

Chapter 1401:

The Wall of Destiny

On the final side of that construct, there were no diagrams or depictions. Instead, there was only text and a lot of it.

Han Sen believed this might have been the second half of Life Door at first, but he soon realized it wasn't. It was a simple, poignant text that concerned itself with destiny.

They both read what was written there, but it failed to provide any revelations. Nothing transpired, following its reading.

Old Qiu and Xu Yanmeng ended up running over to them, as they had been fretting with worry ever since they departed.

"The text speaks of fate, and a cycle of sorts. Perhaps it is associated with the shelter's geno core, in some way," Mister Li said.

With a lengthy sigh, Han Sen drooped his head in disappointment. Then, they returned to the primary group and continued with their expedition.

Caution and wariness of the fellowship were still at red-alert, following the events near the base of the tower. No one dared to speak, in fear it might provide the moment of distraction necessary for an evil force to swoop down upon them.

They eventually came to a very tall wall in front of them, behind which was a winding maze. This wall was so tall, its top was buried in the clouds someplace, obscuring any estimate of its exact height.

There were three entrances in the wall which they could use. They decided to enter the path that the previous group had gone through successfully, which was the middle way.

Three people had made it back taking this way, after all, even if they were on the brink of death when they did. They believed this would be their best course of action.

Mister Li pulled up a map and led everyone through the entrance.

Not long after, they found a dead body sprawled on the floor. Strangely, despite its haphazard placement, there were no obvious wounds or signs of injury.

"Is this guy from Outer Sky Shelter?" Zhong Sanxiao queried.

"Yes," Xu Yanmeng answered.

“How did he die?” Wang Zhao asked.

They assumed he had suffered a similar fate to their own compatriot near the tower, but they could not find any carvings or text on the walls. This was an even weirder death.

“The three people who made it out informed us that if you accessed the incorrect passage, you would be attacked by a strange force. Yet we have taken the right path. The presence of the body is disturbing, yes, but fret not. We are where we’re supposed to be,” Mister Li explained to the group.

“Maybe he triggered a trap and was killed. Strange-murder-force or no, we should still watch our step,” Xu Yanmeng said.

They followed the map, and it wasn’t long before they came to the exit that had correctly been indicated to them on the parchment.

Mister Li was leading them from the front, and just before they reached the end, something suddenly rose up out of the ground.

“What is this? Nobody mentioned anything about a wall prohibiting our passage,” Mister Li said, with a frown.

“It looks like there is text on the wall,” Old Qiu said.

The wall had two lines of text on it. The first consisted of four words, and it said, “The Wall of Destiny.” The other line said, “Destiny reveals the way for the fortunate.”

“Only the lucky ones can get by? What is that supposed to mean?” Wang Zhao said, with a frown. He wasn’t sure what that meant.

“Perhaps it means something else,” Mister Li said.

No one could offer up another explanation, however. And no one wanted to risk dwelling on the meaning behind any amount of text in that shelter. So, they planned to go back and attempt to venture another way.

As they walked, they soon realized they were lost. They were struggling to get back to the way they had come in, and the map offered no sound guidance.

“Mister Li, you have a map. How can you not navigate your way back?” Wang Zhao said.

Xu Yanmeng asked, “What are you trying to say?”

Zhong Sanxiao said, “What do you mean what are you trying to say? Is he speaking in tongues, man? Your precious Mister Li has a map, and yet the dunce has led us astray. Who voted this guy should be our leader, anyway?”

“And you have eyes and half a brain, don’t you? The path has changed. We didn’t come this way. We might not even be able to follow the map, anymore,” Old Qiu said.

“We didn’t come this way? We didn’t come this way because he obviously can’t read a map! The old man is blind and half senile, and thanks to him, we’re now lost,” Zhong Sanxiao said.

Mister Li finally spoke. He turned his head away from the map and turned around, saying, “There is nothing wrong with the map nor my ability to read it. It’s this place; it shuffles and warps to misguide our way. A strange magic is at work here; stay vigilant.”

The map was indeed useless now. Nothing marked on it corresponded to the way they were now traversing.

Still, nothing dangerous seemed to occur. They walked for a whole half an hour before Zhong Sanxiao suddenly felt the urge to exclaim, “Motherf*cker! Why are we back here?”

Everyone looked at him, and then saw what he was referring to. There was a wall with text upon it, one that read: “The Wall of Destiny.”

“It looks like we have to go past this wall somehow,” Mister Li said.

“This place is f*cking cursed! Game over, man! Game over!” Zhong Sanxiao spat on the floor, beginning to lose his composure to the nagging worry that gnawed on the minds of them all.

“Let’s take a timeout for a minute. We need to figure things out a bit.” Mister Li gestured for everyone to take a load off and relax for a bit.

Everyone sat down then, bringing out a bite to eat.

Han Sen brought out a sacred-blood geno fruit to munch on while he studied the wall.

When he was finished, an announcement played.

“Nine-Sky Fruit consumed; Sacred Geno Point +1.”

Chapter 1402: Life and Death Stakes

Han Sen brought the fifty fruits he had been given by Yu Xuan inside the shelter with him, bringing them along as food to sustain him.

Just one of those fruits could keep a man’s belly feeling full for a number of days, so if they were to get trapped inside the shelter for any reason, Han Sen would be able to keep himself going for quite some time.

Han Sen munched on one while examining The Wall of Destiny, then he frowned. He remembered one of the creepy mural sides mentioned something about luck, destiny, and a cycle.

According to what that text said, it was not supposed to be difficult to determine whether or not a person was lucky.

“Do you need luck to find a path that bypasses this wall?” Han Sen wondered to himself.

After the break was over, Wang Zhao suggested he should take the lead—map in hand.

There were no grand objections, and Mister Li thought it best for him to see for himself that the map was of no help now. And that was exactly what came to pass. Before long, Wang Zhao’s fruitless guidance had brought them back to exactly where they started: The Wall of Destiny.

They did this many times after that, and they didn’t encounter any danger. The only thing that threatened them was frustration, for no matter which way they walked, they always ended up back at The Wall of Destiny.

They had obviously been trapped there, and there seemed to be no way out except one that involved flying.

However, they did not dare fly. That seemed like an obvious way to skip the challenge, and they might be subject to punishment if they attempted to cheat in such an obvious fashion. But that meant they were stuck, and it seemed as if they lacked the luck needed to escape.

Most people who had come to this shelter had been forced, after all. That in itself was brought about through misfortune and being plain unlucky.

Yu Zhiyou’s death still hung over them, stoking the fires of their fear.

“Wait a minute; it’s a wall! Why don’t we just smash through it and bring it down?” Xu Yanmeng said.

“Don’t be reckless. That might seem like an obvious way to get through, but do you think the creator of this wretched place didn’t think of that? You might get yourself killed!” Mister Li stopped him, and then he asked Han Sen, “Little Han, do you recall what was written on that mural we went to look at?”

“I remember excerpts of it, yes,” Han Sen answered.

The others leaned in closer to hear what was spoken between the two, as they had all been absent for what was now being discussed.

Mister Li cleared his throat before addressing the others, and he said, “Destiny and a cycle, including the need for luck in its breaking. We seem to be in some sort of loop, so if luck is what we need, it should not be difficult for us to discern which one of us has the most.”

“Wait, are you suggesting we find the luckiest amongst us and have them open the wall?” Wang Zhao asked.

Mister Li nodded and said, "We can't get out via any other means, so for now, it seems like a sound suggestion."

Zhong Sanxiao then balked, but asked, "And how do we find out who the luckiest amongst us is? Toss a coin?"

"The text said a person with much luck can obtain stuff others usually cannot. It's sort of like the lottery," Mister Li explained.

"Did you see any lottery ticket vendors in this maze of doom?" Zhong Sanxiao scoffed.

"No, but we can do it ourselves," Mister Li said.

"Okay. We're stuck in here no matter what we do, so we might as well try this," Xu Yanmeng said.

"If this is the only way, then sure," Wang Zhao said. He then proceeded to pull out a notebook and tear eight pages from out of it. He wrote the word luck on one of the sheets of paper and said, "Whoever gets the one with the word luck can open the door. Everyone else pick, I'll choose whatever is last."

After that, Wang Zhao placed the eight folded pieces of paper in a bag and shuffled them. Then, he said, "Who wants to go first?"

The person who went first would have the slimmest chance, but everyone doubted this method would work, anyway.

"If no one wants to try, then I'll go first." Old Qiu went to the middle and picked up a piece of paper.

There were no words on it, so the chances had been reduced to one-in-seven now.

"I'll go second," Xiao Liuyu said. After grabbing a sheet of folded paper, his face changed.

The paper had the word luck written on it.

"Liuyu..." Liuyu was Wang Zhao's best friend.

"This is fate; I am sure it will let me live," Xiao Liuyu said, with a wry smile.

"Just... be careful, with whatever you have to do," Wang Zhao said.

It was impossible for him not to go forward, as they had all seen him beat the odds and take the winning piece of paper. He seemed like the luckiest, and as such, the prime candidate to try to access the way forward.

Even those from Sacred Shelter would have forced him to go, and being best buds wouldn't change this. If Xiao Liuyu didn't go, then someone else eventually would, anyway. And their luck might not have been as fair.

Xiao Liuyu nodded and pulled out his geno core, which was a jade sword.

Xiao Liuyu's body glowed with a protection that accompanied him on his way towards the door.

"Don't do it; you'll die!" Han Sen exclaimed.

Xiao Liuyu looked at Han Sen, thinking it to be a strange thing to suddenly call out.

“If he doesn’t go, will you?” Xu Yanmeng asked.

Han Sen coldly said, “He picked the paper, and he is now going to risk his life. You guys have got it backwards; that would give him the worst luck.”

Xiao Liuyu’s eyebrows touched the sky, and he began to produce a cold sweat. That logic made a lot of sense.

Everyone could understand where Han Sen was coming from, but someone had to try the door. They couldn’t differentiate between good luck and bad luck when it came to this.

There were no other alternative ideas or plans they could consult and enact, anyway.

“You’re saying whoever gets that paper is unlucky, yes? Because they have to then risk their life, correct?” Xu Yanmeng said, to confirm.

Everyone else started to become of this opinion now, but if Xiao Liuyu didn’t commit to trying the door, then that meant the lottery was pointless.

Chapter 1403: The Man That Opened the Wall of Destiny

“If you can promise me one thing, I can go,” Han Sen said.

There was a certain sternness in his voice, to the surprise of the others in the expedition. They all turned to look at him, confused why a person with only a bronze geno core would and could say such a thing.

“Little Han, these are no joking matters,” Mister Li said.

“You are correct, but if you can promise me this one thing, I will try it in his stead.” Han Sen paused, having achieved the focus of everyone’s ears, before proceeding to explain, “It’s because I’m lucky. I always have been, and I believe I have what it takes.”

“Okay, then what would you like to get promised? We can do what you ask, provided it’s nothing ridiculous,” Wang Zhao said, willing to give the boy a chance.

He would also prefer risking the life of another, if it meant his best friend might have been spared.

Han Sen responded, saying, “The shelter must have offered you a lot to come here. If you can pool together to provide me sixty sacred geno fruit, I will go.”

Sixty was not a small number. There were seven others in the expedition, and each of them had around ten.

“I have sixteen right here with me. I’ll give them to you,” Xiao Liuyu immediately answered, seeing as it was his life currently on the line. Then, he presented the fruit.

Discussions broke out amongst the rest, as they all wondered and tried to gauge whether or not it was a worthy bargain. They eventually decided to go along with it, and they amassed the tally of sixty geno fruits they could give Han Sen upon his completion.

“Little Han, I must repeat; this is no laughing matter. The stakes are high, but there’s always the chance we might find an alternate route,” Mister Li pleaded. He had come to like Han Sen, and he was worried about the young man’s wellbeing.

Han Sen smiled in return, telling him, “It’s nice of you to be so considerate, Mister Li. But me and Lady Luck have tangoed a number of times. The fortunes frequently smile on me.”

Han Sen accepted the fruit and approached The Wall of Destiny; their door and way forward.

He had everything to live for, even a baby on the way. Han Sen wasn’t going to risk everything unless he was 100% certain he’d succeed.

This wasn’t because Han Sen believed himself to be stronger than the others, or because he actually had more luck. It was because he had a theory he had kept private.

Han Sen had examined the text on the tower and mulled over it well. He recalled that there was no mention of explicit instructions, and no statement that in order to tackle the door you’d have to be the luckiest.

Everyone had luck, but good luck and bad luck were all tinged measures coming from the same pool.

Han Sen had already read the text of Life Door, and that gave him a keener insight into the words he had espied on the mural. It helped him understand one thing that was the crux to this entire issue.

To open the door of destiny, one must have already opened their Life Door.

Han Sen had secretly cast Life Door previously, and he felt his body metaphysically connect with The Wall of Destiny. It beckoned to Han Sen, calling out for him to come forward.

It brought ease to Han Sen’s mind, and without an urgent need to open it, he thought of a way in which he might net a few extra goodies in the service of others. He really wasn’t risking his life.

Han Sen believed that those who had ventured into the shelter before hadn’t even seen the wall.

And Han Sen believed that was because no one in the previous expedition possessed Life Door. If the wall had shown up, they would have been trapped there forever; it at least proved the shelter wasn’t a deliberate gauntlet meant to torture and slay all intruders. Or at least, that’s what Han Sen now hoped.

But this also led Han Sen to believe that they’d end up elsewhere, once the wall was removed. Perhaps the others, without Life Door, had been led to their doom. With Han Sen amongst them, they might make greater progress than the other team did.

Han Sen did not hate the people on his team, and he would prefer to help them rather than not. He just didn't see a problem with extracting a few gifts while doing so.

His connection to the door increased and became more voluminous as he approached The Wall of Destiny. He could sense its tangible aura, and it tingled Han Sen's fingertips.

Han Sen then summoned his Bulwark Umbrella, as he drew near it.

The Dongxuan Sutra did not tell him there was any danger ahead, but he still summoned it on the off-chance there was.

Everyone watched Han Sen, and their attention was particularly drawn to his left hand, with which he pushed against The Wall of Destiny.

His hand was brimming with the power of Jadeskin, and when it came into contact with the wall, electricity suddenly surged through him.

Han Sen quickly pulled his hand away and took cover behind his umbrella.

Everyone summoned their geno core for protection, expecting a fight or some sort to have been initiated.

Boom!

The Wall of Destiny let out a deep sound, as if something had been unlocked beneath the earth. And then it began to sink, receding into the ground it had originally emerged from.

Nobody there had expected the process to be that simple. They had half-suspected that Han Sen wouldn't be alive to enjoy the fruit they had all given him.

"Brother Han, you are a man of good fortune indeed!" Xiao Liuyu proclaimed, upon witnessing his success.

The others all looked at Han Sen differently. More than anything, they were just bewildered to see it was he the weakest of their team, yet he had solved and sorted out their biggest issue in the shelter thus far.

There was the sneaking suspicion amongst a couple of them, though, that the entire wall obstacle had been a bluff. And that guts, rather than luck, were needed to near it, touch it, and open it.

"Yeah, it was all luck," Han Sen said, as he marched forward to the exit of that maze.

Han Sen wasn't going to tell them the true reason he was able to remove the wall.

The electric shock he had received from the door, however, seemed to have a lasting effect. It did not hurt, but he sensed it had modified his Life Door somewhat. Han Sen checked out his body, and he confirmed there was no permanent harm, but still, it was a strange sensation.

Everyone followed Han Sen towards the exit, which was somehow obscured by a blinding white light. What awaited them, none could guess.

Han Sen was not concerned with this, having been in situations similar to this in the past. His feet did not relent, and onwards he went. When he breached the veil of white, his eyes cleared to reveal what lay beyond.

But what he saw sent chills down his spine. He immediately wished to retreat, but an invisible barrier prevented him from doing so.

The team could no longer see Han Sen, but thinking the way was safe, they followed in after him.

Chapter 1404: Wolfpack

Everyone shared a similar reaction to Han Sen. As soon as they saw what lay ahead, they all wished to flee.

They ran into the invisible barrier behind them face first. Many of their faces even started to bleed, due to the speed at which they tried to escape.

When they pierced through the veil of white, they were met with the sight of a number of vicious wolves that stared back at them with dirty green eyes. It was as if the wolves had been awaiting their arrival.

Unable to go back, it was clear they had no choice but to engage the wolves and fight for their lives.

Han Sen remained silent amongst the rallying cries of his teammates, and he simply maintained his clutch on the Bulkward Umbrella as he lifted it against the wolves that leaped towards him.

The wolves charged with a greater ferocity and a more intimidating presence than a mania-driven bull. Their fangs and their nails were like blades, itching to sink into the first victim they could.

Han Sen held the umbrella to block the initial strike of the first wolf that came for him. The strength and force of that wolf sent him stumbling back quite a bit before he regained his composure.

Fortunately, the umbrella was as hardy as it always had been. It held strong and did not break.

But it was clear to the crew that the wolfpack was in a league above them. As much as they all wished to stand their ground and battle the wolves, they knew it would be a futile fight.

Han Sen acknowledged this to be true, as well. As he held a defensive posture, he used his Dongxuan Aura to scan his immediate surroundings and identify any route or passage that might allow him to escape.

Then, he took off running into the wolfpack. With his Dongxuan Movements, he managed to sidestep and evade every attack that came for him, until he was clear of the pack and could duck into the clearing on the left.

He was racing towards a plaza that had held a number of statues. With everyone else engaging the wolves, drawing the majority of them away from Han Sen, he was easily able to make it there.

When Han Sen entered the forest of statues, he took cover and began munching on as much fruit as he could. Slowly, his sacred geno points increased, and he cramped the muscles of his torso to speed up digestion.

After eating a hearty sum of them, his sacred geno point tally increased by quite a lot. He would be a lot more comfortable battling the wolves in such a condition.

from what Han Sen could tell, there was one person missing from the group of humans that were behind him, still fighting the wolves. That person was Mister Li, and as much as he might have wished to seek him out, Han Sen had problems of his own. Like coyotes trailing blood, the wolves had sniffed him out, and unless he got moving to secure his own safety, he'd be doggie chow.

After fleeing their snapping maws, however, Han Sen noticed something strange about the method they were hounding him. It wasn't as if they were trying to hunt down and kill the intruder; it was like they were pushing him in a certain direction.

Han Sen kept on running, regardless, and eventually, he came to a place that was empty of anything remarkable.

This was, of course, bad. It was a plaza devoid of anything, removing the possibility of him taking cover. At least amongst the statues that decorated the previous plaza, he could duck and weave and provide his enemies a harder time giving chase. Here, he was at a disadvantage.

But after gobbling down a bevy of geno fruits, Han Sen had earned himself dozens of sacred geno points. If push came to shove, he'd be shoving a lot harder now.

He looked to his left and right and noticed that more wolves were appearing, seeking to close in on him. If he wanted to turn around and return to the cover of the statues, or the teammates he had left behind, he'd have no chance to do so now.

Bracing himself for a fight, Han Sen closed his eyes. When he opened them again, however, he noticed the wolves were gone. They had stopped chasing him and withdrawn, but as for the reason why, he could not guess.

He turned to take a look at his past pursuers, and he saw them standing there, growling at him with their bared fangs on full display. It was as if they had now been stopped by an invisible barrier.

“They really were chasing me here; but for what purpose, I wonder?” Han Sen thought, as he viewed his surroundings.

He had reached a garden populated with strange botanical marvels. The things which grew there were crazy, and Han Sen first noticed this when he saw bunches of carrots that were dangling from trees. Strangely, they looked to have been formed from human brain-matter, dressed with a bit of greenery on top. He didn’t know if he should have looked at it in wonder or in disgust.

Han Sen continued on, wandering through this garden of sickly delights. Blood and ghastly violence seemed to be the primary theme of decoration, for there were many intestinal-shaped plants and flowers running with blood.

They were all so weird, and the sight of them made Han Sen’s skin squirm. He was extremely uncomfortable in this place, as any right-minded individual would be.

Strangely, however, Han Sen could sense the lifeforces of everything that grew there, and he noted there was nothing remarkable. He was detecting them to be ordinary plants, though he had never seen such gross botany before.

The wolves were still watching Han Sen tread the garden, so there was no chance of him returning the way he had come. But, not sensing any danger ahead of him, he wasn’t too wary of walking forward into the deeper recesses of the grotesque place.

The mist was getting thicker, however, and it obscured much in the distance.

There was enough visibility to see what was in his proximity, though, and he could watch the plants become more gruesome and sordid the further he went. Eventually, he came to a tree with a man hanging from its branches. His arm, as weird as it was, was growing a number of ears like a fallen log bearing mushrooms.

But that really was the shape of the tree. There was no actual human body dangling from its rotten eaves; the tree had simply been shaped like that. Han Sen’s skin crawled, like it was hosting a corpse-feeding party of maggots. After all, he was sensing them to be ordinary plants. They were this strange, but they shouldn’t have been.

“Strange. Why are they so creepy and wild, yet so... weak and supposedly unremarkable?” Han Sen thought to himself.

Then, Han Sen heard a noise come from behind. He saw Hezhi approaching him, from out of nowhere.

Hezhi looked to be in an okay condition. He looked a little winded, but that was the extent of it. He was free from injuries.

“Hezhi, where is everyone else?” Han Sen asked.

Hezhi answered, “I don’t know. I ran by myself. You’re the first of the team I’ve seen in a bit.”

Han Sen thought he spoke a little strangely. There was a monosyllabic tone to his speech, and so he took a couple of steps back.

“Give me all your geno fruit and I’ll keep you safe,” Hezhi stepped forward to say.

“And how can you keep me safe?” Han Sen realized Hezhi was still himself, but he had come to Han Sen for the riches he carried.

“This.” Hezhi summoned a black metal wolf, and the marks upon it showed it to be a gold geno core.

Chapter 1405: Killing Hezhi

Han Sen was not worried at the thought that someone might come to steal his geno fruit. Mister Li, Old Qiu, Xu Yanmeng, Wang Zhao, and Zhong Sanxiao already had gemstone geno cores and would not need his geno fruit.

Only Hezhi would need the sacred fruit Han Sen possessed, so it might not have come as an absolute surprise for him. And indeed, Hezhi had been waiting for this opportunity. He was a bit of an outsider himself, and he wasn't closely associated with the others who were on the expedition, anyway. Now that he had caught Han Sen alone, it was his time to strike.

Han Sen looked at his metal wolf geno core and said, “You used this to get away?”

Hezhi said, “Yes. My geno core is called Ditto, and it can take on the form of any creature it wishes to.”

“That's a fairly brilliant geno core you have, but it's a shame...” Han Sen stressed an exaggerated sigh.

“What's a shame?” When Hezhi said that, the wolf slowly began to approach Han Sen.

“Upgrading that geno core to the best it could be might yield some impressive results, but it's a shame your ascension will come to an end here,” Han Sen said, his threat made clear.

“I was going to leave you alive after taking your spoils; I'll take that as permission to silence you for good.” When Hezhi said this, the wolf immediately jumped towards Han Sen with its maw open.

Han Sen used his Gold Dragon Lock in response, immediately tying up the airborne wolf.

The wolf was quickly bound, and it dropped to the ground like a stone. It did its best to squirm free, but it was clearly having trouble.

“You have a gold geno core?!” Hezhi's face swiftly turned sour.

“Yeah, but it's no big deal,” Han Sen said.

“Yeah... you’re right. It isn’t,” Hezhi suppressed the sudden flash of fear he had been stricken with, and he summoned a purple sword.

It was three-feet-long, and many strange writings had been inscribed across the length of its blade.

Hezhi waved his sword, which sent beams of light shaped like the characters on the sword shooting towards Han Sen like a number of lasers.

Han Sen opened up his Bulwark Umbrella to block the barrage of plasma rounds. All the lights exploded against the protective shielding of the umbrella.

Han Sen had eaten a great many sacred geno fruits, so gold geno cores weren’t able to deal half as much damage now.

“How have you managed to obtain so many gold geno cores?” Hezhi thought the umbrella was a gold geno core, too.

It was only bronze, but that spoke volumes about its efficiency. Han Sen did not respond, though; he simply summoned his Crystal Core and tossed the egg at the unsuspecting bandit.

“You were lying this whole time. You are a liar; a big fat liar! You are a demi-god with gold geno cores.” Hezhi was angered by his mistake, and he swung his sword towards the egg that was headed his way.

The crystal egg was able to dodge each and every plasma round headed coming towards it, prompting Hezhi to swing his sword directly at it.

Pang!

The sword beat the egg down to the ground, but it ricocheted off the floor at an even greater speed. It walloped his body with the might and swiftness of a bullet.

He had been unable to dodge, and after it struck his leg like lightning, it bounced right back to Han Sen.

Han Sen had become very proficient in wielding the egg, and when the egg was returned, Han Sen went back to wielding his umbrella. Then, he began walking forward towards Hezhi.

Feeling nothing occur when he was hit by the egg, Hezhi still possessed his confidence. He stepped forward, swinging more and more plasma rounds at Han Sen.

The light-bullets exploded in a haze of sparks against the umbrella, though, and he was still unable to deal damage to the opponent he once thought would be a cakewalk.

Hezhi gritted his teeth and continued trying to attack. But this time, Han Sen did not even use his umbrella. He simply stood where he was and let his foe try his best.

Hezhi brought his sword down directly on Han Sen’s body, but the results astounded him. It did nothing, and the sword itself began to bend like rubber.

He stared at his sword in disbelief, unable to grasp why this might have happened. So, next, Hezhi used his fist to strike Han Sen.

And again, Han Sen did not dodge. He simply stood where he was and allowed Hezhi to do his worst.

The moment Hezhi's fist came into contact with Han Sen's skin, however, chills shot through his body, and cold sweat poured from his forehead. He watched as his own fist bent upwards against Han Sen, as if he was made of sponge.

Then, like an eerie ghost, Han Sen reached out his hand towards his once-pompous opponent. Han Sen was too close, and with a futile reaction, Hezhi brought up his arm to deflect Han Sen's hand.

But Han Sen simply grabbed the man's arms and ran his hand down to Hezhi's clenched fist. Han Sen latched on and did not let go, as if he was sucking Hezhi's soul dry.

Sha!

Hezhi's body was delivered one strike, and then it shattered and crumbled into fertilizer for the wretched garden.

As this occurred, the geno core was also destroyed. The sword he was wielding, however, dropped to the ground with a heavy clanging sound.

Han Sen swiftly moved to pick it up. It was a gold geno core, and Han Sen needed a replacement for his horn. He quickly pocketed it by placing it in his Sea of Soul.

Just as Han Sen was about to turn and leave, he heard more sounds.

When Han Sen turned to take a look at what lay ahead, a human-shaped tree was shambling its way over to him.

"Is this thing alive?" Han Sen asked himself, as he stepped back in caution.

The tree was not that strong, and it gave the illusion of being an ordinary plant like all the rest.

But it came to a stop near the mound of dust on the ground that was once Hezhi.

Han Sen realized the tree was coming for the man whose sequence structure he had just destroyed. The roots of the tree moved atop the mound of dust, and then, it all got absorbed.

Chapter 1406: The Waiting Shadow

It didn't take long for the humanoid tree to absorb the mound of dust. Its previously dull and unremarkable lifeforce then began to resemble the person Han Sen had just slain: Hezhi.

Han Sen was not sure if it was exhaustion playing tricks on his eyes, but he could then swear he was seeing the tree shrink to take on the form of Hezhi himself.

And it did, but fortunately, it did not replicate the mindset of the person Han Sen had just killed. It looked like Hezhi now, but it just stood in place without motion, where it had absorbed his remains.

Han Sen took a step back, just in case. The last thing he wanted to do was trigger or invoke the ire of something he did not have to.

After stepping back a bit, Han Sen decided now might be a good time to return to the forest of statues in that plaza. The wolves that hounded him to the garden had dispersed, after all.

Provided they stayed gone, Han Sen should have no issue returning there. He might even be able to get back to his teammates.

But as Han Sen began his return trek, he suddenly saw the brain-carrots leaping off their harboring trees to stand upright on the ground before him. It looked like the entire garden did not want Han Sen to return, for all the trees and plants began to close in around him. The way back was closed off.

So, Han Sen decided to walk forward in the way he originally had been. He spoke aloud to the garden, saying, "Okay, I'll play it your way. I'll see where you wish to lead me."

As Han Sen walked the path through the garden he had originally been on, the rest of the botanical residents returned to their initial positions, too, as if nothing had changed at all.

After walking for a while, however, the garden began to take an unexpectedly pleasant turn. In fact, it started to look pretty.

The flowers soon looked like butterflies, and the trees were sculpted like beautiful carvings and wooden furniture. It was like something you'd see in a fairytale. It looked almost unreal.

Han Sen soon came to a lake. Its surface was still, glassy, and blue like a clear summer's sky. At the center of the lake was a stone tablet. In front of it stood a man.

This person wasn't someone Han Sen was familiar with, and as he walked closer to get a better look, he saw that the man was clad in sparkingly white, clean clothing. He wasn't the sort of person you'd expect to see in such a sordid shelter.

"My child; you are finally here," the man in white clothing said.

"Are you talking to me?" Han Sen asked.

"Of course, my child." The man seemed to be speaking to Han Sen, but his attention seemed affixed to the stone tablet he was in front of.

Han Sen thought it weird, that the man continuously referred to him as my child.

"Who are you?" Han Sen asked, with a frown.

Han Sen knew this was not someone whose voice he had heard before, and neither was it a person he had seen before.

"I could ask you the same, but only my children are capable of coming here. So, that is what I can best assume you to be." The man in white clothing spoke in a very relaxed manner. He spoke as if he had awoken from a restful slumber, and was at peace and tranquility.

"Speak plainly. It has been a long day, and I'm not in the mood for games." Han Sen spoke with a stern voice, primarily because he could not stand being called my child any more than he could stand being called boss.

"I am a shadow, and I have waited for your arrival for quite some time," the man in white clothing said.

"My arrival? Me? You know who I am?" Han Sen thought the man was very strange.

If it wasn't for the mist skating gracefully across the lake, Han Sen would have been able to scan the man and get a clear reading of who or what he might have been.

"Yes, but it does not matter. You are here; therefore, you are my child," the man in white clothing said.

Han Sen was getting annoyed. The man was speaking quite a bit, but he wasn't actually saying much.

Han Sen summoned his crystal egg with the desire to throw it at the man.

He'd had enough of being called his child, so he cared little for who the man believed him to be. He wanted to shut him up so he could continue with the expedition.

Before Han Sen could lob it, though, the man suddenly said one more thing which stayed his arm. He said, "This is the only thing I can give you."

The man walked into the tablet as if he was a ghost, passing through a wall.

The stone tablet had once been empty, but was now scrawled with a few additional words.

"God has returned..."

Han Sen was quite surprised to see the words of Life Door now appear on the tablet. He peered at the tablet a little closer then, and before his eyes, the entirety of Life Door began to show up on the stone.

The words appeared one by one.

Han Sen was delighted, though, and he quickly tried to remember everything that was written down.

After reading it all, he felt as if his Blood-Pulse Sutra was starting to run by itself and generate a brand new geno core.

Han Sen always believed he was going to create a geno core with it, but there was something prohibiting him from completing the process. There was always a snag he was getting caught on.

But now, just seeing Life Door written before him on such a pristine lake, it had freed up whatever was hindering his progress. The Blood-Pulse Sutra got to work producing a new geno core with no trouble now.

“This place really is connected to Blood Legion. That man must believe I am a part of Blood Legion,” Han Sen thought to himself, as he read the text and did his best to memorize it.

When the text was all revealed, his Blood-Pulse Sutra began to fire on all cylinders. The process of producing a brand new geno core was well underway.

The black crystal was also triggered, prompting more of that black fluid to taint the mixture.

This was the first time Han Sen had the ability to watch the geno core produce. Before, he had always been under fire and unable to, and he found it remarkable how much the substance created looked like a supernova.

Han Sen was rather shocked when he laid eyes on the finished geno core.

Chapter 1407: Real Blood

The Blood-Pulse Sutra’s geno core was a miniature version of Han Sen himself. It was like a little figurine, shaped to replicate his body perfectly.

As Han Sen stared at it, his bewilderment heightened, as something most strange occurred.

It was as if he was watching time itself rewind around the miniature; he actually watched it get younger. It went backwards, becoming a teenager, a child, a baby, a fetus, and then blood.

Bronze Geno Core: Bronze Real Blood

Han Sen did not know what to say, and it felt as if his lingering thoughts had been left suspended. It was a strange sensation, seeing a figurine of himself grow younger in less than a minute.

“Child, the trail you tread is one you must blaze yourself. This is all I can do to help you.”

The light that hovered on the tablet then departed the stone, becoming the white-clothed man again. And this time, Han Sen was able to see his face.

Han Sen was certain he had never seen this man before. He did not look like Han Sen’s father, grandfather, or even his great-grandfather.

The man didn’t resemble Han Sen himself, either. They didn’t look at all related, so the reason why the man constantly referred to Han Sen as his child was completely unknown.

“Who are you? The leader of Blood Legion?” Han Sen asked, his raised voice gilded with a certain sternness.

The white-clothed man merely smiled, and he said, “Remember, your fate is not pre-determined. It is forged through your will and desire; no external, higher power governs it.”

After that, the light on the tablet began to fade, and the man alongside it. All that remained was the faceless tablet in the center of the lake. At that same moment, all the plants in the shelter came alive, crying rivers of blood as if to summon a world-ending flood.

“If that guy was the leader of Blood Legion, I wouldn’t be surprised. But even though he looked human, he carried the aura of a spirit,” Han Sen thought to himself.

At this point, Han Sen was relieved that he had taken the time and been fortunate enough to learn and practice both the Blood-Pulse Sutra and Life Door. Had he skipped one of those, it was highly likely he wouldn’t have been standing where he was at that moment. Repeatedly, people had come to believe he was a successor to Blood Legion, so it was certainly paying dividends, bit-by-bit, in his investigations.

The strangest thing, though, was that his Nine-Life Cat pendant was a relic that supposedly belonged to Blood Legion. Even here, of all places, it did not resonate any sort of power. It was as lifeless as it had been over the previous days.

If that man was the leader of Blood Legion, he should have been able to just sense the pendant’s presence. Others had done so before, so this was a given.

It was a shame he had gone now, though. He had vanished with the silent grace of a wisp. Any more answers Han Sen might have wished to glean didn’t seem likely to be gotten right now.

Han Sen turned his attention to the bleeding plants, and he watched a certain thicket bend and move aside to form a path for him.

“If that man thinks I’m a member of Blood Legion, the plants won’t want to hurt me, will they?” Han Sen wondered to himself.

Han Sen walked the trail and found himself exiting the garden, but it wasn’t by the same path he had used to enter. He had ended up going further, and he now found himself standing before a palace.

The entrance was wide open, and directly beyond it, Han Sen could see a bronze coffin. Strange symbols and enigmatic lines of text were scrawled and inscribed across it, and sitting atop the coffin was a beast.

The beast was asleep there, and its fur looked like a gentle fire.

“This is the place the survivors spoke of before they died; the beast sure does look like the Nine-Life Cat,” Han Sen thought.

As Han Sen pondered this curiosity, his pendant finally came to life. It began to pull Han Sen forward, clearly wanting to visit the beast. He was going to pull it out from beneath his clothes, but just before he did, Mister Li and the others came staggering forward from another direction. Mister Li seemed surprised to see him there.

“Han Sen? You’re alive! That brings this old mind some comfort; I feared we had lost you in the scrape with those wolves.” Mister Li’s rough voice was varnished with genuine concern for Han Sen’s wellbeing.

“I’m lucky to be alive; I can tell you that much,” Han Sen said, stressing each word with a nearly-winded facade.

Mister Li stepped forward, asking, “So, how did you escape the wolves?”

“I don’t know... there was so much going on. There were so many. It’s all a blur; but I went through the plaza with all those statues and reached a garden. I traversed it to reach this place.” After Han Sen’s half-hearted explanation, he approached the others with a question, asking, “And you, Mister Li? How did you and the others get here?”

“It was a trial that was no different than your own adventure. But you... you only have a bronze geno core. For you to make it through on your own, well, you weren’t kidding about that luck you possessed, eh?” Xu Yanmeng’s words were fine at face-value, but the tone with which he spoke expressed doubt about the validity of Han Sen’s tale. He wasn’t entirely convinced, that was for sure.

The wolves were strong, and stronger than the average mutant creature, that much was certain.

They might have been okay, in a series of one-versus-one matches. But an entire pack of the beasts had assaulted the group, and the team was fortunate to make it through.

For Han Sen to escape their pursuit with no wounds, that was suspicious.

Han Sen wasn’t planning to explain, though, and their doubts did not concern him. He merely asked them, “Is this the bronze coffin they spoke of?”

Mister Li and the others examined their surroundings, having not taken them in when they first laid eyes on Han Sen. Their faces turned a ghastly shade of pale when they saw the coffin, as was described. The beast was sitting atop it, just like they had heard.

The previous team had all ended up dead after coming here. There were more people in that team, so the new team’s prospects of making it out themselves did not seem good.

“It sure looks it.” Mister Li did not take his eyes off the beast that was lounging atop the coffin.

“Mister Li, how should we proceed?” Zhong Sanxiao asked. He sounded very polite and respectful, this time around. Something must have occurred earlier on, for Zhong Sanxiao to regard Mister Li with admiration now.

Chapter 1408: Who Will Open the Coffin?

“Outer Sky and Sacred Shelter want us to find out what is inside that coffin. That has been our primary objective since setting foot in this place, so turning back now is not an option,” Mister Li explained.

Wang Zhao and Zhong Sanxiao both looked at each other, and after a moment of silence, the latter spoke. “We have to open the coffin, that much is certain. But it is a needless risk for us all to approach it. Surely, it won’t take the strength of more than one person to go over there and open it alone.”

“What are you trying to say?” Mister Li asked.

Zhong Sanxiao looked at Han Sen and said, “Only one person made it out alive when folks from Sacred came here. And the reason he made it was because of his distance from the coffin. He said he was the furthest away from the coffin when the sh*t hit the fan. So, we should get one person to open the coffin while the rest of us hang back where it is the safest.”

“Sh*t! I see it in his eyes; he wants me to be the one to prod the hornet’s nest!” Han Sen quickly realized.

Although Han Sen wanted to be the one, he wanted to maintain his innocent look and not be forced to open it at the behest of others.

“Brother Han, your luck has carried you on shielded wings thus far. How about you test the mettle of your luck one last time with the coffin. We will satisfy your every desire, if you do. No request will be too outlandish.” Zhong Sanxiao phrased his request carefully, and made sure to make it sound pleasant, but he was well aware that it was a tall order.

Mister Li cut across before Han Sen could respond, though, and said, “How could you even think to place him in such a position? There’s a red creature of some sort on the coffin already. You know the danger of this situation, and no volume of luck can change the odds of him opening the coffin without issue.”

Han Sen had come to like Mister Li a lot. The old man had looked out for him a lot throughout the length and extent of the expedition.

“Thank you, Mister Li. Only an animal could suggest I be the one to go up there.” Han Sen said a whole lot more than this with the icy, dagger-like eyes he gave Zhong Sanxiao.

But Zhong Sanxiao was not happy with this, and he blusterously stepped forward to say, “Do you really think a bronze geno core human could survive everything we’ve been through? Do you all really think he survived a solo chase with the wolfpack without a scratch? This guy is up to something, I’m telling you. All is not what it seems with him—or with you.”

Mister Li came to Han Sen’s defense again, saying, “Now listen here; I haven’t known Han Sen for very long. And I agree, he keeps to himself; but if there’s one thing we know for certain, it’s that he’s a good man.”

“Remember when he pushed the door open? He didn’t even hesitate. Even if you are a lucky sod, you’d still wince when pushing it. He just touched it, fearlessly. He knew it would open, and he knew there’d be a bunch of hungry, slobbering wolves waiting for us behind it. He tried to get us killed!” Zhong Sanxiao was getting a little ahead of himself.

“I do not fondly seek to look ill on others, but there is something off about Han Sen,” Wang Zhao confessed his own feelings.

“I’ll throw my hat into that ring, as well. Something is not right with that dude,” Xu Yanmeng chimed in to say.

“If that is how you all feel, then nothing I say can change that. But, if you want Han Sen to be the one to open that coffin, I will be by his side when he does.” Mister Li was stalwart in his defense of Han Sen.

Mister Li gave Han Sen a pat on the shoulder, and he told him, “Little Han, don’t sweat a thing. I won’t let you face danger alone.”

“Mister Li...” Han Sen felt touched by Mister Li.

“Mister Li, you don’t have to...” Zhong Sanxiao said.

“Well, no one else is volunteering. I have made my decision; I will go with Little Han. And you lot can stand back, just in case something happens.” Mister Li was firm in his decision.

“Well, if you’re going, so am I!” Xu Yanmeng puffed his chest in a display of newfound courage, and he marched forward to stand beside Mister Li.

“We have to find out what is inside the coffin,” Old Qiu said.

Wang Zhao said, “Fine. Let’s go, then. All of us. Mister Li saved our lives once before. If that hasn’t earned him our trust, nothing will.”

“If you agree, then come. But on anyone who goes with us, no oath or bond is laid. You don’t need to go any further than you wish,” Mister Li said.

“Don’t say that!” Xu Yanmeng gave Han Sen a firm gaze, and went on to say, “But if I find out Han Sen is some worm-tongued snake that plans to harm Mister Li, I’ll kill him.”

Han Sen replied, “I’d only hurt you guys if you did something that would warrant a hurting.”

“Bold words.” Xu Yanmeng wasn’t going to trust Han Sen quite so easily as the rest.

Han Sen had pushed open the door earlier to earn himself geno fruit and save everyone from a possibly fatal incident. He hadn’t expected his kindness to be rewarded with suspicion and ire.

Without Mister Li, a fight would have broken out between them already.

Everyone summoned their geno cores next, and when Xu Yanmeng brought out his spear, he pointed it at Han Sen and said, “You’re up-front. If I catch you doing anything dodgy, this’ll be rammed up where the sun doesn’t shine.”

Mister Li was as chummy as ever with Han Sen, and this speech made him walk side-by-side with him. He patted Han Sen on the shoulder again and told him, "Let's go together."

Han Sen could not be bothered to explain anything. If he told them what had occurred during and after the wolf chase, it was highly unlikely they'd believe him.

They all approached the coffin with bated-breath. The creature atop it did not move or make a sound, but everyone remained as silent as they could. You could've heard a pin drop.

But Han Sen's Nine-Life Cat pendant began to burn when they neared it. And the closer Han Sen got, the hotter it burned.

Chapter 1409: Opening the Coffin

When Han Sen touched the pendant, he was scalded by the heat it had generated.

"The pendant did not have a reaction to the leader of Blood Legion, assuming that was who he was. But why is it reacting so strongly to this? Is this the real Nine-Life Cat? Or maybe what I saw was an apparition, and the bones of the leader actually reside in this coffin." There was a lot to question and a lot to be wary of.

Still, assuming that was true, Han Sen noted that it would be very strange for the coffin to be placed where it was. Authority figures or leaders of much renown weren't known for making their resting places at the entrances of their palaces.

The group walked forward until they were only three meters away from the coffin. There, they could now see the creature clearly, and make out all of its distinct features.

The so-called beast was curled up, and it had its head tucked beneath its tail. There was not, however, any life force that Han Sen could detect.

But suddenly, the tail moved. Unsure about what this meant, everyone stopped in their tracks and remained dead still. They peered at the creature with intense, twitching eyes.

"It's alive!" Xu Yanmeng hollered.

The creature's tail swung again, like the slow lashing of a whip. The creature unfurled to look at the group that was approaching, and it did so with eyes that looked like a couple of red sirens.

"It's alive!" Zhong Sanxiao also called out, trembling as he took one step back in fear.

The creature really did look like a cat, complete with oval eyes. Its gaze was menacing and cold, but it wasn't directly threatening.

Everyone readied themselves for a fight. The group that had come before them encountered this creature and died shortly after, after all.

But the motionless standoff went on longer than anticipated. The cold, uncaring gaze of the cat developed into one of disinterest after a certain amount of time elapsed.

After a while, with the prospect of immediate danger diminishing, Zhong Sanxiao said, "Now is the time to strike. It's not attacking, so let's take advantage of that."

Everyone knew it might be for the best to remove the stranger-danger that cat might-or-might-not pose, but they'd have to do it together, if they chose to attack it.

"No," Mister Li said, with a resolute voice. "It is not hostile to us. If we provoke it, and make it hostile, we may not even live long enough to regret it."

"We can't just stand here, though," Zhong Sanxiao pleaded.

Mister Li said, "We can continue to approach it delicately, and assuming it does not do anything more, we will try to open the coffin."

Everyone in the team looked at each other, to see how they each felt about that. Although they were all worried about what might happen, they all agreed it was best to approach the coffin slowly without directly inviting hostility from the cat.

Each step they took was slow and steady, exercised with great care and caution. And each time one foot settled back on the ground, they looked at the beast intently, to see if it had moved at all.

When they reached the coffin, the cat had not moved an inch. It merely looked at them, with its tail brushing softly against the coffin it rested upon.

Everyone approached the coffin from a different direction, surrounding it. Strangely, the creature seemed to be watching Han Sen.

"Get a firm grip around the edges, and lift it up," Mister Li commanded softly.

They placed their hands around the smoothed edges of the coffin and dug their fingers as far they could underneath it.

They did not care much for the coffin or what might rest inside. Their main worry was how the creature would behave once they began moving the lid. They feared it was ready to pounce.

"Three... two... one..." When Mister Li finished the countdown, everyone heaved the hefty lid up.

The combined strength of the group removed the lid with ease. They lifted it as high and as straight as they could, and strangely, the cat did not move an inch.

The beast looked as disinterested as it first had, and it didn't seem to care about what they were doing.

Their mission was to find out what was in the coffin. Once they caught a glimpse of what was inside, they could return. With the lid safely removed, they all stole a glance inside. What they saw surprised them.

It was empty. There was not a single thing inside it.

"It's empty? Why is it empty?" Wang Zhao asked aloud.

Old Qiu then drew attention to the vacant lid of the coffin, with a voice that trembled and shook. "The creature is gone."

Everyone turned to look where Old Qiu was staring.

The cat was gone. It was as if it had completely vanished into thin air.

"Where did it go?" Xu Yanmeng asked, looking around in a near-panic, fearing a sudden ambush or pounce.

Everyone thought it most strange, and did the same. But no one was able to see where it might have wandered off to.

"Look, we've seen what's inside the coffin. We can leave now; we've done what was requested of us. We really should get moving before something ill falls upon us," Wang Zhao suggested, trying his best to conceal the nervousness that tried to break up his words.

"Okay. Let's put the lid back before leaving," Mister Li said.

When they lifted the lid up and set it back down on the coffin, their faces changed.

It made Xu Yanmeng scream at the top of his lungs, and he yelled, "The suction! I can't get my hands free."

"Me, too! Oh f*ck." Zhong Sanxiao tried to pull his hand free, but he was unable to.

Everyone was suffering the same misfortune, finding their hands to be stuck in a vacuum stemming from the coffin. They couldn't get their hands free.

Han Sen held onto the lid like the rest, pretending he was suffering the same fate. Truthfully, the suction that gripped the others didn't seem to be affecting him.

His compatriots already thought poorly enough of him as it was, so he made sure not to reveal his fortune.

Chapter 1410: The Coffin Rises

Everyone was scared, on the precipice of tumbling into full-on panic. They all exhausted as much of their powers as they could trying to free themselves from the coffin, but nothing worked. They were well and truly stuck.

It was like the coffin wasn't just pulling their bodies, but it was siphoning their strength and power as well. Whenever they released some power as they tried to escape, it was as if they were feeding the coffin.

Wang Zhao watched his power bleed away, and he was unable to stop it.

Zhong Sanxiao summoned a sword geno core to batter the coffin into freeing him. But when his blade touched down on the spooky sarcophagus, the power and life of his weapon began to drain.

This occurred to the geno cores summoned by the others, as well. And when their powers were drained, the cores were pulled out of their hands and stuck to the top of the coffin. It was as if the cores had been dragged away by a magnet.

Everyone was shocked, unable to understand what was going on. And amidst this confusion, the symbols and scrawlings that adorned the coffin began to light up with a sinister neon hue.

"Why hasn't your power been absorbed?" Xu Yanmeng asked. His suspicions regarding Han Sen hadn't diminished, and now, they only heightened. To Xu Yanmeng, the fact that Han Sen was unaffected was proof enough that he was some sort of traitor.

Hearing this, they all turned to look at Han Sen, who was seemingly unaffected.

"F*ck! I knew something was up with him." Zhong Sanxiao was furious, thinking Han Sen had willingly betrayed them, and so he summoned a geno core and tried to attack him.

Han Sen let go of his grip on the coffin lid and dropped the pretense. He swiftly moved to evade the attack and pleaded, "Fine; I'm not trapped! But it's not like I tried to get any of you hurt. This is as unexpected for me as it is for you. I don't know what is happening."

Han Sen hurriedly took a few steps back. His former compatriots all had gemstone geno cores, and if the rest sought to attack him, Han Sen did not fancy getting surrounded.

"I knew we should have killed him when we had the chance," Xu Yanmeng proclaimed.

"Your body!" Old Qiu suddenly exclaimed.

Then, all the members of the party began looking at each other in fear. They were all aging at an extremely rapid pace.

Xu Yanmeng's hair turned white, and his skin began to gather wrinkles like weathered, coarse leather. He was like an old man.

Wang Zhao then shouted, "Mister Li, why are you not affected by this?"

Wang Zhao wasn't the only one to notice this, and when the group's enfeebled eyes looked over, they too saw him unaffected.

Mister Li smiled and took a step back, letting his fingers leave the cusp of the coffin's lid. "I wasn't trapped, either. And I won't be getting any older."

"Do you know why this is happening? Surely, there must be something you can do for us!" Everyone's face was turning grim, thinking they were on the verge of death.

"This is a coffin belonging to Blood Legion. The Nine-Life Cat was suppressing the power within; now that we've opened it, it is absorbing all nearby lifeforces to wake up what slumbers inside," explained Mister Li, with disturbing calm and resoluteness.

"What? How do you know all this? Is there a way you might save us?" Old Qiu pleaded.

Old Qiu was already an old man, hence the title. He had withered faster than the rest, and his skin was now not far off the stressed gutturing of tree bark.

Everyone's eyes were fixed on Mister Li. They knew his speech had taken on a different tone, and they had the suspicion that some veil had been removed. But still, they clung to their past vision of the man they had accompanied on their way inside. They desperately hoped he would know how to save them and act upon the ability to do so.

"I can save you, yes. But that would nullify my reason for coming here," Mister Li said.

"You... planned for this to happen?! You wanted to kill us?" The fear that had taken root inside Wang Zhao turned to wrath and rage. He was seething as he spoke, having suffered this betrayal.

"I am taking back what is owed. I already saved you all once, or have you forgotten? You said you were willing to lay down your lives in return, and now the time to do that has come. There shouldn't be a problem, should there?" Mister Li's tone had become cold and callous.

Wang Zhao found the situation incredibly disturbing, and as much as he wished to lash out and spite the man who had done this to them, he found himself unable to. The withering and brittleness of intense old age had settled in his bones, and merely remaining upright was becoming a trying task.

Han Sen, although he hadn't been backstabbed himself, was shocked by what was happening. He had never expected Mister Li to do something such as this. Everyone had placed their faith in Mister Li, and they left no room for doubt. Their blind, unwavering trust had led them to the situation they were in, and they cursed themselves for it.

Mister Li then turned to Han Sen and said, "Little Han, which part of Blood Legion do you belong to?"

Han Sen was taken off-guard by the question, and he wasn't sure how he might answer this. Han Sen knew there were two factions within Blood Legion. One consisted of the loyal, like Nan Litian; the others were considered traitors, like God's Retribution and Han Jinzhi.

He didn't formally belong to Blood Legion, so he wasn't sure if he could give an answer.

With no answer forthcoming, Mister Li didn't seem to dwell on his silence much. He moved on to say, "I need sacred-blood to wake up the coffin; you can help a bit."

Mister Li cut his own hand open with his nails, and blue blood dripped from the palm of his hand onto the coffin lid. The blue blood was almost as bright as that of God's Retribution.

"What is your title within Blood Legion?" Han Sen asked.

Mister Li answered, "Again, which side do you belong to? Did they not teach you about the leader?"

"You... are the leader?" Han Sen asked, with a quivering voice.

Han Sen had always wanted to know who the leader of Blood Legion was, but in his short time in this shelter, two possible candidates had made themselves known to him.

There was the shadow that seemed to imply himself to be the leader, but Mister Li was now insinuating that he himself was the leader.

"Why is there more than one leader now?" Han Sen wondered.