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Book 35: The Aeonian Race Chapter 19: A Single Tear

Ji Ning wasn't a fool, nor was he foolishly overconfident. Although he hoped to be able to make use of this deadly battle to break through his current bottleneck, he knew that there were too many variables in play here. He might actually be able to make a breakthrough... but it was more likely that he would fail! Breaking through the bottleneck to become a Daolord of the Fourth Step was no easy task, after all. Ning's path was that of the Omega Sword Dao; if he wanted to break through, it would be even harder than it had been for Ninedust and harder than it would be for Badlands.

He didn't dare to completely entrust all his hopes into making a breakthrough. Thus, as soon as the spacetime disc failed he immediately asked Hegemon Brightshore for aid.

"Send word to Hegemon Brightshore. Tell him that Daolord Darknorth is willing to give him fifty of the coldflame cauldron fruits and all the remaining fruits from Crimsonwave Temple, in order to request the Hegemon to intervene and save his life. Archon Silksnow is currently trying to kill him, and he can die at any moment," Ning instructed the servant who was in charge of maintaining contact between him and the Brightshore Kingdom.

"Yes, Master." The servant was shocked upon hearing how grim the situation was, and he immediately sent word over to the Brightshore Kingdom.

"I hope the Hegemon will intervene," Ning mused to himself. The Hegemon was an exalted figure who was the supreme leader of the entire Brightshore Kingdom! To the supreme figures of the Endless Territories, a Daolord really didn't count for much, no matter how monstrously talented the Daolord was. This was because the more talented a Daolord was, the lower his chances of succeeding in the Daomerge would be. The Brightshore Kingdom had its Twelve Palaces, but in all of its years of existence none of its supreme Daolords had ever succeeded in the Daomerge. Hegemon Brightshore remained the one and only Hegemon of the Brightshore Kingdom.

Thus... Hegemons generally didn't care about whether Daolords died or not. For them to perish while out adventuring was quite normal. They'd calmly watch as one generation of Daolords after another rose to power, followed by one generation after another perishing...

"But fifty coldflame cauldron fruits might be enough to convince the Hegemon to intervene. Although the Hegemon managed to trade for some of that fruit after our trip to Crimsonwave Temple, I don't think he got fifty," Ning prayed.

"Master, Master! The Hegemon sends word that he is heading towards you with my clone. However, he is going to need some time. He asks you to hold on for a bit," the servant immediately replied.

Boom! Right at this moment, Ning had been knocked backwards with blood leaking from the corner of his lips. He couldn't help but feel delighted upon hearing this. "Good."

"I need to hold on for a bit. If I can hold on for a while, the Hegemon will be able to make it here," Ning thought eagerly. He knew that since the Hegemon wasn't sure as to where he was exactly, the Hegemon needed his servant to guide the way. That delay, combined with what a great distance the Hegemon had

to traverse via tearing through spacetime, meant that the Hegemon did need some time before he could arrive.

Normally, such a short period of time was meaningless. However, Ning was in the middle of a life-and-death battle against someone who was one of the lords of the Sacred Cities. That short period of time was quite long in this situation, more than enough for Archon Silksnow to strike a hundred times.

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“Arise.” Archon Silksnow’s long hair fluttered behind him as he let out a loud shout. Boom! Countless streams of saber-ki flew out from around him, forming a vast world of saber energy that crashed down upon Ning. Clearly, Archon Silksnow wished to end this battle as quickly as possible.

“Come forth!” Ning didn’t dare to hold anything back at all. Nine energy dragons immediately flew out of his body, forming the Yin-Yang Chaos Domain as his awesome heartworld projection came crashing down as well. The heartworld projection merged into the Yin-Yang Chaos Domain, then clashed straight against the surrounding world of saber-ki.

The two domains collided against each other... and the saber-ki domain was actually at a slight disadvantage. This caused Archon Silksnow to feel rather flabbergasted. He then smiled coldly: “So you have a few tricks of your own. However... you are still going to die.”

Archon Silksnow charged straight towards Ning with pure, unadulterated savagery! His six sabers executed his exceptionally brutal and valiant Dao of the Saber. Before his sabers, even spacetime was frozen and even karma was severed!

Attack! Attack! Attack!

“I have to survive. For Ninedust’s sake if nothing else, I have to survive.” Ning labored to defend himself.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The battle between the two caused the skies to darken. Archon Silksnow lived up to his reputation as one of the top three Archons. His attacks were incredibly ferocious, which only made sense; the Dao of the Saber was an offensive Dao, after all. Ning was completely unable to fight back, but when he focused completely on defense his six swords were able to form a truly airtight defense. Still, he was knocked backwards again and again.

“This Daolord Darknorth really is pretty formidable.” Archon Silksnow struck out ten times in a row, but Ning was able to endure all ten attacks. This caused Archon Silksnow to narrow his eyes. “Everyone says that Winesage is the most powerful Daolord, but it seems as though this Daolord Darknorth is actually more powerful than Winesage! I can hardly believe that there’s a Daolord capable of taking ten blows from me in a row.”

In truth, Ning was only able to accomplish this thanks to his [Heartsword] art, which had increased his strength dramatically and made his sword-arts even faster and more ferocious! Without it, Archon Silksnow probably would’ve been able to blast Ning’s six swords out of his hands and then kill Ning right away!

“He’s too resilient. If this continues, I don’t even know how many attacks it’ll take to kill him.” A cold light flashed through Archon Silksnow’s oily green eyes. “Forget it. I’ll make an exception for him and use my [Icesnow] saber-arts.”

Whoosh! Archon Silksnow's six sabers began to move in unison. Three of them became incredibly savage and overbearing, while the other three actually became unpredictable and ephemeral, almost like the dancing of the snow. Their movements were very soft and extremely difficult to see through.

When Ning saw this, his face turned extremely pale. Although the earlier attacks were savage and powerful, they were fairly easy to block as a result. Now that Archon Silksnow was using this strange combination of savagery and softness, merging the principles of Yin and Yang together, blocking the attacks became far more difficult than before. The snow-like saber-arts didn't have as much power behind them, but they were much more troublesome for Ning to defend against.

It was much like how the Heavenbreaker stance was much more powerful than the Blood Drop stance, but the Blood Drop stance was far superior in speed thanks to having sacrificed a degree of power. The most powerful attack wasn't necessarily the best attack.

Clang! Clang! Slash! Slash! Swords and sabers collided nonstop. Ning was forced to use four of his swords to defend against those three sabers executing the unpredictable [Icesnow] saber-art, leaving him only two swords to defend against the other three extremely savage sabers.

BOOM! Using just two swords to defend clearly wasn't enough. A savage burst of power rocked Ning's entire body, causing it to tremble as he was sent flying backwards. Ning vomited out a mouthful of blood, his face ashen. His divine power was being depleted far too quickly. Ning's hands were numb, and even his soul was beginning to feel a bit woozy. Clearly, his sword-arts weren't able to ablate enough of his enemy's attack power, causing his divine body to endure most of it. As a result, his injuries were now much heavier than before.

"After I became one of the Archons of the Sacred Cities, on the occasions when I acted against Daolords I always used my most powerful and overwhelming attacks to crush them directly. You are the first Daolord I wasn't able to crush in such a manner, forcing me to use my [Icesnow] saber-arts. Normally, I'll only use it when I battle against other Emperors. You should feel proud to die these saber-arts," Archon Silksnow said as he once more charged forwards.

His saber-arts fell upon Ning like the snow, drifting and ephemeral.

His saber-light flashed like lightning, piercing directly into one's heart.

These were two diametrically different types of saber-arts, making it far more difficult to defend against them.

Slash! Ning was starting to grow dizzy from the hits he was taking. His divine body found it hard to endure these attacks, and he was starting to decline from peak condition.

"No. If I let this continue, I'm going to die!" Ning understood that each time he blocked, he was walking on a fine line between life and death. In less than ten stances, he would perish to this opponent.

"If I die, I can be revived thanks to my Dao-seal... but Ninedust will be dead for sure." A surge of indomitable will and resolve came out of Ning's soul. This resolve was absolutely unshakable, a form of power that came from his very spirit... and Ning's sword-arts suddenly changed.

Previously, his strikes had taken the form of mist-formed swords. All of a sudden, the mist began to condense and transform into drops of water. The countless water drops condensed into a sword that

looked as though it was made out of water. The watery swords rippled with absolute beauty but emanated a mesmerizing level of might... and both the speed and power of Ning's strikes skyrocketed.

[Heartsword], stance eleven... 'Teardrop'.

Boom! Boom!

The two forces collided. Ning was still knocked flying backwards, and he was still at a disadvantage... but this time, he didn't spit out any blood at all. Clearly, the force of the collision was not enough to cause him any injuries.

"What?!" Archon Silksnow's face completely changed. "The eleventh stance of the [Heartsword] art?!"

"Yes." The distant Ning revealed a smile. "Archon Silksnow, you live up to your reputation. You recognized my technique at a single glance. This is indeed the eleventh stance of the [Heartsword] art."

The reason why it was comparatively easier for cultivators to make breakthroughs in near-death situations was because those situations placed the soul and truesoul under enormous pressure, causing them to enter a special state that made it easier for one to have epiphanies and then make breakthroughs. Ning wasn't just in a life-and-death situation, he was also under the pressure of being responsible for Ninedust's survival. This made his desire to win even stronger, and those strong emotions and tremendous desire to survive caused his [Heartsword] art to finally break through.

In the instant that he made his breakthrough, he finally understood. The eleventh stance of the [Heartsword] art, the 'Teardrop', required incredible resolve and willpower! Long ago, Emperor Heartsword had been facing certain death for the sake of protecting those he loved. He had smiled into the face of death as tears spilled down his face... but in that instant, he had a sudden epiphany and managed to develop the eleventh stance.

Each cultivator had their own paths to take if they wished to create such profound, abstruse sword-arts. God Emperor Helong, for example, had created his [God Emperor's Apocalypse] technique, a technique similar to the [Heartsword] art in that it perfectly merged heartforce, divine power, and Immortal energy together. It also required a terrifying amount of resolve and strong emotions, but the emotions involved had to be a feeling of benevolence and care towards all living beings.

"Only such a blazing level of determination can allow heartforce, divine power, and Immortal energy to merge together in a more perfect manner." Ning finally understood.

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Book 35: The Aeonian Race Chapter 20: Hegemon Brightshore

"How is this possible? How could his [Heartsword] art have advanced to the eleventh stance? That means he'll reach the twelfth stance soon!"

The 'first stage' of the [Heartsword] art consisted of the eighth to tenth stances, while the second stage consisted of the eleventh and twelfth stances.

Ning had made consecutive breakthroughs in the 'first stage' back when he was in Crimsonwave Temple. Breaking through between stances within the same stage was quite fast, while breaking

through from one stage to another was far more difficult. Since Ning had already reached the eleventh stance, the twelfth stance wouldn't be too far behind.

"Daolord Darknorth's sword-arts are extremely well-rounded and extremely durable. If he can master the twelfth stance... he'll be on par with even me." Archon Silksnow's killing intent began to grow stronger.

Emperor Heartsword, even after becoming an Eternal Emperor, was only comparable to supreme Daolords when it came to his actual insights into the Dao of the Sword. He was actually weaker in this regard than the current Ning. However, thanks to his mastery of the fifteenth stance of the [Hearstword] art, he had completely eclipsed all other Archons and was second only to the Hegemons. He was known throughout the Endless Territories as the only Emperor who was comparable to Hegemons in power.

Now that Ning had mastered the eleventh stance, the power of his strikes was three times as much as it was 'normally'. Soon, when he mastered the twelfth stance, his strikes would be comparable to six times his 'normal' power! How incredible would this be?

It was all thanks to this terrifying technique that Emperor Heartsword had been able to battle those who were two levels of power above him and be able to battle the three mighty Hegemons!

Boom! Boom! Boom! The two continued to battle furiously. Ning was knocked flying repeatedly, but he was able to endure the blows with ease. This was because his sword-arts were faster and fiercer than before, allowing him to completely defend against his foe's attacks. "A hundred strikes? I can block even a thousand strikes from him. He might hold the upper hand, but if I completely focus on defense I can endure fairly easily."

"Die, die, die!" Archon Silksnow's oily green eyes grew colder and colder as his saber-arts fluctuated between incomparable savagery and snow-like unpredictability. Ning was completely unable to fight back at all, and with each strike he sent Ning flying away. He was completely dominating Ning, forcing Ning to focus exclusively on defense... but Archon Silksnow really was completely unable to do anything to the defense-oriented Ning.

"His defenses are completely without flaws. His sword-arts have no weaknesses whatsoever." Archon Silksnow was extremely vexed by this; foes with perfect defensive abilities were extremely difficult to deal with. Even those more powerful than Ning would find it hard to breach his defensive sword-arts. "Am I really going to have to use one of my treasures to deal with a single Daolord?"

"Given his current level of power, not even common Hegemon-level treasures are certain to kill him. I would have to use one of my most important treasures." Archon Silksnow felt a bit of heartache at the prospect. "I've only accumulated so many of them despite the passage of countless years... I was planning on using them in critical situations to defend against Hegemons."

Archon Silksnow continued to hesitate as the two exchanged blows. Archon Silksnow was vacillating; he really didn't want to use up his most important treasures. His more ordinary treasures such as 'common' Hegemonic treasures might be precious to Daolords, but Archon Silksnow had quite a few of them. However, those treasures generally only held twenty to thirty percent of the full power of a Hegemon's strike. It wasn't enough to kill an Archon of the Sacred Cities, nor was it enough to kill the current Ning.

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While Archon Silksnow hesitated, he continued to hope that his furious barrage of attacks would be enough to kill Ning. If he could avoid using one of his life-saving treasures, he would do so; he wasn't going to use those things up casually.

Riiiiip. Far away, within the empty void that was beyond the area of ten billion kilometers covered by the blurry light, a tear in spacetime suddenly appeared. This tear was enormous in size, and from it emerged the enormous head of an absolutely titanic beast. The eyes on this head looked like blazing stars, and they turned to stare at the distant field of combat, locking in on both Archon Silksnow and Daolord Darknorth.

Archon Silksnow sensed this new present, and he immediately turned to look.

"Archon Silksnow, stay your hand," the titanic beast said in a rumbling voice.

"Hegemon Brightshore!" Archon Silksnow's face immediately turned pale. Hegemon Brightshore had actually charged over here in person, using his true body?

Archon Silksnow had been hesitating, but a savage look immediately appeared on his face. He produced an ordinary-looking black hammer in his hands, then immediately tossed it out. The black warhammer transformed into an enormous streak of golden light which smashed straight towards the distant Ning. As it flew, the black warhammer's light began to increase dramatically as it became golden in color.

The warhammer was dazzling to behold, and its aura alone caused Ning to feel the desire to prostrate himself before it. Ning forced down that thought, but he still felt a sense of shock in his heart. He hurriedly crushed two protective treasures, causing a barrier of water to appear around him as well as a strange river to cover him.

"Silksnow!" Hegemon Brightshore was enraged. His enormous body stretched out a single claw which tore straight through the blurry light. Boom! The barrier was completely ripped open. However... by the time he tore through it, the dazzling golden warhammer had already reached Ning.

BOOM!

A terrifying wave of power smashed against Ning, blasting through the river around him and shattering the watery barrier. Although Ning strove to use his Northbow swords to defend, the power of this strike vastly surpassed the strikes which Archon Silksnow had unleashed previously. Ning's six arms were immediately torn apart, and his six Northbow swords were sent flying as the terrifying power from the strike swept through Ning's entire body.

The power was simply too great.

"I-I... am going to die?" Ning only had enough time to turn his head to glance at the distant Hegemon Brightshore. As Ning stared at the titanic beast, his lips moved slightly. He wanted to say: "Save Ninedust."

Alas, Ning didn't have a chance to say a single word. His body was completely crushed into dust, leaving only a few magic treasures and his armor behind, floating in the void.

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“NO! Damn you!” The blazing, star-like eyes of Hegemon Brightshore were filled with fury. He had already spoken, but Archon Silksnow had actually chosen to kill Ning right in front of him.

Riiiiip. He had already torn straight through the blurry barrier of light. Now, the Hegemon’s claw tore straight towards Archon Silksnow.

Archon Silksnow had immediately transformed into a streak of light and flown towards Ning in the same instant that he used up one of his trump cards. He wanted to take away the treasures which Ning had left behind. He knew that Ninedust and the realmship parts were all within Ning’s estate-world treasure.

“And you actually think you are going to take the treasures as well?” This enraged Hegemon Brightshore even further. His eyes emanated an aura of blurry light which caused spacetime to congeal in the surrounding area. A wave of invisible pressure crushed down upon Archon Silksnow, causing him to dramatically slow down. As for Hegemon Brightshore’s claws, they tore straight through space itself as they reached out towards Archon Silksnow. Previously, that aura of blurry light had condensed local spacetime... but now that it had been destroyed, Hegemon Brightshore’s attacks were able to almost instantly reach the target.

“So fast! The old man really lives up to his reputation as the premier Hegemon amongst the three Hegemons in our realmverse.” Archon Silksnow hurriedly used his saber-arts to defend against that terrifying claw.

BOOM! The terrifying claw-strike came, filled with such power that it was equal in might to the black warhammer treasure which Archon Silksnow had just used. Archon Silksnow was instantly shattered into tiny pieces of snow, but that snow quickly reassembled far away into Archon Silksnow once more.

When Autarch Bolin was a Hegemon, he had trained and mastered a total of ten Hegemonic Daos! All that accumulated experience had allowed him to break through to become an Autarch. Emperors possessed endless lifespans and thus would generally train in many Daos, hoping that these other Daos might stimulate and inspire them! Emperor Silksnow himself was skilled in both the Dao of the Saber and the Dao of Snow.

He had undergone the Daomerge via his Dao of the Saber and reached the Archon level of power. Over the course of countless years, he had slowly upgraded his Dao of Snow to that same level. Clearly, he wanted to use these two Daos to inspire him and slowly train to the Hegemon level via them.

It was possible for Emperors to train and cultivate, but improving was extremely difficult. Every single person who had been alive for that long, however, had life-preserving abilities available to them. The difference in power between Archons and Hegemons was quite apparent, and in a real head-on battle the Archon would definitely perish.

However, some Archons had defensive techniques like invulnerable forms, while others were extremely skilled in other ways. For example, if one was extremely proficient in the Dao of Numerancy, one would be forewarned of danger and flee early on. Alternately, if one had an extremely formidable evasion art then one would be able to rely on it to escape and prevent even Hegemons from catching up to them and killing them.

Ning had already reached the Archon level, true... but he had merely trained in the Omega Sword Dao and didn’t have an invulnerable form. In addition, he had only been training for a very brief period of

time and had not accumulated enough treasures yet. There was simply no way for him to compete against the likes of Archon Silksnow. The elder Archons had accumulated many treasures of the years, some of which could have an impact on even actual Hegemons.

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“Hegemon Brightshore, are you really going to interfere over me killing a mere Daolord?” Archon Silksnow stood off in the distance. Although he was unhappy, he suppressed his anger. “You and I have both lived in the Endless Territories for countless years. These Daolords come and go; there are nothing more than passerbys in our life. Daolord Darknorth angered me, so I decided to kill him; this is a minor matter. You, an exalted Hegemon, actually decided to interfere? This is a bit much, isn’t it?”

Hegemon Brightshore’s voice boomed out sonorously from afar: “Archon Silksnow, this was indeed a minor matter... but since I spoke out, you should’ve been willing to discuss things peaceably. You actually dared to kill Darknorth right in front of me!”

“This little thief was lucky enough to steal an item I needed,” Archon Silksnow said. “Hegemon Brightshore, I don’t want any of his other treasures, but I do want that little thief’s estate-world. If you are willing to give it to me, you can list any conditions you want.”

“Hmph, you killed Darknorth in front of me... and you think you’ll earn his treasures?” Hegemon Brightshore said coldly, “Fuck off. If you don’t... don’t blame me for showing no mercy.”

“You...!” Archon Silksnow had an ugly look on his face.

“I said FUCK OFF!” Hegemon Brightshore’s voice deepened even further.

“Fine. A Hegemon really is a Hegemon. I’ll accede to your request this time.” Archon Silksnow ground his teeth, then turned and disappeared within a dimensional ripple.

The reason why Archon Silksnow had chosen to kill Ning at that critical moment was partially for the sake of the realmship... but more importantly, he wanted to pull up grass by the roots! He understood that so long as Ning survived, Ning would quickly be able to master the twelfth stance of the [Heartsword] art. By then, the difference in power between the two would be very small. There was already a feud between them. If Ning failed his Daomerge, it would be guaranteed that Ning would die. If he went crazy before dying... while Archon Silksnow himself would be able to keep himself alive, the foundations of power he had spent countless aeons establishing might be completely annihilated by the maddened Ning.

If Ning succeeded in the Daomerge? Things would be even worse! Thus, he had to kill Ning right away. Taking the treasure was just a secondary benefit. Alas... the Hegemon had stopped him.

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Hegemon Brightshore watched as Archon Silksnow left, neither chasing nor attacking. Killing Archon Silksnow would be no easy feat.

The Hegemon’s titanic figure blurred, transforming into a humanoid figure. He returned to his normal form of a snowy-robed, white-bearded old man with six curved horns on his head. He waved his hand, collecting the Northbow swords, estate-world, armor, and other treasures Ning had left behind. He

murmured softly to himself, “These treasures actually still have an owner? Daolord Darknorth actually didn’t die... can it be that he has a Primaltwin?”

Hegemon Brightshore revealed a smile. He felt rather apologetic towards Ning for not having been able to rescue him, but now he felt much better. “He really does have a few tricks up his sleeve. Since he didn’t die... his avatar should be at Vastheaven Palace. I’ll pay it a visit.” Hegemon Brightshore took a single step forward, tearing through spacetime as he travelled towards Vastheaven Palace.

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Book 36: Daolord of the Fourth Step Chapter 1: Revival

Vastheaven Palace.

Within a hidden estate-world, there were beautiful valleys filled with fragrant flowers and birdsong. A golden-robed Ji Ning was seated in the lotus position atop the grass, and in front of the grass before him was a black-white piece of jade. This jade talisman was the ‘Lifeblood’ Dao-seal which Emperor Maniseal had once bestowed upon Ning in order to curry favor with the Paragon of Pills. However, it wasn’t one of his most valuable ones, as it was only able to revive Samsara Daolords. Next to the piece of black-white jade was a giant, mountain-sized pile of countless chaos jewels.

In the exact instant where the distant Archon Silksnow slew Ji Ning...

Rumble... the black-white jade talisman instantly lit up with dazzling light. The strand of truesoul which Ning had left behind in the talisman slowly began to rebuild itself from the talisman’s energy, almost like an infant gestating within his mother’s belly or like life taking shape within an egg. Ning’s strand of truesoul slowly began to recover and reform within that white-black jade talisman, and as more of it recovered he slowly began to gain mental clarity as well.

“Just now, I was killed... and I could sense my consciousness descend into infinite darkness. Now that I’ve come back... I feel as though I have been brought back into endless light.”

This experience of dying and coming back to life had truly and completely stunned Ning. Ning instantly gained a fresh perspective on what the nature of the Dao truly was.

Thruuuuum! Ning’s consciousness instantly began to absorb energy from the outside world. The many chaos jewels which his avatar had prepared long ago were instantly activated and their energy was drawn into Ning nonstop.

Whooooosh. As Ning began to actively drawn in energy, his body quickly began to reform around him as the black-white jade talisman disintegrated soundlessly. The figure of a white-robed youth began to coalesce in the empty air within the gorge, his body glowing with light and looking rather ethereal. However, as more time passed his body gradually began to grow increasingly solid. By the time he had absorbed more than half of the mountain of chaos jewels, his aura was completely restored and reserved once more.

The white-robed Ning descended from the skies, exchanging a glance with the golden-robed Ning. Both had joyless looks on their faces; the only expression they had was that of worry.

“My true body was reformed thanks to the Dao-seal, but brother Ninedust...” Ning was worried. “Archon Silksnow saw the Hegemon appear, but he still chose to kill me no matter the cost. He probably went

after the treasures I left behind. Ninedust was hiding inside my estate-world. I hope he doesn't end up in Archon Silksnow's hands."

Whoosh. With but a thought, Ning exited from this estate-world.

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Outside the estate-world was Ji Ning's residence within Vastheaven Palace.

"Master." The fiery-robed woman seated by herself atop a distant boulder revealed a smile.

"Youji." Ning smiled back at her.

"Master, why has your true form returned?" Su Youji was quite surprised. She had spent almost all of the past few years in Vastheaven Palace, but she generally only saw the golden-robed avatar.

Ning chuckled. "I got beaten back."

"Who was able to beat you, Master?" Su Youji didn't believe it. Her master was virtually amongst Daolords, right?

"Haha, I'd rather not discuss such an embarrassing event in detail. Where's Pillsaint? Still making his pills?" Ning asked.

"Yes, Pillsaint's gone absolutely pill-crazy," Su Youji said.

Suddenly, a spacetime ripple swept across the entire Vastheaven Palace. Su Youji didn't notice, but Ning revealed a nervous look on his face. He was worried about Ninedust's safety, and so he immediately bowed respectfully in the direction of the ripple. "Greetings, Hegemon."

A pitch-black tear in spacetime appeared in front of Ning, followed by a snow-robed, white-bearded old man with six horns on his head emerging from it. When he saw Ning, he revealed a surprised look: "Darknorth, you are actually still alive?"

When Ning saw the Hegemon, he let out a sigh of relief. This was because he could sense that his weapons and treasures were all on the Hegemon; clearly, the Hegemon had picked them up for him.

"Long ago, Hegemon, you arranged for me to enter that alternate universe. I was fortunate enough to acquire a 'Lifeblood' Dao-seal forged by Emperor Maniseal," Ning said. "It was all thanks to that Dao-seal that I was able to survive."

"A Lifeblood Dao-seal from Maniseal?" Hegemon Brightshore nodded slowly. "No wonder you survived. Maniseal is an extremely arrogant and solitary figure; if you were able to attract his interest, you must have had quite the experience."

Ning secretly muttered to himself. It had nothing to do with him attracting Maniseal's interest; in fact, he had never even met Emperor Maniseal! It was all because the man wanted to gain favor with the Paragon of Pills. That was why he had bestowed the Dao-seal upon Ning.

"Oh, right. Here are your treasures." Hegemon Brightseal waved his hand, causing the six Northbow swords, the Hegemon armor, the estate-world, and the many other treasures to fly towards Ning. The

six Northbow swords in particular began to shiver; clearly, they were extremely excited upon seeing their master again.

Ning waved his hand, accepting all of the treasures. Some he stored away and some he wore. As for the six Northbow swords, they re-entered the sheath on his back.

Ning finally relaxed after acquiring these treasures. He had only acquired them after many dangerous adventures; if he lost them all, he really would be heartbroken. Ning could also sense that the Ninedust Sectlord was still safely within his estate-world. This caused Ning to reveal a smile.

“Thank you, Hegemon. These are the fruits from Crimsonwave Temple I promised.” Ning immediately offered a jade green gourd which was filled with all of the remaining fruits from Crimsonwave Temple.

“I cannot accept this.” Hegemon Brightshore smiled and shook his head. “You asked me to save your life, and if I had done so I would’ve accepted these fruits. But... I was just a bit too slow, and Archon Silksnow didn’t show any mercy even though I was there. I wasn’t able to save you; you saved yourself thanks to that Dao-seal, coming back to life. How can I accept?”

“These fruits are nothing more than a portion of the treasures I own,” Ning said hurriedly. “Hegemon, you sent all of my treasures over to me. They are very important, especially my lifeblood weapons! Darknorth is filled with tremendous gratitude towards you.”

“A failure is a failure.” Hegemon Brightshore shook his head. “I’m not going to be greedy over the treasures of a young fellow like yourself.”

Ning was rather speechless. Still, high-level figures generally had exceptional levels of pride. Everyone had bottom lines they would not cross without a very good reason! But of course, a sufficiently tempting treasure might be a good enough reason for them to cross their bottom line. A completely undamaged realmship, for example, would be enough to drive any Hegemon crazy. Ning, however, was just a Daolord; Hegemon Brightshore really didn’t have much interest in his items. Even if he knew that Ning had an omnigeddon bloodfruit tree, he still wouldn’t care. The verdant azuresoul might interest him slightly, but he still wouldn’t go crazy over it.

This was because one would have to first find a Chaos Primordial before one could use the verdant azuresoul to take control over it. One had to remember that even for Autarchs finding a Chaos Primordial was an incredibly difficult task, much less for someone like Hegemon Brightshore who had always resided within the Flamedragon Realmverse.

In other words... even if he knew all of the treasures Ning possessed, he still wouldn’t be so shameless as to pilfer from Ning. And of course, he had no idea that Ning had treasures like the verdant azuresoul.

“T-then...” Ning’s eyes suddenly lit up. He immediately said, “Darknorth has something to ask of you.”

“Oh?” Hegemon Brightshore looked at Ning.

“I need some precious materials.” Ning waved his hand, causing a large number of characters to immediately appear in the air next to him. The text narrated the many materials Ning needed to reach the third level of the [Sword Dao Body] technique. His previous body had been destroyed, after all. Although he had rebuilt his true body, his restored body was just his ‘ordinary’ body.

His protective divine ability? His nine novessence arts? They were all gone. He didn't care about the nine novessence arts, as they were already getting to be a bit too weak... but the protective divine ability was still of use.

Previously, when Ning had battled against Archon Silksnow, the reason why he hadn't died when he was getting blasted back prior to his [Heartsword] breakthrough was precisely because his protective divine ability was quite powerful! But of course, if he wanted to train to the fourth level, where his body would be comparable to a top-grade Eternal treasure, the amount of treasures he would have to expend would cause even a Hegemon some pain. Ning suspected that not even his omnigeddon bloodfruit tree would be enough.

"I remember you buying these things last time?" Hegemon Brightshore chuckled.

"I have to re-train this divine ability," Ning said helplessly. "If I use my remaining fruits to trade for them, it should be enough, yes?"

"It is enough." Hegemon Brightshore smiled. He was starting to like the kid more and more. He really did want to acquire those fruits, but he absolutely was not going to take advantage of Ning, a mere Daolord. The materials which Ning had requested were in fact of equal value to these fruits! However, if Ning wished to trade his fruits, he would've been able to trade with either the Dao Alliance or the Ancient cultivators for them... and he probably would've gotten a better deal. These fruits were rarer and more important to Eternal Emperors, after all.

"I'll accept these fruits and will immediately assemble the materials. I'll arrange for them to be sent to Vastheaven Palace within one month." Hegemon Brightshore accepted the jade green gourd. "Also... you should keep the fact that you at Vastheaven Palace a tight secret. Do not let Archon Silksnow find out."

"Understood," Ning said immediately. He still was not a match for Archon Silksnow just yet.

"If he really does attack, you can immediately ask me for assistance. I'll tear straight through spacetime and immediately arrive at Vastheaven Palace," Hegemon Brightshore said. "Last time, I was a bit slow because I didn't know where you were, exactly; I had to rely on your servant's clone guiding the way for me. I'll be much faster next time, because I can descend directly upon Vastheaven Palace. However, I'll only intervene on your behalf once. Any other dangers you encounter, you'll have to resolve yourself."

"Understood." Ning nodded. To Hegemons and Archons, Daolords really didn't matter that much. Even though some Daolords were incredibly talented, once their lifespans ended they would almost all perish.

Hegemon Brightshore, for example, still viewed Archon Silksnow as a peer despite being far more powerful than him! But when he viewed Daolords, he viewed them as being kids. No matter how much of a fuss they kicked up, they would still just be kids. There had never been a Daolord who was qualified to treat with Hegemons and Archons as equals.

Whoosh. Hegemon Brightshore tore a hole in spacetime, then stepped into it and departed.

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Book 36: Daolord of the Fourth Step Chapter 2: Farewells

"W-was that Hegemon Brightshore?" Only now did Su Youji dare to speak.

“Yes.” Ji Ning nodded.

“Master, just now, you said Archon Silksnow...” Su Youji had overheard quite a bit and now knew much of the story.

Ning immediately instructed, “You cannot make this information public, nor can you reveal the fact that I came back to life thanks to a Dao-seal! Once Archon Silksnow finds out... given his temperament, there’s no way he’ll let this matter rest. Although Hegemon Brightshore promised to help out, for him to assist me once is already giving me great face. In the end, I’ll have to rely on my own skills to deal with Archon Silksnow.”

“But we’re talking about Archon Silksnow! T-this...” Su Youji was extremely worried. No matter how powerful her master was, he was still just a Daolord. How was he supposed to fight against one of the eight awesome lords of the Sacred Cities, Archon Silksnow?

“That’s not for you to worry about,” Ning instructed. He then waved his hand, causing a silver-robed man to appear next to him. It was the Ninedust Sectlord.

“Darknorth.” When Ninedust saw Ning, he immediately revealed a look of delight. “You are unharmed? Thank goodness. I was worried about something happening to you.”

“Haha, you were worried about something happening to me and you being unable to escape, right?” Ning teased.

“You jackass, I really was worried about you,” Ninedust said, feigning anger.

Ning chuckled, then let out a sigh: “Your worries weren’t unfounded. I really did end up being killed by Archon Silksnow.”

“What? You died?!” Ninedust was shocked.

“I once acquired a special treasure which can allow a Daolord to be brought back to life.” Ning didn’t hide what actually happened as he pointed to the surrounding area. “Look, we’re already in Vastheaven Palace! As for you? It was technically Hegemon Brightshore who intervened and rescued you.”

Ninedust started to understand. Moments later, he let out a chuckle. “Hegemon Brightshore? He’s always been filled with enmity towards us Ancient cultivators; there’s no way he would’ve gone out of his way to save me. I imagine he intervened because of you. When it comes down to it, the person I owe a debt to is still you.” Clearly, the long-running feud between the Brightshore Kingdom and the Ancient cultivators made it so that Ninedust didn’t feel any goodwill towards Hegemon Brightshore.

“Oh, right. There’s something I want to make clear to you,” Ninedust said, his face suddenly turning solemn.

“What is it?” Ning asked.

Ninedust glanced at the nearby Su Youji. Suddenly, he used his Immortal energy to form a barrier that completely blocked them off from the outside world.

Ninedust had mixed emotions on his face when he said, “Darknorth, we’ve experience life and death on numerous occasions together. At the beginning, we were on par in terms of power... and even later on,

you were only slightly more powerful than me. Slowly, though, you've become more and more powerful. When we were in the Autarch's estate-world within the Aeonian Kingdom, I could do nothing but watch when you fought against the flame beasts and the sea dragons. Later on, I could only watch when you battled against Archon Silksnow. More and more, I can sense how great the gap between us has become."

Ning was stunned.

"Slowly, without me even realizing it, you have completely surpassed me in power. Even if we were to keep adventuring together, it really wouldn't work out. A good test for me would be far too easy for you, while an adventure suitable for you would be absolutely lethal to me." Ninedust sighed. "If this continues... it won't be good for either of us."

Ning nodded slowly. He understood what Ninedust was saying, but... were the two of them, lifelong brothers, about to separate?

"I have used a Voidsea Jadeseal and gained guidance from an Autarch's Dao, then studied over three hundred Hegemonic legacies. Thanks to all of these fortuitous encounters, I can sense that my chances at the Daomerge are getting better and better." Ninedust's eyes blazed with eagerness. "That's why I can't let myself just come to a halt. I have to keep adventuring and keep testing myself, so that I can improve my Daomerge chances."

"Either I'll succeed in the Daomerge, or I'll die in my adventures. Darknorth!" Ninedust looked towards Ning. "Let us part ways here. You have your cultivation path to walk, and I have my Daomerge path to embark on..."

Ning was silent for a long moment. Finally, he nodded. "Very well. My avatar shall continue to reside here at Vastheaven Palace. If you need anything, you can simply send word here."

"It'll be just as easy for you to reach me. You merely need to send word to the Palace of Ancient Truth," Ninedust said. "The Palace of Ancient Truth has branches throughout all eight of the Sacred Cities of the Dao Alliance. In truth, we Ancient cultivators are behind it. Once you send a message to the Palace of Ancient Truth, it'll naturally send word to the Ancient cultivators and my avatar will immediately be notified."

Ninedust had a very complex look on his face, but he forced a wide smile: "Darknorth, where do you plan to go adventuring next? Deep into the Terror Starsea, or...?"

"I'm in no rush for now. I'm going to quietly meditate for a period of time. I was just slain by Archon Silksnow slew me and then brought back to life by that Dao-seal, after all. This process of death and rebirth... it caused me to gain many new insights which I wish to meditate on," Ning said.

"Understood." Ninedust took a deep breath, then said solemnly: "Brother, I'm going to leave now. Be careful, and be especially wary of that Archon Silksnow fellow. He's definitely not going to give up, if only for the sake of acquiring that realmship part."

Ning looked at Ninedust. He knew that once they parted today, it was possible that they would never see each other ever again. "You also need to be careful on your adventures. Make sure you don't die an early death. I believe in you. You'll definitely succeed in your Daomerge!" Ning said.

“Haha, right. I’ll definitely succeed in my Daomerge. In fact, both of us will! Haha. I’m leaving now. No need to show me off!” Ninedust immediately flew into the skies.

Ning raised his head, watching as the barriers in the sky automatically parted and let Ninedust leave. A streak of light shot through the skies, followed by a dimensional ripple appearing off in the distance. The streak of light flew into the ripple, then disappeared without a trace.

Ning continued to watch silently, head upraised. “Take care.” After a long moment, Ning finally murmured these final words.

“Master,” Su Youji said. She hadn’t been able to hear any of that conversation due to the barrier of Immortal energy which Ninedust had set up.

“It’s fine.” Ning was feeling rather frustrated and disheartened. Indeed, he had his own path of cultivation to walk, as did Ninedust. Ninedust wanted to focus on the Daomerge, after all.

As for Ning himself, his chances at the Daomerge were still too slim. Voidsea Jade seals were of little to no use to him, while the Hegemonic legacies were only useful as references. None of those Hegemons had Daos that were as complex as Ning’s Omega Sword Dao, after all! Even the Autarch’s Dao was merely of use as a guidepost, as the Autarch had not embarked upon an Omega Dao as a Daolord.

“For now, my goal should be to become a Daolord of the Fourth Step as soon as possible. Once I reach that level, I’ll be qualified to fight against my foes... and I’ll even have a chance to acquire enough treasures to ask an Autarch to reverse spacetime and revive my wife.”

“Ninedust’s goal, however, is the Daomerge. I hope he succeeds in it.”

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The first thing Ning did in the upcoming days was to visit Emperor Solesky. Emperor Solesky had immediately noticed when Ning had allowed Ninedust to leave, after all, and so Ning had to advise Emperor Solesky that he absolutely cannot divulge the fact that Ning’s true body was at Vastheaven Palace.

Soon, after half a month, a Daolord of the Brightshore Kingdom came delivering treasures.

That very day. Vastheaven Palace. Darknorth’s estate.

“I’m planning to go out wandering for a bit. Right now, the only ones who know that I am at Vastheaven Palace are you, big brother Solesky, and the two of you. You absolutely must not reveal this information; otherwise, a calamity shall descend upon us.” Ning glanced at Emperor Solesky, Su Youji, and Pillsaint.

“Don’t worry.” Emperor Solesky nodded.

“Master, I wish to go by your side,” Su Youji said immediately. Pillsaint opened his mouth, wanting to agree.

“No need,” Ning interrupted. “I’m just going to search for new insights and meditate on the Dao. Travelling alone will be better.”

Su Youji and Pillsaint could only nod.

“I’m leaving now. If there’s anything you wish to tell me, you can simply inform my avatar.” After finishing his words, Ning took a single step forwards and disappeared gracefully, passing through Vastheaven Palace’s barriers and vanishing within the skies.

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Vastheaven Palace was located within the Vastheaven Everworld, which as an everworld was naturally an incredibly gigantic place. Countless living beings were here, and there were some places where experts were as common as the clouds. There were even a few Ancestral Immortals and even Chaos Immortals who arose from this place! There were other places that, due to special geography, only had mortals and had no cultivators whatsoever.

Whoosh. Ning strode slowly through the everworld. Although there were quite a few dangerous places within it, given how strong Ning was there really was nothing within it which could pose a threat to him. In fact, even the Emperor who had originally established this everworld was significantly weaker than the current Ning!

“This region is quite interesting.” Ning stared off into the distance at a vast region which was hundreds of millions of kilometers in size. This was a region that was completely surrounded by a titanic, barren marsh. As a result, it was completely separated from the outside world. This was a land of ordinary mortals, and even the most supreme of cultivators were at most at the Celestial Immortal level. There was simply no way for them to pass through the great marsh and reach the outside world, and so it was a self-contained realm unto itself.

The desolate marsh had probably been naturally formed when the everworld was first created. Not even some of the weaker Daolords were capable of traversing it.

“Seven kingdoms fighting for supremacy.” Ning stared at the vast land, then nodded slightly. “Countless living beings are dying at any given moment in this place. Very well then... this shall be the place! Here, I shall search for the secrets of mortality, the secrets of life and death.”

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Book 36: Daolord of the Fourth Step Chapter 3: Boulder Transformation

In this vast realm, seven nations were striving for dominance. The cultivation system here was completely different from that of the outside world. There were three major stages known as ‘warriors’, ‘masters’, and ‘grandmasters’. Reaching the ‘grandmaster’ level was akin to becoming a Void-level Earth Immortal in the outside world. Ji Ning transformed himself and entered this realm, beginning to truly experience it and live in it as he watched countless living beings be born and die.

“Waaaaaaa!” An infant was born within a large manor, bawling his lungs out.

The white-robed Ning appeared outside the manor. His body blurred, then transformed into a middle-aged man bearing a flag. On the flag were two simple characters which meant ‘fortune teller’. He walked in front of the manor, then said to the two manor guards, “This young master is connected to me via destiny.”

“A filthy fortune teller like you is connected to him?”

“Beat it! Fuck off!” The two guards immediately shouted at this fortune-teller, shooing him away.

Ning didn't let himself grow angry. When he was pushed away and sent stumbling back, he called out loudly, “But we really are connected by destiny?”

The child who was born on this day within this manor was the manor-master's only child. His name was 'Xuhu'.

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Three years later. The white-robed Ning once more appeared outside this estate. He stared at the ten-plus children playing in the mud from afar, then smiled slightly. His body blurred as he transformed into a four-year-old child as well dressed in red clothes, then ran barefoot towards the others.

“Where are you from? Why haven't I ever met you before?” The child who spoke was surnamed Wang, and he was the only son of the lord of the manor. Wang Xuhu had a very high status, and he stared puzzledly at the red-lipped, white-toothed child in front of him.

“None of your business.” The red-clothed child spoke in a very overbearing manner. “Hey, that's some nice mud art you made. Lemme see!” As he spoke, he reached out to grab the horse-shaped mud sculpture. Plop! The thing completely broke apart.

“Y-you...” The child, Wang Xuhu, stared wide-eyed. Tears were beginning to appear, and he was so angry he gritted his teeth. “Give it back!” As he spoke, he ran forwards to punch the red-clothed child.

“Beat him up!” The other children all joined him in picking on this new, strange child.

“You want to hit me?” The red-clothed child moved like a blur, landing a kick on Xuhu's butt and sending him sprawling on the ground.

“Waaaaaaaah!” Xuhu was both ashamed and enraged. Still sobbing, he clambered to his feet as he continued to charge towards the red-clothed child.

“What's going on? Why are you all fighting?” Some of the manor guests had noticed what was going on over here. The red-clothed child immediately began to run, soon charging into the distant forests and disappearing.

Xuhu was the only son of the manor lord. That very night he was struck by a severe fever which drove him delirious. This terrified the manor lord into immediately sending for a physician, but three days later Xuhu miraculously recovered on his own. He began to quickly grow in strength, and his talent for cultivation became increasingly astonishing as well. At just eighteen years of age, he stepped into the 'master' stage.

Warriors, masters, grandmasters... the three principle stages of cultivation in this realm. Warriors were ordinary mortals who trained physically, making it slow for them to increase their power. At their peak, they were at most comparable to the Xiantian lifeforms of the Three Realms.

Masters began to accumulate a core within their bodies... they were comparable to the Zifu Disciples and Wanxiang Adepts of the Three Realms.

Grandmasters began to establish a world within their bodies... they were comparable to the Primal Daoists and Void-level Earth Immortals of the Three Realms.

Those who surpassed the grandmaster level were comparable to Celestial Immortals. This realm only occasionally gave birth to a new Celestial Immortal, and thus their numbers were extremely low.

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Ning continued to watch as Xuhu grew up. When Xuhu turned eighteen, he had already become the number one hero in the surrounding area, with no one his equal in a million kilometer area! He was extremely powerful and ferocious. However, bandits and robbers began to pour into the region. Xuhu led soldiers to attack them, but ended up being defeated in battle. He fled to a mountain village, and there he met the love of his life... 'Rose'.

"Sir, I'd like to buy two pounds of pork." The girl led the sickly Xuhu out to purchase some food.

"Wait a bit." The butcher was a pudgy, white-robed grandpa who was extremely muscular-looking. He picked up his saber, then began to hack through the pig bones and carve apart the meat.

When Xuhu saw this, his eyes began to lit up. "Rose, you can go home first," Xuhu instructed. The girl did just that with those two pounds of meat.

"Sir, please teach me your saber-arts." Xuhu immediately fell down to his knees.

"Ahaha! I don't know any 'saber-arts'! All I know is how to kill pigs and butcher them," the elderly butcher said with a loud laugh.

"Then I want to learn how to kill pigs and butcher meat," Xuhu said hurriedly.

"I'm not gonna pay you a salary." The old man looked at him.

"I don't need one," Xuhu replied.

From that day forth, the old butcher gained an apprentice. Half a year later, the old butcher suddenly vanished. No matter how Xuhu searched for him, he couldn't find the old man. He had no choice but to bring the girl back to his homeland.

"Ahahaha... I've cultivated for many years, but I've never been a pig-sticking butcher before. That really was a first." The old butcher had transformed back into the white-robed Ning and was standing at the peak of a mountain, watching as Xuhu led his wife away.

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After learning that set of saber-arts, Xuhu began to develop at an unstoppable pace as his level of insight grew deeper and deeper. When he went back home, he slew those bandits with ease. As his insight increased even further, he actually stepped into the 'grandmaster' stage. When the emperor of his nation heard the news, the emperor personally sent someone over to confer the title of 'general' upon him!

He had established his reputation, bringing glory to clan and ancestors alike. He became one of the pillars of the entire nation, commanding over three hundred thousand soldiers to guard the borderlands. He spent more than eight hundred years serving in this capacity.

He had a total of three sons and one daughter, and a plethora of grandchildren.

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Finally, the internal situation of the nation took a turn for the worse as they lost battle after battle. Xuhu did his best to hold on, leading his army in an orderly retreat, but the overall situation had already been set in stone. There was simply no way for Xuhu to reverse it. He was ambushed and surrounded by eight enemy grandmasters, causing him to suffer severe injuries. In the end, he didn't die on the battlefield but was about to perish in bed due to the wounds suffered during that assassination attempt.

Xuhu lay there in bed, surrounded by the aura of death. Within the room stood the emperor, the senior ministers, and Xuhu's children and grandchildren.

"Your Majesty, your old servant is about to depart." Xuhu's voice was hoarse and his face was ashen.

"Old general... my beloved old general... you can't just go like this!" The young emperor was completely terrified. The old general had been his final source of support, and it was thanks to him that their nation had been able to resist for over two hundred years despite the situation being so grim. Once the old general died, everything really would come to an end. Their enemy nations were quite vicious; they had been willing to sacrifice eight grandmasters, sending them into the capital to engage in an assassination attempt.

"Flowers bloom, then shrivel; the grass grows verdant, then shrivels. This is the cycle of life." Xuhu turned to look at his sobbing, kneeling children and grandchildren. He was quite relaxed, feeling as though he was on the verge of release.

Suddenly, a white-robed youth appeared in front of the emperor before the bed. The white-robed youth looked at him.

"You are..." Xuhu looked at the white-robed youth. Suddenly, he turned stiff – he couldn't help but think of the red-clothed child who had given him a kick so many years ago and caused him to enter a three-day fever. That child had exactly the same eyes as the youth before him.

He then thought of his teacher, that old, grandfatherly butcher who had taught him saber-arts. His teacher had the same eyes and the same look on his face.

"Life is a cycle, and your cycle has come to an end." Ning smiled. "I have been by your side for nearly a thousand years. It can be said that the ties of destiny linked us together. I shall ensure that you keep your memories and allow you to be reborn into the cycle of reincarnation... but our karmic ties shall have come to an end. From this day forth, everything shall be up to you."

"Master... Master..." Xuhu called out, but his aura grew weaker and weaker.

"Go on. Go." Ning nodded.

That day, Ning personally escorted Xuhu into the cycle of reincarnation, ensuring that he was reborn into the belly of a woman who lived in a village located within a secluded mountain paradise.

“It is time for me to go find the next person I am destined to meet.” Ning smiled and took a step forwards, leaving the general’s estate. He once more transformed into a middle-aged man who bore a flag with the words ‘fortune teller’ on it, then began to amble through the streets.

“Buns for sale! Steamed buns for sale!” The street he was on was filled with meat bun stalls, and there was a child hunched over the ground playing a game.

The flag-bearing Ning walked over to the child. “Hey kid!” Ning called out.

“Huh?” Puzzled, the kid lifted his head up to look at Ning.

“You and I are linked by destiny,” Ning said.

“You swindler, do you think to deceive my child?” A burly woman immediately charged out from behind the meat bun stall with a dough-roller in her hands. The flag-bearing Ning was frightened into a hasty retreat, but as he fled he called out loudly, “No, we really are linked by destiny!”

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Fortune teller. Innhouse keeper. Coffin maker. Brothel owner. An old deathsworn soldier who lived his life out on the battlefield...

Ning took on one form after another, watching from up close as countless mortals struggled through life. Their lives... their deaths... their rises... their falls.

Time flowed on. The seven warring states ended up as a war between three states, and in the end it was the Qian state which unified the world. However, the Qian dynasty then broke apart in a civil war, with the Southern Qian and the Northern Qian battling against each other.

Eventually, the Qian dynasty fell and another arose.

Ning lived through each and every dynasty, continuing to search for the secrets of life and death. Given his wisdom and intelligence, he slowly began to gain more and more of the insights he sought.

“This... this should be the secret for my Omega Sword Dao to make its next breakthrough.” By now, he had lived in this realm for over 130 million years. On this day, Ning was standing at the peak of a towering mountain, gazing down at the world with a feeling of joy in his heart and a smile on his lips.

Whoosh. Ning transformed into a boulder that was many meters tall. The boulder landed upon the mountain peak, looking quite unremarkable. He just sat there, allowing the wind to blow against him and the sun to bake him. There was even an occasional passerby who would write a few words on him.

After transforming into the boulder, Ning just sat there and quietly stared at the vast world as well as the countless living beings who were born and reborn within it. In his heart, his five major sword stances began to merge. Blood Drop, Yin-Yang, Soleheart, Heavenbreaker, Shadowless... they slowly began to become one.

[The Desolate Era](#)

Book 36: Daolord of the Fourth Step Chapter 4: Omega Sword Dao, Stage Four

Millions of years went by after Ji Ning transformed into that boulder atop the mountain peak. One day, a thick mist suddenly arose around the great mountain. The mist was so thick as to block out the skies and the sun. It covered an area of tens of thousands of kilometers, including every single part of the great mountain.

“What a massive fog.”

“What’s going on? Why am I walking in circles? I keep on ending up here.”

Some of the ordinary mortals who passed through this place quickly discovered how bizarre the mist was. Word quickly spread and some experts began to arrive and explore the mist. Alas, anyone who entered the mist, no matter how powerful, would quickly end up walking out of the mist just a short while later. At first, everyone was quite startled, but after more time passed everyone grew accustomed to it.

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Within the thick mist. Thousands of streams of sword-light were roving about in the air above the boulder at the peak of the mountain, fluctuating and vanishing in an unpredictable manner while being as dominating and exalted as the heavens themselves. At other times, the sword-light transformed into endlessly vast black holes which ground through everything nearby.

The boulder suddenly transformed into human form. A white-robed youth appeared at the peak of the mountain. He raised his head to look into the skies.

“My Dao has been completed.” Ning said in a soft voice.

BOOM! The towering Dao-tree within his body began to grow, rumbling and trembling as its branches and trunk stretched outwards. The branches coiled like the bodies of sinuous dragons, while the trunk grew even thicker. The countless leaves on the tree were all trembling. This towering Dao-tree was unfathomably stronger than the Dao-trees of ordinary Daolords of the Fourth Step. Clearly, Ning’s foundation was far, far more stable than theirs.

The Dao-tree continued to grow taller as well before finally topping out at 540,000 meters. The Dao-tree had finally reached its true, absolute limit in size! The next step would be the Daomerge, which would result in the Dao-tree giving birth to a flower of eternity.

Rumble... the giant pile of chaos jewels continued to crumble apart and shatter as a veritable ocean of energy surged into Ning. His divine body and Immortal energy began to transform and evolve, while his heartworld began its final expansion...

The reason why he completely separated this place off from the rest of the world and elected to absorb energy from chaos jewels rather than from the primordial chaos of the outside world was to prevent anything unexpected from happening! The disturbance which would be caused by Ning drawing upon chaos energy from the outside world in making his breakthrough to the fourth step would definitely shock everyone. News would quickly spread! Moreover, absorbing chaos energy from the primordial chaos was extremely slow. Archon Silksnow or the Aeonians might be able to make it here and attack Ning before he finished his breakthrough!

Archon Silksnow and the Aeonians had been searching for Ning this entire time. At first, Archon Silksnow wasn't sure if Ning was dead or not, but he quickly received word that Ning was actually alive! In truth, this was quite easy to discern; Ning's heartlamp within the Sword Palace of the Twelve Palaces of Brightshore remained lit. This meant that Ning wasn't dead yet! Given how strong Archon Silksnow was, it was very easy for him to befriend a few Daolords of the Brightshore Kingdom and have them help him examine Ning's heartlamp.

Although the Daolords of the Brightshore Kingdom were forbidden from engaging in fratricide, something as minor as inspecting a heartlamp was nothing more than sending a bit of information forward. It didn't count.

"Whew." Ning stood at the peak of a mountain, a smile on his face. It had only been a short period of time, but the chaos jewels had allowed his divine power and Immortal energy to complete their transformations. He now truly was a Daolord of the Fourth Step in every way, shape, and form! He was now simply accumulating energy from the chaos jewels in order to generate more of the azureflower mist energy and expand his heartworld.

"A short while from now, I'll have completely transformed. Archon Silksnow and the Aeonians will no longer pose any threat to me." Ning could sense how his body had changed. With his Omega Sword Dao having reached the fourth stage, his Dao had broken through to a brand new level. Ning himself had been catapulted into a higher level of power.

Ning glanced downwards, his gaze piercing through the mist as he stared at the vast land beneath him. The land was filled with countless ordinary mortals, and Ning was able to see the tiny threads of fate which connected those ordinary mortals together.

"Karma?" Ning nodded slowly. Although he had never trained specifically in the Dao of Karma, anyone who reached a sufficiently high level of insight in any Dao would be able to engage in karmic scrying. Given Ning's current level of enlightenment, there were now many 'hidden' places in the vast universe which could no longer hide from his gaze! If he wished to slay a foe, he could use his sword to follow the threads of karma to slay all of his foe's clones and Primaltwin!

In truth Archon Silksnow was able to do this as well, but the problem was that he wasn't able to rely on his own power to kill Ning; he had to rely on a powerful treasure he had acquired in the Terror Starsea. The power of the treasure was tremendous... but since it didn't truly belong to him, he could at most control the direction in which the power was released. There was no way he could control it to follow Ning's karmic threads and kill Ning's other bodies.

Whoosh. Ning's body began to move. Whoooooosh. Countless Nings appeared above the mountain peak. He was moving at such an incomprehensible level of speed that ordinary matter wasn't able to impede him in the slightest; in fact, not even spacetime was able to impede him! In terms of speed, Ning was definitely superior to the likes of Archon Silksnow by now. He truly had reached an incomprehensible level.

Boom! Ning's body suddenly blasted apart, dissolving into countless motes of light. The light then reformed into a glowing humanoid figure. The glowing humanoid figure then blasted apart, transforming into an endless black fog which drifted away... then suddenly transformed into a stream of water. A while later, the stream of water vanished and a towering inferno replaced it.

“I am the world. The world is me.” In the end, the inferno transformed into countless specks of flying sand which reformed into Ning’s figure. Ning murmured softly to himself, “Shadowless and traceless, I manifest and disappear as I please. So when the Omega Sword Dao – Shadowless reaches the fourth stage, it can actually produce a terrifying invulnerable form...”

Ning had always envied the other cultivators for their various invulnerable forms. Upon gaining an invulnerable form, it would be difficult for foes to slay you unless the gap in power between you and them was ridiculously large.

For example, Archon Silksnow’s invulnerable form made it so that even Hegemon Brightshore would find him difficult to kill. But of course, ‘difficult’ didn’t mean ‘impossible’; if Hegemon Brightshore was willing to pay any price, he would still be able to accomplish it. The price, however, would be huge.

“My invulnerable form should be even more perfect than Archon Silksnow’s.” Ning laughed. His Omega Sword Dao was truly perfect and without flaw. In the past, he didn’t have an invulnerable form primarily because he hadn’t reached the proper stage of cultivation yet. Not that he had, it was naturally unlocked for him.

Archon Silksnow’s Dao of the Saber was offense oriented, and so there was no way he could use his Saber Dao to generate an invulnerable form for himself. This was why he had spent so much time and energy training in the Dao of Snow. The Dao of Snow, the Dao of Light, and other similar Daos were Daos which could be used to generate invulnerable forms with (relative) ease. Archon Silksnow had used this method to cover up this particular flaw, lowering his overall weaknesses.

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Boom! Ning’s heartworld finally expanded to a completely new level as well, causing his massive reserve of heartforce to become even more powerful.

Ning smiled slightly. When his Omega Sword Dao had been at the third stage, his insights into the Dao were already comparable to the insights of ‘ordinary’ supreme Daolords. The difference was, he was extremely well-rounded and flawless in every aspect, which was why he ranked at the very top of the supreme Daolord ranking.

Now, his Omega Sword Dao had broken through to the fourth stage. In terms of insight, he was at the Archon level... and a highly ranked one at that! This was especially true now that his [Heartsword] art had reached the twelfth stance, which meant that Ning’s sword-arts were now six times stronger when using the [Heartsword] art! During his fight against Archon Silksnow, he had only mastered the eleventh stance, but since the eleventh and twelfth stances belonged to the same ‘stage’, it was very easy to break through from the former to the latter. Ning had already spent 130 million years wandering this mortal world; he naturally was able to break through to a new level during this period of time.

“Given my current Omega Sword Dao and my twelfth stance of the [Heartsword] art... there might be Archons capable of defeating me, but they can probably be counted on one hand.” Ning smiled. “Even the three mighty Hegemons... they are worthy of my respect, but I no longer need to live in terror of them.”

Ning's protective abilities were far superior to Archon Silksnow's. He had already mastered his own invulnerable form, the Shadowless form. It allowed him to become one with the world and for the world to become one with him. Injuring him would be very, very difficult.

"With this level of power... I now have a chance at acquiring treasures which are valuable enough to persuade an Autarch to help me out." Ning was in high spirits. After countless years of cultivation, he had finally reached this new height.

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After becoming a Daolord of the Fourth Step, Ning continued to sit by himself at the peak of the mountain, calmly and quietly training in the secret art known as the [Grand Diffraction Sword]. This was a secret art left behind by the Sword Hegemon, and was a Hegemon-level secret art! Even the current Ning was merely able to master two of the three stages of this art, as he was still at a somewhat lower level of insight than that of a Hegemon. For now, he was unable to master the third stage... and in truth, the third stage required so many treasures that not even a Hegemon would necessarily be able to scrounge up all the items necessary.

Hegemon Welkin, for the sake of training in a Hegemonic secret art, had wandered many realmverses and otherverses in search of the materials he needed... but to this very day, he was still lacking a few items. As a result, Hegemon Welkin had only mastered part of his Hegemonic secret arts!

Truly mastering Hegemonic secret arts was just too difficult. If Ning could master just two of those three stages, he would have reached the same level of power in secret arts as Hegemon Welkin had reached.

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Book 36: Daolord of the Fourth Step Chapter 5: Ji Ning Appears

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. Arcs of sword-light flew around Ji Ning in an orderly process while growing increasingly powerful.

The Jindan chaos region inside of Ning's body was currently making use of various treasures to establish a 'sea of diffracted light'. This sea would in turn birth and hold the energy needed for the [Grand Diffraction Sword]. Like the nine novessence arts, this was a type of outside power! However, to train this technique was extremely difficult, requiring an extremely high level of insight into the Dao. Ning was finding it quite laborious and taxing to establish this diffraction sea.

The deeper the sea became, the more powerful his [Grand Diffraction Sword] would become! If he could truly master this Hegemonic secret art, he would be able to beat Archons senseless with casual strikes from it.

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Fortunately, Ning's mastery of the Dao of the Sword had no weaknesses. Although this secret art had high requirements in many different aspects of the Dao of the Sword, Ning was able to slowly master it. After spending over a thousand years, Ning finally finished establishing his diffraction sea. This sea of diffracted light was now more than thirty thousand kilometers wide, signifying that he had mastered the first two stages of the [Grand Diffraction Sword]. The very first stage of this technique was already comparable to the nine novessence arts. The second stage was much more powerful.

Ning rose to his feet, dispelling the mist which had surrounded the mountain for so long, then stared at the world about him. "Now that my secret arts are mastered, it is time to go back."

"Focus." Ning pointed from afar. Instantly, part of his will containing his sword-arts legacy shot out of his finger. Although this wasn't the Omega Sword Dao, it was still something which would allow someone to establish the most stable foundation possible in the Dao of the Sword. It would allow cultivators to walk the path most suitable for them... and in this realm, where the highest skilled cultivators were merely Celestial Immortals, it would allow practitioners to become invincible with ease.

"I, Darknorth, meditated on the Dao in this place and became a Daolord of the Fourth Step here. It can be said that karma binds us together, and so I have left a fragment of my will. The one who passes my trials and acquires this fragment of my will shall gain my legacy and become my personal disciple, the fourth disciple under my tutelage." Ning had already set up a number of trials within the mountain with ease. Anyone who came would have to first follow Ning's trials as he set them up.

If someone wished to breach the trials through raw force? Even supreme Daolords could well die unless they had incredible life-preserving abilities!

Whoosh. Ning took a single step forwards, disappearing from the mountain.

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Although Ning had spent over a hundred million years in seclusion, in truth all of those years had been spent within the Vastheaven Everworld.

Within Vastheaven Palace. As soon as Ning returned to his own residence, Emperor Solesky hurried over to meet him.

"Master." Just as Su Youji called out in delight, she saw Emperor Solesky fly towards them. She hurriedly bowed: "Greetings, Emperor."

"Step back for now," Emperor Solesky instructed.

"Alright." Although Su Youji was a bit puzzled, she immediately retreated.

After Su Youji left, Emperor Solesky said hurriedly, "Darknorth, why have you come back? I told you to go into hiding and not reveal yourself! Although no one in Vastheaven Palace would leak this information, we still need to be careful. There might be Eternal Emperors scrying on us from outside. If they see that your true body has returned, we're going to be in serious trouble."

"No need to worry that much, big brother," Ning said.

"The situation is extremely grim," Emperor Solesky explained. "I already told you last time... Archon Silksnow has arranged for many different organizations to track your whereabouts. Some of my friends, however, have told me that someone else just as powerful as Archon Silksnow is also trying to trace your whereabouts. For now, I haven't been able to find out just who it is, but judging from the amount of manpower he's been able to move, there's no question that he's at least as strong as Archon Silksnow."

"It is the Aeonians," Ning explained.

“The Aeonian race?!” Emperor Solesky was shocked.

“They aren’t just searching for me in the Dao Alliance, they are also searching for me in the Brightshore Kingdom,” Ning explained. “Hegemon Brightshore has warned me long ago.”

“Archon Silksnow is famous for being a savage madman. It is ‘normal’ for him to behave in such a frenzied manner... but why are the Aeonians searching for you?” Emperor Solesky was puzzled.

Ning smiled calmly. “Because of a treasure.”

“You aren’t worried at all?” Emperor Solesky was rather flabbergasted.

“Worried? Why should I be worried? They should be the ones to worry.” Ning smiled. He was at a different level of power now, and so he was also in a different state of mind.

He had been weaker than them in the past, and he didn’t have an invulnerable form, nor did he have any powerful protective treasures. He was constantly at risk of dying! Even his Lifeblood Dao-seal had been used up. Of course he had to be in hiding.

Now, he was much stronger and more confident in himself. Why would he fear Archon Silksnow or the Aeonians?

“You...?” Emperor Solesky was rather puzzled.

“Big brother Solesky, I’m planning to pay a visit to the Brightshore Kingdom. After that... I’m planning to attack the Sacred City of Silksnow and kill Archon Silksnow.” A murderous look flashed through Ning’s eyes. “It’s going to cause a bit of a stir, so I wanted to give you advance notice. No need to worry.”

“You are going to attack the Sacred City of Silksnow and kill Archon Silksnow?!” Emperor Solesky was stunned.

“Well. I might not be able to kill him, but I’ll uproot him and everything he’s ever established.” Ning’s eyes flickered icily. He was going to ‘kill a chicken to frighten off the monkeys’, warning any others that he was not to be messed with. Archon Silksnow was nothing more than a chicken for him to use in this plan!

In the coming days, there would be cases where he would occasionally reveal his strength. This would definitely surprise and puzzle many. Previously, for him to be able to rely on the [Heartsword] art and other art to just barely reach the Archon level was already a freakish display of strength in talent... but it was still within the realm of believability! But when he now revealed an even more terrifying level of power, it would truly stun everyone.

How could a Daolord reach such a level of power? This was completely illogical. It made no sense at all! And yet, it had happened. How? Perhaps the Hegemons and the other ancient cultivators would try to capture Ning and force him to hand over his secrets.

For the sake of personal power, anything and everything was possible. Ning didn’t want to go through all that trouble... and so he was going to go out of his way to show everyone just how hard he could hit! He was going to dominate Archon Silksnow in a display of absolute power! That way, no one would dare to plot against him. Even if they did want to learn some of Ning’s secrets, they wouldn’t make an enemy

out of him without a good reason. No one in the Endless Territories, after all, would want to offend someone who could dominate Archon Silksnow!

“Archon Silksnow... you’ve searched for me again and again, unwilling to give up on your plans. Then... I’ll force you to give up, and I’ll make an example out of you in the process!”

“Darknorth, you... you plan to uproot his foundation?” Emperor Solesky could hardly believe it. “He’s one of the eight lords of the Sacred Cities! He’s so legendary for his savagery that he has numerous bloodthirsty Emperors serving as his retainers. All of the Emperors under his command are powerful, and it is said that he has other ancient Archon-level figures who are supporting him from behind. If you are going to act against him, that means you are going to have to fight all of those Emperors!”

“That’s what makes it fun.” Ning smiled. Archon Silksnow was no threat to him at all. He wanted to uproot Archon Silksnow’s entire foundation; that was what would truly stun everyone around.

“Darknorth, you are still just a Daolord!” Emperor Solesky’s anxiety was beginning to transform into rage. “Those Emperors have been around for an unfathomably long period of time, and Archon Silksnow stands at their very peak. He’s not going to be that easy for you to deal with!”

“Big brother.” Ning frowned.

“I know what type of temper you have, and I know that I can’t stop you. Fine. I’ll go with you,” Emperor Solesky said. “I might not be able to kill Archon Silksnow, but I’m skilled in staying alive. I should stand a good chance at fleeing with you in tow.”

Ning shook his head, then stretched his hand and waved a finger. Whoosh. A streak of sword-light appeared in the air, arcing out and brushing past Emperor Solesky. This caused Emperor Solesky’s face to turn pale, and he couldn’t help but tremble.

“B-but...” Emperor Solesky could hardly believe it. Wasn’t his brother just a Daolord? How could he be this powerful?

“Big brother, just wait for the news.” Ning turned and left.

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The Brightshore Kingdom. The Palace of the Sword. A white-robed youth appeared right in front of its main doors and walked towards it.

“Is that...?”

“That’s Palace Lord Darknorth.”

“Isn’t that Palace Lord Darknorth?” The World-level cultivators and black-armored Daolords in front of the Sword Palace all stared in amazement at the white-robed youth who appeared before them. Ever since Ning had shocked everyone with his performance in the Waveshift Realm, he had become acknowledged as the Palace Lord of the Palace of the Sword.

“Greetings, Palace Lord.”

“Palace Lord.” They all bowed respectfully as he walked past, but the black-armored Daolords began to secretly spread the word. Archon Silksnow and the Aeonians were still searching for him, after all.

Soon, word was sent from the Brightshore Kingdom and began to spread out throughout the Endless Territories. Daolord Darknorth had appeared within the Palace of the Sword in the Brightshore Kingdom!

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“He’s finally come out. Hegemon Brightshore was willing to help you out once, but I refuse to believe he’ll help you out a second, third, or fourth time. How could an exalted Hegemon lower himself to helping out a Daolord that many times?” Archon Silksnow immediately grew excited upon hearing this information, and his oily green eyes were filled with murderous malice. “This time... as soon as you leave the Brightshore Kingdom, I’m going to claim your life.”

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“You’ve hidden yourself for quite some time, but now you’ve finally shown yourself. The only thing that little thief is capable of is running around and hiding. If we can find him, we’ll crush him with ease.” Within the Aeonian Kingdom, Emperors Anchen, Islehide, and Duug were filled with the desire to kill as well. They didn’t believe Ning would pose any risk to them at all.

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Book 36: Daolord of the Fourth Step Chapter 6: Refusal

Ji Ning walked into the Palace of the Sword. All of the cultivators he passed would all address him respectfully as ‘Palace Lord’ or as ‘senior apprentice-brother’. Clearly, Ning’s status was supreme amongst those inside the Palace of the Sword.

If Ning revealed his true power? The only person whose status was higher than him in the Brightshore Kingdom would probably be Hegemon Brightshore himself.

“Armaments Gorge.” Ning walked through the air to descend up on the building located deep within a gorge. This was Armaments Gorge.

“Palace Lord.” The two golems responsible for overseeing Armaments Gorge, ‘Swordfive’ and ‘Swordsix’, both called out respectfully.

“Long time no see.” Ning smiled.

“A mere billion years or so has passed since you first entered our palace, Palace Lord. And yet, you have now become the preeminent power of the Sword Palace,” Swordfive said.

Ning couldn’t help but think back to those early years. When he had first entered the Palace of the Sword, he had merely been a World-level cultivator, awed and dazed by what he was seeing. He had been filled with excitement and desire towards cultivation! In the blink of an eye, a billion years had gone by. He now stood amongst those who were at the very apex of power within the Endless Territories. The only ones who were truly stronger than him were the three Hegemons. Who would’ve ever thought he would rise to such heights?

Ning casually walked into the Armaments Gorge, glancing at the many treasures inside. To the current Ning, they were of very little interest.

“The Halfsword.” Ning’s gaze fell upon the broken sword lying on the table. An awesome sword-intent emanated from the broken sword which surrounded the area, making it impossible for any cultivator who entered to miss it.

“A Universe treasure.” Ning smiled as he walked over. When he was thirty meters away, an invisible field of energy sought to stop Ning in his tracks. Ning paused momentarily, then easily brushed aside the surge of energy and continued to walk over. He walked next to the table, then looked down upon the broken sword resting upon it.

“I didn’t want to let you get close to me, but you actually forced you way over.” A figure suddenly appeared directly above the broken sword. It was a pink-robed, icy-faced woman.

“Treasure-spirit,” Ning said, “Aren’t you bored by life in Armaments Gorge? Why don’t you accompany me in roving through the outside world. What do you say?”

“So you are now the new Palace Lord of the Palace of the Sword.” The icy-faced woman said coldly, “I remember you from back when you were still just a kid, unable to withstand even my aura. You’ve become fairly powerful, but you are still just a Daolord. Successive generations of Palace Lords have sought me out, but I was not interested in any of them. You can leave now. I will not follow any Daolord.”

Ning was speechless. He had come to the Brightshore Kingdom on serious business; he had only come to visit the Halfsword to try his luck. If he really could acquire a Universe treasure, his power would be increased by quite a significant amount.

“Aren’t you setting your requirements a bit too high?” Ning smirked.

“I’m not interested in ordinary Eternal Emperors either, only in sword cultivators who have at least reached the Archon level. A Hegemon would be even better,” the icy-faced woman said coldly.

“Haha, the entire Flamedragon Realmverse doesn’t even have a single sword-wielding Hegemon.” Ning teased, “And the number of Archons who wield swords can also be counted on one hand. It seems it’ll be quite hard for you to find a new master.”

“Hmph. You are far too weak. Even if you did have a Universe treasure, you’d just end up being easily beaten and losing it to a powerful Eternal Emperor.” The icy-faced woman snickered, “Giving a Universe treasure to a Daolord is a waste. I heard that someone named Winesage did end up with a Universe treasure. I think that Universe treasure must’ve been crazy for him to choose to follow a Daolord.”

Two streams of sword-light suddenly shot out of Ning’s eyes. Boom! Boom! These two streams of sword-light carried an aura of terrifying power which spread out in the area around the Halfsword, but it didn’t contain any offensive power to it. All of the treasures within Armaments Gorge were protected by barriers which Hegemon Brightshore himself had set down. The other major powers who had come afterwards had set down barriers as well. It was impossible to take away any of the treasures here by force.

“Your Dao of the Sword...?” The icy-faced woman was stunned. “Y-y-you... how could you have...”

She was a Universe-level sword! Her senses were keenly attuned to the auras of sword cultivators, and she could instantly tell how exquisite Ning's Dao of the Sword was. It had completely surpassed the Daolord level; it was at a level which only some Archons could match.

"Follow me and adventure by my side. You should be able to tell how strong I am; there is no one in the entire Flamedragon Realmverse who can do anything to me." Ning looked at her. "Even if I truly do end up dying one day, you'll just regain your freedom once more. Come adventuring with me. Life here is far too boring and meaningless." Ning was trying to 'seduce' her.

The icy-faced woman hesitated slightly. She actually did want to go out adventuring as well... but her innate pride forced her to let out a cold snort. "Your Sword Dao is excellent, but you are still just a Daolord. If you can succeed in your Daomerge, I'll agree to follow you."

Ning couldn't help but feel speechless. Succeed in his Daomerge? That was incredibly difficult. If he really was able to succeed in the Daomerge and make his Omega Sword Dao eternal... he couldn't even imagine what level he would be at by then. By then, even Universe treasures would probably be of limited use to him.

"Are you sure you don't want to come out with me?" Ning asked.

"You are just a Daolord." Clearly, the icy-faced woman wasn't willing to lower her head.

"Ah, forget it then. It seems that we are not destined to be a match." Ning turned and left.

The icy-faced woman watched as Ning left, gritting her teeth. A Daolord who had reached such a high level in the Dao of the Sword truly had been quite enticing for her. "Bah. In the end, he is just a Daolord. Once he fails his Daomerge, it will all be over. We'll talk again once he succeeds in his Daomerge." The icy-faced woman put Ning out of her mind, returning into the Halfsword.

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Ning flew out of Armaments Gorge, feeling slightly regretful. "Winesage is weaker than me, but he found a Universe treasure willing to follow him... but even now, I'm still unable to take the Halfsword away. Ah, forget it, forget it. Haha." Ning was fairly relaxed about this. His Northbow swords were lifeblood weapons which also helped him out significantly, after all.

By now, his six Northbow swords and the sword quintessence within them had also evolved alongside Ning reaching the fourth stage with his Omega Sword Dao, giving them an even deeper foundation than before.

"My Northbow swords aren't THAT much weaker than Universe treasures by now." Ning transformed into a streak of light, quickly arriving at the peak of a mountain within the Sword Palace. Moments later, an Immortal estate descended upon it.

This was where Ning had resided in the past. Now that he was back, he was going to take up residence here for now. "Help me send word to Hegemon Brightshore. Inform him that Darknorth has a trade he wishes to make," Ning instructed his servant.

"Yes, Master," the servant replied.

Within the Immortal estate. Ning was within one of the towers, gazing down at the beautiful Palace of the Sword while leaning against the railings.

“Darknorth.” A figure suddenly materialized next to him. It was a snow-robed, white-bearded old man with six curved horns on his head.

Ning turned and immediately bowed: “Darknorth greets you, Hegemon.”

Hegemon Brightshore looked at Ning. “You are quite bold. You know that Archon Silksnow and the Aeonians are both searching for you, and yet you dare to show your face here publicly?” Ning didn’t wish for his enemies to know that he had made a breakthrough, and so he was using the [Vitalis] art to modify his aura and ensure that it was identical to before the breakthrough.

“Hegemon, do you know why the Aeonians have been searching for me?” Ning smiled.

“I asked you previously, but you weren’t willing to explain in detail.” Hegemon Brightshore looked at Ning. “Ready to tell me?”

Ning nodded, then waved his hand and produced a fiery fruit within it.

Boom. Boom. Boom. The rumbling aura of the fruit was capable of pervading the hearts and souls of cultivators. Even at his current level, Ning felt his heartrate speed up slightly.

“Is that...?” Hegemon Brightshore’s eyes lit up. “Is that an aeonfruit?”

“Aeonfruit?” Ning was startled. Wasn’t this the mutated omnigeddon bloodfruit which had some of the Autarch’s blood within it?

“It seems you don’t really understand... which makes sense. Aeonfruits are far too rare and far too valuable,” Hegemon Brightshore said. “Aeonfruits are only available to the Aeonian race! The Aeonians view them to be as important as their very lives, and do not trade them to outsiders unless they have an extremely pressing need. Based on what I know, the Aeonians in a few other realmverses also have access to aeonfruits.”

Ning nodded slightly. Prior to the great war starting, Autarch Bolin had set up estate-worlds in quite a few realmverses. Most likely, after the battle concluded he had left behind a drop of Autarch’s blood within most of those estates for his Aeonians to acquire.

“However... none of the Aeonians in any of those realmverses are willing to trade them,” Hegemon Brightshore said. “I’ve heard of only three instances in which they were willing to trade aeonfruits, and in each case it involved something which the Aeonians were desperate to acquire as soon as possible.”

“Is this fruit truly that special?” Ning asked.

“They are fairly similar to omnigeddon bloodfruits, but they are more effective when used to create spirit-pills and medicine. As you are probably aware, a 30% increase in medicinal strength translates into a tenfold increase in value,” Hegemon Brightshore said. “A single aeonfruit is generally worth more than twenty omnigeddon bloodfruits. Right... so this means that the Aeonians have been searching for you because of this aeonfruit?”

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Book 36: Daolord of the Fourth Step Chapter 7: Success

“You stole their aeonfruits?” Hegemon Brightshore asked.

Ji Ning silently mused to himself, “I didn’t just steal their fruit, I uprooted their tree.” Still, Ning didn’t feel much sympathy or guilt towards the Aeonians. This was a race that delighted in devouring cultivators! He really had no idea why Autarch Bolin had created such a race of progeny.

“I wish to trade aeonfruits to you,” Ning said, “But I need certain materials.” As he spoke, he waved his hand. A vast list of characters appeared in the air next to him. These were the materials needed to master the first two stages of the [Lumisword Godwings]. Ning had viewed over three hundred Hegemonic legacies, and from them he had chosen this secret art as being the best match for his [Grand Diffraction Sword] art. He was planning to train in both secret arts at the same time. That way, when he used the Omega Sword Dao – Yin-Yang in the future, he would be able to use them together and further increase the power of this technique.

“The materials you need are all extremely valuable and rare.” Hegemon Brightshore frowned upon seeing them. These were materials for a Hegemonic secret art; of course they were rare!

Ning chortled: “That’s why I’m offering aeonfruits for them.”

“I’ll need half a year,” Hegemon Brightshore said. “I’ll also need fifteen aeonfruits.”

“Alright.” Ning accepted without haggling.

Hegemon Brightshore glanced at Ning, surprised, then laughed: “Darknorth, how many aeonfruits did you take from the Aeonians? They value every single of them highly, but it seems you were able to snatch away fifteen of them with ease. No wonder they are searching for you like crazy.”

“Not that many, actually,” Ning said.

“I have to remind you to be careful. Neither Archon Silksnow nor the Aeonians are easy enemies to face,” Hegemon Brightshore said. “I promised you to help you out once! If you are willing to trade me more aeonfruits, I’ll help you out a second time for ten more of them.”

Ning blinked. Ruthless. Absolutely ruthless. Ten?! The Aeonians were only able to harvest thirty-six aeonfruits every million chaos cycles. They were only created thanks to an Autarch’s blood!

“Very well.” Ning still smiled and nodded, but he murmured mentally to himself, “Oh, Hegemon... I’m afraid you won’t have that chance any longer. Neither Archon Silksnow nor the Aeonians are of any threat to me.”

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The vast Sacred City of Silksnow was perpetually covered by drifting flakes of snow. At the very top of a towering palace within the city. A skinny, white-robed, white-haired man was standing in front of the railings, his long eyebrows fluttering in the wind. He stared off into the void of space, three Eternal Emperors behind him.

“Hmph.” Archon Silksnow was boiling with killing intent. “I’ve received word that Daolord Darknorth is currently hiding within the Brightshore Kingdom,” Archon Silksnow said coldly. “I don’t know if it is a Primaltwin or if he managed to revive himself somehow, but I’m absolutely not going to let him survive again.”

“He’s probably going to spend quite some time in the Brightshore Kingdom,” the red-haired, red-robed woman said hesitantly.

“There’s no way he’ll hide there forever. Sooner or later, he’ll come out. Daolords only live for 108,000 chaos cycles; he needs to go out adventuring, and he needs to attempt the Daomerge. There’s no way he’ll hide inside forever,” Archon Silksnow said.

“But where would he flee to?” The other Emperors were all hesitating. They felt that trapping Ning was going to be extremely difficult.

Archon Silksnow, however, felt quite confident: “Once he leaves the Brightshore Kingdom, there are two possibilities. The first is that he will go through one of the three spacetime tunnels as he leaves. The tunnels which Hegemon Brightshore personally established can send him a tremendous distance, and they lead to three different regions. The second possibility is that he’ll leave on his own power.”

Archon Silksnow smiled coldly. “I’m going to ask the three of you to stand guard in front of those three spacetime tunnel exits. I will personally stand guard outside the Brightshore Kingdom! So long as he dares to exit it, I’ll immediately kill him.”

“Very well.”

“Archon, it’ll be easy if you merely wish for us to watch the spacetime tunnel exits, but you’ll have to watch over the entire Brightshore Kingdom.” The three Emperors all felt rather worried.

“I have my own plans.” Archon Silksnow didn’t explain in detail. He had that damaged realmship, but it was in good enough shape that it even had a ship-spirit. The realmship was usable, it just wasn’t able to cover long distances; in fact, it couldn’t even match up to the distance Hegemon Brightshore could teleport through spacetime. Despite that, Archon Silksnow still didn’t dare to divulge the fact that he had it. He truly wanted to kill Ning and Ninedust so that he could repair it a bit further.

As soon as he moved close to the Brightshore Kingdom, he would be able to sense Ning’s location based on the resonance between the parts. If Ning wanted to slowly fly away... impossible!

“We’ll keep watch over the three spacetime tunnels and the area outside the Brightshore Kingdom. Daolord Darknorth... you have nowhere to run.” Archon Silksnow narrowed his oily green eyes, cold light flashing from them.

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Ning, however, didn’t care at all. Nearly five months went by. Hegemon Brightshore visited quite a few places, finally acquiring all the materials which Ning needed.

Thankfully, Ning had only requested the materials needed for the first two stages of the [Lumisword Godwings]. If he wanted to fully master it, the materials needed would cost tens of time as much. The

entire Flamedragon Realmverse probably didn't have enough; he'd have to go elsewhere to slowly search for it.

"Lumisword Godwings." Ning sat in the lotus position within a flat plains within his estate-world. Above his head hovered an absolutely dazzling pair of golden wings which radiated an aura of incomparable sword-ki.

The wings were spread out revealing countless feathers. Each feather radiated an absolutely staggering amount of power. The wings and the feathers were all formed by sword-light which had taken material form. Within Ning's Jindan chaos region lay the actual golden wings, which were akin to a type of magic treasure. All the precious materials that had been consumed were used to forge this set of wings.

This pair of wings hung there within the Jindan chaos region. As Ning carefully molded and remolded it over and over again, a large number of materials were continuously consumed and transformed into feathers which flew into the wings.

As more time flowed on, the wings began to grow more and more complicated as well as larger in size. Clearly, its power was increasing as well. The Godwings above Ning's head began to glow with absolutely dazzling light. Most likely, ordinary supreme Daolords who saw it would be so terrified their legs would turn to jelly.

The [Grand Diffraction Sword] and the [Lumisword Godwings] were somewhat different in nature. The [Grand Diffraction Sword] was rather unpredictable and ephemeral, almost like the waves of the sea in that it came crashing down upon foes in an endless cycle. Its power was spread out across countless streams of sword-ki. The [Lumisword Godwings], however, focused all of its power into that pair of wings.

The first scattered its power, the second condensed it. This was why Ning had determined that these were the two secret arts which would be most appropriate for him to use in forming his Yin-Yang Chaosworld.

"It truly is complicated. It really does require an extremely high level of insight into the Dao of the Sword." This was an extremely complicated secret art. Ning had spent over thirty thousand years training in it... and if one factored in his usage of a temporal acceleration treasure, he had actually spent over three *million* years before succeeding! The complexity of this secret art was self-evident.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Up above the sea of diffracted light within Ning's Jindan chaos region, a simple yet beautiful golden pair of golden wings could be seen flying about. Its power was now completely restrained and reserved, unlike before when it was plainly visible.

"I've finally mastered it. I've now mastered both of my secret arts; the [Grand Diffraction Sword] and the [Lumisword Godwings]." Ning revealed a look of delight.

"Time to test out their power." Ning stood there on the plains, staring into the empty skies. With but a thought from him, a large amount of power began to flood out of his body and form a pair of golden wings in the air. The wings were absolutely dazzling, a veritable work of art, but they didn't emanate any sword-ki at all.

A moment later, yet another flood of power surged out of his body. This time, a large amount of arcing sword-light appeared. Soon, the countless arcs of sword-light completely filled an area of tens of thousands of kilometers around Ning. They swept through each other, sometimes merging together and sometimes bouncing off each other as they flew about. As for the golden wings, they flew within this storm of sword-light with incredible speed. The golden wings flew more than ten times faster than Ning himself could fly. This was a level of speed which one could not achieve through ordinary movement alone.

Swish. Swish. Swish. The golden wings seemed to be present everywhere within the region. They were absolutely beautiful, yet also simple and plain without emanating the slightest hint of sword-ki at all. As they flew, however, they cut through everything in their path. It was so powerful that even Ning himself was a bit shocked by them.

“Yin-Yang Chaosworld.” Ning immediately controlled the two secret arts together, mixing Yin and Yang to manifest a world of his Sword Dao!

BOOM! The golden wings were like an exalted emperor, flying through every part of the region with abandon. Wherever they appeared, countless streams of arced sword-light surrounded them, and the two seemed to form a natural, perfect whole.

“If I then combine my Yin-Yang Chaosworld with my heartworld projection... any foes would probably be scared senseless even before I personally attacked! With this technique at my disposal, I’m no longer vulnerable to group attacks, no matter how many come at me!” Ning was quite delighted. His nine novessence arts actually hadn’t been a very good fit for his Omega Sword Dao – Yin-Yang, as they had been primarily elemental in nature. Using secret arts based on the Dao of the Sword was the most appropriate choice! As for the two secret arts Ning chose, one just so happened to be Yin-attribute while the other was Yang-attribute.

“Now that I’ve mastered my secret arts... it is time to attack.” That very day, Ning put away his Immortal estate. Then, under the watchful gazes of all the cultivators of the Sword Palace, he left by himself.

[The Desolate Era](#)

Book 36: Daolord of the Fourth Step Chapter 8: Emperor Nightwell

“Palace Lord Darknorth.”

“Palace Lord.”

The various cultivators of the Twelve Kingdoms who Ji Ning passed by all called out to him with great respect. Soon, Ning reached the spacetime tunnels. Ning chose one of the three tunnels, then entered it and disappeared without a trace.

“Daolord Darknorth has already headed out. He’s heading towards the Flydust Star.” Some of the black-armored Daolords as well as the other cultivators began to spread the word. They didn’t know who was actually seeking this information, but given that Archon Silksnow and the Aeonians were both searching for Ning, they were naturally able to use the many channels available for them to accurately and quickly track Ning’s whereabouts.

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In the void outside the Brightshore Kingdom. Archon Silksnow was standing guard, his white eyebrows fluttering. Suddenly, a hint of surprise appeared on his cold face. "The spacetime tunnel which Daolord Darknorth chose is actually the one which exits the closest to Silksnow City? Hmph... how clever. He intentionally chose the one which no one else would've suspected. Unfortunately for him, I've arranged for an Emperor to watch over all three of the exits!"

"Brother Nightwell, Daolord Darknorth is about to appear at the Flydust Star. All you need to do is to tie him down for a period of time. I'm heading out immediately." Archon Silksnow immediately began to issue orders.

"Don't worry, Archon!" Emperor Nightwell was filled with confidence in himself. All of them belonged to the Sacred City of Silksnow, and they all had avatars back home within the city. As a result, the avatars were able to instantly communicate with each other.

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Flydust Star had once been an ordinary, desolate star. Ever since Hegemon Brightshore had set up his stable spacetime tunnels, it had become one of the three tunnel exits. As a result, it naturally became quite a special place. This area was now protected by ancient and powerful barriers, and there were black-armored Daolords as well as more powerful Daolords protecting it.

"Daolord Darknorth?" A pudgy old man was in the chaotic void outside Flydust Star. He had strange white skin and was extremely fat, and he was dressed in loose robes. He had a pair of soft horns growing out of his forehead, and a pair of corrosive-looking eyes that gleamed almost like the cold eyes of a viper. This pudgy, snowy-skinned old man was Emperor Nightwell, famous for his savagery.

Archon Silksnow could be described as 'evil and brutal' in an open and visible manner. Emperor Nightwell, by contrast, was 'insidious and cruel' in a shadowy manner. His reputation was absolutely terrible, and everyone knew him to be a truly maleficent man. Even other Emperors had once pursued him and attempted to kill him. Once Archon Silksnow had risen to power, he had immediately joined Archon Silksnow as a subordinate. Many savage and cruel Emperors had done the same, and they had joined together and then taken over one of the Sacred Cities. They were so strong that their organization as quite difficult to dislodge.

Although evil and brutal cultivators were often hated, there was no way to truly wipe them all out. Now that they had Archon Silksnow as their leader and other ancient monsters supporting them in secret, they became an extremely formidable force.

"There he comes." Emperor Nightwell's gaze was focused upon the tunnel exit at Flydust Star. He watched as a white-robed youth with a black sheath on his back suddenly emerged.

"According to what the Archon said, Darknorth should've reached the Archon level of power and is just slightly weaker than him. Not even the Archon was able to kill him; he had to rely on a treasure." Although Emperor Nightwell held Daolords in disdain, he didn't dare to underestimate Daolord Darknorth too much. The man was probably significantly more powerful than him, after all.

“All I need to do is to slow him down as much as I can and make sure he doesn’t break free.” Emperor Nightwell felt quite confident in his chances.

Whoosh. Ji Ning appeared in the void above the Flydust Star, then quickly flew out of it.

“Eh?” Ning suddenly slowed down, frowning as he stared off into the distance at the pudgy, bizarrely white-skinned old man who had suddenly appeared before him. “Emperor Nightwell?” Ning recognized the man.

“I didn’t expect you to know of me, Daolord Darknorth. I’m flattered and honored.” Emperor Nightwell’s eyes crinkled as he beamed mirthfully. “I imagine you know why I am here, Daolord Darknorth. I’ve been standing guard in this place because I wish to invite you, Daolord Darknorth, to come pay a visit to the Sacred City of Silksnow. Our Archon truly wishes to meet with you.”

“Invite me?” Ning smiled coldly. “Very well. Lead the way.”

“If I’m up ahead leading the way... what if you suddenly run off, Daolord Darknorth? Wouldn’t that be troublesome? I think you should enter my estate-world. That way, we can move more quickly and more conveniently.” Emperor Nightwell continued to beam at Ning.

Ning had already decided that he was going to uproot Archon Silksnow’s entire organization! He had naturally done his research on the Emperors belonging to the Sacred City of Silksnow. Aside from a few reclusive old fellows who were hard to find information about, Ning had essentially gotten full reports on almost all of them. As for Emperor Nightwell... this pudgy, bizarrely white-skinned old man was rotten to the core.

Of the Emperors belonging to the Sacred City of Silksnow who Ning was planning to kill, Emperor Nightwell definitely ranked in the top three.

“If I enter your estate-world, my life would be in your hands.” Ning shook his head. “Pardon me for not obliging.”

“Daolord Darknorth... given the situation, do you really think you’ll be able to escape?” Emperor Nightwell’s eyes flashed with cold light.

“Escape from who? You?” Ning chuckled.

“I might not be able to beat you, Daolord Darknorth, but you can forget about escaping.” Emperor Nightwell smiled. The reason why Archon Silksnow had chosen the three of them was because they were highly skilled at tying down opponents.

Ning suddenly said in a soft voice, “I’ve heard, Emperor Nightwell, that for the sake of training your self-created [Nightwell] secret art, you slaughtered every single infant within a total of 381 territories.”

“They were nothing more than infants. More are being produced every day,” Emperor Nightwell said softly.

“Hegemon Brightshore is a Chaos Godbeast. Hegemon Netherlily is an Ancient. Hegemon Windrain is an Aberrant. None of them had parents, as all three were born from the primordial chaos.” Ning said softly, “But I, however, was born in the mortal world and slowly trained my way up. When I see someone like you, who used the lives of little babies to master your secret arts, I have only one thought in my mind...

to kill you! I was worried about being unable to find you, but you actually delivered yourself right to my doorstep.”

There were many evil cultivators who used babies to train in secret arts or divine abilities; infant placenta, for example, was used in countless evil techniques. This was because newborn infants represented the genesis of new life; they were filled with tremendous vitality and infinite potential.

Ning was filled with the utmost of loathing for these types of cultivators. Whenever he encountered one, his response could be summarized in one word: Kill!

“Ahahaha! There are plenty who wish to kill me, even amongst Eternal Emperors... but so what? I’m still doing perfectly fine.” Emperor Nightwell roared with laughter, his deep Immortal energy causing his laughter to echo throughout the chaotic void around them. “There are only a few who can actually kill me, and I stay the hell away from them. As for you? Daolord Darknorth, you are still just a Daolord. You, kill me? Hah! Archon Silksnow himself isn’t able to kill me, but you think you can? Haha...”

Emperor Nightwell similarly detested people like Ning who wished to kill him just because he was ‘evil’.

Snick. Snick. Snick...

Ning’s six Northbow swords simultaneously flew out of their sheaths. Ning manifested three heads and six arms, holding all six Northbow swords at the ready.

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“Daolord Darknorth is standing right in front of me, and he’s actually going to attack me. Don’t worry, Archon; there’s no way I’ll let him escape.” Emperor Nightwell sent word to Archon Silksnow while immediately executing his legendary [Nightwell] secret art.

Rumble... his bizarrely white skin suddenly extended in every direction like a giant sack, with the opening of the sack aimed directly at Ning and sending a surge of sucking power straight towards him. Inside the giant white sack, only endless darkness could be seen.

Ning held all six Northbow swords as he quietly watched his opponent charge towards him. The giant white sack quickly flew towards Ning, seeking to swallow him within the opening. An enormous, hideous face suddenly appeared at the opening as well. This was Emperor Nightwell’s face, and that face opened its giant mouth, the teeth glistening like a hell of countless knives as he bit down towards Ning, seeking to swallow Ning whole.

“You can die now.” Ning showed no mercy at all.

BOOM! A pair of dazzling wings suddenly appeared in the air above Ning. At the same time, countless arcs of sword-light appeared as well around Ning. The two instantly combined to form an enormous Yin-Yang Chaosworld which completely trapped the giant sack within it.

Rumble... a titanic heartworld projection came descending as well. The heartworld projection had mountains, rivers, lakes, grasslands, and prairies that could be seen with clarity. The giant ‘sword mountain’ at the very center caused a particularly strong sense of awe and dread. The heartworld projection merged together with the Yin-Yang Chaosworld perfectly.

Slash! Slash! Slash! The white sack was instantly torn asunder.

“How is this possible?” Emperor Nightwell reappeared in his original form, but faced by the double dangers of the Yin-Yang Chaosworld and the heartworld projection, he only felt a sense of tremendous fear.