

Timescape 251

Chapter 251: I'll Beat Him to the Punch

As momentous events played out in Revered Ancient, Xu Qing was making his way through the city ruins, with no idea about what was happening so far away. He did notice that the sky seemed a bit more red than normal, but other than that, it seemed like an ordinary day. That redness was so faint it would be hard for anyone to connect it with anything happening in Revered Ancient. After merely glancing up, Xu Qing looked back at the ruined buildings he was traveling through.

The architectural style of these buildings was different from any of the other cities Xu Qing had been in. They were modular and orderly, and from above, the layout of the building structures generally resembled the character 井. There were big structures and small ones, tall ones and short ones. But they were all very neat and organized, making the entire place seem like it had been planned out with much thought.

Despite how the entire city had apparently existed since ancient times, it still seemed like a luxurious and fancy place. The tiles on the ground all had lavish designs on them, and many buildings still had spirit stones set into the walls. The streets were paved with white jade, and the canals that existed in the city were lined with gold.

That said, all of the beauty of the city was now marred by encroaching mutagen, and had lost much of its luster. Because of the erosion, there wasn't much value left.

However, anyone who looked at it would be able to imagine the city's former grandeur. After all, with some imagination one could ignore the animal droppings, the silt, the creeping vermin, or the vicious-looking weeds everywhere.

But in the end, this city was a shell of its former self, with only bits of evidence left to harken to its past. For instance, Xu Qing did see some crumbling steles with the words Violet Cyan on them.

According to the map I found in the Immortal Bathing Cistern, this place was once the mansion of the crown prince of the Sovereign Kingdom of Violet and Cyan. That means the crown prince himself lived here.

Xu Qing walked along through the silt, leaving footsteps behind in the weeds, and keeping his eyes on everything around him. Eventually he spotted cultivators in some of the buildings.

There weren't many. But based on the information he'd read back in the sect, this place was a common destination for cultivators who were out exploring. They came from all over South Phoenix. Some came from powerful sects, others were rogue cultivators. There were immense riches to be found in Forbidden by the Phoenix, and therefore, there were always people willing to brave the dangers to find them.

In a chaotic world like this one, people fought over everything. And that was especially true of people from small sects and organizations, or rogue cultivators. The only way for them to improve their cultivation bases and battle prowess was by means of bloodshed. And to do that, they had to risk their lives.

Cultivators from big sects had a similarly bitter life. But it was different for those in a weaker position.

These ruins had been here for so long that they were relatively safe. And that was why it had become something of a rest stop for cultivators hunting in Forbidden by the Phoenix.

Xu Qing attracted some attention when he arrived. However, most people just glanced at him then looked away. Cultivators who came to this place were a cautious lot, and kept their guard up against others. That fit in line perfectly with Xu Qing's personality. As he walked along, he kept an eye out for dangers from all sides. He also started moving faster and faster.

Before long, he saw a familiar-looking temple up ahead. The architectural style was different from the other buildings. The Supreme Vastness daoist temple was circular. In fact, looking at it from directly above, it looked like a perfect circle in the middle of the ruins. It had obviously been an amazing structure in the past. [1]

Xu Qing looked at it closely as he approached. From a distance, he could see a few dozen cultivators from various species gathered outside of it. Some of them gathered in groups of two or three. Others stuck to themselves. Though all were sitting cross-legged outside of the temple, they were able to see inside.

Most of them were in the great circle of Qi Condensation, but a few were Foundation Establishment cultivators with no life flame. There were two old men who appeared to be in the one-flame level. Despite their relatively high level, it made sense for them to be here, as it was still possible that they could gain enlightenment of the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber. If they did, they would reach heaven in a single bound and make amazing progress.

On the other hand, it seemed strange for people in the great circle of Qi Condensation to be here.

However, after looking them over, Xu Qing realized the reality of the situation. When he arrived, many in the crowd looked over at him with greed and malevolence. However, after sensing his aura, they looked away in alarm. At the same time, it was possible to see rotting and shriveled remains in the surrounding underbrush.

This was a Supreme Vastness daoist temple, where one could gain enlightenment of the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber. But this was also Forbidden by the Phoenix, where the weak were the prey of the strong, and unscrupulous and vicious people abounded.

Given how famous the Supreme Vastness daoist temples were, it wasn't uncommon for cultivators to come visit. If they were strong enough, they would be fine. But if they weren't, then they would die here and lose everything. It didn't matter how the people outside the temple presented themselves, it was obvious to Xu Qing that they were there for nefarious purposes.

Taking note of all that, he continued walking.

Many of the people outside the temple exchanged glances, but none of them dared to make a move on him. People camping out at a location like this would obviously come prepared, and all of them could tell that Xu Qing wasn't a person who should be trifled with.

As Xu Qing neared the temple, he spotted statues inside that seemed both familiar and strange.

Seated cross-legged in front of one of those divine likenesses was Master Shengyun. His golden robe was dazzlingly eye-catching, as was the scintillating umbrella that floated over his head. His eyes were closed, and he emanated a coldness that made it seem like he felt all emotions to be superfluous.

Xu Qing stopped in place, and his guard went up even further. He hadn't paid very close attention to Master Shengyun back in the sect, and was surprised to find him here seeking enlightenment.

Though Xu Qing's cultivation base was high, he preferred to go into conflicts knowing he could crush his opponent. Unless he was sure of that, he would rather avoid fighting. Despite how enticing Master Shengyun's life lamp was, after some thought, Xu Qing decided it wouldn't be good to try to take it with force. Furthermore, he decided that instead of going into the temple, he would find a spot outside where he could see the statue, and try to seek enlightenment from there.

Unfortunately, the tree may wish for quiet, but the wind will not subside.

Master Shengyun noticed him.

He opened his eyes and stared emotionlessly at Xu Qing outside of the temple, his gaze like two blades. Without saying a single word he waved his right hand. Instantly, the air in front of him rippled and distorted, sending out fluctuations in all directions. As dust swirled up, a stone sword took shape in front of him. The sword pulsed with astonishing energy, and spat out sparks of sword energy that hissed as they landed on the ground and dug out furrows.

Outside the temple, the two one-flame old men were visibly shocked, and started backing away.

They knew full well that, given their own level of strength, there was no way they could fight someone capable of forming a sword out of nothing like that. A single blow would likely kill them. The other cultivators in the area also backed away as fast as they could.

At the same time, the sword in the temple swiveled until its tip pointed at Xu Qing. Then it shot toward him. It pierced through the air with a high-pitched whine, leaving behind a wake of fluctuations as it headed in the direction of Xu Qing's forehead.

Xu Qing's expression turned grim as he reached out and flicked the sword with his right index finger. A pop rang out, and the stone sword collapsed, the pieces falling to the ground in front of him. A shockwave blasted out, ripping up weeds and sending dirt flying everywhere.

Thankfully for the other cultivators in the area, they had reacted quickly enough that they managed to avoid being caught up in the blast.

As dirt rained down everywhere, Xu Qing looked coldly into the temple at Master Shengyun.

"What was that for?" Xu Qing said.

Master Shengyun's expression was the same as ever, as if all of this was going exactly as he wished. If he wanted to do something, he would do it. If he wanted to kill someone, he would kill them. As far as he was concerned, humans from South Phoenix weren't even worth thinking about.

Before, he hadn't known anything about Xu Qing. But after Xu Qing crushed Sima Ling, Master Shengyun took a slight interest in him. That said, he didn't know what he looked like, and had planned to let him get a bit stronger until it was convenient to make proper use of him. During the time in which he had been seeking enlightenment, he got messages from other disciples in the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect warning him about Xu Qing. That was the first time he saw an image of what Xu Qing looked like.

His attack right now had been casual, yet it was still surprising to him that it hadn't hurt Xu Qing at all. All of a sudden, he was thinking it might be a good idea to kill Xu Qing and absorb him.

Then he considered that doing it right now might not result in the best flavor, and thus he said, “You’re the one who took advantage of my absence to snatch my Junior Brother? Go back, kowtow to him three times, and then set him free. Let me make it clear, Xu Qing. For every hair on his head that you harm, I’ll cut off one of your fingers. No exceptions.” [2]

Having said this, he ignored Xu Qing and went back to meditating.

Meanwhile, the crowd gathered outside the temple looked on with bated breath as they watched Xu Qing and Master Shengyun. All of them had long since identified who Master Shengyun was, and had even experienced some of his domineering ways. And now they knew how mighty he was when he took action. Thanks to what Master Shengyun had just said, they now knew who Xu Qing was.

“Xu Qing from the Seven Blood Eyes echelon?”

“He’s a chosen from Seven Blood Eyes....”

“So what if he is? Even he has to bow his head in the presence of people from the Revered Ancient mainland.”

Xu Qing stood in the entrance of the temple studying Master Shengyun’s throat, and then his life lamp. Cold light shone in Xu Qing’s eyes, as well as killing intent.

Within the black iron skewer, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior felt the urge to gasp repeatedly, but suppressed the feeling. More than ever he felt like Master Shengyun was the real deal.

In the books I’ve read, what usually happens is that the enemy bullies the main character into a corner. Finally, the main character can’t take it anymore and has no choice but to fight back with deadly force. Those scenes are awesome, though I admit they get old after a while.

But the Fiendish Xu is different. With him, if an enemy simply shows a teeny bit of killing intent, he’ll take it as a threat to his life. The enemy doesn’t even have to attack him, and his own killing intent will skyrocket.

Xu Qing had no way of knowing what the patriarch was thinking about. But he did know that he and Master Shengyun weren’t on the same level in terms of battle prowess. Because of that, he didn’t do anything impulsive. Turning, he found an appropriate position to sit down cross-legged, and without revealing what he was doing, started lacing the area with poison.

He had already decided to kill Master Shengyun.

After all, when he arrested that Soaring Cloud Sword Sect disciple at that Night Dove headquarters, he hadn’t just harmed some hairs on his head. He had smashed him into the ground and broken most of the bones in his body. Based on what Master Shengyun had said just now, if a hair was worth a finger, then a bunch of broken bones had to be worth a life.

In that case, I’ll kill you before you kill me! Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed as his killing intent built. However, he didn’t reveal it in his eyes. After putting down his poison, he looked around to see if there were any dao protectors in the area.

Seeing what was happening, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior thought, The Fiendish Xu is lacing the area with poison. That’s what he usually does when he gets ready to beat the enemy to the punch! This is going to be a battle between real deal main characters from two different novels!

Chapter 252: Blades Clash

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior trembled, and not even he was sure if it was from fear or excitement. All he knew was that if Xu Qing was going to kill someone, then unless the opponent had some sort of absolutely astonishing technique, Xu Qing wouldn't stop until they were dead. It was that way even with the strongest enemies Xu Qing had fought in the past.

From within the iron skewer, the patriarch could sense how mighty Master Shengyun was. What was more, he had overheard the Violent Crimes Division constables talking about how amazing he was. However, he wasn't in the position to be contemplating such things. There was only one thing that mattered to him....

Given the Fiendish Xu's personality, if he died in this fight, he would make sure to blow up the iron skewer before he went out.

Because of this Master Shengyun, the Fiendish Xu is in a killing mood. Because of this Master Shengyun, the Fiendish Xu might blow me up! Because of this Master Shengyun, my life is in danger! It's all because of Master Shengyun. Master Shengyun, you're going to get me killed!!

Having reached this point in his train of thought, the patriarch's eyes were bloodshot as he glared out of the skewer at Master Shengyun.

The shadow could sense the fluctuations coming from Xu Qing and the patriarch. It had recovered much of its intelligence recently, and after sensing what was going on, was getting nervous.

It was already evening, and Xu Qing had been surreptitiously placing poison everywhere around him. It was odorless and scentless, but it was still there, pulsing. The reality was that none of the poison he was putting around was very dangerous. However, by adding one specific primer, they would transform into something incredibly dangerous.

Obviously, Xu Qing didn't think that would be enough to wipe out Master Shengyun. Back in Seven Blood Eyes, Master Shengyun had unleashed six-flame battle prowess, which was so terrifying he had been able to fight with the elders of the First Peak. Most importantly, Xu Qing wasn't sure if six-flame battle prowess was all that Master Shengyun was capable of unleashing. What was more, he still wasn't sure where Master Shengyun's dao protectors were.

Given Master Shengyun's personality, I doubt the dao protectors are in hiding. The most likely possibility is that he sent them away. They're probably out in Forbidden by the Phoenix on some task. But what?

After more thought, Xu Qing decided it would be better to be safe than sorry. He would spend some more time assessing the situation, and wouldn't do anything rash. The best thing would be to keep lacing the area with poison in the hopes of increasing his ultimate chances of success.

At the same time, he released five bottles of his beetles.

However, what happened after that caused Xu Qing's guard to go up even further. The umbrella over Master Shengyun's head had defensive properties that the beetles were incapable of penetrating. All they could do was gather around him.

My life lamp protects my soul... Does Master Shengyun's life lamp protect his fleshly body?

Time passed. Evening went and night came. The moon appeared in the dome of heaven, casting moonlight down on the lands below.

After checking the poisons in the area, Xu Qing was trying to decide what other poisons to add when suddenly his expression flickered.

The cultivators outside the temple were reacting to the fall of night. Their expressions were more serious, but at the same time, some of them seemed to be looking forward to something.

Wondering what was going on, Xu Qing looked over at one of the one-flame old men.

When Xu Qing's gaze fell on him, the old man shivered. After a moment of hesitation, he stood, bowed to Xu Qing, then quietly said, "Fellow Daoist Xu, would you be interested in knowing more about the mysteries of the Supreme Vastness daoist temples?"

Hearing this, Xu Qing's expression remained neutral. The information back in the sect wasn't very detailed regarding any so-called mysteries. He nodded to the old man.

Without any hesitation, the old man went into a detailed explanation. "Fellow Daoist Xu, for many years there wasn't anything special about this Supreme Vastness daoist temple. But four years ago, it changed. That's why there are more people here than normal.

"What's different is that, when night falls and the moonlight enters the temple, the statues will perform a saber dance. Anybody can watch it. But up to now, no one has gained any enlightenment from it, with the exception of that one almighty person...." The old man's eyes flitted to Master Shengyun.

"Virtually every night so far, he's benefited. The rest of us just fail over and over again, but we all still hope that we might have some success. Even a little bit would make people like us a lot stronger."

Xu Qing looked thoughtfully into the temple. Moonlight fell down, covering everything, and eventually reaching into the temple to shine on the divine likenesses there. As Xu Qing watched, one of the statues in the temple started moving.

It started slowly. Then the statue moved with more fluidity. As it did, sabers appeared in the air around it, hardly discernible, as though they were illusions. It only lasted for a brief moment, and then everything in the temple went back to normal.

Surprised, Xu Qing focused more closely on the statue, and before long, could see it moving again, and could sense the saber projections around it. To most people, the saber projections would be so blurry they couldn't see them, except for brief moments when they became clear.

But because of Xu Qing's previous enlightenment of the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber, he could see them quite clearly.

The moment they became clear to him, an illusory heavenly saber suddenly appeared over his head. It was none other than the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber he had gained enlightenment of. As he watched the scene playing out in front of him, the heavenly saber formed, and then glittered brightly as though it were undergoing a transformation.

Specifically, it was growing more corporeal. The original heavenly saber had been illusory, but now, starting with the hilt, it was glittering brightly and turning more solid. As the effect spread, it filled the body of the saber, and Xu Qing's Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber got closer to being true and real.

The onlookers were all visibly stunned. At the same time, Master Shengyun, who sat cross-legged in the temple, also had a heavenly saber above his head, similar to Xu Qing's.

The only difference was that his was green and Xu Qing's was violet!

When the two heavenly sabers appeared, the onlookers let loose shocked exclamations. Many of them started panting in astonishment.

Truth be told, it had been the same with Master Shengyun every day recently, and the onlookers had become used to it. But for the same scene to repeat with Xu Qing was nothing short of astonishing. Everyone knew what it meant; both of these people had previously gained enlightenment of the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber. And even more spectacular, both were gaining enlightenment of a second saber move.

"This Xu Qing... is just what you would expect of a chosen from Seven Blood Eyes!"

"Both of them are gaining enlightenment. It looks like their sabers are transforming from illusory to corporeal. The moment the process completes, they'll have full enlightenment."

"I wonder who will succeed first. Whichever one does, then the other, no matter how far along they are in the process, will lose their chance to finish."

After being here days observing, the people in the crowd knew a bit about the Supreme Vastness daoist temple. Other than whispering a bit among themselves, none dared to do anything devious. Just because someone was gaining enlightenment of the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber didn't mean that they had lost their ability to stay on guard and kill enemies. Anyone who tried to disturb such a person would likely end up dead.

The people outside the temple could tell that Master Shengyun's saber seemed more fully formed than Xu Qing's. In fact, his was about fifty percent complete.

Xu Qing had come later, and therefore hadn't had enough time to seek enlightenment. His was only at the ten percent level.

Xu Qing also could tell that difference, and realized that he needed to speed up his enlightenment. That said, though he valued the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber, there were other temples. Furthermore, you needed enlightenment of seven saber moves for it to count as an imperial-class technique. In other words, if he didn't succeed here, it wouldn't be too worrisome.

What he was more concerned about was figuring out the best way to attack Master Shengyun while he was seeking enlightenment.

He has four life flames, and the battle prowess of six flames. However... his biggest weakness is his 120th dharma aperture....

Xu Qing had been able to do some first-hand research into dharma apertures during his clashes with the chosen from the Seven Sect Coalition.

Ideally I should wait until I place even more poison in the area. That way, when the poison finally takes effect, it'll be even stronger. Looking away from Master Shengyun, Xu Qing patiently continued waiting. Obviously, the process of enlightenment wasn't going to be completed in only a few days. Also... his dao protectors aren't here. That means I have to watch out for attacks from all directions.

With such thoughts on his mind, he stayed more on guard than ever.

Meanwhile, Master Shengyun looked over at him from within the temple. His face was expressionless as he noted the saber image above Xu Qing's head, but his eyes became as cold as if he was looking at a dead person. How could a backyard chicken dare to compare itself to a splendid phoenix!

He no longer intended to let Xu Qing get any stronger. Since Xu Qing was competing with him for the same destined opportunity, then he would kill him before continuing. It wouldn't take that much time.

Master Shengyun didn't care at all that Xu Qing was in Seven Blood Eyes' echelon. He had also noticed the unusual redness in the sky earlier, and given his general understanding of things, he realized... that the coalition was making a move to the north.

In a moment of glory for the Seven Sect Coalition, there was no way Seven Blood Eyes would complain about one member of their echelon getting killed.

Master Shengyun was the kind of person who acted on his impulses, so once his killing intent sparked to life, it was without the slightest hesitation that he stood and started walking out of the temple.

His 120 dharma apertures roared to life like furnaces, and his life flames raged. A glittering, starlike umbrella appeared overhead, sending seven-colored light out in all directions. And behind him, a green-bodied red-tailed ravagemist bird appeared, letting loose a piercing cry to heaven. Six-flame battle prowess raged in all directions, causing wild winds to whip about, and resulting in loud rumbling like heavenly thunder.

The onlookers didn't qualify to even react to what was happening, and couldn't see the speed that resulted from six-flame power.

However, Xu Qing looked up. He also couldn't see six-flame speed; all in all, the difference between five and six flames was just as massive as the difference between three and four. However, Xu Qing was surrounded by poison. And Master Shengyun was surrounded by beetles. Because of that, Xu Qing could detect what was happening.

Chapter 253: The Weakness of Four Flames

Xu Qing had no experience clashing with the power of six flames. But he had a good idea what it would be like. He knew that with every additional flame in Foundation Establishment, one's battle prowess would experience heaven-shaking, earth-toppling advances. In fact, in his experience, each additional flame was like the difference between Qi Condensation and Foundation Establishment, an entire cultivation realm.

Xu Qing wasn't sure if there were other worlds beyond the starry sky that he could see, and if there were, if the species there practiced cultivation. If they did, was there still a Foundation Establishment level that involved cultivating life flames? Was there a monumental difference with each additional flame?

All he knew was that there were big differences between each stage of Foundation Establishment here. For example, four-flame power could crush three-flame power. Unless the latter had some astonishing treasure, they would die for sure. It wasn't even possible to overwhelm a higher level of power by using numbers, like it was with Qi Condensation.

Similarly, six-flame battle prowess could crush five-flame power.

Xu Qing knew that Master Shengyun was moving so quickly it wasn't even possible to see him clearly.

With his own three life flames burning, and his life lamp, plus the blessing of the golden crow to his fleshly body, he was just barely able to make out a string of afterimages. Then Master Shengyun was right in front of him.

Next, a terrifying wave of force hit him, something he couldn't possibly block. A huge boom rang out, and Xu Qing tumbled backward like a kite with its string cut, his face pale, blood spraying out of his mouth. That said, he had no major injuries.

The moment Master Shengyun launched his attack, a field of light appeared around Xu Qing, creating a defensive barrier that blocked the power of the six-flame attack!

"So you have a Nascent Soul defensive item," Master Shengyun said coolly as he pulled his hand back. "I can tell it's weak, though. How much longer will it last?" [1]

A large furrow had been dug in the ground by Xu Qing as he flew backward. Several dozen meters away, he finally stopped moving, then looked up coldly at Master Shengyun. Now Xu Qing had experienced how strong Master Shengyun was. It actually felt similar to the Gold Core Seastar chieftain, before Bai Li had revealed himself. [2]

It was the same level of speed, and the same type of explosive power. No wonder the First Peak highnesses had been defeated so easily. Obviously, if that fight had taken place outside of Seven Blood Eyes, then those highnesses wouldn't just have been defeated. They would have been killed.

Xu Qing knew that his own five-flame battle prowess wasn't going to help. Once he lost the jade pendant given to him by Master Sixth, he would die for sure. The violet crystal would never be able to heal him fast enough.

It wasn't just the six-flame power that was terrifying. Xu Qing's beetles were still unable to get through Master Shengyun's life lamp defenses to burrow into his body.

Does that mean that six-flame power... is basically the same as Gold Core power? The same as a single heavenly palace?? Xu Qing thought back to the information about Sima Ru from the House of Grue Hunters, and how it had mentioned heavenly palaces. [3]

Right now, he didn't know very much about the Gold Core level, but he did know that it involved more than just one heavenly palace. For example, Sima Ru was in seclusion trying to form a second heavenly palace.

In the Gold Core level, one palace is equivalent to six flames?

If an observer could have been privy to Xu Qing's thoughts, they would be very surprised. Despite the circumstances, Xu Qing didn't seem worried at all, and was actually spending time thinking about Gold Core and heavenly palaces.

"Very amusing. You're thinking about something? Well, let's see how long your defenses will hold out." Expression placid, Master Shengyun strode forward, yet simultaneously moved with shocking speed. He was nothing but a blur as he arrived in front of Xu Qing and then thrust his palm out.

This time, Xu Qing prepared to fight back. The moment the palm started moving, he tapped into all 92 of his dharma apertures, causing radiant light to blaze. He also performed a double-handed incantation gesture and then pushed his hands out. As he did, a discarnate soul in one of his dharma apertures shot out in front of him and turned into a weapon.

Rumbling sounds echoed. However, Master Shengyun was just too fast. He suddenly appeared next to Xu Qing, then calmly waved his hand. A tremor passed through Xu Qing, and the jade pendant from Master Sixth vibrated. At the same time, he was thrown backward again.

However, the discarnate soul he had released seemed to move on instinct as it shot toward Master Shengyun with voracious madness.

"Too weak," Master Shengyun said, shaking his head. He waved his hand again to wipe the discarnate soul out of existence.

However, as soon as his hand made contact with the discarnate soul, the soul's voraciousness skyrocketed and it burrowed into the hand. That particular discarnate soul was the Gruegloom that Xu Qing had been tormenting ever since capturing it. That mysterious species had the ability to possess people. And Master Shengyun's life lamp was protecting his physical body, not his soul. Because of that, the Gruegloom's soul was able to burrow right into him, where it then prepared to consume him.

"Well, isn't this interesting." Master Shengyun's facial expression still hadn't changed. However, the ravagemist bird behind him stretched its wings, looked scornfully at Master Shengyun, and then suddenly pecked at him viciously!

Because it was illusory, that pecking attack went right into Master Shengyun. And then an agonized shriek rang out as the discarnate soul of the Gruegloom that Xu Qing had tormented for so long was instantly swallowed up by the ravagemist bird! It was now possible to see a black hole inside the bird, which sucked the Gruegloom soul into it and trapped it there, all while it screamed piteously.

During that entire time, Master Shengyun's expression remained completely neutral. It was as if the discarnate soul wasn't worth anything to him. Looking over at Xu Qing with blood dribbling down the sides of his chin, Master Shengyun shook his head.

"Anything else you want to try? If not, then all we're waiting for are your defenses to fall. After that, you're dead."

"You talk a lot," Xu Qing said, wiping the blood from his chin.

Master Shengyun didn't respond. He lifted his right foot, then brought it down.

However, right at that exact moment, a tremor passed through him. For the first time, his facial expression changed, and looked down to see that there was a dark shadow on the last of his 120 dharma apertures. The shadow seemed like it was alive. With maddening speed, it spread out to completely cover his 120th dharma aperture. And it succeeded!!

The moment that dharma aperture was covered, Master Shengyun's fourth life flame suddenly began to dim. At the same time, the light surrounding him became a bit less bright. That darkening effect wasn't done. Over the space of three breaths of time, his fourth life flame completely went out!! When it came to the 120 dharma apertures, every set of 30 was used to light a life flame. That was a standard law of magic in the Foundation Establishment level. There were no exceptions. If you only had 119 dharma apertures, you couldn't sustain four life flames!

This was the entire reason for Xu Qing's confidence in not only being able to face Master Shengyun, but also spending time thinking about Gold Core and heavenly palaces.

After studying the four-flame chosen from the Seven Sect Coalition for so long, he had come to the conclusion that this was their biggest weakness! All you had to do was get rid of a single dharma aperture, and their battle prowess would drop down by the level of an entire life flame.

His shadow could extinguish life flames, so even if Master Shengyun's cultivation base had been higher, there was no question as to whether it could extinguish one of his dharma apertures.

This had been Xu Qing's plan all along!

As the shadow stuck to the dharma aperture like glue, making sure it was absolutely covered, Master Shengyun's four life flames became three.

His expression instantly turned grim. It didn't matter if it was the ravagemist bird, or his burning life lamps, he simply could not drive away the shadowy grue. He already knew where the shadow came from. It had been concealed in the discarnate soul. That was how it entered him without him realizing it. And while the ravagemist bird got rid of the discarnate soul, the shadow remained.

"This trick..." Master Shengyun said, glaring at Xu Qing with killing intent, "is supposed to be impressive or something? You're weak! And you'll always be weak. Maybe I have one less flame, but that's still the power of five! And that's enough to crush you!" Master Shengyun's five life flames burned hot as he shot toward Xu Qing.

Now, however, Xu Qing didn't bother to mask the killing intent in his eyes. And that was because his opponent was now moving at the same speed he was. All of a sudden, Xu Qing burst into motion.

He moved like a bolt of lightning, piercing through the air in the blink of an eye to slam into Master Shengyun.

Master Shengyun's eyes narrowed in surprise at how fast Xu Qing was. As his right palm descended, Xu Qing's eyes turned cold and he let loose a fist strike. As the two exchanged a blow, Master Shengyun snorted coldly, performed a quick incantation gesture, and then flicked his sleeve. Thrumming with strength, he shoved his index finger toward Xu Qing's eye.

Xu Qing's left hand flashed in an incantation gesture, and a dagger materialized in it, which he slashed toward Master Shengyun's throat.

Rumbling sounds rang out as the two fought.

Master Shengyun's right foot swept through the air toward Xu Qing, but Xu Qing evaded it, then bent his knee and launched it toward Master Shengyun's chest. At the same time, he waved both hands in front of him, causing balefire to erupt out.

Eyes glinting sharply, Master Shengyun threw both of his hands out in front of him and the two smashed into each other. Massive booms rang out in all directions, causing heaven and earth to shake violently!

None of the observers were able to see exactly what Xu Qing and Master Shengyun were doing. All they could do was hear the terrifying rumbling of the fight, and watch as numerous buildings in the area were crushed into rubble. It was incomparably intense.

A moment later, Master Shengyun appeared in the air. Falling back several dozen meters, he glared at Xu Qing with a suspicious look in his eye.

"There's something suspicious going on with you!"

Chapter 254: Fighting Like the Son of a God

At almost the same time that Master Shengyun opened his mouth, Xu Qing arrived with his fist flying. As rumbling sounds filled the air, Master Shengyun threw his hand out to block the attack. Flying backward, his eyes glowed even brighter.

"I want you to show me exactly what it is about you that's so suspicious!"

Xu Qing didn't respond. Eyes burning with more killing intent than ever, he once again closed in on Master Shengyun. The two clashed, and a boom echoed out.

Using some unknown technique, Master Shengyun caused his entire body to glow with brilliant golden light, forming a sea around him that forced Xu Qing to back away. Within that sea of light were numerous glittering magical symbols that formed an attack against Xu Qing. The symbols alone were dangerous, but they linked together to create a power of sealing, casting a glow on the dome of heaven and making the lands shake. As the sea of light spread out, a bit of excitement flickered in Master Shengyun's eyes. He already had a guess about what was going on with Xu Qing, he just needed proof to confirm his theory.

He performed an incantation gesture with his left hand while taking three steps forward, with each step making a different sign with his fingers. With his first step, an immense sinister wind kicked up around him, bringing frigid coldness with it. With his second step, streams of green light formed out of nowhere, rapidly forming an embryonic sword in front of him. With his third step, the embryonic sword grew larger. From the size of a palm, it rapidly extended, reaching a length of three meters, then 30 meters, and soon, 300 meters. It was completely green, partly illusory and partly invisible, and radiated a stupefying energy that could shake one down to the soul.

After those three steps were complete, Master Shengyun's dharma force was as deep and resounding as ever. His eyes shone, and he raised his right hand and pointed at Xu Qing, while speaking in a voice that merged with the surrounding sinister wind.

“Jade Emperor Beheads Souls!”

A sea of flames raged around Xu Qing, filled with massive waves that shattered the magical symbols. But seeing the huge green sword, his pupils constricted.

The sword started moving as quickly as lightning, slashing right toward him.

He evaded, but the sword was locked onto his soul, making it impossible to dodge. Xu Qing’s eyes glittered sharply as he abandoned any attempt to evade. Hands flashing in a double-handed incantation gesture, he tapped into the entire flaming world inside him to send fire shooting upward.

The sword arrived. Completely bypassing his fleshly body, it shot inside of him, shrinking down to a tiny size as it did. Then, it became a soul-beheading force that swept right toward his soul.

At exactly the same moment, the life lamp inside Xu Qing created a black umbrella that spread out protectively in front of his sea of consciousness. Xu Qing didn’t bother to try to hide what was happening. He knew that in an all-out fight with Master Shengyun, there was no way he could deceive his opponent into thinking he didn’t have a life lamp. Unusual levels of strength couldn’t come out of nowhere, and also, his shadow was using all its strength to keep Master Shengyun’s dharma aperture covered. Concealing his life lamp was pointless. It made more sense to simply reveal it, then think of a way to kill his opponent.

When the soul-beheading sword hit the black umbrella, the green sword proved absolutely incapable of withstanding the force. It shattered like an egg hitting a boulder, becoming innumerable green sparks that showered down. Xu Qing forced them out of his body.

From a distance, it looked like countless green dots of light erupting from inside him, while at the same time, an umbrella appeared over his head. The black canopy radiated a gruish aura and was covered with black fire that was currently dripping green at the edges. As Xu Qing hovered in the air in those circumstances, his violet robe swaying, it was almost impossible not to look at him.

All of the surrounding cultivators were astounded. It wasn’t just Master Shengyun who was witnessing what was happening. The other cultivators could see it very clearly.

“Life lamp!!!”

Master Shengyun’s eyes went wide, and waves of shock battered his heart. His heart pounded harder than ever before in his life, as he was overwhelmed with a sensation of wild ecstasy. He had realized there was something suspicious going on with Xu Qing, who clearly had three-flame battle prowess. But even with an imperial-class technique, he shouldn’t have been able to stand up to Master Shengyun. Now that the black umbrella was in the open though, his suspicions were confirmed. Now he knew how Xu Qing managed to crush Sima Ling, and what gave Xu Qing the confidence to fight in this situation. He had his answer.

Xu Qing’s expression was the same as ever. He didn’t seem flustered at all. Publicly revealing that he had a life lamp was a big deal. But as far as he was concerned, it was trumped by the possibility of taking Master Shengyun’s life lamp. If Xu Qing got two life lamps, his battle prowess would reach the level of six life flames.

Killing Master Shengyun will make it less likely to cause repercussions. But if word still gets out, then worst case scenario, I just leave Seven Blood Eyes, change my name, and fly off into the

sunset! I'll lose out on the profit from my harbor investment, but an extra life lamp will be worth even more than that!

Xu Qing's eyes glittered with killing intent as he prepared to attack.

However, that was when Master Shengyun threw his head back and laughed long and hard. Then he flicked his sleeve, sending out over a hundred streams of sword energy. The sword energy swept out over the surrounding lands. As for the cultivators outside of the temple, they had no way to evade it, and in the blink of an eye were stabbed through. Anguished screams rang out. However, the sword energy didn't disappear. It continued to sweep through the ruins, slaughtering everything in its path!

Any cultivator who Master Shengyun thought had seen Xu Qing's life lamp were slaughtered. He didn't want any witnesses around! The existence of a new life lamp was simply too monumental.

Master Shengyun already thought of Xu Qing's life lamp as his own. Once he got it, he would have seven-flame battle prowess, and that mere thought had him completely excited. As he well knew, life lamps were incredibly useful when it came to the heavenly palaces of Gold Core cultivators. One life lamp could be used to create a heavenly palace hidden within the life mist! And two lamps could create two such palaces!

That was also why he hadn't called his dao protectors back. He was worried that the three of them wouldn't be able to keep their greed in check. After all, his own life lamp was different from Xu Qing's. The reason he was so willing to reveal his own life lamp was that few people in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture could take it from him. After all, his own lamp didn't actually belong to him. He was just being allowed to use it. But he could sense that... Xu Qing's was different!

It actually belongs to him!! How did he get it? The number one chosen in Seven Blood Eyes is so deceptive!

The greed in Master Shengyun's eyes grew deeper, and he started laughing loudly.

"I never thought my destined opportunity would show up here. Xu Qing, my personal life lamp is actually with you!"

As he spoke those words, golden light erupted from Master Shengyun, and the ravagemist bird appeared behind him. It was 300 meters in size, with a green body and a red tail. It had a long beak, a huge abdomen, and looked incomparably freakish and ugly. The ravagemist bird threw its head back and let loose a piercing cry, then looked at Xu Qing with vicious ferocity.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as black fire erupted behind him, spreading out in all directions as the golden crow appeared, its tail bursting with fire.

Eyes radiating killing intent, Xu Qing shot forward.

Master Shengyun's expression was one of greed as he did the same thing.

In the blink of an eye, Xu Qing and Master Shengyun slammed into each other, this time with much more intensity than before. It was a battle of raw speed, strength, and defensive capabilities. They weren't using many magical techniques, and even their imperial-class techniques weren't much help. For the moment, they were just trying to assess their opponent's weaknesses. Then, as the fighting intensified, they focused solely on unleashing killing moves.

Master Shengyun's imperial technique was actually called Ravagemist Bird Consumes Heaven. As a result, his vicious ravagemist bird voraciously tried to consume the golden crow.

Of course, Xu Qing's imperial technique was Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits. As a result, his ferocious golden crow viciously tried to assimilate the ravagemist bird.

From a distance, the ravagemist bird emanated golden light, while the golden crow was wreathed in black fire. One was consuming, one was assimilating. One was snatching, one was absorbing. Energy surged and winds screamed!

It was the same with Xu Qing and Master Shengyun. The two fought back and forth in midair. They matched each other move for move. Occasionally, Xu Qing was sent slamming into the ground, only to stand up in the rubble and start fighting again. Occasionally Master Shengyun was knocked far into the distance, where he would smash into a building that would collapse onto him. Then he would burst back out into the action.

Their fight caused the air to ripple and distort. It shattered the land. Neither opponent seemed capable of getting the upper hand, and both had their life lamps on display in the form of projected umbrellas.

Xu Qing's was black, and the black flames covering it emanated a terrifying might. Master Shengyun's was seven-colored, and pulsed with a mysterious power. The two umbrellas crushed down on each other, causing a massive tempest. It was impossible to determine which was superior.

Both combatants' eyes were full of ferocity as they used their imperial-class techniques and life lamps to viciously fight each other. Soon, they backed away from each other, coughing up blood. They were about 300 meters from each other in the air above the daoist temple.

On one side was Master Shengyun, wearing a golden daoist robe, surrounded by golden light that illuminated the land below. He had a seven-colored umbrella overhead, also radiating dazzling light, and a vicious ravagemist bird behind him, howling as it sought to devour heaven. Combined with his unusual good looks, Master Shengyun seemed like a young sovereign lord descended from above. He seemed insufferably arrogant!

On the other side was Xu Qing, wearing a violet robe, surrounded by a black sea of fire that burned the dome of heaven. He had a black umbrella overhead that made him seem profoundly grue-like, and a majestic golden crow with vicious eyes that longed to assimilate the world. As the crow's tail draped over Xu Qing, it seemed like an imperial robe! Combined with Xu Qing's exceptionally attractive face, he seemed like an ancient emperor strolling through the mortal world. He was like a masterpiece of the ages!

Master Shengyun stared at Xu Qing, his eyes shining and full of killing intent. At the same time, he was forced to admit that Xu Qing was truly strong, so much so that it was appropriate to say he could very well become an Ancient Emperor.

In fact, in the small worlds beyond the Revered Ancient mainland, battle prowess like this would be similar to the Nascent Soul level. Revered Ancient contained the most high-level cultivators imaginable. According to the ancient records Master Shengyun had read, before the arrival of the broken face of the god, there were thousands of small worlds beyond the mainland.

And in those places, cultivators were so weak that even a single life flame counted as the great circle of Foundation Establishment.

Places like that simply couldn't compare at all to Revered Ancient.

Chapter 255: Sun and Moon Strive for Dominance

Xu Qing looked at Master Shengyun. He knew he was dealing with a strong opponent. In fact, during his entire journey of cultivation, this was the strongest person he had ever fought. And that was even after he had used his shadow to cover a single dharma aperture and reduce his battle prowess by a life flame. Were it not for that, Xu Qing knew he wouldn't be a match for Master Shengyun.

Even missing one of his life flames, Master Shengyun had too many assets. He had his shocking imperial-class technique, a host of divine abilities, and the defenses of his life lamp, which made Xu Qing's poisons almost useless.

If I can get his life lamp, then I would have the same defenses. I would have a complete level of protection, both of my soul and my body!

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he studied Master Shengyun's throat, as well as the life lamp umbrella over his head.

Master Shengyun was looking back and thinking that of all the opponents he had fought in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture in recent years, Xu Qing definitely ranked in the top three. There was no way Master Shengyun could ever have imagined that he would encounter an opponent like this on the backwater continent of South Phoenix.

Seems the patriarch was right. A great era is upon us. More chosen are appearing than ever before, and freakish hellions are gathering. But when great eras come, so do amazing destined opportunities. For example, this Xu Qing.... If I can take his life lamp and make it my own, then my Foundation Establishment battle prowess will increase by the level of one life flame. But even more relevant than that is how it will affect my heavenly palaces.

Life lamps aren't just beneficial to Foundation Establishment. They're actually more important to the heavenly palaces of the Gold Core level! With his life lamp, I'll have a total of two. And then when I break into the Gold Core level, those life lamps instantly become heavenly palaces. I'll have two heavenly palaces in the life mist.

One palace is worth six flames. Therefore, once I go through core formation, I'll start out with at least twelve-flame power. After consolidating my power and fully forming my first ordinary heavenly palace, I'll have a total of eighteen flames' worth of power!

That's not to mention that he has an imperial-class technique. After I kill him today, I'll devour Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits, and my ravagemist bird will have a much better chance of reaching its second stage!

From ancient times until now, no one, not even the offspring of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns, was able to push an imperial-class technique to the second stage while in Foundation Establishment. In fact, most people couldn't even do it in the Gold Core level. Advancing imperial-class techniques is just too difficult. If I succeed, then my imperial-class technique won't add the battle prowess of a single life flame. Just like a heavenly palace, it will have the power of six flames!

If I succeed, then once I reach Gold Core, I'll have eighteen flames' worth of power. And it won't be long after that before I reach the level of twenty-four. With battle prowess like that, I'll be the number one chosen in all of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Given my status, I'll be able to join the ranks of the swordsages. After that, I'll skyrocket to the highest heights in all of Sea-Sealing County.

As Master Shengyun and Xu Qing faced off in midair, they split the sky in half. On Master Shengyun's side, seven-colored light radiated in heaven and earth. On Xu Qing's side, black flames cast darkness everywhere.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as the two of them glared at each other with pulsing killing intent.

Then both of them moved. Even from a distance, it was a shocking scene as the two different parts of the sky raced toward each other. The ravagemist bird and the golden crow, both of them divine birds of legend, let loose piercing cries as they tried to devour each other. Two umbrellas shone with divine light. A young sovereign lord and a young ancient emperor were fighting a battle to the death.

The sound of the fighting echoed everywhere, stirring up wild winds and shocking both heaven and earth! They matched each other blow for blow as the fighting became increasingly intense. It seemed like the dome of heaven itself might explode. As Xu Qing and Master Shengyun attacked each other at full strength, both were forced to keep their distance from each other.

Blast! If only I had my six-flame battle prowess! Master Shengyun's expression was grim as he sent internal flame toward his 120th dharma aperture in the hopes of ridding it of the dark shadow.

However, no matter how he battered it with flame, the shadow relentlessly stayed in place, covering the volcanic power of the dharma aperture. Because of that, there was no way for Master Shengyun to reignite his fourth life flame.

The killing intent in Master Shengyun's eyes grew more intense as he looked at Xu Qing closing in on him with deadly force. Then determination flickered in Master Shengyun's eyes. Biting the tip of his tongue, he spat out a mouthful of blood.

“Encompassing Ghost Garment; Seal Body and Soul!”

As his words rang out, the blood expanded. In an instant, it reached a size of 300 meters, becoming a blood-colored garment that swept toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. The golden crow behind him erupted with black fire that struck at the garment. And yet, the blood-colored garment ignored the damage and forced its way closer to Xu Qing. As it wrapped around him, sealing power surged out, forcing Xu Qing to a standstill in midair. Xu Qing's eyes flickered with cold light as the golden crow cried out piercingly. His life lamp burned overhead as it tried to dispel the power of sealing.

At that point, Master Shengyun's gaze grew even sharper, and he lifted his right hand over his head.

“Darkheaven Bloodfiend Sword!”

His right hand flickered in an incantation gesture, and his entire right arm turned crimson. Energy and blood surged within him, erupting in a golden beam out of the top of his head. As that beam rose into the sky, close examination revealed that it contained a flying sword!

The dome of heaven vibrated as a blood-colored canopy stretched out, turning the entire sky crimson. Within that crimson sky, the tip of a huge sword appeared, fully 300 meters long. And from the tip, more of it became visible, until the entire majestic sword was revealed. It was covered in masses of magical sealing marks, and pulsed with the aura of endless severed arms and legs. As the sword appeared, winds screamed in the sky, and the blood-colored light became a rumbling sea of blood, like a massive, spinning vortex. A terrifying power surged out as the tip of the huge sword, rotated downward to point at Xu Qing! Then it started moving with incredible speed. Xu Qing might have been able to move out of the way, but he was bound by the blood-colored garment. It was currently being burned away, but still had him sealed!

A sense of profound crisis filled Xu Qing as he looked up at the massive sword. Without the slightest hesitation, he utilized the blessing of protection Master Sixth had given him. As the huge sword was just about to stab into his head, Master Sixth's defensive pendant activated. A deafening boom rang out through the sky.

A massive tremor ran through Xu Qing as the defensive shield was rapidly depleted. At the same time, Xu Qing himself was forced out of the air and onto the ground.

Cold light glittered through Master Shengyun's eyes as he lifted his right hand again, then waved it straight out in front of him.

“Soul-Sweeping Devil-Crushing Sword!”

A second beam of blood-colored light shot out of the top of his head, forming another flying sword, which coalesced into the shape of a second blood-colored sword!

It was exactly as big as the one which had fallen from the sky, and looked the same in every other aspect. But instead of falling down from above, this one appeared in front of Master Shengyun and then swept horizontally toward Xu Qing! It moved with shocking momentum, destroying all the buildings in its way, and creating huge crevices in the ground from its immense pressure.

The massive force bearing down on Xu Qing caused his face to fall. Before he could do anything, the sword smashed into his defensive barrier.

He already had one huge sword pressing down on him from above. Now the second sword hit him horizontally with terrifying force. Despite the protection keeping him safe, he still coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Yet Master Shengyun's killing move wasn't finished yet. At almost the same moment that the Darkheaven Bloodfiend Sword and the Soul-Sweeping Devil-Crushing Sword were unleashed, he threw both hands out and put his palms together. Then, his expression full of vicious killing intent, he shoved his finger in Xu Qing's direction.

“Northghost Heavenwondering Sword!”

As the words left his mouth, a group of eight ghosts appeared in the blood-colored vortex up above. They were bizarre in appearance; none of them had faces, and they all had swords strapped to their backs. They pulsed with frigid coldness, as well as powerful sword energy. And as they appeared, the spinning vortex descended to surround Xu Qing.

There were eight of them, and their backs were to Xu Qing. But then Master Shengyun let loose a shout, and all eight ghosts moved in unison, drawing the swords from their backs, turning around,

and then slashing their blades toward Xu Qing! Sword energy surged forth like the sea, unfolding on a magnificent scale as eight swords slashed toward Xu Qing from eight directions! The swords moved with incredible speed, appearing in a flash right in front of Xu Qing's defensive shield.

There were now ten swords at play, and Master Sixth's defensive gift had already been drained significantly during the battle at Seastar Island. It held strong for a short time, but then ran out of power and exploded.

During that time, the power of the ten swords was largely drained, but there was still enough to send sword energy streaming into Xu Qing toward his life flames.

Xu Qing looked grim as he borrowed power from the exploding defenses to finally incinerate the last of the blood garment sealing him. However, the sword energy still surged through him, filling him with pain and causing blood to spray out of his mouth.

As Master Shengyun strode toward him, Xu Qing's energy teetered unstably. Without any hesitation, he turned and fled, his life flames burning as they resisted the crushing sword energy.

All of this takes a bit of time to describe, but actually happened in the time it takes a spark to fly off of a piece of flint. When Xu Qing backed up, Master Shengyun shot toward him like lightning. In the blink of an eye, he had caught up to Xu Qing.

However, that was when Xu Qing managed to rid himself of sword energy, and he spun in place, a vicious look on his face. Reaching his right hand out toward Master Shengyun, he dropped it forcefully. A roar erupted from behind him as a bluegreen dragon appeared, emanating heaven-shaking, earth-shattering force as it lunged toward Master Shengyun.

Master Shengyun's expression flickered as he performed a double-handed incantation gesture. Instantly, his ravagemist bird also lunged forward, while at the same time, his life lamp defenses spread out in full effect.

The bluegreen dragon exploded, but it still forced Master Shengyun backward, and ripples spread out over his life lamp defenses. That said, Xu Qing's counter attack wasn't finished. Just as the bluegreen dragon was destroyed...

His dharmaskiff appeared.

He didn't utilize an attack of godliness; an unfocused release of power like that wouldn't help in the current situation. Instead, Xu Qing sent the dharmaskiff racing directly toward Master Shengyun with ferocious momentum, the power of self-detonation building within it.

Master Shengyun had just obliterated Xu Qing's bluegreen dragon. Immediately after, he had a dharmaskiff to deal with. There was no time to dodge out of the way, and thus the dharmaskiff slammed into him and then self-detonated. A deafening boom echoed out as the godliness in the dharmaskiff added to the detonation. Terrifying shockwaves blasted out in all directions.

Shaken, Master Shengyun had no choice but to fall back, his life lamp defenses rippling even more dramatically.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing performed a double-handed incantation gesture, causing a violet heavenly saber to form above him. However, he knew that wasn't enough. Finally, he activated all of the poisons he had laced in the area, sending all of their corroding effects right toward Master Shengyun's life lamp defenses!

The reason Xu Qing had allowed Master Sixth's defensive talisman to be destroyed was because he wanted to buy time. He needed to think of a way to get past Master Shengyun's life lamp defenses! With those defenses in place, it would be very difficult to defeat his opponent. He had wanted more time to lace the area with more poison, and also get the right mixture in place. And then he had waited for just the right moment to activate them!

As the heavenly saber slashed downward, poison exploded!

Chapter 256: Fighting Back

The violet heavenly saber slashed down, hitting Master Shengyun's life lamp defenses, and sending out even more intense ripples. Then, Master Shengyun's heavenly saber also slashed forth, and when it hit Xu Qing's, they both shattered.

Master Shengyun was shoved backward by the force of the collision.

But Xu Qing wasn't done yet. Everything up to this point was actually a smokescreen. Next, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior unleashed his most powerful attack from within the iron skewer. Sparks shot out from the shattered heavenly saber as the skewer emerged with blinding speed. The patriarch was obviously in control of the electricity dancing on the surface of the skewer as he pushed it to its top speed.

The patriarch clearly knew how important his mission was. Furthermore, having seen how the shadow had been so critical to the fight so far, he was feeling very nervous. Fearful that he might fail, he went mad in his efforts, detonating lightning symbols to get a boost of speed and power. He became like a real bolt of heavenly lightning that pierced right through the life lamp defenses of the backpedaling Master Shengyun.

A boom could be heard. The life lamp defenses were shocking, and thus they didn't collapse. However, the iron skewer's speed and power allowed it to punch a tiny hole in them. Then the skewer was rebuffed. Spinning off to the side, it looked less bright than before, and agonized shrieking could be heard from the patriarch inside. The backlash he had experienced was clearly significant. As for the hole, it rapidly filled in, and a moment later, the defenses were back to normal.

Sneering, Master Shengyun said, "You can't get through my life lamp defenses. Nothing you do will work."

Despite his words, the attack had sent him staggering backward. The whirlwind attacks from Xu Qing, one after another, were just that effective. First was the bluegreen dragon, then the dharmaskiff self-detonation, and after that the heavenly saber. None broke through the life lamp defenses, but the fact that they came one after another was astounding. However, with those defenses in place, it wasn't possible to truly harm Master Shengyun, any more than his attacks had harmed Xu Qing. That said, it was obvious that Master Shengyun currently had the upper hand. He had more divine abilities to call on, and what was more, the gleam in his eye indicated that he had identified Xu Qing's weakness.

"You don't have enough magical techniques! And you lack divine abilities that can unleash true might!"

Hearing Master Shengyun's words, Xu Qing's eyes turned cold. He didn't respond.

Master Shengyun laughed, then performed a double-handed incantation gesture and prepared to target Xu Qing's weakness. However, just before he unleashed a new divine ability, his face suddenly fell. His life lamp defenses had just faded slightly, and ripples were flowing across them. Even more noteworthy was Master Shengyun had just sensed the defenses corroding around the spot where the iron skewer had poked a hole moments ago.

That was when Master Shengyun recalled a time earlier in Seven Blood Eyes when someone mentioned Xu Qing using poison in his fight with Sima Ling.

“Poison is nothing! It can never be a great dao!”

Master Shengyun snorted coldly. From when he was young, he had always had a unique constitution that caused him to look down on ordinary poisons. He waved his hand, and his life lamp glittered. As its light spread out, the corrosion on the defenses disappeared. Having accomplished that, he again prepared to attack. But then his expression flickered even more dramatically than before. An intense pain had suddenly started to spread through his body, and greenish-black blotches had appeared on his skin from mutagen. At the same time, his life flames were flickering.

“What's this??”

Gasping, Master Shengyun sensed the powerful poison inside of him and realized it was spreading far too quickly. His vision blurred, and all of a sudden, he was filled with a sense of deadly crisis. The poison was, of course, the little beetles. They had been sticking to his life lamp defenses this entire time, incapable of getting inside. They had just been waiting for an opportunity.

When Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior poked a hole, that was all they needed. In that instant, a host of beetles poured inside.

Master Shengyun was right. Xu Qing lacked a lot of powerful divine abilities. However, Master Shengyun was also incorrect, because though Xu Qing lacked amazing divine abilities, he did have his poisons!

The moment the beetles attacked, Xu Qing's eyes flickered with killing intent, and he rushed forward. He had been waiting for this moment for the entire fight. As Master Shengyun dealt with the sudden poison flare-up, Xu Qing closed in with his hand clenched in a fist.

The golden crow appeared behind him, bursting with flame. His life lamp manifested overhead as a shocking black umbrella. And his fist rocketed forward, backed by five-flame battle prowess.

In his poisoned state, Master Shengyun was incapable of evading the blow. He tried to fall back, but Xu Qing just pressed the attack. A boom rang out as the blow landed on the life lamp defenses. A shockwave passed through Master Shengyun, and he was sent spinning off to the side like a kite with its string cut. Xu Qing followed up with another blow.

Master Shengyun gasped for breath, and his eyes were completely bloodshot. Relying on his defenses to keep him safe, he tapped into his imperial-class technique. The piercing cry of the ravagemist bird rang out, sweeping through him to dispel the poison. At the same time, the seven-colored umbrella above him radiated dazzling light to the same effect. However, Xu Qing then waved his hand, and his black umbrella spread out and put crushing pressure down onto Master Shengyun. Intense rumbling sounds echoed everywhere as blood sprayed from his mouth. The

sensation of crisis welled up stronger in him. There was no time to deal with everything that was happening, and he felt more than ever that this was a life-or-death moment. Then Xu Qing's fist arrived.

Master Shengyun backed up again, and Xu Qing shot forward like lightning to keep up the attack. He threw out fist after fist, and slashed down with the heavenly saber over and over again. The golden crow used all its strength, and Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior once again went all-out to try to pierce through the enemy's defenses.

As for the shadow, it took advantage of this moment in which Master Shengyun was forced to deal with the poisons. Stretching out, it covered a second dharma aperture.

Xu Qing was going all out in every respect!

Master Shengyun continued to fall back, blood spraying out of his mouth. Each mouthful of blood contained masses of poisons and when it fell, it melted the ground it touched. And his life lamp defenses glittered as Xu Qing shoved his hands against them. Then, a shocking boom rang out as the defenses finally couldn't take it anymore and shattered. Poison rushed in and blood sprayed out of Master Shengyun's mouth. He tumbled backward, his face filling with rage. And yet he couldn't even fight back. He just tried to get out of the ruins and into the forbidden region.

"What poison is this??" he howled. He refused to believe that this was really happening. Before, he had six life flames, and should have been able to crush this opponent easily. But because of that shadow, his battle prowess had dropped, and then his opponent used an incomparably terrifying poison on him. He felt madness building within him. His hair was disheveled and he looked completely bedraggled. His once-dazzling golden robe was now pale and dull. Altogether, he looked to be in very bad shape.

If any disciple from the Seven Sect Coalition could see him now, they would be completely flabbergasted. No one had ever witnessed Master Shengyun in a state like this before.

Master Shengyun felt bitter and enraged. But Xu Qing's killing intent raged as he closed in again. Finally, Master Shengyun took out a jade slip and quickly sent a voice message, calling back the three dao protectors who he had sent out looking for various specific items.

Unfortunately, his dao protectors had been away for quite a while, and none of them had even considered that Master Shengyun would face something truly dangerous. It was going to take time for them to arrive, and time was something Master Shengyun didn't have a lot of right now. The poison inside of him was erupting violently, and his battle prowess was dropping. In that critical moment, Xu Qing was pressing the attack, leading with the golden crow, which obviously wanted to assimilate Master Shengyun alive.

As the ravagemist bird appeared, Xu Qing launched a fist strike. Master Shengyun tried to defend, but blood sprayed out of his mouth as a result. Expression vicious, Xu Qing head-butted Master Shengyun in the face.

Master Shengyun grunted. His face was covered in blood, and his eyes radiated madness. He wanted to extricate himself from this fight, but black balefire spread out from Xu Qing, creating a

gaping maw that surged toward Master Shengyun. His eyes burned with ferocity; he wanted to take Master Shengyun's soul and use it to open dharma apertures!

The madness in Master Shengyun's eyes grew more intense. Howling shrilly, he caused his golden daoist robe to suddenly expand until it exploded.

The daoist robe was a treasure in its own right. Borrowing the force of the explosion, Master Shengyun shot backward. It was at that moment that his life lamp finally managed to expel all of the poison from within him. His life flame flickered unstably, and he could tell it wouldn't stay strong for much longer. That, coupled with how viciously aggressive Xu Qing was being, ensured that Master Shengyun didn't hesitate at all about what to do next. Now that he wasn't being constantly injured, he shouted loudly and pulled something out from his ring of holding!

It was a dilapidated piece of wood that seemed to be a chunk taken from something larger, and the moment he took it out, it erupted with terrifying fluctuations.

Xu Qing's expression flickered in response. He could sense that his life flames were about to be extinguished, and his dharma apertures vibrated so badly they seemed like they might pop out of him.

The door even seemed to affect the dome of heaven, and the surrounding lands. Plants and vegetation in all directions started withering. Streams of life force began madly rushing toward the piece of wood, causing it to quickly transform into a pitch-black doorway covered with countless scratch marks from fingernails. A sinister, gruish aura emanated from it, especially from the scratch marks, which were ghastly, and seemed to be filled with dried blood. The scratch marks were all of different lengths and depths, which made it seem like different people at different times had desperately tried to claw open the door. The sense of horror it imparted filled the area.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed and he backed up.

Meanwhile, madness filled Master Shengyun's eyes as he pointed at Xu Qing.

"Open!"

The pitch-black door creaked open in Xu Qing's direction.

Chapter 257: Profoundly Vicious and Cruel

The ancient door was covered with the evidence of ancient time. It had obviously seen many, many things, like an old man who had lived for countless years and as a result could see deeply into the core of any person. The black color of the door also contained rot, as if that same old man had grown numb due to the misery of the world around him.

Stifling. Gruish. Sinister.

Those were the things Xu Qing felt when looking at the door.

As it opened, he also realized that everything around him was suddenly very quiet. There was no sound at all. The wind went still, and the clouds stopped moving. It even seemed like his own heart had stopped beating. It was the same with everything, even Master Shengyun, who currently stood atop the opening door.

It was as if the power of this door was too boundless. Too bizarre. Neither the target nor the person using it was spared from its effects. All lost the ability to move.

Xu Qing had experienced a sensation like this before. Four years earlier in the forbidden region outside the scavenger basecamp, he had encountered the Singing. On that occasion, he saw a pair of women's boots walking through a blood fog. The feelings were the same. Back then as now, he felt immobile down to his soul, as if even his thoughts were frozen in place by the opening of the door. [1]

He wasn't breathing. Frost formed on his eyebrows and hair. Coldness built up within him. Everything in his field of vision disappeared except for the door. The long, slow creaking pierced into his ears.

Inside the door was pure darkness and frigid coldness. In fact, steam was slowly rising from the edges of the door thanks to the intense cold.

Atop the door, Master Shengyun had a ferocious facial expression, and eyes pulsing with killing intent. This door was called the Darkspirit Everwill Door, and Master Shengyun considered it a precious treasure. He had only used it once since acquiring it. It wasn't something he was doing lightly, as he knew that the effects would reach both his enemy and himself. Of even greater significance was that opening the door required draining his own soul.

It was an incomparably gruish door with a mysterious history. It was impossible to say what would come out of the door once it was opened, and thus, its killing power and effects varied from person to person. This was information his grandfather had explained to him. [2]

The last time he used the door, targeting himself, what had emerged was a huge rotting tongue, which he had found very unsettling. After all, his grandfather had explained that what came out of the door was a materialization of what already existed in one's heart and mind. At the moment, Master Shengyun was very curious to see what would come out of the door now that Xu Qing was the target.

Hopefully it will be some sort of evil ghost. An evil ghost that rips him limb from limb!!

Even as those thoughts ran through Master Shengyun's mind, from within the endless darkness in the black wooden door... a beam of light appeared! It started out very weak, as little more than a speck. But it rapidly grew larger and brighter, until it was an immeasurably brilliant sea of light.

As the light emerged, it turned into numerous shafts of brightness that spread out everywhere.

Outside of the door, the sky turned from dark to light. The lands were illuminated, and all the plants and vegetation were bathed in brightness. As for Xu Qing, he was right in the middle of it all, with the light consuming even his shadow. Within that sea of light, Xu Qing felt immeasurable pain. It was like he was being burned alive, including his skin, muscles, blood, and his internal organs.

The light pierced his body, stabbing into his soul, penetrating everything about him. Wherever it went, it brought pain. Green smoke began to rise up from him, almost as if he were being erased from existence. However, in addition to the pain, he found that he could move again, and started backing away. He moved at top speed, yet couldn't stop the light from burning him. It was like he was the night, and this light was dawn, bringing radiance and light to wipe away the darkness. His skin was so badly burned it was now black. His muscles and blood were shedding all moisture. His hair had turned into ash. Not even his life lamp or his imperial-class technique could resist this. He took out a jade slip and, despite the hesitant look on his face, crushed it. It gave him a boost of speed.

As he fell back, hardly looking human, Master Shengyun remained atop the door. Seeing what was happening, there wasn't an ounce of satisfaction on his face. Instead, he looked incredulous. In fact, it almost looked like he couldn't believe what was happening.

Light? When the Darkspirit Everwill Door is opened on you, it produces light?? That should be impossible! You're just like me, a ruthless killer! You've walked over countless bones to get where you are. You're a master of poison, a person who consumes souls to further your cultivation. You're surrounded by black flames! Your soul fire is as dark as night. It's no exaggeration at all to say that you're an outright monster. But how could the materialization of your thoughts be... light?? Laughable. Outrageous! Ridiculous!! You're surrounded by darkness and gloom, but your heart is full of radiance and light?

Master Shengyun's eyes were bloodshot and his expression was pure ferocity. Then he started laughing, almost like he'd lost his mind. He simply couldn't control himself after seeing light coming out from this door.

That was because... he had always wanted this for himself!!

He was Master Shengyun! The characters 'Sheng' and 'Yun' represented radiance and light. Yet when this door was opened on him, a revolting tongue emerged. All of it caused his killing intent to tower to new heights. [3]

As Xu Qing backed up in the face of the brilliant light from the door, Master Shengyun quickly performed an incantation gesture, and the door slammed shut, then blurred momentarily as it shifted directions. Now it wasn't facing Xu Qing, it was facing Master Shengyun.

He was still poisoned, and considering how critical of a moment this was, he actually had more than one goal in using this door. One was to kill Xu Qing, but the other was to remove the poison from himself. The last time he'd used the door, he had been in similar circumstances, and had used the door to remove a curse on himself.

He gritted his teeth as the Darkspirit Everwill Door spun and opened in his direction. As before, the interior was pitch black. Then, a revolting tongue appeared, which shot out at top speed and wrapped around Master Shengyun. He trembled and his face contorted with pain. Being wrapped up by the tongue, his entire body started to rot. His handsome features withered until he looked like a corpse, and his hair all fell out. And a noxious odor spread out from him.

However, he was more than pleased to pay that price, considering the outcome. The dangerous poison in him was mostly extruded, and the faint traces left behind seemed inactive. But what left Master Shengyun completely overwhelmed with horror was that the shadow covering his 120th dharma aperture was completely unfazed.

Not only that, but an eye suddenly appeared in the shadow, which cast him a contemptuous glance.

What is that thing???? There was no time for Master Shengyun to think about the subject. With the poison in him suppressed, he put away the door. He didn't dare to continue to use it in this fight. He also took out some healing pills that he popped into his mouth. Then he charged back toward Xu Qing.

Some distance away, Xu Qing finally looked up. He was in a very bedraggled state, but his killing intent was just as intense as ever. Though he had been seriously injured just now, the violet crystal was already healing him. During his retreat, he had also consumed quite a few healing pills.

As Master Shengyun closed in, Xu Qing stamped his foot on the ground, launching himself up into the air, where he met the attack. Booms rang out everywhere, and plants everywhere were shredded to nothing. Trees collapsed, and beasts in the area fled. The fighting between Xu Qing and Master Shengyun caused everything to shake violently.

Even a Gold Core cultivator who showed up right now would be shocked. The two of them fought with incredible speed, launching blows, moving about over the terrain, and leaving destruction behind them wherever they went.

As they fought back and forth, Xu Qing suddenly produced a crystal which he threw out. It exploded, releasing a cloud of black fog, out of which charged a headless grue with the body of an ox. It immediately attacked Master Shengyun. There was more. Xu Qing threw out three more crystals, all of which exploded. Out flew a ball of tangled black hair, a withered hand, and a white eyeball. These deathly items were things Xu Qing had taken from Sima Ling, the so-called god of wealth from Revered Ancient. Releasing them all at the same time caused boundless mutagen to fill the area. Then, Xu Qing gritted his teeth and tossed out a huge quantity of black boluses. [4]

Popping sounds rang out as more mutagen filled the area, which attracted the attention of other vile beings in the surrounding forbidden region.

Master Shengyun's face fell. Backing up, he waved his hand to try to keep the mutagen away. As for the four grues, being in this mutagen made them like fish in water. Without any hesitation, they clumped together. The withered hand attached itself to the neck of the headless ox, and the eyeball connected to the palm of the hand. The hair attached itself to the ox as well. In the blink of an eye, the new grue's energy surged and it launched itself in Master Shengyun's direction.

Master Shengyun prepared to dodge out of the way.

However, that was when a decisive look flickered in Xu Qing's eyes, and he pulled out a bunch of Sima Ling's grue-controlling magical devices from his bag of holding. He threw them, and they exploded, blocking Master Shengyun's path of escape. The charging grue slammed into him.

The ravagemist bird howled. Unfortunately, given Master Shengyun's current state, it was also damaged. Then the golden crow glared at it and launched forth in attack. The two started fighting fiercely.

Xu Qing also closed in, a dagger appearing in his hand. Taking advantage of Master Shengyun's exhaustion, he aimed the dagger at his throat.

Master Shengyun threw his head back, and the dagger whizzed right past him. Though he avoided being slashed, the balefire still burned him. He was an extraordinary individual, and managed to defend himself by calling on his life flames. But that couldn't do anything about Xu Qing's wild style of fighting.

Xu Qing instantly launched into a head-butt.

Eyes bloodshot, Master Shengyun did the same.

A huge boom rang out as both of them staggered backward, stars swimming in their vision.

Master Shengyun was really getting a taste of Xu Qing's ferocity. But that didn't reduce his killing intent. In fact, he now wanted more than ever to kill Xu Qing and take his life lamp.

As he backed away, Master Shengyun slapped his own forehead, causing a tremor to pass through his own body. Then, using some unknown secret magic, he shoved his hand into his forehead and grabbed something inside. The next moment, he wrenched a blood-soaked brush pen from inside himself! It started out small, but rapidly became larger. Astonishingly, the tip of the brush was a head that looked exactly like Master Shengyun in every way!

“I was sleeping, big brother. Why’d you wake me up? Is it time to play?”

Chapter 258: Dharma Seas Crush an Evil Pen

It was such a gruish pen that just looking at it caused Xu Qing’s pupils to constrict!

It was as tall as an ordinary person; its shaft was made of a spine, the tip from a head, and the brush hairs were the head’s hair. There was still bloody flesh on the spine, and though the head still had skin on it, that skin was green, making it look like an evil ghost. When it spoke, its voice was profoundly sinister, causing Xu Qing to frown.

Master Shengyun ignored the words, grabbed the pen, and drew a red circle in the air. The instant the circle appeared, it became corporeal, and it began expanding rapidly, like a rushing wind.

Xu Qing immediately fell back.

The composite grue was shaken. As the ox body fell back in retreat, it shivered and then exploded into four parts. The four parts then also exploded into bits.

Master Shengyun gripped the pen as he looked with bloodshot eyes at Xu Qing.

Master Shengyun had been bizarre from birth; he had been born with a conjoined twin attached to his waist. That wasn’t necessarily a rarity on the Revered Ancient mainland. Truth be told, things like that happened a lot because of the effects of mutagen, and how the properties of life force changed with the arrival of the god above. Even people who looked normal, and didn’t seem like they had any mutagen in them... might have those changes built into their blood. It was only a matter of finding out which generation it would manifest in.

Despite all that, Master Shengyun had been unwilling to accept his lot in life, and from the moment he realized how different he was from everyone else, had wanted to kill his brother. His younger brother had felt the same way. Eventually, Master Shengyun came out on top. He suppressed his conjoined twin, assimilated him, and turned him into this treasure. The patriarch of his clan knew about it, as did many people in his sect. That didn’t matter. The patriarch tacitly approved of the situation, as long as one of them lived. Therefore, no one else had any say in the matter.

The pen in Master Shengyun’s hand looked at Xu Qing with a serene look in his eyes. Then, a long tongue emerged from his mouth. Licking his lips, the head said, “Is he the one you want dead, big brother? He’s so pretty. After we get him, why don’t you do the same thing to him that you did to me? Assimilate him, steal his natural aptitude, and create a second pen brush?”

Master Shengyun snorted coldly. “That’s fine. Kill him, and I’ll make it happen.”

The little brother’s eyes lit up, and he suddenly erupted with a shocking level of mutagen. His eyes turned black, and his expression became one of greed. Then Master Shengyun waved his hand, and the gruish pen slashed left and right to create an X.

The X glittered with red light as it turned corporeal. The pen's ink was as red as blood, making the X seem like it was made from flesh. You could even see veins on its surface, wriggling horrifically.

The X of flesh and blood then shot toward Xu Qing. As it neared, its gruish aura grew stronger, and winds screamed in the area.

Xu Qing's expression turned grim as he pulled out a jade slip, making sure Master Shengyun couldn't see it clearly. It looked like he was about to snap it, but in the end, decided not to.

A boom rang out as the X of flesh and blood arrived and slammed into Xu Qing. Blood sprayed out of Xu Qing's mouth as he staggered backward. Gruish laughter rang out from the X as it prepared to chase Xu Qing. However, Xu Qing was very quick, and it couldn't catch up easily.

At this point in the battle, both Xu Qing and Master Shengyun had sustained serious injuries. Furthermore, Xu Qing's weakness had become very apparent. He lacked divine abilities and magical techniques, especially when compared to Master Shengyun.

Truth be told, if his opponent was anyone other than Master Shengyun, then his techniques could be considered satisfactory. But Master Shengyun was a chosen from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, who they hoped to groom into walking the path of the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns. It was only natural that he would have a lot of techniques and magical devices.

I lack divine abilities and magical techniques. And my magical devices aren't as gruish as his. But as the saying goes... overwhelming power can defeat someone even ten times as skilled!

Xu Qing's eyes glittered as the power of the violet crystal surged within him. As this battle went on, it had become more and more obvious how impressive the crystal was in its ability to heal him.

What was more, the 1,500-meter spirit seas in his dharma apertures ensured that he could stay in the profound radiance state for a very long time. In fact, his current plan was to rely on that advantage to crush his opponent.

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Therefore, as the X of flesh and blood closed in again, Xu Qing suddenly shot up into the air, raised his right hand, and pointed to the dome of heaven. Simultaneously, his 92 dharma apertures erupted, causing intense heat to sweep upward. Next, a 1,500-meter hand appeared above him in the sky! That hand was the manifestation of only one of the spirit seas in one of his dharma apertures. And thus, after the hand formed, a second one appeared, which superimposed over the first one, doubling its power. Things weren't over. As Xu Qing tapped into his dharma apertures, a third hand was added. Then a tenth. Then a thirtieth.... One hand after another superimposed, creating something almost impossible to describe. Intense winds swept through the area, and immense pressure built.

Master Shengyun's eyes went wide, and his heart pounded with astonishment. The spirit seas in Xu Qing's dharma apertures were absolutely shocking. In fact, in Master Shengyun's entire life, he had never seen spirit seas so terrifying.

Even he only had spirit seas that were a bit over 600 meters!

"You...." he murmured, his face falling. He knew that the size of one's spirit seas correlated to the majesty of the dharma force one commanded. At lower levels, that

didn't matter much. But as one's cultivation base got stronger, and one opened more and more dharma apertures, then it could lead to a very big difference between two people. And that's what was happening right now.

In the shortest of moments, the hand above Xu Qing became a composite of ninety-two!

From a distance, it was possible to see a giant, ninety-two level hand hovering in the air. Wind whipped across the trembling lands, and massive pressure weighed down. Lightning crackled across the surface of the hand like dragons or snakes. A will surged that could devour heaven and end the earth!

Even the X of flesh and blood quivered in midair as if from fear.

Xu Qing was not like Master Shengyun with his three peerless swords and amazing gruish items. He couldn't summon a black door, did not have a special treasure that could become a brush pen of flesh and blood.

But he did have ninety-two spirit seas, each of which were 1,500 meters in size!

Regardless of how gruish you were, regardless of what magical techniques you had, and regardless of what special items you possessed, he had the power to crush you!

Veins bulged on Xu Qing's forehead as massive pressure weighed down from the hand. Cracking sounds could be heard from within him as the tendons in his arms grew tight. Then, he shoved his hand in the direction of the X of flesh and blood... and Master Shengyun!

The giant hand overhead, pulsing with might to crush mountains and seas, smashed into the gruish X. Rumbling sounds echoed into the sky as the X stood strong for five breaths of time. Then it couldn't take the force and exploded into bits.

More rumbling sounds echoed out as the hand crushed everything in its path. Behind it, even Xu Qing had to work hard to stand up to the pressure of all the spirit seas.

The ground quaked and trees crumbled into ash from the terrifying power on display. A moment later, the hand was right in front of the pale-faced and astonished Master Shengyun. In that critical moment, his eyes flickered with determination. Howling, he thrust his gruish pen out in front of him like a sword, stabbing it toward the hand.

All of his dharma apertures erupted, imbuing the gruish pen with dharma force. His brother's face looked ferocious, but simultaneously astonished. In fact, his expression made it seem like, in his madness, he sought death!

Thunderous booms rang out one after another, shaking the surrounding forbidden ground.

Xu Qing and Master Shengyun both coughed up blood, and both fought with all their might against the power, their expressions vicious.

Blinding light shot out of Master Shengyun's gruish pen. Shockwaves rolled out in all directions as, in the blink of an eye, thirty-three of the layers of the composite hand were destroyed.

That was when the light from the pen began to fade. A howl erupted from within as Master Shengyun's younger brother fought with madness. However, even if his madness were more

intense, it wasn't enough. Forty-three more layers of the hand collapsed, and then the pen began to shatter and collapse into ash.

The madness in the eyes of Master Shengyun's brother changed. He seemed to experience a sudden release, and a fierce smile appeared on his face. With another surge of force, he destroyed thirteen layers of Xu Qing's composite hand. Then his head collapsed. In the final moment before falling into ultimate destruction, he spoke his final words, shrill and full of venom.

"Chu Shengyun, do you remember how I cursed you when you assimilated me? I said that you would suffer the same fate as me. You would be assimilated by someone else. You would also have your life taken away. Maybe you erased the power of my curse with the fragment of that taboo magical item, but it seems that the curse is effective!"

His words turned into a stream of laughter as Xu Qing's giant hand crushed into the body of the pen, absolutely destroying it. Then, with the final three that remained, the hand hit Master Shengyun. Blood sprayed out of his mouth as his life flames flickered on the verge of being extinguished. His hair was now completely disheveled, and he was bedraggled from head to toe. However, as he tumbled backward, the killing intent in his eyes flickered just as strongly as before.

"Curse me however you want. Your death was worth it!" He slammed both hands onto the ground in front of him and shouted, "Flesh Curse: Myriad Blood Convergence!"

Xu Qing's face fell.

Instantly, the shattered remnants of the grisly pen melded into the mud on the ground. Then, numerous bloody arms stretched up from the ground, thousands of them, all stretching with mad speed toward Xu Qing.

At the same time, it was with bloodshot eyes that Master Shengyun threw his head back, and in a bizarre, vile voice shouted, "I hereby summon a projection of the Soaring Cloud taboo treasure!"

Chapter 259: Stabbing into the Sea of Consciousness

Taboo treasure!

After Xu Qing became part of the echelon, he earned the right to summon a projection of the sect's magical treasure. Some chosen from the Seven Sect Coalition similarly had the ability to tap into the reserve powers of their sects. That said, such authority was only vested in a few people, and was usually given out as a special reward, and to be used for defensive purposes only. After all, the magical treasures of the Seven Sect Coalition were in the 'taboo' level. That meant they could only be used for short periods of time. And if their effectiveness was to be maximized, they were only supposed to be used at specific times.

Master Shengyun had plentiful battle experience, and thus, he didn't immediately resort to summoning that projection. Instead, he made sure to create the perfect set of circumstances to unleash it. He knew that it wasn't going to be a simple matter to take Xu Qing's life lamp. For one thing, he would have to make sure Xu Qing didn't escape in a critical moment, for instance, by means of a teleportation jade slip.

There had been two instances during the fight in which Xu Qing took out a jade slip and seemed about to crush it. Though Master Shengyun had pretended not to notice that, he had immediately guessed at what Xu Qing was thinking of doing.

As far as he was concerned, this fight was like a fishing expedition. He needed to wear out his opponent and make sure he didn't have any special moves left. He also needed him grievously wounded. Only then could he be completely confident in succeeding.

At this point, he was confident that it was time to actually make his move. It had started with taking out his pen of flesh and blood. Regardless of whether the pen injured Xu Qing or not, Master Shengyun had planned to destroy it and use the curse power within it to trap Xu Qing.

Then he would unleash the taboo treasure. By creating nets above and snares below, he would make sure Xu Qing couldn't escape, and would then be able to take away his life lamp.

When Xu Qing heard his words, his expression flickered. The bloody arms surrounding him were extremely tough, and had latched onto him with such force that he couldn't break free. Seemingly without hesitation, he had prepared to crush the jade slip he had been holding in his hand this whole time. Unfortunately, there wasn't time.

The sky above suddenly turned bright red, making it look matchlessly bewitching and gruish. And that redness quickly became an entire world of blood with Xu Qing right in the middle. Spatial ripples flowed within it, ensuring that no teleportations were possible in its bounds. And then it began to shrink. The sealing power grew stronger, cutting off everything inside the world with that outside.

Then, a red-colored seed appeared up in the dome of heaven. It was different from the seed that the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect had sent flying to the Young Arbiter Sect. It was illusory, not corporeal. But it still emanated a shocking might as it dropped to the ground and transformed into a huge, blood-colored tree.

A deadly tempest sprang up around the tree which slammed into Xu Qing and sent blood spraying out of his mouth. It was like some massive force trying to wipe him out of existence.

Master Shengyun threw his head back and laughed uproariously, his eyes shining with greed. Tapping into the full extent of his cultivation base, he shot toward Xu Qing.

The ravagemist bird cried out behind him, and his life lamp umbrella radiated dazzling light above him. Now that he had locked down the area to prevent Xu Qing from escaping, it was time to go in for the kill and take his life lamp.

“This area is now sealed by the projection of my sect's taboo treasure. There are two of us inside, and only one will get out!”

Master Shengyun closed in with deadly force, and blood sprayed out of Xu Qing's mouth as he backed away. The pressure of the sealing power was so immense that his own life flames seemed to be on the verge of sputtering out.

Looking at the strange, gruish tree, Xu Qing's eyes flickered with cold light, and he growled, “I hereby summon a projection of Seven Blood Eyes' magical treasure!”

Seven Blood Eyes' magical treasure was not at the taboo level, and Xu Qing had never summoned its projection before.

The moment the words left his mouth, the surrounding world of blood vibrated, and the sky shook. A massive power descended that seemed capable of ripping the blood world apart, and then an eye appeared in the sky. It seemed calm and peaceful, lacking any hint of emotion as it stared down at the projection of the taboo treasure.

In response, the taboo treasure trembled even harder. However, there was clearly a disparity between the two treasures, as the taboo projection didn't collapse. Xu Qing was unable to escape.

That said, the eye was able to lock down the blood tree so it couldn't do anything. And thus, the pressure weighing down on Xu Qing was slightly alleviated.

"A measly magical treasure from a subsidiary sect couldn't possibly do anything to my sect's taboo treasure. This blood world is going to be your grave!" Continuing to laugh, Master Shengyun closed in on Xu Qing with another attack, his eyes gleaming with greed.

Xu Qing's expression darkened. Without a word, he sent the golden crow forth, and summoned the black umbrella of his life lamp. As black fire raged around him, he and Master Shengyun started fighting back and forth within the world of blood.

Xu Qing was obviously weakened because of the pressure of the blood world, and was soon on the defensive. Seeing that, Master Shengyun started pressing the attack even harder.

Eventually, the blood world had shrunk down to a size of only 30 meters. The huge tree inside of it had also shrunk down. Rumbling echoed out left and right as Xu Qing staggered back, blood spilling from his mouth. Once again, he had a jade slip in his hand, and he was looking around.

"Don't bother!" Master Shengyun said. "You can't escape. Not even I can control the taboo treasure. I have to just wait until it dissipates. The only reason I used it was to prevent you from getting away. That teleportation talisman that you've been hesitating about won't work. I've blocked all your paths of escape!"

Master Shengyun surged with energy as he grinned and stalked toward Xu Qing, looking at him as if he were already dead.

"You're right, we're sealed in here pretty tightly," Xu Qing said calmly. Having confirmed that what Master Shengyun said was true, he tossed the jade slip aside and pulled out an iron box. Opening it, he spilled out the contents.

The jade slip he had been holding was not a teleportation talisman. It was just an ordinary slip with random information in it.

The iron box, however, was a wish box, and sealed within it was the poison pill that not even that monk's head had been able to resist. The moment the pill appeared, its aura spread out.

Seeing this, Master Shengyun gaped, and his eyes narrowed. He had no idea what this pill was, but he instinctively got a bad feeling from it. He launched an attack to destroy it, but Xu Qing blocked that attack, allowing the pill's aura to spread. Because the area was completely sealed, there was

nowhere for the aura to go to. It just gathered in the shrinking blood world, growing stronger and stronger.

This had been Xu Qing's plan all along. He didn't know what trump cards and secret weapons Master Shengyun would use, so he couldn't be on guard against them. He knew that the two of them were evenly matched, and it wouldn't be easy to kill him and take his life lamp in a short time. What was more, Xu Qing knew that his biggest disadvantage was that, if he was around when Master Shengyun's dao protector showed up, he would die. Therefore, there seemed to be only one way to finish the battle quickly. And that was to first trick Master Shengyun into thinking he was going to teleport away, and goad him into doing something to prevent that.

He was using Master Shengyun's greed against him. If Master Shengyun wanted his life lamp, he would have to make sure Xu Qing couldn't teleport away. And Xu Qing knew he could use that as a way to control how the fight played out.

Step by step, he got Master Shengyun exactly where he wanted him. Bit by bit he got Master Shengyun to think he was setting things up perfectly for his own benefit, when in reality, he was setting things up perfectly for Xu Qing.

And now, it came down to finding out one thing. Between Xu Qing and Master Shengyun... who could survive longest when surrounded by deadly poison?

Of course, Master Shengyun was an intelligent person. He had no idea exactly how dangerous this poison pill was, but he could guess. Eyes still flickering with killing intent, he took out a handful of antidote pills, consumed them, and then prepared to continue fighting.

But then his expression flickered as he suddenly noticed the skin on his right hand rotting and decaying. It was a terrifying sensation, as he hadn't experienced any pain at all. He quickly started checking the rest of his body. His pupils then constricted as he found that, without him being aware of it at all, there were many other areas where he was starting to rot! And his antidote pill wasn't doing anything to stop it!

"What poison is this?" he blurted. The skin on Xu Qing's face was also rotting, but the effects clearly weren't as pronounced. Not bothering to answer Master Shengyun's question, he raced forward and began his counter attack. He didn't plan to give Master Shengyun any chance at all to recover or fight back against the poison.

For the first time, fear appeared in Master Shengyun's eyes. He wanted to try to take control of the taboo treasure projection, and undo the seal. But as he himself had just mentioned, it wasn't possible. What was more, the taboo treasure was also being tied up dealing with the projection of the Seven Blood Eyes magical treasure. Because of those two obstacles, there was simply no way he could do anything about the sealing. He could only wait until it dissipated naturally, which he expected to take no longer than two incense sticks' worth of time. Yet Master Shengyun's fear grew more obvious as the decay and rot spread. Even worse, the shadow covering his dharma apertures seemed to be twitching in anticipation, as if it planned to spread out further within him.

Upon all that, Xu Qing attacked with brutal ferocity. He led with a fist strike, then converted it into a head-butt that Master Shengyun didn't dare to meet directly.

Master Shengyun dodged to the side.

However, Xu Qing wasn't holding anything back in terms of speed, and boldly pressed the attack. The golden crow exploded with the power of assimilation, and black flames spread out in all directions. Xu Qing wasn't targeting Master Shengyun's throat. He was targeting his abdomen. Hitting the throat would be lethal. But the abdomen was where the life lamp was. Because Xu Qing had a life lamp of his own, he knew exactly where it was.

Master Shengyun was in a frenzy. Howling shrilly, he consumed a mass of medicinal pills designed to bolster life force. His eyes were filled with terror and madness as a sensation of imminent death filled him. He was now fully aware that this was a competition of seeing who could stay alive for the longest.

There was no escaping, and thus, it was with bloodshot eyes that he started fighting back. Booms rang out for a short time.

Xu Qing's mouth was covered in blood, and his skin was rotting off. But he kept launching blows at Master Shengyun's abdomen.

As Master Shengyun defended himself, he was shoved backward, all while his flesh rotted so badly it was dripping off of him in liquid form.

Xu Qing's ruthlessness was fully on display as he attacked again, slamming his knee into Master Shengyun's belly.

Master Shengyun howled hoarsely; his internal organs were starting to rot, and it was all he could do to block the attacks. Unfortunately, his arm had reached such a horrific state of rot that it collapsed.

That said, Xu Qing's knee was also rotting, and cracks spread out across it after he landed the blow. He didn't care. Opening his mouth, he lunged forward, his teeth bared as he tried to bite Master Shengyun's throat.

The madness in Master Shengyun's eyes had already been replaced by pure terror. He flew backward, except that his right leg was starting to melt, putting him off balance. Then Xu Qing lunged forward again, and the two slammed into each other.

Because of the poison, both of them were very weak and were almost at their limit. The battle was reaching a conclusion.

Master Shengyun truly deserved to be called chosen. With his secret magics, his medicinal pills, and various other methods, he had already lasted more than an incense stick's worth of time. But he couldn't last much longer. Despair filled his eyes.

The ground was covered with rotting flesh and blood, but much of it was Xu Qing's; he was in such bad shape he hardly looked human. Yet his eyes still shone with utter ruthlessness. Jumping forward again, he saw the opening he had been looking for and buried his teeth into Master Shengyun's neck. Then he viciously ripped out a chunk of flesh.

Blood sprayed out of Master Shengyun. His ravagemist bird tried to defend him, but Xu Qing's vicious attack affected it as well, and the golden crow pounced. The ravagemist bird shrieked as the golden crow started to assimilate it.

Things weren't over yet. Xu Qing was gasping for breath, as the rot had also reached his internal organs. But he was so close to Master Shengyun that he was able to punch him hard in the stomach.

Master Shengyun let loose a gurgle of pain, and tried to get away. But Xu Qing viciously head-butted him, provoking another shriek. Blood flowed down Xu Qing's face, and he felt completely weak. But, Master Shengyun was even weaker, and Xu Qing realized the time had come to make his move.

Mustering all of his strength, he stabbed his hand into Master Shengyun's abdomen!

Shifting his hand about inside, he found a dharma aperture. Then he started probing Master Shengyun's sea of consciousness for a lamp-shaped object. His eyes lit up. As Master Shengyun screamed in agony, Xu Qing grabbed the life lamp... and wrenched it out viciously!

It was the ultimate display of ruthlessness! Blood sprayed like a fountain! Two of Xu Qing's fingers had rotted away, but he still had three left, and that was enough!

Seven-colored light spread out into the world of blood, illuminating Xu Qing's face. It was... a seven-colored ceramic lamp!! It almost looked like crystal, and emanated a seven-colored glow. Within that glow, it was just possible to see the faint image of a dazzling seven-colored umbrella. It was covered in blood and also emanated an ancient aura. Obviously, it had existed for countless years and had seen many, many things. It was an exceptionally unique item, covered with countless striations filled with the magical laws of heaven and earth, all of which combined into the image of a person. One look at it would cause anyone's mind to tremble. Any life lamp was an absolutely precious treasure!

"Xu Qing!!" Master Shengyun screamed shrilly, despite how his throat was rotting away. The sensation of having his life lamp ripped out from inside him was driving him into utter insanity.

However, that was when Xu Qing's eyes flickered with cold light. The five fingers on his left hand had rotted away so badly that only bones were left behind. Without any hesitation, he stabbed those sharp bones right into Master Shengyun's throat!

And they came out the other side!

Chapter 260: It Was Worth It!

Master Shengyun's voice ceased as his life force faded.

However, Xu Qing wasn't ready to rest at ease. Pulling his skeletal hand back, he prepared to rip Master Shengyun's throat fully open. Then he would tear the rest of his body to shreds. The last thing he wanted was his opponent using some mysterious technique to resurrect himself. Before he could do anything else, the seven-colored life lamp he was holding emitted a bright beam of light. It happened with no warning whatsoever. Apparently, it was powered by the same force behind the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect's taboo projection, which didn't block it at all. Not even the Seven Blood Eyes magical treasure eye could do anything to stop it. It rose high into the dome of heaven, where it exploded like a firework.

Then, it transformed into a massive blood-colored vortex. A terrifying, hair-raising aura then erupted from the vortex, along with an enraged shout.

"Who dares to harm my grandson??"

The Seven Blood Eyes magical treasure projection collapsed. The projection of the taboo treasure also faded away, unsealing the area and revealing Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's expression flickered as he realized the life lamp was struggling against him, trying to shoot up toward that vortex. He tightened his grip on it. He had worked hard to get this treasure, and now it was his!

He had lost a lot of fingers, though, so he quickly bit down onto the lamp, his eyes bloodshot.

As the sound of the enraged voice continued to echo about, a hand emerged from the vortex! It was a withered hand, covered with wrinkles, pulsing with a sensation of decay and ancientness. Furthermore, it was massive, blotting out the sky and causing all heaven and earth to grow still. An immense mightiness came with the hand, spreading out over everything.

Master Shengyun, who was hovering on death's door, suddenly vanished, then reappeared below the vortex. A moment later, he disappeared into the vortex.

Thankfully, Xu Qing's shadow was quick enough to get out of Master Shengyun before he was gone.

The massive hand ignored all of that, and began to stretch down toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing quivered from head to toe. Blood dripped from his mouth as he kept his teeth locked onto the life lamp. His vision swam. Creaking sounds echoed out from within him, and more blood sprayed from various wounds on him. He felt the shadow of death covering him. There was no way to dodge this. No way to flee. The massive hand brought destruction with it as it descended from the vortex. No level of cultivation base, no special plan, no unique preparations could do anything right now. The difference in cultivation level left room for only despair.

But then....

Deep within Forbidden by the Phoenix, a cry rang out, piercing through the clouds. It sounded like the song of a bird, or perhaps the roar of a phoenix. Brightly colored light flashed in heaven and earth as a huge rift opened up in the dome of heaven. A deafening noise erupted from the rift, shredding the blood-colored vortex to bits, and causing the enormous hand to shiver.

A voice filled with infinite majesty spoke from the very depths of Forbidden by the Phoenix.

"I'm the emperor of this forbidden ground, and Void Returning isn't welcome here. Screw off!"

The vortex ripped apart, and a muffled grunt rang out. All of a sudden, three fingers on that huge, ancient hand collapsed.

A tremor passed through Xu Qing as the intense sensation of deadly crisis vanished. At the same time, the seven-colored ceramic lamp between his teeth vibrated. The human-shaped striations formed from magical laws of heaven and earth suddenly grew blurry. Then, cracking sounds could be heard as the striations were wiped out of existence. With the image gone, the life lamp ceased struggling. Xu Qing could now sense that it was masterless.

At the same time, a shout of rage came from the vortex. However, the huge hand seemed unwilling to press the issue, and slowly retracted. After it was gone, a voice echoed out.

“Dao protectors, you have failed and earned the death penalty. If you kill this child and bring back the life lamp, I’ll pardon your error and spare your life!”

Numerous rifts exploded across the sky, crisscrossing the remaining bits of the vortex like blades. The vortex collapsed and disappeared. Heaven and earth went back to normal.

Xu Qing stood there gasping for breath. Picking up the wish box, he unhesitatingly turned and started fleeing as fast as he could. He had no time to sit around coming up with a plan. The moment that vortex collapsed, he had sensed three Gold Core auras heading in his direction, pulsing with madness and fury. There was no need to guess who those came from. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, they were Master Shengyun’s dao protectors.

The terrifying entity in the vortex was most likely the patriarch of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect. Though he had been forced to retreat by that voice from the depths of Forbidden by the Phoenix, he had somehow managed to teleport the three dao protectors to this location before leaving. The patriarch couldn’t be here personally, but he still wanted Xu Qing dead because of the life lamp.

There were other loose ends. Who was that voice from the depths of Forbidden by the Phoenix? Was Master Shengyun alive or dead? What was Xu Qing going to do next? There was no time to consider those things.

As he fled, the violet crystal went to work, and he kept a tight grip on the seven-colored ceramic lamp.

At the same time, a crazy look appeared in his eyes. He had put everything on the line, and had very nearly died. It had come at great cost. But it had brought great gain. The value of a life lamp was simply beyond description!

“It was worth it!!!” he murmured. Gritting his teeth, he started absorbing the seven-colored ceramic lamp. He couldn’t wait until later to do it, given the danger he was in. There were three Gold Core enemies after him, and he would need every ounce of strength possible, as well as every bit of recovery power available.

Without taking time to study the lamp, he decided to just risk it. He lit his life flames.

As the light of his life flames raged around him, he put the seven-colored lamp inside of himself. The lamp shone so brightly it was nearly blinding. However, nothing stopped Xu Qing from placing fire inside the lamp and then branding it to himself!

As the lamp burned, seven-colored light swirled around him, filling all of his pores. There was no pain involved; in contrast, it felt wonderful. Eventually, the light swirled into his dantian region, and into his sea of consciousness there. As it converged, the image of a seven-colored ceramic lamp became visible, filled with the profound sensation of ancient time.

It didn’t look inferior in any way to the black life lamp.

Both were exquisite. Both had an ancient resonance. And as their radiance combined, it turned into something even more dazzling. The black light and the seven-colored light interacted, casting out radiance that made Xu Qing’s heavenly palaces even more visible!

From a distance, it was possible to see Xu Qing fleeing through the jungle, with seven-colored light surrounding him like a daoist robe. At the same time, two umbrellas were visible over his head. One

was black, surrounded with endless flames that could protect the soul. The other was seven-colored, and it spread out over his entire person, protecting his fleshly body.

It was already as rare as phoenix feathers or qilin horns to have one umbrella. Having two was the ultimate honor!

Xu Qing was in bad shape from the fight, but at the same time, was clearly infinitely exceptional. As the life lamp became part of him, Xu Qing put one of his life flames atop it. Instantly, the light of his life lamp became even more astonishing.

Rumblings like heavenly thunder echoed in Xu Qing's mind as his cultivation base rose rapidly. With two life lamps in him, his life flames were more amazing than ever. It no longer seemed like a world was burning within him. Instead, it seemed like an entire heaven and earth, burning like hell. With the addition of this life lamp, Xu Qing instantly went from the five-flame level to the six-flame level!

With battle prowess like that, he would stand at the peak of Foundation Establishment cultivators in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

Master Shengyun had once been considered the strongest, but now, that spot belonged to Xu Qing!

As Xu Qing fled through the forbidden ground from three Gold Core experts, a shout of rage could be heard in the Revered Ancient mainland, in the Seven Sect Coalition, specifically from the headquarters of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect.

“What peasant dared to steal my sect's life lamp??”

The ancient voice belonged to none other than Patriarch Soaring Cloud. At the same time, a beam of light shot up from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, speeding out over the Forbidden Sea and causing everything to shake violently. Within that beam of light was an old man in a golden robe. He had white hair, and radiated a sense of majesty and might. He was also furious. The wave of his hand caused numerous streams of sword energy to shoot up and accompany him as he shot out over the water in the direction of South Phoenix and Seven Blood Eyes.

The water seethed beneath Patriarch Soaring Cloud, while at the same time, flickering streams of light could be seen in his eyes. Astonishingly, his cultivation level was the same as Sir Bloodsmelter. He was in the first step of the Void Returning level. His rage alone was enough to boil the sea, and he pulsed with a boundless sword energy which caused countless sea beasts to tremble, and struck fear into the hearts of numerous species. The sky trembled, and space itself shattered as an almighty being went out to sea!

Meanwhile, in Seven Blood Eyes, atop the Seventh Peak, Master Seventh sat in a building playing Go with his servant. However, he had been holding the same piece between his fingers for quite some time now. If you calculated the exact time, he had been holding the piece from the moment Xu Qing started fighting Master Shengyun.

The servant wasn't in a hurry, and just sat there waiting.

After some time passed, Master Seventh calmly got to his feet and said, "I have to stop playing for now. I'll go get Fourth Sib, and make my move when I get back."

With that, Master Seventh clasped his hands behind his back, stepped out into midair, and headed toward Forbidden by the Phoenix. His hair was white, and his eyes seemed to contain a starry sky. His robe was violet, and he stood as straight as a mountain peak. He was old, but he was hale and hearty, like an old steed that can still gallop a thousand miles.