

Stranger 151

Chapter 151: Bloody Shirt

“Bloodstains? Did you find any clues?” Ye Qing asked.

Xu Banren shook his head. “No. We searched the area but couldn’t find anything suspicious.”

“How many people did Li Zhou come into contact with?”

“Eighteen.”

Ye Qing knitted his brow in concentration. “So, Li Zhou died when he tried to take off his shirt. What about the others? Did they feel any discomfort or something?”

Xu Banren shook his head. “Unclear. Everyone seemed fine when I left the scene, but I suspect that something bad will happen when their clothes are soaked through.”

“I think so too,” Ye Qing nodded in agreement.

The two were chatting as they walked. By the time they reached Cockcrow Alley, Ye Qing had more or less pieced together a rough outline of the situation.

“My lord!”

A dozen or so Pacification Sentinels were guarding the scene, and they saluted Ye Qing as soon as they saw him. Ye Qing waved them off and asked, “Did anything happen while the Lieutenant was gone, Zhou Xi?”

A thin but tough-looking man in black armor reported, “Everything’s still fine, my lord, but the bloodstains on the victim’s shirts—well, clothes, since some of the bloodstains had spread to their pants—are still growing larger.”

“Is this everyone who has made contact with Li Zhou?”

Zhou Xi nodded. “Yes, my lord. All eighteen people are present and accounted for.”

“Good.” Ye Qing entered the clearing where the eighteen victims were waiting. There were people from all ages and genders. They were all huddled together and shaking in fear and worry. The spreading bloodstains only added to the eeriness of the situation.

“Argh!”

It was at this moment a middle-aged man suddenly screamed out in pain. When the blood completely soaked through his clothes, it suddenly came to life and squeezed him tightly. It was like watching a flesh sponge being squeezed by a vice grip. The man’s face turned purple almost instantly, and every vein on his body was popping out of his skin. It was absolutely horrifying to look at. At this rate, the bloody clothing was going to crush him into a pulp!

Ye Qing frowned and took a step forward. He appeared beside the man and attempted to grab the bloody clothing. Unfortunately, he wasn’t fast enough because the bloody clothing abruptly doubled its efforts and popped the victim like a balloon.

Ye Qing lifted an eyebrow and unleashed his astral qi, burning as much blood and gore as he could before they could fly too far. He managed to prevent himself from being dirtied, but two Pacification Sentinels who were standing a little too close got hit by a tiny splotch of blood.

The bloodstain slowly began to spread just like the victims.

“My lord...”

The two Pacification Sentinels blanched and stared at Ye Qing with a pleading look on their faces. But before Ye Qing could react, another person let out a bloodcurdling scream.

“Aaaaaaaaahhhh!”

The good news was that it wasn't because another victim's clothes were completely soaked through. The bad news was that the group of victims finally realized what they just saw and screamed on top of their lungs. One man was so panicked he started tearing away at his shirt, completely forgetting that he would die if they so much as touched the fabric.

“Don't touch it!” Ye Qing yelled, but he was just a little too late. The man abruptly turned stiff and hit the ground like a log. He was dead.

The victims panicked even more. The sudden deaths were driving them toward the brink of insanity.

“Please settle down and stay calm, everyone.”

Ye Qing immediately wrapped them in a gust of invisible force to prevent them from moving. Then, he said slowly, “I am a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau. I promise you I will find that Stranger and save you all, so please, calm down.”

He had imbued his voice with a tinge of spirit. Like a soothing wind, it slowly chipped away at the victims' fears until they finally settled down once more.

After he was done placating the victims, Ye Qing turned to Zhou Xi and ordered, “Zhou Xi, go gather some men to evacuate the civilians and lock down this area immediately. Also, inform the others to isolate anyone whose clothes look like they're about to be soaked through immediately. Obviously, they should take care to avoid the bloodstains.”

“At once!” Zhou Xi replied and stepped away to carry out his orders.

“Lieutenant Xu, have we questioned these people?” Ye Qing turned to Xu Banren next.

Xu Banren waved his hand, and a Pacification Sentinel walked over to hand Ye Qing a book. It contained a record of the victims' statement and all info and clues they had collected so far.

Ye Qing read through the book carefully before humming in thought, “It looks like Li Zhou is definitely patient zero. Everyone else caught it after they made contact with Li Zhou.”

“Li Zhou had no parents, wives, or children, and his neighbor is the first person to make contact with him. With that in mind, it should be reasonable to assume that the source of the bloodstain is inside Li Zhou's house or somewhere around the area.”

Xu Banren nodded and shot Ye Qing an astonished look. He didn't expect Ye Qing to figure this out so quickly.

Ye Qing did not notice Xu Banren's look not because he was distracted, but because the Lieutenant's expression rarely changed. It was probably because he was a half-corpse. "Come, let's check out Li Zhou's house."

"We've already searched the house, my lord, but we weren't able to find anything," said a Pacification Sentinel who was following Ye Qing around.

"I know. I just want to take another look. It won't take too much time anyway," Ye Qing replied before ordering, "Lieutenant Xu, why don't you take the men and search around the area some more? Who knows, you might find something this time."

"As you command!" Xu Banren saluted and took his leave. Having witnessed Ye Qing's strength several times at this point, he wasn't worried about his safety at all.

After everyone was gone, Ye Qing stepped into Li Zhou's house and began searching for clues. Li Zhou was a tailor, so his house was absolutely packed with clothes and fabric. Whenever a wind blew, they would flap around like a throng of ghosts. It was pretty eerie even during the day.

Ye Qing spread his spirit and began searching for anomalies. The house, the yard, and everything else immediately appeared inside his mind.

To Ye Qing's surprise, he wasn't able to find anything. "Strange. The Stranger has to be here somewhere, right?"

Ye Qing pondered for a few more minutes in hopes of arriving at a genius solution to no avail. In the end, he had no choice but to take out the Annon Sutra. He was hoping to solve the case by himself, but reality was a cruel mistress. She had jabbed a finger into his face and told him directly, "You suck!"

After spitting a mouthful of blood on the piece of vellum, Ye Qing asked, "Where is the Stranger who killed Li Zhou hiding?"

The blood wriggled, and bloody text began appearing on its surface:

"I encountered a strange incident today. Bloodstains had suddenly appeared on the victims' shirts, and when they had spread to every article of clothing, the clothes suddenly came to life and strangled their victims to death. Worse still, attempting to remove the clothes would result in death as well."

"I theorized that a Stranger is behind this incident and followed the clues to the place where I believe the Stranger is most likely hiding, but unfortunately I wasn't able to find anything."

"What should I do? I just became a Patrolman yesterday. If I cannot solve this case perfectly, my reputation would suffer, and people would look down on me. Seriously, what should I do?"

"Maybe I just have bad eyes. I should search through Li Zhou's house once more!"

"..."

Bro, you don't have to attack me like that.

The Annon Sutra was done, but the information it provided made Ye Qing want to roll his eyes. It might as well have said nothing at all.

Of course, the information wasn't completely useless. It more or less confirmed that the Stranger was definitely in Li Zhou's house.

"But... where is it hiding?"

Ye Qing felt a headache when he gave the house another look. There had to be hundreds, if not thousands of clothes and fabric in this house. It would take forever to search them all.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to Ye Qing, "Wait, what was I thinking? I don't need to find the needle in a haystack. I can just burn it all!"

He assumed a stance and threw out a punch. When in doubt, do!

Buzz...

The air vibrated, and the doors, the windows, the clothes and every other item in the house suddenly caught on fire. At the same time, Ye Qing spread his spirit out once more.

"Got you!"

Just when the dark red flames were about to burn everything into ash, a tattered shirt suddenly flew out of a pile of discarded fabric. A bloodstain appeared on the left side of the shirt, but it was spreading way, way faster than the one plaguing the victims. In just the blink of an eye, it was soaked through to the point where blood was dripping from the hem of the shirt, and the smell of iron quickly permeated the room.

That wasn't all. When the blood hit the floor, it immediately dyed it red like adding ink to clear water. It wasn't long before the entire house was covered in blood, and a violent and ominous aura pressed against Ye Qing from all sides.

"Oh my, you're a Hatred-class Stranger? What a joyful discovery!" Ye Qing grinned widely as he examined the bloody shirt. How could he not be happy when a new silver dragon-serpent rune was about to enter his pockets?

Since returning from the Firewind Valley, he had been focusing on refining his true qi and astral qi, so he hadn't used a single silver rune. Currently, he had accumulated nine—and soon to be ten—silver runes in total. Every time Ye Qing checked out his runes he felt proud and giddy not unlike a wealthy businessman who was checking out his account book.

Glug, glug, glug...

Blood began bubbling out of the floor, the walls, the rooftop and other places. They were thick and horrible-smelling. The next moment, they sprayed toward Ye Qing like water sprinklers.

Ye Qing moved his body slightly and summoned the Burning Wind. It instantly evaporated the rain of blood into nothing.

“You’ll have to try harder than this!” He shook his head.

Before he could finish, what looked like bloody pimples started popping up all across the room. Their sizes varied, and the way they squirmed looked absolutely disgusting.

The pimples exploded, and more bloody shirts appeared and flew to the ceiling. It wasn’t long before they ceiling was absolutely dominated by bloody shirts. The stench of blood was positively choking, and it was as if they were trying to turn the world itself into blood.

It was at this moment wisps of blood qi surrounded Ye Qing from all sides. It looked like they were trying to enter his body. However, Ye Qing simply smirked with his hands behind his back. He looked completely unconcerned with the bloody shirts’ attempt to corrupt him.

Chapter 152: Black Pot

Flap flap flap!

Ye Qing’s careless attitude seemed to anger the bloody shirts greatly. In unison, every shirt except the original suddenly pounced toward Ye Qing like a locust swarm.

Unfortunately, they had only gotten halfway when they suddenly froze up and shivered like they were fighting some sort of invisible power. The next moment, they exploded in rapid succession until not a single one was left.

The mist of blood left behind the explosions writhed as if it was trying to retake its previous form, but when Ye Qing made a grabbing motion, they flew uncontrollably into his palm and formed a thick ball of blood.

“You thought you could use *blood* to defeat me? That’s like trying to beat Guan Yu with a guandao [1]!”

While Ye Qing was tossing the ball of blood up and down, countless Blood Shadows rose into the air. He had spread them out to the point where they looked like tiny specks of dust.

“Blood Shadow Magic”

Ye Qing dropped his hand, and the Blood Shadows sliced the bloody house into countless uniform pieces like tofu. Not only that, they ripped the blood right out of whatever surface they were clinging to and brought it back to Ye Qing.

The bloody shirt’s aura grew weaker and weaker as Ye Qing continued to devour its blood like a ravenous beast. When the time was right, he abruptly disappeared from view, reappeared next to the Stranger, and struck it with his left hand.

“Boundless Lightning Palm”

“Blue Demon Hand”

The all-consuming Netherflame combined with the brutal power of Boundless Lightning Palm poured down on the bloody shirt like a heavenly waterfall. Since Ye Qing had locked the space around it with his power, it couldn’t even dodge out of the way.

Bang!

There was a loud bang as the bloody shirt exploded into countless pieces. The Netherflame burned it all into ash.

“And that’s that!” Ye Qing landed back on the floor and dusted off his hands. He smiled a little as the ashes scattered into nothing.

Ye Qing had made it look oh-so-easy when he defeated the Hatred-class Stranger, but in fact it wasn’t weak at all. It just so happened that its power was completely countered by his blood’s ability to devour other blood. Another warrior would have had a lot more trouble to defeat it.

“My lord!”

“Lord Ye!”

It was at this moment Xu Banren and the Pacification Sentinels ran up to him. The bloody shirt had completely isolated the interior of the house earlier, so they hadn’t heard or felt anything amiss until the house collapsed. After that, they rushed over as quickly as they could.

“Lord Ye, what...” Xu Banren looked at the pile of rubble behind Ye Qing and felt the residue of energies around the area. “Did you find that Stranger after all, Lord Ye?”

Ye Qing nodded. “I did. It was a Hatred-class Stranger!”

“A Hatred-class Stranger?” Everyone except Xu Banren blanched at the revelation.

“Where is it? Did it run away?”

Ye Qing shrugged and answered in a casual tone, “It’s dead. It’s just a Hatred-class Stranger. It doesn’t take much to kill one.”

The group had to resist the urge to roll their eyes. At most, ten breaths had passed since they heard the commotion. They could have killed a Hatred-class Stranger, sure, but to do it in the span of ten breaths?

No wonder he’s the boss. I wonder if he’s taking disciples?

“Can you message Zhou Xi and ask him if the bloodstains on the victims’ clothes have disappeared?” Ye Qing asked Xu Banren.

The Lieutenant took out a talisman and activated it. A few breaths later, Zhou Xi’s voice came from the talisman, “Lieutenant Xu, the bloodstains on the seventeen civilians and our two brothers have completely disappeared. I believe that the danger is over.”

The talisman burned into ash as soon as Zhou Xi was done speaking. The talisman was a single-use sound transmission talisman that only worked if the target was close by, and only for a very short while. Even so, its usefulness should be self-evident.

“I believe it’s a job well done, Lord Ye!” Xu Banren reported.

“Good!” Ye Qing let out a sigh of relief and ordered, “Good job, everyone. Let us return.”

Ye Qing waved, and everyone followed him out of the residence. It wasn't long before the place returned to calm once more.

Or did it?

Whoosh...

A cool breeze blew up the ashes on the ground and did a little twirl in the air. Then, it entered a nearby well and rippled its waters.

"They're gone!"

A dull, heavy, echoing voice that sounded like the speaker was speaking from inside a large jar or something came from inside the well. More accurately, it was coming from the bottom of the well.

A three-inch tall clay pot suddenly appeared on the water surface. It looked a little like a fermentation pot. A pair of eyes were peeking out from inside the pot, blinking.

"Don't you think the hiding place you chose is a little too risky, Bronze Toad?" The clay pot wobbled twice as another voice resounded from the pot. The next moment, it sank all the way to the bottom of the well.

The bottom was not the end, however. The pot continued to sink through the silty soil as if it was an illusion. Very soon, the clay pot had completely vanished from view.

The space underneath the soil was surprisingly clean. Not only that, it was glowing brightly as the walls were embedded with countless night pearls. It illuminated the underground space so much that it looked like daytime.

A golden yellow toad that was as large as a millstone was sitting on a chair. Its whole body was embedded in bronze coins. After shifting into a more comfortable position, it answered, "You don't understand, Black Pot. There is a human saying that goes something like this: 'the most dangerous place is also the safest place'."

"Safe my ass! The entire reason we almost got caught is because that mindless shirt of yours can only act on instinct! At this rate, the Pacification Bureau will find us and kill us all!" The clay pot Stranger called Black Pot complained while jumping over to a chair. The poor furniture creaked loudly as it landed like a rock.

Bronze Toad shifted its stout body again, and the bronze coins smashed into each other hard enough to cause sparks. "And this is why I call you stupid. When the Blood Shirt is still alive, it could conceal our auras and act as our meatshield. Even after it's dead, it can act as our scapegoat and divert the humans' attention away."

"After all, all Strangers are territorial, and non-sentient Strangers like Blood Shirt are especially territorial. Normally, they would battle any Stranger who intruded into their territory to the death."

"The Pacification Bureau is aware of this pattern as well, which is why they could never imagine that there are more Strangers hiding in this residence. In fact, they

would be inclined to relax when they patrol this area from now on. I don't need to explain to you why this is advantageous for us, do I?"

Black Pot chuckled. "Yes, yes. You have a big head, so whatever you say."

"If you guys are done talking, I'm going to head up and check if the humans are truly gone," A shadow on the ground suddenly stood up and said.

"Be careful, Shadow!" Bronze Toad advised.

Black Pot leaped off its chair and chirped, "I'll go with Shadow! If anything happens to it, I can act as backup! Sha—"

Black Pot was going to address Shadow, but when it looked back it discovered that the Stranger was already gone.

"You'd think he's rushing to enter a new womb!" Black Pot said sarcastically before floating back to the surface once more.

On the well, Black Pot looked around for a bit but could not find anyone. Sighing in relief, it muttered, "They really are gone!" before dropping to its side and rolling toward the exit.

However, Black Pot had just reached the entrance when a foot suddenly appeared from outside the door and stepped on it. Stunned, Black Pot tried to struggle only for a tremendous force to push it into the underground. What was strange was that it made no sound whatsoever.

"Tsk. You're tougher than I expected!"

Ye Qing stepped out from his hiding spot and crouched lower. While staring at the clay pot beneath his foot, he said with a devious smile on his face, "You better not move a clay though. I swear I will crush you like a watermelon if you so much as shiver."

While saying this, Ye Qing condensed his force until it was practically solid. The container immediately started creaking ominously.

Black Pot possessed a very strong will to live. Despite its fear, it managed to rein in its natural reaction and stopped shivering.

The Pacification Sentinel standing behind Ye Qing looked incredibly impressed. "Incredible intuition, my lord! I can hardly believe there are more Strangers hiding in this place!"

Earlier, no one really believed Ye Qing when he claimed that there were more Strangers in the residence. After all, they were taught that Strangers rarely shared territories unless they were kin or the same type of Strangers. But now that the evidence was right in front of their eyes, it was impossible not to be impressed with the young Patrolman.

"I just got lucky," Ye Qing replied with a smile.

Xu Banren shook his head. "You're too modest, Lord Ye!"

"Ahaha..." *I wasn't being modest though.*

He had, in fact, gotten lucky. When he was using the Burning Wind to drive the bloody shirt out of its hiding spot, he had sensed a flash of energy from the well. His astral qi must have caught

whatever Stranger was hiding inside the well by surprise. However, he could not be sure how many Strangers were hiding inside the well or how strong they were, which was why he pretended not to notice and focused on killing the shirt Stranger first.

After the blood shirt was dead, he led his men out of the residence and told him about his discovery. They then hid themselves and waited for the Strangers to show.

He was pretty sure that the Stranger or Strangers hiding inside the well would send someone to check if the coast was clear. Therefore, all they needed to do was to capture one of them and interrogate them. If the Strangers inside the well were weak, then he and his men would take them out right now. If they were stronger than expected, then he would call for reinforcements.

What? This was his life that was on the line here. Of course it was better to be safe than sorry.

So far, everything had gone exactly as he predicted. Now, it was time to interrogate this Stranger.

“Tell me, pot, how many Strangers are there in the well? How strong are they?” Ye Qing asked in a low tone.

The black pot played dead and said nothing at all, so Ye Qing chuckled and put more strength into his right foot. More cracks immediately started spreading across its surface like a spider web. “Stop playing dead, and don’t try to play dumb. I heard you loud and clear when you were standing on the well earlier. You better tell me what I want to know, or I will literally stomp you to the underworld.”

“M-My name is Black Pot, and I’m one hundred fifty six years old. I’m single and unmarried, but I have a son and a daughter with Yellow Pot’s wife, White Pot next door...”

Black Pot was seriously frightened. Although its body was molded from clay, it was tough enough to withstand blades, blunt weapons, water, fire, wind and even lightning. It was easily his proudest ability.

However, the human had easily broken through its defense. He definitely possessed the power to crush it like a watermelon. Faced with the threat of death, Black Pot did not hesitate to divulge everything that was on his mind right now.

“That... is not what I asked!” Ye Qing rubbed his nose with a strange expression, “And what did you expect me to do with this information? I’m not a matchmaker!”

“Speak human—I mean, get to the point. If you spout anymore bullshit, I will split you like a stick up a human’s ass.”

The Black Pot abruptly stopped its babble and laughed drily, “S-Sorry, I was so scared I reverted to my default state for a moment.”

“That’s your default state?” Ye Qing hmphed. “Anyway, get to the point!”

Black Pot shuddered and started talking, “There are...”

While Black Pot was drawing everyone's attention, a shadow suddenly split into a handful of smaller shadows and merged with the Pacification Sentinels' shadows. No one noticed that something was wrong until the afflicted people suddenly realized that they were unable to control their body or even cry out in alarm. They could only watch in horror as their bodies slowly raised their crossbows and took aim... at Ye Qing.

"Huh?"

Ye Qing raised an eyebrow when his senses suddenly warned him of danger. He looked back just in time to see his own men loosing their bolts at him.

Did a Stranger slip into our midst?

Ye Qing figured out the truth immediately. He swung his sleeves like it was a sheet of steel and batted all the bolts away. Then, he brought down his right foot and attempted to crush the pot Stranger.

Since its cohort had already discovered them, there was no point in keeping it alive or staying hidden any longer.

Boom!

There was a loud explosion as the ground within ten meters of Ye Qing caved inward like tofu. However, he could tell that the clay pot hadn't shattered completely. In fact, it slipped into the underground and was trying to escape.

"Did you think you could run?"

Ye Qing was going to give chase when the surrounding Pacification Sentinels drew their sabers and charged toward him.

"Have you guys gone mad?" Xu Banren growled and unleashed a devastating punch at his colleagues. His Heavenly Yin Corpse Qi would severely injure them at best or kill them at worst.

"Stop! They're being controlled by a Stranger!"

Ye Qing took a step forward and threw out his own punch, burning Heavenly Yi Corpse Qi into nothing with his Burning Wind. Then, he swung his sleeves and sent all of the Pacification Sentinels flying. Not a single one of them was hurt despite the attack.

Unfortunately, this was but a temporary measure. The Pacification Sentinels immediately climbed back to their feet and charged them once more.

"Do you know what Stranger is behind this, Lord Ye?" Xu Banren asked. By now, the Lieutenant noticed that the Pacification Sentinels were definitely not acting as they should. However, he could not find anyone or anything who might be controlling them.

"Their shadows. Something's wrong with their shadows!" Ye Qing's eyes flicked with intelligence. When he sent the Pacification Sentinels flying just now, he noticed that their bodies and their shadows were out of sync. The shadows were moving a beat

slower than it should've been. Moreover, the shadows remained as black as ink even when they were directly exposed to sunlight.

"The shadows?" Xu Banren looked and discovered the same oddities as Ye Qing did. Before he could react, Ye Qing threw a mighty punch at the shadows.

"Cloud Vaporization Style"

The Burning Wind blew across the ground with a loud whoosh. The next moment, the shadows actually burst into dark red flames. As soon as the unnatural shadows were wiped out, the Pacification Sentinels discovered that they could move their limbs once more.

No one noticed Ye Qing's shadow twitching behind his back, however. It abruptly jumped to its feet, transformed its arm into a dagger, and brought it down on Ye Qing's neck.

"Heh... I was waiting for you!"

Right before the dagger would've landed, Ye Qing abruptly reached out with his left hand and caught the shadow's arm. No matter how hard the shadow pushed, it could not so much as touch Ye Qing's skin.

Shadow was flabbergasted to say the least. Everything it did until this point was one, to rescue Black Pot from danger, and two, to assassinate Ye Qing while he was distracted.

His enemy was too strong to be controlled like the Pacification Sentinels, so this was its only option.

Its tactic was tried and true as it had killed countless humans with it. However, Ye Qing had somehow anticipated its movement and caught it hook, line and sinker.

He didn't understand how Ye Qing had anticipated its movements, but it wasn't going to wait around and ask. Its pitch black body writhed for an instant before dissolving into a black, viscous fog.

"Hmph."

It wasn't fast enough. Netherflame gushed out of the Blue Demon Hand and across its whole body. Screaming in pain, Shadow split into countless fragments and slipped into the shadows.

"Lightning Bolt"

Ye Qing opened his mouth and unleashed his Strange Artifact. The mini sword impaled the shadow Shadow had slipped into and unleashed a crackle of lightning.

The shadow writhed and emitted black smoke. The ink black shadow immediately grew faint like it might disappear at any moment.

"Argh!"

Ye Qing was going to end Shadow right there and then, but a scream suddenly drew his attention away. Black Pot had dug out of the ground before he knew it, and a pair of baby soft arms were stretching out of the pot. They grabbed a Pacification Sentinel's legs while he wasn't looking and pulled them unto itself.

The arms looked thin and weak, but they were monstrously strong. The poor guy was completely unable to resist as the arms pulled his whole body into the pot in just the blink of an eye. The sound of crushed flesh and bone were horrifying to put it mildly.

Blood bubbled out of the opening as Black Pot commented, "So juicy and crunchy. There really is no tastier flesh than humans!"

"Kill it!"

His companions' eyes grew bloodshot when they saw this. They immediately fired their hand crossbows at the Stranger.

"Oh my, how terrifying!"

Black Pot teased and withdrew its arms. The bolts were specifically made to kill Strangers, and yet they failed to leave even the slightest mark on the clay pot.

"Too weak!" Black Pot sneered and slammed into a Pacification Sentinel's chest before he could react. It punched right through his torso and splattered gore everywhere.

Black Pot wasn't even done yet. It was heading straight toward another Pacification Sentinel who was standing behind his now dead colleague.

Right before another Pacification Sentinel would perish, an arm appeared from the side and smashed into the pot. Black Pot was sent flying as a cloud of corpse qi surrounded it.

"Get out of the way. I'll deal with it."

Xu Banren stepped out of the crowd while a copious amount of corpse qi rolled down his body. The coffin behind his back gleamed coldly and eerily in the light.

"A deadman? Your flesh stinks like hell, deadman! Heavens, it stinks so much!" Black Pot wobbled a little before a pair of arms suddenly stretched out from the sides, and legs from the bottom of the pot. It twirled twice on its feet before what looked like an infant's head popped out of the clay pot's opening. It had creamy white skin, red lips, and a vertical ponytail on top of its skull.

The next second, Black Pot drew a long saber made of talisman paper from itself and swung it twice. The paper saber actually made a whooshing noise that sounded just like a real blade.

Come fight me, deadman! I'm going to cut you into eighteen pieces!" Black Pot taunted.

That was a mistake though. Before it even finished its sentence, Xu Banren had appeared right in front of it and threw a punch at its face.

I, Xu Banren, always talk less and act more.

Black Pot blocked the punch with its saber, and metallic sparks flew off the point of impact even though it was a fist versus saber. Neither human nor Stranger moved as their force clashed, and the shockwave generated from the impact was enough to shake the earth itself. The Pacification Sentinels looked stunned as they staggered on their feet.

“Not bad, not bad! Again!” Black Pot gave its paper saber a wave before attacking Xu Banren once more.

Halfman Xu had nothing to fear from the clay pot Stranger. His arms turned ashen green as it punched at Black Pot again.

Although Black Pot was a Stranger, its saber technique was shockingly good. It could chain slashes, thrusts, feints, blocks, parries with perfect fluidity. It could alternate its strength between as gentle as a feather and as heavy as a mountain. Finally, it wasn't a stickler for the forms and could modify its moves to meet a specific situation. It was without a doubt a master with the weapon.

On the other hand, Xu Banren's fist style looked anything but masterful. All he could do with his stiff arms were simplistic punches, swings, blocks and the occasional elbow smash. But despite his terrible technique, his fists were overflowing with intent and force. Every time he threw a punch, it took everything Black Pot had to stop it or dodge out of the way. It was why the battle was currently locked in a stalemate.

The clay pot is surprisingly strong! Ye Qing thought in astonishment. Although he knew from the start that Black Pot was a Hatred-class Stranger, it had acted so cowardly he thought that its strength would be impaired by its weak personality. In reality, Black Pot was strong enough to fight Xu Banren to a standstill. Heavens only know how many humans it had killed just by acting weak and surprising them at an opportune moment.

Despite this, the situation was advantageous for them. As long as Xu Banren remained strong, he could focus all of his attention on the shadow Stranger.

Speaking of the shadow Stranger, he failed to kill it even though he landed a severe blow because it possessed the ability to pass through shadows. A moment's distraction was all it needed to escape into a patch of shadow. Not only that, he was unable to detect the Stranger after it entered the shadows.

“Interesting!” Ye Qing smirked. So what if he couldn't detect the Stranger? He raised his fist and punched the ground hard, triggering a mini earthquake and causing Burning Wind to burst out from the seams. Every earth and rock within tens of meters of him was turned red hot as well.

A shadow next to the well immediately jumped into the air. It was burning with dark red flames from the inside out.

“Heh. Found you!”

Ye Qing turned around and appeared right in front of the shadow Stranger. His left hand burst into flames as he made a grab for it.

Whoosh!

Once again, Shadow dissolved into an ink black fog and tried to escape, but Ye Qing abruptly clenched his hand into a fist and, pop! The air within several meters of him popped like a balloon and elicited a painful cry from the shadow Stranger.

A few wisps of shadow survived the sudden explosion and returned to its true body, but it was much fainter and weaker than before.

Honestly, Shadow's ability wasn't weak. It could slip into Shadows, control a weaker being's shadow, and hide even from Ye Qing's powerful spirit. It was perfectly suited for scouting, ambushes, and assassination duties.

Its only flaw was that it was somewhat lacking in direct combat. If the enemy managed to catch it off guard and land a few solid hits just like Ye Qing had, then it would be put on the back foot instantly.

Of course, Shadow was also unlucky to have Ye Qing as its opponent. The Patrolman's powerful spirit, rich true qi and all-consuming Burning Wind was the bane of its ability.

So sorry that I'm too good for ya!

Suddenly, Black Pot let out a cackle. "Shadow is gonna die for you soon if you don't show yourself, Bronze Toad!"

Xu Banren hmphed in disgust, "You dare be distracted while you're fighting against me?"

Halfman Xu blocked Black Pot's slash with his left fist and struck its body with his right. Black Pot was covered in cracks in the first place, but the solid blow and outburst of Heavenly Yin Corpse Qi instantly blew a hole in its sides that spewed disgusting, smelly pus.

"Aaaah! It hurts! I'm gonna die as well if you keep this up, Bronze Toad!" Black Pot let out an exaggerated scream.

Xu Banren ignored Black Pot's attack and kept up his attack. Ye Qing, however, was feeling worried. Black Pot could be bluffing, but it was far more likely that there were more Strangers hiding inside the well. It was obvious now why the shadow Stranger had lured him to the well. It was planning to surprise him with the Stranger inside the well and kill him!

Ye Qing immediately punched the well entrance. It boomed as loud as the drumbeat of a celestial.

Rather than wait for his enemy to ambush him, he would rather take the fight to them first! The best defense was a good offense!

Chapter 154: The Bronze Toad of Cornucopia

Boom!

His fist force had just reached the well entrance when the well water abruptly surged into the air. The well exploded, and water spilled all over the place. This wouldn't be a problem at all except that everything that was touched by the water—the rocks, the bricks, the soil and more—started sizzling as if they were corroded by acid.

"Watch out! The water is corrosive!" Ye Qing shouted, but he was a little too late.

Three Pacification Sentinels failed to dodge out of the way and immediately melted into a puddle. It was so fast that they never even had the time to scream. Even their weapons and their armor had melted into a puddle as well.

To say this is acidic would be an understatement, Ye Qing thought with a small frown. The ground itself was being eaten at such an unbelievable rate it was as if potholes had suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

“You’re dead! Bronze Toad’s venom can corrode even refined metal, much less flesh-and-blood!” Shadow sneered weakly from Ye Qing’s left hand.

Ye Qing was standing right next to the well, so most of the water had splashed onto him. He was sizzling all over as if he would melt into a puddle at any moment.

“Is that so?”

Shadow was destined to be disappointed, however. With a smirk, Ye Qing shook off his tattered clothes to reveal silky smooth skin. There wasn’t even a single scratch on his person.

“How the...” The Stranger’s ridiculing cackle abruptly cut short. It could not help but stare incredulously at Ye Qing.

Bronze Toad’s venom was so deadly that even he didn’t dare to take a direct hit, so how on earth did the human manage to survive it?

“Hahaha... so sorry to disappoint you, but I’m pretty thick-skinned. More importantly, I’m immune to most poisons,” Ye Qing answered while grabbing a new set of clothes from his Nature’s Shell and putting it on. As of late, his clothes had the tendency to go poof for one reason or another, which was why he started to keep a few sets of spares. The situation he was in right now proved that his preparation was wise. He didn’t mind being seen naked, but it would definitely damage his reputation if people saw him like this.

Also, Ye Qing was telling Shadow the truth. He had eaten the Fruit of Life before, so he was immune to all poison. Even if he wasn’t, his body was so tough that the acid had failed to corrode even his skin.

Rumble!

It was at this moment the ground within ten meters of Ye Qing suddenly collapsed entirely. A black hole had appeared underneath his feet out of nowhere, and it was turning everything that fell into it into a puddle of acid.

Upon closer look, it wasn’t a black hole at all. It was a giant maw that was aligned with countless rows of sharp teeth. Disgusting smelling acid was constantly trickling down its oral cavity.

Ye Qing didn’t fall into the all-consuming maw, however. As if he knew this would happen, he had leaped into the air the second the ground had collapsed. In fact, he had been scanning the underground with his spirit from the moment he confirmed that there was, indeed, a Stranger hiding there. He was only pretending to be distracted by Shadow.

In the air, Ye Qing clenched his left hand and elicited a final scream from Shadow. After the Netherflame had consumed every last bit of it, he formed a fist with his right hand and punched toward the maw.

“Cloud Vaporization Style”

The fist force came from every direction. It looked like nothing at the beginning, but it rapidly grew in power until it looked like space itself was being ripped apart by an invisible hand.

Boom!

The underground Stranger let out a muffled roar as the collapsing ground suddenly stopped its descent and pushed upward. It was trying to use the ground itself to block the punch.

“It’s pretty strong,” Ye Qing frowned a little as he felt the Stranger’s resistance was transmitted to his fist. At the very least, it was much stronger than Black Pot and Shadow.

That said, it was hardly unbeatable. Ye Qing sucked in a deep breath until his abdomen sounded like roaring thunder. Then, he exerted more strength into the punch and pushed the giant chunk of ground back to where it began. In fact, the closer it got to the underground Stranger, the more it broke apart until eventually, there was only the fist force and the Burning Wind.

The underground Stranger howled in fury, but it was powerless to resist. When the fist force was right in front of the giant maw, the Burning Wind exploded and entered the giant maw in full force. The dark red flames easily burned its flesh, teeth and acid into ash.

“You like to eat that badly? You can choke on my Burning Wind then!” Ye Qing sneered.

“Croak croak!”

Suddenly, a toadish croak erupted from the underground. Then, the earth split apart to reveal a toad that was as large as a millstone.

“A toad? You must be a close relative of Brother Frog!” Ye Qing commented casually while rubbing his nose, but on the inside he was as serious as he could be. It was because the bronze toad had taken a punch to its mouth, and yet it looked like it wasn’t hurt all too badly.

Dark red flames were jetting out of its pores, but its body remained intact as if it was forged from the toughest metal. Its skin did turn as red as iron, but that was it. Forget turning into ash, it didn’t even look charred or melted.

“I’m going to eat you, human!”

The next moment, the Bronze Toad started growing bronze coins on its body. The round-shaped coins with a square hole at the center had the words “Heavens Bless The Cornucopia” and gorgeous patterns that resembled dragons and clouds inscribed on the surface. It was incredibly beautiful.

The more coins appeared, the bigger the Bronze Toad’s body became. It was already the size of a millstone to begin with, but at the end it became as big as a house itself. It was shining like it was forged from pure bronze.

“The Bronze Toad of Cornucopia!?”

Ye Qing’s heart sank. The Bronze Toad of Cornucopia was one of the stronger Hatred-class Strangers out there. Capable of transforming earth into bronze, and bronze into coins via consumption, its ability was as precious as it was rare. This ability was why the Stranger was named

Bronze Toad of Cornucopia, and why many merchants and peddlers viewed it as a symbol of wealth and prosperity.

In reality, the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia was one of the most brutal Strangers out there and were killed on sight for good reason. It loved eating humans and especially babies, and it possessed the power to transform its whole body into bronze and become impervious to weapons and natural elements such as water, fire, wind and earth. It also possessed enormous strength and could change its size as it pleased. It was a difficult Stranger to defeat to say the least.

It shouldn't need to be said, but there was also a Silver Toad of Cornucopia and a Gold Toad of Cornucopia. Each one was more precious than the last.

"Oh dang. Bronze Toad looks angry. You're so dead, human!" Black Pot taunted while pulling a second paper saber out of its pot. As it turned out, the clay pot Stranger was still hiding its strength. Not only could it run its mouth at Ye Qing, it started driving Xu Banren back as soon as it revealed its second weapon.

"Die, human!"

The gigantic Bronze Toad of Cornucopia raised a limb and attempted to crush Ye Qing underfoot. Ye Qing chose not to endure the attack head on and dashed out of the way. Its foot was strong enough to put a deep pit in the ground.

"What incredible strength. Too bad you're too slow to hit me!"

While Bronze Toad was still recovering, Ye Qing appeared on top of the Stranger and swung his arms down like a hammer. Tang tang! It sounded like someone was hitting a giant gong twice in rapid succession. Knowing that Bronze Toad could take it, he did not hold back his dragon-elephant strength. The arm smash was so powerful that Bronze Toad's skull caved in about three inches and spewed bronze yellow liquid.

The Bronze Toad of Cornucopia cried out in pain and staggered on its feet. Knowing that his attack was effective, Ye Qing did not hesitate to punch the same spot again and again.

"Croak! It hurts! Croak!"

Bronze Toad shook its head in hopes of throwing Ye Qing off, but it might as well be trying to shake off its own coins. A few futile attempts later, Bronze Toad changed its tactics and unfurled a coin-studded tongue from its throat. Like a python, the tongue swept toward Ye Qing with titanic strength.

Ye Qing crouched a little and firmly rooted himself on Bronze Toad's head. Power comes from below, and force from the body. When the tongue got close, he punched it so hard that it snapped in half. However, the attack also sent Ye Qing crashing through at least a dozen houses before he finally came to a stop.

"Kill!"

When the Pacification Sentinels saw this, they immediately fired their crossbow bolts at Bronze Toad. Knowing full well that getting close to the Stranger was a death sentence, they unanimously

chose to harass it from range. Unfortunately, the crossbow bolts easily bounced off its body and failed to leave even a mark behind.

However, Bronze Toad seemed to be angered by the assault. It opened its mouth and inhaled all the surrounding rubble and earth. New metal began growing over its wounds, and its severed tongue quickly regenerated to normal. The next moment, it flailed its tongue across a wide area, caught a few Pacification Sentinels who failed to dodge in time, and swallowed them all.

“Die, humans!”

Not done yet, the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia leaped into the air and landed on top of five Pacification Sentinels. They never stood a chance. They were flattened like pancakes, and the shockwave turned all houses within tens of meters from the point of impact into rubble.

“You fucker!”

Suddenly, an angry roar erupted from the rubble. Then, the silhouette of a war general appeared in the sky. It was wielding a crescent blade and overflowing with killing intent.

“KILL!” The general roared and swung his weapon. A bloody battlefield where two armies were battling each other to the death suddenly appeared behind him. The soldiers were shouting, the weapons were clashing, the cavalry was rampaging, and blood was everywhere. It was as if the blade energy had cut a literal wound in the sky and spilled its blood.

Bronze Toad seemed to recognize the danger and turned around to escape, but the second it moved, a red line suddenly appeared from the top of its skull and stretched all the way to the bottom. A wobble later, the massive Stranger split in half just like that.

Rumble!

It was only after Bronze Toad was dead that cracks suddenly appeared all across the ground. The blade intent permeating the area was so potent it was stupefying.

“It’s... dead?!”

The surviving Pacification Sentinels were deeply worried about the damage the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia would cause, and they were about to charge into the fray and sacrifice themselves for the good of all. Then, the Stranger died just like that.

What the hell just happened?!

Boom!

It was at this moment a man wearing a bronze mask stepped out of the rubble. He was overflowing with such bloodthirst that everyone who saw him shivered in frozen terror.

Then, the man took off the mask and revealed a handsome face. He was none other than Ye Qing.

“My lord!”

“My lord!”

The Pacification Sentinels immediately saluted him.

“At ease!” Ye Qing answered, though his eyes were still bloodshot with fury. It was partially because of the bronze mask, and also because his mistake had cost many Pacification Sentinels’ lives.

He could not bring them back to life, but he could send them a few parting gifts. Shadow was the first, Bronze Toad was the second, and Black Pot... would be the third!

On the other side of the battlefield, Black Pot suddenly felt a chill behind its back and looked behind. It was just in time to meet Ye Qing’s bloodshot eyes and see the split Bronze Toad behind him. Words could not describe the shock and disbelief it was feeling.

What the hell happened?

The answer came to him a moment later.

I’m so fucked.

Chapter 155: Mysterious Silver Page

“I’m not playing with you any longer, deadman! Goodbye!” Black Pot cackled and withdrew its head and limbs back into the clay pot. Then, it started digging into the underground.

“You can’t run,” Xu Banren sneered and rushed forward. The moment he got close, the coffin behind his back suddenly creaked open, and a pair of arms covered in black hair and dark blue fingernails caught Black Pot in a vice grip.

Black Pot possessed monstrous strength despite its small size, but the strange arms proved to be even stronger. It was pulled into the coffin in just the blink of an eye.

Bang! The coffin closed not a moment too soon as something smashed against its lid. This would continue for a time as corpse qi leaked through the seams, and Black Pot tried to smash its way out.

Every time there was a bang, Xu Banren’s face would turn just a little paler. His complexion didn’t look like a human’s to begin with, and now he was the picture of a dead corpse. At this rate, he was going to die for real.

Xu Banren seemed completely unperturbed with the fact that he was inching toward true death, however. He simply kept a hand on the coffin lid to prevent Black Pot from escaping.

Eventually Black Pot’s struggles grew weakened until it was no more.

After the coffin had returned to calm, Xu Banren carried it on his back and slipped his hood back over his head once more. He was now the picture of a badass as well.

“I knew Xu Banren’s coffin is a Strange Artifact. It’s a pretty high level Strange Artifact too.”

Ye Qing was going to assist Xu Banren, but the man surprised him by killing Black Pot with a coffin-no-jutsu. As a result, he failed to land the last hit and missed out on a silver rune.

Besides that, the coffin gave him an incredibly dangerous feeling when it opened itself, and the arms reached out to grab Black Pot. It must be a Hatred-class Strange Artifact at least.

Xu Banren walked up to Ye Qing and saluted him, "I have performed my duty, Lord Ye!"

"And you have done very well, Lieutenant Xu," Ye Qing nodded before ordering, "Please round up our dead and wounded and give them the treatment they deserve. I'm going to patrol the area one more time just in case."

"As you command!"

After Xu Banren was gone, Ye Qing patrolled the area as he said he would but could not find any traces of other Strangers. This confirmed that the bloody shirt, the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia, Shadow and Black Pot were the only four Strangers entrenched in this residence. After confirming that the danger had passed, he knelt down in front of Bronze Toad and stared at its corpse with undisguised greed.

The body of a Bronze Toad of Cornucopia was a trove of treasure. Its bronze flesh could be used to forge Strange Artifacts, and its venom sac could be made into medicine or, of course, poison. However, Ye Qing's real aim was a single coin embedded inside its mouth called the Bronze Coin of Cornucopia. Not only was the bronze coin the quintessence of the Stranger's being, it was extremely lucky. Literally, wearing the coin would bestow the wearer great luck and especially luck of fortune. It was a rare and special Strange Artifact in and of itself.

Ye Qing glanced left and right to make sure that no one was looking. Then, he plunged his hand into the corpse's mouth and dug out the Bronze Coin of Cornucopia.

Ye Qing examined the coin for a moment. It looked no different from the other coins except that it was glowing brightly. The other coins were glowing as well, but their light faded as soon as the Bronze Coin of Cornucopia was dug out. In fact, the entire corpse just dimmed as if it lost its final spark of life.

"The quality is great, and the engravings are all in place. It's an excellent Bronze Coin of Cornucopia!" Ye Qing chuckled and put it away in his Nature's Shell. While he was rising to his feet, he abruptly spread his legs and punched the right half of the corpse.

The Burning Wind howled as his force crushed it into bits and engulfed it all in dark red flames. Then—

"Croak!"

Something golden shot out of the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia's body and escaped to the distance.

"Hmph! And here I thought you would be kind enough to go down peacefully."

Ye Qing smirked and blocked the strange light's way almost as if he knew it was there beforehand. Then, he spun his sleeves like the wind and trapped it in the middle.

He seized the golden light with his left hand after he landed on his feet. Inside the light was none other than the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia clutching a silver page between its arms and hopping all over the place in hopes of breaking out of its confines. It was translucent like a ghost.

“Stop wasting your energy, Bronze Toad,” Ye Qing chuckled. The strange light he was holding was the remnant of the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia’s soul. Clearly, it possessed the same ability as Old Grass and could keep a sliver of its soul alive even after its physical body was destroyed.

Ye Qing had sensed a weak flicker of energy when he was digging out the Bronze Coin of Cornucopia earlier. That was how he knew that Bronze Toad was still alive. It was an unbelievable mistake considering that its life was on the line, but the bronze coin contained the quintessence of its being. Losing it had probably triggered some sort of involuntary reaction.

Even so, the flicker of energy was so weak that most people would’ve missed it. Even he would’ve missed it if he wasn’t standing so close to Bronze Toad, and his spirit was far stronger than most. And thank goodness he was a greedy, selfish man, or Bronze Toad could’ve escaped with its quintessence and made a comeback.

All things considered, one could even say that Bronze Toad was destined to die today.

That said, this was a good reminder to never underestimate a Stranger. Heavens only know what might have happened had Bronze Toad managed to escape.

“You have earned our eternal hatred, human.”

Realizing that there was no escape, Bronze Toad abruptly stopped in its tracks and glared daggers at Ye Qing. Sensing that something was amiss, Ye Qing unleashed the Netherflame and attempted to burn its remnant soul into ash.

It was at this moment Bronze Toad let out a painful, hate-filled scream and turned as red as blood. The next second, it swelled like a balloon and exploded into a million pieces.

“Did it self-destruct? No, there’s something else...”

The Bronze Toad of Cornucopia was as dead as it could be after destroying its own soul, but Ye Qing quickly noticed that something was amiss. Something ominous and vengeful was clinging to his body like a curse, but it wasn’t doing any damage to him. He triple-checked himself to make sure of that. As far as he could tell, it was just a strange aura.

“What on earth is this thing?”

Ye Qing tried to remove it as a matter of course—the aura itself might be harmless, but whatever the Bronze Toad of Cornucopia had meant for him could not be good—but neither the Burning Wind nor his talismans could dispel it.

After trying every method he knew to no avail, Ye Qing finally gave up with a sigh, “Screw it. It might disappear on its own eventually.”

Next, he checked out the silver page Bronze Toad had been clutching during its final moments. It was cold to touch as if it was made from some sort of metal, and many strange, twisted symbols or letters were written on its surface. More importantly, it was resistant to his Netherflame, which was supposedly capable of burning everything.

Just staring at it for a moment made Ye Qing feel nauseous and dizzy. Pain and corruption were also assaulting his mind.

He looked away immediately. Even with his mental fortitude, it took him a few deep breaths to return to normal. “Bloody hell, what on earth is this thing?”

One thing for certain, it was as valuable and extraordinary. Even ignoring the fact that it could resist the Netherflame and bend his mind, Bronze Toad had not forgotten to take it with it even when it was on its last legs. This alone was proof that it was worth keeping.

“In you go!” Ye Qing hurriedly stuffed the silver page into his Nature’s Shell when he sensed someone coming his way. He would research it when he was safe and alone.

Xu Banren strode over and reported, “It’s done, Lord Ye. We are ready to leave.”

Ye Qing nodded. “Good. Let’s go!”

With that, they finally left the residence for real.

.....

“Croak!”

“Croak...”

An unknown amount of time later, a pair of toads—one gold and one silver—leaped into Li Zhou’s courtyard at the same time. They searched around the residence for a bit before the silver toad uttered angrily and impatiently, “Bronze Toad is dead, sister!”

“Yes, he did. He died so thoroughly that not even his soul fragment managed to make it!” The golden toad answered as her abdomen inflated and deflated.

If the silver toad’s voice was clearly masculine, then the golden toad’s voice obviously belonged to that of a woman. Not only that, it was such a voice that it could easily steal the soul of a weak-willed man.

Considering that they had called Bronze Toad their brother, the two toads could only be the Silver Toad of Cornucopia and the Gold Toad of Cornucopia.

The silver toad’s voice turned shrill like screeching metal, “Who’s the fucker who killed our brother! I swear I will kill them all... croak!”

“Calm down, Silver,” the golden toad advised her younger brother and said, “Judging from the remnants of the battlefield, it was probably the Pacification Bureau who did him in.”

“Bronze was a cautious toad. It was probably Blood Shirt, that dumbass, who drew the Pacification Bureau’s attention and dragged Bronze and his cohort into the fight.”

Silver Toad’s eyes turned bloodshot. “I told him! I told him not to associate himself with a non-sentient idiot, but no, he insisted that ‘the most dangerous place is the safest place’. Now he’s no longer with us, that idiot! Idiot! Shit! Shit!”

Silver Toad asked after swearing for a bit, “What do we do now, sister?”

Gold Toad answered gently, “We take revenge on Bronze’s enemies, of course. More importantly, we must take back the silver page!”

“Revenge. Yes, we will take revenge for Bronze. I will rip the murderers from piece to piece and eat them alive! Ahhhh... [1]”

Silver Toad was hot-headed, but he wasn't stupid. “There are a lot of people in the Pacification Bureau. How are we going to find the person who killed Bronze? We can't just kill everyone we meet, right?”

“It's the same for the silver page. How do we even find the person who took it?”

Gold Toad fell silent for a moment before answering, “Bronze is pretty strong, so his killer could only be a champion of the Pacification Bureau. That would narrow down our search considerably. Moreover, I sense a wisp of Dying Grudge in the area. Bronze must have cursed his killer before he died. So long as the aura exists, our enemy will not elude our grasp.”

“Also, I'm fairly certain that the killer is the same person who took the silver page.”

Silver Toad exclaimed in pleasant surprise, “Oh right! As long as the Dying Grudge doesn't fade, it's only a matter of time before we identify Bronze's killer and reclaim the silver page!”

“When the time comes, I'm going to eat their flesh and drink their blood! Oh, I need to go get ready. See you in a bit, sister!”

“Please be careful, brother. If you find Bronze's killer, do not try to attack them on your own and come to me immediately. It would not do to alert them about our presence,” Gold Toad warned.

Silver Toad chuckled darkly. “Relax, sister. I'm not Bronze. I won't make the same mistakes he did.”

“Anyway, see you later, sister!”

After Silver Toad was gone, Gold Toad croaked to herself, “No one can take my silver page from me. No one...”

Chapter 156: A Strange Patient

“If the aura clinging to my body is Bronze Toad's dying curse, then why do I feel just fine, Qingyou?”

Ye Qing was currently at Heavenly Heart Clinic. He was consulting Feng Qingyou on his recent experience. After leaving Cockcrow Alley and compiling everything that had happened today in a report, Ye Qing had gone out on a stroll and somehow found himself in front of Heavenly Heart Clinic. It totally wasn't because he was planning to visit Feng Qingyou, oh no. He just thought that the intelligent woman might know something about the weird aura that was persistently clinging to his body. Yes, his motives were entirely pure.

To his surprise, Feng Qingyou actually recognized the aura. She set down the medical book she was reading and explained, “I suppose that a curse isn't the best way to describe it. Sometimes, a Stranger would leave a mark on its killer. A kin of the Stranger would easily recognize this mark and know their killer.”

“I see! It's a mark of vengeance!” Ye Qing exclaimed in realization.

“You can say that,” confirmed Feng Qingyou with a smile.

Ye Qing relaxed knowing that the aura, however annoying, was ultimately harmless. However, he did not like being on his guard all the time either, so he asked, “Do you know a way to eliminate this mark, Qingyou?”

Unfortunately, Feng Qingyou shook her head. “It’s not impossible, but the mark is the Stranger’s innate magic. Generally speaking, it is very difficult to remove.”

Seeing Ye Qing’s disappointed expression, she chuckled. “However, it’s not something to worry about too much. A mark like this normally has a time limit. It can last as long as two months, or as short as three days. Just bear with it for the moment, and it will pass.”

“Fine,” Ye Qing sighed.

That was what he said, but he didn’t plan on being on the defensive. The Annon Sutra should be able to identify the location of Bronze Toad’s kin. If they were outside the commandery, then he supposed he could be a tortoise one time and hide until the mark had passed its course. But if they were inside the commandery, he wouldn’t mind becoming a hero and reuniting Bronze Toad with its family. Families shouldn’t be separated, right?

Yeah, I’ll ask the Annon Sutra when I get home tonight.

“So, Qingyou, do you—” Ye Qing was going to check if Feng Qingyou was free and ask her out on a date or something, but a loud, panicked cry suddenly came from outside.

“What’s going on, Uncle Feng?” Feng Qingyou called out.

The door creaked open, and a decrepit old man with a crooked back stepped in. He answered, “we have a patient, miss, and he looks to be in pretty serious condition.”

Before Feng Qingyou could react, Ye Qing rose to his feet and said, “Let’s go together. Who knows, maybe I can be of some help?”

She did not turn down his offer. Feng Qingyou nodded at him smilingly and walked toward the door.

As Ye Qing passed by the old man, he could not help but glance at him. Uncle Feng looked and felt like an ordinary old man, but Ye Qing knew that it was the opposite. For one, he hadn’t sensed the guy right until the moment he knocked on the door. Two, the inner hall they were currently in was far away enough from the outer hall that he could only hear bits and pieces of the commotion. And yet, Uncle Feng knew exactly what was going on and reported as such. That was all he needed to see to know that Uncle Feng was a lot more powerful than he was.

As if sensing Ye Qing’s gaze, Uncle Feng looked up and shot Ye Qing a yellow tooth smile. Ye Qing smiled back but didn’t say anything.

By the time Ye Qing and Qingyou arrived at the outer hall, the situation was just barely under control. Six young men were holding a rope each and doing everything they could to keep the man they were dragging restrained.

The man didn't really resemble a man anymore. His limbs were scrawny, but his torso was swollen like a mountain of flesh. His skin was also oozing some sort of smelly, oily liquid from his pores that could only be described as disgusting. His head was misshapen, bald, and inflated not unlike a water balloon that was filled to the brim. It looked like it might explode into a shower of gore at any moment. His eyes were glassy and lifeless like a dead person, his mouth was so huge that it almost stretched from ear to ear, and his teeth were yellowed and unnaturally tiny. Disgusting yellow saliva was also trickling down the corners of his mouth.

"Hehehe..."

"Hahaha..."

"Hihihi..."

The guy was laughing strangely from time to time, but he didn't seem to be conscious at all. He could not seem to feel the rope squeezing into his flesh either. However, his strength was absolutely monstrous. The slightest movement he made was enough to throw the six men restraining him off balance. No one dared to let go of the rope no matter how exhausted they were though.

Snap!

It was at this moment the rope wrapped around the misshapen man suddenly snapped in half. Then, while leaking yellow saliva from his mouth, he suddenly rushed toward the nearest young man while chuckling,

"Eat... eat... eat..."

The unfortunate young man reacted immediately and jumped out of the way, but the misshapen man was surprisingly fast despite his size. He easily caught up to the young man and grabbed him with his thin, seemingly frail hand.

The young man looked strong, but he might as well be a baby compared to the misshapen man. He was easily lifted into the air and toward the misshapen man's mouth.

"Aaaahhh! Save me! Someone save me please!"

The young man struggled with all his might but could not break free. The others immediately rushed forward to pull the young man to safety, but it was no use.

Just when it looked like the misshapen man would take a bite out of the young man's head, a finger suddenly appeared over his wrist and stopped it dead in its tracks.

"Hgggh! Grrrrrr!"

The misshapen man pulled with all his might, but it was like a boulder was sitting on his wrist. He grew more and more frustrated until suddenly, he roared and attempted to bite the owner of the finger.

The finger shifted over to his shoulder, and the misshapen man immediately froze in place not because he didn't want to move, but because he couldn't. The finger was pressing down on his shoulder so hard it was like he was carrying a mountain. Try as he might, all he could do was to roar helplessly in place.

“What’s wrong with him?” Ye Qing asked. He was the one keeping the misshapen man pinned, of course.

His senses were telling him that the misshapen man wasn’t a human anymore. He might have been a human in the past, but something happened to him and warped him into this disgusting monstrosity. Forget looking like a human, he didn’t even feel like a human anymore. In exchange, he gained what looked like a Stranger’s appetite and strength.

“We... we’re not sure,” a young man gulped. He shook his head strongly to jolt himself out of his fear and retorted, “I mean, we wouldn’t be here if we knew what was wrong with him!”

Ye Qing: “...” Well, he’s not wrong.

“Do you know what kind of illness ails Deng Qiang, doctor?” Another person asked urgently.

“Er, I’m not the doctor,” Ye Qing replied and looked back at Feng Qingyou. The young woman didn’t respond though. She circled around the misshapen man—Deng Qiang—twice before grabbing his hand. She was going to check his pulse.

“Qingyou?” Ye Qing subconsciously raised his voice. Deng Qiang was covered from head to toe in horrible-smelling fluid, and it was so disgusting that even he used one finger and only one finger to pin him in place. However, Qingyou was putting her whole hand on his wrist.

Isn’t she disgusted by this?

“I’m fine!”

Feng Qingyou shot him a light smile to show that she truly wasn’t bothered by the filth. Then, she returned her attention back to Deng Qiang. She carefully examined his eyelids, his tongue, and his pulse. Next, she pulled out a silver needle and lightly poked him in a few major points. Whatever it was she discovered, it made her frown like she was puzzling out a complex problem.

It was only now the young men realized something and stared at Feng Qingyou. One of them exclaimed in disbelief, “You... You’re the doctor, Miss?”

In their impression, a doctor should be a stern, old-fashioned middle-aged or old man with a long beard. But a girl? Could they really trust her?

“I am the owner of Heavenly Heart Clinic,” Feng Qingyou confirmed before launching into a brief explanation, “About the patient, Deng Qiang shows absolutely no signs that he is still alive. His pupils are dilated and unresponsive, and he doesn’t have a pulse or a heartbeat. Furthermore, the ‘oil’ leaking out of his body is really corpse wax.”

“Corpse wax?!”

Everyone in the outer hall immediately covered their noses and backed away from Deng Qiang. Ye Qing immediately held his breath as well. Frankly, he wanted to get away from the misshapen man just like the others, but Feng Qingyou hadn't left yet, so how could he?

At least he was using his left hand and wearing the Blue Demon Hand. I'm so sorry, buddy!

Feng Qingyou shot Ye Qing a glance and felt like giggling for some reason, but she controlled herself and continued, "Corpse wax takes form when a body has decomposed so much that the fat is leaking. Therefore, Deng Qiang is dead."

"He's dead? B-But then... how is he still moving?" Someone stuttered.

Feng Qingyou replied, "I'm not sure here. Logically speaking, Deng Qiang is already dead. However, something changed him and allowed him to keep some of his bodily functions."

"Is it a Stranger?" Ye Qing asked instinctively.

She shook her head. "I don't believe so. I haven't found any traces that might suggest that he was infested by a Stranger. Also, judging from the rate of decomposition of his muscles and internal organs, the change had been going on for some time. His behavior should have changed a while ago. When did you guys notice that he was acting strange?"

"You're completely right, lass—I mean, doctor."

One man looked clearly impressed as he reminisced, "Deng Qiang is an orphan, and he lives alone. He was a kind and hardworking man until over a month ago."

"At first, Deng Qiang just looked under the weather. He can't seem to chain more than a few sentences together like his mind was addled, and there was a faint smell that... oh. It was the smell of the corpse wax."

"Over time, Deng Qiang came to enjoy the indoors more and more. He rarely even went out of his room, much less the house. His appearance grew increasingly bizarre, and he started acting strange like peeping at people through the gap between his door, eating raw meat, laughing like he was crazy and so on..."

The man gulped. The more he thought about the past, the more afraid he became. "Later, Deng Qiang's behavior became even more troubling. We started hearing strange crunching noises from his house. He started going out once more, but that was during the dead of the night where he would stick his face against our windows and stare at us. He even started biting our livestock—chickens, ducks, pigs, sheeps and more—to death..."

"A few days ago, Deng Qiang got way worse and started attacking people. He would chase down anyone he saw and bite them just like what you saw earlier. A lot of people were hurt by Deng Qiang."

"Left with no choice, we finally decided to restrain him and bring him here for treatment."

Feng Qingyou was silent for a moment before she asked, "Is there any chance that any of you may recall whether Deng Qiang had come into contact with anything weird prior to his change?"

The crowd tried to think of something, but a while later they all shook their heads.

“Okay,” Feng Qingyou nodded, “You may leave now.”

“What... What about Deng Qiang?” Someone asked weakly.

She replied, “He’ll be staying in the clinic for the moment.”

“Okay! We’re heading back to Longwind Street then!”

“We leave him in your hands, doctor!”

The young men didn’t even bother asking why she wanted to keep Deng Qiang in the clinic. They just bade their goodbyes and left as quickly as they could. It was because Feng Qingyou’s statement had scared the shit out of them. Forget what Deng Qiang already did, what kind of crazy person would want to bring him back after everything they just heard? Of course they ran away and never looked back.

Chapter 157: Black White Shrub, Fruit of Living and Death

“Why do you want to keep him around, Qingyou?” Ye Qing asked, puzzled. “He’s dead already, isn’t he?”

Just dig a hole and put him to rest.

Feng Qingyou answered calmly, “To research him, of course. This is the first time I’ve met someone like Deng Qiang. I’m pretty curious, to be honest.”

“R-Research?” Ye Qing shuddered a little. “A-And how are you going to go about this research, exactly? Are you going to dissect him?”

Feng Qingyou replied, “If it turned out to be necessary, then yes.”

Ye Qing broke out in a cold sweat and shot Deng Qiang a glance. People who study the art of healing are scary!

“What’s wrong? Are you scared?” Feng Qingyou teased him.

Ye Qing let out a chuckle and pretended to be calm. “Of course not. Why would I be scared?”

“Really?” Playfulness flickered across Feng Qingyou’s features, but she did not expose Ye Qing. Instead, she turned to Uncle Feng and asked, “I’m going out for a bit, Uncle Feng. Can you please take Deng Qiang away?”

“As you wish, Miss,” Uncle Feng answered and grabbed Deng Qiang. The misshapen man was monstrously strong and in his prime—relatively speaking—whereas Uncle Feng looked like he had one foot in the grave. However, the old man easily picked him up and walked away as if he weighed nothing at all.

Ye Qing shot the darkening skies a glance and asked, “It’s getting late, Qingyou. Where are you going?”

She answered, “I’m leaving the commandery to forage some herbs.”

“At this time? Isn’t it dangerous? Can’t you forage it in the morning or something?” Ye Qing asked worriedly.

Feng Qingyou chuckled easily, “I’m sure I’ll be fine with you to protect me. Unless you were planning to leave a frail woman like me to collect the herbs I need on my own?”

Frail woman? What kind of “frail woman” can venture into the Firewind Valley alone or repel the Fog of Nightmare with a single qin?

That said, Feng Qingyou was asking him to escort her. How could he possibly refuse a beautiful lady?

And so Ye Qing slapped his chest and declared confidently, “Hehe, of course not. I will keep you safe, my lady. You have my word no harm will come to you while you’re foraging!”

“I’ll be counting on you then,” Feng Qingyou smirked.

It was such an impish smile that Ye Qing suddenly felt a chill down his back. He was starting to have a bad feeling about this.

I suspect you’re plotting something, but I have no proof!

And so Ye Qing and Feng Qingyou left the commandery and traveled to a forest called the Black White Forest. The reason it was given this name was because half of the forest was pure white like the clouds in the sky, and the other half was as black as ink. It was the same for the animals and Strangers as well.

The two halves of the forest possessed distinctively different atmospheres. The Black Forest was dark and eerie, whereas the White Forest looked holy and pure. To a human though, it made no difference. Both sides were equally dangerous.

“Didn’t they say that the Black White Forest is incredibly dangerous? Why haven’t we encountered a single Stranger so far?”

It had been one and a half hours since they entered the forest. They had been following the dividing line that separated the Black Forest from the White Forest.

Feng Qingyou answered, “The black and white Strangers in the forest are completely hostile toward each other. If they meet, they would battle each other to the death. That is why most of them chose to stay away from the dividing line.”

Ye Qing exclaimed in realization, “I see! But what is this herb you’re looking for, Qingyou?”

She smiled mysteriously. “You’ll find out in a bit.”

Another half an incense stick of walking later, Feng Qingyou stared at a big clearing and nodded in satisfaction. “Let’s stop here!”

She walked to the center of the clearing and produced a small bottle from her Nature’s Shell. She then uncorked it and poured some sort of medicinal liquid on the ground.

Young, fleshy saplings began growing out of the ground where the liquid was poured. They were plants, but it might be better to describe them as works of art. They were black-and-white [1]in

color and shiny like they were carved out of gemstones. They were also giving off a clean, fragrant scent.

“What are—” Ye Qing was just about to indulge in his curiosity when a series of rustling noises interrupted him.

“Shh! We need to hide!” Feng Qingyou immediately pulled Ye Qing into a hiding spot. They had just gotten comfortable when a group of ants suddenly appeared from both sides of the forest. Naturally, the ants emerging from the Black Forest were black in color, and the ones emerging from the White Forest were white.

Both groups were charging straight toward the strange plants Feng Qingyou had cultivated, but when they saw each other they immediately changed course and clashed against one another. As Feng Qingyou had mentioned earlier, the black Strangers and white Strangers were completely hostile toward one another. They would not stop until the other side was annihilated.

What happened next was a gruesome battle where blood and gore flew all over the place. It wasn't long before their numbers had dwindled to just a handful.

Ye Qing wasn't sure if he was seeing things, but the plants seemed taller, richer in scent, and more colorful after basking in the ants' flesh and blood.

Ye Qing didn't know if it was the scent of the blood or the plant, but more and more Strangers started showing up at the intersection point. They saw black and white mice, black and white butterflies, black and white mosquitoes; bats, tigers, leopards, pythons, fleshy warts, eyeballs and more.

All sorts of Strangers lived in the forest, but they were all black or white in color. Just like the ants, they went absolutely nuts as soon as they saw a Stranger of the opposite color. It was like their hatred took priority over common sense or even their self-preservation instincts.

Over time, more and more bodies began piling up in the forest, and the stench of blood became positively choking. The plants Feng Qingyou had cultivated also grew bigger and bigger until it became a lush shrub covered in verdant green fruits. Even Ye Qing could tell they looked delicious.

“Can you tell me your plan now, Qingyou?” Ye Qing swallowed to moist his dry throat and whispered. He was also rubbing his face to loosen the muscles that had been taut with shock for over an hour.

He wasn't shocked anymore though. The war of black and white had been going on for over an hour. Even the most sensitive person would've been desensitized by now.

Feng Qingyou whispered, “The plants are called the Black White Shrub. They can only be found at the dividing line of the Black White Forest.”

“The growth condition of a Black White Shrub is extremely stringent. One, it will only grow if it was nurtured with the flesh and blood of both black and white Strangers. Two, it will only bear fruit if it has absorbed a balanced amount of both types of flesh and blood.”

“The fruits it bears are called the Black White Fruits or the Fruit of Living and Death. The white fruit is called the Fruit of Living [2]. It is an outstanding restorative that can neutralize a hundred poisons, regenerate one’s flesh, and restore one’s energies. The black fruit is called the Fruit of Death and the antithesis of the Fruit of Living. Unbelievably poisonous, it can corrode the body and pollute the mind. A single Fruit of Death contained enough toxin to kill a thousand people with ease. It is so deadly that it could threaten even a Spirit Purifier.”

“That sounds incredible!” Ye Qing exclaimed with widened eyes. The Fruit of Living was one thing, but the Fruit of Death sounded absolutely incredible. Any weapon that could threaten even a Spirit Purifier was a weapon to be reckoned with.

“What was that medicine you poured on the ground just now?” Ye Qing recalled. Earlier, Feng Qingyou mentioned that few Strangers would ever get close to the dividing line because it was practically a death sentence, so it would be incredibly difficult for the Black White Shrub to flourish in any capacity. As for bearing fruit, it should be outright impossible unless a miracle happened, or if someone made it happen like Feng Qingyou had. The liquid had to be the reason the Strangers rushed in one after another like they had gone completely mad.

“It’s a special concoction I made that most Strangers found to be irresistible. I used it to lure them over to a location where the Black White Shrub might grow. Since the black and white Strangers must fight to the death, their flesh and blood would fuel the Black White Shrub’s growth until it could emit a special scent of its own, one that would lure more Strangers unto itself. In my estimation, this virtuous cycle should last long enough for the Black White Shrub to bear fruit.”

As Feng Qingyou said this, the verdant green fruits on the Black White Shrub slowly changed colors. The fruits on the white branches slowly turned black, whereas the fruits on the black branches slowly turned white. It was impossible to say why the branches bore fruits of the opposite color, but one thing for certain, it was an incredibly strange sight.

Suddenly, Feng Qingyou cracked a small smirk. “It’s almost time. Before the Black White Fruits reaches full maturity, its scent would become several times greater than before, meaning that even more Strangers would be gathering at this place. Now is your time to shine, Joyless!”

“What? What does this have to do with me?” Ye Qing exclaimed in surprise while feeling a bad premonition. His gut was screaming that she was about to say something he wouldn’t like, and he was right.

Feng Qingyou’s smirk widened. “Did I mention that the fruits’ strong scent will drive the Strangers insane and push them to consume that Fruits of Living and Death at all cost? Can you guess who’s the hero I’m relying on to protect the fruits?”

“...”

Hero my ass! You don't need a hero, you need a meat shield! Can I go home?

Although his first impulse was to escape, Ye Qing ultimately stepped out of their hiding spot and raced toward the Black White Shrub. He then leaped into the air and punched down on a group of Strangers. Everything within ten meters of the point of impact immediately went splat. After he landed on his feet, he swung his sleeves and knocked hordes of Strangers off balance.

Whoosh whoosh...

Dozens of goshawks with white flames streaming behind their wings swooped down on Ye Qing. Under the ground, centipedes that were over ten meters long and with blade-like feet dug out of the ground and skittered toward him as well.

"The White Flame Goshawk and the Hundred Feet Centipede..." Ye Qing smirked as he stomped his foot. As if on cue, the Burning Wind manifested into existence and burned the White Flame Goshawks and all other Strangers around him into ash. The Hundred Feet Centipedes still underneath the ground were crushed into fleshy juices as well.

"Now this is what I call a grind!"

The Strangers weren't just numerous, the large majority of them were Red-class and Malice-class Strangers. At his level, they were practically free experience. Oh, how he missed the days where he grinded mobs and noobs until his hands were literally too sore to continue...

"Hang on, Joyless. The Fruits of Living and Death should mature any moment now." A gentle smile flickered across Feng Qingyou's face as she watched Ye Qing going through the Strangers like the reaper.

"No problem! I can fight Strangers at this level until the end of time itself!" Ye Qing responded while unleashing a Netherflame-empowered Boundless Lightning Palm. The electrified flames easily burned a dozen Strangers into dust. Right after that, he swiped his right hand and manifested countless Blood Shadows into existence. The invisible silhouettes easily cut through an entire swath of Strangers into half.

He wasn't kidding. The black and white Strangers could be endless, and he would never run out of true qi or stamina thanks to the dragon-serpent runes. In fact, given enough runes, he could one day become as strong as the sun itself, so this situation was more than welcomed. Let it rain, baby!

Chapter 158: Black and White Spectres

"Watch out, Joyless. Two powerful Strangers are headed your way."

Ye Qing was having the time of his life when Feng Qingyou suddenly warned him via sound transmission. He looked up just in time to see a pair of Strangers floating toward him. That's right, they were floating.

They were a pair of black and white Strangers. The white Stranger was as pale as paper, whereas the black Stranger was as black as ink. Not a trace of other colors could be spotted on their person. It was as if they were the embodiment of the color white and black itself.

Besides that, the two Strangers looked nearly identical in terms of shape, size, and appearance. He would've believed it if someone told him that they were twins.

The two Strangers possessed a humanoid appearance and wore a long robe. They were also carrying a pair of mourning staffs [1]. They were black and white in color as well. Their lower torso was missing just like a ghost.

When the two Strangers got closer, they waved their mourning staffs and summoned some sort of invisible force that crushed the Strangers blocking their way into pieces. Strangely, the Strangers didn't spill blood like it normally did. Instead, they scattered into black or white powder in slow motion.

The Strangers seemed unnaturally afraid of the black and white pair, so much so that they actually overcame their madness and returned to whence they came. It wasn't long before Ye Qing and the black and white Strangers were the only ones left at the scene.

Ye Qing: "... I can overlook a killsteal or two, but you drove away my mobs as well? I'm gonna kill you!

Ye Qing could tell that the black and white Strangers were Hatred-class Strangers. They seemed pretty powerful as well. However, no (former) gamer worth their salt would stand by and do nothing while someone stole their mobs!

Plus, it didn't look like the two Strangers were going to overlook him anyway. They were floating right past the enticing Black White Fruits and floating straight toward him!

"I don't know what your names are, so I'm just gonna call you Blackie and Whitie. You guys are lucky you got such cute nicknames."

Ye Qing attacked first and appeared in front of Blackie. Swinging his arms like he would entrap the sun and moon between his sleeves, he pushed out the air within ten meters of him and replaced it all with the Burning Wind.

Blackie opened his mouth as if he were screaming, but no sound came out of his throat. At the same time, thick black qi gushed out of his mourning staff and swayed like a flame.

Blackie swung his staff again, and to Ye Qing's shock, the black qi somehow dyed the formless Burning Wind into black. As soon as the Burning Wind had turned completely black, it somehow lost all of its potency and crumbled into invisible dust.

"What a strange power!"

Ye Qing frowned. This was the first time he encountered a Stranger that wasn't afraid of the Burning Wind.

Suddenly, every hair on his person stood on end. Whitey was still a few meters away from him when he was fighting against Blackie when suddenly, it appeared behind his back like teleportation. He then brought down his mourning staff—which was burning hotly just like Blackie's except with a white flame—on the back of his head. The Stranger would've caught him off guard if he hadn't been monitoring his surroundings all this time with his powerful spirit.

Ye Qing sidestepped out of harm's way and summoned a curved saber into his hand. Then, he took a swing at Whitey's neck from a peculiar angle.

“Soulchasing Saber: Chasing Souls”

The lightning fast attack easily cut through Whitey’s neck like a hot knife through butter. Half a second later, the Stranger’s head flew into the air.

However, not only was Whitey still alive, he adjusted his aim and swung his mourning staff at Ye Qing’s shoulder instead. Caught off guard by this unexpected turn of events, Ye Qing took a solid hit on his shoulder. He immediately felt a torrent of bizarre energy pouring into his body and attempting to convert his flesh and blood into white powder.

“Hmph!” Ye Qing grunted and channeled his astral qi. Like fire in a furnace, the Burning Wind melted the invasive energy into nothing in the blink of an eye.

The battle was just beginning though. Having escaped Ye Qing’s pursuit, Blackie abruptly teleported next to him and swung his mourning staff at his head.

Having learned his lesson from his exchange with Whitey, Ye Qing chose to clash blades with Blackie instead. He imagined that he was trying to cut a river in half and launched a devastating sweep.

Bang!

One loud bang later, Blackie was sent flying through the air like a rag doll. The attack had scattered his black qi and snapped his mourning staff in half. On the other hand, Ye Qing was perfectly unharmed. The only problem was that his curved saber was quickly corroded by the black qi and dissolved into black dust.

A short distance away, the headless Whitey shook a little as white powder poured in from the White Forest and into his body. Just a few seconds later, he regrew his head as if nothing had ever happened.

Blackie’s mourning staff was restored the same way as well.

“Are you guys cockroaches?” Ye Qing lifted a curious eyebrow and kicked off the ground once more. When he reappeared, he was standing behind Whitey and swinging his arm like he would aiming to crush a stele into smithereens.

Whitey failed to react in time and lost his head a second time. Not only that, Ye Qing grabbed him with his left hand and activated both the Boundless Lightning Palm and the Netherflame. Completely locked in place, Whitey ultimately burned into a pile of ash.

The second Whitey disappeared, Ye Qing suddenly twisted around and threw a punch behind him. It was because Blackie had teleported behind his back. His fist force and Burning Wind washed over the Stranger before he could react.

“Cloud Vaporization Style”

Blackie started disappearing—or rather, vaporizing—inch by inch as dark red flames forced its way out of his body. Eventually, he turned into ash as well.

“Phew... There’s no way they can come back to life after they’ve turned into ash, right?” Ye Qing breathed out a long sigh of relief and, just in case, scattered the pile of ashes with another punch.

“Joyless, these two Strangers are called the Black and White Spectres. Born from the essence of the Black White Forest, they are something like the guardian spirits of the Black White Forest. That is why they cannot die so long as the Black White Forest remains standing.”

Feng Qingyou deflated his optimism like a balloon, “So, no, it’s not over yet. You’re going to have to hang on a while longer.”

“...”

Blackie and Whitey have infinite lives? Are you shitting me right now?

Ye Qing turned around and stared at Feng Qingyou with an aghast expression. Feng Qingyou favored him with a beaming smile and cheered him on, “You can do it, Joyless!”

Ye Qing rolled his eyes and tried to say something, but something drew his attention away. He saw black and white powder pouring in from both sides of the forest and reforming the Black and White Spectres in the blink of an eye.

“I...”

They say that a man must be strong under any circumstances, but unkillable Strangers are on a whole ‘nother level! I just can’t do it, my queen!

“Watch out, Joyless! Here they come again!” Feng Qingyou warned and jolted him back to reality. Sighing, he swung his sleeves and sent the Black and White Spectre flying like a batter. He was hoping to incapacitate the two Strangers or at least delay them a little, but they immediately got back on their feet and charged as if they couldn’t even feel his attack, not to mention that they could teleport a short distance. Left with no choice, Ye Qing charged forward and engaged the Black and White Spectres in melee combat.

While Ye Qing was keeping the Black and White Spectres busy, Feng Qingyou pulled out a jade box from her Nature’s Shell and walked up to the Black White Shrub. Then, she began picking the Black White Fruits.

Something strange happened then. Every time she picked a Fruit of Living or Fruit of Death, the color of the corresponding forest would fade just a little. On the Black Forest’s side, It was like someone was adding clear water into a glass of ink and diminishing its purity. Pale spots were beginning to appear on the objects as well. On the White Forest’s side, dirty spots were starting to appear on everything and tarnishing its previously flawless white.

“Shaaah!”

The Black and White Spectres weren't the guardian spirits of the Black White Forest for nothing. Sensing the oddity immediately, they let out an unholy roar and abruptly disengaged themselves from Ye Qing. Then, they charged straight toward Feng Qingyou.

Ye Qing wasn't going to allow them to reach Feng Qingyou, of course. While the two Strangers were distracted, he opened his mouth and unleashed Lightning Bolt. The mini sword's deadly lightning easily annihilated the Black and White Spectres into dust.

By now, Ye Qing had noticed the Black White Forest's strange transformation. The more fruits Feng Qingyou picked from the Black White Shrub, the worse the changes became. It was like watching a painting slowly losing its color one fruit at a time.

Whoosh whoosh...

It was at this moment a cool breeze blew in from both sides of the forest, making howling noises and shaking the leaves. He could actually sense a hint of sorrow and... hatred from the wind.

"What the heck? Do forests have emotions as well?"

Ye Qing rubbed his nose in disbelief. Before he could process this information, a massive amount of black and white powder suddenly floated out of the forest and toward their location. On one side, it looked like an avalanche. On the other side, it looked like a tidal wave of black snow straight out of a post-apocalyptic fiction.

It can't be! Ye Qing suddenly had a very bad feeling about this.

"Time to go, Joyless!"

Feng Qingyou finally finished plucking all of the mature Fruits of Living and Death and beckoned Ye Qing. Then, she ran straight for the exit.

Ye Qing did not hesitate to follow behind Feng Qingyou. The black and white powder had converged into many Black and White Spectres, and even at a glance he could tell that there were at least hundreds of them. They looked exactly the same as the pair they had fought earlier, and they were all expressionless like a doll. What really scared Ye Qing wasn't just the fact that they were coming from every direction, but also because they were all Hatred-class Strangers! In other words, they were currently being hunted by hundreds of Hatred-class Strangers!

"You didn't tell me that there were hundreds of Black and White Spectres, Qingyou!"

Ye Qing gulped audibly as he ran next to Feng Qingyou.

For whatever reason, the young woman seemed completely unperturbed by the dire situation they were in. She explained in a perfectly collected tone, "I told you that the Black and White Spectres are the guardian spirits of the Black White Forest, but I never said that there was only one pair."

"While the Black White Forest is normally guarded by a single pair of Black and White Spectres, there are certain situations such as a forest fire, large-scale logging, malicious sabotage and so on that will spur the forest into creating more Black and White Spectres to protect itself."

"Okay... and what on earth did you do to cause hundreds of Black and White Spectres to hunt us down?"

While what Feng Qingyou said made sense, what was happening right now was on an even bigger scale than the situations she had described. There was absolutely something the young woman still hadn't told him about.

This time, Feng Qingyou gave him the whole truth, "The Fruit of Living and Death is born from the countless deaths of the creatures of the Black White Forest. Strictly speaking, it is the essence and source of the Black White Forest itself. What would you do if someone had stolen half of your essence of being? It's only natural that the forest would hate us."

What us? You're the one who took the fruits! I'm just the pitiful worker who was kept in the dark until the last moment! Ye Qing complained on the inside.

Suddenly, Ye Qing tripped and nearly fell. This should be impossible considering his strength. He looked down and saw grass, vines and other plants wrapping around his ankles and attempting to root him in place. The surrounding branches were stretching over to block their path as well. All of them were overflowing with malice.

Chapter 159: Zombie

"Oh right, I forgot to tell you that all the flora and fauna in the forest are hostile now. Until we get out of the forest, they will do everything in their power to impede us, and we will be beset by terrible luck."

Feng Qingyou did not encounter any problems because she was half a step behind Ye Qing, and any obstacle they faced had been taken care of by Ye Qing. He was basically her landmine tripper!

As soon as Feng Qingyou finished, a blob of unknown liquid fell from the sky and splattered right across Ye Qing's face. A rock he was stepping on had suddenly given way and nearly tripped him as well.

"Next time, please don't forget something so important, sister! I could've used the warning before I got hit by bird shit!"

That's right, the suspicious liquid that hit his face was bird shit. He just barely controlled the urge to vomit when the smell had entered his nostrils.

Ye Qing burned the filth with his Burning Wind before looking at the horde of Black and White Spectres blocking their way. He immediately stomped the ground so hard that the earth jugged out of the ground, and everything in front of him was torn to shreds. At the same time, he rotated his waist backward, gathered all of his force at one point of his fist, and punched. The Burning Wind surged across the sky like it would consume it all.

"Cloud Vaporization Style"

All Black and White Spectres within tens of meters of them were engulfed by Burning Wind. Dark red flames gushed out of their bodies and melted them into goo, and an entire swathe of Strangers were cleared out just like that.

This was the first time Ye Qing executed the "Cloud Vaporization Style" in full force. It was so powerful that not even the Black and White Spectres could withstand a single hit.

But they didn't need to. The powders poured in and threatened to undo his efforts once more.

“Motherfucker! This is utter horseshit!” Ye Qing swore out loud this time. You think you’re good just because you have infinite revives? Why yes you are! Someone get me out of here!

“Whatever it is you’re doing, Qingyou, hurry up. I won’t be able to stop them much longer.”

Feng Qingyou remained as calm as ever. She waved her hand, and a yellow talisman suddenly appeared in the sky. It shone like the sun and manifested the word “Suppress” out of nowhere. Suddenly, everything around them froze as if their time was stopped. Then, Feng Qingyou uttered quietly and solemnly, “Go back.”

Her words were simple, but it might as well be an imperial decree. Not only did the plants recede back to the forest, some of them even parted like the Red Sea and revealed a clear, narrow path straight toward the exit. The overflowing malice of the forest had also disappeared like it never was.

“You can do that?” Ye Qing stared at the path and the frozen Black and White Spectres in shock. Why didn’t you use it as soon as you’re finished plucking the fruits then? Do you enjoy watching me suffer or something?

As if noticing Ye Qing’s indignant stare, Feng Qingyou said innocently, “You looked like you were having fun, so I didn’t want to bother you.”

Oh, so it’s my fault now??

Ye Qing blinked. He felt like he had been toyed with by Feng Qingyou all night long. Not only did she work him like a horse, she even made him put on a circus show for her without noticing...

Just how smart is she? I am the man who saved Anyang, repelled the Nether Lord, and even screwed over Wang Luori, dammit! Does she think she can toy with me as she pleases?

“Don’t blank out, Joyless. The suppression talisman has a time limit, so we have to get out of the forest before it’s too late!” Feng Qingyou urged with a giggle, “...unless you were planning to accept the Black and White Spectres’ hospitality after all?”

“Hospitality my butt!” Ye Qing rolled his eyes and followed Feng Qingyou down the open path.

Oh, screw it. If she wants to toy with me, then so be it. A good guy’s gotta make some sacrifices here and there.

Without the plants to block their path, the duo was able to leave the Black White Forest with ease. Not a moment too soon, the golden light disappeared behind them. It was almost as if someone had calculated how much time it would take for them to leave the forest and used the talisman at that exact time.

The Black White Forest regained its vitality after the golden light had disappeared. The grass swayed, the trees moved side by side, and the edges of the forest were positively crawling with Black and White Spectres. Unlike before, their expressions were cold, dark, and bloodthirsty. They glared at Ye Qing and Feng Qingyou like they would eat them alive if they could.

Ye Qing was a little worried, but not Feng Qingyou. She shot the Black and White Spectres an uncaring glance before assuring him, “Don’t worry, they won’t be able to leave the forest.”

Ye Qing also looked away from the Strangers and asked, “Qingyou, why on earth did you go through all this trouble to collect the Black White Fruits?”

Despite everything Feng Qingyou had told him about the fruits, he did not think that the reward was worth the risk at all. She even had to use a valuable talisman to ensure their escape.

Feng Qingyou smiled. “You’ll find out tomorrow. Come, it’s time to head home!”

“What?” Ye Qing scratched his head puzzledly. “If I’m going to learn about it tomorrow, then why not just tell me about it now? There’s no—where are you going, Qingyou? Come on, don’t be like that! Just tell me already!”

Dammit, I hate it when people keep me in suspense! I’m the one who’s supposed to do it to others, not the other way around!

The duo had just returned to the commandery when Ye Qing’s inspection badge suddenly lit up and displayed a short line of text, “Longwind Street. All personnel are to come here immediately.”

The inspection badge was a special Strange Artifact all Pacification Sentinels working for the Inspection Department possessed. In a case of emergency, it could be activated to summon all Pacification Sentinels to the scene.

Generally speaking, the inspection badge wasn’t used unless there was an emergency. This could only mean that something really bad had happened.

“Something came up, Qingyou. I gotta go,” Ye Qing said in a hurry.

“No worries. I’ll see you later. Be careful!” She nodded and said.

“I will,” Ye Qing smiled and left just like that.

Ye Qing arrived very quickly since Longwind Street wasn’t far away from the gates. As soon as he rounded a corner, he saw a ton of Pacification Sentinels standing at the entrance like it was the headquarters.

“What happened, Zhou Xi?” Ye Qing asked when he strode over and saw his subordinate.

“My lord!” Zhou Xi saluted him before reporting, “I’m not sure about the reason, my lord, but over thirty civilians living at Longwind Street suddenly went insane and bit anyone they saw. Furthermore, anyone they attacked would quickly lose their minds and turn aggressive as well.”

“What’s the current situation?” Ye Qing frowned deeply.

“Lieutenant Xu has already locked down the place. He is currently leading the men and capturing the insane civilians.”

“Understood. Stay here and make sure that no one goes in or out of this place. This is doubly true for civilians living in Longwind Street. Only let them through after a thorough inspection. We don’t need this to spread and cause a greater panic.”

If the disease could spread, then it was imperative that they maintained a strict lockdown. Heavens only know what would happen if an infected were to escape.

Zhou Xi answered affirmatively, “Do not worry, my lord. We understand the dangers.”

Ye Qing entered Longwind Street as soon as he was done giving instructions. He had just passed through a small alley when he glimpsed three fat, rotten men from their bodies howling and pouncing toward a group of civilians. They were covered from head to toe in yellow liquid, and they stank so bad he could smell them all the way from where he was.

“Are those zombies?!” Ye Qing exclaimed in shock. The rotten men looked just like the zombies in the movies. Assuming he wasn’t mistaken, this mess just became a whole lot more complicated to deal with.

Shocked he might be, Ye Qing wasn’t slow to the rescue. He dashed in front of the zombies—well, they might have a different name in this world, but until he learned about it he was just going to call them zombies—and sent them flying with his sleeve.

“Huh?”

However, the three zombies quickly struggled back to their feet and pounced toward Ye Qing once more. This surprised him because he had put enough force into the attack to completely shatter the strength of a Qi Invoker and immobilize them temporarily, much less the rotting corpse of an ordinary civilian.

Judging from their movement and the feedback he got when he hit them, it would seem that these zombies were at least as strong and fast as a late-stage Qi Invoker. Not only that, they were immune to pain as well.

This time, he used three Blood Shadows to bind the three zombies to a nearby hitching post like a rope. Although a Blood Shadow was really just a product of blood and true qi, it was tough enough that the three zombies could not break free no matter how they struggled.

The reason Ye Qing didn’t just kill them outright was because he wasn’t sure if they could still be saved. If possible, he did not want to make a choice he would regret down the line.

After he took care of the three zombies, Ye Qing turned to the group of panicked civilians and asked, “Did anyone get hurt by those zombies?”

The eight civilians shook their heads immediately, but Ye Qing still inspected them carefully until he was certain they were telling the truth. He then said, “Head to the exit. You will find a troop of Pacification Sentinels guarding the place. Just follow their instructions, and you’ll be fine.”

“W-We will do that, my lord! Thank you!” The group left in a hurry after thanking Ye Qing.

Ye Qing wasn’t worried that they would run off like headless chickens. The Pacification Bureau was quite influential among the people of Chu, and they possessed the power to kill first and ask

questions later. Even if these people were, for whatever reason, suicidal, he didn't think they would dare to pay a member of the Pacification Bureau lip service.

Ye Qing continued down Longwind Street after sending the civilians away. On the way, he encountered many three-man squads who were capturing the zombies and escorting the civilians to safety.

Although the zombies were as strong as a late-stage Qi Invoker, their lack of intelligence was extremely easy to exploit. Every Pacification Sentinel was a battle-hardened warrior, so they could handle most situations by themselves.

On the rare occasion they encountered a group of zombies that was too big for them to handle, Ye Qing and Xu Banren would step up and take them out. All in all, it only took them a short while to capture every zombie in Longwind Street.

Back at the entrance, Xu Banren reported, "We've gathered them all in one place, Lord Ye."

Ye Qing stared at the fifty or so transformed civilians with a deep frown, "Didn't Zhou Xi say that there are only thirty or so zombies? Why do I count over fifty?"

"Zombies? That's a fitting name," Xu Banren commented before answering, "That's because twenty or so people were wounded and changed before we subdued them all."

"It's that quick?" Ye Qing exclaimed in shock. While staring at the mindless, growling zombies with a heavy heart, he asked, "Did you find any clues or traces that a Stranger might be behind this?"

Xu Banren shook his head. "Not yet. It's still too early to say though."

Ye Qing wasn't surprised by his reply. He had checked the zombies he caught with his spirit earlier, and he too found no traces or energies that might suggest that a Stranger was behind this. Moreover, he failed to find any clues that might pinpoint as to what had happened to these people.

"So, we have no idea what caused these people to change," Ye Qing sighed. The headache was already settling in.

Xu Banren, the insensitive man, replied honestly, "That seems to be the case, Lord Ye."

Ye Qing ordered, "Maintain the lockdown. No one is allowed to enter or leave this place without a thorough inspection. Also, separate those who are wounded by the zombies and the zombies. I want our doctors to take a look at them and see if they can be saved. If not, then you have my permission to kill them on the spot and burn the bodies. The last thing we need is for this... disease... to spread to the rest of Luo Shui."

"As for the rest of the civilians, they will be relocated to a safe area. They are to remain under strict surveillance until we're sure they won't change into a zombie."

"Besides that, I want them to be questioned closely. Hopefully, one of them will be able to provide us with a lead."

“And of course, remind our brothers to be doubly careful when handling the infected. If they caught even a small scratch...”

Chapter 160: Who Gave You Permission To Leave

Ye Qing was still giving instructions when his inspection badge glowed yet again. At the same time, a messenger sparrowhawk landed on top of Xu Banren’s shoulder.

Xu Banren shot the inspection badge a glance and grabbed the paper slip tied to the sparrowhawk’s feet. Shuddering a little after reading its contents, he said seriously, “Lord Ye, I just received a report stating that zombies have been attacking civilians in the Nanping Boat and Fish Dragon Market.”

Ye Qing’s eyes narrowed dangerously. He immediately ordered, “Lieutenant Xu, split up the Pacification Sentinels into three groups. One group will stay here and guard the place, another will follow you to the Nanping Boat, and the last group will follow me to the Fish Dragon Market.”

“There is no time to waste, so let’s go! And whatever you do, do not allow even a single zombie to escape!”

“At once!”

Xu Banren understood the severity of the situation and so did not hesitate to carry out his orders. As for Ye Qing, he raced toward Fish Dragon Market without even waiting for his Pacification Sentinels to assemble. Every second was precious considering the circumstances.

Fish Dragon Market was a popular fish market in Luo Shui. It was incredibly busy and enjoyed a huge amount of traffic every day. Tonight, its popularity would turn out to be a curse. As soon as he got close, he could hear people screaming and running everywhere in panic.

He arrived at the entrance just in time to see five or six zombies attacking everyone around them like crazy. There were also a dozen or so wounded on the ground, all covered in blood. It was impossible to say if they were hurt by the zombies or the ongoing stampede.

“Hmph!”

Ye Qing made a grabbing motion and summoned six Blood Shadows at once. They easily caught the rampaging zombies and dropped them in the blink of an eye. Then, he plunged his hand into the ground, took a deep breath, and pulled.

There was a loud rumble as the stretch of floor undulated like it was soft noodles. It quickly rose to the height as the surrounding buildings.

The people panicked even more as a matter of course, but Ye Qing yelled before they could sabotage themselves even more, “Don’t be afraid, everyone! I am a Patrolman of the Pacification Bureau!”

His voice wasn’t particularly loud, but it was imbued with his spirit. Warm, gentle feelings blew into everyone’s heart and soothed their panic.

“The Pacification Bureau?”

“He’s an officer of the Pacification Bureau?!”

“Thank the heavens... we’re saved!”

“We’re going to live! Hahaha!”

The civilians were beyond happy to hear this, but his next words plunged them right back into the abyss. “No one is allowed to leave the place until the situation is under control. Those who try will be killed without question.”

“We can’t leave?”

“Why can’t we leave? Those... things could attack us at any moment! Why can’t we leave!?”

“My lord, please!”

The crowd protested vehemently as a matter of course. Panic was starting to spread among the crowd once more.

“Calm down, people. The Pacification Sentinels will arrive soon to protect you all. So long as you remain here, I give you my word that no harm will come to you,” said Ye Qing while spreading out his force to prevent them from panicking.

It was at this moment a thin, middle-aged man stepped out of the crowd. He was dressed like a scholar and overflowing with some sort of righteous aura. He declared pompously, “I am Li Yuechun, a bookkeeper in the commandery hall and an important official of Chu. It would be a great loss to the realm if any harm were to befall me. I demand that you let me go this instant.”

Not only that, he waved another five men out of the crowd and declared, “These five are scholars who have journeyed to Luo Shui to attend the imperial examination. They are the future of our realm, and I will bring them with me.”

“W—Wait! I am Chen Dun, the heir of the Skyriver Restaurant! If they can leave, I should be allowed to leave as well!”

“I’m Qian Yidui [1]! I’m the young owner of the Kaiyuan Bank! Let me go!”

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Li Yuechun’s action immediately caused countless others to have the same idea. The civilians Ye Qing had tried repeatedly to calm down started panicking again.

While this was going on, Li Yuechun and the five scholars got ready to leave. As he was an early-stage Vessel Augmentor, he had no problems protecting five people all by himself.

Chen Guo and Qian Yidui had an entourage of bodyguards as well. They leaped into the air to cross over the lifted street.

“This is going to be fun. These dissenters are all pretty influential in Luo Shui. If he forbade them from leaving, this new Patrolman’s career would probably suffer greatly. But if he did allow them to leave, it would sow discontent and anger among the people. Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place!”

At a restaurant next to Fish Dragon Market, a handsome but sloppy-looking man was commenting on the situation uncaringly. Sitting opposite him was another young man with a bearing of elegance and refinement. He had smooth, white skin, starry eyes and straight eyebrows. He was also dressed like a doctor.

Seemingly dissatisfied with his friend's schadenfreude, the doctor replied slowly, "If you have the time to gloat, you have the time to save some civilians and capture those who went mad."

Speaking of mad people, the doctor was looking at a floor of zombies. They weren't tied, but not a single one of them could move or even make a sound for some reason. They could only open and close their mouths soundlessly like fishes.

"Plus, Lord Patrolman's decision is the right one. Everyone who was injured by the crazed people lost their minds in just a short time, meaning that the disease is highly infectious. If a single person were to make it out, it would cause a greater panic and an endless amount of trouble."

The doctor carefully pulled out a needle from a zombie's forehead and examined it closely. After the silver needle was removed, the zombie immediately regained its mobility and tried to jump the doctor.

The doctor did not react, however. He continued to examine the filthy silver needle as if nothing had happened.

"Stop shouting! You're so noisy!"

Right before the zombie would reach the doctor, Fang Xuanlang waved impatiently and condensed a gust of wind into a chain of air. It bound the zombie and dropped it to its feet once more.

Fang Xuanlang then asked the doctor, "Have you found anything yet, An Runyu?"

An Runyu shook his head and answered, "Not yet. They show no signs of parasitism, nor can I find any traces that might suggest that a Stranger is behind this. It is unclear what is causing them to change."

"You really didn't have to do this, An Runyu. I'm sure that the Pacification Bureau can handle this," Fang Xuanlang shrugged and shook his goblet of wine lazily.

An Runyu simply said, "It is a doctor's natural responsibility to treat people and save lives."

Fang Xuanlang crossed his legs and sighed, "Whatever. You do what you want. I'm going to continue enjoying the show."

Back in Fish Dragon Market, a hint of anger flickered across Ye Qing's features. His sleeves billowed as he mustered a river of force.

In the sky, Li Yuechun, Chen Dun, Qian Yidui and their men blanched when they saw this. Before they could react, an unstoppable force knocked them out of the sky and back to the ground.

"Who gave you permission to leave?" Ye Qing glared at the disobedient group icily.

"You—pwack!" Li Yuechun tried to speak, but he felt his blood boil as soon as he opened his mouth. He immediately threw up a glob of blood.

Li Yuechun wasn't the only one. Everyone who ever practiced martial arts in their lives felt their auras and their vigor going haywire. The scholars were the ones who were actually safe and sound. They looked pale, but that was only because Ye Qing had scared them.

"You... How dare you attack a court official!" Li Yuechun accused angrily after he finally mustered the energy to push down the pain.

"Excuse me? I must be hearing things. Why wouldn't I dare to kick your cowardly asses?" Ye Qing sneered and stared at Li Yuechun until his scalp was numb.

"Who are you? How dare you block our passage!" Another guy with thick brows and large eyes yelled as well. He was one of Chen Dun's bodyguards and a late-stage Vessel Augmentor.

"You think this is daring?" Ye Qing's lips curled into a diabolical smile. "Watch closely, brother. I'm going to show you something even more daring in a moment."

I was going to kick that sonuvabitch's ass for ruining my efforts, but since you so kindly volunteered to be my guinea pig...

The thick-browed man felt a sudden chill down his back. He suddenly had a bad feeling about this.

"You—"

The thick-browed man was going to back down—it was better to be a coward than to be dead—when Ye Qing shot forward and stomped him right in the stomach. He immediately sank into the ground and threw up copious amounts of blood like it was free.

Not done yet, Ye Qing went over to Li Yuechun and kicked him in the ribs. Caught completely off guard, the early-stage Vessel Augmentor was sent flying into a nearby shop.

"Heavens... he's brutal!" Chen Dun, Qian Yidui and everyone else took a step away from Ye Qing in unison. They were all looking pale and shivering in fright.

"Oh, he's a man of action! Not bad, not bad at all!" Fang Xuanlang looked pleasantly surprised by this turn of events as he took a sip from his wine gourd. "I wonder what else he might show us?"

"You... you..."

Inside the shop, Li Yuechun was lying helplessly on the ground and staring at Ye Qing like he was the devil incarnate. He could only point a finger at Ye Qing and repeat the same words over and over again like a robot.

Still stepping on the thick-browed man, Ye Qing side-eyed Li Yuechun and said, "Now this is what I call daring. By the way, did I mention that there is nothing more I loathe than being threatened? One more word from your filthy mouths, and I promise you'll never have to say a word again. Just try me."

Both the thick-browed man and Li Yuechun immediately fell silent. This wasn't cowardice, this was adapting to the circumstances.

The crowd had fallen silent as well. What did they see? They saw an official beating up another official like a rag doll. Just how arrogant could the young man be?

“Hmph. It is decreed by Chu that no one is to obstruct the Pacification Bureau when they’re carrying out their businesses. Anyone who breaks this law will be severely punished.”

“Even the Pacification Sentinels are granted the authority to kill first and ask questions later, so whatever makes you think that I, a Patrolman, cannot do the same?”

“I could kill these two disobedient bastards right now, and they would have deserved it.”

“This will be my first and last warning. Disobey me again, and I will do what is necessary.”

Ye Qing took one step forward and crushed the limestone bricks beneath his foot like butter.

The crowd immediately staggered back and turned even paler than before. They looked into Ye Qing’s eyes and, yep, there was no negotiating with the young man. It was his way or the highway.

Satisfied with this outcome, Ye Qing looked at Chen Dun and Qian Yidui next and ordered, “Chen Dun, Qian Yidui, you are assigned to guard duty. You will make sure that everyone stays exactly where they should be. I will hold you two responsible if a single person disappears for one reason or another.”

Chen Dun: “...”

Qian Yidui: “...”

We’re just a bunch of small fries. How did such a heavy responsibility fall to our laps?