

Stranger Danger

Chapter 6: Mud Doll

“Is that you, Ye Qing? Why are you here? I thought I told you to rest until you’ve fully healed?” asked Lin Hu.

It was a peaceful morning. Lin Hu was instructing the trainees on the training ground as usual when Ye Qing walked up to him with a bright smile on his face.

Ye Qing replied casually, “But I am healed, captain. That’s why I came to see you.”

“What?” Lin Hu looked Ye Qing up and down for a moment before exclaiming in surprise, “It’s true! How did you recover so quickly?”

Just a week ago, Ye Qing had looked sick, pale, and so weak that a gust of wind might topple him. But now, he was practically the picture of good health. His cheeks were rosy, his vigor was overflowing, and not a shred of weakness could be spotted anywhere.

Ye Qing was ready for this. He answered, “I wasn’t that hurt in the first place, and my family kept an old ginseng that’s perfect for restoring strength and vigor. It’s why I recovered so quickly.”

“I see!” Lin Hu had no reason to suspect that Ye Qing was lying, so he simply nodded and said, “By the way, your level of vigor should not be possible for an untrained man. In fact, it rivals some of the kids behind me. You have already begun practicing the ‘Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation’, haven’t you?”

“Your senses are sharp, captain. Yes, it was boring for my body to heal, so I thought to myself: why not?” answered Ye Qing while rubbing his nose as if embarrassed. It was why Lin Hu did not notice the triumphant glint in his eyes.

The captain didn’t realize I’m an adept Reforged already. He didn’t notice that my blood is unusual either. That’s good, he thought with a bit of relief.

A week ago, Ye Qing wondered how he was going to explain his unnatural progress to anyone. After all, it wasn’t everyday a nobody skipped a whole year of work and became an adept Reforged in under a day. But after he grew accustomed to his newfound power, he was pleasantly surprised to find that his blood could disguise his cultivation level and his presence. By manipulating its power of consumption, he could “store” his strength, presence and more inside the blood and make himself look like a common man, just one with a stronger vigor than normal. When necessary, he could

simply cancel the effect and return to full power in an instant. To put it simply, he could make himself look weaker than he really was.

It wasn't perfect though. If someone were to take a look at his blood, they would notice that each drop contained an unimaginable amount of power.

Besides absorbing the remnant energy in his body and continuing his cultivation, learning how to control his blood was Ye Qing's main focus for the past week. It was all to conceal his strength. It wasn't that he didn't have any vanity in him, he just wasn't strong enough to afford it right now.

For one, his cultivation speed was so insane that someone would want to know exactly how he had done it. Two, it was highly likely that Chen Zheng would be spurred into drastic action if he discovered that the insignificant pebble he thought he could crush at any moment wasn't so insignificant after all. Until he found out exactly what his nemesis was capable of, it was simply unwise to clash against him so soon. For now, the low-profile was the best profile.

Lin Hu ordered, "Show me your 'Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation'. I want to know how far you've progressed."

"Got it." Ye Qing nodded and took a stance. Then, he began to practice the cultivation art he had practiced at least hundreds of times before. However, his movements were far slower than normal, and his transitions were shaky and rough. By the time he finally completed a full cycle, he was sweating like he had just climbed out of a river and panting like a dog.

He was faking it, of course. The plan was to keep a low profile, so of course he should act accordingly.

"Incredible! Incredible!"

Ye Qing had done his best to practice the "Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation" as horribly as possible. In fact, he was fully expecting Lin Hu to tell him what a failure he was and spray spittle all over his face. It was why he was utterly surprised when he received the exact opposite.

"I cannot believe you learned the entire cultivation art in just seven days! Although your transitions are rough, and many parts of your forms are wildly inaccurate, to reach this level in just seven days is nothing short of incredible. Keep this up! At this rate, it shouldn't be long before you reach the journeyman level."

After Lin Hu was done praising Ye Qing, he turned back to the trainees and lost his smile immediately. "Look at Ye Qing, and then look at yourselves! Our man has only practiced for seven days with no one to guide him, and still he was able to perform the 'Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation' from beginning until the end! But you lot have

been studying under me for over two weeks, and some of you still couldn't perform a full cycle! Did I accidentally pick up a pack of dogs? Is that why you couldn't even learn something so simple? An embarrassment, that's what you are!"

Everyone: "...” Ye Qing: "...”

As a dozen pairs of resentful gazes fastened on his face, Ye Qing rubbed his nose innocently and thought, *I just want to keep a low profile. Is that too much to ask?*

"Zhou Nian, Li Er. Step forward," Lin Hu ordered.

"Captain." Two men—one stout and one slender—immediately stepped into the open.

Ye Qing knew these two. The tall, slender youth with an air of aloofness was Zhou Nian, and the short and portly one beside him was Li Er. They had played together when they were children, and they had shared a good relationship until Chen Zheng had barged into his life and caused them to grow estranged.

"Ye Qing, Zhou Nian, Li Er. The three of you have learned the 'Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation' and begun tempering your bodies. In better times, I would wait until your vigor has fully stabilized before throwing you to the frontlines, but sadly our numbers are too thin to maintain that rule anymore. I have no choice but to put you to work immediately."

Zhou Nian and Li Er turned as pale as a sheet when they heard this, but not Ye Qing. He knew this was coming, not to mention that the reason he showed up today was to participate in expeditions, kill Strangers, and apply them in his cultivation.

"Follow me."

Lin Hu led them to the village entrance where a middle-aged man stood. He carried a bow on his back and a long saber around his waist. "I've got three rookies for you, Nianshui. I want you to show them the ropes."

Fang Nianshui (Thinking of Water) was a refined and graceful name, but the man himself was anything but that. Not only was he as stout as an ox, he had a bandit's face and a thick black beard.

Fang Nianshui let out a hearty laugh. "Perfect timing! I just lost my last few underlings two days ago!"

Zhou Nian and Li Er turned even paler and shivered when they heard this.

"Cut it out. Are you trying to make things harder for yourself?" Lin Hu slapped the big man behind the shoulder before shooting them a reassuring smile. "Nianshui is the most experienced hunter of Strangers in our village. You would do well to learn from him."

“Yes captain,” All three youngsters responded affirmatively.

“Take them to the armory to choose their weapons. Then, show them what a day in a watchman’s life is like,” Lin Hu ordered before adding, “Take good care of them, okay?”

Fang Nianshui nodded with a guffaw. “I get it, captain. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Good. I’ll see you all later then,” said Lin Hu before turning around and leaving.

After the watchmen captain was gone, Fang Nianshui declared lackadaisically, “Alright, the three of you are my underlings now. Although we’re fellow villagers, and I’ve watched over you since you were running around with your birds out, there are watchmen rules that we watchmen must abide by no matter what. For starters, you must address me as ‘Boss’ or ‘Boss Fang’.”

"Boss Fang," the trio answered obediently.

“Good lads!” Fang Nianshui grinned in satisfaction. “Come on then. Let’s go grab your weapons.”

There were sabers, spears, sticks, clubs, axes, hatchets, swords and even pitchforks in the armory. Unfortunately, they were all forged using common crucible steel, and there was nothing special about them besides having a fine edge.

Zhou Nian chose a longsword, and Li Er a long stick. It was a good fit with his portly frame. Ye Qing took a bit longer to consider his options before grabbing a long saber with a long, narrow blade. It resembled the Yanling saber.

A sword looked dashing, but it required a style that revolved mainly around thrusts and jabs. A stick was impactful, but it lacked the sheer deadliness of a honed edge. A saber was heavy and excellent at slashing, but it could not be wielded properly without a good amount of strength. Thankfully, his strength was exceptional even for an adept Reforged, so a saber was the most suitable weapon for him.

“Are you done? If you are, then it’s time to head out and broaden your horizons!” Fang Nianshui declared after all three youngsters had grabbed their weapons.

Li Er asked curiously while running after the hunter, “What should we be expecting, Boss Fang? Is there anything you can tell us?”

Fang Nianshui chuckled but refused to give him an answer. “It’ll be no fun if I tell you everything now, won’t it? Just wait and see. I promise you it’ll be an interesting experience.”

When the group exited the entrance and stared into the distance, they were immediately greeted by a beautiful expanse of lush fields and pastures, tall trees and swaying flowers, calm waters and lofty mountains, soft clouds and a clear, blue sky. Even Ye Qing had to admit that it was a scene straight out of a paradise.

“It’s beautiful!” Zhou Nian could not help but exclaim in wonderment. Li Er and Ye Qing were looking left and right with bright eyes as well.

The people of August Hill Village were generally not allowed to leave the village compound unless it was for farming. It was why they rarely got to enjoy even the scenery just beyond their walls.

“It *is* beautiful, innit? This is just the beginning. More pleasant surprises are waiting for you ahead,” Fang Nianshui winked at them before walking down a path set between the fields.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

They were walking when Li Er came to a sudden stop. It was because he noticed bubbles rising from a quagmire next to them.

“Don’t touch it!” Fang Nianshui hurriedly stopped Li Er when he looked back and noticed that the curious youngster was about to poke the quagmire with his long stick. Not a moment too soon, the surrounding mud suddenly wriggled on its own before joining together to form a pair of mud dolls.

“Yah yah...” The mud dolls had a nose, eyes and legs. Individually, it was just big enough to fit on a palm. The moment they appeared, they started running around making strange noises and playing like children.

More and more mud wriggled unnaturally before taking the form of a mud doll. It took only a few seconds for the otherworldly creatures to fill up the whole path. Mud and water flew everywhere, and some even landed on the group when a couple of mud dolls collided against their feet. It wasn’t an attack though. The creatures were just fooling around and playing among themselves.

About seven to eight minutes later, the mud dolls abruptly ran back to the quagmire as if they had had their fill. Then, they wriggled one last time before dissolving into the pool of mud and disappearing completely.

“What... what are those things?” Li Er asked with a stiff voice. His face was pale, and he didn’t dare to move even after the mud dolls had disappeared.

Fang Nianshui dropped his lackadaisical demeanor and said seriously, “We call them Mud Dolls, an Mundane-class Stranger. From weak to strong, a Stranger may be

classified as Mundane, Red, Malice, and Hatred. They correspond to our Body Tempering, Qi Invocation, Vessel Augmentation, Astral Refinement and more.”

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“Are there Strangers above the Hatred-class?” Ye Qing asked with a frown.

Fang Nianshui answered, “Of course, but you don’t need to learn about them right now. Just know that they are far beyond you or my ability to handle. To give you an example, a Stranger at that level can easily destroy a village or even a county singlehandedly. They can only be handled by another warrior at the same level or higher.”

“Setting that aside, my first lesson to you lot is to rein in your curiosity. Think twice, look twice, and don’t touch anything unless you’re sure it won’t kill you. Why? Because some Strangers are perfectly harmless unless you provoke them first. Take the Mud Dolls for example. Normally, the worst they can do to you is to dirty your clothes. But if you piss them off, they will fight you to the death.

“You might think that you stand a chance, but the Mud Dolls are completely made of mud. They are nigh unkillable unless you can eliminate all the mud in the area somehow. Even I won’t survive a confrontation with the Mud Dolls without some serious luck, much less you rookies!”

Chapter 7: Echo Caterpillar

“So? Have you carved my words into your heads?” Fang Nianshui pressed with a harsh voice.

“Yes boss,” all three youngsters responded with varying degrees of distress. Fang Nianshui’s advice could mean the difference between life and death, and no one was stupid enough to take it lightly.

“That is all I ask. Now, let us continue.” Fang Nianshui abruptly lost his serious face and returned to his sunny, lackadaisical disposition once more.

“We’re not going back yet?” Li Er asked with trepidation as his legs shivered.

Fang Nianshui chuckled ominously. “Of course not. Why would we go back when there’s more fun to be had?”

All three youngsters exchanged incredulous looks with each other. They didn’t dare to say it out loud, but only a maniac would agree with the hunter’s idea of “fun”.

“By the way, the places we’re passing through are all places we’re going to patrol in the future, so you best carve them into your heads as well.”

The group of four passed through the farms and stepped on a major road. Fang Nianshui would continue to explain all the routes and areas they would be patrolling as they continued.

“Hehehe... hahaha...”

Suddenly, Ye Qing heard a peal of laughter he wasn't quite sure was real when a breeze blew against the surrounding trees. He immediately straightened up and kept his eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary.

“Ye... Ye Qing, did you... did you hear anything just now?” asked Li Er beside him. The stout youngster was hunching his shoulders and scanning his surroundings with a frantic look in his eyes.

Ye Qing gave him a random excuse, “The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.”

Li Er: “...”

“Hehehe... hahaha...”

It was at this moment a gale blew at them hard enough to throw their clothes into disarray. More importantly, the laughter was growing louder and louder until it almost felt like someone was giggling right beside their ears. Ye Qing also caught a glimpse of what looked like a blurry silhouette out of the corner of his eyes.

“Aaaaah! It's a ghost! A ghost!” Li Er let out a terrified scream before turning around and running for the village. Of course, he didn't even manage two steps before someone appeared behind him and lifted him to the air by the collar.

“Ghost, my ass!” Fang Nianshui slapped Li Er out of his panic before explaining impatiently, “What kind of ghost appears in broad daylight? That's the Wind Children you're hearing. It's harmless so long as you don't provoke it.”

“The Wind Children?” Ye Qing concentrated his eyes on the passing wind. Sure enough, he glimpsed what looked like the silhouette of a child dancing freely in the wind.

“Yep. The Wind Children are Mundane-class Strangers. They enjoy hiding inside the wind and flying with it. Just like the Mud Dolls, they normally don't attack anyone unless provoked. If you do, you'll find that they are a greater enemy than even the Mud Dolls.”

“That reminds me, our Captain Lin once provoked the Wind Children by accident and nearly died despite being a late-stage Invoker. Luckily, Granny Xia and Captain Chen showed up in time to save his life. Long story short, don't provoke the Wind Children unless you have a death wish.”

Lin Hu is a late-stage

Invoker? Ye Qing's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Since Chen Zheng stood on the same footing as Lin Hu, it should be safe to assume that he was also a late-stage Invoker.

"You know what? I'm feeling generous today, so here's a freebie: If you run into a dangerous situation in the future, do not panic, and definitely do not scream like a goddamn girl. People like that are usually the first to die." Fang Nianshui released Li Er before teasing him in a friendly manner, "Who would've thought that a big guy like you would have such tiny balls? You better grow some soon before you disappoint the ladies, lad."

Li Er chuckled awkwardly and scratched his head in embarrassment.

"Change of plans. Ye Qing, switch places with Li Er. Let's hope that'll be enough to stop you from jumping at every shadow."

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"Yes boss," both youngsters responded as Ye Qing moved to the rear, and Li Er to the center of their group.

"My second lesson to you lot is to remain calm and observe your surroundings no matter the circumstances. The more stressed and nervous you are, the easier it is to lose control and consequently, your life."

Fang Nianshui continued after a pause, "Alright, we're going to make another round here."

By now, the trio was somewhat ready for what was to come. At the very least, they weren't overreacting like when they encountered the first two Strangers anymore.

"That mountain over there—the tallest and biggest of them all—is Little August Hill. You might've noticed, but our village is named after it. While it looks calm and peaceful from the outside, trust me when I say it's very dangerous. Not even our martial artists would dare to enter Little August Hill without cause."

After pointing at a tall, lofty mountain in the distance and providing a brief explanation, Fang Nianshui said, "And that's it. We've patrolled all the areas we have to patrol. Oh! Look at me. We've walked all morning, and I still haven't told you our main responsibilities yet. First, a watchman is responsible for protecting the farmers so that they may toil without fear from the Strangers. Second, a watchman is responsible for protecting the farms so that the Strangers cannot plunge us all into a famine, and third, a watchman is responsible for protecting the village from a Stranger attack. Also, we must report back to the higher-ups if we spot any dangerous Stranger nearby."

“Alright, we’ve been walking for almost three hours, and I’ve told you everything you need to know. It’s time to go home.”

“Oh thank heavens! We can finally go home!” Li Er exploded in excitement. He even swung his stick around a little.

“Oh thank heavens, we can finally go home.” The reserved Zhou Nian said the same thing, but in a stiffer voice.

“Let’s go then!” declared Fang Nianshui with a wave. This time, he did not chide Li Er despite him causing a commotion.

“Let’s go then!” Zhou Nian repeated Fang Nianshui’s words.

“Zhou Nian? Why are you repeating after us?” Li Er asked in puzzlement.

“Zhou Nian? Why are you repeating after us?” Zhou Nian repeated in the exact same intonation.

“Seriously, are you alright? Wait, I think your nape’s bleeding.” Li Er looked completely confused, but the blood on Zhou Nian’s neck drew his attention away before he could say anything more. He was about to walk over and inspect his friend’s injury when Ye Qing held him in place, frowning.

“Wait. Something’s wrong.”

As soon as he said this, Zhou Nian’s eyes abruptly turned bloodshot like he was about to fly into a rage. Then, he actually let out an animalistic roar and swung his sword wildly at Ye Qing and Li Er.

Caught completely off guard, Li Er wasn’t able to react at all. He would’ve died just like that if Ye Qing hadn’t pulled him out of the way. He unsheathed his saber and clashed blades with Zhou Nian.

Clang!

Zhou Nian’s sword flew into the air, but the saber’s momentum wasn’t spent yet. It cut through the youngster’s neck and sent his head flying into the air. Zhou Nian’s headless corpse took two more steps before it finally collapsed on the ground with a dull thud.

“Aaaaaa—”

It was only now Li Er’s brain finally processed what just happened, and he opened his mouth to let out a bloodcurdling scream. However, he was cut short when an icy voice spoke behind him,

“Silence, fool. Do you want to die that badly?”

The voice belonged to Fang Nianshui. Li Er snapped out of his funk and clapped his hands around his mouth, but his panic was plain for all to see.

“Boss, I—” Ye Qing tried to explain himself when Fang Nianshui looked at him, but the hunter interrupted him with a wave and said,

“I’m not accusing you. It’s the Echo Caterpillar.”

Fang Nianshui walked up to Zhou Nian’s head and took a quick look. Then, he lifted his feet and stomped down on it. The second the head was crushed, a worm about half a finger’s length crawled out of the gore. It looked just like a cabbage caterpillar.

Somehow, it had burrowed into Zhou Nian’s head without anyone noticing.

“This is an Echo Caterpillar, a Mundane-class Stranger. It isn’t threatening in itself, but it can bite through the victim’s skull and burrow into their brains without anyone noticing. Then, it would make the body repeat everything it hears. If someone sees through its act, it would immediately control the body to attack everyone around it. It’s incredibly difficult to guard against, and many watchmen were injured and even killed by their own allies because of the Echo Caterpillar.

“Clearly, the Echo Caterpillar had burrowed into Zhou Nian’s head and controlled him for heavens-know-how-long. You did well, Ye Qing. If not for your swift and decisive action, you and Li Er may have been in danger before I could step in and save you.”

Ye Qing did not respond to Fang Nianshui’s praise. For some reason, he was squinting his eyes and shivering a little. He also looked quite pale.

“Ye Qing? Are you alright?” Fang Nianshui asked worriedly. He thought Ye Qing was feeling scared because this was the first time he took a human life.

Ye Qing shook his head, but Fang Nianshui thought that he was just putting up a brave front. He did not know that the young man was really trying to suppress his bloodlust.

When Fang Nianshui had crushed Zhou Nian’s head—no, even before that, when his saber had sliced through the youngster’s neck—his blood had immediately boiled up at the sight of bright red blood. He could feel them screaming at him to devour every last drop of blood in Zhou Nian’s body.

“Hmph!” Ye Qing dug his fingers into his palm almost deep enough to gouge out his own flesh. Thankfully, the terrible pain was enough to push down the bloodlust.

Feng Nianshui comforted Ye Qing, “It’s okay. Everyone gets like this the first time they take a life. You’ll get used to it eventually. Also, Zhou Nian was no more from the

moment the Echo Caterpillar had burrowed into his head. You're actually taking revenge for him by taking out his controlled body, so there's no need to feel regret over this."

The Echo Caterpillar looked just like an ordinary caterpillar without a head to attach to. Although it was crawling away from them, it was so slow that they had all the time in the world to kill it. Feng Nianshui was about to do just that when suddenly, Ye Qing cried out in alarm, "Wait!"

"What? What?" asked the hunter while looking left and right hastily. He thought that danger had crept up to them without him noticing.

"I'll do it!"

Before Fang Nianshui could make sense of his words, Ye Qing rushed forward and stomped down on the Echo Caterpillar. It let out a disgusting "pssh" sound before green liquid began forming around his shoes. When Ye Qing looked up and saw Fang Nianshui staring at him with an odd look, he let out an awkward cough and said, "I er, I just want to take revenge for Zhou Nian myself."

"Well, sure." Fang Nianshui frowned but didn't press the subject. He pulled out a talisman from within his shirt and ignited it with a spark of qi. Then, he tossed it over Zhou Nian's corpse and burned it into ashes in an instant.

"Boss Fang, why did you... we could've taken him home for a proper burial..." Li Er stammered. Clearly, he hadn't recovered from the shock of Zhou Nian's death yet.

"There are two reasons why we do things this way. One, it's unnecessary. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Zhou Nian is dead, and it doesn't matter if he's cremated or buried. Two, a corpse like this will give off a blood stench. It may attract dangerous Strangers that we are ill-equipped to handle. That is why you always cremate the body with a fire talisman," Fang Nianshui replied.

"Speaking of dangerous Strangers... you wouldn't happen to mean that, would you boss?" Ye Qing suddenly interrupted and pointed in a certain direction. When the hunter looked, he noticed that the sky was covered in pitch black clouds. What was strange was that the clouds were moving toward them and cutting through everything in its path like a hot knife through butter. Even the Wind Children had escaped far, far out of their range.

Buzz... buzz...

It wasn't until the clouds got close, and he heard a loud buzzing noise that Ye Qing realized what he was looking at. The "clouds" weren't clouds, they were a gigantic swarm of pitch black mosquitos! There were so many of them that they looked like clouds from a distance. Worse yet, they were man-eating mosquitos!

Chapter 8: Kung Fu Frog

All the blood drained away from Fang Nianshui's face when he realized what he was staring at.

"It's the Bloodsucking Mosquito! Run!" He shouted before breaking into a mad dash for the village.

Ye Qing and Li Er did not need to be told twice. They immediately fell behind the hunter and ran as quickly as their legs could carry them. Unfortunately, the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes were much faster than they were. They had just reached the halfway point when the buzzing swarm caught up to them and descended like a thunderstorm.

"It's too late... Ready your arms, lads! It's time to fight for your life!" Fang Nianshui took a look around him before sighing out loud. His expression was dark and resigned. Despite what he said, he knew there was no chance they were going to survive this.

Although the Bloodsucking Mosquito was a Mundane-class Stranger, it traveled in swarms that consisted of tens or even hundreds of thousands Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. Forget Lin Hu or the other martial artists, even an Augmentor must get out of the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes' way unless they had a death wish. It was no wonder Fang Nianshui believed that they were all going to die here.

Suddenly, Li Er let out a maniacal scream before taking off in a hurry. "Ahhhh! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!"

"Stop!" Caught off guard, Ye Qing tried to grab his fellow villager but was too late. Li Er was already out of range by the time his hand passed through the air where his shoulder used to be.

The portly youngster had only taken a few steps when the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes descended on him and surrounded him. Ye Qing couldn't see anything due to how densely packed the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes were, but he could certainly hear his childhood playmate letting out the final scream of his life before falling quiet four to five breaths before later. When the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes finally flew away, all that was left of Li Er was a shriveled corpse. Every drop of blood in his body had been sucked dry, and bones scattered everywhere when it collapsed on the ground.

It was at this moment Fang Nianshui let out a mighty, "Now!" before slapping a talisman to his saber. When his weapon swept through the air, a massive column of flames burst into view and turned countless Bloodsucking Mosquitoes into ashes in an instant. Unfortunately, it only took the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes one second to fill up the gap before rushing toward Fang Nianshui.

Unlike the hunter, Ye Qing did not have a talisman he could slap to his saber to empower his attacks. He could only hack and slash at the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes the old-fashioned way. The good news was that his strength was formidable, and his vigor unending even though he had never learned how to wield a saber before. He swung his weapon around like a hurricane and was able to keep the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes at bay for a time.

The bad news was that the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes were endless, and his utter lack of swordsmanship ultimately proved to be a fatal flaw. It wasn't long before a small swarm of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes slipped past his guard and landed on his body.

His skin was as tough as iron, but it still couldn't prevent the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes from piercing it with their stylets and sucking his blood. A tingling pain erupted from every part of his body in no time. This was another reason why the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes were so feared. Their stylets were so sharp that they could penetrate even fine steel with ease. Otherwise, anyone who had reached the adept level in the Body Tempering stage could've handled them.

"Is this it?" Ye Qing thought wryly to himself. He felt surprisingly calm despite knowing that he was but moments away from death.

It was at this moment the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes on his person suddenly shuddered as if they had taken a mighty blow. Then, they shriveled up without warning before falling to the ground, dead.

"What the... how did they die?!"

Ye Qing was so surprised by the turn of events that he subconsciously slowed down and allowed even more Bloodsucking Mosquitoes to reach him. However, just like the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes from before, they too shriveled up and dropped dead in just a matter of breaths. It wasn't long before the ground was covered in countless dead Bloodsucking Mosquitoes.

"My blood... it's sucking them all up!" exclaimed Ye Qing in realization. His blood had boiled up the moment the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes plunged their stylets into his skin. But instead of sucking him dry, they were the ones who got their blood sucked out of their bodies instead. Not only that, he could feel his vigor increasing every time he consumed a small swarm.

I had no idea my blood could be used this way! Ye Qing thought ecstatically to himself. Then, he realized something and stopped moving all of a sudden. The Bloodsucking Mosquitoes immediately took advantage of his inactivity and covered him from head to toe.

The Strangers couldn't kill him, and he was growing stronger just by standing there and doing nothing. So, why would he resist?

Meanwhile, Fang Nianshui was still swinging his flaming saber about and slowly retreating toward the village. He did not notice what was happening to Ye Qing because he was busy enough trying to keep himself alive. The youngster was probably long dead anyway.

At first glance, it looked like Fang Nianshui was doing pretty well. The flame on his saber was absolutely tearing through the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. However, the flame was just an effect of his talisman, and every swing of the blade diminished its power a little more. The moment it ran out of power would be the moment he died.

Gradually, the flame on his saber weakened, and his legs grew heavier and heavier. It would appear that he wouldn't even live until his talisman petered out. It was because the high-intensity battle had taken too much out of him, and because there were simply too many Bloodsucking Mosquitoes in the area. They were as numerous as the stars in the sky, and they hampered him every step of the way.

Is this it? Fang Nianshui thought while panting heavily. His eyes still burned with defiance, but he was covered in Bloodsucking Mosquitoes and growing weaker by the second. At this rate, he was surely going to die.

“... Croak!”

Suddenly, a thunderous croak erupted from the center of a paddy field.

“Croak!”

The strange noise came closer and closer until finally, a green frog appeared from the road. It was as large as a human infant and standing on its hindlegs with its head held high like a human. A red strap was tied around its head, and its forelegs were crossed in front of its chest like human arms. It stared at the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes in the sky with its large, round eyes and looked almost... disdainful.

“Croak! Croak! Croak!”

What happened next was something Ye Qing wasn't likely to forget for the rest of his life. Out of nowhere, the frog started shadowboxing the air in front of it. They weren't the wild, swaggering punches of an untrained man either. Its movements were swift and precise, and it croaked every time it threw a punch. It looked like a true martial arts master.

“Is that... a *kung fu frog* I'm seeing?” Ye Qing blurted as he wiped away the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes on his face. He could only stare in utter disbelief as the frog continued to shadow-box its way toward him and deal critical hits to his worldview every time it threw a punch.

The next moment, the frog leaped into the sky and sucked in so much air that its belly was as round as a balloon. Then, it opened its mouth and let out a croak so loud, so powerful that the air shook, and an entire swathe of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes dropped dead from the shockwave just like that!

Ye Qing was not exempt from the croak. His eardrums ruptured, and his mind turned blank for a good few seconds before he recovered. When he did, he realized he was leaking blood from every hole in his head including his eyes.

“Mother of heavens! It’s a kung fu frog *and* a qigong frog!” Ye Qing wiped away the blood just in time to see the frog landing back on the ground and slurping up all the dead Bloodsucking Mosquitoes with its long tongue.

Next, the frog unleashed its tongue and started sweeping, whipping, rolling and herding the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes to their final destination: its stomach. Its movements were well-honed and disciplined in a way that an ordinary frog couldn’t possibly emulate. Even more intriguing was the fact that the frog’s stomach remained perfectly flat despite eating what must have been thousands of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes by this point. It wasn’t long before more than half of the swarm had disappeared into its stomach. The surroundings also looked a lot clearer than before.

As if recognizing the threat it represented, the remaining Bloodsucking Mosquitoes abruptly ditched Ye Qing and Fang Nianshui and pounced toward the frog. However, the frog simply bent down a little, stretched out a forelimb, and did a little handwave that anyone with even a smidgen of worldly experience would recognize.

When the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes got close, it abruptly unleashed a series of lightning fast palm thrusts that not only froze large swathes of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes in an instant, but also crushed them to bits afterward. Its palms must have been infused with some sort of cold energy. The bodies were then swept into its stomach by a gluttonous tongue. The frog moved so fast that it looked like it had a hundred arms, and not a single Bloodsucking Mosquito was able to get close enough to do any damage.

The Bloodsucking Mosquitoes weren’t stupid, however. When they realized that they could not defeat the frog, they abruptly pulled away from it and tried to escape. However, the frog anticipated this and launched itself into the air with a mighty croak. Then, it executed a magnificent roundhouse kick that shook the air and created what looked like an invisible wall of power. The Bloodsucking Mosquitoes were about ten meters away from the frog when suddenly, over half of their numbers just exploded into itsy bitsy pieces and spilling blood everywhere.

Once more, the frog unfurled its long tongue and swept all the fallen insects into its stomach. Terrified, the few hundred remaining Bloodsucking Mosquitoes flew even faster into the distance.

This time, the frog did not pursue them. It simply patted its belly with a satisfied expression.

“That’s... that’s it?” Some distance away, Fang Nianshui finally recovered from his shock and stared at the fleeing Bloodsucking Mosquitoes with incredulity. The Bloodsucking Mosquitoes belonged in a category of Strangers he could never hope to defeat, and yet he just witnessed another Stranger absolutely massacring them before driving them away with their tail between their legs. That the one who did it was a *frog* only shocked him even more.

He did not recognize the frog—he had never seen or even heard of a Stranger like this—but one thing for certain, it was incredibly powerful. After all, it had soundly defeated a Bloodsucking Mosquito swarm that even an Augmentor would have fled on sight. How could it not be powerful?

It was why Fang Nianshui tensed up and watched the burping frog warily after coming back to earth.

“Croak... croak...”

Thankfully, it looked like the frog wasn’t interested in them. After shooting both Fang Nianshui and Ye Qing a disdainful look, it leaped back into the paddy fields and vanished just like that.

After the frog was gone, Ye Qing walked up to Fang Nianshui and asked quietly, “Boss Fang, what in the world is that Stranger? That... kung fu frog?”

Fang Nianshui shook his head. “I don’t know either. I’ve never seen a Stranger like that. ‘Kung Fu Frog’ is a fitting name for it though.”

It was at this moment Fang Nianshui startled and shot Ye Qing a disbelieving look, “Wait, you’re still alive?”

Do you want me to die? Ye Qing rolled his eyes before making up a random excuse. “I was lucky. I was going to die until that Kung Fu Frog showed up and saved me.”

If that strange frog hadn’t shown up, he could’ve devoured more Bloodsucking Mosquitoes and grown even stronger. Unfortunately, the best-laid plans of mice and men often went awry.

That said, the Kung Fu Frog also served as the perfect excuse as to how he survived the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes, so he could hardly complain about it. The heavens give, and the heavens take.

Fang Nianshui nodded, but Ye Qing noticed that he was staring at the red dots and bumps covering his body with an inscrutable expression. It was impossible to say if the hunter believed him or not.

“Let’s head back then. The Bloodsucking Mosquito isn’t poisonous, but wounds have a higher chance of festering in hot weather like this. We should get them treated as soon as possible!”

“You’re right.”

Ye Qing nodded and followed Fang Nianshui back to the village.

Chapter 9: Skin

“You did well. Go home and catch some well-deserved rest!” Fang Nianshui said after they returned to August Hill Village.

Ye Qing tilted his head in puzzlement, “What about you, Boss Fang?” He was asking because it looked like the hunter was going elsewhere.

Fang Nianshui replied with a weary voice, “Me? I have to report what happened today to Captain Lin. Two people were dead after all. Also, I need to inform him about that strange frog you named Kung Fu Frog. It’s no ordinary Stranger, and while it doesn’t seem to be hostile toward humans that is no reason for us to lower our guards. At the very least, our fellow brothers should know not to provoke it under any circumstances.”

He was about to take off when he suddenly turned back to Ye Qing. “I almost forgot. Take this. It’s a spirit snake ointment and one of the benefits we enjoy. It’s meant to be applied to external wounds. Just rub it over your skin, and your wounds should be healed the next day. Every watchman gets two free bottles each month. In the future, you may receive them yourself at the office.”

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“Thank you, Boss Fang,” Ye Qing hurriedly accepted the medicine and thanked him.

Fang Nianshui gave him a careless wave. “Alright, I’m running off to see Captain Lin now. I’ll see you here at Rabbit Hour [1] tomorrow. Don’t be late.”

“Yes, boss!” Ye Qing nodded in affirmation before adding, “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Fang Nianshui while waving him off again. After Ye Qing had turned around and walked some distance, the hunter abruptly stared at his back with an inscrutable expression on his face.

When Ye Qing returned to his house, the first thing he did was to pour himself a full glass of tea and drain it all in one gulp. It took him a long time before he finally recollected himself. He knew that the outside world was dangerous, but it wasn't until he actually stepped into it that he realized just what those dangers entailed. To put it simply, they represented death and slaughter.

Take this expedition for example. What should've been an easy and harmless tour around the area had claimed two lives just because. If it wasn't for his unparalleled fortune, he would've died just like Zhou Nian and Li Er.

Ultimately, he was still too weak to survive in this harsh world.

Some time later, Ye Qing abruptly looked up from the table. "Oh right, I killed plenty of Strangers today. I wonder how many dragon-serpent runes were ignited?"

He took out the Annon Sutra and unfurled it across the table. As expected, a good amount of dragon-serpent runes were dazzling on the vellum. They looked like a river of stars.

"One, two, three... thirteen dragon-serpent runes in total! That's what I'm talking about!" Ye Qing exclaimed in delight before a frown came to him. "Wait, that can't be right. I killed an Echo Caterpillar and at least thousands of Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. Even if the conversion ratio is horribly bad, I should have received dozens of dragon-serpent runes at least."

Thankfully, the answer came to him almost immediately. "Wait a second. These two runes over here are... silver-colored, not gray!"

Ye Qing's eyes lit up. Every ignited rune on the Annon Sutra was gray except two. Not only were they silver, they were brimming with a profound air of Dao.

Did most of the gray runes join together to form these two silver runes? He thought. It was definitely possible. The Annon Sutra was only so big after all. It simply did not have enough space to fit thousands of dragon-serpent runes at the same time.

"Logically speaking, the silver runes should be better than the gray runes, right?" Ye Qing muttered to himself. It made sense. Even their appearance was cooler than the gray ones.

For a second, Ye Qing was tempted to absorb a silver rune. However, it lasted for only a second before he ditched it completely. There was no telling how many gray runes it took to form a silver rune. What if it contained more power than he could hold? It would be most ironic if he survived the dangers outside only to perish in his house because he couldn't rein in a stupid impulse.

“Oh well. Thirteen gray runes should be enough to last me for a while. I’ll consider my options after I’ve used them all.”

And so Ye Qing rose to his feet, took a pose and began practicing the “Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation” once more. It was to refine the blood he had drained from the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes. Food could not provide energy if one did not have a digestive system. Just the same, the foreign blood in his veins must be subsumed before he could obtain their power. Otherwise, it would be like carrying sand in his blood—heavy, irritating and uncomfortable.

Two cycles later, the weight and awkwardness afflicting up till this point vanished completely. His strength and vigor had grown much stronger as well.

Just like that, I’ve gotten even stronger, Ye Qing thought with a smile. I wonder if I could become invincible if I devour an infinite amount of blood? That would be so awesome. It does feel kinda villainous though. Regardless, I mustn’t get complacent.

Ye Qing thought back to the moment he—or more specifically, his blood—devoured the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes’ blood. It was like trying to control a mindless beast that was overflowing with greed and lust multiplied by a billion. Had he let go of the reins for even a second, he might have been pulled into the vortex of madness and be transformed into a bloodthirsty monster. That was why he mustn’t get complacent. He did not want to transform into a monster who was controlled by his greed and bloodlust.

“Now that that’s done, it’s time to do some actual cultivation!” Ye Qing declared cheerfully while touching a gray rune. Its tremendous power flooded his body in an instant.

Mind and spirit as one, Ye Qing practiced the “Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation” with sublime precision and smoothness. It was a euphoric experience he just could not get enough of.

“Hoo... hoo...”

His skin was flushed with heat and sweat. His bones and internal organs were humming with power. It took him merely two cycles to use up all of the rune’s energy.

I thought so. The stronger my body is, the easier it is to refine the dragon-serpent runes, thought Ye Qing with a satisfied smile on his face. Just a week ago, a single gray rune would almost be enough to make him explode. Now, it took him merely seven to eight minutes to refine and absorb it all. The difference was like night and day.

“Again!”

Ye Qing did not wait to absorb another gray rune. The outside world was as strange as it was dangerous, and Chen Zheng was at the minimum a late-stage Invoker. The

pressure from both inside and outside the village was driving him to thirst for power like never before. He did not want to die without even knowing that a brain-eating caterpillar was eating through his skull, or go out with a whimper like Li Er.

He wanted to live!

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Early next morning, Ye Qing ate some breakfast he threw together at random before hurrying to the village entrance. As expected, Fang Nianshui was already waiting for him. The hunter greeted Ye Qing before beckoning him over to his side, "Come, I've got a gift for you."

"A gift? What is it?" Ye Qing asked curiously.

Fang Nianshui tossed what looked like a small sack into his hands. When he unraveled it, he was pleasantly surprised to find that it was a saber manual named the "Five Tigers Door Breaking Saber".

"A saber manual?" Ye Qing exclaimed in pleasant surprise, "For me?"

Fang Nianshui smirked with his arms crossed. "Who else? I've noticed that your strength and vigor are pretty strong, so I reckon that you must have reached the initiate level of the Body Tempering stage already. That is enough for you to begin training in the ways of the saber. Captain Lin's the one who told me to give it to you to improve your combat strength yesterday."

"Thank you very much, Boss Fang!" Ye Qing declared while flipping through the manual with clear delight. Despite the manual's rather... questionable name, it was exactly what he needed right now. In fact, he had planned on visiting Captain Lin in the next few days and see if he could learn a proper martial art to better defend himself. He wasn't expecting it to fall into his lap before he even asked about it.

"I know you're happy, but we still have a patrol to finish, so let's not waste anymore time, shall we?" Fang Nianshui let out an uncaring chuckle before turning to leave.

It was at this moment the night watchmen came through the entrance. Normally, they would be celebrating the end of their shift or at least greeting their fellow watchmen, but today the entire squad was shrouded in a somber mood.

Fang Nianshui called out, "What's wrong, Old Lin?"

A man in his forties with charcoal skin answered with a sorrowful sigh, "Last night, Yu The Third and his men were ambushed by a Night Owl. All three of them were killed without even leaving a corpse behind."

Fang Nianshui's expression immediately morphed into pity and sorrow. He gave the guy he called "Old Lin" a comforting pat on the shoulder before squeezing out a smile, "Chin up. Wherever they went, I'm sure it's a better place than this one. With luck, we may join them soon enough... Anyway, you all look like shit, so go catch some sleep and leave the rest to us."

They left the village after the somber conversation. Not even the beautiful scenery outside could change the mood for the better.

Suddenly, Fang Nianshui burst into a hearty laugh and slapped Ye Qing on the shoulder. "Alright, that's enough black mood for the day. Everyone dies one day, and you and I are no exception, so chin up!"

Ye Qing nodded. "I know."

And so Ye Qing began patrolling the surrounding farms with Fang Nianshui. At the beginning, they often ran into another watchmen squad who were performing their rounds as well. Instead of walking up to their fellow watchmen and greeting them in person, they merely gave an affirmative nod before resuming their business. The reason the watchmen stayed well out of each other's way was because there was a possibility they could be controlled or possessed by a Stranger. Eventually, they came up with the rule to avoid such tragedies from happening again. Those who ignored it did so at their own peril.

"Ahhhhh!"

Suddenly, a horrified shriek cut through the air. It belonged to a farmer who was toiling the soil.

"Shit! Let's go!"

Fang Nianshui and Ye Qing hurriedly ran toward the farmer.

The screaming villager was running toward them with obvious terror riddled across his face. He looked like he had just encountered the scariest monster of his life. Suddenly, Ye Qing noticed a thread appearing on the villager's forehead out of nowhere. It pulled at the villager like a fish hook until horrifyingly, the skin itself started coming loose and exposing the muscle fibers underneath.

What was scary was that the villager did not seem to feel any pain at all, and the faster he ran the quicker his skin was stripped away from his flesh. Even stranger was the fact that his skin wasn't damaged at all despite his frantic movement. It was almost as if he was taking off his shirt.

"Stop right there! Stop!" Fang Nianshui yelled urgently, but the villager ignored him completely. Eventually...

Rip!

When the villager finally got within ten meters away from the duo, his skin abruptly tore off with a crisp sound, leaving behind a fleshy body that was oozing blood and fluid from everywhere. As if on cue, the afflicted villager then collapsed on the ground and began convulsing violently. He was still alive, however. He started crawling toward them while mumbling, “Save me, save me” over and over. As if that wasn’t bad enough, the human skin that should’ve floated to the ground abruptly turned around and took off like the wind. Literally, it was running like it was a person with its own mind.

1. 5 am sharp. 卯 is between 5am to 7am, and 卯时 is 5 am ☞

Chapter 10: Why Don't You Guess?

Bang!

The earth beneath Fang Nianshui erupted as he shot toward the escaping human skin like an arrow. He was still in the air when he swung his long saber and—

Shred!

—sliced the Stranger in half just like that.

A wisp of black qi so miniscule and faint it was almost invisible slipped out of the severed skin, but Fang Nianshui merely let out an imperious hmph and turned his wrist. Fast and deadly, the horizontal sweep easily caught up with the black qi and shattered it before it could go anywhere.

“What on earth is this thing?” Fang Nianshui murmured to himself as he bent down to inspect the human skin.

“Watch out!”

Suddenly, Ye Qing screamed out in warning before swinging his saber straight at Fang Nianshui. He could literally feel the wind whipping against his hair.

Fang Nianshui’s first thought was that Ye Qing was trying to kill him, but then he felt nothing when he heard a *rip* noise that definitely sounded like something was being torn apart. He spun around just in time to see Ye Qing cutting a human skin in half and destroying its black qi in just one strike. The young man’s execution was just as squeaky clean as his.

Fang Nianshui would’ve been shocked for a while longer, but then he heard more rustling noises coming from all around them. He immediately readied his weapon and watched his surroundings warily. Not a moment too soon, six human skins rushed out from the farms and surrounded them in the blink of an eye.

Just how many people has it killed? Ye Qing thought with a deep frown on his face. It wasn't easy to identify someone when they were just skin, but he could still tell that the human skins blocking their way were all villagers from August Hill Village.

"I trust you to handle yourself, Ye Qing!" Fang Nianshui encouraged before charging toward the three human skins closest to him.

Ye Qing narrowed his eyes for a moment. Then, he pounced toward the other three human skins.

The human skins weren't too strong, to be honest. They looked scary, but even Ye Qing was able to carve up the first human skin that ran up to him in one strike. The same strike had crushed the black qi possessing the human skin as well.

Next, Ye Qing shuffled his feet and twisted his waist to one side. His posture looked awkward, but it allowed him to dodge another human skin's attack and sweep out with his saber. The second human skin was also destroyed just like that.

Unfortunately, that was the end of his flawless performance. The third human skin had managed to maneuver behind him and lashed out.

Although Ye Qing possessed a gargantuan amount of strength, he had never learned any footwork or movement technique in his life. He could only watch as the human skin's arms landed squarely against his shoulders.

Boom!

His shirt yoke was shredded into a million pieces, and his shoulder blades caved in like they had just been struck by a gigantic hammer. The human skin's own arms had exploded into bits, which showed just how powerful the blow was.

"Die!"

Ye Qing did not waver, however. He didn't even budge an inch from his position as he calmly reversed his grip on his saber and lashed out. Just like that, the final human skin on the battlefield was dead.

Or was it?

"Ye Qing, watch out!"

Suddenly, Ye Qing heard a warning cry that drove every cell in his body into overdrive. He immediately turned his head as far to the right as possible. An ordinary person would have broken their neck trying to do this, but Ye Qing was an adept Reforged. His flexibility and sturdiness had long since exceeded what was considered normal a while ago, so he was fine.

The next moment, Ye Qing felt a terrible force smashing viciously into his shoulder. He could hear his bones snapping as his shoulder and his elbow became bent at an odd angle.

“Hgg!” Ye Qing gasped both in pain and fear. If his reaction was just a little slower, the attack likely would have struck him in the head. The consequences would’ve been unimaginable, assuming that his head didn’t straight up explode like a watermelon.

As expected, Ye Qing looked up to find a human skin floating in front of him. It was about to dish out another blow when Ye Qing let out a hmped loudly before executing a back roll and lashing out with his saber at the same time. He was able to slice the human skin in half before it could reach him.

It was only then Fang Nianshui’s voice came, “Are you alright, Ye Qing!? Hang on! I’m coming to help you now!”

Instead of running over to Fang Nianshui, Ye Qing took two steps away from him and watched the hunter warily. He sneered while dragging a limp arm, “Help me? No, I’m pretty sure you’re coming to kill me!”

At the distance, Fang Nianshui skidded to a stop and paused for a good few seconds as if he was trying to digest the absurdity he just heard. Then, he asked with a look of utter confusion, “Did you hit your head or something, Ye Qing? I don’t get what you’re saying.”

Ye Qing’s tone grew even more scornful. “I haven’t hit my head, and neither have you, so let’s stop pretending and cut to the chase already, shall we?”

“…”

“You’re the assassin Chen Zheng sent to kill me, am I right?”

At first, Fang Nianshui looked completely flabbergasted at Ye Qing’s accusation. But when a few seconds passed, and Ye Qing’s expression remained firm and unwavering, he finally dropped his mask and asked curiously, “I’m surprised. You’re not as dumb as you look after all. I must ask though: how did you find out?”

“Not even going to defend yourself? Well, I suppose you’re not that type of person,” commented Ye Qing with a raised eyebrow before continuing, “It’s simple. During yesterday’s expedition, I couldn’t help but notice that you were giving me looks every now and then while you were explaining things. We live in the same village, and we see each other all the time even before I joined your squad. So what possible reason do you have to sneak glances at me like I’m your secret crush? It couldn’t be because I’m so much more handsome than you, right?”

“Two, when the Echo Caterpillar took control of Zhou Nian and attacked us, you could’ve stepped in and saved me and Li Er. Instead, you just stood by and did nothing at all. That was a little too much even if I pretend that you were trying to give us a lesson in independence or something. Of course, I now know for certain that you were trying to use Zhou Nian to kill me!”

“Third, I was leading the way while we were returning to the village yesterday, and the whole time I could feel you burning a hole in my back. There was even a hint of killing intent. You would’ve acted then if we hadn’t run into other watchmen squads, wouldn’t you?”

Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath before launching into the last part of his analysis, “Of course, these are just guesses on my part. I could just have an overactive imagination. But then, you proved me wrong by ‘letting slip’ that human skin just now.”

“These human skins may possess enormous strength, but they’re also slow and very fragile. If I, someone who has never learned any saber art or movement technique before could defeat three of them on my own, how is it possible for ‘the most skilled and experienced hunter’ in August Village to screw up so badly that one of them managed to escape you? Even if you’re ugly as sin, that’s a little too much, don’t you think?”

“A splendid analysis!” Fang Nianshui started slow-clapping while looking incredibly impressed. “I still have a question though. If you’ve suspected me since yesterday, then why did you save me just now?”

Ye Qing chuckled. “I’ve already told you, I wasn’t sure if I was just imagining things until you proved me true. Also, I would rather believe that there are more good people than there are bad people in this world. Unfortunately, I was wrong!”

Fang Nianshui let out a wistful sigh. “That got me in the heart, Ye Qing! I’m almost having second thoughts now! In fact, how about this: I’ll let you live if you tell me your secret?”

“Secret? What secret?” Ye Qing frowned. He did not know exactly what Fang Nianshui was referring to. Was he referring to the Annon Sutra, his hidden strength, or his very unusual blood?

A knowing smirk spread across the hunter’s face. “You’re not an initiate Reforged who just started practicing the ‘Seven Forms of Demon Subjugation’, are you? You’re a journeyman Reforged!”

Ye Qing did not bat an eyelid. “Really? What makes you say that?”

Fang Nianshui spread his arms wide. “If you’re not a journeyman Reforged, there is no way you could’ve survived the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes or these human skin Strangers. They might not be especially deadly, but they’re still as strong as an ox. If

you really are an initiate Reforged, you couldn't have defeated three of them on your own."

"Oh, I almost forgot. You were clearly bitten by the Bloodsucking Mosquitoes yesterday, but your skin looks as good as new, meaning that you've made a full recovery after just one night of rest. How is this possible if you don't have a journeyman Reforged's vigor and vitality?"

Ye Qing tilted his head in confusion. "Weren't you the one who gave me a spirit snake ointment yesterday?"

"Sure, but you didn't use them, did you?" declared Fang Nianshui with surprising confidence.

"Well, yes. But how did you know?"

An evil smirk crossed Fang Nianshui's lips then. "If you had, I wouldn't be seeing you today."

Ye Qing put two and two together and exclaimed in shock, "You... poisoned the spirit snake ointment?"

Thank goodness he was suspicious of Fang Nianshui since yesterday, and he never thought of using the spirit snake ointment since he had the dragon-serpent runes. Otherwise, the consequences would have been unthinkable.

Truly, one should always guard against the harm others might do to them!

"That's right." Fang Nianshui readily admitted his crime. "My turn to ask another question. How did you go from a complete nobody to journeyman Reforged in just seven to eight days? It had taken me more than half a year to reach the same level. Is it some sort of medicine? Unknown cultivation art? Or a Strange Artifact?"

Ye Qing chuckled. "You're a good guesser, aren't you? Why don't you guess?"

Fang Nianshui grinned savagely in response to Ye Qing's provocation, "If I have to guess, it's gotta be a Strange Artifact or, hmm, I know! A Strange Artifact. It's how you were able to swiftly increase your strength while still appearing 'ordinary' to everyone, am I right?"

Ye Qing chuckled again but did not say anything. His response was ambiguous, but Fang Nianshui believed he was right because the absence of denial itself was an implicit admission. So, he offered, "I'll let you live if you'll give me your Strange Artifact. What do you say?"

Ye Qing barked out a laugh before shaking his head decisively. "Absolutely not."

Fang Nianshui was surprised by how vehement he sounded. "Why not?"

Ye Qing sneered, "Because you had never planned on letting me live, duh. If you really wanted to deal with me, you'd never have allowed that human skin Stranger to target my head."

If he really was a journeyman Reforged, the blow to the head would've killed him without question. The hunter would never have done that if he was planning to cut a deal with him.

"Tsk, tsk. I take back my words. You are far smarter than I gave you credit for," Fang Nianshui sounded impressed, but his tone steadily grew darker as he spoke. "It's too bad that smart people also have the tendency to die before their time. I cannot let you live now even if Chen Zheng had suddenly decided to change his mind."

Ye Qing shrugged noncommittally before asking, "Aren't you worried that I might have hidden my 'Strange Artifact' somewhere? That killing me would lose you the means to find it?"

Fang Nianshui let out a cold chuckle. "Why are you acting dumb right after I praised your intelligence? One of the functions of your Strange Artifact is to disguise your presence. Naturally, you must carry it with you at all times. Once I've killed you, the Strange Artifact would naturally fall into my hands."

"Even if I'm wrong, I only need to search your house to get it. How big is your house, and how much furniture do you have? You could've dug a well underneath your bed to hide it, and I'm still going to find it eventually. This is my golden opportunity, and no one can take it away from me—you, or the heavens themselves!"

"So, kid... are you prepared to go to the afterlife?"

"I must admit that most of your guesses are correct. You, too, are smarter than I gave you credit for."

Ye Qing let out a sigh before slowly lifting his head. Then, he cracked a grin as sunny as the sky above their heads and declared, "Too bad for you, you got one thing wrong. I... am not a journeyman Reforged!"