

## Stranger 161

Chapter 161: This Show Isn't Free

"Do you hear me?" Ye Qing raised his voice when it looked like the two men were blanking out.

"Y-Yes, my lord!" Chen Dun and Qian Yidui replied in a hurry. They might have a million complaints about this arrangement, but they didn't dare to voice any of it.

"If someone ignores or disobeys you, you have my permission to beat the living shit out of them," Ye Qing instructed before turning toward a restaurant and yelling, "Show's over, my friend! It's time you assist me with taking care of the zombies. You didn't think that the show was free, did you? Don't be so shameless and learn from your friend!"

It was none other than the restaurant where Xuanlang was watching the commotion from.

Xuanlang: "... " Isn't it a little too much to call me shameless?

By the time he thought to make a retort though, Ye Qing was already gone.

Suddenly, Xuanlang turned to Runyu and asked, "Wait a second. Why did he rebuke me but not you?"

His doctor friend didn't even bother lifting his head. "Because I'm actually busy, and you're just lazing around and doing nothing!"

Xuanlang: "... " Shit, I can't say anything against that!

It was at this moment another realization struck Xuanlang. "Wait just another second. How did he know what is happening inside this restaurant when we're so far away?"

The young Patrolman could've gotten a glimpse of him through the window since he wasn't hiding himself, but Runyu had been crouching on his feet and examining the zombies this whole time. He shouldn't have known that Runyu was inside the building, much less grasp their activity like he was right there with him! Either he had a Stranger's ear, or his spirit was far from ordinary!

"This Patrolman Ye is more interesting than I thought!" Xuanlang chuckled to himself before heading downstairs to tackle the zombies as Ye Qing had ordered.

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"Ahhhh! Save me!"

"Monster! It's a monster!"

"Uwaaah! Niu Niu is scared, mama! Niu Niu is scared..."

"Eat... eat... eat..."

Ye Qing had just finished dealing with an alleyway of zombies when suddenly, he heard a cacophony of panicked cries. Something bizarre yet strangely familiar was mixed within the cries as well.

Bang bang!

What followed next was a series of loud bangs and a rumble. It sounded like something big had crashed through several buildings.

“A zombie... no. None of the zombies I’ve encountered so far possess this much power!” The commotion was pretty far away, so Ye Qing could only see the dust clouds but not feel it with his spirit. “Did it mutate into a new species or something?”

Eyes sparkling with curiosity, Ye Qing kicked off the ground and dashed toward the scene.

It didn’t take much effort to identify the culprit behind the commotion. It was a mountain of a zombie covered in oily fluid, stench and rot. It was damaging the surrounding houses like crazy in search for the civilians who were sheltering inside the buildings.

The giant zombie was incredibly powerful. Its punches were at least as strong as a Vessel Augmentor’s, so of course the buildings stood no chance whatsoever. While it was smashing in the wooden boards and brick walls, the zombie laughed strangely from time to time and muttered, “Eat... eat... eat...”

From time to time, the giant zombie would grab a smaller zombie who was trying to snatch its food and shove it between its yellowed teeth. As it chewed, disgusting-smelling blood and bits of rotten flesh poured out of its mouth. It was incredibly gorey and cruel to say the least.

“Eat... eat...”

After the giant zombie was done eating, it wore its signature smile and renewed its assault against a half-collapsed building once more.

Boom!

The next punch turned out to be the last straw, and the house finally collapsed into rubble. Panicked cries filled the air as a dozen or so civilians rushed out into the open.

Unfortunately, a young girl about five or six years old tripped as she tried to run through the debris. The giant zombie immediately grabbed her and lifted her toward its mouth.

“Mama! Mama! Save Niu Niu! Save Niu Niu!”

The little girl screamed and struggled with all her might, but she was as powerless as an ant before the giant zombie.

“Niu Niu! Niu Niu! Someone, please save Niu Niu! I beg you, please save my Niu Niu! Please!”

A woman in the crowd spun around and screamed herself hoarse trying to convince someone to help her. No one lent her a hand, however. She even tried to block their way and pull at their clothes, but they just shoved her out of the way and kept running.

In the end, the woman gritted her teeth and raced toward the giant zombie with fatalistic determination. And it would be fatal. The woman was just an ordinary person who couldn't even pin down a single person to save her daughter, much less the giant zombie. Both her and her daughter would surely die a gruesome death.

It was still a better ending than the alternative.

Unfortunately, she was too late. Before she could even run up to the giant zombie, the little girl was mere inches away from its mouth.

"NIU NIU!" The woman screamed and collapsed to her feet in despair. She could only watch as her daughter was being shoved into the zombie's mouth.

A second before the little girl would perish between the giant zombie's jaws, it suddenly froze as if it had turned into a statue.

Then, the little girl slowly floated out of the giant zombie's hands and into a young man's embrace. He was Ye Qing, of course.

"You don't have to be afraid anymore, kid. I'll keep you safe," said Ye Qing while shooting her a reassuring smile.

Surprisingly, the little girl lost her fear almost as soon as Ye Qing held her. She asked innocently, "Are you here to protect Niu Niu, big brother?"

Ye Qing nodded smilingly. "That's right. I'm here to protect all of you. I'll defeat all the monsters and return everything back to normal."

The little girl's eyes lit bright and clear like a pair of stars. "You're amazing, big brother! When Niu Niu is older, I'll become strong like big brother and defeat the evil monsters as well! I'll protect mama, papa and everyone!"

Ye Qing nodded seriously. "You better grow up quick then, Niu Niu."

"I will! Niu Niu will become as big as big brother very soon!" The little girl waved around her cute little arms just as seriously.

"Niu Niu!" It was at this moment the woman finally recovered from her roller coaster of emotions and cried out in pure joy.

"Mama!" After Ye Qing had put her down, the little girl immediately raced over to her mother and hugged her like a tree.

"Niu Niu... Niu Niu..." The woman couldn't stop sobbing for a time. When she finally managed to rein in her emotions, she looked at Ye Qing and thanked him from the bottom of her heart, "Thank you. Thank you so much for saving Niu Niu..."

The woman even tried to kowtow to him. Perhaps she thought that it was the only way she might express her gratitude.

“It’s my duty.” Ye Qing stopped her with a wave of his hand and said gently, “You should head to the entrance. The Pacification Sentinels will protect you.”

That made the woman realize that she and her daughter were still in danger. Shooting to her feet, she said, “Got it! Thank you again!” carried Niu Niu over her shoulder, and ran off as quickly as she could.

“Bye bye, big brother!” Niu Niu cried while waving Ye Qing goodbye.

“Yeah. See you some time.”

After the woman and her daughter were gone, Ye Qing finally turned around to look at the immobile zombie. It was then he noticed that the smelly fluid leaking out of its skin looked very familiar. “Is that... corpse wax?!”

“I was wondering why the zombie seemed so familiar to me. It’s the same type of zombie as Deng Qiang!”

The giant zombie was almost identical to Deng Qiang, the giant zombie that had been dragged to Heavenly Heart Clinic a day ago. He hadn’t made the connection until now because it was bigger, uglier, and stronger.

“Corpse wax? Giant zombies? Deng Qiang?”

Ye Qing casually bound a few normal zombies who were trying to attack him with his Blood Shadows when he recalled something, “Wait a second. If I remember correctly, the people who delivered Deng Qiang to the Heavenly Heart Clinic yesterday mentioned that they’re from Longwind Street.”

“A massive group of zombies had appeared in Longwind Street after Deng Qiang had changed into a giant zombie. Now, I found another giant zombie at the site of a zombie outbreak. It can’t be a coincidence, right?”

Could Deng Qiang and this giant zombie be the reason behind these sudden outbreaks?

It was then he noticed then the biggest population of zombies was concentrated around the giant zombie. The farther away it was from the giant zombie, the sparser their numbers became. If he wasn’t mistaken, the civilians had transformed probably because they had made contact with the giant zombies.

The more Ye Qing thought about it, the more he thought he was right.

“I’ll ask Xu Banren about this later. If there was a giant zombie at Nanping Boat as well, then my theory is most likely correct.”

Ye Qing rubbed his nose and arrived at a decision. “I was going to burn this thing to dust, but... we’ll have to keep it for now.”

“What the hell is that thing? The generic zombies look like pipsqueaks compared to this monster.”

Suddenly, a curious voice came from above a nearby wall. Ye Qing turned around and saw Xuanlang examining the giant zombie curiously and eating some melon seeds [1].

“It’s probably the cause of this zombie outbreak,” Ye Qing answered honestly.

“You serious?” Xuanlang immediately looked interested. He dropped down the wall for a second before suddenly launching himself forward without touching anything. He landed nimbly and almost soundlessly next to Ye Qing.

Look at how light-footed he is! He must practice an extraordinary movement art, Ye Qing thought to himself.

Xuanlang circled around the giant zombie once before voicing his doubts, “I don’t know, man. This guy is uglier, smellier and fatter, sure, but besides that there’s nothing special about him. Why do you think he’s the reason these people changed into zombies?”

Ye Qing answered, “You said it yourself, didn’t you? It’s because he’s ugly!”

“... Really?” Xuanlang stared at Ye Qing incredulously.

Ye Qing replied in a matter-of-fact tone, “He’s ugly because he’s special, and he’s special because he’s the root cause of this zombie outbreak!”

Xuanlang blinked. “That... actually makes sense. Even if the way you word it is a little sloppy.”

Xuanlang wasn’t stupid. The giant zombie was clearly different from the changed civilians. Even if Ye Qing was wrong, it must be an important clue of some sort.

“Right?” Ye Qing smirked. “Speaking of which, why are you here when you can be catching zombies? You’re not playing truant, are you?”

Xuanlang: “...” Excuse me? I came over to lend you a hand, and instead of being grateful you accuse me of playing truant? How is that fair?

As if he could hear Xuanlang’s thoughts, Ye Qing added, “If you’re going to do something, strive to do it better than anyone else. Do it all the way. If you’re going to half-ass it, why bother?”

“Also, have you not heard that half-assing your job will cause your lifespan to be halved? I’m doing this for your own good, brother!”

No, I definitely haven’t heard of that saying. Do you think I’m stupid and illiterate?

But... if it’s true then...

Xuanlang knew it was complete horseshit, but for some reason he just couldn’t help but think, “What if?” So, he defended himself in a small voice, “I’m just catching a break, man. Is that illegal?”

Wait, why am I talking like I did something wrong?

Chapter 162: The Tower of Secrets

“It’s not illegal, but you’d definitely had your break. Get back to work.” Ye Qing gave him a look.

“Fine, fine. Sigh...”

Xuanlang had just taken two steps when he recalled something and came back, “Wait, your subordinates are already here, so why should I do anything? I’m just a volunteer!”

“Is that so?” Ye Qing nodded. Now that he thought about it, it was about time his men showed up. “You can carry this giant zombie to the entrance then. Don’t give me that look! Do you really want to cut your lifespan in half?”

Xuanlang: “...”

Ye Qing left after that. Xuanlang hesitated for a moment, but he ultimately lifted the giant zombie and started toward the entrance. Better safe than sorry.

The Fish Dragon Market had regained its order by the time Ye Qing made it back to the entrance. The zombies, the people who were hurt by the zombies, and those who were unharmed had all been segregated properly.

“My lord!” The Pacification Sentinels saluted as soon as they saw him.

“No time for pleasantries. Tang Yi, what’s the current situation?” Ye Qing looked at a Guardian.

The Guardian answered, “Most of the zombies in the Fish Dragon Market have been captured, my lord. All of the civilians have been rounded up as well. As far as we’re aware, everyone is present and accounted for.”

Ye Qing nodded. “Good job. Keep up the lockdown and continue the search for both civilians and zombies. Make sure you don’t miss even a single soul.”

“As you command!” Tang Yi replied.

Ye Qing then turned to a Pacification Sentinel and ordered, “Message Lieutenant Xu and ask him how he’s doing. I want to know if he needs reinforcements, and oh, ask him if he’s encountered a giant zombie.”

“At once!” The Pacification Sentinel left to carry out his orders.

After he was done giving out instructions, Ye Qing turned around and saw a refined-looking man examining the giant zombie thoughtfully.

“Have you found anything, brother?” Ye Qing walked up to him and asked.

The refined-looking man was none other than Runyu. Still staring at the giant zombie, he answered, “Nothing yet, but I suspect that this giant zombie is the reason the civilians have suddenly changed into zombies. Not only do they carry similar types of filth, their mutated organs look pretty similar as well. It’s just that this giant zombie carries more filth and has more advanced mutations.”

“On a related note, its filth is extremely infectious. Anyone it injures or makes prolonged contact with will become infected. You should be careful, my lord.”

“Heh, your guess is the same as Lord Ye’s, Runyu,” Xuanlang interrupted. The difference was that one of them was purely guessing, and another had actual evidence to support their theory.

Ye Qing ignored Xuanlang and pointed at the giant zombie, “Do you know where the filth comes from?”

Runyu shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Ye Qing asked another question, “Do you know a way to remove the filth then? Or should I say, can these people still be saved?”

This time, Runyu looked a little apologetic. “I don’t know.”

Ye Qing could not help but feel a little disappointed, but his answer was within his expectation. He saluted the two men and said, “The Pacification Bureau thanks you for your selfless service, gentlemen. My name is Ye Qing. If I may know your names...?”

“You flatter us, Lord Ye. It is no trouble at all,” Runyu returned the gesture respectfully, “My name is An Runyu.”

“And my name is Fang Xuanlang,” Xuanlang saluted as well.

Ye Qing was about to converse with them a little longer when the Pacification Sentinel who went away to message Xu Banren earlier came back. He passed a letter into Ye Qing’s hand and said, “My lord... Lieutenant Xu has responded.”

Ye Qing took one look at the letter and thought, I knew it.

According to Xu Banren, the situation at Nanping Boat was under control. More importantly, he had encountered not one, but two giant zombies.

“How troublesome!” Ye Qing took a moment to plan out his next steps while massaging his forehead. “Tang Yi, I leave this place to you. I need to make a trip back to the Pacification Bureau.”

“As you command!” Tang Yi responded affirmatively.

He then turned to Fang Xuanlang and An Runyu and saluted them both. “Brother Fang, Brother An, I need to get back to the Pacification Bureau for something. I shall thank you both properly when I’m free.”

“Don’t worry about it. You can treat us any day you like,” An Runyu and Fang Xuanlang understood the urgency of the situation and did not waste Ye Qing’s time.

Ye Qing nodded and bade them goodbye. Then, he left Fish Dragon Market and made a beeline for the Pacification Bureau.

After he arrived at the headquarters, the first thing Ye Qing requested was a meeting with Gu Suitang.

Gu Suitang obviously knew about the zombie outbreaks because the first thing he said upon seeing Ye Qing was, “How is the situation?”

Ye Qing answered, "It's temporarily under control, and I found out why the civilians had transformed."

"Oh? Tell me."

And so Ye Qing told Gu Suitang the conjecture both him and An Runyu had arrived at.

"An Runyu?" Gu Suitang seemed surprised to hear that the doctor was involved in this incident. "If Runyu said the same thing, then it's probably the case."

Ye Qing: "... Why do I feel like you're looking down on me?"

Noticing that Gu Suitang recognized An Runyu, Ye Qing asked, "Do you know An Runyu, chief?"

Gu Suitang replied, "An Runyu is one of the more promising young warriors of Luo Shui. He's already quite powerful for his age, but his medical skills are even better. Even the senior doctors in the Healing Department are full of praise for him. We once extended an invitation to him, but unfortunately he decided that his future lies elsewhere."

I see," Ye Qing nodded. An Runyu must be incredibly impressive for the Pacification Bureau itself to reach out to him.

Not wanting to go off topic, Ye Qing said, "Although the situation is temporarily under control, I'm pretty sure this incident isn't over yet. More zombie outbreaks may occur throughout Luo Shui, so I'd like us to be prepared for it."

"What do you propose?" Gu Suitang asked.

Ye Qing answered, "Since we know that the giant zombie is the reason behind the outbreak, and the giant zombies are pretty conspicuous even before they fully transform, I suggest that we deploy additional manpower and search the entire commandery for anyone who is unnaturally fat, covered in oily fluid, and acting strange. They'll be captured and kept in isolation, of course."

"Besides that, we need to monitor anyone who has had prolonged contact with the giant zombie—remotely, because there is no need to cause undue panic."

Gu Suitang mulled over his idea and agreed. "Very well, we shall do as you say. The real question though, is how did the giant zombies come to be to begin with? Is it an accident or a conspiracy? And if it is a conspiracy, who is the one behind this?"

Ye Qing agreed fully with his assessment, but for now the immediate priority was to keep the number of changed civilians to a minimum.

"By the way, has the Healing Department found a way to save the changed civilians? I'm not sure how much longer they will last at this rate."

When he was inspecting the changed civilians earlier, he could tell that their organs were slowly withering and mutating into something unrecognizable. Their lives might be in danger if they took too long to come up with a cure.

Gu Suitang frowned and ordered, "I'll write you a written order. Take it to Yu Huai and head to the first floor of the Tower of Secrets. The Human-grade Strange Artifact No. 58 should be able to save them."



“Tower of Secrets? Human-grade Strange Artifact No. 58?” Ye Qing was confused to say the least.

Instead of explaining, Gu Suitang said, “Lin Yuhuai will tell you everything you need to know.”

“Understood.”

Ye Qing sought out Lin Yuhuai immediately after the order was penned. After he told Lin Yuhuai what he came for, they both headed straight for the Tower of Secrets.

The Tower of Secrets was one of the most mysterious and well-hidden places of the Pacification Bureau. It was where they kept their greatest valuables and secrets such as martial arts, medicine, Strange Artifacts, important documents, top secret intel and so on.

Ye Qing had heard of the Tower of Secrets before, but he had no idea where it was located, much less frequented it in the past. It was why he was beyond surprised when Lin Yuhuai led him to a dilapidated hut that looked like it had seen better days.

“This isn’t a practical joke, is it?” Ye Qing asked disbelievingly while looking the hut up and down.

Lin Yuhuai chuckled and gave him a non-answer. “You will know when we step inside.”

The first thing Ye Qing saw after entering the hut was a mysterious bronze door. The reason he thought it was mysterious was one, it was engraved with all sorts of complex and inexplicable patterns and images. Not only that, the patterns and images were constantly shifting and transforming as if they were alive. Even staring at it for just a few seconds was enough to induce nausea in Ye Qing.

The second reason was because the door was floating about one-third of a meter above the ground. It seemed to be held in place by a mysterious power.

Suddenly, Li Yuhuai slapped Ye Qing on the shoulder and warned, “Don’t stare at the Door Demon. He’s very dangerous.”

“Door Demon? Where? Wait, is he the bronze door in front of us?” Ye Qing asked.

“Kekeke... you came, you came... kekeke...”

It was at this moment a vile, eerie, and malicious cackle filled the room. It was otherworldly enough to make anyone’s skin crawl.

Ye Qing didn’t see it until after the fact, but the bronze door suddenly took on a blood red color and dripped fresh blood. A few seconds later, the pool of blood underneath it started warping into all sorts of horrifying faces including Lin Yuhuai and Ye Qing’s face. At the same time, mad ramblings and whispers filled their ears. It was bizarre to say the least.

What an evil door, Ye Qing thought. But that was it. He did not react visibly to any of the oddities happening throughout the room because he could tell that it was just an illusion. The sudden change of color, the blood, the faces, everything.

Of course, that didn’t mean that the illusions were harmless. A weak-willed person would succumb to them and lose their minds immediately.

“Cut it out, Door Demon. Take us to the Tower of Secrets,” Lin Yuhuai took out the order Gu Suitang had written and signed and waved it in the bronze door’s direction.

Buzz...

A terrifying pressure echoed from the written order. The mad ramblings and whispers in the air vanished abruptly, and the blood on the door was gone as well. Everything had turned back to normal... for now.

“Kekeke... you’re as dull as ever. Hmm? You brought a newbie with you today! Welcome, welcome, kekeke....”

The patterns on the door came together to form a twisted, hideous face. Judging from the way its mouth was opening and closing, it was probably the entity that had been talking to them this whole time.

“I said, cut the bullcrap and open the door.”

Lin Yuhuai waved the written order again, and the face finally cracked a fake smile and slid open.

The air rippled as the bronze door opened. What lay behind it was an infinite landscape of chaos and darkness. It was almost like a portal to another universe.

“Let’s go,” Lin Yuhuai said after the door was fully open. He took the lead with Ye Qing following right behind him.

Ye Qing’s vision darkened as soon as he stepped through the door. When the light returned, he found himself standing inside a massive tower.

The tower was segregated into countless big and small spaces by stone houses. That’s right, stone houses. Ancient, weathered and mysterious, the bizarre arrangement looked both chaotic yet beautiful at the same time.

Chapter 163: Miracle Doctor Calabash

“Kekeke... do you wish to rise up the ladder and become rich, mortal?”

“You can rule the world if you want to, or you can own a harem of millions.”

“Or perhaps your wish is to become the strongest warrior in the world?”

.....

Ye Qing didn’t even get the chance to examine his surroundings when a voice suddenly spoke to him inside his head. It wasn’t just a voice either. Every time it said a wish, it would show off a corresponding illusion. He saw himself sitting atop a literal mountain of gold and silver; he saw countless beautiful women fawning over him, he saw reigning above all as the ultimate ruler, and he saw himself becoming the greatest warrior of all time, literally.

Ye Qing sneered internally. The Door Demon would make a good movie director, if nothing else.

“Do you desire them, mortal? If you do, then know that I possess the power to fulfill all of your wishes!” The Door Demon’s voice rang inside Ye Qing’s head again.

Feeling a little playful today, Ye Qing answered, “I want them all. Can you do that?”

There was a lull in the Door Demon’s response. Is it just me, or did he just skip straight to the ending? Normally, the human would make their wish, I would accept and bring up my condition, and they would obey my every bidding like a dog, right? This is a little...

The Door Demon thought for a moment and forcibly wrestled back control of the conversation, “I can bestow all of your wishes, of course. But in return, you must help me with a little something.”

I bloody knew it. They could never come up with something new, Ye Qing thought disdainfully but replied, “What, you need me to help you before you can fulfill my wish? That’s too much work. Forget it. I don’t want it anymore!”

Door Demon: “...” This isn’t part of the script!

“Are you sure, mortal? If you agree to help me out, I will grant you everything you ever wanted.”

Ye Qing looked tempted. “Okay! I agree! You may fulfill my wishes now!”

Door Demon: “...” Holy shit this guy is materialistic.

The Door Demon let out a helpless sigh, “I would, but my power is limited right now. I can only grant your wishes if you remove my seal.”

“Eh, I don’t trust you. I’ll unseal you after you fulfill my wishes, and not a moment sooner!” Ye Qing curled his lips in disdain. His expression was obviously saying, “I knew it! He’s another Bronze noob pretending to be a Challenger [1]! Ptooey!”

“You must be joking! If you don’t help me unseal my power, then how can I possibly fulfill your wishes?” The Door Demon argued angrily. If I was strong enough to break out of the seal myself, then I wouldn’t need your help, would I?

“If you don’t fulfill my wishes first, then how can I trust you?”

“You... you...” The Door Demon felt like he was about to explode. This conundrum was eerily similar to the famous question, “Which came first – the chicken or the egg?” They could literally argue about this for a year and never arrive at a conclusion.

By now, the Door Demon had figured out that Ye Qing was toying with him. He wasn’t a Stranger for nothing after all. His voice grew eerie and threatening, “No one has ever dared to toy me like that, boy. I will remember this, kekeke...”

“Save it, bitch,” Ye Qing dropped his act and smirked, “You’re not the first person to make that threat, and you won’t be the last. Also, you’re just a pathetic little keyboard warrior right now. What makes you think you can hurt me when you can’t even lay a finger on me?”

The Door Demon might not know what a “keyboard warrior” was, but he certainly got an idea of Ye Qing’s meaning. His voice grew hateful and crazy as he muttered, “You will regret this, you will

regret this, you will regret this..." over and over again. At the same time, irritating and nausea-inducing illusions sprung inside Ye Qing's mind.

"What did I say? You have nothing but your pathetic little keyboard," Ye Qing grinned diabolically and visualized the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method". The great emperor immediately shone like the sun and melted away all of the madness and malice.

Ye Qing did not relent, however. Emperor Fuxi continued to float on the nine heavens and bathe everything in purifying light. A few breaths later, a wisp of black qi suddenly slipped out of a dark corner of his head and screamed hatefully, "Graaahhh! I'll kill you! I swear I'll kill you one day!"

The next second, it was annihilated by Emperor Fuxi's light.

"I knew it wouldn't be that easy," Ye Qing sneered. Had he underestimated the Door Demon's cunningness and overlooked that black qi, heavens only know what kind of trouble it could cause. Strangers truly could not be trusted [2].

"What's wrong, Joyless?" Lin Yuhuai asked when he noticed that Ye Qing was blanking out.

"It's nothing." Ye Qing shook his head. The entire conversation had taken place mentally, so Lin Yuhuai had no idea what just happened. "Can you tell me more about the Door Demon, Brother Lin?"

Lin Yuhuai answered, "According to the records, the Door Demon is a powerful Stranger whose main body is a door. As you may have noticed, it possesses the power to traverse through space."

"Centuries ago, a champion of the Pacification Bureau managed to capture the Door Demon and seal it within the headquarters. Since then, it had become the passage between the Tower of Secrets and the outside world."

"Unfortunately, the Door Demon is anything but pleased with its new life, and it tried everything under the sun to tempt our people into unsealing it. In fact, many weak-willed people had given into temptation and met terrible ends. To put it simply, half of them were led astray, and half of them went mad."

"Did the Door Demon promise you something, Joyless? You mustn't believe it no matter what it says."

"Don't worry, Brother Lin. I know," Ye Qing replied smilingly. He would have to be stupid and crazy to fall for the Door Demon's tricks.

It was at this moment a cold man wearing a black robe with patterns of celestial objects and a silver mask appeared before the duo. He took a look at the written order Lin Yuhuai gave him and said, "You wish to procure the Human-type Strange Artifact No. 58 is the Miracle Doctor Calabash, a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact. You will need three special Artifact Wielders to wield it. Please give me a moment."

The black-robed man's voice sounded hoarse and unclear as if he wasn't used to speaking. He then turned around and went somewhere.

"Miracle Doctor Calabash? Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact?" Ye Qing blurted in surprise. Forget seeing, this was the first time he heard of a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact. He could only imagine how powerful it was.

But what did the guy mean by "three special Artifact Wielders"?

"Can you tell me more about this Miracle Doctor Calabash, Brother Lin? And what are 'special Artifact Wielders'?"

Ye Qing was never afraid to ask something he didn't know about.

Lin Yuhuai answered, "The Miracle Doctor Calabash is a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact that was rumored to be the possession of the miracle doctor, Niu Qinghua. They say that it gained a sliver of sentience and power due to prolonged use."

"The Miracle Doctor Calabash contained the soul of the miracle doctor himself, and it could be summoned to cure any non-fatal disease and most Stranger-based toxins and curses."

"That's incredible!" Ye Qing praised. The Miracle Doctor Calabash might not possess any offensive power, but its healing potency was something everyone in the jianghu dreamed of having.

Theoretically, it wasn't a dream to rule a corner of the world with the Miracle Doctor Calabash. As long as the wielder wasn't suicidal, of course.

Lin Yuhuai continued, "However, the conditions to activate a Strange Artifact became more stringent the more powerful it was. The adverse effects are much worse as well."

"To use the Miracle Doctor Calabash, three people with medical knowledge and skill must be present at the scene. Moreover, the greater their knowledge and skill, the greater the soul they would be able to summon. However, if even one person is missing, then the soul in the Miracle Doctor Calabash would go on a rampage and curse everyone around it. You can see why it's so dangerous."

"Besides that, the Miracle Doctor Calabash is so powerful that it cannot be wielded continuously by one person. It must be used in rotation to prevent its users from being assimilated or cursed by the Miracle Doctor Calabash."

"I see," Ye Qing exclaimed in realization. The Bronze Tiger Mask was one such example. It was just a Hatred-class Strange Artifact, but its use conditions and its adverse effects were already pretty potent, much less a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact.

The duo had just finished talking when the black-robed man returned with another three black-robed men. However, the newcomers' black robes were perfectly plain, and their masks were iron-colored.

In the Tower of Secrets, those who were called upon to wield Strange Artifacts of the corresponding grade were known as Artifact Wielders. The Artifact Wielders were categorized into Human, Earth and Heaven just like the Strange Artifacts. The black-robed man they met at the beginning was an Earth-rank Artifact Wielder, and the three newcomers were Human-rank. The newcomers must be the Artifact Wielders of the Miracle Doctor Calabash.

Ye Qing could tell that they were all late-stage Vessel Augmentors. However, the auras were somewhat impure and bizarre probably because they had to wield all sorts of powerful Strange Artifacts for a long time.

After the four men came close, the Earth-rank Artifact Wielder handed a bronze box covered in mysterious patterns to his three colleagues and said to Lin Yuhuai, "These are the men responsible for wielding the Human-grade Strange Artifact No. 58 this time. Please keep them safe."

Lin Yuhuai replied smilingly, "You have nothing to worry about."

After that, Lin Yuhuai, Ye Qing, and the three Human-rank Artifact Wielders left the Tower of Secrets and made a beeline for Longwind Street. It was because it was the closest outbreak location to the Pacification Bureau.

As they traveled, Ye Qing noticed that the three Artifact Wielders would pass the bronze box to another Artifact Wielder every half a teatime, and the Artifact Wielder carrying it would be shrouded in a faint mist. The faint mist seemed to be poisonous or imbued with some sort of evil energy as well. Clearly, the Miracle Doctor Calabash possessed some sort of corrupting quality.

This made Ye Qing realize just how dangerous a Soulstealer-class Strange Artifact was. Even just carrying it could bring harm to its bearer.

After arriving at Longwind Street, Ye Qing led the three Artifact Wielders straight to the zombies and the civilians who were hurt by the zombies. Once they were ready, one Artifact Wielder placed the bronze box on the ground and slowly opened it to reveal a bronze calabash.

Although the calabash was made from bronze, it was colorful and engraved with what looked like images of a night feast. It was also shaped like a teapot despite its name [3]. Its appearance was so exquisite that it resembled a work of art.

The Artifact Wielder carefully lifted the Miracle Doctor Calabash in front of him. Then, he started rubbing its surface with his right hand.

What the fuck? Why does this look so familiar? Ye Qing was taken aback by the strangely depraved gesture at the same time a memory hit him. Is this Aladdin's lamp? Is he going to summon a bloody genie and make a wish?

Before he could even finish his mental ramblings, a white fog gushed out of the Miracle Doctor Calabash's spout and transformed into a saintly old man with white hair and beard.

Ye Qing: "... It really is a genie!

The three Artifact Wielders gave the miracle doctor's soul a deep bow after summoning him. Shooting them a glance as if he had a real mind, the miracle doctor stroked his beard and exhaled in the direction of the infected.

Rain clouds suddenly appeared above the infected's head. When the rain began, the changed civilians actually started changing back to humans. Their organs regrew, and their flesh and blood knitted until it looked like they had never been hurt in the first place. Then, their deadened eyes slowly regained their sentience, and their faces bloomed with the joy of a survivor who somehow survived despite all odds.

Whoosh!

When everyone had returned to normal, the miracle doctor's soul slowly turned transparent until it disappeared completely.

The moment the soul disappeared, the Artifact Wielder wielding the Miracle Doctor Calabash abruptly collapsed on the ground. His complexion was purple, his breathing was weak, and he looked like he could fall into a coma at any second.

His companions were clearly prepared, however. One of them caught the Miracle Doctor Calabash and deposited it back inside the bronze box. Another produced a pill from his pocket and fed it into his collapsed colleague's mouth.

Over time, the Artifact Wielder's unhealthy complexion slowly faded away into nothing. He soon regained his mobility and strength as well.

Ye Qing summoned Zhou Xi to his side and gave him some instructions. He and the three Artifact Wielders then left the way and marched for Nanping Boat.

There were far more infected on the Nanping Boat because it was beset by two giant zombies. It had taken two uses of the Miracle Doctor Calabash before they finally cured all of the changed civilians.

Strangely, the giant zombies weren't healed. In fact, the Miracle Doctor Calabash's healing powers did not seem to work on them at all.

Left with no choice, Ye Qing ordered Xu Banren to escort the giant zombies back to the Pacification Bureau.

Finally, Ye Qing and the three Artifact Wielders made a beeline for Fish Dragon Market. By the time the civilians were cured and dealt with, it was almost midnight.

"Thank you very much for your services," Ye Qing thanked the three exhausted Artifact Wielders from the bottom of his heart after everything was over.

"You're welcome, my lord, but we are simply performing our duties," they replied in an indifferent tone.

"I'll escort you back to the Tower of Secrets right now." The Miracle Doctor Calabash was very important to say the least. He could not entrust this duty to anyone else except himself.

The three Artifact Wielders bowed respectfully, "If it's not too much trouble."

“Let’s go!” Ye Qing waved and escorted them toward the Pacification Bureau.

#### Chapter 164: Interception

It was a dark and stormy night, a night that was perfect for carrying out a murder or ten. The ephemeral wind swept across the empty streets like a ghost and blew away the night’s clamor. It could not, however, blow away the eternal cold and darkness.

“Are you sure he would pass through here, Silver Toad?”

The mud on a wall suddenly converged on one spot and formed a strange face. The question had come from its mouth.

“Croak... he must. This is the shortest route between the Fish Dragon Market and the Pacification Bureau,” A silver toad answered. It was crouching in a corner of the wall while its abdomen inflated and deflated with air.

Whoosh whoosh...

The silver toad had just finished talking when a dark, chilly wind blew out of the darkness and circled around the wall and Silver Toad. Then, the wind itself spoke, “Whoosh, are you sure your plan would go off without a hitch, Silver Toad? The Pacification Bureau will hunt us to the ends of the earth if anything goes wrong.”

The silver toad was none other than the Silver Toad of Cornucopia and Bronze Toad’s sibling.

Silver Toad let out a strange laugh and answered, “It will. Everything is under my control.”

“Most of the Pacification Bureau are busy dealing with the transformed humans, so much so that they are unable to spare the manpower necessary to protect the Miracle Doctor Calabash. Therefore, he must be alone when he escorts the Strange Artifact back to the Pacification Bureau. And let’s not forget that he is accompanied by three burdens.”

“He has no idea that we’re coming for him, while we know exactly when and where he’s coming from. When we ambush him, he’ll have to fight all of us and protect those three burdens as well. What can he possibly do to turn things around?”

“Even better, the Pacification Bureau wouldn’t suspect us. I’d looked into his background and found out that he had murdered Wang Luori’s direct disciple, Xiao Yang. For those who don’t know, Wang Luori is the Hill Lord of Sunset Hill, a major power in Luo Shui.”

“A few days ago, Wang Luori barged into the Pacification Bureau to take revenge for his disciple only to have his ass beaten by Gu Suitang. No matter how you look at it, Wang Luori has a million reasons to want Ye Qing dead. Therefore, no one would suspect a thing if we pin the blame on Wang Luori.”

The more Silver Toad explained, the more excited he became. It grew to the point where his voice took on a tinge of madness and anticipation, “Not only that, the Pacification Bureau must take



action be it for revenge or their own face. While the humans beat the crap out of each other, we'll have much greater freedom than we had before. All in all, there is practically no downside to this plan whatsoever!"

The human face and the voice in the wind didn't reply as if in thought, so Silver Toad said, "You won't get another opportunity like this if you miss it, Old Mud, Yin Woman. You better think long and hard about this!"

Old Mud was the face on the wall. He paid no heed to Silver Toad and asked, "What do you think, Writer?"

A wolf hair brush abruptly appeared in the air. It looked perfectly ordinary and unassuming, but the air rippled with ink black circles as soon as it made its appearance. It was also dripping with fragrant-smelling ink that vanished into the void after falling for a short distance.

The wolf hair brush swayed left and right as if someone was using it. It wrote the word, "Acceptable."

It was at this moment Yin Woman spoke up, "You won't go back on your promise, right?"

Silver Toad croaked out a chuckle, "You're all well aware of the kind of person I am. I never go back on my words."

"All I want is his life and a silver page. Everything else including the Miracle Doctor Calabash is yours."

"He killed my brother, Bronze Toad. I must have my revenge."

The yin wind flew away and left behind some cold parting words, "Very well. For your own sake, I hope you're not playing games with us."

Silver Toad's beady eyes narrowed into a cruel, anticipatory slits. "Murderer of my brother, Ye Qing... Today is the day you pay your debt in blood."

.....

"Gulp—ah! Man, this night just keeps getting colder and colder. Do you guys want to take a sip and warm up a little?" Ye Qing asked after taking a deep gulp from his wine gourd. The strong wine chased away the cold and the day's fatigue like a stiff breeze.

"Thank you for the offer, my lord, but no thanks," all three Artifact Wielders replied in the exact tone.

"You guys should learn to live life a little," Ye Qing shook his head and sighed internally. He was told that Artifact Wielders were like ascetic monks who spent most of their time in the Tower of Secrets cultivating or researching Strange Artifacts only. Besides that, well, there was no besides that. Pleasure and entertainment were practically alien concepts to these people. Now, he could see it was all true.

Ye Qing took another gulp of wine as another gust of icy wind blew across his face. He had no idea that a wolf hair brush was writing something in an empty house:

“Ye Qing and the three Artifact Wielders were passing through Eminence Street when suddenly, Ye Qing accidentally stepped on a slippery rock and slipped, falling toward the wall next to him.”

Back at Eminence Street, Ye Qing was still enjoying his drink when suddenly, he stepped on a round, slippery rock and fell toward the wall next to him.

“My wine!”

Ye Qing reached out and caught his wine gourd before it could spill out his contents. He chuckled in relief while leaning against the wall, “Thank goodness.”

He would be fine even if he crashed through the wall, but it would be a shame if his wine were to go to waste. In this world, beautiful people [1] and delicious wine were the two things one must live up to.

When Ye Qing tried to get up, however, the wall behind him suddenly turned as soft as mud. Alarm bells immediately rang inside his head as he tensed his muscles and threw himself forward in an attempt to escape the wall.

Unfortunately, he was a little too late. The wall abruptly transformed into a giant mouth and consumed Ye Qing whole. Then, it turned back to normal as if nothing had ever happened.

“My lord!”

“My lord!”

The three Artifact Wielders were hardly in tip-top shape, and the attack had begun and ended in just the blink of an eye. By the time they reacted, Ye Qing was already gone.

“It’s an attack! Bring out the contact talisman!”

The good news was that the three Artifact Wielders weren’t greenhorns. The second they realized the danger, they immediately stood back to back with each other and watched their surroundings warily. While doing so, they produced their contact talismans and tried to activate it.

There was no way to tell if Ye Qing was still alive, and the three of them were thoroughly exhausted after using the Miracle Doctor Calabash repeatedly. That was why the best course of action wasn’t to run, but to hold their ground and wait for reinforcements to show up.

Alas, right before an Artifact Wielder was about to activate his contact talisman, a chilly wind suddenly blew into his face. His eyes suddenly grew dull and lifeless, and a layer of ice started creeping across his skin. He froze into an ice sculpture before his companions could do anything.

Realizing that the situation was even worse than they thought, the two Artifact Wielders abruptly split up and ran. So long as one of them managed to activate their contact talismans, there was still a chance they might survive this.

Unfortunately, they had only taken a few steps when the blurry silhouette of a woman took form from the yin wind. When she exhaled, the yin wind split into two and engulfed the two Artifact Wielders in just the blink of an eye. Their bodies froze, and the light in their eyes abruptly turned dim. A layer of ice rose from their feet and trapped them in the blink of an eye as well.

“Croak croak! Die!”

While the Yin Woman was dealing with the three Artifact Wielders, a muscular, silver-haired man wearing silver armor descended from above. His lips were curled into a cruel grin as he launched a might punch at the wall that had devoured Ye Qing.

Old Mud possessed the power to transform any wall into mud and devour a victim who was close to the wall. If the ambush was successful, he could instantly harden the wall and either suffocate a weakling to death, and temporarily immobilize a powerhouse.

Moreover, if an external force destroys the wall before the victim could escape, then they would shatter and die as well.

Suddenly, the wall shook and emitted a strange noise that sounded like dull thunder. Then, innumerable cracks quickly spread across the whole wall. It looked like a vase that was seconds away from crumbling.

Dammit! The silver-haired man cursed internally and moved faster. He was clearly hoping to destroy the wall before Ye Qing could escape.

Unfortunately, his fist was still an inch away from its target when a hole suddenly exploded from the wall. A fist then reached out from the hole and clashed against the silver-haired man's fist!

Bang!

The silver-haired man's face went from surprise, to astonishment, to full-blown disbelief in the span of one second. When he looked down at his arm, he saw his silver armor, his flesh and even his bones shattering into a million pieces.

The silver-haired man flew back faster than when he had descended from the sky. Like a cannonball, he crashed through several houses before finally coming to a stop.

After the silver-haired man was sent flying, the breached wall suddenly began to vibrate ominously. It was impossible to say if it was because Old Mud was shaking in fear, or if some sort of terrifying existence was about to break out of his confines, or both.

But right before the arm would break out of the wall, the wolf hair brush began writing once more:

“Ye Qing struggled to break out of Old Mud's wall after repelling Silver Toad. It was at this moment his nose suddenly felt a little itchy. When he sneezed, his energies slowed down just enough for Old Mud to pull over a couple more walls and seal Ye Qing permanently.”

Something strange happened then. Right after the wolf hair brush wrote the word “permanently”, the word suddenly began fading as if something was rubbing it with an eraser. It wasn't long before it was completely gone.

When the wolf hair brush tried to write the word again, it discovered that it was blocked by some sort of unspeakable power. No matter how hard it tried, it just could not finish the sentence. In the end, it had no choice but to write the word “temporarily” instead.

As soon as the wolf hair brush completed the passage, Ye Qing suddenly felt a terrible itch in his nose and sneezed. As a result, his energies slowed just a beat.

At the same time, the walls from the surrounding houses turned into liquid and poured in from every direction. Like paper, Old Mud slapped them all on the original wall and buried Ye Qing in a pile of walls. In just the blink of an eye, a bloated, unsightly wall was created on Eminence Street. From a distance, it looked just like a bloated giant.

“Be quick, Silver Toad! He’s too strong! I can’t keep him down for long!” A face appeared on the bloated wall and shouted.

Boom!

A silhouette suddenly dashed out of a pile of rubble and threw a punch at the bloated wall.

Chapter 165: Tonight’s Wind Is Real Naughty

Having learned his lesson, Silver Toad went all out with his second attack.

It was do or die.

As his punch flew toward the wall, silver scales began appearing on his fist and his arms. They were also growing on his face, although they looked more like snowflakes than actual scales. At the same time, the image of a silvery white toad appeared behind his back, croaking. It was an Expression of his true self.

The Toads of Cornucopia were famous for their strength, not to mention that he had manifested his Expression. He refused to believe that his full-powered punch could not kill Ye Qing.

Shriek!!!

The air directly in front of his fist made this shrill, piercing noise as if it was being compressed far beyond its limit. It was deafening.

Whoosh!

Suddenly, wisps of hot air suddenly seeped out from the cracks between the bloated wall. Half a second later, they transformed into dark red flames that swayed back and forth like grass.

Then, an agony-filled face emerged from the flames in a soundless scream.

“Dammit!”

Silver Toad’s eyes glowed brilliant silver as he forced himself to speed up even more. Unfortunately, he was still too late. Right before his fist would shatter the wall, the wall exploded into a storm of fire, wind, and debris. Its howls sounded like the end of the world itself.

As Silver Toad was right next to the wall, the fiery wind struck him head on and melted most of his scales into liquid. They dripped onto melted stone and earth and vanished without a trace.

“Who dares to ambush me and my men!”

One man stood tall amidst the howling wind and raging flames. Floating above the ground like a god or demon who had descended upon this earth to exact his vengeance, he brought his fist straight down on the puny Stranger who had dared to test his wrath.

At that moment, it was like the sky itself had crashed down on the earth, and wasn’t there a saying that described this situation perfectly: “When the sky falls, none shall survive its wrath.”

The punch struck Silver Toad squarely in the head. Forget resisting, he couldn't even react before he was driven straight into the ground.

Rumble rumble rumble!

The moment Silver Toad vanished from view, the entire street suddenly shook like it was an earthquake. Dark red flames spewed out of the cracks and shot at least thirty meters into the air before they finally faded.

"Phew... what a thick head."

The silhouette landed back on the ground, and the raging wind around him disappeared and revealed a man who was covered in dust and mud. He was none other than Ye Qing.

He hadn't held back just now. He had used his full Dragon Elephant strength and his perfect Burning Wind astral qi to pummel the sonuvabitch's skull into the floor. This attack could've vaporized another warrior at the same level like blowing off dust, and yet the guy's head had remained intact.

Is this what it takes to survive in this world? A thick skin and a thick skull?

He was in the middle of a battle though, so he quickly cast away the stray thoughts and pulsed his spirit. Invisible ripples washed over the streets and houses, and—

"Found you."

In Ye Qing's mind, Ye Qing saw a wall slowly dissolving into mud and spreading across the ground. It looked exactly the same as real soil.

If his spirit wasn't as strong as it was, he would never have realized that the mud Stranger was still alive. The fact that he didn't notice anything until he pulsed his spirit was the proof of that.

The walls the mud Stranger commanded were extremely bizarre and potent. Even with his current strength, it had taken him a surprising amount of effort and time to break free. As if that wasn't bad enough, he was struck by the strong premonition that he would die if the wall broke. It was quite the scary moment to say the least.

That was why the mud Stranger needed to die first before anyone. There was literally no reason to keep such a dangerous threat alive for even a second longer. He immediately dashed toward the mud Stranger.

Unbeknownst to Ye Qing, the Writer was writing a new passage inside the empty house,

"Ye Qing discovered Old Mud and gave chase immediately, but as he was passing by a restaurant, the building suddenly collapsed on top of him. He had no choice but to dodge to the left."

Outside the house, everything went exactly as the Writer had prophesied. Ye Qing was dashing past a restaurant when suddenly, the entire building collapsed on top of him. In order to avoid being buried, he had no choice but to dodge to the left. He then attempted to circle around the building and resume his chase.

The Writer wasn't done with him, however. He continued,

“It was at this moment a yin wind blew. Yin Woman had appeared behind him without him noticing, and she was able to catch him in a deathly embrace. An unspeakable cold immediately invaded his mind and froze his soul.”

Unfortunately, the Writer started shaking again when he wrote the words, “Froze his soul.” Then, an invisible power erased the words from existence just like before.

Left with no choice, the Writer amended his passage to, “Froze his body.”

Had the initial prophecy come true, Ye Qing would have died immediately. It was because no human could live with a frozen soul. The body though, that was much more livable.

As soon as the final word was penned, Ye Qing suddenly felt an unnatural chill behind his back. The next moment, a pair of translucent, shapeless arms wrapped around his neck and pressed her body against his back. It felt like a woman was giving him a hug.

When did she get behind me!?

Ye Qing was shocked because he hadn’t sensed anything at all. It was as if the yin Stranger had suddenly appeared behind his back... or something was blocking his spirit from detecting her.

Before he could think of anything else, an unspeakable cold invaded his body and froze him from the inside out. Not done yet, it invaded his mind and attempted to freeze his soul as well.

“Hmph!”

Ye Qing immediately visualized the Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method. The great emperor manifested inside his head and shone like the sun. The unnatural cold permeating his head immediately receded like the tide. After that, Ye Qing channeled his Burning Wind and melted the ice in his body like snow as well.

“Is that all you got? You really should’ve taken your petty little tricks elsewhere!”

The second he regained control of his body, the Burning Wind exploded out of Ye Qing’s body and turned everything into dust. As Yin Woman was hugging him from behind, she got a boat load of his unfiltered passion.

Yin Woman screamed in pain and attempted to freeze the Burning Wind with her cold, but it didn’t even last a second before it burst out of its confines once more. The next second, dark red flames began bursting out of her translucent body. No matter how she screamed and struggled, she was unable to extinguish the deadly flames. Over time, she grew more and more transparent and flickered erratically. It was like a simple gust of wind could blow her away.

Yin Woman was a ghost-type Stranger. As she didn’t possess a physical body, she was immune to conventional weapons and could even change her form as she pleased. At her level, the one thing she was afraid of was objects or creatures of absolute yang and fire, and it so happened that Ye Qing’s Burning Wind fit that criteria perfectly. That was why he was able to deal such a severe blow to Yin Woman so easily.

It looked like Yin Woman would burn to death just like that when the ground suddenly shook unnaturally. It felt like something terrifying was about to burst out.

“So, his true form is a toad, a silver toad no less. But why does it look so familiar?” Ye Qing’s spirit allowed him to grasp the underground Stranger’s clearly.

“Wait a second. Silver toad? Bronze Toad? Now I get it. The guy’s family has come for revenge!” Ye Qing figured out the truth as soon as he connected the dots.

He had wondered why so many Strangers had come together to ambush him. He hadn’t terrorized that many local Strangers just yet, or so he thought. As it turned out, it was because he killed the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia. This silver toad must be the Silver Toad of Cornucopia, and it—well, he, since his human form was that of a man—had gathered this band of misfits to take revenge for his fallen kin. The only reason he only figured this out now was because Silver Toad had assumed a human form.

As for how Silver Toad was able to track him down, he already knew the answer. It was because Bronze Toad had cursed him with the Dying Grudge. It should be trivial for him to locate Ye Qing unless he wasn’t trying at all. It made sense that this ambush would be so well-orchestrated.

In fact, he only survived this ambush because he was exceptionally powerful for his level. Any other early-stage Astral Refiner would’ve died a million years ago.

I might have survived this ambush, but I might not survive the next one. These Strangers need to die right here and now.

As soon as the thought crossed Ye Qing’s mind, he raised his foot and stomped the ground with all his might. There was an ominous rumble as the entire street undulated as if it was fabric, not earth. Silver Toad was going to make a grand appearance, but the combination of Ye Qing’s Dragon Elephant strength and his Burning Wind astral qi forced it another ten meters into the ground.

Even better, the Burning Wind was so hot that it literally burned the earth and the rock into molten lava. It cooked the Silver Toad of Cornucopia like a furnace.

Your skull may be too thick for me to punch through, but what if I slow cook you alive like a frog—I mean, toad?

Of course, Silver Toad wasn’t just going to sit in the ground and slowly boil to death, so Ye Qing stomped the ground again and again like he was playing the drum. Silver scales shattered, and blood flowed like a river. Powerless to change the situation, the Stranger could do nothing but be ground by the earth over and over again.

Suddenly, Ye Qing looked up into the sky. Yin Woman had transformed into a gust of yin wind and was attempting to escape.

“Leaving already? The night’s still young!”

Ye Qing opened his mouth, and a thunderclap shook the earth. A white flash later, Yin Woman disappeared in a long, mournful scream.

The second Yin Woman was dead, Ye Qing suddenly broke into a strange grin and jumped backward. It was because he sensed Old Mud sneaking toward the three Artifact Wielders while he was killing Yin Woman. Whatever he was planning, it could not be good!

While Ye Qing was dashing toward Old Mud, the Writer continued to work hard to meet tonight's word count:

"Ye Qing discovered Old Mud's plan and tried to stop him, but tonight's wind was very naughty. So naughty, in fact, that it kicked up a pile of dust that blinded Ye Qing and slowed him for just a beat. This minor delay was enough for Old Mud to take control of the three Artifact Wielders and manipulate them into attacking Ye Qing with the Miracle Doctor Calabash. And so Ye Qing...

DIES!

DIES!

DIES!"

The Writer's last three words were so potent that they bled ink. At the same time, an evil, unspeakable power rippled outward like the curse of a thousand wraiths.

Whoosh!

A gentle wind blew across the street, and it kicked up a pile of dust that just happened to hit Ye Qing squarely in the eye. It came as such a surprise that he slowed down a beat.

"I got dust in my eyes?! How is this even possible?"

At this point, Ye Qing finally realized that something wasn't right. A moment before the ambush was sprung, he had slipped on a rock and crashed into the wall that was Old Mud. That was how the Stranger was able to devour him and nearly doomed him. Then, the restaurant he was passing through collapsed without warning and forced him to dodge out of the way. As a result, Yin Woman was able to surprise him and almost killed him a second time.

Now, a bloody gust of wind had kicked some dust into his eyes and delayed him at a critical moment. He, an Astral Refiner, had somehow been blinded by a bloody gust of wind! How was this even possible? Was tonight's wind really that naughty, or was a Stranger behind these series of inexplicable phenomenon? It didn't take a genius to figure out the answer!

He had thought that the mud Stranger was the biggest threat of them all, but no, this hidden Stranger was even worse!

Chapter 166: Is It An Idiot?

He had no doubt that Old Mud would make it to the Artifact Wielders first because of the delay. He could be planning to use them as hostages, or perhaps stealing the Miracle Doctor Calabash was what he had in mind. Neither scenario was good for him.

If he took them as hostages, he would have to fight while taking their lives into consideration every step of the way.

If he took the Miracle Doctor Calabash and ran, then he would be in deep trouble as well. A severe punishment would await him for losing the Strange Artifact even if he was a Patrolman.

Worse still, Ye Qing kept having this bad feeling that the enemy's ploy wasn't as simple as it seemed.



In fact, he knew that using the three Artifact Wielders as hostages or stealing the Miracle Doctor Calabash were lousy plans.

Old Mud could never escape so long as he was still on his trail. At best, he would delay the inevitable until reinforcements from the Pacification Bureau showed up.

No, the only way the Stranger could get out of this situation was to kill him.

Speaking of which, Old Mud really should've escaped while he was busy dealing with Yin Woman. Now that Yin Woman had died, and Silver Toad was grievously injured, he had lost his best opportunity to escape Ye Qing. As if that wasn't bad enough, he chose to rejoin the battle and attack the Artifact Wielders. Objectively speaking, it was easily the stupidest choice he could have made.

Was Old Mud stupid?

Obviously not.

When a non-stupid person willingly chose to do something stupid, it could only mean that they were plotting something big. Or in this case, something murderous.

The more Ye Qing thought about it, the more certain he grew. He might not know how his enemy was planning to kill him, but the possibility could not be ignored.

Since he had a gist of the enemy's plan, his newest priority was to kill the danger in its infancy. Whatever it was Old Mud was going to do, he needed to stop it now.

Unfortunately, the minor delay allowed Old Mud to reach the three Artifact Wielders first. A pool of mud flowed up their legs as if it would swallow them whole.

Ye Qing smirked when he saw this. A gong and a mallet abruptly appeared in his hands, and he smacked the gong with the mallet.

Dang!

An evil, unspeakable energy washed over the street as the sound of a gong reverberated in the air. The mud that was a moment away from covering the three Artifact Wielders whole suddenly froze in its tracks.

Dang! Dang! Dang!

Seeing that the gong sound was effective, Ye Qing immediately struck the gong again while walking toward his companions. At the same time, the mud covering their bodies fell back to the ground.

After reaching the three Artifact Wielders, Ye Qing stopped beating the gong and let out a tired sigh. His face looked a little pale as well.

The gong and mallet he just used were none other than the Hatred-class Strange Artifact he had obtained from the lake bogey of Jade Spring Village, the Soul Absorbing Gong. The gong was forged from Soul Bronze and could be used to attack another person's mind, influence their thoughts, disrupt or erase their memories, and even absorb their soul. The mallet was forged from Gloomy Wood and could be used to destroy astral qi and affect the circulation of one's energy and force.

The Strange Artifact was as insidious as it was potent, but its flaws were pretty significant. The gong sound was an indiscriminate attack that affected Ye Qing just as much as it affected the others. If he hadn't cultivated the "Emperor Fuxi Visualization Method" and grown a powerful spirit, he would never dare to use the Strange Artifact. Chances were, he would die before his enemy.

Even now, hitting the gong six times in a row had taken a toll on him. It took him two deep breaths before he finally managed to quell the disjointed thoughts in his head and brought his foot down on the mud on the ground.

The mud was Old Mud's true body. He was currently unresponsive because he was still battling against the influence of the Soul Absorbing Gong.

Ye Qing was, and would always be, a believer of kicking an enemy when they were down.

Perhaps the threat of death had injected a hint of clarity back into his mind, but Old Mud just barely formed a massive hand in an attempt to block Ye Qing's barbaric stomp.

Ye Qing paused and lifted his mallet. Then, he tapped it lightly against the huge hand.

The mud hand crumbled away like dust, and Ye Qing successfully stamped his foot on Old Mud.

Boom!

It sounded like a celestial was using the ground as a drum. The earth shook, and Old Mud scattered into bits.

Ye Qing wasn't done though. He unleashed the Burning Wind and burned the scattering mud into dust, leaving no trace behind.

Just like that, another Stranger bit the dust.

The moment Old Mud died, the Writer's writing disappeared one by one as if erased by some sort of invisible power, but not the three "Dies". Instead, they flew into the Writer's body and caused its aura to plummet. It was as if its curse had backfired on it.

Back on the streets, Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath to stabilize his energies and stomped the ground once more. No, it wasn't because Old Mud was still alive. It was because Silver Toad was gathering its energy to break out of its earthly confinements again. Unfortunately for the poor Stranger, the force of Ye Qing's attack and his Burning Wind knocked it right back to where it started.

Patience. Your turn will come eventually.

Without further ado, Ye Qing pulsed his spirit and searched for the fourth hidden Stranger.

The Stranger's ability was easily one of the strangest he had ever encountered in his life. He could not rest easy until they were dead.

While he was searching for the Writer, the Writer was fuming at its failure to kill Ye Qing. Once again, it was writing up a storm,

"Ye Qing managed to find my hiding spot, but he didn't notice that an Artifact Wielder was slowly opening the bronze box and activating the Miracle Doctor Calabash. As a result, the miracle doctor's soul emerged and killed Ye Qing.

KILL!

KILL!

KILL!”

The last three words were as red as blood. They also gave off a frightening and murderous aura. When they landed on the invisible parchment the Writer was writing on, the walls, the rooftop, the floor and more started bleeding bright red blood like the bloody shirt Stranger had come back to life. The insane mutterings and howls of countless vengeful spirits quickly filled the room as well.

“Found you!”

There was no way Ye Qing could miss such a huge pulse of energy even if he wasn’t actively searching for it. He was just about to dash over to the Stranger when suddenly, he sensed a terrifying pulse of energy behind him. He looked behind just in time to see an Artifact Wielder activating the Miracle Doctor Calabash and summoning the miracle doctor’s soul.

When did he—?

Before Ye Qing could figure out what was going on, the miracle doctor’s soul waved a hand and showered him in a sheen of flawless light. The next second, his astral qi was fully restored, injuries disappeared like they never happened.

At the same time, the Writer’s curse vanished line by line. Then, the brush started shaking as every drop of blood and vengeful spirits in the house entered its body in an instant. It continued to shake as tiny cracks slowly formed across its body. It looked like it might shatter into pieces at any moment.

“Ahahaha! Is that Stranger an idiot?”

It didn’t take much for Ye Qing to figure out the truth. The mysterious Stranger had taken control of the Artifact Wielder in hopes of killing him with the Miracle Doctor Calabash. Unfortunately, they had no idea that the Miracle Doctor Calabash would never lose control so long as three people with medical expertise were present. That was why the miracle doctor’s soul had healed him instead.

Ye Qing was very impressed. It wasn’t everyday you encountered a Stranger who dug their own grave after all.

“Hmm? What is... oh, did the curse backfire on them?” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise when the evil energy he sensed suddenly fell into disarray.

It made sense. Its power to manipulate events was extremely uncanny. Of course it would have some sort of limitation.

If this isn’t my cue to end the bastard’s sorry life, I don’t know what is.

Ye Qing was about to take off when suddenly, he recalled something and turned around. Then, he put the Miracle Doctor Calabash back into the bronze box and carried it on his back. It was only then he made his way toward the Writer.

He was so close to achieving a total victory. The last thing he wanted was some random thief to steal the Miracle Doctor Calabash at the last moment and ruin everything.

As Ye Qing raced toward the house, the floor tiles, the roof tiles, the debris from the surrounding ruins and more suddenly lifted into the air and shot toward Ye Qing.

“Heh... too weak.”

Ye Qing sneered and threw a punch at the incoming debris. The Burning Wind and his fist force easily vaporized it all into dust.

At the same time, a writing brush flew out of the house and dripped an unbelievable amount of ink from its brush end. The ink rippled out in a circle before they hit the ground and dyed large patches of the sky black in an instant.

The real problem, however, was that the ink seemed to possess spirit-insulating qualities. He was unable to detect the brush with his spirit.

Ye Qing frowned. It was clear that the hair brush Stranger was trying to escape, but if he could not sense where it was going, then there was a real chance he might lose it.

It was at this moment a vellum slipped out of his shirt and plunged head first into the curtain of ink.

“The Annon Sutra?!”

It took Ye Qing a full second to realize what just happened. He had imagined countless things since arriving in this world, but he never thought that the Annon Sutra would suddenly leave him one day.

He didn’t even know the Annon Sutra could move on its own. The only time the vellum showed any reaction at all was when he asked it questions. How could he not be shocked by this turn of events?

More than shocked, Ye Qing was gripped by an unprecedented level of panic, loss, and fear.

Was he afraid that the Annon Sutra would leave him forever?

Was he afraid that he would become all alone?

Was he afraid that he would no longer have anyone to rely on?

Or was it all of the above?

He felt like a kid who suddenly lost his parents. One day he was still a superhero defeating evil and saving the world, and the next it was him against the whole wide world—lonely, bewildered, and overwhelmed.

The Annon Sutra was practically a parent to him. Since the first day he came to this world, the vellum had been a big part of his life. It had kept him company, guided him, grown with him, walked with him through thick and thin...

He might have been suspicious of the Strange Artifact before—and he still was, if he were to be completely honest with himself—but there was no doubt in his mind that it was his protector, his friend, and his family.

So what if he was an Astral Refiner now? So what if he wasn’t so weak that a stiff breeze could blow him over anymore?

He could be the strongest man in the entire world, and losing the Annon Sutra would still hurt him deeply.

A loss was a loss. [1]

“W-Where are you going, Annon Sutra? Big brother! C-Come back!” Ye Qing shouted as he gave chase, voice shaky and fearful. He felt as if his soul had been emptied.

Right before Ye Qing would plunge into the curtain of ink, the ink was suddenly pulled toward a certain direction as if drawn by an invisible power. It was gone in just the blink of an eye.

Ye Qing immediately saw the Annon Sutra and the writing brush floating in the air. The writing brush was leaking ink from its brush onto the Annon Sutra—or rather, the Annon Sutra was absorbing its ink.

The ink disappeared as soon as it hit the vellum. It was way faster than when it had absorbed Ye Qing’s blood. The Writer shook and struggled to break free from the Annon Sutra’s invisible hold, but it was futile.

At some point, the Writer stopped struggling completely. Then, as if it had lost its final sliver of life, its wooden body rotted, and its brush wilted like grass. Finally, it shattered completely and crumbled into dust.

The Annon Sutra... killed a Stranger on its own? I wonder if it would give dragon-serpent runes this way? Ye Qing thought distractedly.

With that done, the Annon Sutra flew back into Ye Qing’s hands.

Chapter 167: Orbit of Fate

“Phew... I haven’t raised you for nothing after all.” Ye Qing caressed the vellum and let out a long sigh of relief. He didn’t know what it would do had the Annon Sutra really left him, but that didn’t matter anymore. Everything was fine now.

“It doesn’t look like you’ve changed much though?” Ye Qing gave it a look-over to see if anything had changed about the vellum. It felt smoother and looked a little more mysterious than before, but that was it. On the surface, it still looked very much like an ordinary piece of vellum.

I’ll ask about it when I get back.

It would be nice if the Annon Sutra underwent an upgrade, but he wouldn’t mind even if it was the same as before. He folded the vellum into a square and slipped it against his heart. A gentle pat and another sigh of relief later, he looked into the sky. The night was still young, and the moon was bright. He then turned his attention to the ground.

It was finally time to eliminate the final Stranger.

Rumble!

Unfortunately, he had wasted a little too much time dealing with the brush Stranger. A fair distance away from Ye Qing, a patch of earth suddenly turned swollen as if something was pushing out of it. Then, a giant toad’s head burst out into the open.

The Stranger looked nowhere as imposing as it was at the beginning, however. Its silvery scales had melted into liquid, and the silver was mixed with a lot of red as well. It was obviously blood.

“Croak croak!”

As soon as Silver Toad climbed back to the surface, it immediately let out a deafening croak that collapsed a whole swathe of buildings.

“Bastard!”

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes dangerously. Although Eminence Street was a business area with more shops than houses, that hardly meant that the area was uninhabited. Heavens only know how many people the Stranger had killed or injured with its croak.

“Seal!”

Right before Ye Qing could throw himself into battle, a clear and sonorous voice suddenly caught his attention. He turned and saw a man standing on a rooftop and holding a golden brush. He was none other than Lin Yuhuai.

Clearly, the Pacification Bureau had finally picked up on the commotion and sent someone to help him.

Lin Yuhuai wrote the word at the same time he cried out the word, “Seal!” As soon as he finished the last stroke, golden light burst out of the word and transformed into chains the size of a human arm. They wrapped around Silver Toad and bound it in just the blink of an eye!

“Croak croak!”

Silver Toad kept croaking and discharged a devastating shockwave. However, it wasn’t enough to break through the formless, seemingly illusory chains.

“Suppress!”

Seeing that Silver Toad was still struggling, Lin Yuhuai calmly wrote the word “Suppress” and caused a massive stele to fall from the sky.

The stele looked weathered and ancient. One side of the stele was engraved with patterns of flowers, birds, fishes and dragons, and the other side was engraved with the two words, “Demon Subjugation”. Silver Toad abruptly stopped struggling, and it slowly shrank until it was only as big as a palm. Then, the stele vanished as if its work here was done.

“It is said that talismans are an expression of the laws of reality. I didn’t know Lin Yuhuai is a talisman master, and that he’s reached the level where he could inscribe on nothing and turn fiction to reality. I definitely should stay on his good side.”

“Inscribe on nothing” referred to the fact that Lin Yuhuai could write or draw a talisman without having to rely on conventional items such as a writing brush, cinnabar, yellow papers, ink and so on. He had reached the level where he could borrow the power of nature directly to create his talismans. “Turn fiction to reality” referred to the fact that he could bring physical objects into existence with his talismans. The stele was just one example. At a high enough level, he could also

recreate rivers, mountains, stars, moons, suns and more. It was obvious that Lin Yuhuai's attainment in the way of talismans was incredibly high.

"Are you alright, Joyless?" Lin YUhuai jumped down the roof and went over to Ye Qing after sealing Silver Toad.

Ye Qing shook his head and smiled. "Thank you for your concern, but I'm alright. It'll take more than a handful of small fries to kill me."

Lin Yuhuai was silent for a moment. Judging from the lingering auras on the battlefield, at least four Hatred-class Strangers had attacked Ye Qing at the same time. However, they were apparently just "small fries" to the Patrolman. Were the Strangers really that useless, or did Joyless allow his accomplishment to get into his head a little too much?

That said, Lin Yuhuai wasn't in the habit of roasting someone, so he ignored the boasting and asked, "What on earth happened here?"

Jokes aside, Ye Qing immediately told Lin Yuhuai everything that had happened tonight except the little interaction between the Annon Sutra and the Writer.

For once, the normally genial man looked murderous when he heard Ye Qing's story until the end. "How dare these Strangers attack a member of the Pacification Bureau openly. Hmph! I suppose it's about time we do a thorough clean-up of Luo Shui."

"By the way, you did really well to survive the ambush of four Hatred-class Strangers. Anyone else at your level would've perished a long time ago, but not only did you turn it around, you even managed to kill three of them. You really are an extraordinary warrior."

Ye Qing smiled. "You flatter me, Brother Lin. Oh right! We should attend to our companions first! They're not beyond saving, right?" Ye Qing pointed at the three Artifact Wielders.

Lin Yuhuai strode up to them and inspected them closely. He then gave Ye Qing the good news, "They're fine. They are injured in body and mind, but they will recover."

Lin Yuhuai waved his sleeves slightly and threw out a talisman. It transformed into a ball of green light and showered the Artifact Wielders with its light. Once the cold energy inside their bodies was expelled, the trio eventually regained their consciousness.

"My lords... are those Strangers...?"

As expected of professionals, all three Artifact Wielders eyed their surroundings warily as soon as they woke up.

Lin Yuhuai assured them, "Don't worry. All four Strangers have been captured or killed."

It was only then they let out a sigh of relief.

Ye Qing handed the bronze box holding the Miracle Doctor Calabash back to the three Artifact Wielders. Then, he looked at the frozen toad a short distance away from them and asked, "What do we do with this silver toad, Brother Lin?"

Lin Yuhuai answered, “Since it is an intelligent Stranger, I’m going to take it back to the Pacification Bureau and see if our interrogators can pry the locations of its fellow rats out of its mouth. It would be great if it gives us useful information, but if not we will simply throw it into prison.”

“You mean the Strange Prison? It’ll just be a waste of resources!” Ye Qing exclaimed in mock disbelief, “I’d rather you give it to me if you can’t find anything!”

The Strange Prison was, as its name might suggest, a prison for Strangers. Although most Strangers were hostile toward humans, some of them possessed special abilities that were incredibly useful. For example, some Strangers’ blood could be used to create medicine and draw powerful talismans, some Strangers’ flesh could be consumed to improve a warrior’s power, some Strangers’ hair served as excellent materials to create a Strange Artifact, so on and so forth.

Rather than killing them outright, the humans thought it was better to keep them in captivity and maximize their usefulness so to speak.

The Toads of Cornucopia—the rarer Silver Toad of Cornucopia no less—possessed the innate ability to draw luck and fortune to its owner. Although the Pacification Bureau was hardly lacking in either department, it just barely crossed the line of being more useful alive than dead.

“Do you have a use for it, Joyless?” Lin Yuhuai thought he knew what Ye Qing was aiming for. “Are you planning to start a business or something?”

Ye Qing shook his head. “What? Of course not! I just want to end its life with my own hands!”

Money? Why would he want its money when he could have its life? Specifically, the dragon-serpent runes its life would turn into?

“Oh... I understand now. You may do with the Silver Toad as you wish, Brother Ye,” Lin Yuhuai nodded agreeably.

Ye Qing had no idea what Lin Yuhuai “understood” from his reply—maybe he thought he wanted to take revenge for the ambush or something?—but as long as he got his dragon-serpent runes, then all was well.

Noticing that Ye Qing was looking a little tired, Lin Yuhuai offered, “You look like you can use some rest, Joyless. I’ll take over from here.”

Ye Qing didn’t turn him down. He saluted the talisman master and said, “Thanks, Brother Lin.”

“You’re welcome.”

And so Ye Qing and Lin Yuhuai bade goodbye, though they didn’t part ways until they had escorted the three Artifact Wielders back to the Pacification Bureau and returned the Miracle Doctor Calabash safely to the Tower of Secrets because it was on the way. Only then did Ye Qing finally return to his residence.

It was way past midnight by the time he got home. Wawa and Kung Fu Frog had gone to bed ages ago, though Faceless was still awake and waiting for him. As soon as he returned, he immediately served him a big bowl of thick noodles and a jar of Pear Blossom wine. The noodles were delicious, and the wine was intoxicating. The combination was so good that it wiped the day’s fatigue away.



“Now, if only there is a beautiful woman to finish the picture!” Ye Qing sighed as he lay down on a bench. Despite the fantastic supper and the beautiful moon outside the window, Ye Qing felt like he wasn’t quite satisfied yet. Faceless could take the form of a beautiful woman, but it wouldn’t change the fact that he was a boring man on the inside.

“Oh right, I should ask the Annon Sutra if it had gotten an upgrade after absorbing the Writer.”

Ye Qing made sure that the doors and windows were closed before pulling out the Annon Sutra. Then, he spat a mouthful of blood on the vellum and asked, “Did the Annon Sutra gain some new abilities after absorbing the brush Stranger [1]?”

The Annon Sutra didn’t react though. Thinking that it just needed more blood, Ye Qing spent the next few minutes throring up at least dozens of mouthfuls of blood. Still, the Annon Sutra didn’t react at all.

“Why isn’t it reacting? Was I mistaken after all?”

Ye Qing couldn’t help but feel a bit disappointed. What a waste of my red hot passion, he thought [2]. Right before he was about to give up though, rows and rows of bloody text finally appeared on the vellum’s surface,

“The Annon Sutra devoured the Writer tonight, and it looked like it had undergone some changes.”

“After a careful examination, I discovered that the Annon Sutra had gained an ability that is similar to the Writer’s. To put it simply, it could influence the orbit of a person’s fate to a certain degree. Hence, I decided to name it the Orbit of Fate.”

Ye Qing rolled his eyes when he saw this. What do you mean I named it? You’re the one who named it, not me! The Orbit of Fate is a cool ability though.

He knew first hand just how potent the Writer’s ability was. It was unpredictable, unfathomable, and impossible to guard against. If he used this ability while fighting against any opponent, it would be like cursing them with an Incense of Misfortune. It would be an absolute nightmare for his enemy.

While Ye Qing was imagining all sorts of unspeakably monstrous ideas to screw over his enemies, the Annon Sutra continued,

“All things in existence have a cause, effect, and fate. The intersection of all three is what makes a being’s orbit of fate. By expending a corresponding amount of dragon-serpent runes, the Annon Sutra can, to a certain degree, alter the orbit of fate of everything including gods, demons, Strangers, humans, animals and more. Fortune or misfortune, life or death, the Annon Sutra can decide it all.”

“P.S. The more dragon-serpent runes you spend, the bigger the potency of the Orbit of Fate.”

“P.P.S. Do you know that I can secretly change your fate?”

“The Orbit of Fate! Holy shit!” Ye Qing burst out in uncontrollable excitement. To say that this ability was overpowered would be an understatement, but...

“Why does it need dragon-serpent runes to activate?” Ye Qing groaned. The dragon-serpent runes he earned wasn’t even enough for himself, and now he got a new ability that was obviously going to consume a ton of dragon-serpent runes. It’s like I’m back in university all over again!

The Annon Sutra had made it very clear that the potency of the Orbit of Fate was directly proportional to the amount of dragon-serpent runes that were spent. He was pretty sure that the cost would go way up if his target was exceptionally strong.

He could practically hear the Annon Sutra saying: Prepare your dragon-serpent runes, young man! I’m coming for it!

Fuck my life!

Chapter 168: Corpse Wax and Story Time

Ye Qing lifted his head and let out a long sigh. Not even in this life could he escape a life of hard work. No wonder people said that joy and sorrow are two sides of the same coin.

A moment of self-pitying and self-absorption later, Ye Qing recollected his feelings and thought about the zombies.

The situation was currently under control, and the Pacification Bureau had invested additional manpower to search the entire commandery for anyone who showed any sign of changing into a zombie. For now, Luo Shui should not be in danger of turning into another Racoon City.

That said, they still hadn’t discovered the reason why some people had suddenly transformed into giant zombies. So long as they find the root cause a zombie outbreak would always be lurking around the corner.

Luckily, Ye Qing had a one-stop solution at hand. Biting his tongue and spraying the Annon Sutra in blood once more, he asked, “Why did Deng Qiang transform into a giant zombie?”

Generally speaking, the more specific and simple the question, the clearer the answer the Annon Sutra would provide. Otherwise, the piece of vellum might refuse to answer altogether.

Blood red text began to appear on the Annon Sutra’s surface:

“A lot of people had transformed into zombies today. After a thorough investigation, I discovered that the reason they changed is because they were infected by the likes of Deng Qiang.”

“But why did Deng Qiang transform into a giant zombie to begin with? Was it caused by a Stranger or a human? And was it an unfortunate accident or a devious conspiracy? Regardless, I fear that something bad will happen if I do not solve this mystery in time.”

“But what should I do? Perhaps my examination of Deng Qiang was a little too cursory. I should sniff his body and taste his flesh. It might reveal an important clue.”

“Ayo what the fuck?” Ye Qing was so stunned by the Annon Sutra’s advice that he broke character for a second. Goosebumps popped out of his skin the moment he recalled the disgusting corpse wax leaking out of the giant zombie’s body. He would never smell another giant zombie in his life if he could help it, much less “taste” his flesh. Not in this life, not in the next, not ever!

.....

“Can you sniff this, Joyless?”

At Heavenly Heart Clinic, Feng Qingyou handed a bowl of liquid to Ye Qing. It was oily, slimy, and unsavory-looking in general. He quickly found out that the smell was far worse than its appearance might suggest.

“Ugh! It stinks! What the hell is this thing?” Ye Qing immediately moved the bowl away and pinched his nose after catching a whiff.

“I see. Now try sniffing this one.”

“Do I have to?”

Yesterday, a fuming Ye Qing had gone to bed after receiving a most disgusting answer from the Annon Sutra. When he woke up in the morning, he immediately traveled to Heavenly Heart Clinic. It was because Deng Qiang was probably the first ever giant zombie, and Feng Qingyou had had a whole night to research him. He wouldn’t be surprised if she had found a clue or two knowing how smart the woman was.

However, the first thing he saw after stepping through the door was Feng Qingyou holding two bowls of indescribable liquid in her hands. When she saw him, she immediately asked him to taste the liquid.

Ye Qing turned her down respectfully yet firmly as a matter of course, but she changed her request to sniffing them instead. Realizing that this was probably serious, he ultimately manned up and sniffed the bowls of liquid as she requested.

He regretted his decision immediately. The stench was so bad he felt like it had polluted his very soul.

After he was done gagging, Feng Qingyou asked, “Can you tell me what’s the difference between these two bowls of liquid?”

Ye Qing thought for a moment and answered, “One of them smells worse, and the other less so. Seriously, Qingyou, what the hell are these things?”

Feng Qingyou set down the bowls and shot him a beautiful smile, “They are corpse wax.”

“...” Ye Qing immediately felt like his soul was polluted twice over.

“Corpse wax? And you were going to make me taste them?”

Is this an assassination attempt?

Feng Qingyou chuckled. "I needed a test subject, and you just happened to be around. Someone has to sacrifice themselves for the advancement of medicine, don't you agree?"

"Why don't you test it yourself then?" Ye Qing countered.

Feng Qingyou replied indifferently, "Because I'm the doctor. I can save you if something happens to you, but you can't save me if something happens to me, can you?"

Ye Qing couldn't say anything to that.

Then, Feng Qingyou added, "Also, it smells putrid."

"I know!" Ye Qing rolled his eyes at her. He might've ranted, but the disgusting smell had sapped away all of his energy.

Feng Qingyou's eyes curled into shapely crescents at Ye Qing's deflated appearance. Even now, she looked as beautiful and welcoming as the moon. "Fine, I shan't keep you on tenterhooks anymore. The two corpse waxes are not the same. One of them is ordinary corpse wax extracted from a deceased human, and the other one was extracted from Deng Qiang."

"What?" Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise. A hint of inspiration flashed through his mind, and the fog of mystery began to fade bit by bit.

Feng Qingyou pointed at the bowls of corpse waxes on the table. "On the surface, it looked like there was no difference between the two. But as you said, one of them has a thicker stench, and the other doesn't. The one with a thicker stench belongs to Deng Qiang."

"Not only that, Deng Qiang's corpse wax is mixed with a strange power so faint that it's almost undetectable."

Ye Qing subconsciously asked, "So, you're saying that Deng Qiang's corpse wax is the real reason he changed into a zombie, and why he could infect others and change them into zombies as well?"

He was sure Feng Qingyou had already found out about the zombie outbreaks that had taken place throughout the commandery.

"That is correct," Feng Qingyou confirmed. "Last night, I fed Deng Qiang's corpse wax to a rabbit. The rabbit quickly turned into a zombie just like the changed civilians."

Poor rabbit. Your death will save many lives though.

"That's wonderful!" Ye Qing exclaimed in joy before asking curiously, "But how did you find out something is wrong with the corpse wax, Qingyou?"

She answered, "It's very simple. Remember what I said about corpse wax? It is a substance that takes form when a body has decomposed so much that the fat is leaking. In other words, corpse wax could only be found in dead bodies that have decomposed for a very long time."

"While Deng Qiang is dead, he has only been dead for a while. One could even argue that he is still alive. Therefore, his corpse wax can only come from somewhere else."

“Somewhere else?”

Feng Qingyou launched into an explanation, “You wanted to know why we went to pick the Fruits of Living and Death last night, didn’t you? That’s because the Fruit of Living possesses more properties than just regenerating flesh and restoring energy; one that only a handful of people are aware of. The Fruit of Living is extremely sensitive toward certain energies and can be used as some sort of detector. When I used it on Deng Qiang, it had responded to the corpse wax on his person.”

“After repeated examinations, I discovered that the energy itself is some sort of unusual corpse wax. If I’m not mistaken, Deng Qiang had probably consumed something that was stained with this corpse wax, or made contact with it in some other way. As a result, the unusual corpse wax was able to take root inside of him, corrupt his body, and mutate it into a form that could create its own corpse wax. The unusual corpse wax became nigh undetectable after it was diluted by Deng Qiang’s own corpse wax.”

“Also, the unusual corpse wax is the real reason behind the civilians’ transformation.”

Now Ye Qing understood why Feng Qingyou had purposely ventured into the Black White Forest to pluck the Fruits of Living and Death. He was so impressed he couldn’t help but shoot her an admiring look. If he was the charlatan who pretended to be Sherlock Holmes by using the Annon Sutra, then Feng Qingyou was the real deal who figured out everything practically from the get go. The only reason she waited until now to reveal the truth was because she needed to collect the evidence to prove it.

How awesome was that?

“Thanks, Qingyou. With this, I can finally solve this problem once and for all.”

“Solve?” Feng Qingyou seemed surprised by his confidence. “I might have figured out that the unusual corpse wax is the root cause behind Deng Qiang’s transformation, but that’s all. I have never seen anything like it, nor do I know of its origin. I do not think we have enough information to locate the mastermind behind this just yet.”

Ye Qing shot her an enigmatic smile but said nothing. What Feng Qingyou said was perfectly true, but he was the man with the Annon Sutra. Now that he knew exactly what had caused Deng Qiang and the others to change, all he needed to do was to ask the Annon Sutra where the corpse wax had come from, follow the clues to the mastermind, and then profit!

“Anyway, thanks again, Qingyou! Wait for my good news!”

Ye Qing waved and dashed out of the door. He was gone just like that.

“Strange?” Feng Qingyou furrowed her brow slightly as she stared at the empty exit. She couldn’t understand why Ye Qing was so confident that he could solve the case.

Her puzzlement was quickly replaced by a warm smile though. It looked like a mountain after a good rain; clear and pure.”

After Ye Qing left the Heavenly Heart Clinic, he traveled to a secluded spot and took out the Annon Sutra. Then, he spat his blood on it and asked, “Where did the corpse wax that caused Deng Qiang to change come from?”

The blood slowly vanished into the vellum, and lines of text rose to the surface. However, the words were blurry and unreadable.

Ye Qing knew this was the Annon Sutra’s way of saying that it needed more blood, so he spat out another dozen mouthfuls. The amount of blood essence he spat was enough to put any other Astral Refiner in bed for half a month, but it was nothing to him thanks to his unique constitution.

There was one thing that concerned him though. The fact that it took so much blood to get the Annon Sutra to reveal the answer meant that the mastermind must be very powerful. Whatever comes next, he would have to be very careful.

The blood red text grew clearer and clearer until finally. Ye Qing could read them,

“There is a legend in Luo Shui that goes something like this. Every full moon, a mysterious cook would appear in the streets of Luo Shui. Only those who are kind, noble-hearted, or lucky would have a chance to meet him.”

“The mysterious cook would cook a delicious meal based on his customer’s preference, and it is said that his meals are so impressive that it is like paradise on earth. Not only is the food perfect in terms of appearance, smell, and taste, it could imbue feelings of joy and hope in its customers. The pessimistic would feel joy, the optimistic would feel ecstasy, and the indifferent would come to learn the beauty of this world. It is a wonderful experience that satisfies both the body and the spirit.”

“Not only that, the mysterious cook does not charge a single coin for his services. He would simply favor his customers with a smile and disappear into the night.”

“... That’s it? That’s all you want to tell me, Annon Sutra? You’re not toying with me, are you?”

The Annon Sutra had told him a story about delicious food and hope. It was a simple but beautiful story with dreamlike qualities. In terms of quality, he would rate it a solid 8 out of 10.

There was just a teensy, weensy problem though—this wasn’t what he asked for!

I asked you for a clue, and you gave me a story? Whatever shall I do with you, Anon Sutra?

Ye Qing sighed and put away the vellum. Then, he started mulling over the story.

A while later, he came to the conclusion that... It was just a story. Nothing more, nothing less. That said, the mysterious cook was a central figure to the story. Assuming he wasn’t overthinking this, the Annon Sutra was saying that he must find the mysterious cook first before he could locate the source of the unusual corpse wax.

So... where the heck was he going to find this cook?

Chapter 169: Incense of Fortune

The Annon Sutra had given him a few obvious clues in its story:

One, a full moon.

Two, a kind, noble-hearted or lucky person.

And three, the streets of Luo Shui.

The Annon Sutra had provided him with the time, place, and people. It was now up to him how to make use of them.

There was a problem though. Out of the three clues, the only one that was truly useful was the first clue.

The second clue claimed that only a kind, noble-hearted or lucky person would have a chance to meet the mysterious cook, but there were many people who fit into either one or all three criterias. He himself was a kind, noble-hearted and lucky person if he said so himself, but could he say for certain that he would be able to find the mysterious cook? Nope! In other words, it was completely up to luck.

The third clue that claimed that the mysterious cook would appear in the streets of Luo Shui was just as useless. The commandery was connected by countless main streets and small alleyways. Even if the Pacification Bureau deployed every man and woman to search for the mysterious cook, the chances they would be able to find him was minimal at best. Even half of Luo Shui was still too much for the Pacification Bureau to keep watch.

Finally, the Annon Sutra told him nothing about the mysterious cook's appearance or characteristics, meaning that there was no way to tell if he had found the right person. Was it trying to make his life difficult or something?

In any case, a brute force, human sea attack wouldn't work here. He'd need to think of something else.

Even if a human sea attack would work, he highly doubted that Gu Suitang would allow him to carry out such a massive operation based on a story alone. It wasn't like he could show the chief the Annon Sutra and say, "Look! This is the super duper Strange Artifact I used to locate the culprit!"

In the end, he could only rely on himself.

But how am I going to find this cook when it looks like luck is the only thing that ma... wait a second.

"Luck?"

Ye Qing massaged his forehead to jog his memory. He seemed to remember that he had something that could boost...

"That's right! The Incense of Fortune!"

Suddenly, Ye Qing recalled the Incense of Fortune of the "Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghosts and Gods". The Incense of Fortune didn't just boost one's luck, it could be used to search a specific thing as well. Back in Anyang, he had used it to track down the Soul Eater. If he used the Incense of Fortune, he might just be able to increase his chances of finding the mysterious cook.

"But..."

His smile quickly crumpled for one simple reason: the item had more or less run its course. After he used it to track down the Soul Eater, it had shrunk to the length of a finger. It might be enough to search for an ordinary person, but the mysterious cook? He highly doubted that it would be enough.

In other words, he needed to make a new Incense of Fortune.

The good news was that there were still six days before a full moon rises. That should be enough time for him to create the incense.

According to the “Twelve Incense Sticks of Ghosts and Gods”, he needed a Lucky Flower, a clump of hair from the head of an Infant Rabbit, a Coin of Cornucopia, a strip of tree bark from a century-old Wishing Tree, a bottle of Eternal Flame [1] lamp oil, a drop of agate from the Moon Seeing Stone, and a tuft of Grass of Beneficence.

The tuft of Grass of Beneficence, the tree bark of a century-old Wishing Tree, and the bottle of Eternal Flame were easy to procure. A so-called Grass of Beneficence was basically any plant that grew out of the Forest of Beneficence of some Literary Temples, Martial Temples, or ancestral halls. The century-old Wishing Tree referred to any tree that the people gave their wishes to. There were wishing trees for relationship, luck, health, fortune and more, and they could normally be found in temples and similar sites.

The lamp oil of an Eternal Flame could usually be found in a temple as well. A so-called Eternal Flame was a special lamp people used to pray for blessings.

In and of itself, these three items were nothing special. The only reason they came to gain certain powers was because they received the worship, prayers and wishes of humans all year long. No one would miss them even if he were to procure some of them.

He already had the hair of an Infant Rabbit and the Coin of Cornucopia as well. Although the Infant Rabbit was a rare Stranger, he luckily had run into one on his way to Luo Shui and procured its hair a long time ago. As for the Coin of Cornucopia, the Bronze Coin of Cornucopia he obtained from the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia after killing it would work perfectly.

The Lucky Flower and the agate of a Moon Seeing Stone were a different story though. The Lucky Flower was an extremely rare Stranger not because their numbers were few, but because it was incredibly difficult to find them.

It might sound obvious, but a Lucky Flower was very lucky. Its innate luck drastically lowered its chances of being discovered by a human or a Stranger and being harmed as a result. That was why few people ever managed to find a Lucky Flower.

The agate of a Moon Seeing Stone was even rarer than a Lucky Flower, however. The Moon Seeing Stone was a spirit stone that gradually gained unique characteristics after basking in the sun and moon for years. As it contained the essence of the sun and moon, it was a precious resource that could be used to cultivate a cultivation art relating to the sun and moon, hone one's physique, forge Strange Artifacts and more.

The agate of a Moon Seeing Stone was the culmination of all the sun and moon essence that a Moon Seeing Stone had absorbed. Moon Seeing Stones weren't too uncommon, but the agate of a Moon Seeing Stone definitely was. It could only be found in locations where large numbers of Moon Seeing Stones were exposed to the sun and moon all year long. It was also why people often



said that it took a decade to turn a stone into a Moon Seeing Stone, but a century to sow agate in a Moon Seeing Stone.

The agate of a Moon Seeing Stone was liquid, and it contained a lot more sun and moon essence than an ordinary Moon Seeing Stone. Naturally, it was incredibly precious.

To find the mysterious cook, he must create an Incense of Misfortune, and to create an Incense of Misfortune, he must find the Lucky Flower and the agate of a Moon Seeing Stone. If he could not procure these ingredients, then this case might never be solved.

Luckily, he wasn't fighting alone anymore. He was now a man with an organization behind his back. Considering how powerful the Pacification Bureau of Luo Shui was, they might very well have everything he needed in their vault already. It would save him a lot of trouble if that was the case.

His mind made up, Ye Qing put away the Annon Sutra and traveled to the Pacification Bureau immediately. He then sought out Lin Yuhuai and told him about the ingredients he needed to make the Incense of Fortune.

Lin Yuhuai pondered for a moment and explained, "The Grass of Beneficence could be found in the Forest of Beneficence of the White Horse Academy. The tree bark of a century-old Wishing Tree could be obtained from the trees at the Child Deliverance Guanyin Temple or the Yue Lao Shrine at the Marriage Lane. The lamp oil of an Eternal Flame can be procured from the Iron Buddha Temple or Water Moon Nunnery."

"Honestly, these items are quite common. I can gather them for you myself. We also have the Lucky Flower in our vault. You simply need to pay a certain number of contribution points to get it."

"The agate of the Moon Seeing Stone is a problem. We used to have a lot of agate in our vault, but Chief Gu used them all to hone his body, so..." Lin Yuhuai's smile turned apologetic as he trailed off.

"Thank you regardless, Brother Lin."

Ye Qing was a bit disappointed that he wasn't able to get everything he needed from the Pacification Bureau, but it wasn't like he hadn't expected this. If anything, he should count his lucky stars that he didn't need to search for the Lucky Flower as well.

The contribution points Lin Yuhuai mentioned was a form of reward system that the Pacification Bureau implemented. Contribution Points was a form of currency within the Pacification Bureau, and all of its members were awarded a certain amount of contribution points for killing Strangers, completing quests that were issued by the Pacification Bureau and so on. They could use these contribution points to exchange for Strange Artifacts, medicine, manuals, spirit materials, restrictions, intel and more.

Although he had only joined the Pacification Bureau of Luo Shui a few days ago, he was a Patrolman with almost five hundred contribution points thanks to all the Strangers he killed recently. He had more than enough to pay for a Lucky Flower.

“Alright. I guess I should start looking for the agate,” declared Ye Qing before asking, “Do you know where I might obtain the agate of a Moon Seeing Stone, Brother Lin?”

Lin Yuhuai answered, “You can try inquiring the major businesses about it, but honestly? Don’t get your hopes too high. A Moon Seeing Stone is one thing, but its agate is usually sold as soon as it was put on display.”

Ye Qing nodded. “Got it. ”

“Oh right, I almost forgot,” Lin Yuhuai exclaimed as he recalled a sudden memory, “It’ll be the Longtaitou Festival in another two days, and the Strange Market will open then. You might be able to purchase the agate you need there.”

“The Longtaitou Festival I get, but what is the Strange Market?” Ye Qing asked curiously.

Lin Yuhuai answered, “The Strange Market is a special market that is as well known as it is numerous, but its origin and location are a complete mystery. All we know is that it would open during the darkest hour of the Longtaitou Festival. You will encounter all sorts of peddlers, shops, Stranger hunters, wanderers, warriors, wealthy merchants and more, and most of them are looking to trade. It’s a very popular place. I’m certain you’ll be able to find what you need there.”

“The Strange Market, huh? Sounds interesting.” Ye Qing’s eyes lit up with deep curiosity and interest. “If it is not too much trouble, will you accompany me when the time comes, Brother Lin?”

Even if he wasn’t looking for the agate of the Moon Seeing Stone, Ye Qing still would’ve visited the Strange Market. It sounded like a fun place to be.

“But of course,” Lin Yuhuai nodded smilingly, “It so happens that Nianjiu is looking to obtain something from the Strange Market as well, so we’ll all be going together. The more the merrier, right?”

“Indeed!”

After that, Ye Qing thanked Lin Yuhuai for his help and bade him goodbye, “I shan’t keep you anymore, Brother Lin. I’ll visit the major businesses first and check if they have an agate.”

Lin Yuhuai smiled. “Of course. Good luck!”

Despite what he told Lin Yuhuai, Ye Qing did not actually visit the major businesses in person. Instead, he went to the Inspection Department and dispatched all available Pacification Sentinels who wasn’t already out on a patrol to ask around for the agate of the Moon Seeing Stone. He was the boss, so why shouldn’t he delegate the grunt work to the grunts?

After that, he brewed a pot of tea and began practicing his form at the courtyard. When he was tired, he would lie down on his chair and drink some tea. When he was done resting, he would return to his practice and restart the cycle anew. Now this was what he called the good life!

It was an age old adage that there was power in numbers, but sometimes the impossible really was impossible. Although his men spent the whole day scouring the shops in Luo Shui for the agate,

they ultimately turned up with nothing in the end. More accurately, some of the shops used to have a stock in the past, but that stock had been depleted for one reason or another.

In the end, he could only pray that the Strange Market had what he needed.

.....

“Brother Lin, Brother Chu, I thought we’re heading to the Strange Market tonight? So why are we just standing there and doing nothing?”

The moon looked as white as snow tonight, and Ye Qing, Lin Yuhuai and Chu Nianjiu were all gathered at the entrance of the Pacification Bureau. Ye Qing thought they would be leading him to some secret entrance in a hidden alleyway or something, but instead they were just standing there while carrying lanterns. White lanterns no less.

Are we participating in a funeral procession or a sacrificial ceremony?

The paper lanterns Lin Yuhuai and Chu Nianjiu were carrying were made from white paper. Generally speaking, white lanterns were only used during a funeral procession or a sacrificial ceremony [2].

The orange flame of the candles cast a faint halo on the ground. It looked strangely forlorn and cold.

Smiling, Lin Yuhuai handed Ye Qing a white lantern and explained, “That’s because these white lanterns are all we need to enter the Strange Market.”

“When the Strange Market opens, its would-be visitors must carry a white lantern and walk nine steps backward at a crossroad. Only then can they enter the Strange Market.”

Chapter 170: Strange Market

“What a peculiar entrance! Is the Strange Market a Strange Realm?” Ye Qing’s eyes lit up with amazement. He initially thought that the Strange Market was just a trade gathering of sorts, but to think that it could only be entered through a special method just like a Strange Realm. He was still too young and inexperienced, it seemed.

Chu Nianjiu took a sip of wine and answered, “That’s right, the Strange Market is a Strange Realm. Legend says that a Strange Market is located between the yin world and the yang world, and a white lantern possesses the power to bridge the two worlds. That is why we need it to enter the Strange Market. Besides that, the reason we must walk nine steps in reverse is because the living walk forward, and the dead walk backward. To walk backward is to go from life to death, from yang to yin.”

“I see!” Ye Qing exclaimed in astonishment and accepted the white lantern.

Lin Yuhuai added, “Or so our esteemed ancestors think anyway. The only one who might know the truth is the one who created the Strange Market in the first place.”

“Anyway, it’s already midnight, so let’s enter the Strange Market right away. We have only fifteen minutes to enter the Strange Market. If we miss it, we’ll have to wait a whole year for the next gathering.”

Ye Qing and Chu Nianjiu nodded and walked up to the crossroad in front of the Pacification Bureau. Then, they slowly began walking backward.

From the moment they took the first step, a white mist immediately appeared around the trio. The surrounding buildings started flickering and fading almost as if they were a mirage or a reality that belonged in another world.

Ye Qing reached out tentatively and tried to grab the white mist [1]. His hand easily passed through it and caused some sort of invisible ripples.

Slowly, the white mist thickened until their surroundings were completely gone. It was like they were walking on clouds. Everything was transient, and the line between the living and the dead was blurred.

They were taking their eighth step when suddenly, a huge shadow appeared before their eyes. It asked in an eerie, indescribable voice, “Do you need something to mask yourself, dear customer?”

Ye Qing frowned and got ready for battle immediately. Although the white fog [2] was shrouding the entity from view, he could tell through his spirit that he was a giant skeleton that was made from the fog around them. Its eyes were really a pair of white flames, and white lanterns were floating around its head, giggling.

“Relax, Joyless. It’s just a Mist Spirit.” Lin Yuhuai’s voice rang beside his ear. “A Mist Spirit shows themselves before anyone who wants to enter the Strange Market to offer them a concealing cloak of their preference. The cloak possesses the power to conceal one’s appearance and aura.”

“Of course, you can turn it down if you think it’s unnecessary. It’s completely up to you.”

Lin Yuhuai then looked at the Mist Spirit and said, “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“At your service, dear customer!” The Mist Spirit declared. A white lantern flew out of the fog and transformed into a white cloak. It then wrapped snugly around Lin Yuhuai and covered up his face.

Ye Qing quickly noticed something odd. “I thought you said the cloak can cover up one’s appearance and aura? If so, then why can I still see your face?”

This time, it was Chu Nianjiu who answered him, “That’s because we’re a group, of course. The Mist Spirit acknowledges that we are acquaintances and allows us to see through each other’s cloaks. Otherwise, how are we going to find each other if we become separated in the Strange Market?”

“Wow! That’s surprisingly humane. Please give me a cloak as well, Mist Spirit!” Ye Qing called out.

“At your service, dear customer!” The Mist Spirit said again and sent another white lantern over to Ye Qing’s side. It too transformed into a cloak and wrapped snugly around Ye Qing.

When everyone had gotten a cloak, the Mist Spirit bade them goodbye, “May you have a pleasant time at our Strange Market, dear customers!” and slowly vanished into thin air. Then, they exchanged a glance with each other and took their ninth and final step.

As soon as Ye Qing planted his foot, the surrounding fog abruptly vanished and was replaced by buildings, shops, stalls and more. It was noisy and full of people as well.

They had arrived at the fabled Strange Market.

“Huh! I thought we would appear at an entrance or something, but it left us right in the middle of a street!” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise. Despite their sudden appearance, no one paid any attention to them. Or rather, everyone here had gotten used to people suddenly appearing on the streets without warning.

“Let’s go our separate ways for a bit, Joyless. Nianjiu and I have something to do. We’ll look for you as soon as we’re done with our business,” Lin Yuhuai said before adding, “Don’t worry. We’ll keep an eye for your agate as well.”

“Thanks, man! I’ll see you both later!” Ye Qing nodded. He wasn’t surprised because Lin Yuhuai had already told him beforehand that Chu Nianjiu had some business to conduct.

Ye Qing began roaming the market at leisure after parting ways with Lin Yuhuai and Chu Nianjiu. The Strange Market was bustling with people and activity just like a day market in the real world. Shops and stalls aligned both sides of the streets, and all sorts of items were on sale. There were Stranger parts, medicine, spirit materials, Strange Artifacts, manuals, relics and more. It was enough to give anyone choice paralysis.

Unfortunately, the large majority of the items on display were ordinary goods despite the seller’s shameless boasting. Their targets were uneducated laymen who couldn’t differentiate what was good and what was bad. He had seen a stall owner waving a Red-class Stranger’s bone about and claiming that it was the bone of a Soulstealer-class or a Phenomenon-class Stranger, and another peddling an ordinary martial arts manual as a once-in-a-lifetime martial arts manual. If the peddler were to be believed, the warrior could practice it today and become the living sun the next day.

He also saw a Red-class fragment that was intentionally aged so it might be sold as the part of a Phenomenon-class or a Disaster-class Stranger, a useless Strange Artifact with a completely fabricated name, ability, and even background story, a spirit material that wasn’t even a spirit material and more. Lie? It’s not a lie, you’re just too ignorant to see the truth. Shame? I’ve never heard of such a thing! It was capitalism at its finest.

Even better, the cloak prevented them from being recognized, so they didn’t even need to worry about being caught by their victims when they had returned to the real world. The world was full of idiots with more money than sense in this world. It was sinful to lie about your product, true, but wasn’t it more sinful not to swindle such people?

After walking around for a bit and witnessing some idiots actually falling prey to the scammers, Ye Qing briefly entertained the idea of setting up his own stall and making a quick buck. He changed his mind in the end though. His face-fu was strong, but he lacked his competitors' skill to distort the truth without batting an eyelid.

Wait a second. Is that a Warding Pendant?

Ye Qing's eyes suddenly lit up while he was passing by a stall. He was about to walk up to it when he suddenly changed his mind and examined the order in which the items of the stalls were placed instead. When he noted that the Warding Pendant was placed at the farthest edge of the stall, his mouth slowly curled into a devious smirk.

As soon as he walked up to the stall, the stall owner immediately burst out in excitement, "What do you wish to buy, customer? I'm selling the grave goods I dug out of the grave of a once almighty champion. Yes, yes, I understand that they don't look like much, but I swear on my mother's grave that they are the good stuff. For starters, this fragment is the fragment of a Disaster-class Strange Artifact. I shouldn't need to tell you how strong it is, should I? This bottle over here contains a bunch of Dragon Tiger Marrow Purifying Pills. A single pill is all you need to gain an Innate Immaculate Body..."

The stall owner would continue to rattle on for at least a few more minutes. His eyes burned with fervor and greed, and he was one hundred percent treating Ye Qing like a big, stupid fish who was about to bite his bait.

In response, Ye Qing smirked disdainfully and picked up the so-called fragment of a Disaster-class Strange Artifact. "This fragment is at most the fragment of a Red-class Strange Artifact, it only looks old because you masked it with sand and earth. This whatchamacallit pill... ugh, you can literally smell the vinegar on it. It's obviously flour mixed with vinegar to give it an aged appearance, but since you didn't fully evaporate the vinegar, anyone with a discerning eye could tell that it's a fake. You couldn't even be bothered to make a convincing fake, man? Where is your sense of pride as a scammer?"

The stall owner grew furious when he heard this, "Hmph! Take your ignorance elsewhere, boy. Everything I sell here is real and of exceptional quality. If you're not going to buy, then shoo!"

"Heh. Am I ignorant?"

Ye Qing let out a sinister chuckle and continued, "That porcelain fragment over there is a Son-of-Heaven-hunting-a-deer delftware from Nanhuai Blue Kiln. You aged it by baking it over smoke. This Singsong Sculpture is an actual grave artifact, but it's clearly Yan [3] made and forty years old at most. It does possess some ethereal qualities because it's tainted by yin qi, but it absolutely cannot ward off evil like you claim. In fact, it would draw yin spirits and ghosts to one's residence and damn the residents instead. As for this pair of shoes... I strongly suspect that it's something your wife has discarded. You're just recycling it and hoping that some fool will buy it."

"This... that... this..."

At first, the stall owner was both embarrassed and angry. But the more holes Ye Qing poked in his goods, the more he deflated until all he could do was grin awkwardly.

“Your knowledge astounds me, customer, but I’m just trying to make a living here. Can you please give me some face and stop exposing my lies?” The stall owner wiped some non-existent sweat from his forehead. “How about this: You may choose any item from the stall, and I swear on my mother’s grave that I will sell it to you at cost price!”

Ye Qing smiled. This was exactly the effect he was going on. He bent down and picked up two passable ornaments from the main display. Then, he moved to the edge of the stall and picked up the Warding Pendant.

The stall owner smiled when he saw this. “Hehe, you have good eyes, customer. The items you picked are the best items I have, and that jade in particular is forged using the famous Warding Jade. It is said to be highly sensitive toward all things strange and evil, and capable of warding off evil and drawing luck. It is why many consider it to be priceless.”

Ye Qing’s heart skipped a beat thinking that the stall owner had seen through his scheme. However, he relaxed just a second later. If the stall owner knew that the pendant was a true Warding Pendant, he would never have placed it in the most inconspicuous corner of the stall. He was just trying to talk up his goods like usual.

Also, his earlier performance wasn’t just to get the seller to lower his price, but also to fool him into thinking that he was an expert in identifying goods. This way, the seller wouldn’t suspect a thing when he finally picked up the jade pendant and claimed that it was trash.

Knowing that the cards were fully stacked in his favor, Ye Qing cleared his throat and sneered, “Didn’t you just say you were going to sell your goods to me at cost price? So why are you lying to my face again?”

“Legend says that the Warding Pendant is as clean and translucent as a mirror. It is pure and flawless no matter the time of the day. However, your pendant is yellow, dirty, and clearly of inferior quality. Are you seriously going to tell me that this is a Warding Pendant?”

“I’m only buying from your stall because I was hoping to decorate my house, but you just can’t help but turn away your customers, can you? Very well! I shall be taking my leave.”

Ye Qing then acted like he would toss the items back into the display.

The stall owner hurriedly spoke up, “Wait! Sorry, sorry, it’s all my fault, I was so used to running my mouth that I totally forgot what I said earlier. I beg your forgiveness, dear customer.”

“So, you want me to sell these to you at cost price, right? It’ll be ten silvers then. Surely you can agree that ten silvers is a reasonable price?”

“I suppose you’re not that stupid after all,” Ye Qing hmphed. Faking disdain, he pulled ten silvers from his pockets and tossed it into the seller’s hands. Then, he turned around and tried to leave.

Unfortunately, the best laid plans of mice and men often went awry. It was at this moment a low voice called out, “Wait! I’ll buy that pendant for one hundred silvers.”