

Stranger Danger

#Chapter 21: Dangers Everywhere - Read Stranger Danger Chapter 21: Dangers Everywhere

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The air turned unsettling and cold as soon as they entered Little August Hill, chilling them all the way to the heart.

“On your guard, people. Little August Hill is an evil place with plenty of malicious Strangers about. It’s on you if you lose your life as a result of your own negligence!” Chu Nianjiu warned.

It was unnecessary advice. Everyone in August Hill Village knew Little August Hill was a place to avoid at all costs. Few villagers had ever ventured into the place and lived to tell the tale. Even Qi Invokers like Granny Xia, Lin Hu and Chen Zheng had never gone farther than the outskirts of the mountains.

“Huh? What’s that?”

It? had only been a few minutes since they entered Little August Hill when the group encountered a clump of shiny mushrooms. Not only were they as big as a millstone, the caps were covered in magnificent-looking star-shaped spots. They twinkled like actual stars in the sky.

“Oh! It smells good!” Liu Jinshui suddenly exclaimed in wonderment when he sniffed the air.

“You’re right! These mushrooms smell really good!” Zheng Tao closed his eyes and took a deep breath as well.

Ye Qing had a bad feeling about this, however. He immediately stopped breathing and watched the duo carefully.

“Stop it. Do you want to die that badly?” Not far away, Chen Zheng was breathing deeply with an intoxicated expression as well. He was about to breathe again when he felt someone smacking him on the shoulder and infusing him with an icy sensation. He jolted awake immediately.

Chen Zheng looked beside him and saw that it was Chu Nianjiu. He looked puzzled as he asked, “What’s the matter, my lord?”

Chu Nianjiu smirked. “What’s the matter? Why don’t you take a look at them?”

When Chen Zheng looked, he noticed that Liu Jinshui and Zheng Tao were staggering toward the big mushrooms with dazed expressions. No matter how intoxicating the mushrooms smelled, they should've known better than to approach something so obviously suspicious. Even scarier was the fact that star-shaped spots started appearing on their bodies as soon as they got within a certain range. They looked exactly as the twinkling stars on the mushrooms.

"No! Please save them, my lord!" Chen Zheng exclaimed in horror.

"What's the hurry?" Chu Nianjiu sipped from his drinking gourd before flicking a drop of alcohol at Liu Jinshui and Zheng Tao each. Frost immediately spread over their body and jolted them out of their intoxicated state.

"What happened?" The two men shivered when they woke up and realized that they were just a few meters away from the millstone-sized mushrooms. They immediately scrambled back to the group.

Chu Nianjiu answered, "What else? You were nearly killed, that's what!"

"This mushroom is a Red-class Stranger known as the Sea of Stars. It bewitches and lures its victims close with a delicious scent. As soon as you get close to it..."

Chu Nianjiu snapped off a tree branch and threw it at the Sea of Stars. As it sailed toward the mushrooms, dreamy, star-shaped spots began to twinkle on its surface, and it started melting like it was ice under a hot sun. By the time it reached the mushrooms, the branch had melted completely into a pool of sparkling liquid. It disappeared as soon as it made contact with the mushrooms.

"Heavens..." Gulps could be heard from everyone in the group. If it wasn't for Chu Nianjiu, Zheng Tao, Liu Jinshui and even Chen Zheng would be dead already!

"See?" Chu Nianjiu was the only one who remained unperturbed by the eerie sight.

"Thank... thank you for saving our lives, my lord!" The trio thanked him immediately.

"Sure, but how are you guys still so careless at your age? Even the lad has more sense than the three of you combined! He stopped breathing as soon as he noticed that something's amiss." Chu Nianjiu pointed at Ye Qing.

The trio immediately glanced at Ye Qing with a mixture of embarrassment, jealousy and of course, resentment.

Ye Qing: "... *Why are you dragging me into this?*"

"Let this be a lesson to you all: keep your eyes open, and don't be careless!" Chu Nianjiu warned before moving on.

Some time later, the group entered a valley and encountered a massive burning tree immediately. It had a huge trunk that took two people to cover completely, and its canopy was even more impressive, not least because it was literally on fire. The fire was so massive that the entire valley was dyed red.

The tree didn't feel particularly dangerous, but no one dared to get closer since the encounter with the mushrooms was still fresh in the mind. Instead, they looked to Chu Nianjiu for guidance.

"My lord, is this tree dangerous?" Chen Zheng asked.

Chu Nianjiu shot him a look. "What do you think? It's literally on fire!"

Chen Zheng let out an awkward chuckle before continuing, "What should we do then? We'll have to take the long way up if we decide to circumvent this valley, and the long way is *really* long."

Chu Nianjiu sipped from his drinking gourd before replying, "It's dangerous, but it's also quite easy to handle!"

Chu Nianjiu abruptly tossed an amulet into the air that transformed into a dark cloud. It then started raining over the burning tree.

Flutter flutter flutter!

The next moment, every lick of flame on the tree suddenly flew away from the tree like they had wings. As it turned out, the flames weren't flames after all. They were butterflies that looked almost identical to fire. Not even Ye Qing had noticed this until Chu Nianjiu had disturbed them. The magical things flew deeper into the forest and were gone just a few seconds later.

"That is the Fire Butterfly, a Mundane-class Stranger. Individually, the Fire Butterfly is an insignificant threat, but as you may have noticed, they are gregarious Strangers just like the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes or the Skull Ants. Never provoke them unless you have no other choice."

Chu Nianjiu continued, "On the other hand, the Fire Butterflies love the heat and hate the cold. You'll often see them on a hot, sunny day, but never during the winter or the rain. All you need to do to chase them away is to create a bit of rainwater."

"You're as erudite as you are strong, my lord!" Chen Zheng seized the opportunity to flatter Chu Nianjiu. Unfortunately for him, the Windcatcher did not appreciate it.

"Cut it out. Praise from a pretty woman is one thing, but praise from a guy is just ass. Let's get out of here before anything else shows up!" said Chu Nianjiu before resuming his march.

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was staring at the direction the Fire Butterflies had disappeared to with a twinkle in his eyes. *The Fire Butterflies... I could farm them if I ever run out of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes!*

That said, the Fire Butterflies weren't hard-countered by his blood like the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes were, so it would be wise to come up with a perfect plan first before he threw himself against them.

"Ye Qing? What are you doing? Let's go already!" Wu Biao called out and snapped him out of his reverie.

"Coming!" Ye Qing hurriedly replied and caught up to the group before he was left behind.

More time passed, and the group made it through the valley without incident. It was at this moment a bunch of white things suddenly descended on the group.

"What the...! Oh, for heavens' sake, it's just catkins!"

Liu Jinshui was walking at the forefront of the group, and at first he was quite startled. When he realized what he was looking at though, he swore and batted the catkins away from him.

It was a mistake.

"Don't touch those catkins!" Chu Nianjiu suddenly yelled.

"What's wrong?" Liu Jinshui looked confused by his outburst. "It's just catkins. What could possibly—"

He never got to finish his sentence. Liu Jinshui abruptly shivered like he had a cold before he started sneezing uncontrollably. It sounded like he was trying to dislodge something in his throat or his nose. His sneezes only grew louder and louder over time, and he could not control himself no matter what. Then, something horrifying happened: catkins began to spill out from his mouth and his nostrils. No matter how many he spat out, there were always more catkins. It was as if his insides were filled with them.

"Save—*achoo! Achoo! Achoo!*—me—*achoo!*"

Liu Jinshui reached out desperately to his companions as he staggered toward them. Zheng Tao was going to rush over and support his friend, but Chu Nianjiu stopped him immediately. "Leave him! It's already too late!"

As soon as he said this, catkins sprayed out of Liu Jinshui's eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth with a vengeance. Finally, he collapsed on the ground and stopped breathing just like that.

“What... what in the world is that?” Zheng Tao asked shakily.

Chu Nianjiu explained, “That is a Stranger called the Catkin’s Lie. If you touch it, it will transform everything within your body including your blood into catkins. You can open his stomach and take a look if you don’t believe me. I guarantee that it’s filled to the brim with catkins!”

No one said a word after hearing this. Of course, no one was crazy enough to inspect Liu Jinshui’s body either.

Whoosh! Chu Nianjiu tossed a fire talisman over Liu Jinshui’s corpse to cremate him before sighing, “I know it was an accident, but try to remember this simple rule as we continue forward: Don’t. Touch. Anything. That I haven’t given you permission to touch. Otherwise, not even the heavens can save you!”

“Let’s go!”

They did not linger. The group of five moved on after catching a small break.

The atmosphere was a little gloomy, however. It was because Liu Jinshui’s death made them realize that they weren’t one hundred percent safe even with Chu Nianjiu’s protection.

“Phew. We’re finally out!”

Eight or so minutes later, the group finally left the thick and gloomy forest and entered a massive clearing. The hill they were standing on was covered in beautiful red flowers and green meadows, and the blue sky above their heads was as clear as a mirror. It immediately uplifted the mood that had taken a huge hit since Liu Jinshui’s death.

“Alright, we’re going to take a small break here, everyone! Feel free to dig into your rations!” Chu Nianjiu ordered. The reprieve was much appreciated as everyone was feeling a little tired after a two-hour march.

Chen Zheng wiped away the sweat on his forehead and asked, “If I may ask, my lord, how much longer do we have to go before we reach our destination?”

“Why do you want to know? Are you scared?”

Chu Nianjiu was lying flat on the ground with his drinking gourd sitting on his chest. Every time he took a breath, a stream of alcohol would shoot out of the container and land squarely in his mouth. It looked mighty impressive as a matter of course.

Before Chen Zheng could muster a response, Chu Nianjiu continued, “We’re close. Don’t you feel it? There is an evil aura in the air that is exactly the same as the human skin Strangers’. Naturally, the Strange Artifact that produces them must be pretty close!”

“I’m glad to hear that!” Chen Zheng nodded before looking down on his feet. It was impossible to say what the martial artist was thinking.

A while later, Chu Nianjiu put away his drinking gourd and clapped his hands. “Alright! I can feel that the Strange Artifact is somewhere nearby, so here’s the plan. I want the four of you to split into two two-man squads and search around the area. If you find anything unusual, you will come back and report to me immediately. Do *not* go off on your own, understand?”

A cunning glint immediately flashed in Cheng Zheng’s eyes. “Yes, my lord. Wu Biao, you will team up with Zheng Tao. I will team up with Ye Qing!”

No one—not even Chu Nianjiu—had any objection to offer. From their perspective, Chen Zheng’s arrangement made perfect sense as Ye Qing was the weakest warrior in their group, and Chen Zheng the strongest. Of course the strongest should pair up with the weakest to maximize everyone’s chances of survival.

Ye Qing knew better, of course. He was sneering behind a mask of obedience. Everyone thought that Chen Zheng was looking after him, but he knew that the guy was just trying to isolate them both so he could kill him!

Luckily, he didn’t mind this arrangement one bit. Today was the day they settled their feud once and for all.

After the others were gone, Chen Zheng shot Ye Qing an amiable smile and said, “Let’s go!”

Ye Qing’s smile was just as friendly. It was almost as if there wasn’t a blood feud between the two that could only be settled with death.

Chen Zheng took the lead, and Ye Qing followed right behind him. No one was saying a word, but the air between them could only be described as cold and murderous. The word “two-faced” had never described the two men better than this moment.

Chapter 22: Parting Song

“Say, Ye Qing. Why are there so many people in this world who overestimate themselves? Why are there idiots who would purposely go out of their way to get themselves killed?” Chen Zheng asked suddenly from the front.

Ye Qing replied in an indifferent tone, “Some people overestimate themselves not because they’re unaware of their limits, but because going beyond is the only way to better their future. Just the same, some people do desperate things not because they’re actually suicidal, but because they want to live!”

Chen Zheng let out a disdainful chuckle. "But an ant is always going to be an ant, Ye Qing. It's not going to live or have a future no matter how hard it struggles."

Ye Qing shrugged. "You won't know until you try."

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Chen Zheng sneered. "Is that what you think?"

But Ye Qing shook his head decisively. "Me? Not at all. After all, I'm neither an ant nor desperate, so why would I ever entertain such thoughts?"

"Hahaha!" Chen Zheng burst out laughing like a madman. "That is the funniest joke I've ever heard in my life!"

"Is that so? Don't stop laughing then. After all, it's going to be the last laugh of your life."

That was the last thing Ye Qing said before his saber abruptly exited its sheath as quick as lightning. Chen Zheng's laugh died in his throat as surprise flitted across his features, but he was too late. He never reacted before the saber had cut through his throat.

Ye Qing thought it was over, but Chen Zheng abruptly disappeared into thin air. In his place was a wooden doll with a thin line across its throat.

"The hell is this thing?" Ye Qing stared at the wooden doll with a slight frown. The surprise attack should've ended Chen Zheng's life.

"Where is Chen Zheng?"

Ye Qing looked around but could not spot the Qi Invoker anywhere. It was as if the guy really had vanished into thin air.

Ye Qing shook his head. *No, be realistic. Chen Zheng is no Houdini, he can't pull a vanishing act. There are two possibilities. Either he teleported away to safety, or... he's invisible!*

Ye Qing squinted at his feet as if he was absorbed in thought, but in reality he was watching his surroundings carefully. His caution was rewarded just a moment later. A bush to his right suddenly depressed as if something had stepped on it. Without hesitation, Ye Qing rushed forward and unleashed a devastating series of slashes at the space directly above the bush.

Clang clang clang!

A series of metallic clangs rang out. Ye Qing was sure he had hit something, but instead of the softness of flesh, he felt as if he had struck steel.

The truth was revealed just a second later. The air in front of him abruptly distorted, and Chen Zheng popped back into view. He was covered in a layer of golden light that was shaped like a bell.

“Impossible! How are you so fast?” Chen Zheng exclaimed in astonishment, rage and even a bit of fear. If it wasn’t for his brother’s Scapedoll and golden bell talisman, he would probably be dead already.

The Scapedoll was the wooden doll that had replaced Chen Zheng right before Ye Qing would have cut his throat open. It was a potent Strange Artifact his older brother had requested a respected senior to create in exchange for a huge favor. The Scapedoll didn’t just take a life-threatening hit in place of its owner, it turned the owner invisible to help them escape as well.

The Scapedoll was priceless even though it only worked one time. After all, it could save a life in a critical moment. Its value should be self-evident.

Chen Zheng believed that his own carelessness was the reason Ye Qing was able to surprise him. If he hadn’t showed his back to the young man like an idiot, there was no way in hell his life would’ve been in danger. That was why he chose to stay instead of leaving. He was going to repay the “favor” by ambushing Ye Qing with his invisibility.

Unfortunately, Ye Qing had found him before he could enact his revenge. Not only that, the young man had once again surpassed his reaction and triggered another life-saving item, the golden bell talisman. He would already be in pieces if the item didn’t trigger automatically!

He might be able to dismiss his first near death experience as a result of his own carelessness, but the initiative and surprise factor were firmly in his corner during the second exchange. Despite this, he still failed to defend himself against Ye Qing’s saber. That was just how fast the young man was.

“Is it? I can go faster. Come try me!”

Ye Qing remained cool and collected on the surface, but on the inside he was ranting about how Chen Zheng’s older brother was a total bro-con. He could hardly believe that the sonuvabitch had two life-saving items when he, the main character of this story, didn’t even have one!

So what if you have a brother who’s both rich and powerful? Pshaw! You’re still going to die!

Disgruntled he might be, Ye Qing did not allow it to affect his performance in the slightest. He was attacking even as he taunted Chen Zheng.

Clang clang clang clang clang clang!

It looked like he was only unleashing one strike, but it clearly rang six times when the saber landed on Chen Zheng. Obviously, it was because Ye Qing had attacked six times in a row. It just looked like one to the naked eye because he was moving too quickly.

Unfortunately, it didn't work. "Just how tough is this thing?" Ye Qing complained out loud. He had struck the same spot six times in a row, but still there wasn't a scratch on the golden light.

"This strength... you're not a journeyman Reforged! You're a... Qi Invoker?!"

Although the golden bell talisman prevented Ye Qing's attacks from hurting him, it didn't prevent the force from transmitting into Chen Zheng's body. It was how he was able to identify Ye Qing's true cultivation level. Not only that, he could tell that the true qi behind the attacks were incredibly dense. This level of power was only possible if Ye Qing had been cultivating his true qi for years!

Has he been pretending to be weak this whole time?

But no, that couldn't be right. Just a month ago, he had beaten Ye Qing hard enough to put him in bed for days. The young man's vigor had been weak, and his body as fragile as what you might expect from someone who had never cultivated before. This meant that he had really entered the Qi Invocation stage in a single month.

But how was that possible? He knew that geniuses did not conform to common sense, but this was still a little too ridiculous, wasn't it? Did he encounter a once-in-lifetime opportunity that completely overturned his fate? Was he the reincarnation of a legendary warrior of old? Or maybe he wasn't human at all, and a Stranger had possessed him?

All sorts of possibilities flashed in Chen Zheng's mind, but he had nothing that might help him in narrowing down to the truth.

While Chen Zheng was distracted, Ye Qing mustered his vigor and readied a powerful attack. His arm wriggled like there were tiny mice scurrying underneath his skin before it abruptly swelled up like a balloon. Then, he brought it down on Chen Zheng with everything he got.

CLANG! This time, the golden light flickered unsteadily as if its power source was disrupted, but in the end it still wasn't enough. Not only that, his arm was numb and sore from the recoil.

The terrific impact startled Chen Zheng and brought him straight back down to the earth. He quickly checked his body and was infinitely relieved to find that the golden bell talisman was still functioning. When he looked up and saw the look on Ye Qing's face, he finally realized something: *wait a second, why am I acting scared? The golden bell*

talisman protects me from all attacks! Ye Qing's the one who should be afraid of me, not the other way around!

“Hahaha! So what if you're a Qi Invoker now, Ye Qing? No matter how fast your saber is, you still can't break through my golden bell talisman! Today is the day you die!”

Chen Zheng's laugh was full of scorn and hatred. Just a month ago, the young man was an ant he could literally squish to death with a finger. Now, he was actually threatening his life! How could he let him live? How could he wash away this rage if he did not hack him into a million pieces and feed him to the Strangers?

And so Chen Zheng turned his wrist and summoned a sword to his hand. It had a crystalline body and a fine edge that looked as cold as frost. It was clearly no ordinary weapon. When he thrust the sword forward, it looked like a plum blossom had bloomed in the middle of a cold winter. It was proud and elegant, lofty and cold, beautiful and poignant.

If the edge was the petal, then the tip was the pistil. When the plum blossom descended on Ye Qing, seven cold stars cut through the air and zipped toward Ye Qing's forehead, throat, heart, dantian and three other vital spots.

Parting Song of the Seven Plum Blossom Plays!

Most parting songs weren't deadly, but this one definitely was. If any one of these “stars” landed, Ye Qing was going to wake up on the other side!

Ye Qing's eyebrows shot up his hairline as he swung his saber furiously, weaving a mighty storm of blades to intercept all seven thrusts before they could hit him. At first, it seemed like he was successful as metal rang seven times in a row, and the plum blossom slowly faded into nothing. Then, an eighth star shot out from the center of the plum blossom not unlike a viper striking out from its hiding, vicious and unexpected. Empowered by a strange force Ye Qing couldn't make sense of, it shattered his barrier of blades and struck him squarely in the chest.

Bang! There was a dull impact as Ye Qing's chest exploded in a shower of blood and gore. It threw him a good couple of steps away from Chen Zheng before he caught himself. He quickly looked down on his wound with an indecipherable expression.

“Hahaha! If the seven sword thrusts are the parting song of the Seven Plum Blossom Plays, then this one is the requiem for the dead!” Chen Zheng cackled madly when he saw that he had successfully wounded Ye Qing. “Requiem For The Dead” was a lethal move in the “Plum Blossom Sword Art”. It was deadly, swift, and nigh impossible to guard against without forewarning.

The “Plum Blossom Sword Art” was a Qi Invocation stage sword art Chen Cang had gifted his younger brother. Naturally, it was much better and profound than the mundane “Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber”!

“That technique’s pretty good!” Ye Qing swung his arm a bit in an attempt to alleviate some of the soreness in the limb. The Requiem For the Dead wasn’t just extraordinary, it was empowered by an indescribable force that numbed his arm upon contact.

“Of course it’s a good technique! You ought to be honored that you’re going to die under my ‘Plum Blossom Sword Art’!” Chen Zheng cackled again before closing the distance. The plum blossoms began to bloom in the winter once more.

Ye Qing’s techniques were nothing special. In fact, one might say that they were completely basic—basic chops, basic slashes, basic sweeps, basic flicks and basic parries. But sometimes, you could make magic happen by pushing a certain aspect to the extreme. In Ye Qing’s case, he was going so fast that it was like he had summoned a literal storm of sabers to attack Chen Zheng. If nothing else, it looked a lot more imposing than the plum blossoms.

So what if you have plum blossoms that can thrive in winter? I have a storm that will crush all life no matter how tenacious!

For a time, the only sounds that could be heard was the sound of a sword clashing against a saber. Every time a plum blossom bloomed in the frigid wind, a ruthless storm would crush it without mercy. The plum blossom would then bloom again before another storm scattered its petals across the ground.

That was the problem though. No matter how hard the storm blew, the plum blossoms kept coming back to life. Although Ye Qing’s saber was swift and unending, Chen Zheng’s sword was equally profound and unpredictable. It was soft, but not without an unyielding hardness at its core; proud, but not so proud that it was beneath using surprise and illusions to gain an advantage; straightforward, but perfectly willing to use trickery to achieve its goals. Combined with the fact that Chen Zheng was protected by the golden bell talisman and so did not need to defend himself, and you get a helluva threat that could fight one or even multiple cultivation levels above oneself.

Slowly, Ye Qing started accumulating more and more wounds. His clothes were drenched in blood as well.

Bang!

Once again, Ye Qing’s chest exploded in a shower of gore and blood and threw him backward. He dodged a follow-up attack with a slight frown on his face.

“Hahaha! So what if you’re a Qi Invoker now, Ye Qing? You’re still an ant, and an ant will never be able to climb the heavens!” Ye Qing’s miserable state filled Chen Zheng with ecstasy.

“That’s what you believe. I believe that an ant only needs to grow wings to scale the heavens,” said Ye Qing smilingly while looking down on his wounds. When his blood hit the ground, the grass and the flowers beside his feet suddenly started sprouting like weeds. The flowers grew brighter than ever before, and the grass shot over Ye Qing’s head in just a matter of seconds. It was like he was a walking plant booster.

“Your blood is...? Now I understand! You’re a Strangerkin! You have Stranger blood in your veins! No wonder you shot through the cultivation levels so quickly!” Chen Zheng exclaimed in realization even as a wave of jealousy and hatred threatened to choke him where he stood.

A “Strangerkin” didn’t necessarily refer to a descendant between a human and a Stranger. It could be anyone who had somehow gained the power of a Stranger. All Strangerkins possessed mysterious abilities, and Chen Zheng’s older brother, Chen Cang himself was a Strangerkin. He was a one-in-a-million Innate Immaculate Swordmaster who was born to wield the sword from the very day he left his mother’s womb. It was why he was scouted by his master at a young age.

Not all Strangerkins were accomplished in life, but most of them were certainly one-of-a-kind.

Chapter 23: Surprise

If everyone in the world was a Strangerkin, then this world would’ve been a much friendlier place to humanity. Unfortunately, fewer than one in a million were Strangerkin.

Most Strangerkins inherited their powers from an ancestor, but to this day, no one had found a surefire way to create a Strangerkin or pass down their abilities to future generations. The Chen Zheng brothers were a prime example of that. They were blood brothers, but one of them was an Innate Immaculate Swordmaster and a genius, while the other was just an ordinary human in every sense of the word.

There were many things in this world that were decided by choice, but birth wasn’t one of them.

For a while, Chen Zheng could only seethe with jealousy. Why did an ant get to awaken as a Strangerkin? Why not him? The more he thought about it, the angrier and more upset he became.

“Stranger blood? I have Stranger blood in my veins?” Ye Qing muttered to himself while staring at his own blood. Although he didn’t know what Chen Zheng was talking about, it

was clear from his expression that this “Stranger blood” was something to kill for. It was a good thing to know, but it didn’t really matter to him.

“So what if you’re a Strangerkin? I’ll just bleed you until you have nothing left to bleed!” Chen Zheng grew even angrier and frustrated when he noticed that Ye Qing did not seem to care just how fortunate he was.

Ye Qing shrugged. “So sorry to disappoint you, but blood is the one thing I can afford to piss away like nothing!”

The moment he said this, his wounds began sealing and healing on its own. A second later, Ye Qing was completely healed as if he had never been injured in the first place.

“...”

This revelation pissed Chen Zheng off even more, of course. If a person’s gaze could kill, Ye Qing would have burned down into a pile of ashes already.

Ye Qing wasn’t interested in exchanging passionate looks with Chen Zheng, however. They were sworn enemies who had dropped all pretense to murder the shit out of each other. Chen Zheng must die today, or he would be a source of endless trouble to him in the future.

Bang! The earth shattered as Ye Qing appeared in front of Chen Zheng and brought his saber down once more.

“It’s no use, Ye Qing! You’re just not strong enough to breach my golden bell talisman!” Chen Zheng laughed loudly and scornfully at what he perceived to be a useless effort. It seemed that mocking the young man was the only way he could do to relieve the jealousy and anger in his heart.

Suddenly, Chen Zheng’s smile froze on his face. As Ye Qing swung his saber, his chest and abdomen started inflating and deflating unnaturally. Chen Zheng had just enough time to register a loud croak before he found himself sent hurtling across the air like a ragged doll. The impact was such that even the golden light protecting him all this time had dimmed considerably after flickering wildly like a light.

“Toad Force? You cultivated the ‘Mental Art of The Toad’, which means... you’re the one who killed Fang Nianshui!” Chen Zheng exclaimed in disbelief.

Chen Zheng recognized Ye Qing’s technique immediately because he was the one who had given Fang Nianshui the cultivation manual in the first place. It was because Fang Nianshui was a talent worth nurturing, and because the hunter needed an incentive to assassinate a fellow watchman without getting caught.

But now, it would seem that Fang Nianshui, that fool, had been killed not by the human skin Strangers. It was Ye Qing who did him in. Naturally, his cultivation manual had fallen into Ye Qing's hands.

The irony tasted so bitter Chen Zheng could resurrect Fang Nianshui from the dead and kill him a second time.

Ye Qing had also put two and two together after some quick thinking, but it didn't slow down his movements in the slightest. Chen Zheng was still in the air when he caught up to him and brought down his saber.

Chen Zheng wasn't going to allow Ye Qing to hit him with impunity, so he tried to drive him away by attacking the young man's vitals using the Plum Blossom Sword Art. However, Ye Qing simply took the attack head on—he was confident that his powerful vigor and vitality would allow him to survive most hits—and struck Chen Zheng's shielded body yet again. The golden light flickered and became even weaker than before.

“Again!”

Ye Qing swung his saber like the wind and scored a couple more Toad Force-empowered hits across the golden light. The golden light started spilling golden shards everywhere while flickering dangerously like a dying candle. From the looks of it, it could disappear at any moment.

Chen Zheng was seriously panicking now. As the owner of the cultivation manual, he was well aware that the Toad Force was potent enough to break through his golden bell talisman, not least because it was happening right before his eyes. Perhaps his situation would be less dire if his sword art was effective against Ye Qing, but the bastard was healing faster than he could put a hole in his body. He could scarcely believe that the young man was still human.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Ye Qing's reservoir of true qi and vigor was unlike anyone he ever met. Most people would have had to catch a breather after executing the Toad Force a handful of times, but the young man just kept going like he could do this until the end of time. That was of course an exaggeration, but Chen Zheng was sure that Ye Qing could keep this up until his golden bell talisman was gone at the very least. The moment that happened would be the moment he died!

Is being a Strangerkin really that big of an advantage?

For the first time since the battle began, Chen Zheng was seriously terrified of his enemy.

Swoosh!

Suddenly, a beam of red light shot into the air and exploded like fireworks. It was Chen Zheng activating his contact talisman.

Ye Qing was so surprised that he temporarily stopped his assault and frowned.

Chen Zheng laughed when he saw the realization on the young man's face. "It's over, Ye Qing! You can't kill me before Chu Nianjiu and the others show up, and when they do, you will die!"

Ye Qing wasn't expecting Chen Zheng to be so decisive as to activate his contact talisman the second he determined that he was in grave danger. He was right that the group would want to kill him when they showed up as well. Although Chen Zheng was the one who started this whole nonsense in the first place—he could even prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was his fault—the only one who would be suffering the consequences today was him. Forget that he was carrying multiple valuables that could tempt even a saint off the virtuous path, Chen Zheng had a strong older brother who was acquaintances with Chu Nianjiu. This alone would ensure that he, the real victim of this incident, would be victimized.

In this world, being right didn't matter nearly as much as being strong!

He had two choices. One, he could run right now and pray that he could somehow escape Chu Nianjiu, the guy who had singlehandedly crushed the army of human skin Strangers that nearly annihilated August Hill Village. He would also have to somehow make it out of Little August Hill alive, a death trap where even the likes of Chu Nianjiu had to tread carefully.

Or two, he could kill Chen Zheng.

Ye Qing took one look at Chen Zheng's hateful expression and made his choice. Of course he was going to kill Chen Zheng.

The golden bell talisman still protecting Chen Zheng was a problem though. While the Toad Force could definitely break through the protection, he reckoned that it would take another dozens of hits before it was finally dismantled. By then, Chu Nianjiu would have reached them already.

The only way to do this was to finish this as soon as possible.

"Croak..."

A croak erupted from Ye Qing's chest.

"Haha! Stop wasting your energy already! You won't make it in time!" Chen Zheng said scornfully when he saw that Ye Qing had chosen to struggle. That was all weaklings could do, struggle futilely and pitifully until the end!

“Croak...”

Then, a second croak erupted from Ye Qing’s stomach and cut his mirth short. All the blood drained away from Chen Zheng’s face as he exclaimed in disbelief, “Impossible! The Toad Force can be stacked?”

Despite his shock, Chen Zheng did not allow his emotions to get the better of him. He immediately turned tail and ran like hell. All he needed was to survive for another minute or two, and victory would be his!

“Croak—croak—croak!”

Three more croaks erupted from Ye Qing’s stomach. When his power grew to the point where even the air around him started vibrating ominously, he abruptly vanished from view—the earth beneath him literally splitting like an earthquake as he pushed off the ground—and reappeared right behind the escaping Chen Zheng. His saber came down.

“Nooooooooooooo!”

Chen Zheng could only scream in terror as Ye Qing descended on him like a demon god. When the blade struck the golden light, it trembled one last time before disintegrating inch by inch into nothing. Finally, the Toad Force was able to pour into Chen Zheng’s body unhindered.

Blood immediately shot out of every hole on Chen Zheng’s head like a fountain. He then crumpled into a heap following a series of disturbing pops and snaps. It sounded like Chen Zheng had snapped every muscle and bone in his body.

Ye Qing wasn’t doing so hot himself, however. He was on his knees before he knew it, and his skin was cracked everywhere like he was made of porcelain. He had stacked the Toad Force five times before unleashing the devastating attack. There was so much power that even his body couldn’t quite withstand it. It was an ultimate attack that hurt him almost as much as it hurt the enemy.

But of course, the results were well worth the cost. The ultimate attack hadn’t just destroyed Chen Zheng’s golden bell talisman, it had flooded his body with Toad Force, shattered his bones, and turned his internal organs into goo.

Chen Cang must *seriously* love his younger brother though, because Chen Zheng *still wasn’t dead*

despite sustaining the kind of injury that would kill another Qi Invoker a hundred times over. An unknown energy seemed to be keeping him alive and restoring his vitality from within.

“You—*cough! Cough! Cough!*—can’t kill me. My brother is—*cough!*—Chen Cang, is one of the Four Gentlemen. He will *slaughter* you if you dare to kill me!”

Chen Zheng was still shooting his mouth even though he was completely helpless at this point. Ye Qing spat out a mouthful of blood before forcing himself to stand and staggering toward Chen Zheng.

“I swear you I’ll never bother you again if you let me go, Ye Qing! I’ll even introduce you to my brother! You’re a Strangerkin. I’m sure great things are in store for your future, a future that my brother can make ten times better!”

His saber had long since shattered into a million pieces, so Ye Qing had no choice but to pick up a random rock from the ground. He then continued toward Chen Zheng with unflinching determination. Only an idiot would believe Chen Zheng’s promise, and in this world, the only reliable soul was a dead one!

“You can’t kill me! My brother is Chen Cang! You—” Chen Zheng started screaming incoherently when he saw that Ye Qing would not be deterred. Sometimes, he would swear the worst things upon Ye Qing should he continue his course. Sometimes, he would beg in the meekest tone and promise the world if only Ye Qing would spare him. Like a man seconds away from drowning, he was grabbing at anything that might save his life.

It was too bad there was absolutely nothing he could say or do that would change Ye Qing’s mind.

Buzz buzz buzz...

It would seem that fate had one last joke in store for the two men, however. A loud buzzing noise abruptly came from the sky and drew Ye Qing’s attention away. He looked up and saw an unnatural black cloud flying straight toward them.

“Ha, haha, ahahahaha! It’s the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes! You might still be able to make it if you run now, Ye Qing! Otherwise, you’re coming down to the grave with me! Hahaha!”

Chen Zheng started laughing like a madman when he realized what the black cloud in the sky was. Clearly, the Strangers had been attracted by their blood. It was perfect. His older brother had left him a third and final item that would temporarily fill him with energy and preserve his vitality. It was also why he was confident he would survive until Chu Nianjiu showed up and killed these Bloodsucking Mosquitoes!

Meanwhile, Ye Qing was looking at the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes with the strangest expression on his face. A while later, he turned back to Chen Zheng and stared at him like he was an idiot.

The Bloodsucking Mosquito was his favorite Stranger bar none. Their appearance right before he was about to kill Chen Zheng could only be described as killing two birds with one stone. After all, he would be taking out his sworn enemy and earning a ton of

dragon-serpent runes at the same time. If this wasn't killing two birds with one stone, then what was?

In fact, he would be killing *three* birds with one stone. The Bloodsucking Mosquitoes would deal with Chen Zheng's body for him. Marvelous!

And so Ye Qing raised his rock and brought it down on Chen Zheng's forehead hard, silencing his mad cackle instantly. *Bang!*

"Do you really want to die, Ye Qing?" Chen Zheng screamed hoarsely after a second of utter disbelief.

The only response he got was another rock to the face. *Bang!*

I'm the quiet, strong protagonist. I don't talk unless I have to!

It was around this time the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes finally reached them and enveloped them like a bundle of thick blankets. Chen Zheng's body immediately started shriveling in real time, though he was still alive because of the item continuously recharging his vitality.

Chen Zheng's eyes were wide open. He wanted to sear every second of Ye Qing's agonizing demise permanently into his memory.

What happened next was certainly something he wasn't ever going to forget. Not only was Ye Qing perfectly fine, the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes were the ones that shriveled up like dead leaves before falling lifelessly to the ground. It was as if Ye Qing was the one sucking their blood dry, not the other way around. Not only that, he was visibly growing healthier as time passed.

Ye Qing met Chen Zheng's eyes and winked at him. "Surprise! Are you entertained?"

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"Sha! Sha!"

Suddenly, a shrill, high-pitched noise cut through the air. The next moment, a dozen or so strange birds swooped down from the sky and inhaled entire swathes of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes into their stomachs.

The strange birds were about ten meters in height with a snake's head and an avian's body. Their feathers were dark green and shiny like jades. They also stank. A lot. Every time they opened their mouths, foul-smelling breaths would threaten to empty the contents of his stomach.

Chapter 24: The Gale and the Bull

“Gale Birds?”

A vein bulged on Ye Qing’s forehead as he looked at the strange birds feeding on his precious Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. The Gale Bird was a ten-meter tall Stranger with a snake’s head and an avian’s body. It enjoyed eating children and possessed a pair of powerful wings and a mouth that could generate a lot of wind. The wind contained a deadly poison that would putrefy the skin upon contact.

Ye Qing knew this because he had studied a book named “The Stranger Tales” that was kept within the archives of August Hill Village. It was a compilation of anecdotes and apocryphal stories about the Strangers, and there were a lot. For starters, it had spoken of a strange serpent that eternally devoured its own tail, and anyone who saw the serpent would transform into a baby and be eaten by it; a Mind Demon that was small enough to live in a human’s ear and could mentally manipulate humans into killing each other to feed on their malice, a Nimbus Cloud that was like a child who glowed like the sun when it was happy, shot thunder at the ground when it was angry, rained heavily when it was sad and more; a Dream Eater that fed on dreams, so on and so on.

Before today, Ye Qing firmly believed that the contents of the book was mostly fiction because the Strangers described in it were simply too fantastical to be real. He thought it was just something an author made up to amuse the masses. Now though, he wasn’t so sure. The Gale Birds in front of him were very real at least.

Suddenly, Ye Qing was assaulted by a wave of dizziness. At the same time, his flesh and blood began to fester in real time like they were rotting.

“Its breath is poisonous!?” That was the moment Ye Qing finally decided to abandon Chen Zheng and run like hell. He hadn’t run when the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes came because he was immune to them, but the Gale Birds were a different story. These Strangers would kill him if he did not run while he still could!

It was a shame he couldn’t see Chen Zheng’s death through to the end, but then again, if the sonuvabitch managed to survive the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes feeding on his blood and the Gale Birds rotting his flesh with its breath, then he would just have to accept that fate did not want him to die today.

“Sha! Sha!”

Speaking of which, it looked like fate had a bone to pick with him today because one of the Gale Birds abruptly turned toward Ye Qing’s direction and let out an ugly cry, its ribbon-like tongue rippling across the air just like a snake’s tongue would. At the same time, Ye Qing felt a smelly, powerful gust of wind pulling him from behind and nearly throwing him into the air.

I thought you like eating children? I'm already an adult! I'm coarse and rough and not tasty at all! Ye Qing swore inside his head even as he clung onto a boulder and attempted to wait out the attraction. However, the pull was only growing stronger and stronger, and his body was still rotting from the deadly poison. It wasn't long before chunks of his flesh and blood began stripping off his body and flying into the Gale Bird's mouth like cotton waddings! At this rate, his flesh was going to be sucked clean off his bones, which was basically the same as being eaten alive!

Rumble rumble rumble!

Ye Qing was still racking his brains for a way out when suddenly, the entire hill shuddered like a drake was flipping over in its sleep. Ye Qing was nearly shaken off the boulder he was clinging to, and the Gale Bird attempting to suck him to death startled and stopped doing what it was doing. It hurriedly flapped its wings and escaped into the sky.

Some of the Gale Birds weren't as lucky. Bucket-width vines abruptly burst out of the earth and caught not one, but several Gale Birds who were too slow to escape, dragging them into the ground. Terrified for their kin, the Gale Birds in the air flapped their wings and blasted their wind against the vines with all their might. Unfortunately, they failed to damage the vines even a little. That was all they managed to do before the trapped Gale Birds were dragged into the crevices and disappeared.

"Sha! Sha! Sha!"

Only five Gale Birds were left when all was said and done. They flew circles around the area and cried mournfully for their fallen kin, but they did not dare to approach the ground.

"What the bloody hell just happened?" Ye Qing blurted out loud. He would get his answer just a second later. The ground started trembling once more, and entire chunks of earth were kicked off to the side. The next thing he knew, he was staring at a colossal Stranger the size of a small hill.

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The Stranger was a massive bull with a horse's face. Easily over forty meters tall, it had a pair of crescent-shaped horns and brown scales that covered nearly every inch of its body. Each individual scale was as big as a millstone and glowed a blackish yellow under the hot sun.

The bull Stranger had one tail that was completely covered in fur. Each strand was as thick as a bucket. At the tip of the tail was a human face that was smeared with blood. There were even a few strands of dark green feathers hanging out of its mouth.

Clearly, the “vines” were really the bull’s fur. They had dragged the Gale Birds into the underground before feeding it all into the mouth.

As if all this wasn’t mind-blowing enough, the face suddenly spoke, “Haha! What are you looking at, cutie? Are you so enamored with me that you can’t look away? Don’t worry, I promise I’ll eat you in a moment. That way, you can look at me forever and ever, haha~”

“...”

Ye Qing’s jaw was on the floor right now. His eyes were as wide as saucers, and his brain kept trying to convince him that it was all a dream. How could he not? Not only did a giant bull’s tail just talk to him, it—she seemed to be a female! Like what the fuck?

Then, it finally clicked to him: *Oh shit! The tail-woman wants to eat me!*

Survival instinct prevailed over shock at that moment. Ye Qing immediately jumped off his boulder and sprinted toward the distant forest!

“Oh, cutie, it’s pointless. You’re not going to escape me!” The tail-woman giggled sweetly. Her voice sounded so sweet, inviting and more importantly, human that no one would ever believe she was a face on a bull’s tail until they saw her with their own eyes.

“But first... will you please get rid of those ugly birds in the sky for me, Bull?” The tail-woman said sweetly. Ye Qing instinctively looked back just in time to see the massive bull letting out a thunderous snort that was far louder and impactful than a thunderclap. He was almost a hundred meters away from the bull at this point, and still he felt like someone had hit his head with a hammer.

The Gale Birds in the sky weren’t nearly as lucky. The snort was so powerful that their heads abruptly exploded into a shower of blood and gore. Before their headless carcasses could hit the ground, the fur on the bull’s tail grew like crazy and caught them all. Then, it pulled the carcasses toward the woman so she could gobble them all up in one gulp. Ye Qing could hear their bones snapping like twigs even as blood sprayed forth from the corners of her lips. It was creepy to put it mildly.

“Peeping on me again, cutie? Just give me a moment! I’ll be right there!”

The tail-woman was still chewing up the Gale Birds’ bodies when she called out teasingly to Ye Qing. Assuming he wasn’t mistaken, he even saw her winking at him from afar. Clear goosebumps broke out of his scalp as he ran even faster toward the forest ahead of him. He had no doubt the tail-woman would eat him like chicken wings if he was even a little bit slower!

Ye Qing’s speed was excellent, and he was able to reach the foot of the hill and slip into the dense woods just a few seconds later. However, he had just taken his first step into

the forest when the ground started trembling, and the woman's sweet giggles entered his ears. The hunt was on!

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On a tall, straight mountain that stretched all the way into the clouds, a young man was meditating on top of a cliff. He was around twenty-five to twenty-six years old and wore a set of pure white clothes that matched his handsome features very well. His aura was sharp and devoid of warmth like a sword.

The mountain was lofty, and the wind was extremely strong. It was pushing the sea of clouds beneath the cliff to heavens-know-where. As the ground was completely blocked from view, it was impossible to say how far up the young man was, only that a drop from this height was going to be fatal for sure.

The young man wasn't afraid in the slightest, however. He was so calm and collected that he resembled a cold, hard rock.

Suddenly, the young man opened his eyes and fished out a wooden tag from his sleeves. It had snapped in half before he knew it.

"Zheng's Lifetag is broken!" the young man uttered in a low, raspy voice. He then gripped the wooden tag so hard that it exploded into a million pieces.

"Killer of my brother, I will find you and destroy you if it's the last thing I do!" He swore under his breath. The air was stifling and oppressive just like the calm before the storm.

Buzz—

The sound of singing swords abruptly rang from beneath the cliff. The next moment, the sea of clouds scattered into nothing as if they were skewered by a tsunami of sword qis.

"Master said I've reached a bottleneck, and I've certainly cultivated in peace and solitude for long enough. It is time I leave the mountains!" The young man said while rising to his feet. Then, he started walking down the clouds like he was a god descending to the earth!

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"Haha! Don't run, cutie! You're going to end up in my mouth anyway, so why bother?"

Behind Ye Qing, ancient trees thick and tall enough to have lived for hundreds of years kept falling like they were trampled by some sort of giant. The earth shook violently and constantly like an earthquake that would never end. However, none of them were as terrifying as the sweet voice that kept talking to him like the tail-woman was right beside

him this whole time. He just could not shake the bull Stranger off no matter how far he ran!

Ye Qing snuck a glance behind him and noted that the hill-sized bull was definitely still chasing after him. Its tail was also lifted high up in the air like a snake towering over its prey. He could almost see the woman's face at the end of the tail.

"Peeping at me again, cutie? If you let me eat you, then we can be together forever! Don't you want that?"

"Oh cutie, your flesh smells incredible! I can't wait..."

Ye Qing ignored her and kept running. Every time he was about to run out of stamina, he would sacrifice a dragon-serpent rune and restore himself as good as new. It was the only reason the giant bull hadn't caught him... or maybe not. Given its size, Ye Qing was fairly sure that the bull could catch up to him if it really wanted to. It was just toying with him like a cat would before eating the mouse!

Ye Qing didn't know if that really was the case, and he didn't care. One thing for certain, he must keep running if he wishes to live!

Suddenly, the scenery before his eyes changed drastically. The lush, ancient trees that towered over the earth were abruptly replaced by a completely different kind of tree. Not only was its trunk pitch black in color, they were bald and overflowing with doom and gloom.

The deeper Ye Qing went, the darker the environment became. Then, there came a point where the trees were suddenly covered in human skins. As soon as Ye Qing burst into this area, every skin on the trees abruptly came alive and turned toward him, drilling their gaze into his soul with their pitch black eyes.

"The human skin Strangers? Did I accidentally stumble upon the human skin Strangers' lair?" Ye Qing recognized the creepy monsters in front of him, of course. At first he was cursing his luck, but then it hit him that he might be able to pit the human skin Strangers and the bull against one another. Worst case scenario, it would still be a three-way fight!

Ye Qing did not hesitate. Still sprinting at full speed, he shouted on top of his lungs, "Human skin Strangers, your grandfather's here to kick your ass!"

It was like someone had shot a flare or sent a signal to every human skin Stranger in the area. They immediately peeled off the trees and chased after Ye Qing like a tidal wave.

The human skin Strangers at the very back did not get to participate in the chase, however. It wasn't because they didn't want to, but because a humongous hoof had abruptly descended from the sky and crushed them into bits.

“What ugly things! Bull, make sure you stomp them all into bits! Do not let them hurt a single hair on my cutie!” The tail-woman ordered sweetly while swaying right above the bull.

What happened next was, of course, a one-sided slaughter. The giant bull easily trampled the human skin Strangers to bits! They were unable to put up even the slightest bit of resistance!

Chapter 25: Jade Dragon Lake

“Fuck! They’re so useless!” Ye Qing swore while sneaking a glance behind his back. He sucked in a deep breath before accelerating once more. As he ventured deeper into the forest, his surroundings steadily grew darker and darker. The air itself seemed to be chock full of doom and gloom and misfortune. And of course, the number of human skin Strangers chasing after him was still growing by the second.

The sea of human skin Strangers would’ve been a huge threat against most opponents, but unfortunately, a Stranger the size of a hill wasn’t one of them. Like ants, a single stomp was all the bull Stranger needed to crush an entire group of human skin Strangers into pieces. A couple more stomps later, and they couldn’t even maintain their shape anymore.

Ye Qing was still running for his life when he encountered a wall of thick fog. It was then he heard a crazed, evil laughter from behind the fog.

“Kekeke! You’re here, you’re finally here! I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, kekeke...”

Ye Qing could hardly stop now, so he simply clenched his teeth and got ready for anything. A few seconds later, he saw the silhouette of a giant. It was as tall as a Gale Bird, but its width was no less impressive. It looked like a mountain of flesh from a distance.

“Fang Nianshui?” Ye Qing exclaimed in shock when the bloated giant’s face finally came into view. It belonged to none other than Fang Nianshui.

Ye Qing quickly realized that he was mistaken though. The closer he got, the clearer the giant became, and it wasn’t long before he realized that the mountain of flesh wasn’t a mountain of flesh at all. It was a body that had been cobbled together through an unimaginable amount of human skins. Covered in wrinkles and cracks from head to toe, it looked like an unbelievably ugly lump that had been stitched together using countless pieces of dirty fabric. Ye Qing could confidently say that he had never seen something so ugly and bloated in his life.

The giant’s face was somehow even uglier. The face was technically Fang Nianshui, but it was a giant face grafted together using countless heads. There were mouths, nostrils, eye sockets and ears all over the flesh. Ye Qing wasn’t even sure how the monster

managed to cobble them together into Fang Nianshui's face, but one thing for certain, it truly was the epitome of ugliness.

It was at this moment Ye Qing noticed that a disgusting, pitch black qi was constantly pouring out of the seams between the giant's skins. Through the seams, he could just barely see a black dagger about three inches in length sticking out of its heart. It was also the source of the black qi.

"That dagger! That must be the Strange Artifact Chu Nianjiu spoke of!" Ye Qing exclaimed in realization.

The black qi flowing out of the dagger looked exactly the same as the black qi possessing the human skin Strangers. If he wasn't mistaken, the dagger must be the culprit behind the human skin Strangers!

Ye Qing perked up not because he discovered the truth—what did the truth matter when he was moments away from death?—but because the human skin giant looked quite powerful. And since it was powerful, it should be able to delay the giant bull behind his back for a significant amount of time. Worst comes to worse, it should still buy him enough time to escape to safety!

"Heh! I'm counting on you, brother!" *He did not forget me even after he passed onto the afterlife. You're such a good guy, Nianshui!*

Ye Qing charged straight toward the human skin giant while wearing a giant grin on his face.

The hatred on the human skin giant's face deepened when it saw Ye Qing charge straight toward it. It immediately clenched its fist and punched down on the young man. As it did so, black qi flowed into the fist before bursting into black flames. It seemed intent on burning Ye Qing into ashes.

Ye Qing did not alter his trajectory though. He kept running forward like he was planning to commit double suicide with the human skin giant. But right before the punch would've hit him, Ye Qing abruptly sped up, hugged his head, and rolled right between the giant's legs. Just like that, he was out of danger and free to run to his heart's content once more.

It was obvious that the human skin giant did not have a good head on its shoulders, or rather, it was acting purely based on its instinct. After losing Ye Qing, he froze for a second before flying into a rage and roaring on top of its lungs. It proceeded to punch the giant tree beside it and shattered the trunk in one hit.

Rumble rumble!

It was at this moment the giant bull finally made it to the human skin giant. As soon as the tail-woman entrenched above the bull's head spotted, she immediately let out a cry of dismay and horror, "How ugly! How can such an ugly thing exist in the world? Ugly, ugly, ugly! Quick, Bull! Stomp him to death before he pollutes our eyes!"

The human skin giant was already pissed off in the first place, and now an excellent target had just presented itself. It let out another roar before charging straight toward the bull.

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Well done, brother! Naturally, Ye Qing was thrilled when he saw the human skin giant charging toward the bull Stranger out of the corner of his eyes. He even gave his new best friend a thumbs-up in his heart.

On the bull's head, the tail-woman let out a disdainful snort and swayed left and right like she was shaking her head. Even the strange bull was snorting in disdain—no, it was an attack! A powerful shockwave greater than the one it had unleashed earlier abruptly spread out in every direction! Like a tsunami, it crushed every tree, every grass, and every rock that dared to stand in its path!

Ye Qing was about fifty meters away from the two giants when the shockwave smacked him in the back and sent him hurtling across the air. By the time he climbed back to his feet and looked behind him, he realized that the gloomy woods behind him had been razed to the ground, leaving only an empty clearing behind!

The sea of human skin Strangers were nowhere to be seen. The human skin giant standing directly in the path of the shockwave was completely gone as well!

"Motherfucker! You're useless, Nianshui!" Ye Qing cursed when he realized that the human skin giant had been annihilated. Despite its scary appearance, it was just a paper tiger! It couldn't even survive a sneeze from the enemy!

Ka-thunk!

"What the!?" Suddenly, a dagger fell from the sky and landed right in front of Ye Qing. It was none other than the dagger he had seen embedded inside the human skin giant's body earlier. The shockwave caused by the bull Stranger's sneeze had probably blown it all the way to this place!

"It's considered bad luck to turn down free stuff! Especially if it's from the heavens themselves!" Ye Qing declared in justification of his greed. Every Strange Artifact was a priceless relic in its own right. He might not have wanted it when it was still embedded in the giant's body, it would be foolish of him not to take it now!

But of course, he wasn't bold enough to grab it directly. The dagger looked completely unassuming now, but the horrifying things it had committed—peeling skin off both living and dead people, conjuring armies of human skins, and even creating a monster straight out of one's worst nightmares—was still fresh in his mind. That was why he brought out the Annon Sutra. He wrapped it around the dagger and tucked it all under his shirt.

If the Annon Sutra could suppress even the mysterious blood, then it should have no problems suppressing the dagger as well.

With that done, Ye Qing continued to flee for his life. He hadn't forgotten that a bloodthirsty Stranger was right behind him!

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On a previously scenic hillside, Chu Nianjiu was floating in the air and surveying the ruined and collapsed mess in front of him. He looked grave and solemn.

“What happened here, my lord?” Zheng Tao and Wu Biao blurted from behind when they saw the destruction. They were searching the area opposite of Ye Qing and Chen Zheng when suddenly, they saw the contact talisman exploding in the air. While they were rushing over to their comrades' rescue, the earth suddenly shook as if an earthquake was happening. They already had a bad feeling then, but it would seem that things were even worse than they had imagined!

“Have you seen Captain Chen and Ye Qing, my lord?” Zheng Tao asked urgently.

“No, I have not. The presence of a powerful Stranger permeates this place. I suspect that Chen Zheng and Ye Qing must have used a contact talisman after encountering a serious threat!” Chu Nianjiu speculated. Unfortunately, he was just a little too far away from the duo when the contact talisman was fired. Now, he could only pray that Chen Zheng was still alive. Otherwise, he was going to catch hell from a certain sword maniac.

How bothersome!

Chu Nianjiu scratched his head in irritation as he observed his surroundings. “Looking at the marks on the ground, it looks like the powerful Stranger that caused all this destruction had gone that way. We should follow it. Let's hope... that they're both fine!”

Chu Nianjiu took a sip of alcohol before taking a step. As if magic, he shot ten meters forward like the wind. Zheng Tao and Wu Biao hurriedly chased after him. The Wine Gentleman might look like he was sauntering, but in fact he was moving at high speed. The two watchmen had to give everything they got just to keep up with him.

As they ventured deeper and deeper into the forest, their astonishment steadily grew as well. The hoofprints were the size of a lake, and countless trees lay broken or shattered on the ground. The forest itself had been split in half. They could only wonder what kind of Stranger had caused this destruction.

“Wait, this presence... it belongs to the human skin Strangers!” Suddenly, Chu Nianjiu stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes in concentration. Then, he walked up to a shattered tree and lay his hand on the fragments. “Yes, this was definitely where the Strange Artifact was!”

Chu Nianjiu hurriedly rushed forward until he reached the location where the presence was the strongest and stopped in his tracks once more. His usual expression had been replaced by a look of utter shock.

“What’s wrong, my lord?” Zheng Tao and Wu Biao asked between heavy breaths after catching up to Chu Nianjiu. Their question was automatically answered when they looked up and saw the clearing in front of them; one that definitely had not been present before. The wide clearing in front of them looked like it had been struck by a meteor. The blast radius was at least thirty meters wide, and the pit at least ten meters deep. The crystallization at the center of the pit and the lingering heat in the air all suggested that a terrifying explosion or tsunami had taken place here just a while ago. Lying just beyond the pit were countless fallen trees and debris.

“What... What could possibly have done all this?” Wu Biao stuttered as he gulped.

“A Stranger!” Chu Nianjiu replied expressionlessly before resuming the pursuit.

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“God dammit! It’s been a full hour since she started chasing me! Why is she still chasing me!” Ye Qing panted heavily while glancing behind his back with bloodshot eyes. There, a giant bull with a carnivorous tail-woman were still nipping at his heels relentlessly.

“You should stop, cutie! The place you’re about to enter is very dangerous! You won’t be able to leave once you enter the place!” The tail entrenched on the bull’s head cried sweetly. “Just join me already! You’ll be able to see me everyday if you do!”

“...” *I would rather die than see your bloody face everyday.*

Truth be told, the Stranger’s warning was unnecessary. The unnatural blood stench in the air was all the warning sign he needed to know that he was entering a dangerous place. What was curious was that the smell felt very familiar to him.

“You’re a very naughty boy, cutie! I’m starting to get angry!” Perhaps it was because Ye Qing had ignored her “advice” one too many times, but the tail-woman grew visibly

angry this time. The hair around the tail started growing at an insane rate before plunging toward Ye Qing like a flood of snakes.

“Fuck!”

Ye Qing spat out a bloody spittle before sucking in a deep breath. His stomach swelled and deflated rapidly for a couple of times before a powerful aura seeped out of his body. Suddenly, he was running several times faster than before.

In essence, the Toad Force was a technique that greatly enhanced the wielder’s physical attributes. That was why it could also be applied to fleeing as well.

Whoosh! Ye Qing abruptly burst into a clearing. He was greeted by the sight of a massive lake.

Something was very wrong with the lake, however. A normal lake was azure blue or emerald green in color, but this one was jarringly red—the color of blood.

“A lake of blood? Is... Is this the Jade Dragon Lake?” Ye Qing exclaimed in shock and horror. He finally realized why the blood stench had smelled so familiar to him. It was the same smell that had permeated the village when they were under attack by the sarcophagus!

The lake before him could only be the resting place of that terrifying sarcophagus, the Jade Dragon Lake!