the first to walk forward and stood in front of the man.

"What did you find? Show me," Hei Bao asked while extending his hand to him.

The man was holding a piece of cloth that was folded up. He handed it to Hei Bao, who quickly took it from his hands.

"I found this here beside the cage. I saw the strange blood drops which were spared in a linear manner and saw that they went in one direction. I looked at its end and saw this wedged at the edge of a box that was kept behind the cage." That man explained while pointing at the cage and the box that was behind it.

"Hmm, looks like the mercenary who hid this piece of cloth injured his wrists while trying to hide it. Let's see what it was that he tried to hide." Hei Bao spoke and unfolded the piece of cloth.

The piece of cloth was rather damaged and looked to have been torn from the sleeve of a robe. Hei Bao carefully opened it and saw lines of text written on it with blood. The handwriting was rather bad, and it was barely legible.

It took Hei Bao nearly ten minutes before he was able to make out what was written in there. But once he read it, his face fell and a grim expression filled his eyes.

The others were not able to see it as he was facing way diagonally and the light was flickering under the torches, but Lin Mu and Teng Xiaolian who were standing close by could see it clearly.

"What does it say?" Lin Mu questioned with a straight face.

"This..." Hei Bao muttered.

~Gulp~

He couldn't continue speaking and simply handed the piece of cloth to Lin Mu while he clutched his forehead in stress.

Lin Mu looked at the piece of cloth and tried to make out what was written on it. Five minutes later, even he had a grim expression on his face. The others were now getting tense, and a strange feeling of dread was rising from the bottom of their stomach.

Hong Luo perked up a bit of courage and spoke up.

"What does it say, Brother Lin Mu?"

"The culprits... they are capturing the mercenaries for a sacrifice. They need their blood for something. The mercenary who wrote this was able to hear some things from the culprits' conversations and was able to secretly make this. Apparently, they had found out that they had been attacked by the beast and had decided to escape from here. The mercenary was barely able to mention that in here and the writing seems to have trailed off from there." Lin Mu answered with a heavy heart.

~Gulp~

A collective gulp was heard in the hall as the tense expression were now changed to dread.

"Why do they need the mercenaries' blood though does it say that?" Teng Xiaolian questioned.

Lin Mu shook his head in response before speaking.

"It only says that their master had ordered them to do so, and they have been doing it for a few months now. Hundreds of mercenaries have already been captured and sent to their secret location. Apparently, this is not the only place they are capturing mercenaries from and it has been happening in the eastern, western and southern regions as well." Lin Mu answered.

Chapter 170 - Morality?

"We need to do something, there should be something more here." Hong Luo spoke with frustration.

"We've already looked enough. There doesn't seem to be anything else here." Hei Bao finally spoke after getting a hold of himself.

The faces of his subordinates and the other mercenaries dropped upon hearing his words. But then he spoke again.

"Fear not, we will eventually figure out something. In fact, we do know of one such location that we had previously found before."

Everyone looked up at him with questioning faces.

"The abandoned warehouse!" Lin Mu suddenly spoke.

"But didn't we already investigate that before?" A member of Hei corps spoke up.

"Yes, of course we did. But before we didn't know why they were gathering the mercenaries and had thought whether if they were just hiding corpses. But now we know that they have a proper use for them, they need their blood. That means they have to keep them alive and fed to keep their blood fresh."

"But for doing this, they will need another location that is as large as this to keep them. Also, after the beast attack, I doubt they will take the risk of setting up a place like that here." Hei Bao explained.

"Then that means... they will hide in the town? Or the areas around it?" One of the men asked.

"That is one of the possibilities. But we at least know that whatever their final destination is, the northern town is probably close to it. We don't know about the other locations but do know that we know the mercenaries are being captured from there too, we will be able to expand our scope of investigation."

"This is far too big of a conspiracy to keep hidden. There is bound to be a leak of some kind. We just need to look out for it and wait for the right time." Hei Bao answered.

The people nodded in understanding and realized that there was no use obsessing over what had already happened. All they could do for now was to wait and see.

"We should rest for now. We leave at first light." Hei Bao ordered.

Everyone decidedly agreed, as the sun had already set by now. Even the snow had started falling heavily. In fact, now that the large boulder that was blocking the entrance of the cave was removed, the wind was blowing in swathes of snow.

The floor of the front part of the cave was already covered in snow. The men thus gathered around and sat near the braziers. The braziers were there in the cave already and were used to heat up the cave. But since the cave had been abandoned and no one was keeping them lit, all that was left in them was ash and charcoal.

A few of the members of the Hei corps decisively went out and gathered a sufficient amount of wood for them to burn. Lin Mu took out the carcasses of the beasts that they had killed on their way here and let the others prepare it.

Lin Mu didn't have the mood to do it himself right now, and his mind was not in the right place. While he was reading from the piece of cloth, senior Xukong was also watching it. After he had finished reading it he had asked him what it could have meant and Xukong had told him to wait for them to be done first.

"What did you think, senior?" Lin Mu questioned in his mind.

"There are far too many things that they could have been doing with the blood of the mercenaries. But the most likely thing that I can think of that would require so many of people's blood would be what you humans call an evil cultivation technique." Xukong answered.

"An evil cultivation technique?" Lin Mu asked in a confused tone.

While he could understand the meaning behind the words themselves, he could not understand the context. Senior Xukong had just told him that it was something that humans called it.

"Cultivation techniques themselves are rather neutral. It is only the humans and other intelligent beings that give them a bias. It all depends on the perspective. While here we can see that this 'master' of the culprits is gathering blood for himself, it is only bad because the humans are the ones being hurt."

"If it was beasts in question here, not many would mind it. But such is the truth of the universe." Xukong replied.

Lin Mu thought over it, but still felt a bit lost.

"Then senior you mean that it is right even if humans are getting killed and I should not mind it?" Lin Mu questioned, feeling uneasy.

"No... rather, as long as it is something that bothers you, you should mind it. It does not matter if it's humans, beasts, demons or immortals. These things that you hear, good and evil are but a matter of perspective. But in the end, all that is right in the world is the might of the strong."

"If you are strong, you can decide what to do and you won't have to mind what others think of it. Such is the way of the strong. A strong will comes from a firm mind, and a firm mind comes from an unyielding heart. And finally, the fastest way to gain an unyielding heart is to be ruthless. Be ruthless to your foes and be even more ruthless to yourself.

Only then would you survive and flourish in the cultivation world." Xukong explained.

Lin Mu went silent after hearing the words of senior Xukong. At first, he felt that the words of senior Xukong seemed to be wrong. Lin Mu had always been taught by his parents to be kind and righteous. He didn't understand how it would be correct to equate the killings of humans to that of the beasts.

Lin Mu also didn't understand why senior Xukong had told him about this right now and had related it to the sacrifice of the mercenaries. He was feeling frustrated but knew that being hasty would not do him any good. Instead, he decided to calmly think over it.

Lin Mu did not speak anything, even when he was given food to eat and simply ate it before returning to cultivate again.