

PROTEGE 111

Chapter 111: THE MAGIC ARRAY

Once they were in the car, she leaned in and whispered, “Honey, the tracker I embedded in you won’t work in the Mystical Mountain.”

Four Eyes squeezed her hand back, feeling the weight of her concern. “Chu Yan, don’t be willful. You have your black magic, but honey, just use it as a last resort since killing a lot of demonic beasts with it would only increase the evilness that comes with it. And you are still learning how to use it,” Ling Li emphasized.

“Um,” Four Eyes acknowledged, his eyes reflecting his determination to heed her warning.

“Honey, let me explain. The evil that comes with black magic would control you instead of you controlling the black magic,” Ling Li clarified.

“Um,” Four Eyes repeated, grateful for her thorough explanations. He pulled her into his arms, seeking to comfort her. “Don’t worry too much,” he whispered, pressing a gentle kiss to her temple.

When they arrived at Camp Blaze, several pickup trucks were already waiting for them and the rest of the trainees. The air was filled with anticipation and the muted sounds of preparation.

“Grab all your gears and weapons, except for the guns,” Ling Li instructed, her voice carrying authority. The twenty-eight men quickly complied, returning with their equipment before hopping into the trucks.

The drive was long and filled with a tense silence as they journeyed to the foot of a mountain—a stark and imposing landscape still within Li’s properties.

“Alright, listen up. I have set up a magic array here. In this array, you will encounter demonic beasts. These beasts are only illusions, but when you fight them, you will feel the real pain you should experience.

And no, you will not die inside the magic array. But you will be thrown out back here where we are standing. But the point is, you should fight and not die. Because in Mystical Mountain, you can truly die.

“Shi Min and Mushu will enter the array with you to show you how to kill a demonic beast, but they won’t stay all the way. They will leave you on your own,” Ling Li explained, her voice echoing in the air. “Now, go.”

Shi Min and Mushu were the first to step into the shimmering portal of the magic array. The moment they crossed the threshold, the air crackled with energy.

The group of trainees hesitated, their breaths caught in their throats as they followed suit.

“Wooooow!” one of them exclaimed, the words barely escaping his lips as the world transformed around them.

“What is this place?” another whispered, eyes wide with awe and fear.

The landscape inside the array was a twisted, surreal version of the mountain. Trees with gnarled branches reached out like skeletal hands, and the ground seemed to pulse with an eerie light. When the trainees looked back, the entrance had disappeared, replaced by an impenetrable fog.

“Demonic beasts have five levels of cultivation, from one as the lowest and five as the highest. The deeper you walk into the mountain, the higher rank of demonic beast you will encounter,” Mushu explained, his voice carrying a gravity that made the trainees’ hearts race.

“Since you are at the lowest cultivation, I advise you not to encounter third-level and above beasts. They will be too dangerous for you and could threaten your life.

The most effective weapons are swords and spears. You may use your dagger for close combat since swords will be too difficult if the beast is at close range. If encountering a giant beast, you can attack simultaneously using different weapons. Some use the sword, while others may use bows and arrows,” Mushu added.

“Let’s go,” Shi Min said, his voice a commanding presence among the swirling shadows.

As they ventured deeper into the array, the trainees could feel the oppressive aura of the demonic beasts closing in. Each step felt like a march towards an uncertain fate. The magic array seemed to pulse and breathe, feeding off their fear and determination alike.

After twenty minutes of walking, a beast materialized before them, its eyes glowing with a malevolent light. It was a demonic giant frog that leaped in front of them.

Mushu sprung into action, taking out his sword.

The demonic giant frog was five feet tall, with human hands and a fishtail. It was big but very agile, hopping from one place to another and circling around them.

Looking at the frog in front of them, the trainees couldn't move but stared at it. One started to vomit, while one fainted.

The one who fainted was thrown out of the array and appeared beside Ling Li.

"Reginald. Help this guy." Ling Li instructed. "Once he recovers, bring him back inside."

Meanwhile, the demonic frog began to unfurl its tongue, its eyes gleaming with malevolent intent.

"Demonic frogs' saliva is venomous, and their tongues are very sticky. You should avoid it," Shi Min explained, his voice cutting through the tension like a knife. "Most Demonic Beast saliva is either venomous, poisonous, or so acidic that it can burn your flesh."

The giant frog leaped forward, its long, elastic tongue lashing out to capture Mushu. The air was thick with anticipation as the trainees watched in silent horror.

"Remember your training!" Mushu shouted, his voice piercing through the chaos. "Use your Qi, focus your intent, and strike true!"

The trainees' hearts pounded in their chests as they watched the unfolding battle, the illusions so lifelike and the pain so real that it was easy to forget they weren't truly in danger. But the lesson was clear: if they faltered here, they wouldn't stand a chance on Mystical Mountain.

Mushu stood his ground, his face a mask of concentration. Without moving an inch, he struck his sword, severing the frog's tongue with a swift, precise cut, and with a second strike, he slashed the frog into two.

"Mushu killed it in two moves!" one of the trainees exclaimed, awe-struck.

"Stay sharp!" Shi Min called out as the first demonic beast fell. "This is just the beginning."

The demonic giant frog dropped to the ground and immediately disappeared, leaving behind a piece of its crystal core. Mushu picked up the core and held it up for the group to see.

Chapter 112: DEMONIC BEAST CRYLTAL CORE

"Every demonic beast has its core. You must open them, dig them from their body, and retrieve them. They would all look similar to this." Mushu said.

"Do you mean we need to open their bodies?" One of their Class A comrades asked.

"Yes. The crystal core, gallbladder, spleen, blood essence, tendons, and bile, every internal organ, especially if it's a giant beast. Like bears, lions, apes."

"Apes???"

"Yes," Mushu replied.

"Where do we put them?" Four Eyes asked, his eyes glinting with curiosity and a hint of reverence for the items that had been deemed essential by Ling Li.

Mushu, with a sly grin, said, "We will provide you with storage like this." He held out his sword, and with a quick flick of his wrist, it vanished into his storage ring. The group collectively held their breath, eyes wide with astonishment.

Four Eyes squinted, trying to make sense of the seemingly magical act. The others exchanged incredulous glances; they were convinced that Mushu had conjured some arcane trick. For them, the ring had to be a mystical artifact.

Mushu then retrieved the sword effortlessly and placed it onto his storage belt. "We have a storage ring, belt, and sack," he explained, casually as if discussing the weather.

"Now. From here onwards, you are on your own. We will wait for you outside the array," Shi Min announced, his voice calm but with an underlying tone of urgency. "Don't forget to collect the crystal cores."

Mushu stepped forward again, handing Shun a small bag. "Here, these are ready-to-eat food."

Shun peered inside the bag, and his jaw dropped. It was like peering into a small universe of culinary delights. 'So this is the magical storage bag,' he mused, a grin spreading across his face.

"Is there enough for all of us?" Chatty, the group's notorious chatterbox, inquired, his eyes full of wonder.

Without a word, Shun tilted the bag towards Chatty. His friend's eyes bulged as he inspected the bag from top to bottom, left to right, as though expecting to find some hidden trick.

"This... This is the magic storage bag?" Chatty's voice was barely above a whisper, filled with awe.

"Yes," Mushu confirmed with a nod. In an instant, both he and Shi Min disappeared, their departure so sudden it was as if they had never been there.

Unbeknownst to them, Ling Li was watching their every move through a magical tablet that connected with the array. She could manipulate anything within its bounds, her eyes sparkling with mischief and intelligence.

"I can't get used to all this magic appearing before me," Chatty babbled, trying to process the wonders unfolding around them.

Shun chuckled, securing the bag inside his backpack, ready for whatever lay ahead.

"Come on, let's move forward," Jack urged, his voice cutting through the tense silence.

The group fell into step behind him, the atmosphere heavy with anticipation. Four Eyes walked beside Jack, scanning the surroundings with calculated precision. At the same time, Shun trailed behind with his two new allies from the battleground, their steps synchronized in cautious unity.

In the distance, the unmistakable sound of teeth grinding echoed through the forest, sending shivers down their spines.

"What do you think that is?" they whispered amongst themselves, voices barely audible.

Jack, sensing the unease, unsheathed his sword with a smooth, practiced motion. Four Eyes followed suit, his grip steady and assured. The rest of the group mirrored their leaders, drawing their weapons and readying themselves for whatever lay ahead.

As they advanced, the forest seemed to hold its breath until suddenly, the underbrush exploded with movement. A colossal demonic porcupine leaped from the shadows, landing with a thunderous crash before them. Its quills, each more than a meter long, stood erect, bristling and protruding like an army of spears. The tips were barbed, menacing, and deadly, reminiscent of fishhooks. The creature chattered its teeth, producing a noxious chemical odor that filled the air.

"Cover your nose!" Jack bellowed, his voice urgent and commanding.

“Uncle, the quills are even longer than our swords,” Shun marveled to Four Eyes, Shun’s eyes wide with disbelief.

“The belly is its weakest point,” Jack noted, his gaze fixed on the demonic beast.

The porcupine, as if understanding Jack’s words, curled into a tight ball, shaking its body violently. Quills flew through the air, a deadly barrage aimed at the group.

“Shield yourselves with your swords!” Jack ordered.

“These quills are damned sharp!” someone yelled.

“How do we even attack its belly if it’s rolled into a ball?” another voice questioned, frustration evident.

“Patience...” Jack replied, his tone calm and steady. “When it unrolls, we will distract it while others prepare to use bows and arrows. What do you think?”

“Let’s try it,” Shun agreed, nodding.

Half of the group quickly armed themselves with bows and arrows, spreading out to encircle the beast.

In a mere blink, the demonic porcupine unrolled, its quills gleaming under the muted forest light. Shifting its weight with alarming agility, it swung its menacing tail toward them. The air crackled with tension.

“Attack with your arrows!”

Jack’s voice resonated through the group. In a seamless motion, they launched their arrows, each one a missile of precision aimed at the porcupine’s vulnerable underbelly. With a guttural growl, the beast retaliated, whipping its spiked tail in a deadly arc, narrowly missing Four Eyes.

The demonic porcupine's agonized cry echoed in the forest, a chilling sound that sent shivers down their spines. The acrid smell of chemicals saturated the air as the creature emitted a noxious odor, signaling its demise. Moments later, the beast collapsed, its life force extinguished. A soft glow emanated from its body, dissipating to reveal the coveted crystal core.

The journey ahead was fraught with peril. They faced the demonic boar, whose tusks were as sharp as blades; the demonic lizard, its crocodile-like tail a weapon of destruction; and, finally, the demonic wolf, whose ferocity and cunning tested every ounce of their strength and strategy.

Battles were fierce and relentless. Sweat mingled with dirt, and every arrow shot was a testament to their resolve. Collecting the core of the demonic wolf was a triumph, each core a trophy of their valor.

After collecting the wolf's crystal core, they all found themselves outside the magic array; a palpable sense of accomplishment and exhaustion hung in the air.

Ling Li, ever the stoic mentor, addressed them. "Today, you have faced and conquered level-one demonic beasts. Tomorrow, you will understand the true might of level two. Prepare yourselves."

"Let's call it a day," Ling Li announced; her words were a balm to their weary souls. The promise of tomorrow loomed large and daunting yet filled them with a renewed sense of purpose and determination. They had only just begun to unravel the depths of their potential.

Chapter 113: MAGIC ARRAY: THE INFERNAL CHIMERA

The following day, the air was thick with anticipation as the first light of dawn crept over the horizon. Ling Li, ever the strategist, canceled their usual foreign language lesson. Today, the trainees needed every moment to prepare in the magic array. This was the last day of their training, the final test before they faced real demonic beasts.

At sunrise, the trainees assembled at the entrance of the magic array, the air buzzing with unspoken tension. Ling Li stood alongside Shi Min, both radiating a calm authority.

"Remember, you will be facing second-level demonic beasts today. Learn as much as you can. This is your last day of training. Tomorrow, you will be facing the real beasts," Ling Li's voice was steady, a mixture of encouragement and warning.

“Little Jack, I will put you as the overall leader of your group,” Shi Min added, his eyes twinkling with pride.

Jack’s face turned a deep shade of crimson at the nickname. At six feet four inches, with muscles that spoke of countless hours of training, the name felt like an irony. ‘Am I still so little in his eyes?’ he wondered, his thoughts a mix of amusement and exasperation.

“Could you stop embarrassing Jack by calling him Little Jack?” Ling Li chided, her voice filled with a rare hint of warmth.

“Ha ha, he will always be my Little Jack,” Shi Min replied, his laughter rich with affection. He had watched Jack grow from a determined child into a formidable Class A soldier, and the nickname was an endearing reminder of that journey.

Jack, caught between laughter and gratitude, flashed a smile that showed off his perfect white teeth. “Thank you, Grand Master. I will do my best to lead,” he said, his voice ringing with sincerity and determination.

“Good, you may go in,” Shi Min announced, his tone signaling the start of their final test.

With a nod of resolve, the trainees stepped into the magic array, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead. They were united by their training and the bonds they had forged. The day promised trials that would push them to their limits, but they were ready to prove their worth.

The trainees were stunned as they stepped inside the array, greeted by a colossal demonic lion with a serpent tail, a snakehead swaying ominously on its back. The sight was both mesmerizing and terrifying, an unholy hybrid of ferocity.

“Spread out!” Jack’s voice cut through the initial shock, rallying them into action. “Don’t get entangled with the tail.”

As if on cue, the serpent-tail lashed out, slamming into the ground with such force that the earth fractured beneath them, sending them all airborne.

Thud... thud... thud. They landed in a chaotic, disheveled heap.

“Damn!”

“What the hell!”

“Shit!”

“Focus! Don’t get yourself too near. I think it can breathe fire!” someone yelled, their voice tinged with panic.

The demonic lion’s tail rose again, poised for another strike.

“Look out!!!”

SLAM!!!

Once more, the tail hit the ground, and they were thrown into the air like ragdolls.

“Damn!”

“Fuck!”

Jack quickly strategized. “Let’s try to split into two; others use arrows while we use our swords. Let us focus on one target—its head.”

They nodded in agreement, steeling themselves for the attack.

“How do we attack with our swords? You mean we go near that thing?” someone questioned.

“Yes, attack from the side; don’t go head-on! Unless you want to be barbecued.”

“Ready? Let’s go!”

They launched their assault. One arrow found its mark, striking the demonic lion’s eye. The beast roared in agony, its serpent tail thrashing wildly and sending them flying once again.

The demonic lion’s relentless thrashing sent their comrades flying out of the magic array. Three of them reappeared outside with Ling Li and Shi Min.

"Go back!" Ling Li’s voice rang out, leaving no room for hesitation.

The three trainees, stunned but obedient, re-entered the array, immediately faced with the chaos of their comrades battling the giant demonic lion. One of them muttered, "If these were real demonic beasts, we’d be dead already."

They quickly regrouped. “Why don’t we try to deal with its tail first since it’s attacking us?” one suggested.

"Let’s try it; we can use our swords. Give your best shot!" Jack directed.

"Two of you distract the lion. Don’t get bitten by the snake!"

With a collective breath, they prepared to attack. “Ready? At go, we attack!”

"Ready," they replied in unison.

The demonic lion, lifting its tail for another strike, was met with a barrage of attacks. The serpent-tail hissed and swayed, bleeding from multiple wounds as it tried to shake them off. The beast roared, exhaling scalding steam from its mouth.

"Shit! It's scorching hot!" someone cried out.

"Steam burns are worse than fire!" another added, grimacing.

Despite the heat, they pressed on, hacking at the tail until it was severed. The lion roared in pain, releasing more steam, but its movements were visibly slowed. Jack and his team readied themselves for the final assault.

"Let's do it again! Make sure not to get hit by the tail," Jack instructed.

"We hurt the beast! Let's do it again! Make sure not to get hit by the tail."

The giant demonic lion was about to raise its tail again when the twenty-six men started to attack. The demonic lion roared and exhaled scalding steam from its mouth. Trying to lift its tail, it seemed hurt and swayed its tail sideways instead; it was bleeding profusely from the team's strikes. Now, the snake is eyeing them with its fangs showing.

The group retreated back, watching its movement.

"Don't get roasted!"

"We hurt the beast! Let's do it again! Make sure not to get hit by the tail."

"Ready? At go... Let's go!"

Once again, the whole group attacked the giant demonic dragon snake tail. The demonic lion's tail was cut off. This time, it roared and exhaled an even greater amount of steam.

"Shit! It is scalding hot!"

But the cut tail seemed to have its own life and swayed toward getting ready to bite while the lion started to pounce on them as well.

"Split into two! Bows and arrows!" Jack yelled.

"Shoot!!!" Twenty-eight men started their attacks with their bows and arrows; half were fighting the giant demonic lion, while the other half were fighting the snake tail.

Chapter 114: MAGIC ARRAY: BEAST OF TRIAL

When the snake lowered its head to attack, Jack bravely jumped on its back with precision and stabbed his sword right through its head. The beast hissed, but its long tongue captured one of their comrades and bit him. The soldier disappeared in the array and was out with Ling Li.

"Go back!" Ling Li yelled at him with her brows furrowed.

Upon hearing Ling Li's voice, the soldier jumps back into the magic array without a word.

"Mom, this beast is at the peak of its second level. Are you sending them to fight at this level all day?" Shi Min asked Ling Li.

"It is better for them to practice at this level rather than letting them see the weaker ones. At least they would always be at their highest vigilance. And never underestimate the beast they will face. This is an infant' chimera," Ling Li replied.

After biting their comrade, the snake's head dropped with a loud thud, sending them into the air. Its tongue was still hissing. Four Eyes and Shun took out their swords and stabbed at its tongue while the others continued to attack its head.

Soon, it stopped completely moving, and it vanished, leaving them with a crystal core. Meanwhile, Fatty and Chatty, together with the others, are still struggling with the lion.

Jack and the rest joined them.

"How could this lion breathe fire?! Dammit!"

"It is already wounded and bleeding. Let us attack it once again!" Jack said. "Ready?"

"Ready!"

"At go... Go, attack!"

With renewed energy, the trainees launched their final assault on the demonic lion. Arrows flew through the air with pinpoint accuracy, and swords slashed with unyielding force. The lion roared in pain and defiance, its fiery breath scorching the ground around them.

Once again, half of the group attacked with their bows while Jack's group attacked with their swords, striking the demonic lion's neck.

The giant demonic lion roared, exhaling steam at its mightiest. The sound reverberated through the dense forest, shaking leaves from their branches and sending a shiver down the spines of the soldiers. It used its human-like hands to pound the ground, causing tremors that made their footing unsteady. Its eyes, burning with rage, scanned the group, seeking its next target.

With a deafening roar, the lion lunged forward, its jaws wide open, biting two soldiers at once who were sent out of the array immediately after.

Ling Li's eyes narrowed in frustration as she watched the trainees struggle against the first beast, the giant demonic lion. Their inexperience showed as six soldiers were sent out of the array, leaving their comrades speechless as the lion devoured two of their companions with chilling ease.

Even as the lion teetered on the brink of death, its immense strength kept it dangerous. With a final, earth-shaking roar, it lunged one last time. The soldiers, hearts pounding in their chests, scattered to avoid its massive paws.

"Watch out!" Jack's voice cut through the chaos.

The team ran for their lives, but they knew they had to make this count.

"It's weaker. Let us focus and attack one last time! Aim your best shot! Attack!"

Summoning every ounce of courage, they charged. Swords gleamed under the eerie light, bows twanged, and the air was thick with the tension of their final assault. They stabbed and struck with all their might, faces set with grim determination. Another of their comrades fell, dragged away by the lion's ferocious bite, but they pressed on.

Finally, the beast began to falter. Its movements slowed, and with a final, guttural roar, it collapsed, emitting a blinding light before disappearing completely.

"Fuck! This is one hell of a beast!" someone exclaimed, breaking the heavy silence that followed.

Jack took a moment to assess the situation. "How many were sent out of the array?" he asked.

Seven hands raised in response.

"Alright, we will try to reduce the number of people killed as we continue today's training," Jack said, his voice steady.

"Come on! We can do this!" Jack knew he had to keep their spirits high despite the toll the battle had taken.

The day wasn't over. As leaders, they needed to bolster their members' morale. Otherwise, their motivation to struggle and fight would significantly deteriorate. Jack knew he had to do something to inspire them, to make them feel like they could overcome any challenge.

Throughout the day, the group faced a relentless series of demonic creatures: venomous demonic spiders that leaped from treetops, giant demonic locusts with razor-sharp mandibles, a colossal demonic monkey with eyes burning like coals, and finally, a two-headed demonic wolf whose growls shook the ground itself.

During the battle with the two-headed demonic wolf, Four Eyes was hurled out of the array by a brutal swipe of the beast's paw. He landed heavily, the air rushing out of his lungs, and found himself at Ling Li's feet. Her face was set in a grim mask.

"Paps, why didn't you use your black magic when you knew you would be killed?" Shi Min's voice cut through the tension, anxious and desperate.

Four Eyes struggled to find words under Ling Li's piercing gaze. "I forgot," he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

"You!" Ling Li managed to growl, her voice trembling with fury.

In a daring move, Four Eyes leaned in and planted a quick kiss on Ling Li's lips, then sprang back into the fray before she could react.

Ling Li, stunned and furious, spat out, "That brat!"

Shi Min could only laugh at the scene, the tension easing slightly as he watched the interplay between his mother and stepfather.

Back in the array, Four Eyes saw his comrades struggling with the monstrous wolf. With renewed determination, he focused his powers, casting a spell that slammed the beast to the ground and pinned it there.

"Attack!" Jack's voice rang out. The soldiers surged forward, their weapons gleaming as they struck with all their might. The two-headed demonic wolf didn't stand a chance and was quickly overwhelmed.

"Did the wolf slip and fall on the ground?"

"How did it happen?"

They were all marveling at how the beast ended up on the ground without the ability to fight.

The day ended with the soldiers exhausted but triumphant. They gathered around, ready to face whatever new horrors the next day might bring. The battles were far from over, but their resolve had never been stronger.

Chapter 115: YOUR LIFE IS PRIORITY

After their grueling training at the magic array, Ling Li gathered the weary but determined group. Mushu and Pharsa, together with the Camp Commander, handed them the essential gear for the next day's expedition: space rings, belts, and bags.

"Be familiar with all the items you are bringing," Mushu instructed, his voice carrying the weight of their upcoming journey. "Check your bags and see if they are complete. This is the checklist of what you are bringing."

The soldiers unfurled their lists, eyes scanning over the essential tools for survival: weapons, a fire starter kit, a survival knife, a first aid kit, an emergency whistle, cordage, water, water filtration, and water treatment tablets. Flashlights and headlamps, scalpels and blades, safety pins, a Swiss knife, electrolyte tablets, thermal blankets, solar blankets, tarps, ponchos, and tents. Bivy sleeping bags, cookware, and utensils. Folding shovels and axes. Can openers, 5x power magnifying glasses, waterproof notepads, ink pens, and broad-spectrum antibiotic ointments.

The list seemed endless and included portable oxygens and hydration fluids, which made the soldiers speechless.

"All you need to add are your preferred extra clothes. We've provided you with waterproof jackets, waterproof pants, wool jackets, basic top and bottom layers, durable underwear, everyday warm socks, shoes, bandanas, bug head nets, hand warmers, and hats," Mushu explained, ticking off each item on their fingers.

"There is no mystical mountain map because its form changes regularly. A compass doesn't work, and the flares are useless as well." Mushu added.

One soldier raised a hand, hesitant. "What about our food?" He asked.

Mushu chuckled, "I thought no one would ask. All your ready-to-eat food is stored in your space ring."

The group glanced at their space rings, curiosity piqued.

"How do we open it?" another soldier inquired.

"Good question. First, you need to use a drop of your blood so that the space ring, belt, and sack can recognize you as the owner. Then, use your vital internal energy and tap it to open," Mushu instructed.

Soldiers hesitated, then pricked their fingers and tapped their rings first. Some managed on the first try, while others took several attempts, concentrating harder with each failure.

Finally, the rings opened, revealing their contents. Then, everyone did the same for their space belt and sack.

"The food in your rings will only last you a month. We expect you to be productive and survive in the mystical mountain on your own. These foods we gave you are actually a treat," Mushu concluded, casting a serious glance over the group.

They nodded in understanding, bracing themselves for the trials to come.

"Can we eat the demonic beast?" one of the soldiers inquired hesitantly, eyes wide with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

"Yes," Mushu responded with a nod. "Devouring its meat because of its blood essences is very good for your body. It can strengthen your energy and increase your cultivation level. If you have cooked and have leftover meat, you can put them in your ring. The ring would store food and keep them fresh."

The soldiers murmured among themselves, processing this new information. The prospect of gaining strength from the beasts they defeated seemed to energize them.

“There will be plants and fruits that you can eat inside the mystical mountain,” Mushu continued. “Everyone, if you have no further questions, rest early. We’ll see you all tomorrow.”

As the soldiers dispersed, the air buzzed with a mixture of exhaustion and anticipation. The trials ahead loomed large, but armed with new knowledge and bolstered spirits, they felt a renewed determination to face whatever challenges the mystical mountain would throw at them.

After dinner, Shi Min called Shun to follow him into his Mom’s study. The room was illuminated by soft, amber lighting, casting intricate shadows on the ancient scrolls and artifacts that adorned the shelves. Shi Min’s demeanor was serious, almost solemn, as he began to speak.

“Shun, while in the mystical mountain, you can use your firepower at the Critical Moment,” Shi Min said, his voice steady. “However, using them would call the attention of beasts in the surrounding area. But then again, your safety will always be your priority at every moment, getting the attention of other beasts or not; you have to save yourself first.”

“I understand,” Shun replied, feeling a surge of determination. The responsibility felt weighty, but he was glad to have this knowledge.

Shi Min’s expression softened slightly. “Also, I would like to let you know that Paps has black magic. Though he still has limited knowledge of it, he can use it. Using it too often isn’t good for him, especially when it comes to killing demonic beasts. Black Magic comes with evil spirits and builds around the possessor the more he uses the skill in the killing. Unless he is already profound in containing these evil spirits in him.”

Shun’s eyes widened in realization. “This afternoon, it was him who slammed the demonic wolf?”

“Yes,” Shi Min confirmed with a nod. “Doing this is actually alright for him.”

“Then, it would be a lot of help.” Shun felt a strange mix of relief and concern for Paps.

“Yes, and lastly,” Shi Min continued, reaching into his space ring and retrieving a sword that gleamed with an otherworldly light. “This is for you; this is a top-grade mysterious sword. Weapons are classified as mysterious, spiritual, fairy, sacred, and divine weapons, each having three levels: low grade, mid-grade, and top grade. This sword is almost a thousand times stronger than a regular sword. Take it.”

Shun was mesmerized by the sight of the sword, its blade reflecting the dim light in mesmerizing patterns. He reached out with trembling hands, his fingers brushing against the cool, smooth metal.

“Shi Min, isn’t this too much?” Shun asked, his voice barely a whisper, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the gift.

“No,” Shi Min replied firmly. “This is what you should have. If you get stronger and your cultivation breaks through, you will be able to maximize the use of this sword to its highest level. The more you use it, the more you will familiarize yourself with it. Remember, every strike should have full energy from your ‘qi.’”

“Shi Min, I’m very thankful for this sword. I will learn how to use it well,” Shun vowed, his heart swelling with gratitude.

“I know you will,” Shi Min said with a reassuring smile. “You have to protect yourself, Shun; we will take care of Ren, and don’t let her keep you worried. You focus on your task.”

“Thank you, Shi Min; I’m extremely grateful knowing Ren is in good hands.”

“Alright,” Shi Min nodded, his tone softer now. “Spend time with Ren tonight. We have to leave very early tomorrow.”

“Thank you again, Shi Min,” Shun said, his voice filled with sincere gratitude.

“Don’t keep thanking me. Go,” Shi Min chuckled, shaking his head as he shooed Shun away, his laughter a rare and welcome sound in the serious atmosphere.