# CHAPTER 35: SNARE THE FOOLS WITH TAINTED GREED

Qian Shanyi scanned the discard piles of the three other players, refreshing her mental count of the tiles still left in the game. The noise and smell of the mahjong parlor around her vanished as her focus sharpened to a needle point. In front of her stood fourteen tiles, ready to be discarded. It was the last round of the game, with one of her swords at stake; with the points she had, she would just barely win it back, but if she lost this round, it would vanish together with her opponents. Even a single wrong move here could spell disaster.

In the blink of an eye, she made her decision, picked up one of her tiles, and discarded it.

“Ron!” The other cultivator laughed, flipping open his hand. “Oh, miss Xiao, so close and yet so far! I win this round too!”

“Oh no!” Qian Shanyi covered her mouth in shock, “How could this be? I was so close…”

*Moron, can’t you even tell when someone is losing deliberately?* She sneered in her heart. Exactly as planned.

“Is this really it?” She whined while they counted up the points and distributed the spirit stones. “My luck is really rotten today… Can’t you even give me a chance for a rematch?”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” he laughed, handing her a pouch of spirit stones, “We played two games! It’s skill, not luck, miss Xiao.”

“That’s so not fair.” She scowled at him. “You are just afraid I’d win it back! Play another game, coward!”

“Sorry, I really don’t have the time,” he said, picking up her sword and quickly heading for the doors.

She sighed, counted out her winnings, and headed out of the parlor, feigning despair.

She couldn’t wait three months to sell her sword: even if she could trust the seller to send her the money by post, she needed money *now*. But of course no rational person would purchase an unlicensed sword directly from someone they did not know: the chances of it being stolen were simply too great to justify the risk.

In other words, she needed an *irrational* person.

This brought her to gambling. If she staked the sword on a game and lost it by just a hair’s breadth, she would still get most of the cost of the sword back, and she would get it right away.

*Selling* an unlicensed sword was suspicious; *Gambling* with the one you just found in some ruins was more than solid enough to pass muster for the sorts of men who went to gambling parlors. It took her some time to find a high stakes gambling parlor once they stopped in a large city three days into their journey, but the game was simplicity itself.

Of course, there was a downside: since she had to agree on how much the sword cost with her fellow gamblers, she only walked out with around a hundred spirit stones, as opposed to two hundred she could have gotten from Cheng Dao back in Xiaohongshan. It was still more money than she ever had in her hands in her entire life.

Unfortunately, the risk of doing this again was simply too great. If her fellow gamblers felt something was off, they would drag her to the spirit hunters, and she would have all the same problem on her hands.

Humming a tune and with a small fortune in her pocket, she headed out to the market. It was time for a little shopping spree.

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Qian Shanyi hefted two different bottles of pills that could fortify her skin against burns, shaking them slightly to gauge their weight. One of them felt a bit heavier, but she also thought the glass it was made of was slightly thicker…

“May I also recommend these excellent Ivory Dragon Pills?” the shopping assistant droned in her ear, still trying to upsell her despite her valiant attempts to ignore him. “A young cultivator like you could benefit greatly from having your bones strengthened. A single broken leg could stop you from cultivating for weeks on end!”

She glanced at the bottle in his hands. It was some supplement made by a local alchemist, marketed towards loose cultivators, presumably because they wouldn’t know any better. The road of cultivation was paved in money, and if you wanted to, you could drain any fortune in a single breath. Even if the supplement worked as described, there were much higher priorities when purchasing cultivation aids - first formations for gathering spiritual energy, then general healing pills, then pills that would handle specialized injuries, then items tailored towards your particular cultivation method or towards some specific purpose. Priority for purchasing supplements that could, at best, offer a very marginal advantage, was, roughly speaking, “never”.

“You’d be surprised. But my bones are fine,” she said, turning fully towards him, “I assume you have a scale? I would like to weigh the pills inside of these two bottles.”

“The weights are written on the bottles, honorable customer.” The shopping assistant bowed, put aback by her change of topic.

“I have eyes that can see, I assure you.” She snorted, shaking her bottle for emphasis. “I don’t trust the labels. These pills are made by a local alchemist, not by a large sect with a reputation

at stake - how am I supposed to know if they have followed the recipe correctly, or if you balanced the pills between the bottles well? Plenty of unscrupulous sneaks try to pawn off subpar products."

"Honorable customer, are you claiming our shop lies about what we sell?" The shopping assistant grimaced as if she forced him to eat an entire crate of lemons.

"If you claim you could never make a mistake, then I suppose I am!" She laughed. "Junior, you are a thousand years too young to try to trick me. Get the scale out, I have a right to weigh the products I am purchasing. Or shall we involve the empire? They would be happy to take your money for violating the mercantile codex."

"These pills are sealed, and would not last as long if we open the bottles," he said, his grimace only worsening at the mention of the empire.

"That is your problem, not mine," she shook her head. Honestly, some people.

A couple hours later - and sixty spirit stones lighter - she headed back to the ship, loaded up with medicines, talismans, and a dozen long knives she purchased from the market.

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When she came back to the yacht, she found Wu Lanhua speaking to an unfamiliar cultivator, dressed in all white, with short hair and a muscular build, with a long black box strapped to his back. He seemed to be around thirty years old, and was around the high edge of the middle of the refinement stage. He was gesticulating wildly, while she seemed amused, one of her hands on his shoulder as she tried to get him to calm down.

When Qian Shanyi walked onto the deck, Wu Lanhua noticed her, and waved her over.

"Yishan! How timely for you to return - we were just talking about you," Wu Lanhua said, gesturing to the man in front of her. "This is honorable immortal Wang Niu, my previous immortal chef."

Wang Niu gave her a cold stare, and she raised an eyebrow at him, but bowed in greeting.

"A pleasure," she said, "I am always open to exchanging pointers with a fellow chef."

"You call yourself a chef?" He sneered. "Wu Lanhua told me that you still need help from mortals. How long have you been practicing the great Dao of cooking?"

"Three months, if you mean my own personal journey, away from my teacher," she lied easily, "of what relevance is it?"

"Three months?" He bulged his eyes, before turning back to Wu Lanhua. "This is ridiculous. This woman is barely an apprentice, let alone a chef."

“I see you haven’t even learned how to insult others properly, in all your years of practice.” She shook her head. “Why is this man here, asking questions about me, Lanhua?”

Wang Niu seemed ready to make a retort, but Wu Lanhua put a hand on his shoulder, and he stepped back.

“Well, Yishan, he has put me in a delicate situation.” She shook her head. “He was away on sect business for several months, but now he is back, and wants to take over the cooking for me. Unfortunately, I already signed a contract with you that you will be my only immortal chef for as long as you stay on my yacht.”

“So?” She raised an eyebrow, “If he was so incompetent he couldn’t even manage to hold onto his position, I don’t see why I should step aside to give him face.”

Wang Niu’s lips twitched, but he stayed silent.

“The trouble is that I have already had a contract with him,” Wu Lanhua sighed, “I believed that we broke it before he left, but it appears I was mistaken.”

“How uncharacteristically forgetful of you,” Qian Shanyi said, rolling her eyes, “But I still don’t see the problem. He can travel to Xiaohongshan and be your chef there as much as he wants. *Our* contract only concerns the ship.”

“I don’t suppose that would suffice, honorable immortal Wang?” Wu Lanhua turned to him, “You have received my message about my wedding, I hope? I would very much love to get a renewed taste of your cooking. I would be even glad to pay your rates until I return.”

“This is unacceptable.” Wang Niu shook his head. “This woman defiles the knives she holds by calling herself a chef. That she works in my place is an insult. The only outcome I would accept is a chef’s duel, with her title at stake.”

“A chef duel?” She laughed. “For what purpose? I refuse.”

“Of course,” he grinned, “An amateur, and a coward. What else could I expect?”

“Is it not cowardice to spit in the face of your patron by leaving your station, and then run back with your tail between your legs as soon as you hear they found a better replacement?” She shook her head. “I do not doubt your cooking is better, so is this how you use your title? Bullying juniors like me? Much like building foundation cultivators do not cross swords with refinement stage ones - for the outcome is never in doubt - there would be no purpose in this. Perhaps I should write a letter to your sect, to find out what they think of you soiling their reputation like this.”

Once again, he reared up to respond, but was stopped by Wu Lanhua's hand.

"Would you mind if I speak with Lan Yishan alone, honorable immortal Wang?" Wu Lanhua asked. "Just for a couple minutes."

A short jerk of his head was all the response they needed, and soon enough they were alone in the yacht's kitchen. The bright midday sun has heated the walls, and the air inside felt hot and stuffy, until Wu Lanhua pressed her hand against a glass case housing a talisman on one of the walls, and cold air spread throughout the room.

"I think you should go through with the duel, Yishan," Wu Lanhua said, settling down on one of the chairs.

"Because you orchestrated it?" she asked sardonically.

"Indeed, and I am afraid I must apologize." Wu Lanhua shook her head sadly. "I thought seeing the two of you meet would be amusing, but I did not expect Wang Niu to react quite so explosively."

"Is that why you 'forgot' about your contract?"

"Of course I didn't forget," Wu Lanhua scrunched her nose at her, "but I couldn't very much tell him that, could I? I didn't expect *him* to remember, in truth, let alone make it an issue. But now that he has, we hardly have a choice. Either you go through this duel, or he would drag us both into an imperial court to resolve this contract nonsense, which could take weeks."

"Which you already knew would happen when we set off," Qian Shanyi said, pursing her lips, "I am beginning to think this is simply another ploy to delay my travels."

"What was I supposed to do, tell you that you can't work for me on the off chance that a fool who had not shown his face in months and who never cared about his contract - so much so that I doubted he even *read* it - would make it an issue?" Wu Lanhua said, annoyance clear in her tone. "I expected envy to motivate him to come back, that much is true - I need an immortal chef for my wedding, and if you won't be there, then it has to be him. If not that, I hoped I could have another angle to convince you to stay. But no, I did not seek to sabotage you directly."

She seemed legitimately annoyed, at least, so perhaps she was speaking the truth - Qian Shanyi could certainly empathize with a scheme falling down on your own head.

"Besides, what would be so bad if you accepted the duel?" Wu Lanhua continued, "It's not like he said you have to get off my boat. Win or lose, I will get you to your destination - even though you *still* have not *told* me exactly where it is. All you would lose is some meaningless title and a bit of honor. These aren't the old days of barbaric honor killings, nobody will allow him to cripple you on the spot, so what use is it to you?"

“I suppose this is only clear if you are a cultivator,” Qian Shanyi sighed, “Lanhua, he said the duel would be over my title of immortal chef - if I lose, I could never practice cooking in public again. If I did anyways, then no cultivator who has heard of the duel would deal with me ever again - and these news spread quickly. The empire has mostly killed the honor-bound relations between the ordinary people, but among us cultivators, they are still very much alive.”

“Is that also why you are pursuing this bizarre chase?”

“My accomplice wouldn’t talk, and I am not so blind as to actually care about the principle,” she said, shaking her head, “but if it makes it easier for you, you can think of it that way. In this case, the difference between my own rules and that of others is hardly worth noting.”

They sat in silence for a while, thinking.

“Could you elect to be the judge, and then simply rule the duel in my favor?” she asked, “There is no heavenly law that prevents the judges from ruling dishonestly.”

“If this would be an official duel, then I do not think I could,” Wu Lanhua pursed her lips, “I am known for being fair and impartial in all my dealings, no matter the circumstances, or at least as far as that befits a merchant. If the news got out of my blatant favoritism, it would cost me greatly. If he agrees to me being a judge in the first place, *and* the duel is close, then perhaps I could swing it slightly in your favor - but no more than that.”

“Yet you expect me to sacrifice my own honor?”

“It does seem hypocritical of me, when you put it that way. I suppose I could compensate you for it, should you lose?” Wu Lanhua said.

“There are very few things that would be of comparable value to me being able to cultivate freely.” Qian Shanyi shook her head, pacing around the kitchen.

If she rejected the duel, she would be either stuck here for weeks or forced to abandon her current identity, hard as it was to acquire. If she accepted it, and lost, she would at best be forced to abandon her most marketable skill and a core pillar of Three Obediences Four Virtues, and at worst be treated like an honourless wretch - even more so than she already was. Compensation from Wu Lanhua would be of little value, as she would have to stay here to get it - which would mean abandoning her quest for Wang Yonghao, and then dying to a heavenly tribulation. If she won…

*Could* she win?

“What can you tell me about him?” She turned to Wu Lanhua. “You spoke of his cooking, but what is his sect like? How long had he been a chef?”

“He comes from the Infinite Garden Pavilion.” Wu Lanhua answered immediately. “One of my many suppliers. They position themselves as producers of gourmet ingredients - plant and beast alike - though I think these days about half of their income actually comes from sanitation work. Cooking has never been their main or even secondary focus, but they *have* produced several excellent chefs. I think Wang Niu’s master is the sect’s main cook. Wang Niu himself has been training as a chef for more than a decade, out of which he spent a good five years in my employ, on and off, I think in order to get more experience.”

She frowned, thinking things through, looking around the kitchen. To win against a chef with a decade of experience on her… There *was* a path forwards here, though a fragile one.

“Did you hear something you liked?” Wu Lanhua asked her.

*Hmm…*

“Alright, fine,” Qian Shanyi said, feeling a bit excited at her new scheme, “But I am going to need him to agree to some concessions.”

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When they returned to the deck, Wang Niu was still there, as incensed as he was when he left, talking to  Liu Fakuang who had returned while they were away.

“Well?” He asked, nodding at her. “Did you recover a bit of sanity and courage? Or will you simply bow your head here and now?”

“Something like that.” Qian Shanyi smiled. “But if this duel is to happen, there will need to be some restrictions.”

He stared at her coldly.

“First of all,” she said, raising one finger, “let us not waste any time by involving the city. We will cook here on the yacht, today, in the evening. I will leave the selection of the judges to Wu Lanhua - I trust you would agree with that?”

“I have a friend in the city who would love to come.” Wu Lanhua smiled. “Me, my dear Fakuang, and my friend - I trust that would suffice?”

She and Wang Niu nodded together.

“Second,” Qian Shanyi continued, raising a second finger, “choosing what dish to cook, and thus what ingredients to purchase, is as much a skill of the chef as the preparation itself. To make sure we do not change our minds during the duel itself, we will both write down what dish we intend to prepare, seal them inside of envelopes, and give them to Wu Lanhua for safekeeping. Of course, if we can’t prepare that dish we will concede defeat.”

“I can tell you what I will cook right now, if you think this will help you,” he snorted, “I do not need cheap tricks to destroy you.”

“That isn’t necessary.” She shook her head. “Please use the envelope.”

“Fine,” he said, “what else?”

“Third is merely a continuation of that principle - once we enter the kitchen to cook, with all our ingredients, none of us leave until we are done. It would also help guard against cheating.”

“Sure,” he shrugged.

“Fourth is a way to equalize our experiences,” she said, “A chef must be economical as well, or else they will ruin their patron - whatever meal you cook, any ingredients you purchase must amount to no more than a single silver yuan. I, on the other hand, will have a budget of three yuan, to compensate for my lesser skill.”

That finally gave him some pause.

“I will supply the wine,” Wu Lanhua volunteered, and Wang Niu nodded again.

“Fifth is a question of the stakes.” She smiled again. “If I am to stake my title, you have to stake something as well, no? I want that box on your back, as well as whatever is in it right now. It must be valuable, for you to be carrying it all the time.”

“Absolutely not,” he sneered, “you reach *far* beyond your station, girl.”

“Of course,” she grinned, “a pompous fool and a coward, all empty talk. What else could I expect? You want a duel without stakes? If you can’t take the heat, then *stay out of my kitchen*.”

He scowled in response to that.

“I will make you pay for those words,” he ceded through clenched teeth, “This is an invaluable set of tools, given to me by my teacher, and you want it to equal your worthless title?”

“Fine, I will match it with two hundred spirit stones and my sword,” she waved her hand easily, “I do not have that much on me, so if I lose, I will work for you until I will pay it off.”

Malice creeped into his scowl, until it slowly warped into a smile. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Liu Fakuang look at her in surprise.

“Work for me? Fine, then I accept these stakes!” He said quietly, no doubt thinking of some horrible thing he could do to her in response. It was, in the end, all as she expected.

*Dance to my tune, foolish puppet,* she cheered in her heart. It was time to bring this negotiation to a close.

“Finally, there is a question of cheating,” she said, “I do not want us to constantly debate whether either one of us has violated the rules in some way, or done something objectionable, or we’d be here all night. Neither do I want to debate what counts as cheating beforehand. Three accusations, proven by a contestant: whoever wants to accuse the other of cheating will have to place the accusation and prove it to the satisfaction of our judges, and if they fail to do so three times, then they will concede the duel and pay out triple their stake. If they manage it, of course, then they win the duel, and their opponent pays out triple.”

“Is that your angle?” He asked. “Cheating? Of course, you have no skill to rely on.”

“If you believe I cheated, you just have to prove it,” she shrugged, “No, I simply do not want you to argue all night that I cheated once victory will be mine.”

“Ridiculous,” he scowled, “but fine, I accept these terms. I will see you in the evening.”

She bowed to him respectfully, though he did not return the gesture.

“Let the better chef win,” she lied with a smile.

But there was no chance of that, for he had already lost.