

The Ages 1291

Chapter 1291 - Sword Towering Through the Skies

Ye Dongliu, seemingly a little worried, said, "The Xuanyuan Dragon Sect is in danger now. Either they resist the invasion and fight the celestial orderians, or they join them and antagonize the Myriad Solar Sects. There's no benefit to befriending them now. If we let the Whitedragon Empress come, we'll definitely only be inviting trouble!" He widened his eyes and turned to Gujian Qingshuang. "Chief Instructor, you have to think this over thrice!"

"Dongliu, I think your opinions are a little too extreme. The Xuanyuan Dragon Sect leaders aren't weaklings. They only had their dragonsprings taken away because the enemy took hostages. It's only a temporary setback, not a complete loss. Not to mention, the Myriad Solar Sects won't just silently take this. If we can't even properly host our guests, we would be made a laughingstock by the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect. Not to mention, we can never be so harsh and heartless when it comes to diplomacy, especially not toward the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect, who have stood with us since the start of the Voidsky Skirmish," Granny Mu Hua said at a leisurely pace.

"Your so-called 'standing together' is just a ruse for wanting to keep those disciples," Ye Dongliu mocked.

"It's called repaying favors. Not to mention, we won't even be able to keep them as disciples." Mu Hua turned to Gujian Qingshuang and said, "What are your thoughts on this, Chief Instructor?"

While the two of them were both senior in terms of age, Gujian Qingshuang had the final say and would similarly be held accountable for his choice. He pursed his lips and said, "So far, there's been no word from the Sky Palace. However, the Myriad Solar Sects have come to a consensus to not aid the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect. Granny Mu Hua is still right that the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect is the historical leader of the Myriad Solar Sects, so we can't just brush them off like that. This isn't a black and white matter that can be simply brushed away like that."

Ye Dongliu wasn't happy with this response. "You think I'm too extreme? Fine. You'd better be ready for the consequences." By now, they could see Jiang Qingliu's qilin appearing on the horizon. He humphed and left without saying a word, unwilling to be part of the welcome party.

"That old geezer's temper is still as fiery as ever," Granny Mu Hua said.

"Uncle Ye is just doing this with the sect's best interest in mind. It's a complicated situation. It's one thing for the disciples to perform well in the Voidsky Skirmish. However, the Azurecloud Divine Tree is going to bear fruit soon, and the Supracloud Sanctuary has the Blueblood Starocean and wargodeans helping them. The Azuresoul Palace is wrapped up in this whole mess, yet if we don't go out to fight for the harvest, we won't be able to catch up when it comes to resources in the next ten thousand years!"

With the help of the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect, they wouldn't have had to fear the Blueblood Starocean and wargodeans. But now, things were different.

"Whatever. Let's see what these Sky Palace disciples are made of first!"

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As they entered the continent, Tianming was greeted by two grand sights. The first was the Azurecloud Divine Tree that covered much of the sun, and the second was the Azurecloud Sword Mountain, a sword-shaped mountain that pierced straight through the clouds above.

Ying Huo said, "Doesn't it look kind of like the sun's dick?"

Jiang Qingliu and Yu Ziqian didn't know how to respond to that, though Tianming had to admit that it was a rather apt description.

"Are the membranes that stretch across the mountain part of the Azuresky Myriadsword Formation?" Tianming asked. He could see it more and more clearly the closer he got. There were many strands of sword ki thousands of meters in length surrounding the mountain. Even from afar, the sounds generated from them rapidly moving about grated uncomfortably against his ears.

According to Yu Ziqian, this was a grade-seven formation and one of the two strongest defensive formations on the continent. It protected the core of the entire sect, but the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect had lost control of theirs to an enemy. It was no different from allowing the enemy to come and go as they pleased after slaughtering those within.

"What else? Did you think it was a condom?" Yu Ziqian said, rolling his eyes.

"What's that for?" Tianming asked.

"You don't even know that? You're far too innocent. It's... well... something used during sexy time to prevent babies from being made," Yu Ziqian naughtily said.

"Damn...." Tianming and Ying Huo were both shocked. As expected of higher life forms from the sun. They really knew their stuff when it came to this.

Tianming said, "Get me some next time, will you?" In his lifebound space, Feiling's flower suddenly turned stiff and its petals flushed red. What followed was an awkward silence. Fortunately, they were about to arrive at their destination.

Whether they would stop Tianming and the rest from entering would soon be revealed. It turned out that the formation opened up and let them pass. They reached the Celestial Welcome Hall without any trouble. There were quite a lot of people waiting for them there.

The azuresky qilin had finally reached its home. After dropping off Tianming and the rest, it disappeared into the nearby rivers and hills, where all the other beasts were.

Jiang Qingliu and Long Wanying brought the juniors to the swordpupils. Most of them were grade three and above, and all of them held important positions in the sect. They were all solarians.

"I, Gujian Qingshuang, wish the Whitedragon Empress a warm welcome to our humble abode on behalf of the Azuresoul Palace." Gujian Qingshuang smiled as he saluted her. In terms of status, hers was above his, but he was still the chief instructor of the sect so he couldn't appear too humble in his own turf. But it would be a different story if this was the Saintdragon Emperor. At the very least, Gujian Qingshuang would have to bow if that were the case.

"You're too polite, Chief Instructor. I'm the one who's bringing you trouble. As a result of recent changes at the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect, as well as how much we treasure these four disciples, the Saintdragon

Emperor has instructed that I protect them. I'll only bring them back to the sect after the situation there has stabilized. Please accept my sincerest apologies for the trouble this will cause," she said gently. Her beauty and polite tone immediately caught the eye of many of the swordpupils, practically sweeping away most of the hostility they had previously held. Beauty had its uses too.

Tianming had thought this would be a tense situation, though it turned out to be rather pleasant overall. The people there were all of some import, so they wouldn't lose their temper like a child now that the decision had been made.

"These disciples must be honored to be favored by the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect. It's also our honor as well, so there's no trouble regarding this matter. Please rest assured that we'll do our best to cooperate regarding matters of these disciples," Gujian Qingshuang said.

Chapter 1292 - Six-star Universal Manna

"Thank you, everyone from the Azuresoul Palace. The Xuanyuan Dragon Sect will remember the help you've given us. Now, everyone, stop looking at me and let's welcome these impressive youngsters instead! They created many miracles and brought the Azuresoul Palace up at least five places in the ranking. They're young heroes that achieved much that even their seniors haven't. Not to mention, two of them are even Sky Palace disciples! The Azuresoul Palace's name shall forever be recorded in history!" Long Wanying pushed Tianming and the rest forward.

There were thousands of swordpupils there in the welcoming party, as well as many disciples watching from behind. Whether they were young juniors or youthgrand disciples, they cheered for Tianming and the rest.

"Congratulations, Chief Disciple Yu Ziqian! Inheritor of the Divine Worldeater Cauldron!" Unsurprisingly, Yu Ziqian was the most celebrated among them' after all, they weren't familiar with Tianming. Either way, the disciples cheered their achievements without reservation.

"Welcome to the sect!" Gujian Qingshuang said without the slightest hesitation. "Jiang Qingliu, you single-handedly raised four of the top ten disciples in the ranking, two of whom joined the Sky Palace. What an impressive feat. We're all proud of you!" Everything seemed like it was going well.

"Chief Instructor, you praise me too highly. The sect was the one who nurtured them. I was only fortunate enough to have been the one to guide them," Jiang Qingliu said. He had always been the low-profile type, and wasn't quite used to being in the limelight like this.

After that, Gujian Qingshuang wanted to have a feast prepared for welcoming Long Wanying and celebrating Tianming and the others' achievements, though Long Wanying refused the invitation. She knew that the last thing Gujian Qingshuang wanted was to announce to the world that they were hosting the Whitedragon Empress. This would be better for both parties.

"Since that's the case, what do you think about staying at the Bamboo Quarters of the sixth branch? You'll be able to look after the disciples this way, and even guide them, too," Jiang Qingliu said.

"That would do."

Tianming and the rest would also be going to the Sixth Sword Branch. After the initial welcome, they went back to keeping a low profile. Jiang Qingliu prepared to guide them to the sixth branch, which was

located at the lowest point of the Azuresoul Sword Mountain and had the worst nova source quality. Clearly, the swordpupils and disciples of the sixth branch were ranked the lowest in the sect, though the benefit to that was they had more than ample space at the bottom of the mountain.

"Ziqian, show us the Divine Worldeater Cauldron."

"I want to see the Lifesteal Silverdragon and Dragonblood Desecration too!"

Some swordpupils excitedly asked to see those treasures. It wasn't something they would normally get to see with their own eyes.

"Alright!" Yu Ziqian decided to show off in front of the crowd. He flew into the sky and summoned the cauldron. The gigantic cauldron descended from the sky, causing many of them to gasp at the sight. Yu Ziqian looked mighty and powerful in their eyes; enchanting, even, despite his sausage lips. Comparatively, the Lifesteal Silverdragon and Dragonblood Desecration didn't drum up as much fanfare.

Unquestionably, Yu Ziqian's status had risen quite a lot in the sect. Before this, many people weren't too convinced by his capabilities as chief disciple, as he had come from the Sixth Sword Branch. It wasn't helped by how rarely he fought and displayed his abilities. Even Jiang Qingliu was often lambasted for that. But now that was all history.

Yu Ziqian decided to use the chance to speak to Gujian Qingshuang. "Chief Instructor, now that I have the cauldron, my pill refining capabilities have grown a lot. However, I won't be able to do much without any ingredients. I was wondering if I'd be allowed to go to the Celestial Herbarium."

Everyone turned to look at Gujian Qingshuang, who responded, "Of course. Feel free to."

If it was before, he would have no doubt refused such a request. Even many grade-four swordpupils weren't easily granted access to the Celestial Herbarium.

"By the way, my junior disciple, Tianming, requires some divine ores as well. Since the Soulbreak Mountain is the closest place with ore veins, can he go there as well?" Yu Ziqian asked.

"Of course... he can." Gujian Qingshuang nodded. "You two are Sky Palace disciples. Tell me if you need any resources."

This was a good chance for the Azuresoul Palace to curry favor with the Sky Palace. Back then, they would never have had such a chance. While the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect was in a bad spot now, the Sky Palace was a stable faction they could count on.

"Thank you, Chief Instructor!" He had chosen to make these requests now because there was no reason for him to be refused. His results had spoken for themselves. The other disciples also cheered along with him, fully pleased with the outcome.

At that moment, Tianming finally spoke. "Chief Instructor, I'm in urgent need of cultivation resources. May I ask for them now?"

"Of course. Anything for you." Gujian Qingshuang felt a little fearful, however. The lion was finally opening its mouth, but he couldn't refuse anything so as to not renege against his fresh promise.

"I need a metal-attribute six-star universal manna." Tianming had a feeling that a fifth-star one was the best they could give, but he wanted to see how sincere Gujian Qingshuang would be so he pushed his luck somewhat. He needed to know whether the Azuresoul Palace was a good place for a Sky Palace disciple like him to stay at. I helped raise your ranking a couple of places, so this wouldn't be asking too much, right?

It was one thing for Gujian Qingshuang to refuse him if he'd asked privately about this, but now everyone had heard his request.

"Give it to him!"

"Senior Disciple Li is impressive!"

"His achievements are to be lauded!"

"Kyaaa! Senior, I want your babi—I mean, I want you to look after me!"

The junior disciples were going wild with fervor. Gujian Qingshuang froze. Even Jiang Qingliu's beasts had only received six-star universal manna, and Tianming was asking for the same privilege! Tianming was really testing Gujian Qingshuang's limits with his request. Even if they had one such manna in store, they no doubt had many plans for it already.

"Chief Instructor?" Yu Ziqian winked at him. How they treated the Whitedragon Empress didn't matter. No matter what, Yu Ziqian and Tianming were the ones they truly had to appease. They were effectively representatives of the Sky Palace, after all.

Gujian Qingshuang awkwardly laughed and said, "Tianming, you've served our sect well. As Chief Instructor, I've decided that you deserve a six-star universal manna as your reward!"

The crowd exploded with cheers. Some were envious, but even they couldn't deny Tianming's contributions. He hadn't joined the Sky Palace without any effort, after all, and had defeated many geniuses like Weisheng Moran, Long Longlong, and Zhan Yuance.

"Here it is. This one's called Bonesea Silverstar." Though it hurt Gujian Qingshuang to give it away, he made sure to look decisive as he handed it over. It was stored in a case made of peak divine ores that was a divine artifact in itself.

Tianming received it and immediately thanked the chief instructor. This was a huge gift. He could have asked for five five-star universal manna as well, but it would be hard to get all of them of the same element. As Yin Chen had just hatched, it needed the best quality manna to unlock its potential. Tianming would find a way to get more for his other beasts moving forward. Gan Gangan even managed to solve my divine ore problem. Looks like I'll have enough peace to level myself up in the days to come.

After the group disbanded, Tianming and the rest went to the Sixth Sword Branch. Their legend was still spreading across the entire continent. As they were leaving, small silver cockroaches crawled down from Tianming's body and blended in with the crowd, about a hundred thousand of them in total. Yin Chen had spread out over the entire mountain, covering all the blind spots.

"I have to make sure I'm able to hear every word everyone says. Not a single thing on the mountain will escape me." The cockroaches began spreading out all over the place. "I have to make sure Yin Chen

consumes more divine ores so it can split up even more. One day, my eyes will see everything across the entire continent! But before that, it has to evolve first."

Tianming, Lingfeng, Xiaoxiao, and Long Wanying would be staying in the Bamboo Quarters. While the sixth branch didn't have that many people, they were all of the friendly sort. Yu Ziqian was really popular there, and with Jiang Qingliu in charge, they received great treatment. And Ying Huo and the rest would be more than happy to have so much space to roam around in. They immediately went exploring the moment they arrived. Xian Xian's tree also took root in the open.

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Right after settling down, Tianming prepared Yin Chen to evolve. But before that, one of its bodies that stayed at the Celestial Welcome Hall reported back.

"What's up?" Tianming asked.

"Gujian Qingshuang... welcomed some... other people."

"Can you not talk like you're constipated?" This fellow really tested his patience. Tianming eventually learned that the newcomers were from the Emyrean Sword Sect. Gujian Qingshuang had personally welcomed them and were currently having talks. "Good, tell me what they're talking about."

"Let's eavesdrop... while we... evolve, okay?"

Tianming really was going to lose it. "Just eat this up!" He opened the box and the swarm of metal insects instantly rushed into it.

Chapter 1293 - One-strike Slaughterer

Gujian Qingshuang, Ye Dongliu and Granny Mu Hua had gathered at the Celestial Welcome Hall. The others waited outside; there were quite a lot of people there, arguing and discussing the events, but the commotion didn't disrupt the atmosphere within the hall.

"Please take a seat."

All three of them sat down. There was a woman with stone skin looking straight at them, sitting ramrod straight without the slightest movement.

"I didn't think the One-strike Slaughterer would come all the way here. Welcome, and sorry for the poor hospitality we can afford you," Gujian Qingshuang said.

"Don't bring up that nickname. Just drop the formalities and call me Shi Yan." The woman whose name meant 'stone' sat with both arms on the armrests of her chair and her legs parted. Though she was a woman, there was a really domineering aura coming from her. It was as if her gaze could see through every pretense and read minds.

Shi Yan was a crude, simple name, yet a girl was using it. Like her namesake, everything about her screamed 'hard'. She was the junior sister of the sect master of the fifth-ranked Emyrean Sword Sect, the Northdipper Swordsage. As far as others were concerned, she was a weapon he could direct at anyone. The One-strike Slaughterer got her name from never needing a follow-up strike for any of her confirmed kills.

The stone-like woman looked at Gujian Qingshuang and said, "Since I'm already here, I'll be direct."

"Please do," Gujian Qingshuang said.

"The Emyrean Sword Sect intends to help the Azuresoul Palace rise to the top of the Azurecloud Continent to match your rise in ranking. We will suppress the Supracloud Sanctuary and make sure they won't be able to catch a breather." Every word from her mouth sounded firm and carried weight.

Hearing that, the three Azuresoul Palace elders pursed their lips, wild thoughts racing through their minds. For the longest time, the Emyrean Sword Sect had occupied a special place in the hearts of the cultivators of the Azuresoul Palace. Despite not having had much contact throughout the years, others always spoke of the Azuresoul Palace as a splintered branch of the Emyrean Sword Sect, and how it had inherited aspects from the bigger, older sect. Even their swordpupil, swordtroop and swordcitizen structure was directly borrowed from them.

However, there had never been a precedent for Shi Yan's so-called 'offer' of help in the past hundreds of thousands of years. The Emyrean Sword Sect had never so much as batted an eye to acknowledge their existence, especially with how far apart they were in the ranking. In fact, they were closer to the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect than their own splinter sect, given that they were ranked fifth.

"Is that what the Northdipper Swordsage wants?" Gujian Qingshuang asked.

"It's the will of the entire sect," Shi Yan said.

"Looks like you have the Azurecloud Divine Tree in your sights."

"Of course. What else would it be? What are you worth? But don't worry, we'll definitely leave you with more than what other outsiders would. After all, our sects share the same origin," Shi Yan said. Smiling, she continued, "Not to mention, the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect has their own mess to clean up. Nobody but us dares to come over here. The Dreamless Celestial Nation and Voidword Shrine have historically never paid too much attention to the tree, only sending a couple of elites from time to time to pick small quantities of the harvest. However, we're able to mobilize huge numbers to help with the harvest. Nobody else dares help you resist the wargodeans or the Blueblood Starocean." Though her words were ruthless, they described the reality of the situation well.

"But it's not like the Emyrean Sword Sect is much stronger than the wargodeans, and they also have the support of the celestial orderians. Won't you become another target if you help out like the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect did?" Gujian Qingshuang countered. It wasn't going to be an easy talk.

"Fine, let me break it down for you." Shi Yan cleared her throat and continued, "First, my senior brother, the Northdipper Swordsage, is stronger than the wargodeans' Warlord. Second, the top four in the sect ranking include the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect, traitors who've sided with the celestial orderians, and outsiders. So our sect wishes to challenge their hegemony. Third, we don't have something like the Veildragon Palace, so we aren't afraid of any faction using 'returning' to our sect as an excuse to invade us in our absence. Fourth, the Sky Palace, Voidword Shrine, Dreamless Celestial Nation, and some other factions have already been alerted by what happened at the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect and are taking countermeasures against the traitors siding with the celestial orderians. Borders have been reinforced with more troops. Considering all of that, we've come to give you a hand."

"I see...." Gujian Qingshuang nodded. The divine tree only bore fruit once every ten thousand years, so he hadn't experienced it before. But based on historical records, the Azuresoul Palace had always been picked by those who wanted to help, not the other way around. They never had any right to negotiate. For instance, had the current second-ranked Xuanyuan Dragon Sect picked them, no other faction would dare to come take the spoils of the harvest. Even if they wanted to cooperate, they would be seeking the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect's permission, not the Azuresoul Palace's. They had to accept whatever was coming their way, or they wouldn't be able to even so much as touch the dried roots of the divine tree. That was why they had opened their formation to let those from the Emyrean Sword Sect in.

"In fact, you already knew all this the moment you deactivated the formation," Shi Yan added.

"Then, I guess we shall thank the Emyrean Sword Sect for their help," Gujian Qingshuang said. It appeared that the conflict over the divine tree would be fought between the fifth-ranked Emyrean Sword Sect and the tenth- and fourth-ranked Blueblood Starocean and wargodeans.

"There's no need for gratitude. We're doing this for our mutual self-interest. We just won't dress up our intentions with pointless justifications. We'll leave a tenth of the harvest for your sect," Shi Yan said.

"Only a tenth...."

"That's already considered generous on our part. It's non-negotiable, friend," Shi Yan said, smiling.

"Fine!"

The three elders helplessly looked at each other. Even though the divine tree was the Sky Palace's compensation to them for the low nova source density, they won't be getting any more than a tenth of what was harvested. Perhaps the Sky Palace had never intended for the entire harvest to go to them alone in the first place. The rules had only been put in place to prevent world wars that would have happened once every ten thousand years, otherwise.

"There's another matter we came here to talk about," Shi Yan said.

"What is it?" Gujian Qingshuang asked.

"Jiang Qingliu is to be killed."

"What?!" The chief instructor was stunned.

"Why is an elite of our sect to be killed?" Granny Mu Hua asked coldly. She had been able to tolerate Shi Yan's arrogance, but this was going overboard.

"Simple. Jiang Qingliu is the link between the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect and those disciples of yours. Long Wanying was only able to invite them to her sect through him. Once he's killed, you can completely cut off all ties with the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect. Then, we can slowly educate those four before the Emyrean Sword Sect finally takes them in. Even though the Sky Palace disciples must leave for the Sky Palace after five hundred years, the other two, Feng and Xiaoxiao, can stay with us. Not to mention, they'll be able to do quite a lot for us before the time comes."

"You!" Gujian Qingshuang was completely flabbergasted.

"Two birds, one stone. Not only will you get the divine tree's harvest, you also want the disciples. Are you taking everything the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect initially wanted?" Granny Mu Hua said.

"That's really not much. The only truly historically established factions in the top ten are them and us. Now that they've fallen, we're going to take their place as the representatives of the native Myriad Solar Sects."

"How can you be so sure that they've fallen?" Gujian Qingshuang said. That was the crucial question. At the very least, he didn't think the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect would fall overnight.

"Hahahaha!" Shi Yan broke out into quite a long bout of laughter. She regained her composure and said, "Come, let me tell you a secret."

"I'm all ears," Ye Dongliu said, his eyes brightening.

Shi Yan clicked her tongue and said, "The Sky Palace has summoned the top ten factions. Naturally, the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect, wargodeans, and the Blueblood Starocean weren't invited."

"What happened?" the three asked in unison.

"The Ninedragon Imperial Tomb gave the sun emperor an excuse to act. He struck swiftly and ruthlessly, obtaining many dragonsprings. By now, the entire sect has fallen under their control. The Sky Palace took the blame for that, but there's little they can do to help. However, the excuse of 'repatriating' the Veildragon Palace to their original sect can only be used once. So, even though we've lost the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect, we won't have to worry about any incursions in the near future. Not to mention, the Emyrean Sword Sect will step up our game in the future.

"Either way, the Dreamless Celestial Nation and Voidword Shrine don't want to serve the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect, and neither do we. The opinions of the others don't really matter. So, it's been accepted that there's nothing that can be done about the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect's misfortune. Trust me. It's best for you to stop associating with them to protect yourself.

"As for what happens next, the Sky Palace can simply tweak the fusion formation to decrease the nova source concentration on the continents controlled by the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect and funnel that to second-rate sects like you. The Myriad Solar Sects is our turf, after all. We can decide how to split up the surplus nova source. The sun emperor won't be able to control the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect at their peak without our permission." Shi Yan sounded almost happy about how things had turned out.

However, Gujian Qingshuang and the rest felt a chill running down their spine. The Sky Palace and the other first-rate sects had completely given up on the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect. Now, there were only outsiders, traitors and leader-wannabes like the Emyrean Sword Sect in the top five. It was probably no coincidence that those sects had prevailed over the others. The Myriad Solar Sects were as filled with internal strife as usual, with few hesitating to cannibalize a carcass of their own.

Chapter 1294 - The Heck Did I Just See?

"Gujian Qingshuang, this isn't something you can refuse. We don't need your help to kill Jiang Qingliu, we only require that you don't get in our way," Shi Yan said as she slapped her armrest like a thug. She took a swig of some tea brewed using top-grade divine herbs and adopted a bossy tone. "We only need you to send Jiang Qingliu out to pick divine herbs during the harvest. Naturally, we'll arrange for

someone to take care of him without leaving a trace. Killing a half-cripple like him won't be a big deal. The Emphyrean Sword Sect still needs to look good in front of those disciples, after all. Naturally, you'll have to keep this matter a secret. Crossing us will do nobody any good, right?"

She observed the reaction of the elders the entire time, speaking clearly without any vague wordplay as a method to apply pressure. She didn't need to anyway, given the power differential between their sects. As far as they were concerned, it was thanks to Jiang Qingliu forming a pact with Long Wanying that the four disciples were leaving for the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect in the first place. With him out of the picture, they would surely do whatever Gujian Qingshuang said.

"It bears mentioning that those four have their own thoughts on the matter. Even with Jiang Qingliu gone, they might not necessarily go with you," Gujian Qingshuang said.

"It's fine. The Xuanyuan Dragon Sect has already fallen, so they'll need to find a sect that can support them. It goes without saying that we're the best fit. As for what comes later, that can be arranged at a later date. But Jiang Qingliu must die no matter what, unless he's willing to do what we say. However, we know that he's as stubborn as a rock. I don't have the time to spend convincing him," Shi Yan said, dissatisfied. She could afford to be so arrogant thanks to her station. Not to mention, those three's hesitation and attitude of half-refusal revealed that they didn't have any firm leverage either.

"Gujian Qingshuang, this is a good opportunity for your sect. I've already detailed the pros and cons for you. We took the initiative to make this offer owing to our shared history. We'll make your sect one that stands as close to first-rate as possible. In a sense, we'll be helping you fulfill the ambitions of your founder. The Xuanyuan Dragon Sect can no longer be counted on. Your chance to dominate this continent completely is with us!" Shi Yan added.

"Then let me ask you something."

"Please do."

"What do the first-rate sects and the Sky Palace think about the wargodeans and Blueblood Starocean?"

"Finally, you're getting to the crucial point." Shi Yan's voice deepened. "Back then, before the wargodeans let their allegiance to the celestial orderians slip, only the Blueblood Starocean were publicly considered traitors. Given their scale, they won't be able to do much to the Myriad Solar Sects. But now, the wargodeans are just as much traitors as those of the Veildragon Palace. They're loyal to the sun emperor, and even dared to come to the Azurecloud Continent. Letting those traitors roam free is what'll really make us suffer! The Xuanyuan Dragon Sect suffered a loss as a result of the Ninedragon Imperial Tomb's appearance, too. Even then, it's not like we can just band together to declare war against the celestial orderians. Nobody can afford the casualties that'd result from that.

"However, the Myriad Solar Sects still have to show them that we're not to be messed with lightly. If we can't strike the master, we can at least strike his dogs, and the wargodeans and Blueblood Starocean just so happen to be coming here. That's why heavily wounding them here on the Azurecloud Continent is really important. Neither of us can afford to sit on the sidelines, understood? The Supracloud Sanctuary made a huge mistake in choosing them to help out with their harvest. They've basically handed over the seat of supremacy to your sect. The Azuresoul Palace will definitely be able to beat

them so badly that they'll become a third-rate sect and you'll reign supreme across the entire continent!"

Though it sounded impressive, it was hard to determine what part of what she said was really true. Gujian Qingshuang didn't have proof that the meeting with the Sky Palace had really happened, nor could he possibly know what was said during the meeting even if it did happen. All he had heard was that the Myriad Solar Sects were going to work together to drive the Veildragon Palace away, yet now Shi Yan was claiming that the Sky Palace was going to give up on the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect entirely and let them serve the celestial orderians. In other words, the move the Emyrean Sword Sect wanted to make against the wargodeans and Blueblood Starocean was payback, now that the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect seemed irrecoverable.

As far as the Emyrean Sword Sect was concerned, if the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect fell, they would be the top dog. Outsiders would never gain the popular support of the locals to be at the top, after all, so the Emyrean Sword Sect's future was bright.

The three from the Azuresoul Palace had no way of knowing what the Sky Palace's real intentions were, but they could tell from Shi Yan's words that the Sky Palace was trying to redirect the conflict and show the sun emperor their firm stance by going after their lapdogs. It was indeed a chance for the Azuresoul Palace, even if they found it rather hard to believe that the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect was to be abandoned just like that.

Having their dragonsprings stolen away basically means that they've lost their home. Then again, even if reconstructing their defensive formation will take generations, how could they just give up like that? Gujian Qingshuang thought. He knew the Saintdragon Emperor was definitely still trying to come up with something, yet the Myriad Solar Sects seemed really pessimistic about such efforts. The Azuresoul Palace was now involved in a difficult predicament, being caught in the crossfire.

"The three of you," Shi Yan said, clearing her throat. "Our forces will arrive soon, with even more to come. Let us fight beautifully and crush the opposition on this continent. The divine tree is about to bloom any time now, so please be prepared. Remember to send Jiang Qingliu to the front lines. Any questions?"

Even though Gujian Qingshuang hadn't agreed to anything yet, he could only do what she said. The moment he had let her in, he'd already been ready for that possibility.

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The Driftsword Halls were the highest-tier guest accommodation located at the First Sword Branch. There were more than ten thousand residential complexes there, each of them fitted with large gardens complete with lakes and hills. There was more than enough place for lifebound beasts to roam about. Shrouded in mist and clouds, it looked like an abode for celestials.

The Emyrean Sword Sect's elites were going to lodge there. They loudly spoke and let their rowdy lifebound beasts roam about, bumping into the buildings' defensive formations from time to time without any care. It was as if they were in their own homes; they weren't acting like guests in the slightest. It was situated near the peak of the mountain, not far away from Gujian Qingshuang's Azuresoul Sword Hall.

The One-strike Slaughterer, Shi Yan, also stayed there. Having just finished the discussion with the elders, she went to her accommodation right away only to see five cultivators welcoming her with anticipation.

"How is it, boss? Did the haphazard plan work out to fool them?" they asked.

"Haphazard? It wasn't haphazard in the least. We have proper justification, and we're doing them a favor. It's perfectly legitimate," Shi Yan said.

"Hahahaha!"

"I heard the divine tree bears quite a lot of fruit."

"Leaving a tenth for them sounds like a little too much."

"Perhaps we should only give them more scraps rather than actual spoils...."

Just as they were chatting happily, Shi Yan yelled, "Stop!"

They finally quieted down.

"The Azuresoul Palace is a splinter branch of our sect. Let's not act so tactlessly in their territory." She smiled and added, "At the very least, we have to pretend that they're our siblings. We still need to bring those four disciples with us."

"Will they dare to resist us even if we go too far?" someone asked.

"Resist? They're incapable of doing that, nor do they have the right. Their entire sect is filled with nothing but the old and weak. Not a single one of them has the sharp will of a sword, so why bother even training with them? They'd be better off trying to stop themselves from aging so they don't deteriorate further." The Emphyrean Sword Sect had never really cared much for the Azuresoul Palace.

"Chu Jingchuan," Shi Yan called out.

"Yes, Master?" said a youth respectfully.

"You're still young and about the same age as Li Tianming and Yu Ziqian. Try to get along with them and brainwash them about how the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect is done for, and only our sect can care for them for the next five hundred years."

"Understood!"

"Alright, all of you may rest now. The sect will be sending tens of thousands of people here. The killers we prepared for Jiang Qingliu have also been chosen and will soon be in position."

"Yes!" The group began disbanding.

"The Azuresoul Sword Mountain is a good place, especially for a summer vacation...." The air around here wasn't nearly as warm as that of the sun's south pole. The temperature was much more manageable, allowing divine herbs to grow far more easily. Comparatively, much of the rest of the world was quite a bit hotter.

"I'm starting to like this place." Shi Yan sat at a stone table and enjoyed the sight of lifebound beasts roaming about as the flaming clouds continued casting light down below. There wasn't any nighttime in this world.

"The weak always get devoured by the strong. It's the law of nature! Those divided will always fall. One day, a unified faction will form that includes all Myriad Solar Sects and truly rivals the celestial orderians. Our Emyrean Sword Sect might just become that."

She had seen through it all. The Myriad Solar Sects had basically no internal cohesion at all. With the outsiders taking the top spots, the rest hid away in obscurity. Her heart burned with passion as she imagined the countless corpses that would pile up in the near future.

"Huh?" All of a sudden, she felt like the surface of the stone table was rather odd. It wasn't the wind; something hiding underneath it had fluttered. Instantly, she jabbed a spot with her finger and heard a metallic sound. That didn't sound like stone.

"What's this?" A silver cockroach had been split in half by her fingers. "A lifeform? A golem? What in the world is this?"

Right as she was about to pick it up, the two halves of the cockroach became two different cockroaches, then completely vanished from her sight. Nothing else in the vicinity moved. Shi Yan was completely puzzled. "The heck did I just see?"

Chapter 1295 - Impending Sorrows

Tianming had a feeling similar to the one when his Myriadsword Providence had spanned the entire world. All sorts of information appeared in his head, but this time it went through Yin Chen's reporting. Being telepathically connected should mean smoother communication, but its speech pattern made it quite a chore, especially when there were so many different reports to sort through. Tianming felt like puking at the prospect of listening to that halting voice once more.

"All done... bathing time!"

Yin Chen's bodies were scattered all over the mountain, even at its many lakes and rivers. Apart from serving as a watch sentry, every one of its bodies would take turns washing off dirt and grime in the rivers and lakes before going back to their shifts. It didn't take long to find all the bathing spots in the area, something that had come as quite a shock to Tianming. Not to mention, even as ninety percent of its bodies were undergoing evolution, it still had a hundred thousand silver cockroaches on shift at work. The fact that it could still gather such important information under these circumstances was shocking.

"This fellow seems far more functionally capable, rather than combat capable." He had a feeling that using Yin Chen in combat would be squandering its other potential. It was quite different from its siblings, after all. Then again, that wasn't to say it was weak in fights; it just hadn't had a chance to be tested yet.

"So the Emyrean Sword Sect wishes to kill Jiang Qingliu and take the four of us in, and they're even trying to use Chu Jingchuan to get close to us..." Tianming smirked. This information was far too important. Without it, they would have been led by the nose by the Emyrean Sword Sect without knowing any better, and eventually join them.

"Tianming, shouldn't we tell Aunt Ying about this right away?" Lingfeng asked.

"We ought to at least discuss this with Gan Gangan first," Tianming said.

The Emyrean Sword Sect didn't know that Jiang Qingliu wasn't actually the master of Tianming and the other two, so he didn't hold that much sway over them. Long Wanying, on the other hand, had won their trust through her efforts and sincerity. It was helped, no doubt, by her motherly, decisive, and gentle personality. There was no way a woman like Shi Yan would understand such things.

When Yu Ziqian came over, his face was flushed from all the alcohol he'd drunk while mingling with girls. He was enjoying the fame and attention the best he could. "Come, brothers, I've already done a survey. Around six thousand senior and junior sisters want me to set them up with you two. There's a name list here, pick as you please." He was thoroughly relishing his newfound popularity.

"Stop messing around. Your master's in trouble," Xiaoxiao said. She didn't like flirty guys like him. Had it not been for the camaraderie he'd shown, she would have ignored him entirely.

"Huh? What?" The drunken flush vanished from his face immediately.

Tianming briefed him on what he had heard. He took out a silver cockroach in his hand and said, "Do you see this? It's my fifth lifebound beast. It was injured for a while, so I haven't used it for quite a while. It's a type of metallic broodmother lifebound beast and this is a child unit. I've spread many of them throughout the entire mountain."

"Heavens...." Yu Ziqian widened his eyes, whether from the sheer terror of what the Emyrean Sword Sect was planning or how impressive this Primordial Chaos Beast was. Obviously, Yin Chen wasn't a normal broodmother-type beast, but was much more superior. Broodmother swarms could be crippled once the broodmother itself was killed, but Yin Chen was far more resilient than that. At the very least, nobody on the entire sun could kill it. Its only weakness now was Tianming, having become his lifebound beast.

"What do you think?" Tianming asked.

"Friend, I'm a disciple of the Azuresoul Palace. This place is my origin! My master is the one I respect the most in the world, and also my benefactor. I can't let anything happen to him! I'll never go to the Emyrean Sword Sect, no matter what. Not to mention, they must be underestimating our chief instructor and thinking that he won't do much when the time comes. Taking that into account, we definitely can't let them do as they please. For now, it's best that we go to our master and Aunt Ying. They're experienced elders and should know what we can do about this."

"Alright. Let's go look for them." Tianming had asked Yu Ziqian's opinion to see what he thought about the Emyrean Sword Sect. After all, he wasn't too familiar with the historical ties between the sects.

"You're right, we shouldn't give up on the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect. Let's regroup with the seniors for now."

Though the Emyrean Sword Sect had pessimistically spoken about the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect's situation, Tianming could make his own decisions. No matter how the latter sect was faring, he would never follow Shi Yan. Not to mention, he was a Sky Palace disciple that had both the wondersky realm and Azuresoul Palace, so his reliance on a powerful sect backing him wasn't too high.

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The four of them immediately sought out Long Wanying. Yu Ziqian also used a transmission stone to get Jiang Qingliu to come to them. Long Wanying had just finished bathing and was dressed in a white silk robe. Her long, wet hair was swept to the side, letting out a post-bath fragrance. Her maturity added a few degrees of sensuality to her overall attractiveness.

"Wait a moment." In almost no time at all, she completely dressed and groomed herself, looking as good as she ever did.

Jiang Qingliu arrived quickly. Tianming immediately told them everything he knew, but started with introducing them to his fifth lifebound beast. They were quite shocked to find that he was a quintuple beastmaster, and looked at him as they would a divine miracle. If they knew that he had ten totems as well, they would no doubt faint. After showing off what Yin Chen could do, he went on to tell them about the conspiracy that was being plotted behind the scenes.

"The Northdipper Swordsage and One-strike Slaughterer...." Jiang Qingliu sat down on a chair and blanked out.

"Are you afraid?" Long Wanying asked.

He shook his head

"My master is just sad. He's given his entire life to the sect, yet our chief instructor didn't so much as refuse when asked to cooperate with planning his murder. It's far too cruel," Yu Ziqian said with an indignant look. "I didn't think Gujian Qingshuang would be someone like that. Ye Dongliu's even worse, but then again, he's never liked my master. Even the respected Granny Mu Hua didn't utter a single word of refusal."

"Jiang Qingliu, listen to me. Wallowing in sorrow is pointless. Let's think about how to fix this!" Long Wanying said, completely serious. Ever since the death of her husband, she had relied on herself for everything, and that had helped forge her current hardy and efficient personality. The rest eagerly waited to hear what she had to say. "First, we can't believe them when they say the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect has fallen. That news is colored by the bias of their sect master. We have our own foundations, culture, and will. Even though we're suffering some tough times, completely eradicating us is an impossibility. We've survived countless setbacks since ancient times, and always got back up and rebuilt. If we were facing a threat that could end us, there's no doubt that we would all fight to our deaths to resist it."

She wanted to stress that point far more than any others before she continued breaking down their plan. She couldn't tolerate anyone else so much as entertaining that thought.

Chapter 1296 - Group of Celestial Maiden Halls

"The Sky Palace's alleged stance on this is also really suspicious. There's a lot of things we can suspect about the so-called secret meeting Shi Yan talked about. Even though the Sky Palace has indeed been a little weird lately, there's no way they would go to such extremes and abandon us entirely. No doubt, the Empyrean Sword Sect is just trying to take advantage of our misfortune. Tianming, your beast

reported that they mentioned it was a haphazard plan to fool us, right? That's just as good as proof that suppressing the wargodeans and Blueblood Starocean is merely part of their own ambitions.

"The Emyrean Sword Sect probably just wants to get to the Azurecloud Divine Tree. They might not necessarily step up in battle for the sake of your sect. However, they still want the four of you to become their disciples, so they'll at least appear like they're doing something. But when the situation goes south, they'll just leave the continent altogether and leave the Azuresoul Palace behind to take on the wrath of your enemies. They won't suffer any casualties as a result.

"Thirdly, they want to kill you, Jiang Qingliu! That means they'll take advantage of when you leave the Azuresky Myriadsword Formation. The killer won't be able to enter, otherwise, so all you can do is stay put for now. As long as they want these four disciples, they won't dare to go too far. You can also rest assured that my friends will soon be coming over. Even though they only rank ninth among the other factions, they're sending quite a lot of people over. Even if they can't compare with the Emyrean Sword Sect, they aren't pushovers either. With them here, we also have a say in how things turn out."

She was probably talking about the 'girl friends' she had mentioned back then. It appeared that she was pretty well connected, something that Long Xiqian couldn't compare with, which made her unfit for being the Whitedragon Empress.

"I already know all that. Tianming has been really clear about all this," Jiang Qingliu said with a sigh.

"I know how it feels to be backstabbed by those you trust." Long Wanying gave him a pat on the shoulder.

Though the Emyrean Sword Sect's methods were just par for the course, the truly scary part was how the Azuresoul Palace was silently complicit in all this. No matter how cruel the enemy was, it wouldn't hurt Jiang Qingliu at all. However, Gujian Qingshuang and the others' silence was the thing that truly pained him to think about. He had fought for the sect's glory since his youth, yet now it seemed that all of his effort from back then had been wasted. He had thought that this would be his home, yet he no longer seemed welcome here. That feeling was enough to make many feel despair.

"Should we tell the chief instructor and the other elders about what was said in the Driftsword Halls?" Yu Ziqian asked.

Long Wanying and Jiang Qingliu looked at one another and shook their heads.

"Why?"

"We only heard it because of Tianming's unique ability. That's a trump card that we shouldn't reveal, not to our enemies, nor to our friends. Otherwise they'll only take precautions against it. Not to mention, they've already kept quiet about this, so if we tell them that we know what they're planning, they might feel even worse about it and behave unpredictably. We also can't put our full trust in them any longer. Naturally, the four of you are still safe. Only Jiang Qingliu is under any real threat for now," Long Wanying said.

"Tianming, you should keep listening in on them while we plot our next move. The Emyrean Sword Sect seems to be going all out with their plan, and even if we tell the chief instructor and elders, they might not believe us. Not to mention, the Emyrean Sword Sect can change their minds at any moment. We

shouldn't reveal our hand just yet," Jiang Qingliu said. If they opened up to the elders about this, there would be no salvaging the situation any longer.

"Master...." Yu Ziqian looked at him, his eyes filled with anger. "Damn those Swordbearers! What are those five thinking? They think they can dominate the entire Azurecloud Continent by relying on the power of others? How shameless!"

"Ziqian, you can't put it that way. They hardly have any power to resist. The Emyrean Sword Sect is really pushing hard. Perhaps they're keeping silent so they can strike when they have an opportunity. We'll just see if they take the initiative to send me out. Before that, let's give them the benefit of the doubt," Jiang Qingliu said.

Most of the ones from the Emyrean Sword Sect that had come were grade-one swordpupils and above. In other words, they were tenth-level constellers, at least, that had been cultivating for more than a century. They were much further ahead than disciples like Tianming and the rest, who could do nothing but worry for Jiang Qingliu.

"Don't worry. You won't die as long as I'm here. My friends from the Group of Celestial Maiden Halls are almost here. With them around, nobody will be able to touch you," Long Wanying said confidently.

Tianming didn't know how to react to the name of that sect. Group of Celestial Maiden Halls was the name of the ninth-ranking sect. It wasn't just 'Celestial Maiden Hall', 'Group of' was part of the horrific abomination they called a name. However, nobody could deny the legitimacy of their history and heritage, not to mention that they ranked above Blueblood Starocean. They were one of the few sects among the Myriad Solar Sects that had much higher female membership, so they were often considered a matriarchy. They were based out of the Soulcelestial Continent, from which many of the most famous beauties had originated. Generally, people from the continent were capricious, straightforward, and clear about who they liked and who they scorned. Many astounding women throughout history had come from that continent, and quite a few people wanted to go there for themselves.

"We'll know whether the Sky Palace really had a secret meeting with the other first-rate factions once they arrive," Long Wanying said.

"Who's leading them?" Jiang Qingliu asked weakly.

"My good friend, of course. I haven't seen her for ages. She's really loyal. Unlike the many other sects that didn't answer my calls, thanks to what happened to my sect, she immediately responded to my transmission stone."

"Do you mean Heroine Yan?"

"Yeah. What's wrong? Have some thoughts about her?"

"Not really.... She isn't the most reliable sort, but nobody can doubt her power and loyalty."

"You'd better not tell her that to her face or she'll punch a hole in your stomach."

"Of course. I wouldn't dare. Guess we can expect a good show to play out between the One-strike Slaughterer and Fiendhead Yan. I wonder what kind of havoc those two titans will wreak...."

"She's here to protect you, you know."

"Fine!"

Tianming was relieved to hear that the ninth-ranking sect would be there to help them.

"Tianming, keep watch on them. If you have any questions about cultivation, you can also ask me about it. As for all this plotting and chaos, leave that for when you all mature," Long Wanying said.

"Alright." Tianming nodded. "Aunt Ying, why is Heroine Yan called that? Does she like heroics or something?"

Long Wanying chuckled. "Young man, her name is Yan Nuxia. Nuxia, or 'heroine', isn't her title. It's her actual name. Her actual sobriquet is 'Fiendhead'."

Those from the Group of Celestial Maiden Halls really had a penchant for weird names. So far, those matters wouldn't disrupt Tianming's cultivation progress, so he settled down and did what he should. They weren't the ones at risk here; however, these hidden developments would soon spread across the entire Azurecloud Continent. It would soon be a place where the many sects clashed with the puppets of the celestial orderians in a proxy war. Those that weren't going to participate would keep their eyes open to the developments and plan their next moves accordingly.

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Tianming and the other two were lodging in Yu Ziqian's residence on Fairman Peak. Like many places near the mountain range, it was wide and expansive, filled with many natural sights. No doubt, it was a decent place at which to rest and recuperate. If only Yu Ziqian didn't bring group after group of female disciples there.

"Friend! The pleasure ball I gave you is of the best quality! It's made from the membrane of the petal of a flower called the Grandspring Autumnmoon, so it's incredibly elastic. It can withstand your manly thrusts without breaking, and won't harm the body of your girl! I have a hundred of them, so come get more if you need more!" Yu Ziqian said first thing in the morning.

"Buzz off. Do I look like someone who'd need something like this?!" Though, Tianming stashed the item into his spatial ring while his beasts were out and about before he kicked Yu Ziqian out.

Xian Xian had taken root at the bottom of Fairman Peak and was growing splendidly. Its nine flowers and the additional Eternalbloom were nourished by the nova source around them. Feiling's flower seemed to be growing larger and larger, and looked far more vigorous than before. Tianming talked beside the flower every single day, and it would flutter its petals as if it could hear him. He was missing her more and more with each passing day of peace and could almost feel the human warmth coming from the petals.

Tianming put the ball away, only to hear a chuckling sound from within his lifebound space. Yin Chen had just finished evolving.

"What're you laughing at?"

"I have... to tell... Chicken Bro... about your... pleasure ball..."

Flustered, Tianming said, "Nonsense. There's nothing of that sort."

"If you... want it... kept secret... feed me... more metal," Yin Chen threatened.

"I'll take you to the Soulbreak Mountain immediately!" Tianming hurriedly promised. If Ying Huo found out about it, he would never hear the end of it. Its loud beak would spread the secret to any and everyone in an instant. Soulbreak Mountain was the closest mine to the sect.

"Come out first and let me see how you've evolved." As Yin Chen didn't have a main body, there were no stars to be seen in its eyes. Only it knew how many stars it now had. "What's your star count now?"

"Six thousand... three hundred." It was now a six-star divine beast, on par with the azuresky qilin in terms of classification. Tianming looked at the ninety thousand little eggs that had come out of his lifebound space, but it didn't look like much had changed on the surface. However, Yin Chen's abilities had undergone a transformation.

Chapter 1297 - Bonegnaw Ant

Yin Chen's original form was a silver egg. Apart from being able to change size, it had no other characteristics. Now, ninety thousand of those eggs surrounded Tianming like a galaxy. He recalled that the manna it had consumed was called the Bonesea Silverstar. Looking closely, he could see a hint of bone on the shells of those eggs, making them look even more sinister. The other ten thousand silver eggs were spread out as a hundred thousand cockroaches across the mountain, so they didn't evolve with the rest. However, that wouldn't affect Yin Chen's overall growth. As long as the current ninety thousand could consume more divine ores, they could continue copying themselves. The pre- and post-evolution forms of Yin Chen's bodies could coexist at the same time.

"Do you have any new abilities?" Tianming asked.

"Only one... but it... is very... very strong." It sounded rather confident and proud about it.

"Very well... show it... to me," Tianming said. Yin Chen's speech patterns were infectious. Even Tianming was unconsciously starting to mimic it.

The moment he finished, a silver egg landed in his palm. Then, it began to melt and liquefy before splitting up into countless droplets. Tianming was just about to remark that the droplets were about the size of ants when they actually solidified into ants. Each egg could split into ten thousand silver ants! Bone text manifested on the mandibles of the ants, making them exceedingly sharp. They covered Tianming's entire palm as they crawled around.

Then, all the other eggs around him turned into a total of nine hundred million ants, each one with the texture of bone on their surface. Before Tianming could ask what the ants could do, some of them tore into his palm and began crawling around in his flesh until they bit into his bone.

"Ouch! It hurts." Tianming felt them burrowing into his bones. "What in the world?"

Yin Chen was only demonstrating its abilities. It didn't take long before ten thousand ants left Tianming's body. They lined up neatly on his palm and proudly looked up at Tianming. "It hurt... didn't it?"

"It did hurt, but what's the point?" Tianming said, only to cause all of them to swarm him in an instant. They seemed intent on eating him clean. "Enough! I was just joking!"

Yin Chen was capable, but that temperament! It wasn't a believer in controlling its impulses. Through their telepathic link, Tianming came to learn how terrifying its new form was. They were called bonegnaw ants and, as their name suggested, they gnawed away at bones like nothing. With enough time, they would be able to infest an enemy's body and eat away their entire skeleton.

There was a reason that was incredibly terrifying: even though astral physiques had flesh and organs formed from albi, bones weren't the same. Within each albus was divine will and astralforce. As such, if these ants infested the flesh and organs like they had Tianming's palm, he could easily wipe them out by channeling astralforce through his albi. But it would be a different story if they reached the bone, where astralforce was scarce. It would be really hard to wipe them out then. They could also survive in the bone by using the non-albus parts to protect themselves. To destroy them, the bone would have to be destroyed as well. That was no different from suicide.

Most importantly, the pain that resulted from one's bones being gnawed away was nothing to scoff at. Tianming had only felt a taste of it, yet the thought of experiencing more made him shudder. One could only imagine the onset of terror when millions of such ants bore into their bones and spread across the entire body, including the skull, destroying everything in their path.

The bonegnaw ants reminded Tianming of two techniques. The first was the Imperial Sword Prison, which gave him a trigger that could remotely end someone's life. However, it was much harder to use on people with astral physiques unless they were about the same level as he was. Solarians, for instance, could flare up all of the albi in their body to destroy the technique, though Tianming hadn't really experimented with it before.

The second was Feiling's Latticeheart Curse. She had used it on Huiye Shi and Little You before, both of whom were much weaker than her. It wasn't certain it would work on people whose hearts were composed mainly of albi.

However, Yin Chen told him that no matter how powerful the enemy, as long as a hundred thousand of its bodies had enough time to burrow into their bones, even someone like Jiang Qingliu would never be able to get rid of it. There were metallic elements and minerals within bones, so the ants could make it their home and use it as a material for replication as well. There would be no way of removing Yin Chen from their body unless they were willing to eradicate all of their bones. The prospect of a hundred thousand ants nesting within one's body was more terrifying than the Latticeheart Curse.

"Are you sure it's that impressive? Even someone who's cultivated for centuries can't shake you off?"

"No matter.. how powerful... a hundred... thousand ants... will make... them kneel! If not... enough then... add another... hundred thousand!" The sight of all nine hundred million ants speaking in unison was eerie. Given that there was only one ability unlocked by the six-star universal manna, it was bound to be an impressive one.

"The question is what kind of elite would let a hundred thousand ants burrow into them? You'd be crushed by astralforce before reaching the bone right?" Tianming tested them out and found that they were pretty weak and could be turned back into liquid metal with a single slap. Astralforce could even vaporize them entirely—the ants couldn't turn invisible, after all. While Yin Chen could turn into its locust form and bite the enemy's flesh while enduring astralforce before turning into ten thousand ants to start burrowing, it hardly sounded efficient.

"Just keep... them suppressed... and pressured... for one... hour would... be enough."

In other words, Tianming had to hold the enemy back and draw all the attention he could, making them focus on channeling their astralforce outward. That way, the ants would be able to burrow into them. With an hour or more, the ants could easily burrow to the bone.

Chapter 1298 - Soulbreak Mountain

Once Yin Chen succeeded, any bite from the hundred thousand ants in the bones would cause so much pain that it would cause a breakdown, no matter how powerful someone was. It was far more terrifying than the Latticeheart Curse and had its practical uses. The problem was, if Tianming could suppress someone and heavily wound them for an entire hour, why wouldn't he just kill them outright?

After giving it some thought, he said, "Some people would be far more useful alive than dead, huh...."

The control the ants would afford him would be far higher and firmer than what Feiling's Latticeheart Curse could afford. They could do too many things with it. "Covering the entire Azuresoul Sword Mountain isn't enough. I need to make more bodies for Yin Chen, enough to span the entire continent! That way no secrets can be kept from me!"

With Lingfeng and Xiaoxiao still cultivating, Tianming got Yu Ziqian to come with him to seek out Long Wanying and Jiang Qingliu so they could head to Soulbreak Mountain together.

"Gan Gangan, is it possible to get those folks at Soulbreak Mountain to stop mining for a while and leave the entire place to me?" Tianming asked.

"It should be fine. Let me get my master to talk to the chief instructor about it," Yu Ziqian said.

After a while, Jiang Qingliu came back.

"How is it, Master?"

"The chief instructor looked a little apologetic toward me. The moment I brought it up, he agreed. He also asked me to protect Tianming," Jiang Qingliu said. He had been tasked with keeping an eye on Tianming for his safety. It seemed that Gujian Qingshuang was looking for any excuse to send him out on excursions. Though he didn't make a big deal out of it, he was incredibly disappointed.

"Then you don't have to leave," Long Wanying said.

"I can't be bothered. I'll leave it to you and stay here instead. I'll need to worry about far less that way," Jiang Qingliu said, almost a little unwillingly. After that, he turned and left in a forlorn manner.

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Gujian Qingshuang sent out a transmission stone to Soulbreak Mountain. As it wasn't too far from the Azuresoul Sword Mountain, it was easy to spot from higher elevations.

As Yu Ziqian was in a hurry to familiarize himself with the cauldron, he didn't lead the way for Tianming. Instead, Tianming left the confines of the defensive formation with Long Wanying. As it wasn't too far away, they flew at a leisurely pace and even chatted on the way.

Tianming looked at the beautiful, yet impressionable woman beside him as her hair fluttered in the wind. She inspired deep respect in him. Since coming to Orderia, he had seen all kinds of people. Most of them seemed to have rather impulsive personalities, perhaps due to the hot weather all around the star thanks to the nova source. People as gentle and calm as Long Wanying were few and far between.

"Aunt Ying, I heard about what happened to your husband and son. Was the sun emperor responsible?" Tianming asked.

"Yes...." Her gaze fluttered slightly and she turned to him with a smile. "It's all in the past. Don't bring it up, alright?"

"Okay." Since she wasn't willing to share, Tianming wouldn't pry. However, he could tell that she harbored genuine hate for the sun emperor. It was clear that the branch of the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect she belonged to would never be content with being controlled by the sun emperor. Tianming needed a firm and reliable backer and he wanted it to be them, so he needed them to overcome this predicament.

"Tianming, give us some time. One day, I'll bring you back to the sect," Long Wanying said earnestly.

"Will that become my new home?" he asked.

"Of course." A joyful expression surfaced on her face. "In fact, I have to thank you for putting so much trust in me and my sect."

"Of course. Someone as beautiful as Aunt Ying can't possibly be a bad person," he joked.

"Did your mother not teach you that the more beautiful someone is, the more dangerous they are?" she said with a wink.

"Damn, I almost forgot about it."

"It's fine if you forgot. I'm not a young girl myself anyway, just a vengeful middle-aged woman. I'm no longer as dangerous as that."

"Nonsense. I wouldn't be surprised if people thought you were my younger sister. How are you middle-aged?"

"Now, now, there's such a thing as too much flattery."

"Haha... come to think of it, the Ninedragon Emperor has given me so many treasures. He must trust that I'll help his descendants overcome this predicament together."

"Yeah... it could be a kind of fate. The instant I saw you, I knew I'd like you. And it turned out that you were far more capable than I'd imagined. Sometimes, it's like you're completely different from a child your age. Most crucially, you have a good temperament."

"That's really high praise." Seeing that they were about to arrive, he switched to a more serious tone. "Since we're linked by fate, I'll show you one of my tricks. Tell me how useful you think it can be."

"Now, you're really making me curious."

This was something the Emyrean Sword Sect would never understand. Tianming didn't choose the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect because of Jiang Qingliu, but of his own volition. Everything from Shi Yan's tone and demeanor to the way she talked about the Northdipper Swordsage went against Tianming's principles. Not to mention, the Xuanyuan Dragon Sect was connected to the Archaic House of Xuanyuan from his continent. In fact, after their conversation, Tianming felt closer to Long Wanying than he ever had to Jiang Qingliu.

The two of them finally arrived at Soulbreak Mountain. The thousands of people there were preparing to return to the sect, leaving behind around a hundred to guard the place. The entire mine was protected by a grade-five divine formation, so most normal people wouldn't be able to enter. Gujian Qingshuang had ordered the mines to be cleared out for Tianming.

When Tianming arrived, he was welcomed by a grade-four swordpupil, Wang Yifeng, who was in charge of security around there. Someone of his rank was only subordinate to the six Swordbearers in the entire sect. Tianming told him that he wouldn't need an escort beyond the entrance.

Wang Yifeng nodded and said, "Whitedragon Empress, Tianming, underneath the mines is the lower world. Some wildbeasts hide inside the magma down below and they can be as strong as four- or five-star divine beasts. Please be alert down there."

"No problem. Thank you for the reminder."

"You're welcome." Wang Yifeng was rather accommodating and even gave them a tour around the place. According to him, the mines contained veins of some tens of different ores, all of which were protected by formations. The ores produced there were mainly what the sect used to forge divine artifacts.

Tianming finally saw a vein when he went deep down. The five-colored divine ore was what he had come for.

"Go!" Many metallic locusts emerged from his lifebound space and impatiently charged toward the ores.

"Eeek! Locusts!"

Tianming turned around and saw Long Wanying hiding in a corner far away like a timid girl, her face pale as she gaped at Yin Chen's little bodies. She had seen Yin Chen's cockroach form before, but there weren't nearly as many of them back then.

"Aunt Ying, this is my fifth lifebound beast," Tianming said awkwardly.

"Y-y-you...." Even though she had heard of how terrifying this beast was, seeing it herself was a different matter altogether. Regaining her composure, she asked, "Where's the broodmother?"

"It's too shy to come out," Tianming said.

"Fine. These metal insects look like they don't have any weaknesses at all. Are they eating divine ores?"

"Yes."

Yin Chen's bodies began growing and splitting the more it ate. Now, the ninety thousand eggs could turn into nine hundred million ants, but they would be much smaller than its other forms. In other words, the

number of units didn't really matter, only the volume. Yin Chen could only grow in volume by consuming divine ores and splitting up its existing bodies. Despite how insects might sound disgusting, them being shiny and metallic made them look a little cute. Though the locusts didn't look that appealing, as they were eating, they didn't look horrifying either.

Sounds of metal being crunched rang out nonstop. Tianming only needed to leave some thirty thousand eggs here to munch away and continue multiplying even while he wasn't there. When their numbers grew, some of them could travel back to Tianming at the sect while the others continued growing in number. At this rate, all of the mines here would be completely consumed.

"Aunt Ying, I found some prey," Tianming said.

"Oh, you did mention you were going to show me a trick. Does it have something to do with the prey?"

"Yeah. Let's go!"

Yin Chen was the one who had found it. It had sent out some of its bodies to scout the surroundings and encountered a few wildbeasts on the lower layers.

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The two of them went deeper into the caverns. Soon, they saw a huge beast in metallic black armor climbing out of a magma river. It looked a little like an anteater with red eyes, tough armor, and sharp claws. It instantly spotted Tianming and Long Wanying, though seeing the latter made it instinctively run away from the danger.

Just then, a river of silver emerged from behind Tianming. It was actually ninety thousand locusts. The flapping of their many wings created an ear-piercing sound.

Chapter 1299 - Absolute Badass

Yin Chen swiftly attacked, all ninety thousand locusts instantly turning into metal spiders that spun ninety thousand black threads. Thanks to the enhancement of the bane text, these Infinite Silverthreads were much more reinforced. In an instant, one silver-black net after another landed on the wildbeast, a metal devourer that, like Yin Chen, consumed divine ore to strengthen its scales, claws, and skeleton.

Right as the beast was submerging itself into the magma, the threads pulled tight. Then, the spiders landed on the ground and moved in the opposite direction, dragging the metal devourer out and smashing it to the ground. The beast was about as strong as a three-star constellier, so it was by no means weak, yet it was helpless before Yin Chen.

The threads that tightly pulled together seemed to dig into the beast's hide, causing it to bleed. Then the spiders morphed into countless centipedes that combined into a gigantic one a few thousand meters long, making it even larger than the metal devourer. The giant insect charged at the beast before wrapping its body around it, piercing its countless legs into the beast. The metal devourer's pained cries accompanied the cruel sight, only to be followed by the centipede burrowing itself into the beast's mouth before splitting into a torrent of metal ants that entered its body from its mouth.

The sound of metallic rubbing endlessly echoed; it was a gruesome thing to behold. Putting Long Wanying aside, it was also Tianming's first time seeing Yin Chen fight. This was just the starting form of the insect army. Nobody knew how much more terrifying it could become once it developed even more.

"There hasn't been a lifebound beast the likes of this in the history of Orderia. How did you not let it fight even once in the Voidsy Skirmish?" Long Wanying asked, face filled with awe.

"It was hurt back then." He didn't bother showing how it behaved like a broodmother as it wasn't that kind of lifebound beast in the first place. He would just let others imagine what the imaginary broodmother must look like.

"Stealth, eavesdropping, combat, and binding.... This lifebound beast is a natural-born killing machine."

Tianming had to admit that she had a point. He had thought Xian Xian was already the pinnacle of fighting beasts, yet Yin Chen seemed to supersede even that! At this rate, Tianming would become a one-man army. "Aunt Ying, this still isn't what I wanted to show you today."

As he smiled, the ninety thousand silver eggs turned back into locusts and continued eating divine ores. Before leaving, Yin Chen said, "Mission accomplished!" Those two short words were spoken in a prideful tone. A million bonegnaw ants had already infested the metal devourer's bones.

The beast, seeing that its foe had left, quickly turned and ran, only to suddenly collapse in pain and agony and uncontrollably twitch from its bones being gnawed at. Even though it had only happened for an instant, that was enough to cause it to despair and it no longer dared to move at all. It seemed as if its mind had completely broken down.

It's far more potent than Ling'er's Latticeheart Curse. More importantly, the Latticeheart Curse depended on the level of power of the target, while the bonegnaw ants could seemingly be used on anyone at all, as long as the ants reached the spots not protected by astralforce.

"It looks horrible. What's happening?" Long Wanying asked, inspecting the beast.

Tianming ended the beast's suffering. Wildbeasts basically had no higher intelligence at all, being no different from normal fowl or fish. They focused more on pain in the moment than pain in the long term. He then cut off the foreleg of the beast.

"Aunt Ying, take a look at the bone."

She looked closer and felt her hair stand on end. The bone was filled with many metal ants that flooded out and turned into little silver eggs in Tianming's hand. "This...." She backed off a few steps and blankly looked at the whole thing.

"These are called bonegnaw ants. Once they enter the parts of bone where there's no albi or astralforce to crush them, they can inflict agonizing pain on the enemy by devouring their bones."

"I give up...." She solemnly looked at Tianming. "I thought you were an obedient kid, but it turns out you're far more terrifying than meets the eye."

"Do you think this is a good or bad thing?" Tianming asked, smiling.

"Given the current times of chaos, I couldn't have asked for any better."

"Great." Tianming nodded, then told her more details.

"So you need an enemy to be subdued for an hour for this to work? Wouldn't killing them outright be much easier?" she asked.

"Some people are better left alive, right? There's people whose death can cause problems or inspire others to come after us, but if we can control them and make them work for us, we'll gain a chess piece of our own. Isn't that much better?"

"I see... Tianming, let's try it out on me."

"Try what out?"

"Let it enter my bones."

"It'll hurt a lot, you know."

"It's just a small thing. I want to judge whether that kind of pain is something that can really traumatize someone enough to make them think twice."

While this ability was a little similar to Ghoul King Xue Yi's heartscurge worm, those worms would easily be crushed by astralforce.

"Alright." Tianming sent ten thousand ants into Long Wanying's palm. She easily vaporized them with her albi.

"Looks like they can't survive well in the flesh."

"That's right, which is why we need to heavily wound someone first, then keep them like that for one hour. Even if most of the ants are vaporized, if only ten thousand manage to reach the bone, this will work out."

"Alright. This time, let them burrow straight to my bones." She took a deep breath, her face pale.

"Aunt Ying, you're an absolute badass!" Tianming praised with a thumbs up.

"You little brat, how dare you talk about me like that? I'm not an ass!" She was stunned at how disrespectful he could be to a senior.

Chapter 1300 - A Coffin for Two

"Badass! Not ass," Tianming struggled to explain.

"What does it mean?"

"It means someone who's really straightforward, tough, and impressive!"

Long Wanying looked closely at him and said, "Enough. I don't get your young people slang. Just do it!"

"Alright. Again, it'll hurt."

"I'll be fine."

Ten thousand ants burrowed into her palm without resistance. Her bones were rather hard, and the ants only managed to burrow into them after considerably wearing down their mandibles. Though, it was only the outer layer. The marrow would be much softer. That was proof that with enough time, the ants could even burrow into the bones of an elite like her. Her expression slightly soured from the pain, but the ants hadn't really begun their assault yet. The initial process of burrowing didn't really hurt that much compared to the real thing.

"Let me see if I can vaporize them now." Long Wanying channeled astralforce through her body, basically setting herself aflame and raising her internal temperature, including that of her bones. Astralforce bounced about wildly between her albi. The bonegnaw ants remained near her arm.

Around fifteen minutes later, she asked, "How many are left? I think I still feel some."

"Around six thousand." She had managed to eradicate four thousand in a quarter of an hour.

"Then isn't that pointless? With enough time, they can be completely wiped out.

"No, that isn't the case, Aunt Ying."

"What do you mean?"

"This time, they didn't resist at all. If I'm fighting a real enemy, I would use at least a million ants and invade from all parts of the body. The moment the enemy tries to resist, the ants will start gnawing away. That kind of pain will be enough to make them completely helpless." He kept the part about the ants being able to multiply by consuming bone matter hidden from her.

"Let's give it a try." She continued vaporizing them and the six thousand ants began gnawing away with abandon. "Aaaagh!" Her face instantly paled as her arm shook.

"Stop!" Tianming ordered.

"Out! Get them out!" she said, panting. Her expression was completely different.

Tianming apologetically did as he was told. "I'm sorry, Aunt Ying."

"I'm... I'm fine...." She took a deep breath, but her gaze was much darker than before.

After a while, Tianming asked, "Aunt Ying, are you feeling better now?"

"So ten thousand is enough to control someone... I wonder what kind of pain a million of them can inflict?" she asked with a hoarse voice.

"It might be a hundred or a thousand times what you felt just now, or maybe even more. It can work anywhere where bone is present. The metal devourer just now only suffered it once, but it didn't want to continue living even after it stopped."

"Alright..." She closed her eyes and regulated her feelings. When she opened them again, she looked at her palm and bit her lip. "It was enough to terrify me. If you use this ability well, this can be your trump card. If there's really some key figure we have to control, maybe we can work out a plan. Perhaps I or someone else can defeat them and keep them subdued. However, it'll be really risky and we need perfect timing. I'll cooperate with you, but this can only be used sparingly."

He had a rough idea of what to do based on what she said. "How about the sect master of the Supracloud Sanctuary? How powerful is he compared to you?"

"I should be stronger, but I'll need help if we're to subdue him for an extended time. We'll also need ideal circumstances. Aren't you an ambitious one, targeting someone that high up as your first target?" Long Wanying wondered what kind of plan this junior could be cooking up.

"I want to try making their sect master our pawn. That way the Azuresoul Palace can properly unite the continent," Tianming said.

"Are you... really going to do that?"

"Well, it's just a hypothetical for now, anyway."

"A really daring one, I must say."

"Oh, please, Aunt Ying, it's just a wild plan."

"No. The possibility of succeeding exists. Once it goes through, there's much to be gained." She was regarding him in a new light. "Tianming, I'm a risk-taker like you, so you have my full support on this. Let's work together."

"Then... to pleasant partnerships?" Tianming stretched out his hand to her.

"Ouch! It hurts!" Her hand still slightly stung from the aftereffects. She looked closely at the youth with eyes full of wonder. "Child, what's your wish?"

"Probably becoming the hegemon of the sun. Is that too much to ask?"

"Not really. You truly are a charming and ambitious young man."

"Haha, I was just joking. I just want the people around me to be safe."

"No, your gaze is telling me that you want to conquer."

"Fine...." He stopped denying it. After all, eyes didn't lie.

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After returning to the Azuresoul Sword Mountain, Tianming continued cultivating. Some of Yin Chen's bodies were still consuming divine ores in the mines of Soulbreak Mountain and periodically sending new bodies back to him. As its bodies were those of a Primordial Chaos Beast, increasing their number wouldn't be easy. Yin Chen's estimation was that consuming all the ores there would let it increase in number up to two hundred thousand. In other words, it could become two million cockroaches or two billion bonegnaw ants.

"It should be done within half a month. I wonder how troubled Gujian Qingshuang will be by then. I doubt he'll ever figure out how I managed to clean out his mines in such a short time... hahaha...."

Tianming still needed more universal manna, but the Azuresoul Palace wouldn't be able to afford it. Though, Long Wanying did say that she would try to get more six-star manna from the Saintdragon Emperor, though they had to wait a while for confirmation.

So far, there were no new developments from the Emyrean Sword Sect or Gujian Qingshuang's group. Chu Jingchuan, however, did start meeting with Yu Ziqian, though the disciple didn't hold back at all. As his power as a sixth-level constellier was still there, he sent this top disciple of the Emyrean Sword Sect flying before everyone, further increasing his fame.

One day, the bodies Yin Chen had left near the mountain gates detected a lot of movement. It appeared that the cultivators from the Group of Celestial Maiden Halls had arrived.

"Tianming, come with me to receive our guests!" Long Wanying called to him early in the morning.

He felt like a poster girl being paraded around. "I'm coming!"

There was quite a commotion at the Celestial Welcome Hall. An elegant warship with floral decorations and a festive mood was there, drawing much attention.

"So many goddesses! Looks like my lucky days are here," Yu Ziqian said.

"If you dare mess with them, Yan Nuxia might just turn you into a eunuch," Jiang Qingliu said.

"Is she that terrifying?" Yu Ziqian asked, doubtful.

"You're free to test her."

Soon, Tianming and Long Wanying found themselves outside the Celestial Welcome Hall. A haughty female voice said, "Strawberry, Strawberry, where are you?"

Long Wanying enthusiastically waved her hand. "Tangerine, I'm here! Tangerine!"

Tianming didn't know what to make of those nicknames.

"Is there somebody called Banana?" Xiaoxiao asked weakly.

"What? Do you like to eat bananas?" Tianming asked.

The atmosphere was weird.

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There was a floating white stone staircase surrounded by golden flames left and right. The flames took the forms of gigantic flaming fiendgods; they were probably totems. Some said that totems were manifestations of eternal deities that actually existed, heavenly being totems in particular. Those deities existed somewhere in the boundless cosmic aether, granting their powers to totemancers who had strong faith in them through their bane-rings. There was always a main deity of a totem somewhere. Though these titans were composed of flames, it felt like they were really there.

Footsteps sounded out from the stairs. Though they were soft, they seemed to completely cover the sound of crackling flames. A blonde-haired man was ascending the flight of stairs, covered entirely in flames himself. However, his body wasn't as gigantic as before; instead, it looked to be human sized. Even so, his aura was as boundless as ever. Each of his eyes looked like nova sources that could burn through everything, even the mind.

Eventually, he reached the end of the floating island where there was a glass-like platform. There was a reddish gold coffin ahead of him. It was only around two meters long and a meter and a half wide, being a coffin made for two. Many divine ordered patterns could be seen across it. They turned into patterns of flames, making the coffin red hot.

"I'm back," the sun emperor said with a smile. He removed his clothes, revealing his fine musculature that shone almost like gold. Then, he opened the coffin slowly. Out of it came flames and smoke that took the form of many beast heads. The sun emperor stepped into the coffin and shifted to its left before closing the lid back up. The instant the lid closed shut, the flames began dissipating somewhat. Someone could be seen lying next to him. The person had a similar physique to him and had a head of red hair.