

## Chapter 5451

In the Zilian Villa, the night had enveloped everything, leaving only Maria and Charlie. The rest of the occupants had already gone to their quarters.

As Charlie arrived, he confidently strode through the first-floor courtyard and gracefully ascended the stone steps. The moment he stepped into the courtyard, there stood Maria, her face a delightful mix of happiness and shyness.

"Young Master..." she greeted him, her voice gentle and affectionate.

Maria was dressed in a stunning white sarong, her long hair cascading over her shoulders, still damp from a recent bath. The hot spring pool nearby was brimming with water and a sprinkling of fresh flower petals adorned its surface, permeating the whole area with a faint floral fragrance.

Charlie instinctively sensed that Maria had just finished bathing, which made him feel a bit uneasy. He purposely avoided looking at the pool and focused on Maria instead, speaking with a hint of nervousness, "Miss Clark, my apologies for disturbing you so late. Besides the promises I made to the three old gentlemen, there are a few more matters I need your help with, a puzzle I hope you can assist me in solving."

Maria's smile was enchanting and her beauty was mesmerizing. With lips slightly parted, she replied sweetly, "Young Master, your concerns are my blessings. I'm here to share your worries and offer my aid in finding the answers you seek."

With a welcoming gesture, she invited Charlie into her boudoir, saying gently, "Please, come in. We can talk comfortably here."

Charlie nodded gratefully and followed Maria into her private space.

Meanwhile, in the living room on the first floor, Maria had prepared tea in advance. The aroma of the special brew filled the room, rejuvenating the senses. She guided Charlie to a modest tea table, gesturing for him to take a seat.

"Young Master, please sit down. Let me pour you some tea," Maria said warmly.

Charlie complied and they sat cross-legged, facing each other at the table.

Maria poured a cup of tea for Charlie, saying, "Young Master, please."

Inquisitive, Charlie asked, "Is this the legendary mother of Pu'er Tea, the tea cake?" Maria smiled, "Indeed, you have a discerning eye. This tea is reserved for special occasions and your visit is one such moment."

Charlie, concerned about wasting such a precious tea, cautioned, "We should be frugal with it. Once it's gone, it won't be easy to get a taste of this flavor again in the future."

Maria calmly responded, "Worry not. Like everything in life, the tea will have its time. It's essential to savor it when the occasion calls for it."

Taking a sip of the tea, Charlie marveled at its refreshing taste, appreciating the subtle complexities of the flavor.

Maria then asked, "Now, tell me, Young Master, what issue do you need my help with?"

Charlie looked serious and expectant as he asked, "Miss Clark, do you know about the Divine Dragon Grid?"

"Divine Dragon Grid?" Maria's expression shifted to one of surprise. "Where did you come across that term?"

Charlie explained, "I overheard my grandparents talking and my great-uncle mentioned it as well. My father had a book called 'Preface to Apocalyptic Book' and the Divine Dragon Grid was frequently mentioned in it. I've been curious about its meaning and significance. But I never remember my father mentioning the terms such as a Divine Dragon grid or frame. I once heard Master Exeor say the fate of a person's manga and dragon frame, but I do not know, what is this divine dragon frame."

Maria didn't answer Charlie's question, but asked curiously, "You mentioned Master Exeor, I don't know which Master he is?"

Charlie said, "He's the direct descendant of the the old Exeor family named Orion Exeor ....."

Maria muttered "Gold firm, wood shrugged, water clear, fire strong, earth solid and wind light, Master Exeor, should be grandchildren of Olórin Exeor."

Charlie was surprised and asked, "Miss Clark and the ancestors of the Exeor Family also had interactions?"

Maria nodded and said "The reason why I know Feng Shui, the secret art of the Eight Trigrams, is because that year I had followed Olórin Exeor and learned it. Master that year to me was also considered teaching. Many of the problems that the old man did not penetrate were also passed on to me and after this one or two hundred years of time, I was unlocking the problems left by him one by one. Only now has the answers to the Eight Trigrams has been attained."

Charlie could not help but sigh "It is really the benefits of longevity... Any knowledge, there is more than enough time to understand and digest..."

Maria smiled slightly, nodded and said, "What the Young Master said is very true, there is a list of great talent sages, all the authors are not close to the general wisdom of the sages, they left the knowledge, which when the ordinary people follow get a bit of enlightenment, even if the talent is very good if it is only live for seventy or eighty years, one can only penetrate at most two or three percent of them, the only five live as long enough to penetrate more than fifty percent!"

Charlie nodded in agreement, at the same time in his heart, he was also a little impatient, so he quickly asked, "Ms. Clark, what exactly is the meaning of the Divine Dragon?"

Maria hesitated for a moment before revealing, "The Divine Dragon is an even higher fate than the Dragon itself."

Puzzled, Charlie asked, "Isn't the Dragon considered the highest? How is there something even beyond it?"

Maria explained, "The Dragon Grid is indeed one of the highest destinies, but the Divine Dragon is exceedingly rare, appearing only once in centuries. Many scholars of Change spend their whole lives without ever encountering it."

Charlie, eager to learn more, inquired, "But wouldn't someone who studies the Changes at least be able to recognize its existence?"

Maria smiled, "Understanding Destiny and Changes lies in its layers of hidden meanings. It's like a vast puzzle, with each discovery leading to new insights and revelations. The more one delves into it, the more profound its mysteries become. Think of it like permutations and combinations in mathematics. It contains countless hidden combinations of meanings within its texts, waiting to be deciphered."

Charlie nodded in understanding, realizing that uncovering the Divine Dragon's significance required more than just a cursory glance.

Maria added, "When the Divine Dragon emerges, it defies the Way of Heaven itself. Unlike other destinies, which are subject to the control of Heavenly Realm and its tribulations, the Divine Dragon stands apart. It can challenge the Way of Heaven without fear of divine retribution."

Charlie absorbed this information, contemplating the extraordinary nature of the Divine Dragon.

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Maria's words stirred Charlie's spirits, and he quickly asked, "Can the Divine Dragon truly defy the heavens and soar as the cultivators claim?"

With a laugh, Maria replied, "My Lord, perhaps I was overthinking it. Divine Ascension is merely a conjecture derived from people's understanding of the Book of Changes. They believe that by reaching a certain level of cultivation, they can ascend to another world like the fairyland in the East or the divine realm in the West. However, based on my family's comprehension of the Book of Changes, the essence of cultivation lies in the continuous extension of lifespan and strength."

Charlie humbly inquired, "Miss Clark, could you elaborate further?"

Maria nodded slightly and spoke earnestly, "Young Master, the extension of lifespan and strength means that the nature of beings remains unchanged. It's like a tree, no matter how tall

or old it grows, it remains a tree and won't become a so-called tree demon, tree spirit, or tree god."

"Perhaps with improved cultivation, the flowers and fruits it bears might have extraordinary effects, but fundamentally, it's still just a tree," she continued.

Charlie nodded in understanding, "So, even if a person surpasses the limits imposed by the heavens, they're still human, albeit with a longer and stronger life?"

"Exactly," Maria replied with a smile. "This is the true essence of the Book of Changes. A person's strength can surpass the limitations of fate, but even after doing so, they remain human, not gods."

"If the Mother of Pu'er lives for 10,000 years, it will inevitably face a catastrophe," she explained. "If it survives, it will still be the Mother of Pu'er tree, standing by Heaven Lake as the same tree it always was."

Then she added, "As for the Heavenly Cultivation, its height far exceeds the comprehension of ordinary beings. To put it provocatively, it's like the Master's strength dooming him to only live for a thousand years. If he breaks through that limitation, he may live for two thousand years. But to live until the day when the Cultivation of Heaven descends might take five thousand years, or even ten thousand."

Curious, Charlie asked, "Miss Clark, do you know how high the Cultivation of Heaven is?"

Maria shook her head, replying, "I have only lived for less than four hundred years; how could we fathom the heights of heaven?"

Then, as if remembering something, she said to Charlie, "By the way, the Mother of Pu'er should have lived for 10,000 years. That's what my family's calculations show."

Charlie nodded and asked, "Since you have deep knowledge of the Book of Changes, can you tell me what will happen if the Mother of Pu'er breaks through the heavens?"

Maria explained, "Once it survives the catastrophe and breaks through the limitations of fate, it can absorb reiki from the heavens and the earth, furthering its own practice and making it more effective. Perhaps one day, a single leaf could have the effects of a rejuvenation pill, extending a person's life by twenty years."

She continued with a smile, "So, the legendary Queen Mother's fruit, said to grant immortality, may not be entirely fictional. If a certain tree breaks through the limitations of fate and accumulates tens of thousands of years of cultivation, perhaps such a fruit could truly exist."

Charlie voiced his doubts, "But isn't there no reiki in the world?"

Maria nodded, "According to the Book of Changes, reiki doesn't exist for those who haven't survived the catastrophe. But after the catastrophe, reiki emerges."

Perplexed, Charlie said, "This sounds quite implausible..."

Laughing, Maria replied, "I too thought it was unrealistic at first. But when my family encountered modern technology and radio after World War II, a realization struck me. Reiki energy may be akin to radio frequency, imperceptible to ordinary people's bodies. But once they have the means to receive it, they can continuously absorb its contents. Perhaps aura works in a similar way."

Wide-eyed, Charlie exclaimed, "So, the Age of Doom might not really be the end?!"

Maria explained, "The Age of Doom is just a description passed down through generations. People have obtained the ancient cultivation methods and experiences, but they can't achieve the same results. Hence, they concluded that reiki has vanished from the world, signaling the Age of Doom. But in reality, no one can say for certain. I can't guarantee that my understanding of the Book of Changes is flawless, so everything I've shared is just for your reference."

Charlie nodded, believing most of what Maria said to be credible. He felt that her perspective was more trustworthy, and the idea of ascending to become a fairy seemed more like a fairy tale.

Thus, he steered the conversation back to Divine Dragon and asked, "Miss Clark, how can we determine if someone is Divine Dragon? If I provide you with my father's birth date, could you figure it out?"

Regrettably, Maria shook her head, "My family cannot calculate the Divine Dragon formation, and my understanding of Changes has only recently introduced me to the concept. I still don't know how to determine if a person is a Divine Dragon. I've been stuck in a certain aspect that I can't figure out."

Curious, Charlie asked, "What aspect is causing you trouble?"

Maria admitted, "Based on the Book of Changes deductions, although Divine Dragon exists, it hasn't been born yet."

Surprised, Charlie asked, "Not born?! Can't destiny be cultivated?"

Shaking her head, Maria replied, "My Lord, I don't know either. This is just my deduction. The Divine Dragon is not born, but how it comes into existence, I don't know. I can't be certain if my deduction is correct; it's possible that I made a mistake."

After a moment of hesitation, Maria looked at Charlie and said in a low voice, "My Lord, there's a saying in my family, but I'm not sure if I should share it."

Charlie encouraged her, "Miss Clark, please feel free to tell me."

Maria disclosed, "I believe that your father might not be Divine Dragon, or even a Dragon."

Surprised, Charlie asked, "Why are you so certain?"

Maria explained, "The Divine Dragon's fate is the most formidable in hundreds of years. How could the heavens allow him to be killed at a young age? Plus by Gideon, whose fate is several ranks lower? Even a Dragon, the strongest and highest, can navigate through mountains and rivers, turning dangers into opportunities, as long as his opponent's fate and strength aren't superior, and they don't attack in numbers! Fate's strength is not mere talk!"

## Chapter 5453

Charlie wasn't one to delve deeply into matters of fate.

In the 'Apocalyptic Book', he found a treasure trove of miscellaneous knowledge, but the one thing missing was an explanation of fate. He used to liken fate to the caste system in India, where high fate equated to high caste. Just like a high-caste person, someone with high fate had a prestigious social standing but wasn't inherently powerful.

However, Maria's words suggested that fate was much more intricate than that. The idea that the Divine Dragon wasn't born but could be achieved puzzled him even further. How could something of such high destiny not have a natural origin and yet be attainable in the future?

Charlie felt completely adrift, unable to find any clues to make sense of it all.

At that moment, Maria flashed a reassuring smile and said, "Young Master, don't fret too much. I'm still studying the Book of Changes. Perhaps with another breakthrough, I'll unlock the secrets of the Divine Dragon's fate."

Charlie felt a glimmer of relief. He realized that understanding something as complex as this couldn't be rushed, so he decided to set aside the question of the Divine Dragon for now. Turning to Maria, he said, "Miss Clark, I have no further inquiries. As promised, I'll give those three gentlemen a chance. Would you mind calling them over?"

In no time, Larry Cole from abroad, Keagan Myers from Eastcliff and Marius Cross, who had been Maria's loyal companion all his life, made their way up the stone steps and arrived at Maria's courtyard.

Breathless, the trio stood at the door and Marius spoke, "Miss, we're all here."

With a clear voice, Maria responded, "Come in."

Eagerly, the three men entered the courtyard and saw Charlie seated across from Maria, busy making tea by the stove. Approaching respectfully, they said, "Miss, Mr. Wade..."

Before they could finish, Maria nodded and smiled, "Mr. Wade has graciously granted you a chance and today, he is here to fulfill that promise. Hurry and express your gratitude!"

The three of them exchanged excited glances and immediately knelt to the ground.

In unison, they said, "We thank Mr. Wade for his kindness!"

Charlie had to interject, "Please, the three of you, get up quickly."

Maria adopted a stern, parent-like tone, "You must not rise until you've received a blessing!"

Remaining motionless, the three of them knelt as directed. It was the first time Charlie witnessed Maria's commanding presence. This delicate and well-behaved young woman now issued orders to these three elderly men on their knees before her, completely subverting his perception.

Not wanting to prolong the moment, Charlie decided to administer the elixir and urge them to stand up. He took out three pills and said, "These are Rejuvenation Pills. They can cure all ailments, extend life by 20 years and grant you more time with Miss Clark in the future."

Charlie's final words caused a sudden pang in Maria's heart. She knew the immense value of the Rejuvenation Pills at this level. Her three adopted sons weren't exactly fond of Charlie, let alone kind to him, yet he willingly offered them such precious pills. This exceeded Maria's expectations.

As Charlie finished speaking, Maria realized that his generosity was likely motivated by her, ensuring she wouldn't be lonely in the years to come.

The three elderly men were equally surprised and pleased. Not only were they about to gain 20 extra years of life, but they also saw how much Charlie cared for Maria.

In their eyes, there was no better match in the world for Maria than Charlie. They couldn't help but envision Maria wearing a wedding dress, ready to marry him.

Grateful and slightly reproachful, Maria exclaimed, "What are you all waiting for? Why aren't you thanking Mr. Wade for his blessing?"

Instantly snapped back to reality, the three men loudly replied, "Thank you, Mr. Wade, for your blessing!"

## Chapter 5454

Charlie gazed at the trio of venerable octogenarians before him, his attention drawn to Maria, who stood beside him, still exuding a childlike aura that left him momentarily perplexed.

The three elderly men were undeniably ancient, their wealth of experience and wisdom evident even in their limited interactions. Yet, when faced with Maria, they seemed like children obediently following their parents instructions.

Though Maria herself appeared youthful, her demeanor toward the elderly trio was strict, akin to that of a stern parent, creating an intriguing contrast that left Charlie feeling somewhat out of place.

Shaking off his confusion, he politely addressed them, "Please, the three of you may rise."

However, the old men merely lifted their heads to look at Maria in unison.

Unperturbed, Maria nodded calmly and said, "Since Mr. Wade has spoken, you may all stand up."

The trio helped each other up and though Charlie was tempted to assist, Maria's words stopped him, "Young Master, they can manage on their own."

Awkwardly nodding, Charlie withdrew his hand.

After they were on their feet, Charlie hastened to say, "Gentlemen, I urge you to take the Rejuvenation Pill as soon as possible. It will greatly improve your health."

Still, the elderly trio remained silent, their attention fixed on Maria once again.

Maria nodded approvingly and stated, "Master Wade has advised you to take it, so you should."

She then produced three cups from under the tea table, adding, "Since Mr. Wade has gifted you the Rejuvenation Pill, allow me to offer you a cup of tea as well."

With that, she poured three cups of golden-red tea from the teapot and continued, "This tea is made from the tea cakes of the Mother of Pu'er. I have never asked for anything in return from you all since you were children, call me stingy if you will. But this tea is something I cherish deeply, a treasure I'm unwilling to part with. However, today's lunch is a special occasion, and I'm willing to share it with all of you."

The elderly men were left speechless, their shock evident.

None of them expected Maria to brew the rare Mother of Pu'er tea cakes for them. Having grown up alongside her, they knew of her love for tea and the Mother of Pu'er was her most prized possession, irreplaceable by any worldly wealth.



Maria had never shared this precious tea with anyone except for Charlie, who was the sole exception. Larry Cole took the tea knife to express gratitude and began to separate the elixir on the spot.

Unexpectedly, Charlie interjected, "Mr. Cole, please don't trouble yourself."

Startled, Larry Cole looked at Charlie.

Unfazed, Charlie produced another Rejuvenation Pill and handed it to Larry Cole, saying, "This one is for your wife. Please pass it on to her."

This gesture left not only Larry Cole but even Maria dumbfounded.

Charlie's generosity in giving a priceless Rejuvenation Pill to Larry Cole's wife, someone he had never met, caught them all by surprise.

Charlie's motivation was simple, gratitude towards Maria for saving his life. As orphans brought up by Maria, the three elderly men held a special place in her heart. Charlie felt that Maria trusted Larry Cole's wife and thus, he was generous to those close to her.

Charlie believed in returning kindness with kindness and Maria's act of saving his life left him indebted to her. To him, giving a few Rejuvenation Pills or even producing a batch for them paled in comparison to the depth of Maria's kindness.

Larry Cole, though thrilled and amazed, didn't dare to accept the pill without approval, thus turning to Maria, awaiting her decision.

Though Larry Cole couldn't comprehend the reason behind Charlie's magnanimity, he knew it had something to do with Maria. Her status must have played a role in this generosity.

Since they were raised by Maria, they were profoundly grateful to her, and they wouldn't dare to take advantage of her goodwill for their own benefit.

Thus, it all came down to Maria's consent if the Rejuvenation Pill could be accepted.

Maria looked deeply at Charlie, her heart moved and she instructed Larry Cole, "Mr. Wade has shown kindness, you shouldn't refuse it. Kneel on behalf of your wife and thank Mr. Wade for his blessing! Now, go ahead and take the medicine!"

Larry Cole rose slowly, glancing at the two elderly men beside him. Together, the three men placed a Rejuvenation Pill in their mouths.

The magic of the Rejuvenation Pill once again unfolded before their eyes.

Their bodies underwent a remarkable transformation, aging rapidly in reverse.

Watching the three of them grow younger, Maria's eyes welled up with tears.

As she mentioned earlier, after World War II, the constant threat of the Warriors Den made it difficult for her to continue adopting orphans.

Larry Cole and the others were among the few orphans she had taken in, and their potential departure would usher in profound loneliness for Maria. It could be a hundred-year-long loneliness that only death could reverse.

Although Maria always appeared composed in front of them, she had developed a sense of dependence on them deep in her heart. If these three individuals could gain twenty more years of life, it would alleviate her loneliness for the same period.

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When Maria witnessed Charlie's actions, she was deeply moved. Turning to the three elderly gentlemen with utmost seriousness, Charlie spoke, "Gentlemen, as you take the Rejuvenation Pill, you'll live to be over a hundred years old. To avoid suspicion from the outside world, Mr. Cole could invest in a medical research institution. That way, when people question why you're not aging, it'll be a plausible explanation."

Larry Cole didn't hesitate and replied, "Don't worry, Mr. Wade, I'll definitely invest in a similar enterprise and institution in the future."

Charlie nodded and turned to Keagan Myers, saying, "Mr. Myers holds a high position, and such a sudden change might attract unwanted attention. Be cautious to avoid arousing suspicions."

Without a moment's hesitation, Keagan Myers responded, "Master Wade, I've decided not to go back to Eastcliff anymore. From now on, I'll stay with Marius and be by Miss's side."

"Limiting contact would be safer," Charlie acknowledged with a smile. "The three of you should be prepared ahead of time, and next time you take the Rejuvenation Pill, it might be best to do so anonymously."

Currently, all three are in their nineties. If they took the Rejuvenation Pill again, their lifespan could extend to a hundred and fifty. This prospect excited them greatly, and they felt truly blessed to receive such a gift from Charlie.

Maria was overjoyed as well and urged the three to express their gratitude. "Hurry up, thank Mr. Wade, for your blessing!"

Charlie waved his hand modestly, "That's enough, one thank you is more than enough. I can't bear to be thanked so much."

Unperturbed, the three old gentlemen exclaimed in unison, "Thank you, Mr. Wade, for your blessing!"

Chuckling helplessly, Charlie found himself at a loss for words when he suddenly received a call from Isaac Cameron.

Signaling the others to give him a moment, Charlie answered the call. Isaac informed him, "Master, the Boeing 777 you monitored has taken off from Buenos Aires again!"

An instant frown appeared on Charlie's face as he inquired, "What's the flight route the other party applied for?"

"The route is the same as before, heading to Australia first," replied Isaac.

Charlie's heart tightened. He had no idea that it was morning in Buenos Aires, Argentina at that very moment.

Morgana, who hadn't left the station for many years, had decided to board the ultra-long-range Boeing 777 private jet alone and travel to Myanmar.

Upon hearing that the current route was Australia, Charlie couldn't help but wonder, "Could it be that Morgana has already seen through my empty city plan?"

Maria, who was nearby, overheard the conversation with Isaac and said quickly to Larry Cole and the others, "You three can leave for now. Mr. Wade and I have something to discuss."

The three quickly bid their goodbyes and left the top courtyard together.

Once they were alone, Maria questioned Charlie, "Master, did I hear correctly? Did the plane of the Warriors Den take off again?"

Charlie nodded, "Yes, and it's still heading to Australia. But I suspect they'll use it as a stopover and eventually fly to Asia, quite possibly to China."

Worried, Maria asked, "Do you think Morgana figured out your plan?"

Charlie replied with uncertainty, "I don't think so. The Master's portrait is enough to keep Morgana away. She can't confirm the authenticity of the back, so I doubt she'd send anyone to Aurous Hill again."

Pondering the situation, Charlie asked Maria, "Then who do you think is on that plane, and where are they going?"

Maria admitted, "I dare not speculate, but they will have to apply for the next flight route in advance before leaving Australia, and we should know their true destination in about eight hours, given the flight time."

Agreeing, Charlie said, "Then we'll have to wait until tomorrow morning to find out."

Offering reassurance, Maria smiled, "Don't worry too much, Young Master. Morgana won't return to Aurous Hill, and this plane may be carrying people on another mission."

Satisfied with the response, Charlie nodded and said, "True, it's pointless to overthink now. We'll have at least ten more hours to prepare if she comes to Aurous Hill."

Maria suggested, "Please inform the servants immediately if there are any further developments."

"Of course," Charlie assured her, "I'll keep you informed."

Feeling that it was getting late, Maria said, "It's not early now, Young Master. I won't keep you here any longer."

Before Charlie could leave, Maria suddenly recalled something and said, "Wait a moment, Young Master."

She hurriedly ran up the stairs and returned with a red cloth-wrapped item. Handing it to Charlie with seriousness, she said, "This is a piece of lightning strike wood from the Mother of Pu'er. My family has treasured it for many years, but I can only treat it as a keepsake. You mentioned a magic weapon capable of summoning thunder, and this lightning strike wood might be useful. Please take it and refine the magic weapon!"

Charlie was taken aback. He had actually been considering whether he could bring Maria, the mother of Pu'er, to Aurous Hill. It was a tea tree that had survived a catastrophe and possessed profound energy. The lightning strike wood had been struck by lightning during the catastrophe, making it a potent material for refining thunder-related magic.

Without hesitation, he gratefully accepted the gift. "Thank you, Miss Clark. Indeed, this lightning-struck wood is a timely blessing. I'm in need of materials for refining magic weapons."

Maria smiled, "I'm glad it can be of use to you. This lightning strike wood has finally found its destined purpose."

As Charlie held the lightning strike wood in his hand, he could feel a surge of indescribable energy, akin to standing in a vibrant forest filled with boundless vitality during springtime.

Amazed, Charlie commented, "Truly, the lightning struck wood, of the Mother of Pu'er... Even in this state, it exudes an unfathomable aura!"

Maria smiled, "I hope it serves you well in refining the magic weapon. It's been with my family for over three hundred years."

With gratitude, Charlie assured her, "Rest assured, I'll make the most of it. Thank you, Miss Clark."

As they concluded their conversation, Maria said, "It's getting late, Young Master. I won't keep you any longer."

Charlie nodded and bid her farewell before leaving.

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After saying goodbye to Maria, Charlie returned home with two things on his mind.

Firstly, he was determined to make the most of his time and refine the Thunderbolt that Maria had given him—the Mother of Pu'er, the Lightning Strike Wood.

Secondly, he needed to keep a close eye on the Boeing 777's next destination, which he suspected might be Aurous Hill. If that were the case, he had to be ready to deal with it promptly.

With eight hours remaining until the next stop of the Boeing 777, Charlie wasted no time and immediately began the process of refining the Thunderbolt once he got home.

Refining the Thunderbolt wasn't new to Charlie; he had done it before. But as he entered the lightning strike wood of the Mother of Pu'er, he encountered unexpected difficulties. The spirit energy he used to perfect the formation struggled to make an impact, as if the lightning strike had become incredibly resilient and hard to work with.

In the past, the aura was like a carving knife, and the lightning strike wood was like soft wood, easily accepting the markings. But now, it was like trying to carve into hard steel with a simple knife.

Charlie was taken aback by the surprising toughness of the wood. He had no magical tools that could help him get through this, so he had no other choice but to infuse the wood with more and more reiki. The reiki consumption escalated rapidly, similar to when Maria's ring had absorbed it so voraciously.

Charlie knew there was no turning back, though. To turn the Mother of Pu'er into a powerful tool, he needed to invest more effort.

In his determination, he used a Regeneration Pill to supplement the rapidly depleting reiki. After several hours of intense work, Charlie finally opened his eyes, sweat dripping down his face.

He now held a palm-sized, jet-black Thunderbolt in his hand, giving off a faint metallic luster. The texture was so fine that it seemed impossible to believe it was made of wood. Holding it, he could sense the electricity coursing through it, reminiscent of a storm at sea with thunder and lightning flashing and roaring.

Feeling the connection with the immense power of the Thunderbolt, Charlie was amazed at its potency compared to the previous one.

Just as he was excitedly examining his newly refined creation, Isaac Cameron called again with crucial information. The Boeing 777 had requested a route from Melbourne, Australia, to Mandalay, Myanmar.

"Mandalay?" Charlie frowned. "Are you certain about this information?"

"Absolutely," Isaac Cameron replied confidently. "The flight route reported to the Australian air traffic control department is for Mandalay. The plane will land in Melbourne Airport in about four

hours, rest for an hour, and then continue to fly to Mandalay. It will take at least ten hours to reach Mandalay from Melbourne."

Relieved that the plane was not heading to Aurous Hill, Charlie was curious about why the Warriors Den suddenly sent a plane to Myanmar.

Intrigued, he called Maria and shared the news with her. Maria seemed surprised by the development and pondered, "Why would Morgana suddenly send someone to Myanmar..."

Charlie suggested, "Perhaps they have dead soldiers stationed there, or maybe the Chinese army is involved?"

Maria chimed in, "According to Morgana's cautious nature, she'd put the entire Warriors Den in lockdown. The Five Armies would operate independently and in silence. Sending someone from the headquarters would be highly unlikely..."

Puzzled, Charlie questioned, "If the Chinese army's Governor's Mansion isn't in Myanmar, then what could be Morgana's intention?"

Maria paused, saying, "My intuition tells me it might be Morgana herself going to Myanmar."

"Her? Morgana herself?" Charlie exclaimed, surprised. "Why do you think that, Ms. Clark?"

"It's just a gut feeling," Maria explained. "The Young Master's empty city plan must have terrified Morgana. Sending a plane to Myanmar so quickly indicates she might be going there personally."

Charlie pressed, "Then what do you think her purpose in Myanmar could be?"

Maria speculated, "If I'm right, she might be planning to enter China secretly through the Southern Myanmar border."

Charlie was taken aback, "Morgana coming to China?! Does she plan to visit Aurous Hill in person?"

"No," Maria clarified. "She won't come to Aurous Hill herself. My guess is that she wants to go to the south first, then head to Shiwan."

"Morgana in China..." Charlie mused. "But why go to Myanmar first? Wouldn't it be more convenient to fly directly to Vietnam? Shiwan is closer to the Vietnam border."

Maria thought for a moment before saying, "Perhaps she wants to visit the south first, possibly to revisit her past. Then, she'll head to Shiwan in search of Master's legendary materials, treasures, and tools."

Maria continued, "With more than ten hours until she arrives in Myanmar, she won't use conventional channels to enter China. She might cross the border secretly. Mandalay is over 300 kilometers away from the border, so she'll have a few hours' window to enter the southern province."

Charlie couldn't help but inquire, "That window period? Do you think she'll use this time to reach the southern province?"

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"You're spot-on!" Maria's voice flowed confidently through the phone to Charlie. "I will head to the Southern Province, so I'd better go now!"

Puzzled, Charlie inquired, "What's the reason for your journey to the south?"

Maria let out a soft sigh and replied with a touch of melancholy, "Young Master, ever since Pu'er mother failed to survive and my family left the Southern Province, we've never returned for the past two or three hundred years. Morgana has set up a trap in the Southern Province, just waiting for me to fall into it. Morgana's main mansion is probably in a state of silence now. Even if she still has informants in the Southern Province, they must have withdrawn to the central government or halted their investigations. This is the perfect moment for me to return!"

Concerned, Charlie warned, "Miss Clark, please don't take this lightly! You mean much more to Morgana than you realize. If you go back and she still has a trap set for you, you'll be in grave danger!"

Maria smiled and said, "Young Master, you don't fully understand Morgana. If you did, you'd know that she's extremely cautious, especially around non-core members. If she were to enter the southern province, all the members of the Warriors Den stationed there would surely withdraw in advance. Right now, she probably has more than twenty different routes to reach the southern province within an hour. As a result, the entire Southern Province is likely to be a vacuum zone for the Warriors Den."

Curious, Charlie asked, "What is your plan for going to the Southern Province, Miss Clark?"

Maria's voice turned sad. "My family... I wish to pay my respects at my father's grave. We once buried my father's clothes on a mountain near my grandmother's house as a decoy for Morgana. His actual ashes lie in a place only my family knows."

Maria went on, "We also intend to visit the edge of Heaven Lake, the place where Pu'er mother failed to cross the tribulation."

With a bright tone, she added, "Morgana's first destination in the Southern Province is probably where my father's tomb is located. Given the vastness of the Southern Province, it will take her several hours, if not longer, to get there. Theoretically, the window of opportunity for me will be longer than expected. Even if our timings coincided, the vastness of the Southern Province might prevent a real confrontation."

Firm in her resolve, Maria declared her plan to Charlie, who listened attentively. "Since you're going to the south, I'll go with you, Miss Clark! Let's head there right away!"

Surprised, Maria questioned, "My Lord...you...you want to accompany me?"

"Yes!" Charlie's determination was unwavering. "I can't let you go alone, can I? It's not safe for those three old gentlemen to accompany you either."

Touched by his concern, Maria responded, "My Lord, I'm not afraid of Morgana since I lack aura. Unless she recognizes me, she'll just pass by. As long as she doesn't see my face, she won't know who I am."

Then, she changed the subject with seriousness. "You, on the other hand, are different. You have reiki and the magical artifacts that Morgana gave to my father. If you get too close to her, she might sense your presence."

Unfazed, Charlie explained his reasoning with a smile, "That's why I'll go to Zeba first! She knows how to conceal her presence. When she followed me and Gideon all the way that night at Willow Estates, I didn't notice her at all. If she teaches me how to hide my presence, I won't have to worry about Morgana finding me."

Maria hesitated, concerned about the potential danger. "Young Master, Zeba was taught by Morgana herself. If Morgana finds out about our plan, it could be very dangerous."

Charlie remained optimistic, saying, "Sure, it might be a little risky, but meeting Morgana face-to-face might actually be a good thing."

Puzzled, Maria asked, "What is the Young Master's plan?"

Charlie spoke earnestly, "I don't have a detailed plan, but I can't let you go alone to the Southern Province, it's too dangerous. If you're going, I'm going with you. If we don't meet Morgana, that would be ideal. However, if we do meet her, as long as she doesn't recognize us, we might be able to find the place where she and your father learned with Morvel Bazin as their teacher through her. Lately, I've come to feel that the 'Apocalyptic Book' and the 'Preface to the Apocalyptic Book' are somehow related to my parents and perhaps to Morvel Bazin as well. If I can find things or records related to him, it might shed more light on what happened to my parents."



Maria hesitated and warned, "If you don't want to meet Morgana, there's a 90% chance you won't, but if you want to meet her, there's a 100% chance you will... However, let me be frank, Young Master, even with Zeba's help in concealing your presence, it's highly unlikely you can follow Morgana from the Southern Province to Shiwan Mountain undetected."

Confidently, Charlie responded with a smile, "Miss Clark, you've underestimated China Network's monitoring capabilities. Once we confirm Morgana's presence in a certain location in China and if she's not invisible, she won't escape Sky Net's surveillance. I'll have Mr. Myers assist with retrieving the Sky Net data using his identity and qualifications. The only problem now is finding where to intercept her first, with so many people around."

Quickly coming up with a plan, Maria suggested, "It's not difficult. Morgana is most likely heading to my father's tomb. If I wait there, chances are high I'll encounter her."

Curious about the exact location, Charlie inquired, "Can you tell me which city in the Southern Province your father's tomb is in?"

Maria replied, "It's in Dali. My grandmother was born and raised there, living in the ancient city. My father's tomb lies in the mountain range near Erhai Sea."

Charlie asked further, "And where are your father's ashes buried?"

Maria revealed, "In Poole."

With all the information he needed, Charlie had a clear plan in mind. "Alright, Miss Clark, give me two hours to prepare. After that, I'll pick you up at Zilian Villa and together, we'll head to the southern province."

Maria readily agreed, "Okay, then I will be waiting for you at Zilian Villa."

Charlie hung up the phone and immediately drove to Elys-Champ Hot Springs, where he first met with Zeba.

After that, he would pick up Maria and their journey to the Southern Province would begin.

While driving, Charlie made another call, this time to Isaac Cameron. He asked for assistance in renting a business jet but instructed Isaac to do it discreetly, avoiding any connection to the Wade family.

## Chapter 5458

Ever since Charlie uncovered the trail of the clues and discovered the shipping company based in Singapore, he realized that commercial aviation was a vulnerability that people often overlooked.

No matter how wealthy or influential someone might be, if they had to travel by plane across multiple countries, they had to truthfully report all flight information to the relevant authorities. No individual could control the entire aviation system. Governments worldwide prioritized aviation safety and airspace security, and flying a plane without authorization was practically unheard of, except for drug dealers in Mexico and Colombia.

In this world, no one possessed the ability to create a stealth aircraft that could evade all radars. Thus, whether it was the richest person on Earth or the Warriors Den, once they boarded a plane, their whereabouts couldn't be concealed.

Morgana and the entire Warriors Den had always believed that they had hidden their airline and true purpose of flying discreetly. They thought that even if someone discovered their plane, as long as nobody knew it was theirs, they would remain hidden.

However, in reality, encountering someone with a discerning mind would still lead to a high chance of exposure.

This was why Charlie had asked Isaac Cameron to rent a plane under a different name. Additionally, he didn't plan to fly directly to Dali even if they rented a plane. They still had a time window of more than 20 hours. He decided to fly to Baisha first, which was less than two hours away from Dali, and then drive to their final destination.

This way, their destination would remain hidden, and security would be improved to some extent.

Originally, Charlie had planned to go to Willow Estates first to remove the Rejuvenation Pill formation and then visit the villa where his grandparents were temporarily staying.

However, upon thinking that he was going to meet Zeba, Charlie had Don Albert set up a wireless network for his grandparents' villa, allowing them to connect with the outside world. During a WeChat call, Charlie informed his grandparents that he would be away on business and would visit another day.

Though his grandparents felt a bit disappointed, they urged him to focus on his business.

Charlie promised his grandma that he would visit as soon as he returned.

While Charlie was driving, the Evans family was having a meeting at a mountain villa.

Samuel Evans, after taking the Rejuvenation Pill, was in a good state of mind. He looked at the time and said to his daughter, Tece, "Tece, Charlie asked you to report on Eddie's safety and convey what he wanted to say to him. Why don't you call him now?"

Tece asked nervously, "Dad, what do you think the probability is that Eddie is in trouble?"

Samuel Evans pondered for a moment and replied seriously, "At this point, I have no trust in anyone other than everyone sitting here. I only trust Charlie. I can't even trust my grandson, granddaughter, or daughter-in-law."

Tece nodded despondently, "I understand, Dad. Then I'll call him now..."

Samuel Evans instructed, "Remember to use WeChat."

"Okay..."

Tece took her phone, logged into WeChat, and sent a voice call to her husband, Eddie George, putting it on speaker. On the other end, Eddie answered almost instantly, sounding hurried, "Tece, is that you?"

Tece replied, "Hey, I'm so relieved to hear your voice. I've been trying to reach you for the past two days, but I couldn't get through. I was worried sick!"

Tece's emotions were complicated; she didn't know if her husband was secretly working undercover in their own home. Naturally, she didn't want that to be true, but she couldn't take any chances, considering the life and death situation of the entire Evans family.

She continued to follow Charlie's instructions and said, "Honey, I'm glad you're okay. I've been so worried."

Eddie exclaimed, "Has something happened?!"

Tece explained, "Two days ago, a powerful martial arts expert attacked Willow Estates. That person is said to be one of the four Marshals of the Warriors Den, Gideon Alastiar, the strongest among them. He easily defeated all our bodyguards."

Eddie asked nervously, "Then what happened next? How did you escape? Are your parents okay?"

Tece continued, "We all thought we were doomed, but unexpectedly, another mysterious man wearing a mask appeared and saved us. He fought Gideon and chased him away. We haven't seen him since."

Eddie asked suspiciously, "Another mysterious person? This is the second time! Could it be related to the person who saved you before?"

Tece replied, "Yes, it's the same person. I recognized his voice. It was the same benefactor who saved us in New York last time."

Eddie asked eagerly, "You met him again? Who is he? Why does he always appear at crucial moments?"

Tece said, "He still had his face covered, and we didn't communicate much."

Eddie sighed, "It's strange. Why would such a powerful person secretly protect you all the time and never reveal his true identity?"

An ominous premonition struck Tece's heart as she listened to her husband's questions. She tried to stay calm and said, "It seems like this benefactor has more important matters to attend to, so he hasn't revealed his identity."

Eddie blurted out, "What could be more important?"

Tece's heart skipped a beat, and she replied, "According to what the benefactor told Gideon, he intends to take down the entire Warriors Den and even behead someone named Morgana with his own hands."

Silence came from the other end of the phone.

Tece tentatively asked, "Husband, are you still there?"

Eddie snapped back to reality and said in a fluster, "Ah? I'm still here, sorry. I was just distracted for a moment."

As he spoke, Eddie continued, "I'm so relieved that you're all safe. I've been on edge for the past two days, not eating or sleeping well, and unable to focus on work..."

After that, Eddie yawned and said, "Oh, I haven't slept for two or three days. Now that I know you're safe, I'm so tired that I can't keep my eyes open. My dear wife, I'll rest for a while. I can't hold on any longer."

Tece pursed her lips, feeling dejected, but she said in a concerned tone, "Alright, rest well, and remember not to disturb your phone."

"Okay!" Eddie agreed, then said, "Honey, I'll hang up now."

"Okay, goodbye."

After the call ended, Samuel Evans said with a serious expression, "Don't deceive yourself. Eddie must be up to something."

Tece subconsciously replied, "Dad, Eddie is just concerned about us and wants to know what's going on. Isn't it normal to ask more questions?"

Samuel Evans replied coldly, "Asking questions is fine, but asking too much can lead to problems."

Jack agreed, "I support Uncle Evans's judgment. Eddie does have a problem!"

Tece quickly asked, "Jack, what do you think the problem is?"

Jack explained, "Under normal circumstances, it's understandable that he wants to know if you escaped safely. But not contacting you immediately after being unable to reach you is a bit suspicious. Normal couples would rush to meet each other in such a situation, especially when they have access to private planes. He should have come to Aurous Hill as soon as possible, resting on the way if needed."

Jack continued, "But he never mentioned coming to see you, and I believe it's because he wanted to report this important news to the Warriors Den and let him decide what to do next. If the Lord asks him to visit you, he will come."

Jack frowned again and said, "Actually, the Lord shouldn't allow him to see you. She dare not send anyone to Aurous Hill again."

Tece didn't know how to respond and just sighed.

Samuel Evans comforted her, "Don't overthink it now. Remember that, other than Charlie, no one else is worthy of complete trust."

...

Meanwhile, Charlie drove to the Elys-Champ Hot Springs Villa.

He had already arranged for Zeba to stay in a completely safe living area. When he arrived, he was directly led to her living room.

As Charlie entered, Zeba quickly stood up and respectfully greeted him, "Nice to see you, Mr. Wade."

Charlie waved his hand, "Miss Salazar, no need to be so formal. I'm short on time, so let's get to the point."

He didn't wait for her response and continued, "Morgana is going to Australia soon, with a stop in Myanmar. Miss Clark and I suspect that she might head to Shiwan Mountain. I want to go there and see for myself. Can you teach me how to conceal my aura and presence so others won't notice me?"

Zeba exclaimed, "What did you say? Morgana is coming out?!"

Charlie asked, "Is it surprising that Morgana is coming out?"

Zeba replied, "She hasn't shown herself for nearly twenty years. Are you sure about this information?"

Charlie smiled and said, "It's not any intelligence; we analyzed the clues with Miss Clark and deduced that she might be going to Shiwan. So we're planning to go to the southern province to verify our speculation. Are we wrong?"

## Chapter 5459

Zeba's brow furrowed with confusion as she glanced at Charlie, her surprise evident. "Mr. Wade...why did you and Ms. Clark take such a risk to get close to Morgana? Isn't that incredibly dangerous?"

With a calm demeanor, Charlie replied, "It may sound dangerous, but in reality, Ms. Clark and I didn't plan to genuinely get close to Morgana. Miss Clark's strategy involves creating a time difference. According to her analysis, wherever Morgana goes, the members of the Warriors Den are likely to have withdrawn. Moreover, the entire Warriors Den will now enter a silent stage, so if we time it well, the place she's heading to will be safer for us. She is the most important woman in my life so far. I need to see her face and besides, she probably came to China this time to go to the mountains she trained in and I want to know where Morvel Bazin was in seclusion."

Zeba nodded in understanding and admiration. "Mr. Wade and Ms. Clark possess extraordinary courage and strategy. You make a perfect team and together, I believe you will definitely defeat the Warriors Den and Morgana! However, to confront the Warriors Den, your combined strength must surpass theirs. If you intend to take down Morgana personally, your individual strength must surpass hers. We still have a long way to go in either dimension."

Charlie appreciated her confidence and after thanking her, he spoke, "Miss Salazar, Morgana once taught you a mental formula to hide one's breath and reiki. Can you share it with me?"

Zeba didn't hesitate and immediately taught Charlie the technique without holding anything back.

After Charlie grasped it, he sensed his reiki forming a protective barrier around his body, concealing it completely.

Zeba cautioned him, "Mr. Wade, one major drawback of this technique is that once your reiki is hidden, you won't be able to use it until the concealment is lifted. So be cautious."

Charlie nodded in understanding. Grateful for the knowledge, he said, "Thank you, Miss Salazar. Once I return from the southern province, I'll come to visit you again."

Zeba instinctively offered to accompany him, "Mr. Wade, why don't I go with you? In case of danger, I can assist you!"

However, Charlie declined, waving his hand, "I can ask you for help with anyone I encounter, but not when it comes to Morgana. She left a powerful self-destruction formation in your Soul Palace and I believe she can activate it with her cunning. So, for your safety, it's best not to be near her."

Zeba agreed with his reasoning and said, "In that case, I will congratulate you in advance for your triumphant return."

Meanwhile, Morgana's Boeing 777 had flown through the airspace of New Zealand and was on its way to Australia for refueling. The near 1,000 kilometers per hour speed was still not fast enough for her, considering the recent events surrounding her Master's portrait in Aurous Hill. As a 400-year-old woman, she had lost her usual composure.

As she checked the flight chart alone, Morgana couldn't help but mutter in frustration, "The faster modern technology develops, the more limited these aircraft seem. They can't even fly 1,000 kilometers and the range is so restrictive!"

A crew member approached her respectfully, trying to calm her down. "Please calm down, My Lord. Our voyage is incredibly far, even a Concorde airliner would struggle to cover it. Its maximum range is only five or six thousand kilometers. For example, flying from Buenos Aires to Melbourne, the Concorde would only get halfway before needing to find a suitable place to land and refuel."

Morgana waved him away, irritated with the limitations of supersonic aircraft. She then noticed her satellite phone ringing with the name 'Eddie George' displayed. Sitting up straight, she answered coldly, "Any news about the Evans family?"

Eddie, her little uncle, hurriedly replied, "Reporting to the Lord, I just got in touch with Tece."

Morgana clenched her teeth, "They didn't die!"

Eddie continued, "Tece told me that the person who saved them in Aurous Hill is the same as the one who rescued them in New York!"

"What?" Morgana exclaimed, "Can you trust this news?"

Eddie reassured her, "Tece says it should be reliable. Moreover, that person appeared right after Gideon did. If he had been slightly late, Gideon would have killed all of the Evans Family before dying..."

Morgana's mood darkened and she knew she needed to find out who this person was immediately. She asked, "Did you ask Tece if the person said anything to Gideon when he rescued them that day?"

Eddie hesitated, unsure how to deliver Charlie's message without offending her. Morgana sensed his timidity and assured him, "Answer truthfully, I won't hold it against you even if it offends me."

Eddie finally shared Charlie's message, "He said...he said he would cut off your head with his own hands..."

## Chapter 5460

"What did you say?" Morgana seethed with anger in that moment!

For four hundred years, she had turned a blind eye to almost everything. In the past three hundred years, nobody had dared to utter such audacious words, threatening to behead themselves!

On the other end of the phone, Eddie trembled with fear upon hearing Morgana's furious shout. He quickly bowed and said, "Forgive me, My Lord. I am merely repeating what the hidden Master said, showing no disrespect to you, My Lord..."

Though Morgana knew that Eddie was just relaying the message, her fury still burned.

Eddie feared that Morgana's anger would not subside, so he hurriedly spoke, "My Lord, this subordinate is willing to share your burden. I will go to Aurous Hill and I will do the utmost to uncover the identity of that mysterious person for you."

Morgana replied coldly, "If you go now, you'll be walking into a trap."

Eddie quickly responded, "My Lord, Amelia is dead and the chances of the Evans Family doubting me are not very high. Moreover, even if they suspect me, what can they do without



solid evidence? After all, I am the son-in-law of the Evans Family, husband to Tece and I've always been valued by Samuel Evans..."

Morgana sneered, "The Evans Family is far more cunning than you imagine. Once Amelia is exposed, the Evans Family will never trust anyone with an unfamiliar surname. Even if you are Tece's husband, it won't make a difference. I will never let you go easily."

Eddie couldn't help but say, "But Lord... the current situation is too passive for us. If we don't uncover the mysterious Master behind the Evans Family, we will never have peace!"

Morgana coldly retorted, "Even Gideon can't handle that mysterious Master, let alone you finding any clues about him. They might capture you and use torture to extract our secrets."

Hesitating, Eddie said, "Master, I'm just voicing my concerns. Now I also find it hard to escape this situation. A significant event has occurred in the Evans Family and if I don't go to Aurous Hill, they will surely suspect me. How will I pass that test?"

Morgana calmly replied, "Don't worry. Since the Evans Family already suspects you, passing their test is out of the question. However, there's one thing you can do. Tece's daughter is now in your hands. Keep this trump card, it may come in handy in the future. For now, don't rush to antagonize the Evans Family. Take care of your child in the United States. The Evans Family won't leave Aurous Hill anytime soon and they probably won't willingly provoke you. Let's keep the peace for now, observing each other."

Eddie respectfully said, "Your subordinate obeys your orders!"

At this moment, after mastering the art of concealing his aura, Charlie drove to Zilian Villa to pick up Maria and head to the airport together.

Upon arriving at Zilian Villa, Larry Cole, Keagan Myers, Marius and an elderly woman who looked about 70 years old were waiting respectfully outside the gate.

As Charlie's car approached, the four hurried forward and stood respectfully outside the car door.

Charlie got out of the car and the four of them simultaneously bowed, saying with respect, "Mr. Wade, greetings!"

"Just call me Charlie." He then looked at the elderly woman beside Larry Cole and asked curiously, "You must be Mrs. Cole, right?"

"I am Larry's wife, Ethel Cole. Larry gave me the Rejuvenation Pill that you gave him last night. I wish to thank you for this blessing!" Mrs. Cole was about to kneel as she finished speaking.

Charlie wanted to stop her, but Larry Cole stepped between them and said respectfully, "Mr. Wade, Miss said that genuine gratitude brings blessings. If we don't thank sincerely, we will lose the blessings..."

Charlie held back his words and reluctantly let the elderly woman kneel to thank him.

After she stood up, Charlie asked, "By the way, is Miss Clark downstairs?"

Larry Cole replied, "Mr. Wade, Miss is in the courtyard. After you arrive, please go to her other courtyard."

Charlie thought they would go to the airport directly, but if Maria wanted him to go up, he would do so without objection. Thus, he followed Larry Cole and the others, heading to the upper courtyard.

At this time, Maria was making tea in the courtyard.

Before Charlie entered, the delightful fragrance of tea wafted through the air. He knocked lightly on the door and from inside the courtyard, he heard Maria's voice say, "Please come in, Young Master."

Charlie pushed the door open and saw Maria wearing an oversized Gucci white T-shirt, paired with classic LV printed shorts and Hermes leather slippers on her feet. Her hair was permed into big waves, making her look youthful, fashionable and somewhat charming.

This new look surprised Charlie. In his impression, Maria had always been classically beautiful, regardless of whether she wore school uniforms or casual summer T-shirts. This current image was entirely different, like two distinct personalities.

Seeing Charlie's surprised expression, Maria teased, "Did going to this clothing style from a lowly servant surprise you?"

Charlie smiled, "I'm just not used to it. It doesn't seem like your usual style."

With a smile on her lips, Maria poured tea for Charlie and explained, "Well, I have to go out, so it's safer to disguise myself a bit. By the way, Young Master, I've prepared a set of clothes for you. Would you like to change?"

Charlie was pleasantly surprised, "You've prepared one for me?"

Maria smiled, "Our appearances are quite different. If we go out together like this, it might attract attention. So I thought it would be best to prepare something for you."

Charlie smiled back, "Well, if Miss Clark has prepared it, then I'll change."

Blushing slightly, Maria said shyly, "Then, Young Master, please go upstairs. I will wait downstairs. If you need any help, don't hesitate to ask."

Charlie thought, I'm not disabled, why would I need help changing my clothes? But he smiled and replied, "I'll be right back."

## Chapter 5461

Upstairs lay Maria's boudoir, permeating the same delicate fragrance as her body, which left one feeling a little lightheaded.

Charlie couldn't help but recall the time when Maria had helped him to bed after a severe injury and a peculiar feeling stirred within him. However, he quickly brushed those thoughts aside and proceeded to change into the clothes Maria had prepared.

As he unpacked the garments, he noticed that they were matching couple outfits, featuring oversized Gucci t-shirts, classic printed LV shorts and matching Hermes slippers.

It dawned on Charlie that Maria intended for them to disguise themselves as a couple on their trip to the southern province. It made sense, a man and a woman together appeared more ordinary and inconspicuous. Besides, meeting Morgana, the most powerful master Charlie knew, required extra caution.

With the new attire, Charlie descended the stairs. The sight of him made Maria's heart flutter with joy. Despite being twenty-eight years old, Charlie exuded youthful energy, making him pass off as a college student with ease in this trendy outfit.

Maria admired the harmony between them when dressed as a couple and her happiness showed through her curved eyebrows and eyes.

Approaching Maria, Charlie noticed her blushing and inquired curiously, "Miss Clark, did you prepare these clothes, or was it Mr. Cole and the others?"

Maria shyly replied, "I asked them to prepare it. I thought that our appearance together on this journey would influence how we are perceived. After careful consideration, it seems that... presenting ourselves as a couple would be more fitting."

Charlie nodded in agreement, "In that case, let's act as a couple when we're around others."

With a hint of coyness, Maria bit her lip and suggested, "Since we're playing the role of a couple, would the Young Master like to come up with a suitable name for me?"

"What name?" Charlie asked with curiosity.

Maria explained, "Couples often call each other 'baby' or 'dear,' or refer to each other as 'husband' and 'wife' and such. I was wondering if you have any ideas."

Charlie awkwardly responded, "Uh, maybe Ms. Clark should decide. You have more experience in life than I do. I'll follow your lead."

Maria rolled her eyes playfully and muttered, "Young Master, you sure know how to flatter."

"No, no," Charlie waved his hands frantically, assuring her, "I didn't mean it that way. I just feel that you have more wisdom and life experience. I'll gladly follow your lead."

Maria responded with a tinge of regret and self-consciousness, "While it's true that I may have more years under my belt, I must admit that I lack the wisdom and expertise in matters of the heart that you possess, being already happily married, you have far more experience in such matters than me."

Charlie couldn't help but chuckle in embarrassment and said, "We're both learning as we go, so let's not worry about who knows more. We'll support and lean on each other as we navigate this journey together..."

## Chapter 5462

Charlie's words had a profound effect on Maria, making her eyebrows tremble unconsciously. Though she seemed to grasp something, she decided not to probe further, choosing to brush the matter aside. With a delightful smile, she said to Charlie, "Since the Young Master can't make up his mind, let me choose."

Pausing for a moment, she continued, "In ancient times, I would definitely call you 'husband', but nowadays, no one addresses anyone like that. We pretend to be lovers rather than husband and wife, so how about you calling me dear and I call you my baby?"

Maria's face flushed as she anxiously awaited Charlie's response, fearing he might refuse or be dissatisfied.

However, Charlie didn't dwell on it much. To him, acting like a couple, even wearing matching outfits, warranted using such endearments. Nonchalantly, he nodded and replied, "Baby, right? Sure, let's do it that way."

Afterward, Charlie reminded her, "Just remember, don't use that term 'Nujia' in front of others. We're living in a new era now and such old titles are no longer appropriate. If you say that outside, people who don't know might get the wrong idea..."

Maria playfully stuck out her tongue and said, "Young Master, Nujia has lived through the transition from the old age to the new era. I understand what you're saying. Besides, I haven't

used that term in hundreds of years, only in front of you. After leaving this place, I'll adjust myself."

"Sounds good." Charlie acknowledged. He glanced at the time and suggested, "It's getting late; let's go."

Maria nodded, asking Charlie, "Young Master, after we leave can I call you my dear?"

With a casual tone, Charlie replied, "As long as you're not worried about the teasing from the old folks downstairs, you can call me whatever you like."

Blushing immediately, Maria corrected him, "No, no, what I meant was after we leave the Zilian Villa..."

Chuckling, Charlie shook his head, "Alright, let's get going quickly. They are still waiting downstairs, probably eager to say goodbye to you."

"Okay," Maria apologized, "Young Master, I'm sorry. Wait a moment, I'll come after offering incense to my father."

Charlie readily agreed, then left the room on his own.

As soon as Charlie left, Maria approached her father's spiritual tablet, her jade-like hands delicately holding three incense sticks. She carefully lit them before inserting them into the incense burner. Kneeling on the futon in front of the tablet, she joined her hands and muttered in a soft voice, "Father... Maria wants to marry her husband... oh no, oh no... I made a mistake pretending to be someone else... Maria is going back to the south with Young Master Wade. I hope you, in the spirit realm, bless Maria and Young Master to return safely and also wish that Young Master can achieve his desires..."

After saying her prayers, she kowtowed before the spiritual tablet three times before standing up and hurrying out.

Charlie was waiting in the courtyard, greeting Maria with a smile as they descended from the top floor together.

Below, four old people were waiting eagerly in the hall on the first floor, their heads tilting up the stairs. Their eyes widened when they saw the two in their matching outfits and Marius exclaimed, "Oh! Mr. Wade and Ms. Wade, truly a match made in heaven!"

Keagan Myers couldn't help but wonder, "Marius, between the three of us, you've known Miss the longest, have you ever seen her smile like this in the past 90 years? She's practically glowing!"

Meanwhile, Maria walked with a shy smile on her face, appearing like a young girl. Beside her was Charlie and it was evident that she was in a great mood. She would occasionally steal glances at Charlie, her shy eyes timidly meeting him before swiftly diverting and her countenance was akin to the elegant waltz of willow leaves in the breeze, captivating and exquisite, much like the moon hidden behind a delicate flower.

In their perception, Maria was someone who loved to laugh, but she carried a heartlessness,

playfulness, and dominance that set her apart. Coquettish and shy were words that hadn't been associated with Maria for ages. But now, they were in for a surprise, as they finally witnessed Miss' girlish and shy side.

As Maria came closer, Larry Cole couldn't help but smile and exclaim, "Just imagine how breathtaking Miss would look in a beautiful wedding dress or traditional attire!"

Larry Cole's wife chimed in, "But, you know, the three of you old men should stop gossiping until Miss and Mr. Wade leave. Mr. Wade has formidable powers and you don't want him overhearing your chatter!"

Quickly, Larry hushed the other two, "Enough, we'll talk once Miss and Mr. Wade are gone."

The three of them continued to chat casually while Charlie and Maria entered the hall.

As they approached, Larry Cole and his companions hurried forward, accompanied by Larry Cole's wife and greeted them respectfully, "Hello, Miss and Mr. Wade."

Maria's shy smile vanished and she turned serious as a parent, saying, "Mr. Wade and I are leaving for a trip to the southern province. I'm entrusting this place to you. Remember, no one is allowed to go upstairs."

Larry Cole assured, "Miss, don't worry, I'll take care of everything!"

However, Maria's attention shifted to Keagan Myers and she calmly said, "Keagan, I had some free time last night, so I did a fortune telling for you. Your calamity has been averted by Mr. Wade and there won't be any major changes for the next twenty or thirty years. You can rest assured. If there's something to attend to in Eastcliff, you can confidently handle it without having to stay here all the time."

Maria understood that Keagan Myers had a unique path, which meant he couldn't choose as freely as others. She sympathized with his situation.

Keagan Myers knew this too and he expressed his desire to stay for a while and reconnect with his childhood friends.

After some contemplation, Maria agreed, "It's alright for you to stay. Make reasonable arrangements and I won't worry about you."

Keagan Myers respectfully cupped his hands, "Miss, don't worry, let's discuss it with Mr. Wade later."

"Indeed, let's get down to business," Maria nodded. "In that case, Mr. Wade and I will take our leave."

The four of them escorted Charlie and Maria to the yard, where they settled into the car.

Charlie focused on driving, while Maria, for some inexplicable reason, blushed slightly. She stole a glance at Charlie, then turned to look out of the window, hesitating before asking shyly, "Honey, how long until we reach the airport?"

Charlie responded casually, "About half an hour."

Maria couldn't help but get a little angry, "Shouldn't the Young Master be calling Nujia 'baby'?"

Charlie coughed lightly, asking, "Do you really want to call me that when there's no one else around?"

Maria replied, feeling a bit wronged, "You agreed to it earlier..."

Charlie responded solemnly, "Alright, I'll keep my promise."

He then added, "Baby, we'll be at the airport in half an hour."

Maria smiled sweetly, "Got it, thank you, dear!"

Maria's eyes landed on Charlie's left hand holding the steering wheel and she asked curiously, "My dear, why aren't you wearing the ring I gave you when we left?"

Charlie explained, "Why should I wear it? The owner of the ring is your father, not me. I'm here with you, the ring serves as a teleportation device in case of danger. If we encounter Morgana, it might trap her in a tricky situation. It's better not to wear it, so she doesn't suspect anything. Plus, she's been coveting that ring in her dreams and not having it with us might give us some leverage if we end up negotiating with her."

Maria nodded in agreement, "You're right, my dear. I never thought about it from that perspective."

After a while, they reached the airport. Maria took the initiative to hold Charlie's arm, feigning a couple's appearance.

Charlie caught on and played along.

Maria teased, "Should we continue this act when boarding the plane to avoid suspicion from the crew?"

Charlie nodded, "Sure, we can do that."

With a plan in mind, they observed Morgana's flight progress on Charlie's phone. It seemed she was headed to Melbourne for refueling before her journey to Myanmar. They had plenty of time, even enough to drive leisurely and enjoy the trip.

Maria sighed happily, "It's been years since I've been back to the Southern Province. Once we're there, I'll leave everything in your capable hands."

## Chapter 5463

A stylish couple, clad in designer outfits and sporting top brands, elegantly boarded the plane

through the VIP passage. They strolled arm in arm to the VIP commercial vehicle at the airport. To onlookers, they appeared to be wealthy second-generation lovebirds. Their extravagant taste in clothing and penchant for chartered flights reinforced that image.

Yet, Charlie and Maria were Masters of disguise. Charlie looked so youthful that no one would doubt he was only twenty. If he bumped into an acquaintance in the aisle, he might not even be recognized.

The couple settled into the plane, the crew guiding them to the spacious cabin. Despite the two luxurious first-class seats at the front, Maria paid them no mind, preferring the cozy side-by-side double seats at the back, standard double sofa seats. She set her eyes on those as soon as she boarded.

Playing their roles to perfection, Charlie nodded, "If you want to sit together, then let's sit together."

Maria stopped him, a serious expression on her face, "You forgot to call me baby."

Startled, Charlie replied, "There's someone next to me."

The nearby flight attendant couldn't help but chuckle. She saw them as a typical couple in love, without a hint of pretense.

Maria ignored the stewardess's reaction, saying solemnly, "Nicknames are meant to be used in front of others. That proves your true affection for me. If you only call me baby privately but keep your distance in public, doesn't that mean you're not fully committed?"

The flight attendant couldn't help but give Maria a thumbs up. She found their affectionate banter adorable and genuine.

Unfazed, Charlie decided to play along, wearing a serious expression, "Baby, you're right!"

Maria blushed prettily, satisfied with Charlie's response. "From now on, when we're out, you must treat me affectionately. That way, no other woman will set her eyes on you and no other man will dare to think about me. It's like declaring your love in front of the world."

Charlie nodded, agreeing, "Baby is right, baby is right."

Maria seized the opportunity to tease him, playfully punching his chest she said, sticking her tongue out at him "I knew it."

The flight attendant envied their genuine affection. To her, their playful exchange was the true essence of love.

After the flight attendant went to fetch water, Maria sat down next to Charlie and asked with a smile, "How did I do? Was my acting convincing?"

Charlie nodded sincerely, "It was amazing. If you said you've never been in love, I wouldn't have believed it. You seem so natural."

Blushing, Maria admitted, "I've never been in love, but I've seen it in movies and TV dramas!"



Flirting and bantering are common in romantic shows, right?"

Charlie chuckled, "Yes, indeed."

Realizing the plane had started to taxi, he changed the subject. "We'll land in Baisha in a little over two hours. Once we land, we'll rent a car and head to Dali as quickly as possible. Can you remember the exact location of your father's tomb?"

Maria nodded, "My father's tomb is in the northeast of Erhai."

Charlie checked the map on his phone, "That is a bit closer to Baisha, about an hour and a half from the airport."

Maria confirmed, "Yes, my father's tomb is on a mountain in the northeast. It's been hundreds of years and I don't know what it looks like now."

Charlie asked, "Is there a tombstone?"

"Yes," Maria replied, "I had a stone tablet carved and buried his clothes with my mother's, but I'm not sure if they're still there."

Concerned, Charlie asked, "Is your mother buried there too?"

Maria explained, "Initially, yes, but before I left Dali, I was afraid Morgana might desecrate my parents remains. So I cremated my mother's remains and buried them with my father's ashes at Poole."

Charlie nodded, "Let's focus on finding your father's tomb first. Then, we'll figure out a way to set up surveillance so that we can capture Morgana's appearance. After that, I'll accompany you to Poole to pay homage to your parents."

Maria smiled softly, "Thank you, Young Master. If Morgana disguises herself, it might be difficult to get a picture of her."

Charlie reassured her, "Don't worry. I'm mainly concerned about you going alone to the Southern Province. I want to accompany you to pay your respects to your parents and bring you back to Aurous Hill safely. As for Morgana, catching her is like getting a scratch-off ticket after a meal. Winning is a bonus, but even if we don't, we'll still have a good meal."

Moved by his words, Maria nodded, "My biggest wish was to return to the southern province before I died and revisit all these places. Thanks to you, Young Master, it's finally coming true."

Charlie asked, "If you can resolve the issue with Morgana, what would you like to do the most?"

Without hesitation, Maria replied, "Before, I wanted to move my parents tomb to the edge of Heaven Lake. I dreamed of building a small wooden house there, where the Mother of Pu'er failed to cross the robbery. I'd raise cows, sheep and a dog and live peacefully."

Curious, Charlie probed, "And now?"

Maria looked at him, her eyes slightly lowered and murmured, "Lately, I've been feeling a bit

lost."

Charlie inquired, "What's troubling you?"

With a faint smile, Maria replied softly, "I'm unsure about what I should do in the future."

The conversation ended there and Maria leaned her head on Charlie's shoulder, closing her eyes. The flight attendant discreetly placed two drinks in front of them, offering assistance if needed during the upcoming takeoff.

Charlie nodded in appreciation, "Thank you. We'll let you know if we need anything." When Morgana's plane finally touched down in Melbourne, Charlie and Maria had already seized their chance to catch the earlier flight from Aurous Hill Airport to Baisha, a destination over a thousand kilometers away.

As they soared westward, Maria's initial liveliness and playfulness waned, replaced by a contemplative silence. Her gaze drifted out of the window, seemingly lost in thoughts of her distant home.

Charlie sensed something was amiss, he knew exactly what she was going through. After all, Maria, more than anyone, longed for the comfort of her hometown. Having been away from home for over three centuries, her heart must have been filled with a mixture of excitement and nostalgia as she embarked on her journey back.

After a couple of hours, the plane landed at Baisha Airport. As they disembarked, Maria's legs trembled, betraying her exhaustion from the long trip.

Charlie supported her as they made their way out of the airport, the weight of her weariness palpable.

Once outside, they hopped into an SUV, courtesy of the fake identity prepared by Isaac Cameron.

Charlie discreetly removed the dashcam to ensure their privacy and they set off on the road to Dali.

As they drove, Charlie asked Maria, "Have you been to Baisha before?"

"I've been here once with my grandma," she replied, her voice tinged with a hint of nostalgia. "Three hundred years ago, the journey through the southern province was quite challenging, with its winding mountain roads. Leaving felt like leaving behind a piece of my heart."

Curiosity getting the better of him, Charlie inquired further, "Why did you decide to return to your former title? Weren't you considering changing it?"

Maria's tone softened, "Going back to the south feels like going back to my roots in Sanya. When I returned to my grandparents home a century ago, I lived a secluded life in the women's quarters. At that time, there were only masters and slaves and I grew accustomed to addressing my master that way."

Listening to her reminisce, Charlie couldn't help but wonder about her life before taking the

Eternal Green Pill he asked "Did you live with your grandparents all the time?"

Maria smiled faintly, "My grandfather passed away earlier, leaving my grandmother and me to support each other. Fortunately, his family had been prominent chieftains in the Southern Province, so we lived comfortably. Grandfather made sure I received an education, he taught me to read and write, instilling knowledge and principles in me."

Looking out the window, Maria's eyes filled with emotion. "Grandfather had five children, and only my mother succumbed to illness. The other four fought bravely against the odds, but they met tragic ends during the rebellion. Later, Will Saint's forces slaughtered our fighters, leaving no descendants of the four uncles alive. Now, my grandfather's lineage faces extinction... and my heart aches for the memories and losses of those times."

## Chapter 5464

Every time Will Saint's name was mentioned, Maria's face contorted with intense hatred. When she learned that none of her four uncles and their descendants had survived, Maria broke down into tears.

Charlie was taken aback by the sheer misery of Maria's grandfather's family. He couldn't help but sigh and said, "Back in those days, human life seemed to hold no value. Countless families that had thrived for generations lost everything in that era."

Maria clenched her fists and gritted her teeth, "It's all the fault of that treacherous Will Saint!"

With a rare sternness in her voice, she continued, "My Clark Family has been loyal and honorable for generations! My ancestors served the Ming Dynasty faithfully and my father dedicated his life to fighting against the rebellion. He never forgot to protect the Han Dynasty until his dying breath. But this Will Saint, not only did he allow the rebel army to invade our land, overthrow the Han Dynasty, but he even personally killed the Emperor for his own selfish gains. In my eyes, he is the biggest traitor in Han history!"

Charlie pondered for a moment and remarked, "From what I've heard, Korr Hill's reputation seems to overshadow Will Saint's."

Maria shook her head solemnly, "Will Saint's evil deeds and sinister intentions are beyond comprehension. Delving into them will send shivers down your spine. His deeds are incomparable to those of Korr Hill. Will Saint spent many years stationed in Eastern Shore, fighting against the rebel army. If you want to understand the horrors of the rebel army, no one in the world could comprehend it better than him. He knew full well the disaster their invasion would bring upon the people in the past. Despite that, he still let the rebel army in, betraying our country and seeking personal gain, completely disregarding the safety of the people. It's evident that this man was driven by sinister intentions!"

Charlie nodded in agreement, "I can't argue with you on that. Will Saint truly stands out as one of the most treacherous figures in Chinese history. What's even more disgraceful is his shift from surrendering to the Warriors Den and killing the last emperor, to later rebelling under the guise of restoring the Han people. It's tough to find another figure like him in history."

Maria sighed with dejection, "It's been over three hundred years, and I still can't let go of my

anger towards Will Saint."

Charlie tried to console her, saying, "Will Saint has been dead for so long now, and his family suffered the consequences of his actions. He got the retribution he deserved."

Maria clenched her teeth and retorted, "But Will Saint wasn't executed! He died from illness! A traitor of his magnitude should have suffered a brutal execution! It's too easy for him!"

Charlie nodded and asked, "By the way, does your father have any other relatives?"

"No," Maria shook her head, "At the end of the Ming Dynasty, the Clark family was in decline. My father was the only son in the family and after my mother passed away, he didn't want to carry on the family name. So, when he left, I became the last remaining member."

Charlie couldn't help but feel sorry for Maria.

Maria and Morgana, both have taken the Eternal Green Pill, granting them three to four hundred years of life. Yet, their destinies diverged greatly.

After Lucius Clark's passing, Morgana assumed the role of the British Lord, leading the Warriors Den for several centuries. During this time, the Den flourished and her personal influence grew immensely. Her blessings extended to her own family as well. The Mirren family became the core members of the influential Five Armies Governor's Mansion's. Today, they stand as a mighty and prosperous clan, commanding respect even from the likes of the Rothschild family.

In stark contrast, Maria's lineage had been severed over three hundred years ago and only the Clark family lineage remained. To make matters worse, Morgana has relentlessly pursued Maria for countless years.

Curious, Charlie couldn't help but ask, "After being hunted by Morgana for so long, have you ever considered giving her the ring in exchange for a safe life?"

"I have considered it," Maria replied. "When I left and traveled to Southeast Asia, I faced numerous hardships and almost lost my life several times. In my darkest moments, I thought about it, but the idea of trading my father's life for my five hundred years was unbearable. Later, I pondered leaving the ring with Morgana to end the chase and find some peace. But then, I realized she's the one who killed my father. If I beg for mercy, what sets me apart from those who betray their own people? They're no different than traitors. After careful consideration, I made my decision. No matter how difficult it gets, I will live on. I won't compromise with Morgana. I'll outlive her and have the last laugh."

Charlie spoke with conviction, "Don't worry, you will definitely outlive her."

Maria nodded and said seriously, "Young Master, when I am gone, I ask you to bury my ashes beside my parents. That would fulfill my life."

Charlie assured her, "You can count on me. If I can find the recipe and refining method for the pill, I'll make sure you live as long as Lord Morvel, a thousand years."

Maria smiled wryly, shaking her head, "Living for four hundred years is already so difficult. I don't dare to think about a thousand years. I don't even want to think about it. I've had enough..."

Hearing her words, Charlie couldn't help but glance at Maria, seeing her serious and somewhat lonely expression. He felt a pang of sympathy in his heart. He knew that Maria had endured hardships that most people could never fathom in her three hundred years of life. They say those who live long lives cross more bridges than others, but for Maria, it meant enduring more than most could comprehend.

To lift the somber mood, Charlie offered, "If Morgana is gone, life wouldn't be so hard."

Maria shook her head again, "I'd rather not live another five hundred years, it's enough."

Charlie didn't insist further, but resolved in his heart to refine the Millennium Return Pill before Maria turned 500. He would give her one as soon as it was ready. Not just because Maria had endured a difficult four hundred years, but also because she had saved his life.

In Charlie's subconscious, a voice reminded him that Maria deserved a normal life and a long remaining time to heal from the past three centuries.

Maria was unaware of Charlie's thoughts, she felt the conversation was getting too heavy and wanted to lighten the atmosphere. However, she found herself unsure of how to do so.

At the same time, Charlie also sought to change the topic and ease the mood. He noticed a roadside sign and said to Maria, "We'll be arriving soon."

Maria glanced at the sign and cheerfully exclaimed, "Almost there!"

She then checked her phone and smiled, "Morgana just took off from Melbourne. Her second part of the itinerary remains unchanged, with Mandalay, Myanmar as her destination."

Charlie inquired, "How certain are you that she'll come here?"

"100%," Maria replied with confidence.

Charlie wondered, "Why are you so sure?"

With a smile, Maria explained, "Morgana is incredibly conceited. I know her well enough. Despite my father's rejections in the past, she won't let go after all these years. Since she's passing through Myanmar, she'll undoubtedly come to Dali!"

## Chapter 5465

When Maria returned after over three hundred years, the place had lost its original charm long ago.

Though Erhai was still the same Erhai, centuries of development had transformed its once pristine waters into a different sight from what it used to be. Standing on the vibrant and bustling Dali Street, Maria found it challenging to reconcile her memories with the reality before her.

Thankfully, the changes in the mountains were not as drastic. A few peaks had been mined in the past, but the landscape alterations were relatively minor.

With Maria leading the way, Charlie left their car in the town, donning the couple's sneakers she had prepared. They embarked on foot towards the mountains.

As they set off, Charlie quieted his mind, reducing the aura fluctuations on his body to a minimum. It seemed his mental preparation was indeed effective.

The mountains weren't towering, with only a few hundred to a little over a thousand meters of altitude difference between the peaks and the ground. Climbing was relatively easy, and the scenic views along the way made it a popular trail for young hikers.

While heading toward the mountain pass, they encountered numerous outdoor enthusiasts clad in hiking gear. As they neared the foot of the mountain, Maria's excitement became evident.

Pointing towards the mountain pass, she whispered to Charlie, "I climbed this mountain over three hundred years ago. Back then, there was a small path here, trodden by the locals. I never imagined that after all these years, the same path still exists."

Charlie smiled and replied, "Climbing a mountain is like finding the best route. Once you find it, as long as the mountain remains unchanged, the route will endure."

Maria nodded, saying, "The route may remain, but the ambiance is different now. There are signs of artificial repairs everywhere, with specially hardened roads and steps. Many more people now visit; previously, it was mostly locals paying respects to their ancestors buried in the nearby mountains."

Taking in the surroundings, Charlie remarked, "The manual trimming does have its benefits. It seems there are plenty of people visiting on regular days and surveillance cameras are abundant, including forest fire prevention ones. If Morgana comes this way, she won't be able to avoid these spots. Perhaps, with Mr. Myers' help, we can gain access to all the surveillance information and trace Morgana's movements."

Curious, Maria asked, "If we manage to trace Morgana's whereabouts here, what's your next plan?"

Confidently, Charlie responded, "There's still a thousand kilometers to cover from here to the Hundred Thousand Mountains. Morgana wouldn't walk that distance and she's unlikely to sneak in using public transport like airplanes or trains. The most probable option is driving. Once we trace her movements and her vehicle, we can keep track of her in real-time."

Charlie continued, "Road monitoring is extensive now. Any paved road that allows motor vehicles will have traffic cameras. The traffic department has a vast database, and most of their monitoring probes across the country can recognize license plate numbers. With that data, we can track the time and specific location of any car that passed under the surveillance cameras. This information will help us outline Morgana's real-time actions and discover where she vanished in the end. I suspect it won't be far from where Gideon once practiced."

Maria nodded, cautioning him, "My Lord, before Morgana leaves China, please do not venture into the Mountains. You are not yet her match and it's best to avoid her at all costs."

Charlie smiled, assuring her, "Don't worry, I'm not reckless. I know my limitations."

Relieved, Maria replied, "That's good..."

After climbing the first mountain on foot, they made their way to the turtle-shaped mountain.

As it was the second peak on the hiking route, it saw almost as many visitors as the first.

Maria explained to Charlie, "This mountain is called Turtle Back Mountain due to its resemblance to a turtle's shell. There is an extraordinary treasure of geometric marvels in this region. When my grandfather was a chieftain, he carefully chose this mountain as our ancestral burial ground."

Curiously, Charlie inquired, "Is the entire mountain the burial ground for your grandfather's lineage?"

Maria confirmed, "Yes, the Feng Shui here has auspicious dragon-like qualities, making it an excellent choice for an ancestral grave. It was believed that burying our ancestors here would bless future generations with prosperity and wealth. Unfortunately, the Dragon Veins of the Ming Dynasty were disrupted, altering the nation's fate and rendering the once sacred land less effective."

As she spoke, Maria led Charlie away from the mountain path paved with stone steps, taking him to a halfway point on the mountainside.

At this spot, camping traces were evident, with tent holes scattered around, hinting at its popularity as an outdoor camping base.

Maria's eyes sparkled with delight when she noticed a magnificent Diannan pine flourishing nearby. She said with excitement, "Young Master, that Diannan pine is the ancestral grave of my father's family. My father's tomb lies at the northwest corner of the Diannan pine."

Searching the area, Charlie couldn't see any grave near the massive tree. He inquired, "Did your grandfather and others not leave any tombstones?"

Maria replied softly, "Originally, there were tombstones and I even carved one for my parents. However, later on, they were all forcibly smashed into powder. Even my parents graves were dug up. I strongly believe that Morgana is the culprit. She held a deep grudge against my parents and took out her anger on the rest of my grandfather's family."

Charlie couldn't help but sigh, "This woman is full of temper. Although she inflicted severe harm on your father, he should have resented her. Yet, she persists."

Maria added with a sigh, "Morgana is incredibly vengeful. I suspect part of her motivation for coming to South Providence this time is her deep-seated hatred towards me. She's here to vent her anger."

With a sad expression, she continued, "I wonder if she'll spare this tree."

Charlie surveyed the surroundings and sighed, "Miss Clark, if I could hide a few close-defense guns on those boulders up there, we might be able to put an end to Morgana once and for all."

## Chapter 5466

Maria couldn't help but chuckle when she saw Charlie's serious expression. "Young Master, close-in defense might take out Jarvis, but it may not work on Morgana. Besides, Morgana is the only one who knows the exact location of the Master's past practice. Please bear with it and let's not end Morgana's life here."

Charlie laughed and replied, "I'm just being emotional. Even if someone could bring the near-defense gun here, it's not a safe option."

Maria nodded, saying, "Young Master, there's no surveillance here. Just wait for a moment; I'll go pay homage to the ancestors of the Clark family up ahead."

Gallantly, Charlie replied, "I'll wait for you here."

Maria smiled apologetically and then disappeared into the nearby pine forest.

Five minutes later, Maria emerged from the forest with red eyes.

At the same time, a group of five or six outdoor enthusiasts arrived from the direction Charlie and Maria came from. One of them exclaimed, "What a stunning view! This place is flat and spacious, perfect for camping. Why don't we stay here tonight?"

"Absolutely!" a young girl agreed. "Let's set up the tents and secure the site. Later, I'll explore the surrounding mountains and return to cook for an evening bonfire party."

A young man chimed in, "I'll inform Hector and the others and share the coordinates so they can bring the second group over."

"Sounds great!" the girl replied with a smile. "We're in for a fun night. Let's hurry and find a spot for the tents and I'll gather some firewood after that."

Maria overheard their conversation and came back to Charlie, reaching out to hold his arm affectionately. "My dear, I want to camp here too! How about we buy some equipment and experience camping ourselves?"

Before Charlie could respond, she turned to the outdoor enthusiasts and asked cheerfully, "Can we join you? We don't have any camping experience, but we'd love to give it a try!"

The girl smiled and said, "Sure, but we don't have extra tents. If you want to camp, you should head to town and buy one as soon as possible. We can have a bonfire party tonight!"

Maria beamed and replied, "Thank you!"

Then said to Charlie "Let's hurry and get some equipment!"

Charlie was taken aback by Maria's suggestion. In front of others, he had to play along and said vaguely, "Baby, the altitude here is quite high and there's no shelter around. We have no experience, so if a strong wind comes, we might get blown away. I'm afraid it's not safe."



Maria was undeterred and replied, "Can't we secure the tent with ground nails? Even with strong winds, the tent won't budge if properly anchored."

She added with a playful smile, "Didn't you just learn how to tie ground nails with my cousin? It'll come in handy now."

Charlie knew Maria was referring to Zeba and the 'mental method' was the technique he learned to hide his aura from others. However, he was unsure if Morgana could still see through it.

Maria, seemingly aware of Charlie's concerns, assured him, "Don't worry, dear. The south rarely experiences strong winds, especially on such a clear day. We'll only stay for one night and I'm sure the wind won't be a problem."

Charlie wasn't expecting Maria to be so persistent with the idea. He decided to take a different approach, suggesting they go down the mountain and discuss it on the way.

Maria happily agreed and they started descending.

Once they were out of earshot, Charlie asked, "Miss Clark, were you serious about camping there at night?"

Maria corrected him playfully, "Call me 'baby'! And yes, I was serious. I don't think Morgana would ever expect us to camp right under her nose."

Charlie sighed and replied, "If she senses the reiki in me, won't she be walking towards us?"

Maria confidently retorted, "Isn't the mental method Zeba taught you useful? You couldn't detect Zeba back in Willow Estates."

Charlie acknowledged the effectiveness of the technique but expressed his doubts about Morgana's perception.

Maria reassured him, saying, "Morgana's cautious this time, especially since she knows there's a stronger hidden enemy. She won't recklessly consume her energy to sense her surroundings. Besides, she won't want to reveal her cultivation and position by using reiki. So, my dear, I speculate that she won't discover you."

Maria added, "There are risks, but it'll take Morgana by surprise. She must be extra careful during her stay in China, keeping her aura hidden. With so many camping enthusiasts around, why would she suspect anything?"

Charlie couldn't help but ask, "Baby, can I ask you something?"

Maria smiled and encouraged him, "Of course, my dear. Go ahead."

Charlie asked with sincerity, "Have you always been this smart?"

Maria answered candidly, "No, in the past, I tried to avoid Morgana at all costs because she had a clear advantage over me. She controlled the situation for three centuries."

Maria then shifted her focus, saying with determination, "But this time is different. She knows she's at a disadvantage, so she'll be more cautious. That's precisely why we can be bolder!"

## Chapter 5467

Charlie never expected Maria, who appeared weak and fragile, to possess such courage. Knowing fully well that they stood no chance against the formidable Morgana, facing her head-on would almost certainly lead to their demise.

After all, Zeba had warned them that Morgana had opened the Soul Palace over a hundred years ago, making her strength a hundred years ago comparable to Charlie's now, if not stronger.

Despite the risks involved, Maria decided to go ahead.

"You understand that this could be fatal," Charlie said gravely. "There's no chance of escape if we confront Morgana. Are you sure you want to take this risk?"

Maria nodded solemnly, looking into Charlie's eyes and replied firmly, "For the past three hundred years, I've been avoiding her. I've been cautious to the point of not venturing near anything related to her. But now that I know she might be here, I can't explain why, but I feel compelled to take this chance."

Charlie was taken aback and couldn't help but tease, "Isn't this a little late for a rebellious phase?"

Maria chuckled and said, "Perhaps, but you see, even extreme sports enthusiasts climb skyscrapers with their bare hands. They know the risk of falling and getting seriously hurt or even killed, but they still do it. It's the thrill of adventure and the sense of achievement after conquering something so daunting. When most people look at skyscrapers, they admire them from below. But for me, seeing a skyscraper triggers the desire to conquer it with my own hands, without relying on anything else. The sense of accomplishment from doing that can keep them happy for a long time."

Charlie pondered for a moment and then said, "I advise you to be cautious and sensible. If this decision goes wrong, there might not be a chance to correct it."

Maria lowered her head briefly before lifting it again with determination. "I know myself. I don't have the power to kill Morgana in this life. If I manage not to get killed by her, that's already a great success. But even if I can't kill her, I have the opportunity today to defy her with my actions. Didn't she dream of catching me? Well, she'll never imagine that I'll be right under her nose at this very moment. If I succeed, then I win one in the cat-and-mouse game we've been playing all these years. When she's gone, she won't be able to claim victory over me. I'll win to the very end! One day in the future, I'll make sure she knows that I, Maria, wasn't just running and fleeing from her all my life. I dared to stand up to her and laugh in her face, no matter how powerful she was. I, Maria, would still triumph over her!"

Charlie saw the excitement and eagerness in Maria's eyes and began to understand her true feelings. She had been evading Morgana for over 300 years, running and hiding like no one else in the world. In this life, she might not have the strength to seek revenge, but she could

make a statement with her incredible courage, slapping Morgana in the face right under her nose.

Charlie felt a bit infected by Maria's determination and said, "If that's the case, we don't need someone to pretend to be a spy. I'll stay here with you and wait for Morgana to come. I want to see for myself what kind of person she really is."

Maria asked in surprise, "Young Master, are you really willing to accompany me?"

Charlie nodded with a smile, saying, "Absolutely."

Maria spoke earnestly, "Walking on this tightrope is like standing on the edge of a cliff. One mistake and it's fatal."

Chuckling, Charlie replied, "If you're not afraid, then why should I be?"

Maria smiled, sincerity shining in her eyes and said, "Your words satisfy me. But I'm different from you, I have no one to rely on, no family or loved ones. Death is not something I fear, in fact, it's a release. So I want to stay here alone. I don't want to put you in danger, Young Master."

Charlie waved his hand dismissively, "I can't persuade you and you can't persuade me either."

Maria insisted, "This is a personal feud between me and Morgana."

"True," Charlie said coolly. "I have my own grievances with her. Though she didn't kill my parents directly, she is still the Mastermind behind their death."

Quickly, Maria proposed a plan, "I'll stay here today to face Morgana and you can find another opportunity to kill her in the future. How about that?"

Charlie shook his head, looking into Maria's eyes and said seriously, "From now on, everything related to Morgana, you're with me. Today, I'll stand with you to defy her and in the future, you'll stand with me to eliminate her. We'll face her together."

Maria didn't know what to say for a moment. Her perception of Charlie began to blur and tears welled up in her eyes. She wiped away the tears and smiled softly, saying, "Thank you for your kindness. From this day forward, my life is intertwined with yours."

In a picturesque setting, Charlie and Maria strolled through the Ancient Town, clad in matching outfits. Rather than rushing to buy camping gear, they decided to take a leisurely tour of the town first.

As they wandered, Maria's eyes lit up with nostalgia. Despite the changes that had taken place over the years, she still discovered fragments of her childhood memories. Pointing to a stone bridge they approached, she excitedly grasped Charlie's hand and exclaimed, "Honey, I used to cross this very bridge multiple times when I was young!"

Charlie, surprised, inquired, "Are you absolutely sure it's this bridge?"

Maria confidently pulled him toward the bridge, where she pointed to a bluestone slab with a gap and recounted the tale, "This is the one. A frightened horse once caused that break. It

belonged to a stonemason who was transporting two stone sculptures to the chieftain's new house. When the horse got anxious and struggled, it overturned the cart and one of the stone sculptures fell on the bridge, creating this gap."

As she narrated the story, Maria continued, "I happened to be visiting the chieftain with my grandfather from the ancient city of Dali that day, so I witnessed the entire incident."

Charlie couldn't help but imagine the dramatic scene she described in his mind.

Meanwhile, a lively little girl, dressed in traditional Hanfu attire and munching on candied haws, bounced onto the bridge. Her father, carrying bags and drinks, followed along leisurely.

Maria followed the girl with a fond smile on her face and turned to Charlie, saying, "Back then, I was just a little younger than her."

Playfully winking at Charlie, she added, "But I can tell you, the clothes I wore back then were even prettier than hers and the beanbags my grandma embroidered for me were unrivaled in all of the Southern Province. Nowadays, the garb worn by young girls lacks the same charm as the traditional outfits."

Recalling how exquisite Maria looked in her Hanfu during their meeting in Northern Europe, Charlie curiously asked, "When we met in Northern Europe, where did you buy the clothes you were wearing?"

With a shy smile, Maria replied, "I made them all by myself. I learned the art of female red embroidery from my grandma, but unfortunately, she passed away before I could master all of her techniques."

For the next few hours, Charlie and Maria continued their exploration of the ancient town. Once their shopping was done, they headed to an outdoor goods store to purchase camping equipment.

As they were pretending to be a couple, they decided to buy a tent, sleeping pads, light sleeping bags, and camping lights. Charlie even thought it wise to get folding chairs, a folding table, and some daily necessities to help blend in with the group of outdoor enthusiasts planning to camp on the mountain.

He believed that establishing a good relationship with them would provide valuable cover when Morgana arrived. So he also picked up some high-end spirits and fresh ingredients, intending to share a drink and a meal with the campers and become better acquainted.

As the sun started to set, Charlie and Maria returned to Turtle Back Mountain with their newly purchased equipment.

The other outdoor enthusiasts had already set up eight tents and were now enjoying the serene beauty of the sunset while preparing dinner.

Observing the couple's arrival with the equipment, the friendly young man, Master Hector, called out to them, "Hey there, we thought you guys might not make it, but look who's here!"

Charlie glanced at Maria with a smile and explained, "My girlfriend insisted on camping, so I had

to accompany her."

Master Hector gestured to an open space near their tents and said, "We've reserved a spot for you, over there. We're planning to have a bonfire party, grill some skewers and enjoy a great meal together!"

Charlie thanked him and mingled with the group, handing over a bag containing drinks. "I was going to treat you to drinks so I brought some wine for us to enjoy tonight!"

Master Hector grinned, taking out an acoustic guitar, "Sounds like a perfect plan! Let's eat, drink and sing our hearts out under the stars! There's no need to worry about disturbing anyone up here in the mountains!"

## Chapter 5468

Confronted by the warm invitation of the young man known as "Hector", Charlie responded with enthusiasm, grinning, "Well, in that case, we won't stand on ceremony with you!"

Hector chuckled, "No need for formalities! We're all kindred spirits from across the land. Looking out for one another is just part of our tight-knit bond."

Curiosity sparking, he inquired, "So, my friend, what might your name be?"

As Charlie began to answer, Maria interjected with a teasing smile, "My dear here is named Clark, Robert Clark to be precise. You can call him Bobby for short." Keeping a low profile was essential, and using her real name, Maria, would certainly ring bells.

But Charlie was taken aback by her choice of pseudonym. He mused, "Bobby? Makes me sound like a local barber."

Maria, eager to introduce herself, spoke up, "I go by Kathrine Wade, or just Kate for close friends."

Acknowledging the introduction, Hector beamed, "Bobby, Kate, welcome to our little troupe of 'Southern Province Wanderers'. We began our journey as strangers, bonding over our shared love for hiking, and now, here we stand as one."

Taking a deep breath, he continued, "For formalities, my real name is Blythe. It translates to 'happy', but it does sound a tad effeminate. So, most just call me Hector." He then affectionately wrapped an arm around a young woman beside him, "This radiant lady here is my girlfriend, Shiann. A brilliant mind from Tsinghua University. Our paths crossed during a hike, and the rest, as they say, is history."

Once introductions had been exchanged, Hector generously offered, "Bobby, you seem new to this hiking and camping deal. Need a hand setting up your tent?"

Charlie waved him off politely, "Appreciate the offer, but I'll manage. Thank you."

Hector looked at him intently, "No need to be shy, we're here to help!"

Gratitude and a hint of guilt filled Charlie. For while these kind souls saw him as a new friend, he needed them for cover, a fact that didn't sit well with his conscience.

The group, enthusiastic and outgoing, embraced Charlie and Maria with open arms, quickly breaking the ice.

Hector, an unmistakable leader of the group, drew Charlie's curiosity. "Hector, are you still in school or have you begun your professional journey?"

Hector smiled, "Still a student, actually. Spent some time in the US. Since it's summer break, I felt the pull of China's breathtaking landscapes."

He added, "Most of us here are students. Some from the US, a few from Tsinghua University, and others from renowned institutions across the UK and Canada. How about the two of you?"

Charlie responded, playfully exaggerated, "High school sweethearts we were, too busy with romance and not with books. So, we ended up in an obscure college in Eastcliff, never quite making a mark."

Maria gave Charlie a look that was a mix of faux resentment and amusement. Inside her mind, she couldn't help but think, "Oh, the stories you come up with! Decades of our family's education, tossed aside so casually."

Charlie's intent was simple. By downplaying their educational background, they would divert any prolonged university discussions and potential slip-ups.

As he'd anticipated, the group steered clear of academic queries, showing understanding and tact.

Wanting to ease any lingering discomfort, Hector said, "Ultimately, the university's name doesn't define us. It's about living a fulfilled life."

Shiann, nodding in agreement, shared, "Academics can be tedious. All my life, my parents groomed me for Tsinghua, with dreams of Harvard post-graduation. Just as I secured a spot at Harvard, life threw a curveball. I was diagnosed with a glioma, inoperable due to its location."

Stunned, Maria whispered, "You have a glioma?"

Shiann responded calmly, "Rare as it is, fate had it in store for me."

With a smile tinged with sorrow, Hector added, "Our tales align. Diagnosed with advanced small cell lung cancer despite leading a clean life. With no viable treatments, I've chosen to embrace life's beauty."

Maria spoke with a soft determination in her voice, her words brimming with empathy. "Advanced small cell lung cancer doesn't spell the end. With radiotherapy and chemotherapy, coupled with targeted drugs, one can experience significant improvement. You mustn't lose hope."

A smile touched Hector's lips, his eyes sparkling with humor. "Lose hope? Far from it! I've come all the way from the United States to China, driven by the potential promise of the Oracle Healing Salve Pill. It's reputed to work wonders on nearly every kind of cancer. My doctors encouraged me to take part in Oracle Pharmaceutical's clinical trial. Though, to be honest," he added with a wry twist to his smile, "it's not as simple as it sounds. Even James Smith, the ex-director of the US FDA, couldn't secure a spot for his son. How could I, an ordinary person?"

Shiann, listening from the side, chimed in with a note of disagreement. "It's not about fame or fortune, you know. Oracle Pharmaceutical's quota allocation focuses on who needs the treatment most urgently. Every candidate for the clinical trials is a cancer patient, with at least 30% given less than six months to live. Just consider the hundreds of advanced pancreatic cancer patients, including children. Securing a quota is almost impossible."

Charlie looked at her, curiosity etched on his face. "Shiann, did you also attempt to join the clinical trial of Oracle Pharmaceutical?"

She nodded, her expression thoughtful. "I did, but I wasn't selected. Oracle Pharmaceutical's evaluation is more a comparison of desperation than anything else. They weigh factors like the severity of illness, age, financial situation, and family responsibility. They use a point system; the worse off you are, the higher your score. The selection is made from those with the highest points, akin to points settlement logic. Sadly, I was brushed off in the first round."

Charlie was obviously unsurprised by this revelation as he came up with the guidelines himself. It makes sense. After all, the essence of the Oracle Healing Salve Pill is actually a diluted form of the Life Saving Pill. This unique concoction requires a reiki refinement process, rendering mass production an impossibility. Yet, it serves as a stepping stone for FDA approval.

He sighed, a philosophical glimmer in his eye as he thought. 'I know I'm neither a deity nor a saint. The world is brimming with cancer patients I can't possibly save. My aim is to reach out to those in the most dire circumstances, not those with means.'

One of the group of friends said indignantly, "The boss of Oracle Pharmaceutical doesn't know what he is doing. Why doesn't he give priority to saving talents like you who are useful to society?"

Shiann laughed yet it was tinged with self-deprecation. "I only read more books than most people. Reading more books doesn't necessarily make us more useful to society. It's a doctor's duty to save the most desperate cases first. You can't expect me to cut the line just because I have an education."

Hector's smile was knowing and agreeable. "I understand them completely. James Smith of the FDA resigned and has devoted himself to charity work in Aurous Hill, even putting his fortune into it. He hasn't given up on his son, nor on the other more seriously ill children. It's a difficult decision for him, especially since he initially doubted the scientific basis of Chinese medicines like Oracle's."

A collective gasp went up as someone inquired, astonished, "The head of the US FDA resigned to go to Aurous Hill for charity?"

"Yes," Hector affirmed, nodding gravely. "I spoke to the man himself, and he's faced some tough times. He once dismissed Oracle when they were seeking entry into the American market, even when they offered some for his ailing son. Now, with his son's health worsening, he has come to Aurous Hill, driven by desperation and hope."

His voice trailed off, tinged with a profound sadness as he sighed, "There's nothing left but to try. After all, sincerity can move mountains... even those made of gold and stone."

## Chapter 5469

Charlie had never envisioned that his camping adventure in the mountains of the southern province would lead him to two young souls trapped in the terrible clutches of cancer. What's more, he was surprised to find that both were longing to be part of a clinical trial at Oracle Pharmaceutical in Aurous Hill, only to have their hopes shattered with rejection.

But what astonished him the most was an unexpected connection between Hector, one of the young cancer patients, and James Smith. The very James Smith who had once wielded immense power over the entire FDA, resigning voluntarily to embark on philanthropic endeavors in Aurous Hill. Such a thing was hard for anyone to believe.

Charlie feigned curiosity and looked at Hector, asking, "Hector, how well do you know this James Smith?"

Hector's honesty rang in his reply, "I can't say we're close. After all, before his resignation, he was a towering figure in the U.S., mingling with the world's top biomedical and entrepreneurs."



James Smith's name held weight even among the elite, a world far removed from common, poor folks like me."

He paused, then continued, "I did meet him at Oracle Pharmaceutical's registration site, though. He was signing up his child, appearing quite ordinary, unrecognized by those around. But I recognized him. I studied biological sciences in the U.S., you see. There aren't many in the fields of biological sciences, genetic technology, and chemical pharmaceuticals who wouldn't know the great James Smith."

Charlie's surprise was evident as he asked, "What's the main thrust of your biological studies? Is it the creation of biomedicine?"

"Yes," Hector affirmed, nodding. "My primary focus was biochemistry, and I planned to join a pharmaceutical company after graduation. I wanted to help develop a new generation of chemotherapy drugs, never thinking I'd become a terminal cancer patient before the drug came to be."

With a smile tinged with sorrow, Hector mused, "It's like dying before birth. Like a hero, weeping with anticipation of the battlefield, only to perish before even donning the uniform."

Shiann, sitting nearby, smiled and added, "We all have our destinies. Since we're here for a visit, we must live happily before returning home. That's what matters most."

Hector softly agreed, embracing Shiann gently and smiling, "Fate has been kind, allowing me to find love before I die. Life hasn't been in vain."

Blushing, Shiann scolded him playfully, "Oh, you're so irreverent."

Hector's laughter sparkled in his eyes. "With little time left for grace and reserve, I must be as unbound as I can."

He then turned to Shiann, his smile bright and his voice earnest, "Shiann, will you marry me?"

A boy their age exclaimed, laughing, "Damn, Hector, are you proposing?"

Flustered yet smiling, Hector replied, "Yes, though I admit I didn't prepare a ring."

He looked at Shiann, sincerity in his eyes, "Shiann, will you marry me?"

Shiann's surprise slowly gave way to a thoughtful expression as she responded, "Marriage is complex. There are parents to meet, dresses to pick, hotels to book. Instead of wasting precious time, why not stay together, just as we are, so we can cherish what time we have?"

After a pause, Hector looked earnestly at Shiann, "Before I die, I want to live all I can. If possible, I'd love to take you to live in the U.S."

Shiann's smile turned gentle. "Once we start chemotherapy, our condition will worsen, and travel may not be feasible. Preparing for a wedding might even delay our treatment."

Her expression became serious as she continued, "Hector, let's make a pact. If we survive this year and are still here next year, you can meet my parents in China, and then I'll go with you to the U.S."

Hector's once bright face fell, his voice barely above a whisper, "In four months' time, even if I'm alive, I might not be able to come to China."

Shiann's eyes grew moist, but her smile remained, "It's fine, we can video call. Even courts hold sessions online these days. If needed, you can hire a priest, and we'll marry online."

With tears shimmering in his eyes, Hector agreed, smiling, "Let's do that. I'll find a priest when I return to the U.S. We'll host an online wedding on the first day of the month!"

The gravity of their conversation weighed on those nearby.

Maria turned to Charlie, whispering, "My Lord, doesn't Oracle Pharmaceutical belong to you?"

"It's mine," Charlie affirmed, nodding.

Maria glanced at Hector and Shiann, her voice trailing off, "Then can you perhaps..."

Before she could finish, Charlie nodded, "Yes, but not now. I'll arrange it when we leave."

Relieved, Maria's mood lightened, though she asked tentatively, "Will it cause you trouble?"

Charlie shook his head. "No, every video game designer creates rules, yet they also place easter eggs and leave room for imperfections. I'm a hidden NPC here. Meeting me triggers a hidden easter egg."

Feeling reassured, Maria smiled, "Then why didn't James Smith trigger the easter egg when he met you?"

Charlie's smile was knowing. "Easter eggs aren't just triggered by meeting an NPC. The right method and a humble heart are required. James Smith's overconfidence and disdain for others disqualifies him from the chance."

At that moment, Hector called everyone to attention. "Time's running out. Let's start the fire and cook. Otherwise, we'll dine in darkness!"

Soon, they were working together, collecting firewood, preparing food, and setting up a long table from small folding ones.

Charlie contributed all his purchased ingredients and wine, and while everyone prepared dinner, he set up the tent.

Though the camping tent was for two, its inside was no larger than a standard double bed. Maria, helping with the moisture-proof mat, shyly asked, "Are we to sleep here tonight?"

Charlie nodded, "We'll see if Morgana shows up. If not, we'll let things unfold naturally."

Maria's curiosity piqued. "What if Morgana appears after we've all gone to sleep? We can't sneak out to spy on her without her noticing."

With a reassuring smile, Charlie said, "Don't worry, I've mixed some aura into the wine. Tonight, everyone will be lively and tireless. This bonfire party may last until morning. If Morgana's hurrying from Myanmar, she should be here by then!"

## Chapter 5470

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the group gathered around a blazing bonfire, the flames dancing in the darkening sky. Charlie, sensing the excitement in the air, had thought ahead, ensuring the ingredients for the dinner were abundant. But he went further, acquiring a selection of exquisite wines to heighten the evening's festivities. He carefully infused a touch of reiki into the wine, enough to prevent anyone from growing tired, all without leaving a trace, ensuring their enjoyment and secrecy.

The south's high plateau setting brought a sudden chill as the night descended, but the warmth of the fire and the spirits within sustained the group's comfort. Hector, master of the guitar, and some spirited young singers filled the night with music. Maria, finding herself easily a part of this lively atmosphere, felt truly relaxed for the first time in a long while.

As toasts flowed and laughter echoed, one young man remarked, "This wine tonight is something else, not like any I've had before. I usually drink much more, but I'm feeling so alive!"

Another joined in, "I'm a bit dizzy, but I don't feel a hint of being drunk."

"Absolutely comfortable!" someone chimed in, looking at Charlie. "Bobby, did you bring a rare vintage? It's different, but I can't quite put my finger on it."

Charlie, with a smile, shared, "The difference you feel is in the atmosphere, my friends. The more vibrant, the more your capacity to enjoy the wine."

Hector added, "Bobby's got a point. Your ability to handle alcohol depends on factors like your tolerance, consumption, and surroundings. When we're gathered like this, full of energy and

good spirits, the alcohol goes down smoother."

The man nodded thoughtfully, grinning. "Makes sense! I'm having a blast tonight, so another round it is!"

Charlie, seizing the opportunity, suggested, "Since we're all in such high spirits, let's party until the sunrise, then we'll rest."

The group enthusiastically agreed, staying awake, sharing skewers, and singing into the early hours of the morning. They noticed a few friends leaving the mountain before sunset, but once the darkness set in, they were the only ones around.

Less than twenty minutes remained until sunrise. Everyone added wood to the fire, waiting eagerly for the sun's grand entrance from beyond the mountain. The skyline began to shimmer with a golden hue, heralding the impending sunrise.

Suddenly, a sharp sense gripped Charlie, detecting someone rapidly approaching in the distance. Fearful of being discovered by Morgana, he activated the mental technique he'd learned from Zeba, tightly concealing his aura. He likened their situation to submarines in deep waters, detecting each other through subtle means. Those with higher cultivation were like advanced submarines, harder to detect.

However, even with this technique, there was a possibility that someone skilled enough, like Morgana, could sense them. The key was to maintain absolute silence, minimizing the risk of being found. Charlie had adopted this silent approach, hoping to avoid detection.

At the same time, Morgana, making her way up the mountain, noticed the group below. Seeing the tents and the gathering of young people, she thought little of it, assuming they were ordinary campers. Outdoor activities were common, especially among the youth.

As Morgana approached, Charlie caught a glimpse of her in the distance. Despite her age, she radiated beauty and charisma, not unlike Maria. He was well aware of her strong aura and the formidable presence she commanded.

Sensing Morgana's scrutiny, Charlie drew Maria close, feigning concern for her well-being. He whispered, "You stayed up all night just for this sunrise, my love... Our first together."

Maria, grateful for Charlie's diversion, whispered back, "Yes, and it's worth every moment, even with the late night and the wine."

Seeing her approach, Charlie deliberately glanced in Morgana's direction, ensuring she saw them engaged in a private moment. He lowered his voice, remarking casually, "Looks like we're not the only early risers here. Someone else is enjoying the sunrise."

Maria joined the act, saying, "Seems like she's alone too. She must've camped nearby and decided to catch the sunrise."

"It's a bit odd, though," Charlie mused. "This mountain isn't the highest nearby. Why choose this spot?"

The conversation between them didn't raise any suspicion from Morgana. In fact, it had the

opposite effect, making her realize that appearing alone at dawn might draw attention.

Suddenly hesitant, Morgana weighed her options. She wanted to visit Lucius Clark's tomb, but doing so with this group so close might be inconvenient. They were merely a couple of hundred meters away. If she ventured in, they'd undoubtedly notice.

In the distance, Charlie had sensed Morgana's shift in demeanor. He looked at Maria, a mix of worry and relief in his eyes. "Did you see? She's coming this way," he whispered to her.

Maria, now nervous and flushed, gathered herself, "Charlie, you don't know her," she whispered back, her voice trembling slightly. "I've avoided her for centuries, and now she's right here."

Charlie embraced her, hiding the tension he felt himself. "We'll handle this together. Just act natural."

As Morgana approached, Charlie subtly gestured for Maria to glance their way. "Looks like we're not the only ones," he commented softly, maintaining the illusion that they were simply tourists enjoying the sunrise.

Maria, with great effort, played her part. "True, maybe she's a sunrise enthusiast like us."

"But it's odd," Charlie added, "this isn't the highest peak. Wonder why she picked this spot. What's more is that she is alone..."

Morgana heard every word of the exchange. The conversation between the two seemed innocuous, failing to awaken any suspicions within her. Yet, when Charlie subtly voiced his doubts, a sudden shift occurred, causing Morgana to reflect on her own presence. Alone, so early in the morning, she couldn't escape the realization that her actions might seem somewhat unconventional to an outside observer.

Her thoughts, once bent on uncovering something amiss, now turned inward. She felt a sudden urgency to conceal her own peculiar behavior.

Thus, uncertainty began to gnaw at her, and she thought to herself, "If I were to pay my respects at my brother's tomb right now, would these people sense something out of the ordinary?"

## Chapter 5471

Ever since Charlie unveiled Morvel Bazin's portrait in the heart of Aurous Hill, it sent shockwaves through Morgana that reverberated deep within her. Thus, on her current sojourn to China, her apprehension was primarily reserved for one concern, the potential exposure of her identity.

Observing the young campers nearby, she deduced that they were students, their youthful vigor apparent in their actions. While Morgana didn't harbor concerns about her safety from this group, a recent exchange between Charlie and Maria stirred a twinge of suspicion about her actions in the eyes of others. Faced with this uncertainty, her deliberation hung heavy.

Yet, as she grappled with her inner turmoil, Charlie's magnetic presence led her attention elsewhere, seamlessly diverting her focus. The sun, casting a resplendent golden glow,

embarked on its ascent from the eastern horizon.

The youthful souls congregated around Charlie, who had remained fervent throughout the night, found renewed vigor in the dawn's arrival. Jubilant shouts of the sun's emergence filled the air as phones were drawn for snapshots and videos to commemorate the moment.

Undisturbed by prying eyes, Morgana quietly retreated towards the woods behind the camp, distancing herself from the vibrant scene.

At this juncture, a mere seventy to eighty meters separated Morgana from Charlie and Maria, yet her thoughts lay elsewhere. She stood in an unspoken contemplation, her aura dormant, oblivious to the subtle intricacies unfolding around her.

Cornered by an enigmatic predicament, Charlie surreptitiously examined Morgana from the corner of his eye. A woman in her thirties, Morgana bore an allure that transcended mere aesthetics. Her grace and charisma positioned her as an embodiment of beauty incarnate. In her grasp rested a wine jar and coarsely textured yellow paper – relics reminiscent of a bygone era.

Deducing the purpose behind Morgana's presence, Charlie surmised her intention to pay homage to Lucius Clark. This act spoke volumes about Morgana's sentiments, a tribute devoid of aversion. Maria, taken aback by Morgana's approach, had anticipated a confrontational stance. However, the artifacts in Morgana's possession unveiled an unexpected reverence.

As word spread through the camp, whispers danced among the assembled group. "Is she here to honor the departed?" mused one camper.

Another puzzled, "Perhaps, but where's the grave?"

Uncertainty lingered until Shiann posed her question aloud, "Was this area once a burial ground?"

In response, Hector's composed voice emerged, casting a tranquil reassurance. "Even if this ground held ancient graves, there's nothing to fear. Our city's history, rife with archeological discoveries, includes countless resting places. A scattering of ancient tombs is but part of this tapestry."

Echoing Hector's sentiment, Charlie nodded sagely. "Indeed, the truth of history often eclipses speculation. Let's refrain from idle gossip, a slip of tongue could inflict unintended wounds."

Hector affirmed, "Bobby speaks wisdom. We've no stake in the affairs of others. As the sun ascends, a brief respite in our tents is due, an antidote for our nocturnal revelry."

Amid shared weariness, the group acknowledged their fatigue. Unbeknownst to them, their exhaustion was the side effect of spirits consumed the prior night.

In the midst of this exchange, Maria seized her phone, her intentions plain. "Darling, ere the sun's full blaze, let's immortalize this moment with selfies against its radiant backdrop."

Anticipating her aim, Charlie agreed, producing his phone to capture the scene. The couple positioned themselves, their backs to the emerging sun and Morgana, capturing the essence of

the moment.

In the ensuing moments, Charlie subtly captured snapshots of Morgana, utilizing his phone's high-resolution front camera. Yet, limitations prevailed, Morgana soon retreated into the woods, beyond the camera's reach.

Undeterred, Charlie pocketed his phone, savoring the sunrise's grandeur beside Maria. But his watchful eye remained fixed upon Morgana's enigma.

Within the woods, Morgana selected an open clearing. With a hammer and wooden cylinder in hand, she embarked on a ritualistic process. Vigorously striking the cylinder atop a sheet of yellow paper, she traced circles and squares, invoking ancient customs of yore. This practice, though rough in craftsmanship, held a delicate significance. A nod to ancestral roots, a tradition of rural homage bound by flammable offerings.

A wooden cylinder, a mold for forging a link to the past, stood as a testament to her dedication. Morgana's deft touch pressed a stack of yellow papers against the mold, meticulously transforming them into symbols of remembrance.

Beginning her work in the upper left corner, each stroke of the hammer manifested an emblematic coin on the paper. These symbols, harking back to a bygone currency, spoke volumes about Morgana's conviction.

Yet, this labor-intensive process had become a rarity. Modernity had woven itself into the fabric of rituals, imbuing even the simplest tokens with contemporary design. For Morgana, however, the roots of reverence remained steadfast, manifested in her cherished yellow paper and time-honored mold.

In the forest's embrace, Morgana detached herself from the bustling camp. To her, the campers existed in a parallel reality, with her own purpose and path to navigate. Her detachment mirrored Maria's foresight, a testament to their shared understanding.

With utmost focus, Morgana assembled a trove of paper currency, each piece a testament to heartfelt memory. Igniting one, she initiated a blaze that spread to the stack, flames dancing in reverent harmony.

Amidst the fiery crescendo, tears welled in Morgana's eyes. She whispered words, a private soliloquy, drifted into the wind, merging with the ascending smoke. "Brother Lucius, I have journeyed to your side..."

## Chapter 5472

Many years had flown by since Morgana's last visit to Lucius's resting place. Though hundreds of years had lapsed, she could still discern the spot where Lucius's grave had been.

Despite her having obliterated the tombstone and even the graves themselves having been consumed by the relentless passage of time, she had an uncanny knack for locating Lucius's burial site.

Though she knew his body wasn't entombed here, Morgana still regarded this place as the

closest connection to her older brother.

At that moment, her heart brimmed with sorrow, remorse and a touch of bitterness. Her emotions surged and like an unbidden tide, the events of that fateful year flooded her thoughts.

Initially, Morgana's rush of affection and impulsive feelings for Lucius, followed by his abrupt disappearance from her view, had led her to believe that he must have been dispatched to Maria with the ring bestowed by their mentor. Thus, she had hastily departed the mountains and embarked on a journey in search of him.

Yet the road from the Mountains was perilous and far-flung and Morgana was still a prime fugitive hunted by the rebel court.

Undaunted, she undertook great trials to reach Diannan, only to find Lucius's body already missing, consigned to the earth. It was then she learned the grim truth, her older brother, whose cultivation outshone her own, had met his demise by her own hand.

Truthfully, she hadn't intended to end Lucius's life. Her aim was to seize the Eternal Green Pill that their Master had left in Lucius's care, along with the enigmatic ring.

Moreover, in her estimation, given Lucius's prowess, even a stab to his heart shouldn't have proven fatal.

After all, Lucius wielded mastery over reiki. Though his cultivation remained nascent, his reiki wasn't wholly lacking, enabling him to temporarily stabilize his injuries and progressively recuperate by harnessing his spiritual essence. His wounds would mend and vitality would be restored, in a mere month or two, he'd be whole again, as he had been.

Once in Diannan and after much inquiry, Morgana received the unthinkable news, Lucius had been interred, a truth she struggled to fathom. Only through persistent questioning did the reality settle in, Lucius was indeed gone, with his daughter arranging his burial.

Regret was now beyond her reach, for no matter how she lamented, the dead could not be reclaimed. So resentment seeped in, a belief that Lucius had chosen death over her love, a love spanning the ages.

And so, she vented her rage upon Lucius's tombstone and even upon Maria's mother's, abstaining from returning for years. Her absence wasn't because she'd moved on from Lucius, but rather, in over three centuries, she still could not banish his memory from her heart.

And now, kneeling at Lucius's grave, Morgana whispered with emotion, "Brother Lucius, vividly I recall our first encounter. Back then, you were thirteen or fourteen and I, a mere twelve or thirteen, yet at that sight, love took root. From that day, I awaited your presence in our home, longing to glimpse you. Outside my brother's chamber, I'd eavesdrop on your weighty discussions. Upon hearing your plan to forsake the pen for the sword, I learned to bind my hair and wield the sword and spear, practicing ceaselessly. I yearned to stand by your side, to fight at your flank, to assist in your battles. Then, I concluded I'd stand with you for a lifetime. Wherever you ventured, I'd be there; whatever your venture, I'd share it. I'd follow your sword into the rebel ranks or return to the fields, forsaking strife, to stand at your side. Such were my thoughts, such my devotion."



"When you and your elder sister founded the Warriors Den, I was the third member of the Warriors Den Association. Though you and your sister rejected my inclusion, I remained steadfast, declaring intent to stand alongside you both. I cited patriotism as my motivation, but in truth, I was merely a woman. My allegiance was yours, regardless of Han or anyone. I wished only to be near you, my cherished one. If you declared this realm for the emperor, I'd march sword in hand against the rebels until the last, if you chose peace in any realm, I'd cast aside my blade and pledge my loyalty."

As her words flowed, Morgana's tears flowed freely. She set alight the final sheet of yellow paper voice choked, "Brother Lucius, I thought time would sway your heart, but I was blind to the truth, you never loved me. I stood by you from the year of the golden hairpin to your fortieth year. Twenty-eight years of valor, countless battles, near-death escapes. Amid it all, many worthy hearts sought mine, but only yours held it. From that first gaze to my final strike, all I gave was for you. But to my dismay, you remained unmoved. My heart's lament..."

Now, Morgana wept openly, unable to utter more.

Charlie refrained from invoking his spiritual aura, observing Morgana's faint form through shifting shadows. He sensed tears, yet couldn't be sure.

Maria, though she couldn't make out Morgana clearly, observed the dappled firelight amid the woods. Complex emotions swept across her features. She'd assumed Morgana's visit was born of anger for her father, not foreseeing the ritual with the yellow paper before his grave.

Unbeknownst to her, Morgana, after wiping her tears, opened an old wine jug, pouring its contents onto the burnt offerings. She murmured, "Brother Lucius, in three centuries, I've witnessed the world's evolution. The more it changed, the more I yearned to remain. Yet, lacking a Millennial Pill, I have but a century left. Maria, my brother's sole heir, has eluded me for three hundred years. My intentions aren't malicious. Should she willingly yield the ring, I'll show her kindness. But time wanes, patience dims. If she obstructs me, repercussions will follow. Forgive me, Brother."

Pausing, Morgana sighed, "By the way, I plan to scour the mountain vicinity, seeking our Master's hidden trove. Its discovery may reconcile us, else Maria and I tread a different path."

Pouring the last of the wine onto the earth, she whispered, "Brother Lucius, I depart now. When I acquire the pill, I'll pay respects again."

With the wine gone, Morgana arose and exited the forest. She left behind the bustling youths and the rising sun, without a backward glance. Little did she suspect that Maria, whom she sought for over three centuries, lingered amidst those jovial young souls.

## Chapter 5473

Morgana departed without sensing any peculiarities, but her exit signaled a moment of relief for both Charlie and Maria. The night had taken its toll on those who remained awake, they were now battling the embrace of drowsiness, their eyelids fighting to close.

Several individuals hurried back to the tent, seeking refuge and rest. The weight of a sleepless

night had left Hector feeling drained. He addressed Charlie and Maria, compassionately suggesting they return to the tent and rest. They had a fifteen-kilometer journey to Erdaogou scheduled for the afternoon and he offered to accompany them if they desired.

Charlie shook his head, explaining they had other plans. Maria's curiosity was piqued and she inquired about their destination. With a nonchalant demeanor, Charlie revealed, "We're heading to Baisha to enjoy a few days there."

Their next destination lay in the southwestern border of the southern province and their choice of Baisha was a calculated move, a measure to mitigate risks.

Hector approved, sharing a smile, "We've been to Baisha, it's a stunning place. You two enjoy yourselves there."

As the conversation continued, Hector became increasingly aware of their imminent departure. Regret tinged Shiann's words, "I thought I'd have a few more days with you. It's unexpected that you're leaving so soon. I wonder if we'll ever meet again."

Shiann was acutely conscious of the fleeting nature of life, cherishing these newfound connections. She felt the brevity of existence, dreading the finality of parting.

Sensing Shiann's unease, Hector held her gently, reassuring her, "Don't dwell on it. Fate has its way of weaving our paths."

Maria glanced at Charlie, her lips pursed, a silent exchange revealing her thoughts.

Charlie, attuned to Maria's unspoken desires, explained to them, "We'd appreciate it if Hector and Shiann could see us off."

Hector readily agreed, "Of course, we'll see you off."

Hector offered to pack the tent for them, but Charlie declined, suggesting they leave it for those who might need it.

Maria hesitated briefly before mustering the courage to ask, "Charlie, could we take the tent? It might come in handy in the future."

Charlie, recognizing the practicality of her request, assented, "Alright, let's take it."

Hector joined in, "I'll help you with that."

They carefully packed the tent and Hector couldn't resist teasing Charlie, "You set up the tent yesterday for nothing. Didn't even get a wink of sleep."

Charlie chuckled, "I didn't anticipate everyone having such a great time and staying up all night."

With the tent stowed away, Hector offered to carry the floor mat and sleeping bag for them, leading the quartet towards the mountain's base.

As they descended from Guibei Mountain, they found themselves alone on the short mountain path. Charlie initiated a more private conversation with Hector and Shiann, disclosing, "By the

way, Hector, Shiann, you mentioned Oracle Pharmaceutical yesterday. It's a sensitive topic, so I couldn't discuss it in front of everyone."

Intrigued, Hector questioned, "What's the mystery behind it?"

Charlie unveiled the connection, "I have a connection with Oracle Pharmaceutical. I know the person in charge quite well. If you're interested in getting a shot at the Oracle Healing Salve Pill experiment, I can put in a good word for you."

The revelation left Hector and Shiann astonished. Hector couldn't help but ask, "Charlie, are you serious? You know the person in charge at Oracle Pharmaceutical?"

Charlie, solemn in his response, stated, "This is a matter of importance. I wouldn't joke about it."

Hector, still in disbelief, inquired, "Which department do you work in?"

Charlie clarified, "I'm acquainted with the person in charge of the entire Oracle Pharmaceutical, Liam Weaver. He oversees the clinical trials of the Oracle Healing Salve Pills. Given my rapport with him, I should be able to secure two spots."

The news was astounding, as Liam's name was widely recognized. Hector and Shiann both knew he was the CEO of Oracle Pharmaceutical, the decision-maker for all significant matters, including the allocation of Oracle Healing Salve Pill test slots. This man's generosity was legendary, sticking to a points-based system even when faced with substantial bribes.

Liam rarely met with anyone, keeping his interactions limited to dealers and suppliers. For most, securing a meeting with him was an impossible task, let alone asking for assistance.

Hector, overwhelmed by the revelation, couldn't hide his enthusiasm, exclaiming, "Charlie, you're not kidding, are you? You know Mr. Weaver?"

Charlie affirmed, "Yes, I do. You're in a unique situation and I wouldn't joke about something this crucial."

Hector, determined to believe Charlie, responded fervently, "Alright! Let's check the availability of the flight from Dali to Aurous Hill! Bobby, whether this works out or not, we're deeply grateful!"

Charlie's smile reflected his appreciation, "You don't need to thank me just yet. Save that for when you secure the spot. Look up the flight and jot down my number. When you reach Aurous Hill, give me a call at the Oracle Pharmaceutical factory gate and I'll take care of the rest."

The disbelief in Hector and Shiann's eyes was apparent, yet Hector decided to put his trust in Charlie, promising, "Alright, we'll check the flights now! Bobby, no matter what happens, thank you sincerely!"

Charlie responded, "You're welcome, but let's focus on the task at hand. Don't mention this to anyone else, as it's a bit of a backdoor approach and wouldn't be appropriate to make public."

Hector eagerly agreed, "No worries, we won't speak a word with anyone!"

Charlie, remembering something, advised, "Also, if you can find James Smith in Aurous Hill,

have him bring his son to Oracle Pharmaceutical with you. Liam will handle everything."

The four of them walked together in the direction of the mountain's foot, while Hector and Shiann contemplated this unexpected opportunity.

## Chapter 5474

Charlie held no sympathy for James Smith. In this vast world, countless parents grapple with the agony of having children afflicted by cancer.

James Smith was just one among millions, nothing particularly unique about his situation.

Moreover, he squandered an opportunity to save his son's life, his own ignorance and arrogance sealing that tragic fate.

Given the circumstances, he no longer merited anyone's sympathy.

Charlie hadn't planned on extending a helping hand, but much to his surprise, as per Hector, James Smith had actually taken a radical step. He resigned his influential position as the head of the FDA, liquidated his family's assets and embarked on a charitable mission in Aurous Hill, after their last conversation, where he expressed his intent to pay upfront.

While Charlie knew that this decision was likely driven by his desire to give his son a chance, he couldn't help but appreciate the sincerity of the effort. Thus, as a gesture of goodwill from Aurous Hill, he decided to grant him a small reward, an act of courtesy.

To add another twist, it turned out that Hector, whom they had unexpectedly met on Turtleback Mountain, had a connection with James Smith.

Clearly, there were opportunities at play, perhaps orchestrated by fate.

This led Charlie to a temporary decision to give both Hector and Shiann a shot at survival and of course, James Smith's cancer-stricken son.

This incident reinforced the truth that action speaks louder than anything else. If James Smith hadn't taken action after being rebuffed by Charlie, his son would never have received Oracle's specially formulated pills.

Fortunately, he did take action, and that was the primary reason Charlie now wanted to help save his son.

Hector couldn't believe that Charlie was willing to lend a hand based solely on hearing the story about James Smith. He asked with excitement, "Bobby, can you really help secure a spot for Smith's son?"

Charlie responded nonchalantly, "Once you reach Aurous Hill, just instruct him to bring his son to Oracle Pharmaceutical. The rest will be arranged."

Hector expressed gratitude, saying, "Thank you, Bobby! Thank you so much!"

Charlie patted his shoulder and urged, "Say your farewells to the others. You head there now."

Hector nodded, about to speak further, but Charlie had already turned and walked away, Maria by his side.

As they vanished from Shiann's sight, she muttered in disbelief, "Hector, do you think what Bobby said is believable?"

Hector replied with seriousness, "Is it believable? I'm not sure, but we can gauge his credibility indirectly."

Intrigued, Shiann inquired, "How do we do that indirectly?"

Hector looked at her, posing a question, "Do you think Bobby is a bad person?"

After some reflection, Shiann shook her head, saying, "I don't think he comes across as a bad person. In fact, I feel he's not just a typical wealthy heir who splurges. There's a depth to him, but maybe that's just my impression."

Hector smiled and said, "I won't venture to judge his depth, but like you, I don't perceive him as malicious."

Continuing his line of thought, Hector explained, "What I mean by indirect verification is to start by considering whether Bobby is a bad person. If our impression is that he's not, then we must ponder a common-sense question. Would a non-bad person casually jest about life and death?"

Hector answered his own question, "I believe the answer is no. A good person, even if they achieve something great, won't play with life and death in such a manner. I don't think Bobby would've said what he did if he wasn't sure."

Shiann, enlightened by his reasoning, nodded in agreement, "That makes sense! After you put it that way, I can't imagine Bobby messing around with us."

She broke into an excited sweat and exclaimed, "So, do we actually stand a chance at the clinical trial with Oracle Pharmaceutical? If that happens, could we really survive?"

Hector nodded solemnly and declared, "I believe we have a significant opportunity this time!"

With that, Hector took out his phone to search for flight information, blurting out, "There's a flight from Dali to Aurous Hill at two in the afternoon. I'm booking tickets now. Let's go back, say our goodbyes, and head to the airport!"

Meanwhile, after Charlie and Maria descended the mountain, they headed off to pick up a car and drove to Poole.

For Maria, Poole held sentimental value, being the resting place of her parents, and it marked the beginning of her escape route.

Charlie's purpose for accompanying Maria on this journey extended beyond Pu'er, where they'd visit Maria's old haunt. They planned to continue from Poole to Banna in search of the figure depicted in one of Maria's paintings.

Regarding Morgana's whereabouts, Charlie no longer had concerns. He understood that since Morgana had surfaced in the mountain, she had fully integrated into the human world this time. This integration meant she'd be recorded by various surveillance systems.

Morgana would undoubtedly be monitored and photographed.

With Keagan Myers assistance, they could access surveillance footage, effectively tracking Morgana's approximate path in China.

Charlie believed there was no need to worry about Morgana's situation at the moment. Considering her strength, a sudden confrontation on her part would likely backfire. It made more sense to let her go wherever she intended first.

Once her intended path was clear, they could trace it back.

Ultimately, this would lead them to Morvel Bazin's hideout, narrowing the search radius to within a hundred miles or even less.

Just as Charlie and Maria arrived in Poole, Hector and Shiann boarded an afternoon flight to Aurous Hill.

Their previous visit to Aurous Hill, though not made together, had held high hopes.

Unfortunately, neither of them had been selected for Oracle Pharmaceutical's clinical trial screening.

When they left Aurous Hill that time, they were profoundly disheartened. Yet, here they were, returning to Aurous Hill before facing their impending fate. Throughout the journey, they refrained from discussing their chances of success.

When the plane touched down at Aurous Hill Airport, Hector immediately called James Smith.

Being fellow Americans, one a cancer patient and the other a cancer patient's family member, they had exchanged contact information. This was both a gesture of respect for James Smith and a way to warm up for the upcoming meeting.

Even as the plane was still taxiing, Hector dialed James Smith's Chinese mobile number.

Once the call connected, a curious James Smith asked, "Hector, what can I do for you?"

Hector inquired urgently, "Mr. Smith, what are you doing right now?"

James Smith replied, "I'm at the Aurous Hill Old Temple, helping the homeless and sharing some food I've brought. Is something wrong? What's going on?"

Hector responded swiftly, "Mr. Smith, please wrap up what you're doing and bring Jimmy to the entrance of Oracle Pharmaceutical. Shiann and I are on our way from the airport. We'll meet you there!"

## Chapter 5475

"Oracle Pharmaceutical?" James Smith echoed, a hint of disbelief in his voice. "Why on earth would you be heading there?"

Hector's face lit up, a spark of hope evident. "A friend has pulled some strings for Shiann and me concerning the Oracle medicine. He has ties with the top brass of Oracle Pharmaceutical. He arranged a spot for Jimmy too. We're on our way there to meet him and you should bring Jimmy!"

James eyebrows furrowed. "Didn't they blacklist both of you? Jimmy doesn't meet their criteria. Who is this mysterious friend of yours? How can he wield so much influence?"

"I'm not certain about his background," Hector confessed. "He claims he's close with Liam Weaver from Oracle Pharmaceutical. I've no evidence of his claims, but he doesn't strike me as one to jest about something this serious."

James looked stern, "Hector, Oracle Pharmaceutical has deeper secrets than you might think. Liam is just a face for the real power behind the scenes. Trust me, he wouldn't dare to bend the rules for anyone."

"But," Hector insisted, "He seems genuine. You're already in Aurous Hill and so are we. Just bring Jimmy. Even if things don't pan out, what do we have to lose?"

James hesitated, then inquired, "Hector, what's your friend's name? How did you two meet?"

Hector replied "His name's Robert Clark. Met him during a hiking trip."

"Robert Clark?" James's surprise was palpable. "If it were Charlie, I might be more optimistic. But Robert Clark? Never heard of him. How old is he?"

"In his early 20s, by the looks of him," said Hector.

James sighed with a touch of disappointment. "That can't be Charlie then. He's pushing thirty. But tell me, how's Jimmy holding up?"

"It's grim," James admitted with a heaviness in his voice. "The doctors here say the cancer has invaded most of his organs. Chemotherapy isn't as effective anymore. If there's no improvement after this round, they're suggesting palliative care. It's... it's basically the end for him."

Hector's voice was tinged with urgency. "Where is he? Is he with you in the Temple?"

"No," James replied. "He's getting his chemotherapy at the Aurous Hill People's Hospital. His mother's with him."

Hector raised an eyebrow. "Your wife's here?"

James nodded, "She sorted out matters in the U.S sold our home and then brought our daughter here. She's handling the kids, while I'm focused on the Temple."

Hector took a deep breath. "So, are you bringing Jimmy? We'll wait for you at Oracle Pharmaceutical's entrance."

Making up his mind, James said, "In China, we say it's better to trust and be disappointed than to doubt and regret. I'll get Jimmy from the hospital. See you at Oracle."

Hector nodded. "Perfect. We'll see you at Oracle's entrance. And remember, Mr. Smith, this whole operation is sensitive. We should keep it under wraps."

"Understood," James affirmed.

After hanging up, James addressed his fellow Temple members, many of whom were fellow expatriates. "Excuse me, I have urgent business. Please carry on."

One of them, sensing the urgency, voiced his concern. "Anything wrong, James? Do you need assistance?"

James managed a small smile. "I'm fetching Jimmy. Then we're trying our luck at Oracle Pharmaceutical."

The friend patted his shoulder. "If you need anything, let us know."

"Got it," James Smith replied, swiftly exiting the Temple before hailing a taxi bound for the People's Hospital.

Their arrival in Aurous Hill had seen them promptly enroll their children at the Aurous Hill People's Hospital and adopt the same treatment regimen they had followed in the United States for chemotherapy. Initially, they had lodged in a hotel nearby, waiting for Jenny. Later, after organizing matters in the States and hastening to Aurous Hill with their daughter, they secured a rental home near the hospital.

Guided by Charlie's counsel, James Smith dedicated his days to philanthropic pursuits throughout Aurous Hill. Abiding by the hospital's guidelines, Jenny ensured their child received chemotherapy and tests as necessary, returning home to rest each evening.

Young Jimmy's cancer had entered its advanced stages. The chemotherapy medications currently utilized were top-of-the-line and recently developed, yet even so, they couldn't eliminate the cancer. Their goal was now to slow the spread of the cancer cells as much as possible.



For those grappling with cancer, the optimal scenario was to discover localized carcinoma, curable through surgical excision. If metastasis had occurred, the best outcome was identifying viable targeted drugs.

But the uniqueness of individual genetic makeup played a part. Some individuals, through genetic fortune, possessed the necessary targets for targeted drugs, which could yield remarkable therapeutic effects.

Others weren't as fortunate, their genes offering no viable targets, leaving them unable to avail of targeted drug treatments.

In the absence of targeted drugs, conventional chemotherapy and radiation remained the alternatives.

In little Jimmy's present circumstances, chemotherapy was the final barrier. Yet James Smith was acutely aware that this last line of defense was faltering, its remaining time likely just a few short months.

Entering the hospital's day ward with ease, James observed rows of beds, each occupied by cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy.

Of these patients, little Jimmy was the youngest.

There was once a 5-year-old with end-stage leukemia here. Some time ago, the child had gained approval from Oracle Pharmaceutical, earning a spot in their clinical trials and being transferred to Oracle's internal laboratory for treatment.

James had envied the child's luck, although his hands were tied. Oracle Pharmaceutical's points system favored young patients with severe symptoms and challenging circumstances.

At present, Jimmy lay on the hospital bed, his frame wasted, his hair absent. Fragility seemed to emanate from him as his eyes rested in a half-closed state, akin to slumber.

Jenny James, James Smith's wife, sat wearily on a stool near the bed.

Upon noticing her husband's arrival, Jenny inquired, surprise lacing her words, "James, what brings you here? Wasn't the Temple organizing relief efforts for the homeless this afternoon?"

James refrained from addressing her query directly, his gaze instead fixed on the child in the bed. He inquired of her, "Is Jimmy asleep?"

Jenny offered a subtle nod, her voice tinged with distress, "His nausea has escalated. The doctor added antiemetics to his chemotherapy, but these new drugs are making him drowsy."

With reddened eyes, Jenny continued in a hushed tone, "James, the results from the enhanced CT scan arrived two days ago. Jimmy's cancer cells are still proliferating and spreading. This week's chemotherapy hasn't yielded discernible improvement. The doctor noted that his physical state is deteriorating rapidly, like an uncontrolled plummeting elevator. Chemotherapy is barely decelerating the descent, extending the fall from two months to perhaps two and a half, maybe pushing for three... at best."

As she spoke, Jenny covered her face, succumbing to tears.

Swiftly, James moved to embrace her, his voice gentle, "Don't cry. There might be other opportunities."

Jenny shook her head, voicing her feelings, "I'm weary of clinging to blind hope. I'm even contemplating halting Jimmy's chemotherapy and taking him back to the States for his remaining time. His grandparents, both maternal and paternal, are waiting to see him. Returning home could at least allow him to spend his final days with family."

James countered, "There's still one last chance, even if we don't know its likelihood of success. Having any chance at all is far better than none."

Turning to Jenny, he added, "Let the nurse remove Jimmy's IV, I need to take him out."

Jenny's surprise was evident as she queried, "Where are you planning to take him?"

Recalling Hector's injunction to maintain secrecy, James replied, "Don't inquire further for now. I've promised not to reveal anything prematurely, but rest assured, if there's any development, I'll inform you at the earliest opportunity."

## Chapter 5476

Jenny couldn't fathom why her husband had abruptly whisked their son away.

In the midst of his son's dire condition, he still considered chemotherapy a final lifeline.

Observing her husband's intentions to leave before their son's chemotherapy was complete, she promptly halted him, exclaiming, "Are you out of your mind? No matter what, we must wait until the chemotherapy is done!"

James Smith waved dismissively, "I can't wait. I'm taking him out now."

Without awaiting Jenny's response, he moved forward, deftly removed his son's IV, scooped up the slumbering child, and headed out.

Startled and enraged, Jenny pursued them, her reprimands trailing after her, "James! Put Jimmy down! He still needs half of the chemotherapy drugs. You're risking his life like this!"

James Smith remained silent, picking up his pace as he moved ahead, almost fleeing the hospital.

Jenny hastily followed him outside the hospital doors. As she saw James stopping by a car at the curb, she stomped her feet in anger, her voice cracking with tears as she cried out, "James, what on earth are you doing? You can't play with our son's life like this, no matter what!"

At this juncture, a taxi pulled up in front of James Smith. Just as he was about to embark with his son cradled in his arms, his wife's tearful visage met his gaze. He hesitated for a moment, turned toward her, and whispered, "A friend called. They've secured Jimmy a clinical trial slot at Oracle. I'm not sure about the authenticity or success rate yet, but they warned against discussing it openly at the hospital."

Jenny's surprise was evident as she inquired, "Really? James, are you serious? Can Jimmy really participate in a clinical trial?"

James Smith confirmed softly, "Honey, everything's uncertain. No need to get too excited or anxious. Stay calm and prepare to pick up our daughter from school. If this pans out, I'll let you know as soon as possible. And then we'll celebrate. If not, I'll swiftly get Jimmy back for chemotherapy. Take care of our daughter and don't worry."

Jenny nodded rapidly, affirming, "Alright! You take Jimmy there first, I'll await your news!"

Firmly planting a kiss on his wife's forehead, James Smith turned and entered the taxi. He instructed the driver, "To Oracle Pharmaceutical, please."

Oracle Pharmaceutical's current level of confidentiality rivaled that of a military establishment.

Given previous attempts to pilfer the formula for Oracle Healing Salve Pill, the Aurous Hill police had designated the vicinity of Oracle Pharmaceutical as a restricted area. This zone acted as a protective buffer for the company, with continuous police patrols and a ban on temporary vehicle stops. Any vehicles halting triggered police intervention to ensure their swift departure.

The sole point of approach for outsiders was Oracle Pharmaceutical's main entrance. Here, all visitors underwent ID checks before internal personnel collected them, allowing entry.

Given the vigilant security and police presence, outsiders were barred from entry without prior appointments.

As James Smith alighted from a taxi at the entrance, Hector and Shiann had just arrived as well.

Catching sight of James Smith, Hector greeted with a pleasant surprise, "Mr. Smith, a reunion!"

"Indeed," James Smith responded with a slight smile, asking, "How's the hiking been treating you?"

"Quite well," Hector responded with a grin. "It's a case of exploring while you still have mobility."

James Smith nodded, then couldn't resist asking, "Hector, was what you told me on the phone true?"

Hector produced his phone, scrutinizing Charlie's number before replying hesitantly, "It's true. You'll find out once you make this call."

Just as he finished speaking, two security guards approached, one inquiring, "Do you have an appointment? If not, we can't permit extended stays. Please step outside the perimeter."

Hector requested, "Give me a moment. I need to make a call, my friend secured an appointment with President Weaver."

The security guard seemed surprised, noting with skepticism, "An appointment with Mr. Weaver? That seems improbable. Mr. Weaver hasn't been entertaining visitors lately. Most who claimed to visit him were asked to leave."

Hector responded, "I understand the situation. Can I place a call first?"

The security guard assented, "You can make a call, but don't take too long. We have regulations here too."

"Alright," Hector agreed, aware of the security guard's constraints. "I'll be swift."

He then dialed the call button, contacting Charlie.

With the phone ringing, Hector felt his heartbeat quicken in anticipation.

Despite his internal trust in Charlie, a kernel of doubt lingered. He feared no response or a swift hang-up.

At this moment, Charlie was en route to Poole, answering an incoming call from an unfamiliar number, a guess already forming about its origin.

As he connected, Hector's breathless voice filled the line, "Bobby, it's me, Hector. I've reached Oracle Pharmaceutical..."

Charlie's voice carried reassurance, "Perfect, you're there. Wait a moment, I'll call Liam."

Hector expressed gratitude, his voice tinged with apology, "Sorry for the trouble, Bobby..."

Charlie chuckled, responding casually, "No problem."

With that, he hung up with Hector and dialed Liam.

After two rings, Liam's voice came through, "Master Wade, what can I do for you?"

Charlie queried, "Liam, has the final quota allocation for the Healing Salve Pill clinical trials been settled?"

Liam promptly informed, "Master Wade, there's one remaining batch, comprising 50 slots. Evaluations are underway. The final rankings should be out in two days, thus finalizing the last batch's recipients."

"Understood," Charlie acknowledged with a slight smile, then added, "I'm calling because I'd like to add three more slots. Remember, three additional slots. I'm not asking for a redistribution from the existing batch of fifty, I want you to increase the total to fifty-three."

Liam queried, "Master Wade, are you suggesting that the last batch should comprise fifty-three individuals?"

Charlie affirmed, "Exactly."

Liam inquired further, "Master Wade, with the existing medicine doses, adding three more slots will lead to imbalances. If we dilute the medicine of the initial fifty, can we distribute it evenly among fifty-three?"

"No need," Charlie replied with casual assurance. "Once you admit the additional three, follow the regular treatment regimen. I'll supply the missing medicine when I return in a couple of days. Don't worry about adjusting doses. Focus on treating them properly. As for the rest, I'll take care of it when I return."

Liam hadn't anticipated this approach and sought clarification, "Understood, Master Wade."

Charlie continued, "And one more thing. The trio is outside Oracle Pharmaceutical. Fetch them personally. It's a couple named Hector and Shiann, along with an old acquaintance of yours, James Smith from the US FDA."

## Chapter 5477

"James Smith?" Liam's astonishment was so palpable he couldn't help but blurt out, "Master Wade, forgive my impertinence, but why have you decided to reveal yourself now?"

Charlie grinned, his eyes gleaming with mischief. "Consider it an activation of the hidden act of serendipity. I did mention before that if one truly engages in selfless charity, Oracle Pharmaceutical might offer an opportunity. Though perhaps the word 'might' should be omitted."

Liam didn't hesitate, his determination resolute. "Fear not, Master Wade, I shall make the necessary arrangements."

Charlie continued, his voice rich with intrigue. "The other two are a young couple whose paths unexpectedly crossed mine. Destiny seems to have intertwined our fates. Let's orchestrate their inclusion as well."

With a commanding tone, Charlie instructed, "Once the patients are admitted, ensure that James Smith's son is placed in the children's room, away from the others. Their identities must remain concealed, especially from those two. But do find a moment to privately disclose this truth to James Smith. I'm inclined to believe he shouldn't be aware of the benefactor behind this chance."

Liam nodded, a spark of understanding in his eyes. "I comprehend your wishes, Master Wade. I shall find an opportune time to reveal the truth to him in person."

Charlie spoke again, his tone contemplative. "And speaking of revelations, when you meet James Smith this time, enlighten him about my true identity."

Liam's surprise was evident. "Directly? Master Wade, are you contemplating James Smith's cooperation?"

Charlie's voice dripped with purpose. "Not merely cooperation, but integration. I aim to welcome him into the Oracle Pharmaceutical fold."

Charlie added with conviction, "James Smith has stepped away from the FDA, making his return to his former directorial position a distant dream. Yet, his years within those walls have woven intricate connections throughout the North American pharmaceutical industry. His insight into the rules and strategies governing the FDA and the broader field is invaluable. With him on our side, Oracle Pharmaceutical can swiftly establish dominance in the North American market."

Liam's enthusiasm matched Charlie's resolve. "Absolutely, Master Wade. James Smith is the ideal contender to spearhead our North American endeavors."

Charlie nodded, his vision clear. "Once you meet him, convey my identity and the stakes involved. Let him know that I anticipate a meeting upon my return to Aurous Hill."

Liam vowed earnestly, "Rest assured, Master Wade, I will ensure the message is conveyed."

Beyond the gates, Hector, Shiann and James Smith waited anxiously, their hearts tethered to hope. The uncertainty gnawed at them, for the veracity of this opportunity held their lives in its balance.

The security guard's patience waned and he stepped forward with authority. "Your grace period has expired. Kindly step back from the boundary and wait."

Hector's plea was hurried. "Just a moment longer, someone will come to receive us soon."

Firm but polite, the security guard persisted, "Time's up. You may wait beyond the line. When your liaison arrives, they'll escort you in."

Resignedly, Hector conceded, "Very well, we shall wait here for now."

A voice intervened, turning heads toward its source. "Captain Lance, these individuals are my guests. Allow them in."

It was Liam Weaver, the General Manager of Oracle Pharmaceutical.

Captain Lance, the security guard, shifted his demeanor, now deferential. "Mr. Weaver, since they are your guests, kindly they should register their details."

The protocol of Oracle Pharmaceutical dictated that external visitors be greeted by internal staff, with the attendant recording of visitor data for unified oversight. Not even Liam was exempt from this process.

Liam waved and addressed the trio, his smile warm. "I recognize Mr. Smith and the others. Please present your IDs for registration."

Hector's gratitude was palpable as he introduced himself, his voice tinged with emotion. "Greetings, Mr. Weaver. I am Hector, Hector Kluben and this is Shiann Robins. We are Warren's friends. He mentioned your name to us."

Liam's smile was reassuring. "Indeed, he contacted me. Rest assured, I will honor his commitment."

Emotion surged within Hector and Shiann, tears of joy glistening in their eyes. Oracle Pharmaceutical's stature in the minds of cancer patients eclipsed even that of the Mayo Clinic. Acceptance into their clinical trials heralded a step away from the precipice.

James Smith, clutching his child, was overcome. Gratitude mingled with humility as he addressed Liam, his voice breaking, "Mr. Weaver, thank you for this lifeline. Please pardon my initial skepticism and ignorance."

Liam's reply was gentle yet firm. "Mr. Smith, it is not to me that your gratitude should be directed. We will speak more later."

With that, he collected the documents from Hector and Shiann, registering their information. "Please follow me. I shall guide you to your respective arrangements."

Their steps were light with anticipation as they followed Liam into Oracle Pharmaceutical.

Passing through the gates, they beheld several commercial vehicles. Liam gestured toward one. "Oracle Pharmaceutical is currently utilizing a number of these vehicles. Our upcoming clinical trial center is approximately 1.5 kilometers from here. We shall proceed by car."

Their enthusiasm uncontainable, they followed Liam to the designated vehicle.

As the engine purred to life, Liam commenced his briefing. "Having received your call, I've already arranged your trial spaces. Note that trials are segregated for adults and minors. Mr. Hector and Miss Shiann will be placed within the adult group. Each room houses four patients, without provision for family visitation. Essential care will be provided by our nursing team."

The couple exchanged glances, their shared presence providing solace.

Liam then turned to James. "Mr. Smith, the child group consists of two patients per room. Accompaniment by a family member is permissible for minor patients. Either you or your spouse may stay with him. However, only one individual at a time, with an official pass for changeovers, is allowed."

James Smith's resolve was unwavering. "Understood. I will be with my son."

## Chapter 5478

Liam swiftly orchestrated the arrangement for the trio, weaving their paths with precision.

In the adult ward, Hector and Shiann were strategically positioned, while young Jimmy was ensconced within the children's domain.

Guided by the hospital staff's skilled hands, James Smith navigated the labyrinthine hospital procedures for his son. The entire process unfolded like a wistful reverie.



Just moments ago, he had mused with his wife about the bleak prospect of sending their child abroad for hospice care, resigned to the idea that his son would be excluded from Oracle Pharmaceutical's clinical trial. But life was capricious, and fate's kaleidoscope had spun abruptly.

A whirlwind of transformation had seized the stage, leaving James in wonderment. The orchestrator behind this improbable twist remained shrouded in mystery. Could it truly be the enigmatic Mr. Clark, whom Hector had chanced upon? The intrigue nestled in James's thoughts.

In his daze, the phone buzzed to life, Jenny's call jolted him back to reality.

Regaining his composure, James answered the call, Jenny's fervor palpable even through the phone. "James, what's happening on your end?"

With fervent eagerness, James relayed, "Jenny, it's true! Our Jimmy has been accepted. The admission procedures are complete. Oracle Pharmaceutical has a dedicated clinical trial facility, and both Jimmy and I are here!"

Jenny's excitement was uncontainable, her disbelief echoing in her voice. "Really? James, this isn't some joke, right? You're not pulling my leg?"

James's response was unwavering, "My love, I wouldn't toy with such momentous news. Jimmy's already settled in, undergoing examination by their doctors."

And as he spoke, his enthusiasm contagious, James chimed in, "Wait a minute, I'll send you a video to see for yourself."

Before Jenny could react, the line disconnected, a video call replacing the voice channel. Jenny hastily reciprocated the call, her eyes soon captivated by the screen's unfolding scene.

James was a blur of motion as he dashed through the hospital corridors, his pace eventually leading him back to Jimmy's haven. The door swung open to reveal a pair of doctors scrutinizing the comatose figure on the bed.

These doctors hailed from prestigious cancer hospitals, their mission being not treatment, but meticulous observation. Their expertise was to trace the nuanced effects of Oracle Healing Salve Pills on each patient, chronicling the metamorphosis from ailment to recovery.

One doctor turned to James, a question punctuating the air, "Are you Mr. Smith, Jimmy's father?"

A swift nod followed, accompanied by James's earnest query, "Yes, Doctor. How's my boy doing?"

"In the present, Jimmy's condition is delicate," the doctor replied gravely. "While he exhibits markers of terminal cancer, his life isn't in immediate jeopardy. We've drawn his blood and sent it for comprehensive cancer index analysis. We'll shortly arrange a PET-CT scan to map out the cancer's progression."

James's impatience brimmed, a single question dominating his mind, "Doctor, when can my son begin the Oracle Reconstitution Pills?"

To James, the pills held his son's lifeline, rendering blood work and scans as mere preamble.

The doctor recognized the urgency in James's plea, offering insight into their methodology. "Fret not. The initial blood draw and CT scan serve as baselines for comparison. Before he commenced the treatment, we had already collected blood samples. He's scheduled for a CT scan after taking two pills."

James was taken aback, "Two at once?"

"Yes," the doctor affirmed, expounding, "Given Jimmy's critical state, we aim for rapid consolidation across five days. During this period, he'll receive two pills daily. This regimen is intended to expedite his physical recovery. Following these initial five days, we'll transition to a daily dose for ongoing stability until his discharge."

A weight lifted from James's heart. Five days of double-dosed pills could deliver significant relief, perhaps even prompt his son's return to the realm of the upright.

With gratitude painted across his expression, James voiced his thanks, echoed by the doctor's congenial smile. "You're most welcome. It's our duty."

As the clock ticked, the doctor's gaze shifted. "It's nearly time for the CT scan. Mr. Smith, please accompany us to the Radiology Department."

"Of course," James concurred, steering his son's bed in tandem with the doctor toward the awaiting destination.

Within the Radiology Department's realm, a nurse introduced contrast into Jimmy's still form, initiating his journey through the CT apparatus. The process was time-consuming, intensifying James's anxiety. It wasn't the scan results that drove his impatience, it was the anticipation of his son receiving today's life saving pill.

Amid his pacing, Liam emerged, entering the scene from the entrance. James's eyes locked onto him, urgency and gratitude threaded into his tone. "Mr. Weaver, I can't thank you enough."

Liam's smile was warm, his words both humble and profound. "Mr. Smith, this opportunity arose due to Jimmy's qualities, not my intervention. Oracle's experimental criteria are stringent and objective. I merely follow the rules."

Curiosity gripping him, James inquired, "May I ask who paved the way for Jimmy?"

Liam's smile deepened, "The one who bends the rules is the one who writes them. Only they possess the power to extend an exception. In this case, that power resides solely with our founder, Mr. Wade."

The revelation was startling, James's voice a mix of astonishment and realization, "Mr. Wade... is he the head of Oracle Pharmaceutical?"

Liam nodded affirmatively, "Indeed. But to clarify, Mr. Wade isn't merely our CEO, he's the Mastermind behind it all."

"Mr. Wade." James's surprise was palpable. "He's the Mastermind behind Oracle Pharmaceutical?"

Liam elaborated, "Incidentally, the 'Mr. Clark' whom Hector encountered was none other than Mr. Wade. Due to personal reasons, he concealed his identity from them. With both Hector and your son sharing their battles with cancer, Mr. Wade orchestrated an exception. Afterward, he thought of you and Jimmy, propelling Hector to seek you out."

Realization unfurled in James's eyes, his astonishment growing. "So Mr. Wade is Oracle Pharmaceutical's founder... No wonder I saw him at the Joules research center that day. And even Ms. Joules treated him with such respect."

The weight of his own assumptions crashed down. Jimmy's saving grace was not circumstantial, but rather orchestrated by the benevolent hand of Charlie, an act of grace that left James brimming with gratitude.

The need to express it was overpowering, James's voice tinged with emotion. "Mr. Weaver, is there a chance I could meet Mr. Wade."

## Chapter 5479

James Smith couldn't believe that Charlie was not only a high-ranking executive at Oracle Pharmaceutical, but also the savior who had given his son a chance to survive during the darkest moment. Recalling his own desperation, he overflowed with gratitude for Charlie.

Liam grinned and reassured, "Mr. Smith, fret not. Mr. Wade informed me he's currently away. You should be by your son's side during his treatment. Once the child's condition improves, when he returns to Aurous Hill, I'll set up a meeting for you."

James Smith expressed his gratitude, "Please, convey my deepest thanks to Mr. Wade. Our family owes him immeasurable gratitude!"

Liam nodded, his gaze on James Smith. He sensed the genuine gratitude for Charlie in the man and knew he'd become a steadfast ally in the future.

Oracle Pharmaceuticals cultural ethos and fundamental tenets differed vastly from those of the West. To successfully introduce Oracle's medications to North America and Europe, a deep understanding of the Western medical landscape was requisite. Those poised to excel in this endeavor were individuals deeply entrenched within the system, equipped with considerable resources to spearhead the charge.

James Smith was the *crème de la crème* of prospects, far from just one among them.

Liam Weaver, Oracle Pharmaceutical's CEO, harbored great hope for James Smith's eventual involvement in the team. However, he also sensed the necessity for Charlie's direct involvement. A smile danced on his lips as he disclosed, "Rest assured, Mr. Smith, I'll communicate your gratitude to Mr. Wade."

Glancing at the time, he continued, "Mr. Smith, I've pressing matters at hand. Don't burden yourself too much. We've meticulously arranged the child's subsequent treatment. Cancer patients who enter Oracle Pharmaceutical's doors through clinical trials invariably witness recovery. Your worries are unnecessary. Stay with your child, steadfast and patient, until recovery and discharge."

Liam's words infused James Smith with unshakable confidence. Nodding earnestly, he watched Liam depart, his heart brimming with thankfulness.

About ten minutes later, the electric doors glided open outside the CT room and a group of doctors emerged, gently propelling a still-unconscious Jimmy.

With great anticipation, James Smith rushed to evaluate his son's condition, only to discover that the effects of the treatment had not yet taken hold, since his son had not yet received the Healing Salve Pill.

At the moment, two white-coated doctors approached swiftly, one bearing a compact case, the other brandishing a professional portable video camera.

Standing by Jimmy's side, the doctor with the case inquired, "Is the patient ready for medication?"

The doctor who'd liaised with James Smith nodded, confirming, "All patient assessments are complete; you may proceed."

Nodding, the doctor affirmed, "Very well, we shall begin."

A shared glance passed between him and his camera-wielding colleague before he addressed the device, "Recording commences."

The camera's record button was promptly engaged. The doctor opened the case, revealing neat rows of spherical pill boxes, each smaller than a golf ball. Two were plucked, rotated before the camera, while he remarked, "Patient E33 of group E, Jimmy Smith, aged twelve. First day of admission, two Healing Salve Pills, ebar 1905 and ebar 1906. Packaging intact, no anomalies detected. Family, please verify."

The two Healing Salve Pills were handed to James Smith. "Mr. Smith, inspect these pills. If no issues arise, we'll proceed with administering them."

James Smith's surprise lingered as he asked, "Such strict procedures for medication?"

Affirming, the doctor explained, "The black market has seen a surge in purchases of Healing Salve Pills at exorbitant rates. From now till discharge, our specialists personally oversee every dose, preventing potential illicit distribution driven by profit. "

Comprehension dawned upon James Smith. Oracle Healing Salve Pill was the sole cancer-curing remedy, its rarity fuelling high demand. Without stringent checks, both Oracle Pharmaceutical employees and patients families might exploit this golden opportunity. Safeguarding the administration was paramount.

Methodically, James Smith scrutinized the exterior of the Healing Salve Pills. Satisfied, he returned them to the doctor, entreating, "Proceed and administer them to my child."

With a nod, the doctor opened one pill under the scrutiny of the camera and all present. Another doctor gently pried Jimmy's mouth open, slipping the pill inside. The procedure was repeated for the second pill.

The Healing Salve Pills dissolved swiftly within Jimmy's mouth. Besides cancer treatment, the medicine bolstered vitality, lending his ashen visage a rosy hue.

Minutes later, Jimmy stirred. His eyes fluttered open to a novel environment, strangers encircling him. Disoriented, his anxiety surfaced.

James Smith's reassuring presence eased his distress. "Jimmy, you're awake! Your dad's here!"

Recognition settled upon Jimmy, and the tension in his frame dissipated. He voiced his query, "Dad, where am I? And where's Mom?"

"Oracle Pharmaceuticals. Your mother and sister await word outside. Learning of your awakening would fill them with joy," James affirmed, the weight of his sacrifice tangible in his words.

Though young, Jimmy understood the Oracle Pill held his only salvation. It was the reason his father had journeyed thousands of miles to deliver it to him from the United States. Still, he knew he didn't meet Oracle Healing Salve Pill's clinical trial criteria. In fact, Oracle Pharmaceutical had already rejected him.

Hence, Jimmy's astonishment was palpable when his father mentioned Oracle Pharmaceutical.

Concerned, James Smith inquired, "Jimmy, how do you feel now? Better than before?"

Jimmy nodded faintly, admitting, "Much better. The pain's eased a lot. Dad, am I going to make it?"

Tears brimming, James Smith gripped his hand and pledged, "You're going to be just fine, Jimmy. You'll live a long and happy life. Dad guarantees it."

The nearby doctor intervened, "Mr. Smith, your son's condition is improving. Let's transfer him back to the ward for rest. He should continue the medication tomorrow to further strengthen his constitution. In a matter of days, he'll be up and about."

"Fantastic!" James Smith beamed, overwhelmed. "Thank you, doctor! Thank you!"

## Chapter 5480

As Jimmy's condition gradually improved, Charlie and Maria embarked on a drive to Poole, nestled in the southern province.

This city, christened after the tea it holds dear, boasts a history spanning over a millennium. It's not merely a post station along the ancient tea-horse road but also a significant hub for producing Pu-erh tea.

When Maria left Dali, she carried her parents ashes with her, finding their final resting place in Poole. It had been more than three centuries since Maria last set foot here, and the city's former appearance eluded her memory.

According to her recollection, she had ferried her parents ashes from Dali and when they were buried in Poole, she discreetly selected a feng shui spot for their graves. There were no coffins or gravestones, she had left them bare.

Locating two columbariums from over three centuries ago seemed a near-impossible task.

Thankfully, Maria recalled that her parents lay beneath a tea-covered hill known as Erlang Mountain.

What's more, she distinctly remembered interring the ashes beneath the largest, most opulent Pu'er tea tree on that very mountain.

Oddly, the current map offered no trace of Mount Erlang within the Poole area.

Charlie maneuvered the car into Poole, where he and Maria enlisted the aid of a few local historians. After thorough probing, they unearthed that indeed, a mountain named Erlang Mountain once existed on the outskirts of Poole. Yet, it has undergone numerous name changes over the past decades.

One shift occurred during the Republic of China era, followed by another after liberation. The 1960s saw a name change driven by political movements and in the late 1970s, another was made after those movements subsided.

More than two decades ago, the last renaming took place, christening it Celestial Mountain.

This shift was triggered by the sale of the entire tea-producing area to a company from the southern province. The rebranding paved the way for Celestial Mountain to evolve into their flagship tea garden.

Today, Celestial Group's tea gained acclaim both domestically and internationally, specializing in medium to high-end Pu'er tea cakes. Their Cloud series, originating from Celestial Mountain, stood as the pinnacle product, often priced at no less than 10,000 dollars per piece.

Armed with knowledge about Erlang Mountain's current state, Charlie found Celestial Mountain's location on his GPS. Having developed it for over two decades, the road infrastructure proved sound and they reached the mountain's base from the city in just 40 minutes.

Having not returned to China for several years, Maria's apprehension about Erlang Mountain's possible deterioration was palpable. The sight of Celestial Mountain put her at ease, for the landscape hadn't altered in three centuries.

Although Erlang Mountain bore a new name, it being a tea-producing region ensured that it hadn't undergone drastic transformation. The most notable addition was a cement road that led from the national highway directly to the mountain's base. At the foothills, Celestial Group had also established a tea processing factory on the flatland.

As the car approached, the lush green hill came into sharper focus.

Maria, seated beside Charlie, found herself brimming with excitement.

Observing her fidgeting hands, Charlie inquired, "Are you certain your parents are buried on this mountain?"

"Absolutely," Maria affirmed. "Despite the name change, the mountain's appearance hasn't altered. It must be here. My only concern is whether that Pu'er tea tree remains. If it's gone, locating the site might prove challenging."

Charlie reassured, "Fear not. I'll stand by your side until we find it."

Gratitude shone in Maria's eyes as she responded, "If that Pu'er tea tree still stands, it should be about a thousand years old. It's the largest and most vibrant tea tree here."

A wistful sigh escaped her lips, "Yet, it pales in comparison to the Mother of Pu'er with her ten-thousand-year lifespan near Heaven Lake."

Charlie chuckled, "A thousand years or ten thousand years, generations beyond count."

Drawing nearer, the details of Erlang Mountain came into clearer view.

Maria pointed excitedly at a particularly dense tea tree near the peak and exclaimed, "If I'm not mistaken, my parents ashes rest beneath that tree!"

Raising his gaze, Charlie confirmed her words. There stood an imposing tree near the mountain's crest. The entire hillside was adorned with uniform-sized tea trees, each standing around a meter tall. Considering Maria's account of the Mother of Pu'er, Charlie wasn't surprised. While this tea tree couldn't rival the ancient one, it bore its own history and unique aura.

However, their approach revealed an unexpected challenge.

Celestial Group had enclosed several mountains, including Erlang Mountain, with sturdy iron fences, surrounding them with surveillance cameras and layers of barbed wire.

Although a cement road led to the mountain's base, a park gate blocked it a kilometer away. Charlie parked the car at the gate.

A vigilant security guard emerged from a nearby sentry box and hastened to their car window, demanding, "What's your purpose?"

Charlie answered calmly, "I'd like to speak with someone in charge about a potential cooperation. Could you please inform them?"

With Erlang Mountain under Celestial Group's ownership, accessing it had become quite intricate for outsiders. Additionally, Charlie sought to honor Maria's parents, so clandestine entry felt inappropriate.

Curious, the security guard inquired, "Your surname? Your affiliation? We haven't received any visitor notice today."

Charlie smiled and said, "I hail from East China. I've heard of Celestial Group's reputation and its long-standing presence. I'm interested in the tea business, so I decided to pay a visit."

Shaking his head, the guard apologized, "I'm afraid you can't enter without an appointment. Even city officials need to notify in advance."

Curious, Charlie probed, "Why such strict management? It feels almost like a top-secret facility."

The guard replied solemnly, "Let me enlighten you. Celestial Mountain's entire tea area is a trade secret, especially the Tea King tree at its summit. In recent years, ill-intentioned people have coveted it. Just last month, we caught two Japanese intruders trying to steal Tea King's branches for grafting. They were nabbed before they could approach and were given a sound thrashing. Since then, we've increased security. There's a sentry every few steps around Tea King, monitored 24/7 with a nylon net, barring even birds."

Charlie couldn't help but worry.



Under such strict surveillance, a direct approach seemed implausible. Every inch was monitored and security was watertight.

Judging that Charlie didn't bear any ill intentions, the guard offered advice, "Young man, I'll tell you this, our place is a tea plantation and basic processing facility. The real decision-makers don't work here. If you're genuinely interested in cooperation, head to Poole's urban area. The Celestial Building houses our headquarters. Arrange a meeting there first. If they deem it suitable to visit here, they'll notify us."

On Maria's side, her expression grew disheartened. Still, she tugged at Charlie's clothes and suggested, "Why don't we approach The Celestial Group in Poole first?"

Recognizing the complexity, Charlie nodded in agreement, telling the guard, "We'll head into town first, Thank you for your guidance."

The guard waved them off, saying, "No problem. Take your time."

Returning to the car, Charlie mused aloud, "It seems like a trip back to Poole is unavoidable. However, given the distance, we'd arrive after business hours. We might have to wait until tomorrow."

Maria sighed, "It's quite troublesome. Besides, I'm concerned about Morgana's influence in the province. Despite her silence, she could easily keep tabs on any developments here."

Charlie, calm and collected, waved away the concern. "Don't worry. It's a straightforward business deal and we'll involve the Banks Family. They're our safest option."

He dialed Zara's number, intending to leverage the Banks Family's influence. After all, Celestial Group's sale would be much smoother under their aegis.

As the call connected, Zara's respectful voice came through, "Mr. Wade, how may I assist you?"

Charlie cut to the chase, "Zara, I need your help with a matter."

An eager Zara responded, "Of course, Mr. Wade. Just let me know."

"Acquire Celestial Group for me. The sooner, the better." Charlie said without beating around the bush.

## Chapter 5481

The Celestial Group, a renowned player in the southern province, remained obscure beyond the realms of the tea aficionados due to its vertically-oriented industry niche.

Zara, however, had never encountered the name Celestial Group before. Her approach to tasks was nothing short of direct and capable, without a hint of sloppiness. Sitting at her desk, pen

and paper in hand, she responded over the phone, "Mr. Wade, I'm curious to know how you envision my collaboration."

Charlie's voice crackled on the line, "I'd like you to utilize the Banks Family name and converse with their top brass. In case they wonder why you, the dignified lady of the Banks Family and its proprietor, are intrigued by a tea company, you can spin them a tale. Tell them that your grandfather developed an insatiable fondness for their tea in Madagascar. As such, your plan involves purchasing the company and you can maintain a tone of opulent determination."

"Understood!" Zara agreed without the slightest hesitation, "Mr. Wade, give me ten minutes. I'll swiftly delve into the company's fundamentals, draft an acquisition outline and touch base with you."

Charlie's voice assured, "Alright, I'll be awaiting your updates."

Closing the conversation, Zara initiated a search for Celestial Group's particulars on her computer. After gathering useful insights, she ruminated for a moment before reconnecting with Charlie.

Charlie's voice greeted her on the other end, "How have you grasped this, Miss Banks?"

Respectfully, Zara reported, "Mr. Wade, I've acquainted myself with their situation. This is a private joint-stock enterprise, with Eric Robbs, the founder, holding the reins. It began as his personal venture, but following the economic opening-up in the 1980s, their tea venture soared. They gradually climbed the ladder to become one of the top five tea companies in the southern province."

"Ten years ago, Celestial Group underwent a shareholding reform, with intentions to go public via a main board IPO. Despite receiving guidance from the China Securities Regulatory Commission, the IPO endeavor ultimately faltered due to modest profit margins and earnings instability. A few years back, they made an attempt on the New Third Board, but pulled back due to a low valuation, poor liquidity, and unmet financing aspirations."

"At its pinnacle on the third board, their market value barely surpassed a billion. Their financial reports during that period weren't impressive. Declines in the tea market hit their profits, and reduced tea production impacted their earnings and market value. Additionally, a local powerhouse in the southern province tea sector, Jenkins Groups, also faced challenges. Although they managed a backdoor listing, their market value skyrocketed initially but then dwindled. Currently, it hasn't even reached two billion. Thus, the financial prospects for the tea industry are rather dim."

"In the case of Celestial Group, while they do manage to amass millions in profits annually, these gains fail to ignite much excitement in the capital market. Their repeated failures at IPO

suggest that their founder, Eric Robbs, aspires to cash out by going public, but the inability to do so has kept him stuck."

"Should he hold onto this path, he might collect thirty to forty million dollars a year, if fortune favors him. Less fortunate outcomes could leave him with zero profits or even losses. Over the next two decades, his net income from Celestial Group would likely not exceed six hundred million."

"Should we offer him a deal, guaranteeing that he walks away with over six hundred million in a single move, sans gambling clauses or waiting periods? Under such circumstances, there's no reason for him to decline our acquisition. Calculated based on his 78.5% stake, we're looking at a total bid of roughly seven hundred and sixty million."

"Of course, the final price will depend on our conversation with Eric Robbs. Through dialogue, we can analyze his current mindset and expectations. If all goes well, and assuming a secure stance, I suggest setting the psychological price at eight hundred million. However, I'll quote him six hundred million initially, aiming to secure him within a range of seven hundred to seven hundred and fifty million."

"Do you have full confidence in this?" Charlie inquired.

"Absolutely," Zara responded confidently, "Entrepreneurs like Eric Robbs have been in the real business for decades. They earn every bit of their money with meticulous care. Overnight riches in business are a rarity for them. If he seeks to cash out via an IPO, the odds are against him. Given his sizable consumption habits, he likely hopes someone can just swoop in, take the burden off his shoulders and retire gracefully with a substantial sum. Being the controlling shareholder, he's well placed to make such a move."

Pleased with her assessment, Charlie remarked, "I'm currently in Poole. How long do you think it'll take you to close this deal? If it's imminent, I'll wait for two days. Otherwise, I'll proceed with other matters and return after you've concluded."

Checking the time, Zara offered, "Sunset is approaching here and you should have over an hour left in Poole. If all goes well, I should secure this agreement before the sun sets on your end. Once he nods, I'll immediately transfer a deposit of one hundred million dollars. Our legal team can then proceed with the transfer formalities overnight."

"One hour?" Charlie responded with a smile, "That sounds perfect. I'll await your update. Once he agrees and you've made the deposit, let him know you will dispatch two consultants to his base on Celestial Mountain for preliminary inspection. Make sure he's informed and prepared for their arrival!"

## Chapter 5482

Amidst the urban expanse of Poole, the iconic Celestial building stood in all its glory.

Eric Robbins, a seasoned sixty-two-year-old, had just concluded a distributor meeting. With a dinner gathering scheduled for the evening at a local hotel, he could do nothing but rest briefly in his office before mustering enough energy to attend the event later on.

However, today had left Eric Robbins feeling somewhat disheartened.

Lately, distributors had grown increasingly influential within the company. In the past, Eric Robbins's group exerted pressure on these distributors, assessing their performance and coercing them into consistent product purchases and elevated inventory. Moreover, the group often deducted their sales as year-end rebates, fostering a culture of diligence and obedience.

Yet, the advent of e-commerce had tilted the balance against established brands, leaving them without their once-dominant leverage.

Especially in the realm of opaquely fast-moving consumer goods like alcohol and tea, new brands proliferated daily, boasting of being the next Moutai or tea monarch.

These new entrants excelled at packaging and narrative, presenting themselves more adeptly than traditional companies. They mastered the art of sourcing a better-packaged product from an OEM manufacturer, slapping a 500 dollar price tag on it online, then garnishing it with a slew of offline promotions. Eventually, the product reached consumers, shipped in sets of 51, with the actual cost barely exceeding five dollars.

With tea costing a mere five dollars, advertising and traffic buying expense at ten dollars and logistics costs of two or three dollars, the overall expenditure remained modest.

Selling 51 units to consumers ensured a profit margin of at least thirty.

Tea sales followed a similar pattern.

Eric Robbins offered ordinary mass-grade Pu'er tea at a hundred dollars per cake, with each cake weighing over 300 grams. However, marketing maestros divided up similar quality tea into five-gram parcels, weaving a custom tale around it. Such a presentation fetched a price of fifty dollars.

Some competitors might lack packaging finesse but they thrived in price wars. They bundled tea meant for kindling and brought it to market, simultaneously overwhelming and overwhelming the consumer. If one cake proved insufficient, they'd throw in another, then another, until they reached a sum of five big cakes, supplemented by three small ones for travel. A tea pot might even be thrown in, all for the grand price of a hundred.

This facade of marginal profits and booming sales concealed a deeper deceit. Five big cakes and three small cakes amounted to roughly twenty dollars in costs. The remaining seventy dollars translated into profit. Allocating over twenty dollars to the online influencers who hawked these products still left a significant gain.

Eric Robbins understood his competitors' tactics all too well. He comprehended their success was built upon these strategies, which simultaneously eroded their target market and profits. However, he couldn't bring himself to embrace such crude marketing methods.

These rivals didn't possess a true understanding or appreciation for tea; they simply saw it as a brief conduit to profit. They manipulated tea to acquire consumers, then switched gears to health products, cycling through the same techniques for a fresh audience.

In Eric Robbins's words, these individuals lacked reverence for tea. His stance differed.

A lifelong passion for tea transformed him into a prominent and prosperous local entrepreneur. His affection for tea was genuine.

To him, making money rested upon the foundation of crafting excellent tea. Only earnings earned in this manner could bring genuine contentment.

His love and reverence for the craft, however, had failed to yield an overnight fortune.

In stark contrast, these fraudsters raked in millions overnight. On some occasions, seeing them prosper left Eric Robbins doubting the tea industry's future. He feared most sectors would fall prey to bad money driving out the good.

To avoid becoming bad money, one had to outpace it.

For Eric Robbins, cashing out seemed an attractive option, an escape from the market's turmoil. But cashing out wasn't as simple as it sounded.

Much like a corner bodega, where the proprietor toils tirelessly for a year, managing to accumulate hundreds of thousands, yet yearns to sell the place for ten times its earnings, a profit that encompasses the next decade. Such dreams remain distant, vanishing like smoke.

Today's distributor meeting only deepened Eric Robbins's despondency.

Agents were demanding reduced purchase discounts, dropping from an original 50% to 40%. They even threatened to minimize or halt their purchases altogether if the company didn't comply.

The discount may seem minor, but imagine paying forty for something worth fifty, it equates to a 20% price drop.

Normally, Eric Robbins would have erupted in anger before the agents. This time, however, he controlled his temper, promising the distributors he'd earnestly deliberate their proposal.

Within his office, Eric Robbins held back his frustration, muttering curses at the dealers under his breath, these individuals who burned bridges when they crossed rivers.

In the midst of his thoughts, a knock sounded on his door. Anthony Robbins, his son, sought entry, asking, "Dad, can I come in?"

After shutting the door cautiously, he spoke with a righteous fury, "Dad! These dealers are utterly useless. They're offering a 40% discount, practically robbing us blind!"

Eric Robbins offered a helpless smile, replying, "There's no way around it. Today's attendees are agents from prefecture-level cities and above. They're practically our patrons now and offending them is out of the question. Furthermore, they've banded together. There's no way I can afford to ruffle their feathers."

Anthony Robbins's displeasure was evident, "Why? They're just raising prices and extorting money. If I were in your shoes, I'd have already given them a piece of my mind!"

Eric Robbins sighed, "That tactic might have worked in the past, but taking a step back and offering a few concessions often smoothed things over. However, this year's circumstances are different..."

With a heavy heart, Eric Robbins mumbled his frustration, "In your generation's lingo, the Pu'er tea market this year is a nightmare! To make matters worse, not only are the major traditional tea companies slashing prices to reduce market rates, but even these upstart brands are utilizing marketing and pricing strategies to continually infringe upon our traditional tea market space. They claim their tea is just as good, and they manage to sell it for less than half of our price. What can you do when they can't distinguish between the quality of a 1 dollar tea and a 10,000 dollar tea right in front of them?"

With a touch of melancholy, Anthony Robbins added, "More people are drinking tea now, but very few genuinely understand it. Tea leaves that cost 1 dollar per kilogram and tea leaves that cost 10,000 dollars per kilogram, many can't tell the difference."

Eric Robbins nodded knowingly, sighing once more, "To make matters worse, even the bottled beverage industry is entering the tea market with full force. While oolong and green tea never posed a major threat, now Puer tea is in their sights."

## Chapter 5483

"Brewing Puer tea is like coaxing a dragon from a slumber, an intricate dance of heat and time. Yet now, folks take the easy path, bottling its essence. Not just for sipping from a cap twist, but chilled, over ice. While our patrons, they're confined to the embrace of boiling water at a steadfast hundred degrees. And then there's the matter of aging tea leaves, the passage of time as their warmth dwindles, their flavors shift, how do we hope to keep up with them?"

A heavy sigh escaped Anthony Robbins's lips, his words laden with melancholy. "Father, I've long harbored the inkling that our venture isn't a stroll through cherry blossoms. The competition, it's a maelstrom, an unrelenting tempest. Moreover, our roots run deep in the southern province, where resources and connections flourish, but the industry remains an infant, held back by inconvenient pathways. Even if we transition to dry tea beverages, like the neighbor with their famous old godmother sauce, we'd find the journey fraught with hardship. Back when e-commerce was in its infancy, they reigned as sauce sovereigns. Yet, as the digital tide surged, they found themselves adrift, left in the wake of a new era..."

Anthony Robbins's gaze grew steadfast as he dared to voice the unthinkable. "Father, hear me out. Perhaps, it's time we search for a new home, a worthy spot to dock our company. You've toiled your life away, now, it's the age to bask in life's twilight."

Eric Robbins's response was a dismissive snort, and he inquired sharply, "A new home, you say? This home of ours, is that not good enough? Do you think it's a breeze to find a place anew? If you've lost faith in the industry, how can you expect others to believe? Ours is the most precarious of times. Bigger fish are trimming sails, budget slashes all around. No one's keen on spending a dime to scoop us up, or those fledgling brands smaller in size. The market's plagued by fly-by-night schemes, hoping today's seeds will blossom by morrow's sun, and no soul's willing to burden themselves with a load like ours. Even the small fry view us as mere contractors, why, you ask? The cost of our tea's creation is steep! Without integrity, they'd probably hawk decayed leaves as 'tea', as if our artistry's worth nothing."

A somber exhale escaped Anthony Robbins's lips, his query tinged with defeat. "Is there no window to cash out, then?"

Eric Robbins's nod was laden with sagely agreement. "Indeed, the current financial standings of our conglomerate, factoring in market evaluation and net assets, should tally to around 1.12 billion. Let's not entertain steep premiums, a reduction to 800 million seems reasonable, doesn't it? Yet, none approach with such an offer in sight. The market grants no quarter for premium bids. Set the price beneath 500 million, maybe someone might nibble. Descend below 400 million, likelihood surges."

His gaze held, Eric Robbins continued, "But 400 million is a paltry sum. A fair valuation would be no less than 700 million."

"700 million?" A disbelieving curl of the lips from Anthony Robbins. "You've time for such fancies, yet no plan to tame the dealers tonight? They clamor for a 40% carve, a concession I can't stomach. See if you can't sweet-talk them to a 4.50 split after a few swigs. Time to seal the pact."

Anthony Robbins couldn't help but interject, "Father, a dream must find room to breathe. Who's to say it can't come true?"

A gruff impatience from Eric Robbins, "If someone forks over 700 million, I'll streak thrice down main street!"

The spark of hope in Anthony Robbins's eyes waned as he processed this audacious statement. A sale beneath a hundred million yuan, perhaps? The magnitude of his father's pessimism was more daunting than he'd anticipated.

As both father and son stewed in their collective melancholy, an explosive crash sounded through the door. In strode the secretary, a tornado of enthusiasm. Before steadying himself, he blurted, "Chairman Robbins, Chairman Robbins, big news!"

Eric Robbins, a seething cauldron of irritation, flared at the intrusion. "Since when did you stop knocking? What kind of manners is this?"

Disregarding the reprimand, the secretary gulped and burst forth, "Chairman, the Banks Group... the very titan of our country! Their secretary just rang. They've voiced interest in acquisition talks!"

## Chapter 5484

Eric Robbins and his son, Anthony Robbins, were left utterly dumbfounded by the words of the secretary.

Naturally, the name "Banks Group" was not foreign to them. The Banks Family held a formidable stature in China, a towering titan amidst the national landscape. Meanwhile, Celestial Group, despite its moniker, hadn't even managed to secure a spot on the GEM. In the southern province, it was a mere whisper, and even in Poole City, its fame barely managed to tiptoe above the mundane.

Never in their wildest dreams did Eric Robbins and his son, Anthony Robbins, fathom the notion that the mighty Banks Group would cast an eye their way for acquisition.

The gap between their standings was as vast as the ocean, Banks Group's assets towered over Celestial Group's by a magnitude that defied comparison, dwarfing them by a thousandfold.



Overwhelmed, Eric Robbins voiced his disbelief to the secretary, "Are you playing a jest on me? The Banks Group wants to discuss acquisition with us?"

The secretary, her expression a mix of earnestness and vexation, responded, "Chairman, I wouldn't toy with such matters."

She recounted her conversation on the phone, adding, "They proposed a video conference at your convenience if you're genuinely interested."

Father and son exchanged glances and Eric Robbins asked his son, "Anthony, what do you think?"

Anthony Robbins didn't hesitate to put forth his perspective, "Scam, it's got to be a telephone hoax! Damn these tricksters up in northern Myanmar! Their art of deception becomes disturbingly professional! It used to be posing as executives to bilk accountants into transferring money, but now they're playing M&A games, for crying out loud! Why can't these crooks get their narrative straight? Pretending to be an acquisition? Not a bad idea, but their execution's off. If they had posed as a company from Jenkins Groups sector, we might've bitten the bait by 30 to 50 percent. But posing as the Banks Group? They're treating us like imbeciles! Why not just pretend to be Elon Musk?"

Eric Robbins was taken aback, his son's logic hitting home.

Rubbing his temples, he begrudgingly instructed the secretary, "Call the authorities."

The secretary, embarrassed, muttered, "Chairman, they didn't specify any wrongdoing. They just disclosed their identity and suggested a video conference if you're interested. How would I explain this to the police?"

Eric Robbins waved his hand dismissively, "Then let it be!"

The secretary, stranded by his indecision, pondered her options.

Observing her lingering, Eric Robbins snapped, "Still here? Attend to your duties, woman!"

Coughing twice, the secretary stammered, "Uh, Chairman... forgive me, but this doesn't quite resemble a scam. Their demeanor was remarkably professional. Those con artists from northern Myanmar can hardly string together a coherent sentence, let alone sound professional. This feels different, sir."

Summoning her courage, she suggested, "Considering the offer's a video conference, perhaps we should give it a shot? We'll just present ourselves, no harm in that. We won't fall prey and we won't be made a fool."

Inquiry volleyed back to her, "Tell me, then. Why, in the world, would the Banks Group want to acquire us? What's your perspective as the board secretary?"

With an aggrieved nod, she admitted, "I get it. I serve as your board secretary. You're the Chairman. And yes, I understand. But let's face it, sir, compared to the Banks Group's stature, I'm little more than a scribbler, and you're a scribbler too. But the Banks Group? That's a different ballgame. Their secretary would be a professional, catering to the Banks Family's scion and the group's chairperson."

She emphasized, "Think about it, when would a Banks Group secretary reach out to us for an acquisition chat? The Banks Group's chairperson must have some grand design. It's like the pages of a well-thought-out script. So, Chairman, do you really believe the Banks Group's chairperson suddenly decided to acquire us?"

She grumbled softly, "But we could afford the loss from just watching the video..."

"Damn it..." Eric Robbins, frustrated with her persistence, vented, "Are you the board secretary, or am I? Your job is to follow my orders, not to debate with me. If I command, you execute. Otherwise, I'll send you off to tend tea leaves in the mountains! I'm not in the mood, and you're here jabbering!"

A light bulb went off in the secretary's head, "Chairman, why not vent your frustration directly in the video conference? Let loose a tirade, it might make you feel better!"

Eric Robbins, his patience thinning, grinned and agreed, "Fine! Make the arrangements. I'm intent on making those swindlers eat an electric shock today!"

The secretary sprang to action, "Just give me a moment. I'll dial them back!"

Mobile phone in hand, she exited the room.

Anthony Robbins stretched and muttered, "I've studied the northern Burmese trickster's repertoire. They might guide us into a Tencent or Netease meeting. Then they'd seize control of the computer remotely. Or they could dupe us into borrowing money against gold and white gold bars, only to swipe the funds discreetly. Dad, wait and see, it's likely part of their playbook."

Eric Robbins huffed, "I'm just bloody furious. Their methods don't matter. My goal is to scold them to smithereens."

Moments later, the secretary returned in haste, "Chairman, they've agreed to the video conference. They've directed us to the Banks Group's official website. There's a video conferencing function, just input the code and we'll join the session."

"Uh..." Anthony Robbins was taken aback, questioning, "Did I hear correctly? They want us to start a video conference on the Banks Group's official website?"

"Indeed." The secretary affirmed, "I'm perplexed too. Does the Banks Group even offer video conferencing services?"

"Damn..." Anthony Robbins hurried to his father's desk, searched for the Banks Group's official site and upon verifying, clicked the link to the website.

Once on the site, a section titled "Contact Us" revealed an entrance to online video conferencing. Anthony Robbins clicked again and a prompt popped up, "Enter the conference code to join the session."

Beneath the input field, a series of guidelines was listed, "This video conferencing function exclusively serves as the official channel for online negotiations between the Banks Group and collaborative entities. It's only accessible via Banks Group personnel. If you lack a conference code, kindly consult your liaison."

Anthony Robbins scratched his head and mumbled, "Dad, this... this seems... legitimate. No scam would dare fake the official Banks Group website..."

Eric Robbins inquired, astonished, "Really? Is the Banks Group actually interested in acquiring us? But why?"

Anthony Robbins blurted out, "Dad, even the mighty Banks Group makes miscalculations!"

Musing aloud, Eric Robbins grumbled, "Who the hell knows?"

He sighed and chided, "And here you are, prattling on."

The secretary interjected urgently, "Chairman, enter the code and join the meeting room. They're awaiting us!"

"Right!" Eric Robbins snapped back to attention, punching in the code.

In an instant, the webpage transitioned to the virtual meeting room.

Across the video, a poised young woman sat at her desk. As Eric Robbins logged in, she spoke, "Mr. Robbins, I'm Delores Scott, the Chairman's Secretary at Banks Group."

Outside the camera's view, Anthony Robbins tapped away on his phone, soon confirming Delores Scott's identity through a quick online search. It turned out she was the same woman in the video.

Overwhelmed with excitement, he couldn't contain himself, whispering to his father, "Dad! It's for real! It's real!"

## Chapter 5485

Eric Robbins could tell that the person on the other end of the line was undoubtedly authentic.

The temperament and demeanor exuding from the figure on the screen were just too genuine to be contrived.

His heart raced suddenly, a flush of flattery coloring his cheeks. Restlessness pricked at him.

Delores Scott, Zara's board secretary, glanced at the silence that had hung on Eric Robbins for an extended pause. Seizing the moment, she tentatively inquired, "Mr. Robbins, can you hear me?"

Eric Robbins jolted back to reality, his words tumbling out, "Oh, I can hear you! Miss Riley, right? Hi, hello!"

Delores Scott nodded, a gentle smile touching her lips. "Indeed, Mr. Robbins. I'll get straight to the point. We're here to discuss a matter of great importance. Our President, Miss Banks, is interested in acquiring Celestial Group. I'd like to know if you're open to the idea of selling. If so, we can delve into the specifics of the acquisition."

Eric Robbins's eyes gleamed with a starry hope, a glimmer in the night sky. His deepest desire was for a successor to take over, someone to spare him from selling off his life's work for mere pittance. He yearned to relish his twilight years in peace. Yet here, right before him, was the unexpected spectacle, the most prominent business dynasty in the country expressing their intention to buy his legacy. It was a surreal dream he would never have dared to weave.

So, he put away his usual airs of reluctance and answered, "I am indeed open to the idea of selling. The terms, however, depend on the offer the Banks Group puts forward."

Delores Scott's smile remained affable as she responded, "Since you're willing to consider, I'll arrange for our Chairman, Miss. Banks, to speak with you personally about the price. I'll have her join the call shortly. We can then hash out the details and I'll make sure to document the meeting."

Eric Robbins's voice rang with awe, "Ms. Banks? You mean your Chairman, right?"

"Exactly," Delores Scott confirmed. "Yes, our Chairman, Ms. Zara Banks."

Eric Robbins's heart swelled with a mix of honor and disbelief. What divine favor had bestowed upon his modest tea enterprise such a rare honor? How had he, a humble tea vendor, captured the attention of the matriarch of the Banks Family?

Just as his heart raced with excitement, Zara's video feed popped up on the screen, her poised voice resonating, "Mr. Robbins, I'm Zara, Chairman of the Banks Group."

Eric Robbins's voice quivered with exhilaration, "H... Hello, Miss Banks... I've long admired your name..."

Zara's response was warm, her words succinct, "No need for such formality, Mr. Robbins. I trust Delores has briefed you. Let's get straight to the point. I propose to purchase the majority of your shares. If the price is right, my legal team will conduct due diligence tomorrow and we can proceed with the contract."

Surprise and curiosity tangled in Eric Robbins's tone, "Is there such a hurry, Miss Banks? To finalize a contract by tomorrow?"

Zara's laughter was light, her tone businesslike, "Indeed, Mr. Robbins. Dealing in sums of this magnitude requires swift action. Before the day gets away from us, let's address your terms. If we can reach an agreement, I'd like our lawyers to commence the review promptly. Time is a precious commodity."

Zara's concise words concealed key messages, revealing a glimpse into her intentions.

First, the deal was within the realm of hundreds of millions. Her bid wouldn't exceed a billion, extinguishing any notions of exorbitant demands. Second, her demeanor held an assurance that Eric Robbins's hesitations were understood, though without a hint of negativity.

Intrigued, Eric Robbins inquired, "Why would a conglomerate like the Banks Group be interested in a modest company like ours?"

Zara's voice carried a trace of amusement, "Mr. Robbins, don't underestimate yourself. A company's size isn't the sole measure of its value. As for why the Banks Group seeks Celestial Group, my grandfather is particularly fond of Pu'er tea. Given ongoing food safety concerns in the industry, as his granddaughter, I wish to ensure he enjoys the safest Pu'er tea possible. The investment isn't significant, making it a worthwhile endeavor."

Eric Robbins was dumbstruck. He mused, "Truly a titan of industry! If a man fancies a cup of tea, does he amass a company just to savor it? Or does wealth pour in like a gust of wind?"

A different thought crossed his mind, tempering his amazement. "The Bank's Family's assets exceed a trillion dollars. A few hundred million for a Pu'er tea company is but a pittance, akin to

spending seven or eight dollars on a bottle of drink. If one truly cherishes tea, a hundred dollars or more isn't an exorbitant price."

Buoyed by this realization, he praised, "Miss Banks, your filial devotion shines. Celestial Group holds a prominent place in the world of Pu'er tea. Our extensive tea plantations in the south guarantee environmentally friendly cultivation."

Zara acknowledged, "Indeed, I dispatched Pu'er tea experts there recently and I've reached out to similar enterprises. My intention is to swiftly finalize a choice from among these candidates."

Seriousness replaced her smile, "Mr. Robbins, let's discuss the price directly. What is your desired figure?"

Eric Robbins paused before stating, "Miss Banks, my asking price... is one billion."

His voice was steadier than his confidence, yet he maintained a composed façade.

Zara's eyes remained fixed, unmoving, on her end of the video feed. When the figure 'one billion' reached her ears, she simply smiled, her response calm, "Mr. Robbins, I've reviewed your financial records and past revenues. While one billion isn't excessive, it's not a feasible price for an outright sale. However, I propose purchasing a 10% stake, valued at one billion dollars, with an investment of 100 million. This way, you retain control of your company and continue its management, with a performance agreement in place."

Here, Zara shifted her focus, "Alternatively, I can offer to buy all your assets outright. No performance agreements, no worries about the company's future development. I'll offer 700 million for everything, on the condition that you close the books from this moment and your legal team avoids signing with any third parties. My audit team will take over for evaluation. If this arrangement suits you, I can transfer 100 million to your account as a gesture of intent. We'll formalize it with an agreement. Backing out will cost 100 million in compensation. However, if this doesn't align with your expectations, we can conclude our negotiations here. You're free to explore other options, as am I."

## Chapter 5486

Zara's words sent shivers down Eric Robbins's spine, his anxiety casting a cold shadow over him.

Doubt didn't find a foothold within him. Zara's revelations were too genuine to dismiss. He struggled to fathom any reason why Zara, a figure in her own right, would hold particular interest in his Celestial Group's ambitions.

In his estimation, missing out on Zara's acquisition could mean being trapped in this role until he was seventy, a position he would then pass onto his son. What would his empire look like at seventy? He couldn't fathom that either. The future of his business, and the entire family's destiny, remained uncertain.

Yet, one thing remained clear, Selling the company now, pocketing 700 million in cash and factoring in a 20% equity transfer tax, he would still be left with a sum of 560 million.

A substantial sum that could secure a prosperous life for himself and his descendants.

With this in mind, he clenched his teeth, made a resolute decision, and swiftly declared, "Miss Banks, your sincerity has won me over. No more haggling, I'll meet your price of 700 million!"

Zara nodded, a satisfied smile gracing her lips. She spoke up, saying, "Excellent. I'll have our financial manager draft a letter of intent right away. Once that's done, our experts will visit your tea base. You must instruct your on-site manager to cease all work immediately. You'll then have full authority to cooperate with our team."

"Absolutely," Eric Robbins replied without a second thought. "Miss Banks, rest assured. Once the deposit is received, I'll follow your every directive."

Effectively, the Celestial Group was no longer his to steer. If Zara called for a work stoppage, he would ensure it was obeyed.

Zara's confidence was unwavering. "In that case, I'll have my financial team prepare the necessary documentation and we'll transfer the payment promptly."

A note of flattery colored Eric Robbins's voice. "Of course, Miss Banks. Give me a moment, I'll sort this out right away."

Swiftly, Eric Robbins's secretary forwarded the group's account details to Zara's representative. Within minutes, the substantial sum of 100 million dollars was electronically transferred into Celestial Group's coffers.

The moment the money registered, jubilation surged through Eric Robbins and his son. A celebratory champagne bottle beckoned.

Meanwhile, Zara provided Eric Robbins with Charlie's license plate number, instructing him to rendezvous at the entrance.

Eric Robbins, invested in his new business prospects, phoned his base's manager personally. He imparted the news of the company's sale to Banks Group and with specificity, mentioned the imminent visit from Banks representative.

The base manager, initially startled, regained composure. Being an employee, his primary concern lay in his salary stability. The employer's name didn't matter much, as long as he retained his job. The looming key, however, was to win Banks Group's satisfaction to avoid layoffs under new management.

Thus, he cut his workday short and awaited Banks emissary at the base's gate.

Simultaneously, Charlie received Zara's call. "Mr. Wade, I trust you're well. Celestial Group has officially welcomed my 'intention money,' marking the completion of our acquisition. The grand total comes to a cool 700 million yuan. Oh and I've already nudged him to alert the base's director and shared your license plate number. Just make your way over and he'll be there, ready to follow your lead."

Impressed by Zara's seamless efficiency, Charlie admired her skills. He commented, "Your efficiency is truly remarkable, Miss Banks. It's rare to see someone handle matters with such precision."

To which, Zara's reply came swiftly, "Mr. Wade, there's no need for such formalities. Consider the deposit a small token of my appreciation. Your acceptance is my honor."

Charlie acknowledged her sentiment, smiling. "Now I owe you a favor."

Zara's elation knew no bounds. A phrase from a man of Charlie's stature meant more than any sum of money.

At this juncture, Charlie kept his words brief. He mentioned his pressing business at Celestial Group's tea base and excusing himself, ended the call.

Engine rumbling, Charlie reversed course and embarked on his journey. Beside him, Maria radiated joy, tears welling up. "Thank you..."

Charlie waved it off, humility in his demeanor. "No need for thanks, especially considering you saved my life. Oh yes, given your fondness for Pu'er tea, you're welcome to manage the company. If you find it inconvenient, I'll arrange a team to oversee operations on your behalf. You can visit whenever you please, preserving your father's memory by cultivating the tea you desire."

Moved, Maria responded, "To have the chance to honor my parents is gratitude enough. I'd never wish for your property."

Charlie's tone lightened. "Tea isn't my forte. I'd rather give the company to capable hands than let it languish. If it doesn't work out, I'll shut down operations. That way, your parents peace won't be disturbed."



Maria dissuaded him, her eyes firm. "My father cherished simplicity. He wouldn't wish for destruction in his name."

Charlie grinned, accepting her resolve. "Then it's settled. The company's destiny is yours to shape."

With a pause, Maria concurred, wiping her tears away, a smile gracing her lips. "When we return to Aurous Hill, I'll strategize how to run this company. I'm well-versed in Pu'er tea and with my family's experience, I can make a meaningful contribution."

Charlie recalled Maria's connection to Pu'er tea, recognizing her deep understanding. Her guidance had been sought even by veterans in their twilight years, attesting to her expertise.

Maria sighed, "The Pu'er tea that's been rare in my life, the one to ignite my family's passion, this tree... I think it's from those branches that the farmers cut off from the mother Pu'er. But in the process of transplanting and engrafting, it has diluted the essence across generations. It's doubtful the mother Pu'er's true essence can ever be replicated..."

## Chapter 5487

Charlie might not be an expert on tea, but he sure understands the unique sentiment that Maria holds for the Mother of Pu'er.

In his view, the Mother of Pu'er stands as a sort of spiritual nourishment for Maria, a centuries-spanning emotional anchor. And so, he grasps why Maria's heart longs to recapture the essence of the Mother of Pu'er's flavor.

With conviction, he tells Maria, "Once Erlang Mountain transitions, you can make this place your nurturing ground. With your expertise, let's see if we can nurture even finer tea strains."

Maria, with a wry smile, voices her concerns, "Breeding's a vexing endeavor. My grasp of technological techniques is limited, and as for artificial propagation, it's a decade-long commitment at the very least."

Charlie breathes a sigh of relief, replying, "No worries. Should you succeed, your achievement will be cherished by tea enthusiasts. And even if cultivation evades us, remember, the taste of the Mother of Pu'er has etched itself forever in your memory."

Maria's lips curve into a smile, "Young Master speaks the truth."

As they talk, Charlie steers them back to Celestial Group's production hub nestled at the foot of Erlang Mountain.

Though the factory has shuttered for the day, by the entrance stands a mild-mannered, bespectacled middle-aged man - his anxious demeanor betrays the waiting game. Standing alongside him is the security guard who previously had a tête-à-tête with Charlie.

The security guard gazes at the middle-aged man with skepticism and queries, "Director Garza, who's got you waiting? Is the chairman headed here for an inspection?"

Addressed as Director Garza, the middle-aged man is Nicolas Garza, the man running this processing plant.

Taken aback by the security guard's words, Nicolas Garza motions dismissively, "I'm anticipating the arrival of two esteemed guests."

Eric Robbins, of course, is a man of significance to Nicolas Garza.

Within Celestial Group, two principal ventures reign supreme, the crafting and commerce of Pu'er tea. While Eric oversees the latter, Nicolas Garza shoulders the responsibility for the former. A few years past, in his quest for Nicolas Garza's loyalty, Eric granted him three shares.

Now, the Banks Group aims to acquire Celestial Group in its entirety. This deal means that not only can Eric divest himself, but all equity holders have a chance to cash in on this transaction. That said, Eric already shared with Nicolas Garza the impending buyout by Banks Group. Needless to say, Nicolas Garza's spirits are soaring.

Years of partnership with Eric Robbins have led to this point. Nicolas Garza had hoped for Celestial Group to go public - a moment that would afford him the golden opportunity to cash out his shares.

Alas, Celestial Group's repeated failure to go public dashed his hopes time and again. The years passed with Nicolas Garza no longer viewing these three shares as a tangible asset. In the end, their worth was confined to paper and ink, registered in the company's name.

Why did he stay on? Eric's generous treatment.

Though the long-term prospects of the shares dimmed, the steady income from his wages and bonuses was satisfactory enough for Nicolas Garza.

Today, the pendulum of fortune swung wildly as Nicolas Garza learned of Banks Group's staggering 700-million-dollar buyout offer. Waves of elation nearly swept him off his feet. Those three shares, pegged at 700 million, translated into a pre-tax valuation of 21 million. Once the 20% personal income tax was deducted, his net gain would still surpass 16 million. It was like hitting the lottery fourfold. A windfall, making him rich overnight!

However, his euphoria's life was short-lived. Eric Robbins revealed that the tea experts dispatched by Banks Group were en route. Nicolas Garza's task? Treat these experts with reverence, sparing no effort to please them.

Without hesitation, Nicolas Garza hastened to the factory gates, prepared to provide exemplary service to the "experts."

When Charlie pulls up in his car, Nicolas Garza's eyes capture the license plate, confirming the arrival of the two experts. His readiness to greet them is palpable.

As the security guard approaches, he halts Charlie's car, chiding, "Young man, why the return? Didn't I emphasize that an appointment with the group is a must?"

Nicolas Garza is taken aback by the conversation's nature. That the security guard is familiar with Charlie strikes him as odd.

He intervenes, guiding the security guard aside before addressing Charlie, "Greetings! Are you the experts from the Banks Group?"

Charlie points to Maria beside him and jests, "I might not be, but this lady's the real expert."

With a baffled expression, the security guard inquires, "When did you two become experts?"

Nicolas Garza interjects hurriedly, "Jack, you must extend due courtesy to a VIP. They're here to oversee the inspection. Open the gates without delay."

Though bewildered, the security guard follows the factory manager's lead, allowing the entrance to open.

Turning to Charlie, Nicolas Garza introduces himself, "I'm Nicolas Garza, the plant's director. Matters large and small here fall under my domain. Whatever you need to investigate today, I'll wholeheartedly assist. There'll be no secrets."

Charlie nods, advising, "Great. Arrange a place for us to sit and chat."

Nicolas Garza blurts, "No problem at all! Follow me to my office."

Charlie inquires, "Shall you drive, Director Garza?"

With a quick nod, Nicolas Garza confirms, "Absolutely."

"Excellent," Charlie replied, "Lead the way."

"Understood!" Nicolas Garza hopped into a sleek black Audi, guiding Charlie to the factory's office building.

Once there, he warmly invites Charlie and Maria into his office. As he brews tea, he queries, "So, what brings you two here this late?"

Charlie casually questioned, "I heard your tea base is centered around Mount Erlang, right?"

"Exactly," Nicolas Garza affirms, launching into an explanation, "Our base is intricately tied to the Mount Erlang mother tree. These privately contracted tea hills around us? They're all linked to this place. However, the tea quality and yield dwindled due to poor cultivation and management. Now, things are turning around with improved cultivation, and the tea's quality is on the rise."

Maria's ears perked up upon hearing "mother tree." Eagerly, she inquires, "Director Garza, can you explain the significance of the Erlang Mountain Pu'er tea's mother plant?"

Nicolas Garza elaborated, "Esteemed guests, on Erlang Mountain, there's a Pu'er tea tree that's over a thousand years old. The tea trees spanning tens of miles around it have all been grafted from this ancient one. When we took over, we initiated breeding efforts, and the foundation of our endeavors was this thousand-year-old Pu'er tea tree."

Maria's excitement was palpable, "Director Garza, would it be possible for you to show us this thousand-year-old tea tree? Such a sight could greatly influence our future breeding direction."

Nicolas Garza readily agreed, "If you're interested, then let's go right away!"

He paused, then added, "Though, it's getting dark outside. By the time we reach the mountain, it might be nightfall. Would the darkness hinder your assessment of the tea tree?"

Maria didn't hesitate, asserting, "No, the view will tell us everything we need to know!"

## Chapter 5488

Maria found herself perpetually puzzled by Charlie's unexpected kindness. Ever since the night when the ring transported Charlie to the upper courtyard of Zilian Villa, his demeanor towards her had shifted drastically.

Not only had he generously shared his elixirs, but he also extended the gift of longevity to Marius and others. He even set aside all his pressing matters to journey alongside her to the southern province.

As for Maria, her intention was simply to visit Erlang Mountain to honor her parents. But Charlie's actions surpassed all expectations – he purchased the Celestial Group, the proprietors

of Erlang Mountain. What's more, he planned extensive renovations, ensuring a future where he could pay his respects to his parents.

For Maria, who possessed vast wealth herself, Charlie's actions transcended monetary value. His attentiveness and careful consideration indicated a deep concern for her. Her instincts didn't mislead her – Charlie held a genuine regard for her. The debt of a life saved was only one factor; the more time they spent together, the more Charlie's sympathy for her three centuries of turmoil grew.

This empathy, she realized, could easily morph into something deeper – an aching distress.

Maria, who had lived for over three centuries, cherished one essential desire when it came to honoring her parents. She yearned to stand beside their resting place, touch the earth with her own hands, and exchange silent words with them. She craved closure, a chance to reconcile and to make up for the lost years.

After kneeling on the ground, sharing her heart with her parents for around half an hour, Maria stood up. A knowing smile graced her lips as she gazed down at the darkened earth beneath her feet. She turned to Charlie and said, "My Lord, let's depart."

"It's growing late," Charlie replied, his voice soft and considerate. "If you wish to spend more time here with your parents, perhaps we should rest for the night. I can set up the tent from the car."

"Don't trouble yourself," Maria responded, her gratitude evident. "While I'd love to linger with my parents, I can't bear to have you accompany me through nights of eating and sleeping outdoors. Besides, my lineage remains nameless. How could I impose the duty of guarding ancestral spirits upon you? I'll return here alone in due time."

Charlie dismissed her hesitation. "No need for formality. I don't require rest, and the setting matters little. It's late, and we should find lodging or perhaps camp in Poole City."

Maria suddenly recalled something and looked at Charlie with anticipation. "Master, Banna isn't far from here. How about we proceed to Banna and rest by the Heaven Lake? It's the same lake where Pucha's mother survived a catastrophe!"

Seeing her eagerness, Charlie readily agreed. "Let's head to Banna then. It's just a two-hour drive."

With that settled, Charlie continued, "In the meantime, let the Celestial Group staff continue tending to matters here for the next couple of days. Once Miss Banks completes the acquisition, we'll have her gradually replace the current personnel with her own trustworthy individuals. We can also arrange for security from Dragon Temple."

Deep gratitude emanated from Maria's eyes. "I entrust everything to your guidance."

And so, the two of them descended Mount Erlang together.

Awaiting them at the mountain's base was Nicolas Garza. Spotting their return, he hurriedly approached. "Are you both satisfied with our tea plantation?"

"With time, the quality has matured considerably," Maria replied, her tone appreciative. "Please maintain strict security over the next couple of days. Until the acquisition is finalized, the tea trees must remain unharmed."

Nicolas Garza's assurance was swift. "You can trust us. We've had two security teams alternating in 24-hour shifts. The tea trees' safety is guaranteed."

Turning to Charlie, Maria said, "Master, we should be on our way."

Nicolas Garza was taken aback. "The night is upon us. You needn't rush. Let us provide you with a feast in the cafeteria, and I can arrange lodging for you both."

Grateful but firm, Charlie declined. "We appreciate your kindness, Director Garza, but we must press on. Time is of the essence."

With their decision made, Nicolas Garza nodded in understanding. "Very well, I won't detain you further."

Farewells exchanged, Charlie and Maria departed from the Celestial Group's premises in the dark, their destination set for Banna.

Finding Maria's childhood haven, Heaven Lake, was no challenge. A sole authentic lake graced Banna – Heaven Lake. The spot was easily spotted on a map, yet it remained less popular among tourists, given Banna's focus on its lush forests and nature reserves. The region development lagged behind, hampered further by the presence of ancient villages yet to be relocated.

After a two-hour drive, Charlie and Maria arrived at the foot of Heaven Lake. A winding road allowed them to ascend the mountainside and reach villages on the lake's north bank. This single path served as the villages' sole connection to the outside world.

Banna's elevated plateau offered an average altitude of 1,500 meters. As they drove higher, they quickly reached 2,000 meters. The sky sparkled with stars, a breathtaking sight.

Maria was elated, her window rolled down as she leaned out, beholding the stars. She resembled a young girl returning to her countryside haven after summer vacation. Her contented smile was contagious, mirroring the joy on her face.

Charlie, too, was captivated by the view. City life had only revealed a handful of stars each night, far from the dazzling array above. Here, countless stars adorned the sky, the Milky Way's grandeur on full display.

Through a series of sharp turns, Heaven Lake emerged between mountains. Its waters sparkled like a mirror, reflecting the entire sky of stars. The tranquil night burst into life. While it was nighttime, the scene before Charlie felt familiar, resembling Maria's old paintings – similar in appearance and charm.

Maria's joy was evident as she gazed at the lake's outline. She turned to Charlie and mused, "The lake hasn't changed at all. Its outline remains untouched, just like before."

"Can you locate Pu'er mother's spot?" Charlie inquired.

"Of course," Maria affirmed. She pointed towards a section of the lake's north bank. "Pu'er mother's spot lies on the northern shore, around a hundred feet from the water's edge."

As they conversed, darkness descended rapidly.

Startled, they both gazed upwards. Dark clouds materialized, enveloping much of Heaven Lake.

Charlie couldn't help but remark, "Doesn't it seem like someone's doing this?"

Maria's brows furrowed as she concentrated on the dark clouds thickening above. She began counting on her fingers and muttered, "It seems like someone... could it be..."

## Chapter 5489

Charlie, noting Maria's horrified expression and her unusual nervousness in speech, wasted no time in inquiring, "Miss Clark, what do you make of this sight?"

Maria responded, "This... the dark clouds appear chaotic and unruly, yet there's an underlying complexity, a sense of... it feels akin to the Zen Gua image from the Book of Changes' sixty-four hexagrams."

"Zen Gua?" Charlie exclaimed, clearly taken aback, "Could this cloud actually represent a hexagram?"

Maria nodded, murmuring, "Zen hexagrams are always intricate. Ancient wisdom tells us that when upheaval arrives, laughter turns bitter; a shocking event in the distant field, no mourning for the blade. When this hexagram appears, it's a merging of the main hexagram and the guest hexagram, signifying an unforeseen, earth-shattering occurrence."

Charlie, now even more astounded, inquired, "Who possesses the ability to divine from the sky's clouds?"

Maria appeared befuddled, "I'm not sure... but... this divination seems to have commenced precisely when we arrived. I don't think it's man-made."

"Unnatural, then..." Charlie questioned, "Could it be a natural occurrence?"

Maria shook her head, saying, "The secret eludes me..."

As they spoke, the sky's dark clouds continued their rapid transformation. Thick clouds seemed to draw from an unending well in the heavens, covering the entire Heaven Lake valley in a relentless surge.

Maria frowned, gazing skyward with wide eyes, whispering to herself, "The hexagrams shift too swiftly... I... I cannot fathom it. What are you attempting to convey? Can you clarify? At all?"

The enigmatic clouds, of course, remained indifferent to her muttered queries, their transformation unabated.

Growing impatient, Maria anxiously noted, "There are so many variables, each demanding extensive comprehension. With their rapid changes, another hexagram emerges in the blink of an eye. I... I truly cannot discern..."

Hearing this, Charlie swiftly retrieved his mobile phone, activating video recording. "Miss Clark, fret not. I'll capture all these shifts. If need be, you can unravel their meaning later."

Maria shook her head, saying, "The hexagram's transformations are relentless. Everything is encapsulated within this turbulent hexagram. It hints at a plea for aid, but it does not clarify who or what seeks it. It's not something we can decipher."

Charlie pressed, "If it's not someone or something, then what exactly is seeking our help?"

Maria, her gaze locked on the ever-changing clouds, responded in a hushed tone, "I haven't quite grasped it yet... it's neither someone nor something... just... just..."

Suddenly, her eyes widened, and she exclaimed, "Ah! I see!"

Charlie urgently asked, "What have you realized?"

Tears welled up in Maria's eyes as she pointed to the barren ground beneath her feet, her excitement palpable. "I know who's asking for help!"

"It's the Mother of Pu'er!"

Charlie was perplexed, "Didn't the Mother of Pu'er fail to transcend three hundred years ago? Why would she seek our aid now? And... is she communicating through these clouds?"

Maria murmured, "I can't explain the reasoning, but I can sense it. That familiarity, it's the Mother of Pu'er..."

Charlie pondered, "Assuming you're correct, and it is indeed the Mother of Pu'er appealing through the clouds, what does she require of us? How can we assist her?"

Maria appeared equally anxious, "I don't know... all I perceive is her plea. This ceaselessly shifting hexagram suggests she's trapped within this tumultuous hexagram, unable to break free. It hasn't revealed what we must do to aid her..."



At this moment, the dark clouds had grown denser, coalescing into a sphere that descended slowly.

The air now teemed with moisture, and the atmospheric pressure was plummeting, making it difficult to breathe, akin to the prelude to a summer thunderstorm.

Maria, devoid of any supernatural abilities, found her breathing labored, her anxiety apparent as she paced restlessly. She lamented, "The hexagrams are becoming increasingly ominous, with the main hexagram gradually succumbing to Ke Gua's influence. If I can't devise a solution soon, I may not be able to save her... What do we do... what do we do..."

Charlie, perplexed by the inscrutable hexagrams, could only stand there, his worry etched across his face.

The dark clouds continued to thicken and descend, creating a potent low-pressure system above Heaven Lake. Maria's breathing grew strained, and her anxiety intensified.

Uncharacteristically, she stomped her foot in frustration and exclaimed, "The hexagrams are becoming more perilous, with the main hexagram losing ground to Ke Gua. If I can't find a solution soon, I may not be able to rescue her... What can we do..."

Charlie, still grappling with the enigmatic hexagrams, attempted to analyze the situation logically. He suggested, "Miss Clark, if she is indeed beseeching us for aid, it must be within our capabilities. But where can we assist? Should we dispel these dark clouds? That seems impossible."

Maria nodded, saying anxiously, "You're right, Young Master... we can't disperse these dark clouds. Your power can attract thunder, but it only affects tangible entities. Dark clouds are like thunder and lightning's companions; they won't be deterred by thunder. So, what options remain?"

Charlie's eyes suddenly lit up, and he blurted out, "I've got it!"

Maria urgently inquired, "What have you discovered, Young Master?"

Charlie asked her, "Did you notice anything missing amidst these dense clouds and the strong low pressure?"

Maria's eyes widened as she exclaimed, "Lightning!"

"Yes!" Charlie nodded emphatically. "Normally, such heavy clouds would have sparked thunder and lightning by now. But although these clouds are thick, there's no sign of thunder or lightning. It must have been disrupted when it created these clouds, and the only remotely relevant

magical weapon I possess is the re-forged Thunderbolt. It just so happens that these clouds lack lightning. I should give it a try!"

Maria asked with elation, "Your re-forged Thunderbolt, is it crafted from the lightning-struck wood I provided you?"

Charlie affirmed, and Maria grew even more excited. She clenched her fists, exclaiming, "The lightning-struck tree is a broken branch of the Mother of Pu'er! Perhaps, the three hundred years following her failed ascension haven't been in vain. She's been waiting for this moment."

Charlie agreed, "Yes, it's today!"

## Chapter 5490

Maria's words ignited a spark within Charlie as well! He found himself captivated by the many coincidences unfolding before him.

How had this mysterious dark cloud suddenly descended, casting an eerie shroud over them all?

Why did the dark cloud reflect the unsettling image of quivering hexagrams?

Why did it lack the usual accompaniment of thunder and lightning? And why had it chosen to manifest exactly where the Mother of Pu'er had faced her tragic failure?

Moreover, he had just harnessed the lightning-scarred wood born from the Mother's failed tribulation, birthing an entirely new thunderous power.

A confluence of enigmatic elements left him grappling for answers and only Maria's conjecture provided a solution that could reconcile all uncertainties.

With this realization unfurling within, Charlie blurted out resolutely, "Then, I shall beckon forth a tempest for the brooding skies!"

Maria's enthusiastic nod was laden with anticipation as she proclaimed, "The Mother of Pu'er and the loyal servant stand beside. A favorable chance beckons and God watches over. Your efforts are abetted!"

Drawing forth the Thunderbolt, Charlie held it in his palm, his gaze steadfast upon the deepening, thickening black cloud overhead. With a breath that concealed the suppressed aura, he invoked the incantation in his heart.

And then, with unswerving determination, Charlie cried out, "Let thunder strike forth!"

From his very being surged chi that coursed through the eight extraordinary meridians, torrentially surging into the Thunderbolt clasped in his hand.

In the span of an eye's blink, the ominous thunder sigil radiated an inner brilliance, its luster permeating outward. Most of Charlie's internal aura was drawn into the thunder sigil's embrace. Each heartbeat reverberated through Charlie's grasp, the illumination growing intenser, accompanied by the crackling of contained electricity.

At that moment, the Thunderbolt seemed transmuted, not a mere artifact but a fabled sphere of lightning seen in science fiction.

Maria had never witnessed such a spectacle. Instinctively, she apprehended the intensifying luminescence in Charlie's grasp. Unless she intervened, a perilous prospect loomed, Charlie might well be endangered by his own conjuration. She cried out on impulse, "Young Master, hurry! There is no time to delay!"

Charlie shook his head, his retort unhesitating, "The timing is beyond my control!"

Ordinarily, when Charlie invoked thunder, clouds would gather and the sky would resound with its roars, with lightning promptly descending.

Yet, this instance proved unparalleled. Charlie's invocation resounded, yet the Thunderbolt retained its lightning, amassing energy, as if arbitrating the spell's own potency.

In essence, it seemed the sigil demanded more Reiki.

Overhead, the sky's obscurity had swollen to a bottomless Void, abyssal darkness.

Maria, her disquiet evident, questioned, "Is the Thunderbolt's Master no longer the Young Master?"

Summoning his strength, Charlie raised his hand, where radiance still intensified and strained to answer, "It appears so. The Mother of Pu'er stirs. The Thunderbolt, a fragment of her essence, now answers her call. I've lost control."

Just as the words parted from his lips, the Thunderbolt's brilliance ebbed. In the next heartbeat, an imperceptibly potent energy burst forth from it, hurtling toward the dark cloud.

An inexplicable hollowness seized Charlie, his Reiki dissipating in a crescendo. Simultaneously, the inky expanse above churned with unprecedented velocity. Then, a cacophony unfurled, thunderclaps, a network of lightning reminiscent of entwined roots, fracturing the cloud into myriad fragments.

Curiously, the deafening rumbles seemed to amplify, lightning flaring with augmented brilliance and density. As though Charlie's lightning had ignited a performance, the celestial theater now escalated its thunderous spectacle.

Soon after, the cloud commenced its descent upon Heaven Lake, drawing ever nearer. Swiftly, Charlie took Maria's hand, ushering her hundreds of meters backward.

As they halted, the storm's heart positioned directly above the barren, rain-soaked terrain.

A bolt, massive as a bowl, descended from the cloud, impaling the earth.

In an instant, it was as if daylight materialized, thunder exploding like a barrage of detonated explosives.

Simultaneously, torrents poured from the sky, a deluge from the sky to earth.

Soaked to the bone, Charlie and Maria hurriedly retreated.

But Maria broke away, heedless of her drenched state, sprinting toward the spot where the Mother of Pu'er had once faltered.

Alarmed, Charlie cried out, "Wait! Stop!"

Yet, Maria was undeterred, her steps unwavering as she shouted over the storm, "I sense her!"

Charlie hurried to hold her back, urgent to keep her safe, "Who? The Pu'er mother?"

"Yes!" Maria's voice trembled, her affirmation resolute. "She is here! I think she is reborn!"

Perplexity gnawed at Charlie. How could a tea tree that had perished under tribulation centuries past be reborn? Nonetheless, thunder and lightning had ceased and the cloud receded, apparently, its mission was fulfilled.

Maria's persistence prevailed and Charlie stopped trying to hold her back.

Together, they arrived at the muddied yellow land.

The rain subsided, leaving the pair inexplicably dry, their clothes no longer drenched.

As they stood, eyes fixed upon the freshly cultivated earth, Charlie queried, "Miss Clark, where is the Pu'er's Mother?"

Maria's gaze bore into the soil beneath them, her voice filled with excitement. "This very spot!"

Pointing, she directed Charlie's attention to a spot in the ground.

Maria exclaimed, "Look!"

Charlie followed where her finger was pointing and caught sight of an unfathomable scene.

Amid the drenched soil, a tender sprout had emerged, resolutely defying the rain's onslaught. But more astonishing was its growth, a time-lapsed marvel unraveling before their eyes. A sprout emerged, stretching skyward at a pace akin to fast-motion photography. In moments, it burgeoned from minuscule to several inches, leaves unfolding in rapid succession.

New shoots joined a procession of fresh foliage burgeoning, each instant encapsulating days of growth. Abruptly, the torrential rain ceased, the dark clouds vanishing. The moon and stars reclaimed the heavens, while the earth, once awash, lay dry.

Unfathomably, all the rain on both Charlie and Maria suddenly vanished, their clothes instantly dry with no trace of there ever being rain. Everything was as it was when they first arrived.

The only difference was that in the center of the land, a small seedling with a faint fragrance of tea grew...

## Chapter 5491

In this particular moment, Maria's entire focus was captured by the seedling before her. She knelt on the ground, her unwavering gaze fixed on the delicate plant, her face animated with pure excitement.

Beside her, Charlie stood in silent awe, his eyes locked onto the emerald-green seedling. His mind felt like it had tripped over itself, struggling to make sense of what lay before him.

Charlie's mental circuitry felt like it was in overdrive, struggling to compute the extraordinary scene playing out in front of him. He couldn't fathom how, after such a torrential downpour, not a trace of rain remained. The extensive years of formal education he had undergone boiled down to a mere three words in his mind, "This is unscientific."

Or perhaps just four, "This is utterly unscientific."

He surveyed his own body, his hands exploring from scalp to chest, chest to back and back to ankles. Eventually, he even shed his shoes, delving deep within them for an extended period. But his fingertips only encountered dryness, no inkling of rain's touch.

Maria's thoughts mirrored his own.

Vivid in Charlie's memory was the image of Maria's hair damp and clinging to her cheeks in the deluge, an air of embarrassment about her. Even her trendy T-shirt had been soaked by the rain, revealing a subtle outline of her undergarments.

Yet now, not even a crease remained on her oversized T-shirt, let alone a hint of dampness.

"This is incredibly bizarre," Charlie mumbled to himself, with bewilderment lacing his words.

Moments later, he turned to Maria, questioning her once more. "Miss Clark, did it actually rain just now? Was it just my imagination?"

Maria nodded faintly, her voice gentle as she confirmed, "Young Master, there was indeed rain. A heavy rain. In all the years my family has lived here, I've never witnessed such a fierce downpour."

"Yes," Charlie concurred with a slight nod, then fixed his gaze on her intently. "But where did the rain go? How did it vanish?"

Maria shook her head in puzzlement. "I don't have an answer."

Charlie placed his hands on his hips, his confusion evident. "This defies all logic. People often say that rain leaves its mark. So, after such a downpour, where has it disappeared to? The soil isn't even damp. It's absurd..."

Maria's smile graced her lips. "Young Master, you're walking the path of cultivation, guided by the presence of an enigmatic woman who has lived nearly four centuries. Is it necessary to tether yourself to the constraints of science?"

Charlie responded gravely, "I believe that cultivation can also find its place in science, but our current level of scientific understanding hasn't grasped its principles yet. Reiki might be a higher form of energy, much like atomic energy. People once found atomic energy unbelievable when they couldn't harness it. Similarly, perhaps Reiki is an invisible energy comparable to nuclear fuel."

Maria nodded, her tone equally serious. "You're right, Young Master. Reiki could very well be as you describe, a higher-level energy yet to be comprehended by most, its principles yet to be unraveled."

Charlie pressed on, his curiosity unyielding. "But should even Reiki adhere to the laws of energy conservation? Rain poured, then ceased, yet the water remains. That's energy conservation. But where has that water gone now?"

He continued, his thoughts flowing freely. "And what of my Thunderbolt technique, which expends the reiki within me? Where did that energy go?"

Maria pointed to the seedling before her, a smile tugging at her lips. "Young master's reiki is here! Were it not for your Thunderbolt, how could the mother of Pu'er be reborn?"

Charlie's brows knitted in astonishment, his question voiced with uncertainty. "Didn't the mother of Pu'er turn to charcoal over three hundred years ago?"

Maria affirmed his memory, her tone solemn. "Indeed, that's the historical record. She was witnessed being struck by lightning and turned to ash."

Charlie's finger extended towards the sprouting seedling. "How do you account for this, then?"

Maria's response was solemn. "Though the mother of Pu'er is a tree, she's survived countless tribulations. Her strength must be unfathomable. Similarly, she might rank among the finest of trees worldwide, her abilities stretching beyond imagination."

Charlie's surprise mounted. "You mean, she saved herself during her failed tribulation?"

Maria nodded, her gaze holding his. "Have you heard of Sanshin, Young Master?"

Charlie's head shook involuntarily. "No, I haven't."

Maria delved into the ancient tales of Tao cultivation. "The legends speak of those who overcome the tribulation attaining immortality, while those who fail are obliterated. Yet another possibility exists, when the tribulation is defeated, the cultivator transforms into a loose immortal. They can rebuild their essence, their cultivation, but the chance to ascend anew is forever lost."

Charlie's eyes widened. "So, reaching the level to transcend tribulations is like a guarantee? Either you soar as an immortal or fall as a loose being? Isn't this like well-connected folks securing jobs in state enterprises? Pass the test, go to college, fail, a state job. No unemployment."

Maria's amusement was evident as she responded. "Young Master, does that analogy hold? Whether Sanshin is true or not, even if it is, the legends stress that triumphing in the tribulation's crucial moment is rare, perhaps one in a hundred. Those succeeding are but a sliver compared to the multitudes crushed by celestial thunder. In simpler terms, only two out of a hundred and two could prevail. The rest, ninety-nine, are torn apart by the heavens. It's a precarious journey."

Maria continued her analogy. "If we liken the successful ones to top university entrants, those who become immortals are akin to entering Yale or Harvard. Those who don't quite make the cut are sent into the world, unable to return to that prestigious circle. As for Sanshin, imagine those who miss top colleges by mere points. They become loose immortals, beginning anew. However, their journey starts from square one, continuing until they've reached the equivalent of high school's final year, after which they're forever held in that stage, like a student repeating the final year until they're a hundred, surrounded by ever-young classmates."

Maria took a playful tone. "Think of Sanshin as a substitute. Imagine someone who doesn't make the university cut at eighteen. They begin again in high school's final year, repeating until they're a century old, perpetually in the company of eighteen-year-olds. The rest either graduate or move on, leaving them stuck forever in their ageless classroom. It's a sensation quite akin to Sanshin."

Charlie's surprise turned to admiration. He gave Maria a hearty thumbs up. "Miss Clark, your intellect is truly remarkable. After your explanation, I think I can understand Sanshin."

Turning his attention back to the sprouting seedling, he inquired, "Are you certain this is the mother of Pu'er?"

Maria's nod was firm. "Absolutely. Her aura aligns perfectly with the mother of Pu'er's. Coupled with recent coincidences, I'm confident this is her."

Charlie nodded, his voice a hushed murmur. "So, does that mean the mother of Pu'er has become a loose immortal within this tree?"

Maria responded, her voice calm and thoughtful. "That seems a plausible interpretation, but 'loose immortal' is a concept I've only heard. I've had no opportunity to validate the theory, so it's mere conjecture."

Charlie nodded in understanding, lowering himself beside Maria. His gaze returned to the sprout, his thoughts drifting. "Ordinary as it seems, this seedling holds a profound secret. There's an undeniable allure about it."

Intrigued, he caught the aroma of tea, the fragrance irresistible. He plucked a tender leaf from the plant, bringing it to his lips. "I wonder how this extraordinary tea tastes."

Watching in distress, Maria couldn't hold back her plea. "Young Master, please don't."

Without hesitation, Charlie grasped another leaf, presenting it to her lips, his tone earnest. "Share the joy with me. You've consumed numerous tea cakes from her. You know her taste best. Compare and tell me if this leaf holds the same essence."

Maria's eyes brimmed with tears, her voice quivering. "Even if you were to eat my entire household, it would still be preferable to consuming her leaves. She's just emerged after three centuries and you've already taken two leaves. It's heartbreaking..."

Charlie relented, the leaves safely back in place. "It's alright. I've pulled these off and they can't be reattached. At most, only two leaves have been taken. No more, I promise."

Maria heaved a sigh of relief, her protest shifting into a soft grumble. "Young Master, taste it yourself. I can't bear to..."

## Chapter 5492

Charlie caught sight of Maria's charming yet resistant expression. He leaned in, urging, "I've managed to gather these, and it'd be a shame if you didn't get a taste. Plus, you're the only one who truly understands the essence of the Pu'er mother. Your intuition will guide you. You've got to take a bite to know!"

With those words, he pushed a leaf to Maria's lips and took another for himself. "Come on," he pressed, "Let's savor it together."

Maria found herself unable to resist his insistence. She cast him a fleeting glance before conceding, "Alright, I'll give it a try."

As her words trailed off, she gently parted her lips, letting them close around the tender green leaf.



Seeing her take the bite, Charlie followed suit, chewing with a sense of assurance. He had assumed this thing would carry the pleasant aroma of tea, expecting a good flavor. Yet, reality surpassed his imagination, the moment the leaf met his palate, a burst of rich, pure energy enveloped his senses!

A single bite was enough to rejuvenate his spirit.

Although the energy content wasn't substantial, its purity was extraordinary. And what's more, this was unprocessed, fresh tea. It seemed the plant itself held reiki, a phenomenon Charlie had never before encountered.

Maria, too, felt the peculiar nature of this tea. As she chewed, it wasn't astringent or bitter, but rather slightly sweet. The most astonishing part was the refreshing, comforting sensation it provided. She had tasted countless teas throughout her life, especially those produced by the Mother of Pu'er. Yet, she had never encountered a tea as miraculous as this. Baffled, she turned to Charlie, her eyes filled with wonder. "Young Master, why does this tea possess such remarkable effects? It's as if a single taste erases all fatigue instantly! I recall that the tea from Pu'er mother never had this effect..."

Charlie's expression grew solemn. "That's because this leaf contains reiki."

"Reiki?" Maria exclaimed, incredulous. "How can that be? I heard from my father that certain herbs can be used to craft spiritual elixirs. But these materials must be combined and processed by experts to manifest reiki. This leaf has just sprouted, how could it hold reiki?"

Charlie replied, "Perhaps this is why Pu'er mother failed to transcend her calamity and instead underwent rebirth after confronting the thunder's wrath. It's an experiential transformation, similar to the concept of immortals we discussed earlier. Maybe Pu'er mother has truly become a plant-based immortal."

With a wistful smile, he continued, "Apart from Pu'er mother, I've never encountered a plant inherently infused with reiki."

Maria's excitement was palpable. "I doubt she's following the path of an immortal. After all, she lacked reiki initially. Now, just as she's sprouting, she exhibits an aura. Immortals suggest limited room for growth and a lack of qualitative shifts in strength."

Charlie inquired, "What's her current state, then?"

Maria shook her head. "I can't say for certain. But I sense that she's more like a phoenix reborn from the ashes, undergoing a qualitative leap. When she endured the catastrophe three centuries ago, she must have left behind a thread of life, waiting for these years. And now, after that tempest and lightning, she's received a blessing akin to a weathered dragon's!"

A furrow creased Maria's brow. "What baffles me is how she managed to evade heavenly judgment and survive under the celestial thunder, how she secured that lifeline."

Uninterested in the specifics, Charlie gazed at the seedling before him. "If we nurture her properly, once she grows into a substantial tree, imagine the potential. Merely plucking and ingesting a few leaves daily could make you an unparalleled Master."

Maria voiced her astonishment, "Master, are you planning to take her away?"

"Absolutely!" Charlie declared. "Leaving her here would be unwise. If she falls into the wrong hands or is mishandled by an inexperienced individual, it would be a waste."

Maria hesitated. "But... she's been here for millennia. This is her origin..."

Charlie waved his hand dismissively. "No, she's been here for ten thousand years, failing the calamity each time. This locale is unsuitable for her growth. Just as a person shouldn't stumble in the same pit twice, a tree shouldn't endure multiple failures. She must change surroundings and receive proper care."

Maria inquired, "Where do you believe she'd thrive?"

Charlie contemplated. "I reckon the upper courtyard of your Zilian Mountain Villa could work. Or, we might relocate her to the edge of your hot spring, but that hinges on your expertise in nurturing Pu'er tea trees."

Maria instinctively responded, "Pu'er tea trees thrive in the Southern province's climate. Altitude, sunlight, temperature and humidity there are ideal. Aurous Hill's winters are too harsh for them."

Charlie smirked. "She isn't a standard Pu'er tea, she's Pu'er mother. Having weathered the catastrophe, she now possesses Reiki, making her exceptionally adaptable. Your other courtyard, secluded and undisturbed, is an ideal spot. She won't attract attention unless she grows too tall in a few years. If that happens, we'll consider relocating her. And if she struggles with Aurous Hill's climate, we could construct a greenhouse simulating these conditions."

Quietly, Maria ventured, "Young Master, do you intend to harvest her leaves daily?"

Charlie didn't flinch from the truth. "Certainly, isn't that the purpose of nurturing tea trees? Just as an apple tree is grown to bear fruit, a tea tree is cultivated for its leaves. Once she's taller, I can't simply let her remain as an ornamental plant."

Maria couldn't refute the logic behind his straightforward words. After a pause, she mustered her request. "If you do take her away, Young Master, I have a condition. Will you consider it?"

Charlie grinned. "Lay it out."

With utmost seriousness, Maria stipulated, "My request is that you refrain from plucking her leaves until they grow denser, until she matures. What do you say?"

Charlie nodded eagerly. "No problem. I admit her leaves are pure, though not in abundance. For effects comparable to elixirs, I'd have to harvest more. But for now, let's focus on her growth."

Maria sighed in relief. "It's feasible to transplant her, as long as her roots aren't harmed. Extra soil will prevent stress. But the journey might affect her delicacy. Despite being Pu'er mother, she's freshly emerged."

Charlie assented, "So, let's stay here. I'll arrange a plane at Banna's airport. We'll dig her out and fly directly to Aurous Hill once it's done."

Concerned, Maria inquired, "And Morgana? She's likely in Shiwan Mountain now."

Charlie waved her concern aside. "She can wait. We'll let her go for now. After she's left, we'll review her path and pinpoint her location in Shiwan Mountain."

## Chapter 5493

Maria's journey to the southern province had yielded all the anticipated results. She returned to Dali, paid her respects to her parents, and revisited Heaven Lake, the site where the previous attempt to save Pu'er mother from catastrophe had failed.

Out of the blue, Charlie announced his intention to depart, carrying no regrets in his heart.

Moreover, this visit to the south had unexpectedly borne fruit. Prior to this, she had managed to skirt Morgana's vigilant eye and, now, she had stumbled upon the rejuvenated sapling of Pu'er mother, an astonishing discovery.

But Charlie's proposition to transport the Mother of Pu'er to Aurous Hill made her apprehensive.

Initially, she had thought the reborn sapling of Pu'er mother would continue thriving here. Yet, Charlie's words touched her deeply. Throughout her life, she had been unswervingly tracing the path of failure in every endeavor, meeting only with disappointment. The previous life of Pu'er mother resembled an endless scientific experiment, a researcher striving relentlessly to unlock the secret of a room-temperature superconductor, the data so tantalizingly close to perfection but perpetually slipping through that final barrier. If she embarked on this misguided research once more, another lifetime might pass in vain, with the outcome remaining unchanged. Perhaps millennia from now, Pu'er mother would endure the heavens cycle of reincarnation and yet again falter at crossing the cataclysmic threshold. However, by then, there might not be another Charlie to facilitate her rebirth through the flames of Nirvana.

With this realization, Maria accepted Charlie's decision to bring the sapling back to Aurous Hill. She had lived alongside Pu'er mother for years, not only comprehending her deeply but also gaining extensive insights into Pu'er tea cultivation.

Nonetheless, the thought of transplanting the young, fragile sapling was worrisome, fraught with the risk of near-fatal damage.

Observing her hesitation, Charlie consoled her, "Miss Clark, don't worry. The sapling has already absorbed reiki, ensuring it won't perish easily. We shall take it back and nurture it diligently. Perhaps next year, its leaves could grace our teacups."

With a slight nod, Maria inquired, "Young Master, when will the plane arrive?"

Charlie replied, "Give me a moment; I'll make the necessary arrangements."

Promptly, he dialed Isaac Cameron's number.

Since their arrival in the southern province, they had chartered a business jet from the vest company, a mode of transportation that required careful scheduling. They hadn't predetermined their return date, so upon arrival, the plane had departed to the eastern region. Now, arranging a return flight required negotiations with the jet company.

Currently stationed in the provincial capital Bloomington, a Gulfstream business jet was being readied for dispatch. Its estimated arrival at Banna Airport was 8:30 AM at the earliest.

Isaac Cameron returned the call and apologizing for inconvenience, offered to arrange a Wade Family plane that could reach them within two hours. But Charlie dismissed the rush, acknowledging that the situation was unexpected.

"Nevertheless," Charlie continued, "Don't hurry. Coordinate the third-party business jet as planned. I'll be at the airport by 8:00 AM tomorrow."

Resolute in his decision, Charlie assured Isaac Cameron and added, "Once you've sorted the details, keep my return low-profile. This trip will be brief and I'll likely depart again within a day or two."

With understanding, Isaac Cameron consented, "Understood, Young Master."

Initially, Charlie hadn't intended to rush back to Aurous Hill. His original plan involved Morgana journeying to Shiwan Mountain while he stayed a couple more days with Maria in the southern province. The profound homesickness she felt for her childhood home after more than three centuries was something difficult for others to fathom.

Following Morgana's departure from Shiwan, he and Maria would return to Aurous Hill. There, he would enlist Keagan Myers's help in accessing the surveillance videos of Morgana's time in China, using his connections to retrace her path.

Yet, the sudden emergence of Pu'er mother compelled him to act swiftly. He dared not let her flourish in this environment, so he chose to relocate her to Aurous Hill. This also presented an opportunity to review current surveillance data and hopefully glean insights into Morgana's movements.

After Maria had safely settled Pu'er mother and compiled information on Morgana's route, they would proceed directly to Shiwan from Aurous Hill.

Perceptive as ever, Maria eavesdropped on Charlie's conversation with Isaac Cameron, deducing his next moves. Hence, she asked, "Young Master, when you journey to the mountains, can I come?"

Charlie responded, "Most of the mountains remain uninhabited. It's a risky venture for you to join me."

Maria's voice was resolute, "Do you think I'd be a burden?"

Charlie tried to reassure her, "Not at all... I simply believe that a young lady's safety could be compromised in such a perilous and wild environment."

With sincerity, Maria revealed, "If I am with you and we don't encounter Morgana, then I know you will definitely keep me safe!"

Maria leaned in, her eyes alight with determination. "You know, My father once shared a secret with me. He said that the secluded sanctuary is filled with intricate puzzles and cunning snares. Without the right knowledge, a person could wander their whole life and never stumble upon their hidden haven. Even though you're incredibly skilled, the world of formations is like quicksilver, always shifting. But if you let me tag along, who knows? Maybe I could offer some help to you."

Of course, Charlie grasped this reality intuitively.

Having Maria by his side was akin to having a super think tank at his disposal. She possessed not only brilliance but also a wealth of knowledge. While she might not untangle all the mysteries, Maria had a knack for seeing through them with a mere glance.

Still, Maria's physical strength could scarcely rival that of a featherweight. A delicate woman who seemed eternally seventeen, she was ill-suited for the untamed wilderness that was the mountains. The primeval forests there would likely test her limits.

Observing Charlie's uncertainty, Maria spoke candidly, her words brimming with sincerity. "Young Master, remember when I told you that Gideon once hinted at your parents discovering the elixir of eternal life? Well, it occurred to me that it's like my family's history intertwined with yours. My father traversed the mysteries of Shiwan. My parents embarked on a quest to decipher the riddles left behind in those mountains. So, like you, my family shares a destiny with Shiwan. I yearn to honor my father's memory by carrying his spiritual legacy to that place. If I could rediscover where he trained with Master Bazin, it would be as though his final wish found fulfillment."

## Chapter 5494

Charlie found no reason to turn down Maria's plea.

The Shiwan Mountains posed formidable challenges for a woman like Maria, but with Charlie by her side, those difficulties seemed insignificant.

With this in mind, Charlie agreed, saying, "In that case, we'll embark on this journey together."

Maria beamed, excitement evident in her voice, "Thank you, Young Master! I promise not to be a burden."

Charlie chuckled softly, settling onto the ground beside the mother plant of Pu'er tea. "Let's wait here for a while. Once dawn breaks, we'll unearth this young plant and head to the airport."

Seated by the lakeside, gazing at the serene surface of Heaven Lake sparkling under the moonlight, Charlie turned to Maria and posed a quiet query, "Young Master, do you think that heavy rain we just experienced was real or merely an illusion?"

Charlie pondered, "Was it an illusion? What do you think?"

Maria mulled over the question briefly before responding, "I sense it's somewhere between reality and illusion."

Charlie's brow furrowed in thought, "Aren't those two options mutually exclusive?"

Maria shook her head gently, her eyes distant, "I feel as though it's both true and false, real and unreal, false and real."

Charlie's lips curved into a smile, "Tomorrow morning, you could ask the villagers nearby if they heard thunder and rain last night. The commotion was so intense, it's unlikely they'd be oblivious to it."

Maria nodded in quiet contemplation, her voice barely a whisper, "It seems like it won't be that straightforward..."

Then, she turned her gaze to Charlie and teased, "It appears the servant girl's mind tends to complicate things."

Charlie responded with an unconcerned nod, glancing at the camping gear he had brought. He inquired, "Miss Clark, after all your traveling, wouldn't it be a good idea to rest in the tent while I keep an eye on the mother plant? We could swap shifts."

Maria quizzed Charlie, "Is the Young Master tired?"

Charlie replied casually, "I could go a month without sleep and still not tire. Furthermore, I must guard the mother plant of Pu'er tea. If someone were to uproot it, I'd regret it."

Maria's response held a shy note, "I don't feel fatigue either. Consuming that leaf invigorated me, making me feel incredibly refreshed. Fatigue is the last thing on my mind."

Charlie nodded, aware of the potent energy they'd tapped into. Considering the aura emanating from the mother plant's leaf, it was nearly equivalent to a quarter of the Life Saving Pill's potency. This could sustain an average person for a year or more, significantly improving their overall health. Regardless of the ailment, improvements were feasible.

Maria's Eternal Green Pill had already prolonged her lifespan, setting a limit until she turned five hundred. She would remain free from illness during this time. The mother plant's leaves might not grant her added longevity, but they provided boundless vitality. There was no fatigue, no weariness.

Given their shared vitality, neither felt the need for sleep. Charlie saw no point in assembling the tent and so, they sat together by Heaven Lake, conversing about their respective pasts under the stars.

Charlie relished these exchanges with Maria. Ever since his parents' passing, he had kept people at arm's length. Even his wife, Claire, remained unaware of his identity and strength. Those in his close circle gradually learned more about him, but he never disclosed the story of his 'Apocalyptic Book' adventure.

Maria alone held all of Charlie's secrets. The same held true for Maria.

Over three centuries, she'd adopted countless orphans, sharing her secret of immortality with a select few she deeply trusted. Aside from her wards, no outsider knew her secret, except Charlie Wade.

In their hearts, they found genuine confidants in each other, bound by shared trust and secrets. As dawn approached, their conversation continued, painting a vivid picture of their experiences. The sky gradually brightened as they spoke.

With morning light illuminating the landscape, Maria turned to Charlie, "Young Master, shall we be on our way?"

Charlie nodded, reflecting, "You haven't told me about your encounter with Morgana on Hong Kong Island, narrowly escaping her ambush. What happened?"

Maria's smile hinted at stories yet to be shared, "Young Master, I'd love to share, but it can wait until we return."

"Agreed." Charlie stretched and declared, "It's time to head to the airport."

Pointing at the mother plant of Pucha tea, he suggested, "Miss Clark, your expertise in tea cultivation should be employed to unearth the mother plant."

Maria was ready to dig, but as her hand approached the soil, she paused, exclaiming, "Look, Young Master! The leaves you plucked last night have grown!"

Indeed, Charlie observed fresh, dew-covered leaves where he had plucked the previous day. He marveled, "They've grown so quickly! I hardly noticed the growth!"

Maria shared his amazement, "It's not uncommon for leaves to regrow after picking, but at this speed? Truly remarkable. The mother plant's vitality must be exceptional."

Charlie chuckled, "Given her regenerative abilities, even if we plucked all her leaves, they'd likely return in no time."

Maria advised quietly but firmly, "Young Master, let her leaves grow undisturbed for now. Allow her to replenish her energy."

Charlie grinned, reassurance in his words, "Miss Clark, fear not. I won't touch her!"

Maria carefully unearthed the mother plant, preserving the roots, and moistened the soil with mineral water. She turned to Charlie, "Young Master, we ought to set off."

"Agreed!" Charlie acknowledged, starting the car. Just then, a man around sixty emerged from the village, eyeing their parked vehicle.

Observing the old man's curiosity, Charlie lowered his window and engaged him, "Sir, we're from the Meteorological Department. Did you hear thunder and rain last night?"



"Thunder and rain?" The old man replied gruffly, "Does your Meteorological Department not know if it rained? You've come to ask me?"

Charlie grinned, unfazed, "That's right. Yesterday, we conducted cloud seeding. We heard thunder during that time. We rushed here this morning to inquire if you noticed any rain."

The old man waved dismissively, "No."

Charlie prodded further, "You mean you didn't hear anything?"

The old man retorted in annoyance, "I wake up several times every night. If the neighbor next door sneezes, I'm awake. You think I wouldn't have heard thunder? I'm hoping for rain. It's been over a month without any. Tianchi's water level has dropped considerably."

Charlie nodded understandingly, "We'll report back to our superiors and see if we can arrange another round of cloud seeding."

Without acknowledging, the old man shuffled away.

Charlie rolled up the window and commented to Maria, "Seems the illusion was just that, an illusion. Perhaps it only affected us."

Maria concurred, "Most likely." Yet her furrowed brow suggested lingering concerns.

## Chapter 5495

Charlie and Maria's return journey went without a hitch.

Their plane departed promptly at 8:30 AM and touched down in Aurous Hill at a crisp 11 AM.

At noon, the two rushed back to the Zilian Villa. Along the way, Maria cradled the young offspring of the Pu'er Mother Tea plant, her vigilance unwavering.

Upon their return to the villa, Maria summoned everyone to maintain a respectful distance for the time being. She and Charlie ascended to the villa's top-floor courtyard, wasting no time in transplanting the young Pu'er tea plant. After a careful scan of the premises, Maria determined that the open space adjacent to the hot spring pool would be the perfect spot.

Pointing towards the empty expanse, she turned to Charlie. "Judging by the normal growth rate of tea trees, this space should suffice for a decade or more of growth. However, I'm uncertain about the growth rate. If it expands beyond the available soil space, we may need to relocate it."

Charlie grinned, "Let's not worry about that for now. Let's settle it here temporarily. It survived natural disasters in its past life, but repeated moves could prove fatal. We'll start here and

perhaps consider relocating it in the future. Once you take charge of the Celestial Group and transform Erlang Mountain, you might find a suitable spot there."

Maria shook her head resolutely, "This tree belongs to the Young Master. I'm merely its caretaker on his behalf. If it can't thrive here in the future and the Young Master decides to move it, I'll relocate it to his chosen spot."

Charlie replied with seriousness, "You've been by its side the longest. The choice of where to plant it will be yours in the future."

Maria nodded firmly, "I will follow the Young Master."

With that, she grabbed a gardening shovel, dug a hole in the soil beside the hot spring pool roughly the size of a basketball, delicately nestled the Pu'er tea's Mother's roots within, and filled the void with soil she'd excavated. Next, she fetched a wooden water ladle, positioning it near the hot spring pool. She carefully scooped room-temperature water into the ladle and poured it gently around the plant's edge.

The midday sun bathed the delicate green leaves, rendering them almost translucent. Maria gazed upon the immaculate greenery with a face brimming with awe.

Charlie observed the sapling, his brow furrowing. "It grew rapidly overnight, restoring the missing leaves. But now, it doesn't seem to have changed much."

Maria speculated, "Perhaps the energy it accumulated during its emergence from the soil was used up, entering a prolonged, slow growth phase. After all, it takes thirty years for a Pu'er tea tree to mature."

Charlie nodded in agreement, "The few leaves it has now are incredibly valuable to ordinary people. To them, it's akin to a life-saving elixir. For cultivators, it's an extraordinary treasure. Unlike other elixirs that merely treat ailments or extend life, these leaves contain innate reiki. So far, only the Cultivation Pill can boost reiki, but it's intricate to refine, requiring specific high-quality ingredients. Mass production is impractical. However, once this tree matures, it could produce hundreds or thousands of buds daily, each potentially retaining its reiki. This could become a vast source of wealth, perhaps even enabling the establishment of a sect."

Maria asked excitedly, "Does this mean that with it, the Young Master will have a chance to defeat Morgana and Hector's Warriors Den in the future?"

Charlie replied solemnly, "Morgana possesses formidable personal strength, especially after unlocking the Soul Palace. She's in a league of her own. Give me another twenty or thirty years and I may still not match her. But with this tea tree, I can cultivate numerous others like it. If quality isn't enough, we'll fight with quantity. While the human wave strategy might be inferior, it's not without a chance."

Maria nodded, gazing at the sapling and sighed, "Let's hope it grows quickly."

Charlie smiled gently, "Let's just let it follow its own destiny. By the way, Ms. Clark, please invite Mr. Myers for a discussion on surveillance."

Maria stood and said, "Young Master, please wait. I'll summon Keagan."

Soon, Keagan Myers, who was in excellent physical condition for his age, rushed to the top courtyard.

Upon entering, he greeted them respectfully, "Miss, Mr. Wade, how may I assist you both?"

Maria inquired, "Is there a way to discreetly mobilize all personnel in the southern province for surveillance these days?"

"Surveillance?" Keagan Myers responded, "Miss, if it falls under municipal government surveillance, it can be accessed through my high-level clearance without leaving a trace. Just indicate the areas you need."

Maria nodded, recalling Morgana's early morning appearance on Shiwan Mountain. She instructed, "Begin by accessing surveillance for the entire region."

"Understood," Keagan Myers replied, "Miss, I'll make arrangements right away. We'll transfer all video content to a secure cloud server via a dedicated line. Once the transfer is complete, you can review it at your convenience."

Maria expressed her satisfaction with a slight nod and said, "Hurry and get to work. I'll await your update."

Keagan Myers promptly replied, "Certainly, Miss. I'll begin the preparations immediately."

Simultaneously, amidst the Shiwan Mountains, a highway wound its way like a serpent, navigating countless peaks. An off-road vehicle sped through this rugged terrain.

The woman at the wheel wore a grave expression, her grip on the steering wheel unyielding. She was clearly tense, not due to her lack of driving skills but rather the growing familiarity of her surroundings.

The driver was Morgana.

Though it had been years since her last visit to Shiwan Mountains, the place remained etched in her memory.

Once, it had been a natural labyrinth, a testament to nature's grandeur. It had shielded Morgana and Lucius Clark from rebel soldiers, offering them a rare respite. However, now, the once challenging terrain was connected by a modern highway, bridging the gap between this isolated realm and the outside world.

Yet, even as the highway transformed access to Shiwan Mountains, it couldn't alter the region's unique topography. Over the ages, these mountains stood tall, sparsely populated and difficult to traverse. Villages were often isolated, requiring traversing several peaks to reach the next. Some villagers had never ventured beyond the confines of their mountains.

In recent years, driven by economic development and urbanization, mountain dwellers had slowly migrated out, leaving Shiwan Mountains with a dwindling population. Now, Morgana and Lucius Clark likely outnumbered the locals.

At this moment, Morgana's car had just passed a rest area, but she chose not to stop. Instead, after driving for several kilometers, she pulled over onto the emergency lane. Exiting the vehicle, she stood by the roadside and peered into the distance. Her murmured words carried a mix of anticipation and nostalgia, "This is it... Master, Morgana has returned to see you..."

## Chapter 5496

During this time, the highway was sparsely populated with vehicles. Every so often, a car would whiz by, paying little heed to the woman who had parked her vehicle in the emergency lane. While parking on the emergency lane was a theoretical no-no, the mountain expressways saw less scrutiny. With light traffic and breathtaking scenery, fatigued drivers often opted for a picturesque pit stop. No one batted an eye as they gazed upon the passing vehicles.

The passing motorists showed no surprise at the sight of Morgana. However, she was vexed by the towering 100-meter bridge that spanned two mountains, connecting two tunnels. This was the closest point on the entire highway to her Master's retreat.

Unfortunately, there were no highway exits within dozens of kilometers in either direction since scarcely anyone lived in this area. To reach her destination swiftly, her only option was to take the leap from here. Otherwise, she'd have to exit at a distant highway ramp and embark on a day or two of mountainous trekking.

For Morgana, the leap was a trivial feat. But leaving the car here after her departure would lead to unnecessary complications. Any concerned driver stumbling upon an empty car at the edge of a bridge might conclude it was a suicide attempt. A call to the police would inevitably follow, leading them to the scene in haste.

They'd first seek signs of a fall or worse beneath the bridge. There would be no disguising the leap from this dizzying height. Once the police unraveled that someone had jumped, miraculously surviving and disappearing without a trace, they'd spare no effort to uncover the truth.

They'd employ the highway's surveillance footage to identify the driver and meticulously trace back through the evidence. Morgana understood well that despite her extraordinary abilities, she couldn't elude modern society's ubiquitous surveillance systems. Leaving an image record wouldn't be perilous in a nation of over a billion people, as long as she didn't attract undue attention from the police or higher-ups.

Her current objective was to vanish from this bridge with her vehicle. She was well-acquainted with the car; her years on the Antarctic island had seen her mastering various vehicles. Her extended isolation hadn't dimmed her knowledge of this world's technology.

Given her expertise with cars, Morgana swiftly devised a plan. She closed her eyes slightly, channeling a surge of potent reiki from her body into the off-road vehicle. Then, she extended her spiritual awareness to survey her surroundings, patiently awaiting the opportune moment.

Only when no other vehicles or people entered her consciousness's reach did she snap her eyes open. She pushed the off-road vehicle with empty hands and commanded, "Rise!"

As her words left her lips, it was as if the vehicle had caught a gust of wind. It rolled and ascended into the sky, a bizarre spectacle unfolding before her.

Inexplicably, the over two-ton vehicle seemed to transmute into paper at that moment, tumbling gracefully through the air. Morgana's reiki enveloped it, allowing for a slow descent. Yet, maintaining such control over an object of such mass in the air consumed her reiki rapidly.

As the off-road vehicle approached the bridge deck, she refocused her aura to enshroud only the fuel tank and battery. The descent accelerated suddenly, concluding with a resounding impact that shattered branches along the way.

Fortunately, the reiki protection spared the car from igniting into a blaze; it remained unexploded, deformed but intact. After the crash, tranquility reclaimed the valley. Morgana sprang to her feet, lightly touching down on the ground.

The valley was densely populated with various trees, and the off-road vehicle had plowed a path through the thick woods. Morgana's thoughts directed her reiki to gather the shattered branches, concealing the vehicle. She straightened her attire and strode deeper into the mountains, without a backward glance.

Meanwhile, elsewhere,

All surveillance footage from that region had been swiftly transferred to a secure cloud server by Keagan Myers underlings. Providing Maria with the server's address and key, Keagan watched the surveillance videos with Charlie in her boudoir.

Though there were no cameras in Shiwan Mountain, Maria pinpointed Morgana's figure using the time she ascended the mountain. They retraced Morgana's journey from this surveillance point to the old town, all within the camera's gaze.

Tracking Morgana's route became an effortless task. In China, evading personal surveillance might be possible, but cars left a digital trail nearly impossible to erase. Any road accessible to cars had its entrances and exits under constant monitoring, complete with license plate recognition.

This massive volume of video and image data was cataloged with license plate labels, allowing for rapid retrieval. They input Morgana's license plate number and accessed footage of her on various roadways.

Morgana hadn't foreseen anyone predicting her journey south, let alone Maria daring to act under her nose. She had never expected someone to tail her at this juncture and start tracing her steps.

Within minutes, Charlie and Maria had acquired comprehensive data, including the times and locations where Morgana's car appeared in all traffic monitoring systems. Charlie focused on the most recent data, which revealed that half an hour prior, her car had sped through the highway to Shiwanda Mountain in the southern province, reaching a service area at 120 kilometers per hour.

The surveillance that captured this data lay just outside the service area, between the entrance and exit. In other words, her car had bypassed a service area, continuing along the main road.

Charlie studied earlier monitoring nodes, finding it strange that the car had been recorded at roughly 5-minute intervals, covering about ten kilometers each time. Thirty minutes ago, Morgana had passed the last recorded point, indicating she had traveled sixty kilometers since then.

However, there were no new entries in the system, suggesting a change in her driving status. Charlie checked the next monitoring location within the service area, finding it twenty-two kilometers ahead.

At her speed, Morgana should have reached this area ten or twenty minutes ago if she maintained 120 kilometers per hour. Yet, her vehicle was nowhere to be found here. Either she had drastically reduced her speed to below 50 kilometers per hour or had parked somewhere along these twenty-two kilometers.

Charlie took a screenshot of this section on a satellite map and said to Maria, "We'll wait and see. If Morgana doesn't appear at the next monitoring point, she's likely to leave the expressway within this stretch."

Maria concurred, "There are no service areas or exits along this twenty-two-kilometer stretch. If she's left, it's probably on foot."

Charlie nodded, adding, "This stretch primarily consists of viaducts and tunnels. To leave, she'd have to leap directly from a viaduct."

Maria agreed, "It's improbable that the expressway conveniently reaches Lord Bazin's retreat location. Morgana would have identified the nearest exit on the expressway and continued on foot after abandoning her car."

Charlie pondered the situation, then said, "Our most passionate course would be to confront her and extract information, but practically speaking, I'm no match for her and she's already aware of our presence. Showing up would raise suspicion. My suggestion is to wait. If Morgana ditches her car here, we won't be able to track it. We'll wait in Aurous Hill for Morgana to re-enter our field of vision."

## Chapter 5497

Charlie was acutely aware that his pursuit was not of Morgana herself, but rather the enigmatic destination she sought.

After unveiling the portrait of Morvel Bazin, Morgana promptly silenced the Warriors Den. Her fear was palpable, yet her urgency drove her alone to China, to the secluded Shiwan Mountain. It was a testament to her dire predicament.

Charlie suspected that Morgana's quest likely revolved around the secrets left behind by Morvel Bazin, perhaps even the elusive secret of immortality, hinted at by Gideon in the past. With this conviction, he resolved to follow her into the heart of the Shiwan Mountains, regardless of the potential reward, as it wouldn't add to his risk and held the promise of answers.

Within the depths of the Shiwan Mountains, Morgana resembled a martial arts heroine, gracefully gliding through the treetops, effortlessly traversing the rugged terrain. The ordinary world below felt like a level playing field to her, even as she ventured deeper into the wilderness.

As she distanced herself from the highway and ventured further into the mountains, she realized that little had changed in these mountains over the past three centuries. The verdant hills remained untouched and desolate.

With the memories of yesteryear guiding her, Morgana continued her journey through the mountains, progressing seamlessly even as the night's darkness shrouded her surroundings. Moonlight and starlight struggled to penetrate the thick canopy, and rising humidity veiled the terrain in an eerie mist.

Navigating this inhospitable landscape was challenging for mere mortals, but Morgana seemed immune to its perils. She moved resolutely through the darkness and fog, while creatures of all kinds scurried away in her presence, yearning to avoid her.

After nearly half an hour in the mist, Morgana reached the depths of a low valley. Here, the fog grew denser, and the air hung heavy with moisture, saturating it to the point of producing water droplets. The valley's low elevation trapped moisture and carbon dioxide, rendering the oxygen content dangerously low.

What made it even more treacherous was the presence of toxic gasses, akin to methane, released by rotting trees and swamps over countless years. These compounds had combined to create a toxic miasma lethal to all living creatures.

Despite the inherent dangers of this place, Morgana remained undaunted, even growing more excited. She ventured deeper into the toxic fog, holding her breath as nausea washed over her.

At the valley's nadir, enveloped in inky darkness, Morgana's senses expanded, rendering the surroundings vividly clear. In this abyss, her gaze fell upon a multitude of massive stone pillars, each measuring five to six meters in height and two to three meters in width.

Though they appeared natural and untouched, the sheer number of stone pillars and their haphazard arrangement suggested deliberate intent. Someone had collected and placed them here with purpose.

Morgana, far from surprised, caressed the stones with a reverent touch. In a hushed tone, she whispered, "Master, senior, Morgana has returned."

She ventured deeper into the stone forest, her steps guided by the ancient Nine Palaces and Bagua array set up by her Master, Morvel Bazin. This enigmatic formation concealed its exit from those unfamiliar with its secrets.

Outsiders could only break the formation by destroying all the stone pillars, an act that would alert Morvel Bazin before they succeeded. If their assailant proved more formidable, he could use the formation's size and the pillar's density to gain the upper hand and escape.

Morvel Bazin had hidden within this formation for centuries and no one had ever breached its defenses, except for Morgana and her senior, Lucius. Now, returning to this place, Morgana followed a familiar route, deftly navigating the labyrinthine stone forest.

After several rounds of travel, she abruptly shifted her course, revealing the exit of the Bagua Array, an artificial stone archway. The stone gate bore engraved couplets in wild cursive calligraphy.

The first couplet spoke of eight centuries spent in seclusion, while the second alluded to nearly a millennium among the stars and the moon. These ordinary verses concealed an extraordinary question within their horizontal lines, "Can I live forever?"

Morgana gazed upon these words with familiarity. She mused, "Master, what is immortality? Five hundred years or a thousand? You lived a millennium, changing your name, but could three centuries of cultivation not defy death? Is there a path in this world to transcend the bounds of mortality?"



A sardonic smile played on her lips as she shook her head. "I'm overthinking it. How could you have known the answer? If you had, you wouldn't have perished three centuries ago."

With that, Morgana pushed the stone door ajar, revealing a chamber of roughly forty square meters. She recognized this place well, where she and Lucius had once meditated, where dried bloodstains bore witness to the moment she had plunged her sword into his heart.

Morgana's thoughts drifted as she touched the centuries-old bloodstains. She whispered, "Lucius, the memory of thrusting that sword into your heart still haunts me. If you had acquiesced then, could we have been spared these three centuries of separation? With our combined might, perhaps we could have expelled rebels long ago, claiming dominion over this world together. It's my fault alone, you could not foresee the future, nor the pleasures it might bring. Everything before me appears unchanged from three centuries past, except for your dried blood, proof that none has ventured here in all that time. So the person who unveiled the portrait of the Master has never been here. The Wade couple hasn't been here either. So who is this person? Where did Bruce and his wife unearth the secret of immortality?"

## Chapter 5498

Perplexed and intrigued, Morgana took a step towards the inner stone chamber.

Originally, Morvel Bazin's chamber was solitary, just an outer one.

At that juncture, Morvel Bazin had embarked on his second five hundred years of cultivation, having attained the state of Bigu. His days were devoted to meditation, free from the need for sleep, sustenance, or even restrooms.

Upon ushering Morgana and Lucius back into the cavern, Morvel Bazin wielded his blade to carve two sleeping chambers, a kitchen and a lavatory for their use.

In consideration of his undisturbed practice, Morvel Bazin had fashioned an isolated stone chamber for himself, thereby expanding the count of stone rooms to five.

Morgana scrutinized the initial four stone chambers. But upon reaching the fifth, the very existence of that chamber remained an enigma. The gateway to the fifth chamber had transformed into a seamless, impenetrable stone wall.

Fingertips tracing the smooth surface, Morgana spoke softly, "Master, as your time approached, you summoned me and senior brother to entrust the rites of your passing. I uttered a few heartfelt words in haste and you bade me leave. Lucius and I hastily departed and ever since, your stone chamber vanished. My cultivation was feeble back then, making it impossible for me to distinguish whether it was an illusion or a mystical enchantment..."

From her waist, Morgana produced a ribbon with a deft flick, it stiffened and straightened, resembling a silken sword. This silken sword was Morgana's magical instrument. Now, the blade's edge resonated with an eerie hum.

Morgana pointed it at the stone wall, gritting her teeth. "Today, I will pierce through your sanctuary to uncover your secrets!"

With resolve, Morgana channeled her reiki into the blade's edge, transforming it into a ferocious assault, slashing towards the smooth stone wall.

Today's Morgana differed greatly from the one cast out by Morvel Bazin on that fateful day. She had since unlocked the Soul Palace, her power exceeding a hundredfold of what it once was.

Morvel Bazin of yore carved stone chambers into mountain sides with his blade. Today, Morgana wielded the same confidence and could surely dismantle those stone walls entirely.

With conviction, Morgana unleashed her blow. She anticipated the wall to yield effortlessly, yet as her blade's tip grazed the surface, an unforeseen force enveloped the stone, causing her sword to recoil instantly. The violent rebound surpassed the reiki expended on the initial strike, sending Morgana's sword flying and her arm throbbing with pain, immobilized.

Morgana was struck with horror. She hadn't fathomed that a seemingly ordinary stone wall concealed such formidable might. Her astonishment was overtaken by self-doubt. Was this the Master's doing, a concealed enchantment? She voiced, respectful, "Master! Your disciple, Morgana, has returned to visit!"

Having uttered her plea, Morgana scanned her surroundings warily for any signs of change. Disappointingly, everything remained as it had been, no peculiar alterations in sight. Suspicion crept in. "Perhaps the old man succumbed to his thousand-year lifespan and this is a safeguard left to shield his chamber from prying eyes as he neared his end."

Determination ignited within her. She brandished the sword once more, firm in her resolve. "A formation it may be, but it will wane eventually. Today, I shall shatter this wall and unearth your secrets!"

Her left hand grasped the hilt, infused with formidable true energy and with all her might, she struck at the stone wall.

A resounding crack followed and then a deafening boom. Before Morgana could react, her left hand numbed and her sword was sent flying once again.

The wall's second recoil matched the initial one, leaving Morgana alarmed. She comprehended that the formation was potent, but its relentless resilience confounded her. Why did the force not diminish after the first recoil, despite clearly expending a considerable amount of energy?

Morgana seethed with anger and humiliation, feeling duped and demeaned by Morvel Bazin's devised formation. Through gritted teeth, she fumed, "Did you craft this formidable formation solely toward me? I am your apprentice! Three centuries ago, you anticipated your own end, yet why entrench such a defense? Waiting for the Divine Dragon? Moreover, you've never even encountered him! Why squander your life on him? What about me?"

Her shouts were an outlet for her pent-up frustration. But as she completed her tirade, a commanding voice reverberated in the cavern. "Vile creature, I warned you never to set foot in the Eternal Mountains again. Why do you return?"

Morgana's blood ran cold. She recognized the voice well, for it belonged to her Master, Morvel Bazin. Her thoughts whirred and after a moment's pause, she dropped to her knees with a thud, trembling. "Master, your disciple... I did not intend to defy your wishes. It has been years since I last paid my respects. I came today solely for that purpose, not to affront you..."

This statement, seemingly respectful, was also a test.

By mentioning her intention to worship today, she sought to elicit a response to determine if the voice originated from the formation or reality. Even though she was now certain that it was her Master's voice, she still longed for clarity. Was it a clever riddle created in anticipation of her return, or was her Master still alive?

As Morgana cautiously waited, the voice responded sternly, "In consideration of our Master-disciple bond, I shall not confront you today. Remember, never return to the Eternal Mountains in this lifetime!"

## Chapter 5499

Hearing these words, Morgana felt an icy chill shoot through her from the soles of her feet to her scalp. It was a sensation she hadn't experienced since the accidental rescue by Morvel Bazin more than three centuries ago on Shiwan Mountain.

The last time panic had gripped her was when she stumbled upon Morvel Bazin's portrait online. But now, she faced the shocking revelation that her Master, who had seemingly reached the end more than 300 years ago and ventured westward, might still be alive today. The impact of this revelation was utterly unprecedented.

Morgana couldn't contain the fear welling up in her heart. With a voice quivering, she stammered, "Master... Your Disciple... I... I know that I was wrong..."

In that moment, an enraged shout pierced Morgana's ears as Morvel Bazin's frigid voice commanded, "Begone!"

His words struck Morgana's heart like a thunderbolt. She dared not hesitate any longer. Trembling, she rose, bowed to the stone wall and whispered, "Master, I seek forgiveness for my sins. I will depart..."

Turning away with haste, she dragged her leaden legs out of the cave.

Once outside, Morgana didn't dare linger. She briskly exited the mountain, her heartbeat racing faster and heavier than ever before. She muttered to herself, "How is this possible... How is this possible... Didn't he reach his end more than three centuries ago? Why is he still alive today?"

Her mind swirled with doubts. "No! It's not certain whether he's alive or dead! Perhaps he truly isn't dead, or maybe his consciousness endures even after death. Perhaps he died long ago, leaving behind nothing more than an illusion to torment me..."

There was no solace to be found in Morgana's racing thoughts. Despite considering all three possibilities, she couldn't find a single reassuring answer. All she wanted now was to escape Shiwan and China as swiftly as possible.

While Morgana fled through the mountains, Charlie and Maria tirelessly monitored real-time footage from surveillance cameras within dozens of kilometers of Morgana's last known location.

The place was nestled deep in the mountains, with only two small towns along a nearly 100-kilometer stretch of highway. Surveillance cameras were scarce, but to improve their efficiency, Maria enlisted the help of Marius, Keagan and Larry, four octogenarians, each operating a computer to share the workload. Charlie also administered them an enhanced Life Saving Pill to keep them alert and extend their lifespans by a year or two.

From night till dawn, fatigue eluded them and dry eyes remained at bay. Then, Maria exclaimed, "It's Morgana!" pointing at her computer screen.

Charlie hurried over to see the surveillance footage of a woman walking determinedly along a rural road early in the morning. She was heading towards the camera's location and Charlie inquired with astonishment "Where's this camera?"

Maria replied, "It's more than 20 kilometers from where Morgana disappeared, near a town called Erdaoshan."

Perplexed, Charlie asked, "She vanished halfway through her journey. I suspect she left the highway somehow. Why would she suddenly reappear here? If this was her destination, why not drive straight here?"

Shaking her head, Maria said, "I have no idea."

As they watched, Morgana hailed a passing van in the footage. After a brief exchange with the driver, she waved a wad of red banknotes, persuading him to accept her offer. Morgana promptly climbed into the backseat once the transaction was complete.

Charlie was bewildered. "Where is Morgana headed?"

Maria shrugged. "I can't fathom it, Young Master."

Charlie decided, "For now, let's keep an eye on her and see where that van takes her."

"Agreed." In the underdeveloped mountain towns, surveillance was primarily concentrated on traffic routes, allowing Maria to track the van's movements by switching between road cameras.

Soon, the van exited the town, heading towards the highway entrance.

Inside the dilapidated van, Morgana was eager to escape China. She messaged her crew, urging them to arrange a route for her to fly directly from Myanmar to the nearest airport.

Originally, Morgana had planned to exit the country using the same route she used to enter, but the unexpected turn of events made her impatient to leave China behind. Ten minutes later, the van emerged from a tunnel and Morgana recognized the bridge where she had abandoned the vehicle earlier. She inquired of the driver, "What happens if a vehicle doesn't leave the highway for a long time? Will they investigate?"

The driver, without looking back, scoffed, "Who has the time for that? They issue cards at the entrance and collect fees at the exit. They couldn't care less about who stays on the expressway."

Morgana pressed on, "Each vehicle receives a billing card at the entrance. If it's not settled at the exit, won't the highway authorities look into it?"

The driver chuckled, "Investigate? Who'd bother? Every day, there are countless cars slipping through the cracks. They're too busy to worry about who stays on the expressway."

He brandished his own expressway card and continued, "It's just this piece of plastic. Useless. When we exit the expressway, I'll just pick a random exit and breeze through. Won't cost me a dime. I've got a drawer full of these at home."

Relieved by his response, Morgana knew her abandoned van wouldn't be discovered anytime soon, granting her ample time to vanish from China by any means possible.

Meanwhile, Charlie and Maria remained oblivious to Morgana's current situation. They had no way of knowing that the van she had boarded was now heading in the opposite direction of her earlier journey. Charlie furrowed his brows and wondered, "Is Morgana leaving?"

Maria nodded, puzzled herself. "It seems so, but it's rather hasty. After all the trouble she went through to reach Shiwan, why leave so soon? Could it be that she's avoiding someone?"

Charlie mused, "I don't know."

Suddenly, his face lit up with excitement. "Regardless, let's keep tracking that van. Once Morgana leaves the mountain, we must act swiftly!"

## Chapter 5500

Judging solely from Morgana's return behavior, Charlie and Maria struggled to discern her intentions.

Maria, in particular, fretted over the possibility that Morgana hadn't truly departed Shiwan when she left, but rather sought a new destination. So, she turned to Charlie and said, "Young Master, my father once mentioned that the stone chamber where his Master journeyed westward vanished without a trace. He suspected that his Master must have wielded formidable magical powers to relocate or conceal that chamber. Morgana's arrival in Shiwan Mountain this time, most likely, pertains to unraveling the secrets of that stone chamber."

Charlie nodded thoughtfully and replied, "I share your sentiments. It seems unlikely that Morgana would hastily depart Shiwan Mountain. Perhaps she has stumbled upon fresh leads."

Maria, wearing a concerned expression, added, "If Morgana indeed discovers a means to augment her power through her Master's remnants or acquires elixirs and magical artifacts of value to her, her strength could become even more formidable."

Charlie contemplated the matter and said, "Back then, if Morvel Bazin managed to pass that ring to your father before his demise, it implies that he had insights into Morgana's character. He must have taken precautions accordingly. Although Morgana failed to retrieve Morvel Bazin's relics and legacy in the past, despite the passage of three centuries, I believe she still can't overcome the safeguards he established against her."

Maria nodded in agreement and murmured, "Let's hope you're right..."

Meanwhile, Morgana continued her westward journey without a hint of stopping.

Simultaneously, Charlie received news that Morgana's Boeing 777 flight to Myanmar had taken off. According to civil aviation data, the plane's destination was nearly 200 kilometers from Shiwan Mountain, a state airport.

Observing that the van Morgana had been traveling in was also en route to the airport, Charlie suddenly exclaimed, "Morgana is leaving China!"

Maria asked in astonishment, "Why is she departing in such haste? Has she already located her Master's possessions?"

Charlie shook his head and replied, "I can't say for sure, but Morgana's abrupt departure doesn't seem consistent with typical behavior following a major discovery. As I mentioned earlier, Morvel Bazin was likely wary of her even before his passing. There's no logical reason for her to have found his relics so swiftly. I suspect Morgana has a hidden agenda for leaving so abruptly."

Maria furrowed her brow in confusion and mumbled, "Young Master I can't help but feel that something doesn't quite add up here. There's an element of irrationality."

Charlie reassured her, "We're merely speculating from a distance. To truly understand the situation, we must go there ourselves and uncover the missing pieces."

With determination, he stood up and urged, "Since Morgana is intent on leaving, let's follow suit. Her plane is due to arrive at the Interlocken airport in about two hours. We should rush to the airport and fly to Interlocken. Perhaps we can cross paths with her at the airport once more."

Maria, without hesitation, affirmed, "All members of the loyal clan obey the Young Master's orders."

Charlie nodded and said, "I'll arrange for the plane immediately."

An hour later, Charlie and Maria boarded a flight bound for Interlocken.

This time, Charlie forwent the cloak-and-dagger approach of using Isaac Cameron's shell and renting a private jet. Instead, he utilized the Wade family's private jet in Aurous Hill. He no longer worried about Morgana uncovering their actions, thus, discretion was no longer necessary.

Meanwhile, Morgana successfully passed through security and customs with a Chinese identity passport she had prepared in advance. She sat in the VIP lounge, her anxiety and unease causing her leg muscles to twitch. In her mind, the haunting words of Morvel Bazin resounded incessantly, "Get out of here!"

These four words cast a profound shadow over the depths of her soul.

Unable to contain herself, she replayed the entire sequence of events, desperately trying to analyze the likelihood of Morvel Bazin's continued existence. She recalled every detail of her and Lucius Clark's induction as disciples of Morvel Bazin, reflecting, "In retrospect, Master never placed great importance on me and Lucius. If it weren't for the rebel army hunting us down, Master might have never acknowledged us... never appeared before us... Looking back, the Master took us as disciples, partly to learn about the world beyond and partly with the hope that we could serve his people. He never truly considered us genuine disciples..."

Morgana's thoughts meandered back more than three centuries, revisiting the harrowing moment when she and Lucius Clark were chased into Shiwan Mountain by the rebel army. Beyond the Eternal Mountains as he called them, Shiwan Mountains, under the cover of darkness, tens of thousands of rebel cavalymen launched a relentless assault, relentlessly pursuing the remnants of their foes whom they were determined to crush.

Clad in rebel army attire, brandishing rebel flags and sporting distinctive Manchu queues that set them apart from the Chinese populace, they drove the battered remnants of defeated generals into the Eternal Mountains.

The forces of China suffered heavy losses, retreating while battling, with casualties mounting. Eventually, Lucius Clark and Morgana found themselves bereft of comrades.

An army detachment, led by Gartu, pursued them vigorously. Hindered by the steep terrain and thick forests, the cavalry dismounted and continued the pursuit on foot.

Gartu's commanding voice echoed, "Listen! Surrender now and I, Gartu, will spare your lives. Refuse and if I catch you, you'll be taken to the capital and meet your end in disgrace!"

At that moment, Morgana ran alongside Lucius Clark through the dense woods, her shoulder bearing the painful burden of an arrow wound inflicted by a rebel cavalry archer during their retreat. The rebel army, skilled in horseback archery and notorious for coating their arrowheads with putrid corpse fluids carrying virulent diseases, had inflicted a wound that festered with black, foul-smelling pus. Every jolt sent waves of excruciating pain through Morgana's body, causing her to almost collapse uncontrollably.

Thankfully, Lucius Clark clung to her, pulling her along with unwavering determination, preventing her from being overtaken.

Morgana understood the cruelty of rebel army arrows. Even if the wound was not lethal, it would transform into a festering scourge, spreading ulcers across her body within days and robbing her of life.

With every painful step, Morgana knew her time was running out.

Observing that Lucius Clark was visibly slowing down to save her, she choked back tears and uttered, "Lucius, save yourself! I can't hold on any longer. If you take me with you, it will only hinder you..."

Lucius Clark, resolute and unwavering, replied, "I promised your brother I would protect you. Even if it means giving my life, I will not abandon you. I won't face your brother without fulfilling that promise."



Tears welled in Morgana's eyes as she whispered, "Lucius, don't be afraid. If there's truly no escape for both of us, promise me that you'll grant me a merciful end, that you'll stand beside me and face those rebel dogs to the death. I'd rather not fall into their hands and suffer their cruelty."

Lucius Clark clenched his jaw, declaring firmly, "Morgana, fear not. If we find ourselves with no recourse, I will grant you the mercy you seek. We will confront those rebel fiends to the bitter end and I will never allow you to suffer at their hands."

In the distance, Gartu and his men drew nearer, spotting the telltale trail of Morgana's blackened blood. He sneered with a cruel grin, "Since you refuse to bend, you shall face the consequences. When you fall into our hands, my brothers and I will ensure that the little beauty enjoys her final moments."

Morgana, trembling with fear and fury, cried out, "Even if I become a specter, I won't allow you to go unpunished! One day, the Ming Dynasty will vanquish you all, expelling your puppet emperor from our land!"

Gartu retorted with a cold laugh, "Your Ming Dynasty? Your Ming Dynasty is on the brink of annihilation at our hands! From now on, this land belongs to us Manchus! All Chinese people who defy the Manchu shall meet their end at our hands."

Suddenly, a booming voice interrupted their confrontation, demanding, "What? You even intend to kill me?"

With those words, an elderly man clad in Azure robes descended from above the forest, wielding a majestic and solemn silver-hilted longsword.

This man was Morvel Bazin.

Gartu hadn't anticipated that this elderly figure could descend from such heights unscathed. He warily inquired, "Who are you?"

Morvel Bazin's tone was icy as he replied, "You, a mere offspring of Tartars, dare inquire about my name? You have disrupted my rest and created this turmoil. Today, you shall pay with your lives!"

Gartu sneered and ordered, "This old man fancies himself immortal! Come forth, kill him!"

In an instant, the rebel soldiers raised their bows and arrows, taking aim at Morvel Bazin.

With disdain etched on his face, Morvel Bazin retorted, "Do you dare to flaunt your archery skills before me? Perish!"

With a swift movement, his longsword transformed into a flurry of spinning blades, hurtling toward the hundreds of rebel troops. Before the soldiers could grasp the situation, they were all decapitated simultaneously, leaving not a single survivor.

Not far away, Lucius Clark and Morgana gaped in astonishment. They had never encountered such a formidable individual in their lives and believed they stood before a deity.

Morvel Bazin sheathed his longsword and approached them. He inquired, "Why were the two of you being pursued by the Tartar soldiers?"

Lucius Clark was the first to regain his composure and quickly explained, "I am Lucius Clark and I thank the venerable one for saving our lives. My sister and I stood together against the rebels but lacked the strength to prevail. We were relentlessly pursued by the rebel army. Your timely intervention saved us, or else we may not have survived today..."

Morvel Bazin frowned and asked, "Tartars have always been active in the north. We are currently in the Eternal Mountains, nearly at the southernmost point of the Tang Dynasty. How did the Tartars reach here?"

Lucius Clark blurted out, "Tang? Sir, it is no longer the Tang Dynasty. The current dynasty is the Ming Dynasty, having ruled China for over two centuries. But the traitor Will Saint allowed the rebel army through the pass, leading to their invasion of most of the country..."

Morvel Bazin scolded with a cold voice, "The Chinese people today can't even protect their own land?"

## Chapter 5501

Recognizing the immense supernatural power and the shared heritage of the elderly figure before them, Lucius Clark instinctively knelt to the ground, his voice choked with emotion. "Honored master, our people are now under the cruel yoke of the Tartars. Our homeland lies in ruins and our people suffer unimaginably. The younger generation, though willing, lacks the strength to oppose the brutal rebel forces. We can only watch helplessly as our Dynasty crumbles. Since you too are of our blood and kin, we beseech you to intervene, to banish the rebel invaders and restore the glory to our people."

Morgana, too, regained her senses and swiftly joined Lucius in prostration. She spoke with utmost respect, "I implore the venerable master to take action."

Morvel Bazin found himself mildly surprised by their actions, responding with a mocking chuckle, "I have secluded myself here for centuries. The affairs of the outside world no longer concern me. Whether the Chinese, Mongols, or Manchus ascend the throne matters not to me."

Lucius and Morgana felt a profound despair wash over them. They had assumed that the old deity's incredible power, capable of vanquishing rebel troops with a mere flick of his fingers, would effortlessly grant them access to the Imperial City and the rebel Emperor's head. Yet they had overestimated Morvel Bazin's devotion to the cause.

In reality, Morvel, in his advanced age, had long forgotten any sense of national justice and integrity.

With an indifferent expression, he continued, "This is my sanctuary for cultivation. I would advise you both to leave and cease disturbing my meditation. I have dispatched the troops pursuing you. You are free to go."

Lucius knelt firmly, pleading, "Ancient one, driving the scourge from the land and saving countless lives is an act of great merit. It would surely aid in your spiritual pursuits. Besides, such a task should be child's play for you. I beseech you to reconsider!"

Morvel Bazin sneered, "Merit? Merit is as fleeting as a memorial arch. What use is accumulating more merits? Can they grant you eternal life?"

Lucius was taken aback. The concept of longevity was foreign to him and he couldn't grasp the significance behind those words.

Seeing his confusion, Morvel Bazin explained calmly, "Do not assume I am the sole possessor of such power. Those who ascend to the throne are in harmony with the times, circumstances and their allies. Invading the pass and seizing the Dynasty's imperial city indicates a superior fate, dragon veins from other clans and the Manchu national destiny surpassing the Chinese at this juncture. They must have expert allies."

Morvel Bazin paused briefly and added, "I advise you not to act recklessly. With your abilities, defeating a nation on the rise is nigh impossible."

Lucius Clark's spirits plummeted upon hearing this. He held his head high and spoke resolutely, "Even if I, Lucius Clark, cannot aid my people, I shall never cease opposing the rebels. Though they number only a million, they have conquered our land. If every Chinese person remains indifferent, we shall never reclaim our homeland!"

Morvel Bazin offered a wry smile, saying, "Your ideals and ambitions hold little value in the face of the fleeting years. If you live to my age, it will matter little who sits upon the throne."

Unwilling to yield, Morgana hastily interjected, "Master, the rebel army advances relentlessly southward, their momentum unstoppable. They have reached Hillcrest and are poised to enter these Mountains. After that, they will encroach upon southern territories. Even across the Central Plains, you may find no refuge."

A hint of unease crossed Morvel Bazin's face at her words.

Morgana seized the opportunity, her voice resolute, "Honored Immortal, your presence exudes strength and majesty, especially your long hair, a finishing touch!"

Then, turning sharply, she continued in a loud voice, "My Lord, the rebels are forcing all Chinese to shave their heads and sport a meager rattail braid. Defiance leads to beheading. They demand we forsake our hair. Can you accept such an affront?"

Morvel Bazin's expression darkened noticeably. For centuries, he had enjoyed solitude in this cave, and visitors were a rarity. Yet today, the tumultuous rebel soldiers had disrupted his peace. What Morgana said now made him profoundly uneasy. He remained silent for an extended moment.

As the mountain below ignited in flames, a wildfire set by the rebel army, Morvel Bazin suddenly changed his tune. "Very well, if you both are determined to aid your people, I shall grant you an opportunity."

Lucius Clark's face lit up and he eagerly responded, "My Lord, please instruct us!"

Morvel Bazin spoke calmly, "Today, you shall become my disciples. I shall impart to you techniques for combating this threat. Once you leave Shiwan Mountain, you may continue your battle against these Manchus and support your people."

Lucius could barely contain his excitement, declaring, "I, Lucius Clark, humbly accept your teachings, Master!"

Morgana followed suit, kneeling and proclaiming, "I, Morgana, express my gratitude, Master!"

Back then, Morgana had no inkling of why Morvel Bazin had this change of heart.

However, as she recalled this event from over three hundred years ago, she began to piece together a different story. In 1650 AD, there remained thirteen years before Morvel Bazin's supposed limit.

Perhaps Morvel Bazin had accepted them as disciples to delay the rebel army's advance upon Shiwan Mountain after their training was complete.

In other words, Morvel Bazin had a larger scheme in mind. He had taken Lucius and Morgana under his wing for his own purposes, to ensure thirteen more years of undisturbed peace.

As these realizations struck her, Morgana felt an overwhelming sense of regret. "Master has always been obsessed with extending his life. He couldn't have so readily accepted his fate back then. The only logical explanation is that he had already discovered a method to defy the

limits. He concealed it all along, even feigning farewell to me and my senior brother. I fear we're mere pawns in his grand scheme. If the Master demands my loyalty and the entire broken society's submission in exchange for longevity, what shall I do?"

At that moment, Morgana deeply regretted her journey. She regretted not having come to China. But now, her course was set and all she could do was distance herself as far as possible.