CHAPTER 10: FIND A FEAST AMONG FORGOTTEN RUINS

Qian Shanyi picked up a small axe and went out searching for bookshelves to cannibalize.

Toxic sludge in most of the cavern was at least a foot thick, and if she wanted to pass through it, she would need stilts.

Basic stilts were easy to make, and needed only two parts: a long leg, and a short stick coming out of the leg where the foot would be placed. She decided to use long planks from the side of the shelves as the legs, and attach the footrest by cutting a hole for it directly through the leg.

She did her best to pick out good planks, but *everything* in this place had some amount of rot. Since she couldn't rely on the sturdiness of any individual piece of wood, she made four separate pairs of stilts, and brought them over to the gazebo hill to try walking on them.

Sure enough, three separate stilts broke while she was learning to walk, but after an hour she had figured out how to move around at a good speed. The other five weathered the tests, but she had no way to know if their structural flaws were simply concealing themselves.

[Author note: I moved the pit trap introduction to chapter 8 - it will be there in public release. For now, here is how it is introduced:

Before climbing onto the rope to explore the sect, she decided to prepare a trap. Many types of demon beasts made their dens in spots with high concentrations of spiritual energy, and if she disturbed one, she would end up in danger. Even though Wang Yonghao had gone through the sect before, with his luck, she couldn't be sure that there were no dangers remaining. If she had to retreat, she wanted to have extra options.

She quickly dug a hole wide enough to make a large animal fall in, and connected it to a small hole with a short trench. She put fire treasures into the larger hole, and turned it into a pit trap by covering it with a square of Silvered Devil Moth Silk borrowed from the chiclotron. The hole was far too wide for the silk to rest naturally, and she chopped off some wood from the gazebo to support it.

In the small hole, she put wood- and metal-type treasures, and then blocked off the connecting trench with a curtain of Silvered Devil Moth Silk. Earth-type spiritual energy from the air surged into the pile of metal treasures, and from there flowed into the wood ones, supercharging them. All she would need to do is yank the curtain away, and then the larger hole would immediately turn into a firestorm from the wood-type spiritual energy superheating the fire-type treasures inside.

That this would make the sect marginally safer by removing the poison spiritual energy from the air was a nice bonus.

]

Before setting off, she checked over her pit trap near the gazebo. She was probably just being paranoid. If there were any demon beasts left alive in the poison fog, they would have heard her moving around during the last day, and came over to investigate.

With her trap prepared, she armed herself with anything she could think of. If she needed to go back for something, she would have to track across a field of toxic sludge, and that was not something she was looking forward to.

On her hip, she had her sword, and a small axe that was more convenient for chopping through walls of decaying wood. Three replacement stilts were carried on her back in a crude sling fashioned from one of her Silvered Devil Moth Silk ropes, and in her right hand, she carried the longest spear she had, to poke ahead of where she walked and check for gaps and holes. Fly whisk was tied to her forearm with a short cut of rope - this way, it took more focus to channel her spiritual energy into it than through the pores on her palm, but she wanted to keep her hands free.

She checked herself over before setting off. There were other things she considered bringing, but ultimately, her greatest defense against any threat was to run away - and the more things she carried, the slower she would move.

Finally, she sighed, and got on her stilts. There was no point in delaying the inevitable.

She slowly trod across the sea of poison towards her freedom, following the paved path down the hill. It was framed by trees - dead and rotting, but most of them still standing tall. Poison fog pooled in recesses and gaps of terrain, and she had to walk around them. Her stilts clacked quietly against the paved road beneath the thick green sludge, her movements too slow to make the sludge slurp.

The cavern was split in half by a stream of water, with a broad bridge over it. It must have flowed back in the past, but the water was stagnant now, sludge sinking down to the bottom of the stream. She passed several other small buildings built into the sides of the cavern, but delayed their exploration for now. At the far back end of the cavern, the road headed downwards as the cave narrowed down.

As she headed down, her eyes glistened in excitement. She could faintly see the fog in the distance, glistening green - which meant there was light. And light meant an exit.

The passage narrowed down to the width of a horse carriage before widening again into a smaller cavern, still flooded with the poisonous fog. Fortunately for her, there was a wooden walkway built into the side wall, slippery and covered in toxic slime. She paid even more attention to her footing as she stepped onto it - if it broke, she would fall into the clouds of death below her.

The walkway led to a brick wall built across the entire width of the cavern. Down below, in the poisonous fog, the wall was broken up by an open gate, dim light flooding through it. This must have been where the fog spilled out of the sect, pushed out by the air created by her fly whisk.

The walkway ended in a short set of stairs, leading up to a closed door. With great difficulty, Qian Shanyi managed to inch her way up and open the door. Some poisonous fog leaked out of the door, and she waited until she could safely enter, ducking her head under the top of the door.

The room inside was narrow, and almost completely clean of the slime. There were some boxes inside, a table with a pair of cups, and a single bed in the back, much better preserved than anything in the center of the sect. Opposite to the door she came in, there was a second door, leading to the other side of the wall.

She opened it, and blinked her eyes. The cavern on the other side opened up, its bottom completely filled with the poisonous fog. The paved road headed through the gates and up towards a ledge at the far end of the cavern. Beyond the ledge, she could see blue open skies. The walkway led around the side, heading in the same direction, completely free of the slime.

Qian Shanyi put her stilts up against the wall in the gateway house, and stepped out onto the walkway, her heart trembling with excitement. She could smell the forest beyond. Finally, freedom!

As she headed towards the open skies, she almost missed the bear.

It bounded up towards the walkway, deceptively quiet on its giant paws, and she only noticed it when it was a short thirty meters away. It was large, at least as long as she was tall, and reaching up to her shoulders in height. Her eyes widened, and she fled back towards the gatehouse as fast as she could.

She burst into the gatehouse, slamming the door behind herself. In a flurry of motion, she yanked the table in front of the door and jammed one of her stilts in between the door and the opposite wall. This barricade would not hold for long, but it would buy her precious seconds as she could already hear the walkway behind her cracking under the bear’s weight.

She jumped on her stilts and leaped out of the other door. As she came down on the walkway, one of the planks underneath her gave out, and the stilt went right through. She tried to pull it out, but it was jammed tight.

Behind her, she heard the bear slam into the door, and the crack of her jamming stilt splintering. It was still eerily silent, it’s huffing barely audible above the blood thumping in her ears.

Qian Shanyi yanked one of her last two spare stilts off her back and started running down the walkway as fast as she could.

The bear burst through the door and out of the gatehouse by the time she reached the end of the walkway. She didn't dare look back. In her mind, she counted the seconds before the bear would be onto her.

She heard the sound of wood splintering behind her, and a loud thud as something heavy fell on the ground. This time, the bear roared: the walkway must have splintered under it. If she was lucky, the poison fog would kill it.

Oh, who was she kidding?

Heavy thuds and the slick sounds of the bear slicing through the toxic sludge behind her confirmed her thoughts. She was up in the large cavern by now, but she could already tell she wouldn't make it to the gazebo hill in time. She needed another way out.

She moved off the path and towards one of the dead trees. With a powerful leap, she flew up and grabbed one of the branches, pulling herself up on top of the trunk. The tree groaned under her, but held.

She finally turned around. She couldn't see the bear in the darkness, but she could hear it huffing as it was coming closer.

Her stilts were stuck in the toxic sludge below, mere meters away from the trunk, so she was now stuck here. She'd need to figure out a way to reach them, once the bear succumbed to the poison. She took her last stilt off her back, not wanting it to get in her way. At least she should be out of bear's reach here.

The bear bounded up to the tree and leaped onto the trunk, starting to climb. The tree groaned under its weight.

"Leave me alone, you bastard!", she shouted at it, spinning her spear in her hands, "Can you not seek death on your own lonesome?"

She thrust her spear straight at its head, drawing blood. The bear roared again, trying to bat the weapon aside with its claws. She had almost no experience with the spear, but the bear was stuck, unable to climb with just one paw.

The tree finally cracked in half under their collective weight, sending her and the bear down into the sludge below. She barely managed to put her legs under herself, avoiding being dunked into the sludge up to her head. It came all the way up to her knees, feeling cold on her ankles. Her spear was wrenched out of her hands by the sudden fall, lost somewhere in the sludge.

“I will make you into *soup*, you oversized squirrel!”, she roared, unsheathing her sword. The bear responded in kind, getting up from the sludge.

Instead of trying to debate it, she raised her arm and channeled her spiritual energy into the fly whisk, sending a blast of air into the sludge just in front of the bear. The air hit the sludge, sending a splatter of it into the bear’s muzzle and eyes. She spun around and ran towards the bridge, toxic sludge burning on her ankles. The bear roared behind her, giving chase.

This time, she managed to get all the way to the bridge before the bear was on her, its jaws dripping with drool and death. She dodged to the side - one of its eyes was still covered by the sludge, and the acrid smell must have covered her scent. Her long hair was glowing and whipping all over the place, further disorienting the animal.

She was doing fine, scoring small cuts on the animal’s paws, when she felt the back of her foot hit the bridge railing. She had nowhere left to dodge.

She blasted air into the sludge in between them again, sending more liquid into the bear’s muzzle, but it was too late. The bear swung blindly, and she only barely managed to bring up her sword in time to block.

Weakened as she was by hunger, injury, poison and the change of her cultivation law, she couldn’t manage to resist the powerful blow. Her sword was pushed up against her body, and her spiritual shield shattered. The paw sent her flying down the bridge, skipping through the sludge like a stone over water.

As she hit the ground, she came down badly on her already broken leg. Barely healed, the fracture sheared again, and she screamed in pain. Fighting against her mind’s desire to black out, she pulled her leg back together, and slowly got back up on her shaking legs. She felt a shooting pain every time she drew a breath: her ribs were probably broken too. By some miracle, she kept a grip on her sword.

The bear was huffing somewhere on the bridge, no doubt trying to clear its eyes off the sludge again. The hit sent her closer to the gazebo hill, and she limped over there, fighting through the pain. She heard it bounding towards her again, but she already reached her trap, and set it into an active state by pulling the curtain out. She stepped to the other side of the large hole and stood her ground.

The bear bounded up the hill, heading straight for her. She drew her small axe and threw it straight at its head: the more angry it was, the better.

“Now lie down and accept your fate,” she spit through her clenched teeth, as the bear’s front paws came down on the trap’s cover. Its weight broke straight through the wooden planks keeping it in place, and it plummeted head-first into the hole. Dense fire-type spiritual energy in the hole burst out in a pillar of fire, a rush of air covering up the bear’s panicked roars.

Qian Shanyi turned around and started limping towards the Inner World, not waiting for the bear to die. She was covered head to toe in poison, and needed to wash it off immediately.

She reached the Inner World's entrance when she heard the bear bounding after her again. Fur on the front of its body was charred black, and it was moving a lot slower now, but it was still alive.

Qian Shanyi scowled at it, and grabbed the rope she used to descend into the Inner World. She waited until the bear was within the gazebo itself before leaping in, baiting it to follow.

She came into the Inner World with some speed, sliding a good distance down the rope, using it to swing away from the entrance portal. The bear leaped in after her, unable to see through the opaque entrance portal, and plummeted down through the thirty meters of empty air. It hit the ground with a crack, leaving a small pit.

Somehow, it was still not dead, and was trying to get back up on its paws. Qian Shanyi swung on her rope in its direction, leaped off, and plunged her sword in its neck, severing its spinal cord.

The bear dropped to the ground and drew its last breath. She put her foot on its head and yanked her sword out.

At least now she had something to eat for dinner.

She quickly stripped down and started putting together a bath from Igneocopper bricks and Blue Tear Stones. She was covered head to toe in the sludge, where she had been sent into it by the bear's paws, and her skin all across her body was rapidly growing redder from the poison: she could only hope that it lost enough potency that she would survive this.

While the water was accumulating in an old trench, she went over to one of the old fire nodes where the ground was desiccated to the point of turning into sand. Dust bath was not as good as washing herself with water, but it was faster, and she was working against time.

She got the shakes by the time she was done with her bath. She touched her forehead: she had a fever now. Her body felt weak, but she pushed herself to put Ice Crystal Bars on top of the bear corpse - she didn't want the meat to spoil. Then, she laid down on the grass, waiting for her body to fight off the poison it had already absorbed.

At some point, she lost consciousness. When she awoke, she didn't know how much time had passed: she did not refill her clocks the whole day.

This was her third time losing consciousness in this world fragment, and she was worrying it was becoming a habit.

Her body still felt weak, but a bit better than before. It seemed that her short trip through the toxic sludge came just short of killing her.

Her stomach grumbled, and she slowly got up on her shaking legs. It was time to cook a proper meal.

The bear was very large. With how weak she was, she wasn't about to try and butcher it in its entirety. Instead, she took an axe from the treasury, and chopped off its hind leg.

She dragged the leg over to the old ditch she used as a bath, to wash it off the toxic sludge that still covered it. Having cleaned the leg, she constructed a stove out of Igneocopper bricks, put her pan shield on top, and consulted her jade slate for advice on how to cook the leg. There were two things she wanted to know - how to check the meat for poison, and how to cut the leg apart to preserve as much of the meat as possible. Fortunately for her, the bear didn't have a great quantity of spiritual energy in its body, so at least she didn't need to worry about that.

To think that a mere animal could bring her this close to dying.

There were helpful diagrams on how to skin and butcher animals of many different body types on her jade slate, and she followed the instructions easily. But the question of wherever it was ruined by the toxic sludge proved much more complex.

The basic problem was that there was no such thing as poison, because "poison" was simply any substance that would be detrimental to your body - but what was detrimental would depend on many different factors, such as your current condition, specifics of your cultivation, amount and location of your injuries, and so on. For example, if your body had too little yin spiritual energy, then an increase in your yin spiritual energy would be good, but if it already had too much, then it would be quite bad.

Human bodies were incredibly complex, and cultivator bodies even more so. In general, it was not possible to determine how an unknown substance would affect your body before eating it - at best, you could make an educated guess.

She did find a simple technique that could take a sample of a known substance, and then identify how much of it was in an ingredient. She compared the sludge (which she knew was poisonous) to her skin (which she knew contained poison, since she still felt weak), and to Wang Yonghao (who was still asleep, and definitely wasn't poisoned). Then, she compared it to the meat in the bear leg.

Based on the comparison, she thought that if she were to cut off the top layer of the meat, she should be fine - the remainder had less poison than her own muscles. She supposed that when the bear died, its blood stopped circulating the poison through its body, preserving most of the muscular tissue. This was not a sure bet: the meat might have reacted with the poison,

alchemically changing into a different substance entirely, absorbing the poison in the process. But she felt safe enough to risk it.

Soon enough, bear shoulder stakes were sizzling on her pan. She watched them hawkishly, referring back to her jade slate for how best to control heat. She added some spirit wine into the pan: bear fat served admirably in place of oil, but the liquid should make it easier to cook. Her hunger rose up again, and she couldn't help salivating at the sight of the browning meat.

When the steaks were done, she carefully cut them apart into small chunks, and tried one of them with a dagger. The meat was tough, unsalted, and prepared without any spices. On top of that, she ended up charring the bottom of the stake, while the center was undercooked. It was, objectively, about as badly prepared as it could be.

It was the best damn meat she had ever eaten in her entire life.

Just as she was feeling euphoric from finally eating her fill in many days, she heard Wang Yonghao stir. It seems that the smell of meat had finally woken him up.

CHAPTER 11: FEED THE HUNGRY WITH A SINGLE PAN

Wang Yonghao slowly got up off the ground, rubbing his bleary eyes.

"How long was I out?" he groaned.

"I told you, you are a lightweight," Qian Shanyi said.

"I am *not* a lightweight -," he said in an exasperated tone, turning to face her. As his eyes fell on her, his face blushed red, and he turned away, covering his eyes with his hand.

"Why are you naked?!" He exclaimed.

Qian Shanyi looked down on herself. The world fragment was still warm, so she didn't bother putting another set of robes on after her previous one was soaked in poison.

"What are you, a baby?" She sighed, getting up and heading towards the pile of robes that served as her bed. "Never seen a naked tit?"

"Just…put something on, please."

She didn't respond, and quickly searched through her pile of clothing. She picked out her first robe because it fit her best out of everything that was available, but the second best was not half bad either.

"There, all done," she said, tying off her belt. "Your highness can rest assured that your eyes will remain unmolested."

She headed back to her pan. She had a bear stake to finish.

Wang Yonghao finally turned around, and slowly approached her, looking cautiously at the large bear in the middle of the world fragment.

"While you were out, I found the exit," Qian Shanyi said, quickly dealing with her stake with a pair of daggers, "we can leave after picking up a couple things from the sect."

Wang Yonghao sat down in front of her, eyeing her meat hungrily. She saw him reach out for a piece, and slapped his hand away with the flat of her blade. He yanked his hand back.

"What do you think you are doing? That's my food." She said.

"Are you too greedy to share? I'm hungry," he said, looking hurt.

"He who doesn't work doesn't eat," she noted with a wise look on her face. "If you want food, then see that bear? Drag it to the edge of the world fragment, and turn it over on its back, we'll need to butcher it later."

Wang Yonghao threw a glance at the bear.

"It must be more than six hundred kilos," he whined, "can't you at least help?"

"So? You are a big guy, you'll manage it," she cut back. With her leg and ribs broken, she wasn't going to be dragging anything unless forced to at sword point.

Wang Yonghao looked uncertainly between the meat on the shield and the heavy bear. She made sure to moan a bit as she swallowed the next piece of meat, smacking her lips in satisfaction.

"It's *so* good, you can't believe it," she said.

"Oh fine," he scowled, got up, and walked dejectedly towards the bear.

"Careful, that slime it's covered in is poisonous," she called after him. He threw an accusatory glance back at her, but didn't say anything.

He circled the bear a couple times, and finally decided to pull it by its front paws, where most of the slime was burned off by the flames. While she watched him drag it away, she took out her jade slate and made sure she remembered the butchering steps correctly.

Finally done with her meal, she set aside the daggers she used to cook and eat food, picked up a longer dagger she would use for the bear, as well as a short axe, and headed after Wang Yonghao.

When she arrived, he was massaging his own shoulders, and looking at her warily. He seemed a bit shaky on his feet: it seems that the effects of the egg have not completely faded. She motioned for him to grab hold of the bear.

"Pull its front paws apart, and as far away from its body as you can - I need its chest and stomach taut," she commanded. Now that she looked at the bear from this angle, she could see that it was female - this would make the entire process simpler.

Wang Yonghao did as she said, grumbling throughout. It was nice having minions - she would have had so much trouble doing this alone.

"I'm only doing this for the food," he said, seeing the look on her face.

Well, some adjustment was still needed, but he'll get there in time.

"Sure," she said, choosing to keep her plans hidden, "just keep holding like that, this will take a bit."

She stepped down on the one back paw of the bear, fixing it in place. In retrospect, it was a bad idea to cut off its other back paw in advance, but damn it, she was so hungry.

She sliced vertically through the pelt with small, shallow cuts, trying to slowly get through the layers of fat and muscle. The flesh was stiff from rigor mortis and the freezing temperature - Ice Crystal Bars might have prevented decomposition, but they sure didn't help with the butchering.

“Why are you going so slow?” Wang Yonghao echoed her thoughts. “Can't you just, you know, take a sword and slice it apart in one blow?”

“Because if I fuck up I might pierce the intestines, and I don't want poop all over the meat I will be eating,” she said slowly, concentrating on her work. She opened a vertical gap into the body cavity, showing the entrails, and was slowly widening it. “This is my first time doing this, don't distract me.”

She heard a sound from Wang Yonghao, and looked up to see him go green in the face at the sight. She snorted.

“What did you think was inside the animals you eat?” she said.

“I just…didn't think about it, alright?” he said, looking away.

“Well, then you will like this part,” she smirked, putting down her dagger, and picking up the axe. “I’m going to need to widen this rib cage.”

She stepped around the bear and started chopping upwards, straight through the middle of the rib cage. In a few quick chops, the rib cage was split in half, and she stretched it apart with her hands to look inside.

She rolled up her sleeves, picked up her dagger, and reached deep into the body cavity - the next step was to cut the connective tissues keeping the organs attached to it. Wang Yonghao tried backing away, and she yelled at him to keep holding the bear so that it wouldn’t tip over.

“Why are you so disgusted by this?” she said, her hands up to the shoulder in guts and blood. “You have all the same organs inside of you.”

“*My* organs stay on the *inside*,” Wang Yonghao muttered, looking as far away as he could manage without becoming an owl. “I don’t need to think about them as long as that is true.”

“Thinking about your organs is good for cultivation,” she said, slowly pulling the pile of entrails out of the bear’s body cavity. Her own broken rib sent a spike of pain through her body, and she suppressed a groan. “For example, take the heart,” she picked up the bear’s large heart to punctuate her point, “there are two major meridians that pass directly through your heart, and one of the seven dantians also sits right on top of it. Out of all the organs in the body, it has the highest concentration of spiritual energy - which is also why it tends to explode from severe feng shui deviation or spiritual energy overload. Condition of your heart is directly linked to the condition of your meridian network, and you can monitor one by monitoring the other. The better you understand your organs, the faster you can cultivate.”

She threw the heart onto clean grass nearby, and started picking her way through the other organs to see what was edible, checking them for poison.

“All the more reason not to think of them,” Wang Yonghao muttered. Qian Shanyi stopped what she was doing and looked at him.

“You *don’t* want to cultivate faster?” she asked incredulously, gesturing with bloody hands. “Every cultivator wants that.”

“I want a normal life!” he exclaimed. “This luck already pushes me much harder than I can keep up with.”

He looked at her clearly incredulous face and laughed.

“You don’t believe me?” he said, ”Fine. How long did it take you to fully unblock your first dantian?”

She frowned. “Just about average, around two years. Why?”

“It took me one month,” Wang Yonghao said smugly.

“You liar,” she sneered.

“It’s what happened,” he said, folding his hands on his chest.

“How?” she said.

He shrugged. “Luck, like I say.”

“It’s impossible,” she flatly stated.

“Why not?” he asked, looking curious. “I am lucky at finding treasures. Why can’t I also cultivate faster?”

Qian Shanyi squinted at him. He seemed genuinely confused. “After a cultivator unblocks their first minor meridians by luck, their entire meridian network is still filled with impurities,” she started explaining, trying to keep herself calm. “They can’t circulate spiritual energy because there is no unblocked *path* for their energy to circulate through. The only thing they can do is keep their unblocked meridian filled with spiritual energy, and *wait* until it slowly washes away at the impurities on the path to one of their dantians. Only once at least a single full closed pathway has been partially cleared from the impurities, can they start to circulate their spiritual energy and actively purify their meridian network. Even with the high quality spiritual energy in your Inner World - ”

“I only got it much later,” Wang Yonghao shook his head. Qian Shanyi sighed in frustration.

“*It doesn’t matter*, because the quality of spiritual energy does nothing if you can’t circulate it,” she continued, “Local concentration of spiritual energy doesn’t matter either - early in cultivation, your meridians are so narrow that you can fill them up to bursting in a single breath. Learning how to manipulate your meridians helps, but at the end of the day, it is still just a waiting game until the first closed pathway clears up.”

She pointed a bloody finger at him. “Which is why you saying you did it in a *month* is a clear *lie*!” she said, triumphantly.

“What if I discovered a secret art for clearing the meridians faster?” he asked curiously. She could tell he wasn’t being serious, but she decided to humor him.

“Any secret art that could clear meridians faster without the cultivator circulating their spiritual energy could also be used to unblock them for ordinary people,” she said, “any sect that

developed such a secret art would take over the cultivation world, as they could turn ordinary people into cultivators whenever they wanted."

Wang Yonghao nodded, and scratched his head. "Well, I didn't really find such a secret art. But how about drugs?"

Qing Shanyi got a bad feeling.

"I have heard of some medicines that could loosen up the impurities," she said slowly, "but they are rare and expensive. I have never been given any. And besides, their effect plateaus - you need to take ten times as much for one tenth the effect. For example, young master Yao, the direct disciple of the Golden Rabbit Bay's city regent and the richest noble for many miles, still took a full year to open his first dantian. Are you saying you found some?..."

She trailed off, uncertainly. Wang Yonghao looked away guiltily.

"Well, not so much found as fell into a barrel, but yes," he said,

"A barrel?" she asked, incredulously.

"Yeah, a barrel," he laughed ruefully, "I think it was Asure Heart Cleansing Dew - I had to look it up later."

"You simply fell into an actual *barrel* of *Asure Heart Cleansing Dew?* It's measured in *drops!*" she clutched her head in her hands, paying no mind to the blood staining her hair. Her left eye was twitching violently.

"Yeah, I fell into some ruins," he explained, laughing slightly, "hit my head, spent a day within the barrel before I woke up. Absorbed most of it. After that, my first dantian unblocked pretty quickly."

"*How?*"

"Just…lucky, I guess?"

Qian Shanyi blinked, then stood up, and headed towards Wang Yonghao with a slight smile on her face. He backed away from her.

"Come here, I am not going to hurt you," she said, motioning with her bloody butchering dagger.

"Weren't you going to, uh, finish with the bear?" he laughed, backing away more.

"I'll get right back to it after I *strangle you* for being so disgustingly lucky!" she shouted, and set off after him. He turned around and ran away. Her legs felt sluggish from the aftereffects of the

poison, but he kept stumbling as the egg omelet was still affecting him, so they were actually fairly closely matched in speed.

When she chased him all the way to the edge of the world fragment, he circulated his spiritual energy, and jumped into the air, rising up on top of two clouds of fiery fireflies. She scowled up at him.

“Come back down here!” she said. Running around had calmed her down somewhat, but her blood was still throbbing angrily in her ears.

“I think I’ll stay here for now,” he said, wiping sweat off his forehead. “It feels safer.”

She squinted up at him, and pointed towards the rope hanging from the entrance of the world fragment. “See that rope?”, she said, ”Who do you think put it there? You really think I can’t reach you in the air?”

His face had the decency to grow white when he glanced at the rope hanging from the sky. She snorted, and turned away.

“Whatever,” she said, walking back towards the bear, “If you feel like flying, then fly around the sect, I need some materials. Pots and plates from the kitchens, tables, bookshelves, barrels - it is all going to be decaying and rusted, but I am sure we could salvage something from it. Oh, and there should be a pair of holes near the gazebo filled with heavenly materials and earthly treasures - bring them down here too.”

Wang Yonghao nodded shakily, and walked on air up to the World Fragment entrance. She considered wherever she should follow, but decided against it. There was a risk that Wang Yonghao would close the entrance and leave her stranded, but she estimated it to be minor. He was still clearly intimidated by her, and didn’t seem like the ruthless type that would simply wait for her to starve.

She got back to picking through the bear’s organs, and checking them for poison. The lungs and stomach were unsalvageable - the bear had breathed and swallowed far too much toxic slime during their chase. The liver seemed fine - Three Obediences Four Virtues, when discussing poisoned animals, mentioned that it might absorb poison, but she figured that the bear died before that could happen. The kidneys, spleen, and the heart were fine too.

After she was done with the organs, she went back to the body. She still had to skin it and break it into parts.

The bear’s pelt was soaked through with the poison slime, and would need to be thrown away. Her heart ached at the waste, but even if she could clean it, she had no idea how to tan leather. At least it kept the poison away from the meat.

Bear's jaw, one of the front paws, and many of the ribs were broken in the fall. The other bones were mostly fine, and she was careful to cut between the bones as she separated the meat into parts. She would find a use for the bones later.

The bear was covered in poison slime, so she set up a washing station. It was a simple construction - three different spears tied into a tripod, with a Blue Tear Stone and an Igneocopper bar hanging from the middle, wrapped in one of the spare sets of robes. Water produced by the Blue Tear Stone soaked the robes and flowed down, and made it easy to wash the meat before it could be stored in the cold water trenches of the chiclotron.

She piled everything she would be throwing away together. If not for the poison, she could have reused it for a compost pile, but she knew of no way to remove the poison.

By the time she was done, Wang Yonghao had bought back what she asked. Somehow, he seemed even more wary of her now - staying up in the air, stepping from one leg onto the other. She squinted at him.

"You want to ask something," she stated.

He cringed. "How did you get rid of the fog?" he finally said. "There was so much of it."

"I blew it away," she said matter-of-factly, washing her hands under the tripod. "Now, do you want those stakes?"

Wang Yonghao nodded vigorously.

"You'd need to come down then," she said, smiling at him.

His face went white again, and he swallowed.

She watched the stakes sizzling on the pan carefully. The heart of cultivation was constant improvement: as long as these stakes were cooked better than the last two, then eventually, she could cook them perfectly.

Wang Yonghao sat opposite her, sipping from a bottle of spirit wine. She glanced up at him, and he looked away. She sighed.

"I think I believe you about how quickly you cultivate," she said, bringing up their previous discussion. Hacking the bear corpse apart had brought her blood pressure back down, "It would fit the overall picture. But that does not explain why you think it is bad."

He groaned, and stayed silent for a while.

“Because my luck tailors itself to my realm,” he said, finally opening his mouth. “When I was in the low level of the refinement stage, I got into fights with other low level refinement stage cultivators. Now, they are high level ones. If I advance to the foundation establishment stage like this, then I couldn’t even walk into town without putting ordinary people in danger.”

“Your luck makes no sense,” she said, bluntly.

“Tell me about it,” he groaned further, flopping down on the ground.

“I mean it,” she said, flipping the stakes over. This time, she got the timing right: they were browned, but not charred. “It’s not just that it is absurd in scope. Your luck should depend on your desires - if you don’t want to cultivate, why would it push resources at you?”

“Are you saying I *want* this?” he asked exasperatedly, raising his head. “I don’t!”

“I am not saying anything,” she shook her head, “If your luck worked the same way it does for everyone else, it would not be anywhere as powerful. Maybe what it does has changed too.”

She took the stakes off the fire, and handed them over to Wang Yonghao. He bit into one, yelped, and started blowing on it to cool it down.

“The real question is, who in Heaven has your name on their desk, to grant you such luck?” she wondered out loud.

CHAPTER 12: STROLL AMONGST THE TREES WITH SEEKING EYES

Qian Shanyi reeled back the rope she used to descend into Wang Yonghao’s Inner World, and wrapped it around her waist. It had only been hanging from the gazebo column for about a day, but it felt like ages. The knot on the rope was hard, tightened to the limit after the many times that she had climbed up and down the rope.

Wang Yonghao stood next to her, looking around without a care in the world.

She prepared for the trip as well as she could, which was not very. With Wang Yonghao awake and conscious, there was no need to overload herself with tools which could be retrieved directly from the Inner World, but she still carried the fly whisk, her sword, and a small axe. Her spear, additional ropes, and everything else she could think of was arranged on the ground near the center of the Inner World, easy to grab in an emergency.

She didn’t want to waste the time to bring the poisoned earth out of the inner world, but they did throw out the remaining bear entrails before they had a chance to stink. This process wasn’t as bad as one might have feared - she made a makeshift lift by wrapping a rope around one of the

largest pots they took from the kitchens, and together, they made quick work of the garbage disposal.

Once the rope was drawn fully out of his Inner World, the entrance shrunk into a dot and vanished. All it took was a thought from Wang Yonghao to do it, and she wondered what would happen if it closed on someone's hand. Probably nothing good.

She tied off the rope on her waist, picked up a new pair of stilts, and nodded to Wang Yonghao.

"Shall we go?" she said, and walked down the hill. He quietly followed after her, walking on air. Clouds of dragonflies under his feet shed enough light that she didn't bother making her hair glow.

They got to the edge of the slime, and Qian Shanyi got on her stilts. Wang Yonghao got ahead of her, and walked backwards in front of her, with his hands folded behind his back. She ignored him.

"Why don't you fly?" he asked, "You said you could, before."

Qian Shanyi had already anticipated this question. If she was going to cooperate with Wang Yonghao closely, he was inevitably going to notice that she didn't do anything befitting of an old cultivation monster. This ruse would have to break eventually, but for now, she had ways to stall by relying on a series of implications.

She *didn't* actually say that she could fly - she only said she could reach him in the air, but she wasn't about to correct his misconception.

"My cultivation law is special, and I am doing recuperative training," she replied dismissively. "I don't use spiritual energy unless I have to."

"You know, I could have just carried you," he said.

"It's a good idea," she nodded, "it would make it much easier for me to reach your neck, if I needed to wring it."

After a long day of exploring the sect, removing the toxic fog, getting almost killed by the bear and then butchering it for food, she was quite tired, and knew that she would fall asleep as soon as her head touched the ground. The short nap she took while suffering from the poison helped, but she still felt exhausted.

She considered sending Wang Yonghao out of the secret realm alone and just going to sleep, but the idea rankled her. If she didn't walk through the sect gatehouse on her own two feet, wouldn't it mean that in some sense, she had lost to the bear?

Her newly re-broken leg ached as she balanced on top of the stilts, but at this point, she was used to this level of pain.

As they passed by the fallen tree, she stopped, and headed off the road, looking around for the lost spear. Wang Yonghao followed after her curiously.

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

“I lost a spear here when I wrestled with the bear,” she said, sweeping some slime aside with a wave of a fly whisk, “it would be a waste to leave it behind.”

“Why would you wrestle a bear?” he said, coming closer.

“We had a spirited debate about who was going to be the food and who the chef,” she said, “It lost and got sent into your Inner World. Now do you want to help me look or not?”

Working together, they soon found it, lying not far away from the tree crown. Wang Yonghao threw it into his Inner World, and they continued on, through the gatehouse with broken doors and out into the cavern beyond the sect. She saw the bear tracks in the dirt and dust on the ground, leading towards a depression in the side of the cave - perhaps her flood of poison disturbed its sleep, and that is why it was so angry.

She was the first to scramble up to the ledge where the cave opened up into the wider world, and sat down on it. The warm, humid wind made her long hair flutter softly amid the rays of the midday sun, casting long, wriggling shadows on the walls of the cave behind her, as if a bestial octopus had crawled up from the Netherworld.

The cave was set into the wall of a cliff, and opened up into the forest of towering black trees. They looked similar to the pines that grew near her sect, with long clean trunks and a wide crown of green casting shade onto the ground below, but much taller, and with smooth, pitch black bark that shone slightly at the edges. With a start, she realized it must have been reflecting the sun.

The ground was covered in thick red moss and tall reedy grass, blackened in a wide circle where the poison fog spilled out of the cave. Thankfully, it had long dissipated by now.

She could see where a hidden road had been cut into the forest in the past, tall grass growing in the narrow tracks left behind by carts. Songs of birds and insects filled her ears, almost deafening after the muffled environment of the sect caverns.

She filled her lungs with the fresh air, and smiled. She was finally out.

Wang Yonghao came over and sat down next to her.

“I like forests,” he said, “they are nice and quiet. Very few people can find you here.”

She glanced at him. “Speaking from experience?”

“Yeah,” he said, “I spend a lot of time in between cities, running away from this sect or that. Forests are some of the best places to be - no eyes to report you, no ears to hear you moving around. Unless a sect hires a spirit chaser, tracking someone through a forest is very hard.”

She frowned at his mention of sects. She didn’t have the energy to think of it before, but her sect must have noticed she had disappeared, and had surely heard about the incident at the Northern Sky Salmon. Without her body, they must have assumed she was kidnapped, or ran away. Her teacher was sure to worry.

She didn’t feel a great sense of obligation towards her sect. She joined it for a simple reason - it was one of the few sects in the Golden Rabbit Bay to accept novice female cultivators from a common family. The sect had only given her a fraction of the resources she needed, and in return, she did her best to dawdle in her assigned duties, and spent as much of her time on personal cultivation as she could. The only person she was grateful to was her teacher, Elder Stiding Phoenix, who gave her plenty of helpful advice, even though he obviously did not practice her cultivation law. She was sure that *legally*, she was still tied to the sect, but *morally*, she felt that she had kept her tab clean.

She decided that she would write to Elder Striding Phoenix and tell him she was going away. He deserved that much.

Of course, she wouldn’t tell him about Wang Yonghao. The sect would be only *too* happy to help him with his luck problems - but in doing so, they would completely sideline her. She was not the kind of person to hand over her unique opportunity to someone else - instead, she would bite into it and never let go.

Well, this was something to worry about later.

“If you have spent so much time in forests, does that mean you know how to forage?” she asked.

He laughed awkwardly. “I kept meaning to ask someone to teach me, but never got around to it. I guess it has just never been much of an issue.”

She snorted in response. Of course he hadn’t. She took out the jade slate from her clothes, and activated it with her spiritual energy, going straight to the chapter on cooking.

“Fortunately for us, I happen to have a manual on foraging with me,” she sighed, slapping her other hand on her knee, and getting up, “Come on, let’s follow this road. I’ve never been much

of a forager, but if we are lucky, I may be able to get us some herbs and forest vegetables, so that we won't be forced to eat only unseasoned bear meat for weeks."

"You want us to travel together?" he looked at her weirdly, "Can't you just give me this manual or something?"

"How could I trust someone who did not even clean up their treasury with a precious manual?" she asked rhetorically, "Chances are, you will manage to lose it."

She was not about to let the jade slate out of her hands. It contained her cultivation law, and if Wang Yonghao flipped through it and realized that was what she was practicing, her ruse of being a wizened old master would go up in flames.

"Well, it's just…" he laughed strangely again, "With my luck, strange things tend to happen when I walk on the road. You fed me and helped find the sect exit, so I guess I owe you a warning."

"I am sure it will be fine," she said, walking off towards the forest. "Let's go."

As the sun made its march across the sky, they slowly made their way through the forest. It seemed peaceful, filled with sounds of nature, almost unnaturally idyllic in a way that begged her to relax, pushing on her mind tired after a long day of clearing out the sect and fighting for her life. The bear encounter was still fresh in her mind, so she kept a hand on her sword, treading carefully, and trying to make out movement in between the trunks of reflective trees.

Wang Yonghao walked several paces away from her, humming along while swinging at small flowers poking their way through the moss with a tree branch. She did not stop him: if another bear came, he would make for a perfect distraction away from her.

The road was their best bet for finding civilization, but they lost any trace of it as they headed deeper into the forest. She supposed that was to be expected: it wouldn't do for a sect to leave any obvious trails to follow them back to their secret realm. Wang Yonghao tried walking on air to try and see above the forest, but the edge of the world was hanging low here, barely above the tops of the tree line, and he could not see very far.

After some pushing (and more than a few insults), she managed to get him to admit that he *could* find a way out of the forest. He closed his eyes, threw his branch in the air, and pointed in the direction where it fell. Apparently, his luck let him directly divine a "good" direction for him to head in, but given that he didn't like where it kept leading him, he didn't use this method very often.

She managed to hold her tongue after seeing this "method". At least he seemed to focus on his surroundings more afterwards.

Their attempts at foraging were going badly - they managed to find a lonely oak tree and collect some acorns, but that was all. To cope with the disappointment, they took the time to cut the tree down and put it inside of Wang Yonghao's Inner World - she had many uses in mind for the wood. The entrance portal of the world fragment made easy work of the trunk and the long branches, shearing them into chunks as it closed - all they needed to do was put them inside.

Right now, Qian Shanyi was staring at a plant, flipping between two pages on her jade slate. It was about fifty centimeters tall, with a narrow stalk and cream-colored flowers growing in pointed clusters. She scratched her head, and turned to Wang Yonghao, showing him the picture on the jade slate. The forest was quiet around them.

"Does this look like the same plant to you?"

Wang Yonghao looked at the picture, and nodded.

"Looks like it," he said, "What is it?"

"It's either wild garlic, which would make a great seasoning for the meat, or it's death camas," she said.

"And what does that do?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What do you think 'death camas' does?"

"Fair enough."

She looked at the pictures again. They honestly looked completely indistinguishable to her. The manual said the plants smelled differently, but that was of no help at all when she didn't know the smell of the right one. It didn't help that the evening had fallen, and she needed to light up her hair to see clearly.

She sighed, and got up. Best not risk it.

As she turned towards Wang Yonghao, something put her on edge, and her hand dropped on her sword. She spun around, looking for a threat, but only saw the same quiet dark forest, reflective tree trunks, and the ground covered in red moss and reedy grass.

Eerily quiet. Mere minutes before, birds were singing, but now all she could hear was the rustle of wind in the reeds. Even the insects went silent.

She put her back against a tree, looking around for any hint of movement, and drew her sword out. She extinguished her hair and circulated her spiritual energy, strengthening her spiritual shield. Wang Yonghao looked at her curiously.

“What are you doing?” he asked her, not even bothering to lower his voice.

“Why are the birds quiet?” she hissed at him, “Something is wrong.”

“The birds?” he looked around, and to his credit, immediately went for his sword.

Suddenly, he yelped as something yanked him by the legs, making him sink down to his waist into the moss. He helplessly tugged at his sword, but it was stuck in its sheath.

Qian Shanyi pushed herself off the tree to help him, but something caught her by the throat, and she was jerked back. She clawed at her windpipe, and felt a cord of something thick and cold, pressing against her spiritual energy shield. If she didn’t bring it up in time, she would have been strangled already.

A vine?

She pushed more spiritual energy into her spiritual energy shield, expanding it around her body to push the vine away. Her spiritual energy reserves, already depleted by the many hours of holding her broken leg together, dropped further, but she managed to get her sword underneath the vine. The angle was awkward, but with the push of her shoulder she managed to slice through the vine, and tumbled forwards, using her momentum to instantly spring back to her feet.

She saw a bundle of wriggling vines enveloping the tree trunk she was leaning against. In the middle of the bundle, there was a large flower, its petals black in the dim evening light of the forest. Something white glistened in the middle of it, and as it crawled around the tree trunk to face her, she realized it was a maw full of teeth.

Spiritual energy flowed from the vine she sliced, but the rest of the flower was almost entirely blank. Even now that she knew where to sense, it was very easy to miss it.

A burst of light and a deafening cry of a goose came from behind her, illuminating the forest for a brief moment. The petals of the flower in front of her started to glow blood red, and behind the tree, she could see more patches of red, crawling closer.

She glanced at Wang Yonghao out of the corner of her eye, and saw him getting out of the hole in the moss, shaking the remains of a similar flower from his feet.

“Maneating flowers…” he sighed, “Just what I need.”

She didn’t have time to respond as the flower leaped at her, its hungry maw opening wide.