

Timescape 301

Chapter 301: A Gruish Item

Around dawn, Xu Qing piloted his disguised dharmaskiff out of the Eight Sect Coalition. Moving at a high rate of speed, he left the megacity behind. Though he started out heading in the direction of the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River, he eventually changed directions and headed toward the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains. Specifically, he was moving in the direction of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society.

Ding Xue stood on the deck, blushing a bit. Her long eyelashes quivered as she blinked and charmingly said, “Big Bro Xu Qing, this is my first time going out of the sect since we arrived in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. If I do anything wrong, just tell me right away.”

Taking out a stack of what appeared to be twenty or thirty spirit notes, she slid them over to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing instinctively took them and looked at her.

Ding Xue stuck her chest out slightly. She wore a violet muslin dress with a band of streamcloud silk that perfectly accentuated her slim waist. Her long hair streamed down her back, and the ancient sword strapped there. Although she wasn’t as shockingly enticing as Arch-Immortal Plumdark, her youthful energy and the flush on her face made her seem extremely pretty. She had a charming attitude, and emphasized her love of knowledge by offering spirit stones, just like she always had. Because of that, Xu Qing had no issue with her tagging along.

Master Seventh wasn’t with them on the dharmaskiff. Considering this was a fishing expedition, he was following in secret. That was the best way to hook a fish.

In order to make the scenario seem more realistic, and also because Ding Xue’s aunt had praised her so highly... the trip had turned into a ‘mission’ for Ding Xue and Xu Qing. They were tasked with inspecting a small nation that adhered to Seven Blood Eyes, yet had experienced some gruish phenomena lately.

It wasn’t lost on Xu Qing that Master Seventh had another reason for sending Ding Xue along. It was a chaotic world, and though she had broken through to Foundation Establishment, she still didn’t have a life flame. Some hard training would do her a lot of good. And of course, the best kind of ‘hard training’ would involve seeing some of the true bitterness that existed in the world.

What was really a surprise to Xu Qing was that Zhao Zhongheng was nowhere to be seen. He didn’t ask about that, though. Taking the spirit notes and looking Ding Xue up and down, he calmly said, “Emperor-Receiving Prefecture surpasses South Phoenix in every way. Once outside the sect, there’s extreme danger everywhere. You need to be careful. Don’t touch anything you see off the ship, it could be poisonous.”

Xu Qing felt very comfortable around Ding Xue. After he was done speaking, he sat down cross-legged and closed his eyes. Xu Qing had disguised both his face and his aura. Master Seventh wanted a fishing expedition, so going out without a disguise would have been too obvious.

Ding Xue nodded. Inside, she was bursting with excitement. She had begged her aunt over and over again to be allowed to go on this trip, and it took a lot of convincing to make it happen. Seeing that Xu Qing was meditating, she was careful not to disturb him. Sitting cross-legged next to him, she

looked at the scenery and occasionally gazed at Xu Qing. Though he was in disguise, she knew exactly what he really looked like. Every time she thought about his delicately beautiful, almost bewitching face, she blushed. She had seen a lot of people after arriving in the Eight Sect Coalition megacity, but none of them were remotely as attractive as Xu Qing. And that just made her more determined to win his affections.

Three days passed.

For the most part, it was quiet on the dharmaskiff. Xu Qing meditated and Ding Xue watched him. Whenever he opened his eyes, she would take out some medicinal pills she had concocted to ask questions, and would accompany them with spirit notes.

Xu Qing was very happy with how they got along. With a very small sample of each medicinal pill, he could use his command of medicinal knowledge to provide her with useful pointers.

She always listened very carefully and would pay attention with adoring eyes. When she spoke, her voice was soft and pleasing to the ear, in such a way that those who heard her speak would instinctively want her to keep talking. That was something new, and when Xu Qing noticed it, it caused him to look at her a bit more closely.

Ding Xue was secretly delighted; her aunt had taught her how to talk like that. Meanwhile, she kept looking at the sky, as if seeking some sort of opportunity. Another seven days went by.

Eventually, the weather Ding Xue had been waiting for arrived. Thunder rumbled in the night, and lightning crackled. Rain started falling in buckets, turning everything outside of the dharmaskiff into a haze. Ding Xue's face went pale as she sat there. She wasn't very far from Xu Qing, yet also wasn't very close. Every time the thunder boomed, she would shiver.

Xu Qing opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Big Bro Xu Qing, my daddy and momma were never around, so when storms came during the night, I would just huddle in the corner. I know I'm a cultivator now, but hearing thunder always makes me scared. And rainy nights are so cold. But, I guess it's fine. I'll handle it. Keep working on your cultivation, Big Bro Xu Qing. Don't pay any attention to me." Ding Xue started out talking softly, and by the time she finished, her voice was little more than a tremulous whisper. "I guess I'm used to it."

She huddled into the corner looking incredibly pitiable.

After some thought, Xu Qing took out a gourd of alcohol and handed it to her.

"Huh?" Ding Xue said, stunned.

"Take a drink. It'll warm you up."

Ding Xue hesitantly accepted the alcohol. She looked at it for a moment, then looked back at Xu Qing. Finally, she gritted her teeth and took a big swig. She immediately started coughing.

Xu Qing quickly whipped out a medicinal pill. "This'll suppress the coughing."

Her expression blank, Ding Xue took the medicinal pill and looked back at Xu Qing. Thunder crashed, and she shivered.

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever as he looked out at the lightning and listened to the thunder and rain. For some reason, he found himself thinking about another rainy night about a month ago, on this very same boat, and a figure that sat valiantly on the railing. Eventually, he took out his willow flute, put it to his lips, and exhaled softly. The song drifted out onto the dharmaskiff and into the night. The crashing thunder was like a drum beat accompanying the flute.

The song contained the spirit of the jianghu, and at the same time, perfectly encapsulated Xu Qing's thoughts and feelings. As the music played, Ding Xue's eyes went wide with fascination. She stared at Xu Qing in his violet daoist robe, and the emerald flute beneath his sharply angled eyebrows and glittering eyes. Everything around her seemed to freeze in time. Before she knew it, the song had ended, dawn had come, and the rain had stopped.

Taking a deep breath to clear her thoughts, she quietly asked, "Big Bro Xu Qing, what's the name of that song?"

Xu Qing didn't answer. Standing, he looked out as the dawn light illuminated the surrounding lands. Specifically, he was looking at a small nation off in the distance. This was the destination they had been heading to.

The name of the nation was Thinking of Eyes. It was a human nation that had long been independent. But things changed when Seven Blood Eyes arrived.

A few generations ago, the founder of this nation had been an elder in Seven Blood Eyes. Because of his aptitude, he had been forced to serve in the coalition, and had not been allowed to return. When he grew old, he chose to settle down and found a nation. Eventually, he passed away in meditation, never having seen Seven Blood Eyes again. Because of all that, Seven Blood Eyes was naturally interested in the affairs of the nation he had founded.

Originally, the mission had been intended for a two-flame disciple. But given that Master Seventh wanted Xu Qing to travel alone outside the sect, he had seen to it that the mission was assigned to him.

As the first rays of the morning sun lit the small nation, the commoners were already awake and working. Smoke spiraled into the air from homes here and there. From the peace and quiet, it seemed this was a rare nation that managed to keep itself safe. Of course, much of that had to do with the way that the Seven Blood Eyes elder had set up protective spell formations in the area. Because of that, not even a Gold Core cultivator could enter without permission.

Unfortunately, the spell formations were clearly starting to malfunction, allowing grues to slip inside.

Xu Qing had already read the file and knew the basic details. Twenty days ago, ninety-nine people had been viciously murdered, after which they turned into walking corpses that wreaked havoc in the area.

Because this nation was attached to Seven Blood Eyes, the sect had sent a Sixth Peak disciple to investigate. Though the disciple didn't have a life flame, he was far beyond the compare of any rogue cultivators. Thanks to his decisive actions, the culprit was quickly identified and executed.

Ten days ago, the exact same event happened again, and the culprit was again identified. He looked exactly the same as the person who had been executed.

That was when the Sixth Peak disciple realized that grues were involved. He had reported the matter to the sect, requesting that backup be sent before another ten days passed. According to his analysis, the event would occur in another ten days.

Xu Qing arrived on that very tenth day.

When he arrived, he didn't notify the Sixth Peak disciple or the king of the nation. He sent his dharmaskiff well away from the nation's borders and then disembarked with Ding Xue. Covering their tracks, they returned to the nation's capital city.

All of the citizens were mortal. However, thanks to the spell formations, they looked a lot more hale and healthy than other mortals Xu Qing had seen. They all had mutagen in them, but none of them had so much that their bodies were starting to rot away. People walking the streets even smiled and laughed.

Ding Xue looked around curiously. She had never been to a human nation like this, but at the same time, she wasn't stupid. She had read about the outside world, and knew that they were dealing with a grue. Because of that, she simply followed Xu Qing's lead and didn't disturb him.

Xu Qing had brought a low-level invisibility talisman with him, so no one under the Foundation Establishment level could see him or detect the fluctuations of the talisman. Two hours passed in which Xu Qing walked around and observed. Eventually, he stopped outside one particular mansion. He looked down at his shadow, which responded with fluctuations indicating that there was a grue inside the mansion.

To other people, this would be a difficult mission. But to Xu Qing, it was simple. Without hesitation, he strode inside the mansion. He was met with a sinister wind. Xu Qing didn't even need to issue orders. His shadow spread out and devoured the sinister wind. A moment later, chewing sounds could be heard, and the grue was gone.

Xu Qing stood there waiting. A short time later, his shadow sent him information indicating that there was another grue in the area.

"Don't tell me we're dealing with another Gruegloom," Xu Qing murmured. Taking Ding Xue with him, he followed the shadow to the location of the next grue. The shadow devoured it, then sent Xu Qing more information.

"... not... single... treasure... simullll..."

As Xu Qing frowned, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior flew out to help.

"Milord, what Little Shadow means is that it didn't just eat a single grue. There were two. And the flavor was different from that Gruegloom, so these are most likely not Grueglooms. More likely, we're dealing with an item. An item that creates grue simulacres."

Chapter 302: The Patriarch Earns Credit

"An item?" As Xu Qing thought about the situation, the shadow sent some more specific fluctuations.

“Milord... wait... earn credit...”

There was no need for Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior to translate. Xu Qing knew what the shadow meant. It was telling him to wait, that it could handle the situation and earn some credit for itself.

Xu Qing nodded.

The patriarch immediately felt a sense of crisis filling him, so he anxiously said, “Milord, the shadow is young and naive. I should probably go along to keep an eye on things.”

Xu Qing agreed with his assessment. A moment later, his shadow vanished into the ground, and the patriarch sent the black skewer flying off out of sight.

Xu Qing sat down cross-legged on the roof of the building and waited. Ding Xue blinked a few times. She couldn't see his shadow, and the skewer could move at speeds comparable to the two-flame level, so she couldn't see it either. However, given that Xu Qing was sitting down, she sat down next to him and took out a box of pastries. [1]

Xu Qing looked at her.

“Big Bro Xu Qing, I made all these snacks personally. I'm not sure how good they are. I probably need some practice. Before I make them for my aunt, uncle, and grandpa, do you mind helping me try them? Maybe you can give me some advice to make them better.” [2]

Out of habit, Ding Xue produced a spirit note.

After a moment of thought, Xu Qing sent his senses out into the area. Though he couldn't find any trace of his Master, he had the sense that his Master was watching him. Declining to accept the spirit note, he tried one of the pastries.

“Not bad.”

Ding Xue seemed happy to hear that. Sitting there, she looked around, lowered her voice, and said, “Big Bro Xu Qing, when are we going to go capture that grue? Based on the file I read, it's going to kill more people soon....”

“It's being captured right now,” Xu Qing replied, looking off into the distance.

In another part of the city, Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior had been following the shadow. However, the shadow obviously didn't like the patriarch, and had hidden itself from him.

“You crappy shadow! Do you really think I'm going to let you get any more credit? You just watch and see how awesome I am!” Snorting coldly in his heart, the patriarch changed directions, then took human form. He changed his clothing, though, making him look exactly like the local commoners. Then he disappeared into the crowd.

Time passed. The shadow moved quickly, uncovering one grue after another. Every one it found, it quickly devoured. However, for every grue that died, a new one popped up. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to the way they appeared. They came out of nowhere, and seemed impossible to get rid of.

However, there was an upside to it all. By the time evening came, the slaughter which had been expected didn't come to pass.

As the moon rose, more and more grues appeared. It almost seemed as if they wouldn't rest until the slaughter had been accomplished. Eventually, Xu Qing, who still sat on the roof of the building, had a very serious look in his eyes. Now that it was nighttime, the city around him seemed increasingly sinister. The shadow was busier than ever, zipping around devouring grues left and right.

My interference has caused a change in the grues' behavior...

Next to him, Ding Xue could sense a change in the atmosphere, and felt nervous.

Suddenly, a black light shot out of nowhere and came to hover in front of Xu Qing. It was a black iron skewer. A stream of divine will emerged from it to transmit speech to Xu Qing.

"Milord, I found the source. As expected, the immature Little Shadow only understands violence and extermination. It doesn't realize that these grue simulacra only get more worked up when they're stimulated. If you really want to destroy them, you have to find their source.

"That source is extremely mysterious and strange. The clues don't have anything to do with what's going on right now. You have to go back to a few random incidents in the past to figure out the truth.

"Your humble servant took human form and did some investigating in the city. I changed identities and forms a few times to find the information I needed. Two years ago, a very skilled traveling physician passed through. His treatment method was very unique. He would give a mirror to the patient and have them place it on their nightstand."

Xu Qing's eyes narrowed. "How long was he here, and how many people did he treat with the mirror?"

"Milord, your humble servant investigated everything very thoroughly. The physician was here for three months. At that time, Seven Blood Eyes had not yet joined the coalition, so the coalition disciples stationed here had no idea what was going on.

"Your humble servant went to a few of the houses where the mirror was used in treatment. Believe it or not, even a cultivator who looks at one of those mirrors wouldn't notice anything unusual about it. But for you, milord, it would be a very different story.

"And being at your side for so many years, I've also learned a thing or two. Therefore, I noticed the evidence of a spirit automaton."

Xu Qing looked at him.

“Your humble servant knows exactly what you mean. Following the evidence, I eventually found a mirror hanging from the eaves in the mansion of a local noble. That’s the source of the problem.

“If I’m correct, that physician was actually an evil cultivator, and he chose this place to feed and grow his mirror. Given that the mirror is here, he has to be close by in hiding. That way he’ll be able to react if anyone tries to take away his treasure.”

Hearing all this, Xu Qing opened his mouth to speak.

Before he could say anything, the patriarch quickly said, “Your humble servant knows exactly what you mean. I went out of the city to look for possible hiding spots, and found a low-lying mountain that has a perfect view of the city. I detected cultivation base fluctuations coming from that mountain, which indicates there’s a cultivator present there. However, he’s in a state of slumber, probably because of the side effects of the technique he practices. Not wanting to beat the grass and startle the snake, your humble servant didn’t get too close.”

Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior didn’t make any mention of earning credit for what he had done. As a result, Xu Qing was very pleased with everything he had done. He didn’t let one drop of water leak out. At the same time, though the shadow was indeed working hard, its actions had thrown the city into chaos with grues.

“You’ve earned credit!” Xu Qing transmitted.

The patriarch was so excited the iron skewer trembled. For a long time now, he hadn’t dared to say a thing. The shadow had very unique capabilities which had allowed it to shine, and slowly but surely became a rising star with his lord and master. He had worried that, if he said the wrong thing, the Fiendish Xu wouldn’t hesitate to turn him into cannon fodder. Now that he had earned some credit for his work, he felt a bit more at ease.

“Lead the way,” Xu Qing transmitted. The iron skewer thrummed as it shot off in one particular direction.

Xu Qing immediately followed, and though Ding Xue had no idea what was going on, she could see how serious he looked, so she quickly packed up the box of pastries and hurried after him.

Xu Qing soon arrived at the noble’s mansion. Sending out his senses, he found no fluctuations to indicate a cultivator was present. Making sure not to disturb anyone present, he quickly located the mirror. At a glance, he could tell it was very unique.

It didn’t have any mutagen on it. But when the wind blew, it swayed slightly, Xu Qing found his eyes hurting. He tapped into his life lamps, and the umbrellas provided protection. His eyes returned to normal.

Xu Qing was surprised that, given his battle prowess and the level of his fleshly body, he still felt pain from the mirror. It made it obvious that the thing was very extraordinary. He reached out and grabbed the mirror. But then the mirror suddenly fought back violently, slipping out of Xu Qing’s grasp, and then flying up into the air.

A moment later, Xu Qing appeared in midair, his four life flames burning, his two life lamps active, and his imperial-class technique ready. He had the battle prowess of seven life flames as he reached out toward the flying mirror.

Given that level of battle prowess, the mirror couldn't fight back. Xu Qing grabbed it, then sent his divine will inside to seal it. At exactly the same moment, in the houses of hundreds of families in the city, mirrors on their nightstands shattered.

As for all of the random grues in the city, they shivered and vanished into nothing.

Meanwhile, in the low-lying mountain outside the city, a beam of light shot out of a hidden mansion grotto. Within that light was a white-haired old man, his expression vicious. Strangely, his skin seemed to be flaking off, as if he were in the middle of molting.

He radiated the powerful fluctuations of a Gold Core cultivation base with one heavenly palace. Looking over at the city, he roared, "What good-for-nothing fool dared to meddle with my affairs?"

As his voice echoed like thunder, causing the entire city to shake, Xu Qing appeared. After eyeing the old man coldly, he shot in the direction of the mountain. He moved so quickly that the Gold Core old man's face flickered, and his heart started pounding.

Xu Qing arrived, slamming into him with a land-shaking, mountain-rocking force. Blood sprayed out of the old man's mouth as he was flung backward to smash into the low-lying mountain. As the mountain collapsed, rock and debris crumbled everywhere, the old man's face filled with shock and disbelief.

"This battle prowess...."

Xu Qing's expression was placid, but his eyes were as cold as ice. Only a cultivator with two heavenly palaces could possibly be a match for him. Given that he had seven-flame battle prowess, defeating someone with only one heavenly palace would be as easy as turning over his hand.

The old man could sense that. Still coughing up blood, he unhesitatingly fled, tapping into an evil technique to become a blood-colored shadow that accelerated dramatically.

However, that was when the golden crow manifested behind Xu Qing. Its piercing cry caused the old man's pupils to constrict as Xu Qing closed in on him.

"You're Xu Qing from the Eight Sect Coalition!!"

The old man's scalp tingled when he saw the golden crow and realized who Xu Qing was. It was too late for him to escape. Xu Qing caught up and unleashed a fist strike, and the old man had no choice but to block it with his heavenly palace.

The palace shattered, revealing a shriveled gold core. Letting loose a piercing cry, the golden crow devoured it. The old man screamed as he coughed up blood like mad. Xu Qing's hand, wreathed in balefire, latched onto the top of his head. And then balefire spread out to cover his entire body. His screams echoed high into the sky!

Rogue cultivators simply couldn't compare to cultivators from a powerful sect. And that wasn't to mention that the old man only had three life flames when he stepped into Gold Core. From his foundation to his aptitude to his techniques, he simply didn't exist on the same level as Xu Qing. As

balefire consumed him, his soul was extracted and sucked into Xu Qing, where Xu Qing imprisoned it in his first dharma aperture.

However, as Xu Qing did that, his expression flickered. Thunderous rumbling suddenly filled the area as seven figures descended from the clouds above. All of them had greedy expressions on their faces as they closed in on Xu Qing.

Another majestic figure appeared, behind whom glittered three heavenly palaces, surrounding their face with a bright, holy aura.

“Xu Qing, I’ve been waiting for you to leave the Eight Sect Coalition.”

Chapter 303: Master, Help!

Xu Qing had no idea if these people were at all connected to the old man he had just killed. Their clothing didn’t provide any clues. Whether it was the seven people rushing toward him, or the middle-aged man with the three palaces, he didn’t recognize any of them. That said, he didn’t get the sense that they were working with the old man. It seemed more like they had just been lying in wait for him here. Most likely, they had been waiting to make sure he didn’t have any dao protectors before finally making a move. To do that, they must have had a way to keep tabs on him. And only people from the coalition would be capable of getting information like that. Given his disguise, there was no way any outsider would know about his mission and destination.

Though he was fast enough to keep distance between himself and the seven pursuers, there was no way he could move faster than someone in the three-palace level.

“Think you can get away?” the three-palace cultivator said in a sinister voice. Then he moved so quickly Xu Qing could hardly track his movement. Bursting with killing intent, he appeared right in front of Xu Qing.

In that moment of crisis, Xu Qing’s Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown appeared, creating a protective power that formed a barrier between him and the three-palace cultivator. A boom rang out, and blood oozed out of the corners of Xu Qing’s mouth. Though he could at least defend himself against three-palace power, he would sustain injuries doing so.

The difference between the levels of power was just too great. Xu Qing’s pupils constricted as, without the slightest hesitation, he started fleeing at top speed.

The three-palace cultivator hovered in place, coldly watching him retreat. He made no attempt to give chase, and instead scanned the area to confirm whether or not Xu Qing had a dao protector.

The others, in contrast, chased after him with avarice in their eyes. The pursuers all had extraordinary cultivation bases, all of them being Gold Core experts with heavenly palaces. Five of them had one palace, and the remaining two had two palaces. The power of their magical techniques caused the ground to quake, and the noise caused ripples and distortions in the air. The shockwaves caused the surrounding mountainous landscape to crumble.

Being beset by so many attacks, Xu Qing’s hands flew into incantation gestures, which caused streams of water vapor to transform into roaring sea beasts. As the booms rang out, Xu Qing

coughed up a mouthful of blood, and his eyes filled with killing intent. He was facing a lot of opponents, and each one of them was extraordinary. There was obviously no way he could fight back against all of them at the same time.

All he could do was defend himself and try to get away as quickly as possible. Already, he looked a bit broken-down. The defenses provided by the Violet-Heaven Supreme-Limitless Crown were quivering under the assault of so many magical techniques.

From a distance, it was possible to see terrifying fluctuations spreading out, the power of the Gold Core level creating a deadly encirclement that slowly surrounded Xu Qing. His expression was very unsightly as he unleashed the Ninefold Tsumani, creating massive wave after wave that spread out in all directions.

Except, right then, a piercing sound shot forth from the three-palace Gold Core cultivator.

He approached Xu Qing, radiating a threatening air, surrounded by dazzling light that made him seem almost holy. And yet, his eyes still flickered with suspicion.

“You really don’t have a dao protector?”

Just then, Xu Qing looked up, his eyes wild, and shouted, “Master! Master, help!!”

The moment the words left his mouth, his enemies’ faces fell, and they turned to look in the direction he had just shouted. Xu Qing took advantage of that moment to push his cultivation base as hard as he could, and burst away at top speed. He also produced his dharmaskiff, giving him an even bigger boost. Tapping into its godliness, he became a bright beam of light.

“Are you kidding me?” the three-palace cultivator sneered. And yet, he still didn’t give chase.

All of a sudden, ripples erupted in front of the fleeing Xu Qing, and a massive illusory hand appeared, which smashed into his dharmaskiff.

A boom rang out as the dharmaskiff self-detonated. And yet, it didn’t completely explode. Xu Qing quickly shifted directions and started fleeing again.

The giant hand disappeared, and in its place appeared a ruddy-faced daoist priest in a black robe. Shockingly, he was also a three-palace cultivator. He also hovered there, suspiciously looking around, and didn’t chase Xu Qing.

Yet again, ripples appeared in front of Xu Qing. This time a huge face appeared. It had no hair, and its eyes were completely bloodshot as it viciously opened its mouth and tried to bite Xu Qing’s dharmaskiff.

A boom rang out as the dharmaskiff yet again unleashed the power of self-detonation. Heart sinking with regret, Xu Qing put it away, gritted his teeth, and started fleeing in a new direction.

Another enemy showed his face. This time it was a burly, middle-aged man who appeared right in his path. Grinning viciously, he released the power of three heavenly palaces to crush down on Xu Qing.

Blood sprayed out of Xu Qing's mouth as the Supreme-Limitless Crown's defenses rippled violently. Now that Xu Qing was incapable of fleeing, the original three-palace middle-aged man approached him.

At the moment, Xu Qing was surrounded by four cultivators who were all in the three-palace level. Meanwhile, dozens of rogue cultivators flew toward him from various areas nearby. Astonishingly, all of them had been hiding in the nation of Thinking of Eyes.

Xu Qing's face turned grim as he looked around. Suddenly, he produced an entropic teleportation talisman and crushed it. Instantly, the power of teleportation surged out, and Xu Qing vanished.

Surprisingly, none of the Gold Core experts rushed away to try to find him. The greed and killing intent on their faces disappeared, and then, in an even more shocking development, they began to turn blurry from head to toe. Only a moment later, they disappeared as if they had been erased from existence.

Everything went silent. About an hour later, one area of the ground suddenly started to ripple. Then, a pock-faced old man appeared in that spot, clad in a green daoist robe. After studying his surroundings carefully, his eyes began to shine.

It was all an illusion, but those attacks were real. Based on everything that happened, it seems that Xu Qing really doesn't have a dao protector following him around. But why is he so brazen as to go around alone without protection? That said, he did leave under disguise. If I hadn't known he was coming here, it would have been difficult to lock onto his position.

After some more thought, the old man vanished.

Meanwhile, in the wilderness some distance away, Xu Qing materialized. As soon as he appeared, he coughed up a mouthful of blood, then took out a jade slip to send a voice message to the sect.

Before he could, the ground beneath him sank down, revealing a massive mouth that opened to devour him.

Face falling, he flew up into the sky. Rumbling sounds echoed beneath him as the gigantic mouth started moving up, revealing a huge giant, fully 3,000 meters tall.

Xu Qing backed up at top speed. However, in the blink of an eye, the air behind him rippled as the pock-faced old man appeared. As he took a step forward, five heavenly palaces materialized behind him, creating an immense force of pressure that weighed down on Xu Qing.

Xu Qing shivered as blood erupted from his mouth and his defenses vibrated wildly. Without any hesitation, he pulled out another entropic teleportation talisman and prepared to crush it.

But then, a calm voice echoed out from behind him.

"Be sealed!"

Instantly, a huge golden spell formation appeared in the dome of heaven, which crushed down violently on everything in the area.

Xu Qing's teleportation failed, suppressed out of existence by that force from above. He had no way to fly either, and thus began sinking down toward the ground. Face pale, he looked up at the golden

formation to see a red-robed boy sitting cross-legged atop it. Shockingly, five heavenly palaces hovered above him.

As the formation rotated, cracking sounds rang out from inside Xu Qing. The defenses from the Supreme-Limitless Crown wavered, and he dropped closer to the ground. Then, a boom echoed out as he landed down below.

Suddenly, innumerable strands of black hair appeared around him, wrapping him up. At the same time, a corrosive force began to seep into the defenses of the Supreme-Limitless Crown.

As Xu Qing's defenses dissolved, the boy looked at the green-robed man and the giant, and said, "There really isn't a dao protector. The rest of you were being too cautious. Besides, even if he did have a dao protector, we're all just here in clone form. Worst case scenario, we lose our clones. Who cares? Ah, whatever. In the end, it doesn't matter. We're going to accomplish our mission no matter what happens. Even if Seven Blood Eyes is on a little fishing expedition, we're ready for that."

He performed an incantation gesture, and majestic power erupted from him, creating an exterminating force that descended directly toward Xu Qing.

Right during that moment of extreme crisis, an irritated voice echoed out.

"Three people? That's it? And you're all clones? Talk about boring!"

Master Seventh stepped out of nowhere right in front of Xu Qing. He flicked his sleeve, and the hair surrounding Xu Qing disintegrated. He turned to look at the giant, whose face fell. Then the giant's body trembled, and before it could even try to fight back, it exploded. Next, Master Seventh looked at the pock-faced old man. The old man shivered, and a moment later, collapsed into ashes. Finally was the boy, whose eyes were as wide as saucers. When Master Seventh looked at him, he vibrated for a moment before exploding into a blood rain. All of them were wiped out of existence by Master Seventh's mere gaze.

Xu Qing no longer looked grim-faced like before. His expression was back to normal, and his wounds vanished. As he looked up into the sky, he heard Master Seventh continuing to speak.

"I can understand it, though," he said coolly. "We're not dealing with idiots, after all. But even though they came as clones, do they really think that means they can get away scot-free?"

He made a grasping motion in the direction where the giant had exploded. The air there distorted, as though time itself were flowing differently. The chunks of flesh and blood flew back together, once again forming into the shape of a giant, whose eyes shone with terror and disbelief.

"You...."

Before he could finish speaking, Master Seventh chopped his hand down!

A twang rang out like the sound of a taut thread being severed. Then, shockingly, an actual thread appeared on the giant's head, almost like silk. The thread was collapsing, starting from the giant's head, and moving in a specific direction. As the giant stood there agape, a bloodcurdling scream rang out from nowhere. Then the giant slumped. Blood sprayed out of his mouth, and he screamed miserably as his body collapsed into pieces.

This time, the body vanished into nothing. What was more, the true body of the clone, wherever it was hiding, had also been wiped out of existence by Master Seventh's secret magic.

Xu Qing's eyes went wide. If a clone had five heavenly palaces, he had to wonder about the cultivation base of the true body. Presumably, it had to be in the Nascent Soul level.

As Xu Qing wondered about that, Master Seventh turned his attention to the pock-faced old man. The same thing happened.

When the old man formed anew, his face fell and he screamed, "Forgive me, Master Seventh! I can —"

Before he could say anything more, Master Seventh waved his hand sharply to collect the man's soul.

As Xu Qing watched that happen with regret, he tentatively said, "Master, is there any chance you could give me some of those souls to imprison in my dharma apertures?"

"Hunters hunt for themselves. I'm not responsible for giving you prey. I'll give you weapons and abilities. Nothing more."

He pinched his fingers together, and a thread appeared, coming out of the old man's head. As it collapsed, another miserable scream rang out. The true form and the clone collapsed together, and were then gathered up by Master Seventh. Next, Master Seventh flicked his sleeve, and the blood where the boy had exploded gathered together. The boy appeared, his face full of extreme terror.

"How could someone in Spirit Trove do something like this? How could you trace a clone back to its true form? W-what... what is your real cultivation base?"

He backed up and waved his hands out in front of him, causing a host of flowing spell formations to spring up. Then he fled. However, Master Seventh just waved his hand, causing the boy's true form to collapse. His clone also vanished, collected up by Master Seventh.

When Xu Qing realized he wasn't going to get a single one of the souls, he thought back to what the Captain had said back at that immortal hot spring, about Master being soft-hearted. Trying to sound wronged like the Captain had, Xu Qing said, "Master, my dharmaskiff self-detonated twice in a row! I also used two entropic teleportation talismans!"

Master Seventh smiled mysteriously at him, then nodded. "Since you put it that way, I suppose I should make it up to you."

He waved his hand, and the vanishing clone of the boy shivered, and a discarnate soul flew out. Master Seventh grabbed it, crushed it into fifty-nine fragments of soul power, and then pushed it into Xu Qing.

Xu Qing shivered as the fifty-nine fragments of soul power, which were equivalent to the soul of a Gold Core cultivator with one heavenly palace, rushed to dozens of his dharma apertures, causing their flames to burn even brighter.

Chapter 304: A Good Study Method

Fifty-nine portions of soul power swept through Xu Qing, causing 59 dharma apertures to erupt with power to suppress the power. Because there was so much, it would take time to fully assimilate. Therefore, Xu Qing dropped into a cross-legged position and began working.

Meanwhile, Master Seventh glanced around and puckered his lips.

“I can’t believe it was shrimps like this that came. How boring.” He flicked his sleeve, causing what appeared to be an ordinary dharmaskiff to appear. In shape and size, it looked very similar to Xu Qing’s, except it was slightly more dilapidated. That said, it had very strong godliness flowing through it.

Ding Xue lay on the deck of the dharmaskiff. Obviously, Master Seventh took her away before Xu Qing started fighting with the old man. Having just regained consciousness, she sat up with a dazed look on her face. Then she noticed Master Seventh down below, and her jaw nearly dropped.

“Uncle?” Then she noticed Xu Qing, sweat dripping down his face as he sat cross-legged in meditation next to Master Seventh. Seeing the invisible heat radiating off of him, she hesitated. “What happened, Uncle? W-what... what are you doing here? And what happened to Big Bro Xu Qing?”

She blinked a few times, and suddenly had a very bad feeling which manifested in a bright red blush.

No way. Don’t tell me that Uncle was following us the whole time. Does that mean he saw everything I did...?

Ding Xue’s blush grew even deeper and redder. The idea of an adult in her family seeing her act so coquettishly was absolutely mortifying to her.

When Master Seventh saw the look on her face, and her blush, he laughed heartily. He had, of course, seen everything.

“Uncle!” she snapped, stamping her foot and pouting.

Master Seventh cleared his throat. “I saw nothing! Nothing at all!”

Considering that Master Seventh had no male heir, it was no surprise that he loved spoiling his niece. Still chuckling, he flicked his sleeve to wrap up Xu Qing, then flew up to the boat. Once aboard, he tossed Xu Qing off to one side of the dharmaskiff. Then he waved his hand, causing a soul pearl to appear on his palm. Just as he was about to devour it, he noticed Ding Xue looking worriedly at Xu Qing. Obviously she was concerned with how Master Seventh had roughly tossed Xu Qing to the side.

“He’s tough,” Master Seventh said, trying to hide the sinking feeling in his heart.

“Don’t worry.”

Stepping to Master Seventh and grabbing his arm, Ding Xue pouted again and said, “Uncle, don’t forget that Xu Qing is still young. He’s still growing! Can’t you be a little less rough? Okayyyy? Once we’re back, I’ll make sure to say a lot of good things about you to Aunt.”

Master Seventh looked at Ding Xue, then at Xu Qing, who hadn't reacted at all, and was still assimilating the soul power. Finally, he sighed and mused that now he was finally starting to understand what his highest-ranking apprentice had to deal with all the time. Nodding helplessly, he took the soul pearl and pressed it into Ding Xue's forehead, then patted her gently.

"Alright, alright. You go and work on your cultivation. That soul pearl should keep you going all the way until you reach the one-flame level."

"Thank you, Uncle." Looking very happy, Ding Xue sat down cross-legged next to Xu Qing, closed her eyes, and started meditating.

Master Seventh looked at the two of them and sighed a few more times. Then he walked to the prow and stood there, hands clasped behind his back. After scanning the area, he snorted coldly and then piloted the ship off into the distance.

Sometime after he left, the air distorted and two figures appeared, clad in long, golden robes. Both had fantastic sword energy swirling around them, but also bitter expressions on their faces.

"That was the sect leader of Seven Blood Eyes...."

"There's no way we could defend ourselves against someone like him. Yet he didn't make a move on us. Presumably it was for the sake of the coalition. And he also wants us to take a warning back with us."

Both of these people were from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect.

"Xu Qing is already extraordinary on his own. But with backing like this.... It's only going to get harder and harder to deal with him. Besides, after this, you'll never be able to tell if he's really alone. You'll always wonder if there's some powerful expert hiding out ready to help him."

After exchanging a glance, the two shook their heads and departed.

Sometime after they left, another area rippled, and more auras spread out. There were several figures that appeared, and all of them exchanged glances and sighed.

Unlike the previous two cultivators who had appeared, these were not members of the coalition. Instead, they were rogue cultivators native to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. They had been given information that the Eight Sect Coalition's two-lamp disciple Xu Qing was going outside of the sect, and had hurried over in the hopes of taking advantage of the situation. However, now that they knew the details of Xu Qing's background, none of them would ever dare to casually make a move on him. What they had seen had frightened them to the core, and they were thinking the exact same thing as the two cultivators from the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect.

"So this is how Seven Blood Eyes does things...."

"They were sending a warning to everyone secretly watching."

"Besides, the Eight Sect Coalition recently announced to all of their protectorates that... if anyone kills Xu Qing, they'll pay an astonishing price."

“Life lamps are great. But when it comes to your actual life, you only have one.”

With such thoughts on their minds, they dispersed. And of course, it wouldn't be long before they started spreading stories about what just happened. This was the protection that Master Seventh was giving to Xu Qing. And it was also a warning to everyone.

Time passed. Seven days later, in the evening, Xu Qing opened his eyes. He was still on the dharmaskiff. The moment his eyes opened, 60 of his dharma apertures surged with fire, and rumbling like thunder filled his mind.

Right now he had souls packed into half of his 120 dharma apertures. As a result, his cultivation base had advanced. What was more, that fire had changed. His balefire now had something mournful in it, which was the agony and rancor of the souls that were constantly burning. It was none other than the Stygian Flame, a mighty fire that contained emotions. Once it began to burn an enemy, it would affect their emotions, causing fluctuations and potentially destabilizing their soul.

“How do you feel?” Master Seventh said coolly from the prow, looking over his shoulder at Xu Qing.

“Many thanks, Master!” Xu Qing said, getting to his feet and bowing with clasped hands.

“Going forward, you'll be a lot safer when you go out. And now, there's somewhere else I want to take you, which is the real purpose of this outing. I'm going to give you... a Gold Core technique.”

Hearing that, Xu Qing's expression turned very serious.

“Unfortunately it's not completely ready yet, so don't get anxious. I still need to put some finishing touches on it.” With that, Master Seventh glanced at Ding Xue, who was still meditating off to the side. Waving his hand, he created an extra level of protection around her, then stepped off the dharmaskiff. “Come with me.”

Xu Qing followed, and the two of them descended toward the mountainous forest below.

They weren't in the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, but the land was still rugged, and given that evening was falling, everything seemed particularly sinister.

From above, it was just possible to see a sect within the trees. It wasn't a large sect, but it still had three mountain peaks within its borders. There were currently a variety of disciples hurrying about from peak to peak.

“This is the Heaven Spirit Sect,” Master Seventh said. “They're not part of the coalition. They're just an average sect, not too strong, not too weak. That said, they have some very unique techniques.” Master Seventh led Xu Qing toward the sect.

A curious expression appeared on Xu Qing's face as his Master led him right through the sect's defensive spell formation. Once inside, they would occasionally pass some of the sect disciples, except none of them reacted. It was as if the disciples couldn't see them.

Master Seventh led Xu Qing to the sect's Scripture Pavilion. There were two Gold Core cultivators standing guard, who seemed oblivious to the two people who walked right past them. Once inside, Master Seventh went straight to the high-level section that ordinary disciples weren't allowed to enter. None of the warding spells in this place seemed to work on him. Apparently, they couldn't even detect him. Master Seventh seemed very at-home in the pavilion as he waved his hand, causing jade slips to float out from the shelf. One by one, he examined their contents.

Xu Qing watched quietly, not saying a word.

Master Seventh turned and glared at him. "What are you staring at? I created an entire magical technique myself, years ago, just to help me study!"

Xu Qing nodded, then quickly grabbed a jade slip and started going through the information on it.

Thus, Master and apprentice immersed themselves in study on the top floor of the Heaven Spirit Sect's Scripture Pavilion. Master Seventh studied hard. Xu Qing studied even harder. In fact, when Xu Qing found some jade slips that pertained to plants and vegetation native to Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, he became completely immersed in knowledge.

A few days later, Master Seventh finished with the final jade slip he wanted to examine. He sighed. "Not bad. Not bad at all. As it turns out, this Heaven Spirit Sect has some marvelous ways of controlling dharma force. It's too bad they're so horrible at everything else."

Xu Qing nodded in agreement. He had found a lot of information about plants and vegetation, but unfortunately, none of it was very clear or detailed.

"It's the same with the medicinal codices here," he said. "It seems that some years ago, they had some cultivators skilled in the dao of medicine. But after that time, few people cared to expand on their knowledge. There are almost no supplementary notes in any of the codices. That said, at least I know a bit more about the local plants and vegetation."

Master Seventh nodded, his eyes shining in admiration. "A love of knowledge is a good thing to have."

Clasping his hands behind his back, he led Xu Qing out of the Scripture Pavilion.

On the way back, Xu Qing hesitated briefly, then asked, "Master, I really do love knowledge and learning. Is there any chance you could teach me that magical technique related to study?"

Master Seventh glanced at him, and the admiration in his eyes grew even stronger. He nodded in satisfaction. "Yes, but your cultivation base isn't high enough yet. Once you're in Nascent Soul, I'll teach it to you. Now, let's hurry back. There are some more sects I want to take you to visit. I've been doing a lot of research about your Gold Core technique. The plan is to go to all of these sects and combine various ideas into something solely for you. Going forward, I want to see you really work hard!"

Xu Qing nodded. With that, he followed Master Seventh out of the sect, then up in the air and back onto the dharmaskiff.

Once back at the prow, Master Seventh beckoned at Xu Qing. "However much we cultivators learn and study, we should never forget to be grateful. Remember that. Now, come. Let's offer respect to

this sect for the help they've provided by means of their Scripture Pavilion. This way, if we ever become enemies in the future, we can kill them with a clean conscience."

With that, Master Seventh clasped hands and bowed deeply to the sect below.

Xu Qing was struck by how seriously his Master took these matters. Taking his words to heart, he also clasped hands and bowed deeply.

With that, they left.

When they arrived, no one noticed them. When they left, it was without a trace.

The dharmaskiff zipped through the sky and disappeared over the horizon. A few days later, they stopped at another sect. Master Seventh yet again took Xu Qing down to the sect's Scripture Pavilion, where they focused completely on studying.

Time passed. Bit by bit, the dharmaskiff headed east, eventually entering the Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains.

Along the way, they stopped at one sect after another.

When they were in the forty-seventh Scripture Pavilion, Master Seventh looked at Xu Qing immersed in study, and couldn't help but say, "To people like us, there is no horizon on the sea of learning. You're doing excellent, Fourth Sib. Back when I took your Third Elder Brother on a trip like this, that ignoramus proved that he hates studying. And your Eldest Brother is the same. All he did was keep a record of all the treasures in the sects we visited. Only you, Fourth Sib, have proven to be like your Master!"

Xu Qing wasn't one to react excitedly to praise. Upon hearing his Master's words, he put down the jade slip he had been looking at. After a moment of thought, he quietly said, "Master, do you know of any sects in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture that specialize in the dao of poison? I'm very interested in studying more about that."

Chapter 305: Gruegloom Daoseizing

When Xu Qing asked to study the dao of poison without the slightest nervousness or apprehension, Master Seventh's admiration grew. Throwing his head back, he laughed heartily.

"Of course there are such places. Come on, I'll take you." With that, he led Xu Qing out of the sect and back to the dharmaskiff.

Master Seventh didn't need to say anything this time. Xu Qing somberly turned to the sect below and bowed deeply. Master Seventh looked pleased as he did the same thing.

Meanwhile, Ding Xue was still working on her cultivation. Apparently, her aptitude was nothing out of the ordinary, so even with the help of that soul pearl, she was still having difficulty opening her dharma apertures.

Time passed in which Master Seventh and Xu Qing focused on study. A month later, after the dharmaskiff was deep into the eastern part of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture, Master Seventh felt he had reached the point where he could create a technique for Xu Qing. That was when the session of study reached its end.

Xu Qing had benefited a lot when it came to plants and vegetation, as well as the dao of poison. They had been to several evil poison sects, wherein Xu Qing had experienced some major breakthroughs thanks to their poison codices. One area where he had benefited most was understanding of planning and developing new poisons. He had learned a technique in which *'the fleshly body is the pill furnace and the blood is a curse.'* It was a method that could be used to concoct very deadly concoctions.

However, all of that was secondary as far as Xu Qing was concerned. What really caused his eyes to light up was a small black sphere that currently rested on Master Seventh's palm.

It was made of innumerable magical symbols that pulsed with terrifying fluctuations. What was even more amazing was that, when merely looking at it, it seemed to contain immense amounts of information, ready to pour into the mind. [1]

"Fourth Sib," Master Seventh said solemnly, "give me the Gruegloom heart from that girl Sima Ru." [2]

Xu Qing's eyes turned serious. He remembered his Master telling him that the heart would be useful to him. Taking it out of his bag of holding, he handed it to his Master.

Master Seventh flicked his sleeve, sending the Gruegloom heart into the black sphere. Instantly, the black sphere started pulsing rapidly, almost like it was alive. At the same time, it emitted hair-raising howls.

"This is the technique I've created for you, Fourth Sib. It perfectly corresponds to your personality. It will brand itself into your mind. It's a legacy transmission method that I picked up by studying imperial-class techniques!"

The howling from the black sphere ceased as it transformed into a black liquid. Master Seventh waved his hand, sending it toward Xu Qing.

"Lift your head!"

As Master Seventh's words echoed out, Xu Qing lifted his head and looked at the black liquid. As soon as the liquid reached his forehead, it bored into him painfully, piercing through his skull. At the same time, it released pulses of bizarre power that converged in his mind, transforming into a black sealing mark!

Instantly, Xu Qing's mind filled with rumblings like thunder, which spread through his entire body. He became like a tiny rowboat, rocking up and down on a violent sea.

That sealing mark wasn't an inanimate thing. It was moving as if alive! It resembled a heart, and it beat in unison with Xu Qing's actual heart. As the *thump-thump* sound rang out, massive amounts of information poured from the magical sealing symbol into his sea of consciousness. Closing his eyes, he immersed himself in enlightenment.

At the same time, Master Seventh's voice reached him.

"Fourth Sib, each of my apprentices cultivates different techniques. All of them were custom created by me, after much research!"

“This Gold Core technique of yours was devised around that Gruegloom heart, after doing research into hundreds of different Gold Core techniques. I took special note of numerous legacy techniques passed down from Ancient Emperor Dark Serenity.

“It’s very domineering, which suits your fighting methods. It’s very sinister, which suits your personal style. And it’s very brutal, which suits your killer’s mentality.

“This technique is called... the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art!

“This art will turn one of your hands from corporeal to illusory. Using that Gruegloom hand, you can reach into one of your enemy’s heavenly palaces in their sea of consciousness, seize the gold core inside, and then rip it out. After, you can assimilate its essence and add it into one of your own heavenly palaces, thus making it your own!

“In that manner, once you reach the Gold Core level, you can be stronger and more deadly! Your future path is going to focus on killing as your method of cultivation. It will be a blood-drenched road!

“As your cultivation reaches the highest level you will be able to transform into a Gruegloom state, and tap into a portion of the Grueglooms’ natural characteristics. Although the undying possession arts of the Grueglooms are an innate ability, and thus very hard to acquire, you will be able to ignore the power of certain magical techniques and enter a state which transposes reality and illusion!”

Master Seventh’s each word boomed like thunder in Xu Qing’s mind. As the magical symbol radiated immense brightness, masses of information from the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art filled Xu Qing.

It was similar to when he had learned the imperial-class technique Golden Crow Assimilates Myriad Spirits. The details were being imprinted directly into him. The symbol was like a legacy seed, ensuring that no one could ever rip the technique away from him. Though it wasn’t an imperial-class technique, it was similarly shocking.

Xu Qing’s eyes snapped open, and he struggled to control his breathing. Looking at his Master with shining eyes, he got to his feet, clasped hands and bowed deeply.

“Many thanks, Master!”

Xu Qing could already tell that this technique was matchlessly shocking, especially considering how perfectly it suited him. He wouldn’t need to change his normal fighting style. He could just continue to build on the foundation he already had.

Once he stepped into Gold Core, he would instantly be able to use the technique.

It was late at night, and as the wind blew Master Seventh’s white hair back, he stood there looking at Xu Qing, a faint smile on his face.

“Don’t rush to be happy,” he said coolly. “The technique is incredibly domineering, and you could easily lose yourself in it. The divine will from numerous gold cores could dispel *your* mind, causing you to transform into a psychotic murderer.

“If you want to cultivate this technique, you’ll need something else to serve as a support. You’ll need something to prop up your soul, to make sure that the wills of the gold cores you seize won’t affect you negatively. And that’s why our next stop is a place I mentioned to you before. It’s... the South Tor Ghost Mountain!”

Xu Qing immediately thought back to the time he’d seen his Master painting a map, with a person near the South Tor Ghost Mountain meditating. His Master had mentioned that the South Tor Ghost Mountain could possibly be a land of good fortune for Xu Qing. Back then, Master Seventh had only just begun planning Xu Qing’s personal technique. [3]

Realizing that, Xu Qing felt even more grateful than before.

“Let’s go,” Master Seventh said. “When we get to the South Tor Ghost Mountain... you’ll implant a god into your heart!”

There were obviously deep implications in Master Seventh’s words. Before Xu Qing could ask any questions, he flicked his sleeve, and the dharmaskiff rumbled to life. Considering they had already been traveling east, the South Tor Ghost Mountain wasn’t very far.

Along the way, Ding Xue opened her eyes. She had finally opened her 30th dharma aperture and ignited her first life flame. It was with much excitement that she rushed to the prow and entered the profound radiance state.

Looking at her, Xu Qing sighed and thought back to how difficult it had been for him to open his first life flame. In contrast, the doting Master Seventh had given a soul pearl to Ding Xue without any fanfare at all. All of a sudden, Xu Qing realized what it must feel like to be the Captain.

Master Seventh glared at him. “Girls should get love. Boys should get tough love!”

Hearing that, Ding Xue covered her mouth and laughed softly. Producing her snack box, she opened it and handed a pastry to Master Seventh, who took it in delight. Then Ding Xue surreptitiously handed a larger pastry to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing took it, then glanced at Master Seventh.

Master Seventh glared back at him.

Xu Qing didn’t say anything. Taking a bite, he closed his eyes to meditate. On the one hand, he took time to get used to the new technique, while also contemplating his 121st dharma aperture.

Perhaps because of Master Seventh’s presence, Ding Xue seemed more aloof when it came to Xu Qing. She didn’t offer him spirit notes in exchange for answers to her questions. But she still seemed lively, and the dharmaskiff frequently resounded with her melodious voice and Master Seventh’s hearty laughter.

The closer they got to the South Tor Ghost Mountain, however, the less Ding Xue talked. Master Seventh’s laughter eventually ceased. And that was because... the lands turned bleak and miserable.

Crumbling ruins and dead vegetation stretched out as far as the eye could see. Carrion birds picked at rotting corpses, and a sinister, gruish air filled the place. The sensation of pain and suffering was stifling as it weighed down everywhere, even on the little dharmaskiff.

Eventually, Xu Qing caught sight of a huge mountain off in the distance. It was massive, reaching high into the sky. Looking closely at it, it resembled a gargantuan human form, seated cross-legged in meditation! Its facial features were hard to make out considering how much dirt covered it. But it seemed vicious. It wore a suit of armor, and had a huge bladed weapon in its hands. A world rested on each of its shoulders.

It looked like a vicious god.

Seeing it, Xu Qing was deeply shaken as he was overwhelmed with the sensation that he wasn't looking at a mountain, but rather, at a massive ghostly figure. That sensation would be stronger the higher one's cultivation base. And mortals who looked at it wouldn't see anything other than a mountain, and would certainly not be deeply shaken.

To Xu Qing, that figure radiated terrifying pressure, and the armor seemed to contain deadly, destructive power.

The two worlds on his shoulders were very lifelike, and seemed to contain innumerable demonic devils, all of them shocking and ghostly.

This was Emperor-Receiving Prefecture's South Tor Ghost Mountain.

As for the evil god, he was also known as the South Tor Ghost Emperor.

The two worlds on his shoulders might have once been glorious and radiant. But now they were home to countless vicious beings. The Ghost Mountain worshiped seven fiends, and was one of the six great powers in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture.

"Your task, Fourth Sib, is to put this god into your heart, to be the protector against all extraneous thoughts from the gold cores you'll absorb in the future. If you can do that, then you can cultivate the technique I gave you. If you cannot, then I'll have to give you a different Gold Core technique."

Chapter 306: Spirit Trove, Void Returning, Smoldering God

Master Seventh's words echoed in Xu Qing's ears. As he listened, he looked at the distant mountain that was actually the South Tor Ghost Emperor. Waves of shock rolled endlessly through his mind, growing larger and larger with each passing moment.

Even just looking at the mountain caused his eyes to sting, yet he looked closely and with great intent. Just what cultivation level had this god been in before dying that he would transform into a mountain? And how could a mere corpse contain such boundless majesty?

This was obviously the most powerful entity Xu Qing had ever been in the presence of. Not even Joine could compare, and from what he could tell, that sealizard patriarch wasn't even on the same level as the South Tor Ghost Emperor. Only the god Meegah that Xu Qing saw on the mural in the Merfolk Isles could possibly compare. That was also where Xu Qing got his first life lamp. Xu Qing hadn't forgotten that Meegah also had two worlds on his shoulders. He wasn't sure if that was some special feature of a specific cultivation level, but the memory had never left him. [1]

And then... Master Seventh continued talking.

“Fourth Sib, the time has come for me to pull back the curtain regarding how cultivation works in the Revered Ancient mainland. You need to have a clear understanding.

“After the Gold Core level with its heavenly palaces, cultivators proceed to the Nascent Soul level. Nascent Soul is broken up into sub-levels, which you’ll become familiar with later on. What I want to focus on is what comes after Nascent Soul!

“Beyond Nascent Soul are levels that differ as greatly from each other as heaven differs from earth. Of course, the difficulty in progress is also just as dramatic. In fact, each level is like a completely different realm.

“After Nascent Soul is the Spirit Trove level!

“Spirit Trove is divided into the five secrets. After the fifth secret is the Void Returning realm!

“Void Returning is divided into four stages. After the fourth stage... is the Smoldering God realm!”

Xu Qing’s mind spun as Master Seventh made this explanation and then pointed at the South Tor Ghost Emperor mountain.

“The two worlds he carries signify that he’s a second stage Smoldering God expert!

“Our patriarch, Sir Bloodsmelter, is in the first stage of the Void Returning level, the Space-Shattering 1,000 Daos. The president is in the second stage of the Void Returning level, which is Transform 10,000 Veracities. After those first two stages are a third and a fourth stage. Given that, you can imagine the vast difference between those stages and the level of the South Tor Ghost Emperor.

“If our patriarch secures an amazing destined opportunity, then he’ll have a slim chance of stepping into the second stage of Void Returning. As for the third stage... it’s as difficult to reach as it is to ascend to heaven. In other words, it’s almost impossible. Given that, there’s no need to even mention the fourth stage.

“As for the Smoldering God level... let’s put it this way. Based on my personal research, I don’t think there’s a single living Smoldering God in all of Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. In fact, there isn’t a single one in all of Sea-Sealing County!

“The only one we have is the half-dead Ghost Emperor, who’s in the second stage of the Smoldering God level!

“What’s more, he’s not even originally from Emperor-Receiving Prefecture; he just perished here. Any being that reaches this monumental level of cultivation deserves to be called a god.”

After hearing all this, Xu Qing was completely and utterly stunned. At the same time, he now had a much more clear understanding of the cultivation levels in Revered Ancient.

“Before the Ghost Emperor perished here, Emperor-Receiving Prefecture was a barren and infertile place. Though there were cultivation sects, they existed in a state of utter chaos. Very few experts rose to prominence. But after the death of the Ghost Emperor, his life force became nutrients that caused all sorts of living beings to flourish. You could even say that almost all of the six major powers in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture are connected to him in some way.

“Forget what outsiders say about the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. The reality is that they exist because they have some of the Ghost Emperor’s legacy. That’s why they’re so strong.

“The three spirits from the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain are actually manifestations of the Ghost Emperor’s three spiritual souls. Nethersprite is his human soul, Sunslaughter is his earthly soul, and Sporelight is his heavenly soul!

“The two worlds that exist on the Ghost Emperor’s shoulders contain seven fiends, which are manifestations of his seven physical souls!

“The swordsages control the Supreme Beginning Netherflight Pillar in the far north. The reality is that the pillar... is the Ghost Emperor’s weapon, which he plunged into the ground just before he died!”

Master Seventh’s words struck Xu Qing’s mind like bolts of lightning, especially the final part. He was only now starting to realize how terrifying and powerful the Smoldering God realm was. The death of a Smoldering God completely transformed an entire prefecture, and paved the way for it to eventually become a place full of powerful experts. It really did seem appropriate to call such an individual a god.

It was also quite enlightening for Xu Qing to find out that the Merfolk’s fallen god Meegah was in that level.

“What’s above the Smoldering God realm?” Xu Qing asked hesitantly.

Master Seventh looked up into the dome of heaven, not at the broken face of the god there, but at the starry sky.

“There may be information about that in the holy lands created by the Ancient Emperors and Imperial Sovereigns, or in the histories written by the great species.” He flicked his sleeve, and the dharmaskiff vanished. Taking Xu Qing and Ding Xue with him, he floated to the ground.

Though Ding Xue had heard everything, her mind wasn’t capable of retaining all of the information. Her cultivation base wasn’t high enough, and even if she had been able to remember it all, it would do more harm than good.

As they landed on the vile ground below, Xu Qing still felt shaken.

Master Seventh could tell that he was still digesting all of the new information, and thus led him toward a small town. This was the place that Master Seventh had specially selected for the next part of the journey. It could be considered part of the South Tor Ghost Mountain, though it was quite a distance from the actual mountain itself. However, given how big the mountain was, this village had a perfect view of it.

“We’re going to stay in this village for a while,” Master Seventh said. “Xu Qing, I want you to observe the Ghost Emperor as closely as possible. Every day. You need to create an outline of the image in your mind.”

With his hands clasped behind his back, Master Seventh led Xu Qing into the village, as well as Ding Xue, who didn’t dare to utter a word.

The village wasn’t very big. The paths crisscrossing the place were dirty, and the cold autumn wind blew leaves into big piles in the corners of all the buildings. It seemed like a very bleak place. However, there was something about the village that was unusual. And that was... there were just as many old people as there were young people....

That stuck out to Xu Qing.

Ding Xue had no idea what it signified. But Xu Qing knew. At the moment though, he wasn’t inclined to look more into the situation. Observing the South Tor Ghost Emperor was far more important.

The arrival of three newcomers caught the attention of the villagers. It wasn’t common for outsiders to come to a place like this. That said, the fact that the group was made up of a young man and woman, plus an older man, made a great cover story. They seemed like a family of three. As a result, they didn’t stick out too much. That said, given the dog-eat-dog nature of the world, the villagers were inherently a bit hostile toward outsiders, and kept their guard up. Even after Master Seventh bought a house for the three of them to live in, that hostility remained.

Xu Qing wasn’t worried about all that. He spent his time seated cross-legged in the house, looking at the distant mountain. It was similar to when he had sought enlightenment of the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber. He worked hard to force the image to remain in his mind.

Unfortunately, it was a difficult process. The level of difficulty involved far surpassed that of the Supreme Vastness Solitary Saber. Thankfully, Xu Qing had never been an impatient person. Day after day, he simply gazed at the mountain, gradually becoming calmer and calmer. Slowly but surely, his mind became blank.

Each morning, Master Seventh would take Ding Xue for a walk in the village. He smiled a lot, and made a habit of chatting with the villagers. Gradually, the neighbors started to get used to him. Whenever people asked where they were from, Master Seventh would smile bitterly, but not give any details. People would nod thoughtfully, and soon enough, the locals had come up with their own story about this old man’s bitter past.

When people asked about the girl who accompanied him, he always brightened up. He would tell them that she was his daughter, and that the young man who stayed indoors all the time was his son-in-law who had married into the family. [2]

When Ding Xue heard Master Seventh saying such things, she was very pleased, and often blushed wildly.

In that manner, the three of them settled down into the village.

Days passed in peace and quiet. Xu Qing sought enlightenment on a daily basis, and Master Seventh took Ding Xue out and about. As the villagers got used to the situation, they gradually let their guard down. As that happened, their curiosity about the newcomers grew more obvious.

Though the villagers lived hard lives, they were close to each other. As their hostility toward the newcomers faded, it came to be replaced with kindness and even warmth. It was something that didn't happen a lot considering the state of the world.

There were a lot of old people and also a lot of young people. That indicated... that it had been many years since any true danger threatened this village. That was the only way so many defenseless elderly and young ones could survive.

There was a schoolhouse in one corner of the village, where the local teacher taught the children to read and write. Every day it was possible to hear the young voices joining together to read passages during class, and that brought smiles to the faces of the villagers. There was one child among the group that Master Seventh took a liking to. He appeared to be eight or nine, and was good-looking. He was different from the other children in that he was very clean, from his clothing to his face. He had a small leather bag that he carried his books in, and was always extremely polite.

When Master Seventh and Ding Xue occasionally ran into him after school was out, the boy would look bashfully at Ding Xue, and would cower a bit when he looked at Master Seventh. That said, he would always offer a respectful bow, after which he would run home. He lived right next to the house Master Seventh had purchased. His father was a carpenter and his mother made a living mending clothes. Every morning, they would watch as their son ran off to school, and in the evening, they would wait at the door for him to return. Every night, they would light a lamp and eat dinner by the window. The sight of their shadows cast on the window made a very homely scene.

Everything looked very normal. However, Master Seventh's eyes glittered when he took it all in. In fact, at one point when he sat next to Xu Qing looking at the Ghost Emperor, he smiled and said, "Fourth Sib, what would you and your Elder Brothers and Sister say if I added a Fifth Sib to the mix?"

Xu Qing wasn't paying very close attention to Master Seventh. He was focused on the mountain, his eyes somewhat blank. In fact, when he closed his eyes, the image of the Ghost Emperor started to take form in his mind. The process wasn't complete, but when he visualized the mountain, bits of divine resonance would start to form.

"Hmm?" Master Seventh said, suddenly turning to look at Xu Qing, his eyes flickering with surprise.

That fast? It hasn't even been a month yet. Not bad at all! It's almost on the same level as me, back in the day. When I— Master Seventh suddenly stopped talking, and his eyes went wide. What's the little punk doing? I told him to visualize the mountain. Just knowing its basic shape is enough. But he's... actually trying to make an exact copy??"

Chapter 307: Faceless Ghost Mountain

Ah, whatever. Fourth Sib is young. It's not going to hurt to let him hit his head against the wall a bit. There's no way he'll perfectly copy the Ghost Emperor's resonance. Ahhhh, this Fourth Sib... has too much ambition.

After eyeing Xu Qing once more, Master Seventh stood, clasped his hands behind his back, and left.

Xu Qing, meanwhile, wasn't even aware of what was going on around him. He had lost track of the passage of time, and was completely focused on making a full copy of the Ghost Emperor. As his Master had explained, that was the only way for him to cultivate the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art, which was a technique that Xu Qing felt truly fit him well. He really wanted to have it available the moment he stepped into Gold Core. And therefore... he needed to work hard at his current task.

Worried that a mere outline of the mountain wouldn't be enough, he was deeply focused on getting a very detailed image.

Xu Qing didn't know what 'resonance' was, but his way of thinking wasn't complicated. He just wanted to have a very detailed and lifelike image of this god in his mind. He wanted it to be as close to the real thing as possible.

It was similar to copying a painting, except he was doing it mentally. Therefore, after succeeding at creating a general outline, he went in to add all the specific details. And that process was very, very difficult. If you asked someone with no artistic training to make an outline of something, they probably could. But if you asked them to fill in realistic details, it would be a lot harder.

In fact, Xu Qing had just now noticed a mistake in his copy. He had filled in the details in the wrong way, making the image look strange. Acting on instinct, he erased the image and started over.

An outsider wouldn't have any idea the level of enlightenment he was attaining through that process. However... Master Seventh could see the clues. In fact, those clues were what caused Master Seventh, who had just walked out, to suddenly stop in place and turn back to look at Xu Qing.

What's going on? How come I just sensed a bit of resonance??

Master Seventh looked more closely.

Now it's gone? How come the outline he had already fixed in his mind is gone? What's Fourth Sib doing??

After observing Xu Qing for a while longer and realizing that he was in a state of deep calm, Master Seventh finally left. That day, he had a nice walk with Ding Xue, but couldn't stop wondering about Xu Qing. When they got back that evening, he hurried over to check what was happening. When he saw Xu Qing, he was stunned.

The outline is back? That fast? And that resonance is also there. It's... hey, wait. It's gone again!

Master Seventh was so surprised he considered smacking Xu Qing to break him out of his trance. In the end, he held back.

Days went by until the second month passed.

Eventually, Master Seventh resigned himself to the strange things that were happening with Xu Qing. Just about every day he sensed that Xu Qing had dispelled the image within him and started over. Eventually, he realized what was happening.

I told him to copy an outline, that's all. Fourth Sib, you... really don't need to do this! What are you up to? Showing off your powers of understanding? Master Seventh chuckled wryly. Truth be told, over the last month, his admiration for Xu Qing had grown even more, and he was starting to gain a new appreciation for his powers of understanding.

This brat... is actually a great fit for the daoist magic of the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society. Their true legacy comes from the Ghost Emperor. In some respects, the little punk is perfectly suited for the dao of the South Tor Ghost Emperor. In fact, maybe that's why he's such a beast when it comes to enlightenment.

As Master Seventh contemplated those things, Xu Qing reached a critical point in the enlightenment process. He treated his sea of consciousness like a canvas, and his powers of understanding as a brush. Over and over again, he painted the Ghost Emperor mountain. Over and over again, he erased it and started over.

As a result, the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness grew more and more lifelike. As he made adjustments to the various details, and as he started over repeatedly, the image grew more detailed and complex. However... the Ghost Emperor in the image didn't have a face.

Every time he tried to do the face, it just didn't seem right. Truth be told, he actually wasn't happy with the image as a whole. However, if any outsider could see it, they would be absolutely astonished. After all, it was rare for someone in Foundation Establishment to be capable of something like this. It required incredible powers of understanding.

Unfortunately, Xu Qing felt like he was far, far from a satisfactory result. Though the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness was extremely lifelike, to him, it felt like an empty shell. At the very most, it was a pretty shell.

In terms of creating a perfect copy, Xu Qing felt like he had only reached a level of 1/1,000,000. Furthermore, no matter how hard he worked, he couldn't do any better. After the image formed in his sea of consciousness, he couldn't do anything further with it.

Finally, on the sixty-seventh day, he opened his eyes, and within them swirled a mysterious resonance.

Yet, Xu Qing sighed. After looking around, he found that Master Seventh was sitting calmly off to the side.

"Master, I can't continue to seek enlightenment."

"Don't be discouraged," Master Seventh said coolly. "Although you weren't able to succeed in three days like I did years ago, I know you've done all that you can do."

Though Master Seventh looked like he was trying to be encouraging, the truth was that he was inwardly astonished to find that Xu Qing really did have some of the resonance of the Ghost Emperor mountain. It was only a sliver, but if word spread about that, the Supreme Arbiter Immortal Society would be thrown into a frenzy.

"Master, my powers of understanding have limits. And... I've reached them."

Xu Qing bowed his head and mused that he really couldn't compare to his Master. In his mind, his Master was like a profoundly deep pool whose bottom was impossible to see. And he felt regret that

he had to stop seeking enlightenment after barely more than sixty days. Though his mental image of the Ghost Emperor mountain emanated a black glow and shocking fluctuations, it was far, far from being the perfect version he wanted. All he could do was summon the outline version.

Master Seventh looked at Xu Qing and sighed inwardly. The bit of resonance he had noticed after Xu Qing opened his eyes wasn't the only change. There was also a big difference to his aura, as it now contained a bit of ghost energy. Ghost energy had nothing to do with death. It was something mysterious that, given Master Seventh's cultivation base, wasn't incredibly noteworthy. However, to people on a lower level of cultivation base, it would be very meaningful.

What was more, it would be very threatening to grues. If Xu Qing looked a grue straight on, then unless that grue had incredible willpower, it would be deeply shaken.

Master Seventh sensed that, and so did Xu Qing's shadow. Of course, with Master Seventh present, the shadow didn't dare to reveal itself. All it could do was stew in its terror. As of now, the shadow knew that Xu Qing... could devour it if he wished.

Master Seventh's cheek twitched briefly, but he quickly smoothed out his face. Chuckling, he said, *"The person not satisfied with their progress at least knows the right direction to pursue*

. Fourth Sib, maybe your powers of understanding aren't on the same level as mine, but considering humankind as a whole, they're not bad at all."

Feeling a bit nervous, Xu Qing looked at Master Seventh and asked, "Master, is there any chance my current level of enlightenment is enough to cultivate the Gruegloom Daoseizing Art?"

Master Seventh looked back at him and could see how nervous he was. All of a sudden, he felt very tired inside, and didn't really feel like talking. He stood. "It'll suffice. Barely."

Hearing that, Xu Qing breathed a sigh of relief. That said, he was still determined to focus constantly on making progress with the Ghost Emperor mountain. Hopefully, one day he would have enough enlightenment to make a perfect copy of it.

With such thoughts on his mind, he got to his feet and was about to walk outside when Ding Xue entered with some pastries. Seeing Xu Qing, her eyes lit up.

"You're finally awake, Big Bro Xu Qing."

Hurrying over to him, she held out the pastries.

Looking at them, Xu Qing felt hungry. Though his cultivation base had reached the point where he didn't need food, he still enjoyed the sensation. Eating made him feel content. To someone who had grown up cold and hungry in the slums, it was an instinct that was part of him. Taking a pastry, he ate it. After some thought, he took another.

Seeing that, Ding Xue's smile widened, and she felt more wonderful than ever. Taking out a bottle of medicinal liquid brewed from fruit and other medicinal plants, she offered it to him.

Eyeing her, he smiled. "Thank you."

Those words filled her with excitement, and she was about to say something else when Master Seventh snorted coldly from outside.

"Since you failed at your enlightenment, we need to go."

Ding Xue pouted but didn't dare say anything in response. Xu Qing was in the same position. Together, they walked outside. It was evening, and as the light of the setting sun shone on Master Seventh, standing there in the courtyard with his hands clasped behind his back, he didn't seem very happy.

Blinking a few times, Ding Xue hurried over to him and held out the snack box, all the while pouting visibly. Seeing that, Master Seventh relaxed a bit, and even looked pleased.

It was an expression that Xu Qing had seen before. It reminded him of the old innkeeper from Plankspring Way.... And that made him think of that white anaconda back at the inn.

As Xu Qing reminisced, Master Seventh ate a pastry. Then he took out a white identity medallion and tossed it to Xu Qing. "Give that to the kid next door who's about to get off of school. I don't get out often, so since we're traveling, I want to spread the net, so to speak. Let's see if we can find a Fifth Sib somewhere in Emperor-Receiving Prefecture. I'll wait for you outside the village."

With that, Master Seventh took Ding Xue with him out of the village, though she seemed loath to part with Xu Qing.

Tangerine-colored light filtered onto the village from above as Xu Qing sat down on a nearby stone fence. Watching the sunset, he waited. The spot he had picked was right on the road leading to the neighbor's house.

Before long, he saw a boy skipping down the path, a leather bag slung over his shoulder. He seemed very clean. Whenever he saw any of the other neighbors, he bowed politely, always smiling and always happy. When he got close to home and saw Xu Qing sitting on the stone fence, he stopped.

"Hello, Big Brother." His smile seemed a bit forced, and even slightly scared.

Xu Qing could sense that the fear was real, but he also realized that, deep within this boy was a profound ferocity that seemed just on the verge of exploding out.

Chapter 308: Just Like Reincarnation

At almost exactly the same time as the boy opened his mouth, the door of the house behind him silently opened. The boy's parents stepped out, faces expressionless but eyes cold as they looked at Xu Qing.

Dark clouds rolled out to cover the evening sky, and raindrops began to fall. Thunder rumbled and lightning bolts crashed off in the distance. As the rain fell, villagers scurried home. The breeze kicked up the dirt and leaves in the street. To any casual observer, it would look like nothing more than an everyday storm. But Xu Qing could see that it was all happening because of the boy in front of him.

"Well, isn't this interesting."

Turning, he examined the boy's parents. As he did, the Ghost Emperor mountain in his sea of consciousness glittered, and his pupils suddenly shone.

The boy's parents shivered, and the coldness in their eyes suddenly changed to astonishment and terror. The exact same expression appeared in the eyes of the boy.

Xu Qing didn't exert any pressure. After looking at them, he reined in the image of the Ghost Emperor mountain, then looked away from the parents. They weren't of any concern to him. What

he was interested in was the boy with the forced smile on his face. Xu Qing hopped off the fence and stepped forward.

The boy's face fell, and he backed away.

Xu Qing tossed the white command medallion in his direction. "That qualifies you to join Seven Blood Eyes in the Eight Sect Coalition."

The boy didn't catch the medallion, and it landed on the ground with a thump.

Xu Qing didn't care. He started to walk, and as he passed the boy, he said, "Do you want to become human?"

He walked out of the village.

After he was gone, the rain fell heavily. The pitter-patter of the water mixed with the crash of thunder as the ground, and the village itself, was washed clean.

Within that rain, the boy stood where he was, as did his parents. They didn't move. All of them were looking at the white command medallion sitting there being rained upon.

Eventually, the boy spoke. "What do you think? Should I go check it out?"

The boy's parents didn't respond.

"Right," the boy murmured, "I forgot. I created you. You have simple minds, and couldn't possibly answer that question."

He looked at the command medallion, his heart starting to pound.

The boy wasn't human. Nor was he nonhuman. He was actually a grue, and a very special kind of grue at that. He didn't have amazing battle prowess, but could think as clearly as any of the countless other intelligent species that inhabited the world. And yet, for some unknown reason, he had a very deep-seated desire to live as a human.

Years ago, after finding this village, he had taken human form. He had also created these two parents. Every day he happily attended class at school. Over and over again. After a number of years passed, he would erase the villagers' memories of him and start over. And thus, he lived endless happy days as a young student.

Truth be told, he had already forgotten how long he had been doing this. Maybe years. Maybe generations. He'd watched his schoolmates grow up, get old, and die. Yet he had always remained the same. Throughout all those years, he had always kept the village safe. That was why it was such a peaceful place, and why it had so many elderly people and young ones.

Xu Qing had seen all of that thanks to the Ghost Emperor mountain. And he had also realized why Master Seventh wanted the boy to have an identity medallion. As for whether or not the boy would make it to Seven Blood Eyes, that wasn't something Xu Qing needed to worry about. He just knew that this grue was definitely different from the others.

As the rain fell, Xu Qing floated up to the dharmaskiff and stepped aboard. Master Seventh didn't ask any questions. He just flicked his sleeve, sending the dharmaskiff shooting off into the distance.

Master Seventh didn't seem to be in a hurry to get back. He took his time traveling.

On one occasion, he took Xu Qing and Ding Xue into a big city. Crouching in a tree outside the mansion of a rich family, he observed a young prince.

Another time, they went to a small nation, where he watched some suffering commoners. Xu Qing had no idea what Master Seventh was thinking at that point.

On another occasion, they went to a place similar to a scavenger basecamp. Master Seventh seemed amused by everything that was going on, and would occasionally ask Xu Qing and Ding Xue what they thought of one particular person.

When Master Seventh saw someone he approved of, he would have Xu Qing deliver a white command medallion. All those who got such a medallion were young men and women in their teens. They included a rich prince, a destitute scholar, a beggar girl, and an emaciated child.

As all of this played out, Xu Qing gradually thought back to his time in the scavenger basecamp, and Master Seventh's servant. On this particular outing, Master Seventh hadn't seen fit to bring the servant along, so the work was left to Xu Qing.

Xu Qing eventually came to realize that everyone Master Seventh gave a medallion to had some unique quality.

For example, the prince's soul and fleshly body weren't very well connected. No ordinary person would be able to spot that, but now that Xu Qing's vision was augmented by the Ghost Emperor mountain, he saw it right away. That indicated that the prince had been possessed.

The silly beggar girl in the impoverished nation seemed happy to beg for food, yet her body was ravaged by rot. What was more, anyone who bullied her during the day would suffer nightmares when they slept. The nightmares came from the girl. During the evenings, she would scrape off the rotting parts of her body and use them to create a curse of some sort. It wasn't any sort of magical technique, but rather, some sort of innate ability. She hid it so well that no one had any idea what she was doing. What was more, the people who suffered from the nightmares didn't die from them. However, their chances of suffering from fatal accidents dramatically increased.

In one of the scavenger-like locations, there was a boy who worked at a medicine shop. Every evening, the owner of the shop would force the boy to eat sludge, after which the boy would bleed profusely. The shop owner would carefully collect the blood, then put it into bottles and sell it the next day as a healing tonic.

Tightly kept secrets like this were things that Master Seventh was adept at noticing. As a result, Xu Qing learned a lot. What was more, each person he gave a medallion to had immense potential.

After passing out more than twenty identity medallions, Master Seventh stopped his search. Looking at Xu Qing, he sighed.

"A new grand era is coming. Last time I searched Emperor-Receiving Prefecture like this, people with potential were hard to find. In the end, the only one I found was your Third Elder Brother. But nowadays, there are a lot more people with potential. This time, as before, I plan to select one out of fifty. Let's see whether you end up with a new Junior Brother or a new Junior Sister."

Master Seventh seemed pleased with the results so far.

“Xu Qing. Xue’er. Of all the potential apprentices we gave command medallions to, which ones do you think will reach me in the end?”

Ding Xue thought for a moment, then said, “Uncle, I think the girl who can curse people will do great!”

Master Seventh smiled and looked at Xu Qing.

Xu Qing thought back to all the people he had seen, and in the end, his thoughts focused on the rich prince. “I think the possessed one has the highest chances.”

Master Seventh seemed surprised by that. “Why do you say that? I thought you would pick the very first one, that boy.”

Xu Qing shook his head. “He’s not cautious enough. Of the entire group, only that prince is truly cautious.”

“Very interesting.” Master Seventh threw his head back and laughed. With that, he took control of the dharmaskiff and piloted it back in the direction of Seven Blood Eyes. The trip was over.

On the way back, Xu Qing had some spare time, which was rare. He spent it continuing the search for his 121st dharma aperture. He was starting to form a plan for what to do next, but wasn’t completely sure about some of the details. Finally, he asked Master Seventh, who confirmed his suspicion. The Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure might help him to find the 121st dharma aperture, but he would have to find the right opportunity to make the attempt.

After some more thought, Xu Qing remembered the little mirror he had found some time back. Taking it out, he studied it.

Master Seventh glanced at it but didn’t say anything.

Xu Qing didn’t ask any more questions. As days passed, and he continued his study and contemplation, his plan solidified.

The mirror was a fragment of a magical treasure, and it seemed likely it was similar to the Seven Blood Eyes taboo treasure. Of course, the powers of this mirror were different. This mirror seemed capable of stimulating the soul. If someone looked at their reflection in the mirror, their soul would be dazed, and they would feel intense pain. If they died, then the mirror would produce a grisly copy of them that the mirror could control.

It seemed useful in terms of what it could do. However, the mirror had not been ensorcelled. Therefore, though it would be terribly effective on mortals, to cultivators with a cultivation base, the results wouldn’t be very amazing. And definitely not fatal.

If I could catch someone off guard with this thing, it might be effective. Xu Qing remembered that when he had first acquired the mirror, looking at it had stung his eyes, and distracted him momentarily. A moment of distraction like that could be fatal if used in the right moment. After some thought, he put the mirror away with the plan of testing it out later.

A few more days went by before the Eight Sect Coalition appeared in the distance.

Ding Xue seemed very reluctant to part with Xu Qing. However, that didn't stop him from disembarking and heading toward Zhang San in the Transportation Division. He had been gone for a long time, and had used his dharmaskiff's self-detonation feature twice in a row. The dharmaskiff has served splendidly, but now it needed to be repaired.

It was currently noon, and as he sped through Seven Blood Eyes, his expression suddenly flickered, and he looked down.

On the street below was the Mute. Unlike all the occasions before, the Mute wasn't wearing a dog skin jerkin beneath his daoist robe. He only had on the daoist robe. He was walking in an unusual manner. Instead of sticking to the shadows, he was brazenly strutting down the middle of the street. Though he still seemed to have his guard up, he looked very different compared to what Xu Qing was used to. His vigilance seemed to contain excitement and even curiosity as well. And his curiosity seemed to be focused on the living people around him, as if he might try to devour one of them at any moment. Most relevant of all, the Mute seemed very weak. Not his body, but rather, his soul.

Xu Qing had seen something like that before. It reminded him of that rich prince who had been possessed. Using the Ghost Emperor mountain in his eyes, Xu Qing looked at the Mute. His eyes narrowed. Striding forward, he landed right in front of the Mute.

His sudden arrival caused the Mute's expression to flicker, and he instinctively backed up. Then, seeing who Xu Qing was, he quickly bowed his head and dropped to kowtow.

Before he could drop to the ground, Xu Qing reached out and grabbed him by the neck. Lifting the terrified Mute up to his face, he looked at him with extremely cold eyes and said, "Who are you?"

Chapter 309: The Wind Sweeping Through the Tower Heralds a Rising Storm in the Mountains

The Mute's eyes shone with terror, and he was trembling from head to toe. He wanted to fight back, but Xu Qing's hand was clamped onto his neck like an iron vice. Struggling wouldn't do any good. Due to the vast difference in their cultivation bases, he wasn't remotely capable of fighting back against Xu Qing. After all... he was only close to being in Foundation Establishment.

There was something strange about the Mute's cultivation base. He was somewhere between Qi Condensation and Foundation Establishment, almost as if he had started the breakthrough process but not completed it.

There were a lot of pedestrians on the street, including disciples from both Seven Blood Eyes and other sects. Those who saw what was happening with Xu Qing and the Mute were visibly surprised. The mortals present all hurried away, while the cultivators clasped hands and bowed.

Given Xu Qing's status in the Eight Sect Coalition, no one would bat an eye if he grabbed a disciple by the neck. He could slaughter people on the street and nobody would react. At most, he might get reprimanded for doing something like that. In fact, if he had a good explanation, then he wouldn't even get reprimanded. In some respects, he represented all the disciples in his generation in the coalition.

Xu Qing looked coldly at the Mute and thought back to when they had both been on the river inspection tour. The Mute had been in the great circle of Qi Condensation, just on the verge of reaching Foundation Establishment. Given Xu Qing's current state, and with the added asset of what he could see with his Ghost Emperor mountain eyes, the explanation suddenly occurred to

him. The person in front of him was nothing more than a shell. The dominant soul inside was not that of the Mute.

Without a word, Xu Qing flew back to his berth, bringing the Mute with him.

Taking out his dharmaskiff, he stepped aboard. Once in the cabin, he activated his Stygian Flame, and sent fire into the Mute through his neck. A mournful scream erupted from the Mute's mouth. As his body twitched and shivered, Xu Qing extracted a soul from inside of him.

This soul did not resemble the Mute. It was a conglomeration of pulsating black mist that emanated an evil aura and strong mutagen. Thanks to the Stygian Flame, the soul could do nothing more than spasm. A moment later, Xu Qing's shadow stretched out, its open eyes filled with hunger. The soul started spasming even more violently.

In the end, Xu Qing inhaled, sucking the soul into him and imprisoning it in his 61st dharma aperture. His dharma force surged as he began the assimilation process. Meanwhile, the Mute shivered, and his eyes finally flickered with a familiar look.

Face completely expressionless, Xu Qing released the Mute.

The Mute dropped to the deck of the dharmaskiff, breathing heavily, his eyes vacant. However, as memories flooded back into him, his expression turned grim, and his eyes filled with a baleful aura. Then he dropped to his knees in front of Xu Qing and kowtowed, hitting his head three times. His eyes shone with gratitude.

Xu Qing examined him, then coolly said, "What happened?"

The Mute took out a jade slip, quickly inscribed some information on it, and respectfully offered it to Xu Qing. Xu Qing took it and looked at the details. Looking back at the Mute and seeing how uncomfortable he was without his dog skin jerkin, he said, "Go ahead and change."

The Mute immediately produced a dog skin jerkin from his bag of holding. After putting it on, he looked a lot more comfortable. Squatting on the deck, he silently waited for orders from Xu Qing.

The jade slip made everything clear.

It all had to do with the Mute's attempt to reach Foundation Establishment. When cultivators tried to reach Foundation Establishment, they would face terrifying grues. That was why many used places of refuge in the sect. The lamps there would offer a measure of protection.

The Mute had done that. But there was something unique about him. During the process of searching for his dharma apertures, things had gone normally. At first. Then things went terribly wrong. The Mute had extremely acute senses, which were normally an asset. For instance, those senses were how he was able to detect Xu Qing's shadow.

However... during his Foundation Establishment breakthrough, they became his greatest weakness. His acute senses were like a blazing torch that attracted the attention of unknown entities, and also made it easier for them to possess him. When the terrifying grues came for him, a shadowy figure from another world pounced on him, took control of his body, and suppressed his soul.

If Xu Qing hadn't noticed, then it wouldn't have been long before the Mute's soul was completely devoured. And at that point... it would have been difficult for anyone to see what had happened.

Xu Qing looked down quietly at the incredibly weak but also very calm Mute. He thought back to everything that the Mute had been through, and how he himself had been involved with it all, and somehow felt like the Mute was now related to him. After all, from the very beginning, the Mute had repeatedly displayed his desire to follow Xu Qing. And he had worked very hard in Violent Crimes.

Looking away from him, Xu Qing said, "You can break through to Foundation Establishment right here."

The Mute's eyes lit up, and without the slightest hesitation, he settled down cross-legged. He knew how terrifying the Foundation Establishment breakthrough could be, but with Xu Qing here, he wasn't afraid. He began regulating his breathing, and then tapped into his cultivation base. Gradually, evening came.

Xu Qing also meditated. Late in the night, he opened his eyes and looked at the Mute.

Something like a tideflow rolled off of the Mute as he searched for his dharma apertures. A sinister wind kicked up.

Xu Qing's expression was the same as ever as a black umbrella flickered into being overhead. Xu Qing sent the umbrella over the Mute, where it spread its protection over him. As soon as that protective power spread out, inaudible screams echoed out in all directions. Beneath the fire of that black umbrella, countless shadows fled.

Before they could escape, Xu Qing's shadow snapped out, forming a huge mouth that devoured them rapidly. Crunching sounds rang out as the shadow consumed most of them.

Seeing that, Xu Qing waved his hand, and the other shadowy forms were helpless to fight against him as he gathered them and imprisoned them in his 61st dharma aperture.

Almost instantly, the 61st aperture reached the point of being full.

That works too? As Xu Qing's eyes brightened, the shadow wilted a bit. It was obviously frustrated at the Fiendish Xu taking away its food, but at the same time, didn't dare to complain.

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Eyes glittering, Xu Qing removed the umbrella and its protection.

Without the life lamp to harm the shadowy grues, they swarmed again. As sinister winds pulsed, they tried to rush toward the Mute to possess him.

The only thing that awaited them was Xu Qing's Stygian Flame. Fire swept out in all directions, gathering up the shadowy figures. In the blink of an eye, they were brought into Xu Qing, filling his 62nd dharma aperture.

Xu Qing was delighted. He never could have guessed that this method would work, much less be so effective. It was definitely a lot more efficient than going around fighting and killing people. And it was only possible thanks to the endless shadowy figures that the Mute's breakthrough attempt attracted.

In that manner, time passed.

The night passed, and to Xu Qing's great pleasure, during that time he filled everything from his 62nd to his 73rd dharma aperture. Given that speed, Xu Qing was very pleased as he looked at the Mute.

The Mute wasn't finished, and seemed like he would keep going for a few more days. Given Xu Qing's analysis, it seemed likely that he would be able to imprison souls in all 120 of his dharma apertures. When the truly terrifying grues came, Xu Qing would direct his Ghost Emperor mountain eyes at them and be able to see them clearly. The truly terrifying grues were vastly larger than any of the ordinary ones he was capturing. They weren't just balls of mist, they were fully-formed grues.

For example, right now Xu Qing was looking at one that resembled a huge black fish. It was several hundred meters long, and it circled the area in terrifying fashion before preparing to close in. Before it could, Xu Qing stepped to the Mute's side, lifted his hand, and pushed out. The black fish shivered and made to flee. Before it could, Stygian Flame whipped out, creating something like a huge net that wrapped up the giant fish, then shrank down, destroying the fish and causing soul power to surge into Xu Qing.

After imprisoning it in his 74th dharma aperture, that aperture was complete. Feeling very pleased, Xu Qing sat down to meditate and wait.

Because the Mute had previously gone through some of the Foundation Establishment breakthrough process, the rest didn't take long. His search for dharma apertures only took seven days.

Even still, the Mute was like a bright torch on a dark night, which gave Xu Qing plenty of opportunities to go fishing. It didn't take long for him to blow past 80 dharma apertures. Then 90. And by the sixth day, he had filled all of his 120 dharma apertures with imprisoned souls! However, he wasn't finished yet, as it was possible to replace the existing souls with better ones. Therefore, on the seventh day, Xu Qing waited patiently, and thus managed to snare three of the extremely powerful grues.

At that point, the Mute was done searching for dharma apertures, and was able to start the true breakthrough. The encroaching shadowy figures vanished and didn't return.

Xu Qing was a bit disappointed at that, but overall, was very pleased.

On the ninth day, as a light rain fell, the Mute opened his eyes. He had just opened his 1st dharma aperture, and from the dharma force fluctuations, it was obvious he had succeeded in reaching Foundation Establishment! After sensing his cultivation base, he excitedly kowtowed to Xu Qing, knocking his head against the deck of the dharmaskiff.

Xu Qing eyed him and calmly said, "You should study the Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture. Ignite your first life flame as quickly as possible. After all... without the profound radiance state, you're like a wild chicken. Only with the profound radiance state can you truly be considered a Foundation Establishment cultivator."

The Mute continued to kowtow loudly, his eyes shining with determination.

Outside of the Eight Sect Coalition in the not-too-distant Supreme Arbiter Salvation Mountains, there was a lonely grave. Two figures walked through the rain toward that grave.

It was a silent night with no sound whatsoever, as if the arrival of these two figures ensured that the living beings in the area remained quiet. Only the fall of the rain could be heard, bleak and cold.

Both figures wore voluminous black cloaks with hoods that hid their heads. The only thing visible... were masks resembling the broken face of the god. The masks emanated a terrifying and unsettling aura that filled the area and made the air around the two figures ripple and distort.

From a distance, it almost seemed like these two figures were gods walking through the rain. However, no beings they encountered, regardless of their cultivation base, would notice them. That was because their life level was completely different.

These two were Night Dove and his master.

“We’ll be at the Eight Sect Coalition soon,” said the person in the lead position. He sounded like a young man. “Is the person who invited us to see his performance ready?”

“Yes, he’s ready, Lord.”

Chapter 310: Blood-Soaked Performance - Prelude

Master Seventh had given Xu Qing a path to follow, which led to him copying the image of a god, although without the face.

Xu Qing had given the Mute a path to follow, to study the Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture, which was a path of slaughter. He felt that it was fitting for the Mute. Xu Qing could tell that his life up to this point had been one of killing and brutality. In acting as dharma protector for him these past days, Xu Qing had felt like he was looking at the old version of himself. The world was a fickle place, and only by means of cultivation could one find safety and stability. The Mute was a killer, and people like that, people like Xu Qing, were suited to the cultivation of the Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture. The Mute took Xu Qing’s advice to heart. He had always been a willing follower; it was an instinct of his to revere the powerful.

After seeing the Mute off, Xu Qing didn’t rest. He immediately headed toward the Transportation Division. However, when he arrived... it was evening, and the first thing he saw was a blushing female disciple next to Zhang San. Zhang San, meanwhile, was contently smoking his pipe.

Xu Qing recognized the female disciple. She was an alchemy cultivator from the Second Peak, and Xu Qing remembered seeing her with Gu Muqing when they came to ask Zhang San about bodyguard services. She wasn’t unusually pretty, but was good-looking. Seeing Xu Qing approaching, she blushed even harder, then quickly clasped hands and left. [1]

Xu Qing wasn’t going to pry into Zhang San’s affairs, and was just about to ask about something else when Zhang San proudly lifted his chin. “Well, what do you think? I’m dashing enough, right?”

“Incredible!” Xu Qing said, nodding earnestly. He knew that this specific reaction tended to please others. Whether it was the Captain or his Master, everyone seemed to like it.

When Zhang San saw his facial expression, he looked very happy. Lifting his hand, he pointed at Xu Qing and said, "Hand it over. You blew up your dharmaskiff, right? Did you finally see the Participation Effect?"

Xu Qing thought back, then shook his head. He took out the dharmaskiff.

"You didn't see it? Impossible!" Zhang San anxiously examined the dharmaskiff. After a moment, he seemed to be hit with understanding. "Oh, that's what's going on. You didn't use all of the self-detonations. That said, Xu Qing, this is the first time you actually brought this thing back in one piece. I'm sure it wasn't easy. Keep it up!" Zhang San laughed heartily. "Three days. I'll have it done by then, and it'll be exactly the same as before. You need to get moving, Xu Qing. Fill those dharma apertures with souls, that way you can form a spirit automaton and upgrade this thing."

"I already did," Xu Qing replied calmly.

"Huh?" Zhang San was stunned. He also cultivated the Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture, and knew how much effort and slaughter it would take to fill 120 dharma apertures with souls. And he hadn't forgotten that Xu Qing actually had four life flames. "That fast?"

Xu Qing nodded, then ignited all 120 of his dharma apertures. Countless screams rang out from the numerous souls imprisoned within him.

It turned into a rancorous energy that swept out in all directions with tempestuous force. Seeing it, Zhang San gasped.

"In that case, three days won't be enough. I'll need seven. After that, you can fuse those souls with the ship, and you'll have a dharmaship!"

Zhang San looked very excited, to the point where he ignored Xu Qing and took the dharmaskiff away to immediately start working on it.

Watching him go, Xu Qing clasped hands and bowed deeply. Then he left for the Special Security Division headquarters, which was where he planned to stay for the next seven days.

The Special Security Division in Seven Blood Eyes had been busy recently. They had been focused on working with other departments in the sect, as well as handling various coalition-related missions. Seven Blood Eyes had now settled into its role as part of the coalition. Sect disciples regularly went out on coalition missions, and Xu Qing saw a lot more disciples from other sects in the Seven Blood Eyes capital city.

Seven Blood Eyes disciples didn't just stick to Seven Blood Eyes. They often went out to other cities to go shopping, do business, and even open up shops. As a matter of fact, the addition of Seven Blood Eyes to the coalition had livened things up.

Right now, there were many missions focused on the Three-Spirits Dao-Suppressing Mountain. After checking through the files, Xu Qing saw that the place was more active lately. The population in their 137 subsidiary nations had dropped significantly, and cultivators were spreading out wider and wider, hunting for new people to make up for the loss. Their hunting expeditions were

becoming so frequent that the coalition had started watching the situation closely. Occasionally, friction arose between the two organizations as a result.

The Captain was nowhere to be found. Xu Qing wasn't sure what he was up to, but when he realized Wu Jianwu was also seemingly missing, he had to wonder what the two of them were planning. Xu Qing looked suspiciously in the direction of the Dark Serenity Sect for a moment, then looked away.

Some of the officers from the Special Security Division had recently left for a second inspection tour of the tributary. Xu Qing and the Captain weren't going along this time. Instead, there were some two-flame Foundation Establishment officers from the Fifth Peak who would take charge. Because of all that, the Special Security Division seemed a lot emptier than usual.

Xu Qing liked peace and quiet, so he was perfectly happy with things in the Special Security Division. Sitting down cross-legged in his office, he focused again on his 121st dharma aperture.

I can open it in a spot between life and death.... On the way back from the recent outing, he had come up with a plan for how to open that 121st aperture. It was still just a fledgling plan, and would require a lot of flexibility and adjustment.

I might need the help of the Seven Blood Eyes' taboo treasure....

Xu Qing thought back to what Master Seventh had said about that subject. And now, he just wanted to wait seven days until his dharmaskiff was upgraded to a dharmaship, then he would go to visit the taboo treasure and do some tests.

That said, he knew that this plan of his would be dangerous. He was even a bit hesitant as to whether or not he should really try it.

I don't need to worry about that for now. In seven days, I can just go there and check things out.

That was his decision. As far as he was concerned, it would be great to open that 121st dharma aperture, but if he couldn't do it, he wouldn't worry about it.

For the following days, he remained calm and focused on refining all of the various aspects of his plan. On the evening of the seventh day, he got a voice message from Zhang San letting him know that his dharmaskiff was finished. Putting away the transmission jade slip, Xu Qing stood and left the Special Security Division.

Tomorrow I'll go visit the sect's taboo treasure. He looked up at the sky to check the time. It was evening, and the red sky reminded him of one particular day in the past. The red clouds that spread out cast red light onto the face of the broken god above. Everything seemed like the color of blood.

Xu Qing looked away.

For some unknown reason, he felt jittery. It was a feeling he wasn't used to, and it made him very uneasy. Unfortunately, he couldn't pinpoint why he felt that way.

Mulling the matter over, he made haste to the Transportation Division. Before long, he was looking at his old faceless dharmaskiff. It didn't look any different from before. But close examination revealed that it had stronger godliness, and also, it had many more unique spell formations and magical symbols.

“Those are for the spirit automaton you’ll form soon,” Zhang San explained. “That will make it easier for you to control the dharmaship. I won’t waste time explaining. Xu Qing, take those imprisoned souls and use the Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture method to insert them into the dharmaskiff!”

Xu Qing took a deep breath and then, without the slightest hesitation, activated all 120 of his dharma apertures, like a hundred and twenty volcanoes all erupting. Dharma force surged and flames seethed. Intense heat rolled out. Within the fire, everything around Xu Qing twisted and distorted. The ground dried up and cracked, and Zhang San inhaled sharply and backed up.

Xu Qing was emitting so much pressure that Zhang San almost couldn’t take it. His eyes hurt!

“So strong!!” he murmured.

Xu Qing quickly began performing incantation gestures with both hands, his fingers becoming a blur.

By using the techniques of the Balefire Soulswallowing Scripture, he took about half of the imprisoned souls and sent them out of him into an enormous soul shadow with a vicious facial expression. Xu Qing’s incantation gestures changed, and he sent out Stygian Flame, enveloping the soul shadow and creating something like a suit of armor. With the armor, the soul shadow’s pulsing ferocity and rancorous energy was suppressed. Then Xu Qing guided it into the dharmaskiff.

Zhang San helped, activating the power of the dharmaskiff and causing it to vibrate. When the soul shadow entered, the dazzling light shone out. Even Patriarch Golden Vajra Warrior was taken aback as he watched from within the iron skewer.

After all, this was the Fiendish Xu’s second spirit automaton, and he had to pay very close attention to see if it would be a threat.

When the soul shadow fully entered the dharmaskiff, it trembled visibly, and then the faceless prow suddenly changed. All of a sudden, it had a vicious face on it! It was the same face as the soul shadow!

A new sensation filled Xu Qing’s mind, something different from the dharmaskiff. It was as if this thing were now a part of his own senses. Based on his understanding, his dharmaskiff was now complete, and his control over it was vastly superior compared to before.

Forgetting the soul shadow, even just the spell formation would surpass the Foundation Establishment level, and could threaten Gold Core experts.

As of now, this was no longer a dharmaskiff. This was a dharmaship!

Xu Qing’s eyes glittered, and Zhang San looked incomparably excited.

“It worked!”

As the sky turned redder, two figures walked along the street in the capital city of the Soaring Cloud Sword Sect in the Eight Sect Coalition.

One walked in front, the other behind, like a servant and master. Both wore black cloaks, with masks resembling the broken face of the god, which emanated terrifying auras.

“What a bustling city,” said the person in the front. He sounded like he was young, and also sounded like he was smiling. “Will the performance begin soon, Night Dove?”

“Lord, I received a response to the inquiry. The performance will begin shortly.”

At almost exactly the same moment that Night Dove responded... the water in the Everlasting Immortal Profundity River tributary outside of the Eight Sect Coalition changed.

It turned pitch black!