

Stranger Danger

Chapter 16: When Frog Gives You Lemons

“This is the thirty-sixth one today!”

Ye Qing sheathed his saber while staring at the human skins on the ground. He looked like he was on the verge of exploding.

This was the thirty-sixth human skin Stranger he had killed, and the third wave of human skin Strangers he had encountered today. Not only had they attacked him three times in a row, each attack consisted of more human skin Strangers than the last. The first wave had five enemies, the second wave had ten, and the third wave had a whopping twenty-one. It was almost as if they had a grudge with him. He would've been in great danger if he hadn't refined a silver dragon-serpent rune and become much stronger. At the very least, he would've taken some injuries.

“These goddamn monsters are growing more and more numerous by the day. What on earth is behind these things?” Ye Qing muttered darkly. His man's intuition was telling him that bad things were about to happen in the very near future, but no one could end the threat or even locate the hidden Stranger. It was this persistent sense of gloom that made him grow ever so irritated by the day.

“Since the truth isn't looking to spill out any time soon, the only other solution to this problem is to further my strength. It is the only way I might better protect myself when danger comes.”

He felt like he was facing the same problem again and again. He just did not have enough power to face what was to come.

To grow his power, he would need to gather as many dragon-serpent runes as possible as quickly as he could. But how could he do that? There were a ton of Strangers in this world as a matter of course, but those he could kill seemed to be few and far between. Moreover, he had a sense that the population of other Strangers in the vicinity of August Hill Village had drastically decreased since the rise of the human skin Strangers. It was so bad that he had barely killed anything except the human skin Strangers for the past couple days.

As if that wasn't bad enough, these human skin Strangers did not yield even a single gray dragon-serpent rune. All they did was bleed him and his fellow villagers dry while giving nothing in return. With that in mind, how could he not loathe them for it?

“You better not let me find out who or what you really are, bastard! Otherwise, I will rip you to shreds!” Ye Qing swore into the air before scratching his hair in dejection. “Sigh.

If only every Stranger in the world was as free as the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes; massive in numbers and easy to kill!”

Suddenly, an idea occurred to Ye Qing. “Wait a second... the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes! I can try and lure them to me!”

He didn’t dare to venture into Little August Hill because some of the Strangers there could probably squish him like a fly, but the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes were a different story. Given enough fresh blood, he should be able to lure them out just like Zhou Nian had when he died to the Echo Caterpillar!

Now, there was only one problem left: where was he going to get some fresh blood?

The human skin Strangers had scared away seemingly every flesh-and-blood Stranger that normally lurked around August Hill Village, leaving behind the humans. Of course he wasn’t going to take someone’s life just to satisfy his cultivation needs. Chen Zheng was an exception, but he still couldn’t beat Chen Zheng right now, could he?

What if I use my own blood? Ye Qing thought. Blood was the one thing he didn’t lack thanks to his powerful vigor, and assuming he was successful the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes would restore the blood he lost faster than he could blink his eyes.

Yeah, let’s do this!

Despite his eagerness, he did not execute his plan immediately. He recalled the time and location of the other watchmen squads before moving to a location where there was little chance his comrades might stumble upon him. It was only then he finally kicked off “Operation Mosquito”.

First, he chose a clean rock on the ground and cut not his finger, but an artery on his wrist. His blood poured profusely out of the wound and dyed the rock bright red in just the blink of an eye. It was at this moment something unexpected happened. Green moss suddenly grew out of the rock and covered it completely in just a matter of seconds. They looked like vines, except they were dark red instead of mossy green. It looked very strange to say the least.

Even scarier was the fact that the moss started actively pushing back against all the plants around it. If Ye Qing didn’t know better, he would have thought that the moss had transformed into a Stranger.

“...”

Clearly, his blood was even more special than he thought. Its enormous vitality and power of consumption had literally caused a random clump of moss to undergo an unprecedented mutation.

“I’ll have to redo this!” The reason he chose a rock to pour his blood onto was to prevent it from sinking into the earth and vanishing over time. He just hadn’t accounted for his blood’s unique characteristic.

This time, Ye Qing hacked off the top half of the rock and dug a hole in the middle of it. Then, he removed all the moss and plants around it. After confirming that everything was ready, he cut open his arm once more and poured his blood into the hole in the rock.

The hole was about as big as a human’s head. When it was half full, Ye Qing sealed his wound with a single thought. Literally. His flesh had knitted together so fast and seamlessly that not a scar was left behind.

“I’ve literally bled myself to prepare you this grand feast, Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. Do not disappoint me!” said Ye Qing. With that done, he sat down on the ground, plucked a random foxtail to put in his mouth, and cast a hopeful glance in the direction of Little August Hill. He was just waiting for the main character to show up now.

Fifteen minutes passed...

Half an hour passed...

One hour passed...

“Come on. They have to show up eventually, right?” Ye Qing was starting to get a little worried. “I’ll give it another hour. If they still don’t show up, then I’ll try and find another way!”

Another hour passed, but the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes were still nowhere to be seen. Disappointed, Ye Qing patted away the soil on his clothes and prepared to leave.

It was at this moment a black cloud suddenly appeared above Little August Hill. Not only was it moving toward Ye Qing with insane speed, its buzzing sound was clearly audible even from this distance.

“It’s here!” Ye Qing exploded with such glee that he even took two steps toward the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. He looked like he was looking at a bunch of naked women, not bloodsucking parasites that would literally drain him into skins and bones if they could.

It wasn’t long before the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes reached him. When they discovered Ye Qing and the pool of blood inside the rock, they immediately descended on them and covered them completely.

Ye Qing did not move a muscle. He allowed the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes to drain his blood to their heart’s content. However, every time a Bloodsucking Mosquito had had

their fill of blood, their bodies would suddenly deflate and lose all life. They would then fall to the ground like specks of dust. Layer upon layer of dead Bloodsucking Mosquitoes started stacking on the ground until it looked like Ye Qing was standing in the middle of a black sea, one that was purely made of corpses. It was terrifying to put it mildly.

Ye Qing was perfectly fine with this though. "I feel so good I can fly! A couple more 'sessions' like this, and I'm set for the foreseeable future!"

If he could kill every last Bloodsucking Mosquito in this place, he would gain a dozen silver dragon-serpent runes at least. Moreover, he was making a killing without having to lift a finger. How could he not be ecstatic about this?

Alas, all good things must come to an end. A familiar coak suddenly came from the distance and made him feel like someone had poured a cold bucket over his head. *It couldn't be! I must be hearing things!* Ye Qing prayed fervently.

But he wasn't. A green frog wearing a red bandana and a massive, cape-like leaf suddenly dropped from the sky. It was still in the air when it executed a beautiful roundhouse kick that annihilated a swathe of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes before sweeping it all into his mouth. When it landed on the ground, it launched into a flurry of palm thrusts that killed a ton of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes and generated a tremendous amount of chilly wind. Of course, it ate all these Bloodsucking Mosquitoes as well. Its speed and efficiency was matched by no one!

Ye Qing: "..."

Ye Qing looked like he wanted to cry. He would be cussing up a storm already if he wasn't worried that the frog would turn around and kick his ass if he did. When the Kung Fu Frog started killing the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes faster and faster, Ye Qing finally decided that enough was enough and took the fight to the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. He started executing the "Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber" with all his might to mow down the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes.

His attacks were powerful, and his technique was impeccable. Unfortunately, he was still nowhere close to catching up to the Kung Fu Frog's speed. Every time the Kung Fu Frog executed a move, an entire area would be affected almost like he was firing cannonballs of air at the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. On the other hand, Ye Qing could only affect the immediate vicinity of his weapon. Of course he was slower than the Kung Fu Frog.

Never thought I'd be outmatched by a frog one day...

Ye Qing only felt more and more bitter over time, but the Kung Fu Frog was one of those powerful Strangers he could not afford to provoke. The only him he could do was to urge himself to go faster.

“Croak... croak...”

Ye Qing’s stomach was croaking every once in a while. Thanks to the Toad Force, his saber was slightly quicker and more powerful than normal, which of course helped to kill the dwindling Bloodsucking Mosquitoes even faster. The young man was so focused on his task that he did not notice the Kung Fu Frog shooting him a curious look when his stomach croaked for the first time.

It didn’t take long before the man and the frog had wiped out the skyful of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. The few pockets that were lucky enough to escape quickly flew back to Little August Hill.

Ye Qing let out a wistful sigh as he stared at the escaping Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. Then, he looked at the satisfied-looking Kung Fu Frog with a decidedly unsatisfied expression on his face.

If the Kung Fu Frog hadn’t jumped out of nowhere and interfered, these Bloodsucking Mosquitoes would’ve been all his. At least one-third of his haul had vanished into the Stranger’s stomach!

There was nothing he could do about it though. If this was a game, then the Kung Fu Frog would be a boss. He would have to have a death wish to provoke it!

“Croak.”

To Ye Qing’s surprise, the Kung Fu Frog did not leave after cleaning up all the dead Bloodsucking Mosquitoes on the ground. Instead, it croaked at him as if it was trying to say something.

Ye Qing: “...”

Kung Fu Frog: “Croak croak...”

Ye Qing blinked. “.....” *I’m sorry bro, but I just don’t speak frog!*

As if sensing his incomprehension, the Kung Fu Frog pointed at its own stomach and filled it with a bit of air. Then, a thunderous croak erupted from it.

“... You want me to show you my Toad Force?” This time, Ye Qing did understand. He immediately channeled the Toad Force and made a croak from his stomach, but it was way softer than the Kung Fu Frog’s.

“Croak! Croak! Croak!” Seeing that Ye Qing had understood his meaning, the Kung Fu Frog pointed at its stomach again and started breathing again. Every time its stomach swelled and deflated, a croak would rip through the air, and each time a croak happened, the Kung Fu Frog’s aura would grow just a little stronger. Nine croaks later,

the air around the Kung Fu Frog was shaking unnaturally almost as if it was being distorted by some sort of unimaginable power.

“CROAK!”

The next moment, the Kung Fu Frog let out its loudest croak yet and unleashed what looked like a beam of white shockwave straight from its mouth. It struck the ground in front of it and caused such a massive explosion that Ye Qing had to brace himself for it. The earth shook like a massive drake was rolling in its sleep.

By the time the dust had settled, Ye Qing found himself staring at a massive pit that was thirty meters deep at minimum. It was absolutely terrifying to say the least.

“Gulp...”

Ye Qing’s eyes were as wide as saucers. He didn’t even realize he was trembling until he did. *What the hell is this power? Forget me, I highly doubt Lin Hu or Chen Zheng could take a hit like this and survive!*

The Kung Fu Frog clasped its hands behind its back. After pointing a finger at its stomach and the deep pit in front of them, it lifted its chin proudly almost as if to say: You see this, boy? *This* is the Toad Force, not that chicken shit you were practicing!

“Yes, yes, I get it. You’re a bloody amazing frog!” Ye Qing rolled his eyes at the bragging frog.

When a frog gives you lemons...

Chapter 17: Tubo

Suddenly, inspiration struck Ye Qing. *Hmm, I think that attack was so powerful because the Kung Fu Frog had stacked up its power via multiple qi accumulations. I wonder if I can do the same with my Toad Force?*

Not one to sit on an idea, Ye Qing immediately accumulated his qi until a croak sounded from his chest. But instead of releasing the gathered energy like he normally did, he accumulated his qi again until another croak sounded from his chest. It worked. He could feel the Toad Force in his body doubling in size after the success!

“It does work!”

Ye Qing started accumulating qi for the third time, but this time it didn’t work. The true qi suddenly faded after reaching the halfway point.

It’s probably just a familiarity issue. With enough practice, I should be able to accumulate qi a couple more times before reaching my limit!

Ye Qing could feel himself burning up with excitement. What if he could stack up its power nine times like the Kung Fu Frog as well? Just how powerful would his attack be?

Realizing that the Toad Force had massive potential, Ye Qing made up his mind to study it thoroughly as soon as he returned home. Even if his limit turned out to be lower than expected—perhaps he could only accumulate qi five to six times because he was a human, not a frog—it would still increase his combat strength dramatically.

“Thank you for your guidance, brother Frog!” Ye Qing clasped his hands together and thanked the Kung Fu Frog solemnly. Judging from its behavior so far, he was pretty sure that it was one of those intelligent Strangers that could understand human speech.

And he was right. When the Kung Fu Frog heard his thanks, it actually returned the gesture and nodded. It was the very model of a jianghu master.

The Kung Fu Frog still didn’t leave after receiving Ye Qing’s thanks though. It pointed at Ye Qing’s saber first before pointing at itself. Then, it started croaking while swinging its arm around. Ye Qing couldn’t believe what his eyes were telling him, but he asked anyway, “You... want me to teach you the saber?”

“Croak!” The Kung Fu Frog nodded.

“You actually want to learn the saber...” Ye Qing was incredulous to put it mildly. It wasn’t everyday a Stranger asked to learn the martial arts of a human after all. *Does it fancy itself a super genius like me or something?*

“I can teach you, brother Frog, but it’s not my fault if you can’t pick it up, okay?” Ye Qing warned before snapping a suitable branch from a nearby tree. He then carved it into the shape of a saber before handing it to the Kung Fu Frog. After moving to a clearing and assuming a pose, he said, “I’m going to start now! Watch closely!”

Ye Qing began demonstrating the techniques of the “Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber”. Frankly, the saber art was nothing special. All of its techniques were relatively simple and lacking in variation. In fact, the key of the saber art lay not in its techniques, but the state of the mind. So long as the practitioner executed the saber art with ferocity and violence, they were considered to have grasped the “Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber”.

That was why Ye Qing finished his demonstration in just the span of a few breaths. He did not attempt to hide anything because there was nothing worth hiding. He even slowed down his movements to make sure the Kung Fu Frog would not miss them. It was a frog after all. It made sense that it would have trouble translating his human moves to its froggish body. Let no one say that he was an animal abuser!

Of course, part of the reason Ye Qing was so candid was because he simply did not believe that the Kung Fu Frog could actually pick up the saber art. However...

“Is that enough, brother Frog?” Ye Qing asked after completing his demonstration. He was just about to go through the motions a second time when he saw that the Kung Fu Frog was already starting to practice the saber art with its wooden saber. This would not have surprised Ye Qing—he was quite the hasty learner himself—except the Kung Fu Frog was already executing each and every technique with lightning speed and impeccable precision! It even got the state of the mind right, which meant that it had fully grasped the “Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber” already!

Ye Qing was having trouble picking up his jaw from the floor. What the hell was up with this world? How did a *frog* pick up a human martial art faster than the human himself? The “Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber” might be a relatively simple saber art, but it had still taken him over two hours to familiarize himself with it. On the other hand, the Kung Fu Frog had learned it after a single demonstration, *and*

it looked like it was better than him at the saber art already. To say this was embarrassing would be an understatement. This frog had truly bested him in every sense of the word!

That said, he wasn’t a sore loser. Once the Kung Fu Frog was finished, Ye Qing offered it a heartfelt compliment, “You really are a genius, brother Frog!”

The Kung Fu Frog was obviously excited. It croaked out twice before saluting Ye Qing again. The young man grudgingly returned it while telling himself again and again, *I’m not a sore loser, I’m not a sore loser...*

Suddenly, Ye Qing noticed a strange shape slowly appearing from the foot of Little August Hill. It was slowly walking toward him following a path. It took him a second to realize that it was a Stranger, but one that he had never seen before.

“What the hell is that?” Ye Qing murmured. The Stranger had a tiger’s head but an ox’s body. Around six meters in height, it had four hooves that were literally on fire, three eyes, and a pair of long, sharp horns that looked as crooked as the Yellow River itself. The horns were pitch black and emanated some sort of eerie light. For some reason, the gap between the horns almost looked like a gateway that was connected to another world.

Ye Qing quickly realized that it wasn’t just a feeling. At some point, he saw children crawling in and out of the gap repeatedly. Sometimes they would vanish into the world beyond, and sometimes they would return and run back and forth across the giant horns, playing.

“Seriously, what the hell *is* that?” murmured Ye Qing again while his heart raced at twice its normal speed. Although the Stranger didn’t give off a powerful presence, he wasn’t nearly stupid enough to treat it lightly, much less walk over to it. He slowly started backing away from the Stranger.

On the first day he joined the watchmen, the very first lesson Fang Nianshui had schooled into his brain was this: rein in your curiosity. Think twice, look twice, and don't touch anything unless you're sure it won't kill you!

The Kung Fu Frog did not share his sentiment, however. He was still getting out of the mysterious Stranger's way when the frog suddenly leaped forward with incredible speed!

"Brother Frog, don't—!" It was too late by the time the words had escaped Ye Qing's mouth.

But as luck would have it, the Kung Fu Frog hit an invisible wall as soon as it went within ten meters of the mysterious Stranger. Actually, calling it an invisible wall would be a mistake. It looked more like the Kung Fu Frog was trapped in some sort of invisible space. No matter how hard it tried to leap up to the Stranger, it just could not reach it no matter what, much less lay a hand on it.

The Stranger itself seemed to be completely uninterested in the Kung Fu Frog. It continued to amble along the path toward August Hill Village.

Swoosh!

Finally, the Kung Fu Frog returned to Ye Qing's side with a single leap. It scratched its bare head while still staring curiously at the ambling Stranger.

Ye Qing had to wipe some sweat off his forehead. Thank goodness the Kung Fu Frog's actions hadn't angered the mysterious Stranger, or there was a chance he might have been dragged into the battle.

"I need to go, brother. I'll see you another day!" Ye Qing bade the Kung Fu Frog goodbye before rushing away in a hurry.

It looked like the mysterious Stranger was heading for August Hill Village, which meant that he needed to report this to the watchmen as soon as possible. At the very least, the village could not be unprepared when the mysterious Stranger showed up. So, Ye Qing took a shortcut and sprinted back to August Hill Village at top speed.

As soon as Ye Qing reached the village entrance, he yelled, "Open the gates! I need to speak with the captain this instant!"

When the gates opened, Ye Qing called out to a guard on the walls, "Where is Captain Lin Hu?"

As he was asking, Lin Hu approached from a distance while asking, "You're looking for me. What's wrong?"

Ye Qing cut straight to the chase. "I saw a mysterious Stranger while I was patrolling the area. It's headed straight for the village."

"What did it look like?"

"It's a... oh. I guess you can see it for yourself, captain!"

Ye Qing was about to give Lin Hu a proper description when he looked up and saw none other than the mysterious Stranger walking toward the village. He narrowed his eyes. He had run home using a shortcut, while the mysterious Stranger was ambling at a relaxed pace. He had thought that the Stranger would take at least eight minutes to get here, but clearly he was wrong.

Suddenly, Ye Qing saw a guard on the walls drawing his bow and getting ready to shoot the Stranger. He hurriedly cried out, "Don't shoot! It's not the type of Stranger to attack without provocation!"

"Don't shoot!" Lin Hu added his shout to Ye Qing's as well. While staring intently at the approaching Stranger, he beckoned a guard to his side and ordered, "Inform Chen Zheng and Granny Xia that they are needed at the village entrance!"

After the guard was gone, Lin Hu grabbed the long saber on his waist and watched the Stranger warily. Large beads of sweat actually started forming on his forehead as the Stranger came closer and closer.

The mysterious Stranger finally came to a stop when it was almost thirty meters away from the village. And then... there was nothing. It simply stood there motionlessly as if it was an inanimate object.

No one dared to relax their guard for even a second though. They continued to look at the mysterious Strangers for any unusual movements.

A short while later, Granny Xia and Chen Zheng rushed over to the village entrance and spotted the Stranger immediately. Chen Zheng frowned as he asked, "What is that thing?"

Lin Hu shook his head. "I don't know. I've never seen it before!"

Granny Xia was scrunching up her eyebrows as if she was trying to dredge up an old memory from her ancient mind. When realization did strike her, her complexion slowly turned as white as she started wobbling like she could collapse at any moment.

Ye Qing hurriedly supported her and asked concernedly, "Granny!? What's wrong? Do you recognize that Stranger?"

Granny Xia waved her hand to show that she was fine before saying in a heavy tone, "If I'm not misremembering things, I believe that this Stranger... is the legendary Tubo!"

"Tubo?" Ye Qing wasn't the only one who looked confused. No one present had heard of this name before.

Granny Xia explained, "Tubo is the guardian of the mythical Netherpolis and master of the Nether, land of the dead. It is said to be capable of commanding thousands upon thousands of ghosts. Most importantly, it is said that places visited by Tubo are sure to suffer a lot of deaths!"

Lin Hu asked, "Deaths? Are you saying that this 'Tubo' is going to kill us?"

The old woman shook her head. "No, not Tubo. Tubo does not attack the living. It only guides the dead to their rightful place."

Ye Qing exclaimed in realization, "I get it. You're saying that something terrible and will cost a lot of lives may happen to our August Hill Village soon?"

"It's not a possibility, it's a certainty!" Granny Xia looked like she had aged a couple of years just saying this. "Rumor has it that Tubo had appeared eighteen times in this world, and every time it did the blood ran like a river, and countless people were killed. No one may be spared from this tribulation!"

"What should we do then?" Chen Zheng asked with an ugly look on his face while trembling imperceptibly.

Granny Xia responded, "For now, we can only inform the Anyang Pacification Bureau about this and ask them to send help as quickly as possible. If they move fast enough, we may yet be able to solve our crisis before it happens and save our August Hill Village from disaster."

"Good! Good. Since there's no time to waste, I shall send the word immediately," Chen Zheng exclaimed with much relief before taking his leave.

"I hope we're not too late," Granny Xia whispered. She looked incredibly old and feeble at that moment.

Even if the Anyang Pacification Bureau responded to their plea for help immediately, it was still going to take them two days at minimum to arrive. The question was, did August Hill Village have two days left in them?

I sure hope so.

"Huhu, gather the men and see to our expedition duties and defenses immediately. Be on your highest alert until reinforcements arrive!" Granny Xia instructed.

Lin Hu nodded. "At once."

"I'm going to head home and make the necessary preparations as well. Send someone to my house later. I have some talismans in reserve that should be of use to your people. Let us hope it will be enough to help our August Hill Village survive this tribulation."

After Granny Xia was gone, Lin Hu used a contact talisman to recall all watchmen who were still patrolling at this time. Then, he mobilized everyone to prepare the defensive measures.

It wasn't until nine to ten hours later that Ye Qing was finally allowed to return home to catch some rest. There was no time to rest, however. As soon as he slammed the door behind him, he took out the Annon Sutra and spread it across the table. There were now five silver dragon-serpent runes and three gray dragon-serpent runes on the vellum, meaning that he had killed enough Bloodsucking Mosquitoes to earn four silver dragon-serpent runes.

This was cause for celebration, but celebrating was the last thing in his mind right now. He immediately absorbed a silver dragon-serpent rune and threw himself into cultivation. Tubo's appearance meant that August Hill Village was soon to face a terrible disaster. If he did not grow his strength as soon as possible, if his preparations proved to be insufficient when disaster struck, then everything he had achieved so far would be meaningless!

Chapter 18: Attack of the Human Skins

"Wooooooo..."

It was midnight. The moon and the stars were nowhere to be seen. The sky was an oppressive, heavy blanket that seemed intent on choking everyone in their sleep. Even the air felt particularly inauspicious tonight.

Suddenly, a bleak howl pierced through the air. The villagers weren't sleeping well in the first place, but the howl had woken up absolutely everyone in the August Hill Village. Thousands of candles were lit across just as many houses in the span of minutes, but it still wasn't enough to dispel the coldness of the dark.

"Is this it?"

A steely glint appeared in Ye Qing's eye as he jumped to his feet. After folding the Annon Sutra and tucking it under his shirt, he grabbed his saber, got out of the house, and raced into the night.

When he reached the village entrance, he saw that the gates and the walls were crawling with people already. Every watchman was holding a bow and looking nervously out of the village.

“Do we know what the threat is?” Ye Qing walked up to Ma Shiyuan and asked in a hushed tone.

Ma Shiyuan gulped audibly before answering, “It’s the human skin Strangers. A *lot* of human skin Strangers.”

Ye Qing looked. He immediately noticed that the fields were crawling with them. There had to be thousands at the very least.

For some reason, human skin Strangers weren’t attacking yet. They were simply standing there in complete stillness as if they were waiting for some sort of signal. When the wind billowed across the fields, the way they swayed reminded Ye Qing of scarecrows, but a hundred times scarier. There was clearly something dark and unspeakable going on here.

“Woooooooooooo...”

A dark wind blew, and the human skin Strangers shuddered as if they just received an order. Then, they all started running toward August Hill Village like a black tide.

“OIL, READY!” A grim-faced Lin Hu roared as soon as he saw movement. When the human skin Strangers reached the bottom of the walls, he waved his hand and roared again, “POUR!”

When black oil spilled down the stones, the human skin Strangers who were already scaling the walls at unbelievable speed immediately slipped and crashed into their unholy brethren at the bottom. For a short time, they were unable to make any headway.

“FIRE ARROWS, READY... RELEASE!”

Countless flaming arrows shot into the human sea Strangers and ignited the oil. A sea of fire whooshed into existence in just the blink of an eye.

The human skin Strangers continued to charge despite the fact that they were burning alive. The good news was that they only managed a few steps before they were burned to ashes. The bad news was that their numbers were endless. It took only a few breaths before the entire swathe of inferno was put out under the sea of human skins, and they began scaling the walls once more.

“ROCKS, READY... DROP!”

Lin Hu remained calm as he ordered the archers to stand down temporarily, and the other defenders to pick up the boulders, logs and other deadly objects they had prepared beforehand. They were then dropped on top of the human skin Strangers to crush them.

Again, they were able to throw back the attackers, but again it didn't last long. August Hill Village wasn't a city, so their walls were only six to seven meters tall. Although the human skin Strangers might be frail, they were so strong and light that they could easily clear a few meters with a single jump. Every time there was a lull in between the defenders' attacks, a couple human skin Strangers would successfully surge up the walls and brain a few unsuspecting watchmen. Worse, black qi would slip into the dead bodies, strip them of their skin, and transform them into new human skin Strangers. Some of the defenders weren't paying attention and were killed by these new enemies as a result. For a time, the screams would not stop, and the people were on the verge of a full-blown panic.

"Calm down! I want everyone to fight in three-man squads!" Lin Hu was still barking orders as he cut down two human skin Strangers in one strike, "Also, watch out for the dead men on your feet! They will turn into new human skin Strangers!"

The watchmen quickly split into squads just like they usually did when patrolling the village outskirts. They did their best to cut down any human skin Stranger that had surged up the walls.

Ye Qing did not group up with anyone though. He was used to operating alone by this point, and with his strength he didn't need to group up with the others. Last night, he had refined two silver dragon-serpent runes and entered the middle-stage of the Qi Invocation stage, which drastically increased his strength and true qi. It was why his killing speed was no slower than the other squads. If anything, he had to restrain himself so as not to draw any suspicion. He could've mowed down the human skin Strangers even faster otherwise.

Ye Qing went to town with the human skin Strangers like the rain. Every time he took a step, a group of human skin Strangers would drop dead. Every time he took a swing, multiple heads would tumble across the air. There was no human skin Stranger who was a match for him no matter where he went. For as long as he was wielding his saber, no mere skin was going to make him submit!

Suddenly, Ye Qing noticed a group of human skin Strangers threatening to overwhelm three of his fellow watchmen. He crossed the distance in a single step before killing all the enemies with a Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber technique.

"Thank you!" The squad leader thanked him.

"You're welcome. Be careful."

Ye Qing did not even look at them as he rushed to rescue another losing squad.

“Wait a second. Isn’t he the son of the Yes? When did he become so strong?” A squad member asked suddenly.

“I know right?”

“We’re literally facing an invasion here and you guys are *gossiping*? Get your head in the game! Here comes the Strangers again!” “Kill!”

Ye Qing did not know about their conversation, and he didn’t care. Right now, he was wholly focused on cutting down the human skin Strangers and saving his fellow villagers and comrades.

Despite this, his effort was utterly inadequate in changing the tides of the battle. Watchmen kept dying, and those watchmen transformed into new human skin Strangers who killed even more watchmen. The number of humans kept decreasing, while the Strangers’ increased.

There’s just too many human skin Strangers out there! We can’t kill all of them! Lin Hu thought desperately while wiping away the blood on his face. He had taken a blow that cracked his skull and bled him like a pig a minute ago. The rest of his body wasn’t doing so hot either. Unfortunately, there was just no time to heal his wounds. *If only the Heavens’ Eye is still usable!*

The Heavens’ Eye could have killed every human skin Stranger assaulting the village in one strike, but since it hadn’t regained its energy yet, it was as useful as an ordinary mirror right now!

Granny Xia said heavily while shattering a few human skin Strangers with her sleeve, “We will die long before we take out every human skin Stranger on this earth!”

“What should we do then?” Lin Hu asked while shaking his head to get rid of some of his dizziness.

“It’s not ideal, but we must find the Stranger behind the human skin Strangers and kill it. Only then may we stand a chance to survive this,” Granny Xia replied with a steely glint in her eye. “You will join me, Huhu. It’s either this, or die.”

“Understood!” Lin Hu accepted without hesitation. Although he knew full well that his chances of survival in the sea of human skin Strangers was next to nothing, and even if they somehow broke through there was no guarantee they might find the hidden Stranger, he was willing to give everything he had including his life if it meant giving the tens of thousands of helpless villagers behind him a chance to see tomorrow’s sun!

Granny Xia then turned to Chen Zheng and instructed in a heavy and sorrowful voice, "Chen Zheng, I trust you to protect the village while Huhu and I are gone. If... if it is not possible, then take as many villagers with you and escape through the passage. Many of us may not survive this disaster, but some survivors are still better than no survivors at all!"

It sounded like she was giving her last will. In fact, she was.

She knew better than anyone their desperate plan was folly. It was highly unlikely they were going to find the hidden Stranger that was controlling the human skin Strangers, and it was even less likely they were going to live to see another day. It was, frankly, a suicide charge. Even so, she must try if only because a sliver of a chance at success was still better than no chance at all!

"Let's go, Huhu!" Granny Xia beckoned before leaping off the walls. While she was still in the air, countless yellow talismans poured out of her sleeves and burst into flames on their own. It formed a massive curtain of flames that cleared out most of the human skin Strangers in an instant.

Not done yet, Granny Xia waved her walking stick and caused some sort of ripple to appear from the handle. The next moment, a sea of flames washed over the area, and a shrill phoenix cry pierced through the air. Incredibly, an actual phoenix emerged from the sea of flames and flew to the distance, burning each and every human skin Stranger that crossed its path into ashes.

Granny Xia followed right behind the phoenix as she raced toward the village outskirts. Lin Hu was right beside her and killed every human skin Stranger who dared to get close to them.

Lin Hu was also using the "Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber", but the basic saber art looked particularly formidable in his hands. Wherever his saber flew, the tiger roared, and a river of silver flowed. Any human skin Stranger who dared to get within one meter of him were crushed without a sound.

The two Qi Invokers made slow but steady progress as they pushed through the black tide. Each step was hard fought and not without a dear cost, but their determination was unbreakable no matter how hard the human skin Strangers threw themselves at them. It wasn't long before the duo completely vanished from the defenders' view. The only way they knew that the duo were still alive were the occasional explosions and roars.

At that moment, everyone on the walls were silent. They could only stare at the direction the duo had disappeared to with respect, sorrow and silence.

Suddenly, Chen Zheng let out a roar, "The fuck you guys blanking out for? The enemies are attacking again! Kill them all!"

He then commanded the watchmen to attack the human skin Strangers who had scaled the walls again.

“You must live,” Ye Qing sighed as he stared at the disappeared duo. He had nothing but respect for the two martial artists who had decided to risk it all for the people. Personally, he would never have taken such a risk because he ultimately wasn’t a true member of August Hill Village. He was a soul from a different world with no particular attachment for his fellow villagers. At best, they were familiar strangers to him. He wasn’t so noble that he would sacrifice himself for others either.

That was why he couldn’t do it. He respected people like them, but he could not and would not emulate their example. Not now at least.

It was at this moment a desperate watchman ran up the walls and snapped him out of his daydream with a desperate cry, “Captain Chen, Captain Chen! The gates are soon to be breached! We can’t hold on much longer!”

Although the gates of August Hill Village were carved from tough ironwood, it was still wood in the end. Naturally, it was covered in cracks and ready to break after all the batterings it had endured.

“Dammit! We’ve almost run out of men already!” Chen Zheng took a quick look and realized in horror that the number of defenders on the walls had dwindled to less than twenty. The gates would take a significant amount of men to hold, but if he did that then the walls would be practically defenseless. He himself would be in mortal danger. “What should I do?”

Suddenly, Chen Zheng saw Ye Qing killing a human skin Stranger out of the corner of his eyes. A ruthless plan took form in his mind then. He ordered, “Ye Qing, Ma Shiyuan, Zhang Yuan, your squads will hold the gates! The blood will be on your hands if you allow even a single enemy to enter the village!”

“Captain Chen, you can’t be serious! How can we possibly hold the gates with so few people?” Ma Shiyuan pleaded desperately. While they were technically three squads, Ye Qing was a one-man squad, and Ma Shiyuan had lost all of his men a while ago. Zhang Yuan still had one watchman left, but even then they were only four. How could they possibly hold the gates with just four people?

He might as well be ordering them to die!

“You are the only ones I can spare! The rest of us are needed on the walls! The villagers will be in danger if the Strangers breach through the gates, so you’ll just have to do it one way or another!” Chen Zheng declared sanctimoniously.

“But...” Ma Shiyuan and Zhang Yuan exchanged glances with each other.

“Go now! You’re not thinking of disobeying a direct order, are you?” Chen Zheng yelled harshly.

“At once!” Left with no choice, Ma Shiyuan and Zhang Yuan took off to the gates. They looked like they were ready to die for their people.

Ye Qing smirked but said nothing. He simply jumped down the walls and walked toward the gates.

Chapter 19: Blizzard

“Hmph! Let’s see how you survive this one!”

An evil smirk crossed Chen Zheng’s face as he stared at Ye Qing’s back. The order was deliberate, of course. He knew that four people wasn’t enough to hold the gates shut, much less prevent the human skin Strangers from bursting into the village. The reason he did it anyway was to send Ye Qing to his death.

Ye Qing’s prowess had not escaped Chen Zheng’s notice. Although the young man’s cultivation level was still nowhere near enough to threaten him, he could not shake off a bad feeling for some reason. In that case, he might as well kill the young man while the opportunity was ripe.

Ma Shiyuan and Zhang Yuan were just unfortunate scapegoats. After all, the people might suspect something if he ordered Ye Qing to guard the gates alone. Besides that, Ma Shiyuan and Zhang Yuan were Lin Hu’s aides, and they had dared to contradict him just now. He might not bear a grudge against them, but he certainly didn’t care if they lived or died.

Of course, things would have been even simpler if they had refused their orders. He would’ve had the perfect excuse to end them by his own hands.

In Chen Zheng’s mind, Ye Qing, Ma Shiyuan and Zhang Yuan were already dead. The thought warmed his soul and brought a loathsome grin to his face.

Ma Shiyuan and Zhang Yuan were unaware of Chen Zheng’s scheme, but Ye Qing knew exactly the kind of person the bastard was. He simply didn’t care to thwart his ploy because Chen Zheng had miscalculated one crucial thing: he was a middle-stage Qi Invoker, not a journeyman Reforged.

The group of four quickly reached the gates. One watchman moaned in despair when he saw the cracked, rickety gates that looked moments away from being destroyed by the human skin Strangers. “What do we do now?”

Once the gates were destroyed, they were sure to receive the full brunt of the human skin Strangers’ assault. And the chances they might survive that... was zero!

“What else? We do our best!” Zhang Yuan, a middle-aged man with thick eyebrows and huge eyes said carelessly before spitting on the ground. “We’ll hold the line for however long we can hold it. If we cannot, then we die. That’s all there is to it, isn’t it?”

Ma Shiyuan let out a bitter chuckle at his uncaring comment but remained silent. It would seem that he was in agreement with Zhang Yuan.

More and more cracks appeared on the ironwood as the human skin Strangers continued to pound away at the gates. In the end, it happened. The wooden structure collapsed inward with a loud thud, and the black tide rushed straight toward the four watchmen.

“Kill!” Zhang Yuan roared and became the first to rush forward. His last squad member guarded his left, and Ma Shiyuan his right. Together, they formed a versatile triangle that could handle offense or defense. They collided against the sea of human skin Strangers, and...

And then there was nothing. The trio were overwhelmed in just the blink of an eye. Like a raindrop dripping into the sea, they had failed to elicit even the tiniest of splashes.

Is it my turn now? Ye Qing thought while clenching his saber and squinting at the incoming horde. The second they got close to him, a terrific boom shook the narrow corridor and shattered at least a dozen human skin Strangers. It was the Toad Force.

Next, Ye Qing slashed the air in front of him and unleashed a beam of silver. It spread out into a wide area and eliminated yet another group of human skin Strangers.

More enemies replaced their fallen brethren in just the blink of an eye, but Ye Qing remained calm and executed all the techniques of the “Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber” again and again. He chopped, slashed, swept, flicked or parried everything that was thrown his way again and again. His moves looked brutally simple, but they were lightning fast and colossally powerful.

If someone was watching Ye Qing right now, they would notice that his attacks only traveled halfway to their targets before another set of attacks overlapped them. They might even think that he was playacting if not for the fact that the human skin Strangers facing the attacks were shredded into pieces. It was because he was moving so fast that the naked eye could only capture the moment he unleashed his saber, but not the moment it landed on its target or the moment he withdrew his arm to unleash another attack.

At the beginning, Ye Qing’s attacks still maintained the structure and intent of the “Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber”. Then, his saber moved faster and faster until its ferocity was replaced by speed. Pure, unadulterated speed.

The storm of blades was evolving. What was a small, intermittent stream gradually grew into an unstoppable river of light that shredded everything in its path. Wherever it traveled, human skin Strangers were shredded into pieces. The black tide just could not punch through even though he was one man guarding an entire passage by himself!

One minute... three minutes... eight minutes... fifteen minutes...

Fifteen minutes passed in the blink of an eye, but Ye Qing was like a tireless machine. His saber remained as swift, steady, and accurate as ever as the human skin Strangers fell like weeds.

Snap!

Suddenly, Ye Qing heard a snap and felt a sudden loss of weight from his hand. It was because his saber had snapped in half!

“Not good!” Ye Qing cursed under his breath. Clearly, the battle had gone on for too long, and his weapon just could not withstand the pressure any longer. His attacks might be swift, but that didn’t mean they were light. Each and every swing was empowered by the Toad Force. Since the saber was just a normal crucible steel weapon, it was always going to break in a protracted, high-intensity battle like this.

This was a massive issue as a matter of course. He could still fight, but the loss of his weapon greatly impacted his combat effectiveness. Already, he was starting to strain under the unending tide.

It’s time to leave, Ye Qing thought with a tinge of regret and sorrow. He still had enough energy to fight for a couple more minutes, but what was the point? They still hadn’t heard back from Granny Xia and Lin Hu, and the tide of human skin Strangers was as big as ever. It was obvious that their last-ditch effort to end this invasion had failed. Worst case scenario, they might already be dead.

There was no longer any point in holding the line, and he would die if he remained any longer. In that case, he had no choice but to look after number one!

“Retreat! Retreat!”

It was at this moment he heard Chen Zheng’s angry roar from somewhere above him. Clearly, the defense line on the walls could not hold on either. The next moment, he saw the martial artist sprinting toward the village faster than anyone else.

There was an underground passage inside the village that led to a hill on the outskirts. It was the village’s back-up plan should they ever face an existential crisis such as this one.

“Hah! Look at him run!” Ye Qing snorted in disdain but did not hesitate to chase after Chen Zheng.

With the watchmen broken, the human skin Strangers were finally able to pass through the entrance unhindered. They flooded into the village like a tidal wave and killed everyone they encountered. For a time, the screams and cries would not stop, and it felt like the end of the world. In fact, it was the end of the world for the people of August Hill Village!

“If only...”

Ye Qing let out a disheartened sigh as he watched his fellow villagers fall to the abominations one after another. It felt terrible to watch all these lives disappearing before his eyes and know that there was nothing he could do to change it. Worst of all, he only had his own weakness to blame.

“I’m not too late, am I?”

A casual voice spoke over the screams all of a sudden. Then, a man’s silhouette appeared on the walls. He seemed to be carrying two people with both hands.

The human skin Strangers on the walls tried to run down the mysterious man as a matter of course, but he calmly dropped the people he was carrying, untied the drinking gourd on his waist, and took a sip. Then, he flicked a drop of liquid at the nearest enemy.

As soon as the droplet hit the human skin Stranger, it immediately froze in its tracks, literally. Ice covered its whole body in just the blink of an eye. Not only that, it continued to spread outward and freeze every human skin Stranger that came into contact with it as well. In just the span of a few breaths, every enemy on the wall and even the wall itself had turned into ice. It was as if a mini winter had taken place on the walls.

Next, the man jumped up into the sky and unleashed a palm strike toward the ground. The already frigid air turned even colder as dozens of human skin Strangers shattered into pieces at the same time. They too were completely covered in ice.

The man would remain afloat and walk leisurely in the sky like it was solid ground. Every few seconds, he would unleash a palm strike that shattered numerous human skin Strangers and froze the rest. It wasn’t long before every human skin Stranger in the village was taken out just like that.

The mysterious man wasn’t done yet, however. Seemingly dissatisfied that the battle—if you could even call it that—had ended so quickly, he took another sip from his drinking gourd before sauntering toward the village entrance where more human skin Strangers were pouring in. He then crushed them with the same ease he had displayed earlier.

If the human skin Strangers was a black tide that was seemingly without end, then the mysterious man was a bright moon that melted them away with its silver light. Wherever he went, the black tide receded like fading shadows until all that was left was stunning frost. The silver moon was untouchable, unstoppable. For as long as it hung in the sky, no shadow could bear to stand in its light!

The tide of human skin Strangers continued to wither under the unstoppable ice for a time until suddenly, they shuddered as if they had just received new orders. Then, they abruptly turned around and escaped into the darkness. Finally, the invasion was over.

The mysterious man did not stop the human skin Strangers from leaving. He waited until they were all gone before turning around and walking back to August Hill Village. The way his hair swayed to the icy wind made him look like a deity who had descended from the heavens.

It looked like the man was walking, but he reappeared in the village in just the blink of an eye. It was only then Ye Qing got a good look at their visitor.

He was a young man in his twenties with shapely eyebrows and sharp eyes. His facial features looked like they were chiseled from marble, and he wore a carefree smile that looked like it would never fade no matter the circumstances. On the other hand, his hair was a disheveled mess, and his clothes were covered in dirt and leaves for some reason. It did not mesh well with his looks or his earlier performance at all. And yet... It wasn't a bad look on him. It actually humanized him and gave him the appearance of a fairy tale hero instead.

"My apologies for showing up too late and costing your village so many lives. The fault is all mine," the young man apologized as soon as he walked through the village entrance. A hint of sorrow flashed in his eyes as he stared at the pile of corpses on the floor. He let out a sigh and took another two sips from his drinking gourd.

"Thank you so much for saving our village, my lord!" A pair of voices came from the walls. They were none other than Granny Xia and Lin Hu.

The two martial artists looked rather terrible right now. Lin Hu's face was covered in blood, and his chest was caved in. He had also lost an arm judging from the way his sleeve was flapping limply in the wind. Granny Xia's breathing was erratic, and she looked hunched and thinner than ever. The wrinkles on her face were as dense as tree bark, and she looked like she had aged ten years in a single night.

"Really, it's nothing. This tragedy could've been averted if I had come even a little sooner!" The young man waved them off embarrassedly before muttering under his breath, "I knew it was a mistake to drink too much..."

Granny Xia coughed twice before saying weakly, “What are you saying, my lord? If it wasn’t for you, this old lady and the ten thousand souls living in August Hill Village would have perished tonight.”

Granny Xia was right. If it wasn’t for the young man, the human skin Strangers would’ve ripped Lin Hu and her from limb to limb, and August Hill Village would have been wiped off the face of the earth already. It would not be an exaggeration to say that everyone in August Hill Village now owed the young man a favor greater than the heavens themselves!

“May we know your name, my lord?” Granny Xia asked.

“My name is Chu Nianjiu [1]. I’m a Windcatcher of the Pacification Bureau,” Chu Nianjiu answered lazily before fishing around his shirt for a bit. He then produced a dirty badge and handed it to Granny Xia. “Here’s my badge.”

Granny Xia accepted the badge and inspected it carefully. Once she confirmed that it was the genuine article, she returned it to Chu Nianjiu and greeted him formally, “We greet you, Lord Windcatcher!”

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We greet you, Lord Windcatcher!” echoed Lin Hu hurriedly with a salute.

Chu Nianjiu said carelessly, “Please, let us do away with the formalities. You’re still injured, and I’m sure you would rather be healing yourselves than trading unnecessary pleasantries with little ol’ me.”

1. meaning “Sucker For Alcohol” 🍷

Chapter 20: The Wine Gentleman

Granny Xia did not take Chu Nianjiu’s words seriously, however. She said, “You’ve saved over ten thousand lives in August Hill Village, my lord. We may never be able to repay this favor. The least we can do is to show you the depths of our respect!”

She bowed deeply after saying that.

“Thank you for saving our lives, my lord!”

Lin Hu, Ye Qing and everyone else who survived bowed to Chu Nianjiu as well.

“Heavens, you really don’t have to—if you must repay me somehow, then I implore you to get me two jugs of fine wine instead! Do we have a deal?” Chu Nianjiu said in a hurry while summoning a gust of energy that prevented everyone from being able to lower their backs.

“You jest, my lord,” Granny Xia said smilingly.

Chu Nianjiu laughed. “I’m serious! I’m called Chu Nianjiu for a reason. There is nothing I love more than alcohol! Speaking of which, I’m almost out of alcohol, and I’d rather die than continue living in this world without it. Since I saved your lives, you can spare me two jugs of fine alcohol and save mine, am I right? I think it’s a fair trade!!”

Granny Xia smiled again. It didn’t look like Chu Nianjiu was joking, so she said, “Very well. I shall instruct my fellow villagers to prepare a hot meal right away.”

Chu Nianjiu visibly perked up. “Wonderful! I’ve been languishing in the mountains with only the sky as my blanket, the earth as my bed, and the insects as my friends for the past few days! I haven’t had a single hot meal throughout this time either. I would be most grateful if you would cure this bland taste on my tongue as soon as possible!”

Granny Xia nodded before ordering a watchman who wasn’t hurt too badly to make the preparations.

Seeing that Chu Nianjiu was an amiable, easygoing man, Granny Xia dared to ask, “Can I ask you a question, my lord? How did you get to August Hill Village so quickly? We sent word to the Anyang Pacification Bureau just yesterday. It should have taken at least one or two days for someone to be dispatched.”

She was also a little worried that Chu Nianjiu might not be who he claimed to be. Although the badge was one hundred percent genuine, and the young man had undoubtedly saved all their lives, she was sure she would have heard someone like him serving the Anyang Pacification Bureau. While she didn’t think it would be a problem, caution had served her well for decades, and she saw no reason to relax her guard now.

Chu Nianjiu chuckled. “Oh, about that. Do you still remember the report regarding a sarcophagus you sent us some days ago? I’m the one the higher-ups have dispatched to look into this matter. In fact, I’ve been loitering around Little August Hill for the past few days until I received a new message saying that your village is in grave danger a while ago. Since Little August Hill is pretty close to the village, I decided to rush over immediately. That is why I was able to arrive in time to save you.”

Realization dawned upon Granny Xia’s features. “I see! Your dedication to your duty is most appreciated, my lord.” Who would’ve thought that their cautiousness would be the final straw that saved their village from the brink?

“Since you were in the area, did you find out who or what is controlling these human skin Strangers, my lord?” Granny Xia asked another question.

Chu Nianjiu took a sip from his drinking gourd before answering, “In fact, I do. I believe that these human skins are created from a Strange Artifact.”

“A Strange Artifact?” Granny Xia repeated the word darkly. The term had caught Ye Qing’s attention as well.

During one of his mandatory lessons with Lin Hu, the watchmen captain had explained that a Strange Artifact was a weapon created from the body parts of a Stranger. That said, it didn’t necessarily have to be shaped like a saber, spear, stick, sword or other weapons. It could be a comb, a mirror, a book or other items. Its abilities and power were incredibly varied as well. There was no such thing as a useless Strange Artifact, only one that didn’t fit the situation it was in. In the legends, some Strange Artifacts were said to be capable of flight, underground travel, severing mountains, parting seas, and even stealing a celestial object from the sky itself.

So why wasn’t everyone in the world carrying a Strange Artifact to protect themselves from danger? It was because they were cursed just like the Strangers they were made from. Their staggering power was balanced by a plethora of adverse effects. For example, the user could be afflicted with unnatural drowsiness, hunger, a severe lack of sense of direction, deadly diseases and so on, and these were just some of the mildest adverse effects one could experience.

Generally speaking, the more powerful a Strange Artifact was, the worse the adverse effects became. It was quite common for a particularly potent Strange Artifact to cost one or multiple lives to activate. In fact, it would not be inaccurate to describe a Strange Artifact as a controllable Stranger!

On a related note, Ye Qing had suspected the Annon Sutra was a powerful Strange Artifact for a long time. It was also why he was extremely wary of it. It was common sense that powerful Strange Artifacts required a terrible cost to wield, and yet the Annon Sutra only required him to pay it some blood. He just couldn’t shake the feeling that the Strange Artifact was going to give him a devastating wake-up call one day.

“That is correct!” Chu Nianjiu paused for a second before adding, “Specifically, it’s a Strange Artifact that has gone out of control. I know this because I’ve witnessed something similar in the past.”

“What should we do?” Granny Xia asked worriedly. For as long as the Strange Artifact was allowed to rampage, August Hill Village would never be safe.

Chu Nianjiu assured her with easy confidence, “It’s no big deal. Tomorrow, I will borrow some men from your village and head to Little August Hill. We will deal with the Strange Artifact and settle your troubles once and for all.”

Granny Xia thanked him profusely, “Thank you so much for your help, my lord.”

Chu Nianjiu smiled and yawned a little. “Like I said, it’s no big deal. I’m not done with my investigation with the sarcophagus anyway, and trust me, I’m glad to be able to kill two birds with one stone.”

Judging from how easily he had annihilated the human skin Strangers, an out-of-control Strange Artifact probably was no big deal to Chu Nianjiu.

It was at this moment a villager ran up to Granny Xia and said, "The food's ready, Granny!"

"Fantastic. I was just beginning to feel hungry!" Chu Nianjiu declared with sudden passion. Their savior had been looking somewhat listless this entire time, but the mention of food had immediately injected a fire in him.

"Okay! Let's go enjoy a well-deserved supper!" Granny Xia chuckled lightly before ordering some villagers to lead Chu Nianjiu to the venue. She then looked at Lin Hu and said, "Huhu, I know it's been a long day, but please round up the men, tally our casualties and calm the villagers. I do not want our savior to be disturbed."

"Also, please select a team from those who aren't too wounded to accompany our savior to Little August Hill tomorrow."

"At once!"

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The next day, Ye Qing got up at the crack of dawn and took a moment to clean himself. Then, he ran straight to the village entrance.

Lin Hu was already waiting when he arrived. Chen Zheng, Liu Jinshui, Wu Biao and Zheng Tao were present as well.

The watchmen captain gave Ye Qing a nod, and the others greeted him cordially as well. Chen Zheng was the only one hiding killing intent in his eyes.

Ye Qing smiled and nodded politely at everyone except Chen Zheng. Then, he walked over to a corner and closed his eyes to catch a small nap.

They weren't gathered here for a patrol today. They were going to embark on a proper expedition into Little August Hill and take care of the Strange Artifact with Chu Nianjiu!

The group waited for about an incense stick until Chu Nianjiu finally showed up with a huge yawn. Granny Xia was right beside him.

"Good morning, everyone!" Chu Nianjiu greeted them lazily after he got close.

"We greet you, my lord!" Everyone saluted.

“Right.” Chu Nianjiu leaned against a tree and stared at the group for a bit. Then, he turned to Granny Xia and asked, “Is this everyone? The team that’ll be accompanying me to Little August Hill?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Chu Nianjiu frowned and shot Ye Qing a glance. “Look, I’m not trying to be difficult, but why did you pick a journeyman Reforged to join me? He can’t possibly be of much help, can he?”

Granny Xia smiled sadly. “I’m sorry, my lord, but most of our warriors are dead or severely wounded. This is all we have left to spare!”

“I suppose it’s better than nothing,” Chu Nianjiu acquiesced before looking at Lin Hu with a stern look. “But not you, Captain Lin. You’re out.”

Lin Hu immediately scrunched up his eyebrows. “My lord, I can still—”

The young man interrupted him because he could finish, “Captain Lin, you have a head wound, a collapsed chest, severe internal injuries, and even a moderately damaged dantian. You’re going to be crippled as a warrior if you do not rest. Even if I do allow you to come with us, how can you possibly help in your state? You’re only going to drag us down.”

Lin Hu was going to argue further, but Chen Zheng interrupted the conversation, “He’s right, Captain Lin. You should just stay home and rest. Lord Windcatcher is the famous ‘Wine Gentleman’ of Luo Shui. There is no Stranger in Little August Hill that can stop us with him around, so you don’t have to worry about anything!”

Everyone was surprised to hear this. Luo Shui was not a backwater like August Hill Village. It was a massive commandery overseeing nine counties and thirty-six villages in Chu. In fact, Anyang was one of the nine subordinate counties.

If Chu Nianjiu really was famous throughout Luo Shui, then he must be a seriously impressive warrior. He was someone backwater people like them could never dream of meeting in the norm.

“You recognize me?” Chu Nianjiu asked curiously. He knew he was famous, but he didn’t think he was so famous that a villager this far out would recognize him.

Chen Zheng answered carefully, “I do. My older brother told me many things about you, my lord!”

“And who’s your brother?”

A hint of pride flashed in Chen Zheng’s eyes. “His name is Chen Cang!”

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“Do you mean Chen Cang, the ‘Sword Gentleman’?” Chu Nianjiu raised his eyebrows in surprise.

Chen Zheng nodded. “That’s right! Chen Cang, the ‘Sword Gentleman’ is my older brother!”

Chu Nianjiu clicked his tongue in astonishment. “I can hardly believe it! Chen Cang and I have been colleagues for many years, but I never knew the guy had a younger brother! I know that he came from a small place, but that’s it! The guy is just so stiff and wooden and like—you know what I’m saying. Say, are you sure the two of you are related by blood?”

Chen Zheng: “...”

“Hahaha! I’m just joking. Please don’t take offense,” said Chu Nianjiu with a laugh. “I just don’t understand why he would keep quiet about you. It’s not like you’re a peerless beauty of the ages.”

Chen Zheng explained, “Oh, my older brother actually explained that to me. He said that he had offended a lot of people and killed many intelligent Strangers throughout the years. While there his enemies are no match for him, they could hurt me or use me to threaten him if they knew about our relationship. That is why he refrains from telling anyone about me, and why he told me to be tight-lipped about our relationship.”

Chu Nianzhou exclaimed in understanding, “I see! Yes, that makes a lot of sense. It’s definitely wise of him to ensure that his family is protected.”

Meanwhile, the rest of the group were wearing stunned looks on their faces. It was because they knew that Chen Cang was, in fact, Chen Zheng’s older brother. The two brothers had grown up together until Chen Cang displayed an uncanny talent for martial arts. He was the kind of genius who could pick up anything so long as he put his mind to it. One day, an old man passed through the village and happened to notice Chen Cang’s talent. He immediately decided to take him as his disciple. Since then, the young man left August Hill Village and was never heard of again.

They might not have believed Chen Zheng if there was no one to corroborate his story, but since Chu Nianjiu himself confirmed that Chen Cang had, in fact, become a famous warrior known as the Sword Gentleman, they knew it had to be true. Against all odds, the chicken coop that was August Hill Village had somehow produced a rising phoenix! Everyone knew then a bright future awaited their tiny little village, and that it might just be what they needed to finally break free from their eternal status quo!

Everyone grew excited when they realized this. Some of them were even looking at Chen Zheng with envy and greed. Now they understood why Chen Zheng always acted

like he was above them all. If they had an older brother like Chen Cang, they would have grown an inflated ego as well!

“It’s too bad your brother’s talent doesn’t extend to you though. No offense, but your cultivation is so-so at best!” Chu Nianjiu commented while taking another sip from his drinking gourd.

Chen Zheng’s grin stiffened in an instant. A few seconds later, he replied awkwardly, “Well, yeah. I don’t have my older brother’s talent in martial arts!”

Chu Nianjiu shrugged. “I think that’s a good thing actually. I can tell you right now you’re way more intelligent and sociable than your older brother. The guy isn’t just stiff and boring, he wears a permanent scowl on his face like everyone in the world owes him a couple hundred silvers. Seriously, that guy...”

“H-haha...” Chen Zheng let out an awkward chuckle but didn’t say anything. Chu Nianjiu was bold and strong enough to criticize his brother, but not him. His brother would just beat the crap out of him if he did.

“Alright, time’s a wastin’. Let’s move!” declared Chu Nianjiu while looking at the sun.

“We wish you all the best, my lord.” Granny Xia saluted him. “And please, do take good care of our younglings!”

“Don’t think I can’t hear your subtext, woman! What you really mean to say is, ‘please take care of Chen Zheng’, right?” Chu Nianjiu joked. “Don’t worry. I am here. I promise you that nothing bad will happen!”

With that, they left for Little August Hill.