

Timescape 271

Chapter 271: Crafty from Top to Bottom

“Third Sib, you’ll be in charge of spreading the word,” the Captain said. “I’ll handle anyone that responds to the call, and Xu Qing, you be the public face of the operation. You get forty percent, Third Sib and I will get thirty each.”

“Good idea,” Third Elder Brother said with a grin. “I’ll spread the word that Xu Qing is challenging the coalition chosen.”

“Right,” the Captain replied. “But say that he’s not challenging everyone. He’s picking specific people for duels to the death!” The Captain produced an apple from somewhere and took a bite.

After some thought, Xu Qing said, “Except, the name list isn’t set. I’m still trying to decide who to fight.”

The three of them exchanged glances.

The Captain was smiling enigmatically, Third Elder Brother looked innocent, and Xu Qing seemed as calm as ever.

“Then it’s settled,” the Captain said. “These coalition people aren’t idiots. Anyone with a brain will think to send a gift our way.” Clearing his throat, he looked around. “You two carry on. I’m going to check out the rest of the hot spring. There aren’t enough girls in this part.” With that, the Captain got out of the pool and left to find another. Third Elder Brother stretched, said goodbye to Xu Qing, and then headed toward some of the other disciples in the pool, looking as innocent as a lamb.

Xu Qing simply closed his eyes and started doing some breathing exercises. However, only a moment later he opened his eyes to find that a female disciple from the coalition was drifting carefully toward him, her face a bit flushed.

Xu Qing glanced in the direction of Third Elder Brother and found that he was already in the middle of a whole group of girls. From the way they were smiling and laughing, it seemed they were all getting along great.

After considering the situation, Xu Qing realized that the strong spirit energy in the water was washing away his disguise. It wasn’t all gone. Only someone who knew him well would be able to recognize him. Yet revealing even just part of his good looks still left him bewitchingly attractive.

Closing his eyes, he meditated for a short time, then opened his eyes again.

There were now three female disciples nearby him. They were whispering to each other about his physical appearance. One of them, who was a bit more outgoing than the others, noticed that he’d opened his eyes. Laughing softly, she said, “Hello there, Junior Brother. Which sect are you from? I don’t recognize you.”

Xu Qing declined to respond, and simply closed his eyes.

More time passed. About two hours later, the Captain returned, eating an apple and humming a little tune. The pool he'd gone off to had started to get boring, as the female disciples slowly disappeared. Thus, he returned looking for Xu Qing and Third Elder Brother.

However, when he got close, his eyes went wide, and he suddenly stopped humming. Forgetting to take a bite of his apple, he stared at the spot he had left earlier, which had previously been mostly empty.

As of now... there were a lot of cultivators there, and most were female disciples.

Third Elder Brother was on one side, a girl under each arm, and three more in the vicinity, all talking and laughing with each other.

On the other side, there was no sign of Xu Qing, but the entire area was all girls.

The Captain inhaled sharply as he realized why there had been fewer and fewer female disciples on his side of the hot spring. Not quite willing to accept the reality of the situation, he marched over to get back into the now-crowded pool.

However, before he could get in, a female disciple with a round face and a lot of freckles glared up at him. "There's no room here for a big fellow like you. Can't you go to one of the other pools?"

Upon seeing the Captain being berated, Third Elder Brother grinned, patted the girls on either side of him on the head, and then got out of the pool. Grabbing the depressed Captain, he pulled him away.

"What's going on?" the Captain said, looking back at the pool. "Where's Fourth Sib?"

"He left a while ago. As for what's going on, well, can't you guess?"

The Captain sighed. "He got driven off by hot girls?"

Xu Qing was already back in his room, seated cross-legged in meditation. Given how much spirit energy he'd absorbed, he had to admit that the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River really was amazing. From what he could tell, if you practiced cultivation here long-term, then even someone with a lot of mutagen would find their mutagen levels dropping quickly. Although it wouldn't be possible to completely purge it, the cumulative effects would be very beneficial for cultivation.

No wonder the coalition used their taboo treasure to destroy the Young Arbiter Sect's dam and restore the flow of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River. Xu Qing looked up and to the east.

That was where the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society was located, and was also where the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River flowed from. Considering that the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society controlled a third of the prefecture, it made sense that they would be able to benefit most from the river.

Xu Qing closed his eyes and went back to meditation.

The night passed.

The following morning at dawn, the official negotiations began between Seven Blood Eyes and the Seven Sect Coalition. They needed to discuss all the details of where Seven Blood Eyes would end up. As could be imagined, discussions like that would take a long time, as they touched on a host of

complicated things, for example, spell formations, business interests, rules and regulations, et cetera.

As one of the delegates, Xu Qing was able to join the negotiations. However, he found everything very boring, and eventually went back to his room to work on cultivation. By now, he had fully integrated the seven-colored wind-chanting lamp into himself, and had full control of it. In doing so, he had discovered something very interesting. And that was... his two life lamps actually complemented each other! It was very exciting, and he spent a lot of effort probing and testing.

There were other highnesses who chose not to join the discussions. Most of them found reasons to slip away, and then went out to issue more dueling challenges. Before long, all of the coalition disciples were very riled up. The Seven Blood Eyes highnesses were being very domineering, and word spread fast. In fact, the second highness from the First Peak went to challenge the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect. The other mountain peaks were the same. While the bigwigs negotiated, the disciples' desire to do battle heated up. Before long, everyone in the coalition was talking about it.

Three days later, the negotiations were still going on, and Seven Blood Eyes disciples were still issuing challenges left and right. Although there were victories and defeats on both sides, Seven Blood Eyes obviously had the upper hand.

What was more... one particular rumor started spreading that caused a huge stir among the coalition disciples. That rumor had to do with Xu Qing, and claimed that he was trying to decide who he wanted to challenge to a duel. As soon as word started to spread, the chosen from the various parts of the coalition were struck with fear. They knew that Xu Qing was like Master Shengyun used to be. He had six-flame battle prowess that put him on par with a Gold Core cultivator with one heavenly palace. With a terrifying cultivation base like that, nobody wanted to fight him. What was even worse was that, according to the rumors, he wanted to fight to the death. Everyone was shaken.

Of course, refusing a challenge would be a huge loss of face. Therefore, smart people such as Zhou Qifan secretly got in touch with the Captain, and sent over gifts as a show of goodwill. [1]

News about that quickly spread, and before long, chosen from all over the coalition were sending gifts.

Eventually, word of the matter reached the ears of the bigwigs in the coalition. By that point, the negotiations with Seven Blood Eyes were mostly over, and both sides were happy with the result. However, one of the coalition delegates, who was meeting with Master Seventh, didn't seem very happy about the situation with Xu Qing.

"If your Seven Blood Eyes disciples want to challenge our coalition disciples, that's fine. It's a good thing for them to learn from each other. But that Xu Qing has six-flame battle prowess! For him to go around challenging people is obviously bullying, don't you think? Before you were part of the coalition, it was a different story. But now we're all on the same side!"

"Did he actually challenge anyone yet?" Master Seventh asked.

"That's the most outrageous part! O! Seventh, those apprentices of yours are just running a scam! In fact, your senior apprentice is apparently telling people that

whoever gives the least will be put onto the challenge list for Xu Qing! It's absolutely outrageous, and is simply bad manners. I wonder where they learned this behavior from!"

Master Seventh cleared his throat. "I agree it's bad manners. But they're just kids having fun, that's all. Besides, how could your disciples be so gullible? Say, I have a few questions about our measure of authority with spell formations after we arrive. Come, come. Let's hash out all the details."

The coalition delegate wasn't sure what to say in response. What kind of people are these? he thought, and couldn't help but worry what things would be like in the new Eight Sect Coalition. As far as he could tell, the Seven Blood Eyes people might as well be gangsters. It was never like this before....

The coalition delegate sighed, then put the matter aside and focused on the negotiations. Meanwhile, Master Seventh smiled and earnestly delved into the topic at hand.

Two more days passed. The negotiations were complete, and an official announcement was made in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, notifying all of the other groups of the change to the sect's name. And now, all the other groups would be paying close attention to see what this Eight Sect Coalition was like.

In South Phoenix, the patriarch issued orders in the capital city that everyone was to prepare to move. Within one month, the sect would be transported to the mainland.

Back in the coalition, the other sects would set up a host of teleportation portals to make the move as smooth as possible. The highnesses from the various peaks continued to challenge the coalition disciples. However, not as many people were paying attention to the results. Everyone was more interested in Xu Qing, and were wondering who exactly he would challenge.

A lot of disciples had sent him gifts, and everyone wanted to see what the final result would be. However, Master Seventh picked a day to publicly call his three apprentices to him and severely scold them. He said that as members of the coalition, it wasn't proper for them to issue challenges for life-or-death duels. What was more, he said that considering Xu Qing's battle prowess, it wasn't appropriate for him to bully other people in the coalition.

Xu Qing, the Captain, and Third Elder Brother all looked abashed. Their Master's fierce berating had apparently brought them to their senses, as they loudly proclaimed that they understood the error of their ways, and would refrain from issuing any challenges....

That put an end to the matter. All of the coalition disciples who had sent gifts, including Huang Yikun and Zhou Qifan, could only smile bitterly. They knew full well that this Master and his three apprentices had just put on a show.

"So crafty!"

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"I can't believe a mighty Spirit Trove expert would do something like this with his apprentices...."

"And there's nothing we can do about it! Everything he said makes perfect sense."

As most of the other coalition disciples came to the realization that they'd been scammed, a rumbling sound echoed out from within the House of Grue Hunters. Sima Ru had emerged from her secluded meditation facilities. She had not successfully achieved her breakthrough, and thus, did not yet have a second heavenly palace. But because of what happened to her poor little brother, and because her clone had been wiped out of existence, she decided to come out early. [2]

The first thing she did was send a formal letter of challenge to Seven Blood Eyes.

She was going to fight Xu Qing!

It created an instant uproar. Sima Ru was a Gold Core cultivator with a heavenly palace! For her to challenge someone in a lower cultivation realm seemed like bullying. And yet... no one seemed to think it really was. In fact, everyone was of the opinion that the two of them were evenly matched.

There was no question that Xu Qing had superseded Master Shengyun as the number one chosen in the Eight Sect Coalition, and was someone who could crush heavenly palaces. As the most prominent disciple in Seven Blood Eyes, it wasn't really an option for Xu Qing to decline the challenge. Therefore, Master Seventh offered him some advice.

"Be as deceptive as you can, but fight well. You're fighting for the prestige of our sect. By the way, that girl Sima Ru has two hearts. The one on her right side could be of big help to you in the future...."

Xu Qing thought about the situation, and killing intent glittered in his eyes. After considering what he had accomplished lately with the seven-colored wind-chanting lamp, he sent a reply to Sima Ru in the form of a single sentence.

"I agree, but only if it's a fight to the death."

Chapter 272: Crushing Sima Ru!

Disciples from the House of Grue Hunters would absorb special blood that allowed them to control grues. The result was that they either became gloomy and grim, or they became wild and erratic. Either way, they were always extremely hostile. Sometimes they looked normal on the outside, but on the inside, they were twisted. There were no exceptions. They didn't get bothered by brutal injuries. The reason was that their coexistence with grues involved endless torment. They had no choice but to transcend physical pain, as they always had to deal with unimaginable suffering and backlash from the grues.

For years, the House of Grue Hunters had struggled with ways to deal with this. And they had experimented with many methods, though none of them were particularly effective. Grues were inherently cruel and vicious, and it was made worse by the influence of the broken face of the god. The only way to lessen the effects was to suppress the grues with a higher cultivation base.

However, the higher your cultivation base, the more terrifying the grues you could control. And few people could resist the temptation to rapidly get stronger by doing that. It was an endless cycle. The more progress one made, the more grues they would take into themselves, until they became grim and sinister from top to bottom and from inside to outside.

Disciples from the House of Grue Hunters endured constant torment, and it didn't just give them twisted and vicious personalities. It also made them brutal in combat. What was more, their insane ways made them a big headache for the other sects to deal with.

When Sima Ru received Xu Qing's reply, she almost couldn't control the perverse ferocity within her. Apparently ignoring the advice from her superiors, and also the fact that the sect leader had explained she would probably lose this fight, she charged out of the House of Grue Hunters, becoming a bright beam of light that shot toward Seven Blood Eyes' temporary headquarters in the Heavenmirror Treasure Sect.

Of course, plenty of cultivators noticed what was happening, as Sima Ru was not making any attempt to keep a low profile.

As she hovered in the air above the compound, her long white robe rippled in the wind, and her black hair drifted around her. Shockingly, the faint image of a majestic heavenly palace could be seen above her head. She emanated terrifying fluctuations, and within the image of the heavenly palace, it was possible to see a withered, decaying dwarf, suppressed into the form of a grue core. Countless suppressed grues surrounded the heavenly palace, all of them howling in grief and anguish.

Behind her was a huge ball of flesh that resembled the dancing balls that had been with her clone in Seven Blood Eyes. The difference was that this one was dramatically larger. It was also singing in a high-pitched voice.

“One, two, three, up to ten little friends;

“Paddy-cake paddy-cake with a sweetheart... rip out the lungs and dig out the heart;

“Leave only the head, it's not horrible... dance in a circle, it's so adorable!”

As the piercing voice echoed out everywhere, Sima Ru hovered above the Seven Blood Eyes compound, her face as pale as death, but her features incredibly stunning.

Smiling faintly, she said, “I'm here, Xu Qing.”

Though her voice was soft, her eyes were bloodshot, and she radiated terrifying pressure that caused vicious clouds to gather above her in the shape of a head. As winds screamed around her, the ball of flesh behind her shrieked and dropped down toward the compound.

But then a massive force hit the ball of flesh and sent it spinning in the opposite direction, shrieking loudly, a big chunk missing from it.

Xu Qing appeared, and with a single step, he rose from the compound up into the sky. Two umbrellas could be seen over his head. One was seven-colored and radiant, and surrounded by chanting wind. The other was black and covered with deadly fire.

The golden crow materialized behind him, letting loose a piercing cry into the sky, its flames covering Xu Qing like an imperial robe, and its wings showering sparks everywhere.

Xu Qing looked coldly at Sima Ru. Back in Seven Blood Eyes, he had killed her clone, therefore, he didn't see any need for words. Unleashing his six-flame battle prowess, he launched a fist strike at her.

Master Seventh had requested that he fight for prestige, and therefore, he decided to go all out.

That fist contained the power of all of his 101 dharma apertures, the golden crow techniques, his three life flames, and his two life lamps. That was the very peak of the six-flame level.

The dome of heaven seemed to cave in slightly as the head of clouds above Sima Ru exploded. Sima Ru then waved her hand, causing the heavenly palace overhead to crush toward Xu Qing. One heavenly palace was equivalent to six-flame battle prowess, and in the blink of an eye, it met Xu Qing's fist strike. A deafening boom echoed out in all directions.

Sima Ru's heavenly palace trembled, and then tumbled back because of the full extent of Xu Qing's battle prowess. A tremor passed through Sima Ru as she was flung backward by about 300 meters.

Xu Qing remained in place, unharmed. The seven-colored umbrella protected his fleshly body, and the black umbrella protected his soul. Nothing under the level of six flames could pierce such defenses.

Back when Master Shengyun had the seven-colored wind-chanting lamp, it had been a big headache for Xu Qing to deal with. It had taken a whole series of clever traps to break it open. And now, the amazing defenses of that lamp were benefiting Xu Qing.

However, this life lamp didn't just have defensive powers. It also had a backlash attack. After Xu Qing's study and experimentation, he had found that using the two lamps together came with added benefits.

And now, the seven-colored wind-chanting lamp's backlash attack actually surpassed what Master Shengyun had been able to unleash. That was why Xu Qing had led with a fist attack, and why he had forced Sima Ru into retreat. It was also why he was fairly certain that he could kill her. With a six-flame backlash attack, Xu Qing was no weaker than the seven-flame level.

Sima Ru obviously didn't know that, which made sense considering she didn't even have a single life lamp. Not even Master Shengyun had any idea what was possible with two life lamps. It wasn't just a simple matter of one plus one equals two.

Blood sprayed out of Sima Ru's mouth, and her eyes shone with absolute incredulity.

All of the observers from the Eight Sect Coalition were also shaken to the core. After all, since Xu Qing was now the top chosen in the coalition, many people wanted to see what he was like.

"That's seven-flame battle prowess!"

"Sima Ru was careless! One heavenly palace isn't going to be enough to defeat Xu Qing!"

Everyone in the compound was also stunned, including all of the highnesses from the various mountain peaks.

The Captain was eating an apple as he watched. Looking very moved, he thought, Thankfully I ate half of that nose, otherwise, I really wouldn't be able to beat him. That said, I have the feeling that little Ah Qing... is still being deceptive. He has more secret weapons that he hasn't revealed.

While everyone looked on in astonishment, Xu Qing blurred into motion toward the stunned Sima Ru, launching another fist strike.

Rumbling sounds echoed out as Sima Ru tried to fight back. She unleashed all sorts of magical devices, and released a host of grues. In fact, it seemed like all of the projected grues around her shot toward Xu Qing. However, none of them could get through the defenses of his two life lamps to harm either his body or his soul.

Simu Ru was shoved back again, her heavenly palace shaking. Then Xu Qing closed in for another fist strike.

No matter how Sima Ru fought back, and no matter how her grues snapped and slashed, it didn't do any good. Her battle prowess wasn't high enough. The only way she could be effective was if she had two heavenly palaces, and could thus seal grues that would be a threat to Xu Qing.

As Xu Qing attacked explosively, her heavenly palace trembled violently. He struck with fist after fist, shoving Simu Ru higher and higher into the air. Madness filled her eyes as she performed an incantation gesture and took out a blood-colored sealing crystal. It was obviously an extraordinary item, but she didn't hesitate to crush it.

Instantly, the withered dwarf in her heavenly palace opened its eyes, and they radiated bloodthirsty brutality.

Xu Qing stopped in place. Instead of launching another fist strike, he lifted his hand over his head. Instantly, winds kicked up, and wild colors flashed in the sky. It was as if some unspeakable will had begun to gather, which transformed into a violet heavenly saber. This saber wasn't illusory, but rather, corporeal. What was more to the shock of all onlookers, it wasn't just a single saber that appeared. There were... seven! Seven heavenly sabers appeared, causing everything to shake. Then Xu Qing dropped his hand, and the sabers slashed forth like heavenly punishment. They came from seven directions, making it impossible to evade them. With horrifying might, they slashed into the terrified Sima Ru and her heavenly palace.

Sima Ru shrieked as the sabers landed, shaking her heavenly palace and causing cracking sounds to ring out from within it as seven huge rifts were cut into its surface.

The dwarf inside was shaken, but seemed about to fight back. However, Xu Qing's golden crow materialized and greedily locked eyes onto it. The dwarf shrank back into a sitting position.

Sima Ru was seriously injured and was coughing up blood. Her energy was unstable. But Xu Qing pressed the attack, and moved with even greater speed than before to arrive right in front of Sima Ru. Lifting his right hand, he stabbed it deep into her chest.

Sima Ru had two hearts, and he grabbed the one on the right-hand side. As she screamed, he ripped it out of her chest.

Blood sprayed everywhere as a heart-shaped black stone emerged. Sima Ru's energy crumbled, and her heavenly palace seemed like it was about to shatter. That was when a sinister wind suddenly sprang up. The power of the wind wrapped up Sima Ru and whisked her away. She disappeared in an instant, and then a harsh voice rang out.

"I'm stopping this battle to the death. To make up for it, I'm giving you that Gruegloom heart as a gift."

Xu Qing backed up by about 300 meters and looked up with a frown. It seemed to him that this fight had gone too smoothly for him. Something about it seemed off.

Master Seventh suddenly appeared next to him. "Don't overthink it, Fourth Sib. All grievances are wiped out at this point. If that Sima Ru girl has any sense, she'll thank you in the future. Now hurry up and thank Sect Leader Grue Hunter for the gift."

Xu Qing clasped hands in the direction of the House of Grue Hunters and bowed. "Many thanks, Sect Leader Grue Hunter!"

Meanwhile, in the senate of the Eight Sect Coalition, eight figures retracted their divine will.

Sir Bloodsmelter smiled.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I believe this means I won the bet. Although it was ultimately a deal struck between my son-in-law and the Sima Clan from the House of Grue Hunters, I think all of you saw how outstanding my apprentice's apprentice is. Now, I hope you can think long and hard about my suggestion for coalition fund allocation. After all, he clearly has the potential to become an Ancient Emperor. We don't need the 'dao child' title, but the compensation should surpass that of an ordinary dao child. That's not excessive, is it?"

None of the other seven individuals present said anything. All of them sent a stream of light to Sir Bloodsmelter. Then Patriarch Soaring Cloud snorted coldly and walked off.

Chapter 273: Not a Nice Place

The fight was over, and Xu Qing's name resounded in the Eight Sect Coalition and the 137 sects that made it up.

Master Shengyun had been capable of fighting a Gold Core cultivator with a heavenly palace, and had even managed to crush the grand highness from the First Peak in Seven Blood Eyes. However, that was because that grand highness had just broken through, and had come out of seclusion before stabilizing his first heavenly palace.

Xu Qing was completely different. He had actually crushed a Gold Core expert with a fully formed heavenly palace. For something like that to happen in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was as rare as phoenix feathers or qilin horns.

That was especially true... considering Xu Qing still hadn't ignited his fourth life flame.

Because of that, the attitudes of the coalition disciples began to change. Though some people were still hostile toward Xu Qing, many had come to revere him. Of that group... the female disciples made the majority. After all, as the Captain had mentioned, Xu Qing's good looks were a trump card that surpassed his cultivation base.

Despite all that, Xu Qing didn't leave the compound after the fight. He spent his time working on cultivation, and making sure both of his life lamps were fully integrated.

Master Seventh eventually told Xu Qing that the fight was the result of a deal between Seven Blood Eyes and the Sima Clan.

Meanwhile, the negotiations with the coalition were complete, and a final determination had been made about where Seven Blood Eyes would be located. The results were a secret, though, and not even the ordinary delegates knew the details unless Master Seventh chose to tell them.

Therefore... the Captain, Xu Qing and Third Elder Brother were naturally the first to find out.

Xu Qing was actually working on an important mission during this, his first visit to the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Before leaving, Zhang San had approached him with eyebrows dancing up

and down, and had made Xu Qing promise to get details about where the sect would be located. That information directly related to the possibility of enormous profit.

Zhang San wanted Xu Qing to find out the borders of the new sect territory, the layout of what would be inside the borders, and also specifics about what was on the other side of the borders. As Zhang San had said, an event like this only happened once in a blue moon. Zhang San felt that the Captain wasn't very reliable, and had thus entrusted this mission to Xu Qing. He had also repeatedly warned Xu Qing not to forget about it during the trip.

After Xu Qing got all the details, the first thing he did was transmit them to Zhang San. Then Zhang San, being the resourceful person he was, held nothing back to purchase teleportation passage to the mainland, where he barely had time to say hello to Xu Qing and the Captain before he was busy at work.

Also busy at work was Third Elder Brother. Without batting an eyelid, he started making various preparations based on the inside information.

The news soon reached the highnesses from the other mountain peaks. They knew how important news like this was, so they immediately stopped issuing dueling challenges and began doing various things to capitalize on what was happening.

Considering that, it was no surprise that the news leaked to the public fairly quickly. Once everyone knew where Seven Blood Eyes would end up, things got really crazy. People from all of the various sects in the coalition were at work. One of the results of the negotiations was a stipulation that the coalition, to show good faith, was paying for all of the costs for moving Seven Blood Eyes. It really just came down to good manners and not pushing things too far. After all, if any of the other sects found themselves in a similar negotiation, and had been too stingy in the past, they would suffer for it. Beyond that, people in the know from the various coalitions sects were able to profit handsomely because of their inside knowledge. In fact, shortly after the word started to spread, the coalition put a moratorium on real estate transactions.

At that point, the first wave of teleportations from Seven Blood Eyes began.

It started with a large group of Sixth Peak disciples. That said, South Phoenix was still the foundation of the sect, and wasn't going to be abandoned. So only about sixty percent of the disciples came, along with Master Sixth. With them came the Sixth Peak itself.

The plan was to build an entire new city on the spot that had been set aside. It was a major undertaking, and wouldn't just require cultivators, but also would rely on the help of mortals. Work began immediately.

Soon the second and third waves of teleportations came. On a daily basis, both disciples and mortals from Seven Blood Eyes arrived to take residence in the new city.

Seven Blood Eyes was to be located on the other side of a fork in the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River. It was connected to what had once been the Seven Sect Coalition by means of eight enormous bridges, each of which was wide enough for a hundred horse carts to cross at the same time.

Beyond that location was wilderness, from which point you could see the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains.

The general layout of the city was already determined. Instead of being a square like the capital city in South Phoenix, from high above, it resembled a huge eye. One end of the city touched the Forbidden Sea, and the other was the part with the bridges connecting to the other coalition cities. A canal was dug out so that the waters of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River made their way through Seven Blood Eyes to the sea.

The pupil of the enormous eye was where the seven mountain peaks were to be located. As before, the Seventh Peak would administer the Port District.

Because of all the construction work, Xu Qing wasn't able to immerse himself fully in cultivation. As one of the highnesses of the Seventh Peak, there were too many responsibilities to tend to.

After the preliminary work was done creating the city, preparations began for the large-scale teleportation move, in which the majority of the common citizens and disciples would come to the city. It was such a huge undertaking that even just making the adjustments to the spell formations took an entire day. By evening, most of the teleportation portals were ready. The sect disciples who were present were keeping a close eye on everything. After all, there would soon be a vast number of mortals coming into the city. They were the foundation of Seven Blood Eyes' economy, and as always, the sect went to great lengths to keep them safe.

In fact, that was one of Xu Qing's main responsibilities. Working with him were the Captain and Third Elder Brother. The three of them hovered in midair, with Seven Blood Eyes on the one side with its teleportation portals in a constant state of activity, and a vast wilderness on the other side.

The massive city walls, as well as the sect's spell formation, created a barrier between the coalition and the wilderness. However, from a high vantage point, it was possible to see that, compared to the continent of South Phoenix, the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was actually a much more brutal place.

Furthermore, because Seven Blood Eyes was so close to the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, Xu Qing had a clear view of those mountains. They looked like the corpse of some massive beast. Dark mountain peaks rose up everywhere, and they were covered with sinister trees. The Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains eventually ran all the way into the sea, although that spot was so far away it wasn't visible.

The Captain was next to Xu Qing, munching an apple. "The other end of the mountain range is where you can find the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain."

Xu Qing nodded. As he studied the mountains and the horizon, the teleportation portals in the city behind him rumbled to life, and the light of teleportation shone brightly, illuminating the dome of heaven. Winds blew hard and strong, and the ground trembled. Figures emerged, fully a hundred thousand of them. From high in the sky, they almost looked like ants streaming out into the city. All sorts of facial expressions could be seen, from excitement to apprehension. To them, this was a strange new land, but it was also a place to make a new beginning.

The disciples in the crowd floated up into the air to look around. At the same time, there were already disciples assigned to keep things orderly and direct people where to go. Everyone present was from Seven Blood Eyes.

As Xu Qing was keeping a close eye on things, the sky over the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains changed colors. Pink clouds suddenly roiled out, accompanied by immense pressure that caused lightning bolts to shoot down.

The high-level cultivators in Seven Blood Eyes immediately noticed it, and Sir Bloodsmelter's face appeared in the sky, gazing in that direction.

When Xu Qing did the same, he saw something absolutely shocking and ghastly!

There were thousands of common citizens, apparently nonhumans from a small nation in the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, who were frantically running away from something. They looked skinny and emaciated, and they had looks of terror and despair on their faces.

The pink clouds swept over them. That pinkness was very grisly, like a mixture between rouge and ground meat. Transforming into the shape of a mouth, the clouds shot toward the ground. In the blink of an eye, the thousands of commoners were gobbled up. Then, crunching sounds rang out as blood rained down to the ground. It was really an appalling sight.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted as the pink clouds seethed again, and a huge figure became visible within them.

It was a woman, fully 3,000 meters tall. She was very beautiful, with exquisite facial features, a prominent nose, sculpted cheekbones, and eyes that glittering with scintillating light. Given how close the woman was to Seven Blood Eyes, it was possible to see that her skin was covered with dark spots like that of a leopard. Her waist was very narrow, her teeth were gleaming white, and hanging from her ears were two jade stone earrings that tinkled melodiously when they moved.

Her gown was made from jade thread, and was covered with over ten thousand spirit pearls, each of which glowed brightly and emanated a powerful spirit energy. As for the jade thread, its fragrant aroma spread out for dozens of kilometers in all directions.

What was even more astonishing was that on the front of her garment was a totemic phoenix feather embroidered with hair, that glittered brightly and pulsed with a shocking godliness. As she flew along, she held out a mirror which she used to check her skin after her meal.

As she neared Seven Blood Eyes, Sir Bloodsmelter grimly said, "Halt!"

His voice echoed like thunder through the heavens, and caused the woman in the pink cloud to look up. Seeing the new Seven Blood Eyes city, she looked at Sir Bloodsmelter and sneered.

"Seven Blood Eyes? So you have a taboo treasure now? How amusing." After stretching lazily, she turned and flew back toward the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains.

The entire scene caused Xu Qing's pupils to constrict. The woman's brutality was shocking and her cultivation base terrifying.

"That," said Third Elder Brother, "was August Spirit Nethersprite from the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, where they keep 137 nations around just to devour their citizens, creating a living hell on earth."

“The second-highest ranking spirit from the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain is August Spirit Sunslaughter. The highest-ranking is August Spirit Sporelight. All three of them are in the Void Returning level, and are considered one of the top six powers in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. They’re unfathomably powerful. She must have come to intimidate us.”

Hearing Third Elder Brother’s words, Xu Qing looked at the distant mountains. He could already sense how brutal of a place the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was. Although there was happiness and prosperity in the coalition, the outside world was very different. It was a vicious and ruthless place. It wasn’t a kill-or-be-killed world, but rather a kill-or-be-eaten world.

It was at this point that Xu Qing suddenly heard a gulp from off to the side. The Captain was looking in the direction August Spirit Nethersprite had disappeared, his eyes glittering.

“Those were millennium spirit resonance pearls. And that jade cloth was created using the divine ability from the extremely rare Immortal Jade Scripture. That immortal jade cloth is filled with shocking immortal energy. Eating it would lead to untold benefits. And then there’s that phoenix feather embroidered from hair. That godliness was incredible! An amazing set of clothing. My set of clothing!!”

Chapter 274: Brutal Lands

Before coming to the coalition, Xu Qing had read about the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain in the sect files.

“For 500,000 kilometers around the Dao-Suppressing Mountain, skeletons litter the landscape, and bones stick up out of the ground like a forest. Flayed skin and melted hair cover everything underfoot, turning it black.

“As far as the eye can see, blood and gore cover the lands, creating a horrendous atmosphere. Bones can be seen piled up everywhere and instead of fruit hanging from trees, you will see severed heads, still alive, and howling in endless pain and torment as blood drips from them to the ground.

“There are mountains of corpses and seas of blood. The stench is horrendous in this hell on earth. Within the territory of the Dao-Suppressing Mountain are 137 nations, made up of both humans and nonhumans that are kept for food. When a nation is devoured, another is put in its place.”

That was the description of the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain found in the files of Seven Blood Eyes.

Those brutal lands bordered the Eight Sect Coalition, and were also near the sea, separated only by the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains.

Xu Qing knew why the sect had picked this spot to occupy. For one thing, it was connected to the coalition as a whole. Though it was near the Dao-Suppressing Mountain, the coalition was also one

of the top forces in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. If the Dao-Suppressing Mountain invaded, it would lead to full-scale war.

Another reason the sect had chosen this spot was that it was close to the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River, and the spirit energy was strong. That, in turn, would help Seven Blood Eyes to purge the mutagen from within them.

Most relevant was the canal that now made its way through the city, which would provide strong immortal energy to both sides of the canal. The tributary of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River belonged to the coalition, but according to the negotiated agreement, the canal belonged to Seven Blood Eyes. Although the area occupied by Seven Blood Eyes was now wildly valuable, before the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River tributary filled up, it had been worthless.

At least, those were Xu Qing's speculations. He hadn't been present at all the meetings, nor had he even qualified to participate in the discussions between the sect leaders and patriarchs, so he couldn't be sure.

But he was already wary about the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain. And it reinforced the fact that the coalition was no paradise. Things seemed very nice here, but it was all built on strength. Nothing was truly certain, but one thing was for sure: if you weren't strong, then your paradise would disappear, and you would become food for someone else.

The sunrise and sunset can be changed dramatically, much less the nice conditions here. Xu Qing looked away from the direction where the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain lay, and contemplated how weak he was. Once the construction is complete, I'll ask Master to give me some new divine abilities to study. I need to get stronger!

Eyes shining with determination, he took a deep breath and continued to keep an eye on the surrounding area.

Days passed. Construction work went on constantly. Roads were paved, buildings went up, and spell formations were put into place. The hard work of the Seven Blood Eyes disciples and mortal citizens ensured that the city was rapidly taking shape.

More and more disciples and mortals arrived on a daily basis. The previously empty city was already starting to thrum with life.

The seven mountain peaks were brought in and set up in the city center. Of course, Seven Blood Eyes wasn't going to abandon South Phoenix. They brought in seven new mountain peaks from the nearby Mountains of Truth, which ensured that the grand spell formation continuously functioned. Although there weren't as many disciples in the old capital city as before, now that Seven Blood Eyes was a supervisory sect, it wouldn't be difficult to recruit more cultivators from South Phoenix and the Forbidden Sea.

Life went on.

Now that Seven Blood Eyes was a member of the Eight Sect Coalition, they needed to make sure that their leadership positions matched those of the other sects. For instance, all coalition sects had a sect leader, a position that Seven Blood Eyes never had. Now it did.

There was no debate over Master Seventh becoming the new sect leader. As for the position of Seventh Peak peaklord, it was taken by Master Seventh's daoist partner, who was Ding Xue's aunt. [1]

The current elders were given the new title of dharma protector. Going forward, only Nascent Soul cultivators could be elders. At the moment, only the peaklords were in that level. From that it was obvious that Seven Blood Eyes wanted its peaklords to all be in the Spirit Trove level.

After the matter of titles and positions was handled, Seven Blood Eyes was officially a member of the coalition. That said, there were sundry other matters to handle, and everyone in the sect was incredibly busy.

Everyone had at least one or two different responsibilities.

The sect didn't want disciples to feel pressure regarding their cultivation, so they distributed a lot of resources, and also issued missions with enticing rewards. Because they weren't deadly missions, people were very excited to accept them and earn the rewards.

Xu Qing's second assignment was to work with some fellow disciples to shove as much mutagen-filled water out of the port and back into the Forbidden Sea. That, in turn, made it possible for other disciples to start building the harbors in the port. Xu Qing had never gone back to South Phoenix after being part of the delegation. He had made a big scene when they debarked, and had then defeated Sima Ru in battle. Everyone felt shaken because of that. As a result, he was exactly like Master Shengyun back in the day, a shining beacon that attracted attention.

Though no official announcement had been made in the coalition, everyone knew that he was now the number one chosen. Of course, many people were curious about him. Because of that, as Xu Qing worked with the other disciples, implementing the technique to drive out the mutagen from the port, quite a few coalition disciples from other sects were present, watching. To them, the fact that Seven Blood Eyes was joining the coalition was a huge deal, so it was only natural that they would want to take a look at the top disciple from there.

Many of them were female disciples, and as soon as they caught a glimpse of Xu Qing, their eyes lit up, and they began whispering amongst themselves.

The Seven Blood Eyes disciples took it as a matter of course. This kind of thing had been happening a lot lately. They just carried on, sighing and occasionally looking up at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing ignored all that, and focused on the technique to keep the water out of the port. He was coming to discover that his assignments in the sect all came with opportunities to refine his cultivation techniques. For instance, pushing the seawater out required using the Seaforming Scripture, and also allowed him to feel the full pressure of the Forbidden Sea pushing against him. It took full concentration, otherwise he would be sent tumbling backward.

The effort touched on maintaining stability and forcefulness with dharma force. The pressure of the seawater was like an enormous grindstone constantly polishing him. As Xu Qing came to realize how he was benefiting, he focused even more on doing a good job.

As he was in the middle of this type of cultivation, Ding Xue arrived.

She wore a simple blue garment decorated with floating clouds. Her hair was bound in a ponytail, and she had a sword strapped to her back that was decorated with flying phoenixes, and inset with

jade. She looked valiant and formidable as she walked through the sea breeze. However, her slightly flushed face and completely innocent gaze made her seem unusually charming. [2]

She looked curiously at the female disciples gazing at Xu Qing. And then, after he finished his work and settled down cross-legged to catch his breath, she approached and said, "Big Bro Xu Qing."

He opened his eyes, noted her presence, and nodded.

"Big Bro Xu Qing, I learned some new things about plants and vegetation lately. I concocted a bottle of hundred-spirits immortal grass serum, and when I took a sip, I thought it tasted great. But... the medicinal efficacy doesn't seem very high..." Upon seeing Xu Qing frown in response to her words, she quickly added, "Big Bro Xu Qing, my uncle is so busy nowadays, and so is my aunt. And my grandpa never sees anybody. You're the only one who can help me, Big Bro Xu Qing. If you just have a minute, could you please give even a tip or two to little old Xue'er?"

Ding Xue was charming, and she had a lovely voice that currently sounded a bit coquettish.

When she mentioned those the three people, Xu Qing really had no choice but to nod in agreement. [3]

Ding Xue's eyes brightened, and she took out a bottle along with a healthy stack of spirit notes.

Upon seeing the spirit notes, Xu Qing felt a bit less irritated at having his cultivation interrupted. Taking the bottle, he examined it briefly. Given his understanding of plants and vegetation, he could tell immediately that it wasn't poison. He took a sip.

"Not bad."

Ding Xue's face brightened even more. Being very circumspect, she asked a few more questions, then turned to leave. As she did, she glanced at all the nearby female disciples from the other sects in the coalition, and she snorted inwardly.

Those damn floozies. How dare they try to steal Big Bro Xu Qing from me. They were too far away to hear what we were talking about, so all they saw was me giving Big Bro Xu Qing a medicinal serum, and then him drinking it.

This is the way to show who's the boss! Although, these people aren't worth worrying about. I already took care of Gu Muqing; she's in seclusion trying to reach Foundation Establishment. My biggest enemy right now is Yanyan!

The mere thought of Yanyan caused Ding Xue to grind her teeth. As she tried to think of a way to get rid of Yanyan, Zhao Zhongheng was stomping toward her from a short distance away.

He was an important person too, though not on the same level as Xu Qing. He hadn't given up on Ding Xue, and was convinced that one day she would turn around and realize that the person she was waiting for had been there behind her all along. The mere thought of that caused him to shiver, and then look even more determined than ever.

Xu Qing noticed what was going on. He was no longer a foolish kid, new to the sect and ignorant of the things that happened between men and women. He knew what the feathered tents in the scavenger basecamps were, and knew why many people frequented them. He had grown up, and

along the way, had learned a lot from Huang Yan and Third Elder Brother. That said, such matters still didn't interest him much.

Ignoring the scene between Zhao Zongheng and Ding Xue, he focused on cultivation and pushing the seawater out of the port.

Days passed. After the port construction was complete, Xu Qing didn't get any new assignments. Therefore, he sent a voice message to Master Seventh.

“Master, I want to know more about the coalition chosen. Why do they stay at the four flame level and not move on to Gold Core? Also... I feel like I don't have enough magical techniques. I'm hoping you can help me understand more about all that.”

Only a moment later, Master Seventh replied. “Come see me.”

Eyes lighting up with anticipation, Xu Qing hurried to the Seventh Peak. Master Seventh was now the sect leader, but he still chose to put Sect Leader Palace there. After arriving at the summit, Xu Qing saw Ding Xue's aunt, who was Master Seventh's daoist partner. She was angrily storming out of Sect Leader Palace.

“Well met, Mistress,” he said, clasping hands.

She stopped and looked at him, her expression softening. “Hello, Little Fourth. Ding Xue told me how seriously you've been taking your cultivation, and what good character you have. I know that you always take good care of her, even when she's stubborn. And you never refuse her requests. You're a really good kid.” Raising her voice, she continued, “Unlike someone who's lived for so long yet hasn't said a single kind or gentle thing ever! He deserves to be alone!” She was obviously still angry. However, she still took out a violet bottle and handed it to Xu Qing. “This is a myriad-spirits recuperation pill. Give it to your Master when you head in. I'm not in the mood.”

With that, she left.

Xu Qing looked curiously at the medicine bottle, then walked into Sect Leader Palace. Master Seventh was there, looking very tired as he worked at painting the wall. He was creating a map of the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. There was one spot on the map that attracted Xu Qing's attention. It was on the mainstem of the Eternal Millennium, some distance away from the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, where the river reached the sea.

In that spot, Master Seventh was painting a person seated in meditation!

Chapter 275: Master Seventh Imparts Techniques

There was no one in the spacious interior of the palace other than Master Seventh, working on the painting, and Xu Qing. The servant was nowhere to be seen.

Looking over his shoulder at Xu Qing, Master Seventh asked, “Are you curious why I'm painting a meditating person by South Tor Ghost Mountain?”

Xu Qing nodded.

“It's a very important place in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Once you reach the four-flame level, I'll take you there. Who knows, you might find some good fortune.”

Master Seventh didn't explain any further. Seeing the medicine bottle in Xu Qing's hand, he waved his hand. The bottle flew over to him. Opening it, he took a sip, then put it away and sat down at a Go board.

"Sit across from me," he said, beckoning at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing obediently approached and sat on the other side of the Go board.

"Do you know how to play?" Master Seventh asked.

Xu Qing shook his head.

"I'll teach you." He picked up a piece and put it onto the corner of the board. Xu Qing thought for a moment, then put a piece in the opposite corner.

"Go is like life. And it's also a perfect way to understand a person's personality. I've never lost a game. Ever. Want to know why?" Master Seventh put down another piece.

Xu Qing nodded and, imitating his Master, put down another piece.

"I don't play pieces based on the current circumstances, but rather, the situation as a whole. Most people understand how to do that, but often, they have neither the circumstances nor the aptitude to actually pull it off. In the end, they're left with only regrets.

"It's the same with those coalition chosen with 120 dharma apertures. The reason why they stop at four flames without advancing to Gold Core is that they're thinking about the situation as a whole. They all hope to open a 121st dharma aperture!"

Master Seventh played a piece.

A thoughtful look appeared in Xu Qing's eyes. Back when he was researching Foundation Establishment, he had come to suspect that there was something beyond 120 dharma apertures. An additional dharma aperture. [1]

Seeing the look on his face, Master Seventh chuckled. "There's one more dharma aperture after 120. It's the 121st. And that one aperture ignites an additional life flame. That said, the difficulty level of succeeding is unimaginable, and requires a spectacular destined opportunity. No one can help you do it; it all comes down to you. What's more, the difficulty doesn't come in opening it, but rather, in finding it.

"Throughout the history of the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, every person who has succeeded in opening the 121st dharma aperture found themselves in a spot between life and death. They find destined opportunities in the midst of deadly crises, locate their 121st dharma aperture, and then open it. According to records and speculation, every person has that dharma aperture in a different location, so getting information from people who have succeeded is pointless."

After some thinking, Xu Qing put down a Go piece. "Master, what's the specific benefit of having five life flames, other than just being stronger?"

“The benefit comes when you reach the Gold Core level.” Master Seventh smiled. “I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase ‘ignite life flames, illuminate heavenly palaces.’ The heavenly palaces mentioned... are critical in the Gold Core level.

“Gold Core cultivators with heavenly palaces have inherent limitations. And those limitations are related to life flames. If you have three flames, you can illuminate six palaces. That’s as far as most disciples can go, even the good ones.

“What that means is that someone with three life flames who steps into Gold Core will reach the peak of that level when they illuminate six heavenly palaces. But the reality is that six heavenly palaces are just the start.” Master Seventh stopped talking at that point to let things sink in a bit for Xu Qing.

After thinking the matter over some, Xu Qing asked, “That would equal thirty-six-flame battle prowess?”

Master Seventh nodded. “You can think of it that way. I said it’s just a start because above the six heavenly palaces is the life mist. There are heavenly palaces in the mist, but the mist makes them difficult to illuminate. It’s only with a fourth life flame that you can illuminate the seventh palace.

“However, don’t think of it as ‘just another palace.’ Seven palaces can crush six palaces, just the same as you can easily crush a five-flame cultivator with your six-flame power. That’s why cultivators with four life flames all want to find that 121st dharma aperture, ignite a fifth life flame, and then use it to illuminate their eighth heavenly palace. The further they push their limits, the greater the gain will be later!”

Master Seventh’s words echoed in Xu Qing’s ears as he thought about what it all meant. He nodded.

“You obviously have experience with life lamps. However, only some of their usefulness manifests in Foundation Establishment. It’s in Gold Core, when dealing with heavenly palaces, that they can be truly useful.

“When someone with a life lamp breaks into the Gold Core level and begins illuminating heavenly palaces, the life lamp will instantly illuminate one of the palaces in the life mist. There’s no waiting. No work involved. It happens instantly. The life lamp is itself like a gold core. A ‘life core,’ if you will. Given your aptitude, if you’re able to find that 121st dharma aperture, then you should ultimately have ten heavenly palaces!” Master Seventh looked closely at Xu Qing. “Now do you understand why life lamps are so valuable to Gold Core cultivators?” [2]

Xu Qing’s expression flickered. It was the first time during the entire conversation that it happened. Some of the information corroborated his previous speculations, and overall, it left him shaken. A sense of danger sparked to life within him, not because of Master Seventh, but rather, because of all the malicious Gold Core cultivators he was likely to run into in the future.

“Feeling scared?” Master Seventh smiled.

“Yeah,” Xu Qing replied honestly.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” Master Seventh asked, seemingly very interested in hearing the answer.

Xu Qing took a deep breath and calmed himself. He couldn't change anything about the situation, and frankly, didn't even feel like talking about it. The only thing he could think to do was ignite his fourth life flame as soon as possible, and then start working on the fifth. And if that didn't work, then he needed to break through to Gold Core as quickly as he could. Once he reached Gold Core, then his two life lamps would instantly illuminate two heavenly palaces. That, combined with his poisons, would at least give him a measure of safety.

However, Xu Qing then realized that those were all things that would happen in the long-term. After some more thinking, he glanced at Master Seventh out of the corner of his eye. He hadn't forgotten what Master Seventh mentioned after the fight with Master Shengyun, that he should have worked together with Big Sib, Second Sib, and Third Sib.

“Help me, Master,” he said quietly.

Hearing this, Master Seventh laughed heartily. He seemed pleased with the response. Pointing at Xu Qing's head, he continued, “You need to wear that Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown I gave you. It'll protect you against the Nascent Soul level!”

Then Master Seventh waved his hand, and five balls of light flew out of his sleeve. He flicked his finger at one of them, and it became a jade slip that flew to Xu Qing. “The instructions for the crown are in there. Study them later.”

Xu Qing took the jade slip, then looked at the other four balls of light, his heart racing.

Master Seventh flicked his finger again, and the second ball of light approached Xu Qing. When Xu Qing reached out to take it, it transformed into a palm-sized cloth doll. It looked very lifelike. Its eyes even moved, locking onto Xu Qing, and it bared its teeth, revealing a host of fangs. From the way it struggled in his grip, it didn't seem to like people holding it.

“That's a lifeswapping ghost doll. It's essentially a high-level grue item. It naturally has three lives, and once you form a blood bond with it, it will die in your place up to three times. You should be safe in the sect, but when you go out, take it with you.”

Xu Qing's heart thumped as he kept a tight grip on the lifeswapping ghost doll. Perhaps because he was holding it so tightly, the ghost doll let loose an anguished cry, and struggled even more fiercely. He ignored it and looked at the remaining three balls of light. It was hard to tell what glittered more brightly, them or his eyes.

Looking pleased, Master Seventh continued, “Imperial-class techniques aren't easy to pass on to others, so I can't help you with that. You'll have to experiment on your own. But I can tell you that once your imperial-class technique reaches a higher level, it will become incredibly terrifying. And the fastest way for it to improve is for you to devour the imperial-class techniques of others. Of course... if it's the exact same technique, the result will be better.”

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as certain implications occurred to him.

“You’re too weak right now,” Master Seventh said. “Besides, the president isn’t a fool. He knows that doing something to you would harm the relationship with Seven Blood Eyes, and the detriments would far outweigh the benefits. So you don’t need to worry about him being a threat.”

Xu Qing nodded, thinking about Master Shengyun and his ravagemist bird. He suddenly really wanted to run into Master Shengyun again. Next, he looked at the third ball of light.

“Master Shengyun said that your weakness is that you lack magical techniques. That’s because you had no Master before. All of my apprentices have different techniques and divine abilities. And all of them were carefully selected, curated, and passed out by me, tailored to the needs of each individual.”

With another flick of his finger, Master Seventh sent the third ball of light to Xu Qing.

There was no physical item within the ball of light. Instead, it was a sealing mark that settled on Xu Qing’s forehead and filled his mind with intense rumbling sounds.

At the same time, Master Seventh provided information. “The first technique I’m giving you is a magical technique called Ninefold Tsunami. With this technique, you summon a huge sea, and then use the power of nine waves to create tsunamis backed by the devastating crushing power of the sea.”

Xu Qing took a deep breath as various images depicting the technique appeared in his mind. He could see that, with the wave of his hand, he could summon a huge sea. As the waves rolled out, the fury of the sea could crush anything in its path.

“The second technique I’m giving you is a grue technique. It’s called... the Dark Serenity Curse!” Master Seventh flicked his finger, and the fourth ball of light moved forward, and the sealing mark fused into Xu Qing’s forehead.

Instead of rumbling sounds, his mind filled with a sinister wind that filled every inch of his flesh and blood. And as he exhaled, his breath came out as a white mist. Xu Qing felt like he could see an incredibly withered finger, pulsing with a very gruish aura, stretching out from a black vortex to crush everything with ghastly might.

“This Dark Serenity Curse is something I personally created with knowledge I gained from studying the Dark Serenity Fingers. [3]

“The final thing I’m going to teach you... isn’t a magical technique or a grue technique, but rather, a secret technique!

“I’ve noticed you like using your fists when fighting, so this secret technique should suit you well. It’s called the Within the Nine Springs. [4]

“When using this technique, you need to first land eight fist strikes on your opponent. After that, your ninth blow will destroy one of their dharma apertures. Even Gold Core cultivators with heavenly palaces rely on life flames and dharma

apertures as their ultimate foundation! This is a very domineering technique, and also very treacherous. Use it with care. If you use it on someone to damage their foundation, but they survive to tell the tale, then it will make it much more difficult for you to use the move on others.”

Master Seventh flicked his finger, and the sealing mark from the fifth ball of light fused into Xu Qing.

“Up to now, I’ve never revealed to anyone that I have this technique. You’re the only one. It’s not that I’m being partial. Rather, it doesn’t fit the style of your Elder Brothers and Elder Sister. Again, use it with care.”

Chapter 276: Swordsages

As soon as Xu Qing left Sect Leader Palace, he took the Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown out of his bag of holding and put it on his head. He had known before it was an extraordinary item, that much was obvious given how envious the Captain had been. Now that he knew what it could do, he wanted it on his head before he left the Seventh Peak. As soon as it was on, he performed an incantation gesture that made the crown fade away until it wasn’t visible to the naked eye. In fact, it would even be invisible to divine sense. Xu Qing was very pleased.

As a highness of the Seventh Peak, he had the right to reside in a mansion grotto. But he was used to being on the water. Unfortunately, he had no dharmaskiff right now, but he would still rather be close to the sea, so he got lodgings in the Port District. Right now, he would just have to wait for Zhang San to make him a new watercraft.

Back in the room he had rented, he checked all of his spell formations and other preparations to make sure no one had been inside while he was away. Then he sat down cross-legged to review the new techniques Master Seventh had given him.

The magical technique is quite formidable, but I’ll need to get familiar with it before I can unleash its full potential. It’s the same with the grue technique. I’ll need to find a place where I can experiment with it in private. As for the secret technique....

The sensation he got from the sealing mark in his mind caused his eyes to glitter. This technique was terrifying. Truth be told, he had never even been aware that secret techniques even existed.

I wonder if some of the things Master Shengyun used in our fight were secret techniques.

Thinking back, his guess was that none of them were classified in that manner. And even if they were, none could compare to Within the Nine Springs.

With nine fist strikes, I can destroy a dharma aperture. In a fight with someone I’m evenly matched with, this technique will be my greatest asset.

With such thoughts on his mind, he began working hard at familiarizing himself with the technique as it existed in the sealing mark in his mind. A whole day passed.

Next, he took a drop of his blood and put it onto the forehead of the lifeswapping ghost doll. As soon as he did that, the doll’s eyes went slack, it yawned, and then it fell asleep. Xu Qing carefully put it inside his robe. Feeling very pleased with all the latest developments, he did some thinking.

The protection provided by the Supreme-Limitless Crown will keep me safe in most deadly crises. However, that will only be my first line of defense. If I run into something so dangerous it can destroy the crown, then the lifeswapping ghost doll will be my second line of defense. But that's really not enough.

After some more thought, he disguised himself in some ordinary clothing and went out into the city to look for something specific. Soon, he was in the neighboring district, which was the territory of the Heavenmirror Treasure Sect. After searching for a short time, he found a shop that sold the items he wanted. Entropic teleportation talismans.

Things like this couldn't be purchased in Seven Blood Eyes, but in the big shops in a place like the Heavenmirror Treasure Sect, they were definitely available. That said, they were very expensive.

Though it pained Xu Qing to spend so much money, he bought three.

First line of defense, the Supreme-Limitless Crown. Second line of defense, the lifeswapping ghost doll. And if I run into something so dangerous that the ghost doll has to swap its life for my own, then I'll use an entropic teleportation talisman to get to safety.

With that taken care of, Xu Qing went back to the Seven Blood Eyes district. Walking the streets, he could see all sorts of huge construction projects going on. The building work was going along at high speed. As he strolled, he got a voice message from Zhang San.

"Xu Qing, I just finished my assignment from the sect. If you're free, come over. The Captain and Huang Yan are here. Also, someone gave me a letter to pass to you."

Curious, Xu Qing changed directions and headed to the new Transportation Division where Zhang San was. Upon arriving, he saw well over a hundred huge warehouses. Compared to the old Transportation Division, this place was far larger.

As usual, Zhang San was squatting on a pile of cargo. The Captain squatted nearby eating an apple. And in front of them was Huang Yan, who was giving some very thorough instructions to Zhang San. Huang Yan also happened to be holding the very same Spirit Breath Lamp that Xu Qing had sold him. [1]

Everyone here was someone he knew well. As he approached, the three of them called out greetings. The Captain chuckled, Zhang San looked at him with shining eyes, and Huang Yan patted his belly, looked Xu Qing up and down, and smiled broadly.

"I heard you got two life lamps, Xu Qing," Huang Yan said. "Hahaha! Congratulations! Congratulations!"

Clearing his throat, the Captain said, "It's been a few days since you went to see Master. I bet you got some good stuff, didn't you? Come come, little Ah Qing. Give us a look. I'll help you assess everything. Don't let the old man hoodwink you."

Ignoring the Captain, Xu Qing gave Huang Yan a grin and then looked at Zhang San and explained what he needed done in terms of his dharmaskiff.

"You blew it up again? Did you notice the Participation Effect that I installed?" Zhang San didn't seem very surprised at all that Xu Qing had blown up another dharmaskiff, and actually seemed more excited to hear about the Participation Effect. [2]

Thinking back, Xu Qing shook his head.

“No way!” Zhang San said, sounding very disappointed. “Don’t tell me I installed it incorrectly.” The only thing Zhang San could think to do was make sure that the Participation Effect was easier to activate next time. Taking out a letter, he offered it to Xu Qing.

“Do you remember that girl who joined the sect at the same time as you? Her name was Li Zimei. I eventually got her transferred to the Transportation Division. She’s a hardworking girl.” Zhang San sighed. “It just so happened that the three chosen from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society noticed her. I guess there was some discussion between the two sects, because they ended up taking her away. They said her constitution is perfectly suited for the techniques of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.” [3]

The Captain looked very curious, and even Huang Yan was eying the letter, but Xu Qing just put it into his bag of holding without reading it. He remembered Li Zimei, and how embarrassed she’d looked outside the restaurant that time she went back to get the leftovers, only to be scolded by the waiter.

Seeing that it was getting late, Huang Yan went back to what he had been saying earlier to Zhang San.

“Elder Brother Zhang San, you absolutely must help me make this thing properly. We’re right around the corner from me and Elder Sister’s 3,344th day anniversary. I don’t want to get her anything too expensive, because then she’ll take it the wrong way. But I have to give her something. That’s why I want you to turn the flame from this lamp into a hairpin. That’s going to be my gift for her.” [4]

Hearing this, Zhang San slapped himself on the chest and said, “Of course. I can do that, no problem.”

Huang Yan sighed. “Ai. Why did Seven Blood Eyes have to move to this crappy place? South Phoenix is way, way better. Don’t you think, Xu Qing? Why not head back there? I’ve been trying to persuade Elder Sister to go back.”

While Xu Qing thought seriously about the suggestion, the Captain also sighed. Finishing his apple, he took out a pear and said, “Just hearing about South Phoenix makes me wistful. I had this really amazing plan. I’d thought the whole thing through. I even got all the details from the Intelligence Division, and was just about to go through with it. Ai. Well, whatever. I guess you can say that Flame Phoenix got lucky.”

Huang Yan had been just about to leave, but hearing the Captain’s words, he stopped and curiously asked, “You had a plan relating to Flame Phoenix? What were you going to do?”

Xu Qing also looked over at the Captain.

The Captain cleared his throat. “I was planning to sneak into Flame Phoenix’s nest and take something. What a pity. Thankfully, I already have a new plan ready to go.”

Huang Yan stared fixedly, clearly waiting to hear more about the new plan.

The Captain glanced around, then lowered his voice. “Do you guys know about the swordsages?”
[5]

Zhang San seemed mystified, as did Xu Qing. Huang Yan just stood there blinking and looking similarly curious.

The Captain glanced suspiciously at Huang Yan. Something seems off about this fatty....

However, after a moment, he continued, “A swordsage is a member of the Swordsage Division, one of the Five Greater Celestial Divisions of humankind. Their headquarters is in the imperial capital. The division is divided into seven palaces that govern the seven counties. Every palace has courts. In other words, the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture has a Swordsage Court.

“If you join a Swordsage Court, then you become a swordsage, and then no sect can tell you what to do. As long as you don’t betray humankind, you can basically do anything you want. Put frankly, if you can become a swordsage, then you become a top figure among all humans. You’re an official part of the imperial bureaucracy, and get to live off the government. Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity might have gone off to the holy lands, but the imperial bureaucracy still exists, and the banner of humankind still strikes fear into the hearts of nonhumans.

“As a swordsage, you can arrest anyone who even looks at you the wrong way. If you’re not stronger than them, you can issue an arrest warrant. That’s totally different from a sect bounty list. It’s like a bounty list for all humankind.

“Have a problem with Patriarch Soaring Cloud? You can just have him arrested! As for nonhumans, you can crush them on a whim. And of course, no one would dare to cause problems for you. Accidentally bump into a swordsage and you’ll head to the chopping block to be beheaded.

“Beyond that, swordsages can cultivate Dark Serenity secret magics. I’ve heard they’re really amazing. In fact, once there was someone who cultivated a secret magic like that, and they very nearly killed Flame Phoenix with a single sword move!”

Huang Yan’s jaw dropped.

However, Xu Qing’s expression remained the same as ever, as he was used to the Captain and his deliberately mystifying hyperbole.

Seeing Xu Qing’s lack of expression, the Captain raised his eyebrows. “Little Ah Qing, I heard that Master Shengyun survived that fight with you. Patriarch Soaring Cloud used some sort of secret magic to heal him. It was very, very expensive, and the president of the coalition even had to help. It’s hard to say whether that’s a potential calamity, but what I do know is that people are saying he didn’t take the defeat to heart. In fact, he went into seclusion to break through to the five-flame level!”

Hearing this, Xu Qing’s expression remained placid, but his eyes flickered with cold light.

“However, if you became a swordsage, then all it would take would be a word from you, and Master Shengyun would be shaking in his boots! That’s why my plan... is to become a swordsage!” The Captain finished his pear and took out an orange, peeled it, then continued, “That way, it won’t matter what other grand plans I hatch in the future, no one will dare to mess with me. If they try to, I’ll punish them with the full authority of all humankind!”

“How do you become a swordsage?” Zhang San asked excitedly.

“They have a very rigorous screening and testing process. They only pick the best of the best; every ten years, they let in five new people. Based on my calculations, the examination isn’t very far away. The local Swordsage Court is near the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, and I’m getting everything ready to participate. When it comes time to head over there, I’ll let all of you know.” With that, the Captain stood, wiped the dust from his rear end, and then waved goodbye and left.

Huang Yan also departed. By the time Xu Qing and Zhang San finished discussing all the details of his dharmaskiff, the sun was setting. Finally, Xu Qing left.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the Eight Sect Coalition, specifically in the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, there was a secret location where countless spell formations had been set up in clandestine fashion around a huge blood cistern.

Inhuman screams of agony echoed out constantly from that blood cistern, both day and night.

Eight ancient swords rose up from the blood, and atop each of them a person sat cross-legged. There were men and women, and most were young. All of them radiated Nascent Soul cultivation base fluctuations.

The combined power of the swords released streams of sword energy, creating a web that weighed down on the blood cistern. Atop that web was an enormous golden crow, looking down and absorbing the blood.

An old man hovered in the air off to the side. He was none other than Patriarch Soaring Cloud.

As he looked down into the blood cistern, his expression was very unsightly.

“Grandson,” he murmured sadly, “just hang in there a bit longer. The poison that scumbag hit you with is unique and powerful, and none of my healing methods can purge it. I don’t know how to heal you. Even just keeping you alive is hard enough. The only thing keeping you going is the projection of the president’s imperial-class technique with its powerful life force, which keeps the poison stable.

“You can tell that scumbag has come across some good fortune. Grandson, your name, Shengyun, means ‘radiance and light.’ The omens that appeared when you were born indicate that you can walk the path of the Ancient Emperors. You can’t give

up! Hang in there! You will wrest back the glory that belongs to you. All of his assets belong to you!" [6]

Within the blood cistern was a skeletal figure that only retained about thirty percent of its flesh and blood. Expression vicious, he screamed manically, "I'm going to kill you, Xu Qing!"

Chapter 277: A Young Man with a Mask

The construction was finished on the new Seven Blood Eyes capital city. After numerous teleportations, the population hadn't reached the same level as back on the continent of South Phoenix. Of course, the coalition was made up of a total of 137 sects, so there was no shortage of other people interested in the new city. Visitors came to do business, go shopping, or sometimes just make friends. Regardless, the new city bustled with noise and excitement.

Adjustments had to be made to the various official departments of the sect, as well as the people that made them up. As before, Huang Yan was in Pilot Assistance. His beloved Second Elder Sister was the deputy commander of the Department of Patrol and Investigation, which fit her personality perfectly. Her mere presence struck fear into the hearts of petty criminals.

New departments were created, including ones to handle relations with other sects in the coalition. For example, there was the Department of Commerce. When it came to determining if an organization was strong or weak, there was more to it than just high-level cultivators and taboo treasures. Another very important factor was wealth. That was a universal truth that applied to any location where people gathered in large numbers. It was only to be expected that a Department of Commerce was required. It oversaw all Seven Blood Eyes commercial interests, whether externally or internally. The deputy commander of that department was selected directly by Master Seventh, and it was none other than Third Elder Brother.

Master Seventh knew that Xu Qing and the Captain got along well, so he arranged for them to work together in the most important department.

The Special Security Division.

The name of the division didn't fit the style of South Phoenix. But it sounded appropriate for a government department in a big coalition. It was tasked with special operations relating to safety and security. Seven Blood Eyes wasn't the only place to have a Special Security Division. All seven of the major sects had one. They were really a unified body overseen by a central command, and they had authority both internally and externally.

The director of the division was Master Sixth.

There were two deputy directors: the Captain and Xu Qing.

Master Sixth didn't intend to watch over daily operations, so he delegated authority to the Captain and Xu Qing to handle most affairs.

The locations of the various departments were adjusted. Offices were built near the eight bridges that led to the main part of the megacity. It was roughly triangular in layout, with over a hundred structures, each of which had its own courtyard. Though the structures were all standalone, together, they created one unified area.

There were a host of smaller departments. Over 3,000 disciples from the various mountain peaks were assigned to positions, with about half of them being former constables from the Violent Crimes Division. One of them was the Mute.

After Xu Qing received his assignment and was heading over to check in for the first time, he thought about how he would be working in the same division as the Captain again, and decided to pick up some apples from a cart along the way. After purchasing the apples, he walked a bit further and noticed a newly opened immortal hot spring, where he saw a familiar face.

It was none other than Xu Xiaohui. [1]

When Xu Xiaohui caught sight of him, she called out a greeting and then held out a jade slip for him to take. "Elder Brother Xu, a girlfriend of mine and I started this new immortal hot spring. If you have time, come try it out. With that jade slip you can get in for free." [2]

Xu Qing nodded, then noticed a young woman standing behind Xu Xiaohui. It was his informant. As it turned out, Xu Xiaohui had started a new business with Xu Qing's informant.

As far as Xu Qing was concerned, there weren't enough people in this world like Xu Xiaohui, who knew how to repay kindnesses. She didn't have a very amazing cultivation base, but she was a good person. Therefore, he would do his best to help her. After taking the jade slip, he continued on his way to the main entrance of the Special Security Division.

"Well met, Director!" said the officer on duty, offering a respectful salute. From the passionate look in his eyes, he had obviously been a constable in the Violent Crimes Division.

Xu Qing nodded and went inside. He recognized almost everyone present, including Ding Xiaohai. He was the same one who had worked so hard to become a conclave disciple. After his gains in the Merfolk Isles, he reached Foundation Establishment. But now, he looked at Xu Qing with a complicated expression.

Averting his gaze, he clasped hands and bowed deeply. "Well met, Director."

Xu Qing took a look at him and saw that he did have extraordinary aptitude. He already had a life flame, and had opened about 40 dharma apertures. For most people, achieving that in only a few years wasn't easy.

Xu Qing didn't like him, as the mere sight of him brought up thoughts of Zhou Qingpeng. That said, everyone had their own way of living, and thus, he looked away and continued walking.

Ding Xiaohai watched him go and sighed deeply. He knew that Xu Qing still remembered the Zhou Qingpeng incident, and yet Ding Xiaohai still didn't think he had done anything wrong. In a chaotic world, everyone had to think about themselves before anyone else. [3]

When Xu Qing reached the heart of the Special Security Division, he finally found the Captain.

The Captain was studying a heap of files and occasionally issuing new orders to consolidate the various branches of the division. He looked like he was very busy.

Seeing that, Xu Qing mused that the Captain really was suited to work like this. Taking out one of the apples he'd bought along the way, he placed it on the Captain's desk, then sat down off to the side and closed his eyes to meditate.

Shortly after, the Captain looked up, grabbed the apple, and took a bite. Then he noticed Xu Qing meditating off to the side and instantly felt a bit irritated. In fact, he decided that the best thing would be for Xu Qing to take over the most difficult assignments. He cleared his throat.

“Deputy Director Xu!”

Xu Qing opened his eyes. “Hey, Eldest Brother. Want more apples?”

Xu Qing took out two more apples and placed them on the desk.

The Captain looked at the apples, then back at Xu Qing. His expression became very grave. “Cut it with this malarkey. You’ve picked up some very bad habits, little Ah Qing!”

Xu Qing considered his words for a moment, then took out a jade slip and put it on the desk.

“What’s this?” the Captain asked, sounding surprised.

Looking the Captain straight in the eyes, Xu Qing said, “Along the way here I noticed a new immortal hot spring that opened around the corner. I figured you might like the place, so I arranged for this jade slip that can get you in for twenty percent off.”

Hearing this, the Captain immediately smiled, and his irritation from before vanished. Though he still felt that Xu Qing had some bad habits, at least he had a sense of propriety, and knew how to suck up to his Elder Brother. Realizing that he shouldn’t be petty, the Captain changed his mind and decided not to hand over the most difficult responsibilities to Xu Qing.

“Ah, whatever,” he said. “The old man gave me too many things to handle in this new Special Security Division. I was thinking of assigning you the job of smoothing out all the problems with the other coalition sects. But given your personality, you’d probably think it was too much trouble to talk things out, and would just start killing people. So I’ll handle it. How about instead, you take care of something related to the splitting of profits and privileges between our sect and the coalition. That’ll be a breeze.”

The Captain flipped through the files until he found one in particular that he handed to Xu Qing.

“Specifically,” the Captain continued, “the coalition’s Spell Formation Department has been dragging their feet on finalizing the transfer papers for our Seven Blood Eyes Formation.”

Xu Qing took the file. The truth was that he really didn’t want to waste time on something like this. He had been preparing to clear his schedule to research some poisons and work on his cultivation. Apparently, he had no choice, though. Taking the file, he turned to leave.

“Also,” the Captain said, “the coalition headquarters notified us that we’ll be in the rotation to do river inspection tours. The eight sects take turns handling that. When the time comes, the two of us can go do some sightseeing, assuming you have nothing better to do.”

Xu Qing nodded and left. He headed toward the Spell Formation Division's headquarters in the Lunisolar Dao Palace district, taking with him about a hundred disciples from the Third Peak who specialized in spell formations. Along the way, he asked them why they thought the headquarters seemed to be dragging their feet.

The Third Peak disciple in charge of the group sighed and answered, "Elder Brother Xu, the higher-ups have already negotiated the business side of things. It's the underlings that are causing problems. Especially the people from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect. Every time we have a meeting to handle something, they don't show up. It makes it impossible to get anything done."

"Soaring Cloud Sword Sect?" Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. Not saying anything further, he hurried along to the Spell Formation Division.

Upon arriving, he delivered the file. After waiting for some time, the people in charge of the project showed up. As they neared, and realized it was Xu Qing that was waiting for them, they hurried over.

"Well met, Elder Brother Xu Qing!"

"Elder Brother Xu Qing, we're so sorry to keep you waiting. If we'd known it was you that was coming, we would have come over at once."

People throughout the Eight Sect Coalition were already intimidated by Xu Qing's name. That said, he didn't do anything to amplify the effect. Looking over the disciples that had come, he didn't notice anyone from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect. Transferring control of the spell formation required people from all seven of the other sects to be present. If even one was missing, it wouldn't work.

Because the patriarch and matriarch of Spiritgloom Valley and the Heavenmirror Treasure Sect were already friends with Sir Bloodsmelter, the three sects got along well.

As it happened, the person in charge of this project was a female disciple from Spiritgloom Valley. Eyes glittering, she softly said, "Elder Brother Xu, if the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect doesn't come, then I'm afraid we won't be able to transfer the spell formation...."

Xu Qing nodded. Then he handed a jade slip to one of the other disciples. "Take this to Chu Yunfeng in the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect. Tell him to handle the matter immediately. If it's not done today, I'll go over there to settle accounts with him personally."

Chu Yunfeng was the disciple Xu Qing had crushed in Seven Blood Eyes who had identified himself as a Junior Brother of Master Shengyun. [4]

Xu Qing sat down cross-legged to wait. Everyone else exchanged glances and stood by. It didn't take long for the jade slip to reach the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect. Chu Yunfeng was himself sitting cross-legged in meditation when it arrived. After reading it, his eyes turned bloodshot.

"Poison Demon Xu Qing! This guy is such a bully! He thinks an IOU jade slip will get me to help him out? Quit dreaming, buddy!"

Snorting coldly, he tossed the jade slip off to the side. A few hours later, he opened his eyes and looked out at the sky and realized... the day was almost over. Grumbling the entire time, he sent a message to the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect's Spell Formation Department and angrily barked some

orders. As a chosen of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, his words carried some weight, and it didn't take long before the Spell Formation Department disciples returned, dejected and depressed. The spell formation transfer was complete.

By the time the work was done, it was evening. This evening was different from most other evenings. The sky was as crimson as fire, very beautiful, but at the same time, reminiscent of blood. It was almost like someone had used blood to paint the sky for the benefit of the god above.

As Xu Qing walked back toward the Seven Blood Eyes capital city, he looked up at the red glow and thought back to what he had dreamed just before coming to the Revered Ancient mainland. [5]

In a location in the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture a great distance away from the Eight Sect Coalition, close to the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, there was swampland. It wasn't a forbidden region, but the mutagen levels were high, and it was a deadly place. The swamp was located in a low-lying section of land where water gathered easily. There was also a forest of jagged, black boulders that jutted up out of the water.

As the crimson light of evening spread out over the water of the swamp, it made it look like blood. Within that bloody glow were two figures.

One of them was prostrated in worship. The other sat atop one of those large boulders, one foot resting on the rock, the other leg hanging free, leaning back on one arm as he looked up into the crimson sky.

Both of these figures wore masks. Shockingly, the masks were decorated to look like the half-face of a god up in the sky. The only difference was that the eyes of the mask were open, not closed. And those opened eyes revealed the eyes of the people who wore the masks.

The prostrating individual said, "Lord, the Night Dove operatives in the continent of South Phoenix have been abandoned, as per your instructions. I sent them to Seven Blood Eyes, and used that sect to get rid of most of them. Bai Li is dead, also at the hands of Seven Blood Eyes. He was killed by the peaklord of their Sixth Peak."

His voice was respectful and his eyes were full of fanaticism. He was the leader of Night Dove, and bore the same name as the organization he led. But one word from the person on the boulder, and he would forsake all Night Dove operatives and Night Dove interests. In short, he would go so far as to die for this other person.

Continuing, he said, "There were two other people of little note that participated in Bai Li's death. I mentioned them in the official report. Seven Blood Eyes joined the coalition, which changed its name to the Eight Sect Coalition. I have a contact there who wishes to join Torchlight. He invited us to observe his upcoming Blood-Soaked Performance. He said that we would very much enjoy it." [6]

His words were met with silence.

After some time passed, the person looking at the sky turned to gaze in the direction of the Forbidden Sea. Then he laughed enigmatically. "Let's go watch. While we're there, I can give Seven Blood Eyes a blood-soaked gift."

Based on this person's voice, he was a young man.

"Yes, sir!" Night Dove said, and then faded from existence.

Sometime after Night Dove left, the crimson color in the sky faded, and the moon appeared. The young man, who was still looking up into the sky, gazed at the moon and whispered, "The sect my lil' bro is in... I haven't seen it for eleven years. Another hindrance in this particular life of mine." The young man smiled in a very meaningful way.

Chapter 278: Arch-Immortal Plumdark

As Xu Qing walked across one of the eight bridges that led to Seven Blood Eyes, immortal energy bubbled in the waters that flowed below. Overhead, the sky was a faint crimson color. As darkness spread and the moon came out, he headed into the city toward Zhang San.

Along the way, Zhang San sent him a voice message telling him that his dharmaskiff was finished.

Xu Qing had felt out of sorts without a dharmaskiff. Therefore, he made haste to find Zhang San.

Once in the Transportation Division, Zhang San was waiting in a courtyard with his dharmaskiff.

The dharmaskiff was over 600 meters long and was absolutely shocking in appearance. It looked similar to the old version, but at the same time, was different. That was especially true when it came to the prow and the stern. The prow no longer resembled a sealizard. Instead, it was a huge, featureless face with a black iron mask covering it. Clearly, Zhang San had taken inspiration from the huge ships used by the delegation, as he had installed nine tails onto the stern. Though they were smaller than the originals, they were obviously packed full of spell formations of all sorts. Instead of eight sails, the dharmaskiff now had sixteen of them, and they were bigger than before.

Zhang San was standing atop the ship looking exhausted but also very proud. "Xu Qing, this dharmaskiff has already reached the limits of what dharmaskiffs are capable of. It's basically half a step into the dharmaship category. I tapped into every skill and ability I have to make this thing. Not only can it both fly and move underwater, but also, it can transform into a mask for easy storage and transport."

Looking very serious, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed deeply.

"The cost for this thing is astronomical," Zhang San continued, "but thankfully, the harbor in South Phoenix is profitable enough to cover it. Incidentally, I added a self-detonation mechanism. Truth be told, I actually focused on making it stronger after the self-detonation. In other words, I specifically designed it to be able to self-detonate three times in a row. The structure of the craft has three layers for that purpose."

Zhang San looked seriously at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing looked back at him attentively.

"There's a lot of godliness in it," Zhang San continued, "and the power source is strong. Unless someone attacks it with at least three-flame battle prowess, it'll be

untouchable. Its biggest weakness is when it comes to souls, which is why I included the mask at the prow.

“Speaking of souls, I know you cultivate the Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture. So do I. Presumably you remember how the description of the technique mentions that when you cultivate it to the level of ultimate success, you can suppress souls within your dharma apertures.

“After you reach ultimate success, you can take those imprisoned souls, merge them together, and put them into your dharmaskiff to become its soul. That’s when you can upgrade it to a dharmaship!” [1]

Zhang San’s eyes gleamed. “This is the first craft I’ve built that gets close to the dharmaship level. Xu Qing, when you inevitably use the self-detonation function, make sure not to leave all the pieces laying around afterward. Collect as many as you can and bring them back, so I can figure out ways to improve.”

Xu Qing was deeply shaken by the work Zhang San had done, and therefore, nodded solemnly in agreement. What Zhang San had requested made sense. After talking a bit more about the details of the new dharmaskiff, he bid farewell.

After watching Xu Qing leave, Zhang San yawned. He felt more exhausted than ever, having spent so much time working on the dharmaskiff that he hadn’t even rested. For one thing, he wanted to do Xu Qing a favor. But also, he was really hoping that the next time Xu Qing got into a big fight and detonated the dharmaskiff, it would finally reveal the Participation Effect he had installed.

“Last time, my skills were lacking. But not this time!” Feeling very pleased with himself, he lit his pipe and strolled away to get some sleep.

Xu Qing left feeling perfectly satisfied. At the same time, he felt like Zhang San’s skills were being wasted in the Transportation Division. He was just too good at what he did. That said, Zhang San preferred this kind of life. His cultivation progress was slow, but Xu Qing could tell that Zhang San didn’t mind. It seemed that, to Zhang San, the key to peace of mind lay with seeing Xu Qing and the Captain get stronger and stronger.

“I have to figure out a way to pay him back!” Xu Qing murmured as he headed toward the port.

During the early phases of the construction, he had already selected a berth for himself. When his dharmaskiff splashed down into the water, he leaped aboard, activated the defenses, and went into the cabin. Looking around, he saw that the interior wasn’t very different from his old dharmaskiff. As he sat down cross-legged, he felt the familiar motion of the ship swaying in the water. At long last, his heart began to calm down after recalling that strange dream.

He opened his eyes from meditation when it was late in the night. After checking on the beetles that had eaten the immortal ice, and seeing that they were still dormant, he started working on the magical technique Master Seventh had given him.

When it came to cultivation, Xu Qing always focused well and worked very hard. Three days passed by in a flash. During that time, he never left his dharmaskiff. He didn't go to the Special Security Division. Instead, he stayed completely focused on his cultivation and research of techniques. His 102nd dharma aperture was starting to loosen up.

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In the evening of the third night, he opened his eyes from meditation and walked out onto the deck.

Squatting on the shore was the Captain. Not seeing Xu Qing, he tossed an apple toward the dharmaskiff. The defenses were up, but the Captain had certain skills, so when the apple hit the shield, it didn't splat into a paste. Instead, it bounced right back to him. He caught it, took a bite, and then tossed it toward the shield again. It almost seemed like he was playing a little game.

When he finally noticed Xu Qing, he waved. "Busy tonight, little Ah Qing?"

Xu Qing looked at the Captain's half-eaten apple and nodded in the affirmative. "Yeah, I'm busy."

"Not busy? Great! Come with me to handle a little something. I'm short on cash these days, so I'm planning to sell that idiot Huang's finger back to him. I already handled all the negotiations, now I just need to go extract the cash. The deal goes down tonight." Eyes glittering, the Captain lowered his voice and continued, "Come along, won't you? Remember, I went with you on your trip home."

The Captain cleared his throat.

Without responding, Xu Qing stepped off his dharmaskiff. "Where's the deal going down?"

"At the foot of the Dark Serenity Sect's mountain headquarters," the Captain said, getting happily to his feet. Giving Xu Qing an apple, he threw an arm over his shoulder and continued furtively, "Little Ah Qing, you and I have a very close relationship, right? Not like that jerk Third Sib. As soon as I asked him for help, he ran for the hills. Anyway, don't worry. I love you, Junior Brother, and therefore, I'm definitely going to include you in the huge plan I'm working on."

"You're not worried this meeting is a trap?" Xu Qing asked.

The Captain's eyes glittered excitedly. "I'm hoping it is. Since we're going together, if anything unusual happens, the old man will definitely show up and help. If it was just me, he wouldn't bother."

The Captain blinked a few times.

Xu Qing looked at him deeply for a moment, then nodded.

Under the cover of night, the two of them left the port and went in the direction of the Dark Serenity Sect. They moved quickly. Before long, they were at the foot of the Dark Serenity Sect's mountain

headquarters, at the spot the Captain had arranged to meet Huang Yikun, an open-air pagoda with a good view of the mountain.

The mountain itself rose high into the scattered clouds. Bits of lamplight glittered on it like stars, but overall, it was dark. At the summit was a huge statue framed in moonlight. It depicted Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, gazing out at the Forbidden Sea. Despite how far away it was, Xu Qing could feel the terrifying pressure radiating off the statue. The mountain headquarters gave Xu Qing a sense of profound mystery.

After all, the Seventh Peak had started out as a subsidiary of the Dark Serenity Sect, and their techniques shared a common basis. What was more, the current president of the coalition started out in the Dark Serenity Sect, and was the Elder Brother of the current matriarch. That very same matriarch had once glanced at Xu Qing back in Seven Blood Eyes, though her facial features hadn't been visible. [2]

As Xu Qing looked in that direction, the Captain squatted off to the side and said, "It's about time. That idiot Huang should be here soon."

Xu Qing looked away from the mountain and waited.

After enough time passed for an incense stick to burn, and Huang Yikun still wasn't anywhere to be seen, the Captain raised his eyebrows and sent a voice message via jade slip. Meanwhile, neither Xu Qing nor the Captain had noticed that a person was approaching the coalition, high in the sky.

This person moved with incredible speed, entering the coalition's spell formation without a sound. A moment later, they were at the Dark Serenity Sect's mountain headquarters, and were about to step onto the summit when they noticed Xu Qing and the Captain down below. The figure stopped in midair.

A moment later, the person's facial features were revealed. She was a seductive-looking woman, with long hair streaming down her back and bound loosely with a pink ribbon. Her violet garment was decorated with stars and glowed faintly. Surrounding her was a faint haze that made her truly seem like an immortal that didn't belong in the mundane world.

She had skin as fair as a white peach blossom, and a waist as lithe as a willow tree. Her arching eyebrows almost seemed to be gathered in a frown, except they weren't, and her eyes were both joyful and not. In terms of age, she seemed to be a young lady not past her teens, but if you looked into her eyes, she seemed much more mature than that. She was the type of person who seemed very worldly-wise, and could see into your heart after only a moment. If you had done something, she had likely done it as well. And whatever you had yet to experience, she was already familiar with. [3]

Looking down from the dome of heaven, she saw Xu Qing down below, and smiled. With one step, she was halfway down the mountain. With another, she arrived, sending out an indescribable pressure that caused both Xu Qing and the Captain to react with visible surprise, and prepare to fall back.

"Don't move," she said, her words spoken like a command. The Captain shivered as he recognized who this was. She was the matriarch of the Dark Serenity Sect, and her daoist name was Arch-Immortal Plumdark. [4]

Xu Qing, on the other hand, had no idea who she was. However, his mind was spinning as he realized that he couldn't move a muscle. He could only stare at the seductive woman in front of him as she walked in his direction.

Completely ignoring the Captain, she came to a stop right in front of Xu Qing. Her skin seemed so fair it might shatter in the wind, and she was shockingly beautiful in a mature way. Her eyes seemed to thrum with dao lineaments, and at the same time, looked like the eyes of a hunter staring at prey.

As Xu Qing stood there nervously, the woman's gaze slowly traveled from his eyes to his mouth, then his collarbone, his chest, and finally his abdomen. It almost seemed like she was brushing him with her gaze.

Finally, she reached out, put her finger underneath his chin, and tilted his face up. Exhaling softly, she said, "We meet again, child. What are you doing here at the Dark Serenity Sect so late at night? Are you lost?"

Chapter 279: Seductive

Arch-Immortal Plumdark's voice was both flirtatious and bewitching. It was like the song of an oriole or the cry of a phoenix, being both clear, strong, soft, and gentle all at the same time. What was more, it was deeply alluring.

Xu Qing shivered and his scalp tingled as he stood in place, completely unmoving. He did nothing to stop her from lifting his chin, and in fact, simply looked into her playful, glittering eyes. Feeling somewhat in a daze, but at the same time nervous, he noted the unusual fragrance suddenly filling the area. It came from Arch-Immortal Plumdark, and it caused his heart to race.

This was his first time experiencing anything like this in his entire life. It was like a sense of deadly crisis that made it impossible for him to speak or express himself. He felt like he was a tasty snack that someone else was about to take a bite out of. That was especially true considering this woman's cultivation base, and the way her gaze also seemed like that of a predator looking at prey.

Off to the side, the Captain gasped. *Huang Yikun, you bastard! It's just a Dark Serenity Finger! Did you really have to freaking bring your matriarch in for backup??*

Even as the Captain reeled, he also realized that something about his assessment didn't make sense. Huang Yikun was a chosen, but that didn't mean he should be able to get his sect's matriarch to deal with two low-level people such as the Captain and Xu Qing. The only way he might have that pull was if he was like Master Shengyun and was the grandson of a leadership figure in the sect.

Based on what the Captain knew, Huang Yikun wasn't like that. Suddenly calming down, he measured up Arch-Immortal Plumdark. He noted the way she held herself, and then thought back to the words she'd just spoken. Then his eyes went wide as a wild possibility struck him like a bolt of lightning.

Holy crap, holy crap, holy crap! The Captain immediately shut his eyes and pretended that he hadn't seen anything. Waves of shock battered him inwardly. *Little Ah Qing's face... has dealt a winning blow!*

Meanwhile, two people were flying along at the base of the mountain. One was Huang Yikun, and another was a person who looked very similar to him, just a bit older. They moved like shooting stars across the land.

Gritting his teeth, Huang Yikun said, “Big brother, you have to make sure I get justice today. Those people are completely out of line. They literally ripped my fingers off my hand! It was brutal! Actions like that will *enrage both men and gods!* It really makes your hair stand up in anger!!”

“Don’t worry, lil’ bro. As your big brother, I’m— huh?”

The older young man was Huang Lingfei, Huang Yikun’s big brother, a Gold Core cultivator with one heavenly palace. As they closed in on the meeting location, he had been about to say something when he suddenly cut himself off. His eyes went wide. [1]

Stopping in place, he looked at the scene playing off in the distance, his expression one of utter disbelief. Clearly visible just up ahead was his sect’s matriarch, flirtatiously lifting Xu Qing’s chin in her hand. Standing next to Xu Qing was the grand highness from the Seventh Peak, obviously closing his eyes because he didn’t dare to look at the matriarch and the object of her flirtation, Xu Qing. However, the astonishment on the grand highnesses’ face was clear, and it was exactly what Huang Lingfei was also feeling.

Though Huang Lingfei stopped in place and gasped, Huang Yikun was slower on the uptake.

“That’s Xu Qing!” he shouted. “Big brother, help me go over there and—”

Their arrival attracted the attention of the Captain, who opened his eyes and looked over at them. Simultaneously, the alluring Arch-Immortal Plumdark slowly dropped her hand and looked over at Huang Lingfei and Huang Yikun.

The moment she looked at Huang Lingfei, his heart pounded, and he instantly spun and slapped his brother on top of the head, cutting off his words and knocking him out.

Like hell I’m going to help you! Huang Lingfei howled inwardly. His younger brother had always been off in the head. Not very quick-thinking. That was one reason why he’d been assigned to the Seven Blood Eyes mission. Not one other person from the Dark Serenity Sect had gone on that mission. But Huang Yikun had foolishly, and very excitedly, rushed to join. That was bad enough, but if he lost some fingers, so be it. Yet after returning he had allowed himself to be scammed in the most ridiculous fashion....

Huang Lingfei’s heart pounded as he thought back to what he had just seen, and he cursed Huang Yikun viciously. Of all the people in the world to provoke, why did he have to provoke someone the matriarch had taken a liking to?

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“What are you two doing here?” Arch-Immortal Plumdark asked.

Huang Lingfei was a quick-thinking person, and therefore, it was without the slightest hesitation that he grabbed the unconscious Huang Yikun, flew over, and threw him on the ground. Dropping into a kowtow, he loudly said, “Matriarch, I arranged a meeting with this, er... F-Fellow Daoist Xu Qing! My insensible little brother actually provoked Fellow Daoist Xu, so I brought him here for the punishment he deserves.”

In his nervousness, Huang Lingfei had stumbled over his words. In the heat of the moment, he forgot whether he should call Xu Qing ‘Junior Brother’ or ‘Elder Brother.’ Neither had sounded

quite right, and worrying that the matriarch would misunderstand, had used the only form of address that occurred to him right then: fellow daoist.

Looking up at Xu Qing with a very sincere expression, he continued, "Fellow Daoist Xu Qing, my little brother isn't a very quick thinker. In fact, he's an idiot."

Off to the side, Huang Yikun's eyes fluttered open, and he looked around, confused. Then he heard his brother talking. However, before he could fully regain his senses, Huang Lingfei quickly slapped him again, yet again rendering him unconscious.

"Please, take no offense, Fellow Daoist Xu Qing." Huang Lingfei was sweating, and his heart was pounding. He didn't dare get to his feet.

The alluring Arch-Immortal Plumdark smiled. Without saying a word in response, she took a step forward and floated up into the air. As the moonlight cascaded down her alluring form and fair snow-white skin, she looked like a beautiful, violet flower. [2]

She had a mature beauty to her, but at the same time was incredibly charming and graceful. As she hovered in midair, she slowly turned, looked down, and smiled.

"Come visit the Dark Serenity Sect any time, child."

The moon framed her, enhancing her splendor, accentuating her slim waist, and making her seem like an immortal from the highest heavens, her smile comparable to starlight. Before her words had even echoed out, she was gone.

After the matriarch of the Dark Serenity Sect left, Xu Qing could move again. He staggered backward a few paces, gasping for breath. Thinking about the words she had spoken, and her terrifying status, his mind reeled. He simply couldn't calm himself down.

Off to the side, the Captain was reacting similarly.

It was the same with Huang Lingfei.

The three of them stood in silence for a very long moment. Not a sound could be heard from Huang Yikun.

Finally, the Captain cleared his throat. "So... is the deal still on?"

Huang Lingfei breathed deeply as he slowly regained his senses. Shaking his head, he clasped hands to Xu Qing and the Captain, then grabbed his brother and hurried away. Huang Lingfei was feeling very worried. He was sure he had seen something he shouldn't have seen, and had interrupted the matriarch in a pleasing moment.... That thought made him very anxious.

As Xu Qing watched Huang Lingfei leaving, he still felt jittery. Then the Captain said they should leave. After they were back in Seven Blood Eyes, the Captain breathed a long sigh.

"I can't believe we ran into the matriarch of the Dark Serenity Sect. Arch-Immortal Plumdark!"

Xu Qing didn't respond. He was thinking back to what had just happened, especially Arch-Immortal Plumdark's eyes. The mere thought got him breathing heavily. It was his first time experiencing such a sensation.

“Little Ah Qing, I have to thank you for today,” the Captain said with another sigh. “I know a bit about Arch-Immortal Plumdark. Back when she was young, her name rocked all of the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Countless people wooed her, but even to this day, she’s never had a single daoist partner. Of course, there are a lot of stories about her, and it’s hard to say which are true and which aren’t.

“My guess is that she sensed the both of us, but took a liking to me. She probably lifted your chin to get my attention. You really endured a lot of humiliation just now, little Ah Qing.” Without even a hint of a blush, the Captain slapped Xu Qing’s shoulder.

Xu Qing looked at the Captain. “Elder Brother, you should eat more grapefruit going forward!”

“Huh? Why?” The Captain looked stunned.

Without any further explanation, Xu Qing left for his berth in the port district. A moment later, he hopped onto his dharmaskiff. [3]

The Captain sighed as he watched Xu Qing leave. Then he started thinking about what Xu Qing meant by what he said. *Why should I eat more grapefruit?*

Meanwhile, Xu Qing scattered more poison around his dharmaskiff, and also activated several layers of defense. Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief. Sitting down cross-legged, he analyzed the event which had just played out. It was very bizarre, and was unlike anything he had ever gone through before or even thought about. His first inclination was to think that there must have been some sort of sorcery involved.

Someone with cultivation of that level definitely doesn’t do things without a reason. Did Arch-Immortal Plumdark notice something wrong with me? She and Master are from the same generation, right? Maybe it had something to do with that?

After thinking about it for some time, he couldn’t come up with even a single good theory. Finally, he took out his identity medallion and sent a voice message to his Master to ask for input. It took a while to get a response.

When Master Seventh finally sent a message back, he said, “*Years ago Arch-Immortal Plumdark wooed me stubbornly. I refused her over three hundred times. Perhaps seeing you made her think of me. It makes sense. In any case, don’t spread word about this. All of that is in the past. I’m in the middle of something now, so I can’t go into any more details. Talk to you later.*”

Xu Qing’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. Master’s response seemed... very similar to the Captain’s assessment from before.

Meanwhile, on the summit of the Dark Serenity Sect mountain headquarters, in a grand hall, Arch-Immortal Plumdark sat on a reed mat, stretching. Her servant, an old woman, had just served ‘cloudsnow lotus seed soup’ brewed from the morning dew of a hundred lotus flowers. Just as the matriarch was daintily taking a sip, she frowned and looked off to the side. [4]

Her old servant wasn’t moving at all, as if she was frozen in place, her expression like stone. Behind her, a figure materialized out of thin air.

He was a middle-aged man in a green robe, with hair flowing past his shoulders. He looked scholarly and refined, with eyes that sparkled, making it seem like there were layer after layer of stars within them. In fact, his gaze alone seemed to contain immense power, as if anyone who looked at it would be dragged in. He was the president of the Eight Sect Coalition.

“You don’t have much time left, Junior Sister,” he said. “Have you decided how to respond to my proposal?”

Frowning, Arch-Immortal Plumdark replied, “You inquire every month, and every month I say no. Won’t you ever give up?”

“Why do you always say no? You’re still looking for someone with ‘light in their heart’? People like that don’t exist in this chaotic world. And even if they did, once they realized how truly vicious people can be, the brutality of the world would change them. That light would fade, and it wouldn’t be what you’re looking for. All you have to do is agree to accept some of my divine will. Borrow my power to make up for the final thread of magical law that you’re missing. When you reach the great circle of Space-Shattering 1,000 Daos, you’ll finally have hope of breaking through into the second stage.”

“Go find someone else if you want a pill cauldron,” Arch-Immortal Plumdark said calmly, not backing down an inch. “Others might not know what you’re like inside, but I do.”

The president looked deeply at her, then smiled faintly. “You don’t have much longevity left, Junior Sister. I’ll be back next month to ask again.”

The president transformed into countless specks of starlight that faded into nothing.

After he was gone, the old woman started moving again. She clearly had no idea of what had just happened.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked down into the broth and frowned slightly.

Chapter 280: The Misery of the World

Xu Qing was still suspicious about Master Seventh’s response, and felt that there was something very odd about it. However, he had no idea what the truth of the matter was. That said, he got the feeling that he should keep his distance from Arch-Immortal Plumdark from the Dark Serenity Sect. In fact, he had already decided not to go anywhere near that sect in the future.

With such thoughts on his mind, he closed his eyes and started meditating. Unfortunately, he couldn’t maintain concentration. Eventually, he opened his eyes and took out the medicinal codex Grandmaster Bai had given him. After reading through it for about an hour, he felt a lot calmer.

It was in similar fashion that day after day passed, until half a month had gone by.

During that half-month, Xu Qing worked on cultivation. Also, he got some of the water of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River and used it to wash the fragment of the taboo treasure that

he'd acquired from Sima Ling. Unfortunately, the taboo treasure fragment exuded a lot of mutagen, so the effects of the water were minimal.

After some thought, Xu Qing decided that he still had too many reservations about his shadow. Therefore, he just kept using the river water. Even though the results weren't very spectacular, they were better than nothing.

Things in the new capital city had fallen into a new rhythm. It was at this point that the Special Security Division finally got assigned a mission outside the sect. It was an inspection tour of the tributary of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River that ran from the former Young Arbiter Sect all the way to the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. The long, winding course of the tributary took it through nearly half of the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

The inspection team would travel upriver, checking on mutagen levels, intimidating small-time criminals, and getting rid of any diversion channels created to illegally tap into the river water. Given how long the tributary was, they would be passing numerous sects and small nations. If such places weren't inspected, and were simply allowed to siphon away the water, then by the time it reached the Eight Sect Coalition, there wouldn't be much left.

That was the entire purpose of the inspection tour, and was one of the primary responsibilities of the eight Special Security Divisions in the eight sects of the coalition. There was a rotating schedule for the inspections, and the time had come for Seven Blood Eyes to take the lead.

Xu Qing wanted to see more of the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, although being as cautious as he was, he didn't immediately make the decision. Instead, he consulted Master Seventh.

Master Seventh agreed that he should go on the mission, and gave Xu Qing a special jade slip to hide his identity.

With that jade slip, Xu Qing felt a lot less nervous. He changed his appearance, put on new clothing, and then used a magical device to alter his aura. Then, when the morning came to set out, he and the Captain led a group of seven or eight hundred disciples onto twenty huge ships.

They left the Eight Sect Coalition with great fanfare, then headed up the river.

The tributary was huge, and it only got bigger the further upriver you went. Out in front of Xu Qing stretched a massive body of water, the water bubbling and frothing as it flowed rapidly downstream. The immortal energy was strong. Given how early it was in the morning, immortal mist covered the surface of the river, and even a single breath of it would expand one's mind. The tributary was about 30,000 meters wide, making it seem almost like a sea. The ten huge boats traveled single file, keeping a distance of about 3,000 meters between each of them, allowing all the boats to have a clear view of each side of the river.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was very pleased about the circumstances, and after expressing his desire to Xu Qing, received approval to fly out in black skewer form and work on his cultivation, which proceeded much more smoothly given the surroundings.

There were no negative influences on Xu Qing's gruish shadow. In fact, given how stark the shadows were because of the sun overhead, it sent part of itself stretching down into the water. Occasionally, spirit fish would swim by the shadow, and it would absorb them in the blink of an eye. Before long, the shadow was sending fluctuations of contentment back to Xu Qing.

It can absorb immortal energy? Xu Qing realized. This Everlasting Immortal Profundity River is amazing!

Meanwhile, the Captain looked off into the distance. Sighing ruefully, he said, "It's no wonder the Eight Sect Coalition went to great lengths to destroy the Young Arbiter Sect and their dam. They even risked provoking the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. All to get this river flowing into the sect. It makes you wonder how amazing the source of the river is. Cultivators like us should make it a point of visiting that source at least once in our life. The scenery must be amazing. If I ever become a swordmage, I'll finally be able to enjoy life to the fullest. Everything will be worth it."

The Captain stood there, hands clasped behind his back, his hair streaming in the wind.

Xu Qing looked quizzically at the Captain. He had just realized that, despite being on the river for about half a day already, he hadn't seen the Captain eat a single apple. Beyond that, the words he had just spoken seemed a bit unusual. The Captain normally didn't go on in such a way.

Xu Qing produced an apple, took a bite, and nodded. Now that Xu Qing thought about it, the incident at the Dark Serenity Sect had seemed to light a fire under the Captain. Whenever the two of them met up after that, the Captain had reminded Xu Qing a lot of Wu Jianwu. Except for the poetry-reciting thing. This morning, the effect seemed even more obvious than before.

"Want an apple, Eldest Brother?" Xu Qing asked.

As the breeze blew, the Captain looked over his shoulder piercingly. "Is that what you think of your Eldest Brother? That all he cares about is eating things?"

Hearing that, Xu Qing produced another apple and tossed it to the Captain.

The Captain instinctively caught it.

Xu Qing didn't say anything.

The Captain stood there silently.

A moment later, the two were squatting together on the prow eating.

After taking several bites, the Captain sighed. "Why do you think Arch-Immortal Plumdark is so interested in you? What's so wrong with me? I'm pretty much the same as you.... You know, after that incident I did some research. When Arch-Immortal Plumdark was young, she was famous throughout all of the Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. She was more glamorous than you can describe with words. The only bad things said about her were rumors spread by the people who wooed her unsuccessfully."

Xu Qing didn't say anything. Looking at the two banks of the river, he thought back to the files he had read in the sect about the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River.

On one side were the hundreds of thousands of mountains that made up the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, as dark as night, like the spine of some immense beast that went on without end. There were demons, devils, ghosts, and monsters there, as well as grues, rogue cultivators, and countless sects. It was a place where you could find both good people and villains, but overall, it was a brutal hell on earth.

On the other side of the river was a vast wasteland with strong mutagen and forests of dead trees. There were also innumerable small nations, most of whom only survived because they were run by cultivators.

As Xu Qing thought about the contents of the files, the Captain finished his apple, then took out another and started eating. Just as it looked like he was about to say something, he suddenly looked off into the distance. Xu Qing also looked in the same direction.

At the same time, a voice message came in from the disciples on one of the ships ahead.

“Mortals spotted ahead, on the bank of the river.”

It was far enough away that the disciples on the boats further back couldn't see. However, Xu Qing and the Captain had a perfect view. Upon seeing the nation mentioned in the message, both Xu Qing and the Captain reacted with mixed emotions.

Xu Qing saw a large number of mortal citizens, some old, some young. There were both men and women, and all of them had greenish-black coloration on their skin from mutagen. In fact, many were getting very close to mutation. Most were emaciated, their eyes listless, and many had trouble walking and had to be supported by relatives as they slowly made their way along.

There were a few hundred of them, and they were stretched out on the shore, washing themselves with the river water. Thanks to the immortal energy in the river, they were able to provide a bit of stability to their rapidly deteriorating bodies. Some who were in especially bad condition lay on the bank and used stone bowls to gather water to drink. There were some children in the group, wailing loudly. Apparently, being bathed in the river caused them intense pain.

In the end, this miserable scene was only a tiny fraction of what happened in the world on a daily basis.

As the coalition ships neared, the mortals trembled and gazed at them with terror in their eyes.

Seeing that, Xu Qing quietly said, “Give them some medicinal pills.”

“Yes, sir!”

Some of the nearby Special Security Division officers took out some very low-level medicinal pills that had been prepared in advance and sent them to the miserable mortals.

The Captain sighed. “There's not much we can do. That's just how the world works. Besides, we humans are always fighting amongst ourselves, as disunited as a dish of loose sand.”

“I know.” Xu Qing looked away from the riverbank. “If we can help, we help. That's all.”

The Captain looked deeply at Xu Qing for a moment. Then he waved his hand, which caused a few dozen spirit fish to fly out of the water and land on the shore. Spirit fish were like medicinal pills; they could cleanse mutagen. In fact, they were a lot more effective than the water.

The Captain patted Xu Qing's shoulder. “I think this is why the old man likes you, little Ah Qing. It's also why I like being around you.”

Xu Qing didn't respond.

Time passed. In a flash, a month of travel went by.

During that time, they saw miserable scenes on the river banks over and over again. Xu Qing saw mortals, rogue cultivators, and even entire nations. Such groups gathered at the river to cleanse themselves of mutagen. They were bitter and miserable, and most were in such bad shape they were virtually crippled. Many hovered right on the brink of mutation.

Although opening up this tributary had provided immense benefit to the Eight Sect Coalition, it also brought relief to the countless nations and peoples who suffered in the area. It gave them a little hope. The Eight Sect Coalition allowed it to happen. As long as no one tried to redirect the flow of the water, they wouldn't interfere. As a result, the suffering populace had a slightly better chance of surviving.

Along the way, Xu Qing and others in the inspection team would hand out low-level medicinal pills. It was something other sects didn't do, and had been encouraged by Master Seventh.

Given how long the journey was, Xu Qing spent time working on his cultivation. The Captain, on the other hand, couldn't sit still, and would often go fishing, or even go ashore to hunt for animals.

One day, the ship in the lead position sent a message indicating they'd encountered a situation they didn't know how to deal with.

Xu Qing emerged from his session of cultivation and walked out of the cabin to find the Captain at the prow of the ship, staring off into the distance.

"It's our first time encountering something like this," the Captain said. "If they were cultivators, we could just slaughter them. But they're not. There's a small nation up ahead with a population of about 40,000-50,000. They're taking away the river water... and they're trying to build a canal..."

Hearing the Captain's words, Xu Qing stepped to the prow and looked off into the distance.

He saw several thousand people pushing wooden carts filled with buckets of water. The people doing the actual work were emaciated and malnourished. Overseeing the operation were mortal warriors who shouted at the ordinary citizens and used whips to keep them moving. There were also some citizens digging into the soil to try to divert the river water. The carts were trundling in the direction of a small nation some distance away.

Seeing this, Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. Then he looked at the emaciated and malnourished citizens. Their shadows stretched long and far underneath the setting sun. Though the shadows looked ordinary, when Xu Qing studied them, he realized... they were all missing an ear.

The left ear.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted.