

Timescape 281

Chapter 281: Something Strange is Definitely Going On

Few people would have picked up on the detail related to the shadow. It was only because of Xu Qing's experience with his own gruish shadow that he often paid close attention to the shadows of others. In fact, as Xu Qing looked off into the distance, his own shadow sent out excited fluctuations.

“Same... type... consume....”

Xu Qing didn't need any translation from Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior to understand what the shadow was saying. His eyes narrowed. A moment later, he said, “Something strange is definitely going on here. Especially when it comes to that canal. It doesn't look like they're really trying to divert the water. More like they're trying to attract our attention.”

Seeing the situation, the Captain smiled. “Is it a cry for help? Interesting. Men, bring the king of that small nation in for questioning. Something's off here. They know the rules set forth by the coalition.”

Before long, a streak of light approached as officers from Seven Blood Eyes approached with a fat old man in a yellow robe. Trembling, the old man plopped onto the deck into a kneeling position.

“Higher Immortal, I beg of you, rescue my nation!”

Wailing, the king went on to explain the situation to Xu Qing and the Captain.

His nation was called the State of Chiruo. One of his ancestors had been a Foundation Establishment cultivator from a small sect. Because of having no hope of breaking through to Gold Core, he settled down in this area, started a family, and eventually gathered enough citizens under his banner to found a small nation. Life was hard, but because they paid fealty to a small sect in the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, they had enough protection to stay safe on a daily basis. Despite the mutagen that filled their food, they managed to survive.

Though mortals here had short lifespans, there was nothing they could do about it. However, everything changed when the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River tributary appeared. The reason for that change lay in the constantly vicious infighting between groups in the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. And the situation with the river made things even more dramatic. About a month ago, the small sect that the State of Chiruo had paid fealty to was wiped out by three nonhuman rogue cultivators.

They killed everyone and then took over the sect headquarters. Because they revered the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain, they called themselves the Minor Three Spirits. And they required all nearby nations to pay them fealty in the form of river water. If a nation didn't give them the required amount of water in time, they would eat 1,000 citizens from that nation. At that rate, it wouldn't take long for a nation to be completely wiped out if they didn't deliver the water.

The Minor Three Spirits were obviously taking advantage of the way the Eight Sect Coalition treated other humans. After all, the coalition didn't stop mortals from taking water from the river. Given how much water the Minor Three Spirits needed, and the fact that they were prohibited from directly diverting the tributary, they had come up with this clever plan.

The king was a cultivator himself, though he was only in the Qi Condensation level. Voice trembling, he said, “We missed the deadline, and the Minor Three Spirits came and devoured a thousand of our citizens. They left earlier this morning. If we don’t give them enough water next time, they’ll come back. There’s nothing I can do. My idea was to start digging that canal to attract the attention of you higher immortals.”

Xu Qing’s speculation had been correct. Their act of diverting the river water had been a call for help. Looking down, he studied the king’s shadow, cast by the sun onto the deck. The shadow’s left ear was missing. However, because of the angle, it wasn’t immediately noticeable. And whether intentionally or not, the king kept his head tilted to the side, making it difficult to spot that detail. Only someone paying close attention would notice it when he kowtowed.

“Minor Three Spirits?” The Captain narrowed his eyes. The Captain was very perceptive, and as a result, was able to identify which things the king said were true, and which were not.

Similarly, Xu Qing had enough experience to tell that some of what the king was saying was true, while there were other things he was keeping hidden.

Before making any final decisions, they sent some officers over to the area controlled by the Minor Three Spirits. A few hours later, when the officers returned with a report, the Captain chuckled. Looking at Xu Qing, he said, “The strongest among them are three cultivators with two-flame power?”

The Captain placed his right hand onto the deck, activating the spell formation. Instantly, an invisible pulse spread out in all directions. It had a very wide range, but the Captain focused on one specific area. Using the power of the spell formation, he was able to confirm that there were no Gold Core cultivators in the area. All of the information conformed to the report provided by the officers.

“The coalition spell formations are very accurate. Xu Qing, what do you say we send some people to wipe out these Minor Three Spirits?” With that, he prepared to give orders to some of the nearby officers to go handle the matter.

However, that was when Xu Qing suddenly said, “I’ll go with them, Eldest Brother.”

The Captain smiled enigmatically at Xu Qing, then nodded without asking any questions. “Want me to come along?”

After thinking about it, Xu Qing shook his head. “That would make things too complicated.”

After all, there were things he still wanted to keep secret. Even if the Captain didn’t notice anything suspicious in the heat of the moment, he would be able to think about the matter later and pick up on some of the clues. Ultimately, it was never a good idea to underestimate anyone. In fact, it would make more sense to simply tell the Captain his secret rather than risk him coming to the wrong conclusion later.

In any case, after hearing Xu Qing’s words, the Captain’s smile deepened, but he said nothing further.

Flying up into midair, Xu Qing beckoned at the roughly one hundred Seven Blood Eyes officers to follow him as he raced in the direction of the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. Even after triple checking that the information was correct, Xu Qing was the kind of person who still preferred to bring a lot of people with him for something like this.

As the Captain watched Xu Qing go, his eyes glittered with approval. Little Ah Qing doesn't treat me like a stranger. Given that, I'm not going to get overly curious. Everybody has their secrets.

The Captain took out an apple and looked at the trembling king and his missing left ear. Smiling, he ordered the procession of ships to all stop and wait for Xu Qing's return.

Meanwhile, Xu Qing and over a hundred Seven Blood Eyes officers from various mountain peaks were flying at top speed toward the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains.

About thirty percent of the officers were in the great circle of Qi Condensation, but the rest were in Foundation Establishment. It was a given that anyone assigned to the Special Security Division would be a uniquely qualified person who could be described as being the best of the best. Only a few of the Foundation Establishment officers had ignited a life flame. There were twenty with one flame, six with two flames, and one with three flames. The Mute was in the group. He was in the great circle of Qi Condensation, and was incredibly ruthless. When he fought, it seemed without regard for his own life, and was considered outstanding among Qi Condensation disciples in the same level as him. A group as formidable as this could crush anyone they faced other than a Gold Core cultivator with two heavenly palaces.

As the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains grew more and more clear in Xu Qing's eyes, he saw how many countless mountains made it up. They were covered with dense, sinister vegetation, and in the light of dusk, seemed like they must surely be full of demonic monsters.

The sunlight had a hard time making it through the canopy, ensuring that the forest floor was as dark as night. The muddy ground had many crevices in it, and was full of all sorts of grisly dangers.

As Xu Qing got closer, he sensed grisly fluctuations coming from a location not very far away in the dense forest. Those fluctuations were not his target, but upon merely looking in that direction, he sensed an evil will rapidly stretching out to envelop him and those with him.

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever. Meanwhile, his shadow beneath him opened its mouth. In the blink of an eye, that evil, grisly will vanished without a trace.

Xu Qing didn't pay any attention to the matter. He kept flying, taking note of the noxious smell coming from below. Further down, he saw the bloody skulls of both humans, nonhumans, and animals hanging from the trees. They dripped with blood that landed on rotting corpses below. The mud itself was like a mass of gore.

Everything seemed like it was an imitation of the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain. Frowning, Xu Qing looked at a specific spot ahead in the mountains, specifically, a huge cave, out of which emerged a cacophony of sound. Vicious nonhumans tromped inside, carrying the charred corpses of both humans and animals on their shoulders.

Seeing that, Xu Qing's eyes turned cold. "Slaughter your way in. Kill the ringleaders. Don't leave any survivors!"

"Yes, sir!"

The Special Security Division officers became beams of bright light that shot directly into the mouth of the cave.

The nonhumans carrying the food were shocked, and didn't even have time to cry out for help before their own heads were flying off their shoulders.

The Mute was in the lead, wielding a dagger. After licking the blood off the blade, he shot into motion deeper into the cave. The others followed, and soon, howls of rage echoed out, along with screams of agony.

Face expressionless, Xu Qing strode inside, his iron skewer hovering next to him, his shadow stretching out from his feet.

Inside the cave mouth was nothing but corpses.

Laughing viciously, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior sent the skewer stabbing into one corpse after another to make sure they were dead. Many were actually just pretending to be dead, and screamed before dying.

The shadow ignored the corpses and those faking death, and instead stretched into the deeper parts of the cave. Xu Qing followed, moving quickly. Around the time that the sounds of fighting started dying out, he reached the deepest part of the cave. It was a beautiful cavern with a roughly 3-meter wide hole in the top, through which was visible the evening sky. A bunch of tables were randomly scattered about, and the food laid out on them consisted of a variety of corpses.

The Special Security Division officers were all here, having captured over twenty nonhumans, who were now kneeling on the ground, bound. They were clearly terrified. Among them were three who had two life flames each, and they were covered with fresh wounds. Eyes full of horror, they looked at Xu Qing as he walked in.

The one with the highest cultivation base was covered with scales, and had his life flames burning. "If the supervisory sect would just listen to our—"

Xu Qing didn't bother waiting for his explanation, and simply waved his hand. The nonhuman's head flew off his shoulder.

The other nonhumans gasped in terror, and none of them dared to speak.

Xu Qing still hadn't said a word. Looking at all of the shadows of the various nonhumans, he then focused his gaze on a nonhuman with wings on his back.

He was the second-highest ranking member of the Minor Three Spirits. He shivered as he looked at Xu Qing. Then, just as it seemed he might speak, his face distorted. Somehow managing to slip out of his bonds, he burst into motion, fleeing toward the entrance of the cave.

He moved with blinding speed. What was more, the astonishment in his eyes made it clear that his body was no longer under his own control. And he wasn't being controlled by Xu Qing's shadow. Instead, the nonhuman was being controlled by his own shadow!

Chapter 282: Master... I'm Obedient....

Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly as he raced in pursuit, and his shadow stretched out in front of him, its mouth open. No one perceived what was happening as the shadow bore down on its nonhuman counterpart, gaping maw full of madness and anticipation.

The nonhuman tried to fight back, but the disparity with Xu Qing's cultivation base was so immense that it was powerless. In the blink of an eye, Xu Qing had caught up, and had his hand around the nonhuman's neck. Struggling did no good. All he could do was sense the burning fire coming from Xu Qing's hand madly enveloping his entire body. At the same time, it was with utmost ferocity and longing that Xu Qing's shadow pounced on the nonhuman's shadow.

A howl that no one else could hear echoed out from the shadow.

"Kill everyone here, then go back to the ship and wait for my return."

Leaving behind those words, Xu Qing shot out of the cave through the hole overhead, taking the nonhuman with him. Below him, the sounds of slaughter rang out.

It was dark outside. Moving with shocking speed, Xu Qing dragged the nonhuman off to a nearby mountaintop. Once there, he looked down at the trembling, despairing shadow cast by the nonhuman.

The shadow twisted and distorted as it struggled. Xu Qing could see that his own shadow was inside the nonhuman's shadow, and they were snapping and biting at each other in a battle to the death.

Fluctuations of vile insanity rolled off of the nonhuman's shadow, something that reminded Xu Qing of back when he first acquired the shadow in the jungle outside the scavenger basecamp. It had overflowed with wild savagery. It was only after Xu Qing had crushed his shadow over and over again that it finally lost some of that savage nature, and started obeying him. That said, Xu Qing knew that its rebellious nature was still there.

As it turns out, grues like my shadow are exceedingly rare, but others do exist.

Meanwhile, he looked at the nonhuman cultivator to whom the shadow was attached. Most likely, this cultivator was like himself. In some situations in the past, the shadow had attacked him, then taken him over as the host.

If I didn't have the violet crystal, then the same thing would have happened to me back in that jungle. It wouldn't be me anymore. After all, Xu Qing could tell that, unlike himself, this nonhuman cultivator had normal mutagen levels.

Apparently that was the difference between someone controlled by such a shadow, and someone who controlled the shadow. If you couldn't suppress the shadow, then it would take you over, wearing you like a set of clothing.

Xu Qing looked at the nonhuman's shadow fighting with his own shadow, and unleashed the violet light of suppression.

Of course, he wasn't targeting his own shadow, but rather, the nonhuman's shadow. The violet crystal obviously had immense power over grues like this. As rumbling sounds echoed out, the nonhuman's shadow let loose a scream of agony that only Xu Qing and the nonhuman could hear.

As Xu Qing's shadow got excited, the nonhuman's shadow went wild, eventually lunging toward Xu Qing as if to devour him. Xu Qing's expression was cold as he sent violet light crushing onto the nonhuman's shadow seventeen times in a row.

Over and over, the nonhuman's shadow shrieked in agony, until it reached the point where it was absolutely terrified. Then, looking very weak, it tried to escape. Before it could, Xu Qing sent violet light over and crushed it down in suppression. The violet light of suppression didn't fade quickly. And because the shadow couldn't flee, it simply struggled, shrieking and pleading for mercy.

Off to the side, Xu Qing's shadow was, for the first time, finally seeing its own torment unleashed onto another. It was a very fantastic feeling, and it caused it to look at Xu Qing and send out fawning fluctuations.

Xu Qing squatted down and looked at the nonhuman's shadow in the moonlight. It was basically the same shape as his own shadow, having taken on the form of a tree full of eyes. At the moment, every single one of those eyes shone with terror.

Xu Qing thought for a moment, considering whether or not he wanted to add a second shadow to his collection, perhaps by sealing it within the violet crystal. But... he couldn't. When he put his hand into the nonhuman's shadow, he felt icy coldness. But when he tried to unleash the violet crystal, it didn't work. Finally, he waved his hand, and the iron skewer pierced through the nonhuman's throat, killing him instantly.

Xu Qing thought to back when the black-scaled wolf died, and the shadow pounced on him. He had hoped that killing the nonhuman would give him a similar chance to subjugate the second shadow. It didn't work.

His own shadow had no idea that the plan wasn't working, and sent some anxious fluctuations in Xu Qing's direction.

"Milord... I'm obedient... right...?"

Inside the iron skewer, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior saw this happening and resisted the urge to translate.

Xu Qing looked at the shadow for a moment, then coolly said, "Given how well you've performed recently, I won't replace you with this second shadow. But take note: all your previous service doesn't count for anything now. Going forward, if you don't perform well, then next time... I'll replace you."

The little shadow trembled in response, and wildly shook its head.

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior saw all of this and was pleased to the core.

Xu Qing frowned.

The shadow reacted instantly, shaking its head with even more vigor. Obviously it was very nervous, as it was reverting to what the patriarch had taught it about how to communicate. Thankfully, it could also send out fluctuations, which enabled it to solemnly acknowledge Xu Qing.

Xu Qing finally nodded.

"You can devour it." Xu Qing got to his feet. However, he kept the force of suppression going. As the nonhuman shadow shrieked, Xu Qing's shadow opened its mouth wide and started eating.

The process took an incense stick's worth of time. Eventually, Xu Qing's shadow completely devoured the nonhuman's shadow, after which it burped and sent fawning emotions to Xu Qing. It was clearly stronger than before, and now had many more eyes than before, though they weren't open. What was more, the shadowy tree now had flower buds on it.

"Time... absorb... stronger..."

Seeing Xu Qing looking at it, the shadow sent forth some more fluctuations.

Xu Qing looked away and focused on the Minor Three Spirits mountain. He was pleased with what he had gained out of this incident. Turning into a beam of light, he shot off into the distance.

Before long, Xu Qing was back at the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River tributary, on the ship with the Captain. The king of the small nation was gone, and the officers Xu Qing had led away were already back.

"Is it over?" the Captain asked with a mysterious smile.

Xu Qing nodded.

"Well, that's good," the Captain said. He didn't ask any further questions. Stretching, he put his hands behind his head, lay down on the deck, and looked up into the night sky.

Xu Qing sat down cross-legged to do breathing exercises.

The evening wind blew, stirring their hair as the ships moved upstream. The sound of the water was like a natural symphony, swirling around them as they drifted off into the distance.

Time passed. Before long, they had been traveling for a month. The Special Security Division's ships were about half done with their inspection tour. The reason they were able to do it so quickly was that the coalition ships were amazing. Not only did they have incredible offensive and defensive capabilities, but also, they were very fast. Beyond that, few sects or nations would dare to try to divert the river water. In addition, this wasn't the coalition's first inspection tour. Therefore, everything was relatively peaceful, and they could move quickly.

Xu Qing's cultivation also progressed rapidly. He finally opened his 102nd dharma aperture, giving him even more powerful dharma force.

The Captain, after eating a few spirit fish half a month before, fell in love with the flavor, and spent every day eating all different types of fish. After sampling some, Xu Qing found that they tasted quite good. After that, everyone on board started fishing for food.

At the moment, the Captain sat next to Xu Qing, winking. "Little Ah Qing..."

Xu Qing begrudgingly opened his eyes, waved, and sent out a ball of balefire. The Captain expertly started grilling the fish atop it.

"My cultivation technique has nothing to do with fire," he said excitedly. "And even if I did manage to summon some fire, the flavor is just different. Little Ah Qing, your balefire is just the best! It really brings out the unique flavor of these spirit fish."

Xu Qing ignored him and was about to go back to meditating when his expression flickered. Similarly, the Captain looked up, and together, they stared at the distant sky.

Two beams of light shot through the dome of heaven, one after the other. Apparently, there was a chase going on. In front was an old man with red hair. His chest was torn and bleeding; apparently he was wounded. He had a sinister face covered with wrinkles. Coupled with his vile eyes, he looked very vicious. Hovering above his head were two pitch-black heavenly palaces which exuded a very shocking aura. He happened to be flying right over a small nation of nonhumans. Waving his hand, he caused nearly 10,000 of them to fly up into the air, all of them bleeding from their eyes, ears, noses, and mouths. Despair covered their faces as their blood flowed into the sky, landed in the sinister old man's palm, and then transformed into a blood pill that he consumed. A moment later, his wounds were visibly less severe.

He was just about to continue taking blood from the nonhumans when a stream of sword energy arrived. The devilish old man shrieked as he was forced to flee instead of continuing to heal himself.

As for the nonhumans, they dropped back down to the ground, some dead, some merely wounded.

The person who had unleashed the sword energy was a young man in a long white robe. He had twenty-seven swords circulating endlessly behind him, from which shot streams of sword energy as he continued to attack the old man. He was handsome, with eyebrows like sharp swords, eyes that sparkled like stars, and hair that swirled around him as he moved. However, what was most noticeable was the fiery design embroidered on his robe!

“Look at his robe! That guy's a swordsage!” The Captain's eyes went wide, and he immediately got very excited. [1]

Chapter 283: Have a Death Wish?

Xu Qing had heard about the swordsages from the Captain. They were one of the Five Greater Celestial Divisions of humans. Each of the seven counties had a Swordsage Palace, and all of the prefectures had a Swordsage Court.

However, Xu Qing had never seen any swordsages with his own eyes. Upon hearing the Captain's exclamation, he looked more closely. Both figures flying through the sky had terrifying battle prowess and shocking fluctuations. Either of them could, with a single palm strike, kill Xu Qing without the shadow of a doubt, assuming he didn't have Master Seventh's defensive blessing.

“Two heavenly palaces...” Xu Qing murmured. As the two flew through the sky, it became evident that the devilish old man wanted to cross the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River and make his escape into the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. But then he looked down and saw the coalition ships on the river, and his eyes grew more ferocious.

Given how wounded he was, he needed to consume energy and blood to recover. Obviously, he didn't care at all that the people on the ships were from the Eight Sect Coalition. Eyes radiating ferocity, he suddenly blurred, transforming into a few dozen clones. A dark wind kicked up as his clones then shot down toward the ships to devour those on board.

However, as soon as the old devil closed in, the Seven Blood Eyes ships thrummed, and their spell formations activated, releasing astonishing force into defensive shields. As the rumbling sounds echoed out, the clones dropped down, smashing into the shields, causing them to ripple and distort. Inside, the faces of the officers flickered as they all coughed up blood.

What was more, when the officers looked at the red-haired old devil, he seemed like a black vortex that caused their view of the world to spin.

Only Xu Qing and the Captain had cultivation bases strong enough to resist the pressure. As the clones unleashed palm strikes onto the ships, they sprang into action.

Without the slightest hesitation, Xu Qing unleashed some poison catalyst. In recent days, he had taken to lacing the air around all the ships with poison. Without the proper catalyst, it wouldn't do anything harmful, and in fact, would stimulate the energy and blood of everyone onboard. If the poison was never activated, it would dissipate harmlessly half a month later. Up to this point, Xu Qing had used about 170-180 different types of poison, just in case a dangerous situation like this arose. All it would take was the right catalyst, and those poisons would turn into something extremely deadly.

Without hesitation, Xu Qing launched a fist strike, which also served to unleash the poison catalyst. Thanks to the force of the blow, it would spread that catalyst far and wide. At the same time, he performed an incantation gesture and pointed to the sky. Black clouds appeared, and a withered, immeasurably gruish hand stretched down toward the old devil.

Meanwhile, the Captain also performed an incantation gesture, then waved his hand. An ice spear appeared, which he then threw, causing it to pierce up with unstoppable force toward the old devil.

The withered hand dropped down and the ice spear pierced up. One of the old devil's clones exploded, transforming into a ball of mist that tumbled off to the side.

The other clones were unable to get through the shields in quick fashion, and quickly fell back unhurt. Only the one closest to Xu Qing and the Captain had been destroyed.

In the blink of an eye, the mist and the other clones merged together, once again forming the old devil. Turning, he looked at Xu Qing and the Captain with roiling killing intent. However, the swordswage was closing in, so he snorted coldly and shot onward toward the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains.

But then a sudden eruption of frigid energy caused cracking sounds to ring out as a host of ice mirrors appeared, within each of which was the reflection of a grue, howling noiselessly.

The red-haired old devil reacted with surprise. At the same time, his soul itself suddenly blurred, and the heavenly palace above his head fell. That affected his speed, and the swordswage behind him closed in.

"Dammit!" the old devil cursed. The people from the coalition had caused his trouble, but there was nothing he could do about them. Instead, he tried to speed up. That was when his sinister face grew even grimmer.

"Poison?" He coughed up a great glob of black blood, and his face flickered. Although the poison wasn't strong enough to be fatal to him, it obviously had many negative

properties. His energy and blood were now completely unstable, his cultivation base wasn't responding properly, and he felt itchy and painful all over. That included his throat; he immediately started coughing uncontrollably. He was now moving even more slowly than before.

Then a stream of sword energy arrived, and the old devil couldn't move quickly enough to dodge it. It stabbed through his chest, provoking a bitter howl as he madly fled toward the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains.

The swordsage didn't hesitate to give chase, disappearing into the mountains after the old devil.

A short time later, a stream of sword light shot back out of the mountains. It was none other than the swordsage. He was holding a severed head as he hovered to a stop above the coalition ships. Looking down at Xu Qing and the Captain, he nodded. Then, in a seemingly casual move that could have been intentional or not, he glanced back at the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. Then he left.

Back in those mountains, a headless corpse had fallen in the spot where the swordsage and the old devil fought. And the fingers on that corpse were twitching. Unbeknownst to the old devil, there was an eye in his shadow.

At the same time, back on the tributary of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River, Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as his shadow conveyed to him the reality that the red-haired old devil had only been feigning death. Given how he had attacked earlier, it was obvious he was a vicious fellow, and if he recovered fully, would be a potential calamity down the road.

Xu Qing looked at the Captain, and the Captain looked back at him. The two of them spoke at exactly the same time.

"He's a potential calamity."

"He's got treasure on him."

The two stood, then became two beams of light that shot right toward the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. As they neared, the Captain's nose twitched as he smelled the area, looking for traces of the old devil. However, Xu Qing took the lead, as his sense of direction was far more accurate.

The Captain's eyebrows danced as he followed. Soon enough, the two of them were speeding through the dense jungle in the mountains. Eventually, they spotted a valley. In that valley was a headless corpse that was struggling into a seated position. He was obviously very weak, and was shaking as he performed a double-handed incantation gesture.

Astonishingly, the flesh on the stump of his neck wriggled as it began to spread out into the shape of a new head. Then an eye popped out of that mass of flesh, which looked in terror toward the two figures entering the valley.

They were none other than Xu Qing and the Captain.

"You could have just run away. Instead, you just had to provoke us. We didn't attack you. Was there really a need for that?" The Captain grinned, and his eyes shone with

a mysterious light. Within his pupils were the image of a face identical to his own, also grinning viciously. At the same time, the fluctuations that pulsed out of him caused the headless old devil to shiver.

Then there was Xu Qing, his face completely expressionless, looking at the old devil as if he were already dead. Xu Qing's fluctuations were only that of the three-flame level, but the old devil somehow felt weak with his one heavenly palace. That caused him to shiver even more. He was now incomparably weak, and his heavenly palace was on the verge of collapse. Though his gold core still existed, his battle prowess had dropped significantly. His bag of holding and magical devices were gone, taken away with his head by the swordsage.

He thought he had pulled a fast one on that swordsage, but now it seemed the swordsage just hadn't felt like expending the effort to kill him, and had instead let these two punks come get their revenge. He was about to send out some divine will to communicate with them, but before he could, Xu Qing and the Captain pounced.

The old devil jumped up and tried to flee, only to find a host of ice walls blocking his path. Behind the ice walls was a huge sea with raging waves, like a tsunami heading right toward him. It wasn't just a single attack, but nine in a row, that slammed into the injured old devil. In addition to the Ninefold Tsunami attack, a hand of ice stretched out and viciously grabbed the old devil. Within that ice hand was the Captain's face, eyes closed, but mouth voraciously open.

The old devil trembled as he was shoved backward again. The eye that had popped out on his neck looked terrified as he anxiously sent out a message via divine will.

"Young friends, it was my mistake earlier, I—" Before he could finish speaking, Xu Qing lunged forward with shocking speed, his right hand clenched into a fist. It slammed into the old devil, ripping much of the old man to shreds as he was flung backward. Then Xu Qing performed an incantation gesture with his left hand, and black clouds filled the sky as the withered hand again stretched down, this time to land on the bloody flesh of the old devil's neck.

The old devil screamed via divine will. As his body continued to collapse, a vortex sprang into being behind him, turning into a huge mouth that snapped him up. Crunching sounds rang out as half of the old devil's body was devoured. Then the huge mouth spat him out. The old devil was in agony. His body was severed at the waist and his divine will was extremely weak, having been half devoured.

Xu Qing looked at the vortex and remembered Master Seventh using the same technique to devour three Gold Core experts. [1]

"Disgusting!" the Captain said as the vortex vanished, and he walked away spitting repeatedly. "Too sour! I prefer a milder flavor. Ai. I was hoping for a good snack. Truly disgusting!" He quickly took out a pear and started devouring it. Apparently, that fruit was the only thing that could sate his desire for a snack.

Ignoring the Captain, Xu Qing walked up to the old devil, who was struggling to breathe. Extending his right hand, he touched the old devil's forehead and sent balefire exploding out. As the old devil

was immolated, soul power converged in Xu Qing, and cracking sounds rang out as his 103rd, 104th, and 105th dharma apertures opened.

It didn't stop there, though. His 106th and 107th were next. Finally, his 108th dharma aperture opened. Then, the golden crow appeared and began absorbing the trembling old devil. Having lost his divine will, the old devil could do nothing as his fleshly body and blood were consumed. In the end, he became nothing but drifting ash that vanished with the wind.

Having accomplished that, Xu Qing stood. The Captain looked at the spot where the old devil had disappeared, and then he smiled at Xu Qing.

"Little Ah Qing, do you think he was the old devil, or are we two the old devils? He's... just completely gone!"

Xu Qing seriously considered the question, and was about to answer it when, all of a sudden... a fog sprang up around them in the jungle!

Sinister winds were pulsing!

Chapter 284: Dark Serenity Grave

Thick fog spread out through the dense jungle on the mountains, rapidly reaching Xu Qing and the Captain. Within moments, they were enveloped. It was so dense that they couldn't see even half a meter around them. Everything was hazy and indistinct. Not even the sky was visible overhead.

It came so quickly, and was so cold, that there was no way it was naturally occurring. In all likelihood it was summoned by a grue. What was even more telling was that when Xu Qing touched it, he could tell that there were countless minutely small entities in the fog, trying to bore into his body through his pores. Thankfully, with the defenses of his life lamp, the attack of the gruish fog didn't do anything.

This reminds me of the Fog of Confusion back in the forbidden region by the scavenger basecamp. However, there's a clear difference in level between the two. As Xu Qing looked around, he realized that the fog was making it impossible to sense the Captain's aura. A moment ago he had been right next to Xu Qing, but now Xu Qing had no idea where he was.

That said, Xu Qing wasn't worried about the Captain. Though Xu Qing might have an advantage in forbidden regions and grounds, even he wasn't sure who was fiercer, he or the Captain....

That was especially true considering that his shadow, which had just devoured something similar to itself, emanated a sense of thirst with the arrival of the ghostly fog. In fact, it immediately began absorbing streams of icy water vapor. It reminded Xu Qing of wanting to have some water after eating a big meal, and then having someone pass you a big cup of water. That was how excited the shadow was right now.

As the shadow devoured the fog, it thinned in front of Xu Qing. Looking calm, he proceeded forward, hoping to find the source of the fog. He was very curious to see what kind of grue would maliciously target him in this way. The further along he went, the more of the fog his shadow devoured, revealing more and more of the surrounding trees. They were vile in appearance, like demonic monsters, and the atmosphere was even more eerie given the sinister laughter which echoed faintly through the jungle. It was impossible to say if the laughter came from male or female

lips. Perhaps it was both. It weaved left and right, surrounding Xu Qing but also seemingly coming from nowhere.

Xu Qing narrowed his eyes and reined his shadow in, worried that its devouring of the fog would scare whatever grue was responsible for it. After all, he currently planned to find the malicious grue and kill it! With his shadow in check, Xu Qing concealed his killing intent and proceeded onward through the jungle.

Eventually, he found himself climbing a slope. About an hour later, a vague shape appeared ahead of him in the fog. Soon, it resolved into a log cabin. As he got closer, he was able to see it more and more clearly. It was a very old structure. The logs that made it up were rotting, and in many places had crumbled away, leaving gaping holes in the walls. It was in such bad shape that it looked like it might collapse at any time.

An old rocking chair rested in front of the door, facing it, and it looked like it might fall to pieces at any moment as well.

There had once been a little courtyard and a garden in front of the cabin, but the courtyard was full of weeds and the garden had long since succumbed to the elements. The place seemed to have seen a lot of changes through many years, and at the same time, appeared a bit strange. He was halfway up a mountain in the middle of the jungle. Yet here was this random log cabin.

As Xu Qing approached, a sinister wind blew, causing the rustle of the leaves to sound like countless people whispering to each other. He took in the scene, then focused on the rocking chair.

There was obviously no one sitting in the chair, yet it was moving. It rocked back and forth, not dramatically, just a bit, almost like it might be moving in the wind. Or it could have been rocking back and forth as a dying old man sat in it, thinking back over the many years that he had lived.

Xu Qing's face was expressionless as he looked at the rocking chair. He was certain that the chair had been completely motionless when he approached the cabin. But then he blinked, the wind kicked in, and the chair started rocking.

He blinked again.

All of a sudden, a noose appeared, hanging in the door of the cabin.

Xu Qing blinked a few more times, and ripples appeared around the noose. Then he saw a corpse.

It was the corpse of an old man, hanging from the noose. It had obviously been hanging there a long time, as the corpse was withered up, with its long white hair hanging dry and brittle down from its head. The face was skeletal, with its eye sockets nothing but dark holes. And its mouth was open, as though it had been instinctively gasping for breath in the moments before death.

Xu Qing blinked a few more times.

The rocking chair stopped moving as a blurry figure stood from it, then approached the corpse of the old man. As it got closer, it became easier to see. It was a hunch-backed old woman. She had a stone bowl in her hand, within which was something like a congee, made from blood. She took a spoonful of the blood congee and put it into the mouth of the corpse. Then another. Then another.

The cold, sinister wind seemed to laugh and cry at the same time as it swept through the area. The weeds swayed like waves, making the atmosphere even more eerie. Both the corpse of the old man, and the old woman feeding congee, had very pale faces. Yet both of their lips were bright red.

As Xu Qing watched, the old lady fed about half of the bowl of blood congee to the old man. Then, without any warning, the old lady suddenly reached up and snapped the old man's skull off his neck.

"It's time for you to feed me, hubby!" The old lady's voice was immeasurably hoarse and grating, like two rocks rubbing against each other.

The corpse floated in place. Above it was the noose, and above that was nothing. Though it had no head, it didn't fall down.

Meanwhile, the old lady put the old man's head off to the side, then reached up and snapped off her own head and put it in place on the noose. Reaching down, she found the old man's head and put it onto her own neck. After switching heads, the old man's eyes started glowing. Picking up the bowl, he started feeding the old lady. They truly seemed bound by love. In fact, the old man seemed worried that the congee was too hot, and would carefully blow each spoonful before putting it in the old lady's mouth.

It was an incredibly bizarre and grisly scene.

Xu Qing watched, his face expressionless. He didn't interrupt as they fed each other congee. After all, they weren't making any move against him. Finally, he decided he might as well just leave.

However, after he turned and took a few steps, the old man suddenly turned and looked at him. The log cabin shifted positions, and was now right in front of Xu Qing.

The old man grinned in a very sinister fashion, revealing sharp, crooked teeth. Then he spoke in a very chilling voice.

"You're back, son! Want some congee?"

Hearing that, Xu Qing looked at the grisly couple, then started walking forward. At the same time, a gulping sound could be heard from his feet. A sticky fluid oozed out from his shadow, which started melting everything it touched. Obviously, his shadow couldn't stop itself from salivating, no matter how hard it tried.

Seeing this, both the old man and the old woman reacted with visible shock.

"Go ahead and eat," Xu Qing said quietly.

The shadow, which had pushed its patience to the limit, suddenly rose up behind Xu Qing in the shape of a huge, black tree.

It had over a thousand eyes, all of them open and staring at the old man and woman. What was more, it had an enormous, ghastly mouth that opened and exhaled a sinister wind.

The old man and woman shivered, and fear appeared in their eyes. All of a sudden, the log cabin turned blurry, as if they were trying to flee. It was too late. The shadow shot forward, and in the blink of an eye, had become a vast swath of black shadow that covered the entire cabin. Only the

sound of chewing and screaming could be heard. After some time passed, the shadow shrank down and returned to Xu Qing's feet, exuding fluctuations of delight.

“Very... delicious....”

With the death of the gruish couple, the surrounding fog faded away. After only a few breaths of time passed, there was no trace it had even existed. Xu Qing continued onward until he spotted the Captain up ahead.

The Captain strolled along eating a black apple.

There was clearly a grue sealed in the apple, and it looked similar to the old man and woman Xu Qing had just encountered. It screamed in agony as the Captain ate the apple bite by bite.

Upon noticing Xu Qing behind him, the Captain took another bite, waved in greeting, and walked over. By the time they were in front of each other, the Captain had finished the apple. Licking his lips in satisfaction, he said, “That was a nice appetizer. Now I'm really hungry. What do you say we keep looking around?”

Hearing the Captain's words, Xu Qing's shadows sent him fluctuations of longing. In fact, they almost seemed like the pleas of a little child.... It was still hungry and thirsty.

Xu Qing nodded.

That put Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior completely on guard. He could see that the shadow had really honed its fawning behavior to a high level of skill. The patriarch suddenly felt a deep sense of crisis.

It's still acting like a spoiled child? Outrageous! Disgusting!

As the patriarch fumed in anxiety, Xu Qing and the Captain strolled through the jungle looking for grues. Unfortunately, grues usually showed up when you didn't want them to. And since they were actively searching for them, they didn't find any.

However, after some time passed, they did find an area where some immortal type of grass was growing. It was strange considering the high mutagen levels in the area.

“This place actually has spirit grass?” the Captain exclaimed.

Normally speaking, spirit grass couldn't grow in a place like the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. Usually, it only grew where there was no mutagen. Powerful groups would then fortify those areas, using spell formations to keep the mutagen out and keep the grass growing. To find an area like this was very unusual. It was noteworthy that the leaves were very small, almost stunted. That was understandable. But what was really strange was that the area with the grass formed a straight line, with one section going deep into the mountains, and the other heading in the direction of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River.

Xu Qing squatted down and plucked a blade of grass. He probed at the dirt, then looked in the direction of the river.

“There's water running underground here.”

The Captain's eyes narrowed as he looked down. However, only a moment later, they lit up, as if he could see what was underneath. He smiled.

“What gall! Someone is actually siphoning water from the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River. Underground!” Looking up, he peered into the depths of the mountains, then started moving in that direction.

Xu Qing frowned. It didn't seem like investigating this way was the best idea, but considering the Captain was already on the move, he decided to follow. Before long, the two of them found the place where the water was running to.

It was... a huge grave!

And written on the gravestone were three, sinister, blood-colored characters.

Dark Serenity Sect.

Chapter 285: Another Dark Serenity Sect

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. The Captain's eyes glittered brightly.

Both looked at the huge tomb, which was pitch black and seemed extremely sinister. At the same time, it pulsed with an ancient feeling, as if it had seen countless years of time pass by. It was shaped like a household altar, with two pillars on either side that had once been inscribed with calligraphy. However, the writing had long since faded to the point of being illegible. Within the shrine was a stone statue of someone seated cross-legged. The statue's facial features had long since been erased by the wind. The facelessness of the statue seemed incredibly grish. [1]

Xu Qing and the Captain exchanged a glance. Both were completely on guard, and neither was inclined to do anything rash. In fact, they both started backing up. Instead of exploring this area, they both knew it would be best to report the matter to the sect.

Not only was the grave very strange, but also, the three characters written on the top of the gravestone were very odd and mysterious. The Dark Serenity Sect was one of the supervisory sects in the Eight Sect Coalition. However, there seemed to be another Dark Serenity Sect right here. Thinking of the Dark Serenity Sect made Xu Qing suddenly recall Arch-Immortal Plumdark and her eyes. And that was a somewhat unsettling feeling.

However, before they could leave, the area behind the grave suddenly blurred as more graves appeared behind it, rising up out of the ground. It appeared to be an entire graveyard, filled with hundreds of graves. The eerie atmosphere grew even stronger.

Xu Qing and the Captain immediately started backing up even faster, but then the first grave rumbled loudly and split open. Out from the crevice walked a boy wearing fancy, ancient clothing. His skin was pale white, and he had a red dot on his forehead. His clothing definitely made it seem like he hailed from distant antiquity. Once out in the open, he clasped hands to Xu Qing and the Captain.

“Don't panic, gentlemen. My Master has invited you in to see him.”

Before Xu Qing and the Captain could reply, everything around them changed again, blurring. When the surroundings were clear again, they were no longer in a graveyard in the jungle. Instead, they were inside of a vast, pitch-black temple. All of the building materials were black, and though there were lamps letting off faint light, the entire place seemed very sinister.

What was more, a hair-raising pressure weighed down on them from all directions. The source of the pressure was seated cross-legged in the position of honor. It was a shadowy figure cloaked in such thick darkness it was impossible to make out any details of their features.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted, as did the Captain's. They exchanged a glance, and both could see how alarmed the other was.

The Captain inhaled sharply. "Form Displacement Transposition? Greater Void Teleportation? Earth Contracting Manipulation?"

Meanwhile, the shadowy figure seated cross-legged at the other end of the hall spoke in a raspy voice. "You two young friends must be here because of the diversion channel from the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River."

Xu Qing didn't respond. Instead, he sent his senses out to try to determine where exactly he was. He also checked to see if teleportations were locked down in the area. After determining that they weren't, he breathed an inward sigh of relief. That said, he still kept his guard up.

Remaining calm and collected, the Captain attempted to send a message to the Special Security Division, while simultaneously chuckling and saying, "We wouldn't dare to be dishonest with you, Senior. We're disciples from the Eight Sect Coalition. And yes, that's why we're here. It's our job. Please, don't take offense, Senior."

The pressure in the hall suddenly got more intense. "In recent days, I've been concocting a darknether good fortune pill, and I need to cleanse it with water from the river. I only need five more days, and I'll be done. After that, I'll get rid of the diversion channel."

"Senior, that's absolutely no problem at all!" the Captain said with a smile. "We don't even need to report the matter to the Eight Sect Coalition. In fact, don't feel the need to finish after five days. Take as long as you want, then get rid of the diversion channel when you're done." The Captain was being very respectful and friendly. However, he had been keeping an eye on the surrounding darkness, and had also placed his right hand behind his back and made a signal to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing glanced at the Captain's signal, then casually looked at his shadow beneath him. The shadow had formed an image of an old man eating bugs. The shadow had obviously improved its skills, as the image was very lifelike, and even included a cringing expression on the old man's face. The bugs he was eating were thumb-sized, and as the old man's anxiety increased, he ate the bugs faster and faster. He was seated on a boulder, and the more bugs he ate, the more solid the boulder became.

At the same time, the old man emitted bubbles that floated into the air toward Xu Qing and the Captain to surround them. Beyond that, the shadow's image made it clear that, beyond the range of the bubbles were seven or eight shadowy figures, all of them looking very nervous.

Xu Qing opened his eyes wide and looked straight at the cross-legged figure, cloaked in shadows and emanating a terrifying pressure.

"That's wonderful," the cross-legged figure said. "The two of you have no reason to be nervous. Given that your coalition also has a Dark Serenity Sect, I won't cause any

trouble for you. You can just turn around and leave. You'll be out of here after walking a hundred paces. Just remember... don't look back. I'm worried that I might lose control and accidentally eat the two of you."

The figure spoke in a very sinister voice, and accentuated his final words with a loud gulp, as though he were working very hard to control himself. Overall, it came across as very terrifying.

"Get out of here!" he snapped, and the lamp light in the temple flickered dramatically. The atmosphere suddenly became much more tense.

As for the Captain, he blinked rapidly as he looked at the other figures in the darkness.

"What are you waiting for? Leave!" This time, the shadowy figure's voice seemed to tremble slightly.

"Son of a bitch," the Captain said. "You put on a good show. You almost got us to leave!"

He suddenly stood up and rushed to the darkness off to the side. A cry of alarm rang out from that spot as the Captain reached toward it.

Xu Qing also took action, sending balefire rumbling out. In the blink of an eye, the surrounding temple vanished, as did the graveyard. They were still in the jungle in the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, and they were still in front of the same grave. But all the other graves were gone, and in their place was a small sect that consisted of seven or eight log cabins. Beyond the cabins were crumbling ruins. It was completely different from what Xu Qing and the Captain had seen before.

But not everything they had seen was an illusion. Just outside the sect's main gate was a stone stele upon which were written the characters Dark Serenity Sect.

Xu Qing and the Captain were just outside of the sect. And in front of them was a disheveled old man, a look of astonishment on his face, and a stone bowl of bugs held in his hand. He was currently backing away from them. There were seven or eight disciples surrounding them. They were all sallow and emaciated, and their eyes shone with terror.

When the old man saw the vicious look in the Captain's eyes, he cried, "Show us mercy, Elder Brothers! We're all humans here! Please, don't judge us too harshly!"

The Captain ignored the old man's pleas, and instead headed directly toward him.

Xu Qing scanned the area and confirmed that the emaciated disciples were real. What was more, using his shadow, he made sure that their surroundings weren't an illusion. He also identified the boulder the old man had previously been seated cross-legged on. It was a grayish blue color, and was clearly extraordinary in some way.

As Xu Qing examined it through narrowed eyes, the Captain latched his hand onto the old man's neck and then slammed him onto the ground.

The old man was clearly not on the same level as the Captain; he appeared to have two life flames.

With the old man on the ground, the Captain stomped his foot onto his dantian region. Then he grinned viciously. “How dare you try to scam us, you old codger! You wanted to eat me? How about I eat you instead!”

The surrounding disciples were visibly distraught, and one of them, a middle-aged man, blurted, “Please calm down, sir! We had no choice. Can you please let us go considering you’re from a supervisory sect, and we’re all humans? Our Master had no other option than to do things this way.”

Xu Qing’s expression remained placid, but he was fully on guard. He didn’t show compassion to enemies, no matter how difficult it was to tell how malicious they were.

“Spare me, Elder Brother!” the old man said, trembling as blood oozed out of his mouth. “We also fear the power of supervisory sects. My plan was never to hurt anyone. I just wanted the two of you to leave!”

“How did you create that illusion?” Xu Qing suddenly asked.

“Elder Brother, my sect has a treasure that has the ability to create an illusory region. It can’t be moved away from this spot, though, which is why our sect moved to this location.”

The old man didn’t dare to hide any of the truth, and thus, he pointed out the boulder off in the distance.

“We’re a small sect, so to earn enough to survive, and keep on living, we had to create a diversion channel from the river. Please, we beg you not to vent your fury on us!”

The Captain glanced at the boulder, his eyes glittering.

Xu Qing walked over, inspected the boulder, then looked back at the old man. “Why are you called the Dark Serenity Sect?”

The old man looked stunned, as did the surrounding disciples. “Elder... Elder Brother, we’re just called the Dark Serenity Sect, that’s all... ohhhhhh. I get it. Elder Brother, you must be new to the Revered Ancient mainland. Are you from Seven Blood Eyes?” The old man clearly knew about the recent changes to the coalition.

The Captain pushed his foot down harder onto the old man. “Tell us what you know.”

The old man shivered and tried to act even more respectful. “Elder Brothers, in Revered Ancient, if there aren’t 10,000 Dark Serenity Sects, then there are at least 8,000. Any sect with even the slightest connection to Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity will take the name Dark Serenity Sect. We all follow the same basic teachings.”

Xu Qing was a bit surprised by that explanation. As for the Captain, he focused on one specific aspect, and it wasn’t the name Dark Serenity Sect. Instead, it was...

“What ‘slight connection’ do you have to Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity? A technique? A treasure? A legacy?” The Captain’s eyes were shining, and he seemed to be salivating, as if he were having trouble not just devouring the old man.

The light in his eyes caused more terror to well up in the old man, and he shouted, “Disciples, bring out the sect’s precious treasure!”

Chapter 286: A Heavenly Spike to Crush a Demon Snake

This Dark Serenity Sect’s precious treasure was an engraving on a big rock. At first glance, it was obvious that it was an ordinary engraving on an ordinary rock. What was extraordinary wasn’t the engraving or rock, but rather, what the engraving depicted. It showed an enormous dragon-like snake, with a long, serpentine body, six leathery wings, and a vicious crocodilian head. Despite being nothing more than an artistic depiction, it seemed to radiate viciousness.

In the engraving, the snake had a massive spike impaled through its tail section. Connected to the spike was a chain that had been inserted into the creature’s skull.

In that manner, the snake’s head and tail were both locked in place. However, a creature like that couldn’t die so easily. It was covered with numerous gaping wounds that revealed both muscles and bones, all of which were covered with countless appalling restrictive spells.

The engraving made it very obvious that the snake was experiencing immeasurable suffering. All it could do was howl in helpless anguish. Obviously... whoever had impaled this draconic snake hated it immensely. After all, the impaler could have killed the creature, but instead chose to torment and watch it suffer.

What was most astonishing to Xu Qing and the Captain was that the engraving depicted stars swirling in the snake’s eyes. Close examination revealed that there were over 10,000 layers of stars. That meant... that it was in the second stage of the Void-Returning level!

Xu Qing looked at the Captain. The Captain looked back at him, then shifted his gaze to the old man.

“What is this thing?” the Captain asked.

“This is our Dark Serenity Sect’s connection to Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. Countless years in the past, before Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity conquered Revered Ancient, he came here on a mission that turned him into a legend.

“The place where he arrived on the mainland is what we now call Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. When he made landfall, there was a demon snake in the area that caused constant problems. It refused to surrender to the Ancient Emperor, and was actually so stubborn that it bit him.

“Although the Ancient Emperor had not yet fully achieved his great dao, he had no trouble crushing some paltry demon snake. Then he used a heavenly spike to impale the demon snake on the shore of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, after which he inscribed its muscles and bones with warding spells to torment it. When the process was done, he mocked the demon snake in front of his companions, saying that to punish it for taking that one bite, he would suppress the demon snake for a hundred thousand years.

“In addition to that, the Ancient Emperor composed a poem about the event.

“A heavenly spike to crush a demon snake; 10,000 magics assimilate the cosmos!”

When talking about Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, the old man seemed to forget that the Captain was stepping on his chest, and a look of immense pride filled his face.

“In response to one single bite,” the Captain said, “the Ancient Emperor sliced open the snake, filled it with warding spells, and tormented it for a hundred thousand years? He was that petty?” He turned to Xu Qing, an odd expression on his face as he transmitted a message to him via divine will. “I used to think you were the most petty person ever, little Ah Qing. It seems you might have to work harder in that regard.”

The Captain blinked a few times. With strangers present, there was no way the Captain would reveal Xu Qing’s identity by speaking. That was why he projected the message instead of speaking it out loud.

Xu Qing’s expression was the same as ever as he replied with a single sentence. “Captain, were you that snake in a past life?”

The Captain chuckled sarcastically. Looking back down, he shot a fierce expression at the old man and said, “Your sect’s precious treasure is this engraving? That’s it? Since you have the engraving does that mean you know where the snake was impaled? Was it right here?”

The Captain looked around, but didn’t see anything to indicate that this location was where the snake was impaled.

The old man looked a bit embarrassed, like he didn’t want to answer the question. But then he considered that these two people from a supervisory sect didn’t seem very friendly, and thus he decided not to hide anything. He sighed.

“It wasn’t here.”

“Then where?” Xu Qing asked, though he already had a guess as to the answer.

“In the Dark Serenity Sect in your Eight Sect Coalition,” the old man said.

The Captain laughed. “Your sect’s precious treasure is an engraving of the the Dark Serenity Sect’s pocket realm in the Eight Sect Coalition?”

The old man gave a wry, embarrassed smile. “Actually, we’re the most authentic Dark Serenity Sect in all of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Years ago, our founder was given a mission by the Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity himself, to guard over the demon snake and increase its torment on a yearly basis.

“As time passed, that legacy was passed down with few interruptions, until my own Master took over.... Some years ago, he ran into Immortal Fairy Plumdark from your coalition. Nowadays she’s called Arch-Immortal Plumdark. In any case, as soon as my Master laid eyes on her, he knew that she had limitless opportunities for the future.

“Because of that, my Master was more than happy to give the ancestral land to her, and also pass on the legacy of our sect to her. Afterward, he had nothing holding him back, so he took us here to live in seclusion and enjoy life, aloof from worldly affairs. About thirty years ago, he flew on a crane to the Western Paradise, and passed away peacefully....”

Xu Qing looked thoughtfully at the surrounding emaciated disciples, and then at the cowering old man.

An odd expression could be seen on the Captain’s face as he stared at the old man. The old man looked back awkwardly, not sure what to say next.

After a moment, the Captain cleared his throat and said, “Was your Master surnamed Zhao? Zhao Zhongheng?”

The old man gaped. “Huh? No, my Master wasn’t surnamed Zhao.”

The Captain shook his head and took his foot off the old man’s chest. After everything, he didn’t feel good bullying these people. If anything, he pitied them. Instead, he asked for some more details about the snake.

The old man quickly complied. “That pocket realm is now a reserve power of the Dark Serenity Sect in the Eight Sect Coalition. I’ve never been there, but I heard my Master say that it’s full of terrifying soul power. Strong soul power like that can be very useful for cultivation. Even inhaling a single mouthful can bring immense benefits.

“The demon snake’s fleshly body died, leaving behind only a skeleton. However, my Master said it’s not truly dead. Its soul still exists, though it’s extremely weak. Sleeping, really. So the soul power in the ancestral land is really just emanating off of the demon snake’s soul.

“The Ancient Emperor’s spike didn’t just seal the demon snake’s fleshly body, it also sealed its soul. Thus, even after all of the countless years which have passed, the snake still hates Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity down to the core of its being!”

Thanks to this old man, Xu Qing and the Captain knew a lot more about the pocket realm belonging to the coalition’s Dark Serenity Sect. Shortly thereafter, they made their way out of the sect.

They didn’t bother looking into the diversion channel. However, they emphasized to the old man that he couldn’t go overboard using the river water. What was more, they checked the huge stone at the entrance of the sect, and found that it truly was impossible to move. It was a permanent part of the landscape.

The Captain, however, wasn’t willing to give up that easily, and managed to take a bite out of it. However, that was the limit of what he was capable of. Finally, as the members of this Dark Serenity Sect trembled in anxiety, Xu Qing and the Captain finally left.

On the way back, the Captain sighed and said, “I felt like we got really unlucky. We didn’t get anything.”

Xu Qing nodded. They really hadn’t benefited much on this outing.

Suddenly, they exchanged a glance.

Lowering his voice, the Captain said, "Say, once we're back, why don't we figure out a way to get into the Dark Serenity Sect's pocket realm, and absorb some of that soul power?"

Xu Qing hesitated, all the while thinking about Arch-Immortal Plumdark. On an instinctual level, he didn't want to go anywhere near her. Given that, it didn't seem like a good idea to trespass on the Dark Serenity Sect just to absorb some soul power.

"Then again," the Captain continued, his eyes glittering, "absorbing some soul power isn't exactly something amazing. But if we could wake up that demon snake, and take a bite out of it... that would be amazing!"

That got Xu Qing's heart thumping. Forgetting all about Arch-Immortal Plumdark, he started considering how they could pull something like that off. The Captain was also lost in thought.

Eventually, they flew out of the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains and spotted the coalition ships off in the distance.

That was when Xu Qing suddenly said, "That demon snake hates Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity to the core of its being, right. So... if it sees someone that reminds it of the Ancient Emperor, would it get so irritated it might wake up?"

Hearing this, the Captain's eyes lit up. "That might be a way to solve the problem. Are you talking about Little Jianjian...?"

Xu Qing nodded, and the Captain chuckled darkly. The two of them started discussing the details. The ships were moving up the river again by the time they finalized their plan.

"But Wu Jianwu didn't come to the mainland," Xu Qing said. "I'm pretty sure he's still back on South Phoenix, most likely somewhere in Forbidden by the Phoenix." Xu Qing looked at the Captain. The key to the whole plan would be to convince Wu Jianwu to agree to work with them.

"That'll be simple," the Captain said. "That little punk is absolutely crazy about Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. I'll just send some people to Forbidden by the Phoenix to find him and deliver a message. I'll say something like... 'we found one of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity's old stomping grounds. Guess what, there's a poem there hand-written by the Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity himself!'

"Believe you me, little Ah Qing, stomping grounds plus a poem will be too much for Little Jianjian to resist. Especially the latter!"

The Captain's eyebrows danced up and down as he used the assets on the Special Security Division ship to send a message back to the sect and set things in motion.

Time passed. They continued upriver on the inspection for a few months. Everything went smoothly, and before long they reached the end of the tributary.

This was where the mainstem of the river intersected with the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, where the headquarters of the Young Arbiter Sect used to exist. As they neared, Xu

Qing could see the ruins of the sect, as well as the crumbled remains of the dam. Even the smallest chunks of the dam were hundreds of meters in length, and the big ones were thousands of meters. From that, it was possible to imagine how shockingly immense the dam had been.

Beyond the ruins of the dam and the sect, Xu Qing and the Captain spotted a massive flow of turbulent water that might as well have been a sea.

It was... the mainstem of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River!

The immortal energy there was incredibly strong, such that the Seven Blood Eyes disciples couldn't get too close without feeling intoxicated and dizzy. Even Xu Qing felt unsteady. He looked to the east, where the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society was, and then to the west, where, beyond the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains was... Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's primary forbidden ground.

The river flowed right into that forbidden ground, where it became completely black and full of shocking mutagen. It was easy to imagine how terrifying that forbidden ground was, considering it could transform immortal energy into mutagen!

Chapter 287: The Last From Li Zimei

There was something else at the end of the tributary besides the Young Arbiter Sect. There was a fleet from the Heavenmirror Treasure Sect. They had twelve ships, upon which Xu Qing spotted cultivators from the Heavenmirror Treasure Sect, seated cross-legged in cultivation. They were all Special Security Division officers, and they had been stationed here waiting for Seven Blood Eyes to relieve them.

The Captain went out to handle the formalities. After the official handover, which included transferring the coalition flag, the Heavenmirror Treasure Sect officers saluted those from Seven Blood Eyes and sailed back downriver. The day they arrived back at the coalition, the Special Security Division from the next sect would start the journey upriver to relieve Seven Blood Eyes.

In the meantime, the Seven Blood Eyes Special Security Division would be garrisoned here, and would keep the coalition flag flying on the shore.

Xu Qing and the Captain were in charge.

Although it might seem like a lengthy mission, both the time spent on the river and the time spent at the final destination came with plenty of benefits for cultivation. That said, cultivation wasn't easy at the end of the tributary. Most disciples actually couldn't quickly acclimate to the surroundings because of the very strong immortal energy.

As for the low-level disciples of the old Young Arbiter Sect, they were only able to practice cultivation here thanks to the protection of the sect's spell formation.

Even Xu Qing felt dizzy, and after disembarking onto the shore next to the mainstem, could only stand there and try to catch his breath. The immortal energy buffeted his face, streamed into his nose and pores alike. After gritting his teeth and forcing himself to acclimate, he sat down cross-legged to start cultivating.

The Captain did the same. As for the other Seven Blood Eyes disciples, they also disembarked, checked the area for safety, then used their own various ways to acclimate and start meditating.

Time passed. A month later, Xu Qing opened his 109th dharma aperture. He didn't use soul power, but instead, relied on the strong immortal energy and the Life Nurturing Incantation. It would have been very difficult to do that on the continent of South Phoenix, but here, it was a much easier task.

Xu Qing was excited.

I only have 11 dharma apertures left before I can ignite my fourth life flame!

With that fourth life flame, he would have battle prowess truly capable of crushing everything in Foundation Establishment.

Without any additional assets, he would have six-flame battle prowess. When adding his imperial-class technique, he would reach the seven-flame level. The combination of his two life lamps wouldn't push him completely to the eight-flame level, but he would definitely be at the limit of seven flames.

Another mission came in during that month, and it was to hunt down stragglers from the Young Arbiter Sect. The search itself wasn't important. Rather, this announcement alone was intended to send a message to the rest of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. And that message was... the Eight Sect Coalition would not permit another dam to be built.

If someone tried, they would incur a death grudge! And the Special Security Division was responsible for making sure that message came through loud and clear.

Xu Qing had no idea what secret deal had been made between the coalition and the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, but for whatever reason, the latter had remained silent on the entire issue.

The survivors of the Young Arbiter Sect apparently realized there was no way they could ever rebuild their sect in the area, and had evacuated. When the Seven Blood Eyes disciples returned from the search, they reported that there was no sign that any Young Arbiter Sect cultivators remained. It was the same results as when previous sects from the coalition had scoured the area.

Xu Qing continued working on his cultivation. When it got too difficult for him to be near the water, he would back away from the shore, wait for his body to acclimate again, then return and begin again.

The Captain disappeared for a while. Before leaving, he'd told Xu Qing that he was going to explore the area. Xu Qing could tell that there was more going on that the Captain didn't want to explain, and thus didn't ask any questions. The Captain respected Xu Qing's desire to keep secrets, and Xu Qing did the same with the Captain.

Days passed. Truth be told, most disciples found it too dull and boring to literally sit around all day working on cultivation. So few people spent all their time doing breathing exercises and meditating. Most of them took opportunities to explore the area, or go entertain themselves in a nearby nation.

Xu Qing let them do what they wanted, while he took advantage of every possible moment to further his cultivation. There were a few others who did the same as him, including the Mute.

Three months passed. Xu Qing's diligent work resulted in him opening his 110th dharma aperture, which gave him more abundant dharma force.

Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes and looked over his shoulder. There were currently only thirty other disciples who were still in the area working on cultivation. After looking at them, Xu

Qing was about to close his eyes again when suddenly his expression flickered and he looked in the direction of the mainstem.

It was evening, and the colorful clouds in the sky were exceptionally beautiful. Beneath them, a fleet of ships sailed across the water.

There were several of them, and they were clearly different from Seven Blood Eyes ships, as they were shaped like willow leaves. They looked to be made of crystal or spirit stone, making them bright, glittering, and translucent. They were coming from the direction of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, and a host of disciples could be seen on them, many of whom wore long white gowns. [1]

Females were in the majority, and all of them wore veils. Extraordinary fluctuations rolled off of them in all directions.

Xu Qing knew exactly who these people were.

The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

As the ships got closer, the disciples on the ships and the disciples on the shore were separated only by water, giving them both a very clear view of each other.

As the two groups examined each other, Xu Qing noticed the three female disciples who had visited Seven Blood Eyes not very long ago. Though all of the disciples from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society were dressed identically, and had veils on, they all had unique auras. Xu Qing had keen powers of observation, and having seen these three disciples from a distance back in Seven Blood Eyes, they stood out to him. [2]

There was another familiar person on one of the ships. She had the same white gown and veil that the others wore. She carried herself in such a different way from before that she almost seemed like a different person, and in fact, if it wasn't for the stubborn determination in her eyes, Xu Qing wouldn't have recognized her.

She was... Li Zimei!

Zhang San had previously mentioned that she was taken to the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society, and had even given Xu Qing a letter from her. The letter hadn't said much other than some general words of appreciation. [3]

Xu Qing recognized her, but thanks to the jade slip Master Seventh had given him, he looked like a stranger to her. Their gazes met briefly, and then the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society ships were gone, heading in the direction of the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. Xu Qing watched them disappear in the distance, then looked away.

Four of us climbed the Seventh Peak that day. As of now, Zhou Qingpeng is dead, Xu Xiaohui has given up on cultivation, and Li Zimei is with the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

He sighed inwardly. Four years had passed, but he remembered everything clearly.

Closing his eyes, he went back to cultivation. However, before long, one of the ships from the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society fleet returned. As it approached the shore, Xu Qing opened his eyes and looked vigilantly at the newcomers.

It was one of the female disciples that had visited Seven Blood Eyes. Li Zimei was with her. They didn't disembark. However, as Li Zimei stood further back, the female disciple looked at Xu Qing and asked, "You're from Seven Blood Eyes?"

Xu Qing nodded.

She waved her hand, causing two jade slips to fly toward him, one violet and one blue.

Expression calm, he caught them, simultaneously plastering a look of surprise onto his face and pretending to stagger backward about ten paces. He didn't want small details to give clues about his real identity.

"Give the blue jade slip to your sect leader's third apprentice. The violet one is for a Seven Blood Eyes disciple named Xu Qing." With that, she turned the ship around and then left with Li Zimei. During the entire time, Li Zimei didn't say a single thing. However, after they were on their way, she looked over her shoulder briefly at Xu Qing.

After they were gone, Xu Qing looked down at the two jade slips. Putting away the one for Third Elder Brother, he looked at the violet slip.

It's for me?

After some thought, he cast his senses into the jade slip, whereupon the message within entered his mind.

"Elder Brother Xu Qing, it's me, Li Zimei. Do you remember the very last thing you ever said to me?"

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. This jade slip wasn't an ordinary item. It was locked, and he needed to answer this question to see the full contents. If someone tried to unlock it with force, it would self-destruct.

"Keep up the good work. I look forward to the day when you can get that dharmaboat."

He sent those words into the sealing mark on the jade slip.

Instantly, a detailed message appeared.

Elder Brother Xu Qing, I've been doing well in the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. I'm sending you this message because I started studying a new technique from my sect. It's completely different from the cultivation methods from back at Seven Blood Eyes.

The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society believes that cultivation base is cultivation base, while domain realms are domain realms. And they put less of an emphasis on cultivation base, and primary emphasis on domain realms.

The domain realm doesn't have anything to do with Qi Condensation, Foundation Establishment, Gold Core, and the like. Instead, it's about... the will domain!

The Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society believes that the will domain is the true 'great dao.' That said, will domains require enlightenment, and that's something very difficult....

That's all I understand so far, Elder Brother. I know it's not much. I just hope it can be of some help to you. Perhaps you can spend more time working on enlightenment. I'm not fully convinced that the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society is correct, but their beliefs do have redeeming qualities.

What's more... I'm not going to disappoint you, Elder Brother Xu Qing. I'm going to participate in one of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society's ceremonies of enlightenment. They told me that it's very difficult. If I fail, I'll die. And even if I succeed, it's possible that my personality will change.

That itself isn't a big deal. I've never liked my personality anyway. Sometimes I'm too weak. Sometimes I'm too proud. A change would be good. I don't know if I'll succeed, and if I do, I have no idea how I'll transform. By the time you get this message, I may already be dead. Or who knows, maybe I'll have succeeded.

Either way, this is my choice, and I'm going all the way. I plan to work hard. I know I can do it! I just hope my personality doesn't change too much.

Maybe I'm being too forward with this message. But this is the last letter I'll write before my personality changes. I have no other relatives. For years now, I've only had you and Elder Brother Zhang San. I know that Elder Brother Zhang San looked after me for your sake. I hope you can forgive me for any trouble I caused you.

Finally, Elder Brother, I want to offer you my sincere well wishes. I hope you do really well in life. Forever. Always.

—Li Zimei.

Chapter 288: Earnest Pondering

"Will domain?" Xu Qing murmured thoughtfully. He looked at the mainstem of the river and could just barely make out the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society ships off in the distance.

It wasn't his first time hearing the word. He remembered Third Princess, daughter of the Seazombie king, who had cultivated a technique related to such things. [1]

"Enlightenment, huh?" He committed the information to heart, and at the same time, wished Li Zimei luck.

Things went smoothly after that. Xu Qing worked on his cultivation for more than a month, whereupon the Special Security Division from Spiritglom Valley arrived to relieve them.

The Captain came back, and he looked very pleased. He had obviously benefited a lot while he was out. What was more, Xu Qing noticed that his skin looked especially healthy. It was almost like... he had molted. What was more, the Captain's aura seemed stronger than before.

"Finished?" Xu Qing looked at the Captain.

"Finished!" the Captain replied complacently. "Hahaha! Let me tell you, little Ah Qing, if you and I got into a fight, it's hard to say who would come out on top. I opened another seal."

Xu Qing didn't respond. The Captain was about to say something else when the officers from Spiritgloom Valley approached.

The Captain knew that Xu Qing didn't like dealing with formalities, so he handled everything. Soon enough, the Spiritgloom Valley officers were taking over. The Seven Blood Eyes officers transferred the sect's flag, boarded their boats, and sailed away.

The return trip went faster. For one thing, it wasn't necessary to closely inspect the river banks. Also, the flow of the river added speed, so the ships could move more quickly. Before long, the mighty walls of the Eight Sect Coalition rose up in the distance. The officers of the Special Security Division all looked excited.

Because of the length of the mission, they hadn't been back to the sect in a while. Everyone had benefited greatly, not only by increasing their cultivation bases, but also by reducing their mutagen levels. Most importantly was that they were now getting more familiar with Revered Ancient.

Upon seeing the familiar sight of Seven Blood Eyes, Xu Qing breathed a sigh of relief. The first thing he did was go to his berth to work on his cultivation and inspect the beetles that had consumed the immortal ice. They were still dormant, but were finally showing signs that they might wake up soon. Xu Qing was very much looking forward to that, as the beetles' aura already seemed a lot stronger than before, but at the same time, more difficult to detect.

Xu Qing worked hard on his 111th dharma aperture, and also tried to track down as many soul pills as he could. Unfortunately, his dharma apertures had reached the point that the soul power he required wasn't something that soul pills could provide. There were pills designed specifically for opening apertures, but even after shopping around a lot, Xu Qing couldn't find any for sale.

One day the Captain showed up with some news. Sitting down on the deck of Xu Qing's dharmaskiff, he said, "Xu Qing, I got in touch with Wu Jianwu. He's on his way back from Forbidden by the Phoenix. Given his personality, I bet the first thing he does when he gets back is pay through the nose to teleport to us here.

"I got some more detailed information about the Dark Serenity Sect's pocket realm. It's exactly like what we learned from that engraving. Also, it's open to disciples from all sects! The downside is it's really expensive. You have to pay 5,000,000 spirit stones to get inside for three days!

"To people who cultivate with souls, it's an extremely beneficial place. That means it's especially useful for Dark Serenity Sect cultivators. Most who go in are chosen with three or four life flames, and they usually go in for breakthroughs." Rubbing his hands together and looking very crafty, he continued, "Say, little Ah Qing, can you do your Elder Brother a favor? I really can't afford to pay 5,000,000 spirit stones. It's just too expensive. So... why don't you go talk to Arch-Immortal Plumdark? You know, pout a bit. You never know, she might feel bad enough to just let you into the place for free."

Xu Qing always got nervous when thinking about Arch-Immortal Plumdark. Looking at the Captain, he said, "Senior Plumdark wasn't looking at me that day we met. She was looking at you, Eldest Brother. Remember? You should go."

"Aiyaaaa," the Captain said, sounding anxious. "You big dork. This is 10,000,000 spirit stones we're talking about here! You think I don't want to be the one to do it? I do! Come on, little Ah Qing, you've got an advantage here. Why not use it? You're only young once, ya dummy!"

The Captain went on to make some very persuasive arguments, but Xu Qing didn't say a word in response to any of them. He had no intention of agreeing to the Captain's request. Though he also cared about spirit stones, he just couldn't go along with the idea.

"Everything in this world comes down to cultivation base," the Captain said. "No one will talk bad about you as long as you get stronger. Come on, little Ah Qing. People in this world look down on the weak, not the flirtatious!"

The way the Captain slapped his thigh to emphasize his words, while simultaneously moaning and groaning, made it seem like, if he was in Xu Qing's shoes, he would absolutely do exactly as he was requesting.

"How can you not understand this, little Ah Qing? If I was you, I would already be in Nascent Soul, believe me. The sect would be full of my grandchildren, and in a few hundred years, the entire coalition would be mine. You need to learn a thing or two from Third Sib!"

"If it has to be done, then you do it." Xu Qing was getting tired of the conversation.

Looking absolutely crestfallen, the Captain sighed. "If you don't want to do it, fine. In that case, just lend me the spirit stones. No, wait. You already owe me money! You owe me 5,000,000!"

Xu Qing looked at the Captain, assessed his battle prowess, and then closed his eyes to meditate.

Feeling helpless, the Captain made a few more arguments. But when he realized that Xu Qing was in a meditative trance, he finally left, his heart twinging at the thought of paying 5,000,000 spirit stones. The next day, he was still in mental anguish over the matter as he and Xu Qing went to meet Wu Jianwu, who had arrived even sooner than they expected.

When Seven Blood Eyes moved their headquarters, the only one of the various highnesses who didn't come along was Wu Jianwu. He had remained in Forbidden by the Phoenix. If it wasn't for the fact that the Captain had a very extensive information network, it might have been impossible to get in touch with him. When he stepped off of the teleportation portal, it caused an immediate stir in Seven Blood Eyes. That wasn't because he was wearing a long, silver robe and was reciting poetry. Rather, it was because of his two-flame cultivation base fluctuations.

Even more astonishing was that... he had two baby animals following him around.

They were little bears, no larger than small dogs. They were golden in color, and the moment they followed him off the teleportation portal, they emanated powerful fluctuations of godliness. Those godly fluctuations were full of an aura comparable to the great circle of Qi Condensation. These

were juveniles who weren't fully intelligent yet, so it was only possible to imagine what they would be like when they reached Foundation Establishment.

The matter attracted the attention of the entire sect. And considering that both little bears had ancient bloodlines, the beast-tamers from the Fourth Peak were completely flabbergasted.

Normally speaking, Wu Jianwu wouldn't miss out on an opportunity to look down his nose at other people. But there was something more important to him at the moment, so as soon as he teleported in, he sent a voice message to Xu Qing and the Captain.

"Where are the ruins of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity that you talked about. Where? WHERE? And what about the poetry. Are you serious about it? Is it real???"

Even just listening to the message on his identity medallion, Xu Qing could sense how excited Wu Jianwu was.

"Of course it's real!" the Captain replied immediately.

However, Wu Jianwu wasn't convinced. Apparently, he didn't trust the Captain very much. It was only after Xu Qing made similar assurances that he finally believed them. He was so excited that he was trembling, and didn't need any urging from Xu Qing or the Captain to want to immediately get to work.

When they told him he needed to pay 5,000,000 spirit stones, he frowned for a moment, then immediately agreed.

That shut the Captain up for a bit.

In fact, Wu Jianwu was so insistent that, the very day he arrived, the three of them went to the Dark Serenity Sect.

Xu Qing braced himself inwardly and reminded himself that this was all for the purpose of igniting his fourth life flame. As they made their way at top speed toward the pocket realm, his expression was very serious, and he tried to do everything possible to avoid attracting attention.

Wu Jianwu was also moving at top speed, but it was because he was so excited.

In contrast, the Captain didn't seem to be in very much of a hurry. The thought of losing all those spirit stones was really keeping him down. However, Xu Qing and Wu Jianwu dragged him along until they arrived at the entrance.

There, they found a huge rock with an old man sitting atop it. He was in charge of the area.

He had six heavenly palaces, causing immense energy to roll out in all directions. When Xu Qing, the Captain, and Wu Jianwu arrived, he didn't even crack an eyelid open, much less say anything to them.

Considering how smoothly things were going, Xu Qing breathed a sigh of relief and quickly paid his spirit stones. Wu Jianwu did the same. As for the Captain... he heaved a sigh, then stared hesitantly up into the sky as if he was looking for something. Xu Qing and Wu Jianwu stared at him until he finally trudged forward and begrudgingly paid the spirit stones.

Only when they had all paid did the old man open his eyes and wave his hands. A vortex sprang into being in front of the three of them, emanating powerful soul power fluctuations.

Xu Qing and Wu Jianwu said nothing, and were just about to jump inside when... the old man suddenly got to his feet and clasped hands toward the sky.

“Greetings, Matriarch.”

Shivering, Xu Qing rushed toward the vortex. However, he acted too slowly, as a gentle, friendly voice echoed from above.

“Don’t move, child. Turn around.”

Xu Qing’s foot stopped before it could touch the ground. He couldn’t move it. All he could do was slowly turn and look at the supremely elegant Arch-Immortal Plumdark descending from above.

She wore very different clothing compared to last time. She wore a bluegreen dress of woven silk and had a hairpin that resembled a flying phoenix. Her hair tumbled down her back like a cloak, and she smelled as fragrant as if she had just stepped out of a bath. There was a slight flush to her soul-stirring face, which made her look immaculately beautiful. The smile in her eyes seemed capable of melting anything she looked at.

Just like that last time they met at night, she walked right up to Xu Qing, except this time, from the side.

Off to the side, Wu Jianwu was so stunned he just stood there watching.

The Captain, on the other hand, blinked a few times. What’s she doing here? Don’t tell me she intentionally waited for us to pay the spirit stones before showing her face!

With Wu Jianwu looking dazed and the Captain feeling suspicious, Arch-Immortal Plumdark stopped next to Xu Qing and looked at him with eyes like bottomless pools of water. Her beautiful lips were slightly parted, and she had a faint smile on her face.

“Why are you so adept at pleasing women, child? I got the gift you sent me. I loved it.” [2]

Arch-Immortal Plumdark’s voice was as crisp as the waters of a spring, and could pierce into the depths of the soul. It was both magnetic and tender, like a whirlpool that pulled the listener closer and closer to her.

Upon hearing her words, Xu Qing glanced at the Captain.

The Captain blinked a few times, then looked left and right, as if this situation had absolutely nothing to do with him.

Chapter 289: Jianwu in the Spotlight

Arch-Immortal Plumdark seemed amused at how Xu Qing was acting. She had seen a lot of people in her life, including ones as good-looking and bashful as this child. However, when she was younger, she had never paid much attention to people like that. Yet now, for some reason, she just felt the urge to toy with him a bit. She took a step closer.

Xu Qing was as stiff as a board and was having trouble breathing steadily. Not only was he immobile, but also, the pressure caused his soul to shiver.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark had now approached so closely that her face was right next to his. She smelled like she had just finished bathing, and considering how close she was, Xu Qing was surrounded by that fragrant aroma, and had no choice but to inhale it deeply. He was so nervous that his face was pale white, and his heart was pounding so loudly you could almost hear it from the outside. He had never behaved like this in the presence of any female disciple he had ever met in the past.

Watching the scene play out, Wu Jianwu was in a complete daze. He even wondered if Chen Erniu and Xu Qing had invited him here from afar just to witness this event. Then he started to feel a bit irritated considering he just wanted to see Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

As for the old man with six heavenly palaces, he stood by, respectfully averting his gaze.

Only the Captain was feeling wonderful. I had no choice, little Ah Qing. I had to do this. And that hairpin was so expensive. It was all for your own good. You know what they say... ginger gets spicier the older it is. As I expected, she came here with the hairpin I sent....

The Captain blinked a few times when he thought about how much he had spent on the hairpin.

If only she'd come a bit sooner....

While the Captain sighed, Xu Qing stood there, his mind blank. And then, Arch-Immortal Plumdark leaned closer and exhaled softly into his ear. Her warm breath hit him like a bolt of lightning, causing a tremor to pass through him. For the first time in his life, he was completely at a loss about what to do.

Seeing his reaction pleased Arch-Immortal Plumdark so much that she laughed. It was a soft, beautiful laugh, like the cry of an oriole, so wonderful that anyone who heard it would feel intoxicated. As she laughed, she spun gracefully until she was right in front of him. Along the way, she leaned in such a way that her hip just barely brushed against him.

Apparently, enticing him was exactly what she needed to improve her mood, and now she was finished. A command medallion appeared in her hand, which she placed onto his chest. Patting it gently, she said, "With this medallion, you can go... much deeper into the pocket realm."

Laughing softly again, she turned and floated up into the sky, like an immortal returning to the palace of heaven. Though no one could see it, she was actually shaking her head.

Every time I see that kid, I can't help but tantalize him. I really should get out of that habit. Unfortunately... the smell of blood on him has seeped down to his bones. He's cute, but beneath that is a boundlessly baleful aura. I suppose he's not a person with 'light in their heart.'

It was only after Arch-Immortal Plumdark left that Xu Qing felt he could move again. Gulping in a huge breath of air, he looked over at the Captain.

The Captain felt a shiver of fear run through him. Clearing his throat, he said, "Let's go inside. We spent good money, and time is already ticking!"

Without waiting for a response, he hurried forward and jumped into the vortex. Apparently he was worried Xu Qing might do something to him.

Meanwhile, Wu Jianwu was still standing there in a daze. He looked at Xu Qing, then looked in the direction Arch-Immortal Plumdark had vanished. Finally, he swallowed.

Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to Wu Jianwu. Instead, he was looking at the vortex into which the Captain had disappeared. Grinding his teeth, he vowed to remember what had just played out, then entered the vortex. With the two of them gone, Wu Jianwu finally took a breath.

We cultivators must never fall for feminine wiles. They won't do us any good. Women will only distract and confuse us. Cultivators should focus only on cultivation. That's the way to accomplish amazing things. Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity himself once said that....

In the past, Wu Jianwu had been fully convinced that Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity's philosophy was absolutely correct. But now, he was starting to wonder.... In the end, his dao heart was strong, so he quickly cleared his thoughts. Eyes shining with determination, he entered the vortex.

Beyond the vortex they found themselves in a different heaven and earth. It was a huge place filled with concentric rings of mountain ranges. The sky was a rippling spell formation barrier, and the land was made from warding spells. In terms of size, the place was roughly the same as the old Seven Blood Eyes capital city on the continent of South Phoenix. In the middle of the rings of mountain ranges was a huge lake. The waters of the lake were the color of blood, so dark and thick it seemed like the lake itself was actually made from blood.

A huge spike emerged from the lake, so massive it seemed like it could prop up heaven and earth. It was pitch black, and lightning snaked across its surface. It was shocking and ghastly, and emanated an aura that seemed profoundly ancient. It was as if this spike had witnessed innumerable events going back into ancient time. At the top of the spike was a thick chain covered with spell formation markings, which emanated terrifying fluctuations. Shockingly, the chain was attached to an enormous, skeletal snake!

The massive snake was coiled in a loop, with the spike in the middle of it. It was so big it seemed like it was the final mountain range in the middle of all the other mountain ranges. The snake's head rested on top of the massive spike. It had no flesh on it, and consisted only of pitch-black bone, but seemed just as defiant as the snake had been before death. Within the snake's long jaw were row upon row of razor-sharp teeth. And one tooth near the front was stained with dried, golden blood.

It was that golden blood that emanated a heaven-shaking, earth-quaking energy. It was both domineering and noble, and was something that could shake the soul of anyone who looked at it.

The scene looked exactly like the engraving Xu Qing and the Captain had seen. The only difference was the feeling. Seeing this in person was vastly different from a mere artistic rendition. That was especially true of the terrifying energy in the spike, as well as the pressure coming off of the skeletal snake. Xu Qing, the Captain, and Wu Jianwu were all visibly shocked, and their hearts were racing.

As for the Captain, he was staring at the dried, golden blood on the snake's teeth. "I'm such an idiot! Why was I so focused on outside treasures? I can't believe there's such amazing stuff inside the sect!! Could that actually be the blood of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity??"

Xu Qing wasn't paying attention to the teeth. As he scanned their surroundings, he sensed the very strong soul power in the area. In fact, it was so strong it was like a soul sea that caused his Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture to stir of its own accord and start absorbing the soul power.

This is a land of good fortune for opening dharma apertures! Xu Qing thought, yet he didn't do anything impulsive. Hovering in midair, he continued to closely inspect their surroundings.

Most importantly, there were other cultivators present, not just the three of them. And all disciples, whether from the Dark Serenity Sect or not, had to pay spirit stones to get inside. Of course, those from the Dark Serenity Sect had different qualifications, and had more ways to secure entry. From what Xu Qing could see, the majority of the several dozen cultivators present were from the Dark Serenity Sect. All of them sat cross-legged in cultivation, and most were in the outer ring of mountains. Few were close to the center.

That made Xu Qing think of the identity medallion Arch-Immortal Plumdark had given him.

The closer one got to the center of this place, the stronger the soul power got. Unfortunately, based on what Xu Qing could sense, even if he went deeper inside, three days wouldn't be enough to open 10 dharma apertures. If he wanted that level of progress, he would need to be inside for about a month. And if the soul power requirement for subsequent dharma apertures increased even more dramatically, a month might not even be enough.

I don't have nearly enough spirit stones.... Xu Qing turned to look at Wu Jianwu. The Captain, taking in a deep breath, did the same thing.

If the two of them wanted to succeed at their own endeavors, it would all come down to how much this demon snake affected Wu Jianwu.

At the moment, Wu Jianwu was trembling. The moment he stepped out of the vortex and onto solid ground, he was simply too excited to remain calm. His eyes shone with unprecedented brightness as he stared at that massive spike. Carved onto that spike... was a poem.

Xu Qing had noticed that the poem was different from what they'd seen on the engraving, but he didn't pay much attention to it.

To Wu Jianwu, in contrast, that poem was like the object of his desire. He didn't need any prompting from Xu Qing or the Captain. Trembling from head to toe, he floated up into the air, stared at the poem, and read the first line in an undertone.

“A heavenly spike to crush a demon snake; an emperor's blood assimilates the cosmos!” [1]

Xu Qing and the Captain were paying very close attention to the surroundings, yet nothing was happening.

It's not working? Xu Qing sighed and wondered if he and the Captain had overestimated Wu Jianwu. The snake's soul had been sleeping for countless years, did it really make sense to expect it to notice Wu Jianwu?

However, the Captain obviously wasn't willing to give up so easily. Shifting his attention from the surroundings to Wu Jianwu, who was hovering there focused on the poem, the Captain said, “Can you just imagine, Little Jianjian? Think of the magnificent Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, clad in his imperial robe, his imperial crown on his head, an umbrella of nine layers overhead, and his entire person radiating the light of myriad daos. As he leaves the Sea of Endlessness, his first step sinks into the water. He takes a second step, and the water itself offers obeisance.”

As the Captain spoke, Wu Jianwu began to tremble even more dramatically.

“With his third step, he arrives on the Revered Ancient mainland,” the Captain continued. “Back then, this area wasn’t called Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. Instead, a demon snake controlled these lands, and the countless human kingdoms that filled it were nothing but food for it. Seeing that, the Ancient Emperor was furious beyond belief. But what was even more outrageous was that this measly sea snake had the gall to bite the Ancient Emperor! Right on his leg!”

Wu Jianwu was panting now as he visualized the scene the Captain was describing.

“The Ancient Emperor looks down in disdain,” the Captain went on. “With the wave of his hands, he causes the five elements to form a heavenly spike, with which he impales that demon snake. Before leaving, he then writes that very poem onto the spike! Can you see all that in your mind’s eyes, Wu Jianwu??”

Wu Jianwu was having trouble controlling his breathing, and was shaking even harder than before. In his mind, he could see the Ancient Emperor walking out of the sea, and as a result of that visualization, he gradually held himself in the same manner. In fact, for some reason, even his aura somehow began to change. Wu Jianwu loved imitating Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, and had been doing it for so many years that such behavior was part of him now.

As the Captain described the scene, he instinctively imitated it. His facial expression became somber. His eyes filled with disdain. As he hovered in midair, he looked around casually, flicked his sleeve, and read the next line of the poem. “How dare you bite me, you puny little snake; careful, you might get sick and your teeth might break!”

As the words left his mouth, everything around them trembled. It was like a howl of rage had erupted from the most ancient past, filled with hatred, brutality and madness!!

In a restricted area in the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, another howl of rage erupted out, filled with both agony and hatred.

“I should thank you, Xu Qing! If you hadn’t forced me into a spot between life and death, if you hadn’t filled me with endless pain and torment, then I, Master Shengyun, would never have been able to open my 121st dharma aperture!”

Master Shengyun had previously looked like little more than a skeleton, but now he was flying up out of the blood cistern. Blood showered down off of him, revealing an impressive physique, as well as extremely handsome facial features. However, he had no hair on his head. What was more, his right eye was now pitch black, and a golden crow lurked in its depths. That golden crow’s astonishing life force was counteracting the poison within him.

In the moment when he stabilized, Master Shengyun found himself in a spot between life and death, and had thus found his 121st dharma aperture. And that meant that... he now had five life flames!

Chapter 290: It’s Been a Few Years, Little Demon Snake; If You Hadn’t Bitten Me, You Might Be Awake!

When Master Shengyun ignited all five of his life flames, it shook heaven and earth. It was like he had an entire starry sky inside of him in the form of a sea of flames, shocking and ghastly, providing him with immense battle prowess.

Surrounding him were eight Nascent Soul cultivators from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect. It was with their help that Master Shengyun had suppressed the poison within him, and it had been extremely draining on them. The poison was too unique, and as a result, all of them were extremely leery of it.

Even Patriarch Soaring Cloud looked tired. He had expended immense effort inserting the president's golden crow into his grandson. However, now that his grandson had finally recovered, he looked very pleased.

“Yun'er, what are you planning to do now? Step directly into Gold Core?”

As Master Shengyun hovered in midair, he calmly replied, “Grandfather, I want to go challenge Xu Qing to a duel. I want to take back what I lost to him! With the president's golden crow, I don't need to fear his poisons. Furthermore, it provides me with terrifying life force, taking my battle prowess to an even higher level. And how could the president ever bear to see me die....”

Patriarch Soaring Cloud thought about it briefly, then sighed. “Yun'er, there really isn't a point to doing that.”

“Given my current state, there's no harm. Also, Grandfather, could you please seal my dharma apertures so they can't be extinguished? Without his special poisons, Xu Qing only has three life flames and two life lamps. There's nothing else special about him. I can definitely kill him! All of the pain I endured... will be revisited many times over on him!!”

Moments later, a written duel challenge shot out of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect toward Seven Blood Eyes!

“Master Shengyun hereby challenges Xu Qing to a duel to the death!”

The duel challenge shook Seven Blood Eyes, and in fact, all of the Eight Sect Coalition.

Xu Qing was currently in the Dark Serenity Sect's pocket realm, so he had no idea what was happening. His eyes were fixed on Wu Jianwu, whose poetry recitation was causing everything around them to start shaking.

Xu Qing's mind spun. At the same time the Captain gasped; not even he had really been convinced that their plan would work.

The soul of the ancient snake was actually starting to wake up. Though it was only partially awake, it caused wild colors to flash in heaven and earth, and screaming winds to whip left and right. In the blink of an eye, the boundless soul power in the area increased exponentially.

The other cultivators present opened their eyes and looked around with visible shock. They immediately saw Wu Jianwu with the haughty look on his face, and they sensed the dramatic

change to the soul power. Though they were taken aback, none of them did anything to interfere, and in fact, they all quickly started working on breathing exercises.

Xu Qing did the same thing. Not daring to get any deeper into the pocket realm, he sat down cross-legged and started absorbing soul power. The Captain joined him, and as he settled down, he shouted, "Mine emperor beeth mighty! Mine emperor ruleth all!"

Wu Jianwu seemed fully immersed in his act, and upon hearing the Captain's words, somehow seemed even loftier as he hovered in midair. Clapping his hands behind his back and sticking his chest out, he glared disdainfully at the demon snake's skull and said, "I do as I please both far and near; this silly snake is worth only a sneer!"

As Wu Jianwu's words echoed about, the howling from before suddenly became vastly more intense. The surrounding mountains were now shaking violently!

"I crushed you here for millennia on end; you deserve no pity for being condemned!"

Wu Jianwu emphasized his ringing words with a flick of his sleeve, making him seem more impressive than he ever had in his entire life. In fact, the snake's skull started wriggling, and the soul power surged to many dozens of times beyond anything from before.

Xu Qing was actually starting to get worried that the demon snake's soul would fully wake up, and then swallow Wu Jianwu up in a single bite.

The Captain was also taken aback. And it wasn't lost on him that, if the demon snake really did awake, it would definitely take out Wu Jianwu first. But beyond that, he wasn't prepared yet to extract that tooth. Therefore, he quickly said, "Okay, Little Jianjian, that's good enough. You can stop reading."

Hearing that, Wu Jianwu frowned and glared coldly at the Captain. "How dare rabblers interrupt in this way, and vie with the emperor for glory today!"

Wu Jianwu's gaze was currently thirty percent disdain, fifty percent haughtiness, and twenty percent domineering. He really had completely slipped into the role of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. All in all, this was his life's dream, and he was working hard to fulfill it. His words shook the entire pocket realm even more dramatically than before. Right now, Wu Jianwu's words were causing unprecedented stimulation to the sleeping soul of the demon snake.

The Captain realized how immersed Wu Jianwu was in the act, and he sighed. Looking at Xu Qing, he said, "Can you handle this, Xu Qing? I'm worried this idiot is going to push things too far and get himself killed."

Xu Qing looked up at Wu Jianwu, his eyes cold. He wasn't under the impression that Wu Jianwu had just slipped too deeply into his act. Xu Qing was convinced he was doing all of this on purpose. In fact, as Xu Qing looked at him, Wu Jianwu seemed about to open his mouth and say something. That was when Xu Qing quickly took out a jade slip with some images recorded on it.

When Wu Jianwu saw that jade slip, he suddenly shivered, and his expression became very fawning. His previous demeanor was gone, and he even dropped down out of the air.

"Hahaha! If you have something to say, Elder Brother Xu, we can just talk things over! No problem!"

Xu Qing slowly put the jade slip away. At that point, Wu Jianwu breathed a sigh of relief. He had no need to examine the jade slip to know what was recorded in it. It was almost certainly images of him rubbing a bear's belly in a cave. Thinking back to his moment of glory shortly before, he couldn't help but say, "Well, that was fun!!"

Now that Wu Jianwu wasn't pretending to be Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity, the demon snake's soul was starting to calm down. However, its previous struggle to awaken had brought immensely strong soul power into the area, and therefore, Xu Qing ignored Wu Jianwu and started working on breathing exercises.

As the soul power rushed into him, his dharma apertures trembled, and almost immediately, his 111th opened.

Xu Qing's spirits lifted. Rising, he used the medallion from Arch-Immortal Plumdark to move toward the center of the pocket realm. Upon reaching the blood lake, he found that the soul power was even stronger. He sat down cross-legged and started absorbing it without hesitation.

Time slipped by. Xu Qing didn't pause for a moment in his cultivation, and focused everything on his dharma apertures. Meanwhile, the Captain had no way to get to the center of the pocket realm, so he focused on breathing exercises. However, given the look in his eyes, he still hadn't given up on getting that golden drop of blood from that tooth.

That thing is amazing. Completely and utterly amazing! The Captain swallowed hard as he absorbed soul power but kept his eyes fixed on that tooth.

Later on I need to think of a way to break off that tooth. It's connected to me by destiny! With that thing, I'll be able to get my hands on any item I take a fancy to.

As the Captain's eyes gleamed with longing, Xu Qing managed to open his 114th dharma aperture.

And he kept going. It was only after he opened his 116th aperture that the soul power in the area started waning. At that point he opened his eyes and looked at Wu Jianwu some distance away.

Wu Jianwu had been waiting for this exact moment. There was no need for an exchange of words. Wu Jianwu simply floated up into the air, gazed disdainfully at the bones of the demon serpent, then clasped his hands behind his back.

"It's been a few years, little demon snake; if you hadn't bitten me, you might be awake!

"This place is where you eat, sleep and nap; that also means your skull is covered in crap!"

The demon snake's soul, which had only just settled down, suddenly erupted with another howl. This time, it was many times more intense than before, and it was almost possible to hear the sound of grinding teeth along with it.

"Dark Serenity!!"

Some of the snake's body that formed the outer mountains shifted, causing boulders to tumble down them. The earth quaked, with the soil rolling like waves.

Inhaling sharply, Xu Qing barked, "Enough!"

Wu Jianwu's lips snapped shut, though he was clearly ready to keep talking. Truth be told, even he was stunned by the reaction he'd provoked. And yet, it was so exciting that he had already become slightly addicted to the process. What was more, he now had a slight suspicion deep in his heart that perhaps he was the reincarnation of Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. Otherwise, how could he be doing what he was doing?

Off to the side, the Captain was looking at Wu Jianwu as if he were a divine being. When he and Xu Qing had come up with this idea, they'd originally decided to just try it out briefly to see if it would work.

Never could the Captain have guessed that it would go so well. In fact, he got the feeling that if Wu Jianwu kept reading the poem all the way to the end, the demon snake probably would wake up all the way.

It works this well?? Next time maybe I'll actually try waking it up!

As the soul power in the area increased dramatically, Xu Qing absorbed it nonstop. Actually, it was so strong that he had no choice in the matter; he was absorbing it automatically through his very pores.

Thus, after only an hour passed, his 117th dharma aperture opened. Xu Qing's eyes shone with immeasurable anticipation. He inhaled deeply, and soul power rushed into him. After reaching a certain watershed point, it became a majestic force that smashed into his 118th dharma aperture. Instantly, that aperture opened!

"Only two more to go!" he murmured. Without the slightest hesitation, he continued.

More time passed. Two hours later, rumbling sounds filled him as his 119th dharma aperture opened!

"The last one!"

His mind trembled with matchless anticipation. However, he needed an incredible amount of soul power for that last dharma aperture. Seeing no reason not to, he tapped into his balefire as well. Black flames covered him, becoming a fiery vortex that rumbled loudly as it dragged all the surrounding soul power toward it.

Despite how strong the soul power was, the force dragging it toward Xu Qing was so immense that no one else in the area could tap into the soul power. All they could do was watch in astonishment as it madly rushed toward Xu Qing.

Xu Qing inhaled deeply as the boundless soul power converged within him. Gradually, it coalesced into the vague image of a serpentine dragon, which then smashed unstopably toward his 120th dharma aperture.

Instantly, cracking sounds rang out loudly inside Xu Qing's mind as his 120th aperture smoothly opened!

That said, no one present had any idea it was happening! That was because, in the instant it started to open, Xu Qing had his shadow cover the dharma aperture, cutting it off from outside view! He had no desire to reveal to everyone his true level of strength. Meanwhile, his fourth life flame was also covered by the shadow, preventing anyone from seeing it. Only Xu Qing himself could sense

the intense convergence within him that led to the fourth life flame! With his eyes closed, he could feel something like a massive world burning inside of him.

At the same time, two umbrellas appeared overhead. One was black, incomparably gruish, with waterfalls of flame pouring down the sides that could scorch the dome of heaven. The other was seven-colored, so radiant it created a sea of light that illuminated all the lands.

Behind him, the golden crow's wings stretched as it looked around with brutal eyes, ready to assimilate the entire world. As its flames covered Xu Qing, they resembled imperial robes, making him look like a youthful Ancient Emperor, ready to lead his army to the ends of the earth. A moment later, all of that vanished, and in its place, a look of regret appeared on Xu Qing's face.

"Almost got there, but not quite," he murmured loudly.

When the other disciples heard his words, they came to the conclusion that Xu Qing had come close to succeeding in his breakthrough, but had ultimately failed.

Wu Jianwu sighed. If he had personally witnessed Xu Qing ignite a fourth life flame, he probably wouldn't have been very happy. But to see him fail left him feeling a bit better.

Only the Captain reacted differently. Shifting his gaze from the snake tooth to Xu Qing, he blinked a few times. Something's off here. The deceptive little punk is hiding something!!

With such thoughts on his mind, the Captain decided that he needed to consider opening another one of his seals.

Having a Junior Brother like this really puts me under a lot of pressure!