

Stranger Danger

#Chapter 11: Haven't I Told You? - Read Stranger Danger Chapter 11: Haven't I Told You?

Chapter 11: Haven't I Told You?

Crack crack crack!

The moment Ye Qing finished his sentence, his wounds began healing at a visible rate. His deformed shoulder blades abruptly regained its normal shape, his broken arm abruptly popped back into position, and every other wound on his body disappeared like they never happened.

"Hm... that Strange Artifact you have really is quite something," Fang Nianshui commented with a cold chuckle. "But you didn't think you're going to live just because your wounds are healed, did you?"

Before he even finished speaking, Fang Nianshui leaped into the air and brought down his saber with both hands. The overhead chop was fast and fierce, brutal and ruthless. Ye Qing could even hear what sounded like a tiger's roar from the man's form. He had no doubt that the attack would cut him in half if he allowed it to land.

It was about what he expected from the Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber. Ruthless and fierce, its practitioners were advised to execute its techniques with all-encompassing hatred and violence in mind. They must crush their foes like a bloody executioner would exterminate one's family to the nine generations.

Ye Qing did not avoid the deadly strike, however. He merely crossed his saber across his chest and waited for the inevitable clash.

Clang! There was a terrific impact as metal struck metal, but instead of blowing Ye Qing away, Fang Nianshui discovered in disbelief that he was the one who was blown away instead!

"Impossible... how do you have so much strength?"

It took Fang Nianshui a few steps to regain his footing after he landed on the ground. He was also bleeding from his palm and losing feeling in his saber arm. It was no wonder the man was shocked. He was an adept Reforged who had already begun to replace the qi in his dantian with true qi and was on his way to become a Qi Invoker. His strength was far greater than your average adept Reforged and equal to at least two fiery stallions. However, Ye Qing had still blown him away almost casually. The gap between their strength was like night and day!

“Haven’t I told you? I’m not a journeyman Reforged.”

While Fang Nianshui was still recovering from his shock, Ye Qing bent his knees slightly, circulated his vigor, and kicked off the ground so hard that a small pit was left behind. His saber was already in mid-swing to split Fang Nianshui in half.

Not having anticipated Ye Qing’s speed in the slightest, Fang Nianshui could only cross his saber in front of himself just like Ye Qing had done earlier and hope that it would be enough to weather the blow.

Boom!

A mighty boom shook the world as Fang Nianshui sank all the way to his knees. His arms were completely numb as well.

“Again!”

Ye Qing was nowhere spent despite the powerful attack. Muscles and veins writhing disturbingly like a can of worms, and blood simmering like red hot lava underneath his skin, he could have whaled away at Fang Nianshui at least dozens more times before he finally needed to catch his breath.

Another boom ensued as metal clashed against metal, but this time it was mixed with the sound of breaking bones. Fang Nianshui sank even deeper into the ground.

“Bastard!” Fang Nianshui let out an enraged scream before sweeping his saber at Ye Qing. At the same time, five tiger-like silhouettes appeared out of nowhere and jumped the young man from multiple directions.

Ye Qing didn’t dodge though. He continued to bring his saber down on Fang Nianshui’s head with unwavering determination. What did skill matter when he possessed enough strength to break it all?

Three of the five silhouettes were crushed into bits when they clashed against Ye Qing’s saber, but two managed to land on his arm and leg and bleed him. On the other hand, Fang Nianshui had managed to block his strike a third time. This would seem like a win for the hunter if not for the violent force behind Ye Qing’s saber pouring into his body like tidewater, shattering his arm bones and squeezing his internal organs tight.

“Pwack!”

Fang Nianshui abruptly spat out a mouthful of blood mixed with pieces of raw flesh. Face as pale as a sheet, he shot Ye Qing a baleful glare while uttering, “Even... even if you’re an adept Reforged, there’s no way you can be this strong!”

“Huh? Haven’t I told you before? I’m not just ‘any’ person. I have had godly strength since I was a babe!”

Although Ye Qing was talking, he hadn’t forgotten to move his hands. Again and again, he swung at Fang Nianshui’s head like he would hack the conniving assassin into itsy bitsy pieces. He might not know any saber technique, but he had overwhelming strength and vigor. If one overhead swing wasn’t enough to kill Fang Nianshui, then five would do it. If five overhead swings still wasn’t enough, then twenty would do it.

Read the most updated version of this novel and other amazing translated novels from the original source at [Innread.com]

“You think you’ve won just because you have godly strength, brat? I’ll show you my true power right now!” Fang Nianshui roared. As soon as he said this, he threw out a fiery red talisman that burst into flames and descended on top of Ye Qing like a net.

“That’s not goint to do anything!” declared Ye Qing with a disdainful snort. The fire talisman might look deadly, but it was only effective against Strangers who were afraid of fire. As for him, well, one swing of the saber was all he needed to cut the curtain of flames into two.

Unbeknownst to Ye Qing, a golden light had washed over Fang Nianshui’s saber while he was dealing with the fire talisman. The next second, the hunter swung his saber at Ye Qing’s descending blade and—*Crack!*—snapped it like a twig.

“Five Tigers Sever The Soul”

That wasn’t the end of Fang Nianshui’s counterattack. When the hunter brought his saber down again, Ye Qing felt as if an attack was coming from his left, right, front, back and center with deadly power at the same time. Moreover, the roar of the five tigers possessed a mind-bending quality that seemed intent on terrifying the victim with brute force, violence and bloodthirst.

Caught off guard and without a weapon, there was just no way Ye Qing could block the attack no matter what. He had no choice but to hug his head, protect his vitals as well as he could, and roll away from Fang Nianshui.

Ye Qing was fast, but the saber energies were even faster. They left five deep gashes on his body and spilled blood everywhere. The wound across his chest especially was so long and deep that one could vaguely glimpse his wriggling innards and beating heart.

“Hahahaha! So what if you have godly strength? You’re still going to die!” Fang Nianshui burst out laughing even as he spat out another mouthful of blood. All of his anger and frustration had been swept clean with this singular success.

The fire talisman he threw earlier was just a distraction. It was to buy himself enough time to empower his saber with an edge talisman. As its name might suggest, the function of the edge talisman was to provide any weapon a fine, cutting edge. It was why he was able to break Ye Qing's saber in one hit.

Without his saber, how could Ye Qing possibly beat him?

Of course, the talismans weren't cheap, and Fang Nianshui could not help but wince every time he thought about them. Still, it was worth it if he could obtain Ye Qing's Strange Artifact in return.

Whatever the Strange Artifact might be, it had transformed Ye Qing from a helpless man to an adept Reforged in a matter of days. Not only that, his strength was unnatural even for an adept Reforged. Fang Nianshui was sure that it was all thanks to the Strange Artifact. If he could obtain it, he would surely grow so much more powerful and reach unprecedented heights.

"Cough cough.... I'll admit that godly strength isn't that useful!" Ye Qing let out a couple violent coughs before continuing, "But a powerful vigor and an exorbitant amount of vitality? Now that's a different story altogether."

Ye Qing's extraordinary strength and physique had never been his greatest advantage. It was his awe-inspiring vigor, or to put it more accurately, the incredible power hidden within his blood.

The next moment, a tremendous amount of vitality flowed out of Ye Qing's blood and flowed into the open wound across his chest. Then, the wound began wriggling and healing right before Fang Nianshui's eyes. In just the span of a couple breaths, every wound on Ye Qing's body vanished like they were never there, leaving not even a tiny scar behind.

"Impossible..." Fang Nianshui blurted in disbelief. He was starting to think that the situation was spiraling out of his control.

"Alright then. It's my turn now!" Ye Qing declared before rushing toward Fang Nianshui like a tiger.

"Argh! So what if you have an astounding amount of vigor? I'm still going to kill you in the end!"

Fang Nianshui let out a crazed howl before executing an extremely telegraphed overhead swing. It looked like he had lost his mind to panic and wanted nothing more but to cut the young man in half. However, he changed his technique at the last moment and aimed a stab at Ye Qing's heart instead.

Ye Qing shifted his feet slightly before pushing forward. Fang Nianshui's saber skewered him like a hot knife through butter, but it missed his heart with just millimeters to spare. There was enough pain that he had to stifle a groan, but Ye Qing soldiered on and plunged his broken saber into Fang Nianshui's stomach.

For a second, the hunter stared at Ye Qing as if he couldn't believe what just happened. Then, he let out another crazed howl and gripped the hilt of his saber with both hands. "There is no way! There is no way I cannot kill the likes of you!"

Unfortunately for Fang Nianshui, Ye Qing was able to grab the saber embedded in his chest before he could do anything. His tremendous strength prevented the hunter from twisting the hilt even a little. Not about to allow Fang Nianshui any more funny ideas, Ye Qing leaned back a little and gave him the headbutt of his life. At the same time, he pushed his broken saber another inch deeper into Fang Nianshui's stomach.

Something neither Ye Qing nor Fang Nianshui expected happened then. Like sharks who caught the scent of blood, Ye Qing's blood abruptly came alive and filled him with irresistible bloodlust. His eyes had turned crimson before he knew it.

Fang Nianshui had just recovered from his shock when he met Ye Qing's eyes. He flinched in horror when he realized that it was crimson red, cold, merciless, and full of hunger.

"You—"

Stunned beyond words, Fang Nianshui tried to pull away only to feel a sudden, unnatural weakness taking hold of him. It took him a second to realize that he was losing blood. When he looked down, he saw that Ye Qing's entire arm had turned bright red from all the blood flowing out of his body and into Ye Qing.

"Stranger... you're a Stranger! You're not human! You can't kill me, you can't... kill..."

The more blood he lost, the more Fang Nianshui felt like a plant that was losing all of its moisture to a desert. His consciousness grew blurrier and blurrier until it was no more.

Thump!

When the final drop of blood had been sucked out of Fang Nianshui's body, the hunter collapsed on the ground with a loud thump, dry and lifeless.

Buzz...

A terrifying presence erupted from Ye Qing's body then. Sometimes it was as unrestrained as a wild beast, and sometimes it shivered like someone was trying to wrestle it under control. Not only that, Ye Qing's eyes remained red, cold, and full of

hunger after the consumption. There wasn't a shred of human emotion of rationality to be seen within his eyes.

A long, long time later, Ye Qing shuddered once before he slowly regained his consciousness. The unnatural redness in his eyes gradually faded away.

"That was too close..." exclaimed Ye Qing with lingering trepidation while wiping away the beads of sweat on his forehead.

There was a moment there where he could've lost himself to the ecstasy of accelerated power and succumbed to primal hunger and bloodlust. Had he lost his mind, he would've been entirely possessed by the desire to kill more people and devour even more blood.

Luckily, his willpower was just strong enough for him to resist the urge and come back as himself. Otherwise, the consequences would've been unimaginable.

"I must say this power feels incredible though!" Ye Qing clenched his fist and caused the air around it to pop. A hint of intoxication flashed across his features as he basked in the terrifying current of power running through his body.

The most obvious benefit he derived from this battle was his vigor increasing by at least half of its previous sum. He had acquired more power devouring the sum of Fang Nianshui's vigor than all the dragon-serpent runes he had refined combined. He was about half a fierce stallion stronger than before as well.

Ye Qing was certain that his strength and vigor were greater than that of a late-stage Qi Invoker. His vigor in particular should rival that of a Channel Augmentor. Barring exceptional circumstances, there was literally no adept Reforged in the world he couldn't trounce like a babe!

"It's too bad gaining power via absorbing blood has its side effects even though it's super fast. I should use it as little as possible in the future," Ye Qing told himself.

I'm a warrior with strong willpower. I shan't cultivate my power using such questionable means... unless my enemies insist on delivering themselves to my doorstep, of course.

"First things first, I should deal with Fang Nianshui's corpse. It would be troublesome if someone finds me like this!"

Ye Qing stopped daydreaming and crossed his arms for a moment, thinking. Then, he began rifling through the hunter's pockets.

Chapter 12: Unknown Danger

"That was the last one? Oh well. I suppose I'll just dig a hole then!"

Ye Qing had found two bottles of spirit snake ointment, three silvers, and an unknown book that was wrapped in a strip of a calfskin from Fang Nianshui's body. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to find what he was looking for.

Ye Qing had been hoping to burn Fang Nianshui to ashes with a fire talisman. It would be the cleanest and most painless way to handle the body. Just leaving it in the wilderness wasn't an option because there was a chance it might attract a Stranger. Worst case scenario, it would be a Stranger far beyond his ability to handle and one that was hell bent on hunting him down because why not? That was why he decided to bury the body. All he needed to was to dig a hole, dump the body inside, and cover it back up. With his strength, he could've dug out the earth with his bare hands and still be done in a matter of minutes.

Without further ado, Ye Qing grabbed Fang Nianshui's saber and dug a pit that was about six meters deep. He filled it up once he had dumped the body inside.

A six-meter deep pit was deep enough that most people would not discover the body. Once a subterranean Stranger had consumed it maybe two days later, no one would ever find out exactly what had happened to the man.

"Phew! It's done!" Ye Qing sighed in relief after finishing his dirty work and confirming that nothing was out of place. He was just taking a small break when suddenly, a series of rapid footsteps came from the distance. He turned around just in time to see Lin Hu and a couple of watchmen running toward him. They came to a stop when they were about six meters away.

"Ye Qing?" Lin Hu asked warily.

Ye Qing was watching Lin Hu's squad warily as well. Judging from their disheveled, wounded state, it was clear they had just fought a difficult battle. "It's me, captain!"

"Did you encounter the human skin Strangers as well?" asked Lin Hu while glancing at the severed human skins on the ground.

Ye Qing replied seriously, "Yes. Boss Fang and I were doing the rounds when suddenly, we heard Uncle Ma screaming on top of his lungs..."

Ye Qing proceeded to tell Lin Hu the first half of everything that had happened.

Lin Hu's eyebrows were locked so tight they were practically inseparable. "Speaking of which, where is Nianshui?"

Ye Qing's heart skipped a beat, but he kept his cool and explained, "Boss Fang told me to stay here after we took out all the human skin Strangers. I think he found something, but he didn't want to bring me probably because he thought that I would only be a burden to him."

Lin Hu exclaimed in realization, “Nianshui must have found the Strangers’ true body. Even so, that is too reckless of him!”

Lin Hu never suspected that Ye Qing was lying to him. In his opinion, there was just no reason for him to do such a thing.

“Did you and your squad fight against the human skin Strangers, captain?” Ye Qing asked.

Lin Hu let out a deep sigh. “That’s right. A lot of villagers have died and transformed into human skin Strangers today. I wonder what Stranger could possibly be behind this slaughter...? Never mind. Ye Qing, you’ll join my squad temporarily and assist us in taking out all the human skin Strangers still lurking around the village. Otherwise, all our farmers would be in danger,” Lin Hu ordered.

“Yes, captain!”

And so Ye Qing and Lin Hu’s squad searched the farms thoroughly to hunt down every human skin Stranger they could find. Strangely though, they found nothing at all despite hours and hours of searching.

“Strange. There were a ton of human skin Strangers earlier. Where did they go? There’s no way we’ve chased them all away or killed them all, right?” A watchman voiced his puzzlement.

Lin Hu was frowning as well. “We mustn’t let our guard down. These human skin Strangers are even more abnormal than the ones we usually encounter around the village. I’m willing to bet that none of them are its true body.”

No one saw any reason to deny his sound logic.

Suddenly, a close acquaintance of Fang Nianshui spoke up, “By the way, we should have encountered Nianshui by now. He couldn’t be...”

Although he did not finish his sentence, his meaning was as clear as day. The atmosphere turned darker in an instant. A long and painful silence later, Lin Hu finally said, “He may have gone back to the village before us. We’ll know once we’ve finished our rounds. If he hasn’t... well, he should’ve known what could happen when he chased after a Stranger all by himself.”

“Speaking of which, I’m sure you’re all tired and eager to go home already, so let’s end things here!”

The squad stepped in front of Heavens’ Eye after they returned to the village. They entered only after the relic had confirmed that they weren’t Strangers.

Lin Hu asked a watchman who was guarding the entrance, "Has Fang Nianshui come home yet?"

The watchman shook his head. "No. What's wrong?"

Lin Hu's eyes dimmed as he deflected the question, "It's nothing. Thanks for your hard work!"

Despite what he said, Lin Hu knew full well that Fang Nianshui was probably dead. The others clearly shared his sentiment as well. For a while, the atmosphere was somber until Lin Hu rubbed his aching forehead and said wearily, "Alright, enough. You've all worked hard for the entire day, so go catch some rest already. The threat is still out there somewhere. The village will need you at full strength when tomorrow comes."

"Yes, captain. You should catch some rest as well, captain. It would be bad if you overexert yourself!" A few watchmen responded before taking their leave one after another.

Ye Qing was about to do the same when suddenly, Lin Hu called out to him, "Wait, Ye Qing! I need to speak to you about something!"

Ye Qing's heart skipped a beat, but again he did not allow his trepidation to show on his face. He asked, "What is it, captain?"

"Since Nianshui hasn't come home yet, there's a high chance that he's... no longer with us. If he doesn't show up by tomorrow, then I want you to join Tian Hong's squad instead," Lin Hu instructed sorrowfully and regretfully.

Fang Nianshui wasn't just a warrior who had reached the adept level of the Body Tempering stage in his thirties, he had begun to invoke true qi as well. Out of everyone in the younger generation, he was easily the one with the highest chance to enter the Qi Invocation stage. How could Lin Hu feel nothing when it was all but confirmed that August Hill Village had lost one of their brightest stars?

It was then Ye Qing surprised him by saying, "It's okay, captain. I think I can handle a simple patrol on my own."

The captain temporarily forgot his sorrow and frowned. "You what? Unacceptable! It's too dangerous!"

Ye Qing smiled. "Don't worry, captain. I've already reached the journeyman level of the Body Tempering stage. I think I can handle this."

"You what?" Lin Hu repeated himself like a parrot, "But I thought you've only started tempering your body two days ago! How did you grow so quickly?"

Ye Qing rubbed his nose as if embarrassed. "I don't know. Maybe I'm a born-genius?"

"..." Lin Hu looked like he was considering Ye Qing's proposal seriously. "Even so, it's too dangerous especially since the human skin Strangers are on the prowl..."

He did not ask how Ye Qing had managed to reach the journeyman level of the Body Tempering stage so quickly. Everyone carried their own secrets, and to dig too deeply was to provoke even the most amiable soul into conflict.

Ye Qing assured the captain with a confident smile, "You really don't have to worry about me, captain. Nothing should be able to surprise me as long as I keep my eyes open, and aren't we short-staffed right now? If I don't do Boss Fang's job, it'll be even more dangerous for our farmers."

Lin Hu opened his mouth as if he wanted to argue, but in the end he could only let out a tired sigh. It was true that the watchmen were sorely under-staffed right now. So many Strangers had attacked them in recent times that it was a miracle that they were still functioning. If he were to send Ye Qing to another squad, Fang Nianshui's responsibilities would only fall on another squad's shoulders, which would increase their burden and the dangers they might face. One could say that Ye Qing had hit the nail on the head.

In the end, Lin Hu had no choice but to agree. "Very well."

"Thank you for agreeing to this, captain," Ye Qing replied respectfully. He knew Lin Hu would agree not only because the watchmen really was that short-staffed, but also because he had revealed himself to be a journeyman Reforged. While he wasn't the strongest combatant among the watchmen, he certainly wasn't the weakest either. He was just strong enough that he could be trusted to carry out a patrol by himself.

There were two reasons why Ye Qing wanted this. One, he wanted to make damn sure that this was the first and last time Chen Zheng sent an assassin to be his "comrade". Two, he didn't want anyone else discovering his secret like Fang Nianshui. Despite his best efforts, the hunter had managed to identify some inconsistencies in his actions and conclude that he carried something exceedingly valuable. All things considered, the best way he could keep his secret was to operate alone.

As for his questionable rise to "journeyman Reforged" in just the short span of "two days", he wasn't worried that Chen Zheng would suspect anything. As proven by Lin Hu's somewhat lukewarm reaction, it wasn't that unusual for a talented warrior to reach that level in a short time. Worst case scenario, Chen Zheng would be a little more wary of him, but that was it. There was just no reason for him to throw all caution to the wind and attack him with everything he got, damn the consequences.

It was due to this consideration that Ye Qing dared to reveal just a hint of his true strength.

"I'll speak with Granny Xia about this. Tomorrow, you can visit her and collect some talismans from her. If you run into any danger during your patrol, do not try to handle it yourself. Launch the emergency signal and request for reinforcements immediately," Lin Hu instructed.

Ye Qing nodded. "I will."

Granny Xia wasn't just one of the three esteemed martial artists in August Hill Village, she was also a talisman maker. Every single talisman circulating within the village had been created by her. Of course, it took an enormous amount of materials and mental energy to create them, so only those who were squad leaders or higher were allowed to receive them. Not only that, they could only receive a very limited number of talismans.

The fact that Lin Hu had given Ye Qing permission to get them meant that he was now a squad leader in power, even if not in name.

"If there is nothing else, I shall be taking my leave. I wish you a good evening, captain," Ye Qing saluted Lin Hu before walking away.

.....

Outside the village, a chilly wind mixed with something dark and unspeakable blew across the fields. The Wind Children dancing in the wind were gone all of a sudden, and the few Strangers roaming the outskirts had disappeared without a trace as well. It was as if they had sensed some grave danger and decided to flee. All that was left on the empty fields were deathly silence.

Rustle rustle.

Suddenly, what sounded like tree leaves brushing against one another or someone rubbing sand between their fingers broke the silence. The next moment, a fresh patch of soil on the ground started swelling unnaturally as if something was trying to break out. Then, a withered hand abruptly burst out of it before pushing away the soil. It wasn't long before the arm, the torso, and finally the whole body had crawled out of the earth.

If Ye Qing was here, he would have recognized the man instantly as none other than the man he had killed, Fang Nianshui.

Something was off with Fang Nianshui, however. Excluding the fact that he had literally crawled out of the earth despite being very dead, his expression was perfectly blank as if he did not have a mind of his own. Suddenly, a crack appeared on his forehead, and it grew wider and wider until his skin was completely peeled from his flesh. Then, as if receiving some sort of signal, it trembled a little before breaking into a run toward August Hill Village.

He wasn't the only one. Many, many more human skins had risen from the fields and were running toward August Hill Village as well. From a distance, they looked just like a black swarm of death.

.....

The first thing Ye Qing did after returning to his house was to cook himself a quick meal and warm up some buns. Once he was satisfactorily full, he immediately threw himself into cultivation once more. It was evening by the time he finally finished refining Fang Nianshui's blood.

Ye Qing muttered with a frown after he was done, "I think it's time I enter the Qi Invocation stage."

His body was extremely powerful thanks to an overwhelming amount of vigor and a ridiculously solid foundation, but although he was still growing in power, his progress had clearly slowed down to a snail's pace. If he continued to cultivate this way, it would cost him an exorbitant amount of time and resources just to further his power by a sliver. That was why he should start considering entering the next level of cultivation, also known as the Qi Invocation stage. Only then could he defeat Chen Zheng and truly be free from his shadow.

Chapter 13: Mental Art of The Toad

"But what do I do, exactly?"

Ye Qing wanted to pick Lin Hu's brain, but he was afraid that it would draw suspicion. In the end, he sighed and looked down at the vellum tucked underneath his shirt.

"I suppose I'll have to ask the Annon Sutra..."

In fact, Ye Qing's feelings toward the Annon Sutra was something of a mixture between deep respect and outright dread. If he had a choice, he would've minimized his interactions with the Annon Sutra as much as possible. Unfortunately, reality did not care much for his personal preferences.

And so Ye Qing spread the vellum across his table once more and cut open his finger. After pouring a few drops of blood on its surface, he asked out loud, "How can I invoke qi?"

The Annon Sutra did not answer immediately. It wasn't until he had poured more than a bowl's worth of blood that it finally manifested a response:

"How can I invoke qi?"

“I’ve hit a wall after becoming an adept Reforged. The only way I might advance further and overcome my impending doom is to enter the Qi Invocation stage.”

“But before I can even think of invoking qi, I should search for a Qi Invocation mental art first. It may contain what I’m looking for.”

The bloody text vanished as soon as the last sentence was manifested. No one but Ye Qing knew it was ever there.

“A Qi Invocation mental art?” muttered Ye Qing with a heavy frown. The Annon Sutra had made it crystal clear that obtaining a Qi Invocation mental art was a must if he wished to continue any further. The problem was: how?

He had no doubt that Lin Hu and Granny Xia had what he sought for—they were late-stage Qi Invokers after all—but to ask them about it would be to expose his secret and put himself in grave danger. Anyone can be bought for the right price, and the value of his secrets were worth compromising an integrity or two to put it mildly. But if the obvious solution wasn’t available to him, what else could he do to obtain a Qi Invocation mental art? Steal it? There was no way it would work. Take it by force? Only if he had a death wish!

“This is such a pain in the ass!” Ye Qing groaned while scratching his head in irritation.

Suddenly, Ye Qing spotted a rectangular object wrapped in a strip of calfskin on his table. It took him a few seconds to recall that it was a book Fang Nianshui was carrying. He hadn’t checked out its contents before because an open field littered with human skins and a dead body was hardly the ideal reading environment, and he still wasn’t in the mood to—*wait*. His eyes suddenly lit up. If he remembered correctly, Fang Niansui had already started invoking qi to enter the Qi Invocation stage, and to do that he would first need a Qi Invocation mental art. Could this book be what he was looking for?

It’s definitely possible!

Ye Qing immediately grabbed the book and tore away its wrappings. The cover page of the book read: “The Mental Art of The Toad”.

“‘The Mental Art of the Toad’? What a peculiar name!” exclaimed Ye Qing curiously. He proceeded to flip open the book and poured through its contents.

Half an incense stick later, Ye Qing closed the book temporarily to rein in his excitement and delight. It was as he suspected. The book really was a Qi Invocation mental arts manual.

The so-called Qi Invocation stage was the stage where a warrior invoked internal energy and true qi into their dantian and accumulated them. Qi was the energy behind the life, aging, sickness, death, growth, decline, and longevity of a human being. It was

taken from the essence of all things and stored within one's flesh and blood, but the qi a human was born with was turbid qi. It was why an ordinary human needed to breathe constantly to live, and they could only hold just enough qi to maintain their vitality.

True qi was natural, quintessential qi. To "invoke qi" was to expel the muddy qi in one's body and accept clean, natural qi into one's dantian, and to do so continuously and without loss through a special breathing method. This would open up the blood vessels, invigorate the channels, and nourish the body and the internal organs; all good things that would lead to an increase in power and lifespan.

In addition, true qi was considered to be the essence of the world. It was intangible, insubstantial, and possessed of limitless potential. Greater gross and fine motor control was just the beginning for a warrior who had invoked true qi. It could be applied in countless ways such as merging it with one's vigor to increase strength, imbuing it in one's limbs so that even the weakest attacks could produce thunderous results, covering oneself in it to become ridiculously resilient, applying it to a blade to grant it unparalleled sharpness, so on and so on.

This was why a Qi Invoker was fundamentally stronger than a Reforged. A single wisp of true qi was enough to make a world of difference.

The first step to invoke qi was to breathe in a special way that would allow the warrior to gather true qi inside their dantian, and the "Mental Art of The Toad" was exactly that, a cultivation manual on how to imitate the breathing of a toad and use it to store true qi inside one's dantian. The breathing method even had the positive side effect of vibrating one's vigor, muscles and bones through deep breaths and croaks, leading to a minor improvement in one's constitution..

In addition, practitioners of the "Mental Art of The Toad" could form something called a "Toad Force" in their body once they had cultivated the mental art to a certain degree. The Toad Force was a structured application of true qi where the practitioner mobilized their vigor, muscles, bones and internal energy into perfect harmony through breathing to unleash a devastating amount of power in an explosive instant.

"Not bad," commented Ye Qing as he continued to flip through the pages with a glimmer in his eyes. According to the opening chapter of the manual, most Qi Invocation mental arts taught incredibly slow and basic methods to invoke true qi. A good Qi Invocation mental art was one that not only drastically shortened the time necessary for a practitioner to invoke true qi, but also taught them various ways to weave said qi into powerful spells and techniques.

In this sense, the "Mental Art of The Toad" was clearly an above average Qi Invocation mental art. There might be many Qi Invocation mental arts out there that surpassed it, but it definitely wasn't bad.

“Well then. Without further ado...” Ye Qing licked his lips and began imitating the pose that was illustrated in the manual. He bent down until his inner thighs were touching the floor, and his calves were facing outward. His hands were also touching the floor. It was the pose of a toad sitting on the floor.

Next, Ye Qing began to breathe just like it was taught in the “Mental Arts of The Toad”. First, he opened his mouth slightly and exhaled all the air in his lungs and stomach. Then, he inhaled until his stomach looked slightly swollen. A soft *croak* abruptly sounded from inside his body, and a shockwave washed out of him and kicked up his clothes a little. At the same time, a wisp of ephemeral qi slipped into his dantian.

“You breathe

Clean qi into your chest

And know

That the essence of the world now lies within you.”

“This... is true qi?!”

Ye Qing felt like his body had undergone some sort of fundamental change; like he was a blind man who was seeing the world for the first time. It was a most profound sensation.

“Hoo...” Extremely excited, but not so excited that he would delay his cultivation to just bask in the sensations, Ye Qing quickly closed his eyes and resumed his cultivation. The toad croaks would not stop until a long, long time later.

.....

The next day, when the first ray of dawn shone through the windows, Ye Qing opened his eyes to reveal a clear, bright glint that wasn't there before. It was as dazzling as the stars themselves.

“Croak!”

A powerful croak sounded from within his body, kicking up dust and throwing wind everywhere. Ye Qing then rose to his feet and nodded in satisfaction.

It had taken him just one night to thoroughly grasp the “Mental Art of The Toad” and invoke true qi into his body. Although the size of the true qi in his dantian was quite limited as a matter of course, he was definitely a Qi Invoker now. His power would grow so long as he continued to cultivate the “Mental Art of The Toad”.

“Alright, it's time to go make my rounds.”

Ye Qing changed into a new set of clothes and grabbed his long saber. Then, he took off for Granny Xia's house. He hadn't forgotten that he was now entitled to receive some talismans!

Upon reaching his destination, Ye Qing knocked on the door and heard an aged voice responding, "Is that you, Ye Qing? Come in!"

Ye Qing stepped in and saw Granny Xia sitting in front of a table and enjoying some tea. When she saw him, she shot him a wrinkled, grandmotherly smile and said, "You've done well to reach the journeyman level of the Body Tempering stage in such a short time. There was a moment where I thought Huhu was joking when he told me yesterday, hoho!"

"Huhu?" Ye Qing's mouth twitched with amusement. Granny Xia might be the only person in the entire August Hill Village who could say that to Lin Hu's face and not earn a smack to the head. He saluted her before replying humbly, "You flatter me, Granny Xia, but thank you for the praise!"

"I'm also glad to see that the power hasn't gone to your head. Keep up the good work!" Granny Xia smiled. "You're here to receive your talismans, right? I have them here."

She handed him three talismans in total and explained them one by one, "The first one's a fire talisman, the second one's an edge talisman, and the third one's a message talisman. You know how they work, right?"

"Yes. The captain has already explained everything to me!" replied Ye Qing affirmatively while tucking the talismans under his shirt. The fire talisman could create a massive curtain of flames that was pretty deadly against many Strangers, the edge talisman could improve the sharpness of a weapon and was useful when going up against a particularly tough Stranger, and the contact talisman was exactly what it sounded like: a tool to contact others and summon reinforcements.

"Haha, good." Granny Xia let out a chuckle before advising, "Watch yourself when you're out there, okay? Nothing is more important than your own life."

Ye Qing saluted her again. "I will, Granny Xia. If there's nothing else, I'll be heading out now."

The old woman waved her assent. "Off you go. When you have time, do visit this old woman and keep her company, will you?"

"Of course." Ye Qing shot her one last smile before taking his leave.

After he was gone, Granny Xia's clouded eyes shone just a little brighter. "Strange. I feel like there's something off with his body, but it's masked by some sort of power? How strange!"

Ye Qing wasn't expecting an interruption as he made his way toward the village entrance, but he ran into Chen Zheng by "accident" right as he was about to step out.

"I heard you're a journeyman Reforged, Ye Qing?" the martial artist asked with a meaningful look on his face.

Ye Qing raised his eyebrows and grinned. "Yeah. What business do you have with me, Chen Zheng?"

"I don't. You're under Lin Hu's protection right now, aren't you?" Chen Zheng sneered. "That said, no matter how high an ant climbs, it will always be an ant that I can crush to death with a single finger. So don't get any stupid ideas, okay?"

Ye Qing shrugged his shoulders before responding in a careless tone, "You can certainly try. Say, do I get a prize if I manage to force you to use two fingers instead of one?"

Chen Zheng snorted in disdain. "That's all you got, your mouth."

"Is there anything else? No? Then I have work to do," Ye Qing replied with a perfunctory smile before stepping around Chen Zheng. He wasn't at the point where he could take the fight to the martial artist yet, so he wasn't going to provoke him into a rage.

Chen Zheng's face iced over as he glared daggers at Ye Qing's departing back. "Fang Nianshui, you useless bastard. How did you manage to off yourself before you complete the simple task I gave you?"

"Screw it. So what if the ant gets to live a couple days longer? In the end, it's still going to die!"

Chen Zheng wasn't worth any space in his frontal lobe, so Ye Qing forgot about him as soon as his feet had passed through the gates. And good thing he did, because he was immediately assaulted by a cold, oppressive pressure that came from seemingly everywhere. He frowned and kicked up his alertness another notch.

Just like before, Ye Qing began his expedition starting from the small path between two fields. He kept a hand the hilt of his saber at all times as he scanned his surroundings. He could see multiple traces of battle from yesterday.

Rustle rustle...

A sudden rustle caused him to laser into a nearby bush and unsheathe his saber immediately. He waited to see if something would jump out at him, but nothing happened after he waited a good ten seconds, then another ten. He was just thinking that it was a false alarm and prepared to leave when suddenly, it rustled again.

“What’s with this bush?” Ye Qing frowned a little before making the bold decision to part it with his saber and check what was inside. Unfortunately, it was a mistake. He had just pushed half of the grass away when suddenly, he heard a crisp, melodious chime that stopped his movement and made him feel very, very faint all of a sudden. Before he knew it, he blacked out.

Chapter 14: Human Face Grass

He wasn’t out for long. Just a single breath later, Ye Qing opened his eyes again and saw an orange flame flickering in front of him. It looked fairly similar to a candle flame.

Surprised but still keeping his wits about him, Ye Qing immediately pulled back from the flame. He couldn’t feel any danger from it, but why risk being wrong when he could be safe instead?

Too bad for him, the game was rigged from the start.

Bang!

The second he made a move, the flame exploded and filled his vision with bright orange. It hit him squarely in the face before he could even shut his eyes and yell, “Shit!” But to his surprise, he didn’t feel any pain whatsoever. In fact, the flame’s temperature was lukewarm at best despite its deadly appearance.

When Ye Qing calmed down and looked back at the bush, he saw a pair of oddly-shaped grasses creeping deeper into the bushes as if they had legs. One of them had a stem covered in bell-shaped flowers that chimed melodiously with every movement. The other one carried lantern-shaped fruits with orange-colored flames. The way the lights partially passed through the fruits’ flesh made them look just like lit lanterns.

“That’s the Chime Blossom and Lantern Grass...”

The two Strangers were already gone by the time he finally understood what happened.

“Unlucky. They pranked me!”

The grass with the bell-like flowers was called the Chime Blossom. Its flowers weren’t just shaped like bells, they also rang like one. Anyone who listened to its chime would lose their consciousness for an extremely short period of time. The other grass was called the Lantern Grass. Its fruits were shaped like lanterns, and each fruit carried a flickering flame that shone brighter during the night. It could be used as a means of illumination.

Both the Chime Blossom and the Lantern Grass were Mundane-class Strangers. They were generally harmless save for their prankster tendencies. The Chime Blossom would stun their victim for a short period of time, and the Lantern Grass would seize the

opportunity to spit fire on their face. While the flame was perfectly harmless, it contained a kind of black powder that dyed the victim's face pitch black. It also gave off a burnt, sooty smell that made it seem as if the victim really had been scorched by fire.

Ye Qing could see from the reflection of his blade that his face was, as expected, as black as the bottom of a frying pan. His bangs were dried, curled up, and giving off a burnt smell as well.

"Hmph! One day, I'll catch you both and pluck all your bells and lanterns," Ye Qing swore in the direction of the escaped Strangers, but he was really more amused than he was angry. He would take a pair of pranksters over a group of bloodthirsty human skins any day.

Ye Qing immediately took a detour to the nearest creek after the encounter. It was to wash off the powder, of course. Although the Lantern Grass' powder was just as harmless as its flame, it was sticky, smelly, and more importantly, an absolute blight against his handsome appearance. The last thing he wanted to happen was for someone to see him like this.

After arriving at the creek, Ye Qing stood there and observed his surroundings for a moment just in case there were any hidden danger. When he could find any, he relaxed and started washing his face by the creekside.

However, danger often showed up when one least expected it. A ripple broke out as what looked like a human face suddenly appeared at the bottom of the creek. As it slowly rose to the surface, its features wriggled until it had transformed into a massive, pitch black maw. It then attempted to take a bite out of Ye Qing's head.

Swoosh!

Ye Qing immediately swung his saber and was able to cut the massive maw in half. He then took two steps away from the creek and glared daggers at the thing that just tried to eat him.

As it turned out, the massive maw he just split in half wasn't a maw at all. In fact, it wasn't even flesh and blood. It was an incredible amount of water grass joining together and forming the shape of a giant maw.

"Humanface Grass, a Red-class Stranger!" Ye Qing recognized the Stranger right away.

Whistle whistle whistle!

It was at this moment the Humanface Grass abruptly burst out of the water and launched its blade-like grass at Ye Qing like spears. However, Ye Qing remained calm and cut them all with a long, powerful sweep. He then rushed forward and attempted to sever all the grass on the surface of the creek.

The Humanface Grass wriggled and knitted themselves into a shield just in time before Ye Qing's saber landed. When it hit, he frowned because he felt like he was cutting into a massive ball of cotton. Forget splitting it in half like he did earlier, he only managed to cut a few blades of grass before the attack was completely spent.

It's tough. As expected of a Red-class Stranger! Ye Qing hadn't used his full strength during the attack, but he was still far stronger than most newbie Qi Invokers. Despite this, his attack had barely done any damage to it.

Not daring to treat the Humanface Grass lightly, Ye Qing tried to pull back only to find more grass shooting out of the water and catching his blade in a firm bind. Not only that, they quickly slithered up his arm and pulled him toward the creek before he could react.

The Stranger was stronger than Ye Qing expected, but he quickly caught himself and just allowed the Humanface Grass to pull him for a good couple seconds. No matter how hard it tried, Ye Qing remained rooted in place as if he was a mountain and not a man.

"You want to play tug of war? I *love* playing tug of war!"

Ye Qing wore an evil smile on his face as he abruptly unleashed all the power that was stored within his blood. There was a series of pops and cracks that sounded like a full muscular breakdown before Ye Qing grabbed the grass entangled around his right arm, and pulled.

A gigantic ball of water grass burst out of the creek just like that.

The water grasses writhed, squirmed and swung all over the place like green snakes. At first glance, it looked absolutely terrifying. However, a closer look would reveal that every blade of grass was connected to a clump of roots located at the center of its mass. There was also a human face on the roots that looked like it was looking down on all living beings with utter apathy and cruelty.

This was why it was called the "Humanface Grass". It was also its biggest weakness. Destroy the roots, and the Stranger would die immediately. To try anything else would just be a waste of time and energy.

The roots were completely exposed after it was dragged to the surface, and the Humanface Grass seemed to be aware of that fact. For a second, the skyful of grass writhed madly before shooting toward Ye Qing and entangling him into a mummy in just the blink of an eye. Once done, they started pulling him toward the human face. As they did so, the face on the roots slowly morphed into a big maw with rows and rows of sharp teeth in it.

"Croak—"

Just when Ye Qing was less than a meter away from the maw, a loud croak abruptly sounded from within the tangle of water grass. It visibly swelled up for a second, shrank, then straight up exploded into a million pieces. As soon as Ye Qing was free, one last croak sounded from his abdomen before he slashed at the human-faced roots right in front of him. At the same time, a tiger's roar filled with brutality and bloodthirst resounded across the creek.

The attack was as fast as a phantom and as poignant as frost. The Humanface Grass never even reacted until it was too late.

Slowly, the human-faced roots that had transformed into a giant maw split in half from the center. The flailing water grasses had also frozen like someone had paused their very existence.

Bang!

The next moment, the human-faced roots exploded into smithereens. The water grasses also fell to the ground and started withering at an unbelievable rate. As the grasses were completely reliant on the human-faced roots for sustenance and vitality, they were unable to continue existing without it.

"I knew that combining the Toad Force and the Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber would result in something explosive!" Ye Qing stared at the floor of Stranger remains with a wide grin on his face.

The saber style he just used was none other than the "Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber", but the force behind the attack was a combination of his natural strength and the Toad Force. Not only did it completely sever the human-faced roots in half, the energy of the Toad Force had seeped into its core and overwhelmed it. That was why it had exploded into smithereens. It showed just how powerful the Toad Force was.

Moreover, his Toad Force was only in the initiate level right now. It could be even more powerful when the size of his true qi was bigger.

On a side note, he knew how to use the "Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber" because he had spent some time learning it yesterday. The saber art was neither difficult nor complex. All it asked was that its practitioner execute its techniques with ferocity and brutality. There was literally nothing else about it that was worth mentioning besides that.

"Since I'm strong enough to take out a Humanface Grass alone, I should be on the same level as the average Qi Invoker now!"

The Humanface Grass was classified as a Red-class Stranger, meaning that it was on the same power level as a Qi Invoker. Although it was among the weakest Red-class

Strangers out there, the fact that he could kill it with ease should mean that an average Qi Invoker was no longer a match for him.

“Heh. If this is the result after just one night of cultivation, it’s just a matter of time before I catch up to Chen Zheng!”

Ring ring ring...

Suddenly, Ye Qing heard a familiar chime. When he looked, he saw none other than the Chime Blossom and Lantern Grass who had pranked him earlier peeping out from behind some trees. When they saw that he was looking at him, they immediately escaped into the woods as if startled.

“Am I really that scary?” Ye Qing asked no one in particular while rubbing his nose. It was then he realized something and exclaimed in shock, “No way... could it be?”

It just occurred to Ye Qing that perhaps the Chime Blossom and Lantern Grass had run away not just because he had just annihilated the Humanface Grass, but also because they were in cahoots with it!

The plan was very simple. First, the Chime Blossom and Lantern Grass pranked him so he would be forced to wash his face at a nearby stream. Then, the Humanface Grass lay in wait at the bottom of the stream and ambushed him as soon as he began washing his face.

The Humanface Grass was a plant Stranger who devoured flesh-and-blood beings to become stronger and evolve. That was why the Chime Blossom and the Lantern Grass had sought out its protection. The two Mundane-class Strangers were almost useless in combat, so the only way they might survive in this harsh world was to seek out the protection of a powerful Stranger.

The more Ye Qing thought about it, the more he was sure he was right. Fang Nianshui had mentioned that there were intelligent Strangers out there who were no different from humans in terms of their ability to think, perceive gains and losses, and weigh pros and cons. Some of them could even assume a human form, slip into a human city, and live among the humans.

Ye Qing had taken Fang Nianshui’s words with a grain of salt at the time, but now, he knew that the hunter was right.

I’ll have to be much more careful in the future. This battle would’ve killed me if I hadn’t entered the Qi Invocation stage and learned the Toad Force yesterday.

Suddenly, Ye Qing spat on the ground and chuckled bitterly to himself. “Motherfucker, I almost got played by a bunch of grasses, haven’t I? How embarrassing...”

With that harrowing but ultimately harmless interlude behind him, Ye Qing took a short break before resuming his patrol once more. The next couple hours passed quickly in idyllic peace and boredom. This actually disappointed Ye Qing as he had been looking forward to killing some Strangers and accumulating more dragon-serpent runes. At this rate, his battle against the Humanface Grass was going to be the one and only highlight of the day.

Bang!

It was around evening time, and Ye Qing was ready to head back to the village when suddenly, he heard and saw a red firework erupting in the sky.

“Someone used their contact talisman! What happened?”

Due to how precious talismans were, most watchmen refrained from using them unless absolutely necessary. For someone to use a contact talisman could only mean that their lives were in grave danger, and they needed help as soon as possible. Ye Qing did not hesitate to sprint in the direction of the fireworks.

Chapter 15: The Calm Before The Storm

Clang! Clang! Thud!

Ye Qing had just arrived at the scene when he saw three watchmen doing battle against a massive group of human skin Strangers, although to call it a “battle” might be giving the watchmen a little too much credit. They were desperately trying to not die while ten human skin Strangers at minimum attacked them from all sides. Not far away from their feet, a couple of bloody, obviously skinned corpses lay lifelessly on the ground.

Individually, the human skin Stranger wasn’t a great threat. One hit was all it took to destroy the frail skin it possessed. However, they fought with no regard for self-preservation, and their attacks were as strong as an adept Reforged’s. A single hit from these creatures could injure or even kill a watchman outright. That was why the three watchmen were already tethering on the brink of annihilation by the time Ye Qing finally reached them.

As soon as Ye Qing had found his target, he immediately crouched low and sprinted toward the human skin Strangers like the wind. However, he kept silent so as to maximize the advantage of surprise and to avoid being swarmed himself. Once he had gotten close, he swung his long saber like he would split a river in half and bisected three human skin Strangers in one swing. He slashed again to shatter all the black qi escaping from the destroyed skin.

Not done yet, Ye Qing took a moment to adjust his footing before changing his saber style from heavy to light. He transformed from a powerful storm that could snap even the thickest tree trunk to a light drizzle that could reach even the narrowest cracks.

Nimble, quick, and precise, he easily beheaded another two human skin Strangers and sent their heads flying across the air.

Ye Qing could've killed more, but that would be too much for a mere "journeyman Reforged". So, he pulled back and pretended that he had run out of strength. It was all he needed to do anyway. The death of five human skin Strangers had dramatically lessened the pressure on the three watchmen and allowed them to launch a decisive counterattack. It wasn't long before all the enemies were eliminated.

"Phew... you could not have come at a better time, Ye Qing. We'd have all died if you were just a little slower! Thank you!" A watchman thanked Ye Qing after the crisis was over. He was Ma Shiyuan, a squad leader.

After taking a couple more seconds to catch his breath, Ma Shiyuan added, "And I can hardly believe how much you've grown when you've just joined the watchmen for a couple of days. I'm starting to think that we've all chosen the wrong calling here!"

"You flatter me, Uncle Ma. I'm sure you could've done the same if you were in my position, not to mention that the Strangers were completely focused on you and your men," Ye Qing replied modestly before changing the subject, "So, what on earth happened here, Uncle Ma?"

Ma Shiyuan's expression turned severe as he turned to look at the three dead bodies just a short distance away from them. He said slowly, "You rushed over because of the contact talisman, didn't you? Well, we were the same, except that Old Wei and his men were already dead by the time we showed up. Then, these human skin Strangers appeared out of nowhere and surrounded us."

"I just don't understand where these creepy things are coming from. We turned the whole place upside down yesterday and found nothing, so how?" Another watchman cursed.

It was at this moment more watchmen showed up and asked what happened. By the time Ma Shiyuan was done with his account, everyone was staring at the bodies and human skins on the ground with grim expressions.

"This cannot continue. The captain will want to hear about this as soon as possible!"

Everyone agreed that the wisest course of action would be to head back to the village and inform the captain of this incident, so they did. After listening to the full story and realizing the severity of the situation, Lin Hu agreed to organize a thorough search of the village outskirts first thing in the morning.

The watchmen's efforts would prove to be futile, however. Despite scouring the fields and searching every nook and cranny for the entire day, they would not find even a hint of the human skin Strangers. They had vanished so thoroughly it was as if they had

evaporated into thin air. It wasn't until two days later—when everyone thought that the human skin Strangers had truly been repelled and slowly relaxed their guard—that they reappeared and ambushed multiple squads at the same time, successfully killing a handful of watchmen. Since then, the human skin Strangers would attack the watchmen almost every day.

At first, the human skin Strangers often attacked multiple watchmen squads at the same time, but no one died because they were expecting it, and its weakness was well known. Unfortunately, it got smarter. Just a few days later, they started throwing all of their forces on a single squad, and they retreated immediately after they had dealt a successful blow. As a result, the watchmen started accruing massive casualties in just a short time.

As if this wasn't bad enough, they still didn't know where the human skin Strangers were coming from or how they could end its threat once and for all. It wasn't long before a dark cloud was cast over everyone in the village.

“What the bloody hell are those human skin Strangers? I must have killed at least fifty of them at this point, but still they didn't give me a single dragon-serpent rune.”

Ye Qing had just come back from another grueling patrol. He was currently lying on his bed and frowning at the sparse number of dragon-serpent runes on the Annon Sutra. The fact that he hadn't gained any runes from the human skin Strangers despite killing dozens of them could only mean that they weren't the true body. Specifically, he believed that the human skin Strangers were some sort of doppelganger or puppets-on-strings that were being controlled by a hidden Stranger. So long as the hidden Stranger was still alive, the human skin Strangers were endless, and he wasn't going to gain dragon-serpent rune.

Ye Qing's mood soured even more. Assuming he was right, he could only imagine how powerful this hidden Stranger was.

“I need to cultivate faster, but... the gray dragon-serpent runes just aren't doing it for me anymore,” Ye Qing murmured while staring at three gray dragon-serpent runes on the Annon Sutra.

Ye Qing had been rushing to save himself since the very day he awoke in this world, but that sense of impending doom felt especially clear these days. It was why he made sure to refine two dragon-serpent runes every night, and why he was down to the three runes he had gained from killing the Humanface Grass.

Unfortunately, his hard work had only yielded subpar results so far. Maybe it was because the gray dragon-serpent rune only provided strength and vigor, but his true qi had barely increased despite everything he used. He was still stuck in the early-stage of the Qi Invocation stage.

“I suppose it’s time to consult the Annon Sutra yet again...” Ye Qing sighed. He tried not to rely on the vellum too much, but there was no denying that it was a million times more reliable than the heavens. One rarely answered his prayers at the best of times, while the other would answer any question he asked as long as he gave it enough blood.

“How can I swiftly grow my reservoir of true qi?” Ye Qing asked while cutting open his finger and pouring his blood on the Annon Sutra again. This time, it absorbed two bowls’ worth of blood before it finally gave its answer:

“I had almost exhausted all of my gray dragon-serpent runes, but my true qi has barely grown at all. What should I do?”

“Danger is coming. If I cannot increase my power significantly before it’s too late, I may not live to see the coming dawn. However, I do not have a medicine or a spirit plant that can swiftly increase my true qi. I’m not lucky enough to run into a fairy tale expert who would surrender all of their hard-gotten power to me either. Can I really do nothing but wait to die?”

“No, I remember that there are two silver dragon-serpent runes left on the Annon Sutra. Perhaps they may give me a pleasant surprise.”

“Oh right, the silver dragon-serpent runes! I can’t believe I didn’t think about them!” Ye Qing abruptly slammed the table with his hands while staring at the two shiny runes on the vellum with shiny eyes.

He had, in fact, thought about the silver dragon-serpent runes from time to time. He just overlooked them by accident because he was so used to filtering them out of his usual options.

“Seriously though, this piece of vellum is getting cheekier and cheekier. I’m not lucky enough to run into a fairy tale expert who would surrender all of their hard-gotten power to me? You couldn’t be any less subtle if you tried!”

Ye Qing rolled his eyes before sucking in a deep breath. Then, he pressed a finger on a silver dragon-serpent rune. It immediately slipped into his body with a silver flash.

Unlike the gray dragon-serpent rune, its silver counterpart did not release its contents immediately upon entering his body. It went into his dantian first before—

Boom!

—exploding into a tidal wave of energy. It felt like a storm was happening inside his dantian.

Ye Qing's eyes widened in surprise and delight when he sensed what energy it was. "This is... origin qi! Incredibly pure origin qi!"

He would've celebrated more, but the origin qi started leaking out of his dantian and fading into the background almost immediately.

"Oh shit! I need to refine it before it's all gone!"

Clearly, the pure origin qi did not count as his even though they had been released inside his dantian. They would disappear eventually if he did not refine and absorb them in time.

The dragon-serpent runes might have given a shortcut, but it was still up to him to make the best of it. Without further ado, Ye Qing hurriedly assumed a pose and began cultivating the "Mental Art of The Toad" once more. As he went through the motions, the raw, unrestrained origin qi in his dantian grew steadily tamer. It was as if an invisible hand was willing it to take a stable form and become Ye Qing's.

Time passed in the blink of an eye. When the darkness subsided, and light spilled down from the blue sky once more, Ye Qing slowly opened his eyes and gently exhaled a mouthful of turbid air. A shockwave washed out of him and circled one meter away from him like dragons, thick and unfading.

"No wonder its color is different. I can hardly believe how much true qi I've gained in one night!" Ye Qing muttered to himself excitedly while perceiving the fog-like energy rolling inside his dantian. If his reservoir of true qi was only as big as a small pond a day ago, now it was the size of a massive river. Not only was his true qi a hundred times bigger than it was before, it was almost thick enough to condense into a cloud form. This meant that he was close to entering the middle-stage of the Qi Invocation stage.

In ascending order, the Qi Invocation stage could be split into early-stage, middle-stage, and late-stage. Each stage corresponded to a specific state of the warrior's true qi. When a warrior's true qi was as sparse as a mist, the warrior was at the early-stage of the Qi Invocation stage. When their true qi had condensed enough to form clouds, the warrior was at the middle-stage of the Qi Invocation stage. Finally, when the cloud of true qi had grown so thick that they had transformed into liquid, the warrior was at the late-stage of the Qi Invocation stage.

Ye Qing's true qi was currently rolling inside his dantian like an impenetrable fog. Assuming his feelings were accurate, he should take no more than a few days to transform the fog into a true cloud and enter the middle-stage of the Qi Invocation stage.

"I still have one silver dragon-serpent rune left. If I refine and absorb it completely, it might just be enough to propel me to the late-stage of the Qi Invocation stage. Chen Zheng certainly isn't going to be a concern for much longer!"

Right now, Ye Qing was pumping his fist and dancing a little with undisguised smugness. Was he getting a little drunk with success? Hell yes he was! He almost jumped from the early-stage all the way to the middle-stage in a single night! Even the late-stage was but a silver dragon-serpent rune away! If this wasn't reason enough to indulge a little, then what was?

A few minutes later, Ye Qing finally calmed down and stared at the final silver dragon-serpent rune on the Annon Sutra. He realized then he needed to obtain more of it as soon as possible.

A late-stage Qi Invoker might be a top-tier warrior in August Hill Village, but on a world scale they were still no different from ants. If he was content with just this, he wouldn't be surprised if he got squished as soon as he stepped into the wider world.

Take Lin Hu for example. The poor captain had been running himself dry trying to deal with the human skin Strangers' attacks for the past couple days. His heart was in the right place, but he just couldn't do it with his current strength.

This was why Ye Qing needed power still; far more power than what was thought to be the absolute ceiling in this tiny village. And to gain power, he would need more silver dragon-serpent runes. The gray dragon-serpent rune increased his strength and vigor while the silver dragon-serpent runes increased his true qi. Since the next couple cultivation levels after Qi Invocation—Vessel Augmentation, Astral Refinement and more—could only be achieved with an ocean's worth of true qi, he could never have enough silver dragon-serpent runes.

It wasn't going to be easy though. It took at least one thousand gray dragon-serpent runes to form just one silver dragon-serpent rune. The future looked bleak and painful.

Where are the bloody Bloodsucking Mosquitoes when you need them?