

Stranger Danger

#Chapter 1: Female Ghost - Read Stranger Danger Chapter 1: Female Ghost

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"It hurts!"

Ye Qing gasped in pain as his weary eyes fluttered open. He was hurting everywhere as if his body was falling apart.

"Young Ye! You're finally awake!" exclaimed an aging voice from the side. Ye Qing tipped his head in that direction and saw a white-haired old man shambling over to his side with surprise and delight on his face. He looked to be in his sixties.

"How do you feel, young Ye? Are you alright?" the old man asked concernedly.

Ye Qing slowly pushed himself into a sitting position. He asked weakly while nursing a pounding headache with one hand, "Who am I? Where am I? What happened?"

The old man's expression turned worried as he responded, "We're in your house, young Ye. What's gotten into you? Did you lose your memory or something?"

"My house?"

Still massaging his forehead, Ye Qing turned his aching neck and briefly surveyed his surroundings. It was only then he noticed that he was inside an unfamiliar room. The house was devoid of furniture save for an old table, chairs, and the bed he was lying in right now. The walls were made from mud and straw. Chilly wind was seeping through its web-like cracks and stealing his heat even though he was wrapped in a thick blanket.

This is most definitely not my house. Where on earth am I? Ye Qing thought while furrowing his brow. He was about to ask the old man more questions when surprise stole his breath away. He hadn't noticed earlier because his perspective was skewed, but the old man was wearing an ancient long robe and a crown. His attire was straight out of a historical drama.

Ye Qing had read too many web novels not to recognize the situation he was in. *This isn't my world, is it? Have I... transmigrated?*

He shook his head back and forth in dismay. *Last night, I was... Did I die because I stayed up watching the World Cup for too long? You can't be serious!*

His head was filled with doubt and confusion right now, but he didn't allow them to tumble through loose lips. After deliberating his words for a moment, he said carefully, "My... my head hurts. I can't remember anything."

The old man's eyes flashed with pity as he sighed. "I see you've hurt your head. Don't worry. You'll get better after a couple of days' rest."

"..."

"I've watched over you since you're a wee little boy, young Ye. You're practically a grandson to me, so I'm going to give you a little advice, okay? You cannot protect your parents' fields from Chen Zheng any more than an arm can outmuscle a leg. So what if he refuses to give you a fair price? Had you acquiesced, you wouldn't be lying in bed with a sore body and an addled head at the least. Will you remain stubborn after everything you have suffered?"

As the old man spoke, fragments of memories that did not belong to Ye Qing slowly rose to the surface of his mind. According to these memories, the world was a dangerous place filled with strange, mysterious and deadly creatures known as Strangers. The only sanctuary for a human in this world was a village or a city, and even then it wasn't a sure thing. Take his—or rather, his host's—parents for example. Two months ago, a Stranger had ambushed and killed them while they were farming, leaving behind a pair of quality fields to their only child, Ye Qing. Yes, his host shared the same name as him. In a world where nearly every part of the land was occupied by Strangers, any soil safe and fertile enough to farm was precious to put it mildly.

It was also why Ye Qing was in trouble. Not long after his parents had passed away, a martial artist named Chen Zheng had shown up on his doorstep and offered to buy the farm off his hands. The problem was that Chen Zheng did not carry himself like a proper buyer at all. Not only did he try to coerce Ye Qing into selling the farm to him, the price he offered was obscenely low. When Ye Qing had rejected his offer, he began threatening and mocking him in all sorts of ways.

Ye Qing was a young, hot-blooded male who just lost his parents. Naturally, he was ill-equipped to endure Chen Zheng's provocations. Yesterday, when Chen Zheng sought him out and mocked him again, Ye Qing finally lost control and attacked the martial artist. However, he was just an ordinary person, and Chen Zheng a martial artist. Long story short, Chen Zheng had dished out a sound beating that left him unconscious to this day.

So, my guy tried to man up but got himself a reality check instead, thought Ye Qing while rubbing his forehead and chuckling bitterly to himself. In fact, I bet he was hurt so bad that he died. That's why I was reincarnated in his body. What a pitiful death it was.

Seeing that Ye Qing was looking down and keeping silent, the old man continued, "Young Ye, people like us cannot hope to go against the likes of Chen Zheng, so quit

being stubborn and save yourself some trouble. It's not like he offered you a poor price, unfair it may be."

Ye Qing wasn't in the mood to think about this right now, so he pleaded, "I'll think about it, Grandpa, but can we talk about this later? I've just awoken, and I'm still a little dizzy."

Although Ye Qing had addressed the old man as Grandpa, he wasn't actually his grandfather. He was a neighbor and a friend of the family, Cheng Hui. They shared a good relationship because his parents had taken good care of the old man when they were still alive.

Realization dawned as Cheng Hui cuffed himself on the head. "My age must be getting to me. You're right. You've just awoken, and you need a good rest. The food is in the kitchen. Feel free to warm it up and eat it when you're hungry. I shan't disturb you any longer."

Ye Qing nodded and said, "Thanks, Grandpa."

Cheng Hui gave him a wave before grabbing his walking stick and hobbling out of the entrance. He looked especially hunchbacked and frail in the dying rays of the sunset.

Ye Qing's head began to throb again after Cheng Hui was gone, so he lay back down on the bed and was out like a light. The next time he came to, it was to the painful grip and sound of his own hunger.

"Is it midnight already?"

He opened his eyes to a pitch black room. Not even the weak moonlight seeping through the door sill and the windows was strong enough to chase away the oppressive darkness. Worse, Ye Qing had this feeling that a vicious beast was hiding somewhere in the darkness. It was cold, stifling and frightful.

"Where's my flame stick?"

Ye Qing sat up and groped around for the flame stick he was pretty sure was on the headboard based on his host's memories. When he found it, he blew at it and saw an orange flame flaring from the tip. Unfortunately, it did not even last a second before a cold wind appeared out of seemingly nowhere and extinguished it instantly.

"Cough! Cough! Cough..."

The cold wind hadn't just blown out the flame, it had washed over Ye Qing and chilled him to the core. It was so cold he couldn't stop coughing for a while.

"Hooo... hooo..."

Ye Qing blew at the flame stick a couple more times in an attempt to ignite it fully, but for some reason it kept resisting his efforts. Furthermore, the chilly, almost unnaturally freezing air seemed to have entrenched itself around him. It made the dark room even scarier and oppressive than it already was.

Ye Qing surveyed his surroundings suspiciously as he shivered uncontrollably. Maybe it was just a figment of his imagination, but for some reason, he couldn't shake this feeling that someone was watching him from the dark.

Ye Qing swallowed and forced himself to calm down. Then, while covering the tip of the flame stick with his left hand, he sucked in a deep breath and blew with everything he got. This time, the fire starter did not fail him. A strong flame spilled out of the tube and chased away the darkness in a rush.

"Finally," Ye Qing sighed out in relief, the gentle flame chasing away some of the fear he had been stricken with until now. Unfortunately, it would not last. When he looked up from the flame, he was greeted by the bloodless face of a woman. Not only was she a mere inch away from his face, she was also staring at him with dead, lifeless eyes.

It wasn't just a feeling after all.

"Aaaaaahhhhhh!"

Ye Qing screamed in horror as he recoiled from the woman. He slammed into a corner of the bed so hard that his whole body flared up in pain. Ye Qing was beyond caring, however. It wasn't just because he was just dealt the fright of his life, but also because he noticed that the woman did not have a lower body. She was literally floating in the air with a blank expression and glassy eyes. The air rolling off her incorporeal body was colder than he could possibly imagine.

"A ghost! A ghost!"

Ye Qing screamed again when realization struck him, his scalp tingling with abject fear. It was the wrong move. As if Ye Qing's scream had snapped her out of her thoughtless state, the female ghost abruptly lurched toward him.

She was cold. Even before she got close, the unnatural chill was already invading every pore on his body and turning his blood into ice. He was shaking like he was stranded in Antarctica.

"Get away from me!" Ye Qing yelled while holding the flame stick with one hand and grabbing his bed accessories with the other. His pillow, his blanket, he threw it all at the female ghost in hopes of delaying her for even a second longer. However, the bed accessories merely passed through the female ghost as if she was made of air. Not only that, she reached Ye Qing just a second later and gripped his neck with both hands. She began squeezing.

As her grip tightened, hand-shaped, bluish black bruises started to appear around Ye Qing's neck. At the same time, unending coldness enveloped him like it would freeze him from the inside out.

"A-ack... g-ghk..."

Ye Qing struggled with everything he got, but it was useless. His body grew colder and colder as he lost strength. Slowly but surely, the darkness was consuming him.

Am I going to die again? Ye Qing thought disbelievingly to himself. No, no, it's not over yet. I remember there's something hidden in the cracks of the wall behind me. It might just be what I need to save my life!

A sudden intuition flashed through his head as death marched ever closer. His host was dead, but it would appear that his body wasn't quite ready to follow him to the beyond.

Ye Qing mustered whatever strength he had left and flung the flame stick he had been holding at the female ghost. It worked. Seemingly afraid of the fire, she let out a scream and relinquished her death grip on Ye Qing's throat, floating backward to avoid the flaming object. As soon as he was free, Ye Qing sucked in a few greedy breaths before turning around and punching the wall behind his bed with all his might.

There was a loud bang, followed by the sound of dust hitting the floor and a soft crack from his wrist. He knew immediately from the sharp pain that he had cracked a bone, but there was no time. Gritting his teeth, he snatched a random shirt from nearby, wrapped it around his fist, and resumed his last-ditch effort.

Meanwhile, the female ghost was floating toward him again after avoiding the flame stick. Eyes bloodshot and ugly veins bulging on his arm, Ye Qing struck the wall again and again while hissing, "C'mon! C'mon!"

Suddenly, an entire section of the wall collapsed, exposing a hidden compartment about the size of a human head. Inside the compartment lay a black wooden box that looked like it hadn't been used for a very long time.

"Finally!" Ye Qing's eyes lit up as he threw away the shirt and grabbed the box with one hand. However, the female ghost suddenly appeared before his eyes and reached out for his neck again.

"Die!" Ye Qing threw himself backward to dodge the female ghost's grip and extract the wooden box at the same time. Then, he opened the wooden box, grabbed the object it bore, and threw it straight at the female ghost. At that moment, his movements were as swift as lightning.

Boom!

A ball of white light abruptly exploded in the middle of the room, glaring and hot. Like the sun hanging high in the Ninth Heaven, it lit up the room as bright as the day.

“Aaahhhh!”

The female ghost let out a painful scream as soon the light made contact with her body. For the first time, terror flashed across her face as she tried to turn around and escape. It was futile. The heat easily caught up to her and turned her into ashes in an instant.

The blazing light lasted around ten breaths before fading completely, revealing a tattered yellow talisman at the core. It slowly crumbled into ash as it floated toward the ground.

“Oh thank heavens... thank *heavens* it’s finally over!”

Ye Qing stared at the space where the ghost and talisman were a moment ago before collapsing onto his bed. He was breathing hard and sweating all over like he had just run a marathon.

It was only now he realized that his entire body was screaming like he was being stabbed by a thousand needles. At the same time, extreme exhaustion and fatigue washed over him.

“I’m so glad the talisman actually worked.”

According to his host’s memories, his parents had spent a huge sum of money to acquire the single talisman from a wandering Daoist priest. It was said to be capable of repelling Strangers and blessing the household. His parents had cherished it like a treasure and hid it in their house for when they truly needed it. They had never used it, and they never would.

His host had believed that the Daoist priest was a charlatan, and that the yellow talisman they bought was nothing more but a sham. Ye Qing was extremely glad that he was wrong, because he would have died otherwise.

Chapter 2: Annon Sutra

“That ghost... I think she’s a... Yin Spirit?”

After resting until his pain and exhaustion had faded away a little, Ye Qing suddenly “recalled” what the female ghost was.

“A Yin Spirit is one of, if not the weakest Strangers out there. It should not appear to anyone with even a modicum amount of yang energy. It is why they only attack people who are severely ill or dying; those whose qi, blood and yang energy have hit rock bottom.”

Ye Qing frowned deeply. "But Yin Spirits normally avoid places with great concentrations of yang energy. They're so weak they can only haunt sparsely populated areas such as the forest. Also, I'm pretty sure my house is protected by a purge talisman, so there's no way the Yin Spirit could come in... unless..."

Ye Qing abruptly rose to his feet and picked up the flame stick from the ground. He used it to light an oil lamp before walking over to the living room. Sure enough, when he looked up at the beam where the purge talisman should've been adhered to, he could not find anything.

"It's not there. No wonder the Yin Spirit dared to invade my house."

A purge talisman was the most basic tool a human could have to ward off Strangers. At least one purge talisman was adhered to every household. However, his purge talisman was nowhere to be seen.

"Someone must've deliberately removed it!" Ye Qing rubbed his nose with growing agitation. He did not believe for a second that someone had stolen it because even the poorest household in the village could afford it. This could only mean that someone had taken it to lure a Yin Spirit to his house and kill him.

"But who? Who's the bastard who's trying to kill me? Is it Chen Zheng?"

It had to be him. The martial artist was the only person in the entire village who had a motive to kill him, not least because he had refused to sell his farm to him again and again. If he died, his farm would become ownerless, and Chen Zheng would be able to claim it with little effort using his position and means. Even better, no one could pin the crime to him despite the fact that he was the prime suspect. After all, Ye Qing would have been killed by a Yin Spirit. Why did that have anything to do with him?

"He wants a perfect murder to go with his undeserved inheritance, eh? That son of a *bitch*," uttered Ye Qing with a hint of anger. It was pure luck that he had survived the encounter.

Despite his outburst, Ye Qing was more worried than angry right now. Chen Zheng was one of the three esteemed martial artists of his hometown, August Hill Village. Its namesake was the hill adjacent to the village, Little August Hill. "Martial artist" wasn't a cultivation level, but a title people used to respectfully address those who practiced martial arts.

In any case, Chen Zheng and his fellow martial artists were no doubt the strongest warriors in the village. They were as powerful as they were well-respected, and they were responsible for protecting the village from danger. Bearing that in mind, how could he, a defenseless, common man possibly do any harm to Chen Zheng?

Furthermore, revealing the truth would not help him one bit. It wasn't because the villagers were too stupid to realize the truth, but because they feared the consequences too much to ever acknowledge it. To be fair, who would risk incurring the wrath of a martial artist for a nobody?

On the other hand, Chen Zheng had a hundred and one ways to kill Ye Qing without ever exposing himself. The Yin Spirit was one such example. He might have survived tonight, but he was sure he would encounter many, many more such "accidents" in the future. The next time this happened, he did not think he would be so lucky as to find another talisman to save his life.

Besides that, he remembered that Chen Zheng was an exceptionally petty-minded man. Even if capitulated now and sold his farm to Chen Zheng as Cheng Hui had advised him, he didn't believe that the man would allow him to live.

"I can't beat him, I can't reason with him, I can't even run away because this place is surrounded by Strangers. This isn't good at all, is it?"

Ye Qing was normally a bright and carefree soul, but even he could not help a bitter chuckle and a long sigh when the reality of his situation sank in. He exhaled deeply while massaging his forehead, "Poor, poor me. Just how on earth am I going to survive this?"

"Maybe I should just... give up? I mean, I've already died once. What's another death, right?" Ye Qing joked to himself. "But man, do I have to? Is there really no other way?"

Suddenly, Ye Qing caught a dark flash out of the corner of his eyes. It brightened and dimmed in intervals like a flickering candlelight in the dark.

"Huh? What's that?"

Curious, Ye Qing went over to the strange object and picked it up. Then, he sat down by the table before raising his oil lamp to examine it.

It was a thin, rectangular sheet that looked like it was made from calfskin. It was blackish yellow in color and covered in unusual patterns that were shaped like serpents, dragons, or both. Its appearance invoked a strong feeling of age and mystery.

The dark flash came from a rune etched on the vellum sheet. It was still glowing on and off like a firefly when ominous, blood red text suddenly manifested at the center of the sheet:

"Chen Zheng wants me dead!"

To say that Ye Qing was flabbergasted would be an understatement. If he wasn't paying attention until that point, he was now. As more and more words emerged on the sheet,

his eyes continuously widened until it could widen no longer. There was a lot of shock and even a hint of terror in those eyes.

“By sending his minion to remove the purge talisman in my house, the man had nearly succeeded in committing the perfect murder and robbery by way of a Yin Spirit. Although I somehow survived the encounter, I’m sure he has more tricks up his sleeves.”

“I am but a common man. It would be suicide for me to go up against Chen Zheng, a Qi Invocation stage martial artist. I do not wish to surrender to my grim fate though. What should I do? Is there really nothing I can do except wait to die? Is it really a sin to be weak?”

“I really, really don’t want to die here. Perhaps my only way out is to join the watchmen. I can’t hide forever, but it may just buy me enough time to find another way.”

The ominous passage ended there. Contrary to the vellum’s still and unassuming appearance, Ye Qing’s stomach was churning like the raging sea right now. Not only did the vellum narrate the cause and effect of the attack, it even gave him what looked like a temporary solution to the threat to his life. How could he stay calm? How could he not be afraid?

A long time later, Ye Qing gradually calmed down and realized that he was overreacting a little. This was not the mundane world where he lived. This world was overflowing with all sorts of oddities and unexplained mysteries. With that in mind, it wasn’t so strange that this vellum would turn out to be more magical than expected, was it?

If he remembered correctly, the vellum had come from the same wandering Daoist priest who had sold the yellow talisman to his host’s—*no, I can’t think like this anymore. My host and I are now one and the same*—parents. According to him, the vellum was a special artifact made from the skin of a powerful Stranger. Its name was Annon (Unknown) Sutra, and it was in possession of a mysterious power—or so the Daoist priest claimed.

Honestly, his parents should’ve known better than to fall for the Daoist priest’s dubious sales pitch, but they didn’t, and they quickly discovered that the so-called “artifact of mysterious power” was completely useless save for the fact that it was impervious to water or fire. Even if the Daoist priest wasn’t lying, they certainly hadn’t found the way to invoke it.

His parents were depressed for a long time because of this, but they had spent too much money on the “artifact” to throw it away. So, they decided to store it in the hidden compartment together with the talisman.

For the longest time, Ye Qing was of the same opinion as his parents, but now, he realized that the Daoist priest might not have been lying after all.

“But why did the Annon Sutra wait until now to show its power?” Ye Qing asked himself while tapping his knuckles against the wooden table. It was then he saw the blood on his hand and the blood-colored words on the vellum’s surface. He exclaimed in realization, “Perhaps my blood is what revived the artifact?”

The Annon Sutra had been stored in the wooden box together with the talisman. He must have tossed both the talisman and the Annon Sutra at the Yin Spirit just now. It was also when he accidentally got his blood on the vellum.

“Should I give it another go?” Ye Qing muttered to himself. His mind made up, he clenched his fist and squeezed out a few drops of blood onto the vellum. As soon as contact was made, the Annon Sutra emitted a dark flash and seemingly absorbed the blood into itself. Then, new words began emerging on its surface:

“I think I’ve uncovered the Annon Sutra’s secret! Based on my experiment, I believe that my blood is capable of invoking its power. How wonderful! In the future, I should be able to make some inquiries to avoid the dangers ahead and grow my strength, all at the meager cost of some blood.”

“Still, I have a question. Is this truly the extent of the Annon Sutra’s secrets?”

“I knew it. This is incredible!” Ye Qing slapped his thigh in excitement after reading the passage. Assuming he hadn’t grossly misinterpreted the Annon Sutra’s meaning, it was suggesting that he could pay a blood toll to exchange for answers from now on.

The last line on the Annon Sutra left him feeling a bit chilly though. He also wondered why the wandering Daoist priest would sell something so clearly extraordinary to his parents.

Maybe he never found out its true power?

Or maybe he’s plotting some sort of scheme?

Ye Qing’s head was starting to hurt again from all the question marks sprouting over his head. Even his initial good mood was slowly but surely being overcast by gloom. Eventually, he rubbed his forehead one last time before pushing it all to the back of his mind. “There’s no way I can rid myself of the Annon Sutra right now, and there’s nothing I can do even if that Daoist priest is scheming something. In other words, whatever comes will come, so there’s no point thinking about it until then. Yes, I should just focus on solving the crisis at hand!”

Speaking of which, the temporary solution provided by the Annon Sutra was undeniably excellent. As the defenders of the village, the watchmen were well-respected among their society. Although Chen Zheng was one of the three esteemed martial artists in August Hill Village, even he did not have the right to interfere with their business.

Furthermore, the watchmen was commanded by an equally strong martial artist, so Chen Zheng would not be able to coerce them to his will.

Of course, joining the watchmen did not mean he was rid of his problems forever. In fact, it was highly probable that his life would be in great danger. The watchmen weren't just responsible for guarding the village from Strangers, they frequently went on expeditions to curb the Stranger population in the vicinity of the village as well. This meant that he would be fighting those terrifying creatures directly.

Even so, he would rather die to a Stranger than succumb to Chen Zheng's schemes. Joining the watchmen would also give him the opportunity to learn martial arts. It was the only way he could grow stronger and save himself once and for all. With the Annon Sutra in hand, he might yet be able to turn his seemingly hopeless situation around.

"That's the plan then. I'll apply to join the watchmen first thing in the morning!"

When Ye Qing finally relaxed after sorting out his problems, he abruptly remembered that he was still tired, hungry, and in pain. So, he tucked away the Annon Sutra and forced himself to shamble over to the kitchen despite his aches. After warming the food Cheng Hui had brought him and shoving it all down his throat, he went back to his bed and fell into a deep slumber.

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The next day, Ye Qing got out of bed and went to the training ground at the break of dawn. It wasn't long before he arrived at his destination and saw a dozen youngsters training their hearts out while wielding an assortment of swords and sabers. Giant beads of sweat rolled down their foreheads and sparkled like diamonds in the growing light.

"Your lower half must be steady, your back must be straight, and your punches must be infused with strength! You must be like a tiger galloping down a hill to defend its domain from all manner of predators! If you cannot accomplish this much, then how can you hope to kill a Stranger? Show me strength, dammit! Strength!"

A well-built, stern-faced man in his forties was standing at the edge of the training ground with his hands clasped behind his back. Every time they made a mistake—which was quite often—he would rebuke them and give corrective instructions.

The trainer's name was Lin Hu. He was the captain of the watchmen and one of the three esteemed martial artists of August Hill Village.

"Are you feeling better, Ye Qing?" Lin Hu noticed Ye Qing and greeted him first.

"Much better. Thanks for the concern, captain!"

Ye Qing was going to say more when he suddenly felt a wave of pressure. His senses screamed as if he was facing down a tiger, and the blood drained from his face so fast that a small cough escaped his lips. It was because he had entered the captain's range.

Lin Hu furrowed his brow when he saw his reaction. "You may be better, but you're certainly not healed. Why are you running about when you should be resting instead?"

The watchmen captain wasn't trying to be loud, but his voice washed over Ye Qing like a gale and caused his ears to ring anyway. Ye Qing scratched his left ear before replying in a quiet voice, "I came to see you, captain!"

Lin Hu looked puzzled. "Go on."

"I would like to join the watchmen!" Ye Qing said directly.

"What?"

Lin Hu was having a hard time believing his ears. A watchman's life was terribly risky. Almost every day, one or more watchmen would be injured or killed. Barring a handful of permanent personnel, most of its members consisted of conscripted villagers who were chosen via a rotation system. Not only that, the conscription was only temporary. It was no wonder Lin Hu was surprised to receive a volunteer at all.

The youngsters at the training ground had paused their training as well. They were all staring curiously at Ye Qing and whispering to each other.

Suddenly, Lin Hu glared at the youngsters and roared, "The hell are you people looking at? Get back to your training! You're not allowed to rest until you've learned the 'Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation'!"

The youngsters immediately snapped out of their idle chatter and shrank away like frightened quails. Training resumed not a second later.

Lin Hu turned back to Ye Qing and asked in a much kinder voice, "Are you sure about this, Ye Qing? You do understand what it means to join the watchman, don't you?"

Ye Qing nodded. "I do. I understand I'll be risking life and limb by joining the watchmen. Even so, I am not afraid, so please..."

Lin Hu mulled over the request for a bit before nodding. "Very well. It so happens that the watchmen are in need of new blood, so I have no reason to turn you away."

The captain had an inkling why Ye Qing had volunteered to join the watchmen; he had heard of the conflict between Chen Zheng and him. Lin Hu had nothing but scorn to offer the despicable bastard, but Chen Zheng was also one of the only three esteemed

martial artists in the village. There was nothing he could do to stop the man unless he crossed the line.

That said, he didn't mind offering Ye Qing an olive branch. It was also a fact that the watchmen were sorely understaffed right now. For the past few months, the Strangers had been attacking humans non-stop like they had gone insane. Many watchmen had been seriously injured or killed because of this madness. It was why they needed fresh blood now more than ever.

In fact, the youngsters training on the training ground right now were their latest conscripts. They would be running patrols and performing guard duties after just a few days of basic training.

"Thank you!" Ye Qing replied gratefully.

Lin Hu nodded. "Normally, this is the part where I order you to join your fellow brothers pronto, but that would be unreasonable seeing as you're still recovering. You may come back after you've regained your health."

Chapter 3: Sea of Blood, Sarcophagus

Bang!

A sudden bang startled Ye Qing so much he nearly jumped. When he looked, he realized that Lin Hu had kicked off the ground and was shooting toward the village entrance like an arrow. He reached his fellow watchmen in just the blink of an eye.

What incredible speed! Ye Qing swallowed as he stared at Lin Hu's back. That speed, that power. Assuming that Chen Zheng was on the same level as Lin Hu, he had a long way to go before he could even begin to plot a reversal.

"What happened?" Lin Hu barked harshly as soon as he arrived at the village entrance.

"C-captain... B-behind us..." A terrified watchman stuttered out a response.

Lin Hu did not wait for the watchman to finish before taking one step forward and appearing on the village walls. Then, he stared at the distant sky with a severe expression on his face.

A moment ago, the sky was still light blue and clear like a tranquil lake. Now, an ominous red had consumed over half of the horizon. It looked similar to the fiery kiss of sunset, but it was so much redder that Lin Hu could not help but think of the color of fresh blood.

"Shit. Everyone, get back to your homes this instant!" the captain roared.

Maybe it was a coincidence, but the bloody crimson in the sky suddenly shuddered almost as if it was reacting to the captain's shout. The next second, it churned violently and started flooding toward August Hill Village like an angry god.

It might actually be a literal sea of blood. Whatever blue that still remained in the sky was swiftly overtaken by ominous red as the powerful, stifling, terrifying presence of something unspeakable washed over the entire village. It was immediately followed by the thick stench of blood.

As it turned out, the pungent odor was even more extraordinary than it looked. All villagers who failed to return to their houses before the blood stench flooded the village suddenly slowed down and began bleeding from their pores. Their eyes grew bloodshot, and their expressions slowly subsided into blank apathy.

"Snap out of it! Get back to your homes, NOW!" Lin Hu shouted at the dazed villagers, but he was powerless to help them.

"What the hell is this?" Ye Qing exclaimed in shock as he broke into a run toward the nearest house. However, he had only taken a few steps when the horrible smell assaulted his nostrils and robbed him of his faculties instantly. He then started bleeding like the other villagers as well.

It was at this moment the Annon Sutra emitted a dark glow. As if drawn by an invisible force, Ye Qing's blood crawled over to the vellum before vanishing into the material. A few seconds later, its dark glow grew bigger until it wrapped tightly around Ye Qing like a bubble. It was only then the young man slowly regained his consciousness.

"That was too close!" Ye Qing heaved out a sigh of relief when he realized what just happened. After brushing his fingers across the Annon Sutra tucked beneath his shirt, he made a mad dash for a nearby haystack. He didn't want anyone to notice that he was glowing like a black light bulb, and it wasn't like the blood stench could affect him any longer. He dove head first into the haystack and reoriented himself to face toward the village entrance, revealing only a pair of eyes.

Meanwhile, the sea of blood in the sky had grown even bigger and scarier than before. It was now towering over the entire August Hill Village and dying everything bright red. It looked like it might crash down on them at any moment.

Swoosh! Swoosh!

Two silhouettes dashed across the streets like the wind and appeared next to Lin Hu. They looked up and stared intently at the sea of blood above their heads.

The newcomers were a man and a woman. The man was about thirty years old with an imposing build and a handsome face. His appearance would've been perfect if not for a triangular eye shape that gave him a cold, almost viper-like visage.

The woman was much older than the man. She had dirty white hair, saggy skin and a hunched back. Well into her fifties, she could've easily been mistaken for your stereotypical grandma if not for the fact that she was ten times lighter on her feet than most of her fellow villagers.

The duo were none other than the other two martial artists in August Hill Village besides Lin Hu. The man was Chen Zheng, and the woman was called Xia Ling. However, almost everyone in the village addressed her as Granny Xia.

"What in the world is that thing?" Chen Zheng asked with a deep frown as he attempted to make sense of the terrifying pressure looming over them.

Lin Hu shook his head. "I have no idea."

Granny Xia coughed softly over her walking stick as something sharp and steely flickered in her cloudy eyes. "It doesn't matter what it is, it's clear we're no match for it. I suggest that we bring out the Heavens' Eye!"

"Agreed."

Neither men objected to her words because it was the plain truth. They were no match for the sea of blood.

Thud.

Suddenly, an odd, muffled thud resounded from the sea of blood. It almost sounded like someone was knocking on a slab of stone. The next moment, the sea of blood parted to reveal a single sarcophagus.

The sarcophagus was greenish black in color and covered in intricate, arcane carvings. It exuded such an air of antiquity that it had to have existed for thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of years.

"It's that sarcophagus from...!" Lin Hu blurted in disbelief as all the blood drained away from his face.

"I thought it couldn't move? How the hell did it come all the way here?" Chen Zheng was just as pale as the captain was. Large beads of sweat were forming on his forehead as well.

Thud.

The sarcophagus shuddered ominously once more, and the next thing they knew, the lid slowly began to slide open with an unpleasant screech. The same thought crossed everyone's mind at the same time,

“Is there actually a body inside the sarcophagus? If there is, who could it be?”

The more the sarcophagus opened, the thicker the blood stench in the air became. There was even a tinge of something rotten. All three martial artists started bleeding from their pores as a terrifying aura encompassed what felt like the world itself.

“It must not be allowed to emerge from the sarcophagus! Otherwise, we’ll all die!” shouted Granny Xia as she abruptly sank into the floor and shattered the stone beneath her feet.

Both men agreed with her assessment. Together with Granny Xia, they formed a strange hand seal before firing a beam of light each at the ancient bronze mirror hung in front of the village entrance.

“Please answer our call, Heavens’ Eye!”

Hum...

Runes shaped like flowers, birds, fishes and insects suddenly came alive and swam all over the ordinary-looking bronze mirror. At the same time, the mirror itself began shining like the sun and emitting an epic halo of light.

Sizzle...

Over half of the sea of blood was vaporized just like that. The farther the light spread, the smaller the sea of blood became.

Creeeeeeeeeeeak!

It wasn’t over though. As if angered by the resistance, the sarcophagus’ lid was violently shoved aside before a spotlessly white hand slowly stretched out into the open. Then, it pressed downward in their direction.

A terrifying, crushing pressure pressed down on the entire August Hill Village in an instant. It felt like the sky itself was falling on top of them. Breath caught in their throat, and none could summon even the tiniest will to resist.

It was at this moment the ancient mirror grew brighter and hotter until finally, it fired a gigantic column of pure white at the descending palm.

Boooooom...

An explosion that was beyond description took place. There was no sound, but Ye Qing suddenly felt like an invisible boulder had hit him squarely in the chest. A mouthful of blood burst out of his lips before he realized what happened.

Granny Xia, Lin Hu and Chen Zheng were no exception. They too spat out a mouthful of blood before they hurriedly moved deeper into the village, their faces as white as a sheet.

A long time later, the storm of wind and fire that encompassed the entire sky gradually subsided. Both the sea of blood and the sarcophagus looked a little transparent as if they had suffered tremendous damage. They quickly vanished into the horizon after that.

“Phew... It’s finally gone!” Both Lin Hu and Chen Zheng heaved out a long sigh of relief.

“The Stranger in the sarcophagus has grown even stronger. I can hardly believe it took a full hit from Heavens’ Eye and survived!”

In stark contrast to the men’s relief, Granny Xia looked grim and worried. A hint of distress peeked through her wizened features when she glanced at the ancient mirror that had saved all their lives. It was now as dim and lifeless as an ordinary mirror.

“Holy shit! Is that what they call a Stranger?” Ye Qing muttered under his breath as he tried to calm his racing heartbeat. Having witnessed everything from his vantage point, he was honestly surprised that he and everyone else was still alive. The Stranger was just that scary. When the sarcophagus opened, and that hand had come into view, he almost thought he would pass on to the next life there and then. If it wasn’t for the mirror, that hand most assuredly would’ve flattened August Hill Village like a pancake.

Speaking of the mirror, who would’ve thought it was this powerful? mused Ye Qing. The ancient mirror was usually hung in front of the village entrance, and he had always believed it to be an ordinary ornament until today.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

Suddenly, Ye Qing noticed that a blade of grass in front of him was stained with something. It looked like a dark red crystal under the sunlight.

“Is this... blood?!”

The blood didn’t just look extraordinary, it was emanating an indescribable presence that even a common man like Ye Qing could pick up. At first, he wanted to get the hell away from it as soon as possible. Then, he realized what it was and perked up. “This is the blood from that Stranger in the sarcophagus, isn’t it? It has to be!”

The blood must’ve been spilled when the mirror attacked the Stranger, and it just so happened to have landed on his haystack.

Ye Qing licked his lips greedily as he took a moment to survey his surroundings. Once he confirmed that no one was looking his way, he immediately fished out a small salt

container from his pocket, dumped all of its contents, and held it carefully before the grass tip. When he was ready, he gave the grass a feather-light tap and held his breath. The blood slowly slid off the blade before plopping into the bottle, leaving no trace behind.

The deed was done, but Ye Qing was still frowning. It was because the blood was still radiating a potent presence like the container didn't even exist. How was he going to bring it home like this? Forget the three martial artists at the village entrance, even a villager would notice its presence if they were close enough. He would be in deep trouble if people found out that he was hiding the blood of a Stranger.

He could not discard the blood, however. It might just be what he needed to overcome his personal crisis.

"Oh right! The Annon Sutra!"

Ye Qing immediately pulled out the vellum from under his shirt and wrapped it around the bottle. It worked. The blood's presence abruptly vanished like it was never there.

"I knew it! Thank the heavens!" Ye Qing exclaimed in delight before shoving the items underneath his shirt and close to his heart once more. It was only then he let out a sigh of relief.

"Mmmrrrrgh..."

Suddenly, he heard a strange noise and felt a disgusting odor assaulting his nostrils yet again. He looked up instinctively and found himself staring at a blood-drenched face.

"Argh!"

Recognition struck Ye Qing even as a sharp cry escaped his lips. It belonged to a fellow villager who had failed to escape into the house in time. Not only was he covered from head to toe in blood, he was reaching out to Ye Qing as if trying to grab him!

Ye Qing subconsciously snatched a rock from the ground and smashed it against the villager's temple. Then, he charged forward and knocked the man to the ground.

The brutish assault would've incapacitated most people, but the villager beneath him struggled fiercely as if he couldn't feel any pain. He even opened his mouth and bit down on Ye Qing's arm!

Chapter 4: Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation

Rip!

The villager beneath Ye Qing ripped off a chunk of flesh from his arm and elicited a pained groan, but instead of fear, the intense pain had brought out his inner aggression instead. Eyes turning bloodshot with fury, Ye Qing raised his rock and brought it down on the villager's head again!

Pssh!

There was a disgusting crunch as the villager's skull caved inward, spewing blood and brain matter everywhere. However, the villager continued to bite and tear away at the young man like he couldn't feel any pain whatsoever. Furious, Ye Qing jammed his wounded left arm into the villager's throat and redoubled his efforts, whaling away at the bastard's head like they were sworn enemies.

At first, the villager's struggles were fierce and unrelenting. Eventually though, it weakened more and more until he ceased moving entirely. Still, Ye Qing dared not relax the pressure and continued to smash the villager's head with relentless ferocity.

"Enough, enough! He's already dead!" A gentle voice suddenly broke out behind Ye Qing. "You're going to turn his head into mush at this rate."

Caught completely off guard, Ye Qing jumped to his feet and spun around to face the speaker. When he saw who it was, he let out an audible sigh of relief before launching into a hasty explanation, "Granny Xia, this isn't what it looks like. I—"

Granny Xia interrupted him before he could finish, "I'm not blaming you. This poor man has been contaminated by the blood qi and turned into a Red Walker who knows naught but to attack the living. I would've killed him even if you'd spared his life."

As she was speaking, Lin Hu and Chen Zheng were running around the village and eliminating every Red Walker they came across. Although the mindless creatures were immune to pain, they were unable to put up even a token resistance against the two martial artists. It took them just a dozen breaths to wipe out every last Red Walker in the village and paint the streets red.

"You're Ye Rong's boy, aren't you?" Granny Xia asked in a kind voice.

"That's right. My name is Ye Qing!" Ye Rong was his father's name.

Granny Xia let out a sorrowful sigh. "Ye Rong. Oh, Ye Rong. I still remember holding him in my arms when he was a wee little boy. It's truly a shame that he's no longer with us. By the way, you're eighteen this year, aren't you?"

Ye Qing's face grew saddened as well. "That I am, Granny Xia."

Granny Xia stretched her wrinkled skin into a smile. "I'm glad to see you've grown into a fine man. Anyway, I shan't delay you any longer. The village isn't safe yet, and you look like you could use some rest. Don't come out again until the coast is clear."

Ye Qing nodded strongly. "I will, Granny Xia. Thank you, and goodbye!"

He gave her a wave before throwing away his rock and running off in haste.

After Ye Qing was gone, Granny Xia circled around the haystack he was hiding in a moment ago and wondered, "Strange. I'm sure I felt a potent presence in this direction. Why is it gone now?"

A short while later, she shook her head and chuckled self-derisively. "I guess it's just my imagination. I am an old lady now."

It was at this moment Lin Hu and Chen Zheng walked up to Granny Xia. They had taken out every Red Walker in the village. "It's done, Granny Xia. What do we do now?"

Granny Xia's tone turned heavy and solemn. "The sarcophagus is the one entombed in Jade Dragon Lake, no? Despite its fearsome power, it was never a problem for us because it does not go beyond the lake. One might even say it's perfectly harmless as long as you do not enter its domain.

"Unfortunately, that isn't the case anymore. If not for the Heavens' Eye, I doubt that anyone would've lived to tell the tale. There is no way we can suppress this Stranger, so I suggest that we report this to the Pacification Bureau in Anyang and request their assistance as soon as possible."

Lin Hu and Chen Zheng agreed immediately. "You won't hear an objection from us."

Granny Xia nodded before continuing, "One more thing. The Heavens' Eye has used up all of its power to repel the Stranger, and it will be three months at least before it recovers. In other words, August Hill Village will not have an ace in the hole until then. We must be ready for anything."

"Worry not, Granny Xia. We understand," Lin Hu and Chen Zheng replied solemnly.

The Heavens' Eye was the national relic of Chu. It was said to possess limitless power and the ability to keep vigil over the entire realm, suppressing any and all Strangers that fell within its watchful gaze. Of course, the ancient mirror hung in front of August Hill Village was not the genuine article. It was just an imitation that contained a sliver of the Heavens' Eye power. Not only that, it took months to recharge every time it was used up.

Every prefecture, commandery, county and village in Chu owned an imitation of the Heavens' Eye. It was to be used only in times of great crisis. Although August Hill

Village had managed to overcome their crisis, it had also cost them their greatest trump card. It was a terrible loss to say the least.

“I’m going back to make the report now. I trust that the two of you can handle the aftermath?” Granny Xia asked.

“No worries, Granny Xia. Just leave it to us.”

After the old woman was gone, Chen Zheng shot Lin Hu an enigmatic smile and asked, “I heard you recruited Ye Qing into the watchmen, brother Lin?”

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Lin Hu replied stiffly and mockingly, “You are very well-informed, brother Chen!”

Chen Zheng did not take offense though. He continued to wear a sunny grin on his face as he explained, “Please don’t misunderstand. I just happened to hear about it in passing.”

“...”

“You and I are two of the only three martial artists of August Hill Village, brother Lin. Hundreds of lives are counting on us to ensure their survival in this harsh world. Therefore, I beseech you not to spoil our good relationship over an insignificant matter. That will not benefit you, me, or August Hill Village, don’t you agree?”

“Hrmph. You don’t get to tell me what I can or cannot do!”

Lin Hu knew that Chen Zheng was warning him to stay out of his feud with Ye Qing, of course. He had even laid bare the consequences that would follow should he ignore his warning.

The worst part of it was that he couldn’t say that he disagreed with Chen Zheng.

Chen Zheng laughed. “Of course I don’t, brother Lin. I’m just giving you advice, is all. I will be happy enough if you will sit on it.”

That was all he said before he turned away to leave.

A displeased Lin Hu glared daggers at Chen Zheng’s back. “In that case, I have some advice for you as well, *brother* Chen. Ye Qing is a member of the watchmen now. You best not do something that’ll cross the line!”

“What was it you said again just now? You don’t get to tell me what I can or cannot do either,” Chen Zheng responded without looking back. A sneer crossed his lips as he stared at the floor of corpses beneath him,

“Do you truly believe you’re safe just because you’ve joined the watchmen and attached yourself to Lin Hu, Ye Qing? How naive. You were dead from the moment I made up my mind to kill you!”

“Life is cheap. The only one we can rely on is ourselves.”

“Unfortunately for you, Ye Qing, you do not possess the power to change your fate!”

.....

Ye Qing had no idea about the conversation that took place between Lin Hu and Chen Zheng. The second he returned home, he immediately snatched the teapot on the table and took two long gulps directly from the spout. It wasn’t until the cool, bitter tang of tea had permeated his entire mouth that he finally began to calm down.

It couldn’t be helped. Today had been a shocking day in more ways than one. Although he already knew from his host’s memories that this world was exceedingly dangerous, he still wasn’t prepared for the sea of blood, the Stranger in the sarcophagus, or the Heavens’ Eye at all. The world was just so exciting and dangerous he could die, literally.

“This world is just too hostile. I need to get stronger as soon as possible.”

A bitter smile spread across Ye Qing’s lips. If it wasn’t for the Annon Sutra, the blood qi might have contaminated him enough to turn into a Red Walker already. Furthermore, he had already joined the watchmen. Once his injuries were healed, he would have to join them on expeditions and fight against all kinds of Strangers. Without strength, he was as defenseless as a babe before those things.

That was why he needed to grow stronger. It was either that, or die.

When Ye Qing felt that he had rested enough, he grabbed two cornbreads from the kitchen and swallowed them with some cold water. He didn’t need to be full; he just needed to have enough strength to perform what was to come. After pulling a chair over to the entrance and taking a seat, he began reading the “Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation” he had received from Lin Hu.

Sunlight pierced through the thick clouds and cast a weak glow on the young man’s youthful but resolute countenance. At that moment, he almost looked like he was glowing.

“I see. The first step to cultivation is the Body Tempering stage!”

It took Ye Qing about an incense stick to pour through the entire manual from start to finish. According to the text, all warriors must begin their cultivation journey by tempering their body, also known as the Body Tempering stage. Warriors at this stage were known as Reforged. First, they must temper their limbs. Next, they must temper

their torso. Then, they would temper their skin, and finally, they would temper their internal organs. They must start small before they could move onto the big, and they must complete the externals first before moving onto the internals. It was the proper way to activate one's strength and vigor. If the warrior was successful, then their skin would harden, their flesh and bone would become strong, their vigor would be unending, and their strength would be extraordinary.

The “Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation” was precisely what Ye Qing needed to begin his cultivation journey; a Body Tempering stage cultivation art. At first glance the cultivation art only had seven forms, but each form was made up of seven minor variations. In other words, there was a total of forty-nine forms in the “Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation”. As a whole, they represented a harmonious cycle that tempered the body, strengthened the muscles and bones, and enlarged the strength and vigor.

“Let’s start with the first form!”

Without further ado, Ye Qing rose to his feet and began emulating the first illustration on the paper. It wasn’t easy though. Almost as soon as he twisted his body into the correct position, he started hearing strange pops and screeches that sounded like his bones cracking, and his muscles rubbing viciously against one another. It only got worse as he moved on from one minor variation to another. Despite the blood draining away from his face and large beads of sweat forming on his forehead, he forced himself to ignore the pain and soldiered on.

When Ye Qing finally went through all seven minor variations of the first form, he was drenched in sweat like he had just crawled out of a river. His clothes were completely soaked through, and there wasn’t a single part of his body—his internal organs, his bones, his muscles, and even his skin—that wasn’t on fire. There was also an undercurrent of numbness.

Ye Qing tried practicing the second form after completing the first, but he immediately felt like he was being crushed and molded by a giant hand. The pain had climbed to a new crescendo, and blood was starting to leak out of his pores again. If someone were to pass by his house right now, they might just mistake him as another Red Walker.

“Huff... huff... Dammit, this body is just too weak.” Ye Qing hurriedly stopped his training before letting out a long sigh.

At first glance, the “Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation” looked fairly easy to practice. In reality, each form, each minor variation affected the skin, the muscles, the bones, the arteries and veins, and even the internal organs in its entirety. When a warrior had gone through all forty-nine forms and completed a full cycle, they would have tempered every part of their body one time.

With enough practice, the warrior would discover that their bodily functions and organs were much better than before. If they managed to reach the adept level, then their skin

would become as tough as iron, their muscles and bones would turn as hard as steel; their vigor rivaling that of a tiger's, and their strength comparable to that of a fiery stallion.

Unfortunately, Ye Qing's body was just too weak to withstand the tempering effects of the "Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation", not to mention that he was still recovering from his injuries. Forget completing a full cycle, he couldn't even begin the second form without feeling like he was about to tear himself apart. He could only take it one step at a time.

In fact, Ye Qing wasn't the only one who found themselves in the same predicament. Most of the villagers could only practice the cultivation art slowly and methodically as well.

"No, this isn't going to work!"

Ye Qing didn't mind slow and steady, but he just didn't have enough time. At this rate, it would take him two or three months to complete a full cycle without collapsing, and over a full year to reach the adept level and become an adept Reforged. He would probably be dead by then.

Ye Qing sighed wistfully. "If only I have one of those miraculous medicines that can swiftly replenish both strength and vigor..."

According to the manual, the practitioner was strongly encouraged to consume strength and/or vigor replenishing medicines so as to shorten their recovery time and hasten their progress. The problem was, he didn't have any!

Suddenly, Ye Qing perked up and looked down at his shirt. "Wait. Why don't I ask the Annon Sutra about this? Maybe it has a solution to offer?"

Chapter 5: Strange Blood

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Ye Qing took out the Annon Sutra and put the container holding the mysterious blood on the table. When he unfurled the vellum, he noticed something odd. *That's strange. I'm pretty sure that rune wasn't glowing before.*

One of the strange runes on the Annon Sutra was emanating a grayish glow.

Is it because I killed a Red Walker earlier? Yes, that has to be it!

Last night, a rune had lit up after the yin spirit was dead. Today, the same thing happened again after he killed the Red Walker. It made sense that the ignition of these runes were tied to the Strangers he killed.

I wonder what they're for? Never mind, that can wait. My question is more important right now.

Ye Qing bit his finger and squeezed out a drop of blood. Then, he asked, "How can I increase my cultivation speed?"

The blood drop wriggled on the vellum as if it was alive before vanishing into the material. But contrary to Ye Qing's expectations, no words appeared on the Annon Sutra at all.

"Why isn't it working? It's not broken, is it? No, that doesn't make sense!" Ye Qing racked his brain with a frown. "Maybe it just needs more blood?"

A moment of hesitation later, Ye Qing went to the kitchen and grabbed a knife. When he returned, he gritted his teeth and cut open his finger, spilling a steady stream of blood on the Annon Sutra. The blood wriggled, and the vellum began glowing once more. Four or five breaths later, a familiar blood red text finally came into view:

"What should I do?"

"My body is too weak to withstand the effects of a Body Tempering stage cultivation art, but I do not have the option to grow at a slow and steady pace. If I do not become strong as soon as possible, it won't be long before I succumb to the Strangers haunting the wilderness, or the enemies lurking within the village. What should I do? Can I really do nothing but wait to die?"

"No, I'm not out of ideas yet. Perhaps the dragon-serpent runes on the Annon Sutra may offer me a solution."

"... Okay, the dragon-serpent runes on the Annon Sutra may be able to help me. But how? What do I do exactly?" Ye Qing blinked dumbfoundedly. "Finish your sentence, man. Don't you know it's bad manners to leave someone hanging?"

Ye Qing subconsciously put his right hand on the gray rune as he complained. That turned out to be the right thing to do. The rune flashed once before disappearing into his body.

Boom!

An immense amount of energy filled with strength and vigor detonated inside him. Before he realized what was happening, it spread throughout his body and filled him with staggering warmth. His wounds, his weakness, and even the invisible damage that had been accumulating inside his body were all gone. However, there were far, far more energy in the rune than was necessary to restore him to full health. It began charging all over the place like a living creature, smacking its shapeless head against the confines of his physical body until his eyes turned bloodshot, and his face became as red as an

apple. Blood jetted out of his nostrils like he was in a comic, and his skin began cracking inch by inch while oozing red blood.

The blood itself was overflowing with vitality. His cracked skin was also healing, breaking, healing, then breaking again in an endless cycle. Ye Qing understood at once that this was happening because he had absorbed too much vitality. Just like how a common man might die if he ate solid food after a prolonged period of starvation, he was suffering because his body was frail, and he didn't know how to control the bursting vitality.

"Oh dear. I'm not about to die from 'excessive intake', am I?" Ye Qing chuckled helplessly. He really didn't want to die like this. He would become the biggest laughingstock of all time if he did.

"Wait, the 'Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation'! Now's the perfect time to temper my body, isn't it?"

Earlier, he was troubled because he lacked the strength and vigor to practice the Body Tempering stage cultivation art properly. But now, he was literally bursting with it. If now wasn't the time to cultivate his power, then when?

Ye Qing was a man of action, so he immediately rose to his feet and emulated the first form of the "Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation" once more. Even as he fell into position, he could feel the energy in his body slowing down and flowing in a more controlled fashion. At the very least, it wasn't barging all over the place like a headless fly anymore. It was relieving in more ways than one.

Unlike his first attempt, Ye Qing was able to finish the first form without any problems whatsoever. It was the same when he moved on to the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh form, completing a full cycle. By the time he was done, Ye Qing felt like every part of his body had become healthier. His strength was also much bigger than before.

"That's what I'm talking about! Again!"

Ye Qing was ecstatic. Most people tempered their body starting from their limbs, their torso, and finally their internal organs. It wasn't because they didn't want to temper them all at the same time, but because they simply did not have the strength and vigor to do it. However, he had the opposite "problem". He had so much energy in him he was in danger of exploding if he didn't use them up somehow. It was why he could temper every part of his body at the same time.

Not about to waste this golden opportunity or wait for his body to explode, Ye Qing immediately went back to the first form and resumed his training. He was so absorbed in the activity that he did not notice that the container beside the Annon Sutra wobbling suddenly as if something was trying to break out.

Clatter... clatter... clatter...

A moment later, the container wobbled one last time before an eerie red seeped out into the open. It looked both evil and terrifying.

Bang!

The next second, the container abruptly exploded into smithereens, and a single drop of dark red blood shot toward Ye Qing. It entered his body before he even realized what just happened.

“The hell?”

Ye Qing frowned when felt something foreign entering his body, but before he could react a cold, dark, evil, terrible and deathly energy exploded within him and consumed all of his blood in an instant.

Blood made up approximately ten percent of an adult's weight. To lose it all was to wither away until one was nothing but skin and bones. That was what had happened to Ye Qing. A deathly aura surrounded him. If not for the fact that he was still breathing, Ye Qing certainly could've been mistaken for a shriveled corpse.

“What the fuck! What's going on? Why is this happening?!”

Ye Qing could feel his vitality being greedily devoured by something. At the same time, images of death, slaughter, profanity and darkness were contaminating his mind and dulling his consciousness. If not for the dragon-serpent rune's immense energy working tirelessly to repair his body and restore his vitality, he would be dead already.

This could not go on though. The unknown entity eating him from the inside out seemed to possess a bottomless appetite. No matter how much new blood and vitality were being produced, it had devoured it all like a blackhole. At this rate, he was going to die!

“Wait a second, where's the container? Is it the blood?”

Ye Qing was panicking when he noticed that the container bearing the mysterious blood was gone. He immediately put two and two together and felt his heart clenching in horror.

“Fuck! I should've known this would happen!”

Ye Qing was overflowing with bitter regret. He would not have ended up in this situation if he hadn't gotten greedy and taken the blood home. Now, he was reaping what he sowed.

“What do I do? I don't want to die!”

Ye Qing abruptly slapped himself in the head and forced himself to calm down. Regret would not change anything. He could bask in self-recrimination all he wanted after he had saved himself.

After shaking his head strongly in an attempt to regain some clarity, he took a step forward and snatched the Annon Sutra from the table. Even in his addled state, he knew that it was the only thing that might save his life!

The second he made contact with the vellum, the dragon-serpent runes on its surface shook and swam around like they were alive. At the same time, an icy sensation entered his body and slowly pushed away the negative emotions that were raging inside his head. A couple more seconds later, his initial panic had subsided as well.

“Don’t fail me now, Annon Sutra...”

Ye Qing bit his finger and attempted to squeeze out some blood, but to his surprise, nothing came out. Unwilling to believe this was happening, he chewed his finger until he damned ripped it in half, but still he wasn’t able to squeeze out even a drop of blood.

“...”

How is this possible?! I... Right,? the damn thing is sucking up all my blood! Even the new blood is gone before they can enter my finger!

The Annon Sutra hadn’t failed him, but he had failed the Annon Sutra. What the flying fuck was he supposed to do now?

Not yet! It’s not over yet! This is a cultivation universe, and the blood is inside my body, right? What if I try refining it?

Since the Annon Sutra was useless at the moment, he had no choice but to try something else. He had never been a giver-upper in his first life, and he wasn’t about to start in his second life. Based on his rich experience in fiction over the years, blood that contained vast and mysterious powers like this one could usually be refined and absorbed. If the characters in those novels could pull off such a feat, then why not him?

Without further ado, Ye Qing took a pose and began practicing the “Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation”. To his utmost delight, it worked. Almost as soon as he made his move, the blood flowing through his veins suddenly became much louder, and a small portion of the vitality and energy that were being pulled into the blood suddenly stopped in their tracks. It was because the cultivation art had intercepted them to temper his tattered body.

“It’s working!”

Greatly encouraged by the success, Ye Qing hurriedly moved onto the next form. At first, the cultivation art could only intercept a small portion of his vitality and energy. But after he went through a total of forty-nine cycles, he was able to wrestle most of them back under his control. The corruptive power of the blood was also much weaker than before.

“Oh shit! The dragon-serpent rune is about to run out of power!”

Unfortunately, Ye Qing still wasn't out of danger. The dragon-serpent rune had been feeding the blood and over fifty cycles of cultivation, so it was only natural that it would be close to running out of power. However, Ye Qing hadn't finished refining the blood yet, and without a steady supply of vitality and energy to keep it at bay, he was still going to be sucked dry and killed in the end. All of his efforts would've been for naught.

“Wait! I still have another rune!”

He had ignited one rune when he killed the yin spirit, and another when he took out the Red Walker. It was exactly what he needed to save his life.

The heavens haven't abandoned me yet!

Ye Qing immediately slapped his hand over the gray rune. The next second, it slipped into his body and erupted into a tremendous vortex of energy, shielding him from the blood's influence once more.

Ye Qing immediately started cultivating the “Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation” again. He did not dare to waste even a second.

One time...

Five times...

Ten times...

Twenty times...

Like a tireless machine, Ye Qing practiced the Body-Tempering cultivation art again and again. Slowly but surely, his shriveled, decaying body began to fill up. His muscles bulged, his vitality was restored, and the aura of death that had surrounded him up until this point was gone before he knew it.

That wasn't all. The false death experience had completed his cultivation in a way Ye Qing couldn't possibly imagine. To have “died” once and come back to life as if reborn, his skin, flesh, bone, blood and internal organs were tougher and stronger than they would've been. More importantly, the corruptive power of the blood was steadily fading

thanks to his persistent effort. Even if he were to stop now, he wouldn't be in danger of dropping dead without warning anymore.

Rumble...

Around half a teatime [1] later, the corruptive power of the blood finally vanished. Something unexpected happened to him then. The refined blood abruptly merged with his blood and flooded him with heat, making him feel like his blood was boiling over a stove. At the same time, a vast, profound and terrible power he could not even describe washed over his whole body and filled him with strength.

“What incredible power!”

Ye Qing was as flushed as a boiled crab as every pore in his body opened and released a thin mist of blood. Like a blood red sun, he emitted so much heat and light that the entire room was dyed red.

Ye Qing was caught off guard at first. It wasn't every day you turned into a blood red sun after all. Then, he jumped in delight because he knew that the energy came from the mysterious blood. Previously, it was overflowing with powers of darkness, death, cold, extinction, and anything else that was in direct opposition to the concept of vitality. Now, all that was left was pure energy and the truest essence of its power.

The amount of energy contained within the drop of blood was easily greater than the two dragon-serpent runes combined, and that was before including the arcane essence. If he hadn't accidentally tempered his body once before the blood attacked him, the sheer amount of energy within the blood would have burst him like a balloon. Even now, his skin was cracking ominously and oozing blood all over the floor.

“Cough! Cough... Well, it'd be a shame not to put all this energy to good use. Time to grind like no tomorrow!” Ye Qing coughed as blood jetted out of his nose again. He wasn't going to die from “excessive intake” after all the shit he just went through!

Ye Qing wiped away his nosebleed and assumed a pose. Once more, he practiced the “Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation”.

“Hoo... hoo...”

His form was the fuel, and his body the furnace. Every time he moved, steam would rise from his flushed skin and float around him like a layer of mist. Bit by bit, his skin, flesh, blood, bone, and internal organs were reforged to become better than before. Some time during the cultivation, he lost track of time completely. It wasn't until sunlight flooded through narrow windows and illuminated the floor when a profound transformation came over Ye Qing. His skin and muscles abruptly became as hard as steel, his bones crackled and popped as loud as thunder, his blood rushed in his ears

like a river, and every contraction of his heart resonated like the rumble of a heavenly gong. A terrifying yet magnificent aura began rising from his body.

“Hmm!”