

## Timescape 291

Chapter 291: Who Will Fight?

Xu Qing sat in place quietly for about an hour. For one thing, he wanted to make sure it really seemed like he had failed to open that final dharma aperture. Also, he could sense that he was changing after igniting his fourth life flame. His battle prowess was obviously advancing by leaps and bounds. What was more, he could now tell that 120 definitely wasn't the final limit for his dharma apertures. He had not reached the ultimate level, and was actually missing one aperture.

It's the 121st dharma aperture that Master mentioned. That final dharma aperture that four-flame cultivators all seek to open. And it can only be opened when in a spot between life and death.

Given what Master Seventh had said about the 121st aperture, he only spent a moment searching for it. There wasn't any point in being anxious about it right now. [1]

Only by pushing the Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture to the great circle... can you unleash its true potential, and imprison souls in the dharma apertures. I have 120 dharma apertures, so I can imprison the same amount of souls! If I do that, then not only can my dharma apertures become even more powerful, but also, I can unleash a magical technique from the Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture. And that is... the Stygian Flame!

Xu Qing knew that once he imprisoned a hundred and twenty souls in his dharma apertures, he could use them to create something like a spiritual soul that would elevate his dharmaskiff into the dharmaship category. That would be a highly formidable level of power.

If I do all that, but still can't open my 121st dharma aperture, then I'm not going to hold back. I'll just go right into the Gold Core level.

Having made that decision, Xu Qing was about to get up and leave when something caught his attention. His gaze shifted to the lake of blood, and the huge demon snake skull and the heavenly spike there.

He could sense a faint but terrifying power pulsing in the spike. Based on what he knew about the history of this place, that spike had been created by Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity by using the five elements. He couldn't even comprehend what kind of cultivation base would be required to create something like that with the mere wave of a hand. It defied imagination. And what almighty being could crush a second stage Void-Returning demon snake for a hundred thousand years?

What was more, though that demon snake had withered up, it still existed.

I wonder when I'll be able to do something like that. Xu Qing's heart pounded just looking at the heavenly spike. It was the same feeling as when he had first gazed upon the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber. Slowly but surely, his eyes began to shine as he struggled to commit the image of the spike to memory.

It was exactly what he had done in the daoist temple in the forbidden region by the scavenger basecamp. Unfortunately, the heavenly spike existed on far too high of a level. Xu Qing couldn't commit the image to memory, almost as if a dao resonance were interfering with the process.

By now, the end of his time limit in the pocket realm approached, Xu Qing had only managed to memorize a vague outline of the spike. However he would still be able to copy it. Perhaps if he

worked hard in the same way he had worked at the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber, he would make some progress.

As for whether or not he would ultimately succeed in copying it fully, he had no idea. All he knew was that the heavenly spike contained a terrifying will that, if he could unleash it, would be absolutely deadly.

It's too bad I'm not able to come here every day to study it. That would up my chances a lot.

Feeling a bit regretful, he got to his feet, whereupon a vortex appeared in front of him.

Refusing to enter the vortex wasn't an option. It exuded a gravitational force that wrapped him up and then whisked him away. The same thing happened to the Captain, who had never stopped staring at that tooth, as well as the melancholy Wu Jianwu.

The three of them vanished, then reappeared outside in the Dark Serenity Sect.

When they had entered the place, the three of them had all been in different states. Xu Qing had felt mixed emotions thanks to Arch-Immortal Plumdark. Wu Jianwu had been filled with anticipation at the chance to admire a historical relic related to Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. And the Captain had been frustrated at Arch-Immortal Plumdark showing up late.

Upon leaving the place, they were all in the same state. They were all disappointed. Xu Qing was disappointed that he didn't have more time to spend inside studying that spike. Wu Jianwu was disappointed at not being able to immerse himself fully in the experience, and also at the fact that there was no way he could come back with enough spirit stones to fulfill his desire. And the Captain was disappointed that he hadn't managed to take that snake tooth. Thus, the three of them left the Dark Serenity Sect feeling disappointed.

However, as they descended the mountain, Xu Qing's transmission jade slip vibrated as a whole host of messages started pouring. Surprised, he started checking the messages, whereupon his expression darkened, and a somber and desolate aura spread out around him.

All of the messages were about Master Shengyun coming out of seclusion and challenging him to a duel. The challenge had been issued two days earlier. And the location wasn't in either the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect or Seven Blood Eyes, but rather, in another place not very far away.

It was on Mount Dark Dao, which was in the area controlled by the Dark Serenity Sect, and was one of the Eight Sect Coalition's four main daoist rite centers. Normally speaking, powerful experts would go there to give lectures on the dao.

As Xu Qing looked at the jade slip, his eyes turned as cold as ice, and his killing intent started to bubble. Master Shengyun was the most formidable enemy he had faced since he started walking the path of cultivation.

The Captain had also received a lot of messages, and as he checked them, a smile appeared on his face. "Say, Little Ah Qing, do you think Master Shengyun broke through to the five-flame level? Do you need some help from Elder Brother?"

"Many thanks, Elder Brother," Xu Qing replied calmly, "but no. I beat him once, and I can beat him again." Looking up at the sky to assess the time, he thought for a moment, then changed directions and started moving toward Mount Dark Dao.

Master Shengyun wanted to fight a battle to the death with Xu Qing, and that was fine as far as Xu Qing was concerned. Now he knew what was required to push an imperial-class technique to a higher level; he had to devour the quintessence blood of another person with an imperial-class technique. [2]

With his mind focused on Master Shengyun's ravagemist bird, Xu Qing headed straight toward Mount Dark Dao with the Captain in tow.

Wu Jianwu wasn't going to give up a chance to see something as important as this happen, so he followed as well.

Mount Dark Dao was a low-lying mountain with a daoist rite center at its summit. The roof tiles were light-green jade, and the stone work was pure white. The area was full of spell formations and warding spells, and in the middle of the huge rite center was a large daoist altar, with three massive pillars that represented heaven, earth, and man. Incense burned atop those pillars day and night, with smoke rising high into the sky.

By the time Xu Qing arrived, it was evening, and the glow of sunset caused the daoist rite center to brim with a sense of profound mystery. It was common for people to come here to meditate. When experts from the coalition weren't giving lectures about the dao, disciples would often gather to exchange knowledge about cultivation.

When Xu Qing appeared, it immediately caused a stir. Obviously, news had spread that Master Shengyun had issued a dueling challenge two days ago that Xu Qing had not responded to. A lot of people in the sect had been talking about the matter.

Upon arriving, Xu Qing sat down cross-legged and looked in the direction of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect. Focusing his dharma force on his throat, he spoke in a voice that echoed like thunder.

"There's no need to wait for tomorrow, Master Shengyun. If you want to fight, then come fight!"

His voice pierced through the sect and into the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect.

Almost immediately, a blood-red beam of light shot out of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, staining the sky crimson. At the same time, Master Shengyun appeared, wearing a long, golden robe, his hands clasped behind his back as he shot toward Mount Dark Dao.

His hair fluttered behind him, and his golden robe reflected the red light. He pulsed with a baleful aura, and his previous good looks were now slightly bizarre thanks to his pitch-black right eye. Instead of being beautiful, there was something very gruish about him now.

That was especially true given the rancorous energy that filled him. As his aura spread out, it filled the area with sinister coldness, as well as colorful light that looked like a huge mouth ready to devour everything around it. His five life flames manifested outside of him, swirling around him, their fire matching the redness in the sky, causing everything to ripple from their scorching heat.

The moment Master Shengyun appeared, countless coalition disciples rushed out in shock, and then started making their way toward Mount Dark Dao. For the disciples of the Eight Sect Coalition, the fight which was about to play out was unprecedented, and just about everyone wanted to catch a glimpse. It was a fight between the two most prominent chosen, and what was more, everyone knew about the matter of Xu Qing taking away Master Shengyun's life lamp and almost killing him. By

doing that, Xu Qing had trampled on Master Shengyun's name and then reached heaven in a single bound.

It was only natural that this fight was going to be the center of all attention. Even the patriarchs and other top experts from the various sects were now looking in the direction of Mount Dark Dao.

Xu Qing looked at the raging flames approaching from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, and though his eyes were calm, they also pulsed with killing intent.

The sky pulsed with colors, and the wind whipped like dancing phoenixes and soaring dragons. Fire raged with overwhelming force as a golden figure landed on Mount Dark Dao... right in front of Xu Qing!

The two of them stood on either side of the daoist altar with its incense pillars dedicated to heaven, earth, and man. Smoke swirled as their eyes locked onto each other. Neither seemed to be in the inferior position, and both of their gazes were sharp and incisive. Countless people were already watching, and as more beams of light brought more spectators, none dared to step onto the mountain itself, and instead merely hovered in midair to watch.

The cultivators who had been meditating on the mountain flew away, as did the Captain and Wu Jianwu. Soon, only Xu Qing and Master Shengyun stood there.

"Xu Qing!" Master Shengyun growled.

He was staring at Xu Qing, all the while thinking about the pain and torment he had experienced. His expression already began to twist with madness, and his eyes burned with the longing for vengeance.

Xu Qing looked back at him coldly, then glanced at all the onlookers. He didn't say anything, but instead, began analyzing how the surroundings could be used to his advantage.

There are a lot of people around, so I can't use Within the Nine Springs to its full effect. Patriarch Soaring Cloud is obviously going to be watching, so it's going to be difficult to actually kill Master Shengyun. And it'll be hard to devour the ravagemist bird.

I have a lot of secrets to keep. The question is going to be how many I can afford to reveal.... That said, having so many spectators isn't all bad. I can factor Master Shengyun's personality traits into my strategy. If I weaken him step by step, then I can increase my chances of devouring the ravagemist bird!

Xu Qing's mind worked on overdrive to come up with a plan. That was just how he operated. Before making a move in a fight, he wouldn't start talking. And if he did, it would be part of his plan. And that was why, finally, he said, "Master Shengyun. I only have two life-saving items on me. Here they are."

He took out two entropic teleportation talismans and tossed them to the ground, then kicked them out of the daoist rite center.

His action caused an immediate buzz among the spectators. It wasn't any sort of dramatic action, but it carried profound implications. In fact, Master Shengyun hadn't even considered that Xu Qing would do something like that.

As everyone looked on closely, Master Shengyun chuckled coldly, took out his own jade slip, and tossed it to the side. From the glowing light and power that emanated from it, it was obviously a life-saving item.

With that, the two of them shot toward each other. Rumbling sounds immediately echoed out. What grand momentum! What an unstoppable force!

#### Chapter 292: Things Have Changed

From the perspective of an outsider, this was a fight between three life flames and five. The former also had two life lamps, and as a result, shocking energy. The latter was in the extremely rare great circle of five flames, and was thus imbued with a spirit that could conquer mountains and rivers. Both had imperial-class techniques and, as result, battle prowess that was roughly equivalent to each other.

The difference was that Xu Qing's two life lamps complemented each other. After his fight with Sima Ru, quite a few cultivators had come to speculate about that aspect, and had done research on it. Though it seemed that Xu Qing had a slight edge, it was a given that Master Shengyun had taken that into consideration before challenging him. Everyone present was watching closely to see how it would play out.

In the blink of an eye, Xu Qing and Master Shengyun clashed atop Mount Dark Dao. It was like a shocking fight between a tiger and a dragon, with flames towering into heaven as they exchanged rapid blows. Both had immense battle prowess and shocking speed, resulting in booms like metal striking stone. In the shortest of moments, they exchanged over a hundred blows. Neither of them dodged or evaded. Mount Dark Dao shook as thunderous booms rang out and streaks of silver lightning crashed left and right.

Xu Qing utilized Within the Nine Springs, but only unleashed eight fists. He would only do that if the perfect opportunity arose.

After a short time, Master Shengyun backed up unharmed.

Xu Qing hovered in midair, his hair whipping around him and his eyes narrowed. He was still deceptively hiding his additional life flame. After all, the key to this whole thing wasn't just to crush and kill Master Shengyun. Rather, it was to make sure that whoever stepped into the fight at that point couldn't save his opponent. At the very least, he hoped to buy enough time to devour Master Shengyun's ravagemist bird. To do that, he needed to catch Master Shengyun completely off guard. There was no way he would be able to do that at the very beginning of the fight. Almost certainly, someone would step in to save Master Shengyun as well as the ravagemist bird.

Therefore, Xu Qing planned to keep a close eye on Master Shengyun and whatever secret weapons he ultimately brought out. He also was observing the surrounding areas in case any rescuers showed up. He had no idea what secret weapons Master Shengyun would reveal. But he could sense the aura of a golden crow on him, and had taken note of his pitch-black right eye.

Xu Qing's shadow was out, and his poisons were ready. What was more, in their interchanges so far, Xu Qing had come to the realization that Master Shengyun was a lot faster than before.

However, there was no time to think about the matter at the moment. Master Shengyun suddenly stopped in place and then burst back in Xu Qing's direction with incredible speed. The green body

and red tail of the ravagemist bird appeared behind him, howling. Master Shengyun used all of the battle prowess he could muster as he closed in.

Xu Qing's expression turned grim as the golden crow appeared behind him. As the two forces clashed, Xu Qing's umbrellas appeared overhead, providing a defensive augmentation. As a result, every blow Master Shengyun landed provoked an astonishing backlash attack.

And to Master Shengyun, those weren't just backlash attacks, they were utter torment. After all, this was what people had usually experienced when fighting him in the past. Now Xu Qing had his life lamp, and it caused Master Shengyun's eyes to become completely bloodshot.

Spitting out a mouthful of blood, he howled, "Encompassing Ghost Garment; Seal Body and Soul; Convert the Heart to a Sword; Exterminate the Cosmos!"

The blood transformed into a crimson garment, which was the same technique he had used against Xu Qing in their previous fight. However, this time, it had transformed, and instead of wrapping around Xu Qing, it exploded into countless fragments. Each of those fragments was a blood-colored flying sword, which became a dense wind of blood that shot toward Xu Qing. [1]

Being the previous owner of the seven-colored wind-chanting lamp, Master Shengyun was very familiar with its weaknesses. That was why he attacked it en masse. Ripples and distortions spread across the defensive barrier created by the lamp. He had never revealed this weak aspect to anyone, and had never imagined that he would be the one to take advantage of it.

Booms rang out as the flying swords were blocked. However, there were so many of them that, slowly but surely, some managed to get through.

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed as he evaded the swords. Clenching his right hand into a fist, he launched a punch filled with killing intent. While still keeping the full extent of Within the Nine Springs a secret, he kept a sliver of attention focused on the surroundings. When he noticed fluctuations coming from beyond Mount Dark Dao, he unhesitatingly released the power of Within the Nine Springs.

In turn, Master Shengyun relied on his shocking speed to evade the blow.

Meanwhile, Sir Bloodsmelter's face suddenly appeared in the dome of heaven. Looking into a different direction in the sky, he snorted coldly. In the spot where he looked, Patriarch Soaring Cloud appeared. Neither of them seemed very pleased.

"Rules are rules," Sir Bloodsmelter said. "Anyone who breaks them will be punished."

Patriarch Soaring Cloud didn't reply.

Xu Qing saw what was happening and was pleased to know that his speculations had been correct.

As for Master Shengyun, he backed up, sneered, and then waved his right hand, causing three beams of sword light to shoot out. One of them flew into the sky, becoming the Darkheaven Bloodfiend Sword, which dropped from above toward the top of Xu Qing's head.

Xu Qing looked up with eyes flashing. He had seen this move before, but again, it was different than last time. At the same time, he had new magical techniques as well. Hands flashing in an incantation gesture, he shoved his arms out. The water vapor around him suddenly grew much stronger, making it hard to see anything clearly. A massive, blue sea appeared around him so

immense that it rivaled Mount Dark Dao itself in size. And compared to it, he and Master Shengyun seemed like ants. It was the Ninefold Tsunami! The majestic sea had white-capped waves on it, which converged into one enormous tsunami wave that rushed forth to meet the Darkheaven Bloodfiend Sword. The wave smashed into the sword, devastating it.

Things weren't over yet, though. There was a second beam of sword light. It swept horizontally as it turned into the Soul-Sweeping Devil-Crushing Sword, chopping toward Xu Qing like a stiff autumn breeze.

Xu Qing's hands blurred as another enormous wave formed, crushing the Soul-Sweeping Devil-Crushing sword, and causing intense rumbling sounds to echo into the sky.

Only a moment later, Master Shengyun's third sword attack appeared. Eight ghostly figures with swords on their backs rushed toward Xu Qing. This was none other than the Northghost Heavenasking Sword.

Xu Qing shoved one hand in front of him and one hand behind him, then spun in place, almost as if practicing Tai Chi. Instantly, the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth tsunami waves surged forth. There were four waves, and each contained terrifying force as they smashed into the eight sword-wielding ghosts. Booms rang out as the sword ghosts collapsed.

Xu Qing's facial expression remained the same, his eyes cold as he looked at the grim, retreating Master Shengyun. Xu Qing's arms continued to move, seemingly slow, but in reality, gracefully quick. He took five steps forward. With each step, another tsunami wave rose up. After the five steps were taken, the five waves surged forth successively with shocking force, smashing toward Master Shengyun. From a distance, it looked like Mount Dark Dao was covered with water.

Master Shengyun struggled to control his breathing. This battle felt completely different than the previous one. Before, Xu Qing's magical techniques had been weak. Now, he had made up for that weakness, and was fighting with extraordinary strength. However, Master Shengyun wasn't ready to give up yet. As the five tsunami waves closed in, he howled in rage and produced a special item. It was a withered finger!

It was impossible to tell its origin, but it had a bizarre, gruish aura, and seemed to be filled with countless magical symbols of a very vile nature.

It was... a curse!

Specifically, it was the curse laid upon him by his younger brother. During the process of getting rid of Xu Qing's poison, Master Shengyun had also used the power of the golden crow to extrude the curse and imbue it into this finger to use as a weapon.

At this stage of the fight, he didn't hesitate to throw it out with full force. When the finger hit the water, the finger collapsed, turning into a black liquid that rapidly spread out and turned all of the water black. A noxious odor filled the area as the previously blue water became like a rotting sludge. Then, countless ghost faces appeared inside of it, as well as a host of arms. The entire sea immediately shivered like it might collapse. In fact, the spray of the waves swirled back to unleash a backlash attack.

However, it was obvious that Master Shengyun had primarily been concerned about the way Xu Qing extinguished his dharma aperture in the previous fight. Because of that, he had mostly prepared to deal with that move, as well as Xu Qing's poisons. What was more, his grandfather's

help had been focused on those areas as well. As a result, he really had no idea what Xu Qing's shadow was truly capable of.

That was the benefit of being as deceptive as Xu Qing.

Just as the grues in the water were about to start fighting, Xu Qing looked at them coldly and they shivered. Then they let loose piercing shrieks as they started stumbling over each other to get out of the sea water.

Even as they succeeded, Xu Qing snorted coldly and waved his right hand. Instantly, a heavenly saber appeared, its violet blade fully corporeal. Then another appeared, and another. Given the level of Xu Qing's cultivation base, it was no surprise that seven sabers appeared. Though he had only gained enlightenment of two moves from the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber, which limited the power he could unleash, he was still able to form multiple sabers. This was the same thing he had done in the fight against Sima Ru. [2]

When the heavenly sabers appeared, he dropped his hand, and they shot toward Master Shengyun. Rumbling booms rang out, the clouds swirled in the sky, and baleful energy pulsed as the swords hit their target. Master Shengyun couldn't jump out of the way in time. He was sent spinning off to the side as one saber after another smashed into him, slashing open gaping wounds that revealed bone. One of them was so deep it nearly cut him in half at the waist.

But then, something very gruish happened. The image of a golden crow emerged from Master Shengyun's pitch-black right eye. As it cried out, an astonishing life force erupted, filling Master Shengyun, and causing his wounds to heal rapidly. That included the wound at his waist.

Seeing this, everyone in the crowd was shocked to the core. This fight almost didn't look like a fight between two Foundation Establishment cultivators, but rather, two Gold Core experts.

After backing away a short distance, Master Shengyun stopped in place. He looked completely unharmed at this point. Grinning viciously at Xu Qing, he said, "I have to thank you, Xu Qing. You're the only reason I have this indestructible body. I'll make sure to pay you back for the favor!"

Eyes narrowing, Xu Qing spoke. "You're still long-winded. Won't you ever shut up?"

It was the first thing he had said during the entire fight. Truth be told, Xu Qing wasn't very surprised at how things were playing out. Some things had happened that were slightly unusual, but nothing that didn't fall into the realm of what he had expected. Obviously, the golden crow was one of Master Shengyun's secret weapons.

Meanwhile, many of the onlookers were now focused on Xu Qing. Thanks to this fight, they were now coming to understand his personality a lot better. He had hardly said anything during the entire fight. As a result, everyone could sense how ruthless he was.

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At the summit of the Dark Serenity Sect sat Arch-Immortal Plumdark, who was sipping some cloudsnow lotus seed soup. When she heard Xu Qing's words, she laughed softly.

Given his baleful aura, he can't be someone with light in his heart. He's not the person I seek. But all in all, he's a very interesting young man. And most importantly, he's good-looking. Not like Master Shengyun, that freak. When he was young, he devoured his own twin. Just looking at him makes me sick.

## Chapter 293: Light!

Xu Qing's words, and the look on his face, provoked a very unsightly expression on Master Shengyun. Killing intent burned in his eyes. His hatred and revulsion for Xu Qing had reached the ultimate level. Specifically, he hated people like this who had killed countless enemies, and also used lowdown methods like poisons, or extinguishing dharma apertures.

How could someone like that possibly provoke brilliant light from the Darkspirit Everwill Door?

That fact alone was a huge blow to Master Shengyun, and left him trembling inside. He had always thought of himself as the superlative example of radiance and light. After all, that was the meaning behind his given name Shengyun. Yet ironically, the Darkspirit Everwill Door produced a noxious, slathering tongue when used on him.

Back when he saw the door produce that incredible light, it had seemed so absurd that he could hardly believe it. It had also caused deep hatred for Xu Qing to form in his heart.[1]

And thus, Xu Qing's words filled him with revulsion, and caused his eyes to burn with killing intent. His five life flames raged, and the ravagemist bird behind him let out a piercing cry. Six-flame battle prowess raged as the golden crow flickered in his right eye, giving him boundless life force. All of his assets put him very close to the level of seven life flames, and also made him absolutely confident in being able to kill Xu Qing.

What was more, his grandfather had placed a sealing mark in him, making it impossible for anyone to trifle with his dharma apertures. And thanks to the golden crow, he didn't have to worry about that dangerous poison Xu Qing had used. All of his advance preparation made Master Shengyun sure that nothing could possibly go wrong. Though losing a life lamp had reduced his battle prowess, he was still stronger than his opponent.

With a cold harrumph, he raised his right hand, palm toward the sky, and loudly said, "Five Flame Radiant Divine Canopy!"

The moment the words left his mouth, five blood-colored swords emerged from within him. Each of them seemed sharper than the one before it, and each radiated a brilliant blood-colored glow. Astonishingly, close examination revealed that those five streams of sword energy were Master Shengyun's five life flames!

The sword energy stained the sky the color of blood, causing the clouds to roil for 3,000 meters in all directions.

Eventually, the five beams of light formed five fingers, which began to fall from above the clouds. First the nails pierced through the clouds, then the skin, and then the knuckles. Eventually, all five fingers could be seen, rumbling toward Xu Qing on Mount Dark Dao!

The disciples gathered around the mountain to watch the fight were all visibly shocked. All of them could sense the terrifying power of the fingers. It was a pressure that would weigh down on any Foundation Establishment cultivator. This was the great circle of five life flames, and the intense fluctuations and killing spirit were all focused directly on Xu Qing.

For the first time, Xu Qing's expression flickered slightly. However, it wasn't because of Master Shengyun's battle prowess. Instead, it was because of the fact that he could sense another aura in the clouds above, something different from the five fingers. That aura didn't seem to have anything

to do with cultivation base, and it was hard for him to identify exactly what it was. It seemed to be some sort of will.

Xu Qing wasn't the only one to react with surprise. The old-timers and top experts in the various sects all reacted with shining eyes. And Patriarch Soaring Cloud's eyes positively glowed as he laughed uproariously.

"So, my grandson really does qualify to become an Ancient Emperor. This is the killing domain that results when you gain enlightenment of the great circle of five life flames! Though it's still slightly lacking, it still contains a great will. It's very close to being a will domain. And it's certainly enough to destabilize everything around him. Excellent. Most excellent!"

In the Dark Serenity Sect, Arch-Immortal Plumdark had just taken another sip of her lotus seed soup when her eyes flashed.

Master Shengyun really does have amazing aptitude. No wonder Ol' Soaring Cloud paid so much to get a golden crow clone for him. And no wonder my profit-obsessed Elder Brother agreed to do it.

Everything shook violently as the five fingers of life flame sword energy, filled with Master Shengyun's will and killing intent, got closer to Mount Dark Dao.

Xu Qing looked up. He had to admit that, whether in this fight or the previous one, Master Shengyun was a formidable opponent who had terrifying aptitude. Of even greater significance was the fact that he hadn't given up after losing his life lamp. Instead, he actually got stronger. That wasn't something ordinary people could accomplish.

Xu Qing looked up silently at the five fingers. Then he threw his hand up into the air, and a black fog started spreading out beneath his feet.

It quickly covered all of Mount Dark Dao, spreading relentlessly to create a dense sea. It soon covered an area of 3,000 meters.

Up above were blood-colored clouds. Down below was a black sea of fog.

Xu Qing performed an incantation gesture with his right hand, then pointed toward the dome of heaven. The black fog suddenly surged as a withered finger appeared and started moving upward! Rumbling sounds echoed out with deafening loudness. This was Xu Qing's grue art, the Dark Serenity Curse.

What was more, the finger had a scrap of the enlightenment Xu Qing had acquired from the heavenly spike. Though that enlightenment wasn't complete, even just a bit of it made the Dark Serenity Curse technique even more dangerous. That increased level of danger was minute, such that an ordinary cultivator wouldn't detect it. But people in the patriarch level would notice the clues. Instantly, Patriarch Soaring Cloud's expression turned unsightly. In contrast, Sir Bloodsmelter threw his head back and laughed.

"Well, isn't this interesting," Arch-Immortal Plumdark said, smiling faintly as she took a sip of broth.

Deafening rumbling sounds echoed out as Xu Qing's Dark Serenity Curse clashed with Master Shengyun's Five Flame Divine Radiance Canopy. Even from a distance, it was a shocking sight.

Massive, 3,000-meter-long fingers of blood descended, while 3,000 meters of black fog rose from below.

Master Shengyun shivered as his Five Flame Divine Radiance Canopy collapsed. As the blood-colored light shattered, blood sprayed out of his mouth.

Xu Qing also gasped for breath as his Dark Serenity Curse collapsed, sending black fog spilling out everywhere. Eyes narrowing to conceal a sinister coldness, he bit the tip of his tongue, spat out some blood, and shot backward.

As for Master Shengyun, his right eye blazed with the light of the golden crow, which healed all of his wounds. Shooting in pursuit of Xu Qing, he raised his right hand and pushed down on his chest. Unexpectedly, a long, blood-colored sword emerged from within him. It was a dark red color, and it pulsed with energy and blood. At the same time, it had an acrid aroma, and clearly contained something poisonous.

Xu Qing wasn't unfamiliar with that poison; it had the aura of his own poison pills. This sword had been created with the help of Master Shengyun's grandfather, during the time in which he suffered in agony thanks to Xu Qing's poison. During the entire process, he had visualized himself using that sword to cut down Xu Qing.

Now that the blood sword was in the open, Master Shengyun's expression twisted viciously. The ravagemist bird appeared behind him, and the golden crow flickered in his right eye. Then, with speed that surpassed anything from before, he shot toward Xu Qing with the sword outstretched.

In the blink of an eye, the sword was about to stab into Xu Qing's chest.

Xu Qing put an unsightly expression onto his face as he raced toward the edge of Mount Dark Dao, as if he were trying to make an escape.

However, Master Shengyun aggressively closed the gap between them.

Based on Xu Qing's calculations, it didn't seem like it was the right moment to reveal his true strength and try to devour the ravagemist bird, much less try to kill Master Shengyun. He still needed to wait for the right opportunity. Therefore, he performed a double-handed incantation gesture, resulting in balefire exploding out. Spirit seas erupted from 119 dharma of his apertures, creating a shocking and terrifying force. At the same time, his life lamps also offered protection.

Booms rang out as Xu Qing's defensive barriers collapsed one after another. Again, he was forced back. However, Master Shengyun had trouble dealing with the backlash, and was also forced in the opposite direction.

In fact, as Master Shengyun backed up, Xu Qing's eyes glittered coldly, and he waved his hand to scatter some poison powder! He had already laced the area with over a hundred types of poison. All of that had been in preparation to release the poison catalyst. As soon as he did, poison exploded in the area. Even with Master Shengyun's terrifying ability to restore life force, he was still infected. Though it wasn't fatal, all of the negative side effects hit at the same time, causing Master Shengyun's face to fall. Blood sprayed out of his mouth as his skin turned greenish-black, and his mutagen levels skyrocketed.

Then Xu Qing blurred into motion, racing toward Master Shengyun.

Master Shengyun immediately raised his defenses, threw his blood sword through the air, and performed an incantation gesture and pointed out. The sword detonated, creating a sea of blood that swept toward Xu Qing.

It was a delaying tactic that allowed Master Shengyun to put some distance between himself and Xu Qing. During that time, he realized that the negative effects of the poison weren't going to be dispelled by the life force within him. Looking grimmer than ever, he waved his hand again, causing dense mist to surround the area, making outsiders incapable of seeing what was happening.

Then he took out a black piece of wood. This was the same piece of wood he had used back on the continent of South Phoenix to summon the Darkspirit Everwill Door. However, the piece of wood seemed a bit bigger than before.

When he threw it down, the piece of wood wriggled, and then the same pitch-black wooden door appeared in front of him.

The gruish black door emanated a sinister aura, and yet, no one on the outside could see exactly what was happening. Master Shengyun had intentionally prevented people from observing, as he didn't want to reveal that disgusting tongue. The door cracked open, and the noxious-smelling tongue appeared, dripping with disgusting fluid as it wrapped around Master Shengyun. Instantly, all of the poison within him sprayed out of his mouth in a cloud of blood.

Seeing that, Xu Qing burst into motion, heading right toward Master Shengyun. He raised his right hand, and his cultivation base erupted as wave after wave appeared, pulsing with terrifying might.

Nine tsunami waves converged and smashed toward Master Shengyun. Master Shengyun's eyes narrowed, and the unsightly expression that had covered his face transformed into something sinister.

Looking at Xu Qing, he said, "I finally fooled you, Xu Qing. None of what I did before was important. I went all out to ensorcell my Darkspirit Everwill Door, allowing it to unleash a second ability! Be sealed!"

Eyes shining with greed, he laughed and waved his hand. Instantly, the massive pitch-black door shifted to face Xu Qing, and then... it opened!

As it did, a beam of light erupted from within!

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In the Dark Serenity Sect, a bowl of lotus seed soup slipped out of a hand as fair as jade, and landed onto the white tile floor below.[2]

Chapter 294: The Golden Crow Devours the Ravagemist

The bowl shattered. As lotus seeds tumbled out across the white jade tiles, Arch-Immortal Plumdark inhaled sharply. Her beautiful eyes filled with incredulity as her heart began to race.

"Was that light I just saw?"

\*\*\*

Arch-Immortal Plumdark was correct. For a fleeting moment, she had indeed seen light.

The door atop Mount Dark Dao had shimmered briefly, in a way that was different from what had occurred in the crown prince's mansion back in South Phoenix. During that fight, the light had spilled out in all directions, burning everything, and seriously injuring Xu Qing due to its immolating heat. Were it not for the violet crystal's healing powers, and the blessing to his fleshly body provided by the golden crow, the light of that door would have scorched him into ashes.

It made sense considering it was a fragment of a magical treasure. Not only did it reflect what was in a person's heart, but also, it contained deadly, harmful power. Of course, due to its gruish nature, it had a different deadly power for each person it was used on.

But that wasn't what happened this time. Master Shengyun had performed a twofold ensorcelling on the door, and therefore, the light didn't shine out in a sustained manner. Instead, it became momentary. And its might manifested in a different way.

The light flashed, then vanished.

It happened so quickly that anyone who could observe it might think they were seeing things. That was especially true considering that Master Shengyun had covered the area to prevent people from seeing what was happening. Only someone observing from the right vantage point, with a very high cultivation base, would notice it.

As for its power, it wasn't something that burned, but rather... something that sealed with ice! That brief flash of light was immeasurably cold, and when it hit Xu Qing, it became a layer of ice that rapidly spread over him. Based on what Xu Qing was feeling, the light cast by the door was some sort of indescribable divine ability related to frigid coldness. Almost instantly, he was frozen in place.

His body. His soul. Everything about him was frozen.

Except for the fact that he had been sealed while using only three-flame power. His eyes narrowed as he prepared to ignite his fourth life flame. With that flame lit, he would have battle prowess at the peak of the seven-flame level, and he was confident he could break the surrounding ice.

However, before Xu Qing could ignite the life flame, he noticed something very odd. The icy sealing didn't seem to have much effect on his shadow. It made sense. The shadow was also incomparably frigid, and devoured other grues as food.

To Xu Qing, this level of cold was unusual, but to the shadow, it seemed comfortable, even pleasurable. In fact, the moment it appeared, the shadow was so excited it started carefully absorbing the cold. As a result, Xu Qing wasn't completely immobilized. Although it looked like he was frozen in place, all it would take was a thought on his part, and the shadow would absorb all of the ice, freeing Xu Qing.

However, Xu Qing didn't issue any such order. Nor did he move. He could tell that the opportunity he had been waiting for was coming soon.

"You had this coming, Xu Qing!" Master Shengyun said, and then he burst out laughing. He made no effort to conceal the vicious excitement on his face as he rushed toward Xu Qing. This had been his plan all along. Everything he had done up to this point had been in the hopes of dispelling any suspicion about him summoning the Darkspirit Everwill Door.

He had also hoped to prevent someone from interfering when he used this move. After all, Patriarch Soaring Cloud wasn't the only one ready to jump in and stop the fight. Sir Bloodsmelter could do the same thing.

Master Shengyun didn't believe for a minute that Seven Blood Eyes would respect the rules of the fight, just as Xu Qing didn't think the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect would do so. And the truth was that both of them were right. As soon as Master Shengyun started moving toward Xu Qing, the huge projected face of Sir Bloodsmelter's eyes flickered imperceptibly before he started moving in the direction of Mount Dark Dao.

His countenance was one of complete disregard, as if no set of rules were more important than his apprentice's apprentice.

However, as he neared, a stream of sword light shot out to block his path, resolving into Patriarch Soaring Cloud.

“Rules are rules, Sir Bloodsmelter!”

Patriarch Soaring Cloud wasn't convinced that Xu Qing was actually frozen in place, but before he could check thoroughly, Sir Bloodsmelter took action. All he could do was rush to block Sir Bloodsmelter, and prevent him from saving Xu Qing.

Sir Bloodsmelter appeared to be furious, and even seemed to be thinking of forcing his way past Patriarch Soaring Cloud. Patriarch Soaring Cloud prepared to stop him with full force. Rumbling sounds echoed out as their cultivation bases got close to each other. Although Patriarch Soaring Cloud was actually a bit weaker, he could definitely buy time if necessary.

Meanwhile, the Captain's eyes were bloodshot, and he let out a shout as he prepared to rush forward. However, that was when a beam of sword light shot in front of him as one of the Gold Core cultivators from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect blocked his way.

At the same time, Master Seventh stepped out from Seven Blood Eyes, moving with blinding speed toward Mount Dark Dao. In response, the sect leader of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect rushed to impede him.

As everyone from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect moved to interfere, Master Shengyun closed in on Xu Qing, his eyes glittering with greed. His ravagemist bird appeared behind him, crying loudly as it dove toward Xu Qing. Master Shengyun was so close to Xu Qing that he was able to reach out and grab his shoulders. At the same time, the ravagemist bird snapped at the golden crow.

“Nobody's going to save you today, Xu Qing!”

The greed in Master Shengyun's eyes couldn't have been more profound. Just as he was about to devour the golden crow, Xu Qing suddenly looked up. And his eyes were scorching hot!

Master Shengyun's face fell. Based on all of his plans and calculations, Xu Qing shouldn't be able to move a muscle. The sealing power of the Darkspirit Everwill Door should have been able to immobilize someone with three life flames for at least ten breaths of time, even if they did have life lamps. That was enlightenment he had gained after ensorcelling the door. But so far, only five breaths of time had passed.

He had planned this all out very meticulously. But then Xu suddenly looked up and shattered all those plans.

“You!!!” An intense sensation of deadly crisis filled him, and having no time to consider the matter, he prepared to fall back. Except, that was when Xu Qing’s hands shot up and grabbed Master Shengyun. At the same time, his fourth life flame ignited.

Four-flame power raged, sending intense flames out everywhere. Two shining umbrellas appeared overhead, adding to the heat. And the golden crow the ravagemist bird had been about to bite suddenly flared with more flame. The intense heat was absolutely shocking.

“Looks like you’re the one who got fooled,” Xu Qing said softly. Baring his teeth, he bit deeply into Master Shengyun’s neck. Then he inhaled, and balefire erupted from his 120th dharma aperture, spreading out rapidly to cover Master Shengyun.

The golden crow also opened its beak wide, and as the ravagemist cried out in terror, it bit its head and started absorbing it!

Xu Qing had been waiting for this moment for a long time. He wanted to kill Master Shengyun, or at the very least devour his ravagemist bird to improve his own imperial-class technique. He had been suppressing his battle prowess for this entire time, just to wait for this opportunity.

Xu Qing’s eyes blazed as balefire covered Master Shengyun. The golden crow’s expression was also one of deep longing as it absorbed the ravagemist bird. Master Shengyun let loose an agonizing scream that rose into the sky.

The sudden turn of events caused many in the surrounding crowd to gasp.

The Captain chuckled darkly, and smoothly switched places with the Gold Core cultivator from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect, preventing him from interfering. Master Seventh flicked his sleeve, wrapping up the sect leader from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect. And Sir Bloodsmelter laughed heartily as, instead of trying to rush forward, he blocked the astonished Patriarch Soaring Cloud. All of those three things happened so smoothly they almost seemed rehearsed, as if they had known ahead of time what was going to happen.

As howls of rage echoed out from the outside, Xu Qing’s eyes shone brightly, and he focused fully on absorbing Master Shengyun. Master Shengyun screamed as his quintessence blood flowed out of him. The ravagemist was also screaming in unprecedented agony as the golden crow savagely devoured it.

Xu Qing’s ruthlessness was now on display for everyone to see. All of the coalition disciples present were astonished, and looked at Xu Qing with intense dread in their eyes.

“Xu Qing!!!” screamed Master Shengyun. Being absorbed in this manner, having his aura weakened so rapidly, caused him to struggle. But he didn’t quite have seven-flame power, so there was no way he could do anything against Xu Qing, who was at the peak of the seven-flame level. He could only watch as his ravagemist bird shrank and shrank. Then, golden light suddenly erupted from Master Shengyun.

It was a jade slip with Nascent Soul defensive power. Obviously, the life-saving item he had thrown away earlier had been just for show, and he had saved the real item to use in a moment like this. But then the Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown atop Xu Qing's head erupted with power, and the Nascent Soul protection power was driven away.

Master Shengyun was stuck in place, and Xu Qing continued to absorb him. In the shortest of moments, Master Shengyun shrank down into little more than skin and bones. And the ravagemist bird was so weak and transparent it was almost impossible to see it.

The golden crow in Master Shengyun's eye flickered a few times, but wasn't able to do much.

Xu Qing was still holding back from using Within the Nine Springs. He hadn't forgotten what his Master had instructed, that he wasn't to use the killing move when people could see it. However, he could still put more effort into absorbing Master Shengyun. Burying his teeth further into Master Shengyun's neck, he yanked to the side. It wouldn't be long before he ripped Master Shengyun's neck apart!

Master Shengyun screamed in agony as massive amounts of blood flowed out of him and into Xu Qing's mouth. Intense brutality was on display!

However, that was when a figure in a green robe appeared out of nowhere. Wherever he stepped, ripples spread out, like the fluctuations of heavenly daos and magical laws. Taking advantage of the fact that Sir Bloodsmelter and Patriarch Soaring Cloud were keeping each other locked down, he stepped onto Mount Dark Dao, landing right next to Xu Qing.

"You're very vicious for someone so young," he said coldly. "Given how ruthlessly you attacked a fellow disciple, I hereby command you to spit out what you just devoured!"

He waved his hand, and a boom rang out as Xu Qing and Master Shengyun were thrown apart. Then, the green-robed figure waved his hand again, this time directly at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's mind spun, and his eyes became completely bloodshot. He couldn't see this person's face clearly, but he could sense that the level of power was like that of the patriarchs. There was no way he could fight back against something like this. His mind went blank, and the quintessence blood he had swallowed suddenly surged up into his throat, as if it were about to be forcibly extracted!

However, that was when a violet beam of light descended, landing in front of him, bringing with it a fragrant aroma. Arch-Immortal Plumdark appeared. She waved her hand, and the power from the man in green vanished.

The man in green didn't say anything. He just grabbed Master Shengyun and backed up a few paces without causing any more trouble for Xu Qing.

"Given your age, I'm shocked that you would act like this," Arch-Immortal Plumdark said coolly. "The younger generation should fight their own fights. Since when did the Lunisolar Dao Palace start doing things this way?"

The cultivator in green backed up until he was outside of the bounds of Mount Dark Dao. Only then did he reveal his face. He was a middle-aged man who was none other than the patriarch from the Lunisolar Dao Palace. Looking deeply at Arch-Immortal Plumdark for a moment, he then turned his

attention to Patriarch Soaring Cloud and Sir Bloodsmelter, who had by now backed away from each other.

Sir Bloodsmelter's expression was unsightly as he glared at Patriarch Lunisolar. Next to him, Patriarch Soaring Cloud had a very odd expression on his face for a moment, which then turned into one of faint realization. Finally, it became a bitter smile.

"Cloudsoaring, old pal, you once saved my life, so it's only natural that I would save your grandson. Of course, you'll compensate me for the punishment I'll receive for breaking the rules. Isn't that right?"

Patriarch Lunisolar kept his grip tight on the gasping and shriveled Master Shengyun, who had already lost his imperial-class technique.

Sir Bloodsmelter's eyes glittered, while Patriarch Soaring Cloud suddenly seemed a lot older. The latter nodded.

Xu Qing's expression was also unsightly, and his narrowed eyes glittered with killing intent as he stared at Patriarch Lunisolar. He could tell that there were things going on that he didn't understand. However he wasn't going to forget this. Without any hesitation, he shot over to the Darkspirit Everwill Door, and not even paying attention to any of the coalition experts in the area, took it for his own.

Then he waved his hand, collecting up the two entropic teleportation talismans and the jade slip Master Shengyun had thrown to the side. Finally, he gulped back down all of the quintessence blood! He didn't spit a single drop back out!

Chapter 295: Come See Me, Child

The atmosphere on Mount Dark Dao had turned very, very bizarre. However, it was then that a tranquil voice echoed down from above.

"You're all coalition senators. There's no need to offend each other over the affairs of the younger ones."

All the cultivators present were struck to the core by the voice.

Patriarch Lunisolar was the first to react. Inclining his head, he clasped hands and said, "Well met, President."

Patriarch Soaring Cloud's expression was neutral as he also bowed in greeting. Sir Bloodsmelter looked at the two other patriarchs with an unreadable expression, then followed suit. As for Arch-Immortal Plumdark, she frowned slightly, gave a quick bow, and then turned and left, vanishing after taking only a few steps.

As everyone bowed in greeting, the voice spoke again.

"However, rules are rules. If people were allowed to break them at will, how could we maintain order in the coalition? Fellow Daoist Soaring Cloud, for your impulsiveness, you will lose ten years of your coalition profit bonus. Fellow Daoist Lunisolar, when exactly did you start doing things this way? I suppose I can understand given the history between you and Patriarch Soaring Cloud. But the rules can't be changed.

You'll also lose ten years of your coalition profit bonus. As for you, Fellow Daoist Bloodsmelter, your temper has earned you the same punishment.

"Xu Qing, you performed well. In line with Fellow Daoist Bloodsmelter's previous suggestion, starting today, you will receive the same remuneration as a dao child, specifically, 8,000,000 spirit stones per year. The mountains of all eight sects will be open to you, and you'll have the right to visit all of the coalition's lands of good fortune ten times per year. All sect defenses will offer you safeguard, and your new status will be publicly announced in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. In addition, you now have the right to use projections of the Eight Sect Coalition's taboo treasures.

"As for you, Master Shengyun, you've always had a lot of potential. Fellow Daoist Soaring Cloud will take you back and see to your recovery. My golden crow can help you rebuild your fleshly body. You should step into Gold Core as quickly as possible. I look forward to seeing that.

"And now, this matter is over. We're all members of a coalition, so the most important thing is for us to maintain unity."

With that, the tranquil voice faded away.

Patriarch Lunisolar tossed Master Shengyun like a sack of potatoes to Patriarch Soaring Cloud. Turning to Sir Bloodsmelter, he flashed a meaningful smile, then turned and left.

Patriarch Soaring Cloud looked down at his unconscious grandson, and his eyes seemed to contain pain and regret. After glancing at Sir Bloodsmelter, he left for the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect.

Sir Bloodsmelter said nothing, but he nodded approvingly at Xu Qing before also leaving.

Master Seventh was the only one who stayed behind. Walking up to Xu Qing, he waved his hand, sending out dazzling light that healed all of his wounds. Then he smiled.

"You handled that beautifully. Let's head back now." He cast a glare at the Captain. "You're coming, too."

The Captain sighed. Since when did you become so openly biased, old man? Aren't you worried about hurting my precious little feelings? I'm your apprentice too, aren't I? And I'm the highest ranking one!

Sighing more, he joined the tight-lipped Xu Qing as they headed back to Seven Blood Eyes. Master Seventh led the way, and Xu Qing and the Captain followed side by side. At a certain point, the Captain nudged Xu Qing with his shoulder.

"Why so quiet?"

Xu Qing looked at him but continued to maintain his silence.

"If he opens his mouth," Master Seventh said coolly, "he'll cough up blood. The little punk couldn't bear to lose any of that quintessence blood, so he swallowed it all and still hasn't finished assimilating it."

Xu Qing once again forced the blood down his throat and continued to work on assimilating it.

Meanwhile, the Captain's eyes glittered and rubbed his hands together. "You shouldn't be so greedy, Little Junior Brother."

Xu Qing stared incredulously at him.

"It's fine," the Captain went on, eyes glittering even more brightly. "Eldest Brother won't hold it against you. So... you can just part with one mouthful, right?"

Xu Qing sped up, getting closer to Master Seventh and leaving the Captain a few paces behind.

The Captain's face was full of regret.

Meanwhile, Master Seventh cast a hard glare at his highest-ranking apprentice, then turned to look at Xu Qing.

"Did you pick up on what was happening just now?"

Xu Qing nodded, then shook his head.

"Our president is playing a game of Go, and he just put down another piece."

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed.

Master Seventh smiled. "Unfortunately, though he's skilled at cultivation, he could learn a thing or two when it comes to playing Go. Long story short, you're safe for the time being. But remember... when it comes to people in the Void Returning level, like the patriarch from the Lunisolar Dao Palace and the other patriarchs, they never have just one goal they're working toward.

"Their goals change. They come and go. And if you don't keep tabs on those goals, you can lose out permanently.

"This coalition has a lot of sects, and they all want one thing: profit. Granted, the higher your cultivation level, the less important profit is. But the fact remains that if you stay on the losing end of things, then eventually, you won't just lose profit, you'll be swallowed up entirely.

"It's a dog-eat-dog world, and what I can tell you is that people with high cultivation 'eat' things a lot differently than the normal way. In the end, it comes down to this: we're still too weak."

Master Seventh shook his head.

Further back, the Captain also sighed. "That's right, we're just too weak."

Xu Qing forced the blood back down his throat, then nodded and said, "Yeah. We're too weak."

When they finally reached Seven Blood Eyes, they stopped before parting ways. Master Seventh seemed to be hesitating about saying something. Finally, he said, "About Arch-Immortal Plumdark...."

The Captain's ears twitched, and he took a few steps closer. Xu Qing didn't say anything.

“Fourth Sib... make sure to get along with her.” Looking a bit melancholy, Master Seventh clasped Xu Qing’s shoulder briefly, then turned and left.

The Captain noticed that melancholy look, and his eyes went wide. All of a sudden, an explosive realization hit him. “Don’t tell me....”

Ignoring the Captain, Xu Qing turned into a beam of light that shot toward his berth in Seven Blood Eyes. As for the Captain, he was so wrapped up in analyzing his explosive new thought that he didn’t follow.

Because of that, Xu Qing’s berth was uncharacteristically quiet when he arrived. After taking out his dharmaskiff, he stepped aboard, entered the cabin, and sat down cross-legged. He had consumed too much quintessence blood, and he felt the same as if he had stuffed himself on too much food. It was an uncomfortable feeling, and for now, he wanted to focus fully on digesting it. The totem tattoo on his back emanated a burning sensation as the golden crow did the same thing.

Terrifying fluctuations rolled out from the tattoo as the golden crow got stronger and stronger. It really emphasized to Xu Qing how imperial-class techniques could benefit by devouring another technique.

Devouring another imperial-class technique leads to really shocking results.

Previously, the golden crow had nine phoenix-like tails, and though it had looked mighty, it had also seemed like a juvenile. But now, the totem tattoo had ten tails, and an eleventh was forming. It was also bulkier than before, and its eyes shone like stars. In addition, its aura seemed slightly more primordial than previously. It emanated more heat than before, to the point where Xu Qing felt like his entire body was affected by it. In fact, as he sat there cross-legged, steam rose off of him. It caused everything around him to ripple and distort, but simultaneously, filled him with anticipation about what was happening with the golden crow.

Time slipped by slowly but surely. Three days passed by in a flash.

Xu Qing had fully assimilated about half of the ravagemist bird’s quintessence blood. No longer did he feel uncomfortably stuffed. Rather, he felt very, very full.

The golden crow now had thirteen tails, and the tattoo had spread beyond just his back, giving him a very bewitching and even demonic air. It was similar with the heat. His fleshly body was now absolutely astonishing.

Having reached this point in his work, he breathed a sigh of relief. With only half of the ravagemist bird’s blood left, all he needed was a bit more time.

Feeling a bit more at ease, he took something out of his bag of holding. It was a black chunk of wood that was none other than Master Shengyun’s magical treasure fragment. Looking at it closely, Xu Qing realized that it definitely looked different from the first time he’d seen it. It was longer overall, as if a bigger piece had been added on to the previous smaller piece. Unlike Xu Qing’s fragment of that taboo treasure with its strong mutagen, this piece of wood, though possessing mutagen, only had it in faint quantities. Clearly, it hadn’t been used very often, and had been well-cared for.

After studying it for a time, Xu Qing branded it to himself and then activated it.

The black, gruish door appeared, like a portal to the Yellow Springs, or the source of all evil. Being very cautious, Xu Qing opened the door. As it creaked open, a frigid iciness rapidly built up in the cabin. The same flash of light appeared, becoming an icy sealing power that landed on Xu Qing. He shivered, and the golden crow on his back stirred, sending out massive heat that melted the ice. And yet, just as before, he felt like his life force was locked in place by the sealing.

I remember Master Shengyun saying that this thing is called the Darkspirit Everwill Door. And he said something about ensorcelling it. What's ensorcelling...?

After some thought he sent a message to his Master asking for details.

Master Seventh responded quickly, and it caused Xu Qing's pupil to constrict.

"So, he actually found two pieces of a magical treasure. Putting them together is called ensorcelling. If you put two pieces together, it's a twofold ensorcelling. Put three pieces together, that's a threefold ensorcelling. After ensorcelling the item, it transforms. I wonder what the door will produce when opened on another person."

Xu Qing waved his hand, dispelling the icy sealing power and the door.

One thing was for sure. If Master Shengyun had performed a twofold ensorcelling on this item before their fight in the continent of South Phoenix, Xu Qing would have had a hard time dealing with the icy sealing power.

"It actually seals one's life force..." he murmured. All of a sudden he was very curious what would happen if the door was used on the Captain.

In the middle of his study of the Darkspirit Everwill Door, a voice message arrived in his transmission jade slip.

"Come see me, child. There's something I want to ask you."

Xu Qing inhaled sharply. Arch-Immortal Plumdark was very high on the list of people he didn't want to see. But considering she had saved him, he knew he had no choice but to comply. Standing, he walked out of the cabin.

However, that was when he realized it was getting dark, so he sent a message in reply. "It's getting a bit too late at night to visit you, Senior.... Er, I'll head over there tomorrow."

He turned to go back in the cabin. However, that was when another message reached his transmission jade slip. Arch-Immortal Plumdark's voice sounded flirtatious and bewitching, like a whispering stream or the flute of an immortal.

"It's fine. Just come now."

Chapter 296: Separated by Gauze

Xu Qing looked quietly into the night sky for a long moment. Then he inhaled deeply, put away his dharmaskiff, and headed in the direction of the Dark Serenity Sect.

He took his time.

As he walked, he thought about all the secrets about himself that he had revealed during his fight with Master Shengyun. Although Master Seventh had assured him he was safe, Xu Qing couldn't help but think that he had slipped up more than once recently.

The president has a golden crow, and so do I. That makes him an antagonist. The fact I'm so much weaker does mean I'm relatively safe, though. Beyond that, Master Shengyun obviously has the president's golden crow in his right eye, which means he won't die easily. But as time goes on, will he remain Master Shengyun, or will he change into something else?

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed.

It really is a dog-eat-dog world.

As the darkness of night covered the coalition, a breeze blew along the path, stirring Xu Qing's garment and long hair. He stared up into the sky again.

"Master was right," he murmured. "I'm too weak." He really didn't want to see the day in which he was the one eaten up. But if that day did come, he wouldn't go down without a fight.

I'll give it my all. And if that day does come, I'll make sure that whoever eats me regrets it!

The truth was that the world hadn't changed at all since his days in the slums and the scavenger basecamp. What had changed for Xu Qing were the way people thought and the level of their ruthlessness.

Back in the scavenger basecamp, things were simple. To get what they wanted, people resorted to a simple tactic: killing. But as your cultivation base grew, and you encountered increasingly powerful people, you couldn't just resort to the simple tactic of killing. You had to use other methods. In the past, Xu Qing didn't understand that. But now he did, and he knew that he had to work hard to grow up and master those skills.

He was wrapped up in such thoughts as he made his way to the Dark Serenity Sect. It was late in the night by the time he arrived. Though the Dark Serenity Sect was pitch black, there was light at the summit.

Looking up at it from the foot of the mountain, Xu Qing took a deep breath and was about to start walking up the stairs when his eyes widened. From the darkness above, a figure descended, step by step.

The moonlight revealed the face of an old woman.

Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed very politely.

Snorting coldly, the old woman said, "You really don't understand how things work, do you, Xu Qing? Do you know how long ago the matriarch summoned you? You really took your time. If this happens again, I'll have to punish you!"

Xu Qing didn't say anything in response. Sizing up her throat, he followed her as she turned and started back up the steps.

Without looking back, the old woman coldly said, "Keep your eyes off my neck, otherwise I'll dig them out. Believe it!"

Xu Qing maintained silence. He didn't see any point in engaging in banter, especially when dealing with people stronger than himself. Based on the terrifying cultivation base fluctuations coming from this old woman, he could tell that she was roughly on the same level as Master Sixth. Keeping his expression neutral, he followed.

Upon realizing that Xu Qing wasn't saying anything, the old woman looked over her shoulder at him, but kept walking. It was in complete silence that they climbed to the summit, where they reached a manor complex made from plum-colored jade, with a pagoda in the middle of it. The lamplight was shining from that pagoda.

Inside the main entrance of the manor complex was a limestone path lined with rich decorations. There were small pavilions here and there, and handmaidens hustling about on various tasks. All of them were young and attractive, even seductive, with skin as fair as snow. As Xu Qing walked the path, many of the handmaidens looked at him curiously. Noticing his good looks, they smiled and whispered among themselves.

Xu Qing didn't pay attention to any of that.

As for the old woman, she glared viciously at the handmaidens, who then hurried away.

There were also some colorful boulders that seemed to have been placed in a specific pattern that made the interior of the mansion seem incredibly elegant. A small stream had been hewn out. It wasn't possible to identify its source, but it gurgled out of the mansion and down the mountain. Within the water were numerous golden fish with long whiskers. At a mere glance it was obvious they were extraordinary creatures.

Xu Qing spotted snakes in the trees. There were many, some climbing into the trees from the path, some wrapped around the branches, and some coiled in the shadows. Regardless of what the snakes were doing, though, when they noticed Xu Qing, they bowed their heads in subservience.

When the old woman noticed that, her eyes went wide, and she looked back at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing's face remained expressionless, but inside he was actually wondering what was going on.

His curiosity grew as he realized he was being led into a side-room in the mansion where there was an immortal hot spring. From a distance, it was possible to see steam rising up into the air where it formed auspicious clouds. Surrounding the hot spring was a curtain of white gauze, where a few dozen handmaidens stood, their heads bowed and their backs to the hot spring.

The handmaidens all held jade trays, upon which were pieces of jewelry, clothing, and fruit. The jewelry was all extremely beautiful, the clothing was neatly folded, and the fruits were all varieties of immortal spirit fruit.

A fragrant aroma filled the air. As Xu Qing neared, he realized that the drifting steam, the sound of the water, and the fragrant aroma made the place seem like a celestial paradise. Also as he neared... his anxiety increased. And that was because he could just barely make out a lithe figure beyond the white gauze, bathing in the immortal hot spring.

He quickly averted his gaze and stopped walking.

As for the old woman, she ignored Xu Qing, walked up to the white gauze curtain, and bowed at the waist.

“He’s here, Matriarch.”

From beyond the white gauze curtain, Arch-Immortal Plumdark spoke in a tender voice. “For being rude to the child I invited here, go ahead and slap yourself three times on the face.”

The old woman’s expression was the same as ever as she unhesitatingly slapped herself viciously three times in a row. She used such force that her face immediately started to swell, and some blood seeped out of the corner of her mouth. Afterward, her eyes contained no resentment, and she quietly kept her head inclined.

That put Xu Qing even more on guard. However, all he could do was stand in place, clasp hands, and bow.

“Disciple Xu Qing is here to offer greetings to Senior Plumdark.”

Laughter drifted out from the hot spring.

“Why are you being so formal, child? In the note that came with the gift you sent, you didn’t address me as Senior.” Combined with the sound of the water, Arch-Immortal Plumdark’s voice was profoundly enticing.

Xu Qing’s heart was pounding, and he vowed that he wouldn’t forget what the Captain had obviously done. Given the Captain’s personality, Xu Qing could only imagine what form of address he had used in that letter.

Having no way of knowing, he could only brace himself inwardly as he said, “Many thanks for saving my life, Senior.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re being so formal,” Arch-Immortal Plumdark said. “Truth be told, if I hadn’t stepped in, Sir Bloodsmelter would have.” Her tone was so casual, so languid, that anyone who heard it would feel their innards stirring.

Xu Qing wasn’t sure what to say in response. He had never been in a situation like this, talking to someone from the other side of a white gauze curtain. He was truly at a loss for words. The sound of the water was like pearls dropping onto white jade, and it pierced him to the depths of his heart.

“In any case, it’s true that I helped you. Therefore, child, would you mind doing me a favor?” The sound of rippling water could be heard, as though Arch-Immortal Plumdark were rising to her feet.

Xu Qing averted his gaze even more.

As he did, a shadow appeared on the white gauze curtain, revealing the spectacular figure of a beautiful woman. It was almost as if heaven on high had shown her unusual favor, and had blessed her with every aspect of beauty a woman could have. Her shadow alone was astonishingly alluring, and would leave anyone who gazed upon her, be they male or female, palpitating with longing.

Her long, slender leg left the immortal hot spring, and the white gauze swirled, forming a garment around her. Long, black hair draped down her back like a cloak, and the slight flush to her skin made her oval face delicately exquisite. [1]

The surrounding handmaidens respectfully kneeled and held the jade trays up.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark smiled, reached out, and took a skewer of immortal spirit grapes. As she approached Xu Qing, her enticing aroma reached him before she did.

Xu Qing looked at her. She wore white gauze and had long, black hair. She walked with grace, like a supremely elegant immortal beauty descended from the highest heavens. As she neared, beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, and he took a few steps back. Then she blurred and appeared right in front of him, where she took a grape off the skewer and put it in his mouth. Xu Qing's mind was a complete blank.

“Why do you always call me matriarch, child? Am I really that old? Next time, why don't you just call me Plum?” She laughed softly, and there was something indescribably charming about it.

Xu Qing's heart was racing, and he felt an anxiety that surpassed anything he had felt from even the most terrifying beasts in the forbidden regions he'd been into over the years.

Seeing him react in that way, Arch-Immortal Plumdark laughed again, and this time, it sounded sweet and carefree. Forgoing any further enticing behavior, she turned and began to walk off.

“Why are you so scared of me, child? Are you worried I'm going to eat you or something? I heard that on your recent river patrol you encountered another Dark Serenity Sect. That sect was founded by an old friend of mine. Considering you ran into it, I'd like to go there with you in a few days. To look around.”

With that, she left, flanked by her handmaidens and the old woman. Amidst the other women, Arch-Immortal Plumdark seemed like a peony in full bloom: beautiful but not coquettish, gorgeous but not vulgar, bewitchingly charming and absolutely incomparable.

Xu Qing stood in place breathing heavily for a long moment. Then he left the Dark Serenity Sect, not really sure what he was feeling inside.

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In the tall pagoda in the middle of the mansion atop the Dark Serenity Sect, Arch-Immortal Plumdark sat eating grapes and laughing softly.

*He really has no idea what's going on. Someone wrapped a slip of life essence love around his right wrist. That's not a human technique. Whatever silly girl did that, I wonder what species she's from. She actually parted with a slip of her own life essence love. Unilaterally. Given that, if the child dies, she'll probably die too. [2]*

Chapter 297: The Wind and the Moon

Xu Qing quietly descended the mountain. He chose not to fly, but instead walked through the moonlight back toward Seven Blood Eyes. He felt very strange inside after everything that had just happened. Given how much he had grown up in the past few years, it wasn't often that he felt so deeply shaken in this way. It was uncomfortable, and he wasn't used to it.

As he walked, he started mentally reviewing his old medicinal codex. As the names and information of various medicinal plants passed through his mind, he slowly calmed down. His expression was the same as ever as he started walking faster and faster.

Eventually he reached his berth, where he stood on the shore and looked back in the direction of the Dark Serenity Sect. He felt both suspicious and vigilant. Arch-Immortal Plumdark's flirty behavior wasn't what he was focused on; he wasn't the ignorant child he had once been. He just refused to believe that someone with a cultivation base as high as hers would be so banal. There had to be more to her actions. After all... in this world, people didn't just blindly fall in love at first sight. There were always reasons behind everything.

Unfortunately, he just couldn't fathom what was really going on. Waving his hand, he produced his dharmaskiff, stepped aboard and into the cabin, and settled down cross-legged. Eventually the sky was bright, yet Xu Qing still didn't have any good ideas. Burying the matter in his heart, he started to work on some meditation.

It had been a long time since he had needed to attend to his work at the Special Security Division. The Captain had been using the discount jade slip for the immortal hot spring on a daily basis, and thus handled matters for him.

According to the information Xu Qing's informant had sent him, the Captain actually brought Wu Jianwu with him to the hot spring almost every day. The two of them furtively chatted with each other constantly, and the informant suggested that the Captain seemed to be trying to convince Wu Jianwu to do something. Wu Jianwu, meanwhile, seemed to be getting more and more excited.

Xu Qing was curious about that, but not curious enough to dig into the matter. Instead, he focused on assimilating all of the blood from the ravagemist bird.

A few days passed.

One morning when the blazing sun overtook the darkness of night, sunlight shone onto the featureless face that was the figurehead of Xu Qing's dharmaskiff. That was when Xu Qing's transmission jade slip received a message.

*"Pack your things, child. I'm taking you on a little trip."*

When Xu Qing saw the message, he thought about it for a short time, then sent a message to Master Seventh, explaining the situation and asking if he should agree.

Master Seventh didn't respond immediately. And when he did, he asked a question.

*"Fourth Sib, is this your first time going on a date?"*

*"Date?"* Xu Qing replied, surprised.

When Master Seventh got that reaction from Xu Qing, he laughed, then said that there was no need to worry and that he should keep his chin up when accompanying her.

Xu Qing stewed in suspicion for a short time until he heard the magnetic yet gentle voice of Arch-Immortal Plumdark coming from outside.

*"It's time to head out, child."*

He quietly walked out and saw Arch-Immortal Plumdark sitting on the railing of his dharmaskiff, sipping from a flagon of alcohol, her long hair dancing in the sea breeze. [1]

She wore the white robes of a scholar that didn't have even a single speck of dust on it, and her beautiful face was as exquisite as a pear blossom. She was like a gorgeous image from a painting, her eyes as deep as autumn waters and her skin fairer than the faintest breeze. [2]

Sensing Xu Qing's presence, she lowered the flagon and turned to look at him. Right at that moment, a shaft of sunlight passed through her hair, refracting into a seven-colored halo that made her even more beautiful. Especially noteworthy was the profound charm and grace in her pupils as her gaze fell on Xu Qing. Her lips curled up into a faint smile. It was different from the way she had smiled in the past, which to Xu Qing had seemed like the grin of a predator hunting prey. Instead, it was soft and tender.

If anyone had been present to see this scene, they would be taken aback. There were two people on the skiff: one was a woman as beautiful as a gemstone, the other was a man as dazzling as a shining star. They were so eye-catching that even the sunlight seemed to rush to accompany them.

Xu Qing stopped in place.

There was something different about Arch-Immortal Plumdark. She seemed less seductive and more heroic. Less domineering and more tender. It almost seemed contradictory, and in the end, it only made her more beautiful. Her style had changed, and it prompted Xu Qing to take a closer look at her.

"Do you like it?" she said, blinking a few times.

Xu Qing nodded.

She seemed pleased with his response, as she laughed softly. Then she tapped the railing and said, "You have a nice ship, child. Why don't we use it on our trip? I really want to go see that Dark Serenity Sect you found."

She turned, took a deep breath of the bright, morning air, and then took another sip of alcohol.

As Xu Qing looked at her sitting on the railing, he hesitated. He had laced his dharmaskiff with a lot of poison. At the very least, there were about two hundred varieties scattered about. That included the deck, the railings, and just about every other inch of the ship. That said, considering the level of Arch-Immortal Plumdark's cultivation base, he doubted his poisons were much to worry about. His hands flashed in an incantation gesture, and a tremor passed through the ship. Rising out of the water, it turned and started moving in the direction of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River.

In the first rays of dawn, the dharmaskiff's billowing sails seemed incredibly majestic. Xu Qing piloted the dharmaskiff from a position at the very front, his violet daoist robe flapping in the wind.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark remained on the railing, her legs swaying as she looked off into the distance, sipped from the flagon of alcohol, and enjoyed the breeze. Her hair swayed with the same rhythm as Xu Qing's robe. If someone could paint a picture of the scene, it would be beautiful beyond words.

Meanwhile, down in the harbor, the Captain stuck his head from around a random corner and used a jade slip to record what was happening.

*I absolutely have to have some pictures of little Ah Qing's first date. They might be worth a lot of money one day.* He seemed very pleased with himself.

Little did he know that, not far away from where he was, Master Seventh stood in a building watching the ship leave. Master Seventh sighed.

Is that really the same Immortal Fairy Plumdark who captivated countless elite cultivators all those years ago? Fourth Sib really is dashing.... He's almost on par with me, back in the day.

Under the eyes of both his Master and a fellow apprentice, Xu Qing's dharmaskiff left Seven Blood Eyes and started speeding up the tributary of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River.

The sunny blue sky didn't have a single cloud in it, creating a carefree and relaxed atmosphere. At the prow, Xu Qing kept his eyes straight ahead as he piloted the ship. Truth be told, he was very nervous being alone with Arch-Immortal Plumdark. Not only did she have a terrifying cultivation base, but also, his previous interactions with her left him feeling very unsettled. The only thing he could think to do was stay completely focused on operating the dharmaskiff.

The day passed.

Although Xu Qing still felt nervous, he was finally starting to relax slightly. Arch-Immortal Plumdark hadn't said a single thing the entire day. Apparently, she just enjoyed sitting on the railing, drinking, and looking off into the distance as she enjoyed the breeze.

Perhaps because of how clear the sky was, as night fell, there were more stars out than usual. And somehow, the starlight seemed to gather around Arch-Immortal Plumdark. Before, she had seemed beautiful. But being wreathed in starlight made her seem flawlessly charming, and at the same time, gorgeously pure. She was like an immortal fairy from the moon, strolling through the human world.

Except, this immortal fairy suddenly seemed to lack any sort of charm or warmth. In fact, she seemed as cold as ice as she looked in the direction of the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains.

Xu Qing noticed that, and followed her gaze. There was a sect off in the distance, not too far away, but far enough that he couldn't make out details about it. However, he did hear the faint sound of screaming on the breeze.

"Let's go see what's happening," Arch-Immortal Plumdark said.

This was Xu Qing's first time seeing her with such a cold demeanor. And he had never heard her speak in such an icy tone. Heart thumping, he turned the dharmaskiff in the direction of the mountains.

As they got closer, Xu Qing realized that what he had seen earlier wasn't a sect, but rather, a mountain stockade. There were about a hundred rogue cultivators there, including both humans and nonhumans. All were vicious and emanated the stench of blood. In fact, the stockade itself was splattered with gore, and in the middle of it was a spell formation. Corpses were piled on the formation, apparently as sacrificial offerings. And there was some sort of evil ritual being carried out. As the ritual went on, an indescribably vile aura spread out from the formation. It was accompanied by disgusting chewing sounds. Meanwhile, looks of ecstasy covered the faces of the sinister cultivators who prostrated themselves to the formation.

Xu Qing's pupils constricted at the sight of it, and his heart pounded. But what caused his heart to pound wasn't the cultivators. These cultivators counted for little, as even the strongest among them was only a Gold Core cultivator with a single heavenly palace. No, his heart pounded because of that evil aura.

“The swordsages have outlawed sacrificing living beings to evil spirits,” said Arch-Immortal Plumdark, her voice calm but powerful as it echoed through the night. “The Eight Sect Coalition has similar laws. You people have a lot of gall.”

The evil aura suddenly pulsed fearfully, and it began to retract as if trying to escape. The cultivators were visibly shocked. Yet before any of them saw the dharmaskiff or raised their voices in alarm, Arch-Immortal Plumdark waved her hand.

The movement of her hand carried a divine resonance that Xu Qing couldn't clearly perceive. However, he could sense that it corresponded to natural laws governing the operation of heaven and earth. There was no divine ability at play. No magical technique. However...

The cultivators in the stockade began to shrink. The spell formation also shrank, as did the evil aura. In fact, the entire mountain shrank. In the blink of an eye, everything in front of Xu Qing disappeared.

To Xu Qing's utter shock, a grain of sand then flew up and landed between Arch-Immortal Plumdark's thumb and forefinger. When he looked closely, he realized that the grain of sand was actually shaped like a mountain. It was none other than the mountain from moments ago. The cultivators and the formation were there, in the same proportion as before, just shrunk down by many times over. All of the cultivators were overwhelmed with terror and despair.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark squeezed her fingers together. A cracking sound rang out as the grain of sand collapsed into nothing. She sat on the railing, looking at Xu Qing with a smile. “What are you gaping at, child? Let's move on. Stick to the mountains. I want to enjoy the scenery.”

Her smile could melt even the coldest ice, and contained a divine resonance that surpassed the moonlight.

#### Chapter 298: Music for the Mortal World

Xu Qing watched the grain of sand vanish. He didn't care about the people who had died. Rather, he was shaken by what Void Returning cultivators were capable of. What Arch-Immortal Plumdark had done seemed simple, but was filled with profundity that Xu Qing couldn't even grasp. Inhaling deeply, he looked down into the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains where that specific mountain had once existed. That spot was now a level plain.

Maintaining silence, he piloted the dharmaskiff forward. As the moon shone down, Arch-Immortal Plumdark seemed to be in a good mood. Occasionally, she would lift the flagon of alcohol to her lips and take a sip or two. As she drank, she seemed less flirtatious than usual, and a bit more bold and heroic. At the same time, she was no less glamorous than before. In fact, she emanated the air of those ancient jianghu wanderers who would sip unfiltered rice wine as they roamed the lands. All-in-all it made her even more attractive than before. [1]

Xu Qing found himself repeatedly glancing at Arch-Immortal Plumdark's alcohol flagon. Given the level of her cultivation base, she could probably drink a lot without getting drunk.

Noticing his gaze, she smiled brightly and held the flagon in his direction. Rocking it back and forth, she asked, “Would you like a drink?”

Xu Qing shook his head.

“You seem a bit stiff right now, child.” She laughed softly then took another drink. As she did, a bit of alcohol splashed out and was picked up by the breeze.

By chance, one drop happened to fly over and land on Xu Qing’s chin. He could smell the fragrance of the alcohol. Meanwhile, as Arch-Immortal Plumdark sat on the railing, she took out a green willow flute and started playing some music. It sounded wonderful.

Xu Qing didn’t really understand music, but he could tell that the song was bold and inspiring. It made him think of a woman dressed in a woven rush raincoat, holding a sword in her arms as she told stories about her years wandering the jianghu. The song also seemed laced with regret. As he listened, he slowly relaxed, and eventually lost himself in the music.

In that manner, time passed.

The moonlight shone down. Arch-Immortal Plumdark was dressed in white and looked like an immortal fairy descended to the human world. She was beautiful, but her eyes contained an unreadable look as her flute music drifted about. The mountains and the wind made good companions for the song.

The Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains were usually a brutal place, but this night, with the flute music filling them, they seemed inimitably peaceful. It was as if heaven and earth contained only Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

Gradually, the regret in her song turned into profound loneliness. When Xu Qing sensed that loneliness, he couldn’t help but look over at her sitting on the railing.

She seemed empty, even desolate, like a lone orchid at the bottom of a dark valley. She didn’t need anyone to admire her youthful beauty. She didn’t need anyone to witness her elegance. She bloomed for herself, and for the hope that she clung to.

As Xu Qing looked at her, he suddenly understood what the Captain meant when he said that, in her youth, countless cultivators had been obsessed with her.

Xu Qing wasn’t obsessed. But he was enjoying the bold and inspiring song, as well as the regret within it, and the loneliness. He closed his eyes and thought back to when he was younger. He remembered how he had struggled to survive. And then he thought about Sergeant Thunder and Grandmaster Bai.

He suddenly felt like drinking.

Sometime later, dawn broke. The flute music faded into nothing. As light filled the sky, Arch-Immortal Plumdark stood at the prow, her back to Xu Qing, looking at the rising sun.

“Do you like watching the sunrise, Xu Qing?”

He thought for a moment. “Not usually.”

“I like to,” she replied softly. “The light is most beautiful at sunrise.”

Xu Qing looked into the sky.

They didn’t speak. The crimson sun climbed up, turning the clouds red and casting out light to fill all the lands. Before long, the night was gone, and darkness was removed from the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. Everything was bright.

A new day had come. Along with it came a vile gaze that rose from the mountains below and locked onto Xu Qing's dharmaskiff. The gaze seemed to become corporeal, causing the air to twist and distort, and covering the light from the sky.

A flicker of displeasure appeared in Arch-Immortal Plumdark's eyes.

Then the gaze reached her, and it suddenly filled with astonishment and terror. It immediately fled.

Unfortunately, there were consequences for disturbing Arch-Immortal Plumdark. She waved her fair hand, and a distant low-lying mountain burst into flames and quickly transformed into ashes. It all happened in the blink of an eye. There wasn't even a scream. The mountain, and everything on it, simply ceased to exist.

Having accomplished that, Arch-Immortal Plumdark stretched lazily, then turned and walked toward Xu Qing. His anxiety immediately spiked. She stopped in front of him and looked at him with a deep gaze that would entrance just about anyone.

Xu Qing instinctively stepped aside.

She smiled faintly, and without a word, entered the cabin.

Relaxing, he secretly breathed a sigh of relief. Ever since leaving the sect, time seemed to be moving at a crawl. Sending his cultivation base power into the dharmaskiff, he tapped into the ship's godliness, giving it more speed as it moved onward.

The day passed and night fell.

As before, Arch-Immortal Plumdark sat on the railing drinking from her flagon and playing her flute. The music added to the jianghu atmosphere, and as the unhurried tune entered Xu Qing's ears, he realized that, even though it was the same song he had listened to for so long the previous night, he really enjoyed it.

It was cloudy that night, and there was no moon. Muffled thunder could be heard occasionally. It seemed like it might start raining. Arch-Immortal Plumdark eventually stopped playing and took a drink.

All of a sudden, Xu Qing couldn't hold back from asking, "Senior, does that song have a name?"

"You like it?" she asked, putting down the flagon. She looked at him, her eyes filled with a faint divine resonance.

He nodded.

"Can you play the flute?"

He shook his head.

"I'll teach you." She hopped off the rail and walked up to him, and before he could even react, she was there, holding the willow flute out.

He took it hesitantly. Then she stepped behind him, put her arms around him, and placed her hands on his. When her skin touched his, he shivered from head to toe. As they stood together, he smelled her perfume, and it caused beads of sweat to break out on his forehead. All of a sudden, he wished he hadn't asked about the name of the song.

“The flute has twelve holes. Put your hands on either side and hold it to your left.” Her sweet, alluring voice rippled through his mind, and he could feel her breath on his neck as she helped him lift the flute. [2]

She paid very close attention to his posture and the angle of the flute, until he felt so stiff he couldn't move. Once everything was perfect, she put the flute to his lips.

“Pay attention, child. Don't get distracted. Now, I want you to... blow, just like this.” He felt her warm breath as she whispered into his ear.

He went even more stiff, and was so anxious his heart was pounding like mad. After a few breaths worth of time in which he did nothing, he forced himself to relax slightly. Then, just as she instructed, he gently exhaled.

An ear-splitting sound erupted from the flute.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark laughed. Walking out from behind him, she extended a fair finger and placed it over one of the finger-holes.

“Like that,” she said, looking at Xu Qing with her red lips curved into a slight smile. Her skin was so fair it seemed it might be damaged by the wind, and she was so beautiful that, being this close to her, Xu Qing, for the first time in his life, felt his mind go completely blank.

All of a sudden, a peal of thunder rang out, and rain started falling. As it hit the dharmaskiff's defenses, it made a loud pattering sound that caused Xu Qing to shiver and then back up a few steps.

“Many thanks, Senior. I understand now. Going forward I think I'll just figure it out on my own.”

She laughed softly. It seemed like she enjoyed seeing Xu Qing this nervous. Setting to the side, she sat down, put her chin in her cupped palm, and looked at him.

Taking a deep breath, he sat down cross-legged with the flute. Closing his eyes, he mentally reviewed what she had taught him. Then he opened his eyes and tried again. This time, the sound that came out of the flute wasn't ear-piercing. Instead, it sounded more like a whimper. It definitely didn't sound beautiful.

She smiled. “Take your time, child. There's no rush.”

Time slipped by slowly but surely. It rained heavily and there was occasional thunder.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark's gaze remained fixed on Xu Qing, and over time, it grew more and more tender. Occasionally, she would give him some advice about the flute.

Xu Qing calmed down, and eventually immersed himself in the flute. Around dawn, the rain stopped. He wasn't very familiar with the song, and when he played it sounded forced. But by sunrise, his music echoed out in all directions.

As the dharmaskiff flew through the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, the song drifted to the banks of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River. There, as the various mortals wiped the

rainwater off of their mutagen-ravaged bodies, something stirred in their blank eyes, and they looked to the sky.

For the whole night, Arch-Immortal Plumdark's gaze had remained fixed on Xu Qing. But now, she suddenly looked away from him toward the riverbank and the mortals.

"Wait a moment," she said softly. She stood, hopped off the dharmaskiff, then floated to the bank.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark was the most beautiful thing any of the mortals had ever seen. When they looked at her, they couldn't help but tremble in shame of their inferiority. This clearly wasn't the first time Arch-Immortal Plumdark had done something like this, and she knew how to react. Her smile became incredibly warm and tender, quickly dispelling the unease of the mortals.

Stepping onto the riverbank, she stopped in front of a little girl who was gasping for breath. The girl's body was half rotten thanks to the mutagen that filled her, and she exuded a noxious smell. The light of youth still flickered in her eyes, but it was slowly fading into darkness.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark in her pure white garment knelt next to the girl. Without even a hint of revulsion, she gently put her hand on the girl's forehead. Gradually, the rot that had filled the girl disappeared.

"We live in a bitter world," she said softly. "But don't ever give up hope." A piece of candy appeared in her fingers, which she placed in the little girl's mouth.

The little girl's eyes began to shine brightly once again.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark smiled. However, when she looked around at the other mortals, she sighed. She was powerful enough to change the fate of an entire sect. But she couldn't change the world.

Xu Qing stood at the prow of the dharmaship, watching silently.

Chapter 299: Parting with Sorrow

Time passed.

They were still about two days away from the Dark Serenity Sect Xu Qing had discovered. The starry sky overhead cast down dazzling light, and the moonlight added to it. Soft light shone down for as far as the eye could see. The lands were quiet and peaceful.

Flute music drifted out from the dharmaskiff. It was no longer a whimper. It had a cadence to it, and a distinct melody. What was more, there was something violent and deadly about it that differed from Arch-Immortal Plumdark's music. Some of it came from the fast-paced tempo of the song. It seemed like an army on the move. Then the song changed, as if the war had ended. Now the lands were littered with bones, and the survivors were staring up into the dome of heaven, trying to understand what it all meant. The song seemed filled with bewilderment, seemingly reflecting the mood of the person playing the song.

However, someone familiar with music would be able to tell that this song was being played by an amateur. The musician was someone new to performing. The musician seemed devoted to the song, though, and would eventually master what they had been taught.

At the very least, that's what it seemed like with Xu Qing.

He wore his gold-embroidered violet daoist robe, and held the emerald green willow flute as he sat cross-legged on the deck. His black hair drifted in the wind and moonlight. His sharply angled eyebrows, thoughtful eyes, and somber expression, coupled with the way his lips hovered just above the flute, made him seem bewitching. And his long, slender fingers manipulating the flute would prompt any observer to sigh at how good-looking he was.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark reclined on a divan crafted from thousand-year-old rosecloud wood. Her head rested in her hand as she looked at Xu Qing immersed in his flute music. He seemed incredibly dashing, but as he continued to play, an unusual look appeared in her eyes. That look grew stronger as his song grew erratic.

He closed his eyes and stopped playing. To Xu Qing, the study of the flute was like an indescribably difficult grindstone. He had never done anything like it, and wasn't sure exactly how to deal with it all. Other than spending some time in meditation, he focused fully on studying and practice. Xu Qing had always valued learning. For example, after Master Seventh taught him how to play Go, he had often taken time to mentally review what he had learned. Already, he had developed a deep appreciation for what Arch-Immortal Plumdark had taught him about flute music. Since he wasn't a person inclined to words, music was a great way for him to express his thoughts and feelings.

That said, Arch-Immortal Plumdark's gaze continued to leave him feeling confused and awkward. He didn't understand this matriarch of the Dark Serenity Sect, and couldn't figure out why she was toying with him.

It seemed to him that carnal desire shouldn't be important to someone with such a high cultivation base. Beyond that, over their time traveling, he had seen her resort to violence seven times. Her actions almost seemed casual, and after she was finished, there was nothing left behind. Those who died by her hand didn't shed a drop of blood. Sometimes, those she killed had been courting death by acting maliciously. But other times, it seemed to be Arch-Immortal Plumdark's whims that dictated her actions. On the previous day, a nonhuman cultivator flying nearby had looked too closely at her. A moment later, he transformed into ashes that quickly dissipated in the wind.

When things like that happened, Xu Qing could only watch regretfully as the souls vanished into nothing. He needed souls to imprison in all 120 of his dharma apertures! However, he didn't dare to open his mouth about it.

Xu Qing also noticed some things about Arch-Immortal Plumdark that were different from anyone else he knew. She showed goodwill toward the impoverished nations that occasionally appeared on the riverbank. With the wave of her hand, she would resolve random problems that the mortals had.

A few days previous, they passed a small nation that had been plagued with bandits recently, and couldn't root them out of the countryside. Things like that happened all the time in the world, and most cultivators wouldn't even pay attention to them. But Arch-Immortal Plumdark captured the bandits and wiped them out of existence.

The more Xu Qing got to know Arch-Immortal Plumdark, the less he understood her. Her very personality seemed to change at random. Sometimes she acted like a young lady whose face would light up when seeing a pretty flower. Other times she seemed like a valiant hero, sipping alcohol, her hair swaying in the breeze under the moonlight. On other occasions, she was colder than ice, and would carry out slaughter with the wave of a hand. And then there were times when she seemed

profoundly attractive, with her every smile or frown exuding charm and grace. Of course, there were also times when she was warm and kind. Whenever Xu Qing made a mistake when playing the flute, she seemed to exude tenderness as she gently corrected him.

She was innocent, cold, heroic, seductive, warm, and seemed like she came from the jianghu.... Xu Qing had never met one person who had so many conflicting qualities.

Two days later, Xu Qing discovered yet another personality trait.

It was when they finally laid eyes on the Dark Serenity Sect he had discovered. The entire sect only had a few dozen members, and they all came out looking shocked and terrified, but at the same time, acting unsurpassably respectful. Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked at them, and her eyes filled with reminiscence.

“Are you Master Littlecloud?” she asked the old man who had once tried to pull a fast one on Xu Qing and the Captain.

“Y-yes, Arch-Immortal Plumdark. I’m... I’m Master Littlecloud.” In his bitterness, the old man realized that Arch-Immortal Plumdark looked exactly as she had last time he saw her. A host of thoughts and emotions filled him. He remembered all those years ago when he was just a child, and how his Master had been so infatuated with her. But sadly, *the falling flowers yearned for love, but the heartless brook rippled on*. Back then, not one single person had ever won Arch-Immortal Plumdark’s heart.

There was no sign of the passage of years on her. And yet, in the presence of this old man, it was possible to sense how much time had passed.

“Take me to your Master’s grave.”

Xu Qing quietly followed as the old man led them into the rear courtyard of this Dark Serenity Sect. There was a lone grave there. A willow tree grew over it, and the leaves rustled in the wind, as if they were excited by Plumdark’s presence.

She stopped in front of the grave and looked at it. Sighing softly, she spoke to Xu Qing. “He was an old friend of mine. And a good person.”

Xu Qing thought back to the story he’d been told about this man. He said nothing.

The old man stood off to the side, wrapped up in sorrow and regret.

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Soon it was time to leave.

Arch-Immortal Plumdark asked if the sect was willing to join the coalition. The old man seemed excited at first, but then he looked at the grave and shook his head. Then he asked permission to continue tapping into the tributary. Arch-Immortal Plumdark agreed. She even set up some spell formations to help. Finally, she boarded Xu Qing’s dharmaskiff again, and they sailed off into the distance.

On the way back, Xu Qing continued to improve with the flute. Soon, they were getting close to the Eight Sect Coalition. It was evening, and they were only about an hour away. It was even possible

to see the Forbidden Sea off in the distance. Arch-Immortal Plumdark sat on the railing looking at the evening clouds.

“Xu Qing,” she said quietly, “play that song for me again. I want to hear it.”

As he sat there cross-legged, he closed his eyes to gather his thoughts. Then he put the flute to his lips and started to play.

The song contained the spirit of the jianghu. It described the joys and sorrows of life, and ended in a flagon of unfiltered rice wine. Alone, one drank.

They arrived at the coalition.

“The name of the song is *Parting with Sorrow*. I composed it a few years ago.” In the glow of sunset, Arch-Immortal Plumdark stood at the prow, looking off into the distance. The wind blew her hair, and her robes fluttered. She seemed like she herself was ready to fly away with the wind. The loneliness she normally kept hidden now permeated her, seemingly drawn out by the wind, filling even the depths of her pupils.

She looked over her shoulder at Xu Qing, and her eyes seemed like mysterious pools of water. She seemed like she was trying to fix Xu Qing’s image into her mind. Finally, she smiled.

He looked back at her.

“A lot of people have given me gifts over the years,” she said. “I probably have over a hundred flutes. I don’t even remember who gave me that one, but I know I like it. You keep it, child. A gift to thank you for coming with me on this little trip.”

She lifted her flagon and took a drink, then turned her head, causing her hair to swish. Finally, looking immensely heroic and carefree, she stepped off the deck and flew off into the distance.

Xu Qing looked down at the flute he held in his hands, and then at Arch-Immortal Plumdark disappearing in the distance. Right now, he had no way to describe what he was feeling. Eventually, he took a deep breath, clasped hands and bowed. Then he piloted his dharmaskiff back to Seven Blood Eyes.

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Back in the Dark Serenity Sect, Arch-Immortal Plumdark was still dressed in her white garment. Her mood was mixed. Thirty percent of her was happy. Fifty percent was relaxed. And twenty percent felt as if she were parting with sorrow. Back in the pagoda atop the mountain, she looked in the direction of Seven Blood Eyes and murmured, “If only you were born a hundred years earlier....”

“So what if he was?” a man said gently. Arch-Immortal Plumdark turned to see the president of the coalition walking out of thin air, clad in a blue jerkin. Coming to a stop next to her, he looked toward Seven Blood Eyes. “If he was born a hundred years ago, Junior Sister, he would already be dead. Believe it. What’s more... he could end up dead in the present.”

The president turned to look at Arch-Immortal Plumdark.

“Would you dare?” she said coldly.

He looked at her for a moment, then smiled and shook his head. “How could I possibly hurt a chosen disciple from my own coalition? That being said, Junior Sister, don’t forget that though I fear the life soul Master left to you... you’re running out of longevity. If you find the ‘light’ you’re looking for now... it would actually be a bit tragic.

“Half of a sixty-year-cycle will be gone before you know it. If he doesn’t reach the Spirit Trove level, then you won’t be able to practice cultivation together with him and mend your dao. And that means that, in the end... you’ll have to make a choice between life and death.

“I’ll come back next month to ask you again.” With a smile, the president of the Eight Sect Coalition vanished.

Chapter 300: Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar

As the afterglow of dusk faded, Xu Qing pulled his dharmaskiff into his berth. Before he could even get settled, a voice message came in from the Captain.

*“How was your date, little Ah Qing? Why don’t you come over here to that immortal hot spring you got me the discount for? Have a soak and tell me everything that happened. Based on my extensive experience, I can give you a few tips for next time.”*

“Later,” Xu Qing replied. He was about to put away the transmission jade slip when the Captain sent another message.

*“Ahem. Master’s also here....”*

“....” Xu Qing didn’t respond.

Not long thereafter, he arrived at Xu Xiaohui’s immortal hot spring. The Captain and Master Seventh were waiting for him in a small private pool that overlooked the larger pool area below.

Xu Qing looked at them with a strange expression.

Master Seventh cleared his throat and glared at the Captain. “I was in the middle of meditating when you begged me to come over here. What’s going on?”

The Captain blinked a few times.

Master Seventh snorted coldly.

The Captain sighed and cast a rueful expression at Xu Qing. “Little Ah Qing, you were just out with Arch-Immortal Plumdark, right? So how... ahem... how far did things go?”

Master Seventh’s expression didn’t change at all, and in fact, he looked a bit bored.

Xu Qing glanced briefly at his Master, then thought about the question before answering. “Senior Plumdark taught me how to play the flute.”

Master Seventh’s ears twitched.

The Captain immediately followed up with another question. “And then...?”

“And then she paid respects at the grave of an old friend. It was the Master of that old man we met in the Dark Serenity Sect in the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains.” Not hiding anything, Xu Qing told them about the journey. Truth be told, there wasn’t really anything to hide.

“That’s all?” the Captain said, looking obviously distrustful.

“Yeah. On the way back, she gave me the flute as a gift.”

“What kind of flute?” the Captain asked curiously.

“Let me think,” Xu Qing replied. “Oh, right. It’s called a ‘willow’ flute.”

Master Seventh suddenly inhaled sharply. “A willowmoon spiritcharm flute?”

The name didn’t sound familiar to Xu Qing, so he simply took out the flute.

The moment Master Seventh laid eyes on the flute, he looked stunned. A long moment passed, and then he expressionlessly stood up. Glaring at the Captain he said, “Next time you disturb me when I’m meditating I’ll break your legs!”

The Captain’s eyes went wide, and he looked very hurt. *I can’t believe you’re being so unreasonable, old man! You shouldn’t be yelling at me, you should be yelling at Xu Qing!*

Master Seventh cleared his throat. “Fine, you were right about what you said before.” As he put his clothes back on, he looked at Xu Qing and said, “Fourth Sib, you’re at the four-flame level now. The time is about right. I have a few more things to take care of, and then I’m taking you somewhere.”

Clasping his hands behind his back, he slowly walked off.

After Master Seventh was gone, the Captain’s facial expression returned to normal, and he didn’t look upset at all. Instead, he smiled knowingly at Xu Qing. “Did you learn something just now, little Junior Brother? *That’s* how you deal with the old man. When he loses his temper then admits his mistake, he gets soft. Therefore, I occasionally let myself be wronged to get him to compromise.

“That said, this time the old man seemed really embarrassed. Considering how he knew the actual name of that flute, I’d say there’s an eighty to ninety percent chance *he* gave it as a gift to her years ago.”

Xu Qing blinked a few times as he thought back to what Arch-Immortal Plumdark had told him. She said she didn’t even remember who gave her the flute. Considering how his Master had reacted just now... it seemed likely the Captain was right.

After soaking in the hot spring for a bit, Xu Qing got out and prepared to leave. As he did, the Captain lazed comfortably in the water. “Little Ah Qing, if you have a chance, can you try and get me another jade slip for twenty percent off? Those things are pretty rare, and they give VIP service. I’m sure you can pull it off.”

“What happened to the one I gave you?” Xu Qing asked.

“I gave it to Wu Jianwu.” The Captain looked around furtively, then lowered his voice and continued, “I need Wu Jianwu’s help with something. You’ll understand soon enough. Trust me, it’s going to be incredible. Afterward, though, I’ll have to lie low until the fuss dies down. I’ll also need you to help me smooth things over.”

Xu Qing nodded in response. He wasn’t surprised to hear this. Thanks to his informant, he knew all about the Captain and Wu Jianwu frequenting this place. It wasn’t anything new for the Captain to need to ‘lie low,’ and Xu Qing already had a general idea of what was going to happen.

*Odds are he’s after that snake tooth.* With a final look at the Captain, Xu Qing left the immortal hot spring. By the time he got back to his berth, it was nighttime. Sitting down cross-legged, he closed his eyes to meditate.

During his time spent with Arch-Immortal Plumdark, he hadn’t had time to focus on meditation. Therefore, he wanted to make up for the time he had lost.

Three days passed.

When night fell on the third day, he opened his eyes, and they shone with anticipation as he sensed certain fluctuations in his bag of holding. The beetles that had fed on the immortal ice were stirring. Taking out the bottle, he opened it. There wasn’t anything inside. Casting his senses about, he couldn’t detect the presence of anything.

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However, he was picking up on faint fluctuations of hunger. Expression neutral, he used his left index finger to cut his right palm. Blood oozed out for only a moment before the wound healed, but that much blood was enough. The air stirred as a host of invisible beetles landed on the blood in his palm. As Xu Qing watched, the blood slowly shrank and then vanished.

Once the beetles digested the blood, he was finally able to detect them. After eating that immortal ice, they were so good at hiding their presence that they were virtually impossible to notice. That said, they had been raised on Xu Qing’s blood, and were filled with his poisons. Though they hadn’t consumed his blood in a long time, the connection was still there. After feasting on his blood again, that connection grew strong.

“I have a total of 371,” he murmured, feeling very pleased. However, he knew that this was just the beginning. Going forward, he needed to keep feeding them. Given how long it had been since they fed on any poison, they were famished.

The next day Xu Qing left his berth and scoured all the medicine shops in the Eight Sect Coalition, buying all sorts of poisons and poisonous plants. Given his dao child remuneration of 8,000,000 spirit stones per year, he didn’t have to worry so much about finances.

After buying a huge amount of poisonous materials, including many precious and rare items, even pills, Xu Qing felt that he had plenty for his beetles to eat.

He had originally planned to take things slow. However, the beetles were obviously starving. Worried that they might overfeed, he was careful to feed them only a little at a time. But eventually, he just let them free in the poisonous materials he had purchased. They ate ravenously.

Seven days passed. The beetles feasted on countless poisonous plants, and Xu Qing bled spirit stones. However, perhaps because of the immortal ice they had eaten, the poisonous nature of the beetles rapidly grew more intense. If these beetles bit into a Gold Core cultivator with a single heavenly palace, that person would quickly experience an explosively violent death.

Eventually, Xu Qing took out the taboo poison pill to continue working on the project he had started in South Phoenix, that of getting the beetles to be able to survive long term inside the pill. Things didn't go very well. Although the beetles had mutated into something even more powerful than before, the taboo poison pill was still too terrifying. The beetles could only last for a short time inside.

That said, Xu Qing was still pleased, as he came to find that the beetles were able to consume some of the poison elements of the taboo pill and keep them in their bodies.

They couldn't keep them inside for very long before needing to vomit them out. Otherwise, they would be liquefied from the inside out, then turn into ashes. And yet... even that was enough to boost Xu Qing's battle prowess. It meant that he could use the taboo poison pill in a limited way, and not just as a way to end a fight in mutual death.

Excited, Xu Qing went on another shopping spree. This time, he didn't buy poisonous plants and medicine but rather, living beasts. Back in South Phoenix, he had been able to use prisoners from the Violent Crimes Division as incubators to breed his beetles. But the equivalent division in the Eight Sect Coalition didn't have cell blocks or prisons. That said, the Eight Sect Coalition had plenty of beasts. Though Xu Qing found that the results weren't as good as working prisoners, they were acceptable. As time passed, the beastly howls that rang out on his dharmaskiff didn't pass through the barrier of the ship's defenses.

A month passed.

Xu Qing had started out with a little over 300 beetles, but now he had over 3,000, split between three little bottles. That was when he got a voice message from Master Seventh.

*"I noticed you've been buying a lot of poisonous plants and also beasts. I'm guessing you're concocting poisons. Are things going well? If you have the time, I'd like to take you somewhere to teach you a Gold Core technique. Also, I want to go on a little fishing trip. A lot of people know that you have two life lamps. Whether it's the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect or others, plenty of people have malicious intentions in that regard. Let's see if we can lure them out and destroy them. That will make things safer for you going forward."*

Master Seventh had brought this up earlier, so as soon as Xu Qing got the message, he responded that he was ready to leave.

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In the north of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, toward the far end of the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, there was a tundra of wind and snow filled with bone-chilling coldness. The mountains there were covered with snow year-round, as was the land itself. It was a vile place to live, such that mortals couldn't survive there. There were a few mortal nations, but they were only on the fringes of the tundra. Deep inside, there were no signs of life.

The only thing there was a massive pillar that stretched from earth to heaven, far in the north. It was pitch black, and neither wind nor snow seemed capable of touching it. Standing below it and looking up, one couldn't see its end. If you looked at it closely, though, you would see that it was about 3,000 meters wide. Its surface was carved with magical symbols and totems, imparting a grand feeling that was difficult to put into words. Anyone who laid eyes on it would be filled with the desire to drop down in obeisance. The pillar emanated a will of battle, and seemed filled with incomparable savagery that could destroy anything and everything.

This was the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

From a distance, it was possible to see that the pillar was surrounded by innumerable circular tents that made a unique city. It was no mortal city, but rather, a gathering of cultivators from all parts. They had come here to practice cultivation at the base of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar.

Because of the bizarre nature of the pillar, people who absorbed its fluctuations for long periods of time would gain enlightenment of magical symbols. By using those symbols to hone their willpower, they could strengthen their cultivation base. Beyond that... the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar contained countless rewards that anyone had a chance to acquire. The higher one got when climbing the pillar, the more amazing rewards there were. As such, this place was considered the sixth great power in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

There was another reason though. This place was... the headquarters of the swordsages.

The Swordsage Court was located at the top of the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar, high above the clouds in the dome of heaven, in a magnificent palace. It was a palace that differed from other palaces. It wasn't made from bricks or jade. Instead, it was made purely of swords. Countless, countless swords, all put together into a sword palace.

When it came to the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar and the palace, it seemed like the former held up the latter. Either that, or... the latter suppressed the former.

That wasn't easy to tell from the lands below. But when you reached the top of the pillar, you could see it trembling. It was almost like someone was calling to it, trying to get it to pull itself out of the lands below. But with that sword palace in place, all it could do was tremble in place.

There was currently a meeting of important people happening in the Swordsage Court.

There were nine cultivators present. They all wore white robes, and it wasn't possible to see their facial features clearly. However, they all emitted terrifying fluctuations, and it was occasionally possible to see their eyes, which contained paragonic dignity. These were people who could decide the fate of entire sects.

They were the nine highest ranking swordsages in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's Swordsage Court, the elders. Generally speaking, even an organization as strong as the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society had to listen to their orders and cooperate with their demands. That was because they represented the force of order among all humans. They were part of the Five Greater Celestial Divisions of humankind, and they were assigned to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

They represented the ancient imperial dynasty left behind by Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity. Though humans had declined, and only held sway over seven counties instead of ruling all of Revered Ancient, they were still one of the great species.

What was more... there was still a human emperor.

A voice echoed out in the Swordsage Court.

“We have two matters to discuss. The first matter relates to our recruitment event. Sea-Sealing County’s Swordsage Palace has sent down orders. A new age is upon us. Chosen cultivators are appearing among countless species. This is a great danger, but at the same time, a destined opportunity. The Swordsage Courts in all prefectures need to raise the standards for the entry examination. We only want the absolute elite among all chosen to be swordsages.

“The second matter relates to the increase in fluctuations from the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar. We received a response to our previous formal request. After extensive analysis, our superiors agree with us. The Ghost Emperor of the Eternal Millennium is starting to awaken. Our prefectural superiors have ordered us to take care of the matter as soon as possible.

“The Ghost Emperor’s three spiritual souls and seven physical souls were transformed into the three spirits of the Dao-Suppressing Mountain and the seven fiends of the South Tor, respectively. Because the Ghost Emperor is now awakening, their cultivation bases are advancing by leaps and bounds.

“Just as we discussed before, awakening the Ghost Emperor will require that all three spiritual souls and all seven physical souls be gathered. Therefore, suppressing a single physical soul won’t help much. We need to suppress one of his spiritual souls and imprison it here.

“By doing so, we can prevent the Ghost Emperor from becoming complete, and thus, prevent him from awakening.”